Hope Springs Eternal
by elations

Summary

A young Sasori doesn't expect much from the Chuunin exam at Konoha. Their genin are soft hearted and weak, how could he not cast them aside? Though one catches his eye (and his heart) and at the tender age of thirteen, he discovers his first crush: Haruno Sakura. Watch as an awkward Sasori continually tries to make a move on Sakura during the Chuunin exam and beyond!

Same age AU.
Chapter 1

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast;  
Man never is, but always to be blessed:  
The soul, uneasy and confined from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come."
--Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man

Frankly, Sasori didn't know why he was in Konoha. He was leaps and bounds better than any of the other kids, even the Kazekage said he was a miracle prodigy child. His grandmother was less inclined to say so, but he could tell she was impressed.

He reasoned it was for punishment. There was that time baa-chan found him tampering with Kankuro's puppets. Which she just didn't understand. He had practically made those puppets for Kankuro so technically, he was sabotaging his own puppets. What was a little competitive rivalry between genin? Suna all but encouraged it outright, he was simply a victim of his upbringing.

"Ready for some action, Sasori-kun~?"

"Call me that again and I'll break your fingers," the younger replied casually. This sort of threatening banter was common fare among the two puppeteers, and Kankuro only snickered.

"Get used to it now, all the girls here will be calling you that sooner or later."

Sasori only glared up at Kankuro (the latter was so infuriatingly tall) and kept his silence. The two sand genin were so busy with their staring contest that the child bowling into Kankuro was quite the surprise for both of them.

“Watch it, runt,” he growled, picking the kid up by the front of his shirt. Sasori, ever the quiet observer, found it amusing that the Leaf had such snotnosed brats just running around. Kankuro would teach them all a lesson though, he was sure of it.

“Konohamaru-chan!” Two other pint-sized brats cried out, and then there was an annoying kid decked out in bright orange shouting something. Sasori had assumed he was just a civilian, but his hitai-ate said otherwise.

Looks like they just give them out to anyone in Konoha.

“I'm sorry, I was messing around,” a girl in the back explained weakly. His eyes slid over her coolly, like oil over water, but something was wrong. He hitched, looked back at her.

Pink hair, too long to be a proper ninja, he thought, but such an exquisite shade. Eyes like new leaves, ready to flush in spring. He was frozen, but not as in the fear he ignored in a fight, it was something else. He was...captivated.

“I hate midgets,” Kankuro was sneering at the Konoha kids. “After I beat this one up, you're next!” And just as he was going to punch that little punk they called Konohamaru, a rock flew in from above and cracked the older genin on the wrist. He cried out, dropping the kid to nurse his wrist.
“Sasuke!” The pink hair girl practically fainted in ecstasy. Whoever Sasuke was, Sasori hated him already. He squinted up at the loser in the tree. He looked as pretentious as his name sounded.

Gaara appeared soon after, effectively cowing Kankuro. The youngest sand sibling had learned long ago that he and Sasori were well matched for stubborn talent. The surest way to get Sasori to appear to fall in line was to influence Kankuro, which wasn’t that hard.

They didn't get far before the girl piped up, her face stern and brave as she demanded to know their intent in the village.

"Chuunin exams," Sasori supplied quickly. Kankuro scowled down at him but he paid the older boy no mind. As far as he was concerned, Kankuro could make that face at him all day, as long as Sasori got to speak to the girl. The orange one she called Naruto asked what the heck he was talking about, which was fine by him. If there was one thing Sasori loved (and excelled in) it was showing off.

While Gaara and Sasuke were busy sizing each other up and exchanging names, Sasori thought that this would be the perfect opportunity to get her name. Except, apparently, fear did have some hold on him. He was staring so intently at her as if he hoped to discern her name via mind reading. Or at least to get her to come to him. However, when she did happen to glance his way, the only thing he could do was look away as fast as humanly possible.

He kicked himself mentally over and over again for being such a coward as they left. What if he never saw her again? What if she hadn't even noticed him? What if she—

"Kankuro, that girl..." Sasori trailed off hesitantly. He didn't like to show weakness, especially not in front of Gaara, but he had no control on his brain, his mouth.

"Her name is Sakura, kid," Kankuro jeered, ruffling Sasori’s hair. The younger boy was quick to fix it, but he was grateful to his friend. "If you'd been listening instead of making googlie eyes at her—"

"I was not," Sasori began, cleared his throat, and tried again. "I don't know what you're talking about." He narrowed his eyes at Gaara's back, wondering if the other redhead was listening.

"Yeah, okay," Kankuro snorted. "Honestly kid, you're better off. She's probably just some soft little Leaf kid. You saw those brats," he said once he saw Sasori rise to his bait. "All weak. Except that crazy Uchiha."

Sasori felt his hand twitch, which was worrisome and should've been in the forefront of his mind, but he could only think of that damned Uchiha who stunk of arrogance.

The test room was slowly filling up around him and Sasori was beginning to fidget. He wasn't concerned with the older genin around him, he was confident he could hand their asses to them any day, but it was the lack of a very particular genin that had his eyes searching the crowd in vain. And then, like some kind of absurd angel answering his silent prayers, he heard an annoyingly familiar voice.

"I'm gonna beat all you bastards!"

He might have spun around a little too fast, but you had to cut him some slack here. A boy of only thirteen, heartsick with the thought of a girl he hardly knew. How could he not thank every star in
"Easy lover boy," Kankuro advised, tugging on Sasori's shirt collar. "Don't get too attached. She'll be one of the first to drop out, I guarantee it."

"Shove it," Sasori growled, batting the older boy away.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Suddenly sweet, delicate, pink haired Sakura had Naruto in a choke hold. Realizing that Naruto had gained everyone's attention, she tried to backpedal for him. "It was just a joke. He's quite stupid so please forgive him." Just like that, she went from sweet back to a ball of fire, biting stern words out between her clenched teeth.

"Still think she's so ordinary?" He challenged in his own passive aggressive way.

"Going from hot to cold like that? She's probably insane. You really know how to pick 'em," Kankuro sneered. Temari said nothing and Gaara was quieter still.

Suddenly there was a commotion with the genin from Sound attacking some other guy. Sasori was not impressed with the display and instead wondered what they were getting at. He watched Sakura run to the guy and wondered if he would stoop to the level of feigning hurt to attract this girl to him. He sincerely hoped not.

