

What Is Essential

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What Is Essential

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Summary

Sakura went to summer camp to be with her best friend Ino. Somehow over the next two years, she ended up best friends with two jerks instead.

Notes

This fic was written for [askerian](#), in response to the following prompt: *Or how the summer camp they're at is actually pretty high security, because a lot of the kids who go there are from clan or otherwise privileged backgrounds. Sakura got in her first year because she was friends with Ino (who's low clan, but still clan) and Ino wanted to show off. Except then Sakura fell in with Naruto and Sasuke and got tangled in high politics almost despite herself.* (In other words, I listed some ideas I had for this AU and she told me to pick one and elaborate on it. So I did.)

The first year Sakura went to Leaf Shadow Summer Camp, it was entirely because of Ino. Not because her parents couldn't afford the fees (landscape design paid fairly well, after all, at least when you lived in the capitol and half your client list was filled with various clan bigwigs trying to outdo each other in mansion upkeep and whatever), and not because of the security checks (see above re: clan client list -- the Haruno family had been investigated with a fine tooth comb a dozen times over by Sakura's seventh birthday), but because it simply would never have occurred to her mom and dad to throw their shy, beloved daughter into a horde of clan kids who'd probably spend the entire summer looking down on her.

Sending her off with her closest friend was a completely different proposition. And Ino did make an effort to include Sakura, but she was naturally outgoing and quickly gathered a clique of admirers which left Sakura -- too nervous and awkward to push forward and defend her place as best friend -- inevitably sidelined.

She started spending a lot of time around the arts and crafts center, and also the nature lectures and the gardens and the stables. Sakura was used to being alone. At least at camp the other kids didn't tease and bully her the way her schoolmates used to. It wasn't the summer she'd imagined when Ino asked her to come, but it was still pretty cool.

Except for Uzumaki Naruto.

Sakura knew him on sight, of course. Everyone in Fire Country did. But she hadn't known until she met him at camp just how *annoying* he was. He never shut up, he never stopped moving, he never lowered his voice, he had a horrible sense of humor, and even worse, he decided he *liked* her. So she was the one he kept playing pranks on, and no matter how much she told on him to the counselors, or how hard she tried to hide in quiet places that he'd think were boring, she couldn't get him to stop. It was exactly like school before Ino.

Except maybe not.

Because when they were learning to canoe and Ino stood up and tipped herself and Sakura into the water, and then started yelling about how awful her hair and her clothes looked, and why hadn't Sakura been more careful, and Sakura wished she could slip out of her life jacket and sink to the bottom of the lake, Naruto stood up in his own canoe and jumped into the water, accidentally kicking his partner overboard behind him. He surfaced, sputtering, and grinned like his mouth wanted to split his scarred face in half.

"Hey, hey, what are you mad about?" he shouted at Ino. "This is way more fun than stupid boats! Look, I'm a dolphin!" He spit a mouthful of water out through the gap where one of his front teeth was missing.

"Idiot!" Ino shrieked, dodging the arc of spit-tainted water. She thrashed toward him and forgot about Sakura.

So maybe Naruto wasn't *all* bad. Just mostly. And still the most annoying person in the world.

The next year, Ino's invitation was less a full-out assault plan -- more a casual, "Oh, hey, you're coming to camp again, right?" tossed off during lunch one day at school -- and Sakura's agreement was less immediate, but come the end of the semester they headed off in Ino's big family car, passed easily through the security checkpoints, carted their luggage into their new cabin, and greeted the other girls they'd share a room with for the next two months.

Most of them were the same as last year. Most of the boys were the same too. The biggest change was Uchiha Sasuke.

Everybody in Fire Country knew him on sight now, just like Naruto. News about the terrorist attack on his clan's compound had been everywhere last autumn. But unlike Naruto, Sasuke wasn't annoying. He was quiet and kept to himself, and somehow that made everybody want to get close to him.

"He's so *romantic*," Ino sighed one night as Sakura brushed her hair, fixing it up after a day of sweat and swimming. "Like a real tragic hero, you know? I want to be the one who makes him smile again!"

