From Which We'll Rise

by UchihanoChidori

Summary

Poorly made choices can often result in years of regret. Naruto couldn't be blamed for being oblivious, just as Sasuke couldn't be blamed for not trying harder to stay. But certain bonds cannot be ignored, and it's never too late to acknowledge what's been there all along. SasuNaru/NaruSasu. Placed between chapter 699 and 700 of the manga.

Notes

Okay guys, this story takes place between chapter 699 and 700, but it goes beyond that towards my own ending.

Naruto and co. belong to Kishimoto Masashi.
Okay guys, this story takes place between chapter 699 and 700 and it's on-going. I think. I guess it depends on how much love it receives. If there is no real interest in this, I don't think I'll write anymore since I do have other fics I should be working on. But to be very honest, I fell in love with this plot and it's pretty consistent in my head. I just want these two to end up together in spite of kids and wives and whatever the hell got in their way. So… we'll see how it's received, yes?

Next part will be coming soon since it's almost finished. But the text was too big to put in a single chapter.

It'll be M rated, and NC-17 further down the road.

This is SasuNaru/NaruSasu. There will also be a bit of SasuSaku and NaruHina. Sorry about that.

Betaed by the lovely SNlalalandNHreality! Thank you so much, you rock!

Naruto and co. belong to Kishimoto Masashi.

Enjoy!

From Which We'll Rise

Part I: Oblivious Me

Sasuke looked out the window of the hospital room. From his sitting position on the bed, he could see the sky perfectly as well as the top of a few healthy trees. The weather was beautiful outside, and everything was as peaceful as it could ever be. It seemed impossible that just a few days previously the world had been surrounded by the shadows of a hellish war.

Many still mourned and wept, he knew. The village was still under construction after a brutal attack by Akatsuki's Pein, or so he had heard from Naruto. Still, these things didn't really matter to him. In fact, he didn't care about a past that wasn't experienced by him at all.

He turned his eyes away from the window and looked down where, with his head lying on the mattress next to his thigh, Naruto slept soundly. The idiot was quite the snorer, Sasuke considered. He frowned a bit as a few memories from their childhood assaulted his mind; memories of when they'd been forced to sleep together while on missions and Sasuke had had to deal with that horrible noise all night long.
It was funny how vividly he recalled his days in team 7 and by Naruto's side. Those memories he had tried so hard to repress seemed to be a constant now that he was back in Konoha. While away, he had avoided them at all costs because they hurt him by reminding him of what he had once had that he had almost lost. They reminded him of how alone he had become.

Naruto's right hand squeezed his left one tightly in his sleep, and he snored a bit louder, muttering something under his breath. Features softening, Sasuke looked at his slumbering face.

They had been confined to the hospital bed for five days already. The damage they had done to each other had been far worse than either had imagined, and it seemed like it would take a long time before either could use chakra again or even make any kind of serious efforts. Although it seemed at least that Naruto himself was healing pretty fast since most of the bruises on his face had already vanished.

Sasuke heaved a sigh, allowing himself to squeeze Naruto's hand back carefully so as to not wake him up. How someone could be so naïvely simple and so disturbingly complex at the same time he didn't know.

Naruto held his hand a lot, oblivious to Sasuke's awareness of it since he always did it when he was supposedly asleep. Like now, he would sit on the chair next to Sasuke's bed and hold his hand until he fell asleep.

Sasuke pretended he didn't notice. Sometimes he wondered if Naruto himself was aware of the endless minutes Sasuke spent sitting on that same chair, body turned towards his friend's bed instead, simply staring at him. They both did weird things while thinking the other was asleep, it seemed.

Sasuke wasn't like him – touching like that wasn't an option in his book. So he just stared. Sometimes his mind would be lost in thought, while other times, it would be as blank as a sheet of paper.

In moments like those, he would often feel thankful. When he didn't feel thankful, he felt terrified. And sometimes, he just felt… empty.

Because Naruto was his only friend, and he had almost lost him. He almost lost the only bond he had and his last chance of ever finding some semblance of peace in his life.

And yet, in spite of Naruto's outburst about 'friendship' and 'pain' and 'bonds'… his friend was still out of his reach.

This was painful for him because he and Naruto weren't on the same page yet – maybe they never would be. They had once lived in the same world, but now they lived in different dimensions altogether.

Biting his lip, Sasuke closed his eyes.

'Friendship', huh?

What exactly did that mean to Naruto? Woul Naruto’s understanding of him allow him to perceive that Sasuke wasn’t ‘home’? That Konoha made him feel trapped and unsafe and just… detached?

He wondered how Naruto would react to his feelings this time. Somehow there were so many things between them that they still couldn’t agree on, and surely, this would be one of them.
But he couldn't help it. He no longer had his house, and if the buzzing around the hospital was any indication, he would never be considered a normal shinobi of Konoha again. He suspected the only reason why he hadn't been put out of his misery yet was because Tsunade had given up on her position as Hokage, passing it on to Kakashi.

Being inside the walls of Konoha made him feel restless and powerless. There was still so much he had to cope with, so many things within himself that he had to fix and to analyze. He felt strangely at peace now that he had allowed himself to let go of his revenge and his ideals of revolution, and yet, it was as if he was filled with all sorts of regrets and felt many weights upon his shoulders. The sins inside of him were tearing him apart, and he knew he needed to purge them or he'd go insane.

He and Naruto hadn't really talked yet. Or better, Naruto himself had talked his mouth off; continuously telling Sasuke of what he'd been doing and the adventures he had lived while they were apart – words Sasuke assimilated automatically but didn't pay much attention to. He didn't tell Naruto about his past though. It wasn't like there was much to tell that his friend didn't already know, and quite frankly, Sasuke felt like there were things better left untouched, buried forever.

Sasuke bit his lip, feeling his eyes sting as he looked at Naruto's incomplete bandaged arm. They had both lost their arms in that fight. Naruto had gone so far, just for him.

That was something Sasuke knew he could never repay. Those feelings that Naruto forced onto him… he wondered if Naruto himself understood them. He wondered if Naruto understood exactly what they meant to Sasuke. Maybe he didn't. No, for sure he was as stupid and as oblivious as always.

Still, those feelings lived inside of him, and they were hard to deal with. He didn't know what to do with them or how to change them so that they'd have a different meaning and represented less of a burden to him.

Until he found a way to handle them, he didn't think he could ever be the kind of friend Naruto wanted him to be.

Taking a deep breath, Sasuke leaned back on his pillows and closed his eyes. The wound where his left arm had been destroyed was starting to hurt again. Usually he avoided painkillers at all costs, but Sakura forced them on him anyway because she knew he didn't complain out of self-punishment. So right now he was thankful that she wasn't around so he could feel that pain properly – the pain that reminded him of what he had almost lost. The arm was nothing when he thought about how he could have been without light, happiness, and the most important bond in his life. He had almost lost Naruto. He realized now that without Naruto, his loneliness would've killed him sooner or later.

And even if he and Naruto's paths were not fated to keep meeting, as long as Naruto was alive, he knew he'd never be alone. Because in the past he had endured everything, thinking that he was by himself. But deep down, there had always been something that told him that his blond teammate was looking out for him. And he knew that it would always be like that, so he had no doubt that he'd be just fine.

_A year and a half later…_

He could feel Sasuke's presence all around him, strong, alluring, and involving and he didn't really
know how to respond to it. There was no particular direction that he could follow, which was new to him since his friend had always given him signals as to which way to go. Right now though, Naruto couldn't for the life of him tell what he was supposed to do.

Sasuke hadn't come home since he had left all those months ago, but once in a while during missions, he would feel him and make sure Sasuke would be able to feel him as well. Sometimes their paths crossed (briefly), and other times, Sasuke would – purposefully, he guessed – not go to him.

Sasuke leaving had been something Naruto had resented but understood all the same. Sasuke was running away again, but at the same time, how could he be strong enough to start a life anew if he didn't even know how to accept himself and cope with what he had done?

The moon was reflecting over the endless rice fields ahead of him, and he looked over them to see if he could spot any movement nearby. Apart from the rustling of leaves, the forest behind him was unusually quiet, but despite the ominous atmosphere, he wasn’t worried. He knew Sasuke was around somewhere, but this was far from being something that made him feel threatened.

The weather had cooled down considerably now that November was close. A gush of wind ran past him unwarned, and Naruto only had time to tense in awareness before he felt something sharp poking at the spot between his shoulder blades, making him go still.

There was no denying who the strong, familiar chakra behind him belonged to. There was no denying that it was the tip of a katana that was pressed to his back, and yet he didn't feel threatened by it – if anything, a rush of adrenaline assaulted him, completely untamable. Sasuke had come.

"Careless as usual," a voice that was dangerously low and almost seductive said behind him. "You never learn, do you, Naruto."

Heaving a small sigh, Naruto smiled but didn’t dare to turn around to face him. "I knew it was you," he said confidently.

"So you simply let your guard down?" Sasuke inquired, in a mocking tone. "How foolish. Never let your guard down, not even in front of me."

"Or else what?" Naruto couldn't help but tease, a defiant tone to his voice. "You're going to kill me?"

Sasuke didn't hesitate. "I could."

In spite of himself, Naruto rolled his eyes. He could swear he knew his friend like he knew the back of his hand, and yet sometimes he wasn't sure where some things came from.

"Sasuke..." He made a move to turn around but found the tip of the blade pressing harder to his back. The blade didn’t have enough force to pierce, but it definitely had enough to be threatening, so he stayed where he was.

"Don't fucking move," Sasuke said imposingly. "What are doing here?"

"Your chakra summoned me," Naruto mumbled with a frown, looking over his shoulder at his friend.

"I could just be messing with you," came the easy reply.
Well, never in a million years would Naruto even consider that Sasuke might not show up after he had summoned him, and yes it was rather arrogant of him to assume that Sasuke wouldn't do something like that. Maybe he was taking the Uchiha for granted, but in his mind he liked to believe that Sasuke wanted to see him just as much as he wanted to see Sasuke.

"Clearly you weren't," he said defiantly.

The other didn't reply for a while. Then, the pressure on Naruto's shoulder blades was gone. "Sometimes you do piss me off," Sasuke said smoothly.

Naruto turned around, taking in Sasuke's appearance. Compared to the last time they had seen each other, his friend's clothes were considerably more worn out. He still couldn't wrap his mind around the poncho and the beads around his neck. He didn't like it that, clearly, Sasuke was leading the life of a traveler. Probably going through many trials and lacking many things, he still seemed surprisingly healthy, so it was obvious that he was pulling this journey off rather well.

"You look well," Naruto observed, offering his friend a small smile as Sasuke sheathed his katana behind his back with a graceful gesture, dark eyes never leaving his. "Although, that poncho thing is really awful. You look like an old lady."

"Speaks the guy with the worst fashion sense I've ever met," Sasuke said, also eyeing him up and down, looking unimpressed. "Your outfit just keeps getting worse the older you get. And your hair is ridiculous."

"Your face is ridiculous," Naruto countered, his smile fading to be replaced by an offended glare. To his surprise, Sasuke gave him a small lopsided smirk.

"Sakura and Sai are around," he stated, changing the subject.

"Yeah, they're in an inn at a village not too far from here, sleeping, I hope," Naruto muttered, with a half-hearted pout. "I just felt your presence and thought I could come and see you."

Sasuke nodded. "Your arm looks functional."

Uncrossing his arms, Naruto raised his bandaged right one for Sasuke to see as he opened and closed his fist proudly. "Yeah, it took forever, but the muscles are becoming pretty strong and the nerves are already responding nicely," he explained, smiling again. "I still can't feel much, though. You should definitely get your own arm as soon as you can because the healing process is a bitch."

"Yeah," Sasuke said, black eyes softening. He looked around briefly and pointed to a large tree nearby. "Let's sit there for a while."

Agreeing, Naruto followed the taller male, and they sat underneath the tree, him Indian-style with his back to the tree, Sasuke in front of him, on his knees, his back very straight. The ground was grassy and filled with dry leaves and sticks.

Naruto eyed his friend for a bit, wondering about the simple, peaceful aura he could feel emanating from the other. It felt different. Sasuke himself felt different for some reason and even in worn out clothes, in the moonlight, there was a strange eeriness about him that made him look respectful and still more handsome than any other person Naruto had ever met. This made him strangely happy.
"So... what have you been up to?" he asked, a little sheepishly as he toyed with a string in his pants.

"Just travelling," Sasuke answered, with a small, elegant shrug. "I was on my way to Konoha actually."

Naruto perked up immediately. "Oh, we're going home in two days!" he said excitedly. "We could all go together!"

"I'm still going to make a detour," Sasuke explained, an apologetic tone in his voice that made Naruto feel disappointed.

"You suck..." he grunted, leaning his back on the tree trunk. "Well, how's the journey going?"

"It's alright," Sasuke's dark eyes were stuck to his, calm but inscrutable. "I've been meditating, seeing things, and meeting people. I've been involved with religion to a certain extent. But mostly I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"How's that working out for you?" Naruto couldn't help but tease. "Did you manage to figure yourself out?"

"You could say that," Sasuke smirked, indulging him. "I'm learning how to... accept and cope with certain things about myself. How about you?"

"Ah, nothing new has been happening." Naruto scratched the back of his head. "The village is still being rebuilt and all that. Kakashi-sensei is doing great as Hokage, and with the other countries' help, the place has been growing quite a lot."

"That's good," Sasuke said, nodding approvingly.

Silence settled between them while Sasuke looked to the side and seemed to contemplate some stones on the ground. It was dark, but the moon painted the scenario around them in cold tones of silver.

"You seem strangely thoughtful," Naruto noted carefully.

"I've been thinking about my life and my future," Sasuke admitted, with a small frown. He looked back at Naruto. "Do you ever do that, Naruto? Think about how your future will be?"

The question was unexpected to the blond. "Well... I know I want to be Hokage," he replied. He could feel the mood changing but couldn't tell why. "It's going to take a while, but I'm working hard. I don't really think about the future. I just live one day at the time, I guess."

Again, it took a while for Sasuke to talk, but when he did, the words coming out of his mouth weren't exactly what Naruto had expected to hear. "I've been thinking that maybe I won't go back to Konoha for good."

Shivering in shock, Naruto straightened up. "What do you mean?"

That couldn't be good. He had feared that Sasuke might make such a decision, and yet he had hoped that this journey of redemption of his would be enough to make him realize where his home was and where he belonged to.
"I'm no longer a shinobi of Konoha, so I will never be able to take ranking exams again, or work directly for or inside the village as such," Sasuke explained, using his right hand to rub absently at his upper left arm, an action Naruto didn't miss. "These last few months have been enlightening for me. I feel like I should be out here seeing the world and making sure I understand what it takes to change it. I want to be doing good things and helping people out as much as I can. I will go back to the village once in a while, but it's not like I'll stick around for long."

"I… Konoha is your home, Sasuke," Naruto whispered, his heart sinking. "Are you really just going to leave only to be seen once every year or so?"

"It's what makes sense to me," the Uchiha stated, still with his calm expression. "And my home is no longer there. I have nothing except you and my brother's will to bond me to that place."

They didn't talk for a few seconds. Naruto could only gape, unsure of what exactly he was feeling. He wanted to yell at Sasuke; to tell him he was a complicated asshole and put some sense in his head, again. But at the same time, he couldn't help but understand where his friend was coming from. After everything that had happened to him; after what Konoha had done to him and his clan, even if the village meant something to him thanks to Itachi's legacy, it made sense that Sasuke would still feel misplaced and resentful. But that didn't mean Naruto had to accept it or even like it.

It was one thing giving Sasuke space to sort himself out, but it was another thing altogether to know that the gap between them – that he had been sure would be closed soon – would still exist after all that time.

"Don't make that face," Sasuke said with a frown, perceptive to his mood.

"I don't even know what to think. I'm just pissed off," Naruto hissed, clenching his fists around the fabric of his pants. "Asshole."

But he couldn't really find the heart to make the insult sound serious. To him it was meaningless to have Sasuke around 24/7 if he wasn't happy, but that didn't mean he wanted Sasuke to be a wanderer for the rest of his life.

"Do you ever think about us?" Sasuke asked out of the blue, his voice as smooth as silk. "About how you want our relationship to be? As in, do you ever imagine us getting along? Doing things together like sparring, having lunch together and stuff like that?"

Naruto made a face.

"Well, of course." Blue eyes blinked confusedly at intense grey ones. "I always did. I hoped it would be like that once you were home, but then you left and…"

Naruto shook his head from side to side. Sasuke should know these things. What was with the useless questions? "I missed you during this year and a half, Sasuke. It's never easy when you're not around. It never was."

"Yes, that's why you chased me around for three years," the other male replied, with an ironic chuckle. Brushing his fringe away from his eyes, Sasuke looked down again, his expression serious once more as his fingers toyed with a bit of grass next to his thigh. "I wonder if you realize that there are other options for us."

For some reason this made Naruto's heart beat faster. He couldn't understand the surge of emotions
assaulting him at all, but he couldn't look away from Sasuke's face. "Huh?" was all he could say, confused and helpless.

"Usuratonkachi…" Sasuke mumbled, gazing at him from the corner of his eyes before looking down at the grass again. "I'm not like you. I can't make friends the way you do, and I don't like people. Surely you understand the depth of our bond."

"Well, yeah, I do; but that doesn't mean I buy your lonely bastard bullshit," Naruto couldn't help but reply, annoyed. "Because that's what you're doing right now. You just want to close yourself up to everything again and be alone. I don't want you to be alone. I already told you…"

"What if there are other options, Naruto?" Sasuke interrupted, again, now with something Naruto hadn't been expecting at all. "What if, more than being Hokage, you could find things that fulfilled you just as much instead?"

*What is he getting at?*

Naruto swallowed hard, feeling uneasy all of a sudden. He didn't really understand what was going on, but he felt like he was missing something important and couldn't for the life of him perceive what it was. "I'm… not following you."

Sasuke seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "I have wishes for my future that aren't related to that village, or to whatever it is that you idealize," he explained, his eyes hardening as they narrowed at him. "In my mind I want to do the right thing. To me, that means helping people and seeing how I can change the world with my own hands. When it comes to you, it means that I want you to have everything I know you deserve: friends, a family, recognition… I know you need it, and I alone cannot give you that."

"But I always wanted you by my side!" Naruto yelled, quickly moving so that he was on his hands and knees in front of him. "I indulged your wish to be alone for a while to get your shit together, but I want you to come home and finally…"

"Shut up and let me talk," Sasuke snapped, startling him. "That's not going to happen, and you know it as well as I do." As if realizing how he had spoken, he cleared his throat and forced his voice to remain even. "I know you belong there. You should do everything in your power to become Hokage, and you should allow yourself to be loved by some girl who will be able to give you a real family."

"Sasuke…"

"But I can't help but wonder… how would it feel for you to have other options? To know you could take another path, different from that one even you, surely, have idealized for yourself."

Sasuke seemed to be watching him intently now. "As in… maybe you could join me, and we could see the world together. There are things you don't know that I think you should see. There are many other ways of creating a revolution that go way beyond what a simple Kage can do, and I think that together we could achieve it. In a way, but differently this time, like Madara and Hashirama did. And we'd still contribute to Konoha, of course."

And this is where Naruto lost the ability to breathe.

"What are you saying?" he managed to breathe out.
"I'm saying you have two options, that's all." Sasuke raised his hand and grabbed for a leaf that had apparently been stuck to Naruto's hair. Then, he observed it as if it was the most fascinating thing he had ever come across. "Imagine you have me on one hand, and Konoha on the other. I would never make you choose, but in the end, it comes down to it because your vision of team 7's happy ever after won't happen. As I said, I will never stick around long enough for it."

Moved by a sudden surge of panic, or anger – he couldn't tell – Naruto got on his knees and grabbed for Sasuke's shoulders before glaring at him, teeth clenched, while the other simply eyed him back challengingly.

"Why do you have to be like this?" he hissed, his voice shaking a bit, barely controlled feelings he couldn't understand making his hands tremble. "Why can't you just… try to find something else for yourself? Make friends and find a job, even if not as a shinobi?" Naruto's hands slid over the rough fabric of Sasuke's cream colored poncho, over his arms as if unconsciously caressing them, and when he reached Sasuke's right elbow and found that his right hand couldn't find the other one, he felt the familiar pang of sadness and frustration strike him. It also upset him that he had the perception of grabbing something but not of actually feeling it. He couldn't feel Sasuke with that hand. His voice softened. "It doesn't always have to be black and white, you know?"

"But it is," Sasuke whispered back firmly, running his gaze over Naruto's features quickly. "Being a shinobi is who I am, Naruto. And I don't care about friends or spending my life doing the same routine over and over again. That would kill me, and I made a promise to you that I'd keep my will to live."

Naruto's hands slid upwards once more and he could almost swear that he felt his friend shiver slightly. Inhaling, Naruto tightened his hands on Sasuke's upper arms.

"I… Konoha is my home," he said, stuttering slightly. "I… I want to be with everybody, I want to protect it and keep struggling to become worthy of being Hokage. That is my dream and that's what I've been fighting for all this time." He knew he was pleading, but he didn't care. He understood Sasuke; he understood what was being asked of him, but at the same time, he needed him to know that he cared; that Sasuke not being around would always have an impact on him. "But Sasuke, I want you there as well! I told you! Don't be like this. Don't go away again. You know I need you around. You know I want…"

Sasuke put a hand on his chest to push him away a bit, looking baffled, but Naruto held on to him. "Did you not understand what I just said?"

"I DID! All I'm saying is…"

"No, you definitely didn't," Sasuke contradicted, with a clearly frustrated sigh. "It doesn't matter, Naruto. Let me go."

"No!" Naruto refused, shaking his head from side to side vigorously. "Just… come home with us. Let's see what we can do to make it better! We'll talk to Kakashi-sensei, he'll be able to…"

"I am home right now," Sasuke refused vehemently, looking pained. "I can't ask Kakashi to do more for me than what he has already done." He offered Naruto a small smile that looked defeated. "And it's funny, I knew your answer, and yet I thought you'd surprise me."

It felt like a slap across Naruto's face. He felt his hands loosening their grip as they slowly released
his friend. Without another word, Sasuke got up and fixed his clothes, and while he watched him with his mouth open, Naruto was sure he had just missed something very important and that something had just been shattered between them. There was no mistaking it, yet he couldn't understand what had so obviously hurt Sasuke.

He hadn't meant to hurt him. He thought that Sasuke would understand his feelings like he understood Sasuke's. They were supposed to talk about it; talk about how they could manage things between them and how to make it so everybody compromised and benefited simultaneously. Sasuke knew what Konoha meant to him, just as he knew what it didn't mean to Sasuke.

Were their paths doomed to be so different after all? Even after everything they had gone through together and apart?

Even in spite of how deeply connected they were?

The sound of steps crushing dry leaves woke him up from his state of shock, making him get to his feet at once and turn to see that Sasuke was making his way to the forest, intent on leaving. "Where the hell are you going?" Naruto yelled after him, fists clenched and throat dry.

Sasuke stopped walking. "I'm leaving," he said simply, looking over his shoulder. "The only reason I came was because I wanted to talk to you about this."

"You can't just leave and not explain what the hell you meant!" Naruto hissed, frustrated. "I don't understand! You know how I feel! I didn't mean to hurt you, but you're so damned difficult all the fucking time, Sasuke!"

"I'm difficult?" Sasuke's low, deceivingly soft tone sounded bitter and suddenly angry.

"Why are you mad at me?" Naruto inquired, shoulders slumping helplessly. "Tell me so I can understand!"

Turning halfway towards him, Sasuke seemed to contemplate him with hard, cold eyes. Through them Naruto could see him fighting some sort of internal battle with himself.

Taking a sharp intake of breath through his nose, Sasuke made such a dangerous face Naruto would've taken a step back had that person not been his best friend.

"You know why I'm angry, Naruto?" Sasuke growled with poorly hidden fury. "Because you're so fucking oblivious you can't even understand what's right in front of you. And what's worse is that I could tell you things to your face, but you'd end up either freaking out or just not taking me seriously because you're the kind of dumb as fuck guy who needs to realize things for himself." Sasuke shook his head from side to side, fury fading to give place to sheer disappointment. "And you know what really pisses me off? Is that when the time comes when you do realize the poor choices you made and understand what you really want, it'll be too late to go back and fix it. And trust me… not even you can fix everything."

While he had no idea what his friend was going on about, it terrified Naruto that they would part, once more, in such dire terms. But his voice got stuck in his throat. His heart ached.

*What am I missing?* He thought, desperately.

*What should I do?*
"Sasuke…"

Even calling out his name hurt, and he didn't know why.

Sasuke sighed. "I'll see you when I get back," he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Take care."

And Naruto could only watch him go, unable to shake off the sinking feeling that he had screwed up big time.

Ten months later…

"Ayame-san, today, it's on me!" Sakura said cheerfully upon arriving at the small restaurant, flashing Naruto a bright smile as she sat down on the high stool on his left.

"You sure are in a generous mood today, Sakura-chan!" Ayame said with a smile.

"I'll say," Naruto replied, blond eyebrows rising in surprise as Sakura beamed even more at him.

"The usual for both of you?" Ayame then asked, to which both of them nodded.

As the young cook turned her back to them to help her father, Teuchi-san, Naruto looked to the side again to find his female friend with her eyes closed and a steady smile still on her lips, her chin resting on one hand. The expression of pure contentment on her face was completely unknown to him, and for some reason it made him feel strangely uncomfortable.

"You look like you're in a good mood," he pointed out suspiciously. She opened her eyes and looked at him from the corner of them before chuckling.

"Well, that's probably because I am," she said easily, with a small shrug.

"Is it because we're finally on a date?" he asked her, finding that her good spirits allowed him to make the joke without the risk of being punched.

To his credit, she actually laughed. "Oh, stop it silly!" Sakura replied, slapping his arm lightly. "First of all, if it was a date, you'd definitely be the one to pay for our meal, and secondly, you have a girlfriend now; you can't go on dates with other girls."

Naruto crossed his arms over his chest, looking at the ceiling contemplatively. "Huh… I guess you're right."

Thinking about how he did have a girlfriend now was weird, he considered. It was something relatively recent, so for both him and Hinata it was a first in many things. He'd never been in a relationship before and the truth was he had no idea what being a good boyfriend meant at all. But Hinata seemed happy, so he guessed he was doing something right. But it still baffled him how foreign the concept felt to him for some reason.

He did like Hinata an awful lot, even if he couldn't quite place where or when the exact moment the
feeling had surfaced inside of him the way it did. But having someone close like that felt good, even if some things were still a little awkward and embarrassing, but he guessed that it would improve as they grew together as a couple.

However… the notion of 'couple' sure was different from what he'd envisioned.

"How is Hinata-chan, by the way?" Sakura asked, seeming genuinely interested.

"She's fine," Naruto replied, with a small shrug and a smile. "But hey, I want to know what's gotten you so giddy!"

Her own smile grew as a slightly pinkish tone painted her cheeks. "That's a secret, Naruto!"

"I tell you everything, Sakura-chan!" Naruto complained, turning to her on his stool and grabbing her wrist with both hands, shaking it a bit. "Come on, tell meeef!"

"It's nothing special," she said, amused.

"I still want to know!" he whined.

"Oh, alright," Sakura said, rolling her eyes and shaking her wrist free from his grasp. "But you have to promise not to tell anyone for the time being!"

Naruto nodded excitedly. He loved it that over the years Sakura had learnt how to trust him, not only as a shinobi comrade, but also as a close friend.

"Pinky promise?" she said playfully, raising her hand with her pinky finger stretched out.

"Pinky promise," Naruto agreed, interlacing his own bandaged pinky with hers. She nodded her approval and then motioned him closer so they couldn't be heard. Curiously, Naruto leaned his head closer to hers and offered his ear so she could speak in it.

"I think that Sasuke-kun is finally noticing me," she whispered conspicuously.

He leaned away a bit, looking at her happy face with his eyes opened wide. "What do you mean?"

She merely blushed more. "I don't want to make a big deal out of it yet, that's why I don't want people to know about it. But he said some things, and… we've been spending more time together when he's around… not too much, but still, it feels like it's different now, you know?"

Naruto could only open and close his mouth stupidly. He knew that on his face all his friend could see was genuine astonishment, but deep inside he felt like someone had poured a bucket of frozen water over his head.

He couldn't place the feeling inside of him at the strange, unexpected news, but he knew that it didn't sit well with him.

It felt like his whole world was crumbling underneath his feet, and he was powerless to do anything about it.

Sasuke was… taking an interest in Sakura? Now? Why? How? After everything he had said and done to her? After leaving the village over and over and over again, even after making peace with
team 7?

He was never around. What was he even thinking?

It didn't make sense at all.

And to Naruto it felt like suddenly invisible walls were closing in on him – walls he had no idea had been there in the first place. He felt sick.

And it made him feel horrible on Sakura's behalf because he was supposed to feel happy for them, wasn't he? He had brought Sasuke home for her, for himself. He had given up on his crush on her because he wanted her to stay faithful to her feelings for their teammate. Sakura deserved it for everything she had gone through and for never giving up on her feelings for him – even if she had hurt Naruto when she had lied and claimed that she loved him instead.

It made sense. In his head, he had believed that Sasuke should accept her feelings for him, and yet he had never given that possibility a second thought. in fact, during those two years and a half since the war, Naruto had learned to accept that maybe Sasuke wasn't cut out to be with people like that. Sasuke’s focus didn’t seem to be on dating or relationships in general. Sasuke was a difficult person, arrogant, cold, brutally honest and unhesitantly keeping people at arm’s length. Naruto’s own relationship with Sasuke was strained.

Although, if he had to be honest, he had to admit that things had become a lot more tense between them after that particular conversation they’d had a few months before back in Rice Country and even more so after he started dating Hinata.

Back then, Naruto had somehow understood what Sasuke had told him, and yet it had been difficult for him to perceive what had ticked Sasuke off so much. A lot of time had passed since then, but Sasuke was still obviously bitter about it. Sasuke just kept giving Naruto shit about how he wasn't like him and he couldn't accept other people, but he didn’t even try to be around and be sociable; didn’t even try to give Konoha, or the people inside of it, a chance. The way Sasuke thought wasn’t something Naruto could simply accept and let go. This was Sasuke’s happiness at stake. Their bond was strong, but it wasn’t just about them or at least Naruto didn’t make it all about them. Sasuke should be able to be happy around other people as well.

Suddenly, like a tidal wave, it hit him. He remembered their conversation well.

Everything Sasuke had said and done, everything he was doing, even with Sakura…

His eyes widened even more. Sasuke had… seriously wanted him to go with him. Because…

No… that couldn't be it… could it? The way Sasuke felt for him… the things he didn't say, but what he had suggested they did together, him constantly leaving…

Sasuke truly wasn't like him. And now he was fucking things up again. That damned bastard.

*What the fuck do you think you're doing, Sasuke?*

And to make matters worse… Naruto wasn't pleased on his own behalf, and he was very angry at himself. If Sasuke really did feel that way then he had been completely blind.
"How could I have been so stupid?"

"Naruto?" Sakura asked worriedly, since apparently he had been lost in thought for far too long.

Naruto shook his head from side to side, swallowing the lump in his throat down.

"Well..." he said, forcing the smile to return to his lips. "If you think it's like that, that's great, Sakura-chan. I hope things turn out well for the two of you."

He hated lying to her when all he wanted was to tell her to open her eyes and see what Sasuke was doing and how blind she was to everything he did – everything he had ever done – to her.

But the sparkle in her eyes and her genuine relief at his approval broke his heart. She seemed so happy he just couldn't find the will to question anything and shatter her fantasy.

The fantasy she had always had about the prince charming Sasuke would never be.

But then again, who was he to talk when, to him, Sasuke had always been better and above any other person in his world? Both he and Sakura shared an unmeasurable devotion towards Sasuke that no-one else could comprehend.

And that was sad, for the both of them.

But... in Sasuke’s heart, Naruto knew, better than even, that he had a place Sakura would never have. But he couldn’t something like this to her, could he?

"Thank you, Naruto," Sakura said softly, gratefulness filling her minty eyes. "That means a lot to me."

TBC...
Part II - Nagging Feeling

Chapter Notes

I MUST WARN YOU THAT THERE IS A BIT OF SMUTTY HET HERE! And it’s my first time writing something smutty with a man and a woman, too. I know, three years of writing fics and I never wrote het like that. I’m such a loser.

Bear with me for a bit? It’s a necessary evil, and you’ll understand as you read it, SO PLEASE DON’T SKIP IT!

Also… In spite of me reading a lot of fics and books in English, I think I only read het smut once, and it was a looooong time ago. Sorry if the terms and words I use aren’t exactly right in some way? But I tried to keep the descriptions simple.

BUT… there’s also a bit of something interesting coming between the boys, so… yeah ;)

Not betaed.

Part II: Nagging Feeling

Two months later…

Closing his eyes tightly, Naruto bit at his lower lip as be moved his hips in a few tentative thrusts. Beneath him, Hinata was a trembling mass of heat, legs spreading wider to give him more access so their lower parts were more in contact and perfectly rubbing together, her small hands shaking as they caressed his naked back.

Bending down, Naruto pressed his mouth to hers, kissing her a bit awkwardly because everything was still very new to him, and while he didn't lack confidence, he surely lacked experience and everything he did was based on instinct rather than knowledge. He often mused about how he should've paid attention to the never ending lessons about women and sex Jiraiya had given him during their journeys together.

Naruto liked Hinata. She had a beautiful body and always smelled nice – of something flowery and sweet. Her heart was strong and unblemished. She was kind, and brave, and always eager to please him. It felt good, being loved and simply wanted like that, and it was something he had never experienced before.

The girl was shy and knew even less about this than he did, but somehow, she was always happy to go further and seemed to trust him completely. It made Naruto feel both wary and in control.

His bandaged hand was fist ing a few strands of her soft hair over the mattress of his bed while the other ran up and down the outside of her smooth thigh. Hinata's skin was like pearly silk and he liked it very much.
He also liked that she always wore beautiful matching underwear just for him – it was a male fantasy of his coming to life.

Their tongues clashed clumsily, lips moving noisily, neither able to be very proficient in the heat of the moment yet.

Even with his underwear on, Naruto would feel the sheer heat emanating from between Hinata's thighs – the wetness there seemed to seep from her panties to his boxers and this turned him on immensely. There was no purer and more obvious response to him than that, coming from her.

Breaking the kiss, he took a few gulps of air before latching his mouth over the curve of her neck, pressing wet kisses there before lowering his head to her collar bone, then between her breasts, offering the spot a long lick.

"N-Naruto..." she whispered breathlessly, her nails digging on his shoulders now, hips moving a little to encourage his own movements and simultaneously ask for more.

Lifting his head up, Naruto looked at her, stilling his movements. In the semi-darkness of the room, he could see her beautiful face flushed, hair a complete loose mess spread out all over the pillow under her head, clear eyes sparkling with lust and sheer need, silently telling him what she wanted.

His heart was thumping wildly in his chest, adrenaline at realizing what could be coming next creating a pool of lust to coil in the pit of his stomach. As a man, the need for blissful release almost made him want to rip her panties apart right then and bury himself in her with everything he had, and yet, he had never done something like that before, and he knew it couldn't just go like that.

He contemplated her for a few seconds, breathing hard. Her fingers caressed his shoulders encouragingly and a small smile graced her lips.

He wet his lips, something inside of him shifting suddenly at the thought of actual sex. It wasn't fear, or hesitation, but it was definitely something. Only he didn't know what, exactly, that something was and it made him feel fidgety and uncomfortable. It wasn't like he didn't want this, it was just...

Something was off.

Swallowing hard, he ignored Hinata's inquisitive look and shifted his position so he was lying beside her, on his side, supporting his weight on his elbow. Not giving her time to ask questions, he kissed her hungrily again and grabbed one of her breasts, giving it a small squeeze. His fingers felt her erect nipple before he made his hand run down her body, over her belly and then lower, not wasting time in invading her panties.

She gasped against him, moaning as he made his middle finger slip between the soft lips there and feeling her obvious wetness. He took a sharp intake of breath as she moaned more, her hips convulsing a little, legs closing instinctually at the sensation before parting again.

Breaking the kiss once more, he looked at her just as he carefully made his finger slide inside the moist tightness of her vagina, the slickness there making the process rather easy for him.

Hinata closed her eyes, mouth parting in a silent cry of surprise and pleasure. Eyes never leaving her face, Naruto moved the finger inside her, slowly, but finding no resistance. He pulled out to the tip, then made the finger slide back in. He repeated the process a few times, experimentally, like he always did, and waited until her features began scrunching up a little. He knew it wouldn't take long
from then on.

She released a shuddering breath as one of her hands grabbed his wrist with no real purpose than to touch him or probably motivate him. With his lips pressed close together, Naruto felt her body twitch slightly and he moved his hand a bit faster, making sure he sunk his finger inside her as deep as possible while simultaneously making his palm touch the sensitive clit just for effect (he knew she liked the added sensation, even if it didn't add all that much to it).

As the walls inside her constricted and pulsed around his finger, Naruto watched her face look almost pained as she came, letting out a string of soft, helpless noises that were almost melodic.

He stopped his ministrations as her orgasm slowly faded. She was panting heavily, her fingers loosening around his wrist. Smiling a bit, he leaned down and kissed her temple, removing his digit carefully and his hand from the interior her panties to place it on her knee instead.

"I thought… I thought you wanted to do it," she mumbled, opening her eyes tiredly and turning her face to him.

"Ah, you did?" Naruto muttered with an embarrassed smile. "I didn't think you wanted to do it yet…"

The lie was blatant to him and almost made him flinch. It was the third time Hinata had showed her willingness through body language alone, and the third time Naruto had distracted her by making her cum by other means.

"But, I don't really have any condoms…" he kept on, still sounding awkward, which was a relief to his own ears. "We should probably think about getting them, then, right?"

They had never really talked about it before, thankfully, and yet, since she had exposed the issue so obviously, he just had to find some sort of justifiable excuse, right?

Well, it wasn't an excuse, he really had never thought about buying condoms, anyway. Why, he had no idea. Guys were supposed to just want to jump into the action as soon as the opportunity arose, right?

He had no idea what was wrong with him.

"Yeah, you're right," Hinata said softly, raising a hand to touch his cheek, smiling gently at him again. Then, another blush painted her cheeks. "Do you want… shall I take care of you?"

Naruto's eyebrows shot upwards at that. For a moment, he thought about refusing it – he hadn't made her cum just so he could get something in return, and let's be honest, he did it on purpose to distract her. But he was still pretty hard, and she looked so hopeful that…

"Sure…" he said, with a small shrug. "Okay."

Her eyes lit up at once and she quickly moved to a sitting position, placing her hand on his chest to make him lie on his back. Then, she nimbly changed her location so she was kneeling between his legs. A little curious, Naruto watched as her shy, shaky hands grabbed the hem of his boxers and pulled them down to reveal his erection. She gulped, her face gaining an even redder tone, but her eyes were resolute. He thought she looked strangely beautiful, like a mermaid, her long hair cascading down her body, over her shoulders and curvy, perfect breasts.
Without another second of hesitation, she lowered her body so her mouth was engulfing him and he hissed a bit before closing his eyes, allowing himself to feel. It wasn't amazing, but it certainly felt good.

Vaguely, he wondered if Sakura did this to Sasuke, as well. He wondered if, like him, Sasuke was having issues concerning sex or if he had already done it. Because Sasuke wasn't like him, he did things when they needed to be the done, and Sasuke didn't hesitate.

Perfect Uchiha fucking Sasuke.

Somehow, it frustrated him. Everything about the relationship of those two frustrated him to no end, especially if his guess on Sasuke's feelings was right.

That fucking bastard.

He grunted a bit as he felt Hinata's tongue timidly lap at the head of his cock with her tongue.

Fuck that. He didn't want to be thinking about Sasuke right now.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed every thought of his best friend to the back of his mind and focused on cumming.

A few days later…

Naruto chewed persistently on his lower lip as he stood in a dark, secluded alley near Konoha's hospital with his back against the wall, his hands buried inside the pockets of his pants. Incessantly, his heel was tapping on the ground, signaling his obvious state of anxiety.

He couldn't remember a time of his life when he had ever felt this out of it, so completely all over the place that he had no idea how to even begin to get a hold of himself.

It hurt. He couldn't understand why it hurt, but it did. Surely, Sakura thought so, too, but for a whole different reason.

He didn't really know how to cope with his anger. Well, it wasn't as much anger as it was just… simple disappointment.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. This was not how he had imagined things to turn out at all, and yet, he felt powerless to fight it.

For some reason, fighting Sasuke was becoming harder and harder. He could fight him literally, but when it came to Sasuke being the stubborn asshole he had always been, there was no way he could simply force him to change his mind.

In a not so distant past, he had done it, yes. He had brought Sasuke back from the darkness and made him realize that there were other ways to go about his ideals. But losing his drive because of him, Naruto knew, was something that forced Sasuke to take yet another turn in his way of perceiving his
own life and its meaning. And no matter how Naruto felt about the decisions that came with it, that was something he knew he had no right to interfere with.

Still…

He couldn't understand, for the life of him, why or when things had changed so drastically for them and in a way he hadn't wanted to in the first place at all.

Biting down on his already abused lip, Naruto shut his eyes tightly and clenched his fists.

He knew he was being selfish, but at the same time, that whole mess had been Sasuke's fault to begin with. All of it was Sasuke's fault. Sasuke, with his fucking ideals of redemption and what was right or wrong, thinking he knew what was best for everybody and himself…

Who was being the fucking hypocrite now?

A sudden shift in the air made him open his eyes as he felt the strong chakra signature make his muscles shiver slightly.

At once, he hurried off towards the main street, easily following the familiar source of energy he could perceive. It was far too early in the morning and the stars still filled the dark sky. Apart from the occasional noise inside bakery stores or other early functioning businesses, the streets were silent and empty.

Eventually, he was able to find the tall and recognizable male figure, clad in dark blue and black clothes and he sprinted faster towards the person until he was able to reach him and come to a steady pace beside him. He wasted a few seconds simply glaring at his companion.

The only thing he received back was an unimpressed sideways glance.

"What do you think you're doing?" Sasuke asked, seemingly unaffected by the glare, or even surprised by Naruto's presence.

"Did you do it?" Naruto asked, at once, not even bothering to hide the displeasure in his voice.

"I told you I would do it, didn't I?" Sasuke said blandly, frowning at him. "Tsunade wasn't pleased. It's my choice. You don't get to feel sorry for me, and you don't get to make that face."

Pursing his lips together, Naruto 'tsked' and looked away, shoving both hands inside his pockets again and hearing Sasuke's annoyed sigh at his actions.

For some reason, he became very self-conscious of the rough textures of the bandage surrounding his right hand and arm and immediately hated the feeling. It was stupid that he had to feel this way – that Sasuke had to make him resent his own limb – but he did all the same. Suddenly, he felt like it was pointless. If, almost three years after they had fought, Sasuke still thought he didn't need his fucking arm back, then why should he?

If he had known Sasuke didn't want his arm back, he wouldn't have allowed Tsunade to make one for him at all.

They had gone through the loss together. Whatever happened regarding said arms should be shared and overcome together. And yet, once again, Sasuke decided to take a completely different route
from his, the damned fucker.

Irritated, Naruto chanced a glance at Sasuke's left shoulder. He was wearing an oversized black sweater, and the left sleeve hung loose and empty, swaying as he walked. The sight made his stomach churn for reasons he couldn't explain. His heart ached.

He had once told Sasuke that he suffered for him, and he hadn't been kidding. But Sasuke didn't seem to get it.

"Why are you doing this?" he whispered, angrily, looking down at his walking feet.

Sasuke's answer was quick. "Because I need to."

"That's not good enough of an answer, Sasuke!" Naruto snapped, turning his face to him fully. "Are you trying to punish me, is that it?"

He had no idea why those specific words left his mouth, but they had. Not only that, he had no idea that he had had that impression before, but apparently, all sorts of repressed things were surfacing without his consent.

Sasuke looked both confused and livid at this. "Not everything is about you, you moron," he hissed, as if somewhat offended, walking purposefully faster so he was a few steps ahead of Naruto.

"Bullshit!" Naruto yelled spitefully to his back. "It's not fair, you fucking bastard! You're the one who chose to do everything behind my back, and now I don't even get to feel sad for you?" When Sasuke didn't answer him, he, too, walked faster and reached out to grab for his friend's shoulder to stop him. "Just... stop already and talk to me, damn it!"

Sasuke did stop, furiously slapping his hand away and turning to him, and the firm, cold stare he gave him made Naruto's breath catch in his lungs, not from fear, but from hurt. Slowly, he gulped.

"Don't fucking touch me," the Uchiha said, his voice calm and collected, but dangerous, eyes narrowing as they stared into Naruto's unblinking ones.

For a few seconds, neither spoke. The streets were still blissfully empty, but already they could hear a bit of commotion in the distance as the village woke up; the sun was barely rising.

"What are you going to do now?" Naruto mumbled after a while, trying to keep his hands from shaking and the resentment from his voice. "Leave? Again?"

Sasuke's eyes seem to have gained a new level of intensity, and yet, the flicker of emotions there weren't something Naruto knew how to read.

"I don't belong here, Naruto. Maybe I never did," Sasuke replied, now a little less aggressively, adjusting his sweater with his right hand. In spite of his seemingly calm demeanor, Naruto could feel his chakra bubbling and his energy all over the place. Sasuke was angry.

"Why this? Why now? I don't understand you at all..." Naruto whispered. Then, before he could even stop the words from leaving his mouth, he asked, "Why her? After everything you said..."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you say you didn't want me to be alone?" he asked, almost mockingly. "I'm merely indulging you."
"And what does she think about your stupid assed decision of not getting your arm back?" Naruto hissed.

Sasuke's eyes seemed to darken at that, and the disgusting smirk he gave him made Naruto's blood boil inside his veins. "It's as much her business as it is yours," he said simply.

That made Naruto snap. Before he could control it, he had lounged himself at the other male, grabbing him by the collar of his sweater. Sasuke gasped in surprise but Naruto just pushed him backwards, hard and fast until he was violently slamming his friend against the nearest building's wall so hard Sasuke's skull hit the flat surface rather loudly. But he didn't care about it; if he had to break him up again to make him do what was right he would do it in a heartbeat.

"You fucking bastard!" Naruto grunted venomously in Sasuke's face, eyeing him with fury. "Fuck, you get on my nerves, Sasuke!"

Sasuke's face scrunched up in anger – an expression Naruto had been all too used to seeing in the last few months – but he didn't look intimidated in the slightest. Their faces were inches apart and Naruto felt himself shake with the sheer untamable rawness of everything he was feeling.

He knew Sasuke was just pushing his buttons. They knew nothing about each other at this point, and he knew nothing about Sasuke's relationship with Sakura. If he was angry on her behalf, upset that it all seemed out of balance somehow or just completely furious at Sasuke's attitude towards his body and his life, he didn't know, but everything happening since that war and their battle, Sasuke leaving, their fight… how everything just seemed so misplaced without explanation…

And it was all Sasuke's fault. Sasuke, who didn't talk to him anymore. Sasuke, who was never home. Sasuke, who claimed he only accepted him and yet was doing whatever with Sakura and avoiding him at all costs.

Naruto wanted to scream or punch him until he lost consciousness. Maybe he wanted to do both. The Kami help him, he just wanted to tear him apart and glue him back together.

"If you want to hit me, then just fucking do it!" Sasuke yelled, defiantly, something very akin to hatred filling his eyes. "Or what, are you hesitating because now we're supposedly 'all good' or something? You're such a fucking idealist, Naruto, it makes me sick!"

But Naruto couldn't find words to counter Sasuke's anymore. He didn't feel like he could even be account responsible for his actions anymore, and why the hell didn't Sasuke get it?

His vision only managed to catch Sasuke's mouth opening to let out another possible train of bullshit before everything went short-circuit in his mind. Next thing he knew, his mouth was literally crashing violently over Sasuke's. And it hurt like a bitch. His lips had somehow smashed on Sasuke's teeth and he was sure he had cut them badly.

Sasuke let out a loud, pained huff that made Naruto sure that he had also been abused by the contact. As if to prove it, Naruto felt something warm and slick flooding his bruised lips - blood - and he didn't know if it belonged to him or to his friend, and neither did he care. The pain made him convulse a bit, but his mind was too clouded for him to fully understand every insignificant detail of what was happening.

Sasuke seemed a little at loss, but he said something intelligible and agressive that Naruto couldn't
understand considering their mouths were glued together. Before he could control himself, he tilted his head to the side and moved his lips demandingly over Sasuke's as he pressed their mouths closer together, feeling an almost visceral need to have Sasuke do something. He felt like he was somehow doing something he shouldn't be doing and challenging Sasuke in the worst possible way, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. In a way, he hoped Sasuke would fight him, punch him, or bite him... anything.

Anything to have him responding to him so they could finally connect once more, through anger, hatred, whatever it took...

Sasuke's body fidgeted a bit as he seemed to struggle with what to do, his hand grabbing for the fabric of Naruto's shirt over his shoulder and twisting it in his strong grip. His mouth was unresponsive to Naruto's, just hanging open as if shocked to stillness.

Unaware of what he was doing, Naruto pressed himself more to him, effectively pinning him to the wall. He bit down hard on Sasuke's lower lip, with every intent to hurt, feeling more blood gushing out from the open bruises there. Sasuke's body shook and he let out an angry breath before everything about him came to life and he was moving his mouth over Naruto's ferociously.

Naruto's very being seemed to catch fire as Sasuke deepened the kiss, their mouths touching hungrily and fighting for dominance, the bitter taste of their blood mingling in their tongues, filling both their senses and making Naruto go dizzy with all sorts of conflicting feelings. Adrenaline was pumping violently through him, blood quickly rushing down to his lower regions and he couldn't understand what he was doing at all, and neither did he feel like debating on it. Sasuke was responding, they were sharing something, and that was all that mattered. Everything else was nothing but a blur outside of the existence that was them.

It was a clumsy, overly excited kiss fueled by all sorts of emotions. Neither seemed to know what they were doing, and while Naruto himself was already experienced enough at kissing, he felt like he had no control whatsoever of how that particular kiss was being processed.

His hands released Sasuke's collar and travelled down over his flat chest before his arms surrounded him by the waist. Sasuke's right arm also moved to hold him around the neck and pull him tightly close as he angled his head purposefully for more contact. He could feel Sasuke's upper left arm reacting as if to hug him as well but no contact came from it and he moaned pitifully at it.

It hurt. Everything hurt so much he felt tears coming to his eyes. There was no delicateness in the way Sasuke kissed, but there was longing and an obvious desperation on both their parts and Naruto found that the more they drank from each other's essence the thirstier he became. Sasuke's taste was sharp and his scent was clean and specific. He knew for a fact that he never wore cologne, and yet, he always had that distinctive smell that brought Naruto back to his childhood. It was exhilarating and nothing like Naruto had ever felt in his life.

And it was as terrifying as it was unique.

Suddenly, he felt Sasuke reacting, quickly as lightning itself, and he was being roughly shoved away, stumbling backwards a bit. His mind was hazy for a few confused seconds but he was forced to focus as he felt the tip of something extremely sharp poke at the spot of his neck above his Adam's apple.

Breathing hard, he saw Sasuke in front of him, looking feral and threatening, lips swollen and red as a trail of blood fell from a particularly nasty gash dripped down his chin. Sasuke had a kunai pressed
to his neck.

"Do that again and I swear I won't be answering for myself," Sasuke hissed, his voice was low and shaky. "You have no right to demand anything out of me, do you understand? You have no right to do something like this."

"You're in love with me, aren't you?" Naruto whispered, swallowing hard. He felt really shaken about what had just happened, but more than anything, the sheer pull they had shared towards each other had been overwhelming. "I know it, Sasuke; you can't hide that from me anymore."

Sasuke's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "Is this the stupid conclusion you came up with?" he retorted, his stance becoming even straighter, clearly feeling defensive.

"What else could it be?" Naruto muttered, frowning. "The way you act, the things you've told me…"

"You're offending me," Sasuke spat, lowering his kunai. "In love? Me? As if I'd ever feel such a pathetic and frivolous emotion for someone like you."

"I can't even understand if what you just said is an insult or a compliment!" Naruto complained, his arousal fading rather quickly to be replaced by the now familiar frustration. "Damn it, Sasuke, just talk to me!"

Sasuke shoved the kunai ruthlessly back inside the small pouch he had around his waist. "Fuck you, Naruto."

"No! You should've told me how you felt, damn it!" Naruto contradicted, clenching his fists at his sides. Sasuke had responded to him, surely he couldn't have made the wrong assumption of his feelings, it just wasn't possible. "Why don't you just say what you want to say?"

"And then what?" Sasuke yelled bitterly, using the back of his hand to wipe at the blood on his lips, smudging it all over his chin and mouth instead. "What would you do about it, Naruto, huh? You didn't even think twice about wanting to stay in Konoha when I specifically told you I wanted you to be with me. If I tell you what I want, how I really feel, will your feelings for this fucking place be different?"

Again, Sasuke was surprising him with things he had no idea would be thrown to his face like that, and again, he felt stupid all of a sudden, not knowing how to reply. "I… I don't know, I just…"

"Why did you even do that?" Sasuke looked hurt, and Naruto knew that, somehow, he had taken the wrong step once more, even without meaning to. "Out of all the things you could've done, you kissed me. Are you fucking crazy?"

"I don't know!" Naruto said, truthfully, because, really, he didn't know anything about them anymore. "Just give me a break, okay? I don't know how I feel about all this, but that doesn't mean you just have to go and pretend you don't feel that way about me!"

Sasuke huffed, exasperated. "What way, you idiot?" he asked challengingly, but sounding tired.

"I don't know, but there's something definitely strange going on!" the blond man babbled, unsure of what to say. Sasuke rolled his eyes at him and turned his back on him – something he did a lot recently, it seemed – bent on walking away from him. "Look, we can work this out, we should talk about this…."
"Talk?" Sasuke stopped in his tracks and turned around to face him. He eyed Naruto for a few seconds. When he spoke again, his voice was of a smooth, deadly low tone. "I don't want to talk to you about my feelings, you dumbass. I want you to leave me the fuck alone and not go around doing stupid things you don't even know the meaning of. You have a fucking girlfriend."

"And so do you!" Naruto shot back. "You're being hypocritical!"

"I never said she was my girlfriend," Sasuke replied, as if the thought itself that someone would think so surprised him. "What did you expect me to do, anyway? It's already painful enough watching you being fucking clueless all the time and just taking one dumb step after another."

"Sasuke..."

"You made your choice, Naruto," Sasuke hissed venomously as he turned on his heels and walked away without even bothering to look back anymore. "Now deal with it."

Naruto watched him go, fury and resentment flooding him, knowing that no argument he could ever shout at his best friend would ever be valid enough in Sasuke's eyes.

Because Sasuke was right and he had screwed up, somehow. Again. And it seemed like there was no right way of undoing it anymore.

---

"I suppose you know why I asked you to meet me," Tsunade said, sitting at her doctor's office's desk just as Naruto was coming inside and closing the door behind him.

"Yeah..." the young man said tiredly, making his way to the chair across the desk from her and slumping down. "He really doesn't want his arm back, does he?"

"I'll keep the one I made for him just in case," the former Hokage said, rummaging through a drawer on her left and finally finding what she was looking for. "But, to be very honest, it would be very complicated to implant it on him now that his wound is completely healed. The skin has ever regenerated rather nicely, as well."

"But it would be possible to give him the arm in the future anyways, right?" Naruto inquired, with hope in his eyes.

"Yes, but it would take three times the trouble, and a long time for him to adapt to it and for the general arm to heal." Tsunade pulled out a metallic canteen and two plastic cups which she placed in front of herself and in front of her favorite protégé. "In a way, it was for the best. Without an arm, Sasuke's less of a threat. This will please the council, and the other villages that, as you know, weren't very happy about how easily he got away with what he did, even if they accepted it because of you."

Naruto laughed. "They're crazy if they think not having an arm will make him less skilled and capable."
"I know, that boy is really something," Tsunade agreed, wasting no time in pouring a bit of the beverage into both cups, glad when Naruto didn't protest. "His journeys have been pretty fruitful, or so I heard. He's been providing a lot of information for Konoha, and word says he's been doing a lot of charitable work for poor villages."

"Really?" Naruto seemed genuinely surprised as he picked up the cup and took a sniff of the beverage. He sipped on it and made a face, before taking another sip.

"How are you holding up?" Tsunade asked gently. She knew that those two were going through a hard time, and Sasuke not taking the path Naruto wished for him was surely taking its toll on the blond.

"I'm pissed off at him, but I guess I understand," Naruto mumbled, lowering the cup and resting it over his lap. "Still, I wish he'd stop this dramatic bullshit once and for all and accept that he can be a normal, happy person."

"I suppose doing what he's doing makes him feel accomplished enough." Tsunade also took a sip on her drink, instantly gratified at the feeling of relaxation the alcohol provided for her. Becoming a full time Doctor sure was as troublesome as being Hokage.

"You saved him," she proceeded carefully. "But there are things about him that will never be healed."

"I know, and it sucks," Naruto said with a huff. His blue eyes moved from hers to the window behind her. "Sometimes, I wonder if he even knows how to be happy..."

"Naruto, life is made of choices, and we all make the ones that are more convenient for us," Tsunade began, after a few seconds of contemplative silence. "I don't think he's ignorant towards happiness, I just think that, lucky as he is, he's also terribly unfortunate when it comes to what he wants."

"Huh..." Naruto sounded dispassionate, and it tore at her very heart.

"You two are strangely distant considering how much you care about each other," she observed knowing she had struck a chord when Naruto tensed up.

"We had a fight a few months ago and I don't think he got over it yet," he confessed, looking down at his drink. "I can't even try to make up with him, he's always away and when he's around, he's either with Sakura-chan or purposefully ignoring me."

Tsunade almost smiled but thought better of it. In a way, she wanted to help them, but at the same time, she knew it was none of her business and that, when it came to them, they would have to fix things by themselves, as they always had.

But this 'issue' of theirs sure was becoming a nuisance if so much time had passed and they still hadn't fixed it.

"I don't like the Uchiha brat, as you very well know," she said, with a sigh, leaning back on her chair. "But he has a strong connection to you, and even I can see that that bond is exclusive to you. Just because you saved him once it doesn't mean he doesn't still need your help."

Naruto nodded, looking at her with a pained expression. "I just... wish he could say things to my
"Maybe he's just waiting for you to take the step on your own?" she suggested. "I don't really understand what's with the two of you, but you went through hell and back for him. It would be a waste if you couldn't make peace because of a misunderstanding."

"I know."

Another moment of silence stretched out between them. Tsunade took a few sips on her drink and urged Naruto to do the same, which he did, almost automatically since he was obviously lost in thought.

"Have you ever considered going with him in one of his journeys?" she asked casually, making him tense up again. "Surely he wouldn't mind. Maybe that's what you two need. Maybe you'd be more accepting of what he's doing if you could see it for yourself?"

"Baa-chan, Sasuke is gone for months on end," Naruto complained, with a pout. "I have missions, training, and Hinata …"

"She'll still be here when you get back," Tsunade assured him, rolling her eyes at how simple minded he was. "And so will the village."

"Well, yeah, but… I don't know…"

"You never thought about it seriously, did you?" She chuckled softly as he looked to the side, lips making a pout again. "Kakashi would allow it, I'm sure." Shaking her head from side to side, she proceeded. "I know you're stubborn, and that limits your focus to things you know and are used to. But I think that, after all those years of chasing after your friend, you two didn't dedicate time to each other at all. And it's been almost three years since the war. Don't you think that's sad?"

"Yeah," Naruto admitted, for some reason blushing a little. "I mean, I do want to spend time with him…"

"You have to open up your horizons," Tsunade encouraged. "Life isn't all about Konoha. You'll have time to devote everything to it once you become Hokage. A little change of airs might do you good."

It wasn't as if she wanted Naruto out of her sight. Before the war, he spent so much time away, risking his life for the village and for Sasuke, always in danger, always fighting, always hurting… one would think that with him and the Uchiha brat having made peace, things would be good, and yet, Naruto was still hurting. She had hoped that, with Hinata now in the picture, Naruto could finally put his obsession with Sasuke behind his back, but it seemed like it was impossible, and even less if they were still not exactly on the best of terms for reasons she could only begin to speculate.

If all they needed was time together, they should have it. If Sasuke hadn't managed to kill Naruto before, he wouldn't do it now, for sure. She had seen the way Sasuke looked at him, and had managed to comprehend that there was a certain depth to what they had, even if she couldn't quite embrace what it was because, clearly, it was too complicated to be something positive. Thank gods for Hinata, she always thought. Still, she couldn't help but feel sorry for Sasuke, and since Naruto felt deeply for him, Tsunade had learned to interiorize that whatever the mess between them was, it was here to stay.
"I don't know. At this point, maybe he doesn't even want me to tag along anymore," Naruto retorted with a helpless shrug of his shoulders. He downed the rest of his drink in one go and shuddered before slamming the recipient on the table and crushing it. "There's so much I don't understand about him... anyway, I should go. Don't drink yourself to sleep old hag."

"As if!" Tsunade huffed, falsely affronted as he got up. "Take care brat, and come visit more often! Just because you have a girlfriend now it doesn't mean you have to forget your friends, yes?"

"I would never forget about you, old hag," he said, offering her a small smile and a wink. "I need you to babysit my kids someday."

She laughed at the irony of his statement. "Keep dreaming."

000

From the top of a tree, hidden in the dense foliage, Naruto was crouching down on a branch as he watched the couple standing in front the high gates of Konoha with lips pursed together.

He couldn't listen to what they were saying – not that he particularly cared – but he knew that any person walking by them on that sunny morning would be able to understand that those two were definitely together.

The image was foreign to him and made him feel uncomfortable beyond reason. It was nothing like his childhood, when he'd watch them from behind, resentment and jealousy filling him.

Now, the feelings assaulting him also included jealousy, but a different kind, and for a different person altogether.

Sakura and Sasuke were in front of each other, him tall and imposing as was usual of him, clad in his traveling, long black cloak; her, abnormally close to him, her hands unnecessarily adjusting his clothes, clearly taking every chance she could of touching him. She blushed as she talked to him, while he simply nodded, a very small, bland smile gracing thin lips – a courtesy Sasuke afforded to give to her for some reason.

Then, he said something to her and she smiled back, and when he leaned in to press his lips to hers, her face gained yet another shade of red, but when he meant to move away, she quickly surrounded his neck with both her arms and intensified the kiss. Sasuke seemed a little taken aback by it, but slowly, almost tentatively, raised his only hand to touch her waist, and this is when Naruto turned his face away.

It was stupid, he thought, narrowing his eyes at a spider that was crawling close to his sandaled foot. Why did it end up like this?

He knew he had been foolish – he had been the one completely oblivious all along, for some reason, misunderstanding Sasuke's words completely and his feelings, and still, they should've worked out things differently. Sure, he was pretty dumb in some things, but if Sasuke had simply expressed himself without speaking in riddles, maybe this wouldn't have happened.
If Sasuke had just asked… no, if he had told Naruto what he wanted and not had not given him options instead of making him believe he was trying to push him towards another direction…

And what frustrated him the most was that… Sasuke wasn't even in love with her. This was something he knew, in his heart, and no intense French kissing (he took a peak at his friends and he could see their tongues battling from where he was, which was absolutely disgusting, ew) would ever make him feel otherwise.

He closed his eyes and took a few, deep breaths, his heart beating furiously inside his chest.

No. The way he and Sasuke had kissed the other day… even if Sasuke had ended up threatening him… nothing could replicate that. The fire, the anger, the sheer longing… he had never felt that way for another person (not even Hinata) and even if Naruto himself hadn't expected that outcome, it hadn't shocked him all that much since it helped him understand things he often thought about, feelings he often experienced around Sasuke, urges he had towards him…

And just… how different everything felt from when he was with Hinata.

It had been painful but something sort of amazing, too. And it hurt him to realize that those feelings Sasuke had for him… Sasuke knew about them all along. And it hurt him to know that his naivety had hurt his best friend.

Even if Sasuke said he wasn't in love with him, those feelings he had were very exclusive to him. Just like the feelings he had for Sasuke. Although, he really couldn't explain them very well. He had tried, over and over again to understand what had possessed him to kiss his friend in the first place, but came up with no answer. He knew that Sasuke was attractive, but that had never been something that attracted him personally.

Maybe he had just wanted to test the other to see if his theory of Sasuke being in love with him was right?

Well, if he had to be honest with himself, he had felt some sort of emotional attraction to the Uchiha, and Sasuke's power, his abilities as a shinobi, his very intelligence… these were things that he found himself attracted to. But it had never been... well, sexual. At least he didn't think so.

Naruto still couldn't believe how stupid he had been. And now, awareness came too late, it seemed, because Sasuke resented him deeply and he had no idea what to do about it.

He didn't even understand why Sasuke was doing what he was doing or what his purpose was. At the same time, he was furious on Sakura's behalf and wanted to shake her out of her love-induced state to make her realize that Sasuke wasn't hers. Didn't she even stop for a minute to question herself about why was this happening all of a sudden? Or was she really so immersed in her fantasy all along that she had simply believed that, in the end, they would definitely end up together?

It seemed that way. Some said that there was no stronger power than the power of love, and apparently, it worked in her favor… somehow.

Then why didn't his and Sasuke's 'love' seem to go anywhere, even after everything they had gone through, together and apart?

And it was weird to think of it as 'love', because it was that exactly, but so much more. Maybe it wasn't sexual, maybe it didn't even have anything to do with what he and Hinata had at all, but their
bond was definitely unusual.

Nothing made sense. Nothing was how it was supposed to be. How it was supposed to be, he didn't know either.

Naruto huffed. What the hell was he supposed to do? They had different goals, and if they didn't learn to compromise they would never be able to be friends and get along the way he knew they were supposed to.

Naruto chanced a glance towards the gates of just in time to see Sakura waving and Sasuke exiting the village.

Watching him leave brought a tightness to Naruto's chest he knew would follow him for weeks on end. Sasuke was leaving again and they were still in bad terms.

For some reason, more than anything, Naruto wanted to figure out what, exactly, bonded him to Sasuke that seemed to both pull them together and draw them apart at the same time. They couldn't go on like this, not understanding what they felt, what they wanted and how to cope with it. They had to find a way, they had to fix this no matter what…

Having Sasuke in his life, but not having Sasuke there… it wasn't right. In his world, it felt wrong and it didn't make sense.

That bond they had – Naruto longed for it with his very being, and Sasuke walking away from it as he was doing… that was unconceivable.

He simply… longed for Sasuke.

Awareness made him gulp. He really wanted… to be with Sasuke, right now. For a long time. They needed this.

With a jolt, Naruto straightened his back in sudden resolution – it was now or never. He needed to hurry because he didn't have much time. He had to go to Hinata, and then head over to the Hokage tower. He only hoped Kakashi didn't give him a hard time.

Sasuke heaved a sigh, bringing two fingers to his lips to absently rub at them for a while as he immersed himself deeper into the forest. His mouth was still tingling a bit from the intense kiss Sakura had forced out of him. It hadn't been unpleasant, but he had certainly not expected her to be this feisty considering how he had set the cards on the table for her. Still, in her eyes, he still saw that hope that, someday, she'd be able to make him love her like she wanted.

Lowering his hand, Sasuke sighed once more. Everybody believed that they were dating, and he found that denying it would be too troublesome. Who cared, anyway? It's not like people would ever understand if he did try to explain how things were between him and Sakura.

He had goals and things he needed accomplished. Sakura knew that. Those goals hadn't been
primary in his mind about a year ago, but they were, now.

Naruto had his mind set about his future, and while, before that, Sasuke had kept a small flame of hope alive in his chest, now he knew it just wasn't worth it. No matter what, Naruto would keep moving forward, and because of that, Sasuke should do the same. It was only natural, wasn't it?

Naruto liked Hinata, Sasuke knew that very well, and, to a certain extent, this made him feel relieved, yet sad. There were things Naruto needed that someone like Sasuke couldn't give him, so it made him happy that Naruto had found someone who could.

Still, he and Naruto had been on each other's minds for so long that Sasuke didn't feel like he could be blamed for wishing that things were different between them.

Not that he felt differently about them in any way, Sasuke considered, looking up at the trees above him and absently appreciating the sun rays filtering through the leafy branches. He loved nature more than anything.

Sasuke knew, without a doubt, that the way he felt for Naruto was reciprocated, only Naruto didn't look beyond what was on the surface of their bond. He was goal driven and tended to chase what he thought was right and acceptable and what he thought was expected of him. Sasuke was a bit like that, as well, but instead of these traits of both of them meeting, they just clashed and worked against them.

Naruto thought Sasuke was in love with him. It almost made him laugh – what a ridiculous thing. 'Love' was such an understatement it was offensive to him. After everything they had gone through, after what Naruto had done for him, 'love' could, in no possible way, ever describe the way he felt.

Sasuke walked aimlessly for about half an hour, heading to nowhere in particular, as usual, deeply lost in thought, something that happened to him rather often lately. He had supplies for a few days inside his bag, so he knew he'd be fine until he found the nearest village.

It wasn't as if he understood it himself. He longed for Naruto and for their bond. More than thinking about it in a romantic way, Sasuke thought it was the exclusive way he saw Naruto that made him believe and somewhat that something intimate between them would be possible. he had debated on it for a long time during his first journey and realized it had nothing to do with his sexuality.

Before Naruto had foolishly kissed him for no apparent reason, Sasuke had never even really thought about him in a sexual way. The fact that something like that had happened and that they both reacted to it just proved his theory about how much more complicated their bond was.

It had been a rather… interesting kiss, though. His mouth still felt the strength of it, and it had happened a few days previously.

'Frustrating' didn't even manage to explain their situation anymore, and in a way, Sasuke had resigned himself to how things were. He had been selfish far too many times in the past, so he wouldn't be so anymore in demanding Naruto's comprehension. If this is how it was going to be, it was yet another reason for him to stay away. It was becoming harder and harder to deal with every interaction between them.

*Sasuke! Wait for me!*

He hadn't heard the words inside his brain, and yet, the strange sensation that ran over his body felt
like a calling to his very soul. Naruto was conveying his emotions through their connection, and since it didn't happen often, Sasuke was caught off guard.

He stopped in his tracks abruptly, looking over his shoulder in surprise. Through his chakra, he could feel Naruto calling out to him, demanding his attention.

Blinking in disbelief at the forest behind him, he felt his heartbeat race as he felt Naruto's presence coming closer and closer with each passing second. Sasuke looked up on instinct just in time to see the loud idiot landing on the branch of a tree right over his head before finally jumping down from it and landing in a crouching position in front of him.

As Naruto straightened up, Sasuke watched his every move with his eyebrows quirked upwards inquisitively. Naruto was wearing a grey colored traveling cloak, and he was even carrying a large bag. The blond looked serious and determined.

"What the hell are you doing, Naruto?" Sasuke asked, just as Naruto proudly walked past him.

"Well, I'm coming with you," Naruto said as if it was obvious, not bothering to look back. Sasuke watched his retreating back for a while, dumbfounded, before following after him. He didn't try to keep up with his friend's pace, though; he just kept walking a few steps behind him, eyes boring holes into the back of Naruto's neck.

"Why?" he whispered, unsure if he should feel happy or just plain confused. "You just left Hinata in the village to come with me?"

"It's just this once," his friend said easily, with a shrug. "I'm not going to become a philosophical traveler like you, if that's what you're thinking." Sasuke could swear he detected a smile in Naruto's voice. "You once said you wanted to show me things. Well, I've been thinking that I want to see them, too. With you. Besides, I owe you this."

"You owe me?" Sasuke frowned. "So you're coming with me out of some debt you think you need to repay?"

Naruto turned around so fast Sasuke didn't have time to stop so he ended up bumping into him.

"I just said I wanted to do this with you," the blond one said, looking displeased at Sasuke's misinterpretation of his words. "Don't be an ass. I go because I want to." He poked Sasuke on the chest for emphasis. "We need this. I want to hang out with you. You've been an ass, and I probably lack some sensitivity to your mood swings or whatever, but that doesn't mean I don't miss you or that I don't care."

"I know you care," Sasuke replied, eyeing the other's features attentively. "But still, what do you expect to accomplish?"

"I don't know, but somehow, maybe this will be good for us?" Naruto said, with a small shrug. "Maybe we can settle things once and for all. I want to be a part of whatever it is you're doing out there that makes you feel accomplished."

Sasuke bit on his lower lip, staring into Naruto's eyes that refused to leave his. Somehow, with Naruto's chest pressed close to his and their faces mere inches away from each other, Sasuke wondered if the other male truly understood what he was getting himself into.
When Naruto's eyes lowered to his mouth, he was sure he was thinking about the same thing.

"This could turn out to be a really bad idea," Sasuke whispered.

Naruto smirked. "Well, we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

TBC...
I feel the need to reinforce that, no matter what happens in 'Naruto The Last Movie' this fic will ONLY follow the events we see in the manga. I don't care about the movie; that romance pulled out of Kishi's ass means nothing to me. So, no matter what, even if this story isn't finished by the time the movie is released, do not let the movie influence your vision on this. MANGA ONLY.

Not beated for the time being.

"Nee, Sasuke," Naruto mumbled, with his arms behind his head, looking at his travelling companion from the corner of his eye as they walked side by side on that grey afternoon. "How long will we be away?"

"We've only been gone for two days, and you're already wanting to get back?" Sasuke inquired, frowning at him. "You might as well have stayed there."

Arms dropping to his sides, Naruto felt himself fuming almost instantly. "I don't want to go back, damn it, it was just a question!" he replied, his voice so loud it made a few birds fly from their perches atop of the trees in fright. "I was just making conversation since I'm the only who's even bothering to talk around here!"

"Well, yeah, sorry for not thinking my input would be appreciated since you talk enough for the both of us," Sasuke offered, dryly.

"That's not true!" Naruto defended. "I only talk a lot because you don't and it becomes boring when all we're doing is walking and running!"

"Whatever."

With a huff, Naruto crossed his arms over his chest and pouted.

They had been on the road for two days, apparently simply heading towards wherever, and they had barely had a decent conversation. Firstly, because Sasuke had been bent on putting as much distance between them and Konoha as he possibly could on the first day, so they had practically spent it running until they could barely feel their legs. They had set camp to spend the night, and while Naruto had fallen asleep at some point, Sasuke had kept watch until morning.

There were many things Naruto wanted to tell Sasuke, and many things he wanted to ask him. There wasn't much to say about those two years and a few months that had passed since the war that Sasuke didn't know about, and yet, he felt like he wanted to talk to him, so he did, even if he had nothing very insightful to say. At least he was making an effort.

More than talking, Naruto wanted Sasuke to tell him things, like what he had been up to during his
travels, what he had seen, about people he had met...

But his friend often kept to himself, his conversations polite enough when they weren't bickering. Sometimes, Sasuke told him small facts. Like on the first night they spend together and Sasuke managed to do a small fire jutsu with just one hand, and in a few seconds, they had a good bonfire ready.

Naruto, of course, had been surprised at his ability because most seals were made with two hands and Sasuke, only having one, was obviously at a disadvantage. However, as Sasuke had shortly explained, he had spent a lot of time studying different sources of energy and how to make his chakra respond to certain single-handed seals to summon the type of energy he needed, so while the effect wasn't exactly the same, he had realized that he could still pull off a good number of jutsu just as efficiently as before, only differently.

In spite of knowing how talented and smart Sasuke naturally was and always trusting his abysmal strength, Naruto had to admit that he was fairly impressed and pleased.

"I don't know how long we'll be away," Sasuke ended up saying after heaving a sigh, a clear sign of defeat and willingness to give in to his friend's whining. "I don't really leave thinking about when I'll get back. It could be weeks, or months. We'll see."

At Sasuke's softer tone, Naruto relaxed. "It's not like I'm eager to get back or anything," he felt the need to explain, with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders. "I'm kind of excited about this, to be honest."

A thunder echoed in the air and they both looked up to see the sky darkening. "I think it's going to rain," Sasuke observed absently. Considering how the weather had been threatening them since they left the village, Naruto couldn't help but agree.

"Travelling during the winter," he said, smiling at his friend. "You really are crazy."

To his surprise, Sasuke returned the action with a small, soft smirk that made Naruto's throat run dry – he still hadn't been able to get used to those rare, genuine smiles, small as they were. "It's during the hardest times that we give value to small things. I find the winter to be my favorite season for travelling and learning."

With his eyebrows quirked upwards, Naruto watched as Sasuke pursed his lips together and turned his face away from him, focusing on the path ahead of them. He couldn't find the words to respond to that, for some reason, so he just kept staring at the other – who chose to ignore him – not able to understand why he was feeling such a sense of understanding all of a sudden.

000

"So, they finally left together..." Sakura said casually, stirring her hot chocolate with a spoon to cool it down.

"It seems that way." Hinata muttered with a small nod, both hands cradling her mug of tea. "I'm surprised it took that long, to be very honest."

It was raining outside the small coffee shop. The two had been spending the afternoon together, shopping and talking about mundane things when the weather had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. It was terribly cold all of a sudden, too, and Sakura regretted not having brought a thicker jacket.

The Hyuuga heiress was looking down at her hands, her beautiful face thoughtful and her clear eyes
morose – something Sakura hadn't seen in her in a long time. She hadn't even touched her tea yet.

"You look sad, Hinata-chan," Sakura observed gently, making the other girl look up at her. "What's wrong?"

Hinata gave her a small, elegant shrug. "I just miss him, that's all," she mumbled, and Sakura didn't need to ask to know who she was referring to. "I know it's only been a couple of days, but still..."

"Yeah, I miss them, too," Sakura said, smiling a bit. "Well, Sasuke-kun is never around, anyway, so I guess I've kind of gotten used to the feeling of his absence."

Hinata's attention perked up at that, and she seemed genuinely surprised. "You two really are together, then?" she asked, before smiling. "Congratulations! I'm very happy for you."

Internally, Sakura cringed.

"Thank you, but we're just... trying at this point," she replied, with a nervous chuckle. Well, trying really was the key word. "A man like him loves deeply, but... I guess he just needs to learn how to love in a simpler way. I'm sure I can teach him that... if he allows it."

In spite of her efforts to look jovial, somehow, the façade must've been obvious to Hinata because her smile disappeared, to be replaced by sympathy.

Sakura sighed and took a sip on her hot chocolate. Yes, everybody thought that she and Sasuke were 'together', and in a way, she felt happy that the village had this impression, even though he had been a missing-nin. After all, she had chased after him for years, constantly rejecting other men's confessions, even when others told her that she was being futile and that her devotion was fruitless. At least, this way, she didn't seem like a fool.

It didn't mean she didn't feel like one, though.

It wasn't as though she didn't still love him. Sasuke had been the love of her life since she was a little girl, and no matter how much she had grown, a part of her still clung to that image of the cool, reliable kid that had been her and Naruto's teammate. She knew Sasuke had done a lot of wrong things she couldn't even begin to understand the reason of. She knew she had no ground to speak of 'love' in front of the person that he was now – someone she didn't know at all.

But, in spite of how, for a while, she had actually embraced the possibility that she had moved on and began to love somebody else (she felt guilty thinking about it with Hinata right there), truth was, in the end...

When Sasuke had smiled at her – the first, genuine smile she had ever seen coming from him directed at her – she had fallen all over again.

She hated herself for it. She hated that she had the chance for something better – someone better – and yet, she had given that someone to someone else while keeping her hopes up that something good might come her way.

Because she knew that Sasuke wasn't a bad person. Naruto had seen it from the very beginning, and after everything he had done for the other, that had to mean something, didn't it?

That was why Naruto was on a whole different league from everyone else in Sasuke's eyes, and she was only able to understand it when she had seen how badly the two had injured each other during their fight, going as far as losing their arms together.
She didn't like to delve on it but there were things she was only beginning to understand about those two – things she was learning to accept.

Still, after Naruto and Hinata had gotten together, she had confessed to Sasuke, yet again, and he had agreed that she deserved a chance for all the shit she had gone through because of him.

She had only been happy for three seconds before he started talking and naming his conditions. They weren't exactly the best, but she had agreed to it. After all, Sakura had high hopes that they could both work everything out, at some point, and that, somewhere down the road, they could find something that was good enough for the both of them.

Sasuke wasn't even her boyfriend, yet. In fact, compared to Naruto, he seriously lacked 'boyfriend' material, but Sakura hoped that, with time, she could change that about him.

That was, if he spent enough time in the village for her to achieve it.

Sakura sighed again and focused on her female friend once more. Hinata was looking down at her mug again, a deep blush painting her cheeks, her perfect teeth biting on her own lower lip.

"What is it?" Sakura asked worriedly, noticing how the girl seemed to tense up.

"Naruto won't... do it... with me..." Hinata whispered, her voice so low Sakura had to lean closer across the table to hear her properly. "We've done a few things, and I've hinted several times that it's okay, but he just pretends he doesn't get it. I know he does it on purpose. I mean, how oblivious can he be?"

For one thing, Sakura was shocked that Hinata would actually talk to her about something like that, but at the same time, knowing that her teammate was holding back on sex gave her a sinking feeling – a feeling that wasn't unfamiliar to her.

"Maybe he's just not ready yet," she said carefully, reaching out a hand to place it over Hinata's hand in a reassuring manner. "After all, you're his first girlfriend. Or maybe he's planning something with more meaning?" Hinata's eyes were filled with hope at her words, and Sakura forced her mouth to form a steady, encouraging smile. "He looks like someone who would do that for you."

Hinata nodded, relaxing a bit. "Well... probably..."

Relieved, Sakura, caressed Hinata's wrist a few times before letting go. She couldn't feel bad for lying, could she? After all, Hinata wasn't to blame for Naruto's own issues that, in the end, had nothing to do with her or how he felt for her.

"Sakura-san..." Hinata started softly, turning her face towards the show window next to them. "Doesn't it scare you? Love, I mean." At Sakura's stunned lack of response, she smiled, still not looking at her. "I'm not stupid as to not understand that I'm no match for Sasuke-san when it comes to Naruto's heart."

Sakura swallowed hard. So, Hinata understood it, too.

"Naruto likes you very much, don't doubt that," she whispered hotly, empathy for Hinata filling her.

"I don't," Hinata admitted. "But I can't help but wonder, sometimes..."

Pearly eyes were lost on the streets outside for a while, contemplatively, and Sakura could only look at her in slight dismay. She felt strangely happy all of a sudden, for knowing that she wasn't alone in the middle of Naruto and Sasuke's relationship. Hinata wasn't stupid at all, she knew her place and
still, just like Sakura, she was bent on prevailing. While Sakura had always liked her, now she felt like they shared something very personal that no-one should ever know, and for that, they had each other's backs.

With a smile, Sakura took another sip on her beverage. Then, she lowered the cup and adjusted herself on her stool so she was very straight, feeling confident. "Listen, Hinata-chan... men aren't like us," she started, firmly, her tone catching the other girl's attention once more. "Us, women, are selfish when it comes to love. We want affection, love, and devotion. We want to be the center of our partner's universe. Men are devoted to the person they love, more than women, I believe."

Blinking a few times, Hinata nodded, looking very serious.

"Now, I don't really understand what's going on between those two, but... there's no doubt in my mind that they love each other in ways we can only ever dream of being loved," Sakura proceeded, as if it was the most natural thing to say in the world and, in a way, it felt that way because she knew it was completely true. "This is why we are lucky. Because it's so unconditional that they become completely selfless. They will never demand a single thing from the other, and they will do whatever is in their reach to make sure the other is happy and fulfilled. Do you understand?"

Hinata was silent, taking the information in. Then, she wet her lips, her big eyes becoming strangely calm, making Sakura smile wider. "I... I think so."

"We have nothing to worry about," Sakura said, her tone becoming jovial. "Naruto's love for you is different from that, but it exists all the same, so it's okay. It's because it's so distinct that your place is exclusive."

Which was also true. Hinata had from Naruto what she could only pray in order to have with Sasuke. In spite of everything, she knew the blond cherished his girlfriend and that, in his eyes, she was what no woman would ever be able to be. There was no doubt in Sakura's mind that he loved her. They were good together and balanced each other well.

The thought brought a bitter taste to her mouth, though.

"I see..." Hinata mumbled, a shy, but pleased smile forming in her pretty lips.

"He'll be a changed man when he returns, trust me," Sakura pressed on, certain of herself. "Hopefully I'll be just as lucky. I can't help it that my love is selfish..."

Hinata's smile grew, and it was so sweet and friendly that Sakura couldn't help but feel bad for ever feeling jealous of her. "Selfish or selfless..." Hinata said, with an encouraging tone in her voice. "Love is still love, no? So there's no wrong in it as long as your feelings are sincere."

"Yeah..." the pink-haired one mumbled, with a small chuckle. "I wonder if that's true..."

Because, no matter what, she loved Sasuke, but knew she still had lingering feelings for Naruto, who had become the better man, growing up to be a hero, strong, reliable and handsome. But Sasuke had returned to her far too soon, and she had realized her feelings of longing for Naruto far too late.

Truth was… if given a say on the matter…

She wished she didn't have to choose. If the universe was, in any way, kind to her – kind to her two boys…

It was only right that the three of them became a family. That way, they would all have what they needed and the balance in team 7 would achieve perfection.
Or, at least, perfection for her.

But, as it was, the puzzle was incomplete, and there would forever be pieces missing no matter what. Especially in Naruto's and Sasuke's lives, and this would, obviously, have repercussions in their lives with Sakura and Hinata, sooner or later.

All they could do now, Sakura thought, was wait and hope that her own words about their bond were true.

000

They were running as fast as they could through the woods, the pouring rain soaking both their clothes and chilling them to the bone.

Sasuke ran ahead of him and Naruto knew he had both his sharingan and rinnegan activated so he could see their path properly. It was hard for Naruto to see with the incessant water falling over his eyes, so he relied on his senses alone, focusing his hearing on the sound of Sasuke's breathing and his quick footsteps so he could follow their direction. Night was falling quickly, so it wouldn't take long before they stopped having light altogether.

Under different circumstances, they would've stopped already to make camp for the night, but Sasuke had insisted that there was an abandoned cottage nearby where they could stay for a few days if the apparent storm approaching lingered for too long.

"I can see it!" he heard Sasuke shout over the noise of rain and thunder and Naruto thanked the heavens because things were about to get really ugly out there.

After what felt like far too long, Sasuke came to a halt that made him stop, as well. He could barely see, but there was no doubt that they were now standing in front of a small, old and asymmetric house made of stone.

"Help me out!" Sasuke shouted, and Naruto could make out his gesture towards the heavy wooden door. The two proceeded to push the door together, but it was very thick and heavy, and its surface was far too slippery from the rain so the process was difficult. He understood why Sasuke didn't want to use chakra to help them open it since it would most likely destroy the rusty hinges with the force.

They managed to open it enough to create a gap they could slip through, so, following Sasuke's lead, Naruto threw his bag inside first, accepting Sasuke's as well and doing the same before squeezing his way in. Sasuke managed to get inside as well behind him, and together they pushed the door closed again.

The two turned and leaned their backs on it, panting heavily from hours of travelling and the exertion of getting to the cottage as soon as possible with their clothes and possessions – little as they were – weighing them down.

Breathing hard, Naruto wiped the excess of water from his eyes and managed to focus his vision. He looked to the side and found Sasuke with his head leaning back against the door, eyes closed and lips parting as he tried to steady his breath.

"Shitty weather, huh?" Naruto joked, making Sasuke look back at him, mismatched eyes heavy with fatigue. "You look like a drowned cat, by the way," he couldn't help but point out, finding it extremely hilarious that Sasuke's usually rebel hair was now stuck to his face and neck.

"Should I point out what you look like right now?" Sasuke retorted, managing a small but rather
"Shut up," he mumbled, running his hand self-consciously over his dripping hair. He looked around the place, noticing that it was, indeed, very small – there was only one division. On the wall in front of him stood a large fireplace that also seemed to serve as a stove, since there was an old pot in the middle of the ashes there. There was a huge chest on the wall to the left, underneath the small window, and on the right, one could see a robust wooden closet with a metallic bucket next to it. The floor was made of stone, and even if everything was a bit dusty and dirty, it was obvious the place had been well kept. "How did you even know about this place?"

"I came across it during my first journey," Sasuke explained, looking up at the ceiling filled with cobwebs. "An old lady lived here back then, and I had been lost on the road for days and ended up coming down with a fever. This was like heaven to me. She nursed me back to health, gave me shelter and food in exchange of me helping her out for a while. She was really old and lonely, could barely see or hear properly." Sasuke closed his eyes again. There was no expression on his features, but Naruto could feel that his friend felt thankful to her. "Last year I came by and found her dead. Had been for a long time, I think. So, I buried her. But the place was still alright, so I thought we could come here."

In spite of himself, Naruto found his heart warming at the story and couldn't help but smile. "It's a pretty cool place," he said. "Too bad she isn't here anymore."

Sasuke re-opened his eyes, and they were back to their dark grey color. Then, he sneezed a couple of times. "We should probably start a fire or something." He sniffed, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "I think I left enough wood in the trunk. And we should probably take off our clothes or we'll catch pneumonia."

Absently, Naruto watched as Sasuke leaned away from the door and removed his black cloak. There was a wide hanger on the wall next to the door where Sasuke hung it, motioning with his head for Naruto to do the same, which he did.

It wasn't particularly cold inside the cottage, but with his body cooling down after the run, he knew it wouldn't be long before he and Sasuke started freezing.

Sasuke gave him a few quick instructions and together, the two hurriedly moved about to get things done. Sasuke took care of the fireplace, efficiently starting a fire, while Naruto rummaged the huge closet where we found several thick blankets – they kind of smelled funny, like dust and smelly feet, but it would have to do – and a few worn out cloths. As Naruto stretched the fluffiest blanket out on the floor, a placed another one on top of it, Sasuke seemed to be busy removing his clothes and hanging them next to their cloaks, so Naruto grabbed for some of the old cloths and moved over to him, handing a few to Sasuke once he was only on his boxers, which he accepted with a silent nod of gratitude.

Naruto also removed his clothes and hung them next to his friend's, actually feeling less cold without them off, and took a few seconds to thoroughly dry himself, trying not to stare too much at the remains of Sasuke's left upper arm that were neatly wrapped up in white bandages.

While he dried his hair, his eyes followed Sasuke's movements as he went to the fireplace, taking off his sandals and putting them to the side before crouching down in front of it to warm himself up in front of the fire. Naruto, for his part, also removed his sandals and headed for the blanket. He sat down, the heat in front of him comforting. He threw the other wide blanket over his shoulders.

"Hey, Sasuke," he called out, making the other look over his shoulder. The way his hair was tousled from the friction of the drying, making him look strangely young. "Come here."
Naruto stretched out his legs and spread them to the sides a bit as he lifted up the blanket a bit and motioned the other male closer. Sasuke didn't reply, looking at him as if considering whether even being that close to Naruto was something he should do (or wanted to do), making the blond roll his eyes. "I'm not going to eat you, for fuck's sake."

In spite of the words, Sasuke still considered it before carefully straightening up and going to him, rapt eyes unblinking. Demandingly, Naruto lifted his chin up as if daring his friend to say something, but Sasuke didn't open his mouth, simply sitting down between his legs with his back to him and leaning back a bit so that his chilly skin was in contact with Naruto's also naked chest. He pulled his knees to his chest, and smiling a bit, Naruto surrounded Sasuke's shoulders with both his arms, efficiently wrapping the blanket around him as well.

They were silent for a while, both contemplating the fire. Gradually, as his body heated up, Sasuke relaxed in Naruto's embrace, releasing a tiny sigh of exhaustion. Naruto felt like he was comfortable enough, and feeling happy that he had been able to provide that feeling, he allowed the thumb of his right hand to brush over Sasuke's collarbone, resenting a bit that his bandaged hand couldn't feel the skin there.

"Why do you have your whole arm bandaged?" Sasuke asked casually, lifting his hand to touch said arm, fingers absently brushing over the rough texture of the bandages.

The question took Naruto by surprise, but he found that he had no problem in answering it. "I guess it's a lot of things," he replied easily. "Baa-chan tried to make a mirror copy of my left arm, but the skin tone is still darker than mine. Also, I kind of feel self-conscious about not having it bandaged."

"How so?"

Naruto wet his lips. "Because I lost that arm because of you," he said softly. "I got my arm back but you didn't. I can't just pretend that it didn't happen and flaunt my new arm around. People will forget that I didn't have it for a while. They can't. I can't. I want to always be remembered of it."

Sasuke fidgeted a bit, his hand now grabbing Naruto's forearm. "You can't think about it like that," he muttered, gravely. "What happened may have been meaningful, but life goes on and things change. My decision of not having my arm back is my own. You have yours, and that's how it was supposed to be."

"No," Naruto retorted stubbornly, tightening his arms around his friend, his left hand with fingers sprawled over Sasuke's chest. "If I had known you weren't going to get your arm back, I would've never have allowed Baa-chan to get me a new one."

"You're foolish," Sasuke said simply. "Always such an idealist, but that's not how things work."

Naruto didn't feel like contradicting him, knowing that the topic would start a fight he didn't feel like having when they were sharing such a peaceful moment. He knew he was an idealist, but that was what made him who he was, and when it came to Sasuke, his ideals would always prevail. It ate at him that Sasuke was, more often than not, bent on simply doing things his own way without including him. It made him ecstatic that Sasuke had allowed him to tag along on this journey. Well, even if Sasuke were to tell him to go home, he would've followed him anyway until the other accepted him.

But Sasuke wanted him around, it seemed – he had said so all those months ago in Rice Country, but after so long, and after Naruto had refused the offer, one would think that he'd still be bitter about it.

Burying his face on the curve of Sasuke's neck, Naruto said, in a grumpy way "You're a bastard."
"You never ask for my opinion on anything." He bit on his lip. "Does not having an arm make you happy in any way?"

"It gives me peace." Sasuke didn't bother to say anything else after that, giving the topic a definite end.

Well, Naruto thought, feeling his heart being squeezed by an invisible force. At least *that* he could understand.

Raising his head up a bit again, Naruto looked down at the pretty curve of that neck and observed it for a while, not really thinking about anything in particular. Then, he pressed his lips to it carefully, once, enjoying the sudden jerk in the other's body who, otherwise, didn't seem to want to move.

"What are you doing?" Sasuke asked, his voice devoid of emotion.

Naruto planted another kiss over the smooth skin before speaking lowly in his ear. "Do you always have to ask questions?" he whispered, feeling Sasuke shiver slightly again. "'What are you doing, Naruto?', 'Why are you here, Naruto?', 'Why, Naruto?'… Cant' you just *not* ask questions?"

"It's hard when you keep doing impulsive things without a valid reason," Sasuke said, accusingly.

"Sasuke, hear me out on this," Naruto said, with a tired sigh. "I came with you for *you*. For *us*. Konoha is Konoha, and this is this. The village is there, and I am here, to be with you, to understand you, to… see what's going on between us. I don't want to mix things. I'm here with an open mind, to focus on you, and that's all there is to it. Don't ask questions I don't know the answers to, okay?"

He could feel Sasuke swallowing hard, his muscles tensing up again, and yet, his hand didn't let go of Naruto's arm. "I know that you think I'm in love with you," he said, dispassionately. "So let me say it clearly, so there're no misconceptions: I'm *not* in love with you."

Placing his chin over Sasuke's shoulder, Naruto smiled. "You've already said something like that," he pointed out. "But there's definitely something different, isn't there? I kissed you and you kissed back."

Sasuke made an exasperated sound with the back of his throat. "Naruto, you're *in love* with Hinata," he replied, shaking his head from side to side. "You like her, you want to have sex with her and be gentle to her. You look at her and you feel like she could be your wife, the mother of your kids, because she cherishes you, gives you everything you want and keeps you grounded. Am I right?"

Naruto pursed his lips together. Listening to Sasuke talking about Hinata and his relationship with her felt off, for some reason, and was embarrassing to him. "I guess…"

"The way I feel for you…" Sasuke proceeded, his words coming out slower, more careful this time. "It's different. Completely different."

"Do you know what it is?" Naruto inquired, curiously.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I have a definition for it," Sasuke answered. "It's just… different. It's not that at all, and yet, it's more."

Naruto perked up in astonishment. "*More?*

Sasuke huffed. "I know you feel it, too, but it's no use trying to explain it to you if you can't identify it. Once you understand it for yourself, you'll know. Saying that I'm 'in love' with you makes me want to punch you. Several times."
In spite of his confusion and slight shock, Naruto chuckled. "Sorry about that. I really didn't mean to offend you." He joined his temple with Sasuke's, happy at the lack of rejection. "I know that we feel the same way about each other in some things, but certain things really are a bit blurry to me. You're my best friend, someone very precious to me, and yet, I don't really understand us at all. That's why I'm not holding back on this. I'm not holding back on my feelings for you like I've been doing all these years, too afraid that you might run away or reject me. I want to know what you know, Sasuke."

Sasuke merely nodded, letting his own temple relax against Naruto's. "Alright."

Naruto knew they still had a lot to talk about, a lot to say to each other and a lot to learn about each other. But this time, Sasuke wasn't pushing him away, and they really were in this together, because they both wanted that comprehension between them.

And while finding it was something that scared him a little, it was also very exciting because he'd be with only Sasuke for weeks, something that was new to the both of them. Who knew what things they'd see and do together?

A loud growling noise coming from Naruto's stomach shook them both out of the blissful moment of peacefulness they were sharing. Sasuke twisted his body so he was looking at him with one eyebrow quirked upwards. Naruto grinned sheepishly. "I'm starving."

Sasuke rolled his eyes. "I'm going to get us something to eat," he said as he untangled himself from Naruto's hold, who pouted at the lack of contact once he got up and headed towards their bags.

Still, as soon as Sasuke turned his back on him, Naruto grinned again. It was weird how he could feel so warm inside from so little.

He found that he didn't mind the feeling at all.

000

With his elbow supporting his weight and his head resting on his hand, Naruto watched his friend intently. Sasuke was sleeping on his back, face turned slightly away from him, lips parted as he breathed in and out soundlessly, his hand resting over his chest.

The fire was crackling gently behind Naruto and since the division was already warm enough, he had kept a comfortable distance between them so the other's heat would make him feel too hot.

*I'm not in love with you.*

Naruto hadn't been able to sleep, thinking about their conversation. It was weird how little often they spoke, but whenever they did talk about things, Sasuke always managed to say things that made him think.

*It's just... different. It's not that at all, and yet, it's more.*

Naruto couldn't comprehend this. If Sasuke wasn't in love with him, then why had he responded like that when he had kissed him? There had to be some... deeper feelings that went beyond friendship, right?

But then again, Naruto himself had taken the initiative to kiss him, hadn't he? And he wasn't in love with him, was he?

He still couldn't understand what had taken over him to do something like that. It hadn't been some
sort of instant attraction or lust or anything. Even if he had gotten strangely hard because of it, somehow, it felt like the response had been born more out of the intensity of the conflicting feelings he was having other than some sexual hunger.

Naruto frowned, biting his lip. No, he definitely wasn't in love with Sasuke. He was in love with Hinata, he was sure, and yet the feelings he had for his best friend were very different from what he felt for her. They came from a deeper, darker place and had been built from years and years of everything that consisted of them. He was aware that the way he felt for Sasuke had nothing to do with how he felt for, let's say, Sai, Kiba or even Shikamaru. It was stronger, definitely.

Their souls were linked. In another life, they had been brothers. Sasuke was definitely like a brother to him. They were family, dysfunctional as it was.

Raising his hand, Naruto carefully brushed an inky strand off Sasuke's closed eyelid. He felt his breath catch momentary. The bastard sure was good-looking, no doubt about it. Looking at his sleeping features like this made Naruto's chest swell with a sense of fondness and something else he couldn't quite describe.

He loved Sasuke, he knew that. But what that meant, exactly, to him, wasn't something he knew how to put into words, and it irked even him. It was love, but maybe not romantic love, or at least not on the same level as the romantic 'love' he had with Hinata. He had enjoyed kissing him, even if it had been brutal in every sense of the word, yes.

His feelings for Sasuke had always been there, loud and all over the place and he was used to them. It was what it was, and he hadn't once questioned them, or himself – he hadn't felt the need to. But Sasuke was demanding and, in a way, Naruto felt like he owed him a proper answer, especially because even he was curious about what, exactly, was the depth of what bound them to each other in a such a way.

He had told Sasuke that he had come on that journey for them, and he meant it. From the moment he came face to face with his friend, he decided to leave his life behind for as long as they were away. It was just him and Sasuke now, and everything else would be secondary in his mind. He owed them both that.

Which was why he didn't think too much about it when he dared his hand to touch Sasuke's chin lightly so he was carefully turning his face to him. As his thumb absently brushed over the soft skin of his friend's jaw, Naruto allowed his eyes to roam over the other's strong, but well-defined features, a little surprised by how peaceful he looked while asleep. Just like when he smiled, Naruto mused – it was if it turned him into a different person altogether and allowed his light to shine.

Because Sasuke also had 'light'. Maybe it wasn't perceptible to others, but it was to him. So perceptible, in fact, that he knew Sasuke willingly didn't show that light to anyone else. And the sheer fact that he was able to relax so completely around him was proof of that.

A sudden wave of pride filled him – pride for knowing that certain parts of Sasuke were exclusive to him – as well as a strange possessiveness he couldn't quite place.

Wetting his lips, he leaned down and pressed them to the ones beneath him, chastely, before pulling away. Then, he considered his friend for a few seconds before doing it again.

There was no telling what had come over him, but he found himself planting a series of small, repetitive kisses on Sasuke's mouth, feeling oddly affectionate for some reason and needing to act upon it. It wasn't as much as a physical need to express it like that other than it was just something instinctual.
Feeling almost playful, he kissed Sasuke's lower lip before gently sucking it into his mouth. He liked the way Sasuke tasted, which was a weird train of thought for him, who didn't really take notice of such trivial things.

However, he found that he was really enjoying his curious exploration. He smiled against the other's mouth before using the tip of his tongue to trace the seam of Sasuke's lower lip, then doing the same to his upper one, relishing in how surprisingly soft they felt under the wet muscle.

In the back of his mind, he knew it wasn't exactly right to risk being frisky while Sasuke was asleep, but he couldn't help it. He had no idea what he was hoping to accomplish, anyway, but at that moment, it was better than giving himself a headache. Besides, trying something like this with an awaken Sasuke would surely be almost the same as petting a hungry lion, or so he feared.

With his eyes glued to Sasuke's face, he adjusted his position so he was half hovering over the other male. Both his hands were placed on each side of Sasuke's head and yet, he wasn't touching him at all. For some reason, he wasted some time simply watching the perfect lines of Sasuke's face, his dark eyelashes, and the unbelievably pretty nose. It was almost ridiculous how clear that skin of his was. Girls had to be jealous of that, Naruto mused.

Naruto didn't hesitate this time and brushed his mouth over Sasuke's again, slowly but confidently this time, feeling his heart skip a pleasant beat.

It was so weird. He really enjoyed Sasuke's taste. He hadn't been able to properly push it to the back of his mind after they had kissed – in fact, he had thought about it over and over again, because the sensations provided by that same taste had plagued him.

He really didn't know what the hell he was thinking, but he felt terribly bold all of a sudden and his need to have a taste of that again overpowered him, so he pressed his mouth more to Sasuke's, going so far as to daring his tongue to sneak inside the warm cavern to touch the other's. Instantly, a pleasurable chill ran down his spine, filling him with an almost childish excitement. This wasn't anything that he could possibly say that he knew. Kissing Hinata didn't feel like this at all.

A strong, unexpected tug on the hairs at the back of his head made him grunt in pain and brace himself to break the contact.

"You don't know when to stop, do you?" Sasuke's smooth voice said. "You're always an impulsive idiot."

"Ouch, bastard, that fucking hurts!" Naruto complained, looking down at his friend's reproachful face. He hadn't even sensed Sasuke's hand moving, so lost in his own pleasure as he had been. "Do you always have to be so aggressive?"

"I'm sorry if waking up with someone's tongue shoved down my throat doesn't awaken the kitten in me," Sasuke said sarcastically, but without a single drop of amusement in his voice. If anything, the death grip on Naruto's head became more painful.

"Let go, damn it!" the blond demanded, dropping half of his weight on top of his friend, one forearm on the blanket beneath him next to Sasuke's head. He reached behind him to grab Sasuke's wrist that tug pull his hand away, almost moaning in relief when those strong fingers complied and released his hair. Looking down at the other male's frowning face, he felt himself blush. He should've had a little more restraint, it was obvious that Sasuke would wake up, and all things considered, he was lucky to have gotten away with just a hair pull. "You're not going to start asking questions again, are you?"

"No," Sasuke said, impassively. "I should, though, if I'm in danger of being molested in my sleep"
from now on."

Naruto's blush deepened in outrage. "I wasn't molesting you!" he yelled. "I was just trying something out."

"Of course you were," the condescending tone Sasuke used now allowed him to know that he wasn't angry, but Naruto wasn't sure what he was thinking at the moment. "Surely you had your fun, though."

Naruto pursed his lips together, moving his hold so it was grabbing for Sasuke's hand instead. Sasuke's eyes travelled to their joined hands before looking back at Naruto's blue eyes, his narrowing gaze far too knowledgeable. For a moment, Naruto thought he was going to say something, but instead, he just waited, patiently, for his next move.

And, truth be told, Naruto couldn't help but still feel brave. If he had been enjoying himself when the other was asleep, there was no doubt in his mind that it would be a lot better if Sasuke was aware and responding.

"Can we... do it for real this time?" Naruto inquired carefully, slowly intertwining their fingers together while his other hand moved to rub a few strands of Sasuke's hair between his fingers. "I'm sure it'll feel better without teeth and blood in the middle."

Sasuke's eyes seemed to gain a whole new level of expressivity and he smirked nastily. "Idiot," he said, in a whisper that was almost seductive. "At least do it properly this time."

Naruto bit on his lower lip, blue eyes taking their time scanning Sasuke's calm face and relishing in the almost studious way those beautifully intense dark ones looked back. Naruto felt strangely serene, yet, inside of him lay that strange wave of affection and anxiety that made him want to do all sorts of embarrassing things at that moment. It felt foreign to him, to want to do those things to his best friend, and he wasn't sure if those urges were being directed at Sasuke, or if he was simply feeling needy.

Leaning down, he brushed his nose over the spot under Sasuke's ear, soft strands of inky hair tickling his cheekbones. Sasuke turned his face to the side, consequentially exposing more of his neck, and Naruto, taking the invitation for what it was, planted a small, experimental kiss on the spot.

He took a second to take a whiff of Sasuke's scent and found exactly what he had been looking for -- the smell of grass, rain, a bit of sweat and that something else that was very him. Sasuke's scent made him feel fuzzy inside with the familiarity of it.

Slowly, Naruto distributed several open mouthed kisses down the elegant column of the other's neck, loving the way his friend's breath caught in his throat. Smirking, Naruto used the tip of his tongue to trace the path back up, leaving a trail of saliva on the other's skin before gently blowing on it. Sasuke made a small, soft noise with the back of his throat, causing Naruto's heart to beat wildly with excitement. He found that he loved his best friend's dissimulated reactions immensely.

He took the liberty of gently nibbling on the line of Sasuke's perfect jaw, stopping at his chin, where he delivered a small peck. He watched, mesmerized, Sasuke's lips part when he sighed. Their eyes met in silent acknowledgement that this was completely mutual. Sasuke tilted his head slightly to the side in clear invitation, and that was everything Naruto needed to fill the gap between them.

Their open mouths met, carefully at first, just a small, tentative brush of lips meant to test out the dynamics of the kiss so they could find a suitable rhythm for the both of them. Then, Sasuke's tongue darted out playfully to lick at the inside of Naruto's upper lip a few times, and he let him, wanting
Sasuke to enjoy himself, as well, and explore him as much as he wanted. Then, Naruto trapped that teasing tongue between his lips, sucking on it gently before conceding entrance inside his mouth. He could almost swear Sasuke had released a small laugh before their mouths were pressed together. The sound itself made adrenaline rush through his body and before he knew it, he was losing his composure and intensifying the kiss, tongue sliding hungrily over Sasuke's and immediately feeling Sasuke's equally eager response.

Ah, Sasuke's taste…

Just as before, it was intoxicating, addicting. They were able to find a good, steady pace for them, mouths clashing over and over again, noisily, lips slippery, tongues battling furiously but not with the intent to overpower or dominate. It was a lewd, slow, but intense kiss that felt different from anything Naruto had ever experienced.

Naruto had the sudden urge to touch his friend everywhere, still, he was glad that his position didn't allow it and that his fingers were still so strongly linked to Sasuke's.

The feelings inside of him caused by the kiss were confusing and untamed. That mouth was sinful and he wanted to drown in it, drown in the sheer joy and completion he felt, and yet, it felt painful and he didn't know why.

He didn't know much about kissing since he had only ever kissed Hinata like that, but as far as kisses went, if the violent one they had shared had been good, this one felt…

It felt as if his entire being was spinning out of control.

Sasuke moaned softly against him, the sound low and seductive unlike anything he had ever heard, and he found himself becoming harder because of it.

While before, having an erection had felt natural because of how angry they had been and how sudden the act of kissing Sasuke had hit him, now, it was confusing. He was knowledgeable enough by now to know what kind of things brought him to hardness, but kissing his best friend wasn't on the list.

Not that he was complaining. He knew that something was definitely wrong with him. He had a girlfriend – a beautiful one at that, whom he loved deeply – and that he wasn't supposed to want to kiss someone else or feel hard for someone else.

Hinata…

No, he had promised himself that he wouldn't mix things and that he would just focus on his feelings for Sasuke. If Hinata came into play, he just knew that she would affect his judgment, and he couldn't have that.

Because Sasuke was… Sasuke. Sasuke deserved his attention – they both deserved this time they were spending together, no matter what would happen along the duration of that journey. And for some reason, he couldn't find fault in that.

Noticing he was short on oxygen, he broke the kiss, panting and letting his forehead rest against Sasuke's and feeling the other male's equally labored breath against his lips.

"Ah, I feel dizzy," Naruto muttered, keeping his eyes closed and feeling his head spinning. "I feel like I'm falling."

"Isn't that how it's supposed to feel like?" Sasuke breathed. Naruto almost smiled.
Is it, now?

Without warning, Sasuke pried his hand free from Naruto's, and next thing the blond knew, he was being suddenly rolled over and a heavy weight was being settled on his things.

Wide blue eyes looked up to see Sasuke straddling him, looking peculiarly alluring, what with him being practically naked, his bangs partially obscuring his features and yet, his gaze was blazing with life, almost predatory. Even without that fucking arm and the several scars covering the milky skin, his body was well built and aesthetically perfect, all of him flawless lines and taut, well-defined muscles. Naruto couldn't help but notice the obvious tent in the other male's grey boxers, but Sasuke didn't seem too self-conscious about it – after all, he was sitting with his ass right on top of Naruto's very prominent hard on.

When Sasuke licked at his lips, Naruto swallowed hard, unable to shake the sheer longing assaulting him with such violence he didn't know what to do with himself.

Reaching out, he placed both his palms over Sasuke's chest. "More?" he said, ignoring the fact that he sounded childish and pitifully pleading.

Inhaling deeply, Sasuke nodded once. "Yeah."

As he leaned down to lie on top of him, Naruto surrounded his neck with both arms to pull him close, his lips ready to receive the ones that wasted no time in capturing his.

There was no telling how much time they spent simply exploring each other's mouths until they hurt. Getting some oxygen into their lungs was a necessary evil that sometimes forced them apart for a few seconds during which they simply stared into each other's eyes, trying to read what the other was feeling and thinking, before resuming the almost thirsty kissing.

It wasn't right, Naruto knew, but it felt right, and the more time they spent doing it, the better it became and the righter it felt.

And Naruto felt only too powerless to do something to contradict the need inside him – a need he had no idea he had had up until this point.

Realizing that he didn't really want to fight it, anyway, wasn't nearly as shocking as it should've been.

TBC…
Endless Winter II

Chapter Notes

Not Betaed. Sorry for the typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We'll Rise

Part IV: Endless Winter II

Sasuke always brought a thick notebook with him whenever he left for his travels. It was a medium sized one, with a leathered brown cover that was already dirty and worn out from time and use, and even though he didn't exactly like to call it a 'journal', in the end, it was exactly what it was.

Although, Sasuke didn't really write his thoughts or his feelings there, and neither did he write a daily report of his life. Instead, he wrote about all the things he saw, lessons he learned, places he visited and the people he met. His journal was like a book of information to him. Occasionally, he drew things as well, like strange looking plants, lost temples or very interesting landscapes. Sometimes, he drew maps as well. Since he didn't lack the skill, he found it to be kind of a cathartic hobby for him.

When the information he gathered was worthy, he would replicate it into a scroll and then send it to Konoha.

Naruto, he knew, was very curious about what he wrote on that notebook, sometimes trying to take a peek at it. It wasn't like he hid it from him, but Naruto did keep his distance for some reason and never asked questions whenever he saw him writing. These were the things that let him know how much Naruto had grown when compared to the obnoxious kid that had been on team 7 with him.

Things were… alright between them. Apart from the occasional, expected bickering, they worked well as a team and Naruto didn't complain about the cold, lack of comfort or poor sleeping conditions. Well, they were Shinobi, after all, so it wasn't like they weren't used to this kind of lifestyle.

So far, in spite of everything – including a few small not-really unexpected details of their sudden physical proximity – things had been running rather smoothly.

To Naruto's displeasure, they only spent two nights in the cottage out of necessity before moving on. It had rained heavily during those two days, and while they had managed to keep themselves fed and warm inside the cottage, they would have to find food soon enough, and Sasuke had been hoping to find civilization. By now, thanks to his maps, he could more or less understand where he was in case he wanted to head towards someplace specific.

They had been travelling for a few days already, hunting for small animals to eat – which were scarce considering the season – and spending their nights either inside caves, if they could find any.
Day and night had become rather useless to them considering that, if it was raining and they couldn't find shelter, it was better to keep moving so as to not freeze to death. Sasuke's eyes would guide them in the darkness, and Naruto would follow him in a literal blind trust. When this happened, they took turns during the day watching their surroundings while the other slept for a couple of hours before moving again. If they were lucky enough to find a sheltered corner in the woods during the rain, they rarely ever found sticks and logs that were dry enough to make a fire. During those nights, they'd just wrap themselves up in their warm waterproof cloaks and stick close together in order to share body heat.

Sometimes, they'd find other ways to warm up, too, by kissing and touching a bit. These things felt natural to Sasuke, even if a little overwhelming because of how natural it apparently was for Naruto. It seemed almost funny to realize how easily he had given himself to the intimacy when, a few years previously, he couldn't have the ability to even consider such a thing with Sasuke in spite of everything that drew them together, over and over again.

Not that Sasuke didn't know his friend would feel this at ease about physical contact with him since they both shared the same bond and feelings towards each other, the difference being that Sasuke understood this while Naruto didn't. He had expected the blond to at least make a small scene about it and make a big drama inside his head, but instead, he kept to his promise and just went with the flow, giving in to whatever it was that he felt like doing in regards to how he felt for Sasuke. And Sasuke had to be honest that accepting it was far too easy. It was a whole new level of emotional conflict, and a whole new level of physical ecstasy caused by that obvious flame that was theirs alone.

They didn't talk about it all that often. Naruto seemed to be respectful of Sasuke's space in a way, and yet, he was always the one to take the first step towards that intimacy. Sasuke found this longing from him to be both very intense and innocent, because he could still feel that childish need for acknowledgement coming from his friend. It felt as if Naruto still craved to have Sasuke's attention focused on him, and while he definitely had it, Sasuke tried his best to not be obvious about it. Secretly, he enjoyed that feeling of unease he got from the other if he was too quiet or closed in on himself.

Their clothes were quickly becoming worn out, the colors faded. The exhaustion was a constant and they lacked many things. It was a hard life Sasuke was already all too accustomed to. Still, the journey was a companionable one and he felt at peace, away from everything and everyone, now with his precious person by his side. It was kind of a bittersweet happiness he knew he wouldn't be able to explain if he tried.

Strangely enough, Naruto seemed content as well. He was always in a relatively good-mood, his positivity as unwavering as ever, and every time he smiled, it was genuine. Sasuke felt it in his very being – Naruto's delighted energy that never faded, bubbling powerfully every time they did something together, be it running, arguing, touching or just sharing a look.

Everything was simple between them, yet, overwhelmingly particular. Like those times when they ran together for hours on end when Sasuke could almost hear Naruto's excited thoughts inside his own head. Running was the kind of activity during which they barely spoke unless it was strictly necessary, and yet, it was when they felt more connected because they were constantly racing each other to see who could go faster and who was nimbler on their feet.

It was always a silent dare, but a mutually acknowledged one. They cheated many times, both showing off as much as they could and trying to be better than the other, but it was a friendly rivalry that was more playful than competitive, and Sasuke had to admit that he had fun. It was liberating.
And what was more… Naruto trusted him completely, and this was still a little shocking to him after all those years.

They had been on the road for far too long when they came across a small agglomerate of small wooden houses that could barely be called a 'village'. Sasuke knew they were in the Land of Rivers, close to the border that lead them to the Wind Country, where, hopefully, they would enter soon to enjoy a warmer weather. If things went well, they could even drop by Suna and pay Gaara a visit – Naruto would certainly be happy and surprised once he found out Sasuke had been keeping in touch with the young Kazekage.

The population in that agglomerate of houses was of about fifty people at most, and while the weather was sunny, it was still very cold. The people there mostly had honey colored skin and dark brown eyes. By no means was that place ruled by a leader and the population was very poor, wearing clothes made out of wool and linen and living off of the land and the animals they raised in a large farm close to the wide river they worshiped as a deity. All the families joined to make a larger one and they all worked the fields and took care of the animals as one. They shared everything with each other, and even though they lacked many things, they were a happy bunch.

Sasuke, as per usual, had entered the unknown territory with a steady plan on his mind, which had been to ask for food and shelter in exchange for their work helping with whatever they could. From his experience, he knew that equivalent exchange was a highly valued concept in the world, be it for the good or the bad. Naruto, who was a selfless person by nature, was intrigued by his theory on it.

"Even if people give you something without expecting to receive something in return, it will always be more meaningful if you show your gratitude," Sasuke had explained to Naruto. "That's how you gain trust, and with it, harmony, even amongst strangers. You accept their help, and they know you are thankful and correct if you are willing to reattribute what has been given to you. That's a form of showing appreciation."

Sometimes, Sasuke would explain Naruto his logic, just like this, and he would listen intently and look impressed, not because this was something he didn't know already, but, Sasuke knew, because he enjoyed knowing that Sasuke himself understood it. Naruto liked it when he talked about his learnings, so once in a while, Sasuke indulged him.

The people of the village were happy to receive the two young Shinobi, and while they didn't have much to offer, they immediately gave them clean clothes and warm food. They seemed a bit wary of Sasuke's deadly-looking Katana, so he thought it best to leave it in the possession of one of the families during their stay – along with Naruto's own weapons – which immediately made the people relax around them.

Since all the houses were so small and barely enough to shelter the families that lived in them, Sasuke and Naruto were given a place to sleep in the barn. After spending so many days out in the rain and cold, sleeping (only occasionally) on the hard ground, it felt like heaven to both young men.

"Doesn't it make you feel thankful?" Sasuke had asked that first night, while they were lying on their backs side by side on a makeshift bed of hay with a warm woolen blanket covering the both of them. "You have a comfortable bed at home, but after living like a hobo out in the wilderness, this makes you feel like an emperor, huh?"

"Yeah," Naruto had agreed, smiling empathically at him. "Lacking the basic comforts totally makes you value the simple things differently, right? I feel really happy right now. It feels like I haven't been this comfy in years."

And Sasuke felt happy, too, because he was making Naruto grasp what he was looking for and what
he needed in his life – to value himself and what he had, little as it might be, in order to become a
more humble person, capable of loving things he didn't before, and capable of giving value to people
who, in other circumstances, he would only treat as business acquaintances.

He was learning to love everything the way Itachi did. Often, he wondered if his brother was looking
out for him, still proud of him, still loving him the way he always did.

*I'm struggling, Itachi,* he would think. *I want to be worthy of your feelings for me.*

In spite of his past, Sasuke looked for happiness. Not a constant one, but those simple moments in
life when he felt like it was good to be alive and that moving on would always be worth it. After all
the hatred he had once felt, and in spite of all the resentment that would probably never truly leave
his heart, it was all he could do to be even a little bit forgiving of himself.

Because he had realized that he didn't need much to be happy at all. If life was made of small,
meaningful moments like those, when he could feel thankful to the world for being dry and having
Naruto by his side, then he thought he could feel accomplished. He didn't need money, power or
recognition anymore. He didn't need people, or even a normal family. That was all under rated to
him at this point. If Naruto was by his side and they could have this similar feeling towards the
world, then they would definitely be able to create the revolution the Shinobi universe needed.

"Misato-chan, I have your water!" Naruto announced, pushing the old wooden door of the small
house open with the small of his back, being careful not to spill water from the buckets he was
carrying.

Upon entering, he put the buckets down next to the door and wiped at the sweat on his forehead with
a large smile towards the young girl that was kneeling on the floor in front of a low table, knitting
what looked like a tiny red sweater. She was younger than Naruto – probably 18 – very pretty, with
short dark brown hair and eyes. She smiled back.

"Thank you so much, Naruto!" Misato said with a grateful nod of her head. "I'm really sorry you
have to go through the trouble, but I can barely stand as it is."

Naruto all but shrugged, his eyes travelling down to the obvious bulge that was the girl's belly and
feeling strangely shy and giddy. There was something about seeing a pregnant woman that made his
insides go fuzzy and warm. "It's okay, I like to help and I know your boyfriend is always busy
hunting. I still have a few buckets to refill for the rest of the guys, but I can help you out if you need
anything?"

"It's fine, my mother should be here soon," the girl said, shaking her head from side to side. "What
do you think about this, though?" She lifted the small sweater she was knitting up so Naruto could
see it and he felt himself blushing even more because the little unfinished garment was just the cutest
thing ever.

"It's really adorable, Misato-chan, and it looks really fluffy," he said, grinning. "You think it'll be a
boy?"

"I'm not sure," she said sweetly. "But I don't mind either way. I just want this baby to be healthy,
that's all."

They made a bit of small talk for a few minutes before Naruto left to check out which houses needed
water for the day. Most of the youngsters got water for themselves since the river was close by, and
while he gave priority to sick, pregnant or elderly people, Naruto liked to visit everybody and offer his help to anyone who would need or accept it because it made him feel useful and occupied his time. Sasuke liked to work in the farm with the animals, but sometimes he enjoyed getting involved in construction work with the other men, and he was pretty good at it, too. He didn't socialize much, unlike Naruto himself, but people seemed to not mind his quiet nature since he was hard working and surprisingly polite in spite of his stoic demeanor.

They had been there for two weeks now, and Naruto had to admit that he was loving it. Yes, he slept in a barn with dozens of smelly animals, and yes, his clothes were simple and the food was scarce. Hot baths were a luxury that was far too complicated to pull off, so they usually bathed in the river. Compared to Konoha, it was a hard life, but the people were amazing and simple, and Naruto felt like he belonged. He wasn't being a Shinobi, but he was contributing to someone's well-being, and that made him feel amazing. Being away from fights, weapons and blood was different, but a welcomed novelty. It made him feel calm.

Also, he was experiencing all these things with his best friend, and while he often thought of Konoha, he couldn't say that he was missing it all that much, for now. He also thought of Hinata and wondered if she was alright, but this always made him feel terribly troubled for some reason, so he avoided it as much as he could.

At the end of the day, he ended up finding Sasuke sitting on the ground at the back of a house, a scroll spread out in front of him and a group of children surrounding him. He seemed to be teaching them the Hiragana, allowing the excited group to take turns in writing the characters. No-one in that village knew how to write or read, so it was a huge deal.

Naruto watched him from afar in amusement and pride, leaning against a tree with his arms crossed over his chest. He could tell Sasuke had noticed his watchful presence from the way his shoulders had tensed, but not once did he look at him, which made Naruto smirk internally.

He had to give it to his friend, that he was taking this redemption thing rather seriously. While Sasuke still kept mostly to himself and still had that proud and imposing look about him, he had certainly changed his demeanor to become more approachable and was definitely trying hard to relate to people. It was a shame he wasn't like this when in Konoha.

But this Sasuke was… just like the Sasuke he had grown up with, yet better. He was even more damaged, even more broken, but at the same time, he was stronger in so many ways and was working hard to heal and become the person he should've been all along.

This Sasuke was very… alluring. Looking at him made those familiar feelings of yearning and affection bubble inside Naruto. He found that he had them far too many times during the day to be remotely normal, but experiencing them was something precious to him, and something he was quickly getting used to.

After a while, Sasuke put the scroll away inside his bag and shooed the kids away. They seemed disappointed that he had to leave, but Sasuke promised to teach them more the next day and they all released loud exclamations of joy.

Only after getting to his feet did Sasuke make eye contact with him. The kids spotted him as well and waved at him, who waved back just as energetically. With calm steps, Sasuke went to him, frowning slightly.

"You didn't have to stand there and stare," he said, causing Naruto's smile to grow.

"I didn't have anything better to do," the blond said, with a relaxed shrug. "Got a problem with it?"
Sasuke raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Should I?"

Naruto merely chuckled as they made their way towards the barn to grab for clean clothes and head to the river to clean up. It had become some sort of a daily habit for them to do this before heading back to the 'main square', as Naruto liked to call it, for dinner. It was the only time of the day where everybody got together to eat outside and share the food among each other, and it was always nice because of all that family-like environment that surrounded him. And, okay, having the traditional cup of liquor to accompany his meal was also something he looked forward to because it warmed him up and helped him sleep like a rock. It also improved Sasuke's mood flawlessly.

The sun was setting, the last rays kissing the running water and making it glow in all its crystalline glory. There was no wind so it wasn't particularly cold. As they stripped by the riverbank at their usual spot considerably hidden by bushes, Naruto found himself only on his boxers, staring at his friend's elegant figure. He had long since dismissed Sasuke as being shy towards his appearance, and even without an arm he couldn't care less about how he looked in other people's eyes. Still, Sasuke had to know that, even without his arm, he was still devastatingly handsome, and the female population there clearly didn't care about his 'disability' if the way they eyed him as he passed was any indication.

Naruto couldn't help but notice how worn out and dirty Sasuke's bandage looked, even if he bathed with it every day. Sasuke was very thorough with his hygiene, something Naruto remembered from their days back in team 7, but, just like him, he never took the bandage off. Funny how they were so similar in the weirdest things.

"You shouldn't bandage that for a while," Naruto pointed out casually, just as his friend was bringing a hand to his boxers to push them down, his interference stopping the action. "It looks disgusting."

Sasuke glanced at him, looking down at Naruto's own bandage that wrapped his arm all the way up to his elbow. "So does yours."

"Yeah, that's why I'm going to take it off and wash it properly," Naruto said, with shrug, sitting down on a large rock and letting his feet sink into the ice cold water, shuddering a bit. He began undoing the knot that kept his bandage in place and started untangling it from his arm carefully. Beside him, Sasuke moved to sit on his left, their sides almost touching, and started to do the same. Naruto tried not to stare, but he always had a morbid curiosity about seeing how what was left of Sasuke's arm now looked like, so as soon as his bandage was off, he stared at Sasuke until it was revealed to him.

He had no idea what he was expecting since his own arm had been replaced rather quickly, but he was surprised, to say the least.

"It really has healed, hasn't it?" he said gloomily, clutching his dirty bandage over his lap with both hands. The fact that the skin looked almost flawlessly merged together as if there hadn't even been an arm there to begin with made him feel like he had missed something huge because that was proof that a lot of time had gone by and he hadn't even noticed it.

"I guess," Sasuke muttered, watching his reaction contemplatively for some reason. "Give me your hand," he then said, holding out his own. Naruto cautiously turned a bit and placed his right hand over it, the intimate, yet simple contact causing his heart to constrict.

There they were, those weird feelings he had sometimes, whenever Sasuke was too close, doing unexpected things – feelings that made him think about the past, about that emptiness that he had felt without Sasuke there and about… how different things were between them nowadays.
There was no reasonable explanation for it inside his head, but he liked it – every single bit of it. And it terrified him that it could ever be over – that he might lose it.

"It is darker than the rest of your body," Sasuke observed, thumb rubbing over the back of his hand as if trying to figure out if the skin texture was right.

"Sasuke..." Naruto said, voice cracking unintentionally. The other looked up at him, and when their eyes met, Naruto had to swallow hard because his throat became dry for some reason. "When you left that first time... I was always thinking about you. Even back then, I knew our bond was strong, so I hoped that you thought of me, too." He didn't really know what he wanted to say, or even how to say it, but he hoped Sasuke got it. "I hoped... that thinking of me made you stronger, just like it happened to me."

His friend's expression didn't change but his eyes became softer.

"How did you think that I was able to become who I am?" Sasuke said quietly, not letting go of his hand. "I wanted to drown in darkness but you were always there, in the back of my mind..." He licked at his lips, the action drawing Naruto's attention to the flicker of that pink tongue. "You should understand by now exactly why I was so desperate to kill you. Your existence pained me. It still does. Every single day."

"Why?" Naruto whispered, closing his fingers around Sasuke's hand. "Aren't you happy that you're not alone? That you got rid of all that hatred and pain? That I didn't let you kill me?"

Sasuke didn't blink, gaze becoming serious and intense, but he didn't seem to have an answer for him, or maybe he realized that Naruto had more to say.

"I'm so... glad you're alive," Naruto admitted, his own words causing his very soul to ache; but these were things he had been wanting to tell that man for a long, long time, and he needed to get it off his chest now that Sasuke was there, beside him, listening. "If you died, Sasuke... nothing would be able to fix that. I just... this world wouldn't... I wouldn't..."

"You have other friends now," Sasuke interrupted, but not aggressively so. "You have Hinata, too."

Naruto couldn't help but huff.

"Why would you bring her into this?" he asked, frowning. "She has nothing to do with you, with us. It's different. You are you. Nothing will ever be able to replace you."

This made Sasuke's features finally scrunch up with displeasure and he tried to pry his hand away, but Naruto held on to it tighter.

"Don't say meaningless things, Naruto," Sasuke hissed. "Let go."

"They're not meaningless!" Naruto defended stubbornly.

"They are," Sasuke retorted back, firmly. "Your relationship with Hinata has nothing to do with me, and in your world with her there is no place for me. Therefore, I am replaceable as far as that's concerned. Just as she is when you're with me, apparently."

Naruto's shock at the statement was enough to make his fingers loosen around Sasuke's hand, who took the chance to finally break the contact.

"It's not like that!" the blond said, not really understanding why Sasuke would even say something like that when he had to know that Hinata and him were two, very distinctive people and that he
cared deeply about both but that neither were being used as replacements. "Sasuke..."

"We should leave soon," Sasuke cut, with a sigh, grabbing for both his and Naruto's bandage and throwing them to the side, to the pile of their sweaty clothes nearby. "I was thinking we could go to Suna."

"Hey, we're not done talking y..." Naruto was going to press the subject, but at hearing about Suna his attention was efficiently thrown off balance and focused solely on that topic. "We're going to visit Gaara?"

"If you want." Standing up, Sasuke turned his back to him and finally started removing his boxers, and for a few seconds, Naruto's eyes couldn't help but be attracted to the pale, very naked figure of his friend and his very firm, very round ass. Not that he hadn't seen enough of that since they had started travelling together, but it still had an impact on him, maybe because Sasuke was comfortable enough around him to actually get fully naked. "I should send word to him that we're coming. The people there tend to be a bit hostile when I drop by."

This made Naruto jump in his seat. "You... you've been to Suna alone before? After the war?" he inquired, astonished.

"There are many things about me you have yet to know, Naruto," the Uchiha said with an empty smirk, looking at him over his shoulder.

Naruto merely crossed his arms over his chest. "Apparently, since I didn't have a clue that you and Gaara even got along, let alone that you have kept in touch."

Sasuke sighed again and threw his boxers away towards the pile. "The Kazekage and I have things in common," he chose to explain. "Also, we owed each other apologies."

"That's so surreal."

"Things change."

"Well, whatever..." Naruto waved a dismissive hand towards Sasuke, who was slowly walking a bit further away, deeper into the river where he knew the water would at least reach his thighs. "I'm glad we're going to see him, though. I miss that weirdo a lot."

"As he misses you, I'm sure," the other said plainly, crouching down so his body was immersed in the flowing water up to his chest. If the cold temperature bothered him, he didn't show it.

"Can we just wait until Misato-chan gives birth?" Naruto asked hopefully. "I really want to meet her kid."

"Sure."

Because Sasuke kept his back to him, Naruto knew he wanted to give a definite ending to their conversation.

Chewing on his lower lip, Naruto watched him slowly wash himself with steady but elegant gestures of his single hand that, to his appreciative eyes, was a mirror image of the level of skill and precision he was capable of in a fight. Sasuke had a grace to him that was fascinating to watch, and yet, the imposing aura he emanated was a clear warning that he was a force to be reckoned with.

Even after all this time, even after becoming a recognized hero in the Shinobi world, Naruto still envied him. It was a healthy kind of envy now, because while Sasuke was as skilled and as strong as
he was, he also had the looks and the behavior to match with it. Sasuke was, in every sense of the word, the perfect character for a book of adventures – some sort of handsome heroic prince with a tragic background.

It was kind of funny and endearing to think about.

"You're very intent on being a voyeur today," Sasuke noted dryly, sensing Naruto's gaze on him, without stopping what he was doing or looking back at him.

"I'm just... really happy," Naruto said, cautiously. "I'm happy to be with you right now. Why can't you see that?"

Sasuke's hand stilled on rubbing his chest.

"I can see it," he said, voice low and devoid of emotion – something Naruto already knew he used as a shield to conceal his real emotions sometimes. "But it's only worth of value right now. I know that this is not a long termed situation, so I'm not exactly willing to be blinded by these fleeting moments of hope."

"What do you mean?" Naruto mumbled, able to feel the all too familiar bitterness behind that forced impassiveness but not really understanding where Sasuke was coming from. "I'm your friend. I'm here right now. I'll always be there for you, no matter what. Don't doubt that, Sasuke."

Sasuke's short laugh sounded aggravated. "You're just as oblivious as ever," he replied, shaking his head from side to side. "Just hurry up and get washed up. Usuratonkachi."

Hesitantly, and wondering what the hell he had done wrong this time, Naruto nodded (even if Sasuke couldn't see it) and obeyed.

A few days later, early in the morning, Naruto was working the fields when he heard someone shouting that Misato was going to have the baby.

