

NARUTO

**ITACHI'S
STORY**

[D A Y L I G H T]

Masashi Kishimoto

Takashi Yano

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ITACHI'S STORY

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CHARACTERS



Sarutobi Hiruzen
Third Hokage



Uchiha Itachi
Konohagakure Ninja



Shimura Danzo
Leader of the
Akatsuki



Uchiha Mikoto
Mother of Itachi and Sasuke



Uchiha Sasuke
Itachi's
Younger Brother



Uchiha Fugaku
Father of Itachi and Sasuke
Head of the
Konoha Military Police Force



Uchiha Yashiro
Uchiha Inabi
Uchiha Tekka
Konoha
Military
Police Force



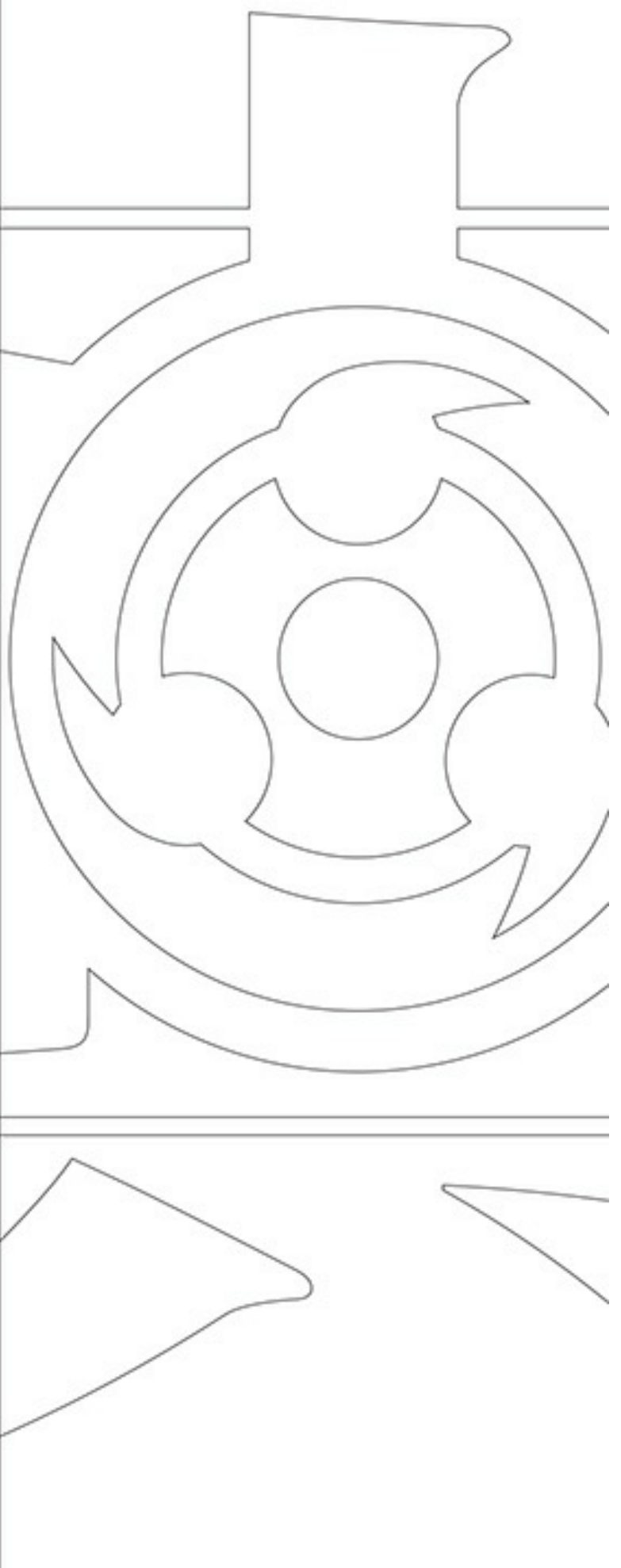
Uchiha Shisui
Konohagakure Ninja

Baby brother, you're pathetic.

If you want to kill me, settle for hating me ...

Hate me, and live like the coward you are!

Clinging to life without honor!



Chick in the

dark night, yet to

leave the nest

1

CHAPTER 1

***Chick in the dark night,
yet to leave the nest***

1

Uchiha Itachi remembered very clearly the moment he became aware of exactly what he was.

It was raining that day. Itachi had only just turned four, and the rain—so heavy he had trouble opening his eyes under its weight—beat down mercilessly on his tiny body. Standing beside him, his father offered nothing in the way of sympathy or support. And Itachi himself didn't wish for any.

“Remember, this is a battlefield.” His father's powerful words pushed through the roar of the rain to pierce Itachi's heart.

Battlefield ...

Not a word for a four-year-old boy to fix in his memory. To say still less of the scene that lay before him at that moment, nothing remotely fit for a child's eyes.

Bodies, bodies, bodies ...

Mountains of dead bodies as far as the eye could see. And not a single one at peace. The corpses had stiffened, with faces twisted in agony.

“In a few years, you'll be a ninja too. This war might end, but the reality of the ninja does not change. This is the world you will step into.”

His father's callous voice filling his ears, Itachi stood still and endured. If he relaxed his control, the tears would come spilling out.

It wasn't that he was scared. It wasn't that he was sad. An emotion he couldn't put into words surged within him. He didn't understand why, but he felt such a tightness in his chest, he could hardly stand it.

Soaking wet in the rain. His father probably wouldn't notice if he cried. Still, Itachi didn't want to. He felt that if he cried here he might lose something critical to his life as a ninja. So he desperately tightened his control over himself.

But the tears came naturally spilling out.

People with Konoha forehead protectors. Ninja from other lands. The countless dead bodies blanketing the surface of the earth had no connection to national borders now. All of them been unable to kick free of their own deaths as they struggled, mourned, writhed. Those anguish-filled faces were all the same, no matter which land the ninja were from.

Not one among them had wished for death. And yet they had all died. Why? Because of the war.

“Father.” Itachi heard his own voice. And then, for the first time, he realized he was shaking. It wasn’t the chill of the rain. It wasn’t a fear of the corpses. Rage made Itachi shake. “Why did you bring me here ...”

