

# Der Untergang der Sonne

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## Kapitel 7: Drowning Sun (EN)

Lately, Naruto's letters had gotten scarcer, so his heart was fluttering when he heard the screeching of the bird approaching him.

When Sasuke first left Konoha after being released from prison, he didn't hear from anyone in months. He didn't have a goal for the first time in his life, and so he spun free for a while. He just kept pushing forward and forward with nowhere to go.

He headed for the cave in which he and Itachi had fought Kabuto. Where they said their final goodbyes. He went to the destroyed former Uchiha hideout in which they'd fought each other. The rubble was still like an open wound in the flesh of the landscape, but ever so slowly, nature reclaimed it. Small trees grew in the ashes his Kirin created and coy animals hid away when they heard his steps echo between the once mighty halls.

Until he ended up at the beach where he bemoaned Itachi's death for the first time after learning the whole truth about his brother, family and village.

Once again the sun drowned in shades of orange and gold in the deep blue, and once again he found himself unable to hold back his tears.

He watched the light die, night after night, and watched it return, morning after morning. Every day he told himself he'd leave the next morning, but then he didn't. And where was he supposed to go, after all?

That was where the hawk found him, just when the sun was about to set another time. He left his arm to catch the bird. Immediately Sasuke recognized it as a bird from Konoha from the red string and capsule attached to its legs. To get the message, he had to put the animal to the ground which she didn't appreciate. She screeched, but then let him remove the message from her leg.

First, he had thought it was another message from Kakashi. He regularly received mission requests from the Hokage and chose to accept or not based on his own accords. But he recognized the handwriting quickly.

„Illegible ... It's Naruto," he sighed as he unfolded the two papers.

„Sasuke,

it's been a while since I've gotten to write you. How have you been?! I was super busy – that's why it took so long, hehe.

Anyways, Kakashi told me about how you dealt with those exploding humans. I knew you'd handle it – but of course, I would've done it wayyyyyy faster than you, believe it. You may not be back in the village right now, but you're still protecting it! I talked to Sakura and she said you're like a one man police force. In that way, we're working together again as a team, right?

Sasuke ... Us being a team, together with Sakura and Kakashi, won't ever change. But some things have changed back home that I can't tell you in a letter. So I'm really looking forward to seeing you soon!

Move your ass home. Everyone misses you!

Naruto"

Sasuke felt his expression melt under the memories of him and his brother. He'd told Itachi how he wanted to join the police force, before life decides to give him another path. But maybe, that path lead to same destination, after many twists and turns and thorny , dark thickets he had to pass.

Maybe the sun was rising again on a new morning for his life.

„It's been a while. Maybe ... I'll go home,“ he decided as he spoke the words.

His feet seemed to have known his plans before him, because they stepped forward in new conviction, setting sights on Konoha.

Destination: Home

Konoha's city walls were looming over him, higher even than he remembered. They melted into the grey of the winter sky, only to spew out five shinobi when Sasuke was about to enter the village. Almost the same had happened when he crossed the borders of the land of fire, so he just stood and waited for their assesment.

They used gadgets to communicate with their colleagues in the Hokage office to inform Kakashi of Sasuke's arrival and confirm his identity. All this took longer than he thought was neccessary. It reminded him of why he didn't come often. But then his hand brushed the worn out letter in his pocket and he knew why he was making an exception today.

He was on his way to the Hokage tower when he heard a familiar voice calling out to him. „Sasuke? It's been so long! I didn't know you were coming home.“

He ignored the subtle accusation in her voice. „Sakura.“

She blusehd and played with a strand of pink hair. It was longer than she had it last time they spoke. However, his confusion about her reaction to his acknowledgement of her presence was the same as back then.

He had been grateful for all she did for him - still was. She however seemed fo read more into his simple "Thank you" judging by her flushed face and starry eyes. He didn't know what to do, so in a knee jerk reaction, he did what Itachi had done to him countless times in similar situations: He poked her forehead.

The same words Itachi used to say even fell from his lips without him conciously choosing them: "Maybe next time."

To Sasuke, it was the lie Itachi had told him to protect his feelings. To make Sasuke stop interfering with things that had nothing to do with him at that time and that Itachi didn't want to have anything to do with Sasuke, ever.

It meant a certain familiarity. But it also meant a barrier that he and Itachi had only been able to break down in their final moments together. And in that moment, the gesture between them had changed as Itachi pulled Sasuke closer and put their foreheads together.

Sakura knew none of this - why should she?

And yet, she had blushed, like Sasuke had as a little boy that did not know of the world and his big brother's lies. She blushed like when they were 13 and Sasuke nodded in acknowledgement of her cheerful greetings.

He didn't want to be cruel to her anymore, not just because Naruto asked him to. He was grateful for everything she did for him and remorseful of her suffering on his

behalf. But just like when they were kids, he hadn't known why she did it or what to do about it.

So he turned and left.

He set his foot forward, but this time, she followed him. „Are you headed to Kakashi?“ she asked on their way. He nodded, which she took as an invitation to chitchat about their former Sensei's abilities as Hokage. She seemed content with him, like most people. But Sasuke wasn't.

