Simultaneous demilitarization across the entire region, although promising peace one day, has caused more chaos than Sakura expected upfront. As the world moves towards a new way of life for shinobi, Sakura trusts her instincts.

Notes

inspired by the the prompt “the protection of laughter” from this list by stonelions.

while writing this, i realized that this series’ alternative name could probably be: “sakura thinks about stuff for awhile with maybe a few dozen words worth of actual action thrown in.” this fic has the bonuses of a complete disregard for canon (“epilogue, what epilogue” for reals) and my need to see true post-war political reform especially in regards to the hidden villages’ military force.

special thanks to calciseptine for the read over and generally being my #1.

Sakura reacts before she fully processes what’s going on.

One minute, she’s slicing the scallions Sasuke needs for the oyakodon. The next, she’s wiping her
hands on the seat of her pants as she rushes across the kitchen.

Her mind works in the spaces between heartbeats. No sense of killing intent poisons the air, and there is no rumble in her bones that usually accompanies a blast. Sasuke has not moved from the stove to follow her. If he can prioritize dinner over whatever caught Sakura’s attention, then the issue cannot be too dire and/or he believes Sakura can handle it on her own.

Although she isn’t sure what caught her attention, she doesn’t stop herself because she trusts her impulses. Her short sprint ends in front of their weapons cache door. Only now does Sakura hesitate.

Naruto will never be studious or patient with paperwork, but he’s learned enough discipline to get what needs to be done, done. Whenever deadlines overwhelm him, Naruto holes himself up in terribly inconvenient places to finish his tasks. Their bed, the bathtub, the roof, the ceiling of the kitchen on more than one occasion… It’s what helps him focus, and Sakura and Sasuke do their best to give him a wide berth.

She heard Naruto enter the cache that morning with his paperwork. She normally wouldn’t disturb him, but a sound from within the small room startles her. It’s a harsh whine of distress followed, inexplicably, by a laugh.

Worry sets a deep frown across her mouth. Sakura pushes the door open quickly as if the speed of the action alone can stop that awful sound.

The cache is small in its efficiency, acting as an auxiliary to the weapons stashed in the training room, the bedroom, and various hiding spots around the house. It houses a mismatch collection of old family arms from both Naruto and Sasuke, as well as some decorative or ceremonial weapons given to them over the years. Naruto jokes that the cache is where knives go to die, and Sasuke thinks it’s childish to hoard such useless, sentimental items (but never does he suggest to get rid of them). Sakura ignores the cache—making either of her boys go into it if she needs something stored—so this is only the second time she’s been in this closet of a room. Not much has changed, except the addition of a shelving unit and what appears to be a halo of paperwork spread out around a hunched over figure.

On the floor against the locker on the furthest wall, Naruto sits in the eye of a storm. He has surrounded himself with clipboards, reports, blank forms, government records, messy folders, messier notepads, at least eight different writing utensils, a kettle, a cup for tea, and three half-finished mugs of coffee even though Sasuke is the only coffee-drinker in their triad. His eyes are wide, glassy, and slightly unfocused, but they still snap up to follow Sakura as she enters the room and crouches in front of the paper pile.

Sakura schools her face to reflect patience that hopefully comes across as both calm and calming. Not sure where to start, Sakura doesn’t break the silence; she simply quirks her eyebrow. Naruto, picking up on the cue, licks his lips into a self-conscious smirk and says, “Checking in on me?”

“Yes I am. Surprised?”

“Nah.” Naruto’s breathing more quickly than usual. He might be sucking in the sobs that brought her here. “Figured you could hear me from the kitchen.”

At least he’s being direct, which means that Sakura won’t have to coax him through speaking to her.

“Well, you’re going to tell me what’s wrong,” Sakura says after a beat, which makes Naruto lick his lips into a self-conscious smirk. While she at times resented his confidence while they were
children, maudlin breaks in Naruto’s demeanor worry her, because she can read how deeply he must be affected to actually show his vulnerability. She had to learn how to understand him and his sensitivity (just as the boys had to learn to understand her and her stubbornness). With that knowledge comes responsibility.

“Lucky you, you’ve got a few options for how we do this,” she continues. “One, you come out of your hovel and we move somewhere else. Two, we stay where we are, how we are. Three, you stand up, catch me when I jump, and put me in your lap because that’s the only way I’m making it across this pile without messing anything up.”