That's when the examination proctors showed themselves at last. Unfortunate, because Sasori had not even begun plotting how to approach the Leaf girl. If she was as smart as she seemed, maybe he would get a chance later...

They drew their lots for the seating arrangement for the test. Sasori had hoped against hope that they would be seated together. The odds were astronomical with so many others taking the test too, but he found himself sitting beside her. It was a miracle, a sign, divine intervention. Call it what you will, but it was running his nerves ragged.

Kankuro, who was sitting a row in front of him and a few seats down, turned around and gave him that insufferable grin. He hated him, truly.

On his left, Sakura had just been shot down for asking a question. She was deflated, Sasori guessed, because she didn't trust her teammates to do well. He then reflected that he wouldn't trust that oaf Naruto either, if he was as dumb as he looked.

When they were told to begin, Sasori took stock of all the questions. He could answer them independently, of course, and discretely sought out his teammates. He used his chakra strings to write in the answers for them with one hand while filling in the answers with his other, so as to not draw attention. His peripheral vision told him that Sakura was hard at work with a fistful of hair. She wrote furiously and Sasori was pleasantly surprised. It turned out she was pretty clever after all, if she could answer these advanced questions.

He took a break to tackle a particularly complex question and made Kankuro doodle on his exam paper. He stifled a laugh when he saw the older genin twitch off his strings and begin erasing with gusto.

When the tenth question had come and passed, and with it the brash Anko, Sasori lingered near Sakura.

"Smart," he blurted before they all rose. Sakura looked at him quizzically and he gulped. "Uh, I
mean, your answers. They're all correct. You must be pretty smart."

"Yeah, I guess I am," Sakura replied with a triumphant smile and looked back at her test. "But to know that, you must be smart too."

Sasori shrugged modestly, embarrassed to even be acknowledged by her.

"You're from Sunagakure right? What's your name?"

"Sa—Sakura...no wait, that's your name." Sasori was finally beginning to panic. Well, his luck couldn't have lasted forever. But Sakura laughed kindly, not at all like his peers. "Sasori. That's my name."

"I can see how you could get them mixed up," she teased. He could feel his cheeks begin to flush so he turned aside, rubbing a cheek self consciously. Yeah, he really messed that one up. "Good luck with the second test," she said, and she smiled at him in that deceivingly innocent way.

"You too," he choked out. It was only a whisper at her back as she joined her teammates and started tearing into Naruto about something.

"Incredible," he said to himself. She had such fire, such life. Was that because she was from Konoha or was it just her nature?

"So she's smart, so what? She won't make it past the next test," Kankuro assured him, reading Sakura's discarded test from behind him. Sasori remained silent. Who knew what the second trial would hold for them? Whatever it was, he hoped to speak with Sakura again.
Haha so you guys are gonna hate me, but I had most of this sitting around on my computer for a long time. Decided to polish it a little and finish it up because holy cow, there were nearly 100 kudos on the first bit? So here we are, a continuation just for you~ <3

Anko's threats of death did not have him fearing for his life like the greater half of the genin. After all, he was from Suna. He had already been in countless life threatening situations already. No, the life Sasori was anxious for was Sakura's. She had spunk, sure, but spunk could only get you so far.

He signed the waiver carelessly and joined his team to receive their scroll. Once it was hidden safely with his puppet scrolls, he joined the crowd of genin again. He scanned the faces for Sakura but it was time to disperse to their respective gates. He looked for her in vain but saw Kankuro and Temari go off with Gaara, both older siblings looking nervous. Sasori didn't blame them. He wouldn't want to be stuck with Gaara more than an hour tops.

As soon as they could be, his three-man squad was off into the forest. Even though there was the threat of death hanging over them in such a lushly foreign environment, Sasori did not fear. It wasn't until those Grass nin showed up that he began to doubt himself.

Their leader left his lackeys to deal with them. At first he was insulted. Didn't his skill merit something more than a scrappy fight? But Sasori found himself beating a hasty retreat after his teammates had fallen, surely dead with the placement of those blossoming wounds.

How had it ended up like this? How could he have been so quickly outmaneuvered? It didn't take a genius to know a puppeteer’s weakness was close combat, but even he thought he had those bases covered. Apparently not.

A shrill scream cut through the foliage and Sasori paused on a tree branch as thick as his torso. What were the odds it was Sakura? Unlikely odds at best, but Sasori's luck had been so good lately that he was willing to gamble on it.

He was not disappointed.

From his vantage point in the trees, he suspected a fight had just ended. Sakura was hiccupping faint sobs as she touched the face of one of her teammates before visibly shaking herself. Sasori could see her rally; see her pull herself up instead of pooling out into a pathetic mess. He watched her retrieve the one in orange and laid him beside the other. She was looking around for something...what? An enemy? No, she was investigating a dug out hole under a nearby tree. Apparently deemed safe, she dragged the boys one at a time into the shelter.

Was it appropriate to help her? Sasori pondered over this for a moment and rephrased his question: would she want his help? Surely her teammates weren't dead. But when would they recover? He chewed the inside of his cheek. This girl was no concern of his. He shouldn't care if she was in danger or not. He didn’t even know her.
His thoughts were silent, ready for him to take off into the forest. He had failed the exam by default, what with the death of his teammates, and there was nothing left for him but to survive the trek to the tower. And yet, he didn’t move.

What would Kankuro say if he were there? Forget her, move on before you get yourself killed. Yes, that made sense. Sasori’s own hesitance was simultaneously confusing and irritating. His body refused to jump away from her, so he thought that maybe helping her was in his best interest after all.

Yes, he could justify this if he thought at the right angle. He was alone, he needed all the friendly faces he could get, never mind that she was from a different village. They were at peace, right? They should stick together for their own safety.

His teeth jarred with the impact on the earth. Sakura whipped around, kunai clenched between her teeth with a canteen and a cloth in her hands. She looked frightened at first, startled by the sudden presence of an unknown person. Friend or foe? Sakura apparently decided foe, because her fear bubbled and blackened into fierce hate and she dropped her burdens, throwing the knife at him.

It was no hard thing to dodge. She was desperate and unprepared for an assault, but it was clear the adrenaline hadn’t left her system from the previous encounter.