Kakashi had done nothing to clear Itachi's name or the Uchiha's reputation. He didn't clarify what the council and the third Hokage had done. The the old council members were still in positions of power, the age in which students graduated the academy to become active Shinobi hadn't been adapted despite the peaceful period of the last two years.

Nothing had changed in Konoha, so nothing drew Sasuke closer to his birth place.

Well, almost nothing, he corrected when they passed a huge graffiti of Naruto that covered the whole side of a house. Naruto leapt forward, Rasengan in his hand in a pose that Sasuke knew all too well, the trademark orange clothing included. Only the red scarf he wore was strange to Sasuke, but he took it as creative liberty of the artist. Sakura had folded her hands behind her back and followed Sasuke's gaze. „Unbelievable that that's our little troublemaker, right,“ she mused, a fond smile on her face.

He smiled in the same fashion. „Hn.“

The rest of the way to the Hokage tower was filled with stories about the shennanigans Naruto had been up to as a child. Sakura remembered how he painted the Hokage stone faces, the ridiculous Genin registration picture he insisted on using, how he cut his hand to make a blood oath just to get scared of his own wound and how they tried to see Kakashi's face. She ended with how Naruto insulted anyone and anything during the chunin exams on sight.

At the mention of that time, Sakura went silent, so Sasuke offered a story of Naruto taking everything he did as a provocation. One time, Sasuke would want to walk next to Naruto in peace, but the blonde made a challenge out of it so they all but raced to their destination. The same with their battle of who would be able to eat more or how they stayed up half night to learn how to climb a tree.

When he finished, he caught Sakura looking at him strangely, but then she just smiled and turned her face. At this point, they had reached the Hokage building.

She lowered her gaze and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. „I could ... Come along, if you want to ...?“

Sasuke looked at her for a moment, before turning away. „If you have business with the Hokage, you should meet him.“

That's how they ended up in front of Kakashi's desk together. Their former teacher looked from one to the other, visibly pleased by the sight. Sasuke didn't understand why.

It reminded him of that time right before his final fight with Naruto.

He had put Sakura in a brutal genjutsu in which he pierced her chest. While it wasn't real, the pain and after effect certainly were. Everyone who had been victim of such ocular powers could proof this. Even Kakashi, himself skilled in genjutsu, had been bedridden for a week after Itachi's attack years ago.

Today, Sasuke regretted putting Sakura through that. After all, Kakashi had been right. She did think she loved him, for whatever reason, and she tried to save him almost as much as Naruto had.

But what he replied to Kakashi still held true. He had no reason to love her or be loved by her. And he had to disagree on his former sensei's idea about how one didn't need a reason to love someone, just to hate them.

People grew to love others for various reasons: Time spent together, shared trauma, mutual care, trust, fun, lust, equal ambitions or views of life, family bonds.

And while he might have shared some of those things with Sakura when they were young, that was long ago. Childhood memories weren't a valid reason to love someone in Sasuke's eyes. Not in the way Sakura wanted, anyways.

And they didn't have a single conversation after he'd left the village. When they met again in Orochimaru's hideout, he only talked to Naruto. When she sought him out on that bridge, they exchanged nothing but lies. It had once again been Naruto he talked earnestly to. After that, he joined Konoha to fight in the great ninja war and all Sakura and him said to each other were tactical assessments. Even that was very limited as in his eyes, Naruto and him were the ones that would save the world. It always had been that way. Naruto and him against the rest of the world.

Even after that, Sakura came for Naruto and him and cried over their spilled blood. Maybe for the first time, she pushed back against Sasuke a little. He realised all he did took a toll on her. More than he thought possible, considering the limited contents of their friendship. So he apologized.

He spent most of the following year in hospitals or prison respectively. Sakura assisted Tūnada with his and Naruto's recovery, so naturally he saw her more often. She'd often visit when Naruto was off to some treatment, and Sasuke let her peel her apples and chat along.

His thoughts were far away, but he was stuck in Konoha – even more so when he was imprisoned and his eye prowess sealed away.

As if he were a weapon of mass destruction that could go off at any moment. As if he had no reason for his desire for revolution in Konoha and the whole shinobi world.

It became clearer by the day that nothing significant would change. The walls closed in on Sasuke with the realisation of his utter failure.

His only hope remained Naruto. He'd change the shinobi system. He was the only one who understood Sasuke.

For that to happen, he had to study, Naruto told Sasuke on his rare visits. He was too busy to come often. Sasuke understood and he helped as best as he could by explaining complicated tactical maneuvers and budget calculations again and again. The aspect Naruto didn't need help with was strategical teambuilding and foreign affairs. He knew every shinobi in the land of fire and the other nations after being connected to them through nature chakra. He balanced their strengths and weaknesses with ease while always considering personal aspects.

Yet, he had much to learn.

Sasuke understood, he told himself every time Naruto's step faded into the darkness, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Sakura came to visit him often. She was planning to open a mental health clinic during that time, she told him. It was more work than she had anticipated, but she loved it. She didn't need much input on Sasuke's part to talk about it for hours.

