from the corner of your eye

by chadsuke

Summary

When a misunderstanding prompts Sasuke to take a deeper involvement in the growth of his teammates, no one is quite prepared for the way things... change. Especially Sasuke.

The question is - is it for the better?

[A slow burn Naruto rewrite.]

[Current Arc: Secrets of the Uzumaki]
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

It’s not like Sasuke’s surprised a boy has fallen for him, too. There are enough girls after him – it’s be stupid to assume everyone in their class is straight. Some guy might want to be Mr. Uchiha, and he doesn’t really care.

No, the surprising part is that it’s Naruto.

Sasuke doesn’t know a lot about romance. He doesn’t really care to, not right now. But what he has picked up from his admirers is that you are genuinely very nice to your crushes. All the girls act like everything he does is perfect, as if he can do no wrong. Naruto – Naruto doesn’t. He argues with him, he never agrees with him, he fights back at every opportunity. If it wasn’t for the kiss, Sasuke wouldn’t have a clue.

But maybe that’s how Naruto deals with his crush? It’s not a guy thing – Sasuke isn’t stupid enough to think there’s an inherent difference in girl-crushes vs. boy-crushes vs. other-gender-crushes, so it must be a Naruto thing. Constantly fight with your crush and be a rival. Huh.

A rival isn’t a bad way to go about things.

Too bad he’s not interested.

He catches himself staring at Naruto out of the corner of his eye, sometimes. Whether it’s spamming clones so they can weed the garden faster, or throwing himself wholeheartedly into catching Tora, he’s always pushing himself.

It’s… interesting.

Maybe if he wasn’t keeping an eye on Naruto, he wouldn’t have noticed, but Sasuke is so he does. Kakashi dismisses them for the day, and disappears. Sakura gives him an apologetic look – she asks him to hang out almost every day, but not every – and babbles out something about helping out her dad and runs off. He squints at her, watching her wring her hands together, turn red, and then flee when he offers up no response but a grunt.

Naruto waves as she leaves. “Bye, Sakura!” he crows, and Sasuke turns his squint onto him. The other boy doesn’t seem even slightly tired from their missions. It doesn’t matter that he made over 30 clones over the course of the day to help patch the roof – Sasuke had kept track – or that they had had to chase down that godforsaken cat. Naruto, it seems, has stamina.

He catches Sasuke’s squint, and glares at him. “What’re you looking at, bastard?”

Sasuke ignores the insult. He’s quiet for a moment, mulling it over in his head. “…Are you going to train after this?”

It’s hard to resist a smirk at how startled Naruto is. “W-What?” He rallies quickly. “Of course! I need to train lots if I want to be the Hokage!”

The Uchiha surveys him for a moment. “You have a lot of stamina. Spar with your clones until you’re too tired. It might help.”
Naruto stares at him, thunderstruck. Sasuke waits. One... two... three... four... He manages to count all the way to eleven before the other manages to speak. “Why are you telling me this?”

He’s suspicious. Sasuke approves. He smirks, before turning to go. “If you do that for a week or two, I’ll start sparring with you. But you need to get good first, idiot.” He ignores the sputtering and yelling at his back, and keeps walking, hands in his pockets, all the way back to the compound.

Sasuke wonders if this counts as flirting.

Naruto, apparently, is actually taking Sasuke’s words to heart. He shows up every morning tired, and naps on the bridge, sprawled out like a starfish and snoring. He’s rejuvenated and fresh by the time Kakashi finally shows, so a nap must be all he needs, but it’s a bit of a damper on Sasuke’s morning. Without Naruto there to argue with, Sakura can focus only on Sasuke. It’s... annoying.

Sasuke sighs. “It’s clan techniques. You can’t read it.”

She droops. “Oh. Okay.” Sakura stares at her feet, and Sasuke starts to wonder when he became a bleeding heart. Is this why they’re put on teams? To make them actually care about people?

That Man’s team had died and quit around him. No wonder it didn’t work on him. Sasuke frowns down at his book for a few more moments, listening to the birds chirp nearby and Naruto’s quiet snores. “Don’t you have any books to read, Sakura?”

She blinks at him, surprised. “Er- N-No, I don’t.”

He frowns. “Bring one next time. Check one out from the library if you don’t have anything at home.” He has no idea if her parents are civilian, or ninja – he knows they’re ALIVE, because he’ll never forget that exchange that made her more abhorrent for him and made him soften slightly towards Naruto, but he knows no details. He doesn’t care to.

But for now. Sasuke reaches into his bag and pulls out a second book, offering it to her. It’s nothing fancy, just a book on elemental ninjutsu. He had brought it along just in case he needed something less-secret to read. “You can read this for now. Take care of it.”

She takes it reverently, holding it carefully in her hands. Sakura’s face is bright, is the sun, cheeks red and teeth gleaming and she BEAMS at him. “I will! Thank you so much, Sasuke!”

“Hn.”

They read until Kakashi arrives, jumping lightly down onto the bridge railings. No one greets him, and his eye curves up in a smile as he reaches out to ruffle Sasuke’s hair. The boy scowls as he tucks his book away, and Kakashi’s eye smile just crinkles further. “Good job, Sasuke.”

He averts his eyes and tries to will away the blush that’s risen to his cheeks. It doesn’t work.
Exactly one week after he told Naruto to train, the blond shows up wide-awake to their morning meeting. He sticks his finger in Sasuke’s chest, in his personal space, and grins. “Fight me, Sasuke!”

Sasuke swallows down the quip he wants to make – he doesn’t want to actually flirt with this loser – and smirks, instead. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

Predictably, the idiot takes the bait, his grin turning into a scowl. “I trained for a week! You said if I would then you would fight me!”

The Uchiha resists the urge to correct him, and flickers off the bridge, instead, over to the grass. It’s wider here, better for a spar, and the only thing they’d destroy would be the trees if they’re not careful. After a moment of surprise, Naruto heaves himself off the bridge and runs over, grinning widely. Sakura follows, less sure of herself. “Sasuke… Naruto… are you sure? Master Kakashi might not.”

Sasuke levels her with a look, and she squeaks and stops. “I need to get stronger,” he says, simply. “I need to spar for that. If you get strong enough, I’ll spar with you, too.” Left unsaid is the fact that she isn’t strong enough, not by far – he’s sure that Sakura is smart enough to read between the lines. From the way she wilts, he knows he got her.

Surprisingly, Naruto picks up on it, too, and scowls at him. “Hey, hey, Sakura’s AWESOME, bastard! She’s really strong and her punches hurt a lot! I’m gonna beat you and then you’re gonna apologize!”

Sakura doesn’t seem to know what to do with that avid defense – quite frankly, Sasuke’s not sure what to think about it, either. To be fair, Naruto WOULD know. Sasuke’s never gotten punched by the girl. “Fine, Naruto,” he concedes, giving the other a smirk. “If you beat me, I’ll apologize to Sakura.”

Naruto pumped his fist in the air, and then formed a familiar seal. “Shadow Clone Jutsu!” With a poof of smoke, five other Narutos surrounded him, and Sasuke narrowed his eyes.

“Sakura, you be the ref.”

She nodded, straightening up. “No weapons, just taijutsu and ninjutsu.” Not like any of them knew any genjutsu anyway, but good idea. “The spar ends when Kakashi-sensei shows up or one of you…” She fumbles slightly. “When one of you get in a spot where you could kill or knock out the other, if this was real.”

They both nod at her, waiting for her signal. “One… two… go!”

Sasuke moves, a blur to the eyes, and takes out a clone. And then another, another, another- He dispatches all five easily, but Naruto has summoned three more, and Sasuke has to duck underneath a punch and sweep the feet out from one of the Narutos.

This one hits the ground with a yell and doesn’t poof – the real one, then. With the real one on the ground, Sasuke poofs the spare three Narutos in a few moments, before tackling the real Naruto. He pins him to the ground on his stomach, twists his hands up behind him, and sits on his back. “Yield,” he says calmly, and Naruto growls.

He can’t move, though, and Sakura calls it with glee. “Sasuke won!”

Naruto growls again as Sasuke lets him go, pushing himself to his feet. He doesn’t offer to help him up, and the other doesn’t even look for it. “Come on, let’s go again! Best two out of three!” Naruto doesn’t even seem slightly winded, and Sasuke considers this for a moment.
Could be a good workout, if nothing else – and he smirks, taking a few steps back before giving his teammate a nod. “Fine. Again.”

The smaller boy lunges forward with a yell, and it’s on. Sasuke defeats him again. A third time, a fourth time. They might have even gotten to a fifth, had Kakashi not appeared on the bridge with a small puff of smoke, lifting his hand in greeting and as careless as ever.

Naruto yells at him, Sakura yells at him, and Sasuke lets the tension of sparring bleed off from his shoulders as he shoves his hands into his pockets and wanders back over the bridge. Despite the fact that he won, he’s breathing heavily, bits of his hair stuck to his skin with sweat. Naruto doesn’t even look affected in the slightest. It’s annoying.

It comes to him that evening, when their missions are long done and the quiet darkness of his house is pressing in on him. Both of his teammates have crushes on him. Both of them.

Naruto had easily been shoved into training the way Sasuke wanted, so he would be a better sparring partner. (But why, why, had he never broken a sweat…?) Sakura lapped up the book he gave her, and could easily be persuaded to start learning more, one way or another, to get stronger.

He refuses to let himself get attached. It was why he had isolated himself from Naruto all these years (though it hasn’t, apparently, stalled the other’s crush). He can’t let That Man have ammunition, can’t handle the temptation for his eyes, can’t do it. It’s just… too painful, too.

But Sasuke has to go on missions with these two, and training with these two will be easier if they were strong, and using their crushes to make them stronger will stop him from being dragged down as much.

Yeah. It’s a good plan.

Chapter End Notes

https://68.media.tumblr.com/8ad4ea50e02ed2d03238abcb6d4263da/tumblr_inline_mgvtxqU5ic1r8xds8.jpg

Canonically, at least in my interpretation of that image, Sasuke doesn't know that Naruto was bumped into when the two kissed. He thought that was done on purpose. I feel like that should've changed things?

So this is me taking the idea and running with it. Thinking Naruto has a crush on him leads Sasuke to pay more attention to him earlier, which leads to this idea with training, and so on and so forth. It's very much a ripple effect.
Sasuke doesn’t get a chance to practice leading his teammates in the right direction too much. They only have a few more days – during which Sasuke goads Naruto into training even more, and Sakura reads through a book a day (which, if he’s honest, kind of impresses him) – and then Naruto throws a fit about their mission.

Sasuke... kinda agrees. Yeah, it makes sense that genin are sent on these missions. He likes having the money – the less he has to pull out of the Clan Savings, the better. (He’s kept a total of how much he’s used, because his orphan stipend doesn’t cover everything, and he’s started to slowly put it back.) But he was the top of the class! Sakura was high, too, he knew that, even if he didn’t know how high, and Sasuke wonders how much they’re being held back by having Naruto on their team.

…At least, he would wonder, but Naruto is turning out to be surprising. He just wishes they would do more training, because all it seems Kakashi is focused on is team formations and correcting stances and making sure their throwing is accurate and-

Sasuke isn’t going to get any stronger at this rate.

So he welcomes the opportunity that Naruto’s tantrum brings them, welcomes the fact that now they get to leave Konoha and escort someone, even if it’s a drunken bridgebuilder. Maybe bandits will attack, or- or SOMETHING, and he’ll be able to do something. Anything. He impressed Kakashi, once, and maybe he could impress him again and then actually LEARN something IMPORTANT and-

He catches Sakura by the elbow before they part ways to pack, though, and levels her with an intent look. She blushes. “Bring some books,” he instructs her, noting the way she perks up under the attention. “You’ll probably have time to learn.”

“Of course, Sasuke!” she chirps, flashing him a pleased smile, and he lets her go.


Naruto takes it like the insult it is and bristles. “O-Of course I do! You’ll see!” Sasuke rolls his eyes and opens his mouth but before he can, the idiot’s taken off after Sakura.

…Probably to ask her how to pack one, if he knows him at all.

He looks up at Kakashi. Kakashi eye-smiles back down. Sasuke frowns. Kakashi’s eye crinkles more. Sasuke’s lips fall into what is decidedly NOT a pout, and Kakashi ruffles the boy’s hair. “Maa, maa, I’ll go check up on him. You’re a good teammate, Sasuke.”

The drunk bridgebuilder laughs and laughs at the way Sasuke’s face turns red, and it’s only the fact that this is their Civilian Client that stops him from punching him. Instead, Sasuke marches off towards his compound, trying to ignore his teacher’s words. That hadn’t been what he meant by it at all.

Sasuke manages to hold his own against two chunin until Kakashi shows up, and it’s a welcome
fact. He can face two chunin and hold his own – maybe he would have beat them with more time, maybe not, but he can hold his own.

His teammates were useless, though. He can give Sakura a little credit, he supposes – she was in position, maybe she could have done something. But Naruto? Naruto did nothing.

And then he almost bled to death. The moron.

But that makes him think about Naruto, at least. And thinking about Naruto makes him remember how the idiot hadn’t known a single thing about anything, hadn’t understood about Wave or the Kages or anything. He waits a little bit, until Naruto is all patched up and they’re moving again, and he contemplates his words and-

“Naruto, if you don’t know basic information, you need to ask one of us.”

Naruto stares at Sasuke. Sasuke stares back. Sakura stares at Sasuke. Kakashi does that thing where he pretends he’s not paying any attention but actually he’s analyzing every bit of the conversation and eye-smiling fit to burst. Tazuna stares at Sasuke, cause everyone else is. Naruto swallows – as if something’s caught in his throat, something painful lodged there and choking him. “You… What?”

There’s something pained in his voice, and Sasuke is- is abruptly reminded of himself, of how he used to be fragile glass held together by force and will and nothing else, and he looks away. Stares straight ahead and doesn’t meet anyone’s eyes and lets Naruto pull himself together. “If I’m going to fight with you, I won’t let you drag me down. So ask one of us.” He pauses, and before anyone can speak, continues. “Maybe ask Sakura first, though. She’s the most booksmart.”

It’s not really a compliment – and… it is at the same time – but he can see Sakura blush from the corner of his eye. She nods. “Y-Yeah, sure, I’ll answer your questions!”

Sasuke makes himself glance at Naruto, and while there’s still something fragile in his face, it’s overshadowed by a large beam he’s directing at the girl. “Thanks, Sakura!”

He pesters her with questions (even the next day) until they have to be quiet on the boat, and Sasuke is proud that Sakura didn’t snap and punch Naruto a single time. (Not that he disapproves of her punching Naruto. He really doesn’t. Shinobi hit their comrades all the time, even from birth, getting them used to dispatching violence. It’s never been discouraged.) She answers all of his questions and Sasuke is unsurprised that Naruto has not even a simple understanding of what chakra is and something leads her into explaining the Hyuugas and then the Yamanakas and so on and so forth.

She’s finished with the Akimichis and is about to go onto the Naras before they hit the boat, and Sasuke has never seen Naruto so attentive before. Huh. He’ll have to capitalize on that.

Then everything goes to hell. They almost die. Naruto proves to be very good at strategizing – must capitalize on that later – and seriously, someone needs to teach Sakura how to fight.

And-

And-

And Kakashi has the Sharingan.

They sit by his bedside after they’ve brought him to Tazuna’s house, Naruto’s clones helping the trio to carry him, and they stare.
Well. Sasuke stares. He stares at the way Kakashi’s forehead protector tilts, how it covers one eye. He had thought, previously, that his teacher only had one eye. But he… he has the Sharingan. From the way a scar covers it, and he only has one, AND he can’t de-activate it, it seems like it was a transplant but that is-

It is-

It. Hurts. Seeing one after so long, even if it suddenly makes so much sense as to why Kakashi is his teacher. Maybe he actually can learn something from him, once he activates his own Sharingan…

“Hey, hey.” Naruto speaks up, and the two awake ninja dully turn their eyes on him. He’s frowning, staring at their teacher, and apparently in deep contemplation. “You told me to ask if I didn’t get something, so I’m asking! What’s up with Kakashi-sensei’s eye?”

Sakura doesn’t answer. She glances over at him, and Sasuke has never been grateful that she’s his teammate, but he is in this instance. He inhales. Exhales. Swallows sharply. Speaks. “It’s… called the Sharingan. It’s a dojutsu unique to the Uchiha clan.”

Sasuke knows the only reason Naruto knows what a dojutsu is is from Sakura telling him about the Hyuuga yesterday, but the blonde nods as if he’s known all along. “But Kakashi-sensei’s not an Uchiha, right? So how he’d get it?”

Sakura fields this one. Sasuke’s grateful again. “I think… it’s probably a transplant, Naruto. Someone else had it first, and now Kakashi-sensei does.”

Naruto frowns. “So where’d he get it?”

He snaps. “From a dead Uchiha.” He sneers, and doesn’t feel bad about how his teammates pale, how his fists curl into tight balls on his lap and how he shakes, shakes with anger and something deeper he refuses to acknowledge exists. “They’re all dead now, where the hell else would he get it from?”

The other boy scowls at him. “Bastard! Why are they all dead, huh, are you sure? Maybe there’s more!”

Sakura bashes her fist on Naruto’s head, and Sasuke realizes he’s trembling. “Idiot! Leave Sasuke alone!” She yells, and she grabs him and she yanks. Sakura is probably the only one Naruto will listen to, and even if he doesn’t she certainly has the strength to pull him along, and she does.

They leave and they’re loud and they slowly get out of the range of his hearing and-

Sasuke breathes. In, out. Inhale, exhale. And he stares at his teacher’s eye once more. Because- Because Naruto’s question, while it’s wrong, is also right. Did- Did Kakashi pluck his eye from one of his dead relatives, post-Massacre? The thought makes his heart clench. He hadn’t burned the bodies. He hadn’t burned them or disposed of them properly and-

Could… could people have taken their eyes?

He doesn’t ask Kakashi about the eye, when he gets up.

He doesn’t ask Kakashi or say a single word about it.

Sasuke accepts that Zabuza is alive, accepts they need to work harder, and he does. He throws himself into his training – though not as recklessly as Naruto – ashamed that Sakura has managed to
beat him, ashamed that he doesn’t have Perfect Chakra Control, ashamed that he doesn’t have his Sharingan even though someone else does, someone else who isn’t from his team and probably a thief and-

And then they fight. He gets his Sharingan, he gets that thing he had desired so much, so much in this world-

And Sasuke dies.

He remembers his body moving, realizing Naruto was down and there was no way to stop the masked boy. There was no way to stop him, there was nothing, there was-

*I’m an Avenger*, he thinks. He needs to survive. He should let the boy attack Naruto and then attack him while he’s distracted and take him down but. But.

Sasuke can’t let someone else die in front of him.

He moves and it *hurts hurts hurts* but Naruto is safe, Naruto is safe and- “I don’t… know,” he says, he says to Naruto, but he does.

Kakashi was right the whole time, and it’s a burning, unpleasant thought.

He had pretended like he was manipulating them, pretended like he was just raising up his team to be stronger. There were no emotional attachments, he had lied to himself. He didn’t care. They could be replaced tomorrow by more competent team members and he wouldn’t bat an eye, he told himself.

But he couldn’t let- he couldn’t let Naruto die.

“I… I hated you,” he whispers, he whispers even as he can’t feel his body. The lie falls from his lips so easily – or maybe it was a truth, once upon a time, but he can’t admit it’s true now.

“Why?” Naruto demands, and he can feel the pain in the other’s voice, feel the glass of his voice and of his being start to fracture. “Why? Why me? I didn’t ask for your help!”

No one asks to have someone die in front of them. Especially not if Naruto likes him. Does it hurt as much as family does? Does it?

Sasuke can’t make the guilt any greater. “I don’t know…” he whispers, even as he feels his body fade. “My body… moved on its own…” He’s crying, he realizes then, he’s crying and he’s going to die. “Idiot…”

He collapses. Naruto- Naruto catches him.

His arms are warm. Sasuke wonders when the last time he was held was. Held like this – not the hugs his fangirls flung on him before, that he tried to avoid, not the holds some people gained on him in sparring before he beat them, but like this. Naruto’s arms are warm, and gentle, and he’s oh-so-careful with Sasuke.

The other yells, and Sasuke tries not to cry more. He’s dying, here. He gave his life for his teammate, and he’ll never be able to kill his brother. Avenge his clan.

Somehow, that’s never seemed less important.

Naruto’s eyes are wide and big and blue, blue like the sky, and Sasuke tries to talk. Tries to tell him. “That man…” he whispers, staring at the blue, drowning in the blue. There’s nothing left but the
teary eyes of his teammate. “Until I… killed my brother… I absolutely refused to die… That’s what I decided, but…”

But he decided to give his life for Naruto. He can’t help it. Tears well up in his tired, black eyes and he tries to lift his hand. He wants to touch him, wants to touch Naruto, whose blue eyes now hide from him and he can’t see them and please, please-

His arm is tired. He’s not… he’s not going to last.

“You… please…” He whispers, soft and quiet. “Don’t… don’t die.” He thinks of the other. Thinks of this loud, boisterous boy who had been put on his team and who never gave up, who always bounced back, who wanted so desperately to be Hokage someday. His lips would curve into a smile if they could, but he’s so tired. Too tired.

“Don’t let your precious dream die.”

Sasuke wakes up.

He doesn’t talk about his “death”. His teammates don’t talk about his “death”. Kakashi doesn’t talk about his “death”.

That’s the way that Sasuke would prefer to have it, honestly. He doesn’t want to talk about it. He doesn’t want to talk about how he gave up on his dream, how he was willing to die for Naruto, how he gave his life in an instant and could only think of how he didn’t want him to die, please please Naruto don’t die live on live on and dream and

No. He doesn’t really want to talk about it.

After a few days, though, Naruto has gotten over his Treat Sasuke Like He’s Glass attitude and approaches him about a different question. One that Sasuke would prefer to talk to about even less.

It’s all three of them. Sasuke is sharpening a kunai. Sakura is reading a book. Naruto- Naruto comes and plops down next to Sasuke. For a moment, the two of them ignore each other. Then-

“Sasuke, why… why do you want to kill your brother?”

Sasuke stiffens. Sakura stops reading. Naruto stares at his teammate with wide, wide blue eyes, blue enough to drown in. The Uchiha- Stops.

Breathes.

Stares at the wall.

“He… he killed my entire clan.” It’s been a long time since he’s verbalized this, it’s been a long time since he’s spoken of this, and it feels so fragile. Tenterhooks. “I’m going to kill him.”

Naruto doesn’t react like any of the others. No pity, no ‘I’m sorry’, no none of that bullshit. Naruto has never reacted like the others. He never has. Never will.

He’s scowling, instead. “Damn right you are! We’ll help you. Right, Sakura?”

The girl starts at being addressed, but after a moment, meets Naruto’s determined look with one of her own. “Yeah. We’ll help you. We’re… we’re a team, right?”
Sasuke stares at them both with wide, wide eyes and then *snaps*. “He’ll kill you!” He lunges to his feet, drops his kunai and snarls at them both. “He’ll kill you! He’ll kill you both, and I couldn’t- I can’t let you die, Naruto, I-“

He needs to stop talking. He shuts his mouth and he stalks out of the room and he slams the door behind them. No. No, they can’t help. Itachi will kill them. Itachi will kill them just for being close to him, because Itachi wants him to have nothing in the world and

Sasuke won’t let Naruto or Sakura die in front of him. Not if he can help it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for your positive responses!

The early arcs are going to jump around a lot - I'm not going to rehash canon unless there are real differences, internal or external, so I fit the whole arc into one fic.

Hope you like!
Sasuke doesn’t talk to his team for three days. He ignores Sakura. Doesn’t look at Naruto. He speaks to their hosts when it’s necessary, and he asks Kakashi for training every day, but the other two genin? They might as well not exist.

He can sense his teacher’s disapproval every time he says no, but Sasuke doesn’t care. They shouldn’t have pried. Shouldn’t have poked and prodded at all his weak spots until he feels like he’ll break.

Teams don’t make you strong. Teams make you fragile.

He finds this out, truly, on the third day, when he demands training and Kakashi does his passive aggressive ‘I’m so disappointed in you’ eye smile and Kakashi finally says yes.

“But you’re still recovering, Sasuke, so I’ll just take Sakura and Naruto!”

Sasuke’s glass of water almost – almost – shatters in his hands. He breathes in. Breathes out. And then shoves himself up from the table, pushing away and stalking out and ignoring the way that Sakura calls after him. He walks and walks and then runs and runs until he’s through the town, down the path, up the hill – and he stops at their graves.

Zabuza’s grave, and the boy named Haku.

He stares at them for a moment, stares at the sword of the deadly man who almost ended them, and the wooden figure marking the grave of the boy who could have killed him but showed mercy, and then he sits.

That’s where Sakura finds him, almost a half hour later. She stops, hesitant, not wanting to go any close and disturb him, and that’s when Sasuke speaks. “Sakura,” he says, the first time he’s talked to her in three days. “How did they die?”

She starts. “What?”

Sasuke glances at her, frowning. “How did Zabuza and Haku die? What happened after I-“ He stops. After he died. After he passed out, after he-

No, he doesn’t want to talk about that.

Sakura hesitates for a moment. She chews her lip – bad habit, you might bite through your lip while fighting or startled – and then she steps forward and sits next to him, carefully arranging her dress around herself as she folds her legs. “Well, I don’t know what happened right afterwards, but after Naruto broke through the ice…”

She talks. She tells him how Naruto had managed to beat Haku, had almost killed him, but how Haku had sacrificed himself for Zabuza. She talks about how Gato had shown up and kicked Haku’s corpse, how Inari and the villagers came, how Zabuza cut them all down and how Kakashi had carried Zabuza so he could die next to Haku and-

She’s crying by the end of it, tearing up and emotional, and he doesn’t flinch away when she leans
into him. He allows it. Sakura needing comfort, Sakura seeking him – that’s not new. That’s normal. But Naruto managing to overpower and beat an opponent who could have killed Sasuke if he wanted to?

That’s the farthest from normal.

They sit there together, quiet aside from Sakura’s quiet tears as she tries to wrestle herself back under control, and Sasuke doesn’t look at her. He gives her her privacy, because she’s sensitive and brought to tears by others, and even if it’s a weakness that will get stamped out he won’t shame her for it.

Instead, after a few moments, he reaches down and curls a hand around her wrist. He says nothing. Does nothing more – but it seems to help, and she slowly relaxes.

After enough time has passed that it seems safe, he looks at her again. Her cheeks are blotchy and so are her eyes, but she’s not crying anymore. “Sakura,” he says, relieved. “Could you tell Naruto I want to talk to him?”

She seems disappointed, but nods, carefully getting to her feet and brushing herself off as he releases her. “I… okay, sure.”

He hesitates. “…Thanks.” She deserves that much, at least.

Sakura smiles, one of her genuine ones and not her fake ‘cutesy’ ones, and he thinks he made the right choice. “Any time, Sasuke!”

Sasuke can’t accurately judge time out here yet – he knows approximate time, but he doesn’t know the exacts – but it feels like ages until Naruto stalks up the road and plops next to him. Interestingly enough, on the opposite side, different from where Sakura had sat. He’s ungainly, legs sprawled out in front of him and leaning back on his arms, and he scowls at Sasuke. “What d’you want, bastard? I was training, I was training!”

He’s so relieved by the utter normalcy that it takes him a moment to respond. “How did you defeat him?” he asks, gesturing to the mist nin’s grave.

Naturally, it takes Naruto a moment to catch up with the topic, but then he- pales, surprisingly, and looks away. “Why do you wanna know?”

Naruto’s scowl deepens. “His name was Haku. And we…” He hesitates for a moment, torn, and forges on. He always forges on. “We met, before the battle. I met him in the forest when I was training. He… told me something, you know. Made me think.”

The blonde looks up to meet Sasuke’s eyes, intent and dead serious. Sasuke’s breath catches in the back of his throat. “He said you get stronger when you protect your precious people.”

There’s so many holes in that explanation, Sasuke thinks. So many things that don’t make sense – Naruto had to pull the power from SOMEWHERE, after all – but all he can think of is does that make me one of your precious people, Naruto?
It makes sense. Naruto likes him. But there’s- there’s a big difference between ‘I’m like one of your fangirls, and I have a crush on you like so many others in the class’ and... and precious people.

He needs to re-evaluate. He needs to reassess. But right now Sasuke just needs to breathe, and he inhales and exhales and tries to speak. “Oh,“ is all he can say. “Oh.”

There always has been more of an unspoken understanding with Naruto than there has been with Sakura, and the other boy smiles as if he had said something profound, breaking through the clouds like a ray. “Yeah. He was really smart.”

Mm. Sasuke doesn’t want to think about that, about the boy who had shown him mercy and then had died, so he cracks his neck and then stands up, stretching slightly. “Hn. Spar with me?”

Naruto lights up, bouncing up on his feet. “Yeah, yeah! Let’s go!”

Sasuke beats him six times.

He doesn’t seek out Kakashi until it’s dark. Naruto and Sakura are asleep, sprawled out on the floor, when Sasuke clambers up onto the roof. His teacher is there, and Sasuke sits next to him, silent.

Kakashi, unfortunately, isn’t the kind to break the silence. So after a few moments, Sasuke breaks the silence. “How did you get a Sharingan?”

He looks straight ahead and resolutely doesn’t try to turn and see his teacher’s face. There’s a few moments of silence, and then Kakashi places a hand gently on Sasuke’s head. “Maa. It’s a long story.”

Sasuke doesn’t pull away. “I have time.”

“How do you respond to such a story? He remembers how Kakashi had said all of his friends were on the memorial stone, and he swallows sharply. “Why... why didn’t you tell me you had the Sharingan?”

Now, Sasuke finally looks at his teacher, and Kakashi looks down at him, one visible eye wider than normal. “I thought you knew. I thought your family would have told you.”

It’s painful, to think of them, when his pieces are only now sealing back together after the way his teammates prodded, but he shakes his head. “No, they never mentioned you to me.”

Kakashi moves his hand to wrap around Sasuke’s shoulder, pulling him into his side. Sasuke allows it. “Maa, I’m very sorry, then. I didn’t mean to keep it a secret.”

That was a relief. He got the Sharingan through normal circumstances (no corpse robbing), and he hadn’t meant to hide it. That was... that was good. “Will you teach me how to use it tomorrow?”

Kakashi hums, and then nods. “Not too much, though, you are still healing.”
“Hn.”

He stays there, letting his teacher keep his hand and his arm on him, and doesn’t shrug it off. He’s too tired. Too tired to even get up and move away, no matter how embarrassed he’ll be in the morning. He’s sure that Kakashi won’t let him forget it.

Quietly, he vows to visit Obito Uchiha at the memorial stone as soon as they get back.

Chapter End Notes

Lil shorter this time, sorry (I haven't had a ton of time, but wanted to get it out today) - and very introspective. I think they'll be heading back to Konoha next chapter, though, and we can utilize some other missions for fun before the chunin exams.

Thanks for all your kind comments! I'll reply to them as soon as I can, sorry, I've been really busy.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Events in this chapter reference Naruto Shippuden Episode 180, "Inari's Courage Put to the Test".

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kakashi immediately goes back on his promise the next morning. Or, rather – Sasuke is expecting more, and what Kakashi gives him isn’t satisfactory. When Kakashi said a little, he meant it, teaching Sasuke was the different amount of tomoe in the eye mean, having him practice activating and de-activating, things that Sasuke would know if he had grown up surrounded by Uchiha.

Instead, he’s being taught by Kakashi.

They sit cross-legged in the same clearing where – was it really only days ago? – the team had learned to climb trees, and stare across at each other.

“Remember, Sasuke,” Kakashi says, very serious. “You will remember everything you see with your Sharingan activated.”

He seems to be hinting at something, something important, but Sasuke can’t see it and doesn’t want to SHOW that he can’t see it. He already knows this, anyway – he remembers not-dying as viscerally as if it had happened just a minute ago, and goosebumps go up on his arms. Kakashi notices, damn him.

His teacher eye-smiles at him. “Come on, let’s go back to the house and see how the others are doing.”

Sasuke frowns. “I still have chakra. We can train more.” That Man had had his Sharingan for YEARS by the time he was Sasuke’s age. He needs it, needs the training. Oh-so-badly.

Kakashi shakes his head. “You’re still recovering. Not yet.”

It’s true, when Sasuke stands up, that he feels shaky. Unbalanced, and maybe a little queasy. Very, very tired. But that doesn’t mean he couldn’t keep pushing, couldn’t keep going, and he shoves his hands into his pockets as he surly follows Kakashi back to the house. He’s being underestimated, and he doesn’t like it.

Sakura and Naruto aren’t being underestimated, Sasuke thinks.

Countless Narutos dot the bridge, being ordered this way and that way by the workers. Kakashi says they won’t leave until its done, and that they’ll go home by walking instead of by boat, which means Naruto has been wholly enlisted to help out. The sooner they get back, the better.

There are so many Narutos, in fact, it’s hard to find his other teammate amidst the mess. You’d think it’d be easy to find bright pink in the middle of bright yellow, but apparently not? Sasuke furrows his brow, and turns to his teacher to ask, before arms come up around his shoulders.
He stiffens. Barely resists the urge to toss the offending person over his shoulder – and Naruto’s voice sounds in his ear. “Hey, hey, Sasuke, are you okay?”

It’s just Naruto. Relaxing almost immediately, Sasuke glances to the side, to where his teammate is almost resting his chin on Sasuke’s shoulder. The other’s eyes are squinting at his face, mouth pulled into a thin line. “You don’t look so good.”

Before Sasuke can protest, Kakashi ruffles his hair. “He pushed himself too hard. Go take him over to Sakura, okay, Naruto?”

“Okay!” Naruto chirps, excessively loud right next to Sasuke’s ear, and the next thing the Uchiha knows is he’s being dragged across the bridge and being manhandled into sitting firmly on a bench next to Sakura, who seems to have materialized from nowhere.

He blinks at her, and then blinks up at Naruto, who’s gripping Sasuke’s shoulders tightly and forcing him down on the bench. He obliges, and the blonde beams. “Good!” With that, he plops on the other side of Sasuke, and it’s all of Team 7, sitting right there on the bench.

There’s a few moment pause, Naruto swinging his legs and beaming, Sasuke staring straight ahead and contemplating when the fuck his life reached this point, and then Sakura giggles. “It’s nice to take a break,” she says.

Sasuke finally looks at her again, frowning slightly. She swims before his eyes, a little blurry, but Sasuke ignores it. “What were you doing?”

She flushes underneath the attention and smiles. “I was helping out Naruto. The idiot doesn’t know where to put all the wood and stuff he’s carrying!”

Naruto pouts. “Hey, hey, I thought we were working together, Sakura!”

The girl grins mischievously, shrugging. “Maa, maa,” she says, imitating their lazy, lazy teacher. “Maybe. I think I was doing most of the work.”

“Sakura!”

They bicker, him sandwiched between them, and Sasuke lets it wash over him. He doesn’t mind this. It’s okay to be between them, to let them talk, and to not actually engage. Since he’s part of this team, he needs to work with them. Since he’s part of this team, being able to trust them enough to watch his back is probably necessary.

But it doesn’t mean that he has to be friends with them, or trust in them for more than fighting, and he closes his eyes as their bickering fades into the noise of the waves.

When he wakes, it’s morning. He hadn’t realized he was that tired, and as he checks his chakra levels, he begrudgingly has to admit Kakashi was right. He had exhausted himself, and it galls to be that week.

Something had happened when he was asleep, it seems, and it means that Sakura gives him more attention than normal, that she’s terribly, terribly mad at Naruto, and Naruto seems to waver between being terrified of her and unable to look at Sasuke.

Sasuke promptly decides he really, really doesn’t want to know.
It takes them almost a week more until the bridge is done. Kakashi trains Sasuke on his Sharingan every other day until the world goes woozy, and he spends the off day recuperating and watching Sakura and Naruto work on the bridge. He’s pretty positive that if it isn’t for his blonde teammate, they wouldn’t be leaving this quickly.

Kakashi does know what he’s doing. Sometimes.

Of course, the moment they leave it turns out Naruto forgot a **ramen ticket** and they go back, and embroil themselves in a fight to save Inari, and then end up taking out at least a dozen thugs. Fun, even if they weren’t ninja.

Naruto can’t seem to be happy with the whole **winning a battle on their own without their teacher** thing, though, and bawls the whole way back to Sakura and Kakashi about his “poor, poor free ramen ticket!”

Finally, Sasuke **snaps**. “I’ll treat you to ramen when we get back if you just **shut up!**”

Naruto looks like Sasuke’s given him the Hokage hat. “**You will? Really?**”

“Yes!”

He ends up tackled in a hug by the moron, and of course *that’s* when Kakashi decides to jump down from the trees and congratulate them on a job well-done. “You did well, my cute little students!”

Sasuke curses him out under his breath.

A few hours later, he curses **himself** out under his breath as they head back to Konoha because him and Naruto? Going to ramen together as Sasuke’s treat? That sounds like a date. No wonder Naruto had hugged him for that.

Thankfully – or not-so-thankfully, depending on your perspective – they can move a lot quicker without Tazuna with them. Kakashi teaches them all the traditional Konoha tree-jumping, now that they had mastered the whole ‘sticking to a tree’ thing. Add in using chakra to make longer jumps, and they are moving far more quickly.

Sasuke would have thought they’d move at Sakura’s pace, resting when she needed to rest, or maybe letting Kakashi or a Naruto clone carry her when she tired. He’s wrong, and it’s humiliating.

He’s exhausted from his constant Sharingan practices, and it looks like Kakashi is swallowing down an ‘I told you so’ when Sasuke starts flagging. At first, neither of his teammates notice. Sasuke starts lagging behind more and more until finally he jumps and doesn’t *quite* reach the next branch.

He reaches out desperately with one hand, trying to catch himself that way at least but his fingers fall short and he’s falling and falling and-

Kakashi scoops him out of the air, cradling him like a child. He lands lightly on the ground, with Sakura and Naruto quickly following suit after a moment. “If you’re too tired, Sasuke, you need to tell me,” he chides, and the Uchiha is ashamed to realize he’s breathing heavily, almost panting.

Both his teammates’ brows are knit with worry, and Sakura reaches out to put her hand on his forehead. “He’s hot, Kakashi-sensei,” she tells him, and Sasuke frowns.
“I’m fine,” he protests, trying to squirm his way out of his teacher’s arms. Kakashi holds fast.

“Sasuke,” he says, in the tone of one speaking to a small, dimwitted child. “You almost died-“ And didn’t Naruto flinch at that- “And then you pushed yourself too hard. You’ve exhausted your chakra, and you made yourself sick.”

Naruto peered into Sasuke’s face, getting so close their noses almost touched and Sasuke went crosseyed, before pulling back. “He’ll be fine, right?”

Kakashi nods, and then says, with what seems to be glee in his voice, “I’ll have to carry him the rest of the way.”

Sasuke closes his eyes at that point. Just let him die, honestly.

Sharingan or no, he’s ready for this thoroughly humiliating mission to be over.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the wait!

This chapter was a bit of a struggle. Part of me wants to promise that Sasuke isn't going to just have screwy drama happen to him again and again but uh... cough. Canon?

There's also no way that Sasuke can be 100% fine after getting stabbed with a fuckton of needles and going into a death-like state. Given he's pushing himself after getting his Sharingan... no wonder he's getting sick, right? Poor kid, even if it's nothing serious. Sorry for the Sakura neglect this chapter, too, but she should be in a bit more next chapter if all goes according to plan.

You may have noticed, but I WILL be including the filler episodes, flashback or otherwise. Don't worry - I'll only be using them for plot and character development. If they don't give me either, they'll only be mentioned in passing.

Finally, this chapter is dedicated to yondaiime on tumblr! Thank you for reccing this fic!
Hahahaaaaaaaaaa I'm sorry for the wait. But it's Narusasu day, so I had to post!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They weren’t talking about the last leg of the run home.

“We’re not talking about it,” Sasuke says, his cheeks aflame. He tries to ignore it. It’s just because he’s sick – no, no, damn it, he’s not sick. He’s just warm. It’s a hot night!

Naruto still hasn’t wiped that stupid, stupid grin off his face. He’s been wearing it ever since Sasuke fell asleep about a half hour into his “ride”. (Well, Sasuke assumes it started then. He was asleep, after all.)

Sakura, by contrast, is practically glowing. “But Sasuke, you were so cute!” she squeals, and the Uchiha is struck by the sudden urge to claw off his own ears.

Instead, his cheeks burn even more. “I was not.”

Naruto cackles. “Yeah, Sasuke, you were sooooooooooooo cute!”

“Now, now,” Kakashi intervenes, ambling away from the two gate guards, and Sasuke feels a hopeful tinge well up inside of him. Their teacher ruffles Sakura and Naruto’s hair, eye-smiling at them all as the duo squawks. “All of my students are cute.” There’s a single moment of blessed relief, before he has to open his masked mouth again. “But you’re right, Sasuke was very adorable.”

Sakura giggles and Naruto guffaws and that is it. He turns on his heel, ignoring the way they hush behind him as he marches past the startled guards. It doesn’t matter that his vision is starting to tunnel – he knows the well-trodden path to the Hokage Tower and could walk it in his sleep. Still, not being able to see out the side is dangerous, so he blinks. Once, twice, a third time-

and then Kakashi is right in front of him.

He stumbles to a stop and Kakashi reaches out, gently taking his shoulder to stabilize him. Resentment and gratitude well up alike, and he stomps it down. “Sasuke,” the other says, and Sasuke stares at his teacher’s vest, refusing to look up. “I need to take you to the hospital. You’re sick, and you got severely injured on this mission. You need to see a mednin.”

Sasuke knows his teacher is right – he’s not arguing that – but he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to be poked and prodded by some mednin who will probably coo over the “poor last Uchiha” and sleep in a bed that’s not his own and the hospital always makes him remember the blood and the sweat and the-

He stops. Boxes that thought up, tucks it away, and tries not to taste the bile in his throat.

Kakashi’s face is unreadable when he finally looks up, and Sasuke’s grateful. He doesn’t know how much of his tangled mess of thoughts were on his face, and he doesn’t want to deal with his teacher’s pity. It takes three swallows before he feels able to speak, and even then, he just gives a slight shrug.
“Fine.”

Nothing changes about his teacher’s face, but he nods to the other two genin. “Naruto. Sakura. I’ll meet you in the Hokage’s office.”

And then he teleports them away.

Sasuke isn’t too surprised that Kakashi doesn’t stick around. He spends just a few moments talking to one of the civilian nurses – explaining the situation, no doubt – and then he’s gone.

Sasuke tries not to feel any resentment for that. It’s not hard. He can’t really feel much more emotion than exhaustion.

They check his temperature, run tests involving chakra that he’s not even close to comprehending, have him take off his shirt so they can examine any remaining puncture wounds from the needles. It’s standard. Everything makes sense.

But it doesn’t stop him from staring at the wall, from not looking at a single soul, from trying deep breath exercises and then cringing because there’s such a distinct hospital smell-

The last time he was in here, everyone was dead.

They still are.

They give him a drug to make him sleep, and Sasuke doesn’t wake up for two more days. He knows his teammates have been here when he wakes – there’s a bouquet of flowers in a vase, and a covered container of ramen, now cold, sitting on the bedside table.

(He doesn’t eat it. He throws up, instead, dry-heaving into the toilet and trying desperately to block out the scent of antiseptics.)

To be honest, Sasuke’s more impressed by the flowers. He knows Sakura and Ino aren’t friends anymore, haven’t been for years, though he wasn’t sure why they stopped.

It says a lot.

Kakashi doesn’t show when they let him out of the hospital, later that day. Naruto doesn’t, either. But Sakura does, and she gives him a big grin as he leaves his room. “Hey, Sasuke! Glad to see you up!” she chirps, and Sasuke takes one moment to curse the universe for giving him incredibly cheerful teammates before he shoves his hands in his pockets and falls into step with her.

“Why are you here?”

She pouts. Probably trying to look cute. “You’ve been asleep! And I thought someone should walk you home.” He stiffens at the thought, but either Sakura doesn’t notice or she doesn’t comment. “I don’t know where Kakashi-sensei is, but Naruto’s off doing something with Iruka-sensei. So I thought I’d pick you up!”

Sasuke thinks he’s grateful for it. Maybe. But he doesn’t say it, instead giving a sharp nod. “I need to sign out.”

“Right!”
Sakura babbles the whole way, and Sasuke feels himself unloosening, just slightly. Apparently, Team 10 had taken on a C-rank since they left, but it was nothing like theirs. Team 8 hadn’t yet. Kurenai and Asuma were probably dating. Kakashi seemed very distracted about something.

He signed his name neatly and led the way out – but the scent of the hospital stayed with him.

“Sasuke!” The Uchiha sighed, focusing his attention on Sakura again. She giggled, blushing a little and biting her lip. “We don’t have to rush back, you know. We could do something. Shopping… Lunch…”

“Fine.”

The word is out of his mouth before he even thinks about it, and Sakura looks as surprised as he feels. “Really!?”

He doesn’t want to go home, and he desperately needs to chase the scent of the hospital from him. Sakura’s perfume, flowery and strong, is a great start to that – and sure, he wouldn’t mind food. He hasn’t eaten in a few days, after all. Sasuke shrugs. “Sure. Lunch sounds good.”

(Nothing stayed down at the hospital.)

She beams, bright and happy in a way that he’s never seen her before, and hooks her arm into his, faintly dragging him off. They’re going to a barbeque place, is what Sasuke manages to grab from her excited chatter, and the rest he can barely absorb.

He’s tired. Hopefully he doesn’t fall asleep right in his food – he’d never ever hear the end of it from Naruto if he did.

Sasuke’s barely paying attention to where he’s being dragged (he does trust Sakura not to kill him), so it takes him a moment before he realizes someone’s calling his name. “Uchiha! Oy, Uchiha!”

He blinks, and realizes he’s in the restaurant. He’s been here before – sometime, somewhen, he recognizes it faintly – and Shikamaru is calling him. Sasuke skims the room before he manages to spot him, sitting at a table with Chouji and waving him down.

The boy obliges, pulling Sakura along for the ride as he approaches the other genin. “Nara,” he greets, stuffing both his hands in his pockets. “What?”

Shikamaru grins. “I heard you two had a rather eventful C-rank. Want to join us and share?”

Sasuke exchanges a glance with Sakura. She grimaces, and he frowns slightly. It doesn’t sound tempting… Chouji pipes up, swallowing his bite. “My family owns the restaurant. Eat with us, and it’s on the house!”

The hole he’s been slowly burning in the Uchiha clan savings weighs on him for a moment, and the boy sighs, before plopping down next to Chouji. “Fine. Sakura could probably tell you better than me, anyway.”

She blushes, even as Shikamaru turns to give her a considering look. “Oh yeah?”

Sasuke is so very relieved when Sakura takes him up on that prompt. She talks about Tazuna, how they had been tricked, the situation in Wave, everything. She speaks of Haku and Zabuza and how they were ultimately tragic, in the end, a tragic pair of missing-nin that maybe should have lived another day.
He slowly eats his barbeque and doesn’t say a word.

Not until Chouji reaches over, giving his shoulder a slight, comforting squeeze. “You were really brave, Sasuke,” he says, and Sasuke pauses. Doesn’t know how to respond to that.

Sakura nods. “He was, wasn’t he?” She pauses, and looks down. “When I saw you lying there, it was-“

His food drops back on his plate. He gets up, shoving himself away from the table, and the three there stare at him with wide eyes. “I have to get home.”

“Hey, hey, Uchiha, we can change the topic if you want-“ Shikamaru is already hurrying to reassure him, but Sasuke ignores the Nara, turning to Chouji.

“Thank you for the meal,” he says, and half-manages a flicker of a smile for the boy, before he turns and he’s gone.

It reminds him of his exit from a few days ago, leaving his team in the dust, but this time he manages to get away. He ducks through the trailing crowds of people, ignores every single call of his name and greeting tossed his way, until everything starts to thin.

He slows.

The closer and closer he gets to the Uchiha district, the more notable it becomes. There’s no reason for anyone else to come here. It’s deserted – and soon, he’s the only one walking down a quiet street.

Sasuke rarely goes into most homes. Only when he needs something, like when he starts to outgrow his current clothes, or he’s out of shuriken, or something. Anything.

There’s only one home he returns to every single day.

He raps on the door to said house. Takes off his shoes and sets them by the entrance. “I’m home,” he says quietly into the empty building, filled with nothing but ghosts, and shuts the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Still not pleased with this chapter. Don’t think I’ll ever be pleased with this chapter. Ugh. (Though, confession? Sasuke/Chouji is a quiet otp of mine that I hope to write someday. They’d be really great and I HAD to include some of that here.)

The next chapter will bring us back to our regularly scheduled episode-inspired chapters. We’ll be starting in on the filler that takes place between the Wave Arc and the Chunin Exam! I'm actually very excited because I've got a LOT planned for this little filler arc.

My next chapter should be out in exactly a week, if all goes as planned, because it's Sasunaru day. Yay! So you won’t have to wait like two months next time. (Though, to be fair, I graduated from college in the meantime and am now working fulltime. So. It's been busy.)

Finally, this fic is now on the 5th page of Sasunaru sorted by kudos, so I really wanted to thank you all. And for all of your kind comments, even though I haven't gotten a
chance to reply to many! I'm really grateful for your support, and I hope you continue to enjoy the direction I take this fic.

And, just a warning bc of the comments I've been getting: this is going to be the slowest burn that ever did burn. Y'all are gonna need to hold onto your hats for a LONG time.
A Date and a New Face

Chapter Notes

The episode referenced in this chapter is Naruto Shippuden #469, 'A Special Mission'.

The first real large change is ahead!

The next two days, Sasuke has off. Suddenly, with no schedule to guide him, he realizes how much he desperately needs it. When he attended the Academy, he went to school almost every day and worked on homework and training until he dropped on the others. Now that he’s a genin, he’s had training in the morning and then missions after – he really has no idea what to do with himself.

On the first day, he tries to mend some of his clothes. The shirt he “died” in is relegated to the scrap heap, and he uses part of that to clumsily patch a hole in another shirt’s sleeve. It’s nothing he’s particularly proud of (all the practice in the world doesn’t erase the fact that no one taught him how to sew), but it’ll hold up. He can wear it for training.

It takes him far too long, though, and he shoves the other shirts aside for later. He’ll go for a walk, instead. Pack a lunch. ‘Take it easy’, like the mednin ordered.

Carefully assessing what food he has, and throwing out most of what’s in his fridge, he ditches that thought. He’ll have to go grocery shopping when he’s out, and start stocking up on less perishable food. If he has no idea when he’ll leave for a longer mission (and he didn’t this past time), he can’t keep a lot of perishable food onhand.

Ugh. He needs more tomatoes.

Fortunately, as he ambles down the street with hopefully enough money tucked into his pocket, he doesn’t run into anyone he knows. Sasuke thinks it’s probably because they’re busy with training, or missions – unlike him. It’s aggravating, having this time off, even if his body may “need” it. He’s just contemplating whether he should grab lunch and shop or the other way around when he hears a familiar voice behind him. “Sasuke!”

The Uchiha stops, half-turning as Naruto dashes up, grinning a mile a minute. “You’re out of the hospital!”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow as the blonde halts only inches away. “I got out yesterday.”

“Oh! Okay!” His smile is almost blinding. “I just went to visit you and they said you were gone already so I’ve been walking around and—“

Sasuke tunes him out, turning to continue his walk. “Oy, oy, Sasuke!”

Naruto grabs him, swinging an arm around his teammate’s neck and half-stopping, half-choking him. The Uchiha turns a baleful glare on him. He’s pretty sure the blonde doesn’t even notice. “Bastard, have you eaten lunch yet?” Sasuke says nothing. Naruto seems to take that as a negative. “C’mon, then, you owe me ramen!”
His teammate isn’t technically wrong, so Sasuke sighs, nodding slightly and grimacing when the blonde lets go with a crow of delight. He’s not really looking forward to this… date. Hopefully even Naruto isn’t stupid enough to read more into it.

Naruto leads the way, chattering a mile a minute – at a volume that makes Sasuke wince – and the Uchiha follows behind, trying to pretend he’s not horribly embarrassed by this whole affair. He’s not sure how well he succeeds. (Probably not at all.)

“Hey, hey, old man Teuchi!” Naruto yells as he plops down on one of Ichiraku’s stools. “Sasuke’s treating me to ramen!”

Sasuke carefully ignores the cook’s eyes as he takes his own seat, staring down at the counter as a flush rises in his cheeks. Still, he can practically hear Teuchi’s smile. “Is that so? Well, what can I get you boys today?”

“Miso ramen, miso ramen! Er, please!”

Sasuke nods, adding quietly. “I’ll have the same.”

“Coming right up!”

It’s only when Teuchi disappears into the back of the stand that Sasuke can breathe, looking up finally. Naruto’s grinning at him, fit to rival the sun. “Thanks for the ramen, Sasuke!”

Sasuke shrugs, really really not wanting to make a big deal out of this. “I had to eat anyway.”

Naruto doesn’t waver. “Still! Only Iruka-sensei ever treats me!”

Okay, Sasuke has to admit he’s curious. He knows – everyone does – that the two are close, and yet… “Why does Iruka-sensei take you out for ramen?” He’s pretty sure their old teacher hasn’t done that for anyone else, no matter how kind he is.

The blonde’s smile falters, and then fades. “He… he says I remind him a lot of himself, when he was younger,” he says slowly, one hand moving to curl in his shirt above his stomach.

There’s a lot to process about that, that he could focus on right now. The emotional upheaval that questions seems to bring, the words themselves, Naruto’s whole shift in mood – but Sasuke simply smirks. “If Iruka-sensei used to be like you, I guess there’s hope for you yet.”

Naruto’s mouth drops open, and he flaps his lips uselessly for a moment – like a fish, Sasuke notes with amusement – before he jabs his finger dramatically into Sasuke’s chest. He scowls. “I’m just as good as-“

“Here you are!” announces Teuchi, dropping both of their steaming bowls of miso ramen in front of them. He smiles warmly at the two of them – probably timing his entrance just right. “Enjoy!”

Sasuke looks at Naruto. Naruto looks at Sasuke. Sasuke breaks his chopsticks apart. Naruto huffs, and gives him, reaching for his own. Teuchi watches them both, eyes sparkling, before retreating to the back.

Unfortunately, that means there’s no one there to distract him from the sight of Naruto wolfing down four bowls of ramen. It’s disgusting. Sasuke’s more than a little horrified – and can barely finish his own. “Guess that explains your stamina,” he finally manages as Naruto slurps up the noodles of his last bowl.
Naruto swallows, and squints at him. “Stami- what?”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Stamina. You’ve got a lot, which means you don’t get tired very easily.”

“Ohhhhh!” Naruto nods, comprehension finally dawning. “I dunno if that’s cause I eat a lot of ramen.” Completely missing the point – he… really hadn’t been serious – Naruto frowns thoughtfully. “It might be because-“ He stops.


The blonde shakes his head. “Because nothing! Nothing, nothing,” he says, giving a nervous giggle. “Probably all the ramen, you’re right.” He nods rapidly, overcompensating. “I always knew ramen was amazing!”

Sasuke opens his mouth, and then shuts it. Naruto is the worst liar he’s ever had the misfortune to meet, and he can’t bring himself to care about whatever stupid thing his teammate is trying to hide. “…Sure.”

He looks away from the palpable relief written on Naruto’s face, pulling out his money and instead carefully counting out a stack of bills. Setting them on the counter, Sasuke hops off his stool, shoving his hands in his pockets. “That should be enough. Later.”

“Uh, okay, bye, Sasuke!”

Naruto doesn’t chase after him.

His second day is filled with patching clothes and grocery shopping (yes, he completely forgot after eating with Naruto) and finding a note from Kakashi telling him to meet up the next day for a mission.

And just like that, it’s as if none of it ever happens.

They’re chasing after Tora, painting houses, gardening, running errands, doing all sorts of meaningless D-ranks as if they hadn’t tackled missing-nin, saved Kakashi, or even- even died. As if none of it had ever happened, as if they hadn’t been scrambling for skills to try to defeat people far above their level, they’re working on their tree climbing, drills, reaffirming their basic skills –

It’s why when Naruto proposes an S-ranked “mission” to see under Kakashi’s mask, and a strange photographer steps up to help, Sasuke says yes.

Anything is better than that. Anything is better than this.

They fail, of course.

Sasuke’s not too surprised, but he’s still disappointed. He does very much want to see Kakashi’s face – but more than that, he wanted to prove that he could do something. Even with all the genin working together, they couldn’t accomplish it, not because of that other genin team.

(Privately, Sasuke swears a little vengeance on them.)

…

(Privately, he’ll also admit the whole adventure was kind of fun.)
All nine of them get together afterwards for dinner – Chouji’s treat – and no one bothers Sasuke about the mission where he you-know-what. Sure, Ino’s clingy and Sasuke very carefully maneuvers himself away from her and Sakura, but Shino and Chouji are calming balms, Kiba fights with Naruto, Hinata is still the only girl he can fully tolerate (though, he will admit, Sakura is getting better), and Shikamaru slides some barbeque onto Sasuke’s plate as an apology the Uchiha recognizes.

It wasn’t all bad, even if it was a bit of a waste of time.

Especially because it gives him an idea.

He waits exactly three days before he tries to break into the Ninja Registration archives again. Sasuke figures that’s enough time for them to lose their suspicion – and maybe he was right. He’s not sure.

But he’s caught, either way.

Kakashi sighs, squatting on the rooftop next to where the ANBU had unceremoniously dropped Sasuke. “Sasuke, Sasuke, my cute little genin… what am I going to do with you?” He doesn’t answer, and his teacher shakes his head. “I’m going to have to tell the Hokage about this, you know. Why would you break into the archives like that…?”

Sasuke doesn’t look at his teacher. He very, very resolutely doesn’t look at his teacher. Instead, he looks at the roof, picking out each individual rock and crack and little contour he can see. “I wanted to find his form.”

Kakashi doesn’t ask who.

They sit there in silence for a few moments – or, rather, Sasuke sits and Kakashi squats – before his teacher finally sighs. “You know you’re not allowed to see it, right?” Sasuke doesn’t answer. “… You know you’ll get in more trouble if you try again, right?” Sasuke still doesn’t answer.

His teacher tips his head back and stares up at the sky. “Why do I have such stubborn little genin?” Kakashi reaches out and bops Sasuke lightly on the head. “If I introduce you to someone who worked with Itachi, will you stop?”

Sasuke’s head snaps up, and he stares at his teacher wide-eyed. “Yes,” he says without even thinking about it, eyes fixated on the man.

Kakashi eye-smiles, giving him a pat this time. “Good. Be at the bridge an hour early tomorrow.”

Sasuke, in fact, shows up an hour and a half early.

He can’t remember the last time he was this excited about something, this eager to learn. It finally, finally feels like he’s getting closer to defeating Him – something he’s honestly needed since he almost gave up on his dream.

Even though he’s early, there’s a man waiting for him at the bridge. He looks about Kakashi’s age, with long brown hair pulled into a ponytail, and as he turns slightly at Sasuke’s arrival, the genin can see he wears a strangely-styled forehead protector.

The man gives him a nod, the faintest trace of a smile on his lips. “You must be Sasuke.” He holds out a hand, offering it up for a shake. “My name is Yamato.”
Chapter End Notes

My computer shut off partway through this chapter - almost didn't get it out in time.

I'm going to be busy working on Naruto Femslash Week now, so there won't be another chapter until I finish all seven of those and get those up, sorry. :P After that, hopefully I can stick to every-other-week chapters.

I hope you liked! And wonder if anyone guessed something like this was coming?
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

The episode referenced in this chapter is Naruto Shippuden episode 181, "Naruto's School of Revenge".

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hesitantly, Sasuke reaches out to shake Yamato's hand. He's not. Sure what to expect from this man who he has NEVER SEEN BEFORE IN HIS LIFE, and it's kind of unnerving. Usually, he knows at least a little better than this. "I'm Uchiha Sasuke," he introduces himself, despite the pointlessness of it all.

Yamato chuckles slightly, his handshake warm and firm, and withdraws his hand. "I know." He soberes, just a little. "Kakashi-senpai told me you wanted to talk about your brother?"

Brother. The word sits uncomfortably in the air, and Sasuke can't quite manage to hide his scowl. THAT MAN is in no way his brother, not anymore, never again, and it makes him feel ill to here him called such. Yamato's face twists into something a little softer, and the Uchiha looks away - he won't accept any pity. There's a moment of silence, his hands clenching into fists, before Yamato clears his throat and breaks through the boy's anger. "What did you want to start with, Sasuke?"

It's staggering. The amount of questions he could ask, information he could get, that it's both overwhelming and pointless at the same time. It's been almost five years, now - his fighting style will have changed and developed. THAT MAN'S personality doesn't matter, not now. He's evil, the worst of the worst, and knowing how he was as a child won't help him succeed. Sasuke looks up, meeting Yamato's eyes, and his tongue locks in his mouth. What does he ask- What can he say- He hates this. How a simple conversation about THAT MAN reduces him to silence, to feeling as though he's on the verge of breaking.

That soft look hasn't left Yamato's face - it looks WRONG, there, not a man meant for that soft look - and he speaks again. "How about I tell you a story of one of our non-classified missions?"

Sasuke is so grateful he despises it. He gives Yamato a short nod, and they sit together, folding their legs as they face each other on the bridge. "Most of my missions with Itachi are classified, but there were a few that were not," he says, his face pulling into a slight frown as he thinks. "But there was one where we had to retrieve a statue for a client..."

After a moment, he nods slightly to himself. "Yes. That one." Sasuke leans forward in anticipation. "It was about... six or so years ago, now. My team was myself, Kakashi-senpai, Shisui, and Itachi - all very good at genjutsu. You see, we had to retrieve the statue for Lady Tomi, but not let a single soul recognize us."

He gives a small smile. "Seems simple? It was... an interesting mission. You see, everything started going wrong when..."

"...finally, Shisui managed to whack the officer in the face with one of his cabbages, and we ran like
hell to get out of there.”

To be honest, Sasuke hadn’t been expecting anything but pain when he was to hear a story of Itachi. But Yamato-sensei? Is actually good at storytelling, and slowly but surely, a small smile has been spreading across the young boy’s face.

“They didn’t catch you?”

Yamato-sensei shakes his head. “No. They were civilians, all of them – it’s easy enough to seem faster than normal by boosting just a small amount of chakra to your legs, but not enough that people will know you have to be a shinobi.”

Sasuke mentally notes that down, as he has a lot of things Yamato-sensei mentioned over the course of his story. Mostly infiltration tactics, which he’s not sure will come in handy while trying to take down his brother, but they should be somewhat useful for at least one mission along the way.

Besides. You never know when a skill might be useful, and he’d be a fool to pass up on any sort of training just because.

There was something he noticed, though – throughout his tale, Yamato-sensei had seemed… unmistakably fond of the others on his team. Kakashi makes sense; even years later, Yamato-sensei seems close to Sasuke’s sensei. Itachi and Shisui, though… “Were you close with them? Shisui and… him?”

Yamato-sensei smiles, a soft, sad smile. “Itachi was… a little too young, then, for me to really consider us friends. We were comrades. But I was… close, to Shisui.” Sasuke wonders, then, that he had never heard the name ‘Yamato’ pass from Shisui’s lips. Why had his cousin not mentioned Yamato-sensei to him? And, for further matter, why had Kakashi not mentioned that he had dealt with Itachi before, as well?

The boy frowns slightly. “Yamato-sensei,” he says, noticing the small start that Yamato-sensei makes at his name, “Why did-“

He can’t finish his sentence. “Sasuke!” calls a familiar female voice, and the Uchiha suppresses a groan as he turns. Sakura is walking down the street – no, running, picking up the pace at his attention and waving, a giant grin starting to form on her face.

Damn it all.

“Sasuke!” she chirps again, literally jumping to a halt, bouncing the last few steps and landing firmly a few steps behind her teammate. “Who’s your friend?” She squints at Yamato-sensei, suspicious, but doesn’t get rid of her smile. (She looks like she’s in pain.)

“This is Yamato-sensei,” Sasuke says, and the brunette starts again at the sound of his name. (Seriously, what’s with that?) “He’s giving me some extra training.”

Her eyes light up, and she plops down right next to him, their knees banging. Sasuke very carefully doesn’t wince. “I want extra training, too! Teach me, teach me, Yamato-sensei! My name’s Haruno Sakura, and I was the top kunoichi in the academy!”

It’s a stark reminder that though Sakura seems weak, oh so weak, she’s actually extremely intelligent, so Sasuke glances sideways at her as he turns back around to face Yamato-sensei. He doesn’t want her assistance with Itachi – never, never ever – but if he presented a situation as a hypothetical, maybe she’d have something good to say…
Or maybe it would at least make her a little more serious about training or anything, really, he’d take just about anything.

Yamato-sensei doesn’t appear to be on the same page as Sakura, and he grimaces. “Kakashi-senpai is your sensei, you two, not me… I really should be going, anyway. Isn’t it almost time for you to start training?”

Sakura pouts, puffing out her cheeks. (It’s a decidedly cuter look than the one she wore just moments ago.) “Kakashi-sensei’s always late! And he never teaches us anything!”

“Oh? Is that so?”

Both of the genin whip around, nearly falling over at the sight of Kakashi standing right in front of them. They pale. They see their life flash before their eyes.

Kakashi is on time.

Yamato-sensei sounds so profoundly relieved behind them that Sasuke hates him for just a moment. “Kakashi-senpai! Perfect timing! I was just about to wrap it up!”

Their sensei smiles at the brunette, his eye crinkling. “Thank you, Yamato. I’ll see you later.”

Sasuke manages to tear his terrified eyes away from his teacher long enough to give Yamato a slight bow. “Thank you, Yamato-sensei. Can we meet again sometime?”

Yamato smiles, just a little. “Of course. It was nice to meet you, Sasuke, Sakura.” And then he’s gone, and the two genin are left along with the on time Kakashi.

The Uchiha isn’t sure anything more can frighten him. Kakashi pulls out his book, holding it in front of his face, and meets Sasuke’s eyes steadily with his own. “Now,” he murmurs, his voice a quiet curiosity. “Is there any reason he’s Yamato-sensei and I’m just Kakashi?”

Sasuke isn’t sure he’s getting out of this one alive.

Thankfully – and god, is Sasuke so thankful he could kiss him right this very moment – Naruto bumbles in. (Seriously, Sasuke could kiss him. He shoves that thought far, far away and locks it up with a key.) “Oy, oy, I was almost late!” Naruto practically shouts, running full tilt down the road towards the bridge, behind Kakashi. “I can’t believe I fell asleep after-“

His teammates can tell the exact moment he sees their teacher, because Naruto stops in the middle of the road, gaping. “K-Kakashi-sensei!” he stammers, and Kakashi turns slowly, oh-so-slowly, the impending doom growing in the air. “You’re- why are you here!?”

“Maa, maa,” says Kakashi. “You’re late, Naruto.”

The blonde sputters. “B-But you’re always late!” He yells, pointing a finger accusingly at their teacher. “Who cares if I’m just a few minutes late if you’re not gonna be here anyway!?”

Privately, Sasuke agrees. Privately, Sasuke has wanted to yell those few choice words at his teacher before. Privately – okay, not so privately – he thinks Naruto is a colossal idiot for actually saying them.

Kakashi closes his book and puts it in his pocket. He leans forward, towards Naruto, and smiles very, very carefully. “A shinobi should always be on time, Naruto!” he chirps – oh god he chirps. His demeanor darkens. “If you think it’s okay to be late just because your clients are… well! Guess
“It’s time for more training, huh?”

Mother, Father, Sasuke thinks, staring at his teacher. *It’ll be good to see you again.*

Over an hour later, the Uchiha desperately wishes that were the case. He’s sure all his teammates agree with him, actually. He can’t feel anything.

His limbs tingle from sheer exhaustion, weak and unable to move, he think he still has a streak of dirt coating half his face, and he definitely pulled *at least* one muscle. Leaning against this tree is about all he can do right now.

Sakura, slumped into his side, is worse off. She threw up about a half hour ago, wiped her mouth, and just kept running. Her knee is skinned and bleeding, her dress is torn at the hem, and he honestly doesn’t think she has the strength to sit up properly. He doesn’t have the strength to push her off his shoulder. (Okay, okay, he just doesn’t mind it.)

Naruto looks the best out of the three of them, and Sasuke kind of hates him. Unlike Sasuke, who had collapsed by the tree when his legs finally gave out, and slowly managed a sitting position, or Sakura, who had collapsed midrun and been carried over by Kakashi afterwards, Naruto made it to the tree under his own power. He complained the whole way, and his frontside was covered in mud, his jacket torn, but he still made it there under his own power. Right now, though, he’s leaning into Sasuke’s other side, asleep and snoring softly.

Turns out? Kakashi can be absolutely vicious at training when provoked. The three of them have been chased around by all of Kakashi’s dogs for about an hour, and it’s exhausting.

The man in question approaches, looming over them, and both Sakura and Sasuke turn bleary glares on him. He leans down, eye-smiling at both of them. “Well, now, my cute little genin! It’s time for our next task!”

Sasuke can’t help it – he groans. Kakashi giggles. Giggles! A grown man shouldn’t giggle! He waves a small scroll in front of them. “We have a mission! Pack for two days, and meet in the front gate in an hour. Wake Naruto and tell him.” And then he’s gone.

“…I’m going to murder him,” Sakura says, with absolute finality.

“I’ll be your alibi,” Sasuke replies without missing a beat.

That decided, the two of them shove themselves to their feet, half-leaning on each other and half on the tree. *That* means Naruto falls over, and he wakes up with a shout and *that* means the two of them have to explain the situation to their third teammate, and hear his curses fill the air.

“We’re going to kill him,” Sakura tells him.

Naruto jumps, pumping his fist in the air. “Damn right! Damn right, that bastard! Ughhhhh!” He slumps over, and then squints at the other two. “Uh, are you guys gonna make it home? You look kinda… tired.”

Sasuke, currently throwing all of his weight on the tree behind him, balefully glares at him. He wants to say he can – his pride demands it – but he knows he. Actually can’t.

Sakura is more than willing to admit it, though, and shakes her head. “I’m too tired.”

The blonde beams. “I can help, I can help!” He makes a familiar seal, and two shadow clones pop
into existence right next to him. “Look, they can each help you home!”

Immediately, the clones drop to play Rock, Paper, Scissors to decide who takes Sakura home. They tie on paper. They tie on rock. They tie on Scissors. Finally, as they try a fourth time, Sasuke takes a step forward and leans into the nearest Naruto. “You get me,” he tells it.

The clone blinks at him, surprised, before shrugging. “If you say so, Sasuke,” it says, wrapping an arm around him.

They part ways, and the silence… is. It’s not uncomfortable, or comfortable, or anything else, just is. They don’t talk as the clone helps Sasuke home, and the only sound is Sasuke’s heavy breathing that slowly evens out as they go on, in the same way he puts less and less weight on the clone as they walk.

Finally, he feels he can stand on his own feet, and he pulls away from the clone. “I can get back the rest of the way by myself,” he tells it. “You can dispel.”

The clone grins a little, tipping his head to the side. “Well, okay, Sasuke,” it agrees. “But- you know I’m the original, right?” Sasuke didn’t. Naruto laughs, just a little, eyes closing. “See you in a bit, Sasuke! I gotta pack!”

Sasuke stands and watches him until he disappears.

It doesn’t take him long to throw together enough supplies to cover two days, shower, change, and eat, and so he ends up the first one at the gate. The second is Sakura, who greets him with a smile – she’s looking a little better. Naruto is the third, racing up from behind and greeting them both with loud, joyous yelling.

Kakashi finally shows up, only twenty minutes late.

Sasuke, however, is completely unimpressed by the contents of their mission. “We’re retrieving an ostrich?” he asks incredulously. “Named Condor?” He’s pretty certain this is worse than the cat. And after today, he has dealt with too many animals. Dogs are enough. He doesn’t want to deal with a misnamed bird on top of it all.

Kakashi shrugs. “Maa, maa, it’s an easy enough mission.” He eye smiles at them. “A good choice after this morning, no? And you get to leave the village!”

There’s not much they can say to that, and they start walking.

Naruto takes point, running ahead with another loud yell, and Sakura follows, scolding him slightly. It’s funny, Sasuke thinks. He doesn’t realize how much being out of the village takes… a weight off his neck, until he actually takes a step out and the pressure rolls away. He can’t pinpoint why, but it does.

Kakashi glances at him out of the corner of his eye, falling in step, and the boy knows he noticed. It grates him at him a little, but still, if it means they take more missions outside the village, he’ll take the small blow to his pride.

It’d be worth it.

Unfortunately, they move slow. Sasuke’s sure it’s because of their beatdown earlier that day – while he feels better, he’s still exhausted, and starts noticeably wavering far faster than normal. Sakura is
the same, falling from her point position until she’s trailing after Sasuke, dogging his steps in an effort to keep up. Only Naruto seems alright, and even his body starts to droop with exhaustion after a little.

Kakashi calls it an early night and says he’ll take the watch, and the Uchiha aches with gratitude. Literally. It takes all he is to set up his sleeping mat and collapse next to Sakura.

But sleep won’t come immediately, and Sasuke curses himself. Kakashi is keeping watch, not within visible distance, Naruto is already snoring on his mat, wrapped around his extra pillow, and Sakura—Sakura taps him on the shoulder.

Sasuke rolls over on his mat, blinking blearily at her. “What?” he whispers.

She twitches a little, barely visible in the darkness. “Sasuke?” she asks, voice just as hushed. “Why were you getting extra training from Yamato?”

He considers telling her it’s none of her business (because it’s not), but he knows from far too much experience how much she’ll just… latch onto things and not let go, so she sighs. “He knew my brother.”

“Oh.” She’s quiet for a moment more, and Sasuke is about to roll back over, when she speaks again. “Sasuke, can… can I come to training, too?”

His immediate reaction is no. No, because this is for him and it’s about his brother, and besides, how much would Sakura really learn, anyway? But… But…

Sakura really doesn’t do a lot of training, he thinks. Not enough. It's why she’s so physically weak, and it irritates him so much. Why is she a shinobi if she doesn’t want to give her best, for one? Why does she have to drag the time down like this? She’s worse than Naruto, most of the time, even though he’s far more of an idiot.

So… He sighs. “Fine. But I don’t know when the next training with Yamato-sensei is.”

She grins slightly. “Okay! Just let me know when, alright?”

“Fine.”

And then he rolls over and finally – oh god, finally – goes to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

yayyyyyy guess whose computer was broken. this dude's. guh.

So! Now I have a new computer, and a new chapter for you. Slightly longer than usual, I think. The next chapter should be relatively soon - I want to try to finish up all the filler episodes by the end of September, so I can start the chunin exam arcs in October.

We'll see if I can manage it. Thanks for your support and your patience! I really am sorry this one is so late. I've had it written for ages, but haven't been able to post it. Sorry!
Catching the ostrich is surprisingly easy – it had just gotten farther than anything else they were sent to retrieve. Sasuke’s a bit disgruntled by this. Well. That’s a bit of a weak word.

When he’s sent out on a multi-day mission with an easy to retrieve target, no fighting, and having to put up with his teammates straight for what has been 24 hours straight already, and promises to be more? When he could be training?

This is a nightmare.

At least he doesn’t have to deal with the ostrich. That’s Naruto’s job, hah. Hopefully they can finish this up quickly and head back to Konoha before he loses his sanity.

It doesn’t work like that. It never, ever does.

Sasuke stands in the doorway of the inn, watching Naruto run around with Tsukado, with this man who so desperately wants revenge and yet- yet can’t do it. It’s pathetic. What does Naruto know about revenge?

Kakashi steps up behind him. “Maa, anything interesting?”

He deliberately waits a moment before he replies. He’s not interested in a conversation. “They’re both idiots.”

“Oh?”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “We both know Naruto’s an idiot, but that Tsukado…” He frowns. “You saw it too, didn’t you?”

Kakashi nods. “He is more skilled than he lets on.”

He considers for a moment. “Are we going to do anything?”

His teacher claps him on the shoulder, and it takes a lot of restraint to not pull away. “I’ll let you know.”

He doesn’t let him know. No, Sasuke’s long gone inside to read one of his jutsu scrolls (lending Sakura one, of course, to keep her entertained and quiet), and Kakashi is keeping watch outside.

No, Kakashi doesn’t tell him. There’s just an uproarious noise, an unholy squawking, and then
Kakashi appears, balancing sheepishly on the windowsill. “Maa, maa, the ostrich ate through his rope.”

Sasuke very deliberately doesn’t swear and instead scrambles up, following Kakashi outside to chase after the bird, Sakura at his heels. Their teacher doesn’t go his fastest – indeed, not even Sakura is hitting her top speed.

She frowns, glancing over at him. “Sasuke…?”

He shakes his head. “Explain later.”

They chase the bird down to the river, arriving just in time to see Tsukado actually show off his swordsmanship skills. Why does he hide it? Why?

Because of the other man’s eyes. His eyes.

Honestly, that makes no sense to Sasuke, unless the man is really gay. (He doesn’t think he is.) It’s the man who killed one of his relatives, who killed one of the people important to him-


Sasuke doesn’t care about weaklings like that.

But-

But then it turns out all to be fake. Everything is a farce. Sasuke doesn’t understand. Why would someone carry the weight of revenge on their shoulder for a brother? It sends shivers down his spine, it feels… wrong, so wrong.

He’s quiet on their walk back to Konoha. It’s a lot to process, a lot to think about, and then Naruto-

“Revenge is a hard thing, isn’t it?”

He. Stops. Metaphorically, of course, he doesn’t literally stop. “What would you know?”

Naruto turns to frown at him, confused. “What?”

Sasuke speeds up a little more, walking quickly past the others. “Sometimes, revenge must be carried out, no matter how hard it is.”

There’s a few minutes of quiet from everyone, and Sasuke can feel his heart beating rapidly in his chest, roaring in his ears, and he exhales shakily as Naruto runs up next to him. The ostrich is left behind, likely held onto by Kakashi. “Your brother?”

Sasuke says nothing. Naruto seems to take that as affirmation, and walks close enough so they brush shoulders. The Uchiha very carefully doesn’t pull away, and they’re quiet together, for just a moment. Walking side by side, teammates, and it’s… it’s nice. Comforting.

“You know… we’ll help.”

He turns to look at Naruto, a little confused. “What?”

Naruto shrugs, blinking at him with the bluest eyes Sasuke has ever seen. “We’ll help. Me and Sakura and Kakashi-sensei. We can help take down your big brother. I said it before, and I still mean it.”
For one long moment, Sasuke can’t even breathe- and then he wrenches himself away, shoulders hunching as he walks faster, faster faster faster so Naruto won’t catch up with him and-

No. No. He can’t even contemplate that. Not again.

He’s so glad to be home. He’s so glad to be home and settle into the regular routine of training and simple missions and then avoiding the hell out of his teammates the moment they’re all dismissed. He doesn’t want to be by Kakashi or Sakura or Naruto any longer than he has to be.

They… strike a chord with something inside him, his heart aching, and he can’t do it. He can’t get attached, doesn’t want to be attached, just wants to train and do missions and train and do missions and train himself into weariness at his home until he can finally pass out and sleep without nightmares on the floor.

Maybe Kakashi notices. Maybe it’s just coincidence. Maybe Sasuke is just unlucky like that, but their next mission is out of Konoha.

Their next mission involves his hand glued to Naruto’s hand.

They kiss again.

It’s a clash of lips and teeth, bloody and messy as they tumble into each other, crashing bodily, genin-to-genin, as they fall down the waterfall.

Sasuke can taste Naruto’s blood in his mouth. He can taste his teammate, and it’s-

“Why is it always you!?” he asks, and doesn’t get an answer.

They’re stuck together for three days, and Sasuke doesn’t look at Naruto once. It’s half annoyance, half embarrassment. He can’t- He can’t deal with the fact that he is attached to the boy who has a crush on him, who has kissed him twice, whom he basically has to hold hands with to sleep.

But at the same time, Naruto is a perpetual bouncy ball of energy, yelling and screaming and bouncing off the walls and Sasuke will go mad if he has to hear another moment of him.

It’s such a god damn relief when the glue finally falls away.

It’s not even negated by the fact that Kakashi announces the chunin exams a few days later, which means he’s going to be constantly with Sakura and Naruto soon enough (he’s. Not sure how long the exams last?). Anything’s better than being glued to Naruto or kissing Naruto or hearing about revenge from Naruto or Naruto Naruto Naruto Naruto-

Besides. He’s the top genin. He’s going to wipe the floor with all these losers.

How hard can the chunin exams be?

Chapter End Notes

hi i actually hate this chapter. a lot. i’m probably going to come back and rewrite it later.
but for not thank god this chapter is FINALLY OUT and this stuff is FINALLY COVERED and i can actually hit the chunin exam arc. this was so hard to write and im not sure why.

thanks folks

(srsly i rlly hate this chapter and had such a muse block on it + my dad had a heart attack + it’s the holiday season and i work in retail which basically means im living in a nightmare rn so yeah it sucks thanks)
There are only two days between finding out about the exams, and the actual exams themselves. Well – one full day, and the day they’re told, Sasuke supposes. They have the freedom to do what they wish, so Sasuke trains.

He’s under no illusions about this exam.

1) Even though Kakashi SAID they didn’t all have to take it, there’s no way at least part of the exam isn’t a combined team effort. He doesn’t relish being matched up with someone else if either of his teammates quit.

2) He doesn’t need to worry about Naruto. He’s such an idiot that even if he was an absolute failure (which… he’s not, as Sasuke’s loathe to admit), he’d keep plowing forward towards the exam anyway. Ugh. To be fair (he. Guesses he should TRY to be), that’s not a bad way to get stronger. He hates agreeing with Naruto.

3) Finally, though, Sasuke DOES need to worry about Sakura. He had noticed the way she trailed behind the two, noticed her downcast face, and he knows she’s the weakest of them all. Normally, he wouldn’t… care. Sakura’s emotions are annoying, 99% of the time. But.

If she drops out, or fails early, or something along those lines, Sasuke might get stuck with someone else. The thought sends shudders down his spine. He’s only barely begun to figure out how to work with the other two – trying to haphazardly take the exam with a new person sounds torturous.

