The Sixth Sense

by poetatertot

Summary

In a world where one's psychic sixth sense dictates occupation, The Academy Hidden In The Leaves prepares students with exceptional abilities for their futures. With an ugly family reputation and a list of reservations a mile long, Sasuke Uchiha plans on doing his best to get by until he graduates. Alone.

What he doesn't plan on is the Triad Initiative: the Academy-led project that puts students in close-quartered teams for the last two years of school. Sasuke could handle being with some people, but what's a guy to do when he's suddenly stuck rooming with Naruto Uzumaki, Konoha's sloppiest student?

Notes

Happy Nano November everyone! I'm so excited to finally post this - I've been working on this AU concept for years if you can believe it (transforming the plot as I transitioned through several fandoms) and now I finally get to apply it to the perfect cast: Naruto! I'm so excited to share everyone's powers - I made a table chart of the whole cast I'm using - and I can't wait to get into the thick of it!

The setting is suuper indulgent, but I hope you'll forgive me (: Enjoy!
Awakening

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dreams were happening again.

Sasuke sucked in a deep breath. He could always tell when things were about to happen—the way the world’s edges wobbled, the odd soundlessness of his own footsteps. Everything felt thick and stuffy, like ducking into a room that’s been shut for too long. The air in his lungs stuck.

He walked down the hallway. The wood floors, polished to gleaming, whispered under his bare feet. A hundred windows let in silver moonbeams and starlight, flooding the walls, turning stone statues to white marble.

The fifth floor, he thought. Just before the greenhouse.

Sasuke knew instinctively where to go. He could feel everything in those dreams: the dreamer’s presence like a siren call, the tug at his navel to follow their lead. If he wanted to leave, or change the vision, he had to find them.

He always found who he was looking for.

Up, up. He heard no footsteps, no trace of midnight wanderings. Sasuke held his breath and stepped out onto the highest platform the school had to offer.

The greenhouse was a sanctuary. Rows of ferns and flowers stretched towards the tapered ceiling, green fronds and vines tangling and slithering over every surface. The air was always warm there, like a gentle blanket, and faintly sweet.

But not all sanctuaries can be preserved.

There. Small and delicately boned. Uncombed hair; unmarked face. The book in his lap had fallen to an unmarked page as he slept.

Sasuke approached. The little boy looked so comfortable, nestled beneath a thick hibiscus tree. A single bloom perched behind one ear—remnant of an afternoon that would be his last.

The beginning of the end.

Sasuke extended a hand. His fingers stretched like ghostly claws to scrape the boy’s cheek before passing through. A shudder rippled through him; his brow scrunched, soft mouth puckering in distaste. The little boy’s eyelashes fluttered like moths before flying apart altogether.

Sasuke stared up into the older face of himself.

And then he began to scream.

Sasuke stared at his reflection. He looked almost as bad as he felt—which was to say, like absolute horseshit.

Dark eye circles like he hadn’t slept. Rumpled hair like he hadn’t gelled it. Twice.
“Sasuke,” Itachi called through the bathroom door. “You’re going to be late again.”

He knew that. Of course he knew that. But if Itachi thought he was just going to waltz out with evidence all over him, he had a new one coming. Sasuke made some headass decisions sometimes, sure, but he wasn’t stupid.

“I’ll be out in a second,” he called back. “Just go on ahead.” He ran his toothbrush under the faucet, willing the tell-tale rasp in his voice away.

A moment of silence. “Another rough night?”

Sasuke scowled at his reflection. He bent, spitting loudly into the sink, and turned on the faucet as high as it would go. With any luck Itachi would take the hint and retreat; he had his own stellar attendance to cater to.

Sasuke went through the motions: fixing his hair, swishing his mouthwash, straightening his tie. He counted to fifty, and then a hundred. He straightened his tie again for extra measure.

The hallway was thankfully empty when he finally emerged. His brother’s bedroom door was open—a sign that he’d left, if things were going right.

Sasuke dipped into his own room for his satchel. The worn leather was a comfort over his shoulder, a weight he could rely on. He straightened his shirt the best he could in his mirror’s reflection, toed into his sneakers, and made for the kitchen.

A mug sat on the table; an egg bake sandwich nestled beside it, steaming in a paper towel. No Itachi was in sight.

Sasuke’s shoulders relaxed. Things really were going right.

*Maybe today will be livable after all,* he thought, cramming the sandwich in his mouth. He slipped the travel mug into his bag and locked the front door behind him. *Maybe..*

He should have known better. Some things really were too good to be true.

The amphitheatre was jam-packed by the time he arrived. Sasuke shoved his way past a gaggle of girls up the staircase, searching through the rows for an open spot. The room was a sea of white shirts and black pants, monochrome speckled with red, yellow, and green neckties. His own—a rich, navy blue—suddenly felt as if it were strangling him.

*There.* A lone chair in the dead-middle of the ninth row. Sasuke bumped knees and stepped on toes in his haste to sit. Still, try as he might, he couldn’t escape the hushed whispers and ogling eyes of his classmates.

“*Look who’s back. I thought..”*

“*His brother works for the school now, right?”*

“*...hope I don’t get paired with..”*

“*Mindfreak.”*

Sasuke tucked his bag under his chair. He didn’t look at anyone; he didn’t talk to anyone. All he
could do was wait for the verdict and leave as fast as possible.

*If there’s a god out there, he thought irritably, you better come through for me this once.*

Several excruciating minutes passed before the lights began to dim. A single spotlight flared over the podium at the floor. Around him, babbles of conversation softened and died away.

The moment they’d waited all summer for.

Chancellor Sarutobi was a stoop of a man. When he walked up to the podium, he had to lower the microphone nearly four inches. His bald head reflected light like a mirror. Sasuke wondered distantly if anyone in the front row was blinded.

“Students,” he rumbled out. “Welcome back to another year at Konohagakure. I’m sure your summers were well spent, being young and full of promise as you are.”

The Chancellor shifted, pulling a sheaf of paper out of his robes. Sasuke’s eyes narrowed.

“The past two years have been laden with trials both social and academic,” he went on. “Time and time again, your professors have taught you, tested you, trained you. Your hours have been heavy with study, I know—perhaps too much, if I believe some of your complaints.” A rumble of laughter. “But now, the first fruits of your labor shall be beared.”

He lifted the papers for all of them to see. Nobody breathed.

“As you all know,” the Chancellor croaked, “the academy’s rules state that each student be placed into three-man teams starting their third year. These teams shall be upheld for the remainder of your education as a preemptive triad, a circle to rely on in the coming years. Personal skill may be powerful, but partnership—particularly at the level of skill you all possess—is even more critical.”

He cleared his throat, coughing into the microphone. Sasuke didn’t dare move.

“I will now speak the names of the upcoming triads.”

Chancellor Sarutobi looked out over them all. He paused, wetting chapped lips, and peered down at the roster.

“Team One: Nakamura, Hana..”

Sasuke sat on the edge of his seat. His eyes burned; his throat clicked. He didn’t dare think a single thought except *please, please, please*..

He’d thought long and hard over the summer. There weren’t many students in his year that he could stand being around, much less tolerate for the next two years. There was Nara, of the Intelligence sector. There was Hyuuga, of Intuition.

Two people out of thousands. Sasuke didn’t fool himself with favoring the odds.

They were hardly through when it happened.

“Team Seven,” the Chancellor croaked. “Haruno, Sakura. Uchiha, Sasuke..”

Sasuke sucked in a sharp breath.

“..Uzumaki, Naruto.”
All the air whooshed out of his lungs.

You’re kidding. You’re kidding. That’s not—

Of all the people. Thousands in their class, and he was stuck with—

Sasuke stood. He ignored the murmurings around him, their prying eyes. He couldn’t stand to be in this room any longer. He was out of here.

The room was even harder to navigate in the dark. Nobody made it easy for him; he could feel knees, elbows, stares jabbing into him. Always watching, waiting for him to fuck up.

Those Uchihas, they would say. A whole family of freaks.

Morning sun stung his eyes when he stepped outside. Sasuke narrowed his vision to the path directly in front of his shoes and made for home as fast as he could.

It hadn’t always been this way.

There had been a time before, or so Itachi told him. A time when they all lived in one house; a time when Father would come home from work and Mother would make dinner while Itachi bottle-fed Sasuke on the couch. There hadn’t been anything to fear, then.

An Uchiha’s pride is their power, Father had said, and powerful they had been.

But sometimes power isn’t enough.

Nobody greeted Sasuke when he came home. He dropped his keys on the counter and moved to stare blankly at the fridge’s contents. Nothing looked appetizing.

Uzumaki Naruto.

Images of blond hair and big, blue eyes rose unbidden. Sasuke’s mouth thinned into a line.

Everyone knew Naruto. He was the greatest spectacle to hit Konohagakure since Sasuke himself, but for all the wrong reasons. He was supposedly sloppy. Inconsistent. His power leaked like a dripping faucet, splattering hallways in multicolor and blinding overhead birds.

He was infamous for his failures and famous for his charm. His posse nearly encompassed the student body. Half the professors shook their head at his scores; the others smiled at his jokes. He was unfathomably popular and undoubtedly annoying.

And now I’m stuck with him for two years.

Sasuke flopped back onto his bed. His academy flag stretched above him on the ceiling. He eyed it wearily, tracing the lines between the four colored points and the tree in the center.

Invention. Intuition. Intelligence. Intercommunication.

It wasn’t hard to guess what Naruto’s sector; his powers gave him away even without the red tie. Invention, Sasuke thought bitterly. The sector of show-offs and loud-mouths. How fitting.

Sasuke, with his dream manipulation, specialized in Intercommunication. It had been a point of pride, once, to share the same sector as Itachi. They matched in uniform, two blips of blue in a sea
of red, yellow, and green.

But then Itachi had graduated and left Sasuke all alone. There weren’t any Intercom students in his year. He was the odd man out, the one to be avoided.

*The mindfreak.*

Sasuke rolled over onto his side. He hadn’t been awake for long, but the morning’s events suddenly were too exhausting to bear. He closed his eyes and immediately fell into an uneasy, dreamless sleep.

Morning was long gone when Sasuke awoke. He sat up, grimacing at the way his uniform stuck to his skin, and slid out of bed. Disaster or no, Itachi would have his head for skipping out on chores.

He went through the motions. Their apartment wasn’t much—a two-bedroom, one-bathroom carpeted affair—but it was all he’d ever known. Signs of long inhabitance were everywhere: Sasuke’s height chart in the kitchen, marked with ink; their old fridge, smothered in drawings and report cards; the potted plants out on the balcony, viny tendrils blanketing the wall.

Sasuke squinted out over the balcony. The academy-sanctioned neighborhood sat amidst a rippling sea of wild grass and perennials, a cluster of grey buildings on a massive slope. There were few trees; wild deer, when they chose to, grazed openly. The heat would keep them beyond for now, though.

*Beyond. His eyes trailed up the slope to its peak. Beyond, in Konohagakure.*

The academy was aptly named. While no trees grew beneath, an evergreen forest sprung up at the hilltop, crowning the slope in thick, dark trees. Sasuke imagined the way the forest extended backwards, blanketing hundreds of miles in dense foliage. It was there, buried among skyscraper trees and clover swathes, that Konohagakure lie.

His eyes fell to the single path from the treeline. Someone was making their way towards the neighborhood, clad in worker uniform and blue tie.

*Itachi.*

Minutes stretched before the front door opened. The afternoon heat flushed Itachi’s cheeks, pressing clothes to skin as Sasuke’s had. Someone really needed to argue for uniform shorts or something.

“Sasuke,” he greeted. “Back so soon?”

Sasuke turned away to nudge his stir fry.

Itachi paused. Sasuke heard him lower his bag onto the counter, moving to stand beside him. “Sasuke? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He exhaled harshly. “Just—”

He clenched the spatula, stabbing at a piece of broccoli. Itachi waited.

“Is it about your team?” he finally asked, when Sasuke had no answer.

The stove clicked off. Sasuke stared into the pan.

“. ..Yes.”
Itachi’s forehead creased. “Take a seat,” he suggested. “I’ll serve you up.”

The first mouthful was impossible to swallow. Sasuke stabbed furiously at his chicken, willing himself to relax, but he couldn’t. How was he going to stand this?

Itachi’s eyes stayed glued to him even as he ate. “Do I need to speak with the Chancellor?”

“Yes. No.” Sasuke frowned, forcing down a mouthful at last. “I don’t want you interfering. But—”

“But what?”

“It’s my teammates.” He glared at his food. “I’m paired with an idiot.”

“So you already know them personally?”

“No,” Sasuke bit out, “and I never want to.”

Itachi’s eyebrows rose. “Well, who is it?”

Sasuke scraped his fork tines along the bowl’s edge and chewed his lip.

“Sasuke?”

“It’s”—he inhaled—“Uzumaki.”

Itachi stilled. Sasuke glared at his food, willing it to set fire.

“He’s an idiot,” he repeated bitterly. “I have to spend the next two years of my life trying to scrape together a team with that, that clown. I bet he doesn’t even know what the four sectors are! And the way he walks around leaking colors like he’s pissed himself—Itachi, I don’t have to know him personally. I already know he’s a dumbass!”

Sasuke dropped his fork with a clatter. He sucked in a rattling breath, slowing his heart, and looked up.

“What?” he snapped. “What’s that look for?”

“Nothing.” Itachi’s face smoothed out. “That’s a shame. Perhaps he’s gotten better over the summer?”

Sasuke gave him a look that would peel paint.

“Right,” Itachi said. “Never mind.” He cleared his throat. “Well, who else is on your team?”

Sasuke exhaled sharply. The moment he’d heard Naruto the rest of his brain had flown out the window. Who was on his team? Were they any good?

Anyone’s better than that idiot. Still, admitting he had no idea to Itachi made him feel stupid.

“You don’t know?” Itachi guessed. “Weren’t you supposed to meet with them after the ceremony?” He blinked. “You came home immediately. You didn’t even stay until the end.”

“What’s there to stay for?” Sasuke sniffed. “The less time I spend with Uzumaki the better.”

“That’s going to be impossible soon. You’re going to live together, aren’t you?”

Sasuke froze. “What?”
“The dorm assignments,” Itachi said slowly. “They change with team assignments—or did you leave before they announced that, too?”

Sasuke’s stomach plummeted. He stared at the clock over the oven without really seeing it.

*This is it*, he thought miserably. *The beginning of the end.*

The following week was a vortex of anxiety. Sasuke tossed and turned for hours, barely sleeping before waking again. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Uzumaki fucking up somehow.

Ruining their triad exams. Ruining his peaceful dorm life. Ruining Sasuke’s evening runs through campus.

*I won’t graduate with him stuck to me*, Sasuke feared. *He’ll stop me from leaving, and then what?*

Every meal was overshadowed by worry. Could he get by without relying on his team? Had anyone ever petitioned to just go solo before? Was it even *allowed*?

Bit by bit, his personal belongings were boxed away. Down went his academy flag; away went his desk supplies. He was scheduled to move into K-32 next Saturday—all too soon.

Team assignments were posted online on Thursday. Sasuke sat with his laptop and stared at the roster for hours, willing the letters to change.


*Uzumaki, Naruto.*

Their school emails were listed too—an effort to preemptively connect teammates. Sasuke pretended the links didn’t exist. He pretended the following email from *sharuno@konoha* didn’t exist either.

*Dear Sasuke,* the preview line said. *I was thinking we could—*

*No.* He deleted it immediately. *Absolutely not.*

Most things in life eventually went away if Sasuke ignored them for long enough. The girls who followed him. The crane fly trapped in the bathroom. The flu.

But every morning Sasuke woke up and had to face reality over and over. Uzumaki was *not* going away.

*This is for* real, he thought, lugging his things up the hill that Saturday. The open grasslands made his trek miserable, sweat soaking his shirt within minutes. What he wouldn’t give to be telekinetic at that moment.

Itachi, at least, seemed no worse for wear. Where Sasuke spent the whole week wishing for death, Itachi tried to encourage him. He took on the optimist role, offering info in a vain attempt to improve his brother’s mood.

*Haruno has adequate written exam scores.*

*Her skill apparently packs quite the punch.*

*Uzumaki only got two black marks on his record last year?*
None of them worked.

“Look at it this way,” Itachi suggested. Sasuke hated that he wasn’t even sweating. “You only have to be with him during half your class hours, and when you go to sleep. But that’s really only sixty percent of your day.”

“Not helpful, Itachi,” Sasuke grit out.

“Sorry.”

Stepping under the trees was sweet relief; breeze or not, the air had to be at least fifteen degrees cooler. Sasuke felt the sweat on his back instantly chill. He paused, taking a deep breath of rich, earthy air.

The K-30 apartments lie northwest on campus, circumventing Konohagakure’s main roads. Their thoroughfare was paved with cobblestone and soil, the trees casting sunbeams in soft, green hues. They didn’t pass any other people, but there was plenty of birdsong.

It could be worse, Sasuke supposed.

K-32 sat in the upper right corner of a huge, brown-shingled building. There were plant boxes hanging out in front and two staircases on either side leading to the second floor. The trees overhead barely cleared the perimeter, scattering fallen needles beyond the property. As they approached, Sasuke caught the clear starting bars of pop radio. All the sliding glass doors on the bottom floor were open.

A girl emerged—blonde, with bangs covering one eye. Sasuke wondered, briefly, if she had trouble seeing.

“Oh.” Her gaze skated over him and his brother. “Upstairs?”

“32,” Itachi replied pleasantly. “Are you Sasuke’s new neighbor?”

“Yeah.” She paused, tucking her hair behind one ear. “Ino Yamanaka.”

“Itachi, Sasuke’s older brother.”

Ino’s lips pressed thin. “I know,” she said.

Right. Sasuke pushed past her for the stairs and left Itachi to say goodbye.

K-32 was larger than his old dorms. For one, the apartment had a kitchen. There were supposedly two communal bathrooms in the floor plan, one with a whole tub. The living room was already partially furnished with a couch, armchairs, and a table. They had two fridges.

“Two,” Itachi remarked. “That’s.. unorthodox.”

Sasuke pushed onward. Muffled laughter echoed from a bedroom down the hall, but he didn’t bother looking. The room he needed was directly in front of him—and already occupied with one tall, gleaming blond.

Literally. He was gleaming.

Itachi set down his armful of boxes with a thump. “Uzumaki?”

Naruto yelped. Sasuke squeezed his eyes shut as a kaleidoscopic flare exploded into the room.
Prisms flung over the walls, the ceiling, the furniture—hundreds of thousands of lights, each bright enough to blind.

“Crap!” The light dimmed, leaving spots in Sasuke’s vision. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you come in!”

_How can you see anything? _Sasuke thought irritably.

“It’s fine,” Itachi said. “You’re Sasuke’s new roommate, yes?”

Naruto flashed a smile bright enough to drop pigeons. “Yeah.” He extended his hand. “That’s me. I guess we’ll get to know each other plenty, heh.”

“Something like that,” Sasuke muttered.

Naruto’s eyes slid from Itachi to him. Sasuke didn’t miss the way they widened slightly, sweeping over him in a quick one-two before sticking to his face.

“Sasuke,” he breathed.

“Naruto.”

The moment stretched.

“I’m going back downstairs to get the rest of your things,” Itachi said. “Be right back.”

Sasuke turned away. His side of the room was furnished with the bare minimum: a bed pallet, a standard desk and chair, a set of drawers. Little pin holes speckled the walls—remnants of someone with a penchant for decoration. Sasuke supposed he could hide most of them with his flag.

Naruto went back to shuffling around behind him. Sasuke staunchly ignored how uncomfortable the air suddenly was, thick enough to smother. Naruto could fidget all he wanted; Sasuke was here to _excel_ , nothing less and nothing more.

The seconds ticked away.

_I can do this_ , Sasuke thought. _If he can just keep his mouth shut_—

"So what’s your power?"

Sasuke's hands stilled over the desk. ".What?"

"Your power?" Naruto repeated hesitantly. More shuffling. "You're uh, a blue-tie right? So—"

Heat rose like vomit from Sasuke’s throat. "Is this some kind of joke?" he choked.

"Huh?"

"I said" —Sasuke spun around— "Are you fucking joking?"

Naruto's eyes stretched even wider. His mouth flapped open for a moment, hands rising as if Sasuke were a wild animal. Sasuke instantly hated the motion.