Kakashi had granted her special visitation rights, the Hokage had informed Sasuke. He sounded expectant, but Sasuke just nodded. His former mentor was the third person to visit him irregularly. Other than that, he was left to himself and his thoughts and the ever moving walls.

He had decided to leave Konoha early on in his arrest.

He needed to see the world Naruto wanted to protect so desperately – with Sasuke by his side. While Sasuke had traveled a lot in the past, he never had the chance to enjoy it. There was always something to do, somewhere to be, no time to simply exist. In his confinement, he was forced to do exactly that. After endless weeks of restlessness, he finally felt the constant stream of electricity that had pushed him forward for all those years leave his body. He would be free to move on his own accord, a steady flow, like a summer river.

When the time of his departure had arrived, he was confronted by Sakura and Kakashi. Their teacher's eyes had been expectant, much like they were in the present time when Sakura and Sasuke entered his office.

„I'm surprised you've returned, Sasuke," Kakashi said after Sakura had finished her slightly rambling account of how she'd run into Sasuke.

People talk more when they lie, he thought, maybe their meeting wasn't a coincidence after all. Then the Hokage's voice demanded his attention. „Is there a particular reason for your visit?"

Kakashi's eyes shifted to Sakura who blushed deeply. Sasuke got annoyed at this, as it set her up for disappointment, but he took a breath and stayed calm.

„Naruto has something he wants to discuss."

Kakashi's smile grew softer. „I see, then. He'll be happy to see you – just like we are. Right, Sakura?"

„R-right!" she quickly saluted, a faint blush on her cheeks.

„Do you need a place to stay while you're here?"

„I'll manage." There were tons of wandering shinobi, especially after the nations had formed their alliance. He'd find an inn, like all of them.

But first, he'd go follow that tinkling warm sensation that had been getting stronger ever since he entered the city falls. He knew he'd find a pot of gold at the end.

„Do you need anything else?"

„No, you're dismissed. And ... Sasuke?" When Sasuke looked at Kakashi again, he smiled brightly. „Welcome home."

„Hn," he made and left for the one person that tied him to this place as his 'home'.

He heard her steps when he left the Hokage building. Sakura showed up behind him. She caught up to him and crossed her arms behind her back, scuffed her foot on the floor, to which she directed her gaze.

„So, if you don't know where you'll stay ..."

„Where's Naruto?"

She was perplexed for a moment, but he didn't feel like repeating that he'd manage to find a place. Also her aid would shorten his search, despite Sasuke being able to track Naruto down on his own.

„Ah ... Oh, he's probably at the library at this time. Should I ..."

„Thank you, Sakura," he said and vanished. Before disappearing, he saw her blush and shy smile and frustration welled up in him. Which words of his would not make her blush and get that dreamy look in her eyes that made him uneasy?

He couldn't have been clearer on his standpoint about his feelings for her, having told her multiple times she was annoying after she confessed. While he wished he would've been less cruel back then, he stood by what he said. And he thought she would know him enough to realize that he was straight forward with these things.

Then again she seemed happy when he thanked her or greeted her by name. Even though he had abandoned and ditched her and had been cold to her many times, she had dedicated her love to him. She tried to be the spring sunshine in his dark life.

Didn't he owe her that little at least after all the pain he had put her through?  
Guilt was a bitter dish, he knew it all too well.

### Temporary Tsukoyomi

He had been in thoughts so he was surprised when someone bumped into him. The woman tumbled but when he reached to catch her, she had already made an elegant spin and now stood next to him.

„I'm sorry ... Oh! Is that you, Sasuke? We didn't know you would come.“ Her smile grew soft. „Naruto will be so happy.“

Sasuke scanned her vaguely familiar face and finally produced a name. „Hinata,“ he greeted.

„I take it you're looking for Naruto?“ Nodding, he noticed her stutter was almost gone, despite her soft voice. „He's studying here, but ... It could be hard to get to him.“

Confused, Sasuke followed her pointing finger and realised what had made her stumble. There was a big crowd of men and women in front of the library doors. Some had posters and fans with the Uzumaki crest or Naruto's name written on them. Sasuke was surprised before he let out an amused: „Hn.“

Naruto had become a true celebrity.

„You could wait at this apartment ...?“, Hinata suggested. „I'd take you, but I have an appointment.“

„I'll manage.“

„Oh ... I see. See you soon, then, Sasuke.“

Her smile was gentle so he nodded in agreement before she turned and left. In the past, he didn't know what to make of her. She was fearful, lacked self-esteem, was always checking other's reaction and seemed to have no opinion of her own. But Hinata had changed, he saw that even from afar during the ninja war. She revealed a power inside with which she was looking out for Naruto with protective eyes and supported him.

He looked at the building, activated his Rinnegan and had passed the crowd in seconds. A loud screech greeted him, followed by a harsh "Sh!" that could only originate from a librarian.

When he had collected himself, he understood the scream. Teleporting to places he could not see was always a bit unprecise. This time, this had led to him manifesting standing right on top of Naruto's lap.