But… he REALLY doesn’t want to give her a pep talk or something like that. Maybe he could get Naruto to do it…?

The idea comes to him that evening, when he beats Iruka-sensei disguised as a random ninja trying to get him to quit. (He… doesn’t quite appreciate that his old teacher doesn’t think he could win, but Iruka-sensei CARES, so he supposes that is that.) The ninja-that-is-his-teacher disappears, leaving just a rock behind, and Sasuke stares at it dumbly.

Of course. Jutsu.

Sakura soaks up information like a sponge, reading every single morning and devouring library scroll after library scroll (he is very glad he planted that idea in her head). What would cheer her up better than some Uchiha scrolls to study before the exam? It’s perfect.

Her mother – he assumes – answers the door the next morning when he knocks. “Oh, you must be Sasuke!” she says brightly, giving him a smile that he very much recognizes. “Sakura’s just up in her room, come in, come in!”
Sasuke shakes his head. “I have to go train. Here.” He offers her the three scrolls he picked out, and she takes them with slight confusion. “Give these to Sakura. Tell her… she’ll be fine tomorrow.”

And then he’s gone, leaping towards the nearest tree before she can say another word.

Sakura’s bright and happy and gushing the next morning, thanking Sasuke for the scrolls – while Naruto complains about how he didn’t GET any – so Sasuke supposes he did good.

He rolls his eyes. “Naruto, you can’t even read,” he tells him, and ignores the blustered yelling of his teammate as he heads inside. Sakura follows him with a giggle, before Naruto falls into step, grumbling.

“I can TOO read, bastard,” he mutters, and Sasuke ignores him.

They make it up the first set of stairs, but are stopped by a large group of people gathered around one of the doors. There’s two genin in front of it, blocking the way, rambling about how they’re weeding out the weak, and pushing down some poor kid in an ugly green jumpsuit.

Sakura grabs his arm. “Sasuke,” she whispers, careful to not draw attention. “It’s a genjutsu.” She points, subtly, and Sasuke follows the line of her finger – huh. The room is marked ‘301’, which is where their exam is supposed to take place, but… this is the second floor.

Sasuke almost – almost – steps forward to put these two assholes in their place. They deserve to be knocked down a peg, and Sasuke is definitely the one to do it. But Sakura keeps talking. “There’s stairs just over there. We can sneak by and no one will notice us.”

She’s definitely thinking like a ninja, and Sasuke sighs with a nod, before tapping Naruto on the shoulder. “Idiot,” he says. “Come on, we have to keep going.”

Naruto rounds on him, and isn’t quiet at all. “Bastard, we-!” Sakura slaps a hand over his mouth before Sasuke can.

“This is the second floor, dummy!” she hisses out. “Be quiet!” With that, she pulls her hand back, and Naruto rubs the back of his head, apologetic.

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll be quiet.” His whisper isn’t much quieter than a normal volume of speech, but it’s good enough, and Sasuke nods.

Sakura beams at them both. “We’re doing great already!” she chirps quietly, grabbing both of their hands, and dragging them past the crowd.

Unfortunately, they don’t go unnoticed. “Hey!” yells one of the asshole genin. “Where are you guys going? The exam’s right here!”

Sasuke doesn’t miss a beat. “Bathroom.”

There’s a pause, and they keep walking – Naruto sniggers. The genin manages to find his voice. “You’re all going together?”

Sakura looks back at him and gives him the most wilting glare he’s ever seen from her. It’s kind of impressive. “Yes. The bathroom’s a team bonding activity. That’s what Kakashi-sensei says, duh.”

No one else stops them.
Sasuke is... incredibly grateful to be done with the test, when it's finally over. To be honest? It's a miracle they all passed. It was Naruto with a paper test. God.

And the drama before it didn’t help, what with all the loud-mouthed fellow rookies, Kabuto, and those damned Sound Ninja with their weird tricks. He hasn’t even done anything physical – in fact, all he’s done is get info on that Gaara, and cheat on a test – but he feels absolutely exhausted.

Fortunately, the next part of the exam is tomorrow.

Naruto leads the way out of the room, bubbling and bursting with joy, but Sasuke and Sakura share a tired look. He feels complete and utter solidarity. Time for this day to be done.

Kakashi’s waiting for them just outside the door. “Maa, maa,” he asks, as if he doesn’t know already. “Did you pass?”

Naruto leaps at him in a hug, clinging to the man while Kakashi gingerly pats him on the back. “Yes! Yes, we passed, Kakashi-sensei! We’re gonna be chunin!”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Idiot. We’re not done with the test. We’ve still got another part to go.”

Their teacher eye smiles at them all as the blonde finally releases him. “Well... you’ve actually got two more to go. There’s three parts.”

Sakura groans. Naruto pouts. Sasuke resists the urge to bang his head on the wall. Two more? How long was this going to take? It already felt like an eternity, and they had only just started.

Kakashi waves off their distress. “You’ve passed part one, though! Congratulations. Should we get some ramen?”

As if on cue, his stomach rumbles, and Sasuke reddens. “…Sure.” Sakura makes a face, but nods, and Naruto’s faintly bouncing off the walls.

“Ramen, ramen, ramen!” he chants, bouncing up and down as he starts to lead the way, Kakashi and then the other two ambling behind. Kakashi spares them from his sing-song antics by asking him for test details, however, and Sasuke is incredibly grateful.

Of course, Naruto’s account of the test is extremely inaccurate, spiced up and inflated beyond measure to make the blonde seem like a genius, but Sakura’s more than willing to poke holes in his story, angrily interjecting every time he makes up some bullshit. Sasuke’s fine leaving them to it. He doesn’t really want to get involved – he doesn’t care.

Unfortunately, the whole ordeal gets started over again when they arrive at Ichiraku’s, and Naruto HAS to tell Teuchi and Ayame what happened (and when did he get on first name basis with them? Has Sasuke been here that many times, really?), and Sasuke slumps in his seat next to Kakashi.

The man just laughs, reaching over and ruffling the Uchiha’s hair (which makes him scowl). “You did good today, Sasuke.”

Sasuke doesn’t look at him. “Hn.”

“You stuck together as a team. I’m proud of all of you.”

Naruto shuts up, staring at Kakashi. “You’re... proud of us?”

Kakashi nods. Probably not sensing his impending doom – because Naruto’s eyes well up in tears,
and he throws himself at the jounin. “Yes!! We really are gonna be chunin!” He crows, clinging to the man.

Their teacher tries to pull him off, to no avail, and Sakura slides over one stool to whisper to Sasuke. “What’s up with that?” she asks, and.

Sasuke is abruptly reminded of what she said to him, the day they became teammates. He breaks apart his chopsticks and doesn’t look at her. “Hn. I guess he’s lucky he doesn’t have parents who praise him.”

From her sharp inhale, that struck home, and he’s definitely relieved when the other two stop their antics, Naruto returning to his overeager story – without any interjections from Sakura, this time – and Sasuke eats. Kakashi surveys them, but says nothing.

He’s done quickly, eats quickly, and he sets some yen next to his bowl and slides off the stool. “See you tomorrow,” he says. “Don’t be late.”

The Uchiha lifts a hand in acknowledgement at the good-byes tossed his way from Kakashi, Naruto, and Teuchi, but he doesn’t look back.

He has to get home and train for part two.

Chapter End Notes

So no fight with Lee! Hmmm... I guess we'll see how that changes things, huh? Hehe. I didn't feel the need to cover the exact details of the test, given it basically goes down the same way in canon.

The next part of the exam (not including preliminaries) will take an estimated three chapters. Hopefully not more than that, but DEFINITELY not less.

I'm going to be out of the country from December 29 to January 9th! That means I won't be able to post any chapters. I'm going to try to get one more out before I leave, but if not, I'll have one written and ready to post when I get back.

Happy Holidays!
They’re all on time the next morning – it’s kind of unbelievable. Naruto is pumped up, raring to go, yelling at the top of his lungs. Sasuke snorts, and looks to Sakura. She meets his eyes for a moment, just a single moment before she glances down and away.

Hm. Looks like she’s shaken up from what he said yesterday. Hopefully that won’t be a problem.

Sasuke doesn’t have even a moment to think about it, though, before the proctor is calling attention to herself – and it becomes very, very clear that could be a problem. This is a challenge where they could die. They have to sign actual, written waivers to prove that Konoha will not be held responsible for their deaths. And from the looks of the other genin (the sand and sound and grass nin, especially)... death is a strong possibility.

His mouth is dry, and he swallows sharply. No. No. He can’t get too caught up in the possibilities – he knows he won’t die today, not tomorrow or the day after or any of the days of this task, and he needs to make sure none of his teammates die today, either.

As the waivers are handed out, the crowd begins to disperse, and he clears his throat. “Naruto. Sakura,” he says, and they turn towards him, confused. “Stick close to me. We shouldn’t separate.”

Naruto frowns. “I’m gonna be stuck with you for five days, anyway! Can’t I have a half hour to myself?”

Sasuke shakes his head. “We don’t know what the other teams are capable of. We don’t want them to somehow get a one over on us.”

Naruto’s not convinced, so Sakura speaks up, nodding in agreement. “Sasuke’s right,” she says, and the Uchiha relaxes a little. He’s not on that bad of terms with her, he guesses. “Maybe they could put a tracker on us, or something. We should stay together.”

The blonde accepts that, at least, letting out a little huff but nodding. “Okay, okay…” He looks a little sheepish. “Maybe you can help me with this, anyway. I can’t read it all.”

Sakura rolls her eyes. “Idiot.”

Sasuke is really god damn concerned about this whole event.

They’ve barely made it a half hour into the forest when Naruto has to take a leak. “You should’ve went before this,” Sasuke mutters under his breath, but ugh, they would’ve had to deal with this sooner or later.

He catches Sakura’s fist before she hits him, though. “No. Naruto should go here, you just look the other way.”
Sakura glares at him, ready to protest, before she wilts a little and pulls her fist back. “Because we shouldn’t separate, right?” He nods, and she sighs, turning away. “Fine. Hurry up, Naruto.”

It’s immensely awkward, listening to Naruto piss into the bushes while Sakura blushes furiously and stares off into the other direction, but it’s definitely worth it to Sasuke. He can sense the presence of another ninja, and the Uchiha doesn’t want to give them even the slightest opening.

“Come on,” he says to them as soon as Naruto’s finished. “We need to keep moving. We don’t want anyone to catch us with our guard down.”

They nod. “Right,” says Sakura. It seems like she feels a bit better, and he’s grateful. Tensions in a team aren’t good when they’re literally fighting for their life – well, abnormal tensions, he and Naruto are never going to get along while the blonde is an idiot.

He wants to tell Sakura about the watcher, given her intelligence and that he knows she won’t do well with a surprise, but he can’t think of a way to tell her without the ninja overhearing. Mentally, Sasuke curses. They need… hand signs, or something.

Especially when, about ten minutes later, another watcher shows up. Are they teammates? Most likely – and that worries him. It means there’s another teammate lurking about that he hasn’t sensed yet, and all of them are quite possibly in danger.

“Stop,” Sasuke says, and the other two do so.

Naruto scowls. “Oy, oy, you were the one who said to keep moving! What now?!”

Sasuke – mostly – ignores him. “We need a password. In case we get separated.”

Sakura’s eyes light up. “I’ve got an idea! Maybe we could-“

“I already have one,” he says, cutting her off, and Sakura wilts a little bit. “We need something no one else will think of.”

He kneels down, and the other two follow. “Listen. We need to assume if we get separated, and someone gives a different password, or doesn’t know it, they’re the enemy. No matter what they look like. Understand?” They both nod, and Sasuke relaxes just a little bit. “I’ll only say it once, so listen closely.”

Sasuke tells them a song his… his mother once sang to him, the ‘Ninja Chance’ song, and is a little relieved when neither of them recognize it at all. Sakura picks it up immediately – he’s not surprised. Naruto… doesn’t, and that’s not a surprise at all.

But good. He has a plan.

The Uchiha stands up. “I’ll take the scroll,” he says, and Naruto scrambles up, too.

“Wait, wait, Sasuke-“

It’s as if the enemy was waiting for them to make the password. Something comes flying at Naruto, too fast for Sasuke’s non-Sharingan eyes to see it, giving him a scratch on the other cheek to match the one the crazy proctor gave him. “What the-?”

They all turn, instinctively, towards the direction it came from. There’s nowhere there, nothing but trees, but Sasuke can feel the hair on the back of his neck sticking up, goosebumps lining his arms as he readies a kunai. There’s something… something… something’s coming.
He’s proven right, a moment later, when a massive gust of wind comes out of nowhere. Sasuke can’t see anything, just feel the sting of new cuts forming on his cheeks, feel the dirt hit him as it’s gouged up from the ground, taste the burning dust in the back of his throat. He can barely open his eyes into the wind, can’t even see his teammates around him-

So he stops grounding himself, letting the wind push him back until he tumbles through a bush. There, finally, he anchors himself, dropping to the ground underneath it and stabbing his kunai into the dirt to keep him stable. It keeps him from the worst of the wind and means that when it finally clears, he has a perfect vantage point of the ones who attacked them.

It’s the grass nin. A shudder goes down his back – they had seemed strong, or at least the woman and apparent leader had, and filled with bloodlust. This. This might be a tough one to get out alive from. He watches as the woman tells her teammates to leave (which concerns him even more. How strong is she if she confidently knows she can take them on by herself…?), but before he can see which direction they go, there’s a rustling behind him.

Sasuke scrambles to his feet, whirling around with his kunai at the ready, and- it’s Sakura. Disheveled, dirty, picking a twig out of her hair, but it’s Sakura, looking incredibly glad to see him. He almost – almost – relaxes, but a glance back shows that all three of the grass genin are gone, and the Uchiha is acutely aware of the other mysterious presence that he still doesn’t know the source of (he doesn’t think it was a teammate, now). He narrows his eyes. “Password?”

She blinks at him, surprised, before she nods and recites it – perfectly, to a T. He supposes someone could be disguising themselves as her, but… He doesn’t think so.

Before Sasuke can interrogate her further, though, and make sure it’s really her, there’s another rustle, and both of them whip around. This time, it’s an unfamiliar genin from Amegakure. He’s a brunette, dressed in a strange yellow jumpsuit with a sash around his eyes and a strange device on his mouth. “Ow, my head…” he groans, rubbing it, before he opens his eyes and jolts at the sight of them. “Fuck, listen-“

The Uchiha can guess who this is, but his kunai is at the ready, Sharingan activating. “Who the hell are you?” he asks, taking up a defensive pose half in front of Sakura.

He shakes his head. “Look, I was watching you guys, but I had nothing to do with this, I swear-“

“Ohw!” Naruto’s voice cuts him off, and they all turn as the orange-clad ninja half-hops, half-runs towards them. “That hurt! Are you guys okay? Who’s that?”

Sakura holds up her hand, and he skids to a halt. “Never mind him,” she says. “What’s the password?”

“Oh! I know, I know,” he says, and grins – and recites the password perfectly.

Sasuke’s eyes narrow. Sakura, on edge from the appearance of the random new genin, narrows her eyes as well. “You remembered it?” Sakura says slowly, unsure, and glances at Sasuke.

Naruto’s face scrunches up, confused – but it’s different than his normal scrunch. (Why the fuck does Sasuke know this.) “Ehhh, of course! Sasuke said to memorize it!”

“Che.” Sasuke glares at him. “You’re not Naruto. He could never remember the password. Who are you? Show yourself!”

The Ame genin takes a few steps towards them, standing in a defensive position, and Sasuke spares him not even a glance as he and Sakura stand ready to fight. He doesn’t think they’re on the same
And Not-Naruto’s face-twists. Morphs into a smirk that looks so unnatural on the Uzumaki and then the tongue… Yeah, Sasuke has no questions about who this is. “So that’s how it is, huh…” the Not-Naruto says, and with a puff of smoke, it’s the grass nin woman standing before them. (The Ame nin swears.) “But if you knew he couldn’t remember the password, why didn’t you make it shorter?”

Sasuke smirks a little. He can’t help it. “I knew you were eavesdropping nearby.”

She takes off her hat and licks it—ugh. Disturbing. “Oh, really. So you’re not tired or letting your guard down… this will be more interesting than I thought.”

Where the fuck is Naruto, though?

The Uchiha can’t contemplate that long before the grass ninja decides to be even MORE disturbing, somehow. Swallowing the scroll. Sakura shudders next to him, and while Sasuke doesn’t twitch, he understands that feeling deeply. It’s horrifying. Even if it’s the scroll he needs, would need to cut her apart to get it open, or force her to regurgitate it—both of them disgusting options.

The Ame genin swears, and tenses—about to leap away, leave them to their fate, Sasuke thinks—but he never gets the chance.

They die.

It’s a forceful wind, rushing at them, ripping them apart and cutting into them— he can feel the sting of every cut on his body, feel the blood starting to drip down his arms, shakes and can barely stand—

He sees Sakura, shaking, fallen, the Ame genin, choking on his own air, and the kunai fly, straight and true and there’s no way to dodge they’re coming too fast right at their foreheads and there’s an explosion of pain and colors and everything blurs blurs together in black and white no colors no colors is life literally fading and—

It’s over.

He falls onto his knees, feeling the burning bile in the back of his throat and throws up every scrap of his breakfast. Sasuke finds it hard to breathe, finds it hard to even think, and he forces himself semi-upright, staggers a little, and falls back down.

Sakura’s in no better state. Shaking, trembling with fear, eyes wide and tears down her face and looking at absolutely nothing. The Ame genin has fallen onto his rear, breath coming in sharp, short bursts as he hyperventilates, staring between his knees at the ground.

She takes a step closer, and Sasuke—He can’t move. His body won’t move, won’t do anything but shake as she takes another step, and if he doesn’t move he is going to die

Move—

He pushes himself onto his heels.

Move, do something!

He reaches out, wrapping his hand around the hilt of a kunai.

Get up, get up, get up!

Slowly—surely, he forces himself to his feet, trembling but— but he can’t do any more than that, he
The woman smirks. “What do you intend to do with that?” she asks, continuing to walk closer. “Don’t worry, I’ll finish this in a second.” She takes out three kunai. “You won’t even feel any pain.”

.Move, move, move!

He needs to think of something, do something, as the woman lets the kunai fly and none of them can do anything, all of them are useless and terrified and-

.Move! Move, move, move, move, move!

He stabs himself.

Knife sinks into flesh, slicing through and Sasuke cries out, choking for just a moment, just one single moment as the blood starts to trickle down his leg but he can’t stop, can’t stop, flipping on his Sharingan and scooping up Sakura and snagging the wrist of the Ame genin with the other and they’re gone.

He flies from branch to branch, ducking up into the trees as Sakura comes to life in his arms and the Ame genin swears and starts moving under his own power instead of banging uselessly against the bark and straining Sasuke’s arm until he can’t pull them anymore and he collapses on a large enough branch, dropping both of them and dryheaving.

The Ame genin swears violently again. “Shit! What the hell was that?”

No, no, shut up- Sasuke lunges forward to cover the genin’s mouth with a shaking hand, looking terrified back the way they came, waiting to see her pop out and come at them… They need to escape. Need to run. They can’t stand and fight, not even with three of them (where’s Naruto, where’s Naruto)

“Sasuke! There’s a snake!” Sakura yells right behind him, and he had been too shaken up, hadn’t been paying attention-

It’s large, huge, could easily eat them and the three scatter in different directions. The snake comes after Sasuke –

And it’s the woman.

The snake is coming out of the woman and Sasuke screams, yelling even though his lungs burn and firing off shuriken at the snake – he can’t think, can’t process, just does and-

It’s dead.

He lands on a branch, watching the corpse fall over, breathing hard and trying to not to throw up. Sasuke glances – Sakura’s safe. Nearby. The Ame genin is next to her, and he shakes his head. “We need to get out here,” he says, and Sasuke couldn’t agree with him more. “Shit, I shouldn’t even be a part of this, what the-“

He stops. Sasuke follows his eyes to the corpse, and it’s… breaking.

Oh no.

The scales crack, the skin of the snake breaking as the familiar figure of the woman slowly, slowly
rises from it. (He hadn’t been hallucinating. He kind of wishes he had been.) “Don’t lower your guard, not even more a moment,” she says. “A prey must always stay tense and try to flee desperately… before a predator.”

And then she moves. Faster than the snake, but like a snake, winding up the branch too fast for Sasuke to even think, to even do anything.

The Ame genin throws a shuriken but it misses, and Sasuke can’t do anything but cry out, taking a step back and palming a kunai before- a mess of kunai and shuriken embed themselves in the branch right in front of her. She stops. Sasuke stops. Sakura and the Ame genin stop.

“Sorry, Sasuke!”

The Uchiha can barely breathe. He turns, slowly slowly slowly and there-

There is Naruto. He’s safe, whole (if a little… slimy?), folding his arms and grinning a mile wide. Sakura yells in joy from behind him, but Sasuke only has eyes for Naruto.

The blonde beams. “The password… I forgot it!”

Chapter End Notes

so!! it's up before i leave!!! oboro and team 7 time. u can beat orochimaru!! (not lol)

this was originally going to cover about two more episodes but uh it was already getting quite long and I needed a good stopping point so! the exam part 2 may take four chapters now, instead of the previously mentioned three

not sure when the next chapter will be up - either another before i go (unlikely), i'll have enough internet to post it while i’m away (possible), or i'll be posting it on like the 10th/11th (most likely). thanks so much for all the support guys, happy holidays!!!
Naruto surveys the grass nin before them, and everything pauses for a second. The enemy smirks. "You got rid of my snake quickly," she says. "Well done, Naruto."

The blonde’s face twists into a scowl. "That was you!" His hands fly, flashing through a familiar set of hand signs. "Shadow Clone Jutsu! You won't get to do it again!"

Dozens of Narutos poof into existence, running at the grass nin full-tilt, and Sasuke feels the vice of terror wrapped around his heart ease a little. Yes. That's a good distraction, a good way to keep her busy while the four of them try to flee for their lives, get away, and maybe survive another day.

He doesn't even care about passing the exam at this point. He just wants to live.

"Naruto!" he yells, voice strained - he can't bring himself to look at the cloud of smoke that is her decimating the clones. Fortunately, the real Naruto hung back, and Sasuke leaps from his branch to Naruto's, landing with a stagger right next to him. The blonde automatically moves to stabilize him, putting on a hand on his back and-

Wow, he reeks. And really is covered in slime.

No, no, not the time.

"Naruto, we need to run," he tells him. "She's way out of our league - we need to distract her as long as possible and get out of here."

His teammate nods, pale and shaking. "Okay."

Sasuke blinks - he hadn't really expected an easy agreement from Naruto, of all people. Before he can question it, though, someone lands behind him, and he whirls around-

It's Sakura and the Ame genin, tense and with drawn faces. "If we can get down to the ground, I've got a plan," he says, and Team 7 exchanges glances. "Look, I don't want to die today, okay!? So-"

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto yells in Sasuke's ear, and another wave of clones rushes at the grass ninja. There's no time to waste, and nothing to lose. That won't work for too much longer.

"Down," Sasuke says, and they leap together, landing neatly on the forest floor.

"We just need to delay her as long as possible," the Ame Genin says, flipping through an unfamiliar pattern of seals - and all around them, shinobi begin rising from the earth. Copies of their new ally, as well as copies of the three of them. It's. Incredibly eerie.
He turns to Naruto. "Make four clones and disguise them as us, in the bushes, and then add as many clones as you can to my illusions."

Sasuke should be in charge. Taking control. He is the de facto leader of Team 7 - but he's shaking too much. He hasn't felt blood lust like this since... since...

He thinks he's going to vomit.

Sakura leans into him, grounding him, as they watch Naruto steel himself. He inhales, exhales- "Shadow Clone Jutsu," the blond murmurs, and the effect is instantaneous.

At least a hundred Narutos populate the clearing, and as they watch, a ripple passes through them as most of them henge.

It's staggering. Sasuke had no idea Naruto had that much chakra.

The Uzumaki looks a little worse for the wear, pale with a sheen of sweat covering his skin, but he gives them a tired grin. "Let's go."

They move. The entire production only took a minute, but it's a minute they didn't really have to spare, and Sasuke is beyond terrified that grass nin will see right through it. Or, worse - was watching and is going to get the drop on them any moment. She's so above their power level it's not even funny, and getting into an actual entanglement with her will be the death of all of them.

As the three jump from branch to branch, though, Sasuke starts to think they might actually make it. Ten minutes pass of naught but their hard breathing as they go go go, and there's no sign of her. Naruto hasn't said anything, either, and wouldn't he know if all of his clones were destroyed? They might... they might do this. Survive this.

While Sasuke is starting to feel tired and Sakura is near shaking from the exertion, Naruto is looking a bit better. In fact, he grins at the Ame genin, seemingly relaxed. "Good plan, jumpsuit!" he crows, clearly not afraid of being heard. "She's still fighting them right now!"

Oh. Oh, thank god.

The Ame genin scowls, though. "My name is Oboro," he says. "Not jumpsuit." After a moment, though, he begrudgingly adds a "Thanks."

Sakura tiredly smiles, leaping to the next branch alongside Sasuke. "What was that jutsu you used back there?" she asks quietly. "I haven't seen any illusions like that before."

Oboro puffys up a little. "I bet. It's actually-"

"Quiet," Sasuke hisses, coming to a stop, and the other three shut up. They all pause for a moment, and the Uchiha stretches out every single one of his senses, desperately trying to find a source for the unsettling feeling burrowing up from his core. "Naruto," he says slowly, as hushed as possible. "Are you sure that-"

He doesn't get a chance to finish.

Sasuke moves, hurtling himself away from his branch to another with every ounce of speed in his body. He barely makes it, four shuriken embedding themselves in the spot he just vacated.

There's a laugh and the four of them look up, terrified, to see the grass ninja standing on a giant fucking snake.
Oboro curses.

"My, my, what clever children," she says, and Sasuke. Can't. Move. It's not like before, with the killing intent that felt as though it was flooding every inch of him - this is just sheer, unadulterated terror.

This ninja had realized none of the many, many copies they had left behind were real. She had slipped by all of the clones while tricking Naruto into thinking the plan was working - probably via her own clone. She had snuck up on them while riding a giant snake, and now had the them exhausted and cornered.

They were going to die.

"This was your plan?" she continues, turning slightly to face Oboro. "A pity."

It's a movement so fast even Sasuke's Sharingan can barely see it. Her tongue whips out, wrapping itself around Oboro's neck and yanks. It's barely a blink.

Barely a blink, and a crack, and he's gone.

Sakura gasps, horrified, as the woman retracts her tongue, Oboro's body crumbling, face locked in an expression of horrified shock - Sakura catches him. Sasuke can't stop staring. The last time he saw someone look like that-

The woman laughs. "A pity," she says again, and licks her lips. "If only he hadn't been with you..."

Naruto is shaking. His hands curled into fists by his side, every part of him steel and tense and he whirls, his eyes teary and red red red as he snarls, animalistic and feral. "I'll kill you!" he screams. "I'll kill you!"

He launches himself at the grass nin. Sasuke's only a beat behind him.

The Uchiha has never seen Naruto strong like this before - it's almost frightening. He punches the snake, and it seems to hurt it, to actually stop it, but Sasuke drives that thought from his mind. He blocks out Naruto taking on the snake, and Sakura rising to her feet, wiping at her tear-filled eyes and joining in. He blocks it all out.

It's just him and her.

He lunges forward and she pulls back. She lashes out with her tongue and he rolls to the underside of the branch. It's a deadly game, a deadly dance, and it's terrifying. They bandy back and forth fireballs and he tries to trap her with ninja wire but can't, his hands shaking too badly to properly direct it.

Sasuke only really acknowledges the disappearance of the snake (a summons) when Naruto leaps over him, launching his whole orange self at the grass nin with a snarl. "Don't touch him!" Naruto yells, and the woman laughs, easily dodging him.

"I didn't expect to see you here," she says, and Sasuke charges, hands flying through the seals for a fireball but- he has nothing. There's only the barest vestiges of chakra to draw upon, and it's not enough.

The grass nin takes advantage of his distraction. She flings Naruto away from her, pinning him swiftly to the closest tree trunk with three quick kunai. Before he can do more than snarl at her, she slams her hand into his stomach and he slumps, going terrifyingly still.
Sasuke falls to his knees.

The woman turns on the branch, licking her lips, and slowly - achingly slowly - begins to walk towards Sasuke. He can do... nothing. Absolutely nothing. His legs are like lead beneath him, his breath is coming so fast he's on the verge of hyperventilating, and he's almost out of chakra. (Lose anymore, and he's dead.)

"P... Please," he begs, one hand slowly, shakily moving to the pouch on his hip. He doesn't know if it will do anything - it almost feels like this is a game to her, that she's hunting them for sport - but if giving her the scroll spares them, he'll do it in a heartbeat.

He doesn't get the chance.

"Don't touch him!" Sakura screeches with all the valkyric fury of a twelve-year-old girl. Sasuke barely registers her voice before her fist slams into the grass nin's face. The woman stagers, taking a few steps back, and Sakura takes the opportunity to get between the two of them. Leg back, poised to leap, kunai in her hands and low to the ground - she's ready. "I won't let you touch him you... murderer."

The woman laughs, straightening up and locking a spot of blood off the corner of her mouth. "Silly little girl," she says. "All ninja kill."

"Then I'll kill you!" Sakura spits, and she hurtles herself forward.

It's too fast for Sasuke to see. Sakura throws a punch at the woman's stomach, but she dodges easily and moves and- the girl cries out, a fresh line of blood slicing down her chest, through her chest, and fuck, Sasuke can't tell how deep it is. "Foolish," the woman says, and then she throws her.

Not hard. She grabs Sakura by the arm and flings her - just hard enough to push her away from the branch, but not hard enough so she can grab another. The perfect amount so she falls right into a gap.

Sakura screams falling and reaching out for something - anything - but there's naught but air. She disappears into the darkness below... and a moment later, her scream cuts off.

It's silent.

And Sasuke is alone with her.

"Well, well, that was a fun game," the woman says, walking closer once more. She's been toying with them the whole time, Sasuke realizes. She could've taken them down at any point.

"Who are you?" he croaks. "What... what do you want?"

"My name is Orochimaru," she says, crouching in front of him and gently stroking his cheek. Sasuke's skin crawls, and he tries to pull away, but she grabs his chin and holds fast. "When you want more power, Sasuke... come to me. It will be yours."

And then she bites him.

There's a fire burning in his neck, rippling through his veins, infecting the rest of him and he screams, feeling clutching at the wound as his vision flickers...

Before going peacefully, mercifully black.
i'm back in the united states, woo! guatemala was awesome.

when i rewatched the orochimaru fight, i was actually kind of surprised by how underwhelming it was? it's incredibly clear that orochimaru is toying with them, and just testing sasuke out, so i've tried to reflect that here. (it's why he let them get away with their plan for a little bit - he wanted to see what they would do.)

poor, poor oboro.

i'm going to try to keep to a new update schedule, because 2018 is my fucking year and i'm forcibly grabbing it by the reigns to make it work. every other wednesday, because that's my day off! (well, for now - i'm changing jobs soon.) i'm also posting a naruto self insert story in a little bit (i just need to type it up), if anyone's interested in that!

thanks for all the continued support, guys! i hope you enjoy it!
Sakura Interlude: One

Chapter Notes

welcome to the first sakura interlude!!!

aka the time we get sakura's pov because sasuke is otherwise occupied and we need to see important plot shit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She hurts. It’s the first thing Sakura is aware of, the pain. It radiates through her entire body – like Naruto ran her over with an army of shadow clones. Especially her arm, which she’s… lying on…? She’s never, ever felt like this before. No matter how rough a spar was at the academy, not even when Kakashi nearly murdered them with his terrifying dogs, she’s never felt like this before.

What happened?

Groggily, she opens her eyes – they don’t hurt, at least, even if they feel almost plastered shut. Her vision swims dizzily for a moment before snapping into focus: she sees trees. Trees. Trees in darkness, night, clearly. Trees…

The Chunin Exam.

Sakura sits up and immediately bites her lip so hard it bleeds to try to muffle her cry of pain. Her whole body hurts like hell, yes, but her arm… Tears well up in her eyes as she looks at her left arm hanging limply by her side. It had been lying underneath her, wrenched around, and she wonders if she had instinctively been trying to cushion her fall, in those last few moments of falling. Maybe it worked. Sakura can’t tell. What she can tell, though, is that her arm is dislocated. Possibly broken.

Tears roll down her cheek, and she can’t help it. The girl lets out a half-choked sob. It’s dead silent – and god, she’s terrified that she’s going to climb up the trees and find someone well and truly dead – the nice Ame boy, Oboro, is fucking dead and her team was attacked by a fucking Sannin.

The moment she saw that snake summon, she knew. After Zabuza, her newly formed library habit (thank you, Sasuke!) had brought her to the bingo books, and she did her best to memorize the ones that might come up. Orochimaru had been Konohan, once. She remembered him.

And he had come after them.

He had come after them and he had toyed with them and-

The girl leans over, carefully trying to not jostle her arm as she hangs her head between her legs and tries to breathe. Breathe, Sakura, breathe. What does she need to do? What would Sasuke do? (No, no, she can’t think about Sasuke, she left him alone with that monster-) What would Naruto do? (He was so still, so still and silent and she thinks of the way Oboro’s neck just snapped and-)

What would Kakashi do? She’s gonna hug him so hard when she sees him and then hit him for putting this dumb idea in the boys’ heads, it’s his fault they’re in this situation!

No, she can’t picture what anyone else would do. It’s impossible and makes her heart hurt because
all she wants to do is hug them all and never ever go on another mission again. Ever. She’ll do D-ranks for the rest of her life if everyone comes out okay from this.


She’s read medical texts, she knows anatomy, she… sort of thinks she knows what to do here. Sakura needs to pop it back into place, probably bite something so she doesn’t chew off her own tongue (or was that just a myth? God, she can’t remember), and then probably make some sort of splint if it seems broken.

The genin is no medic, and she can feel the deep-seated terror set in every corner of her bones at the sheer silence surrounding her. It’s terrifying. She needs to- she needs to do this and get it over with and see how her teammates are. She needs to.

She can do this. She has no other choice.

It’s funny how a simple event can turn your whole world upside down, Sakura thinks. It’s not being put on a team with Naruto and Sasuke – though, honestly, she’s pretty sure her patience is getting stretched beyond belief with this kind of dynamic. No, it’s a simple act.

“Don’t you have any books to read, Sakura?” Sasuke asks, and things. Shift, just a little. She’s long resigned herself to never impressing him via her physical prowess (She’s just. Not that strong, no matter how hard she tries), but this- she can do this.

Sakura is good at reading, and Sasuke seems a little happier in the morning when she’s got a book in hand. (Maybe happy is a bit much, but he does frown less!) Maybe she’ll never be a rival like how Naruto is, never be someone that throws herself at Sasuke in a fight, never has quite the same… dynamic as the two of them, but she’s eager to be useful. She’s eager to show Sasuke that she’ll listen, that she’ll learn, and so she does.

The genin becomes a frequent visitor at the library, and reads a vast variety, particularly now that she has access to more books as a shinobi. She needs to learn what she’s going to do. There’s so many different things, and a lot are less physical – thank goodness.

Elemental ninjutsu. Genjutsu. Medical ninjutsu. Fuinjutsu. The list goes on and on, and Sakura doesn’t even know where to begin. True, she’s only a genin, but… but…

She feels like, with these sort of teammates, she might get a little left behind. She doesn’t want that.

The more time goes on, the more terror Sakura feels. Even when she screams, muffled by the kunai in her teeth, shoving her left arm back in its socket, there’s not a peep. She weeps softly, trying to stay as quiet as possible, as she breaks branches off the closest tree, bandaging them around her arm and then ripping off part of her dress to create a make-shift sling-

Not a single soul even breathes.

“They might just be unconscious,” she mumbles to herself, bracing her good arm against a trunk to help her struggle to her feet. She can’t quite believe it. “Just get up there, Sakura. You can do it.”

She’s shaking, she realizes, trembling with both cold and terror and nausea curling in her gut- Nope, that’s bile climbing up her throat, and she leans over to throw up. It’s not a pretty sight, and she barely swallows down another go of it. No. No, don’t.
It’s as good as incentive as any to finally climb the trees.

Sakura mentally thanks Kakashi-sensei for teaching them how to do this – it takes so much effort, one foot in front of the other, but she wouldn’t be able to do it with her hands. That’s how she realizes she’s bleeding, though.

“Oh,” she says, softly, looking down to where there’s a ragged line cut down her front, starting to slowly bleed again. It… scabbed over, it seemed, or dried, or something (how long was she out), but now that she’s moving again… it’s open. Bleeding sluggishly.

Well, she doesn’t have the chakra to stop and deal with it now. She has to keep climbing.

One, two, one, two, one, two, Sakura counts, focusing on something, anything. Anything than the silence coming from above, anything but the pain echoing through her body (especially her arm) with every step she takes, anything but the slow trickle of blood staining her dress and starting to slowly drip, drip, drip. She thinks she might be leaving a trail.

She thinks she doesn’t care.

It feels like it’s forever until she hits a solid branch and carefully steps onto it, immediately sagging against the tree trunk behind her. Sakura has chakra – she hadn’t really used any before this, and she’s so glad for that – but she’s so achingly tired she still worries she’ll slip and fall, that she won’t be able to find them, that she- that she-

No, no, fuck, no. Sakura slaps herself with her good hand, shaking herself into awakeness, into clarity. No, she can do this.

Opening her eyes – when had she closed them? – the genin looks around, squinting into the darkness to see if she can find her team. Naruto is- Sakura swallows sharply. He’s one branch over, hanging from the tree trunk by a kunai. Sasuke is- She shakes, clutching at her ruined dress with her free hand. He’s lying on that same branch, not making a single movement. From this far, she can’t tell if either are breathing.

She lets out a choked sob, and leaps.

Wave only encourages her – and reaffirms her thoughts. Sasuke and Naruto had been… they had been useful. They had fought. Naruto was the absolute dead last in the class and he had done so much more than her.

Sakura had done nothing.

Sakura had been nothing.

“Kakashi-sensei,” she asks one morning, when the boys are racing ahead to the missions desk, Naruto racing to get there and Sasuke doing his usual ‘I’m not racing you Naruto but like hell you’ll beat me’, while she and their teacher hang behind. “Can you help me figure out my ninjutsu affinity?”

He gazes down at her with his one eye that sees far more than she ever could, unreadable as ever, and the girl steels herself before she continues. “I… I want to learn some, but I don’t know what would be the easiest for me, so I-“ She’s interrupted as a gloved hand shoves a piece of paper in her hand, and comes to a stop.

Kakashi-sensei is offering her the small square, and his eye crinkles up in a smile. “Maa, it’s always
good to see my cute little students bettering themselves. Do you know what this is?"

She nods eagerly, taking the paper from him and starting to walk again. Sakura can channel chakra into a piece of paper and walk at the same time, so she does – and it turns into dirt, crumbling away. She blinks once, twice, and then beams up at her teacher. “Earth, right?”

He laughs a little, reaching out to ruffle her hair. “Yes, yes, Earth. Come on, or we’ll get left behind,” he says, and then he disappears from her side in a swirl of leaves and smoke.

Cursing quietly in her head, Sakura starts to run. “Hey, hey, wait for me!”

Naruto is the closest, but she stops right before she touches him. *Come on, Sakura,* she thinks. *Naruto would have done so much more for you by this point.* He would. Unreliable, dumb, idiotic as he could be – he was the most selfless of them all, and it’s with that in mind that she reaches out, brushing past his hair to gently place her fingers on the side of his neck.

For one heartbreaking moment, she feels nothing. She feels absolutely nothing and her heart climbs up in her throat, beating so loud as if to beat for him too, and god she should have been so much nicer to him, but now he’s gone and she can’t even remember what the last thing she said to him was-

And there’s a heartbeat under her fingers.

She stares, wide-eyed, but she can feel the faint twitch underneath her fingers. The slight pulsing of some vein, some artery, whatever, but it’s there and it’s real and Naruto’s alive.

Sakura hugs him. He’s unconscious and hanging from a kunai and pretty slimy, but she’s so relieved she hugs him, and then gingerly pulls out the kunai, catching him before he can fall and then laying him down on the branch. He looks… asleep. Peaceful. Not like he had just attacked a missing nin and nearly gotten killed in turn, and it’s such a relief she could cry.

But she can’t. Not yet.

Still, Naruto being alive has bolstered her, and though she takes a deep breath to steady herself, she’s not shaking as she walks across the branch towards Sasuke. He’s… crumpled on the branch, hand clutched at his neck, and she’s so scared of what she’ll see underneath it. A wound?

Sakura crouches next to him, and pries his hand away – no, it’s not a wound. It’s a seal, she realizes, something she only knows from her time in the library, but that can’t be a concern right now. Living, living is the concern, and she can figure out everything else from there.

She presses her fingers to his neck, and this time, she has the mind to be patient. Wait a few seconds, and then the pulse seems to come to life. Thank god, they’re both alive. Naruto’s alive. Sasuke’s alive. All three of them are alive.

Sakura bends over her teammate and weeps.

She studies as much as she can – she reads, she devours. When she’s not training with her team, not taking missions, she reads. It’s not like she has any social life to speak of.

That realization actually… hurts. Ino had been the main person she spoke with when she had been in the Academy, even with all their bickering, and now they’re on separate teams and she can only see Ino if one of them seeks the other out – which neither will do, of course. They’re rivals! They
But Sasuke and Naruto are rivals, and they see each other every day…

It’s a bit of a sobering thought. Naruto—Naruto doesn’t have any friends, she knows this. Neither does Sasuke. Sasuke doesn’t because—because he’s Sasuke, because all he does is train and get stronger (and that’s really really cool!) but that means that she can’t hang out with him. She’s been rebuffed since day one, and even though she’ll keep trying because she really wants to, it means she doesn’t expect an answer in the positive any time soon.

Naruto, though… Naruto likes her. (Why wouldn’t he? She’s the best girl in the whole year!) So maybe… Ugh. Even if he’s annoying, maybe…

She crinkles her nose at the thought, but waits until Sasuke’s left after training one day (she doesn’t want him to get the wrong idea!) before approaching her other teammate. “Hey, Naruto. Want to go shopping?”

Sakura carries them down to the ground, one by one. She’d rather bring them down, first—leaving them up in the trees is too precarious, and she’s so, so worried. And she doesn’t want to leave them alone.

After a long moment of hesitation, she collects Oboro’s body, too. She can’t leave him lying there.

She’s tired, and she can feel that ache in every part of her bones—and god, is it hard to carry people with just one arm—but she still places them under the roots of a tree, big enough to allow for shelter. Sakura carefully rummages through Sasuke’s pack, not even blushing because of the circumstances, and pulls out some sweat towels she knew he had stashed in here. (She had seen him use them and wow.) She wets them carefully with some of their precious water, folding them up to lay them on both of her boys’ heads, and watches them for a moment.

Sasuke is clearly having a nightmare of some sort—she wonders if it’s related to the seal. He looks so distressed, so upset, that all she wants to do is reach out and wipe it all away but she can’t, she can’t. Naruto… Naruto looks better, but now that he’s lying like this, she can see his knit brow, that something is bothering him as well. He’s not just sleeping peacefully.

Oboro—She doesn’t look at him, tucked away in the corner. She can’t.

She watches them for a little bit, catching her breath, before she forces herself to stand. First, she needs to wrap up her side—she has no idea how bad it is, just that it’s bleeding sluggishly and when she pulls off her dress the scabbing rips even more, and she has to bite back a cry. Sasuke had packed bandages, thank god, and she has to pull off even her bra to wrap her whole front. It’s long and bleeding and that can’t be good, but it’s not as though she can do anything else for it at the moment.

Right now, Sakura needs to set some traps.

“Naruto, if you don’t ask me out ever again, we can be friends. I won’t ever say yes and be your girlfriend,” she tells him, and he agrees.

He. Agrees.

“We’ll be friends? Really?”
She rolls her eyes. “Yes, dummy.”

“Okay!”

Sakura immediately regrets it when she’s dragged off to go to Ichiraku – “No, I said shopping! Shopping!!!” – to greet a bemused Iruka, perched at one of the stools.

“Iruka-sensei, Iruka-sensei!” Naruto yells, releasing her hand to lunge at their old teacher, almost knocking him off the stool but not quite. He had braced for it. “Guess what! Me and Sakura are friends now!”

Iruka laughs a little, and smiles at him, before smile at her, warm and open and genuine in a way that she hadn’t seen from the teacher before. It’s not that he hadn’t been warm and nice with her before, but this was… this was different? “Is that so, Sakura?” he asks, and she blushes a little, before nodding.

“Yeah. He’s not so bad.”

Naruto immediately protests that, but Iruka directs him away from arguing with her, steering him towards telling him about his week, which he eagerly does. He talks about the most banal things, and Sakura blows on her noodles and eats, watching. It’s like her and her parents, but… but not.

The blonde seems to relish every single word Iruka-sensei says, brightening at every piece of attention, and Sakura wonders, when was the last time she appreciated her parents like that? When was the last time she had hugged her mom, eagerly told her dad all about her day, written a letter to her aunts?

For someone who’s legally an adult, she… she has a lot of growing up to do, doesn’t she?

By the time she finishes the traps, it’s daybreak. Sakura has no true way of knowing how long she had been unconscious, before, but it had apparently been a decent chunk of time.

That’s. Worrisome.

She’s only barely settled herself down when out comes a squirrel from the bushes – and she stops it. Prevents it from going into a trap, and maybe that was too much of a giveaway, because out of the bushes come three ninja. Sound ninja, and they skirt the trap as easy as breathing.

“I’m going to kill the girl, and then I’m going to kill this Sasuke guy,” one of them says, and Sakura stops breathing. They work for Orochimaru, work for that Snake sannin, and they’re part of the reason that Oboro is dead. They’re part of the reason that Naruto and Sasuke are unconscious behind her, and she grabs a kunai with her free hand, every part of her shaking.

The one covered in bandages laughs. “Don’t bother with the second trap,” he says. “We’ve been watching you the whole time.”

She’s going to die here, Sakura realizes. She only has one arm, and she hurts and she’s bleeding still (did they watch her change she’s going to vomit), but still, she braces herself. Maybe she’s going to die here. Maybe there’s nothing she can do about it, and tears well up a little in her eyes.

But she’ll try to take down at least one of them with her, and hopefully she can stall long enough so her teammates can wake up and save themselves.

They rush at her, and she inhales. Mom, Dad, if we get out of this, I’m going to give you such a big
hug when I get home. She tightens her grip on her kunai. Ino, I wish we were best friends again. I wish we weren’t so stupid. She exhales. Naruto, Sasuke…! I won’t let you down!

And then someone punches the female ninja in the stomach.

The new ninja moves, chakra visible around their fists as they punch her a few more times and she crumples to the ground, before they back up swiftly, getting between Sakura and the other two ninjas as they grind to a halt. It's a surprise attack, and wow, it's a really good one.

“What the hell?” the ‘I’m going to kill you’ one asks. “Who are you?”

“I’m Hyuuga Hinata,” says Hinata, standing in front of Sakura, a squirrel perched on her shoulder. “I won’t- I won’t let you hurt them.”

Chapter End Notes

one person mentioned, before, how not meeting lee would change this - and they were right, but there's a little more that i'm surprised no one picked up on. the fact that the three of them ran for ten minutes before finally getting taken out by orochimaru? well. that just means they're in a COMPLETELY DIFFERENT location than canon

which means... different people to come to the rescue!!! (team 8 is like. hypercompetent tbh it's a crying shame none of them became chunin and only (1) made it to the end bc they're the most competent of all the rookies by FAR) anyway i had a lot of fun with this chapter, even if the ending was a lil bit of a struggle, so i hope u enjoy!!

check me out at grellsuke on tumblr for writing updates and any other fics i post, lol, which i will be doing plenty of this upcoming femslash february.

see you in two weeks!
Sakura Interlude: Two

Chapter Notes

every time i was like 'this is unrealistic, they wouldn’t stop in the middle of this fight' i reminded myself that yes, yes, they do, every single god damn fight. they literally stop the fight to explain their fucking techniques, they would absolutely do this

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sakura can’t even breathe. She can’t- She can’t wrap her head around this. “What- What are you doing here?” she asks, a half-crazed laugh curling in the back of her throat, but she swallows it.

Hinata doesn’t turn to face her, keeping her eyes on the enemy ninja even as she sets the squirrel down on the ground. The two boys on the team are hanging back, and the girl is coughing, gingerly shoving herself to her feet. “There… There was an exploding tag on… on the squirrel… So I… I investigated…”

Oh. That explained a lot – and also made Sakura feel a little better. She hadn’t given them away by driving the squirrel away from a trap, but that also didn’t… “But you’re the enemy,” she protests.

For a moment, Sakura doesn’t think the girl will answer – they probably shouldn’t be talking like this, probably shouldn’t be given the bandaged boy time to reassess, reevaluate, but she can’t help it. “…Wouldn’t… Wouldn’t you help me, Sakura?” she asks, and it’s like a punch to the gut.

“Yes,” she says immediately, ashamed of herself for even asking that, now, her good hand curling around her kunai. “I would.” Hinata nods, simple as that.

The bandaged one rolls his eyes. “Well, isn’t this a touching display of Konoha solidarity,” he snarks, tossing his scroll to the other male. “Zaku, you take care of Sasuke.” Zaku. That’s the one with the metal on his face, Sakura files away. “I’ll take care of them.”

“Dosu, let me handle this bitch,” the girl says, snarling in Hinata’s direction. She looks pissed, and Sakura doesn’t blame her - that looked like it hurt.

“No,” says the one named Dosu, the leader. “Stay back, Kin.”

And then he takes off. He’s not terrifyingly fast, but he’s still far faster than Sakura can move, and her shoulders tense up. Hinata cannot dodge, not unless she wants to leave Sakura and her team exposed, and the pink-haired girl doesn’t think she’ll move. Terrified terrified terrified, Sakura flings her kunai, but Dosu just dodges it easily.

Hinata doesn’t even move.

She stands there, ready to fight, ready to take him on, but doesn’t move forward, doesn’t push to engage, and Sakura can’t breathe can’t do anything is completely useless-

Something hurtles into Dosu from the side.

It’s- It’s a tornado, a sideways tornado, hurtling into the sound genin and sending him flying, and Sakura has only a moment to think Holy shit, I want to learn that jutsu, when the whirling stops, and
it’s Kiba, standing above Dosu and panting heavily. That-

She had no idea Kiba could do that. Dosu is smashed in a crater in the ground, and definitely has at least one broken rib, from how hard that impact was. This is crazy.

Zaku swears. “Shit, she’s got teammates,” he says, and then the clearing explodes into movement.

Shino shoots from the trees, appearing out of nowhere just as fast as Kiba had, leaping straight for Zaku and nimbly dodging a spout of air he shoots from his arms. Hinata lunges forward, striking at the girl, Kin, with an open palm and slipping to the side to avoid a senbon, which comes to a halt barely a foot in front of Sakura.

Sakura has no idea where to look. Zaku and Shino seem evenly matched. Hinata looks like she’ll be winning, though, and Kiba…

Kiba’s standing guard over Dosu, but he’s not looking at him – rather, his teammates. Sakura doesn’t blame him. She remembers Wave, and she deeply understands that it’s hard, it’s so hard to stay and not fight when everyone else is, even when that’s the tactical decision, but-

Dosu is moving.

“Kiba!” she screams, grabbing another kunai from her pouch, but it’s too late. Dosu flings his arm out, connecting with Kiba’s leg, and she has no idea what kind of attack it is, but Kiba collapses.

The thought of another Oboro has her up and running before she’s even consciously realized it.

Sakura flings her kunai at Dosu, embedding it in his shoulder as he rises, and bodily shoves her entire self into him, knocking him back down before he’s even fully gotten back up. She cries out in pain, her arm on fire, every one of her muscles screaming at her to stop, but Sakura pushes past it, desperately forcing herself up and off the other. She doesn’t, desperately doesn’t want him to hit her with whatever he got Kiba with. It even sent Akamaru down, too, sent the puppy twitching to the ground and she’s so, so scared she’ll get the same.

He doesn’t need to.

Something locks in her hair, yanking and pulling. Tears spring to her eyes as she struggles, but she’s dragged up into a sitting position- and freezes, as a kunai hovers right in front of her throat.

“Stop moving, or the girl gets it!” Dosu yells from behind her, and Shino and Hinata. Stop moving. Hinata jumps back first, putting some distance in between her and Kin, and even from here, Sakura can see the panic in her vision, the ways her eyes dart between Sakura and Kiba, lying unconscious but breathing, definitely breathing, at her feet. Shino stays exactly where he is.

Sakura can’t see the ninja’s face behind her, but he yanks on her hair again and she gasps in pain. “Good, good, just like that,” he says. He sounds delighted with himself. “Drop your weapons.”

Neither of them move, and Dosu gives another yank to her hair, enjoying her pain. “Drop them, or the girl dies.”

Shino is the one to speak – Sakura can’t remember the last time she heard him say something out loud. “I can move faster than you,” he says, and the girl feels terror settling in her bones. Yes, Shino is fast. She saw that. But-

From behind Shino, out of his peripheral vision, Zaku aims both arms at Shino and blows.
Well, that’s what’s supposed to happen – instead, Zaku’s arms blow up. She can see the crackle of chakra around his arms as the sound genin yells in pain.

But that’s where she stops paying attention to him, because she sees her chance.

Dosu gasps at the sight of his teammate, and his hand shifts, just a little, just a little upwards, and it’s enough. Sakura bites him. He yelps and she doesn’t let go, doesn’t release her teeth even though she can taste the coppery sting of blood in her mouth and it’s disgusting.

Her free hand palms a kunai from her pouch and reaches up and slices through her hair.

She doesn’t give herself a second to mourn. Not a single second to think about it. Shino is there in a matter of seconds, scooping up Kiba, and she drops the kunai, grabbing Akamaru with her free hand and bolting with him.

Zaku is collapsed to the ground, panting and struggling for air. Hinata has Kin pinned to the ground, kunai to her neck and other hand grabbing Kin’s arm – no jutsus for her. “S... Stop,” Hinata says, as Shino lays Kiba gently on the ground and Sakura holds Akamaru cradled to her chest. “If you move, I’ll... I’ll kill her.”

There’s terror in Kin’s face, and Sakura feels sympathetic, remembering her fear, but she does nothing. Hinata won’t kill her, she won’t, but they don’t know that.

Dosu, though? Dosu just laughs, tilting his head to the side and looking like some sort of bandaged, deranged puppet. He’s injured, bleeding from the arm and breathing heavily and painfully, but if all he has to do is touch one of them to knock them out, the three of them may still have a fight on their hands. “Go ahead,” he says, and Sakura stops breathing. “Kill her, for all I care. She means nothing to me.”

Sakura can’t help herself. “But she’s your teammate!” How- How- How can he say that!?

He laughs again. “You’re so naïve. What-“

Two kunai embed themselves in the ground in front of him, and he stops talking. They all do – because none of them threw those.

Out of the trees come two genin, and Sakura’s brain. Just. Stops. They’re wearing yellow jumpsuits- yellow jumpsuits just like- just like- 

Just like Oboro.

Their words only confirm her frantically racing thoughts. “Sorry to bust in on your... meeting,” one of them says, glancing around. “But we’re looking for our third teammate.”

The second one, slightly shorter, glances over to meet Sakura’s eyes. “He was following your team. Any idea what happened to him?”

She wonders, for one hysterical moment, what their relationship is. Sakura would jump into a bunch of enemies for Sasuke, or for Naruto, she knows she would (now, she knows she would – she didn’t before). Any member of Team 8 would. The sound team... wouldn’t.

But how does she even begin to explain what happened?

“He... I...” She stumbles over her words, gently petting Akamaru. He’s comforting. Shino and Hinata trade confused glances, and Sakura tries to steel herself, tries to say it.
But Dosu laughs again, and it’s a chilling sound. “You killed him, didn’t you?”

Sakura blanches, even as the Ame genin start. “N-No! Your boss killed him!”

He smiles behind his bandages, evidenced only by the crinkling of his eye. It’s something familiar to see on Kakashi – it’s terrifying to see on him. “Then why do you have his body in your hideout?”

She bursts into tears, trembling and shaking and half-burying her face in Akamaru’s fur. “I c-couldn’t leave him!” Sakura wails, and the entire clearing stares at her. “I couldn’t- Oboro t-tried to help us escape from Orochimaru, and th-then the snake k-killed him, snapped his n-neck and- and- and-”

She can’t finish, desperately sucking in air.

“He’s… he’s really dead?” whispers the shorter Ame genin, and Sakura nods miserably.

“Orochimaru- You mean the Sannin?” asks the other one, horrified, and even though she can see the growing disbelief on Hinata and Shino’s faces, Sakura nods again.

“And you-“ The shorter one growls, whipping around to glare at Dosu, who takes a step back. “You work for him!?”

Dosu smirks. He’s cocky, cocky even though he’s the last one of his team, and Sakura wants to reach out and smack that sorry face of his, but she just cries.

“Sakura,” says Shino from right next to her. “What’s that?”

There’s a purple chakra rising from the tree where she left her teammates and Oboro. Slowly, everyone turns to look at once. Sasuke pushes himself up from the ground, and for one sheer moment, all Sakura can feel is relief. “Sasuke!” she cries, “You’re-”

And then it hits her.

It’s the teeming essence of wrong, of corruption, of Orochimaru that’s surrounding Sasuke and choking the air around them. Chakra usually isn’t visible, not like this, but it whips and spirals around him, a sickening purple color that seems to coat every inch of his body. As he steps into view, however, steps out of the shade, she realizes that’s not the case.

There are little tattooed flames covering his body. They spread down his left arm and across the left side of his face, and Sakura knows with terrifying, heartbreaking clarity that they must come from the seal. No wonder they feel of corruption and of the sannin – whatever this is, whatever’s infected Sasuke, it’s from him!

Sasuke takes another step forward, and his red, Sharingan eyes meet hers. She quakes. She’s– She’s never been scared of Sasuke, not ever, but she finds herself shaking, so, so scared of what he’s going to do. This isn’t him. This isn’t her teammate, this isn’t the boy she’s come to know as her friend, and it’s both heartwrenching and the most frightening thing she’s ever seen.

“She’s,” he says, and he doesn’t look away. Neither does she. “Who did this to you?”

Chapter End Notes

aaaand that wraps up our sakura interlude!
I'm really grateful for the positive response of the last chapter, haha. It's fun mixing things up - and it makes me pretty damn excited for a pretty big change that'll be happening soon. I'm terribly excited.

Thank you so much for all the support! The next chapter... may be just a little bit sooner than you anticipate. :) See you then!

(also, footnote: i was very disappointed that i couldn't utilize kin in a better way, bc i love her as i love all naruto women, and yet... she rlly. is no match for hinata. whelp.)
Exam, Part Four

Chapter Notes

gasp another chapter so soon!?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He is alone. It’s the first thing Sasuke’s aware of. There’s no one else around – nor nothing else around, but a myriad of colors that stretch above him, below him, around him. It makes no sense. He is on nothing, nothing at all, and yet he is standing. The Uchiha takes a step forward, glancing around, and that’s when he sees him.

It’s him, from long ago.

The young him is crying, fiercely crying, and Sasuke feels no need to wipe his tears. He feels the need to shake him, to tell him to stop crying because crying solves nothing, it does nothing, but the other boy speaks first. “Father and Mother didn’t need to die!”

And suddenly, he’s back in his home.

The bodies of his parents lay before him, fallen over each other from where they were kneeling – why? Why were they kneeling? – but everything has a sheen of… of fakeness to it. It’s like one of his nightmares, when he keenly realizes it’s a nightmare, and knows it’s not the truth. But the younger him keeps talking, and the real Sasuke trembles.

“Everyone was killed,” the younger boy says, and the older Sasuke can’t see his eyes anymore, can’t see his gaze, as he hunches forward, hiding in the shadow of his hair. “I had no power so… the clan vanished.”

This is an illusion, Sasuke thinks. It’s not a nightmare. It feels too… too vivid to be that, the other Sasuke, but everything else is so fake it must be an illusion. But not a genjutsu…?

“After all,” the young boy says, clutching at his head, “Without power… I can’t do anything! Because I had no power… everyone was killed!”

“No…” he says, and he looks up, and the real Sasuke trembles. “You killed them. You only watched. If I only I had power…”

And the boy shifts, transforms, and it’s Itachi, it’s Itachi and he’s reaching out for him and- “If only I had the power…”

Sasuke wakes up. There’s no pain. He feels… strong. Powerful. As if he could take on the world and leave it as nothing but ashes behind him.

It’s a good feeling.

Naruto is lying next to him. He remembers how Orochimaru had pinned him to the tree, had done something, so he reaches out, pressing his fingers to Naruto’s throat to make sure he’s alive, and he does. Thump, thump, thump goes his heart, and he breathes, and Sasuke pushes himself to his feet.
There are others here.

Team 8 is here. Hinata pins down a sound genin. Shino holds Kiba. One sound genin lies on the ground, stunned and groaning. One sound genin stands, a half-crazed grin seemingly on his face beneath his bandages. Two Ame genin, in the same uniform as Oboro, stand in the center. And Sakura-

Sakura is hurt. One arm wrapped up, as if broken, hanging from a strip of cloth around her neck, a bloodstain on her front, her hair chopped short, Akamaru clutched to her with her free arm and tears on her face. Sakura looks beaten up and terrified.

She meets his eyes. “Sakura,” he says, slowly but surely, feeling the power swirl in and around him. “Who did this to you? Who is it?”

“Sasuke…?” She says, and she shakes. “Your body…?”

He has his sharingan activated, he realizes, though he doesn’t recall activating it, but that’s not the concern here. Sasuke looks down, and there are… flames trailing up his arms. Not real ones, but… tattoos…?

That should be alarming. He doesn’t know where this power is coming from, he doesn’t know why these marks are on his arms, and the sharingan activated without his conscious thought.

Sasuke isn’t alarmed.

“Don’t worry,” he says. He understands, now, what the woman had been saying. She had given him power. The power that flows freely within him – and she can give him more, if that is what he desires? Interesting.

He smirks. “Sakura, get behind me.” Uncertainly, she glances at Shino, and then Hinata, but does as he says. Slowly, but surely, shuffles towards him, step by step by step. She’s slow, but that’s something Sasuke has long learned about her. He has all the time in the world… None of them can stand up to him here.

The moment she’s close enough, he grabs her. Not hard, but not gentle either, and she looks terrified.

She shouldn’t be looking at him that way, whispers part of his mind, but he ignores it, squashes it back down and refuses to think about it. Who knows. Maybe she should.

“Who did this to you, Sakura,” he says, and it’s not a question. It’s a demand, and her eyes skitter away from him. From the corner of his eye, he can see Team 8 readying themselves for something, but he pays them no mind. He can take them.

She’s terrified, trembling beneath his fingers. “Oro… Orochimaru,” Sakura whispers, and Sasuke absorbs that. The blood on her front must have been from when she cut her. The broken arm from when she fell. But her hair…

“Was she the only one?” he presses, and Sakura’s eyes flicker. Flicker in one specific ninja’s direction. Sasuke lets go and he’s gone.

This power is so much. He flies across the clearing in an instant, smashing his leg into the sound genin’s side and sending him into the closest tree. The genin cries out, falling helplessly onto the ground, and it’s clear he’s broken something. Sasuke grins, putting his foot on the other ninja’s chest. “Don’t touch her,” he breathes.
Something’s going on behind him, but he ignores it. He cares little for the antics of Team 8. They’re nothing to him, nothing but dust and ashes and vermin.)

The genin’s eyes are wide, wide wide wide and frightened, and Sasuke relishes in this. He brought him down. He made this genin feel as though there was no way out, no possible way to win. “Please,” he begs, and oh he begs. It’s delicious. It’s beautiful. Sasuke presses down harder with his foot, and the genin gasps. “P-Please… I’ll g-give you my scroll, just… let us go, please…”

Sasuke stops. Considers this for a moment. “Give me the scroll.”

The genin reaches into his pouch, and Sasuke watches him closely. He pulls out naught but a scroll, and the Uchiha relaxes, reaching down to take it. It’s an Earth scroll. Exactly what they need.

He smirks. “This is exactly what we need,” he says, and hope, desperate, dogged hope flickers across the sound shinobi’s face. “Too bad it doesn’t matter.” Sasuke grinds down with his foot, digging into the genin’s ribs, and he screams in pain.

“Sasuke-“

There’s no one but the two of them, no one but Sasuke, the one who is feared, who is a threat, who has so much power he can dispose of this genin with barely a thought-

“Sasuke!”

If this is what true power is, he needs it. Craves it. This is the way to defeat Itachi, he knows, and he grinds down even harder. Any more, and he’ll kill him, Sasuke thinks. Snap the remaining rib bones and drive his foot straight through his heart. It’s what he deserves. It’s what he should do. He hurt Sakura, and that meant Sasuke should-

The fist comes out of nowhere.

One second, it’s him and the genin and power and fear and everything he’d ever wanted, and the next, a fist is slamming into his cheek, sending him flying off the sound genin. Sasuke twists around in midair to land nimbly on his feet, glaring with red red red eyes, and meets the eyes of his opponent.

It’s Naruto.

He’s breathing hard, Sakura right behind him – she must have woken him up? – and he’s glaring. “Bastard!” he says. “What the hell was that for!? You were gonna kill him!”

Of course he was, Sasuke almost says. He deserves it. He did, and Sasuke should end him and the world would be better and-

But he stops. Looks at the way fear flickers through Naruto’s eyes, though a different fear than the terror Sakura holds. Looks at the genin, barely breathing at the ground. Looks at the way that the conscious members of Team 8 stand ready to battle, a few feet behind them, and even the Ame Genin seem ready to pounce to save the one that Sasuke had been hurting.

He had… he had been ready to kill that genin. Kill him because of power.

“Why? Why did you do this?”

“To test the limits of my ability…”
Sasuke turns around and throws up in the nearest bush. He sinks to his knees, trembling, hugging himself tightly and he’s so, so relieved to feel that power, that terrifying, dark power leave him. The flames on his arm are gone. Chakra no longer swirls around him. He’s nothing but Sasuke. Just… just Sasuke.

Naruto wraps his arms around him, and Sasuke sinks into him, shaking. He’s warm.

Things go on in the background. Talking. Discussions. Sasuke tunes it all out. He can’t- He can’t focus on it, can’t think, can’t really do anything. At one point, Naruto switches spots with Sakura, and she sits next to him, arm wrapped around him. She’s not as warm as Naruto.

All he can do is stare at his feet, head between his legs and try to breathe.

Someone is saying his name, but he doesn’t respond. He doesn’t acknowledge it, until there’s a rough shove to his side and he almost topples over, barely catching himself. “Oy, Sasuke,” the voice says, and Sasuke realizes it’s Naruto. He blinks up at him, meeting worried blue eyes. “Come on. We’re leaving.”

He accepts the hand that helps him to his feet, staggering into his teammate, and he finally, finally, takes stock of the entire clearing.

All three of the sound genin are tied up, but they’re apparently not being left behind. The Ame genin both have one they’re carrying, and Shino has the other. Kiba is up, but woozy looking, leaning on Hinata, while Sakura carries Akamaru in her non-broken arm. Oboro’s corpse is nowhere to be found, and Sasuke thinks someone must have sealed it away, for there’s no upturned earth that he can see.

And Naruto is standing behind him, right there for Sasuke to lean on. “Alright,” he whispers hoarsely, and sees a little bit of tension fade from the other’s shoulders.

They’re slow going. With two members of the group leaning on others, three passengers, and Sakura being… Sakura (though maybe that’s uncharitable, given how hurt she is), they make slow going. It’s okay. Sasuke doesn’t mind it.

The others talk quietly among themselves, but Naruto is quiet, for once, and no one speaks to Sasuke. It’s alright. He’s okay with that.

He doesn’t want to talk.

It’s not until they reach the tower, though, limping through the darkness and the night (for there is no reason to stop, not now), that Sasuke comes to a realization. “Naruto,” he asks, voice rasping from lack of water, and his teammate snaps to attention. “Did anyone grab the sound genins’ scroll?”

There’s a silence, and the Uchiha tries not to curse. They need that scroll, they need to keep going, but none of them (except maybe Naruto) is in any state to keep going. “You can have ours,” says one of the Ame genin, and Team 7’s eyes snap to him.

Sakura protests. “No! We- We couldn’t take your scroll!”

The second one shakes his head. “You have to have all three team members, to… to finish the second exam. We. Don’t.” His voice cracks at that, even as he reaches in his pouch, pulling out his scroll and offering it to Sakura. “You did your best, with- with Oboro. Take it.”
They’re some of the first teams back, but Sasuke can’t bring himself to care. Iruka is stunned by the state of their team, and there is a lot of yelling, lots of strong words, lots of things that Sasuke just tunes out.

He pays attention when Kakashi shows up, though, because Kakashi tries to take him from his teammates.

“Sasuke,” he says, with patience that the genin has never heard from his teacher in his life, “We need to deal with that seal.”

The boy shakes his head, stubborn as can be. “Then they come with me. They can watch.” He’s not letting them out of his sight. For… quite a few reasons, but he doesn’t want to think of them, because they whirl and twist and blend in his head until he can’t focus. He can barely focus at all, right now.

Kakashi sighs, and caves, and the two watch as Kakashi draws painstaking patterns over the Uchiha’s body. “You have to want it to stay sealed away,” his teacher says, and Sasuke nods.

He wants it to stay tucked away. Very, very much so.

For the next three days, all he does is sleep. That medic, Kabuto, shows up at one point, and offers to heal everyone who needs it – all the Konoha ninja that need it, that is, and Sasuke decides he must not be so bad. Sakura definitely needs the healing.

At least one of his teammates is by his side at all times, and Sasuke can’t find himself mad about it. He likes having them close. Likes waking up with a sudden jolt and seeing them right there, breathing and alive and decidedly unmurdered by Itachi or Orochimaru or even himself.

Sakura must tell Naruto everything, because he doesn’t bother Sasuke with questions, and the Uchiha is extremely grateful for that. He doesn’t think he could answer them right now, and it’s not like he exactly has a lot of answers.

Naruto just stays close, and Sakura just stays close, and even Kakashi occasionally peeks his head in, pretending he was just swinging by even though there’s no reason for him to be in the tower aside from visiting his team.

The night before the second part of the exam ends, Naruto sits next to him on the bed, their shoulders brushing. “Are you ready for tomorrow?” he asks with a grin, like nothing has happened, and Sasuke…

Sasuke finally, finally relaxes. He smirks. “More than you, idiot.”

The ensuing squabble is a balm to all of his worries.

Chapter End Notes

happy one year anniversary!!!! exactly one year ago, i uploaded the first chapter of ’from
the corner of your eye', so you get an extra chapter today. <3

this one was difficult to write, just bc i obviously didn't want to make things the same and i... really, really could give less of a shit about sasuke's avenger monologue. it doesn't even make sense in this situation. i love him but what even, child, what even so have angst instead! yay. they got to finish the exams very fast this time, what a good nice change from the norm. time to sleep for sasuke. ik i glossed over the ame genin a bit bc of sasuke's breakdown, but they will be addressed more fully post-preliminaries, Not To Worry

also? sorry for not replying to like any of your comments, i just started a new job and i'm working very hard to churn out a fic/chapter every day for femslash february. i read every single comment, promise!!! thanks for all your support!! <3
Preliminaries, Part One

Chapter Notes

i am ridiculously attached to team oboro now

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke pretends not to notice them hovering. He doesn’t want to acknowledge it, and besides – acknowledging that his teammates are hovering will mean he has to tell them off and he doesn’t… really want to tell them off. Not just his team is hovering – team 8 is, too. He imagines team 10 would be if they were here, but thus far, he hasn’t seen them.

He knows that his team has passed, as has team 8… Kabuto’s team, the other Konoha team with the Hyuuga on it, and the team from Sand. The second part still has a few hours left, so it’s quite possible that more teams will show up, but it’s unlikely there will be very many.

“N… Naruto,” Hinata speaks up. “I-I… Can I…”

Sitting on his bed, Sasuke eyes the byplay, watching as Hinata shoves an ointment at Naruto. It makes something twist in his chest. He doesn’t like it.

Naruto, though, grins big and wide. “Wow, Hinata! Did you make this yourself?” She nods, and his grin grows even bigger. “That’s so cool! Hey, hey, when the test’s over, can you show me how, too?”

She looks like she’s going to faint. (Sasuke hopes she does.) “Ah… Um… If y-you want to…?”

“Great!”

Sasuke doesn’t like this, and he glares down at his lap. Sakura giggles next to him, and he glances at her. “What, you don’t think it’s cute, Sasuke?” she asks. “She’s liked him for like, ever. I’m really happy for her.” There’s something in her smile that seems to be a bit… false, but he doesn’t know what.

“Hn.” He doesn’t say anything, can’t say anything, and Sakura’s smile fades, melting into a contemplative look.

“Do you…” She looks like something’s stuck in the back of her throat. “Are you…” Sakura grimaces. “Never mind.”

Weird.

Sasuke stands up, stretching, and starts to gather together his supplies. “We should eat and head to the meeting room,” he says, Naruto glances over to listen. “We want to be there early to scope it out.”

“I wonder if they’ll have ramen!” the blonde yells, his natural volume.

Sakura rolls her eyes, standing up as well. “Idiot. They haven’t had it so far.” She gives Hinata a warm smile. “Hinata, want to come with? I think your team’s already down there, anyway.”
She flushes. “Um… S… Sure, Sakura.”

Even though Sakura and Naruto are more than ready to socialize with Team 8 and Kabuto, who are at the small eatery set aside for the rather fast test-takers (and when did Naruto start calling Kabuto *Kabuto-nii*?), Sasuke doesn’t want to talk.

He really doesn’t ever want to talk.

Instead, he sits sandwiched between his two teammates, munching on a mixed bowl of rice, eggs, and natto (he’s not sure when he’s going to get to eat again today, so something hearty is probably better) and sipping at a small cup of tea.

Not everyone respects his desire to not speak, though.

“Hey, Sasuke,” Kabuto says, and the Uchiha glances up at him. “Are you feeling alright? You’ve been sleeping almost the whole exam.”

His breakfast sticks in his throat, and he’s only barely able to swallow it down with a drink of water, glaring at him. Even the rational thought of ‘he’s a medic’ doesn’t dissuade the anger that swells up at that. “Yes,” Sasuke says, very firmly. “I’m fine.”

Team 7 and team 8 share uneasy glances, but they’re smart enough to not share details with someone who is an outsider. Konoha genin or not, Kabuto wasn’t there, and he isn’t one of the rookies – to be honest, Sasuke is very, very grateful it was another rookie team that showed up.

He needs to talk to the Ame genin as it is.

Shoveling down his last mouthful of breakfast, Sasuke stands up abruptly, taking his tray of dishes with him. “Sakura. Naruto,” he says. “Let’s go.”

Naruto groans, looking about to protest, but Sakura kicks him under the table. He huffs at her and she gives him a winning smile, and like that, the two other members of his team get up to follow Sasuke.

When they reach the open room where they’re supposed to meet – it looks like one of the rooms they arrived in, in the tower, just bigger – two teams are already there. The team with the Hyuuga, and… Team Oboro.

“Oh, god, hide me,” says Sakura, and she immediately ducks behind Sasuke. Naruto snickers. Sasuke has no clue what his life has turned into.

Against his better instincts, he asks. “Hide you from who?”

Naruto snickers again. “Bushy Brows has a crueluuuuush on her!” He chants, sing-song. Sakura takes a swing at him, but he easily dodges, since she doesn’t want to move from the safety of Sasuke’s back.

Sasuke doesn’t know any of the other team – he hasn’t met them – but it’s really, really easy to see which one is ‘Bushy Brows’. The one in the green jumpsuit very loudly proclaiming how excited he was for the next exam, and how everyone was extraordinarily YOUTHFUL and-

And Sasuke very wisely opts for heading up the stairs to talk to Team Oboro.
The duo is still in their jumpsuits – it isn’t like anyone else had brought other clothes for the second exam – but they’ve ditched their masks and headwraps. Mubi, that’s the name of the one with one eye, glances up at their approach. He has a brown buzzcut, Sasuke can see now, and his right eye is completely opaque, the skin around it covered in burn scars – it looks almost melted. Kagari, on his other side, has the bushy brown hair that Sasuke had briefly noted earlier, and he looks over at them just a beat behind Mubi. Both of his eyes are the exact same as his teammate’s right, and he is, thus, completely blind.

It’s kind of interesting, in a strange way. Sasuke hasn’t ever seen any other ninjas with one or no eyes, barring Kakashi-sensei, and there’s two at once. He sort of wonders what their story is, but he’s not rude enough to ask.

“Hey,” Sasuke says, coming to a halt before them. “Why are you guys still here?” Well, apparently he’s that rude.

Thankfully, they don’t appear to take offence. “We’re the only team that failed that made it to the tower,” Kagari says. “Since we made it here, figured we might as well watch, if there’s anything cool that happens today. They said we could.”

Sakura smiles at them, and steps back Sasuke so she can stand next to them, nudging Mubi’s shoulder. “Good. I was hoping to see you guys before you left. I wanted to ask…” She glances over at Naruto, clearly a little hesitant, and the dumb blonde is more than willing to step up, bouncing over to them.

“Do you guys wanna be friends? And penpals and stuff? I’m not super good at writing but Sakura said she’d help me!”

Yeah, that uh… wasn’t something Sasuke was privy to. Or wanted to be part of. Or really anything like that – there had clearly been some bonding while he was out that he didn’t really want to be part of. The Ame genin look a little startled at that, too, and Sasuke is kind enough to save them. “You know Konoha and Ame aren’t really friends, right, losers?” he drawls, even though Sakura looks a little hurt at being lumped together with Naruto.

“We’re not stupid, Sasuke,” she huffs, and oh, maybe it’s a little more than that. “But it shouldn’t matter what villages we’re from! Oboro died trying to help us escape, and if we all want to be friends, we should be able to!”

…He glances away. “Hn.”

Naruto snickers, nudging Mubi. “That just means he’s wrong but doesn’t want to admit it!” No, he is definitely not blushing, that’s not a blush.

Mubi laughs softly. “Alright. I’m willing to write, though I can’t promise how much I’ll get to say. Village secrets and all that. Kag?”

Sasuke forces himself to look at the conversation, and Kagari grimaces, but shrugs. “Fine, I guess. We’ll probably have to ask our sensei when we get back, since he’s not here.”

Naruto nods. “Yeah, yeah! We’ll ask Kakashi-sensei, whenever he gets here! He’s always late!”

“Maa, what was that, Naruto?”

Slowly, slowly, anticipating their doom, the genin slowly turn around. Right there, perched on the railing, is Kakashi, and his smile fills them with dread. “Sensei… do you just wait for us to say something like that?” Sakura has to ask, staring at him.
He just smiles, offering up no answer to that. “What did you want to ask me, Naruto?”

Quickly, Naruto and Sakura talk over each other, explaining their desire for penpal-ship and friendship and all that. They don’t bother to explain Oboro – Sasuke’s certain they’ve told Kakashi already. He nods slowly, listening to what they have to say, and then smiles again. “Sounds fine to me! You’ll have to run the letters through security, first, make sure there’s nothing classified you’re sharing.” He leans over and ruffles their hair, ignoring their squawks. “I’m so proud of you two for fostering intercommunity friendship!”

He glances at Sasuke. “Are you participating, my cute little Uchiha?”

Resisting the urge to shudder at that title – why was he so weird – Sasuke eyes his teacher’s hands with trepidation. “No.”

Kakashi pouts. And then disappears in a quick swirl of smoke to stand behind the Ame genin, where he ruffles their hair. He smiles. “I’m sure you two will be such good friends to my genin!” There’s an almost… threatening undertone to that, and the two nod very rapidly. “Good! Now, everyone should be getting here soon, so good luck!”

Before he disappears, he ruffles Sasuke’s hair, too, and the Uchiha scowls. “I hate him.”

His teammates grumble in agreement, but the Ame genin seem stunned. “You… didn’t tell us your teacher was Hatake Kakashi,” Mubi says, staring at Sasuke.

He shrugs, and can’t resist a smirk. “You didn’t ask.”

Sakura and Naruto are more than willing to happily chat with the Ame genin, and Sasuke lets them. He considers talking to them about, you know, ‘not telling anyone about the whole freaking out and nearly killing someone’ thing, but the conversation has reminded him: they’re from Amegakure. They… would probably have to, if they deem it relevant, tell their superiors.

He hopes they don’t deem it relevant.

While his teammates talk – probably telling them about themselves, given Sasuke has overheard the word ‘Hokage’ like five times – Sasuke focuses on watching the floor below. Team 8 showed up a half hour ago, and is currently mingling with the other Hyuuga team. Well, almost – Hinata is very clearly avoiding the other Hyuuga. Interesting.

The team from sand has shown up, but they interact with no one, standing in the corner but not talking to each other, either. Kabuto’s team is walking in right now… and oh, the teachers are starting to gather near the front.

“We should head down,” Sasuke says, and the conversation beside him stops. “It looks like everyone’s almost here.”

He looks over at the four, and Sakura and Naruto are serious. Sobered up. It’s time for the third part of the exam.

“See you later, Mubi, Kagari!” Naruto tells them, giving them a smile, and Sakura echoes him.

They both smile back. “We’ll cheer you on,” Mubi tells them, and with that, Team 7 heads down to the floor.
Just in time, it seems like. Team 8’s sensei – a woman who he doesn’t know the name of – directs them all to line up in an orderly fashion, and they do so. From the corner of his eye, Sasuke can see Team 10 join them, ushered in from behind, as well as a team from… Ishigakure, maybe, he doesn’t get a good look because the Hokage appears with a small puff of smoke in front of them.

After a few moments, though, Sasuke tunes out the Hokage. As. Disrespectful as that is. He doesn’t really care.

He doesn’t really care if this is what they do in place of war, or if clients are coming to see them and thus they must show off, or whatever exactly is the meandering man’s point – he’s here to test himself. See how strong he is.