“Ah, don’t,” he said, trying to look as non-threatening as he could. He raised his hands, showing he held no weapons. “I heard you scream.”

Sakura eyed him warily before remembering he was the genin from Sand, the one from the written part of the exam.

“Oh, you’re the nerd,” she said, but she seemed to relax.

“Yeah, well, takes one to know one,” he shot back a little defensively. Sakura smiled though, and the smoldering suspicion faded from her eyes.

He had been taught that mimicry was a form of trust building, but he didn’t find himself thinking about that now. Sakura smiled and by some strange reflex he had never known, he smiled too.

“I didn’t get here until the other genin left,” he said, and nodded to the two behind her. “Are they okay?”

“I’m not sure,” she muttered distractedly, turning her head as if she wanted to make sure they were still alive. “Naruto hit that tree pretty hard. And Sasuke…” She didn’t finish and bit her quivering lip instead.

“I know some healing. I could help, if you want,” he offered. He remained still, letting her think it over before moving. The last thing he wanted now was to suspect him of any tricks. When she welcomed him into the den he wondered if she was naive or desperately worried for her teammates. It pained him that she was even allowed to be a ninja.

Maybe if he had anything to gain from taking their scroll or killing them, the story would be different. The medical chakra lit up his hand as he went to work on Sasuke, the one she was more concerned with. He certainly looked worse than the brat Naruto, and medically speaking he was beyond help.

“I can’t do anything for him,” Sasori panted, wiping the sweat from his brow. “His chakra is...messed up, for lack of a better word. It’s confused; going haywire.” He looked down at the last Uchiha, the unconscious boy sweating just as much as he was. “There’s another chakra mingling with his. It’s impossible to separate…” He shook his head. “What happ–”
“Please look at Naruto now,” she said quickly. Clearly she wasn’t ready to talk about it, whatever had happened before he had arrived. He didn’t press the matter, and instead examined Naruto.

“He’s fine, just unconscious. He needs to rest and replenish his chakra.”

Sakura looked immeasurably relieved.

They sat in silence while she changed the damp cloths. Her tenderness with Uchiha did not go unnoticed by the young puppeteer, but it was easily excused. After all, Sakura would surely see that Sasori was the better and more impressive ninja soon enough.

“I guess the rest of your squad is…” Sakura hesitated.

“Killed by Grass nin,” he offered. It was only polite.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she murmured sympathetically, thinking what it would be like to lose Naruto and Sasuke. She very nearly had, or so she thought, and it was already crumbling her foundations of hope.

“We weren’t close. Our squad was assembled for the sake of the exam. I’m experienced enough to carry out solo missions,” he boasted quietly. He just couldn’t help himself. Take that, Uchiha Sasuke. Even though the other boy was unconscious, Sasori was sure he saw him twitch.

“How old are you again?” Sakura blinked in surprise.

“Thirteen.” A pause. “I know Konoha is...different than Suna.” He would’ve said softer, but he knew how to choose his battles. Besides, he wanted to make an ally out of Sakura, not an enemy.

Sakura could barely handle catching a cat with her three-man squad, never mind a real ninja mission. The thought was disheartening. Not only was she the weakest link on her team, she was probably the most worthless ninja in all of history.

“Oh, um, don’t feel too bad,” Sasori amended as he saw her face cloud over. “I’m more advanced than some of the other genin. Should’ve started with that.” He gave her a sheepish little smile and hoped it would dissipate her growing self-deprecation.

“A prodigy?” She sniffed, already turning her nose up at the idea. “I'll take a lot more than that to impress me.”

“Eh? Moping to unimpressed?” Sasori smirked, tilting his head to one side. “You’re a funny one, Sakura-chan.”

“Eh? My teammates are the last Uchiha and the vessel for the Kyuubi. Prodigy just isn’t going to cut it.” She shrugged, as if she couldn’t possibly help his situation. But that was the best part, he didn’t need the help of her imagination to make him impressive, he already was.

“I’m one of the only practitioners of the puppet arts. I have surpassed my master long ago and I’ve made poisons so complex not even baa-chan can break them.”

He would omit the animal experiments for the time being. She was too sugary, too nice to understand that part. But who could say, she was a fellow academic. Maybe she would understand the lust for knowledge, the desire to be more.

The fervor of his words, not the words themselves, transfixed Sakura. The way his eyes shone, the intensity of them. It was a siren’s call, beckoning her into the rocks.
“But what about that other Sand nin. The one with the paint,” she said, mock drawing the lines of Kankuro’s face paint. “He’s got a puppet too, right?”

“An amateur,” he scoffed. As if Kankuro could ever measure up to him. He was the closest thing Sasori had to a friend, but he preferred to keep private and professional separate in his life.

But before he could elaborate on the shortcomings of Kankuro, because he kept a running mental list and it was long, there was a noise outside. They tensed, Sasori reaching for his puppet scrolls, but it was just a squirrel. They could barely make out its furry little form in the darkening forest, and Sasori finally realized how late it was. Sakura stifled a yawn.

“I can take the first watch,” he offered, and it was quite polite of him if he did say so himself, but Sakura still had misgivings.

“I hardly know you, no offense.” Her eyes shifted from his face and her casual grip on her kunai tightened.

“Don’t you think that if I wanted to kill you, I would have already?” He tried not to sound so incredulous because honestly, wouldn’t he have?

“I don’t know, maybe you’re one of those creeps who likes to drag it out,” she muttered, still avoiding eye contact. “I’ve heard stories about Sunagakure. And they’re not nice.”

“Being a shinobi is all about not nice.” So what if it had been hard growing up? The desert was harsh, and to survive in it you had to adapt to that lifestyle. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep in some choice words about Konoha because for some reason, he wanted to help this girl. Okay, the reason was obvious. Less obvious was the why of the attraction.

“Well, you’re not so bad.” An admittance of what? Reluctance to change? She could bear to look at him again and she looked markedly embarrassed. “The others from Suna. You’re different than them.”

He was glad of the fading light, because he could feel a blush creeping up his neck at an alarming rate.

“Good different?” He couldn’t stop himself from asking it. He couldn’t stop the weird thing his voice was doing either, unfortunately. His throat felt drier than the desert he was born in.