"Bastard, what the fuck? You'll give me a heart attack"

Sasuke met furious blue eyes and pouting lips. He climbed off Naruto rather fast. "I had to bypass your fanclub."

"SO NOW IT'S MY FAULT?!"

"SH!"

„Sh,“ Sasuke repeated calmly and chuckled as he watched Naruto repress the urge to yell at him again.

„What are you doing here, anyways, bastard?“ Naruto finally asked when he had calmed down.

„I could ask you the same.“

„Hokage studies,“ he waved off, pointing at history, finance and battle strategy books surrounding him. Naruto pouted but from experience Sasuke knew that it was next to impossible to make Naruto do anything he didn't want to. So he must have decided to become a honor student by himself. Sasuke felt pride welling up inside him.

„Anyways, you didn't say you would come!“

„Did I have to?“

„No, but ... Sakura would've been happy to know.“

„I met her before I came here.“

„Oh ... Oh, yeah, of course. That's good!“ Something seemed off about Naruto's smile and Sasuke was inclined to tell him about his uneasiness regarding Sakura. But then again, Naruto probably wouldn't understand. He learned to like almost everyone, even for the slightest resemblance to himself he could find.

Sasuke had no such patience, nor the intent of developing it. And while he meant no harm to Sakura, he could not relate to her on any level.

„I came because of your letter,“ Sasuke finally admitted, his heart speeding just a little. „You wanted to talk to me about something.“

Naruto let out a little ‚Heh‘ and looked away. "So you do read the letters ... Sakura and I weren't sure since you barely reply and all."

„Hn.“

Truth be told, he often didn't know what to reply. He pondered over Naruto's words for days, thinking of the faces Naruto would've made while writing, smiling about his little mishaps, being proud of his achievements and sad for his losses. And yet he was rarely able to form a sentence that wouldn't feel awkward as he wrote it down. So a week passed, then two, until it was too late to reply, anyways. And the next letter was bound to come soon.

Until it didn't come so soon anymore, and Sasuke felt the distance between them heavier than ever. But he couldn't blame Naruto and he couldn't write more now, so they spiralled away from each other, until this very moment in the library.

Looking into Naruto's eyes was like someone had pulled a cover off a mirror.

Sasuke saw himself for the first time in forever. He wanted to touch that other part of himself that Naruto reflected back at him, wanted to reassure them both that they had not, would not, could not lose any part of each other and themselves. He wanted to come home, truly, but who was he to seek that comfort in the man he had hurt so much? Who was he to ask for a home when he had no intention of staying?

So he looked away, cutting himself on the widening cracks of the mirror.

Hurt bled from Naruto's little chuckle. He rubbed the back of his neck when Sasuke looked at him again. „It's okay. We've known you long enough ...“

As always, Sasuke was impressed by how easily Naruto could pretend he was fine, no matter what. He cursed the village that taught him that. It made Sasuke re-evaluate his decision about Konoha. While Naruto had cut out the festering, maggot ritten flesh of Sasuke's hatred which had eaten him alive, Sasuke certainly did not forgive anyone involved in the genocide of his clan, in Itachi's villanization or Naruto's treatment.

Them walking free was one of many grudges Sasuke held against Kakashi as a Hokage. He didn't care about political reasons, he wanted their rotting heads on sticks.

Would Naruto not have been such a puppy of the state, Sasuke would've taken things into his own hands.

„Anyways, tonight's the Rinne festival. Wanna go?“

Sasuke blinked at the sudden change of topic. „Didn't you want to talk to me?“

Naruto started to collect his books. „We can do that there, right?“ he asked without looking up.

Sasuke sensed something like guilt in him but couldn't figure out why Naruto would feel that. „I guess?“

„Great!“ Naruto beamed.

One final „Sh!“ accompanied the arrival of the previously invisible librarian. Apparently they had a 3-strikes-rule which Naruto had broken, so they weaved Sasuke and Naruto to the exit.

Sasuke headed for the front door, but Naruto grabbed his wrist. „Let’s use the backdoor.“

Remembering the fans in front of the library, Sasuke agreed. They snuck out, but some of the fans had suspected this and were waiting for Naruto. Left no other choice, Sasuke and Naruto fled. Naturally, Ichiraku Ramen was Naruto’s hideout of choice. They got take away. A wise choice, because when they just payed, they heard the fanclub approaching fast.

Sasuke had enough, grabbed Narutos arm and transported them to Narutos apartment. Not being used to traveingl like this, Naruto stumbled. Sasuke grabbed him harder so he wouldn’t fall, but let go immediately after he steadied himself.

„You could’ve warned me!“ Narut whined but it couldn’t be too bad because he placed their meals on the table and bussied himself setting up. He hummed and urged Sasuke to sit and cluttered and whistled until he finally came to sit across of Sasuke. His upper body softly swayed front to back, contentment beaming in all direction. Sasuke melted just a little at the sight.