His father was silent for a while at the question from his young son, and then he began to respond, as if choosing his words carefully. “You are a clever boy.”

Eyes still turned toward the corpses, Itachi waited for his father to continue. He felt a warmth on the top of his head. The palm of his father’s hand.

“I wanted to make sure you saw this reality.”

Itachi frantically searched his mind for the meaning of the word “reality.” He was only four. He didn’t understand the difference between reality and fiction. Even so, he grasped the meaning of what his father was leaving unsaid.

“This is the world I will live in ...”

“That’s right, Itachi. Ninja are creatures that fight. Never forget what you’ve seen here today.”

His father’s voice led Itachi to rub his eyes. He burned the hellscape before him into his retinas so that he would never forget it.

A warmth unlike that of his tears wriggled and squirmed within his eyes. The sensation—a wild wave of power flowing toward his retinas—was so terrifying, he unconsciously closed his eyes. When he did, the wave slowly, quietly disappeared into the center of his head. His heart pounded madly, and his breathing was ragged. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes. Before him, the hellish world was unchanged.

He gently pressed a hand to his chest. He felt like if he gave himself over to that

power, he would stop being himself somehow.

“What’s wrong?”

He didn’t respond to his father’s question, but simply stared hard at the sight before him. This hell might have been the world in which he was to live, but he had no intention of sitting back and simply accepting it.

I will change it.

It was a mistake to try and resolve things by fighting, for whatever reason. This world had to change. This belief became the foundation of the man known as Uchiha Itachi.

Itachi never forgot that day.



The end of this Great War that swallowed up ninja from every land came several weeks after the day Itachi became aware of the meaning of his own existence. Later called the Third Great Ninja War, the conflict came to an end after an armistice agreement was concluded between Konohagakure and Iwagakure, the principal aggressors.

Although the war had been proceeding favorably for Konoha, Hiruzen, the third Hokage, established a policy of reconciliation to bring an end to the fighting with an unprecedented offer to not seek reparations from Iwagakure. Advocates for the war opposed Hiruzen’s seemingly weak decision, and to keep dissatisfaction in the village in check, he decided to step down as Hokage. This led to the selection of a new Hokage, and the hero of the Great War, Namikaze Minato, became the fourth. With Hiruzen’s retirement as Hokage, the village inched toward recovery after the tumult of the war.

Itachi had a clear objective: “Become the best ninja ever, and eliminate war from this world.”

An adult might speak of such a grandiose dream with a laugh. But for four-year-old Itachi, it was precious and irreplaceable. To achieve it, he would first learn basic ninja skills at the academy, take his exams, and be formally recognized as a ninja.

This, despite the fact that the boy had still not been accepted into the

academy yet. But he wanted to become a ninja as soon as possible, so he was training by himself.

“I’m home.” Itachi quietly slipped off his shoes in the entryway and walked slowly down the hallway.

“How was your day?” his mother Mikoto called out to him when he passed the kitchen. At that moment, a new life was growing in her womb.

Will it be a little brother or a little sister?

At any rate, it would be Itachi’s first sibling.

“Were you training by yourself again today?”

“Yeah.”

At this reply, sounding too grown-up to have possibly come from her four-year-old son, Mikoto turned around, holding her heavy belly, and shrugged her shoulders.

“Is Dad in his room?”

“He is, but right now’s a little ...” his mother said, but Itachi was already stepping toward his father’s room. After the day’s training he had a question about the way to hold a kunai, and he wanted an answer right away.

“Why should the fourth be Minato?!” The fierce voice on the other side of the closed sliding door stopped Itachi in his tracks.

“You don’t know who could be listening.” His father’s even tone. “Keep your voice down, Yashiro.”

“But I just can’t accept it. The only name other than Minato put forward for the selection of the Fourth was Lord Orochimaru! Why did not a single person say your name, Lord Fugaku?” the man named Yashiro demanded of his father.

In Itachi’s head, Yashiro’s face popped up. A man with narrow eyes and closely cropped white hair. Although he was older than Itachi’s father, he served him as a subordinate.

“It’s just as you say, Yashiro. I cannot accept this either.”

“Inabi ...” His father spoke the name of the master of this new voice. Uchiha

Inabi was a leading ninja in the Konoha Military Police Force. His distinguishing feature was his long black hair. He was also Itachi's father's subordinate. "Ninja from the other lands trembled at the mention of 'Wicked Eye' Fugaku during the Great War."

"The head of the Konoha Military Police Force. That is my position in the village."

"There's talk it's all the administration's plan!" Yashiro shouted, and then spat out, "Village officials don't want the Uchiha clan standing on center stage. They said nothing in the village about all the work you did during the Great War, Lord Fugaku. Because of that, it was Minato and the Sannin, and even Hatake Kakashi—who has the sharingan despite not being a member of the clan—who shone. If the people can make a fuss over Minato and Kakashi, then your name should also—"

"Enough." Fugaku's controlled voice cut Yashiro off. "My son is listening."

Itachi winced slightly.

"What is it, Itachi?"

He noticed me ...

Rookie.

Itachi gritted his teeth. Having no other choice, he pushed the sliding door open.

Inside were four people: his father Fugaku, Yashiro, Inabi. And one more, a man with a dot on his forehead. A subordinate of Itachi's father, Uchiha Tekka.

"What is it?"

"I wanted to ask you about shuriken."

"I'm busy right now. Ask me later."

"All right." He quickly slid the door shut as he spoke.

The instant it was almost entirely closed, a crimson light grew in the eyes of the four men. Sharingan. The kekkei genkai inherited by members of the Uchiha clan.

Returning to his room, Itachi recalled the air filling his father's room. And then for some reason, the battlefield he had seen with his father came back to life in the back of his brain. The very picture of Hell, overflowing with evil intent and malice.

The aura hanging over the men in his father's room was the same ominous air he had felt on the battlefield.

"What is Father thinking ..." There was no one to reply to his murmured question.

2

Five years old.