"No, I—"
"Because it wasn't funny," he went on. He felt sick. Who was Naruto playing him for? As if Naruto, jewel of Konohagakure, didn't know about Sasuke. About the endless rumors and staring, the unending shoves and notes under his door and—

"Sasuke, there's one more box outside. Could you get it for me?"

Naruto's shoulders jerked; his hands fell to his sides, gripping his jeans. Sasuke ripped his eyes away, sucking air frantically through his lungs. He would not snap here. He refused.

"Whatever," he snapped, and stormed out of the room.

Whoever had made the housing assignments had a sick sense of humor. It wasn’t enough that Sasuke was rooming with Uzumaki—he’d also been placed with some of the slouchiest, idiotic clowns Konohagakure had to offer.

The second refrigerator wasn't school-issued, as Sasuke first suspected; his new housemate, Choji Akimichi, had lugged the damn thing in. Choji was always in the kitchen making dirty dishes, and with the way everyone flocked to pick scraps, the living room was always full. This wouldn't normally be a problem—everyone was entitled to eat—but his housemates were noisier than Itachi's old neighbors.

There was Kiba Inuzuka—Uzumaki’s uglier, equally-idiotic half, apparently. But where Uzumaki could keep his mouth shut, Kiba had no qualms. He dogged Sasuke about everything from his powers to his eating habits, baring his teeth when Sasuke snapped back.

With the way he lorded himself over everyone, Neji Hyuuga was turning out to be scarcely better. The man was self-obsessed. Sasuke had already caught him gazing into his reflection in their cutlery; he shuddered to think about why Neji spent so long in the bathroom. His narcissism rankled like nothing else.

The silver lining—if one could call him that—was Shikamaru Nara. He rarely raised his voice, and if he had shit to say about Sasuke, he kept it out of earshot. Sasuke supposed he could live with him.

Their first weekend together was a tenuous affair. Sasuke did his best to avoid the other boys at all times, taking long walks through campus or reading under the trees behind their building. The summer air was uncomfortable even beneath the pines, thick with the heady scent of crushed needles. Sasuke found himself burning despite his best efforts. He’d have to buy better sunscreen when the campus pharmacy opened.

Naruto, amazingly, kept to himself. After their first encounter, he hadn’t dared to speak a word in their room. He didn’t even look at Sasuke if he could help it. The silence was a relief compared to their boisterous apartment, but Sasuke knew it wouldn’t last. Once classes started, he would have to talk to Naruto, and their uneasy peace was sure to fall apart. The blond already looked ready to explode.

But Sasuke wasn’t going to give in. Naruto could act as innocent as he liked, but there wasn’t a soul on campus who didn’t know about Sasuke. Who didn’t know what a freak he was. Reprehensible, they called him. Fucking freak.

Idiot. Sasuke watched him trip on a desk leg, scattering papers everywhere. This team is set up for disaster.

“Maybe he’s improved,” Itachi had suggested after they’d finished moving. “He seems personable
Sasuke scoffed. “Being personable isn’t going to pass the triad exams. He can hardly hold himself together. He’s like a dog, ready to piss all over the floor.”

And piss Naruto had. He oozed light like a walking sun, scattering prisms when he smiled. Every burst of laughter made his skin flicker. It was like rooming with a star.

*It could always be worse,* Sasuke kept reminding himself, but he wasn’t sure how.

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Monday morning started the worst way possible: with screaming.

Lots of it.

Sasuke’s eyes snapped open. He shot to his feet immediately, shaking all drowsiness away. Naruto attempted the same maneuver and fell over his bedside, hopelessly tangled in his sheets.

“Wha?” The blond slurred. “Wha’s goin’ on?”

Sasuke slammed open the bedroom door. The other two bedrooms were already open. None of their housemates were in sight, but when he walked out into the living room, Sasuke could see them outside. Their necks were craned over the walkway, staring down where the screaming originated.

Sasuke took a deep breath and stepped out.

“Awaken, brethren! A new day is upon us!” The screaming was even louder outside—bloodcurdling, even. “Youth should not be wasted within the confines of luxury!”

“Is this some sort of joke?” he hissed, plugging his ears.

Neji gave him a flat look. “Close,” he said. “It’s our new RA.”

*Our new RA* was a sight for sore eyes. Between the bright-green spandex biking suit, the orange leg warmers, and the horrific bowl cut, Sasuke was beginning to wonder if everyone around here suffered some sort of brain damage. Was there something in the air?

“Greetings!” Ugly RA hollered. “Residents of K-30, the morning has long greeted us! Come outside and relish the fresh air!”

“I’d rather die,” Shikamaru muttered under his breath. Sasuke could hear similar groaning from the floor below—the girls’ apartment, if he remembered correctly.

“As your RA,” Ugly continued, “I must make my intentions clear! This morning meeting is mandatory and will be logged in your gradebook!”

Shikamaru’s mouth twisted. He gave Sasuke a sideways glance. “You better wake up blondie.”

Ten minutes later Sasuke stood in a circle of pajama-clad students. Some had the foresight to slag on clothes; others, like Naruto, weren’t even sporting shirts. Sasuke could already see goosebumps rising on his arms.

*Idiot.* He tore his gaze away.

Ugly RA introduced himself as Rock Lee. He was, to quote, “absolutely ecstatic to have them
under his wing.” Sasuke took one look at Lee’s sweaty armpits and made a mental note to never be anywhere near his wingspan. Ever.

“We’ll go around the circle,” Rock Lee chirped. “Everyone will introduce themselves—name and station, if you please! It’s for the community record.” He waved his clipboard.

The girl on his immediate left had to duck. “Hinata!” she squeaked. “Intuition sector!”

Rock Lee beamed. “And your power?”

Hinata’s eyes flit over everyone, her face reddening under the attention. “U-um.. Danger intuition?”


Around the circle they went. Sasuke couldn’t have cared less about the girls’ names—they were fellow residents, nothing more—but he did take note of their powers. They had two Inventors: a plant manipulator and a telekinetic. There was a single Intel telepath. Hinata was the only Intuit.

Then they moved onto the boys’ apartment.

Sasuke tuned out his housemates. He already knew he was the sole Intercom, an ugly add-on to an otherwise balanced house. The only other notable thing about their apartment was the volume of Intels—three—in comparison to a single Intuit.

And a single Inventor. Naruto.

“I’m a photokinetic,” the blond informed everyone. He smiled, radiating beams, and Sasuke felt the overwhelming urge to roll his eyes.

“We’re nearly done!” Rock Lee finally announced. “Only one left on my roster—you, in the blue sweatpants! What is your name?”

All eyes flew to him. Sasuke could feel the sudden discomfort, the palpable tension hovering above. He grit his teeth and mentally counted to five. He was used to this.

This was his normal.

“Sasuke,” he forced out. “Sasuke Uchiha.”

Rock Lee hummed and scratched something down. “Power?”

The others shifted uneasily. Sasuke’s eyes narrowed.

“Dream manipulation.”

Sasuke saw the moment Rock Lee understood—the sudden stiffness, the recognition. His bushy brows rose until they disappeared behind his god-awful haircut.

“Oh,” he said. “How.. unusual.”

Sasuke bit his tongue.

Rock Lee squirmed for a moment, clearly uncomfortable. “Well,” he finally managed, “if that’s, ah, everyone.. Then I suppose you’re free to mingle?”
The circle dissolved. Sasuke stepped back, watching his housemates group up. Naruto immediately gravitated towards a young woman with pink hair. His hand was already outstretched, his smile glimmering like sun-lit glass.

Sasuke turned and went back upstairs.

Later, after he’d already crawled back into bed with a book, Naruto returned. Sasuke tried to ignore how he paused in the doorway. He could feel the blond’s eyes on him from behind his novel.

“For the record,” Naruto finally said, “I didn’t know you were an Intercom.”

Sasuke flipped a page noisily.

Naruto moved further into the room. Sasuke heard bed springs creak, then the shuffle of moving sheets. The room lapsed back into silence.

He read two more pages before Naruto spoke again.

“I’m not afraid of you.”

Sasuke stilled. He couldn’t see Naruto—their dressers were back-to-back to give a semblance of privacy—but he could hear him roll over.

“Really,” Naruto insisted softly. “I’m not.”

Bitterness bubbled in Sasuke’s stomach. His mouth twisted, fingers helplessly curling into the pages. The audacity of this guy—

“You should be,” he spat.

“Maybe,” Naruto agreed. Sasuke hated the way he sounded so calm, almost sad, like he pitied Sasuke. It was the only thing worse than being feared. Sasuke wanted to stand up and throw something at him.

But he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t give Naruto the satisfaction.

“I’m sorry,” Naruto said. "I wish.."

Sasuke waited for him to finish. His throat felt impossibly tight; his eyes burned for no reason. He hated that he’d ignored Naruto all weekend only for their first conversation to be like this.

He waited, but Naruto never completed the thought.

Somehow that made him feel even worse.

School officially started on Wednesday. Tradition stated that teams met prior—to establish teamwork, or something like that. The only thing Sasuke wanted to establish with Naruto were boundaries. Ones where he didn’t have to hear him scratching his ass, or know what he sounded like singing in the shower.

But that was a whole extra deal. There was still the matter of the mystery third member, this Haruno. Sasuke knew she had to be one of the girls in the apartment below, but he had no clue which one, and he didn’t dare ask Naruto.

He found out the hard way Monday evening.
“Sasuke,” Naruto called. “You’d better get out here.”

He didn’t look up from his book. “Sure.”

“No, like..” Naruto’s head popped in. His blue eyes were enormous, bottom lip caught between teeth. “Right now? Please?”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. He set his book down.

A young woman sat in their living room—the girl Naruto had talked to earlier, in all her pink-haired glory. She leaned against their coffee table with her arms crossed, a stormy look on her face. Sasuke could already feel what was coming.

“Let me guess,” he drawled. “You’re Haruno?”

“And you haven’t been responding to my emails.”

Sasuke forgot he’d set her address to spam. “They were clogging my inbox.”

“They were important.” Her eyes narrowed. “And here I thought you were going to take this seriously. Isn’t that your reputation? Nasty-neat?”

“It doesn’t apply to chumps.”

Haruno huffed. “It’s going to have to. Like it or not, we’re both stuck with Uzumaki.”

“Hey!” Naruto yelped. “Why am I suddenly the problem?”

“I didn’t want this any more than you,” she pushed on. “We both know what’s at stake. But we have to deal with it, okay? I want to graduate just as much as you.”

Sasuke’s nose wrinkled. “I have higher aspirations.”

“Don’t we all.”

Naruto looked between them. “So.. does this mean we’re going to be a team now?”

*Over my dead body*, Sasuke wanted to say. But he knew Haruno was right.

God, he hated it, but she was.

“Schedules,” he said. “We get them all tonight, don’t we? Come to me when you get them.”

“To compare classes?” Naruto asked.

“To see when we share free time,” Sakura said. She blew out a breath. “Of course, I almost forgot. We still have to find a sponsor.”

Sasuke hadn’t forgotten. Sponsorships were only the second most annoying Academy tradition behind teaming up with other people. They had to find a teacher too—one that could connect them to potential hirers and vouch for their strengths.

Sakura and him shared a look. He knew what she was thinking—he could see it in her eyes.

*How are we supposed to find a sponsor with someone like Naruto?*

“What?” Naruto frowned. “What’s that look for?”
Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you guys think! I'm a little nervous about posting this bad boy and would really appreciate your feedback (: Thank you!

This chapter's track: GRRRLS - AViVA
tumblr
“We need a plan.”

Sasuke peered over his computer screen. Sakura sat across the kitchen table, knees pulled up to prop her freshly painted fingernails. She frowned thoughtfully and tapped a few keys.

“We have to market ourselves,” she explained. “Everyone already knows about Naruto’s... shortcomings. But there has to be something we all share, right? Something we excel at?”

Sasuke’s looked to Naruto, who was using his computer’s reflection to pick his teeth. “Patience?” he drawled.

She rolled her eyes. “I was thinking something tactical.”

“It depends on our personal assets. What are your high marks in?”

Sakura examined a nail. “Cooperative reaction and physical aid.”

“So you’re a healer.”

“I’m multifaceted.”

Sasuke sat back. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

She visibly bristled. “What’s that supposed to mean? Worried I won’t be able to keep up?”

Sasuke had good reasons to be wary. It wasn’t every day you paired with an Intercom; some people went their whole careers without ever teaming with one. As a result, typical strategy measures focused on the Inventor-Intel-Intuit trifecta.

Sakura could be as capable as she liked, but without Intercom training she was little more than an extra body.

“You’ve never worked with an Intercom before,” he told her. “I have reasons to be skeptical.”

“You could at least give me a shot before shitting on me.”

“Uh, guys?” Naruto leaned in. “I’m here too.”

Sasuke didn’t even look at him. “How could we forget.”

“Right. Well. I figured I should let you know before you kill each other.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed. That definitely drew his ire. “I’ll kill you sooner,” he informed the blond, “if only because you talk in your sleep.”

“I do?”

Sasuke sighed loudly, leaning in. “You want my approval so badly?” Sakura’s eyes narrowed. “Then prove it to me. Show me what you can do.”
“I would have sooner,” she said, “but someone was deleting my emails.”

“I thought we were over this.”

“No, you’re over it. I’m still mad.”

“Right. Whatever.”

“So..” Naruto looked between them. “Does this mean we’re going outside?”

“Unless you have a better idea.” Sasuke snapped his laptop shut and stood. “Meet me behind the building in fifteen.”

Sasuke believed in a pyramid of rational thinking. Most of his decisions dwelled somewhere on the bottom: constant, reliable, a solid ground to build his life upon. He’d built his education and lifestyle on good choices.

This scenario was not one of them.

He squinted. “What the fuck is on your head?”

Naruto grinned sheepishly. “It’s a headband. Pretty cool, right?” He adjusted the orange abomination, snapping it sharply against his skin.

“You look like you’re filming for a 1980’s aerobics video.”

“In a good way?”

Sasuke gave him a dry look.

“You better not be all talk,” Sakura said, stretching. “Otherwise I’m never going to let you live it down. I hope you’re aware of that.”

“I’m aware of a lot of things,” Sasuke replied. Like how dumb this decision was.

So maybe Itachi was right sometimes. Sasuke was good about making the right choice—usually—but when his blood was running hot, he sometimes got a little ahead of himself.

There are better ways to do this, he reflected as he warmed up. Ways that didn’t involve potentially maiming each other. But if there was one thing Sasuke never did, it was go back on his word. Shit choices be damned.

Sakura straightened. “What’s the plan?”

“Old-fashioned,” he said shortly. “Hand-to-hand combat.”

“What, against each other? Is that even balanced?”

“Worried you’re going to look bad?”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed. “I’m worried I’ll break your arm.”

“Worse things have happened this week,” Sasuke deadpanned. “I’ll get over it.”

Naruto practically bounced up and down. “So who goes first?” he asked. “Can I?”
“We’ll draw straws,” Sasuke decided, picking up some twigs.

The lots came up in Naruto’s favor: him against Sasuke, then Sakura against whoever won. They’d take a break in between matches.

*K-30* butted up against a pine-ringed clearing full of smooth dirt and clover. Sakura sat on the old bench at it’s edge, ankle knocking a coffee can of cigarette butts. Sasuke moved to the center and faced Naruto.

“First pinned loses,” Naruto suggested. He smiled crooked, fingers curling and uncurling experimentally. Sasuke felt something respond within him: the thrill for a fight, an untamable eagerness to *move*.

Sasuke smirked. He knew his body well. His limits were carefully placed and rarely reached—that is, unless he was fighting Itachi. Naruto would hold no challenge.

“You’re on.”

They circled each other. Sasuke took Naruto in: stocky, but sloppily stanced. The rumors were true, then.

Naruto had gone deadly quiet. Every muscle was visibly tensed, eyes following every move. He looked grimmer than Sasuke had ever seen.

His intense focus surprised Sasuke, but he wasn’t afraid. All he had to do was wait and—

*There.*

He shot forward. Naruto’s arms flew up. Flesh collided; knuckles bit. Naruto grunted. He dodged sideways and tried to slip under Sasuke’s guard; Sasuke moved with him, cutting from the right.

Naruto’s jaw bit Sasuke’s knuckles. He recoiled with a glare. Sasuke bared his teeth.

“Careful,” he hissed.

“Follow your own advice,” Naruto shot back.

On it went. Naruto’s fought unrefined—landing blows with wild force, throwing his weight into movement—but he was tireless. Sasuke’s strikes glanced off as if he’d been made from stone.


Dust flew up. Sweat stung his eyes. Every breath became a *punch*: hot air in, hot air out. Sasuke’s muscles ached.

Sasuke had no idea how long it’d been. The fight was supposed to be *over*. Frustration curled hot in his chest; he forced it away. He couldn’t get distracted.

Blue eyes blazed; shoulders hunched tight. Naruto’s shots got even sloppier.

He lunged. Sasuke moved back, ready to dart around—and felt earth crumble under him.

In an instant Naruto had his ankle hooked. Sasuke fell to his knees, snarling. He *refused* to lay down. His pride wouldn’t allow it; *he* wouldn’t allow it.

They grappled hands. Hot breath washed over Sasuke, mixing with his own. Their heads smacked;
Sasuke bit his tongue and tasted blood.

Sasuke wasn’t a messy fighter by nature, but he felt something changing. Naruto pressed in hard. They rolled, grappling desperately. Blood pounded in Sasuke’s ears; his body throbbed, alive.

Naruto fought hard, but Sasuke wouldn’t lose.

He’d trained with the best.

Dirt clouded. Naruto’s eyes narrowed, tears streaming, and Sasuke saw his chance.

He rolled them again. An arm wrapped around Naruto’s neck. The blond thrashed and bucked beneath him. Sasuke grit his teeth and held on for dear life.

And then, after a minute of furious squirming, Naruto relaxed.

Sasuke sucked in a breath. His heart beat furiously on his tongue, filling his head with noise. He could feel Naruto’s breaths on his arm—his body heat, unbearably warm.

“Point,” Sasuke panted.

Naruto ripped away from him and rolled onto his back. His chest heaved; his skin gleamed with sweat. Sasuke rose to his feet slowly.


Sasuke looked down at him. Even caked in dirt, Naruto glowed. He looked away.

Sakura stared from the bench, arms crossed. Sasuke had forgotten she was there. “Are you sure you can go another round right now?” she asked. Her eyes swept over them. “You both look wiped.”

“Give me a few and I’ll prove it,” Sasuke breathed.

Sakura raised an eyebrow. “Sure. Okay.” She stood and held out his water. “Here.”

It was as Sasuke expected: neither teammate was up to par physically. Sakura was better about her form, but she was too obvious. Their fight was almost painfully short compared to Naruto’s; all Sasuke had to do was watch her body language to do her in.

He didn’t escape unscathed, though. Sakura’s right hook was fucking terrifying.

Afterwards they sat beneath the trees. The morning dew had evaporated into musky, thick heat; every inhale tasted like dirt and sweat, salty bitterness on Sasuke’s tongue. He was going to have to shower twice after this.

“I’ve been thinking.” Naruto tilted his head back. “Why can’t we just ask someone to be our sponsor?”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Do you even pay attention? They have to choose us—it defeats the purpose of the exercise if we beg someone for a handout.”

“Who said we’d be begging?”

“Idiot,” Sasuke grunted. “We have you. Nobody’s going to want to sponsor your scores.”

“Bastard! Nobody’s gonna want us with your shit attitude!”
“At least I’m capable.”

“Yeah, capable of being a grade A bastard!”

“You already used that insult.”

Naruto got to his feet. “What’s your problem?” he growled. “I barely even know you and you act like you have bees up your ass. Why do you dislike me so much? I didn’t even do anything!”

Sasuke glared up at him. “You’re Naruto Uzumaki.”

“What’s that got to—”

“*Listen,*” Sakura snapped. “Everyone knows your field scores aren’t very good. We have to make up for that somehow.” She sighed, shoulders slumping. “Like it or not, right now you’re a liability.”

“I don’t want to be,” Naruto protested.

“Then don’t,” Sasuke suggested. His eyes narrowed. “If you can.”

“I’ll do it if it’s the last thing I do,” the blond snapped. “You both will see. I’m gonna graduate and work for ANBU!”