The commotion was huge amongst the people. Sasuke was supposed to be shearing the sheep, so Naruto ran over there in excitement to tell him but he was nowhere to be found. He then ran over to Misato's to see if there was anything at all he could do to help her, but there was a lot of people surrounding the house already; some, like him, wanting to help, others praying, and others simply wanting to witness the miracle of birth. Naruto found this a little peculiar because he thought giving birth was supposed to be something private, and yet, to these simple people who had no electricity or means entertainment, witnessing something like this was perfectly normal.

Lost in the crowd, Naruto felt anxious every time he heard Misato's screams of agony. Where the fuck was Sasuke at a time like this?

Figuring that asking around was the best option, he found out that Sasuke was in there. With Misato, her mother, and her boyfriend.

He was there to help Misato give birth. Naruto thought he might throw up his own heart.

Why was Sasuke even there in the first place? Naruto had to be there, too. He wanted to be next to his friend, to be useful, to just... do something.

So he acted without really thinking, pushing himself through the crowd of people and muttering apologies until he managed to get inside the small house, already packed with people who were
peaking inside the room where the delivery was happening. He made his way through them, ignoring their questions and their warnings, and into the room, and upon entering, he was in no way ready for the scenario in front of him, of the young Misato semi-lying on her back over a mat on the floor, her upper body resting on her boyfriend’s (Tori’s) lap, her sweaty features scrunched up in pain. Her mother was kneeling between her spread thighs – the girl's dress tunic had been pulled up all the way up her chest, revealing most of her lower body – looking anxious but concentrated as she wiped at the residues there.

Sasuke was kneeling beside the girl's body, facing the entrance. Everybody was talking at the same time while Misato grunted in torment and Tori seemed to look both worried and thoroughly sick as he wiped at the girl's forehead with a wet cloth. All over the place, towels stained with blood and the gods knew what else could be seen, and close to Misato's mother, many weird instruments were scattered about. There was a pungent smell in the air that he couldn't – and didn't want to – identify.

Naruto had to swallow the bile that rose to his throat.

"Naruto!" Sasuke yelled, startling him out of his initial shock. He looked exhausted and relieved to see him there, hair sticking out in every direction. Only then did Naruto notice that he had his hand over Misato's protuberant belly and that it was glowing with baby blue chakra. "I need your help! The baby's wrapped in up the umbilical cord and I can't untangle her single handedly! You need to use your chakra!"

Naruto had no idea what Sasuke was talking about, how he knew it was a girl or that she was even in such a situation – it was far too much information for him at the moment – but he knew Sasuke needed his help, and he'd do whatever it took to be of use.

He quickly moved to the small group and slumped down on the floor on the other side of Misato, in front of Sasuke.

"Put your hand over mine," Sasuke instructed urgently, and Naruto did as told, even if he felt himself shake. "You feel my energy? You feel where my chakra's touching?"

"Yeah," Naruto confirmed, with an exuberant nod, because he could also feel the thumping of the feeble life there.

"I need you to apply pressure there with your own chakra," Sasuke said. "That's where the cord is inflicting the most damage, but it should be okay if we keep it still. The cord is far too tangled up in the baby and if we loosen the pressure in that point it might squeeze her to death. It's also preventing her from coming out." He took a deep, shaky breath. "While you apply pressure to that point, I'm going to use my chakra to try and untangle as much as I can of the cord. If we're successful, she'll be out fast, or so I hope."

"You should've called me!" Naruto said, panic filling him at all the words Sasuke had said that he had barely registered. "What if I hadn't showed up?!"

"I was going to!" Sasuke protested. "I was trying to do as much as I could!"

"How do you even know about this kind of stuff?!"

"I told you I've been studying!" Sasuke yelled, in exasperation. "I know a bit of medical stuff, but it's the first time I'm actually using the knowledge."

Another pained yell from Misato and a curse from her mother made Sasuke eye Naruto meaningfully. They nodded to each other at the same time, and in silence, they got to work. Naruto
concentrated the same amount of energy in his hand that he had felt from Sasuke, and as soon as his friend removed his hand, he was ready to apply pressure on that same point.

"P-please save my… baby…” Misato pleaded, looking at Sasuke with a heartbreaking expression of distress.

"I will," Sasuke promised, forcing a smile. "Just keep your breathing even and refrain from pushing for a while, okay?"

She nodded, taking in a sharp breath as another violent contraction assaulted her. Naruto watched Sasuke, torn between fascination and fear at the certainty in his voice. What if he couldn't do it?

Misato's mother was quiet, but tears were streaming down her face, probably thinking the same thing.

Naruto wondered what those poor people would do if Sasuke hadn't been there. They would never be able to tell the baby's condition and the gods knew what would've happened to her and Misato then…

"Focus, Dobe!" Sasuke snapped, just as warm tears made Naruto's eyes sting. He blinked, a single drop falling from his eyes and down his cheek, but the determined look on Sasuke's face was enough to help him get his shit together.

Sasuke had this. Someone as focused, diligent, skilled and talented as he was had no room for failure in his own mind, so he'd definitely pull this off no matter what.

"Tell me if there's anything else I can do," Naruto said.

"I'll tell you if I need more pressure, or pressure on another point," Sasuke said, taking a deep breath. He concentrated chakra on his hand again and placed his hand over Misato's belly. "I'm going to start moving the cord now. Try to stop her from moving too much, Tori."

It felt like hours passed during which Naruto kept his hand immobile, making sure he didn't fuck up and didn't disturb Sasuke's methodical job. Misato's screams upset him, but he did his best to remain as calm as he could, joining Tori in muttering soothing words to the soon-to-be mother, listening carefully every time Sasuke reported on how he had managed to loosen the cord here and there.

By the time he was done, Sasuke was literally dripping with sweat and his whole body was trembling from the physical exertion that the task had forced out of him, and yet, in spite of his obvious shaken state, he still moved quickly to Misato's mother's side and used more of his chakra to help ease the passage so the baby could come out faster, and thankfully, a few minutes later and after a lot of pain from Misato, the baby was out.

Misato's mother caught the tiny body in her eager hands, and Sasuke was quick to instruct Naruto to fetch more towels and more water from the corner of the room, which he did, feeling almost as if he were in a dream, watching everything from outside of his own body.

When he got to Sasuke's side, his best friend was cutting the umbilical cord with a rudimental knife. The eldest woman did a few procedures to clear the baby's airways that got Naruto's stomach in a twist but immediately made him feel relieved as the tiny individual started to cry weakly. After that, Naruto passed Sasuke the towels and, filled with joy and gratefulness, Misato's mother passed him the baby, even though he only had one arm to hold her.

Sasuke seemed a bit surprised by this, but the woman was ecstatic. "It is a girl," she said, before looking up at her daughter's relieved face. "You hear that, Misato? It's a beautiful girl, just like you
Misato was even able to release a small, exhausted laugh and Tori could no longer hold back his emotions as silent tears ran down his strong features.

"Help me clean her up," Sasuke said to Naruto in a whisper. His voice shook, and consequentially shook Naruto's very soul as well, who could barely keep his hands steady as he dipped a few cloths in the water and twisted them, with which he carefully wiped the bloodied baby clean as much as possible.

They had helped bring a baby into this world. The little girl was alive and kicking and Sasuke had been responsible for that miracle. If it hadn't been for him…

Naruto could barely breathe as he looked at Sasuke's drained, yet soft features while he looked at the tiny creature he was holding. He looked ridiculously heroic and just ethereal, like a beautiful, out of this world entity. Despite his best efforts, Naruto couldn't help the sob that escaped his chest as well as the flood of tears that had been threatening to escape his eyes for quite a while now.

He felt so happy and grateful, too. He felt so many things at the same time, for Misato, for that baby, for those people, for Sasuke… the things he felt for Sasuke almost choked him. Yet, he laughed because everything was just so beautiful it amazed him.

He was only able to calm down when Sasuke passed the baby to Misato, who, along with Tori, both smiled widely at them, both too emotional to properly voice their gratitude.

They were a bit drunk, Sasuke was aware of this. Everybody had been indulging in celebration of Misato's baby and Sasuke and Naruto had been no exception.

So, yes, it had been a wild night, filled with laughter, booze, tears and dancing and it had been beautiful in ways Sasuke had never seen or experienced before. The fatigue of the delivery had left him to be replaced by pure exhilaration and need to be free.

Still, if Naruto, ever the bright individual hadn't been there, Sasuke was sure he wouldn't have taken part in any of it, but his friend's energy was far too strong and captivating, and it drew people in like a brutal force.

Naruto was out of himself after the delivery. So, Sasuke drank, laughed, and even danced around the fire with a few of the youngest girls as well as a few women – well, it wasn't exactly 'dancing' as much as it was just jumping around in a rather ritualistic way to the sound of rustic drums – and if the suggestive looks he received were any indication, those females were looking out for some fun. Too bad for them that he had no interest in them.

Naruto seemed to be enjoying himself as well, but more often than not Sasuke would find those strong, vivid blue eyes trained on him in both joy and fascination. Sometimes, those eyes darkened and became oddly intense, following his every move from the other side of the huge bonfire and Sasuke would relish in all those raw emotions he saw there. Those eyes ravaged him, caressing him all over and he could all but let it consume him as the pull he and Naruto had on each other made him feel powerful and simply wanted like never before.

So, he smirked nastily at Naruto, and whenever they happened to walk by each other in that sea of happy dancing bodies, he would make sure to touch Naruto's arm, hand or the back of his neck, teasingly, playfully, and would drink in the way his friend shivered every single time and would
always reach out to touch him back. The mutual contact felt like electricity on his body and he'd feel himself burn with an uncontrolled longing that he noticed to have an erotic feel to it as well.

While Sasuke was no stranger to feeling aroused from kissing, this kind of feeling, he knew, was new to them and caused by new, deeper things that had blossomed between them. Naruto felt it, too, if the hungry glint in his helpless sapphire eyes was any indication.

This to say that Sasuke wasn't surprised when Naruto suddenly appeared in front of him and grabbed for his wrist before dragging him away from the loud celebration. They found themselves near the barn, closer to the woods and away from the party they had been immersed in. The night was a bit chilly, but thanks to their woolen sweaters and all the dancing, neither was feeling particularly cold. In fact, when they reached a rather secluded area and Naruto leaned his back against a tree trunk, pulling Sasuke to him, the Uchiha had to admit that he was feeling more than a little hot, heart beating painfully inside his chest because of the euphoria he was feeling.

His head was spinning, and when strong arms surrounded his neck in a loose, but meaningful hug, he could only lean in to capture the lips that met his halfway through. By now, he and Naruto had kissed enough times for them to identify each other's moods, and Sasuke quickly understood that his friend was in a rather lightheaded and playful mood. This however, only made him more carefree, thus more intense.

The kiss was eager from the very start, Naruto releasing a pleased moan as their tongues slid over each other with uncoordinated ease. Sasuke enjoyed those small sounds they made and the way Naruto's body seemed to twitch from raw need. His hands moved so his fingers could close tightly around the dark hair in the back of his head, making sure Sasuke didn't break the kiss, and Sasuke allowed it, pressing himself closer and winding his arm underneath Naruto's armpit to grab his shoulder.

If there were times when Sasuke regretted not having his arm, these were it. When he and Naruto were being like this, he often wished he could hold him properly and make sure his intents, his desires were well comprehended. As it was, there was only so much strength he could display, and only so much affection he could bestow upon the other. They were both male, and just like Naruto himself seemed to understand that in order for the mutual respect to be achieved they would both have to keep their male pride intact, so did Sasuke, and while the balance was still overwhelmingly delicate due to the early stages of their intimacy, it was also surprisingly steady.

Sasuke had expected Naruto to try and subjugate him at some point, considering how he had already been with a female, and yet, his friend didn't, not even once. If it was natural or just him being considerate, Sasuke didn't know, but he knew that he was ready to counter it with everything he had.

Still, there seemed to be no need for them to fight for dominance so far, and the way Naruto's leg had wound around his waist was proof enough of it. Sasuke allowed a small noise to escape his throat as he broke to kiss to latch his mouth over the curve of the other's neck and sucking on it wetly, the alcohol in his veins making it all too easy for him to instinctively venture a few tentative thrusts of his hips against his friend's. Both of them shivered slightly as their obvious arousals came into contact, Naruto's fists tightening more on Sasuke's hair, who couldn't help but smirk against the other's skin at the way his name was uttered in a sinful release of breath in his ear.

Sasuke couldn't possibly claim to know what he was doing. He wasn't naïve, or ignorant about sex – he had read about it – and while he was in no way experienced, it wasn't something that he considered to be that much of a big deal. The notion of sex, or any kind of sexual interaction, was something he perceived with the same rational mind that he perceived everything else. Whatever had to happen would happen, and he, being a fast learner, would be able to deal with it, no doubt about
it. Call it arrogance, but at this point of his life, he was far too confident in himself to be intimidated by something as banal and mindless as sex. Like fighting an unknown opponent, it was all about instinct and body language.

Right now, as they panted and trembled against each other, Sasuke wasn't sure what it was that he wanted to do or what Naruto himself wanted.

However, he couldn't say that he felt completely prepared for the intensity that emanated from his best friend, so when the blond searched for his mouth again, kissing him desperately and alluringly rocking his own hips against Sasuke's in search for more friction, Sasuke felt powerless to the sheer pleasurable heat that seemed to set his body on fire.

His painfully hard cock throbbed with unchained lust as he found himself automatically responding to Naruto, who seemed to be in a rather horned mood for some reason Sasuke couldn't quite understand. Sure, he had seen those eyes almost devouring him just a few minutes ago, but where had that come from?

Sasuke grunted, letting his hand travel down the side of Naruto's body in a possessive caress before cupping an ass cheek and pressing himself harder, enjoying the uncoordinated way Naruto pressed back, their lengths rubbing deliciously against each other through their linen pants.

The Kami help him, but that felt better than anything else in the world.

"Fuck," Naruto grunted against his mouth. "Sasuke… faster…"

Naruto's speech was a bit slurred, but not enough to deter Sasuke from moving faster, teeth biting roughly on Naruto's lower lip, who let out a mumbled complaint that sounded both eager and pained.

Sasuke had no consciousness of Naruto releasing his hair, but he felt Naruto's cold hands sliding down his back in one quick, swift motion before pulling the hem of his sweater up so they could touch skin, blunt nails scratching viciously and making Sasuke hiss.

Their mouths parted again with a wet popping noise and Naruto attacked his ear lobe, nibbling and licking at it with a lewdness Sasuke had never imagined he was even able to possess, the noises his tongue made causing his head to spin. Then, those hands became even more daring as they shamelessly slid down again to invade Sasuke's pants and underwear and cupping both his ass cheeks.

Sasuke almost cursed himself for not being able to touch Naruto more. If only he had two hands he could just…

He wondered if, even like this, Naruto found him attractive, somehow – if this outcome had been triggered by their emotional bond or if something about him turned Naruto on.

Naruto did turn him on, and while this hadn't been exactly something that was important before they had started kissing, being intimate definitely had an impact in how differently Sasuke looked at him now.

"Sasuke…" Naruto gasped in his ear, rolling his hips even more desperately against his, heart beating wildly against Sasuke's erratic one. "Oh, shit… so good… I'm so close…"

Sasuke bit his lip and closed his eyes tightly, feeling his cock leaking even more inside his underwear.

They had never gotten this far during a make out session, but Sasuke knew by now how this was
going to end. There was still time to stop, or at least time to ask Naruto if he was sure about it, if this was the right thing to do and if it was better to not go through with it after all. Because, once they did, those last few doors that separated them would finally be unlocked and it was only a matter of time before Naruto opened them. And Sasuke was more than ready for it – had always been, he knew that now – but Naruto had other people, other thoughts, other aspirations, and this would have a strong repercussion in their lives from here on.

Stopping now would be hard (he was so devastatingly close to that blissful completion, too) but for Naruto's sake – for both their sakes – Sasuke was willing to do it.

However, as soon as he opened his mouth, Naruto's fingers squeezed his ass and pulled him more to him, hands urging him to move faster as his leg flexed around Sasuke's waist. "I'm gonna cum… fuckfuckfuck…” he chanted, his face buried in the curve of Sasuke's neck, who could all but indulge him and be guided by his precious person's whims as he helped Naruto ride his orgasm for all it was worth.

Naruto came with a long, strangled moan of Sasuke's name, hands twitching on Sasuke's bottom and body trembling with powerful spasms. Sasuke's lust was both fueled and pacified by those amazing sounds he attentively listened to, his brain registering every breath, every shiver and every senseless word the other uttered. He deeply regretted not being able to see Naruto's face, but in the dark forest, the chance was slim anyway.

Still, he was too aroused and absorbed, even if everything had been so sudden and fast. It was remarkable that it didn't feel awkward, and even more so that Naruto had let himself go so easily, and the thought itself was nothing short of amazing.

Sasuke didn't really have much time to delve into things though. He barely registered the moment Naruto came down from his high because the blond was lifting his head and smashing his mouth against his in another fervent kiss. If Sasuke hadn't been so fucking horny to begin with, he would've gasped at the nerve of Naruto as he blindly (somehow) managed to untie the strings in his pants and pulled them and his underwear slightly down. Sasuke's already moistened cock was exposed to the cold environment, but Naruto's hand was quick to reach for it and pump it. The movements of his fist were a bit awkward but energetic and obviously into it, and Sasuke almost lost the ability to stand. He had never been touched like that by another person before – and it wasn't like he felt the need to masturbate all that often – and, clumsy as it may be, it felt too good.

Naruto was still breathing hard against his mouth, trying to kiss him at the same time but it ended up being nothing more than a mess of tongues and lips that Sasuke enjoyed far too much to care about how uncoordinated it was.

He held Naruto close by the waist, his wrist scrapping a bit against the roughness of the tree trunk and probably scratching skin, but he barely felt it. He just wanted Naruto close – that flawed perfection that was theirs – and nothing else. He had never needed something as bad in his life like he needed release in the arms of that particular person.

He grunted, unable to stop himself from fucking Naruto's hand while being thoroughly jerked off.

He quivered at the impending ecstasy coiling in the pit of his stomach, his cock convulsing with the upcoming orgasm.

"That's it…” Naruto murmured lovingly against his mouth, his words sounding almost like a prayer. "Cum for me… Sasuke…”

And Sasuke did, trying to swallow his voice down but not being able to because a long grunt
escaped him while pleasure washed over him and he kept thrusting his hips against Naruto's hand, his seed leaving him and coating it.

As his orgasm subsided, Naruto's hand slowed down considerably as well, but its movements didn't cease, still pumping carefully, almost as if enjoying the new slickness that aided it, which made it difficult for Sasuke to clear his mind and stop shivering from the small pleasure.

He remained very still, breathing hard while Naruto took the chance to mouth at his parted lips, the upper one first, and the lower one after it. Sasuke allowed it for a few submissive seconds, only because he was far too lost in the blissful haziness of his pleasure, before lazily pressing his lips to Naruto's responsively.

They kissed for a while, Naruto's hand eventually stopping its ministrations to close around Sasuke's sweater, dirtying it. Sasuke couldn't care if he tried.

When they parted, Naruto looked at him, and when their eyes met, the blond sucked in a breath, seemingly about to say something.

"Don't talk," Sasuke interrupted, voice coming out a bit rough since he was still feeling drowsy. "You'll say something to piss me off, for sure."

Naruto frowned at him, looking offended.

Truth was, Sasuke felt… good – ecstatic that yet another wall had been torn down. But also queasy and somewhat angry. Naruto had initiated it for some reason, and Sasuke had accepted it because he had wanted to. But again, this was something rather huge for them. Or maybe, it was what he wanted to believe, but Naruto was different, and sometimes, he looked at things from a light-hearted perspective, and sometimes, Sasuke just didn't want to know his thoughts. In fact… just thinking about how this could have less meaning to Naruto than it did to him made him feel furious. Because, unfortunately for him, his friend was dumb.

"I was just going to say that this was really good," Naruto said quietly, blue eyes seeming to glow a little resentfully in the dark. "It felt really good, doing this with you, Sasuke." In spite of himself, Sasuke turned his face away, but the blond proceeded. "If you were thinking that I did it because you think I'm drunk and am I going to regret it, then you're wrong."

"Then why did you do it?" Sasuke asked, noticing his voice sounded colder than necessary, but uncertainty not allowing him to take anything for granted.

Naruto blinked, as if the question didn't even make sense to him. "Because it felt right," he said, sincerely. "After this morning I just…and just a while ago you looked… really cool out there, laughing and dancing, and I just… felt drawn to you and really wanted it. And you did, too, so it felt perfect. Don't be upset about something that felt amazing like that."

"I was just going to say that this was really good," Naruto said quietly, blue eyes seeming to glow a little resentfully in the dark. "It felt really good, doing this with you, Sasuke." In spite of himself, Sasuke turned his face away, but the blond proceeded. "If you were thinking that I did it because you think I'm drunk and am I going to regret it, then you're wrong."

"Then why did you do it?" Sasuke asked, noticing his voice sounded colder than necessary, but uncertainty not allowing him to take anything for granted.

Naruto blinked, as if the question didn't even make sense to him. "Because it felt right," he said, sincerely. "After this morning I just…and just a while ago you looked… really cool out there, laughing and dancing, and I just… felt drawn to you and really wanted it. And you did, too, so it felt perfect. Don't be upset about something that felt amazing like that."

It was Sasuke's turn to blink stupidly, his anger draining away. It wasn't exactly the kind of answer he was looking for – then again, when did Naruto ever say what he wanted to hear? – and yet, the simple, pure way he had spoken made him realize that it was when Naruto was the most oblivious that he acted more on impulse and heart alone. This was when he became more honest.

And for some reason, while it frustrated Sasuke to no end, he couldn't really stay angry at him.

But… it was upsetting, he thought. Looking into Naruto's eyes and seeing the longing, the hope and that... he hated seeing it but knowing his friend couldn't grasp it, even if, little by little and with each passing day, he seemed to give in more to their bond.
"Damn it," Sasuke hissed, letting his forehead fall to Naruto's shoulder. "You're always saying stupid shit, Usuratonkachi."

Naruto chuckled. "I know you like it when I go all mushy on you, even though you always act tough like you don't give a shit," he teased, using his clean hand to caress the back of Sasuke's neck, cheek coming in contact with his temple. "But I meant what I said. I feel like, no matter what happens between us, it's fine because it's you. If it makes sense, then that's all I will focus on."

"I know," Sasuke mumbled, toying with the fabric of Naruto's sweater with his fingers. "But you have to admit: you were also pretty horny, weren't you?"

Naruto made a thoughtful noise with the back of his throat. "Well... yeah, I guess. A guy has needs. Didn't you feel terribly horny and frustrated that we've done all that making out without some sex involved? I was almost ready to jump out of my skin a few times, to be honest. And who wouldn't want some sex after that delivery? That was sick, man."

Sasuke could only release a bitter, amused laugh.

The weather seemed to be against them hitting the road again on that grey morning, dark clouds having covered the sun as thin raindrops fell over their heads. Naruto had to admit that he felt sad that, after four weeks, they had to go. He had grown attached to the people and to the quiet, yet hardworking lifestyle.

They were given their weapons back and enough food to last for a week, as well as more of the typical linen and wool clothes they were already used to wearing, even though he was sure that the weather would be very hot once they entered Wind Country. Everybody was feeling rather emotional, but Naruto couldn't help the tears from falling at the sight of the kids that usually followed Sasuke around crying all around him and telling him not to go. Sasuke merely smiled gently at them and ruffled the top of their heads, promising that he'd be back to visit sometime.

Amongst the strong hugs, forehead kisses and words of farewell, Naruto thanked everyone for the way they had been received and for the things he had learned. If by the time he took a glimpse of Sasuke leaning down to press a small kiss to the forehead of the baby in Misato's arms (Mika was her name), Naruto was already a sobbing mess, seeing his friend like that made him start hiccupping uncontrollably. Thankfully, Sasuke realized that there were only so many goodbyes the both of them could handle and decided that it was time to go.

Their bags considerably heavier than they had been before meeting civilization, the two headed towards Wind Country, and Suna.

After they left, Naruto kept on crying for about an hour, and while Sasuke sighed his annoyance beside him and just threw him frowning glances, he didn't really say anything to give him comfort either. Bastard, Naruto thought bitterly, wiping at his snotty nose with the sleeve of his sweater and ignoring Sasuke's disgusted shudder.

He had met many people in his life, gone on many missions, seen many things... but actually spending so much time with other types of people, actually knowing what it meant to live as someone poor who actually had to survive by their own means, was a completely new thing to him. Maybe this was what Sasuke's process of self-forgiveness meant, he considered. Feeling empathy for different kinds of lives and people, learning how to feel for them so strongly you just ached to do something to make sure their lives were a bit easier. And yet, there was no pity in him for them, because they were genuinely united and happy.
After a while, he managed to calm down enough to be able to stop seeing everything so blurry, but he was still hiccupping heavily. That's when a linen handkerchief made its appearance in front of him, to his surprise. He looked at Sasuke, who was extending it to him with his features scrunched up in aggravation and took it, gratefully. He wiped his face and blew his nose loudly.

"For fuck's sake, Naruto, do you have to be so damned disgusting?" Sasuke yelled, clearly irritated beyond himself. "I've never seen someone crying so much in my whole life; where the fuck do you store all that water?"

"Shut up, I have the right to cry for as long as I want!" Naruto protested, voice coming out hoarse. "Just let me be, bastard!

Purposefully, he blew his nose again, causing Sasuke to make a sickened 'urgh'.

"Just… calm down," Sasuke said, between clenched teeth, while furiously rummaging inside his bag in search for something. He took out a canteen of water and extended it to Naruto. "Drink some water, you're upsetting me with all that crying, it's uncalled for and you look terrible."

In spite of having a nasty retort on the tip of his tongue, Naruto accepted the canteen and unscrewed the cap before taking a few healthy swigs, the liquid soothing his sore throat. Once he was done, he passed it back to Sasuke, who put it away inside his bag again.

Then, Naruto watched Sasuke for a while as they walked side by side, contemplating his friend, who chose to not look back at him.

He wondered if seeing him cry was really all that upsetting for Sasuke or if it just got on his nerves because he was noisy. Nevertheless, that small 'village' had had an impact on him for many reasons, and yet, what had really moved him the most was seeing Sasuke's strange display of humility there and his constant calm, helpful demeanor towards other people.

Naruto had always known that, deep down, Sasuke had always had a gentle heart that had, unfortunately, been tainted by hatred, pain and sadness, but seeing his friend working hard to heal himself and bring himself back from the chaos he had been in… it was almost like seeing someone looking for the child within them – that same purity, that same simple enjoyment over simple things, and that freedom to love and live.

This made Sasuke look, to him, more beautiful than ever.

Those who knew nothing about him had no idea – they couldn't understand what Naruto saw – what he had seen – the progression Sasuke was going through, thus, they could never really comprehend how it felt to see this Sasuke, who was completely himself, yet someone better.

It made his heart ache with something strong, yet not unpleasant. He wondered if Sakura was even aware of this, but by the way Sasuke closed in on himself, it wasn't very likely. Also, Sakura had never travelled with him before, like Naruto was doing.

Sniffing, and feeling a bit needy, he reached out to brush the back of his fingers over Sasuke's shoulder, running them down his arm slowly, a bit clumsily considering they were still in motion. Sasuke glanced at him sideways, one eyebrow quirking upwards. When Naruto was about to reach his hand, Sasuke spoke, voice smooth but cold as ice. "Do it and I'll break every single bone in your hand."

As if burnt, Naruto removed said hand with a pout. "You're so mean, Sasuke!" he retorted, sticking his lower lip out and making it tremble on purpose. "A guy needs a bit of comfort and you're just a
cold bastard all the way!"

"Oh, yes, because out of all the comforting gestures, holding hands is by far the best of them," Sasuke said, sarcastically.

Naruto felt himself smile. "We could always have sex again," he said, grinning mischievously even if the memory alone of the event a few nights previously was enough to make heat flood him from head to toe. Just the previous morning things had gotten pretty nice when they had woken up, both apparently feeling rather horny and ready for some action, but had been interrupted by one of the kids who oh-so-conveniently decided to 'wake' Sasuke up himself. "I'm sure even you agree that that's comforting enough."

He was ready for the swig Sasuke took at his head, so he was successful in ducking and avoiding it. With a satisfied grin, he stuck his tongue out at the other, effectively causing Sauske to roll his eyes.

In silence, both proceeded on their way, side by side. After a while, Sasuke seemed to have moved abnormally closer so that their arms touched when they walked. Naruto felt happy and victorious at the same time – it seemed as though they were becoming closer and closer the more time passed, both physically and emotionally and it felt liberating beyond anything he had ever experienced.

It also felt weird, all these sudden, very conflicting yet specific feelings he had whenever he so much looked at Sasuke, let alone touch him. It was the same as always, that strong pull, that easy, yet clashing dynamic between them, and yet, it was becoming increasingly different for some reason.

He didn't like to think about it. All he knew was that he was incredibly happy right now, and this kind of happiness wasn't something he was used to.

In fact… he wasn't sure he had ever felt quite like this in his entire life. He hoped Sasuke felt it, too, and all he wanted was to keep moving, alongside his best friend, and see how much happier they could both be, together.

TBC…

---

Chapter End Notes

Long-assed chapter just for you! Don’t ask where this came from, but there are scenes here that I definitely wanted to include, so… I’m glad I did? Anyway, I hope you liked it!

Next part: Gaara, relationship talk, some fluff, some more arguing and… well, who the fuck knows? Look forward to it!

Oh, and HAPPY NEW YEAR TO YOU AAAAAALLLL!
Endless Winter II.I

Chapter Notes

I wasn’t going to update this in a while, but this is a scene that I started to write for the next chapter, but kept getting deeper and bigger, so I decided to make it into a full chapter. I finished it yesterday because I was in the mood for this fic, so I thought, why not post it?

This is why it’s a 2.1 chapter. You can also see it as an extra that is directly linked to the story since this is very important for Sasuke’s and Naruto’s development. I’ll have more to say at the end of the chapter, but you guys might want to read it first. Brace yourselves for some emotional stuff.

Also, I want to thank Aredbittenapple for always supporting me and for drawing amazing fanart that inspires the inner Muse that blesses me with inspiration for this story. You are amazing!

Not betaed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

From Which We'll Rise

Part V: Endless Winter II.I

Naruto hated when Sasuke asked questions. In a way, Sasuke understood it – Naruto was still too green, too excited, too impulsive and too curious to actually take the time to stop and think about the things he did and why he did them in the first place.

If he had to be honest with himself, Sasuke enjoyed Naruto’s adventurous and carefree side, which was one of the reasons why he held back on taking the initiative on being intimate or showing affection to the blond. His apparent nonchalance forced Naruto to look at him in questioning and made him seek for Sasuke's attention on a regular basis, his seemingly endless hunger for acknowledgment and response a constant in their daily lives. The conflicting confusion in those expressive blue eyes was highly amusing to watch.

Sasuke wondered if Naruto even realised this – if he realized exactly how often he unconsciously reached out for him just because he could in his genuine curiosity of everything that was Sasuke and them.

However, the more time passed and the more things changed, the more Sasuke wanted to ask questions. How could he not when things just kept getting more and more out of hand?

Sitting on the stony ground with his back resting against Naruto'S naked chest, Sasuke unconsciously held his breath as full lips were pressed to the curve of his neck before teeth scrapped at the spot, rebellious blond locks bushing against his cheekbone. He could feel his friend's slightly shaky breath against his skin, causing small goose bumps to rise everywhere.
The huge bonfire was crackling happily in front of them, the only sound that reverberated gently on that mild night. There weren't many trees around them since they had set camp on the border of Wind Country and the landscapes were gradually becoming less green, sandier and stonier, so the full moon was shining bright in the dark sky above, providing extra illumination.

Since they'd be entering the desert soon, they had taken the chance to bathe themselves thoroughly and wash up the few clothes they owned in a river nearby, so the garments had been strategically stretched over tree branches around them close to the fire to dry during the night. Both Sasuke and Naruto were left in their boxers, but Sasuke had chosen to wear a simple worn out grey sweater as well, and even though neither was particularly cold, somehow, Naruto had pulled him to him so they'd be in that position and Sasuke, after travelling restlessly for days, was far too tired to protest the embrace. Or, well, certain things had become sort of a habit for them, and since Naruto dealt with them so naturally, Sasuke could only go along with it because it was all he could do to get to that next level.

Also, he had to admit that it was really comfortable and relaxing.

It was a strange feeling, too, to be so at ease and so unguarded just because Naruto was around. This only made Sasuke realize that it had been far too long since he could afford to not be suspicious of both his surroundings and of the people around him. It was a gloomy thought.

Usually, Sasuke would be automatically alert no matter what, but he was far too distracted, at least on that particular night, to really be bothered.

Naruto's arms surrounded him, one hugging his neck, the other wound around his waist in a loose grip and he seemed to be very content in pressing small kisses all over the skin exposed to him, fingernails scratching Sasuke's belly underneath his sweater lightly.

"Does this feel good?" Naruto asked, lowly, offering an intense bite to the side of Sasuke's neck before running his tongue over the spot as if to soothe it, causing Sasuke to shift a bit in slight discomfort that was more psychological than it was physical.

"Yeah…" he ended up breathing out before he could stop himself. "Ah…"

The indecorous moan left his mouth without his consent and he frowned, annoyed at himself. It bothered him that small interactions like these moved him so much. He should have more control than this, and yet, whenever Naruto so much as touched him, his body responded in the most eager ways manageable – which often consisted of him being irreversibly turned on. Most of the times he felt like rejecting the contact was the easiest way out, and the safest way to keep his sanity in check. However, even if it was easy enough to push Naruto away when they were on the road, travelling, it became almost impossible to do so when they stopped for a few hours and basically had nothing better to do.

He had been neglecting his own needs for far too long, he knew that. He had never been very sexually inclined before, and since he had studied enough to know the damage his own grief and anger caused to his body and psyche, he didn't really found it unusual that he had no sexual desire or even curiosity towards such things when all he had cared about was his revenge and his goals. Whatever he knew of sex was knowledge acquired out of his own necessity of not being in the dark considering his age back then. And, of course, out of self-preservation because Orochimaru had a few weird ideas Sasuke had had no desire to indulge out of naivety.

But now... Somehow it was as if, finally, his body had awakened - as if Naruto's mere presence had triggered the most primal instincts he had had no idea he had possessed.
"I love it when you make those sounds," Naruto whispered softly. "It's pretty sexy, to be honest."

Narrowed eyes trained on the fire in front of them, Sasuke had a sense of déjà vu. He bit on his lower lip, swallowing down the dryness in his throat as he couldn't escape the distinct feeling of uneasiness that took him by force.

"Naruto?"

"Mm?"

"Do you think I'm attractive?"

Naruto seemed to jolt a bit in surprise, stopping his apparent seduction tactic at once and lifting his head up. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious," Sasuke muttered, shrugging his shoulders in a nonchalant fashion, even if the lack of those lips almost made him shiver in loss. "After all, you do seem like you enjoy touching me."

"That's because I do," Naruto replied, without missing a beat. "I always knew you were attractive, even when we were kids, but it really bothered me because it just added to the cool factor. I mean, you were smart, good at everything and then you also had to be good-looking."

Sasuke pressed his lips together for a moment. "It's not like anyone is naturally good at things," he said dryly. "People tend to think that we Uchiha were prodigious people, and while most of us did pick up on things rather quickly, the truth is, we all worked pretty hard to achieve our goals."

The fire hissed and Sasuke shifted yet again as Naruto's blunt nails scrapped absently at the skin of his abs in a restless, rough way.

"I know that," his friend said, sounding sheepish. His heart had started beating faster against Sasuke's back. "I… kind of watched you. Like, a lot. I knew how much you trained, and you never were the kind of kid who went to the park to play like all the others."

For a second there Sasuke almost felt like that conversation wasn't happening and that he had somehow fallen asleep in Naruto's arms and was currently dreaming. They didn't really talk about stuff like this all that often, and while Naruto wasn't exactly someone who kept his own feelings and thoughts to himself, it always took Sasuke by surprise when he chose to talk about them and their past. Sasuke himself ran away from the topic most of the times, even if a part of him desperately wanted to talk about it.

A past they had shared but hadn't gone through together. Just like Naruto had watched him, Sasuke had watching him back, and while the blond may have felt the depth of Sasuke's feelings for him, there were details he wasn't aware of.

In a way, Sasuke wanted to tell him these things, these details Naruto didn't know of, but found the words locked up inside of himself. It wasn't the time, yet. Sometimes, Sasuke wondered if the time would ever come.

"I was always eager to go home so I could study or train with Itachi," Sasuke explained simply, sighing and stretching his legs out, crossing them at the ankles of his feet. "He was my best friend and someone I wanted to be like. Everybody loved and admired him, including me, so playing with kids wasn't something that interested me. I liked learning and becoming better. I wanted to be like him. It was important to me to have my family's approval no matter what."

Naruto tensed, sensing the obvious sensitive topic they and chuckled nervously before nuzzling the
back of Sasuke's ear with his nose. "You were always very studious. I envied that about you because I hated reading and I couldn't get stuff inside my head no matter what." His arms tightened around Sasuke's form. "Just like you looked up to Itachi in order to become better, so did I look up to you in my own way. But you always seemed so unreachable to me, and even when you lost your clan… we had things in common then, but at the same time, we felt differently towards things and the world. But I always envied your strength, your way to fight harder for what you wanted. Even in your own innocent darkness you never gave up…"

An image of a younger Itachi smiling at him and poking his forehead triggered the memory of his anguish when he had found out about how his older brother had been the one to slaughter their whole clan. Those feelings… Sasuke would never forget them. The feeling of loss, of despair, of shock… but most of all, the sheer disappointment and emptiness he had felt would never be forgotten for as long as he lived.

He had been so young the first time he had felt such deep, painful things. It had been like being stabbed in the stomach, betrayed, beaten up to a bloody pulp and left to rotten someplace dark where he could never be found.

Sasuke still remember it all vividly. Sometimes, he still dreamed of it. He still recalled how most of his pain was caused by that betrayal coming from the person he had loved the most in his small world.

He had hated himself, over and over again, for not being able to forget that unconditional love he had had for his brother. It frustrated him because he knew that, while his anger fuelled his growth as a Shinobi, those feelings didn't seem to leave him and allow him to be where he wanted. No matter how hard he tried, it was never enough and he could never be strong enough.

And in the end… had it all been worth it? Had Itachi's death given him anything other than more grief? More regret? Even knowing that Itachi had done it all for him, out of the same unconditional love…

In the end, Sasuke was still left alone with his own pain and remorse, unable to fix anything, unable to be freed of his anger, of his loneliness, not knowing where to go or what to do.

In the end, he had been left alone with his own demons, once more.

Unconsciously, Sasuke reached inside his sweater with his right hand and grabbed for Naruto's, bandaged one giving it a strong squeeze, which caused the other man to stop talking abruptly, sensing his friend's sudden but dissimulated need for emotional grounding. That they sometimes didn't need words was a strange way to make things easier for them in moments like these.

"You okay?" Naruto asked quietly, "I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't be talking about stuff like this."

"It's fine," Sasuke said, shaking his head from side to side. He was still alone, he knew. Not right now, and not emotionally, no. Naruto would always be there for him, sharing his pain, sharing his longing, but at the same time, just like he hadn't been able to reach Itachi, there were certain places of Naruto's soul Sasuke would probably never be able to reach either.

"Anyway… about you being attractive," Naruto started saying, perceptively going back to the main subject before clearing his throat. "I guess I kind of… never really looked at you like this before? I guess I know you are attractive but… how can I explain it…"

Naruto trailed off for a while, apparently lost in thought, choosing his words carefully, which Sasuke found rather surprising since his friend would usually just spit out whatever was on his mind at the
moment. As if to soothe him, he rubbed his chest gently. "It's not just the way you look that draws me in and makes me want to touch you. Sure, you're good-looking, but I admire you. You're my best friend. We have never been very close physically so I guess I automatically want to be close to you if you let me. It feels right."

"Right enough for sex apparently," Sasuke couldn't help but mock.

"Apparently," the other agreed, laughing a bit but stopping almost instantly. His voice then dropped an octave as he made sure he was speaking directly in Sasuke's ear again. "I'm drawn to you in more ways than one. Or did you think that you not having an arm would make a difference in how I see you?"

In spite of himself, Sasuke used his whole willpower in order to not openly shiver at the clear purposeful undertone in those words. Naruto seemed to finally be in the mood for some deeper talking and he had to take advantage of it, not let himself be seduced.

The thought caused him to make a face, and he was glad the man behind him couldn't see it. If anyone would have ever even implied that he could ever feel 'seduced' but his idiot of a friend he would've probably beaten them to a bloody pulp.

"How did you fall in love with Hinata?" He asked instead of commenting, aware of his own cold bluntness and glad that he had sounded as mildly disgusted as he did. "You never really paid much attention to her that I have known of. And don't dismiss it, I have the right to ask questions, Naruto."

Again, Naruto tensed, his energy turning from calm and playful to anxious and uncomfortable.

When the blond leaned back against the rock, Sasuke was ready for the defensive attitude, so he wasn't surprised when both Naruto's hands moved to loosely rest on Sasuke's hips instead, creating a bit of physical propriety now that the issue was Hinata.

Sasuke didn't feel any animosity coming from him, though, just a slight exasperation, so he, too, leaned back more against Naruto's chest, allowing himself to slide down on the ground. Naruto took the chance to lean his chin on the top of his head and sigh.

"You're such a difficult person..." he muttered, not without a bit of annoyance. "The conversation was going so well, too…"

"We'll have to talk about certain things sooner or later, you know that." Sasuke merely said, unshaken.

He could swear he sensed Naruto rolling his eyes.

"Fine," he agreed. "Hinata has been in love with me for a long time, it seems," he started, as if that was literally the last thing he wanted to talk about. "She had confessed to me before, when Pein attacked the village. She almost died for me, too. I didn't really understand what it meant before, and then time passed and I had so much on my mind. There was you, Akatsuki, Itachi and the war and then everything else that kept coming my way. Then, once everything was over, you left after we fought but life moved on and I didn't really think about love or whatever. It wasn't exactly something that actively interested me."

"You didn't think about love with Sakura?" Sasuke inquired, not convinced. After all, Naruto had been in love with her ever since he remembered (or thought that he was, Sasuke's wasn't even sure of the depth of those feelings), so it seemed strange that, after everything, he would not want to pursue her considering how oblivious he had been (and probably still was) to his feelings for Sasuke
himself.

"Sakura-chan is a delicate issue, Sasuke," Naruto huffed, more bitterly than expected. "She has always been in love with you. All these years I have been reminded, over and over again that one simply can't steal a person's heart. I stopped trying to convince myself that we would end up together. And then she started helping me, pushing me towards Hinata and I realized that... she was dumping me for good. She may not realize this, but she has said some really mean things to me that made me feel like an idiot."

At this, Naruto trailed off, needing a bit of time to get himself together, the memory obviously painful for him. "As if I didn't understand what love is. I don't understand where she got her ideologies from, but the message was clear to me, so I played along. I pretended like she was right, like I couldn't see that she was merely making a fool out of me and pushing me out of the way, closing herself off to me and throwing me towards someone else. So she could be with you. Now I understand that, maybe, she did it to keep me away from you, as well. I wonder if she knew about this... about us..."

Naruto was clearly hurt. Sasuke wanted to know what, exactly, Sakura had said to him but at the same time, he didn't want to make Naruto hurt anymore but forcing it out of him, so he didn't ask.

However, this made him feel livid beyond words. He had specifically told Sakura that he had no feelings towards her. He had had no intention of taking her travelling with him and no intention of becoming more than a friend to her. He had made it clear, over and over again. He had no idea that she had been the one to push Naruto and Hinata together.

Why would she have done this? She loved Naruto, he knew it. He could see it in her eyes when she looked at him, he could hear it whenever she spoke to him or of him. Maybe it wasn't the same kind of passionate longing she had for Sasuke himself (an attraction he had still yet to understand) but it was a consistent feeling. They could've easily gotten together and been happy.

This didn't please Sasuke, but he knew that, had this happened, Sakura would still find a way to try and put him in the middle - she was a smart girl, she understood what Naruto meant to him, and wouldn't it be just perfect, for her, to have the two men she loved by her side?

But it was too troublesome for someone like her, too sociably frowned upon, not to mention that Sasuke himself had no physical or emotional interest in her, and this wouldn't change even if Naruto was there. She knew this.

If Sasuke had to be honest with himself, when Sakura had approached him yet again after Naruto got together with Hinata, he had thought that he was being chosen as second best. He felt alone and slightly bitter, regretful of what he had put her through in spite of everything, so he had agreed. They had a deal that, on Sasuke's part, has nothing to do with emotional attachment.

He had thought that, in a way, they were both mourning the loss of what could've been with Naruto.

But it wasn't so. She had pushed Naruto away, towards Hinata, so Naruto would lose focus on both of them. She didn't want Naruto to love her, or to ever realize the potential he could have with Sasuke.

If Naruto noticed Sasuke's sudden anger, he didn't comment on it, but still placed a small, chaste kiss upon Sasuke's head where his chin had rested, as if to placate whatever thoughts he thought he might have, which was of little use. Sasuke was enraged.

"I saw Hinata's heart. I didn't think that anyone in this world could possibly feel so deeply for me," Naruto proceeded, more carefully this time. Sasuke clenched his teeth but refrained from interrupting.
"I mean romantically. I was flattered. I felt compelled to respect those feelings and try to understand them. I guess that, at a certain point, I realized she was the kind of girl who could give me what my parents wanted me to have."

"Which is?" Sasuke asked, not able to keep the chill from his voice.

"Someone who loved me unconditionally," Naruto replied easily, sounding a lot more composed and mature than he probably felt. "Someone who would take care of me, someone pure, gentle; someone I could start a healthy family with."

A gush of unexpectedly cold wind caressed them. Sasuke felt it as if the gods themselves were naturally expressing the bitterness that had taken over him. He knew he had no reason to be angry – he had been the one to ask for an explanation – but he couldn't help the sickening feeling from making his insides churn with disgust.

Naruto was so naïve. So… stupidly blind. Everything was just fucked up and distorted and unbalanced.

He should've been straightforward to Naruto when he had the chance. He should've asked him to follow him, should've asked for his presence. Not only this, he should've voiced out how much he needed Naruto by his side after everything he had gone through. Things would've been different now. Their feelings towards each other would've grown and progressed naturally and all this unbalanced absurdity that had become their lives wouldn't have happened.

Sakura, Hinata, fate… nothing would've been able to interfere.

He should've made his move when he had the chance…

In silence, he put his hand on Naruto's thigh for support and got up, not looking back at his friend, who surely was eyeing him up in questioning as he took a few steps towards the fire, needing more of its heat to help warm up the inescapable chill he was experiencing. For a moment, he thought he was going to be sick he was so angry but managed to keep his shit together and not give anything away.

He stood there, in front of the fire and hugged himself with his single arm, staring at the scorching flames as if mesmerized.

"Sasuke?" Naruto called out hesitantly.

"So you fell in love with how she felt for you and with the idea of what she could give you?" Sasuke said, scornfully casual, unblinking.

"She's a wonderful, beautiful girl, Sasuke, that's not all there is to it," Naruto defended in a murmur.

"Pfft…" Sasuke spat, in spite of himself. "What else is there, then?"

Behind him, he could sense the other male getting to his feet.

"If you're going to be a bastard about this I'm not talking about her anymore," Naruto retorted from his position, not moving to come closer or walk away.

"Not that I want you to, anyway," Sasuke replied, shrugging his shoulders. "I already got my answer."

"You're angry again," Naruto pointed out, sounding both exasperated and confused now. "And
smug. I don't get you."

When Sasuke didn't reply, Naruto's energy became considerably more restless but he did nothing to pressure him. Thankfully, he had been smart enough to realize how dangerous the ground they were stepping on had become.

"When I think about all the things I've done to you in the past, I understand that I have no right to be angry at you, no matter what," Sasuke finally said, forcing himself to keep his tone collected now. "If I am angry, you should pay me no mind."

"I care about your feelings!" Naruto said firmly, taking a few small but brave steps towards his friend until he was standing behind him, but at a safe distance. "You do have the right to be angry at me if it's my fault. And since I know it's my fault, we have to work things through to fix it. That's why we're here. That's why I wanted to be with you in the first place."

This time, Sasuke actually laughed but it had no joy in it. He looked over his shoulder at Naruto's pleading blue eyes that shone with so many things he couldn't bear to interpret at the moment.

"I'm not angry, idiot," he whispered. "I'm just fucking frustrated. I'm frustrated at us. At how things have been going between us and yet you tell me to not ask questions and it drives me crazy. I have the right to understand things, Naruto, because everything is fucked up. Everything between us since we fought is fucked up"

"I know." Naruto admitted, looking to the side with a crestfallen expression. "I'm sorry."

"Don't fucking apologize," Sasuke turned to him with a heavy frown, hugging himself tighter as if it could give him some sort of extraordinary strength or ability to deal with this kind of emotional disturbance he didn't want in the first place. "I just wonder if you even understand the parallels between what you do with your girlfriend and what you do with me. Fuck, you can't possibly be that oblivious."

At this, even in the dim illumination provided by the bonfire, Naruto blushed and closed his mouth tightly. Sasuke watched him contemplatively, wondering if the other would even have an answer for him or if he'd just play dumb again.

He didn't know how much longer he could take being with his best friend the way they were and pretending it wasn't a big deal. It was killing him. Naruto knew him like no-one else did, so he had to know this, even if he chose to ignore it.

"I'm not stupid, I do see the parallels," Naruto ended up saying, looking up at Sasuke as if intimidated by his own confession. His fists clenched at his sides. "I know that we do stuff that only lovers are supposed to do together. I know I'm not supposed to be like this with you when I have a girlfriend back home, waiting for me." His expression changed then, to one of despair and longing, his eyes huge and lost, haunted, and Sasuke found that he couldn't speak.

As expected, Naruto could be painfully honest, but no matter how much Sasuke thought he was ready for it, it always took him off guard.

"I understand, Sasuke, that I shouldn't want to have you in ways that I definitely do. I know my feelings for you go beyond friendship. I always did," Naruto kept on saying, taking yet another step towards him, voice filled with meaning. "After all, we're opposite sides of the same complimentary force. But it's so deep I'm scared of even thinking about it. Also, before, I didn't see that this between us was possible; that we could be like this. That you may want it, too. Up until I kissed you that night I had never considered this to be an option."
With mouth partially open, Sasuke watched as Naruto took a steadying breath and reached out to him with his left hand, the tips of his fingers brushing against his cheek, wistfully but with a trace of hesitance. The fingers were a bit sweaty and they shook, almost unperceptively.

"It's not something seen every day, two guys together," he whispered. "I didn't understand how I felt for you, so I just dropped it. Those feelings were devastating, and they still are. They consume me and I just... I don't know what to do with myself." Sasuke couldn't help but sigh as the hand cupped his face now, but his eyes were hard, unblinking as they stared into Naruto's equally attentive ones. "I thought Hinata was my dead end, the last step of my love life. I didn't think we'd ever come down to this."

"I get that," Sasuke acknowledged, grabbing for Naruto's wrist. "But your confusion brought us here. And you screwed up. By not seeing it, you just..."

"You have Sakura-chan, too!" Naruto hissed, shaking his head from side to side as he quickly moved his hand to the back of Sasuke's head, gripping at the hair there and forcefully bringing their faces so close their noses touched, the action sending jolts of adrenaline and defensive awareness throughout Sasuke's body. So Naruto was on edge, too. Good. "You screwed up, too! How would you deal with this if..."

"Sakura is of no concern to you," Sasuke grunted back defiantly, feeling his anger simmering again. His anger wasn't directed at his friend, though, not all of it. "For you I'd dump her in a fucking heartbeat!"

Naruto groaned in exasperation. "That's so heartless!"

"That's me being honest with myself," Sasuke hissed, gripping at Naruto's elbow with force. The proximity of their faces, the way their breaths mingled between them made him feel dizzy, hot and desperate for that something more he knew it was now his. After all, they were confessing a lot of things to each other they had never voiced before. "That's me not settling for second best!"

Naruto groaned once more before breaking the distance between them and crushing their mouths together, far too easily lured by Sasuke's energy, as per usual, hands releasing Sasuke's hair to rest on his shoulders, gripping the fabric there for dear life.

Sasuke all but released a small, anguished noise with the back of his throat, responding for a while, allowing Naruto's tongue entrance and eagerly tasting everything given to him as he revelled in the intensity given.

Again, and again, he just wanted to drown, but found that the suffocating feeling was unbearable.

Quickly, he regained his wit and nimbly moved his forearm so it was pressing against Naruto's jugular and violently pushing him away, causing the other male to stumble backwards a bit, and barely missing stepping on the fire.

Naruto was panting as he stared at him intensely, a hand coming up to feel his neck. Sasuke frowned dangerously, unconsciously licking at his lips and forcing his own mind to not give into the raw sentimental lust that made him want to tackle the man in front of him.

"What can I do..." he said breathlessly, tone smooth and almost poisonous. "...to make you understand what I want, Naruto?"

"I understand it better than you think," Naruto said as he ran a distressed hand through his messy hair. "Don't you get it? I can't think about it too deeply right now! I know you want answers and you
want me to make decisions and come to conclusions, but if I do it right now I'll just feel guilty for Hinata's sake. And for Sakura-chan's sake. They don't deserve it." He sighed, his eyes pleading – a look Sasuke was becoming tired of seeing. "I don't want that. I don't want guilt to stop me from giving you everything you deserve and from having what I want from you. I just want to keep going forward, with you. I want so much. If I start thinking about stuff at this point I won't be able to do it."

Not being able to tell if this made him even angrier or just wretched, Sasuke swallowed hard, his stomach in knots. His heart ached and he didn't know what to do about it. It made him weak, it gave him strength, but it felt terrible and he wanted to get rid of it. He didn't know what to do anymore, yet he knew it was something he had to endure.

He deserved it all and he had to take it. No happiness would ever come to him without a huge amount of pain first, and he had come to understand and accept it all too well. It was his fate, it was what he would have to go through, over and over again to redeem himself for all the sins he had committed.

He felt like a child, constantly seeking for immediate answers, for attention, for results, selfishly demanding things he had no right to demand.

He had no right, when it was his fault as much as it was Naruto's. He was just as naïve, just as stubborn and just as complicated. Only Naruto had other bonds, other people he loved while Sasuke had no-one. It was his obligation to understand. It wasn't in his right to demand things after everything he had done.

"I can't deal with you right now…" Sasuke retorted coldly, turning his back to his companion with every intention of leaving him there for a while. Taking a much needed walk to cool off was the only sensible thing to do at the moment, and he was seriously regretting ever having chosen to talk to Naruto about those kinds of things – they had never really gotten along with words alone, so he should've already known better in spite of their older age.

Naruto moved quietly at an impressive speed, going to him again and preventing him from taking another step as his arms surrounded him by the waist in an iron-like grip.

"You won't fucking walk away from me ever again, Uchiha…" Naruto hissed in his ear, fury evident in his quivering voice.

Sasuke wanted to fight, letting out a menacing sound as his muscles clenched up defensively, but Naruto was quick to press his felt hand flat against his abs before moving it lower, calloused fingers brushing the waistband of his black briefs in a clear warning of what he was intent on doing.

"I don't know what you've done to me, Sasuke," the blond whispered, his breath hot and uneven against the side of his neck. "But I'm wanting to find out. I'm wanting to understand why you make me feel like I have no control over myself when I'm around you and yet, at the same time, know exactly what I want in this very moment and who I am when it comes to you."

Sasuke released growl of annoyance that ended up sounding impatient. How was it possible for Naruto to be so insightful but also so stupid?

No, he wasn't stupid, Sasuke vaguely considered, as Naruto mouthed the back of his ear hungrily, hand not being shy in sneaking its way inside his briefs to tease at his groin, skillfully avoiding his forming erection but still running the tips of his fingers at the bit of pubic hair there. It was enough to have Sasuke squirming a bit in irritation, teeth biting down hard on his lower lip as his arm reached behind him to grasp hard at hairs of Naruto's head, demanding for more as he closed his eyes, panting as the rush of adrenaline from the ministrations and his previous anger did nothing to give
him enough willpower to fight it.

Naruto knew what was going on between them, but was too much of a good person to admit to it at this point. He shut his own thoughts down to push his guilt away, his own fear. Sasuke could smell it all over him – that panic that emanated from him, because he was overwhelmed but how much they felt for each other when they were together. The anger, the resentment, the envy, the longing, the frustration, the love, the hatred…. All of them feelings that had been built over years and years of watching each other, wanting to reach out to the other and not knowing how to do so to the point where they had almost killed each other.

Sasuke understood that fear all too well – after all, he felt it, too. Those feelings were unhealthy, so all over the place he had no idea how the hell he was even sane. They were all consuming, violent, and demanding. They were everything to him.

But maybe it was because they were both so fucked up that it all made so much sense. Maybe this was why they needed each other so much and why no-one else seemed to match that.

Naruto was his. Everything of Naruto was his, but this wasn't something Naruto had fully realized or accepted yet. He felt it, too, just as Sasuke himself did, but didn't know how to interpret it and how to respond to it like he should. He wasn't intimidated by Sasuke, but by their feelings.

"You fucking idiot…" Sasuke hissed, directing Naruto's head towards his shoulder with a rough pull of his hair to match Naruto's action, making the other automatically indulge him and push the collar of his sweater to the side with his free hand and nibble hungrily, viciously on the appealing expanse of skin before him. "You just keep saying useless stuff. I fucking hate it…"

"I'm just being honest," Naruto breathed, licking at the abused skin and pressing himself more to Sasuke's back, so much so that he could feel the other's arousal firmly placed between his ass cheeks while his other hand daringly cupped his genitals.

Fuck.

"Fuck you," Sasuke spat. Turning around to face Naruto, he was the one kissing him now with a passion that could only be matched by the lips in front of him.

As always, Sasuke knew that he was hopeless – they both were – as the lines between them gradually faded until they were inexistent. He needed out, away from Naruto so he could breathe, so the ache could go away, even if just a little, and yet, that need seemed frivolous and meaningless when compared with how much he craved that.

And Naruto knew it. He always did because he needed the exact same thing. Naruto knew him, knew when to read between the lines.

Weighted by the intensity, somehow they both ended up stumbling and falling to the ground with a muffled noise of complaint, Naruto on his rear, Sasuke immediately taking advantage to straddle his hips, mouths still glued together meeting over and over again clumsily, tongues willing to devour.

The desire for contact, for release was powerful and all-consuming. Sasuke surrounded Naruto by his neck, pressing himself more to him in need for some friction, but the other male was frantically struggling with Sasuke's sweater. More out of impatience than anything else, Sasuke broke the kiss and lifted his arm up so Naruto could remove the garment as he wanted, and once it was off and thrown to the side, their lips automatically found each other again as Naruto's hands ran all over the body in front in him as if scared that it might disappear without warning.
Sasuke relished in the possessive display of affection, shifting more so he was sitting directly over Naruto's hips and so his ass was directly over Naruto's hardness and his own cock could rub against the other male's solid belly. His mind was a mess and he felt no shyness in moving his hips for more contact, immensely satisfied by the pleasure it gave him and by Naruto's low moan of approval.

"Shit…"

Before he could move more, though, he found himself being efficiently flipped over so he was the one on the bottom now, lying on his back over the stony ground that would surely scratch him up pretty badly. It was terribly uncomfortable, but Naruto was on top of him, now, between his thighs and all he cared about was how the man over him was pushing his underwear down to free his cock. Sasuke desperately tried to free his own erection as well in spite of how the position didn't allow him a lot of space to move.

He caught a glimpse of Naruto's sky blue eyes, filled with lust, longing and despair before his lips were captured again and the other's heavy body fell upon his with its heavenly weight, mercilessly joining their slippery erections together, both elbows on the ground on either side of Sasuke's head and simply thrusting.

The needy grunt that left Sasuke's throat made Naruto moan indecorously, moving against him faster, relentlessly. The contact hurt – it was rough, blissful and didn't seem nearly enough, so Sasuke all but would his legs around Naruto's torso, urging him on, using his thighs to move in a senseless tempo with the other, as his hand was pressed against the back of Naruto's hand, his touch oddly gentle considering the violent body language they were using.

Like animals in heat, they rutted as if the earth might swallow them whole, panting against each other, bodies sliding, hard and slippery against each other from recently formed sweat, their pre-cum mixing together as their cocks rubbed in the most delicious and avid of ways.

Naruto broke the kiss for a while so he could move his mouth to Sasuke's left shoulder. He kissed it several times, also a surprisingly gentle action considering how wildly they were behaving, then kissed lower, to the remains of Sasuke's arm. He kissed it as if it was something precious, as if to offer some kind of reassurance, but there was a devoted sadness to it that made Sasuke's breath catch inside his chest and his balls tighten with his upcoming orgasm. He swallowed a frustrated sob and felt the same restrained emotion coming from the other as he came all over himself and Naruto with a far too loud set of moaned curses, his limbs quivering from the sheer physical force of it and the emotional strain he had been experiencing for the last hour.

Naruto pulled away slightly to brace himself with his hands on the ground now, eyes lost but abnormally focused as they stared deeply into Sasuke's, his movements as frantic and desperate as ever. In awe, Sasuke stared as Naruto also came with lips slightly parted so a soft grunt could leave them, a shudder raking his body when his seed left him, eyes lever leaving the dark ones below him as if in fear that he might break if he looked away.

As Naruto's body came to stop, Sasuke couldn't even have the strength to feel anything but amazed, satiated and so, so very tired.

Both breathing hard, they stared at each other for a long time, neither saying anything nor daring to move.

Then, Naruto allowed himself to fall on top of Sasuke with his head over his chest, uncaring of the mess between them. Looking up at the starry sky above him, Sasuke could do nothing but hold him with his single arm, his thighs lowering so he could place his feet on the ground.
He felt empty all of a sudden, yet he knew he had acquired at least a little bit of what he wanted. He was torn between relief and anguish, anger and happiness.

Everything was fucked up.

"Don't hate me," Naruto begged, quietly, sounding vulnerable. "I couldn't stand it if you hated me at this point."

Sasuke sighed.

"I don't hate you," he said, in a bland way. "I just wish you were simpler to deal with."

"Right now, you're my best friend, my family and my lover," Naruto muttered. "When the time comes we'll talk about it again and I'll have my answer for you." He hugged Sasuke back as much as he could, swallowing hard. "You just need to understand that this is huge turn for me. It's my whole life, the decisions I've made, my goals, my future… everything's at stake here. So many things would change. So… please, just wait for me, Sasuke."

Ah, yes. Of course. The last cruel card, the one that would give him hope for what might never come to be.

How cruel and selfish. But then again… hadn't they both been selfish for each other ever since the very beginning?

Wasn't Sasuke being selfish right now, in wanting Naruto to leave everything for him after all he had put him through? After trying to kill him several times?

"That's all I ever seem to do," Sasuke whispered, closing his eyes.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

This chapter might come off as a bit confusing? It’s all over the place, I think, just like their feelings. They basically confess a lot of things to each other but not as straightforwardly as they probably should. There’s a lot of anger and sadness but also hope and a new light. Things will definitely be a bit different between them from here on.

Gaara will definitely make an appearance next, and he might have some insightful things to tell them :)

Anyway, I hope you liked the chapter! Happy belated Valentine’s Day, everyone!
To Love Him

Chapter Notes

This is a looooong and boring chapter. Trust me, it really is. Like, really. But I needed to write it anyway because I love Gaara and I needed Sasuke and Naruto to talk about their feelings and fears and whatever to someone else. So… I hope you can reach the end of the chapter without falling asleep.

Not betaed! Forgive the typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

From Which We'll Rise

Part VI: To Love Him

Gaara tapped his pen on the surface of his desk, patiently waiting for the announced arrival of his two friends, for a while choosing to neglect the huge pile of papers beside him.

While he had – rather eagerly – been waiting for the usual visit from the Uchiha, when Sasuke had sent him a message letting him know he was on his way, he had not expected for him to bring company; least of all that said company was a certain blond Shinobi.

Not that he wasn't more than glad to see Naruto – he had missed him dearly and regretted not being able to visit Konoha more often, but the world was slowly but consistently entering a time of peacefulness that required few meetings between nations, and Hatake Kakashi kept his most precious underlings under his wing, sending more inexperienced Shinobi on small missions to Suna.

However, after Sasuke's first shocking visit on his own that Gaara had given up on expecting Naruto's presence by his side – something he had to admit to have surprised him immensely.

If there was one thing in the world that had always fascinated him was the relationship between those two.

For different reasons, he had distinct bonds with both Sasuke and Naruto. What connected him to Naruto was in no way similar to what had caused him to empathise with Sasuke, and yet, he had come to cherish them both.

He knew he had made mistakes when it came to Sasuke, just as Sasuke himself had, before, failed to see that Gaara was trying to reach out to him and make him see reason.

But who had Gaara been back then to talk to the Uchiha about anything at all? More importantly, what did he even know about either him or Naruto to meddle in the way he had?

When he had talked to Naruto about Sasuke and what would make him a good friend to him, he knew by Naruto's rejection that he had made a mistake that could've potentially ruined their friendship. No only this, but in that moment, he understood exactly who was Uchiha Sasuke in the eyes of Uzumaki Naruto.
In that moment, there were a lot of things that he had come to realize at the same time and that, no matter what, there was no way he or anybody else could ever come in between them. Whatever had to happen, would happen, and there was nothing he could possibly do about it.

So he relaxed and trusted that, in the end, everything between those two would be fixed.

That 'fixing' almost got the both of them killed.

Naruto had wanted to save Sasuke on his own, so Gaara had trusted that he would pull it off as he always did, but there was a part of himself that forced him to embrace the idea that they both might end up killing each other because…

In the end, he didn't understand them at all. He knew Naruto's longing well, but how far it went was a mystery to him. And this had scared him.

Sasuke had been a blank page to him until Gaara had seen him and Naruto fight together during the war.

Seeing them like that made him understand that there were things time could never erase. Just as if they had never been apart, they were like two halves of the same whole, coming together and fitting perfectly.

Some duos took years to reach that kind of physical and psychological coordination and yet, those two fought as comrades as if it was as easy as breathing. Gaara was sure it felt to them like a second nature.

There was no doubt that he had underestimated them.

Sighing, Gaara closed his eyes. To him, and maybe to a lot of people as well, after Sasuke had been forgiven, it had been clear what would become of those two, eventually.

Gaara had been shocked when he visited them at the Konoha hospital and saw what they had done to each other after fighting and completely devastating the Valley of the End, but the shock came solely from the fact that there was no cold hatred in Sasuke's eyes anymore and that Naruto seemed to be gleaming with joy.

Naruto had done it. He had saved the person he had chased after for so long. His precious person was, once again, by his side.

His journey, his efforts, his pain… it had all been worth it.

Still, when a few months later Sasuke had appeared at Gaara's door step, repentant but wrecked, he knew that things hadn't turned out as expected.

He and Sasuke had made peace and talked about many things. Sasuke wouldn't ask for many things and refrained from asking questions. He'd never ask about Naruto, but Gaara would tell him as much as he knew all the same and the other would listen. It would bring a smile to his lips and a pain to his eyes Gaara had comprehended far too well.

Gaara understood that, through it all, those two had felt the same way towards each other all along.

Silently, Sasuke acknowledged what Gaara knew, but they didn't openly talk about it.

*I know he's too blind to see it, Sasuke had said, at one point. But I thought that, after all the things he said to me, that he'd at least want to keep reaching out for me like has always done. But he stayed*
behind this time. Just when I needed him the most, he stayed behind.

Sasuke was hurt, but his pride was still intact and he was still strong. Gaara knew better than to intervene or offer some kind of consolation, even if he felt for Sasuke – but he seemed to think that this was merely the universe working to punish him for all the sins he had committed.

But Naruto was the kind of person who defied even the laws of the universe. The Naruto he knew would never let go of the person he had longed for with everything he had.

Gaara didn't understand what went wrong between them this time, but it wasn't his place to give tips or make assumptions. It was clear that they lacked some serious normal communication skills, but who was he to talk about this when it was still hard for him to express his feelings and emotions freely? He was still as wrecked as Sasuke was. He wasn't like Naruto. Neither of them were.

A knock on the office's door woke him up from his thoughts. "Yes," he said, standing just as his older sister Temari was opening the door, a crooked smile on her lips.

"They're here," she said, trying to hide the fondness in her voice and stepping aside to let the two men behind her step inside the office.

Naruto came in first, a huge grin on his face, Sasuke behind him, as serious as always.

Raking his eyes quickly over the two of them, he was able to confirm that, indeed, they weren't on a mission together but merely traveling. By the poor state of their dusty, almost rustic clothes, he guessed they had spent a while at some undeveloped village. They didn't bring many possessions with them, just a large satchel each. Naruto was tall and looked a lot more mature, his features having become sharper and more pronounced but no less charming. His skin was considerably darker than he remembered, probably from traveling the desert for a few days, and Sasuke himself looked tanner than normal. Apart from the obvious dirt in them, they both looked exceptionally healthy. Sasuke still didn't have his arm back, which was something Gaara knew he should probably get used to but that his rational mind had yet to accept.

"Gaara!" the blond greeted loudly, eyes shining with genuine happiness, opening his arms wide just as Gaara was walking around his desk and making his way to him. With a small smile, the Kazekage opened his own arms and accepted the strong hug.

"It's wonderful to see you, my friend," Gaara said softly when they pulled away, placing both his hands over Naruto's shoulders and giving them a squeeze. "It's been far too long."

"Yeah, it feels like it's been forever since the last time I've seen you!" Naruto said, still beaming with that childish joy that, Gaara hoped, would never leave him. "You look great!"

"Thank you; so do you," Gaara said. He had missed Naruto and couldn't wait to spend a bit of time with him, but cordialities came first. He turned to Sasuke, whose sharp eyes looked at him with acknowledgement. They softened for a second, and he extended his right hand, which Gaara wasted to time in grabbing in a tight hold.

"Uchiha," he muttered gently, as they shook hands. "How have you been?"

"As well as I possibly can," Sasuke answered easily, with a tiny smirk that wasn't very genuine, letting Gaara know that something wasn't completely right with him. "We were nearby, so I thought we could drop by. I hope our visit isn't inconvenient."

"It's never inconvenient, you already should know that," Gaara dismissed, sharing a meaningful look with Sasuke to silently tell him that he had perceived his mood. Whatever was upsetting him, he
wanted to know, even if all he could do for Sasuke, in the end, was to lend him his ear.

Sasuke's fingers tightened around his hand before releasing it. "Thank you, Kazekage-sama."

"I was so shocked when Sasuke told me he usually comes to visit you!" Naruto said happily, looking from one to the other curiously, completely missing the personal interaction between the two.

"Yes, he's already part of the furniture, as they say," Gaara explained calmly. "Still, considering the war and past issues, there's still hesitation towards him from a few people, so it's good that he announces his arrival so we can send someone to pick him up on my part to avoid unnecessary commotion."

"Yeah, that's kind of understandable," Naruto said, with a nod, looking sideways at his friend, who rolled his eyes. "Still sucks, though. I was just telling Temari that we've been waiting for hours at the entrance for her to pick us up!"

"You probably didn't even wait a full hour!" Temari retorted, offended.

"Well, we've been traveling in the sun for days, it's obvious that waiting even five minutes would feel like an eternity!" Naruto defended.

"Would you shut up already?" Sasuke hissed, elbowing his friend's side roughly, making him release a grunt.

"Hey!"

"We have arranged for two separate rooms here in the residence," Gaara interrupted smoothly, watching with interest the way Naruto snapped back to attention. "They are side by side and just a few rooms down the hall from mine. I hope this isn't inconvenient?"

"Ah, not at all!" Naruto assured him with a wave of his hand, but there was a strained twitch to his smile that gave away his displeasure.

"Well, I have a very busy schedule, but Temari will take you to your rooms so you can clean up and get some rest," Gaara said, thinking it best to ignore it. "If you're both up to it we can all have dinner together to catch up."

Naruto's smile grew radiant again. "Sounds like a plan!" he said in a far too loud voice that had Sasuke scowling.

Gaara smiled back. It seemed like things would be interesting around Suna for a while.

000

One of the watch guards had written in his report that he had seen Uzumaki Naruto sneaking inside Uchiha Sasuke's bedroom in the middle of the night and not leaving until early in the morning.

Holding the scroll in front of him, Gaara's eyes stared unblinkingly at the report. Then, he calmly tore it to pieces before throwing it to the garbage can. He'd have to burn it as soon as possible.

This could mean many things and nothing at all, but his intuition told him enough.

Things were definitely becoming interesting, the question was: ultimately, what would it lead to?

On the second night, reports said that Naruto had tried sneaking inside again but had found Sasuke's door locked and the same had happened for two more nights.
Gaara didn’t know whether to be amused or just feel for both of them.

Naruto liked exploring the village while Sasuke enjoyed keeping to himself and spending hours on end in the library. Naruto would always complain that Sasuke wouldn’t spend time with him, but considering for how many days or weeks they had already spent in each other's company, Gaara could certainly understand the Uchiha’s need for some much needed distance. His mere face screamed for a bit of emotional peace, and in a way, Gaara, was glad that Suna could at least provide him something probably more important to him than the physical comfort.

Either Temari or Kankuro would often spend time with the blond so he wouldn't get bored, but unsurprisingly, he would make acquaintances easily and find something to entertain himself with quickly enough, either by helping old ladies carry their bags or stopping to play with children, among other things. The party was always his, and the fact that he was now a worldwide known hero made him quite the attraction, especially amongst the ladies and the younger population.

Gaara was happy for him. Naruto deserved every bit of love and recognition he was receiving after how much he had fought and struggled to achieve. He knew Naruto revelled in this kind of attention even though it was clear that it wore him out even almost three years later.

Gaara regretted not having nearly enough time as he wished he did to socialize more with him, but he guessed the fitting time would come.

He was more eager to talk to Sasuke first because he knew he’d get more answers with fewer words.

Sasuke was someone who wore an iron mask over his feelings. Sometimes, it was hard to understand what kind of mood he was in, but Gaara prided himself to have become intimate with him enough to be able to at least understand the subtle undertones.

And Sasuke was in pain, exhausted like he had never seen him and emotionally drained. From most people he succeeded in hiding this behind his cold, stoic demeanour, and there was always something in his nonchalant beauty that managed to infatuate the eye and block out any kind of deeper observation of him. He supposed Sasuke used it to his advantage.

But someone like Gaara saw through him easily. After all, he knew emotional pain well.

Just as he saw this in Sasuke, he saw it the strained way Naruto smiled more often than not.

Whenever Gaara caught glimpse of the blond on the streets below from the window of his office, there was always a strange loneliness in his eyes, which always seemed to unconsciously search for something – more specifically someone – in the crowds.

It had always been like this, Gaara considered. Naruto had always been surrounded by people, warming his way into their hearts, changing them, changing their lives, and yet, his mind had always been focused on his target, and it had always been said target that had fuelled his determination.

Even now, after everything, he still looked ahead, way past beyond the people around him, way past their love and recognition and automatically crave for that single gaze upon him, for that single nod of approval that came from just one individual.

And when Sasuke left the confines of his mind and decided to leave his studies and his solitude to go to Naruto so they could take walks around Suna, the blond’s smile grew radiant. Gaara was sure he had never seen Naruto smile quite like that.
Having the two dine with him every night was a personal indulgence Gaara demanded and that neither refused. Naruto would do most of the talking while the other two intervened once in a while, and it was clear that this was when he felt the happiest during the day. He babbled on and on and on and was constantly seeking for Sasuke's input and for Gaara's attention.

Naruto would tell him about Konoha, about how the people he knew were doing and about Kakashi as Hokage. Then, he and Sasuke would talk about their journey, leaving the details of how and why, exactly, they had come to travel together after so long out of the way, meaning that the topic was a fragile one, so Gaara knew better than to ask questions.

Also, Naruto never talked about her. But Gaara knew. Everybody did, even if the blond wasn't aware of it.

Sometimes, Sasuke and Naruto would look at each other from across the table for a few seconds in the middle of a conversation and the air would become heavy, charged with an energy Gaara didn't know how to interpret but that would always make him feel like this was something he wasn't supposed to witness.

In times like these, he would feel terribly lonely.

000

On his way from his office to his room in the middle of the night after working late, Gaara couldn't help but notice Naruto's voice coming from Sasuke's room. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, of course, but still found himself coming to a halt in front of the door. He wasn't a naturally curious person by nature, but there was something in the rustling of clothes and raged breathing coming from the inside of the room that kept him rooted to the spot.

When an obvious muffled moan echoed in the hallways he felt his throat run dry with the recognition of it coming from Sasuke.

"Fuck…" It was Naruto speaking this time, or better yet, he was clearly panting. "Fuck, I missed this so much… you're such a fucking bastard for doing this to me…"

As if the shock had made him apathetic, Gaara stared at the door, unable to move.

He had always expected that something like this would happen between them. Of course, he had suspected this outcome considering Naruto's travels to his friend's room, but to know it in your mind and to actually 'be witness' was something completely different.

"Shut up," Sasuke hissed with a grunt that sounded both pleasured and highly annoyed. "I'm close…"

"Me, too…" Naruto breathed. "Ah… faster… don't stop…"

Many feelings fell upon Gaara, then – longing, embarrassment, sadness, anger, happiness, loss – but he didn't know what to do with them or who to blame. He didn't even understand if these feelings were directed at Naruto, Sasuke or at himself, or if everything he was feeling wasn't directed at them but existed for them.

"You're so…" Naruto mumbled, sounding lost and helpless and just plain lost and it tore at Gaara's heart. "I want… fuck, just come here…"

"What do you want?" Sasuke breathed, demandingly but also with a hidden gentles unlike anything Gaara had ever heard from him. "Tell me, Naruto…"
Naruto whispered a breathless reply that Gaara couldn't make out.

There was no point in trying to figure things out, he concluded, composing himself quickly. This only proved that there were things he was far from understanding and that those two had finally (and unfortunately) entered a territory of their relationship that was very, very dangerous. Even he, who knew nothing, could see it.

The wet noises. The obvious kisses, the sounds, the moans… all of it fast, intense and desperate – Gaara could feel it in his body without even seeing it.

Unnecessarily fixing his clothes, he made his way to his room where a restless night awaited him.

In the middle of the following night, he found Sasuke on the rooftop of the Kazekage Residence near the rail, the sleeve of his dark blue sweater where his arm should be billowing gently in the nightly wind. Gaara had no doubt that he had sensed his approach, and yet, he didn't move as he got closer, only tensing up slightly as a blanket was placed over his shoulders.

He looked at him as Garra moved to his side and placed his hands on the rail – close but not enough to touch – muttering a soft "Thank you" and wrapping the fabric more around himself.

They both looked down at the sleeping streets of Suna in companionable silence. It wasn't cold outside, but the breeze wasn't exactly warm either, so Gaara was glad that he had brought his thicker robes with him.

Sasuke's distress was obvious, and yet, when Gaara eyed him, he was still looking at the scenery in front of him with an inscrutable expression.

"Can't sleep?" Gaara inquired carefully.

"No," Sasuke replied. To Gaara surprise, he added "He's just sprawled all over the bed anyway and I don't really feel like kicking him out."

Then, Sasuke released a small, bitter chuckle.

"You know," he started, sounding almost amused. "I am at a point where I have no idea what I'm doing anymore."

It was easy to understand that Sasuke was giving him an indirect hint that he was aware of Gaara's knowledge of what was going on between him and Naruto. Relief washed over him as well as gratitude. Before approaching Sasuke he hadn't realized how much he needed to be a part of this, but now he did, and on a personal level he wasn't very comfortable thinking about just yet. The fact that Sasuke was welcoming him, even if from a distance, made him feel strangely happy.

"You are simply doing what your heart tells you to," Gaara muttered, not bothering to deny his knowledge. "And so is he. Surely both of you have made mistakes and will continue to do so because you still have much to learn, but that doesn't mean either of you is wrong."

Sasuke sighed. "I wonder about that," he whispered, closing his eyes as the breeze caressed his face and ruffled his hair. "Sometimes, I wonder about why I allowed myself to let things go this far to be where we are now. I wonder why I'm always indulging the both of us when I know that, no matter what…"

He stopped himself, unspoken words that Gaara could only guess left hanging in the air between
them. He didn't want to intrude too much, but he understood it all too well even without knowing the whole story. Sasuke's and Naruto's feelings for each other spoke to him loudly.

They wanted each other but didn't even know how to begin something together – something with a future. Sasuke still harboured a strong resentment towards Konoha and had no intentions of actually going back there for good while Naruto's dream was to protect it and become Hokage.

"It overwhelms me..." Sasuke whispered. "... how much the thought of him hurting and lacking what he wants scares me. I get mad at this, and yet, I can't turn away from this kind of thought. The closer he gets the more it haunts me."

Staring at him intently, Gaara could see the sadness behind those impassive, strong eyes and it tore at him. Things could be simple, yet they weren't because the two were just opposites. They complemented each other in the most fascinating of ways, but their ideals and the way they went about things was very different.

Gaara knew nothing, he was aware of that. But if there was one thing he knew was that, no matter how things had turned out, for Naruto, it had always been Sasuke. Obliviously, blindly, passionately, he had always reached out for him.

And, as Gaara had come to learn in these last few years, the other way around had been no different. But they were still re-connecting after so many years apart, and after so long of only being able to communicate through violence, doing it differently was throwing them off balance.

Also, relating to each other in such a physical, intimate way when they already had exterior forces to make them hesitate didn't help.

"What he wants, what he needs and what he lacks..." Gaara muttered, choosing his words carefully. "You can't be the one to decide it."

Sasuke snorted. "If that's what you think..."

Gaara frowned at him. "Naruto has always acted with his goals in mind. He never made mistakes, he just kept moving onwards, taking with him the things that crossed his path. With the Hyuuga girl, it's the same thing. It's how he thinks and it's how he moves. One goal at the time, one step at the time. It's all an automatic response to what he has settled for himself and what he thinks others expected of him." Again, Sasuke looked away. "You're the only thing in his life that side tracks him right now. It's only natural that he's feeling lost. Everything he thought he knew and understood about himself and his relationship with you has taken a violent turn. He's panicking."

"I know that."

"He chased you for years," Gaara couldn't help but press on, realizing that he was being persistent. "Yes, he made other friends and other bonds. But he never forgot about you. If he is where he is today, and if he's as strong as he is it's because of you. He was willing to die for you and with you. He lost his arm. You can't underestimate that."

"Gaara, please." Sighing, Sasuke rubbed at his eyes tiredly. "I know, better than anyone else, how he feels about me. There are things no-one in this world or the other will ever understand. How I feel for him or how he feels for me... why, and how... no-one knows but us."

"I can see that clearly."

"I know he knows it, too," Sasuke retorted with a scowl. "But he's not selfish like me. He may be
acting selfish now, away from everything he knows, naively reaching out for me in this bubble he's been living in. But when the bubble bursts, he'll be Naruto of Konoha and I will be Uchiha Sasuke, the criminal."

Blinking up at him, the Kazekage was speechless for a few seconds, unable to process Sasuke's train of thought.

"Why can't you two just be Naruto and Sasuke, fighting together for the same ideals?" he asked simply. "It doesn't always have to be either black or white."

"But it does," the other male insisted irritably. "We have the same dreams but different visions on how to achieve them. We are like night and day after all. We are not similar in any way, Gaara."

Oh, so that's what he meant.

"But you complement each other perfectly," Gaara pointed out. "You can't run away from who you are and neither can he. You can't run away from something you have both been wanting for so long."

"What we wanted…" Sasuke repeated, narrowing his eyes in annoyance.

"Love," Gaara said, exasperated. "Do you know how many people crave for that? Do you know how many people would kill to have that?"

The wind blew harder around them as they stared intently at each other. Dark eyes watched Gaara's features for a while, either assessing him or his words, he didn't know.

When he spoke, he sounded sarcastic and gently condescending. "Surely you don't know what 'love' means to someone like me, an Uchiha."

In spite of himself, Gaara sighed. Sasuke was a bright man, yet far too difficult for his own good.

"You're right, I don't," he acknowledged. "I can't give you any kind of advice, nor can I tell you what's best for either of you." He took a step closer to the other man, glad when he didn't budge. "But I've seen Naruto's struggle to get to you. I see you hurting right now. I know nothing of love or even of the relationship between you two, but I can see clearly that what you two have is not something seen often."

Finding himself standing in front of Sasuke, Gaara reached out to absently arrange the blanket over the other's shoulders that had fallen a bit loose. "Don't find chains where there are none. Just grab for what's rightfully yours because if you don't… I know you'll both regret it."

For a few seconds, they were both silent as Gaara's hands worked slowly. Once the blanket was safely wrapped around Sasuke's form again, Gaara looked up into dark eyes that had softened but gleamed with some sort of realization.

"You are interesting person, Kazekage-sama," he said quietly. When Gaara's hands lingered a bit more than necessary on the fabric, the corner of his mouth quirked upwards slightly. "So strangely selfless."

"I don't know what you mean," Gaara said, as he tilted his chin up proudly and took a step back to establish a decent distance between them once more. "It's not a secret that I deeply care about the both of you."

"I suppose it's not," Sasuke conceded, nodding his head once.
They stared at each other for a while, silent comprehension passing between them. Sasuke's gaze was simple but firm and it made Gaara think about things he knew he shouldn't be thinking about, but it wasn't like he was submitted to this kind of emotional conflict every day. In fact, he never exposed this much of himself, but he supposed he could afford it once in a while if it was with someone who truly understood him without being judgemental or acting differently towards him.

And Sasuke understood and accepted it. They probably would never talk about it, though, but it was better this way.

"You know, I have a bottle of a very high-class sake in my quarters." Gaara's suggestion came with a tone of nonchalance that didn't reflect his heart at all. "I don't drink alone, but I think we both could use the unwinding."

Thankfully for him, Sasuke had also become rather good at reading him because he smiled, and this time, it was an open one.

"Sure."

On a sunny afternoon, Gaara took the liberty to invite Naruto for lunch at a local restaurant. Sasuke had preferred to stay in the quiet of his room, stating that he needed to organize his most recently acquired information before hitting the road again. Gaara didn't know what Sasuke studied and researched during his travels, but he was thankful for the amount of information he provided whenever he found something that could either be of interest for Suna or even if he was aware of some kind of threat, small as it may be.

Knowing that the restaurant served ramen had Naruto salivating. It had been far too long since he had last had ramen, he had said, so he was eager to have some. Still, when he first tasted it, he complained that it was nothing like Ichiraku's.

The two talked about mainly mundane things, and while Gaara enjoyed the casual, easy-going conversation, there were many things that were currently upsetting him, especially because his friend didn't approach them on his own free will.

So, Gaara decided to do that himself. "How come you haven't told me about your girlfriend yet?"

The question had left his mouth with polite casualty, but apparently it had caused enough of an impact on Naruto for him to almost choke in the process of slurping his noodles.

"H-Hinata?" he blurted out hoarsely, punching his chest and coughing. Awkwardly, he tried to regain his composure, but Gaara could see how uncomfortable the topic was for him. "Well, huh… you already know about her? Sasuke told you?"

"He didn't have to, news travel fast," Gaara stated, poking at the meat in his plate with his chopsticks in a way that could almost look bored.

At this, his friend blushed, scratching his temple with a finger and looking to the side. "Oh… really?"

"She's the Hyuuga heiress, right?" Gaara offered. "I remember her vaguely from the war."

"Yeah…" Naruto mumbled. For a while, he rubbed at the back of his neck, trying to avoid Gaara's eyes. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I guess I just…"

"Didn't want to?"
"What? No!" Naruto denied, waving his hands in front of him. "I just… that's kind of a sensible topic right now… Sasuke… well…"

Gaara wou'd've smiled if he didn't feel terribly sorry for his friend. "I'm not stupid, Naruto, I know about you and Uchiha."

Well, he didn't feel sorry enough to not poke him.

As expected, Naruto's eyes became huge, and he blushed even more, panic and embarrassment obvious in his features.

"I… Holy shit…" he sputtered, looking at anywhere about him, suddenly unsure of what to do with himself. "Fuck… I… Gaara, I…"

"Don't worry, I'm not upset about it," Garra replied, highly amused. Naruto actually buried his eyes in the palm of his hand.

"I can't believe this…" he said under his breath.

Putting down his chopsticks, Gaara intertwined his fingers in front of his face and placed his elbows over the table. He watched Naruto mumble to himself for a while, wondering about whether it would be a good idea or not to speak his mind. The decision wasn't hard to make.

"Can I just say one thing?" he requested politely.

With a sigh, Naruto lowered his hand, picking up his cup of green tea. "Sure…"

"Don't take this the wrong way, I just feel the need to express my opinion now that I have the chance," Gaara muttered slowly, thinking about how to phrase what he wanted in a way that was straightforward but not aggressive. Truth be told, he had been feeling uneasy about things between Naruto and Sasuke for a while, so it wasn't like he didn't feel a little bit of exasperation bubbling up inside of him. "When Sasuke first came to visit I thought, for sure, that you'd be with him. I have to admit that I was rather… surprised, but also disappointed."

Naruto took a few gulps in his tea and pursed his lips together with a serious expression. "I don't understand what you mean."

"You went through so much trouble for him for over three years," Gaara stated, quirking his nonexistent eyebrows up. "You trained, you fought, you suffered, and you humiliated yourself. You put your own life at risk. Was I wrong in assuming that he'd mean a little more to you than just letting him go once you got him back?"

Naruto placed his cup down and bit on his lower lip, completely ignoring his ramen now as if he had lost his appetite.

He placed his hands underneath the table, seeming to shrink in on himself. "You don't understand…"

He had said it almost inaudibly, but Gaara could hear him since the restaurant was rather quiet. "Enlighten me, then," he encouraged.

It wasn't surprising when Naruto's face scrunched up in frustration.

"I don't know, okay?" he snapped. "We fought and then he returned to Konoha and I was really happy. But I could tell he wasn't comfortable and then he said he was going on a journey to become a better person and it didn't please me, but I thought… I thought he'd… need the time for himself."
Somehow, Gaara was sure that, in spite of his reluctant demeanor, Naruto had needed to speak about this with someone, just like Sasuke had.

"You genuinely thought that someone who had felt nothing but hatred, pain and loneliness for a long time would want to be alone?" Gaara said softly, not really wanting to upset his friend but feeling genuinely surprised by Naruto's logic – or lack of it thereof. "You're supposed to know him better than anyone else."

"It wasn't just that!" the other male grunted with a huff of impatience. "The village was still grieving and recovering from the damage of the war and I just wanted to do everything I could for it. I lost a lot of people dear to me, and so did my friends…"

In spite of himself, something inside Gaara snapped.

"Your friends, Naruto, have other friends and families to support them, just as the village has many people to keep it on its feet. Unlike Sasuke. Right about now, you're all he has left." He didn't regret the firm accusation in his voice. "I fail to see your reasoning."

Naruto, for his part, seemed slightly taken aback by the blatant reproach, if not even a little hurt. If at Gaara or at himself, it was unclear.

"Look, Gaara, you don't understand, okay?" the blond repeated. "I wanted to go with him, I really did, but I couldn't! As you said, I almost died for him and that… that was something I only thought about when everything was over and I had him by my side."

Gaara merely eyed him, silently asking him to explain.

"I used to watch him sleep when we were recovering in the hospital," Naruto emphasised. Gaara could see that this kind of exposure made him anxious. "I did it for hours. I was so happy that he was back. I just… I felt so many things for him that I had no idea what they were or what to do about it and it was just… too much. It scared me. I didn't know what it was. So when he said he was leaving I didn't have the strength to go with him. And then, when we met in Rice Country he wanted me to travel with him and I just…"

"You let him go instead of working out your feelings for him?" Gaara interrupted, astonished. "And instead of traveling with him like he specifically told you he wanted to, you refused him and got yourself a girlfriend instead?"

"Don't put it like that, it's not how it happened!" the other defended.

"One would almost think you got together with that girl to run away from how you felt for him."

"That's not how it was!" Naruto hissed heatedly. He was quickly becoming angry but Gaara couldn't care less, especially because he could see the blatant denial of actual facts. "You're being a real jerk right now, Gaara, and I really have enough shit to deal with as it is to listen to you making assumptions on stuff you know nothing about!"

"He loves you," Gaara snapped, throwing his card unforgivingly. "That's what I know, and it's all I need to know, as it should be for you."

To his simultaneous pleasure and anguish – because it pained him to have to be like this towards his best friend – Gaara watched as Naruto looked at him as if he had just punched him.

Could Naruto really be this oblivious or was he simply willingly neglecting what was right in front of him?
"He told you this?" Naruto whispered, something in his eyes changing, and the fear, hope and happiness reflected there actually helped Gaara regain his calm.

"Naruto..." he sighed softly, lowering his hands and placing them over his thighs. "You saved me, and you saved him. In our hearts, you will always be one of a kind. But what you did for him, who you are in his eyes... How anyone could possibly misunderstand that is beyond my comprehension."

Naruto cringed visibly, looking away once more. He didn't say anything for a while, almost as if he was lost in his own rampant thoughts and he didn't know what to do about them.

Several times, he opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. Gaara wondered if he should say anything else to encourage him, something more to give him the light he needed, but he honestly didn't think he could be any more honest than this. He understood that this was difficult for Naruto, just like it was for Sasuke, maybe for the same reasons, maybe for reasons that didn't match, but either way, it wasn't fair that they made things so difficult for themselves.

"I... love him, too." Naruto whispered as if his own voice scared him, throwing him a pleading look that made Gaara's heart skip a painful beat. "I understand that. And I love Hinata, too, but it's different. I don't know how, or why, but it just is. It's nothing like how I feel for him." He took a deep breath before adding, longingly "I love him so much I don't even want to think about it because it makes me feel like I could do anything, go anywhere and that, as long as I have him nothing matters. He makes me feel like I don't need anybody else. And that's... that's terrifying. That's just... not right."

Gaara's throat ran dry. That had not been what he was expecting at all, but he allowed Naruto to keep talking.

"I can't tell him this because... I thought it was different. Loving someone... it's not how it's supposed to be, you know?" Naruto fidgeted awkwardly. "Love... how it happens between him and me... that's not how it's supposed to work, I'm sure..."

"You don't know anything about this kind of love, my friend," Gaara commented, shaking his head from side to side, unable to comprehend what Naruto was getting at. "And neither do I. But I don't assume that there's a way that love is 'supposed to be'. There isn't."

Unconsciously, Gaara was sure, Naruto rubbed at his bandaged right warm for a while before gripping it in a possessive way.

"I don't know... what to do..." he breathed out. "It's so... good but so painful. Lately I've been happy like I don't think I've ever been in my life, but it's so painful, Gaara. We hurt each other and now it's like we don't know how to heal each other. It's not like this with her. It doesn't hurt like this."

"If it doesn't hurt with her, then I'm sure you're not feeling that love right," Gaara muttered sadly. "That should tell you enough."

Naruto didn't reply, frowning at him but not commenting.

"You've always wanted him by your side," Gaara pressed on. "Don't give up on that if he wants it as much as you do. You've been spending too much time thinking about others, maybe it's time to think about yourself."

"You think I'm not doing that?" Naruto laughed bitterly. "Every time I touch him I'm thinking about myself and I can't stop, regardless of other people back in Konoha or of how it makes him feel. I
know it destroys him, and yet I keep taking because I need it. But I know it makes me a bad person on so many levels..."

Again, Gaara was left wondering about the other man's logic, but in the end, that was Naruto, always thinking that being completely selfless was the right path.

"How are you a bad person for wanting someone you love?" Gaara inquired.

"I don't know..."

"Naruto..."

"Look, I appreciate what you're doing, Gaara, I really do. And it makes me really happy that Sasuke talks to you and that you guys are friends," Naruto mumbled, with a dismissive but rather weak shrug of his shoulders. "But I'm just really tired right now. I can't think about this, it weighs me down. And Sasuke and I... we don't need these kinds of depressive thoughts. We just need what we have, for now. I'm with him and I'm really happy. In spite of everything... I really am. And I want him to feel the same way."

"You can't will the depressive thoughts away, Naruto," Gaara offered reasonably.

"I know that," Naruto acknowledged, resigned, looking down at his bowl of ramen. "But we still haven't figured things out, Gaara. We still haven't reached the balance needed for... whatever this is to make sense out there, not just when we're together but in our lives. Do you know what I mean?"

It seemed like Naruto wasn't as foolish as Gaara thought. He knew what he was saying, what he was doing and why.

But that didn't make it any less unnecessary, Gaara concluded. He had told Sasuke that he and Naruto needed to grow up, and Naruto understood it, too. Still, it annoyed him how, all of a sudden, the number one surprising ninja had become so thoughtful and contemplative of such trivial things when he used to always follow his heart regardless of the obstacles.

Maybe this had something to do with the Hyuuga girl and him not wanting to hurt her. Maybe it was something else.

Or maybe Naruto really was scared (for the first time in his life) of his feelings for Sasuke and really didn't know how to handle them.

Or maybe... they were just thinking about each other far too much.

And that couldn't possibly be good.

"You should embrace what you two have instead of worrying about the way things are unbalanced," Gaara couldn't help but advice. "Then you'll both have a reason to make it work." Leaning forward, he let his voice drop to a meaningful whisper. "I can't tell the future, but I don't think that the two of you ruining this is what's supposed to happen."

At this, Naruto smiled sadly. "Supposed to happen?" he said, with a bitter chuckle. So you're saying Sasuke and I are 'supposed' to be together in spite of everything?"

"I'm not saying anything," Gaara denied. "It's what you feel in your heart that can give you a proper answer, Naruto."

When Naruto laughed, it echoed throughout the restaurant and it was filled with irony. When he kept
laughing, Gaara all but watched him with interest and confusion, unable to identify the source of such a reaction but realizing that maybe he had found something terribly funny in what had been said to him. Or maybe he just needed the laugh because the conversation was undeniably heavy.

Gaara decided to give up. There was only so much he could do or say to someone as stubborn as Naruto and with such consistent ideas already.

But he had just admitted to loving Sasuke, so that had to be good for something. Maybe he would feel the relief later on and be able to express himself as he should.

Naruto laughed for about five minutes, stopping only because it gave him hiccups. Gaara ordered more tea. They didn't talk about Sasuke anymore and barely touched their food.

When Naruto changed the subject to talk about his job as a teacher, the Kazekage indulged him.

He had never felt as tired in his life as he did talking to Naruto and Sasuke.

000

They had booked one of the Residence's Dojos to do some sparring. According to what Naruto had confessed to Temari, he and Sasuke hadn't sparred since they were kids, so he was looking forward to it. Also, it had been a while since either worked out like regular Shinobi do.

Gaara didn't know who had suggested it first, but he had been wondering about when the day would come.

Word spread like wildfire all through the Residence and everybody seemed to be excited about the prospect of watching the Shinobi World’s hero Uzumaki Naruto and the infamous Uchiha Sasuke sparring, especially considering that they had chosen the biggest dojo and that the last remaining Uchiha currently lacked an arm.

Gaara could empathise with the collective feeling of curiosity and amazement but somehow, just thinking about dozens of eyes watching them fight made him feel uneasy. This was, for them, a moment of reunion and utmost intimacy and Gaara could understand why they'd choose to share it now – they needed this from each other considering all the emotional turmoil they were going through.

Which was why he explicitly stated that no-one was allowed to watch the sparring session so as to not disturb them. Of course, the disappointment from all of the Residence's staff was evident, but Gaara paid them no mind. The last thing he, or Naruto and Sasuke needed was for people to see what they weren't supposed to.

The two had headed for the dojo in the middle of the afternoon. As soon as he got word of it, Gaara's heart skipped an awkward beat. Throughout the two hour long meeting he had with the daimyo, he struggled to stay focused but his mind kept traveling towards to where the two males were, wondering about how things were doing, wondering if they were alright. He had no idea if the individual conversation he had had with the both of them had even managed to offer something good to them or not, but they had been strangely distanced from each other ever since they arrived in Suna, yet, close as well, but with obvious walls surrounding them. If they had decided to do this, maybe they just wanted so find another form of closeness again.

Somehow, from what he could tell, the two of them having become lovers wasn't something that deeply shook them for the physical part of it, but it did bring out many sorts of conflicting feelings for them that left them both helpless.
Gaara didn't understand his own reasoning, and sometimes, thinking about how they worked became terribly exhausting, especially because he had no way of knowing if his assumptions were correct or not.

Just thinking about what kind of feelings sparring could unleash in them made him feel uncomfortable.

Still, as soon as he was done with the meeting he couldn't help but want to go and see them.

"You kept everybody out of the way, and yet you're going to take a peak?" Temari had teased him.

"I need to ease my mind," Gaara had merely said.

"They're clearly not going to kill each other, you know?" she had pointed out reasonably. "At least the building is still intact."

That didn't make him feel reassured in the slightest. "That's the least of my concerns."

His sister, Gaara knew, understood his heart very well, which was why she refrained from commenting any further. There were things they didn't need to talk about, and his feelings regarding Sasuke and Naruto as individuals and as a duo was one of them. For this, Gaara was thankful to her because certain things were better left untouched.

Respectfully, she didn't follow him on his way the dojo.

Even that particular corridor was left empty, but the sliding door of the dojo they were using was slightly open, a wonderful treat for anyone who dared to defy the Kazekage's orders and watch. Still, there was no-one there, and this pleased Gaara.

It wasn't like he felt like he needed to conceal his chakra signature from them – he was sure that they wouldn't mind knowing he was there either way – but still, Gaara wanted nothing to disrupt their focus, so he did it anyway. On the outside, he sat on his heels on the polished floor, calmly watching the two through the gap the door had provided.

Their feet were bare, both wearing dark blue sweatpants (that they had probably burrowed from the uniform room), Naruto wearing a plain white t-shirt, Sasuke wearing a grey one. Much like it always happened, Gaara felt a sudden dryness in his throat at not finding Sasuke's right arm, but he quickly swallowed the unwanted emotion down.

Apparently, the two had chosen hand-to-hand combat with no weapons or the use of justu. They had been sparring for about three hours now, so they were both sweating heavily, their clothes clinging to their bodies, their cheeks rosy and skins glistening with the effort. It was clear that they were both getting tired but refused to be the first one to drop the towel.

With his heart racing a bit, Gaara watched quietly from his position as the two moved. Their fighting styles were very different. Sasuke had a natural grace to him that was very poised, precise and calculated, his dark eyes alive and intelligent as he watched his opponent with an almost intimidating attention. His attacks were aggressive and merciless and always seemed to have a bit of a show off flare to them that was breath-taking to watch. He attacked more than he defended, his speed impressive, and even though he only had one arm, that only made him all the more persistent and ten times more focused on his opponent. He had trained himself well, Gaara concluded, to not be in any way inferior in spite of his disability.

Naruto, on the other hand, was always the impulsive one. The way he fought was nothing but an automatic response to Sasuke's attacks, and yet, even this was impressive in its own way because
following Sasuke's moves was difficult enough as it was.

It was like watching leaves dancing in the wind. Prediction, followed by action. Attack, followed by defence, followed by attack. Punch, eviction, kick, jump backwards, strike.

The easy but powerful way they came together and drew apart was sinfully beautiful to watch, as if they had done it for years on end – as if they knew each other's fighting styles better than they knew their own. It was almost like watching something very private, very intimate. Their eyes were trained on each other with an almost animalistic intensity that spoke of words Gaara was sure only they could hear, and when their bodies came into contact, even without any sort of sexual interaction or intention, the raw energy that came from them was palpable.

Sometimes, Sasuke would openly offer Naruto an opening so he could attack back and things became less coordinated, which, Gaara could see, was what he was looking for. When Naruto attacked, it stopped being that automatic response to become something feral, fast and harsh where they actually managed give it their all to land a punch.

For about half an hour Gaara watched them in interested fascination, listening to the sounds of their grunts and heavy breathings. Once in a while, one of them would release a curse, but apart from that, they didn't speak at all.

And then, there came the time where Sasuke managed to land a rather brutal kick to Naruto's chest that sent him flying across the place, but instead of doing something to get back on his feet, Naruto just landed on his back on the floor in a graceless heap, letting out a pained noise. Still, instead of getting up, he remained lying there, arms and legs spread out as he panted.

Sasuke straightened his stance with fluidity, impassively watching his friend while also breathing hard.

Leaning forward a bit, Gaara could see Naruto placing his bandaged arm over his eyes and biting on his lower lip. And then, he started sobbing.

Eyes wide, Gaara turned them to Sasuke, whose expression changed completely to one of soft exasperation. Inhaling sharply through his nose – something he did to calm himself down in that moment – Sasuke slowly made his way to his friend until he was standing with his feet on either side of Naruto's body. He looked down, his hair concealing his features.

"You said you saw Hinata's heart," he said in a low voice that still echoed clearly throughout the large dojo. "What about mine, huh? Did you see what was in it?"

Naruto sobbed harder this time, but he nodded. "Yes…"

"Was it any different from what you saw when we last fought at the Valley of the End?"

Naruto hiccupped. "N-No…" he mumbled, sniffing. "But I… this time, I…"

When he stopped himself, Sasuke seemed to contemplate him for a while. "I'm not your girlfriend," he whispered. "My feelings are nothing like hers. I may have little left that I can call my own, but I'm still an Uchiha and I bow to no-one, not even you. You don't get to fuck around with me just because you're scared."

"I-I know…"

"To be honest, Naruto, there's only so much shit I can take before it drives me crazy." Carefully, Sasuke bended his legs until he was straddling Naruto's waist. Gaara held his breath as he watched
Sasuke's hand landed on Naruto's chest, just above his heart. "What are we doing?"

If anything, Naruto cried harder at this, his sobs shaking his body as he shook his head from side to side several times. He seemed like he wanted to say something, but all he could do was cry in that helpless, heart-breaking way, unwilling to reveal his face.

Sasuke sighed tiredly. "Don't cry, you fucking dumbass."

Neither moved for a long while, Naruto's sobs incessant as if he had held all his tears in for far too long, which, Gaara guessed, he probably had.

Then, Sasuke rolled to the side until he was also lying down on the floor on Naruto's left side, his head turned so he was looking at the blond.

Blindly, Naruto's left hand felt the floor between them. Noticing it, Sasuke's right one reached out for it and grabbed it before he slowly intertwined their fingers together in a tight hold.

A single tear rolled down Gaara's cheek when he blinked, and feeling it, he wiped at it quickly, both surprised and annoyed at himself.

He didn't even understand why that tear had escaped him or why his heart was beating so fast inside his chest. It wasn't like he was personally damaged by what he was witnessing, he simply… empathised. It was ugly on so many ways, but also unique. He couldn't even understand if the scene made him happy or just shattered on the inside, but maybe it was a bit of both.

A hand landed on his shoulder, startling him for a moment and he turned around to find his brother, Kankuro, looking down at him with a slightly reproachful look, silently shaking his head from side to side, as if asking him 'don't you think it's enough?'.

Gaara shouldn't be intruding like this, he knew, but it was all he could do for them to try and read what was between the lines. He felt like he knew more now, but that, at the same time, not much had changed and the thought unsettled him as much as it calmed him down.

Still, taking one last peak at the two men who were still resting on the floor, he cautiously got to his feet and followed his brother down the hall without making a sound.

"You shouldn't do this to yourself," Kankuro admonished once they were out of ear range. "You already know how things are for those two, Gaara."

Smiling a bit, Gaara heaved a small sigh. "I can't explain it myself, but I'm grateful for what I've seen," he said quietly. "It brought me a certain sense of peace and hope I suppose I needed."

Kankuro seemed far from convinced, but just as Temari herself, he refrained from meddling inside Gaara's thoughts too much.

But that was exactly that. Watching those two people who were so precious to him on such different levels gave him peace of mind, and no matter how restless he felt about them right now, what they had was bigger and stronger than themselves and they both knew it. Maybe they wouldn't be able to settle things right now, or even in the next couple of months or even years, and while this made him ache for them (he always would), he was sure that those mistakes they were constantly making wouldn't be fixed as easily as they probably should. But there was nothing he could do about it more than he already had.

Still, he couldn't help but hope that, one day, everything would be as it was supposed to.
They stayed for ten days before deciding it was time to keep travelling. Their need for the privacy of each other's company on the road again was all over their faces and this made Gaara happy. Maybe they'd be able to communicate better and hopefully find the answers they needed.

Gaara made sure they had enough provisions for a few days and new clothes that would be suitable for both the desert and other climates. Sasuke would usually refuse the few offered comforts, but this time he had accepted it with nothing but a few thankful words – on Naruto's behalf, the Kazekage mused.

"I hope the two of you return soon," Gaara had said as a means of farewell, grabbing for Naruto's shoulders after they had hugged and giving them a meaningful squeeze. By Naruto's pouting blush, he had understood the obvious implications of his words. "I apologize we didn't get to spend as much time together as I wanted to."

"Don't be stupid, your hospitality was awesome and I'm glad I got to see you," Naruto mumbled, offering him a genuine smile. "Thank you for everything, Gaara, seriously."

Sasuke, as per usual, moved to shake Gaara's hand, a tiny smirk lifting the corners of his mouth that looked almost fond. "See you next time, Kazekage-sama."

"Of course."

Gaara, Kankuro, Temari and the four other elements of their escort watched them leave for a while before returning to the village.

Gaara wondered about where they'd be going this time and what they'd talk about. He wondered if they'd still be lovers or if they would create a whole new distance now that certain things had come to light – but somehow, it didn't seem like they'd be able to.

Sasuke and Naruto both had dreams that they wanted to see fulfilled, and genuinely, Gaara hoped they could find a way to do it together, whether it involved politics or love.

Maybe they didn't know how to deal with each other yet. Maybe they'd find a way, or maybe they didn't, but it was okay as long as they both understood exactly where they belonged.

They had something Gaara could only wish to ever achieve. The thought made him feel an amused bitterness he couldn't quite place. It was ironic, to say the least.

He had longed for love for so long, and yet, his love slipped away from his grasp. But it didn't bother him. He knew the type of love he wanted wasn't directed at him, and he was fine with it. Slowly but consistently, he was winning the love of his village and that was enough.

He had no idea if someone in this world would ever feel for him the same things Sasuke and Naruto did because the three shared something not many was able to understand – rejection, pain, loneliness, hunger for love... then empathy, acceptance, friendship, understanding and complicity.

Gaara doubted he'd ever be able to truly give himself to someone who wouldn't understand such things, but only time would tell.

Right now, he felt devoted to another love that would never be his, and he was fine with it. Seeing that love come to life was one of his greatest desires.

In the end, he supposed that Sasuke was right.
After all... wasn't being selfless what true love was all about?

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was, as I loooove saying, a 'necessary evil'. Some of you were wondering if Gaara was going to come between Naruto and Sasuke and, as you could see, it was the opposite, regardless of his feelings.

Anyway, the dynamics between Naruto and Sasuke will change from here on for many reasons, so you can expect a lot of... understanding and intensity in the next chapters, but always with a bit of drama in the middle. You know you love it!

I don't feel like spoiling the next chapter, but... I'm really excited about it!

Oh, and don't worry, I will reply to all you guys' comments as soon as I can, both for this fic and for the others, you know I always do! It just takes a bit more of time once in a while, especially if I want to get something written before.

And thank you for the constant support! I love you all from the bottom of my dramatic heart. <3
This chapter was betaed by the lovely fangirlandiknowit! Thank you my lovely! I love you so much, you’re so awesome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

From Which We’ll Rise

Part VII: Family Taka

As they crossed the Vast Desert of Solitude, Naruto’s mind was all over the place from the things he had experienced in Suna, the conversation he had had with Gaara and the new awareness of the things he had seen in Sasuke’s heart.

Not to mention that he had admitted out loud that he loved Sasuke. Not as a friend, not as a brother, but as all that and a lot more.

Naruto couldn’t even explain it himself, but if there was a truth that he knew about himself, this was it, unquestionably.

But… he had told Hinata that he loved her and this made him feel like an absolute wreck. Now he understood what it meant to love, but back then, he hadn’t. Hell, two months ago he still hadn’t known what real ‘love’ was.

And now, he loved Sasuke.

If he told Sasuke that he loved him… wouldn’t that be wrong? What kind of meaning would it have, then? He couldn’t put Sasuke and Hinata on the same level anymore, because now he knew the difference, and it was nothing short of astronomical.

Still, he cared for Hinata. She was his first lover, the first person he had known to be so completely devoted to him that she disregarded everything else, and while Naruto couldn’t completely say that he understood or agreed with this way of being and thinking, there was no denying that it made him feel grateful and more than a little special. They were good together and she was good to him. She was the kind of girl his family would approve of, and the kind of girl he had always imagined he’d end up with. But… was it really that kind of love?

Now, he didn’t know anymore. No, for sure, it wasn’t the same thing.

Although, in all honesty he had always pictured that it’d be Sakura in Hinata’s position. But Sakura had chosen Sasuke and had blatantly refused him, and Naruto could only be a fool for so long.

Naruto wasn’t like her, blindly chasing after a love that would probably never be corresponded.
Well, but she was, at last, getting a bit of what she wanted, Naruto considered, looking at his travelling companion from the corner of his eye as they silently walked side by side.

Just out of pity, and probably, fear of being alone, Sasuke had finally indulged her.

And Sasuke loved him in spite of everything. And yes, he loved Sasuke back. Looking at all the people that meant the most to him in the world, regardless of how much he loved them, no-one had this much impact on him and no-one could make him feel things the way Sasuke did. And all those sensations, all those feelings, the intensity and the passion that travelled between them, the sheer energy… Just thinking about Sasuke made shivers of longing run down his spine. There was anger between them, yes, and resentment, too, but there was also trust and companionship and that raw lust he was sure he had never known before. He didn’t even think about the things he did to or with Sasuke. Just one look was enough to set him on fire and the tension was never slow building like with Hinata, it simply exploded between them and the only thing they could do was act upon it.

He loved every second of it. Never in his life would he have guessed that he’d need to be physical with someone as much as he needed air in his lungs.

Sasuke’s presence felt like home, no matter where that ‘home’ was. He felt at ease, content and fulfilled. He felt like just having Sasuke by his side was all he needed to be happy.

He was in love with Sasuke, that much was obvious, but at the same time, the term seemed far too simple. Sure, he loved being intimate with him, but it was so much more than that.

The emotional connection they had was unique and something he’d never have with anyone else. No-one in the world would ever understand him the way Sasuke did.

The only person who had understood his loneliness. The only one able to erase it completely. He felt whole when they were together, even if they were arguing and just being assholes.

That was what their love felt like, and it was different from the love he had for Sakura, for Hinata, and for Konoha.

They loved each other to the point where they felt like they didn’t need anybody else.

But that was not how it was supposed to be, was it? Naruto had always needed a lot of people around him. His goals had always involved growing up to be strong and rightfully acknowledged by his own village. He had been so lonely throughout his life that he had struggled hard to end that same loneliness by whatever means it took. It was because of this that he didn’t understand Sasuke’s need to be alone.

Now, he understood it a little better. Sasuke didn’t want to be alone, he just didn’t want to be with people, but he wanted to be with Naruto because Naruto was his ‘home’. Just like Naruto felt like he didn’t need anybody else, so did Sasuke. It wasn’t wrong, and yet…

He was sure Sasuke could feel his scrutinizing eyes on him, but instead of throwing a nasty remark, he just let him look without looking back.

Was them being together like this even healthy? Naruto pondered, chewing on his lower lip. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to – in fact, he was sure he had never been happier in his life – but… Could he even… do it? After all he had struggled to achieve, after his determination to reach his goals…

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that his desire to have Sasuke was as strong as his dream to become Hokage. But Sasuke didn’t want to be in Konoha, and Naruto couldn’t for the heart of him force him
to stay anymore – he knew it would be of no use.

So his only option was to leave the village as well and go with him. Spend his days like this. It didn’t look bad now that he knew what Sasuke was up to, but again, was this something he’d be willing to do for the rest of his life?

He loved Konoha. He loved his friends. He loved teaching the kids at school. He loved Ichiraku and Hinata and Sakura and his dreams.

Whenever he looked at Sasuke, though, he couldn’t help but think about how easy it would be for him, right now, to leave it all behind. But, even if being with Sasuke wouldn’t mean that he’d leave Konoha for good, it still made him feel like a cruel person towards the village and his girlfriend.

And… what about Sakura? As Sasuke had said, they weren’t exactly a couple, but she’d still feel betrayed, he was sure. He couldn’t bear the thought of her hating them after everything they had gone through together.

He loved Sasuke with every fibre of his being, there was no doubt about it. It seemed so easy to think it freely now that he had come to terms with himself. Gaara had put his mistakes to light and Naruto had been angry, but by thinking about it deeply and by sparring with Sasuke he had been forced to see things as they were. He had let Sasuke go out of fear and ignorance, and that same ignorance could’ve made him lose him forever. Now he wondered if he had gotten together with Hinata to, as Gaara had said, run away from how he felt about Sasuke.

*Why* had he told her that he loved her when he knew nothing about it in the first place?

How could he now even begin to tell Sasuke that he loved him when he had already said it to someone else without its proper meaning?

How would it feel for him, to say it to the person he cherished the most in the whole world? How would it feel, for Sasuke, to hear it? Would it build everything from scratch and heal them, or would it completely make them fall apart?

*I’m such a fool…*

They had been travelling for a few days, mostly in contemplative silence that, for once, Naruto appreciated, considering how much shit he had to sort through in his head. It wasn’t exactly uncomfortable, and Sasuke didn’t seem too bothered by the lack of conversation either, so neither really tried to talk more than necessary. Strangely enough, this seemed to have lightened the mood between them considerably.

Naruto didn’t ask Sasuke where they were going – it wasn’t like he cared anyway – but they had been in Wind Country for a while. The air was becoming more humid the more they walked, so he guessed they’d be reaching a vegetated area soon. He was hoping they’d find some civilization, or at least a place where there was enough water for them to fill their canteens and properly wash themselves up. Also, he was looking forward to getting some proper rest somewhere he didn’t wake up filled with sand, not to mention that they were running out of food.

Glancing at Sasuke, he noticed the other male looking at him, which caused his heart to do a funny thing inside his chest. Naruto simply swallowed hard and shook his head from side to side. Sasuke’s eyes narrowed but he looked away.

Naruto all but sighed. What was going to become of them now?
As soon as Naruto spotted vegetation he felt an immense relief and excitement wash over him. Hopefully they’d find water soon and they could set up camp for a couple of days to wash their clothes and get some rest. Also, he didn’t know about Sasuke, but he was dying for some meat.

It was the middle of the day on their (probably) fourth day of traveling since leaving Suna – Naruto wasn’t even bothering to count anymore – when they entered a rather dense forest. Sasuke estimated that they were about two days away from the Bear Country. Neither had much money on them, so they’d probably need to stop by the City of Shack to find jobs and a place to stay for a while before entering Bear. Sasuke claimed that he wanted to study it for a while since he had heard from Kakashi that he was looking into finally creating steadier bonds with the land.

They soon realized that the water was very scarce even in such a place, but after spending a couple of hours searching around, they found a small spring running, and even though Naruto could easily cross it merely by jumping to the other extremity and that it was only deep enough to cover his feet, it was still better than nothing. The water seemed clean enough for consumption as well.

The weather had become surprisingly hot and damp, the sky a dark grey that could barely be seen over the dense foliage of the threes over their heads.

Naruto didn’t feel like starting a fire with how hot it was, but it would be the only source of light they’d have during the night, so it wasn’t like they had any choice. They put their things close to the spring and immediately divided tasks between them before nightfall; Naruto leaving to find some food, Sasuke being in charge of getting wood for the fire and getting things ready for the night.

Naruto managed to hunt a couple of weird animals that were probably some sort of exotic rodents and a few berries he had never seen before but that he was sure Sasuke would be able to tell if they were edible or not.

When he got back to their camp, a small bonfire was burning and their dirtier clothes were already washed and hanged on branches. For a while, he and Sasuke skinned and cleaned the poor animals together in silence before sticking sharp sticks through them and putting them to cook over the fire. Night was upon them and the time was finally perfect for them to wash themselves up as the food cooked.

Together they stripped completely and threw their dirty clothes to the side. Naruto removed the bandage from around his right arm, and from the corner of his eye, he watched as Sasuke removed his own. For a few seconds, he simply allowed himself to watch the other male’s figure, vaguely admiring the pale scarred skin and the strong muscles. Sasuke had a handsome face that one could even go as far as calling beautiful, and even though his gestures were always precise, elegant, even, there was a harshness to the lines of his well-defined body that was powerful and intimidating. It was a man’s body Naruto was looking at, and a man who, physically, was a bit bulkier than him. Even without an arm, Sasuke was a stunning warrior.

That body, Naruto considered, excited him as much as it demanded respect, and it was a feeling he didn’t know how to deal with.

The two of them immersed their feet in the running spring and crouched down – the water wasn’t as cold as Naruto had first assumed, which was good. Both were pretty smelly and had sand and dirt in all sorts of inconspicuous places.

They washed up most of the dirt as thoroughly as possible while sharing the small bar of soap Sasuke had brought from Suna. Naruto hated washing his hair with soap because it always left his hair feeling rough and even messier than it usually was, but it was better than nothing and it felt wonderful to finally smell of something that wasn’t body odour and dust.
In silence, they agreed to wash each other’s backs. They both knelt on the stony bottom of the spring in spite of it being slightly uncomfortable, Naruto with his back to his friend. Sasuke rubbed a bit of the soap all over Naruto’s back before placing it on a stone at the edge of the spring. Slowly, he ran his hand over Naruto’s shoulder blades in circular gestures, moving upwards to rub slightly at his left shoulder, then to do the same to his right one. Naruto allowed himself to relax into the touch, his chin connecting with his chest, enjoying the simple intimacy willingly provided by his lover.

Inhaling deeply, he then released a small pleasurable moan as that hand slid up and down his spine. Even like this, he loved it when Sasuke touched him, and always resented that the moments when he did it willingly were very rare.

He let out a small complaint as Sasuke gathered water in his hand and, several times, poured it over his back to rinse the soap.

Once this was done, behind him, Sasuke shifted and the hand disappeared to be replaced by a firm chest pressed to his back. Sasuke touched his right upper arm, and instinctively, Naruto tensed when he felt a mouth breathing in his ear. For a moment there, he thought that Sasuke was going to say something, so he waited, anxiously holding his breath, until he felt a pair of lips being gently pressed to the curve of his neck and Sasuke’s hand was running slowly down his wet arm.

_Sweet heavens... is he..._

He could feel the wet tips of Sasuke’s hair on his shoulder as more kisses were gently pressed up his neck, and with his heart fluttering pleasantly inside his chest, Naruto all but leaned his head to the side, more than happy to receive the surprising display of affection.

Sasuke reached his ear again and placed a small peck in the cartilage. Then, he gave it a playful lick with the tip of his tongue that had Naruto squirming a bit and biting on his lower lip to prevent the loud moan that was about to escape him.

They hadn’t exactly been physical while in the desert, which was why he found his body responding rather quickly.

Sasuke’s fingers moved again, this time to run through Naruto’s hair in an almost calculating way, the sensations to his scalp making the blond lean back again his friend, his head coming into contact with his shoulder. “Your hair is growing rather nicely,” Sasuke whispered in Naruto’s ear in a way that was definitely suggestive. “I like it better like this.”

“Then I won’t cut it,” Naruto promised.

There was no way Sasuke couldn’t see his proudly erect cock in full display from the position they were in, and quite frankly, he too, could feel the other’s erection poking at his lower back.

The sky had darkened and night surrounded them. But they could see well enough with the fire not too far from them.

With a hand, he reached behind him to grip at Sasuke’s thigh with an impatient huff. “I don’t want to ruin the mood, but the food is going to burn if we don’t turn it,” he said resignedly. No matter how horny he was, they couldn’t exactly afford to ruin food in their current situation.

Sasuke pressed a kiss to his temple and Naruto could feel him smirking. “You should go make sure it doesn’t burn then,” he said. “Just get your ass back here when you’re done.”

In spite of his unwillingness, Sasuke’s words held a hidden promise to them that Naruto was bent on making sure he would keep.
Taking a deep breath, he moved away from Sasuke’s touch and got up, water dripping from his body as he made his way to the fire, his cock bobbling as he went. The air was still warm so it felt too good on his wet skin. Quickly, he turned the rodents only to realize that he had done so just in time because the side in contact with the fire had just been on the verge of starting to burn.

When he turned around, he found Sasuke sitting on the edge of the spring, twisting whatever he could of his hair to remove the excess of water from it, so Naruto wasted no time in making his way back to him. Sasuke looked over his shoulder and his head followed him as Naruto walked around him and moved to straddle his thighs, winding his arms around his neck.

Sasuke placed his hand over his waist, tilting his face upwards so his lips could meet Naruto’s waiting ones.

So… maybe this is what love really is?

Naruto didn’t think he had ever been this focused while being intimate with Sasuke. His heart was beating so fast it hurt, and there was a dizziness in his head that made him feel like he was relaxed, and yet, his eyes couldn’t leave Sasuke’s – taking in every single expression that flickered through those powerful, gorgeous features – and his senses hypersensitive as if abnormally aware of every single contact they shared.

Naruto tilted his head to the side as Sasuke pressed slow, languid kisses along the side of neck, his single hand gently caressing the small of his back. Naruto’s hands travelled from Sasuke’s shoulders down to his chest, gently and carefully, making sure he properly memorized every single contour of what he was feeling. Under his palms, Sasuke’s nipples were small and soft, but hard and they made him feel slightly ticklish, but the sensation was also strangely arousing.

Considering how close they were, their prominent erections came into contact more often than not, poking at their desire to an almost unbearable level.

Naruto wasn’t used to this kind of slow exchange of affections, so his body wanted nothing more than to brutally seek for release in the arms of his lover as fast as humanly possible. That was how things between him and Sasuke had been before, but for some reason, things had turned out like this.

The slow exploration was new to them, and while it felt simple, it also brought a level of intimacy Naruto hadn’t known before.

He was aware of everything. Of how gentle Sasuke’s kisses were, of how hot their bodies felt together, of the eager sounds of their breaths, of the scars he could feel beneath his fingertips…

When Sasuke captured his mouth, he could taste him like never before – that divine essence that he knew well but that he rarely had time to properly enjoy – and could feel the softness of his playful tongue.

Naruto had no idea if Sasuke was a good kisser or not. Compared to Hinata he was certainly more coordinated but also more aggressive, and Naruto loved it. Their mouths fit perfectly, lips sliding together with the same untamed desire that had no possible comparison.

Naruto’s hands moved to cup Sasuke’s face, thumbs brushing over his cheekbones lovingly as they kissed and their tongues met. Sasuke’s fingers tensed on his skin in a rather possessive way.

With a gentle suction to Sasuke’s lower lip, Naruto pulled away, panting slightly and feeling ecstatic that his lover was also breathing hard.

He looked into Sasuke’s eyes and found them looking back. There were so many things in those
endless pools of darkness that he found himself mesmerized and breathless, his chest tight.

*I love him…*

*Yes…*

That was what he was feeling right now, Naruto realized, slowly tucking a bit of hair behind Sasuke’s ear and watching those gorgeous features longingly. That desire to possess and be possessed. The simple need to let go and forget about everything and everyone and just give into those painful, wonderful feelings that were theirs alone.

He wanted Sasuke in ways he had never wanted anything or another person before.

It wasn’t just lust, or even just longing. He still didn’t know what it was, but at least he knew he was deeply, madly and hopelessly in love with that man. Maybe he had always been.

No, he was sure these feelings weren’t recent at all.

*I almost died for him…*

*Without him I…*

Sasuke’s hand moved up his spine gently, almost as if guessing the path his thoughts were taking in that precise moment. Then, Sasuke turned his face to the side and kissed the palm of his hand gently and Naruto bit down on his lower lip.

There were things he had been thinking about for a while now – things he had tried to forget, things he wanted to ignore because they made him feel guilty. But the thought wasn’t exactly new, and the more time passed and the more he opened his heart, the more these thoughts assaulted him, becoming unbearable.

Especially because, now, he was sure of what he wanted to do.

*I can’t do this anymore…*

*I shouldn’t do it but I want to… I want it to be him…*

*No… it has to be him.*

Sasuke’s eyes were intense when they looked back at him, and when Naruto ran a thumb over his open mouth, those lips captured it to close around it as he sucked.

Feeling the inside of Sasuke’s mouth and the texture of his hot moist tongue on the digit made Naruto take a sharp intake of air.

He felt hot and desperate. He wanted so many things he didn’t know how to even begin going about them.

He had thought about this. When the desire had first reached him it had overwhelmed him, but it didn’t shock him as much as he had expected because… well, he was sure that it was what he wanted. From then on, every single time he had been intimate with Sasuke he had known that he wouldn’t hesitate if things were to go that way. He wanted it. His heart wanted, his body… there was no uneasiness, no feeling of wrongness of misplacement, just something he wanted to do.

“Sasuke,” he whispered, his voice weak with desire. He shifted his hips so his cock could collide more forcefully with Sasuke’s in a clear demand for more. “I wanna… I really wanna have sex with
you.”

Sasuke’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes narrowed. Since Naruto didn’t know how to interpret it, he decided not to panic yet.

Sasuke bit lightly on the thumb before letting it slip from his mouth. He licked at his lips, eyes watching Naruto’s features calmly. He brought his hand to the side of Naruto’s neck. “You already have sex with me,” he said, his voice giving absolutely nothing away.

“That’s not what I mean,” Naruto said, shaking his head from side to side and grabbing for Sasuke’s wrist. “You know that’s not what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Sasuke said. Clearly, he had no intention of talking about the subject more, but he didn’t seem upset or angry, and Naruto was just glad to get that out of his chest.

It wasn’t like he needed an answer, or a reciprocation. Surely what having sex meant to him was a million miles away from what it meant to Sasuke at this point, and he was fine with it. Whether Sasuke would want to do it with him or not didn’t matter. What really mattered was that Naruto knew for sure what he wanted to do and that Sasuke himself was aware of it. It made him feel at peace with himself, as if some deep hidden mystery about himself had been solved.

“You’re not freaking out?” Naruto couldn’t help but ask.

To his credit, Sasuke smirked at him. “Am I really supposed to be scared of you wanting to fuck me?” he teased. “I’m a Shinobi; that’s the last thing I’d ever freak out about.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to fuck you,” Naruto corrected, making a thoughtful face. “I said I wanted us to have sex.”

Or, to be very honest, he hadn’t thought about it that far yet. He didn’t even know about that kind of sex with a female, let alone with another man. But he wasn’t worried. If they had to do it, they would. They had been very impulsive from the beginning, and things were still very blurry when it came to their future together, so it was okay.

He loved Sasuke, so no matter what, it was okay. It wasn’t about any of that, at all.

Sasuke eyed him contemplatively, his hand moving to run his fingers through Naruto’s rebellious fringe that had gotten bigger and tended to fall to his eyes. Naruto could see the desire in his eyes and feel the still very obvious erection he sported, but somehow, he knew that the actual sexual vibe had passed, at least for now. “We should get dressed and get something to eat,” Sasuke replied, easily changing the subject. “Plus, you’re heavy as fuck and I have rocks and sticks sticking to my ass right now.”

“Well, we can’t have that ass being tortured can we,” Naruto teased, leaning down to peck the lips already awaiting for his. “But you’ll have to make it up to me later.”

They’d be fine. Sasuke wanted him, too, but this was a dangerous ground they were stepping on and they were both very aware of this.

They couldn’t push each other to their limits anymore or everything would be ruined.

And Naruto wouldn’t allow it to happen.
The City of Shack was a beautiful, well-kept and lively place built near the seaside. The weather was sunny but not exactly hot thanks to the cold, salty breeze brought by the ocean that seemed to carry with it marine scents that followed them everywhere. Naruto had to admit that he was excited about being surrounded by civilization once again. He loved the noise, the sound of people talking and laughing and just the life that emanated from such places. Lots of different faces and new places to see and discover.

He couldn’t help but be reminded of Konoha and wondering how things were going back there. Vaguely he considered writing – someone was bound to be worried about him and Sasuke since it had been a while since they had left – but he wasn’t sure who to write to. Hinata would be the obvious choice, but he was sure that Tsunade and Iruka would also like to hear from him.

When he asked for Sasuke’s opinion, he was expecting some sort of nasty remark. Instead, Sasuke told him that sending a letter to Kakashi might be the wisest choice since he could easily talk to all of them and no-one would be offended considering he was the Hokage, after all. Naruto was happy about this and decided to write home as soon as they settled in.

They took a few walks around the large city to see what it had to offer and what they could possibly do with themselves to earn some money. They attracted quite a bit of attention since they looked like obvious travellers no matter how much cleaner they were compared to the previous day. Sasuke’s Katana strapped to his back also drew attention, and yet, no-one seemed to find this particularly threatening. Bear Country had a Shinobi village, so Naruto guessed that these people were used to it.

Finding physical labour was never difficult, but for Sasuke it was. He was strong and very capable in many ways, but there was only so much a one-armed man could do. They thought it was best to work together since they were in an unfamiliar environment, but it was easier said than done. Sasuke didn’t seem very upset by this, however, silently assessing his surroundings.

After a few hours of quick exploration, though, Sasuke came to an abrupt halt and stretched his arm to the side to make Naruto stop.

“What is it?” Naruto asked worriedly, noticing the frown marking Sasuke’s features. He couldn’t really understand if the other male looked displeased or vaguely concerned but it unnerved him all the same.

“Taka,” Sasuke said blandly, shaking his head from side to side. “They’re close by.”

“Who?” Naruto inquired confusedly.

“My team,” Sasuke explained, looking at him with sharp, strangely bright eyes. “The people that were with me after I sealed Orochimaru. They helped me get to Itachi.”

Naruto tried to focus his attention on sensing the people around him and indeed, not too far away he could definitely spot three particular chakra signatures that weren’t all that unfamiliar to him.

Realization dawned on Naruto. “You mean, those guys that were with you during the war? And that girl you tried to kill?”

Naruto had been blunt on purpose, and it amused him to see the slight twitch of irritation in his friend’s eyebrow.

“Yes, dumbass, precisely,” Sasuke replied coolly. “If I noticed them, I’m one hundred percent sure that at least Karin has sensed me by now.”

“So?” Naruto inquired, shrugging his shoulders. “They were your teammates at some point, aren’t
you glad to see them?"

“I haven’t seen them since the war,” Sasuke admitted, to Naruto’s surprise. “And the three of them are still together, apparently.”