Itachi could not have cared less about birthdays and all that. The annual event was at best nothing more than a milestone. Whether it was spent largely adrift or packed with a variety of experiences, a year was still a year. Just because the number indicating his age had increased by one didn't mean that anything changed.

What was important was daily training. That steadily moving forward one step at a time was important, was how Itachi felt, but that year, something truly significant had changed and shaken his heart. That something was before his eyes at that moment.

“So?” Mikoto asked, lying back on the floor.

But he didn't respond and instead sat, legs tucked underneath him, staring at the creature laying before his knees.

The tiny newborn baby seemed to be intently focused on understanding his situation, while his still unseeing eyes wandered around empty space.

Itachi gently touched the baby's cheek.

At the sudden stimulus, the infant twitched with surprise. Shocked by this reaction, Itachi pulled his hand away, while his mother giggled as she watched.

“Sasuke.” The child's name. His own little brother.

Uchiha Sasuke ...

Itachi gently touched the baby's cheek one more time. “Sasuke ...”

The moment he gave voice to his brother's name for the first time, something warm exploded in his heart. Different from the love he felt for his mother and father, a special, indescribable emotion. In the end, five-year-old Itachi couldn't really put into words just what it was. But faced with this ephemeral life, a

creature who seemed like he would shatter if Itachi even touched him, something like a masculine sense of responsibility did indeed come to life inside him, the feeling that he had to protect this tiny life.

“Take care of your baby brother, hm?” his mother said, and Itachi nodded fiercely, hand still on Sasuke’s cheek.



Itachi had trained nonstop since the day his father had taken him to the battlefield. Just one more year until his long-awaited start at the academy. His sole objective was to hone his skills so that he could be a ninja among ninja.

Why a ninja among ninja? To rid the world of fighting, of course. Itachi simply refused to accept his father’s conception of a ninja as someone who lived in the midst of killing.

Were the ninja arts and chakra really only for fighting? Itachi was sure they were not.

If you had the greater strength, you could step in between people fighting to stop them. If you were a ninja more powerful than the ninja at war, if no ninja—however skilled—stood a chance against you, then everyone would listen to and obey your commands.

Itachi wanted to be that kind of ninja. He believed that if he was more powerful, more capable than anyone else, he would be able to stop even enormous fights like the last Great War. He had a goal, so his devotions were not difficult.

A grove near his house was his training ground. Wooden targets were hung on the cedar trees in the cluster surrounding him. Each was about the size of a human head, with two black circles drawn on it.

Itachi stood alone in the deserted wood, kunai tucked between his fingers. Four in each hand, the eight kunai were his weapons of choice.

“Haah ...” He closed his eyes and slowly pushed the air out of his lungs from the bottom of his stomach.

As he crouched down, he kicked at the ground as hard as he could. His body danced into the air and flipped upside down. He held his arms to his chest, and

then shot them out to both sides, and eight flashes of light scattered in eight directions.

Thk! Thk! Thk! The sound echoed all around Itachi as he landed.

The sharp blades had pierced the centers of the targets on the cedar trees.

“Nice work.” A voice came suddenly from behind him.

Itachi swallowed his breath and looked back to see a boy with black hair standing there. He was clearly older than Itachi. As proof of that, the silver of a Konoha forehead protector shone on the boy’s forehead.

“How old’re you?” the boy asked.

Itachi didn’t know his name, but he had seen this boy before. Another ninja of his Uchiha clan.

“Five.”

“That kind of mastery of kunai at your age. You’re really something, huh?” The boy stretched out a hand. “Uchiha Shisui.”

“I’m—”

“I know. Itachi. Military Police Chief Fugaku’s kid.”

Itachi was confused by how friendly Shisui sounded. It probably showed on his face, since Shisui shrugged and opened his eyes wide.

“I heard you were a strange kid and you don’t really talk to anyone. You really are stubborn, huh?”

“If you don’t need anything ...”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that.” The smiling Shisui disappeared.

Itachi’s eyes chased after his aura.

The sky.

As he danced up into the air like Itachi had moments earlier, both of Shisui’s arms flew out, and eight flashes of light shot through the air.

“Whoa!” Itachi opened his eyes wide in amazement.

“How was that?” Shisui grinned as he landed. “I’m not too shabby with the

kunai either, right?"

New kunai stabbed into the surface of the targets on the cedar trees, immediately to one side of the kunai Itachi had plunged into them earlier. Naturally, these were the ones Shisui had thrown.

"I've been watching you training here every day for a while now." He slowly approached Itachi, holding out his hand once more. "Let's be friends."

Shisui's voice was warm; his demeanor naturally pulled Itachi in. Accepting the invitation, Itachi extended his right hand. Warmth wrapped itself around his palm.

"Nice meeting you, Itachi."

As he stared at the beaming older boy, Itachi was perplexed by his own behavior as he welcomed this strangely overfamiliar ninja.



He looked up at the moon.

Just me and Sasuke ...

His mother and father had gone out. He left the sliding doors open after stepping out to sit on the veranda, Sasuke in his arms.

The moonlight was dazzling. The full moon, shining so radiantly that it nearly erased the light of the surrounding stars, seemed like it would fall from the sky.

A gentle breeze softly stroked his cheeks. "Hm?" He furrowed his brow at the faint unpleasant smell riding on that breeze. Sasuke began to fret in his arms, perhaps sensing the change in his older brother, or perhaps because of the keen sensitivity of a baby noticing something out of the ordinary.

Itachi stared at the moon in the sky. "What is this feeling ..."

Sasuke began to cry.

"There, there." Even as he rocked his baby brother soothingly, his eyes stayed focused on the moon. The wind blew once more, smelling like a wild animal. "I don't like this feeling. Why are Mom and Dad always out at times like this ..."

Sasuke began to cry even harder. This was definitely not the time for staring up

at the moon; Itachi dropped his gaze to his adorable baby brother, a smile creeping across his face.

“Don’t cry, Sasuke. Your big brother’ll protect you, no matter what.”

Sasuke’s cry changed from a scared wail into something sweeter. It was still almost as powerful, the faintest of differences in the strength behind the wail. Rather, the change was more in the baby’s mindset, because he knew they were brothers.