She can tell it’s the last option by how Naruto laughs—not that broken laugh, but the sweet one that means he’s feeling indulgent. The operation takes a few seconds, but Naruto being Naruto switches them around as they slide down so he’s the one in Sakura’s lap. Sakura rolls her eyes, but she doesn’t say anything about their arrangement. He’s much bigger than her now so even tucking himself in at odd angles doesn’t hide this fact. Regardless, it’s not awkward as his weight presses down on her thighs.

It’s familiar.

It’s them.

They settle into each other, with Sakura’s arms locked around Naruto’s waist and Naruto’s hand cupping her face. Tension knots Naruto’s muscles, so Sakura brings him up flush against her. Against every point of contact, she feels each tremble that he quickly tampers down before it can develop into a sob, whine, or laugh.

It’s so quiet, and they are so close.

“Well?”

She can see the exhaustion straining at Naruto’s eyes, but they shine beautifully with Naruto’s concession to being taken care of. Mischief’s also there, in the blue.

Sakura tracks his pupils as they expand and flicker down to trace the curves of her mouth. The tenor of their conversation isn’t lost to him, but through his eyes Sakura measures his growing distraction in dilating micrometers.

His thumb brushes against her cheek then her lips, which is the warning she gets before he leans in for a kiss.

“This doesn’t get you out of anything,” Sakura says when they break for breath.

The answer is another kiss, just as hard and longing as the last. Naruto immediately sets a rough pace, opening his mouth against her with a little nod of his head. The choice pulls Sakura into reaction: she moves in tandem, loving the drag of his bottom lip dragging on her. There’s some teeth and tongue, and their noses squish against the other’s cheek, and it’s great. Really great. It’s the kind of kiss that looks really ugly and sloppy but feels amazing, so it’s something she’s used to encountering in the bedroom. And even then, only when he’s alone with her or Sasuke’s too otherwise preoccupied to notice. Sasuke both hates how messy it is and values aesthetics too highly to partake, so it’s just their kiss—her and Naruto’s.

She would push against so sexual a kiss in place of a traditionally comforting gesture if it wasn’t this one. Sakura lets Naruto ground himself in them, and if Sakura enjoys the kiss, who is going to judge her? It doesn’t help that Naruto’s hand has slipped to her hair, both to thread his fingers through the strands and to encourage her to keep in place. She rests against his palm and allows
herself to be directed through the rocking movements of their kiss.

Then there’s the tremble again. Naruto stops, Sakura following his lead instantly.

He sighs out his nose. After two quick pecks to her lips as an apology, Naruto’s kisses move down her jaw and neck. He waits there as he relaxes his body.

“I cannot believe there’s ten more years of this,” is all he confesses before he bites softly at the crook between neck and shoulder.

It would be that.

Simultaneous demilitarization across the entire region, although promising peace one day, has caused more chaos than Sakura expected upfront. It was work to get every Hidden Village to agree to continue the Allied Forces’ solidarity in the form of a Shinobi Union, post-war; it was another thing entirely to get them to contribute their greatest minds to form a demilitarization thinktank. But it worked out, and they came together to transform the shinobi way of life within the region.

Sakura anticipated that there would be difficulties, of course; she isn’t naive.

Yet even with two years of development to lay the groundwork, the implementation of these plans has encountered stumbling block after stumbling block. Naruto (privy to so many councils he couldn't count them all) promises they did all they could to alleviate the worst of the growing pains. Sakura knows that firsthand, having served on many panels due to her medical expertise. Sakura is also sure that Naruto—as Hokage Candidate and as leading Konoha representative alongside Shikamaru—had a huge hand in teasing out potential hiccups while remaining optimistic for the Shinobi Union’s overall success.

Still… still. There were times when Sakura doubted that nothing could be worth the trouble brought up by the summits. Take, for example, the infamous arguments over defense. Many argued against the standing defense program (wherein the Union nations all held a few ranks of trained shinobi on reserve, including highly specialized ANBU-esque teams). No process could be made otherwise according to the pacifist leaders of the philosophy, a philosophy that was not without merit, nuance, or popularity. Debate around the issue threaded across every conversation about the reform, because absolutely everyone had an opinion on it. The defense strategy found its way into councils unrelated to defense. It found its way into Sakura’s every work shift for months after the defense program was announced.