Sakura looked down at the brush in her hands, running smoothly through her friend's long blonde hair. "I guess," she said.

She wanted to make Sasuke smile. It wasn't right for people to be as alone as he was trying to be. She knew what isolation felt like, and she didn't want anyone else to hurt that way. Even if he seemed to want the pain.

The thing was, Ino's attempts to get Sasuke's attention didn't work. She'd ask him to help with arts and crafts and he'd move to a different table and tell her to ask the supervising counselor. She'd try to hold his hand on a hike and he'd pull back and walk so fast she couldn't keep up and the counselors started yelling at them for getting too far ahead. She'd sit next to him at meals and talk and talk, and he'd just turn away and tune her out.

Nobody got any reaction out of Sasuke except avoidance.

Except Naruto.

Apparently he really was the most annoying person in the world. He could actually get Sasuke to explode -- and he did, to the point where they were forbidden to sit at the same table, and Sakura even heard they got reassigned to separate cabins.

Which made it very confusing when Iruka-san assigned them to the same canoe on their first river trip, with Sakura stuck between them.

It wasn't much of a trip, as Naruto loudly informed everyone. "We're just going like a mile and having a stupid picnic and then we're not even paddling back or carrying our canoes over a portage or anything. That's nothing! I went on a real trip with Kakashi-jisan this spring down south and we had tents and everything and camped out for two whole nights and saw a bunch of giant bugs and an *alligator*. So there!"

He turned around to glare at Sasuke, who sat in the back of their canoe, steering.

"That sounds nice," Sakura said. "But, um, can you turn around and keep paddling? I'm afraid we'll hit the rocks."

"Pffft! Only if that stuck-up bastard steers us wrong," Naruto said. "I'm the best at canoes! And you're good, too, Sakura-chan," he added, turning again to smile at her.

"The rocks!" Sakura said, and Naruto faced forward just in time to stick his paddle out and prod them away from a large stone rising from the moving water. They were heading downstream to the picnic ground, where they would leave the canoes for a camp truck to collect while they hiked back.

"See, no problem!" Naruto said cheerfully. "You worry too much, Sakura-chan. Even if Sasuke keeps crashing us into the rocks."

"Idiot," Sasuke muttered behind her.

"Hey, you're the one who's supposed to be steering! And I'm not an idiot," Naruto said, turning around *again*.

"I have enough trouble making sure we don't tip when you keep turning around," Sasuke said. "*Idiot*."

Sakura jabbed her paddle to the right and fended off another rock. All the other canoes were well ahead of them now, paddling faster than the lazy flow of the broad, shallow river while she was stuck with two arguing boys. She already knew Naruto was dumb. She was starting to think maybe Sasuke was just as bad -- or at least Naruto was just that good at dragging people down to his level.

"I am not an idiot!" Naruto repeated, still facing backwards.

Sasuke switched his paddle to the other side of the canoe, deliberately aiming them toward another rock.

"The rock! The rock!" Sakura shouted, trying frantically to paddle them away. But she couldn't work against both the current and Sasuke, and Naruto was trying to crawl over her to reach Sasuke instead of doing anything to help, and the rock got closer and closer, and--

Naruto grabbed hold of Sasuke's life jacket just as they crashed and tipped into the water.

Luckily the body of the canoe shielded them from the rock, but Naruto and Sasuke were too busy trying to drown each other to grab hold of either the boat or their paddles. Sakura, caught between them, managed to hang onto her paddle like grim death, but the edge of the canoe slipped through her grasping fingers and drifted away down the river while the boys thrashed and kicked and generally tried to drown her, too.

She ducked underwater and pushed herself away, using the rock like the side of a swimming pool. She didn't get very far -- the paddle and her life jacket were a big drag -- but just

enough to be out of the boys' reach. Sakura jammed the paddle down into the riverbed as an anchor and breathed for a minute.

The boys drifted slowly downstream, unable to keep any solid footing on the slippery rocks and mud. Eventually Sakura took pity on them.

But not much. They'd shouted in her ears, knocked her into the water, and practically beat her up trying to get at each other. Now she was *sure* Sasuke was just as bad as Naruto.