The very idea was laughable. Nobody *chose* ANBU; ANBU *chose* you. It was like declaring to become president or something. Sasuke snorted loudly.

“With your record right now?” Sakura pointed out. “I hate to say it, but Sasuke’s right. We’re *all* going to have to improve to get what we want, you most of all.” Naruto scowled, but couldn’t disagree.

They lapsed into sullen silence. Sasuke drained the last of his water to the hum of bees and stood, wincing. His limbs felt like lead weights.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said. “I want to see your powers. *Properly.*”

Naruto looked up with grim determination. “Will it get you off my back?”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. “Can you do any better than sparkling like a beauty pageant?”

“Bastard.” Naruto rose. “I’ll show you what I can do.”

The blond stepped out of the shade. Sasuke watched him walk to the clearing center, counting the steps between them. He turned.

“It’s going to be bright,” he warned. “Don’t look right at me.”

Sasuke bit back a sour comment and turned cheek. In his peripheral he could see Naruto’s hands raise and his head tip back.

The effect was instantaneous.

Light exploded outward. Naruto’s shape flared; his skin lit like molten gold. The shadows beneath them dried up, every dust mote and leaf alight, and even turned away, Sasuke had to shut his eyes.

And the *heat.* Sasuke already knew Naruto was a furnace—the blond practically slept in the nude.
—but bedroom heating was nothing compared to this. He felt like he’d stepped into an oven.

Slowly, the light dissipated. Afterimages danced over Sasuke’s open eyes; he swung, turning to where Naruto bashfully glimmered rainbows.

“This is the lowest setting,” he explained. “But that’s about as bright as I can go before.”

Sakura wiped her forehead. “Is it always so hot?”

“Yeah. I can melt stuff if it’s soft enough.” Naruto paused, thinking. “I wonder if I could bake cookies.”

“Who knows,” Sasuke replied flatly. “Maybe we can bribe our sponsor that way.”

“Can you extend the light?” Sakura asked.

“Like sending out beams? I don’t know. I’ve never really tried manipulating it—I just think and it happens.”

Sasuke mulled over the possibilities. Photomanipulation wasn’t just moving light; if Naruto could learn to direct beams, they could also use temperature to their advantage. He could be a walking lighthouse, or one of those magnifying glasses under the sun.

If he stayed quiet long enough to surprise the enemy, anyway.

Sakura was next. Sasuke wasn’t sure what to expect. Officially she was an Inventor, but from what he understood, Sakura didn’t create illusions or compel elements.

She forced them.

The fist Sakura threw into the earth would have shattered a lesser man’s hand. The ground beneath reverberated; soil roiled outward from the epicenter, rippling like waves. Sasuke sucked in a sharp breath.

The ground exploded. Dirt flew in every direction. A horrible, awful groaning echoed around them—wood cracking and splintering like rain—and Sasuke didn’t understand why or how anything was happening until he finally managed to lift his head and see the thick, thorny tendrils three stories up.

Leaves sprouted from every surface. The trees were alive, trembling with unspoken fervor, and Sasuke had to cover himself again as needles rained from above. The air hung thick with sweet sap and sharp, fresh growth.

“There,” Sakura said. “That’s what I can do.”

Naruto lowered his arms. “Holy fuck,” he breathed. “You’re like that girl from Sky High.”

Sasuke shook himself free of dirt. He glared.

“I thought you said you were a healer.”

“I’m multifaceted,” she repeated smugly. “Maybe next time you should listen better.”

Sasuke didn’t know what to say to that.

After what had to be hours, a vague image of their team was becoming visible. It could maybe be
worse, but there were holes they couldn’t cover overnight.

For one, while both Sakura and Naruto had power and potential in spades (something he could begrudgingly admit internally), neither of them had exemplary ingenuity scores or finely-honed skill sets. They appeared to both get by on sheer raw output.

*Of course,* Sasuke thought irritably. *They’re Inventors. They fall right into the stereotype.*

There was nothing to be done about it now, though. Wish as he’d like for an Intel, Sasuke was stuck with what he had.

“So,” Naruto said, breaking through Sasuke’s thoughts, “how do we test you?”

Sasuke eyed him warily. He could see Sakura giving the blond an incredulous look in his peripheral; they both knew Sasuke’s reputation, the rumors of what he could do.

Why would anyone want to willingly be subject to *that*?

“We don’t,” he replied stiffly. “You take my word for it.”

Naruto hummed. “That doesn’t seem very fair.”

“You don’t want to experience my talents, trust me.” Was Naruto really as oblivious as he looked?

“I can take it,” Naruto said, confirming Sasuke’s fears. “Try me.”

“Naruto,” Sakura interrupted, “I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“What? Why?”

They shared a look. Sasuke hated the way she wouldn’t say it outright—the way she stepped away from him, as if just remembering how dangerous he supposedly was.

*Good,* Sasuke thought bitterly. *Better safe than sorry, isn’t it?* He swallowed hard, hating the sudden sourness on his tongue.

The tenuous peace between them had been ruined. Sasuke was out of there.

“I’m done playing with you two.” He picked up his water bottle and turned back towards the buildings. “We can figure out who to ask tomorrow after classes.”

“Sasuke? Wait!”

Sasuke didn’t look back. Nobody followed him inside.

He couldn’t decide if he hated it more that Naruto tried to stop him, or that Sakura obviously held the blond back.

After two days of his depressing new reality, Sasuke was dying to talk to Itachi. Sure, he motherhenned the crap out of Sasuke, but his overbearing love was far better than the wary looks Sasuke’s housemates gave, or how Naruto treated him like a dangerous animal. Sasuke wished he’d never moved out at all. How was he going to stand *two years* of this?

He shot his brother an email Monday night.
>>Meet me at our spot tomorrow.

>Everything alright?

Sasuke didn’t bother dignifying that question with an answer.

_The spot—_ Hinami’s Cafe, specifically—_was a quaint little coffee shop wedged into the Academy’s main plaza. Students and professors alike flocked to its brown booths and wicker-chair seating for the best baked goods on campus. The owner, Hinami herself, used to babysit Sasuke while Itachi was in class._

The cafe was moderately full when Sasuke arrived, but his favorite corner table remained occupied. He sank into it gratefully, inhaling rich wafts of grounds and baked bread, and felt his shoulders already relaxing. He’d needed this _bad._

Itachi emerged from the bathroom almost immediately. He took his place across the table and gave Sasuke _The Look._ Sasuke hated when he did that.

“Needed a reprieve already?”

“Am I not allowed to have coffee with my brother?”

Itachi raised an eyebrow. “So soon after moving in? I would think you too busy.”

“I’d always make time for you.”

“Hmm.” He leaned back. “What is this about, Sasuke?”

Sasuke stared into his brother’s eyes and sighed. He looked to the ceiling, eyeing the wobbly ceiling fan. Where was he supposed to start?

“It’s _them,_” he explained eloquently. “They’re.. somehow both better _and_ worse than I expected.”

Itachi’s second eyebrow rose to meet the first.

“Haruno,” Sasuke said. “You were right about her scores being middle-of-the-road. She has good output, but I can’t quite gauge how multifaceted she _is._” He decided _not_ to mention how Sakura had left him speechless. “They’re both lacking in creativity. And they’re _Inventors._”

“Did you expect anything more?” Itachi asked.

“Yes,” he replied bluntly. “This is the top Academy in the country. What’s the point of attending if you don’t have _finesse? Or a brain?_”

“Careful, Sasuke. Your big head must be painful for your neck.”

“Shut up Itachi. You know what I mean.”

“Well, have you tried showing them what _you_ can do?”

Sasuke stiffened. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Oh, Sasuke,” his brother sighed. “How do you expect your teamwork to improve if you won’t even work with them? Do they even know what you’re capable of?”

He shifted uncomfortably. This was _not_ how he expected their conversation to go. “I’m sure
they’ve heard the rumors.”

“Why not show them the real thing?”

“Are you really suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?” Sasuke narrowed his eyes. “You know what happens when Intercoms use their powers on other people. I could be expelled if something goes wrong! How am I supposed to just whip out my powers on a whim?”

“You’re going to have to get used to it. Combat training requires monitored use.”

“No. I.. this is beside the point. This isn’t what I came for. I need..”

He sucked in a deep breath. He hated asking Itachi for favors—hated living in his heritage’s shadow, as powerful as was. But how else was this going to work?

Who else was going to help them at this point? With Naruto Uzumaki on his team?

“I need a sponsor,” Sasuke said. “And I need you to tell me who to ask.”

Itachi exhaled slowly. He tapped one finger carefully against the polished table. “I didn’t think you to be the one pulling favors.”

“It’s dire,” he admitted. “I don’t see how else we’ll find one. We don’t have anything in common, and right now Uzumaki’s scores make him deadweight. Nobody will want to vouch for us.”

Itachi hummed thoughtfully. The waitress, sensing a break in their tense conversation, finally came by to take their orders. Both brothers ordered without even looking at the menu; they’d been Hinami’s regulars for years and knew exactly what they liked.

When Sasuke’s espresso arrived, he didn’t even bother sugaring it. He took a giant, steaming mouthful—burns and all—and swallowed. Itachi’s nose wrinkled, but he refrained from saying anything. The battle over Sasuke’s tastes (and sense of patience) had long stalemated.

“Well,” he finally said, when both of their cups were half-empty. “I do know one man who might take you.”

Sasuke looked up from his cup. “Who is it?” he demanded.

“An old coworker of mine. He’s become a permanent professor—a partial retirement, if you will.” Itachi paused. “He’s.. a character in his own right. Yes. I think he’ll take you all on.”

“A name, Itachi,” Sasuke pushed. “I need a name.”

Itachi smiled.

“It’s the night before instruction begins. Are you sure he’s going to be here?”

“I know what Itachi said,” Sasuke repeated. “He’ll be here. We just have to ingratiate ourselves somehow and the deal is done.”

Itachi hadn’t been clear on exactly how that was supposed to happen—he’d seemed bafflingly confident that this professor would sponsor them—but Sasuke figured it couldn’t be that difficult. He had to be a real sucker to take on Naruto, right?

And you, Itachi had not-so-helpfully pointed out. You’re on the same team. Your strengths are each
The idea of holding hands and singing kumbaya with Naruto made Sasuke vaguely ill, but at this point he would fake any friendship to get a sponsorship. Sasuke was going to graduate with highest honors. He would drag the others behind like deadweight if he had to.

The building they’d been directed to was nestled behind the Academy’s main library and a nearby residency office. Dead needles were strewn over the cobblestones; the air hung thick with old smoke—a fireplace somewhere, or a serious cigarette problem. Sasuke tried not to sneeze.

“The lights are off,” Naruto noted. “Are you sure he’s here?”

Sasuke deigned not to answer. He eyeballed the pathway. If this building was used daily like Itachi said it was, then how did anyone get inside?

His gaze strayed to the trees. Their branches were similarly ungroomed, thick and snarled enough to block the dying sunlight.

And low enough to climb.

He turned to Sakura. “Can you get us to the second floor?”

“What am I, your on-demand garden service?” Her nose wrinkled at his glare. “Okay, fine. Stand back.”

She stepped forward, fingers trailing over the snarled lower branches. Instantly they greened under her touch: new leaves growing, extending upwards, curling like a slow, curved staircase. Several thick roots burst from the grass to form lower steps. The last branch stopped inches from a second-story window.

“Ladies first,” she said, and stepped forward.

The windowpane was opaque with grime. Old litter smeared the sill, clogging the drain with dead leaves. It almost looked unused—if not for the shiny, obviously-oiled hinges.

_Bingo._

Sasuke’s expertise lied within the mind, but that didn’t stop him from picking up a couple tricks alongside his education. Breaking and entering, for example.

Within seconds he’d jimmed the outer lock. The window slid up soundlessly, clicking into place. _Perfect._

“What the hell,” Naruto hissed. “Where’d you learn to do _that_?”

“Ninja school,” he muttered, and jumped inside.

The building’s interior belied its usage. Even with heavy dust over the windows, the floor was perfectly swept. There wasn’t garbage on any of the desks; the bookcases, thickly stocked, were polished to perfection. A tiny doggie bed sat in the corner.

“That’s weird,” Naruto remarked. “I thought you said—”

_Snap!_

Sasuke lunged sideways on reflex. Sakura screamed. Naruto yelped like a kicked dog, flaring
bright enough to blind a small animal.

Cord swung inward. Something tight viced over Sasuke’s limbs; he flipped end-over-end like Charlie Brown until he found himself staring at the floor.

Suspended.

“Oh my god,” Sakura breathed. “We were booby-trapped?”

They hadn’t just been booby-trapped—they were clumped together like fresh catch in a fishing net. Sasuke could feel Naruto’s elbow digging into his spine.

Slowly, a single shadow slipped out from behind the furthest bookcase. Sasuke glared as the figure came within Naruto’s glowering halo. A book lowered from its face.

“Excuse me,” Professor Hatake said. “Who the hell are you?”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Questions? Please feel free to leave feedback; it’s really important to me!

This chapter’s track: Kiss With A Fist - Florence + The Machine

Tumblr
Chapter Notes

Happy 2020 everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“There seems to be a mistake,” Sakura pleaded. “We’re really not who you think we are.”

“Yeah,” Naruto said. “I don’t even like stealing.” Sasuke rolled his eyes.

Was this Itachi’s form of a joke? He’d come to his brother in all seriousness, desperate for a sponsor—but to send them to this?

Professor Hatake was dressed in the ugliest pair of camo khakis Sasuke had ever laid eyes on. With flip-flops. And a trucker hat with a pug stitched into the brim.

With his shoes propped on the desk and his erotica open in one hand, their new sponsor looked like the newest basket case to escape ANBU facilities.

Clowns, Sasuke thought miserably. Clowns everywhere.

“We don’t want your garbage collection,” he said instead. “What would we even do with that much porn? Open a gift shop?”

“How should I know?” Professor Hatake sniffed. “I’m not the one who stole it.”

Sasuke’s eyes threatened to roll right out of his skull.

“Look, Mr…” Sakura’s eyes flit to his name plaque. “Kakashi. I’m a lesbian.” She paused, eyebrows raising. “I wouldn’t touch your hetero porn with a ten-foot-pole. Or any pole, for that matter. Sir.”

“Oh.” Grey eyes trailed over Sasuke and Naruto. “I see. So then what are you here for?” As if they hadn’t already told him four times since he cut them out of the net. Sasuke sucked a deep breath through his teeth.

“A sponsorship, sir,” Naruto said. “We need one in order to be eligible for the duration of our education.”

“A sponsor. Hmm..” The professor spun in a slow circle. “Sounds boring.”

Sasuke’s eye twitched. “Itachi said you had already essentially agreed. Was he wrong?”

“Itachi? Oh yes, him.” He jerked to a stop and leaned in. “You look almost identical. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Just count back from ten, Sasuke told himself. His eyes strayed to the professor’s novel. A woman with giant breasts stared back up at him. Okay, twenty.

“With all due respect, sir.” His eyes narrowed. “We need the sponsorship. And my elder brother
directed me towards you. He said you were a respectable teacher, and that you’d be able to help us out. Problems and all.”

“Goodness,” Professor Hatake said. “Itachi really said that? I’ll have to write him a Christmas card or something.” He squinted at the three of them. “Yeah, alright. I’ll do it.”

“Yes!” Naruto hollered. “Thank you sir, you really won’t regret this.”

“I hope not,” Professor Hatake replied dryly.

That was it? Sasuke thought incredulously. He really is a bigger fool than I thought.

He curled and uncurled his fingers in his lap, sighing deeply.

They’d done it. There was no turning back from their partnership, now.

So why did it feel like they’d lost somehow?

Sleep was an uneasy reprieve from Sasuke’s worries. No matter how much he tried, he couldn’t get comfortable enough to fall asleep. He watched, exhausted, as the hours ticked away on his alarm clock. Naruto snored quietly from across the room.

Must be nice, being able to sleep like that.

The sponsorship was taken care of. Sasuke’s team was cemented, now: an amalgamation of Konoha’s finest and unrefined, mixed into the dictionary definition of mediocre. Itachi had sung praises about Kakashi Hatake; now, all Sasuke could feel was doubt. Cold, hard, doubt, like a rock in his stomach.

Uchiha’s don’t make do, Father had once told him. They make change.

But how was Sasuke supposed to change the mess he’d been given?

He sighed, squeezing his eyes shut, and willed himself to fall asleep. He’d have to think of a solution in the morning.

The first day of instruction started like any other miserable day: with a massive, throbbing migraine.

Sasuke squinched his eyes open. Naruto was already up across the room, fumbling with his dresser with his eyes closed. He watched the blond bumble around before shuffling out the door. A moment later the shower started up.

Sasuke glared at the clock. He hadn’t slept more than four hours—a new record for this month. Itachi wouldn’t be pleased.

He sloughed off his comforter—the bedroom was freezing again, damn Naruto for always opening the windows—and shuffled out to the kitchen.

Fog hovered beyond the sliding glass, pillowing the trees in soft gauze. The windows had already condensing with dew; beyond them, Sasuke could see the sky melding into morning pastels. All in all, it wasn’t the worst way to wake up every morning.

But the men at the table made it a little harder to bear.

“Look what the dog dragged in,” Kiba crowed. Cereal dribbled out of the corner of his mouth onto the table. Beside him Neji stared longingly into his coffee; Sasuke could only presume he was
ogling his reflection again.

Sasuke’s migraine throbbed. “I don’t think you know how that idiom works.”

Kiba smirked around his spoon. “Who cares?”

Choji, ever one to attempt niceties even at ass o’clock, waved. “There’s extra cinnamon bread in the bread box,” he said. “If you want it.”

“I don’t like sweets.”

Choji’s shoulders sagged. “Right,” he muttered, and scuttled out of the kitchen.

“Asshole.” Kiba glared, but the effect was ruined by his milk moustache. “He was trying to be nice to you.”

“And I was stating a fact,” Sasuke grumbled. He was too tired for this shit. “Who let you out of the doghouse anyway? Don’t you have somewhere else you have to be?”

“Not until 9:30.”

Neji sighed deeply. “I can already tell today’s going to be a pain. I woke up with eye bags.”

If Neji had eye bags, then Sasuke sported eye suitcases the size of Kentucky. “You’re telling me,” he muttered, and pulled out his instant oatmeal.

The first day of classes was uncomfortable—that is to say, that the year started like any other. Even in massive crowds, students took pains to give Sasuke a wide berth. It was like he had a contagious disease, or really bad body odor.

*It’s normal,* he chanted to himself. The ogling stares and whispers were normal. *Just ignore them. And shouldn’t you be used to it after all this time?*

He moved through hallways and down paths with his chin high. It didn’t do any good to react; all he could do was give everyone the cold shoulder. One person cursed him as he passed. Another woman even crossed herself when she saw him coming. As if *that* would hold him back.

His MWF schedule was neatly arranged: Psychic Social Ethics in the mornings, Psychic Balancing in the afternoons, and Team Strategy in the evenings. Field Simulation—the class he disliked most, if only because he’d be working with his *team* nonstop—was blocked for Tuesdays and Thursdays instead. He’d taken pains to leave a gap for his meals, and time for exercise before dinner. Sasuke had planned everything perfectly.

Or so he thought.

One thing he *hadn’t* planned for was walking into Ethics and finding himself face-to-face with Professor Hatake.

Sasuke looked behind himself. He looked back. Professor Hatake stared unimpressed from over his bodice-ripper novel.

“You’re joking,” Sasuke said.

“Am I?” Hatake remarked serenely. “I don’t seem to be laughing.”
“You laugh at your own jokes?”

“Who else is going to?”

Sasuke frowned. He’d been hoping Ethics would be taught by someone competent. The class description had captivated him from first browse; Itachi had even recommended it.

Yet another joke played on me. Sasuke was beginning to wonder if he’d slighted his brother unknowingly.

“Take a seat,” Professor Hatake suggested. “You’re blocking the doorway with your bad vibes.”

Sasuke rolled his eyes and slouched into the third row.

It didn’t take long for other students to arrive. Soon the room was filled with raucous chatter, the occasional laugh booming through. Sasuke sank further into his seat.

And then, at 8:59—less than a minute before the lecture was scheduled to begin—a horribly familiar head of blond hair burst through the doorway.

Oh no, Sasuke thought. You’ve got to be kidding me.