“Maybe,” she said, and he could more hear the grin than see it now. She was playing coy, something Kankuro said girls did a lot, but what did it mean? What was the purpose? It maddened him.

“Do you want to do something crazy?” He blurted out, heart hammering madly in his chest. “Not like actually crazy, or maybe it is, but I have an idea.” And there he was, rambling like the adolescent he was.

“What?” Her interest was wary, but it gave him hope.

“I want to see something. Here, give me your hand.” He reached his own out blindly in the complete darkness, and it took some fumbling for them to meet, but he brought her out of their hiding place without much trouble.

“Watch the root, there,” he said, tugging her gently by the hand away from twisting her ankle.

“What are we doing?” She asked uncertainly, and he could feel her turn back to her teammates.
They’ll be fine, it’s just a second. Follow my lead.” He let go of her hand grudgingly and took off up the face of the tree. She had no choice but to follow or go back, but he was relieved when the soft patter of feet followed him.

It wasn’t long to the top, not really, and their lightweight bodies allowed them to stand among the topmost branches.

“Wow,” Sakura breathed in awe. “I’ve never seen so many stars!”

“If you think this is impressive, you should see the desert. Way more stars.” Sasori couldn’t help the boast, it just came naturally. If you’ve got it, why not flaunt it?

“Really?” She was absolutely breathless. Then, “Can I come visit some time? After the exams?”

Sasori nearly slipped from his branch.

“Sure,” he said, and tried his best not to squeak. Oh god, what would it be like to show her around Suna? Would she like it? Worse, would she hate it? And then there was Chiyo…

“Thanks for bringing me up here, I feel a lot better.”

She was so close, when had she gotten that close? Had he really just been sitting next to her, shoulders brushing so casually?

“Good. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

He wanted to reach out and touch her. Just her arm, or maybe just hold her hand again but for real this time. But it was like he was a puppet; his body was stiff and refused to move until she wanted to go back down.

It was for the best, unless they wanted to incur danger on her team. Personally, Sasori wouldn’t mind, but they meant something to her and he would allow her that weakness.

She let him take first shift on the watch after all was said and done. Something changed her mind, but Sasori would be damned if he knew what it had been. He chalked it up to the enigma of women in general and sat at the entrance of the den, watching for movement in the forest.
"First Kiss-less"

It was nearly dawn when Sasori bolted fully into the waking world. He was a light sleeper on a good day, but missions into enemy territory made him more of an insomniac.

But this time he had heard something, he was sure of it. A twig underfoot? He peered over the wall of earth, head peeking out between the solid roots of the tree.

Another squirrel? Now royally pissed and fully awake, Sasori had the desire to do murder. Sakura, who was supposed to be on guard, had predictably fallen asleep on her watch. But she looked so sickeningly saccharine in sleep, floating innocently among her cotton candy hair; it made all his romantic thoughts feel very, very wrong.

The squirrel was leaping towards their hideout now, perhaps sniffing out the rations in their packs. If anyone was around, that stupid squirrel would give away their position for sure. With a deft flick of his fingers, Sasori attached thin chakra strings to the creature and turned it neatly away.

Only then did he see the exploding tag glued to its back.

Calmly, with both eyes scanning the underbrush, he placed a gentle hand over Sakura’s mouth and shook her away. She offered a muffled groan and he allowed his eyes to flick to her, only to flick right back to he undergrowth.

The delicate arch of her back was not something he needed right now. He catalogued the thought away for later. He was an artist of human anatomy, after all. Maybe he could make puppets so delicate some day.

But “some day” would only come if they made it out alive, so he focused his attention to the matter at hand. He checked quickly to see if she was coherent yet. By the way her eyes flashed with alarm, it seemed she was. He motioned for her not to speak, and paused. Had she learned hand signs? More importantly, did Suna and Konoha use similar gestures to communicate in silence?

Sasori hesitantly made the sign that indicated danger. It was a crude but effective manner to warn her, and it worked. Sakura nodded her understanding and unsheathed her kunai, creeping up to view the potential war zone.

It was then that the three-man squad from Sound decided to make their presence known.

“We know you brats are in there,” the more mouthy one with the spiky hair taunted. “Come on out. Don’t you know this test is for being a ninja, not hooking up?”

Sasori refused to rise to the taunt. It was always best to keep one’s head level in a fight, and with a virtual three to one odds, it wasn’t going to be easy.

“Sakura-chan, wait here,” he muttered, trying to think of a way to climb out of this stupid hole gracefully.

“I’m not letting you go without me.” Her lips were pressed into a firm line. Determination, he thought, was definitely her strong point. But how much could she really do?

He had no choice but to accept. He just knew she would make this more difficult if they weren’t on the same side.
This didn’t bode well for their odds. She wasn’t a taijutsu user, which is exactly what he needed in this situation: someone to get in close while he worked from the background. He silently bemoaned his pathetic fate because it was his own fault that he involved himself with the girl.

“Why don’t you let your *boyfriend* do all the fighting, little girl,” the female of the team sneered. Now her, Sasori liked.

“Say that to my face,” Sakura growled, and took a defensive stance.

He had never seen anything truly so fulfilling as Sakura covered in dirt and her hair matted, lip curled in defiance. This is what she was made of, deep down. He could feel it.

Maybe they really could do this.

Five minutes later, he had changed his mind. They could not do this. Definitely, definitely not.

The girl had Sakura’s hair in a death grip, taunting and sneering the way all catty girls do. Sasori could barely focus, though, so disoriented by the sound waves wracking his body. Everything was in double vision and he could feel blood slowly dribbling out of one of his ears. He spit out the gritty earth from between his teeth (Konoha dirt tasted so different from Suna sand) as he tried to orient himself.

His Mother and Father puppets lay on the ground, defenseless and inanimate. The annoying one with the spiky hair lay unconscious some meters away while the guy with the Sound Arm of Doom sauntered his way over to Sasori. He was hoisted up roughly by the collar of his shirt, trying not to throw up. It would be nice to lose yesterday’s lunch all over this asshole, but he probably shouldn’t goad him unnecessarily.

“Who’s got the scroll, pretty boy?” Sound Arm’s smirk was so self-righteous. He hated every inch of him. He wanted to make his insides his outsides and watch him writhe in the slow death that would follow.

Unsatisfied with Sasori’s nonexistent answer, Dosu turned him roughly towards Sakura. Great, they’d use her against him. It was so predictable.