Naruto didn’t understand why Sasuke spoke as if this shocked him on some level, but personally, he was feeling rather excited. It wasn’t as if he even knew anything about Sasuke’s team, but in a way, he wanted to – after all, those people had travelled with him and followed him to a war that didn’t concern them, so they had to have some sort of bond with him. Naruto remembered well the orange-haired man whose name he didn’t recall, but Sasuke had seemed protective of him back then.

Surely, Taka had some sort of meaning for Sasuke, and that made Naruto curious. They never really talked a lot about what Sasuke had been up to in those years he had been away, so this was a great chance for him to know more about it.

“We should go meet them, then!” he said excitedly, offering Sasuke a huge grin.

Sasuke scowled at him. “I’m not even sure they want to see me at this point,” he said, rolling his eyes in exasperation. Then, he sighed, his frown becoming heavier. “Never mind, they’re coming anyway. And fast. We should probably start walking.”

He grabbed for Naruto’s wrist, bent on starting to walk away as fast as possible but Naruto didn’t budge.

“Sasuke, there’s no way we’re going to run away from your friends!” he said, prying his wrist free for the strong grasp. “I mean, come on! I’m sure they’ll love to see you after so long!”

“Friends is a strong word to use in this situation,” Sasuke hissed impatiently.

“Don’t be like that,” Naruto pleaded. “I really want to meet them properly if they meant something to you at some point.”

If he didn’t know better, he would almost swear that a flash guilt made an appearance in Sasuke’s features. “Look, we don’t…”

“Sasukeeeeeee!”

Sasuke sighed again and actually pinched the bridge of his nose. “Here we go…”

Naruto didn’t even have time to look for the source of the obvious female voice because next thing he knew, Sasuke was leaping to the side and someone was promptly throwing themselves at the now empty spot where he had been and ending up face down on the ground. Naruto blinked confusedly at the familiar long mop of red hair at his feet, realizing that the girl had probably been trying to tackle Sasuke.

“I don’t even want to know if you were trying to strangle or hug me, Karin,” Sasuke said impassively to the girl, who slowly got to her hands and knees. Naruto noticed that her glasses had somehow flown away and landed a few meters from there, so he rushed to pick them up for her.

“I was probably going to do them both since you deserve it, you heartless prick!” he heard the girl say in an angry, sort of whiny voice. “Where the hell have you been all this time?!”

When Naruto turned around, he saw Sasuke crouching down to help Karin get to her feet and felt the urge to smile. The girl eyed him with visible resentment and yet, there was no hatred in her eyes. She was as cute as he remembered, Naruto noticed as he walked over to them, but her clothes were…
well, she was wearing these super tiny green shorts and a black sleeveless top that left her belly completely exposed. She was quite the hottie, Naruto admitted, but Sasuke didn’t seem impressed.

Just as Naruto was approaching to hand her glasses back, she jumped at the Uchiha, putting her arms around him, so he stopped. Sasuke looked at him, clearly uncomfortable with the physical intimacy but not pulling away either, indulging her. Naruto could only grin softly.

She was clearly another one of his devoted fans.

“Your arm!” she said, pulling away with tears in her eyes, looking at Sasuke from up and down. “What the hell happened to your arm?!”

“That was actually my fault,” Naruto intervened, with a goofy laugh, catching the girl’s attention for the first time. “I lost mine, too, but I got it back. Sasuke is an ass, so he didn’t want his.”

“You’re… Naruto…” Karin said, only vaguely surprised to see him there. She accepted her glasses with a nod. “I almost couldn’t believe it when I felt your chakra next to Sasuke’s.”

“Yeah, we’re just on a small journey together,” Naruto muttered, not sure how to interpret her words.

“Yo!” The three looked to the side to see a white haired man carrying a plastic bag approaching with his hand up, followed closely by the large man Naruto remembered from the war, the one with the orange hair. Naruto didn’t remember him being this tall, though – the man was… big, and yet, his features were gentle and his eyes were calm.

Eagerly, Naruto looked at Sasuke, to see how he’d react to seeing the rest of his teammates, but Sasuke simply watched their approach with his usual stoic expression.

“Suigetsu, Juugo,” he greeted nonchalantly, with a small nod of his head. “It’s been a while.”

“It sure has!” The white haired guy, Suigetsu, said, with a large, nasty grin. “We heard you didn’t stay in Konoha, so we’ve been looking all over for you, man!”

“Look, he lost his arm!” Karin yelled, pointing dramatically at Sasuke. Then, she turned to him with an adoring look. “But don’t worry, you’re still as gorgeous as ever! Although, you could use a haircut.”

“Sasuke…” Juugo’s voice was soft, almost boringly bland, and yet, Naruto could hear the fondness (and relief?) in the man’s voice at saying the name. “We’re glad you’re alright.”

“Of course I’m alright,” was all Sasuke said, not without a bit of an arrogance Naruto almost felt annoyed by before realizing that this was probably a very awkward situation. Sasuke had left his friends after the war and he probably never expected to see them again – or better, hadn’t even expected them to want to see him again, let alone think that they might’ve been looking for him for all this time.

Knowing they still cared for him probably shook him to his core. He clearly didn’t even know how to deal with such a situation so he played the uncaring asshole. But as he looked away from Juugo’s soft gaze, Naruto understood that it was quite the opposite. Sasuke felt at loss for what to do. They had mattered to him but he had thought that they wouldn’t want anything to do with him. Or maybe it was because he was expecting them to be like this that he hadn’t wanted to confront them.

“And you came with the hero, huh?” Suigetsu noticed, eyeing Naruto with interest. “Did you two run away together or something?”
“They’re on a journey, you fucking idiot!” Karin explained irritably, clenching her shaky fists in front of her face as if to stop herself from punching the guy. She quickly composed herself and turned to Naruto and Sasuke, looking frighteningly sweet. “What are you guys doing around here? Do you have a place to stay? You should stay with us, we have so much to talk about!”

“No, we…” Sasuke was saying, but Naruto quickly cut him.

“Actually, we got here today and were just looking for a place to stay and jobs since we’re low on cash,” he said with a large smile that made the girl blush and simply beam at him.

“Oh, Naru…” she said, sweetly, eyeing him appreciatively from head to toe. “I didn’t remember you being this handsome.”

“For fuck’s sake, Karin, keep your knickers on, woman,” Suigetsu retorted, with a disgusted expression. “You can’t possibly need to get laid that often…”

Juugo elbowed him rather roughly and Karin gasped in outrage.

It was Naruto’s turn to blush while Sasuke simply raised a questioning eyebrow.

“We have a place outside of the city,” Juugo said calmly, easily dismissing the subject. “We would be glad to have you both around for as long as you wish, free of charge. Also, we have a business going on, you could join us for the time being if you wished.”

“What kind of business?” Sasuke asked, suddenly interested, which Naruto found rather amusing.

“Well, you’ll have to come with us to find out,” Suigetsu said mysteriously, winking at him.

“Please come with us!” Karin begged, grabbing Naruto forcefully by the collar of his t-shirt and pouting. “For old times’ sake, you and Sasuke need to come!”

Naruto looked at his friend with a pleading, expectant expression that he truly hoped Sasuke would understand – Naruto thought that this would be a good chance for all of them to get to know each other and for Sasuke to re-kindle his friendship with his team.

To his joy, Sasuke ended up sighing in resignation. “Fine,” he agreed, with a vague wave of his hand. “It’s not like we have another choice for the time being.”

Karin jumped in excitement and threw herself at Sasuke’s neck to hug him, an action that he didn’t respond to and that made him inhale deeply as if praying for patience.

“Sweet,” Suigetsu said with a pleased smirk, and even Juugo nodded, smiling slightly.

Naruto couldn’t be happier – they had a place to stay, and in the company of people that had been close to Sasuke at some point. He couldn’t wait to hang out with them properly, and even though Sasuke looked like he preferred to be anywhere else at that particular moment, Naruto could feel the gentle sense of contentment coming from him.

Certainly, this would be a good experience.

000

“We’ve been with Orochimaru since the war ended,” Karin explained. “It’s not like Taka had anything else to do anyway, so the three of us stuck together.”

At the end of the day, the five of them were in the middle of the forest and Juugo was currently
performing a series of very complicated hand seals Naruto tried hard to follow but couldn’t seem to memorize for the life of him.

“We actually helped him rebuild a couple of his biggest hideouts,” Suigetsu proceeded casually. “I have no idea what he’s going to use them for, and I don’t really care. But anyway, once he stopped needing our help he dismissed us and gave us this place as a reward. You’ll see that it’s not much, but it’s a roof.”

Juugo slammed both his hands on the ground, and with a loud ‘puff’ noise, what seemed to be a wooden trap door emerged from the earth. Carefully, he brushed the leaves and dust from it before pulling the iron handle to open it, revealing a set of stairs that lead to some sort of underground.

Karin was the first one to descend, followed closely by Suigetsu, Sasuke behind them with Naruto almost glued to his back. Juugo was the last one to enter, closing the trap door behind them and doing another set of hand seals to close it again.

The stairs led to a long and dark corridor, so Karin gathered a bit of chakra in her hand to provide a bit of illumination. They all walked in silence for a while, time during which Naruto looked around to find the obvious patterns of the walls that identified the place as having been Orochimaru’s. He almost shuddered, hoping that the actual place they’d be spending time at wouldn’t be as bland and as hostile-looking as he remembered from the hideouts he had come across.

Thankfully, they stopped in front of an iron door that Suigetsu opened with a large key and yet a new set of seals, and as soon as the inside was revealed, what was presented to Naruto almost made him moan.

The place was very small and had obviously been built inside some sort of cave, with low stony walls and a tiled floor, but it still looked cozy and comfortable enough. On the wall to the right, one could see a small kitchen area equipped with a necessary set of blue cabinets next to a tiny but useful black stove. There was no refrigerator, but Naruto could tell that this was because they obviously didn’t have electricity, if the torches hanging from the walls were any indication. On the left wall, Naruto could see a door (the bathroom, Karin had said), as well as a neatly folded large futon next to a large dark blue wardrobe. There were no tables or any sort of decoration for that matter, but Naruto appreciated it all the same. Facing them on the other side of the room, there were two large and thick glass doors that allowed a lot of light to illuminate the place during day time. That was the entrance of the ‘cave’, Naruto assumed, and what closed it from the outside world to make it liveable.

“Well, this is home,” Suigetsu said in a pleased tone after having removing his sandals, now placing the bag of groceries he was carrying on the counter as the rest of the group took off their own shoes. “We have a toilet but no shower stall or anything like that. We always keep water in a bucket inside the bathroom, though.”

“There is a waterfall not too far from here,” Juugo informed calmly. “We can access it through the veranda and it’s very secluded. If it’s cold we’ll just heat up some water up here. The stove works with gas but it can also be used with wood.”

“And we have our own private beach!” Karin said excitedly, pulling Naruto by his arm and dragging him towards the glass doors. “Look! Isn’t the view gorgeous?”

From there, Naruto could definitely see the sea beyond all the vegetation below. He noticed that if one were to open the glass doors, they’d find a wooden platform that served as some kind of balcony. A little to the left he could see a makeshift set of natural stone stairs that led a path downwards into the woods below, and probably to the water falls and beach that Juugo and Karin had mentioned.
The view was amazing and peaceful, and for some reason it made Naruto feel a sense of happiness he couldn’t explain.

Taka were a simple bunch that immediately made Naruto feel at home. He wasn’t shy in answering the questions Karin and Suigetsu threw at him, also asking his own curious ones. The three talked loudly and he found it kind of funny how Karin was always telling the white haired man to shut up. Juugo and Sasuke worked on making dinner, and from the corner of his eye, Naruto could see them talking quietly to each other and wondered what kind of bond those two had. Juugo was a gentle, calm creature and for some reason, this seemed to fit with Sasuke’s personality in an odd, interesting way.

Since there was no table, they stretched a table cloth on the ground and knelt on colourful cushions to share a simple meal of grilled meat and white rice.

Naruto was glad to listen to the obviously short version of how Sasuke had met the individual elements of Taka and how they had come together to search for Itachi. He hoped that later, when they were all more familiar with each other, they could tell him more details about their travels with Sasuke.

Sasuke was mainly silent throughout the tales, but he didn’t seem particularly upset either.

Then came to light the ‘business’ Taka ran, which consisted of them being freelance Shinobi in Shack.

Shack wasn’t was a Shinobi city, and neither was it ruled by a system of Kage. Instead, it had a council of people who worked under the Country’s Daimyo’s orders. Still, there was a lot of crime going on, and Bear Country, while not too far from it, didn’t really offer any help. They did have a security system that severely lacked what the Shinobi system could offer. So Taka had made a deal with the Daimyo and the council and they often took on several important missions, be them related to protection of high politicians, information scavenging, transportation of high value goods or even taking down threats.

They didn’t have missions every single day of the week, and they got paid depending on the level of danger of said missions, so while they didn’t make enough money to be rich, they were faring off well enough to actually save money in case things got dire someday. They said Naruto and Sasuke could help them with the missions and they’d share their money with them.

Naruto didn’t know much about Taka (that had once been called Hebi, as well) but he was impressed. Three people that were very different from each other were apparently living in a way that led him to believe that they somehow intended on staying together for an awful amount on time. Which was… odd. And they lived in quite an intimate environment, too.

He tried to check if there were any pairings in there. He could definitely sense some kind of thing going on between Suigetsu and Karin even though Karin kept verbally flirting with Sasuke and Suigetsu spent a lot of time making fun of her, which angered her beyond belief. Juugo just seemed… not interested in anything in particular since he was too quiet.

Naruto couldn’t help but be curious about those three and the past of Taka.

Did Sasuke and Karin ever get involved? It didn’t seem that way, though, but Naruto didn’t know much about Sasuke’s sex life. Did Suigetsu – who was kind of a person who was a lot into physical contact from the way he enjoyed being in Sasuke’s personal space – have something going on for Sasuke?
Why was Juugo so obviously attached to Sasuke?

Vaguely, he wondered how things would’ve been if Sasuke was still among them. It wasn’t like Naruto felt jealousy, no. He was just curious and confused. There were so many things he didn’t know about Sasuke, and he wanted to know them all. He wanted to be part of it – past, present, and future.

He just hoped Sasuke would let him in.

“Be honest with me,” Naruto asked well humouredly. “Are you even a tiny bit happy that we’re here with Taka? I mean, I know I forced it, but if you’re genuinely angry we can always leave tomorrow and stick to the initial plan.”

He and Sasuke were sitting down on the floor of the balcony outside of the ‘cave’, their backs leaning on the closed glass doors as they enjoyed the warm night and appreciated the wonderful starry night sky. Behind them, Karin and the other two males were cleaning up the house and getting things ready for the night. Naruto wondered if they could detect that something was happening between him and Sasuke because they had easily dismissed them while they worked – or maybe he was just being paranoid.

Oddly enough, he didn’t really care about what they could possibly think of it.

“No, it’s fine,” Sasuke said, with a sigh. “I am… happy that we’re here. I didn’t think I’d ever see them again, to be honest, let alone be welcomed.”

“They all seem fond of you,” Naruto said, with a smile that made Sasuke roll his eyes.

“I released them from Orochimaru’s clutch, and I chose them to help me get to Itachi,” he said. “They have all saved my life on various occasions. They’re a reliable bunch and they were very faithful.”

Naruto’s smile grew. “Wow, I never thought I’d see the day when you’d talk about someone like that. I’m so proud of you. You’re actually talking about feelings.”

“Speaks the guy who used to talk his mouth off and yet has been keeping quiet about this whole situation,” Sasuke accused, even if there was no actual resentment in his voice now.

Naruto stuck his tongue out at him. “Don’t be mean,” he said, with a pouting expression that he quickly changed so he was smiling again. “I’m really happy to be here with you, you know. I know there’s a lot going on between us but, right now, no matter what, there’s no place I’d rather be.”

Sasuke looked at him from the corner of his eye.

“It’s your turn to be honest,” he said, stretching his legs out and crossing them at the ankles. “I think I deserve it after confessing to something very private.”

“You didn’t’ exactly say a lot, though,” Naruto pointed out teasingly. “But yeah, fine. I’ll talk because there are things I’ve been keeping bottled up.”

He was glad to find Sasuke’s expression changing to one of amusement. “By all means, hold nothing inside.”

“Alright, then,” Naruto conceded with a thoughtful nod of his head. Looking at Sasuke’s curious
expression, he couldn’t help but smile sheepishly. “I’m crazy in love with you.”

As he had already expected, Sasuke merely raised an unimpressed eyebrow that made Naruto laugh. “I know, I know. You said you didn’t feel that way about me, and I get it.”

Taking a deep breath, he leaned his head back against the glass, looking up at the stars. “I understand that saying that I’m ‘in love’ is banal. It feels too simple, yeah, because it doesn’t explain at all how I feel about you. But I guess there’s also a lot of truth to it, so it kind of fits.”

At this, Sasuke heaved a sigh. “Well, at least you’re beginning to understand it,” he said quietly.

Turning his head to the side, Naruto noticed that Sasuke was watching him. For a while, the two looked at each other in silence, both their hands resting on the ground between them, close enough to touch, but not really coming into contact. He could feel Sasuke’s fingers tapping the ground in a slightly impatient fashion.

Fascinated by the simple beauty of Sasuke’s features, Naruto wondered if his precious person would accept his touch or reject it if he did try to hold his hand. He really wanted to right then. In a way, it annoyed him that Sasuke had to be so difficult with such insignificant things, but at the same time, he knew how fragile things were between them, and honestly, the challenge that the Uchiha was as a person was one of the things that lured Naruto to him the most. He liked never knowing what to expect, no matter how well he thought he knew him.

Chewing on his lower lip, Naruto dared to move his hand a bit, the tip of his middle finger brushing lightly against Sasuke’s thumb almost shyly. It seemed ridiculous that he felt this way about a fucking hand when he and Sasuke had done far more intimate things, but he couldn’t help it. It always felt different when they weren’t being taken over by their immediate urges.

“Did you…” Naruto asked, looking down at their hands and watching as Sasuke’s fingers stilled without really moving away from the touch. “Did you know that this would happen to us? Back then… before we fought and after…”

“You should already know by now that I have a difficult time trusting or even liking people easily,” Sasuke whispered tonelessly, and Naruto felt him looking down at their hands as well. “You have always been on another level from Sakura, or even Kakashi. Regardless of how much you annoyed me with your stupid plans or how much we bickered and competed against each other…”

Sasuke stopped himself, his thumb moving of its own free will to brush against Naruto’s finger carefully. “It’s not like I knew that things would go like this, exactly. But for me, considering who you are in my eyes, I guess I automatically accepted that anything could happen as far as the two of us were involved. After my first journey I understood that, if you would ever want it, this could be an outcome I wouldn’t reject.”

In spite of himself, Naruto felt his cheeks catch fire. It was stupid, but he did feel a little embarrassed at the blunt revelation coming from someone as stoic as Sasuke. He couldn’t help but feeling this giddiness whenever Sasuke talked about this kind of stuff.

“Gaara said that he had been expecting this kind of outcome from the beginning,” he said, with a small chuckle. “Now I wonder if more people were predicting this. I wonder if they were surprised that I didn’t go with you the first time.”

His voice faltered unexpectedly and he swallowed hard. Lifting his chin up to meet Sasuke’s eyes, he found them full of empathy, which made his heart thump brutally inside his chest.
I love him…

Sasuke placed his hand on top of his and Naruto lost his breath.

“Does your heart beat like crazy when we touch like this?” he couldn’t help but ask, not really knowing what to do with the wave of feelings the simple touch caused inside of him.

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed in an almost evaluating way that wasn’t hostile at all, just… appreciative. “It does,” he confessed calmly, squeezing Naruto’s hand in his.

It hurts…

“I wish… I wish I had seen this before,” Naruto muttered, not without a bit of regret. “I wish I hadn’t been so scared of you… of us.”

Turning his hand upwards, he was overcome with joy when Sasuke spread his fingers slightly so Naruto could easily slip his own between them.

Sasuke’s fingers, Sasuke’s hand in his… it wasn’t something he’d ever forget, and not something he wanted to let go of, ever.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Sasuke muttered. There was a strong intensity to his eyes that Naruto found himself immensely drawn to. “You are mine, Naruto. No matter what or who you choose; no matter where you go.”

Naruto felt his whole body spasm at those words, not because they shocked him, but because they were something he knew to be true. In the past, he had never thought about his feelings for Sasuke like he had been doing in the last few weeks, but now that he did, he understood that this wasn’t new at all, even if it felt like it was because now he could identify them and know what they meant.

His voice got stuck in his throat and came out a bit hoarse. “Sasuke…”

“Maybe you don’t know it yet,” his friend proceeded, his tone firm as if not allowing contradiction. “Maybe you don’t even accept it in spite of your silly claims of being ‘in love’. But the day will come when you do.”

In spite of himself, Naruto dragged himself closer to Sasuke, twisting his body a bit to face him without letting go of his hand.

“You scare me when you talk like that,” he whispered, bringing his face closer to Sasuke’s until they were a breath away from each other and enjoying the tension, the simple excitement that being this close and sharing something so deep brought. “Not a bad kind of scared, though.”

Sasuke’s fingers tightened around his. “I’m simply stating a fact neither of us can escape,” he whispered back, also adjusting his position ever so slightly so he could tilt his head to the side, the sides of their noses brushing against each other. “That’s what you need to understand.”

“I do.” Slowly, Naruto broke the distance between them only enough to brush his lips over Sasuke’s as he spoke. “And I don’t think I want to escape it, anyway.”

Against him, Sasuke smiled. “You’ll regret those words, someday.”

“Somehow, I highly doubt it.”

“Hn…” Without warning, Sasuke pressed his lips fully to Naruto’s in a way that got his heart beating
like crazy. “You’re as naïve as ever.”

“No,” the blond panted, his free hand reaching out to grab the back of Sasuke’s neck. “I’m just not scared of how you make me feel anymore. After all, we belong to each other, right?”

He didn’t give Sasuke the time to reply, though, because he was kissing him now in a voracious way, demandingly prying those lips open with a tongue and revelling when the other male responded with as much fervour. Sasuke didn’t seem to care about what the three people behind them could think of what they were obviously seeing, and if Sasuke didn’t care, then Naruto didn’t either.

Because Sasuke was his. And he knew now that he belonged to Sasuke as well. Regardless of who came in between them, regardless of who claimed to love them… it had always been about them, and it would probably always be about them.

The thought was exhilarating as much as it was terrifying and it made Naruto feel like a bundle of exciting shit.

He had been the biggest fool.

Sasuke was turning him into someone he didn’t think he’d ever be – a selfish and possessive individual who wanted nothing more than to quell his own whims and desires.

He pressed himself more to Sasuke, wounding his arm around his neck and deepening the kiss, devouring that mouth that had become such a simple source of pleasurable perfection for him.

Who was he trying to fool? He had always been selfish when it came to Sasuke. He had always wanted Sasuke’s attention, Sasuke’s friendship, Sasuke’s understanding. He had taken upon himself the mission of saving Sasuke, first on Sakura’s behalf, yes, but it hadn’t taken him long to realize that he needed it, too, to the point where he hadn’t wanted anyone other than himself to save Sasuke.

He had been willing to die with him, regardless of what it would make other people feel.

And now, Naruto, who was always chastising his best friend for not wanting bonds, was so focused on Sasuke that, in his heart, he knew he was easily able to leave everything behind for him.

There was no doubt in his mind that this craving was beyond his control and it would drive him crazy.

He feared it would break them both sooner or later. It had to. Something like this was just…

Is this even right?

Is this even healthy?

“Naruto,” Sasuke murmured against his mouth, panting heavily. “I wanna have sex with you, too.”

Naruto could only moan pitifully and kiss him again.

TBC…
Alright, so, a quiet chapter, I’d say? Next chapter: More Taka + Naruto knows Karin is an Uzumaki + sexual tension.

OMG. Taka. My passion is back. I’m so glad that I introduced those three to the story, it just made me feel so… accomplished. In spite of everything, I really liked Taka’s dynamics and I do think that Sasuke has had a bond with them in spite of him trying not to get attached. So, yeah. I’m a happy person.

I hope you all liked the chapter! Did you guess what’s going to happen real soon? Did you get what’s happening with Taka right now? Can you guess what might happen in the future?

My head is spinning with new ideas! I’m so frustrated but excited! This fic was supposed to be like a five part or something, but nooooo, I just have to go and make it long. *sigh*

Anyway, as usual, thank you all for the love and constant support!
Before the Storm

Chapter Notes

This is just another looong useless chapter, so don’t expect much! Again, to make up for the long wait!

I wanted to focus a little on feelings and… well, TakaxSasukenNaruto interactions, I guess. Bear with me!

NOT BETAED. Let me know if you find serious typos, please!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We'll Rise

Part VIII: Before the Hurricane

Sasuke supposed he shouldn’t have felt surprised by the fact that Karin, Juugo and Suigetsu shared a king sized futon considering how little space they had in their small home. Even Naruto and Sasuke had been forced to push their sleeping bags together because they could barely fit in the room with the other three, but still, with two fewer people, Taka could’ve easily had an individual futon for each of them in their ordinary days. Only they didn’t.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t noticed certain things about Taka, and Suigetsu’s shameless hints weren’t very concealing either, and yet, Sasuke had a hard time figuring the dynamics. Not that he tried very hard, anyway, since he had other things on his mind.

But this wasn’t something that he was bent on openly questioning or wondering about simply because he didn’t care as it was none of his business. He often found himself lacking in interest in being judgemental of such frivolous things, and this was no exception.

Also, after he and Naruto got inside the makeshift house, neither of his three former teammates had opened their mouths to talk about their obvious making out outside. Karin looked like she had swallowed something nasty, and Suigetsu sported a rather nasty, knowing grin on his face, but apart from that, no-one made a single comment about what they had seen.

Sasuke would lie if he said that he wasn’t thankful for it. He didn’t want to talk about his relationship with Naruto to people who wouldn’t understand, and neither did he have any desire to talk about his sexuality, something that, surely, those three were wondering about.

He had been pretty much averse to the idea of intimacy for a long time, and even as a teenager, he couldn’t say that he had been someone very prone to seeking his own personal pleasure since he hadn’t felt the need to. Always the target of sexual interest, Sasuke could admit that he had used his looks and his rather self-recognized sex appeal to his advantage in Orochimaru’s lair, but it wasn’t like he was personally interested in sex. For a long time, it was as if his body had been shut down but
his constant turmoil of conflicting and shifting emotions, and the only times where he did feel the need to masturbate were usually provoked by adrenaline after a particularly exciting training session. Even then, touching himself was a necessity that annoyed him, and something he wouldn’t have done if his teenage body hadn’t demanded it out of him.

There were no thoughts in his mind back then as he did it, but simple irritation of a weakness his body possessed sometimes that he couldn’t control.

Still, during those years after the war and up until he and Naruto had been reunited in that journey, Sasuke’s already low sex drive had been reduced to nothing.

It wasn’t like he had ever been interested in romance, sex, or even intimacy. During his first journey he had come to realize many things about himself and his feelings for Naruto, and yet, not even once he had questioned his sexuality, nor did he feel the need to. How he felt for the blond wasn’t of a sexual nature at all, and yet he acknowledged that it surpassed all those frivolous human needs.

It wasn’t like he could explain it himself, and it wasn’t like he felt the need to find a definition for it. It wouldn’t matter either way.

He had a hard time falling asleep, unaccustomed to being so physically close to another person. Sleeping right beside Naruto was like sharing a bed with him, and while this wasn’t exactly news to him, it wasn’t like they shared such a close space all that often regardless of their intimate moments because Sasuke always found the need to create a certain distance between them. It was already enough that they kissed and got engaged in sexual activities. The open displays of affection outside of the impulsiveness of sex was already something that had slipped out of his control, so it wasn’t like they needed to sleep together and cuddle to make things even worse. They weren’t a couple. Next thing he knew, they’d be holding hands while taking strolls and going on dates, and that was a definite ‘no’ in his book. Sasuke hated things like that, and truth be told, he didn’t imagine himself in what society would consider a ‘normal’ relationship. Even if Naruto, clearly, relished in it.

No matter what was said and done between them… he couldn’t let himself be dragged away.

Although… sometimes it was very easy to go with the tide.

Loud snores echoed throughout the place that Sasuke recognized as being Karin’s and Suigetsu’s in the most abhorrent of duets. Juugo, as usual, slept soundly through it all, and while Naruto usually snored for his life, tonight he was oddly quiet.

The moon filtering through the glass doors cast shadows over the furniture and occupants of the room, and even in the semi-darkness it was possible to see contours of things around him rather clearly.

Turning on his left side, Sasuke noticed that Naruto was also turned to him, his bandaged hand resting next to his face. His lips were slightly parted but no sound came out, which made Sasuke wonder if he was either awake or having an abnormally light sleep.

Running his eyes over Naruto’s features, Sasuke felt his breath catch, his heart beating just a little faster than normal. He felt the sudden urge to reach out and touch his cheek, but held himself back.

*I’m crazy in love with you…*

Hearing those words had hurt and Sasuke hadn’t taken them seriously at all, not because he considered them lies – they weren’t – but because, in the end, that was all they were, really. Nothing but words.
Loving someone had been painful for Sasuke. In fact, he didn’t think he would ever come to know what it felt like to love so devotedly, simply and innocently like he had loved his family as a child. That kind of easy love seemed far and unreachable for him now. Loving someone these was painful. It brought him happiness, too, though, and was proof that he was alive and human, capable of loving in spite of how closed and stone hard he had thought his heart to have become.

Loving Naruto made him feel like he was normal again. It gave him a certain type of strength he knew no-one else could ever give him. It felt like breathing – natural, essential – and it gave him hope for the future, for himself. He wasn’t sure how this came to be when there were currently so many things against them – even themselves – but he knew that this was something that wouldn’t change no matter what happened or how much time passed.

Sasuke heaved a small sigh but his eyes never left Naruto’s face.

Sometimes, he wondered if Naruto thought about them the way he did, or if things were just very intense for him, emotionally, but very superficially interpreted.

Sasuke often thought about how they had been confirmed by the Sage of the Six Paths to be descendants of his sons. Two souls strongly bonded, chasing each other through time, parting ways only to come together once more, over and over again.

He wondered if Naruto even knew about Madara and Hashirama’s story and understood how much of that had been carried and passed on to their present selves.

Sasuke didn’t like thinking that he was like Madara, even though, as an Uchiha that he himself had tried to beat and had almost been killed by, he was someone he admired greatly. Madara was a force of nature like Sasuke had never seen before, highly intelligent, goal driven and emotionally unstable thanks to the pain and anger in his heart. Sasuke could’ve been like him, he knew this, but he had, even if unconsciously so, clung to that little light that he had left that had Naruto’s name on it.

Like Naruto, though, Hashirama was the same idealist, always protecting someone who others thought to have no hope, always craving for that overwhelming bond with that someone important without hesitation.

Madara and Hashirama had had a bond that transcended anything he and Naruto had, he knew this. Even though they became enemies in the end, the respect they had for each other and the sheer longing had been something Sasuke had been able to see very well. Neither Madara nor Hashirama had bothered to hide it.

He and Naruto had had tough lives in different ways, but nothing compared to what those two had gone through. And still, they had cared for each other and acknowledged each other above everyone else. No-one was worthy enough in each other’s eyes regardless of how bad things turned out for them.

Sasuke wondered if these feelings had been passed through them to him and Naruto – if these things that they had never been able to say and all those unsettled issues were now left for him and the blond to fix so the cycle of hatred would end.

Would it ever end?

Hashirama had gotten married and had kids, while Madara never seemed to take interest in people in general. Sasuke doubted that they had been lovers, but there was definitely ‘love’ between the two.

Sasuke understood that ‘love’ didn’t mean that two people who felt for each other deeply had to
become lovers. He had never personally felt inclination towards romance in general, and his feelings for Naruto had always been greater than himself, so he knew that such ‘love’ could never be erased. Wanting Naruto to understand what they both felt had been important to him and he had felt that, if they both could come to a consensus, and that what they felt for each other was something nothing or anybody could ever compete against, he’d be happy.

Knowing that Naruto ‘loved’ him like that made him happy. He wouldn’t have felt the need for sex or intimacy if Naruto hadn’t pushed him down that road, and while he didn’t complain about the outcome, he did know that it made things unnecessarily complicated and more serious between them. It created a need for closeness and intimacy that was addictive and that was sure to destroy them both at some point.

If they had just acknowledged each other without the need for certain things, Sasuke would’ve never felt like he was about to lose something. If they had stayed the way they were before… he wouldn’t be scared of losing something he had never had.

This was where Madara had been smarter than him, he considered, biting on his lower lip as Naruto shifted a little. Madara had stayed faithful to his feelings but hadn’t allowed them to weaken him. By not getting sexually/romantically involved with Hashirama he didn’t allow those feelings to consume and weaken him. This allowed him to act with the intent to crush and damage – to kill – because he had nothing to lose.

One can’t lose something that was never theirs, could they? Neither could they miss something they never had. Sasuke understood the need to not have attachments and useless feelings in order to become stronger all too well.

But Sasuke had already made a mistake, and he just knew he would come to regret it. But it was too late, now. He had hurt too much, and he just knew that it wouldn’t stop. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t allow himself to bask in whatever happiness crossed his path in the time being.

And Naruto gave him that. That loud, idiotic fool that had both built them and ruined them. That person who still loved and desired him in spite of everything he had done.

The complimentary other half of his being. He had never believed in soul mates, and it wasn’t like he saw it in some kind of amorous context, but it wasn’t something to be under rated at all.

Wasn’t fate a hilarious bitch?

In spite of himself, Sasuke moved his body silently so he was dragging himself and his sleeping bag closer enough to Naruto’s so his body was almost pressed to the other male’s but still distanced enough so they weren’t touching.

During the process, Naruto’s eyes cracked open sensing the approach. Laying his head down on the pillow again, Sasuke noted that the eyes staring back at his were attentive and lucid, meaning that Naruto hadn’t been sleeping, maybe aware of Sasuke’s intense gaze all along. This didn’t upset him, though.

Naruto didn’t say anything, unbothered by Sasuke’s stare, simply staring back in silence, his features calm, yet serious. There were things in those eyes that Sasuke felt compelled to explore and he did so openly, watching every flicker of emotion there, reading easily every single word that was presented to him and for once allowing himself to relax and for his feelings to be reflected in his own eyes, as well. He noticed Naruto watching him just as attentively, and as the seconds ticked by as they looked at each other, the more the air seemed to become thicker. Naruto’s lips parted slightly, his breath coming out a little uneven and brushing against Sasuke’s face. He could feel his friend’s energy
becoming queasy, anxious even, the pull between them alluring and creating an ungodly wave of heat around them.

Sasuke hated how quick his body could go from controlled to a desperate mass of lustful yearning, but he was far too enamoured by the familiar tension already to claim that it bothered him. There was something about ‘power’ that he valued and craved for regardless of the way it manifested itself, and there was no denying that there was something very powerful happening whenever their eyes met like this and their very souls spoke to each other. It was something he relished in and felt compelled to respect and act upon. His body tingled and burnt and the physical pull was almost unbearable.

If they had been alone right then he was sure they would’ve been lost in some wild animalistic wrestle that would’ve brought them both release. Or maybe they’d be fucking since it was settled that they both wanted to.

He ached to touch the other, and could tell by the way Naruto’s muscles tensed and his hand itched that he was feeling the same way. Still, neither moved, knowing that it would be a terrible idea to engage in such things while the others were asleep and pretty much prone to wake up.

So they just stared at each other in the dark, close but not daring to come into contact.

Lost in the millions of words Naruto’s eyes spoke to him, Sasuke thought that such things between them shouldn’t feel as natural as they did.

The next morning found the five on their way to Shack. They were supposed to visit the city’s council to see if they had any missions for the day, and then they’d split to get stuff done.

Naruto was feeling pretty excited about exploring the city and actually being back to an active working life once more, and even though Suigetsu had already warned him not to keep his hopes up for exciting adventures, he couldn’t neutralize his giddiness if he tried.

His time in Suna with Sasuke seemed very distant, and it was during times like these, when he felt the thumping energy of the cities and their occupants, that he realized how much he absolutely loved that kind of environment – it gave him life. This was where he and Sasuke contrasted the most, he would often think, not without a bit of sadness.

There was a large red and gold temple close to the seaside where all political affairs of Shack were taken care of. The council was composed of three stern looking elderly men that looked at both Sasuke and Naruto with suspicion. Juugo told them that they were old comrades that would be helping them for a while and that could definitely be trusted. Juugo made up some last minute names for the both of them that Naruto didn’t even catch, but the council didn’t seem to care either way as long as they didn’t demand to be paid extra just because Taka now had two more members.

There were several ‘missions’ assigned to them for the day, Naruto noticed, but all of them were very simple and mundane.

Naruto suddenly remembered that he should write to Konoha, and in spite of Sasuke’s protests Naruto insisted that he wanted him to approve the letter’s contents. After they managed to come up with something acceptable to Sasuke’s standards, the Uchiha summoned a large hawk and tied the piece of scroll to its leg with a string. Together, they watched the proud animal take flight and head towards fire country. Then, their group divided tasks among them to get everything done as fast and as effectively as possible. Sasuke would be going with Karin and Juugo while Naruto would go with Suigetsu.
Naruto had been a little hesitant about leaving Sasuke. It wasn’t as if he feared the other might flee or anything, and it wasn’t like they had always been together every single day of the journey, but it had been a few days since they had last parted ways and somehow, it didn’t sit well with him.

“You can go and kiss your boyfriend goodbye if you’re that sad that you’re going to be without him for a few hours,” Suigetsu teased perceptively at Naruto’s crestfallen expression while looking at Sasuke’s retrieving back as he walked away between Karin and Juugo.

In spite of himself, he blushed at the man’s choice of words. Sasuke wasn’t his boyfriend. Even thinking about him in such terms made him feel annoyed and… slightly offended. He had no idea when things had gotten so clear for him in regards to his feelings for Sasuke, but ‘boyfriend’ was an insulting term to describe what they had, Naruto knew that now.

But… Hinata was his ‘girlfriend’ wasn’t she? And he wasn’t offended by it when it came to her. Because… that was what she was, plain and simple.

Plain. And. Simple.

He didn’t know what to think of it, though, and didn’t feel like killing himself over it either.

“Let’s just go,” he mumbled irritably, slapping Suigetsu’s arm lightly. “Lead the way.”

Suigetsu all but threw him a knowing smirk and pushed him forwards playfully. “Lighten up, princess, your prince charming isn’t going anywhere anytime soon.”

000

‘Dear Kakashi-sensei (or should I say ‘Hokage-sama’?),

I’m sorry it took me so long to write, but it’s been quite an eventful journey so far, and to be very honest, I didn’t even think about it before yesterday. Heh.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know Sasuke and I are alive and well. We’ve been sorting things out between us, and of course, we have our ups and downs, but I’m really happy right now and things are good.

Mainly, we’ve been doing a lot of travelling. Sasuke studies a lot and loves researching. We spent a couple of amazing weeks at a really great village and dropped by Suna where we also spent a few days. It was fun seeing Gaara.

We’re close to Bear Country, now. Sasuke said something about seeing their political interests, so we might go there soon.

I’m not sure when we’ll be back yet. Tell Hinata and Sakura-chan that we’re doing great. Also, tell Baa-chan and Iruka-sensei that everything is alright.

We’ll write again when we’re on our way home. Or if we end up in some deep shit.

Love,

Naruto

P.S.: Sasuke says hi.’

Kakashi folded the piece of scroll neatly in four and placed it over his desk. His visible eye was smiling, but Sakura didn’t really share the mood. Beside her, Hinata seemed to have the same
“Well, they’re alive, at least, and apparently having fun,” Kakashi stated, well humouredly. “If they haven’t killed each other yet, I don’t think they will. I hope this was useful in putting your minds at ease.”

“We didn’t think they’d kill each other,” Sakura mumbled, a little crestfallen that Naruto and Sasuke still didn’t have a date to return. But then again, Sasuke left for months at the time. “But thank you. I will speak to Tsunade-sama.”

“Thank you, Hokage-sama,” Hinata said, bowing down in gratitude. “I just hope they come home soon.”

“So do I,” Kakashi said, linking his fingers in front of his face. “After all, Naruto is a Shinobi of Konoha who is currently off duty. He needs to be back on the field soon.”

With a few parting words, the two girls left the Hokage’s office side by side, a strained silence having settled in between them.

“What’s bothering you, Hinata-chan?” Sakura couldn’t help but ask gently as they walked down the hall, unconsciously fishing out for a sense of empathy since, surely, Hinata was feeling the same restlessness she was feeling, if the sad look on her face was any indication.

“I’m glad Naruto’s okay,” the Hyuuga heiress said, tucking a strand of her long hair behind her ear. “I guess I just… I thought that he’d write to me as well. But he didn’t even say that he was feeling homesick, or that he missed me.”

In spite of herself, the same sentiment brought a pang of hurt to Sakura’s chest.

“Don’t think about it too hard!” she said, patting Hinata’s shoulder with a forced smile. “Naruto is terribly dense, and besides, he wouldn’t write mushy things in a letter for Kakashi-sensei, it would be embarrassing! I’m sure he misses you. He didn’t want to get sentimental so he didn’t write to you because he’s just playing strong.”

Nodding, Hinata looked at her curiously. “Does Uchiha-san ever write to you?”

Sakura’s smile faltered, but she kept her voice steady. “He never writes,” she admitted, with a natural shrug. “But that’s just him. He’s a man of few words, so knowing he’s okay is enough for me.”

It was Hinata’s turn to force a smile. “Do you really think they’re getting along?” she asked, her dispassionate tone not matching the curve in her lips.

Sakura bit on her lower lip and looked at the floor, to her walking feet. She was positive they were getting along. If Naruto hadn’t claimed to be homesick, that meant that he wasn’t, and that said a lot about how things were going with Sasuke.

But it wasn’t like she could be that blunt to Hinata, because the girl loved Naruto and that love only allowed her to understand a small part of his relationship with the Uchiha. She wasn’t stupid, she knew a few things, but it was best to keep them in the dark and pretend neither of them were aware of what those two were probably doing.

Pretending was easier. Denial made it easier to bear, and in a way, Sakura kept convincing herself that she was wrong and that, indeed, those two didn’t mean to each other as much as they did. She had always pretended, even to herself, even though she had seen it from the very beginning.
She just couldn’t have it. She couldn’t accept the pain of being second next to them, and of being easily discarded. She knew she was loved, though, but… it just wasn’t the same.

And Hinata… well, Sakura never wanted her to feel with Naruto the same way she felt with Sasuke – she didn’t deserve it, and she was too pure and gentle to comprehend certain things. She and Naruto would be together and have a family and be happy, and that was how it was supposed to be. Sakura and Sasuke… well, if Naruto and Hinata were together, it was easier to work her relationship with Sasuke. And that was all she focused on.

“Of course they are,” Sakura reassured her. “They care about each other. They’re best friends! When they come home, things will be different and everything will be better, you’ll see! They needed this, so and so did we.”

Sakura felt proud of herself for being able to smile wider this time. “We’ll be able to be a proper family, which was something Naruto has always wanted. Team 7 will be alright again, and you’ll be a part of it, too!”

Thankfully, this seemed to cheer the shy girl up considerably, because she returned the smile, more honestly this time. “I really hope so!”

But as they parted ways, Sakura couldn’t help but doubt her own words.

Would it really be like that? Would those two ever even allow it?

Please, just come home…

000

They had basically spent the day doing pretty simple and mundane stuff for the city, mainly running errands for the nobles that required a lot of moving, delivering messages, fetching up important documents for them and escorting young maidens on their strolls around Shack. While it was an easy way to make money that kept them busy, Naruto found that it was also excruciatingly boring. Suigetsu explained to him that Shack was a rather peaceful city and that there wasn’t a lot of crime going on, especially since Bear Country usually took care of the more serious threats, not to protect the city, but usually to protect themselves from a greater evil. Sometimes random trouble makers invaded Shack and tried to steal and fuck things up, but it wasn’t exactly an everyday occurrence, and really, the nobles, both native and passers-by from other countries were so snobbish they enjoyed immensely relying on real Shinobi to get their shit done and having their backs covered. Some even wanted to hire Taka as personal body guards, but they were enjoying a bit of peace and quiet in a steady home for a while, and no-one was really interested in licking anyone’s boots anyway.

By lunch time, Naruto could at least understand that this kind of job had a few perks. They both found themselves in a large kitchen of some noble’s mansion, sitting at a large table as the (far too many) servants finished some extravagant meal after running an errand and reporting to the lord the success of their errand. They had been invited to stay and ‘have something to eat’, and while they hadn’t been welcomed to the main hall, the absurd amount of food presented to them in the kitchen didn’t make Naruto feel offended at all. Not to mention that they had received quite a large tip for having just delivered a gift wrapped box of high value to a damsel staying at an Inn across the city (a lover, Naruto supposed, since the lord was married).

There was all sorts of fruits, freshly baked bread, cheese, exquisite meat, three different types of juice, and wine. Suigetsu wasn’t shy in digging in, so Naruto didn’t feel the need to hold back either.
They ate until they were stuffed, and Suigetsu even had a few glasses of wine, and while Naruto had been tempted to try some as well, he decided that it was best if he didn’t in case he had to drag the guy’s drunken ass back home since he didn’t listen to Naruto’s warning that he shouldn’t get himself drunk.

To Naruto’s surprise, Suigetsu was no light weight and even finished the pitcher of wine as Naruto decided to clean up the table from the mess they had made. The cook (a chubby woman in her mid-fifties) was nice enough to give them a bag full of bread, cookies, some tea leaves and vegetables for them to take with them that Naruto was very thankful for.

He wondered if that tea was good and whether Sasuke would like it. Sasuke liked tea, maybe this would please him. He’d make sure to brew some for him later.

“This is the life, heh, Naruto-chan?” Suigetsu said, elbowing him playfully as they made their way through the crowd towards their last appointment of the day, surprisingly lucid and steady even though his speech was a bit slurred. “This beats a lot of jobs, I’d say. We get free stuff all the time and make money every day. It’s not a lot but it’s enough to save a bit and not worry about our next meal. It’s rather nice.”

“Yeah…” Naruto agreed absently.

This was definitely not a bad way to live at all, and Naruto couldn’t help but wonder if this would be the kind of life he and Sasuke would lead if they were to stay together. There were so many possibilities for them, so many outcomes, and yet, Naruto couldn’t find one that would be perfect for the both of them.

This was fine, for now, and Naruto was enjoying the peace and being more in touch with Sasuke’s past, but they would have to move on eventually; this was just a temporary thing so they could make some money to get back on the road.

He wondered what Sasuke wanted to do? They couldn’t stay with Taka forever and Naruto had made it clear that he wanted to return to Konoha; maybe not right now, but definitely sometime soon. Sasuke had no interest in the village still, and Naruto...

He couldn’t help but huff. Why did they have to be so different? And now that things were becoming clear for them, now that they had grown closer…

“I like you,” Suigetsu said, with a twisted grin, eyeing him appreciatively. “Saviour of the Shinobi world and all that, and yet you’re travelling like a hobo next to Sasuke. You must really like him a lot, I guess. I mean, the guy’s an ass, but he’s a natural leader; can lure you in like a fly to light. Plus, you have a piece of that pristine Uchiha ass, you can consider yourself privileged.”

Naruto made a face but didn’t comment. It wasn’t like he disliked Suigetsu, but he had an open way of speaking that was able to either make him feel at ease or very uncomfortable. Besides, he didn’t know him enough to trust him with personal things, so it wasn’t like he was going to tell him that Sasuke was dating a girl and that his ‘pristine Uchiha ass’ wasn’t exactly exclusive.

“Hey, hold on,” Suigetsu said, grabbing his arm to stop him. With an inquisitive look, Naruto watched him rummage inside the small pouch around his waist before taking something out of it and shoving it towards Naruto’s chest, who clumsily grabbed it with the hand that wasn’t carrying the bag they had been given. Suigetsu winked at him before resuming walking with his hands linked behind his head.

Looking down, Naruto found a small plastic bottle that contained a transparent substance inside and
three small square silvery packages. He blinked at the items in his hand confusedly for a while until his eyes managed to read the label of the bottle, and everything clicked instantly.

In panicked embarrassment, he quickly shoved the bottle of lube and the three condoms inside the pocket of his pants, afraid that the people around him might see them.

“Suigetsu!” He called out outraged after the other man, running to fall into step beside him, who merely eyed him with amusement. “What the hell! Why did you give me this?! More importantly, why are you carrying stuff like this around?!”

“Well, a guy needs to be prepared at all times,” Suigetsu replied, shrugging with his grin still in place. “And I thought you might need them. You and Sasuke haven’t done the deed yet, right?”

“That’s none of your business!” Naruto yelled, and noticing that he was being way too loud, he felt himself blushing heavily. He was seriously annoyed that Suigetsu, someone he didn’t know at all, would meddle in between his and Sasuke’s affairs and just… shove such things his way as if he knew anything.

“Please, man, spare me the useless excuses, there’s no way you two have fucked with the way you interact,” Suigetsu dismissed easily. “You guys want to fuck each other so bad you can smell it, it’s kind of gross. And here I was thinking Sasuke was frigid.”

“That’s not…” Naruto stammered, keeping his voice low but unable to keep the horror from his voice. “We don’t… We don’t really… and he’s not… I mean, we did… but that’s…!”

_Frigid_ wasn’t something he could say Sasuke had ever been, at least where it concerned him, but he could get that he was likely to give off that vibe in spite of his looks and imposing demeanour.

Still, he didn’t like how easily Sasuke’s ex-teammate talked about him or their sex life, and definitely didn’t like how he was meddling in.

Nevertheless, even if he wanted to be angry, he was too embarrassed for words.

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t care.” Suigetsu seemed highly entertained by Naruto’s reaction. “I just thought you might need a little help. You can’t fuck a guy like you fuck a girl, you know. Make sure you make use of both the lube and the condoms, though. Or make sure Sasuke does, whatever floats your boat.”

If Naruto wasn’t so mortified – and completely taken off guard by the situation – he would’ve said something smart and probably offensive, but as it was, he simply gapped and stuttered, unable to form a single coherent sentence. To his credit, Suigetsu was still looking smug, but he didn’t seem to want to press the issue further or tease him more, so Naruto gave up on trying to feel offended by his perceptiveness and making a fool of himself. So he kept his mouth shut.

Wow, was he _that_ obvious? Were _they_ that obvious? Sure, Taka had seen them kissing already, but from that to their sexual tension being obvious went a long way, or so he thought.

But… well, he and Sasuke had talked about wanting to have sex with each other but they hadn’t exactly thought about a specific date or anything like that, and while Naruto didn’t know how sex with a girl went, from the experience he had with Hinata, he had an idea how things would go between a man and a woman.

But it wasn’t like a certain part of male’s body would self-lubricate like a vagina did, and surely that particular hole wasn’t the most hygienic so… even if neither he nor Sasuke had a chance of getting pregnant, the items Suigetsu provided were obviously essential for safe sex. Safe… _male on male_
sex.

So… should he feel thankful that Sasuke’s friend had actually been kind enough to help them by providing something essential? They had established the eagerness, but everything else was still unknown. What would happen, when, how, who did what and who put what where… those were things Naruto had thought about in fantasies that probably had nothing to do with how things would be in real life. But this to say that he hadn’t thought that far ahead in terms of what they’d need to get it done.

Why hadn’t he thought of it before? What if they were to have the impulse and found themselves empty handed? How awkward would it be? Sasuke would definitely be mad at him, but then again, it was also Sasuke’s duty to think about such things, wasn’t it?

“Thanks,” Naruto ended up mumbling shyly.

“No problem,” Suigetsu said, winking at him. “If getting Sasuke laid will remove the stick that’s lodged up his ass, I’m all for it.”

In spite of everything, Naruto couldn’t help but laugh.

000

It was the middle of the day when the five of them reunited outside the temple to meet with the council to deliver their reports. Unsurprisingly, Naruto’s and Suigetsu’s reports didn’t have more than a couple of lines written for each of the missions, which exasperated Sasuke and made Karin angry, who started yelling at them before promptly forcing them to re-write the whole thing.

Sasuke was rather surprised by the amount of money he and Naruto were given by Juugo for their part. It was no fortune, but he had definitely not expected it to be such a comfortable amount either. Or maybe he just wasn’t used to money anymore. After all, Suigetsu was complaining that the payments were getting worse.

Sasuke was more than used to living without money by now, and when he did need it to buy clothes or other essential goods, he just worked for it, but it wasn’t a main priority. He thought that he and Naruto could definitely leave Shack in only a few days and proceed on their journey soon.

All the way down to the forest towards their place, Karin kept complaining about how she was sweating like a pig and wanted to go to the beach to chill out, and Sasuke was more than tired of listening to her incessant yammering, not to mention they hadn’t eaten lunch yet and he was starving. Thankfully, Naruto and Suigetsu were given free food and tea.

Karin had been in a foul mood since the previous night, and while she hadn’t pushed the issue, Sasuke knew she was dying to ask him about his relationship with Naruto and torturing her female overemotional brain with questions of why and how that she wanted answers to but knew he wouldn’t provide them.

Suigetsu, though, was in high spirits (Sasuke could tell he had been drinking even though he was pretty stable), so he suggested they had a pic-nic down at the beach, an idea no-one disagreed with.

Naruto, for his part, was abnormally quiet. He kept avoiding Sasuke’s gaze, but he looked more uncomfortable than anything else, so Sasuke had no idea what was going through his mind. They had barely spoken to each other the whole day, but Naruto wasn’t exactly trying to avoid him since he talked to him and had even looked excited that they had gotten free tea since it was something Sasuke enjoyed. He guessed that Suigetsu had probably said something to him that had upset him,
but Naruto wasn’t the kind of person to keep things in, so surely he’d talk about it, soon.

The path down to the beach was very rocky, the foliage around them dense. They were carrying a lot of things with them - food, towels and an extra set of clothes since they’d be making a detour to the waterfalls to wash up later on their way back home – so the ten minute journey was a bit bumpy, but as soon as they sighted the beach, Sasuke realized that, indeed, it was worth it.

The beach was nothing more than a very small corner surrounded by rocks. They were lucky the sea was calm and that the tide wasn’t high, otherwise they’d barely have enough space to stretch their towels without something being carried away by the waves, but today they did have enough space to be comfortable, and Sasuke found that he enjoyed the beach immensely.

The sand was clean and soft under his feet and the water was clear as glass, glittering beautifully under the late afternoon sun. The scents of the sea relaxed him.

Juugo had offered earlier in the day to cut Sasuke’s hair, so the two of them stretched a towel and knelt over it, Sasuke in front of Juugo.

Naruto seemed to have brightened up at the prospect of swimming in the ocean, so he didn’t hold himself back from taking off his clothes and running to the water in his ridiculous vibrant yellow boxers since he didn’t have swimming trunks. Karin was more than happy to undress as well but keeping her black plain panties and bra. Naruto actually blushed when he saw her and tried to look away as he randomly swam to his own content. Sasuke couldn’t help but smirk at Naruto’s still so childish innocence. Karin was a good looking woman, it was only natural that he, who was usually interested in women, would find her attractive. For some reason, this didn’t upset him.

Suigetsu, on the other hand, had stripped until he was stark naked and gloriously showing off his assets as he calmly walked towards the water.

“You fucking disgusting pig, put some clothes on!” Karin yelled irritably, her cheeks rather red at seeing him so carelessly flashing what no-one was interested to see. “No one wants to see that!”

“Don’t pretend to be such a prude, four eyes,” the other dismissed teasingly, kicking the water in her direction. “Be quiet and take a good look while I pretend you’re not enjoying yourself.”

A very angry Karin then threw herself at him and the two proceeded to engage in a rather ridiculous fight that at least one of them was clearly enjoying while Naruto looked at them, unsure if it was okay to stay in the water on not. The whole scene amused Sasuke immensely.

With a kunai, Juugo trimmed Sasuke’s hair carefully, and with a gentleness that was probably unnecessary. Sasuke enjoyed the quiet companionship. He had to admit that he had missed it, too. Juugo had always been faithful to him, a gentle soul in spite of his cursed nature, never asking for anything in return. If this was because of Kimimaro or not, Sasuke couldn’t tell, but he thought that, somehow, he had never been a substitute in Juugo’s eyes. What had kept Juugo and Kimimaro together was very different from what had made him join Sasuke, and even though they hadn’t spoken for years, Sasuke could feel Juugo’s obvious fondness for him. Still, he didn’t ask questions or make demands. He seemed content enough that he had the chance to have him around.

He had definitely liked Juugo. He couldn’t pinpoint exactly how their bond had been formed or when, but it had been there. It still was.

If Sasuke had to be honest with himself… he had missed Taka, weird and crazy as they all were. He was no better. He had no idea what he’d do in the future, depending on what happened between him and Naruto, but he thought that it wouldn’t be so bad if he could stay with them once in a while.
Naruto left the water just as Juugo was finishing up with Sasuke’s hair – Sasuke had requested that he left his fringe long to cover his rinnegan when it showed. As expected of Juugo, he quietly cleaned things up and stood to move away so as to give Naruto and Sasuke some privacy. Why he would think they needed privacy in such a situation, Sasuke couldn’t tell.

Naruto landed on his rear heavily beside Sasuke just as he was watching the large, man stretching a kitchen towel over the sand not too far from them, getting things ready for them to eat.

Naruto hadn’t sat too close to him so as to not get him wet. Sasuke turned his head to him and was momentarily fascinated but the way droplets of water ran down his body and how strangely blue his eyes were under the hot sun. He could smell the ocean on him, too.

“You hair looks good,” Naruto said casually, reaching out a wet hand to run it through Sasuke’s hair before brushing his still rather long fringe to the side to reveal the eye it was covering. “But this should totally go.”

“No,” Sasuke retorted, grabbing for Naruto’s wrist and pushing it down. “I want it this way.”

Naruto smiled slightly and shrugged his shoulders. “Okay,” he said softly. “You’re not going to take a swim?”

“No.”

They looked at each other for a while, but Naruto’s expression was still confusing to Sasuke. When his friend dragged himself closer so he could lean on him, Sasuke frowned.

“You’re wet, and you’re soaking up my clothes,” he complained, feeling the cold water in Naruto’s body pass through to his t-shirt and shorts. However, he didn’t push him away.

“Just let me be, Sasuke, don’t be prissy,” Naruto retorted, leaning his head on his shoulder and pulling his knees to his chest. “I’m not used to being away from you for so long.”

“You were away from me for almost eight years, I fail to see how that’s an issue now,” Sasuke replied, a little annoyed that Naruto’s hair was wetting his face and dripping water all the way down his neck.

“Shut up.”

“What is it,” Sasuke asked, sensing the abnormal behaviour. “You’re acting weird.”

Naruto huffed and hugged his knees tighter. “I think it’s kind of stupid but… well, I have to tell you,” he mumbled sheepishly, lowering his voice in fear that Juugo might listen. “Suigetsu kind of… he gave me condoms and… lube.”

Sasuke looked down at the top of Naruto’s wet hair with his eyebrows quirked upwards in surprise.

“Why would he do that?”

Naruto shrugged. “I guess he thought we needed it? I didn’t tell him anything about us, but they saw us kissing yesterday and I guess we’re not exactly very discreet, but…” Naruto looked up at him, hesitance in his eyes. “I mean, he’s not wrong. We do need them… don’t we? It’s not like we can just... do it.”

“I know that,” Sasuke said plainly. For some reason, Naruto’s awkwardness was very entertaining. “It doesn’t mean it’s any of his business.”
“Well, it’s not like we could’ve afforded it anyway,” Naruto pointed out with a sigh, clearly relieved that Sasuke hadn’t reacted badly to it. “Now we have money, but… I don’t know about you, but I’d be embarrassed to death of buying something like that in front of any of them.” He touched Sasuke’s thigh carefully and gave it a small squeeze. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“No,” Sasuke muttered, looking at Suigetsu with his eyes narrowed, because, really, that guy was just absurd. But perceptive. And useful. Sasuke was a little dumbfounded at himself for not having considered that they would need such things for sex. It wasn’t like he didn’t know they would – it was pure common sense – it just hadn’t crossed his mind. “I just hope he doesn’t plan on meddling in our sex lives.”

“I don’t think so. Or rather, I hope not. Still… he only gave me three condoms.”

Eyes moving towards Naruto again, Sasuke gave him a small smirk. “We haven’t even done it yet and you’re already planning on fucking like bunnies?”

And there it was, Naruto’s outraged expression, completely worth the teasing.

“No!” he sputtered, shaking his head from side to side vigorously, his cheeks so red his eyes seemed even bluer. “That’s… totally not what I meant, damn it!”

“You don’t need to get flushed, idiot,” Sasuke said, pinching the hand on his thigh playfully. After so many years, he had definitely forgotten how much he had loved teasing the idiot when they were kids. Naruto had matured a lot since then, but the childish way that he still got easily riled up was the same.

Naruto rolled his eyes and bit on his lower lip in frustration. “Never mind,” he mumbled, removing his hand from Sasuke’s thigh and burying his face in his folded arms.

Sasuke watched him for a few seconds, an undefinable feeling filling his chest that was a mixture of something amazing with something terribly bitter. Nevertheless, when he felt the impulse to touch his best friend, he didn’t stop himself from putting his hand over the other’s head and caressing it carefully.


Naruto lifted his head up and made a pouting face at him before blushing again, a small smile tugging at his lips. Sometimes, Sasuke couldn’t really understand how a twenty year old could still keep such a youthful innocence, especially after everything he had gone through.

Sasuke’s hand slid down to the back of Naruto’s neck, massaging it gently.

“Don’t you worry about it?” Naruto asked, eyeing his features intensely, clearly pleased by the willing way Sasuke kept touching him. Sasuke knew it made him happy, especially when he was the one to initiate it. Somehow, more and more Sasuke felt himself wanting to, especially since he had officially opened himself into allowing his soul to just… go with everything that involved Naruto, for as long as he could.

Even if every single brush of skin burned him from the inside out.

“Should I?” Sasuke said, with a small snort. “Isn’t this something we both agreed on? I don’t think it’s of use to make assumptions or plans. We’ll just go through the motions as we’ve always done, and if somehow we do end up needing to fuck like dogs in heat, I will get everything we need if you’re so embarrassed. Without Suigetsu’s help.”
“You’re an ass,” Naruto stated, even though he did release a good-natured chuckle.

“So you keep saying.”

Naruto sighed, leaning on him, again. “I just kind of… now that it’s out there that we both want it and we can do it… I wonder when we’ll…”

“Let’s fucking eat!” Suigetsu’s loud yell shook them both out of their own private world. “Aw, man, I’m fucking starving!”

“Please put some clothes on,” Juugo said in a polite but exasperated way as the white haired man ran towards the impeccable arrangement of food he had made. Sasuke found his waving private parts rather disturbing to look at.

“Shove it, Juugo.” Suigetsu landed on the sand next to the larger man, dripping water everywhere just as Karin was making her way to the pic-nic spot as well, twisting her hair to remove the excess of water in it. “This is my property and I can walk naked if I want to.”

“Why do I have to put up with you?” Juugo lamented, but it wasn’t heartfelt at all.

“Your life would be booooooring without me,” Suigetsu pointed out, conceitedly.

“As if,” Karin hissed, making a face.

Sasuke and Naruto shared a final look between them before the blond got up and extended his hand to Sasuke, who took it and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. They made their way to the other three already comfortably settled.

000

“Naruto, did you know that Karin is also an Uzumaki?” Sasuke decided to comment, once they had finished eating the simple meal that would also serve as their dinner.

Sasuke didn’t know what had made him throw that fact out there. It wasn’t like it would make a difference in Karin’s or Naruto’s lives, but somehow, since neither Juugo nor Suigetsu seemed to have talked about it with her, Sasuke felt like it was something Naruto should know since he and Karin had actually crossed paths.

The sun was already setting, but it was still nice out there, the cry of seagulls loud above them.

“Whaaaaaat?” Both Karin and Naruto yelled in surprise, looking at each other since they were sitting right across each other.

“No way! Seriously?!” Naruto asked, looking from Sasuke to Karin quickly, his eyes very wide.

“You’re an Uzumaki?!” Karin asked back, just as surprised. “I thought there was something familiar about your chakra, so that’s it!”

“Why didn’t you tell me before, Sasuke you ass!” Naruto complained loudly, punching Sasuke’s shoulder with unnecessary force, only to receive an equally strong punch to his knee in return.

“I only remembered it now,” Sasuke grunted in annoyance, throwing a warning look his way. “It’s not like that fact has exactly been terribly important to me. I had other things on my mind after I heard of it.”

“Ah, yeah, we heard about it before leaving for the battlefield during the war!” Suigetsu
remembered, thoughtfully scratching his stomach.

“And you didn’t fucking tell me?” Karin protested beside him.

“But… how did you know?” Naruto asked Sasuke, excitedly. “Why was it brought up?”

“That’s a long story,” Juugo intervened seriously.

“Well, never mind that!” Naruto all but dismissed, easily distracted in his excitement, his focus turning to Karin as if, all of a sudden, she had become the most interesting and fascinating thing in the world. “Now that I think about it, my mom had hair as red as yours and…” He jumped a little in his seating spot, clapping his hands together “Holy shit! This is so awesome! We’re family, right? Are there any more Uzumaki out there? Where are they? Where’s your family? How come I didn’t know of this before?!”

“Calm down, pipsqueak, I can’t answer all your questions at the same time,” Karin interrupted with a lopsided grin, pushing her glasses up her nose with her middle finger. “Not to mention that I don’t think there’s much I can tell you.”

“I don’t know anything about my family or the Uzumaki clan, so I’d be glad to hear anything about them, really!” Naruto insisted, to which Karin nodded.

For the next few minutes, Karin seemed happy to tell Naruto about her, but there was also a graveness to her features that Sasuke wasn’t used to seeing. But, as he came to understand from listening to the tale, it was justifiable.

Like Sasuke himself, Karin had once had a home and a family, a village, but it was all destroyed during a local war, leaving her with nothing. She had been the only one who had managed to survive thanks to her extraordinary sensory skills. She had known a lot of people were coming to attack the village, but it had all happened so fast that she had only had time to hide, thus not being able to warn anyone about the attack. Then, she told them about how she managed to escape to another town, where two guys had noticed her bloodline and planned on kidnapping her to sell her to the black market. She had been very weak, malnourished and ill after so many days of traveling in her grief, wounded and lost. Luckily, Orochimaru rescued her and offered her a home.

Sasuke had heard about her past with Orochimaru vaguely from Kabuto, but hearing more details of her life from Karin’s mouth somehow made him empathise with her in ways he didn’t think he ever would.

Karin was the same as he and Naruto, and he hadn’t been fully aware.

Chancing a glance at his companion, he could see Naruto looking at her with compassion, clearly thinking the same thing.

“I’m not sure if anyone has survived the massacre, to be honest, or even if someone managed to run away,” Karin was saying, adjusting the strap of her bra and looking at the ocean with a distant look in her eyes. “If they did, they’re probably hiding. I left with Orochimaru-sama and never looked for another trace of my family or my clan again. I honestly think they’re all dead, otherwise, for sure, Orochimaru-sama would’ve known.”

“I guess,” Naruto muttered, sadly. “But, you know, there are probably more members of the Uzumaki clan out there. After all, many decades ago when the Shinobi world was at open war, they were seen as threat, so those who weren’t killed surely fled. It’s impossible that there are no Uzumaki descendants.”
Sasuke had to admit that he was impressed by Naruto’s knowledge on the subject, or rather, he’d never thought that Naruto had even considered his lineage before.

Karin turned her face to him and gave him a small smile. Sasuke watched the interaction as anxiety filled him. Even Juugo and Suigetsu seemed to be listening attentively. “I suppose that’s a probability,” she agreed, with a shrug. “Still, I… I have my own life now, and I think it’s useless to look for people who probably don’t even exist anymore. I don’t think I could tell you about the village and the Uzumaki customs if I tried. I honestly can’t remember much anymore.”

“That’s okay, at least we found each other!” The smile Naruto flashed at her clearly took her a bit off guard. “I’m half Uzumaki, but we’re still blood related, even if distant. I never thought I’d ever find family, and surely neither did you! So, yeah, I think that it’s pretty awesome that we’ve come across each other, don’t you think? I mean, what are the odds?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Karin replied, with a nod. “Although, you and I lead very different lives, Naruto. We don’t belong in the same world, that’s for sure.”

“It doesn’t mean we aren’t still family,” Naruto contradicted cheerfully, crossing his arms over his chest as if it made him look more certain of himself. “Aren’t we family right now? We have each other’s backs, even if only for a little while during my stay here with Sasuke. I’ll definitely want to see more of you in the future, so I’ll make sure we keep in touch!”

“I suppose that would be nice,” Karin conceded, with a genuine smile at him. Then, that distant, dreamy expression took over her features once more, and she looked from Sasuke to Naruto in a way that seemed either sad or endeared. Sasuke couldn’t really understand it, but it made him feel uncomfortable.

“It’s… nice knowing I still have family out there, definitely.”

Not knowing why, exactly, he felt suddenly upset, Sasuke looked away from her.

The only thing he knew about that look in her eyes was the same longing and loneliness he had seen in his own reflection many times. Naruto had looked at him with those same eyes, too. He didn’t understand why he had never noticed before, or maybe Karin was just dropping her mask now.

It was as if she didn’t know how to react to knowing there was family out there. Naruto was the saviour of the world, well-known and respected, always there for everybody, and a Good Samaritan to the bone. If Karin was his blood, he’d definitely turn the world around for her if she would ever need it.

By his chakra, Karin had been able to tell this since the very beginning, and still she was moved.

People like her and Sasuke… they never expected kindness from others. But Sasuke had Naruto, and because of him, he had opened up his heart to allow himself to see that, indeed, there was love and kindness out there, and that the world as it was had good people in it that were worth fighting for.

Karin had always been strong, Sasuke knew. So strong that no one dared to step on her and she did keep people at arms’ length. But, for some reason, Sasuke hoped that Karin was able to understand that there were definitely people out there that wouldn’t abandon her and leave her behind.

But then again, despite their conflicts, maybe she already knew that both Juugo and Suigetsu would give their lives for her just as they had once put them on the line for Sasuke.

Taka was no group of traitors. They looked after each other, and that was why Sasuke had chosen them. They were all incredible people he could relate to, flawed as they might be.
The emotional conflict inside of him made him feel burdened and irritated. He didn’t need this at this point of his life. His longing and distress towards Naruto were already draining enough.

Next to him, Naruto was shifting and his body was shaking. Sasuke almost released a growl of annoyance because he sincerely didn’t need the drama.

“Please tell me you’re not going to cry…” he begged, but Naruto was already sobbing violently and throwing himself at Karin’s neck, and basically smashing the food still on the towel between them with his clumsy knees.

“Karin-chan!” he hiccupped in Karin’s neck, and even though she was usually a very affectionate, touchy feely person, she hadn’t been expecting the blond’s hug at all. Still, she smiled and hugged him back a little awkwardly before trying to push him away, throwing a few insults at him and calling him a pervert.

If the scene had been any different, Sasuke would’ve felt bothered by the fact that both Naruto and Karin were practically naked and indecently close.

“Well, this is definitely some hilarious shit,” Suigetsu commented, leaning back on his hands and watching the two Uzumaki struggling next to him with a visible sparkle in his eyes. “I wonder if finding incest hot turns me into a psychopath.”

And by the very obvious way certain parts of his body were reacting to those two, he wasn’t even joking.

Juugo could only groan. Sasuke, instead, grabbed for a random piece of clothing lying nearby and viciously threw it at Suigetsu’s face, sand flying everywhere. “You better cover that thing up before I lose my temper,” he threatened smoothly, ignoring the other’s protests while spitting out sand.

Fortunately, Suigetsu caved in and got up to look for his own clothes and put them on. All the while, Naruto and Karin seemed to be talking over each other about something Sasuke didn’t feel like listening to.

Suddenly, he felt terribly tired and lonely, and he couldn’t really tell why. All he knew was that… maybe it was finally time to let Naruto in on what he was really doing during his travels.

All that talk about family and blood relatives… those were issues that still messed with him and that he and Naruto had yet to talk about in a more serious note.

Naruto still had family, and Sasuke was happy for both him and Karin. They deserved such a simple knowledge of themselves, just that little piece of something better in their lives, even if wouldn’t make any difference in the end. They would never feel like they were completely individualized ever again, if that made sense.

But Naruto wanted to work with Sasuke in the future. Regardless of what would happen to them, they wouldn’t abandon each other, and if Sasuke finally told him what he needed, what he wanted and exactly why he couldn’t be in Konoha…

Maybe Naruto would understand. Maybe they could work together for both their sakes, equal ideals and even individual ideals.

Maybe… just maybe Naruto would come to understand him for good and think twice about all the hopes and dreams he still had.

TBC…
I hope you liked it? *Hides in a corner*

Now that Taka is kind of out of my system (or should I say, Suigetsu? I don’t know why he’s everywhere being a fabulous ass during the entire chapter?) I can focus on what’s really important.

Which is, of course, Naruto and Sasuke. Next chapter will be kind of emotional and intense. Heavy, too. It’s a chapter I’ve been slowly working on and something I need to make them go through, definitely. These two have been strengthening their bond and their longing for each other has grown, and yet, there are many things working against them and those things need to be approached. I feel like Sasuke’s reaching a certain… state of mind. He looks and acts like he’s in control and accepting but… I think that, when he cracks, things will be complicated. And I think it doesn’t take much for him to crack.

However, Taka will still have a relevant role throughout the story, and I plan to approach more of Naruto’s relationship with Karin!

Anyway, thank you all for reading! To the new readers of FWWR, welcome, and I hope you enjoy the ride!

I will reply to comments tomorrow if all goes well! Sorry for the delay!

See ya next time!
Two Halves I

Chapter Notes

Okay this wasn’t supposed to be this big, but there was no way to cut it. Brace yourself for an emotional chapter, guys!

Also, this might be confusing and you might have a few questions, so PLEASE READ MY NOTES AT THE END OF THE CHAPTER ONCE YOU’RE FINISHED READING!

Not betaed. Please let me know if you find terrible typos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We'll Rise

Part IX: Two Halves I

Naruto swallowed hard as he pressed his sweaty forehead against the rocky wall of the bathroom, the nails of his left hand scrapping its surface before forming a fist. Inside his chest, an irritated moan threatened to leave him while his breath came out in quick gasps that he had a hard time controlling.

Licking at his dry lips, Naruto sped up the desperate movements of his right hand on his cock, feeling the muscles in his body tense automatically at the approach of his climax. Fuck, he was leaking, he was so hard, pre-cum dribbling helplessly from the tip and adding the most exquisite lubrication to his self-pleasuring.

Still, he felt like it wasn’t enough. Nothing seemed to be enough nowadays.

He closed his eyes tightly, wishing that he wasn’t alone there. He imagined that a strong, familiar body was behind him, a muscular chest pressed to his back as soft lips brushed his ear while a low, sinful voice teased him with seductive words he knew too well.

Look at you… Sasuke would whisper. Losing yourself so willingly for me. You could die for letting your guard down like this, you know?

Naruto gasped quietly, his heart rate speeding up so much it made him feel dizzy. He twisted his hand over his cock as he pumped it at a more leisured pace, eagerly trying to mimic Sasuke’s particular way of touching him when he wanted Naruto losing control and begging for release in his hands. What he wouldn’t give to call out his lover’s name in a plea, to have him there, with him, pleasing him…

But he couldn’t. Outside of the bathroom everybody was getting up and ready for the day, there was no way he could call Sasuke to come to him – they’d be teased until the end of times by the others.

Naruto…
Sasuke would press his naked body against him, his erection firm, coming to rest between his ass cheeks and he’d move, thrusting up against him slowly and provocatively, the length of his cock brushing against his anus as his hand jerked him off and his mouth did the most exquisite things to the back of his neck, his breathing hot against him. Naruto could swear he could feel it as if it was real, too far gone in his own fantasy as he was. He couldn’t get enough of how good Sasuke’s body felt against him, of how much he wished that agonizing thrusting would stop being teasing to give him what he wanted.

I want you fuck you…

Unconsciously, Naruto held his breath and spread his legs as further apart as his trousers – lowered to his knees – allowed, as if readying himself to submit his body to fantasy Sasuke.

Gods, please do…

He felt his whole being thrumming with desire as he tightened his hold on his cock. He needed more, wanted more because everything just felt empty and he needed to be…

Have you no shame? Sasuke’s voice teased him in his mind.

“Urgh…” Naruto let out weakly, feeling his cheeks catch fire and his legs tremble.

Say you want me…

He needed to feel whole, complete. He needed Sasuke in him, around him, possessing him in any and every way, marking him, consuming him…

When would it ever stop?

“Fuck…”

Why wasn’t Sasuke there? He thought frantically. Why wasn’t he fucking him against that stupid wall already?!

Naruto…

Too lost in his own pleasure and frustration to fully understand what he was doing, Naruto unclenched his left fist and instinctually brought his index finger to his mouth, rolling his tongue around it to coat it with as much saliva to it as he possibly could.

Naruto…

Then, without thinking about it, he brought his shaky hand behind him, easily finding his hole and sliding his finger inside, instant excitement and surprise at the lack of resistance clouding his mind. It felt… foreign, and different, but added a whole new level of pleasure to the whole situation he hadn’t known before, and Naruto was already far too close for questions, awes or explorations. Not in the right state of mind to hesitate he thrust the finger in and out of himself a few times and this made the movements in his cock a lot more awkward and uncoordinated, which added yet another layer of realism to his fantasy.

It was too much. The new sensations were so good and his cock was so hard it was bordering on painful, and if it had been Sasuke there, doing it to him, fingering him like this...

Sasuke…
“Oh, shit…” he hissed, not even lasting a whole minute while fucking himself and jerking himself off because his orgasm hit him hard and rather unexpectedly, strings of cum hitting the walls and falling to the ground as his body shook with small spasms of adrenaline.

Naruto didn’t move for a while, panting heavily and swallowing the excess of saliva in his mouth as he willed himself to calm down. Once he had managed to stop shivering, he slowly slid his finger out, flinching a little at how much the ring of muscles had tensed around the digit with the orgasm.

Well, that had been intense. And… interesting.

Heaving a sigh, Naruto straightened up and lazily reached out for some toilet paper to clean his hands with, feeling oddly embarrassed by what he had just done.

He couldn’t believe he had fingered himself like that, thinking about Sasuke.

It wasn’t as if he had never masturbated to thoughts of his friends before, he thought, throwing the soiled paper to the toilet and fishing out more so he could clean the wall and the floor – it wouldn’t be good to leave traces behind.

Things between him and Sasuke had been rather tense during the last week, to say the least. Taka was always around, and the amount of daily work didn’t leave them a lot of time to sneak out somewhere to be together. Every time they so much as went down to the waterfalls to bathe without the others, they’d be teased by Suigetsu, and unfortunately, Karin had started joining in as well. They did touch more meaningfully sometimes when the others weren’t looking, and kissed if they did have a bit of time alone at the end of the day, but Naruto was always afraid that they might be interrupted when they least expected it, because Suigetsu was that kind of guy, who would come and look for them to see if they were behaving and walk in on something he definitely wasn’t supposed to see.

So, it had been a while since they had actually done something and Naruto was becoming increasingly frustrated. They had talked about having sex, but they couldn’t even afford to make out properly, let alone that.

It wasn’t just the sex that Naruto wanted, no. He missed being with Sasuke. Just Sasuke. Not that he didn’t like Taka, far from that, but…

There was a need inside him that was becoming increasingly hard to ignore, and it wasn’t something he could understand exactly what it was. It was… a need for Sasuke. It seemed simple, really, only it wasn’t. But it was driving him mad.

One could call it lust, perhaps, but to Naruto it felt like it was greater and more dangerous than that. It consumed him and made him lose himself. No, it was… a **thirst** for Sasuke’s focus on him.

Masturbating to thoughts of Sasuke just a few minutes ago had Naruto realising he wanted Sasuke to have him, and the awareness had been sudden and even a little bit surprising, but not shocking. Naruto hadn’t thought about what he wanted in sex because he hadn’t thought that it mattered between them. He had thought about fucking Sasuke and had thought about Sasuke fucking him, but those things were just fleeting considerations, lacking any real true preference because… really, he was fine with whatever happened.

Yet, in the haze of his own desire, he had wished that Sasuke had been there with him, fucking him with his fingers, owning him. If Sasuke had been there, Naruto would’ve begged to be taken, for sure. He would’ve given himself without a second thought. And this didn’t upset him, even though it did make him feel ridiculous and embarrassed at himself. He was no prostitute. He shouldn’t be willing to spread his legs for a man so easily.
Yet, just thinking about Sasuke inside him…

Because Sasuke wasn’t just any man. Sasuke was...

“Naruto, are you alive or did you go down the toilet?” Suigetsu’s voice said from the outside, knocking on the bathroom door a few times with too much force and startling him. “Hurry up man, I need to piss!”

“Hold your horses, I’ll be right out!” Naruto yelled back irritably. “Can’t a guy take a dump in peace?”

On the other side Suigetsu mumbled something that he didn’t quite catch but didn’t care about, either. He was in a sour mood, and not even jerking off had helped.

Once he was out of the bathroom – Suigetsu running past him to take his place – he found that the room had already been tidied up and that Karin was currently making breakfast with Juugo, while Sasuke was sitting on his heels and seemed to be packing a few things inside his satchel.

“We’re going out today,” he said, looking up after noticing Naruto’s inquisitive stare. “Hurry up and go wash yourself up while I get some food ready for the day.”

“Out?” Naruto asked, excitement replacing his gloominess almost instantly. “You mean… just the two of us?”

Sasuke probably noticed the hopeful tone, because he smirked slightly and nodded. “Yes.”

Naruto felt curious and happy. Was Sasuke able to read his mind or something? Because this seemed too good to be true. “Where are we going?”

“Nowhere in particular,” Sasuke replied, with a shrug. “We need to talk, that’s all.”

Talk? Well, that didn’t sound as much fun to Naruto anymore. “Okay,” he muttered.

He made his way to the closet to take out a clean set of clothes, a towel and soap before heading out to the waterfall to bathe.

He had a bad feeling about this. But at least he and Sasuke would spend some time together. 000

The morning was gloomy and the air was chilly. The foliage of the forest was rather dense, so Naruto and Sasuke were mostly protected from the thin drops of rain that fell from the grey sky, and still, the blond was thankful that his friend had been sensible to suggest they brought their waterproof cloaks.

They walked at a fast pace for a while in silence, Sasuke in the front and Naruto behind him, confused as to why his friend seemed to be in such hurry when, apparently, they didn’t have a predefined destination.

While Naruto was happy that they were finally going to spend some time together, he hadn’t been happy about the ominous tone that the other had used to say that they needed to talk.

Just the thought of ‘talking’ to Sasuke made him nervous. They were at a dangerous stage of their relationship, he was aware of it. Like Sasuke, he tried to ignore the cons of what they were doing and just enjoy the peacefulness for a change. They were both volatile people, and their wishes,
frustrations and fears collided far too quickly, which was what had happened at the beginning of their journey. But they had pushed it to the side, living with their feelings as if they were real lovers, embracing affection for each other, giving in and just letting things flow for a while. Naruto liked that peacefulness and constant focus they had on each other, it made him think of what could be, but also caused him an unnecessary amount of anxiety.

There were things to be settled and decisions to be made. They couldn’t avoid those issues forever, and they couldn’t live in such a make believe world for much longer.

Besides, Naruto thought, looking at Sasuke’s back as they walked, the more time passed the more they would grow attached to what they had and the worse things would be once the journey was over.

And he was scared of the day when it would.

There was no way he could continue to evade what was of real importance anymore.

Sasuke suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around, causing Naruto to bump into his chest unexpectedly with a small noise of surprise. Looking at his friend, he met with dark eyes that were strangely clear and his breath caught, longing filling him.

Barely aware of Sasuke’s hand moving to cradle his nape, Naruto was already leaning in to meet the other’s lips halfway, hands fisting the front of Sasuke’s cloak to keep him close. Sasuke released a small moan as Naruto pried his lips apart with his tongue, seeking to taste and devour as much as he could. He felt thirsty for that, and Sasuke seemed to share his feelings, which only served to fuel his passion further.

They kissed for a while, enjoying the quiet feeling of privacy and basking in the pure bliss that was being this close in such a carefree way. Naruto could feel their connection tightening as the longing they felt for each other helped spike up their lust, and for a moment, he prayed that it was time for them already, that Sasuke had taken him out there to have him, finally. He knew it was a selfish thing to think, and he knew that sex between him and his friend would never just be something that was going to just happened because he willed it to. Even he knew that it had to mean more than that and it would, somehow, for better or worse, but while he had no intention to push it, he couldn’t help but want it.

It would always have to be Sasuke to make the move.

Sasuke was the one to pull away, panting slightly as he ran his eyes over Naruto’s features, his lips wet from the excess of saliva they had shared. Seeing the glazed look in those dark orbs, Naruto had to swallow hard to keep his self-control in check. Sasuke licked at his lips and slowly drew away from him, forcing Naruto to loosen his grip on his cloak unwillingly. His eyes didn’t leave Sasuke as he took a couple of steps backwards.

“We’ll be here for another week so we can make enough money for the rest of the journey, and then we’ll leave,” Sasuke said, once they were at a safe distance from each other once more, his voice hoarse but collected. “We’ll stop by Bear Country, as planned, and then we’ll start making our way back to Konoha.”

“What?” Naruto whispered, feeling his heart sink. He should’ve expected this, but he didn’t think they’d be returning so soon. “I mean, already? Why? It’s not even been two months yet…”

“You’re a Shinobi of Konoha, Naruto, not an information gatherer, and your absence from the village is probably giving Kakashi enough trouble as it is,” Sasuke stated. “You can’t simply leave
with no explanation and expect to be away for six months without a specific mission assigned to you.”

“I know that!” Naruto pouted. “I just…”

“It’s not like we’re going to rush on our way back,” his friend interrupted softly, his face now blank, giving away nothing. Naruto hated it when he closed off like that. “There’s still a few things I want to show you, but we’re not going to spend so many days at a time in one single place anymore. So, I thought you should know that you’ll be going home, soon.”

If Sasuke had kicked him, Naruto didn’t think it would’ve hurt half as much.

“I will be going home?” he mumbled.

Sasuke offered him an empty smirk. “Don’t act like you’re surprised; this comes as no news to you.”

Sasuke then turned around and started walking at the same fast pace as before, leaving Naruto behind, chewing nervously on his lower lip before running after him and, again, coming to walk behind him.

They were both silent for about ten minutes, but Sasuke seemed to know exactly where they were heading after all. This wasn’t a last minute decision, Naruto concluded. Sasuke had thought about this for a while.

Above them, the rain had started pouring down harder, trespassing the foliage and falling heavily over their heads, forcing them to pull their hoods up. It was a terrible day to be out taking walks, but Naruto knew better than to point it out since it wasn’t like he cared anyway. Still, he hated how even the weather seemed to be offering a proper setting for the tension that had settled between them.

Eventually, Naruto couldn’t hold his apprehension back anymore. “Is this what we’re going to talk about?” he asked Sasuke’s back loudly so he could be heard over the rain. “About how it’s going to be from here on? About us?”

Sasuke looked over his shoulder. “Yes,” he said simply, before looking away again. He made a sharp turn left to a narrow path of several slim trees and Naruto followed behind him silently.

They climbed up a small rocky hill for a while – the wind having become rather strong and cold – before Naruto spotted a black roof peeking from above a mass of trees up ahead. They walked for only about two minutes more before coming to stand in front of a red and apparently abandoned temple. It seemed to be very old, too, because the large black wooden doors had been completely destroyed and the visible windows were full of dust and broken.

“Let’s go inside,” Sasuke said without hesitation, making his way to the entrance.

“How did you know about this place?” Naruto asked curiously, happy to leave the rain.

“Juugo showed it to me the other day,” Sasuke explained simply.

The interior of the shrine it was just as plain as its exterior. The floor that had once been of polished cherry wood was now completely ruined and covered by dirt, dust, bits of nature and broken glass. It wasn’t very wide, but it had three large pillars on either side of the room that led to a set of five stairs in front of a small altar.

Even though the place was such a mess, Sasuke still lowered his head to say a small prayer, and Naruto felt compelled to do the same, clapping his hands together and muttering a few words under
his breath. Then, Sasuke quickly climbed the steps towards the altar where a few half used candles were already glued to the wood of the altar by wax as well as a cup with a old incense. Someone probably still visited that place, Naruto thought, and left the incense there. He watched, a little dumbfounded, as Sasuke made a few hand seals and used his fire jutsu to light whatever he could. Immediately, the scent of incense filled the room and the six candles were lit.

With a small sigh, Sasuke descended the steps and dropped his satchel to the ground next to one of the thick red pillars on the right while Naruto was left standing there, unsure of what to do with himself or what to think of the location his friend had chosen. There was no denying that the abandoned place was oddly beautiful in a solemn, sad way, and the sound of the rain hitting the roof above them and sliding down the tiles, creating curtains of water all around them that could be seen through the open door and broken windows made it all the more beautiful. In another situation, Naruto would think it to be devastatingly romantic. It wasn’t like he knew a lot about romance anyway, but Sasuke seemed to possess a six sense for simple beauty that Naruto himself lacked, so this was definitely impressive.

Only Naruto was sure that the purpose of their visit wasn’t a romantic one at all.

“I have been thinking about us, and I think that I’ve been going on about things the wrong way,” Sasuke started, unclasping his cloak with his hand before removing the garment from his shoulders. “As I have once said to you, I don’t think I have the right to demand answers from you, or to tell you to make a decision. I think that, now that things are as they are between us, we should talk about what we both want and… see if we can reach some kind of final decision.”

Naruto watched, motionless, as his friend shook the excess of water from his cloak. “I think that’s a good idea,” he said simply.

Sasuke quirked an eyebrow upwards. “You should make yourself comfortable, we’ll be here for a while.”

In all honesty, Naruto didn’t want to make himself more comfortable because that would give him a false sense of security he didn’t need. But Sasuke seemed to be bent on working things out with a proper posture, and while Naruto wasn’t happy, he didn’t feel like he had the right to object. After all, he had blown Sasuke off many times since they had started that journey, telling him that he couldn’t give him an answer, evading the issue of their feelings and of their future. He had been selfish so far, even though he knew it hurt Sasuke, and yet, Sasuke had been patient, playing his game. But enough was enough.

“Naruto, I think it’s time I told you what, exactly I’ve been studying and what I’ve been doing during my travels.” Walking over to the steps of the altar, he carefully placed his cloak in one of them so it could dry during their time there. “I already know how you feel about Konoha, but maybe if you understand what I want to do for this world you’ll feel differently and want to share that with me. I feel like I need to give it a shot even though I know how this is going to end.”

Sasuke’s words were well-thought out, Naruto noticed, and he had been thinking about this for a long time since he seemed to have prepared himself for some sort of outcome that, in a way, Naruto thought he should’ve prepared himself to, as well. Sasuke was a ticking bomb, and so was their relationship, regardless of how strongly they felt for each other, and they both knew some things were out of their hands.

“I told you I wanted us to work together and change the world,” Naruto muttered, just as carefully, moving his hands to the clasp on his own cloak. Sasuke turned to him and watched him remove the garment like a predator assessing a prey, stoic and motionless. Then, as Naruto shook his own cloak, Sasuke elegantly sat down on the second step, one knee pulled to his chest, his arm resting over it.
Naruto tried not to feel self-conscious of those eyes on him as he pushed Sasuke’s satchel a bit to the side with his foot and placed his cloak on top of it. Then, he sat down on the ground Indian style with his back leaning against the thick red pillar.

Nodding once, he said “I’m all ears.”

Sasuke contemplated him for a while, his expression inscrutable, before starting. “Ever since we fought against Kaguya in the war, I’ve been having this strange feeling of uneasiness,” he said. “She was defeated, but I don’t think we should have a false sense of security at all. There were many people out there pursuing the Sharingan and the Rinnegan; not just Orochimaru, Danzo and Madara, I’m sure. Certain bloodline limits are increasingly close to extinction, but I don’t think that this is a relief to anyone.”

Naruto’s eyebrows furrowed in seriousness, since the issue his friend was presenting was definitely something that even Kakashi had thought about.

“Evil people, greedy people… they will always exist,” Sasuke went on. “There will always be someone out there interested in taking over the world and becoming powerful. There will always be someone willing to take revenge for something. What Danzo and Orochimaru know… I can’t know for sure that such information hasn’t reached others as well. And that makes me feel restless.”

Looking down at his knee, Sasuke scratched at it absently. “The war brought a false sense of peace, yes, but many families were destroyed, and many villages perished in the face of the natural devastation it caused. You don’t know this because you have been locked up in Konoha all this time, and truth be told, I have avoided certain things in our journey so far so that you wouldn’t have to see it.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Naruto said quickly, a little taken aback by the confession. “How can I know what needs to be done if don’t see things for myself?”

Sasuke looked up, his eyes sharp and cutting. “That’s the question I’ve been wanting you to ask yourself ever since we parted ways at Konoha’s gate three years ago,” he said, his voice calm but filled with obvious accusation. “You were the one who focused so much on Konoha alone that you didn’t feel the need to see how things were out there or how the rest of the world was also struggling.”

“That’s not true!” Naruto defended, feeling his cheeks catch fire with outrage. “Peace comes from all the villages forming an alliance, and we all worked together to fix those issues and come to a worldwide agreement…”

“And what about everything else that doesn’t involve the main villages?” Sasuke interrupted brusquely. “What about small villages like the one we were at, filled with poor people vulnerable to disease, natural disasters and ambushes? What about people from lost clans that had to hide in woods and underground lairs to keep their bloodlines from being murdered? What about all the children that were left orphans and homeless because of the war?”

His mouth hanging open, Naruto moved it but no sound came out. He had never thought about such things. Konoha and the main villages being at peace had always been the main concern because they held a larger population and many things that were important to secure. But… of course it wasn’t all about them. While the main villages had it all, others were struggling to survive.

“It’s not just about the main villages, Naruto,” Sasuke muttered, a little more softly this time, realizing his friend was just being faced with a reality he had never considered. “There is so much to be done and so many people that need protecting.”
“You’re right,” Naruto agreed, swallowing the lump inside his throat down. “I never thought about it, but you’re right. They’re also important, of course.”

“I’ve been studying about Kaguya,” Sasuke proceeded. “I want to know more about the history of chakra and of all the main bloodline limits. I’ve been gathering as much intel on the Sharigan, Rinnegan and Byakugan as I can. I believe that, if Madara was able to unleash her, someone else might be able to as well, if they have the right information. Besides, I’m positive that there are wrong people out there in possession of my clan’s Sharingan.”

“Alright.” Bending forward, Naruto rested his elbows on his knees, impressed by his lover’s train of thought, excited, too, but also a little hesitant. “What you say makes perfect sense, but… what if you never find information on that? What if you study and research and still not come across anything? Will you just… keep traveling for answers? Away from Konoha?”

When Sasuke smirked, for some reason it made a shiver run all the way down Naruto’s spine. “That’s not all I have in mind, Naruto,” he said, almost standoffishly. “I study many things, as you have probably noticed. I’ve learned a lot during these past three years, and more and more, I am confident that my ideas can be executed.”

“Which are?”

“I want to create my own village.” Naruto’s chin fell, once more, but the other wasn’t bothered at all. “I want to take in people that are homeless, orphans and small villages that are willing and join them all in one place to create the kind of village that would be an example for the Shinobi world.”

Naruto could only stutter. “A… village? That’s… that’s insane!”

“Why should it be?” Sasuke inquired, with a disbelieved snort. “Think about it. If everything goes well I might even find lost members of lost clans out there. Maybe Uzumaki people, too. I will be able to revive those clans. With the correct political system that fixes all the flaws that the other political systems have, we’d be able to do what Madara and Hashirama couldn’t. Bringing those people together as one big family and giving them a home they will build with their own hands. We’ll always take in people who have no home to go to and give them a home that will be rightfully theirs.”

To say that Naruto’s head was spinning out of control was an understatement, and he had to straighten his back and take a few controlling breaths. It was too much information, too soon. “That’s a lot of work, and you don’t have the necessary resources to accomplish it!” he said, more than a little overwhelmed, still.

“Not right now, no,” Sasuke admitted, with a shrug that was as elegant as it was arrogant. “But I will. I know where and how to get it. I have it all figured out, Naruto. As I said, I don’t just take strolls doing nothing while I’m away. I am still learning how to live with my disability, but I will become fully capable soon and I will become stronger than anyone even without an arm.”

For a moment there, Sasuke’s confident words made Naruto’s heart beat faster with pride and admiration. If there was one person that Naruto had faith in and trusted that would accomplish every single plan he put his mind to, Sasuke was it, and truth be told, Sasuke’s plan was… pretty fucking awesome. Like… going back in time and re-starting something. Almost like grabbing the past and embellishing it towards a new, more perfect future.

But…

Tilting his head down, Naruto’s blue eyes stared at the dusty ground. But would that… help in
changing Konoha? How many years would it take for such a place to grow and become influential enough to be a role-model?

“Sasuke, that’s… that’s a very… honourable and admirable thing to do and I… if you say you can do it, then I believe you can. I know it,” Naruto muttered, clapping his hands together tightly.

He could feel Sasuke’s eyes boring holes into the top of his head. “But?” he encouraged, ever the perceptive bastard.

Naruto let out a dry chuckle. “Should there be a ‘but’?”

“I should ask you that,” Sasuke countered smoothly. He was silent for a few seconds before proceeding. “I want to do it with you. We’d be co-kage, of course, and we’d do everything the way it’s supposed to be. We’d give people families and our village would be our family. We’d all take care of each other and of our people.”

Of course, Naruto thought, feeling his heart sink.

“What about Konoha?” he asked lowly, closing his eyes.

Naruto heard Sasuke sighing and shifting slightly. “Konoha is a steady village as it is,” he explained, as if it was obvious. “Of course we’d form an alliance with it later down the road, as well as all the other main villages. You always wanted to protect it, so of course we’d offer Konoha protection. I’ve been doing so all along, Naruto, even though I’m not there. I do work for Kakashi, you know. And I do help Suna whenever I can.”

“I think… I think it’s a great idea, I really do,” Naruto repeated, opening his eyes and looking at his friend, who simply looked back at him intently, studying him. “If someone can get it done and succeed, Sasuke, I know you definitely can.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed, but his expression remained blank. “This isn’t just about me.”

“I know. I just… I don’t know what to say. I’m happy, and excited, but at the same time…”

“As I said, I’m not having this conversation with you to make demands, I just want to know where you stand and what you want to do,” Sasuke pointed out as he ran his hand through his hair to push his fringe out of his eye. “This is what I want to do, and I would like to have you by my side, building our dream village that would be a role model to all the other villages. However, I will put my plan forth, with or without you.”

Naruto was assaulted by many feelings then – yearning, exhilaration, disappointment, fear and guilt – and he didn’t know what to do with them. He felt like his very soul was torn in two, but he knew he should’ve expected something like this.

But… he was divided. While being with Sasuke and changing the world with him was probably one of his biggest desires, Konoha was… where everything else was – his friends, his life, his dreams, his home… it was because of Konoha that he was who he was today regardless of past issues. His old dreams had many years of existence, yet their flame was still alive inside of him. Konoha knew who Uzumaki Naruto was. Leaving it and building a village from scratch was like… re-writing his own story and giving himself a new identity. Oddly enough, that was just…

Gods, he hated himself for feeling this way. He wanted to be with Sasuke, wanted to see the world with him and change every little imperfection he knew to be real, and yet, something inside him just… wasn’t cooperating.
“Konoha is my home,” Naruto muttered, giving Sasuke a defeated look. “It’s all I know. Those are the people that watched me grow and become who I am and… Konoha made me who I am, and my family is there. They’re all there, except for you…”

“You won’t have me there, ever,” Sasuke cut, mercilessly. “It’s not going to happen.”

“This conversation isn’t going well at all,” Naruto hissed between clenched teeth, leaning his head tiredly against the pillar and stretching his legs out brusquely.

“You were naïve into thinking it ever would.” Sasuke’s voice was almost condescending now. “You can’t expect things to go smoothly just because now we have a different relationship. My feelings for you have never gotten in the way of my goals, and the same happens with you. I don’t expect it to be any different now.”

The ceiling above him was cracked, Naruto noticed, trying to distract himself from the uncomfortable feeling he was having. “I don’t know what to say to you,” he muttered, truthfully. “I really just want you to be by my side, Sasuke.”

The rain seemed to have gotten heavier, and the strong wind that danced around them through the windows carried with it a cold that smelled of iron and salt. In the distance, a thunder echoed.

The sound of Sasuke’s sandals on the ground let Naruto know he was getting up, but instead of acknowledging the action, Naruto kept his eyes trained on the ceiling.

“Let me be blunt with you.” Sasuke’s steps were slow but firm, but he wasn’t walking towards Naruto. “I have no attachments to Konoha. Everything there that once was mine was either destroyed or killed. I have no interest in licking Konoha’s ass, as I have no interest in them needing me for anything in specific. I don’t live to please them, and I have no interest in their pardon or in seeing approval in their eyes.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Naruto pleaded, feeling strangely more on edge with each passing second as Sasuke’s own voice seemed to have acquired a harsher tone.

“There is only one thing I want from that place.” Sasuke said coldly. “I want Itachi’s name cleared, and for the village to acknowledge him for what he has done for them and then, maybe, I can forgive them.”

This forced Naruto to lock his eyes with his friend, leaning his back away from the pillar as unwanted tension made his spine go stiff. “What? I thought you had already…”

“Just because I fought for it and protected it doesn’t mean I have forgiven them, or the disgusting people that still lurk behind Kakashi in the fucking council.” With his hand fisting the fabric of his linen sweater (one of the ones given to them by the people from the first village they had been on) Sasuke paced firmly in front of the steps of the altar, but his steady gaze didn’t leave Naruto. “I did it for you and you alone.”

“Wait, how do you plan on doing that?” Naruto inquired nervously, shifting his position so he was on his knees. “That’s one of Konoha’s biggest secrets! People believe that it was Itachi who slaughtered your clan on his own! If Konoha comes to know that it was their leaders who ordered him to annihilate his clan the trust of its people can be shaken! And what if this comes out to the other villages? That’s not what Itachi wanted!”

Sasuke stopped pacing and faced him, tilting his head a little to the side complacently, and a barely perceptible smirk appearing on his lips. “You think I care what the population will think?” he asked,
and the deceptive softness in his voice made the hairs at the back of Naruto’s head rise in awareness.
“It wasn’t the first time leaders used genocide as a means to protect their people out of fear, it’s not like Konoha won’t be understanding. And even if they aren’t, I seriously doubt such a knowledge would bring forth a civil war. All I need is physical proof that I can use, and I’ve been searching for it.”

“It’s not what your brother would’ve wanted,” the blond insisted. He felt confused by Sasuke’s train of thought, but also a little scared, because he hadn’t expected it. But, just as with everything else with Sasuke, he should’ve. He should’ve known that, even now, Sasuke wouldn’t lower his arms. Why hadn’t he? Why had he neglected all these things that had, apparently, haunted his best friend for so long? “He kept things a secret for a reason, Sasuke!”

Hand slipping from his sweater to clench at his side, Sasuke pressed his lips together in a grim line. “My brother made many mistakes for the greater good. It doesn’t stop them from being mistakes, Naruto. I lost him for Konoha; I lost my family for Konoha. He sacrificed himself for the sake of a village that always ostracized the Uchiha clan and used him as a tool when he was only thirteen; the least they could do was clear his name and give him proper credit. Kakashi knows about what happened, and yet he’s done nothing even though now he can.”

“You can’t think like that when Itachi himself chose to die as a criminal!” Naruto defended, quickly getting to his feet, his heart speeding up without his consent. “It’s not Konoha’s fault that…”

“Konoha has destroyed my life and hurt the people I care about the most in my life, so don’t tell me how I can or can’t feel about it!” Sasuke snapped coolly, making the blond flinch in spite of himself. He could see the older male’s temper rising at a frightening speed, and while it had never intimidated him before, now it did because he knew how fragile the topic was and how it could potentially be harmful to their relationship and to Sasuke’s take on everything involving Konoha.

“The only thing that makes me even think about going back is you. Don’t you see that? That place murdered my family and forced Itachi to do what he did! I can’t live with that! It makes me sick that they don’t know the kind of man he was, that they don’t know what he did. Don’t you understand?”

“Itachi loved you!” Naruto yelled, but not being brave enough to come closer. “He did all those things by choice, so the world would have peace! He loved the village, but it’s not Konoha’s fault that he chose that path, Sasuke, if the Uchiha were a threat even he acknowledged!”

“Just like it wasn’t Konoha’s fault that you were neglected and treated like a monster?” The trump card was cruel and almost made Naruto gasp in shock, but instead, he just bit on his lower lip, hard. That truth felt like a punch to the gut, and Sasuke could see right through him. “You make me laugh. They used you as a target for their hatred of Kurama, and even then, the destruction he did wasn’t his own fault but Madara’s since he was the one controlling him. Still, they chose to project that hatred on a child who wasn’t to blame. That was their choice, wasn’t it, Naruto? Did you enjoy that choice they made, huh?”

Clenching his fists at his side, Naruto felt them shake. Sasuke was right, he knew it. Naruto had suffered in isolation, craving for love but finding nothing but hatred and neglect all around him. But things had changed and Naruto, who had once been consumed by that darkness of resentment, had forgiven them. “They have changed,” he stated, wishing that his feelings, his faith could reach the man standing a few meters away from him. “They are different, now.”

But Sasuke only laughed. “Yes, because you saved their sorry asses, and now everybody loves you,” he mocked. “Tell me, have they ever apologized to you? Any of them? Has any of them said they were sorry for the way they treated you instead of just fawning all over you for being a fucking hero? Have they ever stopped to think about all the shit you went through as a child to be where you
are today?"

The gods help him because he had had no idea that these sorts of things had even been an issue to Sasuke and it made Naruto feel overwhelmed with affection for him, but it also pained him.

“No… no they haven’t,” Naruto admitted, lifting his chin up defiantly. “But I don’t need them to. I chose to protect and love Konoha. I can’t demand anything in return if it was my choice.”

“Well, I can.” Sasuke’s eyes hardened. “It’s all a matter of choice in the end, I know that. People need something to blame for their sadness and misery, it’s how human beings work. It doesn’t make them any less hypocritical and disgusting. In the end, everybody’s just selfish and relying on whatever suits them best.”

“Sasuke…”

“I fucking hate that place.” Voice lowering to a whisper of despite, Sasuke’s body seemed to have become oddly rigid, which, in turn, made Naruto’s instincts tingle. That feeling coming from him was something Naruto had felt far too many times in the past, in days where Sasuke would easily turn against him just to prove a point, and even if things were different now, emotionally, they were both capable of damaging each other beyond repair. “Just thinking about living there, in that fucking well of ignorance makes my blood boil. I hate what they did to you, to us, and I hate that they only seem to think highly of those who actually sacrifice themselves for them. It makes me sick.”

“You have people there who love and respect you,” Naruto muttered, resenting the hatred coming from the other man, and even if it wasn’t directed towards him, it still affected him deeply.

“Love? There you go, using that word again so easily,” Sasuke grunted, frowning angrily at him. “They fear me, which is very different.”

“You are also a hero!” Naruto shouted, irritation and desperation clawing at him. “You saved the Shinobi world! Everybody will be forever thankful to you! How can you look away from that?!” He chewed on his lower lip, upset by Sasuke’s unwavering gaze, and when he spoke again, he didn’t care if he sounded pleading. “If only you tried… if only you gave them a chance…”

The way Sasuke inhaled through his nose, sharply, made Naruto swallow hard and every single nerve in his body tingle with anticipation. And that’s when he realized that, even with everything they had gone through, he still didn’t know how to deal with his best friend when it came to things like this because Sasuke saw things in a very different way from him.

“I killed him,” Sasuke hissed, closing his eyes, clearly in pain. “I killed Itachi. Whether he wanted to die by my hand or not, that’s not relevant. I loved him the most in this world and I hated and killed him because no-one knew how to tell me how to feel differently. I watched him die twice, and three times he abandoned me. And regardless of what he wanted for me he said that he loved me no matter what.” Re-opening his eyes, he took a deep breath to get his feelings in check. “I can’t live without cleaning up his name, I just can’t. I don’t care about my name or how people see me, but Konoha needs to know who Uchiha Itachi was and what he wanted for it. I will not rest until I can make it happen. I don’t care what I have to do or who I have to fuck up.”

For about a minute, Naruto couldn’t do anything but look at him, his heart tight with sympathy and hesitation. Also, he felt a devastating surge of love for him that made him want to go to him and comfort him in any way possible.

Under different circumstances, Naruto would’ve gone to Sasuke and wrapped his arms around him, whispering all sorts of reassuring things in his ear – that was what he wanted to do – but he knew
that Sasuke wouldn’t accept it.

In fact, right now, they weren’t lovers at all. In front of him stood Uchiha Sasuke, still fighting for his individual dreams and still clinging to the desire to fix all the things that had destroyed his clan and almost destroyed him. Compared to his past self, he wasn’t going about things the wrong way.

Naruto understood where he was coming from, he really did, and he didn’t think Sasuke’s goals at this point were not valid – not the way they had been back then.

But his dreams implied things Naruto couldn’t keep up with, and it broke him. He couldn’t possibly claim to understand how Sasuke felt for Itachi, but he knew enough to understand that his love was unconditional, and that, for that love and for his own inner peace, Sasuke would move mountains. To honour Itachi’s own love for him, Sasuke would do anything.

In a way, it devastated Naruto because he had genuinely thought that, at some point, Sasuke could look away from certain things and give himself the chance to focus on a new life – after all, wasn’t ‘making himself better’ the purpose of his never-ending travels?

However, Naruto’s feelings were all over the place, torn between what he knew of Itachi’s wishes, his own personal dreams, Sasuke’s dreams, and wanting to help Sasuke in every possible way he could but not wanting to let go of his own ideals in the process.

And it was hard seeing that he was the only one struggling with his emotions because Sasuke seemed pretty certain of himself. But that shouldn’t be surprising since he had always been relentless and goal-driven.

Licking at his suddenly dry lips, Naruto dared to take a few careful steps towards him. Another loud thunder echoed in the sky that had seemed to have darkened as the candles in the altar flickered dangerously.

“Sasuke, I would do everything and anything for you,” Naruto muttered, cautiously approaching him enough so they were close but not in each other’s immediate reach. “If this is important to you then I’ll help you, okay? I swear I will do whatever is in my power. And when I become Hokage, all those things you abominate in the village… I’ll stop them completely. I’ll make it so your resentment towards them is erased and I’ll change it for sure.”

To Naruto’s disappointment and slight panic, his words didn’t seem to impress Sasuke or soothe his worries because he frowned at him and snorted, anger oozing out of him so strongly that the air around them seemed to have gotten thick with its electrifying effect. “When you become Hokage?” he snapped venomously, clearly not happy about what had just been said to him. “You’re just as hypocritical as they are. You, who saved me and told me you couldn’t leave me alone, and yet, you let me go and got together with that big breasted creature…”

“That’s not what it was about!” Naruto said, easily affected by Sasuke’s anger. “Damn it, Sasuke, it has nothing to do with her!”

“Even now you’re choosing everyone else over me, just after I told you my ideas!” Sasuke reproached, finally raising his voice to show Naruto exactly how much resentment he had inside of him and why. The way he snapped at him made Naruto flinch. “You’re already discarding everything I just told you about Itachi and my dreams in favour of Konoha! Fuck, how can you say that you’ll do this or that? When you didn’t want to be with me back then and you’re still rejecting me now?”

“Because, back then I was scared of you, Sasuke!” Naruto yelled back, pushing aside the fact that
Sasuke’s accurate accusation stabbed him in a way he hadn’t expected to. Things were getting out of hand too fast, too soon, and they were approaching things they shouldn’t and stepping on dangerous ground that seemed to not take them anywhere or even present another path for them to take, and that made it all look like they had nowhere else to go.

“Scared?” Sasuke released a bitter laugh, completely uncalled for. “You fucking fought me when I was serious about murdering you! You said you’d die with me! And now you tell me you were scared of me?”

“Yes, Sasuke, I was fucking scared because I loved you!” Naruto threw without thinking, taking another step towards Sasuke, his nails of both hands digging into his palms. “I wasn’t aware of it back then, but now I know that I loved you and was completely overwhelmed by it! I’m sorry I didn’t know better! I’m sorry that I couldn’t act upon properly!”

To Naruto’s simultaneous outrage and sadness, Sasuke kept on laughing tonelessly, as if something was just so funny that not even he understood what was so funny about it. “You’re fucking hilarious, you know that? You say you love me now, and claim to have been overwhelmed back then, so instead of trying to figure yourself out you go and believe you’re in love with someone else? Someone who knows nothing about you? You ruined everything for us, Naruto!”

“What are we even talking about this?!” Naruto retorted, his head spinning with all the things being thrown at his face with him being helpless to deal with them. “What am I supposed to do now, Sasuke?”

“Fucking fix it!” Sasuke yelled viciously, his laughter disappearing to be replaced by a threatening scowl as he, too, took a step towards the other man until they were in each other’s personal space, close enough to feel each other’s heat but not enough to come into contact. “You fucked up before, this is your chance to fix it!”

Fix it?

There was a stinging in Naruto’s eyes as he stared back into Sasuke’s defiantly, refusing to look away no matter how hard it was to see the powerful, alluring emotions there. “How?” he inquired desperately, because he couldn’t see a way out of this, and if Sasuke knew of a way, he genuinely wanted to know to make everything better. “You hate Konoha and I love it! I want to become Hokage and you gave up on the idea for other kinds of ideals! And your ideals are wonderful and inspiring, but I can’t fight what I want as much as you can’t fight your own goals at this point! What am I supposed to do when we have the same dreams but different ways of wanting to get there?!"

Lips parted as he breathed hard, Sasuke tensed, seeming to not know how to respond. Then, it looked as though some sort of realisation hit him because he looked vaguely surprised before his expression changed completely to one of utter desolation.

“You said you wouldn’t leave me alone,” he said bitterly, lowering his voice.

Naruto couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “You’re not listening to me!”

Did Sasuke actually expect Naruto to go with what he wanted, for real? But then again, how could Naruto possibly blame him when he had wanted (and hoped) for Sasuke’s quiet and accepting return to Konoha?

I was foolish… we both were. Naruto thought, feeling his eyes watering in spite of his valiant efforts to keep the tears from falling. We actually both believed that becoming lovers would give us a chance to compromise.
But there’s no way… not with neither of us willing to give up on something.

He should’ve known. He should’ve seen it coming.

Naruto tried to speak, but something thick inside his throat stopped him as he longingly scanned Sasuke’s handsome features.

Was this how it was going to be? Them both denying the other’s wishes and not being able to come together, again?

Had they… been doomed from the start? Were they both that selfish?

Why… why aren’t our feelings enough?

“I know I’m selfish, okay?” Sasuke whispered, releasing a long, exhausted breath. All colour seemed to have drained from his face. “I was selfish when I left, naively waiting for you to follow and then throwing it to your face when I wasn’t straightforward, and I am selfish now because I want you to give up everything to be with me. I want to take you away from that place. I don’t want you to be around those people, I don’t want you to belong to them, or to that stupid, useless woman that is beneath you.”

“Sasuke!” Naruto admonished, his voice hoarse as tears of both frustration streamed freely down his face. “Don’t say that! Don’t…”

But when Sasuke’s hand reached out to touch his cheek, Naruto was rendered speechless again. “I want that place to fucking burn, Naruto.” While Sasuke’s voice was now soft, the meaning behind it was very harsh. “And everything that’s inside of it, everyone… I just want it all to burn down to ashes.”

On reflex alone, Naruto roughly shoved at his friend’s chest, and without really thinking about what he was doing but acting quickly, he raised his hand and hit Sasuke right across the face, the noise resonating in the blond’s ears like a nasty and painful sound. The strike was strong, enough to turn the man’s head to the side in a violent way and force him to bend a little awkwardly, but in no way fast or surprising enough to say that Sasuke couldn’t have avoided it easily if he had wanted to. Such a blow was child’s play to someone like him, and yet, he took it without making a sound.

Panting, Naruto watched him through blurry eyes with the palm of his hand tingling unpleasantly from the slap. He and Sasuke had had so many fights already, but this time, for some reason, that simple, almost pathetic act of violence hurt Naruto deeply.

“I’m sorry,” he said almost immediately.

He was angry at Sasuke, not for feeling the way he did, but for having the gall to express it when he knew how Naruto himself felt. He also felt unbearably angry at himself because he hadn’t been able to change Sasuke’s views and still, he couldn’t do anything for him.

He had hit Sasuke solely because he didn’t know what else to do to cope with his own pain and self-disgust. No-one could get inside of him as much as Sasuke did, and no-one knew him like Sasuke did – not even himself.

Sasuke was right – he had abandoned him for other people, all because of his fear, and he was going to do it again. Because Konoha was a place, a crowd, a race, and Sasuke was just one, very clever and powerful individual that, alone, was able to shake the world with every step he took.

And Naruto… was still afraid. Not of Sasuke, but of what he represented to him and of what he
could do. If Sasuke still felt that way towards Konoha, then…

But how could he not resent the way Sasuke – the person he loved the most in the world, the person he needed the most and wanted by his side – spoke of the place that was his home, the place he wanted to rule some day?

“How can you say these things?!” Naruto sobbed, torn between anger and sheer frustration. “Sakura-chan is from Konoha, and Kakashi-sensei, and Iruka-sensei! My family, your family… they were all from Konoha! I’m from Konoha! How can you have so much hatred and not give a fuck to what happens?”

Sasuke heaved another sigh and straightened up, his gaze as steady as ever, unfaltering in spite of Naruto’s tears.

“I’m not like you,” he said simply, as if Naruto hadn’t hit him at all. His voice had become so smooth, so calm it was upsetting. “And I understand that you’re not like me, either. I understand that there are things you wish for that don’t involve me, and I understand that you love that place because it gave you the recognition you’ve been fighting for, and for so long. But I can’t feel the same way you do. I don’t think I ever will. You defending it won’t ever change it.”

On that moment, blinking stupidly at the Uchiha and sniffing pitifully, Naruto realized where he had gone wrong with him from the very beginning.

Everything he had ever done since Sasuke set foot inside Konoha again had been a mistake, and he had known it, yet, he had also blamed Sasuke for it. But he had been the one who insisted that he came back. He had been the one to sleep beside him in the hospital, often watching him for hours and crying himself to sleep when Sasuke was slumbering he was so happy. He was the one with the hopes and dreams, promises and demands from the very beginning, and yet, when Sasuke wanted to leave, he hadn’t done a single thing to stop him, even if it had hurt, even if his heart had screamed for him to do something, to reach out to him and own him, to see what Sasuke wanted, how he felt. He had ignored it completely out of fear and ignorance.

Over and over again during those three years Sasuke had tried to reach out to him, and Naruto had drifted away from him. He was doing it now, too.

And there was no way to fix it, Naruto realised, a painful hiccup shaking his body.

He loved Konoha. All he wanted was for Sasuke to feel the same way he did, not only because of Naruto himself, but for him. Naruto wanted Sasuke to have a family, a normal life free of the struggles he put upon his own shoulders, filled with love, friends, comfort, respect, a career beside him, as his right arm…

Why was this so hard for Sasuke to understand? Why did this have to be so complicated?

“You could if you tried,” Naruto insisted, wiping at his tears with his shaky hand furiously. “If you only trusted me, if you gave them a chance…”

“No.”

“If we stay together…!”

“You’re contradicting yourself when you just acknowledged neither of us can look away from what we want!” Sasuke snapped, irritation filling him again. “For fuck’s sake, Naruto, I don’t understand you!”
“My dreams… our dreams need you!” Naruto said, reaching out for Sasuke and fisting his collar, hoping to convey his feelings to him, somehow. “I want to be beside you. I want those dreams to come true with you!”

A flicker of emotion appeared in Sasuke’s eyes, but Naruto couldn’t identify it properly.

“Well, my own dreams need you, as well,” Sasuke stated bluntly, sounding both resentful and exasperated. “But if you want to be Hokage of Konoha while I have no intention of going back there, then I guess it’s a no win situation for us.”

Sasuke was… mad at him. More than that, he was disappointed, and yet, this ridiculous outcome didn’t seem to surprise him. He had known Naruto’s answer from the start, but he had hoped, much like Naruto himself had, that things would be different.

With both hands, Naruto squeezed the fabric of Sasuke’s sweater and let his head fall to the other male’s chest. He didn’t know what to do, or say anymore. “I don’t… Sasuke… please…”

A hand fell at the back of his neck, warm and familiar, but all Naruto could do was cry, and yearn for all the things he couldn’t have.

If only he had listened to his heart and realized how he and Sasuke felt for each other back then. If only he had turned the village upside down to defend Sasuke’s honour and force their acceptance of the Uchiha. If only he had accepted that Sasuke had needed him more than Konoha had, for sure, things would’ve been different and Sasuke would’ve wanted to stay with him in the village and his plans would’ve been a thousand times different. Now, so much time had passed that all these things that could’ve been done from the beginning were a million times more difficult to accomplish now.

“I need peace, Naruto. You were the one who told me that I deserved another chance at life and happiness. You think I’m worthy of it, and so do I. But I have my own dreams that I think will make me feel happy and fulfilled. You either take part in them or you don’t. But I’m not going to give in to your whims if you’re unwilling to give in to mine.”

“Konoha was your home.” Naruto raised his head to look at Sasuke, beseeching. “I just wanted you to let me help you see it as such again. With me. If only you gave me a chance we could get there. Even if it seems like it’s too late, if you’re patient… with time… we could work with it when I become Hokage and turn Konoha into the perfect village you… we want.”

Sasuke pressed his lips together resignedly and used his hand to wipe at Naruto’s tears. Naruto relished in the touch like a helpless child, and yet, he wished Sasuke would just hit him, too, because he deserved it just as much.

“Naruto, I won’t repeat myself, so listen closely,” Sasuke said sombrely, resting his hand on the curve of Naruto’s neck. “I’m only protecting Konoha because of you and Itachi. If the two of you didn’t have that mindless passion for that fucked up place, I can assure you that I wouldn’t give a single fuck about it if the earth swallowed it whole. But since it won’t happen, and since I can’t help but indulge you, I will protect it out of respect to you, nothing else. But I want my brother’s name cleared and the Shinobi world to know who Uchiha Itachi was and exactly why the Uchiha clan is dead. I need that, and I will have it, with or without your help, and I don’t care if it happens now or in thirty years. I will have it.”

“And when you have it… will you come back?”

“No.”
That was it, then. They were doomed to fail; doomed to be away from each other forever. It was a two edged knife.

They both had strong reasons to feel the way they did, it wasn’t like they could blame each other at all.

It still hurt, though. Somehow… somehow Naruto thought that it would be different. Not being able to do anything, to change another person’s heart wasn’t something he was mature enough to understand. People had always believed in him, allowed themselves to be carried by his flow, but Sasuke wasn’t just anybody, and it was obvious that he wasn’t charmed by Naruto’s ideals and promises anymore – Naruto knew that he was the one to blame. He was the one who kept failing him.

With a groan, he pulled away from his friend and ran his sleeve under his nose furiously. What good would crying do anyway? The damage was already done, and things were what they were. There seemed to be no turning back now, and that was both their choices.

Still, the sadness he felt seemed to be running on an endless spree.

Sasuke really was a force to be reckoned with, Naruto mused bitterly. A fucking tornado no-one seemed to be able to tame, not even him.

Love seemed to only take you so far, after all.

“I’ll help you,” Naruto stated, as firmly as he could with his quivering voice, sniffing loudly and ignoring the way Sasuke’s now almost sympathetic gaze made him want to return to the warmth of his body. “If you want Itachi’s name cleared, I’ll do everything I can to make sure Konoha knows who he was. We’ll talk to Baa-chan and Kakashi, and we’ll look for evidence. Sai was from ANBU. And if you’re going to start your new village, I will become Hokage in Konoha and provide all the resources I can so you can do it, and I’ll make sure your political system is acknowledged by all villages…”

“Why are you crying?” Sasuke interrupted. “You’re all snot and tears, it’s disgusting. Did you really think that this conversation would go well?”

“No, I didn’t…”

“Then stop crying. We’ve already settled that there’s no other solution than both of us going our separate ways again, and that’s it.”

“Because I want to find a way for us to do this together!” Naruto blurted out, angry that all of that situation didn’t seem to upset Sasuke as much as it did him. “I want to be with you, you fucking bastard! And I’m so angry because I know you’re right! And I want you to have everything you want and I want to give it to you! I But I can’t look away from what I promised myself I’d do with my life and it hurts that you hate it so much, but I know you have reasons to and I wish I could erase that hatred but I can’t be selfish and tell you to not feel the way you do…”

“Calm down.”

“Why is it like this?” Naruto snapped at him. “Why? I want to be with you so bad, Sasuke, but I can’t… I can’t leave them behind. And you’re so stubborn, but I’m being completely selfish as well and I can’t tell you to think differently when I don’t do it. But it’s not fair!”

“I know,” Sasuke all but admonished, running a hand through his hair. He then rummaged inside the pocket of his pants and took out what looked like a piece of grey torn fabric that wasn’t exactly a
handkerchief but that was clean and extended it to Naruto, who snatched it away from him. “Don’t cry. Come on, sit with me.”

Blowing his nose on the piece of fabric, he allowed himself to be pulled by the elbow towards the set of steps in front of the altar. He and Sasuke sat down with their sides pressed close together. Sasuke’s hand rested on his thigh in a simple gesture that was meant to bring some kind of intimacy and Naruto was grateful for it.

They were both silent as Naruto wiped at his face, taking deep breaths to try and calm himself down and stop his frustration from making him cry more, but it seemed as though the despair he felt inside of him would never go away.

It was still raining heavily outside and it seemed like a storm was coming by the way the wind had lifted. Naruto hadn’t noticed the air draft around them before, but now he realized it was really cold and windy. Oddly enough, it helped soothe him because he and Sasuke being together like this and in terrible weather conditions was something that had become precious and familiar to him.

Shifting a bit closer, he leaned his head down on Sasuke’s shoulder, just needing the comfort that he would soon be without. Sasuke didn’t lean his head on his, but he did press his lips chastely to the top of his head like he sometimes did.

“How will we fix it?” Naruto asked weakly, once he felt more in control of his emotions. “What can I do? Tell me so we can find a way.”

“There is nothing to fix,” Sasuke whispered. “Once this journey is over, you’ll go back to Konoha and I will go back to my journey. You’ll work your way up to the Hokage position and I will keep doing my studies, searching for threats, providing the village with information as I’ve been doing, and working my way towards building my village. That’s all there is to it. Nothing will change, really.”

Leaning away, Naruto looked at Sasuke meaningfully, his voice almost failing him again. “What about us? Doesn’t this mean anything to you?”

Sasuke’s eyes were calm and his expression inscrutable, but there was something swirling in their depths that compressed Naruto’s heart and told him exactly how he was feeling towards their situation. “We are two halves of the same whole,” he said, rubbing Naruto’s thigh fondly, even though he wasn’t smiling at all. “I told you that you are mine, didn’t I? And you already know what you mean to me. That’s not going to change, ever. But I’m not going to be your long distance lover, that’s for sure.”

In spite of himself, Naruto smiled sadly. “Of course not…” he replied, twisting his body towards Sasuke and reaching out to brush his long fringe away from his eye and tuck it behind his ear. That fringe seemed to be in a stubborn mood today.

Sasuke really was a handsome man, and for some reason, Naruto didn’t like that he seemed to be trying to hide his eyes. Naruto loved Sasuke’s eyes – always able to look deep into his soul, so strong and intense, capable of making him experience so many different feelings that no-one else seemed to be able to.

They stared into each other’s eyes in silence, both emotionally exhausted and unwilling to fight anymore. There was no way to turn things around unless one of them caved in, and it was clear neither was willing to. But what right did either of them have to demand it from the other?

They loved each other and they wanted to be together, to work together, but there were too many
issues to allow it, and frankly, Naruto didn’t think that begging for Sasuke to change his mind was fair when he was already being selfish enough.

It was either one of them giving in, or them both going their separate ways, fighting for their separate goals and, some day, hopefully, their dreams could meet again and they would be able to work together like they were supposed to.

There was no way things could ever work with a ‘compromise’ between them because it was impossible for anything to work when one of them wasn’t even around. It wouldn’t be fair for either of them.

So that was it, then, Naruto thought, broken. In the end, they both had demands the other couldn’t comply to and everything was ruined.

But then again… had anything ever had a chance of being fixed in the first place?

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

Okay, guys, first of all, this part isn’t over yet. There will be more talking, and other things, and this really isn’t the last of Sasuke’s and Naruto’s relationship as lovers.

Also, I know the conversation seems a bit confused (to me it does) because there are so many things there and many things they should probably address and tell each other but… yeah.

And I have to explain to you guys the logic behind Naruto’s reaction because he sort of comes off as a douche considering all the stuff the blabbered on about in chapter 698 of the manga. I never believed that Sasuke would return happily to Konoha, but I do believe that, if Naruto had fought and tried to make him want to stay from the beginning, things could’ve been different. But Naruto didn’t give a shit once he got Sasuke back.

A lot of authors write Naruto as doing anything and everything for Sasuke, fighting for his goals, leaving everything behind for him. If this was an ‘alternate ending’ fic, and if ‘Naruto’ hadn’t ended the way it did, I strongly believe that that would be the kind of thing the Naruto we all knew would do.

But as it stands, this Naruto did let Sasuke go on chapter 699 and didn’t manage to accomplish anything he told Sasuke they would. Even the political system is messed up in chapter 700 and Gaiden and nothing was really fixed or improved. So, this is what I kept in mind for the writing of this conversation, so yes, Naruto does act selfishly and Sasuke does give up on trying to change his mind because Naruto just doesn’t know how to embrace an alternative future that’s different from what he did plan for himself. I think that Naruto still doesn’t know that his happiness won’t come from him fulfilling his childhood dreams alone, but… as I ALWAYS say, Naruto has always been a hypocritical character.

But, as I said, this part isn’t over yet, and this fic is far from being finished.
Also, please remember that this story does follow chapter 700 and Gaiden in a way (even though I’m not planning on approaching those things), BUT I WILL GIVE IT MY OWN ENDING, SO DON’T BE DISCOURAGED.

I will reply to everybody’s comments later tonight when I get home from work! Sorry for the delay!

Oh, and tomorrow is my B-Day! God I'm getting old. I will be working all day so, yeah, I won't be doing anything fun. But... yay for being alive and healthy and all that ;P

Thank you all for reading and for loving this story, I really appreciate it!
Two Halves II

Chapter Notes

Finally, a new chapter, right? Sorry for taking so long, but I get so easily side tracked these days *sigh*
This chapter is very different from what I had initially planned. Like… worlds apart. Sasuke and Naruto decided to take matters into their own hands, and… well. I had to do a lot of cutting scenes and cutting dialogues and editing because it was always turning out differently from what I wanted and well, I just gave up on trying to fight it. It’s just another one of those chapters where you’ll get 16 pages of basically the same.

These two kill me ;__;

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy?

Not betaed.

WARNINGS: 18+ Content. Male/Male intercourse. If you don’t like it, don’t read it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We’ll Rise

Part X: Two Halves II

Naruto woke up slowly but didn’t immediately open his eyes. His head was a bit fuzzy, and he felt oddly confused. He was laying down on his back on something hard, but under his head he could feel something warm and firm, and there was some sort of heavy fabric covering him. He felt comfortable all the same, so he sighed and turned to his side, his face colliding with something warm, a familiar scent filling his senses.

He could hear the sound of heavy rain outside, and this made him snuggle more against the warmth.

His hair was being touched – no, caressed – and it felt soothing. He felt so good, and yet there was a distinct feeling in his chest that was constricting and painful. Ah, yes. His conversation with Sasuke; he remembered now.

Naruto just wanted to curl up and fall asleep again, but at the same time, wouldn’t that just be him wasting his precious time with Sasuke away?

He opened his eyes slightly and nuzzled his nose against Sasuke’s stomach. The hand on his head stilled.

“Are you alright?” Sasuke’s voice inquired in a low tone.
“What happened?” Naruto mumbled.

“You cried yourself to sleep, I think,” Sasuke said calmly. “Or rather, I think you just unintentionally shut yourself down.”

Naruto felt his cheeks catch fire in shame. He didn’t remember the moment when he had passed out at all.

Why had he passed out? Because he wanted to switch off his feelings, his sadness, thus taking shelter inside of himself? But he hadn’t escaped anything at all.

He didn’t want to run away, that wasn’t it. On the contrary, more than ever he wanted to reach out to his friend. But he was exhausted, and in pain, and he didn’t know how to deal with it because it was a pain unlike anything he had ever felt in his life. It wasn’t even a feeling of loss of a loved one because Sasuke was still alive. He didn’t feel lonely because Sasuke was right there, and he didn’t feel rejected because he knew Sasuke felt just as deeply for him.

It was just… emptiness mixed with helplessness and longing.

Slowly, Naruto moved so he was sitting down. He rubbed at his eyes before taking a look around. Sasuke had stretched out what looked like a table cloth on the ground underneath them, and was now sitting over it with his back against the same pillar where Naruto had been as they had talked before. Naruto noticed that he had been laying with his head over Sasuke’s lap while covered by a cloak (also Sasuke’s), that he carefully pushed off him, to the side. Considering they had been sitting on the altar steps before, Naruto wondered how Sasuke had managed to get everything done and carry him all the way down there with only a single arm.

“Our body was cooperative even though your consciousness wasn’t here,” Sasuke explained, as if reading his thoughts. Naruto looked over his shoulder at him apologetically, but his friend simply looked calm and not judgemental. “Here, drink this. You need it.”

A canteen was extended to him and Naruto adjusted his body more so he was facing the other man, he rubbed at his eyes before taking a look around.

Naruto had stretched out what looked like a table cloth on the ground underneath them, and was now sitting over it with his back against the same pillar where Naruto had been as they had talked before. Naruto noticed that he had been laying with his head over Sasuke’s lap while covered by a cloak (also Sasuke’s), that he carefully pushed off him, to the side. Considering they had been sitting on the altar steps before, Naruto wondered how Sasuke had managed to get everything done and carry him all the way down there with only a single arm.

“Your body was cooperative even though your consciousness wasn’t here,” Sasuke explained, as if reading his thoughts. Naruto looked over his shoulder at him apologetically, but his friend simply looked calm and not judgemental. “Here, drink this. You need it.”