To reassemble himself, he asked what the festival was about. Naruto got all excited while he talked about the winter holiday of Konoha. First, it was a time for praying for the deceased, the Rinne Festival has since evolved into a holiday where friends and loved ones exchange gifts. He wasn’t sure if it was celebrated in the other lands.

It was probably the reason Naruto’s fan were so out of it. Everyone wanted to go there with Naruto who hoped they would calm down now that he had a date set.

After they were done eating, they cleaned up and showered. Naruto lend Sasuke a simple dark blue shirt with big white dots, black pants and open sandals. Naruto himself took forever in the bedroom. When he finally emerged, he wore a grey Yukata with swirls on it and rolled up sleeves.

„Isn’t it too messy?“ he asked, pulling on the Obi. „I usually don’t put it on myself.“

Sakura or Kakashi sure were thrilled to dress him like a toddler, Sasuke thought. Maybe to distract himself. „No ... You look fine.“ More than that, acutally, but his words made Naruto smile nonetheless.

They left into the chilly autumn night. The festival was held on a free space underneath the Hokage monument. The area was full of booths with food and games, the air between them illuminated by lampions and laughter.

Sasuke and Naruto payed their visit to the memorial of the fallen shinobi during the wars before they joined the masses. They played booth games like fishing and can tossing before they got a bunch of snacks from the booths. They shared the food on a bench near the center of the festival. Their laughter and banter became white mist in the cold night.

„You wanted to talkt o me.“ Sasuke turned to Naruto. Even in the unsteady light he could see Naruto blush. His heart raced, but he kept quiet. Maybe he would finally hear another answer to his question of just what he was to Naruto. Something else than friends, something more.

„I’m getting married.“

The mirror finally broke, atomized into glittering dust that revealed Naruto’s back turned to Sasuke, smiling at an undefined figure next to him. But ... Was she really that undefined?

„Hinata?“



Naruto spun around. „How'd you know?!”

„A hunch. She was at the library,” Sasuke shrugged.

Naruto smiled his soft derpy smile and rubbed the back of his head. „She helps me study a lot. Wouldn't get anywhere without her, really.”

Sasuke doubted that but he kept quiet again. Naruto took that as an opportunity to tell him how they'd gotten together. They had been closer friends for a while when the whole thing on the moon happened – of course Sasuke knew about that. Kakashi and Naruto had informed him in letters about the details.

During that mission, Naruto realized he had feelings for Hinata. Obviously that clutz would confess on a mission to rescue his girl's sister and unsurprisingly, he got rejected. He paused, seemingly expecting Sasuke to mock him, but Sasuke said nothing, so he continued. After the threat was banned, she accepted his feelings.

They had been dating for about a year now.

„So ...” Sasuke began after a while of being quiet. „When's the big day?”

Naruto fidgeted his fingers, a habit Sasuke vaguely remembered the soon-to-be-bride possessing. „Next summer, if everything goes well.”

„What should go wrong?”

„Kakashi said it'll be a lot of planning with all the high profile guests.” Naruto paused before looking at Sasuke. „Or my best man could not be there.”

The shards of their mirror bore into Sasuke's heart. Already he yearned for solitude, to lick his wounds. The peaceful beach at sunset had lost its appeal though. Nothing but a cliché and the sand got stuck everywhere. He would have to find a new place to sit with his new grief.

„Not a good idea. I'll draw unwanted attention. And people don't want me there.”

„But I do!” Naruto looked disappointed but not surprised. Still, he wouldn't give up so easily and grabbed Sasuke's hand. He had fire in his eyes, but it dwindled fast. His grasp on Sasuke's hand got gentler. „I need you there. Please, Sasuke.”

Sasuke was about to give in but then shook his head. He wanted Naruto's happiness, more than anything. But seeing him start a new life, seeing the proof of how Naruto moved on from whatever intense, childish, earth altering thing they had was not something Sasuke had in him. Not when Naruto was what he had been alive for over the last two years, maybe even longer.

Naruto shot up to glare down at Sasuke. „Fine, be an asshole. I don't know why I expected anything else, honestly.”

Sasuke wished he could flee into anger, too, but he was just numb. Defeated once again by the man in front of him, and not even on purpose this time. „You know me.”

„I do. I just thought you could make an exception for me, but you couldn't even congratulate me.”

Sasuke's whole body was heavy when he got up. He put his hand on Naruto's shoulder and looked into his eyes. The anger melted out of them, making room for uncertainty.

„I could ask Kakashi and ...”

Sasuke squeezed his shoulder and their eyes met. He didn't explain but Naruto nodded instinctively. Their picture was distorted, but they still could see each other in the broken glass all around them.

Slowly, Sasuke pulled back. „I should leave.”

„Already? I thought you'd stay the night.”

The disappointment in Naruto's voice was tempting, but Sasuke would have to learn to resist. „I'll be back.”

At that moment Sasuke didn't know it would be almost two years until they would

meet again.

### Congratulations

It was early summer. The cherry blossoms around the exclusive wedding venue were in full bloom, framing the cheerful crowd and several pictures Sakura had taken with her friends.