Sakura hung onto her paddle and started to swim down the river toward the boys. They didn't notice when she passed them, too busy hitting and shouting and spitting out the water they kept splashing in each other's faces. Sakura found a shallow spot, set her feet, raised her paddle over her head, and waited for them to drift into range.

Then she brought the paddle down on their interlocked arms.

"You're BOTH idiots!" she yelled. "Look what you did! We lost our canoe, we're soaking wet, we're going to miss lunch, Iruka-san's going to be *so mad*, everyone will laugh, and it's *all your fault*. BOTH of you! I HATE you!"

She swung the paddle again, slamming it down on the shoulder of Sasuke's life jacket. "Everybody thinks you're so cool, but you're just a jerk!" she shouted at him. "And you're a jerk too!" she added, turning to swing the paddle sideways into Naruto's stomach. "Jerk, jerk, jerk, jerk, *asshole*!"

Sakura raised the paddle again, but Sasuke lunged forward and tackled her around her waist, knocking her back into the water. She lost her grip, and the paddle floated away after their lost canoe.

When she surfaced, sputtering, the first thing she heard over the sound of water was Naruto's laughter. Sakura closed her eyes as tight as she could, not wanting to see the expression on Sasuke's face.

"Oh gods, oh spirits, that was *awesome*. That was the best thing ever! You rock, Sakura-chan!"

"She hit you too, idiot," Sasuke snapped.

"Like I care! Seriously, *best thing ever*. Didn't I tell you she was awesome?"

"She's friends with Ino," Sasuke said, as if that was a horrible crime.

"Pffft, whatever. If you actually talked to people sometimes, I bet the girls wouldn't push at you so hard. But oh right, I forgot, you're the only person who ever had anything bad happen in his life and you can never smile again. Dumbass."

A hand gripped Sakura's left shoulder, helping steady her on the uneven riverbed. Another hand gripped her right arm, offering counterbalance.

Maybe the world wouldn't end if she opened her eyes.

Sakura raked her sodden hair from her face and glared at the two boys holding on to her. Naruto grinned like they were lifelong friends and she'd given him the best birthday present ever -- which was dumb, and stupid, and crazy, but also really hard to resist smiling back. And Sasuke...

Sasuke was smiling too. Just a little, like his face was rusty and he didn't quite remember how it was supposed to move, but definitely smiling.

"You're smiling," Sakura said, her hand reaching instinctively toward him.

Immediately Sasuke's face snapped back into a scowl. "You're hallucinating," he said.

"Hey! Didn't I tell you back at camp not to insult Sakura-chan?" Naruto said, swinging toward him.

Oh for the love of spring, they were going to start fighting again. Sakura lifted her hands and smacked them both across the backs of their heads. "Shut up. Both of you! I don't care what you do at camp, but right now we need to get over to the shore and start walking toward the picnic ground before Iruka-san sees our canoe float past and comes and finds us standing in the middle of the river yelling at each other like a bunch of morons."

The boys stared at her.

Fine. Whatever. Sakura officially Did Not Care anymore. "Or you can keep fighting like grumpy babies. Because you *are* babies! I'm going to go find Iruka-san and the others. I want a towel and I want lunch."

She started slogging toward the shore. It was hard work -- the water was always at least up to her waist, and sometimes she stepped into a pothole and it came up to her shoulders or all the way over her head. The rocks and mud were slimy and kept shifting under her feet. And the river pushed at her, trying to shove her downstream. The summer sun overhead was warm, but the water itself was chilly and growing colder by the second, now that she wasn't too angry to notice the temperature.

The boys argued for what felt like forever until they finally started splashing after her. Sakura refused to turn and look at them. They were a pair of dumbass jerks, and she didn't care if they fell or drowned or got eaten by an alligator.

The worst part was that she knew she couldn't tell anyone. Ino wouldn't believe that Sasuke was just as bad as Naruto, and the only girl who didn't have a crush on Sasuke was Hyuuga Hinata, who had a crush on Naruto and wouldn't listen to anything bad about *him*. Iruka-san was a good counselor and would probably believe her, but he thought everyone in the world was a good person at heart and would probably give her a lecture on forgiveness and stuff instead of letting her scream like she wanted to.