A canteen was extended to him and Naruto adjusted his body more so he was facing the other man instead of having his back to him before he accepted it resignedly. Under Sasuke’s firm, demanding gaze, Naruto unscrewed the cap and took a few sips of the water inside. He hadn’t noticed how thirsty he was until the refreshing liquid slipped past his lips and down his dry throat.

Sasuke was rummaging Naruto’s satchel that was next to him, looking for something.

“How long was I out for?” Naruto asked, lowering the canteen and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I’m not exactly carrying a watch,” Sasuke said monotonously. “But I’d say about an hour, give or take.”

An hour? It had felt like only five minutes.

Something else was extended to him, and Naruto noticed that it was one of the sandwiches they had brought, neatly wrapped up in napkins by Karin. Naruto looked at it with a disgusted face and shook his head from side to side.

“You need to eat, you look like shit,” Sasuke insisted, pressing the sandwich to Naruto’s chest.

“I don’t want to,” Naruto refused with a frown. “I feel sick.”

“You feel sick because you haven’t eaten in a while and you’re under a lot of emotional pressure,”
Sasuke pressed on, frowning back. “Eat.”

Naruto felt suddenly annoyed at Sasuke’s authoritative tone. He was pretty much upset, his stomach was a mess and his emotions were running wild. The last thing he wanted was to be bossed around. “I don’t want to,” he repeated stubbornly, screwing the cap of the canteen closed and putting it aside while still ignoring the sandwich under his nose.

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed waringly. “Naruto…”

“Gods damn it, Sasuke, just give me a fucking break will ya!” Naruto snapped, probably more viciously than he had intended to. “I don’t want to eat; I just need a bit of fucking space for a few minutes; is that too much to ask!”

The way Sasuke’s features scrunched up in a flash of anger made Naruto regret both his words and his tone immediately.

“Fine,” Sasuke hissed, shoving the sandwich more forcefully against Naruto’s chest and letting go of it, making the other grab hold of it anyway. A little panicked, Naruto watched Sasuke move as if to stand up so he automatically reached out for his wrist to stop him, throwing him an apologetic look as the other glared.

“Don’t. I’m sorry,” Naruto said in a whisper. “I don’t… want you out my sight at all, I just… I’ll eat in a bit, okay? I promise.”

Sasuke watched him for a few seconds before heaving a sigh that sounded far too tired before leaning back against the pilar. His features turned from angry to something else entirely – something heavy that made him look a lot older than he was, something burdened and sad – and again, Naruto felt guilty.

He hadn’t stopped to think about how Sasuke must’ve been feeling right then. After all, Sasuke had wanted Naruto with him on this new journey of his life, had been willing to live just for them, for their goals, and yet, they were to part ways again, both their dreams forced to be mutated once more because they couldn’t meet, because they wouldn’t be together.

There was no doubt in Naruto’s mind that Sasuke felt just as devastated, only he was able to hide it better.

Adjusting his body so he was sitting cross-legged (he was facing Sasuke’s side), Naruto let his forehead drop to his friend’s shoulder, his hand still squeezing his wrist, afraid to let go. Sasuke merely let his head fall to the side, so his temple was connecting to the top of Naruto’s own head. The silent action felt so casual and intimate, so theirs at that moment that it was relieving. They shared the same feelings, and they both acknowledged it.

Naruto wanted to say so many things, to express himself more, but he found that he was too tired. What else was left to say when he had already said so much? What use would it be to utter vain words once more? To speak his feelings out loud, his regret, his suffering?

*Words are just words in the end.*

Shifting a bit, Naruto lifted his head up carefully to look at Sasuke, finding beautiful dark eyes ready to meet his with such intensity that it took his breath away.

He bit on his lower lip before leaning in and gently pressing his mouth to the one in front of him.

The position was a little awkward for them, so he tried to move a bit closer without breaking contact,
letting go of Sasuke’s wrist to touch Sasuke’s shoulder, his other hand moving to cup his cheek and stroke it lovingly.

The kiss was gentle at first – a simple, soothing and coordinated brush of lips against lips from the amount of times they had already kissed like that before. It was reassuring and filled with words neither dared to say.

But then, Sasuke’s hand came up to touch Naruto’s arm, his hold tight. As if in response, Naruto’s hand on his shoulder moved as well, to that elegant neck curve, and as his fingers met with smooth skin, they automatically slipped inside the loose collar of Sasuke’s linen sweater to feel more.

Sasuke’s lips parted as his tongue slipped out to seek for Naruto’s. A moan escaped Naruto, and the whole world seemed to shift and shake in the few seconds it took for the kiss to intensify without either man noticing.

Naruto wasn’t exactly sure of who’s mouth had become more persistent first, when, exactly, Sasuke’s body had twisted to awkwardly face his, or when their kiss had become so fierce their hearts had started beating so fast they could barely breathe.

Naruto was only vaguely aware of both of them struggling to get to their knees without breaking contact, because all of a sudden, all he could think about – all his body knew how to do, really – was to get as physically close to Sasuke as he possibly could. There was Sasuke’s arm around his neck, their chests in full contact now. Someone gasped. The slurping sounds of their now too loud kissing seemed to drown out the sound of heavy raining outside.

The air had become dense and abnormally hot. It was so hot, Naruto thought desperately as his hands blindly pulled at the hem of Sasuke’s sweater up so they could feel the firm skin of his body. Against him, Sasuke released an almost violent growl.

Sasuke’s body seemed to be on fire, but then again, Naruto himself felt like this burning heat would engulf him and yet, instead of making him feel discouraged, it lured him in, made him thirsty for more.

Maybe it was their current tumultuous feelings combined, reaching out to each other through that invisible string that connected them, but somehow, this felt different from everything they had shared so far, and it was as painful as it was amazing, and Naruto knew that he wouldn’t, couldn’t run away from it even if he wanted to.

The need that awakened inside of him was frustrating and unbearable.

Their kiss broke with a lewd suction noise. Naruto wasted no time in attacking Sasuke’s neck with his mouth, pulling him as close as he could by the waist. He was excited and anxious and barely able to focus on anything other than the man in his arms. The very obvious reciprocation of Sasuke’s body against him only served to fuel his desire. It was maddening how quickly things had progressed in only a few minutes.

“Naruto…” Sasuke’s urgent utter of his name made him shiver openly as he bit down on the curve of Sasuke’s neck sensuously, hungrily. “Hey… are you listening?"

Sasuke wasn’t exactly pushing him away (he was actually holding him close and even tilting his head to the side so the blond could have more access to his neck) so it was rather hard for Naruto to respond to the call for attention. Still, he managed to make a strangled noise with his throat, his fingers clawing at Sasuke’s back possessively. The heavens help him; he was ready to eat the other man alive.
“If we do this…” Sasuke breathed, still sounding surprisingly coherent. “If we do this… we’ll have to live with it forever. Do you understand? Naruto…”

Did he understand? It was crystal clear to him what this would do to them, and how it would affect them both, especially after their catastrophic conversation. Things weren’t hope filled like before. It wasn’t just about their feelings and their longing for each other anymore. That meant nothing. Right now, their feelings were nothing but a weight they’d be better off without so it could save them both all this unnecessary torment.

“You mean that this will become a burden,” Naruto whispered in Sasuke’s ear, his voice a little hoarse, but no less steady. “I understand that. I understand that something we both want so much will only serve to bring us more pain in the future. I know that very well.”

Was it even possible to go through such a thing with someone you love and not have it being part of you forever?

He took a deep breath, inhaling Sasuke’s familiar scent before pressing his cheek against Sasuke’s as he hugged him tighter. There were so many feelings inside his chest he thought he might burst, but there was nothing else he could do but hold the other man. “We’ve come this far, Sasuke. There isn’t anything about us that will ever be anything less than it already is. Even if it is a burden, it’s too late to get rid of it… but I would never choose to not carry it, anyway.”

Naruto pulled away to look at his friend once more, finding in his features the same stream of emotions he himself was feelings. It was funny, Naruto considered. They had been so sure and happy about taking a step further, and now, all of a sudden, it felt like a dangerous, far too ambitious thing to go through with. “Because there was never anything about you that was a burden to me. And this is no different. I’ll gladly walk this path if it’s with you.”

Sasuke’s mouth was slightly opened as he breathed hard, his eyes quickly scanning Naruto’s features earnestly.

After closing his mouth and pressing it to a thin line, Sasuke inhaled sharply before nodding his head once. His eyes were penetrating and focused, but also very resolute. There was something in them that was very calm as well, and it managed to fill Naruto’s chest with confidence.

Fingers ran through the hairs at the back of his neck, before tightening around them. “You have what we need, right?” Sasuke asked in a whisper.

“Yeah, it’s in my bag.”

Their lips met again in a brutal clash, their kiss now sloppy since it seemed pointless to hold back anymore.

Naruto tugged at Sasuke’s sweater again. Breaking the contact, Sasuke lifted his arms up so Naruto could remove it over his head in one swift move and carelessly let it drop somewhere nearby. How glad Naruto was that neither had bothered with bandages that day.

“How are we going to do this?” Sasuke breathed, as Naruto hastily removed his own sweater and threw it to the side.

“You top,” Naruto said without hesitation, hurriedly untying the strings of his pants. Just saying those words alone made his hands shake and become unnecessarily clumsy. “I want you to.”

“Alright,” Sasuke said, sounding slightly surprised by the firm decision as he watched Naruto basically fall back and roll around on the floor in the least sexy way possible to remove his sandals,
pants and underwear impatiently. Naruto knew he looked ridiculous, and it shouldn’t be this hard to take off your fucking clothes, but he was too excited already to care. “But you’re going to have to help me… to… Naruto, what the fuck are you doing?”

Once he managed to be stark naked and kick everything to the side, Naruto hurried back into a kneeling position and immediately brought his hands to Sasuke’s own pants, offering him a rather silly grin that was also a bit embarrassed.

“Sorry, I guess I’m just too enthusiastic for my own good,” he apologized, looking down and almost groaning in annoyance at how complicated the knot in Sasuke’s pants was. “How did you even manage to tie it this way single handily?!”

“Aren’t we a little too eager?” Sasuke said, mockingly as he also looked down to watch Naruto desperately trying to untie those fucking knots. “It’s not that complicated, idiot.”

He slapped Naruto’s hands away with his and calmly picked at the end of one of the strings. As if by some sort of miracle, the complicated knot loosened at once and Naruto could only roll his eyes. “Seriously?”

“Seriously?” Sasuke said, with a small smirk.

Rolling his eyes again, Naruto brought his hands to Sasuke’s pants and pulled them slightly down along with his underwear, carefully freeing the very obvious erection from its confines. He stared at it for a while and swallowed hard, feeling both excited and a little intimidated, because Sasuke was… well, he wasn’t exactly small. Not huge either, definitely a little narrower than Naruto himself, but also bigger. Since they had only basically just rubbed up against each other and jerked each other off so far, he hadn’t exactly considered sizes, but now he had to. That wouldn’t feel the same as a finger, that was for sure.

But he was more than a little eager to find out what it would feel like.

*Are we really going to do this?*

“Feeling scared now, after you so confidently claimed you wanted me to top?” Sasuke teased in a whisper, pressing his lips to Naruto’s forehead. Naruto could only snort.

“As if,” he said, licking at his own lips with the tip of his tongue. He tilted his head up to brush his lips against Sasuke’s and speak lowly against them. “I just fingered myself this morning thinking about how I wanted you to fuck me against the bathroom wall. Does that sound like me being scared to you?”

The way Sasuke’s breath caught made Naruto very pleased indeed.

“You were taking too long in there,” Sasuke replied, before swallowing hard. “Have you been thinking about that for too long?”

“Who knows,” Naruto muttered, feeling his throat constricted, his knuckled boldly brushing over Sasuke’s abs as his hand travelled lower to grab hold of his lover’s firm cock. “I thought about a lot of things, Sasuke…”

He gave the turgid member a few languid strokes, causing Sasuke to sigh appreciatively. Then, Naruto kissed him shortly before adjusting his body and leaning down as he could so his face was levelled with Sasuke’s cock. He watched it attentively for a while, actually *looking* at it as he worked on it with aroused curiosity. Many times before he had seen it, and yet, he had never really taken the time to look or even appreciate the feel of it properly. It was odd, because he really liked it. He liked
it when it was hard like this, for him, liked to feel the smooth, delicate skin, enjoyed the scent and the small, occasional twitches…

Right now, he really wanted to…

There was a sudden tension in Sasuke’s body. “What are you doing?” he asked in an unidentifiable tone as he ran his fingers through Naruto’s messy hair, massaging his scalp.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Naruto mumbled grumpily at the awkward question, not daring to look up. “Just let me do my thing.”

There was no hesitation in his mind as leaned in to put his lips around the swollen pink head of Sasuke’s cock and gave it a small, experimental suck before running his tongue over it.

“Ngh…”

Swallowing hard, Naruto couldn’t tell if it was the muffled sound that Sasuke had released, the fact that he was actually sucking on Sasuke’s dick or the sudden sensorial explosion that made his heart beat harder and his head become fuzzy.

With new found resolution, he ventured to take the length in further inside his mouth, even though he had absolutely no idea what the hell he was doing or what might please Sasuke – he only knew he wanted to do it.

They had never done this to each other before. Their encounters were always either far too heated moments of desperate search for release, or long drawn out explorations that usually consisted more in touching each other than anything else in a need that was far more emotional than physical.

But Naruto had desires, curiosities that he wanted to fulfil with Sasuke, and he might as well start now. Sucking Sasuke’s cock hadn’t exactly been a primordial fantasy, all things considered, but he had considered it before. He sincerely hoped Sasuke would repay the favour someday.

Naruto knew how that felt – Hinata had done that to him quite a few times – and he enjoyed it very much indeed, so now he wanted to see how Sasuke would react to it. He knew he could not overdo it if he wanted them to actually go through with it to the very end, though.

There was a strong grip on his hair now as Sasuke’s essence overflowed unexpectedly, dripping over Naruto’s tongue, and it was a bit a slimy and salty, but Naruto found that he didn’t mind the taste at all, so he let Sasuke’s cock slip from his mouth as he clumsily but eagerly lapped at the precum oozing out from the rosy tip, something inside of him rejoicing every time more droplets emerged. He liked the feeling of that hard member on his mouth, the textures under his tongue and the strong musky scent that invaded his nose. All of it felt and tasted as amazing and distinct as everything else of Sasuke’s.

It was as though everything concerning his best friend had suddenly become an aphrodisiac.

Sasuke was moaning softly under his breath, obviously enjoying himself with those more than a little encouraging sounds as he tensed and refrained from moving too much so as to not break Naruto’s concentration.

Naruto felt his own cock give a few pitiful twitches at his lover’s restlessness, which caused a pleasurable shiver to run through him just as he was rolling his tongue around the head of Sasuke’s cock. For a second, he thought that he was going to cum, and the feeling was confusing because he had been wisely neglecting his own erection, and yet, everything felt so intense and he knew he was hard enough to cum at the slightest caress at this point. He definitely couldn’t overdo it, even if he
felt like he wanted to tease Sasuke to oblivion and suck him dry. Fuck, he was ready to drink him whole if he could. But he wanted Sasuke to finally do him, so delaying it was not an option, which would happen if they came too soon.

Leaning back, Naruto stopped what he was doing to wipe at his mouth with his arm, making Sasuke look down at him, a little annoyed, with eyes glazed and heavy with lust.

“What?” he snapped breathlessly, with obvious disappointment. “Why did you stop?”

Naruto licked at his lips and shrugged, apologetically stroking him while he ran a thumb over the sensitized head. “I’m pretty close already…”

“You’re giving me a blowjob, and you’re the one who’s close?” If Sasuke’s voice wasn’t so lust filled, he would’ve sounded appalled and even a little angry. “You have no self-restraint!”

“Shut up,” Naruto hissed, sticking his tongue out at him. Sasuke was one to talk, he was always just as sensitive as him most of the times. “You have no idea how fucking horny you make me!”

There was a weird expression on Sasuke’s face just then. He tugged at Naruto’s hair forcefully to make him straighten up so they were face to face.

“Don’t say such things…” Sasuke gritted out through clenched teeth, in a way that sounded both immensely turned on and warning, his hand running up and down from the back of Naruto’s head to the back of his neck in a very possessive and sensuous way.

“It’s true,” Naruto admitted, heatedly. “When we do this sort of thing I can’t help myself. I’ve never been this desperate for another person in my life, Sasuke. You have no idea.”

Naruto couldn’t help a small smile as Sasukes eyes travelled avidly over his features as if to confirm in them the words he was speaking. Letting go of the length in his hand, Naruto gently touched the other man’s shoulders, caressing them before letting his hands slide down the arms. Of course, the path of his right hand on Sasuke’s left arm was interrupted, and he looked down at it, to the remains of what had once been a fully functional limb. His heart ached at the sight, as it always did, but he had long since stopped feeling bitter or sad about it. Sasuke was Sasuke, the person he cared for and needed above everyone else, and no matter what, he would always be stronger, more resilient, more powerful and more beautiful than anyone else. That would never change.

“Let’s just do it,” Naruto pleaded, feeling his breathing become erratic once more.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Sasuke said “Go get the lube and the condoms.”

It wasn’t like Naruto wanted to break the proximity between them, but he knew that he had to, so it was with a slightly resentful nod that he pulled away and quickly dragged himself towards his bag – which was laying not too far from them – and rummaged inside it for the much needed items. It wasn’t as though he had expected things to happen between them today, but Naruto always carried the items with him just in case, not to mention that it wasn’t exactly safe to just leave them back at Taka’s place where anyone could just see them and tease them even more. Not that Suigetsu didn’t already.

Once he managed to grab for the small bottle and find one of the three condoms he owned, he moved back to where his lover was, feeling slightly nervous all of a sudden. Sasuke was watching him with that inscrutable expression of his, but his eyes were undoubtedly soft and focused.

“I, um… Do you want me to put it on you now?” Naruto mumbled, clenching both items in his sweaty hands.
“Sure.”

Naruto couldn’t understand what was this need to just do things for Sasuke and make him feel good and confident. He knew that, without an arm, Sasuke wouldn’t be as proficient as he could’ve been otherwise, but Naruto didn’t feel discouraged by that at all, and neither did he belittle Sasuke’s abilities. It was just that he wanted to do something and make sure Sasuke knew he wanted every little thing happening between them, but he didn’t know how to express himself properly or how to act accordingly. He wanted everything to be perfect for their first time together, even though he knew it was probably only wishful thinking since Naruto was a virgin and Sasuke was… well, Naruto didn’t know much, but he was sure Sasuke had never fucked another man before, at least. He felt silly in his own hormonal daze.

Gulping, he put the bottle of lube down so he could use both hands to rip the package open with slightly trembling hands and take out the rubbery item, throwing the empty package to the side. Even though he had never put a condom on himself (least of all on others), he knew the theoretical part of it enough to know that he had to pinch the tip first, which he did, before pressing the condom to the head of Sasuke’s still rather impressively firm cock. Biting on his lower lip, he carefully rolled the condom on the length. Once he was over, Sasuke used his own hand to adjust it better around the base and Naruto heaved a sigh of relief.

“I hope you don’t deflate in the meanwhile,” he said playfully, grabbing for the bottle of lube again and uncapping it.

Sasuke’s eyes merely narrowed as he threw him a rather seductive, almost dangerous smirk. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

In spite of himself, a highly flattered blush crept up Naruto’s cheeks as a mild feeling of anguish and love filled his heart.

Yes, that was the issue, wasn’t it? Sasuke sometimes reacted to things so differently from him, but their feelings were the same. Exactly the same. The same longing, the same desire, the same love, the same pain, the same hatred…

It was a vicious cycle that connected them, endless and resilient, theirs. No matter what, they felt the same way about each other, so Naruto just had to always remember that, regardless of Sasuke’s actions or words. It would follow them closely to their last dying breath.

Naruto didn’t even understand why he kept trying so hard to let Sasuke know his feelings and his thoughts. No matter how hard he tried, how much he did or many words he wasted, it never seemed to be enough.

But then again… was ever anything about them enough?

Pouring a considerable amount of lube on his hand, Naruto carefully palmed the erection in front of him with it, making sure he did so evenly and that there was enough. He had a vague idea of how tight his anus was and that it didn’t exactly self lubricate, so things might be rough if they weren’t properly prepared.

Sasuke hissed at the touch and Naruto took a sharp intake of breath as his mind decided that it was a great time to fantasise about what was to come. Just touching Sasuke’s cock like this made every nerve in his body boil with want. His own erection ached, swollen and angrily demanding for attention, but he tried to ignore it, no matter how desperate he was. They’d have time for mindless, quick releasing sex at some point, but now it was their first time and he didn’t want to ruin it when Sasuke himself was behaving so flawlessly. Well, if Naruto himself had managed to be this patient
so far, he owed it to Sasuke’s self-control.

“You think that’s enough?” Naruto asked hoarsely, before clearing his throat.

“We’ll see,” Sasuke replied a little breathlessly. Leaning in, he placed a small kiss on Naruto’s cheek, clearly noticing his condition. “Put some lube on my fingers. I need to prep you, too.”

If Naruto had been standing, he would’ve swayed on his feet because the effect those words had on his brain made something short circuit there.

Sasuke was going to finger him. He really was…

A little too eagerly, as soon as Sasuke extended his hand to him with palm turned upwards, Naruto poured a generous amount of lube over the fingers presented – maybe a bit too much – but Sasuke didn’t seem to mind as he moved his own fingers and rubbed them against each other to spread the lube better over them.

“Brace yourself on the pillar. I’m going to need you to spread yourself for me.” Sasuke then instructed. His voice was low and alluring but a bit rough around the edges, as though he was truly trying his best to be composed but was on the verge of cracking.

Naruto swallowed hard, just those words alone causing a violent shiver to run through him. He felt his cheeks catch fire, but it wasn’t from embarrassment, but from excitement. He was so turned on, he felt so strong, yet so vulnerable, so enchanted by Sasuke’s presence and the intensity in his lust filled eyes…. He wanted nothing more than for Sasuke to feel the same way – to want him just as much as he wanted Sasuke.

Those words, combined with that dark, smooth voice almost had Naruto cumming on the spot, but instead, he just bit on his lower lip, taking one last look at Sasuke’s figure. Fuck, he looked terribly sexy, with his hair dishevelled, his eyes filled with that hypnotizing intensity and his cock standing proudly from the confines of his opened pants that hung loosely around his hips. He looked absolutely gorgeous.

Even without that fucking arm, he had Naruto surrendered with his imposing figure and otherworldly beauty.

For the umpteenth time, Naruto forced himself to swallow hard.

*I’m not going to last*, he thought desperately. He was sure he’d come hard the moment Sasuke so much as touched him more meaningfully.

*Keep your shit together, Naruto!*

Still, he had no choice but to put the bottle of lube aside and wipe his hand on the table towel beneath them. The floor was hard and it was starting to hurt his knees, but there was no other choice for the time being since they had to use the easiest position to accommodate Sasuke’s condition and their lack of experience.

Sasuke moved aside so Naruto could drag himself towards the pillar, facing it. He had to take a deep breath first, before bracing himself on the cold marble surface with one hand, reaching out behind him with the other to grab for one ass-cheek and push it to the side so Sasuke could have better access to it. One would say that this was an embarrassing pose, and *it was*, but strangely enough, more than feeling ashamed, Naruto felt terribly turned on and restless. He really couldn’t wait for what was coming.
He could feel Sasuke’s cock against the back of his thigh. The tip of Sasuke’s finger touched his entrance and Naruto jerked slightly at the unfamiliar sensation to such a place, but immediately felt more comfortable as he felt it being gently circled. Sasuke did it only for a few seconds to get him accustomed to the feeling before carefully starting by pressing only the tip of said finger inside, causing Naruto’s muscles to clench in anticipation, his heart beating furiously inside his chest, thumping loudly in his ears. Just that little intrusion felt sinfully good, but Sasuke seemed to be hesitating, which was normal considering he had no idea how it felt for Naruto, which was why the blond decided to voice his go ahead with a small encouraging moan.

The heavily lubricated finger easily slipped further inside him until it was knuckle deep in. The foreign invasion made his body react as if it wanted to expel it, but the sensation was unlike anything Naruto had ever felt, similar, but different from when he had done it to himself, definitely better.

Slowly, Sasuke removed the finger halfway before pressing it in once more. He did this few more times, more confidently now, effectively managing to loosen the passage slightly. Naruto tried to stay still at first, but the more Sasuke did it, the more on edge he felt, and the more fidgety he became. He didn’t understand how something so simple could feel so absurdly good, not to mention that his body seemed to feel increasingly hungrier for more.

“Fuck…” he mumbled meekly, pressing his forehead against the pillar. “That’s so good.”

Behind him, Sasuke took another deep, but shaky breath. Naruto felt lips on his spine, between his shoulder blades, brushing hotly over his skin before a nasty tongue licked all the way up to the back of his neck. He shivered openly and heaved a long sigh. Sasuke’s finger withdrew, only to be replaced by two. Naruto barely had time to breathe in and the two fingers were nudging their way inside. This time, the sensation was different – slightly uncomfortable; it stung and it felt like being unnecessary stretched – but not less pleasurable, because that light pain brought another spark to his lust. It was obvious to him that Sasuke had never done that before, and yet he was careful and had just the right amount of gentleness and firmness required, so it truly felt amazing in every sense of the word, because Naruto could feel his body becoming more and more sensitized by the minute.

Naruto didn’t need to look to know that he was leaking heavily, his own cock weeping for attention, begging for release.

A kiss was planted to one of his shoulder blades at the same time that the two fingers moved, pulling out and thrusting in several times, deep and with a precision that was nothing beneath maddening. He couldn’t help the long moan that escaped his throat if he tried.

“Ah…”

He couldn’t believe that Sasuke was literally fucking him with his fingers. More, he couldn’t believe he even had something of Sasuke inside of him and that they were so connected like this, finally, skin on skin, sharing this heat, so shamelessly delivering each other like this. His brain couldn’t handle it; it was so good he felt like he might pass out.

When Sasuke’s fingers hit something miraculous inside of him, a strong wave of pleasure washed over him and he moaned even louder this time. His cock gave a violent twitch and pulsed as if he was cumming, and yet, it felt a bit different, less intense but no less pleasurable. There was no way he had ever felt anything similar to this, so he felt dazed and confused as he looked down at his erection and found that a pearly string of cum was leaking out. But he knew he hadn’t exactly had an orgasm because he didn’t feel satiated at all, so what the hell…

“Did you just cum?” Sasuke asked hotly in his ear, not stopping the ministrations of his fingers.
In spite of his own confusion and of his increasing desire, Naruto had managed to stutter out a weak “I—I’m not sure…”

He could swear Sasuke was smirking. “Was it because I touched you here?”

Somehow, the bastard had teasingly pushed his fingers inside deep once more and consequentially pressed that fucking amazing spot again. It made Naruto see stars and his cock throb again.

“Fuck, Sasuke…” Naruto panted, closing his eyes tightly. That was just pure torture. Pure, blissful, hellish torture that he both wanted to end and to last forever. “Just don’t stop… please…”

“If you want to cum, then just cum…” Sasuke said, kissing him behind the ear in an almost mocking but really enticing tone. “You should take full advantage of the fact that I’m the one who needs to hold it in to the end.”

“I just want you to fuck me already…” Naruto grunted through gritted teeth.

Sasuke released a slow breath in his ear. “Spread yourself wider, Naruto; you’re slacking off.”

The other was going to offer a nasty reply but could only gasp helplessly as Sasuke twisted his own palm upwards and decided to add yet a third finger to the party, effectively turning all of Naruto’s muscles into something resembling jelly with the added burn. He didn’t think it was possible to feel this full, this completely enamoured by feelings and sensation, and he had never really understood the concept of pain and pleasure quite as well as he had whenever Sasuke was involved. His fingers scratched the pillar in front of him as he awkwardly tried to adjust his other sweaty hand to push the ass cheek more to the side, but he was nothing but a mass of need and he was sure that, sooner or later, he’d fall apart.

Sasuke fingered him patiently, wanting him to be as relaxed and ready as possible, but it became clear to Naruto from the way he was breathing hard against him that he was also probably reaching his limit. They both were, and the anticipation was becoming excruciating.

“Is this like your fantasy?” Sasuke inquired hotly burying his face in the curve of Naruto’s neck. “Was this what you were thinking about while you fucked yourself?”

In spite of his dazed state, Naruto snorted and even managed to smile a bit to himself. “I know you’re going to get cocky but… this… is a thousand times better than my fantasy,” he panted meaningfully. Then, he ventured an impatient roll of his hips so he could press himself back against Sasuke’s body, feeling his lover’s raging erection press more against his leg, leaving trails of the lube it was coated with everywhere. “Just fuck me already, Sasuke. I want you to cum, too. I want you inside me, now.”

He could swear that Sasuke had shivered.

“You have a surprisingly dirty mouth on you,” his friend hissed, voice dripping with obvious desire, but also with a hint of astonishment. “Are you trying to finish me off already?”

“It’s your fault. You make me act this way,” Naruto replied impatiently. “Sasuke… it’s fine already, so just…”

“Be quiet.”

Sasuke’s authoritative tone effectively shut Naruto up. The fingers left him completely, causing him to feel suddenly empty, his anus throbbing both from the ministrations and from eagerness for more.
But as Sasuke leaned away slightly, Naruto felt his breath catch. It didn’t take long for him to feel something poking against his entrance once more, and it was definitely harder and thicker that the three fingers previously used. Naruto’s mind was immediately blown away as Sasuke’s cock slowly made its way inside.

No, definitely not the same. It didn’t hurt as much as he had thought thanks to Sasuke’s thorough prepping, but more than ever, Naruto felt like his insides were being terribly stretched and that he was being filled to the maximum of his capabilities. It was a terrifying, but also incredible feeling that made goosebumps rise on his skin. Still, he wanted it all, and was relieved that his body wasn’t offering Sasuke any resistance. He knew he’d accommodate the foreign width inside of him soon, so he wasn’t worried in the least, quite the contrary – he just wanted things to move along and fast.

“Ho-holy shit…” he stuttered, impulsively pressing backwards harshly until Sasuke was in all the way. A pained but ecstatic gasp left his mouth “Oh…”

Behind him, Sasuke seemed to be having a bit of difficulty in reacting once he was engulfed in Naruto’s heat, because he became very still, his breathing loud and shaky as he hissed softly. Naruto could relate, which was why he said nothing. He wanted to speed things along, desperately so, but also felt grateful for the break, otherwise he was sure he’d cum before even having the time to enjoy what he was supposed to, so he willed his lust filled mind to clear a bit and for his body to just stop being so on edge. He genuinely had no fucking idea how he had managed to last this long.

They took a few seconds to adjust to this new feeling and find some semblance of control. It was easier said than done for Naruto, who had Sasuke’s cock buried deep inside his ass and felt more than a little compelled to do something about it and feel more, but he stopped himself. He was aware that this wasn’t exactly something to be taken light-heartedly and that they couldn’t just fuck like beasts in heat during their first time, and least of all before Naruto was properly loose. But damn it, it was fucking frustrating.

“Does it hurt?” Sasuke asked softly after a while, his voice considerably steadier.

“It feels good,” Naruto admitted, truthfully. “Please, just move… I’m trying to hold back, but it’s driving me fucking crazy…”

Without needed further words of encouragement, Sasuke pulled out slightly and then pushed slowly back in always being infuriatingly considerate and careful. The feeling of that lazy slide of turgid flesh rubbing against Naruto’s insides stung but also felt unbelievably relieving, and yet, it seemed to set Naruto’s every nerve on fire with sensation.

Hes’d be damned if that wasn’t one of the best feelings he had ever experienced, and he didn’t hesitate in spreading his increasingly sore knees wider apart, finally releasing is ass cheek since Sasuke no longer needed the aid so he could brace himself with both hands properly on the pillar. Sasuke placed his still slippery hand over his hip to aid his movements.

The Uchiha, who had been mostly quiet so far, allowed himself to let out a low moan of pleasure before finding a careful but steady pace that apparently suited him for now. Naruto was fine with the slow thrusting since it allowed him to enjoy it fully even though it made him feel terribly impatient, but somehow he loved the vexing torment.

Having Sasuke inside him was like… something out of this world that he couldn’t identify if he tried. It felt perfect and pleasurable beyond words. The way their bodies fit felt so good it made him woozy, adrenaline flowing through his veins at a worrying speed. It was something akin to divine, this level of intimacy that he hadn’t wanted to share with anyone but his precious friend. It was a sea of emotions that he couldn’t explain, all mixed up and heightened from the heavy weight of their
willing joining.

It was as if Sasuke had been built specifically to fit with Naruto exactly like this – to make love to him just like this and give him nothing but unparalleled pleasure.

Naruto understood now that this was why nothing had made sense before. This was why his body had waited for so long – because it just had to be Sasuke and no-one else. His body had known it wanted to loose itself to Sasuke’s hands even before Naruto himself did.

There had been no other way. It had to be Sasuke.

A small sob made it’s out of Naruto’s mouth, but he wasn’t crying, he was just deeply moved and more than a little overwhelmed. He grunted indecorously, feeling desperate as Sasuke started to move faster, more confidently now, plunging in deeper and managing to often rub against that mysterious spot inside of him that made explosions of desire wash over him.

It was real, but Naruto didn’t believe that it was humanly possible for two people to feel this much with each other.

Whatever little control they had managed to keep before shattered to pieces in the first couple of minutes of Sasuke’s penetration.

Naruto had felt a growing desire with Hinata, the kind that gradually emerges between couples, careful and slow building. They had progressively become intimate, and Naruto had gotten hard for her many times because his body had needs and had reacted naturally to provocations coming from her. She was beautiful. He had desired her naturally as a man, and yet, so many things had stopped him from being inside her like Sasuke was inside of him right now.

And… with her, that desire hadn’t been overwhelming like this. It hadn’t been this desperate, instantaneous, strong and all-consuming. It hadn’t made him want to possess her, to eat her alive, to merge with her so they could never be apart again.

Behind him, Sasuke said something but Naruto’s brain had stopped connecting with reality and all he could feel was the way Sasuke’s chest collided with his back and all he could hear was his lover’s heavy breathing, his small pants of ecstasy, and the deafening sound of skin slapping against skin powerfully where they joined.

Unable to stop himself, Naruto moved his hips urgently to meet Sasuke’s thrusts in a clumsy tempo that was slightly awkward but that didn’t really take them off balance.

With Sasuke, everything had exploded from the very beginning. Everything was too much, and not enough at the same time. They triggered each other and their bodies burst to flames and there was nothing they could do but give in. The way they pulled each other in, the way their skins felt against each other, the wild beating of their hearts, those suffocating and agonizing feelings that never seemed to be able to truly give them release, or comfort, or an exit.

Sasuke’s possessive hand was now clawing at his stomach, the ruthless slide of his cock inside of him painfully erotic, his thirsty lips on his shoulder. The heavenly feel of their hot, perspiring bodies moving together, their sweat mingling as their blood once did on that fateful day. Naruto couldn’t breathe.

I love him.

No matter what they both did, these wild feelings and urges couldn’t be tamed.
There was no matching this level of desire, of want. It was bigger than them, he knew. And yet…

Naruto’s arm came behind him to grab at the back of Sasuke’s head just as Sasuke pushed inside with one languid but strong thrust that hit all the right nerves inside of him again. He did it over and over and over again, so Naruto bit on his lower lip hard, a pained growl rumbling inside his throat. Sasuke groaned and latched his mouth wetly on the side of Naruto’s neck.

That passion they shared had a will of its own and would not let itself be erased. Naruto understood that now.

He understood the meaning of Sasuke’s worries now. This level of physical connection, this emotional deliverance and this painful perfection that had to have been bestowed upon them by some divine entity…

All of it would haunt them forever.

_I am doomed._

If he died now, he would have no regrets. He knew he wouldn’t die, but in the heat of their vile fucking, he wondered if, eventually, the pain this love brought would end up killing him.

Sasuke’s thrusts had picked up a steady but fast pace now that was both ruthless and anxious, letting Naruto know that he was close. He was overcome with deep feelings just then. He didn’t want it to be over so soon, but he knew they were both desperate for release together already and that there was little they could do to prolong this any longer.

Sasuke’s teeth sank on the curve of his neck harshly before licking hungrily at the spot, and Naruto released a small, pleasurable hiss. With his free hand, he grabbed for Sasuke’s and quickly guided it towards his cock. Even close to the edge, Sasuke was able to understand the message as his hand – still covered by Naruto’s – enveloped him in blissful heat. Together, they worked up a proficient but urgent pace on Naruto’s cock as Sasuke’s thrusts became more erratic.

_I love him._

Naruto felt his orgasm hitting him hard a few seconds later, shaking him to the core. He came with a low grunt all over the pillar and their hands in seemingly endless spurts of white, the way his anus clenched around Sasuke’s cock excruciating but also heightening the strength of his final bliss.

He was only vaguely aware of Sasuke letting out a muffled groan against his shoulder before he, too, was riding his own orgasm in a few rather unforgiving and uncoordinated thrusts. Naruto was only able to feel a little bit of his pulsing member inside of him, but it only fuelled them further as they held on to each other as tight as they could in that position until it was all over.

That had been, by far, the best thing he had ever done in his life, and he had shared it with his most precious person. It couldn't have been any other way. Unexperienced as it had been, it had been unmistakably powerful.

It seemed as though the world had shook and crumbled beneath them only to be put back together. It seemed as though so much had changed, and yet, around them everything was the same. The rain still poured down heavily outside, and the wind still brought in a cold chill to it that neither had noticed in their heated intercourse.

Outside, the reality of their world was still the same, and so was the reality they were sharing just then.
Nothing had changed. They were still as strong and equally as helpless as before.

If anything, things had gotten better and substantially worse for them. Naruto was aware of this, but there was no way he could possibly regret ever sharing such otherworldly things with Sasuke.

Naruto’s knees hurt like a bitch from supporting his weight on the hard ground for so long, but he didn't want to move. Sasuke was still in him and he wished that it could be like this forever. Maybe if they didn’t move, time wouldn’t pass at all.

He swallowed hard, a sudden surge of hysterical and painful emotions assaulting him. His eyes stung unexpectedly. Once more, he felt moved to very depths of his soul.

They were both left panting for a long time. Sasuke had his forehead resting against his spine and only now did Naruto just notice how badly he was trembling. More than ever, Naruto could feel Sasuke’s chaotic feelings as if they were his own. Sasuke sniffed quietly but didn’t speak.

Their reality was his, Naruto realized, biting on his lower lip and fixating his watery eyes on the world outside of that broken window before him. He gently tugged Sasuke's hand away from his deflating cock and laced their fingers together – they were dirty with cum and lube, slippery, but Sasuke didn’t protest, merely squeezing his back slightly. Another sniff seemed to resound way too loudly in the room and Naruto could only tighten his hold on the hairs of Sasuke’s head behind him. He wanted to turn around and hold him, kiss him, but didn’t dare to move, feeling the weight of Sasuke’s feelings too heavily in his own heart. He sobbed slightly and closed his eyes, two twin tears rolling down his cheeks. He didn’t understand how it was possible for someone to feel so happy, and so miserable at the same time.

"I love you..." he whispered, his lips trembling as he spoke, his own words causing a strong impact on him. "I know it doesn't mean anything at this point, but I do. I really do, Sasuke..."

Sasuke didn't answer, but Naruto didn’t expect him to anyway.

He could feel something warm and wet moistening his back and trailing down his spine.

He lost the strength to do anything else.

Maybe it had been better if the world had crumbled down after all, and hopefully swallow them both whole, as well…

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

I did not expect this ending, to be honest. But alas, my poor Sauce broke down. I guess there was so much emotional baggage already that it took its toll. I feel for them.

I wanted this scene to be a lot shorter and for the actual sex to be a bit more intense and wild, but as it progressed, it didn’t happen. We'll have time for that later down the road, I believe.
I think that it was definitely a lot less sexy than what I had first intended, but I can’t say I’m displeased.

I am hoping that the plot moves along in the next chapter. A few parts for it are already written :)

Thank you for reading and for the constant support!

See you all soon!
It was almost sundown when the rain finally stopped and the two men were able to finally leave the shrine.

Both of them had cleaned up after themselves as best as they could, making sure they left no traces behind and no personal dirt.

They hadn’t really spoken a lot during the rest of the day since the mood was rather solemn and pensive, but neither seemed bothered by the intimate silence. They had cleaned themselves up before falling asleep curled up on each other under their cloaks. A few hours later, both woke up famished and finally ate the sandwiches they had brought with them while waiting for the rain to stop. There was no hurry, and Sasuke found that he had needed this moment of peace and quietude in the company of the only person he would ever want by his side after such a stormy, eventful day.

Truly, he felt so emotionally drained he barely had the strength to do anything anymore. Right now, all he felt was an undeniable sense of bitter accomplishment and also a simmering anger at himself that he couldn’t shake off.

He and Naruto had finally spoken about them, about their future, and the cards had been laid down on the table for them and there was no turning back now. There were no more ‘what ifs’, no more insecurities, no more hope. Their future was no longer uncertain. It was what it was, and that was the end of it.

Both their feelings were clear as water, but that wouldn’t change a thing. Sasuke admonished himself for having allowed his heart to hope, even knowing very well that it would be this way.

A couple years ago, even before Naruto even knew how he felt for him, Sasuke had made him an offer and he had refused. He was that kind of goal driven man and Sasuke knew it, so it was his own fault for believing that it would be any different just because their bond manifested itself differently now.

Now, all he felt was… hurt, relief and emptiness. He had made the terrible mistake of fucking Naruto
even though he knew that it would only worsen things between them, and yet, he had loved every painful second of it, as he had expected. But after having broken down in such a shameful, unexpected way, he had no idea what he was really feeling at all.

The world hadn’t changed because he had lost his virginity with his precious person. It had been awkward and intense and just exceptionally good – perfect for them, all things considered – but nothing had changed and he was still the same man.

In a way, he could say that he felt… resigned. Maybe they shouldn’t have fucked at all, but he understood that it was bound to happen sooner or later, so he accepted things as they were.

“I can’t believe it’s still standing,” Naruto said softly, once they were outside the shrine. He had needed to look at the old place for a while, and Sasuke didn’t feel like stopping him from being emotional again, so they were both standing side by side in the middle of the woods, looking up at the building that would forever be engraved in their memories. “We just defiled sacred ground. The gods must have a soft spot for us.”

Sasuke looked at Naruto’s profile from the corner of his eyes. “We are irreversibly bonded by a transcendent force, so our fate has always been in the hands of the gods,” he said, with a serious calmness. He bit on his lower lip before proceeding. “Besides, what we did wasn’t ill intentioned, it just happened and the gods must know it. If our feelings were pure, I don’t think they’ll consider it defiling at all.”

Naruto turned his face to look at Sasuke for a while, his blue eyes very bright and vivid even in the shadows of the end of the day. He, too, looked tired but lively. Sasuke was glad. He didn’t care about what happened to him, but he never wanted Naruto’s soul to die, or for him to ever stop being exactly who he was, no matter what.

“I need to tell you something,” the blond said, turning to him then. There was a graveness in his tone – Naruto seemed very determined to get his words out. “I didn’t want to tell you before because I didn’t want it to be an issue between us, but what we did back there... That was my first time having sex.”

In spite of himself, Sasuke blinked several times.

“What?” he asked slowly, frowning a bit in confusion.

Naruto pursed his lips together and looked to the side, the first flashes of embarrassment appearing on his features. “Well, I have done sexual stuff before, with Hinata, and then you, but... How can I explain it...? I guess I had many chances of doing it with her, but I just couldn’t. I couldn’t bring myself to, even before I understood how I felt about you, even before I kissed you back then.”

Sasuke merely stared at him. Naruto glanced at him before looking away again. “Recently, I’ve come to understand that... all along, I wanted it to be you, somehow. It couldn’t be anyone else,” he muttered, with a small shrug. “So... thanks for taking care of me. Thank you for giving me this.”

Naruto looked slightly uncomfortable by the admission, and yet, he looked calm. Sasuke had to stare at him for a few seconds in silence, unaware that his mouth was hanging open.

Did Naruto really... had Naruto really lost his virginity to him? This came as shock to Sasuke, who had been so sure that Naruto had already had sex with his girlfriend, and yet, Naruto had literally been saving himself for him, all along, without even knowing it, but coming to acknowledge it recently.
He hadn’t taken Naruto for an expert, no, but he had been almost sure…

*We… with each other…*

Sasuke couldn’t breathe.

“You… you think I’ve had sex before,” he breathed out, unsure of whether to feel genuinely surprised or offended.

Naruto’s head snapped back towards him, his blond eyebrows quirked upwards. “You didn’t?”

“My first sexual interaction was in that forest, with you, on the day Mika was born!” Sasuke couldn’t help but snap aggressively because, really, he had been so inexperienced, one would think that it was obvious!

It was Naruto’s turn to blink stupidly at him. “But… during those times with Orochimaru…”

“That’s disgusting!” Sasuke yelled angrily, pushing at Naruto’s chest aggressively and making him stumble backwards slightly. “Seriously, Naruto?!”

“I don’t mean with *him*, I just meant like, he’s a deranged pervert and there’s all sorts of weird stuff going on at his lairs, I thought for sure…!” Naruto defended, looking genuinely shocked now while rubbing at his chest. “Or Sakura-chan…”

“Sakura and I only kissed once,” Sasuke hissed, rolling his eyes. “You’re the more experienced one, idiot! I’ve only done sexual stuff with *you*! I thought for sure you had already had sex, you fucking idiot! I thought you knew I hadn’t!”

Naruto’s mouth kept moving without him saying anything, his eyes wide, fixed on Sasuke’s.

“I…” he stuttered, after a while, blushing furiously and bringing a hand to his mouth “Oh… so we… we both lost… our virginities to… each other?”

Sasuke literally couldn’t take it anymore.

“I can’t handle this kind of embarrassing conversation!” he hissed, turning around on his heels and walking away, quickly immersing himself in the woods with his heart beating frantically inside his chest.

What the actual *hell*?! He didn’t need this, after everything they had gone through, he sincerely didn’t need anything else to fuck things up even more and make everything even harder than it already was.

*Maybe we really are being mocked by the gods…*

Sasuke bit viciously on his lower lip and closed his eyes tightly before opening them again.

*Why do I just keep letting myself fall deeper in this mess?*

*I have no fucking control…*

“Hey!”

He heard Naruto run after him, but instead of falling into step beside him, the other man simply followed him from a few steps behind. Naruto’s energy was excited and tormented and basically all over the place and Sasuke could feel it in his very body.
Sasuke was thankful for the few minutes of silence they shared, because it allowed him to put his thoughts in order and keep his emotions in check. A lot had happened in those few hours they had spent together in that shrine, some things Sasuke had predicted, other things that had been beyond his control. Nevertheless, things were very clear for him now, painfully so, but he had to work towards the future in his own way, and prepare himself for the end of his life with Naruto.

No, not exactly the end, he pondered. There would never be an end to them, not really. They would be pulled apart, and yet, one way or the other, they would always be close to each other.

It wasn’t the end at all. Just… a new beginning. One different from what Sasuke had envisioned, but… it was a beginning all the same.

All Sasuke had to do now was get his priorities sorted out and start over, once again, all by himself. As long as he could accept this and focus on his goals, he’d be fine. He would simply not allow himself to crumble, not even because of Naruto.

“I’m really glad, Sasuke…” Naruto said after a while, softly. Night was almost upon them and soon the path would be hard to perceive. Luckily, only a few more minutes and they’d be home. “Do you… do you regret it?”

Sasuke understood the question well. “Of course not,” he mumbled firmly.

Well, he wished he could regret something that he understood would bring him a lot of pain in the future. If he found the heart to regret it, at least he could find some anger to hold on to, something to help himself want to let go.

He hated that he didn’t regret it; hated that he wanted to regret it but couldn’t. He felt so angry at himself for not being able to feel those sorts of feelings. But he… he had feelings for Naruto. Strong feelings that he didn’t like to label, feelings that he knew would never fade no matter how much time passed or what happened between them. He had his own personal reasons for feeling this way for his best friend – his heart had chosen Naruto long ago – but he also knew that there were things that went beyond his own personal reasons. He still couldn’t believe how at peace he had been fucking Naruto, even though he knew how dangerous it was.

Knowing things, knowing how painful their future would be… even knowing it he had accepted that things would happen and that he would be powerless to fight them. This sort of attitude coming from himself pissed him off the most. He wasn’t supposed to accept it and just be an obedient dog in fate’s hands, not even for Naruto.

“Me neither.” There was a smile in Naruto’s honest voice. “I… I wanted it like that. I really liked doing it with you. As I said, I… it just had to be you.”

Naruto’s words echoed in his ears and made his heart beat faster. He could feel his blood running hotter through his veins at the memory of what they had done, and the fact that he could feel Naruto’s truthful feelings through their bond didn’t help.

It hurt.

“Naruto,” Sasuke had to take a long, steadying breath before proceeding, thankful that his friend was behind him and thus unable to see his face, even though, surely, he could feel the onslaught of emotions he was experiencing. “I’m not going to kill myself over us anymore. We have said what we wanted to say, and we both know how this is going to end.”

Naruto didn’t say anything this time, waiting for him to speak with unusual patience.
Taking another breath to help his voice remain steady and definite, Sasuke kept on talking. “Things will remain the way they are while we travel if that’s what you want, but our affair ends the moment you enter Konoha. From then on, we’re back to being friends, and rivals. We will work together when we have to, and I will always help you and Konoha whenever you need it, but you do the things you need to do to achieve your dream, and I’ll do the same for my own.” Sasuke forced himself to swallow down the lump in his throat. “Whatever happened during this journey will be in the past. If we can live like it never happened, the easier it will be for the both of us. We will never speak of this again, Naruto.”

“I understand,” Naruto mumbled, dejectedly. “I want to enjoy my time with you for as long as we’re together, of course I do.” He hesitated for a second. “But… don’t ask me to forget, or to pretend that it didn’t happen. I can’t. I know it will follow me forever, but I got myself into it knowing it was risky anyway. But it’s not because we’re going our separate way that my feelings for you will change, Sasuke. I doubt they ever will and…”

“We’re not talking about this anymore,” Sasuke had to interrupt him, walking faster, grateful that his instincts knew where to take him because he could barely focus on the path as it was. “We’re not going to discuss feelings anymore while we’re travelling, and neither will we talk about it again once we part ways.”

“And don’t say you love me,” he cut once more, not giving Naruto time to object. “I don’t want to hear it ever again.”

Naruto took a while to respond, but ended up whispering a shaky “Okay…”

Sasuke hadn’t meant to sour the mood after the already heavy events of the day, but he couldn’t help it. The world hadn’t stopped spinning.

No matter what happened between them, nothing would never change.

He wasn’t angry, he just didn’t need to delve too much into things – he didn’t want to. He was more than done with superior forces toying with him as it was. It was no use making a big deal out of things anymore.

Their short journey back to Taka’s residence was made in silence.

A few days later, with pockets full of money and satchels stocked with clean clothes and food, Naruto and Sasuke bid their goodbyes to Taka. Naruto cried, of course, and promised to hang out with Karin as soon as he could. Sasuke merely rolled his eyes because (call him cruel) he genuinely didn’t believe that it would ever happen.

Even Suigetsu seemed a bit disappointed that they were leaving, while Juugo remained mostly silent, with his beautiful light-brown eyes focused on Sasuke with a gentleness that expressed many unsaid feelings and a comprehension of many things he would never voice. Juugo knew him well, Sasuke knew, but wasn’t the type to ever make demands or ask questions, and that was what Sasuke liked the most about him. He found himself longing for the big man’s presence even before they parted ways. Mentally, he promised himself that he’d visit Taka again soon.

Karin eyed him in silent acknowledgement. Between them, things had been settled, finally. There was a hint of sadness in her eyes that he couldn’t really soothe in any way that would be fulfilling for
Karin was aware of this, that’s why she smiled at him, encouragingly so, putting aside all of her whims and all of her desires. It had been like that since she had known about him and Naruto. She might’ve been confused and devastated at some point, but she got the message, and had taken a step back because of that. All of the things Sasuke had done in the past, all the missing pieces Taka had tried to find had come together at seeing him and Naruto side by side. This was why Sasuke cherished Karin above any other women – because she was selfless like this when one least expected her to be. She might’ve been more sexually straightforward than many other girls in the past, but Sasuke knew it was just the way she was, because she knew perfectly well that he would push her away if it had to be done, and yet, she hadn’t given up, and more importantly, she hadn’t feared him. She had been in love with him, but never flaunted it or expected him to respond to it with the same sort of feelings or take responsibility for it and, regardless of her advances, she had never overstepped his boundaries or openly asked anything out of him. It was infinitely more than Sakura had ever done, and in a way, this upset him because Sakura was supposed to be a smart girl, and yet, even throughout the years, she hadn’t grown up when it came to him. She hadn’t known (or tried to) understand his way of thinking at all.

Flirting with him was nothing more than Karin’s way of expressing herself and it was exactly because Sasuke saw no real threat in her actions that he had indulged her without so much as a sigh or a sideways glance. Karin was just Karin, but she was strong on her own, and her feelings for him never got in the way of that, and neither did his lack of interest ever dissuade her from doing whatever the fuck she wanted to do or being who she was. This, Sasuke respected.

He didn’t love her, though, nor did he love Sakura. Not like possible lovers, and he knew he never would because that was how things were. Half of his heart was already in someone else’s hands, while the other half had been taken away to the underworld along with Itachi. That part would remain frozen in time and would never return to give place to something else. There was no changing this, and neither did he want to.

They had been a team for a long time. Taka had seen the best and worst of him, had protected and been protected by him. They had lived as family. Karin had saved his life and had even almost given her own because of his whims. These were things Sasuke would never forget.

Taka was chosen by him for a reason, and these last few weeks were proof that he hadn’t been wrong.

He too, felt love towards them, like he knew they felt for him. Like family, they were a part of him he’d never let go of. He regretted the things he had done to harm them, but they had forgiven him, again, without making demands. They were his companions and the people who had been by his side unfalteringly during his darkest hours. They understood him. They were loyal without ever questioning him, regardless of his actions. They required nothing in return.

It wasn’t an all-consuming love or a dependable one, but wasn’t this, too, a form of true love?

Sasuke had come to understand that there were many types of love in the world, some of them deeper than others, but no less important. But, no matter what type of love it was, it was only ‘love’ if it had a meaning. For him, ‘love’ seemed like such a frivolous, simplistic word that he couldn’t use it randomly like many people did. ‘Love’, to him, needed to be something that pulled him in, that moved him, that drove him to do things for the sake of it. ‘Love’ needed to be mutual. It could hurt, but it would also have to bring happiness and joy with it in spite of that. He needed to want to ‘love’, to be with the people he ‘loved’ to understand that those feelings were special.

Naruto, Taka, Gaara, Itachi… yes, he felt that way towards them. Everyone else was just… alright.

But whether he saw them ever again or not made no difference to him. It may be a cold way to put it,
but it was no less true. Kakashi and Sakura… he acknowledged that he’d be sad if they died (and yes, he had tried to kill them both) but life would move on and they’d be nothing but another fleeting thought in his mind.

Sasuke wished that the day would come when he’d be able to express his gratitude towards Taka properly, but that day seemed so far away he had a difficult time picturing it.

Still, he was sure… he and Taka would reunite, someday, as a team, and he’d pay them back for everything they had done for him, if it was the last thing he did.

000

Naruto was oddly excited about Bear country even though there was nothing all that great about it beside a lot of landscape – but apparently he’d already been there during some mission at some point. Sasuke wanted to check out the area and try to figure out what kind of politics were used and what kind of people inhabited it, even though Konoha and Hoshigakure (the main village, not particularly developed) already had some sort of minor peaceful alliance. But Kakashi seemed to want to expand said alliance and help Hoshigakure grow so it could finally become one of the main Shinobi villages and be properly recognized and thus serve an invaluable political ally and offer potential natural resources that might be beneficial for Konoha. The issue was, would the village even accept it?

For now, Sasuke only had the intention of exploring the village’s strong points and their potential interest in development.

However, in spite of his excitement, Naruto seemed to be in no rush to reach the village as he suggested they set camp for a few of days just to hang out and take a while to rest. Honestly, Sasuke couldn’t blame him – after all, they had spent an awful lot of time in the almost constant company of Taka – and surely knowing that they’d be making their way back to Konoha soon, his friend was probably intent on delaying it as much as he possibly could.

It was pathetic, but Sasuke couldn’t say that to him, because he, too, was constantly being assaulted by the simultaneous desire to delay everything as much as possible or to run back to Konoha at once so it would all be over once and for all.

Things didn’t seem to change a lot between them, though. They seemed to speak less than before, and it was as though the tension between them couldn’t be erased no matter what they did. It was an emotional tension, and combined with the new sexual development between the two, their relationship seemed to be losing the delicate balance they had achieved at an alarming speed.

Naruto was an emotional mess, so he took it all out on sex. He liked it a lot, too, and while Sasuke had felt undignified by the three boxes of condoms and two extra tubes of lube the blond had convinced Suigetsu to purchase ‘just in case’, truth was, it had come in handy.

Sasuke couldn’t say that he didn’t enjoy sex, because he did. Or, well… it wasn’t exactly spectacular, if he had to be honest. It felt good, definitely, but not exactly something Sasuke thought that he’d ever need in the future, as a man. He understood the appeal of sex, of course, but to him, it wasn’t exactly the sex itself, but the soul stirring things he felt while doing it – the turmoil of emotions, the pleasure, the pain, the intensity, all the things mouths couldn’t say properly but that two bodies moving together seemed to be able to express clearly. To him, it was a new, superior type of spiritual connection altogether. It had been so even before an actual penetration had even occurred. But these were things he understood only happened within him because and for Naruto. He understood that people could have sex for stress relief or for fun. He understood how easily sex could happen between people. But to him, it seemed impossible to want to fuck someone with complete detachment, without feeling the same things he felt when with Naruto.
How boring and empty it must feel, he thought, to be in the arms of another and feel nothing at all for them. But what did he know?

Either way, as much as he enjoyed the torturous joy that fucking Naruto was, it was a hassle to him in many ways because the more times they did it, the more used to it Naruto became, making him more impatient every time. Regardless of how nimble Sasuke was with just one arm, there was no way he could be that nimble and proficient when it came to sex, and it frustrated him that he couldn’t please Naruto’s whims as easily as Naruto could his.

Luckily, they had quickly handled the obstacles between them and found a steady and coordinated routine regardless of the position they chose, but Sasuke knew that this sort of accommodating dynamics wouldn’t have been possible if they had switched positions already.

Naruto enjoyed bottoming, no doubt about it, and Sasuke enjoyed topping, but then again, neither still knew the other side of the coin, anyway. It wasn’t as though neither was curious about switching, it was just that, most of the times, Naruto’s impatience would get in the way, and it was usually easier to just fuck it out like they used to than waste time being slow.

Which was why Sasuke was having a hard time wrapping his mind around the fact that, in that oddly cold but windless morning, he was the one unexpectedly sprawled on his back over his bed roll, naked under the sun and lips parted as he panted hopelessly in awe at the sensations running through his body.

It had hurt at first. Naruto had tried to be calm and patient, but their random making out after their morning routine had them both a bit too riled up. Naruto’s fingers in him had been far too impatient and nervous, but Sasuke hadn’t complained, merely clenching his teeth and forcing himself to relax as much as he had been able to, even though his lover seemed far too much on edge already to take his time prepping him. Sasuke had known it would be like this, no matter how hard Naruto tried, so he had been sort of ready for it. After all, as a Shinobi who had fought for his life many times and had experienced all sorts of wounds and bruises and near-death moments, a bit of discomfort was literally nothing. Besides, Sasuke had expected Naruto to be as restless, eager and demanding as a top as he was as bottom.

What he hadn’t expected, though, was this. The insufferable way Naruto’s cock filled him and stretched him in ways that seemed impossible. Then, the sharp pain he had experienced at first slowly turned into a chaos of acute pleasure as his muscles relaxed and his body promptly opened up to Naruto, willingly receiving the deep and uncoordinated first thrusts. Something inside of Sasuke rebelled against such a passive position, where he could literally do nothing but lie there and take it, and yet, his arm, that surrounded Naruto’s neck, held him tight and his thighs were firmly adjusted to Naruto’s sides. He could barely breathe, could barely do anything at all his head was spinning out of control.

It was… a whole new level of intimacy, to be penetrated by another. Being inside Naruto had been intimate, yes, but this was…

Intrusive. Invasive. He felt oddly violated, exposed and vulnerable, and yet his body received the pleasure shamelessly, eagerly, hungrily. He found himself trying to open his legs more. He couldn’t control the low, repetitive moans escaping him, the hissed curses or the constant shifting of his muscles in a restless desire for more, every cell in his body screaming with desire, unsure of how to process his conflicting feelings. Naruto’s voice in his ear was lewd and his hot, open mouthed kisses along his neck intense enough to be devastatingly embarrassing.

Sasuke’s erect cock gave a violent twitch that made him shiver, a small spurt of pre-cum emerging from its tip and immediately smudging Naruto’s naked navel, that rubbed up against it.
It wasn’t something Sasuke knew how to explain. He didn’t like it at all, this ridiculous position that didn’t let him do much, like some submissive, boring woman. He needed to move, to be active, to touch, to feel, to scratch, to battle, to be in charge of his own pleasure and pain, and to be in charge of his lover’s own pleasure…

He realized that his needs were no different than an animal’s, which was why Sasuke always tried to keep his cool as best as he could as a top, because he realized how easy it would be to turn sex into an animalistic copulation.

And yet…

There he was, feeling Naruto’s sweaty body sliding so perfectly against his, relishing in Naruto’s kisses, in the way Naruto’s hands possessively caressed his sides, his legs, allowing his consciousness to almost fade with each deep, painful and amazing thrust inside of him, connecting them in maddening perfection and giving him the exact amount of everything he needed.

He heaved a long breath, turning his head to the side and running his tongue along Naruto’s temple. It tasted of salt and iron, of something pungent that awakened his senses, so he did it again.

There he was, allowing Naruto to move to suddenly push his knees further apart and bend his body in half so his knees almost connected to his chest, desperate for more access, for more depth so he could move more freely. Clumsy as he was, Naruto was also surprisingly efficient for a beginner, at least for Sasuke’s standards. Naruto’s stamina was overwhelming, but this was no news by now. If Naruto were to top more often from here on, Sasuke would definitely be in deep shit – he’d wear him out and suck him dry in no time.

Sasuke bit on his lower lip and groaned in irritation as a new wave of pleasure ran up his spine thanks to that even stupider position. Now he understood why Naruto liked being fucked hard and deep.

Still, what the actual fuck? What was he, some kind of articulated fuck doll?

But that felt unbelievably good. He hadn’t understood why Naruto had enjoyed being fucked or why he would always become so eager and impatient for it, but now he could see why.

Fuck. His stomach felt heavy, his breathing becoming more erratic. He was close. But damn it, he was so annoyed.

‘Who the hell do you think you are, manhandling me like this?’

Sasuke wasn’t sure if he said these words out loud or not. He tried to move, to make his body meet Naruto’s fluid but shaky plunges, but couldn’t, he was completely trapped by the opulence of Naruto’s strong body. Gods, he’d be damned if he’d ever let himself be fucked like this again. This was humiliating beyond reason. If Naruto felt his conflicting emotions, he gave nothing away, but then again, his friend was the kind of person who could be very aware of Sasuke’s feelings and still mess with them just to see (no, feel) Sasuke being riled up by the things burning inside of him.

‘Motherfucker, I’m not a fucking woman…’

But… being like this… allowing someone else to touch him, manipulate his pleasure, his feelings, caring for him, bestowing so much affection, pouring their everything for him to see…

It wasn’t that Sasuke felt needy, no. Or rather, he supposed there wasn’t a time when their impending fate didn’t make him feel needy, even in times like these. It was if there was never a moment when ‘enough was enough’, but there would be a time when the end would come, and no matter how
many things they experienced together, nothing would ever be enough to last a lifetime. It was because they both knew this that the hunger seemed insatiable.

Sasuke didn’t like this, didn’t like to just lay around, being fucked and doing nothing, but at the same time, giving himself wholeheartedly to Naruto’s care and giving up his control felt dangerously ideal.

Yes, dangerously. It was if his very essence was being used by Naruto’s hands, his body marked forever by the roughness of Naruto’s nails dragging across his skin. Sasuke felt like, not only his body was opened, but that his soul was bared, as well, and it was all so frustrating because it was so much more than just the sex, something that moved his very core in a deeper and sharper way that seemed so much more complicated. His body being penetrated seemed like such a trivial thing compared to all the things crawling inside him.

He worshiped these things that travelled between them, he always had, and always would. But he also hated them with a passion that made him want to either die or kill Naruto, or maybe both. It was because of this that he had always been weaker than he should’ve been. Even now, he was weak.

But he’d do better to not agonize over it, he kept reminding himself of this.

His fingers clutched strongly at the hairs at the back of Naruto’s head. Naruto’s now erratic thrusts slowed down to a languid undulation that allowed Sasuke to feel him inside with detailed precision. A stinging emotion pieced his heart. Their eyes met, two contrasting sets equally heavy with lust and awe and so many feelings that the air itself seemed to be thick and heavy with the weight of them. Naruto’s eyes travelled in marvel over his features, the tip of his tongue peeking from between his lips to wet them. He was shivering, and yet Sasuke could see the fine sheen of sweat marking his brow and gluing strands of hair to it, glistering in the sunlight.

He had a hard time handling the desperation in Naruto’s stare, as he always did. He couldn’t understand why certain things had to be so painfully obvious to them, why he had to go through all of this and still be witness to Naruto’s soul like this, knowing that the same happened to his friend. Most of the times, he didn’t understand what hurt him the most – if his own pain or if the fact that he knew Naruto was hurting, too.

Still… what else was there for them to do but to give and take from each other as much as they could?

I love you.

Sasuke could hear it, loud and clear. Naruto hadn’t said it once since that day, over a week ago, but it didn’t make a difference.

A strangled noise left Sasuke’s throat as he pulled Naruto’s head down, their mouths meeting in a voracious kiss, teeth clashing and tongues devouring each other wetly.

I’m close.

Naruto moaned against his mouth before releasing a long breath through his nose. His body fell completely on top of Sasuke’s now, heavy and unbearably hot – he was everywhere, pressed up against him, strong and suffocating but perfect. He shivered openly now before moving his mouth hungrily over Sasuke’s, his hips speeding up once more, since he, too, seemed to be desperately close. Naruto liked to cum at the same time as Sasuke, or as in time with him as he possibly could unless he couldn’t help it. Sasuke groaned lowly in his throat, feeling his insides burn with every powerful thrust inside of him, wave after wave of exhilaration washing over him the closer they both got.
Sasuke felt the impending need to touch himself, to reach his own climax as soon as physically possible, but he wanted to keep holding on to his lover. It was odd how it was only during intimate times with Naruto that he regretted the absence of his arm.

However, Naruto’s hard navel rubbed up against his cock, and Sasuke was more than thankful for the amazing rough friction. Now he understood why Naruto always either asked him to be touched or touched himself during sex, because the dual stimulation really was something out of this world.

Unable to stop himself, he surrounded Naruto’s waist with his legs to pull him closer still and urge him on, demand more, this offering him a small, but glorious moment of control, finally. Against his mouth, Naruto released a small, but heartfelt laugh before biting down harshly on his lower lip.

It didn’t last long before Sasuke felt his orgasm threatening him as his muscles clenched around Naruto’s cock. He felt Naruto let out a small moan, riding his own climax awkwardly, and everything exploded in flashes of white as Sasuke came, his seed erupting between them and coating their stomachs and chests. When he came to, panting and dazed, the only indication that he had that Naruto had finished, too, was the fact that he was suddenly very still. Sasuke hadn’t noticed the moment they had stopped kissing at all, but Naruto now had his head buried in the curve of his neck, breathing hard against his ear. He was fucking heavy, was what Sasuke thought, with a tired, slightly confused, but satiated sigh.

His mind was oddly empty, his conflicting emotions blown away as if carried by the soft morning breeze that had started to run.

Well, that was another wall torn down. It didn’t feel as overwhelming as their first time fucking, though, but it was still meaningful.

They had finally given themselves to each other completely, and now they were equals, yet again. Sasuke had given Naruto his complete trust, giving his everything without restrictions, once more.

What else was left to happen between them, anyway? He didn’t think they could bare themselves in front of each other any more than they already had. Sasuke doubted that any other human being would ever be able to see him the way Naruto had for as long as he lived.

Still, it was cold and he was grateful for the warmth of another. Or rather, grateful for the warmth of Naruto.

His friend muttered something he couldn’t understand lazily against his neck and Sasuke could only sigh again and hug him, placing a small kiss on the top of his blond head. Well, it seemed obvious that neither wanted to move, and that was fine.

While sleeping, Sasuke would often dream about his battle with Naruto.

When he had first left Konoha to be with Orochimaru, his dreams had often been a replay of their battle at the Valley of the End. He remembered every blow, every kick, every surge of pain, every feeling, and every word exchanged between them. Sometimes, he would wake up filled with regret and longing, but other times, these memories only fuelled his desire to move forward – he had done something painful, something that had hurt both him and his precious friend by almost killing him, and for a moment there, he had almost done it. He had been lucky that he hadn’t, which was why he couldn’t let it all go to waste.

But it was when he had these sorts of guilty thoughts that he understood how weak he still was. He
had abandoned his life, his friends, his home so as to break all bonds and attachments, so feeling guilty over this would never do a thing to help him become stronger.

It was because he understood very well that Naruto’s existence was a weakness to him that it had made him all the angrier, all the more resentful towards the blond, and all the more determined to shut down his heart.

As he grew up and gradually became stronger, learning how to shut down his emotions, his dreams shifted. Instead of replaying his and Naruto’s first battle, he dreamt of the day when he would see Naruto again and fight him to the death. His heart had been fickle; it had only fluttered to life with thoughts of his brother and his best friend. But Itachi had been his goal, his dream, and it was because Sasuke knew that he had still been moved that he realized that for him to succeed and become stronger and ruthless like he needed to be, Naruto would have to perish. Because, angry as he might feel at the blond, he hadn’t hated him – he had hated the fact that he couldn’t hate him. But while love had resided in him, he had known that he would never be able to do the things he needed while that love remained alive.

Of course, back then, he had thought that his heart was divided between his feelings of love for Naruto and feelings of hate for his brother, only he hadn’t realized that he had still loved Itachi, too. He had been weak all along, but these were things he’d only come to learn through shock and pain.

So he had dreamt of fighting them. He had dreamt of the day when his soul would be put to rest and he could finally be freed of the constant torment that followed him every day. Back then, he had seen nothing ahead or even thought of the future. His life had meant very little to him as long as he could achieve his goals, and if his own death were to follow his brother’s, then so be it.

Now, he could hear the sound of a child crying, or maybe laughing – he couldn’t tell the difference, but it was loud and resonant and made his head hurt. It had been so long since the last time he had heard that sound inside his head he genuinely thought that he’d never hear it again.

In the past, when he had had constant and restless dreams of killing his brother and fighting his best friend, Sasuke used to hear that sound, over and over again, always clear, always present, always confusing. He had never understood why his dreams contained such an odd sound. Sometimes, it was all he could hear in the heat of battle, even though his soul was on fire, even though his heart thumped painfully with emotion, desperation, fear and adrenaline, and he didn’t understand it at all.

Even after Itachi had perished by his hands, Sasuke had still dreamt of fighting Naruto to the death, and during every single dream, that child would laugh, or cry, but when Sasuke desperately looked around, it would be nowhere in sight. Dream Itachi hadn’t been able to hear it, and dream Naruto seemed just as oblivious.

But he had seen him. Or maybe it was a she? Sometimes, it didn’t even look like it was human at all, because all Sasuke could see was white – a tiny, skinny body, pale and fragile, hair dishevelled as white as snow and eyes completely white, like an empty canvas. Like a wild creature, like a ghost or a mystical creature, it was terrifying and had nothing of beautiful.

Sasuke had only dreamt about its form twice, but he recalled it vividly. He never wanted to see it in his dreams ever again, for that sound it made was already haunting enough.

However, after the war and his real battle with Naruto, that sound had disappeared completely along with his dreams.

Maybe it was because he was currently ill that his mind was replaying strange things. In his feverish
haze, Sasuke could hear it clearly once more, but he wasn’t dreaming this time.

*Why, at such a time? I thought I was already…*

Turning to his side, he curled in on himself feeling another shiver run through his spine even though he felt hot and was sweating profusely. Outside he caves they were in, the night was humid and windy, and yet, the bonfire Naruto had made kept the place warm, not to mention the ridiculous amount of stuff he had covering his body. He couldn’t understand if he was feeling hot or terribly cold, and yet another unpleasant churn inside his stomach made him swallow hard and take a shaky breath through his nose. It would be no good if he were to throw up where they were camping in. Sasuke had no idea how long they were going to be there, but Naruto had been adamant that they didn’t travel again until he was completely recovered. He had only started throwing up a couple of days before, and the fever had escalated rather dramatically that morning. Naruto, of course, had decided that they should find someplace sheltered for Sasuke to recover.

Sasuke was upset and angry at himself for falling sick and delaying their exploration of Bear, and yet, he did feel like shit regardless of how much he wanted to keep moving and not waste his time feeling miserable and leaving Naruto alone. More importantly, he hated being vulnerable to the point where Naruto had to take care of him.

Thankfully, he had been sleeping a lot and thus hadn’t been throwing up as much as a couple of days ago, but still, if he wasn’t so weak he would’ve been seething.

It could’ve been something he had eaten, or maybe just some sort of small virus since Naruto was in perfect health. Either way, it sucked.

He could smell something in the air, a broth of vegetable or something, and it made him feel even more nauseous. There was a wet fresh cloth being pressed to his forehead with gentleness, and it was soothing in spite of everything. Naruto had been successful in looking for a few medicinal plants Sasuke had instructed him about, but now it was only a matter of time until he recovered.

“You’re going to have to eat something soon, Sasuke,” Naruto whispered quietly next to him, mindful of his raging headache. “I’m making soup. It’s really light, it’ll do you good.”

Sasuke shook his head from side to side, feebly, his eyes firmly closed. “I don’t want to throw up again…” he muttered.

“It’s fine if you do, I carved a bowl of wood that you can use,” Naruto said, brushing Sasuke’s wet fringe away from his face carefully. “You need to eat so you can get your health back.”

Sasuke shifted slowly in his bed roll until he was on his back, removing his arm from under the covers and putting a sticky hand over his stomach as he opened his eyes slightly to look up at the blurry ceiling of the cave. “I think I might be pregnant.”

He knew he wouldn’t exactly say something like that if he had been in his perfect state of mind and healthy. But he supposed it was alright if it would alleviate the worried tension he could feel coming from Naruto.

Naruto’s hand on his forehead stilled abruptly. “Are you serious?” he asked gravely, and Sasuke was too tired to tell, but he could swear that there was hint of both panic and hope in his voice.

In spite of how ill he felt and how hard it was to keep his eyes open, he looked at his friend’s serious expression and managed to throw him a weak frown. “Are you an idiot?” he muttered reproachfully. “I’m a guy, I can’t get fucking pregnant; it was a joke.”
Naruto’s expression changed to a less tense one but becoming strangely sombre, clearly unamused. “Wow, you’re sick and yet you manage to crack such poor tasted jokes,” he retorted, clearly upset for some reason. Then, he continued to gently wipe at Sasuke’s face with the wet cloth. “We’ve never even done anything without condoms, but still, I know you can’t get pregnant, I just... I don’t know what I thought, forget it.”

Slowly, Sasuke blinked at him, trying to focus his vision on Naruto’s face but the bonfire was too bright behind his friend and hurt his eyes, so he closed them.

“Come on, let me help you sit down so you can at least try to eat something,” he heard Naruto say, removing the cloth from his forehead. “I also made you tea with those leaves you told me about.”

Sasuke muttered an intelligible complaint, but Naruto was a bossy caretaker and was already manoeuvring him gently so he was in a sitting position. Sasuke was barely aware of his body position being shifted again and his back was pressed to the walls of the cave. Sasuke ‘tsked’ in annoyance as Naruto rearranged the covers over his legs and threw a blanket over his shoulders to keep him as warm as possible. He felt like such a useless piece of shit. He hated being taken care of, treated like a helpless child.

But he could barely move he felt so weak. And he’d lie if he said that he didn’t feel... safe with Naruto by his side.

Naruto didn’t complain at all, treating him, cooking for him, cleaning up after him with the same joviality as always, as if such things were no trouble for him. His hands were always gentle, his words always kind and light-hearted. Sasuke hated that everything comforted him so much. He didn’t like to have to put Naruto through so much trouble, and yet, it made him feel special. Well, he knew he was, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed liking being spoiled.

When Naruto knelt in front of him with a metallic bowl of watery soup and stirred it with a table spoon it Sasuke tried his best to glare at him, knowing exactly what his friend was thinking about.

“You feel like you’re strong enough to feed yourself?” Naruto asked, in a smart assed way. Sasuke merely tried glaring harder, which made Naruto roll his eyes. “Just let me feed you, bastard. I’ll go through the humiliation willingly when you’re better if you want.”

With narrowed, slightly blurry eyes, Sasuke didn’t reply, watching as Naruto carefully blew on the soup that was now on the spoon and carefully extended it so it was close to Sasuke’s mouth.

Sasuke’s stomach churned slightly, but he swallowed his nausea hard and parted his lips, too tired to fight.

“That’s the spirit,” Naruto teased, feeding him with surprising gentleness and care. Sasuke would’ve blushed in frustration if he could find the strength, but he simply couldn’t be bothered to feel much at all. He just wanted to sleep and get well as soon as possible.

The soup was very light but tasty, and as Sasuke swallowed, he prayed that it would stay inside his belly.

“Okay?” Naruto asked, eyeing him worriedly again. Sasuke nodded, so he extended a new spoonful towards him. For a few minutes, Naruto fed him patiently, silently waiting when Sasuke needed more time to chew the vegetables or had to take a break to let the broth settle in.

“I wouldn’t mind it,” Naruto said out of the blue, after a while, using a clean cloth to gently wipe at Sasuke’s mouth. “If you and me... well, if, somehow, we had a kid together. It would be cool. I
know it’s not possible, so don’t look at me like that. I’m just saying.”

Sasuke eyed him impassively. Suddenly, he felt like his mood had worsened, his head even heavier than before.

“Would it change anything if that potentially happened?” he asked tiredly and with a bitter tone, sighing. He seriously didn’t need to talk about potential situations. To dream, to imagine possible case scenarios… those kinds of things he had decided to simply not do, so he hoped Naruto got the hint.

Naruto looked back at him, bright blue eyes serious. “I don’t know…” he retorted, with a small shrug. “Would it change for you?”

Sasuke could only sigh again, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the cave wall. He really felt like shit. “I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about stupid stuff like this.”

He couldn’t explain it, but sometimes there was a heaviness inside of him that made him feel exhausted, as if the mere weight of his own mind and heart was too much to bear. He knew this, knew what it was, but before, he had been stronger and colder. Now, he was sick and feeling weak, and there was no way he could escape it.

It sucks…

He felt Naruto shifting, the air becoming thicker between them as the blond tensed, frustrated. However, if he was going to say something, he gave up on it pretty quickly, and Sasuke was grateful for that. It wasn’t easy to keep things simple, to keep conversations on hold, or things left unsaid, desires kept hidden, dreams untold. But for them, it was as it should be.

“Shall we give it another try at another spoonful?” Naruto muttered, before clearing his throat.

Sasuke swallowed hard. That goddamned sound. Why didn’t it just go away? Why now? He really didn’t need to remember that image.

Why was it so hot? He just wanted to sleep.

Ah. He didn’t really feel like eating anything anymore.

“Sasuke?” Naruto called out softly.

But Sasuke’s consciousness was already drifting off. He was only vaguely aware of Naruto giving him something bitter to drink and then lying him down once more. The last thing he felt was the cool cloth on his forehead and loving fingers brushing over his cheek.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

I thought that the only thing I needed to happen in this chapter was Naruto topping Sasuke (BTW, sorry for the random smut scene, it came out like this. Sexier times will come, eventually, now’s just not the time).

But re-reading the chapter I realize that what comes out of it is something very
important: Sasuke’s feelings for Taka (which will be of great relevance in the future), and a growing tension between him and Naruto. I hadn’t realized how sour things were between them at this point, and to be honest, it wasn’t supposed to happen quite like this, but I guess… I guess once more they took matter in their own hands, and that’s perfect for the plot and for what I need for this story. So I apologise if this chapter is confusing and boring, but I guess I needed it to get in tune with Sasuke’s mind and sort out my own ideas for the future of this fic.

Plot will move along faster, hopefully, from here on. Sorry for the wait, and sorry for the ups and downs.

THANK YOU ALL FOR READING AND FOR FOLLOWING THIS STORY ALL THE SAME!

Again I repeat, EVEN THOUGH THIS STORY IS SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW THE EVENTS OF THE MANGA POST 699, I WILL GIVE IT MY OWN ENDING, SUITABLE FOR NARUTO’S AND SASUKE’S STORY. I cannot reveal how it will go, obviously, but I want to give it a happy ending, so you guys keep your hopes up, okay?
Sasuke was ill for a few days. Naruto didn’t like seeing him so vulnerable and was constantly worried sick, but while this was an unexpected situation for him – and one he had never gone through – he didn’t mind taking care of his best friend. Sasuke slept a lot and barely ate. Considering their lack of comfortable conditions, Naruto’s task was hard, but he didn’t think it was a hassle at all. All he wanted was for Sasuke to recover as soon as possible, and if he could reduce his discomfort, he wished to do so as best as he possibly could, which was why he didn’t mind helping him wash, relieve himself and do his basic necessities, didn’t mind cooking for him or cleaning up after him when he threw up. He thought that this was the kind of stuff couples did for each other, was it not? Through sickness and in health, or something like that. He and Sasuke weren’t married, and neither were they a couple. They were something that, for now, suited what they had together. With the future awaiting for them, it was no use trying to find labels. Still, he had strong feelings for Sasuke, so he wanted nothing more than to give him whatever he possibly could, for as long as he possibly could. He wanted them, just the way they were, for as long as they lasted.

After all, he was in no hurry. Of course, the time stalled would’ve been a million times better if Sasuke had been healthy, but Naruto supposed it was good enough as long as they were together.

As soon as his lover recovered, they made their way to Hoshigakure where Sasuke was decided to speak to its leader, now a sharp eyed man in his fifties with hair and beard in various and magnificent shades of grey. Naruto personally had had no interest in such affairs (even though he probably should), but he was impressed by the way Sasuke handled things and by the amount of political knowledge he seemed to possess in order to expose Konoha’s offerings; he was doing more than fine. Later on, at Naruto’s questioning, Sasuke would randomly confess that Kakashi sometimes used him to send out message to certain villages of Konoha’s desire for alliance and peace. Of course, such treaties needed a thorough exploitation of both villages’ interests, and that was something Sasuke was very good at.

The leader offered them stay for as long as they remained in Bear Country, but after only a couple of days filled with boring reunions and sightseeing, Sasuke was ready to go, carrying three scrolls for
Kakashi inside his bag with terms, demands and conditions for a stronger alliance.

Naruto wanted to keep traveling with Sasuke for as long as he could, but his friend, while not exactly in a hurry either, seemed unwilling to simply waste time unless he couldn’t help it.

Bear country was right next to Fire country, so it wasn’t like they’d take forever to get to Konoha.

And so, they were making their way back to the village. And never before did Naruto feel less inclined to ‘go home’. He knew that this was supposed to tell him something about his choices, and he was sure that his personal lazy pace often compelled Sasuke to bitterly tease him, and yet, Sasuke never did.

Somehow, the time for jokes and teasing seemed to have come to an end. A lot of things, Naruto thought, seemed to have come to an end, even if their daily lives were still the same; even if they still wanted each other with everything they had. Sasuke had stopped talking about certain things, and Naruto tried to choose his words carefully so as to not unnecessarily sour the already fragile mood between them. It seemed as though they had started walking on thin ice with each other. Still, it was better than nothing. As long as they were together, that was all it mattered.

Naruto realized that the only thing that they couldn’t hold back was their longing for each other. Fortunately, sex and intimacy was something Sasuke indulged in whenever the opportunity presented itself. This relieved him.

On their way, Naruto didn’t really feel the urge to be with people, and yet, he allowed Sasuke to take him up a mountain he had never seen before and show him a hidden religious community living within an oddly shaped stone temple. He was confused when they set camp nearby where they couldn’t be seen rather than going to the community to ask for shelter. Together, for a few quick passing days, they watched the group of people. They wore weird, ancient but colourful clothes and often indulged in strange outdoor rituals in a language neither understood. Sometimes, they walked about naked, women, men, and even children, wearing nothing but necklaces made of stone. They didn’t look like primitive people, though. Every day they used living sacrifices – animals – but sometimes, their rituals consisted of dancing and making strange looking artefacts only to break them. Sasuke told him that he had once before observed the group, and that he was genuinely interested in making part of it, to understand the odd culture and which gods (or what entities, exactly) they worshiped. Naruto had to admit that, if it was to go through the experience with Sasuke, he wouldn’t mind being involved with the community and their religion, but even if he had eagerly waited for Sasuke to say something so they could spend a while there (and again, delay their return), the suggestion never came. Sasuke took many notes in his notebook, though. Far too soon they were back on the road.

Neither rushed to Konoha, but it wasn’t long before they found themselves merely a few hours away. Naruto kept whining that he needed to stop to eat or pee. Sasuke kept being oddly side tracked by a sudden interest in flowers and herbs that he insisted he must add to his notebook. Before they knew it, the sun was setting, bringing about the perfect excuse to set camp for one final night near a small stream. Not that they couldn’t easily reach Konoha even in the dark, but neither seemed inclined to, even though they hadn’t really had any comfort for a long time. Naruto hunted a chubby rabbit for dinner to go with the dried fruits they still had left in their bags while Sasuke made the fire. The evening was mostly spent in silence. What was there left to say that neither knew already? The mood was heavy and tension filled as they ate. Neither felt the need to speak, because the occasional glances they shared already said enough of what they didn’t dare to voice.

After dinner, as Sasuke undressed to wash himself up by the edge of the stream, Naruto couldn’t help but go him. Carefully, he wrapped his arms around his naked torso, hugging him before
planting an open mouthed kiss on the curve of his neck. He felt Sasuke’s heart beating faster, his muscles tensing, his body heating up. Naruto could feel Sasuke’s lust escalating quickly, flamed by his own, the strong mutuality working them in a way that was now far too familiar to both of them.

Sasuke’s hand grabbed Naruto’s arm across his chest and tightened around it. His voice came out a little worked up, but oddly empty. “Let’s not do this,” was the only thing he said.

Naruto stopped himself in the process of lightly scrapping his teeth on Sasuke’s shoulder, surprised. Sasuke had never stopped him before. “You’re not the in the mood?” He asked unnecessarily. Of course Sasuke was in the mood, he could feel it in his own body. Sasuke wanted it as much as he always did, as much as Naruto himself did right now. Naruto didn’t let him go, but leaned away a bit, so Sasuke could look at him over his shoulder.

“It’s not that I’m not in the mood,” Sasuke said honestly, looking at him with eyes soft but strangely vacant as well. “I just don’t feel like we should do it just because it’s the last time. We did it many times already. Doing it now will just be…”

He trailed off, clearly not wanting to say what was on his mind. Naruto could only frown at him, feeling disappointed. He understood where Sasuke was coming from, and he was right. Still, he wanted to do it. Even if it was the last time, even if it was sure to hurt them, he had thought that, to spend their final night together making love would be fitting. Was he wrong in wanting it? In wanting to take and be taken by Sasuke, to, one last time, drown in everything they were, getting drunk in what they would never have again?

Even if it hurt, it had never stopped them, before. It had never stopped them at all.

“Sasuke…”

“No, Naruto.”

If Naruto had been a little younger, he would’ve probably thrown a small tantrum. But he was older now, and he respected Sasuke’s feelings above his own whims, regardless of his knowing that Sasuke himself was fighting against his own desires.

Maybe it was all for the best, he thought, talking a deep, but dejected breath. Maybe keep this sort of distance would make it all easier in the end.

Then again, maybe not.

“Can I at least help you wash up?” Naruto muttered, hesitantly, trying not to sound too resentful.

Sasuke eyed his features before pecking his lips gently. “Sure.”

000

Morning had come too soon and Naruto hadn’t slept a wink. While they hadn’t spoken at all through those nightly hours that seemed to end far too soon, Naruto knew Sasuke had been awake, as well – they had remained close to each other, occasionally touching and exchanging silent and meaningful looks in the dark, unable to move away from each other.

His body felt abnormally heavy as they silently gathered their things and got ready to hit the road. Konoha was about an hour away by foot (less if they were running), but neither was in a hurry. In fact, they improvised breakfast just to make time, even though neither was able to eat much of anything at all.
Naruto felt literally sick to his stomach, anguish and anxiety filing his heart, accompanied by the horrible despair of knowing that the dream he had shared with Sasuke during those months was about to come to an end. He couldn’t even speak, but thankfully, his friend didn’t demand it of him.

Those feelings were probably some of the worst he had ever experienced in his life. It was misery at its best. It felt like something inside of him was dying, as if a part of himself was being ripped out of his body.

He didn’t want it.

Maybe he was being overly dramatic. He knew that Sasuke would be entering Konoha with him and spend a few days there before leaving indefinitely again. He knew Sasuke wouldn’t be around after that, that they’d only see each other once in a while, but that he’d always be there for him, that this was no definite goodbye.

They were bonded souls. He would always be able to feel Sasuke within himself no matter how far from each other they were.

But he was being parted with something (someone) that gave his existence more meaning than any other. In spite of their ups and downs, his days beside Sasuke had been the happiest of his life so far. He’d miss them and think about them with love and devotion for the rest of his days, he was sure of it.

It was a cold morning, but the bright sun was warm, the sky stupidly blue and clean. It wasn’t fair and for a moment, Naruto almost hissed up at it but kept his irritation to himself.

As they made their way through the forest, they walked side by side with agonizingly slow steps. At some point, Naruto’s left hand searched for Sasuke’s right one, grabbing for it with hesitant fingers, but instead of refusing the action, Sasuke’s hand responded and held it back. Their fingers automatically intertwined and Naruto’s heartbeat sped up furiously, filling his chest with so many emotions he didn’t cry just then simply because they were far too overwhelming.

Sasuke’s hand in his was warm and strong, slightly rough but perfectly fitting. Holding hands with someone stoic like Sasuke, another guy, and in such a situation, was definitely strange, but it was a tiny light in the middle of that dark path they seemed to be taking towards the village, and gave them both strength to keep walking. Naruto wished he could feel that firm, confident grip in his forever, silently offering him comfort and reassurance, grounding him firmly like this. He’d always been able to be strong on his own, but he had no idea how he’d manage from now on.

Sasuke didn’t speak, and for a long time, didn’t even look at him, but Naruto couldn’t help but look at his profile as they walked. He had stared at Sasuke so many times during their journey, witnessing his most beautiful expressions, as well as his more disgruntled, aggressive ones. He had seen Sasuke livid with anger, sad, content, contemplative, happy, lost in his own pain, immersed in his own pleasure… all of these expressions Naruto had engraved inside his memory and locked inside his heart. Right now, Sasuke looked nothing but impassive, his face revealing nothing as his eyes stared at the path ahead. Under the sun, those eyes were of a light stormy grey rather than hellishly dark and his hair, pitch black but with obvious hues of blue, swayed gently with the breeze, contrasting heavily with his pale, but healthy skin.

If Naruto didn’t feel the violent surge of devastating emotions Sasuke’s soul conveyed to him, he would have wondered if his friend felt anything at all. But he knew he did. Sasuke was the most passionate, emotional and devoted human being he had ever met and the most faithful person to his own feelings that Naruto would ever meet.
Naruto was in love with everything that Sasuke was, the good and bad. And he simply couldn’t look away.

For many years, he had thought that Sakura had been beautiful. Surely enough, she had become a beautiful, solicited woman. Ino was also one with a striking and sexy beauty. Hinata, herself, was said to be one of the most beautiful women of Konoha, and Naruto could vouch for that, because he had seen everything of her, and surely, she was the kind of girl men would kill to have in every sense.

There was no complexity in Sasuke’s looks unless you took the time to observe the details, Naruto considered, and yet, he was absolutely breath-taking. ‘Beautiful’ or ‘handsome’ were words that could never make him justice.

And to think that, just a few months previously, all he saw was Sasuke as a person and not his physical form at all. How weird was it, to feel attracted to the person first and then gradually fall in love with their looks? Such a striking beauty was supposed to affect the other person first, right?

But with them, it had always been about the heart, the person, the individual. Their eyes had followed each other even before they themselves were mature enough to understand why they empathised with each other so much.

Now, he didn’t want to lose sight of him, ever. He wanted his eyes to see it all, every day.

But…

Noticing he was being watched, Sasuke turned his face to him and quirked his eyebrows upwards in questioning. Naruto could only swallow hard and shake his head from side to side.

You’re beautiful, he wanted to tell him. But Sasuke wouldn’t appreciate it, least of all now, so he kept his mouth shut.

“We’re here,” Sasuke said, causing Naruto’s stomach to jump unpleasantly. It wasn’t possible that they had reached their destination so quickly, but in the distance, among the foliage of the forest, he could definitely see the huge entrance of the city.

No…

He stopped walking abruptly and beside him, Sasuke came to halt as well. Sasuke’s hand slid away from his, slowly, and he wanted to grab hold of it, to not let it go, but he found that his strength had left him.

He looked at Sasuke, noticing that his friend was looking at him, his eyes cold and intense but expressive, almost threatening, warning. Naruto was overcome with the desire to reach out for him and wrap his arms around him, one final moment of comfort, one final minute when he could feel Sasuke against him, when he could be enraptured by his familiar scent, when he could feel his lips against his. Just one more time or he wouldn’t be able to let go…

But Sasuke felt his desire and took a couple steps back, away from him. “Don’t,” he said authoritatively, and his voice was firm and cold – a well-trained façade. “There will be no need for us to touch each other.”

Naruto felt like his gut had been punched. He hadn’t been mad or offended when Sasuke had refused to have one final night of intimacy – he had understood Sasuke’s feelings – but now of all times?
“But, Sasuke…” he pleaded, and his voice trembled and his hands shook helplessly without him even understanding why. He felt so out of himself all of a sudden, so lost. This was the end and all he wanted was to be close to Sasuke, that was all he needed. It was a moment he had dreaded, but he had envisioned that he’d at least get to hold his best friend once more, to just…

“Don’t do this to us, Naruto,” Sasuke said, quickly and sharply, lifting his chin up proudly as if to reinforce his own determination. “This is not goodbye. There is no need for more sentimentalist bullshit.”

Naruto knew that. He gritted his teeth; his eyes stung. He knew it, but…

“Turn around,” Sasuke demanded, a little softer this time, surprising him.

“What for?” Naruto asked in a shaky whisper. He felt angry, but at the same time, knew that Sasuke’s attitude was the best one to take for both their sakes. “You’re not sending me back to Konoha by myself, are you?”

“No,” Sasuke muttered, frowning a little. “I just want you to walk ahead of me. I’ll be right behind you. There’s something I need to say to you.”

There was something in Sasuke’s eyes that stopped the blond from protesting. He thought that, whatever Sasuke had to say could and should be said to his face, but that… that look…

Through their bond, he could feel Sasuke’s restless soul, his feelings of dejection, his sadness, his exhaustion, and yet, there was an odd, resigned calm about him that was eerie.

Naruto eyed him with his lips parted, trying to figure out what Sasuke’s intentions were. Suddenly, he felt very scared. Not of Sasuke, but because he felt that…

“Please, Naruto.”

He couldn't do anything else to against that enticing voice, so he swallowed hard and merely nodded, his heart beating wildly inside his ribcage. This was not how he had envisioned their parting to be.

Offering Sasuke one last, imploring look, he tried to say something but the other man's glare stopped him. Taking a deep breath, he did as he was told, turning his back to him before he slowly started walking ahead of him.

“Don’t look back as I talk, and keep walking no matter what,” Sasuke said evenly, following behind him with firm steps.

“I want to look at you,” Naruto said, frustrated. “Fuck, why are you doing this to me? You’re such a bastard, even now…”

“Just do this one last thing for me,” Sasuke asked, his tone smooth and polite, almost as if he was sweetly talking to a child. “Promise you’ll do as I say.”

Naruto could only bite the inside of his cheek, because he was powerless to such a plea. “Fine, I… I promise.”

Naruto tried walking as slowly as he could, because Sasuke took his time talking. He could feel his friend's struggle; the onslaught of emotions coming from him that he had become so accustomed to running through his veins as if it were his own.

“I know I said we wouldn’t talk about this anymore, but this is the last time I will, because I need to,”
Sasuke said, after a while, his voice low but clear. And it was sad, too. Sasuke's voice was so sad... Naruto hadn't been prepared for it. “I hate you for doing this to me, Naruto. For choosing Konoha over me, for not entertaining the idea that there are things out there, with me, that would be able to make your dreams come true.”

Sasuke's bluntness was like a punch to the gut.

“Sasuke…”

“Shut up,” Sasuke interrupted once more, the sudden resentment in which he'd said it making Naruto cringe. “I hate this about you, and it hurts, but I understand that you probably feel the same way about me and my choices, so I respect it. I know I was a bastard for forcing you to want to understand how we felt for each other. I know my anger made things worse for the both of us and brought us to this. But I regret nothing. Not a single thing. Even if being your lover while knowing you wouldn’t be with me was one of the most painful things I’ve ever had to go through.”

Biting on his lower lip hard, Naruto felt his eyes watering. Sasuke was right, but he didn't blame him at all. How could he possibly blame him when the man had given him some of the best things in his life? How could he blame him for wanting to be loved, to not be alone with his feelings?

Naruto knew he'd never regret it either, ever.

“I've always been watching you, Naruto, ever since we were kids, longing for you, envying you, feeling sorry for your pain.” Just as Naruto was going to speak his mind on the matter, Sasuke's words left him speechless. “Apart from my brother, you are all I care for in this world, and the single person that I can’t stand to be without. I’d fall if I had to walk this earth without knowing you were alive somewhere. You know it very well.”

What?

Have we felt the same way for each other all along, even back then?

How...?

Nononono...

“I wish we could see this world change together.” Sasuke’s voice had become a whisper, melodic and pained, cold. “I wish we could work on it, together, side by side. I know we’d never be a normal couple, and I know we’d never be a normal family because we’re both men and there are things I can’t give you that a woman can. Society isn’t kind in these situations, but I don’t care about it, and I’d make sure you wouldn’t either.”

Involuntarily, Naruto's body shook, a mixture of shock and embarrassment joining his broken heart. He clutched at the strap of his satchel viciously.

Why now?

I want to look at you...

I can't take this...

Still, he kept walking, knowing Konoha was closer by the second.

“Don’t say these things now,” he begged, his voice trembling. “Why are you…”
“We have made our choice.” Sasuke heaved a long, deep sigh. “I will always be loyal to you, as a friend, as a Shinobi, and I will be there for you when you become Hokage. If that is your dream, then I want to see it happen. Everything you want, Naruto, everything you dream about, all you long for… I hope you can have it. I want you to. I want you to be happy, no matter how, or with whom.”

That was it, Naruto couldn’t hold himself back anymore as a sob escaped his chest.

Suddenly, he hated himself, and he hated Sasuke. He hated Konoha, and the world, and all the things in it that did nothing to make their lives easier.

Bu no. He loved it. He loved everything, fortunately or unfortunately, and he loved Sasuke the most. He had always loved him, even when he hadn't loved himself.

If only we had known, even before we ever even became teammates...

Tears streamed down his face and he wiped them with the sleeve of his sweater, feeling weak and feeble, powerless.

“So go be happy, Naruto; as happy as you possibly can,” Sasuke proceeded, then cleared his throat, for his voice had become hoarse. “Do everything you can to achieve your goals. Mary Hinata, have children, become the best Shinobi you can, become an icon, a role model, a Hokage that will have no possible comparison. I know you can do it, I always did. I will help you in everything I possibly can. I will always be there for you. Say the word and I’ll come for you. To see you happy and accomplished is all I wish for. If you are happy, then that will be enough for me. I won’t be happy unless you are. Do you understand this?”

“Yes…” Naruto hiccupped and sniffed loudly. He couldn’t see anything anymore, and had no idea how he even had the strength to keep walking. He could tell they were almost at Konha’s gates, and they never seemed this frightening or unwelcoming to him until today. “But… but you… Sasuke, you…”

“Don’t cry.”

“How can you tell me not to cry when I…!”

“I love you.” More than the words uttered, it was the way Sasuke uttered them that made Naruto clutch at his chest and release an almost guttural groan. The certainty, the hidden things that those words promised him… Now he understood why Sasuke didn’t like such a thing being said half-heartedly, because when Sasuke himself spoke those three simple words, it was as if he could carve their meaning with his voice alone – like a vow, carve it in the grounds beneath them, write it in the sky, blend them with the wind, always everywhere, never to be forgotten, for eternity.

He knew, without understanding how, that Sasuke would never say it again.

“I hate you for leaving me, and I’m sure you feel the same way about me, but we are still us. And no matter what happens in both our lives, this will never change,” Sasuke proceeded, dropping his voice to a whisper to keep it in check, even though he knew Naruto could feel his feelings clearly. Right now, Naruto wished he couldn’t, because it hurt even worse to witness Sasuke’s stoicism. “You are my best friend, my soul brother, the other half of me, and my saviour. I don’t think even you understand what this means, but it’s fine. We are now, finally, on the same page right now, aren’t we?”

Naruto could do nothing but sob pathetically. Before he knew it, they were outside the open gates of Konoha, and they could both hear the lively commotion inside. Naruto had always loved listening to
the sound of ‘coming home’ and yet he resented it right now. He could barely stand the thought of embracing it, because he knew that, for the first time, it would cost him greatly.

He stopped himself, fearing the moment when he’d step foot inside the village. He didn’t want to leave Sasuke, even if he knew that the more time he spent in his presence, the more it would torture them both. They were both being tormented by their feelings for each other, and for Sasuke to have wanted to say these things to his back rather than to his face, he had to be in a dark, dark place right now. Naruto knew he was. And knowing Sasuke was feeling this way didn’t help him feel better at all. He couldn’t stop crying if he tried. He wondered if he ever would.

And I can’t do anything to help you…

I want you so much I can’t stand it…

“Go home, Naruto,” his former lover muttered, “I’ll see you around.”

He knew Sasuke did things the way he did for a reason. He knew that demanding things from Sasuke at such a moment was selfish, that no matter what he did, nothing could soothe the way they were feeling, if anything, it would only make this moment even harder.

Still, he couldn’t help but turn around and quickly close the short distance between them so he could put his arms around Sasuke’s neck and hug him as tight as he could. One last time, he thought desperately, just to be close like this. He buried his face in the curve of Sasuke’s neck, shakily inhaling that familiar scent, feeling that warm, firm body against his so he could memorise how perfectly they fit against each other. Like pieces of a puzzle.

Really, he could do nothing but sob pathetically.

“You’re everything,” he managed to blurt out, hurriedly trying to convey his feelings, to say one last thing before they returned to the past, to a life before they had known each other this way. “And I will never forget us, Sasuke. I’ll never forget that we are eternal. Don’t forget it either…”

Sasuke shook and tensed in his arms, not daring to hug him back. “Naruto…”

“Someday…” Naruto cut, leaning away to look into Sasuke’s eyes with his blurry vision. “No matter how old we are; I swear…”

“Naruto…” Sasuke’s voice had dropped, finally, to a low, pleading and pained whisper. Naruto wanted to see him so badly, and yet his vision failed him. “Please… go home.”

And it was better this way. It was. Still…

Biting on his lower lip and letting out yet another painful sob, Naruto clutched Sasuke’s cloak in his fists for a second as if it would magically give him courage, before roughly letting go and running to Konoha, blind to everything but his own personal devastation.

Sasuke looked away as Naruto ran, his teeth buried on his lower lip so hard it was drawing blood, but there was no physical pain in his body that could possibly ever drown the pain he felt inside. He wondered if he’d feel better if he ripped off his own skin. He felt as if his very life had been drained away, forced out of him and stolen by Naruto. The blood trickled down his chin but he didn’t even take notice of it.

He wanted to leave. But he couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe.
He had lied. Why had he lied? There was no way he’d never be happy with Naruto away from him, no way he’d ever be happy if Naruto were to love someone else for the rest of his life.

But he was selfless like that. He would give Naruto away if that was what his friend wanted. He wouldn’t even fight it because he couldn’t – it wasn’t in his right to. He just wanted Naruto to have everything he wanted, even if these were things Sasuke himself couldn’t give him.

He had told Naruto to be happy. He had meant it. But… would it ever be possible?

I lied.

Automatically, he started walking, entering the village, but his legs felt heavy and foreign, as if his body didn’t belong to him at all. He didn’t know where he was going, because his mind could think of nothing but Naruto. But he understood that he had no strength to carry himself to his small, lonely apartment, so it was probably thanks to some divine entity that he was able to walk (or practically stumble) towards the nearest dark alley he could find, immerse himself in the shadows and lean his side heavily against a wall to support his weight.

He couldn’t see anything in front of him. It was as if his very being had entered a state of irreversible shock.

His head hurt. His heart hurt. His lungs hurt. It was an agonizing pain, so he brought his hand to his chest, hissing.

What have we done, Naruto?

Just thinking about how Naruto was going through this as well tore him apart, even if a part of himself felt secretly glad and thought that Naruto deserved it for being naïve. He was so angry at them both, but his pride had already been bruised enough. He was not so weak as to give in. Even if it killed him…

He didn’t know what upset him the most – if the fact that Naruto would be away from him, or the fact that he knew Naruto had put himself in a path of glory that would never give him the sort of happiness he wanted; the sort of happiness Sasuke wished he could have.

Sasuke didn’t know how he knew this, but he did. He knew it, inside of himself, that he would never be happy away from Naruto, so his friend was supposed to know these things as well, understand that it wasn’t just one-sided regardless of their own independent lives. But he was an idealist, and he believed in more than the obvious, so Sasuke couldn’t just tell him. There would come a time when he’d see it for himself. And when he did, he would be miserable.

And Sasuke ached knowing this. He didn’t want Naruto to suffer. If he could take on Naruto’s pain and bear it himself so the blond could be happy, he would. But he couldn’t.

I don’t want this…

He was assaulted by a sudden urge that was greater and bigger than himself. He recognized as being the same as what had happened to him once before, with Naruto, on the day they had first had sex.

It was one of those times when their bond burdened him and became too much for even him to bear.

His legs gave in and he found himself sliding helplessly until he was kneeling on the floor, covering his mouth with his hand to stifle the horrible sounds that left his chest.

It was worse than before. A million times worse.
There was no telling if these feelings inside him were of loss, anger or utter despair. It seemed so stupid to grieve so much for something like this – something that would never die. He was so angry at Naruto, at himself, at the world.

He thought he had been strong, he thought he had everything under control and that he was resigned, at peace, emotionless.

But this was like a tidal wave, crashing over him and pulling him helplessly along with the current, suffocating him and enveloping him. He was drowning and couldn’t pull himself back to the surface.

Tears poured down his face as his breath left him in violent sobs that shook his body without his consent.

Sasuke didn’t know how long he spent there, or if anyone had seen him. He cried until there seemed to be nothing left inside of him that was capable of feeling anything anymore.

There was no doubt in his mind that a huge part of him had died in that alley.

Naruto had run straight home without telling anyone he was back. He knew that he was supposed to report to Kakashi, that Hinata surely wanted to see him, that his friends had thousands of questions for him and would surely want to throw him a welcome party, but he couldn’t bother to even think about these things. All he thought about was how much everything hurt and how hard his heart ached to be in the company of his best friend, and his one and only lover.

For two whole days, he could do nothing but cry, sleep and lie in bed, looking at the ceiling impassively as his mind replayed everything that had happened during those months away from the village. He thought about those things with love, and then longing, sadness and happiness would crash over him and the desire to see Sasuke and feel him beside him became almost unbearable.

As Sasuke had said, they had both chosen this, and now they’d have to face the consequences. Naruto understood this, and he understood that he needed to move on. Even though he now felt empty and lonely and filled with a grief for them so strong it seemed powerful enough to kill him, he knew that they were both strong and that they’d be fine soon enough.

For now, though, Naruto needed this and couldn’t do anything else if he tried.

On the third day, Hinata visited him, and while he wanted to ignore his doorbell, he didn’t want her to get unnecessarily worried and attract more people to his doorstep. Besides, he’d have to get out of his self-seclusion and get back to work. There were things he needed to do – his future awaited him and he wouldn’t let it go to waste when he’d already given up on the most important person in his world. He had no idea if Sasuke was still in Konoha or not, if he was alright or not.

So, Naruto got up and opened the door, only to find her looking anxious and worried but beautiful in her long woollen baby blue dress. She paled as soon as she saw him, but he understood that he probably looked like shit, having neglected himself until now, so he tried smiling at her in a somewhat reassuring way.

“The Hokage told me you had been seen returning with Sasuke-san, but that neither of you had reported to his office yet,” she said, worriedly, as Naruto stepped tiredly aside so she could get inside. He didn’t miss the way her eyes avidly roamed the apartment, as if looking for something. She looked oddly relieved when she didn’t find it, though. “I thought… I was really worried.”

Oh. Sasuke had also been missing in action, Naruto thought, a pang of anxiousness hitting him. He
hoped Sasuke was alright. Or, well… as alright as he could possibly be. Thinking about how Sasuke
was certainly going through the same hell as him made him feel even worse.

“I was sick throughout our journey back, so I headed straight home,” Naruto lied, forcing out a weak
chuckle. He didn’t like lying, especially to someone who didn’t deserve it, but what else could he
do? He couldn’t just tell her the truth. “A cold I think. And my stomach… well, I’m better now.
Sorry to have made you come all this way. The house is a mess, too. I’m sorry.”

Hinata turned to him, blushing slightly but looking up at him with love in her clear eyes. It made him
feel very uncomfortable all of a sudden. “You could’ve called me and I’d come and take care of
you,” she said, taking a hesitant step towards him. “You were gone for so long without barely saying
a word, and then you return and…”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. He felt guilty for making her worry, these were feelings he only had the
heart to feel right now, because until now, she had barely crossed his mind. But this wasn’t how it
was supposed to be, he knew. This was his life now, and she was his girlfriend, oblivious his sins,
undeserving of his selfishness. And yet, she asked him no questions, demanded nothing of him. “I
really didn’t mean to worry you.”

Her eyes softened and she nodded. Her hands fidgeted in front of her chest, as if she was unsure of
what to do with them. “Can I… can I help you, now?” she asked, and there was a pleading tone to
her sweet voice. “I can clean up while you take a shower. I’ll cook something for you!” She blushed
even more and bowed down ever so slightly – something she often did but that, after everything that
had happened between them, he still couldn’t comprehend. “Please, just… let me do something for
you.”

Naruto eyed her with a small smile. He loved her. She was a precious friend, his first girlfriend, his
first lover, someone who loved him devotedly and wholeheartedly. She was beautiful and kind and
dedicated. She deserved everything. He was thankful for being loved by her like this, even when he
had ignored her feelings for so long.

But… while it made him content to see her and knowing she wanted to take care of him… he really
hadn’t missed her. For months he and Sasuke had been away and he had barely thought of Konoha
or Hinata. He had parted ways with Sasuke three days ago and it felt like his longing would kill him.
He wanted Sasuke there, offering to help him, taking care of him. He wanted to see Sasuke so
badly…

She was no Sasuke. He almost felt like crying again, but knew that he couldn’t. These feelings, this
pain would eventually numb him and he’d be able to deal with them. Hadn’t he been able to handle
it when Sasuke first left after the war? This was much worse, but he’d do it. He had to. After all, he
had chosen this himself.

“Thank you, Hinata,” he muttered hoarsely, reaching out a hand to touch the top of her bowed head
gently. He could tell she was tense, hesitant. He had no idea what had brought it on. “It’s good to
have you here.”

She straightened herself up. His words hadn’t been useful in relaxing her at all. “Are you…” her
eyes looked straight into his, oddly knowing and attentive. “Are you alright?”

For a moment, he wondered if she had seen through him, through his lie. For a moment, it seemed as
though she understood what was wrong with him. Her hand reached out for him, to tug at the hem of
his t-shirt, as if to offer a bit of… something. It was as if she was trying to convey something to him
that neither could really understand. He didn’t know what, but he didn’t feel like guessing either. So
he merely touched her hand on his t-shirt and squeezed it.
“I’m not alright,” he admitted in a whisper. “But I will be. I have you.”

“I don’t want to,” was what Sasuke had said to Sakura at the gates of Konoha, when she had leaned forward to kiss him goodbye. “I didn’t like it the first time.”

He didn’t even have to take a step back, because she stopped herself at once and leaned back. She didn’t look as surprised as he thought she would, but there was a flash of disappointment and hurt in her eyes. How she hadn’t seen it coming Sasuke had no idea, since he hadn’t even allowed her to touch him during the short time they had spent together in the torturous five days he’d been in Konoha. If he had felt uncomfortable before, now there was a sort of rejection that he could easily associate with revulsion. It wasn’t towards Sakura; it wasn’t her fault – it was just him that didn’t wish to be touched.

“I understand,” she said, forcing a smile as she awkwardly pushed her skirt down, blushing furiously, maybe in humiliation, he had no idea. Sasuke eyed her thoughtfully for a while, trying to wrap his mind around his feelings.

Sakura was a gorgeous woman; he could tell as much. She was strong, smart and had a promising career as medic. He was aware that she was solicited, and yet, here she was, crawling at his feet like this when he could barely feel more than a looming ancient affection for the woman he had seen as a family in times when he thought he had no-one.

He didn’t understand why was it that he couldn’t even begin to find the will to want to love her as more, let alone actively give himself into trying.

Their relationship could barely be called as such as it was. He had agreed to ‘give it a try’, but no matter how much time he spent in her company, no matter what she did for him, nothing new bloomed, and even now, his desire to try harder had been reduced to nothing. He wanted her to go away, and he himself wanted to be left at peace. But he was a better person now, and he wouldn’t hurt her unnecessarily because she didn’t deserve it.

He couldn’t be with her the way she wanted to, neither did he want to.

Sasuke shouldn’t’ve allowed her to kiss him at all back then. He had indulged her too much. But while back then it made no difference, right now he just couldn’t keep trying, aiming for something that clearly wasn’t meant to be.

He felt like his life had already been far too unexpectedly filled with lies already. It was useless to live another one at this point.

He didn’t even want to talk to her about himself, didn’t want to tell her about his past, his thoughts, his ambitions, and had refused to say a single word about his journey with Naruto. He simply didn’t want to talk to her about anything personal at all when making small talk was so much easier and less compromising.

“Sakura,” he muttered, tilting his head to the side and making her look back up at him. “You understand that we’re not a real couple, don’t you? That the way we are isn’t how two people who are together are supposed to behave like?”

She seemed genuinely surprised at his bluntness and bit hard on her lower lip.

“I know,” she said, with a short nod that seemed as frustrated as it was sad. “I know I try too hard and maybe push it too far, too soon. But I understand that maybe you are not ready to be with me
yet. Or rather, maybe you are not ready to give yourself to someone yet and let go of your past. I understand it.”

Sasuke was almost impressed by the accurate logic. Her eyes seemed to express a level of knowledge he was surprised by, but he wondered exactly how much she knew and about what. The curiosity didn’t last long, though – he couldn’t care less about what Sakura thought she knew about him.

“Listen…”

“I’ll wait!” she said firmly, lifting up her chin resolutely, not letting him say anything more. “It’s alright! I will wait for however long you need, I’ll wait for you to come home, when you feel like you should.” Noticing how she had been a little too enthusiastic, she cleared her throat and forced yet another smile while tucking a strand of pink hair behind her ear. “This is your home, Sasuke-kun. Someday, you’ll understand it. And I’ll be here when you do.”

Sasuke could only stare, his brief awe dissipating to give place to disappointment.

Should he try explaining to her that she deserved more, that the things she dreamt about were things he couldn’t give her?

Maybe he didn’t know how to express himself properly, or maybe his words lacked the necessary strength, the necessary meaning.

No, she understood what he was telling her because she was smart. But she was also blinded by hope, because she thought he was still trying to find himself, because she thought she was the only woman who was close to him. She understood that Sasuke didn’t let a lot of people close, but just the fact that he let her close gave her hope. And this wasn’t something Sasuke could manipulate because she thought that he was the one in denial, holding himself back from being loved and loving in return.

Wasn’t this such a ridiculous concept? Surely she read a lot of novels. That was not how he operated at all.

Because he had allowed himself to be loved as hard and deeply as any human being could, and he had loved just as intensely back. In fact, that love would consume him forever. No other love could possibly replace it. Maybe he truly was in denial, and maybe he did refuse to be loved by her. What was the point if it didn’t give him what he wanted and needed?

There were things about him that she would never understand, and the fact that she didn’t even try to angered him. Maybe she thought that staying in her place was better, that this would warm him up to her, that he’d find this respectful. But…

This only showed how little she knew him and how little she understood him.

He didn’t even know what he thought about her anymore. He didn’t even know what it was that he kept expecting from her. He liked her, she had meaning in his life, but he couldn’t understand his feelings for her when he wanted her to be happy and wished her the best, but at the same time didn’t feel like having her in his personal space at all.

Maybe what moved him about her was nothing like love at all. Maybe it wasn’t even something positive.

As he eyed her, he was assaulted by exhaustion. He needed to leave. He was fighting a lost battle, and no matter what he said, he knew he’d just be slamming his face against the same old wall.
Sakura and he exchanged a long, silent look. He thought about something to say but couldn’t find the will to struggle too hard, so he gave up. It wasn’t like he had anything else to say to her, anyway. With a single nod of his head, he bid his farewell and turned his back on her, ready to return to his journey to the world, once more, in desperate need for healing, for an internal peace when his soul felt like it was in hell.

After all, that was where his home was.

He hadn’t seen Naruto since they had parted ways at the gates of the village, but it was for the best. He had no idea when he’d see him again, but he supposed it was irrelevant.

Kakashi hadn’t asked a single question about their journey when Sasuke had come to report to him and give him all the data he had gathered, and yet, there was a very curious, yet knowing expression in the Hokage’s visible eye.

Hadn’t Kakashi shoved him towards Sakura during the war, basically telling him that he had to take responsibility for her feelings for him? So why look at him as if he knew anything at all, when he knew nothing?

He had never understood anything about him and Naruto, ever. Sasuke knew that, if it came to Kakashi, he’d be dead already. Kakashi himself had tried to kill him – not that Sasuke blamed him – but through it all, the only member of team 7 that had remained faithful to him through it all had been Naruto. And smart-assed Kakashi knew nothing.

This was why Sasuke just wanted to flee from the presence of ignorant people who had nothing to offer. Still, he’d work for Konoha and would protect it as he could, as the system allowed him to, because that was what Itachi had wanted, and because Konoha was Naruto’s home.

But it definitely wasn’t his.

This was nothing but another beginning, another rebuilding. And if he had been able to start over once, he’d definitely make it again.

For himself, and for Naruto. This was how it was supposed to be.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Well guys, I know this chapter was fast paced and that their journey ended abruptly. But it had to be done, I saw no reason for it to be extended longer since the plot needs to move on. As I said, this story still has a long way to go, so don’t panic. There still a lot left to happen, and many things I still need to explore. But the story WILL be moving along fast, with more scenes in each chapter and probably a lot of time skipping.

I do hope that, in spite of the drama, you guys will read it to the very end, because I mean to make it all worth it then. So please, don’t get discouraged by me following canon. Through it all, Sasuke and Naruto will always be Sasuke and Naruto :)

As usual, thank you all so much for reading and the constant support!
This chapter is one I am very happy about. It’s a rollercoaster of stuff, but… I’m happy with it, because the story is finally reaching the point I’ve been eager to work on.

Don’t forget that this follows canon, only it’s MY explanation of how things happened. Still, I’m working my way towards my own ending, and more than ever, my thoughts are shaped about this story.

So, while this chapter might be sort of surprising, I ask my faithful reader to PLEASE TRUST ME. If you’ve been loving this fic so far regardless of the drama and pain, then you’ll definitely want to see this coming to an end :)

Betaed by the wonderful SNlalalandNHreality, who’s been doing a marvellous job at proof reading this fic. A HUGE thank you with lots of love coming your way.

Also, I listened to ‘Attack’ by 30 Seconds to Mars quite a lot while writing this. I think it sort of defines this chapter well.

It was very late into the night when a knock on the door of Gaara’s quarters woke the Kazekage from a light sleep. His underling came with the announcement that Uchiha Sasuke had arrived. Gaara had asked him if he was alone, and the man had confirmed.

Well, that was unfortunate, Gaara had thought, feeling his chest tight with disappointment. He hadn’t expected a visit so soon regardless of the circumstances, but if Sasuke was there, it was because he truly and genuinely needed it, and Gaara would do everything in his power to do whatever he could to help him.

Based on Naruto’s way of thinking, he really should’ve expected things to have come down to this in the end, but he had hoped for something different for both his and Sasuke’s sakes.

Gaara ordered for Sasuke to be brought to his quarters. The guard asked him if he wanted to send for someone to prepare a room, but Gaara refused, to which the man simply nodded, pressing his lips together before bowing down and leaving.

Gaara made sure to leave the door ajar for Sasuke and waited for him while standing in the middle of the room.

Sasuke simply tapped on the door before pushing at it slowly, revealing himself.
“Can I come in?” he asked, in a smooth and polite voice that was also very bland.

“That’s an unnecessary question,” Gaara merely replied. “Come in, and close the door behind you.”

As Sasuke entered the room and did as he was told, Gaara took in his appearance. He looked more or less the same as he had a few weeks previously; the same kind of traveling clothes, the same satchel, and the same hairdo. He looked a bit dusty from walking the desert, but that wasn’t unusual. However, in spite of that cold and stoic beauty seeming to never fade, he looked considerably more tired than he ever recalled seeing him.

Gaara didn’t care if he was in his brown pyjamas and looked less dignified than usual – he knew the Uchiha wasn’t one to care for such things – so he took a few steps towards him, sharp eyes following his every movement. Standing before him, Gaara could only reach out a hand automatically and place it on the curve of Sasuke’s neck. The other man didn’t flinch, didn’t even blink, his eyes staring into his. They were unsurprised, and yet, they seemed to convey many things that Gaara understood he didn’t feel like voicing.

The pain Sasuke must be going through wasn’t something he could even begin to comprehend, and it made him feel useless.

Gaara didn’t know what to say. He wanted to manifest his feelings, to speak his mind, but he doubted Sasuke wanted to hear it. He wanted to offer soothing words, but he knew they would be meaningless. After all, even if he did understand the situation, what did he possibly know about how Sasuke was feeling right now? There was no way he could ever reach Sasuke that way, he knew.

He felt suddenly angry as he looked at Sasuke while biting on his lower lip. “He’s an idiot,” he said resentfully, barely louder than a whisper. To his surprise, Sasuke’s lips formed a very small, very empty smile.

“So am I,” he said softly. “You can’t be angry at him without being angry at me, too, Kazekage-sama.”

The honourable name almost made Gaara flinch. He knew that Sasuke was right. He understood that Naruto and Sasuke were too different, yet too similar; both proud, stubborn and goal driven. Both selfless and selfish at the same time. Both starving for each other but always giving priority to things that lived outside of their relationship.

Gaara could understand, and yet he couldn’t. If they hadn’t been shinobi, maybe they’d be the sort of people who’d leave everything behind for the sake of love. But as shinobi, both their lives couldn’t possibly revolve around it. Could they have lived a shinobi life of their choosing and still cling to that love, together? Certainly. That was what Gaara had hoped, and prayed for. But nothing was ever that simple when it came to them.

Gaara could see it clearly in Sasuke’s eyes. They had consumed each other to the core, and now they were apart and there was nothing left but a hunger that would last forever.

It was just sad, and Gaara ached for them. It didn’t have to be like this, but who was he to say anything else, when he had encouraged them in the first place? He knew nothing.

There were so many things he wanted to ask Sasuke, so many things he wanted the other man to tell him, but he couldn’t find the will to ask. He knew he had no right to. So he simply swallowed hard and gently caressed Sasuke’s neck with his thumb, hoping that it would offer something, and that it wasn’t too much in Sasuke’s eyes.
“Do you want to take a shower?” Gaara asked carefully. “Or do you wish to sleep? You look exhausted.”

“Sleep sounds good right now,” Sasuke said evenly, with a small sigh. He grabbed for Gaara’s wrist as he removed the hand on his neck. He gave a light, reassuring squeeze. “Although, I don’t think it would be very proper for me to sleep in your quarters.”

“It would seem even less proper for you to sleep in my bed,” Gaara said, with all seriousness, but not at all worried. He knew that whatever happened inside the Hokage building didn’t reach exterior ears. “But you’ll have to manage, Uchiha. I’m not letting you sleep alone tonight.”

He was relieved to see Sasuke’s smile prevailing, small and empty as it may be. “Thank you.”

Without asking for permission, Gaara reached out to take Sasuke’s satchel from him and place it over an armchair nearby. When he made his way back to Sasuke, as soon as he stood facing him once more, he was grabbed by the collar of his pyjamas and next thing he knew, warm and slightly chapped lips were pressed to his. He was strongly overcome with shock as his heart started beating crazy fast. The kiss was but a gentle press of lips, and yet, Gaara would be lying if he said he hadn’t wished for something like that.

However, this was far from being what he had envisioned, because Sasuke’s kiss was completely devoid of the things he had longed for, and this alone prevented him from trying to take more and kept his body in check quite efficiently.

Putting a hand over Sasuke’s chest, he pulled away, looking up at the slightly taller man with a small frown and an evaluating glare.

“What are you trying to do?” he asked, both curious and slightly upset at the soft way Sasuke was watching his reaction. “Are you testing me? Did you think I’d take advantage of you just because you’re vulnerable right now?”

“No,” Sasuke said easily, still with that vacant smile. “I was actually testing myself. I was the one trying to take advantage of you.”

The words were unintentionally cruel, but nothing Gaara didn’t know already. He could tell it in his heart that there were things Sasuke now knew that Gaara himself was still naïve about, and still, the purity in Sasuke’s heart was still the same. Sasuke still believed that his heart was stronger and harder to crack than it really was.

Gaara knew better than to be foolish.

“I don’t want anything from you that you wouldn’t want to give to me wholeheartedly,” Gaara said firmly, tugging Sasuke’s hand away from his collar. “So, if we are done with this pitiful behaviour, let’s get you out of your clothes and…”

“I wonder if it’s easier,” Sasuke proceeded, his eyes still very much fixed on Gaara’s. “To love someone and not have that love reciprocated than to have it returned, only to be forced to live apart from that person.”

Gaara looked up at him, his frown deepening. “What do you want me to say, Sasuke?” he asked, aware that he sounded harsh but knowing that there would be no other way to be heard and respected by that man. “You can’t possibly know how I feel, just like I can only guess what you’re going through right now. But life is the way it is, and the choices we make are ours to take responsibility for. You and Naruto are idiots, and for that, you both will suffer, but this is no news to
you, is it?"

This time, it was Gaara who gripped at Sasuke’s cloak with both hands. “Whatever pain you’re feeling right now, I wish I could take it off your shoulders, but I know it’s not up to me to do it. We can’t always have what we want. Even if things never go our way, all we have left is to raise our heads and keep moving forward. Fight for what you want, because if you’re honest about it, if it’s meant to be, then it will be yours, someday. But don’t make a fool out yourself. And don’t make a fool out of me.”

Sasuke blinked a few times at him, seeming a bit surprised for a while, but then simply nodded. “I’m sorry, Gaara,” he said, softly. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Gaara would’ve sighed if that was something he usually did. As it was, he merely shook his head from side to side. In silence, he helped Sasuke remove his dusty clothes. The other man allowed him without barely moving, his eyes fixed on him, but not really seeing him.

If the situation had been any different, Gaara might’ve felt like being adventurous, but even though his heart was a bit uncoordinated, he understood his place and his body behaved in accordance. Sasuke wasn’t in a good place right now, and Gaara’s feelings couldn’t reach him. Maybe they never would. But as long as Sasuke acknowledged them (as he did) and respected them, it was alright. This was nothing Gaara hadn’t anticipated, and never in his right mind would he ever covet for something he had zero chances of winning. He was no fool.

But he would offer Sasuke whatever he needed right now, just like he’d do with Naruto if it had been the case. So he gently rid Sasuke of his clothes and allowed him to lay in his bed and sleep under his covers wearing only his boxers. He fell asleep almost instantly, as if somehow Gaara’s presence had demanded his exhaustion to give in.

As Gaara lay beside him, watching his face while propped up on his elbow, he wondered if having Sasuke in his bed was really just a good deed he felt he should offer or a subconscious whim of his own.

Whenever he remembered the things he had witnessed between Sasuke and Naruto, longing filled him. Longing for them. For that. Things that, even with Sasuke so close, would always be distant to him.

And yet, Naruto had turned away from something most people would kill to have. But Gaara couldn’t blame him because he understood Naruto’s heart, just as he understood Sasuke’s goals and feelings. It wasn’t just Naruto’s fault.

Reaching out a hand to brush away Sasuke’s fringe from his forehead, he pressed his lips together. He tried not to think about how handsome Sasuke was, even in his sleep. Like a cold porcelain doll, his features were defined and breath-taking. No-one could see that, on his shoulders, the weight of the future seemed unbearable to him. Gaara felt for him. If there was something, anything he could do to make it better, he would. But that didn’t mean he would ever want Sasuke to lie to himself, or to him. He valued their relationship far too much.

Sasuke slept all night without moving a single muscle, his breathing slow and barely audible. Gaara couldn’t help but watch over him.

000

Naruto used to think that sex was some kind of overwhelming thing, a huge deal, especially when it came to a couple’s first time. Emotions, urges, fears, desires – everything mixed up in a turmoil of
passion that needed to be satiated, like the quelling of an unbearable thirst.

That’s how it had been between him and Sasuke; not just their first time together, but all the following times as well, had felt like something was about to combust between them. It was as if something amazing happened to the world when their bodies joined and everything shook and moved with every breath they took.

Naruto hadn’t once expected sex with other people to feel the same way it had felt with Sasuke. He was very aware that what they had was something very particular that couldn’t be replicated; it wasn’t like he needed to physically experience it to know it.

Still, when the moment presented itself and Hinata eagerly made her intentions clear to him once more, everything seemed absurdly simple. No confusing feelings, no painful urges, and no uncontrolled desperation; just simple arousal.

It was so simple. Too simple, even. Sex wasn’t a big deal after all. It was supposed to be relieving, and feel good, and it did. But that was all there was to it.

Sex with Hinata was easy. Her body was curvy, slightly plump and soft, her breasts full and firm. Her entrance was always ready to receive him, and she submissively allowed him to do basically what he wanted until he teased her into taking some action herself, because he was that sort of restless person. He liked being challenged, and she was far from being one. She wouldn’t struggle for dominance, wouldn’t curse at him, wouldn’t scratch him or bite at him viciously, wouldn’t cause violent and overwhelming feelings to run through his veins, unlike a certain dark-haired man.

He didn’t even have to prep her for penetration most of the times, even if he did sometimes pleasure her, so as to not simply fuck her and be done with it. Hinata was so easy to please. So easy it could be considered boring. Or maybe his standards had changed. The bar had been set high with Sasuke, in every single way. Sasuke would insult him, tease him, make demands and complain when he had to, and he would take as much as he’d give.

And he’d give his everything, always.

Naruto tried not to think about the fact that he missed that hard, powerful body against his, inside of him, those vile cursing words and those times when Sasuke would possess him entirely regardless of their position. Whether they’d be fucking hard or slow, Sasuke would capture his attention completely, captivate him and make sure Naruto remembered exactly whom he belonged to. And Naruto did. He always would.

He missed those overwhelming emotions, that connection, how their feelings mingled together so strongly they didn’t know which belonged to whom.

He knew that sex with a lover should be like that. Good sex. Passionate sex. Mutual intensity. Sex that made you want to do it over and over again because you just can’t get enough of the other person. With him, Naruto had felt that way, every single time.

With Sasuke, it had been painful, tiresome, bothersome, and sometimes even rough. But it had been more than good. It had been perfect.

Naruto missed it the most when he was doing it with Hinata. He knew he wasn’t supposed to think about it in such times, but he couldn’t help but to. It gave him drive. It helped him endure the knowledge of the things he had let go of. It allowed him to be who Hinata needed him to be.

It made him feel miserable, too, but he denied it to himself when the feeling punched his chest.
He loved Hinata, of course he did. It was just that Hinata wasn’t Sasuke, and neither could she ever be a replacement for him. Maybe life would be a lot easier if she could, but some people were irreplaceable, and Sasuke had always been the one and only person in his life no-one could replace. Not even a crowd of people would be able to, or a whole country, maybe not even the whole world.

But as long as his relationship with Hinata was simple, that would be enough. She loved him unconditionally. Simple was easier, less troublesome. He knew Sasuke was out there, thinking of him, too, living his own life, maybe fucking his own lovers already. He didn’t like to think about it, but he couldn’t help it. The thought alone made him feel angry, frustrated and jealous, even if he knew it wasn’t in his right. After all, he was fucking his girlfriend on a daily basis, wasn’t he? It shouldn’t matter if Sasuke chose to fuck other people as well.

But it did, and it killed Naruto thinking about who the person, or people might be, if there were any. It took his sleep away from him every night.

But life moved on. It was hard, but he and Sasuke would manage, each in their own way, Naruto was sure. Soon, things would be better.

It just sucked that he had to miss Sasuke every single day.

000

“You’ve been overworking yourself lately, Naruto,” Kakashi said from behind his Hokage desk while leaning back on his chair. He patted a considerable pile of papers sitting on the desk. “This is rather remarkable, but if I’m not mistaken, you’ve had about two days off since you returned from your journey with Sasuke… five months ago.”

Standing on the other side of the desk, Naruto rubbed at the back of his head with an annoyed huff. “I was away for so long, I had to make up for it,” Naruto explained, as if saying this was giving Kakashi an unnecessary explanation.

“You consulted me before leaving,” Kakashi corrected. “I gave you my permission to go, so it’s not like you have to ‘make up’ for anything.”

“I want to be involved with Konoha!” Naruto insisted, with a huff. “I want be out there, helping out with everything I can, being on missions, getting to know my people…”

“You do know that you’re not yet qualified to become Hokage, right?” Kakashi interrupted harshly, with a frown. “There’s more to being Hokage than field work, Naruto.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” Naruto mumbled, throwing him a glance while crossing his arms over his chest. “You barely do any field work; you’re just sitting behind that desk all day.”