When her and Ino had grabbed a drink, Sai joined them. Soon after the two of them descended into their private little universe. Long ago, Ino had told Sakura that she liked Sai. Way later, the both of them had fought a shinobi that could control minds. That incident made it clear that Ino's feelings were mutual. So Sakura hadn't been surprised to learn that the both of them would attend the wedding together. Now they were holding hands, exchanging shy smiles.

Temari gave off a similar picture. She stood next to Shikamaru as they talked to his old teammates. And obviously, the glowing bride and her dashing husband. They made a good pair, Naruto and Hinata. Sakura was happy for them.

And yet she couldn't escape the jealousy that had hunted her ever since Naruto had told her about their engagement.

She had met Naruto and Hinata a few days after Sasuke's last visit. She was still chewing on the fact that he had left without saying goodbye. But he must've gotten an important mission from Kakashi. Naruto thought so, too.

Then he changed the subject and became a blushy stuttering mess before he managed to blurt out the news.

Sakura had been stunned for a moment, then quickly produced a smile to congratulate them. She asked all the questions: about how Naruto had proposed, about a ring, her parent's opinion, the date, the dress.

And yet all she could really think of was what about me.

When would be her time to put on a beautiful dress, when would her special someone smile down on her gently, when would she change the sigil on her back to match the one she loved?

She had her family and friends but the loneliness swept over her sometimes as she watched everyone find love while she was always just waiting. Maybe she should start dating, she thought – right when a shadow fell over her.

She spotted a falcon and raised her arm for it to land on. Her body tensed as she undid the note on the bird's leg. For someone to send a note here today it had to be urgent. Maybe something had happened at the construction site of the children's mental health hospital she was supervising.

But when she opened it, the note just read: „Congratulations.“

For a moment, Sakura was confused by the minimalistic card. She turned it to find a signature, but nothing. Then she looked up at the hawk circling above her and it dawned upon her.

„Sasuke,“ she whispered with a soft smile as her cheeks darkened.

Her thoughts followed the circle of the hawk, spinning around themselves. Why would he send the note to her instead of the young couple if not to congratulate bride and groom together with Sakura – as couples did. He had always been quiet, leaving her to interpret his words and actions. Maybe she had read something wrong and he thought of them as a couple already. Maybe ... The poke to her forehead! That had to be it. Surely, it held significance to him as it did to her. She remembered how he said her forehead made him want to kiss it when they were younger. And he said „Thank you“ and „Maybe next time“. For a quiet, reserved boy such as Sasuke, that basically was a

marriage proposal, now that she thought about it.

Her heart pounded in her chest to which she held the note.

It was her treasure. She didn't want to give it up. But then, what good was this insignia of Sasuke's feelings if she didn't use it as intended. To congratulate as a couple, she had to congratulate.

So Sakura downed her drink and approached Naruto and his bride. Both smiled at her as if nothing Sakura could say could even touch them in their happiness. She cleared her throat.

„I know we've already given you presents but I have another small thing,“ she declared, handing over the note.

Naruto and Hinata looked surprised but Naruto unfolded the paper. The bliss melted from his face as he mouthed each kanji.

„It's from Sasuke and me, so ... Congratulations from both of us!“ Sakura said cheerfully.

„You and Sasuke ... Talked?“ Naruto sounded beaten. He had tried to keep up his happy face leading up to the wedding, but Sakura knew Sasuke's radio silence ate at him just as much as on her. Maybe more.

„Actually, we decided to meet up somewhere around Konoha.“

She didn't know why she said that. She just decided that she would follow Sasuke who had to be somewhere close to the village to send the letter. She had fought many stubborn enemies, and just like their defenses, she would break Sasuke's refusal down.

After all, they had come so far. From „You're annoying“ to „Thank you“ and „Maybe next time“. And Sakura decided that next time would be now.

„Oh, for a mission?“ Hinata asked politely and Sakura blushed.

„Not exactly“, she giggled.

„Oh!“ Hinata's smile was genuine. „I'm so happy for both of you. When will you be leaving?“

Her nervousness acted up but she couldn't back out now. She spotted Kakashi amongst the other Kage and made a decision. „Now, actually.“

Sasuke wouldn't stick around the village much longer, she had to be quick. She said her goodbyes to the surprised couple and approached her former master. He was surprised, too, when she told him the same as Naruto and Hinata, but then he smiled. She gently implied that it would be nice to surprise Sasuke on the road instead of waiting until their meeting spot. Finally, Kakashi caught up and summoned Paccun to help her track Sasuke down.

The ninja hound watched Sakura as she hurried her utensils into a backpack. „Didn't you say you planned on leaving tonight?“

She shot him a sugary smile. „You know women. Always late ...“

Minutes later, they were on the road. They were stopped a couple of times by the security around the city wall. It really had been ramped up for the wedding. But most people recognized her and waved her through. With the mention of Kakashi's name and his summon by her side, nobody tried to stop her.

It wasn't long before Paccun had sniffed out Sasuke. They tailed him for a while until finally, they appeared in front of him. If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

„Sakura,“ he greeted. Her name, spoken by his deep voice, sent her heart on a run.