Even her home wasn’t safe from the contention. The arguments Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura had would bring out the very worst of their personalities, insecurities, and underlying fallacies to their entire world logic.

In retrospect, Sakura can pinpoint the exact moment it went from horrible to a disaster. During a spat over udon about how guards should approach possible defectors, they stopped referencing the points from the Union’s debates, and moved into theory and personal histories. With anyone else, it might have been fine, but not for them. They were in each others’ lives for most of their twenty-two years of existence, after all; the three knew to their very bones exactly how to hurt one another. The months after that night were a nightmare as they squabbled and cried and broke over just what makes a village safe. If there were a few weeks when Naruto wouldn’t speak to Sakura after she implied he wasn’t doing enough to protect Konoha during one of her rage spells... and if Sasuke and Sakura fucked lonely and desperate for their third in the meantime... and if Naruto shut Sasuke out for sleeping with her and not telling Naruto… and if Sasuke humiliated himself by calling on Kakashi for an intervention to correct the mess they’d made…
And if they became the worst of themselves, at least they can say now they know they haven’t lost themselves in their pursuit of love with one another. At least they found a way to forgive and love again. For people as prideful and as vulnerable as they are, that lesson was a valuable one.

(Yet when Naruto sealed their truce with the gentlest kiss she’d ever received, Sakura wept so hard she had to laugh to keep from hyperventilating. She’d never been held by either Naruto or Sasuke as she had that night, and she hopes there’s never a reason for a repeat performance.)

After dozens of attacks and acts of sabotage from missing nin and rebellious factions to the summits, the need for defense remained and so the Shinobi Union settled for hypocrisy at least for the foreseeable future.

That was just a single issue that came up in the planning stages. A month into the ten-year span given to implement these changes, and she can already feel how much more stress presses down on her little family. However, while tiring, the constant demands on them rarely overwhelm Sakura, Sasuke, or Naruto. Not without reason to set them off. Not enough to have Naruto bodily seized by the pained laugh caught in his throat.

Naruto has stopped teasing her neck. He’s opted to hugging her lightly with his nose in her hair.

Sakura runs her fingers along the S of his spine. “Anything in particular bothering you?” The fabric of Naruto’s shirt is whisper soft against her fingertips, which probably still smell of scallions.

“It’s nothing,” Naruto says, breath warm on her ear. He can probably feel the oncoming eye roll from Sakura, so he steamrolls ahead. “It’s just… The Maekawa matriarch has written me personally that the clan’s going to pull three children from the Academy. And they don’t plan on sending no more until”—Naruto pitches his voice shrill in obvious parody—“the so-called Union better articulates how recent changes to their youth’s chakra instruction will ensure Konohagakure’s future prosperity.”

“Ah.”

“Yes: ah.”

The first three years after the Fourth Shinobi World War, before negotiation talks began, the Academy was in confused shambles. There had been a shortage of instructors, an unfortunate abundance of traumatized orphans, and an unbearable amount of political strife. Resources were spent on counseling and stabilizing what they had left rather than rebuilding chakra-based education infrastructure. Kakashi thankfully never had to close the Academy down completely, but it came close too many times for Sakura to count that as a victory.

For all the disagreements had at the Union summits, the one thing nearly everyone agreed on was that school reform took priority: stop the assembly line of weaponized shinobi, stop swelling the ranks of armies, stop the possibility of war.

But at least on Konoha’s end, chakra-based education has encountered some missteps brought on by its rapid change.

It became obvious that a strong pedagogy is not all that matters. Education goes beyond simply promoting a holistic philosophy of chakra wellbeing. It’s more than just telling people that for the good of Konoha, youth should build chakra control for domestic, artistic, industrial, and recreational spheres of life. The realities of making theory into practice strain at every part of Academy life. As Iruka reminds Sakura everytime she sees him, the instructors struggle as they push against what they have always come to know as teachers. Parents worry their children aren’t
receiving the best education if offensive techniques aren’t emphasized. Traditionalists warn Konoha will lose its cultural heritage to a misguided attempt to broker peace.