Something’s coming ...

All Itachi could do was tighten his arms around Sasuke.



The village was abruptly thrown into total chaos.

Uchiha Fugaku stared at the cloud of dust rising up off in the distance from the roof of the Konoha Military Police Force headquarters, his face grim. His aides, the best and brightest of the Uchiha clan, stood around him, waiting.

“Oh! That’s ...” white-haired Yashiro murmured from his left.

Fugaku had already discerned the cause of the commotion with his own eyes.

“N-Nine Tails ...” This from Inabi at his right. Long black hair pulled up, Inabi desperately tried to stop himself from trembling in fear.

Fugaku cast sidelong glances at his subordinates, their fear on full display, and then stared resolutely at the reality before them. “No mistake. It’s Nine Tails.”

Out of the dust cloud rising up in the center of the village crawled nine tails, writhing like serpents. The tails converged on the body of a burnt-orange beast, a sinister fox roaring as if to swallow up the full moon hanging in the sky. A beast of legend, here to wreak havoc on this world.

“Send a unit to the scene immediately. I’ll go, too.”

“Lord Fugaku, you intend to set out yourself?” Yashiro’s voice quivered as he asked the question.

“Of course!” Fugaku shouted, even as his eyes remained fixed on Nine Tails. He could hear bellowing and shrieking from every corner of the village. Given that

the figure of the monster was no doubt visible from all areas of Konoha, even places not yet under attack wouldn't be exempt from the confusion, once the people there caught sight of Nine Tails. "This might be the biggest disaster to befall the village since its founding. Do you think I can just sit back and watch at a time like this? Me, the chief of the Military Police Force?"

"But ..."

Going near Nine Tails meant risking death. Some of the ninja hurrying to the scene had likely already been sacrificed. It was no small wonder Yashiro was scared.

"I have never once begrudged my life to do my job."

"Chief ..." Tears blurred Yashiro's thin eyes.

"The only thing that can control Nine Tails is the sharingan of the Uchiha clan. If we don't hurry, stopping it will be impossible."

"Chief!" His aide Tekka appeared, panting as though he had run up the stairs. From the ghostly mien of his capable subordinate, Fugaku guessed that something alarming had happened.

"What is it?"

"Instructions have come down from top brass. The police are instructed to strengthen the village defenses."

"What did you say?" Fugaku glared at Tekka, doubting his own ears.

Cleverly grasping his superior's anger, Tekka gave voice to his own supposition. "Only the sharingan can control the Nine-Tails. Brass likely has misgivings—"

"Are you saying that this commotion is our fault?!" Yashiro shouted.

Fugaku understood so well it hurt. The Uchiha clan was part of Konohagakure. They had no reason to release a creature like Nine Tails and bring about this chaos. If whoever was controlling Nine Tails avoided just their own home, they would obviously soon be a suspect. No one in the clan would do something so foolish. Not to mention that the raging beast before his eyes was rampaging indiscriminately. If a member of the clan had indeed summoned it, they had basically called disaster down upon their own self as well. At the very least, it

could not be the work of any Uchiha *currently* living in the village.

“Tell them, understood,” he spat bitterly at Tekka.

“Chief!” Yashiro drew in closer.

Fugaku nodded wordlessly, before turning toward the stairs leading to the lower floors. He was worried about Itachi and Sasuke at the house, but right now, his duty came first.



“Itachi!”

“Mom.”

“Thank god you’re safe!” Mikoto wrapped her arms tightly around Itachi, who was standing in the lane in front of the house, holding Sasuke.

“I didn’t want you to worry if we ran away, and then you came home, so I waited for you.”

“Mm hmm.” His mother nodded, tears spilling down her face.

Eyes that had been narrowed with the tension of having to protect his little brother relaxed to some degree. But this was fleeting. When he noticed something closing in from behind his mother, those eyes quickly regained their original grimness.

“Mom!” He practically threw Sasuke to his mother. And then he flew.

A boulder tossed into the air by Nine Tails shattered near their house, and the pieces danced above their heads. One chunk was falling toward his mother’s back. He looked down at her, clutching Sasuke to her chest. Her surprised eyes chased after him; he could see the question there, her wondering just what was happening to make Itachi leap up so suddenly.

The rock was enormous, large enough to easily crush a mother and her two children.

“I’ll protect you,” he murmured. He clenched his fist tightly.

The physical arts of the ninja were not about strength. He might have been a small child of five years, body as yet undeveloped, but as long as he managed to

knead his chakra properly, he could smash even this enormous rock.

He brandished his fist high in the air. Chakra filled his arm, covering it in faint blue flames.

The rock slammed into Itachi's fist, and exploded with a shriek.

Even a child could effortlessly destroy boulders, as long as they simply kept up their ninja training.

Showered in a rain of pebbles, he landed soundlessly on the ground.

"Are you all right?" he asked, turning around.

Unable to conceal her surprise, his mother stared at Itachi with saucerlike eyes. His mother was a jonin, which was precisely why she was amazed at his instantaneous action.

"It's dangerous here. Let's get to where everyone else is."

"Right ..." As if pulled to her feet by his voice, his mother stood, and Itachi raced over to take her hand. "You haven't even started at the academy yet, but you can already do something like that. You really are your father's son, hm?"

She was no doubt praising him, but it wasn't the time for that. A sense of duty filled his heart—he had to get his mother and brother to a safe place. All around him, he could hear the shrieks of girls and the shouts of boys, mixed with the roar of destruction; it was overwhelming.

People running around trying to escape, bleeding. A man who had lost his arm, yelling at a fellow ninja. A young woman staring blankly at a mountain of rubble, like a marionette with the strings cut. A child wailing loudly, trying to rouse a now-cold mother.

In the core of his brain, Itachi heard an ear-splitting screeching. They hadn't actually run that far, and yet he was having trouble breathing. Overlaid on the scene before his eyes was the battlefield he had seen when he was four.

War ...

A dull pain raced deep into his eyes. Just like that moment on the battlefield, waves of power pulsed behind his eyeballs. He felt like the world was dyed crimson for a moment, but the sensation quickly subsided.