(See how strong he is with his own power, not with the brand seared into his neck.)

What does catch his attention, though, is the fact that they’re going to have to fight preliminaries right now. It makes sense. There’s too many for a proper showcasing, it would take too long, and some of them are rather… weak. (He resists glancing over at Team 10, because he’s still kind of stunned they actually made it here.)

Those three are the ones that complain, of course, but it’s their fault they didn’t make it to the tower until this point. Team 7, Team 8, the Sand team, Kabuto’s team, and Hyuuga’s team had all made it here before the end, and managed to get some rest and healing. If they wanted to be on an even playing ground, they should have gotten here faster.

Idiots.

Kabuto gives up, but no one else does. Sakura eyes him worriedly, but says nothing, and even though the girl from the Kusagakure team, not Ishigakure, looks like she got really messed up, she doesn’t quit, either.

They’ve come this far. Who, really, would give up now?

The screen flickers, spiraling through the twenty names remaining in the exam, and slowly, surely, comes to a halt. Sasuke smirks.

_Uchiha Sasuke vs. Akado Yoroi_ is displayed prominently. Good. He’d rather go first.

Naruto gives his shoulder a friendly punch, and Sakura gives him a nervous smile. “Good luck, Sasuke,” she says, as everyone else starts to clear out, leaving just Sasuke and the older genin.

He doesn’t respond. He doesn’t need luck.

To be honest, when someone has stayed a genin for a decade, Sasuke isn’t too surprised it’s easy enough to beat him. Sure, that chakra-sucking technique was a bit of a surprise, but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t handle.

Sakura and Naruto are hanging out over by Kagari and Mubi, and he joins them. “That was pretty lame, Sasuke,” Naruto says, grinning.

He shrugs. “Hn. Not my fault he was a pathetic excuse for a genin.”

Shino gets called to battle with the sand puppeteer – Kankurou, now he knows his name, if that becomes relevant – and Sasuke keeps an eye on it even while they speak. “Still, you did win, so congratulations,” Mubi says, and the Uchiha inclines his head.
Kagari is also focusing on the battle below – which is… mostly just Shino and Kankurou standing there, for now – and he frowns. “That Aburame kid’s chakra is interesting…”

Okay, Sasuke feels like he’s earned the right to be rude. He won his battle. He gets to be. “How do you know that?” he asks.

The other genin doesn’t look at him, but his frowntightens up a bit. “Isn’t that kind of rude?”

“I don’t care,” he says, and Kagari finally turns, narrowing his eyes in his direction.

“I’m a chakra sensor,” he spits at him, and oh, that makes sense. But now the tension is… it’s awkward, and Sasuke looks away, focusing on the battle below. It’s almost a relief when Shino randomly strikes out at the puppet, and it turns out that the puppet was Kankurou, and Kankurou was the puppet, and-

Well, Shino handily wins that one, no problem. His bugs probably helped him sense that. A bad opponent to go up against, given the entire match is over with in like five minutes.

“I take it back, Sasuke,” Naruto says, coming up between him and Kagari and wrinkling his nose. “That was a really lame match. At least the guy you fought did something.”

Sasuke relaxes, just slightly, and nods. “Hn. Shino did well.”

Sakura comes up on his right, smiling a little. “Yeah. Team 8’s pretty good, so I’m not surprised…” She trails off, and Sasuke distinctly remembers that he doesn’t know what happened before he woke up, that day a few days ago. Team 8 had clearly fought well-

But. But he doesn’t really want to ask about it.

Expectantly, all but Kagari glance up at the screen, waiting for the next match-up. Sasuke is curious, and isn’t sure what to expect, but unless his two teammates are fighting each other, he can’t imagine there’s anything that will really surprise or alarm him. It’s just the preliminaries.

(He’ll never get used to be wrong about these fucking exams.)

Sasuke and Sakura can’t tear their eyes away from the screen. Naruto grips the railing, white-knuckled, and Sasuke doesn’t even think he’s breathing as he desperately glances around the room, trying so very hard to find the person in question.

The proctor coughs. “Will Rock Lee and…. and Uzumaki Karin come down?”

Chapter End Notes

im sorry i wasn't. gonna write that fight w/ yoroi all over again. if sasuke could beat him while having basically no chakra AND working with a funky seal, he can definitely beat him after sleep and while having chakra and a stable seal. like. i'm sorry but y'all know how that goes

IM GENUINELY SURPRISED NO ONE HAS EVEN REMOTELY THOUGHT OF KARIN. please. also, like i said before? i'm loving team oboro

anyway the fights are!!! not gonna be the same this time. i'm not going to write out
every single one bc some are like... okay you KNOW who's gonna win, and some are rlly dumb bc like. shino has chakra bugs cmon kankuro ur 'pretend to be a puppet' trick is not gonna work. so some are gonna be completely fully written out (the important emotional ones!!!) and others are... well. not. lol.

anyway yeah! thanks so much for all ur comments, ilu all, and i read every single one even tho i havent been responding. see you in two weeks!!
Sakura has the sense of mind to grab Naruto and stop him from doing—well, whatever it is that moron has the impulse of doing. “You can talk to her later, later!” she hisses, and since Sakura seems to have Naruto wrangling duty under control, Sasuke takes the time to examine this other Uzumaki.

He knows Naruto has absolutely no family. Doesn’t even know his parents, that’s how little family he has, so to have a relative or at least someone with the same name come out of nowhere…

Rock is excitedly talking with his sensei, but Uzumaki Karin is quietly making her way down to the floor. She’s messed up, her clothes ripped and streaks of blood on her arms and her shirt. With short, bright red hair and glasses, she doesn’t look like Naruto at all. Scars cover her arms, and the way she holds herself… it reeks of timidity. More like Hinata than Naruto.

Still, an Uzumaki was an Uzumaki.

“Moron, you don’t want to distract her,” he says, and that seems to calm Naruto down.

He stares at her as if she’ll vanish, after a moment, Sasuke leans in to brush his shoulder against Naruto’s. The blonde stiffens and then relaxes. “Right. We’ll find her afterwards, right?”

Sakura smiles. “Promise, Naruto.”

That resolved, the three refocus on the arena below, and Kagari snorts beside them. Sasuke glances at him. “What?” he demands, and the Ame genin only shrugs – before he can answer, Rock vaults over the side and lands neatly, falling right into a ready position, right arm outstretched in front of him.

“It is an honor to face you,” he says.

Karin falls into her own position, clearly ready to flee, hand on her kunai pouch. She says nothing, and the proctor begins the battle.

Rock moves. He’s fast, so incredibly fast as he zips forward to toss a punch at Karin, and—she dodges, nimbly and neatly. It’s so unexpected that Sasuke activates his sharingan.

Neither of them is using any techniques. Rock’s speed is based on his own abilities, and Karin is dodging, somehow, with her own taidjutsu skills—no techniques. No ninjutsu. No nothing. It’s a battle of sheer taidjutsu and dodging, and that in and of itself is kind of impressive.

Karin tries striking back, tossing a kunai, but Rock flips over it, and the moment of delay costs her—Rock manages to strike a hit, sinking a fist in her gut and sending her flying. She crashes into the wall and collapses, panting and gasping, but Rock doesn’t press it. He hangs back. “Your determination reflects well on you!” he says encouragingly, with a smile, and the girl forces herself to her feet,
straightening her glasses.

Her teammate… seems to think otherwise. “Uzumaki!” one of them yells, and Sasuke’s eyes flicker over to the other two Kusa genin. One, the one who hadn’t spoken, looks bored. He’s not even paying attention to the fight, leaning on the rail and staring off into space. The loud one is watching, though, and he sneers. “Just give up already. You need to save your chakra.”

For what, Sasuke wonders, but he’s not about to yell. Naruto has no such compunctions. “Shut up!” the blonde snarls, glaring across at the Kusa nin. “She’s your teammate!” He refocuses his gaze on Karin. “Come on, Karin, you can do it!”

Rock nods. “Yes. The Power of Youth flows strong in you, Uzumaki Karin! Let us continue our bout!”

She looks dumbfounded, glancing between Naruto and Rock in front of her, and something in her face hardens.

And she bites her own arm.

Everyone… stares. Even Rock and his strange sensei seem taken aback, but Sasuke, with his Sharingan on, can see something’s happened. The Hyuuga, on the other side, has his Byakugan active as well, and the Uchiha very much wonders what he’s seeing.

Whatever that technique was, whatever it does, it gives her the boost she needs to charge forward towards Lee and begin everything again.

Because it goes exactly the same way. Lee striking and Karin barely dodging. Karin attempting to attack and Lee avoiding it as easy as breathing. Lee managing a hit and Karin biting herself and launching herself into the fray. It happens two more times before the girl can’t force herself to get up and she lays there, gasping.

The proctor steps over to her. “Do you forfeit?” he asks, and after a moment of hesitation, she nods. “Winner: Rock Lee!”

Rock doesn’t celebrate, though, like how Sasuke would expect from such an excitable ninja. Instead, he approaches Karin, squatting down in front of her. “You did well,” he says, and he smiles. “You will be an excellent ninja, Uzumaki Karin, I am certain! The Will of Fire burns strongly in you!”

That’s not exactly a compliment to a non-Konohan ninja, but Karin still stares at him like he’s handed her the world. He offers her a hand, and she takes it, letting him help her to her feet and leaning heavily on him as they start to walk towards the stairs. “Do you mean it?” Sasuke can hear her ask softly, and Lee lights up.

“Of course! A true ninja never gives up, never stops-” Rock begins to wax on about YOUTH and POWER and the WILL OF FIRE, and Sasuke tunes him out at that point. He focuses, instead, on Karin’s face. No one should look like that when handed such simple kindness, especially when it’s coming from Rock.

Once is an accident. Two times is a coincidence. Three times is a pattern.

He wonders if he’ll meet a third Uzumaki.

Sakura is still, thankfully, restraining Naruto from running over to the other side to talk to Karin, but Sasuke is still immensely grateful when the next matches start up.
The girl on Rock’s team hands Chouji his ass handily, barely working up a sweat – it’s interesting how *physical* that team is, how many *weapons* she had. While the Akimichi had certainly tried, motivated by his sensei’s promises of barbecue, it’s very clearly who is the superior fighter between the two of them.

The Hyuuga – Neji, that’s his name – also beats the quiet Kusa genin. It takes not even a minute, perhaps, before the foreign genin is unconscious.

Team Gai is *the* team to beat, it seems, and Sasuke has to wonder at the fact that all three of them competed in a row. Strange coincidence.

Hinata fights Kabuto’s other teammate, and while he’s fairly certain the Hyuuga is going to win between the two, it’s not as fast as the previous two fights, so the Uchiha takes the time to survey the competition.

There’s one Kusa genin remaining. Sasuke isn’t even *remotely* concerned about him – his teammates were pushovers. He only hopes that Naruto gets to fight him, gets to put him in his place. Staying on this side of the arena and not going to talk to Karin is clearly killing him, but right this moment, at least, he’s busy cheering on Hinata.

(His gut twists. He forces himself to move on.)

Both Shikamaru and Ino of Team 10 remain. Ino is… nothing. Sasuke is positive Naruto could beat her easily. He’s… not so certain about Sakura. (Maybe. Hopefully.) Shikamaru, on the other hand, is a mystery. While the Nara scraped by in class, he’s a *Nara*. They’re like… inherently lazy, and thus he could be grossly competent. Honestly, even Sasuke would be wary about facing him, mostly because of his lack of knowledge.

While the puppeteer from Sand had lost badly to Shino, Sasuke knows it was a bad match-up. They seem stronger, very much so, and Sabaku no Gaara especially. Naruto against them would be interesting. Sakura against them would be death.

Kiba is the only remaining member of Team 8 who hasn’t fought, yet, and he’s strong. Team 8 as a whole is – Team 10 is the one rookie team that… slacks.

Mubi sidles up next to him. “Checking out the competition?” he asks, and Sasuke glances at him. Gives a short nod, and Mubi hums, glancing down to where Hinata is neatly dodging the bendy Konoha genin, jabbing him in his shoulder and locking up that whole arm. “Naruto seemed awfully surprised to hear of another Uzumaki. It’s not like they’re that uncommon.”

Sasuke is… curious, now. “You have Uzumaki in Ame?”

The other boy nods. “Yeah. They sort of went everywhere after Uzushio fell, I think. Except Kiri.” He snorts, as if that should mean something to the Uchiha, but he comes up completely blank.

He frowns. “Uzushio?”

Mubi looks over and frowns in return. “You’ve never heard of it? It’s where the Uzumaki clan hails from. I would’ve thought you’d learn about that in history class. We did, in Ame.”

Sasuke has never, ever heard of Uzushio. He didn’t even know Naruto had a *clan*. That’s… that feels wrong. That feels very, very wrong. If it’s something that’s so common knowledge that Mubi is surprised he doesn’t know it, why hasn’t he learned it? Sasuke was the top of his class. It isn’t like Naruto, who often misses things – if Sasuke doesn’t know it, chances are, no one in his class knows of that information.
What had he been thinking earlier? Three times is a pattern?

He’s sure as hell found it.

“Hn. Konoha puts more emphasis on… practical skills,” he says, in a way that shuts down the conversation, and Mubi nods.

“I see,” he says, and that’s that.

It’s almost impossible now for him to focus on the battle, on the exam, and Sasuke itches to call a conference with his team right that moment. Naruto deserves to know something like this. Sakura would be incredibly helpful in looking things up – and Sasuke doesn’t quite want to use up his time on that, if possible.

But Naruto lets out a loud cheer as Kabuto’s teammate falls and Hinata is declared the winner, and Sasuke shelves that for now. Tucks it up, neat as can be, in the ‘look into this after the exams’ box, right next to ‘find out what happened to the Oto genin’ and ‘who the fuck is Orochimaru’.

Sakura giggles, on Naruto’s other side. “Do you like her?” she asks Naruto curiously, and the boy turns red.

“I d-dunno, Sakura, she’s kinda weird!”

Sasuke snorts. “Idiot.” He ignores the way that eases something in his chest, even as Naruto rounds on him.

“Oy, Sasuke, what does-“

He stops. Everyone sort of… stops, because Sabaku no Gaara flickers to the center of the arena. Sasuke hadn’t even been paying attention to the announcements, and as a unit, Team 7 stops their shenanigans to glance up at the sign.

Gaara verses… Nara Shikamaru.

Chapter End Notes

I have to work tomorrow, so I'm uploading my chapter a day early - I don't have a regular schedule yet for my new job, but if it keeps heading this way, I may switch updating dates to Tuesday, instead.

Sorry about the shortness! I have the preliminaries pretty plotted out, and this was the stopping point I intended for this chapter - it ended up being a bit shorter than I anticipated, but I didn't want to add pointless filler to make it longer, so whatever.

I'm so glad everyone was enthusiastic about Karin (given she was canonically taking these exams, I couldn't NOT use her), and sorry that we won't get a quick resolution to that. Naruto and Karin will take after the preliminaries, don't worry, I promise. For now, we get Sasuke digging into one of Konoha's buried secrets, though surprisingly not the one about him.

Is there gonna be an Uzumaki arc? Believe it!
Two more chapters will wrap up the preliminaries (I'm incredibly excited to write the last one), and then we get to move on with the rest of the Chunin Exam! Which is like... so long, holy fuck.

See you in two weeks! (Or maybe a little sooner, Depending On Things.)
“I forfeit,” Shikamaru says immediately, and Sasuke rolls his eyes. He’s not sure why he expected anything else from the Nara, and it seems everyone else shares his irritation.

“Shikamaru!” Ino yells, and wow, he can literally hear every single word. She’s so loud. He feels a sudden surge of gratitude for his own teammates. “You can’t just forfeit! We made it this far, and Chouji already lost, so you’ve gotta get out there and win!”

He’s not so easily convinced. “Maybe if it was someone else, Ino, but I’m not-“

His sensei rests a hand on the Nara’s head. “Give it a shot, Shikamaru? I’ll buy you a new shogi set if you try. If anything goes wrong, I’ll step in, I promise.”

Shikamaru still looks skeptical, but he sighs, sticking his hands in his pockets and ambling over to the steps. “Fine, fine… Why is it always shogi bribes with you? I’ll give it a shot.”

Everyone watches as the boy slowly but surely makes his way to the floor. Gaara is trembling, it seems like, and Sasuke is more than a little uncomfortable. He can’t be scared, so is he… excited? That excited to fight?

Even the Uchiha thinks that’s a bit much.

“Begin,” the proctor coughs out, and the two survey each other. Gaara stands with his arms folded, eyes intently focused on Shikamaru. The Nara stands slouched, hands in his pockets and seemingly unprepared, yawning, but Sasuke is Hatake Kakashi’s student. He knows deception, and how you can appear lazy but are ready to move at a moment’s notice, and everything sort of slots into place. Shikamaru is the same kind of shinobi as Kakashi.

He’s proven right just a moment later, when sand lashes out and Shikamaru drops to the ground, rolling neatly beneath it. It’s a clean dodge, vaguely impressive but not anything particularly special – so Sasuke is surprised at Shikamaru’s triumphant grin when he rises to his feet. “Got you,” he says, hands in a seal in front of him, and that’s when Sasuke realizes Gaara is mimicking that very action.

Damn. That’s actually really impressive.

Before Shikamaru can do anything, though – force Gaara to forfeit, do some sort of attack, Sasuke isn’t quite sure what the Nara’s shadow possession entails – the frown on the Sand nin’s face deepens. “No,” he rasps, and his sand starts to creep forward.

Sasuke leans forward, but whatever move Gaara is using that requires no seals, no movement, it’s not one that his Sharingan can copy.

“Shit-“ Shikamaru swears, and beads of sweat form on his temples. He hadn’t anticipated that, clearly, and now he’s stuck. The sand is slower now than it had been before, so he’s doing
something that slows it, but it seems unlikely he can keep this up and move to dodge at the same time, so-

He drops the jutsu and bolts for it. “I forfeit!” he yells, as Gaara’s sand picks up speed and the Nara poofs out, reappearing a few feet away – the sand simply changes direction, and Shikamaru runs again. He’s exhausted, clearly, having no chance to rest before this. The proctor is coughing. “I said, I forfeited, I’m done, stop attacking!”

He trips. Everyone moves at once.

A large hand slams down on the sand, smashing it into the floor like a fly swatter hitting a fly as Chouji vaults the rail to land right in between Gaara and the fallen Shikamaru. Gone is the friendly Akimichi – his gaze is far more intense, far more focused than it had been in his earlier fight, focusing straight on the sand nin.

Kakashi stands on Gaara’s right. Rock’s strange sensei on his left. Asuma helps his fallen student to his feet, and Chouji and Gaara have a staredown.


It must be a question, but there’s no inflection in his voice – Chouji answers anyway. “He’s my friend,” he says, and that’s all it is. “I won’t let you hurt him.”

There’s silence, for a moment, and then Kakashi speaks. “Shikamaru forfeited,” he says, slowly. “Sabaku no Gaara, your fight is over.” He’s so serious, so strangely serious in that Kakashi-sensei way, and for one moment Sasuke doesn’t think he’s going to move, that he’s going to keep trying and they’re going to get to see three jounin and a genin take down this terrifyingly insane foreign nin, but-

Gaara nods, simply as that, and in a whirl of sand, disappears and reappears up behind the railing, next to his teammates. They look more than a little frightened.

He hasn’t taken his eyes off of Chouji.

Sakura exhales next to him. “That was… scary,” she says, and he’s more than inclined to agree. While it was the shortest fight thus far – even shorter than Kankurou and Shino’s – that could have gone very, very badly.

Mubi hmms next to him. “Why would they let him fight, I wonder?” he says, and Sasuke glances at him out of the corner of his eye. He’s not sure he likes Mubi, because he’s incredibly suspicious in some ways, but he does agree on this with him.

“Politics, probably,” he says, and Mubi doesn’t disagree.

Shikamaru is shaken up, but fine, just exhausted – Chouji helps him up to where Ino is waiting to fuss over him, and someone steps forward to sweep up the sand. Naruto huffs, and worms his way up in between Sakura and Sasuke. “That dude was really screwed up!” he says, and he doesn’t even bother lowering his volume. Gaara’s teammates wince across the way. “Just like that guy, Oro-“

Sakura slaps a hand over his mouth, and Sasuke lo- appreciates her for it. “Naruto,” she says, sweet but terrifying. “Shut up. There are three fights left and two are ours and if you keep yelling in my ear, I’m going to beat you into the ground if we fight. I just want to get this over with.”

Wisely, he shuts up.
It’s actually really interesting, when he thinks about it – Sasuke was the very first fight, and now both of his teammates are waiting until the very end. He hopes they don’t have to fight each other. He’d rather all of them make Chunin, if possible.

Thinking as he is, he misses the clean-up being done, and the proctor stepping forward. “Shigeri vs Uzumaki Naruto,” he says, and the blonde lets out a whoop.

“Alright!” he crows, launching himself over the railing only to stumble on the landing, nearly falling on his rear. Sakura and Sasuke exchanged amused glances. Kagari snickers.

Shigeri snickers, too, even as he walks down the stairs, and Sasuke narrows his eyes a little. It’s the loud Kusa genin, and Naruto turns from excited to hostile in the blink of an eye when he realizes who he’s fighting. “An Uzumaki, huh?” he drawls. “Guess it’s a good thing you can heal. You’ll need it when I’m through with you.”

“Shut up,” Naruto growls. Karin is paying rapt attention, Sasuke realizes, glancing over the other balcony, the redhead’s eyes intently fixed on the other Uzumaki. “She’s so much better than you!”

The proctor calls for the match to start, and Naruto moves.

He doesn’t even bother making any clones. Using ninjutsu. This is a sheer taijutsu beatdown, the same way that Karin lost – but this time, the Uzumaki is winning. Whatever Shigeri’s specialty is, it’s not working here, or Naruto isn’t giving him enough time to use it. Either or.

Kick. Punch. Body check. Naruto is relentless, and the fight takes but a few moments before the blonde clocks his opponent and sends him into the wall. He doesn’t move.

Naruto wins.

Hinata politely claps, and Sakura cheers for her teammate, but Naruto is… mad. Breathing heavily, and Sasuke doesn’t like it. Doesn’t like it at all. “Oi. Idiot,” he calls, leaning over the rail, and his teammate’s eyes snap up to him. “Go talk to her.”

He isn’t stupid enough to ask who – he nods, relaxing just a little and grinning, and practically races over to the other railing, nearly tripping over himself in his excitement to talk to her.

Sasuke looks away. It seems private.

“I wonder what’s up with that,” Sakura muses, even as Kiba and the final sand nin – Temari – are called down to the middle. She’s not paying much attention, and neither is Sasuke. “I mean. Isn’t it kind of weird to have family in another place like that, that you didn’t know about?”

He gazes at her. “Sakura,” he asks after a moment. “Have you ever heard of Uzushio?”

She hesitates, contemplating. “No,” Sakura finally admits, after a moment. “No, I haven’t.”

Sasuke is all too aware that Mubi and Kagari are right there, right there listening, and even if they seem nice, they’re still from Ame, still not allies, and he shakes his head. “Never mind,” he says. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

Sakura is enough of a ninja that she nods at that, and Sasuke sneaks a glance at Naruto. He doesn’t look happy, talking to Karin in what is clearly a hushed whisper. (Well, it’s at least quiet enough that Sasuke can’t understand him all the way over here.) Her back is to him, so the Uchiha has no idea what expression is on her face, and he desperately wishes she’d turn around.
No. No. No. That wasn’t important. Ignore them.

He looks back to the fight, just in time to see Temari blast Kiba into the ground with one more gust of wind from her fan. Kiba tries to get up, but she steps on his back – match over. Temari wins.

Interesting.

So, moving on to the next round, thus far... Sasuke. Shino and Hinata. Temari and Gaara. None of the Kusa team – but all of Rock’s team. Naruto. Which leaves...

Sakura stiffens next to him, which probably means she’s realized the same thing at the same time as him. His hand twitches, almost as if to reach out to comfort her, but he stops himself in near horror. No. Absolutely none of that.

Instead, he glances up at the board, which displays the only two names remaining in the preliminaries.

Sakura... and Ino.

Chapter End Notes

how did one commenter put it? "I'm also about 99% certain that the next chapter is going to want to cooperate like a typical housecat with taking a bath" yeah, this was a bitch and a half to write. but it's done!!! yay!!! and hopefully not too disappointing lmfao. if short.

anyway few quick things!

1) i'm going to rescind what i said abt sakuhina. not bc it's no longer a possibility or blah blah blah, but i've decided that i'm not going to formally declare any ships for this fic (aside from sasunaru ofc) until they actually happen in text and whatnot. so! nothing is canon yet. lmao.

2) i've had a few ppl commenting on canon similarities/lack thereof/etc. currently, i anticipate this fic having FOUR PARTS. possibly, maybe, five - it depends on how i want to take a certain future plot. PART ONE, which we're currently in, follows pre-shippuden naruto, and will align decently closely to canon, just bc there's a lot of plot points that won't be changed. once we hit part two, however - which is NOT following shippuden - things are going to quickly spiral away from canon. so! never fear. i will be majorly majorly changing things.

3) i'm not sure when the next chapter will be - either this wednesday, or next wednesday. depends on how much time i have to write it. but thank you for your patience!!! i really appreciate it!!!

4) I AM SO PUMPED FOR WRITING THE SAKUINO FIGHT Y'ALL ITS GONNA BE THE BEST ONE SO FAR

thank y'all so much for all of your comments, i read every single one and always go back and reread them whenever i need inspiration for my fic. i wish i had enough time to reply to all of them but im so busy nowadays nnn. thank you!!
“Go, Sakura!” Naruto cheers, one arm hugging Karin close to his side, the other waving wildly in the air as his form of encouragement. “You can do it! Don’t lose!”

The encouragement doesn’t work. Nothing eases the line of tension threaded through Sakura’s spine, and Sasuke doesn’t even try to say anything. There’s really nothing he can say, and really nothing he wants to. He cannot even begin to try to guess at her and Ino’s tumultuous relationship – during the Academy, he would have dismissed it as being simply about him, but something very much suggests it runs deeper than that.

Besides. No words he says right now would change her winning or losing this match.

Silently, the two of them, both Sakura and Ino, walk to the floor. There is tension in every line of their shoulders, and the room is… silent. Team 10 murmurs together, and for one fleeting moment, Sasuke wishes he were standing over with Naruto to discuss this, but Naruto also wouldn’t know the meaning of quiet if it threw a shuriken at him, so perhaps this is for the best.

Mubi leans over. “History, huh?” Sasuke gives a simple nod, not wanting – and also unable – to truly talk about it, and he subsides.

The two girls stare each other down. “I never thought I’d be fighting you, Sakura…” Ino says. “Are you sure you don’t want to quit?”

“No,” Sakura says sharply, and that’s all she says, for the match begins.

They’re evenly matched. Ino neatly dodges Sakura’s kunai, Sakura ducks under a punch, they meet each other kick by kick and punch by punch.

They shouldn’t be evenly matched. Sakura has rested. Sakura has been healed. Sasuke has given Sakura reading materials and she has better chakra control and she should come out on top why isn’t she? He grips the railing tight, so tight it starts to creak underneath his fingers but he cannot bring himself to care.

Sakura manages to knock a punch into Ino’s gut and the blonde gasps and Sakura raises her hand to punch her in the face and-

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Her fist hovers an inch from Ino’s face but doesn’t make contact, and the two girls lock gazes, green on blue and something far beyond the rest of their understanding passing between them. Maybe it’s a second. Maybe it’s a minute. Maybe they’ve all been standing here for hours watching these girls stare at each other, but Sasuke cannot tell, Sasuke cannot care to tell.
They break apart, each taking two steps back, and Sakura’s hands ball into fists at her sides. She glances back, for just a moment, meeting Sasuke’s eyes – he doesn’t know how he looks, but his teammate must find something that hardens her resolve, and she turns back to Ino.

“You’re not taking me seriously, Ino,” she says, and Ino looks startled, a quick flash of emotions too varied for the Uchiha to decipher flashing across her face, before she settles into a smirk.

“Why, Sakura,” she says, shaking her head. “I don’t need to take you seriously to win Sasuke’s heart. It doesn’t seem like you’re taking that seriously.”

“You’re right,” Sakura says, and Ino stops. Sasuke stops. Naruto frowns in absolute confusion and Shikamaru looks like he is absolutely ready for this day and all of its surprises to be over with. (Sasuke… relates.) “I’m not playing that game, not anymore.” She straightens up – and god, Sasuke has to wonder what exactly happened with Sakura, alone in that forest. “This was never about him, and you know it.”

And then she takes off her headband, and ties it on her forehead.

Sasuke doesn’t understand the significance – it seems only Ino does, from the way she gapes at her, before pulling off her own and tying it around her forehead as well. “Fine,” she tells Sakura, and she smiles. “Let’s make this about the real thing. I’m going to beat you into the ground, Forehead Girl.”

Sakura smiles, too. “Not if I kick your ass first, Ino-pig.”

And they lunge at each other.

It’s ten agonizing minutes of fighting in which Sasuke has to reevaluate his mental estimation of their stamina. That’s impressive. Ino was already exhausted to begin with, and Sakura’s still a little off over what happened in the last exam, and yet they just. Keep getting back up.

Sasuke is reminded of Naruto’s stamina, and the way that Karin kept getting up as well – except this isn’t some bloodline, but sheer determination.

(He thinks. He wonders. He knows. That if this were him against Naruto, that it would be the same.)

They get up again and again and again, and something needs to change. Someone needs to give. Someone needs to do something different – and surprisingly, it’s… Ino who steps up.

Ino doesn’t seem to have changed a single wink from school. She still seems to be the same girl from the Academy, not different in any way, still chasing after him and yelling at Sakura and yet. Yet! This isn’t about him.

Sasuke isn’t 100% sure what this is about – he can make an educated guess, of course, but he doesn’t think he could grasp all the details without speaking with Sakura which uh is not on his to-do list – but it’s not about him. It’s about them.

So he stays quiet as Sakura lashes out and Ino lashes out – as hair is cut and exposition is said and traps are laid. He even stays silent when it seems like Ino is going to win, to force Sakura to forfeit, even though Naruto yells yells yells.

Because Sakura manages to fight back. She breaks free and she doesn’t forfeit and she grins at Ino. “Ino,” she says, though she barely has any breath left in her body. “It’s my turn to use a jutsu.”
Both girls shove themselves to their feet, but Sakura moves, faster than Ino does. She lunges forward, hands flying through a jutsu that Sasuke recognizes. She blows out through her fingers, and a gust of flame emerges, right into Ino’s face.

The blonde yelps, taking a step back, but Sakura- Sakura pushes through the flame, heedless of the way it singes at her hair and dress and arms, and punches Ino in the face. She goes down. She doesn’t get back up.

Sakura stands there, panting, and the proctor nods. “Winner: Haruno Sakura,” he says, and Sakura tears up. Naruto vaults over the railing like it’s not even there to almost tackle Sakura in a hug, and Sasuke waits just a few moments to ensure that he Doesn’t Look Desperate Or Anything No Way and then carefully, slowly, ambles down the stairs to join his team.

Naruto is babbling. “Sakura, Sakura! That was so cool! You beat her like POW and WHAM and you were like NO and-”

Sasuke can make absolutely no sense of what he’s saying, and he doesn’t even try to. “Sakura,” he says, and she turns to him, eyes shining with tears and oh god if she cries on him again he’s hiding behind Kakashi, pride be damned. “You… did well.”

She smiles, at that, and then- she wraps one arm around Naruto in a hug, and the blonde abruptly stops speaking. She wraps one arm around Sasuke in a hug, and Sasuke tries not to run away. “Thank you,” she says. “That was hard. Ino is…”

Naruto starts babbling again, but Sasuke is stuck on that unfinished sentence, even as he squirms out of her hold. Ino is…

Oh.

Oh.

“Sakura,” he says again. “Do you…” She stares at him, and he stares right back. “Are you…”

She flushes. “Maybe. I. Don’t know. Maybe. Do you…? Are you…?”

He glances away. “Hn. Maybe.”

She nods, just a slight one. “Sorry, Sasuke.”

Naruto squints between the two of them, awful suspicious. “Hey, hey, hey! What was that about? What are you talking about?”

Yeah, no way is that conversation happening. “The Hokage’s going to speak,” Sasuke says, instead, and Sakura lets out a quiet laugh, even as she glances over to where Ino is laid, leaning against one of the walls, completely unconscious.

“You can introduce us to Karin after, yeah?”

It’s the magic words, and the blonde lights up. “Yeah! Oh man, oh man, you’ve gotta help me with something about that, too!”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Hokage first, idiot.”

Chapter End Notes
this one ended up an interesting write, simply because you can't GET a lot of the undercurrents from Sasuke's POV. I briefly considered popping over to Sakura's perspective, but I don't really want to do that unless Sasuke is out of the picture.

So, yes! Next chapter you'll get to find out the lovely next matches for the final exam, some good team bonding time, and Kakashi being....... Kakashi. I'm going to try to get this chapter out next week, actually, since they've been short recently. (Also I. Really want to wrap up the preliminaries WHY IS THE CHUNIN EXAM ARC SO FUCKING LONG.)

I'm intensely curious as to what you guys think the matches will be. Let me know if you have any guesses?

Thanks so much for reading, and all of your lovely comments, they make me so happy and they're so terribly encouraging to read!! See you next week!
The In-Between: Part One

Chapter Notes

me: hey. hey, hiruzen, look at me.
hiruzen: ?
me: bitch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The proctor coughs, and moves to the center of the room, and Sasuke glances his way. “With this, the preliminaries for the third exam are completed,” he says. He coughs again. “Can all the winners step forward, please?”

Sasuke glances at his teammates – they meet his eyes, Sakura nodding, Naruto grinning, and they step forward together. It’s all three of them. All three from the Hyuuga team – Hyuuga, Tenten, and Rock. Two from Team 8 – Shino and Hinata. And two from the Sand team – Temari and Gaara. He glances around the half-circle, Naruto on his right and Sakura on his left, taking stock.

They’re all formidable. All threats.

He’s eager to learn what’s next.

With all of them gathered, the remaining genin watching from the sidelines, the proctor speaks up once more. “To everyone who has advanced to the Final Round of the Chunin exams… congratulations.” Sasuke doesn’t need empty words of praise. He needs information.

Ibiki, the proctor for the first exam, stands to the right. Anko, the proctor for the second exam, to the left. She’s staring intently at… Sasuke, strangely enough, and the boy lifts his chin, staring her right back in the eye. She smirks.

He glances away, uncomfortable and a flush rising to his cheeks, as the Hokage tips his hat. “Well. I will begin the explanation of the Third Exam.” He nods, just slightly, and Sasuke pays rapt attention. “The final round is one where you will fight and show off your battle skills in front of everyone. I want you to satisfactorily demonstrate and show off your ability as representative battle forces from your respective lands.”

Sasuke barely resists the urge to roll his eyes. Barring the two sand genin, it’s all Konoha.

“Accordingly, the final round will commence one month from tomorrow.”

Naruto frowns, making a face next to him. “Hey, hey, we’re not gonna do it right here, right now?” He sounds confused, and Sasuke has to echo that. Why wouldn’t they? Just get it over with, right?

The Hokage shakes his head. “This is so that there’s a suitable period of preparation.”

Hinata speaks up this time. “What… what do you mean, sir?” she quietly asks, and the Hokage gives her a very slight smile. She pinks.

“That is to say…” The Hokage seems to ponder his words for a moment. “Along with the announcement of the conclusion of the preliminary match to each country’s Daimyo and Shinobi
leaders, readying the summons for the Final Round requires preparation time – not to mention the
time it takes you examinees to prepare.”

Tenten tries a smile. “Um… Sorry, sir, I’m still not quite getting what you’re saying.”

He puffs on his pipe for a moment. “In other words, in order to know your adversary, in order to
prepare yourself, time is necessary. Time to analyze what you learned about the adversaries in the
preliminaries… time to take stock of your successes. The battles until now were like actual battles- it
presupposed situations in which you can’t know your adversary.”

“However, this is not the case in the final round.” He shakes his head. “Some of you might have
already revealed everything in front of your rivals… In the spirit of fairness and equality, you will
have a month to train yourself further on your skills.”

Sasuke frowns. That. Doesn’t make any sense. In fact, he’s pretty sure the Hokage is lying.

Preliminaries aren’t always necessary, it seemed like – just because there were too many of them.
There shouldn’t be more time to train, because if they’re taking the exam… they should be prepared,
right? And shouldn’t they have known they were holding the exam for a while now? Shouldn’t they
have notified people in advance? Sure, maybe a week delay for the exact results, but…

That seems off. He’s not sure why the Hokage is lying – and it could merely be the presence of the
foreign ninja – but he is.

He resolves to talk to Kabuto, later.

The Hokage continues. “Now, I’d like to let you go, and rest… but first, there is one more thing to
take care of.” Naruto fidgets next to him, but Sasuke elbows him and he grunts and glares but stops.
Thank god. Anko comes around with a box and each one of them carefully plucks out a piece of
paper – Sasuke smooths his out carefully. It’s a one.

He glances over Naruto’s shoulder. It’s a five. He has to nudge Sakura and she flushes, before
showing him hers – a nine. Interesting. And they mean…?

A tournament.

Sasuke is first, and he smirks. He’s number one, and number two is… Hinata. His eyes slide over to
her, only to find her already staring at him. She flushes, and glances away.

Him versus Hinata. An interesting first match.

Tenten and Shino are the second, and Sasuke thinks he’ll look forward to that. Whichever one wins,
he’ll face – and they both seemed powerful, so it’s a toss-up on who will win. Naruto is fighting the
Hyuuga, next… and his teammate is already vibrating with excitement, staring him down.

Sasuke snorts, shaking his head, and moves on. Rock and Temari are fighting fourth, which leaves…
Sakura and Gaara, for last. Oh, shit.

She’s nearly ghost-white, he realizes with immediate concern that’s quickly swiftly squashed and
crushed. He barely pays attention to the Hokage noting you do not have to win to be promoted in the
background – because of course he’s going to win, that’s not even a question – and instead glances
over at Naruto. He’s frowning, looking from the chart to Sakura to Gaara-

But before Sasuke says anything, Sakura inhales sharply, and then turns to give them both a shaky
smile. “Come on, Naruto, we can deal with this later,” she says. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to
Karin?

It’s a suitable distraction, and the blonde lights up. “Yeah, yeah, come on!” He grabs them both by the hand, tugging them away from the other genin, and Sasuke can’t even bring himself to roll his eyes. He’s curious, he admits, as they come to a stop in front of the redhead, and Naruto’s hand is warm.

He immediately yanks it out of the Uzumaki’s grasp with a faint flush to his cheeks.

“Karin!” Naruto crows, wrapping an arm around her. She flushing, but doesn’t do anything to protest it. “This is Sakura and Sasuke! Sakura’s really cool but punches really hard if she gets mad, and Sasuke’s kind of a big fat jerk, but they’re my teammates and they’re great! Guys, guys, this is Karin, my cousin, and she’s the best!”

Somehow, he doesn’t breathe a single time, and Sasuke does roll his eyes, this time. “Idiot.” He looks at Karin, and tries to formulate well. Uh. He actually has no idea what to say in a situation like this so he just. “Hi.”

Sakura, who somehow possesses more social skills than the rest of them combined despite being more annoying than Naruto quite frequently, gives the girl a smile. She’s still shaken, but she’s clearly holding it in for the moment, so whatever. “It’s nice to meet you, Karin. You and Naruto are cousins, huh?”

The redhead stares at Sakura for a moment before glancing away with a faint blush, reaching up to push her glasses up her nose. “Um, I guess… I’ve never met another Uzumaki before, aside from my Mom, so I don’t really know what else to call us…”

Naruto beams. “Yeah! We’re cousins!”

That’s a lot of Family Emotions that Sasuke really. Really really really doesn’t want to deal with, so he reroutes the conversation. “Didn’t you say you needed our help?”

The blonde perks up even more, if that’s even possible, and he nods. “Yeah, yeah, right! See, they’re really mean to Karin in Kusa! It sounds really terrible! So I think she should just stay here with me so you gotta help me hide her!”

Sasuke has a headache.

Sakura… grimaces. “Um… Karin, is that… what you want to do…?”

She glances away. “I… don’t like Kusagakure,” she admits quietly, and now that Sasuke is closer, he realizes that her arms and legs are littered with teeth marks. Scars, from people biting her. He stares at her legs, at the way they crawl up even her inner thighs – he feels Orochimaru’s teeth in his neck for one terrifyingly real moment, and he refocuses on her glasses. Doesn’t look down. “See, I…”

Karin chews on the inside of her cheek for a moment, and continues. “I can heal people by them biting me. But I don’t.” She sniffles and oh god is she going to cry, Sasuke does not even remotely want to deal with that.

Naruto wraps his arms around her and she sniffles into his shoulder and he looks at the two of them, very serious. “Her Mom could do it too and they killed her mom by making her heal and heal and heal and they can’t do that to Karin, too! You gotta help me hide her in my apartment or something!”

…Sasuke really doesn’t blame her for wanting to leave, in that case, wow. Even Naruto is a much
better alternative to that.

Sakura looks absolutely appalled, but she shakes her head. “We can’t hide her, but Karin… Are you...” She picks her words very delicately. “Will you be declared a missing-nin, if you leave Kusa?”

“Even if she is, they probably won’t come after a genin,” Sasuke points out.

Karin shrugs from within Naruto’s embrace. “Me and my Mom… we healed people, and that was why they let us stay with them.” *After the fall of Uzushio, Sasuke filled in the blank, and now he really needs to talk to Mubi again. “I never even took a genin test, honestly… I’m just here to heal my teammates…”*

Naruto grins at that. “Oh! Cool, okay! We’ll just ask the Old Man, then!” And then he takes off running at full tilt towards the Hokage, who is speaking with the proctors, yelling at the top of his lungs. “Old Man! Old Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!”


They give her a moment to wipe her eyes and make herself a little more presentable, before following Naruto over at a more sedate and normal pace. He’s talking a mile a minute, loud but unintelligible but slowly becoming more coherent as they get closer and closer.

The Hokage seems to be taking him seriously, nodding as he considers his words, and he looks in their direction as they approach. His smile crinkles his tired, lined fine. “Uzumaki Karin, right?” She seems positively terrified to be talking to the Hokage. He reaches out and sets a gentle hand on her head, ignoring the way she flinches, just a touch. “Is it true that you want to stay here, with Naruto?”

She hesitates, and then straightens up under his hand, steeling herself. “Yes, sir,” she says quietly, but firm. “I… I’ll be a good Konoha genin, I will, but I… don’t want to heal, anymore. Please.” The last is almost a whisper, and a flash of sorrow flickers across the Sandaime’s face, so fast that Sasuke’s not sure he even saw it.

“Of course,” he says, and Karin sags in relief. “I’ll write a letter to your leader tonight, and I’ll let you know the details later. For now, you can stay with Naruto.”

Naruto *beams*, hugging the Hokage around the waist with a large yell of delight, and then pouncing on Karin, who looks equally shocked and happy for the embrace. She looks stunned, to be honest, that it’s that easy, but really it’s probably just that they’re genin.

Also the Hokage has a soft spot for Naruto.

“Thank you, Lord Hokage,” Sakura says, giving a quick bow, and Sasuke mimics it though shallowly, and the Third waves it off. Naruto’s chattering is reaching near critical levels, loud and excited and Sasuke’s ears are going to melt if he doesn’t shut up, so Sasuke elbows him.

“Hey,” he says. “Idiot. Say goodbye to Mubi and Kagari before we go.” It’s the only thing he’s got, and Naruto’s face goes from excited to irritated to sad.

“Ahhh, no, I wanted to hang out with them more!” He pouts, and then lights up so fast it’s like he was never anything else but happy. “Wait, wait! Let’s go out for celebratory Ichiraku and invite them! Yeah, yeah!” He takes off like Zabuza is at his heels, and Sasuke rolls his eyes.

Sakura giggles. “Ramen. Welcome to Konoha.”

Chapter End Notes

teeny karin is very different from the karin we know and love. DON'T WORRY. SHE'LL COME OUT OF HER SHELL. ALSO MORE CONSPIRACIES. fuck konoha. fuck hiruzen. fuck the government.

immm probably going to try to update this fic every week now! We'll see if it lasts but lol that's the goal for the moment.

also the match-ups! woo! we'll have plenty of discussion of them next chapter because uh WOW we've got a lot to wrap up still until the training month montage time. so. there will be a few more chapters before we get to the final exams and then i have to bang my head against the wall and attempt to write good coherent fight scenes.

i would like to reiterate again that while sns will be the eventual endgame main relationship, sasuke's relationships with other characters are just as important!! his and sakura's friendship is on equal footing with sns, and later relationships will be the same.

ANYWAY THANK YOU FOR THE LOVE AND SUPPORT. your comments are amazing. im blessed. y'all are my motivation and ilu. SEE YOU NEXT WEEK.
The Inbetween: Part Two

Chapter Notes

short. ugh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I’ll be right back,” Sakura says, then, giving Karin an apologetic look – but oh, it seems that Ino is awake. That’s. Alright, that’s a reasonable reason to leave, Sasuke guesses.

Even if it means it’s just the two of them.

Sasuke and Karin.

Standing next to each other.

Just them.

Alone.

God, he hates his life.

She fidgets just a little, reaching up to adjust her glasses, and Sasuke very resolutely doesn’t look at her. He doesn’t believe in small talk. It’s pointless and dumb and he really cares to get to know so few people better so-

Sasuke runs over his mental checklist.

His two most pressing issues are finding out what happened with the Sound ninja and who the hell Orochimaru is, and training. He doesn’t. Really want to look into it, figure out what happened, would prefer to just shove it out of his mind altogether but at the same time… he needs to know. They wanted to kill him, and they’re a threat. He needs to know. (The training is sort of… a given. He’ll need to strategize later, tomorrow.)

Slightly on the backburner is the strange inconsistencies with the exam, and the Uzumaki/Uzushio issue. He doesn’t really want to spend time devoted to Naruto’s family, of all things, but it’s a niggling issue that doesn’t quite add up. He also wants to ask Kabuto about the exam simply because that in and of itself may be a test – underneath the underneath, right? It wouldn’t surprise.

Though. Oh.

Sasuke glances at the redhead standing next to him, who is looking at the ground. “Karin,” he says, and her eyes snap up to meet his. “Have you heard of Uzushio?”

“I, er…” She’s clearly surprised, but he doesn’t care. After a moment, she nods. “Um, yes. That’s… that’s where Mom came from.”

He inclines his head, just slightly, and turns away to think while waiting for his teammates. That really confirms it.
It is not six that end up making it to Ichiraku, but seven – for Naruto grabs his ‘Kabuto-nii’ before they leave, who was lingering just by the door, and Sasuke can’t say he’s displeased. It’s not something he wants to ask about in front of others (Mubi and Kagari are foreign ninja, Naruto cannot keep secrets, and Karin is an unknown. Sakura would be fine), but the connection is still there.

So he trails along, quiet, watching the interactions. Sakura is more than happy to discuss the matchups with Mubi and Kagari – who she thinks will win, who will lose. (She thinks he’ll beat Hinata, of course.) Naruto eagerly introduces Kabuto and Karin, telling him excitedly about how she’s going to be staying, and the silver-haired teen smiles. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Karin,” he says. “I have to ask… that technique you used in your battle, that was a healing technique, wasn’t it? How does that work?”

Karin’s very small smile grows stiff and brittle on her face. “I, um… I don’t really want to talk about this now.”

Kabuto gives her a onceover, eyes lingering for just a split second on the bitemarks on her thighs, before he nods, his smile warm. “Of course. Maybe another time.”

Of course, Naruto has to introduce everyone to Teuchi and Ayame (Sasuke has been here. Too many times.), and so the Uchiha simply shakes his head, slipping onto a stool near the end of the stall. Kabuto sits on his right, turning his smile on him. “It’s nice to get together and eat with friends, isn’t it?”

Sasuke wouldn’t call Kabuto a friend by any stretch of the definition, but he doesn’t argue. Instead, glancing to make sure the others are still talking, he reaches down to touch Kabuto’s leg and carefully taps out a silent message. Kabuto may be a failure of a genin, but he’s clearly intelligent, and there’s no way that he doesn’t know the Konoha Code.

Kabuto inclines his head.

It’s miso ramen all around, apparently, and Sasuke doesn’t care enough to protest. He’s tired and hungry and just wants to get away from all this secrecy and trickery and go sleep in his own bed. And maybe it’s because he’s too tired but he absolutely jolts when Teuchi sets down a bowl to his left because holy shit Kakashi is there.

How long has Kakashi been there???

Sasuke blinks, once, twice. Shakes his head. And in that short amount of time, his teacher consumed his entire bowl. Of course.

“Oy, oy, Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto crows, waving his arm eagerly. “You gotta meet someone! This is Karin!”

Kakashi smiles at her. “Yo. An Uzumaki, huh?”

She turns red. “Um, yes. How did you know?”

“You red hair.” There’s a pregnant pause as everyone stares, and then he chuckles. “Also, the Hokage told me. You might want to clean your apartment, Naruto.”

He nods. “Right! Right!” Shoving his hands together in a familiar sign, the blonde creates two shadow clones behind him in a puff of smoke. “You two, go clean!” They groan. “…I’ll buy you
some ramen if you do!”

Well, that certainly sends them moving.

Your red hair, though. That’s… interesting. People outside of Konoha know about the Uzumakis. Kakashi, who is much higher ranked, also does. He’d say it’s classified, but they’re at such a disadvantage if they don’t know something and their enemy does…

Sasuke scowls down at his ramen. He doesn’t like how none of this adds up.

“Maa, why the gloomy face, Sasuke? All three of you won your matches!” The Uchiha slides his scowl up to his teacher, who looks as cheerful as ever.

“Kakashi-sensei,” he says instead of answering. “Who is Orochimaru?”

Kakashi’s smile doesn’t waver. Kabuto inhales sharply next to him. The other five still as well, and their teacher tips his head back. “Aah, well… Orochimaru is a missing-nin of Konoha. The Hokage exiled him after he found him breaking the law.”

That answers everything and nothing at the same time.

Sakura speaks up, this time. “What… what did he do?”

Their teacher’s smile doesn’t waver. “Unless you were there,” he says, “It’s classified. I’m sorry.”

[H]Kakashi slips away shortly after, and then Sasuke becomes the second person to leave.

He stops, though, before he goes. “Mubi,” he says, “Kagari,” he says. He struggles for a moment, and then glances away. “Thank you.”

Thankfully, Mubi doesn’t need more of an explanation, and he smiles. “Maybe we’ll see each other again.”

Kagari grins. “A spar could be fun.”

Sasuke smirks. “Maybe. See you.”

He has a lot to think about. The Uzumakis… for the moment, he boxes that up, tucks it away in the corner of his mind. He doesn’t want to waste time on that when he has to work on the exam. Afterwards.

Orochimaru, though… there was something wrong with Kakashi’s words, and Sasuke cannot quite grasp them. Underneath the underneath… ugh. Again, he hopes he can learn more when it’s just them. It’s why he didn’t ask about the Sound ninja – not when so many others are around.

…He’ll deal with this in the morning. Sasuke is tired and there’s nothing he can really do at this point, holding too little of the puzzle pieces. No, he’ll deal with this later, when he’s tracked down Kakashi for training.

[H]There’s a hand over his mouth and he wakes with a start. “Ssh,” says a familiar voice. “Don’t scream.”

Chapter End Notes
i was hoping to wrap things up in this chapter, but oh well. hopefully, if all goes as planned, we'll get one more chapter and then an interlude before the final round of the exams starts! and then everything starts going to shit ahahahaaaaa.

this was a lot of thinking and not a lot of anything happening, but i'm setting up for a few longer-term plots here, sorry! also, trying to handle seven and then nine and then ten characters at once is fucking difficult? no wonder naruto has so many reaction shots. jesus.

anyway, it's my birthday next week!!! may 4th! so we may or may not have a chapter, depending - i may be taking the week off. :P which i'm sure you can understand. you can catch me on my newly-remade tumblr, chadsuke, if you ever want to hmu! thanks for reading!
The In-Between: Part Three

Chapter Notes

this didn’t quite go where i had planned but i enjoyed it

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hold isn’t tight, and Sasuke wrenches himself up and away, lunging for the kunai on his bedside drawer and turning to face the other. Kabuto laughs quietly, pushing up his glasses. “I thought you wanted to meet with me?” he asks, and Sasuke scowls, his heart pounding pounding pounding.

“No like this!”

He can’t believe the other would just come into the district like this, sneak into Sasuke’s house so nimbly that Sasuke didn’t wake until he wanted him to. That’s. Either Sasuke’s traps and survival instincts and alertness are absolutely pathetic, or Kabuto’s skills are far, far greater than they seem. Maybe both.

(Either way, it means that if That Man wanted to he could simply sneak in and slaughter Sasuke in his sleep, and that Will Not Stand.)

Kabuto grows serious at that. “It was the only way. You’re being watched.”

Trepidation crawls up his spine. “By- by who, Orochimaru?” If that woman, man, whatever was watching him… He feels disgusted. And horrified. And wants to run to his teacher which is beyond pathetic even if it’s technically the smart thing to do.

The older genin shakes his head, and then pauses. “Well. Maybe. Not that I know at least. But you’re being watched by Konoha.”

He needs to cling to his last vestiges of sanity. “Because of Orochimaru?” If they’re concerned Orochimaru is going to do… well, he doesn’t actually know what Orochimaru would do, but it would make sense to watch him.

Kabuto hesitates. “That, and they’re concerned you’ll defect.”

Sasuke’s brain shatters for just- just one split second before he tries to scrabble it all together and keep. Keep himself and everything and all that just a little intact, please. That- That-

That’s not what he wanted to talk about.

“I. See,” Sasuke digests slowly, and then tries to bring his breathing down to a fucking normal level while shoving all of that into a box of ‘deal with when Kabuto isn’t here or you’ll have a pathetic meltdown in front of him’. “Not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

The older genin smiles slightly, and sits down on the edge of Sasuke’s bed. (Sasuke is washing these as soon as Kabuto leaves no one has been in here in years this is wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong-) “Ah, yes. What did you want to ask me about?”

It’s like, 2 in the morning and Sasuke is so very tired and kind of on the edge of freaking out but he
inhales, exhales, breathes. “When you previously took the exam… was there a month-long gap in between the second and third exam?”

He looks a little surprised. Maybe he expected something different. “No… never. We had a week at most, depending on where it was held, but never anything like a month.”

Either Kabuto is lying, or the Hokage is lying, and it’s kind of fucked up that Sasuke’s thinking it’s the latter. This being something regular doesn’t make sense, and he’s sure there are other, older shinobi he can ask to validate that.

So the Hokage is lying.

Inhale, exhale. “Second… have you ever heard of Uzushio?”

Kabuto frowns, brow knitting in confusion. “Uzushio? No, I can’t say I have. It doesn’t sound familiar at least.”

That cinches it, then. “That was all I had to ask.”

For a moment, the silver-haired genin just. Looks at him. Sasuke wants to know what’s going on through his mind can he be trusted but after a few seconds he nods. “Not really what I expected, but I’m glad to help. Can I know why you wanted to know that?” Sasuke scowls. Kabuto snorts. “Right, right, sorry for asking!”

He gets up, stepping over to the window and gives Sasuke a smile. “You know you can ask me anything, right?”

Sasuke knows this. He knows he may not necessarily trust the answers, but he knows he can ask. He knows Kabuto would be more than willing to answer.

He’s pretty sure, after this night, that Kabuto has an agenda – but everyone has an agenda.

So he nods in response, and Kabuto’s smile widens a bit more. “Good. See you later, then, Sasuke,” he says, and he vanishes out the window.

Everything on his bed goes into the washer. Everything. It’s not that Kabuto is particularly disgusting or anything – he’s not, he’s really not – but the last time someone touched his bed and his belongings was so long ago the memory has faded on the edges and it makes every part of Sasuke feel wrong wrong WRONG so he washes them.

He doesn’t want to try to see if there are any spare sheets or comforters (he has. No idea.) and the thought of sleeping in one of the other beds in his house makes him want to retch so he goes for a walk instead. Sasuke needs to think.

Fact One: Kabuto isn’t trustworthy. Yes, he’s another Konohan genin – but the way that he managed to so easily slip into Sasuke’s house, the way he-

Sasuke.

Stops.

How did Kabuto know about Orochimaru?

He didn’t express any surprise about it, earlier. He had been surprised that… that Sasuke had asked about Orochimaru, was that enough for him to put two and two together? Had he overheard
something, whatever he overheard that made him convinced Sasuke was being watched in case he defected? Had Naruto or Sakura told him?

And how did Kabuto know that fellow Konohans were watching Sasuke in case he defected? How?

He’s in such a turmoil over whether or not he should trust Kabuto’s answers – because they make sense! Reinforce what he already believes! Mesh with the other answers given! But Kabuto is quite possibly working with Orochimaru! – that his feet take a long familiar path. Down to the pond.

Someone’s sitting on the dock, and Sasuke stares. It’s Naruto. His shoes tossed haphazardly behind him, Naruto sits on the edge of the dock, his feet just barely trailing the top of the water.

Oh.

He considers, for just half a moment, but Naruto glances back at him and that’s when Sasuke caves, walking down to the end of the dock, pulling off his own shoes, and dipping his feet in the water. His legs are longer than Naruto’s, and the water reaches his ankles. It’s. Nice.

They sit there, quietly, just the two of them, before Naruto speaks. “…Couldn’t sleep?”

Sasuke shakes his head. “No.” What about you, he wants to ask. Where’s Karin? Shouldn’t you be spending the night with her what’s going on-

But. He doesn’t. Want to ask at the same time.

Naruto knows – sometimes, he knows Sasuke so well it makes him feel like he’s being hit with Haku’s needles all over again – and he stares down at his feet, kicking them gently so he makes ripples in the water. “She… went back to her hotel room to sleep. We only had my bed and she didn’t want to share and-“

Oh, fuck, Naruto’s crying. Not. Crying crying but on the verge, almost there.

“She said she’d sleep over tomorrow when we get a mattress just for her but what if she doesn’t actually and she leaves!? I’ve never met another Uzumaki before!”

“There are more Uzumaki.”

Sasuke’s mouth moves before he thinks – his body has a. strange way of doing that around Naruto that he doesn’t particularly like – and the blonde’s gaze snaps up to stare at the Uchiha. Blue eyes wide, disarming, and filled with tears. “What?”

It’s. Now or never, and the boy swallows. “There… used to be a village. Uzushio. All Uzumakis came from there. It’s gone now.”

His words feel uneducated, unintelligent, inadequate, but Naruto’s eyes are so bright. “What happened?”

Sasuke shakes his head. “I don’t know. Even Kabuto hasn’t heard of Uzushio. Maybe Karin knows.”

That was, apparently, the right thing to say, because Naruto relaxes a little and gives his teammate an honest-to-god smile. “I’ll ask her tomorrow when she comes over.”

They’re quiet for a moment more, and then Sasuke speaks. “Naruto, did you tell Kabuto about Orochimaru?”
Naruto blinks once twice three times at the random question, before nodding. “Yeah! I mean, not everything, but I did tell him we fought Orochimaru and about- about Oboro and stuff.” Oboro is still raw, and both boys hunch in a little and grit their teeth, but that makes sense at least. Sort of.

He still doesn’t know where Kabuto got the information about Konohan ninjas watching him, if he was telling the truth after all…

“Why?”

Sasuke shrugs. “He mentioned him.”

“Oh.”

It’s late. It’s so late that it has become early, the moon slipping across the sky, and Sasuke wishes he could go back to bed. He’s tired, almost drooping, and-

“Hey, hey, Sasuke, want to spar?”

It’s Sasuke’s turn to blink once twice three times at his teammate. He’s tired. He’s exhausted. But… But… He smiles, very slightly. “You’re on, idiot. I’m going to beat you.”

Sasuke does, in fact, beat him. Mostly. They don’t really hit much of an ending point, just sparring until Naruto just about keels over and decides to head back to his apartment to sleep, but given that Naruto was the one to call it quits and Sasuke would never lose to that idiot, it’s very clear he’s won. Good.

It put him back in order, a little bit.

Uzushio is still a looming mystery. Maybe the Hokage isn’t all that he seems. Kabuto might be an ally, or he might be a foe, or maybe he’s neither but can be useful. Sasuke’s not sure. (He’s leaning towards the latter two.) He still doesn’t know what happened to the sound genin, nor why Orochimaru is interested in him.

But right now, none of that is important.

“I hope we get to fight in the final exam,” Naruto had said before he left, and it rings true. Sasuke… hopes the same. Oh, yes, he wants to try himself against difficult people. Gaara, if he gets to fight him, will be very interesting. Even his already planned fight against Hinata would be intriguing. She fought well in the preliminaries.

But there’s something about fighting Naruto that’s different. Naruto is his rival, is his teammate. He wants to fight him, wants to struggle against him and prevail and they can both be named chunin. Maybe Sakura, too.

Sasuke yawns, covering his mouth with one hand, and then sticks both his hands in his pockets, ambling down the street. The sun had risen.

It was time to find Kakashi, and figure out how to win this thing.
One more chapter and then it's!!!! final exam time!!! woo!!! the next one is going to be a
doozy so idk if I'm updating next week. You might just end up with a pretty long
chapter the week after. We'll see how it goes!

thank y'all so much for your support lol. i'm having so much fun with this fic. and tbh
karin has the right of it like naruto's apartment is......... well. if i had a hotel i didn't have
to pay for i could sleep in i definitely would.

(also given @ this point in canon kabuto had already tried to kill sasuke, he's like...
actually doing better. i guess. less kill-y.)

you can find me on tumblr at grellsuke. thank u!
She doesn’t say good-bye to her team. There’s no real point, she thinks – none of them ever cared about her, and she never cared about any of them. All she was on this mission, for this exam, was a tool. She was there to heal her teammates. No one cared about her advancing.

Why would they? She wasn’t even properly trained as a genin.

Karin packs up every single one of her items, neat and tidy in her bags, and leaves the hotel. There’s nothing at home she could possibly want – the few material items that are important to her absolutely came with – and to be honest, there’s nothing worth going home.

It’s early, maybe too early to wake Naruto, so instead Karin finds herself going to the one other location that she knows here in Konoha: Ichiraku.

The stall seems open, the warm smell of ramen coming from inside, so she steps in, dropping her bags by one of the stools and sitting down. After a moment, the young woman – Ayame, Naruto had introduced her as – comes out with a smile. “I thought I heard someone come in. Just you, Karin?”

She ducks her head, cheeks turning a little red. “Um, yeah… I’m pretty sure Naruto’s still asleep…”

Ayame, thankfully, doesn’t ask any questions. “He likes to sleep in. Is there anything I can get you?”

Karin shrugs. Thinking seems hard this morning. Everything is kind of… overwhelming. “Whatever smells really good right now…?”

She laughs. “Coming right up!”

Even though it smells delicious, though, Karin only finds herself toying with her ramen when she gets it, unable to really. Stomach anything. She has no idea how she’s going to do this. How she can make Naruto like her – she had been too scared last night, too overwhelmed, all of this was Just So Much how was she even going to-

Ayame leans on the counter, and Karin jerks up, startled. The older girl only smiles. “Hey, you know… Naruto’s a pretty simple person. He cares a lot, but he hasn’t really had anyone. He’ll love you for who you are, whoever that is.”

Whoever that is?

And in truth – isn’t that the real dilemma? Karin has no idea who she is.

She’s an Uzumaki – and that’s why Naruto wants her, why he wants to keep her, and she’s so fiercely glad she’s an Uzumaki right now, that that blood runs through her veins. She’s now a Konohan – and that. She doesn’t know what that means. Karin doesn’t need to heal anymore. Maybe she doesn’t even have to go on missions. Maybe she can just be a gardener or a librarian or
do Anything Else But See More People Hurt.

Karin stares at the bowl in front of her and it’s. The broth is moving and no, the broth isn’t moving, Karin is just **crying** and Ayame is on the other side of the counter, suddenly, hugging her tight and it feels like Mama is here and alive all over again and she buries her face in Ayame’s stomach and **bawls**.

She’s not sure how long she cries. She’s not sure how long she weeps and shakes and feels like she’s going to wretch but she doesn’t wretch she just. Falls to pieces while Ayame rubs her back and makes shooshing noises and holds her until she’s calm. Calm. Calm-ish, at least.

“It’s okay to be scared, Karin,” Ayame says, holding her tight. “Moving to a whole new village… that’s big, isn’t it?”

It is. But it also isn’t. She’d expect moving to a whole new village to be Exactly The Same, full of hurts and biting and never ending days and exhaustion and this is-

This is going to be none of this.

“I don’t know if- if I want to be a ninja,” Karin confesses. “I don’t-“

She can’t. Summarize, can’t put into words all she’s seen, all she’s experienced, all the awful things that make her want to run so very far from this profession, and so she stops there, but Ayame doesn’t ask anything more. She gently rubs her back and rocks her, just a little, as Karin’s hands curl into Ayame’s shirt. “Well. If you want to change, I think now would be the best time for it.”

Karin sniffles, and manages to pull back, wiping at her eyes with one hand and the other keeping a tight hold in the other girl’s top. “You… think that’s okay?”

“Definitely,” Ayame says, and she smiles. “I think that’s-“

“Karin!?”

It’s a familiar voice, and Karin’s gaze jerks over to the stall entrance, where Naruto is standing, wide-eyed. “Karin, what’s wrong!??” He’s there, by her side in an instant.

As if she hadn’t left abruptly last night, ruder than she had meant. He didn’t know that she was overwhelmed, that it was too much – she had just LEFT him, when she KNEW he was alone and yet. Here he was, standing right by her side, looking over her with concern as if trying to find a spot where someone hurt her.

She lets go of Ayame and flings herself into his arms. He staggers slightly, but they stay upright, and he wraps his arms around her in turn.

Naruto is… warm. His hug is different than any she’s had before – he just. Holds her tight and close and snugly as though he’s scared she’ll disappear if he doesn’t keep her there. He’s small, she realizes, and she could put her chin on his head.

“Naruto,” she says, and she smiles just a little. “Do you- Do you have time today, to go shopping?”

He doesn’t let go, though his voice is very clearly confused. “Shopping?”

“I need… I need to buy a bed.”

Naruto squeezes her, tight tight tight. “Y-Yeah. Yeah, yeah, I do!”
They don’t end up getting another bed.

Naruto’s apartment isn’t. Isn’t very big, and there’s not really room and while Naruto happily produces a very fat frog full of money, Karin is kind of loathe to deplete it, especially since she’s not going to be doing a mission any time soon (if. ever.), and neither will Naruto since he’s training for the exams.

They compromise by getting another mattress that stays on the floor and they take turns, switching beds every other night.

Karin cleans the whole apartment from top to bottom while Naruto is at training. She’s very positive this place has never, ever seen a thorough cleaning – she dusts, she wipes everything down, she tosses out so many many things, she even vacuums! (Sakura was more than happy to lend her parent’s to them once she learned what Karin was up to.)

Everything is spic and span and clean. She didn’t get rid of all the homey touches, of course – all of Naruto’s posters are carefully in place, mostly focused around ramen and training and you can do it!!! – but it’s still… empty. Bare.

She counts out her money carefully, and goes to the store.

When Naruto returns home that day, tired and grumbling about a “perverted old man”, he stops, abruptly, when he hits the kitchen. Because there, on the wall, is a carefully framed picture of Karin and Mama.

He stares at it. And then he stares at Karin, waiting flush-faced for his reaction. “Is that…?”

She nods. “That’s me and Mama.”

It was taken not long before Mama died. Her Mama had wanted a picture, a family one, one to put in a frame and hang on the wall but by the time they got it properly developed Mama was.

Gone.

A small Karin sits on her mother’s lap, beaming brightly at the camera – while Mama looks tired, her smile is just as genuine, both of her arms wrapped around her daughter. Naruto stares at it again. “She has red hair… like you.”

“Yeah.”

Naruto tugs on his blonde strands, then, and frowns. “I don’t.”

Oh. Karin frowns as well. “You probably get it from your Mama,” she suggests. “She must’ve been blonde.” Cause if his Papa was an Uzumaki… But maybe Naruto was like her and hadn’t ever had a Papa, so his name came from his Mama…?

Her cousin – cousin! – seems to have accepted her explanation though, and nods, refocusing his stare to the picture again. Karin waits a moment, shifting her weight awkwardly, and speaks up. “Um, Naruto… do you have any pictures you want to put up on the wall, too? I got. Another picture frame.”

Actually she had gotten three total.

Naruto lights up. “Yeah, yeah, hang on!” He scrambles for his dresser, nearly tripping over himself as he does, and bangs it open to fish out a picture he trots over with, holding very carefully, to
proudly present it to her.

It’s his team.

There’s his teacher, Kakashi-sensei, and Naruto scowling at the camera and that kind of frightening Sasuke ALSO scowling at the camera and then the very nice Sakura smiling in between them. It’s very cute. She tells him so.

“Hehe, thanks.” He flushes, just a little. “We can hang this one on the wall with yours.”

Very cautiously, she says it. “Both of our families?”

He… nods. “Yeah. But if this is gonna be families… we need more pictures.”

It’s about a week later that he very carefully hangs one of him and Iruka-sensei, who Karin had met and very much liked. A nice man. No wonder he’s family.

Karin watches him do so, blowing on her ramen. Ayame and Teuchi have been letting her help out at Ichiraku, and it’s really fun. She sees a lot of the other Konohan genin that way, and they’re all very nice. She likes them a lot.

She likes… everything here a lot. No one expects her to heal. She helps out at Ichiraku and reads books at the library, spends some time with Team 10 since they’re the ones with the most free time right now, and Sakura once even invited her over for a “girl’s day” and they did their nails and had a little spa and it was really, really fun.

“I needed that,” Sakura had said, tired and exhausted and very clearly not sleeping as much as she should.

Karin had nodded, and smiled. “Yeah. This… this was nice.”

The one thing that’s marring everything is the lack of word from the Hokage. She hasn’t heard a single thing. Not a drop. Not a whisper. She’s so very worried that all of a sudden the Hokage will tell her that Actually, You Have To Leave and she’ll never ever get to see any of these great people ever again.

Actually.

Actually.

There’s one more thing marring everything that is otherwise the happiest Karin has ever been in her entire life, even before Mama died.

“Naruto,” she says, and it takes all of her strength to say it. “Naruto, I can… sense chakra.”

He turns to look at her, quizzical but happy. “That’s really cool! Can you see how much chakra I’ve got? Do I got a lot?” She nods, and he puffs up. “You gotta see if I’ve got more than Sasuke! I bet that bastard-“

“Naruto,” she says again, and he stops. She’s serious now. “Your chakra is warm. And bright. But you’ve also got some chakra that makes me feel…”

She can’t finish, but it doesn’t seem like she needs to. Naruto pales, and one hand reaches up to clutch at his stomach. “It feels bad?” he says in a whisper, and Karin doesn’t even need to nod. His eyes skitter away, and he looks at the pictures, of him and his team and him and Iruka-sensei and her
and Mama and something. Something in him gets just a little stronger because he straightens up and looks her in the eye again.

“That’s because there’s a demon sealed inside me.”

Karin doesn’t breathe. “A… demon?”

And he tells her everything.

“Why do you want a picture here?”

Naruto scowls at her. “I told you, I told you, it’s important!”

They sit, crammed together on a small wooden swing outside of the Academy where Naruto once took ninja classes. Iruka-sensei smiles at them both, looking rather bare without his headband – since Karin hadn’t gotten a new one from Konoha, (and might not ever not that she told him that) Iruka-sensei lent her his.

They match. The two of them, crammed side by side on this swing, Konohan headbands on their forehead and an arm swung around each other, half for balance and half because they wouldn’t fit otherwise, Iruka-sensei ducks behind the camera.

“One… two… three… smile!”

She’s warm. She’s smashed up against her cousin’s side, taking a picture to go on their wall of family photographs, having a kind man who could care less about her healing ability take said picture. Afterwards, when Naruto heads off for training, she’s going to go meet up with Ino and Chouji at Chouji’s family’s restaurant, and then that evening, she and Naruto are going to meet at Ichiraku to talk to Teuchi and Ayame. Tomorrow, she and Shikamaru have a shogi match (which he will inevitably win), and then Sakura had asked for her help at trying out a new technique for the finals. She’ll return home to sleep on the mattress on the floor of a once-again messy apartment, which can never stay clean no matter how hard she tries, and-

Karin smiles.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for your patience y’all!! young!karin is a difficult character for me to write, and i’m looking forward to her coming into her own and becoming more like the karin we know and love - bc that karin I can write so very easily ;w; I kept redoing this chapter rip.

anyway!!! we should be back to our regularly scheduled sasuke next chapter, aaaaaand dun dun dun the finals! WHO IS READY FOR THESE SHOWDOWNS and then for everything to go into the clusterfuck we’re going to see
Sasuke’s the first one there. He’s not surprised – Naruto is almost always late, and Sakura is a master of getting somewhere ‘Precisely on time!’, and Sasuke is early. That’s fine by him.

He stands off to the side of the entrance a bit, not wanting to attract too much attention, and quietly munches on a steamed bun for breakfast. Having too much in his stomach is a very bad idea, given upcoming events, but having absolutely nothing is worse – so this is a nice, light, compromise.

“Oy, oy, Sasuke!” The Uchiha turns, and Naruto is there – early, for once. Karin is by his side, and Sasuke suspects she’s the reason for the difference.

“Good morning,” she greets him quietly as the two of them approach, giving him a small smile, which he answers with a nod. She’s much better, since the first time they met her. Still quiet, but less timid – she’s not a second Hinata, anymore. He wonders how much of her quietness can be chalked up to HIS presence, since they don’t know each other that well yet, but it doesn’t really matter.

All of a sudden, Naruto’s hands are in his face, way way way too close, and Sasuke nearly goes cross-eyed. “Sasuke, look!” He tries. He really does, but he ends up taking a step back to see. “Karin painted my nails this morning!”

His stubby nails are orange with blue spirals in them, the same kind that Naruto wears on his back and Konoha shinobi wear on their jackets, and it does actually look good. For all that Sasuke knows about nails, anyway. His bro-

He stops.

Something must show on his face, though he tries very hard to hide it, because Naruto pulls his hands back and Karin speaks up and It’s A Distraction. “I like painting nails,” she says, glancing at her cousin and then refocusing on Sasuke. “I could do yours, if you want.”

Sasuke tries very hard to not let his face show his true feelings but some of his no thank you must show because Naruto laughs. “Sasuke’s too coooool to get his nails painted,” he teases, and grins.

“Oh! Are we talking about how great Sasuke is?” For one terrifying moment, Sasuke thinks that his teammate has reverted to her previous self over the past few days, but when he looks over, the approaching Sakura’s eyes dance with mirth.

Karin is not the only one changed, over the past month – though Sakura’s change is more physical. Her hair is neatly trimmed, and instead of her previous red dress, she wears black pants that go halfway down her calves, a mesh tank, and a short-sleeved red crop top. Her dress had been unsalvageable from the exam – so it was time for a new look, she decided.

The Uchiha rolls his eyes at her teasing, huffing and looking away, but she just laughs. “ Alright!”
she says, in a surprisingly cheery mood despite who she’s going to face later that day. “Let’s go!”
She pumps her fist. Naruto pumps his fist. Karin mimics them after an awkward half-second.

Sasuke starts walking in.

"I won’t train you."

Out of everything Kakashi could have said, he wouldn’t have predicted that answer. Sasuke starts, and then glares fiercely. “Why not!? I have a month, you’re my teacher, I need to-"

Kakashi cuts him off before he can finish. “I’m training Sakura this month.”

Sasuke stares. He looks his teacher up and down, as if he’ll admit it’s a joke and his usual dumb teasing, but Kakashi doesn’t. Instead, the man reaches out to ruffle Sasuke’s hair. “Maa, Sasuke… what happens if you lose to Hinata?”

He glares. “I won’t.”

His teacher’s eye crinkles into a smile. “But if you did? You’d be fine. She’s a nice girl. And Neji’s not so nice of a boy, but if Naruto loses, he’ll be fine. But Sakura…”

Sasuke thinks of the strange, crazed redhead that fought Shikamaru, how he kept going even once the Nara forfeited. How Chouji had to step in and stop him, the way he trembled with sheer excitement.

If Sakura loses, she dies.

It’s a sobering thought.

Kakashi pulls back his hand, softening. “Don’t worry – I’ve already found a teacher for you! One that will be perfect for this exam!”

He perks up. That’s promising. “Who?”

His teacher reaches out to tweak his nose, and Sasuke flushes and yanks back, half-protectively covering his face. “Someone you already know!”

“Good luck!” Sakura tells him, giving the boy a grin as she goes to sit by Ino.

“Good luck,” Karin quietly echoes, trailing behind to sit next to Shikamaru.

Naruto lingers, just a moment, and he and Sasuke look at each other. Sasuke is the one who breaks the silence. “I want to fight you, Naruto,” he says.

The blonde stares at him for a moment, wide-eyed, and then grins. “Then we better make it to the Finals.” He holds out a fist, and after a second, Sasuke gently bumps his teammate’s fist with his own.

Hinata is getting a pep talk from her team, it seems like, but when he glances over, as Naruto starts to walk away, Kiba gives her one last hug and it’s just the two of them. She looks nervous, definitely nervous, but ready.

Sasuke gives her a nod, taking a few steps back. Hinata stiffens up, before falling into a fighting
stance. “All… all the best to you, Sasuke,” she says. He falls into his own ready position, a kunai curled loosely in his right hand.

“Begin!” the announcer says, and they move.

What is the best way to fight a Hyuuga?

“Don’t get hit,” Yamato had advised. “You have more stamina than she does. Wear her out, keep moving, and take her down when she gets tired.”

It’s easier said than done. Hinata is fast, very fast, and extremely determined to win this. Sasuke is also fast, but he’s still on the defensive, still ducking and weaving and doing his absolute best to stay out of range of her fists. He throws a few kunai that she’s forced to dodge, and that gives him a bit of a headstart.

He feels like Karin at the preliminaries, almost, but this isn’t futile running and he’s absolutely going to win.

Hinata stops, and Sasuke stops, too, staring at her warily. She’s breathing hard, chest heaving, and so is he. They stare at each other, and there’s. So much emotion in Hinata that the Uchiha cannot even begin to comprehend.

“Why do you keep fighting?” he asks. “You know that you’re going to lose.” It’s obvious, to him. It’s probably obvious to her, too. She’s more tired than him, and he’s just a beat too fast, and even if neither has struck a blow on the other, in a battle of stamina, Sasuke will win.

She flinches a little, at the question, but steels herself. “I… I need to… to prove my strength. To me, and to… to someone.”

It’s strange, to look at someone and see a strangely distorted mirror image of yourself.

Because Hinata is everything that Sasuke would have been if his family hadn’t died.

He can see it, now. She’s the clan heir – but may not be for long. He heard the rumors when the clan was still around, the whispers of her unsuitability because of course the Uchihas talked about that, how could they not? She’s under that pressure of never being able to match up to her sibling, of never being good enough, of never being strong enough-

Sasuke has that now, too, but without a family to strive forward for.

The Uchiha nods at her. It’s an understanding, and she can see it, too. And here, today? He knows that whoever she cannot live up to must be watching.

“When you become the head of your clan,” he says, and he says it loud and clear. This is not just for her ears. This is an alliance, and this is a big fuck you to Him and to all the forces trying to manipulate him. She’s wide-eyed, but. But. “The Uchiha Clan will extend its hand in partnership.” He’d rather ally the Clan with those who aren’t trying to screw him over.

And then he smirks, and this part is for her ears only. “But no hard feelings, here. I’ve got someone to prove my strength to, too.”

He lunges forward, and the battle begins anew.
Sasuke wins, in the end. It’s an outcome that both of them probably expected. He pins her to the ground, holds a kunai to her neck, and waits until he is declared the winner.

But saying that Hinata did not fight hard, was not a worthy opponent, would be an absolute lie. His right arm hangs useless by his side, his tenketsu points blocked and bruises dotting it, and he breathes heavily, faintly. If he had to fight again, directly afterwards, he would lose. There are no ifs ands or buts about it.

Hinata looks absolutely exhausted, but her only wounds are some singes from the fireball she could not quite dodge, and a small cut on her neck from where Sasuke had held the kunai that made her surrender, but his shaking, exhausted left hand had not been able to hold it still.

She is the one that helps him up, in the end, once he rolls off of her, taking his left hand in her own and hauling him to his feet. She smiles, just a little. “That... was a good fight,” she says.

He glances down to where she's still holding his hand, and she turns red, jerking back like she was burned, and Sasuke snorts, shaking his head. “Yes,” he says, and that’s that.

No one got hurt, not seriously so, and there were no grudges involved in this match. No high tense emotions between two people who need to beat each other to a pulp to get it all out, so they’re quickly surrounded by the seven other rookies (and Karin) when they head back up. Kiba hauls Hinata in a big hug, yanking her off her feet and completely uncaring about her bright red face, Naruto nearabout tackles Sasuke from behind, arm hanging around the Uchiha’s neck, and Sakura warmly congratulates Sasuke and-

Shino clears his throat. “Hinata,” he says. “I would like to… continue what Sasuke stated earlier. When you become the head of the Hyuuga Clan, you will have the backing of the Aburame Clan.”

Kiba blinks, once, twice, and then grins. “Yeah, yeah, same here! Inuzukas got your back!”

Shikamaru sighs. “Troublesome… you have the Naras, too.”

Ino pledges the same. So does Chouji. Sakura has nothing to pledge, so she doesn’t, just smiles at Hinata, but.

The Hyuuga, the slightly older Hyuuga from the non-rookie genin team, is glaring. It’s an intense glare that Sasuke hasn’t seen the likes of since his Clan was around, a skill that was not mastered easily, and he nudges Naruto. Naruto follows his gaze, and something in his face. Shifts a little, and he turns back to Hinata.

“Hinata,” he says seriously, and Sasuke swallows down the pang in his throat as her cheeks turn redder under the blonde’s gaze. “You’ve got the Uzumakis too, yanno? Me and Karin gotcha, too!”