In spite of himself, Kakashi didn’t let this upset him. He had noticed that Naruto had changed since his journey with Sasuke, his feverish desire to work hard having become almost an obsession. He had drowned himself in work, taking up every mission he possibly could, getting involved in everything, and training hard. While there was an odd arrogance about his abilities as a shinobi, Naruto now had, somewhat, understood that it would be good for him, as a person, to go through an ordinary progress in the shinobi rankings. Naruto was far beyond Jounin or even ANBU level, but without a doubt, as Hokage, he could never understand his underlings’ struggles in their ranks unless he lived those things first hand. Naruto would be taking up the first exams soon, and Kakashi knew his former student was making progress.

But his notions of what being Hokage meant seemed a bit off in Kakashi’s opinion. Not that, by any
means, he thought that there was a certain course of action a Hokage needed to take, or a way they should behave, but he certainly thought that Naruto definitely felt like he should take far too much upon his shoulders. Being Hokage behind a desk was already taxing enough without the field work, not to mention the daily meetings and constantly leaving the office to personally check out the development of more serious issues throughout the village. Naruto had no notion of these things, which was why he thought of the position in a far too idealistic light.

Kakashi often wondered how much of this new behaviour was because of Sasuke. What had happened between them during their journey was a mystery Naruto never disclosed (neither did Sasuke), but truth was, the boy had certainly been acting strange since then, far too serious, and undoubtedly far too goal-driven. It was almost as if he felt like it was his obligation to work as hard as he could to become Hokage as soon as possible. It was somewhat afflicting, and Kakashi didn’t have a good feeling about it.

Heaving a sigh, the older man rubbed his chin. “You can’t exhaust yourself if you want to progress faster,” he said, trying to sound kinder and less impatient. “I’m the Hokage now, and you will become my successor only upon my death, so that might take a while.” Naruto groaned, and Kakashi allowed himself to relax a little. “Or, well, if the time comes when I feel like I want to retire and pass on the position to you. But that’s not going to happen because you simply will it to, Naruto. It’s my call, not yours. So settle down, worry about your career progress, and don’t kill yourself. Enjoy life a little and stop thinking about so many useless things at the same time.”

At this, Naruto’s shoulders tensed and he looked to the side, avoiding Kakashi’s eye. “‘Enjoy life’, you say?” he muttered, his eyes darkening strangely. “That’s not… I can’t… my goals are all I have. I can’t just…”

“You’re going to take a few days off,” Kakashi said firmly. Naruto’s head snapped back up and he opened his mouth to protest, but the Hokage didn’t let him. “By the start of next week, you’re going to take seven days off to rest, spend some time with your beautiful girlfriend, sort out your priorities, and then, when your head is cleared, you’ll focus on studying and training for the upcoming exams so you can climb up a rank.”

Naruto pursed his lips together, visibly frustrated and anxious. It reminded Kakashi of those days when Naruto had been so bent on becoming strong as fast as possible so he could save Sasuke and be at his level. Kakashi never thought that he’d see that expression again - that kind of anguish disguised as determination - and it was disconcerting.

“But can I leave the village, then?” Naruto asked unexpectedly.

Kakashi eyed him silently for a while. “As long as you are back to report to work in time, I will give my permission.”

“Thanks.”

“Try to understand, Naruto,” Kakashi said, choosing his words carefully since he felt that Naruto was a bit on edge. “Everyone is worried about you. Even Tsunade-sama says you’re overdoing it. Just put our minds at ease for a while, alright?”

At this, Naruto looked at the floor, his expression changing to one of slight guilt. “Yeah,” he mumbled, almost inaudibly. “Sorry. Can I go now? I’ve got stuff to do.”

Kakashi’s visible eye narrowed, but he nodded his consent. Naruto merely offered a clumsy bow (a courtesy he tried to maintain now that he was older and more mature) before turning around and making his way towards the door.
“You cut your hair short again,” Kakashi couldn’t help but point out, suddenly noticing that Naruto’s hair was different. After returning from the journey with Sasuke, his hair had been an unruly mess similar to how he had kept it as a teenager, only slightly longer so that it covered his ears. In a way, Kakashi had found that it had made Naruto resemble Minato quite a lot. Naruto had seemed to enjoy the hairdo, as well, since he had kept it like that for several months. But now, he had suddenly changed it.

“Yeah,” Naruto said, looking over his shoulder with an indifferent shrug. “Having my hair longer made sense to me, but Hinata likes it better cut short, so…”

Ah, Kakashi, thought, with a thoughtful pout as Naruto left the room without another word, closing the door behind him. So there was a reason behind everything, it seemed.

He couldn’t really shake off the feeling of certainty that there had been an odd bitterness in Naruto’s tone at the confession.

000

‘Sasuke,

Where are you right now? Are you somewhat close to the village? I have a few days off, so I was thinking we could meet up somewhere and hang out if you want.

Sincerely,

Naruto.’

Sasuke stared unblinkingly at the small folded piece of paper one of Naruto’s toads had brought him. It was clear the message had been carefully thought out, probably re-written many times so as to not sound… well, desperate.

They hadn’t exactly communicated since they had parted ways five months ago. Sasuke knew Kakashi informed Naruto occasionally of his doings, just like Kakashi randomly informed him of Naruto’s shenanigans since he wrote to his former teacher quite often - a requirement because of his absence from the village, considering his so-called status of ‘shinobi of Konoha’.

It wasn’t as though Sasuke didn’t want to write Naruto or anything of the sort; he just thought that it was unnecessary, and maybe a little too soon. No, definitely too soon if Naruto had decided to write a formal note adding ‘sincerely’ instead of being himself and expressing his feelings freely.

What a pathetic letter.

Couldn’t you have just openly said you wanted to see me, dumbass?

With a sigh, Sasuke rubbed at his face with his hand. What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to say? Was he even supposed to reply to that?

He knew that being in Naruto’s presence wasn’t safe yet. Maybe it never would be, but he was just managing to readjust himself and his heart was definitely taking too long to heal.

He wanted to see Naruto, of course he did, but he was sure it wasn’t a good idea.

Still, he knew they couldn’t run from each other forever, otherwise the day would come when neither would be brave enough to be in each other’s presence anymore, and if there was one thing that Sasuke definitely wasn’t willing to give up, it was Naruto’s friendship. Regardless of their
relationship or their feelings, regardless of the distance, he didn’t want to lose Naruto.

He didn’t want the day to come when Naruto would be so used to being without him he wouldn’t have the desire to see him.

“You’re waiting for a reply?” Sasuke asked the small orange frog sitting patiently on the leafy ground and looking up at him. The frog merely nodded, and Sasuke stifled a groan of annoyance.

He straightened his back more against the tree trunk carefully. He had his legs crossed indian-style, and on his lap, a chubby baby wrapped only in black fabric diapers slept on her back, her tiny fists clenched over her chest. As if feeling him move, the baby shifted slightly but didn’t rouse. It was an unnaturally hot day and not even the shadow provided by the tree under which they were relieved of the heat. But then again, the area surrounding that poor village he had come to love so dearly had always been blessed with mainly good weather.

Sasuke looked down at the baby girl, and he couldn’t help a small, lopsided smile. Naruto would love to see her right now and see how much she had grown. Mika was, without a doubt, a healthy baby and already very bright and usually in a good-mood. He put the note down, over one of his knees, and brushed a knuckle over her round, soft cheek. He was glad that Misato had so much trust in him so as to let him take her baby wherever he wanted.

He really couldn’t say that he liked kids. Well, he didn’t dislike them either, he just didn’t like it when they were whiny and annoying. But he did have a very special spot for Mika, and for all the children in the village whom he had promised would all know how to read and write soon enough.

Mika’s brown reddish hair was a soft mess, and fondly, he rubbed a thin strand of it between his fingers.

Yes, Naruto would love to see her.

“Juugo,” Sasuke called out, making sure he didn’t yell so as to not wake the baby up. Not too far from him and Mika, Karin and Juugo were gathering medicinal leaves. Since his return, the villagers had come to him whenever there was a health issue. Sasuke had his small knowledge on the subject and had assisted in Mika’s birth, so right now he was definitely more qualified than the sick elderly woman who claimed to be the village’s healer. The information he had gathered during his journeys had made him knowledgeable of all sorts of medicines that could be brewed with nature’s ingredients (not to mention that he had chakra to help him detect bodily abnormalities if he wanted).

Back then when he and Naruto had come across the village, Sasuke hadn’t wanted to get involved in such affairs (and Naruto had been the one to tend to the sick and elderly in his own way, anyway), but now, he felt like he wanted to give everything he had for that place because… well, it was where he had felt like ‘home’ the most. So he helped with absolutely everything he could, and if offering medical help made these people feel safe and happy, then he’d do it.

As he had promised himself, he had reunited with Taka back at their small place, but when Suigetsu had been summoned by Orochimaru, Sasuke had decided to pay a visit to the village, and Karin and Juugo had wanted to tag along. Sasuke hadn’t complained since keeping himself busy and having company made him think less about useless things.

Both Karin (who was carrying a straw basket) and Juugo approached him upon his calling. “You got a message?” Juugo asked, perceptively noticing the shinobi frog and the small note on Sasuke’s knee.

“Naruto wants to visit,” Sasuke informed blandly. “I need one of you to hold Mika while I reply to
Juugo immediately crouched down and took the baby from Sasuke’s lap with surprising gentleness for a man his size. Karin was still standing, absentmindedly separating the leaves in her basket while occasionally sneaking weird glances at Sasuke. He tried to ignore her as he rummaged through his satchel for a piece of scroll and a pencil. He knew what she was thinking. Taka had been more than a little surprised when Sasuke had returned without Naruto, simply telling them that they had gone their separate ways and that it was over between them.

But they weren’t stupid (or, well, Juugo and Karin weren’t), and it had been obvious to them that, in spite of Sasuke’s explanations, his feelings were still the same, and surely, Naruto’s were, too. Still, they hadn’t pried, even though Karin sometimes tried to get him to talk.

‘Naruto,’ Sasuke wrote.

‘I’m at the village we spent two weeks at, remember? It’d be nice if you could see how Mika has grown, so maybe spending time here wouldn’t be so bad. Just tell me when you’ll start your vacation and I’ll come pick you up at Konoha. Karin and Juugo are with me.

Best regards (a loser farewell like yours),

Sasuke’

“We’re going to pick him up?” Karin asked, as Sasuke rolled the small note and gave it to the frog, who immediately vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Yeah,” Sasuke said, looking up at her, and finding a weird expression on her face mixed with worry. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” Karin said, with a shrug, looking away. “You do what you think is best for you, Sasuke.”

What’s best for me, huh?

Sasuke wasn’t sure of what was best for him. Seeing Naruto, not seeing Naruto… all of these things were both essential and detrimental to him, so in the end, it was all a matter of choice. He knew that certain things weren’t a good idea, but at the same time, he had stopped understanding what was ever a good idea when it involved him and Naruto.

“I have you and Juugo with me,” Sasuke chose to say, evenly. “I trust you two to keep things in check.”

Both Karin and Juugo looked at him with identical expressions of understanding about what Sasuke had meant. Both nodded their silent promise, even if hesitantly so. Sasuke understood their uncertainty, and he couldn’t blame them.

Not even he could possibly know what would happen once he and Naruto met again.

000

Naruto felt better than he had in weeks. No, in months. Sure, drowning in work had, without a doubt, been an excuse to keep his mind away from certain things, but he liked it like that, and he wasn’t as tired as people thought he was. He really just wanted to make sure he was truly and wholeheartedly living the life he had chosen instead of a life with Sasuke. He had lost Sasuke as a lover so he could fulfill his dream of perfecting Konoha and becoming Hokage so he could actually change the system, and then the world. He needed to work hard to make it happen a fast as possible,
and he did so constantly fighting the feelings of sadness and misery that followed him every day.

These were things he couldn’t tell a soul, but it was his way of coping with the constant feeling of loss and the void inside of him—a void that constantly called for Sasuke to come and fill it up. He knew he’d get used to this emptiness, someday, and yet, he couldn’t really find the will to pray for the day to come when he’d be able to live this life as if his past with Sasuke had been nothing. A part of him wanted to move on, but another part refused to let go, and he had no idea which one he should cling to. So, he coped the only way he knew how, and couldn’t really care if people understood it or not. It was his own secret that he wouldn’t tell a soul.

Nevertheless, he had to admit that he was maybe a little too excited to see Sasuke again. Nervous, yes. Scared, also a bit. But immensely happy? Completely. He hadn’t been in this much of a good-mood since… well, he couldn’t remember.

And Sasuke was coming to pick him up, surely, so they could spend as much time together as possible.

They… they really wanted to see each other, didn’t they? Naruto was sure that his longing would be overwhelming. He longed for Sasuke when he ate, when touched someone, when he had sex with Hinata, when he worked, when he sparred with a friend, when he slept with or without company. Seeing Sasuke again would without a doubt ignite all these things he’d been starving for since they parted. It was dangerous, no doubt about it, but he’d take the chance. They were no longer lovers, so seeing Sasuke and being in his presence would have to be enough. He just wanted to see him; seeing Sasuke would ease his heart and give him strength, reassure him that this life was going to be worth it.

After fastening the clasps of his brand new backpack, he put his hands on his hips and took a look around his room. Everything seemed to be in order. With a small smile, he took a stroll around his apartment to make sure he had left everything properly cleaned and organized. Sasuke should be arriving soon, later that same day, or sometime during tomorrow morning. Either way, Naruto wanted to be ready to go as soon as his best friend got there. Still, he had a few errands to run for Tsunade at the hospital, since his last working day of the week wasn’t over yet.

Quickly, he put on his sandals and grabbed for his house keys. As he opened the door of his apartment, though, he jumped backwards by unexpectedly seeing a surprised and furiously blushing Hinata standing outside.

“Hinata!” he said, bringing a hand to his chest, where his heart was beating fast thanks to the fright. “What are you doing standing there without knocking? Did you just get here?”

His girlfriend looked up at him with her pretty lips parted, looking both horribly insecure, and he knew at once that something was wrong. She was clutching a white folded piece of paper in her shaky hands, pressing it to her chest. Worriedly, he reached out to put both his hands on her shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” he asked urgently. That look on her face was one he had never seen, and he didn’t like it. “Did something happen?”

She bit on her lower lip hard, her eyes watering unexpectedly. She blushed even more, if it was possible, and looked away.

“I… I know you’re going on vacation,” she stuttered, hiccupping a bit. “And I’m really sorry that I’m ruining it, but…”
She pushed the sheet of paper towards him, and he was forced to let her go in order to grab hold of it, feeling confused.

“T’m really sorry!” she said, crossing her arms over her chest as if to hug herself and closing her eyes. “P-please look at it. I’m sorry!”

Naruto didn’t understand why she looked so sad, so scared all of a sudden.

“Hinata, are you scared of me?” he inquired softly. “What did I do to make you…”

“I’m not scared of you!” she interrupted, with another hiccup, looking up at him with tear-filled eyes that shone like beautiful pearls. “I’m scared of how you’ll react, and I…” She hugged herself tighter. “Please, just read what’s in the paper.”

Throwing her one last concerned look, he nodded slowly and unfolded the paper. Quickly, he scanned its contents.

He could swear his heart stopped. With a small gasp, the paper fell from his hands and onto the ground, and all he could do was look at Hinata with wide, shocked eyes.

000

Sasuke had been hit by a sudden feeling of foreboding. Karin and Juugo, who ran fast towards Konoha beside him, could tell that something was upsetting him, but neither asked what was wrong. Still, inside of him, somehow, he knew he was about to face something unpleasant. He could feel Naruto’s conflicting feelings, his anxiousness and his fear.

Sasuke had the impending urge to give up and go back. After all, what he didn’t know couldn’t possibly harm him, but in spite of himself, he was worried about the things he felt coming from Naruto and he couldn’t simply ignore him if he was needed.

It was almost nightfall when he arrived at Konoha’s gates. Karin and Juugo didn’t need to be told to wait outside, and they didn’t call for Sasuke when he stormed inside the village without saying a word.

Where are you, Naruto?

He was sure his presence had been noticed by his friend, so he tried to summon him, letting his chakra, his energy flow through him and towards Naruto, calling out to him. He could feel Naruto’s own restless energy, chaotic and unsure, and at once, Sasuke understood that the other man was conflicted on whether he wanted to see him or to keep him away.

No way you’re getting away from me…

Eventually, Naruto summoned him back, and through their chakra connection Sasuke found him at the overhang over the Hokage mountain, way above the faces of all the Hokage that had ruled Konoha.

Naruto was very straight, his hands on the red railing, and even though he had his back to Sasuke, it was clear that he was looking down at the village.

He tensed slightly as Sasuke’s presence stood behind him, but didn’t move. Sasuke needed a moment to catch his breath, not because his search had tired him, but because being in Naruto’s presence suddenly left him breathless. He didn’t understand what it was – they had spent years without seeing each other in the past, and now, five months later since their parting, it had seemed
like forever.

As soon as his eyes took in Naruto’s form, he immediately noticed that his friend had cut his hair short again, and Sasuke hated it with a passion. Still, this didn’t stop him from feeling like he wanted to reach out and offer his friend some form of comfort to ease the chaos within his soul, but he knew he couldn’t. From Naruto’s heavy energy, Sasuke was already regretting coming.

“What happened?” Sasuke demanded, not wasting time with cordialities since he could tell that the issue was serious.

“Hinata’s pregnant,” Naruto replied flatly, still with his back turned, not wasting time with walking around the subject either. “About seventeen weeks long, it seems.”

The bluntness came to Sasuke as a punch to the gut.

Pregnant? The Hyuuga woman was pregnant? And… of about three months, already?

He fucked her…

Sasuke tried to shake that stupid, completely useless thought away, but he felt suddenly disgusted. What was he expecting, anyway? Naruto was still dating her, of course they’d have to have sex at some point. Couples were supposed to do stuff like that. Naruto had lost his virginity to him, but once that had been out of the way, of course he’d be able to do it with her.

Still, if Hinata was pregnant…

Sasuke swallowed hard, feeling nauseous. He had known that this could happen, that giving Naruto away to a woman could yield this result. He had been the one to tell Naruto that he should have kids, build a family and work hard to make his dreams come true.

“I always wore a condom, I really don’t know how this happened,” Naruto proceeded, with a heavy sigh, his voice thick. “I… I don’t know how I feel about this. I didn’t think that something like this would happen, not so soon, not without it being planned…”

“You do realize you have to marry her, don’t you?” Sasuke cut, the pain he felt inside his chest manifesting as cold, vicious anger. Still, his voice was sharp, firm. “She’s the Hyuuga heiress, she’s not supposed to be defiled before marriage.”

Naruto flinched, his shoulders tensing. He looked over his shoulder, and Sasuke had a hard time meeting the sky blue in Naruto’s eyes again. “Marry her?”

Sasuke felt like his lungs had ceased functioning. This wasn’t supposed to feel like this.

You’re killing me...

“You’re not going to ask her to abort, are you?” Sasuke snapped, knowing he sounded sarcastic but not caring. He shouldn’t be surprised, but he was so pissed off right now and he didn’t even know why. “Because that would be cruel, unless she wants to.”

“Of course she doesn’t,” Naruto muttered. “She’s so happy. She was so scared I’d leave her over something like this, that I’d reject her… you should’ve seen the terrified look on her face.”

Sasuke pressed his lips together, glaring at Naruto and inhaling sharply through his nose. He almost felt sorry for Hinata, but he felt even sorrier for himself right now. He never thought he’d hate this situation so much.
“It’s your responsibility,” Sasuke said coolly. “It’s not her fault. If you love her, you will protect her integrity and marry her before it becomes a scandal and her family comes for your neck.”

Finally, Naruto turned around, dejectedly, slowly facing him with fists clenched at his sides. The street lamps that illuminated the place cast shadows over his face, making him look much older, and Sasuke wished that he hadn’t, because the anguish and frustration he saw in those brilliant blue eyes tore at him.

“Sasuke…” Naruto whispered, taking a few steps towards him, whose feet remained firmly planted on the ground solely because of his own pride. “I don’t know how I feel about this. Wasn’t I supposed to feel happy? Why don’t I feel happy or excited, then? It’s so weird… the feeling is so weird.”

Sasuke didn’t reply. Naruto licked at his lips.

“I wanted to see you so badly,” the blond said, regretfully, extending a hand to run a knuckle over Sasuke’s jaw, the action simple but full of meaning. “And now you’re angry at me.”

“It’s not my right to be angry,” Sasuke contradicted, staring sharply into Naruto’s eyes, allowing the contact but remaining immobile. “Just like you feel confused, so do I. You can’t expect me to be jumping with joy, even if this was supposed to happen sooner or later.”

“I… I want to go with you, Sasuke,” Naruto said, with genuine resentment and eagerness. His hand cupped Sasuke’s cheek now, the other one - the right one, Sasuke noticed, once more wrapped up in neat white bandages - clutching the fabric of Sasuke’s black shirt above his heart. “I want to be with you. I was so happy that I was going to see you again, and now you’re here and you’ll vanish again, and I…”

“You can’t come with me; you need to be there for your girlfriend,” Sasuke said, touching Naruto’s naked hand that was now caressing his cheek and grabbing it, a small indulgence he regretted the moment their skins touched. “Use your time off to get your shit together and arrange for everything. Do the right thing and ask her to marry you, Naruto. It’s what you have to do. It’s the weight of your choices, and you need to take responsibility for your actions. This was supposed to happen, anyway. It just happened sooner than we both expected.”

Naruto’s lips parted as if he was going to say something, but no sound came out. He simply stared into Sasuke’s eyes, looking apologetic, filled with longing and a sadness Sasuke wasn’t at all ready to deal with. Their bodies had somehow drawn closer together without either noticing, and there was even a moment when Sasuke realized he could feel Naruto’s breath on his lips.

He didn’t know what was stronger; the tension between them or the hesitation. They were no longer in that sort of relationship, and crossing the line was forbidden. It would be very easy, though, for them to just break the distance separating them, and for a fleeting moment, Sasuke considered it because they were both wanting the same thing with an almost feverish desperation. He could feel Naruto’s energy thumping along with his, like a steady heartbeat that pumped in tune with his own - hot, hungry and alluring. But this moment of weakness coming from him only added more heat to his already burning anger.

“I knew I shouldn’t have come,” Sasuke hissed, shoving Naruto’s hand away from his face and taking a step back that looked more confident that it really was. Naruto looked positively dejected as he was forced to let go of his shirt, swallowing hard. Sasuke tried not to let that miserable look affect him. “I only came because I was worried about you. But you’ll be fine. You’re going to be a father, Naruto. You’re going to have a family, like you always wanted. This is a good thing. You’ll be fine.”
He knew his reassurance sounded fake and forced, but he couldn’t help it. It was all he could do not either punch Naruto’s face or kidnap him and take him as far away from Konoha and Hinata as he could.

But he knew Naruto wanted a family. This was the reason why he hadn’t stayed with Sasuke. Naruto wanted this; this would make him happy. Right now, Naruto was overwhelmed and scared and feeling lost and vulnerable, confused, but he would come to his senses soon and realize that everything would be alright, and that this was what he wanted – what would make him happy. Or at least, give him a bit of the happiness he was seeking.

This alone, gave Sasuke strength and clarity. His resolution had to be stronger than Naruto’s right now. That was all he knew.

It wasn’t about them at all.

“I’ll see you around, Naruto,” Sasuke said, with an elegant nod of his head towards his friend. “I’ll keep in touch.”

He wasted no time in turning his back to the other man and making his way down to Konoha, more than ready to leave as quickly as possible. He couldn’t stand being there another second longer.

“I’m sorry, Sasuke.”

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t heard Naruto’s pathetic words. It was just that Sasuke didn’t want to acknowledge them.

_Do something instead of just saying you’re fucking sorry._

He knew it. It was still too soon for them, and things were happening way too fast.

Sasuke needed to stay away from Naruto, otherwise, his friend would have an even harder time getting his shit together. And he needed a cool head now more than ever.

He had to stay away, for Naruto’s sake, and for his own sanity for as long as took for them both to heal properly and manage without each other.

000

The journey back to the small village was made in silence. When Sasuke had left Konoha by himself and Karin had asked him what was wrong and why wasn’t Naruto with him, Sasuke had simply said that ‘his girlfriend is pregnant’. Thankfully, that was enough of an answer to explain his sour mood, since his two companions didn’t feel the need to pry anymore.

They set camp for the night a couple of hours away from Konoha since it was already pitch dark in the woods and it became hard for Juugo and Karin to keep up with him and his superior sight.

Karin and Juugo put up their convenient tent (a luxury Sasuke himself didn’t care for when he travelled by himself), made dinner, and started a fire. Sasuke had helped with getting wood for the night and then just sat down on the ground with his back against the trunk of a tree with one knee pulled to his chest. He had refused to eat, and the other two didn’t pressure him to. They understood that he needed his space.

Sasuke didn’t know what he was feeling, but he wished he wasn’t. He was angry, yes, but not exactly at Naruto. It was just…
He was jealous. Jealous that the Hyuuga girl had been fucked by Naruto, that she had him the same way Sasuke once had; jealous that she had been able to give him something he couldn’t. Jealous that Naruto was growing, moving on without him. Even if under no circumstances did Sasuke want the same kind of boring married life with kids, it was painful. He had known such things were bound to happen, he knew he’d be witness to them, but he hadn’t considered that when they did happen he’d feel so empty and so devoid of hope.

It was as if, even if Naruto had a girlfriend, as long as things remained the same as always, reality would always be something distant.

It felt like, with Hinata pregnant, he had truly lost Naruto forever. Not lost him exactly, just...

He couldn’t explain it if he tried. Sasuke had felt like he’d never be able to be with other people since Naruto, like he’d never be able to have sex with anyone else, to touch or be touched by anyone other than Naruto. Not that he had tried, anyway, apart from that mindless kiss with Gaara that had been more of a childish whim than anything else.

He had hoped that the same had happened to his friend; that Naruto still wouldn’t want to fuck Hinata, and that, just maybe, he’d realize for himself where he belonged and to whom he belonged to.

But perhaps – no, surely – Sasuke was a bigger idealist than he had thought. He was the foolish one, a hopeless dreamer, not Naruto.

Because, no matter how much Naruto thought of him, no matter how much longing his eyes transmitted, no matter the tension between them, no matter how much he hurt or how strongly their feelings for each other were...

Naruto whined and acted pitifully, but he managed. He kept moving, he went with the flow, he embraced the future and was easily dragged by it. Be it a mechanical life, led automatically by the course of the wind or not, he was moving. And now he was going to become a father, get married, and build a family.

Sasuke thought that he was admirable. It made him feel angry, frustrated and it hurt, but it was still admirable. He had no doubt in his mind that, somehow, Naruto would definitely pull this life off.

‘I’m the one who’s stupid’ he thought bitterly, biting on his lower lip, viciously. ‘I, who thinks my feelings for him stop me from going through life as I’m supposed to. Why do I even bother clinging to him? It’s useless. It wasn’t like this before. I was capable of doing my own thing without him, it shouldn’t make a difference now.’

He clenched his fist over his thigh and grit his teeth. He was so fucking frustrated, even knowing that he had no reason to be - that he himself had also signed up for it. But he couldn’t help it - he just wanted to scream and tear at things - maybe at his own body. His very skin didn’t feel like it belonged to him.

In another life, had he been alone, he would’ve probably been lashing out at trees. But his self-control was better now, so he remained unmoving with his own chaotic thoughts. After all, Naruto wasn’t there to push at his limits anymore.

Damn you...

Something tickled Sasuke’s face and he jerked slightly, noticing that Karin was kneeling on the ground beside him, her cold fingers touching his face. Her eyes were filled with concern and pity -
not for him, but for his situation. Sasuke couldn’t believe that he had been so lost in his own thoughts that he hadn’t even felt her approach. But it wasn’t just her, because when he looked to the opposite side, he noticed that Juugo himself was sitting on his heels next to him, his expression placid and inscrutable.

This was getting way out of line, Sasuke thought, feeling angry at himself now. He was a powerful Shinobi, one of the strongest out there. Once, he’d had the power of gods. He had trained himself hard so that the lack of his arm didn’t make him inferior. He had meditated, controlled his anger, came to terms with himself and his existence, sharpened his senses, and he had expanded his mind. He was strong. Not as strong as he wanted to be, yet, but he was strong. Why was this happening to him now? Because of Naruto?

Did this stupid situation between them only served to make him weak and distracted?

No, that couldn’t happen. Not for Naruto, not for anyone.

“Sasuke,” Karin said gently, touching his cheek more firmly so he was facing her again. “I don’t want to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, but please, we’re worried about you. Don’t just close yourself off like this. Let us help you. Talk to us. Let us do something for you, anything.”

A strong hand landed on his shoulder - Juugo’s - as if to give emphasis to Karin’s words. Sasuke stared at her, blinking a couple of times, his mind blank.

He wanted to ask her if she had the power to change the world to magically make everything right, somehow. But he kept his mouth firmly closed, his eyes watching her. They fell from hers and down her body in an unintentional cold evaluation. What was it about a woman’s body? Was it the breasts? Was it the fragility compared to a man’s body? Was it the fact that women were easier to penetrate? What enticed Naruto about Hinata’s body that made it so easy for him to want to fuck her? What went through his mind?

Was it that good? Good enough to make him forget how it had been between him and Sasuke? Good enough to make him want to go back for more, to be able to?

Sasuke didn’t want to think about these things, but he was so upset - so wounded, really - that he could only seethe within his own mind.

Just like pressing his lips to Gaara’s five months ago had been a childish impulse, so was the impulse of his body to lean forward and kiss Karin. She gasped softly against him, clearly not expecting it, but as his mouth became more insistent, she easily gave in, just like he had expected her to.

Like with Gaara, he felt nothing of the things simply being close to Naruto created in him. Still, he needed to understand. So, he brought a hand to Karin’s neck and kept kissing her. She was good at it as far as Sasuke could tell and responded with earnest, dragging herself closer on her knees and clutching at his shirt with her eager hands.

Sasuke couldn’t think. His heart started beating faster - he had no idea what he was doing, and indeed, doing something like this was easy. He felt nothing.

He was highly conscious of lips being carefully pressed to the back of his neck - Juugo’s - as Karin’s tongue hungrily teased his, searching for a more enthusiastic feedback from him. The large man exhaled gently against the hairs at the back of his head, causing small chills to travel down Sasuke’s spine.

Automatically, Sasuke straightened his back as a strong arm held him across the chest in a rather
awkward hug, feeling Juugo bury his nose behind his ear and now inhaling carefully.

That was rather nice. Juugo was a lot bigger than him, but while he felt the embrace to be comforting, it didn’t make him feel subjugated at all because the man’s cautiousness showed a respectable devotion.

In desperate curiosity, Sasuke boldly brought his hand to one of Karin’s firm breasts over her sweater, but the contact didn’t stir anything special in him even though she moaned sensuously against his lips. It was just flesh, round and squishy under the thick layer of her bra, nothing spectacular. However, his body was reacting, probably fueled by the sudden heavy emotional and sexual tension coming from his two companions, for him. Sasuke didn’t even have a mind to be surprised by all of this. It was surprisingly easy to let go and not think about anything at all.

In fact, not thinking seemed to be a wonderful idea. Something like this had never crossed his mind, least of all with these two. It was obvious to him that he was wanted, deeply and selflessly loved. He had known it all along. It wasn’t the same as Naruto, it wasn’t what he wanted, or what he needed, but maybe he needed it now, just so he could fucking understand why the human mind and body were such frivolous, easily manipulative things. And they were.

*How disgusting...*

He was no different from Naruto, after all. There was no deep mystery in sex, no philosophical or astrological paradigm between him and Naruto that made them different from other human beings. Their feelings had nothing to do with something like this.

Love was just love, and apparently, the body could be easily detached from the heart. Now he understood. Sex and love could both happen separately. It didn’t feel the same way when both acted together, but it could happen. People could get involved without feelings in the middle because it was just that easy. Just say ‘yes’ to someone, light the fire and everyone’s good to go.

How pitiful. Why, exactly, was he doing something like this? This meant nothing to him. Why was he even bothering? Why had he started something like this on his own accord, even though he knew his friends would give in?

He had no answer for this. Blame it all on his anger. Maybe it was just curiosity, maybe it was him looking for a different way to relieve his feelings, to drown his sadness. Maybe he was just feeling terribly lonely. Maybe he needed to feel needed, or maybe he was just feeling vengeful and wanted to pay Naruto back for fucking someone else.

He was a terrible person. He’d regret this, he knew. Then again, probably not. Either way, right now, he couldn’t care less if he tried.

He didn’t care about anything at all. Wasn’t he allowed to crumble, just once? Wasn’t he allowed to let someone else pick him up for a change?

Thinking and feeling brought nothing but bad things nowadays, anyway.

Panting, he broke the kiss with Karin and turned his face towards Juugo, who raised his head. Their lips clashed wetly, a bit messily at first, but Juugo wasn’t as excitable as Karin, so they found an easy routine quickly enough. It was nice, soothing. It made him feel hot and a little on edge, but again, nothing otherworldly. Juugo held him tight while pressing his chest to Sasuke’s side, his large hand holding on to his waist in a possessive grasp.

While he and Juugo kissed, Karin came closer still to press small, loving kisses on his jaw. Her hands
on his shoulders were gentle and eager, but cautious. In fact, both her and Juugo seemed content to just be there for him, to give whatever it was that he wanted, however he wanted it. It was clear, to him, that they were scared to cross the line. They wanted him, but by no means would they try to own him and have of him something that didn’t belong to them.

Sasuke didn’t know if this made him feel relieved, even more frustrated, or furious at himself. He loved them both in his own way. In his life, they meant something. He wasn’t scared of them, or of what could unfold from then on; he understood them and knew they understood him, too. But that didn’t mean he wanted to take advantage of them if this was going to hurt them.

It was Juugo who broke the kiss, looking down at him with kind, but oddly intense honey-coloured eyes that managed to say what he wouldn’t voice. Karin stilled, also looking at him. They seemed to be expecting him to say something. Sasuke swallowed hard, unsure of what to do or say but knowing they were waiting for his final decision.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” he said, in a whisper, as honestly as he possibly could. “I don’t… I don’t want to be in this sort of relationship. I can’t give you anything of what you might possibly…”

“We know, Sasuke,” Juugo interrupted, with a small nod. “We’re here for you. Even if it’s just this once, we’re here for whatever you need.”

“We won’t tell a soul,” Karin muttered breathlessly, making Sasuke look back at her. “You know that. It’s your call. We know how you feel, and nothing will change. We don’t expect anything from you. We know you. We know how you feel.”

“I know that,” Sasuke said. And he did. He truly did. And he couldn’t be more grateful that he wasn’t alone just then.

It didn’t matter anyway, what he did or what he didn’t. The things Naruto made him feel, good and bad, wouldn’t disappear no matter what. His feelings would forever be unchanged, but this was his own life now, his own decision not driven by his feelings for Naruto. He needed to be free, to settle within himself that he could live for himself, by himself without Naruto in his mind. Hadn’t he done so before?

This was him telling himself that he could move along, too. Even if he knew that he wasn’t like Naruto and that he’d never take a steady lover or settle down, right now he just needed to prove this one thing to himself.

I can move on without you...

He pressed another brief kiss to Juugo’s lips and clutched one of Karin’s hands with his. They both understood the message and exchanged a silent look between them.

Without saying another word, together, they led Sasuke towards the tent, knowing fully well that, willing as he was, this fragility of his was nothing but a momentary indulgence that offered no steady future. Sasuke was broken, but in his own way, he’d glue all the pieces back together by himself, and once more rise from the ashes. If they could help him for once, then that’d be enough for them.

The future, Sasuke thought, was only just beginning.

TBC...
TRUST MEEE! Okay? Okay.

I know this sort of came as a shock to a few of you (or not) especially Juugo’s side, but I love Juugo and Sasuke’s dynamics, and in my mind, it had to be done this way. This isn’t just about Sasuke and Naruto, least of all at this point. This is about following canon material while manipulating it to my own SNS whims and filling in the blanks left by Kishi. Also, this is me manipulating the story so I can end it the way I want to. AND BOY, am I looking forward to it.

Surely, you know what’s coming, with this, right? Yeah.

I hope you liked the chapter, and I hope you’re hyped for the next one, because I sure as hell am. This story is on fire, baby, and I’m really excited working for it.

Once more, thank you all for the constant love and support! Forgive me for not having replied to reviews yet, but I will during the following week since I’ll start my vacation tomorrow! So, please let me know what you think of this fic, ask whatever questions you have, and take as much advantage of my time as you can ;)

See ya next time! <33
Okay guys, be ready for a huge, useless chapter. I ask you to forgive me in advance, but I needed this chapter to sort out where Sasuke and Naruto stand, and to comprehend Sasuke’s feelings at this moment.

It’s not exactly a very important or eventful chapter, so don’t expect much. To me, though, it feels perfect because I desperately needed to write it before unchaining the events that will form the story from now on. Also *whispers* Sasuke and Naruto!

Also, I wanted to say that there is a lot of stuff that has yet to happen in the story and that I have no intention of bashing characters. Some things might happen that might upset you in the future, but my goal is to portray the characters in the most human and realistic way possible, and follow canon with my own magical twist. I know the way I do things might look crazy at some point, and maybe you guys might not like this or that, but unfortunately for me, I really can’t follow the story I have planned and please every single one of you.

Everything happens for a reason.

I also hope you guys know that, for this to be as close to canon as possible, this story can’t be all about the Sasuke/Naruto relationship – it has to revolve also a bit around the lives they lead, separately, and the people surrounding them.

BUT, I do read every single one of your comments and take them ALL into consideration and I do try hard to work around what you guys are expecting, in my own way.

Well… I do hope you enjoy it anyway!

Beta’d by the lovely SNlalalandNHreality who did a wonderful job at this! Thank you dearly for your hard work, you rock!

Warning: A bit of intimacy between Sasuke/Juugo in the first part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**From Which We’ll Rise**

**Part XIV: Acceptance**

Sasuke was laying on his back on a fluffy futon as he stretched his arm over his head lazily. It was probably noon already.
Two days previously Sasuke, along with Karin and Juugo had rented a small room for the three of them at a simple but clean inn, and Sasuke felt positively content. Later today, he would be on his way, back to his studies, and back to focusing on his path and his dreams. He felt like he was more than ready now, and that he finally came to a point where he could be released from the burden of his own feelings and finally spend time alone with his own thoughts. Well, he actually needed it now.

It wasn’t like he was tired of Juugo and Karin exactly, it was just that he wanted to keep living without shackles, like he had done for so long, and really start thinking about himself and how to start working for his own future, for the shinobi world, with his own hands.

But there was something he had to do first, and he’d be on his way in only a few hours.

The sun filtered through the window, warm and inviting, a gentle breeze waltzing inside the room carrying with it the scents of the world outside. In the distance, the sound of a running shower alerted him that Karin was in the bathroom. Next to him on the futon Juugo also stretched his muscles with a gentle yawn before scratching at his naked chest. Sasuke brushed his own fringe away from his eyes before looking to the side, at his friend. Noticing that he was being watched, Juugo’s head turned so they were facing each other.

In silence they watched each other without moving, their naked bodies close enough to feel each other’s heat, but not enough to touch.

This was what Sasuke enjoyed the most about Juugo, he considered, feeling a wave of fondness hitting him. The fact that things were natural like this, that they didn’t need to always behave like lovers just because they were fucking. Juugo kept his distance mostly until Sasuke either summoned him or initiated something on his own; he wouldn’t touch Sasuke without permission or if the moment didn’t call for it, be it a random touch or a more intimate one. Karin was a bit more daring, though, but then again, she had always been affectionate, and yet, she never pushed Sasuke’s buttons either.

They wanted him, yet they gave him the necessary space and never demanded more than he was willing to give.

It had been good for a while, Sasuke thought, turning slowly so he was laying on his side, reaching out a hand to absently brush his fingers over the curve of Juugo’s strong shoulder. This casual intimacy, not being alone, always having an escapade to ground him whenever his mind started to crack… It was all very new, very twisted, but also very simple. A simple diversion, a quick acting drug that caused no addiction. Sasuke liked it simple, for a change.

Sasuke’s hand moved, his fingertips touching a slightly stubbled cheek and causing Juugo to close his eyes and sigh gently.

Side by side, Sasuke and Juugo lay quietly, enjoying the silent companionship. After a while, Juugo
reopened his eyes before carefully moving so he was hovering slightly above Sasuke, one hand on either side of his head. Sasuke shifted so he was once more on his back, looking up at the large man calmly.

Juugo understood him without him saying a word. It wasn’t like they could communicate deeply and clearly with just one look like Sasuke and Naruto did, but all it took was a sign from Sasuke, and Juugo was very much capable of reading him easily, and Sasuke liked that. No questioning, no hesitation, just plain action and reaction. It wasn’t about lust at all, or passion with Juugo and Karin, but about meetings and blossomings, and about sharing something between the three of them. An exchange, Sasuke supposed, only he did feel like he was the one benefitting more, no doubt about it.

Sasuke brought his hand up to touch Juugo’s chest, placing his palm over his heart and feeling the quick, healthy heartbeat. It was still weird for Sasuke, to perceive other people’s feelings in such a detached way, so simply physical. With Naruto, the physical part had been obvious, but their bond had always allowed them to feel each other’s urges and feelings as if they were their own. It was the type of intimacy regular human beings couldn’t possibly understand. It was deep and intense and so exposing that it made one feel violated and vulnerable, helpless. This kind of normal intimacy was safe, bland, with just enough exposure and just enough space for him to keep to himself what needed to be guarded. It was relieving.

Juugo’s honey-coloured eyes travelled over Sasuke’s features, a gentle, but slightly crestfallen expression in them. Juugo knew very well that they’d be parting ways that same day, as did Karin. Sasuke couldn’t possibly tell when they’d reunite again, but maybe someday by chance, or if Sasuke himself longed for them at some point. Maybe he would long for it. Maybe the sex, maybe just the company, maybe something else entirely. These were things that didn’t bother him anymore. He wouldn’t run from his own life, ever.

Running his palm up Juugo’s chest, Sasuke let it slide, slowly and cautiously up the column of his neck. Again, Juugo sighed contently and leaned his head to the side to willingly receive the caress until Sasuke’s hand traveled towards the back of his head and curled around the hairs there. Sasuke shifted again, and the man above him got the hint loud and clear because he moved to the inviting spot between Sasuke’s parted thighs. Long gone were the days when Sasuke found himself struggling internally with his own pride. Why had he even thought about it in the first place, the first time he had been fucked? It was all about mutual respect, desire, and giving in when the time called for it. With Naruto, it had also been about love and wanting to belong, but with Juugo, things had been different.

Juugo was a larger man, gentle and caring, but no less passionate and as such, in need of possessing his own dominant role. But his repressed desire to be cared for demanded other things as well - things that Sasuke could easily provide - so their dynamics were settled surprisingly fast. Having such a powerful and visually imposing figure submitting to him willingly had left no room in Sasuke’s heart to feel even remotely subjugated when things happened the other way around. Besides… sex didn’t always have to be about who was giving in and for what purpose. It didn’t always have to have a significant meaning, nor to be about proving something to the other person involved.
With Karin… well, Karin was a very dominating woman, of that there was no doubt, and adapted to the things Sasuke liked rather easily. Sasuke knew why she was so experienced and flexible (just like Juugo), but it wasn’t something neither of the three would ever approach if they could help it. What happened with Taka stayed within Taka, and Sasuke simply knew that these things would never reach Suigetsu’s ears. Even if Sasuke was sure that Suigetsu would never turn down Sasuke’s involvement with the three of them, it was already too much. Besides, the last thing Sasuke needed was being constantly flirted with and teased about the things he’d done - as surely Suigetsu would do, even if unintentionally so.

Sasuke’s legs came up to surround Juugo’s waist as he pulled the man’s head down. Their lips met in a languid and fluid slide as Juugo’s heavy naked body fell on top his, warm and rough, their semi-hard erections coming to press against each other easily. Sasuke’s nails scratched possessively at the skin on the back of the man’s neck, making him shiver openly.

Juugo said something against his mouth but Sasuke didn’t care to hear it. He didn’t need it, neither did he want words of farewell or yearning. He was done with sad partings, they were useless. Besides, this kind of goodbye was never supposed to be forever.

Taking a breath, Sasuke surrounded Juugo’s shoulders with his arm and parted his lips to deepen the kiss, silencing the man and making sure he didn’t waste time with trying to say useless things. His thighs flexed around Juugo’s waist as their tongues met, slowly and deeply. The larger man was quick to understand what Sasuke wanted, so he moved his hips tentatively so they could slide against each other, their cocks rubbing together languidly and teasingly.

Sasuke was barely able to stifle a small pleasurable gasp. He really liked it like this, and he knew he’d miss it in a way. He was almost sure that he wouldn’t need it, though. But what did he know? He had stopped wondering about the what ifs of the future.

The kiss picked up a pace, their bodies heating up consistently as their breaths became more elaborate. Sasuke could feel one of Juugo’s hands feeling the pillows underneath his head, surely for the condoms and lube that had been left there the night before. Good. It was alright if Karin wasn’t there yet - Sasuke would definitely make it up to her before leaving.

This was the least he could do for everything those two had done for him. This is was all he had to give right now. But the day would come, he promised himself, when he would truly make it up to them like they deserved, as human beings, and as Shinobi.

Sasuke left the small Inn freshly bathed, wearing new clothes and carrying enough provisions for a while. His Katana had been properly sharpened and polished, firmly secured to his back. He had new blank scrolls, pens and pencils with him. His scratched headband was still firmly hidden in a secret pocket in his pouch, as per usual. Clenched in his fist, a crumpled piece of paper stood, with a vague message that offered him a choice. He had made his.
It had been about a month since he had last been to Konoha, and this time spent travelling with Juugo and Karin had been something akin to cathartic for him. They had visited Mika and the others at the village once more, and then simply travelled, Sasuke’s style, towards nowhere in particular and no specific goal in mind. Nothing had bothered him during those days, and when it did, he shut his own mind down and occupied himself with more useful things.

As Sasuke made his way down the unknown streets in that mid afternoon, he was filled with nothing but calm.

It wasn’t as though he had been running away, with Taka, no. He had simply needed the emotional peace. He hadn’t wanted to forget about who he was or how he felt, no - quite the contrary: he had been exploring different facets of himself, and in his own way, working on himself and on embracing who he was. In many ways, he had, and there was so much about him that he had yet to discover, so much about who he was as a person that he needed to let loose and embrace.

He didn’t regret it at all. He had needed it, not on a physical level, but surely on a personal and spiritual one.

He sometimes wondered what his family would think of his actions if they saw him right now. Would they understand, or would they twitch their noses at this sort of behaviour? Would they reproach him and tell him he wasn’t suited to be called an Uchiha?

It wasn’t like the Uchiha name even had value anymore, but Sasuke still loved and respected its honour as much as he possibly could. He’d never forget who he was and what he had fought for. He’d never allow himself to forget his family, his clan, and the things he had yet to accomplish for their sake.

For Itachi’s sake. There was still so much that he had to do, and his path was only just beginning.

Sasuke liked to believe that his parents still loved him and respected what he stood for, just like Itachi did. He liked to believe that they understood what he needed, what moved him, and that they watched over him, protecting his path and helping him move forward. In his mind, they understood his pain, his love, his motivations, and that all of this made him strong. Even if they wouldn’t agree with it, they’d support him and want for him to be happy and fight for what he believed in, always true to himself.

Either way, these weren’t things that troubled his soul. It was no use wondering about things he’d never have an answer to. But he did like to believe that somewhere out there his loved ones understood that his heart was in the right place and that, at this point of his life, things might not be ideal, but they were the way they had to be considering the circumstances. That was all he needed.

He had come to understand that ‘love’ was complicated and had many shapes. ‘Love’ was a volatile, dangerous and constantly evolving feeling that shaped itself inside humans depending on the exterior factors surrounding them. Sasuke had learned by now that ‘love’ was never predictable.

Feelings themselves, could be the best thing in the world or the worst form of torture. Still, it was up to him to learn how to live with them. And he was learning. He was learning how to deal with the pain and look ahead of it. Soon, it’d be just a passing feeling that he’d throw over his shoulder whenever it hit him.

Sex was just sex, and there was no need to overcomplicate it. Men fucking men, or women, or multiple people… who cared? Why did people kill themselves over sexualities, labels, over what was politically correct or not? Bodies were made for this - to fight, to fuck, to live, to struggle, to feel, and to bleed. They lived, knowing that they would definitely die someday. Why limit oneself with
pointless shackles and fight one’s own instincts when humans were nothing more than barely civilized animals anyway?

More than ever, Sasuke rejected the idea of finding a label for who he was as a human. He moved according to the wind, he acted based on his ideals, and that alone made him strangely content and at peace with himself.

He would fight for what he wanted. He would love the way he wanted to, and no longer would he allow himself to be dragged around by his feelings. He was better than that.

The world was a very hypocritical place to live in. Humans were nothing but hypocrites, hiding behind masks of self-righteousness. Who made the rules, anyway? Sasuke had his own values, so he’d make his own rules.

He felt like he was ready to start over and face the things that he had been avoiding. He was stronger now, and he would prove it.

It was with a light heart and a new resolution that he left the town to begin his journey towards Konoha. Hopefully, this visit would be the last in a long time.

000

Naruto was laying on his back in his bed, staring at the ceiling of his room. It would be the last time he’d look at it like this, since from that day onwards, he’d be living somewhere else - the house he and Hinata had rented where they’d live together as husband and wife, and where, in a not so distant future, they’d watch their kid grow.

The sun had barely risen, but already Naruto could tell it would be a beautiful, perfect day for a wedding. Surely Hinata would be happy.

Naruto himself had barely slept a wink. It wasn’t as though he felt nervous, no; it was just that he had this constant feeling of restlessness and of dislocation that he couldn’t quite shake off no matter how hard he tried.

His life would change completely from this day onwards, and even he, as a person and as a family man, would have to change and sort out his priorities.

He couldn’t say that he felt ready for any of this. He was 21 and had just barely started to understand the dynamics of life as an adult, and already things were taking a giant turn for him, and there was no one he could blame but himself.

Well, this is what he had always wanted, so what difference did it make that this happened now instead of later?

With a sigh, Naruto placed his arm over his eyes and kicked at the sheets until they weren’t covering him anymore. He didn’t even want to get out of bed right now, let alone go to his own wedding.

It wasn’t like he didn’t want to get married, it was just that he felt so emotionally drained. The baby, talking to Hinata’s family, asking her father for her hand in marriage, talking to everyone about it, getting things ready as fast as possible, finding a new home…

So many changes in such a short amount of time, and he felt like he was the only one feeling overwhelmed by all this, and without a grounding force to support him.

He was the man of the relationship, after all, and there were certain things that tradition demanded of
him that Naruto had known nothing about but that he had been forced to learn.

He swallowed hard and took a sharp intake of breath. Even so, through it all, there was only one thing that was really making him feel edgy.

He had sent a note to Sasuke, telling him the date of his wedding, but he hadn’t invited him per se because he didn’t know how that would make Sasuke feel. Inviting him would seem hypocritical, but not inviting him would just be cruel and out of character for Naruto, who always wanted Sasuke present in his life. He loved Sasuke, so of course he would, in any other situation, want him around.

But Naruto himself didn’t know how he was feeling right now. Did he want Sasuke to be there on this important day of his life? Sasuke was his best friend, his most precious person so far, so of course he did. But it was precisely because Sasuke was so precious that he didn’t know if it was a good idea to have him there. They had been lovers - something Naruto was reminded of every day - and having Sasuke there witnessing Naruto getting married to someone else seemed like something that would hurt them both. Not to mention that Naruto himself was terrified of his own reaction if Sasuke’s eyes were to watch him take this step from a front row seat. He had always been confident about himself and his resolution had always been unflinching. But this… if Sasuke was there, he couldn’t be sure that he’d be strong enough not to ruin everything.

So… he had just given Sasuke the date, and decided to let the man choose what he wanted to do.

Only Naruto had no idea what he wished the outcome to be. All he knew was that he wouldn't mind seeing Sasuke at all. Or rather, he needed to see him, even if it probably wouldn’t be the best of times at all.

Inside him, he was praying that Sasuke would come, but dreading it as well.

A sudden gush of energy ran through his body, startling him and causing him to sit upright on the bed. Breathing hard, he looked around the room frantically but there was no one there. He could feel someone watching him as another flow of energy pulsed inside his veins, intimate and alluring.

His mouth suddenly ran dry, but he jumped out of bed at once and ran to his window, sliding it open and looking outside, his eyes urgently seeking the figure that he just knew had to be there, somewhere.

But he found nothing but the usual view.

How…

“Your instincts are becoming dull, Usuratonkachi.”

The voice was smooth and low, and made chills of awareness run through Naruto’s body, every single nerve he owned reacting to those simple words.

Quickly, Naruto turned on his heels to find Sasuke standing in the middle of his room, tall and mysterious in a long black cloak and his usual satchel. He looked good, clean and healthy, and so oddly breathtaking that Naruto had to forcefully swallow the dry lump inside his throat. It had been about a month since they had last seen each other, but Sasuke’s bodily presence never failed to have its effect on him.

He couldn’t believe that Sasuke was there, in his apartment, and on such a day. Naruto didn’t know if he wanted to reach out and hug him or run away. By the way his hands tingled with yearning and his heart raced, he knew what his body wanted.
“You…” Naruto muttered, licking at his dry lips, unsure of whether he felt radiant or very self-conscious. “What… what are you doing here?”

Sasuke looked around the room with a nonchalant expression on his face. His eyes fell upon a chair next to Naruto’s wardrobe before he placed his satchel over it. Then, he removed the strap across his torso, that carried his Katana, and carefully placed the weapon on the floor.

“It’s your wedding day, isn’t it?” Sasuke said casually, bringing his hand to the clasp of his cloak and undoing it. “I’m supposed to be your best friend, or at least you always said so. So I wanted to do my part by being here for you on this special day, and make sure your got your shit properly together.”

Naruto’s mouth moved without a single sound coming out as Sasuke removed his cloak and neatly placed it over the satchel. Underneath, he was wearing a pair of dark grey pants and a dark green sweater that hugged his body in a rather flattering way, the sleeve where his left arm should be hanging empty.

“You’re… you’re coming to the wedding?” Naruto asked hesitantly, even though he couldn’t stop watching Sasuke as he ran a relaxed hand through his own hair.

Sasuke quirked an eyebrow upwards. “Of course not,” he said, on his face, a slightly disgusted expression appearing. “And certainly you don’t expect me to be that much of an idiot. I definitely don’t want to see you getting married to that woman.”

If Sasuke had punched Naruto in the chest it would’ve hurt less than the reality of that statement.

Naruto’s shoulders tensed and his bandaged hand scratched at his other arm. “You’re just as brutally honest as usual, I see,” he muttered.

“I can always leave if my presence here isn’t welcomed,” Sasuke said without missing a beat, and causing Naruto to frown at him.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he hissed, looking deeply into Sasuke’s eyes. “Of course I want you here, Sasuke.”

He pursed his lips together and frowned deeper. Sasuke watched him impassively, but his eyes were alive and fierce, easily perceiving Naruto’s words.

For a moment, they stared at each other intensely. Naruto felt like there were so many things he wanted to ask Sasuke, so many things he wanted to tell him, but he couldn’t bring himself to. He wanted, more than anything, to go to him and put his arms around him, to feel that familiar comfort, that feeling of completion he had so longed for, but he simply stood there, rooted to the spot, simply because he could feel the same feelings coming from Sasuke.

The air seemed to vibrate between them and it was hard for Naruto to breathe. He didn’t even know what he was supposed to do, or how he was supposed to react. Thankfully, as per usual, Sasuke took matters in his own hands.

“Oh alright, then,” he said, with a small nod. “What time is the wedding? What do you need help with?”

“I, erm…” Naruto was surprised by the question more than anything else. He glanced at the clock hanging in the wall to his right. “Everything’s settled, I… the wedding’s at noon, but the guys are coming in about three hours with my clothes to help me get dressed… It’s barely seven in the morning…”
“Right, I’ll be gone by the time they get here,” Sasuke stated casually. “Well, at least I can cook you breakfast and make sure you bathe and shave properly.” He actually offered Naruto a shockingly mischievous smirk, then. “Although I think a bit of stubble actually suits you, but it’s not something women like, is it?”

“How would you know?” Naruto inquired, with a devastating sinking feeling hitting his gut. Sasuke’s smirk faltered ever so slightly.

“Have I ever told you how much I hate your haircut?” Sasuke said, making a disapproving face at him.

“Have I ever told you how much I hate that you wear your fringe like that?” Naruto countered, crossing his arms over his chest. He was only fighting Sasuke on this because he felt bad. Sasuke had liked his hair longer, and for a long a time, Naruto had kept it that way because, somehow, it had made him feel closer to Sasuke. But then Hinata had told him that she preferred shorter hair, that it gave him a more mature look, and he had accepted it, even though a part of himself had felt devastated that he had done something against Sasuke’s liking. It was a stupid train of thought, he knew, but still…

But he liked Sasuke’s hair, even though he felt like it was a shame that the new hairdo hid practically half of his handsome face and that beautiful rinnegan.

“I suppose that’s fair,” Sasuke said, heaving a sigh, his smile turning to a clever, knowing one that clearly had comprehended Naruto’s true feelings. He looked around the room again, unnecessarily. “Well, I’m borrowing something to wear and a pair of slippers; I don’t want to get my clothes dirty. Do you have food in your fridge I can cook with?”

“Yeah, I do…” Naruto muttered, feeling himself blush and tense. They had spent so much time together during that journey, sharing everything, going through everything together, and yet having Sasuke in his house, in his room, so casually and claiming that he’d touch his things and wear his clothes felt eerie. In another life, this would’ve made him curse at Sasuke and call him all sorts of names at the guy’s nerve, but right now, he was just feeling very affected. Emotionally and physically, as if, for some reason, his heart hadn’t been ready for this at all.

Why was this so difficult?

Why was he so torn between being overwhelmingly happy or just confused and scared of Sasuke?

No, not of Sasuke, but of them. Of himself. He felt like his control was dangling on a thin thread.

“Sasuke?”

Sasuke’s voice came out calm, almost soft. “What is it, Naruto?”

“I just…” Naruto took a deep breath and bit on his lower lip as he looked to the side. He couldn’t handle that stare at all, it made his whole body catch fire and...fuck, he knew Sasuke knew it, too. He almost felt like Sasuke was being this way on purpose, and maybe he was. Only Sasuke was somehow stronger, his stance stoic, even though his own emotions were clearly all over the place. “Thanks… for being here. I really… I really wanted to see you.”

Sasuke watched him for a while.

“I know; that’s why I came,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “Go take your shower, Usuratonkachi. You need it.”
Naruto frowned at him, but refrained from commenting. He didn’t even feel like he had the right to feel embarrassed anymore, since he was an open book to that man anyway.

Throwing one last look at his friend, he walked past him with every intention of making his way out of the room and towards the bathroom. However, he couldn’t help but stop at Sasuke’s side for a second and carefully touching Sasuke’s right hand with the tips of his bandaged fingers. They both looked down at the same time, with their breaths suddenly stuck inside their throats. Together, they watched Sasuke’s fingers gently closing around Naruto’s. Their fingers moved together, in light touches that were meant to be soothing, feathered-like caresses. That innocent but meaningful touch seemed like a gift from the heavens to Naruto. The sight was something akin to artistic, poetic. It gave him life but ruined him at the same time. It spoke about a lifetime of things they’d never tell a soul.

“Go take your shower,” Sasuke whispered, not looking up. Gathering his courage, Naruto made an acquiescent sound with the back of his throat and forced himself to let go and make his way to the bathroom.

000

Back in his room, freshly showered and carefully shaved, Naruto put on a pair of boxers, yellow shorts and a baby blue t-shirt. It would be no use worrying about clothes now if he had to change into his ceremony attire soon. Now, he was towelling his hair while staring intensely at the drawer of his bedside table, fighting an internal struggle that was actually driving him crazy. He could smell a breakfast of eggs and toast coming from the kitchen, and it was such a welcoming scent, especially when he knew who was making it, for him.

Naruto lowered the towel and clutched at his own t-shirt over his wildly beating heart with his now unbandaged hand.

Sasuke…

He felt like such a horrible person for thinking about the things he was thinking. On his wedding day. This wasn’t who he was supposed to be; he wasn’t supposed to entertain such a horrible course of action, not on such a day, not when he was about to become a father.

He glanced at his drawer again. He felt like he wanted to cry, especially in humiliation because Sasuke could totally feel his anguish right now. Sasuke couldn’t read his thoughts, though, luckily.

Giving in to his internal demon, Naruto threw the towel over his bed and made his way to the bedside table.

‘Don’t do it, Naruto…’

Naruto’s hand stopped in the process of opening the drawer. Kurama hadn’t once interfered with anything related to him and Sasuke. Not once had he teased, advised or reproached him. They hadn’t ever talked about it, even if Naruto had been able to feel Kurama’s exasperation towards some of the actions he had taken in his love life. They had talked about a lot of things, but Sasuke wasn’t one of them, maybe because Kurama didn't want to meddle, or maybe because Naruto himself didn't want to talk about it.

‘You made the choice of being in Konoha and becoming Hokage,’ Kurama’s harsh, cold voice resonated within him. ‘You chose to not be with Uchiha even though the two of you have been disgusting like this since forever. You’re going to become a parent, a married man like you always idealized.’ There was anger mixed up with sarcasm in Kurama’s tone, and Naruto swallowed hard.
‘You’re not the brightest crayon in the box, but this is pitiful, even for you.’

‘I’m not in the mood for your funny games,’ Naruto thought, opening the drawer and immediately finding what he was looking for. ‘You don’t understand, Kurama.’

‘I don’t understand?’ Kurama laughed. ‘He’s not yours to have, Naruto. You have no right to go for the kill just because you know you’ll be given what you want. If you love him like you are constantly telling yourself you do, then you should respect those feelings a little, don’t you think? It’s your wedding day.’

‘Shut up,’ Naruto hissed in his mind, clenching his teeth. ‘That’s exactly why…’

‘You are stupider than I thought,’ Kurama cut, his voice clearly angry right now. ‘Suit yourself, lover boy. You’ll mourn it all more than he ever will, and you know why? Because for a hero who said one should always be true to themselves, you sure don’t practice what you preach.’

‘That’s enough, Kurama!’ Naruto knew he was being a jerk, but he really didn’t need to be told something he already knew far too well. ‘You were doing fine not interfering! Just… don’t, okay? I know all of that, but I can’t help it, okay? I can’t help it…’

‘I never felt sorry for you, because in spite of everything, you always had the strength to do the right thing.’ This time, the beast’s voice was frankly disappointed. ‘But I do feel sorry for you right now.’

With this being said, Kurama went silent, and Naruto felt him retreating to a deeper pit within himself, his presence vanishing.

Naruto couldn’t help but sigh. What the hell was he doing? When had he become this ridiculously pitiful person that even the demon residing within him felt the need to interfere?

Naruto grabbed for the item he was looking for and shoved it inside the pocket of his shorts, slamming the drawer closed shut. He knew all of what Kurama was telling him was right, but he really couldn’t help himself when it came to Sasuke. He wasn’t even sure that he’d have the guts to go through with it, and he knew he was being an ass and a horrible human being, but…

Well, he needed this, and if the chance presented itself, then he would take it. He knew very well how Sasuke operated, and if Naruto himself took a step back at the last moment, then Sasuke wouldn’t move on his own, either, so there was a chance that all this drama would be in vain. Although, Naruto seriously didn’t know which outcome would be the best since neither seemed acceptable in his mind.

Taking a deep breath, Naruto made his way to the kitchen to find Sasuke standing by the small counter, his back turned to him. He was wearing a pair of black sweat pants (Naruto’s) and a green sweater (also Naruto’s). On his feet, a pair of grey slippers could be seen, again, the extra pair Naruto owned.

The blond had to swallow hard. Seeing Sasuke in his environment like this, wearing his clothes, touching his things...

“Are you doing that on purpose?” Sasuke suddenly asked, looking over his shoulder and startling Naruto.

“Doing what on purpose?” Naruto asked, confusedly.

“Nevermind,” Sasuke said, turning around with a cup in his hand that he extended towards Naruto. “Coffee? I also made toast and eggs.”
Only then did Naruto confirm that, indeed, on the table, one could see a plate with freshly toasted bread and another one with beautiful yellow scrambled eggs. There was also a jar filled with orange juice and two glasses.

His heart skipped a beat.

“Let me just have coffee first...” he said, slowly making his way to Sasuke. He accepted the cup of coffee and leaned on the counter beside him, taking a small sip of the beverage. It had just the perfect amount of sugar. “That’s really good.”

“Of course it is,” Sasuke said, reaching out behind him and grabbing for his own cup of coffee before he, too, leaned his lower back on the counter.

They drank the coffee slowly without speaking for a while. Naruto was torn between finding comfort in the scene and feeling completely out of himself. Having Sasuke near him made everything in him lose control.

“This is really… unexpected,” he said after a while, softly. “This cozy scene of you in my clothes and slippers. It’s familiar, and yet it’s new.”

Sasuke turned his head so he could look at him. “You like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” Naruto admitted, with a small smile, looking at him from the corner of his eye. “I like you all over my stuff, in my home. It’s really...”

“You’re getting a boner just because I’m in your home?” Sasuke interrupted, casually, blunt as always and with a hint of amusement, and Naruto couldn’t even bother to deny it.

“It’s not as if I can help it,” he replied, with a slightly self-conscious shrug.

Sasuke released a small chuckle. “At least you’re honest, too,” he said, bringing the cup to his lips again.

Naruto looked openly at him now, both out of curiosity, but also because he wanted to take in everything that Sasuke was. He had missed this simple intimacy more than he had ever anticipated.

“What happened to you?” He couldn’t help but ask, elbowing Sasuke’s side slightly. “You seem… different. Like yourself but… I don’t know, less… preoccupied?”

Sasuke sipped on his coffee while he absent-mindedly looked up at the ceiling. He lowered his cup. “Aren’t you going to eat?” He asked, motioning towards the small round table with his chin.

“Ah, yeah, of course,” Naruto said, jumping slightly. “Will you join me?”

“If you want.”

The two carried their cups of coffee towards the table and placed them on it. Naruto waited for Sasuke to sit down before dragging his other chair closer to Sasuke’s so he could sit by his side close enough that their knees could touch if he moved his leg. The other man simply quirked an eyebrow up at him but made no comment. Sasuke poured them both some orange juice and Naruto wasted no time in grabbing for a toast and putting some scrambled eggs on it before passing it to his friend, who took it with a small nod of gratitude. Naruto then helped himself as well, and together, they ate.

The eggs were really good, moist and soft like Naruto liked, and with just the right amount of salt, so he offered Sasuke an appreciative sound behind a mouth full of food that made the other smirk.
Sasuke was still nibbling on his toast when Naruto finished his and had a bit of juice. He put the glass down, just then noticing that there was a bit of egg at the corner of Sasuke’s mouth. Instinctively, he reached out and wiped it with his thumb before bringing it to his own mouth and sucking on it. Sasuke eyed him expressionlessly, but his eyes darkened considerably. Naruto swallowed, feeling his cheeks slightly flustered before helping himself to another toast.

“So, huh…” he stammered, feeling suddenly self-conscious. “Do you have another lover?”

He had no idea why that particular question had left his mouth so mindlessly, but it was out anyway. Sasuke seemed only vaguely surprised as he chewed slowly. “I did,” he replied shortly, with an elegant shrug. Naruto’s heart fell.

Well, what had he expected to hear, anyway? He had been the one stupid enough to ask, knowing fully well that an affirmative answer would upset him. He took a deep breath and bit on his lower lip, looking down at the toast in his hand.

“You have no right to be angry,” Sasuke pointed out seriously, maybe because of the face Naruto made.

“I know, and I’m not angry,” Naruto lied in a whisper. “I just… I guess I’ve always felt very territorial of you, and I just…”

“Territorial?” Sasuke retorted, disbelievingly. “I’m not yours to own, Naruto.”

“I know that.”

He had lost his appetite. His stomach was in knots. He wanted to ask Sasuke who his lover was but knew he had no right to do so. “What about Sakura-chan?” He asked instead, putting his toast down on the plate.

Sasuke sighed. “Sakura understands that we are not a couple, but she insists on waiting,” he muttered. “That’s her decision, and I have nothing to do with it.”

“Everyone thinks you two are dating.”

Sasuke looked at Naruto intensely just then, his eyes narrowing. “So? People believe what they want to believe. Sakura’s fantasy is a social reality, my own sexual preferences aren’t a dilemma for people and your life is a lot easier, is it not? No-one will ever suspect of anything going on between you and me if the two of us are supposedly in relationships.”

Naruto leaned back on his chair and crossed his arms over his chest as he threw Sasuke a sideways glance and a pout, but he didn’t reply.

Sasuke sighed again and ate the rest of his toast in silence. “I’m not planning on taking any other lovers, though, if that makes you feel better,” he said blandly after a while. “I only did it because I needed to prove something to myself.”

“Like what?” Naruto inquired in a mutter.

Sasuke tapped his fingers on the table and leaned back as well, looking down at his own hand. “I needed to free myself from the idea that I would never be able to be with anyone other than you,” he explained, choosing his words wisely. “You fucked Hinata and got her pregnant. I was angry that
you could do it when I thought that my feelings for you turned me into someone exclusive for you.”

Naruto lifted his head up, his eyebrows quirking upwards.

“But if you could fuck other people easily, then it wasn’t fair that I was trapped by my own ideology,” Sasuke proceeded. “Don’t get me wrong, I value my feelings for you like I value my own life. But I needed to know that I wasn’t chained by them; that I could live my life my way and be with someone else if I chose to. And thankfully, I now know that I can. I am free from that pressure.”

In spite of his words, he smirked darkly. “Still, even this freedom is nothing but an ideology, too. I’m definitely not suited to be anyone’s lover, nor to be in a relationship. I seriously don’t want to. The only relationship I genuinely wanted was denied to me, so…”

Naruto swallowed hard, feeling his chest tight. He understood what Sasuke was telling him, and he respected it - he had to. Sasuke had every right to live his own life the way he wanted, had every right to experience things, and see what he wanted for himself. A part of Naruto ached at knowing that Sasuke still didn’t want to be with people, still wanting his own loneliness, not even now of all times, but another part of him (a selfish, cruel one, he knew) relished in knowing that his best friend would always be faithful to him and belong to him exclusively.

“Did you… like being with that person?” Naruto asked, out of morbid curiosity, simply because he knew he needed to at least know that something good had come out of it for Sasuke.

Sasuke turned his head to him, his eyes unblinking. “I did,” he said, firmly. “It didn’t compare to being with you, if that’s what you want to know, but I liked it for what it was, and more importantly, I liked what it represented to me, as a person.”

“I see,” Naruto said, hugging himself tighter for some reason even though he felt relieved. “Good. I’m glad.”

“I don’t need sex, Naruto,” Sasuke said, a bit coolly this time. “It’s good, it serves a purpose, but that’s all it is to me.”

This made Naruto feel even more restless, his heart beating fast. Sasuke was there, with him, on his wedding day, and they hadn’t spent time together like this in over half a year. Now, Naruto was getting married, and maybe this was why Sasuke had felt the need to come to him and talk to him about what he had been up to and how he was handling himself after everything that had happened between them. Maybe this was their final peace making, maybe this was their chance to be honest with each other one last time and truly find some peace of mind since things had been crazy between them since the moment they parted ways.

He really, truly did understand what Sasuke was telling me, which made it all the more difficult to hear.

But there were things that would never change between them, and feelings that wouldn’t burn out no matter what. There was no way their paths would ever come together now.

This was afflicting to Naruto, and surely, to Sasuke as well. There were things hidden within Naruto that were bubbling, suffocating him and slowly throwing him into a pit of a constant despair he knew he’d never get out of.

Being with Sasuke was hard. It made him happy but also took his control away from him.

He knew that he was a terrible person when it came to this. He was selfish and greedy and yes, territorial. The things that crossed his mind, the things he wanted from Sasuke, the way he wanted

But he couldn’t let go of this, and he didn’t want to. Only when his feelings for Sasuke were involved did he feel alive. It was with Sasuke, for Sasuke, that he knew he could be himself, and this horrified him as much as it made him feel free.

“You say you don’t need sex,” Naruto said through clenched teeth, looking straight into Sasuke’s eyes now. “But do you need sex with me?”

Sasuke didn’t reply, the question obviously taking him by surprise.

“Because I like sex, Sasuke,” Naruto said, unable to hold back his thoughts anymore and not giving Sasuke time to reply. “It’s a biological need, so I do it because it’s easy, and that’s what couples are supposed to do, right?”

His feelings were overflowing. He uncrossed his arms and started gesticulating, but his hands were shaking slightly as he became nervous, impatient. He didn’t know what was suddenly wrong with him, but somehow he needed Sasuke to know, too, how he felt, and why he did the things he did. “I mean, sex is good, right? But it’s like, I don’t know how to explain it but no matter how many times I do it with Hinata, I always feel like I want more. Not more with her, just… more, you understand?”

Sasuke was eyeing him without saying a word, his lips pursed together in a thin line, but this didn’t stop Naruto from turning towards him on his chair and moving his hands more for emphasis. “It’s like, it’s good, but it’s not spectacular. It’s like something’s always missing.” He kept talking, words leaving his mouth but he couldn’t really put his thoughts in order. “And I want that missing piece, Sasuke, and that’s you. She’s not you, so something’s always wrong. Because I’m always thinking about you, when I have sex with her, when I do things to myself, when I…”

“Naruto…” Sasuke muttered.

“I want you to fuck me,” Naruto sputtered, again, without even thinking about the vomit of words coming out of his mouth, but he didn’t even have the mind to be shocked at himself. It wasn’t like he hadn’t already humiliated himself enough.

Sasuke took a sharp intake of breath through his nose and frowned deeply. Naruto could feel the tension in Sasuke’s body and his energy losing balance.

“You’re asking me to fuck you on your wedding day?” His voice was cool but slow, yet his eyes were sharp. “Are you out of your mind?”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Naruto cut demandingly, putting a hand heavily on Sasuke’s thigh. “Do you need sex with me?”

Naruto didn’t need an answer to that. He had felt it since the day they had first fucked, that this bond would be theirs and that some things would be exclusive to them, and this was no different. Naruto had thought that it would be bearable for them if they both were to move on and be with other people, but that hadn’t been the case. But somehow, he wanted Sasuke to say it.

His breath came in fast pants as he felt Sasuke’s energy spiraling, conflicted between slight anger and obvious longing and lust, and Naruto relished in feeling it. He loved how his and Sasuke’s feelings could flow from one to the other and mingle in the most sublime way. He wanted Sasuke to feel his need, to feel, through their bond, how much he wanted him. He wanted to get Sasuke worked up.

*I am a horrible person…*
Sasuke’s eyes narrowed and he wet his lips. Naruto could feel the man’s control on the verge of snapping, and yet, Sasuke’s expression was stoic.

“Did you happen to have brought lube to the kitchen with you?” Sasuke asked unexpectedly.

Naruto bit on his lower lip, hard, feeling heat spreading through his neck and all the way down his body. “Yes,” he admitted, in a whisper.

“Condoms?”

“No condoms.”

Sasuke’s eyebrows rose. “Why?” He asked, his voice low, oddly seductive but authoritative, making Naruto’s muscles tense in slow building arousal. “You don’t have any?”

“I have plenty,” Naruto said, staring deep into those beautiful eyes. “I just didn’t want them.”

Sasuke’s lips parted. Naruto noticed his hand clenching and unclenching over the table, the hot aura of arousal coming from him in waves, pulsing and eager, reaching Naruto like a captivating melody. Naruto wanted to jump him but he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t make the first move, because a part of himself felt like Sasuke had the right to make a choice - which wouldn't happen if Naruto himself attacked first since Sasuke would, without a doubt, give in.

Naruto held his breath as Sasuke, too, turned on his chair so he was facing him, one of his legs in between Naruto’s, just as Naruto had one in between Sasuke’s. Sasuke’s hand reached out and held Naruto’s chin, slowly pulling him close and making his head spin.

“I do need sex with you, Naruto,” Sasuke whispered gently, once their faces were so close the tips of their noses touched. Naruto shivered openly in yearning as he felt Sasuke’s breath on his lips, his hand clenching on the fabric of Sasuke’s pants. “Sex between us isn’t the same as sex with other people; It has meaning, it’s intense, and it’s fucking amazing. It’s us.”

Sasuke stopped himself for a second to take a breath. Naruto felt like he was being cruelly teased, but he didn’t dare to move. “I understand how sex with someone else will always be lacking something. But you know what? We could fuck as many times as you want. My offer will always stand. If you take it, we’ll fuck each other exclusively for as long as we both shall live.”

Naruto couldn’t help but gasp, something very painful piercing his heart. Sasuke offered his lips a small, chaste kiss that alone was enough to both soothe and unleash atrocious thoughts in him. “I could fuck you right now,” Sasuke said, his voice alluring but condescending, firm and frustratingly steady. “But I’m not going to let you become this sort of terrible person on this day. This person is not who you are. You’re not thinking straight, this isn’t who you are. Besides, you need to understand that we belong to each other, but we don’t own each other. I’m not going to be your fuck friend while you build your own life with your wife.”

The words stung and hurt Naruto in ways undescrivable. He felt wounded, rejected, but still loved and protected. He knew Sasuke was right. But how could he stop feeling these things, how could he just avoid everything when he missed everything about them? When he felt so lost, empty, vulnerable and alone all the fucking time?

Sasuke didn’t allow him to utter any more pitiful words as his mouth captured Naruto’s in a gentle but deep kiss. Feeling those familiar lips on his made Naruto moan desperately and adjust his body so he could put his arms around Sasuke’s shoulders and hold him tight. He could almost laugh with joy as Sasuke’s arm held him back. His chest felt tight with longing, his nerves tense with arousal
that he could feel being reciprocated by Sasuke, and yet, his friend remained physically calm, steadily controlling the kiss so it was intense, meaningful, and honest, but leveled. Even when their tongues touched and their mouths quickly devoured each other, Sasuke kept perfect control of his body, not letting things escalate, not giving anything away.

Naruto understood that Sasuke was giving them both only a bit of what they needed, his feelings flowing through to Naruto strongly, reassuringly, but his purpose being to ground them both and establish boundaries, as it should be. Naruto couldn’t help but feel pained and disappointed, but he found that he loved Sasuke too much to violate his wishes and to force Sasuke to taint what he expected Naruto to be.

He’d rather be disappointed a million times than have Sasuke disappointed at him.

To stay faithful to who he had become was all he could do for Sasuke after everything. To respect Sasuke’s wishes was only a small gift.

Sasuke wasn’t his to have. He was going to be a parent and a married man, he couldn’t simply use Sasuke’s body regardless of their feelings for each other. He had no right to make demands, no right to tarnish himself and Sasuke for this.

Trust Sasuke to keep him in check, even now.

But… Naruto still felt…

*What am I doing?*

They broke the kiss after what felt like hours, both panting and with lips moist from each other’s saliva. They shared a silent, meaningful look between them. Then, Sasuke motioned Naruto so he would lean his head on his shoulder and Naruto did, burying his face on the curve of Sasuke’s neck and allowing the back of his head to be caressed. He took a deep whiff of Sasuke’s familiar scent - how he loved it above any other. Hinata’s sweet perfumed body could never compare to this - this feeling of comfort and ‘home’, so filled with emotions and memories.

“I’m sorry, Sasuke,” Naruto muttered, placing a small kiss on the man’s neck and hugging him under the armpits. “I never want to hurt you, but it seems like I always become this stupid ass when it comes to you.”

“Yeah,” Sasuke said quietly, his tone very serious. He hesitated for a moment. “You understand that we need to stay away from each other, don’t you? This is not how things are supposed to be. We can’t be alone together. This not what you should be thinking about.”

Naruto held Sasuke even tighter. “I understand.”

Sasuke was quiet for another few seconds. His fingers ran through Naruto’s blond hair caringly.

“Have you thought about whether you want a boy or a girl?”

Naruto almost snorted against Sasuke’s skin, but instead he heaved a heavy, tired sigh. “No. But I guess girls are too troublesome. A boy would be nice, probably.”

“How do you think he’d look like?”

“Hopefully like me.” Naruto managed a small, sad smile. Oddly enough, he hadn't wanted to talk about his unborn child with people, but he found that he had no problems doing it with Sasuke. “I mean, Hinata’s really beautiful, but I hope the kid has my eyes and my hair color. It’s more unusual, I think.”
“A tiny bouncy person with your blue eyes and your blond hair…” Sasuke said softly. “I’m sure he or she will have your loud mouth and your conceited grin. And maybe they’ll be a crybaby like you, too.”

At this, Naruto actually laughed, burying his face more in the curve of Sasuke’s neck, relishing the simple familiarity that was being in his precious person’s arms. “Bastard,” he muttered, his voice coming out muffled by the other’s skin. “They’ll be beautiful no matter what.”

“Of course they will,” Sasuke agreed, placing a lingering kiss on his head. “You’re going to love that kid and become a great parent. You’re going to be really happy, Naruto. Having a family is the best thing in the world.”

Somehow, Sasuke’s words were heartfelt and Naruto was truly grateful, yet, he felt as sad as Sasuke had sounded. He knew Sasuke knew what having a family felt like, but he had lost them. He was still alone, and still not really wanting to build himself a home like Naruto. But Naruto supposed Sasuke was always better than him - he wasn’t able to be hypocritical like him for the sake of a dream.

“I’m still your family, Sasuke,” Naruto said, lifting his head up to look at his friend. “And I will always be available for you, no matter what.”

“Right,” Sasuke said, without smiling. “As friends and as Shinobi, our paths will always meet.” His hand cupped Naruto’s face. “But from now on, we won’t be seeing each other unless it’s strictly necessary. So, I sincerely hope you can do better at living without us from now on.”

“Yeah,” Naruto whispered, his throat feeling constricted. This was nothing new, and Sasuke’s constant absence had allowed him to prepare himself for those endless, torturous months without him. “I will try my best.”

Maybe it was a lie. Maybe everything outside of this would always be nothing but a lie. But it was the lie that Naruto had chosen, and for Sasuke he would try his best.

He would work hard at not dreaming about him, at not thinking about him, and at not longing for him. He’d work hard at not wondering about how things could’ve been, and he’d work hard at not aching for the lonely path Sasuke had chosen. This, he would do. For Sasuke, he would aim high even if his soul felt like it was burning in the pits of hell because Sasuke wasn’t around.

He understood what Sasuke’s eyes told him. ‘Look forward to the future, Naruto, and focus only on that. That’s your life, embrace it, cherish it. Show me that this is all worth it.’

Swallowing the dryness in his throat down, he leaned forward and cautiously placed his lips over Sasuke’s receptive ones in a soft, caring way. Maybe this would be the last kiss they would share, maybe for a long time. Naruto refused to think that they’d never be able to be like this again. They needed each other. The universe itself had shoved them together many times before, this couldn’t possibly end here. Naruto wouldn’t allow it.

‘Wait for me, Sasuke,’ his kiss said. ‘No matter how much time passes… this isn’t the end for us. I’ll come for you, even if it’s the last thing I do.’

Naruto’s wedding day was a busy and happy one. The sun was shining as the village of Konoha celebrated the event of one of their greatest heroes joining not only one of the most beautiful women of Konoha, but one whose name and lineage was fit to such a personality. Together, Uzumaki
Naruto and Hyuuga Hinata made a striking pair, and the people rejoiced.

The ceremony and party itself was considerably modest, consisting mostly of the couple’s friends, relatives and/or close people to them.

Even the Hyuuga clan seemed to be happy enough that Hinata had chosen a good suitor who would take responsibility for getting her pregnant.

The scandal hadn’t been as big as one might think since Naruto and Hinata chose to drop the bomb to Hinata’s father on the same day that he formally went to ask for her hand in marriage.

Sakura had known of Hinata’s condition for a while before news reached Naruto. Hinata had taken a pregnancy test quite early and she had only been a few weeks long when she found out.

But the girl had been terrified. She knew she was young and that Naruto had many goals he wanted to achieve before getting married and having kids. She had been scared of Naruto’s reaction, and no matter what Sakura said to her to assure her that Naruto would be happy and supportive, she had felt very hesitant. Hinata hadn’t been oblivious to Naruto’s weird mood ever since he returned from the journey with Sasuke, so when he had told her - in a rather happy mood - that he was going to meet the Uchiha for a few days, Hinata had panicked, and in a way, so had Sakura.

Sakura hadn’t seen Sasuke in a long, long time, and she knew that, as long as those two found the place and time to be alone together, there would always be a risk that something would fall apart and that suddenly the world would turn upside down. And at this critical moment, that definitely could not happen.

So she had urged Hinata to tell Naruto the truth before he left for his vacations with Sasuke, and thankfully, things had gone back on track as they were supposed to.

On that night, Sasuke had been in the village, but he had left as quickly as he had arrived, from what Sakura had heard. Even if things were weird between them, she hadn’t expected him to leave without seeing her, even if he had apparently just dropped by to pick Naruto up and nothing else, as it had obviously happened.

These were things that made Sakura resent Naruto. She had no reason to, of course. Those two were very clear about how they felt for each other and most people got the hint, even though they didn’t understand the depth of it or where it came from.

Sakura didn’t even fully understand how Naruto was able to climb the barriers that she could not when it came to Sasuke. But she understood very well the line that separated her from Naruto and Sasuke, and she understood where she stood when weighed up against Naruto in Sasuke’s eyes. And this frustrated her to no end, because, even now, she couldn’t get through to him. Not even with Naruto about to become a father and a married man did Sasuke have the heart to even entertain pursuing the same for himself. Well, not right now anyway. She had promised to wait, and she would. He might not want it now, but someday, for sure...

Sakura knew that Naruto wasn’t to blame for this. Naruto had always stood up for her feelings for Sasuke and motivated her to stay true to herself. Still, even if she knew that Sasuke did things by personal choice, a deeper part of herself felt bitter that Naruto would always be in the way, somehow. Naruto was Sasuke’s blinding light - his only one. As long as Sasuke remained blinded, he would see nothing else. Sasuke needed to focus on something different, to have a different goal, to see a new path, something else to live for.

But… for as much as it pained Sakura to admit, he was tougher to crack than she ever thought he
Naruto’s and Hinata’s wedding was filled with joy. Hinata looked beautiful, and her belly was hardly noticeable since she was a curvy woman. Sakura was happy for them, they were such a lovely and inspiring couple, she thought. Naruto loved Hinata and cherished her, respected her as any lover should, silly and clumsy as he might be and not at all the perfect boyfriend material, but genuine all the same. Deep inside, Sakura felt a small pang of jealousy; to think that Naruto had been in love with her, and that, right now, it could be her getting married instead of Hinata had she chosen it.

But... she had made her choice, and that was to fight for the man she had loved most of her life so far. The same man that wasn’t even present for Naruto’s wedding.

People gossiped, of course, and wondered where Sasuke was that he couldn’t come to his best friend’s wedding. Sakura doubted he’d been invited, but she knew that, even if he had, he wouldn’t show up - his pride wouldn’t allow him to.

Sakura couldn’t tell if this was relieving for Naruto or if it upset him. He seemed perturbed, but also strangely relaxed. She didn’t bring the topic up so as to not ruin the day, but once in awhile, his eyes would scan the crowd around him as if they were avidly looking for someone or something. Then he would smile to himself - an odd, gentle smile that was hard to define. Other times, those beautiful blue eyes would lose focus for a few seconds, and his smile would vanish, only to return when his attention was demanded by the people around him.

Sakura could only guess how he was feeling, just like she could only guess the sort of things that had happened between those two for Naruto to look so momentarily crestfallen and simultaneously filled with longing.

The kind of longing Sakura knew all too well, and yet, even if Naruto was the only person in the world she could talk to that would understand her, she had drawn that line long ago, when she had convinced him that Hinata was the woman of his life. There were things they had once shared (and still did) that could no longer meet. Thankfully, Naruto understood it well, even if Sakura knew that it hurt him.

Where was Sasuke? What was he feeling, right now? Was he watching, from a distance, these events unfolding, bringing him further apart from Naruto? She wished she could know, like Naruto surely did, if he was around or not.

Sakura wished that she could be there to soothe Sasuke’s heart, no matter where he was. She wished that things didn’t have to be like this, that team 7 could be united and be naturally happy as they had been when they were kids, but the balance had been broken with Sasuke’s first departure, and without him willing to return, it was obvious that their worlds would fall apart. Now, her two former teammates had created something for themselves that had bonded their hearts further, but that somehow managed to complicate their relationship even more. Having a simple relationship would always be nothing but a foolish idealism for them.

How Sakura longed to be part of those sorts of feelings. To be longed for like that, to have such a deep yearning directed at her, to have the same strong link to Sasuke that Naruto did. But she was aware that the things that Naruto and Sasuke shared were in no way comparable to the things she had shared with the Uchiha. What those two had was something not even she understood, but that she knew to be unbreakable.

*I want that link with you, Sasuke-kun... I want to see you*...
She wished that she could be strong enough, like Naruto, to reach out towards Sasuke and demand his attention, his respect. But more and more, she understood that she couldn't simply sit around and wait for the heavens to grant her wish. Like Naruto, she would have to be the one to move and reach out, forcing Sasuke to see her, to acknowledge her.

Only Naruto had always been seen by Sasuke. In fact, she thought, not without a bitter resentment that made her feel ashamed; Naruto had had everything from Sasuke since the very beginning. Sasuke’s eyes had always been directed towards him and him alone. But the more Sasuke slipped away from Naruto, the further away he’d be from Sakura, as well, and that couldn’t happen. He’d leave, and soon he would leave for good if she allowed him to.

Seeing Naruto and Hinata getting married only fueled her conviction further. She would get to him by her own means. She had meaning to him, and she wanted to be of value.

Yes, she would need to move, and soon, before he disappeared completely.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Please, don’t see Sakura as a bitch, I’m just following her canon personality and what ‘The Last’ gave us. I think you all knew that Hinata telling Naruto about her pregnancy at that time was a convenient plot necessity.

I know this chapter was kind of boring, and maybe some of you were expecting hot passionate and desperate sex between our boys (trust me, I was, too) but it didn’t happen. I feel like it wouldn’t be right at such an occasion, and it didn’t fit Sasuke’s mind-set at this point.

But I needed this interaction between them because the plot will evolve from now on, but it’ll take a while before it focuses back on them as a pair again. Also, updates will be coming slower since I’ll be back to work in a couple of days. Sorry about that.

Anyway, next chapter will have something I’m sure you guys didn’t see coming (or maybe some of you did). I’m actually pretty excited about it!

As usual, thank you all for reading and for supporting me and this story! You have been leaving the most wonderful comments and giving me a lot of constructive criticism and I truly and honestly appreciate it! It truly gives me an insight of my writing and what I need to work on as an author :)

I love you all!

See ya next chapter!
Orochimaru’s main laboratory was located in a new underground hideout in Tea Country. Sasuke had never visited it before, but Karin had assured him that Orochimaru would be there, so Sasuke had decided to show up unannounced. It was a certainty he had - that his former mentor would always receive him. In spite of the things that had happened in the past between them, Orochimaru didn’t seem to hold grudges against him. Truth be told, while Sasuke had sealed him, it had been a necessary evil at the time, because apart from being a little too possessive of Sasuke’s body’s well-being, there was nothing that Sasuke could really complain about when it came to the man. Orochimaru was a powerful man and a diligent teacher. He was highly intelligent - someone that one could have an interesting conversation with without getting bored - and in his own, egoistical and distorted way, had saved a lot of people from the streets, where certain death had awaited.

In spite of everything, Sasuke trusted the man to a certain extent, and at this particular stage of his life, he knew his relationship with Orochimaru was far from being over if he wished to accomplish his goals. Better to keep in touch and get down to business sooner rather than later.

From the entrance, Sasuke looked at the narrow but long corridor that stretched out in front of him that was Orochimaru’s lab. It was dark, windowless, and filled with odd machines, shelves of books and tables that carried scrolls, chemicals, and all sorts of vials. The air smelt of medicine and acids. The constant beeping sounds were as annoying as ever, and here and there, tall tubes of liquid that reached the ceiling could be seen. Inside them, human sized creatures that Sasuke had no interest in seemed to be slumbering.

It appeared that the man was still experimenting as much as he used to.

“Sasuke-kun, what a pleasure,” a familiar, smooth voice hissed as Orochimaru seemed to emerge
from the shadows while making his way to Sasuke. His arms were slightly open in welcome. On his lips, an almost pleasant smirk could be seen while his golden eyes watched him appreciatively. “It’s been a while. You’re as beautiful as always, I see. What a fine man you’ve become.”

With his Katana firmly attached to his back, Sasuke almost resented not having it placed somewhere more at handy. It wasn’t as though he feared Orochimaru or even saw him as a threat, but there was an air about the man that subconsciously forced Sasuke to keep his wits about him.

“This is merely a visit to talk business,” Sasuke informed, eyes firmly trained on the man in front of him - he hadn’t changed at all. “I need something from you, Orochimaru.”

“I’m always eager to talk business with you, my beloved Uchiha,” Orochimaru said, with a new glint in his eyes. He joined his hands together in an elegant manner. “Considering I can be of service, that is.”

The two exchanged a silent look for a while, both assessing the other cautiously, but while Sasuke’s face remained expressionless, Orochimaru’s had an almost friendly expression that didn’t serve to ease Sasuke’s mind at all. Sasuke could tell that the man was somewhat pleased to see him. Still, he forced himself to relax before moving his eyes away from his former mentor to look around the lab once more.

“This place…” he said calmly. “You’re still working on this kind of stuff?”

“Of course,” Orochimaru replied, in his very polite way of speaking. Apparently inspired by Sasuke’s question, he gestured towards the corridor behind him with a hand. “Most of these subjects are failed experiments I created from scratch, though. I will dispose of them soon. You know I always aim for the sun, don’t you? Practice makes perfect. But come, let me show you something wonderful.”

He turned away from him without another word, so Sasuke followed after him at a safe distance.

As they made their way through the lab, Sasuke observed what lay inside with a mixture of pity and disgust. Some of them were children, some malformed with members misplaced or lacking, others mutated into horrible looking beasts, and others barely looking like they were alive at all. Other ‘specimens’ were older but seemed to be barely hanging on. If Sasuke hadn’t spent years living in this sort of scenario, he was sure he would’ve felt more moved than he did. Those creatures could barely be called ‘human’, and being put out of their misery was certainly the best outcome they could hope for.

They stopped by one of the tubes. Sasuke noticed, a little taken by surprise, that inside, a tiny baby was floating. Completely curled in on itself so not even its little face could be seen, it had several wires connected to its small body and what little hair he possessed was of a strange, silvery colour. But it was obvious that he was being well taken care of.

“This is my son,” Orochimaru explained proudly, placing a pale hand on the tube as he looked up at the baby with a smile. “Fabricated with my own genes, exclusively. He was supposed to be my next vessel, but I find that I have become too attached to him. He’s been surprisingly resilient from the start, so I held back on the genetic mutation I wanted so he would survive as a human. I’m definitely getting better at this.”

“He looks strong and healthy,” Sasuke commented, unsure of how to feel about the revelation. He found that he was torn between shock and something akin to fascination, but he let nothing show on his face. It seemed like such an odd miracle; that life had been created so spectacularly through science and Orochimaru’s genes alone. That baby was nothing like the other horrible things resting
inside the other tubes.

“I know,” Orochimaru said, an arrogant glint in his eyes as he looked at Sasuke. “I’ll name it ‘Mizuki’. He’ll be ready to leave the cylinder in a few days, if all goes well. It’s fascinating to see him move. I can’t wait.”

Something attracted Sasuke’s senses unexpectedly. It was some sort of light, he thought, shining and catching his eye coming from his left side. Slowly, he turned his face to see the source and his heart seemed to stop the second his eyes landed upon the figure inside a nearby tube.

He felt his mouth run dry and his mind racing, but for a couple of seconds he was frozen where he stood before quickly making his way towards the tube.

There was a child in there, and not just any ordinary child, no. Since the child was naked - as all specimens were - it was obvious that it was a small boy of about four or five years old from what Sasuke could guess. He was thin and his skin of a pale white so ghostly that one could see the seemingly fragile veins underneath it. His hair, far too long, was of a silvery hue that was almost transparent. It floated around him in an almost enchanting way that made him look like some ethereal creature from another world. His eyes were closed, an oxygen mask covering his mouth, the only indication that he was living, because otherwise he seemed lifeless.

But everything about the boy was familiar to Sasuke. From his nightmares, from his dreams, it was the same nameless, colorless child whose cry and presence had followed him for so many years. Sasuke couldn’t remember the face from his dreams, but he was sure that this creature was a perfect replica.

The boy was as enticing and as terrifying as the one in Sasuke’s dreams.

Sasuke was sure that if the boy’s eyes were open they would show nothing but white.

“Ah, you like that one?” Orochimaru said, joining Sasuke in gazing upon the child. “Poor little thing; it’s an old experiment. Also another vessel wannabe, my most daring experiment, I dare say.”

Orochimaru looked at Sasuke for a moment before proceeding. “He’s four. I wanted to make him so that his genes would be able to use all types of elements and absorb other people’s characteristics, adapting them to his body. Sort of like a chameleon, you see; capable of easily replicating other shinobi’s powers and using them, as well as shifting his appearance.”

Sasuke took a slow breath and hesitantly reached out to touch the thick glass of the tube. He wanted to ask Orochimaru about the boy but his voice was stuck inside his throat, confusion and a slight anger bubbling up inside him.

How had this come to exist?

“He was supposed to be beautiful, but he’s always had this horrible look,” Orochimaru explained, apparently very happy to share information with Sasuke. “He barely reacts to external stimulus even though his data is responding with the numbers I’ve been aiming for.” He knocked on the glass gently, and when the boy shivered slightly, Sasuke felt a chill run down his own spine. “He’s faulty, but he’s been managing to survive my tests, somehow. I’m quite impressed, which is the only reason he’s alive at this point. I thought he might be of use to me. Still, I might dispose of him because he’s been too much of a hassle to keep and not giving me what I want.”

“How did you come up with the idea for this?” Sasuke’s voice left him in a rather cold, harsh whisper. He looked at Orochimaru and something in his face made the man quirk an eyebrow upwards.
“It was an idea of Kabuto’s,” he said vaguely. “A project started by him a few years ago while you were still with us. I found it in an old notebook of his.”

Sasuke looked up at the boy once more. He remembered being a test subject as well. It had been painful sometimes, but a necessary evil. He had been pierced, pinched, drugged, given thousands of blood samples, and been mentally and physically tested beyond human boundaries. But back then, he had embraced it all as a chance to come closer to defeating Itachi and becoming stronger. Maybe Kabuto had, somehow, been able to read his mind and seen his dreams, somehow? Or maybe Sasuke had come upon one of those notebooks of the man and seen this project but had been too high from the drugs to remember it, the information having, somehow, gotten stuck to his mind, emerging in the form of the child that haunted his dreams. Sasuke had no reasonable explanation for it, but he wouldn’t risk showing his weakness by asking anything anymore.

“You look upset, Sasuke-kun.” Orochimaru’s voice had dropped to a soft, curious one, but Sasuke didn’t reply, because at that moment, the child’s eyelids trembled and slowly rose to reveal, as Sasuke had predicted, nothing but white.

For a moment, Sasuke felt his breath stuck in his throat. He wondered if the child could even see. The boy was a vision of horror, so unfitted to such a young age, and such a small, fragile body. Nevertheless, when the boy’s head curved slightly, Sasuke could swear that those white, ghostly eyes now awaken were looking directly at him. Still, the boy’s expression didn’t change at all, like a soulless doll.

Still, the words left his mouth before he could sort his thoughts out.

“I want him,” he said to Orochimaru, his voice coming out firm and steady. “If you’re going to dispose of him, just keep him alive for me for a while longer and I’ll take him.”

Oddly enough, Sasuke was certain of his decision. There was no other way. He had lived with the vision of this child for years, and now here the boy stood, alive and existing and he knew he couldn’t pull away from him. Sasuke was irrationally drawn to the boy, and while he knew he didn’t exactly lead a life that would make it easy to have a child attached to his hip, there was no space for doubt in his mind. This was only the beginning of his own self-forged path, and this child was something he wanted with an overwhelming intensity.

“I’m positively horrified,” Orochimaru said, sounding genuinely surprised. Then, he hummed. “Very well, it makes no difference to me. I can’t guarantee that he’ll survive outside of the lab, though, since he’s never been outside..”

That made things more difficult, Sasuke considered vaguely. Surely the child’s muscles were weak, barely developed, and his immune system was sure to be sensible to external threats. He’d talk things through with Orochimaru later on.

“I’ll take the chance,” Sasuke said, dismissively. Looking at the boy one final time, he forced himself to avert his gaze and look at the man standing beside him. “Orochimaru, the reason I came here is a very particular one. I want every information you have on my brother and the Uchiha.”

“Itachi?” Orochimaru’s eyebrows rose delicately as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Now, Sasuke-kun, that’s already a bit too much, don’t you think? My information on your brother is very valuable to me. Or, well, my information on the Uchiha bloodline.”

“I will personally make copies for you that you can keep, but I need the originals,” Sasuke said. “I don’t care what you do with the information. The Uchiha are dead and the pureblood of my clan will die with me. But surely you have invaluable documents of all kinds about the Uchiha. I know you
stole a lot of scrolls before leaving Konoha for good, and surely you had people who worked for you inside the village and who provided important intel.”

Orochimaru actually chuckled darkly at this. “You think so low of me, yet know me so well,” he replied, shaking his head from side to side. Sasuke could almost swear that there was a slight fondness in those cold, deceiving eyes. “I’m very pleased. That’s why I like you so much.”

“I need everything you have, Orochimaru,” Sasuke repeated, in a tone that left no room for argument. “In return, I’ll give you whatever you want. Except for my body, be it as a vessel or anything else. I will work for you for a while, if you wish.”

The man looked at him from up and down, clearly amused by the offer.

“While I still have interest in your body, you are far too interesting to be gone from this world as Uchiha Sasuke,” Orochimaru said after a while, heaving a small, but entertained sigh. “I can think about a few favors you can do for me, though. The price you’ll have to pay is high, my dear boy. And don’t forget, I’m giving you one of my experiments.”

“I am aware,” Sasuke said, with a small nod of his head. “Business is business.”

Orochimaru shrugged and absent-mindedly looked up at the pale boy inside the tube. “Well, it’ll take a while for me to gather all the information you want since it’s scattered about a few of my hideouts, so if you want to crash here for a while, please, be my guest,” he offered, as politely as ever. “It will come in handy since I can use the help, and I’m sure you and the little monster over here will need to bond, no?”

‘Bond’ wasn’t exactly the right term Sasuke would use, but sticking around for a while would help him understand what the boy was and plan out their future together properly. Hopefully, Sasuke could have Orochimaru take the boy out of the tube so they could work on adapting him to a ‘normal’ life before they had to hit the road.

Sasuke, too, looked up at the boy. Hard as the future might be, he looked forward to it without fear.

000

Refraining from heaving a sigh, Sasuke carefully knelt on the leafy ground and gently put down the small boy he’d been carrying. However, the boy’s pale arms around his neck were thin and feeble but didn’t loosen up. The boy’s face was buried in the curve of his neck and didn’t move, and while Sasuke felt some form of relief that the kid was already trusting him this much, he was pretty drained from the long hours they had been walking already.

“Come on, I need you to let go for a second,” Sasuke said tiredly, his nose against the boy’s hair. “You need to eat, and I need to rest. I won’t go anywhere, I promise.”

Hesitantly, the arms loosened and Sasuke was able to move away slightly as he made sure the child was properly sitting down with his back against the tree trunk. Sasuke looked at the boy’s face and found white orbs staring directly at him. By now, Sasuke knew well that the child was able to see and hear in spite of his ethereal appearance, but he had yet to say a word or even utter a single sound. Orochimaru assured him that the child might speak at some point since his vocal chords seemed to be fully functional, but it could take time.

Sasuke stared at the well defined features, trying not to shiver at how empty and devoid of emotion they were for someone so young. More than anything about the small creature, this was something that he hadn’t gotten used to yet.
They had been travelling for five days since they had left the Orochimaru’s hideout, and already, Sasuke could tell that his impulsiveness in taking the boy in would bring him unnecessary trouble.

The boy had barely walked or even been out of the liquid filled tube in his life, so his body was very fragile and weak, his muscles underdeveloped. They had taken him out of the tube a couple days before Sasuke got back on the road, and Orochimaru had conducted a few final tests and given him a few drugs or whatever it was to improve his immune system. But that was hardly anything efficient enough to magically turn the boy into a normal child.

The boy was living and breathing, but resembled a porcelain doll; frail, lifeless, emotionless, and impassively awkward in everything he did. His gestures were careful and his movements clumsy. He was like an innocent wild creature, with obvious understanding of words and basic concepts of the world around him. But because he had been locked away since his ‘birth’, not knowing anything but Orochimaru’s lab and the consecutive tests and experiments, he didn’t even know how to feel, express himself, or even gesticulate properly. It was as though he barely knew how to respond to external stimulus.

But Sasuke was glad that those empty eyes followed his every move, taking in everything he said and did as if his life depended on it.

Orochimaru had given Sasuke a few liquid vitamins and pills for the journey and told him that he should give the boy a few shots of a brown substance. The boy’s stomach wasn’t used to consuming a lot of solid food, so that was something Sasuke was also struggling with, trying to give him light things to eat in very small portions along with the vitamins until he could eat like a normal kid. Sometimes, the boy would throw up, and at other times, he would hold the food in but would almost choke far too many times and get horrible, silent hiccups.

Still, the boy had survived these five days on the road with only a few vomiting fits and a bit of a fever, so Sasuke considered it a victory. Maybe the gods were protecting them. The fact that the child’s movements were becoming less strained was also great, but it was still too soon to make him stand on his own for too long. Sasuke was grateful that at least the child understood his words and seemed to have a good understanding of a lot of things because he never seemed awed or moved by anything at all. But Sasuke would make sure he would.

Sasuke had vowed that he would take care of the boy and make sure he’d become healthy and strong like he should be if it was the last thing he’d do. He had taken this responsibility upon himself, and he’d carry it through. This boy was his now, his child, and Sasuke would do whatever he had to in order to make sure that he’d survive and be happy like any normal child. His looks would have no influence whatsoever. Besides, Orochimaru had told him that the boy’s genes were supposed to allow him to change his appearance, hair and eye color if he wanted, only this particular feature hadn’t reacted at all, ever, but there was a small chance that it would, eventually. Sasuke could hope, for the boy’s own sake.

It was hard, carrying and nursing a child that barely moved with just one arm, but Sasuke didn’t allow himself to feel frustrated about it. That terrifying looking boy drew him in in ways he couldn’t begin to explain, and somehow, Sasuke desperately wanted to bring him to life and save him from being this inarticulate doll Orochimaru had programmed. It made Sasuke’s heart ache with worry and sorrow that the boy didn’t make a sound nor show emotion. Whether he was hurting, hungry, or upset… Sasuke couldn’t tell and this made him anxious, but he tried to act confident and show himself as a strong and reliable presence for the boy. Apparently he had achieved it already since the child had accepted his fate with Sasuke easily, clinging to him in an almost instinctual hunger for survival, trusting him like any child would trust a parent.
Maybe because he had never known affection or physical touch. Maybe because he had never seen the outside world and it had amazed him. Maybe because he felt that Sasuke worried and tended to his every need immediately. Maybe because he felt like he was not alone in isolation, after all.

This was how Sasuke understood that the boy was, in fact, able to feel in spite of not knowing how to express himself accordingly.

He had accomplished a lot in just five days, so he wouldn’t give up no matter what.

Now they were on their way to the village where he and Naruto had lived those wonderful days that seemed to have occurred many lifetimes ago. It had become, Sasuke’s now constant resting place, and the closest to a ‘home’ he had. He was always received by everyone with joy and treated as one of them. He was sure they’d receive the boy with as much enthusiasm.

If all went well, he could leave the boy with Misato and Mika for a few weeks, only long enough so he could go to Orochimaru’s other hideouts to retrieve the information on Itachi and the Uchiha that awaited him. As soon as he was done, he’d go back and think his and the boy’s life through. Maybe he’d have to talk to Gaara about it, to see if there was any way that he could help.

Silently, Sasuke rummaged through his satchel in search for the vials of vitamins and the syringes for the shots - he always took care of the boy’s needs before his own. Even when it came to sleep, Sasuke would only do so with his arm wrapped around the small creature so he could keep him safe and rouse at the smallest movement.

Blank eyes watched his every move impassively, the boy’s head moving slowly to follow Sasuke’s quick but precise gestures.

“Can you hold out your arm for me?” Sasuke asked, knowing the child would understand him. The boy looked at him and slowly extended his arm along his stretched leg. He pulled his own sleeve up to expose pale skin to allow Sasuke to give him the needed shot. Once Sasuke was done, he gave the boy a bit of vitamin liquid to drink, and thankfully, he didn’t throw up. This was good and made Sasuke feel hopeful.

Sasuke offered him a small, encouraging smile in praise before, a little awkwardly, ruffling the boy’s fluffy, silvery hair that he had cut before the journey. The strands were naturally messy and would always stick in every direction regardless of what Sasuke did. He found it endearing because it reminded him of a certain blond haired idiot.

Putting away the syringe and the pouch with the kid’s medicines, he searched his bag for a small plastic container that had a few berries he had picked up recently. Since he had tried giving them to the boy once and he had managed to eat them, he thought that he could try it now, as well. He searched the child’s features, looking for a sign of emotion, but apart from a tiny tilt of his head to the side, he showed nothing. But, Sasuke was glad to see, the boy stretched out his hand towards him with his palm turned upwards in a silent request.

Without saying a word, Sasuke put three berries in his tiny palm and watched as the child picked up one and brought it to his mouth, chewing slowly. They stared silently at each other, Sasuke torn between horror and fascination as he looked into the eyes that didn’t seem to see him at all. But they did, and barely even blinked, too.

The boy swallowed and put another berry in his mouth.

“That’s good,” Sasuke whispered gently. He wondered what kind of thoughts ran through the boy’s innocent mind, or if he had thoughts about anything at all. “You know, we should give you a name.
Orochimaru didn’t mention you having one.”

Sasuke hadn’t thought about naming the kid before knowing if he’d survive the first couple of days outside. There was no point in getting uselessly attached. But now that things seemed to be looking up, it was definitely time to name the kid.

The boy blinked at him and coughed slightly, but thankfully this wasn’t followed by a fit of vomit. Sasuke only had one more change of clothes for the kid and no river nearby to wash the ones he was wearing if he were to soil himself.

The kid swallowed the second berry and put the third one in his mouth, chewing it with his mouth open and stretching out his hand in request for more. Sasuke didn’t understand the small feeling that seemed to fill his heart, but it was a good one, so he didn’t delve on it.

Sasuke noticed the boy’s cheeks were a bit rosy so he placed the small box of berries down on his thigh and reached out a hand to touch his fingers to the boy’s forehead. He was relieved to find that he had no fever.

“I think the most important part is past us, which was to make sure you survived out here,” Sasuke said, picking up the box of berries and extending it towards the boy, who eyed it before taking another berry and putting it in his mouth. “You’re a tough guy, I can tell. You want to live, don’t you?”

The boy looked up at him before picking up another berry. The only sound he made was the unnecessarily loud one from his chewing. A clumsy trail of saliva flowed down his chin.

“Don’t chew with your mouth open like that,” Sasuke said, frowning a little, even though it didn’t bother him all that much. The kid closed his mouth at once, and his cheeks became slightly pinker. Sasuke almost smiled, but instead gave the container of berries to the child to and searched his bag for a clean tissue, with which he wiped the boy’s mouth. “There.”

He kept watching as the boy ate the rest of the berries, more carefully this time, and with his mouth closed. Sasuke was glad to see he was a fast learner, and most of all, that he respected Sasuke’s rather bossy nature. Not that Sasuke would be anything less since he was the adult in a position to educate a growing child.

“I was thinking about calling you Katsuo,” Sasuke offered. He had been thinking about the name since the previous day and for some reason, this one seemed fitting. “You’re a victor, and will always be one as long as you’re by my side.” They looked at each other for a while before Sasuke proceeded. “Do you like it? We could call you Katsu in abbreviation, it’s cute. If you like it, please nod.”

The child blinked a few times as if thinking about it for a while and then slowly, almost elegantly, nodded. Sasuke couldn’t help but smirk.

“Well, then it’s settled… I’ll be calling you Katsu from now on” he said, with a small, content sigh. “Somehow I’ve known the image of you for a long time. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we were to meet. Maybe I was fated to find you and take you in. I plan to protect you and give you a real life, and one a lot better than the one you’ve had so far, this I can promise you.”

Katsu kept on eating silently, but he seemed to be listening intently to Sasuke’s words, so Sasuke thought it was okay to speak further. “I wasn’t the sort of person who believed in fate, but by now I know enough to know that it’s real. There are things in this world that we can’t run away from no matter what.”
Katsu sneezed unexpectedly - a feeble, adorable sound that had Sasuke’s instincts on alert. At once, he removed the cloak from around his shoulders and wrapped it around Katsu instead. It was a sunny afternoon and not exactly a cold one, but it was still too soon to feel relaxed. He was happy to see that Katsu seemed to snuggle within the large cloak, and even though his features revealed nothing, Sasuke wanted to believe that he had offered some sort of comfort and that the added warmth made him happy.

Using the handkerchief he had wiped the boy’s mouth with, Sasuke cleaned Katsu’s nose and told him to blow in it, which he did. Sasuke was quickly beginning to realize that he really wasn’t carrying around enough things to take care for a child. He couldn’t wait to get back to the village and introduce Katsu to Misato and everyone. They’d help him and would definitely provide Katsu with whatever he needed. That village was the closest to ‘home’ that Sasuke could ever offer him for now, as opposed to Konoha, which was definitely out of the question.

Sasuke had this vision that, someday, Mika and Katsu would play together, even if there was a bit of an age gap between them.

Oddly enough, he had recently been forming small idealistic images of the future, and picturing Katsu’s growth and development seemed to be one of his main focuses. Katsu was only part of the beginning of the dream he had envisioned. Their bond was an ancient one that not even Katsu knew about, but with time, hopefully, he would be able to tell him in a way that he would understand.

*I wonder what Naruto would say…*

There was a desire within Sasuke to write his friend and tell him about Katsuo, the child he had saved from extermination - the sort of family Sasuke had been thinking about building, slowly. Right now, he barely had the means to take care of the kid alone, but he wanted the day to come when he’d have enough power to take in abandoned children and people without a home and form their own home, their own village.

Naruto would be horrified at this point, even though he would, without a doubt, tell Sasuke that he believed in him no matter what.

Sasuke almost smiled. Ever since picking up Katsu, he’d been wondering how this experience would’ve been like if Naruto had been with him.

He wanted Naruto and Katsu to meet. But not yet. It wasn’t the time yet, and Sasuke knew he couldn’t pull Naruto’s attention away from what mattered at this point - his wife and unborn child.

The time for drawing away and doing their own thing, separately, had come, and they both would have to respect it. They would only meet when completely necessary, and they would only write each other when their curiosity (or longing) could no longer be helped.

“You’re going to meet a lot of good people, and be surrounded by nature and kids your age,” Sasuke told Katsu, fondly. “You’ll be playing with them in no time, you’ll see. But even if you never speak or are not like the other kids, that will be alright. You’ll be loved no matter what.”

Katsu would never feel like an outcast, be lonely, or hurt. He’d follow his own path, become what he wanted to become regardless of Sasuke’s own dreams. Sasuke would never burden him if he could help it, and would make sure that he’d create a world Katsu could be happy and free in.

This was Sasuke’s promise to Katsu and himself. For both their sakes.
When Sakura had heard from Kakashi about how Sasuke was on a particular mission to check up on Orochimaru’s current whereabouts, it felt like fate itself had dropped a bag full of luck on her lap.

This particular information had come from Kakashi because she had simply asked about Sasuke and whether the Hokage knew what he was doing. Sakura understood that Kakashi had no intention of sending backup for Sasuke since he clearly neither needed it nor wanted it, not to mention that spying on Orochimaru wasn’t exactly a task that could be performed by just anyone. But she had requested to be part of this mission alongside Sasuke either way, even though she had no interest in it other than having a chance to finally see her former teammate and spend some time with him.

It had been a while since she had left the hospital and her medical training, and this was the excuse she used to convince her former mentor. However, by the way Kakashi’s eyebrows rose showing how unimpressed he felt by her persistence, there was no doubt that he considered her motivations to be rather frivolous. But then again, hadn’t Naruto left with Sasuke for months with barely more than a oral announcement that he was leaving with no predictions of when he’d return? Kakashi owed it to her, too.

She wanted to see Sasuke, and she knew she couldn’t simply leave Konoha and travel the world randomly looking for him without a clue as to where he could be. Also…

While she was sure that Naruto and Sasuke communicated nowadays, she didn’t dare ask her blond friend for help. Naruto would give her the information she needed - considering he had it - but somehow, she knew Naruto would do anything in his power to go with her if it meant they’d get to see Sasuke together, and this was a major ‘no’.

Sakura knew she was thinking about this the wrong way. Naruto loved team 7, and surely, seeing Sasuke was as important to him as the chance of having his former team hanging out together like the good old days was. But Sakura knew that those days were over. She had made sure of it, and so had Naruto and Sasuke when they decided to ‘bond’ on their own and leave everyone else out of the picture. The dynamics of team 7 were ruined, and the past could no longer be replicated. There was too much baggage between the three of them in many ways, and this would hardly ever be fixed. The three of them were far too divided, and while this devastated Sakura, it was also something she had learned to live with.

Pretending that everything was normal and that no offense had been done often did the trick, especially when it came to her and Naruto. She had hurt him by trying to convince him that he had never been in love with her, but he had paid her back in full force by taking Sasuke for himself.

However, she’d rather die than ever address such issues, and she was sure Naruto felt the same way.

So now, on her fifth day on the road, Sakura found herself alone after having left Tea Country without having spotted Sasuke at all. While Kakashi didn’t know the exact location of Orochimaru’s hideout, he had assured her that Sasuke would be there somewhere. The only problem was that Kakashi had also just informed her by letter that Sasuke had already sent in his report and was now back on the move without any indication of where he was headed to. She had been too late.

Sakura was forced to wonder if Kakashi had sent word to Sasuke that she was meeting him. If that had been the case, maybe Sasuke had evaded her on purpose? Or maybe Kakashi hadn’t said a thing to him and circumstances just made it the way it was, and in the end, the Hokage had merely indulged her whim knowing she’d be standing on a dead end at some point?

Either way, she was angry. Kakashi wanted her to head back to Konoha since the mission was already over, but she felt as frustrated as she felt helpless. She had not travelled alone for a whole week for nothing.
Standing in the middle of a street market in a crowded village, Sakura clutched Kakashi’s letter in her hand, not knowing what to do, but also knowing that she couldn’t give up now of all times. She had come to find Sasuke and fix things between them, and she couldn’t just give up and go back. Not this time. She had to be the strong one. She would put her foot down once and for all and make herself heard.

The morning was a bit chilly, so she bit on her lower lip hard and wrapped her cloak tighter around herself so it would cover her chest area. She had no idea how she could even begin to look for Sasuke, but she guessed that she could ask around in the most obvious places. There was a high chance that he’d have stopped by this village to buy travel supplies or something, and someone like him would certainly not go unnoticed, least of all by women. The thought made Sakura feel even worse.

*I’m so unlucky...*

Walking through the crowded market, Sakura couldn’t help but feel horribly depressed. So much had changed since the war and Sasuke’s ‘return’, and yet, while it had seemed like she had accomplished so much with him, she hadn’t moved at all from where she had stood at the very beginning.

By getting Hinata and Naruto together, she had somehow managed to convince Sasuke to give her a chance. But not only was this useless in keeping him around, he hadn’t warmed up to her at all, regardless of how much time they spent together when he was in Konoha. He was hard to talk to, uttering barely more than a few words and not speaking about himself at all. Sasuke always looked either stoic or just plain nonchalant, as if he was merely in her company to be polite. Physical proximity was almost impossible to achieve, and when she had, finally, managed to kiss him - the sort of passionate kiss she had yearned for her whole life - he had kissed back, but hadn’t enjoyed it. That had been a hard blow to take.

It had been a good kiss as far as Sakura could tell, but what she had thought to be a wonderful memory had turned to ash with the knowledge that the man she loved hadn’t enjoyed it at all.

Her first kiss. Their first kiss. Shattered and turned into a horrible memory. She was embarrassed beyond words.

Sakura understood that Sasuke was a man different from the others. There were many things about him she didn’t know, but she knew enough to know that the person he valued more than anything or anyone else in this world was none other than Naruto. The things they had experienced during their journey together, what they had done… these were things she didn’t want to know about, but understood that those same experiences had bonded them together in ways no-one would ever be able to reverse.

But Naruto had returned to Hinata’s arms, ever with his dream of becoming Hokage, and Sasuke was still by himself. No matter how they felt for each other, they had chosen different paths, away from each other. If Naruto had been able to give up on the man he had fought for with his own life and body, yet had moved on, Sasuke would, too. Sakura just needed to find a way to fit into his life somehow and give him something he wouldn’t have anywhere else. She’d have to prove herself worthy and gain his trust, and she was willing to do whatever it took. But she couldn’t keep letting things go. *Naruto* hadn’t.

Which was why she couldn’t return to Konoha yet, not before she spoke to him, expressed her feelings properly, and made him understand that she wanted to be there for him in any way possible.

She felt like they didn’t understand each other at all, but they should. They had to.
Lost in her own thoughts, Sakura was so distracted that she found herself colliding with something solid. She noticed it was someone’s back, so she took a step back, a little startled.

“I’m really sorry!” she apologised, ready to bow down. When the person turned around to face her and she met a familiar face that took her completely by surprise. “You!”

A flash of bright red hair made her blink a bit since she wasn’t sure her eyes were seeing right, but there was no mistaking it. The eyes behind red rimmed glasses staring back seemed just as surprised.

“Well, I’ll be damned…” the woman in front of Sakura muttered, glancing at her suspiciously up and down.

“It’s been a while… Karin-san, right?” Sakura said, amazed by this unexpected turn of events. “I never thought we’d meet again. You escaped from Konoha prison!”

Karin, Sakura noticed, had grown up a bit and become… well, a very attractive woman. She had the sort of curvy, fit body every woman would want to have, and she showed it off proudly and confidently in her shorts and tight fitting shirt. She had also been in love with Sasuke and been part of his team for a while. She was the kind of girl every man would drool for, kind of like Hinata, and back then, Sakura had wondered if Sasuke had felt any sort of attraction towards her, not only physically, but also intellectually since Karin held herself in such an imposing, almost threatening way that was definitely alluring. Sakura wondered if, in any way, Sasuke enjoyed this sort of view now that he was older.

But Sasuke didn’t feel attraction easily, this was something Sakura now knew. Either way, from a woman’s perspective, she felt a bit jealous of Karin.

“Haruno Sakura, wasn’t it?” Karin mumbled, with a small frown. “Are you on a mission? Did you come to arrest me now of all times?”

Sakura could tell Karin’s tone was sarcastic, but also a bit condescending. It sort of ticked her off the wrong way, but she managed a small awkward laugh all the same.

“No, don’t worry! I’m actually here by myself, and not on a mission of any kind,” she said truthfully, since, theoretically, her ‘mission’ (that she never got to participate in) was over.

“Oh.” Karin threw her another unimpressed look before raising her hand in a parting gesture. “Well, then, it was nice seeing you Sakura. Goodbye.”

Sakura was a bit taken off guard as Karin promptly spun on her heels and turned her back on her, intent on walking away. Torn between anger and anticipation, Sakura could only call out to her. After all, Karin could be of help in a time of need and it was worth a shot.

“Wait up, I need to ask you something!” Sakura called out, loud enough to make the other woman look over her shoulder. “Is Sasuke-kun with you by chance?”

Karin’s eyes seemed to darken at that, but her eyebrows rose.

“Sasuke?” She asked, slightly surprised. “Why should I tell you?”

“I need to speak to him,” Sakura informed, in a pleading way, hoping that Karin would somehow empathise. Sasuke’s name didn’t seem as foreign to Karin as Sakura had hoped, so it was definitely a sign that Karin still kept in touch with him. This wasn’t exactly good news, but she couldn’t let her jealousy get in the way of her goals.
“That’s what they all say.” Karin’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not going to randomly give you information about him, sorry.”

She turned her face away from Sakura, and this time, she truly started to walk away. But her words made Sakura sure that Karin knew something and could be a valuable help. There was hope at the end of the tunnel, and finding Sasuke could be closer than anticipated.

“Why not?” Sakura asked, running after her at once, with a bit of difficulty since there was so much people around her. “I’m his girlfriend and his teammate! I need to talk to him! I’ve been searching for him for days!”

“Girlfriend, you say?” Karin said, with an almost ironic voice. Sakura managed to fall into step beside her. Karin looked at her, and this time a small smile curved her lips. It wasn’t one Sakura enjoyed; it spoke of Karin knowing things Sakura was utterly naive about, and she hated it. “That’s rich! Well, if you’re his girlfriend, shouldn’t you know his whereabouts better than anyone else?”

The fact that Karin was also smart and perceptive annoyed Sakura as well. But she merely clenched her teeth.

“I… it’s complicated,” she said calmly. Karin laughed, a bit maliciously.

“I’m sure it is.”

“Please, Karin-san…” Sakura stopped in her tracks and grabbed Karin’s arm, stopping her from walking any further. Karin seemed displeased by the random touch but didn’t pull away. “I just want to talk to him. I haven’t seen him in almost a year, I don’t know what’s going through his mind. He didn’t even go to his best friend’s wedding, I just…”

“You’re awfully naïve for a kunoichi.” The snappish way Karin spoke made Sakura’s eyes widen. “You came out here just to look for him all by yourself without any leads and without him knowing? Give me a break!”

“Oh, so I asked the Hokage to be on a mission with Sasuke-kun, but I couldn’t find him and now the mission is complete, but I still want to find him because I have to see him, I just have to! He’s my boyfriend and things are odd between us and I just…” Sakura blurted out, her cheeks catching fire in embarrassment. “I need to get close to him and fix things between us. I know he was somewhere around here, so please…”

Karin simply looked at her without reacting for a few seconds. There was nothing but a slight pity in her eyes mixed up with annoyance. Sakura had no idea what was going through Karin’s mind or what she thought of her, but she knew that Karin owed her for saving her life back when Sasuke had stabbed her. Karin, as a shinobi, wouldn’t have forgotten, and Sakura knew it. Even if she did, Sakura would make sure to remind her of it. She’d do what she had to in order to find Sasuke.

“Well, I know where he is,” Karin said after a while, heaving a resigned sigh. She offered Sakura an odd look, one Sakura didn’t understand at all. “In fact I was on my way to meet him, there’s something I need to talk to him about, too. I’m travelling, and you can come with me if you want, but if you try to do anything to harm me, or Sasuke, or the place we’re going to, I won’t be responsible for myself.”

Letting out a gasp of sudden excitement and relief, Sakura released Karin’s arm and bowed down a bit. She couldn’t believe how easy that had been. Luck was with her after all!

“I understand!” She nodded vigorously while flashing Karin a genuinely wide smile. She couldn’t
believe that she’d be seeing Sasuke soon. “Thank you so much!”

“Don’t thank me,” Karin said, with an ominous tone. “You’ll regret having come on this journey for him.”

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

Sooooo, can you guys guess what’s coming? Surely you can!

I’m sorry for a mostly boring chapter, but it had to be done. I got a little too excited about Katsuo, and even so, I tried to not waste too much time on him for the time being. How did you guys like him? Are you excited to see what I’ll do with him?

By the way, ‘Katsu’ means ‘victory’ and ‘o’ means ‘hero/manly’. Google information, don’t kill me if it’s incorrect.

Anyway, I’m sort of feeling hesitant about the direction of the fic at this point because of this new ‘Boruto’ manga. I’m thinking that there will probably be a time when this fic WILL take its own course seperated from canon if ‘Boruto’ gets too sidetracked from my own vision. We’ll see.

BTW, I’m making an ‘official’ *cough* ‘From Which We’ll Rise’ playlist! If you have a song that reminds you of the fic, please let me know and I’ll add it to the playlist and post it as soon as it’s completeled :)

Anyway, thank you for reading, and I hope you guys are still looking forward to the next chapter! Sakura and Karin come face to face with Sasuke and… well, you’ll have to wait and see ;)

Lots of love, and until next time!
Another booooring chapter! Brace yourselves, nothing good is coming. Due to a few complications, this is semi-betaed, but I think it’s presentable enough? ;) Anyway… enjoy? Don’t forget to read the endnotes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We’ll Rise

Part XVI: Never as Planned

‘Naruto,

How are you, dumbass? It’s been a while, so I thought I’d drop you a note so you wouldn’t freak out and start randomly sending frogs my way with demanding letters. Everything’s fine, so don’t worry about me.

I finished my most recent mission and have already sent my report to Kakashi. I managed to convince Orochimaru to provide me with all the information he has on Itachi and the Uchiha, the only catch is, I’ll have to visit several hideouts to get a hold of the scrolls and run a few errands for him. Still, I’m getting closer to fulfilling my dream of cleansing Itachi’s name and that fills me with hope. I try not to be too optimistic, though. It’s Orochimaru we’re talking about, so surely I’ll find some trouble at some point.

My hands have been very busy lately. This being said, I won’t be returning to Konoha for a long while.

I can tell you’re pouting already. It’s no use getting mad, or sad, idiot. You have more important things to concern yourself with.

Nevertheless, you can always contact me if you need anything.

Take care of yourself. You’re going to be a father soon. Don’t forget your priorities.

I’ll see you soon,

Sasuke.’

Chewing on his lower lip, Naruto leaned his back against the wall of that deserted alley, blue eyes roaming a little slower this time over the piece of paper in his hands and re-reading the small letter. For the next couple of minutes, he did so several times as the lively sounds of the main street on his left surrounded him on that grey afternoon.

The more times he read those simple words, the more Naruto found himself shifting uncomfortably
because of the growing heat in his body. He didn’t know what it was that caused it - if it was the fact that he could clearly listen to Sasuke’s voice, or the missing lines Naruto couldn’t find written, but could perceive well enough.

Sasuke didn’t write often. Maybe that was why Naruto longed for his letters so much. Dry and with carefully chosen words, they screamed of ‘Sasuke’, so Naruto couldn’t help but savor the small moment of intimacy with his best friend, even if they were away from each other.

It was but a piece of paper with but a few words written on it. However, for Naruto, it carried Sasuke’s essence, and he’d indulge in it by absorbing it as much as he could.

Sasuke had touched it. Maybe he had hesitated (like Naruto often did) before writing. Maybe he had kept it with himself for a few days before finally deciding to send it.

Had Sasuke felt that same inexplicable longing, that same need to reach out to Naruto in some way? Was he thinking about him? Missing him now that he was one step closer to reaching one of his goals?

Or maybe he just wanted to soothe Naruto’s spirit?

‘I can tell you’re pouting already. It’s no use getting mad, or sad, idiot.’

Naruto couldn’t help but smile dejectedly.

He does know me better than I know myself.

This was why Naruto always read Sasuke’s letters alone and never in the presence of others - he couldn’t keep his emotions in check, and never before had this been an issue, but now it was. It wasn’t as if the contents of those letters would ever have anything but simple news of Sasuke’s whereabouts (when they did), so that wasn’t a problem.

It was just that everything about Naruto got out of control, and he wasn’t exactly a ‘pro’ at dealing with it yet. But he knew he would have to become one, at some point.

Naruto thought about Sasuke a lot. Whether he felt happy, lonely, or simply nostalgic, Sasuke was always in the back of his mind, several times a day in fact. He hoped Sasuke was thinking of him, too. He hoped Sasuke was thinking of him right now.

Just thinking about it made Naruto’s cheeks flare up. He wondered if taking a whiff of the paper would turn him into a creep.

Of course it would. He was supposed to be a responsible adult; doing such a thing would be unfitting. He wasn’t supposed to be this pathetic.

When have I become this sort of pitiful person for you, heh?

It was weird though - it didn’t upset him as much as it probably should. Heaving a sigh, Naruto pressed the letter to his chest and closed his eyes.

He just… couldn’t stop these feelings. He couldn’t help desiring Sasuke’s presence, his touch, and the simple and comforting reality of him, standing there, where Naruto could easily reach out and touch him.

Taking a deep breath for extra courage, Naruto forced himself to fold the letter neatly and shove it inside the pocket of his green vest so as to not give in to the temptation of staring at Sasuke’s rough
but clear calligraphy again, even though he had already memorized every line.

He did feel lighter, and somehow more relieved to know that Sasuke was alright and that he wasn’t slipping away no matter how much time passed without them speaking to each other. But the feeling of impatience and lingering despair would never leave, and he didn’t like the persistent sensation that there was something Sasuke had wanted to tell him in that letter that he hadn’t. But Naruto was sure he would, eventually.

In times like these, Naruto’s memories became frighteningly vivid and it burned him. His heart ached with happiness and a hunger for the close past he couldn’t seem to let go of. And gods, did he try. Every single day. He tried so hard, and in a way, he was successful. He could live life as a married man with a woman he deeply cared for - the one who had given him a family. As Sasuke had told him, this was what he should think about, so he clung to these thoughts, finding comfort in them and reminding himself of how lucky he was. He worked hard every day just so he could mature, become more knowledgeable, and reach his goals faster - so he and Sasuke could finally find a way to work together on good terms.

But his goals weren’t coming fast enough, and more often than not, it was devastatingly frustrating.

With a groan, he buried his face in one hand and rubbed at it viciously. It wasn’t fair. Why had Sakura sneaked her way into a mission beside Sasuke without telling Naruto? Why? Why did she always take action by herself and not let him in? Why didn’t she understand that team 7 should find their old balance back rather than the three them drifting apart like this?

Sakura had changed. First, it had been that manipulation to get him and Hinata together, then that weird ‘relationship’ with Sasuke, and now…

Now she barely even spoke to Naruto, and truth be told, he had a hard time speaking to her, too. There was a lot of hurt involved still, from her having belittled his feelings back then, and consequently, now in regards of Sasuke, as well. He didn’t even know why it upset him so much that she was so adamantly trying to have him, but it did. It offended him on both his and Sasuke’s behalf.