“Okay little lady, where’s your scroll?” He mocked, holding a nice, sharp senbon to Sasori’s jugular.

Ah, now this was new. Since when was he prime bait? Since he was properly incapacitated, he supposed.

Her heard her sniffling, saying something through watery words, but the world was worsening instead of clearing. Not good, he thought, trying to focus harder on Sakura. If he passed out, he’d die. Worse, *she’d* die, probably, and her teammates if he was feeling so all encompassing. Wasn’t that what they were here for? Uchiha Sasuke?

Stupid Uchiha.

He was about to die and that damned idiot was the reason.

It was distant, but he heard her voice. Sakura was rallying, as she was wont to do in tough times, and he allowed a small smile. Maybe spunk *was* enough. In a desperate act, she used her own kunai to simultaneously cut her hair and free herself.

That’s about the time that Sasori blacked out.
When he came to, it was after all the fighting was said and done. Sasori’s face was being tapped insistently, as if by some annoying child.

“Hey, you, wake up.” It was not a voice he was familiar with, and the girl shrieked when his eyes flew open. It only served to make his headache worse.

“Sakura, your boyfriend’s awake,” the strange girl called, and he decided that he liked her, whoever she was.

“He’s not my boyfriend, Ino pig,” Sakura hisses to his disappointment, but they have plenty of time to make it work in the future. She appears in his field of vision, bending over him with her new haircut.

“Your hair,” he says dumbly, because he’s an idiot and what else is new.

“Yeah, decided it was time for a change y’know?” She forces a smile and the other girl leaves, presumably to tend to some other person.

“Looks nice.” Shorter hair does suit her, in his opinion. He doesn’t know he’s reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear until he’s touching it, but he drops his hand lamely.

“How are you feeling? That guy hit you pretty hard.”

“Fine,” he said, and it was mostly true. He would live to fight another day, but it would take a couple more hours at least until he was back up to speed. At least he could manage to sit up on his own.

“What happened?”

Sakura ran through the rest of the fight, how her other friends from Konoha came to her aid and then finally Sasuke’s weird transformation.

Stupid Uchiha.

Sasori glared over Sakura’s shoulder at the dark-haired boy in question. Well, he looked perfectly normal now.

“It just wasn’t right. It wasn’t Sasuke,” she muttered, biting the inside of her cheek. But he trusted her instinct because it came from the gut. Never mistrust a gut instinct, Chiyo had taught him, and he had never questioned one with success.

If Uchiha wasn’t himself…that hit a chord somewhere in the recesses of Sasori’s mind. But where? The thought reverberated on quiet darkness. Perhaps it would come to him later.

“Oi, Sakura-chan, who’s the weirdo?”

Sasori turned his glare on Naruto, who was now fast approaching. It didn’t even faze the brat.

Naruto, Sasori would soon discover, had a determination similar to Sakura’s. In Sakura, it was admirable. In Naruto, Sasori found it annoying.

“Naruto, this is Sasori,” she sighed, already resigned to the inevitable. Naruto was going to scare away this clever, interesting guy because that’s what Naruto did best.
“Uzumaki Naruto!” The boy proclaimed, grinning confidently. “Here, let me help you up!” Before Sasori could say no, he was being hoisted to his feet by the exuberant power of Naruto.

He stumbled a few steps and, because he was taught actual manners, he muttered a “thank you,” and then…what? What was he supposed to do now that the threat of danger had passed? He was no good to them in his current condition so that bargaining chip was out.

He could play on Sakura’s bleeding heart, since he had gotten this way because of trying to protect her. By the way she was muttering to Naruto and the way the boy was shooting suspicious looks at Sasori, that plan was already in motion.

After the others had left the clearing, leaving only Team 7 and Sasori, the topic was discussed openly. Naruto was easily won with a demonstration of the puppet technique, but Sasuke was not so easily won. Which was fine by Sasori, because who even cared about the bleeding Uchihas anyway.

“Come on Sasuke, we’d all be lost without him,” Sakura pleaded. “He knows some healing techniques too. He’s been on dozens of missions that aren’t just catching cats,” she said, hissing the last part for emphasis.

“He was too easily beaten by Dosu’s technique,” the Uchiha scoffed. “He’d just slow us down.”

“Because we didn’t have a full squad. We’d never worked together,” she said, frustration in every line of her body. “That’s not fair.”

“You sound like such a child,” he said and rolled his eyes.

“Shut it Sasuke. The vote is two to one.” Naruto pointed out. Majority rules.

“Well I’m not saving his sorry ass when he lands us in trouble,” Sasuke quipped, because Uchiha was petty and had to have the last word either way.

The matter was not discussed further, or at least where Sasori could hear. Naturally Sakura was in charge of watching over their “new friend” because she was the one that was his friend, Sasuke would point out on more than one occasion.

Sasori could tell that these negative interactions hurt Sakura to the core and always tried to do something to balance it out. A handful of pretty wildflowers, a shared ration of sweets, just little things that made her smile more genuine.

In exchange, she taught him how to swim.

The day was bright and hot when they came across the river. Sasori and Sakura’s mission, since they were always paired to do chores, was to catch fish for lunch.

He had no reservations about stripping down to his undershorts. He knew his body was thin and lanky, but he accepted it as something he couldn’t be bothered to change. Sakura’s body, however, was a different story.

“No, no, I can do it myself,” he assured her, trying to get into the water as quickly as possibly without slipping on the mossy stones.

“But you don’t know how to swim!” She laughed, plopping down on the shore to wrestle her sandals off.

“A lady shouldn’t…I shouldn’t see…” Sasori tried, grasped, and failed miserably for the words. “It’s
not proper!” He half squealed, half shrieked as Sakura undid her zipper.

He did fall then, in a vain attempt to save his poor virgin eyes from a life of ruin. Ruin because nobody ever, ever, could compare, and Sasori did not want that on his conscious for what he was sure would be the rest of his life.

“Are you okay?” She was at his side in an instant. Too bad the water wasn’t deep enough to drown himself in. Maybe he could just let the current take him…

“M’fine,” he gulped, studiously looking every place but Sakura.