Karin probably has the least amount of clue as to what’s going on out of everyone here – someone needs to catch her up on Konoha politics, ASAP – but she nods, once, twice. She can go with the flow quite admirably. “Um, yes. We’ll support you.”

Sasuke’s win has become a lot more about Hinata, from the encouragement of all the rookies as her face gets redder and redder, the glare of the other Hyuuga, everything, but... that’s alright. This wasn’t the fight that really mattered to him, anyway. He has more to look forward to.

He learns into Naruto’s warmth, and awaits the next match.
hey, you know, i'm gonna be completely honest. these finals are getting away from me. and that's okay! none of it's changing my overall plot plan, i just wasn't quite expecting to highlight certain aspects of characters that i'm ending up highlighting. akdsfjadsklf oh well.

ANYWAY SAKURA GETS A NEW LOOK. YAMATO TRAINED SASUKE. KAKASHI TRAINED SAKURA. HINATA GETS SOME GREAT SUPPORT FROM THE OTHER ROOKIES. man am i deeply excited to show you what i got planned for the sakura vs gaara fight - i made it last mostly because the others aren't anywhere near as epic alksdjfkl;adsfj but. guys. it'll be great.

sasuke: oh yeah this was a whatever fight i've got more sweet finals fights coming me, knowing what's ahead: Oh My Sweet Summer Child........

thanks for all of your lovely comments! it's hilarious m that my struggle is like... trying not to make Sasuke Too Nice but he's actually in a really good headspace overall right now? So. he's not too bad.
They settle down into their seats. Team 10 sits next to them, Shikamaru next to Chouji next to Ino next to Sakura – then Karin, Naruto, and Sasuke. Team Gai is on the far side of 10, Rock rather loudly encouraging Tenten on, and “You can do it!” while Hinata, Kiba, and Shino talk much quieter just a few feet down from Sasuke. He thinks they’ll use the other teams as a barrier, to keep Hyuuga as far from Hinata as possible.

(Why? Why is that necessary? What is going on underneath that he knows nothing about?)

Kabuto sits next to him, though, before Team 8 can, and Sasuke stiffens. “That was a very good match. Congratulations, Sasuke,” the older genin says, and Sasuke glances his way, teeth clenched together so hard he’s certain he’s going to break his own jaw. “A Hyuuga-Uchiha alliance, though… I don’t think that’s ever happened.”

Light flickers off his glasses as he smiles, expression unreadable. “Do you think they’d approve?”

It’s like a punch to the gut.

Sasuke wants to snap, to snarl, to wrestle Kabuto to the ground and break his stupid glasses and break his stupid face because how dare he, how dare he bring them up like this and how dare he be right and-

He claps a hand over the back of his neck and tries to breathe.

“Hey, hey, Kabuto-nii!” Naruto leans around Sasuke, and the boy can’t tell if his teammate is just that oblivious or if he’s doing it on purpose – with Naruto, it could be either. “You came to watch? I’m gonna win, ya know!”

Kabuto turns that same unreadable smile onto Naruto. “Hyuuga Neji is a genius, Naruto,” he chides gently. “Top of his class, just like Sasuke. You’ll have to try very hard to beat him.”

Naruto puffs up – he always likes a challenge. “I’ve got a plan! Don’t worry, I’m gonna kick his ass and then I’m gonna kick more ass til it’s me and Sasuke and then I’m gonna kick Sasuke’s ass!”

He’s amused. “Seems like you’ve got it all worked out. You two in the finals, huh?”

The blonde nods fiercely. “Yeah, yeah! The two of us!” He turns, just a little bit. “Right, Sasuke?"

His nails cut into the skin of his neck so hard he thinks he might be bleeding, but he swallows, nods, tries to force himself to relax. “Yes,” he says, and that’s enough for Naruto, who is more than happy to chat with Kabuto.

Still, maybe it’s his imagination, maybe it’s just wishful thinking, but he feels like Naruto scoots a little closer, as if that bulk of Naruto’s warmth pressed up against his shoulder is a little more tangible, and he relaxes, just a fraction.

“Hey, Sasuke.” The Uchiha opens his eyes – hm, when had he closed them? – to look over at his teammate. “Does your arm hurt?”
He glances down at where his left arm is mottled with bruises from Hinata hitting his tenketsu points, and shrugs. Yes, it hurts, but he’s more concerned about the whole ‘not being able to use it in the match’ thing.

“Do you want me to heal it for you?” Kabuto offers, and Sasuke turns to look at him sharply. The older genin smiles, oh-so-softly. “And… your neck, it seems like it’s bothering you.”

Sasuke still has his hand over his neck, he realizes, still has his hand covering that seal and it’s like now that he’s thinking about it, it burns just a bit more, like a fireball is singing his skin, and-

Yamato-sensei showed him some breathing exercises but he can’t do this with Kabuto right here, he cannot deal-

Naruto’s reaching for him- “Sasuke, hey-“

He gets up and leaves.

Naruto is only a few steps behind him, calling out his name and Sasuke ignores him, completely ignores him until he can turn down an empty hall, back hitting the wall, and then slide down it to slump on the floor, inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

His teammate kneels in front of him, hands hovering over Sasuke’s shoulders, unsure what to do. “Hey, hey, Sasuke,” he says, and the Uchiha manages to look up, manages to meet Naruto’s concerned eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Sasuke shakes his head. He doesn’t have words, doesn’t have anything he can say, and Naruto glances back at where they came from before his hands form a seal and poof, there’s a shadow clone next to him. “Tell Sakura what’s going on,” he tells the clone, who casts its own worried glance at Sasuke before running off, and then Naruto is sitting next to Sasuke, leaning back against the wall, shoulder to shoulder.

He. Struggles. Breathing in, breathing out, trying not to think of Kabuto and his words because when he gets angry it’s like he… instinctively draws on that. Instinctively draws upon that tainted power sealed away and it's so hard to not go for it.

But Naruto’s warm presence is next to him, is grounding him, and slowly, slowly, his breathing calms. Evens out. His neck no longer pains him and he draws his hand away and stares at it, not really seeing it but still looking anyway.

“Hey,” says his teammate, and Sasuke drags his gaze away from his hand to stare at Naruto. “What… happened? The seal?”

He weighs his answer for a moment. “I don’t trust Kabuto,” he says.

Naruto blinks at that, and then furrows his brow. An unexpected answer. “Why not?”

“He broke into my house over break.”

“He what?!“

Sasuke has to snort, pulling his gaze away from Naruto’s alarmed eyes and leaning back against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. “Yes. He… wanted to talk to me. I think…” It clicked, just now. Because there’s no way that comment wasn’t a subtle dig at the seal on his neck. “I think he’s working for Orochimaru.”
Naruto stares at him, alarmed and worried and upset all at once. “Kabuto-nii is…?” He shakes away whatever thought is plaguing him. “We need to tell Kakashi-sensei!”

He shakes his head. “We don’t have enough time. Your match is next.”

The blonde deflates a little. “Well- Well, we can tell him after I kick that bastard’s ass, then we can find him!”

Sasuke snorts. “Do you really think one match will be enough time to find Kakashi? Because Sakura’s right after.”

Naruto slumps against the wall beside him, letting out a groan. “Ughhh. You’ve got stupid logic. We’ll tell him after the Finals, right?”

“Yeah.”

They sit there for a moment, just the two of them in silence, shoulder against shoulder, before Naruto gets up. “My shadow clone popped – match is almost over!” Even with the subject they were discussing, the blonde can’t help but grin, beaming excitedly at Sasuke as the other shoves himself to his feet. “I’m gonna kick his ass! Wait til you’ve seen the cool jutsu I’ve learned!”

“Heh.” Sasuke shakes his head, falling in behind Naruto as they start to head back. “Don’t use all your tricks on Hyuuga, or you’ll never be able to beat me.”

“Agh, bastard, you’ll see about that!”

Sasuke is relieved to see there’s been a slight shift in seating arrangements, when he gets back. Sakura is firmly engaging Kabuto, having taken Sasuke’s seat – they’re talking about medical jutsu, it seems, and Karin (having moved over to Naruto’s spot) is listening in and offering the occasional comment.

Ino waves the two of them down as soon as they come down the stairs, and this is the first time in his life that Sasuke has ever been relieved to see the Yamanaka.

He sits next to her, Naruto on his other side – all the better to keep more people in between him and Kabuto – and Ino leans in, as does the rest of Team 10. “Sakura says we need to keep Kabuto away from you,” she says, and she’s… concerned. Chouji looks concerned. Even Shikamaru looks concerned. “What’s going on?”

The idea of explaining everything about Orochimaru and the seal and Sound – especially when his own team still doesn’t know all the details – isn’t even an idea. “He’s… a creep,” Sasuke murmurs.

Team 10 – InoShikaCho, he can’t forget that, can’t forget what kind of team they are – looks downright alarmed. “Like… that?” Chouji asks quietly, kind of horrified and shooting a glance over to Kabuto.

Naruto is puzzled. “Like what?”

Sasuke knows what they’re asking, though. His hand reaches up, clasps over the seal on his neck, and he thinks of Orochimaru’s touch and Kabuto in his bedroom and he’s not even sure if he’s lying when he says, “Yes, like that.”

Ino’s face hardens into a glare that she shoots to a seemingly oblivious Kabuto, before glancing back at the rest of her team. They communicate in a way without words, complete with wiggling
eyebrows and mock faces of disgust, before she turns back to him. “You guys stay and watch the match. We’ll go find one of our teachers.”

It was something Sasuke hadn’t even considered.

Asking… other people.

Sakura reached out, automatically. He knows her relationship with Ino is better, now, knows that… things are different, but he hadn’t thought about asking Team 10. Hadn’t thought about asking Team 8, even with their different, shared history, now – he could have told Team 8 more of the truth – and yet, here is Team 10, sneaking off and willing to track a teacher down for him.

“Ohay,” Sasuke says.

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Team 10 waits a few minutes for Tenten to win her match against Shino. He wishes he would have paid more attention, gotten a better look at their strategies and tactics and jutsus, seen how they changed from the preliminaries, but this was too distracting. Too much.

It’s Naruto vs the Hyuuga, now, and the blonde stands up.

Karin gives him a smile and Sakura reaches up to slap him on the back so hard he has to take a few steps forward to recover his balance. “Knock him dead, Naruto!” she says, and she grins.

Hinata doesn’t quite give Naruto a smile, but. “Be… be careful,” she says, and he beams at her.

Even Kabuto has something to say. “Good luck, Naruto,” he says, and Naruto is actually a pretty damn good actor, wow, because he grins at Kabuto, too.

“Thanks, Kabuto-nii,” he says, even as Ino comes up behind him and swings an arm around Naruto’s shoulder.

“We’ll take you there,” she says, and Naruto looks at her, wide-eyed, even as Chouji gets up and Shikamaru pushes himself to his feet with a tired sigh.

“Eh? You will?”

Ino scoffs. “I’ve got some tips for you!” she says, as they march right on by Rock and the Hyuuga. “That boy made fun of me in the middle of the last exam!” She shoots him a glare and he stares back at her, impassive, before they keep going. “Can you believe it! So I’ve got some great ways for you to…”

Their voices fade as they head up the stairs (ironically enough, to then head down the ones in the back), Shikamaru and Chouji exchanging exasperated (faked?) looks behind them.

Sasuke relaxes, just a little bit. Karin reaches over to touch him, just gently poke his shoulder, and she looks at him and he can… see the resemblance to Naruto, just a bit. Okay? she mouths at him, concerned, and he nods. He’s fine.

Hyuuga leaves, following in the steps of Team 10 and Naruto, with Rock dogging his heels and cheering and near jumping around him enthusiastically, and Sasuke glances their way – wondering for a split second what kind of relationship they have, but shelving it because he honestly doesn’t care – before he looks over at Sakura and Kabuto.
Sakura looks a little wistful, gazing after them, and Sasuke wonders… wonders who she’s thinking of. Or what, rather, he supposes it may not be a person.

He looks, just a little past her.

The glint of his glasses hides his eyes, but Sasuke swears that Kabuto is wearing a smile.

Chapter End Notes

this almost went in a completely different direction, so you know, but i like this way better. it jives a bit more with the previous and next chapter, more coherent.

anyway ROOKIE NINE BONDING. GOOD. WHOLESOME. kabuto being a creep. i think tenten should beat shino because even though they're both BOSS tenten really does have more experience and it shows, she just got a cruddy matchup in canon. WELL NONE OF THAT HERE.

coughs two more fights and then the epic sakura v gaara showdown y'all KNOW you're excited.
Finals: Part Three: Team 10/Neji Interlude

Chapter Notes

quietly adds team 10 to the list of characters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ahh, Ino, there’s somethin’ ya gotta know,” Naruto says as they head down the stairs, and Ino releases him, pulling her arm away because even if she’s acting, she doesn’t really want her hands all over him. “Sasuke thinks Kabuto-nii’s working for Orochimaru.”

“What,” says Ino.

“What,” says Shikamaru.

“Oh my god,” says Chouji.

Naruto is serious, though, very much not joking, and he nods at them. “Yeah. I gotta fight and then Sakura’s gotta fight and then Sasuke’s gotta fight again, so we don’t got time to go get somebody, but ya gotta tell someone. Tell Kakashi-sensei.”

“Well, okay,” Ino says.

For about a minute after Naruto heads to go fight (and probably lose to) Hyuga Neji, Ino stares after him, before letting out a groan and burying her face in her hands. “Is that entire team insane, guys.”

Chouji is wonderful and always up to bat. “Their sensei is pretty weird.”

“Who- Who just! Chills with that! He’s working for an evil baby-murdering Sannin and they’re just ‘oh yeah haha he’s bad’ and-!”

Shikamaru has no idea where she learned the whole ‘baby-murdering’ thing, but Ino always knows more than she should about things like that so he just shakes his head, rolls his eyes, and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Talk later,” he says. “We can talk about how crazy they all are later. Right now, we gotta find a teacher before that freaky mednin snaps and kills everyone.”

“Or worse,” Chouji shudders, before they all exchange A Look.

Their yearmates may be more oblivious to the shadier aspects of ninja life – well, except for Sasuke, but No One Talks About That – but Team 10 knows what was up. With one parent in T&I, one parent the jounin commander, and one parent the head of the Military Police, they have their finger on the pulse of that side of Konoha.

Which is, uh, both good and bad.

“Come on!” Ino commands, ever the leader, hands on her hips. “Let’s go! We’ll find one of the teachers and get this taken care of and maybe we’ll be back in time to watch Sakura fight!”

Chouji mouths ‘gay’ behind her back. Shikamaru tries very, very hard not to snort. Now’s not the
What Team 10 isn’t, though, is a tracking team.

“We should’ve grabbed dog boy,” Ino groans as she looks over yet another crowd of people, desperately hoping to spot one of their teachers, or at least someone she trusts. One of their parents, maybe.

Shikamaru rolls his eyes. “He has a name.”

Ino huffs. “Just because you boys were class-skipping buddies doesn’t mean me and dog boy are besties, Shika.”

“Rookies need to stick together, Ino,” Chouji points out, digging in his pocket for a bag of gummies. He offers the bag to Shikamaru – he takes one. He offers it to Ino – she glares at him. And then also takes one.

They should maybe be putting on a more serious air, but Team 10 is the kind of team to go to the grave bickering with each other. It’s just in their nature. No matter how serious the situation is, this will always be them.

“Okay,” says Ino, half a gummy worm hanging out of her mouth. “Okay. Kurenai-sensei is probably with Asuma-sensei, so if we find one, we find the other.”

Shikamaru frowns. “I still dispute the validity of your ‘Kurenai and Asuma are dating’ theory.”

She turns her glare on him. “You’re going to owe me big time on their wedding day.”

“I’m telling you, Asuma and that proctor are together-“

“Well, since we only need to find one, it doesn’t matter if they’re together or not, right?” Chouji puts in, swallowing a worm and offering the bag up once more as a further peace offering. “We trust Kurenai-sensei, right?”

“Right,” sighs Ino.

“Troublesome,” says Shikamaru.

They both take a gummy worm.

“Don’t go whining about things like destiny and stuff and how it can’t be changed! Because unlike me… you’re not a failure.”

Lady Hinata enters the room right as Lord Hiashi is leaving. She doesn’t look up at him. She walks right by him, right by her father in a showing of steel that Neji cannot ever remember seeing in her, and sits right next to Neji.

He says nothing.

The door very quietly closes behind Lord Hiashi, after a moment, and Neji silently offers up the scroll of his father’s words to his cousin. She takes it. She reads it.

After a moment, she speaks up. “He never… never told you?”
Neji shakes his head. “Did you know?”

“No.”

Silence falls upon them once more, and Neji struggles with his words, struggles with what he even wants to begin to say to her, say to his cousin that holds his fate in his hands and whom has become the symbol of everything he struggles against even if she has, personally, never done anything to him.

Lady Hinata speaks before he can. “I don’t… I don’t like him,” she whispers, very quietly, hands curling into fists on her legs. “Father. I don’t…”

Neji stares at her for a moment. He hadn’t… hadn’t expected that. “I don’t, either,” he tells her. Even if… Even if Father had made that choice, even if Hiashi had not intentionally condemned his own twin, even if it had been what his Father wanted to do, there was still… “I don’t like you.”

She flinches, a little, but she doesn’t get up. She stays. “What… What are you going to do, now? Are you…”

His entire ideology, his entire belief system, everything that he thought was true… has been turned on its head. He had spoken openly of everything he thought in front of everyone, in front of Lady Hinata, and he had been proven so thoroughly wrong that- “I’m going to get stronger.”

“I do… I do, too,” she says, and she looks up and meets his eyes. One Hyuga to the other. Main House to Branch House, sitting next to each other, sharing goals and plans for the future.

“Neji-nii.” He cannot breathe. “I want to… to… I don’t want to be Father.” She reaches for his forehead, and he flinches back, and her hand hangs in the air between the two of them, not moving. “I don’t want… I don’t want any more… more Branch House, or… or seals, or…”

Father, he thinks, and it’s the first coherent thought he’s had since losing to that orange moron. I want to choose my own path.

“Lady Hinata,” Neji says, and he leans forward, forward forward until his forehead is resting against Hinata’s shoulder. He echoes the other genin from earlier, takes a small step in their direction. “You have… my backing.”

She wraps her arms around him and he very softly begins to cry.

Naruto has (somehow) beat Neji, and Team 10 is no closer to finding one of their teachers than they were at the beginning of the fight. There’s just so many people, so many scattered everywhere, and it’s not like there’s some designated section Just For Teachers Whose Students Are Competing or something. (And even then, it’s not like Asuma-sensei would be there.)

“Yes, he would, cause he and Kurenai are dating.”

“Yes, he would, cause he’s with the proctor.”

Chouji wonders whether Sasuke or Sakura is the sane one of Team 7 – he’s really not sure – and
resolves to both find out and befriend whichever one it is really soon, because he needs that sanity.
Also, to befriend Team 8 in general, because they’re the sanest all around even if Kiba talks to animals.

“We could send up a flare or something,” Chouji offers up, discarding the second bag of candy that Team 10 has worked through and pulling out a pack of crackers. Automatically, both of his teammates take one.

Shikamaru looks awfully tempted by the idea, crumbs dotting his lips, but shakes his head. “We don’t wanna start a mass panic or anything, especially since the next match’s started. And we don’t want to tip off the enemy that we know what’s going on.”

Ino takes a second cracker. These two always need calories when they’re plotting, which is yet another reason Chouji always has snacks on him. Good old brain food. “Do we want to see if we can find an ANBU or something? There’s probably at least one here.”

Oh! Oh oh oh! The Akimichi’s eyes light up. “Let’s head towards the Hokage,” he says, and the other two just stare at him. “We know where he is, and if we make it all the way there without finding anyone, we can tell his bodyguard and he can decide what to do. This really is important, so I don’t think they’ll get annoyed or anything.”

Shikamaru considers it. Ino considers it. They both nod. “Sounds fine by me,” Shikamaru says, taking the rest of the packet and quietly absconding, beginning to lead the way towards the Hokage’s box.

Ino flashes Chouji a smile. “Nice one.”

They don’t get more than a few minutes of walking not running because that would panic people towards the box in – and bickering – with Ino trying to crane her head to see what’s going down with Lee and the sand genin, before they’re stopped.

“What are you three up to?” asks a very familiar face, and their shoulders slump with relief as they turn. It’s Asuma-sensei, in the flesh, cigarette in his mouth and confused smile on his face as he surveys them. “Why aren’t you sitting and watching the matches?”

“I could say the same to you!” Ino automatically retorts, forgetting that actually she has a Perfectly Acceptable Reason to be walking about.

Asuma-sensei is very amused, though. “I’m sitting down there with the other teachers,” he says, gesturing to the section of crowd they just walked by. “I saw you passing.”

“Asuma-sensei,” Chouji says, redirecting the conversation to the point. “We have something really important to tell you.”

Shikamaru nods. “Danger to the village and other genin kind of important.”

Ino pumps her fist. “Dangerous to Sasuke, sensei! We’ve been looking all over for you so we could talk!”

His cheer slips away. He’s serious, now, in a way that Team 10 really hasn’t seen him before – none of their missions went to the same level of craziness as Team 7’s – and he pulls his cigarette out of his mouth. “Is this something you should tell me privately?”

Team 10 glances at each other. Considers. Nods.
“Alright, kids, this way,” Asuma-sensei says, and he heads for the back.

They follow.

Chapter End Notes

not sure how i feel about this chapter. eh.

i rewatched all the naruto v neji eps and decidedly that honestly, it would really just be a rehash of it. at least with the sakura v ino, i changed things up, but this match would've ended the same with the same sort of realization for neji and it just wasn't worth going through the whole thing again. thus, team 10 shenanigans and a lil hyuuga time!

next chapter is the sakura v gaara fight. or at least the beginning of it.

Are Y'all Ready For This. also we hit 50k!!! yay!!!!!!! and god is there so much more to cover.
Sasuke doesn’t understand.

He’s been feeling like that more and more, lately – between the mysteries that surround Naruto, between Kabuto and Orochimaru and the strange discrepancies in Konoha and Him, it feels like he’s always a little lost, always a step behind on the uptake and he doesn’t like it. Not one little bit.

The boy stares ahead, stares at the spot where Naruto had been when he was fighting the Hyuuga, completely ignoring the now on-going fight between Rock and the sand genin, and tries to think.

Naruto, who had such strange stamina, such easy healing, and now strange power out of nowhere… Karin, who could heal so very easily, who had more stamina than he would expect from her… Red hair, Kakashi had said, and he thinks of that strangely powerful sand genin, of Gaara, and he wonders.

“You’re not the only one who’s special!” Naruto had snapped at Hyuuga, and Sasuke wants to wring his teammate’s neck until he tells him the flat, honest truth. Does he have a bloodline? Is there something from the Uzumaki Clan? Given how little Naruto knows about his clan, it would make sense that he didn’t know before, when Sasuke had commented on it last time… But…

He glances at Karin, just a seat down from him, and considers asking her because she clearly knows a lot more than Naruto does, but she is very, very intently watching the match. Completely ignoring Sakura still engaging Kabuto right next to her.

…Huh, that’s right, Rock had spoken to her before Naruto reached out.

Glancing at Karin means that he does look beyond, though, and he realizes that Team 8 isn’t there. He’s not certain where they went or when they went, but they’re not there, none of them. Team 10 is out hunting for a teacher. The older genin team, the Hyuuga team, had not yet returned, which makes sense given all three of them are fighting in a row.

So it’s just Sakura, Sasuke, Karin, and Kabuto.

Dread pools in his stomach, and even though to all of the world he looks intent, looks like he’s fixated on the match which is wind versus speed-

Holy shit, what were in those weights!?

Naruto slides into the seat right between him and Karin, and Sasuke manages to tear his eyes away from the fight to look at him. Naruto beams at him. “Hey, hey, I kicked his ass, Sasuke! Now you gotta win your next match!”

He rolls his eyes. “Hn. Don’t worry about me. I’ll win it.”
Sakura glances over, and gives him a smile. “That was really great, Naruto! I knew you could do it!” she says, as if she hadn’t been on edge the entire match, just like him.

Kabuto smiles as well, but there’s no warmth in it like Sakura’s. “I underestimated you. Congratulations, Naruto. Drawing upon that was… unexpected.”

Naruto’s smile freezes just a little bit, as does Karin’s, and god Sasuke wants to know the undercurrents so bad. What does Kabuto mean. The fact that Karin understands what Kabuto is talking about, what Naruto did, is another tick in the ‘Uzumaki heritage’ column, but he doesn’t know for sure and it’s so very frustrating.

He’s not stupid enough to ask about it in front of Kabuto, though, to even bring it up like it’s something to be surprised by, and so he rolls his eyes. “Shut up,” he tells them, without any heat in his voice. “I’m watching the match.”

His teammate relaxes, just a little bit, next to him and Sasuke knows deflection was the right choice.

Rock wins, of course. The sand genin is definitely good, may perhaps get promoted to chunin despite her loss on skills alone, but Rock is fast, so intensely fast especially without his weights, and Sasuke wonders how on earth Naruto is going to beat him.

To be fair, his teammate always pulls surprising things out of his hat, but there’s surprising and there’s beating an opponent that’s too fast to see with the Sharingan.

(He did only try for a brief few seconds, though, because he doesn’t want to waste chakra.)

But that means…

Sakura is pale, when he looks over, pale and determined and hands clenched into fists and she gets up and gives them all a fake, closed eyes smile. “I’ll see you in a little bit,” she says.

Kabuto adjusts his glasses. “Good luck, Sakura,” he says, and Sasuke hates him a little more because he doesn’t think the older genin means a single word of that.

Naruto looks so terribly concerned, and Karin echoes that, and Sasuke doesn’t know what kind of expression he has on his face but he might look the same, too. “Sakura,” Karin says, and she stops. “Are you… sure you don’t want to forfeit?”

She shakes her head. “No. I’ve got a plan.” Her smile turns a little more real, now, and she meets each of their gazes, one by one. “Cheer me on. Me and Kakashi-sensei worked something out, something really good, and I’m going to win this. It’s going to be all three of us in the finals, just watch.”

A tiny, tiny bit guiltily, Sasuke realizes he hadn’t even considered Sakura when talking about how he and Naruto are making it to the end. Mostly because he hasn’t… thought she could win this.

But. But.

She walks away, headed down to fight, and Sasuke watches her leave. When these exams started, he had been kidding himself. I don’t want to figure out how to work with another person for the exams, he had told himself, and he had been lying. He remembers her fight against Ino, wondering what happened in the forest while he was out, and now-

Sasuke watches Sakura’s back, and wonders when she clawed her way up to the same level as the
Kabuto doesn’t matter right now. Nor does Orochimaru. The snake man could probably get right up in all of Team 7’s faces – because Karin is a part of Team 7 now, he realizes, she’s an honorary member – and they would just shove him aside because right now they’re focused on the final member of their team.

On Sakura, standing in the middle of the arena, right across from Gaara.

*I’ve got a plan,* she had said, and Sasuke desperately hopes it’s a very, very good one because she’s going to need it.

If Sakura doesn’t make it, if she dies here. Sasuke. He will.

He doesn’t think he can lose someone else.

She’s ready, fingers twitching and leg back and ready to spring into action, start whatever her plan may be, and Gaara just stands there, with that twisted smile of his. It sends chills up Sasuke’s spine. If the sand genin is, indeed, an Uzumaki, he’s a completely different brand than the two sitting by Sasuke’s side.

“Begin!” says the proctor, and Sakura moves.

She bolts away from Gaara, running almost to the other end of the arena, and Sasuke wants to yell at her, wants to yell at her that running will do nothing that he will still get her like this, but she’s flying through a set of hand signs so fast he can’t tell what they are, stopping at a dime near the wall and slamming her hands against the ground and a pillar of rock shoots her upwards about seven feet, so she’s towering over Gaara and everyone else.

Naruto’s already moved to the railing, yelling encouragement, and Sasuke stumbles to his feet and does the same, gripping to the railing like a lifeline and Karin follows a beat behind, taking her place on his other side.

Sakura has bought herself time, certainly, but. But. How is she going to win this how is she going to get out of this without dying how how how-

She pulls out a scroll from a pouch around her waist, and stands there, narrow-eyed, watching Gaara, not moving. Sasuke redirects his gaze, and sees that Gaara hasn’t moved. He’s standing there, right where he was before, his sand billowing around him. Watching.

It’s probably the thrill of the chase for him, the thrill of the fight, like playing shinobi and civilian and Sasuke grits his teeth so hard his jaw aches.

When it becomes clear that Sakura isn’t doing anything, is waiting for something, though, Gaara’s sand shoots forward. It’s so fast. So terribly fast and he can hear Karin nearabout swallow a scream next to him and Sakura just stands there watching watching watching watching what is she waiting for just move just move-

What she’s waiting for, apparently, is to have the most sand close to her as possible. Sakura waits until she’s just a few feet away from death to toss open the scroll, throw it up into the air, and out gushes water.

It’s a deluge of it, like an entire ocean has been sealed away in this scroll. Sasuke gapes.
Sakura is protected from the water, standing on her pillar as she is, but Gaara throws up a wall of sand to shield himself from the water but that does nothing. Sand does nothing against water and the wave crashes through his shield, knocking the boy to the ground and for a split second, under the water before he shoves himself up, gasping for air.

He looks like an angry, dripping cat, and Sasuke is gripped by the hysterical thought that he’s probably never seen this much water in his life before. He’s from Suna! Sand! Desert!

Sakura might actually win this.

Now that the roar of water has stopped, you could hear a pin drop in the arena. The audience is silent. Sasuke grips the railing so tight it’s painful – didn’t he do this last time he watched Sakura fight? – and the two combatants stare at each other.

Because they’re the last first round contestants to go, the battlefield has been broken up. Marked. It’s no longer even, and a lot of the water has disappeared down the hole that Naruto dug when he fought Neji, as well as into the little indentations and pockets from Rock’s kicks shattering the ground. There’s a few spots where puddles have collected, but for the most part, it’s just mud, just sand turned into mud sprawled all across the arena.

Gaara looks furious. “You-“ he starts to say in that horrible rasp of a growl of his, but Sakura doesn’t even let him finish.

She pops a soldier pill into her mouth, and tosses up another scroll.

It’s very clear she took inspiration from the older genin, Tenten, and Sasuke can’t help but approve – for this time, a net comes flying out. A metal one, in an old-fashioned spiderweb sort of pattern he hasn’t seen before, but it doesn’t hit Gaara.

No, this one falls in about the middle of the arena, closer to Sakura, honestly, and Karin whispers “Oh, no,” beside him.

But Sasuke doesn’t think it missed.

Sakura doesn’t miss a beat, so he’s very positive that it was part of her plan. She’s already starting to fly through some handsigns when- “Sakura, look out!” Naruto yells, and oh no.

Gaara isn’t willing to sit still while his opponent sets up whatever she plans on doing. That’d be too easy. They had all underestimated him – that with his sand turned to mud, with his sand deluged with water, that he wouldn’t be able to do anything. That he’d be too slow, or that he wouldn’t be able to use it, or what.

And maybe it did affect him, because he looks like he is so fiercely concentrating, putting forward so much effort to lift the sand, to have a single strand come up from behind Sakura and wrap around her ankle and yank.

She goes down with a scream, pulled down off her pillar and down below and even with the mud there to cushion her fall that had to have hurt but there’s no real time to even think about that.

The mud- sand- whatever is already moving, and yes it’s slower than before, slower than before Sakura let loose the water, and beads of sweat are forming on Gaara’s brow, but it’s still moving to trap Sakura, to wrap her up in the sand and probably kill her.

Sasuke can see it, on her face. She makes a decision.
Whipping through handseals as the sand starts to surround her, Sakura reaches out one hand to touch the very, very end of that metal net she had launched and there’s light.

Lightning sparks from her palm to the metal and it travels all along the net, travels all along the wet wet sand and through the entire arena. Sakura screams, barely visible in the sand and the light and the smoke that’s rising as she writhes and Sasuke thinks that horrible, horrible sound is Gaara screaming as well as he falls to his knees and there’s smoke and sand everywhere and he can’t see a thing and everyone is rising to their feet, straining to look, waiting and waiting and waiting for the smoke to clear and-

The sand has turned to a mottled brown glass.

Chapter End Notes

before anyone @’s me about it: i know that’s not how lightning turning sand to glass works irl, but this is bullshit ninja magic. anyway.

Y’all have... no idea how long. I have been waiting to write this. This is one scene I have had fixed in my mind for quite some time and I am so terribly excited to present this to you. I HOPE THIS LIVES UP TO THE HYPE.
Happy belated birthday Sasuke!!! Sorry ’bout the short chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The smoke clears.

Gaara kneels, half-choking for breath as he wheezes, chips of glass falling from his face and his body. He had had a sand covering of sorts, it seems, and- The boy throws up, and Sasuke thinks the glass might be down his throat.

The tunnel of glass where Sakura had been lays still, quiet, for just a moment, before there’s a crack. And another, and another, and she bursts out of her trap and barely manages to catch herself and stand.

Sakura looks terrible.

Her short hair hangs around her head like some sort of static halo, like she’s an avenging angel of sorts – her clothes are singed, and every inch of her visible skin looks mottled, dark, raw. She’s clearly burnt, but Sasuke isn’t educated enough in medical arts to know how badly.

Despite that, though, she walks. Step, by step, by step, she walks across the arena, across the sand that cracks just lightly under her foot. Sakura is exhausted. This much is clear. Sasuke isn’t certain that she’ll last another match, but he’ll be genuinely astonished if this one isn’t enough to promote her to chunin.

She stops in front of the kneeling Gaara. “Forfeit,” she says, and oh does her voice rasp, did she even electrocute her vocal cords, but she’s loud enough for everyone to hear, completely audible. “I’ve won.”

Gaara doesn’t twitch.

“Forfeit,” Sakura says again, louder, and she shoves him – he falls over, on his side, and he’s staring at nothing. Straight ahead, at absolutely nothing, and she turns back to look at the proctor. “Have I won?”

He had leapt up to stand on the railing at the first sign of water, and now he hops back down to the ground. The man chews his senbon thoughtfully. “I… suppose so,” he says slowly, like he never expected this kind of outcome, and Sasuke can’t really blame him for his surprise- “If he cannot-“

Sasuke is too far to hear, too far to know what sound was made, but Sakura and the proctor turn to stare at Gaara. Sakura falls back into a defensive position, and Gaara speaks again. This time, Sasuke can hear.

“Mother,” Gaara says, and it’s a horrible aching rasp, his already freakish vocal cords sounding even worse from the effect of the lightning. “Mother.”

He screams, and Karin claps her hands over her ears next to Sasuke. “Mother!”
And the entire ground upheaves.

They had underestimated him. Again. Again again again, this genin does more than they think, more than they think possible, and Sasuke can’t help but wonder what brand of monster he is.

Because he’s controlling the glass.

The boy slowly pushes himself to his feet, and the glass that Sakura had so carefully planned for rips itself free from the ground. Chunks of dirt go flying. Large pieces of glass swirl around and around like a mini tornado, crashing into each other and breaking everything down into smaller and smaller pieces – there’s no real place for Sakura to go, no real spot to run, but she bolts for it anyway. Runs for her pillar and hunkers down behind it as a shield and waits for the storm to pass, barely visible in the swirling glass.

Gaara is laughing, and it’s definitely up there on Sasuke’s ‘Sounds That Should Not Exist’ list, crazed and half-mad and every other synonym for insane that exists. “Sakura,” murmurs Naruto, and he looks over at Sasuke, brow furrowed. “That guy’s on a whole ‘nother level. We need to stop this match.”

Sasuke shakes his head, sharply. “Too late,” he says, and he’s right. The only thing that can stop this match is Sakura forfeiting, or Sakura dying. He doesn’t think she’ll beat Gaara anymore, not like this.

Glass crashes into glass, shattering and breaking until Gaara has naught but the smallest fragments circling around in the air. It’s like he has his sand back, except that it’s deadlier. The boy reaches out his hand, palm up, fingers hooked, and jerks back – the glass follows, whipping around his feet, and his grin is grotesque.

“Don’t worry,” he says, folding his hands together and starting an unfamiliar sequence of seals. “I’ll give you some fresh blood, Mother…”

The glass rises up. It spreads, it surrounds him in this strange ball of glittering glass, reflecting the sunlight in various directions, and then all is still. There’s nothing to be heard from within the ball. Sasuke has no idea if the boy is even breathing.

Cautiously, a kunai clutched in one raw hand, Sakura forces herself to her feet and limps around the pillar. Nothing happens.

The pink-haired girl stares across the arena for a long moment, at this strange glass ball that holds Gaara within, and then she looks down at herself.

She’s barely hanging on, and she turns slightly to look at the proctor. “I forfeit,” she says.

He stares at her, lifts an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

Sakura nods, grimacing. “Yes.” She glances over at where the other genin is, silent, doing something decidedly ominous within his glass, and drops her kunai with a sigh. It embeds in the upturned earth, and the proctor shrugs.

“Okay,” he says, seemingly uncaring. “Haruno Sakura-“

Everything happens at once.

The sound of an explosion rips through the stadium. Sasuke turns, wide-eyed, just in time to see one of the levels collapse, people screaming as an entire floor caves in and then abruptly stop –
something’s holding it up, and the boy can already see the ninja in that area moving, darting so quickly over the crowd and starting to pull people away and-

Feathers start to fall on the crowd, little light things that make Sasuke sway before he snaps his eyes open in the Sharingan, dispelling it from him in an instant. Karin yells “Kai!” next to him, having realized just as soon as he did, and Sasuke reaches out and pinches Naruto’s hand so hard that he yelps and his drooping blue eyes fly wide and-

There’s another explosion, a cluster of smoke bursting forth from the area that Sasuke recognizes as being the Hokage’s box, someone is attacking the Hokage and ninja immediately start moving in that direction hopefully to stop what’s going on there too-

He tries to say something to his team, anything, but before he can, before he can even begin to think of where this is coming from, what’s going on, what they should do, his seal starts to burn, crawling up his neck and down his arm and he cries out, staggering backwards and-

Before his vision goes completely black, he sees an arm of glass whip out from the ball and knock Sakura off her feet.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO EVERYONE!!

1) I am. BEYOND floored to the reception of the last chapter. I'm so glad you liked it! I absolutely love Sakura to bits, and I want to give her a chance to fucking dazzle in this fic. It feels like she gets shunted to the side way too much, even in Team 7-centric fics, people relegating her to the same old shit over and over again... Well. That's. Clearly not happening here. Thank you so much for all your comments!!! I cannot tell you how many times I read them.

2) This is mostly a transitional chapter, sorry about the shortness! Wrapping up the finals, setting up all the Shit That's Going Down in the next arc. Invasion time.

3) Which is... the third point. Despite the invasion lasting, like, a few hours tops, this is probably going to be the longest arc thus far. This arc is going to change a hell of a lot, and I want to showcase everyone moment of it, because it's going to affect people and a lot of things to come. You may not see immediate results from the differences, but longterm... definitely. I'm super excited to show this to you.

I'm going to be updating as much as possible (chapters are going to vary in length - you'll see why, shortly), just because I really don't want anyone getting arc fatigue. I don't want to get stuck in this arc for eons. (Seriously - my initial estimate for this arc was 13 chapters, and I'm pretty sure it's going to be longer.)

Thank you for your patience, and I hope you enjoy the changes!
Sasuke crumples and Karin catches him. He’s clutching at his neck, at the strange seal that Sakura and Naruto had told her about but she has yet to see for herself, and she lowers him to the ground, gently. Her cousin is already shooting off clones to go help Sakura, and Karin looks up, meets his eyes, shakes her head. “I’ve got him,” she says. “I know the most about medical jutsu, anyway. Go help Sakura.”

He hesitates, torn between his two teammates, torn between Sakura down below and Sasuke twitching up here, and curses quietly. Naruto slams his hands together, two more clones popping into existence next to him, and then he takes off down to the arena below.

They both kneel next to her, the three of them watching that strange, black fire climb Sasuke’s neck, appearing on his arm from under his sleeve. It’s just the three of them. No one else is over here, and somehow that seems wrong, like she’s forgetting something, but Karin can’t remember right now. “Is he gonna be okay?” one clone asks, and Karin…

“I don’t know,” she says, as she presses one hand to his forehead. He’s hot, so very hot. “I don’t know.”

It doesn’t take three people to tell a single teacher about Kabuto, no matter how dire it is, so Shikamaru waves Ino away when she asks to watch Sakura fight.

She sees Sakura’s plan, sees her friend so injured, sees her friend forfeit-

And rips away the genjutsu with a flying leap over the railing the moment that Sakura’s swept off her feet.

“Sakura!” she screams, and she’s not fast enough to catch her, but she throws kunai in the direction of Gaara without looking, scoops up her friend bridal-style, and turns on her heel to face the crazed genin. He’s not alone, anymore.

Glass coats half his side, one arm long and monstrous, and the side of his face is covered as well, just as terrifying. Demonic. Horrifying. Ino has no idea what kind of bullshit jutsu this is and she’s so pissed off that she has to deal with this at all. Especially since he’s not alone anymore.

Those other two sand genin and their teacher have hopped down to join him, and they’re talking quietly – maybe trying to calm him down? – and don’t seem like they’re going to attack soon.

If Ino were like, a little smarter, maybe she’d hightail it out of dodge. But she’s a Yamanaka. She’s smart. She’s thirteen years old and so very used to be underestimated.

She’s got a plan.
Carefully, the girl sets Sakura down on the ground, who blinks blearily at her – girl looks exhausted. “Ino…?” she says, and the Yamanaka gives her a grin.

“Inhale for half a sec. I’ll need your help soon.” Sakura gives her a pained nod, forcing herself to sit up, and Ino’s plan promptly falls apart when three Narutos appear from the sky to rush at the sand genin. Great. Juuuuust great.

Naruto lands beside her – or is it another Naruto, not just Naruto? Fucking Team 7 – and she shoots him a glare. He stares at her, bewildered. “You messed up my plan,” she says.

“Uh? Sorry?” He glances over at the sand genin, who had popped his clones so very easily, and she rolls her eyes.

Covering her mouth so that if the others are looking her way they can’t read her lips, she whispers to him. “I need you to keep the crazy one still. Keep him in the same spot for me. I’ve got a plan.”

Naruto’s brow furrows. “Are you sure?”

Hell, no, Ino isn’t sure. But she nods anyway. “Yes.”

He grins and nods back. “Yeah! Let’s go!” With that, a dozen clones poof into existence around him – again, what the hell – and he charges full tilt at the enemy, because that is apparently what’s going on, what the fuck, sand ninja attacking.

(She can see fights starting up in the stands, ninja vs ninja, and she hopes her clan and her team are both okay, is glad that at least the other three are all together.)

Ino breathes, inhales, exhales, and starts gathering up her chakra.

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Neji’s very first thought at the sound of the explosion is of Lady Hinata.

It’s startling. Very much so. But Lee and Tenten are both with him, both right alongside him watching the final first round of matches, and worrying about Gai is like worrying about a force of nature, so maybe it makes sense that his first thought is of his cousin.

Hanabi is with her father, and as much as Neji has twisted, complicated feelings towards his uncle, he knows that he’ll protect her.

But Hinata? Is she even with her team right now?

Team Gai looks at each other. They have several options. Several points of attack that are going on right now by – Neji sweeps the arena with his Byakugan, and pinpoints the enemy. “It’s the sand ninja,” he tells them, and their faces both harden into battle mode.

“Yosh!” exclaims Lee, fist pumping – as energetic as ever despite having literally just fought and kicked the ass of the one sand genin. “What is our move?”

“First explosion,” says Tenten immediately, eyes darting to Neji to see if he disagrees, and he nods. They can probably do nothing for the Hokage. Randomly fighting the sand ninja – especially when, as genin, they are more liable to get overlooked – seems like a poor decision when no one is actively attacking them and they don’t know what’s going on behind the scenes.

“Let’s go,” Neji replies, and they’re off.

Team Gai is fast. Everyone now knows how fast Lee is – he hasn’t bothered to put his weights back
on – but he’s not going at top speed, keeping pace with his other two teammates, but they’re all very fast. Even an exhausted Neji can move.

Something is still holding up the level, and the Byakugan reveals it – “The Akimichi from Team 10 is holding it up,” Neji says, and his eyes narrow. “I don’t know how much longer he can continue.” Nor is he alone, but Neji doesn’t want to keep his Byakugan activated for long enough to see the details. He’s too low on chakra.

They weigh the options for a moment.

The level is partially evacuated, but the genjutsu they had so easily ripped away (the other two members having long practiced freeing Lee from them) has sent the civilians into slumber. The Konoha ninja previously evacuating now fight the sand ninja, and they’re definitely on a time limit here.

He wishes, for one brief moment, that he had the ability to make as many clones as Naruto.

Tenten speaks up. “Neji, you’re not in the best condition.” He frowns at her. She’s undeterred. “Me and Lee will evacuate the civilians, you go check on Akimichi.” She pulls out a small box, taking his hand and pressing it into his palm. “Chakra pills. He might need them. You might need them. Go.”

Lee’s already gone, having moved the moment he got his instructions, already proceeding to start roughly shaking civilians awake – Tenten darts off to follow.

He heads for the stairs, and waits until he’s 100% sure that Tenten can’t see a single hair on his head before he, reluctantly, takes one of the pills. The rush of chakra is rejuvenating, and he heads down to where the Akimichi is.

The sight he emerges on, when he rounds to corner to where he had seen Akimichi, is a halted battlefield. Akimichi is just like how he had seen in his brief glimpse before – swelled to more than his normal size, towering over the other two in the room, giant and holding up the floor above. Beads of sweat drip from his face, and Neji can tell he won’t be able to hold it much longer.

Sarutobi is one of the other people there, the sensei of Team 10, and he is… being held in place by Nara’s shadow jutsu?

Nara is sweating as well, struggling to hold his opponent in place. “Hey, Hyuuga,” he snarks, gritting his teeth. “That’s not Asuma-sensei. Welcome to the party.”

Neji palms a kunai easily, throwing it towards Sarutobi – it passes through his shoulder as if it’s not (because it’s not), embedding itself in the wall behind him. The transformation ripples and then fades.

A white-haired teenager, two red dots upon his brow, no headband in sight, stands impassively before them, caught in the Nara’s jutsu. He does not even seem remotely phased by any of what’s going on. “I did not expect to fight another,” he says, and then he moves.

Hinata is with her team.

Kiba knows this, cause Kiba’s right next to her and Shino’s on the other side. “I do not carry as many varieties of bugs as you think I do,” Shino says. “Why? Because I do not have that much carrying capacity.”

The Inuzuka grins. “So are you telling me,” he says, “That if you were as fat as Chouji-“
“Quiet,” says Hinata, but definitely not meanly, and they both promptly shut up.

“Status?” Shino says after a moment, and Hinata takes a moment to gather herself before speaking.

“The Hokage’s surrounded by some sort of barrier,” she says, shaking her head. “I don’t think we’ll be much help there.”

Kiba makes a face. Akamaru whines. Saving the Hokage would’ve been real cool. “Okay, what else?”

“Sasuke is unconscious with Karin,” she says, and she slumps over a little. “I forgot to unseal his chakra… I was too focused on your fight, Shino, and then Neji…” Well, she really didn’t need to elaborate on Neji. All of Team 8 knew the details there, and Kiba presses up against her side a little.

Shino inclines his head. “You should not worry. Why? Because he is not fighting anyway.”

Kiba can’t resist a snort, and Hinata turns red and shoves him a little bit, clearing her throat. “N-Naruto and Ino and Sakura are fighting the whole sand team,” she says, and Kiba whistles.

“They might need our help.”

Shino nods, but does ask. “What of your cousin and his team?”

Hinata turns, just slightly – seriously, how does she process all that information at once at where everything is, it makes no sense to Kiba whatsoever. “He’s with his team, they’re talking right now.”

“So he’s probably good,” Kiba says, and he gets up, stretching, from where the three of them had been hunkered down behind some chairs. “I vote on fighting the sand team with the others.” Akamaru barks in agreement.

“I second this,” says Shino. “Why? Because they are outnumbered.”

Hinata nods. “Yes, I think that’s…”

She doesn’t quite get to finish her sentence before a familiar voice speaks up from behind them. “That’s a handy trick,” the voice says, and holy shit, how had he managed to sneak up on them without Akamaru or Kiba noticing!?

The team whips around, Shino and Hinata jumping to their feet, only to relax as they see who it is. Just another Konoha genin. It’s Kabuto. “Sorry, sorry,” he says, lifting his hands to show he carries no weapons. Not that it really MEANS anything among ninja, he could grab a weapon in a second, but it’s more the principle behind it. “I was hiding, too, and I overheard you. Can I come with?”

Team 8 exchanges a look, and Kiba’s the one who says something. “No offence,” he says, and okay Kiba really means all the offence by that, “But can you even fight? You kinda sucked in the exams, dude.”

He laughs, and it sounds very fake. “I know I didn’t make a good showing, yes… But that’s because I’m a medical ninja.” Kabuto shakes his head. “I’d be no good against the sand team, but maybe I can heal Sasuke and Sakura, or at least help a little bit.”

They exchange looks again, but as weird and… off as Kabuto kinda makes him feel – and Akamaru wholeheartedly agrees, yipping quietly that the dude is fucking off – he is a leaf genin, and he probably can help them out at least a little bit. Though wasn’t he over with Team 7 before? Why did he leave?
“Okay,” says Hinata, very quietly. “Let’s go.”

Kakashi never should’ve gotten up this morning.

He had considered it, of course. Considered sleeping in or spending a few hours at the memorial stone just to make sure that he was hours late and wouldn’t have to watch his students fight and possibly see one of them murdered right in front of him, but someone had knocked on his door that morning, exactly one hour before the matches started.

He had answered the door, mostly out of curiosity.

It was Sakura’s Mom.

“Hello,” she had said. “Sakura told me to make sure you were at the matches, right on time.”

Kakashi didn’t – and still doesn’t – know Sakura’s Mom’s name, but she was and is a terrifying force of nature that reminded/reminds Kakashi of Kushina and had made sure that he had gotten here on time.

And he didn’t want to talk to Sakura before she was inevitably murdered and he had another grave to visit so he hadn’t gone to his students and had instead decided to hang out by the Hokage because god knows nothing ever happens up there but boring political talk which he can interrupt impolitely with his favorite little orange book.

Which leads to this, because fuck his whole life.

Trapped in a pink barrier with the Hokage by his side and Orochimaru across from him. “Fuck,” Kakashi says, softly but with heartfelt emotion, and resolves to blame Sakura’s Mom if he dies here.

Whatever her name is.

Chapter End Notes

okay so next chapters will.... PROBABLY not be quite THIS fast but like. you understand now why it's gonna be a long one, huh. there's a lot of shit that's going down with a lot of people in a lot of locations.

everybody's getting their chance to shine and holy fuck am i so terribly excited for this shitshow.

i hope y'all love it thank u so much for the support!!
The problem is, Ino thinks, is that her jutsu is too slow. It takes time for her to send chakra to an opponent, to take over their mind – sure, she’ll definitely get faster, but this is why she’s not gonna make chunin. SAKURA better make chunin, or Ino is personally going to sue the Hokage herself (please please let him be okay, she never thought she’d be worried about the Hokage but she kind of is right now).

Speaking of Sakura, she rubs her eyes next to her and pops a chakra pill into her mouth. “Sakura,” Ino says, and she sideyes her. “You’re using another one?”

She waves her friend’s concerns off. “Don’t worry, it’s only my second.”

“Don’t poison yourself, Forehead Girl.” To be honest, though, Ino is more worried about Sakura’s burns. Sakura is naturally darker than Ino – naturally darker than most of Konoha – but her skin is seared almost pure black. Like, the color of Sasuke’s hair. Her left arm and face are patchy, probably wherever she got hit, but her right arm is completely burnt, every single visible inch of skin marred by the lightning.

It’s also clear she’s in pain, from the way she forces herself to her feet with a hiss. Before she can jump in and join the fight, though – “Try to keep Gaara still,” Ino says. “I’m trying to transfer minds with him.”

Sakura looks at her, wide-eyed. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? He’s insane.”

Ino nods, grim. She knows. She knows all too well. “I’m sure.”

“Good luck, Ino-pig.”

“Good luck, Forehead Girl.”

And Sakura joins the fray.

_Ino had been there when Gaara had attacked._

_All it was was a simple visit to Chouji. A training screwup – it happened to everyone. They all ended up in the hospital at one point or another, par for the course for a young ninja. Especially since Ino was pissed as hell they were the only genin team without not a single member in the third exam when everyone else had at least TWO so they were training like maniacs. Shikamaru had went with her, of course, but ended up wandering down the hall to visit Naruto after a little bit. Apparently, he, too, was in the hospital._

_The two of them had been talking, chatting. Chouji was and is one of her best friends, so talking was easy – and then the door slid open. “About time, Shika-“ she had started, expecting to see her_
teammate and maybe Naruto at the door, expecting more company for breaking Chouji out so they could all get lunch together, but.

But it definitely wasn’t her teammate.

It was like the moment she met eyes with Gaara, she was choking on killing intent, unable to get a single drop of air in her lungs. Ino couldn’t breathe, couldn’t even twitch, and her heart felt like it was about to stop.

Chouji got up.

He was scared, he was so very scared, but Chouji was and is and will always be brave when it comes down to it. “What are you doing?” he asked.

The killing intent stopped, as abruptly as it started, and Ino gasped in air and promptly tried not to choke on it and scrambled away to stand next to Chouji. They fell into fighting stances together, ready to flee, ready to do whatever it took to live through this.

“Is she your friend, too?” Gaara asked, and Ino felt the hairs on the back of her neck go up.

“Yes,” Chouji and Ino said at the exact same time, and they glanced at each other for the briefest of moments before looking back at Gaara.

“So you will not let me hurt her?”

“No,” said Chouji.

“I won’t let you hurt him, either,” said Ino.

Gaara opened his mouth again to speak, and Ino had no idea what he could have said, what he would have said, because Asuma-sensei appeared behind Gaara in the open door. “What’s going on here?” he asked.

Ino said nothing. Chouji said nothing. Gaara said nothing, but turned to leave, Asuma stepping out of his way. They waited until he was gone, far enough down the hall that he wouldn’t hear them, before Asuma-sensei turned back towards them. “Everyone okay?”

They nodded. “Sensei,” Ino asked, and she swallows sharply, trying to find the words. “Why is someone like that in the exams?”

She didn’t need to clarify. Team 10 understood. It was politics, of course, but she hoped Asuma-sensei would clarify what kind of politics. He looked thoughtful. “Bait,” he had said. “We’re springing the trap.”

Hanabi loves her sister.

It doesn’t matter what Father says about her – Hanabi loves Hinata, and thinks that Hinata is one of the best people ever. Not one of, no, the best.

Maybe Hanabi is better at fighting. Maybe Neji-nii is. But Hanabi can tell that Hinata holds back, even if she’s not trying to, because she doesn’t want to hurt Hanabi. Because Hinata is gentle and kind and way too good for all the things she has to do, and Hanabi loves her so much. She’s glad that even if Hinata lost, the Uchiha showed her good respect, and maybe an Uchiha-Hyuuga alliance will make Father warm towards Hinata.
Hanabi loves her so, so much.

So when Hanabi and Father and Ko and all the other Hyuuga surrounding them rip through the genjutsu and then start to either 1) fight or 2) evacuate, Hanabi’s first thought is of her sister.

“Father!” she cries out, and she grabs for his sleeve. “Sister! And Neji-nii! What about them?”

He looks at her like he cannot even believe she’s asking this question, and she flinches back, just a little bit. “Hanabi,” he says, and it’s with the stern almost-patience that she’s heard so many times. “Do not worry. Go with Ko.”

“But-!”

“Go.”

She’s bundled into Ko’s arms, into the Hyuuga that once took care of Hinata and now takes care of her, and he clutches her to his chest and moves. “Ssh,” he reassures her. “Lady Hinata and Neji are strong. They will be fine.”

Sometimes it feels like Ko knows everything, but Hanabi knows that Ko is only nineteen, still a teenager even if he’s not gonna be a teenager anymore in like, a month, so Hanabi knows that he doesn’t actually know if they’ll be fine.

The little girl wipes at her eyes, trying not to sniffle, and shifts position so her chin rests on Ko’s shoulder. It’s not dignifying, being held like a baby when she is Seven Years Old Thank You Very Much, but it’s dangerous so it’s fine.

She activates her Byakugan, trying to scout out her family in the hubbub, in the mess, and Ko pats her back. “They’ll be fine, Lady Hanabi,” he tells her.

The little girl hopes with all her might that he’s right.

Sakura is exhausted.

Chakra ripples through her, fills her, but that doesn’t change her bone weary exhaustion and deep, deep pain. She’s having trouble with the movement of her right arm – she can’t really move her fingers, and it makes her want to scream and throw up to try to force them into a handsign, to wrap around a kunai.

The only reason that she and Naruto aren’t dead right now, she thinks, is because it looks like Gaara is rapidly spiraling out of control and lashing out at his allies, as well, who are very much trying to corral him, but it’s a close thing.

She’s left Naruto to deal with that team, with all his clones – so it’s Sakura versus their sensei. He looks almost… pained, to fight her. “I don’t want to kill you,” he says, and Sakura guesses that hell, that’s one of them. “If you surrender, we won’t hurt you.”

Sakura laughs, and it’s a hysterical, broken thing. “I’m already hurt!” she says, and she throws a kunai at him with her left arm – he catches it, neatly, and Sakura can only think about how fucked she really is. “I’m not going to let you hurt my friends!”

“So be it,” he says, and she literally cries out as she awkwardly dodges the kunai he throws back at her. He tosses a few more, and Sakura lets out a broken sob as she has to throw herself to the ground, landing on her bad arm.
Tears stream down her cheeks, but she doesn’t care, she doesn’t care she doesn’t care she doesn’t care-

She weeps as she forces her hands to flip through familiar handsigns, slamming down into the ground in front of her with a small cry as the ground springs up in front of her as a shield. And then she bolts, away from the sand genin, away from Ino, and she can hear him springing over the wall behind her and what was the point if that didn’t do anything-

Sakura stumbles. Sakura falls.

She feels like a child, weeping into the dirt as she tries to force herself up. Sakura’s supposed to be a genin. Supposed to be an almost chunin. Supposed to be an adult, a grown-up, someone who fights the enemy and saves Konoha and her friends and never, ever is weak again.

The little girl sits up, and her death hovers over her in the form of a Sand Jounin. He’s just doing his duty, his eyes seem to say, and Sakura can’t help but think of the rock. The stone. The memorial thing that the exact name of escapes her because her mind is currently gibbering panic monkey brain.

I’m gonna die, she thinks hysterically, and Kakashi-sensei won’t be late to see me anymore.

The kunai comes down and Sakura squeezes her eyes shut and-

“Dyanmic Entry!”

She opens her eyes just in time to see the crazy proctor from the second exam kick the sand jounin in the face. Sakura gapes as the man goes flying, and Mitarashi Anko grins, licking her lips. “Always wanted to do that,” she says, and she turns back to wink at Sakura. “You okay, kid?”

Sakura is not okay. She hurts so so so bad and she’s so tired and she’s got tears all of her cheeks but she sniffs and wipes her eyes with her left hand and scrambles to her feet and nods. She’s an adult. She’s gonna be a chunin and she needs to defend her village. “Y-Yeah,” Sakura rasps. “I’m… I’m okay.”

“Good,” she says, as the sand jounin gets to his feet. “Go help your friend, then. I’ve got him.” And with that, Anko charges.

Karin can’t bring herself to watch the battle below. She can’t bring herself to pay attention at all, even.

Right now, she’s focusing all of her attention on the writhing Sasuke. “Brother,” he gasps, and oh, Karin has to wonder what he’s seeing, what nightmares caused by the seal are plaguing him. What does Orochimaru want with him, she wonders, and the ideas chill her.

Sasuke may be… standoffish, and aloof, but he’s part of Team 7 and part of Naruto’s family, and that makes him part of Karin’s family by association. She hasn’t been here long, but Naruto means the world to her, and so does Sakura, and so does Team 10, and she guesses so does Sasuke, too.

He can’t die, not yet. Not when she barely knows him.

Tears well up in her eyes, and she sniffs, and both of the Narutos with her bend down to hug her, one on either side. “Hey, hey,” the one on her left says. “Sasuke’s too strong to let something like this take him out.”

“Yeah,” says the other one, on her right – bravado in its voice that she doesn’t think the clone is truly
feeling. “Aren’t you like, really good at healing, Karin? You’ve got it! I believe it!”

Before this, Karin had never wanted to heal again in her life. She had never wanted to ever use her abilities again, just—just a simple civilian was enough for her. But now, she wishes that Sasuke was even slightly conscious so she could let him bite her and get himself back up again.

“Karin? Naruto?” says a voice that Karin only barely recognizes, and she half-turns. She hasn’t been able to sense anything, sense anyone, her abilities so very overpowered by the deep, terrifying chakra from below that make her wonder if maybe there’s another demon, maybe Gaara is the same as Naruto. It means she’s surprised by the voice behind her.

It’s Hinata. Karin barely knows her, hasn’t ever talked to her aside from that very brief show of support earlier (that feels like another life altogether), but she knows that Hinata is an ally.

The person behind Hinata, though, makes Karin clamber to her feet, a Naruto on either side, every one of the three brandishing a kunai and glaring. “You!”

Kabuto simply smiles. “Me.”

Chapter End Notes

i’m not going to have like, every character and every group in EVERY chapter because that would be. so, so very long and i can’t do chapters that long, not for this fic. i’ll eternally hover around 2k for each chapter.

anyway i might as well label this the ‘naruto ladies are badass’ chapter and be done with it. i fucking. love them all so much. god.

all of your comments are so lovely!!! i read every single one and they make me so excited. i love hearing ur thoughts and your theories on what’s gonna happen. next chapter will be up somewhere between sunday and tuesday, depending on how writing is going. let’s... see if i can keep up this speed akdsjfladfs.

thank you all so much!!!!!!!!!

EDIT ALSO HOLY SHIT i completely forgot that! i totally commissioned a piece of fanart for this fic! you can find my kiddos HERE i love them so much. MY KIDDOS MY CHILDREN.

p.s. i am formally completely dismissing the way that chakra pills work in canon because it makes No Fucking Sense To Me At All. thank you.
“Lord Hokage,” Kakashi says, trepidation in his voice. “Shouldn’t we be stopping that?”

Sarutobi shakes his head. “There’s no stopping that jutsu,” he says darkly.

The three coffins rise ominously from the ground, and Kakashi hangs back. It’s galling, to stand here and let Orochimaru do whatever creepy shit he’s doing (because it’s ALWAYS creepy shit with Orochimaru), but Kakashi trusts Sarutobi’s opinion on his former student’s jutsu. If he says it can’t be stopped, that hanging back is the best reaction at this point, Kakashi is going to listen.

He feels like he’s fifteen again, as it is, facing down the Sannin and freezing up.

He won’t freeze this time.

“To summon those people,” Sarutobi mutters, and Kakashi glances at him from the corner of his eye. Like, hell, maybe it’d be good to let him know what’s going on. He’d like to hit his thirties, please.

Or at minimum, see all of his team become teenagers. He could live with that much.

The coffins fall open, one by one by one. The doors just falling to the ground, nothing connecting them to the chambers behind.

Out steps Senju Hashirama. He died before Kakashi was born, died before he ever got to meet him, but he’s the spitting image of his face on the mountain.

The second coffin reveals Senju Tobirama. Again – not someone the jounin ever got to meet, but he would be about Naruto’s level of intelligence if he couldn’t recognize the second Hokage. (Actually – he’d be surprised if Naruto couldn’t recognize the previous Hokages, given his obsession with obtaining the title. So maybe that’s an insult to his rather thickheaded student.)

The third coffin makes Kakashi’s heart stop.

“Minato-sensei,” he breathes, and it’s him. He looks less vibrant, less colorful, so very clearly not his living self that it hurts him deep inside, but it’s his teacher.

He smiles, just a little. “Kakashi,” he says. “You look well.”

Kakashi doesn’t feel fifteen anymore. He feels fourteen, thirteen, twelve, no, five years old. He wants nothing more but to tell his sensei that no, no, he’s not doing well he hasn’t ever been doing well but okay, yeah, now that he has three (four?) little minions that cling to him like limpets, he HAS been doing a better better.

The jounin clears his throat. “Ah, you know… so-so.”

Minato blinks, startled – and oh, he was so difference twelve years ago, wasn’t he? – but then softens. “I’m glad. I… didn’t do right by you, and I’m sorry.”

Kakashi shakes his head. “No, Minato-sensei. You did your best.” Kakashi is now all of twenty-seven years old, three years older than his sensei ever, EVER got to be, and he realizes how much Minato-sensei had no idea what he was doing.
When Minato became Kakashi’s teacher, he was fifteen years old. Fifteen! Kakashi remembers what he was like when he was fifteen and he really had no idea how to even function as a human being, let alone care for a traumatized little five year old murder tyke, so he. Understands.

Maybe Minato-sensei didn’t make all the best choices, but he tried his best, and Kakashi understands that.

“Well, well, isn’t this touching,” drawls Orochimaru, and Kakashi tenses up. Having this conversation across the battlefield maybe isn’t the smartest thing to do in front of the enemy, but it’s not like he’s ever going to have a chance to talk to Minato-sensei again.

(Everything Orochimaru does? Still creepy. So very creepy.)

Minato glances back to half glare at him – can he… move from his position? It doesn’t seem like it – and then absolutely ignores him, and the handsigns that Orochimaru is flipping through. “Is Naruto alright?” he asks.

Kakashi nods. “He’s on my team, Minato-sensei. He just won his chunin exam battle. He’s happy.”

“Good,” Minato-sensei says, fierce and proud, and then he’s gone.

Steam rises from the bodies of each of the Hokage, and they look healthier. The color comes back to them, and Minato looks so much like he did in life, so real, but – there’s no life to his eyes. No brightness, no shine of the Minato he knows and saw just a moment ago.

“You two,” Orochimaru says, smiling that horrible smile of his. (Seriously, Kakashi owes Anko so many drinks for putting up with this guy for years.) “It’s time you learn the joy of hurting the one you call Sensei.”

And then the three rush them.

Sarutobi is pale, watching the two Senju brothers circle around him, and Kakashi barely gets a kunai up in time to block Minato, kunai against kunai, strength against strength, staring his puppet of a teacher right in the eyes.

He looks. He looks so real.

How can Kakashi even begin to fight him?

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Tenten is worried.

See, she’s normally not a worrier. Like, at all. She has Team Gai and her older brother. Those are the only real important people in her lives. (All guys. It’s horrible. It’s terrible. She needs some gal friends stat.) Worrying about Gai or Lee is just… why. Why would you do that. What is going to happen to them.

She doesn’t usually worry about Neji, because he’s like, a prodigy and all that, and her brother is a special jounin, so really, she’s surrounded by pretty powerful dudes.

But she’s worried now.

All the students of Team Gai are exhausted – Neji in particular. Lee is bouncing around at super speed without his weights, but she knows that won’t last long. That Uzumaki kid beat Neji into the ground, and it took Tenten every single ounce of herself to beat Shino. If she hadn’t worked as
hardcore as she did on hand-to-hand this past month, she might’ve lost.

“Lee,” calls Tenten, and her teammate zips over, a blur of green that she can barely identify in motion. “We’ve got this cleared out. Move on to the next section, help more civilians evacuate, and I’ll tell Akimichi he can let the floor down.”

Lee salutes – god, he’s such a dweeb. She loves him for it. “Yosh! I will continue to wake and evacuate the civilians! If I finish, I will find you!” Tenten doesn’t even remotely think he’ll finish because there are so many civilians here, but yeah, sure, if he manages it, come find her. She nods, and he’s off.

With that, Tenten turns to sprint. She’s not sure how much time Akimichi has – and even if he’s got plenty of time, the less time he exhausts himself holding up a floor that is now (thankfully) empty, the better. There are sound and sand ninja everywhere, and the only reason she’s not fighting any right now is because her brother swung by and dropkicked a few in the face for her.

“Stay safe, lil sis,” he told her, stabbing a senbon through one of her hair buns for safekeeping, and he was gone.

Tenten just has to trust in her heart that he’s okay.

“Akimichi,” she yells, as she rounds the corner, and then she stops because uh, what, holy shit.

It’s only her time in Team Gai, in her crazy beautiful team that moves at top speed at all times, that lets her take in the sight as fast as she can. Akimichi, holding up the ceiling. Neji and Nara, barely managing to avoid getting speared by some teenager who is growing bones out of his body.

(That’s such a handy homemade weapon if you can pull them out, is her first thought. Tenten has accepted that she is just as insane as the rest of her team. It’s okay.)

Everyone freezes and blinks at each other for a moment and well, okay, Tenten’s taking her chance. “Akimichi,” she yells again. “We evacuated the floor. Let it drop!” And then she yanks the senbon from her hair, uncaring as she pulls out the entire bun, and lets it fly.

Her aim is true.

She hits him straight in the neck as the entire ceiling falls around them.

Ino doesn’t want to wait.

Shino and Kiba have joined the fray, and it’s Naruto, Sakura, Shino, and Kiba against the sand team. The crazy proctor has shown up to take care of the teacher. And Gaara is slowly slipping more and more out of control and Ino needs to stop this right now.

She’s not a physical fighter. She’s not, not at all. She lost to Sakura, and even if her friend made a terrifyingly good showing in the last test, Sakura isn’t a powerhouse. (Or. Wasn’t. Everything is topsy turvy now and Ino has no idea how to measure literally anyone, and she doesn’t like it.) Ino is pretty sure that she’ll be useless if she dives into the fray, but she also can’t. Do nothing.

Sakura stumbles, barely dodging a swipe from the sand genin’s puppet, and Ino takes her chance. “Shino, you handle him!” she yells, because Shino cleaned the dude’s clock last time and even if now is slightly different, she’s pretty sure Shino can hold his own, and she goes in. She grabs Sakura by the back of her shirt, she doesn’t want to touch the other girl’s hand, and hauls her away.
She, terrifyingly enough, doesn’t protest.

Ino yanks her friend away from the battle – no one stops them, thank god, none of the sand genin pay them any mind, because Gaara’s having some freaky conversation with himself – and over to the wall. Sakura slumps down, immediately, and oh god Ino’s heart hurts to see that she’s been crying.

“Forehead girl,” Ino says, and she’s never been more firm on a single thing in her whole life. “No more fighting.”

The other girl shakes her head. “Ino, I can’t.”

“Sakura.” The use of her name makes her snap into focus, meeting Ino’s eyes. “Please. We’ve got this, I promise. I can take him out.”

Sakura smiles, just a little, her eyes welling up with tears. “I know you can, Ino.”

It feels like goodbye. It feels like a terrifying sort of goodbye, and Ino reaches out to brush a strand of Sakura’s hair away from her face. “You’ve blossomed into a really beautiful flower,” she tells her, and then Ino stands up.

Waiting on the outskirts for Gaara to be still, for her slow chakra to travel fast enough – no. No. Ino doesn’t have that kind of time, doesn’t have that kind of patience. It won’t work.

But the closer she is, the less distance there is between her and Gaara… the less time it will take for her to take control. The less that chakra has to travel. The sooner she can do this.

Ino reaches up, pulls her hair out of its bun, lets it flow freely to her shoulders. If she’s gonna do this, she thinks, she’s gonna make it amazing.

She shakes her head, a simple toss of her hair, and she dives in.

Ino skips around the Naruto clones, ducks underneath the sand genin’s fan, neatly avoids an elbow to the face courtesy of Kiba (or was that Akamaru?), and then stands across from Gaara. He’s muttering, the crazy glass slowly spreading across the rest of his face, across the rest of his body. He’s terrifying, like force of nature kind of terrifying, but Ino’s got him.

No one else is going to be hurt by him. Not like how Sakura was.

He glances up and he looks at her. She’s even gazed. He looks absolutely batshit. “Mother,” he whispers, rasps, and what, ew?

“I am not your mother,” she tells him. Inhale, exhale.

Ino charges him, her hands held out in front of her in the familiar handseal. “Mind transfer jutsu!” she yells, and he whips out his freakish glass arm to swing at her, but before it connects, before she plows right into him or he plows right into her, or contact is made-

Her body hits the ground, empty. Transfer complete.

Chapter End Notes

honestly i tried to rewatch the orochimaru vs sarutobi fight for this chapter and god, do i
hate the canon version so much. it's so boring. i hate it.

ANYWAY. i have to say that like... everyone saying they can tell i love the characters is probably the best compliment you could give me. because i do!!!!!! i dearly, dearly love all of the naruto kiddos and i just. want to express that so much in this fic and yessss. angels. kiddos.

i'm glad you all are enjoying this so far!!! i'm kind of getting a little hopeful i can wrap this up faster than i thought i would initially, but we'll see. thank you guys so much!!!! you're lovely!!!

next chapter will probably be out faster since i won't have to suffer through orochimaru v sarutobi for that. i saw enough for like, the next few chapters at least.
Temari has never been more terrified in her life. And that’s saying something, given she’s on a team with her baby brother who would murder her with no qualms whatsoever. And that if she fucks up enough, she’s really not sure what her dad will do.

No, today has been the most batshit insane frightening day of her entire life.

Because she’s been scared for Gaara.

Seeing that pink-haired waif of a genin take down her little brother was the most. Ridiculous thing she had ever seen. Gaara, brought that low. Screaming in pain, her little brother! It had been the first time in so… so long that she had just. Wanted to help. To hold him. To stop the pain.

Temari doesn’t think Gaara had ever felt pain in his life, before today, and seeing him…

And now.

Oh, god, and now.

She seriously needs to stop underestimating the Konoha kunoichi, because that blonde genin stops her suicidal charge at Gaara to collapse – and then, barely a minute later, Gaara sways and goes down. Oh god. Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no.

“What did she do!?” Temari screeches, pointing at the two fallen genin, and the dog boy fighting her (again) stops, his weird transformed animal companion stopping as well. Kankurou turns to look and gets brained in the face by the bug boy’s elbow and falls to the ground, but he doesn’t care, staring wide-eyed at Gaara.

Gaara unconscious on the ground.

They’re all gonna die.

Dog boy stares at her uncertainly. “Uh… probably transferred her mind into crazy dude’s body…?”

Oh god oh fuck oh FUCK. “No,” she whispers, and she’s clutching her hair with the hand that’s not holding her fan because oh god oh godddd. “No no no no no no.”

The blonde brat pipes up. “Yeah, yeah, you should be worried! You’re gonna lose now!”

“Shut up!” she yells, palming a kunai and throwing it blindly in his direction, before she looks up and meets his eyes. (Or. One of his pairs of eyes. There’s like, a forest of clones.) “My brother has a demon sealed in him!” The blonde pales, sharply, and Temari relishes the fact that she and Kankurou are now not the only ones who understand the gravity of the situation. “Your friend is going to get eaten, and-“

Gaara stirs.

He gets up, very slowly. Forcing himself to his feet awkwardly – like someone unused to these limbs, these proportions. Kankurou scrambles upright and half-hides behind Temari, and normally she’d curse him out for being a coward, but he is, also, her little brother. She’s the oldest.
Gaara’s face is shrouded. Expressionless. The glass has fallen off his body, the monstrous transformation halted, and maybe, maybe this is… okay? Maybe the genin shut the demon up, or eating her has temporarily silenced it, or. Or.

She’ll take anything, at this point.

The battlefield here is still, though she can still hear the clash of fighting in the stands and Baki is still going at it with that crazy proctor, and Temari holds up her hands, taking a very, very small step forward. “Gaara,” she says. “Are you… okay?”

There’s no response. No sound at all but the heavy, heavy rasp of his breathing, and Temari’s heart clenches. Kankurou, bless him, peeks around her. “Hey, hey, Gaara.”

Slowly, slowly, the boy lifts his head and meets their eyes.

There’s no Gaara in them.

Nothing but the sheer rage of the Ichibi as he screams and glass swirls around him and starts forming on his body, molding him into the true form of the demon inside him, twisting him, distorting him and Temari takes a few steps back, and then a few more, and then a few more.

“Run!” she screams at the other genin, at the leaf genin, because if they’re a bunch of morons they’re invading she doesn’t want to see more death at the hands of her brother, but- but Temari doesn’t run. Kankurou doesn’t run.

And neither do any of them.

The two Naruto clones charge at Kabuto the moment he speaks, rushing right past an absolutely confused Hinata, but he takes them down so, so easily. “Ssh,” he says, dodging their blows nimbly, hands flying through an unfamiliar jutsu, and the two clones waver, blink blearily, and fall. Kabuto catches both of them, now fast asleep, and sets them oh so gently in chairs, careful not to pop them.

“Hinata,” Karin tells her. “Kabuto is working for Orochimaru.” Her eyes widen and then harden, and she whirls on her heel to face the enemy, backing up a few steps so that she and Karin are side by side, standing right in front of Sasuke.

Karin knows that’s who he must be here for. “I won’t-” She swallows, sharply, throat oh so dry, as Kabuto straightens up to face them both. “I won’t let you take him.”

He smiles, and she wonders at the fact that she ever, ever thought it was genuine. “Maybe I’m not here for Sasuke,” he says. “Maybe I’m here for your healing talent, Karin.” She stills. “Or perhaps I would like an unsealed Byakugan.” Hinata trembles, next to her, and his smile grows a little more. “Maybe all three.”

It’s psychological. It’s entirely psychological, messing them up, freaking them out, and Karin knows this, she really truly does, but it doesn’t stop it from working, doesn’t stop it from tripping her up and shaking and trying not to freak out.

Karin can’t fight.

She can’t. There was no worth in ever teaching her how to fight, in Kusa, and the thirteen-year-old has never hated that place more. The only thing she can do is heal, and she hates it, hates it, hates it, and she can’t fight to save her life.
Hinata can fight, but Hinata just lost to Sasuke and is definitely exhausted, and there’s no way that Hinata can win against Kabuto. Karin can just tell. He took down Naruto’s clones as easy as breathing, and he could probably take out both of them the same way as well.

She takes a deep breath.

“Hinata,” she whispers very quietly, and maybe Kabuto can hear her, maybe not, but she’s got to try this or they’ll all be dead or captured and Karin can’t decide which is worse. “Can you hold him off for just a minute or two?”

That’s asking for a lot, she knows. A lot to ask from a tired genin she barely knows who could honestly just leave them here and Karin doubts Kabuto would go after her. If this were Kusa, she’d expect to be abandoned.

But this is Konoha, and Hinata simply nods. “Yes,” she says, and then she darts forward.

Karin doesn’t even give her a moment of time to watch. She doesn’t have that time, as much as she wants to make sure that Hinata is okay, that she’s safe, that she’s alright – no. She doesn’t have that time right now.

Instead, she whirls around, sinking to her knees in front of Sasuke. Strange flames from the seal on his neck are spreading, spreading down his arm and up his face and yes, Sakura and Naruto told her a bit about it, told her what went down in the forest – “Since you’re with us now,” Sakura had said, “You might see it again, and you should know.” – but seeing it herself… she doesn’t know what to do. She doesn’t know if what she plans on doing will work.

Karin pries apart Sasuke’s jaw, ignoring his struggles, and shoves her hand in between his teeth – he bites down, instinctively, and she cries out and she can feel the rush of chakra and the drain and the dizzy feeling in her head and-

Sasuke’s eyes snap open.

He opens his mouth and she pulls away her hand, trying to keep her soft trembles to herself, and he blinks at her once, twice, trying to snap back into focus. “Karin,” he says, and then he looks beyond her. “Hinata…” His face hardens. “Kabuto.”

The Uchiha pushes himself to his feet, and the flames continue to spread, roaming across his entire face and down his opposite arm. They’re showing up on his legs as well, and he smirks.

Hinata and Kabuto have stopped fighting, pulling apart to watch Sasuke step up, and Kabuto smirks. “I see you appreciate your gift,” he says.

Sasuke cracks his neck. “Hn. Maybe.” And then he lunges for him.

Lee is disappointed to not be fighting, but that doesn’t mean that he isn’t going to give this his all. He darts from civilian to civilian, shaking them into consciousness and pointing them at the direction of the exit. It’s easier when they’re in groups – he wakes one, and the parents focus on waking each other and then waking their children (or simply hefting the kids onto their shoulders and carrying them out), but either way he’s very, very careful to evacuate.

Tenten’s brother, Genma, had clapped him on the shoulder and told him to direct them to the mountain, which he’s been doing, when a small body barrels into him. He stops shaking the man in front of him, surprised, and turns to look. Two teary Byakugan eyes peer up at him, and he’s genuinely shocked to see Neji’s cousin clinging to him.
“Lady Hanabi!” he says loudly, surprised. Neji had very much insisted on them calling her that. He definitely likes Hanabi better than Hinata, and both Lee and Tenten have shared words over the topic. “What is wrong? Are you hurt?”

She holds her arms up in the universal child-sign for ‘pick me up’, and Lee, ever obliging, does so, perching the small child on his hip in the way that he’s see others do. (He’s, uh, never held a child before In His Whole Life.) She weighs basically nothing. “Rock Lee,” she tells him, wiping at her eyes and sniffing. “You’re Neji’s teammate. I need your help.”

Lee would help even if this wasn’t his teammate/close friend’s cousin, and he nods, straightening to attention. “Yosh! What can I do to help?”

The little girl points in the opposite direction of Lee’s teammates, in the direction that Lee had been slowly going. “It’s- It’s Ko, he-“ Her face crumbles, and even though Lee has no idea who this Ko may be, he’s on the job.

“We will go save him!” he assures her, and he’s off like a rocket. “Direct me, Lady Hanabi! Where are we going?”

She wipes her eyes once more, activating her Byakugan, and nestles into him, warm against his chest. “Left here,” she says, and Lee does as commanded.

Ino wakes.

The fact that there’s any sort of waking involved is strange – she should be controlling Gaara’s body right now. She should be in the body of that strange, terrifying genin, able to control his freakish powers and thus decisively win the fight for the leaf genin and curbstomp the sand genin into the ground.

But she’s not in his body. For a split second, she thinks she’s in her own, and she’s in the shape of her body but it’s also not her body.

Ino opens her eyes. She’s standing in water, ankledeep. There’s a circle of stones in front of her, which feels… ominous, dark, and shadows coat everything.