Naruto squinted out over the sea of students. Sasuke could hear people calling for him, their laughter echoing off the walls. Naruto fielded greetings with a blinding smile of his own. He glimmered under the attention like a well-lit disco ball.

And then his eyes alighted on Sasuke.

Don’t, Sasuke tried to tell him with his mind. Don’t you dare. You have your own friends to sit with. Don’t—!

Naruto plopped down next to him.

“Wow,” he breathed. “How lucky! There’s open seats on either side of you!”

Sasuke glared at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Who would’ve guessed, right?” His roommate continued. “Our sponsor as a teacher. That’s some good luck—I bet we could gain extra favor, or something. Is that allowed?”

“I don’t want the favor of some slack-off pervert,” Sasuke muttered. Naruto laughed, sparkling.

“Maybe you’re right,” he agreed. “There are probably rules against it anyway.”

Sasuke eyeballed him from his peripheral. Naruto was way too chipper for 9AM. And wasn’t he supposed to be in another class anyway?

“It got cancelled,” he explained. “I had to switch last minute.”

“And you chose this one?”

“Ah, well.” Naruto rubbed the back of his head. “I kind of closed my eyes? And picked blindly?”

Sasuke stared. Never mind the pains he’d taken to get everything exactly right; people like Naruto were playing Russian Roulette with their semester schedule. Of course.
“It’s lucky, actually,” he went on. “Because now I have another class with you. You’re a good note-taker, right? I can study with you.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that,” Sasuke replied stiffly.

Naruto waved a hand. “But you’ll do it, right? Please?”

Sasuke glared. It wasn’t like he had a choice. If he let Naruto fail, then they would both look bad. He was really already getting to hate this team thing.

Sasuke turned away, grunting. “If you don’t pay attention, that’s on you,” he growled. “Don’t talk to me during lecture.”

“As if I’d want to,” Naruto mumbled.

Sasuke’s temper flared, but he couldn’t reply before the lights dimmed. Instantly the class fell into a hush. Gone was their professor’s novel; the man at the podium was all business, dark eyes trained on the crowd.

“Good morning,” he said, “and welcome to Psychic Social Ethics.”

Sasuke had to begrudgingly admit: when Professor Hatake was serious about something, he was tolerable.

Sure, the man was an incorrigible lout off the clock. He walked around essentially reading porn. But once the podium lights came on, Sasuke could appreciate how his sponsor took on a different persona. He became someone else entirely.

“The sixth sense is impossible to prematurely determine,” Hatake said. “There is no feasible way—yet—to ascertain a child’s aptitude or abilities before birth. And yet, already we see signs of society attempting to control psychic outcome. We enforce the belief that greater ability is better—that a powerful child has more possibility than its peers. We separate children as early as preschool into tracks according to a sense that should have no bearing over social life. We encourage relationships between people of a certain.. caliber, treating those bloodlines with far more care than others.”

He paused, looking out over the crowd. “We send our best—that is, what we have arbitrarily believed to be best—to special schools where they are encouraged to do far more, achieve greater heights, with their lives. But what of the ninety-five percent that don’t fall into this category? What amount of attention do they deserve? And what of the rare few who are favored?

“What does that make us?”

The room stirred uncomfortably. Sasuke’s fingers curled over the edge of his desk. He could see people turning to look at him. Naruto had gone deadly still.

“Today, as groundwork, we’ll be discussing the primary psychic laws and affects governing our society. Now, as you can see by this graph..”

“That was wild,” Naruto murmured, after they'd finished. “I feel like my brain is going to explode.”

“That’s because it’s too small,” Sasuke muttered absently. Secretly he agreed—Hatake’s class was nothing like what he expected. He hoped the man wouldn’t be quizzing them on lecture material
During meetings, because the info felt like it was leaking out of his ears.

The sun had emerged while they were inside. Now, slipping out into Namikaze Plaza, Sasuke could appreciate how the evergreens filled the air with sweet, heady pine. There were no traces of earlier fog; in its absence, the flowers had begun blooming, filling lawns with the low hum of bees.

“So,” Naruto said. “Where are you going?”

Sasuke cast him a suspicious glance. “Why?”

“What, I’m not allowed to ask about my roommate?”

He turned to squint. “No.”

The blond shrugged. “I have Sense Scientifics in an hour,” he offered, “over by the main library. You wanna come?”

Who was Naruto kidding? They had one class together and suddenly the guy wanted to be best friends or something. “No,” Sasuke sniffed. “I’m busy.”

“Suit yourself then.” Naruto cocked his head and smiled. “I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Whatever.”

Sasuke wasn’t sure what to make of his other classes. He’d hesitantly signed up for something called Psychic Balancing. What with the description—the separation of mind and soul had been a key line in the advertisement—he was expecting absurd hippie shit. But hey, it filled an awkward spot nothing else had been available for. The least he could do was be invested.

Professor Kurenai was exactly as he suspected: lithe, airy, and firmly rooted in spiritual awareness. Sasuke found himself sitting in a circle of desks as soft alternative played through classroom speakers. There was a grand total of one face he recognized—the Intuit girl, Hinata—but Sasuke would rather gut himself than sit with her. She looked terrified at the sight of him anyway.

The professors on campus were a mixed bag, generally. Many of them were specially stationed at the Academy to recruit potentials into ANBU or similar high-level agencies. Sasuke couldn’t quite pin where Kurenai originated, but her scarlet wrap-dress spoke a thousand words.

Or perhaps just one: Creator.

“Good morning class,” she announced when the hour hit. There couldn’t be more than twenty of them in the room. “Welcome to Psychic Balancing: Mental Versus Physical Approach. We’ll be delving into the various responses of the psychic sense this semester, as well as building on personal strengths and weaknesses concerning psychic reaction. I expect you all to be signed up for Field Simulations, with Professor Gai?” Murmurs of assent echoed. She nodded. “Excellent. The skills you learn here will be valuable in both his course and in the field, regardless of where you end up. Shall we begin with introductions?”

Sasuke cringed internally. Always the damn introductions. He could already see the students around him eyeballing him like he was going to jump up and maim them. If only.

He leaned back and sighed. It was going to be a long semester.
Sasuke was done with everyone by lunchtime. Sure, people’s aversion to him was normal—you could even call it average, considering the stigma Intercoms typically faced—but it didn’t make life any easier. He’d almost forgotten about being a pariah while holed away with Itachi. House plants couldn’t give you the stink eye for merely existing.

The closest dining hall to Professor Kurenai’s was the Senju Hall.

Built from industrious concrete and lathered in moss, Senju Hall housed the largest dining commons in the entire Academy. Their salad bar was also the best. Sasuke always tried to snag a meal when he was around; pariah or not, nobody was going to get between him and his fresh tomatoes.

Lunch for the day was limp spaghetti and meatballs or corn chowder. Sasuke decided to just make himself a sandwich. He wasn’t in the mood for food poisoning, and the lunch ladies disliked him almost as much as the students anyhow.

Senju Hall’s lower floor was filled with floor-to-ceiling windows and polished wood tables. Sasuke slid into one of the smaller ones overlooking the plaza and settled down to eat.

Or at least he would have, if he didn’t hear a familiar voice.

“Twice in one day? Who would’ve guessed?”

Sasuke glared at his water. Prisms reflected back at him. He sighed deeply.

“Don’t look so put out,” Naruto said. He slid into the seat across from Sasuke with ease, dropping a giant plate of spaghetti and garlic bread. The smell overpowered Sasuke’s nostrils like poison gas. He wrinkled his nose.

“Can’t you sit anywhere else?”

“Sure,” Naruto said. “But why not sit with my teammate? You know, since we’re a team and all?”

Sasuke’s eye twitched. “Is this how you ingratiate yourself to people? By bugging the shit out of them? We live together. I don’t need to team with you any more than I already do.”

“Aw, don’t be such a sour-puss. Here—have some garlic bread.”

Sasuke stared down at the soggy breadstick. It looked like solidified baby vomit.

“Pass.”

To Sasuke’s surprise, Naruto didn’t talk incessantly during the meal. He certainly had a lot of admirers—it was disgusting how many times he said hello with his mouth full—but nobody ever pulled him away. He seemed almost comically serious about eating his spaghetti as fast as possible. It was impressive, in a gross kind of way.

They both finished with twenty minutes to spare before their third class: Team Formation and Strategy with Professor Asuma.

This class was more familiar to Sasuke. He’d taken the prerequisite just the semester before with Professor Iruka. The only difference between then and now, it seemed, was the annoying presence of two extra bodies in his game plan. Teammates.

They met in front of a smattering of classrooms at the north end of campus. There, the Academy’s
open terrain butted right up against academic buildings. It was one of the simultaneously beautiful and bizarre things about the Academy: there were no fences or gates anywhere that didn’t house the Chancellor. Nature flowed freely into habitation.

“Hey,” Sakura greeted. “You guys come from Senju?”

Naruto nodded. “Grabbed lunch. You?”

“Had class. Psychic Healing Methods.” She sighed. “I haven’t had lunch yet, actually.”

“Maybe you should’ve planned your classes better,” Sasuke offered.

Sakura smiled. “Maybe you should keep your opinions to yourself,” she said sweetly.

“I was just giving advice.”

“Yeah well, I didn’t ask for it.”

Sasuke scowled. “Fine. Don’t bitch so much then. You’re clogging up the air.”

Sakura’s face turned pink. “*Excuse* me? You want to say that again, asshole?” She raised a fist, eyes darkening.

“Bring it on,” Sasuke snarled.

“Hold on a sec,” Naruto interrupted, shoving between them. “How about we *bring it off*.”

“Oh, so now the talking clown is going to preach to us,” Sakura hissed.

Naruto flared dangerously. “So that’s how it is? Who’s the guy trying not to make us look bad?”

“Idiot,” Sasuke growled. “You’re the *reason* we look bad!”

“Well you’re—”

“Ookay,” Choji said, appearing out of nowhere. “Let’s all take a deep breath now.”

Shikamaru followed on his heels. He eyed them all mildly, one eyebrow lifting. “How do you guys already hate each other? That’s kinda impressive.”

“Oh don’t you try teaming with these bird-brains,” Sakura grumbled, smoothing her hair. “It’d be enough to put a saint down under.”

They all took a moment to collect themselves. Sasuke caught the other teams suddenly trying very hard not to make eye contact.

“It’s just about time,” Shikamaru said, checking his watch. He sighed. “Hiking miles into the wilderness on the first day? What a *drag*.”

“At least we won’t have to hit the gym after,” a blonde girl said, walking up to them. Sasuke remembered her from the first day. *Ino.* “We can go straight to the showers.”

“Yeah, if Asuma doesn’t want to have another team meeting after.”

Naruto’s eyebrows raised. “Professor Asuma is your sponsor?”

Shikamaru half-shrugged. “He approached us Tuesday. The papers are being processed.” Ino
nodded.

“Lucky,” Sakura said. “I’ve heard he’s pretty nice.”

Ino smiled. “He’s got a lot of good ideas. We hit the jackpot.”

Professor Hatake hadn’t even signed anything, much less offered ideas. Sasuke could see the wheels turning in Sakura’s head and knew she thought the same.

_No wonder he agreed so easily_, Sasuke thought irritably. So the sponsorship was already becoming a bust. Great.

They were interrupted from their thoughts by Professor Asuma’s arrival. He was a solid wall of a man, all smiles and corded muscle under khakis. Sasuke could see him running a summer camp.

“Greetings,” Asuma said. “Are we all here? You brought your blank maps and supplies?”

A hum of assent arose.

“Good.” He straightened, shouldering his pack. “Let’s get going, then. I expect you’re already in your teams, yeah? If you didn’t get the email, our first exercise is to map this whole stretch of land in an outward square five miles. You’ll be graded on accuracy, teamwork methods, and speed.” He checked his watch. “I expect you back by the time the sun sets. You may start now.”

The lack of introductions was honestly a relief, though Sasuke saw other teams looking disconcerted. The less conversational skills he had to use, the better.

Off they strode into the wood. The sun had reached its pinnacle earlier; now, in the early afternoon, shadows filled the forest floor. The air felt pleasantly crisp and cool. Sasuke imagined these backwoods didn’t get as much sun as main campus; with how thick the overhead branches were, little sunlight filtered through.

The temperature would probably drop closer to sunset. Sasuke hoped Sakura packed herself a thicker jacket. He certainly wasn’t offering his.

“We should go about this strategically,” Sakura suggested after a few minutes. They’d split away from the other teams already, following the backwoods perimeter eastward. “Like going in parallel lines. That way we don’t miss any crucial landforms.”

“Or we could split up and cut through the middle,” Naruto offered. “It’s faster that way.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Remind me _not_ to vote you captain on practice missions.”

To be honest, Sasuke wouldn’t mind separating. He felt itchy after being under Naruto’s scrutiny for so long; it was like being followed around by a particularly pitiful puppy. A puppy that gave idiotic opinions.

“Let’s just start in one direction,” he sighed. “Right?”

“Left,” Sakura offered.

“Straightaways?” Naruto raised his eyebrows.

Sasuke sighed even louder.

_There are worse ways to spend the afternoon_, he thought. _I could be cleaning toilets right now._ Or
listening to Naruto belch the alphabet again. He repeated the mantra to himself as they moved deeper into the woods.

Evening approached all too quickly.

Sweat cooled beneath Sasuke’s clothes, forcing goosebumps to the surface. The terrain had quickly roughened once they abandoned civilization; now, roughly four miles out from their starting point, the ravines and growth snarled thick enough to struggle through.

Sakura’s sense could’ve been helpful—if she was better about prolonged use. The consequences of overusing one’s sense were ugly; it was best to avoid sending her to the hospital for a first-day assignment.

Even if Sasuke wished they could use it.

“Sakuraaa, how much longer?”

“I told you: we’re on our way back now. Just hold on, okay?”

“But Sakura, my legs hurt.”

“And I have a giant forehead,” she snapped, wiping sweat away. “We all have our flaws. Just shut up and keep walking.”

Naruto grumbled inaudibly from the back. He’d been so eager to stride ahead at first. Now he lagged behind like a stray sheep. Sasuke would have laughed if he had the breath to spare.

Konohagakure’s forest was beautiful. The trees surrounding campus were interminably old and incredibly tall, with gnarled roots that extended longer than Sasuke’s body. During the day they were incredible to behold, standing sentinel over the Academy with their shivering needles.

But during the night, the forest became its own: a living, breathing creature with unpredictable will. Sasuke had heard stories of students who’d wandered out too far; they turned up weeks later absolutely mad—if they came back at all.

Everyone had their own theories. The Academy had hidden research facilities. The trees cast illusions. Rogue Intercoms wandered the forest.

Sasuke personally believed anyone stupid enough to go camping in the wild had it coming. The Academy was very clear about how far was too far. If you drifted out into the ether, it was on you.

Five miles was well within the safety limit. Even so, the way the trees shuddered around them made Sasuke’s hair stand on end. Whispers echoed around them; an owl hooted. Wood creaked and groaned.

And then Naruto began to scream.

“Get down!” Sasuke barked and ducked. Sakura flattened herself behind a tree. Naruto’s screams rose in pitch behind them. Underbrush snapped; birds flew.

Then silence.

Sasuke slowly lifted his head. The forest was still and utterly serene. He breathed slow and even, just the way Iruka had taught them. You couldn’t make a sound.

Shuffling elsewhere—Sakura slowly emerging. A pink head poked out from behind a cluster of
roots. Sasuke waited until she’d fully stepped out to make his own appearance.

And stopped.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Kakashi Hatake lifted an eyebrow. “What, not happy to see me?”

“Not particularly,” Sasuke said. “Where’s Naruto?”

Hatake pointed up. They looked.

“Wow,” Sakura said. “When did you have the time to set that up?”

He shrugged half-heartedly. “A few minutes?”

“Shouldn’t we be trying to get him down?”

Hatake waved the thought away. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll cut him down in a moment.” He straightened, eyes darting over the both of them. “My. You both look worse for wear.”

“I wonder why that would be,” Sasuke deadpanned. “Is there something you wanted to say?”

“So rude, Sasuke. And here I was, coming to remind you all about our meeting tomorrow.”

“What?” Sasuke thought back through his emails. “What meeting?”

Hatake brought his thumb up to his mask. “Oh dear,” he said. “Maybe I forgot to send it after all. Well, now you know. A complex, eight o’clock. Don’t be late.”

“What are we doing?” Sakura asked. “Are you teaching us something?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. Be sure to remind Naruto too.” Professor Hatake gazed up. “Once I get him down.”

Sakura huffed. “How’d you know where to find us anyway? How did you get out here?”

Two grey eyebrows waggled. “No time for questions,” he said. “I’ve got places to be. Here he comes.”

“Who—”

Hatake darted away. Sasuke barely moved back in time to avoid Naruto flying into the bushes. He awoke with a noisy squawk, smattering prisms everywhere.

“What the hell was that?”

Sakura pursed her lips. Sasuke sighed, looking skyward.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ll explain on the way.”

Dreams were fickle things. Their flow followed rhyme nor reason; they rippled, changing, at the barest of thoughts.

But there was always that something—a tickling, a blurriness, a calling—that made Sasuke know: he wasn’t inside himself anymore.
The dream had been innocent enough. Sasuke didn’t know why he was making stew, but the image was clear. He stood in his childhood home, stirring at the stove. Dinner was soon.

And then the edges rippled. White tile blurred and bled; yellow paint smeared, blending and mixing until it wasn’t paint but plaster. Brass cutlery shone from wall hangings above a wooden kitchen table. The kitchen was suddenly much smaller, homier, cluttered in a way that comforted Sasuke somehow.

But it was not his own.

Vegetables lay out all over meager counter space: carrots and seaweed, green onion and garlic. A wooden cutting board spread next to the stove, speckled in a rainbow of fresh cuts. There was even tomato.

The soup pot had changed, too: no longer full of stew, the broth had thinned and lightened into something that smelled salty.

*Ramen?* He thought hazily.

Footsteps echoed behind him. Sasuke turned, eyes trailing across an old kitchen island to a stool across it. A person sat at the table, thumbing through a crossword puzzle.

*Oh no. No, no, no.*

Sasuke dropped the spoon. Broth flew everywhere. The person’s eyes lifted, mouth falling into an open *o*.

*Sasuke?*

This was a mistake. He shouldn’t be there—shouldn’t have been *able*. A mistake Sasuke hadn’t made in years. Not since..

*I have to leave.*

*“Naruto,”* he said. *“You have to wake up.”*

The blond’s brow creased. His eyes were so *blue*. Sasuke found he couldn’t look away. *“What?”* he said. *“How’d you get here?”*

*“Naruto,”* Sasuke repeated. *“You need to open your eyes.”*

The plaster rippled. Paint peeled from the ceiling, flaking to the floor. The world tilted.

*“Now, Naruto,”* he snapped.

*“I don’t understand. What—”*

The walls caved in. The world was suddenly bright—too bright—a giant soap bubble popped to reveal—

Sasuke shot up. For a wild moment he thought he was still asleep—his heart beat wildly, throbbing in his ears. He was soaked in sweat.

Across the room Naruto thrashed in his bed. He whimpered softly, sheets rustling as he kicked around.
Sasuke struggled out of bed on jello legs. He clambered blindly through the dark to Naruto’s side. Through the open window he could clearly see the blond’s mouth moving, eyes darting beneath his eyelids. His skin flickered oddly.

A chill crawled down Sasuke’s spine. He’d been afraid of this. But what could he do now?

_Breathe. Breathe. It’s not too late. Just—_

He shook Naruto’s shoulders frantically. The blond fought back, rolling, pulling Sasuke down with him. Sasuke grimaced at the feel of wet clothes, damp sheets.

“Wake up,” he repeated. “Naruto. Wake up!”

Blue eyes flew open.

“suke?” he blinked, stiffening. “Wha’ you doing? Get off me!”

He yanked the sheets. Sasuke flew off the bed. One elbow collided with Naruto’s desk; he swore, curling in on himself. He’d hit his fucking funny bone.

“You asshole,” he snapped. “Fuck, that hurt.”

“What?” Naruto breathed. He shuffled; a lamp turned on, illuminating them both. Sasuke glared up from the floor. “What are you doing down there?”

“I was helping you,” Sasuke snapped. He struggled to his feet, arms shaking. He felt like he’d just run five miles nonstop. “Some thanks this is.”