“Ugh, just think of it as a swimsuit. It’s fine,” she sighed, crouching beside him in the shallows. When he still refused to look at her, she grabbed his head. “Look…at…me!” She growled, forcing his stubborn head to come even with her own.

Sasori supposed he could just let her break his neck. It was more than he deserved. But he caved.

“Okay, I’m looking at you. Now what?”

He could feel her fingernails dig gently into his face. Her sunny smile was as heady as the rush of a kill and at that close range; she might have killed him in some small way.

“Now,” she chirped. “I teach you how to swim.”

Simple as that. Or so it seemed initially. Swimming did not come inherently to Sasori. Sakura swam like she was born in it, so she was a good teacher. Catching fish was an entirely different beast, though, so they ended up relying on Sasori’s chakra strings to entangle a good many fish.

Something that sounded like an argument floated through the trees. No doubt it was Thing One and Thing Two, as Sasori liked to call them. But Sakura didn’t seem troubled so they went on splashing around in the water while the fish dried on the bank.

“I think they like each other,” she said casually, floating on her back and looking up at the clouds. “Bunny,” she added, pointing to the weirdest cloud bunny Sasori had ever seen.

“They don’t sound like it. But I guess you guys are all teammates.” He tried to shrug but it was pointless on his back. “That’s not a bunny, it’s a squirrel.”

“No, not like that,” she giggled and slapped the water gently. “I mean they like like each other. Like, they’re going to get married when they’re older. And that tail is too short to be a squirrel, definitely a bunny.”

“Like like? What are you, seven?” He smirked. “And how would you know, anyway?”

“Because they kissed on the first day of class,” she said sagely, submerging herself before coming up vertical. “And like you said, I’m their teammate. So I know everything.”

“You know more about them than I do,” he admitted, content to keep floating on his back down the river a while more. Sakura had other plans.

She grabbed his hand before he could get too far away from her and he had no choice but to abandon his carefree lifestyle. Not that he was complaining too much.

The easy-going smile she had minutes before was somehow different now. It wasn’t a bad different, but it was different. He couldn’t put his finger on it because a girl hadn’t looked at him like that
before.
It was moderately alarming.
And she was still holding his hand.
“Y’know, it’s a shame really. Not fair at all.”
“…What’s not fair?” He blinked. What did she want from him?
“My teammates have had their first kiss,” she sighed dramatically. “And here I am, first kiss-less.”
Sasori blinked. And again. And again.
“What?”
There were guys throwing themselves at her feet on a daily basis. How was he supposed to believe she’d never even kissed one?
“Okay, there was that one time with Ino, but we were just practicing!” She said quickly.
“But I mean…you’ve never…?”
Sakura shook her head.
“Why not?” He hoped he wasn’t being terribly rude, but curiosity was a powerful drug.
“I don’t know, I haven’t found the right boy to kiss.” She shrugged as if she hadn’t been lamenting it with full drama just a minute earlier.
“Oh,” he said, and this was confusing. Was he reading the signals wrong?
“But lately, I met this guy,” she admitted shyly.
Well, he was a guy wasn’t he? And they had recently met?
“Yeah?” He gulped. His hand was beginning to feel pruney under the water.
“Yes. I think… I want to kiss him.” Her eyes dropped to his lips and oh god, it was actually going to happen.
“You… should.” It was embarrassing how haltingly he spoke, but he couldn’t tell if the shivers in his body were from the cold of the water or the nervous electricity spiking through his body.
His pulse beat an erratic rhythm as she closed her eyes and they were close, so damned close, when an all too familiar shout rang from the bank.
“HEY! What do you two think you’re doing?!”
They jumped apart like magnets and Sasori feared the moment was lost forever. He would make Naruto rue the day he was born, he swore then and there.
“I was picking algae off of his face!” Sakura shot back, now looking every inch that she was in the right. When she turned back to him though, her grin was sheepish.
They didn’t speak of it the next couple days. Sakura acted as if it had never almost happened so Sasori took his cue from her. His ego was bruised if nothing else.
And because Team 7 attracted danger and mayhem like it was natural, it wasn’t easy getting out of the forest.

Frankly it was exhausting worrying about someone else in addition to yourself, and Sasori wondered again and again why he bothered. Every time, he came to the same answer: because he hadn’t chosen this. His dry, desiccated heart had betrayed him as it never had before.

It was infuriating, that part he could decipher without a doubt. But the lovesickness, the crushing, the stupid things he did for her recognition. These were the things that mildly disgusted him in the back of his mind.

All in all, though, he had no regrets. But he would need to gather more information on all things girl-wise if he was going to proceed successfully.

He resolved to consult with Kankuro before the next test.
With the second test of the Chuunin exams under his belt, Sasori resolved to seek Kankuro out as he had intended. After consulting Temari, he cornered the older boy at a ramen stand, where he was doing more than slurping up his lunch. The young woman working the counter looked relieved when Kankuro was no longer trying to coerce her into a date or some such, as far as Sasori could tell.

“She tried to kiss you?!”

“Keep your voice down,” Sasori muttered trying in vain to keep the blush from rising in his cheeks. It was no use, he could feel the blood rushing to his face already. He tried to think of a more sobering topic while Kankuro mopped up the soup he had spit out.

Puppet anatomy.

Forming chakra strings for innumerable puppets.

His grandmother’s wrinkled face.

The last thought was enough to bring his brain to a more reasonable level of sanity.

“She tried to kiss you???” Kankuro asked again, apparently reassessing the younger boy in front of him.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Sasori replied dryly. He wouldn’t admit it to Kankuro, or anyone really, but he found himself just as surprised.

“And you’re not just making this up?”

“I’ve been over it a hundred times in my head,” Sasori sighed heavily. “She said she met a guy, recently, and she wanted to kiss him, and then our faces were really close together all of the sudden —”

He hadn’t realized that his words had been tumbling out of his mouth. Sasori paused, collected himself again, and continued carefully.

“Her teammates interrupted us. And we haven’t spoken about it since.”

“Oh. Well, you know,” Kankuro shrugged, pausing to slurp up some noodles. “Girls are mysterious. They’re weird. They say one thing but mean another.”

“And? Was that supposed to be some kind of advice?” Sasori’s eyes narrowed. Some help Kankuro
was turning out to be.