Then there’s nitty gritty nuances that complicate things even further. It can be impossible to balance all agendas at stake, especially when considering small clans like the Maekawas.

“The Maekawas have been opposed to demilitarization from day one,” Sakura reminds Naruto sharply, hugging him even tighter. “Hisako is doing her clan a disservice by letting them use those children as pawns.”

Naruto chuckles, but it’s not as cheerful as she likes. She suddenly wants to see his face. She wants to gauge his reactions a little more carefully. She wants to follow his expressions as she draws him out of his funk. But they’ve got each other too tight to escape their hug, no matter how awkward a business conversation is around their embrace’s tenderness.

“Her family’s kind of right to worry, you’ve got to admit. That salve thing of theirs depends on people sticking each other with pointy bits of metal.”

Sakura is aware. The salve reacts comically well with wounds produced with metal, and so it has been a part of many supply kits since the Maekawas began marketing their unique blend of river plants decades ago. Albeit too small to compete politically with higher population clans, their tidy fortune meant they weren’t to be overlooked. Demilitarization would change the demand of their product, but...

“Oh please. The Maekawas rely heavily upon the shinobi market, yes, but they do not depend on it. I keep telling them that there’s non-combat uses for it, and I could find them if they would only let me do research on it.”—“Sakura...”—“Hey, no.” Sakura feels herself speed up and can’t stop herself from spilling out her impromptu speech. “Don’t write this off, Naruto. It’s not my fault they refuse to believe I can be trusted with their super top secret recipe. I was trained by the most powerful kunoichi ever produced by this village! I was involved with some of the biggest operations of the Fourth War! And did I mention I am the top med-nin of our generation, because I am! I can keep a secret.”

This is a conversation they’ve had a million times, and the familiarity the routine inevitably brings some lightness to Naruto’s tone as he says: “If I pull back will you be pouting because I’m telling you, girl, you sound like you’re pouting.”

He starts to move, but she’s got him tight. He immediately begins squirming and gently (or as gently as a shinobi will get while horsing around with another shinobi) shoves against her grasp, but Sakura isn’t going to let him win. Naruto might not be able to breathe with how tightly she’s holding him in place, but he still manages some hard-earned movements. He kicks out his legs for dramatic effect, careful to not disturb the papers which remain perfectly organized according to whatever haphazard system Naruto has them in. He can get some leverage with his legs now, which means he adds bucking his hips to his chaotic movements.

Sakura does her best to contain him, but he manages to twist himself so that he’s straddling her lap. Sakura realizes slowly that feeding Sakura the opportunity to go off with her monologue was as much a distraction technique as Naruto’s kissing, but they’re both laughing, both still wrestling without any purpose other to interact.

“You’re a menace,” Sakura declares suddenly, giving Naruto the pout he was searching for earlier. “I’m trying to be serious here and you’re distracting me with your antics.”

“Sakura.”
He’s got both hands cupped on either side of her face now, and he smile he gives her is radiant and leisurely and big and sweet.

“I’m so lucky you care for me.”

She feels herself holding back a tremble of her own at the sincerity within his declaration, crushing her into emotion. He may be older now, with a longer face, shorter hair, and a more serious set to his eyes, but in moments like this Sakura can still find the young, devoted boy she ignored, then hated, then tolerated, then envied, then inch by inch began to respect as a friend, admire as a peer, and (in the last four years) love as a partner.

Naruto kisses her again, playfully now, with their lips mashing and Sakura clutching Naruto’s hips like a lifeline. He’s still exhausted from the many hours of nonstop work he’s forced himself to complete, and the Maekawas will be on his mind and heart until he can magic up a way to support their business, and he still has so much to catch up on now that the planning summits are over… but Naruto’s happy here within her arms. And maybe that’s enough for now, because they have time to unthread the tension knotting Naruto’s muscles. They have time for care.

She hears footsteps from the hallway, but neither she nor Naruto bother to react even as Sasuke crosses the threshold.

Sasuke watches them for a moment before sighing theatrically (for him, which is that he sighed at all). He walks to the edge of the paperwork. Sakura listens to him bend down to pick something up and shuffle a little farther to repeat the process. The clink of ceramic against ceramic tells Sakura that he’s picking up Naruto’s abandoned dishware.