Oh.

She’s in Gaara’s mind.

Ino hasn’t ever mindwalked before. That weird, weird thing where Sakura had kicked her out in the preliminaries, that wasn’t mindwalking – and hadn’t that been strange, that Sakura admitted she really didn’t know what she was doing when she knocked her out? – but this is. She’s inside of Gaara’s mind.

This is strange.

“Gaara?” Ino calls, because even if he’s a crazy homicidal genin, she knows that if he’s in here, he can’t use his freaky glass powers. Sand powers. Whatever.

There’s no response.

For a moment, Ino thinks that she’s alone here. That she’s trapped in the mind of this strange, strange boy, that his powers somehow prevent her from taking over and just trap her in his mind instead, that she’ll be trapped here, alone, until he decides to let her out.
And then she hears the crying.

It’s so, so achingly soft. The whimpering and cries of a small child, and Ino steps up on top of the water and walks in that direction. She’s not sure how long she walks. Everything looks the same. Just water and darkness and that ominous circle of rocks that never seems to move no matter how much she walks, and then she sees him.

It’s Gaara, clearly, but he doesn’t look like Gaara.

He looks all of… five, six, seven, a young boy, softly crying without the tattoo on his forehead, and Ino wonders if this is how he sees himself. If this is how he appears here because this is how he truly, truly sees himself.

As a crying young child, and her heart pangs.

Carefully, she sits down next to him, sitting cross-legged on top of the water. He hasn’t reacted to her presence at all. “Hi,” she says, very carefully, as if she was talking to a real small child. “My name’s Ino. Gaara, what’s wrong?”

Chapter End Notes

i don't really have much to say except that i love all of your comments and read every single one!! thank you all so much for the support!!
Chouji moves, instinctively. He lets go of the ceiling, lets it plummet around them, and throws himself forward to grab both Shikamaru and Neji, putting the bulk of his body over him. Tenten is too far away to grab, but she’s also far enough that hopefully, she can get out of the way in time.

It hurts! Of course it does, it hurts a lot to have the ceiling fall on him, but he’s big and he’s bulky and he can take it, and he screws up his face to keep himself from crying out because he doesn’t want Shikamaru to worry, not at all, and then it. Stops.

The last pieces thud to the floor, and Chouji shakes off the dust and the plaster that clings to his back and straightens up.

Their impromptu battlefield is an absolute mess. Chunks of plaster and stone scatter everywhere. Seats, haphazardly here and there, some still connected to the floor and others completely thrown off by the fall. Tenten, Chouji is relieved to see, stands on the outside of the disaster, wide-eyed. Dusty, sure, but not touched by any of the debris.

There’s no sign of the ninja they were facing.

Chouji exhales, relieved, and shrinks back down to his normal size – he sways, dizzy, and Shikamaru catches him so he leans into his best friend. “Hey, Chouji,” Shika says, and he blinks up at him. “That was really cool.”

Neji opens his mouth, stops, reconsiders, and then continues. “Thank you. For… shielding me.”

Tenten is picking her way through the rubble when she. Stops. “Uh, guys,” she says. “Not to interrupt the feel good moment here, but…”

There’s an explosion of dust and plaster and ceiling, and the sound ninja emerges from the rubble, pushing a debris chunk off of him as he straightens up. He seems… well, a little roughed up, certainly, but that’s not really what catches Chouji’s eye – no, it’s his bones.

He had sprouted bones from his arms before, when Neji had tried to attack him, but this is different. He has sharp bones curling from his front, like a weaponized ribcage, and more bones coming from his back, from his other arm… The sound nin reaches up easily, plucking Tenten’s senbon from his neck, and lets it plink to the floor.

“I hate him so much,” Shikamaru mutters, and Chouji really isn’t the kind to hate, but he kind of agrees here.

“An admirable attempt,” the ninja says, and dizzy as he is, exhausted as he feels, Chouji flails around mentally for something, anything, that he can do.

“Why are you following Orochimaru?” he blurts out, and all the other leaf genin stare at him like
he’s insane. Which, uh, maybe he is? Though, actually, maybe it’s because Neji and Tenten have no idea what’s going on in regards to that. Could be that, too. “He can’t treat you well, can he? Why do you fight for him?”

Hey, from what he was told of Team 7’s adventures in Wave, talking works! Sometimes! So maybe it can work here!

The sound ninja’s face turns from passive to angry, in an instant. Not Ino angry, not how she likes to yell at them and scold them, but the sort of deep, chilling kind of anger that Chouji sees on his dad when he’s really upset. “Why do you follow your Hokage?” he asks, very quietly, very intently.

Tenten goes quiet. Shikamaru looks surprised, as if that idea, as if thinking about it, hadn’t occurred to him – Chouji has an answer. “The hokage is kind,” he says. “We don’t have to be ninja, if we don’t want to. Doesn’t matter how strong we are.”

“Really,” he says, with no hint of surprise in his voice, no hint of anything. “A hokage who will allow that-” and he looks at Neji with steel in his eyes- “He is kind?”

“Shut up,” Neji says, low and dangerous. “You don’t know anything.”

“I don’t?” He shifts backwards slightly, in a ready stance. “Then show me.”

“Sasuke, Sasuke, Sasuke,” Kabuto teases, quietly, dodging every single strike from the genin. “Why don’t you show me what you learned? Did you learn anything, over the past month?”

Sasuke glares. “I don’t need it to beat you,” he says, and his hands flash through a set of hand seals, blowing a stream of fire out at Kabuto.

He dodges it, oh-so-easily, slipping underneath it like a snake and kicking out, knocking Sasuke to his feet. He puts a foot on Sasuke’s chest, and his smile grows. “How do you like being on the opposite end of this, hmm?”

The boy pales. “How- How do you-“

Kabuto tips his head very lightly to the side. “I know a lot, Sasuke. A lot more than you’d think.”

Hinata knows what he’s talking about.

Hinata was there, she witnessed it. Witnessed that seal on Sasuke acting as it is right now, watched him hurt Sakura and nearly kill that poor sound genin (enemy or not, that genin was/is still their age), and now Kabuto is flipping it around on him. It’s terrifying, a little bit.

She wonders what she would do if she had someone so very closely watching her every move, and oh, wait, that… that describes her father.

Box that up. Deal with that later.

Right now, she dives in. She goes down, taking advantage of Kabuto’s taunting to land a hit right at his knee, blocking his tenketsu point there, before a scalpel digs into her shoulder and she screams and scrambles away.

Her shoulder is bleeding heavily. Kabuto is a medic nin, she knows that, and he knows the body so very, very well. He must have hit an artery because it’s a lot of blood, maybe too much, and she feels a little woozy.
But her attack allowed Sasuke to escape, allowed him to shove Kabuto’s foot away and get to his feet, and Kabuto is putting most of his weight on his right leg, now, because his left leg is now too weak to properly support him. Sasuke’s eyes flicker over to her for a moment before he refocuses on Kabuto, face contorting into a fierce snarl. “You want to see what I’ve learned?” he asks, and he pulls a small… handle? Maybe? Out of his pocket.

But that’s when Hinata stops paying attention, because Karin is right next to her. “Hinata,” she whispers, and Hinata has literally never spoken to her but Karin is honest-to-goodness the most beautiful sight Hinata has ever seen right now.

“Karin,” she says. “Wake up… Wake up one of the Naruto clones.” Hinata has no idea how Naruto’s jutsu works, except that he’s very good at it and he can use it to make a lot of himself. Maybe a clone can make more clones. Maybe the clone can vault over the railing and get help. Maybe maybe maybe, but Hinata is dizzy and doesn’t know if she can even move, and so. “Please.”


She gets up, but Hinata can’t watch her go, because her vision is starting to flicker on the edges. At least… At least she got to speak with Neji before all this…

Neji. Hanabi, wherever you are – be safe.

Naruto is having a Very Rough Day.

Sasuke won his fight, and that was great! And then Naruto won his fight and it was awesome! And then Sakura was really badass and cool and almost won her fight even if she hurt herself, but she kept trying and that was really neat and now-

Now Naruto is worried.

Sakura sits, slumped against the wall, too hurt to move. He doesn’t know where Shikamaru and Chouji are, cause they went off to get help but only Ino came back and Ino might have just been eaten by a demon. Sasuke is unconscious and Karin’s looking out for him and now Shino and Kiba are here to fight Gaara but Naruto doesn’t know where Hinata is and-

And.

Gaara has a demon inside him.

He stares up at the terrifying creature forming in front of him, on the layers of glass-sand piling up on top of the other boy to make him bigger, bigger, to turn him into a monster. Would that happen to me, he wonders, and he doesn’t want to think about it at all.

One of his clones scoops up Ino because his clones are Just As Smart As He Is, racing over to set her against the wall next to Sakura, and Shino lands right next to him, clearing his throat to catch Naruto’s attention. “Naruto. We should go. Why? Because if we lead him out of here, he will cause less damage.”

That’s right. There’s all these people here, all these innocent Konoha people who just wanted to watch some cool fights, and now they’re all in so much danger.

“Right,” he says, and he stills. Concentrates for a moment, and channels the demon inside of him. Demon versus demon, right? Isn’t this how it should work?
His nails lengthen into claws, teeth sharpening, and he bares his teeth in an animalistic snarl. “Hey, ugly!” he yells up at the demon, and Gaara’s older sister stares at Naruto like he’s insane. “You’re a demon, right? Don’t you want to pick on someone your own size?”

He pulls on that chakra more, more more more, until the red chakra of the Kyuubi swirls around him and he grins, fierce. “Why don’t you fight another demon, huh! Like me!”

The demon roars and swipes at him, and Naruto and Shino dodge, leaping out of the way at the last second. It swings at Naruto again, and he knows he has its attention – so he runs. The most logical way, in his mind. Right out the front door!

It crashes through the wall after him, roaring again, and Naruto pays no mind to if anyone else is following, anyone else is with him (aside from the few clones that he had left, throwing themselves at the demon to slow it down and promptly getting poofed). He turns away from the street, away from Konoha, and into the woods and the demon crashes through the trees behind him.

He leaps from branch to branch, running with all his might, when the memories hit him – Kabuto. Kabuto fighting Sasuke and Hinata bleeding and Karin looking so scared and he trips and he misses the next branch and oh shoot he’s gonna hit the ground that’ll hurt when someone grabs his ankle, the same way that Sasuke did when he was learning how to stick to trees.

Naruto looks up, and it’s the sand genin’s older sister, standing next to the weird puppet sand genin on the underside of the branch. “Demon, huh?” she says, her face pale, and Naruto feels the last of his clones flicker out, knows that the demon-that-is-Gaara will be on them momentarily.

“Yeah,” Naruto says, dangling upside down, as if this is a perfectly reasonable spot to have a conversation. “I’ve got the Kyuubi.”

The two genin glance at each other, and Shino and Kiba and Akamaru-who-looks-like-Kiba land on the branch above them, but the girl swings Naruto up and lets go and he turns in the air to grab onto the branch and stick there and haul himself up. They climb up, too, and it’s all five of them sitting on the top of the branch together.

“Can you… help us take down Gaara,” the sand genin who Naruto now remembers is named Temari says. “Without… killing him. Please.”

She glances at the other sand genin and he gives her a face for a moment before sighing. “Please,” he says. “I know we just invaded you but whatever, I don’t care about that right now, he’s… he’s our little brother, even if he’s a psycho.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Naruto agrees easily, nodding. “Of course!”

Shino adjusts his glasses. “Of course,” he also says. “Why? Because any damage inflicted on your brother will also appear on our comrade Ino’s body.”

Oh, shoot, Naruto hadn’t known that.

They’re forced to jump away, though, forced to leap off of the branch as one of the demon’s arms come smashing down where they were, and Naruto runs for it.

He can’t go back and help them. He doesn’t even think he can send any clones back, past the demon, and everyone came with him but Sakura who really can’t fight right now, anyway. He has to trust them. He has to trust that Karin and Hinata can hold their own, can survive.

Naruto thinks of Sasuke, fighting against Kabuto with that terrible curse seal of his, and his resolve
hardens. Sasuke can do it. He knows him. He trusts him. Sasuke is his Best Friend In The Whole Wide World, even though he knows Sasuke wouldn’t admit that like ever, and Naruto needs to trust him. He can fight. He can win.

Sasuke will beat Kabuto, and Naruto will beat demon-Gaara, and everything will be okay. They can do this, the both of them.

*Sasuke*, he thinks. *I’m counting on you.*

Sakura sits.

She can do nothing else, right now. She sits, and a Naruto clone gently sets Ino next to her, and then it’s off, to fight against Gaara. Shino and Kiba and Naruto and the two sand genin run off, and it’s just Sakura and Ino’s body.

There’s fighting above her, she can hear it going on in the stands. Sand ninja fighting against leaf ninja. Anko and the sand jounin are still fighting, but they’ve leapt into the stands. They’re still visible, faintly (Anko’s hair is kind of distinctive in the same way that Sakura’s is), but that’s only if she squints and she’s too tired to squint.

Instead, she reaches out and holds Ino’s hand and ignores the pain.

When they were younger, when they were two kids who were best friends before Sakura let a stupid thing like a crush on a (very) cute boy get between them, they held hands a lot. It was something little kids just did – or little girls did, at least. The only little boys she remembers holding hands were Shikamaru and Chouji. Ino’s hands were soft. She used lotion all the time, kept a little bottle in her backpack, and always shared it with Sakura.

Sometimes, Sakura would go home and put her hands over her face and her hands would smell like Ino, because of that lotion, and it was nice on the days she felt bad about herself, about being pretty and being a *real* girl not just a pretend one and everything else.

Ino’s hands aren’t soft, not anymore.

They’re callused, worn, the hands of a fighter. Sakura doesn’t know about hers. She lifts up her right hand, her free hand, and stares at it, but she can’t see any calluses, only charred brown flesh.

“*Ino,*” Sakura says, and she says it quietly. There’s no one else to hear this. There’s no one else to witness it, and Sakura is doing nothing but talking to herself. “I’m sorry.”

She has a lot to apologize for. To Ino, to Sasuke, to Naruto. Maybe to herself, even, a little bit, but she especially needs to apologize to those three.

“*Ino-pig,*” she says, and she smiles at the girl who really isn’t there, at the shell of her best friend who sits beside her, because no matter what happened she and Ino will be best friends forever. “You need to come back to me, okay? And we can… And we can have a sleepover, how we used to, and p-paint our nails, and train together, and… and…”

Sakura bends over and *weeps.*

She thought, this past month, this chunin exam, that she was done being useless. That she could actually do things, now, that she could be strong, that she could stand right alongside her teammates and not feel like she was dragging them down, that she could actually win a fight for once in her life but-
She’s still just the same old useless Sakura, isn’t she? Who can’t even save her best friend.

Chapter End Notes

i saw a few people disappointed, when sasuke fought hinata, that we didn't get to see what he learned - sssh, don't worry, i was just saving it for a different fight. : P No need to worry!

anyway, this was our first naruto pov! one of very, very few. i hope you liked it and the chapter! THINGS AREN’T GOING TO HOT BUT SURELY EVERYONE WILL MAKE IT OUT OF THIS OKAY, RIGHT?

Right???

quietly adjusts the tags sssh
Lee is much faster than a seven-year-old, even a seven-year-old prodigy like the young Lady Hanabi clutched in his arms, and he hits the scene within minutes.

An ambush, it seems – the amount of sound ninja battling the Hyuuga in their midst is great, far more than necessary for a single shinobi. And he does not try to flee. No, every time a shinobi seems as though they are going to escape the battle, engage another, Ko – for that must be his name – leaps forward and engages him.

Somehow, he is managing to engage a dozen shinobi at once, and Lee is impressed. He is bloody, he is weary, and he will clearly not hold on much longer, but he is doing so.

“They wanted me,” says Lady Hanabi, and ah. That may be why he is so keen to not let a single one get away. He does not wish them to chase after the young heiress.

“Lady Hanabi,” he says. “Can you hold to my back while I fight? Will you use your Byakugan and be my eyes?”

She blinks up at him, sniffs, and nods, clambering around to hang her arms around his neck, wrap her legs around his waist. “Okay, Lee,” she says.

“Thank you,” Lee tells her, and he rounds the corner fully and dives into the fray.

_They’re dead_, whispers the part of Sasuke’s brain that has not quite awoken, that remains in the shadows of the seal. Or perhaps it isn’t his mind at all. _They’re all dead, this isn’t real._

He can’t banish the images entrenched in his mind, the ones that played on a loop after he sunk into that darkness. _Itachi. Mother. Father._

The compound is a present, flickering vision around him, the world slipping from the arena to the bloody houses, the bloody streets. One moment it is Hinata, collapsed against the seats to his left, the next, it is the body of a neighbor, a friend, a cousin.

One moment his enemy is Kabuto, the next, it is his brother.

It matters little.

He pulls out the handle that rests in his pocket, the secret weapon that Yamato-sensei had trained him in so relentlessly. _Don’t use this right away_, his teacher had said. _Save it until at least the second battle unless you have to. You want the element of surprise._

Sasuke supposes this is his second battle, even if it’s not what he had expected, and he swipes his hand over the seal on the handle. A blade comes away from it, following his hand upwards until it’s fully extended, a full blade, and Sasuke holds it in front of him with his right hand.

Kabuto doesn’t even look startled.

“You’re going to beat me with a little knife like that, Sasuke?” he asks, and he shakes his head. Itachi smirks. “Foolish little brother. You can try.”
Sasuke charges. He swings, aiming for Kabuto’s gut, but Kabuto’s- Itachi’s- His eyes glint and he bends backwards at the waist to let it swing pointlessly over him, using one hand to hold himself upright. “Not fast enough.”

The boy snarls and slices down and He blocks it with a kunai in his free hand, shoving Sasuke back, back, back until he’s standing up straight. “Do you really think you’re strong enough to beat me?”

There are ANBU, out of nowhere. No- Not ANBU, Narutos? Naruto clones? Everything seems dimmer, less vibrant, the orange colors swirling into black as the charging figures shift from ANBU to Naruto to back again. They charge and He yanks back, away from Sasuke, and has to deal with these incoming figures.

“Get away from Sasuke!” one of them yells, and okay, Sasuke knows they must be Naruto and not ANBU. Why Naruto is disguising himself (poorly) as ANBU, Sasuke doesn’t know, but it is Naruto. Or clones, at least.

They puff out around them, each hit from Him knocking them out of existence, and Sasuke takes advantage. He goes down, since that seems to be the strategy for the day.

Ducking down and sliding by, using his chakra to push away from the ground instead of sticking to it, Sasuke lashes out to slice His leg with his sword. That Man pulls away from him, attempts to avoid the strike, but it’s a hit – a thin slice, on the same leg that… Hinata? Shisui? That Person had made earlier.

Sasuke rises to his feet and smirks. That Man is even more heavily favoring that leg now, and the Naruto clones aren’t giving Him a moment to heal, a moment to catch His breath and that’s. That’s what they need to continue. If he doesn’t have a moment to rest, a moment to heal, a moment a moment a moment-

The last Naruto clone is fading into smoke and Sasuke charges. Shisui gets up from the ground, pushes himself painfully off the wall, and does the same. Izumi clambers to her feet, bites her lip, palms a kunai and dashes in as well.

It’s the three of them against The Man that destroyed them, and Sasuke grins.

It takes Shikamaru a minute to put together a viable strategy. A minute of Chouji distracting the other ninja by talking – his name is Kimimaro, apparently – a minute of growing tension in the air, a minute of holding his breath and hoping upon hopes that today is not going to be the day that they’re going to die.

“Neji,” he says, very quietly. Chouji is warm against him, but he’s breathing heavily – doing that was a lot. Holding that entire ceiling up was a lot, and Shikamaru doesn’t know how much help he’ll be in a fight.

…No. Chouji would always be helpful, in a real fight, but he’s a taijutsu fighter and this isn’t the kind of fight he can do well in. Not when Kimimaro is basically a spikeball. “Neji,” he says, very very quietly. “Take Chouji.”

Chouji doesn’t take his eyes off of Kimimaro. Shikamaru isn’t sure what it is about Chouji and locking eyes with crazies and maybe forging connections? But? It’s not like he can change his best friend. Chouji shifts, leans against Neji instead, and Shikamaru ignores the way that Kimimaro’s eyes flicker, evaluating. “Now. Tell Tenten where she can hit him, in just a sec.”
He glances at her – she nods, just fractionally, and Shikamaru’s shadow stretches out to snag Kimimaro.

“Now,” he says, holding fast, and Neji activates his Byakugan.

Shino did not anticipate his day going this way.

He did not expect to lose to Tenten, who was far more prepared to go hand to hand than he had thought. (She had prepared well.) He had not expected to publically throw his support behind Hinata (not that he minded it). None of this was in his plan for the day and. Yet.

Here he is, running through the trees from a raging glass demon that is normally another genin, normally a 12-year-old boy, and yet is roaring and striking down trees as they flee from their lives.

“Guys!” yells Kiba from another tree, bounding – Akamaru has shifted back to normal in the flight, sitting on top of his head and panting up a storm. “Should we just run the whole time? Are we gonna fight?”

That is certainly a possibility. It is the one that will cause the least amount of harm to Ino, should she still live – but at the same time, it may require stamina they do not possess. Shino is tired, weary. He does not think he can last for very long at such a pace, and yet he must force himself, unless they plan on staying and fighting.

Naruto frowns. “He’s gonna be able to go a long time,” he says.

And… Naruto would know. Why don’t you fight another demon, huh? Like me! he had said, and that means that Naruto is a demon.

Shino does not quite know where to even begin with that kind of idea, where to even begin to assess the logic of that statement and how the orange-covered loudmouth is possibly a demon.

Does that mean that Naruto can turn into a giant beast like this.

No. Contemplate that later.

“Can your friend really stop him from the inside?” Temari calls, from a little behind. She and her brother are not as fast – no doubt because they have not been raised in Konoha, where trees are abundant – and yet they are keeping pace rather admirably.

Kiba laughs. “Ino can make anyone do anything she wants!” he crows, shaking his head. “She’ll make your little brother stop being crazy in no time!”

Kankurou – for Shino recalls his name from when he had so easily beat the other ninja – looks very skeptical at this notion. “No offence, but your friend’s probably dead.”

Temari smacks his arm, but Shino takes this as his moment to speak up. “We lead him on a chase until we no longer can,” he says. “And then we fight. Why? To give Ino as much time as possible. The less harm we inflict upon her, the better that it is.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, landing next to him on a branch for a split second before they push off. He gives Shino a grin, his big blue eyes scrunched up with optimism, and Shino does not understand how he can be a demon, not in the slightest.
“Switch!” calls Kakashi, and he goes underground. It’s a split second of holding his breath, of rocketing through the mud and earth called up by their fights and then he’s emerging right inbetween Lord Hokage and the Shodai Hokage, lunging at Senju Hashirama and pulling him away from Sarutobi.

Enma lunges towards Minato-sensei, drawing him into the fight between them and Senju Tobirama, and it’s just Kakashi against the God of Shinobi himself.

Hashirama’s Wood Release misses, springing up from the rooftop below, the wooden tendrils failing to catch Kakashi, but Kakashi’s lightning misses as well, the Senju leaping out of the way before the shot connects and electrocutes him much like how Sakura had been before—

(The genin are fine. Fine. The shitshow that Kakashi vaguely witnessed below probably has nothing to do with them they are fine.)

Kakashi’s only saving grace is that this is not the real, alive Hashirama, but a mind-controlled undead one bent on fighting him. He’s not as powerful as he was in real life – or at least, Kakashi assumes he isn’t. Minato-sensei isn’t as powerful as he was when he was alive, so it stands to reason it is the same for the other two.

As it is, he barely manages to hold his own, but it’s so much easier than fighting Minato-sensei. Kakashi has no idea how Sarutobi is able to hold on.

A quick glance while dodging a strike from the Konoha Founder shows a grim image – he’s not. He’s very much at his wits end, and the terrifying fact is that Orochimaru is simply standing there watching with amusement.

Should the Sannin actually enter the fray, the both of them will be dead very shortly. The two cannot hold up against four.

But against three, maybe…

His resolve hardens.

In a fight for his life or not, Kakashi doesn’t want to summon his Pack. This is not their kind of fight, it truly isn’t, and if Kakashi has to die here he doesn’t want them dying alongside him. (He never wrote a will or anything, but Gai knows him well enough to know what Kakashi wants down with them, which student to give the contract to.) There are some techniques he doesn’t want to use.

(And Kakashi… does want to live. He truly does. He wants to scold his past self for ever thinking otherwise.)

His headband has been up. His Sharingan has been exposed for the world to see – it is the only reason that he is able to, right now, dodge the strike that Hashirama aims at his heart.

It brings the man close enough, and Kakashi exhales.

His eye shifts, twists, distorts – it’s a pinwheel now, he knows it is, and he can feel the sudden exhaustion drain at him. Now it’s not just him and Obito fighting, it’s Rin, too. Minato-sensei is nearby, and it’s like, for one brief instance that tugs at his dead heart, that Team Minato is back together once more.
“Kamui,” he whispers, so faint, just a breath of air that Orochimaru cannot hear, no matter how keen his hearing may be. And Hashirama twists, distorts, is yanked and spiraled and pulled by the miniature black hole Kakashi’s technique has created and then he’s-

Gone.

Chapter End Notes

you know. like, logically, the reason that kakashi didn't use the mangekyou in part one is probably because kishimoto hadn't decided he had it yet. but then we see in kakashi's backstory that he got it from rin.

when i used to read a lot of fanfiction when I was younger (i don't, anymore), i saw a lot of people write that away as him not knowing it EXISTED, or him not knowing how to USE it, and like-

fuck that lmao! Let's Have Some Fun Shall We. everyone figuring out strategies! fights coming together! CAN THEY GET OUT OF THIS WITH EVERYONE INTACT???

also rip sasuke's headspace. the fact that it was good for awhile was nice while it lasted. my poor boy.
my apologies on the delay!

For one split second, what might be fear or concern or some other emotion that signals worry over a possible defeat flits over Orochimaru’s face, and then Kakashi sways and falls to his knees and the traitor laughs. “So this is one of your prized secret techniques, is it, Kakashi?” he laughs, and he shakes his head. “How honored am I, to have witnessed it. I do look forward to tinkering with that eye of yours.”

As Kakashi deactivates his Mangekyou, tucks Rin away and lets her rest, those words are a chilling reminder of what happens if he loses here. Orochimaru will take him – there are no doubts about it. He will rip Obito from him and dig deep into Rin’s secrets and Kakashi is nothing without them, nothing without his team – either of his teams, his fallen one and the children that tug him in every direction nowadays. The thought shakes him to his core.

He forces himself back up to his feet, forces himself back up despite the chakra drain, and attempts to stagger over to where Sarutobi is managing to hold his own against two undead Hokages, but he cannot make it. Cannot take much more than a few steps before he lurches and falls again, landing on his hands and knees, and Orochimaru laughs.

Sarutobi is in front of him, now, so fast it’s like he teleported, Enma at his side, and now he’s defending Kakashi. Stopping the other Hokage from killing him, or maiming him, or whatever Orochimaru’s new order is.

Kakashi is a liability. He is dragging down his Hokage. The best thing would be to either get up and fight or to slit his own throat right here and now – not stay on the ground like a child, like he’s a genin who is facing his first C-ranked fight. (That had, incidentally, been Kakashi’s first kill.)

“Kakashi,” the Hokage says, and he spares one glance back at the jounin. “Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

Well.

That’s gotta be a hell of a plan to get them out of this mess.

Neji has to hand it to Nara – despite not making it to the final round of the Chunin Exams, the genin can make a good battle plan on the fly.

He holds Kimimaro in place with his shadow jutsu – whenever it fails, when he has to pull back and try again, or pull back and take another chakra pill (Neji is. Carefully not counting how many the other has taken because he doesn’t want to think about it), Akimichi is right there to brace himself against Kimimaro, hand to hand, shoving the other back and keeping him at bay. Neji had been surprised when the boy pulled away from him to lunge forward into the fight, but no matter how tired he is, no matter how much the sharp bones of Kimimaro’s arms dig into his own and make them
bleed, dripping blood all over the battlefield, Akimichi doesn’t stop.

Neji and Tenten are smoothly in sync, the result of long practice – he barks out coordinates on the body and she slides in senbon between protruding bones as though this were simply practice. His bones do not cover everything – his armor is penetrable.

It was what they were counting on.

His vision flickers briefly, dimming out for a moment into blackness, but Neji shoves past it, yelling the next coordinate, and Tenten’s senbon sinks into Kimimaro’s shoulder.

She’s hitting the tenketsu points that he’s pointing her to – she’s blocking off every single one of them.

Technically, it’s not something you need the Hyuuga Gentle Fist for, but none have the ability to see tenketsu without the Byakugan. Neji names the spot, Tenten hits it, and Kimimaro slows down at a steady pace, Akimichi and Nara more and more able to hold their own against him in their defensive positions.

His vision flickers again.

Kimimaro doesn’t seem threatened, though. Not at all. He doesn’t seem like he is concerned by this, not quite – there is a pinched look to his face that Neji thinks is frustration, but he doesn’t feel threatened. He doesn’t yet seem like he thinks he will lose.

That’s dangerous.

“Enough,” says Kimimaro, slowly. “This is pointless.”

Neji almost snaps right then and there. Fighting for their lives is pointless? Pulling out every tactic in the book from four exhausted genin to try to beat this monster of a ninja is pointless?

But then Kimimaro truly becomes a monster.

There’s a mark on his chest that Neji hadn’t taken real note of – there had been so many more important things to worry about than atrocious tattoo choices. But the mark turns red and strange black square-ish lines begin to spread out across body and Neji realizes it was a seal.

He throws Chouji back, and Neji barely manages to move fast enough to catch him, to slide back a few steps until he hits the wall with Chouji leaning against him – Kimimaro pulls out of Shikamaru’s shadow, and the lines warp even more.

They thicken until they cover his whole body, pale until he’s a dark grey, and his body warps. The senbons Tenten had so carefully littered him with go flowing, showering them in a wave of backward senbon and Neji ducks his head as his vision flickers again and when it’s done, all of them look up, yes, Kimimaro is truly, truly a monster.

He has a tail, bones sprouting from it, hands enlarged and warped into claws, like some terrifying ancient creature from stories children hear at bedtime, and he lunges forward, pinning Neji against the wall by his throat.

“You’re nothing,” he says, and Neji’s vision goes completely black.

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Kankurou knows it was bound to happen.
There’s only so much you can run from a terrifying Gaara!demon, only so far you can go when that thing is on your tails, and Kankurou knew it wouldn’t last. He knew one of them was gonna get caught and likely crushed into powder.

He’s already decided that if it’s one of the Konoha genin, he’s not gonna save them. He’s not risking himself to save them, no way, even if they’ve decided to trust them for the time being.

Kankurou could care less about the invasion and sticking to that – sorry, Baki! – but he definitely cares about keeping himself alive and decidedly unmurdered by his batshit insane nut of a brother, thank you very much.

Unfortunately for him and fortunately for them, Konohans grew up in trees. Senju bullshit and all that. So all three of them are ahead of Kankurou and his sister, even the demon kid (and uh holy shit) who had gotten his ass beat earlier though Kankurou guesses that. Makes sense. Because. Demon.

Hahahaha fuck his whole life, really.

The three leap from branch to branch with ease and Kankurou and Temari scramble to keep up, scramble to stay with them as they run through the forest. They came prepared, of course, to deal with Konoha’s forests and stuff, but two months of preparation don’t do anything in comparison to a lifetime. They struggle.

Kankurou is rested, though, or moreso than his sister – that bug boy had beat him in the preliminaries, and so Kankurou hadn’t had to fight recently. Aside from duking it out with the genin that are now on his side, he’s had a pretty easy time of it.

Temari, though… she had fought that fashion disaster of a speed ninja and gotten literally smashed into the ground. He doesn’t think of it at first, because she’s his older sister and she’s always one step ahead of him, always doing alright, until suddenly he realizes she’s not next to him and he turns and-

She’s fallen behind. Step by step by step. And maybe she was too proud to say anything or maybe she didn’t even notice because she was so focused on one step after the other and maybe she simply didn’t have the air to say it- No matter the reason, she’s fallen behind, and Kankurou pales sharply underneath his makeup.

“Temari!” he screams, and she lands and looks up just in time for the demon to smash her against the tree trunk with one hand.

Kankurou’s moving before he’s even consciously thought about it.

Karasu is off his back and lunging forward to shoot smoke bombs at the Ichibi’s eyes in an attempt to blind the beast, an army of demon kid clones right beside it. It works, at least a little – the beast howls and takes a step back and pulls away from Temari and it’s enough for Kankurou to leap forward and catch her as she slumps.

“Temari,” he says, and she’s so terrifyingly still in his arms that he thinks, for a split second, that he’s lost her, that he’s lost his older sister and he can feel his whole world crumbling away, and then she coughs and opens her eyes.

“I’m fine,” she says, sitting up and looking at his face and then to his opposite arm, which is currently controlling Karasu and not letting him get smashed by the demon as it swipes at it and the clones.

“Looks like we’re fighting now, huh?” says dog boy as he lands on the branch next to them, face grim.
Temari pushes herself to her feet, pulling her fan off her back and using it as support, and nods. “Yeah. Time to take down our baby brother.”

Karin has never been more terrified in her entire life.

And that’s saying something! Because up until recently, Karin’s life was nothing but terror and pain (okay, mostly terror and pain) but now that she’s gotten a taste of freedom, a taste of being something other than a healing machine, she’s so scared to go back.

He might have been riling up, but he knows that if Kabuto has the chance to nab her, he will. He might have been kidding, but if Kabuto gets the chance to take Hinata, he will.

She’s already been bitten twice today, and she feels light headed. A little dizzy. She could probably get bitten more and more and more, until her vision goes black and hopefully people stop biting her, but she doesn’t want that to happen. No. No thank you.

Still, when Sasuke lunges at Kabuto with his sword and Hinata dives right in, Karin clutches a kunai and does her best.

Sasuke is practiced with the sword – it’s clear that this is what he spent the last month working on. He hadn’t breathed a single word of his practices to any of his teammates (which. Does Karin count as one of those?) but he’s good. Not like… masterful, good, but he’s got a good solid grasp and he clashes sword against kunai with Kabuto, slashing back and forth but getting nowhere.

Kabuto holds his own against Sasuke, and he holds his own against Hinata. He dodges every single blow from the Hyuuga, dodges every single flat palm that tries to block off his chakra. He holds his own against the two famed dojutsu of Konoha, against two genin trying oh so hard to kill him, and Karin-

Karin is the only opportunity they have to change the flow of the fight.

She doesn’t really know taijutsu – just dodging. She can’t really throw straight. She doesn’t know any genjutsu, and her ninjutsu is nonexistent. Karin has nothing.

But she has a kunai in her hand and a body that she can throw forward at her opponent, and so she does.

There’s no plan behind it, no nothing, just a kunai clutched in both hands that she swings at him, the third body in the mix and hopefully the one to throw him off balance. He can hold his own against two, but three…? He catches her kunai with his own and she meets his gaze levelly, trying her best to seem unafraid, but he just smirks.

And then he grabs her wrist, yanks her forward, and bites her hand.

Karin cries out, the rush of chakra and the pain unexpected, and he shoves her backwards into Hinata, sending the two of them tumbling backwards into the ground.

He catches Sasuke as the boy lunges forward, grabbing his wrist with one hand and with his other, too fast for Karin to fully see, he palms something from a pouch on his waist and jams it into Sasuke’s neck.

The boy goes slack, and Kabuto catches him and throws him easily over his shoulder, like he’s a sack of potatoes and not one of Karin’s very few friends.
“What did you do to him!?” she yells, scrambling to her feet, Hinata beside her, but she doesn’t lunge forward to attack. Neither do – he has Sasuke, and if he so wants to, he can kill him in an instant before they get there.

(Kabuto doesn’t want to – Karin knows this. But she also really, really won’t put it past him.)

“What did you do to him!?” she yells, scrambling to her feet, Hinata beside her, but she doesn’t lunge forward to attack. Neither do – he has Sasuke, and if he so wants to, he can kill him in an instant before they get there.

(Kabuto doesn’t want to – Karin knows this. But she also really, really won’t put it past him.)

“Just a mild paralytic,” Kabuto says, and he smiles. “He’ll be fine.”

Hinata takes this as her opportunity to lunge forward, but Kabuto is ready. He’s ready to neatly dodge her strikes, even as she tries to grab anything of Sasuke to pull him away, and he’s ready to, as she does so, cut a long slice open along her leg and send her crumbling to the ground.

He smiles, a terrifying smile, and then he starts to run away.

Karin has a single, heart-stopping choice. Hinata, bleeding out on the ground, or Sasuke, slung over Kabuto’s shoulder. She inhales, exhales, closes her eyes for one split second and counts to ten in a rush, and goes to kneel next to Hinata, offering up her hand to bite for the fourth time this day.

She can’t fight. She just… she can’t. She can only heal.

*I’m sorry, Sasuke.*

Chapter End Notes

i’m literally not sorry about any of this. but i am deeply looking forward to reactions.

(also, i was rewatching the gaara v kimimaro fight for the curse seal transformation and oh my god curse seal!kimimaro looks like a fucking dinosaur im screaming)
Tenten lunges forward without even thinking. There’s distance between them but she covers it as fast as Lee without her weights, bodily slamming into Kimimaro with all the force of her thirteen-year-old self.

It’s not cool. It’s not dramatic. She doesn’t send him flying or anything, and instead ends up with his bones digging into her side and she cries out and stumbles back a few steps—

But it makes him drop Neji.

Neji is dropped unceremoniously to the ground, like a rag doll, and Tenten spares just a second to glance over at him – he’s wheezing for air, gasping for it, bruises the shape of the monstrous hands forming on his throat, but he’s alive.

Kimimaro turns on her, and Tenten narrows her eyes, clutches at her bleeding side with one hand and can’t bring herself to regret it. “Why did you do that?” he asks softly, his voice so formal, perhaps even could be called polite, despite their fight to the death.

Tenten isn’t sure what he’s asking, exactly. Why she chose that line of attack? Why she moved without thinking? Nara and Akimichi draw themselves up behind her – no, Shikamaru and Chouji, you can’t fight for your lives and not get first name basis – even through their exhaustion, and Tenten stands firm.

“Because he’s my friend, and I won’t let you hurt him,” she says.

His eyes widen in surprise, and it’s an opening that someone takes.

It’s like the wall comes alive – stone hands emit from it in a rush, grabbing Kimimaro and hauling him up against it, pinned, trapped, hands around every part of his body and holding him still. His terrifying eyes nearabout roll back in their sockets as he struggles, and a familiar but non-placeable voice yells “Run!”

They do.

Tenten hauls Neji up and slings him over her shoulders in a Jounin’s Carry, and bolts as fast as she can, ignoring the blood that soaks her pink shirt – Chouji and Shikamaru huff and puff but they run with her, right next to her, because they too see the freedom.

It’s Asuma-sensei.

Tenten hasn’t ever had a single emotion about Sarutobi Asuma, but she like, vows to start a fanclub for him as soon as this is all over with. Or something. He’s Lady Tsunade level at least for this split second.
All three of them (plus Neji) run their hearts out until they’re behind Asuma, and they skid to a stop. He flashes them a smile. “You did good,” he says. “But we’ve got it from here.”

She’s more than willing to take that as the sign to collapse behind the jounin, and the other genin do the same. Neji lays on his back for a moment before sitting up, and Tenten is torn between watching Asuma-sensei blow what looks like… ash? at Kimimaro and checking on Neji.

She checks on her teammate.

“I can’t see, Tenten,” he tells her bluntly as she rests a gentle hand on his shoulder. There’s an underlying hysteria to his voice that she can tell he’s trying to swallow down, and Tenten moves to hold his hand instead of his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze and he swallows sharply and leans into her.

“Okay. Uh. Okay.” Panic later. It’s probably an exhaustion thing because nobody attacked Neji’s eyes at any point. Don’t panic! Just talk. “Asuma-sensei is here. Kimimaro is being held to the wall by a bunch of stone hands and Asuma-sensei is blowing ash on him, it’s all in the air surrounding him, you can barely see Kimimaro…”

And then Asuma does something with his teeth and all the ash explodes in a rush of heat so intense it feels as though all her exposed skin is getting a sunburn.

Holy shit, Tenten wants to learn that.

Fighting with Lady Hanabi and Ko is like fighting with a strange version of Neji – a not-Neji. Lady Hanabi clings to Lee’s back and tells him where he should strike, and even if he nearly stumbles and falls the first time she yells directly into his ear, the Hyuuga is very clever, very intelligent, and following her commands leads Lee’s strikes true.

Ko is at his back, protecting Lady Hanabi from anyone who may attempt to take her, and though he is very clearly exhausted, he fights. He strikes out and he knocks opponents out and the three of them-

They win.

It is a glorious battle! If not a very difficult one.

“Ko!” cries Hanabi, and she launches herself off of Lee’s back towards the teenager, who catches her and wraps her in his arms. It is a Tender Moment, a Beautiful Moment, and Lee can truly see the care between the two of them, see how they must love each other. He does not know how Ko is related to Hanabi, barring that he is not of the branch house, but they truly seem to be a family.

Lee smiles softly, and Ko turns to him. “Thank you,” he says. “You are on Neji’s team, right?”

“Yosh!” The genin jerks his head in a sharp nod. “I am Rock Lee! Lady Hanabi seemed Very Distressed and so I let her lead me here! I am glad you are unharmed!”

Something in his words makes Ko smile at him, the taller and older teenager reaching out to place a hand on Lee’s head and Lee feels heat rise to his cheeks. “I would not have survived without your help,” he says, and Lee knows this to be true – for though the opponents were nothing to the three of them, to Ko alone, they would have been his death.

“Since they are after Lady Hanabi, may I request to accompany you to safety? I do not wish for her to be taken!”
Ko looks surprised, but Hanabi smiles at Lee, reaching out, and he obligingly takes her and balances her on his hip once more. It’s easier this time. “Yes,” she says, nodding very primly. “I want you to come with.” She glances at Ko. “He can, right, Ko?”

He shrugs very lightly and smiles. “I do not see why not, my lady. Come, let us leave this place before more come.”

“I want Lee to carry me,” Hanabi says, very firm. “He is very fast!”

Lee laughs. “We can go as fast as you want, my lady! Or I will walk around Konoha 200 times on my hands!”

She stares at him for a moment, before turning to Ko, sparkles in her eyes. “Ko! Can I-“

“No.”

It’s something known to very, very few that Anko likes kids.

Every year, like clockwork, Anko submits the paperwork to become a jounin-sensei – and every year, like clockwork, she’s rejected. Other special jounin become teachers – she knows it’s not because of that.

No, it’s because of who she is. When people think of her, they still think of her teacher. They still think of murdered children, of experiments that warped people beyond imagination, of a cruel man that left his village behind – it doesn’t matter that she was a failed experiment, as well, that he had abandoned her, none of that.

“Who is to say that you wouldn’t have willingly gone with him, if you had been a success?” A councilwoman had said once, and the fact that Anko promptly broke her nose hadn’t really helped her image much.

So Anko submits the paperwork, every single year, and every single year, Lord Hokage shakes his head and she goes back to T&I emptyhanded.

It’s okay. It’s. It’s fine.

So when Anko sees all these kids, all these genin, fighting for their lives, she does her best to keep an eye on them. Even when she’s backflipping away from an attack from this old desert fox, Baki, she makes sure that no one has snuck up on Pinky and Ino (she actually knows Inoichi’s kid pretty damn well). Even when she summons a batch of snakes that try to nip at Baki’s ankles, she watches the sand genin and three Konoha genin lure away the Ichibi container.

Even when a kunai scores her cheek in the same way that she had fucked with a genin during the second exam, she sees Kabuto-chan (he had been Kabuto-chan to her) sling Sasuke over his shoulder and runs.

Well, that decides that.

“Sorry about this,” Anko announces with forced cheer, and then she slips underneath his arm and slaps a tag on Baki’s forehead – his eyes roll back in his skull and he collapses to the ground.

She doesn’t like using those tags. They only work about a quarter of the time, they’re an Orochimaru invention (that take FOREVER to make), and they can often cause brain damage – not handy for when T&I needs people to interrogate and extract information from.
But right now, she has a kid to save.

Anko turns on a dime and bolts towards where the genin had been fighting against Kabuto. She stops for half a second to look at the two girls who stare at her with wide eyes and goes “Don’t worry, I’ve got him,” and then she’s continuing on, bolting after Kabuto.

He knows she’s behind her, Anko can tell – but he’s not trying to lose her, and that concerns her, very much.

Corner after corner they turn, bolting past a few scattered fighting shinobi, but not too many… for Kabuto is leading her deliberately, leading her to where it will just be the two of them and the Uchiha boy.

That’s fine. Anko’s alright with that.

To a civilian, or someone without a brain, it seems like Kabuto’s hit a dead end as he rounds the corner. He stops, and then turns around, letting Sasuke slip off his back and lean against the wall – oh, the kid isn’t unconscious, just paralyzed, his non-Sharingan eyes wide with fear as they flicker between the two of them.

“Anko-sensei,” Kabuto greets with a smile, and the hair on the back of Anko’s neck goes up.

She had thought that was a sincere smile, once. Just two days ago, she had thought that was a sincere smile, when he came to her apartment and nagged at her that Reo-sensei missed her, why didn’t she spend more time with them? And she had put him in a headlock until he whined at her and then she went with him to see Reo and his teammates and they had all eaten dango.

Yoroi. Misumi. Reo. Are they all traitors as well? Does she need to start looking into Hoheto and his team?

Is everyone she knows and holds close to her heart going to betray her?

“Kabuto,” she says, and there’s no endearment in her voice. “I never thought you…” Her voice chokes up, and she can’t help it. He’s only five years younger than her, the student of her teammate, and Anko genuinely cared about him – does. Still care about him.

“Give him back,” she says, and she manages to keep talking. “And maybe we can forget like none of this ever happened.”

His smile grows. “You don’t really think that, do you, Anko-sensei? Do you really think they could forgive me so easily? Look at how Konoha has treated you.”

Anko knows, deep in her bones, that even if it turned out Kabuto had been manipulated, had been brainwashed, had been… anything like that, Konoha would never forgive him. Ever. It hasn’t forgiven her, and she had been but a child when Orochimaru left, younger than the Uchiha boy that watches them with such wide eyes.

“No,” she answers honestly. “I don’t. But I don’t want to fight you, Kabuto. I don’t want to kill you.” She shakes her head, furrows her brow.

She’s vulnerable. Too vulnerable. Far, far too vulnerable, every inch of her exposed for him to see, but it’s not as though he doesn’t know. He’s seen her get too drunk for words to forget, he’s seen her cry into Reo and him cry into her and Hoheto to hold them both, he’s helped her up and he’s told her that he’s more than her past and-
He’s been the closest thing that Anko has had to a little brother.

Anko swallows. Meets his eyes. And then boxes that part up, shoves it deep away. Their past relationship doesn’t matter. Not the way that he laughed at Yoroi’s occasional bouts of idiocy, or how he lapped up her senbon teaching or the way that he would ambush her and drag her into socializing along with Misumi whenever it had been too long, when she was in depression mode and shut the world away.

None of that matters.

Put it away.

Right now, he’s the enemy and he has kidnapped a Konoha citizen, and Anko must get him back. She doesn’t say a single word more, and lunges forward.

Chapter End Notes

fascinatingly enough, the fact that kabuto’s teacher is anko’s old genin teammate is actually 100% canon! which, hello, @ kishimoto why didn’t you do anything with that. ever.

also im sorry i had to laugh at how everyone just gave up on sasuke like. fucking immediately. y’all are so funny. FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ASKED ABOUT THE ADULTS: CONGRATS. YOU WERE RIGHT. THE CAVALRY IS HERE.

but it’s not over just yet.

also quietly adds anko to the character list
“We must be careful in our attacks. Why? Because we do not wish to hurt Ino,” says Shino, and that’s the exact thought that makes Kiba hang back.

The puppeteer that smells of poison and other things that make Kiba’s nose twitch might be dismissive of Ino’s chances, might be dismissive of the fact that she’s still alive and kicking, but he doesn’t attack head on. He hangs back, his puppet guided by the twitches of his fingers and attracting the fucked up glass demon’s attention, dodging blows and creating a distraction.

Naruto’s clones, too, are an easy way to fight without really fighting – they poof so easily, and it seems like Naruto can make so many of them! Which would be crazy, would be really strange cause it’s Naruto-

But Kiba’s always known about Naruto.

He glances over at the blonde, who is deep in thought about something. Akamaru can always tell people’s chakra levels, always has and always will be able to, and so Kiba’s known that Naruto’s basically made of chakra since like, day one. And scary chakra, too! Which again, Naruto – weird.

The demon thing makes it all make sense, so cool, Kiba’s glad to have that mystery he never really cared about solved.

Shino buzzes next to Kiba, but he can’t really do anything here, either. It’s not like he can drain a demon of chakra, and Kiba doesn’t think his teammate has any bugs that eat glass. (Which would be like, way cool though.) And Kiba doesn’t really want to get in there with Akamaru and either fuck the demon up (which means fucking INO up) or get, you know, get fucked up themselves.

Temari – who reminds Kiba of Hana, which makes sense – swings her fan and the gust of air sends the glass demon stumbling back into a few trees, and Kiba wonders if Ino feels that. The puppet’s stomach sword chips some glass off of the demon’s cheek, and Kiba wonders if that’s gonna leave a mark.

“Guys,” says Naruto, and he looks serious. “I’m gonna summon a toad to fight Gaara.”

Shino and Kiba exchange looks of alarm, both on the same team wavelength. “Dude,” Kiba says. “We don’t wanna hurt him. Would your toad hurt him?”

Kiba has absolutely no idea how dangerous toads are.

Naruto contemplates it, really thinks, and Shino shakes his head. “No. Why? Because if you have to think about it, it will be too dangerous.”

“Just do some demon stuff or something,” Kiba says, and they both look at him. Shino expressionless but definitely conveying the typical emotion of what the hell Kiba and Naruto wide-eyed and kinda vulnerable in a way that makes Kiba really uncomfortable. “You know. I dunno what demon stuff you can do, but since you’re a demon or whatever, if you can do that stuff and fight and not hurt Ino, I say do it.”

Shino nods, sharply. “Yes. My bugs are not going to assist much against him, and I am…”

Konoha Crush: Part Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
uncomfortable engaging with taijutsu with the demon.” Which is totally Shino talk for how on earth do you use your fists against a glass demon, which is fair but also really funny, and Kiba snickers.

Naruto’s still got that uncomfortable vulnerable look, and there might genuinely be tears glistening in his eyes which makes Akamaru whimper a little because oh boy. “You-

“Konohans!” the puppeteer yells back with a glare, and oh, all of Naruto’s clones popped. “Are you gonna do something or just stand around and talk?”

Naruto’s face hardens into resolve. “Yeah,” he says, and his hands form a familiar sign. “Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu!” he roars.

There’s smoke, so much smoke, like a fire is right in his face, and Kiba coughs and covers his nose to try to block it out, but it’s pointless – it doesn’t linger. It was just a technique, and it fades quickly to show-

Naruto. Just. Naruto. Every single visible inch of space is occupied by a Naruto, by hundreds of them, and the sand genin’s jaws drop in astonishment and even the glass demon stills, surprised. “Let’s go!” the original Naruto yells, and with a roar, they rush the demon.

She’s so tired, so achingly tired, and it feels like one moment she’s closing her eyes for just a second and the next, Karin is kneeling in front of her, pressing the back of her hand to Sakura’s forehead. Sakura blinks, confused, and a tiny smile appears on the redhead’s face. “You’re awake,” she says. “Thank goodness.”

Hinata is behind her, and it’s clear the other girl is exhausted – in fact, neither of them look well. Sakura’s brow furrows. “What happened to you?”

They glance at each other, and then Hinata sits very carefully, crosslegged, and Karin glances away. “Kabuto. We… we fought Kabuto.”

Her tiredness evaporates in a single instance, and Sakura sits up straight, pulling her hand from Ino’s and ignoring the spring of tears to her eyes at the movement. “Sasuke! Where’s Sasuke?”

Neither of the girls look her in the eye, and her heart drops. No, no, please, no… “Where’s Sasuke!”

“Kabuto took him,” Hinata whispers, oh so softly, and Sakura feels like she’s gonna throw up, like she’s going to bend over and weep and lose her breakfast all at the same time, but Karin speaks.

“That proctor’s getting him, Sakura,” she says, and she says it with such fierce determination that Sakura’s breath catches in her throat, meeting the other girl’s red eyes head on. She has no idea whether Karin believes her own words, but even if she doesn’t, she seems determined to make Sakura believe them. “The one from the second exam. She went after him.”

Anko. Mitarashi Anko.

First, she saved Sakura from death at the hands of the sand jounin – now, she’s saving Sasuke, and Sakura feels a rush of gratitude that’s so, so overwhelming. She needs to get her like, a gift basket or something like that when this is all over with. “Okay,” she says. “Okay.”

There’s nothing she can do right now, god, Sakura doesn’t even know if she can stand up, so she needs to believe that Anko will bring Sasuke back to her, safe and sound. Naruto is fine. She trusts Naruto to be fine, she needs to. Kakashi-sensei… well, he’s Kakashi-sensei. He’ll be fine. She
knows he must be, because the idea of anything else happening to her crazy, enigmatic teacher is so strange.

So that just leaves…

Sakura glances to her side, to where her best friend is slumped against the wall, still terrifyingly unconscious. There’s a cut on her cheek, now, a drop of blood dripping down her cheek, and it frightens her.

*Kakashi-sensei, Naruto, please stay safe.* Sakura thinks, as Hinata and Karin settle down to lean against the wall next to her, all three girls exhausted beyond belief. *Sasuke, Ino…*

*Please come back to me.*

She reaches out gently, towards the small Gaara. “It’ll be okay,” she says, because he’s not doing nothing more but crying, and as soon as Ino touches his shoulder, he crumples into nothing.

Ino can do nothing more but blink for a moment, staring in surprise, before she’s aware of someone else nearby and she scrambles to her feet, whirling around.

It’s Gaara – except this is the Gaara that she knows, the one that’s her age and absolutely terrifying, and he levels her with a look that makes her skin crawl. It’s like… she’s a puzzle, maybe, but one that he’s willing to rip to shreds to understand, and Ino really really doesn’t wanna die here.

“Gaara,” she says, managing to keep her voice neutral, and he continues to watch her.

…And then, after a moment, he speaks. “It’ll be okay,” he says, and his voice isn’t comforting. It’s flat, but there’s a hint of… something behind the words that make Ino feel very, very wary. “Why did you say that?”

Ino needs to choose her words very carefully. Or at least, maybe she should, but-

The mind? This is her playing field.

“Because I wanted to make you feel better,” she says, and she’s honest. “You were crying and I didn’t know why, and I wanted to make you feel better.”

There’s a crack in the mask he’s wearing, something simmering below the surface, behind even the terrifying look in his eyes. Ino barely gets a chance to analyze it, though, because Gaara is rushing at her, faster than she’s seen him move so far but-

He doesn’t have his sand, doesn’t have anything like that, and so he physically *throws* himself at Ino, and for a minute, they’re two genin tussling with each other on top of the water, rolling around like they’re two kids roughhousing and not two genin who don’t really know taijutsu to save their lives.

Gaara gets on top for a split second, and it’s all he needs to wrap his hands around her neck and squeeze and *Ino can’t breathe*. She’s struggling for air, trying to gasp, chakra control flickering as she falls into the water and that means she can’t breathe all the more and she grasps for something, anything, and her hand wraps around Gaara’s wrist-

He lets go of her like she’s burned him and she *kicks* him off and pushes up into fresh air, sucking it in as she tries to breathe before Gaara comes at her again.

But he doesn’t.
And when Ino finally feels like she’s not going to die, has enough air in her, and looks up, Gaara’s staring at his wrist where she touched him, wide-eyed. It’s the least terrifying expression he’s worn thus far, and Ino’s ready to capitalize on that. “Gaara?” she says, and he snaps his eyes up to meet hers.

He looks like a caged animal.

A caged animal, one who is trapped and yet- yet-

Ino, suddenly, knows what she needs to do.

She hadn’t planned for this, when she used her jutsu. Hadn’t planned on coming into his head and talking with this boy, with this terrifying, yet lost boy, and she hadn’t prepared anything.

She’s my friend, and I won’t let you hurt her, had been her one coherent thought.

And now, she stares at this boy, and thinks I don’t want anyone to hurt you, either.

Ino knows the signs of abuse. She does. She’s seen them in classmates, and reported them to her father, and she’s seen them around Konoha – it’s important, to recognize the symptoms of abuse from the symptoms of the trauma that go with shinobi life. Sometimes, that’s something that T&I need to exploit – other times, it’s something that T&I need to deal with.

She knows trauma, she knows abuse, and she… she knows…

Gaara, from the little she’s seen, wears his sand like a covering. She had seen it crack when Sakura had attacked, had seen how he had been wearing it, and for him to react like this to her touching him…

In a place where he has no sand…

They’re within reach of each other, and so Ino sits on top of the water. Folds her legs once more, and keeping eye contact with Gaara, holds out her hand. Palm out, fingers splayed.

She waits. Ino has all the time in the world – she knows of no way out of here, and she doesn’t have anything else she can be doing.

So she waits while slowly, slowly Gaara uncurls and slowly, slowly – presses his hand against her own.

Chapter End Notes

she's finally here!!!!!!!!

IM SORRY FOR MAKING YOU WAIT SO LONG FOR INO BUT LIKE. I WANTED THIS AT THE END. if all goes well, there are only three chapters left in the konoha crush arc!!!!
Ino isn’t sure how long the two of them sit there, palm to palm, staring across at each other. Gaara seems content to be quiet, and Ino isn’t certain how to phrase her question. How do you just… ask something like this? Especially when talking to someone who isn’t on the same wavelength at all.

In the end, she just goes for it. “Gaara,” she says. “What’s wrong?”

And the sudden rush of memories is overwhelming.

She’s alone. She’s alone, completely alone – no matter what she does, no one wants to play with her. Touch her. Look at her. Father stops Kankurou and Temari from playing with her and the next time she sees them, they’re so scared of her and she wonders what he told them, what was said to make them so afraid-

Yashamaru is the only one who speaks to her kindly, is the only one who doesn’t hurt her, and an unfamiliar feeling – love, Gaara, that’s love – swells up in her chest every time he speaks to her, spends time with her, and she wants to give Yashamaru the whole world. Anything she can. She’ll be the Best Child Ever, just for him.

And then Yashamaru tries to kill her and she’s so, so alone again, and she hurts.

It’s her and Mother and they won’t hurt anymore. No. She’ll hurt others, she’ll love herself, and it’s all she needs – that’s all that’s necessary, right? She feels the burble of Mother’s agreement in the back of her mind, the bloodlust and the urge to kill and she listens.

She kills the people who try to kill her, and sometimes she kills even more than that. If she didn’t kill, no one would know she was here. They don’t talk to her. They don’t see her. She drifts through the streets every night, all alone, and curls up in her room during the day, all alone.

Father makes her train with Temari and Kankurou and Baki, but they’re scared. So, so scared, but they at least see her. Talk to her. Even if they’re scared, they do that, and it’s the only reason that she doesn’t kill them.

And then she stands across the battlefield and it’s Chouji, eyeing her down and He’s my friend, and I won’t let you hurt him. And she’s in the hospital, facing Chouji and herself and They’re my friend, and I won’t let you hurt them.

And then it’s her against Sakura and she screams because she hurts, she hurts so much and she can’t remember the last time she’s hurt like this and-

No one stops her from being hurt, and she just wants to hurt everyone else, too.

And then it’s Ino and Gaara sitting on the water in the depths of Gaara’s mind, and Ino pulls her hand back and starts to weep.

“Why are you crying?” Gaara asks, pulling his hand back to himself, and Ino shakes her head because she doesn’t think she has words, doesn’t know how to communicate, to make sounds shape into coherency off of her tongue. “Why are you crying?” he asks again, more insistent.
“Because- Because-“ She hiccups, wiping at the tears that won’t stop coming, and looks up at him through her blurred vision. “I’m sorry, Gaara.”

His face grows blank. “Sorry?”

“You hurt so much… I’m sorry,” she sniffs, wipes her eyes. “No one was there, and I’m sorry.” He stares at her, uncomprehending. Ino doesn’t understand, not at all. How no one was there. How everyone just… ignored him. She wouldn’t have if she was there. She would have reached out, she—

Or maybe she wouldn’t have.

Because she remembers a little boy in her class that adults would murmur about, who truly had no one, and even though that little boy is now a genin…

No, Ino realizes with shame, she wouldn’t have been any better than the people who ignored Gaara.

He stares at her like she’s a puzzle, like she’s something strange he doesn’t know how to react to, how to decipher at all, but there’s a glint of something behind his gaze that makes her hopeful. “Why?” he croaks.

What does Gaara think about caring, Ino has to think. Love – Yashamaru had said that he loved him, and Yashamaru had taken care of him, but given the volatile emotions Ino had felt around that that was probably not the best mine to stumble into. (Also, she doesn’t really want to lie and say that she loves Gaara.) Or there’s the impressions that her team has given him – They’re my friend, and I won’t let you hurt them.

But Gaara isn’t her friend, and Ino wants to be honest.

“Because you’re a person, and I don’t think people should be hurt like that,” she admits. “It’s one thing if you’re hurt fighting… that happens. And sometimes, people hurt others. Sometimes it’s on accident, and sometimes you’re angry and it’s on purpose. But…”

She studies the water in front of her, but forces herself to look up and meet his gaze. “When you get hurt, you should have someone who cares. Someone who holds you or bandages your wounds or helps, however they can.” The image of tenderly putting a bandaid on Yashamaru’s finger flits through.

“I’m sorry you didn’t have anyone like that. That you don’t.”

Ino scoots forward, and very carefully reaches out to offer her hand. Not like before – but to hold hands. He stares at her hand as though it’s both poison and an antidote, all at once. “Do you want to try being friends, Gaara?”

She doesn’t know if it’s this simple. None of this – none of this is therapy, none of it will help Gaara with the myriad issues that he clearly needs to work through, but that’s not what Ino’s trying to do.

Sometimes, you just need a single hand to pull yourself back from the brink. Ino’s seen it before. There’s no such thing as healing from trauma, not really, not here, but you can cope.

But you can’t cope alone.

He stares at her hand for a moment longer, and then at her, and Ino can tell that he doesn’t understand, not really. He doesn’t grasp that caring should be such a simple thing, that she does genuinely want to help, any of that. No. And that’s okay.
Because he reaches forward and takes her hand anyway. “Okay,” he whispers.

The glass demon stills. Temari realizes immediately and stops. “Stop!” she yell as well, and Kankurou ceases the dancing of his puppet and the demon boy’s clones come crashing to a halt on various branches, a few missing or just unable to stop themselves in time and poofing out.

There’s so many of them, even after the amount that has crashed upon Gaara’s glass and destroyed themselves, that it doesn’t really matter.

The demon that is Gaara is still, and Temari holds her breath. One by one, the Konoha boys land lightly on her branch, and the bug boy with the glasses glances at her. “You have asked us to stop. Why? Because you believe your brother is in control.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know, but…”

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Maybe that Konoha girl wasn’t suicidal after all, maybe she didn’t get eaten by Shukaku or killed by her brother, maybe she was able to do something and maybe she just plain gave up and left and Gaara’s battling Shukaku for dominance right now.

Temari has no idea, but she doesn’t want to hurt him if he’s trying to win.

Slowly, glass begins to flake off, crashing to the ground around them – slowly, and then all at once, until it’s a cascade of glass falling to the ground and Temari can see her brother in that mix, see him falling among the glass as the demon splits into nothingness, and she doesn’t even think. Doesn’t even breathe.

Temari pushes off the branch. She doesn’t care about the glass shards that rain down, the way they cut her arms and her clothes and her legs, doesn’t care about the fact that she has to leave her fan behind and the fact that this might be incredibly suicidal.

She moves, and she catches Gaara, safely cradled in her arms, and she lands on the ground with a jolt.

It was a long jump, to get her out of the way of the glass, and her legs collapse underneath her the moment she lands but Kankuro is right there, suit cut up and blood running down his cheek but he doesn’t care, letting Temari lean against him as she holds Gaara.

Gaara opens his eyes, and he stares at the both of them. “Temari… Kankuro…” His gaze shifts to her, specifically. “Why are you crying?”

Oh. She hadn’t realized she was crying, but she is, tears welling up in her eyes and sliding down her cheeks and she shakes her head. “You’re my baby brother,” she says, and she doesn’t care how mad he might get at that, or whatever reaction there might be. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

His eyes shift over to Kankurou, and her brother nods. “Yeah,” he says, and something feels… there’s a weight to this scene, and she’s glad the Konohans are staying back.

“You would…” His voice rasps, rasps so awfully. “You would care if I got hurt?”

Hearing that is so sad, so fucking sad, and Kankurou turns slightly to rub at his eyes and what did that girl say to Gaara, but really… it doesn’t matter what was said, when has Gaara talked to anyone?

“Yes,” Temari says, and she means every word. “We would care if you got hurt, Gaara.”
“Oh,” he says, and then he joins his siblings in tears.

Ino stirs with a groan, and immediately, there’s a clash of familiar voices that washes over her as she struggles to open her eyes. Her body stings from a few cuts – and feels like it’s been run over by a train. Her head pounds, and the light makes it even worse as she squints.

It’s Hinata, Karin, and Sakura, all right there, and Ino relaxes.

Their voices echo over each other, too many people talking at once, but she can figure out the gist of what they’re asking by piecing together the fragments.

Ino, are you okay?

She pushes herself up so she’s sitting upright, and casts her gaze over the others. Karin looks exhausted. Hinata looks like she’s been through the ringer. Sakura’s eyes are puffy, like she’s been doing some major crying, and she looks just as shit as she had been when Ino left her.

“I’m okay,” she says, as if she hadn’t just done the scariest thing in the entire world. She looks down at her hands, remembers the touch of palm against palm, fingers against fingers, and she shakes.

“I’m… I’m okay,” she says, and tears are welling up in her eyes and Hinata’s hand is on her shoulder and Karin’s hand is on her knee and Sakura leans into her side and Ino buries her face in her hands and hiccups. She had thought she had exhausted her tears, with Gaara – but she supposes those had been fake tears, imaginary ones, not real ones that her body is making.

“I was so scared,” she admits, and she sniffs and weeps into the warmth of her friends.

Chapter End Notes

part of me is like ‘this is too easy’ but naruto basically punched gaara into submission and went GUESS WHAT I RELATE so like. talking out shit also works.

anyway thank you all so much for all of your comments!!!!! i read and love every single one of them, im so glad you like this lil story of mine. who woulda thought we’d end up here, huh. we've reached 75k, holy shit!

as always, you can reach me at grellsuke on tumblr, and be sure to check out my femslash week fics! i’ve got one up but will be getting out more this weekend! and only two more chapters left til the end of the konoha crush arc!!!
The smoke clears, and Chouji holds his breath – but he’s so, so relieved to see Kimimaro, slumped over in the stone arms. His tail is gone, and that strange skin color is fading away to reveal his normal paleness.

Kurenai-sensei melts out of the wall right next to him, and gently lifts up his drooping head to check. After a moment of examination, she speaks. “He’s unconscious,” and everyone relaxes.

She straightens up and gives Asuma-sensei a look that communicates what words do not – and he nods. Her hands form a seal, the stone arms falling away, and she scoops Kimimaro over her shoulder and disappears.

Asuma-sensei turns to them. “Alright,” he says, putting his hands on his hips and surveying the fallen kids. Chouji slumps into Shikamaru, and Neji and Tenten lean into each other, holding hands. “So. Who needs some medical attention first?”

“Chouji,” says Shika.

“Chouji,” says Tenten.

“Akimichi,” says Neji.

Chouji turns to blink at him, but Neji isn’t looking at him, frowning down at his lap. “Neji,” he says, and he does his best to say it kindly, because that did kind of surprise him. “You can call me Chouji.”

Neji seems to mull this over for a second, before he nods, still not looking up, even as Asuma-sensei kneels before Chouji. “Alright,” he says after a moment. “Chouji is the one who needs the most immediate medical attention.”

It makes Chouji smile, even as the boy’s expression gets a little strained when Asuma-sensei takes his right arm to start examining the wounds. He’s really not a big fan of the doctor, and it’s a little bit embarrassing to be the one who needs to get checked out.


Chouji feels a rush of affection for his best friend. He’s definitely doing this as a distraction, and it helps, even as Asuma-sensei reaches into a pouch at his side and pulls out a mini medpack. “Yeah,” Asuma-sensei says, and ohoho, it’s very very intentionally casual. “We are pretty close.”

“But not like… dating close, right?” Shika asks, eyes flickering over to the side when Chouji hisses as Asuma-sensei dabs some sort of stinging ointment on the gouges on his arm. “I thought I saw you and that crazy proctor hanging out once or twice.”
“Anko?” Asuma-sensei’s eyes twinkle. “Shikamaru, are you asking after your sensei’s dating life?”

Tenten snickers softly and Chouji is, of course, a traitor. “He and Ino keep arguing about whether you’re dating Kurenai-sensei or Anko.”

Shikamaru elbows him, but then quickly apologizes when Chouji hisses in pain. “Sorry, sorry.”

Asuma-sensei shakes his head. “Well,” he says, pulling away the stinging cottonball of ointment and pulling out some bandages instead. “You’re both right.”

Shikamaru and Chouji have twin frowns of confusion. “Both?”

“I’m dating both of them, and they’re dating each other. All three of us are together.”

“Oh,” says Chouji, and they both go quiet as Asuma-sensei wraps up his arm. Tenten’s still quietly amused in the background.

And then, finally, Shikamaru speaks again. “I didn’t know you could… do that.” He sounds absolutely, 100% affronted by this lack of information, by his lack of knowing, and Asuma-sensei laughs.

After a moment, Chouji joins in – so does Tenten, and Shikamaru shakes his head at his own foolishness. And Chouji thinks he even sees Neji smile.

It’s a good end to a really fucked up day.

Oh.

Wait.

Actually.

“Hey, Asuma-sensei,” Chouji says, and he glances at Shikamaru, finds the same moment of realization in there. “We came to find you to tell you something, before.” Before they got tricked, before they got caught up in a fight, before they were desperately trying not to die.

“That genin, Kabuto? He’s working for Orochimaru, and he’s trying to get Sasuke.”

Lady Hanabi, Lee has decided, is a Bright And Joyous Youthful Child. She giggles and claps and crows delightedly in Lee’s ear as he runs and runs, careful not to go his full speed because Ko is right beside him, but still fast.

She is so very different from both Neji and Hinata, and Lee wonders why. He can guess the difference between her and Neji. But her and Hinata…

“Your father is just up ahead,” Ko says, and it’s like Lee is holding a completely different girl.

“I see,” she says, and she no longer has a smile. She no longer laughs, she does not clap, she simply holds fast to Lee’s back and her face is completely blank.

“Lady Hanabi?” Lee asks, concerned, glancing back at her, but Ko just shakes his head softly. Oh. He… he supposes that her father can see them, if he so wanted to.

They emerge on the outside of the stadium, and there he is.
Lee has never spoken with the head of the Hyuuga clan before, never spoken with Neji’s uncle – he’s never had any need to, nor any desire. But the man is tall, imposing, and when he feels the way that Lady Hanabi shrinks a little on his back, Lee’s grin swiftly becomes very, very fake.

Hyuuga does not even spare Lee a glance. “You are the last Hyuuga to emerge,” he tells Ko, very stern. “I have ensured the safety of the elders – your lack of timeliness is unacceptable.”

“My apologies,” Ko says, bowing. “We were delayed.”

He offers up no further explanation, no details about how he would have willingly died for Lady Hanabi, had been about to die before Lee stepped in and levelled the playing field. He gives no details about how he had told Lady Hanabi to run for her life, how she had been targeted specifically, about the way that Lady Hanabi was in tears and-

Lee’s fake smile disappears completely, and he’s frowning.

It is only then that Hyuuga turns to him. “Who are you?” he asks. “Why do you hold my daughter?”

He does not even try to smile. “I am Neji’s teammate, Rock Lee,” he introduces himself. “I was, um, helping Ko and Lady Hanabi.”


Ko straightens up, and Lady Hanabi slips off of Lee’s back to land lightly on the ground, and Lee seizes his chance. He squats down in front of her. “Lady Hanabi,” he says, and he rests a hand on her head. “It was Joyous to meet you. You are very Youthful – you have a Bright Future! If you wish to train or play together, speak to your cousin, and we can Happily do such wonderful things, my lady!”

She smiles, just a little. “Thank you, Lee.”

He straightens up, and nods at Ko. “Ko, sir, it was good to meet a strong older ninja who cares so deeply for his charge.” The other shinobi looks a little surprised by this, but Lee presses on. “You are good and kind and strong, sir, and I will strive to follow the Great Example that you set, your willingness to give your all for the ones that you love, to protect them! Sir, you are truly great!”

Lee turns to the head of the Hyuuga clan. “Hyuuga,” he says simply, all joyfulness falling from his face. “I don’t like you. You’re not a very kind person – I hope you will Find Your Heart and Mend Your Ways, but I hope we don’t talk again. Thank you.”

And then before anyone can say anything, he turns on his heel and bolts back into the stadium, using every single bit of his weight-free speed before he spontaneously combusts because that was So Very Terribly Rude but also So Very Terribly Worth It.

He really hopes he won’t meet Hyuuga again.

Kakashi realizes what the Hokage is going to do about the same time that Orochimaru does. The forming of two clones, one to deal with each Hokage? Not immediately strange. Advisable, even – but then the Hiruzen in front of Kakashi, the original, goes through an incredibly familiar sequence of seals.

No. No no no no no.

The shinigami that rises behind the Hokage is the stuff of Kakashi’s nightmares – this is the entity
that stole away Minato-sensei, and now, it seems, it’s going to steal away another Hokage, too.

Tobirama is taken first – the second Hokage dissolves into nothing once the hand of the Shinigami steals his soul, but he has enough time to speak to Sarutobi, to murmur something that’s too quiet for Kakashi to hear.

Kakashi pops a chakra pill, just in case, and Minato-sensei is next. The man – the younger man, as terrifyingly strange as that is to say – doesn’t have a moment for Sarutobi. No, he looks right past him, to where Kakashi crouches on the ground. “Kakashi,” he says. “Please, take care of Naruto for me.”

A pang of guilt so fresh and hot scores through him, and Kakashi hangs his head. “I haven’t been doing a very good job,” he says. He hasn’t. There must have been some way he could have done more. Some way he could have made a difference.

“Please,” says Minato-sensei, and Kakashi looks up to see his mentor, his teacher, his sensei, fading into starlight. “We can’t dwell on our mistakes, okay? Just make them better.”

“Okay,” Kakashi says, very softly. “I will. Say hello to Kushina and Rin and Obito for me, will you?”

Minato’s expression shifts into something not quite readable, not quite understandable, but as he opens his mouth, he fades into nothing and whatever it was goes unsaid.

Kakashi wishes he could have stayed just a moment longer, but he pushes himself to his feet anyway, even through his exhaustion – because Orochimaru is the last one, and Kakashi doesn’t think he’ll go easy.

At first, Kakashi hangs back. He and the Hokage have not fought side by side, and he does not want to get in the way. Besides, the… the Hokage is a dead man, as it is, so as long as he can perform his jutsu, as long as the Shinigami can steal Orochimaru’s soul, it doesn’t matter. The snakes that tangle up the Hokage and Enma don’t matter, because the Hokage is within soul stealing range and is going to do it.

But the sword? The one that the Hokage had knocked to the side, that Orochimaru nowbeckons to life with his fingers?

Oh, oh, that makes a difference.

Enma is straining at his bonds, trying desperately to reach for the sword before it manages to stab Sarutobi, but Kakashi is free. Kakashi is fast. But Kakashi is tired, and the only way that he can stop the sword is with, well…

He flings himself in between Orochimaru’s sword and the Hokage, and the moment it starts to enter his flesh he turns to the side, so the endpoint is very very much away from the Hokage. It’s a blinding pain, a fierce pain, being stabbed through the stomach like this – the sword moves, probably beckoned by Orochimaru’s fingers, and Kakashi cries out but he grips the sword, holds fast to it, makes sure that it stays within him and doesn’t touch the Hokage even as he falls to his knees.

Kakashi coughs, wetly, and tastes copper in the back of his throat. The sword moves again, shifting around within him and it’s more pain, more blood spreading across his shirt, and Kakashi wonders if Orochimaru is trying to force him to let go, but Kakashi laughs very softly.

For Tenzo, and for Anko, and for his students, he’d do anything to see this bastard in the ground. “Fuck you, Orochimaru,” he says softly, and he thinks those are the last words that the snake bastard
hears before the arm of the Shinigami fully emerges from his chest, soul in hand, and the empty body drops to the ground.

Sarutobi staggers, blinks, and falls into Enma’s arms, who catches him – he passes within moments, and it looks like a peaceful death.

Huh. Kakashi’s kind of jealous. He guesses that either way, though, he’ll be able to find out what Minato-sensei was going to say in just a little bit.

His vision is blacking out at the edges, and he coughs again, but the pink barrier has fallen, he can tell, and all of a sudden there are warm arms wrapped around him, cradling him oh so gently, carefully drawing out the sword that’s piercing him. The wound is so large, now, that the sword really isn’t holding anything in.

“Gai,” he whispers, very softly, because there isn’t even a single question as to who it is that holds him, and when he looks up, he’s right.

It’s his rival. His… well, his Gai. Holding him, oh-so-carefully, even as tears run down his cheeks. Gai is a crybaby, Kakashi knows this, but now isn’t the time to tease him about his ever flowing manly tears.

“It’s his rival. His… well, his Gai. Holding him, oh-so-carefully, even as tears run down his cheeks. Gai is a crybaby, Kakashi knows this, but now isn’t the time to tease him about his ever flowing manly tears.

“Kakashi,” Gai whispers, just as soft. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t… I wasn’t fast enough.”

It takes a lot of strength, a lot of effort, but Kakashi lifts his hand, cups Gai’s cheek. The man leans into the touch, and Kakashi’s gloved thumb brushes the corner of his lips. “Guess this means… you won, huh?”

Gai doesn’t understand. “Huh?”

Kakashi smiles, oh so softly. “You’re ahead of me by one, Gai. You… You won.”

He smiles back, gently and softly and tenderly. “I guess I did, rival. But I’d rather have you than winning.”

Kakashi doesn’t have an answer to that.

That faint, gentle smile of Gai’s is the very last thing he sees before his vision gives out entirely, before even Obito’s eye cannot show him anything anymore.

The gentle press of Gai’s lips upon his own are the last thing he feels before he slips away.

Chapter End Notes

i cried writing this chapter not gonna lie. im an emotional mess. (tbf i am also sick rn so w/e)

one more chapter and the konoha crush arc is done and over with. this will be finished by the end of the weekend!! so it's gonna be updated tomorrow (sunday) or the day after (monday), depending on how things go

cry w/ me thanks
as always u can find me at grellsuke on tumblr, feel free to HMU whenever!!!
The problem with fighting someone you helped train is that you both know each other’s moves so, so easily. Anko has known for a while that Kabuto is above genin level – he just chicken’s out when it comes to the real deal, doesn’t want to actually fight and hurt people that aren’t his teacher or his teammates or Anko or Hoheto and his team. A select few, really.

Compare that to how Reo always said he froze up in the middle of a mission, and well…

Anko had always thought he had the skills for a chunin, maybe even a jounin, but not the guts. Now she just knows he was and is a fucking liar.

“How can you work for Orochimaru?” she asks, ducking underneath a swing of his sword. He’s got a new weapon that she’s never seen before, a short sword that’s more suited for someone smaller than him, and she has a strange feeling he took it off someone else. “You know what he’s done!”

“How can you work for Konoha?” he parrots, clashing kunai against kunai and then dodging the senbon that’s aimed for his neck. “They’ll never forgive you for something you didn’t do. You work in T&I, you know how many skeletons they have in the closet.”

She narrowly misses hitting an artery and then narrowly avoids getting nicked in the artery. “So it’s better to be awful openly?” Anko asks, shaking her head. “At least Konoha doesn’t experiment on children!”

Kabuto laughs at that. Kabuto outright laughs, and it’s high pitched and maybe a little broken and Anko comes to a halt. “Do you really think that?” he laughs, and he shakes his head. His smile is genuine, now, but it’s… it’s not a pleasant smile. “Oh, Anko-sensei… Konoha experiments on kids. I’m one of them.”

And before Anko can think of a single thing to say to that, the fight resumes.

Kunai against kunai, senbon and scalpels wielded, duck under and clumsily wielding a sword – neither of them is using any ninjutsu, and Anko’s not sure what to think about that.

She’s not using it partially because the Uchiha kid is right there and she doesn’t want to accidentally catch him in the crossfire if she uses something more destructive, and partially because she just. Really doesn’t want to hurt Kabuto.

Anko doesn’t know why Kabuto’s not using it.

Whatever reason he’s not using it, though… it lets Anko get the upper hand. She nicks his arm and forces him down to the ground, wrenching his arms behind his back and holding a kunai to his neck and then she-

She stops.

“What?” asks Kabuto, and he smiles. “Anko-sensei, you’re not going to kill me?”

She can’t, and he knows it. Even if he’s the enemy, she- she just-
Anko has very few precious people, has very few that are so absurdly important to her that she cannot handle it, and it’s the rather unfortunate fact that Kabuto is one of those people. She’ll use a knockout tag, even if there’s brain damage risks behind it and she hates to use two in one day.

“Orochimaru didn’t abandon you,” Kabuto says, and Anko freezes.

“What,” she rasps, because that came out of nowhere, came out of absolute nowhere, and she stares down at him.

“The seal was a success,” Kabuto says, uncaring of the knife to his neck, smiling away. “He wanted you to join him. But you refused, and so he altered your memories. He didn’t abandon you. You said no.”

It’s too much. It’s so much. It’s a complete shattering of everything she knew and every expectation and she doesn’t understand why he’s telling her this and she thinks it’s not a lie, she thinks she knows Kabuto enough to tell that it’s not a lie but she guesses she didn’t know him at all, actually, but-

He uses the distraction.