“I don’t—” Naruto ran a hand through his hair, grimacing. “What was that? Were you really—”

“I dreamwalked,” Sasuke snapped. “I—”

It’d been a mistake. It shouldn’t have happened. Any longer and something irreversible might’ve happened—something Sasuke wouldn’t have been able to fix. Not on his own, anyway.

He would have been expelled immediately. Years of hard work gone to waste over a simple dream.

The idea made Sasuke's stomach roil.

“I’m going back to bed,” he announced. He turned away, walking carefully back to his own bed. Naruto’s lamp stayed on even after he tucked himself back in, avoiding the wet spot he’d been lying in. He could see Naruto staring at the ceiling.

_It's not my fault, _he told himself. He rolled over to glare at the wall. _It was an accident. It's not my._

He squeezed his eyes shut. There was no way he was going back to sleep now.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this chapter last year before I hit burnout, but I wanted to hold onto it until I was sure chapter four was going to be done by this month. My goal is to update twice a month, so.. Thank you for your patience!
..And no, Sasuke isn't going to be stinky like this forever. Stay tuned (:  

This chapter's track: Worst in Me - Unlike Pluto

tumblr
“There seems to be a mistake. My son would never hurt someone like that.”

“Ma’am, it’s too late. We already have testimonies. Now if you would please—”

“Sasuke, please. Tell them—”

“No, stop— mom— ”

“Sasuke?”

His eyes flew open.

Naruto peered down at him. “Hey. um, sorry. You were talking in your sleep.”

Sasuke sat up. His eyes felt like someone had poured a whole sandcastle into them. “What did I say?” God, had he called for his mom out loud? He really hoped not.

“I dunno.” Naruto’s eyes slid away to stare at the wall. Sasuke’s heart sank.

“Right.”

His eyes flit to the clock. 7:15. So he’d gone back to sleep after all.

“It’s almost time,” Naruto said. “You know. To meet with Professor Hatake?”

“Right.” Sasuke’s brain wouldn’t stop sticking to his dream. He blinked slowly, tearing his gaze away.

Not a dream, he reminded himself. A memory.

One better left forgotten—not that anyone would allow him to.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m getting up then.”

“Alright.” Naruto paused, running a hand through his hair. “And, uh..”

What could he possibly want now? “Yes?” Sasuke asked impatiently.

Naruto’s mouth twisted. He couldn’t seem to stand looking at Sasuke for longer than a moment before he had to look elsewhere.

So that’s how it is, Sasuke thought bitterly. Alright, fine.

“Forget it,” Naruto muttered. “Just.. I’ll be waiting for you in the living room.”

“Fine.”

The blond shuffled out of the room. Sasuke stared for what felt like forever at his wall hanging, tracing the colorful lines over and over. He sucked in a deep breath and let it out, slow as Itachi had instructed, counting the beats.
In four.

The points gleamed luridly, even in the morning light.

Out eight.

All except the blue star—lone, cold in its isolation. The irony wasn’t lost on Sasuke.

He glanced at the clock again. 7:23. He was running out of time.

It was time to face the music, as they say.

Their walk across campus was done in abject silence.

It was a relief. Sasuke would take birdsong over Naruto and Sakura’s braying any day. The only problem was their demeanor—Naruto’s demeanor. The guy trudged as if someone had ripped his whole night away from him.

Which you did, Sasuke’s brain reminded him unkindly. And then nearly put him into a coma.

The thought turned his stomach. If Sasuke thought he was hated now, public outcry over losing Naruto Uzumaki, Konohagakure’s finest, would send him into the stix. Or an early grave.

If only he were so lucky.

But for whatever reason, Naruto seemed determined to clam up. He brushed off Sakura’s needling the whole way to the A complex with waves and half-hearted smiles. He was a horrible liar; Sasuke could see it, and Sakura obviously could too. But she didn’t quite know what was wrong, and the longer they could keep it from her, the better.

Naruto wasn’t afraid of Sasuke for some unfathomable reason. Sakura was. Sasuke was sure she’d report him the second she caught wind of something dangerous. All it would take was a simple slip-up.

All he had to do was make sure Naruto didn’t blab. Easy enough. Probably.

They were saved from Sakura’s inspection by their arrival.

“Wow,” Naruto murmured. “I’ve never been… so close before.”

Even Sasuke could admit the complex was quite the sight. Between three floors, heavy stone arches, and the thick, green moss smothering most of the exterior, the A complex could have been erected in the Stone Ages and promptly forgotten. Flowers bloomed from hanging lattices; somewhere a fountain ran quietly. The whole place smelled fresh, like an open lawn.

Sasuke had heard plenty about the A complex. It supposedly housed the most important—and dangerous—of the Academy’s current staff, second only to the Chancellor himself. Those sleeping within its halls held the highest accolades. You had to hold serious medals or a field career a mile long to even chance living inside.

And to think Professor Hatake had told them to just walk in. It was like asking sheep to waltz into a lion’s den.

"Well," Sakura said uncertainly. "I guess we just go in."
The interior courtyard was empty. A single fountain of the Academy’s founder, Hashirama Senju himself, stood in the center. Water spilled freely from his open hands in the shapes of twining branches and vines to splatter into the mosaic bowl below.

Several benches ringed the fountain. Sakura perched on the edge of one of them; Naruto sat beside her.

“T__feel like we should be whispering or something,” Naruto mumbled. He trailed two fingers through the water. “When did he say he’d be here again? 8?”

Sasuke glanced at his watch. 8:05. “He’s late.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Big surprise.”

“How did we get stuck with him anyway?” Naruto complained. “Sasuke, this is your fault.”

Sasuke stiffened. “What? No it wasn’t. Itachi was the one who told me.”

“Itachi,” Sakura echoed. She paused. “That’s.. Your brother, isn’t it?”

Silence stretched between them. Sasuke plucked at a stray thread on his jeans. “Yeah.”

Of course they’d know. He and Itachi had always stuck out like sore thumbs—twin Intercoms, mirrored features. The only difference between them was that instead of manipulating dreams, Itachi manipulated thoughts.

“How does your brother know Professor Hatake?” Naruto asked. “Was he a student of his or something?”

“No.” He could’ve been—if Itachi hadn’t been in specialized classes. “They worked together.”

Naruto’s mouth popped open. “Isn’t your brother barely older than us?”

Sasuke shrugged. “Five years.”

“That’s crazy. Your brother must be crazy good to work with ANBU veterans right out of graduation.”


The truth was that Itachi hadn’t really been recruited at all. The accomplishment looked good on paper—and it was, Sasuke wouldn’t deny that—but Itachi’s future had been spoken for long before he even started his Academy education.

Agreements had been made. Sasuke barely remembered those days: the masked figures in his home, the man who took Itachi outside to speak with him. Father had seemed so proud. Mother had been near tears by the end.

Sasuke wouldn’t understand why until their bags had been packed. The maids had made a game out of it, telling him he was going on a trip. Sasuke hadn’t understood what was happening until everything was in the car and Mother was saying goodbye.

*It’s for your own good,* Father had said.

*It’s to keep you both safe,* Mother had promised.
I’ll miss you, he’d whispered into her skirt. *Mom, you have to come visit. Okay?*

Itachi hadn’t said anything at all.

Homeschooling was different, then. The apartment they learned to call home was nice, if not a little drafty in the winter. They didn’t get extravagant holidays anymore, or chef-cooked meals. Sasuke grew up making the long walk to the Academy and back on weekdays—weekends too, if Itachi needed to study.

There weren’t any kids Sasuke’s age on campus. There were hardly any kids living in the compound either; those that did, avoided him like the plague. But it was fine. Sasuke was used to their behavior even then. It was his normal, ever since—

“Professor!”

Sakura shot up from the bench. “Do you know how late it is? We’ve been waiting for over half an hour!”

Hatake waved a hand. “My mistake,” he said. “I got sidetracked admiring the flowers. This summer is turning out so beautifully, don’t you think?”

Sasuke shook himself and stood. “It would be better if you played your part and showed up on time.”

“Always a sourpuss. How about *you* become the sponsor instead?”

Irritation frothed in Sasuke’s throat. “Let’s just get this over with,” he snapped. “We have class at noon.”

Hatake waved a hand away. “We’ll be done far before then. Let’s go.”

There weren’t many sanctioned training areas on campus. Students either had to be covert about unrestrained sense usage—for example, in a clearing behind their apartment—or use the special student sparring grounds connected to the gym. Other approved areas required instructor clearance, like the East Wing Labs where Professor Kurenai’s class was held.

Or the A complex sparring field.

“Are you sure we’re allowed to be here?” Sakura looked around. “Kakashi, sir, I don’t see anyone on watch.”

“You’re right,” he agreed pleasantly. “Because I’m spotting you.”

Sasuke lifted an eyebrow. “Is that wise?”

“Worried I’m going to let you kill each other?”

“It would make your sponsorship a lot easier.”

“Ahh.” He winked. “But then Itachi’s compliments would go to waste. That wouldn’t be nice of me to make him look bad.”

They came to a stop in the middle of the field. Tall, metal walls ringed the perimeter; pine trees peeked over the edges, scattering needles in the shade.
Kakashi turned to look back at them. “Show me what you can do.”

Naruto looked around. “What, right now?”

“Sure.” Hatake stuck his hands in his pockets. “How’s your hand-to-hand? And your sense output? I want to know what I’m working with.”

So what they’d already tested. Sasuke had a feeling Hatake was going to be unhappy with their results. He sighed, bending into a calf stretch. “Who do you want to watch first?”

“Who said anything about watching?”

“Sir?” Sakura stared through her forearm stretch.

“It wouldn’t be fair to pit you against each other. We have an odd number of students here. So instead…” He smiled. It wasn’t a very encouraging expression at all. “I’ll fight all of you at once.”

Naruto rose from his lunging stretch. He glittered with energy, eyes alight in a way they hadn’t been before. Whatever thoughts had plagued him from the night before were gone in the face of a new challenge.

“You’re on!”

_Oh god._ Sasuke looked between them. _This is either going to go well, or very, very badly._

“Come on!” Hatake crowed. “Is that the best you can do? Get up!”

Sasuke glared from the dirt. Sakura’s vines snarled around him, squeezing the circulation out of his legs. His feet had already gone numb.

Sakura lay unmoving across the clearing. She’d brushed the professor’s shoulder before he swung her into a backflip and promptly knocked her out. Naruto fared no better. He’d also been caught in Sakura’s vine wave, and now sported an impressive clump of dirt on his head. He looked like he was going to puke.

“So that’s it, then?” Hatake pursed his lips. “Wow. you’re all worse than I thought.”

They hadn’t been able to lay a scratch on him. Sasuke wasn’t sure what he’d expected—something flashy, perhaps—but Hatake hadn’t even used his sense. He’d swung in with feet and fists flying and let them fall over themselves trying to knock him out. Sasuke’s face burned with shame.

“Your teamwork is abhorrent,” their sponsor casually remarked. He sat back on a thick root Sakura sprouted earlier. “And your sense is practically infantile. No wonder nobody else wanted to sponsor you. I bet your academic scores aren’t very good either, are they?”

Naruto glared. “What’s it to you?”

“Idiot,” Sasuke hissed. “He’s our sponsor. It’s his business!”

“And yours, now,” Hatake reminded him. “You should be holding each other up, not tearing each other apart trying to get at me. I wonder what your old professors were thinking, making a team like this.” He blew a spit bubble.

Sasuke’s temples throbbed furiously. “Is there anything _else_ you want to say?”

“So what happens now? You just going to dump us like the garbage we are? Hang us out to fucking dry?” Sasuke spat out a mouthful of dirt. He hated this team. He hated this sponsor, this shit card he’d been given, this stupid school—

“None of the above,” Hatake said calmly. “I said I would sponsor you, and I will.”

“It sure doesn’t look like you are.”

“Hmm.” The man rocked back on his heels. “It’s true. I wasn’t sure where to start with you, but I thought you were better than this. I guess I’ll have to actually pull my own weight, won’t I?” He wrinkled his nose. “No wonder Itachi was so nice. I see it now.”

“Is—is that it then?” Naruto squirmed. “Can we.. get up now?”

Hatake’s lips quirked. “You guys get to wake up Sakura. I’m going to go have breakfast.”

“Wh—” Naruto shuddered. “But—” He leaned over and vomited.

“Kakashi—”

The bastard was already gone.

The day only seemed to capitulate from worse to—more worse. Sasuke wasn’t sure which gods he’d angered, but he hoped they had their fill soon. His migraine was becoming permanent.

Fieldwork Simulation was a disaster. Gai was a bulwark of a man with a bowl-cut ugly enough to rival Lee’s. He didn’t speak so much as yell, with great gusto. For the whole two hours.

Yeah. Migraines.

“I can’t feel my legs,” Naruto groaned. He shuffled along like a crippled turtle, caked in dirt and sweat. Sasuke could relate; he felt like he’d been hit by a car. Every muscle in his body screamed.

Sakura squinted through sweat-limp bangs. “I can’t feel anything.”

“Lucky.”

Their first day had been disastrous. Most of the other groups carried some semblance of order—strategies, complementary abilities—that bolstered their early incompetence. Compared to them, Team 7 was horrific. There was a blinding incident that ended up with Naruto losing his food again, courtesy of Sakura.

Yes, Sasuke thought bitterly. Everything is going just fine.

They dragged themselves to Senju Hall. Sasuke took one look at the proffered dish—chicken on greasy pasta—and steered himself towards the salad bar. He’d just make himself something.

Naruto and Sakura silently slid into seats across from him. They all ate in the melancholy silence of soldiers at war, scarfing down juice and salad and hot, cheesy pizza.

Sakura eyeballed Naruto’s plate. “Aren’t you lactose intolerant?”

“Don’t worry about him,” Sasuke mumbled through a cherry tomato. “That’s his problem.”
She pursed her lips. “And it’ll be ours when he shits on the field.”

Naruto choked. “Wh—I wouldn’t do that!”

“You already threw up today,” she pointed out. “Twice.”

“Yeah, but that was your fault.”

She gestured to her filthy clothes. “And this is yours. I was supposed to go grocery shopping this afternoon, you know. Now I have to go home and take a shower.”

“Oh yeah? Well I have dirt in my—”

“Okay,” Sasuke butt in loudly. “I want to finish my food, thanks.”

They dissolved in sulky silence. Sasuke’s salad was deliciously fresh, but he found he couldn’t enjoy it much. The dirt caked in his teeth probably had something to do with that.

After lunch, all that was left was the long walk back to K-30.

The walk across campus was a beautiful one, but almost entirely on an incline. With aching bodies and crushed spirits, even Naruto couldn’t summon enough air for an inane conversation. The world narrowed to the pavement beneath their feet, the soft rush of their exhales into humid air.

And then: home.

“Oh thank god,” Naruto moaned. “I don’t think I’ve ever been happier to see it.”

Even Sasuke could agree. With soft linens hung out to dry and every balcony and window flung open, K-30 looked almost hospitable. Someone on the lower floor had hung out some prayer flags; soft music drifted out over the lawn.

“I guess I’ll see you guys later,” Sakura sighed, making off for her sliding glass.

Naruto and Sasuke trudged up the stairs. Choji must have cooked earlier—the kitchen reeked of onion—but the living room was mercifully empty. Sasuke pushed right on to the hall.

“About earlier—” Naruto began.

Contempt burned like a signal flare through his haze of exhaustion. Sasuke white-knuckled the bathroom door, sucking air through his teeth. His eyes burned behind sweaty eyelids.

If this was only the first week, how was he supposed to pull through for two years?

How is anything ever going to get better? What am I going to do?

He felt like he was going to throw up. Again.

“Don’t bother,” he choked, and slammed the door.

The final kick in the pants was the email Sasuke found after his shower.

iuchiha19@kha.edu

Check my plants for the next couple weeks.
Sasuke stared numbly at his computer screen. Messages like this weren’t a surprise—he’d had his fair share of checking over the past decade—but he hadn’t expected to get one barely a week into the school year.

*War waits for no man,* he thought bitterly, and slammed his computer shut.

Protocol required Itachi’s departures to be sudden and vague; he would disappear sometimes for weeks without explanation. It was a routine Sasuke loathed being familiar with, but a necessary one. It was all necessary.

Or so he was told.

Sasuke was realistic. He knew what sort of missions Itachi went on without details; he knew the danger involved. Even if he never admitted it, there was always a chance that his brother would never return. It was—an inevitability.

He picked forlornly at the table’s chipped paint. It was silly of him to sulk, especially after all these years, but Itachi had been leaving more than usual lately. His trips had gotten longer and longer, and soon—

*Don’t jinx it.*

Itachi was Sasuke’s one confidant. He was the only family—the only *friend*—Sasuke ever possessed. Living without him had been fine when Sasuke didn’t have to deal with anyone else. Now, trapped in an apartment with Uzumaki, living potentially the worst days of his life, Sasuke felt Itachi’s absence like a hole in his head.

Who would he talk to now? How could things get any *worse?*

*It’s just a few weeks,* he told himself. *Probably.*

He pressed his palms to his eyes. The thought wasn’t a comfort.

“The functions of the sixth sense are well-studied,” Professor Hatake droned, “as are the repercussions of overextension. Laws are placed to minimize it, but that doesn’t prevent a culture where overworking is glorified.”

Sasuke thumbed at his desk. Someone had engraved initials into the corner with a heart. The paint was flaking onto his jeans. And.. was that old gum?

He withdrew his hand.

Naruto’s mouth hung wide open next to him. Every so often Sasuke could hear little snuffles and grunts, but he otherwise slept quietly. His determination was almost admirable—if he didn’t snort so loud.

On cue, Naruto jerked; a hog-like noise erupted from his throat. Someone behind them coughed.

“You’d do well to watch yourselves,” their professor went on. “No glory can make up for injuring yourself beyond repair.” He checked his watch. “Class dismissed.”

Students exploded out of their seats. Naruto jerked violently, elbows akimbo; Sasuke narrowly missed losing an eye. He glared at his roommate. 
“Thanks for joining the land of the living.”

“You’re welcome.” Naruto smacked his lips. “Man, class went by fast huh?”

They followed the river of students out front. Naruto plucked at his backpack strap, obviously lost in thought; Sasuke followed quietly behind.

“So, about the other night—"

Sasuke’s stomach dropped. Between the Worst Day Ever and Itachi’s email, he’d placed the dreamwalking incident firmly into a box. He’d almost hoped Naruto would forget about it.

No such luck. Even Naruto, it seemed, couldn’t ignore near-death phenomena.


Blond eyebrows rose. “Okay. But I’m not going to stop asking. It’s..” Naruto squirmed, adjusting his backpack. “I have questions.”

Of course he did. It was only natural—but that didn’t mean Sasuke worried any less.

Naruto would want to know everything. He was like that: asking questions, dogging endlessly until he got what he wanted.

But Sasuke never had to explain himself before. When you were an Intercom, nobody stopped to ask questions. All they needed to know was that you were dangerous. Simple as that.

It was only a matter of time before Naruto learned everything. He’d want nothing to do with Sasuke then—nobody ever did.

*This is my normal.*

Why, then, did the idea hurt so badly?

“Sasuke?”

The low murmurs of discussion stopped. Sasuke looked up from his notebook; he’d finished talking to his partner almost five minutes ago, desperate to get the exercise over with.

Relief warred with wariness. Nobody ever called for him.

“It’s for you,” Professor Kurenai said, gesturing to the phone. “The health center.”

Sasuke frowned. *It couldn’t be—*

*Itachi?*

Fear, cold and slimy, curled in his gut. He reached for the phone with carefully-controlled fingers, eyeing the wall as discussion resumed behind him.

*“Is this Sasuke Uchiha?”*

He licked dry lips. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Ah, good. We have your teammate here—Miss Sakura Haruno? She seems to be experiencing overextension symptoms and needs to be helped home immediately.”
Sasuke paused. “I wasn’t aware I was on Sakura’s emergency listing.”

“Of course. All teammates are. It’s standard protocol.”

The thought of Naruto coming to Sasuke’s rescue wasn’t a pleasant one. “.Right. I’m on my way.”

He hung up. Cold relief washed over him; his fingers trembled as he jammed them through his bangs.

Not Itachi.

Not this time.

“I’m leaving,” he told Professor Kurenai. “I have—a team emergency.”