“Itachi?” his mother called to him from behind, having noticed something strange in her son.

“I’m all right, Mom.”

He ran desperately. He ran to escape the massive violence of Nine Tails. From the bottom of his heart, he prayed for the strength to stop war.

He wanted to be a strong ninja.



Four figures were lined up in the conference room of the Hokage Residence. The third Hokage, Hiruzen. Shimura Danzo from the Anbu. And Homura and Koharu from the Council.

The sudden calamity under control, an exhausted Hiruzen looked at his three comrades, the wrinkles on his face deeper now, and opened his mouth. “The Fourth and his wife Kushina gave their lives to seal the Nine-Tails. They saved the village.”

Listening with a sour look, Danzo picked up where the former Hokage left off. “But Konoha took a devastating blow, the likes of which we didn’t see even during the Great War.”

“Unless we rebuild immediately, the other villages might take this opportunity to attack.” This from Councillor Homura.

Hiruzen nodded slightly, and continued in a grave tone. “I was planning to make arrangements for that right away.”

“And here, there is a condition I would very much like to see put in place.” The right half of his head covered in bandages, Danzo’s exposed left eye glittered cruelly. Hiruzen met this icy gaze silently, a question in his own eyes.

“I want to move the residences of the Uchiha clan on the edge of the village,” Danzo said.

“What?” Hiruzen glared at him, brow furrowed.

Danzo didn’t flinch, but instead continued dispassionately. “You are aware that only the sharingan of the Uchiha clan can control Nine Tails.”

“Are you saying it was an Uchiha who summoned Nine Tails?”

“I am,” Danzo asserted, and Hiruzen held his breath. The two Councillors watched over the fierce back and forth with closed mouths. “The treatment of the Uchihas during the Great War, Fugaku refusing to comment when the Fourth was decided on. Dissatisfaction with the village has been growing among the Uchiha clan in recent years.”

“I don’t agree.”

“Members of the Foundation have been looking carefully into the movement of the Uchihas. It is a fact that the Uchihas are dissatisfied.”

“That’s a long-standing—”

“That’s not all.” The self-assured Danzo cut Hiruzen off. “Those who lived through the Great War are beginning to despair that even a rare genius like ‘Wicked Eye’ Fugaku must resign himself to being the head of the Military Police Force. That disappointment with the village will someday become a serious dissatisfaction, and lead to an attack on Konoha.”

“Still, that said, don’t you think you’re being a bit hasty in declaring Nine Tails incident the fault of the Uchihas?”

“This is not the kind of thing you can simply leave be just because you have no positive proof, Hiruzen. Listen. The only thing that can control Nine Tails is the Uchiha sharingan. That is a fact.”

Hiruzen faltered.

“At any rate, we must gather the Uchiha clan together in one spot and push them to the edge of the village. And we should do it now, while we can do it in the name of town planning after Nine Tails’s attack.”

Faced with the relentlessness of the man who embodied the darkness of the Anbu, the other three could only remain silent.



Itachi was satisfied with their new home. They were a fair distance from the center of the village, but Nakano Shrine, where the clan originated, was within the compound, and best of all, they were right on the edge of the village, so there was green all around them. Finding places to train was no trouble at all, and if he just walked a little, he could cross the border of the village, beyond

which rugged hills rolled across the landscape. He also thought it was a good, quiet place for his baby brother to grow up.

However, the adults apparently felt differently. Ever since it was decided that rather than being scattered all over the village, the members of the clan would be brought together and a new compound built, a stream of young ninja had been coming and going from his father's place.

Discrimination.

Persecution.

False accusations.

Itachi heard only reactionary words from his father's room. And he was well aware of the reason the adults didn't think this move was a happy one.

One of their clan was suspected to be the perpetrator of Nine Tails's attack, and as a result, they had been pushed as a group to the edge of the village. And not permitted even a word to try to clear themselves.

Itachi was not surprised at all that his father and the others were outraged. But once a thing was decided, that had to be the end of it, didn't it? The clan was all together at last, so the healthier choice was to think instead about trying to make the compound environment even better.

The village was a disaster after the destruction inflicted by Nine Tails. It wasn't just the Uchiha clan going through difficult times: a great number of people had seen loved ones pass on ahead of them. Many had lost their homes, and had no idea what they were going to do. Shouldn't the Uchiha clan consider themselves lucky, given that this compound was set up for them before measures were taken for a lot of other people who had lost everything in the catastrophe?

Itachi couldn't contain his despair at the unrelenting dissatisfaction of these adults.

"All right, I'm going." His father's voice came from behind.

Itachi was sitting eating supper with his mother and Sasuke. But of course, his little brother still couldn't eat solid food. Perched in his high chair, Sasuke bobbed his head from side to side, having only recently grown strong enough to

hold it up. He turned big, round eyes on his brother, and stared curiously at Itachi lifting rice from his bowl to his mouth.

This boy is putting something white in his mouth on long sticks. What on earth do you suppose he's doing?

The baby's gaze was so intense that Itachi almost wondered if he wasn't thinking grown-up thoughts like this. The baby wasn't yet a year old, but he had strong eyes that clearly communicated his thoughts and will.

"What about supper?" his mother asked, looking past Itachi.

Itachi took this as an invitation to turn around, and caught a glimpse of his father's stern face through the tiny gap in the sliding door.

"I'll eat out. And I'll be back late, so you go ahead to bed without me."

"All right. We'll see you later, then."

"Bye," he added to his mother's farewell, and his father's cool gaze pierced him. Unlike his little brother's eyes, his father's gave away no hint of what he was thinking.

"Next year's the academy. You make sure you keep training hard."

"All right."

"Ahunnnh," Sasuke raised his voice unintelligibly in imitation of Itachi.

His father looked at the baby and nodded slightly before disappearing completely behind the sliding door.

The family in the kitchen started eating again.



"What exactly are the grown-ups doing so late at night?" Itachi tossed the question at his only friend.

Shisui stared off at the Hokage Monument in the distance, a loose smile curling up the corners of his mouth.