He loved Sasuke. For a long time he had thought she had understood it, even if, back then, Naruto himself hadn’t understood the nature of those feelings. But it wasn’t as if they had changed or lessened - they had simply mutated in some ways, but the essence was still the same.

Sasuke loved him. Sakura knew little about their past, but with everything they had gone through during the war, and with things as they were now… she was supposed to understand, but either she didn’t, or she did but chose to ignore it.

Naruto didn’t like to think that she was that much of a selfish person, so he preferred to think that her own love for Sasuke simply made her very naïve and blind.

He didn’t understand why she couldn’t just… let Sasuke be and simply accept him as a friend - simply accept team 7 as a family. Naruto was sure she’d get more chances of getting close to Sasuke if only she’d realize this.

But as it was… they only met once in awhile and made small, forced talk. Sometimes, they’d get Sai and have dinner. Sometimes, Ino would join. Sometimes, Hinata was there, too. Sometimes, it felt like everything could be almost perfect as long as Sakura and Naruto weren’t alone together. And knowing this was just sad. It saddened him so much.

He still loved her, even though these feelings were different now. She was a precious teammate and
a precious friend. She was the first person he had loved. They had trusted and protected each other so many times. They had been family.

And yet, none of this seemed to matter when faced with her stubbornness, and Naruto could only wonder if there would come a day when they’d stop relating to each other at all. It sure seemed this way.

It was painful to think about. However…

There was still Sasuke. And, somehow, as long as there was Sasuke, everything else seemed bearable. Maybe someday things could get better if only…

If only Sasuke came home, to where Naruto was. If only Naruto could turn Konoha into a place Sasuke could call home…

Maybe… just maybe things could be a little bit like they were supposed to be. Now that he thought about it, wasn’t this what Sakura was thinking, too?

Things would never be that way. Because Naruto was married and would become a father soon. Because Sasuke would never come to this ‘home’, because Naruto could no longer give it to him.

Because they had different mindsets.

Because they were in love with each other.

Because they’d always want to be together.

All the dreams Naruto once had for team 7… could they really ever come true now that this sort of love existed? Now that, in a way, it would always be them against the world, alone with their shared feelings?

Such a simple way of living no longer suited them and it never would.

Naruto’s muscles tensed instinctively. He wanted to see Sasuke so badly he could barely breathe, and yet, all he had was a fucking letter. One would think that this sort of yearning would’ve subsided by now, but it was still as persistent as ever.

He groaned softly and checked his watch. He should be going home soon, Hinata was waiting for him. But…

Fanning himself with a hand, he swallowed hard.

He was still pining for all the things that letter had awakened within him. Life really wasn’t fair sometimes, even though Naruto knew this train of thought was nothing but selfish when, really, he had everything a man could possibly want.

He just hoped Sasuke was doing as great as he said.

000

The thought of dropping Katsuo off at the small village he so cherished was harder than Sasuke had anticipated. It wasn’t that he was hesitating, or even fearing that the villagers wouldn’t take him in, but rather it was a feeling inside him that made an overly familiar and painful emotion sting - the longing and sadness that came with the simple act of parting ways. It was a feeling Sasuke hadn’t expected to feel this early in his relationship with the boy.
While the village was a mere country away from Tea Country, with Katsuo as his companion, it had taken considerably longer when compared to when Sasuke had travelled alone. Not only was there no way he could use shinobi speed, carrying such a fragile being, but also they had to make several stops to rest, eat, and take care of other necessities. These far too many indulgences weren’t something Sasuke would’ve wasted time on if Katsuo wasn’t with him, but he understood the absolute need for them for the boy’s sake.

Still, tiring and frankly frustrating as it was, those seemingly endless days had made for a challenging journey and a real trial for Sasuke’s patience.

However, Sasuke soon realized that Katsu’s presence in his life was certainly meant to teach him many, many things and, once more, help him grown to a whole different level.

From feeding Katsuo to bathing him, to cleaning up after him. From knowing how to separate being kind from being demanding and authoritative. From helping him in his fragile state to encourage and teach him to do things by himself and strengthening his arms and legs.

From formerly thinking about himself first, to presently thinking about Katsu’s needs first and foremost.

Katsuo was only a child, but a child who needed to progress so he could be at the same level as other children his age; so he could learn how to walk, run, talk, and express himself like other children did. So he could eventually be healthy and try to lead a normal life.

Sasuke didn’t know what it was about Katsuo, but all these things, tiresome as they were, were also things that made him feel excited to be in the child’s presence and to watch over him.

Sasuke was quickly learning how to read the tiny indications of little Katsuo’s flickering moods and emotions. He understood that Katsu’s vacant eyes watched his every move, taking everything in, so Sasuke was careful in everything he did. Sometimes (embarrassing as it was), he tried to explain to Katsu the difference between facial expressions according to inner emotions - this had him feeling stupid because he had to make faces at the little guy as an example. Either way, it was hard for the child to associate the things Sasuke tried to show him, but Katsu did make the effort to try and imitate him with awkward ticks of his mouth, eyes, and cheeks that had Sasuke torn between feeling, horrified, amused, or simply sorry for him. But seeing him make genuine efforts to walk faster, to make faces and to communicate with Sasuke as he knew how to considering his young age and physical weakness, made Sasuke’s heart swell with something very similar to happiness.

It was weird how, in such a short time, Katsu had become the center of his thoughts and a priority in his life. It was like his mere existence had come as a unwavering force to ground Sasuke like no other before. It was a sense of self-awareness and selflessness that the man wasn’t used to at all. It was like… caring for Naruto but in a whole different way. He couldn’t afford to be selfish with Katsuo because that small individual depended on him fully to live and develop.

It was unfortunate that Katsu had to show up in his life at such a complicated moment, when he finally had emotional stability to pursue his goals the way he wanted to without regrets or second thoughts, and the chance to start getting things in motion. He had finally learned how to fully separate his previous life with Naruto from his life as an individual, and more than ever, since their paths had been divided so forcefully, now he had the clarity to move forward without shackles or hesitation. He did what he wanted to do, and moved towards where his heart led him to.

Right now, they had their own goals. Once Naruto became Hokage, things would change, Sasuke knew, but that would be something he’d deal with once the time came. He’d definitely work with his best friend as well as he could, yet, for sure, he had no intention of living a life different from the one
he had now. He hoped Naruto was already preparing himself for that.

Sasuke didn’t want Katsu to ever return to anything related to Orochimaru - he didn’t want him to even step foot inside any of his hideouts unless he absolutely had to for health reasons that only Orochimaru might be able to solve. He certainly hoped it would never be necessary and that was why he would try to expand his medical knowledge as soon as he could.

Either way… Sasuke couldn’t keep Katsu travelling with him at this particular stage. He needed to run his errands for Orochimaru and get those scrolls about the Uchiha and Itachi. This couldn’t be helped.

The boy needed a steady home, people to interact with, healthy meals, and a comfortable bed. Misato’s village wasn’t exactly overflowing with richness, but right now, it was better than what Sasuke himself could provide (not to mention a million times better than being in a tube) and for sure, Katsuo would be welcomed and well taken care of in his absence.

However…

There was no doubt in Sasuke’s mind that he’d be in a state of anxiety when away from the child, without being able to see him and make sure he was alright. More than anything, Sasuke had the absurd thought that Katsuo might, at some point, evolve spectacularly, and he might not be there to see it happening. Because he wanted to be there for Katsu, wanted to be his strength and the hand behind his back.

Taking Katsu in had probably been one of the craziest things he had ever done. Every single day he asked himself what the actual fuck had he been thinking and - he hadn’t - and how the hell he was supposed to pull this off successfully.

But… he didn’t regret it at all. There was no bitterness to his thoughts, no frustration at himself. No matter what, whenever his eyes landed upon the small, quiet boy, only an odd sense of peace filled him, and a strong urge to move forward, fast. When Katsu’s tiny arms trustingly wrapped around his neck, when he pulled at his sleeve for attention, when those blank eyes followed him unwaveringly…

Sasuke knew he had made the right choice.

He often wondered if these silly, completely plain wishes were things parents thought of and felt. They made him feel stupid and childish but…

In the end, it really wasn’t so bad. Surely, this was how it was supposed to be.

000

It had been a while since Sasuke had felt as mortified as he did now - mortified and absolutely pissed off out of his mind.

Quickly, he grabbed for Katsuo’s wrist and pulled him towards the nearest bush to hide before putting a knee to the ground and placing a hand over the boy’s head so he’d duck. He didn’t need to tell the child to be quiet since he barely made a sound anyway, but he still made a gesture for him to be still, to which the boy merely nodded.

Far, but not too far from them, Sasuke had seen two familiar figures calmly walking side by side - Karin and Sakura - and his brain had instantly reacted. He was sure they were headed for the village since they were clearly heading towards it and Karin already knew of it. The questions were, why would Karin go there without him, and why was Sakura with her? They were obviously travelling
together, and there was no doubt that they were the least likely pair of travellers he’d ever picture.

Kakashi had sent him a message about Sakura’s persistence about helping with the mission about Orochimaru, but Sasuke had already sent in his report and all the information the Hokage had requested, so why exactly was Sakura still there and not already back in Konoha?

And why was she with Karin? What was Karin doing, heading towards the village? Had they met by chance?

Why were they together?

He couldn’t fucking believe it. What the hell was happening?

It wasn’t like Sasuke had any sort of issues because those two were supposedly in love with him and were now being travelling partners for whatever reason. Sakura had nothing to do with Taka or with whatever Sasuke had done with them, and Karin wasn’t the sort of person to tell anyone about a single thing. For all Sasuke knew, not even Suigetsu knew about those days Sasuke had spent with Karin and Juugo and never would. These things didn’t worry him at all.

But he had Katsuo now, and while he wasn’t embarrassed of him nor was he being exactly secretive about him, things were still too new and he didn’t want the whole fucking world to know that Uchiha Sasuke had adopted a scientific experiment of Orochimaru’s that might be seen as a threat.

Plus… he didn’t want Sakura to know about that village. That place was his sanctuary, and if all went well, it would be Katsuo’s steady home. That had been the place where he and Naruto had been the happiest during their journey, where they had experienced so many things together, and that had been the place where they had first been genuinely intimate. Sakura wouldn’t understand. Sakura would ruin its meaning if she knew about that place.

In a way, Sasuke felt guilty for thinking about things this way but… he couldn’t help but be possessive of that place. Taka had been one thing. But Sakura belonged to Konoha, and he wanted nothing to link that place to Konoha.

Except for Naruto, but the village had held the same meaning to him, and Sasuke knew that the blond could be as selfish and possessive as he himself was when it came to things that were theirs.

Now, Sasuke was just pissed, and mostly at Karin. Of course, he hadn’t specifically told her to not take people there, but he figured she wouldn’t. It seemed that he had been wrong. Either that or Karin really needed to find him for some reason he didn’t particularly care for and Sakura had convinced her to tag along, somehow. All case scenarios that flashed through his mind seemed unlikely, though. Nothing made sense.

Regardless, he had to do something before Karin reached the village with Sakura.

“Damn it…” he hissed under his breath, while rummaging through his bag and taking out a scroll, from which he ripped a piece off. He then searched for his pencil, with Katsuo’s eyes following his every movement, and quickly scribbled a few words in it, using his knee for support. He peeked out from under the bushes to see if the girls were at a safe distance before biting down hard on his thumb until it drew blood and slamming his hand on the ground. A young hawk appeared from a cloud of smoke. With quick fingers, Sasuke managed to fold the bit of scroll and gave it to the hawk, uttering a few words to it before seeing it fly away. It wouldn’t go far, though.

‘Don’t take her there. Set camp now and I’ll meet you shortly’. That’s what he had written and sent to Karin, knowing that she’d understand the message and do as he said, unless Sakura posed some
problems. But Sasuke trusted that Karin would be able to handle at least this.

Fuming, and filled with a strong sense of uneasiness, he waited until he was sure it was safe to grab his things and picked Katsu up by the waist. The child automatically put his thin arms around his neck and held tight as he buried his face in the crook of Sasuke’s neck, as if somehow having sensed Sasuke’s distress and was trying to offer some kind of comfort. Either that or he was preparing himself for the uncomfortable travel he knew was coming.

Sasuke hated that he’d have to run to get to the village now. Katsu didn’t deal well with quick paces yet, not even while being carried by Sasuke. Having Sasuke running and jumping would take its toll on the child, not only on his stomach but also on his fragile muscles - he’d be exhausted regardless of how quickly Sasuke managed to get them home. He only prayed that Katsu wouldn’t throw up on him. But he had to get there as fast as possible so he could solve this mess quickly.

Placing a small kiss at the top of Katsu’s head in silent reassurance, Sasuke took a deep breath and sprang off; his surprisingly agile feet barely making a sound.

He had a bad feeling about this.

---

Sasuke had been close, Sakura had known it. When Karin had received a message and suddenly decided to set camp without another explanation, Sakura understood that Sasuke had been around, seen them, but prevented them from heading to wherever it was that Karin had first been leading them to.

Sakura knew nothing of this foreign land, or the paths they were taking, even though it was right next to Fire Country. She had no idea if one of Orochimaru’s hideouts was nearby or if they were just headed to someplace where Karin knew Sasuke used to stick around more often than not. Either way, she was upset for more than just these reasons.

Karin was tight-lipped and barely spoke of things that could be considered relevant. She didn’t offer Sakura any sort of important details during their travel, neither did she answer Sakura’s questions. It was frustrating beyond belief, but it wasn’t as though she could simply make demands considering Karin was doing her a favor.

Still, as formal and stiff as their small journey together was, there were things Sakura understood about Karin that, no matter how much the young woman tried to hide, were impossible to let go. She understood why Karin herself was on her way to meet Sasuke, and that was essentially the one thing she needed to know, and probably the one thing she could’ve done without knowing.

“Karin-san, you’re pregnant, aren’t you?”

It wasn’t as though Sakura wanted to approach the subject. As a medic, she was about 100% sure that she was pregnant, since Karin’s symptoms were the most obvious of her condition (even though she tried to hide them), but somehow, while she wanted to believe that maybe the child was someone else’s, a gut feeling told her that it was just futile and selfish wishful thinking. She had known Karin to be in love with Sasuke, had known that they had been a team for a while, but had no idea to the extent of their bond or what sort of relationship they had right now.

Still… she could be wrong… right? Not everything was lost. Sakura was there with a purpose and she’d fulfill it. Maybe she was wrong and being pessimistic.

It was nighttime and the two girls were sitting on thick logs in front of a lively bonfire across from
each other. Sakura was having a hard time dealing with the constant silence and seeing Karin looking pale and struggling to eat the simple broth in her metallic mug was making her very angry.

Supposedly they were waiting for Sasuke to come, that much Karin had let slip. But once he did, what was going to happen? Was this Karin’s business with him?

Sakura didn’t know what she was supposed to do if that was the case. She feared what kind of relationship those two might have. Which was why she wanted to get it out there before it even had time to slap her in the face with Sasuke present.

At Sakura’s firm question, though, Karin didn’t flinch, merely looking up from across the fire at her with dead serious eyes. “I should’ve known you’d notice,” she said blandly. “You’re a medic after all.”

“How…?” Sakura swallowed hard, finding it difficult to voice the words, but forced herself to straighten up her back and remain steady. “Is the baby Sasuke-kun’s?”

Karin didn’t seem surprised by the assumption either, and for some reason, this only made Sakura feel even more upset.

“It’s not what you think,” Karin said. Her not denying it gave Sakura the answer. “It’s not like Sasuke and I have that kind of relationship. After all, aren’t you his ‘girlfriend’? He can’t possibly have two, right?”

Sakura didn’t let the sarcastic comment get to her. “Then what kind of relationship is it?” She pressed on, knowing she sounded childish and a little rude, but unable to help it after the confirmation. “Because you’re pregnant. Two people need to have sex for that, so something must’ve happened.”

Karin actually had the nerve to sigh and look annoyed. “Listen here, pinky,” she snapped, pushing her glasses more up the ridge of her nose. “What, exactly, does this have to do with you? You claim that you’re Sasuke’s girlfriend so easily, but really, are you that self-centered not to understand the type of person he is? Does this bruise your ego in any way? Do you feel cheated on?”

A hand coming to her chest, Sakura let out a small gasp at the straightforwardness being thrown her way. The words actually made her blush in self-anger. She knew she had no right to feel cheated on when Sasuke had told her things as they were, but she had insisted on waiting. She wasn’t stupid, she understood that Sasuke didn’t want a commitment to her because he had already stupidly devoted himself to other… causes. And to another certain someone else. Either way, she didn’t know if Sasuke was even capable of easily falling into that sort of relationship with other people. After all, he had ‘tried’ with her, but they never got very far.

But… had he been able to go that far with others who weren’t that person? Was Karin just an exception, or did Sasuke find it easy to find occasional lovers?

She had no right to feel this way, but she did and that was it. Because she couldn’t stand it. She couldn’t stand the thought that everyone else seemed to be able to reach Sasuke but her. She couldn’t stand that he would let them in but not her.

Why? Why were they the exception? Why was she different? What was she doing wrong?

She knew it was easy for people to feel enraptured by Sasuke. Falling in love with him, being fascinated by him was easy. Loving him was something she was sure wasn’t exclusive to her, nor Naruto. For some reason, Sasuke had been able to have people faithful to him.

Being loved by him, though, that was hard.
She loved him. Others loved him, too. She expressed it. Others did, too, didn’t they? Hadn’t Naruto’s expression of love for him been so completely over the top, so mindless and desperate all the time, so persistent?

So… why was she any different? How was she different from Naruto, or these people that surrounded Sasuke and that she knew nothing about?

Sakura felt jealous, so jealous she could barely contain herself. She wanted to cry all of a sudden, out of frustration and devastation and fury, but the feelings were thankfully too overwhelming for her to express the weakness.

“So Sasuke is not the kind of person you think he is,” Karin proceeded, irritably and mercilessly, as if reading Sakura’s mind. “He’s no-one’s ‘boyfriend’ and he doesn’t judge you by normal standards; he doesn’t think like people usually do. You’re an idiot in believing that you’ll ever be a girlfriend to him, or that someone will ever be that to him. He already has his own goals and certain people whom he prioritizes above everyone else. Can you really tell me that you don’t know this already?”

Ah… so Karin knew about Naruto, too? How hilarious.

Sakura’s lack of response didn’t stop Karin from pressing on. “Whatever he does with other people, whatever detours he takes… those are just bumps in the road for him.” She hesitated for a moment. “This pregnancy is no different. I am aware of that. I was aware back then when stuff happened between us, too. It wasn’t about me and Sasuke at all, it wasn’t just us; it was about him. There is no ‘Sasuke and me’.”

It made no sense. Sakura couldn’t understand what Karin was telling her at all, yet she didn’t want to. It seemed preposterous. Regardless of what had happened, why or how, truth was, it had. And now Karin was pregnant. It didn’t matter Sasuke’s feelings, or Karin’s apparently cold and sort of dismissive evaluation of the situation she was in - facts didn’t change.

“I don’t understand your way of thinking at all,” Sakura hissed, clenching her fists over her lap and lowering her head. “How can you simply dismiss such a thing? How can you feel like something like this is just… acceptable? That you’d do those sorts of things with him and not be with him as a lover? Aren’t you in love with him? Why don’t you just… try?”

Karin didn’t say anything, so Sakura was positive that she’d get no more answers. However, after a while, her companion heaved a tired sigh.

“I haven’t known Sasuke for as long as you have,” she said, causing Sakura to raise her head to look up at her to see her staring at the fire, the flickering flames reflecting on her glasses. “But we, along with the rest of our team, have shared many experiences that forced us to trust each other with our lives. It’s not like I, or anyone from Taka, has a family, or something to look up to, really. We live one day at the time and hope we can survive in the jungle for another day.”

Karin placed her metallic mug on the ground. “Sasuke gave us all a purpose when he chose us to follow him on his quest to find Itachi,” she explained, the revelation sort of surprising Sakura. “That was the first time in a long time, for all of us, that we could feel what it felt like to have comrades and family. That’s the kind of thing you don’t forget.”

She pressed her lips together. “I’ve been in love with Sasuke for a long time, but I always knew that he didn’t feel the same way about me. I tried seducing him a few times, hoping that age and hormones would eventually make him notice me, but he’s never been interested in such things, so it was useless. In a way, I suppose becoming the best and most trustworthy comrade to him I could possibly be was the only way I could connect with him somehow. And… at some point I realized
that when it came to a man like him, maybe that would be better than simply becoming a lover. More
significant for him, if you will. I thought to myself, ‘if I can become someone important in his life,
isn’t that a hundred times better than fucking him and being forgotten?’”

Sakura watched her for a while, unsure of how to interpret the sudden outburst of information.
However, Karin’s bluntness made her blush gently. “Being comrades … you say that, but is it
enough? For someone who loves him, is it enough? Because I just...”

She trailed off, feeling like she wanted to say more, to voice her own dilemma, her own frustration,
but unsure of whether she should or not. She doubted Karin would understand anyway - she’d had
Sasuke already. Even if the way Karin saw things was hard for Sakura to understand… Karin didn’t
understand what it meant to not be able to reach him at all - to give it your all to have just a little
something more than mere acknowledgement only to see your attempts promptly ignored.

Because Sakura knew she was important to Sasuke to some extent, but…

Sasuke only cared enough to not look like complete neglect.

Sakura wasn’t relevant to him. If she died, he would only be sad for a second. She wasn’t in his
mind at all. She was just another person that had entered his life and to stubbornly around without his
consent.

But not Karin.

What would Sasuke do once he knew she was pregnant? Would he want to have the child, to be
with her, to share a life together? Or would he tell Karin that he had no life for such things and tell
her to get rid of it?

Or… maybe...

Karin frowned, looking mildly annoyed once more. “Sasuke doesn’t need a lover, Sakura,” she said,
shaking her head from side to side. “I’ve seen many sides of him already and he’s… his heart… no
matter what happens or what he decides to do… he already belongs to someone. What would be the
purpose of ignoring that and pursuing something that’s vain to him compared to those feelings he has
for that person?”

Sakura knew this. She was no match for that person, no-one was. But… Naruto was out of the
picture, and that was reality. Without him, there were a million choices Sasuke could make, and a
million paths he could take.

“Even if you say such things, what, exactly, are you expecting from him?” Sakura blurted out, her
voice a bit shaky from all the conflicting emotions inside of her. “If you being pregnant isn’t that
much of a big deal in your mind, why did you find the need to talk to him? If it’s not important to
you, why didn’t you just take care of things on your own and left him in the dark?”

It seemed like a horrible thing to say and to ask, and yet, Karin kept her gaze focused on the fire.
“Because it’s still my child, and his, Sakura,” she said, her voice lowering so much it was hard to
hear her. “Because I love Sasuke. Because this baby will have Uchiha blood and it’s not up to me
alone to decide whether this bloodline will die or not. No matter what kind of life we both lead, he
has the right to choose what he wants to do.”

This left Sakura speechless. She didn’t understand people like Karin at all, but then again, she had
never been able to fully understand Naruto’s way of thinking either.

Selfless people; people who thought of others before themselves, who sacrificed their own happiness
so others could be happy. People who lived to see others smile and were completely devoid of selfish interests.

It struck Sakura that Karin and Naruto were very different people, but also very similar, especially when it came to Sasuke. No wonder he was drawn to them both. They both loved him but respected what he wanted and gave him exactly what he needed. Because of this, he hadn’t pushed them away but had pulled them in, giving them an opening, a piece of himself. They had both been lovers and friends - neither of which Sakura could genuinely claim to have ever been. That was how they had loved Sasuke and shown it to him. That was how he had accepted it.

Was this what it meant to love Uchiha Sasuke? To just… let yourself be used by his whims and let him be free? To think of him first and give him what he actually wanted? To just… be there for him, unconditionally, even though it hurt that he wouldn’t always be beside them?

To be completely selfless when it came to him?

How… did they manage to live like this? Was it okay, easy to accept simply because they knew that he loved them? Was this simple knowledge enough to help them get through his absence, his way of living and thinking?

Was that… what she’d been doing wrong all along?

*I am a horrible person in his eyes…*

“Karin.”

A familiar, deep voice startled both women out of their bitter moods and they both stood up quickly. With her heart hammering inside her chest, Sakura saw Sasuke’s figure emerging from the the dark foliage around them, tall and frighteningly stoic as usual, dressed up in simple black loose trousers and a worn out linen cream shirt with one sleeve hanging empty. His sword was attached to his back, and a small leather pouch could seen strapped around his waist, but apart from these simple details, he wasn’t carrying anything else. So, there was a place around here where he was staying, Sakura concluded quickly.

Sasuke’s eyes landed upon Sakura, who barely suppressed a shiver. His expression didn’t change, but she could feel the irritation coming from him. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked, his voice sounding almost as if it belonged to a stranger.

“I met her on my way here, and she said she wanted to speak to you, so I brought her along,” Karin explained firmly, not at all disturbed by the heavy tension that had settled between the three of them. “She is your girlfriend after all.”

The taunt was obvious. Sasuke’s eyes narrowed at Sakura, who could only gulp. She couldn’t falter now. Even if things hadn’t gotten the way she had planned, she couldn’t...

“Sasuke-kun, I…”

“You brought her here?” Sasuke cut her off coolly, turning away from Sakura and glaring at Karin now. “You know how important this place is; I told you how dangerous it is to have a people from Konoha…”

“I won’t say a word about this, Sasuke-kun!” Sakura intervened loudly. “I figured you’d have a special place around here somewhere, but I don’t care about that, I really just wanted to see you…”

“She saved my life once, this was the least I could do for her,” Karin replied shortly, unfazed, as
Sasuke still kept his fuming attention on her and promptly ignored Sakura. “It doesn’t matter, I came here because I needed to talk to you, too. I’m pregnant.”

Sakura felt mortified at Karin’s nerve. Sasuke was clearly mad and yet she had given him no space to act upon it for long, straightforwardly getting down to business. Sakura had no idea if she felt impressed, jealous or just angry.

Sasuke’s expression did change then, as his eyebrows quirked up in disbelief. “What?” Even his voice had lowered slightly. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Karin affirmed with a grimace, crossing her arms over her chest. “I went to see a proper doctor close to Taka’s hideout, I couldn’t risk Orochimaru finding out about this. I’m about seven weeks long.”

“How do you know it’s mine and not Juugo’s?” Sasuke’s question came quick and unforgiving, and it made Karin jump in offense.

“Excuse me?” She snapped angrily, walking around the fire so she could stand face to face with Sasuke (which was a rather hard feat since he was much taller than her, so she had to look up). “You know how things happened, Sasuke! Even though I was on the pill, the only time we didn’t wear protection you were the one who…” She trailed off and swallowed hard, probably realizing she was saying too much in front of a stranger. “Anyway, you know what happened.”

Sasuke’s gaze softened to one of slight discomfort as he and Karin stared at each other. Sakura almost felt like she was standing in a crowded room where she didn’t belong, and she hated it but suddenly felt too out of place to intervene.

“I didn’t mean to be insensitive, Karin,” Sasuke muttered - a surprising apology.

“Nevermind.” Karin huffed and punched him slightly in the chest before rubbing her forehead anxiously. “When you left back then Juugo went to meet Suigetsu at one of Orochimaru’s hideouts and I went back to our home to check up on things, so I haven’t been with anyone since that morning when you left. I’ve been running errands back there and checking out the hideouts, but that’s it.”

Sasuke bit on his lower lip. Sakura was confused and felt like these were details of Karin’s life she definitely shouldn’t be listening to. She tried to identify Sasuke’s expression, to figure out his possible feelings, but she couldn’t. He didn’t seem angry anymore, and there was an odd restlessness in his eyes, but other than that, nothing gave away his thoughts.

“What if it’s not mine, Karin?” He insisted, keeping his voice cool and steady. “If this happened while you were on the pill, maybe even with protection, with Juugo…”

“It is yours, dammit!” Karin yelled, punching his chest again, more forcefully this time. “Don’t be a fucking prick when I’m telling you things as they are, damn it!”

“Alright, calm down,” he hissed, with a frown. He grabbed for her arm in a way that could be considered gentle and that made Sakura’s stomach feel like it was being squeezed. “What do you want to do about it? You know the kind of life I lead. I’m not going to marry you just because.”

“I know that, Sasuke!” Karin grunted up at him. “Fuck! I didn’t do on purpose, I didn’t want it either! I never wanted to have kids, which was exactly why I was on the pill and always wore protection. I like travelling and working for Orochimaru and being a free shinobi, I don’t want to be stuck with kids, and neither will I ever demand that you take responsibility for what we did, because
I knew what I was getting myself into.”

Sasuke took a breath. “Then…”

“I… I can’t have this child and raise it, it’s too dangerous,” Karin whispered, forcing herself to calm down, probably a bit soothed by Sasuke’s own infuriatingly calm demeanor. “Our bloodlines, mine and yours… If Orochimaru finds out about this… If anyone…”

Sakura wondered what could Karin’s clan be for her to think that it would make that much of an impact when joined with Sasuke’s. She wanted to ask but she it wasn’t the time.

“Then what do you want to do, Karin?” Sasuke asked.

“I don’t know…” she admitted, a hand coming up to touch Sasuke’s on her arm. Sakura felt revulsion at seeing it and wanted to look away, but refused to. “I… I don’t want to have it, but at the same time…”

Karin seemed sad and genuinely conflicted as she looked up at Sasuke with visible anguish. “Sasuke, it’s yours. It’s ours. Regardless of the events that conceived it and why we did what we did, this baby has meaning, for me, at least. I really don’t know what I should do… I wanted you to decide, too. It’s your family, your clan. Would it really be alright to kill it?”

A flash of something made an appearance in Sasuke’s eyes but was quickly concealed.

Sakura wanted to know what he was thinking. She felt short of breath and tense just wanting to know. Was he shocked but still longed for the child? Was he angry and didn’t want the child? Was he simply feeling helpless because he wanted it but didn’t want to give up on his dreams and doing what he wanted? Because neither he nor Karin had the means to take care of it, together nor apart?

What was Sasuke thinking? Why wasn’t he saying anything - being angry, happy, vocal, honest? Why was he just…

Sakura found herself shocked by a fleeting thought she had just then.

“You don’t want to get rid of it, I get it,” Sasuke said, as if his own feelings didn’t matter at all. “It if it’s mine, it will be an Uchiha, of course. We’ll think of something, Karin, don’t worry about it.”

“But, what about…”

“We can’t tell anyone about this, for now.”

“I haven’t,” Karin assured, eyeing him strangely. “Only the three of us here know. Sakura noticed it…”

“We’ll figure something out, Karin,” Sasuke repeated firmly, not leaving room for anymore idle talk. “If you want to keep it, we’ll think of something, alright? It’ll be fine. We just need to think this through and revise our resources.”

“But…”

“Sasuke-kun!”

Sakura’s shout echoed throughout the forest and seemed to cause a gush of wind to pass by them, causing branches and leaves to shake around them.

Both Karin and Sasuke finally seemed to acknowledge her presence as they looked at her at the same
time. Her throat felt dry.

Maybe this was the craziest thing she would ever do in her life but… for some reason she knew that it was all she could do.

She had come to see Sasuke with a purpose, and she wouldn’t let it go to waste. She had to show Sasuke that she knew how to love him the way he needed to be loved, too.

*Selflessness… Will I be able to reach you like this, Sasuke-kun?*

Mustering up all her courage, she swallowed down the lump in her throat. “I have an idea,” she said, keeping her voice steady and as imposing as she could. “It’s crazy but… let me be of use, and please hear me out.”

000

Sakura’s world had been turned upside down, and still, the nature around them was silent and, now unburdened, Karin was fast asleep by the bonfire that Sasuke was busy poking absently with a stick while sitting on Karin’s log. Somehow, everything felt surreal. Things didn’t seem different in any way but Sakura felt… lighter, and yet, there was a heaviness in her heart that didn’t seem to go away.

Minty eyes were glued to Sasuke’s features - he looked beautiful and handsome as always, and it made her feel slightly flustered and out of breath. The line of his elegant neck, the perfect angles of his jaw, the way spiky hair fell over his eye, that well built form…

Even without an arm he was dazzling. It was as though everything that was beautiful about him refused to wither away.

What was it like, she wondered, to be taken by such a man? How would it feel to be an object of his desire, to be target of his intensity?

Even dressed in rags, Sasuke was simply…

Sakura felt her cheeks catch fire. Sometimes she was disgusted at herself for thinking such things, but she couldn't help it when she loved him so much. Wanting him even now was just part of that love. But she had to respect him. The boundaries between them didn’t need to be agreed on - Sakura understood his body language well.

Even now he was far from her reach.

But things would change for them from then on. She was going to be what he needed her to be, and she’d be closer to him than Karin or even Naruto. She would...

“I wanted to see you,” she breathed out, unable to stop herself. “Naruto got married and you weren’t there. People talked. I… I heard you entered Konoha a while ago but you never visited me. I missed you. I just…”

“I already told you how I feel Sakura, and nothing is going to change after this,” Sasuke interrupted, not looking up at her. “Konoha is not my home. Nothing will change that. You should understand it by now. You made a bold offer that I am grateful for, but you should realize things as they are.”

She took a breath, feeling her muscles tensing and her eyes stinging. Why was she always so damn impatient? Why couldn’t she ever say the right words to not make him mad? Hadn’t she made progress just a few minutes earlier?
“Have you no feelings for me at all?” She found herself blurtling out.

Why couldn’t she just stop doing this?

“Talking to you is extenuating, did you know that?” Sasuke said, before heaving a tired sigh. She was being a nuisance again.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, wrapping the blanket over her shoulder more around herself since the night had gotten considerably chilly. “I wish I could understand, Sasuke-kun, why am I so different from the people you love. Karin, team Taka, Naruto… They’re all people I can’t possibly compare to, right?” “She released an ironic, sad laugh. “I don’t know why. I’ve tried so hard to become strong, to be seen by you, respected by you. All I want is to be there for you, and yet you never rely on me. I’m never on their level, even though we’ve known each other for so many years, even though I want to be selfless for you. Why?”

Sasuke eyed her from across the fire. “I do like you,” he admitted, and while it was said with an almost boring tone, it was definitely honest. “You’re a precious friend, an important member of the family I have in team 7. But the people you and I are don’t match, Sakura. I can’t love you a certain way just because you want me to. I can’t be with you how I am with them because the things I experienced with them cannot compare to what I experienced with you, and there are many things they know about me that you don’t…”

“Then tell me!” She pleaded emphatically, lowly so as to not wake Karin up. “I’m going to be a mother to your child! Please, I just want to be by your side in any way I can! I just want to be what they are to you, I…”

“That’s enough, Sakura, I’m tired of this conversation already!” Sasuke grunted through clenched teeth, causing her to flinch. He heaved an impatient sigh. “I appreciate your feelings, but you knowing certain things would make no difference for the both of us.”

“How can you say that when I’ve told you a million times that I love you!” she snapped, feeling the tears burning her eyes and stubbornly not letting them fall. “I want to help you no matter how! I want to be part of your life! The people important to you… you love them and they all love you, too, don’t they? Then why is it that they can give you shelter while I can’t? Why am I so different, Sasuke-kun? Why can’t we live something important together? Why not take advantage of this…”

“Sakura.” Sasuke’s voice was steady and cutting, but he hadn’t raised it at all. “What is it that you want me to say, huh? I’m not the person you think I am, and I don’t love you the way you want me to. I never will. There are two people I love unconditionally, and one of them is dead while the other is lost to me, but that doesn’t mean I want to be in a relationship with someone else just to not be alone. If I feel lonely, I’ll fuck someone, and that someone either realizes it’s just that, or no deal. Is that what you want from me, Sakura? Will that make you feel better?”

“And if it does?”

“You can’t just force our paths and feelings to meet Sakura!” Sasuke actually released an annoyed grunt. “Some things are meant to happen, and some people are meant to go through things together; but our paths were never supposed to cross like that. It’s you who keeps sidetracking what’s obviously not meant to happen!”

“Because I cannot accept to be cast aside even when you give me a chance to do something for you! You say there’s only two people you love, and yet you were able to sleep with Karin, but why I’m just that different from her?”
“I don’t want to do that to you,” Sasuke retorted. “You’re not… you don’t work the same way Taka works. You don’t deserve to be used, you’ll just suffer.”

“You don’t know how I’ll feel…”

“No means no.” Sasuke was openly glaring at her now. “You and I are going to get married. I appreciate your offer to take care of mine and Karin’s kid, and I already said that I’d accept to give you my name and pretend that we are married for your sake and the child’s. But that’s it, Sakura, and it’s already more than I ever expected I’d give to another person, ever. What more do you want?”

Sasuke’s words hurt.

He threw the stick to the fire with a vicious gesture. “You are you, and you can’t be at the same level as other people because you’re not like them. I don’t want you to be. They live the way they want to, but that kind of life isn’t fit for you at all. You deserve better. You should be more, aim for more. Do you understand? I’m already fucking upset enough that I have to do this to you and rely on you because of this child. You just keep on wasting your life with me.”

“Because I chose to,” Sakura sniffed, her tears falling down freely now because she simply could hold them in anymore.

“Naruto once loved you,” Sasuke retorted unexpectedly, speaking as if this genuinely upset him on Sakura’s behalf. “You threw that away because of me. It’s me who doesn’t understand you. I don’t understand how you’d rather lose real love for someone like me. I’ve never given you anything worth fighting for; I’ve never given you a reason to love me.”

“If I had chosen Naruto instead of you, then maybe you two would never have had the chance to understand each other the way you were supposed to!” Sakura replied bitterly, suddenly angry that he had to reject her feelings so adamantly and at the same time feeling sorry for her happiness. “So what would be better, Sasuke-kun? For me to have Naruto’s love, or for him to acknowledge that you’re the one he loves? Would you ever be okay with him never knowing he was in love with you? You couldn’t stand that he got together with Hinata! You’ve been suffering the whole time because of his stupidity! Because you wanted him to know! If it was me instead of Hinata you would’ve done the same thing anyway, so what would be the point of me accepting his love?”

Through her watery eyes, Sakura saw Sasuke’s expression changing. He was looking at her as though he had never seen her before, and this allowed her to straighten her back proudly and wipe at her tears with the blanket, even if it was a wasted effort.

“Naruto loved me, b-but he never loved me like that… he just liked the... thought of being in love with someone like me,” she hiccuped, furious at herself that she was in such a state but not being able to stop herself now that her feelings were exposed. “I’m not stupid; I know what you’re telling me. I know what you did on your journey with him; I’ve known for a long time that, if you two had the chance, you’d be together right now. That was why I was... selfish and scared that I’d lose the both of you. T-that was why I wanted for Naruto to be with Hinata. I was scared that I’d be left behind if the two of you… but I guess that, as you say, some things are meant to happen and some things aren’t.”

Her lower lip trembled violently. “I-I... knew that you wouldn’t end up together. I knew Naruto would go back to Hinata. B-because you two are idiots and you are selfish for each other but also love each other more than either of you can bear. I know. And it sucks, but... in the end, he’s with her and you’re...”

She couldn’t believe she was admitting such things. Maybe Sasuke wouldn’t even understand what
she was saying, but still, if he was listening, wasn’t this the time to speak her mind and tell him everything?

She was sick of lying, sick of hiding her feelings and her knowledge of things. She was sick of being left behind, of being the presumably stupid one in everything. She wasn’t. She knew. And if knowing would bring Sasuke closer, so be it.

“I do love you, be it for selfish, idealistic reasons or not…” she said, feeling more courageous than she had in awhile. “You don’t understand the effect you have on people. You don’t understand how much you make us love you, long for you, how much you make us want you to just look our way. You just don’t realize how bewitching you are, how beautiful. It’s impossible to meet you and not be affected on some level, just like Naruto. You two are…”

The only sound that followed came from the crackling bonfire and Sakura’s incessant sobs. She was horrified that she had revealed this much, and she understood that this would either push Sasuke away from her or bring him closer. Maybe he’d hate her, or maybe he’d learn to respect her. She didn’t know if he was angry or just taken aback, but it seemed like a long time went by before he finally spoke.

“I’m sorry Sakura,” Sasuke whispered, this time, for some reason, sounding genuinely regretful. There was a hint of frustration in his voice, too, but he seemed to be trying to drown it. It was surprising. “I’m sorry that you have to feel this way and still see how things are between me and Naruto. I don’t think you’re stupid at all, and I already knew your play with Hinata.”

Sakura made a small, strangled sound of surprise because he didn’t seem angry even though she had expected him to be.

“I don’t blame you,” he proceeded, eyeing her with distinctive awareness. “Things between Naruto and me have always been complicated, and we are in this situation because, in the end, we still don’t see eye to eye in many things.” He ran a hand through his hair tiredly. “I know you’re smart, and I understand why you do the things you do. I just don’t know how to deal with you. It’s not fair to you that you’re aware of these things and yet you’re still at this, claiming that you love me and still wanting to do things for me. It’s not fair to you. I can’t do anything to repay it.”

She knew that, but her heart alone moved her.

“I… I just want you to let me help you,” she retorted, sniffing but feeling a lot more confident after Sasuke’s words. “If it means something to you, then I want to do what I can, even if it’s another woman’s baby. It’s still your child and a precious Uchiha existence. I don’t want you to give up on your dreams because of something like this, so of course I want to be of use to you.”

Her eyes stared into his, hard and unfaltering in spite of the sobs making her chest tremble. “But don’t dismiss it, Sasuke-kun. Don’t refuse this bond we can create. Naruto didn’t stop himself from bonding with Hinata. You know it’s my face that’s going to be out there, there’s a lot at stake for me. I chose to help you in spite of knowing your feelings for Naruto, so I’ll give it my all and support you, but please try to cooperate with me and help me create a life where this child can grow happy and unburdened.”

It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the truth either. She did know of Sasuke’s feelings but she didn’t think she could ever be honestly supportive. But that was what Sasuke needed from her, wasn’t it? That was what he needed from an esteemed friend, and a precious teammate.

For a while Sasuke didn’t reply. Sakura watched him close his eyes and take a few slow, steadying breaths. She kept on sniffing and the tears didn’t seem to want to stop. She knew she had taken on a
huge responsibility upon herself, that her life would change and that shit would hit the fan for her. Her path would be hard from here on and she’d postpone a lot of things for herself because of this child that wasn’t even hers yet.

Yet. But it would be. Karin had said so. From the moment the baby fell upon her arms, Sakura herself would be the official mother of Uchiha Sasuke’s child. They would become a family. Not the kind of family she had envisioned, and not the kind she wanted, but…

In spite of everything, even if, right now, this child seemed nothing but a nuisance to him…

Truth was, Sasuke had agreed to keep it, and he had accepted Sakura to be the mother Karin couldn’t be. Right now, things were like this, but eventually, just like Naruto, maybe Sasuke would change his mind about having a family and settling down, regardless of where. After all, he was trusting her this wholeheartedly. Not everything was lost. She had managed to breach that wall even if by force.

Naruto had been able to live a life away from Sasuke and to return to Hinata. Sasuke, too, had found other lovers. Maybe, at some point… even if he didn’t want to return to Konoha, maybe he would…

She was being selfless for him, wasn’t she? All she had right now was hope. If she could be as lucky as Hinata, even if on a different way, then everything would be worth it.

“I understand, Sakura, you’re right,” Sasuke ended up saying, snapping her out of her dazed-like thoughts. “I’m sorry for being rude when you’re the one risking everything because of me. I will make sure you’re protected and lack for nothing. If this is your choice then we’ll work together to make sure things are the way they’re supposed to be.”

She didn’t know what he meant by those words, but they made her brighten up and made her heart fill with joy. She could barely believe that Sasuke had listened to her and was actively wanting to work alongside her.

“We’re a team now,” Sasuke reinforced, making Sakura’s heart race. “We need to figure things out, together. We need a plan if you’re supposedly pregnant at this point. We need to think this through and act fast before it gets suspicious. We need to get news out there to those who matter.”

Perking up, Sakura furiously wiped at her face with both hands and offered Sasuke a large smile. “Right!”

Yeah, for sure, things would change for them from now on.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

Okay so… from next chapter onwards, things will be happening rather fast. I know things are a bit weird in this chapter, and even a bit vague, but I guess I needed it to be this way when it comes to Sarada’s birth, considering what little knowledge we have about it. Either way, we’ll have more info about how things were processed on the next chapter. Also, can you tell how much I struggled with Sakura/Sasuke dynamics?? Because I did- I do. I hate writing these two in these terms, it really would be so much easier if Sakura wasn’t interested in Sasuke romantically. And Sakura is so hard to deal
with, and Sasuke in my mind is constantly trying to fight Sakura and being exasperated towards her. He likes her, though, he just doesn’t like her feelings for him. I suppose now they are convenient, but I guess depending on her pisses him off.

This is why I wrote that whole part from Sakura’s POV because it would’ve probably turned out a lot more aggressive if Sasuke’s own feelings and thoughts were involved in this chapter.

Either way, I hope you enjoyed the chapter as much as you possibly could, considering the situation. Sorry that there isn’t much happening. I promise next chapter will be a lot more interesting! It was interesting for me to write, that’s for sure! Expect an update soon, yes?

Thank you so much for reading guys, you are all awesome and I love you all!

Don’t forget to COMMENT! I love talking to you guys and knowing your thoughts and feelings about the fic! Don’t hesitate to offer tips and I accept headcanons, too ;)

See ya next time!
This chapter will probably be a lot different from what you guys have expected, but to make things clear beforehand, I wanted to wrap up certain things and explore this and that. I needed it for own own relief towards this part of the fic.

Have to tell ya, I love this chapter even though, again (but I know I always say this) nothing important happens. But I love the ending. No, I love it all!

Not betaed for the time being.

Don’t forget to read the endnotes!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We’ll Rise

Part XVII: Intensity & Confusion

When Kakashi requested his presence, Naruto should’ve known nothing good could possibly come out of it. However, out of all the things he had expected to hear from the current Hokage, this was, by far the last of them.

Kakashi’s words didn’t make sense. Naruto could hear them perfectly, and yet, it was as if his brain had failed to register what was being said to him, so all he could do was stare at his former teacher with wide eyes. Beside him, Sai stood very stiffly, just as speechless, but his stance was a lot more composed.

“... and so, since Sakura’s pregnancy seems to be going through several complications because she traveled a long way to find Sasuke to give him the news, she will be staying with him at one of Orochimaru’s abandoned hideouts until she gives birth and is ready to come home,” Kakashi was saying, holding a letter - from Sakura - in his hand and waving it. “She assured us she has a trusted medic following her and proper medical facilities. All this to say that neither she nor Sasuke will be returning for a while. I have to get word of this out to Tsunade-sama, the council and Sakura’s parents. This is all very unexpected and troublesome, but there’s nothing we can do now.”

Naruto swallowed hard. His mouth tasted of bile.

Sakura was... pregnant? With... Sasuke’s child?

He couldn’t believe it. It seemed far too crazy to be real, far too atrocious.
“Where are they?” Was all Naruto could blurt out, not even recognizing his own voice.

“The letter doesn’t say, and frankly I think it’s better this way,” Kakashi replied, with a sigh. “There’s an Uchiha child on the way. If Sasuke’s bloodline limit prevails over Sakura’s lineage. It’s a very delicate issue and the council will probably either be ecstatic or in panic.” Kakashi quirked an eyebrow at Naruto’s frozened stance. “Naruto, Sai… you’re both part of team 7, so I wanted you both to know before anyone else. But it’s exactly because of this that I need you two to help us organize this information and deliver it as it should be done. I will be contacting Yamato as well. We need to stick together so this doesn’t get out of hand.”

“You mean to say that Sasuke and Sakura will return with their child,” Sai said thoughtfully. “Will they get married? I mean, will Sakura-san’s image be tarnished because of it? Because she got pregnant before marriage? It’s going to be quite the shock for her family.”

“I don’t know, Sai,” Kakashi said, rolling his eyes. “Either way, we need to have things settled down beforehand so Sasuke and Sakura can return safely and have the village ready to receive them and the baby. I will try to contact Sasuke and see if he already has plans. In about seven to ten months, if all goes well, they’ll be returning. Sakura will need time to recover from labour before she can travel, so this is just an estimation.”

Seven to ten months? Naruto tried to frantically do the math in his head to see if somehow it added to the last time Sasuke had been in Konoha but couldn’t seem to make sense of it at all. He couldn’t think, couldn’t focus, couldn’t do math, nothing. His head was a fucking mess. Nothing made sense.

How… why…

It just didn’t make sense.

He felt sick to his stomach, a horrible feeling washing over him. More than horrified he was… was he angry? Anxious? Jealous?

It felt horrible. Everything felt completely turned upside down. He was sure he was going to be sick.

Is this how Sasuke felt when I told him Hinata was pregnant?

Now he felt even worse. He couldn’t believe Sasuke had to go through this feeling of anguish and of such an overwhelming bitterness that it was disgusting. Naruto felt disgusted at himself and at his own hypocrisy.

He didn’t even understand himself. The two people he had loved as family and possible lovers (possible in Sakura’s case) had come together and… had sex. Sasuke had told him that nothing had ever happened between him and Sakura and somehow, that had made Naruto feel good and undoubtedly relieved for his own selfish reasons. Even though he had accepted the fact that those two had been ‘dating’ (after all, Sakura deserved it for never giving up on Sasuke), from the moment that he and Sasuke had become lovers, in his mind, just thinking about it made him boil with uncomfort and jealousy. He hadn’t wanted Sasuke to belong to anyone else but him, and yet, he knew he couldn’t possibly make such demands. After all, hadn’t he married Hinata and was about to become the father of their child?

Still, it wasn’t as though Naruto still had romantic feelings for Sakura, but it was as if a part of that love he had felt for her as a kid and a teenager brought forth these unwanted feelings of worry, horror and bitterness.

Had those two really… even though Sasuke had said he had no feelings for Sakura… even though…
He clenched both his fists at his sides and lowered his head, biting down hard on his lower lip.

He wanted to see Sasuke and ask him, he needed to know. He wanted to see Sakura and help her. If she was going through a hard time, then he should be there for her; team 7 should be together. They were family. No matter what, they had to stick together and be there for each other. If there was a single time when things could be fixed, when the three of them should be together and support each other, this was it.

If there was a time to rewind and go back to what they were as kids, then this was it and Naruto felt like he wanted to grab it with everything he had.

He had lost them both. Team 7 had been reunited and yet had fallen apart, unexpectedly, in spite of everything.

If only he could reverse everything and know what he knew today, he would’ve done everything differently - he would’ve definitely kept them and not let either of them go. And maybe, just maybe this baby could’ve been...

Fuck, he needed to be there for them. He wanted to. They were his precious comrades, his precious friends, the two people he had been so sure he had wanted to be with for the rest of his life, in one way or the other.

“Naruto.” Kakashi’s voice calling out to him was firm, making him flinch slightly in awareness, but he didn't look up. He could feel Sai’s eyes on him, too. The atmosphere had gotten colder and more solemn. “I know what you’re thinking and I know how you feel. But Sakura will have to be forcefully put out of shinobi duty unexpectedly, and this will already delay her career progress as such, and as a medic for indefinite time. Worst of all, she’s away from the village. Sasuke’s absence is already a given due to his status and his already assigned position outside, so it doesn’t make a difference. He’ll be there for her, as he should, and it’ll be fine.”

Naruto could only grit his teeth and close his eyes tight. Kakashi didn’t understand. He didn’t understand how he felt at all, and he didn’t understand that this wasn’t just about Sakura.

“I…”

“You status is already high in the eyes of the shinobi world,” Kakashi interrupted. “I know you will become Hokage at some point, but there is still too much you need to learn, Naruto, I’ve told you this several times already but you don’t seem to get it. Learning how to prioritize things and detach yourself are just a few examples of how far you are from being what you need to be.”

“You don’t understand; I have to go see them!” Naruto yelled suddenly, looking up at Kakashi in desperation. “They need me! As their comrade, I need to be there for them at this point, I need to do whatever I can! I have to…”

“You can’t,” Kakashi snapped cooly, effectively silencing Naruto. “I’m sorry, Naruto, but you can’t always simply act as you see fit and do whatever you feel like doing just because of your own selfish reasons. I understand that you’re driven by your emotions and that your friends and your team are important to you. But you have a wife who also happens to be very pregnant, and you have a job working for this village.”

Seeing as Naruto seemed to have no words to refute the facts, Kakashi sighed in clear annoyance and put down Sakura’s letter. “Isn’t Sasuke your best friend and the person you’ve been trusting more than anyone else in your life?”
Naruto swallowed hard, guilt and frustration running through him. “You know he is.”

“Then trust him to take care of Sakura and get their family back to Konoha safely.” Kakashi said, his voice softening a little. “No matter how much the council favours you right now, I can’t cover for you all the time just because you feel like acting impulsively. If you want to become Hokage, you need to stop being driven by your immediate feelings and you need to organize your life and the things you must do right now. Things aren’t the way they used to be anymore, Naruto, and you already should know that better than anyone else.”

Sasuke was always telling him this, so it wasn’t like Kakashi’s words sounded wise or struck a chord inside of Naruto.

After a while, Kakashi added. “You have made your choices and you have taken your own path. Don’t you think it’s time you let Sasuke and Sakura do the same?”

His eyes unblinking, Naruto stared at Kakashi, frozen, suddenly feeling like he was being crushed and discarded. He felt like he had no place to turn to while the very floor he stood on was crumbling under his feet. Like falling off the edge of a cliff, going down in seconds that felt like a lifetime, waiting for death but fearing it with his very being.

Kakashi was right, he knew. It wasn’t his place, and he had things to take care of, his own family, his village, his work. He knew he couldn’t always behave this selfishly just because he desperately still clung to that past that had been so precious to him - the past he wanted desperately to bring back but didn’t know how to.

Sasuke had warned him. Life was made of choices, and once they were made, there was no going back and no way to simply cheat and take detours. More and more, several doors were being closed behind him while others were waiting to be opened. He couldn’t have it all.

Those doors weren’t exclusively his to use.

But still, Kakashi didn’t understand Naruto at all. He was right in everything he said, but things were never that simple inside Naruto’s heart. That was not how he dealt with things.

But he had to, didn’t he? He had chosen his path, he had no right to want to interfere with Sasuke’s and Sakura’s.

But he wanted to. Not moving was overwhelmingly difficult.

A hand fell on Naruto’s shoulder - Sai’s. “Let’s do the best we can here in Konoha,” he said, his gentle tone barely a whisper. “There’s a lot to be done and things will be complicated for a while. As team 7 members, Sasuke and Sakura-san can only rely on us to make sure everything goes in their favor. That’s our job here, so let’s do our best, okay?”

Naruto couldn’t even reply to him. There was nothing he could say and nothing he could do.

*Family, huh?*

*That’s right... everything’s different now.*

Without another word, he turned around and stormed out of the office.

000

Misato and her family had immediately taken Katsuo in, and the villagers, while a little freaked out
by him, had been curious and felt sorry for him. As soon as Sasuke had explained the boy’s situation, everyone had wanted to help and interact with him, and even the other children seemed torn between fear and fascination. Truth was, during that week and a half that Sasuke had left him there to tend to Karin’s ‘problem’ and the hideout, Katsuo had gained weight and improved his physical strength considerably, even if everything else was still the same. Nevertheless, Sasuke was happy. It had been a small flicker of joy to lighten up all the disorder that seemed to have stormed into his life.

In all honesty, Sasuke didn’t feel much of anything in regards to Karin’s pregnancy apart from a strong feeling of frustration. It was as though it wasn’t even real. It didn’t feel real, either. He had been shocked and confused by the unexpected turn of events, but other than that it just…

It was a hassle, as simple as that. He had long since decided that he’d be the last Uchiha alive and had come to terms with himself about how he, for sure, would never have kids of his own blood. He had been fine with this since he’d had no intention of getting married in the first place, or follow a ‘normal’ life like Naruto had. Never in a million years did he ever expect to be on the same boat, forced to follow the same routines, one way or the other, in order to establish some semblance of peace.

This child, even being an Uzumaki and an Uchiha (and his and of someone he deeply cherished) was not welcomed, and while it was a cruel way of thinking, it was the truth. If he had done things his own way, Karin would’ve gotten rid of it, but he had understood her feelings, and in a weird way, had sort of empathized. This being said, he had tried to accommodate by accepting Sakura’s proposal. It was useful, but also very troublesome. Now Sasuke was going to have to build some make-believe situation he had never wanted in the first place.

But he was to blame, so it wasn’t like he felt that he had the right to feel any sort of anger towards it. He just didn’t feel any emotional attachment to the situation at all, he was simply doing what he should do, for Karin, as a man and as a friend.

It didn’t change the fact that he watched these events unfolding as if through the eyes of someone else. He couldn’t even be happy that he was going to become a father - this was just something to disturb the balance of the path he wanted to lead. It was damned annoying, the whole thing was completely unwanted.

It bothered him that he couldn’t feel anything but annoyance. He was a sort of father to Katsuo, and it didn’t feel anything similar to this. Katsuo wasn’t a burden to him, but everything about this upcoming child was, from its oncoming existence to his forced ‘joining’ with Sakura. Of course he and Karin were grateful to her, but it didn’t mean that it wasn’t inconvenient and that he wasn’t aware that Sakura would try to use this to her advantage.

Sasuke didn’t want any of it at all, but he had to take responsibility for his own mistakes. That certainly served to teach him to not get involved with women ever again.

Sasuke thought that he understood Naruto’s feelings towards Hinata’s pregnancy. News had travelled towards Konoha, and by now, everyone should already be aware of the big lie Sasuke and Sakura had thrown.

What really bothered him was what Naruto was thinking about all of this and why the blond hadn’t written to demand answers yet. It had been a while since Sakura had sent that letter to Kakashi and still, Naruto hadn’t manifested himself at all.

Not having a feedback from his best friend make Sasuke feel uneasy, yet, at the same time, he understood that this was sure to have been a shock to Naruto and that he was probably very angry and confused at this point. Sasuke couldn’t even imagine how things would go once they met face to
He knew Naruto was probably very angry. Either that or dealing with such a thing was too much for him to handle and he had chosen to stay away from it all.

But Sasuke knew Naruto had ached to come to him and Sakura, but had understood that it wasn’t his place to intervene. Sasuke didn’t know if this made him feel relief or emptiness.

Sometimes Sasuke felt lost, too, and this was one of those times. He wanted to go to Naruto and reach out to him, find some strength, find where he belonged and get back to that path he had assigned for himself. Things around him just kept sidetracking him, but he’d let nothing stop him.

Usually, all he had to do was look up at that light that was Naruto. Right now, that was all he wanted to do, and the only thing he couldn’t do. Katsuo, Karin, Itachi… he wanted to tell Naruto all about it but he couldn’t. He would ruin everything they had struggled for during these last few months.

He had to do this alone. He had fucked up. Now he had to get himself out of this pile of shit and pull himself together, by himself.

One step at the time, Sasuke thought. He had to stay focused. For now, Karin and Sakura were taken care of - it was Katsu that needed attention, as well as all the affairs related to Itachi.

But now… he was headed for Suna. He needed to be somewhere else and get back the things he had before everything was turned upside down. He wanted to be with Gaara, and wanted to spend time with Katsu.

He had wanted Katsu to go to Suna with him so they could be together and to help the child gain endurance, but after that, Katsu would be returning to the village, where Misato as well as little Katsu’s new friends would be eagerly waiting with open arms. If there was a place where Katsu was sure to be happy and where he could evolve at his own pace, that village was it.

Sasuke could tell Katsu felt at ease there, surrounded by nature and simplicity, and being pushed slowly towards his own growth without too much strain. Sasuke couldn’t wait to have things settled once and for all so he could start planning Katsu’s future and… the future of other things he had been thinking about lately.

All in its due time. It would be alright.

Now, he just needed some peace of mind.

000

Gaara would lie if he said that he hadn’t been surprised to see Sasuke at his doorstep with a small, ethereal looking child attached to him by the hand. The two had arrived in the middle of the night, as had become habit - not that it upset Gaara in any way, and this time, Sasuke’s motivation was to keep the child’s existence as concealed as possible, thus the late hour. It wasn’t like the fact that Sasuke had adopted Katsu was a secret in any way, but it wasn’t something that the man considered to be anybody’s business but his own and Gaara respected that. Plus, Sasuke feared for the boy’s safety, not to mention that Katsu’s true nature was still a mystery even to him. It was not surprising considering he was an experiment of Orochimaru’s - from the little Gaara had heard from Sasuke himself.

It wasn’t as though the Kazekage hadn’t expected Sasuke to have this sort of initiative. Many times had the two of them talked about future ambitions, and taking in people without homes was one of the things Sasuke dreamt of. This poor, ghostly child who didn’t even look like a regular human
being surely had captivated Sasuke’s interest for one reason or the other.

Gaara had listened to the tale of how they had met, and it almost sounded crazy how impulsively Sasuke had made the decision to keep the boy. One would almost say that it had been an action driven by a need to fill a certain empty hole, but upon watching Sasuke and Katsuo interact, somehow, everything seemed to click spectacularly.

Gaara leaned over on his armchair, supporting his elbows on his knees and linking the fingers of both hands together as he watched the two figures interacting on the bed. Sasuke was sitting with his back against the head of the bed and Katsuo was sitting between his spread legs, with his back pressed to Sasuke’s chest. The boy had his legs crossed, and over his lap, a large book was open. It was an illustrated one about some old shinobi legend that Sasuke had gotten him from a local bookstore. Sasuke was reading it to Katsuo in a low voice, patiently stopping once in a while to point at the images in the book to offer a few explanations. Katsuo seemed positively fascinated by them, his blank eyes wide and tiny mouth slightly open. Sometimes, he would nod to let Sasuke know he understood him, or make small noises that sounded almost delighted in a grotesque way that would’ve made Gaara flinch if the scene hadn’t been intimate to the point of being endearing.

It was clear to him that Katsuo was a very clever boy for his apparent age. Maybe it was the fact that he was an artificial creation rather than a regular human being, but either way, even if he didn’t talk and was, according to Sasuke, having a hard time associating expressions with feelings (or understanding feelings at all), the boy was definitely smart and was becoming stronger and more independent at a quick pace. Sasuke seemed to be very pleased indeed.

In all honesty, Gaara found the boy’s appearance to be something rather disturbing, but mostly, it was his apparent difficulty to show emotions properly that upset him the most- Sometimes, when he wasn’t moving, he seemed like a very refined, but poorly dressed doll. There was an odd androgynous beauty about him that was haunting. In a way, Gaara could understand why Sasuke’s heart had reached out towards the boy. Even so, according to him, Katsuo was in a much better shape now than he had been at the start.

Either way, Sasuke still seemed unnaturally preoccupied with the boy, and it was clear that he genuinely cared about him, his development and his well-being. Gaara could clearly see it in the tiny smiles Sasuke offered the child, and the gentle way he looked at him. Still, while he took care of Katsuo’s every need, he didn’t treat him as a child nor babied him. It was clear that wanted him to become strong and make progress.

However, as pleasant and endearing as the scene in front of him was, Gaara could sense that something was off about his friend, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He supposed maybe Sasuke was waiting for the right time to tell him, just as Gaara himself was waiting for the right time to give Sasuke back some unfortunate news.

Somehow, they had shared looks upon seeing each other and instantly known that this meeting would be different from their previous ones.

It was the end of the day and the sunset was filtering through the window of his chambers. Gaara had been able to leave work a little before dinner time, but he knew that the night would be hellish with all the paperwork he had yet to take care of. However, Sasuke was only dropping by for a few days, and Gaara had needed the indulgence of being in his presence, plus, it gave him immense pleasure seeing Sasuke in his room, especially when he seemed so at home and relaxed.

A knock on the door could be heard, making both Katsuo and Sasuke look up from the book.

“Yes,” Gaara gave his permission in a bland, but firm tone. The door creaked open and the three
occupants of the room turned their heads to see Temari peaking inside.

“Sasuke, I found a few clothes that used to be Gaara’s that I’m almost sure will fit little Katsu,” she said, smiling gently while looking at the child. “Do you think I could take him with me for a few minutes so he can try them on?”

“Of course,” Sasuke said with a nod, placing his hand on top of Katsuo’s head. “Thank you for your help, Temari, I’m really grateful. I still don’t have a lot of things fit for a child at this point.”

“It’s alright; we still have a bunch of stuff from when we were kids, and it’s not like we’re wearing them anyway,” Temari replied, with a smirk. “I think we still have a few toys, too.”

“He can choose a few of those, but don’t overdo it because I can’t really afford to carry around useless stuff with me,” Sasuke said, running his fingers through Katsuo’s rebellious hair while the child simply watched Temari with a blank stare. “But I’m not sure he even knows what toys are.”

“Oh, he’ll learn soon enough,” Temari assured, with a good-humoured laugh. She extended her hand. “Come on Katsu-chan. We’re going to have some fun together, heh?”

The boy tensed visibly and immediately looked over his shoulder up at Sasuke, who smiled down at him. “It’s fine, Temari will take good care of you. I’ll see you in a bit, okay?” Sasuke reassured. He gave the boy’s back a small shove. “Go on.”

The boy eyed Sasuke without moving for a few seconds before turning away, carefully closing the book and setting it aside. On his own, but with slightly wobbly and awkward movements, he descended from the bed and made his way towards Temari. He took her hand, but still looked over his shoulder at Sasuke, who shooed him out with a gesture of his hand. Tilting his head to the side, Katsuo raised his own tiny, pale hand, and waved him goodbye.

Gaara had the stupid impulse to wave at the child as well, so he did, and in response, Katsuo turned his gaze to him and waved at him, too. It was cute in a very awkward way that Gaara wasn’t used to.

“I’ll call you guys when dinner’s ready,” Temari laughed before pulling Katsuo along and securely closing the door firmly behind them, leaving Sasuke and Gaara by themselves.

Temari sure had known what to do to make it happen as per Gaara’s request, and he was very pleased he have some time alone with Sasuke indeed.

“Well, Katsuo seems to be fond of you,” Gaara commented simply, as Sasuke straightened his back and crossed his legs at his ankles. He looked terribly young, wearing just a white t-shirt and a pair of cream loose pants.

“Yeah, it’s a relief, I suppose,” Sasuke said, with a sigh, rolling his shoulders tiredly. “He’s a handful. I mean, thankfully, he’s very obedient and calm, but he’s still a child and his physical condition is still very fragile even though he’s so much stronger than he was even a week ago.”

“Traveling with a child must be extenuating,” Gaara said, leaning back on his armchair, his gaze fixed upon Sasuke’s form.

“It is, but… I don’t know, even if it’s a lot of work, I like it,” Sasuke admitted, with a small shrug. “It’s great seeing him progressing from day to day. In a way, even though it’s easier having him being quiet and docile, I really want to see him running and being active like other children are.”

“You sound like a real parent,” Gaara teased, but making sure his tone was careful and gentle.
Sasuke actually smirked at him, but something changed in his features as an unfamiliar darkness flickered over his eyes. “I guess you could say that.”

He and Gaara eyed each other for a few silent seconds during which the Kazekage felt his muscles clench. Sasuke’s gaze had always been very firm and intense, and it was a pleasure to have it so attentively focused on him.

“I didn’t think Temari was the type to like children, though,” Sasuke commented, after a while.

“Well, it may not seem like it, but she always wanted her own family,” Gaara confessed, conversationally. “She’s getting married in a couple of months, did you know?”

“Nara Shikamaru?” Sasuke asked, perceptively.

“Yes. A small ceremony as I’ve been told. She’ll be moving to Konoha permanently.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Sasuke’s eyes turned curious. “I suppose letting go of your sister and one of your trusted advisors can’t be easy.”

Gaara couldn’t help but smile, feeling morose. “It’s sad for me, but it’s her own life and her own choice,” he muttered, sincerely. “I only want her to be happy, and I wish her all the best.”

“Shikamaru is a good man,” Sasuke replied, leaning his head back against the bed’s headboard, but his eyes never leaving Gaara. “She’s in good hands, I’m sure.”

“I know.” The corner of Gaara’s mouth quirked upwards further. “Not that she needs anyone to take care of her, of course.

With a small snort, Sasuke nodded his agreement.

Silence fell between them once more, filled with the strange sort of tension of unsaid things hanging in the air, but it wasn’t the uncomfortable kind at all. In fact, Gaara felt an almost sadistic joy in knowing that he was probably one of the few people who would always feel comfortable sitting in companionable silence with Uchiha Sasuke.

“Hey, Gaara,” Sasuke muttered softly, his voice an innocent, but alluring calling. “Come sit with me.”

There was no way Gaara could not accept such a request when he had been wanting to share a bit of proximity since Sasuke had gotten there. It wasn’t like he was in any way upset by Katsuo’s presence, but considering he was a busy man, every minute with one of his favorite guests was precious.

Slowly, Gaara got up and made his way to the bed, sitting on the edge of it next to Sasuke’s thigh. He twisted his body just enough so they were more or less facing each other.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” Sasuke noted seriously, once more with that acute perceptiveness that seemed superior to that of other human beings. Gaara thought that he was good at masking his own thoughts, but of course Sasuke’s senses would be sharper, after all, they had come to know each other rather well.

Tensing slightly, Gaara allowed himself to heave a small sigh. “You don’t let anything slide, do you?”

“Not when it concerns people who matter,” was Sasuke’s response. Gaara’s eyes narrowed. It
wasn’t fair that the man had to be honest at such a time. It wasn’t fair that they’d be open about things right now.

“The council is pressuring me to get married,” Gaara confessed, blandly. Sasuke’s eyebrows rose a bit. “They say I’m already old enough and I should form an alliance with a strong affiliated village. They think that, considering I used to be a threat, getting myself a family will give me even more credit as Kazekage and, I quote, ‘bring me closer to the people’.”

“You don’t sound very excited about the prospect,” Sasuke noted, studying Gaara attentively.

“No-one likes the prospect of marrying for political reasons and, to be very honest, the concept of ‘marriage’ never even crossed my mind.”

“Do you have any suitors already?”

“Yes, but I lack the time to meet them you see.” Gaara threw Sasuke a mischievous smile that made the other man roll his eyes. “I don’t want to think about it until I absolutely must, Sasuke. I know there are duties to being Kazekage. I am aware that my life stops being my own to belong to this village and its people.”

“But sacrificing your happiness for that is not something I personally find righteous, not even for a leader,” Sasuke said, frowning in indication of how much the thought angered him. Gaara immediately understood the association to a certain blond individual. “This is exactly one of the many issues with main villages. I don’t understand the logic. You are a perfectly capable leader with or without a wife and children. It should be your choice whether you want to get married or not. They can’t change who you are, or your life goals.”

Gaara tilted his head to the side in flattered amusement. “Leave it to you to say something like that,” he replied, shaking his head from side to side. “At least Naruto won’t have to worry himself about any of this when he becomes Hokage.”

It was said to test Sasuke and see his reaction. As expected, the man ‘tsked’ and looked to the side, to the book resting over the mattress, his frown deepening. “That’s a lame joke.”

“Forgive me; I’m not very good with jokes,” Gaara said, softly. When Sasuke didn’t say anything, he sighed and reached out a hand towards him. Carefully, Gaara hooked a finger under Sasuke’s chin and made him look back at him. With his other hand, he brushed Sasuke’s hair carefully out of the way so his rinnegan was exposed. Mismatched eyes found his, firm but freed from animosity. For a moment, Gaara wished that Sasuke would give up wearing his hair like that so his beautiful face and eyes could be seen. He vaguely wondered if Naruto had the same kind of thoughts.

“I understand why these sorts of political details upset you,” Gaara muttered. “And while it isn’t exactly ideal to me either, from the moment I became Kazekage, I was prepared to devote my life to my village. I wish only for peace and safety for everyone. I want my people to trust me and live happily. As a Kage, those are my goals.”

Sasuke’s lips formed a thin, white line; his eyes narrowed. “And as a man?” he asked, his tone sharp. “Are you alright with just being forced into marrying and dealing with someone you don’t even know or love? You’ll be expected to have children. Do you even understand what it’s needed for sex to happen smoothly?”

“Sasuke.” Gaara held back an indulgent smile. With his thumb, he gently caressed Sasuke’s chin. “You’re an idealist, full of self-righteous thoughts that you can afford yourself to follow. I appreciate your concern, I truly do. But I am not you.”
“What is that supposed to mean?” Sasuke’s hand came to rest on Gaara’s wrist, squeezing it empathically. “You’re still human and not a dog of the system. You should still care about your future.”

Gaara’s eyes fell to the other man’s stubborn mouth. “I don’t have what I want within my grasp like you do,” he said, his voice lowering to an almost whisper. “I don’t have the chance to choose between my goals and my love life, because there is no corresponded love to choose from. What I want is already in the possession of someone else, so it makes no difference to me, really.”

He knew Sasuke would understand who his words were directed at, and truth be told, he was purposefully stepping the line to cause a certain impact. He didn’t know what he was expecting, though. So many things about Sasuke came to him as established facts, yet still felt as constant novelties.

Sasuke’s hand tightened further and Gaara confirmed that he had hit a sensitive.

A second later, there was a sudden increase of tension in the air and Gaara felt himself being drawn by an inexplicable pull. Sasuke’s eyes seemed to have been lighten ablaze for they became feral, and they were the last thing he saw before he felt Sasuke’s body moving and lips falling harshly over his own, demandingly. Adrenaline rushed through his body and seemed to flood him with life. It was different from the last time Sasuke had kissed him, but right now, he couldn’t tell if it had been Sasuke or himself who had leaned in first. Either way it didn’t matter. Sasuke was willingly moving his mouth against his quickly and impatiently and all Gaara could do was eagerly part his mouth to respond and grab for Sasuke’s face with both hands, completely inebriated by the sudden intensity he could feel coming from the other man, for him, in that precise moment.

Gaara had never kissed another person like this in his life, so he had no idea what he was doing, but it wasn’t as though Sasuke wasn’t aware of this fact, so he couldn’t worry himself about it. He felt at ease, confident enough and comfortable - a feeling he knew he wouldn’t experience this easily with just anyone.

This was nothing like their first time, and it both brought him an immense joy and a terrible feeling of self-pity.

“You’re so frustrating,” Sasuke panted against his mouth in between kisses. “What did I tell you about not talking about him?”

“I won’t say a thing anymore,” Gaara breathed, before making sure they both stayed quiet by capturing Sasuke’s mouth again. They both shifted hurriedly. Sasuke’s arm came around his neck to pull him demandingly close as Gaara’s hands lowered so they were hugging Sasuke's torso, his hands running over the man’s back over his t-shirt with far too heavy hands, fingers curling so he was clawing at the fabric. When their tongues met Gaara felt like everything was spinning out of control and that he no longer knew how to do anything but feel amazed and overwhelmed. He knew he was clumsy in his naivety, but Sasuke was quick to take the lead and basically force him to sharpen up and adapt. Thankfully, Gaara was a fast learner and really, kissing wasn’t the hardest thing he had ever had to do, so it didn’t take long for a suitable, deep rhythm to be achieved.

A few of Gaara’s dreams had been made of moments like these. He had envisioned such a scene many times for many months now. It was something he had never expected to happen in his life. Or maybe he had? Maybe he had simply hoped.

There were many things Gaara wanted to do, so much more he wanted to feel, so many more things he wished to try with the man in his arms, but willing as Sasuke was just then, the boundaries were still high and Gaara didn’t have to ask to understand it.
Still, Gaara could tell that there was a strange form of mutual attraction going on between them, even if his was very different from Sasuke’s, both in motive and intensity. What mattered was, it was real, and Gaara didn’t know how it made him feel, but sadness was definitely one of those many emotions consuming him.

Maybe Sasuke was merely indulging them both from the constant tension they had been feeling for a while now. Maybe it was only that Sasuke now knew things that allowed him to give himself like this more easily, or maybe it was just a whim of his, doing this simply because he could and because he knew that, this time, Gaara would allow it.

Either way, this was Uchiha Sasuke, kissing him because he wanted to. And for that, Gaara was thankful. It was just the two of them this time, without ghosts hanging between them.

It was just them and their feelings of loss and mourning for something that could’ve been but wasn’t, and probably would never be.

Gaara didn’t know how long they spent simply kissing as if they needed it to live. Sasuke was passionate about it, rough, and did everything with a very dominant, controlled precision that had Gaara’s body feeling hot, tense, and strangely aroused like it hadn’t in a long time. His hands ached to move more, to feel more, to invade the unknown territory of firm skin underneath annoying fabric, but he did not dare. Other hands had claimed that same skin long ago, and in spite of his better judgement, that sacred ground wasn’t something he felt like he had the right to tarnish.

He berated himself for not being able to be selfish.

Sasuke’s fingers caressing his nape in an almost possessive manner did nothing to help his desire subside, but he didn’t let it overpower him. He was a Kage; lust shouldn’t be something to rule over him, ever.

“You’re very compliant today,” Sasuke panted against him, as they broke the contact so Gaara could mouth at the column of his neck.

“That’s because we’re doing this for us, not because you are pouting over someone else.”

“You know,” Sasuke breathed, leaning away so he could look into Gaara’s eyes. His hand slid from Gaara’s nape to his neck in a slow caress before stopping over his shoulder. For a moment there, Gaara could swear that he saw genuine pity on his usually stoic face. “You and I see the world the same way. It’s unfortunate because I think this between us could’ve worked if things were different. But alas, you are the Kazekage and have duties. And I am…”

“A wandering idealist, and already belonging to someone else, yes,” Gaara interrupted, offering Sasuke a lopsided smile that felt empty. Sasuke’s words had made his heart beat faster with happiness and a tiny, minuscule flame of hope - one he absolutely knew he shouldn’t let live. His hands clenched on Sasuke’s t-shirt at his waist. “As I said, I know I’ll never have what I want, and I have made my peace with it long ago. Still… no-one finds this more unfortunate than me.”

Sasuke knew it, too. Either way, there was an odd longing in those unblinking eyes that Gaara was enraptured by.

He wanted to consume the man in front of him and overpower this moment between them to make it his - theirs. If it were possible to change this dimension to one where nothing else existed to stop them, he wished he could be there.

Maybe, in a different world, this could’ve actually worked. In another life, if Naruto and Sasuke had
never fallen into each other, maybe right now Gaara could afford to make choices. As it was, they were still two people who were a million miles away from each other, and that wouldn’t change.

It would’ve been devastating for him. But he knew better already.

Still, for now, even if just for a few more seconds, it was just the two of them, and maybe, just maybe, they could pretend that there were no political issues, no divergent ideals, and no other lovers.

Sasuke was now biting on his lower lip, and from the look in his eyes, he was thinking the same thing.

For now, this paradise could be only theirs, and the future didn’t need to be an issue.

But… maybe they shouldn’t have talked about this because Sasuke’s expression changed suddenly, to one of true resentment, and he sighed, frowning heavily.

“What is it?” Gaara asked at once, finding himself confused and disappointed at the sudden change in the mood between them.

Sasuke looked away and Gaara knew that, what it was that he had been waiting to say would come as a bomb he wasn’t sure he was ready to deal with.

“I’m no better than Naruto,” Sasuke said suddenly. “I just keep fucking up no matter how hard I try to follow my path and do my own thing.”

Gaara’s mouth hung open. This wasn’t going to be good, he could feel it. “What… did you do, Sasuke?”

“I got someone pregnant.”

Well, Gaara thought, feeling a hard stab piercing his chest. That was all it took for that tiny flame of hope for them to be completely extinguished.

000

Sasuke and Katsu had only stayed in Suna for a couple of days, much to Gaara’s obvious disappointment. Either way, it wasn’t like things hadn’t become very strained for them at some point, and with good reason. Sasuke knew he had hurt Gaara, and consequently, hurt himself. Why had he even given into the temptation of testing the waters between them if he had known in advance that it would be useless?

When had he become such an impulsive type of person, so easily giving him to the small pleasures of the world, so thirsty for these moments of uniqueness?

Sasuke was going to become a father and a married man in just a few months, and Gaara was expected to join some stranger. It had been doomed from the start, but Sasuke supposed that everything happening to him in the last few months led to this sort of conscious need for something else.

That was why he had only wasted enough time to leave Karin and Sakura safely at one of Orochimaru’s abandoned hideouts in the Land of Spindrifts and immediately returned to the village to grab for Katsuo and head over to Suna. He had needed to be away from everything and find some semblance of ‘comfort’, and for some reason, not taking the boy hadn’t been an option despite his previous judgement. Sasuke had needed to work over this secret out of his chest more than anything.
after feeling so thoroughly suffocated by Karin’s pregnancy, and Katsuo was his only shelter, just as Gaara was the only person he could ever go to for that comfort.

Sasuke had so much he needed to do, and yet now he was too overwhelmed and frankly upset to do them. Reaching out to Katsuo and Gaara was just reflexive behaviour that frustrated even him, but by now, he already knew when to recognize his unbalanced moods and understood that he needed time for himself to recover and get back on track. If it was what it took to not let himself fall into a pitch of anger and despair, then he’d do it, for Katsuo’s sake, and for his own sake.

Using people to get what he needed had become a habit it seemed. And it was far too easy, but already it was proving to be detrimental. He supposed that, all things considered, he should’ve learned how to respect karma by now.

Sometimes he felt thoroughly (self)destructive, and it upset him knowing it was something he did unintentionally. He would throw himself at things and sink into them without previously considering how harmful it could be, for himself and for others.

He had taken control of it when it came to Naruto. With his friend, he had been forced to ponder every word and every action, otherwise he would fall into an endless pit that would be very hard to get out of. No matter what he did or how much time he was without Naruto, as soon as they stood face to face, he’d be undone. Even if he could mask it, even he could resist and fight Naruto to come out on top and not be the pitiful person he couldn’t let Naruto see…

Pulling himself back together was always the hardest battle.

But with others…

It was easy to get up and go, so diving seemed far too easy.

Still… ‘unfortunate’ was too tame of a word to describe the situation between himself and Gaara. It was as if fate itself had worked so they’d never come together in such terms, and Sasuke found it oddly sad but also ironic.

Some part of him wished that he could’ve stayed longer, so he could show the lively village to Katsuo (and so Sasuke himself could understand his own feelings for his relationship with Gaara better) but upon entering he had quickly realized that, even though it had been nighttime, the far too big place had left the boy feeling scared and restless. Sasuke had felt it from the tenseness in his body and the way he had tightened his tiny arms around his neck.

Either way, Sasuke still had a few errands to run for Orochimaru and many hideouts to visit to obtain what he wanted, so he couldn’t stay long and wallow in his own issues and his own lamentation. He had wanted to introduce Katsuo to someone close, and knew that Gaara and his siblings would never open their mouths to anyone unless Sasuke told them to. It was a welcomed relief.

If Sasuke had to be honest with himself, he, too, had wished that he could indulge in Gaara’s company for a while longer. He was emotionally exhausted and had desperately needed time away from Karin, Sakura and all the issues that had barged into his life uninvited. Besides, having a little bit of physical comfort was always good, for both him and Katsuo. Also, it left him feeling slightly bitter that he and Gaara had so little time to explore their attraction a little more, even if it would be fruitless in the end.

But… what had he been expecting anyway? He already knew that he would have to create a fake marriage with Sakura, and Gaara himself would soon be betrothed. What the fuck had he been thinking, Sasuke didn't know.
He had almost considered offering Gaara what he had so adamantly refused Naruto - an affair.

This only proved that he wasn't right in the head, and Sasuke would’ve snorted in disgust if only he wasn’t so angry at himself. He had to sort out his priorities once more and get back on track.

He felt only slightly guilty for wishing they had time to have sex, though. Why hadn’t they? It wasn’t like he didn’t know Gaara was a virgin, and it wasn’t like he felt like he wanted desperately to do it with him, it was just…

A whim? Possessive behaviour by wanting to be fulcral in something deeply relevant in Gaara’s life?

If that was so, then...

Maybe it had been for the best. Gaara definitely deserved more than a one-time fuck for his first time. But then again, he certainly deserved more than having his first time with a complete stranger, a forced wife.

Sasuke couldn’t exactly explain it himself, but he had always been drawn to Gaara in his own way. As a friend, as a shinobi comrade and as an important bond he had forged in the last few years, Gaara was present in the small list of people Sasuke could claim that he genuinely cared for. It was nothing like what Sasuke and Naruto had, of course, but it was still something highly relevant.

The fact that Gaara had feelings for him was no news to Sasuke, but it wasn’t as though he could reciprocate those feelings the way Gaara wanted, and they both knew it. Least of all now, with babies and marriages on the way. It just wasn't right.

Still… The fact alone that Sasuke had longed for a bit of intimacy with Gaara already said a lot. Under different circumstances, maybe they could’ve come to some sort of arrangement. They both knew Sasuke would never remain in a village and that Gaara would never abandon his position (neither would this be something Sasuke would ever ask of him) but still, surely there’d be a way to compromise.

It wasn’t like Sasuke needed a lover, or someone waiting for him. He had Naruto. He knew that all he had to do was show himself willing and Naruto would fall apart for him. For intimacy, for sex, for emotional chaos, for a minute of comfort…he knew he would always have Naruto. No matter how many years passed, Naruto would always be his one and only kindred spirit, and forever his lover regardless of whether they did have sex or not.

But… if Naruto had someone else, in a way, Sasuke wanted to understand what it was like, too - if it was that easy to learn how to love someone else, to become someone else’s constant lover, even if not in a serious constant commitment.

Taka had been different. Gaara wasn’t like Juugo and Karin - he was someone whose feelings were too exclusive, and while he could understand the line between sex and love, he would end up getting hurt. He wouldn’t be able to let it go, and Sasuke didn’t want to fuck things up for them like that. Which was why it could never be ‘just sex’ between them. It would always have to be more.

In a way, Sasuke felt sorry that they never would get to figure out how it could’ve been. Out of all the people, apart from Naruto, Gaara was...

But things had never been in their favor- the system was still getting in the way, and Sasuke… well, could he ever really make Gaara go through this? Having Sasuke as a lover while knowing fully well that there would always be someone else in the back of his mind?

Gaara deserved better; so much better than Sasuke.
But… as everything, it was all a matter of choice, and both Sasuke and Gaara had made theirs.

After all… Sasuke himself was in a very tough situation right now. Karin and Sakura were in Orochimaru’s hideout for the time being, but as soon as the baby was born he and Sakura would need to return to Konoha as parents and as a supposed couple. There were so many things that needed taking care of, so much that he had to juggle with - a new life and a new child, Katsuo, the village, his errands for Orochimaru, information for Konoha…

*Months Later…*

Time seemed to have gone by in a flash, and yet, time still seemed to be dragging itself infinitely.

One thing was for sure - Naruto hadn’t been ready to feel the weight of his newborn child in his arms at all. It was a boy, healthy and strong according to the doctors in spite of his tiny body. His head was already filled with a mop of unruly sunshine hair, and on his cheeks, two whisker marks could be seen. *Boruto* hadn’t even opened his eyes yet, but somehow, Naruto was sure those eyes would be just like his - he just knew it.

It was the middle of the night, and pale and exhausted from hours of labour, Hinata was sleeping soundly in the hospital bed. The beeping sound of the machines around her filled the dark room.

Naruto stood by the window so the moonlight would shine upon his son’s face. Holding such a small creature was awkward for Naruto, but he did the best he could. The baby in his arms was so fragile and warm, tiny hands clenched over his chest. He was making feeble sounds that could barely be heard.

Naruto hadn’t expected any of it to feel quite like this.

Seeing his own blood and flesh right there was otherworldly. He hadn’t given it all that much thought before, hadn’t realized how important this was, exactly, but now it all seemed to have come crashing down and overwhelming him. This reality was overwhelming.

His heart ached from beating so fast; his throat felt dry and constricted. It felt as if something inside of him was going to burst. He was scared of the baby, scared that moving too much would hurt him, but completely enamoured, too. From the moment he had laid eyes on his son, he knew that he would love him with everything he had, unconditionally. This love for this individual he was still about to get to know would last forever.

*His child. His son. His family.* Someone he had to protect at all costs and prioritize above any other.

This was what he had abandoned everything for. All because of this small, defenseless being.

*Uzumaki Boruto*. The name itself spoke of things only Naruto understood. Hinata’s own perspective was founded on nothing but lies, but if an illusion made her happy, Naruto wouldn’t shatter it.

This was where it all had ended, and where it all had started.

This child would be the split image of him. Boruto could’ve been his and the child of just about anyone; no-one would be able to tell. It was a terrifying thought that brought with it a feeling of unbearable longing he hadn’t expected to feel.

This love came with a bitter taste. Naruto could only pray.

*Please, don’t let me hate him…*
I just want to love him…

Please let me love him selflessly...

A sob escaped Naruto’s chest as he gently brushed his nose over the baby’s soft cheek. He felt so fulfilled all of a sudden, and yet, it was as if he was experiencing a grand moment of his life in a desert, with no-one there to share the joy with.

Yet, Hinata was right there. He felt gratefulness towards her for having given him this gift of life, and yet, the room might as well be empty.

He had people. His friends had congratulated him already and Hinata would wake up soon. They’d make plans and discuss things. They’d probably cry some more together than they had already. A party would be thrown at some point. Naruto would have all the attention and company to celebrate this with in just a few hours.

So… why did he feel so painfully lonely?

Where was Sasuke? Why hadn’t he written?

Where are you now, Sasuke? Now that this has happened to me?

I thought you’d be here...

Was Sasuke in Sakura’s arms, sleeping peacefully? Was Sakura’s belly already big enough to be noticeable? Surely it was.

Was Sasuke even happy he was going to become a father?

Naruto felt so helpless, unsure of what to do with himself. A small tear slid down his face. He wished Sasuke could see this - see his baby boy and feel the way Naruto felt, give him his support, offer a few harsh remarks.

What would Sasuke do? How would he feel at seeing Naruto’s son for the first time? Would he be happy and emotional, or would he just feel those bitter feelings of longing and have those same thoughts of ‘what if…’?

Would he… think about Boruto the way Naruto did? The way Naruto knew he shouldn’t?

But Sasuke wasn’t there, just like Naruto wouldn’t be there for Sasuke’s child’s birth. Not even this they were allowed to share.

Why was the life of an adult so unfair? Why couldn’t they just go back to the days when everything was simple and pure?

Sasuke, I want to see you...

This was the beginning of a new world, a new generation. Old things were being left behind, the past was being brushed away to give place to newer, supposedly more beautiful things.

It was like the coming of spring after a cold, hard winter.

That was how this was supposed to feel.

And still…
Sasuke... even if you joked about it... even if you said that it's not possible...

I know that.

But when I think about it...

Boruto could as well be ours.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

I KNOOOOOW! DON’T KILL ME! But I needed to wrap up this tension between Sasuke and Gaara. I needed to know what was going on between them and whether it would be a thing or not. Doesn’t seem likely (*cough*unfortunately*cough*), but it was a pleasure to write. It was driving me crazy, so I’m glad I got to explore it.

I suppose more things will be exposed as the fic develops.

That ending scene though! I’m so not sorry for Naruto’s feelings.

NEXT CHAPTER: Sasuke returns to Konoha, and our boys finally meet once again! Are you looking forward to some hellish feels? I’m not. Just like I’m not prepared for Naruto’s and Sasuke’s animated battle in two days.

I hope you have enjoyed the chapter (as much as possible)!

See ya next time, and don't forget to COMMENT! I love talking to you! <3<3
Unpredictable

Chapter Notes

Let me just say that I have no idea if Sarada is younger or older than Boruto and I don’t particularly care since the story was already constructed this way :P

Forgive me for I haven’t been able to edit the previous chapter and rid it of atrocious grammatic typos. I will as soon as I can. Meanwhile, please forgive the ones you might find here since this chapter isn’t betaed either and I can’t exactly spot mistakes or typos at this early post-writing stage.

I’m terribly sorry for taking so long to update, but, as it turned out, I was dragged by the violent and blessed tide that was ‘Yuri!!! On Ice’ and couldn’t focus on Naruto related stuff at all. Today was the last, glorious episode and thankfully I had this chapter finished. I’m actually updating so I can move away a bit from the emotional chaos YOI has left. Gorgeous characters, Ice Skating, a canon LGBT+ couple and flawless character development. What more can we ask for? A truly gorgeous anime, do watch it if you haven’t. I still need to catch my breath.

BUUUUUT, back to Naruto stuff! I’m happy I managed to update before Christmas!

There isn’t a lot happening this chapter, but trust me, god stuff is coming for the next one ;)

Happy reading, and sorry for the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We'll Rise

Part XVIII: Unpredictable

Sasuke and Sakura returned to Konoha on the expected date. Kakashi had, at some point, received a letter from Sasuke announcing his daughter’s birth and on which day he and his family would be returning to the village.

Uchiha Sarada was the baby’s name. Sasuke was now the father of a healthy little girl and Naruto sincerely found it all too ironic.

Naruto had always envisioned that Sarada would take after Sasuke, with the same dark hair and eyes. For some reason, it seemed only natural - after all, Boruto took after Naruto himself, and certain things seemed irrefutable when it came to him and Sasuke, as if destiny itself had written it all down in stone to be this perfectly predictable.

Several months (or little over a year, Naruto couldn’t tell) had passed since he and Sasuke had last seen each other. It felt like such a long time had gone by, and yet so many things had happened in
the meantime that made these events seem unreal. It felt like several years had gone by. Sometimes, Naruto wished they had.

Sasuke’s increasing closeness to the village had made itself known to Naruto like a strong breeze that had enveloped him. An invisible hand had seemed to close around his heart and squeeze it, rendering him powerless.

Sasuke was coming. The thought of seeing him once more was accompanied by an eerie sense of apprehension.

Naruto, many times, thought about what would happen once he came face to face with his friend, so he had imagined hundreds of possible case-scenarios, dialogues and reactions on both their parts to a point where it had become an almost obsessive daily train of thought.

However, as soon as he felt Sasuke’s feet stepping inside the village, Naruto already knew that there was no way he’d ever be able to predict what would happen once he was in the same physical space as Sasuke, and honestly, it had stopped bothering him a long time ago. As well as they knew each other, everything about ‘them’ as a duo would always be unpredictable to both. Even if they could read each other’s hearts and, sometimes, minds, some things seemed to go beyond their own will and instinct.

Lying to himself was no longer an option - Sasuke had taught him that - so he had long since accepted the fact that the element of surprise scared as much as excited him immensely.

In fact...

It was a sort of luxurious and alluring darkness that Naruto couldn’t escape from, neither did he want to. It was like a drug he didn’t want to stop being addicted to because it made him feel things he couldn’t feel anywhere else. He felt the most alive whenever Sasuke was involved, and this was a fact he couldn’t refute.

Naruto had been busy with work, so he didn’t witness Sasuke’s return. He could feel Sasuke’s presence, though, and it made him feel on edge like he hadn’t in a long time. However, he had decided not to interfere until he saw how things would unfold. Sasuke surely had his own way of dealing with his situation, and Naruto wanted to see what would come of it. Besides, he already knew Sasuke probably wouldn’t come to him unless he couldn’t help it. That was how they had left things the last time they’d been together.

The village whispered incessantly during the first couple of days. It wasn’t as if it was news by now (Kakashi and team 7 made sure of it), but people still wondered about things, and everyone wanted to get a glimpse of the Uchiha baby. Naruto refused to look for Sasuke and Sakura - he didn’t want to get in the way of whatever it was that they had to do with their lives from now on.

Curiosity made him fidgety and exasperated, but he fought strongly against himself. He had better things to do, so he kept telling himself; bigger things to concern himself with, and if neither Sasuke nor Sakura had felt the need to ask for his help so far, he wouldn’t come crawling to them either - he had learned how to keep his pride.

However, the fact that Sasuke and Sakura seemed to be doing things silently and without considering his presence drove him crazy, even though he kept telling himself that he understood it. He did understand, but there was no helping the way he felt.

All their friends kept asking questions Naruto couldn’t answer and no-one (not even Ino) seemed to know what was really going on. Since no-one knew the truth behind all these secretive moves, it was
expected that all sorts of made up stories would start to come to life, all of them ludicrous. But who
was Naruto to defend them when not even he knew the real story behind Sasuke’s and Sakura’s
relationship?

Thanks to Sai’s ever attentive ears, Naruto had come to know that there was a rumour about Sasuke
and Sakura having gotten married sometime during that fateful week - a bland ceremony with only
Sakura’s parents as witnesses. He tried to not feel hurt that he wasn’t invited, but then again, he
knew how he had felt about inviting Sasuke to his own wedding, so it wasn’t like this was
unexpected - he just thought that it wasn’t fair that they kept everyone at a distance.

Sakura suddenly appeared at their doorstep one evening, all smiles and joy and a tiny baby in her
arms, but no sign of her supposed husband. Sasuke was busy, she had said, with a far too loud laugh,
but she had wanted to introduce Sarada to them, and meet little Boruto. She looked a little out of
herself, and her good-spirits were so out of character that Naruto thought she seemed almost
hysterical. From the look Hinata exchanged with him, she felt the same way. Regardless, they invited
Sakura for dinner and played the part of happy hosts.

Meeting Uchiha Sarada was a painful, yet joyful experience for Naruto. The baby girl was, for now,
all Sasuke - pale complexion and dark, beautiful huge eyes and messy hair - not a trace of Sakura at
all. Then again, babies never resembled their parents at such a young age. Either way, most of
Sarada’s traits were Sasuke’s. His fantasies coming true made him feel more than a little
overwhelmed.

Boruto, his son, took after him. Sarada, Sasuke’s daughter, took after Sasuke. Naruto knew he’d
laugh bitterly at the irony in the future. At least he hoped so.

Holding Sasuke’s child in his arms was an experience similar to the one he had felt when holding
Boruto for the first time - the loneliness and elation were there - so he had been expecting it already.
The tears of joy came as no surprise, and of course, Sakura teased him about it, but clearly her heart
wasn’t in it. For some reason, she took Sarada away from his hold before he could even let the
baby’s warmth reach him. It made him unbearably sad, but he had learned that keeping his pride
intact was an important life hack, so he forced himself to mask his feelings behind a smile and gentle
words.

Still, he avoided eye contact with her just as much as she did. There were so many things he wanted
to talk to Sakura about, but it seemed far too difficult and it wasn’t fair - things weren’t supposed to
ever be this strained between them.

They were friends, weren’t they? Family. So, when had things become so irreversibly strange for
them?

Sarada was an Uchiha. His two best friends’ blood. He was sure Sarada would be as beautiful as
Sasuke when she grew up. The feeling of protectiveness towards Sarada was strong- Naruto knew
he’d keep an eye out for her no matter what.

Seeing Boruto and Sarada lying side by side on Naruto’s bed was unexpectedly difficult, and yet, it
filled Naruto’s heart with something akin to pride and devotion. It was a vision that fascinated and
terrified him, making his heart race and his stomach churn. He didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or
break down, so he did neither, forcing himself to shut down his emotions and put a smile on his face.

*They could as well be ours…*

He felt hysterical, too.
He wished Sasuke was there to see this sort of sight with him. He wished Sasuke would hold his Boruto in his arms like he had held Sarada, but he knew in his heart that it wouldn’t happen. The feeling was excruciating, but he was already pro at pushing it aside.

Sakura helped Hinata and Naruto making dinner. She was in high spirits it seemed, and unusually talked her mouth off about everything that came to her mind - to keep the silence from settling in - but never once did she say a word about Sasuke or her time away from Konoha. They didn’t ask anything either. Sakura kept talking to Hinata, but made it sound as if she was talking to Naruto as well, only she wasn’t. Naruto pretended that he didn’t notice it. Hinata was clearly uncomfortable but tried her best to be a delicate and pleasant host.

In Naruto’s mind, though, throughout the forced pleasantries, all he could think of was where the hell Sasuke was. He wanted to fucking see him.

Was Sasuke alone right now? Had he had dinner already? What was he doing? Was he even feeling well and mighty composed, or was he was somehow as distressed by being in Konoha as Naruto was by having him there?

What was going on? Why did Sakura seem so strange? She had what she had always wanted, right? Sasuke had caved in, they had fucked and built a family and gotten married. Wasn’t it just perfect, all her dreams coming true? She had more than Naruto ever would.

Ultimately, she had won.

So why… did it feel like nothing made sense? Why did he have this nagging feeling that he was missing something? That something terribly wrong made this world feel unfamiliar and hard to comprehend?

_Sasuke… why aren’t you here?_

He knew Sasuke had said that once Naruto got married they’d only see each other if strictly necessary. Naruto could understand Sasuke’s logic considering how much the circumstances had changed their lives and forced their relationship to change, too, in some ways.

But wasn’t this too much?

Why did it always have to be like this? Always this black or white hell between them - everything or nothing.

Their lives were unfortunately miles apart from each other no matter how similar their situations were at this point.

He understood, he really did. He understood that there were certain things about Sasuke’s life that were none of his business regardless of what Naruto himself thought or felt. It wasn’t as though Sasuke needed to explain anything to him - they owed nothing to each other at this point.

Still, he couldn’t help but want to know and want for things to be different. Why couldn’t they be different? Why did it have to be like this?

Why did it have to _feel_ like this?

Was he simply doomed to wonder about Sasuke forever - to desire the concept that formed _them_ forever? To keep reaching out for something he had but that was no longer in his grasp? To have to settle for the painful boundaries Sasuke kept establishing?
Was he supposed to watch these events unfolding and simply accept that there was nothing he could do to change them?

Naruto could barely breathe, and yet he stood very still in front of Kakashi’s desk, forcing himself to look outside the window behind the Hokage. Sasuke was standing right next to him, tall and imposing, and all Naruto wanted to do was stare at his profile to make sure he wasn’t dreaming, but he didn’t trust himself not to be emotional.

This wasn’t how he had envisioned his reunion with Sasuke at all, though. They hadn’t even talked to each other yet.

“You took a while to come to me, but I suppose you were busy. Congratulations on the baby, and getting married,” Kakashi was saying to Sasuke, his tone polite but clearly sarcastic. “Thank you for inviting us to the wedding.”

“There was no wedding, just paper signing,” Sasuke dismissed. His voice was low and deep, and made goose bumps rise on Naruto’s skin. “That’s not what I came here to talk about.”

Naruto’s feet shifted uncomfortably as he put both his hands behind his back, rolling his shoulders slowly. It was as if the weight of Sasuke’s closeness took a toll on his very being. They weren’t even that close, not even in arm’s reach, and yet he could feel Sasuke’s firm heartbeat in his very body and smell his scent - soapy, clean and simple, but distinctive.

He swallowed hard. Unceremoniously, Sasuke rummaged the contents of the satchel he had strapped across his chest and took out a few scrolls that he placed upon Kakashi’s desk. The Hokage didn’t seem surprised as he picked one up and rolled it open. “These are not original,” Kakashi noted.

“You can’t possibly expect me to simply deliver them to Konoha’s care after the trouble I had to get them.”

“You can’t expect me to be able to do anything with mere copies, Sasuke,” Kakashi grunted, with a sigh.

“That right there is still confidential and valuable information on Uchiha genetics and copies of stolen official reports,” Sasuke retorted. “Some of them belonged to underlings of Tobirama Senju.” Naruto bit on his lower lip as Sasuke proceeded. “I’m putting together Uchiha history, Kakashi. Slowly, I’m building a chronological order until I reach Itachi, and I intend to bring it all to life and make it all real, official. I will accomplish it.”

“Even if this is valuable information, Sasuke, it’s still not…”

“Give me access to Konoha’s top secret files and I’ll give the originals to you,” Sasuke cut sharply. “I told you I’d get the information, and I’m working on it. I will get to the bottom of this. You need to work on it with me, as the village’s Hokage.”

Naruto couldn’t help but glance at Sasuke now, needing to see his face and what expression he was making. It was a mistake.

“You know very well that I can’t do that; not yet,” Kakashi said, putting the scroll down. “Your determination to create an official document on Uchiha history and cleaning up your brother’s name is admirable, but the council and the Daimyo don’t really care about making your clan look any different in the world’s eyes. You are currently an asset, a powerful beast tamed by the system, but a wild and an unpredictable one all the same. Giving you access to confidential information would be
the same as giving you the keys to Konoha’s destruction. You haven’t proven yourself enough, Sasuke, and denying us the original scrolls isn’t going to help.”

Naruto swallowed down the urge to reach out towards Sasuke in some way, because even if his friend’s stoic expression didn’t change, his energy swirled in anger and his eyes were intense enough to make him stop breathing. The conversation made him irrationally angry, too, but he understood where Kakashi was coming from. It didn’t matter their feelings about Sasuke or their trust in his convictions - in the end, it was the eyes of the shinobi world that made the difference.

Naruto promised himself that he’d change that, too, as soon as he became Hokage. Not for the first time, he hated how powerless he still was.

Sasuke inhaled sharply through his nose, and when he spoke, his voice was collected. “You will read it, though, won’t you? And help me bring the pieces together?”

Kakashi observed him in a way that could be considered fond. “As long as you remain loyal to me and this village, I will help you and do whatever is in my power to back you up and give you credit,” he muttered, with a single affirmative nod of his head. “I feel your pain, Sasuke, and I understand your motivation. As Hokage, I too want the truth to be out there because there are things the shinobi world should know so real peace and trust can be achieved. But I’m merely one person juggling thousands of different matters that concern this place and the fire country, which is why there are many people behind me that have the power to make decisions. There is only so much I can do and allow by my own will alone.”

“I know that.” Sasuke straightened his back. “How long? What should I do to get that kind of trust?”

“I don’t know,” Kakashi admitted. “It hasn’t been that long since you were trying to destroy this place, and not that long since you started working with us. Regardless, your past stains you, and you know you can’t simply have a normal life, as a shinobi, within these walls. People know what you do, but you don’t have an official title yet. Only once this government gives you one can we even start making suggestions to put things in motion.”

Sasuke didn’t say anything for a few seconds, but his stance never wavered. Naruto could feel the bubbling frustration running through Sasuke’s veins as if it was his own. “I understand,” Sasuke ended up saying, putting a definite end to the conversation.

Kakashi seemed genuinely relieved. “Well, but you did want Naruto here for this ‘reunion’, and I’m sure he wouldn’t be necessary if we were just going to discuss the Uchiha and Itachi,” he said good-naturedly, changing the subject. “Let’s hear what else you have to say.”

In spite of himself, Naruto now looked openly at his friend expectantly, feeling a sense of excitement he couldn’t contain. He didn’t know what he expected, and he hated that he was, in fact, expecting something, anything at all from Sasuke.

Anything. He would do anything if he could just manage to give Sasuke something, share something with him, even if for a little while, bring back just...

“I know you have access to every move I make inside Konoha, Kakashi.” Once again, Sasuke was straightforward. “By now, surely you know I have placed all my money under Sakura’s name as well.”

“It was an impressive amount, too,” Kakashi acknowledged, with a nod.

“Sakura wants to purchase a house, and I have agreed to it,” Sasuke told them, his tone far too
business-like for Naruto’s liking. “Regardless of how much money I have, it’s still not enough to pay for the whole thing, obviously.”

“You’re not going to ask us to lend you money, are you?” Kakashi teased, but there was still a hint of agitation in his words.

Sasuke actually narrowed his eyes at him, displeased. “No, that’s not what this is about at all. I need a new bank account, one that Sakura doesn’t have access to. And I need Naruto to manage it.”

Turning on his heels so he was facing his friend, Naruto’s mouth fell open in surprise. “Excuse me?”

“You should explain yourself better, because I can’t understand your intentions.” Kakashi’s playful tone disappeared completely.

“It’s just as I said,” Sasuke grumbled, looking at Naruto briefly from the corner of his eyes before looking at Kakashi once more. “The money I’m currently making by working for Konoha will be sent to the account Sakura now has access to. However, I want a percentage of its total amount to go to a separate account under your exclusive surveillance and Naruto’s management. I can’t open a new account with my name on it since the council follows my every move, so I need this account to be under someone else’s name, and that someone needs to be of trustworthy. But I also need it to be approved by you, Kakashi, and protected by you so I know the council won’t be questioning Naruto’s affairs.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but surely you understand I need to know the reason as to why you’d want to open a secret account under someone else’s name without the knowledge of your family,” Kakashi mumbled, with a frown, as if all of this was suddenly very bothersome.

Sasuke actually tilted his head down slightly, clearly choosing his words carefully. “There is no particular reason other than me wanting to put some money aside,” he ended up saying, but Naruto could tell from his energy that there was something else behind it. “I don’t live here. I don’t want the money I need while travelling to be involved in the steady income that reaches Sakura and Sarada.”

“You barely spend any money at all, Sasuke,” Kakashi pointed out, not without sounding a bit impressed by the fact.

“Yes, but I still want to keep track of my own personal part; plus, it might come in handy someday in the future. We never know what can happen and I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

Kakashi watched him for a while before clearing his throat. “That still doesn’t explain why you don’t want your name in this account, nor why you don’t want Sakura to know about it.”

“Because I want this to be between me and Naruto, and no-one else.”

“Now wait a minute, Sasuke; you didn’t ask for my opinion on this!” Naruto barked loudly, clenching his fists at his sides and feeling his cheeks flaring up unexpectedly. Why would Sasuke want such a thing? Why would he even say such a thing?

When Sasuke’s mismatched eyes met his, he actually jumped a little. “Aren’t you going to do it?” Sasuke questioned.

Naruto huffed in frustration. “That’s not what I said…”

“It’s also money that I’m probably going to invest at some point,” Sasuke interrupted, cutting Naruto short, but not moving his stare away from the other’s ferocious one. “Because Sarada isn’t my only child.”
“What?!" Naruto was sure Kakashi’s surprised gasp had joined his own.

Sasuke actually had the audacity of groaning as if all of this was very tenuous to him. In spite of himself, Naruto started to feel personally insulted. As if everything else hadn’t been enough, how dare Sasuke hide such an important thing from him?

“I have rescued a boy from one of Orochimaru’s hideouts a few months back.” Sasuke’s casual way of delivering the news both horrified and pissed Naruto off further. “He was the product of an experiment and was about to be discarded, so I saved him. It was before Sarada ever existed. He’s about five or six years old, I don’t really know.”

Sasuke’s eyes were strong and unblinking as he and Naruto stared at each other. There was a challenging glint there.

Before Sarada? That meant Sasuke had adopted the kid several months ago. Months. And only now...

“No-one knows about this but Orochimaru and Gaara, and now the two of you. I expect it to remain a secret for the time being.”

Gaara of all people knew?

Naruto felt the world shaking under his feet and his vision blurring. He could barely rationalize he was so angry, all he could do was clench his teeth.

He couldn’t help but feel crushingly betrayed, and he knew it was a childish feeling and that he couldn’t simply think that he had the right to be part of anything in Sasuke’s private life, but...

It still hurt. And the way Sasuke’s gaze seemed to test Naruto did nothing to ease him.

The silence that followed Sasuke’s words was chilling, but it was Kakashi who broke it. “I’m speechless.”

“I have to leave, soon. My son is waiting for me,” Sasuke said, his tone becoming surprisingly humble. “I would be... grateful... if you two could do this for me before I left.”

“What about Sarada?” Naruto spat, forcing the constriction around his throat to loosen up. “And Sakura-chan? You’re just going to drop a bomb, make demands and then fucking leave, again, just like that? You just got married, Sasuke! Your daughter is just a baby!”

“I’ve already done what I needed to do here in Konoha,” Sasuke said, quirking an eyebrow upwards as if it was the obvious answer. “Sarada’s existence, and my marriage, will not stand in the way of the other things I must do. I will not stop being a shinobi just to live here and ‘be’ with them. That makes no sense to me. It’s not something I can do since it’s my job to provide intel for Kakashi and work for the village, not inside of it.”

“Why didn’t you fucking tell me, Sasuke!” Naruto yelled, taking a single step closer to Sasuke - that brought them close enough to be considered a bit threatening - his body tense with rage. “A fucking son?! You adopted a kid and didn’t tell anyone and now you just expect it to be acceptable when you’ve been lying to everyone, including Sakura-chan?!”

“Omitting an event isn’t the same thing as lying,” Sasuke countered coolly, completely unfazed by Naruto’s approach. He even turned towards Naruto so they were standing face to face. “Sakura knows my plans already, and she doesn’t expect me to stick around randomly like you do.”
Naruto couldn’t help but gasp at the fucking nerve. Without thinking, he reached out and grabbed for Sasuke’s collar with both hands to brusquely pull him close until their faces were mere inches away from each other. He felt the sudden tension of Sasuke’s own body and the almost imperceptible way Sasuke’s breath caught abruptly. He could feel the warmth that emanated from his friend, and the equally hot breath that reached his face. It all made his heart race for more reasons than just his anger but he wasn’t going to dwell on it.

“Fuck you,” he hissed, through clenched teeth. “How are you even going to pull this off? Why didn’t you fucking tell me? I could’ve helped, I could’ve…”

“You have nothing to do with my decisions,” Sasuke hissed back, defiantly, the dismissal hitting Naruto like a slap. “Your family is here.”

“So is yours!”

“My family out there is currently needing me,” Sasuke said, putting emphasis on every word, and their faces were so dangerously close it made it impossible for Naruto to breathe without fearing his own disgrace, but he could tell Sasuke looked pissed. A hand came to rest at one Naruto had at his collar, squeezing it hard and painfully. “This family is well protected. They have you and all their friends.”

“How can you say that…” Naruto whispered, before swallowing hard - it was even hard to speak. “What are you even thinking? How can you speak like this when you just married Sakura-chan…”

“It served a purpose, Naruto.”

He was going to lose it, either to lust, love, frustration or anger, he was going to lose it.

“I’m going to fuck your face up if you don’t stop…” Naruto choked out. “I’m fucking going to…”

“Boys, please give each other some personal space, you’re making me uncomfortable,” Kakashi’s voice got in the way and forced Naruto to realize the position he was in and that they were not alone. Still, his own body was too rigid to move, so he didn’t, challengingly keeping his face close to Sasuke’s and not letting go. “Sasuke is a free man, and personally, I only care about his work for Konoha being done, so I’m not going to judge or make assumptions about his decisions.”

“But!”

“We will create that account, so long as Naruto decides to cooperate,” Kakashi said, tiredly. “Now, since it’s lunch time, I think I’ll be going out for a bit. You two can have the office for a few minutes and fix this… whatever it is that’s happening right now.”

“There is no need since there’s nothing to fix between us,” Sasuke said, intent on putting a definite ending to that conversation. He tugged at Naruto’s hand and forced him to let go of his collar, which Naruto did on reflex because he knew he couldn’t simply let his emotions out since he had no idea what they’d make him do. Letting Sasuke handle it was the answer, and the rational part of Naruto’s brain understood this, even though he wanted so much more, to talk more, to press their buttons further, to yell, to unleash chaos between them no matter in what shape it might manifest itself.

He just didn’t want it to end. He wanted answers, he wanted solutions - for them, for right now, for everything.

Sasuke leaned away slightly so they could look at each other properly. His expression softened the slightest bit but didn’t lose its overpowering resolution. Sasuke hadn’t released Naruto’s wrist yet, but his grip had relaxed considerably. Naruto could only chew on his lower lip, feeling his chest tight
and an odd sense of sadness and absolute helplessness that was greater than his fury and shock.

“Will you do it or not, Naruto?” Sasuke then asked, infuriatingly calm.

Were they really just going to leave it like this? Was this how they’d interact, was this all Sasuke had to say? Was Sasuke just going to keep on making demands and dropping bombs and simply dealing with everything by himself without giving a fuck about what other people wanted or how his decisions affected others?

_It’s because you know we can’t turn away from you no matter what..._

Several things passed between them in the few silent seconds that they spent looking into each other’s eyes. “You know I will,” Naruto muttered, defeated. There wasn’t much he could do or say in this situation, not with Kakashi right there. There wasn’t a lot that they could tell each other, not a lot they could talk about.

“Thank you.” Sasuke sounded sincere and for just a moment Naruto almost forgot about all the conflicting feelings inside him.

Unexpectedly, Sasuke blew shortly on Naruto’s face, making him blink several times, confusedly. It was an innocent, almost playful action. However, for some reason, it made goose bumps rise all over Naruto’s skin and a familiar rush of adrenaline travel down his body. Then, Sasuke let go of his wrist and stepped away from him until they were no longer in contact.

If anything, Naruto felt lost, looking at Sasuke’s now closed expression as he turned away from him and again towards Kakashi. The two men were exchanging words but they didn’t register on Naruto’s brain. He felt empty. Everything felt empty.

Before he knew it, Sasuke was turning his back on them and leaving the office. Naruto wanted to call out to him, to run after him and maybe kick his sorry ass, but found that he didn’t have the strength.

_Wait for me_, he wanted to say.

What was Sasuke even thinking that made sense only to him?

But Naruto wanted to understand, to see things the way Sasuke did, feel things the way Sasuke did.

_Take me with you..._

_Why can’t I just..._

Kakashi’s next words and instructions fell on deaf ears. Naruto didn’t feel like he’d be himself again for a while.

000

Sasuke had only stayed in Konoha for a few days, but even those felt like too many to Hinata.

The constant uneasiness she had felt during those seemingly never ending days made her feel guilty. She was being stupid, she knew, but she couldn’t help herself when the centre of her husband’s world was so close.

Sasuke had been close enough to touch, and definitely close enough for Naruto to want to at least try to reach out to him. There was nothing more terrifying to her than that.
Not that she wasn’t aware that Uchiha Sasuke’s existence haunted Naruto every single second of his day. When one thought of this, it became far too easy to feel depressed and irrationally scared, but Hinata was no longer the sort of woman that ran away and belittled her own worth. After all, she was married to one of the shinobi world’s greatest heroes, the man of her dreams. She, alone, had achieved it. Despite how long it had taken for Naruto to look at her and see her, she had managed to pull through and shine - to become a worthy person in his eyes, worthy enough to love, to be more than a shinobi companion, to stand out from all of Naruto’s friends.

She was his wife, the woman he had chosen to have a relationship with, the woman he had chosen to have a family with.

She was the woman he had chosen instead of the person who meant the most to him in the world.

They were happy. Naruto loved her, took care of her. They were friends, and lovers, and had good dynamics. Their sex life was healthy and pretty good; they worked together to take care of their home and of their beautiful, perfect baby boy. They were a wonderful team. One could almost say that they were the perfect couple, the kind that is book-like ideal, and the kind that girls dreamt of while growing up.

She had no reason to be scared. She had been chosen. This life, with her, had been Naruto’s choice. Nothing could change that.

Only it never seemed to be enough when she knew perfectly well that Naruto’s heart was not fulfilled by this perfection at all.

Regardless of how honest Naruto’s feelings for their life together were, Naruto’s soul belonged somewhere else, and his thoughts, his longing, would always belong somewhere else.

This wasn’t his fault. She knew Naruto’s and Sasuke’s past together wasn’t something people from the outside would ever understand, and she understood that what connected them had been written by fate itself. It was what it was, and it wasn’t something she wanted to understand - she had long since accepted that there were things about her husband she was better off not knowing for her own sake.

But being aware of these things was difficult. Knowing her husband thought of someone else, wanted someone else, could feel someone else…

Knowing their feelings were connected in ways no-one else could reach…

How could she not be affected by this? But what was there to do? What could she possibly do that wouldn’t ruin her relationship with Naruto, destroy their family and make him feel even more miserable than he already did?

Because Naruto was miserable. Well, he was happy with her, but only as happy as his own mental fantasy allowed him to be. Half of him was embracing this life he had idealized while the other half clung to whatever memories of times shared with Sasuke that he couldn’t, wouldn’t let go of.

It was all genuine, yet it was all a lie. Hinata preferred to believe the lie she had created for herself so she could live with the reality of Naruto’s situation - it was easier that way.

So, she pretended that she didn’t understand that Naruto made love to her automatically. She pretended that she didn’t see the sadness and apathy in his eyes on some days, or the constant frustrated flush in his cheeks when the longing was painful to bear.

She didn’t mind being the receptacle of his needs, the one who would help him carry out the burden
of his feelings for his bond with Sasuke. By acknowledging Sasuke and Naruto for what they were to herself from the very start, Hinata had been prepared to live life just like this - like Naruto’s second best. Because that’s what she was. Even if Naruto had chosen her…

As Sakura had once said, Naruto and Sasuke were selfish for each other, but also selfless. No matter what, they were two people that were very different from each other. Circumstances alone had led Naruto to Hinata, nothing more.

So, what was there to do? Even if she had accepted her fate and chosen to love and support Naruto, could she really just stand by doing nothing forever? For how long could this weight in her heart exist? For how long could she pretend that she didn’t know Naruto’s feelings, that she didn’t see his desire, his pain?

Did she even want to? Was this fake image of her and Naruto preserving them or simply thickening the walls that divided them?

It was all very tiring. She didn’t like being scared, but more importantly, she didn’t like being scared of not being able to tear down those walls.

Because seeing Naruto’s sadness made her feel incompetent. It hurt knowing she wasn’t the one who knew how to make it go away, but if there was a way she could at least contribute to the solution of a problem, then she wanted to be able to help.

She had always wanted Naruto, had always looked up to him, always jealous of those who were able to make him smile. Now, she was standing right next to him as his wife and the last thing she wanted was to be powerless when it came to him.

She wanted Naruto to trust her, to rely on her, to know she would love him forever. He was her everything, the strength that had helped her stand up and walk so many times in the past, and while she knew she had no light in Naruto’s eyes compared to Sasuke, she still wanted to be seen, acknowledged, respected. She wanted to be a confident, a shelter. She didn’t want walls dividing her and Naruto, and she didn’t want to be left in the shadows.

She was in Naruto’s life for a reason. She had to be Naruto’s best friend next to Sasuke and the person closest to his heart. He had to trust her in ways he didn’t trust Sakura, or Kakashi, or Shikamaru. Not even Iruka. She had to be better than all of them, even if she’d never out best Sasuke.

Just thinking about it made her feel sick, but it didn’t matter. She knew what she had to do to nurture her bond with Naruto and protect their life, their family, and their simple, beautiful love.

Sasuke was a force to be reckoned with. He and Naruto’s souls were bound, their fates linked until the end of times. Sasuke possessed, as a man and as an individual, a beauty hard to match. He was strong, powerful, fearless, challenging, threatening, unpredictable, unreadable, overwhelming and breath-taking. She didn’t think Naruto feared him at all, and yet, she was sure something about Sasuke’s overpowering and intimidating existence excited him. She was aware that these were things that lit a fire in Naruto’s passion for the other man.

Sasuke made her shiver. She tried to think of him as just another man - an ordinary man - but deep inside, she felt like they were worlds apart and that she could never reach him. No-one could, except for Naruto. She didn’t understand him at all, and sometimes, she wished she did, but then immediately regretted it. He was the scariest person she had ever met.

Even if he was the hurricane that brought chaos to Naruto’s world, she couldn’t bring herself to hate
him for some reason. In fact, in spite of herself…

She was grateful that Naruto had someone who fulfilled him so completely, someone who was equal to him, someone who would always fight him the way he needed, who would protect him with his very life and who would love him unconditionally and fill that bottomless loneliness. It was a reassuring thought that she didn’t understand, but…

She supposed this was proof of just how much she loved Naruto.

Of course, she was jealous. Sometimes that jealousy was so strong she wished Sasuke would just disappear, but then guilt ate at her in Naruto’s behalf.

It should’ve been a relief when Sasuke and Sakura came back with a child and got married, only it wasn’t. Hinata didn’t know a lot about Sasuke, but from the way things had gone, she knew enough to share Naruto’s confusion and uneasiness. From Sasuke’s actions he hadn’t changed miraculously in order to suddenly fall in love with Sakura, plus, Sakura wasn’t herself at all, and surely, there was more than what was meeting the eye. Sakura wasn’t stupid, she and Hinata had a certain situation in common, so what, exactly, was going on?

Sakura wasn’t saying anything, just pretending everything was fine and telling the whole world about her marriage with Sasuke (even though they didn’t even have wedding rings) and showing Sarada off, but she said nothing of how things had come down to this. Hinata had realized that Sakura was the one who had unexpectedly closed the doors between them for some reason she couldn’t understand.

Were they no longer in this together? Or maybe it was just her living the momentary high of becoming officially an Uchiha bride and finally having her own dream coming true.

But… she was supposed to know it wasn’t completely real. She had been aware of it from the start, she couldn’t possibly think things were different now, right? Because they would never change. Never. Accepting it, Hinata, thought, was probably the best shortcut to some form of contentment.

All in its due time. She had more to worry about than Sakura at this point. Sasuke was finally gone once more, but this didn’t placate her since it meant yet another season of Naruto’s emotional distress, and she was already predicting a horrible downfall this time. From Naruto’s sour moods during Sasuke’s short stay, she had realized that those two hadn’t exactly been on the best terms, and very likely had barely spoken to each other, let alone do… other things.

Hinata didn’t know if this relieved her or made her feel unsettled. Being on bad terms with Sasuke for whatever reason would always take its toll on Naruto’s heart and soul, and Hinata feared the thought that her husband would be mulling over this for an indefinable amount of time.

No, she had to look out for him.

Boruto was sleeping in his crib on their room as Hinata was making sandwiches in the kitchen. She heard keys entering the lock in the front door, alerting her that Naruto was home at just the expected time. He called out a grumpy ‘I’m home’ as the sound of him taking off his shoes and vest could be heard. Her heart burst with nervousness. She started making another sandwich just as she heard Naruto entering the kitchen. She didn’t look up as he approached her, but once he stopped next to her to put a hand on her shoulder, she turned her head to the side so he could place a small kiss on her lips.

“Hey,” he said, massaging her shoulder gently. “How are you? Is Boruto sleeping?”
“I’m fine, and yes, he finally is,” she muttered, smiling up at her husband and meeting blue eyes that seemed to have lost some form of life over the last few weeks - and even more in the past few days. “Are you hungry? I just brewed some tea and I’m almost done making sandwiches.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“Have a seat, then.”

Naruto leaned in to kiss her cheek affectionately this time before making his way to the table at the centre of the small kitchen and slumping down in a chair.

Taking a deep breath, Hinata looked over her shoulder at the love of her life. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Naruto sighed, running a hand over his hair and shrugging. “Just really tired, I guess.”

After eyeing him for a while, Hinata turned her attention back to the sandwiches. It was now or never. She had to be subtle, but in a way that would make Naruto understand her intentions. “Did you hear? Sasuke-kun has left the village again.”

She could almost swear the sudden tension in Naruto’s body caused the air to thicken. “I know,” he said, sounding empty. Hinata waited for him to say something else, but he didn’t. Mustering up her courage, she calmly reached up to open the cupboard doors and retrieve two plain teacups. She carried them to the table, setting down one in front of Naruto and another one across from him.

“Before this, Sasuke-kun was away for a long time,” she dared to comment, casually. “Did you two manage to catch up?”

She chanced a glance at Naruto but he wasn’t looking at her, vaguely watching some pattern on the tablecloth. “Apart from that day with Kakashi-sensei where we discussed issue of his phantom account under my name that I told you about I haven’t been with him at all,” he muttered. Then, he bit on his lower lip and his eyes seemed to lose their light further even if he was clearly making an effort to sound casual. “He just vanished. I didn’t get to see or talk to him since then.”

She hated how old he sounded.

“That’s really unfortunate,” she said, sincerely, turning around to grab for the teapot from the stove. “I’m sure he was very busy.”

To her surprise, Naruto laughed dryly. “He’s just being an ass, doing everything by himself and not wanting others to lend a hand,” he hissed, a bit of resentment finally showing. “Sometimes I wonder why I worry so much about him. Maybe I’m the only one who always has things I want to tell him.”

Hinata couldn’t be sure if this last part was meant for her to hear or if the words had slipped his mouth without his consent. Either way, he hadn’t noticed, nor seemed upset at himself.

“I’m sure that’s not the case,” she assured him, pouring him some tea carefully, the steam reaching her face and offering a bit of comfort. “If you missed him, then there’s no doubt that he’s missed you too.”

Her words had been chosen carefully. She didn’t look at Naruto, but could tell his attention had been captured.

“That’s not really relevant when he’s being a fucking bastard, is it?” Naruto retorted, sounding a bit confused as she moved away to pour herself some tea now. She felt him swallowing hard. “It doesn’t really matter. Sasuke’s gone.”
“Are you okay with that?” She asked, before she could stop herself, moving to place the teapot over the stove again and picking up the plate of sandwiches from the counter. Naruto was watching her with a startling intensity now but she remained calm, not meeting his eyes. “I’m surprised you didn’t try to talk to him by force, to be honest.”

“He’s married to Sakura-chan now, and there’s Sarada-chan, too; I can’t simply...” Hinata pretended that she didn’t notice the way his voice cracked as she placed the plate in the middle of the table before moving to sit on the chair across from him. “It’s not like we’re kids anymore. We don’t... step into each other’s affairs, nor violate each other’s personal lives anymore. It’s just the way it is.”

They had never spoken so openly about Sasuke before, Hinata realized. In fact, apart from trivial mentions of Sasuke, they had never spoken about him at all because the man had always felt like a sacred entity to Naruto, someone with whom he had shared things no-one was worthy enough to be privy of. Sasuke had always been some sort of taboo.

Inhaling gently, she allowed her clear eyes to look at Naruto’s awaiting ones. Trying to relax, she moved both her hands so they were cradling the teacup. “So, you’re telling me you’re just going to let another year and something go by before you two see each other again?”

There was no malice in her question, just gentle curiosity, but Naruto seemed taken aback all the same. “We write to each other,” he confessed, something Hinata had guessed long ago.

Inhaling gently, she allowed her clear eyes to look at Naruto’s awaiting ones. Trying to relax, she moved both her hands so they were cradling the teacup. “So, you’re telling me you’re just going to let another year and something go by before you two see each other again?”

There was no malice in her question, just gentle curiosity, but Naruto seemed taken aback all the same. “We write to each other,” he confessed, something Hinata had guessed long ago.

In spite of herself and of how tight her heart felt, she offered him a lopsided smile. “And is that enough for you?”

Naruto looked so surprised one would almost say she had slapped him. She was glad he was beginning to catch up with her, because she wasn’t sure if she could be straightforward if he hadn’t. “What do you mean?” he asked.

With a sigh, she brought the teacup to her lips and sipped the clear beverage, allowing the warmth to engulf her and give her the necessary strength. There was no turning back now.

She lowered the teacup, making sure her expression was serious. “Naruto, I... I understand that you... care about Sasuke-kun... deeply,” she started, again, trying to be cautious in her approach. “I understand, very well, in fact, that you miss him and that he is the only one who can give you certain... things... that you need.”

Naruto’s mouth was slightly open. The sandwiches were left untouched. He released another laugh, this time, a nervous one, and scratched the back of his head. “What are you saying, Hinata? I don’t particularly need anything,” he said, louder than necessary and almost sounding like the little noisy kid he had once been. “I mean, yeah, of course I miss him, he’s my best friend, but...”

“You want to be with him,” Hinata cut firmly, almost flinching at her audacity when Naruto seemed slightly taken aback. “You want to see him and talk to him and spend time with him. Not having these things is draining you.”

She pressed her lips together. This was it. Once she violated Naruto’s and Sasuke’s territory, once she exposed their secret, everything would change, and even if it scared her like nothing else before, it was literally all she could do to hold on to her precious person.

She had to swallow hard to keep the tears from stinging her eyes. Her resolution had to be rock solid.

“I don’t want you to wither away, Naruto. All I want is for you to be happy; for that sadness inside of you to go away, even if it’s only temporary. I can’t do anything else when certain things are only
up to you two. There are things only he can give you, I know.” Naruto actually gasped, but she wouldn’t falter. “That sort of love you need from him isn’t something I can interfere with, and I don’t want to. I know I cannot fight against it, and I wouldn’t dare to. Just thinking that I could do something to make you unhappy, I…”

The words got stuck in her throat. She tried to clear it but it felt dry, swollen. Her ribcage felt too small for the sudden feebleness in her lungs. She took another sip of her tea, hoping it would help it all feel better than it did.

Naruto seemed to be speechless, but his eyes - those beautiful eyes that were the bluest in the world - seemed to have gained a new sparkle. He looked pale, yet his cheeks were flustered. It was as though he was torn between surprise and horror. In another situation, Hinata would’ve laughed.

“All I’m saying is he surely feels the same way and wants to be with you just as much regardless of his actions and words.” Better to let it all out than waste time with uncertainties, and Hinata had given up on being a coward. She was glad she sounded more in control than she felt. “I think… you should speak to Kakashi-san and ask for a few days off so you can go and meet Sasuke-kun. Surely, you’ll be able to find him easily, right? After all, you two are connected.”

“I…”

Hinata didn’t know how to deal with a speechless Naruto, but seeing that flame of life in his eyes was worth every excruciating moment of that conversation. They looked at each other for what felt like hours, millions of things being communicated between them - understanding, respect, confusion, pain, happiness, hope - but the only thing Hinata cared about was the honest overwhelming wave of affection and gratefulness she saw displayed on Naruto’s handsome features.

This was what she needed - all she needed. This sort of love, this understanding, this companionship. This was a mutual but silent pact that she’d always have his back, that she knew about him and Sasuke and that, no matter what, she’d let Naruto have at least a little bit of what he desired. If that made him happy and if it brought him closer, this was the only gift she could possibly offer him that he would ever find useful.

They didn’t need to talk about it. Naruto understood Hinata didn’t want details or excuses. She was simply giving him a free pass that he could use and that was the only thing they needed to settle between them, nothing more.

His features were filled with empathy for her - he understood knowing more about him and Sasuke would only destroy her, and she could tell he had no intention of hurting her.

He loved her. She knew that much, and that much alone was enough for all this to make sense.

For a minute, she thought he was going to cry. He was aching for her, hurting because his condition was hurting her.

He truly loved her. It wasn’t the same love he had for that man, but it was love all the same. As long as he could love her like this, and see only her, want only her by his side, that was enough.

She would never let him regret being the woman he chose to marry. She could be second best to a man, but she would not be second best to anyone else.

“It’s alright, you can go,” she reassured him, with a small nod and an encouraging smile even though
her voice was failing her. “I’m telling you to, actually.” Her chest quivered with emotion. “Our son and I will be waiting right here when you return, honey. We’ll always be right here, waiting for you to come home.”

The message was clear to Naruto, and so was Hinata’s dissimulated plea.

*Go, but return to us. Take what you need, do what you must, but come back.*

*Please, Naruto, is that too much to ask in return?*

But she couldn’t possibly say this out loud.

Naruto shook his head from side to side, a grateful, yet sad smile gracing his lips. He seemed even more drained than before, but his muscles had relaxed and for some reason, the air around him felt lighter, his stance a lot more relaxed and unburdened. She had been the cause for it.

“I love you, Hinata.” His whisper was clear, honest and gentle. His eyes held a kindness within them, for her, that made her feel powerful and important. Thanks to them, she could almost feel happy. Almost. “I hope you know it. I love you very much, no matter what.”

“I know,” she muttered shakily, clutching the teacup in both her hands tighter. “I just want what’s best for you. I only want you to be happy.”