A rush of fondness overtakes her, and she finally pulls away from the kiss. When Naruto opens his eyes a moment after Sakura, he lets out a private laugh Sasuke can hear but Sakura knows is just for her.

“Your dinner’s cold,” Sasuke says as he collects the last cup.

Naruto leans back so he can face him. “Can’t you see we’re having a moment?”

“You’ve had to have had more than just the one moment, because I was done fifteen minutes ago.”

Naruto groans, but after a final peck on Sakura’s lips, he guides them into standing up in the tiny island of space they’ve been sharing. “Don’t ever forget you’re a huge ass spoilsport, Sasuke.”

“Hn.”

Her legs wobble slightly after being held in one position so long, but Sakura gracefully jumps the paper halo. Instead of landing in an empty space beside Sasuke as she’d done, Naruto chooses to aim himself directly at him. Sasuke manages to spread out his arms just in time so nothing spills or drops on the papers, but it’s close enough that Sasuke’s expression sours slightly with impatience.

“You’re an idiot.”

Naruto cradles Sasuke’s face as he’d done with Sakura. He waits until Sasuke relaxes his frown. He waits longer as he draws a quiet seriousness to their proximity, and his tension bleeds in the space between them. “And you love me anyway.” Unsurprisingly with how things have gone so far, Naruto leans in for a kiss. Sasuke quickly relents to Naruto’s insistence, and they’re as gorgeous together as they ever were.

Sakura chooses not to act as a voyeur, unlike Sasuke, so she looks away until she hears them draw
for breath.

She didn’t play witness to when the cups and kettle transferred to Naruto, but that’s where they are when she glances back. Naruto’s staring at his hands like he doesn’t know how they’d gotten there either.

“I…” The word sounds thick from kissing. “I don’t even like coffee.”

“So stop wasting my grounds,” Sasuke admonishes, not unkindly.

“Yes,” Naruto nods to himself, but he’s definitely not thinking about the coffee. The tenor of his voice sounds resolute like he’s come to a decision. “Yeah.” Naruto glances up to make eye contact with Sasuke before quickly doing the same with Sakura. The action, however small, punctuates the moment awkwardly but efficiently. Whatever spell Sakura brought when she entered the cache has settled. “I’m just going to…” He gestures ambiguously with the mugs.

Then he’s gone.

After so much concentrated intimacy, Sakura immediately feels his absence with a chill. She reaches for Sasuke’s hand. He grips it firmly and doesn’t ask after what was wrong with Naruto, or even what’s keeping her. She’ll let Naruto explain himself and she won’t tell him the latter.

Now she just takes her time to look at the room around her. She's surrounded by the echoes of war: in the cache's shelves and the drawers and cubbyholes rest discarded tools of destruction, tucked neatly away and gathering dust. They have no place in the rest of her home, nor do they have real purpose beyond their enclosure. Not in this new, strange, exciting world sparking in the hearts and minds of the Shinobi Union, captured in the explosion of paperwork on the floor. And through these papers, through the talks, through the endless arguments, the shinobi way of life will be changed. No longer will they be their nation's kunai ready to gut friend or foe upon command, a weapon tossed away when dulled or broken. They will not be tucked away. Their lives will not be so easily forfeit.

They must change, and this change must be learned. Grown. Earned.

It will be a difficult process. It has already been.

But she will not face this alone. Instead, she gathers her strength, kindness, and affection within her heart, Naruto's kiss still warm on her mouth, Sasuke's kind presence at her side.

She’s so loved, and it leaves her in awe.

“The oyakodon.”

Because she’s seen him do it for them before, Sakura knows Sasuke drew out the cooking to give them more time. Albeit slightly overdone, the meal would not be as cold as he played it out to be. He would have plated it just before he came to fetch them, so the oyakodon’ll be warm and wonderful when she sits down. Naruto has probably begun picking at his bowl, and there’s a 50/50 shot that his egg will be devoured before his partners arrive. If so, he’ll try to convince Sasuke to donate his egg because he clearly forgot to add one to Naruto’s plate.

The bowl will still be warm if she takes another minute or two, but she allows Sasuke to lead her from the cache.

There’ll be love in the kitchen, too, she figures.
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