They were sitting on a cliff outside the village, in a spot only they knew about. Below the cliff rising up perpendicular to the ground, there was a river that meandered along from behind the Hokage Monument and flowed out of the

village. By the time it reached Itachi and Shisui, the water flowed much faster and deeper than at its starting point in the village.

“I’m a genin,” Shisui said, eyes still focused off in the distance. He turned toward the quietly listening Itachi and continued softly, “So I go to the adults’ meetings.”

“Huh?”

“They meet regularly at Nakano Shrine.”

Itachi wanted to ask what exactly Shisui was talking about, but he was afraid, and no words came out.

Shisui looked down. “It’s something you don’t have to know about yet.”

Uneasy, Itachi stared at his friend as he averted his eyes.

A heavy air’s hanging over the clan ...

Let it be a guess, Itachi murmured over and over in his heart.

3

Six years old.

Itachi finally started at the academy. It wasn't that he was particularly overjoyed about school itself. It was that school held for him a concrete sense of achievement, the feeling that he was getting closer to his long-awaited goal of being a ninja. School would be completely different from the way he had trained in secret by himself, or with Shisui. The days at school were the path to ninjahood. And that made him indescribably happy.

"Now then, please introduce yourself and tell everyone your dream for the future," the older male teacher said, looking out at his students.

Their first class. The slightly nervous students looked at each other, confused. Itachi watched as the others chatted—"Hey, what're we doing now?"—still unfamiliar with one another. And then he thought, as if he were not a part of the situation himself, that it was no wonder they were confused.

They couldn't just get up in front of all these unknown people and spill out their dreams.

"All right then, maybe we'll go by student number," the teacher said, loudly, rolling over the murmurs from all corners of the room, perhaps understanding how his students felt, perhaps not.

Uchiha Itachi ...

The first character of his name was "u." That was toward the beginning of the student numbers. He didn't worry about what he would say. He had had the same dream ever since he could remember. All he had to do was say it.

"All right, very well done."

The nth classmate was applauded. Her dream was to be a great ninja like her father.

Be a great ninja like her father ... He imagined his own father. Fugaku was

great. But Itachi felt like it wasn't enough for him to be the head of the Military Police Force. Which didn't mean he was rejecting his father; he did want to excel like his father did. But the place Itachi had his eyes set on was beyond that, and he couldn't say that his father was currently standing there.

"All right then, next, Uchiha Itachi." The teacher looked at Itachi and smiled.

With the thought that there wasn't much point in a self-introduction if their teacher said their names first as he had been the whole time, Itachi stood up and walked to the front of the class. The other students, the same age as he was, turned interested eyes on him, and he felt a faint itching on his forehead.

He patted the space between his eyebrows with a finger, and then thrust his chest out. "I'm Uchiha Itachi. My dream is ..." He faltered.

The teacher and the students cocked their heads, almost as if to ask what was wrong.

It wasn't that he didn't have a dream. And it wasn't that he was having trouble choosing the dream he was going to talk about. And naturally, his mouth hadn't stopped working because he was nervous or anything of the sort. He wasn't sure if he should actually talk about his dream in this place.

The dreams the people before him had shared were all so modest. *I want to be like my father. I want to be a great ninja and do a lot of missions. I want to be a cute ninja.* This was the sort of dream the teacher and his classmates expected.

Itachi's dream was different.

"My dream ..."

"It's all right, go ahead and say it," the teacher urged him.

It doesn't matter what they think. "I want to be the greatest ninja ever, great enough that I can erase all fighting from this world."

He heard someone laugh in a corner of the classroom. And then immediately after that, came the pre-established harmony of applause.

"Well done," the teacher said and patted Itachi's head.

Apparently, it was just too absurd. No one believed him. They all thought it was a dream that could never come true. A delusional dream, that came from a

young child's ignorance of the world. That's what they all thought, so they laughed at him, they clapped mechanically.

Only one of them—only Itachi—was serious.

And his teacher and classmates would learn just how serious later.



“Ooh ...”

His classmates sat in a row, dumbstruck. Even the teacher, a little ways off taking notes, forgot to call on the next student in his disbelief.

The class was basically a test to see how many of the twenty human figures set up all over the schoolyard a student could hit with kunai in a short period of time. Each student took a turn individually.

His classmates before him had all run around the schoolyard at top speed, managing to complete the task in just over five minutes, panting all the while. Before the class started, they had shown the location of the human figures; all of them were in annoying places like the top of the tallest tree, or behind a half-open window on the third floor. So everyone raced around frantically, and managed to do it in an average of five minutes.

Itachi had done it in thirty seconds. And all his kunai hit the figures precisely in the head or the chest, in almost exactly the same place each time; the slight differences were only due to the differences in how much of the figure was actually exposed. His kunai had all hit with almost flawless accuracy.

We know where the figures are, and all of them can be reached from the schoolyard ...

The students before Itachi finished the test, limited by these factors.

His study of them, and the plan he crafted in response, were impeccable.

From the starting point in the center of the schoolyard, Itachi drew a line in his mind to split the range into four, and then further roughly divided up the areas of concentration of the targets, before he categorized these as ones he could reach from the starting point, and ones he would need to move to hit. There were twelve that required him to move.

He then sorted the targets that required movement, and calculated a trajectory that would allow him to go round with the most efficiency.

As the teacher gave the start signal, Itachi launched the eight kunai he held in both hands at eight human figures simultaneously. That didn't even take two seconds. From there, he started running, tracing out the route he had pictured in his head, and made a swift tour of the yard.

Thirty seconds.

Itachi felt like it almost took too long. Shisui could have done it faster.

"W-well done. All right, next up," the teacher said, sweat rolling down his forehead.

Without responding, Itachi returned to his place among the excited students. His performance had been so incredible that no one could say a word directly to him. They circled him from a distance and whispered to each other.

Unaware of this reaction, Itachi reflected on the results of the trial he had just completed. Before his eyes, the next student was racing frantically around the yard.

I could shave another five seconds off ... He found a place where he could correct the trajectory of his run, and felt ashamed of his immaturity.

"Uchiha Itachi," the teacher called, and Itachi stood up and proceeded to the front of the classroom. "Here you are. You did very well."