And it was the truth. That was the only truth she could fight for, and the one truth that she had to be strong for.

Even if only for now, even if this truth would only help her buy as much time as she possibly could…

. All she could do was fight for Naruto for as long as he allowed her to. For as long as she could keep helping him be strong.

For as long as he could endure to ‘stay’.

“Thank you.”

Forever would never be real for them. And she probably knew it better than Naruto himself did.

The clock had started ticking long ago.

000

The feeling was strong and startled Sasuke violently. Like a premonition, a sense of *déjà vu*, he knew something was coming. Not exactly *something*, more like *who*. It was unmistakable. It was so strong it hit him with the force of a wild beast.

He looked up from his notebook, his eyes urgently scanning the centre of the village in front of him in that rather gloriously sunny afternoon, where several children of various ages were playing some made-up game with stones he hadn’t learnt yet. He easily found the figure of Katsuo crouched between two boys who were laughing. The group was noisy and was yelling at something happening on the dusty ground as a boy and a girl took turns playing the game. His son was smiling widely, blank eyes very unblinking as he watched whatever it was that was happening in the game. He was smiling, yet it looked awkward, still strangely distorted in those immaculate features he was still learning how to use. Regardless, Sasuke knew he was finally beginning to understand how to relate expressions with internal states of mind. He had progressed so much since arriving at the small
village, and yet, he still had a long way to go.

But he was stronger, more independent now. He had friends, even if he wasn’t able to talk yet, and he was more comfortable gesticulating his intentions in order to be understood. The kids around him were fine with it - they liked him and protected him.

He didn’t run yet, but he was able to walk on his own for long periods of time without collapsing.

Katsuo lifted a hand to brush the fringe away from his eyes. Sasuke’s heart seemed to inflate.

The man took a deep breath and looked up at the clear blue sky, lips parted so he could breathe more easily.

He could feel the rush of adrenaline, a sudden surge of anticipation, urgency, and happiness, but these feelings weren’t his - or rather, they mingled with his and fuelled them, blurring them to the point where he didn’t understand the things within him at that very moment.

What was he supposed to do now? He didn’t even know if he was angry or somehow… relieved? If he was looking forward to this or hesitant.

This… what was going to happen now?

He didn’t know if he was ready for this.

Either way, it wasn’t as if it mattered since there was no turning back. He had to deal with it now and see what would happen; there was no point in wondering or planning anything.

He quickly closed the notebook in his lap and shoved it inside his bag. Vaguely, he sensed Katsuo looking up at him in wonder as if sensing his distress, so he looked up and managed to offer him a small smile simply to ease his mind.

Then, he nimbly got to his feet. He was only wearing a pair of cream shorts and a linen sweater that was too big for him. He was aware that he looked ridiculous and maybe undignified to anyone outside of that village. He had flip flops made of straw on. Still, he dashed off and ran, somehow, knowing exactly where he was headed. He didn’t care about anything but the wild beating of his heart and the reality of another’s very soul throbbing within his veins, announcing chaos, intimacy and a growing closeness. The presence was approaching fast but not fast enough.

The village was soon left behind. The forest was dense and eerily quiet, but by now, Sasuke knew it like the back of his hand, so it was easy to avoid obstacles and know exactly the path he needed to take. The blood in his ears, his own raging breathing and the sound of his running feet crushing leaves and sticks was all he could hear. The calling that reached him was of a spiritual nature and couldn’t be described, familiar but somehow different. It seemed to grow stronger with every second that passed.

It didn’t take long for him to abruptly come to halt. Clumsier feet than his stumbled before stopping in their tracks, too.

Two elaborate breathings echoed in the forest as two contrasting sets of eyes met. Sasuke quickly took in Naruto’s appearance, dishevelled in his plain travelling clothes and clearly having been on the road, but not for as long as he should’ve been - it was obvious he had been trying to get there as fast as possible.

Sasuke shouldn’t have been surprised, but now he realized that he was. These sorts of things weren’t supposed to happen at this point, Naruto had no right…
He had no right to simply show up and look at him like that. He had no right to simply exist in this
every moment and make it feel like everything that had been falling apart was finally coming together.

“Naruto…” he blew out, unsure of why he was feeling so breathless for so little effort. “What are
you doing here?”

“I was summoned,” Naruto breathed back, with a sheepish grin Sasuke couldn’t return.

“I didn’t summon you,” he said.

Naruto’s grin softened. “You always summon me, even without realizing it,” he replied, gently. “Just
as I summon you.”

Maybe that was true, Sasuke realized, a bit annoyed at himself, but also…

Why was it so easy to let his guard down outside of Konoha? Why did he feel like the stoic armour
he had been wearing throughout all these months was about to fall apart completely?

Things weren’t supposed to be like this. Naruto wasn’t supposed to be there, Sasuke had
specifically...

“Listen, I’m not here to ask questions or make demands,” Naruto said quickly, probably seeing the
change in Sasuke’s suddenly cold expression. “If you don’t want to talk to me about what happened
during the time we were apart and you were away, fine, that’s your choice and I respect it. We have
our own separate lives and we don’t have to stick our noses where they don’t belong. I accept that.”

Sasuke could only frown and bite on his lower lip. His hand closed in a fist at his side. He had tried
so hard to move away from this, to form his own mental and emotional shield, to not reach out when
Naruto had been within his reach back in Konoha…

He had tried so hard and somehow had been successful, and yet...

Naruto’s grin disappeared to be replaced by a pleading and hopeful expression. “I missed you,
Sasuke. I wanted to see you so badly but you’re just so frustrating all the damn time, and worst part
is, it’s something I hate as much as I love about you…” he actually had the nerve to blush, clutching
the straps of his backpack in his hands like an uncertain child. Still, he lifted his chin up and dared
to look defiant. “I’m pissed at you. I know you said we would only see each other unless it was
strictly necessary, but I’m not letting you do this alone, Sasuke. I want to be a part of this, of your
life, of your kid’s life… this has nothing to do with what’s back there in Konoha. This is us. And I’m
tired of just… pretending that I can do it all without us when I can’t.”

Sasuke wanted to tell him not to be stupid and to stop saying ridiculous, embarrassing things that
served no purpose other than to hurt them both.

But he had closed his feelings for this for so long that he had somehow managed to completely
ignore the fact that he was completely exhausted, too.

And right now, he was so angry at Naruto for reminding him of this. He was angry at being forced
into feeling that despair, loneliness and hopelessness again, angry at Naruto for imposing his
presence. He was furious that he had worked so hard and still, he had fooled himself into thinking he
had it all under control when all it took was a spontaneous moment like this for everything to get
fucked.

And yet, he was simply so… stupidly grateful, too. He didn’t know why, but he was.
Have I been really wanting this all along? For him to defy me and simply force himself into my life no matter what I say or do to keep him away?

Naruto was right - they did summon each other constantly.

You’re here… for us.

Naruto…

What was going to happen now? How was this going to destroy them this time?

Why did he know it would and yet was more than eager to see how it would all unfold?

It was moments like this when Sasuke was sure he definitely was a very unbalanced individual.

But it didn’t matter. Naruto would always come for him even so.

“I don’t care what you say, I’m not going anywhere!” Naruto affirmed, with a stubborn pout. “So, you either take me in right now, or you’re going to have to fight me and force me to go away. If you can, of course. You can always try, but I’m warning you that I’ll kick your ass.”

And in spite of himself, Sasuke knew this was the sort of tide he couldn’t fight anymore.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

I knooow, cliff-hanger. I have a feeling things are going to change soon, but even though I know what I want to happen next chapter, I’m genuinely waiting to see what Naruto and Sasuke are going to do and how they will interact from now on. I’ll let them decide. Naruto has a new-found freedom thanks to Hinata and Sasuke… well, hasn’t he been free all along?

It’s been a while since they’ve been ‘alone’ together, huh? I wonder how they’ll deal with it, especially being away from Konoha. Plus… Naruto is going to meet little Katsu! Are we all excited for that or what??

I truly appreciate every single one of you reading my story, favoring, commenting, and really, just being patient with me and sticking around regardless of how long I take to update or the fact that ‘Naruto’ is over. Trust me, I’ll write for the fandom for as long as I have you guys wanting to read my fics :)

Thank you for reading, and I wish you all a happy Christmas!

Lots of love, and see y’all next time!
Happy 2017 guys! I didn’t take that long to update this time, right?

This chapter was HARD to write. I can’t explain how many times I had to re-write the scenes to find the right sort of atmosphere I needed. Sometimes Naruto and Sasuke are hard to tame. But I’m pleased by the outcome, and I sincerely hope you guys can enjoy it!

Thank you for following this story and for not giving up in spite of the unusual stuff I come up with!
More notes at the end of the chapter!

Unbetaed. Please, forgive the horrible typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We'll Rise

Part XIX: Human Concepts

Unconsciously, Sasuke hugged himself with his single arm, keeping his safe distance under a tree as he tensely watched the children who recognized Naruto running to him and surrounding him with exuberant exclamations of joy. Some of the kids tackled him, too, almost making him fall to the ground.

Even though Sasuke’s eyes were fixed on his best friend, he could tell the village was slowly coming to life as they realized there was an unusual commotion in the main square. In no time, as some villagers realized who had just arrived, shouts of ‘Naruto’s back!’ could be heard as people started leaving their small houses and abandoning whatever tasks they were doing to come and greet him.

Everyone had loved Naruto back then, and seeing Sasuke return, over and over again without him had always been a collective disappointment Sasuke was very aware of. Naruto’s presence had shed a glorious light over the village; it was only natural that being reunited with him had caused such a commotion since his vibrant, helpful nature had never been forgotten.

Sasuke knew he and Katsuo were precious to the village. Sasuke did whatever he could to help with his medical knowledge, was constantly trying to suggest whatever improvement likely to be pulled off with what little resources they had, and he had been teaching children – and some adults as well – to read and write. Plus, his presence as a shinobi was a constant promise of protection. That place had become the closest thing to a ‘home’ Sasuke could think of, and whatever he did for its sake was merely an appreciation of his gratefulness for everything everyone did. The people loved him and treated him as one of them, and even though Katsuo had been taken in willingly by Misato and her family, every single one of the village’s occupants kept an eye out for the boy and helped him in
whatever way they could. They hadn’t once repudiated him for his odd looks nor considered him a nuisance for not being as developed as other kids.

Sasuke really couldn’t be more thankful than he was, and it seemed like no matter what he did or how hard he tried, his actions were never enough to repay the blessings the village had given him, and the freedom he was allowed to have thanks to its people. Every day he thought about how lucky he had been that Katsuo had been received so welcomingly, what with Sasuke’s hectic life working for himself and Kakashi, plus his new ‘second life’ back at Konoha as father and married man. Not that it would make a lot of difference, anyway, since the Hokage himself had his back covered - Kakashi certainly found him more useful out here than inside Konoha.

Biting down on his lower lip, Sasuke tried not to let the old bitterness within him bubble back to the surface, but in times like these, it was hard not to.

People inside that nameless village loved Sasuke, but they had loved Naruto, too. Naruto was the friendly, helpful type that enjoyed being everywhere and doing everything, while Sasuke was the knowledgeable type to go to for serious things that needed quick fixing and reasonable solutions. Like everything about them, they had provided a healthy balance as a duo when it came to bringing something new to those people who didn’t know much outside of their own world.

The lack of Naruto beside Sasuke had always felt like something was constantly off, but eventually, everyone had gotten used to it. There was only stoic, firm but kind Sasuke, and no one to make him smile and loosen up like Naruto used to do. Sasuke was aware that this was what people thought, and still, they accepted him as he was while lamenting Naruto’s absence.

This poor, humble village had given Sasuke so much, and back then, it had been his and Naruto’s heaven. They had been involved with the community so deeply, the feeling of simply belonging had naturally settled in after the first couple of days.

Back then, Sasuke had felt like it would be so easy for both him and Naruto to find a steady home there, like the one Sasuke had now. The place to return to.

Now, it was almost impossible to not think about how much he and Naruto could’ve accomplished already if they had been together. He was sure the village would be a lot more developed, and that a few of their goals for the shinobi world might’ve already been on their way to being accomplished.

Maybe they could’ve found Katsuo together. Maybe other children, too, because, surely, like Sasuke himself, Naruto would want to reach out to parentless children and everyone who didn’t have a home. That was a pain they both knew and a dream they had both shared. They would’ve tried ending that loneliness together, and even though they knew it was impossible to fix these issues for good, for sure, they would’ve at least tried to make a significant difference.

In times like these, when Naruto was so close Sasuke knew he could touch him, it was impossible for him to not think about how they would’ve been so much happier than they were now. As sure as he was of the sky being blue, he was sure of this.

This awareness was one of the many things that made it so difficult to be around Naruto. A part of Sasuke would always yearn desperately for that closeness, for that physical space between them to be easily breached at every whim, like today, and yet another part…

Another part would always wish to be as far away from his best friend as possible so this same yearning would be easier to bear.

Naruto seemed a bit overwhelmed by all the attention he was receiving, and he couldn’t seem to be
able to reply to everyone’s questions or keep up with all the hugs, so he just flashed everyone his brightest, happiest smile and allowed everyone to ruffle his hair and relieve him of his travelling belongings.

Sasuke wished that he could stop his heart from beating so fast and his stomach from feeling so sick. He didn’t want to feel this sort of conflict within him towards all of this and not know if he was still fucking angry or somehow happy. If he could settle for just one emotion at the time this wouldn’t be so fucking draining.

Either way, he felt disgustingly anxious but also… oddly accepting that this was something that had to happen. Sasuke had been avoiding Naruto, and that was the truth. He had hidden things from him and not contacted him for a long time, even when Naruto himself had sent a rather sheepish letter when his son had been born. Sasuke knew Naruto had been anticipating his arrival to Konoha, and yet, all he had done was make demands and continue running away. Regardless of how different things were now and how much of a distance they both needed to have from each other’s personal life, too much was just too much. Sasuke was aware of this, and he was aware that Naruto had every reason to be upset at him.

But Sasuke had every reason to be pissed too. He didn’t understand why Naruto couldn’t just let things cool down for a while before taking action and come running. This last year had been an emotional chaos for Sasuke, what with Katsuo, Sakura and Karin and the issue with Sarada, plus his constant travelling in order to gather the original scrolls with information regarding Itachi and the Uchiha. Sasuke was just exhausted and Naruto could surely feel it.

Sometimes, everything felt like too much and Sasuke needed some peace, some sense of direction, which was hard to have when Naruto kept forcing these conflicting feelings and thoughts out of him. Naruto provided anything but that quietude Sasuke needed. With him, it was a turmoil of anger, resentment, longing and happiness. There would be laughing and yelling and possibly crying. Maybe some fist fighting at some point. Sasuke enjoyed all of it, but understood that this wasn’t normal and that he couldn’t afford to fall into his unbalanced self because of it – he had to keep his head on his shoulders.

Naruto had lots of people to put him in his place if he strayed – Sasuke had no one but himself to ground him, and no one but himself to keep pushing him forwards.

But Naruto was always selfish like this, demanding of Sasuke’s attention, demanding of things to go his way. This time it would be no different – he had come for a reason. But then again, Sasuke, too, had been demanding and selfish by establishing his own revengeful boundaries regardless of how much it hurt the both of them.

For all of this, he was upset. He just didn’t want to be controlled by these things he and Naruto shared, so he refused them and forced himself to move on. That was the only way.

But Naruto always tried his best to fight him on this – like a dog constantly chasing after its own tail, not resting until he could bite down on it only to realize the outcome would result in suffering.

When will it ever end, Naruto?

And the worst part of it all was that a dark part of Sasuke would always love being chased by Naruto. He enjoyed this sort of game where they tested the power they had over each other. Their personal hell was his own masochistic guilty pleasure.

It wasn’t his fault that this was a thrilling heat he couldn’t escape – after all, he couldn’t get it anywhere else. Still, he constantly berated himself for it.
He felt a presence near his left side before tiny arms encircled his thighs. He looked down to see a messy mop of translucid hair and white eyes questioningly looking up at him in something that could be considered questioning and a heart-breaking innocence. Schooling his features, Sasuke smiled down at Katsuo and put a comforting hand at the top of his head, even though he felt suddenly guilty - he had never spoken to him of Naruto, so surely the boy was confused about all the fuss.

“That’s my best friend,” Sasuke explained simply, knowing that it was still a million years too soon to explain their story. “His name is Naruto. He was here with me a long time ago, that’s why everyone knows him. He is also someone very important to me. Do you understand, Katsu?”

Katsuo blinked a few times before nodding, but his eyes didn’t leave Sasuke. His arms tightened around him as if to offer some kind of reassurance Sasuke was grateful for. Katsuo always watched him attentively, so he was sure the child knew him enough by now to easily sense his distress, and this upset him because he didn’t want to burden Katsuo with his own problems.

In spite of himself, Sasuke forced his smile to become more honest. “He came here to meet you, you know? Because I told him that you’re important to me, too.”

Katsuo finally looked at where Naruto was. The blond man seemed to be looking around amidst all the people in search for something, and it didn’t take long for his eyes to land upon Sasuke and brightening up further before falling to the small child attached to his leg. As soon as Naruto noticed Katsuo, Sasuke’s heart felt like it had stopped as he held his breath. Naruto’s blue eyes widened for just a second before his smile grew further. Sasuke couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Naruto smiling so openly like that and the sight seemed to nurture his very soul.

Naruto seemed to excuse himself from the crowd around him before stumbling away from them and jogging his way towards where Sasuke and Katsuo were. Once he stopped in front of them, his expression was a bit awed. He and Sasuke exchanged a short look before Naruto crouched down in front of the boy and flashed him his huge smile. Sasuke found it interesting that Katsuo didn’t shy away, unmoving from his position as if defiantly, only his hands gripping Sasuke’s shorts a bit tighter. For some reason, Sasuke could definitely tell that Katsuo was quickly developing a strong personality, forged by his obvious desire to keep up with everyone else and impress Sasuke.

“Hi, I’m Naruto, your dad’s friend,” Naruto introduced himself, extending his hand in a friendly manner towards the child. “What’s your name?”

Sasuke was reminded that he hadn’t told Naruto Katsuo’s name, nor anything about the child, really. Again, he was struck by guilt.

“He was an experiment; there are many things he’s still learning, so he’s not able to speak yet,” Sasuke explained in mutter, running his fingers through Katsuo’s thin and soft strands of hair. “But he can understand you well. His name is Katsuo.”

Naruto didn’t seem unfazed. “Ah, Katsu-chan! It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said, happily, his hand still out. “Isn’t that a wonderful name? Do you like it? Did Sasuke name you?”

It was simply out of curiosity that Sasuke didn’t say anything, wanting to see what Katsuo himself would do. The boy seemed to be thinking hard about something (or evaluating Naruto more likely) because he didn’t move for a few seconds. Then, he slowly nodded and eyed Naruto’s hand before looking up at Sasuke once more as if asking for permission. These were things Sasuke had yet to make him understand were alright because Katsuo always seemed hesitant about his own actions and what was acceptable or not in Sasuke’s eyes. Seldom had Sasuke scolded him, but maybe out of some trauma from his times with Orochimaru, he always acted as if he was supposed to be the perfect child, wanting to get Sasuke’s approval at all times.
“It’s only polite to shake someone’s hand when it’s offered to you,” Sasuke encouraged, gently. “Unless you don’t trust the person in front of you, but that’s a lesson for another time. But you can trust Naruto, so… go on, shake his hand.”

Sasuke could almost swear Katsuo seemed a bit hesitant, but the boy ended up looking back at Naruto. Eventually, he let go of Sasuke to turn to Naruto so he was fully facing him before extending his hand back ever so slightly. He didn’t reach out to grab for Naruto’s, though, instead waiting for Naruto himself to make a move. Naruto’s eyebrows rose but he carefully wrapped his larger hand around Katsuo’s to shake it. Naruto still had a smile on his face, and he seemed genuinely happy that Katsuo had shaken in his hand. In fact, Sasuke noticed, there was a watery gleam in his eyes that gave away how emotional he felt. It tore at his heart. This wasn’t fair. “Let’s be friends, heh, Katsu-chan?”

Sasuke couldn’t help but snort as Katsuo tilted his head to the side to contemplate Naruto before slowly nodding.

000

Naruto knew Sasuke was very upset about a lot of things, but then again, so was he. That was why he was here in the first place - because he couldn’t accept things between them as they were anymore.

The joy they both felt at being together after so long was unmistakable, though. Naruto couldn’t read Sasuke’s mind, but he could feel everything happening inside of him, which was a thousand times more revealing. No matter what fucking conflicting thoughts and feelings Sasuke may be having, it was a fact that his heart was full of joy at Naruto’s presence, and this was something that gave the blond hope and peacefulness. He knew things between them had been simmering for a long time, so it was all a matter of time before they’d start combusting. Naruto and Sasuke knew it very well, and both were aware that the other was more than eager to see what would come of it.

Only this world wasn’t theirs alone to walk on anymore, and they couldn’t just act recklessly and fuck everything up while hoping that it would end up fixing them like they had in the past. Things could never be as they had once been; they weren’t kids anymore, and about two years had passed since they’d been lovers and many things had changed. They weren’t alone, they had other people in their lives, and they couldn’t simply think only of themselves. Naruto understood this well.

But...

He also knew that the one thing that didn’t change was the way they felt about each other. So, no matter how much things around them changed, as long as they remained immutable, there was always hope, always a constant sense of comfort.

He couldn’t blame Sasuke for wanting to create a certain distance. The tension between them was palpable and left them both on edge and excessively cautious around each other. Naruto himself didn’t trust his own impulsiveness, so he relied on Sasuke to ground them.

Either way, he knew they’d probably fuck some things up - it’s what they did to fix things between them, and that was fine. All Naruto knew was that he was there for Sasuke, and Katsuo, and that he didn’t have much time. Returning to Konoha without finding common ground with his best friend was not an option anymore. Things would not stay the way they had been so far.

Unfortunately for him, Naruto didn’t have a lot of time during the rest of the day to communicate one on one with his best friend because he was very solicited all around. Everybody wanted to talk to him, ask him about how life was going and tell him things about themselves and the village. More
babies had been born, a few more houses had been built, new plantations had started to grow and new pathways had been created. It all looked the same, yet different, definitely a lot more organized and obviously in development. This sort of improvement had been conducted by Sasuke, obviously.

Naruto felt a bit restless about the amount of attention he was getting and overwhelmed by the constant amount of information being thrown his way, but he supposed it was better to get it over with as soon as possible so he could have the next day free to be with Sasuke. Also, listening to the villagers allowed him to know a little bit more about Sasuke’s affairs and Katsuo’s condition. People talked about Sasuke’s devotion to his son, but that was something he had known just by seeing them together. Naruto had seen it in Sasuke’s eyes when he had first spoken about Katsuo in Kakashi’s office, and he saw it now as Sasuke’s gaze followed the boy’s every movement. This sort of look hadn’t appeared once when Sarada’s name was mentioned, though, and this hurt Naruto for reasons he couldn’t explain.

Still, Naruto was glad about the things he learned, and also immensely proud of his friend. Seeing the love both had from the villagers moved Naruto and warmed up his heart, and he could definitely understand why Sasuke had settled there and considered that place the ‘home’ Konoha would never be.

This really was a second life to Sasuke, his sanctuary. To these people, he trusted Katsuo’s safety and maybe his own sanity, too. Naruto understood it all too well and felt a bit jealous that Sasuke could at least afford to escape from one reality to the other.

One of the things Naruto realized early on though, was that no one knew about Sasuke’s other family, so Naruto didn’t feel like letting out that he, too, was married and had his own family waiting. Putting such things out there might disturb the balance and would make certain things awkward – he was sure people had known there had been something between him and Sasuke back then, even though no one had talked about it nor judged them. Frankly, Naruto felt more at ease if they still had that same perception of them.

Seeing Misato and her family again made Naruto very happy. The young woman had cried and hugged him, and immediately had showed him her daughter, Mika, the same Naruto had, along with Sasuke, helped bring to this world. Tears welled up in his eyes as he saw the little girl, walking around happily and smiling at him. He was happy to know Katsuo was under Misato’s care and that Sasuke lived with them as family. It was immediately settled that Naruto would be sleeping at their place.

Dinner came in the form of a celebration as everyone gathered in the main square. Food and beverages were brought out and everyone gathered round a huge bonfire while eating, drinking and chatting loudly. Naruto had almost forgotten how lively that place was and how everything seemed to be reason for celebration. He couldn’t help being in high spirits if he tried, and this inevitably brought back memories of a similar night that had probably been one of the happiest of his life. This night felt very similar, the same atmosphere, the same wonderful weather, and yet, it was so very different.

There was a lot of singing and dancing as expected, but Naruto was so solicited he didn’t get to interact with Sasuke much, plus, Sasuke seemed to be content enough with watching him while taking care of Mika so Misato and Tori, her husband, could have a bit of time to enjoy themselves. Still, Naruto took the chance to grab hold of Katsuo. Oddly enough, the boy was complying as soon as Sasuke nodded his consent. From the things people had said, only recently had Katsuo been able to start walking properly and sort of running - his health was fragile – so Naruto was careful with him as they danced. The boy seemed to be energetic though, easily fired up by Naruto’s encouragement, and while his expressions were weird to say the least, there was definitely a smile on
those lips and an awed look in his blank, wide eyes. If Katsuo had looked eerie during the day, right
now, at night time, he looked haunting, the paleness of everything about him almost ghostly,
ethereal. It was both fascinating and horrifying, and in a weird way, Naruto couldn’t help but find the
child compelling and beautiful.

Sasuke watched the two of them interact like a hawk, following their every move with that intense
gaze of his that never failed to thrill Naruto.

It was easy to understand where Sasuke’s feelings for the child came from. Katsu was fragile and
small for his age, and yet, despite how hard it was to read his pretty features, it was obvious that
Katsu knew how to listen, and more importantly, understand. Naruto couldn’t explain it if he tried,
but he had this odd feeling that Katsu possessed an understanding of things around him that was
beyond his age and that he definitely made a strong effort to express himself and be understood in
return. Naruto felt that he had a strong aura that was constantly fighting, relentlessly reaching out for
something, for more, in an endless starvation for… affection? Recognition? His own self that he
wanted to become but still couldn’t because his body was unable to keep up with his mind?

Naruto didn’t know how he knew this, but he did. Maybe because something about Katsu reminded
him of Sasuke. Maybe this was why Naruto felt enchanted by him so quickly, and even though he
and the boy didn’t really know each other well, somehow, he understood that Katsu had quickly
become aware of who Naruto was when it came to Sasuke. One could say it was frightening.

“Whoa, that was great!” Naruto said with a grin, using one hand to wipe at the sweat on his
forehead, his other hand being pulled by Katsu as they made their way towards where Sasuke was
sitting in a log. Mika was now sleeping on Atsuko’s lap – Misato’s mother – who was sitting not too
far from there.

“It’s amazing how much stamina you have even after a long journey,” Sasuke said calmly. He
looked serious, but his voice had been soft. Katsu let go of Naruto’s hand to eagerly move to sit on
Sasuke’s left thigh, making the man smile softly.

“Well, you know me, I’ve got stamina for days,” Naruto joked, slumping down on the log beside
Sasuke. “Plus, Katsu-chan had a lot of fun, isn’t that right?”

Katsu nodded empathically and Sasuke heaved a small sigh. “Look at you,” he said to the boy,
running his hand over the child’s forehead and pushing his wet fringe to the side. “You’re all sweaty.
You feel alright?” Katsu nodded again while looking up at Sasuke. He was breathing a bit heavily,
and yet his legs were dangling happily to the sound of the music still playing. Sasuke then picked up
a large clay cup that had been resting next to his thigh and put it in front of Katsu’s chest. With
Sasuke’s help, the boy held it with his hands and brought it up to his lips, drinking thirstily under his
father’s attentive stare.

In spite of himself, Naruto couldn’t help but watch them with a smile, feeling his chest tight with
emotion. How he had longed for this sort of sight, even if a bit differently…

Katsu stopped with a content huff and promptly pushed the cup in Sasuke’s hand towards Naruto,
who couldn’t help but feel a bit surprised. Well, children would always be innocent and honest,
right? The kid was definitely cute. Naruto wondered if Boruto would ever be this open. After all, his
and Katsu’s upbringing would be very different.

Sasuke actually smirked at Naruto’s expression but passed him the cup, that he accepted willingly.
“Thank you,” Naruto said, with a playfully solemn nod of his head towards the boy. Katsu seemed
pleased in his own way.
Feeling very relaxed and satisfied, Naruto took a few sips on the water inside the cup and gave them back to Sasuke, who also took a sip before putting setting it down beside him once more.

“Are you hungry?” Sasuke asked Katsuo gently, carefully arranging his clothes. The child shook his head from side to side. “You didn’t eat much at dinner. We should probably get you some vitamins again, huh? I know the last ones I made weren’t very good.”

Katsuo released a small breath and seemed to relax against Sasuke’s chest, letting his head fall to his shoulder, but his eyes, empty and attentive, were on Naruto, who could only smile reflexively back. It was endearing to see Sasuke hugging the child closer and resting his cheek reflexively back.

A sort of comfortable silence settled between the three as the lively atmosphere around them remained. For a while, Naruto watched the scenery around him placidly, simply enjoying this moment and feeling for what it was. It sure felt good to be away from everything and, just for a few minutes, pretend that this was his reality.

“Hey, Sasuke,” Naruto said after a while, making his friend look up at him without really moving. “I’m here with Hinata’s permission and thanks to Kakashi-sensei having pulled a few strings. But the journey back and forth takes too much time, so the day after tomorrow I have to go back.”

Sasuke inhaled sharply. “Alright,” he said, his voice giving nothing away, but Naruto could feel the tension in him. “It was kind of a waste of time for you, then, to go through all this trouble to come here only to leave shortly after.”

“It’s never a waste of time if it’s for you,” Naruto said honestly, noticing Sasuke snort slightly. He knew these sorts of things made his friend uncomfortable, but he didn’t care – he wasn’t going to hide behind his own mask anymore. “I’m glad to be here.”

Sasuke didn’t reply, looking away to the bonfire with his chin resting atop Katsuo’s head. In spite of himself, and of Katsuo’s almost unblinking eyes, Naruto reached out and gently brushed his knuckles over Sasuke’s cheek. The other man tensed further, but just touching Sasuke so easily after so long felt surreal to Naruto, a blessing. “We need to talk,” he muttered, carefully. “You know we have to. So, please… spend some time alone with me tomorrow morning. Afterwards we can pick up Katsu-chan and hang out the rest of the day, just the three of us. Okay?”

Sasuke eyed him from the corner of his eye. “It’s not like I have any another option, is it?” he said dryly, making Naruto chuckle a bit.

“Come on, admit that you’re at least a little tiny bit happy that I’m here, Sasuke,” Naruto teased, daringly moving his hand to the back of Sasuke’s neck and rubbing it. He didn’t want to push things between them, least of all with Katsuo watching him like that, but he felt like the reality of Sasuke’s physical form under his fingertips was simply too addictive. He had craved for it, but somehow had naively forgotten that these sorts of interactions created an instant dependence.

Sasuke, of course, threw him a very intense, rather dark look that seemed to be able to penetrate Naruto’s very soul, and it was only out of sheer willpower that he didn’t allow his body to shiver. “Don’t tease me in front of my son, Naruto,” Sasuke admonished, his voice coldly firm, and yet, he did nothing to push Naruto’s hand away. He could’ve, Naruto debated, smiling. That was all Naruto needed.

After dinner, everyone worked on cleaning up the main square, a long and extenuating task without running water and proper cleaning appliances, and Naruto hadn’t realized how much he had missed the amount of work they had to put in everything in that village when compared to the comfort of
Konoha. Naruto offered to fetch some water along with some other people while Sasuke helped with cleaning up the food and the bonfire.

Once everything was ready, everyone retreated to their own homes with joyful words of parting.

By the time they needed to get things settled for sleep, Sasuke had to quickly work on lighting several candles around Misato’s house to illuminate the place, closely followed by Mika and Katsuo, both appearing to love seeing him make his complicated single handed seal and perform the small fire jutsu. Naruto was sure that it was a nightly ritual between the Uchiha and the children, and he found it very endearing.

While Sasuke was helping out Misato heating up some water to bathe the kids before bed, Tori got Naruto some clean pants and a sweater to sleep in, so Naruto took the chance to make a quick journey to the riverside to wash up properly since the night was actually pretty warm. He could’ve waited to use a bit of warm water, but he’d been traveling the whole day, and with all the dancing at the celebration and playing with the kids, he was sure he smelt horrible. The last thing he needed was Sasuke kicking him out of the room they’d be sharing because of it. He also made sure to thoroughly wash his travelling clothes, too, so it would be clean for him to wear once he left.

The village was already deadly quiet by the time he returned, so he tried to be as quiet as possible as he put his wet clothes on a makeshift stretch made with rope outside Misato’s house. Once he got inside, he saw that the candles were still flickering, but no sound could be heard, indicating that everyone was probably already asleep.

Naruto made sure to blow out all the candles on his way to the room he’d be sharing with Sasuke. He had heard that originally Katsuo slept with Sasuke, but since the place was too small, the boy would be sleeping with Atsuko and Mina as he always did when Sasuke was away.

As he made his way to the room, Naruto wondered if his friend was already asleep - the thought came with a small sense of disappointment. However, there was light under the thick linen curtains that served as a ‘door’ to the room and Naruto had to swallow hard the excitement and simultaneous uncertainty he felt. He pushed the curtain aside to find a rectangular room that was even smaller than he had expected, probably having been used for storing things before Sasuke had settled there. It was barely enough for two grown men, but he supposed Sasuke and Katsuo managed just fine.

On the wall to the left, one could see something similar to a chest made of thin tree trunks, the single candle that illuminated the room resting on top of it inside a sort of bowl made of clay. On the floor, next to said chest, Naruto could see his backpack and Sasuke’s katana. The floor was completely occupied by two narrow but separate mats and blankets that literally had no choice but to be shoved together so they could fit inside the tight space. There was a small, glassless window near the ceiling on the wall adjacent to the entrance, and sitting with his back to it on his own mat was Sasuke, whose head tilted up elegantly to acknowledge Naruto’s arrival.

Naruto’s breath got caught inside his throat. His eyes didn’t leave Sasuke as he entered the room and slid the curtain closed behind him. Sasuke had one knee pulled to his chest, his wrist resting over it. The air was instantly thick the second their eyes met, a sudden familiar rush assaulting Naruto violently and almost making him sway on his feet. The obvious electric feel was powerful enough to turn his legs into jelly, and in spite of the turmoil of emotions that travelled between them through that simple gaze, a single one seemed to overpower them all right now and push unnecessary complications to the side. It was a mutual state of mind that allowed both their souls to be exposed, and Naruto could see in his friend’s eyes all the good and bad feelings Sasuke was having towards this meeting, and yet, it was nothing but a willing exposure, something he wanted Naruto to see, feel and understand but that wasn’t meant to keep him away.
In fact, Naruto felt Sasuke’s aura like it was his own, and he could tell Sasuke could feel him too. He wanted it - wanted for Sasuke to listen to him just as clearly and see how much he...

Naruto put his hand over his own chest.

This willing spiritual openness was a calling on both their parts. There was literally nothing standing between them, neither physical nor emotional. It seemed like ages had gone by since he’d been in a room alone with Sasuke, and it was undeniably exciting because there was nothing but the two of them, alone with their feelings for each other in that small room. Nothing else seemed to exist, and for now, that’s how it had to be.

Naruto hadn’t been ready to feel this overwhelmingly moved. Maybe the emotional weight of the day’s events was finally crashing down on him. Seeing Sasuke again, being welcomed by everyone so warmly, meeting little Katsuo – it felt like he was dreaming.

Gulping, Naruto watched Sasuke bring his index finger to his lips to silently tell him to be quiet, to which he nodded. Silently Sasuke slowly got to his feet. Naruto allowed himself to finally fully take in Sasuke’s figure in his white t-shirt and grey boxers, and couldn’t help but notice that Sasuke’s incomplete arm was devoid of bandages. In the dim candlelight, Sasuke looked simple and oddly misplaced, like some beautiful mythical creature that had no business being defiled by such a vulgar setting and such simple clothes. This ability of Sasuke’s to go from a striking force of nature easily compared to some otherworldly demonic entity to be feared, to this vision of simple human perfection was something Naruto loved. The demon, unreachable Sasuke was his, and so was this human, bare one. All versions of Sasuke could only be reached by Naruto alone, and he knew this.

This simple, domestic Sasuke who took care of his son, worked the fields and protected this small family. This Sasuke was still one not to be underestimated.

With his heart hammering inside his chest, Naruto’s naked feet were careful as they stepped on the mat to get closer to Sasuke until they were standing face to face without touching. His friend’s eyes softened but didn’t lose the resolution in them. Sasuke’s lips parted slightly but no sound other than his breathing could be heard.

The atmosphere prickled both their skins. It was like standing on the edge of a cliff during a storm and let fate decide to push him over or spare him depending on how strong the wind blew and in which direction. It was always this vexing uncertainty when it came to Sasuke.

It had been so long since they had stood in front of each other like this, simply defying the odds. Maybe that was why it was so easy for Naruto to throw himself down that cliff. Standing on the edge and suffering from anticipation was harder than simply jumping and putting an end to his misery. He had never been one to hesitate anyway.

They eyed each other. Naruto couldn’t say a word if he tried. In a way, this all seemed like a dream - that Sasuke would ever be in his reach so willingly again after so long.

That’s right. All he had to do was jump right now. He knew that, like a dream, he’d eventually wake up in a safe place before meeting his end at the bottom.

He and Sasuke would always make it through any storm as long as they were together.

It was hard to breathe. Naruto’s eyes fell to Sasuke’s parted lips to confirm that Sasuke was feeling short of breath too.

There it was – the sheer perfection of the shared feelings they couldn’t hide from each other.
That was why Naruto allowed his mind to shut down and his heart to open up helplessly. His hands reached out on impulse alone and closed around the fabric of Sasuke’s t-shirt tightly. The sound of Sasuke’s low gasp threw all caution out the window as Naruto’s body moved automatically, pulling the imposing body in front of him forcefully closer until it came into full contact with his.

It was excruciating and delicious at the same time. There was nothing quite like this. It was so painful he wanted to die to put an end to his misery, yet, it made him want to live and agonize forever.

For a fleeting moment, Naruto thought he finally understood the logic behind Sasuke having wanted to kill him in spite of his feelings. Sometimes it felt like the world would be easier to breathe in if only this single existence didn’t live in it to make everything so much more difficult, so much more painful.

Naruto released a shaky breath, blue eyes avidly searching for Sasuke’s in the dangerous proximity they shared. He could swear Sasuke had said something but he couldn’t process the words.

What was he even thinking about? As if he could ever walk this earth without Sasuke. Sasuke alone had made the world a place worth living in during times when Naruto was surrounded by nothing but loneliness and hatred. Sasuke’s very existence had made it all worth living. Every single battle, every single struggle, every single moment of pain and suffering, every victory, every accomplishment, every moment of happiness…

How could he have ever grasped it all without Sasuke?

And there Sasuke was, so close, yet so far – his, but even that nothing but a momentary indulgence that would soon be over.

*I wish we could both disappear…*

Sasuke’s whole body shook in surprise, and he made a small noise that sounded exasperated, or pained, Naruto couldn’t tell. “You fucking idiot,” he hissed, his hand coming up to clutch hard at Naruto’s right forearm, letting him know that, somehow, Sasuke had been able to read his feelings. “Stop it right now.”

*This is why I’ll never be able to get used to this…*

Naruto had half a mind to make a move, but Sasuke’s body hit him first with enough force to make him stumble slightly backwards knocking the wind off him. A mouth crashed over his with such a brutal force that all he could feel was a searing pain he had not been expecting as Sasuke’s teeth clashed with his. Naruto gasped softly, vaguely aware that he had to keep quiet because there was nothing but a curtain separating them from the rest of the house as struggled for balance.

There was only place for excitement and desperation as his whole being felt moved to the very core of his existence.

He was vaguely aware of Sasuke’s arm coming around his neck to hug him close as his mouth moved quickly and demandingly over Naruto’s. The hunger was intoxicating.

Of course, Sasuke had been holding back, too. Of course, he had wanted this just as much.

*Sasuke…*

Sasuke’s physical touch after so long made it feel as though something had exploded inside of Naruto, awakening within him things that had been dormant for far too long.
Fucking finally...

It was relieving. Naruto didn’t have time to think about anything else, let alone feel guilty about giving in so quickly. He didn’t even feel like wondering about whether this was the right move to make so soon and after so much time had passed without them embracing like this. None of that mattered. The world might as well have turned into a blur of grey, because the two of them were all he cared for at that particular moment.

He had longed for this for so long, fearing it would never happen again that all he wanted was to be completely undone by Sasuke.

If this was how it was going to be, Naruto wasn’t going to question any of it. It was simply meant to be, and having Sasuke unable to fight it as well only served as proof that the charade they had built was already falling apart.

A strangled whimper left his chest as he released a breath against Sasuke’s mouth. Like a switch being turned on, his body instinctively came to life as his arms moved to encircle Sasuke’s waist to hug him, his lips eagerly responding to Sasuke’s ferocious assault with a thirst he hadn’t forgotten. The kiss was clumsy and wet as tongues desperately slid out to taste and hands travelled wildly over each other’s bodies for some sort of mutual reassurance that the other was real and that at least this hadn’t changed at all. He couldn’t believe how alive Sasuke felt in his arms, nor how powerful his heartbeat was. Sasuke seemed to be fuelled by these feelings because he pulled away slightly in order to lewdly suck on Naruto’s lip before offering it a languid lick. In spite of himself, Naruto let out a small, choked laugh that Sasuke quickly silenced with another searing kiss.

It had been so long since Naruto had felt this kind of emotional anguish that filled everything inside him with nothing but this blissful completion he thought he’d never get to feel again. How was it possible to feel so unburdened all of a sudden, so free, so…

…at home. Yes, Naruto felt like this was exactly where he was supposed to be right now. He and Sasuke belonged in this very moment and he’d be damned if he’d let anything take it away from him - not when Sasuke needed it just as much. Sasuke belonged wherever Naruto’s fingertips could feel this reality of him.

Pulling away, Naruto mouthed Sasuke’s chin before running his lips hungrily down to the column of his neck. He could smell Sasuke’s addictive scent. Sasuke’s fingers cradled his nape almost tenderly. Naruto’s hands urgently lifted Sasuke’s t-shirt so they could feel the familiar warm skin underneath, not wasting time in roaming up Sasuke’s and down Sasuke’s back possessively and eliciting the most deliciously wanton groan from the man. How Naruto had missed that sound, those firm muscles that flexed as his hands caressed them, that strong body that fit close to his perfectly…

Without thinking, Naruto lifted his head so he could kiss Sasuke again before pushing forward and forcing Sasuke to stumble a few steps backwards now. He didn’t really know what he was looking for, or what he wanted to do, only that he eagerly wanted a stable surface he could press Sasuke against. He felt like he wanted to consume Sasuke with everything he had.

Sasuke collided against something because he awkwardly came to a halt. The wall, Naruto concluded. Through his own dizzy frenzy, he realized his body was reacting to Sasuke’s rather quickly, and considering where they were and the chances they had of waking up the entire house, this wasn’t a good thing.

But oh, how he wanted it. How he wanted to take everything Sasuke wished to give, and how he wanted to drown Sasuke in everything he wanted to provide.
His feelings threatened to overflow, his instincts yelling at him to simply reach out for what was rightfully his. It didn’t help that he could feel his friend’s growing arousal against his, or that he could feel Sasuke’s own feelings thrumming along his.

It took a tremendous amount of willpower for him to break the kiss they were sharing so he could look at Sasuke. They were still wrapped around each other, both having great difficulty breathing after the intense making out, and yet they stared at each other almost as if both needed reassurance that the other wouldn’t disappear in the blink of an eye.

Sasuke swallowed hard, his fingers clawing at the back of Naruto’s head – he looked a bit out of himself, obviously dazed, maybe a bit sad as well, but definitely filled with yearning. Seeing him like this reminded Naruto of things he had refused to let go. It made his heart beat so fast he almost lost his strength. How could it be that he suddenly felt so invigorated but exhausted at the same time?

Chewing on his lower lip, Naruto took a tired breath, eyeing Sasuke’s features. “I really didn’t come here for sex, I swear,” he dared to joke shakily in a barely audible whisper.

“Liar,” Sasuke whispered back, but there was no animosity in his words.

Naruto had to smile at that, as fondness washed over him. Well, a man could only hope, but he was mature enough to understand the situation they were in and that the place wasn’t safe at all. From a logical point of view, they should know better than to do something like this so impulsively.

With a sigh, Naruto placed his chin over Sasuke’s shoulder and tightened his arms around Sasuke’s waist. He wanted so much from his friend, and yet, just being close like this seemed more than enough – more than he could’ve ever asked for. His tongue tasted of Sasuke; he could feel Sasuke’s scent, touch him. Even this felt too good to be true.

“I thought we’d never get to be like this again,” he muttered lowly in Sasuke’s ear, hoping that this familiar proximity could help him calm down. “I really love you so much I don’t know what to do with myself.”

He had expected the small jolt in Sasuke’s body, and the sharp intake of breath too. “What did I tell you about saying that to me?” Sasuke hissed in an equally low voice, pulling at the hairs at the back of Naruto’s head roughly and forcing him to meet his eyes.

Naruto didn’t care what Sasuke said - he wasn’t backing down anymore. Seeing Sasuke’s anguished, angry look did nothing to make Naruto’s resolve falter. “You can’t make me run away from my feelings, Sasuke,” Naruto said firmly while ignoring the pain in his scalp. “You can’t just decide what I say and what I don’t. I’m not going to avoid things just because you want me to, and I won’t simply not tell you that I love you when I have to live with this feeling every second of my existence.”

Sasuke seemed only slightly taken aback, even his grip loosening in his surprise. He seemed somewhat hurt the words spoken to him, but not on a personal level – it seemed to hit him that his own attitude had inflicted pain on Naruto, but then again, many things Sasuke did and said never failed to hurt him. Sasuke knew this well, of course – Naruto thought he did certain things on purpose to keep him away, and really, he could understand it.

“What’s the point of not saying it anyway?” Naruto proceeded, shaking his head from side to side. “Pretending that these feelings don’t exist? It’s worse that way. I don’t want that. If you’re important to me then…”

Naruto stopped talking abruptly as he felt a presence behind him. He hadn’t heard a thing, but then
again, he and Sasuke had been too focused on each other to take notice of their surroundings. He saw Sasuke’s eyes looking away and over Naruto’s shoulder and the expression he did was all he needed to be sure that there was someone else in the room.

“Is it… Katsu-chan?” Naruto asked hesitantly.

Sasuke nodded and when he spoke, his voice sounded very serious yet surprisingly sober. “I have no idea what this looks like to him, but you’re going to have to get off me now, Naruto.”

Naruto heaved a defeated sigh, letting his forehead bump against Sasuke’s for a second. Seriously, he just wanted to spend time alone with Sasuke and speak his heart out him, was that too much to ask? Just half an hour so he could make Sasuke understand what he wanted…

At least the mood had been completely ruined before he could either ravish Sasuke or start crying, and both were bad anyway.

He felt Sasuke’s hand sliding down from his nape to push slightly at his chest, and resignedly, Naruto pulled away and forced his arms to let go of the body he had so wanted to hold to put a respectable distance between them once more.

Sasuke cleared his throat softly and fixed his t-shirt as Naruto turned around to find Katsuo still outside, but with his head shamelessly peeking through a gap he had made in the curtain, blank eyes very wide as he looked from him to Sasuke. In spite of himself, Naruto couldn’t help but laugh a bit. Katsuo was so clueless and innocent it was ridiculously cute. His lack of tact where other children would feel something obviously being off was amazing.

Sasuke snorted as well and apparently shared a bit of same amusement because he chuckled lowly. “Well, I can’t exactly tell him to knock or call out to ask for permission, can I?” he whispered, before snorting some more as if finding his own words funny. Naruto had to look away from him to stop himself from feeling overwhelmed by his own feelings of affection.

“Come on, don’t just stand there, it’s kind of creepy,” Naruto muttered to Katsuo while motioning him inside, trying to keep his voice down even though. “How come we couldn’t notice you? Unbelievable.”

Katsuo wasted no time in pushing the curtain aside and entering the small room, careful to close it behind him again. If he had been shocked or upset by what he had seen, he gave no indication, which was a relief. Maybe he hadn’t seen anything special after all.

Sasuke was already kneeling down and pushing the covers of his makeshift bed back. “Just because this is our room, you can’t simply peek inside, Katsu. Naruto may not feel very comfortable about it,” he said, as Katsuo walked past Naruto and towards Sasuke with obvious eagerness.

Katsuo seemed to take Sasuke’s actions as an invitation for him to get inside the bed, because he wasted no time lying down on his back, eyeing Sasuke as if he was waiting to be tucked in. Naruto didn’t know if he should find it hilarious or not since he didn’t know Katsuo enough to understand the details of his actions and personality, but from Sasuke’s sudden change of expression, this wasn’t exactly a good thing.

Naruto couldn’t help but notice that Katsuo had apparently laid down as close to Naruto’s mat as possible, meaning he had strategically placed himself in the space between both Sasuke’s and Naruto’s mats, clearly expecting Sasuke to sleep on the spot closest to the wall.

*So much for not being affected*, Naruto thought, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. Was
Katsuo somehow feeling possessive? That couldn’t be a good sign. Naruto wanted to get close to the boy and be liked by him – he thought he’d been doing a great job so far – but if he was going to be seen as threat, it wouldn’t do.

He wondered if Katsuo had been there long enough to have caught them kissing. He wondered if the boy had ever even seen two people kiss at all and understand what it meant, but he lived in a community, so surely…

Sasuke quirked up a reproachful eyebrow down at his son. “Do you really think the three of us can sleep here comfortably?” he said, seriously. “You’re supposed to sleep with Atsuko-san and Mika for a reason, you know? You can’t sleep here, Katsu.”

Katsuo simply reached out his tiny hand and tugged at the hem of Sasuke’s t-shirt as if motioning him to lie down with him, but Sasuke simply frowned. “Katsuo,” he said, his tone warning, and Naruto could swear Katsuo’s mouth made a small pout.

“It’s fine, Sasuke,” Naruto muttered with a small huff. “I’m sure we can all fit if the three of us don’t move around too much.”

The place had already been cramped enough for two grown men to sleep in, let alone having a child there, as well, no matter how small Katsuo was.

“That’s not exactly the issue,” Sasuke hissed, looking up at Naruto seriously. “It’s one thing to want to sit with us for a while, but Katsuo needs to understand that he can’t just impose his presence on other people’s…”

“It’s fine,” Naruto repeated, offering Sasuke a small smile. “I’m a stranger whom he’s just seen violating his parental figure’s personal space, it’s normal that he feels like he needs some sort of comfort and reassurance. I suppose I should be thankful enough that he isn’t kicking me out of the room. Although, I think he’s actually ignoring me right now.”

Sasuke looked down at Katsuo, who was still eyeing him fixedly, almost challengingly. And yes, pretty much ignoring Naruto. “As if I’d ever let him do that,” he whispered, narrowing his eyes at the boy. With a finger, he poked Katsuo’s forehead. “What are you looking at, child? You won’t get away with this, just so you know. This is very disrespectful.”

Naruto was sure Katsuo would get some sort of punishment if the tone Sasuke used was any indication. He thought his friend was probably over-reacting, but what did he know? Katsuo wasn’t like other children, and didn’t have the same basic concepts, and yet, he was actually more normal of a human being than one would expect considering he was an experiment of Orochimaru’s, and if this was so, it was all thanks to Sasuke, so he certainly was doing this parenting thing right. Or… well, at least towards Katsuo. Sarada was an issue for another time. Naruto tried to push these unwanted bitter thoughts aside.

Katsuo’s expression didn’t change and he didn’t move, his little hand simply clutching Sasuke’s t-shirt tighter. Sasuke ended up ‘tsking’.

“I’ll put out the candle,” Naruto said, turning around to do so. The room darkened considerably but the moonlight filtering through the small window still allowed Naruto to see contours clearly.

Sasuke got under the covers first, lying down on his side with his back pressed against the wall, Katsuo immediately dragging his body to nestle up against his chest and put a small arm around Sasuke’s torso. As Naruto kneeled to push his own covers back, he noticed Sasuke covering Katsuo up as he whispered something in the child’s ear he couldn’t hear. Naruto tried to lay down as well in.
what little space he had against his own side of the room but it was a tight fit since he didn’t want to
crush the boy between him and Sasuke.

In spite of himself, Naruto propped himself up on an elbow to watch the two individuals beside him.
Sure, he was a little upset that he wouldn’t be able to cuddle up with Sasuke. He was also upset that
he couldn’t exactly make out with him anymore, either, plus he had wanted to talk to Sasuke more.
But…

Somehow, this sort of scenario was very comforting. He was reminded of similar situations when
Hinata would bring Boruto to their room whenever he cried for hours on end because he couldn’t
seem to sleep in his crib and could only calm down in their bed. It felt similar, familiar, yet strangely
different.

Katsuo wasn’t Naruto’s child, so there would always be a distance between them no matter how
much Naruto wished they could be close. Naruto wanted to be there for the boy, wanted to help
Sasuke raise him, and yet, of course, these were just frivolous wishes he would never be able to fulfil
like he desired. There was no turning back from the path they had carved away from each other
anymore. But the past was in the past.

Naruto’s future with Sasuke was still like the pages of a book waiting to be written, and right now,
all they could do was come up with drafts. They still had a long way to go, and so many things to fix
between them, but more than ever, Naruto wanted to start making changes for them and planning
things for them.

It was odd how happy this sort of simplicity made him. He couldn’t be upset at Katsuo himself if he
tried.

Leaning down a bit with, Naruto spoke softly in Katsuo’s ear. “Nee, Katsu-chan,” he said. “You do
love Sasuke a lot, don’t you?”

The boy shifted slightly but nodded with his face against Sasuke’s chest. Naruto could feel Sasuke
watching him without a word.

“Well, I love him a lot, too,” Naruto still whispered, as gently as he could. “I met him when we were
about your age and so many things have happened since then that we’ve become the best of friends.”
He risked brushing his fingers through strands of translucid, soft hair carefully. “But your love and
my love aren’t the same. You’ll understand that, someday. Regardless, he’s your dad and he loves
you more than anyone else, I’m sure. As for me, I only want to protect the two of you because
you’re both important to me. Even though I can’t always be here…”

“Naruto,” Sasuke whispered. “You don’t have to say these things.”

Even though Katsuo didn’t move, Naruto smiled. “I know. I guess I just want him to understand that
I’m not a threat,” he said, honestly. “I don’t want him to think badly of me. Maybe if he knows you
and I love each other, and that it’s got nothing to do with your feelings for him…”

“He’ll know, eventually,” Sasuke said, with surprising conviction. His hand moved to touch
Naruto’s over Katsu’s head, his fingers a feathered-like brush that conveyed the chaos of his
feelings. “Right now, it doesn’t make a difference. Tomorrow, that could change. Besides, he does
like you. He’s just confused about how to feel, that’s all.”

Naruto wished he could look into Sasuke’s eyes but it was too dark. Still, he nodded, knowing
Sasuke would be able to see it and moved to a laying position. Katsuo heaved a sigh and made
himself more comfortable against Sasuke, his back unavoidably pressing against Naruto’s belly. At
least he seemed alright with all of this in a weird way, Narut considered, feeling more at ease. Maybe
Naruto’s words had somehow reached him. Kids sure were weird, always thinking about their own
well-being before anyone else’s.

Still, if Sasuke said Katsuo liked him, then…

*Maybe he’s not that easy to understand after all.*

With a resigned huff, Naruto tried to make himself more comfortable too, but it was hard considering
he could barely move. It would be a long night, he could just tell.

Still, he extended his arm so it was draped over both Katsuo and Sasuke, bringing the three of them
closer together. It seemed easier to move that way, so he released a pleased breath. It was actually
very comforting. Sasuke’s own arm stretched out so it was enveloping Naruto’s waist.

*Ah, this sure is nice…*

Loving someone sure felt great when it was this easy to pretend that there was nothing but *this.*
There was nothing quite like it. But then again, nothing could really compare to how it felt when he
and Sasuke were together.

“I won’t respond to your feelings with useless words,” Sasuke said unexpectedly, his voice a soft
murmur. “But… I’m glad you’re here, Naruto. Thank you.”

Just this made Naruto’s heart skip a pleasant beat, heat flooding him from head to toe. It would’ve
been easy to just move a little and press his lips to Sasuke’s but they weren’t alone, so Naruto tried to
ignore the desire flooding through him.

Tomorrow was a new day. Hopefully, things would change for the two of them, and Naruto would
do whatever he had to make sure it happened.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

For this chapter, my main goal was to understand the vibe between Naruto and Sasuke
after so long apart, which was why it was so hard to write. They have so many
conflicting feelings for each other it’s very hard to balance them. I suppose they always
came off as either extremely frustrated or filled with an unbearable longing that was hard
to describe. I suppose I wanted to express all of this in a more mature way, so I moved
away from straight up sex and/or physical violence. I like to believe that Naruto has
managed to gain some semblance of clarity for himself and a new-found control now
that he knows he has backup from his wife.

These scenes allowed me to understand how draining it is for these two to fight their
feelings for each other, and I think they are both learning how to accept that they’re
becoming very tired and far too soon.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Next one will probably be very long and I
have a feeling the vibe will be different, too. The boys will talk, so let’s see how that
turns out ;)
Thank you all for reading, and see ya next time!

PLEASE REVIEW! Your opinion is very important to me and fuels my inspiration to write! Don’t hesitate to let me know your thoughts and head canons for the fic, who knows what might happen? ;)

Uncertain Consensus

Chapter Notes

Get ready for a loooooong chapter and looooots of talking. Wow, this was really hard to write. So many conflicting feelings from both Naruto and Sasuke, my own ideas being challenged.

Either way, I think that, in the end, it turned out the way it had to, so I can definitely say I’m happy about it! I hope you guys enjoy, too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We'll Rise

Part XX: Uncertain Consensus

Naruto wasn’t worried about the possible turn of the events of the next day. In fact, it had been quite a long time since he had felt this carefree. He did not expect how surprisingly well things had gone with Sasuke last night. Even if the tension had been high and undoubtedly dangerous, in the end, they had been able to simply enjoy each other’s company and presence.

Naruto knew there was no way he could push his luck towards intimacy with Sasuke, yet he still felt like he was in cloud nine. It was as if nothing could possibly shake away all sorts of happy and hopeful feelings inside. Just being there, away from home and finally close to Sasuke, brought a sense of peace to his soul that fate had long deprived him from.

He had met Katsuo, the child Sasuke had adopted and considered his ‘son’. Sasuke’s surprising love for the child was very evident, as was the child’s devotion to him. Katsuo had an unusual appearance, yes, and his features were hard to read, but his actions were still the ones of a child. Naruto was good with kids, so he was constantly waiting for an opening that would allow him to reach out to Katsuo in any way he could. However, right now, he knew he should give Sasuke and the boy some space and think about how far he could go without violating their family bubble. The fact alone that Katsuo was this important to Sasuke was enough to awaken some sort of fascination in Naruto. Somehow, he was very curious to see what type of person Katsuo would become in the future.

Naruto didn’t remember Misato’s place being as chaotic as it was that morning, but then again, back then, it hadn’t exactly been their home since they had been guests sleeping in a barn. Plus, the house now had an extra grumpy man and two extra children in it.

Contrary to what he had thought, he had been able to sleep surprisingly well, even though he had woken up with his face pressed against the wall with the upper half of Katsuo’s body sprawled over his legs – which was surprising since he’d never imagined such a docile child would have such
terrible sleeping habits. Sasuke, on the other hand, didn’t seem to have gotten much sleep, complaining about the heat, Naruto’s snoring and Katsuo’s constant thrashing.

At the large low wooden table during breakfast, Mika seemed to be particularly energetic, throwing food everywhere while laughing at everyone’s pissed off reactions. Naruto couldn’t help but notice Katsuo beside Sasuke carefully trying to fill a spoonful of porridge, getting ready to copy Mika’s actions. Unfortunately for him, as soon as he was positioning his wooden spoon to throw some porridge at Misato, as Naruto suspected, Sasuke noticed it and cleared his throat. The sound was enough to make Katsuo halt in his actions and quickly look up, only to see Sasuke frowning down at him reproachfully. Naruto almost laughed when, without taking his eyes away from his father’s, the boy slowly brought the spoon to his mouth instead, which earned him an approving nod from Sasuke.

Naruto had always imagined Sasuke to be the kind of parent who is level-headed and stern without the need for violence, yet still surprisingly caring in the simplest of things. Naruto sort of wished that he would manage to have this same kind of respect and affection from Boruto as he grew up.

After several failed attempts, Atsuko finally managed to convince Mika to eat instead of play, but the kitchen-like space, where they were eating, still ended up as a gooey mess by the time they managed to finish breakfast.

However, everyone worked to clean up the place together, even Katsuo, who had carried the bowls outside so they could be washed in the large basin next to the house while Sasuke and the others used rags to wipe the food off the floor and the walls. Misato explained that Mika wasn’t exactly this boisterous during mealtimes, so she was probably trying to impress Naruto since he had been playing with her the previous day. Naruto found it unbearably cute, even if Misato was far from amused.

Naruto offered to go to the river and fetch some clean water, a task he enjoyed since it allowed him to breathe some fresh morning air and stretch his legs. He brought in two buckets full; one that served to clean the house and the other that was used to help Katsuo wash the bowls outside. Naruto had forgotten how difficult doing small tasks were in that village in contrast with Konoha. Every little thing required a tremendous amount of time and effort without pipes of running water and proper cleaning utensils in the houses. It was the same with everything else, Naruto knew, and it was funny how he had still missed being part of this community.

He tried to make small talk with Katsuo even if he knew he’d get no verbal response. The boy seemed very focused in wanting to wash the bowls by himself, which made Naruto wonder if, somehow, the child was still harbouring any kind of hard feelings towards him concerning what he had seen last night. Either way, Naruto insisted on showing him the best way to do his task without breaking anything. To his relief, Katsuo did seem to listen to what he said and was eager to learn.

Naruto made sure to play with him once they finished their task by splashing a bit of water in his direction, just enough to wet him a little. The child was hesitant until Naruto encouraged him to retaliate. It didn’t take long for a small battle to take place, and while Naruto laughed, he wished that he could see and hear Katsuo laugh too, but all the boy could manage was to open his eyes wider than usual and form a weird, and rather twisted, sort of smile that looked very psychotic for such a small and innocent being. It wasn’t his fault, but Naruto had to wonder how the kids in the village didn’t have nightmares by associating with him on a daily basis. At least Naruto knew the boy was having fun, and that was all it mattered.

Sasuke emerged from the house to find Katsuo and Naruto throwing water at each other, both already soaked. Needless to say, Sasuke didn’t look pleased. Katsuo didn’t seem fazed by his sour expression, because he made a movement with his hand as if asking Sasuke to join in.
“You’re already wet enough Katsu. Naruto and I have things to do,” Sasuke reclined from the entrance of the house, motioning for his son to come inside. “Let’s get you changed. I’ve spoken to the basket maker, Ritsuko-san, and you’re going to be helping her this morning.”

Katsuo’s lips twitched in a small pout, and while he stopped attacking Naruto, he didn’t move from his spot.

“It’s no use looking at me like that,” Sasuke quipped, seriously. “It’s punishment for being rude yesterday, but if you don’t feel like doing it, I could always tell Tori you want to help cleaning up the barn. It’s your choice.”

Well, that seemed to be enough for Katsuo because he immediately stomped past Naruto and entered the house under Sasuke’s intense stare.

“I could almost swear this is some kind of tantrum?” Naruto commented, smiling at Sasuke and wiping the water running down his face with both hands.

“Yeah,” Sasuke confirmed, with a sigh. “He’s still very obedient though, but I feel like, more and more, he’s creating his own personality. I don’t know if I should feel proud or start worrying.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing the great Uchiha Sasuke can’t handle,” Naruto teased. Sasuke merely threw him an unimpressed look.

“You bring the bowls inside,” Sasuke then instructed, as Naruto tried to dry his hands by patting them on the fabric of his pants. “Once you do that, preferably without breaking anything, there are clothes in our room for you to change into. After you get changed, we’re going to sit and talk, like you wanted.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” Naruto retorted in a purposely childish manner, looking at Sasuke up and down. “Who says I want to be around your moody ass?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes and got inside the house, leaving Naruto alone before he could even say anything else.

A few people passed by and Naruto greeted them with an exuberant wave of his hand. Once they were out of sight, he let his hand fall and took a deep, steadying breath.

It was no use feeling nervous now – he would do what he needed to do, with a cool head and a goal in mind. That was all he had to focus on. There was nothing standing between him and Sasuke but their own selves at this point.

Slapping both his cheeks once with both hands to sober up, Naruto followed after Sasuke with renewed conviction.

Naruto had only packed enough things to last the journey there, so he was grateful for the clothes Sasuke had provided – the green linen sweater was oddly fitting, and so were the cream coloured trousers of an indefinable cream fabric that resembled thin leather and had a soft warm layer on the inside. Naruto had always enjoyed the simple clothing of the village; they were the comfiest he had ever worn.

Sasuke, on the other hand, was wearing trousers of the same fabric as Naruto’s but of a dark brown colour, and his sweater, made of something that looked like very delicately knitted wool, hugged his torso in a rather flattering way. In Naruto’s eyes, Sasuke looked absolutely gorgeous because there
was something about this casual side of Sasuke that was very attractive.

When Naruto thought about it, Sasuke had always dressed so plainly when within that village. He was always in some sort of Shinobi attire when in Konoha, and Naruto remembered always seeing him in complex and carefully planned outfits that were suited for battle and for weapon hiding, even back when they were kids. However, in that place, it was as if Sasuke didn’t particularly keep his guard up more than strictly necessary. This simpler version of Sasuke made him look younger, and his whole visual was fresh and very appealing, because he still held himself like a handsome and fearless warrior. Naruto couldn’t really look away if he tried, but then again, he hadn’t seen Sasuke properly for such a long time that he felt like no amount of gawking would make up for that.

Misato and Tori had left to do their respective tasks in the village, and Atsuko had left with Mika, as well, offering to drop Katsuo off at Ritsuko-san’s place. This meant the house would be empty for a while, leaving Naruto and Sasuke completely alone.

No matter how hard Naruto tried not to feel nervous, it was a fact that the atmosphere had become rather solemn as Sasuke heated a bit of water to make some tea in a sort of rustic makeshift stove while Naruto waited, sitting on the floor Indian style at the same low table where they’d been having breakfast early that morning.

The entrance door of the house was wide open, allowing the cool morning breeze to waltz in and for occasional passers-by to see the inside – Sasuke’s statement that talking was about all they would be doing, period. Truth be told, Naruto had been serious when he had said he hadn’t travelled there hoping to eventually have sex with Sasuke. He had no way of knowing the outcome of his visit there, but his focus had been to meet Katsuo and talk to Sasuke, and in his resolution, he hadn’t even considered bringing neither lube nor condoms. Now, he couldn’t help but wonder if that had been tremendously stupid of him.

He’d lie if he said that he hadn’t been expecting something to happen between them, but he hadn’t exactly expected for Sasuke to have taken the initiative first. Naruto supposed he should be glad. Still, his friend was unpredictable, and a bit of heated kissing after so long away from each other was no reason to take things for granted when it came to the two of them.

The silence wasn’t exactly an uncomfortable one, though, and this put Naruto a lot more at ease as he contemplatively watched Sasuke work.

Once Sasuke was done brewing some tea, he brought a mug to the table and put in front of Naruto, who immediately leaned forward to take a whiff of the steaming beverage. It had a pinkish colour, and the scent wasn’t one he recognized – spicy and slightly sweet.

“Thanks for this,” Naruto said with a wide smile, as Sasuke brought his own mug with him and sat down gracefully on his heels right across from Naruto, his posture very straight and dignified. It was kind of disappointing since Naruto had expected them to at least sit side by side, but he wasn’t going to push it.

Naruto grabbed for the mug with both hands and carefully brought it to his lips – it was very hot and very flavoured in a rather refined way, and nothing like anything Naruto had ever tasted. “It’s really good,” he said to Sasuke – who had been watching his reaction.

“I’m glad you enjoy it,” Sasuke said, with an almost formal nod of his head. “It’s made of several flower petals and a few spices. It’s my own invention.”
“Of course, it is,” Naruto teased. Then, he leaned back a bit, his hands supporting his weight on the floor. “This sure feels nice. It’s so peaceful here. I missed this sort of quiet time alone with you.”

Sasuke’s expression was calm, but serious. He absently scratched at his forehead, briefly allowing Naruto to get a glimpse of his rinnegan. “Naruto, let’s not beat around the bush,” he said, letting his hand drop to his lap. “I’m fine with you being here, but you came for a reason. If you have something to say, please say it already.”

Naruto eyed him contemplatively for a while. He couldn’t sense any sort of negative feelings coming from Sasuke, but it was clear that the man was facing the prospect of them talking with a bit of reluctance. “I don’t have anything to say, really,” Naruto said, shrugging slightly. “I just… I guess I want to know things about you? But I promised I wouldn’t ask questions, so I’m trying not to.”

Sasuke seemed to choose his words carefully before nodding once. “You can ask your questions, but I can’t promise to give you the answers you want.”

“Fair enough. Are you going to tell me the story behind you and Sakura-chan?” Naruto asked, as casually as he could because he didn’t want to create unnecessary tension between them right from the start. “Clearly you didn’t fall in love with her out of the blue, not with the way you spoke about her with Kakashi-sensei.”

“I think you need to think more carefully about what you want to know instead of asking questions to which the answers won’t please you,” Sasuke replied. “There are things you’re better off not knowing.”

Ah, Naruto had guessed as much. This was all he needed to know that there was definitely something complicated going on between his two teammates. “For now?”

“For now.” Sasuke’s words came as a silent promise that eventually, he would tell Naruto the truth, and even if it was infuriating, Naruto knew better than to pressure a topic Sasuke clearly didn’t want to talk about. “You know me better than I know myself, Naruto. Did you really expect me to just stay in Konoha and give up my goals just because of Sakura and Sarada?”

“Well, I do know you, but duh, they’re your family!” Naruto pointed out, making a displeased face. “Not enough reason for me to stay,” Sasuke countered, with a dismissive gesture of his hand. “I didn’t stay for you.”

“That’s different.”

“How, tell me, is it different if you’re the only living person with whom I’ve ever willingly wanted to share my life with?”

Naruto frowned to conceal the frustrated - and embarrassed - blush threatening to reach his cheeks. Sasuke sure knew how to press his buttons by so subtly making such bold statements and shoving things to his face. “Sarada is your kid. You give so much to Katsu-chan, but you’re neglecting your own blood. I’m not judging, Sasuke, I just don’t understand. I try not to get mad, but I just…”

“Sarada wasn’t desired, Naruto, and this the most honest thing I can tell you, and about all I’m going to say on the matter,” Sasuke interjected. “She is my daughter, yes, and of course I love her and I wish that she can have the best life possible, but she’s not Katsuo.” He heaved a small sigh. “I never thought I’d have kids, let alone of my own blood; I didn’t even want it. I adopted Katsuo of my own free will while Sarada simply turned everything upside down and forced me to take a path I never wanted to follow. Obviously, this isn’t her fault, and I don’t blame her, but I can’t help the way
I feel. And Sakura… she accepts things as they are between us. Isn’t that enough?’

Even though Naruto had sort of guessed Sasuke’s feelings on the matter, he hadn’t expected this bluntness, nor the acidic taste it left in his mouth. It was cruel and cold, and having known it beforehand didn’t ease the anger bubbling inside him. “So you’re saying Katsu-chan is the child you wanted and the one you consider a true son,” Naruto concluded, not without feeling bitter on Sarada’s behalf.

“I didn’t say I didn’t consider Sarada my child,” Sasuke corrected firmly. “I said that the way I feel about my situation with her and my situation with Katsuo is different.”

Straightening up, Naruto had to inhale deeply through his nose to calm himself down. “And, in spite of whatever deal you and Sakura-chan have, you’re telling me she’s simply alright with you not being home to see your daughter growing up?”

“It’s not like I’d be a present father even if Katsuo didn’t exist,” Sasuke defended, unfalteringly. “It’s my job to work outside of Konoha, for Kakashi, if I want to keep my status as a shinobi and eventually make the changes that need to be done to help you and your village in the future. It’s not like I’m always going to be there for Katsuo either.”

Sasuke had a point, and knowing he was doing it for Naruto’s sake as well - for the sake of Naruto’s hopes and dreams for Konoha - felt like the greatest gift to Naruto. It seemed like everything Sasuke did, every step he took was a calculated move with their future goals in mind.

It made Naruto feel both guilty and happy, but in Sarada’s and Sakura’s behalf, it wasn't like he could exactly accept the logic.

However, he didn’t want to fight, not this time. They had fought so many times, bickered, argued and not seen eye to eye, and these things would never change between them; but they could be improved, and this was what Naruto wanted. They had already ruined things with each other once because their opinions didn’t meet. Naruto would not let Sasuke drift away from him again.

“If you don’t want me to get involved, then that’s got nothing to do with me, right?” Naruto declared, crossing his arms over his chest. Sasuke didn’t reply, instead slowly lowering his head so he was looking down at his mug of tea. This allowed Naruto to wisely decide to take a few seconds to calm himself down and push away the unwanted feelings inside of him.

There was so much he wanted to tell Sasuke, so many things he wanted to know, but he needed to tread carefully since he was already lucky enough that they were sitting like this and trying to be civilized.

“Sasuke, I wanted you to meet my kid,” Naruto ended up saying, once he felt like he was more in control of his own emotions. “I wanted you to see him, to hold him. I held Sarada in my arms and it was the most beautiful thing. Do you understand that? I wanted you to feel it, too, because it was such a huge deal for us, something I’ve always wanted to share with you. But you fucking ran away. It just pisses me off that you would reject such an important moment in our lives.”

Sasuke tensed visibly. “I can’t… embrace the concept just yet,” he admitted, looking suddenly upset, the honesty in his words bringing chills up Naruto’s spine. “Maybe you’ve envisioned it, but I never did. Not like this. Not us, with wives, holding each other’s kids. It’s just not… ideal for me.”

It was like being slapped across the face because Naruto hadn’t once thought of things from that perspective. It had felt natural, for him, to think that once one of them had kids, the other would want to be there and share that special moment. That’s what friends did. That was what Naruto had
wanted to do as soon as he heard that Sakura was pregnant – to be there for her and Sasuke.

But, he and Sasuke were no longer just ‘friends’. Marriage, children… Sasuke hadn’t chosen any of it, and while he had supported Naruto, he had never really truly accepted it. It made sense that Sasuke wouldn’t feel compelled to simply barge into Naruto’s life and into Naruto’s family to simply pretend that he was okay with it when, in fact, he wasn’t – had never been.

How could Sasuke ever accept something he had wanted for himself being taken away by someone else? Wasn’t that how Naruto himself felt when he looked at Sarada and Boruto? When he thought about Sasuke being with someone else?

I really am a fool, Naruto thought, surprisingly angry at himself.

“Do you… want to know about him?” Naruto asked Sasuke, hesitantly. “My son, I mean? I don’t remember if I ever told you his name…”

“I’d rather not,” Sasuke interrupted, his voice soft, but definite, and yet he still wasn’t looking at Naruto.

“Does it hurt you that much?” Naruto muttered, even if he already knew the answer.

“I don’t know,” Sasuke confessed, with an elegant shrug of his shoulders. “I don’t know how I feel about it yet, even now. I’m… honestly so glad that you managed to understand the joy and importance of having a family but, at the same time, it just frustrates me beyond myself.”

That sort of conflicting feeling was something Naruto could understand, even though he hadn’t expected Sasuke to actually want Naruto to understand what having a normal ‘family’ meant. Then again, if Sasuke’s family had once been the most important thing of his life, it was obvious that - considering Sasuke’s feelings for Naruto - Sasuke would want Naruto to experience that kind of joy, as well. It was just that Naruto didn’t know how to feel about it all of a sudden.

As much as he had observed Sasuke, there were so many details about the complexity of him that Naruto had never thought about.

Sasuke had always said that he wanted Naruto to have everything, hadn’t he? Even the things Sasuke himself couldn’t give him. The thought was… flattering and unsettling. More than being lovers they had been friends, two people who had connected through pain and loneliness - two people who felt for each other like families and soulmates do. Sasuke had always wanted Naruto to have everything regardless of how that made Sasuke himself feel.

“How did it feel, for you, to hold Sarada for the first time, though?” Naruto asked, hoping to stop the overflowing of emotions in him.

“I don’t know,” Sasuke repeated, his hand reaching out to touch the mug of tea, and even though his gestures were composed, it was clear that he was becoming slightly restless. He stared at the mug unblinkingly. “She was so small and feeble. It was an odd feeling, seeing her looking so much like me even though she’s still so young. I suppose it was relieving in a way, but other than that I’m not sure whether it brought me immense happiness or a sense of utter despair. I don’t know how I feel about her and how this will affect our relationship as father and daughter.”

It never failed to have an impact on Naruto how much Sasuke’s words resonated within his very soul, forcing him to empathise, and in a way, it hurt him because once in a while, sharing Sasuke’s feelings made him wonder what kind of person he truly was. Was he really this sort of man, selfish and unavoidably damaged by his own decisions, so torn apart by these kinds of conflicting types of
love he didn’t know how to sort out? Would Naruto’s feelings for Sasuke end up influencing his future with his family so deeply? When Naruto thought about Hinata, he was sure that it would. He could only hope it would not affect Boruto the same way.

“You know what pisses me off the most?” Naruto hissed, shaking his head from side to side in self-disappointment. “You’re being a bastard about this, because the things you say are so cruel, Sasuke, and yet I can’t be mad at you specifically because I actually understand you. I understand your frustration very well.”

Sasuke finally looked up at him, his expression inscrutable. “How so?”

“You haven’t seen them together, Sasuke.” Naruto clenched his fists over his knees. “Our kids. They’re like us. And it was because of them that both our lives started spiralling out of control, and yet, when I look at them I just can’t help but have these feelings of both exhilaration and resentment. I think about all the ‘what ifs’ and…”

“Shut up,” Sasuke cut, upset, clearly understanding what Naruto wanted to convey. “What’s even the point of you pointing out these things to me? What’s the point of agonizing, huh, Naruto? Our kids look like us; isn’t that just a fucking ridiculous cliché? It’s like a fucking joke.”

“It is, isn’t it? I can’t help but have these pathetic thoughts, though,” Naruto confessed, looking into Sasuke’s eyes. “I can’t stop thinking about my own resentment and frustration towards this whole situation, and I can’t stop thinking about how, if they had been ours instead, somehow…”

“This part of the conversation is useless,” Sasuke interjected, becoming angry. “What kind of reasoning is this? As if something like that could ever be real! Why do you do this to yourself? Fantasising about things that are impossible…”

Naruto could only sigh tiredly. “I can’t help it,” he said.

“That’s because you’re an idiot,” Sasuke huffed, annoyed. “It’s all useless anyway.”

“When it comes to you I’ll always create expectations and idealize things, even though you never fail to do behave the exact opposite way, and even though I know some things will always be impossible!” Naruto protested, before swallowing hard due to the sudden embarrassment he felt. “But you are you, Sasuke, and I’ve long since chosen to… care for you just as you are. I guess that, when it comes down to it, I can’t accept things as they are between us either because we were meant for more. A life with you, kids that are ours, growing old together. I guess… this is the real meaning of ‘love’. And honestly, I’m fine embracing it as it is. Frustrating, stupid and hurtful as it might be, I don’t want to feel differently.”

What the hell am I even saying? Naruto thought desperately, bringing a hand to his mouth. His cheeks were burning. He hadn’t been able to stop the vomit of embarrassing words coming out of his throat, but in the end… that was how he truly felt, wasn’t it?

He hadn’t given it that much thought, but he supposed this was the naked truth. I want that kind of life with you, huh?

When Sasuke’s hand clutched tightly around his mug of tea, Naruto couldn’t help but notice the slight tremor of his hand, giving away how upsetting those words had been for him. Naruto knew he had probably taken things a bit too far considering their situation, and that hearing such things was painful for Sasuke at this point, but…

If Naruto wanted to tear down his walls, he had no choice but break him with every honest feeling
he had, even if it hurt the both of them. He wasn’t going to allow Sasuke to be in charge of things
anymore, and he wasn’t going to allow him to keep silencing the unmistakable truth of what they
were. He didn’t want to think that Sasuke might end up shutting him down completely out of pride
alone.

It was because he wanted Sasuke to have his own space to be honest that he decided to not say
anything else and simply watch as Sasuke took his time sipping on his tea. There was a very
dignified and stern posture about him despite how obvious it was for Naruto that he was all over the
place, so he let him regain his composure.

“Naruto, please look after Sarada, if you can,” Sasuke requested slowly, after a while. “I will repay it
to you eventually, and do something for your kid in return.”

You’re not going to indulge me, then, Naruto concluded, seeing how swiftly Sasuke had ignored his
heartfelt confession and effectively brought back the conversation of their kids. There was no way
Sasuke hadn’t been moved, Naruto could feel it in his very body. Sasuke felt the same way, wanted
the same thing, but he wasn’t allowing himself to be charmed.

Naruto smirked to himself, refusing to feel disheartened, and lowered his hand with renewed
conviction. You’re not getting away from me, stubborn bastard.

While the request was surprising, in a way, it was to be expected. “I don’t think Sakura-chan even
wants me to be that close to them, but yeah, I’ll do my best,” Naruto promised, leaning forward
slightly in a small, formal bow.

Traditionally, Sasuke bowed slightly back, a genuine look of gratefulness in his eyes. “Thank you.”

Naruto’s brain was all over the place. Why was Sasuke so easy to understand, and yet so
complicated to read at the same time?

“What about this place?” Naruto questioned, choosing to indulge Sasuke just a while longer. “I
noticed you’ve been making changes around here.”

The change of subject seemed to help Sasuke fall into a more relaxed stance. “If possible, I do want
this to become my dream village, eventually,” he said honestly, giving voice to Naruto’s
assumptions.

“I thought so.”

“I know it takes time and effort, and most of all, cooperation from everyone here,” Sasuke
acknowledged, playing with his mug almost absently. “Under no circumstance do I want to impose a
culture or a way of living that’s not acceptable to the villagers. But if I can expand this place and
make it a home for people without a place to return to… if this can bring everyone happiness,
comfort and a sense of joined compassion towards the world that’s similar to mine… surely, we’ll
make progress at some point.”

Naruto swallowed hard, a familiar tightness wrapping around his heart. “When I look at you, with all
your ideals and dreams, I almost feel like my dream of becoming Hokage is frivolous.”

“It’s not frivolous.” Sasuke frowned at him. “Becoming Hokage will allow you to change the world
according to your own vision. You’ll be able to help me, too.”

“I definitely want to work with you as soon as possible,” Naruto confided, unable to hold back a
smile even though his heart had suddenly started beating faster in excitement at the prospect. “It’s
actually one of things that makes me want to reach the future faster.”
“Everything takes time,” Sasuke muttered. “And money, I suppose.”

“Your motivation is beautiful,” Naruto said, crossing his arms and placing them over the table as he eyed his friend with an open fondness he couldn’t suppress if he tried. “I don’t know what’s going through your mind right now but when you follow your heart, I can’t help a part of me from empathising. I’m pissed at you for not telling me things beforehand, but I’m also happy, I guess, and proud. Maybe envious of you, yes.”

“It was your choice to not be a participant in my personal adventures,” Sasuke said, quietly but ruthlessly. “They could’ve been our adventures, Naruto.”

With an annoyed groan, Naruto scratched his nose with his index finger. Sasuke would never let him live that down, huh? Well, it’s not like he could blame him.

“So, are you going to raise Katsu-chan to be shinobi?” Naruto ended up asking, once more changing the subject so the mood wouldn’t sour again.

Sasuke took another sip in his tea. “I don’t know. I want him to be able to defend himself, at least, but whether he wants to follow the shinobi life or not, that’s something for him to decide.” He looked down at the mug he had just put down, thoughtfully. “In fact, I want him to be free to choose the kind of life he wants to lead. As long as he turns out to be a good man who’s faithful to his own principles, I’ll be happy enough.”

Naruto hummed. That was such a ‘Sasuke’ thing to say, honourable to the very end. “I hope you do understand that you can’t keep Katsu-chan’s existence a secret for long,” he said, carefully. “Just like you’ll have to eventually tell him, and everyone here, that you have another family back in Konoha.”

“I know that,” Sasuke assured, unperturbed. “All in its due time, Naruto. You don’t have to concern yourself with my affairs.”

“Even if you say that…”

“Let’s not talk about this anymore,” Sasuke cut, effectively forcing Naruto to close his mouth. “I’m tired already. If you have anything else to ask, then go ahead.”

_How many lovers did you take up until now?_

_Why did you tell Gaara about Katsuo but left me in in the dark?_

_Why are you still being like this?_

_Why are you constantly closing the gap between us only to create more distance afterwards?_

But Naruto wouldn’t ask these things. It didn’t matter anyway, because he sure as hell was going to turn things around. Knowing he had the upper hand when compared to others was all he needed. He was the only one for Sasuke, just as Sasuke as the only one for him, no matter who or what got in between them. That was a power he would always hold.

Biting down on his tongue, Naruto heaved a sigh and shifted so he could stretch his legs under the large table to stop them from going numb. His toes connected with Sasuke’s knee but the other man didn’t say a thing. Sasuke patiently kept sipping his tea as Naruto then readjusted himself so he was also on his knees, sitting on his heels. It wasn’t a position Naruto would ever choose of his own accord, too stiff and too formal, but in a way, he thought it would be fitting to add yet another level of depth to the continuation of their conversation. Maybe this way Sasuke would understand that Naruto was to be taken seriously.
He wanted to send a message, and from the way Sasuke’s eyebrow quirked slightly in his direction, his friend understood this.

Straightening his back as much as he could, Naruto placed both hands over his thighs, looking down at them. “A lot of things have happened in this last couple of years, huh?” He muttered, with a small sigh. “It feels like forever has gone by since we’ve been together like this, and yet, it’s like it was only yesterday that I was here with you, in this village, sleeping in that smelly barn.”

“I still slept there for a while; it made me feel at ease, even though Misato was always telling me to move in with them,” Sasuke confessed, nostalgically. “But when I brought Katsuo in, she practically forced us to live here.”

The corner of Naruto’s mouth twitched. “I’m glad you now have people that you want to rely on instead of thinking you have to do everything by yourself,” he said, honestly. “This may be a selfish thing to say but, Sasuke, I’m your friend, too, and you can rely on me. I know you said we would live separately and reach our individual goals before anything else. I know you said you wanted me to do the best I can in this life I chose, and I know you said we weren’t going to talk about our relationship anymore. I know you don’t want to deal with it more than you have to. But that’s the thing – it was all you. You decided everything for yourself, because it’s convenient for you. You never let me have a say in it.”

“My way of dealing with things is the right one, Naruto, and you know it” Sasuke replied, sternly now, and Naruto could tell his eyes were intensely fixed on him. “It’s the only way we can help getting hurt. I’m thinking of you, as well. That’s why boundaries need to be established and not trespassed, because the moment one of us breaks the rules, everything falls apart.”

“You kissed me!” Naruto accused, clenching his fists over his lap. “Granted, I might’ve probably provoked you because I really wanted you to do it, but you still did it first. You always do.”

“That’s why we should never break the rules!” Sasuke pressed on stubbornly. “You shouldn’t have come here, and I shouldn’t have kissed you. One slip and it’s a constant unfold of events, and no matter how fascinating and alluring it all is, it can’t be like that.” Naruto felt Sasuke’s energy changing once more, to one of distress and annoyance. “It’s because I know I’m weak when it comes to you that I need these boundaries to be respected, Naruto. You of all people should know where I’m coming from.”

“I do, and yet I don’t.” Looking up resolutely, Naruto met Sasuke’s stare. “I understand that I’m not supposed to leave my family to come and see you. I understand I’m not supposed to give in to intimacy because I’m married and so are you. But, in the end, seeing you or not seeing you; being lovers or just being friends; It’s all a fucking pain in the ass either way because I still want you and it’s a sort of feeling that won’t disappear or diminish no matter how much I will it to. That’s not how it works, Sasuke.”

For a moment, Sasuke’s intense gaze faltered and became gloomy. Within himself, Naruto could feel Sasuke’s emotions of resignation, sadness and a longing so strong that it pulled at his heartstrings. All he wanted was to be able to reach out to him and make it all go away, for both their sakes, but he knew already that he couldn’t do that to Sasuke. There was only so much he could force out of his friend.

“I know very well how it works,” Sasuke whispered, shaking his head from side to side tiredly. “But what else am I supposed to do? Giving in is always just a childish indulgence on both our parts, and you know it. It may have a meaning, but it serves no purpose when nothing will come out of it. We’re already worlds apart, and that, to me, is worse than me not having you as a lover.” It was his turn to swallow hard before continuing, his words clearly difficult for him to utter. “It’s easier to live
as your friend than to be your fleeting lover without a purpose. I don’t need to borrow your body if it’s never going to be mine. It doesn’t work when it’s you. I don’t deal well with things being taken away from me. At least your friendship is something I know is impossible to be sabotaged. At least those feelings are mine alone and will be with me to the very end.”

In spite of himself, Naruto was shocked. He would’ve gasped but found his breath painfully stuck in his throat.

Had Sasuke really been living his life believing that they’d live separate lives forever?

But… I told him, didn’t I? That someday, for sure we’d…

Does he have that little faith in me? In us?

But then again, didn’t things just seem so terribly dire lately? Hadn’t the world changed so much and so suddenly around them that everything seemed larger and bigger than themselves?

Didn’t their lives currently feel like they had reached a point of no return?

It wasn’t like Naruto could blame his friend for feeling like it would be this way forever.

Still, it was hope that made Naruto move forward – the hope that, once he became Hokage and their paths finally met again, he and Sasuke would be able to start carving something new for them. He had honestly thought that Sasuke had been able to see it, too – to feel his intentions – but was somehow being revengeful out of bitterness for how things had turned out for them.

Sasuke’s insisting that they stay away from each other had always felt to Naruto like some kind of punishment, and calling it as such was probably accurate. Either way, Sasuke was right in behaving the way he did and in wanting things to be the way they were – it was only sensible all things considered. It wasn’t that Naruto couldn’t understand where he was coming from.

But… to think that Sasuke was pulling away from him because he thought…

“Do you think I’d want to use you?” The question left Naruto’s mouth with bewilderment. “I mean, I know I can come across as lame and pathetic when it comes to you, and that my feelings are persistent and nagging; and I understand that they are a burden to you. I would be lying if I said that I’m not dying to be able to hold you right now with every second that ticks by, and I know this affects you greatly, but…”

“Naruto…”

“… I never wanted you to simply have an affair with me!” Naruto blurted out, feeling suddenly agitated because being misunderstood wasn’t an option. “Hell, I didn’t come here believing I was going to have sex with you! I just want to be with you, to be a part of your life, to be by your side as much as I can! But we’re not friends anymore, Sasuke, and nothing will change that! Just like nothing will change the fact that we’re now married to other people and have kids! But that’s not… that doesn’t mean it’s supposed to be over between us!”

“Yes, it does!” Sasuke contradicted, now with an angry frown. “If you’re not after an affair then what the fuck do you want from me? You say you want to be part of my life and yet you say we’re not friends, but I already told I’m not going to be your fuck buddy!”

“I don’t want you to be my fuck buddy! Are you seriously saying this to me, Sasuke? Don’t you know you’re way more valuable than that?!” Naruto yelled, feeling offended. “Fuck, I never harassed you! I can’t help how I feel, but I’ve always given you your space! I always wait for you to
take the first step, and guess what, you always do! It’s got nothing to do with having an affair! You know we can’t help it, so why can’t you simply accept that this is how it’s always going to be and make things easier for the both of us?”

“Because I can’t live my life based on concepts, and that’s what we are right now!” Sasuke snapped, and the cold way he raised his voice made Naruto purse his lips together. “Our whole relationship right now is a concept we’ve created; but concepts aren’t real things, they’re just theories that more often than not don’t work in practical aspects. And I don’t need something I can’t grasp, Naruto; it’s as simple as that.”

“I’m right here!” Naruto contradicted, rolling his eyes. “I’m always within you reach if you want me to! We’re real! All of this between us is real and still you’re saying it’s impossible…”

“I don’t need to be given scraps of you.” Sasuke spat, but the way his voice cracked ever so slightly punch the breath out of Naruto’s lungs. “I don’t need be fed with illusions of us only to be left with nothing, over and over again, until I die. I don’t want to live this way for the rest of my life! You don’t understand how it makes me feel, you don’t…”

“Stop it!” Naruto interrupted, lifting one hand up while the other rubbed at his chest – his heart was thumping far too painfully from the sudden wave of Sasuke’s feelings crashing over him. “Just… you’re misunderstanding everything!”

“I’m not misunderstanding, I’m just upset,” Sasuke said, before pinching the bridge of his nose. “I know, we can’t help it, Naruto, and I’ve long since accepted that. That’s why I need to stay away from you. Because all of this is painful. Being close to you, or being away from you… as you said, it’s all the same. Because no matter what we do, or think, we’ll always be this stupidly drawn to each other. But I’d rather not have you at all and make peace with that than live as your lover in the shadows forever. It’s a matter of principle, and I wish you would simply accept and respect that.”

“I don’t have a say in this,” Sasuke retorted, without smiling. “You’re supposed to feel me, too. Are you simply telling me to accept you slipping away from me just because you have your own ideas about how the future will be? Because everything has to be your way or no way at all?”

“Unlike you, I’m objective and don’t live in a world of make believe,” Sasuke countered irritably. “Things aren’t always the way we want them to be regardless of how much we understand each other’s feelings.”

Naruto slammed his hand on the table, inhaling sharply. Furiously, he pointed his index finger at his friend. “Listen here, you. I don’t care what you say or what you think you know. I’m here for you, and I always will. I’m not going to let you do everything alone as you please anymore. You’re not going to run away from me again, and you’re not going to close yourself off for months on end, because if you do, I don’t care what I have to do, but I will chase you down to the ends of the earth.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Sasuke retorted, without smiling.

“You don’t have a say in this,” Naruto proceeded firmly, ignoring the irritation and impatience he could feel coming from the other man and challengingly not breaking eye contact. “And you’re going to listen to me closely, Uchiha Sasuke, because I sure as hell am not going to make things clear a third time.”

Despite Sasuke’s unconvinced expression, Naruto straightened his back again, trying to look as imposing as he possibly could. “I never wanted you to have an affair with me. All I want is for us to accept each other as we are, freely and without demands, like we always have. Right now, we’re on
even ground and our situations are similar. It’s true that there isn’t much we can change at this point, and it’s true that I fucked up from the start, way before I realized how I felt about you. But…”

The gods help him, why did his heart hurt so much? It pounded with such a force it seemed to not belong inside his chest at all. He could feel the weight of Sasuke’s own feelings and it made it hard to think and breathe because he didn’t know which feeling belonged to whom. Maybe it was some strange phenomena that changed their hearts whenever he and Sasuke were close like this. It wasn’t the first time that he felt that their hearts connected and somehow mutated when they were together, to become one. Naruto liked to believe that they could beat in sync, too.

He wished these strong feelings he had could reach the man sitting across from him more clearly than his clumsy words did. He knew Sasuke felt them, he just didn’t know how Sasuke interpreted them.

“I honestly don’t understand how you can think that there is no point, that we’re just a fucking concept,” Naruto proceeded, forcing his voice to remain steady. “Because it doesn’t feel like a concept when I’m constantly worrying about you, and thinking about whether you’re alright. It doesn’t feel like it’s pointless when I remember what it feels like to sleep beside you and to see you smile. It’s not a concept, for me, when I desperately want to see you and feel your touch so much I forget what I’m supposed to do with myself.”

Sasuke pursed his lips together, and once more, looked away from him. “I don’t want to hear these things from you,” he said dryly. “Do you do it on purpose to hurt me? Because this…”

“It’s because I know you’re hurting that I’ve given this a lot of thought,” Naruto cut once more, unwilling to let Sasuke manipulate things with his chivalrous ideals again. “And I don’t want us to have an affair, but I do want us to be the partners we’re supposed to be, and yes, I do want to be your lover. Not out of a whim, not for sex, but because, no matter what happens, you will always be the one person I need in my life and the one I can’t live without. I do love you with everything I have, even if you don’t want to hear it. And I don’t want to have a double life with you, or a make-believe one, but I want to be as involved with your life as much as I can because… I will be a part of it at some point in the future. So, for bad or worse, we need to build that future together.”

Sasuke closed his eyes and exhaled loudly. Naruto could feel the whirlwind of emotions inside of him even though Sasuke was sitting very straight and very still, like a beautiful porcelain doll. “I don’t understand what you’re getting at,” Sasuke said, even though his voice was giving nothing away.

I’m not letting you hide from me, Sasuke.

“I’m saying that there is a purpose,” Naruto explained, softly this time. “There are things the both of us must achieve first. There is no fixing what’s been broken. But there will come a time when we’ll be able to create something for ourselves. I will make sure it happens. I won’t accept anything else.”

“When we’re nearly dying of old age?” There was no mockery in Sasuke’s tone. “I’m going to have to pass on that. I’m not going to sit around and wait for you forever.”

“Oh course not!”

Hesitating only for a second, Naruto carefully moved on his hands and knees towards the other man and stopped beside him. He could see Sasuke’s shoulders stiffening as he sensed his proximity, but his face was still stubbornly facing the opposite direction. Reaching out a hand, Naruto carefully touched his chin and gently turned his face to him. Sasuke allowed it, opening his eyes so he could look at him.
Naruto often wondered how Sasuke could manage to force himself to look so stoic when they were close like this. Inside, Naruto was a mess and wanted nothing more than to break remaining the distance and consume the other man in any way he could. It took everything he had for him fake his composure like this.

More often than not, he wished Sasuke would just drop his guard down completely when around him, so he could see reflected in those attractive features all the things he knew his friend was feeling. He wanted to see the same expressions Sasuke had showed the previous night, when their longing had been so completely exposed to each other nothing else had mattered.

Swallowing hard, Naruto brushed Sasuke’s fringe away from his other eye, the beautiful purple of the rinnegan meeting his stare. “There’s so much I want to see and do with you,” Naruto whispered. “There’s a world we must build together, side by side. That’s why I want to become Hokage as soon as possible and do as much as I can, as quickly as possible. I want to be with you. Do you understand?”

Sasuke’s gaze roamed over his features. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t,” he muttered.

Naruto’s hand took the liberty of sliding its way to Sasuke’s neck, the firm, yet smooth skin causing a sense of fascination in him. “Hinata knows about how I feel for you,” he explained. “She was the one who told me to come, seeing how miserable I was all the time. She said she understood there were things only you could give me. We didn’t talk much about it, but she understands.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed. “You’re a disgrace, and your woman has no pride.”

“She loves me and wants to see me happy,” Naruto defended, and he would’ve smiled if he wasn’t so burdened by the heavy atmosphere around them. “I feel sad for her, because she doesn’t deserve it. I’m a terrible, selfish person because of you, and I’m hurting her. But if she knows, then there’s nothing I can do to reverse things. She probably knows that it’s a matter of time for us, but…”

“Again, you’re being idealistic,” Sasuke retorted, almost condescendingly now. “You say you want to live a life with me at some point, but you already know my reality and how I live. Will you really abandon your child, your life, your beloved village…”

“That’s not something you need to concern yourself with,” Naruto interrupted firmly, giving Sasuke a bit of his own medicine. With his free hand, he searched for Sasuke’s – finding it resting over his lap - and held it tightly. “I can’t make promises as to when it’ll happen, and I sure as hell don’t know how the fuck it’s going to happen nor what I’ll have to do to achieve it with minimal damage. But I can promise you that it will. And I need you to have faith in me, Sasuke. I need us to be in this together.”

Finally, the corner of Sasuke’s mouth twitched slightly. Finally, he allowed himself to look patronising and obviously endeared for some reason. “So, you’re telling me that, because your wife knows about us and has given you permission to be with me, we should just be together,” he said, with a small, slightly mocking shrug. “Since she knows, it’s not considered an ‘affair’ because I’d be waiting for you, and when you put things in that perspective, that would mean that we’d simply be in a long-distance relationship until the day comes when we can live together.”

In spite of himself, Naruto had to laugh. “Come on, don’t make me seem like such an asshole.”

“Well, you certainly sound like one,” Sasuke accused, mercilessly.

Huffing, Naruto let his head fall so his forehead was resting on Sasuke’s shoulder. His thumb brushed over the top of Sasuke’s hand. “It’s not like I’m telling you that we have to fuck every time
we see each other, that’s not what this is about. You know it’s much more than sex between us,” he mumbled, sighing at just how perfect just this bit of intimacy was. Being in contact with Sasuke alone was a heavenly relief. “I’m just asking you to let go of your boundaries and accept us the way we are. I’m asking you to stop running away from me. If we have to live apart, at least let us meet whenever we have the chance and be happy when we’re together instead of always feeling so damn miserable all the time.”

Naruto could feel a small, gentle pressure at the top of his head and he knew that he was being kissed. He bit down on his lower lip, his very soul filled with nothing but blissful relief.

“I don’t know what to say to you, Naruto,” Sasuke whispered solemnly, against his hair. Turning his palm upwards, he held Naruto’s hand back. “My principles are as strong as my desires, and I know I’m always the biggest hypocrite in this. I keep pushing you away, and then I’m always the one to close the gap between us. I know my actions hurt you, and that’s not something I’m happy about. I just don’t like the way things have turned out. No matter what we do, it’ll still be nothing but momentary fantasies. Whether others know it and accept it or not, our reality remains the same. And I’m very, very tired of it already.”

Lifting his head up, Naruto brought his lips close to Sasuke’s ear as his arm encircled his neck in a semi-hug. “You think too much,” he said in a whisper. “Those fantasies should be used to fuel your passion towards what’s already ours and what we’ll definitely have someday. I’m making a promise to you here. If you stop being so difficult all the time, things will be better and easier for us. You’re tired, and so am I. I’m sick of hurting, sick or pretending to not feel the way I do. I can’t do it anymore, Sasuke. I won’t.”

Sasuke heaved a sigh. “Somehow your vision of happiness is so very different from mine,” he said. “You seem to ask so little of me, and yet it feels like too much.”

“How is our freedom together too much?” Naruto protested, before placing a timid kiss on Sasuke’s cheek. He was glad Sasuke didn’t push him away, so he nuzzled the spot with his nose as he held Sasuke tighter. “Just being with you like this is already enough for me. I feel like nothing could possibly go wrong and I feel like I have the strength to endure whatever comes my way.”

He leaned away so he could look at Sasuke again, determinedly. “I’m not demanding anything from you – not your exclusiveness, not your body, not your response to whatever whims I may have. I know that’s not in my right, and we both have our duties to fulfil. I’m just asking you to accept ‘us’ and have faith in ‘us’. Just… wait for me. Is that really too much to ask?”

Even though Naruto’s whole speech had been meant to somehow set Sasuke’s heart ablaze, he understood that Sasuke was more than a little disenchanted at this point. He could feel Sasuke’s doubts, his stubbornness in not wanting to give in to idealisms, but also that unbearable yearning for him he carried that allowed a small flicker of hope to burn him. Still, Sasuke was too objective to allow himself to be enamoured by words, or even by a promise of a lifetime, even if it came from Naruto himself.

Naruto’s words had been nothing but sincere, but he had worn a mask of casualty to try and hide the despair he felt, even though he knew Sasuke could clearly feel it. It was true that he didn’t want to demand things from the other man, but the fear that their situation might go back to how it was – that Sasuke might want to insist on staying away from him – almost drove him insane. Determined as he was, it terrified him the thought that he might go back to Konoha without knowing how things stood between him and his best friend. He didn’t think he could handle another two years of absence and rejection.

He didn’t want to live like that anymore. He didn’t want to be in that constant state of frustration and
anxiety simply because Sasuke didn’t want to make things too personal between them. He didn’t want to need Sasuke and agonize about whether he’d even be allowed to touch him and talk to him the next time they saw each other.

Why should they hurt each other like that when they could at least find a sense of comfort together?

Releasing Naruto’s hand, Sasuke touched his palm to Naruto’s chest, right above his heart. “Everything between us is always too much to ask,” he said frankly, his voice low but smoothly clear. “This sense of wanting you as if my life depends on it, and the simultaneous need to spare myself the drama…” he looked down to Naruto’s chest, as if he could see what was inside. “I don’t think our current situation will ever be something I will get used to. I can’t possibly promise that I’ll always be in the mood to play the part of your lover, with or without the sex. I can’t promise I’ll always be emotionally available for you, even if I’m in Konoha, because the position we’re both in isn’t something I will ever be able to fully accept.”

“I understand, and I respect that,” Naruto assured him quickly, even if it disheartened him a bit. Sasuke looked up at him again, his hand fisting Naruto’s sweater. “Waiting for you is all I ever do, Naruto; so please, don’t demand anything else of me. Accepting us is something I can do, but no matter how much I want to let go and be the way you want me to be, I’m not like you and I will always be burdened by this impending feeling of anger and loss towards what we could’ve had from the start.” He licked at his lips and took a deep breath. “We could have it all, right now, and yet this is all we have, and all we’ll have for a long time. I can’t deal with these fleeting indulgences the way you do. I get angry every time I’m forced to be with you and then having to let you go to a world I’m not part of. Even if you say you want a future with me, the right now carries too much weight. Even if I trust your word, that doesn’t stop me from feeling the way I do.”

“I understand how you feel, and I don’t want to put any sort of pressure on you,” Naruto said urgently, the hand he still had on Sasuke’s thigh moving to touch his belly. “I’ll take whatever you feel like you can give me. And I guess this makes us even, right? We’ll both be waiting for each other, but in different circumstances and in different ways.”

“I suppose so.” Sasuke’s hand relaxed a bit as his voice became a bit sarcastic. “From that perspective, it makes me feel better that you’ll also feel a bit miserable.”

“Fucker,” Naruto teased nervously, tightening his arm around Sasuke’s shoulders. He couldn’t blame Sasuke for not feeling the way he did – for not desiring this between them just as much and wanting to just get whatever he could. Sasuke wasn’t like him, and his pride and ideals worked his heart in cautious ways Naruto’s didn’t. Nothing was ideal for neither of them, and even when it came to them and their feelings for each other, not even this was enough for them to see eye to eye.

But… Sasuke was conceding just a bit, right?

The man in Naruto’s arms tilted his head up so their faces were intimately close, their noses touching. Naruto had the impulse to lean in and close the gap between them, but his friend’s words were too fresh in his mind and he didn’t dare. Sasuke’s feelings always called out to him, luring him in irresistibly, but Sasuke’s mind was a completely different thing and, right now, Naruto didn’t understand exactly how emotionally ‘available’ Sasuke was. There was too much tension in Sasuke’s body still, his aura more resigned than exactly accepting. Naruto understood that being this close after everything they had talked about was a privilege itself, and he didn’t want to compromise even this much.

In times like these, just thinking that he could easily spend hours simply touching Sasuke like this was enough for him.
A moment of silent contemplation passed between them during which his heart seemed to soar gently. Naruto lived for moments like these – this was what he had been hoping for all along. “Come on, just hug me already, this is getting really frustrating,” he whispered.

Even with their proximity he could clearly perceive Sasuke rolling his eyes. “Talking to you is exhausting,” he said, with a sigh. “Then again, being in your general presence always is.”

Either way, Sasuke ended up willingly twisting his body towards him and putting his arm around Naruto’s neck to pull him close. Naruto had to adjust his own body more so they could hug properly, shifting on his knees to come closer while trying not to fall across Sasuke’s lap. It wasn’t exactly an easy task considering their positions, but it was fine. It didn’t matter as long as they could share this. Even with all the hesitation and uneasiness, at least it seemed like they had found some sort of common ground and got their feelings across. It would just have to be enough for them, for now. This was already more than Naruto could have possibly asked for.

At least now they had something else to fight for. Even if Sasuke hadn’t really shown a lot of faith towards their future together, for sure, he’d fight for it in his own way because that was who Sasuke was.

Without a doubt, Sasuke loved Naruto, and their bond was one of the things he cherished the most. They belonged to each other. Regardless of how things might turn out for them, or how Sasuke felt about it, in the end, they’d always belong close to each other just like this, and this was the only certainty Naruto had in his life – that they’d always end up finding each other and colliding just like this. Everything else… how Sasuke chose to live his life, the decisions he made, whom he chose to care for, what he prioritized…

Who the fuck am I to tell him what to do when I can’t control how I feel about my own life and the people in it?

Surely there would be a lot of things that would make them bicker and not agree with each other. Surely, they’d be frustrated at each other often, and without a doubt, they’d still do things that would unavoidably hurt the other. There was no helping it when they were parallel beings, fated to collide and be each other’s reverse of the coin.

At least we have each other, one way or the other. As long as that’s ours, we’ll overcome this. If he waits for me, I’ll wait for him, too.

“Don’t you just love the tension?” Naruto said playfully against Sasuke’s neck, with a content sigh. He felt so fulfilled with just this that he even had goose bumps. He enjoyed the way Sasuke’s hair brushed his closed eyelids. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to understand it, but you make me really happy. Just seeing you makes me happy. It’s the weirdest feeling in the world.”

Sasuke grunted. “You’re disgusting,” he muttered grumpily, but there was also a hint of joy behind his words, embarrassment, too. There was a moment of hesitation before his arm squeezed Naruto tighter. Sasuke’s heart was beating just as wildly, his breathing just that little bit more elaborate. He took a quick breath before saying “Are you going to kiss me of your own volition or not?”

In Naruto’s excitement, he didn’t really need to be told twice as he pulled away only enough so his lips could eagerly meet the ones of his friend with far too much force. Sasuke’s mouth was instantly receptive and immediately moved against his, but slowly, in a rather deep and intense kiss that Sasuke understood was meant to be felt and enjoyed, like a quiet re-exploration of each other that served to remind them both of this beautiful sense of belonging that was theirs alone. It was a different kind of passionate from those mindless kisses they shared in the heat of the moment, but
was in no way less searing. They could feel trace of each other’s bodies like this, be aware of every move, every sigh, every moan, every slippery sound, and be very aware of details they wouldn’t have otherwise. The taste of Sasuke, the methodical way their tongues met, the slide of their lips. The way their bodies would shiver gently on occasion. Sasuke’s firm, soft skin as Naruto’s hand slipped underneath his sweater to touch his naked firm stomach. The way Sasuke’s body pressed slightly forward to be more in contact.

How the temperature seemed to rise, slowly but steadily, and the air seemed to become heavier, making it increasingly harder to breathe. The familiar dizziness that made both their heads spin and their chests tremble. That spiralling chaos of their shared feelings.

The door was still open. Anyone casually passing by would see them, but neither cared.

This was theirs right now, and simple as it was, there was nothing that would ever compare.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so… let’s see how things will go from now on. Sasuke is clearly a bit reluctant, but I guess he can’t help but wanting it, too, even if he’s always going about things in a ‘my way or the highway’ style. In the end, it’s his principles being savaged, and it’s him who decided how ‘emotionally available’ he is in all of this. Tough cookie ^^

Next chapter will be a lot more lighthearted, with Sasuke and Naruto spending a bit of time together with little Katsuo, and Naruto’s return to Konoha. Probably will be an equally gigantic chapter. Let’s see how things go between the boys, heh?

Thank you all for your constant support and for not giving up on this fic! You have no idea how much I cherish and appreciate every single one of you!

REVIEW?
Conflicting Thoughts

Chapter Notes

Brace yourselves for a long and rather useless chapter!

I already explained this in my fic ‘It’s Not Fair’ but I now have a Ko-fi page (you’ll find the link at the notes at the bottom of the page) where you can offer your support to what I do and commission me. I was commissioned for the ending of ‘It’s Not Fair’ so that’s what I’ve been working on, and what I plan to finish before the end of the year. This to say that, while I definitely WON’T be dropping this fic, it might take a while for another update to follow. Let’s see how fast I can pull the completion of ‘It’s Not Fair’ and we might all just get a surprise ;)

BETAED BY THE LOVELY IXTAB-LOVES-ME FROM TUMBLR! THANK YOU FOR YOUR HARD WORK, MY DEAR, I'M TRULY GRATEFUL!

Enjoy your reading, and please read the notes at the bottom, after the 'TBC'!

From Which We’ll Rise

Part XXI: Conflicting Thoughts

“Do you understand the promise you just made, Naruto?” Kurama asked, leaning down so his sneering snout was at Naruto’s body level. “Do you think Sasuke even took you seriously after everything you’ve already said and done up until this point?”

Naruto and Kurama were talking in the dark depths of Naruto’s core. Unable to keep his mouth shut, the nine-tailed fox had felt the need to interfere because he felt like things were quickly getting out of hand, and even if Naruto thought they were changing for the best, he had a feeling this wasn’t true, no matter what his vessel thought.

Outside, Naruto’s physical body was too busy straddling the Uchiha man’s thighs and putting his arms around his neck, pressing himself close in an almost desperate need for contact. A tightening in his belly and a heat in his groin gave away his arousal, and the unsteady way his heart was beating was proof of how much he had yearned for this easy and simple type of interaction.

Sasuke’s mouth allowed Naruto to kiss him at will - Naruto was aware of this. Their tongues touched and slid over each other sensually before their lips brushed almost in slow motion. Sasuke’s arm slid around Naruto’s waist. When they were like this, it was as if they had electricity running within themselves and it was such a rush it made it hard for them to be still, let alone keep their hands off each other.
A low, appreciative sound emerged from Sasuke’s mouth.

It was obvious that Sasuke was revelling in this as much as Naruto was – hell, Naruto’s body could feel Sasuke’s energy pulsating with raw want - but his actions were premeditated and calculated, his aura clearly dripping with longing and simultaneous pride – a warning that this wasn’t to escalate or there would be repercussions. Sasuke didn’t fuck around if his pride was at stake, and right now, the Uchiha was fucking upset regardless of him having accepted this intimacy with Naruto.

The disappointment deep in Naruto’s soul was piercing, yet he convinced himself that even this would have to be enough. Naruto had needs, yet he respected Sasuke above any other living human or creature, so it was automatic for him to simply accept Sasuke’s wish and be understanding.

Anything as long as he could have Sasuke. Kurama wanted to weep, or growl, or beat some sense into both of them.

How many times had he seen this sort of dance between them? How many more times would they hurt each other because they were too stubborn to just do something for themselves instead of fucking thinking about the greater good or whatever it was that moved them and made them this ridiculous?

In Naruto’s core, the blond crossed his arms over his chest, his mouth making a thoughtful pout. His eyes, however, seemed like luminous sapphires in the darkness that surrounded them – a vibrant hue that Kurama hadn’t seen since the day the man had last parted ways with Sasuke all those months previously after their long journey.

Naruto ‘tsked’ and looked away from Kurama’s wild, piercing eyes before kicking slightly at the water under the soles of his sandaled feet. “It doesn’t matter if he didn’t. I’m not stupid; I know exactly what I said and why. I meant it.”

Kurama didn’t blink, watching his receptacle closely. He almost had the urge to roll his eyes but instead, he simply narrowed them. “I’m the first one to tell you that whatever hell you put Uchiha Sasuke through suits him just right,” Kurama said, his voice a low whisper of exasperation. “But he is who he is to you; the person who’s hurt you the most, and the person you are hurting the most in return. He is the person your heart desires the most, and I know that as well as you do. But, while I do know your intentions are genuine, I can’t help but think that…”

“You don’t believe me,” Naruto interjected, looking up at Kurama with a frown that was both surprised and hurt. “You don’t believe I’ll do it.”

Kurama actually hesitated. He had long since given up on trying to talk to Naruto about Uchiha Sasuke because whenever he tried, Naruto always had arguments to fight him with and his own feelings to put on the table. Naruto’s love life had always been frustrating to watch since the very beginning, and it had become considerably more pathetic (although immensely more interesting) to watch from the moment Naruto had first willingly forced their first real kiss in that alley in Konoha. However, Kurama thought, it had all gone down to shit from then on as well, as they both had promptly thrown themselves at each other only to fuck it all up in the end. Kurama genuinely didn’t know which of the two was more infuriating.

It wasn’t as if Kurama liked Uchiha Sasuke by no means, but it remained an undeniable fact that Naruto’s feelings for the man had always run deep. After all, Kurama had had a front row seat to everything relating to Naruto.

There was no doubt that Sasuke himself cared for Naruto more than he did about his own life. Kurama’s personal feelings towards Sasuke had nothing to do with this when Sasuke would gladly...
die if it meant he could protect Naruto. Granted, the bastard had tried to kill Naruto as well, but it all turned out to be out of ‘love’ in the end - not that this was enough to justify his past actions either way.

It was all very clear yet confusing to Kurama, who had watched them move around each other since the very beginning and still couldn’t grasp things between them accurately, even if he had complete awareness of Naruto’s feelings, thoughts and body reactions. He had understood how Naruto had felt for Sasuke even before Naruto himself did, but Kurama wasn’t exactly one to interfere and offer input unless he strongly believed that Naruto was stepping out of line and making his own life more difficult.

Right now, that was what Naruto was doing. If he had made a choice, he should just stick to it to the very end.

It didn’t matter anyway. There were several types of ‘love’ between them. There was also hate and a huge amount of frustration and a distant co-dependence that was a little sick to watch. Kurama felt it in his very being – Naruto’s loneliness, the lust, the love, the excitement, the anger, the anxiety – and all of this was as pure as it was tainted. It was like liquid silk yet dirty and violent. There was no rational, emotional, philosophical or astral answer to any of it. Their light and their darkness attracted them both to each other with a force literally noone could stop.

Naruto’s willpower when it came to Sasuke was like an endless well. How Naruto felt when he looked at Sasuke – the way his eyes and mind perceived him…

Kurama would feel torn between disgust and embarrassment if he hadn’t been used to it already.

It wasn’t exactly that Naruto put Sasuke on some kind of pedestal. Naruto knew Sasuke’s flaws all too well, but he had accepted them all the same.

One could not forget that Sasuke was the only person in the world (aside from Kurama himself) who had seen Naruto’s heart – all of it – and knew it like no-one else. No matter what people thought of the Uchiha, and no matter how seemingly crazy his actions were, it was a fact that he was the only one who knew Naruto better than Naruto would ever know himself.

If there was someone who would always know Naruto and accept him completely, that person would always be Sasuke.

The same happened the other way around, and maybe this was why those two were so hung up on each other the way they were. It was an acceptance that went beyond any kind of rational train of thought. Because the other existed, they were able to live. Because they had each other, they could never be alone.

They would always have acceptance from each other.

If Kurama had to speak of it to anyone, he supposed that, from Naruto’s part, it was… infatuation mixed with obsession. These feelings were both directed at Sasuke, but most of all, at the exclusiveness of how Sasuke made him feel - and Sasuke did make Naruto feel things in a way that literally no one else had ever been able to. With Sasuke, it was as if pleasurable and painful feelings and sensations were elevated to the maximum, and indeed, it was overwhelming; so much in fact that for Naruto it was almost like a vice. Uchiha Sasuke was like an addiction, a fix Naruto could not get anywhere else, and it had always baffled Kurama that this wasn’t simply for sexual reasons.

Sasuke’s mere existence, the mere sight of the man never failed to make happiness and relief bubble over inside of Naruto.
Because they were bounded, Kurama knew it was the same for Sasuke.

Kurama simply didn’t understand why such a bond had to be this complicated. He had literally groaned to himself when Naruto had told Hinata that he loved her. Naruto had been so naïve, but back then, if Kurama had interfered in Sasuke’s behalf, Naruto wouldn’t have believed him - he’d been that oblivious and ignorant of his own feelings towards the Uchiha. Sasuke had been partially right in telling Naruto that he had to figure things out for himself, otherwise he’d never accept the truth.

It wasn’t like Kurama favoured Sasuke over Hinata – the woman was beautiful and dedicated to Naruto, of course – it was just that he had known it would come down to this, eventually. For Naruto, it had to be Sasuke. His heart had told him so from the very beginning, but only now was Naruto’s mind keeping up with it.

Kurama just wanted Naruto to be happy and stop being an idiot. He had chosen Hinata over Sasuke, and he had chosen Konoha over Sasuke and now he had to deal with his own choices, as Sasuke had pointed out very wisely.

But Naruto couldn’t help but want more. If he and Sasuke had never kissed, maybe Naruto would’ve never realized how deep his feelings for him were. However, as soon as he had the first taste, letting go had been impossible. And Naruto was vehemently refusing to let go – he simply couldn’t.

Kurama understood Naruto’s passion but couldn’t really find the will to excuse the hurtful things Naruto was doing. From the moment he had chosen Hinata and Konoha, Naruto should’ve moved on with his life, and Sasuke had been right in wanting for them to stay away from each other since it was the right thing to do. However, Naruto, torn between his own choices and his longing, had a hard time facing the fact that he couldn’t simply have it all, so he kept demanding things of Sasuke and pushing their boundaries, even knowing that it was killing them both.

And now, poor Hinata was added to the mix and Naruto couldn’t even be rational enough to see that what he was doing was immensely selfish and only for his own benefit.

Who would’ve thought that the guy who had been selfless and sensitive to the pain of others would now allow others to hurt?

The problem was that he was hurting himself, too.

Honestly, Kurama had no idea for whom he felt the sorrier. He knew Naruto was dumb but never in a million years would he expect him to be this much of a dumbass.

How someone like Sasuke could put up with him remained a mystery. Then again, nobody really chooses who they love, and Naruto was a unique and loveable character.

Kurama knew it wasn’t just that, though. Naruto was someone who had wanted to be loved for a long time, and now that he had so many types of ‘love’ coming from all sides, he didn’t want to give up on any of them – after all, he had fought so hard to have that recognition.

But now he was making Sasuke promises he didn’t even know how he was going to keep when he had a wife and a kid waiting for him back at Konoha.

In a way, he had hoped that Sasuke would refuse Naruto – he was disappointed. Still, he knew that at least the Uchiha wasn’t one to take things quietly – Uchiha Sasuke did not simply accept things without making sure he’d fight back.

“You are asking him to wait for you while you accomplish all your dreams,” Kurama said to Naruto,
mockingly. “Only after you have everything you’ve ever wanted will you give yourself to him. Sounds selfish and cruel to me. I wouldn’t accept that lightly.”

At this, Naruto bit down on his lower lip and looked away, looking genuinely in pain. “I know I’m selfish,” he muttered. “I can’t help it. He didn’t really make it easier for us, either. He chose to not be with me.”

“And you chose to go back to your wife,” Kurama pointed out, making Naruto flinch. “You could’ve broken up with her and have your merry affair with Sasuke from a distance, like you want to have now. You could’ve been faithful to him if you wanted to own him that much. But no, you had to have it all. Sasuke, Hinata, Konoha…”

“I know that already!” Naruto snapped, looking up at Kurama again with resentment. “I know I fuck up constantly, Kurama! I know I’m just fucking things up left and right, but there’s no turning back now!” Naruto brought both palms of his hands to his eyes, rubbing them tiredly before once more looking resolutely up at him. “I want Sasuke. I will have him no matter what, and long before we’re both old and wrinkly.”

How possessive Naruto sounded, Kurama thought, his eyes narrowing. Just like a wild animal towards their lifetime mate. “Of course, you still need to be young enough if you want to enjoy a few years of fucking him,” he teased, with a nasty grin.

Naruto’s cheeks reddened. “I don’t want to just fuck him, Kurama!”

The fox’s grin slowly dissipated. He knew that.

“You’re hurting him,” Kurama said slowly. “And Hinata. All of this will have strong repercussions on your life and in the future of your family. You can’t make others happy unless you are happy yourself, Naruto.”

“I am… not unhappy,” Naruto corrected. “It’s just that my feelings for Sasuke are really frustrating. They make me anxious and I just can’t avoid… reacting to them and reaching out to him. But I love Hinata, and I love Boruto. I want to make them happy, as well.”

“I know you do,” Kurama acknowledged. “But you’re still hanging onto something you don’t have. Something you won’t have for a long time.” Kurama frowned. “Sasuke won’t go easy on you, Naruto. He won’t simply spread his legs for you upon sight. He won’t just bend to your whims or come to you just because you want to see him. He might even take other lovers – he already has.”

The thought alone seemed to have made Naruto’s nerves catch fire. He took a deep breath through his nose and clenched his fists at his sides. “There’s nothing I can do about that,” he said, his voice lowering to a firm murmur that he used to mask his simmering anger. “I have Hinata as my lover, too. He has Sakura-chan. I know there were others, too, but it doesn’t matter as long as I know he’s mine. There will never be anyone else for me, just as it is for him. Sex is just sex, in the end.”

Heaving a sigh, Kurama finally moved his snout away from Naruto, straightening his back so he was sitting and looking down at the man. “I don’t understand you,” he said flatly. “You’re way over your head about this, brat. I only want you to do what’s best for you, but I do believe that you are chewing more than you can swallow. You should just spare yourself of the trouble and your life would be a lot easier.”

In spite of himself, Naruto smiled – a gentle smile that was reassuring but also surprisingly self-aware. “Was there ever a time when life was easy for me?” he asked, shaking his head. “No matter what he did, Sasuke didn’t really make it harder – he was actually the reason why I could go through
everything the way I did and the reason why I became as strong as I am today. I was naïve, and now I have to take responsibility for it, and I will.” His smile broadened, more genuinely now. “Look at all the great things I have ahead of me! I have so much to protect and to accomplish, Kurama! You should know how I work already! I would die before ever going back on my promises!”

Kurama could only exhale, eyeing Naruto dejectedly from over his snout. “It’s not that I don’t have faith in you,” he said, carefully. “It’s just that I think you could avoid a lot of unnecessary damage if you would just pick a side now.”

Indeed, Kurama understood that it wasn’t easy for Naruto to simply give away what was important to him, both Sasuke and what he had back at Konoha.

It was still selfish, but Kurama could be sympathetic.

“Don’t worry and just have faith in me!” Naruto said, now jovially, placing both hands over his hips with an arrogant grin that reminded Kurama of his younger days. “I’ll find a way to fix it! You know me and Sasuke; there’s no way we won’t figure it out!”

Kurama couldn’t help but snort.

In the end, hadn’t that been more of a problem instead of a solution?

000

Sasuke couldn’t remember if there had ever been a time in his life when conversations with Naruto hadn’t left him feeling emotionally exhausted. How he hadn’t gotten used to it already never ceased to amaze him.

He actually felt… incredibly stupid. There should be a limit to how much devotion a heart should have towards another person before becoming this pathetic.

It wasn’t as though Sasuke didn’t know Naruto kept all his promises, but the truth was, he also tended to dress everything up to make it look a lot easier and practical than it was in reality. And Sasuke was all about being practical, but sometimes certain things that sounded simple at first were actually the most complicated in the end. Depending on the perspective, of course.

Naruto wanted to relieve his own spirit off of the burden of his choices so he could live an easier life, and it wasn’t like Sasuke could blame him - after all, they were only humans prone to having desires and feelings that often were too strong to ignore. And, all things considered, some of their feelings towards each other were far beyond their control due to their karmic connection. It wasn’t like Sasuke didn’t understand this; it wasn’t like he couldn’t feel in his own skin the emotional and spiritual impact that staying away from Naruto had for both of them. It was infinitely easier to give in and simply say ‘fuck it’ and not give it too much thought.

Affection, aggression, gazes, deep talks with or without words, expressions of their hearts’ longings without boundaries… these were all things they had done before, when their passion had just been found and the world had seemed to belong to the two of them alone. Back then, despite how fatidic things had turned out to be, Sasuke had been fed with the illusion that those days would never end – that they’d keep travelling together forever – and that same illusion had hurt him to this very day.

It wasn’t as though Sasuke needed Naruto’s words of love and devotion; in fact, most of the times he wished the other man would simply shut the fuck up and keep his feelings to himself. They felt the other as if they shared a single soul, and for this reason, even the silence between them was loud enough.
Yes, keeping himself away from Naruto was hard, and so was keeping things from him. Looking ahead and knowing Naruto wouldn’t be by his side, instead living next to that needy woman of his and within the walls of that hypocritical village he so loved, was painful.

But being given hope was worse. Naruto didn’t have to ask for Sasuke’s love, nor for his presence when necessary - those were things Sasuke would give without hesitation, over and over again, in his own way and terms.

However, wanting them to live as lovers apart from each other was something that left Sasuke conflicted because he knew what it felt like to have Naruto close and not being able to reach out to him when his whole body screamed for closeness. More than a sexual need, it was an impulse from within his very being, a hunger, a search for something he only seemed to find when Naruto was by his side. It wasn’t like Sasuke didn’t want to be Naruto’s lover - he didn’t need it - but Naruto was his one and only, the only person in the world who was the embodiment of everything to him.

Naruto’s existence was absolute and the single fact that he lived and breathed was sometimes enough for Sasuke to feel happiness.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t know that he was a terrible man himself, what with all the things he had done and the way he had left things with Sakura and Sarada. He was no-one to act righteous or noble and pretend like him and Naruto being ‘together’ was the worst thing he’d do from here on.

It was simply that, for Sasuke, it was all a matter of pride and principles. Sasuke may have a wife and a daughter, but he was living life the way he saw fit and hadn’t made any promises to anyone. This family he hadn’t asked for had been his responsibility, but not something he had desired and everyone involved knew it. He wasn’t the one lying to himself and stubbornly moving forward in a path that no longer made sense but that had become too familiar to move away from.

Naruto had chosen this path and now he wanted to make things easier for himself out of self-pity, guilt and regret. His feelings were nothing but selfish all the way.

It felt like Naruto’s words and promises were nothing but wishful thinking, as usual. Naruto wanted for them to get together in the end. How long would it take for them to get there; five years, ten, thirty, forty? Would they even live to see the day? Would Naruto even have the same faith in their relationship by then, or would he create such deep roots with his life in Konoha that he’d be left with the fear of losing it all for Sasuke?

‘Don’t fuck with me, Naruto,’ he thought.

Sasuke’s less idealistic nature kept his feet firmly on the ground, even if his heart ached with a flicker of hope, small as it may be. That same hope… how he hated its existence.

It was all very tiring. Sasuke wished he could shut down his emotions when it came to Naruto so he could say ‘no’ and not feel affected by it. He wished it was easier to not want, to not be available, to turn his back and to walk away.

In truth, Sasuke was resentful and fucking pissed. All of this felt like a fucking joke. A part of him wanted to beat his friend to a fucking pulp and ask him who the fuck did he think he was to play with him this way and make demands with that stupid voice and with such fucking convincing determination.

Naruto wanted them to be what they were supposed to be together? Lovers in the shadows, as if it was the most normal thing ever, behind both their (knowing) wives’ backs, not denying themselves of anything until the day they supposedly would be finally together. Wasn’t it just fucking perfect? It
was laughable. All of it was just beyond absurd.

What exactly would they become if they managed to be together? What was even ‘together’ in Naruto’s dictionary? What was he planning to do, where did he plan to go, what was he going to tell the people whose opinions he valued so much? What about their children? Was Naruto really going to throw away his perfect marriage, his perfect family, his perfect friends - everything he had fought so hard for - for Sasuke at some point? What about his Hokage position? Because Sasuke was sure he would get there, sooner or later.

Naruto did keep his promises but Sasuke was sure Naruto was talking way over his head because he felt lonely and his sex life was probably boring. Even if Naruto made so many claims that he loved him more than anything and that nothing made sense without him, the truth was that he hadn’t chosen Sasuke to begin with. Regardless of how much Sasuke cherished him, this was something he’ll never forget. He’ll never forgive Naruto for making them go through this. He hated that Naruto was in pain, but on the other hand, he couldn’t help but think that it suit him well.

And now he had made demands, pleaded for Sasuke to not abandon him and for them remain lovers or whatever it was that they once had been, until they finally got together for good.

All of it were lies - Naruto’s hypocrisy slapping him in the face once more. Sasuke liked to believe that he was smarter and prouder than that. He should just simply refuse instead of taking it with a grain of salt.

But when he looked into Naruto’s sky-blue eyes that stared back at his with nothing but honesty and breath-taking longing, completely and hopelessly wishing for him, it was as if Sasuke’s anger and bad thoughts were replaced by exasperation, resignation and hopeless want.

Why couldn’t he just say ‘no’?

Because, in spite of Naruto’s frustrating personality and even more frustrating decisions, Sasuke knew that Naruto truly loved him with an irrational passion he didn’t know how to handle. In fact, Sasuke knew Naruto loved him unconditionally, wholeheartedly, and in ways he’d ever be able to love anyone else.

This affected Sasuke, of course, and yet he knew it shouldn’t be an excuse to allow the blond to have his way.

Well, at least Sasuke knew himself well enough to know that he wouldn’t be emotionally available for Naruto at all times. His desire was strong, but Sasuke’s temper and his ego could overcome that easily, if needed. Even now, regardless of how much he longed for Naruto’s touch, something inside of him stubbornly refused to give into that extreme indulgence because he was still angry at him.

Naruto knew Sasuke held the reigns in that situation. He would have to make sure Naruto wouldn’t forget. That was the only way he could possibly accept this mess they were in.

000

The rest of the morning was spent getting things ready for a picnic. Naruto was oddly content as he and Sasuke cooked rice together, cut and peeled vegetables and brewed some more tea to put inside canteens. By lunch time, already carrying the food and necessities they’d need inside Naruto’s large backpack, both men went to pick Katsuo up. They found the boy outside at the back of the old lady’s house, sitting on the dusty ground with a half-finished basket between his crossed legs, and even if his expression was impassive, there was a small crease between his eyebrows that allowed Sasuke to know he was miserable. However, his awkward expression actually twisted in a smile.
when he saw Sasuke - it was clear that he was more than happy to leave the mountain of baskets that surrounded him.

He didn’t seem mad at Sasuke for putting him through that hell, though. In fact, his eyes became huge with what Sasuke knew to be excitement as soon as he heard they were going to have a picnic.

He and Naruto wasted far too much time politely declining Ritsuko-san’s invitation to have some tea but, eventually, she gave up on that but they were forced to accept the loaf of spiced bread she insisted they take with them before finally getting on their way.

These were the sort of things Sasuke loved so dearly about this small village and their people—no one was left out, and everyone was treated as family once they were deemed worthy.

On a different occasion, Sasuke would’ve definitely spent some time with the tiny, curvy old lady and probably even help her out with anything she needed, but today it was all about him, Naruto and Katsuo.