“It’s obvious that she thinks you’re cute,” Kankuro sighed, rubbing his forehead in frustration and smearing some of his face paint. “She likes you. Is that what you want to hear? Because I shouldn’t have to tell you not to get attached,” he muttered, voice sinking to a low whisper. “You know what we’re here for.”

“I don’t need to explain myself to you,” Sasori bristled, eyes hard and flashing in the muted light. “I know what we’re here to do. I withdrew from the exam so that we could keep a few surprises for the grand reveal.”

Sasori had been so careful to compartmentalize his feelings for this Konoha kunoichi and his mission. Perhaps he had been too careful, because now that the ideas were mixing in his brain for the first time it was…unpleasant.

“Well she’s not going to like you so much after the final exam,” Kankuro mused quietly, stirring his noodles. Sasori had no witty response, because he was right. They both knew it. When the Sand and Sound villages attacked Konoha, everything would change.

“Then I had better make the most of the time before then,” Sasori replied stiffly. He rose from the stool and ducked out of the shop without a clue on where he was going. As he waited for his eyes to adjust, there was one bright yellow spot that did not fade.

Not many shinobi sported a bright orange jumpsuit and blonde hair. After a scan of the people behind the Glowing Annoyance and no Sakura in sight, Sasori decided he had two options. One, he could ask Uzumaki where Sakura was likely to be or two, he could simply walk the other way and try his luck. He had inadvertently caught Uzumaki’s eyes, however, and decided a hasty retreat was best. After all, talking with Kankuro had already put him in a sour mood. He didn’t think he could even attempt being civil with the more annoying of Sakura’s teammates.

Sasori let the crowd take him along, blending in seamlessly with the other bodies as he ignored the fading shouts of Uzumaki. Dodged a kunai there, he snorted to himself, and stepped into the next shop on his right. He didn’t think Uzumaki would follow him, but one could never be too careful.

He found himself surrounded by thick floral scents and velvety blooms. It appeared he had stepped into a flower shop. Quaint, he mused, and pretended to browse the wares. Until he was caught red handed.

“Are you…Sasori?”

The young shinobi in question stiffened. He didn’t know who this person was or why they knew his name, but it might not be a bad thing. It was the girl minding the counter, who he had dismissed as a civilian. Upon closer inspection he realized it was the girl Sakura had fought in the elimination round yesterday.

“Yes. Your match was against Haruno Sakura yesterday for the exams. A draw,” he replied. The two of them stood there for a beat, both unsure of how to proceed in the empty flower shop.
“Yeaaaah…” Ino nodded, looking like she wanted to say something but opted for biting her lip instead. Another beat of awkward silence. Sasori hated small talk.

“Is there something you want to say?”

“Oh! Well,” she laughed, leaning on the counter in front of her. “It’s just that. It’s so weird that we have these fresh daisies and well, I accidentally cut too many from the garden today. We’ll never sell them all.”

Sasori looked at the white flowers Ino was gesturing towards. There didn’t seem to be an exorbitant number of flowers, much less compared to the stock of the other kinds of flowers.

“Silly me,” she continued in a false, cheery tone. “I guess I’ll have to throw them out. Unless you’d like to take some off of my hands?”

Now that Ino had come to the point she was trying to make, Sasori was much less suspicious. She was trying to give him flowers to…do what, exactly? Make some kind of antidote?

“I guess I wouldn’t mind,” he replied slowly. “These plants are certainly good for…?”

Ino blinked at him.

“For giving to girls,” she suggested, somewhat dryly. Apparently, the subtle approach didn’t work on this guy either but hey, he was certainly sharper than most of the guys their age, she thought with an inward sigh.

“Oh,” was all he could think to say. Of course girls liked flowers. Well, he had heard that they did. The flowers in the Suna greenhouses were grown strictly for their utility, not for pleasure, so he wasn’t too familiar with the practice of presenting anyone with flowers.

While his brain had temporarily stalled out, imagining presenting these flowers to Sakura and what she might say, Ino had wasted no time in gathering a nice cluster.

“I’ve added an iris for color and some ferns for sincerity,” she grinned, pushing the paper-wrapped bouquet into his chest. Sasori took it gingerly, cradling the sweet-smelling gift in his arms.

“Let me just get my—”

“Free of charge! They were going to the trash anyway,” she said brightly, practically pushing him out into the street. “Sakura should be at the third training ground. Just head to the outskirts of town, follow the path on the left, and you should see it.”

Sasori nodded his thanks, squared his shoulders, and marched down the street like a man on a mission. Ino watched him until he was lost in the crowd. A devilish smile quirked her lips as she turned back into the shop.

Sakura owed her big time for this.
Recipe for Disaster

Chapter Notes

hey there's no editing whatsoever in this chapter just so you know
i PROMISE they'll go on a date soon idk

As it turned out, Ino’s directions hadn’t been entirely helpful.

Sasori had done as instructed. He had followed the main road to what appeared to be “the outskirts of town,” took a left, and was somehow in the middle of the forest.

“This can’t be right,” he muttered to himself. Who would put a training ground all the way out here?

Perhaps a village with more civilians than Suna? He pondered the population of Konoha, or what he had seen of it, and compared it to that of his home village. It appeared to be more populous, but he couldn’t be sure there were more civilians than shinobi unless he could see a census record…

His ninja training stopped his body even though his mind was elsewhere, calculating a problem that didn’t matter. Sasori blinked out of his daydream of statistics and population growth and found himself just within ear shot of someone’s shouts. Not shouts of pain, per se, but something more like frustration and impact. Shouts of training, he would guess, because he was hoping to be somewhere near training ground three.

Sasori suddenly became self-conscious about the bouquet in his hands. It wasn’t a feeling he particularly used to or liked. Should he dump it in the bushes? The flowers had been free after all… but what if she liked them? What if it made her smile and laugh and blush and kiss him?????

He stood there on the well-worn path, hands tight around the paper surrounding the flowers. He was sure he looked like an idiot, and just as he was about to ditch the bouquet in the bushes, he heard light footsteps.

Sasori froze. And he never froze. He had been broken of that long ago, but that was in reaction to a combat situation. Nobody in Suna had ever taught him how not to panic in a romantic situation.

Time seemed to slow as she came into view, the sun dappling her skin as she moved through the shade. Sweat glistened on her skin, mingling with the water she was chugging furiously from a canteen. He was sure his heart stopped this time, his petrification mingling with his desire to impress her.