A large circle was drawn around the score "100" at the top of the page he was handed.

"You're the only one to get a perfect score on the test."

Hearing this, his classmates gasped in surprise. Itachi bowed slightly to the teacher, and then returned directly to his seat.

Three months since he started school. And he still had not had anything resembling a conversation with any of his classmates. They naturally hesitated in the face of the outstanding grades he got in each and every one of their classes. All of them had ever-so-timidly spoken to him once, but Itachi's responses were always so concise and definite that none of them wanted to try to speak to him

again.

He was not going to school to make friends, though, so he was fine with that. The larger dissatisfaction for Itachi was how he felt like it was never enough, no matter how excellent his grades were. The limit for grades was one hundred percent; it was impossible to get anything more than that. But he felt like this was unproductive.

Can I really learn the true nature of the ninja in a place like this?

School grades and actual ability were not the same thing. That's what he felt, which was why he was always dissatisfied. Itachi was truly concerned about the fact that being number one at school was not directly connected to his own dream of being a great ninja.

"Make sure you show this test to your parents," his teacher instructed, and Itachi carefully folded in half the page with the 100 on it.



"Um," a voice said suddenly, and he looked back slowly.

In the hallway after school, all around him were boys waiting for friends to go play with, and girls chatting and squealing with laughter. Filled with a sense of liberation at their release from the formalities of lessons, they were excessively energetic.

"You're Uchiha Itachi, right?" the girl said, looking at him with upturned eyes. Her brown hair reached down to her shoulders, and she had both arms crossed in front of her chest. The eyes below thin eyebrows were almond-shaped and bright, while at the same time having a mysterious charm that made him feel bittersweet somehow.

"I am."

"I-I'm also a member of the Uchiha clan."

"You are?" he returned, curtly.

It wasn't just with this girl. Itachi always had this attitude at school. Most people would crumble at this point in the conversation. And then they would never try to step into his space again.

“My name’s Uchiha Izumi. I’m in the class next door.”

“So?”

Shisui had the day off today for the first time in a while, so once school was over, they were supposed to train together. He didn’t have the time to dawdle here like this now.

“We take the same way home, huh?”

“There’s only one Uchiha compound. Of course we take the same way.”

“Uh, um,” the girl Izumi said, hanging her head. “M-maybe we could—”

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry.” Itachi turned his back to her, and started racing down the hallway.



“So how’s school?” Shisui asked, wiping away the sweat on his forehead with a towel.

Itachi jerked his shoulders up and down, and exhaled heavily.

They were talking at the park in the center of the compound, after running for about four hours. And not just running: running at top speed. They ran for four hours, maintaining their top speed the entire time. Anyone not diligent with their ninja training wouldn’t have lasted five minutes.

Shisui looked slightly cooler than Itachi felt, and the younger boy glared slightly as he opened his mouth. “It’s way better for me to train with you.”

“But you’ve gotten pretty good at talking since you started at the academy.”

“I haven’t changed.”

“I guess you have always been pretty mouthy.” Shisui laughed and put a hand on Itachi’s head. “I guess there’s no one in your class who can take you on?”

Itachi said nothing.

“Is there?” Shisui asked, surprised.

Itachi shook his head from side to side, his friend’s hand still pressing down on it. “I don’t know what kind of grades everyone else gets. But as far as I can tell from watching them in the schoolyard, there’s no one amazing or anything.”

“So you’re only looking at yourself?”

Itachi felt like that might be exactly it. He couldn’t see his classmates. What should he do? How could he become the best ninja? That’s all he had thought about since he was a little kid. He had no energy to spare on anyone else.

“There’s no one more amazing than you at that school. I’ll tell you that right now.” Shisui’s hand tousled Itachi’s hair.

“Quit it.” He pushed the hand away.

“As long as we have you, the future of the Uchihas is secure,” Shisui said, laughing, but his smile was a little sad somehow.



Listening to Sasuke breathing softly in his sleep beside him, Itachi laid down on his futon. It had been just over a year since they moved to the new compound, and he had gotten very used to the look of the ceiling above his bed.

Beyond the bedroom where the two children slept was the family’s dinner table, where Fugaku and Mikoto were sitting.

“Itachi’s grades are amazing, hm?” He heard his mother’s voice from the other side of the closed sliding doors. She apparently thought the children were already asleep. Without trying to listen, Itachi stared absently up at the ceiling.

“He is my son, after all.”

“I suppose so.”

His father was praising him. And his mother was happy about it. There was nothing to feel bad about.

“How is he at school?” his father asked.

“What do you mean? Look at these excellent grades—”

“I’m not talking about that,” his father said, cutting his mother off. “Does he have any friends?”

“He doesn’t really talk about his friends.”

“That boy doesn’t know how to take it easy.”

“That’s not such a bad thing.”

“But he goes too far. It’s like he’s rushing, like he’s hurrying to become a full-fledged ninja.”

Dad sees right through me ... The slightest heat colored Itachi’s face.

“The way he’s so earnest about ninjahood, sometimes I feel like I should take lessons from him, even though I’m his father. But a thread stretched too taut is fragile. I’m worried he needs to let loose somehow.”

“He’s a gentle boy. You just have to watch Itachi cuddling Sasuke to know that. He’ll be fine. And lately, he really looks up to Shisui like a big brother. They train together; they’re quite close.”

“Shisui of the Body Flicker, hm?”

Itachi was also aware that Shisui had been drawing attention as a ninja lately, garnering the nickname “Body Flicker.”

“It’s all well and good to have an older friend too, but it’d be nice if he could talk with friends his own age, and learn at least a little of what fun feels like.”

“I’m sure he will.”

A friend the same age ... The face of the girl who spoke to him suddenly after school floated up in the back of his mind.

“Uchiha Izumi.” Murmuring the girl’s name, Itachi quietly closed his eyes.



Six months after starting at the academy.

Itachi’s fame spread throughout the school. He excelled to such an extent that some teachers and students said his level of talent had never before been seen at the school. Given the fact that the first-year classes had nothing to teach Itachi, his teachers gave him special homework and tests. But Itachi easily mastered it all, and his teachers threw up their hands in defeat.