She nodded, dark eyes wide. “Take care, Sasuke.”

It was only when he was out the door, items thrown haphazardly into his bag, that the nurse’s implications hit him. The relief in his gut soured.

Sense overextension of serious. It wasn’t like overworking a muscle; there wasn’t a hot compress or ice pack you could stick on your brain. All the damage—permanent or not—was inside.

Side effects varied depending on sense. There was the surface level: severe flu-like symptoms, vomiting, feverish chills. The more dangerous symptoms, however, existed underneath. It could take weeks for the brain to recuperate if the injury was bad enough.

Sasuke was no stranger to the signs. He’d been barely eight the first time he’d overexerted himself—just old enough to know he had to work harder, do better, to gain his father’s approval. He’d ended up bedridden for two weeks, wracked with migraines, insomnia, and horrific nightmares when he managed a nap. Paranoia clung to every waking moment; he saw shadows that weren’t there, the bleeding of dreams into reality. It was sheer hell.

Never again did he go so far. But there were other, smaller ways to burn the candle at both ends. Mild insomnia here; a bout of flu there. Small, swimming images in his peripherals before exam periods.

Sasuke was good at ignoring the signs now.

Severe signs of overexertion, the nurse had said. That didn’t clue Sasuke in on what Sakura was dealing with, but he supposed he’d know soon enough.

He ran into Naruto on the front steps of the health center. The other boy was flushed pink, backpack unzipped off one shoulder. The worry visible on his face meshed with another emotion Sasuke was surprised to see: resignation.

What had Professor Hatake called it?

A culture where overworking is glorified.

Naruto didn’t strike Sasuke as the overworking type—but then, Sasuke tried his best not to think anything about his roommate.

He supposed he’d have to watch Naruto better.

“You got the call too?” Naruto ran a hand through sweaty hair. “Man. This sucks, you know?”
We’ve barely started the year.”

Sasuke grunted, holding the door open. “I told her she should change her schedule.”

“Nobody’s going to take advice from a bastard.”

“Better a bastard than an idiot.”

“Listen, you—”

“Can I help you boys?” The front desk nurse peered over spectacles. “You’re making a ruckus in my waiting room.”

“Of course ma’am,” Sasuke replied automatically. Naruto grumbled behind him. “We’re looking for Sakura Haruno? She’s our teammate.”

The nurse looked them up and down. “You’ll have to sign in. She’ll be out in a moment.”

“Thank you.”

The lobby was woefully quiet. They signed in and took seats, staring at the nubby, blank ceiling.

Sakura came out after a few moments. Sasuke stood—and stopped.

“Man, Sakura,” Naruto said weakly. “Are you.. okay?”

It was a stupid question. Sakura was as white as sheet; she hunched in on herself, lips pale, heavily-lidded eyes ringed in bruises. All the life had been sucked out of her.

Rapid overextension, Sasuke realized. Of course. After the day they’d had, she went to her Psychic Healing lab class and probably ended another drastic stunt in a dead faint. The ice pack pressed against her head said it all.

“No sign of a concussion,” the nurse said, “but you should keep an eye on her.” She turned to Sakura. “Eat something light and keep taking the pills we gave you. Until they’re all gone, alright?”

“Yes ma’am,” Sakura whispered. Her voice scraped like dead leaves.

Naruto stepped forward to take her under one arm. Sasuke hovered for a moment at her other side.

“No sign of a concussion,” the nurse said, “but you should keep an eye on her.” She turned to Sakura. “Eat something light and keep taking the pills we gave you. Until they’re all gone, alright?”

“Yes ma’am,” Sakura whispered. Her voice scraped like dead leaves.

Naruto stepped forward to take her under one arm. Sasuke hovered for a moment at her other side.

“Open the door for us,” Naruto suggested. And for once, Sasuke found himself silently obeying.

They slogged back to K-30 without encountering anyone. The girl’s interior was clean and shaded in soft pastels—purples, pinks, and yellows—that draped the couches and spread over table tops. Sasuke smelled lavender.

“Down the hall,” Sakura croaked. She stepped forward out of Naruto’s grip and nearly keeled over before he caught her. “The.. last double.”

They tucked her into bed—or rather, Naruto tucked her in while Sasuke watched. He stood by her desk and ignored his own uselessness while the blond pestered her over what she wanted to eat, where her medicine was, if she needed another pillow.

“I’m fine,” she huffed. “Not dying. You think this hasn’t happened before?”
“That doesn’t make it any better,” Naruto contested hotly. “You look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Just—” He ran his fingers through his hair again. “Let me make you toast before we go? That nurse said to make you eat.”

Sakura dragged the covers up to her nose. “Yeah. Okay.” She paused. “Thanks.”

They left the bedroom door open and backtracked to the kitchen. Sasuke took in the impeccable countertops, the schedules on the fridge. Someone had put up a bunch of flower magnets.

He traced a finger over one. “You’re worried.”

Naruto rummaged through the cupboards quietly. Sasuke watched him take out a loaf of bread and pop two slices into the toaster.

“Wouldn’t you be,” he finally said, “if you knew how bad it could get?”

Sasuke leaned back against the counter. “She’s not there. A couple days of bedrest and she’ll be fine.” He frowned. “It’ll set us back, though. We can’t do any trio maneuvers without her.”

“And that’s all that matters?”

“What else is there?”

Naruto looked up from the fridge. His eyes were startlingly blue in the light, ringed by half-invisible lashes.

Sasuke glared back. “What?”

“Just amazed at how someone like you could ever make friends.”

“I have bigger things to worry about.”

“You’re serious.” Naruto exhaled a laugh. “Wow.”

Sasuke hated how little it look for his roommate to annoy him. “Some of us have futures on the line,” he snapped. “Not that you would understand. You’re practically dead last.”

“Some of us,” Naruto said, infuriatingly calm, “know better than to judge a book by its cover.”

“And you think you’ve got me all figured out, do you? You hardly even know me!”

“I know what you’re trying to do.” He turned, rummaging for a butter knife. “And it won’t work. I’m good at worming into people’s hearts, you know?”


“Something like that,” he agreed. “Hey, bring her this toast, would you? I’m going to make tea.”

Sakura had fallen asleep. Sasuke set the plate between a framed picture and a jewelry box on her dresser. He stopped, eyes flitting to her prone figure, and leaned in for a better look.

It must have been a family picture. Sasuke could see traces of Sakura in the older man and woman, their arms wrapped around each other in obvious adoration. A picnic sprawled out in front of them,
with Sakura wedged between two baskets. She was missing her front teeth.

Something dull pricked at Sasuke’s stomach. He straightened, pushing away the plate.

“Is that for me?”

He froze. “. . . Yes.”

“Thanks.” Sakura shuffled under the covers, rolling to grab a piece. “Ugh. I’m going to get crumbs in my bed.”

“Then don’t eat in it.”

She barked a laugh. “Always the comfort, aren’t you? Asshole.”

“I’m giving you advice.”

“Unsolicited. Unwanted.” She took another bite. “But. thank you for coming to get me anyway.”

Sasuke squirmed. “It’s protocol. I had to.”

“No,” Sakura said. She eyed him thoughtfully. “You didn’t.”

Sasuke didn’t have anything to say to that.

“So.”

“So.”

They looked at each other.

The time had finally come. The door was shut; their apartment, dead-quiet. Sakura lay safe in her bed, resting; she’d promised Ino was returning within the hour.

“Where do you want me to start?” Sasuke finally asked. He drew a leg up on his bed. It was better this way, he thought, sitting in his bedroom corner where nobody could see them. Nobody else was allowed to hear what he was about to say.

Naruto sat at his desk. Having him in Sasuke’s personal space practically gave hives, but it was necessary. God forbid someone like Kiba listen in if they sat elsewhere. “I don’t know,” he said. “Where do you want to start?”

“From the beginning,” Sasuke decided. “That would be. . . best.”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

Would he ever be? Sasuke shook his head, exhaling slowly. His fingers curled into his sheets unconsciously. “Alright. Fine.”

He sucked in a deep breath.

And began.

Chapter End Notes
I indulged myself writing a cliffhanger onto this chapter.. and then immediately added on a short chapter so you guys wouldn't be left hanging. It should be up very shortly. Half of this chapter was written before my lil break, so if there are any inconsistencies in tone, now you know! I tried my best to edit it as best I could.

Comments greatly appreciated!! <3

This chapter's track: Stuck With Me - The Neighbourhood


tumblr
Nobody knew what triggered the sixth sense.

There were a million explanations: astrology, biology, endocrinology. Mental trauma. Diet during pregnancy. A whim.

Nobody knew what decided their future. They simply were.

Sasuke was born a dream manipulator.

He was not the first. Not even close. His family boasted a line centuries old of pure, undiluted Intercom blood—a holdover from a time before, when upper echelons strove to keep different senses apart. There were hundreds of Uchihas: empaths and memory changers, psionic projectors and mental controllers. Sasuke had relatives who could drive someone crazy. He had relatives who could convince people to kill themselves.

And then there was him: barely five and rumpled, tucked away from prying eyes. He had no power. That young, few did. It normally came later.

For him, it came in his sleep.

He closed his eyes one night and dreamed. He was ephemeral, a skittering shadow in the night, rushing along corners and racing over beams. He had no thought except to go.


He remembered little when he woke. He was confused; what five year old dreams of being something else?

He nearly tripped over the mouse. It was small, twitching frantically; it didn’t wake when he lifted it into his hands. He could feel its tiny heart beating away on his fingertips, the way its breath came too quickly.

He knew something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

Itachi found him sobbing in the garden. They didn’t share words; they didn’t need to. Sasuke showed him the sleeping mouse, and his brother knew.

It should’ve been cause for celebration. In their house, it was; Mother acted as if it was his birthday again, and the cook baked him a special bread with maple. He choked on its sweetness.

The mouse died. They buried it under Sasuke’s favorite rosebush, the two of them, and Itachi whispered a few final words to soothe the guilt knotting his brother’s heart.
It never had woken up.

Over the years, Sasuke learned. He learned what it was like to know the dream—gossamer threads, the *knowing* of finding—and how to maneuver within. He learned of his brother’s prowess, the family tradition of excellence he was expected to follow. He learned why none of the staff ever meet his father’s eyes, or spent too long in his mother’s company.

He learned why nobody ever came to play.

There was a boy. Just one; a maid’s son, with curly brown hair and a wide smile. They shared Sasuke’s toys and played on the lawn, lost in easy comradery. They tumbled, end over end, and shared sandwiches over grassy knees by Sasuke’s favorite persimmon tree.

He didn’t realize something was amiss until he startled awake an hour later. The grass under his clothes had gone cold; the sky, dull grey. It was going to rain.

“Renji,” he said. “We better go inside.”

But Renji can’t hear him. He was asleep, shivering violently, and refused to wake no matter how much Sasuke begs. He cried for ten minutes over his friend’s body before someone found them—Renji’s mother.

“Oh-help me,” he gasped. “Something’s wrong. He won’t wake up, and—I’m sorry!”

Renji’s mother fell to her knees without a sound. She tore her son’s body from him, tucking him at her chest. She stared into Sasuke’s eyes with an expression he’s never seen before.

And Sasuke *understood.*

In the end, there were no reparations that could be made. Renji and his mother left within the hour and never returned. Nobody ever said where they went.

A week later, Sasuke learned what an obituary was.

Their picture was one he’d never seen before. They looked like ordinary people, sweetly smiling together, and the ink ran where his tears fell. He couldn’t bear to read the rest. All he could think of were her final words.

_You should have never been born._

Chapter End Notes

Panic Room - Au/Ra

tumblr
For the first time in over a week, Sasuke didn’t dream.

It was a blessing. Lately his nights were plagued by insomnia and anxiety—unending waves that kept him awake until Naruto’s snoring pulled him under. Worries clung like a second shadow: Itachi, his future, their team. Everything was falling apart.

Until.. It wasn’t.

“Did you sleep okay?”

Sasuke swallowed his oatmeal. Naruto always looked like a rumpled puppy in the mornings, all fluffy hair and bright eyes. It was almost nauseating how chipper he was once he got up.

“Fine,” he muttered.

“Good.” His roommate plunked down across from him. “You needed it.”

His kindness chafed Sasuke’s pride. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” A flash of teeth. “Except you’re less bitchy when you sleep. You should do it more often.”

“Idiot,” Sasuke huffed. He scraped at his bowl and ignored how Naruto’s smile lit his whole face up. He was practically glimmering.

So much for pushing him away.

Sasuke didn’t know what he’d expected. He half-hoped Naruto would get the picture once he had explanations—that Sasuke was dangerous, that anyone unprotected ended up braindead. Nobody wanted to be near him. It was normal; Sasuke couldn’t blame them for it.

But no. Naruto had misinterpreted Sasuke’s warning. Was he tone-deaf or just stupid?

“So,” he’d said, when Sasuke’s story finally ended. “You could have killed me?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t.”

The wonder in his voice raised Sasuke’s hackles. “Not yet.”

The blond hummed then, leaning back in Sasuke’s desk chair. He propped his chin on one hand, nose scrunching, fingers combing hair. And then:

“I’ll help you fix it.”

“Naruto,” Sasuke bit out, “it’s not something you can just fix. Did you miss the part where I’ve killed people?”
“All I’m hearing is a kid who didn’t know any better.”

“Then listen up. I don’t want your help. I want you to get lost.”

Naruto had leaned in close enough for Sasuke to count his eyelashes. His skin sparkled, vivid prisms ricocheting off the walls.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Naruto’s voice rose. “I won’t give up on you. If we’re going to be a team, then we have to work this out! You can’t just hide away from us for two years, you know? Shit doesn’t work like that!”

“So what, you’d rather have me kill you in a harebrained experiment? I’d be expelled, dumbass!”

“Not if I can help it,” he replied grimly. Sasuke’s jaw dropped. Naruto was serious about this. “I’m not your charity case!”

“Then do it for yourself,” the blond snapped. “I’m tired of seeing you walk around like you’re scared of your own skin.”

“Wh— I’m not scared, you—”

“Then prove it.” They were nose to nose. Sasuke could hardly see for Naruto’s light, his skin bright as a second sun. “If you’re not scared, then do it.”

“Fuck you,” Sasuke hissed. Didn’t Naruto get it? He was a walking time bomb—a weapon with legs. The Academy had let him in because he was too dangerous to leave alone; he was a liability, a tool they’d shape for their own goals. And what else could Sasuke do but let them?

Where else could he go?

Hatred closed Sasuke’s throat, squeezing his lungs. Naruto would never understand. He was the golden child. “Fuck you, Uzumaki Naruto,” he snarled. “Fuck you.”

“No.” Naruto was dangerously calm. “That’s your job—since you love throwing a pity party so much.”

Sasuke couldn’t help himself. He punched him.

Knuckles bit into Naruto’s left eye. He lurched sideways out of the chair. The desk rattled, books falling, and then a hand closed into Sasuke’s shirt and dragged him down.

It was ugly. Naruto clocked him in the jaw. Sasuke got him in the ribs. Apple-sized bruises erupted between them, blood speckling the floor.

They rolled, grappling, until the bookshelf next to Sasuke’s bed fell onto them.

“You bastard,” Naruto panted. He was half-crushed, hands wrapped around Sasuke’s shoulders. “I won’t let you give up on yourself. You fucking suck, but I won’t. We’re a team.”

“Fuck you,” Sasuke whispered. He couldn’t breathe. There were two anthologies on his ribcage and his right leg was going numb. He hated Naruto. He hated him.

“Promise me.” Naruto rose over him, skin sparkling, teeth bared. Nails pinched Sasuke’s collarbone. “You have to at least try.”
And—well.

Sasuke didn’t know what to do. He was tired, fucking exhausted. His whole life was a crapshoot of mistakes and never being good enough. He was a pariah, an insect the Academy watched like a hawk. Naruto would never know what it was like to be him.

But. Even with the world weighing on him, even with a thousand faces that feared him, Sasuke wanted—

He wanted. And wasn’t that more dangerous than anything he already was?

“I won’t do it for you,” he choked. “This is my choice.”

Naruto’s hands relaxed, then. His eye was already purple; his lip, swollen. He looked like shit—but he was glowing.

“That’s all I wanted,” he said.

Now, bruises and all, Naruto seemed hellbent on including Sasuke. Like he was some sort of pitiful orphan in need of friends. It was nauseating.

“I told Kakashi about Sakura.” Naruto slathered his toast in butter and honey. “He said we should focus on duo conditioning until she’s well enough to join again.”

“Hn.” Figured. The man would make any excuse to skip out on training.

“So,” Naruto went on, “I was thinking..” He crammed toast into his mouth. “We coul’ wor’ on ‘ou.”

“You want to swallow and try that again?”

He rolled his eyes and swigged milk. “I said, we should try working on you!”

Sasuke’s intestines pinched. At this rate, he’d have an ulcer by winter break. “What am I, your pet project?”

“Can it. We have to do something today, right?”

“I was going to study. On my own.”

“Right, well.” Naruto licked his fingers. “Then after that, maybe. Or before? Wait, could we study together for our quiz next week?”

Sasuke snorted. “Worried you aren’t going to sleep through it?”

“Fuck off. We’re a team, you know?”

“And I’m not your mother.” He sat back. The idea of working one-on-one with Naruto.. and his sense. What’s he have planned?

“C’mon, Sasuke. You gave me a fat shiner. The least you can do is help me out!”

“And you bruised both of my legs. It’s even.”

“Bastard.”
“Dumbass.”

“Kiba!”

Sasuke’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. “Speak of the devil.”

“And he shall disappear’, right?” The brunet yanked open the fridge.

“That’s not—” Sasuke sighed. “Whatever.”

“Sasuke’s going to help me study,” Naruto announced. He puffed out his chest. “We have class together.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kiba deadpanned. “Hey, did someone drink all the milk?”

Naruto’s eyes flit to his cup. “Uh. No?”

“Shit.” He slammed the fridge shut. “I’ll let Choji know. He wanted to make milkshakes later.”

Sasuke could almost see Naruto’s ears prick. “Milkshakes? Like—what kind? Chocolate?”

“Dunno. You’d have to ask him.” Kiba trailed out of the living room.

Naruto turned back, eyes bright. “Sasuke. Come with me to buy milk.”

“What? No. Didn’t I already say I was studying today?”

“But we’ll be together! It’s a win-win situation!”

“Idiot,” he grumbled, “the only one winning here is you.”

But Naruto was nothing if not determined. Somehow, despite all of Sasuke’s insistence to leave him behind (including a half-successful escape), he ended up trailing Sasuke to the main library.

Air-conditioning blasted inside. Sasuke savored the air rushing down his neck for a moment, wavering in the doorway before scaling the stairs. Naruto groaned behind him.

“Man, that’s good shit.”

Sasuke’s spot wasn’t really a secret. In fact, he was almost positive that everyone knew it was his. Why else would a corner table in the sun always be empty when the library was packed?

“Nice spot.” Naruto plunked down on the green couch, eyeing the wall-to-ceiling glass.

Sasuke grunted. “Thanks.”

They had a perfect view of the treetops. Sun spilled onto the carpet before them; Naruto pressed his chin into one hand, admiring the swaying needles, eyelids falling to half-mast.

Sasuke kicked him. “Don’t get cozy. We’re here to study, remember?”

“But it’s such a nice day outside!”

He threw a glare over one shoulder as he unzipped his backpack. “You’re the one who insisted on coming along. By all means, feel free to leave.”

“Right, right.” Naruto sighed, slumping. “Okay. Where should we start?”
“Kakashi’s last lecture. You were asleep for it, weren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

Sasuke glared over his laptop.

“..Yes.”

He sighed through his nose. They had a lot of work to do.

Two hours later Sasuke was half-asleep. The sun had begun its afternoon descent, painting the room with golden, syrupy warmth. Naruto’s head bobbed dangerously close to the tabletop. He couldn’t even keep his eyes open.

“I think we’re done for today,” Sasuke muttered. Naruto hummed assent.

He didn’t know what he expected of Naruto’s work ethic—something pitious, if his grades were anything to go by. What Sasuke got was something entirely different.

Nauto’s notes were full of sketches. He remembered all of their vocabulary through symbols—odd twists and stick-figure drawings that made sense in his little brain. His rote memorization was horrific, but given an acted-out situation or a sketch, he could immediately discern the solution.