„Sasuke,“ was all she could offer.

„What are you doing here?“ His eyes searched the area as if they were looking for someone else to emerge from the dark woods.

Sakura steadied herself. „I want to come with you.“

Sasuke's eyes hadn't found what they were looking for, so they returned to her face. „I see,“ he said and surrounded her to keep walking.

He didn't tell her off and that was as much of an invitation as she'd ever gotten out of him, so she followed suit. Sakura heard a complaint about impolite females but spared Paccun no second glance. Then she heard the puff of a disappearing summon.

Finally, she was alone with Sasuke.

Belladonna (Tollkirsche)

True to his character, he said nothing. Probably he was shy after inviting her like that, Sakura thought. So she filled the silence with chatter about the wedding, missions, their old friends.

Sasuke barely listened but didn't have the strength to ward her off. Not today.

After a while they ended up in a small village. Usually Sasuke camped outside but tonight, his feet led him to a pub. Sakura followed suit and took the seat next to his. When he ordered, she got the same. A hinge of annoyance scratched on the walls of his sorrow but couldn't take them down enough for Sasuke to react. He just sat and drank in silence. From the way she shifted and glanced at him, he knew that Sakura took it as insightful silence or something. The only thing he wanted to see was the bottom of his glass, so he downed another one. And another one and another one, in hopes to find the happiness some people seemed to expect from alcohol. But he just felt like he was drowning faster.

„What's happiness, anyways,“ he thought. He didn't notice he said it out loud.

Sakura flinched at the sudden words and stared at Sasuke. She had never thought about it. She just thought she'd be happy once she was with Sasuke. That was why she couldn't acknowledge how out of place she felt next to him. She was happy or she would be soon. She was just nervous, that had to be it.

Playing with her glass she said: „Naruto and Hinata seem happy. Marriage makes people happy.“

She knew that wasn't it but she couldn't give up her dream. She'd gotten so far – from „You're annoying“ to him letting her join his travels. She had to keep punching that wall around him until it gave in. After all, a girl's feelings couldn't change and a woman had to be strong in order to survive, right?

And Sasuke was still so handsome with his alcohol flushed cheeks and sad eyes and soft deep voice that had mentioned Naruto so many times ever since he had started talking.

She wanted to take the sadness from his eyes. Just like the last time she saw him last winter during the rinne festival. He hadn't looked sad then, rather ... Hopefull.

Sasuke thought she might be right about marriage. Sakura looked happy when she was with him, she always had. He didn't understand why but maybe that didn't matter. Maybe Kakashi had been right. She loved Sasuke, no matter what he did and for seemingly no reason. Didn't he owe her more than an apology for her pain? More than a constant „next time“ that they both knew would never come? Didn't he owe her like Konoha owed him for his pain? How could he demand reparations while he didn't do the same for the ones he'd hurt?

So he allowed her to almost carry him out of the bar and the village. When they found themselves on some tree tops he allowed her to come closer as they looked into the starry night.

She kept talking about the beauty of the moon to fill the silence. Maybe that was what he needed. Because with the silence came the thoughts and the regret and the

grief. He was so, so tired of grieving.

The alcohol couldn't keep it at bay. Maybe Sakura could.

When she caught him half mindedly staring at her, she blushed and her eyes sparkled brightly in the dim moonlight. She was pretty, wasn't she. And he owed her. So he gave to her.

The poke against her forehead didn't represent lies and distance like it had with Itachi, he told himself. It meant something new for them, and by her shy smile he could tell that she'd already come up with what she wanted it to mean.

She looked at him expectantly. Hadn't that been enough? Well, he might as well give her more. Everything. After all, what did he have left to lose?

So he leaned in and kissed her with alcohol heavy lips. And she took what he gave until he truly had nothing left, unknowing of what she would give him in return.

### Lunar eclipse

Silence weighed heavier when someone was there to share it, Sasuke thought as he and his wife approached the Hokage office. She had insisted on coming with him, so they'd given Sarada to Hinata. She was pregnant with her second child and didn't attend meetings anymore if they didn't directly impact her clan. Even then, her sister often took over for her.

Her plump body reminded Sasuke of what Sakura had looked like when she tracked him down for the second time a few years ago. That time, he was annoyed when she appeared in front of him.

„What are you doing here?“ He had send her back home when she'd gotten sick after traveling together for a while. Now she was here again, uninvited.

She flinched and the ninja hound that had guided her to Sasuke had looked at her concerned. But then she steadied herself and pulled back the long cloak of her ninja uniform, revealing a pregnant body.

„I wanted to find you before you came a father, Sasuke.“

From that moment, his world had shifted.

He wanted to take her back to Konoha for the birth but it was too late. Their only chance was Orochimaru's laboratory, as much as it irked Sasuke to bring a child – his child – anywhere close to that location. But Karin was there and savely delivered the first Uchiha child in over a decade. His heiress.

„Sarada,“ he said when he first held her, and Sakura agreed to the name.