Kabuto shoves out of her grip. He whirls around, fast as can be, swiping the kunai from her hand and tackling her down and-

He doesn’t hesitate.

Sasuke’s limbs have been coming back to life, slowly but surely. First his face – his mouth is no longer numb, he can speak once more, he can move his jaw… Then his fingers, one by one. His arms. His torso. It’s not a long lasting paralytic, it seems, but even though he can move his arms, he doesn’t try to throw any kunai.

This is Kabuto, fighting that proctor, Mitarashi Anko, he knows this now.

It was like the needle shocked sense into him, broke through the haze that covered his mind, and maybe when he’s not in the middle of a battlefield, in the middle of being scared and worried and Uchiha don’t get scared he can evaluate and figure out what happened. Was it Kabuto? Was it his seal? Is he cracking, going mad, absolutely losing it?

He’s so, so concerned that it’s the latter.

But then Anko screams and everything falls apart in front of him. Kabuto slices through her front like butter and it’s like a worse, harsher version of the same cut that Sakura got from Orochimaru and Sasuke is scrambling to get there as soon as he can. He has to crawl, his legs still dead, and Anko drops like a puppet with its strings cut and oh god oh god oh god-

There’s so much blood.

There’s so much blood everywhere and his breathing comes short, short and quick and all he can think of is the way the Uchiha District was once flooded with blood. He cut straight through her shirt, straight through the mesh, and there’s so so much blood.

Sasuke presses down on the wound with his bare hands, wishing he had something, anything, anything anything anything that could stop the bleeding, and Anko hisses. “Kid,” she says, and it’s soft. “It’s okay. Run for it.”
“No,” he says, and tears spring to his eyes even as his stained red hands try to stop the flow, to stem it. He knows, intellectually, that no one can lose this much blood and survive but-

He turns to Kabuto, because he’s still here, and Sasuke… pleads. “Heal her,” he begs, and he’s not even ashamed of it, not at all. “I’ll go with you willingly. Please, just, heal her.”

Kabuto leans in, and one for desperate, hopeful moment, Sasuke thinks that he’s listened. That he’s going to heal her and stop the light that’s fading from her eyes and stop the blood that coats his hands and then Kabuto laughs, very quietly. “Good-bye, Anko-sensei,” he says.

There’s a sharp pain at the back of his neck and everything goes black.

He wakes.

Sasuke doesn’t twitch. Doesn’t open his eyes, doesn’t so much as move as he reaches out every single one of his senses to try to figure out his location.

It smells of antiseptic. Of the hospital – there’s breathing in the room, the sounds of multiple different people breathing, some very close by, and he opens his eyes and very, very carefully sits up.

His team surrounds him.

Naruto is dirty, his jumpsuit cut up a little but otherwise seeming entirely unharmed, sitting in a chair to the right of the bed with his upper half sprawled on the bed, asleep. Sakura is in the same position next to him, in a different chair – her entire arms, from the tips of her fingers all the way up to her shoulders, are covered in bandages. A few mark up her face, as well, but the skin of her face mostly seems whole and healthy. She’s just as passed out.

To the left, Karin leans back in a chair, also asleep. She’s dirty, a little bloody in spots, but Sasuke doesn’t think it’s hers. She’s not on his bed at all, just in a chair, but she’s just as fast asleep as the others.

“How am I here?” says a quiet voice, a familiar one, and Sasuke tears his eyes away from his teammates to look up and it’s-

It’s Kakashi.

Kakashi is in a bed to his right – he looks terrible. Exhausted. He’s in a hospital gown and Sasuke can see bandages peeking through underneath it but he’s here and Sasuke very carefully slips out of bed, ignoring the wave of dizziness that shifts through him, careful not to wake Karin as he walks around the bed to Kakashi.

The floor is cold against his bare feet, and the fact that he’s only wearing a hospital nightgown definitely makes the air have a bit more of a chill, but he doesn’t care. “Kakashi,” he whispers, stopping by the side of his teacher’s bed. “What happened?”

Kakashi scoots to the side very carefully, and pats the spot next to him, and after a moment Sasuke climbs up and sits next to the man on his bed. “Orochimaru replaced the Kazekage and tricked Sand into invading with Sound,” he says, and the name of That Man makes Sasuke’s breath catch in the back of his throat. “We won.” As if that wasn’t obvious already, and Sasuke shakes his head.

“How am I here?” Kakashi’s eye crinkles in a smile, just slightly.

“Team 10 found Asuma and told him that Kabuto was after you. He made it just in time to stop him
from taking you.”

That… He owes Team 10 and Asuma-sensei so much, right now, but he can’t let himself be relieved, just yet. “What about Kabuto? And… and Anko?”

“Kabuto got away,” Kakashi says, very quietly. “And Anko…” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Sasuke.”

She’s. Dead.

Sasuke shakes because god, god. She had put herself in the way, she hadn’t needed to try to save him and yet. Yet she had and now she’s dead and her blood had been all over his hands and he looks down, quick, just to make sure none of that red is on him anymore and and-

Kakashi wraps an arm around him and very gently pulls him into his side.

“Orochimaru is dead,” he says, and he says it very firmly. “You don’t need to worry about him anymore, at least.”

That cuts through the panic, at least, cuts through the haze and Sasuke turns, looks up at him. “You’re… You’re sure?”

He nods. “I saw him die.”

Sasuke looks at Kakashi’s chest, looks at the bandages that cover everything underneath his hospital gown. “Is that… what…?”

Kakashi stills. Inhales, exhales. “It was… his sword,” he says, very delicately. “The Hokage used a jutsu to sacrifice himself to defeat Orochimaru, and Orochimaru tried to stop it, and, well…” He shrugs, very lightly. “I got in the way.”

Got in the way- “You’re going to be fine, right?”

He doesn’t say anything for a long moment. “There were… a lot of internal organs damaged,” he says, and he says it very quietly. “The doctors don’t think I’ll ever be able to return to full, active duty.”

Oh.

He.

Kakashi had done that. Had stopped Orochimaru and brought him down and now Orochimaru wouldn’t touch him ever again but Kakashi won’t be a shinobi again and-

“I don’t regret it,” Kakashi- no, no, Kakashi-sensei says. “I’m glad all of you are safe.”

Sasuke buries his face in his teacher’s side and for the first time in a very long time…

He cries.

Chapter End Notes

MAN. MAN MAN MAN @ Y’ALL.
1) I knew you would be upset over that chapter but like HOLY SHIT MAN. that blew up. wow. thats why i got this chapter out sooner than expected so you wouldn't be breathing down my necks askldfjaldk;sfsdf

2) some of you were like. genuinely rude. mostly ppl on anon that i just deleted but please, chillout. thank you. im doing this because its super fun please let this stay fun.

3) @ y'all telling me to tag major character death: I KNOW WHAT IM DOING

rip anko, though, damn. we'll be revisiting her death and all that like, almost immediately. i just needed to clarify that kakashi was alive before y'all murdered me alksdfjalskdfjasdf

anyway KONOHA CRUSH ARC IS FINISHED. YAY. time to move on (finally)
Chapter Notes

and now we begin the very first original arc in ftcoye! the aftermath arc. wont be too long i don't think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke’s not sure who wakes first.

One moment, he’s nearly falling asleep against Kakashi-sensei, curled against his teacher in a way that would leave him very embarrassed come morning, and the next, there’s a hubbub of noise.

His teammates cluster around their teacher’s bed, every single one of them in his face, and it’s both overwhelming and welcome at the same time – he didn’t quite think that was possible. “Are you okay?” asks Sakura, her face pinched in concern. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

Sasuke resists the urge to touch his neck, resists the urge to clap a hand over his seal, and shrugs. “I’m… fine,” he says. “He didn’t hurt me. Are you okay?”

She’s the one who has bandages all over her arms. She’s the one with bandages underneath her clothes, too – he can see that, now, under her mesh. And she had been the one screaming and nearly murdered by Gaara. But Sakura nods, tipping her head to the side and smiling, eyes closed. “I’m fine, promise. I’ve got a healing cream all over me right now, but I’ll be good as new.”

That’s a relief. That’s such a relief, and it takes a weight off of Sasuke’s shoulders that he didn’t even know was there.

Karin grabs his hand and Sasuke flinches, but doesn’t pull away. “I’m sorry,” she says, and her eyes shine with unshed tears. “I’m sorry I let him take you.”

Oh, god, Sasuke’s so uncomfortable. “It’s not. Your fault.” Awkwardly, he gives her hand a squeeze, hoping that’ll help.

She squeezes back, and shakes her head. “I’m sorry,” she says again, but before he can say anything in response, Naruto is right in Sasuke’s face.

They’re inches from each other, so very very close, and neither pulls back. “Hey, Sasuke,” Naruto says.

“Hey, Naruto,” Sasuke says.

They pause for a moment, looking at each other, even though his eyes itch, and then Sasuke asks, because he needs more than what Kakashi-sensei gave him. “What happened?”

Their stories spill out over each other. About Anko saving Sakura and Ino going into Gaara’s mind and Hinata getting hurt and Naruto allying with the sand team and-

“He has a demon in him!?” Sasuke didn’t even know that was possible. He knows about the bijuu, of course, because he had a good education but Sasuke didn’t know until now that they could be
stuck INSIDE of people, and that’s kind of a horrifying thought.

Naruto frowns, just a little bit, and his hand curls in the fabric of his jacket. “Yeah,” he says, and he doesn’t look Sasuke in the eye. “He does.”

The three fill Sasuke in on everything, and Sakura always has her finger on the pulse so she fills all on them on what Shikamaru and co were doing, which is cool – it means they captured a sound ninja.

That brings back something that Sasuke’s kind of been avoiding, but seems like a good time right now. He glances back at Kakashi-sensei, who is watching them all with a softness that makes Sasuke want to look away. But, still, he wants to ask and so he does. “Kakashi-sensei. What happened to the sound genin we captured?”

“Ahh, that…” Kakashi-sensei lifts his hand as if to rub at the back of his neck but hisses and lowers it. “Well, it seems they broke out, or were broken out – Orochimaru used them to bring back the three Hokages.”

They all stare at him.

“He did what,” Sakura says, and Kakashi-sensei has the gall to look surprised.

“Maa, did I not mention that?”

That leads into Kakashi-sensei explaining the whole fight with him and the Hokage against Orochimaru and the other Hokages, and Sasuke is very, very interested into the technique that Kakashi-sensei described. That he could destroy the first Hokage with his Sharingan… “How did you do that?” he asks.

Kakashi-sensei looks very, very old all of a sudden. “I’ll tell you later, Sasuke,” he says – Sasuke accepts that. Later.

It’s… probably an Uchiha clan secret, anyway, and he shouldn’t share it with Naruto and Sakura and Karin.

…

It feels strange to think of keeping a secret from them.

But beyond that, even, not a single one of them asks Sasuke what happened to him. None of them bring up Kabuto. None of them bring up Anko. None of them bring up Orochimaru, even, beyond Kakashi-sensei’s describing of the fight, and not a single word is breathed about his curse seal.

He doesn’t know if they already know everything about it, if they’re trying to treat him like glass, or if they don’t care. (Well. He doesn’t think it’s the latter.) It doesn’t matter. Sasuke is drained. Tired, numb, like a cloth that’s been wrung out, and he slumps against Kakashi-sensei more and more as the conversation grows quieter and quieter.

“You can spend the night here,” he hears Kakashi-sensei murmur to the others at one point, and there’s the signature poof of Naruto’s shadow clones as the other bed is dragged over alongside Kakashi-sensei’s, so there’s just one giant bed, and the other three pile in. All five of them, sharing these two beds – which is kind of cramped, certainly, but it’s warm.

Kakashi-sensei on one side, Naruto on the other, and then Karin and then Sakura to his left, all five
of Team 7, crammed together in these tiny little beds-

Sasuke is warm, and he sleeps.

He’s home.

Sasuke’s standing in the middle of the Uchiha compound, and he knows he’s dreaming. The bodies scattered everywhere are ones he’s memorized – positions he will never forget until his dying day – and this is normal.

Nothing fun, and his breathing is starting to quicken, but normal.

“Little brother,” says a voice, and Sasuke whirs around. It’s Itachi- No, it’s Kabuto, no, it’s- It’s both of them, at once, two images overlayed upon each other and it’s horrifying. “Little brother,” He says, a smile crossing his face. “Why are you here?”

The three sound genin rise up behind him. Their skin is grey, rotten – they’re dead, as if dug up from a week old grave, and they smile in unison. “Why are you here, Sasuke?” they ask, tipping their heads to the side. “You’re too late.”

They point behind him, to where he had just been facing, but when he turns, it’s- It’s-

Oboro’s neck is broken, as it had been in his death – he’s sprawled on the steps of the nearest house, his head at an angle that makes Sasuke want to vomit. Karin lays at his feet, a withered husk, drained of every last scrap of chakra while blood leaks from the bites that scatter even her face.

Sakura and Naruto lay next to each other, holding hands, a macabre presentation of the two people who hold him in their hearts. Glass embeds Sakura over and over again, like a pincushion of shards, her skin blackened and crackled and peeling from lightning, her mouth open in a soundless scream while her eyes stare at nothing. Naruto could be sleeping, but for the way that his whole chest is concave, like someone stepped on it and kept pushing pushing pushing until it burst open.

Kakashi-sensei staggers in front of him, a sword through his stomach, reaching for Sasuke helplessly. “Sasuke,” he says, and then he’s turning into Anko, sliced open and bleeding at his feet.

“Run,” she tells him, and the blood rises. There’s so much. So much more than could come from a single person. It covers Sakura and Naruto, drowns Karin, laps at Oboro’s feet and then it’s rising, rising past Sasuke’s ankles and then his knees and then up to his waist and he can’t move.

Anko floats to the top, as if she were sleeping in a pool of water, until the blood is up to Sasuke’s chest and her eyes snap open. Itachi’s swirled Sharingan stares up at him – “Run!” Anko screams, and Sasuke is drowning in blood.

He’s drinking it, swallowing it down and choking on it, the copper coating his throat and mouth and tongue and he clutches at his throat with both hands but someone grabs his shoulders and it’s Anko and she stares right at him with those Sharingan eyes, the blood still streaming from her front and making the level rise higher, higher, higher, the light coming through growing less, less, less.

“I’m one of them,” she whispers, but it’s Itachi’s voice that says it, not hers and not Kabuto’s, and Sasuke doesn’t understand, can’t understand and then she leans forward and puts her mouth right up by his ear and-

“Run.”
He awakes choking on nothing and thrashing to be free of the covers, free of the things that hold him down and everyone’s shouting.

“Sasuke!” yells a voice that might be Naruto’s, and he grabs his shoulders and Sasuke wrenches himself free, accidentally kicking someone in the face as he vaults over the end of the beds and curls up on the cool tile, resting his forehead against it and trying not to throw up.

His mouth tastes of copper.

“Sasuke?” says a different voice, more tentative this time, and the Uchiha looks up to see all four of his teammates peering over the edge of the bed, looking oh so very concerned. Oh. That’s.

The boy pushes himself to his feet, and stares right at Sakura – she had been the one who spoke. She stares at him right back and for a split second he can see her bleeding, see her bandaged arms replaced with blackened, crackled ones. Run, whispers Anko in his head, and he turns on his heel and flees.

Sasuke has no idea where he’s going.

He’s wearing nothing but a hospital nightgown and his boxers but he still throws himself out the first window he sees, landing hard on the ground below and ignoring it, ignoring the pain as he runs.

It’s night. It’s pitch black and there’s no one and it’s gently sprinkling, turning everything into mud as he runs. His feet and legs are splattered with it, as is the edge of his hospital gown, but he keeps going, keeps running, hoping no one is following him.

Sasuke’s mind may not know where its going, but his feet do. They take him to the very edge of a muddy, grassy clearing and stop – because in the middle is the Memorial Stone.

He takes one step forward. Then two. Then three then four five six and he’s walking up to the Memorial Stone, both dreading and looking for the one thing he is fearing: Anko’s name.

But it’s not there.

There’s nothing but smooth rock, at the very end, where Anko’s name and the Hokage’s name should be, and Sasuke realizes they must have not added it yet. His fingers travel backwards, skimming up the lines of names to find his usual one, the name he always seeks out – Uchiha Obito.

Sasuke finds it, runs his fingers across it, and then closes his eyes.

He had wondered, before, a simple wonder. Why a month between exams? It seemed like a conspiracy, then, like he stumbled across a secret that would help him for the future, but it wasn’t. No. A month to plan a battle strategy, more like.

A month to decide upon a jutsu that will kill you but save your whole village, Sasuke thinks, a month to decide that your village is more important than yourself, and he feels bad for ever doubting the Hokage. A simple secret.

“I’m one of them,” Itachi’s voice echoes in his head, and Sasuke flinches. He doesn’t want this.

He wants to mourn. Wants to mourn over Anko, and then get stronger so that nothing like this will ever again, that no one will die in front of him, that Itachi and Kabuto won’t hurt anyone else. He wants to try to go forward, because it feels like for every step he takes, he takes two backwards, and he’s tired of doing nothing, being nothing.
“I’m one of them,” Itachi whispers, and Sasuke is frightened.

A conspiracy behind the gap in exams? The whims of a child. Trying to learn more about Uzushio? Well, only natural, given his teammate – besides, finding out information about other villages is hardly bad.

But… this…?

“I’m one of them,” says the whisper, and Sasuke thinks if he opens this box, there’s no going back.

“Anko-sensei,” Sasuke breathes against the stone. “I don’t know what to do.”

Chapter End Notes

i’m so glad for all of your support!! 80k!! wow!!! im sorry for being cruel to y’all
asdkfjkadsflf but no, i really don't pull my punches. ahem.

i’m very excited to show you where i’m going with this fic! because obvs we got a LOT
of possibilities here and gosh, it’ll be fun. thank you sm for all your comments and
feedback!! they help me a lot, both in motivation and because sometimes y'all mention
things i hadn’t even remotely thought of WHICH IS GREAT

anyway, you can find me on grellsuke on tumblr! I uploaded a few naruto femslash fics
yesterday, so u should check those out. thanks for reading, see you soon!
“Sasuke?”

The voice is familiar, but he can’t quite place it, and Sasuke turns slightly – it’s Kurenai, who is probably one of the people he least expected to see.

“What…” He coughs slightly, to clear his throat, and fully turns towards her. “What are you doing here?”

She’s not in the usual dress that he sees her in (well, the few times he’s seen her, it’s not like they interact a lot) but in rumpled pants and a shirt, her chunin vest thrown on overtop. “Kakashi alerted us that you ran off.”

And sent her out as a search party? Wait, “us”- How many people are looking for him?

His face colors, a little. It’s embarrassing. But he guesses Kakashi-sensei can’t search for him on his own, anymore, not now… “Oh. I…”

Sasuke turns back towards the rock, unable and unwilling to articulate his thoughts. He doesn’t want to share the dream – doesn’t want to talk about it. Between that and the way he had been seeing Kabuto as Itachi when he fought against him, Sasuke doesn’t want to get benched. He doesn’t want to be taken off of the roster, doesn’t want to be seen as crazy, doesn’t want to get stopped from getting stronger.

Even if he doesn’t know what’s going to become of Team 7, at this point.

There’s a pause, a weight in the air, and then Kurenai steps up beside him. She doesn’t seem to care about the drizzle in the air. “They’ll be adding the names of those we lost tomorrow,” she says. “We’re having a joint ceremony for the Hokage and for all the others we lost.” Kurenai sounds tired, and Sasuke glances up at her.

“…Did you know Anko?” he asks quietly, after a moment.

She dips her head, just slightly. “We were lovers,” she says, and Sasuke wonders how she can be this steady, be this calm. “Asuma, Anko, and I – we were all in love.”

And what, really, what can he say to that? He barely knew her – as much as Sasuke’s certain Mitarashi Anko will haunt his dreams and his goals for the rest of his life, he didn’t know her. The only words he spoke with her were while she was dying in front of him. To love her… And oh, god, Asuma had been the one that saved him…

Sasuke knows the pain of coming upon the corpses of those you love. Of seeing them sprawled out before you in an unnatural death when they should be greeting you with a smile.

It’s not something he would wish upon anyone.

“I’m sorry,” he says, very softly, but that’s all he can really get out. He doesn’t know how to articulate how- Well, it’s his fault, isn’t it? She came after him and she paid the price to save him and she was struck down by someone she cared for and why is it always like this.
Sasuke’s shaking, his hands trembling slightly and he can’t tell whether it’s from fear or tension or just plain cold, because his hospital gown is starting to get soaked through from the drizzle and plastering itself to his skin, and Kurenai sets a warm and gentle hand on his shoulder.

He flinches, but she doesn’t pull back.

“No one blames you,” she says, and she says it very softly. He doesn’t understand how she has the control to speak like this, to tell him this, because he barely knew Anko-sensei and all he wants to do is cry. “Anko made the choice to go after you and to save you, and she wouldn’t regret it, Sasuke.” She turns him lightly, so that he’s facing her, looking up at her, and god her eyes are so sad, a familiar warm red that smiles kindly down at him. “I would make the same decision, even if it cost me my own life.”

That startles him. Sasuke stares, openly, and his question is written into every feature of his face. Kurenai’s hands squeeze his shoulders. “We’re all behind you, Sasuke, we’re all with you. Me, Asuma, Kakashi, Gai… All of your fellow genin, all of Konoha…”

It seems wrong.

It seems wrong because when he had lost everyone, there had been no one and nothing there for him, not a drop of another person aside from the occasional ANBU that saved him from death when he went too far, so Sasuke doesn’t think all of Konoha is behind him, but the others…

Shikamaru, Chouji, and Ino had tracked down Asuma – they are the reason that Asuma had been there to get him.

Hinata and Karin had fought Kabuto to try to save him – they could have run, they could have left him behind, and yet they stayed and they fought for their lives.

Team 8 had saved Sakura in the Forest of Death, had kept his secret, and he thinks from the way that the Hyuuga and his teammate Shiranui had fought alongside Shikamaru and Chouji (according to Sakura, at least), that they would stand beside him if he needed it.

They have proven to him that they care, that they’re willing to fight – who is he to doubt that, to doubt their conviction?

He can’t say anything, can’t voice the one thing that rises to his lips and hovers there, until another voice appears as someone gently touches down from a tree. “Sasuke,” says Yamato-sensei, and he approaches the two of them. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

It’s Yamato-sensei that finally pulls it out of him. Yamato-sensei who makes him say it because Sasuke has already lost one (two?) sensei to those that want him so badly and Sasuke doesn’t think he could bear it if he loses another. “I don’t want anyone else to die for me,” he says.

Sasuke couldn’t say this to his team. He couldn’t.

He couldn’t say it to Sakura – he remembers the way she flung herself at Orochimaru, the way she screamed “I’ll kill you!” at the missing-nin as if she had had any chance in the world. He couldn’t say it to Karin – not when she had given her all to save him, not when he had seen the pain on her face when Kabuto bit her (when Itachi bit Izumi, whispers his mind, and he shuts that out). He couldn’t say it to Kakashi-sensei – not when his teacher was benched, could no longer be their teacher, could no longer be a shinobi because he had decided to stop Orochimaru.

He definitely couldn’t say it to Naruto.
But to Kurenai- to Kurenai-sensei, whose warm red eyes make him think of the ones he’s lost, who feels so much more keenly the cut of the loss of Anko-sensei? But to Yamato-sensei, the one who has guided him every step of the way over the past month, who showed him how to hold a sword and taught him to calm and shared stories that made the hurt of Him just a little less?

Yes.

Kurenai-sensei’s eyes widen, and then she’s drawing him into a hug, drawing him into an embrace and he stiffens, uncomfortable, not sure how to react to this because she’s warm but he also really doesn’t know her too well, but it thankfully doesn’t last long before she lets him go. “I know,” she says, and she says it very softly. Her eyes shine with unshed tears and Sasuke really hopes she doesn’t cry because that honestly might make him start crying again. “I wish it were that easy.”

Yamato-sensei is right there, having moved up as quiet as a mouse, and he puts a hand on Sasuke’s head. “Come on,” he says. “Your teammates are worried.”

They leave Kurenai-sensei wiping her eyes – “Sasuke, if you ever want to talk about Anko, we can get tea, alright? I’ve got stories.” “Alright.” – and the boy turns down Yamato’s offer of a piggyback ride to the hospital. Sure, he is barefoot, but…

“I’ll walk,” he says, and Yamato-sensei leaves it at that.

Sasuke’s sure they make an unusual sight, especially since his gown is now so wet it’s basically translucent, but there’s no one on the streets. It’s raining and most likely like 3 in the morning so Sasuke can’t be surprised, but he’s definitely relieved. He didn’t want to have to deal with anyone.

After a few moments of walking in silence, Sasuke speaks. “Kabuto took your sword,” he says, and does it hurt to say his name, but.

Yamato-sensei looks surprised, and then softens. “That’s your sword, Sasuke.” He pauses. “Or, was. I’ll get you another one.”

That’s uncomfortable, warm but uncomfortable, and Sasuke shakes his head. “No.”

“Yes,” says Yamato-sensei, and they’re at a stalemate.

Sasuke doesn’t respond to that, because he doesn’t want to get into pointless bickering like he does with Naruto, and Yamato-sensei has a distinctly pleased look on his face the entire walk back.

Mednins fuss over him and get him changed and cleaned off the moment he steps foot in the hospital, which he’s annoyed but relieved about, and he feels the tension in his shoulders immediately reappear the moment the scent of antiseptic hits his nose.

He hates hospitals. Hates them so much.

Yamato-sensei stays behind him as they make their way upstairs to where Sasuke’s room had been, and he’s caught off guard to hear a surprising amount of noise coming from behind the closed door. Not just the sounds of his teammates yelling and arguing and doing whatever it is they do when they’re being idiots, but… a lot more voices. Way too many.

He sneaks a glance up at Yamato-sensei, but his teacher betrays nothing but a small smirk, and so Sasuke sighs and opens the door.
All of Konoha is crammed into his room.

Okay, okay, not all of Konoha, but a lot of it.

The second bed has disappeared, leaving only the one that Kakashi-sensei was in, and pillows and blankets are scattered all across the floor. Gai-sensei sits on Kakashi-sensei’s bed, holding his hand and talking quietly with him. Hyuuga Neji, bandages on his eyes, leans back against the bedframe as he sits on the floor, arguing with a standing Ino, who inexplicably wears a full face of make-up despite being clad in a hospital gown and having a bandage on her cheek. Karin sits in a chair, looking about the same as she did before they went to sleep, speaking with Hinata who is also in a hospital gown, bandages all the way down her leg.

Shiranui (in a hospital gown, bandages down her side) is speaking with Shino (none worse for the wear) while sprawled out on two blankets, apparently discussing the merits of different weapons. Chouji (in a hospital gown, bandages on both of his arms) is laughing with Rock, who looks completely fine. Shikamaru looks absolutely exhausted but isn’t in a hospital gown, rolling his eyes at some dumb joke Kiba is making, who also looks fine.

And Sakura and Naruto have sprung up from their seats on the floor, smiling at him expectantly.

“…What?” he rasps, so horribly confused and very conflicted.

Sakura grins. “Everyone was in the hospital already,” she says, with a shrug. “People aren’t allowed to go home yet – they’re making sure there’s no more enemy nin out there. So why not have a slumber party?”

Naruto rocks back on his heels with a very pleased expression. “Yeah, yeah! I made a bunch of clones and found everybody and now we’re all here!”

The room is warm. It’s cozy, it’s… it’s homey, honestly, and while people do glance up to look at him when he enters, they merely give him affirming nods, small waves, or go right back to their conversation. (Well, Karin and Hinata both distinctly, visibly relax, and he’s going to have to talk to them later.)

He doesn’t think he can have a nightmare in a room like this.

Sasuke struggles for a moment, can’t get out the words, but it doesn’t seem to matter. Yamato-sensei gives him a gentle push from behind and the moment he takes those two extra steps into the room, they’re both right there. Sakura half-curls her hand into his left, and Naruto yanks on his right and all three of them go down with a cry into the blankets and pillows.

They laugh, and it’s a genuine laugh, and Sasuke smiles.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve had a few people comment on how this has been kind of depressing: YEAH, SORRY. So I wanted to make it clear in this chapter that we are very, very much clawing our path upwards.

It’s going to get better, it’s going to get happier, it’s going to get cheerier. Promise.

Hope you enjoy! I needed that fluff - didn't you?
Sasuke sleeps soundly.

Well – it takes him a little bit to fall asleep, on account of all the noise in the room from everyone, but once he does pass out he’s out. It’s a little frightening, falling asleep in a room with all these people in it, any of whom could harm him while he’s defenseless, but… he trusts them.

Trusts them enough to sleep with them nearby, at least, but Sasuke supposes some measure of trust is better than none at all.

(He doesn’t like thinking about this.)

When he wakes, almost everyone is gone – the only ones that remain are Kakashi-sensei, who’s reading his usual book in bed (is he… ever going to be able to leave his bed?), and Naruto, Hinata, and Karin, who are all… eating ramen?

Sasuke sits up and stares, and Naruto catches the movement immediately and grins. “Sasuke, we saved you a bowl!”

The three of them are sitting together on the floor, each with a bowl of ramen – there’s one steaming next to Naruto, which he immediately picks up to offer to Sasuke, and two more steaming next to Hinata (for who…?). Sasuke scoots his way off the blankets strewn on the floor, just in case, and takes the offered bowl.

It’s salty, but good, and he slurps down the noodles while Naruto chatters. “Everybody went home already! Cause it’s all safe now, so we can leave whenever. Sakura wanted to make sure her parents were alright and stuff and everybody else went home so it’s just us now.”

Kakashi-sensei is, well, confined to his bed. Sasuke can understand why Naruto and Karin would rather stay here than return to an empty apartment, but Hinata…

She’s finishing off the last of her noodles, setting the bowl next to her and picking up another one, when she happens to meet Sasuke’s eyes and abruptly turns pink. The other genin fumbles, almost spilling the broth, and then ducks her head. “Sasuke,” she says quietly. “I’m sorry.”

Sasuke draws an absolute blank.

He glances at Naruto, hoping the other boy will have an answer, but Naruto looks just as lost as he is. Karin’s gaze is on Hinata, so no help there, and Sasuke awkwardly clears his throat. “Why?”

She looks at him, startled, and dojutsu meets dojutsu as he stares impatiently back. “Because…” Hinata sets the bowl aside, apparently too overcome, and buries her face in her hands. “I was too… too weak, I couldn’t…”

Oh, god, Sasuke doesn’t even want to deal with this remotely. Nope. Not at all.

He looks at Naruto and maybe he’s ridiculously transparent, or maybe Naruto just knows him that well – or both, whatever – but the blonde takes over. “Hinata, you’re not weak!” he says, and she peeks at him from between her fingers, face a deep red. “I mean, he beat that crazy-“ He stops, face
growing a little serious, and amends his words. “He killed Anko. So it’s not like you’re really weak or anything.”

Naruto shakes his head, resolute and bright, and Sasuke feels a knot in his chest he didn’t even register slowly, slowly unwinding. “Sometimes, we gotta… gotta fight people stronger,” he says, and his hand splays over his stomach, fingertips snagging in his jacket. (He does that a lot, Sasuke realizes, and he wonders if it’s a self-comforting thing.) “We gotta deal with… hard stuff sometimes, ya know? And maybe we won’t always do it good, but…”

He shrugs, and realizing every eye is on him, that even Kakashi has set his book aside, glances away with his cheeks darkening. “Dunno where I was going with that…” His hand rises, a finger dragging across his upper lip as he smiles sheepishly. “A-Anyway, I don’t think you’re weak, Hinata! You’re real strong! Kabuto was just even stronger so we gotta get even better together so we beat him next time!”

The idea of next time, of facing and fighting Kabuto once more, sends a shiver of… something down Sasuke’s spine, thrill or fear, but he pushes that emotion away for the time being. “What he said,” says Sasuke, and that startles a laugh out of the two Uzumakis.

He hides his small smile with another bite of noodles, and glances up at Hinata – she’s staring at Naruto, wide-eyed, a flush to her cheeks, but she relaxes, slowly, and gives him a shy smile. “Thank you, Naruto…” she says, and Sasuke’s heart pangs.

“Ah, no problem, ya know!” He rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, and with one more smile between the two, everyone resumes eating. It’s quiet but for the slurp of noodles – Naruto finishes first, then Karin, and Hinata is on her third bowl when Sasuke sets his aside.

“Kakashi-sensei,” he says, catching the attention of the man, who lifts a brow from behind his book. “Can I be-”

Sasuke doesn’t get to finish his sentence.

The door bangs open, and everyone except Kakashi and Karin jump – Hinata’s bowl of ramen nearly spills, and it’s only Sasuke’s quick reflexes, darting one hand out to steady it, that stop the other genin from getting covered in broth.

There’s a man standing in the doorway that Sasuke doesn’t recognize.

He’s tall, burly, and older – long white hair and red… clan markings? Tattoos? that trail from his eyes to his chin. The strange forehead protector that he wears doesn’t denote any village that Sasuke knows of, instead simply reading oil, and he’s already tensing up, ready for battle.

“Pervy Sage!” Naruto yells, leaping to his feet, and Sasuke freezes and then relaxes. Oh. The man that trained Naruto while preparing for the Chunin Exams. Naruto had mentioned him, that he was strong and powerful as well as a pervert (though, really, that could just mean he reads porn like Kakashi-sensei), but Sasuke had never gotten the chance to meet him.

“Naruto,” he says, but he says it calmly, sadly, and gives a small smile, setting a hand on the blonde’s head. “Hey, kid. Are you doing okay? Not hurt or anything?”

Naruto shakes his head. “Nah, I’m fine. I’m just here ‘cause of Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei.”

The man glances over at Kakashi-sensei, who gives him a respectful nod that the sage returns, and then flickers over to the other three. “Karin,” he says, who gives him an uneasy smile – she recognizes him, clearly. “You must be the Sasuke I’ve heard so much about,” the man says to
Sasuke, which makes Sasuke kind of really uncomfortable because what has Naruto been saying…? And as Naruto sputters in the background, he looks to the last member of their group. “And you are?”

She flushes, looking down at the ramen bowl in her hands. “Um. Hyuuga Hinata.”

“Ah, Hiashi’s kid,” he says, and when she flinches at that, the man turns back to Naruto. “Kid,” he says. “I need you to pack your bags. We’re going on a trip tomorrow, after the funeral.”


He puffs up a little at that. “To go get my teammate, Princess Tsunade! The other Legendary Sannin!”

Three kids stare at him blankly. Hinata doesn’t look up from her bowl of ramen. “Uh… who?” asks Karin after a second, and he deflates.

“You’ll meet her soon enough,” he says.

“Ah, Lord Jiraiya,” says Kakashi-sensei, and Sasuke is so glad to finally have a name to put with this strange man. “Why do you need my student?”

“Yeah, yeah!” asks Naruto, nodding vigorously. “Why d’you need me, Pervy Sage? I got stuff to do, ya know!”

Jiraiya completely ignores Naruto, turning towards Kakashi-sensei and folding his arms. “She’s not going to want to come willingly to be Hokage, you know that. So I need this kid here to help her convince me.”

Naruto… convincing someone else to be the Hokage?

Sasuke feels like he woke up in opposite world, or something. Would that make this Iwa?

Kakashi hmms, stroking his masked chin and considering it. “I suppose Naruto can go with you… if you take Sasuke as well.”

Wait, what?

“Wait, what?” both Naruto and Sasuke chorus at the same time, before exchanging confused glances with each other. Karin just looks plain uncomfortable in the background and Hinata looks like she wants to sink through the floor.

Jiraiya shrugs. “Sure, we can make it three,” he says, and then he straightens up with a grin and gives a little bizarre dance. “Great! You need to pack, brat, and then I, the great and gallant Sage-“

His dance has moved him back a few steps, and Naruto takes advantage of that to shut the door in his face. And then lock it.

The muffled cursing is great to hear, and even though Jiraiya tries the door and finds it locked and Sasuke knows he could easily break it down, he doesn’t, and they hear the fading clack of his footsteps.

Nobody wants to break things in the hospital, because that’s a one-way ticket to mednin hell.

“Kakashi-sensei!” exclaims Naruto, rounding on their bedridden teacher. “What the hell!? I don’t want to be alone with the Pervy Sage for a trip! He’s a pervert!”
Their teacher says exactly what Sasuke had been thinking. “Maa, Naruto, don’t you call me a pervert?” he asks, waving his little orange book gently in the air.

Naruto flushes but presses on. “Yeah, but- But- You just ready those books, he-“

“He called me flat-chested,” Karin says, very softly, and Kakashi-sensei’s smile wipes away immediately.

“He said what,” Kakashi-sensei says, and it’s… dangerous. It’s a dangerous sounding voice and the last time Sasuke heard that, he and the rest of Team 7 had been chased around by Kakashi-sensei’s dogs for an hour.

Naruto is either an idiot or obscenely brave (or both), because he presses on. “Yeah, yeah! And he kept perv ing over me in my Sexy Jutsu and wanted me to stay in it so he could see cause he’s gross and he kept peeping on these women in the baths and-“

The book in Kakashi-sensei’s hand lights on fire.

They all jolt, a little bit, staring at it, and it crumbles into ash in his hand. “Well,” he says, and his voice is so tightly leashed that Sasuke has no idea what to make of it. “I guess I need to find a new book series to read.”

Sasuke can’t make heads nor tails of any of that, except to agree that ew, Jiraiya is a serious pervert, and the other three stare at Kakashi-sensei just as wide-eyed. Naruto looks downright stunned. “E- Eh, Kakashi-sensei, you don’t gotta, the Pervy Sage is a really good teacher and stuff… He’s not all bad…”

Their teacher leans forward. “If you don’t want to go on a trip with him to get the next Hokage,” he says. “You don’t have to. I know Jiraiya wants you to, Naruto, but you don’t have to. Sasuke, I wanted you to go because with Kabuto on the loose and me…” He doesn’t finish it, and shakes his head. “You might not be able to leave the village safely for awhile. Jiraiya is powerful enough that you should be in no danger. But neither of you have to go with him – I would have said no, if you had told me about him earlier, Naruto.”

That’s.

The ‘power’ and ‘might not get out of Konoha for awhile’ cinches it for Sasuke, really.

Maybe this Jiraiya is a huge pervert – which it sounds like he is – but it’s not like they’re gonna be around girls anyway, so as long as Naruto doesn’t do his Sexy Jutsu they should be okay. “I’ll go,” Sasuke says.

Naruto whips around to stare at him, surprised, and then nods. “Y-Yeah, then I’m going, too!” he says.

Karin bites her lip. “I don’t think I want to go,” she says softly, and she looks so torn, like she’s betraying them by saying that, but Kakashi-sensei shakes his head.

“As your jounin sensei,” he says, and oh does she stare at him for that sentence, “I won’t let you go, anyway.” His eye crinkles into a smile. “You and Sakura can stay here with me – I’m sure we’ll find stuff to do.”

Karin returns the smile, very slightly. “Okay,” she says.
Hinata bows out almost immediately after that, taking all the empty ramen bowls with her, and Sasuke kinda feels bad. Just... a touch. Maybe. Because that was an awkward enough exchange and he was part of it, versus Hinata who was just an uncomfortable bystander.

Oh, well. She was the one who decided to stick around, after all.

As soon as she’s gone, Sasuke remembers to ask the question he had been about to ask before that whole... intrusion. “Kakashi-sensei,” he asks. “Can I leave?”

“Interesting question,” his teacher says, frowning thoughtfully under his mask. “Can you? Are you physically able to leave, Sasuke, or will someone need to carry-“

“Kakashi-sensei.”

The man has the gall to chuckle a little bit, smiling. “Yes,” he says. “You’re free to go.”

Naruto lets out a whoop, like he had been the one trapped in here, and grins. “Yes! Let’s get out of here, then!”

Karin smiles. “I need a change of clothes,” she says, honestly.

Sasuke’s about to feel bad for Kakashi-sensei, leaving him all alone like this, before he smiles. “Wait,” he says, and he glances around the room. Blankets are strewn everywhere, same with pillows, a bunch of snack wrappers scattered around as well. “You have to clean all this up, first.”

They all groan.

Chapter End Notes

jiraiya officially lands on the tippy top of the list for me in 'most difficult characters to write'. but honestly, like, an adult should react to that kind of thing like that??? what jiraiya does is not okay???

kakashi-sensei thank u for being a reasonable adult. im sure you'll find smth else to read.
“See you tomorrow,” says Naruto, as he and Karin head towards their apartment, and Sasuke gives them the barest hint of a nod as he traces the familiar path to the Uchiha Compound. The clear effects of battle are everywhere – scorch marks on buildings, walls caved in, the occasional stain of blood… but no bodies.

None, at all, and Sasuke is absurdly grateful to whatever cleanup crew made the rounds before they let people out on the streets.

The compound is untouched, though, and Sasuke pauses in the entrance. Not a single blade of grass has been disturbed – not a rock so much as touched. It’s as empty as ever, filled with nothing but ghosts, and he hunches his shoulders as he heads inside.

It’s a far cry from the warmth of the hospital, and he wonders at the fact that a hospital sounds welcoming, now.

“I’m home,” he says softly as he enters the house, toeing off his sandals by the door, but he doesn’t linger. He can’t. The weight of the silence feels too much, too much weighing down upon him, and he can’t even think about it, doesn’t want to.

Sasuke strips and showers, scrubbing his skin in the hot water until it’s raw and red, and then hunches down on the tiled floor and tries to just. Breathe. The beat of the water, the sting as each droplet hits him and the noise it makes as it clatters against the wall of the shower – it helps. It does. It’s something grounding, something that exists in this silent place, and when he gets off and dries himself off, he leaves the shower on.

It’s a good background noise for when he realizes he cannot wear his usual clothes, that he had been planning on doing laundry when he was done with exams but now he doesn’t have the mental ability or time to do that.

He tosses on a pair of grey shorts, because he does have those, and wanders out into the neighborhood to a few houses down. “I’m borrowing some clothes, Izumi-nee,” he calls out into the quiet house, and heads for her bedroom. She has a high-collared, sleeveless purple shirt that he pulls on, and it fits him pretty well.

She was his age when she died, after all.

The thought makes him shiver, sends tremors down his spine and he knows he needs to leave immediately.

He’s out before he even thinks about it. Out the door, out on the street, headed into the rest of Konoha. He can’t handle the silence, can’t handle the ghosts hanging over his shoulder, not after all the company he had had last night.

Of course, Sasuke has no idea where he’s going. He has no idea where Sakura’s house is. He was just at the hospital and doesn’t want to go crawling back to Kakashi-sensei. He just saw Naruto and Karin and how pathetic would it be if he told them he couldn’t even handle an hour of being alone-

“Sasuke?”
He turns, and it’s Ino. She looks tired – as Sasuke is sure all of them do – clad in simple black pants and an orange t-shirt. She’s holding a vase with flowers in it, and Sasuke stares at it for a moment before meeting Ino’s gaze. He’s not sure what she sees, but she sees something, and she gives him a small smile. “Want to walk with me? I’m going to visit Gaara.”

Okay, he’s interested, and he falls into step behind her as she leads the way, a path that Sasuke isn’t familiar with. “Gaara’s here?”

She nods. “We captured him and his team, and some other sand shinobi. I’m not sure what we’re going to do with him, since we don’t have a Hokage…”

Ino sounds worried, and Sasuke shrugs, glancing away. “We’re going to get her tomorrow,” he says. “Me and Naruto and the Sage, Jiraiya.”

Her eyes go wide. “Her? Princess Tsunade is going to be the next Hokage?”

Sasuke’s not sure how Ino knows who Tsunade is and Sasuke doesn’t… “Yeah.”

They don’t talk, after that, Ino leading the way to a completely nondescript building that Sasuke has passed by thousands of times and never thought twice of. It looks like a house, like a random average civilian is living there, and Ino knocks on the door.

A woman with short dark hair, a white bandana wrapped around her head, answers the door – she looks like a civilian. Like a plain, ordinary civilian, clad in a blue dress and without a headband in sight. “Ino,” she says, and she doesn’t sound surprised. “And Uchiha Sasuke. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Ino offers up the flowers, and the woman takes them. “Oyone, could you give these to Gaara? And tell him they’re from me. I know I can’t visit him yet, but…”

She smiles, just a little. “Of course. I’m sure he’ll appreciate it. Come by for dinner sometime, alright?”

Ino smiles back. “I will. I’ll make something for everyone tomorrow and have Dad bring it by.”

Oyone reaches out to pat Ino’s head. “You’re so sweet.” She gives Sasuke a respectful nod, and then shuts the door, leaving the two genin alone.

“…You go to T&I a lot?” he asks, and Ino shrugs, turning around. He follows her.

“Yeah. I mean, my dad’s one of the people in charge of it.”

“Huh.” That… explains how Ino had known who Tsunade was, especially if she was by a lot. It means that there’s a lot Ino could know that Sasuke doesn’t, and that thought is…

Ino glances at him, sidelong, and turns a little pink. “You know, uh, Sasuke…” Oh, god. He doesn’t want to deal with flirting. “I never actually had a crush on you.”

Sasuke actually stops dead in the middle of the street and stares at her. “You what.”

Her face darkens even further, and she stops as well, half-covering her face with her hand. “God, this is so embarrassing… It was just about, you know, being Sakura’s rival and stuff. She thought I had a crush, and so I… faked it.”

Sasuke has absolutely no idea what to say to this. “…You’re a very good actor,” he ends up saying,
which sounds stupid but is also true, and she gives an embarrassed laugh.

“Yeah, uh, thanks.” Ino coughs twice. “So! Now that you know I don’t actually like you like that – do you want to come over to my house for dinner?”

He stares at her.

She glances away, awkward. “It’s just gonna be me tonight, and… I dunno. I’d like it if we could be friends.”

Friends.

It sounds like a strange thing – it’s not like Sasuke has any real connections outside of his team, and so taking that leap is so different. Strange! But… he remembers how Sakura had reached out, reached out without even thinking and Team 10 had been so willing to go to bat for him that they had been the reason Asuma-sensei even found Sasuke in the first place…

“Alright,” he says.

Ino puts him to work as soon as they get to her house, so Sasuke guesses she really wasn’t kidding about the whole ‘not having a crush on him’ thing. They both cut up vegetables, and Ino cooks them over the stove and combines them with rice and a sauce that, as she says with a wink, is a “secret family recipe”, and then they both eat together in the kitchen.

There’s a family picture hanging above the stove, and Sasuke studies it while they eat.

There’s Ino, looking to be maybe five at most, the cropped blonde hair that he remembers she used to wear. An older boy with orange hair, a hand on Ino’s shoulder. A man that could only be Ino’s father, dark blonde hair and looking so similar to her, and another man, a brunette that is wholly unfamiliar.

Ino follows his gaze and smiles. “That’s my family,” she says. “My dads, me, and my cousin Fu. The blonde one is one of the heads of T&I, but my other dad specializes in undercover work – he’s on a long-term mission right now.”

She stops, at that, but Sasuke’s curious. “And your cousin?”

Ino stares at her plate. “He went missing,” she says. “Years ago. We never found him.”

“Oh,” says Sasuke, and they don’t speak after that.

He helps her clean up, to wash the dishes and put the rest the vegetables away in the fridge, and Ino gives him a glance. “You know,” she says. “If you want, you could spend the night.”

It’s a nice offer, but one he’d feel weird accepting. Really, really weird.

So Sasuke shakes his head, and she accepts that. “Ino,” he says, as he slips his sandals on at the door. “Do you know a lot of ANBU?”

Ino shrugs. “Maybe I do, maybe I don’t. Why?”

He hesitates, because he doesn’t want to and yet he does, but he should ask. He needs to ask. Sasuke realizes, now – his fellow genin would give their all for him, simply because he’s one of them. They’d give their all and even more, and he didn’t realize.
(He wonders if he would do the same.)

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he says, finally. “When I come back… do you think you could get… Kabuto’s file for me?”

Ino’s eyes go wide. “That’s- That’s illegal, Sasuke! What you’re asking me to do is illegal, you know that, right?”

Sasuke meets her eyes. “I know,” he says.

She stares at him, meets his gaze for a long moment, and he wonders if this was too much of a risk, but she shakes her head. “I’ll do my best,” she says.

He nods, and opens the door, and she reaches out and touches his arm. “Sasuke.” He glances back, and she smiles. “I know it’s late, but happy birthday.”

…Huh. She’s… right. That was a thing that happened, about a week ago.

“Thank you,” Sasuke says softly, and then he goes.

He feels more at peace now. He’s not sure why.

Maybe he just needed to interact with someone, needed to have a conversation with someone and breathe. Maybe he needed the reminder (again, he seems to need this reminder a lot) that there are others, outside of his team, who are willing to support him. Maybe he had simply been *hangry*, and now that he had eaten he was feeling better. It could be any or all of those.

Sasuke traces the familiar path back to the compound, and the ghosts don’t feel as heavy, now.
Everything feels a little lighter, and a small smile curves at his mouth as he steps inside. “I’m home,” he says, and his voice echoes into the silence, but that’s okay.

He goes to the fridge, pulling out a tomato so he can wash it and eat, just a little bit more food before he passes out, when he realizes.

It’s quiet.
That’s the norm – that’s how it always is. It’s always quiet here, but something about that is off. Something seems strange. Something’s abnormal.

Sasuke drops the tomato and bolts to the bathroom.

*The shower’s off.*

He stands in the doorway to the room, trembling slightly. He left it on, he knows he did, and now it’s off. Someone was here. Someone- Someone turned it off.

Even if it was an ANBU stopping in and turning it off to save water, the idea of someone being in his house makes him want to throw up. No one goes to his house. The only person that’s been in his house aside from him was… was…

Kabuto.

He turns his head, oh-so-slowly. There’s a senbon in the wall, next to his bathroom mirror.

No – it’s not just a senbon. It’s more than that. It’s dozens of them, carefully marking out a statement
that haunts his nightmares.

_You’re one of them_, reads the wall, and Sasuke stumbles forward, lurches to touch it and make sure it’s real and not a figment of his deranged imagination, that he’s not losing it again, and he kicks something across the floor.

He looks down, and it’s his sword.

The blade is out, and the boy reaches down to pick it up by the handle, turning it slightly so it glints in the harsh lights of the bathroom, and it’s red.

Blood red.

_Anko’s_ blood red.

Sasuke drops the blade and _screams_.

Chapter End Notes

guess yamato-sensei doesn’t have to get him that new sword after all! : D

as always, you can find me on grellsuke on tumblr! thank you so much for all of your lovely comments, i adore them all!
Sakura is grateful her mom and dad are more happy that she’s safe and sound, for the moment. They had asked after her bandages, of course, pressed that she really was okay, and her dad had gotten that thin-pinched look in his face that he gets when he thinks about her and being in danger, but they hadn’t pressed.

Right now, the Harunos are more happy that everyone is safe. They can deal with the other things later.

She locks her door carefully, and makes sure that her window is locked and her curtains are 100% drawn. No one can look in. No one can get in. It’s just her.

Sakura strips down to her underwear – takes off even her bandages! - and stares at herself in the mirror.

She has a scar like a bolt of lightning. It flows from one hand to the her hips, wrapping around her waist, and when she scrubs off her concealer, even flows up the right side of her chest to climb her neck and cheek, stopping right below her eye. It’s… kind of pretty, a little bit, or would be if it were a tattoo and not a scar, but that’s not quite what concerns her.

Her arms are an absolute mess of scar tissue.

Sakura’s skin is thick, coarse, rough in a way that even Ino’s precious lotion won’t fix no matter how many times she applies it again and again, and it’s so keenly visible it makes her feel so horrific she doesn’t even have words. It’s ugly. It’s terrible. It feels so horrible and-

“You might never regain your dexterity in your hands,” says the nurse, eyes so sympathetic and so soft. “It will be far more difficult for you to hold weapons from now one. And your chakra… you’ll have to come back in a few days so we can properly test, the pills you took and your lack of chakra right now are interfering, but you may have messed up your chakra control.”

It was the one, SINGLE thing that Sakura had going for her. The one single fucking thing.

She was useless in every single thing else, but she had literally pinpoint perfect chakra control, and if the nurse was right… if she’s right and Sakura screwed up her own biggest selling point, screwed up the one thing that she could actually do-

There’s a knock on her window.

Sakura jerks in surprise, and fumbles, yanking her robe out of her closet to throw it on and then fumbling around in the very bottom for a too-small pair of gloves she uses on the rare occasions it gets too cold here – she hasn’t used them in years, and they’re old and kind of smelly and definitely too small, but they cover up her hands. She thinks for one more moment, and pulls on some high socks to cover the bottoms of her legs, an insistent tapping on her window her background noise, before she pulls back her curtain.

Naruto is hanging on her window.

She stares, because uh, what, and he waves frantically with one hand, like he doesn’t already have
her attention. "Sakura!" he yells, slightly muffled through the glass. "You gotta get to the hospital! Kabuto was at Sasuke’s place!"

Every ounce of blood drains from her face. "What? Is Sasuke okay? What happened?"

Naruto shakes his head. "I dunno, he came by while Sasuke was gone and he’s fine, but we gotta have a team meeting right now!"

She nods. "I’ll get dressed and be right there."

His face flushes darker, likely just realizes that she’s in her robe, and his eyes flicker away. "U-Uh, right! See you then!" He poofs out of existence – a clone. Makes sense.

She throws on long pants and a long-sleeve shirt, making sure to wrap up her hands with bandages as well as her feet, tosses on her sandals and bolts out the door. "Kakashi-sensei needs me, bye Mom, bye Dad!" she yells, and she’s gone before they can say anything.

It’s almost dinner time – her family tends to eat pretty late, and Sakura is definitely hungry, but that’s not something to focus on, not now. Not when Sasuke’s in trouble and needs her.

She doesn’t even bother to go through the front door, running up the side of the building so she can knock on the window that she knows is Kakashi-sensei’s. Her chakra control is fine in her feet, at least, and that’s something to bolster her – or maybe it’s just because she’s running on dregs right now.

Sakura knocks on the window twice and Naruto lets her in, looking a mix of relieved and worried. She climbs in with a “Hey,” and surveys the situation. Kakashi-sensei is still in bed – is he… going to be stuck there forever? A frightening thought – and Karin and Sasuke both have chairs. He’s got her hand in a death grip, and they both look rattled. Shaken. Terrified. In Sasuke’s other hand, he clutches a sword, and none of this adds up to a story to Sakura.

She turns to Kakashi-sensei. “What happened?”

He tells her.

Bile climbs up in the back of her throat, but she just barely manages to hold it in. Sasuke coming home to that message… “What does it mean?” she asks.

Naruto frowns. “You’re one of them…”

“Kabuto said it,” Sasuke rasps. Everyone turns to look at him, but he’s staring straight ahead, staring at the wall, Karin’s hand in his own. “Similar. Anko said Konoha didn’t experiment on children, and he said they did, and he said ‘I am one of them’.”

Kakashi-sensei goes pale under his mask. “Sasuke,” he says, and he says it very cautiously. “You haven’t been…”

He shakes his head, just slightly. “No. So I don’t understand.”

Their teacher nods slowly. “Everyone, huddle in.” Sakura and Naruto exchange surprised glances, but dutifully approach his bed. Karin pulls Sasuke to his feet, and he sways and drops the sword with a clatter, but lets himself be pulled over. He manages to meet Kakashi-sensei’s gaze, even though he looks almost completely out of it, and their teacher sighs.

“There are factions here that I can’t explain,” he says. “Not because I don’t want to – but we don’t
They’re still. All four of them, because- because- what?

“You can trust your fellow rookies and their teachers,” he tells them. “As well as Gai and his team. You can trust Jiraiya, Yamato, and Iruka-sensei – but don’t trust anyone else. If I or someone else sends a different person to speak with you that you should be able to trust…” He frowns, just a little. “Do you remember what I told you, on the day you became my team? Something that you should keep in mind always?”

“Yes,” all four of them answer, even Karin, and Sakura does remember Naruto eagerly informing her of that at one point because ‘You’re part of Team Seven, now!’

Kakashi-sensei relaxes, just a little. “They’ll tell you it. Only trust someone if they say it – only then. Use it as a password if you’re not sure it’s not someone else in disguise. I’ll pass it along among everyone else you can trust.”

Naruto looks frightened. Sakura is sure that she does, and Sasuke and Karin haven’t stopped looking frightened this entire time. “Kakashi-sensei,” he says, so softly, uncertainly. “Is this about…”

He doesn’t finish his words, but Kakashi-sensei seems to understand. “No, Naruto.” His gaze softens, and he looks at all of them. “You’re my students,” he says. “Remember what I told you, in Wave? I don’t let my comrades die.”

“Sasuke, Karin, Naruto, Sakura… You’re all my cute little genin, and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Sakura thinks of the way her hands don’t hold things right, now, thinks of the faraway look in Sasuke’s eyes and the blood on his sword, the way Karin’s now wearing gloves and Naruto’s quiet question, and knows that Kakashi-sensei is only human.

Kakashi-sensei asks Naruto to linger, and the three of them head out into the hallway, where Yamato-sensei is. He’s holding two packs in his hands, and he offers one to Sasuke. “I hope you don’t mind,” he says, “But I packed your bags for you. We’re leaving in just a few minutes.”

“We?” asks Sasuke, as he manages to let go of Karin’s hand to take the bag (his other once more wrapped firmly around the sword).

Yamato-sensei nods. “Yes. I’m going with you.”

Wait – Sakura frowns, confused. “Where are you going?” she asks.

Sasuke doesn’t seem inclined to answer, instead pulling on his pack, and so Karin turns to Sakura. “Naruto and Sasuke are going with Yamato-sensei and Jiraiya to get the next Hokage,” she says.

Why can’t she come? Sakura is literally about to voice that exact thought when her mind catches up with her, circling one single name on that list: Jiraiya. Oh, no, she’s okay not going then. That’s fine. Okay.

The door slides open behind them, and Naruto emerges. He takes his pack easily, and then turns to Sasuke. “You know, I was wondering – why are you wearing a dress?”

Sakura frowns, and takes a closer look, and huh, Sasuke kinda is. She had only really seen purple, before, but he’s wearing a short qipao dress that’s kind of similar to her previous one. No sleeves, a
solid purple and no zipper with long grey shorts underneath – it looks good on him (though, honestly, Sasuke could probably look good even in Lee’s jumpsuit), but yeah, why is he wearing it?

He blinks twice, slowly and shrugs. “I didn’t realize that’s what I grabbed… I don’t really care.”

“It looks good on you,” Sakura tells him, and Naruto nods next to her.

“Yeah, yeah! I like the purple!”

He looks at them all like they’re crazy, like he can’t even believe that this is what they’re discussing right now (okay seriously Sasuke if she thinks about the actual problem they’re facing right now she’s going to scream), but a line of tension leaves his shoulders. “Hn,” Sasuke mutters, shaking his head. “Whatever.”

They head to the gates, the five of them, after saying their goodbyes to Kakashi-sensei, and Sakura glances over at Naruto. “Hey, Naruto,” she asks. “What was that about?”

He looks back at her, surprised. “What was what, Sakura?”

“You know… you asked Kakashi-sensei about something. And then he asked you to stay behind.”

“Oh. That.” Naruto grows quiet for a second, and he looks down. “He… When I get back,” Naruto says. “I have something to tell you.”

“Okay,” Sakura says, and she really wonders what it is. She glances down at her hands, and… by the time they get back, she’ll have gone back for tests. She’ll know, for sure, if she’s turned herself into a complete failure of a ninja. “When you get back,” she says. “I’ll have something to tell you, too.”

“Okay,” says Naruto, and they share a smile.

Sakura gives them both hugs at the gate. Naruto returns the hug eagerly, squeezing her back and lifting her off the ground, and they hold it for maybe a touch too long. “You be careful,” she tells him, very seriously. “You look after Sasuke for us.”

“I promise.”

Karin trades off and goes to hug her cousin, and Sakura approaches Sasuke slowly and wraps her arms around him. For a second, she doesn’t think he’s going to hug back, but he slowly, slowly lifts his hands and curls them in the back of her shirt. “Stay safe, Sasuke,” she tells him. “And look out for Naruto for us. You know he can’t figure anything out alone.”

That startles a small snort from him, and he exhales heavily into her shoulder. “I will,” he says, very quietly. “You don’t have to worry about us. We’ll be okay.”

“It’s my job to worry,” Sakura says, but she leaves it at that.

The four of them head off. Jiraiya leading the way, his sandals clacking cheerily with every step. Yamato-sensei hangs back, a shield against any that may come up from behind. Naruto and Sasuke are in the middle, and as she watches, Sakura sees Naruto reach over and take Sasuke’s hand. He doesn’t pull away, and after a moment, Sakura mimics the action and takes Karin’s gloved hand in her own.
They stand there, the two girls left behind, watching the four disappear into the orange of a sunset, and then Sakura lets out a ragged exhale. “Come on, Karin,” she says, and turns to the other girl with a smile. “Want to have dinner at my house?”

Chapter End Notes

aaand the aftermath arc is a wrap! the search for tsunade is next - and boy oh boy, that'll be a fun one. i thought we were going to have two chapters to finish off this arc, but everything i wanted to do ended up fitting into one, so here we are!

i have two gifts for you today, two playlists! from the corner of your eye - side a and from the corner of your eye - side b. i hope you like them!

as always, you can find me at chadsuke on tumblr! thanks so much for reading!
Naruto reaches out to take Sasuke’s hand, giving it a squeeze, and Sasuke’s okay with that. He had been holding Karin’s hand, earlier, and Naruto’s slots right into play where hers had been, warm and steady and something to focus on, to try to stem the tide of panic that threatens to overwhelm him.

Sasuke glances down at their conjoined hands – and almost makes an attempt to say something, almost gets words out, but Naruto speaks before he has to. “Hey, hey, Pervy Sage!” he yells cheerfully, as if the last time he hadn’t seen the man he didn’t immediately turn around and begin listing all of his bad traits. “Why’d you want me to go on your trip with you, huh? Why’d you choose me?”

That’s a really good question, actually. Sasuke can understand why Kakashi-sensei would send him along, but why did Jiraiya pick Naruto?

The white-haired man hmms, as if considering it. “Well,” he says, “I taught the Yondaime. And you look a lot like him – that’s all.”

Naruto’s smile has frozen on his face, and in fact, slowly slips away, and Sasuke nudges him slightly. “Naruto?” he murmurs, not wanting to make a scene.

His teammate shakes his head. “Later,” he says, and okay, Sasuke will let that be.

He needs to remember to ask, though, if Naruto doesn’t, and ask as soon as possible. He hadn’t gotten the secrets of the Sharingan from Kakashi-sensei before they left, hadn’t gotten a moment to figure out how Kakashi-sensei made the first Hokage disappear like that.

“Ya know,” Naruto says, remarkably recovering as if he had never had that moment of weakness in the first place, “If I’m as cool as the Yondaime, that means you’re gonna teach me a technique, right, Pervy Sage?”

The man gives Naruto an absolutely done look. (Sasuke relates.) “How many times do I gotta tell you it’s Jiraiya, Jiraiya! Not Pervy Sage! I’m a Sannin!”

“A what,” says Naruto.

Yamato-sensei, quiet behind them, thankfully cuts in. “The Sannin are a legendary team of Shinobi that were taught by the third Hokage,” he says, smiling down at the two of them. “Lord Jiraiya, Orochimaru, and Princess Tsunade are three of the Sannin.”

Sasuke can’t remember if he already knew this or didn’t – really, everything’s sort of jumbled up in his brain right now – but it’s new information to Naruto, and he nods thoughtfully. “So Princess Tsunade’s the one we’re getting, right? She’s gonna be the next Hokage?”

“Yes!” says Jiraiya, spinning around so he’s walking backwards and facing them. “Because if we
don’t get her, they’ll make me be the Hokage.”

Naruto looks terribly unimpressed. Sasuke feels about the same. “You’d be a terrible Hokage,” says the blonde, and he speeds up to walk right by Jiraiya, tugging Sasuke along with him. Yamato chuckles softly behind them and slips by as well, so it’s Jiraiya in the rear.

Better, probably, and Sasuke manages to find his words. “Yamato-sensei,” asks Sasusuke, since Jiraiya wasn’t really responding, “Will you teach us a jutsu?”

Yamato glances away, shifting uncomfortably. “Ah, well…”

Naruto lights up, twisting to beam up at him. “Yeah, yeah, Yamato-sensei! Teach us some jutsu! Come on!”

He pulls one of those faces. Sasuke is used to Yamato-sensei being… mildly frightening at times, and lets the ice run down his spine but keeps his composure. Naruto, however, has never seen Yamato-sensei pull one of these faces, and staggers back a step, terror in his eyes. “Say. Please,” says Yamato-sensei, and Naruto nods frantically.

“Uh- Uh- Please, Yamato-sensei, teach us a jutsu!”

Immediately, the shadows and terror disappears and their teacher smiles gently at them. “Of course I’ll teach you a jutsu,” he says, and Jiraiya just laughs in the back.

It’s not a very complex jutsu that Yamato-sensei teaches them, and in fact, is not an offensive jutsu at all. “Sometimes,” he says, “You need to see in a dark place and you won’t have anything else. It’s a good one to have in your head.”

All it is is a simple ball of light, hovering over your palm. Sasuke concentrates as they walk, and in fact, the growing darkness does seem to help him focus, but it’s difficult. He manages to get a ball of light, but it flickers, doesn’t stay steady, and definitely doesn’t rise into the air over his palm, instead sitting on it and stinging a little.

Naruto doesn’t even manage that, which means his awful chakra control is still a thing, and really, how ridiculous is it that Naruto can make such a ridiculous amount of clones and yet not create a simple ball of-

“Hey,” Naruto says, interrupting Sasuke’s train of thought. “Can we stop here?”

There’s a shrine on the road, a very simple one with two bells, and Naruto doesn’t even wait for an answer before he’s bolting up the stairs, dragging Sasuke along with him. “Since we’re gonna miss the Hokage’s funeral,” he says quietly when he gets to the top, and finally releases Sasuke’s hand.

Oh. Oh.

Sasuke stares up at the bells, and then closes his eyes, clapping his hands together. Lord Hokage, he thinks. I’m sorry I doubted you. There’s a million more things that come to mind, a million more, but he doesn’t know how to articulate them, how to form them into coherent thoughts.

He hadn’t trusted the Hokage, and yet the Hokage had given his life for the entire village. And he hadn’t… he hadn’t known Anko-sensei, yet she had given her life for his. I would make the same decision, Kurenai-sensei’s voice echoes in his head, from just the other night, and it’s still so hard to believe.
That so many would be willing to... and yet, would Sasuke give his life for another? Would he really?

Naruto turns at him, smiles at him, and Sasuke gives him a small smile back as the blonde goes to cheerfully ring one of the bells. Yes, he would.

He already had, even before he really knew his team – and now, there’s not a single doubt in his mind.

By the time they reach Shukuba Town, it’s dark. Sasuke’s managed to get the ball of light to hover above his palm consistently, but it still flickers or dulls into darkness. Naruto managed a burst of light that blinded Sasuke for several minutes (which Sasuke had punched him for, once he could see again), but other than that, hasn’t managed anything. It’s okay.

Yamato-sensei leads the way to a decent looking inn, and Jiraiya takes a look, nods, and then gives them all a jaunty wave. “I’ll be back!” he announces with a grin, and runs off into town.

Yeah, uh, Sasuke really doesn’t want to think about what the ‘Pervy Sage’ is going to be doing tonight.

“A room with two beds, please,” Yamato-sensei requests. He glances back at the two of them. “You don’t mind sharing, right?”

Sasuke silently shakes his head and Naruto shrugs. “It’s fine, it’s fine!” he says, rocking back on his heels. “We did it yesterday, anyway.”

Yamato-sensei nods at that, and turns back to the receptionist, taking his key, and leading the way. “We’ll leave Lord Jiraiya to figure out his own room,” he says with a thin smile, and Sasuke snorts, Naruto giggles. Serves that pervert right.

Naruto grabs the shower first – Sasuke doesn’t need it, he just washed that morning – and ends up getting water all over the floor. Sasuke uses the blonde’s dirty shirt to mop it all up so he can brush his teeth and change into his usual t-shirt and sweatpants for sleeping, and when he emerges, Naruto’s sitting on his bed in his pajamas, meditating.

Yamato-sensei’s nowhere in sight. “Where’s Yamato-sensei?” Sasuke asks, since that seems to be the pertinent question.

“She’s right back,” Naruto says, opening his eyes. “And he’s like, keeping an eye on us or something, I dunno, but he said we don’t gotta worry about getting attacked or nothin’ while he’s gone.”

Sasuke hadn’t exactly been thinking about being attacked, but okay, that’s good to hear. He sits on the bed next to Naruto, since they’re sharing and everything, and focuses on the other so he doesn’t have to think about the storm in the back of his mind. “What was wrong, earlier?” he asks, because he made sure he wouldn’t forget.

Naruto looks away, focuses down on his lap. “Today, before... we left, Kakashi-sensei talked to me, yeah?” Sasuke nods. It was just a few hours ago. He remembers. “He wanted to talk to me about two things. I...”

He doesn’t really know what to do, what to say, so he leans in and sort of gently bumps Naruto’s shoulder with his own. The blonde looks up, startled, and then smiles just a bit before glancing back down to his lap. “He, um... My parents. He told me about my parents.”
Naruto takes a deep breath, inhales and exhales. “The Old Man… he made it a law, that I couldn’t
know. So Kakashi-sensei, he… he told me before we get another Hokage, just in case she, ya know,
makes it illegal, too.”


“My mom… her name was Uzumaki Kushina,” Naruto says. “She was from Uzushio, ya know.
Makes sense, I guess… And my Dad.” He takes another deep breath, and Sasuke has to wonder
what’s so hard about this, why is this so difficult, but – he always knew his family, knows them far
too well. “My dad was the fourth Hokage.”

“What,” says Sasuke.

That startles a little laugh out of Naruto, and he curls his hand in his hair, his other hand curling in his
shirt, right over his stomach. “Yeah. He was… he was Kakashi-sensei’s teacher, too, did ya know
that? Kakashi-sensei was taught by my Dad… And my Mom, she…” He hesitates, here, hunches in
on himself. “She had a demon in her, like how Gaara does.”

Sasuke isn’t stupid. Sasuke, is in fact, extremely intelligent.

Naruto’s mom had a demon in her. Naruto lives alone, doesn’t know anything about his family (or
didn’t, until now), and most of the adults in the village aren’t pleasant to him. He has a crazy amount
of chakra, has a secret that Kakashi-sensei knows but that Sasuke doesn’t, and his Dad died
defeating the Kyuubi and Naruto was born almost 13 years ago in the same month the Kyuubi attacked-

“It’s in you now,” Sasuke says, and it isn’t a question. It’s a statement and from the way that Naruto
flinches, he realizes that, realizes that Sasuke knows now and there’s no taking back a secret like that.
He takes in the way that Naruto hunches in on himself, the way he holds himself and how he can’t
even look up to meet Sasuke’s eyes, and does the only logical thing.

He tackles Naruto.

Naruto yelps and struggles and they wrestle for a moment and fall off the bed, where Sasuke pins
Naruto the ground, sitting on his stomach and holding down his arms. “Idiot,” he says, and when
Naruto just stares up at him with wide-eyed, he lets go of his arms, but doesn’t get up. “Do you
really think I care? You really think – what, I’m going to tell you to leave?”

The blonde opens his mouth and Sasuke shakes his head. “Shut up. Moron. Of course you think that,
stupid.”

He leans over, until there’s only inches between their faces. “You’re still the same idiot you’ve
always been, Naruto,” Sasuke says, meeting his gaze. “So shut up.”

That’s when he rolls off Naruto, shoving off of the other boy to flop on the floor next to him,
sprawled on his back. They’re both breathing a little hard, not too much, not exhausted or sweating
but just worked up. “…Thanks, Sasuke,” Naruto says, after a second. “You’re…” Sasuke glances at
him sidelong, and Naruto turns his head to meet his gaze, and maybe there’s a hint of a flush to
Naruto’s face, but he plows on. “You’re my best friend, bastard.”

“Hn.” He looks away, a blush rising in his face even as Naruto tangles their hands together again.

“…Same, dead last.”
yay, now sasuke knows! it's honestly either ride or die with those two. either they're each other's best friends and right there every step of the way, throwing themselves into danger... or they're trying to kill each other, and STILL being best friends. christ. take a chill pill, small children.

anyway, thanks so much for reading! this is a nice good start to our search for tsunade arc, and the events are... definitely gonna be a bit interesting, compared to canon. you'll see.

thanks again, and you can as per usual find me at chadsuke on tumblr, where i take drabble prompts! thanks so much!
Sasuke wakes the next morning with Naruto clinging tight to him like a limpet. The blonde’s arms are wrapped around his waist, head nuzzled into his back, and Sasuke can’t not blush, prying the other boy’s hands off of him – he rolls over and immediately snags a pillow to squeeze in his grasp, and geeze, Naruto’s a cuddler.

Someone snorts, amused, and Sasuke looks up to see a fully-dressed Yamato-sensei, sitting cross-legged on his bed with a small cup of coffee. “Sleep well?” he asks. “You two had a good talk last night.”

He hadn’t come back to the room before they passed out, so how- “…You were right by us the whole time, weren’t you,” Sasuke says bluntly, narrowing his eyes. He thought it was suspicious that Yamato-sensei would go off so easily and leave the two of them alone, and his teacher’s smile grows a little bigger.

“Maybe,” he says. “But I wasn’t eavesdropping.”

Sasuke really, really doubts that. They’re ninja. Eavesdropping is kind of what they do. Still, he appreciates the gesture, and he gets up and grabs his pack to head to the bathroom to get ready. It seems like Yamato-sensei had taken his cue from Sasuke’s clothes yesterday and also raided Izumi’s house – but fortunately, Yamato-sensei hadn’t packed dresses. (Not… really his thing?)

Pulling on black shorts, and a high collared purple sleeveless shirt, he rummages around for a moment and is pleased when he comes out with purple arm warmers – he hadn’t worn any yesterday, and his arms had felt cold and bare.

Naruto is still sleeping when he leaves the room, and Sasuke rolls his eyes and shoves his teammate out of bed. He hits the ground with a loud thump and yelps, springing to his feet and staring around wildly in confusion. “Get ready,” Sasuke says, impatiently, and Naruto’s eyes snap to him. “We’re wasting time.”

“Bastard-!” He lunges, and the two of them waste even more time tussling on the floor before Yamato-sensei sighs and grabs Naruto by the collar, hauling him into the air.

“Naruto,” he says, and he pulls his scary Yamato-sensei face once more. The boy gulps in fear. “Go get ready. We’re waiting on you.”

“R-Right, Yamato-sensei,” Naruto stutters out, and when he’s released, he jumps for his pack and hauls the whole thing into the bathroom with him.

Sasuke shakes his head, shoving himself up off the floor and turns to his teacher. “Yamato-sensei,” he asks. “Where are we going?”

The man takes a sip of his coffee – not a drop has been disturbed. “There’s a nearby festival,” he says. “It’s going on for a few weeks, and we believe that Princess Tsunade will appear there. She likes to gamble, and there will be plenty of opportunity.”

A… gambling princess? As their Hokage? Powerful or not, Sasuke grimaces – that’s not something he’s too keen on. Still, Kakashi-sensei is fine and he really likes porn… or liked porn, he guesses,
since he burned that book…

Naruto comes barreling out of the bathroom in what are probably his clothes from yesterday, nearly falling over from the weight of his bag but catching himself and snapping to attention. “Ready to go!” he crows, and Sasuke rolls his eyes, picking up his bag, and follows Yamato-sensei out the door.

Jiraiya is waiting at the entrance to the inn, leaning against the doorframe and yawning, and Sasuke eyes him critically before letting his gaze sweep around the entryway. Naruto’s already pestering his teacher about something, while Yamato-sensei speaks with the receptionist, and-

There’s a calendar on the wall, and it’s August.

Sasuke stares at it for a moment. He doesn’t keep track of the days – there’s no point, really. Especially since before this year, he was in school with a regular schedule and Iruka-sensei kept track of all that for him. There was never any need to pay attention.

“Something wrong, kid?” Jiraiya asks, and Sasuke turns his gaze on the white-haired man and shakes his head – he looks dubious, but lets it go as Yamato-sensei approaches them.

Somehow, he missed a whole month. It went by without him even realizing, without even looking, without- without anything. Time is slipping away.

He’s been thirteen for a little over two weeks now. Huh.

It’s raining as they walk, and Sasuke starts working on the ball of light jutsu once more, determined to get it right, but Naruto is decidedly more somber. He glances over, and the blonde is staring at the sky. “I wonder if they’ve started the funeral for the Old Man yet,” he says quietly, and Sasuke’s heart catches.

That’s… that’s right. He had forgotten, because he had paid his respects at the shrine yesterday, but the third Hokage’s funeral is today.

The boy lets his ball of light flicker away, hand dropping, and focuses on the click-clack of Jiraiya’s sandals in front of him. The Hokage gave his life to stop Orochimaru – gave his life to stop the man who wanted Sasuke, oh so very badly. (And still he wonders why, because if the snake-man had wanted him why hadn’t he just taken him in the Forest of Death? If he had wanted his eyes, why hadn’t he just plucked them from his skull?) And Anko…

He remembers the last time Konoha had had a mass funeral.

It hadn’t been the Uchihas – there had been no public funeral for his clan, because Sasuke had been in no fit state for anything at the time and they had had to try to figure out who and how before he woke and-

There was no funeral for the Uchihas.

The last mass funeral that Sasuke remembers was a little after the slaughter of his clan – it happened when he was ten years old. There had been a fire in the households of the Kurama clan, and it had killed the head, his wife, and a few others. He remembers their daughter, who had attended the Academy once but not anymore, standing alone apart from all the others, and remembers the way they had a neatly lined row of pictures of every lost member.

He wonders if they have a picture of Anko, a picture of her, of Anko-sensei sitting up there next to
the Hokage, and Sasuke hopes she’s smiling in that picture, that that’s the last image everyone has of her. The clouds part, then, as if on cue – a single ray of sunshine spitting out and he stops in the warmth, closes his eyes.

“Sasuke?” Naruto asks, and he opens them to see that the other boy has stopped as well, right in front of him.

“It’s nothing,” Sasuke says.

The weather has fully cleared up by the time they reach the festival, and Yamato-sensei lets both of them retrieve their wallets and then shoos them away, taking their packs for himself. “Jiraiya and I will look for Princess Tsunade,” he tells them, smiling – and it’s strange to see a smile, and not just the crinkles in the corner of Kakashi-sensei’s eyes. “You two go have fun – I think you need a day of it.”

Maybe they do, Sasuke concedes, and given how Naruto lights up, grabs Sasuke’s hand and hauls off in the direction of the nearest stall, he’s okay with this.

He doesn’t want to think about death, today, or even how he needs to get stronger or any of that, he just-

He can’t remember the last time he just breathed.

Naruto’s all excited about the food, and Sasuke ends up trying a million different things that day, even if he refuses to try the sweets. “I don’t like them,” he tells his teammate, even though that nearabout makes Naruto tear out his hair because how can ANYONE not like SWEETS Sasuke that’s a CRIME-

Sasuke buys sweets at the next stand and gives them to Naruto and it works at making him shut up.

When they’ve both eaten their fill, it’s time to hit the games – most are fairly easy, because they’re ninjas and not the weak civilian playing most of the games, and Naruto’s over the moon. He wins a mask and trips over his feet while wearing it. A rubber kunai goes right in his pocket, despite Sasuke’s logic of “Idiot, you have real kunai,” and he’s more than pleased with the rice-stuffed frog he gets for hitting all the right targets.

Naruto tries seven times to catch a stupid goldfish, though, before Sasuke rolls his eyes, shoves him over, and wins one handily. Okay, it takes him three tries, but he wins Naruto the stupid goldfish and he beams at him. “Thanks, Sasuke! I’ve always wanted a pet, but my landlady won’t let me. But she can’t ban fish!”

Sasuke is pretty sure that actually, she could, but he doesn’t say anything to ruin his mood, simply shrugs and sticks his hands in his pockets. “Hn.”

His teammate isn’t phased by his response, grabbing him by the upper arm and dragging him over to the next game. Naruto’s hand is warm on his arm, nice, and Sasuke doesn’t pull away.

He thinks this is definitely a date.

He’s not sure if he cares.

It’s late in the evening – a long day of just… eating and enjoying themselves – that Yamato-sensei finds them. He leans over them at the stall and smiles. “Make that four kebabs total, please,” and both
kids whirl around to see him and Jiraiya right behind them.

Jiraiya laughs. “Need to work on your sensing skills, kids,” he says, and Sasuke looks away because he’s right and he kind of hates it.

“Hey, hey, did you find the princess?” asks Naruto with excitement, and both of the adults frown.

“No,” Yamato-sensei says, “Unfortunately not.”

The stall owner gives them their kebabs and Yamato-sensei pays for their three – pulling the scary face when Jiraiya tries to walk away to cow him into paying, too – and Sasuke is the one to speak up. Today has been enjoyable, but if it’s going to take them awhile to find Princess Tsunade… he doesn’t want to waste that time. “Yamato-sensei,” he asks. “Are we going to help you look tomorrow?”

His teacher shakes his head. “No. Jiraiya and I will set you up to train tomorrow, and we’ll keep looking.”

Alright. That’s an acceptable compromise, Sasuke thinks.

Jiraiya has a jutsu planned for Naruto that involves water balloons that honestly Sasuke is pretty interested in witnessing, but Yamato-sensei pulls him away before he gets a really good look at it. “Come on,” Yamato-sensei says. “We’re going to spar – I want to work on your swordsmanship.”

Sasuke stares at him like he’s insane. “Yamato-sensei,” he says. “We just spent a month on this.”

He’s dead serious, though. “If you’re so certain you know this,” his teacher tells him, “Then come at me and prove it.”

Yamato-sensei draws his sword, and fine, if it has to be that way, Sasuke can prove it. He pulls out his sword, swiping his hand over the seal to draw out the blade of the sword, and decidedly doesn’t look at it. Right. Right. He can do this.