"Why is this stupid river so wide?" she yelled, tipping her head back to shout at the sky.

"I don't know," Naruto shouted from behind her. "Hey, are we even heading for the right shore? Which side is the picnic ground on anyway?"

"The left shore," Sasuke said.

Sakura stopped dead in the water, barely two meters away from the *right* edge of the river. Slowly, she turned around. Her hands clenched into fists.

The boys stayed just a little bit ahead of her all the way back across the river and down the banks to the picnic ground, where they crashed through the trees just in time to interrupt Iruka-san from setting out to find them.

The next morning Sakura got up early and went to breakfast without Ino. Nobody had ended up laughing at her yesterday, but she still felt raw and grumpy and didn't want to listen to Ino praise Sasuke while running down Naruto. She took a container of fruit yogurt from the refrigerator in the dining hall and sat at the back corner table with one of the books she'd brought for rainy days. It was the newest in a series and her mom had bought it in hardcover as a special summer present.

It seemed like she'd barely started reading before two bodies thumped down across the table from her.

Sakura glanced up, startled, to see Naruto and Sasuke sitting next to each other, both determinedly ignoring each other's presence.

"Hey, what're you reading?" Naruto asked, talking through a mouthful of cereal. "Kakashi-jisan and Jiraiya-jisan keep telling me I need to read more, but then they won't let me read their books and all the ones in the Old Man's house are about politics and stuff like that."

"The old man?" Sakura asked.

Naruto shrugged. "You know, Sarutobi-san."

Right. Naruto was the son of Namikaze-san, the previous prime minister, and would naturally know his father's mentor. But somehow the idea of the annoying jerk she knew from camp running around in the prime minister's mansion refused to make sense, even though she'd seen him there on television sometimes during national holidays.

"My cousin Mariko was reading that series last year," Sasuke said, looking down at his plate as if talking to his salad. "It's girly trash -- stupid nonsense about a princess in disguise and magical horses and rainbow fairies and idiotic things like that. They solve all their problems with the power of friendship instead of fighting. It's disgusting."

"Hey! There's nothing wrong with friendship!" Naruto said, waving his spoon in Sasuke's face. "If more people tried to be friends instead of being jerks, the world would be a lot better place. I bet if a magical rainbow fairy came here right now, she'd have to cast a spell on you because *you're* an enemy of happiness!"

"I'd like to see a magical rainbow fairy deal with real problems, like war and terrorists and *people dying*," Sasuke snapped, glaring at Naruto like he wished he could set people on fire

with his eyes.

Sakura's hand tightened on the spine of her book. Why were they here? Why couldn't they leave her in peace?

"If you don't make friends with people, they'll just keep on fighting and hurting you forever!" Naruto said. "That's what my dad said, and he was right. We made peace with Wind Country, and now all the people who had to run away from the borderlands have gone home and--"

"I won't make friends with the bastards who killed my parents!" Sasuke shouted, and lunged for Naruto.

Sakura hit them both with her book.

"Shut up! Shut up or go away and leave me alone! I don't care about your parents, I don't care about the war, I don't care about any of it! Just shut up and let me eat breakfast!"

She expected them to leave, but instead they rubbed their heads and settled down to eat, occasionally shooting evil glances toward each other. After a while, Naruto started talking about the day's planned activity -- a giant, camp-wide scavenger hunt -- and Sasuke joined in without even calling him names.

Iruka-san assigned the three of them as a team. Somehow, Sakura wasn't surprised.

She was surprised when they won. And when the boys kept hanging around, until days became weeks, weeks became a month, and then suddenly summer was over. They never stopped fighting, but after a while Sakura got used to the arguments. It helped that both Naruto and Sasuke had a healthy respect for her aim with a heavy object. And somewhere along the line, without her quite noticing, the two biggest jerks she knew turned into her best friends.

Next summer, Ino got sick with mononucleosis and couldn't go to camp. Sakura never even thought of staying home.

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