Sasuke knew of a small and quiet lake at the top of a hill that was secluded enough and perfect for a few hours of relaxation. He had already taken Katsuo there once, but at the time, the child had been very weak so Sasuke had had to carry him all the way up there. Now, though, his son was contentedly climbing the hill by his own foot (even though it was clear it still took a lot of physical effort from his part), holding on to the hem of Naruto’s sweater for support. Sasuke was leading the way a few steps ahead of them, and would often look over his shoulder to check up on the two, only to find Naruto happily talking to Katsuo and offering him encouraging words. They even held hands at a certain point.

The sun was very warm by the time they got there. However, the tree foliage around the lake cast enough shadows to protect them from the heat, so they chose a nice spot on the ground under a tree where they could spread out a towel for lunch.

It was when Sasuke told Katsuo to undress so he could wash up in the lake and change clothes that he noticed the boy’s tiny hands were filled with small cuts and bubbles from working the baskets. Katsuo didn’t speak, didn’t know how to express things properly so, of course, he kept the pain to himself. He often tended to do that whenever he got a bruise, and Sasuke never knew if it was because he didn’t want to trouble him or because he didn’t understand that he was supposed to complain in some way whenever he was hurting.

With a frustrated sigh, Sasuke had to sit down on the towel with his back to the tree trunk, pulling the boy down along with him so Katsuo was sitting between his legs, facing away from him. Sasuke grabbed for one of his hands and examined the extent of the damage, relieved when it didn’t seem like it was serious.

“No swimming for you, for now,” Sasuke said to him, with his hand rummaging through his pouch for the small first aid items he always carried with him. Katsuo looked over his shoulder, the way his eyebrows rose slightly and his lips parted letting Sasuke know his indignance. “We need to treat you. You should’ve shown it to me, Katsu. You have to tell me when you’re injured or something hurts, you understand?”

The child flinched a bit but nodded once, almost timidly.

Naruto crouched down in front of them, looking at Katsuo questioningly. “What’s wrong?”

“His hands are a mess,” Sasuke explained, after which Naruto grabbed for Katsuo’s thin wrists so he, too, could examine his palms.
“Yeah, there are splinters, too,” the blond confirmed. He looked at Sasuke. “You got some ointment or something?”

“Yes.”

“Let me just fetch some water and I’ll remove the splinters since it has to be hard for you to do it single handedly.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed at Naruto as the other man extended his hand to reach for his backpack nearby. “I can do it myself, you know?”

“I’m not saying you can’t, Sasuke,” Naruto said, rolling his eyes. “I just want to help.”

Sasuke inhaled sharply to get rid of this small bit of stupid irritation. “Fine,” he said, before taking out of his pouch the flask he’d been looking for, as well as a small roll of clean bandages.

From his backpack, Naruto took out a large canteen he had previously filled with clean water. Kneeling down in front Katsuo and Sasuke as he uncapped it, he gently grabbed for both of the child’s hands in his considerable bigger ones and carefully poured water on them, careful to not wet the towel. Katsuo rubbed his palms together to wash them, flinching a bit from pain in the process. In a way, Sasuke was glad to see him reacting to things so honestly.

Still, something inside of Sasuke made him feel guilty at seeing it and for a moment, he wondered if the punishment had been too harsh. Katsuo was a fragile child, and Sasuke wanted him to become stronger no matter what, but he was still a boy who was far behind other children his age.

Nevertheless, Katsuo was a tough one, and Sasuke often wondered if this came from his own desperate will to live and reach all the other kids his age. Sasuke suspected his son also acted strong more often than not to impress him, but while this was a good sign, it was also painful to watch because children should just be children. It was true that Katsuo was still learning how to express himself and associate emotions with physical responses, but this only frustrated Sasuke further because he constantly wondered what he was doing wrong.

With a sigh, he placed the flask and bandages over the towel within Naruto’s reach before putting his arm around Katsuo’s tiny waist and resting his chin at the top of his head. The child, as usual, was hauntingly quiet.

“It’s not that bad. I think I’ll be able to remove all the splinters with my fingers,” Naruto informed, flashing Katsuo with a smile. “It won’t hurt, so don’t worry, buddy.”

Katsuo sighed and leaned his back further against Sasuke’s chest as if seeking some comfort. Sasuke wondered what he was thinking – he always did. Sometimes he wished he could read him, but while Katsuo could be an open book to him already in some things, once in a while, he was very difficult to interpret. Right now, Sasuke had no idea if he was feeling sceptical about Naruto treating him or not, but then again, if the child didn’t want it, Sasuke suspected he would’ve refused it already – Katsuo could be very obvious when he wanted to, just like it had happened the previous night, when he’d so stubbornly interrupted him and Naruto and shamelessly laid down between them. Sasuke supposed his bluntness was part of being a child, and yet, he sort of hoped that it was simply Katsuo trying to take after him as much as possible.

Granted, he and Naruto shouldn’t have been doing that kind of thing, anyway. Sasuke still couldn’t believe how easily he had allowed himself to get carried away, but he had missed Naruto, so fighting it hadn’t exactly crossed his mind – he could indulge himself, too. It didn’t always have to be about what Naruto wanted exclusively.
Sasuke placed a small kiss at the top of Katsuo’s head as Naruto patiently and gently removed the splinters with the tips of the fingernails of index finger and thumb while happily talking his mouth off. Sasuke couldn’t help but wonder if, like himself, Katsuo thought Naruto talked too much.

Once he had removed all of the splinters in Katsuo’s hands, Naruto cleaned them with a bit more water before rubbing some of Sasuke’s ointment gently on the child’s palms with his rough, but tender thumbs. Sasuke was actually impressed with his patience and proficiency – but then again, he was already a father himself. For a fleeting moment, Sasuke’s mind visualized Naruto holding his own kid in his arms – from the man’s description, a tiny version of himself with big blue eyes and golden locks. He wondered if Naruto made faces while changing diapers and if he used cooing tones of voice as he played with him. He certainly didn’t sound condescending with Katsuo but, well, the boy was not exactly a baby.

Then, for some unfathomable reason, Sasuke imagined what Naruto’s face must’ve looked like as he held Sarada in his arms. Naruto must’ve looked… emotional, overwhelmed; maybe his eyes had watered, too. Maybe he had smiled. Had Naruto kissed Sarada’s head? Had he nuzzled her belly with his nose?

Swallowing down the unpleasant feeling he had in his throat, Sasuke’s arm hugged Katsuo closer as Naruto was now bandaging his hands.

Sasuke didn’t like to think about Sarada, and it wasn’t as if he hated her or her existence. It was just that she was… inconvenient. He had held her, fed her and changed her once or twice shortly after she was born, but he hadn’t been around much while she was growing and becoming strong enough for the journey back to Konoha to be safe.

There had been a feeling of exhilaration when he had met his biological daughter, he’d admit to that. She was his, even if not desired, and both an Uchiha and an Uzumaki. A part of Sasuke felt like this was relevant, and he could even say that it brought him a bit of happiness. He could even say that he was glad that she had taken after him and not being so obviously Karin.

But Sarada was also an existence who had forced him to do something against his desires and a presence imposed on him that he had never wished for, so while he did feel love for her, another side of him – a cruel one – resented her. Because of her, he was in an uncomfortable situation with Konoha and Sakura.

He could understand Naruto’s feelings, though. When he had seen Sarada, he had realized that it didn’t matter who the mother was – it could’ve been just about anyone. Just thinking about the sight of her and Naruto’s kid side by side – two copies of their fathers – he felt such a strong wave of regret that he couldn’t explain.

They could’ve been their own.

Naruto had put it out there and yet, Sasuke had tried to think nothing of it.

Regret and sadness was what Sasuke felt while thinking about it. While one side of his heart was glad that Naruto had a family and understood the importance of it. The other side just hated the fact that said family had been given to him by someone else, which ended up being a contradiction since Sasuke had never really had any interest in ‘having kids’ nor having the sort of life that villages considered ‘socially acceptable’.

“Nee, Katsu-chan,” Naruto was saying jovially, flashing Katsuo one his biggest and most charming smiles. “Do you like me?”
Sasuke bit down on his lower lip, looking away. He couldn’t stand how infuriatingly warm that smile was.

How could he not think about it? There was Katsuo, a child he and Naruto could’ve both adopted, had they been together. Like Katsuo, other children could’ve followed maybe not as their children, but as children they could’ve helped in finding homes. Maybe they could’ve found a way to have their own biological kids by finding a surrogate mother or simply talking to Orochimaru – surely the guy had a considerable amount of options at their disposal.

But wasn’t it useless at this point? It wasn’t like there was anything to be done now.

And to think that Sasuke hadn’t even entertained the notion of a family for so long.

Katsuo seemed to take a while to answer, watching Naruto attentively. Then, slowly, he nodded. In spite of himself, Sasuke held his breath.

It shouldn’t feel like such a relief, yet it was. Sasuke’s eyes travelled to Naruto’s features silently.

Naruto’s grin was so luminous Sasuke actually felt Katsuo’s heartbeat speed up a little. Sasuke’s own heart seemed to imitate the pace.

Fighting Naruto’s natural charm was exhausting, Sasuke thought, pursing his lips together. He should already know better than to go through the trouble, but at the same time, if he didn’t, he knew he’d just be a pawn in Naruto’s capable hands, and he refused to be. Not the way things were at this point.

“Ah, I really like you, too!” Naruto said genuinely, as he finished tying up the bandages around Katsuo’s hands. He reached out and ruffled the top of the child’s head. “All done! You okay there? Does anything hurt?”

Katsuo shook his head.

“Let’s just let that heal for a bit, and later you can go take a swim, okay?” Sasuke said gently, in Katsuo’s ear. “We should have lunch first. Are you hungry?”

Katsuo looked over his shoulder at Sasuke and nodded emphatically, to which the man smiled.

Naruto watched the interaction with open fascination. Sasuke felt those big eyes on Katsuo, then on him, with an intensity that was far too intimate to be casual.

“You look so handsome when you smile like that,” Naruto complimented cheekily, flashing Sasuke a big grin and yet, his voice had suddenly weakened ever so slightly. Sasuke saw Naruto’s goofy expression, but underneath the blond man’s skin, those veins pulsed with emotion and a desire that was far too obvious – at least to Sasuke himself.

It was becoming increasingly evident that the time they had spent away from each other was taking its toll, and it pissed Sasuke off that Naruto’s mood affected him, as well.

It was impossible to avoid when they could feel each other so accurately whenever they were within each other’s reach.

They exchanged a look. In turn, Sasuke’s smile disappeared completely as he frowned and Naruto’s cheeks reddened briefly – being caught barehanded – before he faked a pout to keep up appearances.

“See, why do you do that? I was enjoying the sight and giving you a compliment; why do you have to revert to moody bastard mode again?”
With a sigh, Sasuke rolled his eyes. Katsuo turned his head to look at both of them, his clear eyebrows quirked up slightly in confusion. ‘Good’ Sasuke thought. The child was still too young to perceive certain things, and it was bad enough that he had already seen Sasuke and Naruto being so thoroughly improper the night before.

Together, the three of them got things ready for lunch, and even with his hands in bandages, Katsuo was eager to help as much as he could. Sasuke felt a sense of pride when the boy refused to be fed, instead wanting to do things by himself, even if it took some effort.

Lunch felt like a long event, probably because they were taking their time eating, or maybe it was because Naruto still couldn’t keep his mouth shut. They shared the food they had put on display over the towel with Katsuo sitting on his heels between Sasuke and Naruto. Naruto was overly excited, telling Katsuo about their *gennin* times in team 7 like it was the greatest time of his life, but spoke of things and terms the child had no idea about, so Sasuke had to interrupt him to explain things properly, which only excited Naruto further, since he always had something to add.

It was a little baffling how genuinely happy Naruto was – Sasuke could easily feel the warmth emanating from him, his emotions strong and pure. They were only having lunch, the three of them, and it was not really a big deal.

And yet, for Naruto it was. Naruto was spending time with Sasuke after so much time apart, and eagerly bonding with the child Sasuke had willingly adopted and called ‘son’. They were together. Naruto and Sasuke had reached some kind of fucked up truce after all the pain they had willingly and unwillingly inflicted upon each other.

The cycle never ended. Sasuke was still exasperated and upset beyond himself, but…

He could feel Naruto’s happiness, too. After all, he had missed the man just as much, and had fantasised about this very moment several times.

It pissed him off immensely, though.

It was all very conflicting, yet peaceful. As Naruto had said, they should just… accept things as they were, the good and the bad, and simply stop fighting against it or delving too much into it.

Sasuke wouldn’t admit it out loud, but there was no doubt that he loved seeing Naruto interact with Katsuo like this – Naruto knew, anyway.

There was something very intense about the way Katsuo’s big white eyes watched Naruto, though, and Sasuke was having a hard time identifying what was causing it. There wasn’t exactly tension in Katsuo when it came to Naruto, but the way he watched him reminded Sasuke of the way the boy watched Sasuke himself only it was probably more... evaluating?

“Your dad was like, super cool, but he had the wooooorst temper!” Naruto blabbered, through a mouthful of bread. “Like, you couldn’t even call out to him, he’d go like ‘what?’ in that arrogant assed tone of his! But he was making fun of me and calling me a dumbass, but when he had to kick the bad guys asses we’d totally get in sync and fight together and it was so cool! Like that one time when…”

Naruto talked and talked, and through it all, Katsuo would nibble on his food slowly, listening very carefully to the tales Naruto told about himself and Sasuke. He was retaining information like a sponge.

The fact that Sasuke wasn’t able to put his finger on that odd vibe made him feel queasy. Sometimes,
Sasuke felt that Katsuo was a lot smarter then he let appear, and the fact that he didn’t speak made it harder to perceive. Katsuo, even having spent most of his life locked in Orochimaru’s lab, was adapting to the outside world too quickly and getting the hang of things at an impressive speed, even if his own body couldn’t keep up with his mind. Sasuke knew this, and yet, he wondered how much Katsuo had learned apart from what Sasuke and the people around him had taught him. Once more, Sasuke wondered what was going through Katsuo’s head.

What was he thinking about when his eyes so unblinkingly stared at Naruto like that? Was it admiration, fascination or just suspicion? Did he still see Naruto as some sort of threat even if he had admitted to liking him?

Even without saying a word, Katsuo had never once lied and every action on his part had always been one hundred percent genuine.

However, all of his mental effort must’ve taken a toll on him because it only took a few minutes after he had eaten for Katsuo to completely black out with his back against the tree trunk. Endeared and amused, Sasuke guessed the boy must’ve been tired already.

As quietly as they could, he and Naruto cleaned up everything before Naruto carefully moved Katsuo so he was laying down on his side on the towel. The man offered the child’s cheek a gentle caress with the back of his knuckles. Sasuke’s heart felt like it was going to jump right out of his chest at the sight. It made him want to both punch Naruto in the face and do things they definitely should not do at this time and place.

That wasn’t Naruto’s child, and neither would Naruto be part of Katsuo’s life, so it was rather irrelevant whether they liked each other or not. Still, for Sasuke, it made him feel relieved in a way but also restless.

“I got us something.” Naruto said in a whisper with a mysterious smirk while rummaging through his backpack. Eventually, he triumphantly took out a small clay bottle and showed it to Sasuke, shaking it slightly. “It was given to me as a gift by one of the villagers yesterday.”

By Naruto’s childish enthusiasm, Sasuke guessed that it had to be some sort of alcoholic beverage, so he merely nodded in agreement. Smiling widely, Naruto also managed to take out of his backpack two tiny clay cups – clearly, he had planned this somehow. It was almost endearing, if not a bit corny, but Sasuke found that there was no harm in indulging him when they did have time to kill.

Silently, the two men made their way towards the edge of the lake, so they could talk without waking Katsuo up.

The gentle breeze was fresh, but the sun was scorching hot and, by the lake, there wasn’t exactly a shadow they could sit under, so Sasuke simply sat on his heels at a convenient spot where he could still keep an eye on Katsuo’s sleeping figure. Naruto heavily sat down by his right and wasted no time in uncorking the bottle and passing Sasuke one of the tiny cups. Sasuke extended it to him, and he poured him a generous amount of the clear brownish beverage before helping himself, as well. In an unspoken agreement, the two clicked the cups together before downing the liquor in one go. It was sweet but not too strong, with a woody flavour to it. Sasuke didn’t refuse it when Naruto poured him some more. It wasn’t like he was used to drinking, but he supposed it wouldn’t hurt to share a few drinks with his best friend since he knew when to draw the line.

Naruto sipped the second cup with as much gusto before licking at his lips contently. “Ah, I think the last time we drank together was… when was it? Was it here, or with Taka?” he asked, thoughtfully.

“I think it was with Taka, during one of the last nights we spent there,” Sasuke said, remembering it
quite vividly. “You drank too much and ended up being a horny mess. Luckily, you fell asleep before you embarrassed yourself in front of them.”

Naruto’s cheeks flared up, but he chuckled embarrassingly. “I don’t remember that,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Of course, you don’t,” Sasuke replied, dryly. “How could I forget, though? You tried to take my clothes off and Suigetsu and Karin ended up teasing me for the rest of the night.”

“Ah, did I really?” Naruto muttered, looking away from him. He was blushing so hard the redness went all the way down to his neck, and Sasuke couldn’t help but find it humorous.

“Take your sweater off if you’re feeling hot,” Sasuke suggested, and he knew his tone was more teasing than anything else but he couldn’t help it when Naruto was so damn obvious like this. “You always get horny when you drink. Maybe bringing liquor wasn’t such a good idea after all.”

“Oh, shut up,” Naruto mumbled with a pout. He set the small bottle aside on the grass and with it, his cup. Without another word, he did as he was told and tugged his sweater over his head, throwing it carelessly to the side before fanning himself with his hand. Shamelessly, Sasuke’s eyes were drawn to the expanse of exposed skin.

Naruto’s body had further matured in the time they had been apart, and he was certainly bulkier now than he had been back then, but still unbelievably fit, hard muscles flexing beautifully under golden skin with every movement. Naruto’s right arm though, was still obviously darker than the rest of his body.

Helplessly, Sasuke found a far too familiar heat pool at his loins, simmering with want. It wasn’t so much the image of Naruto’s body – it was the recollection of what that same body could do. Naruto’s body was resilient and hard – a body ready for combat, and the only body who had been able to endure the overwhelming strength of Sasuke’s power and feelings. That was the only body Sasuke knew that was capable of taking everything he had, no matter if it was gentleness or aggression. That was the only body that would always take it all without faltering, always eagerly, always willingly.

It irked Sasuke to think about the things he wanted to do to that body. He wanted to shower it with affection on one hand, but on the other, he had the dark urge to fuck it until he ripped it apart.

And…

He wanted to fight against it. Not spar against it, no – he wanted Naruto’s own power exposed to the maximum, ready to take Sasuke on without restraint.

Their battle at the Valley of the End had been painful, both physically and emotionally, but it had, without a doubt, been the most excitingly dangerous battle Sasuke had ever fought. It was because he knew it would be so that he had decided that it would be his last one.

Nothing in the world could ever compare to that.

Remembering how it all had felt was…

A part of his thoughts must have manifested in his chakra, because Naruto’s muscles tensed and he took a sharp intake of breath. Slowly, blue eyes turned to meet Sasuke’s and they looked awed yet heavy with acknowledgement. Sasuke berated himself for being so obvious.

The way their chakra was bound made them react to each other in an animalistic way, and more
often than not, Sasuke could swear that he was sensitive to Naruto’s every move and every emotional fluctuation. Sometimes he could almost swear that he could smell Naruto’s feelings, from the purest one to the dirtiest and darkest one.

Openly, Sasuke watched Naruto’s lips as a pink tongue darted out to moisten them. He twisted his body a bit so it was facing Sasuke’s now, one hand supporting his weight on the grass, the other one falling to Sasuke’s knee. “Aren’t you hot?” Naruto asked slowly and Sasuke thought that the other man was being too confident. Had he learned nothing from their conversation that morning?

But then again, Sasuke had allowed himself to be kissed in spite of everything he had said, so he couldn’t exactly blame Naruto for keeping his hopes up.

“No” Sasuke lied, even when his voice had sounded cold yet husky.

“Indulge me, then,” Naruto said, and his voice was gentle yet unfamiliarly demanding despite being a little breathless, and it spiked up Sasuke’s lust without warning even in his slight surprise and irritation.

Naruto was testing his luck exactly because he felt like he could. Sasuke’s walls had crumbled in his longing and there was little he could do about it now that Naruto could see all of it. But, there was still time to retreat, and they both knew it – it was only a matter of whether Sasuke would back away or not.

In the end, Sasuke knew he held the reins. If Naruto thought he could use this tone on him, he was dead wrong.

With cautious, elegant moves that were meant to keep Naruto’s guard up, Sasuke too put his cup aside. Blue eyes that were now of a mesmerizing luminescent tonality under the bright sun watched him as he pulled his own shirt off. It was Naruto who took it away from his hand and threw it aside.

Naruto’s gaze scanned over his chest hungrily, accessing every little detail as if it somehow fed him. The hand that wasn’t on Sasuke’s knee reached out – the tips of his rough fingers coming into contact with Sasuke’s left pectoral, a light brush before slowly descending to slide over his nipple then down to his abdomen. There was a gentle tremble in his touch that gave away his fascination and his immense restraint. Sasuke found that this sort of touch from Naruto made him feel powerful.

But then again, everything about Naruto did.

It took everything he had to not let his own emotions run wild.

Sasuke knew he could back away if he wanted to – he always could. But Naruto was leaving the next morning and he had already spent too much time being frustrated at him. It had been too fucking long and neither knew how long would it be before they had the chance be close like this. For all Sasuke knew, Naruto might end up pissing him off again and they wouldn’t touch each other for years, simply because Sasuke could be that petty.

Naruto had no right to just… shove his feelings and his desire so straight forwardly to Sasuke’s face like this, knowing it was impossible for him to not react.

“Look at me,” Sasuke said, authoritatively. Naruto’s eyes immediately rolled upwards to meet his. Without blinking, Sasuke’s hand came up to curl around the back of Naruto’s neck, pulling him in gently until their lips were a breath away apart.

Sasuke took a deep, steadying his breath before concentrating the chakra needed to summon his bloodline limit.
Naruto gasped in realization, sharply watching as the Sharingan quickly turned into its *Mangekyō* shape, but before he could say or do something, Sasuke’s mouth was already falling over his in an open-mouthed kiss.

In the blink of an eye, Naruto found himself somewhere else entirely. He didn’t know exactly where but he was no longer by the lake and neither was he kissing Sasuke any longer. He had felt Sasuke’s lips over his and it was but a single moment of euphoria before it had all vanished. He remembered seeing Sasuke’s *Mangekyō* forming earlier.

And now, here he was.

What was Sasuke’s plan by doing this? It was disappointing – he had been very excited about that kiss, and the quiet intimate moment they had been sharing. From Sasuke’s body language, things would have been getting good soon.

A little confusedly, he looked around to find himself in some sort of never ending field that stretched out as far as his eyes could see and beyond. Huge cherry blossom trees in full bloom could be seen, petals floating about carried by the same gentle breeze that also brushed his hair and filled his nose with the nature’s perfume. His feet were bare and underneath them, the grass was of a vibrant fresh green like he’d never seen before, warmed by the sun and unexpectedly fluffy with small colorful flowers peeking out from here and there. The sky had never seemed so vast and so blue, and the occasional clouds were of a pure white, resembling the most exquisite cotton.

The setting was like the most perfect natural landscape one could possible imagine. If heaven existed, Naruto supposed it would be something like this.

It wasn’t cold but it wasn’t hot either. The breeze carried the scents of grass, earth, and the cherry blossom tree flowers and while it was rich, it wasn’t overwhelmingly intense. Naruto could hear the sound of birds chirping and running water but there wasn’t a lake, river, nor any animals in sight. Everything was stunning and peaceful, like the end of the world - a place too distant and secret to be found and too unique to be reached by any sort of godly wrath.

“Time is almost irrelevant here,” a familiar voice said, startling Naruto. “We could be here for months, while outside, only a few minutes have passed. But of course, controlling that sort of time balance between reality versus *genjutsu* takes a lot of energy from me considering I’m in charge of both of our physical and spiritual well beings. I’d say a couple of hours here should be more than enough.”

Naruto noticed that Sasuke was standing in front of him, and yet what he saw made him gulp, his throat suddenly tight. “Is this… a *genjutsu*, then?” he asked meekly, his eyes avidly travelling over his friend’s figure from up and down, his chest suddenly overflowing with shock and emotion. “Is this why you look like… that?”

It was Uchiha Sasuke standing in front of him alright, but not the current adult of their reality, no. In front him stood none other than Sasuke in all his 17-year-old glory, and if Naruto remembered accurately - which he did - this was the same Sasuke that had appeared at the warfield, unexpectedly in other people’s eyes, but awaited by Naruto himself all along.

Naruto could remember the feeling of knowing Sasuke was coming to war to fight with them, his final purpose still in the shadows but the fire within him burning to defeat the enemy, beside him, resonating alongside Naruto’s clearly. Naruto had never felt more confident and determined as he had back then, because he knew that with Sasuke fighting beside him, there was no way they’d lose.
Seeing that Sasuke now was very nostalgic, exciting and yet… through adult eyes, it was all so very different.

Teenage Sasuke was about a head shorter than Naruto was right now, yet he was still tall and surprisingly fit. He wasn’t bulky by no means, still holding himself with that arrogance and pride that now seemed far too mature for his age, but there were no doubts that he’d been a bit wider and more muscular than Naruto back then. His hairdo was the one Naruto recalled so well, all spiky in the back, his fringe still short so both his eyes - still matching dark orbs without the rinnegan - could be seen. Sasuke had had such beautiful, deep piercing eyes, Naruto thought affectionately. And yes, he had been tremendously handsome too, despite the threatening air about him. Naruto couldn’t tell if Sasuke was better looking now than he had been then - he was simply different, being an adult and changed as such, so it was impossible to compare.

And… like the Sasuke at the start of war, this one in front of Naruto still had both arms. Naruto felt a sob threaten his chest and tears pricking his eyes but he held his emotions in and clenched his fists at his sides. It wasn’t real but it still hurt to be confronted by an image of the past like this, especially when it embodied both Naruto’s worst nightmare and most desired dream.

Everything was exactly like it had been back then, from Sasuke’s appearance to his outfit. The only thing that was missing was Sasuke’s katana strapped to his back.

This younger Sasuke looked at himself and raised both his hands so he could look at them. His eyebrows rose slightly but he didn’t seem surprised. “It seems that your desires have had an influence on how I look here,” he said, dispassionately, letting his hands fall to his side and looking up at Naruto. “I allowed your mind to choose what you wanted to see and somehow it has chosen an image of a younger me. Why?”

Naruto immediately looked at himself, too. He realized that he was only wearing a pair of Shinobi black trousers and an orange t-shirt; apart from that, he was the same Naruto in his twenty’s. He touched his hair with a hand and noticed that it was reasonably longer - the length Sasuke favoured the best, for sure, which was a tiny bit longer than what he had worn as a teenager and the same length he had appreciated while they had been travelling together.

In spite of himself, Naruto was filled with embarrassment. Why, indeed, was he seeing a teenage version of Sasuke? It wasn’t a matter of preference - his feelings for Sasuke had always been the same regardless of how he looked.

But, this kind of made him feel like some sort of pervert, especially because he did find Sasuke’s younger version of himself rather…. enticing.

There had always been something about Sasuke’s darker side that had seduced him helplessly. Sasuke’s apparent lack of emotion, that threatening fire of hatred and superiority in his eyes, that cold, closed off expression - they hadn’t frightened Naruto for himself, no, but he had feared for Sasuke’s sake, and yet, he had felt himself shiver many times, his heart beating wildly and his blood rushing with an unknown type of adrenaline.

Being faced with the memory of those feelings made his chest feel like it was burning. He took a moment to think about it all to keep his emotions in check. Sasuke was watching him like a hawk, attentive and observing.

For a moment, Naruto mused on how real things felt, even if it was a genjutsu.

“I suppose… this was the ‘you’ I chased more eagerly” Naruto said, hesitantly, trying to find an answer to his own dilemma. “I guess… this was the ‘you’ that I wanted the most and… at the time,
you made me feel so many things, good and bad that I suppose… no, I’m sure that this is the ‘you’ I felt more deeply about.”

“I thought the present ‘me’ was the one you felt more deeply about,” Sasuke said plainly, and even his low voice sounded younger, now that Naruto noticed. “Even now, there are good things and bad things going on between us. Even now, you chase after me and even now, I bring you pain. Nothing’s changed.”

“It has changed, Sasuke, because now, no matter what, I know I have you,” Naruto explained, taking a cautious step towards the other. “And yes, I have been through hell even with things as they are between us; but again, you are mine, and I know I can count on you and that you won’t abandon me anymore. But back then, I wanted you so much, and yet I feared you. I knew your heart, but I feared your mind, the strength of your motivations and what they might do to you. You were so powerful and ruthless. You were connected to me and yet, you were so distant it hurt. I didn’t know if I could ever reach you and even through my determination, I feared that I couldn’t save you and that I’d lose you before I could ever let you know that I was there.”

Once Naruto was in front of Sasuke he reached out a hand so he could grab for the other’s left one - the one Sasuke had lost. Sasuke’s penetrating eyes followed his every move as Naruto brought said hand to his lips so he could place a gentle kiss over the palm.

“I want you right now, but it’s simply different from the agony and fear I felt back then. In many ways, yes, I suppose that in my heart, this was the you I hungered for the most, the one I was truly scared to lose” he said, breathing against the calloused skin that felt so real against his lips. How his memory has been able to reproduce this Sasuke in so much detail was a mystery. “For sure, back then, it wasn’t sexual, but… when I think about the loneliness I feel without you, now I realize it’s nothing when compared to how I felt back then. I was so desperate to reach out to you that I made peace with dying by your side because I was too scared to imagine a world without you. Just thinking about it…”

“I understand” Sasuke interrupted, his voice giving nothing away as his hand cupped Naruto’s cheek - an intimate gesture but not carrying any sort of sentimentalism to it. “This is the me you fought with almost to death; the one who tried to kill you. Also, the me you saved. I should’ve known this image would’ve had such a long lasting impact on you.”

“One would think it would be the same for you?” Naruto said, his tone as serious as Sasuke’s, grabbing for the other’s wrist and looking down at the teenager in front of him. It was so odd to stand with such a young version of his best friend and yet, feeling so devastatingly in surrender of him. Even like this, Sasuke’s figure and the sheer force of his very existence was devastating.

“Although your importance was in no way inferior back then, the truth is I spent many years too focused on myself, my pain and my goals,” Sasuke explained, in return. Firmly but not aggressively, he pulled his wrist free from Naruto’s grasp and looked up at him since his younger self was considerably shorter. “I knew you were moving forward, finding your own strength, making friends and being happy so I didn’t worry about you the same way you did about me.” Sasuke’s eyes narrowed. “The you right now is the one that is constantly on my mind. Back then, I didn’t think I needed anyone nor anything other than my revenge and reaching my goals. Right now, even though I don’t technically need you or the things you want me to have, my heart is open to other sorts of selfish and selfless feelings.”

Naruto bit down on his lower lip, feeling a little out of breath all of a sudden. There was nothing on Sasuke’s face that gave away his feelings or thoughts, but his eyes were bright and oddly cold, one could say curious, but not with a good type of curiosity. There was no anger coming from his friend
and yet, something about him made Naruto feel very exposed and self-conscious in a very intimidating way. Sasuke looked positively feral in his perfectly controlled stance.

“You always speak about love, but that is just a word to label feelings we have no description for. I know what love is, and I don’t think it fits the whole that is us. When you look at me…” Sasuke said, his voice lowering to a low, slow and venomous whisper. “What is it that you see?”

Sasuke’s eyes were savage and unblinking, challenging - Naruto was sure that type of unreadable look had made many people shit their pants. To him, it was a kind of thrill that elated him as much as it made him sick with something akin to dread, but not of Sasuke. He didn’t fear Sasuke – he feared how unpredictable Sasuke was. But this had always been something that had shamelessly excited him as well.

“You don’t like labels, yet you’re asking me to categorize you?” Naruto asked, in an exhaled breath.

In a heartbeat, Sasuke said “Indulge me.”

Naruto’s eyes quickly scanned those ferocious features. It wasn’t as though he had to think too hard about it, but he still decided to indulge Sasuke’s game and choose his words carefully.

His body felt the impulse to reach out and take Sasuke in his arms so he could shut that mouth and that imposing, arrogant tone of voice that made him feel both annoyed and turned on as fuck. His wildest instincts wanted to fight back and push Sasuke’s buttons. He knew he couldn’t if he didn’t want to throw away what he had managed to accomplish by being with Sasuke on this very day. Somehow, he understood that they were walking on thin ice right now, which was surprising since Naruto had thought that things had been going well between them. He couldn’t understand what the other’s game was but it was on.

Summoning every ounce of self-control he had, he forced his body to stand still even if the way Sasuke was in his space did nothing to help.

“I see past, present and future. I see a powerful and highly intelligent man like no other, capable of as much kindness as he is of violence,” he started, making sure his voice was steady even though his heart was beating painfully inside his chest. “I see someone who knows exactly what love and hatred are, and yet despises both. I see a wounded man desperately trying to heal himself by learning how to love himself and the world he lives in because… if he doesn’t, he’s afraid he might become numb and not be able to forgive himself for the things he blames himself for.”

Naruto paused, but Sasuke’s expression didn’t change, neither did he move a single muscle. Naruto clenched his fists and swallowed hard before proceeding. “I see… someone too radiant. You are confusing and you’re dangerous, even when you’re being kind. I see someone I’m famished for. I see… someone immortal in my eyes, someone beyond comparison. You don’t scare me yet I always tremble when I’m with you because I feel like you’re capable of forcing me out of my own skin. I want to belong to you just as much as I want to own you but I don’t like the feeling of wanting to be drowned and swallowed whole by you.”

Sasuke actually released a bemused, dark chuckle.

“I’m dangerous but you are captivated by that part of me.” Sasuke licked at his lips, the action so slow and oddly sensual it made Naruto’s head feel fuzzy. “You know what kind of darkness I am capable of and still, you seek it. You seek my darkness as much as you seek the light I bring to your lonely existence. That’s why you want so desperately to be my lover and suffer through the cyclic process of belonging to me and then mourning the loss of what we are. Even though you know you’ll have it again, you know parting will always kill you a little bit every single time.” A small,
Sasuke’s voice sounded like liquid honey seasoned with poison and Naruto’s mouth watered. Why did Sasuke have to sound so damn erotic? He definitely wasn’t used to this kind of tension anymore—it was intoxicating.

It was amazing how his body felt real, a very intense rush of lust washing over him suddenly. “Maybe,” Naruto whispered. “After all, I really did enjoy fighting you to death.”

It was a truth Naruto hadn’t considered before voicing it like this, but a truth nonetheless. He couldn’t remember a time when he had felt so alive as he had when he was fighting Sasuke, feeling his desperation, his passion, and his anger, sharing blows and drawing blood—a dance of longing and physical and emotional pain like no other.

It tore at Naruto’s heartstrings and filled him with passion and sorrow but desire, too. He was still pretty much yearning for the day when he and Sasuke would fight again, as equals.

Finally, Sasuke took a sharp intake of breath, his eyes gaining a dark, lustful hue to them. “I think we can definitely work with that,” he said.

Then, with a calculated gesture, Sasuke lifted his hand up towards Naruto, who was completely caught off guard as a powerful invisible force shoved his body about a meter backwards, making him stumble helplessly, barely avoiding falling on his ass. His shinobi senses quickly activated in the face of an apparent threat, so it was with little effort that he regained his footing and straightened his spine. However, before he could even think about shifting to a defensive stance, he felt something cold and heavy close tightly around both his wrists. It took him but a second to recognize the thick, black handcuffs, but as soon as his mind registered it, he felt a violent tug on his wrists, forcing his arms up and over his head.

His chest exploded with adrenaline as he found himself restrained. With a groan, he thrashed a bit as he looked up to see that there were heavy chains attached to his handcuffs and that said chains seemed to have descended from the sky itself, long and unbreakable, the other end impossible to see, lost in the vastness of the blue above. It was quite the strange sight.

Naruto noticed that his feet weren’t chained but it didn’t make a difference. His hands struggled with the cuffs. The chains rattled noisily in his effort and even the iron against his skin made all sorts of alarms flare up in his mind.

“Sasuke!” he yelled, looking down to see that the teenage version of his best friend was still standing in front of him. There wasn’t a trace of smugness in his features, but the feral gleam in his eyes seemed to have acquired a new facet. “What the fuck! I thought we were having a moment!”

“We are” Sasuke said smoothly. “But I didn’t exactly put you under a Genjutsu so we could have an emotional heart to heart.”

“Huh?”

A dirty smirk appeared on Sasuke’s perfect lips and he raised his hand again and with a swift wave, made a gush of freezing wind hit Naruto’s body with full force, causing him to clench his teeth, the cutting cold forcing him to close his eyes.

The wind stopped as fast as it had started, though.

“Nice.” Sasuke’s smug voice prompted Naruto to open his eyes again only to find Sasuke’s eyeing him from up and down avidly. That’s when Naruto looked down at himself to notice that he was
completely and utterly naked. He could feel the warmth of the sun now and the gentle, perfumed breeze caressing his exposed skin.

What the…

Naruto was torn between shock, anger and embarrassment and yes, it was ridiculous that he was still oddly turned on by this sort of expression of dominance. This was unlike anything he had ever experienced and it made all his nerves stand on edge. “What the hell, Sasuke?!” he exclaimed, struggling against the chains, but it was useless. “Let me go right now!”

Impassively, Sasuke watched him as he tried to flex his arms so his hands could perform a seal but as soon as he managed it, nothing happened.

“You seem to forget that this is my genjutsu,” Sasuke said casually. “I’m inside your brain, Naruto. I’m the only one who dictates what happens and what you are allowed to do. I’m letting you do what you want by choice but I can control you in here. I can even control what you feel and how you feel it.”

There was something about Sasuke’s words that immediately made Naruto stop thrashing. His eyes widened a bit. “Control me?” he asked, feeling his chest tight with something that wasn’t exactly fear but rather anticipation. “How so?”

The corner of Sasuke’s mouth quirked upwards, and it was as elegant as it was nasty. In spite of himself, Naruto swallowed hard. Every instinct he possessed was on instant alert as Sasuke came closer once more and it didn’t really matter if the guy in front of him was shorter at this moment – Sasuke’s presence both made him want to press forward against him or recoil completely. It was that intense. Unfortunately for Naruto, Sasuke’s aura was strong enough to make him almost forget that he was upset for being put in chains while completely naked.

“Well…” Sasuke said, looking down at Naruto’s evident half hard erection. They were close enough that Naruto could feel the inviting heat of Sasuke’s body and smell the familiar scent of his hair but not enough to touch unless one of them willingly moved. “You will never break those chains, not with chakra, and not even with your own will power unless I allow it. It takes less than a second here for me to either put you through a year’s worth of pain or force you to have three orgasms in a row without me lifting a single finger.” When Sasuke’s intense eyes met with Naruto’s surprised ones, Naruto held his breath. “Although, that wouldn’t be much fun, would it?”

Naruto wanted to be offended but it was difficult when the implications of Sasuke’s words were this captivating. In spite of himself, he felt heat flood him helplessly.

Their mouths were too close for comfort and Naruto was reminded of the kiss they had been sharing before the genjutsu had started. He wondered what it would feel like to kiss this younger version of Sasuke, who so daringly remained still, torturing him, defying him.

“What are you planning, Sasuke?” Naruto questioned, feeling his breath quicken.

Sasuke’s lips parted slowly and it was a bewitching sight. “I thought you said you wanted me,” he said, suggestively.

“I do,” Naruto admitted in a whisper. “But I told you I wasn’t thinking about…”

“Tell me,” Sasuke interrupted, placing his left hand over Naruto’s heart to feel the erratic pumping. “How much did you miss me, exactly? Enough to fuck your wife whenever your longing for me became unbearable?”
Naruto’s breath caught at the intimate, warm touch but his eyebrows furrowed. He looked into Sasuke’s mocking eyes, trying to read what was in them. It sounded like he was being insulted or made fun of but at the same time, something about Sasuke’s expression made it feel like he was simply being a tease. Sasuke was testing him, turning the tables around fast and ruthlessly in a way that only he was capable of, changing the atmosphere between them completely.

Sasuke wanted to rile him up, Naruto noticed. He wanted to impose his dominance and show Naruto exactly who was in charge. Naruto understood it now and it was something that frustrated him to no end but that he could understand and respect. It wasn’t supposed to be that way between them and he had hoped Sasuke would understand it and take things a little less aggressively.

“Your way or no way, huh?” Naruto thought

And oddly enough, Naruto found that he didn’t give a fuck – the challenge only fuelled his desire further as his cock reached full hardness, brushing against the fabric around Sasuke’s waist. “Yeah” he said truthfully, his voice firm and equally challenging.

Sasuke smirked. “Did you fuck her up the ass, too?”

There Sasuke was, being crude on purpose to upset him. Naruto smirked back. “No, that’s exclusive for you,” he said in a suggestive mutter. “I do finger myself when I miss you inside me, if that’s what you’re wondering about.”

From Sasuke’s reaction, Naruto had finally managed to shake him.

Almost imperceptibly, Sasuke inhaled deeply, his dark grey eyes dropping to Naruto’s mouth as if it was the most interesting thing in the world, and for Naruto there wasn’t really anything quite like Sasuke’s raw desire for him.

And despite Sasuke’s efforts in showing Naruto just enough of what was going through his head, Naruto could see that he was pining for him.

Naruto bit down on his lower lip, hard. It had been too long since they had played cat and mouse like this, both as friends/rivals and as lovers and it was insane. He had almost forgotten how amazing and exasperating it was. He resisted the immediate urge to thrust forward so his dick was openly and suggestively rubbing against the other. He had actually considered buying himself a dildo roughly the size of Sasuke’s cock when he’d been on a mission at some point but he’d be caught dead before he would ever admit that to anyone, let alone Sasuke himself.

It wasn’t really a matter of preference, he just never refused his body’s desires so he went through the motions as they were.

Right now, he was torn between wanting to ravage Sasuke like a beast or be ravaged instead.

“Naruto...” Sasuke whispered, letting his hand slowly and suggestively trail down Naruto’s torso until his fingers were teasingly brushing his groin. “You really do piss me off.”

And Naruto knew that whatever would follow would probably throw him to the pits of hell.

TBC...
CLIFFHANGER!

Sorry not sorry. I do have more of this written, but I thought it was the perfect time to cut the chapter because it was getting waaaay big. Also, it will allow me to gauge what you guys reaction to this will be, and depending on that, I might or might not proceed with what I had in mind.

You guys should already know I’m a bit deranged and come up with crazy shit. This being said, whether this smut scene happens or not might be up to you guys. I know I’ll probably lose followers with this scene alone, so I want to thread this carefully.

Anyway, as I said, in the first author’s notes, I won’t be writing for this for the time being, at least until ‘It’s Not Fair’ is finished. I wasn’t going to touch this fic until then, but I had a good part written so I thought it would be nice to indulge myself and make you guys happy with an update as well since it had been far too long since I had last updated and you guys were always so supportive and amazing you deserved an update <3

Not sure if the update was what you had expected or not, or even if you guys enjoyed it, but let’s just say I’m pleased with it and needed everything I wrote to get back on track.

Next chapter will be the last one before Sasuke and Naruto part ways again, and it might have a few surprises in store for you. It will be rather intense, regardless of how things go with the Genjutsu, so look forward to it!

Thank you all for being so patient and supportive towards this fic! I cannot tell you how much I appreciate and am grateful to every single one of you.

See ya next time, and don’t forget to comment, your input if highly valued and appreciated!

Love,

Debbie
It took forever for me to update, but here it is! I cannot believe it was October the last time I posted for this fic.

So, I know I’ve been absent and barely have posted anything on tumblr or updated my fics, and I sincerely am sorry for that. Don’t think that I have given up on finishing my stories, because I haven’t, it’s just… this year has been filled with new things and it’s been hard to be in the right mood.

For starters, a few of you already know this, but I’m currently pregnant, 28 weeks today to be precise, of a baby boy ^^. It feels like something I’ve been wanting for so long that it’s eerie. It’s been a blessed journey, but I’ve been on medical leave a lot and my brain feels like mush most of the times. I feel so happy that I managed to have a strike of inspiration for this chapter you have no idea!

Well, apart from this, my grandmother passed away. She was like a mother to me – or more of a mother than my own mother, to be honest - and just on the weekend that I had decided to tell her about the baby, she passed away without knowing, and that was… difficult for me. Mixed up with other family situations, I had rough times here and there.

Anyway, at the moment I’m feeling a lot better, but I will be going back to work next week, so we’ll see how that goes. Thank you all for being patient and not giving up on this fic! All the reviews I get and all the love this fic still receives fills my heart with joy! It’s beautiful to see that people are still wanting to see Sasuke/Naruto stuff even though this fandom has been quieter than ever. Please don’t let our wonderful ship die!

Not betaed. Excuse my typos.

I apologise in advance for the chapter, by the way. Hehe.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Which We’ll Rise

Part XXII: By the Hand

There he was, inside the *genjutsu* he had created, immersed in a fantasy he had willingly started, not so much to indulge Naruto but to give in to his own particular whims, and all of a sudden, Sasuke was assaulted by the strangest feeling.

He had no doubts that he was in complete control of everything within his *genjutsu*. Regardless of
how oddly upset he still was, he acknowledged that this was giving him quite the rush, adrenaline and desire flooding him as he arrogantly observed Naruto’s naked and wanton body from up and down. His dark gaze landed upon the obvious arousal between his friend’s thighs before rolling back up to find blue eyes that were heavy with lust, yet feral with expectation.

He shouldn’t have been surprised that Naruto would be into this - after all, the man did seem to have a thing for being at Sasuke’s mercy. Naruto could pretend to be angry, fight and talk shit at Sasuke with a surprisingly dirty mouth, but in the end, this type of challenge and the curiosity he always had towards Sasuke was something that excited him beyond his own comprehension.

Sasuke knew instantly that, right now, he could do whatever the fuck he very well pleased and Naruto would take it willingly, be it pain or pleasure. In fact, he suspected Naruto was eagerly anticipating both, and not knowing what was going to happen was definitely turning him on.

The thought alone made Sasuke’s mouth salivate. A savage part of him wanted to ravage Naruto and hurt him, unleash upon him all the negative things he was forced to feel and simply let go. And then, there was the other side of the coin that, after all of this, desperately wanted to heal him by showering the other with waves of affection and show him sensations Sasuke knew he’d never feel with another person.

Sasuke found himself swallowing hard as a familiar tightness squeezed his heart.

“Sasuke?” Naruto called out, a little breathlessly. Sasuke didn’t blink as he stared at him, wave after wave of longing washing over him, causing his entire body to pulse in yearning, and it was unbearable.

But… underneath these things that seemed impossible to drown, there was still something vile and dark that made him stop. No matter how much he wanted to reach out, somehow, all of a sudden, his body refused to touch the other man’s skin as he kept watching him.

And he realized that he simply couldn’t do this.

000

Sasuke came to himself with a violence he wasn’t used to. As if his very soul had somehow escaped his body and had suddenly decided to re-enter him with viciousness, he came back to the real world with a spasm and a strangled gasp as he urgently pushed at Naruto’s chest to break their kiss so he could take a few quick, deep breaths.

His chest hurt and his heart was beating wildly. Breathing heavily, he blinked at Naruto, who was panting and looking back at him with an expression that was both worried and confused. “What?” Naruto asked quickly, clearly a little out of sorts. “What happened? Why are we back?”

Swallowing hard, Sasuke shook his head. “I… I can’t…” he said, in more of a hiss than a whisper. “I need a moment.”

“Heh?!”

Naruto sounded utterly appalled as Sasuke nimbly got to his feet and walked away without looking back. He just needed a minute to get his shit together, and he was praying that his friend would be sensible enough not to follow.

As he immersed himself in the dense forest, completely unaware of the chill of the shadows hitting his naked torso, he tried to force himself to calm the fuck down. He didn’t understand himself at all, because the turmoil of emotions was so strong and conflicting he didn’t know what to do with
himself. The lust that burned his body made him feel dizzy, his obvious arousal still very prominent between his thighs, and yet, he felt so helpless towards it, it seemed to fuel the bubbling anger inside his heart.

He was so fucking angry he wanted to run as fast as he could, and as far away from Naruto as he possibly could. It had all seemed so easy for a moment, so simple. His pride hadn’t allowed him to give in, in reality, but he had thought that, maybe in his *genjutsu* he could give both himself and Naruto some sort of relief, not exactly what they both wanted, but a sample nonetheless that would alleviate the tension and the raging longing they had for each other. It was the perfect idea, he had been sure, and yet…

Even in that *genjutsu*, regardless of the things he was able to control at will, he still wasn’t able to control - nor balance - the fuckfest that involved his love, his resentment and his desire.

There was no way that he could do it. No matter how much he loved Naruto, how much he had missed him, how much it was physically and emotionally painful for him to keep his distance and deny himself like this, his own ego won. And he wasn’t sure if he was glad or frustrated out of his mind.

He wasn’t like Naruto - he simply could not throw his principles out the window and deal with it afterwards. Even if he knew giving in would offer some sort of short term relief, it never seemed to make up for the amount of pain.

He just wanted to be able to say ‘no’ to everything. It was so easy to switch himself off when it came to other lovers, but with Naruto it didn’t work no matter how hard he tried. He always thought too much, always calculated his steps, always felt too much and it was all so inconveniently bothersome.

It was a fact that Sasuke wanted Naruto with everything he had, but he was also pissed off beyond belief at their situation, and no matter what Naruto said or how many promises he made, nothing would change the fact that they were just fooling around with each other and naively gambling on fate. Sasuke wasn’t a person who gambled, and no matter how impulsive he might be at times, he did not make decisions lightly nor acted without a certain amount of consideration towards the consequences.

Naruto, on the other hand, loved to jump into things first and think about it afterwards.

With an annoyed huff, Sasuke stopped next to a tree and placed his shaky hand over the trunk for support. Closing his eyes, he focused on breathing through his nose and will the chaos within him to subside, somehow. The sounds of the leaves rustling in the soft breeze complemented the melody of birds chirping, and it was strangely soothing.

What the hell had he been thinking?

For several minutes he stood there, motionless while taking in the energy of the nature that surrounded him in search for a calming, grounding force that would get him back on track. The quietude was a blessing, and despite the raging thoughts inside his head, he slowly managed to catch his breath as his body calmed down enough to for him to regain some semblance of composure. He still felt like every cell in him was on edge while other parts of him didn’t seem to want to whither, either.

Re-opening his eyes, he leaned his side on the tree trunk with a groan. This was utterly exhausting and he wanted it to be over.

And yet… thinking about Naruto leaving and them not seeing each other for the gods knew how
long wasn’t easier on his heart either. Thinking about it over and over again didn't help.

The familiar presence made itself known before a single noise could be heard, and Sasuke was glad that he had regained his dignity, at least.

“Sasuke?” Naruto called out hesitantly, and only then could his cautious steps be heard in the forest grounds as he approached.

Straightening his posture, Sasuke inhaled sharply just as the form of his friend emerged from a nearby bush. Naruto had chosen to put his sweater back on (a clear sign of him understanding Sasuke’s distress) and as soon as he spotted Sasuke, he stopped in his tracks, the tension in his body giving away his uncertainty on how to approach the man in front of him.

“Did you come here and left Katsuo all alone?” Sasuke snapped, feeling on edge again now that Naruto was close once more.

“Of course not!” Naruto defended, looking hurt at the accusation. “I left three clones behind to look after him! Three!”

Narrowing his eyes at a frowning Naruto, Sasuke bit on his lower lip, knowing he was being unreasonably unbalanced about all of this. He used to have more control, but he couldn’t, for the life of him, seem to get it back in moments like this. Just looking at Naruto made him lose sense of who he wanted to be in this situation and it drove him nuts.

Heaving a long sigh, Sasuke forced himself to relax. “Alright,” he said, voice a little softer now, but not less annoyed. “I’m sorry I doubted your competence.”

“I don’t even know if you’re being sarcastic or honest,” Naruto protested, making yet another confused face. “Sasuke, what’s wrong? What did I do this time to piss you off like this?”

“I’m not…” Sasuke started, but then interrupted himself because, yes, he was very pissed off and Naruto could feel it, so it was pointless to deny it. “You didn’t do anything. Or more like, you didn’t do anything in the genjutsu specifically. I just couldn’t go through with what I had in mind. There’s just too much going on in my head and I can’t.”

Naruto chewed on his upper lip, his expression changing to one of disappointment. “You mean you can’t… be with me like that? Not even in a genjutsu? Because that’s not even real…”

“Real or not, the sensations feel real and the memories will be there,” Sasuke refuted. “For all your brain and body know, it’s as real as it possibly could be. And, no matter how much I want to do it, I just can’t. I’m too conflicted. I can’t just decide to shove everything to the side and fuck you as if you’re not leaving tomorrow, to your fucking village and your fucking wife and kid, to that fucking life you have so much difficulty letting go of.” He took a deep breath. “I have a difficulty letting go of certain things as well, Naruto.”

There was a shift in Naruto’s body, and Sasuke’s eyes lowered to find that the other’s hands had been closed into tight fists. He couldn’t feel anger coming from Naruto, but he could feel frustration, sadness and, like Sasuke himself, helplessness. Only Naruto’s was different and emerged from a different source.

Naruto loved him and wanted him just as eagerly - Sasuke could feel that hunger throbbing in his veins and smell it from a distance, like an erotic fragrance calling out to him. He understood Sasuke’s motives and his feelings, but he didn’t understand Sasuke’s mind nor his stubbornness. He didn’t understand why Sasuke simply couldn’t make life easier for himself, and this - knowing Sasuke put
himself through so much out of pride - burned his heart with melancholy.

Sasuke himself didn’t know why it was so hard for him to cave in; he only knew that he couldn’t. Not right now, at least. It wasn’t about what he wanted anymore, it was just that his soul was already shattered from so many crushed dreams and useless faith.

“I’m sorry,” Naruto said, shortly, and it sounded sincere, but defeated. His eyes didn’t look human in that eerie setting around them, too big and too honest.

“You have to stop apologising for things you can’t fix,” Sasuke said, for some reason feeling his anger slowly melt away. He could feel Naruto’s longing for him, but the fact that he currently knew how to keep his distance and not attempt to cross the line again helped Sasuke relax and drop his guard ever so slightly. “It is what it is. I’m not going to apologise to you for leading you on and breaking it off like this.”

“I didn’t expect you to,” Naruto said, again, sincerely. He unclenched his fists. “It was my fault. I’m sorry for pushing your buttons. I guess my selfishness sort of… makes me take things for granted. I take you for granted, too, because I know you want the same as I do. But you don’t feel the same way about this so… I’m not going to try to lure you in anymore if it’s going to make you feel like this. I’m really sorry, Sasuke.”

For a few seconds, Sasuke could only look at the stiff and heartbroken figure of Naruto, standing there without knowing which way to turn or how to react around him. This Naruto was so oddly pitiful, fragile and so scared of pushing Sasuke away that it actually made him feel sorry for him, but only a little because, truth was, Sasuke couldn’t help but feel sadistically satisfied. Naruto needed to understand that fulfilling his whims was entirely up to Sasuke, and if Sasuke was not up to it, then that would always be the end of it. That was the bargain between them, and that was something he had agreed on, so he did not have the right to mope.

“Can I ask you something?” Naruto said, tilting his chin up as if it would give him strength.

After a pause, Sasuke nodded. “Go ahead.”

“Do you… also feel conflicted when you fuck other people?”

The question took Sasuke aback for a split second, but he didn’t let it show at all, his expression unchanged. Unblinking, he looked Naruto from up and down. “I know exactly what I’m doing when I’m fucking other people,” he said, his voice soft and composed. “I know the purpose it serves at that moment, so for me to feel guilty about doing it.”

“Which you don’t,” Naruto finished for him, and for some reason, his voice cracked.

“I wouldn’t do it in the first place if I did.”

Naruto swallowed hard. “I see.”

“You don’t feel guilty when you fuck your wife.”

“That’s because I love her,” Naruto defended, and there was a watery glint in his eyes that finally exposed a hint of anger. “She’s the mother of my son, that’s…”

“What makes you think I don’t love the people I’m involved with?” Sasuke cut, ruthlessly. “You’re way over your head to say it to my face that you are entitled to fuck your wife because you love her. You don’t get to talk to me about love and what you consider right or wrong feelings for sex. Unlike you, I don’t just fuck because I can’t keep it in my pants, Naruto. You don’t have to fuck someone
because you ‘love’ them, and you don’t have to have an ulterior motive to fuck someone you care
for. And regardless of what you may think, you’re not the only person I happen to care about in this
world.”

In front of him, Naruto pressed his lips tightly together and looked away from him, crossing his arms
over his chest. “How many people did you fuck?” he ended up muttering.

Sasuke didn’t hesitate in coldly replying to the childish question. “Certainly, more than you have, and
I don’t need to excuse myself with frivolous conversations of ‘love’.” He paused, before adding “I
don’t need to justify to you, or to anyone else what I do, who I fuck or why. I never did, and I never
will. Whether it’s easier to fuck this or that person than it is to fuck you, that’s up to me, Naruto, and
you have to respect that.”

“Right,” Naruto snapped.

Sasuke could feel the other man’s jealousy, and in so many ways, it both amused him and upset him
because, even if it felt good to show Naruto that he had the upper hand, it still bothered him that his
personal need to be this vicious hurt Naruto.

“Naruto…”

“Look, I know you have other people, and I know I don’t have the right to be jealous or
judgemental.” Naruto threw, looking back at him with a deep frown and tears of frustration in his
eyes. “I know you’re married to Sakura-chan, and that I’m married too and that this is all so fucking
twisted none of us have the right to be moralistic about it. But I can’t help it, okay? As I’ve said a
million times already, I didn’t come here so we could have sex, but it’s fucking infuriating that you
open up to me and give it your all in one moment and then close the fuck up in the other! I
understand it, Sasuke, I really do, but it pisses me off that you’re… so difficult about it when it comes
to me! When all I want is to give myself to you wholeheartedly, you’re constantly finding reasons
not to do the same!”

“It’s exactly because it’s you that it’s difficult,” Sasuke explained, keeping his voice even,
unperturbed, but strict. “It’s not like I can explain it myself. It doesn’t mean that it’s going to be like
this all the time.” He frowned. “This morning you said you’d respect that. You said it was okay as
long as I accepted our conditions as lovers and didn’t run away from you. But it is what it is at this
point, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Naruto huffed and took a few seconds to inhale deeply through his nose as if to calm himself down,
eventually allowing his stiff shoulders to slump. With a hand, he rubbed his eyes. “Right,” he said,
shaking his head softly in defeat. “I just… I wish things could be easier. I wish you’d just… stop
overthinking things so much. Sometimes it looks like you do and I get excited, but… you are you,
and I know you. I don’t know why I keep expecting you to be different just because of my whims.”

Sasuke couldn’t help but sigh. “Don’t think that I’m insensitive to your side of the situation,” he
muttered, running a hand through his hair, tiredly. “Regardless of my feelings and motivations at this
very moment, later on this will have a heavy impact on me. I might even regret not taking the chance
to be with you like that at some point, but… right now I can’t. And it has nothing to do with the way
I feel about you; that much you should know.”

Lowering his hand so his eyes were uncovered, Naruto lifted his head up and eyed him, his
expression slightly less strained, almost bordering on impassive, as if he had completely given up on
whatever arguments and defensive rants he might have. This, too, pleased Sasuke in a strange way.

“Yeah, I do know,” Naruto agreed, lowly. After a few serious seconds, his mouth formed a small,
honest but sad smile. “I don’t love you any less, even if it’s vexing as all hell, especially knowing you want the same thing as I do. But I said that I would wait for you, and I will, even if it takes years or decades. So, it’s alright.”

It wasn’t alright and Sasuke knew it. Naruto was wounded, mostly by Sasuke shattering his wishful thinking - despite Sasuke’s previous warnings - but for the both of them, it was better this way. Sasuke knew he might mourn this distance he had imposed them at some point, when memories of their days together weighted him and he would come to miss Naruto and long for him with everything he had.

However, Sasuke wasn’t a person to regret past actions that made sense to him. Even if, in a week, he’d wonder why this was such a big deal and wonder why the fuck he didn’t go through with his initial plan for the genjutsu, he would remember well that, on this day, he felt like this was the right thing to do, and that would be enough to push regrets and feelings of remorse away from him.

They exchanged a silent look between them for a while before Sasuke reached out a hand towards Naruto. “Come here.”

Naruto’s calm but attentive expression didn’t change, and there was no hesitation as he slowly made his way towards Sasuke, their hands meeting halfway before their chests ever did.

With his naked back rubbing against the tree trunk, Sasuke’s arm went around Naruto’s shoulders as Naruto’s arms instinctively surrounded him by the waist. He felt his friend easily burying his face in the curve of his neck, so he pressed a small, almost condescending kiss to the man’s temple before leaning his head back against the tree and look up. From there, he could only see small bits of the blue sky peeking out from the dense foliage above him.

Oddly enough, even though the contact of Naruto’s body against his got all his animalistic instincts on alert, truth was, he felt a lot calmer than he expected. He could feel Naruto’s heart beating wildly against him, contentment, resignation and longing pumping inside his chest, alongside with Sasuke’s. But Naruto was calm, accepting, and finally not assaulted by insolent thoughts of lust, and that was a welcomed relief that allowed Sasuke to breathe properly, finally.

“Were you really willing to let seventeen-year-old me fuck you?” Sasuke asked, allowing himself to sound the tiniest bit teasing to lighten up the mood.

Naruto snorted against his skin. “Why not? Seventeen-year-old you was fierce. And kind of hot, too.”

“You’re in your twenties; it’s still kind of weird,” Sasuke pointed out, rubbing the back of his friend’s neck with a soothing hand and feeling the other’s arms tightening around him.

“Well, sorry, not sorry,” Naruto grumbled, pressing a small kiss to the back of Sasuke’s ear. “I would’ve done it. It’s your fault, anyway. And I hope we can repeat that genjutsu properly sometime. Or, like, forget the genjutsu and we’ll do it for real? You just created a fantasy I expect to see fulfilled someday.”

“What, when you’re in your forties or fifties?” Sasuke mocked. “That would be even creepier.”

“Not if I can somehow manage to make myself younger, too?” Naruto suggested, and Sasuke felt him smile. “Or not. Depends on how kinky I’m feeling.”

“You’re the most disgusting pervert I’ve ever met,” Sasuke said, shaking his head in amusement.

“That’s because you never met the mighty Jiraiya,” Naruto retorted.
Sasuke couldn’t help but snort. “Well, I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

When they returned to where they had set camp for their picnic after a few minutes, they found Katsuo still sleeping soundly with three Naruto clones sitting cross legged on the ground around him, all of them watching the boy as if they feared he might miraculously vanish. Sasuke found it rather funny.

“Don’t laugh! You can’t be too careful, and I don’t know him well enough to know if he’d run away or not,” Naruto protested, once he saw Sasuke’s smirk.

“He’s not the type of kid to randomly run away, idiot,” Sasuke said, rolling his eyes as he made his way to the edge of the lake where he’d left his sweater. He quickly put it on as Naruto dispelled his three clones, the soft puffing sound making Katsuo shift a little in his slumber.

The sake bottle and cups were still resting on the ground, now with a few ants travelling all over them as expected.

“Ah, damn…” Naruto mumbled, crouching down to pick them up and shake the ants off. “I’m gonna wash it really quick. We’re lucky the bottle had the cork on.”

As Naruto made his way to the edge of the lake to wash the dust away, Sasuke sat back down where they had previously been, pulling his knees up to his chest. He took a moment to look over his shoulder at Katsuo to make sure he was indeed alright.

Once Naruto had everything properly washed, he sat down next to Sasuke. Silently, the two shared a few more cups of sake in a strangely peaceful silence. Sasuke was happy about that, because he was so very done with useless conversation for the moment. After the intensity between them had been crashed so disastrously, there was no way that things could turn casual and easy-going all of a sudden, and it was already bad enough that the tension between them was still awkward for being unresolved.

Still, simply enjoying each other’s company was fulfilling enough considering things, and Sasuke was internally grateful that Naruto wasn’t forcing his feelings through his energy towards him anymore, instead quietly watching the lake with a thoughtful expression that demanded nothing from Sasuke anymore.

Katsuo woke up in the middle of the afternoon, nodding excitedly when Sasuke asked him if he still wanted to swim in the lake. Naruto insisted that he took a look at the wounds on the child’s hands before that and seemed pleased that they seemed to have started healing.

Sasuke prepared things for an afternoon snack while Naruto and Katsuo played in the water because he wasn’t in the right mood to join them. Plus, it kind of soothed his troubled soul to see the two interacting. Naruto truly wasn’t like him, easily regaining his good spirits and managing to crack his heart-warming smiles. He seemed happy to play with Katsuo, surprisingly energised as he attempted to teach him how to swim. Katsuo watched Naruto attentively and seemed very receptive to him, taking his suggestions and never rejecting contact. A distorted, awkward smirk would sometimes chance an appearance on his thin lips. Sasuke was happy he seemed to be enjoying himself - it was important to him that his son liked Naruto.

However, Katsuo still didn’t have enough strength to handle being in the water for too long, and after about half an hour he and Naruto got out and made their way to Sasuke, dripping water and looking happy. Naruto, of course, had to be childish and throw some drops of water Sasuke’s way.
After Naruto insisted that he anointed and bandaged Katsuo’s hands again, the three ate together. It was already late afternoon when they gathered their things and headed back to the village. Naruto carried an obviously thrilled Katsuo on his shoulders, the child confidently holding the sides of his head for support.

Once they arrived at the village, everyone was already preparing food at their doorsteps for the usual dinner banquet outside. Since Misato already had collected water for the night, Sasuke took the chance to make sure Katsuo bathed properly, and only then did he and Naruto wash up as best as they could before all of them went to help with the remaining preparations.

The banquet outside was the usual loud event, followed by lots of music and dancing, and even if Sasuke loved it, that day he wished it had rained so they could have their meal in a quieter environment in Misato’s house, just their small household, in peace. However, this was a rare occasion since the village’s culture believed that eating in community brought happiness, health and prosperity and no one dined in their own homes unless it was strictly necessary.

Despite his apparent regained good-mood, Naruto didn’t eat much and politely refused everyone that asked him to dance, content in sitting next to Sasuke and slowly sipping his wine. Katsuo had grown rather drowsy as well, and Sasuke could tell that he was absolutely exhausted. At some point, despite the noise, the boy ended up letting his head fall on Sasuke’s shoulder and promptly fell asleep. It was easy to think of him as being strong and healthy on normal days, but it was when he pushed himself like this that Sasuke remembered that he still had a long way to go to be as energetic as the other kids his age.

In spite of it being a little difficult with just one arm, Sasuke managed to pick Katsuo up - under Naruto’s attentive but silent gaze - and carry him to the house, Naruto following after him.

Naruto seemed surprised when Sasuke took Katsuo to the same room the three of them had shared the night before - cramped as all hell. “You and I are not sleeping here tonight,” Sasuke explained vaguely in a whisper, which made Naruto sigh in relief.

Quickly, Naruto prepared the makeshift bed before Sasuke laid Katsuo on it. Together, they managed to undress the boy and somehow put some lighter sleeping clothes on him without him so much as stirring slightly.

After a small kiss to his son’s head, Sasuke blew out the candle they had lit for illumination and they both quietly left the room.

Naruto looked confused as Sasuke moved about the house to fetch a few things - blankets, a couple of canteens he ordered Naruto to fill with water, and a bit of fruit, all things they shoved inside a large satchel.

“You want to go back to the party?” Sasuke asked Naruto, pushing the satchel towards Naruto as they were heading outside. “It’s your last night here, after all.”

“No, I’m fine going wherever you want to go,” Naruto said easily while throwing the satchel over his shoulder, his tone honest. Nodding, Sasuke made hi way to the banquet to look for Misato but she was nowhere to be seen. Thankfully, Sasuke found Tori feeding an agitated Mika, so he managed to tell him that Katsuo was sleeping in the house and that he and Naruto would be spending the night somewhere else. Tori simply nodded and shooed them away.

“You think they’ll be mad if we don’t stay to help clean up?” Naruto muttered, still following after Sasuke as they left the banquet area. Sasuke found a lit lantern and picked it up - they’d need it if they wanted to see where they were going in that darkness.
“Well, you’re not an inhabitant right now, you’re a guest, and I’m officially your host, so I don’t think they give a fuck to be honest,” Sasuke said dismissively. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Not tired, no; just… being away from all of that noise kind of feels nicer at this point,” Naruto admitted. Sasuke was glad they agreed, but then again, emotionally the day had been rather draining for both of them, and after all, Naruto had travelled all the way there for a reason - to talk to Sasuke and spend time with him.

They walked side by side for a while. The night was particularly dark since it was a new moon, and while the air was humid, it wasn’t cold despite the gentle breeze.

It didn’t take long for them to spot their destination, and Naruto quickly connected the dots, which helped him perking up. With a smile, he turned his head towards Sasuke. “You serious?” he asked, ever with that hopeful tone to make sure he wasn’t getting his hopes up for nothing.

“Yeah,” Sasuke replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. “Unless your old man body can’t handle sleeping in hay anymore.”

“Hey, I’m not an old man!” Naruto protested, elbowing Sasuke playfully. “I’m still a Shinobi, you know? Granted, I don’t really spend as much time sleeping outdoors in the same horrible places as your constant travelling ass, but I’m still used to rough conditions.”

“A barn is hardly considered ‘rough conditions’,“ Sasuke said, rolling his eyes.

The barn was dark and mostly quiet since most of the animals seemed to have settled down for the night, only the occasional rustling being heard. Despite having been properly cleaned at the end of the day, the place was expectedly still smelly, but Naruto seemed to pay no mind to it, grinning from ear to ear as he took a nostalgic look around. Sasuke put the lantern down, and together, they found a healthy pile of hay and arranged it so it made a suitable mattress for the improvised ‘bed’ they’d be sharing, putting some of the covers Sasuke had brought with them over it before finishing with a couple of warmer ones that they’d use to cover themselves. It was considerably hotter inside the barn that it was outside, though.

“Well, we can make a bonfire outside if you want,” Sasuke suggested, once they were done. “There are logs in here somewhere that we can use. In case you want to hang out for a while and, well… talk some more.”

Naruto smiled at him gently and shook his head. “Nah, we’ve done enough talking for the day,” he said easily. “I think we’ve already told each other what we both needed to say. Don’t you?”

“That depends on the point of view,” Sasuke replied, narrowing his eyes at his friend. “If I knew it would make a difference, I’d be glad to give you another good piece of my mind.”

In spite of himself, Naruto let out a small chuckle. Then, he reached out a hand towards Sasuke, palm turned upwards invitingly, who looked down at it with a raised eyebrow. “What?”

“Dance with me.”

“Dance?” Sasuke inquired, genuinely surprised by the out of the blue request. “We can barely hear the music from here.”

“We’re not going to dance to that, silly, we’d wake up all the animals,” Naruto said, this time being the one to roll his blue eyes. “Come on; do this one thing for me?”

Sasuke eyed his friend’s hand for a few seconds before letting out a resigned sigh. Conceding, he put
his hand over Naruto’s and allowed the other man to carefully pull him close before putting his other hand on Sasuke’s waist. A little awkwardly, Naruto took the lead in a slow dance with no particular rhythm at all. They barely left the same place, but Sasuke wasn’t going to complain - he knew nothing of dancing, neither did he remember ever having danced this way in his life.

Sasuke’s eyes roamed freely over Naruto’s calm and content face, unsure if he should find himself curious of the other’s demeanour, glad, or simply uncomfortable. It was strange to have Naruto in a mood that wasn’t whiny or demanding, and it was even stranger to, for once, not be able to feel the suffocating weight of the man’s every want and need. Yes, he could feel Naruto’s longing for him, his engulfing love, too, but these feelings weren’t trying to eat Sasuke alive and drown him to the point where he almost felt helpless to the point of breaking. It was clear to him that Naruto was pushing down these things so they wouldn’t affect Sasuke, though, but even this seemed like such a huge step in their relationship, and one Sasuke was grateful for, and a little impressed by. This was a start for Naruto in proving that, despite his frustration, he was willing to learn and mature in order to accept and respect what Sasuke himself needed.

“You’re looking at me funny,” Naruto commented lowly, his small smile still in place. “What’s going through your mind?”

“Nothing in particular,” Sasuke said, monotonously. “It’s just fucking weird dancing with someone without the appropriate music.”

“You can just think of a song in your head,” Naruto suggested.

“I don’t know any songs that would be suitable,” Sasuke said, sincerely.

“Make one up, then.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

Naruto chuckled. “Gods, you’re really insufferable sometimes,” he muttered, not without fondness. “I often wonder why I love you.”

“I often wonder about it myself.”

For the first time since they entered the barn, Naruto’s smile faded just the tiniest bit. Without taking his resolute eyes off Sasuke’s, the pressed his lips together. “Bastard; I don’t wonder about it at all,” he said gently, but with firmness. “I never really did, because why would I wonder about something that’s been a part of me since forever?”

Sasuke didn’t reply but didn’t look away either. When Naruto put his arm around him and pulled him closer until their chests were pressed together, he didn’t protest, keeping a serious, defiant expression, even if the new-found proximity of their faces made his heart beat a little faster.

“The thing is, Sasuke,” Naruto started, breath brushing over Sasuke’s lips as he spoke. “No matter what happens between us, good or bad, or how conflicted we both might feel at some point… I won’t let you second guess me and doubt me. You simply can’t, even if, at times, you might feel like things won’t happen and we won’t pull this through. You have to believe that we will.”

And there Naruto was, ever the optimistic, needing to assert his resolution and needing to, once again, reaffirm his motivations. Sasuke felt like he no longer wanted words of reassurance towards a future that seemed too distant to reach. He wanted to believe Naruto - he always had - but at the same time, his friend had already put so many other things above them and their accomplishments together that it felt like, the more time passed, the harder it would be for Naruto to let go of his
growing personal responsibilities and attachments. Which was why, despite Sasuke’s efforts to hope and focus on the positive, he could not allow himself to be blinded by his faith in Naruto - he wouldn’t.

But it wasn’t like he was going to say this out loud again - Naruto had already heard enough of his discontentment as it was for one day, and since the man was making an effort to keep things going well between them, Sasuke didn’t want to ruin that by being unnecessarily bitter - he’d had enough, as well.

With a huff, Sasuke cautiously pried his hand away from Naruto’s before placing it at the back of his blond head, wrapping his fingers around rebellious locks. It didn’t take much for him to lean slightly in so his lips were touching the other man’s in a silent but hopefully soothing way that would prevent Naruto from saying any more useless things.

Naruto sighed against him, his heart speeding up at once as he willingly parted his lips so he could move them against Sasuke’s in an almost relieved fashion. Sasuke felt Naruto’s arms surrounding his body, holding him close, and once more, he gave in to the contact, allowing himself this little indulgence that his body didn’t find difficult to accept. It was nice, filled with unspoken things, but controlled. Their feelings were obvious, travelling between them like an electrical force, and yet, for once, it felt good to simply enjoy it all quietly rather than being overwhelmed by things they couldn’t handle, and this made Sasuke feel at ease because he was tired of being unable to grab a hold of himself whenever Naruto was involved.

In a way, he wanted Naruto to understand this, which was why he didn’t think twice about pressing himself closer until their bodies were in full contact and deepening the kiss by prying Naruto’s mouth further open with his tongue. Immediately, Naruto tensed, a swirl of yearning emotions Sasuke could feel flooding him, and yet, Naruto did nothing to instinctually concede to them, instead merely hugging Sasuke closer and responding to the searing kiss. Sasuke couldn’t help the familiar feeling of belonging from assaulting him.

Time seemed to have frozen as minutes passed by with them inexpertly slow dancing in the same spot, but neither really cared. Words seemed to have lost relevance to give the spotlight to silence and the tender exchanges of meaningful touches.

To his surprise, the memory of a soft melody filled Sasuke’s brain - one he had a few times played on the flute so many years ago, as a child, when his mind had been untroubled by the nightmares that would fill his life. Sometimes he remembered that he used to play in secret - having been taught by Itachi - and missed the wooden instrument that he had no idea where he’d left. He wondered if Naruto ever knew that he had played. He also wondered if, in the present day, he’d be able to play single handily. Somehow, he doubted it, but he suddenly wished he could, so he could show it to Naruto, and Katsuo, too. Maybe even Sarada.

Right now, it didn’t matter - he was glad that he had a song in his head to dance to.

The next morning Sasuke felt as if he was trapped in a surreal dream where he just went through the motions without feeling anything in particular. He and Naruto woke up at the same time because of the rooster’s cry. The animals around them had started to shift for a new day, but Naruto felt lazy and asked to cuddle. Sasuke realized that, despite knowing Naruto would be leaving that same morning and the fact that they had been touchy feely the previous night, right now, he did not share the sentiment at all. Or rather, he had no intention of making things more emotionally awkward than they already were, and frankly, he wasn’t in the mood for unnecessary sentimentalism. To his relief, Naruto laughed and merely nodded, even if his disappointment oozed from his aura like steam.
After a while of lying next to each with only their feet touching, and without saying much, they gathered their blankets and few belongings and made their way back to Misato’s house, greeting people that were already up and doing their things outside.

Katsuo and the others were already awake by the time they got there, so Sasuke and Naruto hurried up in washing up and changing clothes so they could help with the morning affairs and making food. Sasuke tried to ignore the penetrating way his son’s clear eyes followed him everywhere, almost unblinkingly, as if the child was trying to see through him, and he couldn’t tell if Katsuo felt curiosity or worry. It was fascinating how sensible Katsuo was to his moods. Sasuke didn’t want him to concern himself with affairs that had nothing to do with him, so he pat the boy’s head and smiled at him reassuringly, not wasting time in giving him simple tasks to do so he could help the rest of the family.

Breakfast was, once more, a loud occurrence, with Mika making a mess and Naruto talking his mouth off as if it was just another day. Misato and Tori seemed disappointed that he’d be leaving soon, so they kept making conversation with him. Sasuke could feel Naruto’s restlessness at leaving, his insecurities, doubts and his sadness, and it didn’t help make him feel any better. Sasuke tried not to let his mood get the best out of him, especially for Katsuo’s sake, but if he had to explain his feelings, he had to admit that he felt lost.

In his heart, he felt relief that Naruto was leaving, but at the same time, it was as if he was, once again, about to lose an important part of himself - a feeling that never failed to be present.

Parting with Naruto was always like this. He had the distinct feeling of not knowing what he wanted and didn’t know how to physically or emotionally respond to it, which made his nerves boil. Sasuke hated that he was second guessing himself, all of a sudden wondering if there had been any point to this meeting at all and if he had somehow been wasting precious time by fucking things up with his difficult attitude.

It was no news to him that these doubts would come to plague his mind now that the anxiety of Naruto’s departure was kicking in, but it still infuriated him. No matter how many times he predicted his own feelings and convinced himself that he wouldn’t be fucked by them in the end, truth was, he always was.

Naruto, expectedly, seemed to be lazing about as he helped clean up the mess from breakfast and getting the house reorganized - it gave Sasuke a strange sense of Deja vu.

“Naruto seems different from before,” Misato commented, as she and Sasuke cleaned the floor of the kitchen on their knees with old rags - they usually cleaned it daily but made the effort of doing a more proper scrubbing once a week. Naruto and Katsu were outside cleaning the dishes and Tori had already left to work on fixing the roof of an old lady’s house. Mika was being changed by her grandmother in her room.

“What do you mean?” Sasuke inquired, not looking up as he soaked his rag in the wooden bucket of water he had beside him.

“Well, he was always good with children, but now he seems different, with a different sort of attitude,” Misato said, thoughtfully. “I guess what I mean to say is that it’s kind of obvious that he has a... different experience now. Just like you.”

It wasn’t difficult to understand what she was getting at, but Sasuke didn’t comment as he twisted his rag as best as he could with a single hand.

“I just...” She interrupted herself to scrub harder a particular spot before proceeding. “It’s obvious
that you guys care a lot about each other, but it’s also obvious that something has happened between you two, and it’s a little unsettling.”

“Naruto and I have different paths now, and everything is different from what it was back then,” Sasuke grunted, proceeding with his task with a little more energy. “He has his life back in his village, I have mine here and… everywhere else. That’s about all there is to it.”

“Sasuke, our village may be secluded, and we may look old fashioned, but we know about Konoha, and we know about you and Naruto and who you both were during the war,” Misato said firmly, now forcing Sasuke to lift his head up to look into her smart almond eyes. “We’re not stupid. We know, to a certain extent, what you’ve done and who you are. We know who Naruto is. Regardless, we took you in because you are a good man and have a good heart that you put in everything you do. But we cannot help but have the feeling that there are still too many secrets that you keep from us.”

Sasuke sighed. “Misato, whatever you think you know about me and Naruto… that’s just the tip of the iceberg, and even if I tried explaining it, I don’t think I could,” he replied, carefully. “There are things that, at this moment, I cannot tell you about. I don’t want you think lowly of me, and I don’t want you to think lowly of Naruto, either.”

“Why would I ever think lowly of either of you?” The woman asked, looking confused.

For a second, Sasuke fondly observed her round, kind features and the way strands of her brown reddish hair had messily gotten loose from the bun at the top of her head. “Simply because,” he said.

She huffed impatiently, frowning. Misato looked so young and small, but so strong at the same time even though she didn’t have a shinobi bone in her body. “You are part of the family now,” she said emphatically. “Naruto is, unfortunately, a visitor, even if we all love him. If you don’t feel comfortable talking about things between the two of you, or about Konoha, I respect that. But know that I will not forgive you if you allow yourself to be hurt, Sasuke. Because I know for a fact that no place is a home unless you want to inhabit it. And where Naruto is, Konoha, is not where you want to be, and if you come from there, I don’t know why that is. But we’re here for you, first and foremost. Alright?”

Sasuke couldn’t help but smile at her, not without a slight feeling of guilt burning him inside. “Thanks, Misato.”

There were so many things Misato didn’t know, not only about Naruto, but about Sasuke, as well. Those people had no idea of who he was as an Uchiha, and no idea of the things he had done because of his clan, but more importantly, they had no idea of the secrets he still kept. To say that he lived a double life was being nice - he lived several different lives. Whether it was in this village, with Taka, Orochimaru, Konoha, Gaara… those were all bits and pieces of himself he had scattered here and there that most people didn’t know about, and it wasn’t as if he had any regrets or felt ashamed, and neither did he desire to keep them a secret for the world.

It was just that he realized it wasn’t something easy to understand by the common people, and he didn’t want to justify himself unless it was strictly necessary. One day, Katsuo and everything else would have to come to light, and all the layers of himself that he had hidden would be exposed to all those surrounding him. It could be no other way if he ever wanted to be completely free.

But that day wasn’t today, and it most certainly wouldn’t be a year from then either.
Sasuke and Katsuo both watched in silence as Naruto leisurely packed his things along with the food that Sasuke and Misato had prepared for his journey home. Naruto seemed to be in no rush even though it was almost lunch time by the time he had everything ready, and while Sasuke thought that the delay was excruciating, he didn’t want to kick the guy out either. It wasn’t as if he wanted Naruto to leave, but if he had to go, he might as well make it quick and painless.

Naruto wanted to take a while to play with Mika and Katsuo, and Sasuke allowed it. Finally, after what felt like endless hours of procrastinating, the man decided to get going. Sasuke felt the sadistic desire to pick on him and ask sarcastically if he missed his family so much that he was in a hurry at that time of the day but decided against it and shut his mouth.

Unlike their first joined departure from the village, there wasn’t a huge agglomerate of villagers waiting to see Naruto off. Some left their houses as they noticed him leaving, others working outside made their way to him, and children that were playing ran to him to hug him. All of this delayed his departure. Naruto could only smile hesitantly as people told him to return soon.

After a while, Katsuo grabbed Naruto’s hand, and together with Sasuke, they both escorted him to the outskirts of the village. The small walk seemed to last for ages.

“You’re going to get good care of your dad so he doesn’t misbehave,” Naruto was saying to Katsuo, in a falsely joyous mood. “And you have to become strong soon so I can teach you some shinobi moves the next time we’re together, yeah?”

Behind them, Sasuke saw Katsuo nodding excitedly. Naruto flashed the boy a brilliant smile, but it was obvious that it was nothing but a mask - Sasuke could feel his deep sadness at having to leave without knowing what the next few months would look like.

After a while, the three finally stopped.

A sick feeling made Sasuke’s stomach churn at seeing his son lift his arms towards Naruto in a request for a hug. With a smile, Naruto put on a knee on the ground and put his arms around the child before pressing a small kiss to his cheek. If before Sasuke had had any doubts that Katsuo liked Naruto, they disappeared with this, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about it.

Katsuo then made his way to Sasuke as Naruto straightened up, looking at them without a trace of a smile now. Sasuke caressed Katsuo’s silvery hair shortly. “Wait here a moment while I say goodbye to Naruto, okay?”

At Katsuo’s nod, Sasuke walked the few steps that brought him close to his friend, the sound of his sandaled feet crushing the leaves and sticks beneath them almost deafening, horribly upsetting for some reason, and yet, Sasuke’s calm expression remained unchanged.

“I guess it’s no use asking when I’ll be seeing you again?” Naruto said quietly, once they were standing in front of each other.

“I was in Konoha just a few days ago, Naruto; I won’t be returning anytime soon,” Sasuke replied, in an equally low voice. “I’m going to be spending some time here, and then I’ll get back on the road. Either way, you keep doing you and aiming for what you want.”

“You’ll write, though, won’t you?” Naruto asked hopefully, both his hands clutching the straps of his backpack. “To let me know what you’re up to? And to let me know if you need anything. I swear I’ll come to you no matter what.”

“Sure,” Sasuke said, with a nod. Then, he formally extended his hand towards the man. “Take care
of yourself, Naruto.”

Naruto eyed the hand as if it were a foreign artefact he’d never seen in his life as he seemed to ponder what to do with it. “Sasuke, you are my best friend, but you are also my lover,” he ended up saying solemnly, finally grabbing the hand offered in his and giving it a small shake. “I will wait for you for as long as I have to if that is what you want. Even if you are not mine to own, I am a lover to you, too. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“If in the future I couldn’t take you as my lover anymore,” Sasuke started, unable to stop the words from escaping his mouth and squeezing the hand back meaningfully. “Would you still keep the promise you made? Would you still want to leave everything and be with me to the very end?”

Naruto’s blue eyes rolled up to meet his but his expression didn’t change. “You are you, and will always be you,” he ended up saying, softly. “Even if I want things to be different, nothing can replace that, Sasuke, whether we’re lovers or just friends. Nothing can replace you. Even if, someday, you find someone else. What I need from you goes way beyond any of these labels and far surpasses my whims. I understand that now. And it’s fucked up, and it hurts, but it’s okay.” He took a moment to take in Sasuke’s features. “As long as we’re together, it’ll be okay.”

Sasuke bit his lower lip hard and inhaled sharply. “We’ll see when the time comes.”

“Yeah, I suppose we will.” Naruto leaned in and pressed a sheepish kiss to Sasuke’s forehead. Then, he leaned away and slowly released Sasuke’s hand. “It was nice being with you, and I’m glad I met Katsuo. Take care of yourself. I’ll see you soon, bastard.”

With a lump inside his throat, Sasuke could only nod. There was no escaping the onslaught of affection and sadness that Naruto pushed his way through their bond, and yet, the unfaltering strength of his resolution was astounding, too.

Sasuke couldn’t predict the future, but through their shared feelings, he could tell that Naruto’s words were as sincere and consistent as they could be in his determination.

In times like these, when Sasuke wanted so badly to be able to push away the lust and love in their relationship, he also wondered if it was even possible that a day would come when he would be able to look at Naruto as merely a friend, a brother and a kindred spirit and not hunger for the deeper intimacy. In times like these, it seemed impossible for a day to come when he wouldn’t want to forget himself, his morals and his pride to completely give in to the unique decadence of the animalistic want that was theirs alone. Sasuke so desperately wanted it all to stop, and yet, part of him clung to something he knew he wouldn’t be able to get anywhere else in this lifetime - maybe not even in the following ones.

Maybe feeling this way was why it was so hard for Naruto himself to let go of the concept of ‘lovers’. Maybe anything less than that would simply not allow them to live and cope.

With one final deep breath, Naruto turned around and started walking away, leaving a slightly disgruntled Sasuke watching him disappear with a heavy weight in his chest that took his breath away.

How many more times would they have to repeat this cycle before it was over? How many times would they be forced to part ways not knowing when they’d see each other and under which conditions?

How many more times would Sasuke be forced to fight himself, over and over again?
Swallowing a pained groan, Sasuke too breathed deeply before turning around and making his way towards his waiting son. “Let’s go home, Katsu,” he muttered, feeling tired and morose, but still trying his best to not to show it. He put his hand on Katsuo’s shoulder and the boy looked inquisitively up at him. “Don’t be sad, I’m sure Naruto will come visit us sooner than we…”

But Sasuke’s voice got stuck in his throat as his eyes found Katsuo’s, and for a moment, it felt as though the ground had vanished from underneath his feet.

It wasn’t Katsuo’s pearly eye colour that meet his gaze - it was the deep, vibrant blue of Naruto’s.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

I swear I wanted to write something kinky, but Sasuke was just NOT cooperating. I wrote about three samples of the start of this chapter with the smut in mind, and it was so, but so difficult for him to get into the right state of mind for sexual intimacy that I had to change things and give it another direction, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to write this chapter at all. Please don’t kill me! I promise it won’t be this way forever between Sasuke and Naruto, but their relationship is… complicated. I don’t think I could write it any different if I tried, though. They love each other so much and want to reach out to each other, but their personalities are so different, as is what moves them.

The next few chapters will probably have several time skips and several different things, so I’m excited about it! This story is finally somehow reaching the beginning of the end, even though there’s still a bit to go. Katsuo is growing and developing, and I’m so happy to be exploring that as well.

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter enough. Please don’t forget to leave a comment, it means a lot to me to know if you enjoy this story and still want to read more of it.

Also, I’m always happy to know if you guys have a certain scene you’d like to see or if you have any story headcanons for the future! I can’t promise to fulfil them, but you’ll never know ;)

Thank you for reading, and see ya next time!
Making his way to Ichiraku Ramen at the end of the day, Iruka felt happy and more than a little excited - after all, it had been a while since he’d spent some time with his former student.

Ever since Naruto had gotten married things had been hectic for him, what with Hinata’s pregnancy and them getting their lives together. With Boruto’s birth, Naruto seemed to have grown very attached to giving it his all at work, barely having a minute to spare for social outings, even when he was in Konoha and not on missions.

It wasn’t as though Iruka didn’t understand this. All his former students were now adults, successful, married and, most of them, already parents. Life just kept putting more and more surprises in everybody’s way, and this was just the beginning of a new journey for all of them, as well as the start of a new era - a new generation was born.

Iruka found this to be very exciting, but it also made him feel unavoidably nostalgic, because it seemed like it had been just yesterday that he had taught his first class of snotty, loud kid. Sometimes, he felt like he wanted to go back in time, so he could return to those days when he was younger and more energetic, but often reminded himself that he had new students now, and that this joy of seeing them all grow up and becoming good people wasn’t over yet. He felt nothing but pride at this point, though.

The sun was setting by the time he arrived at Ichiraku, and as soon as Iruka approached it, he could see the orange and black of Naruto’s outfit peeking from under the familiar blinds. He seemed to be the only person there, which was a relief for Iruka, since it gave them a little more privacy.

Pushing the draping aside, Iruka found Naruto sitting at the counter with a thick glass of half-drunk beer already resting in front of him, and he seemed to be talking to the owner, Teuchi-san, with a small smile on his lips as the older man prepared something on the other side.

A deep emotion tightened around Iruka’s heart - how Naruto had grown. He could still envision the small boy sitting in one those high stools, being loud and boisterous as he pretended that the world wasn’t a cruel place and that he didn’t feel lonely.

“Naruto!” Iruka greeted with a small smile, as he moved to sit on the stool by the young man’s left.

“Iruka-sensei! Welcome!” Naruto greeted back, flashing him such a huge grin his blue eyes seemed
to glint. Naruto patted his back with familiarity. “How have you been doing? Any exciting stuff happening in your life?”

“Unfortunately, I have nothing exciting to tell you,” Iruka said with an embarrassed chuckle. “For me, teaching is all the excitement I need.”

“Ahaha, you sound like a grandpa!” Naruto teased, moving his hand to Iruka’s shoulder and giving it a healthy squeeze. Then, he turned to Teuchi-san. “Old man, two bowls of the usual, for starters. This one is on me!”

Naruto’s hand left Iruka’s shoulder to grab for the glass of beer. With a small smile, Iruka watched him down the rest of the beverage in a few swigs. “Someone is in a good mood,” he commented gently.

Naruto still smiled. “Well, I just missed hanging out with you!”

“The feeling is mutual,” Iruka replied, with a polite nod. “So, I heard you’ve been taking personal leave days away from the village from time to time. You’ve been working hard, too. It’s been a while since I’ve lain my eyes on you!”

“Ah, yeah,” Naruto mumbled, his smile diminishing while he rubbed at the back of his head - a gesture Iruka recognized as one of nervousness (and, sometimes, embarrassment or shame). The fact that he didn’t say anything further was immediately strange.

“Is Hinata alright with that?” Iruka pressed on, carefully. “I mean, she has to stay with the baby and everything.”

Naruto, who always looked so deeply into people’s eyes, now lowered them as he seemed suddenly very interested in a flaw in the wood of the counter as he shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, she’s cool with it.”

The short reply had the teacher immediately on alert. The mood seemed to have changed rapidly from happy casual to tense and cautious, and Iruka couldn’t really understand why - it felt foreign.

“May I ask where you go all by yourself?” he inquired, as casually as he possibly could since, somehow, he felt like they had, for some reason, entered shaky grounds.

Running the tip of a finger over said slash on the counter, Naruto bit on his lower lip and visibly flinched. He seemed to hesitate for a few seconds before deciding to reply. “Yeah, I… go meet up with Sasuke.”

Well, if Iruka had to be honest, that wasn’t exactly an answer he’d been expecting, but he supposed it made sense. Sort of. Now that he thought about it, wasn’t Sasuke married to Sakura? Couldn’t he and Naruto just meet when he returned to Konoha? There didn’t seem to be any reasonable reason as to why Naruto would have to actively leave the village to meet up with him, but the issue was obviously sensitive for Naruto, so Iruka figured he had to be tactful.

“I see,” Iruka muttered. “Is Hokage-sama giving you many missions together?”

Again, Naruto took a while to reply, taking his time chewing on his lower lip. Then, he took a deep breath. “Not really… I just… to be honest, it’s really difficult for me to have him away for so long,” he started, speaking at lightning speed. “He’s always away and doing his thing and working so hard and he has all these ideals and great plans for the future and the shinobi world.” Finally, he looked at Iruka, his eyes wide and worried. “In a way I suppose I… feel like I should’ve been by his side to make it happen. I feel like I should help him as much as I can you know? But there is little I
can do right now, so I do whatever I can. But I feel so restless about it I don’t really know what to do!”

So, there had been a reason for Naruto to schedule their meeting that day, Iruka realized. The young man wanted to vent, needed to talk and he was trying to tell him something; but what, exactly? It was obviously something related to Sasuke, but his worries seemed pointless now. Weren’t those two sorts of working together, now? Weren’t they finally in tune with their ideals and fighting for the same thing - world peace - in their own individual ways?

And yet, there was more to it, he could tell.

“Oh, you look distressed,” Iruka noticed. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Ah…” Naruto scratched his head more roughly this time as he grunted, messing up his already unruly hair even more. “I’m not sure. Maybe I really do? I just don’t know if I should.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Iruka assured him, using his gentlest voice.

Naruto seemed thoughtful, staring at Iruka as if quickly assessing if he should say what was on his mind or dismiss it entirely. “Have you ever dreamed about how your perfect life would be?” he then asked, choosing the first option. “You design this complex map of a path that you want to follow and are sure is the right one, but when you walk that path you realize that, even though it’s not the wrong one, maybe a different one would’ve been the right one, too?”

Because Naruto wasn’t one to be philosophical, Iruka was taken aback by the question. After all, Naruto wasn’t one to question his life choices, and that was what he was alluding to right now. “I suppose it can happen,” Iruka commented with a nod. “Some paths are right, and some are wrong, but of course it’s possible for several paths to be the right ones. It’s not like the gods have given us free will so our fates would be black and white and written in stone.”

“Exactly!” Naruto said, straightening up emphatically, and now that he knew Iruka wasn’t going to make all the wrong questions, he seemed much more prone to talking. “I just… I’ve achieved so much throughout the years, Iruka-sensei, that I’m proud of myself and really want to take advantage of that and keep pushing forward, to become Hokage and the person I always wanted to be. I have a family, love, and worldwide recognition, you know?”

“But?” Iruka pressed.

Naruto ‘tsked’ as his body seemed to slump once more.

“I didn’t think I’d ever feel this… lonely… having so much,” he admitted. “I felt that way for so long before the war, when I was fighting to bring Sasuke back and trying to save him and everyone else. I thought that I would get some form of peace and completion once I achieved all my purposes, so I kept doing what I thought should be done.”

“But you didn’t?” Iruka asked, not without feeling a bit surprised. Naruto had accomplished so much in his life so far - most of his dreams having come true already - that it seemed almost impossible that, after everything, he’d feel something as familiar to him as loneliness. Loneliness was something he had felt as a child, without friends or family or a caring hand. Now, he had all of that and more. He was more fulfilled than most men older than him ever would be, and he was on his way to becoming Hokage; how was it possible that he still felt lonely?

Naruto admitting it made Iruka feel unavoidably sad, and for some reason, he had a bad feeling about where this was going.
Naruto tensed once more, looking at Iruka with a bit of fear. “Do you think I’m a bad person for feeling like this?”

“No, of course I don’t,” Iruka muttered, placing a hand on Naruto’s forearm reassuringly. “I’m just trying to understand if you’re telling me you found an alternative path that wouldn’t make you feel this way? That doesn’t make you feel lonely, I mean?”

“I… I think I have,” Naruto said, in a low voice, his expression turning strangely sour unexpectedly. “But now it’s too late to take it. Because I… simply cannot turn things around like that at this point. I can’t take that path when I’m too far down a different one already.”

“Does this different path involve Sasuke in any way?”

Iruka didn’t know what had possessed him to ask this so bluntly, but he figured that, given how the conversation had started with Sasuke’s name on it, this had to have something to do with Sasuke and Sasuke’s own path.

Was Naruto… having regrets at this point? Why, when he’d done everything right with Sasuke and with himself? Why now, that he had everything he’d ever dreamed of?

To his surprise, Naruto looked away from him again, crimson coloring his cheeks. “It involves him in every possible way, Iruka-sensei,” Naruto admitted, almost inaudibly.

For a second, Iruka could swear that he saw longing in Naruto’s features, but this quickly changed to an almost innocent sadness.

“Naruto…” he whispered, concerned. “Are you…?”

“Bah, let’s not cry over spilled milk!” Naruto interrupted loudly, with a joyfulness that seemed far too exaggerated. “Everything is fine, and it is what it is! Let’s drink! Old man, sake for two! Me and Sensei here have a lot of catching up to do!” He beamed at Iruka, who was so shocked by the sudden change of demeanor he could do nothing but smile nervously.

So, Naruto wasn’t ready to talk about… whatever it was that he had wanted to talk about, and Iruka wouldn’t pry because they were adults and Naruto had every right to keep his own secrets. However, Naruto had always been open with him, had always told him what was in his heart, and right now, for him to have held back like this it could only mean that the issue was serious - very serious.

Naruto was hurting, and he needed someone to know it. But why was he hurting? Had Sasuke hurt him? But hadn’t Naruto mentioned that this other path that could be the right one involved Sasuke?

What was Naruto trying to say that Iruka couldn’t grasp? That he would much rather be travelling with Sasuke than to live the life he had now?

The thought made Iruka’s stomach churn with horror, and all he could do was watch Naruto as the other man spoke of mundane things he had tuned out already. No, for sure, it couldn’t be. This life he led was everything Naruto had ever wanted, he wouldn’t trade it for anything, least of all for a life of wandering never-ending days like Sasuke’s. That made no sense whatsoever.

But… Sasuke remained Naruto’s best friend to this very day, and for reasons Iruka understood only to a certain point, because the Uchiha boy had certainly done horrible things to him. However, to Naruto, the good things Sasuke had given him had been enough to forgive and forget, it seemed, and to Naruto, Sasuke was his number one friend and rival - would always be -, and everyone else just had to suck it up and accept it. Those two had always had a strange relationship, and a way of
communicating with each other that was foreign to others.

Everyone knew that ever since the war, those two had made up and become closer. Sasuke was a free man, fighting to be respected once more, but now he and Naruto led different lives, so there was no reason as to why whatever Sasuke did with his own life would make any difference to Naruto if the Uchiha was alive and well.

Or was there?

Maybe Sasuke’s ideals (that no-one knew anything about) were a strong match for Naruto’s? Had Sasuke somehow managed to convince Naruto that his life choices paled in comparison to Sasuke’s? That there were other ways to be happy other than the one Naruto had chosen?

But why? What was Sasuke’s purpose with this? Hadn’t Sasuke’s choices been like Naruto’s? Hadn’t he gotten married and become a father? Wasn’t he struggling to get his life together, so he could one day become an active citizen of Konoha and be home permanently with his wife and child?

Another path… Iruka mused. A path that had everything to do with Sasuke… a path very different from this one, that denied everything Naruto thought he ever wanted…

A path far away from everything else.

A path leading to Sasuke.

In a flash, the brief expression of longing in Naruto’s features appeared in Iruka’s mind and he almost gasped before managing to control himself.

And then, he understood.

It was a lonely road, the one Naruto wished he could take, or so it seemed to Iruka. However, to Naruto himself, it gave him everything his life in Konoha couldn’t, simply because Uchiha Sasuke was in it, and it was such a simple, humble desire that it was almost offending.

Iruka could only stare at Naruto’s smiling face as he held his breath. Teuchi-san, placed a bottle of sake and two tiny cups in front of them.

That Naruto wished he could turn back time and give everything up to be out there with Sasuke seemed preposterous and unreal. Iruka couldn’t believe it, but he didn’t have the audacity to ask for a confirmation of Naruto’s reasoning simply because it wasn’t his business, and it wasn’t something he could just easily talk about with other people around. If this was what was tormenting Naruto, then the man had good reasons not to elaborate.

It was very serious indeed, and while Iruka was sure Naruto had purposely told him enough information for him to draw his conclusions, he didn’t feel like it was his place to demand more.

Who exactly, was Uchiha Sasuke? What was he? What had he done to Naruto, what had he given him that was important enough for Naruto to have such serious and deep convictions towards him? What kind of man could be this manipulative, this poisoning, especially after everything he had put Naruto through?

Uchiha Sasuke had always been a mystery, even to him, his teacher.

Iruka felt anger boiling suddenly inside him, a white rage making his hands tense, which caused the hand holding Naruto’s forearm to tighten painfully around the limb. Naruto went quiet at feeling it.
“Iruka-sensei?” he called out worriedly at seeing Iruka’s face becoming feral.

But then, it struck him. It was so obvious that he didn’t understand why he hadn’t come to this conclusion at first. Naruto was a loving man, and he was dumb and oblivious in many things, but he wasn’t stupid when it came to his own heart. If Sasuke hated him or had nothing positive to give back, Naruto wouldn’t turn his back on him, but he wouldn’t drag himself after him either. Sasuke did have something Naruto wanted ferociously - or maybe, needed? - and this was something that clearly no-one else could offer in equal measure.

And even if Iruka didn’t know how or didn’t understand it - for Naruto it was everything.

Sasuke, lonely and hurt as he had been in his life, loved Naruto, and for Naruto, who had craved love just as strongly, wanted to absorb every drop of it he could.

Sasuke wasn’t like Naruto - hate and contempt came easier than love to him, (or so Iruka thought) and no-one understood his feelings or how they worked. However, Naruto did - always had - and this was why Sasuke had allowed himself to reach out and be saved.

This type of love… Iruka could only imagine how different it had to be from a ‘normal’ type of ‘love’ for it to make such a huge difference for both.

With this in mind, his heart skipped a beat before becoming unbearably heavy as he realized that Naruto carried a far too heavy burden.

What would people say? How could Naruto ever express himself openly about this without being submitted to judgement? Was this why he had chosen a path so opposing to the one he desired - so no-one would know regardless of what he did?

He understood what was going on. For a moment, he felt sorry for Sasuke, too. Iruka knew nothing, but he now knew enough.

“It’s his heart, isn’t it?” Iruka asked unexpectedly and carefully in a whisper that only Naruto could hear. Blue eyes widened as Naruto’s chin fell slightly. “To you, it’s different from others, isn’t it? Hinata’s, Sakura’s… And you want it. You want his heart.”

Naruto’s mouth closed, and he seemed to understand what Iruka was saying and why. Relief washed over his features as a small, thankful smile graced his lips in an utterly sad but beautiful way. “His heart is not his, Iruka-sensei,” he said, almost sweetly, in an equally low voice. “I have it. Just as my own isn’t mine anymore. That’s why they never worked properly when they’re not together, you see. Because bodies and hearts need to be together, so they can function as one.”

And this was all Iruka needed to be sure, and yet, this didn’t ease his mind at all.

In fact, the bad feeling was still there.

How were they going to fix this? What could he do to help? Was it even his place to meddle in? Did Naruto even want him to?

Naruto just wanted to be honest and tell him things as they were but telling him the truth behind it all was too much. In all honesty, Iruka was curious, and yet, didn’t know if he even wanted to know.

All he could do was be there, and make sure Naruto knew he could count on him.

But he didn’t like it. He couldn’t possibly imagine where this was going, and the way things were, it could only lead to a painful ending.
What was Sasuke’s take on this? Naruto seemed so sure that it was mutual, whatever it was. Had they talked about this or did they simply know? Had they acted upon it?

The thought was terrifying. Naruto had alluded to a physical proximity, so Iruka guessed it wasn’t just platonic. It could be just a mention of a desire for more though, but…

If they had responded to these feelings at some point, then things were not good at all. If they hadn’t… what was the chance that they would, someday? And what would it lead to, what would become of their lives, their families?

Would Naruto close his mouth with Sasuke’s heart in his hands and live his whole life like this, or would he eventually take a leap of faith? And Sasuke? What was he even thinking?

Iruka didn’t have the guts to ask. Naruto would tell him if he wanted to, but it wouldn’t be today, nor tomorrow, and maybe not even ten years from then.

However, Iruka would love Naruto no less for this, and would be there for him no matter what.

With a firm nod that he made sure offered silent comprehension, compassion and support, he gave Naruto’s arm one final squeeze before letting go. “Let’s drink and catch up, shall we?” he said, with a fatherly smile. “I do have some gossip I want to share with you.”

By Naruto’s smile, this was the response he had been looking for.

000

The Hokage didn’t seem surprised to see him. “Iruka-sensei,” Kakashi said pleasantly from behind his desk - and surrounding pile of papers. “To what do I owe this visit?”

“Hokage-sama,” Iruka greeted, with a polite bow. “Thank you for having me.”

“Don’t be so formal; you’ll make me uncomfortable,” Kakashi said, with a dismissive gesture. “We’re still shinobi comrades, and fellow teachers.”

Iruka smiled hesitantly. “Yes, well… it’s rather hard being informal when we haven’t spoken in a while,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck a little awkwardly before clearing his throat. “There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Go ahead, I’m all ears,” Kakashi encouraged.

“I was wondering if you think it’s reasonable to keep Uchiha Sasuke away from Konoha for such long periods of time,” Iruka started, not wanting to waste time beating around the bush. “I’m sure there must be some political reasons for that considering what he’s done in the past, but it has been a while since the war.”

Kakashi’s visible eyebrow rose. “Is there any reason why you’re approaching me on this particular subject?”

“I was with Naruto a couple of days ago, and he seemed… disheartened,” Iruka confessed, not really wanting to give anything away. “Sasuke has been a strong presence in his life for a long time now, both for positive and negative reasons. They have finally managed to find some common ground between them, and yet, they are distant and barely able to have a significant influence on each other at this point.”

“I beg to differ,” Kakashi disagreed easily. “I think that, even if Sasuke is absent, those two still
influence each other more than anyone else. Sasuke’s trust in Naruto is enormous, and I’ve been witness to that.”

“Yes, but they are not present in each other’s lives after all the things they had ambitioned to do together,” Iruka insisted. “I’m worried about Naruto’s motivations without Sasuke around, Kakashi-san, and I’m worried if Sasuke’s constant absence will be detrimental to his own reputation inside the village once he decides to return for good.”

“Forgive me, but I have the feeling that you’re worried about something else, as well.”

Kakashi was as perceptive as always, and Iruka didn’t know if he should feel glad or upset.

Iruka wanted to look after Naruto, but he didn’t know how he could do it at this point. Naruto missed Sasuke, that much was obvious, but he was married. Having Sasuke away forced Naruto himself away, and that was detrimental to his marriage to Hinata. However, having Sasuke around could have the same effect, so it was a double-edged sword. While Iruka didn’t doubt Naruto’s love for his wife and son, he now also knew Naruto would be happier if Sasuke was closer. Maybe things were different from what Iruka thought, and maybe if Naruto and Sasuke were more in contact, things would cool down and they could live their lives with their families as they were supposed to. Or maybe this was all just wishful thinking, but Iruka seriously didn’t know what to do, or what was better. Far from him to advise Naruto to leave his family behind and go to Sasuke - that would be detrimental, and he wasn’t that type of man. Naruto needed to understand himself, his heart, and make a choice. Until then, though, the final decision wasn’t up to Iruka.

Still, he wanted to do something to make Naruto feel happier, less heavy.

“Ah, no…” Iruka muttered, feeling himself blush in frustration. “I just don’t want Naruto to feel lost, I suppose. I sort of feel like his priorities might be a little all over the place now.”

Good, he had been cleverly vague.

“Well, he certainly has been working himself to the bone for a good while now,” Kakashi commented, joining his hands in front of his face. “But I suppose he wants to become Hokage as quickly as possible. Surely he has his own reasons.” Kakashi assessed him, and for a moment, it looked as if he was looking through him, reading Iruka’s mind. “I understand what you mean, Iruka-sensei, I truly do. But Sasuke’s situation is a delicate one. Even if he is a war hero, some of his past misdeeds haven’t been forgotten, and the council insists that he proves himself worthy of this village once more. His loyalty is constantly being put to the test with every mission assigned, and trust me, he leads a hard life. Even if he wanted to return and go back to being an active shinobi of Konoha, worthy of working for his titles, right now, it would put him in a worse position than he is.”

“That’s terrible,” Iruka said, defeated. “I mean, he just got married, and he has a child, too…”

Kakashi sighed. “Iruka-sensei, this is what you need to understand about Uchiha Sasuke,” he said, seriously. “He is not unhappy about this arrangement. Sasuke travels a lot and does a lot of research of his own accord. The work he delivers is something we are very pleased with, and he enjoys his life as it is. In fact, I dare say that he prefers to live this way than to live in Konoha.”

“But… if Naruto is aware of this then it must surely sadden him…” Iruka mumbled. “And Sakura, too…”

“Well, that’s a given,” Kakashi said, with an eye roll. “But I know at least Naruto and Sasuke have their own understanding, even in their own distinct paths. Don’t ever doubt that this sort of arrangement has been mutually accepted between them, one way or the other. It may not please
Naruto, but that is a different story altogether.” Kakashi offered Iruka a smile behind his mask, and one that told him the Hokage knew of things he probably shouldn’t. “I advise you to not think too deeply about it, my friend, because it’ll only give you headaches. It is best to leave those two alone.”

“It already gives me headaches!” Iruka grunted, not understanding how this could be so easily dismissed. “Because Naruto has said some things that have surprised me. He’s…” ‘Enchanted’ or ‘obsessed’ sounded like correct words to use, but Iruka swallowed them back down. “I still feel like I’m missing something important, somehow, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

How much blunter could he be without being obvious he couldn’t know, but he had to try.

“That’s because you probably are,” Kakashi said easily. “No matter how hard you try, the pieces of that puzzle will not fit for the time being, Iruka-sensei. Those two are too hard of a riddle to solve, but they can handle it. It’s no use worrying for nothing.”

Iruka couldn’t feel like this, no matter how hard he tried. His conversation with Naruto had kept him up for days and he couldn’t help but feel like Naruto and Sasuke were like winds that had no direction and kept clashing helplessly, creating chaos. He didn’t want to see what the chaos would turn to.

“What do you think will happen when they do?” Iruka asked, tiredly. “What do you think happens when they ‘handle it’? I somehow have the feeling that things will take a complete turn at some point. I’m just worried that it’ll be for the worse.”

“Well, I suppose we’ll have to wait and see,” Kakashi said, with a relaxed shrug of his shoulders. “Besides… do we really have the right to have a say on what they consider to be better or worse for themselves? Even if we don’t understand it, or comprehend it, in the end, only they know what’s best for them. It may not be conventional, but if it works for them, then that’s all there is to it. They’re adults now, Iruka-sensei, and don’t need people to meddle in their lives and touch things they’re not supposed to. Sometimes it can only make things worse.”

The Hokage’s words came as a slap and sounded like a reprimand, which made Iruka feel childish and helpless. Maybe he was worrying too much, but he couldn’t help it. It wasn’t just about Naruto and Sasuke, but about Hinata, Sakura and the children involved, as well. He just wanted things to be easier for all of them, but maybe he was just being paranoid.

Maybe he was misunderstanding everything. Some types of ‘love’ just existed and weren’t supposed to be questioned. Whatever was happening between Naruto and Sasuke could have repercussions or not, but regardless, whatever needed to happen would happen because that’s how things worked, and Iruka would be powerless to stop it.

Nevertheless, he wished he could. He wished he could be able to fix everything, so no-one would get hurt.

But, as Kakashi had said, that was not up to him.

“I suppose… you’re right,” he ended up saying. “I’m sorry for bothering you with this.”

“Don’t worry, you are always welcome to come talk to me, Sensei,” Kakashi said, pleasantly.

With a final bow and a heavy heart, Iruka turned around and left.

Sasuke’s lips remained tight, his posture rigid and firm. If he had two arms, he would’ve crossed
them over his chest, but as it was he just stood there stiffly as Orochimaru examined his son.

If Sasuke had to be honest with himself, he was very surprised that the boy was so calm, obediently allowing the older man to observe him, touch him and take his blood. It sort of irked Sasuke that he’d had to go to his old mentor of all people, but with Katsuo’s existence in his life being a secret, he couldn’t exactly go to random doctors out there, not to mention that the child wasn’t an ordinary human being, and Orochimaru had created him after all.

Sasuke had no idea if Katsuo even had any kind of resentment towards Orochimaru - or any feelings for the man at all - but then again, how can one have resentment towards the only life he’d known up until then? Before Sasuke, Orochimaru’s lab and that dark, empty life as an experiment had been all Katsuo had known. Maybe someday he’d come to realize the hell he had been in, but Sasuke sincerely wished that he wouldn’t.

Katsuo was sitting on a hammock with his legs dangling happily from over the edge of it, his small mouth opened wide as Orochimaru checked his throat with a thin flashlight.

Many days had passed during which he had worn the color of Naruto’s bright blue eyes as his, and it had upset Sasuke for reasons he didn’t want to explore. Then, Katsuo’s eyes had suddenly started to reflect colors they saw as fast as the speed of light, and it was more than haunting. Whether he was looking at fire, leaves, flowers to Sasuke’s own eyes, the boy’s orbs would instantly reflect the exact same hues. Sasuke had no idea if this was supposed to be normal or not, so despite Katsuo looking and acting healthy, he was worried, which ultimately led him to decide to take his son to Orochimaru for a checkup, after roughly a year had passed since adopting him.

“Well, everything seems to be fine with him,” Orochimaru said, straightening up and turning the flashlight off. “I need to look at his blood samples, but from a superficial examination, he is doing fine. I’m actually impressed at how well he’s developed, I wasn’t even expecting him to survive the first few days outside of my laboratory.”

“He’s stronger than you thought,” Sasuke said dryly. “You didn’t give him enough credit. Or rather, you didn’t nourish him the way you should for him to develop properly.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Orochimaru admitted with a smirk before looking at Katsuo. “I almost feel sorry that I allowed you to take him.”

Inhaling sharply, Sasuke tried not to tense at that. “What about his eyes? And his voice? Is it normal that he doesn’t make a sound?”

Orochimaru put a hand over Katsuo’s head, and if one didn’t know him, the gesture would almost be considered affectionate. “Sasuke-kun, he was created to be a chameleon,” the man said smoothly. “Genetically, he supposedly has the superior ability to change hair and eye color, as well as the pigmentation of his skin. Since he is an underdeveloped child according to the standards I had hoped for him, what’s happening with his eye color is just an early and uncontrolled manifestation of this same ability. If he ever gains control of his chakra, he will be able to do all of this at will and even change his facial features if he wants.”

This time, Sasuke did feel his muscles stiffen. “But if that manifests itself in an uncontrolled way, it could be painful and even damaging,” he commented, trying to keep worry from his voice.

“That is very likely, but while it may be easy for him to change his eye and hair color, I doubt his body will automatically want to change shape in a random fashion anytime soon,” Orochimaru explained with a new, knowing smile that was unnerving. “I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you. He is a defective specimen, so I’m sure the odds of him ever developing the skills I had planned
for him are low.”

Unsure whether to feel relieved or offended, Sasuke heaved a sigh. “What about his voice? Will he ever be able to speak?”

“There is nothing wrong with his vocal chords that I can see, I’m sure it’s just a matter of him not understanding how the process of making noises work, since he wasn’t stimulated as a normal child would be,” Orochimaru said, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, and as if he hadn’t been the one to blame for the fact. “He might come to figure it out eventually, but as you can imagine, it will probably be painful, and his voice might not come out clear for a while.”

The man’s smile became sweet in a nasty, almost condescending way. “If you’re struggling to understand him, I strongly suggest you teach him some form of sign language. After all, he might, or might not, be able to speak, so it would be important for him to be able to express himself, otherwise his intellectual growth and his maturity might be held back.”

Sasuke understood that the reason why Orochimaru sounded condescending was simply because it was such a simple suggestion anyone would be able to think about it. For a second there, Sasuke berated himself for not having thought of it sooner - he was supposed to be an intelligent man, after all.

Seeing Sasuke’s facial expression turn to one of obvious self-frustration, Orochimaru smirked once more. “Well, I shall take a look at his blood and urine samples, and see if I can get him some vitamins,” he announced, in his almost deceivingly charming, professional way. “The two of you are free to roam about and get something to eat, if you want. Make yourselves at home.”

With one last nasty smirk at Sasuke and Katsuo, Orochimaru gathered his samples and left the laboratory without a word. Despite himself, Sasuke had to release the breath he had been holding unknowingly and force himself to relax before making his way to Katsuo, who was already putting his t-shirt back on. “You alright?” Sasuke asked, putting his hand on the child’s knee.

With a simple nod, Katsuo lifted his small hand and gave him a thumbs up, a small, crooked smile gracing his thin lips. His eyes were now of a deep grey hue - a reflection of Sasuke’s.

Sasuke all but had to roll his eyes. For sure, that gestures had to have been taught by that dumbass Naruto.

000

Naruto was biting on his lower lip hard as a stupid, big assed grin graced his features. Avidly, he ran his eyes over Sasuke’s words for the third time, clutching the piece of scroll in his shaky hands.

It was the stupidest thing, but he was over the moon with joy - Uchiha Sasuke had reached out to him in need for help, and this was such a rare occurrence that he could be nothing but happy.

Not Gaara, or Taka, but him.

Apparently, Sasuke needed himself and Katsuo to be taught sign language but had absolutely no idea how to accomplish it without exposing the boy. Sasuke wanted Katsuo to be able to express himself freely and communicate with him, and Naruto thought that it was great idea, but understood Sasuke’s struggle - after all, Sasuke only had one hand, and learning sign language by himself to teach it to Katsuo perfectly would be impossible.

And this where Naruto would intervene and save the day. He could barely believe that his friend would go to him of all people for help considering his prideful nature, but he knew this was his
chance to show Sasuke how reliable he could be and do something for Katsuo that would have a
positive impact in the relationship between the three of them.

He would not let Sasuke down.

**A FEW MONTHS LATER**

Sasuke felt restless that afternoon as he knocked on the door of his (supposed) house. He should
have remembered to get a copy of the keys when he and Sakura had purchased it, but it wasn’t like
Sasuke dropped by enough to need them, anyway.

His eyes quickly roamed the outside of the house, noticing that it looked… *slightly* different from
what he recalled. Mainly, he could not ignore the fans representing the Uchiha symbol so evidently
painted on either side of the door for everyone to see. It was a fine work of art, he’d give Sakura that,
but he couldn’t help but feel like it was completely and utterly unnecessary.

For a moment he considered talking to Sakura about it and tell her that this was a little over the top.
Sasuke didn’t belong to Konoha, and Konoha had slaughtered the Uchiha clan. Regardless of the
people’s knowledge (or lack of it thereof) about the truth behind his clan’s massacre, as far as Sasuke
was concerned, the ‘Uchiha’ name and crest had no business being advertised in that place. As an
Uchiha, Sasuke had his own path now, and his family name had a different meaning to him these
days than it did a few years previously.

However, Sarada was an Uchiha, part of the village, and his heir by blood. When it came down to it,
Sasuke realized that he didn’t particularly care if his family symbol was exposed like that - it just
didn’t matter to him. If it helped his daughter get some respect and some form of recognition, then so
be it. He wasn’t thrilled about it, but he wasn’t terribly offended, either.

Although, he was sure that this was not the reason why Sakura had done this. But then again, maybe
he was thinking too lowly of her. Frowning, he berated himself for always assuming the worst.

Even back then when they had gotten married and Sasuke had decided to get Sakura and Sarada
their own place to live, he had thought that such a big house was a little too much. There were
several great apartments throughout the village that would be more than suitable, some of them
modern and brand new, having been built after the degradation of the war and the previous Akatsuki
attack. However, Sakura had seen that large house and had wanted it, and maybe out of guilt, Sasuke
hadn’t been able to say ‘no’.

Sakura was now the mother of his child, and for taking that responsibility upon herself exclusively,
Sasuke owed her a lot, especially considering that he was never around, and Karin took no part of
Sarada’s life, either. He felt grateful, and in many ways, he felt like he had the obligation to provide
for absolutely everything Sakura and his daughter could possibly want and need, as long as it didn’t
go off limits. Since he knew Sakura was a responsible, intelligent person, he trusted that she
wouldn’t. He didn’t even bother to check the bank account she had access to, and she had never tried
to contact him asking for more money, so Sasuke supposed she was managing, even if Sasuke *did*
provide enough money for them, even without that small percentage he kept in a separate account
under Naruto’s name.

The door was soon opened to reveal a breathless Sakura. Sasuke glanced at her from head to toe,
quickly noticing the high heeled shoes and tight fitting minty green dress. As his eyes met her face,
he couldn’t help but notice that she was also wearing make-up and that she had straightened her hair,
so it looked neat and glossy. There was no denying that she looked pretty, and yet, her obvious effort
to look good for him made him feel oddly uncomfortable and self-conscious. It made him wish he
hadn’t written telling her he was arriving that day.
Luckily, he couldn’t stay long since he had left an obedient Katsuo waiting for him hidden behind a few bushes outside of Konoha’s gates. While he trusted that the child wouldn’t run off on his own, he expectedly couldn’t help but feel very anxious and eager to go back for him as soon as humanly possible.

“Sasuke-kun…” Sakura greeted, blushing slightly. “Welcome home!”

“I won’t be long, I just wanted to check up on things here and see if there is anything you need.”

Making his unapologetic way inside the house as he spoke, Sasuke couldn’t help but notice that his brusque and straight to the point greeting seemed to throw an invisible slap towards Sakura, whose smile froze before dropping.

“What do you mean you won’t be long?” she asked, visibly crestfallen as she closed the door behind him. “Aren’t you staying?”

“No, I need to leave before the sun sets.” Sasuke looked around at the pristine clean hallway. “This is just a quick visit before I get back to my mission.”

“I see…” Sakura muttered. The action of her tucking a strand of pink hair behind her ear (in a very feminine and clearly dissimulated seductive way) with a manicured hand forced Sasuke to look back at her. “Can I at least show you around? Sarada is taking a nap, but I can wake her up if…”

“That won’t be necessary,” Sasuke cut firmly. Despite Sakura struggling to keep her composure, her hands fidgeted in front of her chest almost sheepishly. He wondered if she realized how much women who played cute and shy annoyed him and how much her stance made him feel uncomfortable. There was no doubt in his mind that they would be able to get along much better if she could just relax and simply be herself.

“At least go and see her while I make something quick for you to eat?” She insisted, visibly hopeful. Holding himself from sighing but moved by guilt of knowing how much his attitude wasn’t the most correct one, Sasuke nodded. “Fine.”

She offered him a genuinely happy smile. “She sleeps in my… our room,” she said. “It’s upstairs. Make yourself at home.”

Sasuke nodded and wasted no time in searching for the staircase and ascending the steps once he did. He was quick to find the simple yet tidy room that was obviously Sakura’s since it had a wooden crib inside at the king-sized bed’s feet. The curtains were drawn, so the place was relatively dark. He couldn’t help but hesitate before making his way inside and towards the crib with cautious steps, almost as if he was afraid of what he might find. Also, he didn’t want to wake Sarada up because he wouldn’t know what to do with her.

Once he was standing next to the crib he saw that the toddler was already up, her hands grabbing her small socked feet playfully as she silently looked around. Sasuke took a moment to watch her, surprised at how much she had changed in the last few months and how big she had gotten. As soon as he saw her smile and started babbling incomprehensible things, tiny hands and feet kicking the air now. She already had two teeth peeking from her upper gums and Sasuke would have smiled if he didn’t feel so utterly at loss.

She had his dark hair and his dark eyes, even though the shape was rounder, maybe like Karin’s. Her completion was pale like his, too. Sasuke knew she would be a beautiful woman someday.

He had no idea how he felt, looking at his daughter. That was his blood right there, and while he had
feelings for her, their nature was a mystery to him. He didn’t hate her, no. There was a form of love there, but it was somewhat tainted by his feelings of resentment towards her birth and his own distance. On one hand, he knew he would kill whoever tried to hurt her, but on the other one he didn’t want to actively be close to her. He hated himself for feeling this way, but these were emotions he didn’t know how to manage yet.

“Aren’t you in a good mood,” he muttered dryly. Then, a little awkwardly, he leaned down and stretched his hand towards her. Sarada at once grabbed for his finger with a small cackle and pushed at it until it was in her mouth before she bit down on it, hard, but not enough to hurt the calloused digit. Sasuke could only raise his eyebrows. That was kind of cute. Not Katsuo cute, but cute. However, Katsuo wouldn’t be considered ‘cute’ by most people, so maybe Sasuke’s standards were all wrong.

“She looks a lot like you,” Sakura’s voice said from the entrance of the room. “She’s very lively as well.”

“I can see that,” Sasuke said, removing the finger from the child’s mouth. “Are the two of you doing well?”

“We’d be better if you were here,” Sakura said courageously, stepping inside the room and making her way to him. “The house’s mortgage takes a bigger toll on the expenses than I initially thought, but we are managing, you don’t need to worry.”

Sasuke noticed she held a bento box close to her chest, wrapped in a blue cloth. “If you need more money all you have to do is ask.”

“It’s not money I need…” Sakura said shyly, stopping beside him, close enough to feel the heat but not enough to touch. “When is your mission over? Will you have a chance to, eventually, stay for a longer period?”

“I can’t answer that question.” Again, he was using a cold tone. Why did he always have to be this way, he berated himself. “Sakura, I don’t know. You know I must be constantly working for the village until my name is completely cleared. I’m not wanted here, and my life works around what is asked of me by Kakashi and the council.”

“I know, I just…” Sakura seemed to struggle with words that Sasuke didn’t want to hear. Coming here had been a mistake.

“I have to go,” he announced.

“Wait, take this,” she said, pushing the bento towards him and forcing him to accept it. “What do you think about the Uchiha symbol on display? I hope you are not offended by me wearing it. I am an Uchiha right now, after all. I am your wife.”

“As such, you are the one who runs the house and takes care of this family,” was all Sasuke said. “I don’t really care about what you do if it makes you feel happy and safe.”

This made her smile, even if it was a bit disheartened. “Thank you.”

Sasuke looked at her, unsure of what else to say or do, so he simply said, “Take care, Sakura.” With one last glance at a giggling Sarada, he quickly made his way out.

It was with relief that Sasuke crossed the gates of Konoha to the exterior and found that Katsuo was
still where he had left him, quietly crouching down behind a thick bush and attentively looking around with now blue eyes that had yet to return to their normal pearly hue. Sasuke had told him they were going to see Naruto, and for some ungodly reason, the child's eyes had been instantly painted in Naruto’s bright blue color, much to Sasuke’s exasperation.

Sasuke had already allowed his energy to reach out to Naruto to let him know they had arrived, so it was just a matter of time before the other man came to their spot. Naruto would usually feel his presence without him doing anything, but if Sasuke actively summoned him it would mean that coming to him would be safe.

As they waited, Sasuke offered Katsuo the bento Sakura had given him. The food inside had been positioned with care, that much was obvious, but it was also obvious that it lacked finesse and skill, the rice visibly overcooked, the omelet crooked and the veggies resembling mush. Sasuke almost felt sorry for Sakura but appreciated her effort nonetheless - especially since Katsuo ate without complaint, even nodding in approval.

It only took a few minutes for Naruto to meet them in his Jounin outfit with the happiest and cockiest smile ever, giving away an obnoxious amount of happiness and self-pride - it was infuriatingly blinding. If Sasuke hadn’t been so depending on Naruto’s help in getting Katsuo inside Konoha, he would’ve scoffed, or rolled his eyes, but he didn’t feel like questioning Naruto’s reliability to himself would be beneficial to his mental well-being, let alone picking up a fight with his friend by teasing him. Besides, Naruto looked strangely good in his uniform.

Sasuke could not be seen entering Konoha again, otherwise mouths would open and question the reasons for his return there, and it wouldn’t be long until rumors started about why he wasn’t sleeping in his own house. If Sakura herself were to know that he was in Konoha and staying home, things would become unnecessarily bitter, and this was why Sasuke was counting on Naruto’s help in entering the village with Katsuo without drawing attention to either of them.

Truth be told, in normal circumstances, Sasuke could’ve just used a genjutsu on the Gatekeepers and manipulated their minds into forgetting they had ever seen him - from then onwards, he’d just rely on his speed and skills to get Katsuo safely inside without being spotted. As it was, though, and considering his fragile situation within the village, he simply could not risk being caught using his powers against a Konoha citizen, even if said citizen was a shinobi.

Upon seeing Katsuo and the vivid, familiar color of his eyes, Naruto’s expression changed to one of utter shock and confusion. “Whoa, what the actual fuck?!” he uttered in an impulsive, but very loud gasp.

“Mind your language, idiot!” Sasuke scolded in a hiss, throwing Naruto a reproachful look. “I’ll explain later. Now put your oh-so-fabulous plan into action and get us inside!”

“Don’t talk to me like that!” Naruto barked, mockingly offended. “Excuse me for being shocked at seeing him with eyes like mine!”

“Yeah, it happened, deal with it,” Sasuke retorted, grabbing for Katsuo’s hand. “Now what do we do? Wouldn’t it have been easier for you to teach Katsuo sign language outside of Konoha? This is too dangerous.”

“Relax, Sasu-chan, I have everything ready,” Naruto assured, putting his hands on his hips with a bright smile. “But I need my greeting first, you can’t just come here and demand stuff with that frisky attitude of yours when I’ve worked so hard to help you.”

Sasuke’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. “Excuse me?” he hissed, annoyance rising in his chest. By gods
he loved Naruto and had missed him in the months they hadn’t seen each other, but he was feeling anxious at having Katsuo so exposed this close to Konoha and he was in no mood to fuck around.

Naruto turned his cheek to Sasuke and tapped it with his pointer finger. “Since you’re such a prude in front of Katsu-chan you can kiss me here.”

Sasuke’s chin fell. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me right now,” he grunted, rolling his eyes. “Naruto, we don’t have time for…”

“Watch your language in front of Katsu-chan!” Naruto admonished, playfully, and Sasuke could only roll his eyes impatiently. If he didn’t feel so restless he would be kicking Naruto’s ass just about now.

Naruto then crouched down in front of Katsuo, who offered him a twisted smile. “You’ll give Naruto-nii a kiss, won’t you?”

Of course, Katsuo instantly nodded and placed a loud kiss on Naruto’s cheek. The man looked up at Sasuke mockingly. “See? At least someone is well-behaved around here.”

“F. You,” Sasuke threw, as Naruto stood up. “Can we please get out of here?”

“Can’t you ever be nice to me, Sasuke?” Naruto said, shaking his head from side to side with false disappointment. “I hope you make it up to me later.”

The implications of those words were obvious, and while they resonated within Sasuke in form of a sudden physical hunger for things that had been neglected for far too long - Sasuke had to take a deep breath to not tell his friend to go fuck himself again - he had to think of Katsuo and he wasn’t being a good example right now. “You wish,” he said, with a composure he didn’t feel. Naruto winked at him, simply knowing Sasuke’s own words were all bark and no bite - in the end, he always gave in one way or another.

“Come on, I’ll get you both inside safe and sound,” Naruto said in an unshakable good mood. “This week is going to be the best week ever!”

Sasuke could only fight to repress yet another eye roll.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a simple one, but I hope you guys enjoyed it nonetheless! The scene with Iruka is relevant to the plot since it will have importance further down the road.

Next chapter will be a nice one (sort of), and big things are about to happen!

Thank you all for waiting this long and being so patient by never giving up on this fic! It means a lot to me. I know I’ve been absent since forever, time isn’t something I have often nowadays - but rest assured that this story will continue to be published to the very end ;)

My baby boy is already six months, can you imagine? How time flies <3
Don’t forget to comment, and if you’d like to show your appreciation for my art, I do have a Ko-fi account under my author’s name.

Also, I have a Twitter account. Find me @NoChidoriUchiha.

See you all next time!

Works inspired by this one:

Multiverses: What is and what could have been by LovelessTENSHI1

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!