Sasori wasn’t sure what to say, but he need not have worried. Sakura beat him to the punch.

“Sasori?” She asked, eyes wide. “Oh my gosh, I look disgusting! Why are you here? Don’t look at me!” She demanded, quickly and ineffectively trying to wipe the sweat from her face. If anything, she was smearing dirt everywhere.

“You look more like a real ninja than when I first saw you,” he smirked, but averted his eyes anyway. He like this raw, unpolished Sakura. She seemed more interesting, more alive than that girl he had initially met.
“Not sure if that’s a compliment, but thanks?” She replied, splashing some of the water from her canteen into her face and scrubbing furiously. “How do I look?”

“You told me not to look at you,” Sasori said, now looking very obviously at anything but her. It was hard, but manageable. He could hear her frustrated growl and regretted nothing.

“Well you can look at me now,” she sighed. “I think I’ve done the best I can do without a mirror.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he said. He gave her his best judgement face but saw nothing less than perfection. Sakura’s skin was red from the sun, exertion, or her furious scrubbing. Likely a combination of all three.

Her eyes dared him to tease her, lips set in a thin determined line. He walked slowly towards her, his former anxieties drifting away with the light breeze that passed between them.

“You look…” Sasori swallowed. “Acceptable.” Best not to let her get a big head about it, or she would never forget it.

“I—what’s that?” Sakura had been so caught up in her appearance that she hadn’t even noticed the flowers until now. She blinked in surprise at the bouquet, and then looked back up at Sasori.

“Mmm,” he hummed, buying himself some time to choose his words carefully. “I never got the chance to congratulate you yesterday. On your match.”

“So you brought me congratulatory flowers for losing my match,” she deadpanned.

“For giving it your all,” he corrected quickly. She sure had a way for putting words into his mouth. She considered him carefully before examining the flowers more closely.

“Well, daisies are my favorite…” Sakura murmured, her defensive manner turning soft. “I don’t suppose Ino told you what to get.”

“She may have helped,” Sasori shrugged, offering the bouquet before his sweaty hands dampened the paper.

“Thanks.” Sakura’s face became a little pinker as she accepted the flowers. “I’ve never gotten flowers before.”

“Why? You deserve them,” he said before he could even stop himself. He clenched his jaw, cursing his stupidity, but she laughed happily.

“You’re sweet. It’s weird.” There was a pause before she realized how that sounded. “No, I mean, it’s weird that the sand siblings seem so untouchable. You’re all from the same village, but you’re completely different than I thought you’d be.”

“Not sure if that’s a compliment, but thanks?” He said, allowing himself a small smile as he echoed her words. She laughed and pushed his shoulder with her own. An electric thrill ran through his spine, the feeling tingling in his fingertips.

“Well, what do you think?” Sakura asked as they walked down the path back to the village. She ran a hand through her now considerably shorter hair, ruffling it at the roots.

“More suited for you line of work,” he admitted, wishing that he was the one with his hands in her hair. “Although it was such a waste of hair. It would’ve looked good on a puppet,” he smirked.
“Okay I take it back. You’re just as weird as the rest of the Suna shinobi!” She declared with a laugh. Some nearby birds scattered from the tree tops into the sky at the sudden outburst. He was suddenly reminded of the plan, why he was even here in Konoha, and tried to push it to the side.

“I don’t actually think you’re weird,” Sakura backpedaled, looking worried. He must have let it show on his face after all.

“It’s not that. I was just thinking of something else.” He could feel himself closing up, distancing himself from her. It’s what he was good at, and it was all too familiar. He forced a small smile. “They’re really not too bad once you get to know them.”

“Maybe you could introduce me?” She asked, green eyes sparkling hopefully. How could he deny a face like that?

“If you want me to, sure.” What was he agreeing to?! But maybe, just maybe, if he convinced Gaara’s team that Sakura could be spared from whatever was to come with the invasion... “I’m sure they’d like to really get to know one of the locals. You know, village cooperation and all that.”

“Great!” She grinned, and he was once again reminded of what she did not know of the world. The horror, the bloodshed, the unfairness of it all. Something tightened inside of his chest, but released suddenly when she took his hand.

She was still grinning as they walked, hand in hand, toward the village. Toward her people, her home, the safest place she knew.

How could Sasori protect her and serve his village at the same time? Not that he had a strong desire to serve Suna, but there weren’t a lot of options out there. Defect to Konoha? They would never have him. He’d be scrutinized as long as he lived here.

He could just imagine what Kankuro would say: “Moving to a weak village for your first crush? Pathetic. Maybe you do belong with those losers,” or something like that.

An idea struck Sasori as suddenly as lightning, and he was sure it was the best idea he’d ever had. As he worked out the finer points in his head, they arrived at an apartment building where Sakura lived with her parents. Both of her parents.

“Ah,” he said, momentarily caught off guard. Obviously both of her parents were still alive. How could she have such a sunny disposition and be an orphan? He gathered himself quickly before he lost his nerve.

“Are you busy tomorrow afternoon?”

“Not particularly. Kakashi is off training Sasuke somewhere so it’s not like I have a lot to do at the moment,” she grumbled.

“Would you like to train with me?”

“Not exactly what I thought you would ask me but sure, I don’t mind getting some pointers from an outside perspective.”

“Wait, what did you think I was asking?” Sasori asked, their fingers still intertwined. She gave his hand a little squeeze.

“Well if you have to ask, I’m not telling you,” Sakura sniffed, but didn’t unlace their fingers. He just looked at her, mind visibly trying to figure out what he had missed. “Maybe you can figure it out
before tomorrow,” she teased, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

She dashed up the stairs to the main door, pausing only to throw a triumphant grin over her shoulder as he stood there dumbly. He pressed his fingertips lightly to his cheek, trying to recall the brief sensation she had bestowed upon him.

Sasori didn’t know how long he had been standing there until a passerby jostled him from his frozen state. He looked up at the windows above him, trying to see if maybe she was watching him from above, but she was absent.

At that point, he should have known he was in trouble. He should’ve known he was getting in too deep, that the waters of this infatuation were well past his knees and threatening to drown him. He might as well have been taking big gulps of it into his lungs, ignoring the painful sensation of surrendering to his newest obsession.

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