Darting forward with full speed, Sasuke brings his sword down on his teacher and Yamato-sensei pulls his up and they clash, right in front of Sasuke’s eyes. It means he has to look. It means he has to see his sword, see it right in front of his eyes and-

It’s red red red with blood and Sasuke jerks back and drops the sword and staggers to the side to dry heave, hands on his knees. It’s red with her blood, red red red and he- he-

Yamato-sensei sets a hand on his shoulder, and Sasuke flinches, but all his teacher does is rub his back soothingly. “Sasuke,” he says. “I can get you a different sword.”

Sasuke’s already shaking his head before he finishes his sentence. “No,” the genin says, because he doesn’t think it will make a difference because it’s not actually stained with her blood, not anymore and Yamato-sensei gave him this sword, this was going to be the sword he made chunin with, and-

It feels wrong to give it up to Kabuto. Like once he’s touched the sword he’s tainted it.

He staggers over and picks up the sword without looking at it, trying not to let his hands tremble. He opens his mouth to speak one, two, three times before he manages to form words. “Aren’t… aren’t you supposed to be looking for Princess Tsunade?”

Yamato-sensei shakes his head. “I sent out a clone. I can train with you here until we find her.”
Oh. That’s. That’s good, he guesses.

Sasuke inhales, exhales, tightening his grip on the hilt- and then lunges forward, one more time.

*Again.*

Chapter End Notes

so! a few housekeeping notes!

1) I'm amused by the amount of people who were talking about Itachi in the comments of the last chapter. they left early, everyone!! they left earlier than canon - so who knows when itachi is gonna show up around the corner wink wonk

2) you may have noticed this chapter took a bit longer! that's partially because this arc in general is going to take longer - it's fairly canon compliant (well, at least compared to other ftcoye arcs), so i'm doing a LOT of rewatching! so chapters will be slower until i finish up this one. and that's also partially because...

3) in november, i'm leaving to go backpacking with my sister! i'm leaving in november and won't be back until january - so im doing a LOT of planning things out for that trip. it's sucking up a lot of time! so i don't have as much time to write, at least until we get everything figured out. once i leave on my trip, there won't be any updates until i return - i won't have a computer or anything. thanks for understanding!

4) aaand finally, i've recently started rereading fullmetal alchemist so you're going to be seeing some good ol' fma fics from me! i've already uploaded two, buuuut i know myself so there will be more lol. if you're interested in fma go check em out?

as always, you can find me at chadsuke on tumblr, where i take drabble prompts! thanks so much for reading, i love all your comments!
“Naruto,” Kakashi says, when the door shuts behind the others and it’s just the two of them. “I need to talk to you.”

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out, immediately, and looks away. “I shouldn’ta told ‘em. I’m sorry.”

He stares at his student, bewildered. “Shouldn’t have told who what?”

“I told… told Kiba and Shino and them Sand genin about the fox. Oh, and I told Karin too, I guess, awhile back but she already sorta guessed.” Naruto stares at his feet and doesn’t look up. “I know that’s against the rules and stuff but that crazy guy Gaara has one too and I wasn’t really thinking and-“

“Naruto,” Kakashi cuts him off, and the blonde peeks up at him. “You can tell whoever you want about the Kyuubi.”

He wrinkles up his nose. “But I thought it was against the law-“

“Not for you. You can tell anyone you want.”

“Oh. Okay! Cool.” He nods to himself, relieved. “Wait, then what didya want to talk to me about?”

“Your parents.”

Every single trace of expression on the boy’s face wipes away, to be replaced with shock- “My… my parents?”

“The Hokage made it a law,” he says, very slowly, “That none of us could tell you.”


Kakashi… doesn’t have an answer for that. Because he still doesn’t know. “I don’t know,” he says. “I’m sure he had his reasons but- I don’t know them, Naruto.” He reaches out and sets a hand on the boy’s head. “I don’t know if Tsunade will continue with that law, so I want to tell you now, when there’s no Hokage.”

He sucks in air, stares at his teacher with such wide and wet eyes that Kakashi feels like a heel for not telling him before this, laws be damned. “Sensei, who... who were they?”

“Your father was my teacher,” he says. “Namikaze Minato. The Fourth Hokage.”

“My-“ Naruto’s thunderstruck, and his hand curls in the fabric over his stomach. “He-“ He takes a second to sort out his words, to try to figure things out. “He put the fox in me?”

“Yes,” he says. “He needed a newborn, and-“
“So my birthday really is October 10th.” He swallows, doing his best to hold back his tears. “I wasn’t—wasn’t sure if maybe people just said it was that because, or…”

“No, you really were born then,” Kakashi tells him, ruffling his hair gently. “Because your Mom… your Mom was the Kyuubi Jinchuriki, before you.”

“Jinchi—” Naruto stumbles over the unfamiliar word, but his eyes are so big, so wide. “My mom was like me?”

Kakashi’s heart breaks. “Yes,” he says. “All the Kyuubi Jinchuriki have been Uzumakis. Before your Mom, it was Uzumaki Mito.”

“The First Hokage’s wife!?”

Of course that’s all Naruto knows about her, and he nods. “Yeah — that’s her.”

He stares down at his stomach, and Kakashi wonders what he’s thinking, wants so desperately to know what is going through the mind of his student, and- Naruto looks up, and he’s crying. “So they…” He sniffs, and wipes at his eyes. “They didn’t abandon me?”

Is that what he’s been thinking, his whole life? That his parents abandoned him? That the reason the Third and no one else would speak of them is because they were alive and walking around?

How many times did Naruto look at someone with the same color hair, the same color eyes, and wonder so fiercely if this was a parent who kicked him to the side?

“Naruto,” Kakashi says, and he says it fiercely, firmly, because he never wants his student to doubt this. “Do you know what your father asked me to do, when Orochimaru brought him back?”

“What?” Naruto asks, oh so softly.

“To take care of you.” Kakashi isn’t good with this. He isn’t good with feelings, isn’t good with… with anything like this, but he thinks what would Minato-sensei do and he reaches out to pull Naruto into a hug — an awkward one, with his student standing and Kakashi forever trapped in this cot, but a hug nonetheless.

“Naruto,” he says, as his student curls his hands into the back of his hospital gown, as Naruto sniffs into his chest. “Your parents loved you so much. I can promise you that — they loved you more than the world.”

Gai is holding his hand, and Kakashi marvels at the fact that it doesn’t feel strange at all. It’s welcome. It’s like they belong together, his hand and Kakashi’s gloved one, and he almost misses Gai’s question.

“Rival,” he asks, and he says it so seriously. “Do the mednin think that Princess Tsunade will be able to heal you?”

Kakashi would be lying if he said that wasn’t one reason Jiraiya sped up his search — he knew that, eventually, he would be approached to become Hokage, and that eventually, he would have to track down Princess Tsunade.

But Kakashi’s situation is a bit… dire.

“If she can fix my chest,” he says, considering, “Heal the damage and stop the internal bleeding, then
I'll be able to leave the hospital.”

Gai knows him, oh so well, and he tightens his grip. “But…?”

“…There was some... spinal damage,” Kakashi says, very quietly. He doesn’t want to think about it. “I may never be able to walk properly again.”

He doesn’t respond to that. Really – what is there to say? The doctors haven’t allowed him to try walking yet, because of the damage to his chest, and while Kakashi is normally pretty negligent with his instructions he’s also fully aware of how close he came to dying.

He can’t die, not yet.

“No matter what,” Kakashi says, because he needs to say something to break this stillness. “I’ll stay a shinobi. I’ll figure it out.” He shrugs, nonchalantly, as if shinobi who cannot walk are an everyday thing and not something he’s never heard of before.

Gai smiles at him, at that. “Of course,” he says, as if he hadn’t ever considered anything else. “We will figure it out together!”

Together.

Kakashi looks down, at their hands holding each other, and thinks back to that moment he had been sure he would die – when Gai had been certain he would die. They haven’t spoken of it, so far – it’s been a lingering thing in the air, and he’s certain that if he never ever brought it up, neither would Gai. It would simply stay silent, never voiced, brushed aside.

He doesn’t think he wants that.

“Gai,” he says, and he doesn’t look up from their hands. “When you found me, on the day of the Invasion…” Gai stiffens up, because he isn’t foolish and he knows what’s coming. “You kissed me.”

Gai looks at him, and Kakashi looks up to meet his eyes. “…Yes, Kakashi,” he says, very quietly and very tense. He pulls his hand away. “I did. I apologize for any liberties I took – I was overcome by the heat of the moment. I-“

The ‘heat of the moment’ is typically a far less excusable excuse in a completely different context, and perhaps Gai realizes that, because he looks away, hands curling and uncurling into fists on his knees. “I thought I was losing you,” he says, the quietest Kakashi has heard his voice in many years. The last time Gai’s voice was this quiet was the death of his father. “I apologize.”

If this were anyone else but Gai, Kakashi thinks, that would be what he would want. An apology. And he, too, would give his own apology – but Gai is different. Gai has… has always been there. He knows him inside and out and all of his demons, and typically gets him as easy as breathing.

Gai is different.

“I don’t want an apology,” he says, and he smiles underneath his mask, visible eye crinkling. “I want you to do it again.”

Gai’s head snaps towards him so fast Kakashi thinks he’s broken his neck, for a moment. “Kakashi?” he asks, unable to articulate more- and Kakashi takes the initiative.

“Close your eyes,” he says, and once Gai has, he pulls down his mask, leans over, and presses his lips to the other’s.
It takes the other man a second to respond, and then he’s cupping the back of Kakashi’s head, curling his fingers in the white strands, and kissing back gently. Maybe it’s creepy of Kakashi, but he doesn’t close his eye – he watches the way that tension seeps out of Gai’s shoulders, the way he tilts his head just slightly. He feels the press of lips against lips, how they slide against each other, and then he pulls back very carefully.

Gai looks starstruck as he opens his eyes, cupping Kakashi’s face gently in his own and staring at his face, bared before him for the first time. “Kakashi,” he says. “You’re beautiful.”

Kakashi flushes, and pulls up the mask – he needs it to hide behind. “Maa,” he says, because he doesn’t know what to say. “Thank you.”

To Gai, at least, that was enough, and he pushes back his chair and gets down on one knee. Kakashi forgets how to breathe. “Rival,” he says, oh-so-formally, and the other jounin is now terrified he’s going to pull out a box. “Kakashi. Will you do the honor of formally going out with me?”

Oh thank god.

“You’re paying for the dates,” he says, especially because he’s not going on a mission anytime soon, and Gai springs to his feet with a smile and a thumbs up.

“Oh of course!” he says, and Kakashi would love to pull him down and kiss him once more because hey, practice makes perfect, there’s a pitter patter of steps headed their way that says they’re not alone, and so Gai sits back down, right before Karin and Sakura open the door.

“Senseis!” Sakura greets, and she steps through holding a tray. “I brought lunch! Enough pork soup for four!”

There’s four dishes on the tray, each wrapped carefully, and huh, this looks homecooked.

“You made this?” he asks, and she smiles.

“Karin and me and my mom did,” she tells him, and he accepts the soup and the spoon that Karin passes him with thanks.

Gai takes a huge bite, and then beams at them both. “This is delicious!” he says, and while their attention is focused on him, he sucks down the soup in an instant and replaces his mask.

“Aa,” he says, and their eyes snap to him and then the empty bowl, disappointed – both girls wilt in unison. “It was very good.”

“Sensei, how do you eat so fast…” Karin complains quietly, and Kakashi simply smiles at her, eye crinkling. He’s pleased to see her opening up, and she smiles back.

“How did you know Gai was here?” he asks, because he very much hopes he’s not that transparent, and the two girls glance at each other and then shrug.

“He’s been here awhile, sensei,” Sakura says, rebuking. “Hours. Karin just sent a clone to check.”

“A clone?”

Karin flushes and looks at her feet. “I’ve, um, I’ve been practicing. Naruto showed me.”

“Be careful!” Gai advises, which Kakashi thinks is the most hypocritical thing he’s ever heard in his life. “Young Naruto has a lot of chakra – you need to be careful to not use too much!”
Karin stares at him, a little wide-eyed at his loudness, and honestly Kakashi can’t remember if she’s ever met the man before. “Um, I… I will.”

All of this is very fun and amusing, but Kakashi sets his empty bowl to the side and picks up his new book from the side table, holding in front of his face as he starts to read. It takes a second for Sakura to notice, but her whole face spasms when she does. She fumbles with her bowl, sticking her spoon in it before pointing at him with her free hand. “Kakashi-sensei!” she squawks. “What’s that!”

He eye smiles over his copy of *Parenting for Dummies*. “Why,” he says, very calmly. “My new book, of course!”

She does the most flailing she can while not spilling her soup, and Karin giggles. “Kakashi-sensei, you know you’re calling yourself a dummy by reading that?”

Kakashi turns his smile on her. She’s a good addition to his team. “Maa, I’m sure you misunderstand. It’s for Parenting if you *have* Dummies.”

Karin nods mock-wisely. “Then you have the perfect book.”

She manages to hold a straight face for a second before giggling again, and Gai booms laughter next to her and even Sakura rolls her eyes and grins, after a minute. Kakashi smiles, too, at everyone surrounding him.

The loss of the Third, Hayate, Anko and others is still so very present. Kabuto and Itachi and others loom in the distance, and Sasuke and Naruto are not with him right now, are out of his reach and possibly in danger. He may never be a shinobi again.

And yet Kakashi thinks this is the happiest he’s been in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

change of plans w/ backpacking in that i am now not going until january rip SO you'll be getting more chapters til then and hopefully at a bit of a faster pace than initially planned! this arc is just... rlly hard and mildly boring for me to write because it's MOSTLY just canon plot stuff going down.

(mostly. we're gonna get some fun noncanon stuff by the end.)

kakagai is real good, y'all. real good.

AND it looks like for the next arc, i'm going to have to do a bit of a spin-off. which i didn't really want to do buuuut i guess i have to. so! stay tuned for more details on that rip. but i guess that means more content so that's like... good for u right? (not so much for me and the amt i still have to write cries)

As always, you can find me at chadsuke on tumblr where I take Drabble prompts!
He tries again and again and he fails again and again. For three whole days, Yamato-sensei trains him and for three whole days, Sasuke can’t manage to use his sword. Oh, that’s not everything that he does, of course not. Yamato-sensei makes sure that he has the light jutsu 100% finished with ease, and he spars with Naruto on occasion, but the main focus is his sword.

It doesn’t work. He can’t.

Yamato-sensei has left the two of them to spar and Sasuke still can’t use his sword, still can’t do anything, and he falls to his knees and dry heaves into the grass. Naruto puts a hand on his back, warm and comforting, and they both wait until he manages to breathe normally before the blonde speaks. “Sasuke,” he says. “Why don’t you try something different? You don’t have to use a sword, ya know. Or maybe a different one!”

He breathes for a moment, hands curled in the grass, before he forces himself to sit down. “No. No- I need to do this.”

Naruto scrunches up his face in a frown. “Why?”

It’s not an easy question to answer. Sasuke stares at his hands for a moment. He remembers when they were covered in Anko’s blood, trying to stem the tide, and he wonders if Kabuto killed her right after knocking him out, or if he left her to die, let her bleed out until there was nothing left and she couldn’t gasp for air any longer.

She had been alive the last time he saw her, and that makes all of this so much harder. No finality. He never even got to see her body. (Does. He want to see her body? He doesn’t know.)

“I won’t let Kabuto take it away from me.”

His teammate scrunches up his forehead to match. “What? What do you mean?”

Articulating his words is. Difficult. But with Naruto’s blue eyes boring into him like that, Sasuke doesn’t know if he could ignore the question. “People take,” he says, because that’s the best way he can think of. “People always… take stuff, and I don’t want them to take things from me in… like this.”

Everyone takes. Even his teammates take – even if he wants him to, they still do. They’ve taken his whole self, and he thinks if he lost Sakura or Naruto (or even Kakashi or Karin) it would be like he’s chopped off his arm. He’d RATHER lose an arm than lose them. He couldn’t let Itachi take away his family, his home – no matter how many nightmares the compound inflicts on him, he doesn’t want Itachi to take it away.

He worked hard for his swordsmanship. Barely got to use it on that day of the invasion, but he worked hard for it. A weapon that Yamato-sensei had given him, as well… the first REAL gift he had gotten in a long time.

No way is Sasuke letting Kabuto take that away from him.

Naruto nods a little, but whether to show he’s listening or that he really actually gets it, Sasuke’s not
sure. “But people give, too, ya know. And it’s okay to let stuff go and let people take.”

And maybe sometimes it is, maybe sometimes it’s okay for people to take, like how his team has taken from him, but Sasuke sees his dumb smiles every day and he knows, oh he KNOWS. “Is that what you do?”

He stills. The blonde stares at Sasuke for a moment, eyes wide and hurt, and then he drops his gaze to his feet. Sasuke presses it. “You just let everything go, don’t you? You let people hurt you and you just smile at them and you don’t care.”

It’s different, thinking that people dislike Naruto because he’s a troublemaker, because he pulls pranks and is loud and annoying and obnoxious. That’s understandable – even if it didn’t quite add up, even if it didn’t quite make sense. But because he has the fox within him…

And Naruto just smiles at everything people do. “I’m going to be the Hokage and make everyone acknowledge me!” he says, says so much, and Sasuke hadn’t put the words together until now.

Naruto scowls down at his feet and then turns his glare on Sasuke. “Just cause I don’t act like a bastard like you doesn’t mean it doesn’t bother me, ya know!” He shoves Sasuke and Sasuke shoves back and then they’re rolling around together, tussling on the ground.

He shoves Naruto into the dirt and he gets slammed into a tree and they’re full out brawling by the time that Yamato-sensei returns and yanks them apart. “Hmm,” he says, and Sasuke eyes him warily, chest heaving, but he doesn’t pull his freaky face. “This doesn’t seem super productive.”

“He started it,” grumbles Naruto, not looking at him, and Sasuke looks away because he can’t deny it, he really can’t, and Yamato-sensei sighs.

“What am I going to do with you?” He starts them, like disobedient kittens held by the scruffs of their necks, and then drops them on the ground. “If you two think you can get along for two minutes, I’ve got some news for you.”

That perks Sasuke up a little. “What?”

Yamato-sensei smiles. “We’ve found Tsunade.”

They pick up Jiraiya along the way – ugh – who shows Naruto the next step in the jutsu he’s learning. It looks interesting, but Jiraiya shoots him a glance, draws Naruto away, and speaks softly enough that Sasuke can’t hear him. When Naruto tries, it’s something that involves popping a LOT of balloons with a rush of wind so strong that Naruto falls over.

Multiple times.

By the fourth time, Sasuke grabs Naruto by the shoulder so he doesn’t fall over and waste more time, but Naruto shoots him a glare and Sasuke frowns and then glares back and he lets Naruto fall over the fifth time, screw him.

Jiraiya just keeps making more balloons for him and leads the way. “We have to hurry,” he says. “If she catches wind of us, who knows where that shrew will go next.”

Despite that, though, he takes his time. It’s as if he truly doesn’t know where to go, as if he’s just peeking into stores, asking questions of passerby, moseying his way through and Sasuke is suspicious. Yamato-sensei wouldn’t have told them they had found the Princess unless they had ACTUALLY found her.
So what is he doing…?

His teacher catches the glance that Sasuke shoots at him, and shakes his head. “Lord Jiraiya knows what he’s doing here,” he says softly. “He is the one who knows her better than anyone else in Konoha – we need to follow his lead, here.”

Well. Sasuke doesn’t like it, because it feels rather pointless, but if Jiraiya knows what he’s doing here then he’ll listen, even if it kind of pains him to do so.

Because it really does feel pointless – they “wander” all day. Sometimes down the same routes, and Sasuke so desperately wonders what on earth is going on in that sage’s head but he also really REALLY doesn’t want to know, at the same time.

Naruto doesn’t seem to have picked up that right now they’re just pointlessly wandering, instead focusing on the jutsu that keeps knocking him to his butt and grumbling under his breath. Another day, Sasuke might have pointed it out – but they’re apparently not talking today, so. He won’t.

It’s getting later, around dinner, when Jiraiya finally approaches a pub. “Well,” he says. “We might as well stop and grab a bite to eat here.”

Naruto protests immediately, which Sasuke wants to shake him for because he could actually really go for food, right about now. (Also Jiraiya selected this one on PURPOSE.) “Hey, pervy sage, me and Sasuke are underage! We can’t drink!”

Jiraiya rolls his eyes. “Then don’t. You can just get snacks.”

They enter and immediately – immediately – Jiraiya locks eyes with a blonde, young-looking woman across the room. There’s no hesitation. No moment of confusion or even looking around.

(He’s probably been waiting, all day, for her to enter a location where she could be cornered easily. Sasuke has begrudging respect for that tactic, even if he wishes Jiraiya had waited and grabbed them after she was cornered, but that would probably take too long… Ugh. It had been the correct decision, even if it wasted a whole lot of training time.)

“Tsunade!” He announces, pointing dramatically.

She gapes and then points back. “Jiraiya!”

And that’s how they find themselves crammed in a booth facing Tsunade and another woman, whom Sasuke hasn’t heard of. They order food, and Jiraiya pours two glasses of sake – one for him, and one for Tsunade. “For Orochimaru and Sensei,” he says simply, and her eyes soften.

They lift the glasses. “For Orochimaru and Sensei,” she agrees, and they down them. A good icebreaker, because she seems more at ease than she did before. “Now – I know you didn’t drag these other three along with you because you wanted to reminiscence with me, Jiraiya. What do you want?”

She pulls out a pack of playing cards and slides them across the table – he shuffles. “Ah, straight to the point, Tsunade… It’s simple.” He sets the cards in front of her, and she reaches to take them. “You’ve been summoned to be the Fifth Hokage.”

Tsunade freezes.

Sasuke waits for her to respond, but she says nothing. Instead, she draws her cards, holding them in front of herself like a shield. Jiraiya picks up his own, chooses three, lays them down and then picks
up three more. “Tsunade,” he says again. “What is your answer?”

She closes her eyes for a moment and then drops all of her cards in front of her, leveling Jiraiya with a glare. “No,” she says. “Impossible. I refuse.”

Jiraiya doesn’t seem even remotely phased, smiling at her. “You know, I remember you saying those-“

Naruto springs to his feet, standing on the seat. “You!” He’s- He’s angry, and he jabs one finger in Tsunade’s direction. “Why would you say no to being the Hokage!?”

Tsunade narrows her eyes at him. “Jiraiya? Who is this brat? And the two quiet others.”

“This is Uzumaki Naruto.” There’s a flash of recognition through her face, through her eyes, and Sasuke wonders if she knew Naruto’s parents or just that he bears the fox within him. (Or perhaps she doesn’t even know that?) “Next to him is his teammate, Uchiha Sasuke, and his teacher, Yamato.” She recognizes his name, too – probably knows of him as the last Uchiha, the sole survivor – but there is no recognition at Yamato and Sasuke envies his teacher and his anonymity for a moment.

Naruto starts literally yelling, wordless wails, and Yamato-sensei reaches over to smack him upside the head. “Calm down,” he says, and Naruto sits but glares at Tsunade, still.

“There cannot be any other Fifth Hokage than Tsunade,” Jiraiya says, and Sasuke knows he’s lying. “There’s no one who can match her combat and medical skills – and she’s also the granddaughter of the first Hokage.”

Lineage. Sasuke has never truly thought of the line of Hokage in regards to lineage, but the first two were brothers. The third hokage was taught by the second, and the fourth hokage was taught by the student of the third. The fifth hokage, taught by the third and born from the line of the first? And then the sixth to be Naruto, born from the fourth and taught by the student of the fourth?

It’s a little disconcerting, to see it that way.

“Jiraiya,” she says. “Unlike your previous apprentice, this kid not only has bad mouth and wit, but he’s ugly to match.”

Naruto goes very, very still beside him, and Sasuke wonders if she knows what she’s saying.

Jiraiya laughs, slightly. “Oh, it’s tough being compared to the Fourth Hokage-“ He talks of how great the Fourth is, but Sasuke is focused on Naruto, right next to him, and reaches out to take his hand under the table. Fighting or not, this isn’t okay, and Naruto stiffens and then squeezes his hand, holding onto it so tight it feels like he’s going to break it.

“But even that Fourth Hokage died quickly,” Tsunade says, and the boys both snap their gazes to her. She stares down at her cards and doesn’t even look at any of them. “Risking his own life for his village…” She shakes her head. “Life is different than money. To easily risk and lose it is a fool’s doing.”

Naruto’s chopsticks snap in his fist and Sasuke puts down his cup of tea, shaking.

“Both my grandfather and the second Hokage seemed to want to subdue the disturbances of war above all else. But after it all, they died in vain, in the midst of their dreams for the village.” Sasuke lets go of Naruto’s hand.
“The Fourth Hokage, and now Sarutobi-sensei, dying so easily…” She sets down her cards, tipping her head back. “Hokage is a bother. Only a fool would take it on.”

They move as one.

Naruto lunges across the table, his swipe at the woman only halted by Jiraiya grabbing the back of his jacket, and Sasuke throws three shuriken – Tsunade bobs her head to dodge each one before Yamato-sensei is grabbing his hands and stopping him from throwing a fourth.

“Shut up,” says Sasuke as Naruto is hauled back into his seat. “You have no right to talk about them like that.”

The third and Kakashi-sensei and Anko and Oboro- none of them were fools, and to claim such, he- he-

He hates her. He cannot stand the sight of her – he’ll defect if she becomes Hokage, he would rather have Jiraiya as their new leader.

Naruto manages to haul his way up to stand on top of the table. “Anyone who insults the Old Man and-“ He pauses, and then his face hardens in determination. “Anyone who insults the fourth Hokage, my dad, I’ll kick their ass!”

Tsunade’s eyes snap wide and Jiraiya lets go of his jacket in shock and Naruto swings a fist directly at her face.

Chapter End Notes

i rewrote this like... five times lmao. also this is sticking SO close to canon but also it's 1) logical and 2) pretty necessary.

sorry for the wait!!!
Search for Tsunade: The Bet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She dodges at the very last minute, and Naruto’s fist hits the wall, cracking it. Jiraiya looks absolutely stunned. “Naruto,” he says, but the blonde ignores him.

Sasuke isn’t the best at reading emotions, especially those of other ninja, but shock is written on all of the adults here. Well, he guesses not Yamato-sensei – he seems completely unruffled, and Sasuke’s not certain if that’s because he’s just that good at keeping everything locked away or that he most likely KNEW that Naruto already knows. (Both, maybe? Probably both.)

It doesn’t matter either way, though, because Tsunade recovers quickly, flicking Naruto’s forehead with enough force to send the boy stumbling back. Jiraiya reaches out to snag his jacket once more and haul him back into his seat. “Not inside,” he hisses, and Tsunade smirks.

“You’re decades too young to land a hit on me,” she says.

Naruto glares fiercely. “You’re just really old’

Her smug look quickly turns to anger, and she surveys the other blonde with obvious distaste. “Guess I know why the Hokage means so much to you,” and Sasuke wants to tell her to shut up cause she knows nothing about Naruto, but before he can get out a word her gaze slides over to him. “But you… simple loyalty to a teammate?”

He grits his teeth, clenching his jaw so hard it aches because nothing about loyalty or being a team has ever been simple. It’s the hardest thing in the world and how dare she.

“I don’t care about the Hokage.” Naruto’s eyes snap over to him, but screw him, it’s true. “But people who die for others aren’t fools.” His hands shake with anger under the table. He hadn’t been a fool when he thought he gave his life for Naruto’s. Sakura hadn’t been a fool when she threw herself at Orochimaru. Karin and Hinata hadn’t been fools when they tried to stop Kabuto – the Sandaime and Kakashi hadn’t been fools against Orochimaru – none of the genin had been fools when they rose up against the Sand and the Sound.

Anko hadn’t been a fool for saving him.

(He thinks if he ever thinks otherwise, if he wastes what she lost, he’ll shatter.)

“And-“ He swallows sharply, and it feels so. Weird to say but he doesn’t care he doesn’t care. “Naruto’s going to be Hokage some day.”

Naruto stares at him and Sasuke honest to god thinks he’s going to cry for a second before he gives Sasuke the biggest grin he’s EVER seen (which is, saying something.) before he turns to look at Tsunade, determination etched in every line of his face. (She looks shellshocked.) “That’s right! I’m gonna be Hokage, ya know!”

His hands twist together, one rapidly spinning over the other as he starts to form a small ball of wind in them – it’s the same movement Sasuke’s been seeing Naruto do over the past few days to balloons, but before he can finish it, Yamato-sensei moves. There’s the puff of a replacement and then all of a sudden Sasuke is sitting where Yamato-sensei was and his teacher is sitting where Sasuke was and the jounin chops right through Naruto’s jutsu, dissipating it. “Naruto,” he says, ever
calm. “You don’t have that mastered yet.”

Tsunade’s shock turns to rage and she glares at Jiraiya. “You taught him the Rasengan!? He’s a genin!”

Jiraiya keeps his very slight frown, and looks down at the grains in the table. “It’s his father’s jutsu,” he says quietly. “He deserves to know.”

“When he’s older! He shouldn’t be learning such a dangerous-“

“Hey, hey, old hag, I can learn Rasengan, no problem!” Naruto’s glaring fiercely, but not trying to get out of Yamato’s grip. He’s so loud, though, and Sasuke glances around in self-consciousness to learn that yep, just about the whole restaurant is staring at them. Great. “I’ve almost got it!”

“Almost got it, huh?” Tsunade narrows her eyes just slightly at him, and she’s completely unreadable. “Bragging’s not a good look for you.”

“Shut up, I can master it in- in three days! I’ll show you!”

She smirks, and its predatory and makes Sasuke want to shiver, if he were a weaker ninja. “That sounds like it’s a bet.”

Naruto scowls right back at her. “Yeah! Hell yeah, it’s a bet! Name your terms!”

“Oh, no,” whispers the woman next to her under her breath, the pig in her arms seeming to wilt in dismay as well, but Tsunade ignores her, leaning back and surveying Naruto.

“I’ll give you a week,” she says. “And if you do it, I’ll give you this necklace-“ she gestures to the necklace she’s wearing around her neck- “and acknowledge you as a future Hokage. If you lose, I get all the money you’ve got on you.”

“No bet,” says Naruto immediately.

Tsunade arcs a brow. “What happened to that confidence?”

He huffs and folds his arms. “I can do it, but I don’t like your terms, old lady! I don’t wear jewelry, and I don’t care about you thinking I can be Hokage.” But what, wait, hasn’t Naruto always been about acknowledgement- “If I win the bet, I want you to come back and be Hokage.”

She wavers for one visible, tangible second before her face sets into surety. “I’ll take that bet,” she says, and it’s done.

That’s about when the owner comes and kicks them out.

It’s understandable – they were yelling at the tops of their lungs, throwing weapons and punches, and jutsus. (Sasuke’s pretty sure the timing is because of Yamato-sensei – the owner gives him a nod after they grab their stuff and leave, and his teacher’s steady look seems just a touch smug.) They box up the remainder of their food, pull the shuriken from the walls, and part ways.

Tsunade and the woman whose name Sasuke actually never learned head one way, and everyone else heads the other. “Be prepared to lose,” she tells Naruto before she leaves. “I’m on a winning streak.”

He scowls at her. “So am I!”
The moment they’re out of sight of each other, after they’ve walked beyond the city limits – Jiraiya rounds on Naruto. “How did you know about that?” he hisses, and Naruto. Doesn’t react.

He stares up at him and then quietly asks. “Why didn’t you tell me who my parents were?”

That stops Jiraiya in his tracks. He stares down him, and there’s a flash of pain over his face, through his eyes, so acute that even Sasuke can read every moment of it and he turns to look away. “You didn’t need to know,” he says, and Naruto’s calmness cracks.

“No!” he yells at the top of his lungs. “Why not!? Why didn’t you tell me!? I’m a genin now, I’m an adult! Even if I couldn’t know as a kid, why didn’t you tell me!?”

Jiraiya brings up a hand to cover his face. “There was a law-“

“Bullshit!” Naruto screams. “There’s no Hokage! You could be the next Hokage if you want, you could’ve told me! And- And what would the Old Man have done, anyway? Lock you up!? Bullshit! You’re lying, you’re lying, you’re lying!”

He takes off running.

Jiraiya takes a step after him, but Yamato-sensei lays a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t,” he says, very calmly, and the man subsides.

Sasuke lingers for just a single moment more. “Don’t follow us,” he tells them, and he’s gone.

It’s easy enough to follow Naruto. He’s not being quiet, and it’s simple to follow him through the woods, and then into the trees when he does. He runs and he runs and he runs until he hits the end of the forest – that’s when he sits at the very last tree, at the very end.

After a moment of hesitation, Sasuke joins him.

They sit together on the branch, side by side, not looking at each other and instead up into the sky. The stars are out, and it feels a little nostalgic. This isn’t the first time they’ve sat together to watch the constellations.

“…Why didn’t he tell me?” Naruto asks, very quietly. “I don’t- I don’t know anything about them, I didn’t even know who they were, and he didn’t- And why didn’t Kakashi-sensei do or say or ANYTHING before, I… I don’t…”

Sasuke puts himself in Kakashi-sensei’s position.

If Kakashi-sensei had died and left a child behind, and Sakura and Karin and Naruto and Yamato-sensei were all dead, and everyone in the village hated the kid, what would he… do?

What could he do? Cause Kakashi would’ve been like, their age-ish, right?

“I dunno about Kakashi-sensei,” Sasuke says, because he doesn’t. Maybe he just… didn’t know what to do. Sasuke wouldn’t. “But Jiraiya’s just a jerk.”

A sound that’s a half-sob, half-laugh bubbles out of Naruto’s throat, and he turns slightly to see tears sliding down his teammate’s cheeks as he curls in on himself. “Y-Yeah, he- he is.”

They sit there for a few more minutes, while Naruto wipes his eyes and sniffles, before he speaks up again. “…I don’t know anything about them,” he says softly. “I mean- I know lots of stories about the Fourth Hokage, I guess. So my dad, I know a lot about him, but…” His hands curl into fists.
"My mom, she…"

Sasuke has never heard the name Uzumaki Kushina before. He hasn’t heard the name Uzumaki aside from…

Aside from…

He had wondered about Uzushio. Uzumaki Karin. Uzumaki Naruto. And now Uzumaki Kushina – three Uzumakis, now all in Konoha, and still not a single word of the clan, and of the village, and how Karin had heard of it but no one in Konoha had… Sasuke doubts she knows anything of Uzumaki Kushina, because she would have said something if she knew of an Uzumaki from here, but- but-

"Naruto," he says. "Didn’t the Ame genin say there were Uzumaki in Ame?"

His teammate stills next to him. "…Yeah," he says. "They did."

"Have you still been writing them?"

Naruto nods, wiping at his nose and turning to meet Sasuke’s gaze. "Yeah. I put it on my calendar – every week."

Which is about five-ish letters now, maybe six, because it really hasn’t been THAT long but the second exam seems like a lifetime ago – and Sasuke considers. "You could always ask them to talk to the Uzumaki there for you," he suggests. "You could write those Uzumaki letters. Maybe they knew your mom."

It feels so weird to be… this person, this problem-solver this person fixing things and NOT the one falling apart, and even if it requires more effort and talking than he’d like, Sasuke is kind of glad to be on this end. It’s nice. Refreshing.

And the way that Naruto looks at him like he’s hung the moon in the sky makes him flush, just a little. "Sasuke," he breathes, his eyes sparkling. "You’re a genius."

"Hn. I already knew that."

Naruto laughs at that, shoving him lightly, but there’s a bit of hope to him that wasn’t there just a second ago, a determination, a step towards the future and Sasuke’s glad for it. Everyone should know who their parents are. He’s lost his and he thinks losing the memories too would be-

Well.

He doesn’t want to think about that.

They’re quiet for a moment, but it’s a content sort of quiet. He can hear Naruto’s breathing even out from its previous raggedness, and there’s a chill in the air as it starts to turn towards fall – he can just see the barest hints of their breath.

"Hey, Sasuke?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

Sasuke leans over, nudging Naruto’s shoulder with his own and the other nudges back, and despite… everything. Despite Kabuto and his swordsmanship and their fighting earlier and Tsunade
(will she honestly be Hokage? Ugh) and Naruto’s parents and the tears, it’s…

Peaceful.

Chapter End Notes

WE’VE REACHED OUR FIRST 100K! WOO! the first of...... many to come, given i still have this arc + three more plot arcs and then i’m finally finishing part ONE of naruto. geeze. long fic ahoy.

thank you so much for all of your comments!! i love and read them all and they're all super encouraging. i know i don't usually reply (cries i wish i had the time to) but i deeply, deeply appreciate and love all the comments. thank you so much!!!

AND TODAY I BRING FANART!!! lundsdotter on tumblr was kind enough to draw me this pic of my Sakura design for this fic, and i'm in L O V E. she looks SO good and SO cute. AND because i'm terrible i just realized i never linked the first fanart this fic got?? done by sakurafightmeharuno for a scene from chapter FIFTEEN (geeze it's been so long) and i also deeply love it as well. go give these amazing artists some love!!!

as i write and rewrite the search for tsunade arc is like. growing exponentially RIP because i have NO idea how to keep things short so!!! i hope you enjoy and the next chapter will be out fairly soon!! as always, you can find me on chadsuke on tumblr. thanks!
Sasuke barely sees Naruto for the next few days.

It’s fine – it really is. He struggles with Yamato-sensei to try to get a handle on his sword, but it doesn’t work. Not at all.

“Sasuke,” Yamato-sensei says, and he says it kindly. “I think it’s time to try something new, at least for awhile.”

“No!” Sasuke snaps, and he glares. “I can do this!”

Yamato-sensei sets a gentle hand on his shoulder, and Sasuke stiffens up, looks away, tries not to let tears of frustration prick at his eyes because he can do this, he can. “Sometimes, it’s better to step away from things for a little, and come back to them. Isn’t there anything else you want to learn, Sasuke? At least right now?”

He’s quiet for a moment. What he wants to learn are techniques for his Sharingan – but Kakashi-sensei is the only one who could teach him any of that, and he’s back in Konoha in the hospital. But… there’s also…

Anko. There’s also Anko and her bleeding out in his hands and Kabuto and his scalpel and the glint on his glasses and-

“Yamato-sensei. Can I learn healing?”

He doesn’t, as it turns out, know any healing. That strikes Sasuke as very odd – isn’t it just good, tactically, to know a little bit? Even if you’re no mednin, he feels like knowing just a scrap of healing in case you’re separated from your teammates or on a solo mission is the way to go, in the same way that he thinks no mednin (that’s going on missions, at least) should be without the ability to fight.

“Shizune is a healer, though – I’m sure she’ll teach you something.”

That turns out to be the woman accompanying Tsunade, carrying along her pet pig for the ride. “It’s always good to meet new healers!” she greets him cheerily, setting the pig next to her and sitting on the ground. “Do you have any experience at all?”

Awkwardly, Sasuke mimics her and shakes his head. “No. But it…” He swipes his hand over his sword, letting the blade slip away so he doesn’t see the blood blood blood, and then looks down at his hands. “I should know a little. Just in case.”

Shizune considers him thoughtfully. “It’s very rare that someone knows medical ninjutsu without being a mednin.”

That seems so… odd. “Why?”

“It requires extremely precise chakra control,” Yamato-sensei says, joining them as they sit in a circle on the ground. “I do not have enough control to use it – and I haven’t needed it.” There’s a twist to his mouth that Sasuke doesn’t quite get, but it’s not really what’s interesting to him anyway.
“My teammate, Sakura, has the best chakra control,” he tells her. “Near-perfect.”

Shizune smiles at that. “She’d do well to become a mednin, then.” Sasuke notes that to tell her later. “How good is yours?”

He… hesitates.

Sasuke is able to perform every technique he’s tried. He’s in the top. He has better chakra control than Naruto and yet-

Yet-

Sakura had gotten tree climbing so fast, so quickly in comparison.

“It’s good,” he says. “But it’s-“ He can’t actually say the words, say that he’s not good enough, and he grimaces instead.

Shizune understands, by the look on his face. “You can still learn, but… It will be hard. An upwards struggle.”

Yamato-sensei nods. “Like you decided to specialize in water jutsu, Sasuke.”

Did they tag team it? He wonders if Yamato-sensei talked to Shizune on the way over, told her about him and his want to heal and if Yamato-sensei can guess where it comes from, that Anko was under his hands and coating them in her blood and he couldn’t save her then and he can’t save her now. If he can’t even learn…

His hands curl into fists on his knees and he grinds his teeth, furious. He shouldn’t- He should be better than this. He’s the last Uchiha, he was the top of his class, and all he’s doing is losing again and again and again. People are dying in front of him again and again, and now he can’t even learn how to save them, fighting OR healing. His sword is still beyond his reach and now he can’t even heal.

But.

**But.**

“Yamato-sensei,” he says, eyes snapping to his teacher. “I want you to teach me-“

“Hey, hey, what’re you doing?” Naruto asks, but it’s really a yell. Always a yell with him. They all look up and he’s standing, hands behind his head and eyeing them curiously.

“Why aren’t you with Jiraiya?” Yamato-sensei’s eyes narrow and Sasuke’s pretty sure Jiraiya’s going to GET it.

Naruto shrugs. “He’s with some lady and told me to come find you.”

Yamato-sensei looks homicidal, and Sasuke is very glad that look isn’t directed at him. He’s terrifying in a way that Kakashi-sensei very much *isn’t*, mostly because Yamato-sensei is very serious and, well.

Kakashi-sensei reads porn in public.

The blonde flops down between Sasuke and Shizune and looks at Sasuke expectantly. “So, whatcha doing?”
Shizune answers for him, and Sasuke doesn’t know if it’s because of training confidentiality or something else altogether, but she skips over all of Sasuke’s questioning. “Sasuke was telling me about how Sakura has perfect chakra control. She’d make a very good mednin.”

Naruto puffs up a little in pride. “Yeah! Yeah, Sakura’s awesome! She’d be great at healing!”

It stings, just a bit. A healer being on their team is good, especially since Sasuke’s pretty certain Karin doesn’t want to heal ever again (not that he. Blames her.), but hearing that about Sakura…

It’s not her fault, he supposes. There’s nothing-

“Isn’t this cute.”

Sasuke’s on his feet immediately, spinning around and then nearly toppling over in shock. It’s only Yamato-sensei’s immediate reach out to balance him that keeps him from falling because- because- It’s Itachi.

His brother stands about fifteen feet away. He’s wearing unfamiliar clothing – a black cloak with red clouds – and his companion wears the same. The other shinobi towers above Itachi, a shark-like man that’s like no one Sasuke’s ever seen with a large sword in his hand but- but- but-

Sasuke shakes and shakes and shakes and can’t take his eyes off of Itachi.

“Itachi,” the shark-man says, the light glinting off his toothy smile. “I thought you killed all your family. Who’s this kid?”

He’s activated his Sharingan, Sasuke realizes, and he meets Itachi’s eyes. His older brother gazes at him with his pinwheeled eyes, and there’s nothing in his expression. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

“Kisame,” Itachi says, and that’s it.

Itachi turns his gaze onto Naruto, instead, and that’s when Sasuke lunges.

His sword is drawn before he even thinks and he yells, running at his brother and swinging it with every ounce of his body. Itachi dodges nimbly and Sasuke swings again.

“Don’t look in his eyes!” Yamato-sensei yells at the other two and then he’s running towards Itachi, hands forming unfamiliar seals and then wood grows from the ground, wrapping around Itachi’s ankles and his eyes widen, just a little, and Sasuke almost scores a hit.

“Tenzo,” he breathes, so very softly, and Yamato-sensei smiles, very sadly.

“Itachi,” Yamato-sensei replies, and then they’re fighting.

Shizune and Naruto are keeping Kisame (for that must be his name) at bay. Naruto’s just spamming clone after clone after clone, and Shizune seems to be firing needles from her arms. Yamato-sensei is chasing after Itachi with wood (HOW IS HE USING WOOD) and Sasuke throws himself back into the fray.

He spits out a fireball as Itachi dodges one more round of wood and Itachi ducks underneath it, racing towards Sasuke and he brings up his sword hastily and kunai clashes against sword. “Foolish little brother,” Itachi murmurs, but Sasuke can hear every word. “Did you really think that would work on me?”

The sword is in front of him, now, glinting with blood right in front of his eyes and he looks into
Itachi’s voice and he shakes. Anko speaking with Itachi’s voice and Itachi’s eyes and Kabuto and Itachi overlaid with each other and his own younger self shapeshifting into Itachi and now it’s actually Itachi it’s actually him it’s actually it’s actually-

Yamato-sensei shoves him as wood rises up to trap Itachi by the ankles and Sasuke realizes he’s not breathing. He sucks in air and barely manages to keep his feet, trembling fit to burst.

“Sasuke,” his teacher tells him, eyes serious and gaze focused. “Get out of here. I want you to go find Jiraiya and Tsunade and send them this way.”

And leave? “But-“

“No buts,” Yamato-sensei says, shaking his head. “We need them, and you’re the best for this.”

He’s lying.

Yamato-sensei turns to engage Itachi once more (who? Just let them talk? He doesn’t understand) and Sasuke knows he’s lying. The best thing to do would be to send a million Naruto clones to find them. That way everyone’s still fighting, four vs 2, and Tsunade and Jiraiya would get found much faster than if Sasuke alone looks but-

He’s a liability. He can’t fight.

Sasuke grits his teeth and turns on his heel and bolts. If he can’t- If he can’t fight and he can’t heal then he might as well get help, since that’s all he can do, and hurry back before all of them are killed-

An explosion fills the sky.

The sudden heat sends Sasuke stumbling back a few steps, shielding his face with his arms and ears ringing, and for a split second he thinks this is a new technique of Itachi’s, that his brother isn’t letting him leave, but then a man lands in front of him.

No, not a man – a boy. A teenager. Fifteen, sixteen at most.

He straightens up, wearing that same clouded cloak and almost resembling Ino, in a way, and he stares in surprise. “A Sharingan? Oy, bastard! I thought you were the last one!” he yells, and Sasuke was always sick of being the Last Uchiha but he thinks he hates that even more.

“You’re late, Deidara,” Itachi says, somehow audible despite not yelling. Kisame laughs, and Sasuke wants to turn and look back at the five behind him, wants to see how they’re faring in their fights, but he can’t.

Deidara steps forward and grins. “This’ll be a blast, yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY FIFTIETH CHAPTER Y’ALL!!! throws confetti!!!

shorter than i would've liked, but... i really wanted to end where i did. i'm sure you understand why. waggles eyebrows.

thank you for all your support!!! edit: you can find me on grellsuke at tumblr, now!!
chadsuke was deleted by tumblr unfortunately.
Sasuke scrambles back, nearly tripping over his heels as he tries to get as far away from this ninja as he can – there’s no way for him to get around him, he doesn’t think. If he’s allied with Itachi then he’s probably strong, too strong to avoid, and with that explosion in the sky there’s no way that Jiraiya and Tsunade don’t know they should come running. No way.

So he just has to stall as long as he can.

Deidara pulls something out of his sleeve, a small white bird, and throws it at him and instinctively, Sasuke brings up his sword to swipe at it – he hits and the explosion sends him to the ground.

His ears ring – vision flickers. Sasuke pushes himself gingerly to his knees and when he touches his ride cheek, it comes away stained with blood.

His opponent is laughing and speaking and it takes a second for Sasuke’s left ear to crack through the ringing, the static, to be able to understand him. “-your little brother!” Deidara is laughing, and he grins. “It’d be a sight, if I took him out and you couldn’t.”

There’s not a response to that, and Sasuke braves a glance over to see Itachi completely ignoring Deidara in favor of fighting Yamato-sensei and some of Naruto’s clones. The… the utter lack of caring Itachi shows shouldn’t hurt him, it shouldn’t, but he still grits his teeth and pushes himself fully to his feet. Deidara’s grin is gone, and so it seems Sasuke’s not the only one affected by Itachi’s quiet.

“Young brother pisses me off, you know?” Deidara says, shaking his head. “He’s an asshole! God!”

Sasuke jerks his head, trying to shake hearing back into his right side but he can’t, and it leaves him a little imbalanced. “Hn. He is.”

Deidara looks at him with pity. “Was he always like this?” Sasuke slips his hand into his pocket, very resolutely doesn’t think about the memories, and nods. Stall. Stall stall stall. “That fucking sucks! I just want to stab his eyes out, you know? Or blow his whole stupid face up – he’d look better. He’s such a-“

Go.

Sasuke yanks his hand out of his pocket, pulling out his shuriken and throwing two with one hand – it’s all he needs as the two of them dig into Deidara’s shoulders and he cries out. If Deidara does explosives, that means there’s plenty of material on him FOR it. And that means if Sasuke combines with fire…

He grins, dropping his sword so he can run through the hand seals rapid fire and he blows, sending fire along the wires connected to the shuriken, sends them right towards Deidara whose eyes widen in alarm and-

The explosion throws him into a tree.

It’s big – as big as the one from the sky, the heat searing Sasuke’s arms and face and burning them, and his back hurts, aches and he thinks some of his hair is singed and hes not sure if the explosion
reached the others but if he hurts this much at this distance then Deidara is-

He opens his eyes and Deidara is standing right in front of him.

The older teen cackles and kicks Sasuke across the face and it’s a flare of pain and he’s thrown to the side. He reaches out frantically for his sword but he- he had dropped it, hadn’t he? Deidara steps on his back and Sasuke tries to hold in a groan. “How?” he croaks instead.

“It was a clone, little Uchiha!” Deidara singsongs, and Sasuke wishes he could see something right now. He doesn’t think anyone’s dead because surely Naruto would have freaked out and he can hear Naruto’s yells, still, can hear the clashing but Yamato-sensei and Itachi are so quiet in comparison they could have left for all he knew. Deidara grinds him down into the dirt a little more and Sasuke hates this, hates this feeling of hopelessness even as his mind races, how can he throw him off, how can he get out- “I think your brother wanted to kill you,” Deidara says conversationally, and Sasuke’s blood runs cold. “I’m looking forward to the look on his face when he sees your body, yeah.”

No, no, no- Not like this, not in a way that’s so pointless, not when he hasn’t managed to accomplish ANYTHING not while Itachi’s still out there not-

“GET AWAY FROM HIM!” Naruto roars, and the pressure is off Sasuke’s back.

He jerks to feet. Naruto stands in front of him, or maybe a clone, bubbling with red chakra as he glares with a ferocity that Sasuke’s never seen – Deidara’s a few steps back, wide-eyed, clutching his cheek. But the older blonde recovers quickly and he grins. “The Kyuubi! You’re the one we’re looking for. This is perfect, really.”

Sasuke sneaks a glance at the others – Yamato-sensei still holds Itachi at bay but Sasuke thinks it’s only because he knows the other, knows his moves. Kisame and Shizune and countless clones still fight and the shark man roars with laughter and enjoyment even though Shizune seems like she’s starting to falter.

He can’t help them, though – there’s too much to deal with here.

“Shut up,” Naruto growls, and there’s a more guttural quality than normal, a tint to his voice that’s not normally there. The Kyuubi? “Pervy Sage and the Old Lady’ll get here soon. They’ll kick your ass.”

Absolute bewilderment crosses Deidara’s face for just one second. Pervy Sage? He mouths to himself, before it finally clicks with him. “Oh! Don’t worry about the Sannin, yeah.” He grins again, and Sasuke is really starting to hate that grin. “We’ve got someone taking care of them.”

Sasuke swallows sharply, forcing himself to step up next to Naruto and scoop up his sword from the ground. There’s no backup. There’s none coming.

It’s just the four of them against these insanely powerful shinobi. Yamato-sensei is barely staying on top, Shizune will fall soon, and even with Naruto’s demon within them, Sasuke highly doubts the two of them can take down Deidara. Even if they do somehow manage it, they’ll still have the other two to contend with and that’s not going to work.

They’re going to die here. There’s no way on earth they can win this.

Sasuke glances at Naruto, and he doesn’t know if the other has come to the same realization or not, but. He can’t figure out what words he wants to say. There’s more he would have told Sakura.
Kakashi-sensei. Karin. Ino, Hinata, Chouji- Too many moments left and Anko’s sacrifice was nothing but a waste because maybe if she hadn’t come after him, they’d BOTH be alive instead of this.

“Naruto-“ he says, but he can’t get anything else out before his throat closes up.

“Boooring,” Deidara says, rolling his eyes, and he holds out his hands and oh my god does he have MOUTHS on his HANDS??

“What the hell,” Sasuke blurs, unable to help it.

Deidara laughs. “You like them? I’ve got one more, but-“

Everything happens at once.

That’s how it always is, isn’t it?

Kisame crows with excitement and the three of them turn and Shizune has fallen. For a terrifying moment, Sasuke thinks the shark man has cut her down but she’s just crumpled down to one knee, panting and exhausted and the last of the Naruto clones poof themselves out on Kisame’s sword. Yamato-sensei jerks his head towards the sight, too, eyes widening in alarm and he jerks his hand and-

Wood and vines shoot out of the earth, entangling Kisame. “What the-“

He swings angrily, struggling against the wood and behind him, a slightly larger vine with a bud on the end rises – it opens and it’s Kurenai-sensei. She throws her kunai at Kisame’s head but he yanks it to the left at the last minute, grinning and managing to break through one block? string? log? of the wood and swings his sword around at her.

It misses, passing straight through the vines like the illusions they are, and Kurenai-sensei disappears into the ground, melting into it like Sasuke once saw Orochimaru do. Shizune has her head turned slightly to the side.

Sasuke can see, throw the red haze the Sharingan throws over everything – chakra. There’s a chakra mass right next to her, right next to Shizune, and it’s not Kurenai-sensei because Sasuke can see where her mass is underground.

So there’s someone else there, a second person next to Shizune that only he and Itachi can detect, and his tension fades a little.

“I hate genjutsu users,” Deidara spits, and Sasuke lets his attention get drawn back to him. He hasn’t moved, and it’s so clear that he’s not taking this seriously at all – Sasuke never thought he’d be RELIEVED at something like that, but he is right now. “It’s cheating.”

“Shut up,” Naruto growls, clapping his hands together and he and Sasuke are surrounded by clones that yell and charge at him.

The problem with that, though, is it’s easy enough for Deidara to wipe them all out quickly with just a few small explosions as he does his best to dodge.

The good part of that, though, is that it gives the third chakra source enough time to communicate. **Hold position**, fingers tap into Sasuke’s back. The chakra source moves to Naruto, presumably doing the same, and Sasuke wishes he were better at this, that he could see more than just the fact there was
chakra, but he’s not that good with his Sharingan yet.

He and Naruto exchange looks and nod. Stay.

When all the clones are popped and their smoke has drifted away, Deidara shakes his head at them. “You’re really not making this too much fun, yeah. Think it’s time to make some real art.”

He pulls what Sasuke has figured out must be clay out of his sleeve, feeding it to his left hand, and Sasuke can’t help but pull a face.

Naruto trembles next to him with suppressed… rage, maybe? and Sasuke wonders how difficult it is for him to keep this steady flow of Kyuubi chakra. Already, the bubbling red around him has faded, but his eyes remain red and the scars on his cheek are thick.

“Now,” Deidara says, and the tongue of his hand starts to spit something out onto his other palm.

There’s a flash of light behind the older teen and he cries out, muscles seizing up and dropping the clay bird and hair blooming with static as he crumples forward onto the ground.

Sakura stands behind him, hand flashing with a quickly fading lightning.

Naruto and Sasuke gape. “Sakura!?” Naruto yells, finding his voice first. “What are you doing here!?”

She quirks a small smile. “Saving you, I guess.”

Wait, so who was the other- Sasuke glances over and it’s Karin next to Shizune. The woman stands, pulling herself to her feet, while Karin rubs at a spot on her arm and looks up to meet his gaze and oh, that makes perfect sense. Okay.

That’s one down, two to go, right? And seven against two is good odds, even if the opponents are powerful.

Sakura steps over Deidara to walk in their direction and he grabs her ankle. She shrieks and her teammates move, Sasuke grabbing her hands and pulling while Naruto punches Deidara in the face. The older blonde reels back, slamming both his hands together and so does Naruto.

The bird at his feet explodes at the same time shadowclones fill the clearing.

Everything upheaves – the ground shakes and explodes outwards and Sasuke wonders if this is like how it was when Sakura fought Gaara. She clings to him and he slams a kunai into the tree trunk to hold them there despite the heat despite the fire despite the how he aches and he hurts and the smoke from all the shadowclones shielding them and then popping makes everything worse.

But it clears, as it has so far, even if Sasuke’s vision is starting to blur and he deactivates the Sharingan, shaking his head to try to clear the ringing in his ears again.

The left one works, once more – the right one is still dead.

Naruto breathes heavily, sitting on the ground with slightly singed clothes but otherwise not worse for the wear – Deidara stands in a crater, his cloak billowing around him and he laughs.

It’s deranged, and it’s chilling.

“You kids want to get serious, yeah?” He asks, and he grins, wild and crazy and fierce.
Naruto forces himself to his feet, clambering to stand by them – “Wait!” Karin yells, and she’s there, too. Yamato-sensei still fights Itachi with wood, with wood that Sasuke doesn’t understand. Kurenai-sensei and Shizune keep Kisame at bay, keep him in a rousing dance of darts and illusions.

And Team 7 stands before Deidara, ready to go.

“Yeah,” says Naruto. “We do.”

Chapter End Notes

this was a difficult chapter to write lets leave it at that. i hope its acceptable. (i dont like writing fight sceeeenes like this agh)

two quick things! first - if you look, you'll see that ftcoye is now part of a series! the other fic is called 'snippets of stories' and its basically little things in the ftcoyeverse that aren't going to be in the main fic (well, at least i dont plan them to be), but like... i still want to write them, yeah? feel free to pop over there, and if you have any requests for specific scenarios you want to see, send me an ask over at my tumblr!

and now we hit to the second thing, in that my tumblr got deleted in the tumblr purge. rip. so i've remade over at grellsuke if you want to hit me up there and send me drabble prompts!

thanks so much for your patience, i hope you like the chapter!
“Naruto – clones,” Sasuke says, and Karin watches as dozens of copies of her cousin bloom into existence around them and rush their enemy.

The missing-nin only laughs, exhilarated, and a shudder of fear rolls up her spine before she jerks, twisting, at Sasuke tapping her wrist. She looks at him, eyes wide, Sakura doing the same and his hands flash with symbols and motions that she doesn’t know, that she cannot possibly understand.

Each village has their own hand signs, their own ways of communicating so that the enemy will not know them – of course, the enemy COULD know them, if Sasuke’s older brother taught him them, but it was worth the risk. Sakura nods beside her – she understands Sasuke’s hand signs.

Karin does not. She knows nothing.

Sasuke nods back at Sakura and slips into the crowd of Narutos and Sakura wraps a hand around Karin’s wrist, leaning in close to breathe words into her ear. “Be Naruto and then hide,” she whispers, and her breath tickles Karin’s ear which makes her want to almost inappropriately giggle for a second before she suppresses the urge and nods.

(She’s not sure why Sasuke couldn’t just whisper that himself, but he had moved before they did so maybe he has more of a plan for himself.)

Karin’s not THAT much of a fake ninja that she can’t do a simple henge, so she throws one up so she’s her blonde cousin and then blends into the crowd. She can’t see Sasuke or Sakura and they must have done the same – it’s a mass of clones and Team 7 hiding and their missing nin opponent blows them up with glee. Smoke fills the air as they’re destroyed, but wherever Naruto is in the crowd, he’s making more and more and more and Karin wonders how many he truly can make before he’s exhausted.

There’s also other battles going on, and that’s distracting.

She can feel Yamato-sensei’s strange chakra which is like… like Konoha’s chakra, like the chakra that is saturating her new village, and she wonders if maybe the wood is making is part of that because if she’s right, didn’t the first Hokage make all those trees and stuff? Is Yamato-sensei like, his great-great-grandson? And then there’s the chakra of Sasuke’s brother, which is- which is surprisingly not terrifying. (She doesn’t understand why it’s not. It’s unsettling, that lack of terror.)

There’s Kurenai-sensei, her chakra like mist on the breeze, like the genjutsu she had taught her and Sakura on the way over because of course she had caught the two of them when they went after Sasuke’s brother, of course she had stopped them and Karin feels awful because she shouldn’t have but the moment she and Sakura had heard Uchiha Itachi was after Naruto, they had bolted. The other woman, who had said her name was “Shizune,” when Karin had healed her, is flickering in chakra, weak and running low but she fights strong and she’s a healer, Karin can tell.
The shark man’s sword is a void of chakra and it makes Karin absolutely nauseous.

She tries not to focus on that, and tries not to focus on the chakra-filled fight happening out of her vision, where she can sense Jiraiya and two others and just. Focus on going forward, towards the missing nin.

Of course, Karin has no idea what she’ll do when she actually gets there. She has kunai in her hands and she only just worked up the courage to ask for helping training and she hasn’t actually started yet and-

One of the chakras from the other fight starts surging towards them.

Karin stumbles sideways as an explosion catches her off-guard, and that’s enough to catch the missing-nin’s attention. Oh, she-

She looks up, locking eyes with the terrifying teenager as he grins and Karin realizes with a sinking feeling in her chest that then was when she should’ve disappeared, used that jutsu Kurenai-sensei had showed them to pretend she had poofed, just like the clones.

“Found one of you,” the blonde singsongs, and this is when Karin realizes that huh, okay, she can do something.

She can be a distraction.

“Sh-Shut up!” Karin blusters, trying to pretend she’s her so much stronger cousin and jabbing a finger in his direction. “Took you long enough! Is that all you can do, blow things up??”

His smirk immediately swaps to a scowl. “This is art, yeah! It’s more than just fighting”

Karin… stares. “Blowing stuff up is art?”

“Of course it is!” He looks ready to go on a full-blown rant about it, and Karin is honestly kind of interested in what on earth he’s going to say, but before he can – Sasuke makes his move.

Ninja wire comes out of absolutely nowhere, out of nothing, wrapping around the enemy and pinning his arms to his sides and his eyes go wide as a Naruto that feels like Sakura shimmers into existence a few steps in front of him and holds a kunai to his throat. He refocuses on her, but that’s his downfall, because more wire comes out of nowhere to wrap around his legs and he falls.

Sasuke fades into view, breathing heavily, the ends of the wire curled in his fists and the missing nin scowls. “Fucking Sharingan,” he swears, but he doesn’t try to get out, not just yet – far too relaxed for someone in his situation, albeit pissed off, and Karin knows he must have something more up his sleeve. “I hate you fucking Uchiha! You’re just like your fucking brother!”

“Guys-” Karin tries to say, but Sasuke scowls right back, absolutely incensed.

“Shut up!” he snaps. “I’m nothing like him!”

“Guys-“

The missing nin laughs. “Nothing! Oh, that’s rich, yeah! You and your brother are-“

And then someone smashes into the ground.

Chunks go flying and Karin swallows a scream as she holds up her arms to shield her face, pivoting on one foot to face the attack as Narutos poof around her until it’s just the real Team 7 and when the
smoke clears, Karin gapes.

It’s the mass of chakra she had felt earlier – the one headed this way that had caught her so off-guard.

A woman. A beautiful blonde woman, diamond on her forehead, one who had punched the ground so hard all of the flying stones had nicked Karin’s arms and poofed Naruto’s clones and forced Sasuke to let go of the wire so the missing nin slips out of the wires, pushing himself to his feet and instead of attacking, he, too, gapes.

She has a puppet under her arm, and the teenager’s eyes fixate on that. “Sasori!” he cries, and the woman’s gaze turns to his. “Did you- Is he-“

Something in her gaze softens. “No.”

“Lady Tsunade!” Shizune yells, and the woman that Karin now knows is Tsunade – wait, oh my god, like the future Hokage – snaps her eyes over to where the shark man is fighting Kurenai-sensei and Shizune.

Kurenai-sensei neatly dodges a sword swipe her way, disappearing into a cloud of rose petals, and Shizune pants heavily, on one knee but before anyone can do anything more, Sasuke’s brother moves.

The only reason Karin knows it was him is because it came from that direction and kage knows Yamato-sensei wouldn’t send shuriken towards Shizune.

They’re shot off so quick that Karin doesn’t even see the Uchiha move and even though Shizune sees it coming and wobbles to the side she’s so low on chakra the shuriken still slices through the side of her neck and there’s so much blood so much blood-

Tsunade freezes, trembling, eyes frozen wide and Karin knows the signs of trauma when she sees it but she doesn’t take a second to stop, to think about that. The wheezing that Shizune is making as her hand slams over the wound is horrible and Karin bolts.

She doesn’t know what her team is doing behind her and she knows the shark man is right there but Kurenai-sensei has him occupied and maybe Karin can’t fight (not yet) and maybe she doesn’t want to heal every again but like hell is she letting someone die in front of her when all she has to do is let them bite.

Karin only gets halfway there when Sasuke’s brother appears in front of her.

Maybe it’s a clone. Maybe he somehow got Yamato-sensei occupied maybe in the two seconds she looked away her teacher died because Karin can’t breathe can’t even look past him to see because he’s just right there right in front of her. “The healer,” he murmurs and oh, shoot, the Sharingan can see through genjutsu right, can see that she’s actually Karin and that she’s not Naruto-

He tips her chin up with a single finger and she meets a pair of Sharingan eyes.

“Lee?” she asks quietly. He’s a regular at Ichiraku – it seems like all the genin are, Team 10 and Team 8 and Team 7 and Lee’s team, and so many other ninja, and Karin is slowly starting to learn all their names, to figure out who’s who.

He looks up at her and beams, the way he always does. She wonders if he’s ever unhappy, ever discouraged. “Yes?”
“Would you, um…” She had to wait until his teammates weren’t there, because Hinata’s cousin makes her very nervous and she doesn’t know the girl very well (except that her older brother is a regular and that Genma is really nice and offered to teach her how to use the senbon and she might take him up on that). “I want to… to learn taijutsu.”

His smile gets even more blinding. “Yosh! Do you want to train with me, Karin? The Will Of Fire and Power Of Youth is strong in you! You would be a worthy opponent!”

Her face feels warm and she wants to hide, wants to bury her face in her hand and pretend this conversation isn’t happening, but she needs it to, she really does. “Not... an opponent,” she says, and Lee’s face turns to perfect confusion. “I’ve never really learned taijutsu,” Karin says, and it all spills out in a rush. “I can- I can heal and Kusa always just wanted me to heal and I never really learned all the normal skills of a genin, just to dodge and to hide and to stay out of a fight so I could heal people when they needed me to and-“

She’s crying and she hiccups and wipes her eyes and Lee moves with a grace Karin wishes she had as he puts one hand on the counter and pushes himself over it to land in front of her. He puts two callused but gentle hands on her shoulders and gives them an unsure squeeze. “I’m not a teacher,” Lee says, and he looks away, a frown tugging at his face. “But! But I can ask Gai-sensei, and I can train with you too, and- and you’ll be a great genin and you’ll show Kusa!” Every word amps him up and he’s on fire, only his grip on her shoulders stopping his clear urge to flail in emphasis. “They will wish you would have never left because you will be the greatest genin and then chunin and then jounin and you will not need to heal if you do not wish to-“

Karin hugs him.

He stills for a moment and then wraps his arms around her too and even though she still doesn’t really know him yet, doesn’t really feel like she knows anyone here not even her cousin (because is a month enough time to truly, truly know someone? She knows a lot but she still doesn’t know him), Karin cries into his chest.

When he finally leaves, after he promises to talk to his teacher and then talk to her later this week, Ayame pulls her aside with a serious look on her face. “Karin,” she says, concern written all over her. “I thought you didn’t want to be a ninja.”

Karin hesitates, glances to the side and curls her hands into fists. “If... If I could, I wouldn’t.”

Ayame frowns. “You don’t have to-“

“I do.” That makes the older girl hush, and Karin tries to articulate her thoughts. “People are going to come after me – or after my team. And I want to fight and save them. I don’t just want to heal, I want to help and not be a burden and-“

She looks up and meets her gaze. “I don’t want to be useless. I want to protect them.”

Sasuke’s brother tips her chin up with a single finger and Karin meets Sharingan eyes.

They’re different than Sasuke’s – pinwheels, she realizes in her last moment of coherency - and then she’s falling falling falling with her cousin’s screams echoing in her ears.
sorry about the wait on this one - holiday season is CRAZY BUSY and also this chapter wins the award for the amount of rewrites done!

genuinely - first draft of this chapter was something massively different, but i'm pleased with how this turned out. i hope you like!! the next chapter definitely won't take as long (partially because uh i only have a month to finish up this arc before i go on a 2.5 month hiatus since i'll be out of the country whoop)

expect an update to snippets of stories fairly soon - going to get some interesting backstory for some future plots!

as always, you can find me at grellsuke on tumblr where i take drabble prompts! thanks so much for reading!
Search for Tsunade: Tsunade Interlude

Chapter Notes

happy 2019!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Naruto- no, no, it’s a girl under a genjutsu, the red hair becoming clear as it fades, crumples, and all Tsunade can see is Nawaki. It’s Nawaki falling at the feet of the Uchiha, the one who murdered his whole family and clearly sees nothing wrong in murdering young children. It’s not Dan’s niece but Dan himself bleeding out in front of the missing nin from Kiri, and Tsunade cannot breathe, cannot move, cannot convince herself she is a living mobile being-

Even as the Uzumaki boy tears by in front of her, screaming with rage and Kyuubi chakra, she doesn’t move. He slams a Rasengan into empty air where Uchiha Itachi had been but moments before, a clone scoops up the redheaded girl, and Tsunade doesn’t move.

The blonde missing nin, the one who had been so concerned for the puppeteer that Jiraiya currently faces, he grins like this is the best day of his life and sends two small birds of clay towards the Uchiha boy and the other girl and they bolt for it. Tsunade doesn’t move.

Hoshigaki Kisame – and that’s a face she recognizes from the Bingo Books – goes for Shizune but finds himself thwarted, caught in a sudden mystifying growth of vines that quickly fade into nothing when he swings his sword at them, but when he turns Shizune is gone. The new woman, the genjutsu master, has scooped her up and pulled her away but Hoshigaki doesn’t bother to turn and try to find them. He grins, the grin of one who loves the fight, and turns to charge at Tsunade instead. Tsunade doesn’t move.

But someone else does.

She hadn’t paid much attention to the children’s teacher, up until this point. Yamato was a nondescript man with a nondescript face, notable only for the fact that both the Kyuubi Jinchuriki and the Last Uchiha were on his team – a sign that he was a capable jounin or that Konoha had somehow gotten even worse since Tsunade had left, and she could believe both.

Yamato leaps in front of Tsunade, slams a hand to the ground and a wall of wood leaps up to protect them and stop Hoshigaki and he has Wood Release.

A man stands in front of Tsunade, with her grandfather’s bloodline, protecting her from a missing nin from Kiri. A girl with the hair of an Uzumaki falls while her cousin roars with the chakra of Tsunade’s grandmother and fights an Uchiha – the brother of that Uchiha flies through the handsigns of a fireball jutsu while diving for cover with his teammate, who palms two kunai and sends them rocketing on either side of the fireball. Shizune, her closest companion, the niece of the man that Tsunade loves still, bleeds out and grows still and pale while in the arms of a Konoha jounin who owes none of them anything and yet still tries to call a feeble, flickering green medical jutsu to her hand in a sorrowful attempt to heal.

(Her teacher is gone, fallen to a teammate of old, and her only remaining teammate battles for his
life against puppets that he had insisted he could handle, that she left him to face to come here and do absolutely nothing absolutely nothing-

Tsunade breaks.

She slams past Yamato, bursts through the wooden wall, neatly dodges underneath Hoshigaki’s sword swing and punches him in the stomach. Without stopping, without pausing, she swings a kick at his legs and then keeps moving moving moving – hurtling past Naruto and Uchiha Itachi and headed straight for one person: Shizune.

Tsunade drops to her knees right next to the woman, who is trying so very hard to heal even though she can’t, can’t at all, and Shizune opens her eyes weakly. “Lady Tsunade,” she whispers, and she pulls her hand away from her neck to cup Tsunade’s cheek and the scent of copper, of blood, of blood blood blood and yet another person dying in her arms dying because she can’t do anything-

She wastes two seconds and a slight flare of chakra to wrap a jutsu around her mouth and nose so she can’t smell a thing, and then she heals.

The cut is deep on Shizune’s neck – it’s clear she’s been doing her best to stabilize it, with what little chakra she has left. If Tsunade were a little more stable, her hands a little less shaky, the situation a little less dire she could make it as so it had never happened, use up every drop of chakra she could so that there wouldn’t even be a scar, but as it is she wraps her hand in healing light and holds it inches from slippery red skin.

“Lady Tsunade,” Shizune whispers again, her hand slipping just slightly to her jaw and painting red on her face. “The… the blood…”

Shizune knows. Shizune knows every in and out of her, every minute and every moment. Shizune was never even there for the best – Shizune has seen her at her worst, again and again, and Tsunade cannot lose her.

“Ssh,” Tsunade tries to hush, but she’s so frightened that it comes out more of a hiss between her teeth than anything else, and Shizune grabs her wrist with her other hand and she jerks. The wound is gone – all that’s left is a small pink scar, one that may even fade with time, and the healing chakra on her hand sputters out.

“That’s enough,” Shizune whispers, and she’s so quiet Tsunade wonders for just a moment if her vocal cords were damaged, but no, no, she would have healed that, she was healing everything- “It’s okay.”

The jounin is gone. Tsunade realizes this now, belatedly, and thinks she’s probably back in the mix of the fight still echoing behind them, but she doesn’t care. “Shizune,” Tsunade whispers back, and then her face crumples into a mess of tears and she buries her face in her student’s neck.

She doesn’t care about the blood streaking over her face, over her front – she cares about the heartbeat she can feel below Shizune’s skin, the way her chest moves as she breathes, the slow wrapping of Shizune’s arms around Tsunade, curling in the back of her top. Dan’s niece, she’s forced herself to think all this time, but really, aren’t they more than that?

Family.

There’s so many words that Tsunade wants to breathe out against Shizune’s skin- I can’t lose you, maybe. Or I love you. She’s raised this girl since she was seven, brought her up into the wonderful young woman that she is right now, and Tsunade has never been a mother and never will be but she
wonders, fiercely, if the love she holds in her heart for Shizune is anything comparable.

Even if it’s not, it’s comparable to what she holds in her heart for Nawaki and Dan, and she’ll damn herself before she lets Shizune suffer their fates.

“Stay here,” she tells her, pulling away and letting Shizune’s arms slip away from her, and Tsunade gives her cheek one last touch before she pushes herself to her feet, turning to face the battlefield.

Tears still stream down her cheeks – blood paints them as well as staining her front, and Tsunade is fully aware she looks like a mess. That’s okay.

She doesn’t need to look pretty to win.

Tsunade yells, moving at lightning speed and slamming her fist down between Naruto and Uchiha – he launches himself backwards, towards where his teammate fights the other jounin woman. She doesn’t hesitate – she ignores the flying rock, ignores the way the ground shatters, and follows him to confront both Uchiha and Hoshigaki, weaving around the sword once more and tapping just the right spot to flood his system with chakra and completely mess up his nerve endings.

Hoshigaki nearabout collapses on the spot. He tries to move his arm but ends up shaking his head and looks completely bewildered. “What did you do?” he asks, and Tsunade grins.

“Changed your nervous system,” she tells him, because it’s such a handy trick that takes most opponents quite some time to figure out. “Good luck with that one.”

She stands in front of Uchiha Itachi and Hoshigaki Kisame, Yamato and Naruto and the other woman at her back, and she thinks she can take both of them on easy. The young Uchiha boy and his teammate have grabbed the fallen genin, the Uzumaki girl, and cleared off the battlefield, and even as the blonde missing nin rises behind his teammates, Tsunade knows that they can win this battle very simply.

Uchiha Itachi realizes this, too.

“Deidara,” he says, “Grab Kisame’s other side. We’re leaving.”

The blonde – Deidara, someone to look up in the Bingo Book later – scowls fiercely. “Hell no! I’m not taking orders from you, Uchiha!”

Hoshigaki laughs, rumbling and deep. “Itachi, make a clone and we’ll leave this kid on his own,” he says, and Deidara pales behind them, seeing himself against all six of the remaining opponents and clearly seeing where he comes up short.

“Fine! Fuck!” he yells, and he’s there supporting Hoshigaki’s other side and the three of them are gone.

We should follow, thinks part of Tsunade, but being able to beat them in a fight here and trying to pursue them is a completely different story. They can’t leave the children or Shizune behind unprotected and Tsunade’s knees wobble and give out and the only reason she doesn’t fall is that Yamato catches her.

She looks at him, at this man she doesn’t know who holds her grandfather’s wood release, and huffs out a smile. “Thanks,” she says, and he lowers her gently to the ground.

Tsunade has chakra. That’s not in question – she has chakra and she can keep going and healing and fighting but she is so emotionally drained she just wants to lay here and get up in about 48 hours.
But-

But.

She inhales, exhales, and the steel light of the Hokage enters her eyes. “Yamato-“ He snaps to
attention, and she eyes him. “I left Jiraiya fighting another missing nin. Back him up and bring him
back here.” He nods and is gone in a heartbeat. Tsunade refocuses on the jounin next to her. “You,
uh-“ She falters. “What’s your name?”

The woman smiles, just slightly, but she looks tired and drawn, red eyes red-rimmed from old tears.
“Yuhi Kurenai,” she tells her.

Yuhi. “I know your father,” she says, thinking of Shinku, and Yuhi’s small smile disappears
completely.

“Knew,” she says, and Tsunade doesn’t ask.

“Yuhi, go get the girl,” she instructs instead, and Tsunade’s not sure if it’s her own natural charisma
or if Yuhi is also one of those that know she’s going to be the next Hokage, but she obeys without
question, flickering away over to the other children.

There’s still one standing beside her, and she turns to Naruto. He’s shaking, eyes locked on where
the redhead girl lays among his other teammates, and Tsunade lays a hand gently on his arm.
“Naruto,” she says, and he whips around to look at her. He’s not just shaking – tears cloud his eyes,
and he looks so much like her younger brother in this moment that Tsunade’s heart
aches.

“K-Karin-” he says, and half-sobs. “Can you- She’s my c-cousin, you need to-”

“Of course,” she replies, and Tsunade gently flicks his forehead. “Should you really be doubting
your Hokage like this?”

His eyes are so wide. “Ho- Hokage?”

“I said if you mastered the Rasengan I would, wouldn’t I?”

Naruto sniffs and wipes at his eyes, choking down the rest of his tears even though he still shakes.
“Y-Yeah.” She honestly doesn’t want to. She doesn’t.

But just because she doesn’t want to doesn’t mean that she can run away, Tsunade realizes, because
she was sucked in the moment she had made such a foolish bet. Between Yamato and Shizune, the
Uzumaki red of the girl she now knows is Karin and the boy that trembles before her, the
unwavering faith of the Uchiha in his teammate and the pink-haired girl who now approaches them,
carrying Karin in her arms, and Yuhi who vanishes to scoop up Shizune and bring her back to join
the remainder-

There’s no real turning back now, is there?

Sasuke clings tight to one of Karin’s hands, like a child and uncaring about that, as Tsunade waves a
hand glowing green over Karin’s forehead. For a split second, he’s envious of her ease with healing
and then Karin sits bolt upright and its only Sakura’s quick reflexes that stop her from getting nailed
in the chin.

Karin looks at them all, wide-eyed in Sakura’s lap, from Naruto to Sasuke to Sakura who holds her,
and then she wraps her arms around Sakura’s neck and starts crying. She doesn’t linger there too
long, just enough for an embrace back, and then Sasuke has an armful of crying Karin and he panics slightly before just wrapping his arms around her in turn and squeezing. And then she’s off to throw herself at Naruto and the two cousins squeeze each other like they never ever want to let go.

Jiraiya and Yamato-sensei appear soundlessly – impressive, given how loud Jiraiya’s sandals are – and the two Sannin share small smiles with far more undertones than Sasuke could ever begin to decipher. He doesn’t really care about that, though. He’s more focused on his teacher.

Sasuke looks him critically, up and down. “You’re… fine?” he asks, because even though Yamato-sensei looks exhausted and strained, he doesn’t seem to be hurt aside from a few easy heal cuts, and marks, and that seems so unbelievable when he was facing Itachi.

Itachi, who hadn’t looked twice at him, Itachi who had greeted Yamato-sensei by an unfamiliar name and known him, who had gone after Karin and Naruto and retreated without even a single breath to Sasuke, a single word and he shouldn’t be craving attention from Itachi Itachi is a **freak** and a **murderer** and-

“I’m fine,” Yamato-sensei replies tiredly, sitting down next to Sasuke and Sasuke resists the urge to question every single piece of his interactions with Itachi, resists the urge to question the wood and he wants to so badly but Itachi had ignored him so completely that Sasuke just glares at his feet, knees hauled up to his chest.

There’s a pause, a measured pause in the conversation between him and Yamato-sensei and Sakura shamelessly eavesdropping, and then his teacher speaks again. “He was holding back,” he says.

Yamato-sensei was trying with all his might and Karin is sobbing into Naruto’s shoulder who is sobbing right back- only one of Sasuke’s ears is working right now and he feels burned and blistered and had been needed to be saved by Sakura- Itachi hadn’t even glanced in his direction or said a single word said a single scrap of **anything** and **he was holding back.**

Sasuke buries his face in his knees and swallows a scream.

**Chapter End Notes**

thanks so much for your patience, everyone! i’ve been very busy, because guess what! I fly out at the end of this month to go backpacking for like three months!!

i’m hoping to get out at least one more chapter before i go, to wrap up the arc just a little bit more, but that may not happen. if it doesn't, theeem i’ll see you in april? sorry about that! but after that i should be on a faster update schedule than i have been.

thanks so much for all of your support!! i read all ur comments and love u. thank u. as always, you can find me at grellsuke on tumblr!
She heals all of them - well, Sasuke and Sakura, because no one else really needs it. Shizune and Karin have already been attended to. Yamato-sensei and Naruto are both miraculously unharmed, and Kurenai-sensei declines treatment. (Jiraiya doesn’t even get an offer of healing, not that the Sannin looks injured, and Sasuke isn’t sure what that means.)