It was bizarre to say the least. Sasuke was used to his own work, the steady neatness of highlighted words and organized bullets. Naruto’s notebook looked more like he’d shot a bullet through it.

But it worked. They’d gotten halfway done before the sun melted their resolve. Now, with drawings and papers and snack bags (courtesy of Choji) scattered around them, Sasuke couldn’t find it in him to read another word.

“So,” he lifted his head, “why do your grades suck so bad?”

“Wha?”

“Naruto.” The blond cracked open an eye. “Your grades. If you can remember shit like this, what’s the deal?”

“Bad.. test-taker.” He opened both eyes, blinking slowly. “I.. have trouble doing it on my own. It’s impossible to get all my thoughts down when I can’t talk it out. You know?”

Sasuke did. Naruto talked to himself like someone else would carry a conversation. Outside. With multiple people.

Sasuke couldn’t imagine proctors allowing that during exams.

“Well,” he spoke without thinking, “you have me to study with now.”

Naruto’s mouth quirked. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

They paused, gazes meeting across the table.

“So.” Sasuke tore his eyes away, fighting down a sudden, unhelpful flush. “You needed to get milk?”

Naruto’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! Let’s get out of here.” He started cramming stuff into his backpack at
the speed of light.

The shade was blessedly cool. Sasuke stepped from tree to tree, following a shadowy path to the on-campus Quik-Mart. Other students clustered under trees or sprawled out on lawns; their chatter was an easy hum, married with the cicadas’ buzz and distant laughter.

Grocery pick-up was brief. Naruto plucked a gallon of milk (“really Sasuke, who buys a pint?”) and a cup noodle for himself. After a moment’s hesitation, he stopped in the drinks aisle for bottled tea.

“For Sakura.” Naruto paused. “Do you think she’d like lemon or green?”

“I don’t know.”

“What would you get?”

“Green,” Sasuke replied immediately. “It’s my favorite.”

The blond nodded slowly and grabbed them both.

It was only when they’d finally left the store—because of course the cashier knew Naruto and roped him into chatter—that Naruto handed the green tea to Sasuke.

He frowned. “Isn’t this for Sakura?”

The blond side-eyed him. “No? I thought that was obvious.”

“I didn’t ask for this.”

“No,” he agreed. “But it’s your favorite, so.”

Sasuke slid his thumb over the cap. Naruto’s niceness was really.. Well. Sasuke didn’t know how to deal with everything. He’d never gotten attention like this from someone who wasn’t Itachi. What was the protocol? Did he keep refusing things? Was it a trick?

*What are you playing at, Uzumaki?*

But it was his favorite brand..

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

“Of course,” Naruto replied. He flashed a grin. “Think of it as an apology for your shins.”

Sasuke could hear them in the living room.

His fingers stilled. He didn’t need to be working on his section assignment—it wasn’t due until next week—but it wasn’t cool enough to go on a run yet. His side of the room was clean; his laundry, folded. He was all out of everything else to do.

But now, outside, Sasuke could hear voices. Choji, Shikamaru, and Kiba. Cupboards banged. Someone belched. Naruto’s familiar rasp ran an undercurrent, talking all the while.

It wasn’t that he was interested. He wasn’t. He was just..

*I don’t even like milkshakes.*
He bit his lip. It was one thing to hang out with Naruto; he had to. But to enter a room full of the others—a room with Kiba—

“Sasuke?”

He froze. Naruto peeked from the doorway.

“Yes?”

“Um. Choji’s making the milkshakes.” He stepped in further, rocking on his heels. “Do you wanna come out and have one?”

“I don’t like sweets.”

“Right, I know. But, like..” He smiled crookedly. “They’re milkshakes. And he’s offering to make you one!”

Sasuke gestured to his work. “I’m doing homework.”

“You mean you’re sitting by yourself, sulking.” Naruto wasn’t afraid to step into his space. Sasuke hated that he wasn’t afraid. “Come on. Get up, it’s a free milkshake!”


He pushed in his chair slowly. Naruto beamed, skin glowing like a warming lightbulb, and darted out of the room. A moment later Sasuke heard him hollering in the kitchen.

Sasuke sighed, running a hand through his hair. What was he doing? What was this?

Why was it easier to go along?

“Sasuke!”

“Coming,” he called again. He’d have to dwell on it later.

To Kiba’s credit, he didn’t say anything about Sasuke joining them. Sasuke felt their eyes—palms clammy, fingers curled tight into his pockets—but nobody commented on his sudden appearance.

Silence stretched. Choji’s fingers stilled around a cutting knife; Shikamaru raised an eyebrow, lips pursed. Naruto beamed.

“What flavor do you want, Sasuke? You like matcha, right?”

Sasuke dragged his eyes away from everyone else. It was easier, standing there awkwardly, to focus on Naruto’s smile. He looked infuriatingly self-satisfied. “Yeah.”

Choji blinked. He started cutting bananas again. “I think we have some in the spice cupboard. Check for me Shika.”

“On it.”

“Not a sweets guy?” Kiba asked. His arms were crossed, eyes wary—but if he had any acerbic to say, he held it in. “Suits you.”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. “Does it?”

“He does,” Naruto replied. “He drinks it hot with nothing in it before and after morning practice. It’s disgusting.”

“Better than cramming down a shit ton of pancakes.” Sasuke wrinkled his nose at the memory. “And cereal. And milk.”

“And juice,” Choji chimed in.

“No wonder you always throw up,” Shikamaru mused. “Choji, there’s matcha.”

“Great. Bring it out.”

The air—relaxed. Sasuke felt his shoulders lower; his hands made their way out of his pockets, gesticulating and shoving at Naruto’s shoulder. It was easier to bridge the gap, he realized, with Naruto between them all. He didn’t know how to feel about that.

But Sasuke supposed, sitting between Naruto and Shikamaru with a milkshake in hand, that it wasn’t so bad.

“Are you busy?”

Sasuke looked up from his book. Naruto sat on his bed, picking at a hangnail. They’d both traded running clothes for pajamas over an hour ago. Now, with the windows open and their bedside lamps on, the evening was slowing to a lull.

Or it should have been.

“Depends.” He dog-eared a page; his eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“I meant what I said.” Naruto looked up. “We should practice on your power.”

“Wh— now?”

“Well, yeah!” The blond frowned, eyebrows furrowing in obvious thought. “We’re about to sleep, right? When else would you practice?”

“Somewhere public with a chaperone?” Sasuke retorted. “Do you have a death wish or what?”

“You’re never going to get better if you’re afraid of yourself!”

“I’m not—” He bit his tongue, glaring. They were not going over this again. “Fine. Fine. If you want to get hurt so badly, be my guest.”

It was stupid. He shouldn’t; he couldn’t.

You know what happens to the weak, his father had once said. Don’t let that be you.


“So are we doing this or not?”

“Idiot,” he snapped. God, why was he so sweaty? “You have to be asleep.”

“So let’s fall asleep.”
“It’s not that easy!” He’d never had to explain this before. How..? “I have to.. to find you.”

Naruto hummed thoughtfully. “But you will. You’re good, right?”
“The best,” Sasuke replied automatically. The words tasted hollow.

“Then it’s fine.” Naruto flopped onto his side. Sasuke hated that he could see his stupid smile even when he was laying down, cheek smushed into his pillow. “I was going to sleep anyway.”

Sasuke tore his eyes away. “You can’t fight it. When you feel me—” because there wasn’t any better way to describe it—”you have to let me in. We have to find a balance.”
Easier said than done. Itachi had practiced with him for years—creating mental blocks during nightmares, experimenting on how to stay asleep—before they were perfectly in sync. Then, Sasuke could slip in and out without hurting him. Sometimes Itachi didn’t even know he’d visited his dreams.

But to try with anyone else?

What if I make a mistake?

Nausea cramped Sasuke’s stomach. He glared at his rug.

Uchihas don’t make mistakes.

And really, that was all Sasuke could ask for.

It was amazing how quickly Naruto fell asleep. Sasuke watched his brow smooth quickly. Lips parted; a snore rose through the quiet. It only took a few minutes.

Sasuke never watched him sleep before. Naruto appeared peaceful—childish, even, with his blankets tucked around his cheeks and his smile wiped away. He looked.. smaller. The thought disquieted him.

Sasuke forced his own eyes to close, his breathing to slow. After all, he wouldn’t get anywhere just staring at Naruto.

In.
Out.
In.
Out.
In—

The fall into the dream world was.. ethereal. Sasuke didn’t know how else to describe it: the floating above himself; the stretching for something beyond; the falling endlessly into a world where hard objects became soft, and the sky wasn’t blue but blue, impossibly so, laced with stars even during the day.

He reached. The world reached back.

Sasuke knew his own dreams. The home his thoughts painted was always the same: dark blue rugs, the white halls lined with heirloom paintings. To honor their memory, father said. Sasuke would
never admit how those gazes unnerved him.

He turned. A single door intruded on cold serenity: orange, tarnished door knob worn to brass.

A door to elsewhere.

The knob felt warm beneath his fingers. He twisted, feeling the divots where other fingers had journeyed, and the door opened. Sasuke stepped through.

The dream churned. Wooden floors softened to carpet; cold air melted to warmth. The walls bloomed carmine and tangerine, photographs bursting from cracks in the plaster like mountain weeds. A ceiling fan whirred into existence. Beneath it, Sasuke smelled salt. Ramen again.

Naruto’s room was exactly like Sasuke expected. A twin mattress sprawled blankets in one corner; beside it, a shabby wooden desk stood on uneven legs. The trashcan overflowed with wrappers and pencil shavings. There was even a hotplate on the floor—unplugged, thankfully—speckled with burned noodle bits.

And there: kneeling in the window seat, hanging up a wind chime, was Naruto himself.

Sasuke closed the door. The dream’s blurred edges hummed—an affirmation.

He was beyond, now.

The wind chime was tangled. Naruto chewed his cheek as he worked through the knots, bitten fingernails plucking over snarled cord. Sunlight bounced off the prism’s surfaces; rainbows kaleidoscoped over cheeks, summer shorts, the floor below. The room spun with lights.

Sasuke stepped forward.

Naruto jerked. Chimes clinked; the walls shuddered. Sasuke froze, wishing, willing—and the dream solidified. At the window, Naruto sighed and continued picking away.

Careful. He knows something’s wrong.

He’d leave Naruto be, then. They weren’t ready to face each other—not while Naruto’s wild subconscious shied from him.

Sasuke examined the photographs. He didn’t know what he’d expected—friends, perhaps, or records of carefree escapades. At closer inspection, however, none of them had any people.

They were colors.

Rainbows. Pool reflections on concrete. The sunset, mackerel-clouded, with a single plane. Reds and blues, greens and yellows. A violet so deep Sasuke could hardly discern it.

They hung without rhyme nor reason, pinned and taped (or was that glue?) onto the walls at wild, crooked angles. Some were cut from magazines; others, shiny and thick, must have been developed. There were even polaroids, pale from exposure, with Naruto’s spiky handwriting beneath. Ichiraku’s on a Monday. 5:47PM, Laurel. Ayame’s birthday party. And one, completely white, that just said: Iruka knows.

Knows what? Sasuke wondered.

“Shit.”
Sasuke swung around. Naruto frowned at his thumb, glaring at where blood was beginning to bead. The chime clattered to the floor, forgotten. His gaze lifted.

They locked eyes.

“Sasuke?” Naruto’s lips parted, eyebrows raising. “Sasuke!”

“Easy,” Sasuke warned. “Don’t—”

“How did you—? Nevermind. Where are my bandaids?” Naruto’s head swiveled. “Crap.”

Blood continued to well. A single droplet fell as Sasuke watched, staining the creamy carpet red. The walls shuddered.

“Naruto,” he said. “Careful. You need to relax.”

“I am relaxed,” Naruto snapped. His eyebrows creased; he jammed his thumb in his mouth. “If I could just—”

He went to stand. One foot—bare, Sasuke realized—pressed into the chime. Blood began to ooze. He fell backwards. “Shit!”

Sasuke stepped back. The walls shuddered again. Blood dripped from the chime, soaking the carpet, staining glass red. Naruto fell to his knees.

“Sasuke?” His eyes were wide; his chest rose quickly. Blood poured down his hand, staining his shirt. “What’s—”

“Naruto.” The walls sagged. Photographs had begun peeling away, crumbling to dust. The window was gone; the sunlight, winking away. “It’s time to wake up.”

“But I—”

A flutter of wet eyelashes—

A sharp gasp, his throat burning—

He knows, the photograph had said. He knows, he knows, he—

“Fucking shitballs!”

Sasuke jolted upright.

The room was dark. He scrambled, shaking fingers yanking on the lamp. His sheets were tangled, why were they always tangled dammit—


He exhaled sharply. His heart felt like it was going to fly out of his throat, and ugh, why were his eyes burning?

“Wouldn’t change much,” he forced out.

“Hey!” A shuffle. Naruto’s head poked over his desk. An impressive red blotch was already blooming on one cheek—his black eye hadn’t even fully healed yet, he looked like shit—but the
crooked grin Naruto flashed relieved Sasuke.

*They’d done it.*

“Idiot.” He sat back, limbs suddenly weak. “What are you smiling for?”


“What?”

“I dreamed about you.”

Sasuke couldn’t help it. He snorted—and soon Naruto was joining him, a chuckle that turned into full-blown laughter when Sasuke threw a pillow.

It’d ended *wrong.* An unfortunate first step, but a first step nonetheless.

*Itachi,* Sasuke thought tiredly. He’d crawled back into bed, desperate for a few hours of *real* sleep before sunrise. Naruto was already snoring again, filling the room with his buzzsaw drone. They’d agreed to discuss things properly in the morning. *You’ll never believe this.*

*We’ve done it after all.*

Sundays, it seemed, were never for sleeping in.

“So let me get this straight,” Shikamaru said. “You *accidentally* adopted a wolf pup? How do you *accidentally* do that?”

They all stared at the carpet. The dog on the rug wagged its tail.

“It’s a long story,” Kiba began.

Shikamaru pinched his nose. “How the fuck are we going to take care of him?”

“Hey, I didn’t ask for your help!”

“You dumbass,” Sasuke seethed. “Are you forgetting the part where it’s *in our apartment*?”

“And you guys don’t even share a room with him!” Choji groaned. “For real, man. I get the birds, but this? Lee is gonna flip.”

Of course. Sasuke hadn’t even thought of their bushy-browed RA—and by Kiba’s pale face, he didn’t either.

“I’ll do something,” he hissed. “Just leave it to me, alright?”

“That’s what you said when you were approached by the pack,” Choji pointed out. “And now we have a wolf. In our *apartment.*”

Sasuke closed his eyes.

This was *not* how he’d planned to spend his Sunday. Sasuke still had to talk to Naruto about last night; they’d woken to *yelling,* like Shikamaru’s ponytail was falling off. There were other things to do too—*normal* things, like laundry and studying and going on a run.

*Stupid me,* he thought irritably. *I’m the one rooming with a house full of idiots.*
“So, like.” Naruto gulped his milk. “Is it potty-trained?”

“He,” Kiba corrected. The wolf pup whined; Kiba paused, head tilting like a dog’s. His eyebrows creased. “Um. He says he has to work on it.”

“Great,” Shikamaru muttered. “We’re doomed.”

“Hold on. We?” Sasuke crossed his arms. “This isn’t my problem.”

“It’s not a problem!” Kiba protested loudly. His eyes narrowed, flicking towards the open balcony. “It’s not,” he repeated, softer. “Akamaru’s good. We’re going to train together, and it’ll be like he isn’t even here.”

“Akamaru,” Choji repeated. “His name’s Akamaru?”

“Well, yeah.” They all stared at Kiba. His shoulders hunched. “What? That’s what the pack leader called him! I’m not going to rename him, that’d just be rude!”

*Only omnilinguals.* Although really, did every omnilingual just walk out of the forest with a new familiar one day? Somehow Sasuke didn’t think so.

“Right,” he deadpanned. “Our mistake.”

Choji knelt, hand extended. Akamaru sniffed hesitantly. “Okay, I’m still not on board with this.. But he is kinda cute.”

Akamaru nosed his hand and *wuffed* quietly.

“He’s going to get dog hair everywhere,” Shikamaru sighed. “What a drag.”

“The living room is going to stink,” Sasuke added.

“Choji’s right though,” Naruto said. “He is cute. Aren’t you, boy?” Akamaru *arfed* happily. “Oh! Yes you are!”

Sasuke watched them roll on the floor together. He could feel a migraine coming on. *Sundays.*

“Just give me a week,” Kiba pleaded. “I’ll get all the paperwork done, you’ll see! I’ll make a case for him. Just—help me keep Lee from finding out, okay?”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. “What’s in it for us?”

“I don’t know. Whatever you want.” Kiba pouted—a bone chilling expression, in Sasuke’s opinion. He was ugly enough. “C’mon. *Please*?”

They all looked at each other.

“There are better ways to get a familiar,” Shikamaru finally said. “But if you really mean it—”

*Whatever* we want?” Choji frowned thoughtfully. “Then I want—”


“What? No! Two weeks.”

The blond’s nose scrunched up. “Three.”
Kiba’s eyes narrowed. “Fuck you. Fine, three. But no more!” He jabbed a finger at Choji. “And I’m poor, man. I can’t keep buying you cookware.”

“That was one time—”

“Chores,” Sasuke decided. “You get double bathroom duty next time it’s my turn.”

“What? But Naruto shaves his—”

“Do you want to keep the dog?” He leaned in, baring his teeth. “Or not?”

Akamaru wagged his tail between them.

Kiba slouched, utterly defeated. “You guys are killing me,” he groaned.

“You said anything,” Shikamaru pointed out. “Fair’s fair.” He knelt to pat Akamaru’s head. “Wait until Neji gets back from the gym, though. He’ll have a fit over this.”

Kiba groaned even louder.

Sasuke sagged against the counter. Naruto smiled over his glass, good-humored even through his eye bags.

“Teamwork,” he said. “Remember? It’s all about teamwork.”

“Kiba is not my team.”

“Family, then.”

Naruto said the words so easily—unthinking. Sasuke’s throat itched. He tore his gaze back to the floor. Shikamaru was already kneeling, resigning himself to petting the pup’s floppy ears. Choji was talking about making a big breakfast for everyone. Kiba beamed like a proud den mother.

“Family, huh,” he mumbled.

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun writing this chapter! I hope you all enjoyed it too ( : As of this point, we’re going to slowly be getting into other character’s senses. Predictions? Thoughts? I’d love to hear them!

Kudos/comments make my skin glow like Naruto’s <3

This chapter’s track: How to be Human - Chelsea Cutler

Tumblr
Some background on this week’s chapter: first of all, I’m sorry it’s a week late! I went on a week-long vacay for my birthday and then, right when I got back, I had to start working on report cards (I’m a second grade teacher). I’ve barely had time to breathe since Valentine’s Day so.. yeah. Sorry about this chapter being shorter than usual, but I’m super excited for the next few and can’t wait to get them out! Thanks for your patience!

The flowers on the sill were moving again.

Sasuke glared over his laptop. “Stop.”

The one closest to him wilted. Across the room Sakura sighed loudly, green eyes narrowing as she looked up.

“It’s not like I can turn it off.”

“Try,” he deadpanned.

“He’s right.” Naruto slipped in with the tray, kicking the door shut behind him. “You’ll only be sick longer if you use your sense now, you know?”

Sakura scowled. “Famous words from a bunch of hypocrites.”

“Who’s the sick one here?”

“You’ll be more than sick when I’m done with you—”

“Okay,” Sasuke butt in loudly. “Let’s finish this. I still need to go to the gym.”

This being their assignment from Kakashi. A whole written-out assessment of each other’s strengths, weaknesses, and potential collaborative maneuvers. Why he’d thought it was a good idea to make them work without him Sasuke didn’t know (laziness, probably), but it was taking forever — no thanks to Sasuke’s teammates.

Sakura coughed into her mug. “Pass me my painkillers.”

“Can’t you say please?” Naruto complained. She gave him a deathly glare. “Fine, fine.”

They’d been arguing for over an hour. Every interview question devolved into accusations (“I did not say that, don’t write that down asshole!”) or arguing (“Naruto, you don’t have any strengths”). Sasuke didn’t like this activity any more than his teammates, but writing shit down they all agreed on was like pulling teeth. Naruto couldn’t stay on topic today to save his life, and then there was Sakura—

“You’re doing the thing again.”
The plants on the windowsill froze. Sakura gave Naruto a murderous look.