Almost in trance he followed her back to Konoha. While their child was perfectly healthy, Sakura got uncomfortable in her hospital bed when her parents announced a visit. Sasuke got more and more irritated until he made her spill what bothered her.

She had told everyone that they'd gotten married when she found out about the pregnancy. He was shocked, but couldn't embarass his child's mother by spreading the truth. From that point on, she was known as his wife.

They lived with her parents for a while until Sakura put a newspaper with appartments for sale in front of Sasuke. He replied by putting the key to their new home in front of her a month later. Money wasn't an issue.

So they moved in together and for a while, he took short term missions to provide for Sakura and Sarada and still be with his daughter. She was what filled the silence in their appartment, both with her laughter and babbling and as the one topic her parents could talk about.

A few month after their move, Sasuke was supposed to take care of the baby alone

for the first time. Sakura and Hinata wanted to go out together to chat, so naturally, Naruto and his first son came over to the Uchiha's so the babies could play. Not that the infants could play a lot.

They hadn't been alone for a long time and Sasuke felt awkward at first, but seeing Naruto interact so naturally with both children made him relax quickly. At some point, Naruto said that they could be proud of what they made. Sasuke couldn't help but smile and agree. Indeed, Sarada was the best thing that he had created in his existence.

The time for the guests to leave came when the kids fell asleep. Naruto offered to tidy up while Sasuke brought Sarada to bed. It was at that moment that he noticed the Uchiha crest on the back of her rompers. Fondness, grief, hope, loss, pride and all kinds of undefined emotions swelled up, build a whirlpool inside him. He reached for the child as if she were an anchor.

And he sobbed his unjust fate into her tiny shoulder that would never have to carry the burdens he had to. Not if he could buy it off of her with his own blood.

He curled up around her, cradling her to his chest with his one arm while surrounding them with the susannoo. He would shield her from anything. No harm would come her way, not after he had already cursed her with a dead name and himself as a father.

Any sense of time was lost to him when he felt the touch of a warm chakra that automatically opened his protective barrier. He was still pressing Sarada against him when he looked up and saw Naruto kneeling beside him. He stroked Sasuke's forehead, an understanding smile on his lips.

"Sarada's onesie is all wet. Should we change it?"

At that moment, Sasuke would not have given his daughter to anyone, but when Naruto held out his arms to her, he let him hold her without hesitation.

He sat up, his shield by now collapsed in on itself, and was about to get up. Instead, he fell against Naruto's chest. His hand clung to his shirt, his forehead leaning against his shoulder. And Naruto held him, for he had two arms strong enough to hold the baby and Sasuke gently.

Why couldn't this be their home. Why hadn't he been able to give Sarada Naruto's name, a bright name, the name of a hero.

Naruto's hand gently stroked through his hair. "It's creepy, isn't it? Being responsible for them. Much creepier than fighting any bad guys or monsters," he laughed before pausing thoughtfully. "But we protect them, and everyone else. That's the peace we fought for, right?"

Well, it was Naruto's peace that Sasuke was tasting small, forbidden morsels of. But he decided that he would make it Sarada's peace as well.

Soon after that Sakura started wearing the crest, too.

Sasuke felt a lot about that, as well, but he just turned and left for his next mission to ensure the peace like he had made up his mind to do. And the next mission, and the next, always longer and more dangerous than the one before.

Naruto, who had been announced Hokage in the meantime, didn't like this. But he couldn't argue with Sasuke's argument: Who else would do it? Surely not Naruto himself. He was needed in the village, both as the head of the shinobi and a father and husband.

When Sasuke said that at one of their meetings in the middle of nowhere, Naruto rebutted that Sasuke was part of a family too. At first, Sasuke's wishful thinking made him believe Naruto meant his own family. But then he remembered his child and her

mother.

„You should see them more often. Sakura is lonely, although she's smiling through it, and Sarada's starting to ask about you,” became Naruto's standard speech at the end of their meetings.

„Maybe next time,” Sasuke would reply and vanish into the night.

Tonight, they wouldn't be alone. Aside of Sakura, Sasuke and Naruto, Sai, Ino and Shikamaru were in the Hokage office. Their faces were serious as they talked about signs that might be linked to the devine tree and Kaguya. They didn't know much and had to investigate, Ino said in her function as head oft he Konoha intelligence department.

As they kept talking, Sasuke felt concerned eyes on him, first blue, then green. They knew before Shikamaru turned to Sasuke.

„I'll investigate,” Sasuke said before the advisor could even ask.

Shikamaru nodded, but Naruto approached to clutch Sasuke's arm.

„I'll go with you,” he said firmly. The fire in his eyes that had seemingly become so weak rose up. A familiarity deemed lost long ago seemed to spark between them.

Sasuke brushed Naruto's hand off his shoulders anyways. „You will do no such thing. You are needed here, Lord Seventh.”

Naruto fell into himself. Sasuke felt a morbid surge of victory but promptly composed himself. „I'm the only one who can investigate,” he said more gently, adresssing only his friend.

Sakura took his hand and looked at him pleadingly. He decided to leave the same night and he wouldn't return for nearly a decade.