Tsunade runs a gentle hand over Sasuke’s whole body - his skin tingles as burns fade, ears popping as hearing is restored. Sakura is next, and he wishes with fierce jealousy that he could do that. Patch up a teammate afterwards, or- his eyes flicker over to Shizune. Or... save another from falling.

There are unshed tears in Sakura’s eyes as she wiggles her bandaged fingers, and she smiles at Tsunade. “Thank you,” she says, and it’s only when she meets his eyes that Sasuke realizes he’s staring.

“Sakura,” he asks, because he has no one else to ask. “Why are you here?” Kurenai-sensei is taking to Yamato-sensei and Jiraiya, and now also Tsunade as she rises to join them, and while Karin’s stopped crying, she remains quiet, staring off into space with a blank look on her face.

Sakura sniffs, knuckling away her tears and gives a slight shrug. “They... attacked Konoha. The blue guy and...” She shrugs again - everyone knows who she means. “They put Asuma-sensei in a coma. When we heard they were after Naruto... we had to come.”

A roiling, churning case of emotions burns in his core. Jealousy. Fear. Anger - all three making him almost ill. Itachi has barely looked at Sasuke, and yet Naruto...

He tries not to seethe. He doesn’t quite manage that.

Sakura regards him for a second before she stands up, brushing off her pants. There’s a small tinge of relief that swiftly drowns in anger at her leaving so easy, but- She doesn’t. She moves, instead, plopping down next to him so they’re pressed up against one another, shoulder to shoulder, and then takes his hand and twines their fingers together.

They sit there for a moment and Sasuke just... breathes. Trembles he hadn’t even noticed cease and Sakura gives his hand a long squeeze. They’re quiet, nothing but the sound of the adults talking in undertone and their breathing to be heard.

She doesn’t address Sasuke again, looking past to focus on Naruto, on his other side. “Naruto,” Sakura asks, but quietly, for he still holds Karin gently on his lap. “Do you know why they’re after you?”

There’s a long moment of silence. Naruto doesn’t take his eyes off his cousin’s red hair, and when he does finally speak, his voice is rough, hoarse. “The Fourth Hokage sealed the Kyuubi in me when I was born,” he says, and Sakura’s eyes go wide. “Think that’s why.”

Sasuke doesn’t react, and Sakura stares at him. “Did you already know?” He nods, and a wave of hurt flashes across her face before she swallows it down. “Thank you for telling me, Naruto,” she says, and the blonde’s shoulders twitching slightly marks the only indication he’s heard her.

They’re quiet for a few more moments, and then Yamato-sensei steps away from the others and
towards them. He takes it all in, eyes flickering from genin to genin. Karin’s hollow fear. Naruto’s
tired worry. Sakura’s resigned pain, and Sasuke’s angry bitterness.

His gaze softens. “Come on, kids,” he says. “Let’s go.”

Jiraiya, Tsunade, and Kurenai-sensei all leave. They say it’s to heal Asuma-sensei as soon as
possible, but there’s lines of tension written all through them that makes Sasuke doubt. Yamato-
sensei and Shizune are both staying, with a slug summon from Tsunade curled in Shizune’s robe,
just in case, so they’re safe, but-

That doesn’t really mean Sasuke can sleep, though.

Shizune sleeps on the floor in between the two beds - Sakura and Karin are in one, Sasuke and
Naruto in the other, and Yamato-sensei stands guard. Presumably on the rooftop, so when Sasuke
slips out of bed, he goes for the windowsill. Yamato-sensei appears out of nowhere, alighting next to
him - and for a moment, they both lean against it, staring out into the sleeping town.

No sleep? Yamato-sensei’s hands flash after a moment, brows lifted in question as he signs.

They don’t want to wake the others, if any of them have truly managed to fall asleep, and so Sasuke
shakes his head. Hesitates for a moment, and then signs back, his brows lifting as well. Who not- He
frowns, weighing over what signs to use, and tries again. Who enemy in Konoha?

Kakashi-sensei had said it before this mission - that not everyone could be trusted. Sasuke isn’t
stupid, and he bets that’s why Tsunade and the others have rushed back so quickly. Something is
going on, someone is working behind the scenes, and he wants to know who and why.

I’m one of them, whispers the Kabuto-Itachi voice in his mind, and Sasuke tries not to shudder.

Yamato-sensei shakes his head. No say, he signs, and Sasuke scowls. I say, you more danger.

Tell me! He signs sharply, agitated. I need to know-

Karin jerks awake with a cry and his hands stop. She sits up in bed, sharp breaths rattling her frame,
and when she and Sasuke accidentally make eye contact she’s slipping out of bed to come stand next
to him.

Yamato-sensei’s moved back to the roof. Bastard.

“Nightmare?” Sasuke whispers softly, because he doesn’t think Karin knows Konohan Sign yet.
Besides, he’s pretty sure now, Sakura and Naruto are just pretending to sleep.

She nods, staring at her hands resting on the wooden sill. He can see the faint bite marks on them,
and crawling up her arms, and he wonders if she knows which one belongs to.

If she remembers which bite is Kabuto.

Karin hasn’t said a single word since she awoke, and Sasuke doesn’t want to make anything worse,
but... he needs to ask. “What did-“ His mouth feels dry, and he stops abruptly, swallowing and
wishing he had water, before he continues. “Itachi. What... What happened?”

She doesn’t move. For a few moments, Sasuke thinks she’s going to stick to her silence - that he’ll
hear absolutely nothing, and be forced to contend with the not knowing once more, even if Karin’s not doing it on purpose the way that Yamato-sensei is.

“Your family,” Karin whispers, hoarsely, and Sasuke flinches like he’s been struck. “He showed them-“

She can’t quite finish her words, staring blankly out the window, but Sasuke doesn’t need her to. He knows what she means.

He wonders if Itachi just loves that moment, loves to share it as much as he can-

Or if he knows that’s the best way to traumatize someone.

They make it to Konoha the next day.

Kakashi-sensei hugs all of them from his bed (near-death has made him so touchy-feely and it’s a lot.) and scolds the girls for running off, though he’s gentle, and all of them sleep together on his floor on a big blanket heap. Karin only wakes once from nightmares, and the rest of them manage to get a little bit of sleep.

“Can Tsunade heal you?” is the first thing Sasuke asks the next morning, when he realizes he’s an asshole and didn’t ask the night before, and Kakashi-sensei just shrugs and ruffles his hair.

“She hasn’t checked yet,” he says, eyes crinkling into a smile. “You’ll be the first to know when she does.”

Sasuke guesses she can get a pass, since they’re throwing everything together in such a rush to make her the Hokage. The ceremony is that morning - Sasuke ends up using Kakashi-sensei’s shower to get clean so he can go, since he doesn’t want to return to the clan compound just yet.

(He will eventually. He has to. But he just needs... a day. Two.)

Maybe, if the situation were different, Sasuke could join all the people cheering, all the crowds absolutely ecstatic for their new leader. But everything feels so... dim. Exhausting. There’s a dull coat over everything and it seems like everything is moving so quickly and yet not moving at all. There’s so many people and he is still running on so very little sleep and he feels so crowded and jostled and-

Sakura turns, says something to Karin which makes the redhead perk up a touch, and though he can see both their mouths moving there’s no sound, nothing over the dull roar in his ears that Sasuke can’t tell the source of. The crowds? Inside? Yamato-sensei sets a hand on Naruto’s shoulder and Sasuke sees this as if it’s happening from far away. He takes a small step back, and then another, and he’s just moments away from fleeing from the masses of people when someone taps him on the shoulder.

He whips around, nearly jumping out of his skin and it’s Ino. She lifts an eyebrow at him and says something, but he can’t hear it and he shakes his head. She frowns and says something and his hearing snaps back into place. “-alright?”

“Sorry,” he says, and his breath comes quickly like he’s been running for miles - it’s with unabashed concern that Ino looks him over. “Could you... repeat that?”
“...You just answered my question,” she says, pressing her lips together. “I asked if you were alright.”

If Ino can tell, aka someone who most likely doesn’t know any of this recent things he’s been dealing with like Kabuto and Itachi, he’s really not hiding it too well and his shoulders tense. “Too many people,” he says, because it’s not exactly a lie. “They’re annoying.”

He doesn’t think she believes him, which is fine, because she shrugs. “Want to get out of here, then?”

When Sasuke meets Yamato-sensei’s eyes, his teacher nods, having clearly listened to the whole thing - so why would he say no?

They trace the path to Ino’s house, the sounds of the crowds growing fainter behind them, and Sasuke is glad he didn’t have to explain his departure to his teammates. He’s not sure... how he would explain.

That explaining he’s going to be with a friend that’s not them is hard... Sasuke doesn’t like how that makes him feel.

Even if that friendless nature is something he tried so hard to cultivate, for years.

“Wait here,” Ino says, dropping off Sasuke in the kitchen before she heads upstairs, and Sasuke takes the moment to scrutinize the picture of her family, again. A boy that went missing, so many years ago-

_I am one of them_, Kabuto whispers, and Sasuke wonders if the timing of that visit, of speaking of Fuu and returning back to that, was truly a coincidence. He wonders how closely he is being watched, or if he’s reading into something that’s not there at all, and shivers crawl up his spine.

Either way, watched or not, he has the faintest ideas of what might have happened to Fuu and it makes him ill.

“Here,” Ino says, appearing out of nowhere, and she drops papers in front of him. “Paperwork.” She regards him with a scowl, folding her arms across her chest. “Learn how to write your own report next time, I’m not doing it for you again.”

He states down at them, the papers that _have_ to be Kabuto’s file, because he had almost _forgotten_ in the mess of everything else, and he’s so fiercely thankful because now he has other things to concentrate on. “Thank you,” he says, and he’s about ready to start dissecting them right now, but Ino shakes her head.

“Dads’ll be home soon, I think. You should probably doublecheck it later.” She’s speaking in code, which makes sense, they’re shinobi, but...

That gives him a _new_ concern - where is he supposed to read these safely? - but he can’t impose on her any longer and he nods, gathering them up and slipping them underneath his shirt, feeling them crinkle against his skin. But before he goes, he has to ask- “Ino, was... was Fuu a shinobi?”

She stops herding him, stilling with her hand on the door. “Yeah. About to graduate.”

That’s the perfect age, isn’t it? To grab someone to experiment- and yet unskilled enough that it isn’t
a huge loss- “Ino,” he says slowly. “I don’t... think your cousin is dead.”

Ino is unreadable, and then she shakes her head slowly. “No. He’s definitely gone, Sasuke. Don’t be... don’t.” She hesitates, very visibly hesitates, and then leans in, pressing her hands against Sasuke’s chest and shielding the view from any possible spies. She taps out a rhythm on his chest.

*Being watched.*

Chapter End Notes

hello from Prague!! I’m still on hiatus right now but here, have a chapter I wrote after a late night

as always, you can find me on grellsuke on tumblr! thanks for your patience - i’ll be off hiatus later this month.
Sasuke stills for a moment, unsure, before he lets his hands slip down, resting on Ino’s waist so he can tap out his message with his thumbs – still keep it hidden, still keep it between them. (Well, he supposes, unless whoever is watching is a Hyuuga.) Who?

Not know, she taps on his chest, eyes skittering away from his. She chews on her lip, which is something Sakura does, and the quick, off-the-wall thought of Who got that from who? flickers through his mind. Saw me take papers.

Everything about him sharpens, because wait, was she not going to tell him this? When he had been the reason she was finding those files? You tell anyone?

Yes, she raps smartly against his collarbone. Tell sensei. He doesn’t recognize the name sign she trails out, but he can make the easy assumption that it’s Asuma-sensei. Not know who he told. Stay quiet please.

Part of him.

Part of him grates at that, at the notion of keeping quiet about something like this, and yet the other part… There are so many mysteries, here, that he feels like he’s only beginning to scratch the surface of. So many things underneath the underneath. Uzushio, Kabuto, I am one of them, Naruto’s hidden parents, the untrustworthy factions here in Konoha-

Focusing on these strange inconsistencies makes him feel less like he’s going to curl in on himself until he disappears.

“So,” says a voice. “Got something to tell me, Ino?”

Sasuke whirls away from Ino like he’s been burned, and there’s a brown-haired man standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame. His arms folded, he looks at the two of them with a raised eyebrow, and that’s Ino’s dad.

He recognizes him from the pictures that’s one of Ino’s dads.

Ino’s face is burned a brilliant red when Sasuke glances over and she stands there uselessly and Sasuke stands there uselessly too because he can’t remember the last time he talked with someone’s parents-

“It’s not what it looks like!” Ino says, kind of hysterically, and Sasuke’s brain stops all motion.

Wait. Wait wait wait.

What did it look like???
Ino’s dad’s other eyebrow climbs to join the first, but he steps inside the kitchen. He’s already ditched his sandals and how long was he watching?? “Right,” he says slowly. “So you were just hugging The Sasuke Uchiha alone in the kitchen for absolutely no reason. The Sasuke Uchiha.”

Sasuke can barely breathe and his face feels so warm he thinks he might need to sit down. “We’re friends now,” he blurs because he can’t think of anything else to say and it isn’t technically a lie, even though Ino looks at him like he’s sprouted a second head. “I, uh—” His words are a little more difficult to say because they are like… really true, and he hunches his shoulders a bit and looks down at the floor. “I needed it.”

The tension in the room stills for one moment, poised like a kunai, and then dissipates.

Sasuke chances a glance up and Ino’s dad’s face is softening towards him – looking at him with something that’s too akin to pity, makes him feel like he’ll be ill. “Better not let Sakura find out,” he simply says, calmly, and walks past both of them to flop in a chair at the table. He’s exhausted, clearly, Sasuke can see now, the ache of a long mission present in every movement he makes. Probably why he wasn’t with other people, celebrating the new Hokage.

“Sakura and I are friends again now!” Ino insists, folding her arms. “You’ve been gone too long.”

Her dad gives her a tired smile and Sasuke feels now like he’s kind of intruding. “I have to go,” he tells Ino, as if she hadn’t been trying to kick him out not too long ago, and he can’t honestly tell if it’s because of the fact that she’s being watched or that she really wanted to avoid something awkward like this with her dad or maybe both that she was trying to get rid of him. From the way she relaxes, just a tiny bit, he thinks it’s the last one.

“Okay,” she says, and she gives him a tiny smile. “I’ll see you later, yeah?” Ino hesitates, biting her lip again. “And, uh—”

Sasuke shrugs. “I won’t. Don’t worry.”

With that, he turns to slip on his sandals and leave, and he hears her dad’s amused voice rising up behind him. “Don’t worry about what? Keeping secrets, are we? Should I worry—”

He’s cut off as Sasuke shuts the door behind him.

Kakashi-sensei.

That’s Sasuke’s next thought – that’s who he should go to. He left his stuff in Kakashi-sensei’s room anyway, because he didn’t want to go back just yet, and Kakashi-sensei will be able to tell if anyone’s watching, and if Kakashi-sensei asks him about what he’s looking at then. Well.

He doesn’t really mind telling his teacher and letting him help handle things.

(He’s been realizing, lately, how in over his head he is and it hurts.)

But when he runs up the side of the hospital, up to Kakashi-sensei’s window, there’s… no one there. The blankets the team used that morning are gone, the bed is stripped of its sheets, his bag isn’t there…

Sasuke stares at it for a few moments, blank, completely unsure about what he should do, and then he heads back down the building and heads to the reception desk. “Where is Hatake Kakashi?” he asks, and the woman behind the desk frowns at him.
“Name?” she asks, and Sasuke stares at her blankly again because wait, seriously? She folds her arms. “Name.”

“Uchiha Sasuke,” he grinds out, and there’s not even the slightest flicker of surprise – she knew it already. Screw this.

She flips through her papers, checking something or other. “Hatake Kakashi was released to go home,” she says, and Sasuke feels numb. He just saw Kakashi-sensei a few hours ago, was he- was he healed, now, did that mean he would be their regular teacher again, was he out of bed-

Sasuke turns on his heel and bolts to Kakashi-sensei’s apartment.

The crowds are dispersing now, the ceremony over, but instead of trying to forge his way through Sasuke still sticks to the rooftops, leaping from building to building until he drops down in front of Kakashi-sensei’s door. He raps on it, and after a few moments wait – there’s no answer.

He frowns, and tries again, a little harder this time. “Kakashi-sensei?” he calls, even though his knocks alone should be loud enough, and the door to the neighbor’s apartment opens.

It’s an older woman, and she squints at him. “Are you one of young Kakashi’s students?” she asks, and if Sasuke has to work to not drop his jaw, well, he feels justified. (Was Kakashi-sensei… not kidding when he said he was late because he was helping little old ladies?)

“Yes,” he says, and the woman doesn’t lose her suspicious look but she does nod slightly at him.

“Well,” she says. “You’re not going to find him here. He’s staying at his boyfriends, he kindly told me, so I’ll ask you to not disturb my grandson’s nap anymore!”

She slams the door shut and Sasuke actually gapes this time. “Boyfriend?” he asks no one.

It takes him about ten minutes to realize that unless Kakashi-sensei has a mysterious boyfriend they’ve never met who never even visited him in the hospital, it’s gotta be Gai or Yamato-sensei. One of the two. Those are the only two men that Sasuke’s ever seen Kakashi-sensei talk to aside from Asuma-sensei, who is definitely taken.

Sasuke turns to the streets, shoving his hands in his pockets, and he feels… alone. Well and truly alone right now, because he has no idea where anyone is. Kakashi-sensei is at either Gai or Yamato-sensei’s place, and Sasuke doesn’t know where that is. When he left them, the rest of his team was with Yamato-sensei, and since the crowds are dispersing, he doesn’t really know where they could have gone to because he really doubts they would have gone to Naruto’s apartment and does he actually know the way to Sakura’s house and Ino is with her dad and-

That’s… those are all the people Sasuke has.

He realizes he’s stopped walking, people parting around him like water, and he quickly steps to the side to just breathe. He doesn’t- He doesn’t- He doesn’t want everything to fade again, to have a panic attack in the middle of the street, and Sasuke tries to calm his breathing. He was fine when he was in Ino’s house, when he was focused on that – he was fine running to the hospital, and to Kakashi-sensei’s apartment, even though he probably panicked when no panicking was necessary and-

“Sasuke?” says a concerned, familiar voice and Sasuke looks up to see Kiba.
It’s all of Team 8, actually, Kiba standing there with his brow furrowed and Akamaru on his head, Hinata on one side, worry on her face, and Shino on the other as unreadable as ever. “Sasuke?” Kiba asks again. “Are you… okay?”

Sasuke hasn’t been okay since he was eight years old, and maybe that shows on his face, because Team 8 exchange unreadable glances. “I don’t know where my team is,” he manages to get out after a moment, because that’s the point that matters right now.

Kiba nods, as if that answers everything he needed, but Shino is, surprisingly, the one to speak up. “We can help you find them. How? Because we are a tracking team.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Kiba agrees, shooting his teammate a grin. “We’ll help you find them.”

Sasuke stares at them for a moment, not sure what expression he’s wearing, before Hinata takes a small step forward and offers her hand. “C-Come on,” she says softly, and Sasuke takes it.

Akamaru leads the way, occasionally barking at Kiba which, Kiba somehow understands. Shino is a quiet shadow and Hinata holds onto his hand so tightly it almost hurts, but- he’s grateful for the grip, so it doesn’t matter.

They don’t ask him any questions, don’t do anything of the sort – he’s fairly certain that at least Kiba can hear the slight rustle of papers underneath his shirt, but he doesn’t bring it up. Instead they talk quietly among themselves, interspersed with the occasional bark from Akamaru, and they bicker about the semantics of linner vs. dunch.

It’s comforting and soothing and he feels better, like how he did with Ino.

Didn’t he think, not that long ago, that he truly did have the other genin? That it wasn’t just him and his team? It means there’s more to lose, more that can hurt him, more that takes and takes and takes but-

But.

But that might be okay.

They reach an apartment on the ground floor of a building, and Kiba gestures to it, large and sweeping. “Here you go!” he says, grinning. “This is where the trail ends.”

Sasuke opens his mouth to say something, anything, but he’s feeling kind of overwhelmed right now so he just gives a jerky nod and squeezes Hinata’s hand tight before he lets go and he thinks they all get the message.

He pushes open the door – doesn’t even bother to knock, this time, because he doesn’t think the anticipation is something he can handle – and his entire team looks up at him. Kakashi-sensei sits on the couch – in clothes, again, not in a hospital bed anymore but can he really be healed that fast, is he really entirely okay? Gai sits by his side, and they’re holding hands and Sasuke is positive that confirms that he is the boyfriend in question. Yamato-sensei sits on Kakashi-sensei’s other side, leaning against the back of the couch and almost falling asleep.

His three teammates sit on the floor.

Naruto is in the middle, Sakura on his right, Karin on his left, and there’s a large photo album open on Naruto’s lap. “Sasuke,” he says, and there are tears in his eyes, face scrunched up into a blinding smile. “Kakashi-sensei has a photo album of his team. It’s got… my parents in it.”
“Oh,” Sasuke says because he doesn’t know how else to respond, and he glances back but Team 8 is gone. He pulls the door shut behind him, and sits down across from the blonde. The papers – he needs to look at them, he does – crinkle against his front, under his shirt, and the look Kakashi-sensei sends him isn’t one Sasuke can decipher (does he know, did Asuma-sensei tell him?) and there are so many questions he wants to ask and have answered and-

“Show me,” Sasuke rasps instead, and leans forward to look.

Chapter End Notes

aaaand i'm back! done backpacking - absolutely amazing.

ftcoye now has a set update schedule, every other thursday. i'm working on getting my teaching certification right now so i can't update as often as i'd like, but when i finish i'll probably update every week.

you can now find me at the tumblr url ftcoye, which is going to be my writing blog! bc i'll be deleting my personal as soon as i finish working through all the asks lmao. thanks so much for all your support!!
It’s strange to see Kakashi-sensei as a child. He looks so… grumpy, both eyes visible, but he still wears the mask he always wears and there goes that possible chance of seeing what his face looks like.

(It helps, sometimes, to focus on little things like that.)

There’s a dark-haired boy with goggles that Sasuke could identify on sight as an Uchiha even with the atrocious orange he wears – so it must be Obito – and a brunette girl with purple marks on her cheeks who never seems to stop smiling. The Yondaime looks so strikingly similar to Naruto it’s so clear they’re related that it’s a wonder no one figured it out before (but it’s not as though Sasuke has ever seen a picture of him before, which is a curious fact), and then a redheaded woman with a great big grin that must be Naruto’s mom.

They flip through the whole book in quiet, tactfully ignoring Naruto’s sniffles and the way he rubs his eyes. Sasuke feels himself… calm, slowly. It’s a peaceful atmosphere despite the tears. His heart can stop pounding, he can get oxygen in his lungs, and he knows he’s safe here. Kakashi-sensei occasionally leans over to provide commentary – “Maa, that was when Obito was so late for our mission they gave it to Asuma and we had to run laps around the village.” – and Naruto occasionally speaks up in question – “Is this Mom’s birthday? Where are her parents?” “Gone, years ago.” – and it’s… nice.

The panic slowly slips away and it’s replaced with shame.

He panicked over nothing. Nothing. Nothing but not knowing where his team is – despite knowing they were safe, they had been with Yamato-sensei when he left them of course they were safe – and there being too many people and-

They hit the end of the book and Naruto stares at the back cover. “Kakashi-sensei is there… anymore?”

Kakashi-sensei shakes his head. “I only have one,” he says gently, and he reaches down from the couch to give Naruto’s shoulder a squeeze. “You can take it with you, if you like.”

Naruto jerks around so fast that he knocks Kakashi-sensei’s hand, eyes wide. “R-Really? You don’t… you don’t want them?”

Their teacher shrugs lightly. “Maa, I have copies of a few. Take it. Early birthday present.”

“My birthday’s in two months.”

“It’s a very early birthday present.”

Naruto scrubs at his eyes and then he’s handing the album to Karin and spinning around to throw his arms around Kakashi-sensei in a hug. Their teacher looks startled, for just a split second, before his gaze softens and he wraps his arms around him in return.

Gai-sensei is weeping openly and the rest of Team 7 stares at him. “How youthful!” he cries. “Naruto, I will ask our comrades!” Ask them… what? He wipes at his eyes and then reaches over to
set a firm hand on Naruto’s shoulder, even as the other’s wrapped in Kakashi-sensei’s arms. “There may be other pictures! They are yours!”

Naruto starts getting teary again and Sasuke looks away because it feels too intimate and close and not something to be staring at, and he ends up catching Karin’s eye. “You… came straight here with Yamato-sensei?” he asks quietly, because it does ache just… just a fraction that he was not here, that the others were.

His fault for meeting up with Ino, he thinks, and the papers press against his stomach.

She nods. “Yamato-sensei said you were with someone else,” she says, and Sasuke’s a little surprised that he didn’t just tell the whole thing. “You just, um… vanished. We turned around and you were gone. But Yamato-sensei said we should let you be…”

Well, he thinks, I just had a panic attack and then went to go get secret illegal papers from a friend. That’s why I had to vanish. You know how it is. Like that excuse would fly.

…Actually, scratch that, it was Team 7. If the adults weren’t around, or he had looked at Kabuto’s papers before, he’d tell them on the spot.

Sasuke shrugs instead. “Wanted to talk to Ino.”

This catches Sakura’s attention, and she joins the conversation, brow furrowed in surprise. “You and Ino are friends, Sasuke?”

He hesitates, but nods. She presses her lips together in a thin line and some indecipherable emotion flashes over her face so fast he cannot tell, but she turns that into a small smile, looking down at her knees. “I’m glad,” she says. “Ino is… Ino is a good friend to have.”

Ino is…

Maybe, Sakura had said, what feels like years ago but was only two months. Maybe, Sasuke had said back, and she had apologized. For going after him, before, he thinks, but it's not like she knew… or he knew…

And it was only maybe. (But he thinks about the festival and wonders if they’re past a maybe.)

He glances over at the couch, and Kakashi-sensei and Gai-sensei are holding hands and Naruto’s wiping at his eyes and Sasuke’s heart clenches in his chest.

There’s his maybe and there’s her maybe and then there’s the truth that: “Yeah, Ino is.”

They go through the photo album one more time and Kakashi-sensei shares a few more stories behind the pictures (it’s hard, they can tell, like it almost hurts him to say it and Sasuke thinks that’s why Naruto’s not more upset about not getting every single story), before Yamato-sensei forces himself into the waking world and to go get them all takeout.

When they’re all done eating, Gai-sensei brings out a bunch of blankets and it’s clear all four of the genin are going to sleep on the floor of his apartment together.

Sasuke hasn’t slept alone since… the incident, before they left.

He wonders if his teachers are doing it on purpose or if it’s just a coincidence. What Sakura’s parents think.
How long this is going to last before everyone goes back home.

Sasuke can’t sleep, though. He hasn’t gotten a chance to look at the papers yet but they’re stuffed in his bag now, carefully hidden in his shirt still from when he pulled on his pajamas. He had left his bag in Kakashi-sensei’s room, before, and when his teacher came from the hospital he must have taken it with him.

Now it sits next to Sasuke on the floor, because he’s too paranoid to let it out of his sight.

Groaning internally, he sits up. Naruto’s got his pillow in a chokehold, snoring away, Karin pressed up against his back and Sakura sprawled out next to her. They all appear to be asleep – but they’re all ninja, so they could really easily be faking it. It doesn’t really matter, anyway.

He stands up, picking up his bag quietly, tiptoes across his teammates and then slips out the door. The streets of Konoha are quiet, and he stands there for a moment, looking out over them and the lack of movement.

Anyone outside right now is a shinobi, and no shinobi would be seen at this time of day.

“Where are you going?” asks a voice quietly from behind him, and Sasuke spins in shock.

It’s Kakashi-sensei, leaning against the wall next to the door, arms folded. He doesn’t look distressed or worried or even curious, simply looking at him. Sasuke opens his mouth and then closes it. He doesn’t really have an answer – he just wants to know what those papers say, and he can’t look at them here.

“Are you okay?” he asks instead, and Kakashi-sensei lets his surprise show, eye widening just slightly. “Did… the Hokage heal you? Are you going to be our teacher again?”

It’s not. Not that he doesn’t like Yamato-sensei, because he does. He’s a very practical and down-to-earth man, very different from Kakashi-sensei, and he’s a good teacher and patient with him, even if he doesn’t have patience for them messing around.

But Kakashi-sensei is… Kakashi-sensei, and however good a teacher Yamato-sensei may be and however much Sasuke may want him to stick around, he wants both of his teachers.

Kakashi-sensei’s gaze softens and he reaches out, setting a gentle hand on Sasuke’s head and ruffling his hair up. The boy flushes. “I was healed enough to be out of the hospital,” he says quietly. “But I’m not ready for active missions yet. I’ll need surgery for that.”

“Surgery?” Sasuke’s voice rises in volume, a little more than it probably should, because he quiets instantly upon the look his teacher gives him.

“Yes,” he says calmly. “Surgery. Yamato-sensei already knows your next mission, and when you come back, I’ll be right as rain. Promise.”

Sasuke nods jerkily. Surgery… It makes him a little frightened for his teacher, but Kakashi-sensei doesn’t seem too concerned, so it must not be that big of a deal. “What’s…” His voice rasps, just a little, but he swallows and his teacher thankfully doesn’t comment on it. “What’s our next mission?”

Kakashi-sensei taps Sasuke on the nose and he pulls back with a jerk, scowling. He’s unphased, though, smiling beneath his mask at his student. “Maa, that’s a surprise,” he says, and that makes Sasuke hunch his shoulders, kind of ticked off.

He doesn’t like secrets, which is kind of ironic. No- He guesses he doesn’t mind secrets, but he
minds things being kept from him. There’s a difference.

(Also he doesn’t like surprises very much.)

Sasuke hunches in silence and Kakashi-sensei gazes at him for a few, long moments and then his teacher speaks again. “Sasuke,” he says gently. “Is there anything else you wanted to tell me about? Or ask me?”

His bag feels so heavy in his hand and he tightens his grip on the strap. “Nothing to tell,” he says. Sasuke… trusts Kakashi-sensei. He does. Kakashi-sensei has fully acknowledged that there are other factions in Konoha and Sasuke has already confided in him that bit about Kabuto – *I am one of them* – but. But.

Kakashi-sensei has already been hurt so badly for his sake, and he can’t do anything right now. Plus… Plus Asuma-sensei may have already told him (and Kakashi-sensei is just seeing if Sasuke will share), and Sasuke doesn’t know who might be listening, and he hasn’t even looked at the papers yet to see if there’s an information on them to share and-

There’s another question, though.

“Sensei…” He says, and then he… tries to figure out how to word it, because he still doesn’t know if there’s anyone else around. (He wants to think not, because Kakashi-sensei is here, but it could also be people that Kakashi-sensei thinks can know about the Kabuto thing – again, if Kakashi-sensei does secretly know – and that’s an unknown Sasuke doesn’t want to deal with.) “The… technique you used on the first Hokage. You told me you would tell me about it, later.”

Kakashi-sensei regards him with an unchanging expression of nothing but calm, and Sasuke resists the urge to squirm underneath his gaze. “Tomorrow,” his teacher says, and Sasuke blinks up at him with a frown. “I will tell you tomorrow – if!” He wags a finger at Sasuke. “You go back to bed right now.”

Sasuke wants to protest, but he does want to learn what it was and so he scowls at him. “Fine,” he says petulantly.

When he leads the way back inside, he tries to ignore the way Kakashi-sensei has to lean on the wall the whole way.

He’s not sure what time he finally manages to fall asleep, but he’s still tied for the first one up in the morning. It’s not their teachers – they’re quiet as can be, shinobi, but when Sakura sits up with a yawn Sasuke snaps into awareness. *Morning,* she signs sleepily at him over the two Uzumakis, and he manages to drum up something that feels more like a grimace than a smile but still satisfies her.

Kakashi-sensei is cooking what looks like a ton of scrambled eggs mixed with an equally large amount of veggies over the stove, leaning into Gai-sensei for support, and Sasuke’s mouth twists at the sight.

If his teacher can’t even stand without assistance… Can whatever the Hokage’s surgery is really make him “right as rain”?

He hopes. He has to think so.

Sasuke eats his eggs mechanically, barely tasting them, and he ignores the way Sakura shoots a
concerned glance his way. He just… has a lot on his mind, that’s all.


It’s… a lot to think about, and he shovels in another bite.

The Uzumakis wake eventually, stumbling their way over to the kitchen in a sleepy sync to grab their plates of food. It’s kind of cute, honestly, the way they bumble into each other and-

Sasuke shoves some more eggs down his throat because he did not just think of Naruto as cute.

The boy in question blinks blearily at Sasuke, shaking his head a few times like a dog as if trying to snap himself into awakeness. “Sasuke?” he asks. “Are you… okay?”

At whatever expression his face is making, Naruto flushes a little and looks back down at his eggs. “Just didn’t get to ask yesterday,” he says.

Oh. That’s.

“M’fine,” Sasuke mumbles, and pretends it doesn’t taste like a lie.

Last night must have been the last night he could sleep, bundled up with the rest of his teammates like that, because they part ways.

Sakura gives them each a long, tight hug before she leaves, first. “My parents will get worried if I stay away any longer,” she says, and Sasuke wants to protest, that she’s an adult and it shouldn’t matter but.

If he had parents, he would want to be with them, too.

Yamato-sensei leaves next. He doesn’t give much more than a nod to all of them, and instructions to “Keep an eye out,” and then he’s gone, vanishing out the door.

Karin and Naruto take their time eating, but even they, too, are eventually ready to go. He gets hugs from both of them – Karin doesn’t seem to want to let go, and she shakes a little when she pulls back. “Be careful,” she says.

Naruto holds out a fist and Sasuke gently taps it with his own and Naruto’s grin grows. “See you later, Sasuke,” he says, and then they’re off, hands curled tightly around each other.

And then it’s just Sasuke.

He sits on the couch with his bag on his lap, staring at the wall. Gai-sensei does dishes and Kakashi-sensei gently limps over to Sasuke and sits next to him. “It’s safe for you to go back to the compound,” he says. “We looked it over when you were gone, and you’ll have ANBU watching, now.”

That…

That might put a bit of a crimp in his plans.

Sasuke fiddles with the strap of his bag, trying to think. “Are they… the kind of ANBU who would know our motto?” he says, because that’s the best way he can think to phrase it.

Kakashi-sensei inclines his head, just slightly. “Yes. You’ll be safe.”
He doesn’t know if he can ever feel really truly safe again there, because Itachi was one thing and Kabuto was another, but he can’t exactly live on his teacher’s boyfriend’s floor for the rest of his life, so he nods. “Hn. Let’s go.”

There’s a wheelchair for Kakashi-sensei in the bedroom, and that’s what he uses to walk Sasuke back. …Wheel Sasuke back. Whichever.

They don’t talk. There’s no sound between them but Sasuke’s footsteps and the everturning wheels of Kakashi-sensei’s chair as he rolls it – of course, the rest of Konoha is bustling and wide awake, and they make plenty of noise, but not these two.

When they reach the compound, it looks the same.

Sasuke stops at the entrance, unable to go in just yet, and it’s only when Kakashi-sensei wheels past him that he manages to keep going. There’s stairs leading up into his house, so Kakashi-sensei leaves his wheelchair outside and leans on Sasuke as they head in to sit in the kitchen.

He has no bad memories in the kitchen. It’s… the best place.

Kakashi-sensei settles down with a sigh and Sasuke stares at the wooden table, at the grains he has so intricately memorized, and his teacher sighs again.

“There is a further form of the Sharingan I don’t think you know of, Sasuke,” he says, and Sasuke looks up. “The Mangekyou Sharingan. It has… abilities, that vary per person. I have it, and Itachi has it.”

Sasuke stares at Kakashi-sensei as if he holds all the secrets in the universe. “How do you get it?” he asks, hoarsely.

Kakashi-sensei closes his eye. “By killing your best friend,” he whispers.

Shisui.

That’s-

That’s why Shisui died first, why he happened before the rest of the clan, why-

Sasuke swallows. “Obito?”

Kakashi-sensei shakes his head. “My other teammate, Rin.”

“What… what happened?”

And his teacher tells him the story of the bravest mednin he ever knew.

Chapter End Notes

happy birthday to me! hence why this chapter is, coughs, slightly late. it's a lil longer than usual so??

thanks for all your kind comments!!! as always, you can find me on tumblr as 'ftcoye', where i take drabble prompts. see you soon!!
To Ask A Question: Gaara Interlude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The only way Gaara can keep track of the days passing is the flowers.

He doesn’t sleep – still cannot truly sleep, only passing out for small spurts and bits of time while his siblings watch over him – and there is no outside light to keep track of the days, but the flowers are constant.

Every single day, one of the Konoha ninja bring him flowers. It’s a different arrangement every time, different shapes and colors and sizes, and it always goes into a simple wooden vase they brought out solely for this purpose. “From Ino,” each Konoha nin says, and Gaara wonders.

At first, his siblings do not say anything about it. They’re still navigating this, this strange… familial relationship that they have not tried in so long, not since they were all very young. The ninja question them on occasion, but mostly they are simply relegated to the bedroom they’re all sharing. It’s nice, it’s simple, but their weapons are gone and there are no windows, no other ways to exit.

Gaara could easily break them all out if he had a wish to, of course, but he does not.

“They’re just not sure what to do with us,” Temari says on the first day, quietly, after she returns from her questioning to the relief of her brothers. “The Kazekage is dead, and so is the Hokage.”

Kankurou looks interested at that. “Think they’ve got all of us stuck like this?”

Temari shakes her head. “Doubt it. That’s a lot of holding cells and food they probably don’t have. Since we’re, well…” She doesn’t quite finish that – while they’re more than willing to acknowledge each other as siblings, now, acknowledging their father is… “And because Gaara is…”

“Because I am a demon,” Gaara says, and both his siblings flinch at that.

“B-Because you have a demon inside of you,” Temari says, and they all pretend she didn’t have a slight stutter, a slight thread of fear. “And because we were in the Chunin Exams. They’ve got us, and maybe Baki and a few other jounin.”

“If he is alive,” Gaara says, and the other two pale at that.

Kankurou swallows harshly. “It’s… Baki, yeah? He’s an old desert fox. He’s fine.”

But none of them ask the Konoha nin.

The flowers come again on the second day, when none of them are questioned, and on the third and the fourth and every other day after.

The shinobi bring them with their afternoon or evening meals, which is good food even if it lacks the spice of Suna, and Gaara can’t help but be surprised every time he sees them.

Kankurou finally comments on them, the fourth time. “Is she like… trying to date you?” he asks, and Temari shoves an elbow into his gut so hard he keels over.

Gaara stares at the flowers and considers this. He turns to his sister. “Is she?”
The expression on her face is one that Gaara has never seen before, of pain and humor and exasperation all at once, and she shakes her head. “I don’t think so,” Temari says. “I don’t know what they mean, but she’d probably leave a note with them or something. I think she’s just nice.”

Nice. Gaara thinks of the frightened girl who had held her hand out to him, who had comforted him, and agrees that that is a good word that describes her. Nice.

Yamanaka Ino is the nicest person he has ever met.

Touch changes, now, with his siblings. They’ll sit next to him. Let their shoulders brush each other. Kankurou ruffles his hair one day and then laughs so hard he cracks his paint at the bewildered look Gaara gives him.

They do not mind that he does not speak much, or do not seem to, chatting next to him and occasionally addressing him in a way they never did before, and there’s a warmth inside of him that doesn’t seem to diminish.

Not even the whispers from Mo- from the Ichibi can diminish that. When the whispers are too strong, his sibling shield him, gentle hands holding his arms and their bodies hiding him from the ninja that stand watch outside their door and they talk him through it and Gaara feels so full he could burst.

They care if he gets hurt, and it’s so much it’s overwhelming.

There has been over a dozen flowers delivered when Gaara stops counting, and when the new Hokage finally arrives. She’s very tall and blonde with very big arms and Gaara, quite honestly, finds her a bit intimidating. He feels justified in this response – because the Ichibi feels the same way.

There’s something about her necklace that keeps drawing his eye, and he tries not to stare at it.

Temari seems to feel no such intimidation, though. She gets in a shouting match with the new Hokage in the middle of the room, fifteen years old versus however old the Hokage is (very old, Gaara thinks, because she’s very tall) and Kankurou looks like he’s going to hide under the bed after he dodges the end table the Hokage throws but Gaara grabs his arm and anchors him next to him.

It turns out okay, because no one gets hurt and the Hokage ends up laughing at them and giving all of them a grin. “Alright, kids,” she says. “We’ll get you an escort back tomorrow. Get some sleep.”

“I do not think-“ Gaara starts to say, because he cannot truly sleep and thus cannot follow her instructions, but the door is already shut before he can finish and so he blinks twice instead.

Kankurou laughs slightly, shaking his head. “Temari, you’re fucking crazy,” he says, which is a definitely odd statement to make because out of all of them, Gaara definitely thinks she is the most normal. He nudges Gaara and grins at his younger brother. “I saw where you were staring,” he says, and oh.

“Yes,” Gaara says, though it wasn’t really a question. “Her necklace bothers the Ichibi.”

His grin falls away and he and Temari both stare at Gaara before Kankurou tips his head back in despair and stares at the ceiling. “Why are you always so weird?”

Gaara thinks this is the first time that Kankurou’s insulted him, even if he doesn’t quite understand. “Thank you,” he says.
True to the Hokage’s word, there are several ninja ready to escort them the next day. One of them is the second proctor from the exam, senbon caught in his teeth, and he gives them a cheery grin. Another is a woman with long purple hair pulled into a braid who gives them a respectful nod. The third is a woman with two red triangles on her cheeks and three dogs at her feet. The fourth is-

“Baki!” Temari and Kankurou exclaim in relief, and Gaara can see how they twitch, how they hold themselves back from flinging themselves at their jounin instructor. It’s not something you do in front of an enemy, or one you are uncertain about – Gaara personally doesn’t know where Konoha falls in that, but he hopes it’s the second.

He doesn’t want them as an enemy.

Baki looks fine – something is a little bit… off about his face, a little bit of a droop in his left eye, but he doesn’t seem to be injured. Still, he signs at Temari and Kankurou, whose smiles drop off their faces. Gaara doesn’t know Suna Sign. He nudges his sister. “Temari, what…?”

It’s dangerous to give interpretations when there are others right there, because no one wants the enemy to be able to figure out your sign, but Temari gives him a rough estimate. “He can’t speak. Damage from an attack – he has to relearn it.”

Oh. That’s…

Gaara doesn’t know how one should take that, but he simply makes a note that he needs to learn Suna Sign, just in case it takes Baki a long time.

They all walk to the entrance to Konoha together, and Gaara can feel the weight of stares upon them. “We were the only ones they were holding,” Temari murmurs into his ear. Baki has been signing to her and Kankurou – Temari can’t tell Gaara everything, but she has shared the important, and Gaara is listening. He nods slightly, looking past her to the gate, and then stops breathing.

There are two genin standing there.

He recognizes them – Ino’s teammates. The boy he had tried to kill in the preliminaries, and the boy who had stepped in to save him. Gaara doesn’t know their names, but they look up when the group approaches. “Hey,” says the one who had trapped him in his shadows. “Can you all hang on just a second? Ino’s on her way.”

Gaara’s heart catches in his throat and his siblings both shoot glances at him, but it’s the proctor they look to, who chews on his senbon thoughtfully. “We can wait,” he says. “But she better get here soon.”

The other one nods. “Promise, she’ll be here any second. She’s just going to get-“

“Hey!”

A shout echoes across the village, an unfamiliar voice, and the group turns to see two small figures darting from rooftop to rooftop in their direction. The first one lands neatly in front of them, jogging the rest of the way over – it’s Ino, and she smiles. “Hey, sorry, I didn’t want to miss you.” She glances back and the other figure lands clumsily on the ground and sprints over and it’s a genin that Gaara recognizes, but doesn’t know.

It’s kind of hard to forget a blonde ninja wearing nothing but bright orange.

Temari and Kankurou stiffen next to him, and the Konoha shinobi shift uneasily, but Ino forgives
forward and pushes the other blonde next to her. “Gaara, there’s someone I want you to meet,” she says. “Gaara, this is Naruto. Naruto, Gaara.”

Naruto stares at him with wide eyes and Gaara really has no idea why Ino wants them to meet, but the other clears his throat and sticks out his hand. “I- I’ve got the Kyuubi sealed in me,” he says, and the woman with the dogs sucks in air between her teeth. Ino’s teammates stare at Naruto with wide eyes. “It’s… It’s nice to meet you.”

It-

He-

Gaara stares at him for a long time, and he can see the other ninja getting uncomfortable but he can’t-

“I have the Ichibi sealed in me,” Gaara says, and he reaches out to take Naruto’s hand. He’s warm through the sand, and they shake, and the smile that splits the blonde’s face is the widest Gaara has ever seen.

“I know you gotta go,” Naruto says, “But- Do you wanna be penpals, maybe?”

Gaara has no idea what that is. “I have no idea what that is,” he says.

“Oh, it’s, um.” Naruto frowns thoughtfully for a moment. “It means we like, write letters to each other, back and forth? So we can talk even if we’re in different villages and stuff. I’ve got penpals in Ame, too.”

The idea is… it’s an interesting one. To write to this other ninja who also has a demon, to talk to him and see what he has to say and- “Yes,” he says. “I’ll be your penpal.”

Naruto cheers and lunges forward for a hug and Gaara neatly steps out of the way.

The proctor doesn’t bother to hide his snicker, patting Naruto on the shoulder. “Come on,” he says. “We have to get going – we have a schedule to stick to.”

In the desert, that’s important. You don’t want to get caught in the cold of night, nor trapped with the blazing hot sun when you are unprepared, and the Suna nin nod. Ino’s teammates approach Gaara next, and the one who had done the saving smiles at Gaara. “Hey,” he says. “No hard feelings, right?”

The one who Gaara had tried to kill snorts and rolls his eyes. “Shouldn’t I be saying that?” he mutters, but he quells at the look the other teammate sends him. “Yeah, yeah, no hard feelings.”

“…Thank you,” Gaara says, because he knows of nothing else he can say.

They aren’t addressing anyone else – Naruto doesn’t do much more than wave at Temari and Kankurou and greet them, and Ino’s teammates don’t really look at his siblings at all – because they’re all here for Gaara, and the realization is overwhelming. It’s so much.

Ino is in front of him, and she smiles.

“Hey,” she says, and she reaches out for him. Ino moves slowly, telegraphing her movements, but Gaara doesn’t move away, not like with Naruto. She wraps her arms around him and squeezes him tightly and she’s so… warm. He reaches up and lets his hands curl in her shirt, and her arms wrap just a little bit tighter, before she pulls back enough to look him in the eye. She’s just a little bit taller than him, and it feels comforting, her arms around him as they stand.
“Can I write you, too?” he asks, because there’s so many things he wants to ask her he doesn’t think he can get it out right you.

Ino blinks twice, surprised, and then relaxes. “Yeah,” she says. “I’ll write you back.”

He pulls back, then, because he realizes literally everyone is watching them and it’s a lot, but Ino doesn’t lose her smile. “Write me as soon as you get there, okay?”

Gaara nods. “I will. I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

eh, fuck schedules, i end up updating faster when i have no committed schedule i’m keeping to ;;;

thanks so much for all the lovely comments!! i read and love every single one, super motivating to keep going always. the next chapter is the OFFICIAL midpoint of part one! with a prologue (wave arc) and three fully-fledged arcs on this half of it (chunin exams, konoha crush, search for tsunade), and three fully-fledged arcs and a prologue on the other half... i don't know if the word count will be exactly the same, but outline-wise, the next chapter is the halfway of part one!

the next three arcs are, anime-wise, the movie, land of tea, and the sasuke retrieval arc... probably not ending up the same here, lol. i think y'all will be very, very pumped for the next one. but first, our midpoint chapter, which will probably be the longest chapter in the fic so far, so it might take a touch longer.

thanks for sticking with me! as always, you can find me on tumblr as ftcoye, where i take drabble requests. (i'm a lil slow rn because ive been prepping paperwork and other stuff for moving later this year). thanks again!
Kakashi leaves Sasuke in his compound.

He leaves his student – the one who recently ran into his murderous older brother, who not long before was tormented by Kabuto, who not long before that witnessed a woman dying in front of him to save him, who not long before… Well, after the long list of trauma that is Sasuke’s life, Kakashi has left him in his clan compound alone, and it’s a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Sasuke had insisted, though, had told him to go, and Kakashi… respects his choices.

In a way, perhaps it’s the same as how he has ignored his ancestral Hatake home for so many years, how he hasn’t stepped foot in it since… That Day. It’s a different method of coping.

It doesn’t mean it’s good coping, though, something Kakashi would know very well.

He wheels himself back to Gai’s apartment, and Tenzo is still there when he returns. He looks exhausted – Kakashi truly did throw him into this whole ‘hey watch my kids’ thing without warning, but it’s not like he could have warned him.

Gai’s washing dishes in the kitchen, humming to himself, but Kakashi opts for gingerly shifting from wheelchair to couch, relaxing into it with a sigh. “Tenzo,” he says quietly, and he can feel the man’s gaze even as he shuts his eyes. “If this… does not work, if I can’t continue, I want you to be their teacher.”

Tenzo doesn’t seem surprised by the statement. “It’s up to the Hokage,” he points out.

Kakashi cracks open his single good eye. “Why would she say no to that?”

His cute little Tenzo seems to have a million responses, enough so that he can’t settle on one, and he shakes his head. “Captain,” he says, with the faith of one who cannot conceive of a different ending, who cannot imagine living in that kind of world, “You will continue to be a shinobi. There is no way you will not.”

“I wonder,” Kakashi says, and he leaves it at that.

“Iruka-sensei!” Naruto’s familiar voice echoes down the street, and Iruka turns, smile on his face – always ready to see his favorite student. He comes barreling down the street and only just manages to stop before he knocks his old teacher over.

Iruka ruffles his hair. “Naruto,” he greets, pleased to not be bowled over for once in his life. There’s a twinkle in his eye. “It’s almost dinner time – were you finding me for ramen?”

“No! I… I mean…” Naruto frowns, clearly deeply thinking, and folds his arms over his chest. “I got
something big to talk to you about, Iruka-sensei, but… can we pleeeease get ramen, too?”

He laughs. “I was the one to bring it up.” Naruto cheers and tackles him in a hug – but Iruka’s prepared this time, sticking to the street with chakra to stop them from falling over and shaking his head. He pats Naruto on the back, and his student lets go.

Naruto is more than happy to lead the way with a grin and Iruka follows behind fondly. “Now, Naruto,” he says. “What did you mean when you said you had something big to talk with me about?” He frowns. “Nothing… bad, I hope?”

“Nope!” He shakes his head cheerily. “All good, Iruka-sensei!” Naruto leans in, speaking quiet enough that civilians would not be able to hear. “I told my team about… the fox,” he whispers, and Iruka’s eyes go wide. “They didn’t care.”

Oh, he’s so glad for Naruto, his heart swells- Iruka beams, putting a hand on Naruto’s shoulder and squeezing. “I’m so happy for you,” he says. “That’s exactly how it should be.”

Naruto gets a little misty-eyed, scrubbing at his eyes and then beaming back. “Yeah! Yeah, yeah and- and Kiba and Shino know, and so do Shikamaru and Chouji and Ino, too!” He pauses, considering. “I should tell Hinata, I guess she’s the last one…”

Iruka may not be a parent, and he may no longer be these children’s teacher, but he’s so proud of every single one of them. He’s so proud of how they grew – especially since he knows that not all of their parents approve of Naruto, he has fielded those complaints before, so for these kids to not care even when their parents are the exact opposite?

Yeah, he’s proud.

“I’m sure she’ll be just as fine with it as the others,” he says, because he hardly doubts Hyuuga Hinata will reject Naruto, and his student nods.

“Yeah! Yeah, I’ll tell’er later. But that’s not why I wanted to talk to ya.”

“Oh? Why?”

Naruto pauses, puffing his cheeks out like a frog’s as he thinks. “I want your help,” he says slowly. “Cause I got to write some penpal letters.”

Iruka’s interested. “Oh? To who?” (Also, proud. Naruto makes him so proud.)

“Well, to… to family.”

“Again,” Neji says, and Hinata blindly rushes forward. Literally – he has her wearing a blindfold, and she’s not using her Byakugan.

Predictably, she fails. Going only by sound, by what you feel in your bones, is… is difficult, and she cannot land a hit on him. Neji knocks her down soundly, and she reaches up to pull off her blindfold, blinking up at her cousin. “I d-don’t… I d-don’t know if I can,” she says quietly.

“You need to,” Neji says simply. “If what happened to me happens to you…”

The idea of losing her eyesight is a terrifying one. Even though it only took about 48 hours for Neji’s vision to return, it was 48 hours too long. Strain, the mednin had said, and Hinata knows that both her and Neji had the same, paralyzed fear. Yes, he had been using it a lot that day, but what if…
what if it was because of the seal?

Neji was the only one – to their knowledge, at least – to get this far in the Hyuuga arts, to be this strong. He was also one of those who had his seal used the most. The unfortunate results of being so close to the Main Branch and yet not.

It’s not something Hinata has to worry about – not yet, and hopefully not ever, and the backing of her yearmates and cousin sits warmly in her chest – but if that theory is wrong and it is overuse, she needs to be prepared as well.

Neji offers her a hand up, and Hinata takes it. His palm is heavily callused, but warm, and she doesn’t quite let go even when she’s standing. “Thank you,” she says softly. “It’s… it’s nice to train with you. Even if… Even if I hope you don’t have… have to worry about this for long…”

Because as soon as she’s the head, she’s getting rid of them. No questions. No more seals, no more… injustice.

Her cousin colors, just a little. “Prove you’ll do that by landing a hit,” he says instead, and Hinata reties her blindfold with a small sigh.

Neither of them have their Byakugan activated – and neither of them see Hiashi watching with a frown, just out of sight.

Sakura knocks on the door.

It takes a few moments, utter ninja silence behind it, before an exhausted Hyuuga face peeks out. “Yes?” he asks.

“Excuse me,” Sakura says, the epitome of polite. “Are you Hyuuga Hoheto?”

The man in question surveys her and the homemade fruit basket she holds in her arms. “…Yes?”

“I’m Haruno Sakura,” she says. “And… I wanted to give this to you.”

He sighs and opens the door more fully. “Come in.”

It’s a house, not an apartment, which is definitely abnormal for shinobi in Sakura’s experience – she’s never met a jounin that lives in a house and not an apartment. (Except for, well, the Hokages, but that’s definitely different.) It’s warm, inviting – very different from what she thought a Hyuuga’s home would look like. Sunshine colors and pictures decorate the wall.

She walks through the kitchen to get to the living room, and there’s a picture of Anko on the counter. Sakura stops and stares, and Hoheto stops too. “I’m assuming you’re here about her?” he asks. “Or is it about Reo?”

Reo… that’s Anko’s other teammate, who supposedly also lives here. “During the invasion,” she says slowly. “Anko… saved my life. I told myself I’d get her a fruit basket when it was all said and done.” She shakes her head. “I couldn’t, so… for you and Reo.”

His gaze softens and he finally takes it from her arms, setting it on the counter next to the picture. “Thank you,” he says softly. “Reo isn’t here, but would you like some tea?”

“If it’s not a bother.”

“No,” he says, and he leads the way once more into the living room. “I would appreciate the
Hoheto bustles around for a moment, getting hot water poured and pulling out a box with plenty of tea variety – Sakura opts for green – and then sits with a sigh. He doesn’t say anything for a moment, just holding his tea, so Sakura decides to speak up. “You asked if I was here about, um, Reo,” she says, even if it feels odd to call him by his first name, but there wasn’t a surname listed in the book she found. “Did something… happen?”

The man looks so weary for a moment, so old and tired that Sakura wishes she didn’t ask, before he nods, just slightly. “Reo… Yakushi Kabuto was on his team,” he says, and her heart sinks. “He’s being questioned by T&I.”

“Oh,” she says, and stares down at her tea. It was something she hadn’t thought about – she hadn’t done much more than look up previous team rosters in the library and then asked around to find where Hyuuga Hoheto and Reo lived (together, apparently). But to be on Orochimaru’s team and then, years later, to have your student leave and join Orochimaru…

“I’m sure the Hokage will sort it all out, and he’ll be back soon,” Sakura tells him, and tries for a smile.

He returns it, and takes a sip of his tea.

Chouji can tell that Shikamaru’s head is moving a million kilometers a second, spinning wildly, but he doesn’t say anything. He’s kind of grateful for it – the fact that Naruto has a demon in him is shocking enough, but he doesn’t need to hear one of his best friend’s give his commentary. It’ll make his head hurt.

Instead, he dismisses it – because it doesn’t really matter, does it? Naruto is Naruto – and focuses on his other best friend, giving Ino a smile. “Ino,” he says. “Asuma-sensei started talking this morning – you should visit him.”

She seems distracted, staring after where Gaara left, and she doesn’t respond until Shikamaru gently elbows her. “Huh? What?” Ino blinks twice and then processes the conversation again. “Oh! I, uh, I will, tonight. I’ve got something I’ve got to do, first.”

Ino’s not forthcoming on the topic – which isn’t super like her, but even Ino has secrets – so Chouji forgives forward. She’ll tell them when she needs to, he’s positive. “Okay,” he says. “But soon, alright?”

“If you’re only really seen him once since he woke, and he wasn’t very awake then.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m not super big on hospitals,” she says, and that’s not something Chouji ever knew and judging by the look Shikamaru gives him, not something he knew either, but it’s not a lie, it feels like.

“I’m not super big on hospitals,” she says, and that’s not something Chouji ever knew and judging by the look Shikamaru gives him, not something he knew either, but it’s not a lie, it feels like.

“Okay,” Chouji agrees amiably. “We were just gonna go visit him after this, and I just wanted to let you know you could come if you want.”

Ino softens a little and gives him a smile. “I will. I just have to talk to someone real fast, and then I’ll meet you there.”

Shikamaru can’t help his grin. “Oh? Someone special?”
Her cheeks flush and she pins him with a hard glare. “None of your business!”

Ino marches along ahead and Chouji and Shikamaru share snickers behind her back. Whatever’s going on with her, she’s still the same old Ino, and he loves it.

Kiba leans into Shino, and he doesn’t protest it. Of course he wouldn’t – they’re a team, they’re pack, and Kiba likes it when Shino smells like him and Akamaru and Hinata and Kurenai-sensei instead of just his freaky lovable weird bugself.

Shino doesn’t have the same sense of smell, so it’s not like Kiba’s gonna tell him that (and then he’d probably go take a really flower-scented bath to get rid of it), and it’s nice all the same. “Kiba,” Shino says suddenly, and Kiba blinks from his drowsing, dragging himself into full awakensness.

“Yeah?” he says quietly, not wanting to wake Akamaru from where he sleeps on his lap.

“You were friends with Naruto in the academy,” he says. “Your family, did they tell you anything of him? I wish to know.”

Kiba rubs at his eyes and yawns. “Nah,” he says. “Never brought anybody home cause my mom scares a lotta people, but she didn’t care when I told her ‘bout Naruto. Why?”

There’s a long pause, and Kiba thinks Shino isn’t going to answer before he does. “…I respect your family,” he says slowly. “Why? For my own warned me against him.”

“Huh.” Kiba’s really not sure how to take that, and he scratches his head. “Like, he’s a menace and stuff? I heard other parents say that, but… ‘sides, I knew he had a freaky ton of chakra anyway, I just didn’t know why. Kinda makes sense now.”

Shino inclines his head. “I knew the same. Why? My Kikaichu informed me. Yet I took that as a reason to stay away.” He doesn’t respond for a moment. “…You are a better person than me, Kiba. Why? For we knew the same, and yet you embraced him as your friend.”

He shakes his head. “Nah.” Kiba grins. “You didn’t like ‘im because you didn’t like anyone back then. You don’t care now, right?”

“…That is correct. You are more intelligent than you look.”

“Thanks- Wait, is that a compliment or an insult!?”

“I stand corrected.”

It’s only when her lungs are burning does Tayuya stop for air, lacing her hands behind her head to get better airflow and trying to inhale. Her companion does the same, coming to a stop and collapsing on the ground, staring up at the sky and doing her best to function. “We can’t… stop long,” Tayuya says, barely able to form the words.

Isaribi nods, but she can’t get out much more than that.

For a few minutes, they just wait. Trying to breathe until they finally, truly can, and then Tayuya grabs a canteen from her pack, downing some water, and then passes it to the other girl. Isaribi gulps it down gratefully, and Tayuya wonders with a pang how she’s managing to do this, away from water. “Drink the rest,” she says, and though Isaribi hesitates, she does so.
“How… How much longer?” she asks, and Tayuya doesn’t want to say ‘forever’, but she really feels like that’s the answer.

“Nightfall, I think,” she estimates instead. “When it’s dark, I think we might be able to properly lose her.”

Isaribi nods and Tayuya offers a hand, helping her to her feet and then just. Holding her, for a moment, grabbing her and tugging her close, and the other girl does the same. Her scales are strange against Tayuya’s fingers, strange but feeling more familiar every day, and it’s comforting to hold another in her arms. “If she gets us, she’ll… make us like her,” she says softly, and it’s a terrifying thought. She’s already lost the boys, and as much as she hated them when they were around, they were a comforting form of hate. Kin and her team were lost to Konoha, and now Isaribi is the single person she has left.

She won’t lose her. Not to this.

Tayuya pulls back and cups her cheek. “I won’t let her get you,” Tayuya promises with all the fucking ferocity she can, and Isaribi snorts.

“You act like I’m defenseless,” she says, but there’s humor in it. “I won’t let her get you either, you know.”

“Yeah,” Tayuya says, and it’s a warmth she hasn’t felt since Kin and Orochimaru died in one fell swoop. “I know.”

They take off a few moments later, and Tayuya tries to breathe. She won’t lose another.

She can’t.

Tenten is a hard opponent – there are no ifs, ands, or buts about that. Karin is infinitely grateful to Lee for properly introducing her to the rest of his team and also infinitely grateful that Tenten offered to teach her as well – Neji had just given her a kind of disdainful look and then Tenten stuck her tongue out at his back and Karin tried not to giggle – even if it means the other girl fights her until she’s black and blue.

Karin’s gotten a lot better at throwing weapons, though, even in this single one hour session, and if Tenten’s willing to keep training her she’s sure she’ll learn a lot.

(And it’s nice, to be around someone who doesn’t know what happened, who doesn’t know what plagues her dreams and her nightmares and-)

Tenten plops down next to Karin, giving her a smile. “We can catch our breath for a sec,” she says, and Karin’s so grateful she could cry. “Sides, I want to talk to you. I need to get to know my fellow kunoichi.”

She winks and Karin blushes and covers it by taking a sip from her water bottle. “Oh, well, um… what did you want to know?”

“Basics, I guess. Like, why did you want to be a shinobi?”

That’s… a basic question? Karin takes another sip of water and tries to think. “Well, um…” Words fail her for a moment as Tenten looks on in curiosity. When she doesn’t come up with an answer, Tenten shrugs.
“It’s okay if you don’t want me to know. I just thought I’d ask.”

Karin shakes her head. “It’s not that,” she says. “I… want to protect my team. Simple as that.”

Tenten looks like she really, really tries, but can’t resist rolling her eyes. “That’s not a reason,” she says. “Everyone wants to do that. Being a shinobi came before your team, and will come after. Jounin don’t do stuff with their team even if they’re around, you know?” Karin… has to admit she’s right, on that. “No, like… what’s your goal? What do you want to do?” She shrugs. “I want to be the greatest weapons master in the world. I want you to be able to hand me any weapon and I’m the expert and I can beat like, a thousand people with it easy. That’s what I want to do – my specialty, I guess.”

“Oh,” Karin says, and she thinks about it. She doesn’t really… have an endgoal. Sasuke does – don’t think about them don’t think about the bodies don’t think don’t think don’t think – and so does Naruto, but Karin doesn’t think she does and she doesn’t think Sakura does.

Lee has one, she knows this, and she’s pretty positive that Neji does as well. But Karin…

“I don’t have… that,” she says, and she feels horrible for it.

Tenten just gives her a smile, though, and a nudge on the shoulder. “That’s okay,” she says. “I guess we’ll just have to figure it out.”

Asuma opens his eyes, and one of the two most beautiful beings in the world is sitting at his side. “Hey,” says Kurenai gently, eyes damp with tears, and he manages to draw a small smile of his own.

“Hey,” he says back.

She’s holding his hand, fingers interlaced, and it’s a grounding point. He had been locked up in his head for too long – so long – and Uchiha- He flinches and she squeezes his hand all the tighter.

They haven’t… talked about this. Haven’t talked about their relationship, now that it’s just two, if they’re going to remain together or if it’s too much or just… any of that, and Asuma doesn’t think he wants to try that conversation soon. Right now, it’s just so much to be awake. The light hurts his eyes, even, and he covers them with his free hand. “Can you… close the curtains?” he croaks.

He loses her for a single second while she does so, and then she’s back. “How are you feeling?”

Asuma laughs harshly. “Like I battled my way through Iwa alone,” he says, and Kurenai has to smile at that one. “How are the kids?”

“Good,” she says. “Gaara left today, and your team saw him off.”

He’s proud of them – proud of all of them for their actions during the exam, and proud of them for becoming friends with former enemy and just… proud of them in general. “They’re good kids,” he says.

“They are.” Kurenai tips her head slightly to the side. “And if I’m not mistaken, you’re about to see some of your good kids.”

Part of him is glad to see them, is always glad to see them, and the other part wishes he were alone with her just a little longer. Still, he’ll take what he can get. “Hey,” he says. “I love you.”

Her gaze softens, and she leans forward to press a kiss to his cheek. “I love you, too.”
The door swings open, then, and Asuma greets his boys with a smile.

It is hot.

That is typical of the desert, of course, but they have not yet reached the desert. They still travel within Konoha, with their escorts, and they keep to the ground.

Gaara is not sure of his tree-jumping abilities, and he’s glad they will not be tested today.

He wonders at the three that accompany them, the two women and the man, but they do not talk. They keep to themselves, and so do Baki and Temari and Kankurou, and Gaara is loathe to break the silence.

Uncharacteristically, he does.

“Kankurou,” he whispers, just a breath of air. “Who is going to be Kazekage, now?”

His brother’s gaze flickers over to him, mouth pressing in a thin line, and he makes a single hand sign that Gaara does know, the upright hand that is familiar to all shinobi: \textit{Wait}.

So he will.

He glances from Baki to Temari to Kankurou, eyes bouncing from one to the other, and then he stares straight ahead at the back of the woman with the dogs. (She had introduced herself, but Gaara had not been listening.) It will be one of them, he decides.

One of the four here – because they are the only trustworthy ones, the only ones that Gaara knows truly care and will not try to make him into a weapon again.

He does not think he could bare that.

(He’ll run away to Konoha and live with Ino or Naruto before he allows that to happen again, and bring the other three with him.)

Father was supposed to train Hanabi today. And he had been – right up until he had caught sight of Hinata and Neji training through the walls of the building and cancelled their session.

Annoying.

Father is… Father, but he is very good at being a shinobi and teaching Hanabi to be a good shinobi, and she likes, well, being a good shinobi. She wants to keep training.

Ko is her first thought, of course – but Ko is being punished for his failure during the invasion. (No amount of protests from Hanabi made that any better, and she thinks she might have made it \textit{worse}.)

Neji and Hinata are training together and since Father is watching them, Hanabi definitely can’t go over there, even if she wants Neji to give her a pat on the head and call her “Lady Hanabi”.

Well, she guesses, there is another person who is a strong shinobi who will call her that.

Having the Byakugan is a really good thing, in situations like this. It makes searching very easy, makes it super simple to sweep the entire village as she wanders and tries to track down one of the strongest shinobi in the village: Rock Lee.
He’s currently attacking a tree and basically knocking it to smithereens, and Hanabi just stands there for a second and watches with awe until a well-placed kick sends it knocking to the ground. She starts clapping and he whirls and then lights up when he sees who it is. “Lady Hanabi!” he crows, and he darts forward to scoop her up, spinning around and she laughs.

“You’re so strong!” she says, and he beams at her as if that’s the biggest compliment in the world. (Which. To be fair. It kind of is.)

“Yosh!” he says, “I am glad to have impressed you!”

She giggles and then plants both her hands on her cheeks and meets him square in the eye. “Lee,” she says, and she says it with such mock seriousness she can barely keep a straight face. “I want you to train me. Can you teach me to do that tree stuff?”

Lee’s eyes are on fire and he tosses her up and catches her like he’s juggling a weapon and it’s amazing. “Of course! If I fail to succeed, I will run around the village ten times!”

“With me on your back!”

“…With you on my back, of course, Lady Hanabi!”

He’s alone again.

It’s a weird feeling, almost – he hasn’t been alone in what feels like awhile. The Uchiha compound is silent once more, but he doesn’t turn on the shower, doesn’t leave it on like… before. He lets it be silent, and it’s good.

If someone approaches, he’ll be more likely to hear it.

Kakashi-sensei had been reluctant to leave, but Sasuke wanted him gone. There’s much to process – something niggles in his mind about the Mangekyou, some long forgotten memory that threatens to burst forth, and if it does he wants to deal with it alone. (He’s been too vulnerable lately – yes, he has allies, yes, he has friends, and yes he can rely on them but he also needs to stand on his own and not crumble.)

And there are the papers.

They crinkle against his front, and he remembers what Kakashi-sensei said – that he is safe.

He isn’t, he really isn’t. Sasuke doesn’t know if he’ll ever feel safe again (though… he had last night, with his team…), but it does mean if any of the ANBU decide to read over his shoulder, whatever factions in Konoha that his teachers are worried about will not get involved.

Sasuke gets a glass of water and sits down at the table to read.

_You’re a good actor_, Sasuke had said.

It makes her want to laugh, now, makes her want to laugh until she cries because she feels on the verge of hysteria at all times. But she’s a good actor, and she can hide it.

No one can tell how close she is to slipping.

She holds the papers in her hands. The originals – the true versions of Yakushi Kabuto’s papers, not the same as the ones that Sasuke holds. Ino swallows sharply.
It’s… betrayal. It’s so much. *Never leave a teammate behind*, she thinks, and she hopes everyone will understand once the cards all fall.

For Fuu.

And Ino tips the papers towards her candle and sets them alight.

Chapter End Notes

there are still plot points i couldn't include... alas... i hope you enjoy!

i'm SUPER looking forward to feedback on this one, since it contains plot points i've been planning for literally years. lmao. i really hope this goes over well. hope you like it!!! this is the midpoint of part one, FINALLY reached. god bless.

as always you can find me on tumblr as ftcoye where i take drabble prompts.
He wakes with his Father’s words echoing in his ears. For a second, Sasuke can’t remember where he is. The whispers of five years ago, and it’s not his familiar bedroom, and-

Oh. Right.

He’s sleeping in Izumi’s house.

There aren’t any plans today that he knows of. Well- Kakashi-sensei had said that there was going to be a mission, but no other details, but Sasuke doesn’t… really want to wait around and see. He remembers, now, remembers how he had asked his Father about Itachi’s strange Sharingan and how he had said it was special and-

Sasuke swallows the bile that threatens to climb his throat, throws on clothes, and heads for Gai-sensei’s apartment.

Sakura’s the one to answer the door when he knocks, looking as tired as Sasuke feels, and they share a morning nod of utter exhaustion before heading inside together and collapsing on the couch. Kakashi-sensei is already sitting there, and he peers over at the two of them. “You’re here early,” he says nonchalantly, as if his students showing up just after the crack of dawn is normal.

It’s actually ridiculously weird to see Kakashi-sensei conscious this early, and Sasuke wonders if he gets up this early every day and then spends hours wasting time before he decides to meet them at the bridge.

If he’ll ever do that ever again-

He gives a shrug, not wanting to tell his teacher he couldn’t sleep even if that’s patently obvious. “Sensei,” he says instead. “Do we have training today?”

Sakura perks up next to him at the thought, lifting her head from where it had slumped down onto Sasuke’s shoulder, but Kakashi-sensei shakes his head. “Maa, no. Yamato’s taking you four on a mission today.”

Right, that. But… Sasuke’s exhausted. He can feel it in every fiber of his being and Sakura looks like she feels the same way and he really, truly thinks they’ll be utterly incompetent at whatever mission they’re taking.

Unless it’s like, a D-rank, but Sasuke doubts there’d be any build-up if it was something like that.

Kakashi-sensei looks like he can read every line of their faces, and he eye smiles, reaching over to ruffle Sasuke’s hair and then Sakura’s. “Don’t worry,” he tells them, as if being told by Kakashi-sensei not to worry will magically make them stop, “It’s a really easy one. It’s a treat more than anything else, promise.”

Sakura and Sasuke exchange equally dubious glances.

“It’s just one, maybe two nights,” he says. “But when you get back…” Their teacher wags his finger.
“We can do some training. Any requests?”


Kakashi-sensei nods. “Mm,” he says, and he doesn’t put him down at all. Doesn’t say anything about that being too difficult for him, nothing about it being something he shouldn’t attempt. There’s a rush of warmth that runs through Sasuke and he ducks his head. “Well, I’ll see what I can do.” Sensei ruffles Sasuke’s hair again, because there’s no escape, and glances at Sakura. “Sakura?”

She hesitates, biting her lip, and then shakes her head. “Not really,” she says. “I’ll… think about it while we’re gone?”

Sasuke feels like Sakura has grown less hesitant, since they started being a team, and he glances over at her with curiosity. She really does look uncertain, and he remembers what Shizune said, that her chakra control would make her a great medic, and- “You don’t want to learn healing?” he asks.

Sakura looks surprised, and Kakashi-sensei surveys them with a narrowed eye. “I… I don’t think so,” she says, chewing it over slowly. “I want to fight. But I don’t know… what.”

Kakashi-sensei ruffles her hair, too, because that’s his new favorite activity since he figured out it makes them all scowl, and eye smiles at her. “You have time to figure that out,” he says gently. “You’re still a genin.”

Well, they don’t know the results of the Chunin Exams, if there will be results, so maybe they’re all actually chunin at this point-

There’s another knock on the door that interrupts Sasuke’s thoughts before he can ask Kakashi-sensei about the results, and Sakura hauls herself to her feet once more to answer the door. It’s Yamato-sensei, and he doesn’t look at all surprised to see them there. It’s Yamato-sensei, and he doesn’t look at all surprised to see them there. “Sakura, Sasuke, Captain,” he greets them all in turn. (Sasuke definitely wants to know the reason for Kakashi-sensei being ‘Captain’, but he’ll ask that later.) “Are you ready?”

Sasuke folds his arms. “No,” he says flatly. “You haven’t told us what the mission is.” How can they be ready?

That seems to amuse Yamato-sensei, more than anything else. “It’s a surprise,” he says. “A good one.” Sasuke and Sakura exchange dubious glances. Is it really?

But it’s not like they can argue with their superior officer, so they get to their feet. Kakashi-sensei smiles at them. “Tell the cute little Uzumakis hi for me,” he says. “And ask them about training.”

Why is he never not weird.

Sasuke gives him a nod, still, and Sakura reaches over and gives him a hug which Kakashi-sensei accepts with a crinkled eye, and then Yamato-sensei and Sakura are out the door. Sasuke lingers for a second. “Sasuke,” he says, “Is there anything you want to tell me?”

The papers are folded up small, hidden in the farthest corner of Izumi’s drawers, not someplace anyone would think offhand to look, but Sasuke shoves his hands in his pockets and glances away. “Are we going on another mission to keep me out of the village?” he asks.

Kakashi-sensei doesn’t look surprised by the question. His smile does fade, though, and he tips his head back. “Maa, well… we have a few problems to root out before you linger here,” he says. “I
don’t think we’ll be able to weed out everything, but give us a bit, okay?”

Sasuke frowns, considering, and then gives Kakashi-sensei the barest fraction of a nod. “Fine,” he says, and he follows the rest of his team.

Sakura tries to pry out their mission from Yamato-sensei on the way over to Naruto’s apartment. Or, well, the Uzumaki apartment – it’s not just Naruto’s anymore.

Their teacher stands resolute, though, and doesn’t breathe a word about the details. He knocks on the Uzumaki’s apartment door and Karin answers, blinking sleep out of her baggy eyes. “Yamato-sensei…?” she asks quietly. Sasuke wonders how much sleep she gets, now, and how much time she just lays awake and hopes it comes to her.

(He understands, way too much.)

“Good morning, Karin,” Yamato-sensei greets, a little more gentle than he was with Sasuke and Sakura. “We’ve got a mission. Can you and Naruto pack for two nights, light combat, and meet me on the bridge in half an hour?”

It takes her a second to absorb that, and she nods. “Alright, I’ll wake him…”

He smiles at her. “I’ll see you there.” She shuts the door and he turns to the two of them. “Right. You heard that – think you can do the same?”

Sasuke narrows his eyes at him. “Couldn’t you have just told us that before we followed you all the way over here?”


“Sensei,” Sakura asks quietly, her voice fading behind him, “Do you think you could…”

Packing is easy. This time, though, he spends a little more time poking around. He likes the sleeveless purple he’s been borrowing from Izumi, and he swaps his arm warmers out for her fingerless gloves. He packs as much medical supplies as he has, which isn’t… a lot, and he pulls out the papers from their hiding spot. Untouched.

Sasuke holds them and tries to figure out what to do.

He had hoped… he had hoped that with Kabuto’s papers, with that knowledge, he could figure something out. I am one of them, Kabuto’s voice echoes in his ears, and he flinches. There’s secrets, so many secrets, and he hates every single one of them. He hates keeping them.

When he was young, his father wouldn’t tell him what the Mangekyou truly was, he remembers now. He had asked about Itachi’s eyes, oh-so-innocently, and his father had called them “special” and that was that. No hint of their true nature, no hint of what Kakashi-sensei divulged.

If even he had not been allowed to know when he was younger, is that something he should share with his team? Should he tell them how the Sharingan grows stronger?

He’s not stupid. He knows it wouldn’t make any of them wary, any of them think he would go for them to kill them. Sasuke wouldn’t do that and they know he wouldn’t do that and there’s not a doubt in his mind on that front.
But it still eats at them, keeping that away, almost like… he could, and that’s why he’s not saying anything.

The papers crumple in his grasp.

And then there’s Kabuto. Kabuto, who… who speaks of experiments in Konoha’s underbelly, who comments that he is one and says that Sasuke is “one of them” and he doesn’t understand, can’t even begin to. There’s more to being “one of them” than being an experiment, Kabuto must mean, for why would Sasuke be in that number? Is it being a target, how Team 7 is being ushered out of the village almost the moment he got back? Is it to do with the people that are untrustworthy, here in Konoha?

Sasuke still doesn’t understand how Kakashi-sensei made the jump, that day, from the message which had to be from Kabuto in his wall, to the fact that there are factions in Konoha that are untrustworthy. True, Kabuto had been a Konoha shinobi, but that jump was different than the possibility of spy. That statement, to trust none but their fellow genin and their teachers…

Kabuto’s papers had given him no answers, either. The simple story of an orphaned boy who grew up to be a mediocre shinobi until it turned out he was not, at all, but a very good spy instead. Were his teammates all spies as well? His teacher?

Ino had told him to tell no one about the papers, unless they already knew – Sasuke’s been waiting for Kakashi-sensei to say something that truly affirms that Asuma-sensei told him, but there’s been nothing yet and Sasuke is very close to breaking his promise and just not mentioning Ino’s involvement.

Because if Kabuto’s papers say nothing…

That means someone is high enough in the system, or has the connections, to make that info disappear.

He shudders, tucking those papers away in his bag, and heads for the bridge.

He’s the last student there. Naruto leans against the railing, half asleep, while Sakura and Karin lean into each other, hands clasped and talking. They all perk up when he arrives, and he has the faintest of smiles for them.


He shrugs, leaning against the railing next to him. “Kakashi-sensei said it would be a treat…” Oh, that’s right. “He said you need to figure out what you want to do next for training.”

Naruto leaps up with a yell, all sleepiness apparently gone. “I wanna learn that cool trick he taught Sakura!” Their teammate looks over at him, quirking a pink brow. “That lightning was sooooo cool!”

Sakura snorts. “It’ll be hard,” she says. “It took me the whole month to master that.”

“I’ll do it in half a month!” Naruto boasts, and she scowls at him, and Sasuke wonders for a brief moment if he’s going to have to break up a fight between them because oh how the tables have turned, but-

“Settle down,” Yamato-sensei says, looming over them, and they do. Immediately. He’s freaking
scary. Yamato-sensei settles back, and they realize there’s a woman standing next to him. She’s got
short brown curls with freckles patterned across her nose, and is very clearly not a shinobi. She has a
green dress with leggings and sandals, a choker around her neck that seems very much like a fighting
liability, and no headband in sight.

She grins at them all. “Aww, you’re cute!” she says, and Sasuke turns his gaze from her to Yamato-
sensei cause what the hell?

He smiles gently at her, though. “Yukimi,” he says. “This is Karin, Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura.
Kakashi’s students, but I’m looking after them for the moment. Team, this is Yukimi, my sister.”

They all snap to attention and she flashes them a peace sign. “Nice to meet you!” she greets cheerily.
“So which of you are the Uzumakis?”

Karin and Naruto exchange glances, and then they both raise their hands. “Uh… We are,” Naruto
says.

She beams at them and taps the side of her nose. “You two are gonna have fun on this mission.”

Chapter End Notes

aaand we start a new arc!!! secrets of the uzumaki uwu. arc-wise, this one takes place
when the first movie does. i’m not too fussed about the details, because the movie arc
DOES go on longer than this arc will, but this takes the place of it.

yukimi is a canon character!! if you don't recognize her - totally fine. you don't need to
look her up on narutopedia and watch her episodes if you don't want to (though feel free
too!!) because everything necessary to ftcoye with her will be covered in the fanfic.

anyway, thanks so much for your patience! i’m glad i finally got this out - see you next
time, and thank you so much for all your support!! as always, you can find me on tumblr
as 'ftcoye', and i take drabble requests there.

ciao!!

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