Sasuke stared down at his laptop. He’d written three measly sentences about Naruto. At this rate, they’d take eighty years to finish.

*I’m going to die of old age before I graduate,* Sasuke thought, exasperated. *What was the Chancellor thinking?*

“Number four,” Naruto read aloud. “What is your teammate’s primary area of improvement? How can you help?” He looked up with a grin. “Oh, that’s easy.”

Sasuke’s eyes flit to Sakura. “Naruto,” he warned.

“What? It’s perfect; we’re already doing it. Kakashi will be pleased.”

*If he can be happy about anything we do.* “Maybe.”

“Doing what?” Sakura leaned forward, eyebrows furrowed. “Are you guys doing shit without me?”

Sasuke waved his hand. “Nothing that concerns you.”

“You asshole. *Everything* you do concerns me.” She rolled her eyes, nudging at Naruto’s shoulder. “Come on. Tell me.”

“Well…” Blue eyes met brown ones. Naruto frowned at whatever he saw, drawing his lip between his teeth. “I’ve been helping Sasuke improve his sense.”

Sakura’s eyebrows rose. “What, he’s using it on you?” She looked between them. “*Without* me? What happened to us being a team?”

“It’s only recent,” Naruto explained hastily. He rubbed his head. “Um. Like, once? Anyway, we’ve barely started. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s a big deal when you keep team decisions from your teammates.” She sighed. “Okay. when’s your next session?”

“Don’t make this your problem,” Sasuke said. “It’s mine.”

“And Naruto’s,” Sakura pointed out. “It’s only fair that we all share the effort. Otherwise what’s the point? I’m here too, you know. It’s not a two-man show.”

“Sakura’s right.” Naruto leaned in. “If we’re gonna be a team, then shouldn’t she be in on this too?”

Sasuke scowled. It was one thing to risk Naruto; it was another entirely to put his whole team in danger. Just because something awful hadn’t happened yet didn’t mean it wouldn’t. What would he do if he lost both of them at once?

*Expulsion. Worse than expulsion.*

“You don’t understand,” he growled. “I can’t—it’s not that easy.”

“Then *make* it easy,” Sakura said. “We’re an all-or-nothing deal, Sasuke. You have to come to terms with that.” One eyebrow lifted. “What, you think I can’t handle the risk?”

“But you’re—” He gestured vaguely.
Sakura snorted. “It’s temporary. Or is it because I’m a girl?”

“No. Gender doesn’t matter.” Sasuke frowned. “If I.. made a mistake—”

“Then we’d handle the consequences together.”

Sasuke stared. The fire in Sakura’s eyes burned in spite of her frailness; her jaw set in spite of her dark circles. A fist curled into her blanket, knuckles white.

“Together,” he echoed. He looked between them. “I could kill you, and you want to work together.”

“But you won’t,” she said confidently. “You’re too good for that.”

How he wanted to believe her.

“Come on. What happened to you being too good to work with us?”

“I am.”

“Asshole.” She sighed. “Look—we’re never going to get anywhere if you don’t trust us. Okay? As much as I’d love to work with some other idiots—”

“Hey!” Naruto barked.

“—it is what it is. So just deal with it.” She glared. “No more of this clam shit. I’m tired of arguing with your superiority complex.”

His eyes narrowed. “And I’m tired of you being a bitch.”

“Then we’re even.” She tucked hair behind her ear. “Now can we please finish this assignment? I want to lay in my own bed. No offense, Naruto.”

“None taken.”

Sasuke pursed his lips. His laptop reflection glared back at him.

Sakura didn’t get it. It was so easy for her, compartmentalizing him like something to be studied. She didn’t understand how wild the human mind could be—how fragile they all were.

You’re never going to get better if you’re afraid of yourself.

Stupid Naruto. He deleted the last line of his report, sighing. Stupid Sakura.

But he let the matter drop. For now.

Four weeks.

Itachi had been gone for four weeks. It wasn’t the longest disappearance by a long shot—the memory of Sasuke’s twelfth birthday came to mind—but it was.. Unusual.

“You okay?”

Sasuke counted the days again. Thirty-five.

“Sasuke?”
He tore his gaze away. Naruto peeked back at him from over the desk shelf, blond hair akimbo. So he’d woken from his nap after all.

“Fine.” Sasuke got to his feet. “Are you coming, then?”

“Yeah. Just let me change real fast.”

Another run. Sakura wouldn’t join them today—something about studying for her upcoming Psychic Healing Methods midterm—but she’d promised to meet up before they saw Kakashi.

*Big news,* the email had said. *See you tonight.*

An emergency meeting was never good news.

“What do you think it’s about?” Naruto panted. The path wasn’t wide enough for them to run side-by-side; Sasuke could feel Naruto’s hot breath washing down his back, feet close enough to nearly trip his own. “Something—serious?”

“Idiot,” Sasuke grunted. “If I knew what it was, we wouldn’t be having a meeting.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess.”

At least the evening was gentle. A real breeze rained needles like mist, weighing the air with a heavy scent. The sky was deepening into violet and magenta, washing the sky in warm streaks, and the running trails were nearly devoid of students. It was Sasuke’s favorite time to be in the forest.

“I wonder,” Naruto continued, “if it’s about our midterm.”

“Who knows,” Sasuke said.

He loathed to think about it. Sure, they’d been in school for a month, but they weren’t *ready.* Sakura’s illness set them back by over a week, and there hadn’t been time for more than a couple extra dream sessions. Kakashi still kicked their asses *every other day.* How were they going to handle.. whatever hell-scape the professors decided?

*There isn’t any more time,* Sasuke knew. *We just have to do our best.*

The thought wasn’t comforting.

Kakashi’s office was the same as it ever was: cluttered, dark, and full of pornography.

Sakura gingerly tossed aside a novel. “He *really* needs to get some better reading habits.”

“What, like your copies of *Vogue*?” Naruto muttered.

Sakura shot him a look that could kill small birds. “Make-up is a form of art, asshole.”

“So is farting the alphabet.”

“Pig.”

“Jerk.”

“Asshole.”
“B—”

“Oh, good!” Kakashi burst into the room. “The gang’s all here.”

Sasuke slouched into a chair. Sakura and Naruto glared at each other and took seats on either side of him.

“What’s the deal?” There was no point in beating around the bush. “I had to skip dinner for this. It better be good.”

“It’s the best,” Kakashi sniffed. “I’ve got the details on next week’s midterm.”

Sakura leaned in, brows furrowed. “Well? Go on, spill it!”

“All in good time.” Kakashi leaned back, fiddling with his straw hat. Today’s get-up was comically scarecrow-like, all patchy overalls and an abhorrent floral shirt underneath. He even smelled like manure. “Let me settle in first.”

Settling in could take as long as a half-hour. Sasuke’s stomach growled furiously; if he was going to let Kakashi clown around, he might as well start eating the furniture.

“Cut the shit,” he snapped. “Tell us now.”

Their professor waved a hand. “Always so demanding. Haven’t you heard that patience is a virtue?”

“Like you’d know anything about being virtuous.”

“So cruel!”

Sasuke’s eye twitched. “Are you going to tell us or not?”

Kakashi sighed loudly, spinning in his chair. “Fine. I see how it is.” He twirled one finger. “It’s a trip through the forest.”

They all looked at each other.

“But professor,” Naruto said, “isn’t that dangerous?”

“Oh, yes. Definitely.” Kakashi’s chair creaked to a stop. “But we won’t let you go outside bounds. It’ll be like a giant camping trip, see? Except you won’t see us. And you’ll be fighting each other.”

“Do we get to bring supplies?”

“To an extent. It’s a lesson in survival as much as teamwork. Which.. You guys have moderately improved on.”

“By all means,” Sakura muttered. “Don’t flatter us too much.”

Kakashi’s eyes crinkled. “Have some confidence! I’m sure you’ll do fine. Probably. Maybe.”

The silence was deafening.

“Right,” Sasuke drawled. “So.. what, are we just defending ourselves? What are the rules? The premises?”
“Missive acquisition.” Kakashi propped his feet on the desk. “You’ll start with one—a Sun Scroll or a Moon Scroll. The key is to obtain both and keep them until time’s up.”

“Which is what, a night?” Naruto frowned. “Two?”

“Try four,” Kakashi suggested.

Sakura’s jaw dropped. “Four? Isn’t that overkill?”

“On the contrary. We wouldn’t decide on it if we didn’t think you could handle the pressure.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed. “You’re trying to weed out teams.”

“We’re trying to assess them. If there happens to be a failing grade, well..” Kakashi shrugged. “It’s rightfully given.”

Of course. Konohagakure wasn’t a prestigious academy for no reason—but Sasuke hadn’t considered the stakes being so high. Itachi never mentioned anything like this before.

What he wouldn’t give to have him here now.

Acid burned Sasuke’s throat. He swallowed hard, crossing his arms.

“Don’t look so down,” Kakashi said. “It’s not over yet. There’s still time to change things.”

Sakura snorted. “A week.”

“Then you’d better get on it.” Kakashi’s feet lowered, then; he leaned forward, fingers lacing between each other. His gaze hardened. “I didn’t pick you all just to watch you fail.”

The next few days were a blur.

Waking up before dawn to the cold dew; warming up with Sakura in the front lawn before training with Kakashi. Breakfast, short and painfully fleeting, before classes; then, after lunch and studying, running or hitting the gym before dinner. Long nights working at the dinner table until they couldn’t keep their eyes open anymore.

Restlessness plagued Sasuke. He couldn’t stay asleep—but he couldn’t wake entirely, either. He found himself stumbling down crowded hallways in dreams, writing illegible words, desperately ignoring the orange door that appeared every time he closed his eyes.

Naruto and Sakura were no better. Every morning they woke and acknowledged each other’s eye bags and weary limbs. They hadn’t worked this hard since their last finals—perhaps even before that. They weren’t prepared for Kakashi’s intensity—the way he sprung surprise quizzes during lecture, or refused to hold back during training.

But they didn’t have a choice. There were no fringe grades in Konohagakure. You either passed, or you failed.

Sasuke refused to fail.

“Shit.”

He slumped over. Blood was already beginning to well, dripping down his calf in rivulets. The cut
hadn’t been deep, but it stung like a bitch.

“Sorry, sorry!” Sakura hovered, visibly cringing. “I didn’t mean to hit so hard. Are you okay?”

Sasuke grit his teeth. “Fine.”

“You’re soaking your sock,” Naruto pointed out. “Are you sure you don’t want help with that?”

“I’ve been injured far worse than this.” Sasuke struggled to his feet. His hamstrings felt like molten lava; his feet throbbed. He rubbed dirt from one cheek and willed his vision to stop swimming.

“It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.” Sakura planted her hands on her hips. “Here. Let me heal you—I need the practice anyway.”

“But I—”

The world tipped. Rough, warm fingers pulled him back to the ground, sprawling him in the grass. His leg burned.

“Naruto!” Sakura snapped. “You’re getting the wound all dirty. Move it, would you?”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Sweet coolness. Sasuke’s eyelids fluttered. When had he closed them?

Get up, idiot. Get up.

He didn’t want to move.

“It’s not deep,” Sakura reported. “The skin’s stitching together smoothly. See?”

He cracked an eye open. Soft, green light enveloped his lower leg—coalesced dew over wide leaves. As he watched, the leaves shrank bank into the earth, revealing unblemished skin. There wasn’t even a scar.


“I do my best.” Sakura wiped sweat away. “There are some things I can’t fix, like broken bones, but we’ll get there. Eventually.”

Sasuke flexed. If anything he felt even better. He sighed, running fingers through sweaty bangs.

“Thanks.”


“But—”

She glared. “What, you want me to maim you too?”

Naruto shrank back. “Uhh. No.”

They walked from the sparring grounds straight to Senju Hall. The night was wonderfully cool; pines shivered, owls taking flight above them. The stars glimmered in sharp relief through the trees, their light dimmed only by the occasional lamppost. For once, campus was quiet.
“I talked to Choji,” Naruto said quietly. “He says the weather isn’t changing any time soon. We won’t have rain.”

“Small mercies,” Sasuke muttered. The idea of camping with Naruto and Sakura gave him a premature backache. They wouldn’t be allowed any more than what they could carry.

*Just like a real mission,* Kakashi said. Not that it made them feel any better.

Because the biggest problem wasn’t going to be fighting other teams. It wasn’t going to be finding food or water either. Sasuke was confident in their foraging abilities after years of training in navigation, mapmaking, and self-sustainment.

He was most worried about their stamina.

It was one thing to engage in high-impact fights once in a while. It was another entirely to live with their sense activated *constantly,* on and off, for days at a time. There wouldn’t be any proper rest; there wouldn’t be emergency energy boosters.

Nothing but the forest, huge and hungry.

Senju Hall was annoyingly full for how late it was—midterms, Sasuke supposed. Nearly every table was full. Some even had extra chairs pulled up to make room.

*We’d have better luck sitting in the bathroom,* Sasuke thought irritably. He was just about to suggest taking their food to go when a familiar voice piped up near them.

“Naruto! Guys!”

Sasuke groaned.

“Kiba!” Naruto called back. They gravitated towards the table, eyeing the empty spaces beside Hinata and Ino. “Is there space for us?”

“We’ll make space,” Hinata said. Her cheeks darkened. “Um, I mean. If you want to?”

“No,” Sasuke muttered.

Sakura elbowed him hard. “We’d love to.”

It was a tight squeeze. Sasuke ended up sandwiched between Naruto and some other guy he didn’t know that was almost... *buzzing.* Every time Sasuke stopped chewing he could hear wingbeats near his ear. Why wouldn’t anyone trade seats with him?

“Shino’s got an amazing movie collection,” Kiba was saying. “All these old black-and-white films. He has a whole rig to get ‘em playing.”

The random guy—Shino—pushed up his glasses. “They’re scientifically inaccurate,” he admitted in a low rasp, “but guilty pleasures nevertheless.”


“Wow, Hinata!” Naruto laughed. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Kiba barked a laugh. “Oh yeah. You should see her when we put on *The Evil Dead.* I’ve never seen anyone so happy —”
“Kiba!”

“What? It’s true!”

She covered her face with a squeak.

“We’ll have to all get together sometime,” Naruto suggested. Hinata’s flush deepened into a worrying shade of purple.

“So anyway.” Kiba scraped his fork through curry sauce. “What’ve you guys been up to? Training?”

“Nonstop.” Naruto scowled. “I feel like my head’s going to explode.”

“Only because it’s too small,” Sakura muttered. Naruto gave her a look.

“Us too,” Choji said. “Sometimes my legs feel like they’re going to snap off. It’s not good for the psyche, you know?”

Sasuke shook his head. “It’s standard procedure.”

“It’s a drag,” Shikamaru deadpanned. “If I had a buck for every time Asuma told us to straighten up, I’d be able to pay for a ticket to Cabo.”

“Too bad,” the blonde—Ino? Sasuke wasn’t sure—said. “I could use a break right about now.”

“Soon.” Hinata tucked hair behind one ear. “We just need to make it another week.”

“But a week is so long,” Kiba whined. He flopped onto her dramatically. “If I don’t sleep soon, I’ll die. Even Akamaru is tired, aren’t you boy?” The wolf pup in his lap yipped.

“You could train with us,” Naruto suggested. “Suffering’s easier in groups, right?”

“Sure. Maybe. When?”

“Join our morning runs? We make a circuit starting at 6AM from K to A and back again.”

Everyone at the table shared glances.

“Yeah, alright,” Kiba said. He grinned. “We’re in.”

____________________

Hanging out with the other building members was—not as awful as Sasuke expected. Sure, he wasn’t in love with them or anything, but when they started running and Kiba’s chatter lulled to sweet, sweet silence, Sasuke couldn’t complain.

The next few days were more of the same: exercising, studying, barely sleeping. Except now it wasn’t just Team 7—there was Team 8, and 9, and 10 too. They moved like a pack of zombies, fumbling through classes and gym sessions and cool-down runs with the single-minded drive of students pushed to the brink.

Perhaps, Sasuke thought, jogging alongside Shikamaru. Their steady breaths were the rhythm his feet pounded to, the tempo his body moved along. It’s okay, like this. Maybe.

The one blip on his radar came Saturday—the last day before they packed their bags and waited.
The birds sing in a morning green.

Itachi.

The code wasn’t official. There wasn’t an exact key—only the lines to a poem Itachi loved, carefully dogeared in a novel long gone. Nobody knew it but them.

I’m fine, the message read. Moving on soon.

He couldn’t ask about Sasuke (though Sasuke knew he was probably itching to know) or give anything more. Protocol dictated he fall directly off the face of the earth. If anyone knew of this—poetry stolen, thrown in glimpses—Itachi would be severely punished.

But if there was one undeniably Uchiha trait they shared, it was their stubbornness. Nothing would keep Itachi from his brother.

Sasuke couldn’t deny the hope fluttering beneath his ribs at the thought.

He closed his laptop carefully. There wasn’t any point in studying now. He knew all he would know; he’d done all he could do. And now this. He was better off just going to sleep.

“You okay?” Naruto asked. Sasuke had forgotten he was there. “You look kind of...”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem fine.”

“Naruto.” He pushed away from the desk. Questions swirled in his mind, thick as evening fog. “Just leave it, okay?”

They shared a look. The shadows beneath Naruto’s eyes mirrored his own, lips bitten until chapped.

“Fine,” Naruto said. He slumped and threw an arm over his eyes. “If that’s what you want.”

Sasuke shuffled down under the covers, Naruto already forgotten. Safe. Itachi was safe.

He exhaled slowly. His eyes fell shut, limbs melting into the mattress.

No matter what the next few days brought, Itachi would come back.

Monday morning dawned with storm clouds.

Naruto squinted at the sky. “I thought you said there wouldn’t be any rain!” He turned, hiking his backpack up higher. “Choji!”

“There wasn’t supposed to be!”

“We can’t do anything about it now,” Hinata murmured. “It’s probably part of the exam.”
Sasuke grunted. “Damn Creators.”

“Hey, bastard! *I’m* a Creator!”

“And I said what I said.”

“Now isn’t the time,” Sakura snapped. She finished tying her hiking laces and stood. “They’ll be calling it any minute now. We need to be ready.”

“What a drag.” Shikamaru sighed, kicking a rock. “I didn’t pack an extra tarp. What are we supposed to sleep on?”

“A branch?” Ino suggested. Her nose wrinkled. “Ugh. All the bugs will be out, won’t they?”

“On the contrary.” Shino appeared—or had he always been there? “Insects prefer emergence after periods of heavy rain. With any luck, however, we won’t get more than a few centimeters.”

*Luck,* Sasuke thought. He snorted. *As if we ever had any.*

They all clustered before the ridge: a vine-tangled cliff, the rocks sloping down into dark foliage. Sasuke couldn’t pick out anything beyond but treetops and the occasional bird in flight. It was endless.

*If there’s a god watching.* He toed the edge, watching pebbles scatter below. *Now would be a great time to help us out.*

“Teams!” Professor Asuma’s voice boomed overhead. Crows took flight; the wind stirred, kicking up leaves. “*Line up against the line.*”

A hush fell over everyone. Sasuke curled and uncurled his fists, breathing slowly. Beside him, Naruto glowed gently. Sasuke could feel his soft warmth, and Sakura’s on his right.

“*On your marks.*”

“Good luck,” Sakura whispered.

“*Get set.*”

And there, held upon the precipice, Sasuke saw them for what they could be: a triad, chins lifted to the darkening sky. Maybe they weren’t ready for what was ahead, but it didn’t matter anymore.

All they had was each other.

“*Go!*”

Naruto whooped wildly. Somewhere Kiba could be heard laughing, a wild cackle above the crushed branches and earth. Dust curled into the air, clouding and sticking to Sasuke’s skin as he pushed forward, tumbling down the hill.

Forward—into the forest.

Chapter End Notes
Thoughts? Predictions on the next few chapters? I'd love to hear them! Shit's about to get a little.. wild.

Kudos and comments make my heart bloom like Sakura's flowers <3

This chapter's track: Sucker for Punishment - Alex Lahey (upbeat music now woo)
tumblr

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!