He was more than advanced enough for the genin level, and so, just over four months after he started school, his teachers unanimously agreed on his graduation after his first year.

The village of Konohagakure, exhausted from the Great War and the attack by the Nine-Tails, urgently needed ninja. Because of this, a select number of

students judged by their teachers to be particularly gifted could take the graduation exam without waiting for their full term to be up. If they passed the exam, they would then attend the graduation ceremony with the older students, and be assigned duties as a genin.

Naturally, Itachi passed the graduation exam. It was on clone techniques, something he had mastered with the instruction he got from Shisui before starting at the academy.

“You’ll be a ninja and out there in no time,” Shisui had said, knowing Itachi’s fervent desire to become a ninja as soon as possible, and then joined him in clone training.

Six months of school left ...

His graduation had already been settled.

“Hey! You!”

Itachi heard someone call out and stopped walking.

“You him? Uchiha Itachi?”

Three older students, probably from the school’s senior class, stood in the hallway behind him.

Itachi had spent his whole life training as a ninja; he didn’t have an ounce of energy to pour into anything else. He just barely remembered the names and faces of the students in his own class. He didn’t know anything about students in other classes or grades. So he was assuming, based on their height, that these students were in the most senior grade.

The average age of graduation from the academy was twelve. The physique of seven-year-old Itachi was completely different. He was so short, he had to look up at the students standing before him.

“You know who we are?”

“No.”

At Itachi’s blunt response, the student standing in the middle, the one who had done all the talking, furrowed his brow. “Cheeky brat, just like everyone says, huh?” He was a scary older boy with a small nose and narrow eyes. “I’m

Izumo Tenma. Fleet Foot Tenma, they call me. Ain't nobody at school who don't know me."

I don't know you made it as far as Itachi's throat, but he swallowed the words and looked up at this Tenma.

"You wanna go?" said the student with droopy eyes standing on Tenma's right. He was nervous, maybe concerned about what Tenma would think.

"Slow it down, Katsura," Tenma instructed, and Katsura threw him an ingratiating smile.

"You know why we stopped you?" the boy on Tenma's left asked, his right eyebrow shooting up. He was the tallest of the three.

"No idea."

"What's with this kid?"

"Hold up, Hagiri," Tenma held the tallest boy back. "We're gonna make sure we teach this kid about school manners. Just don't rush it."

Tenma slowly took a step forward to stand before Itachi. "You know hierarchy's important in the ninja world, right?"

"With the four-person cell as the basis for ninja duties, the orders of superior jonin and chunin ninja are absolute. Thus, decorum and seniority are the foundation for ninja."

"Just like an honor student to have a neat answer. But ..." A malicious look came over Tenma's face. "I can't stand that attitude of yours." He came close enough that Itachi could almost feel his breath, and glared at the younger boy. "You sure are an eyesore for an Uchiha."

"You're really going there?" Hagiri muttered, as if amazed at Tenma. But his voice clearly contained a sneer.

Lunch break. The other students were afraid of the violent threesome, and no one came near them. All the teachers had gone back to the Teachers' Room. Boosted by a sense of superiority, knowing no one was going to get in his way, Tenma's mouth stretched out in a mean grin.

The "cheeky brat" before him was a younger student, after all. And Tenma had

almost certainly decided before this encounter began that Itachi would cry and apologize, if they just threatened him a bit. No doubt he had made countless classmates and younger students obey him like this. He wasn't the least bit ashamed of threatening a student five years his junior. The dim arrogance of their natures bled out onto the faces of all three students.

It wouldn't take Itachi even three minutes to beat down these fools.

They called him cheeky or whatever, but really, they just wanted to make him yield. They wanted to make the supposed school prodigy cry and beg for mercy, and stroke their own vanity. So why didn't they come at him the moment they called out to stop him?

This was no ordinary school; this was a training ground for ninja. The thought of killing was no sooner had, than the act was carried out. Wasn't that the way of the ninja?

These older students didn't understand that the institution of school was protecting them. It was like they were open on all sides.

Itachi had kunai hidden on his back. And quite fortunately, he had three of them there. There wasn't even any need for him to take a step. He could simply reach around to grab the kunai at his waist, and send them flying through the air. Holes would be dug out of the foreheads of Tenma and the other two, and all three would fall.

But he wouldn't kill them. For Itachi, who believed a ninja's decision to kill was the movement to kill, the fact that he didn't move meant he wouldn't kill them. The reason was simple: Itachi didn't like fighting. That was why he'd never once been in a fight. In a fight, you couldn't actually kill the other person. You needed to show restraint. And he was uncertain as to whether he could actually show the crucial restraint. He worried that he might actually end up killing his opponent.

So, he wouldn't kill them. Better to avoid futile fighting. But he also had no intention of letting them hit him.

"It was you guys who set the Nine-Tails on the village, right?"

His heart beat faster at Tenma's words.

“All the grown-ups say so, you know—that the Uchiha clan made the Nine-Tails attack the village. You’re a sneaky, cunning clan, so we’ll probably never catch who did it, right? But it was definitely an Uchiha. The fact that the Hokage and them don’t trust you is proof. I mean, they made you all go live together, on the edge of the village.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“You think you can’t just say, ‘I don’t know,’ and be done with it?” The furrow between Tenma’s brows grew deeper. “My uncle died when the Nine-Tails attacked us. His dad did, too.” Tenma pointed to Katsura, standing behind him. “And how’d things go for your family again?” Tenma then asked Hagiri, as he glared at Itachi.

“Right in front of me, my mom, she was trying to protect my little sister from debris that came flying, and ...” Hagiri faltered.

Itachi remembered when he had protected Sasuke and his mother. He had leapt innocently at the enormous rock sailing down toward them, and mustered everything he had to smash it. *Did you stand by quietly, and watch your mother die? Couldn’t you do what I did?* he wanted to ask Hagiri. *You have to get stronger so that you can protect things, so that you can push away sadness.*

“The Uchiha clan are our enemy. I mean, you’re our enemy. You killed our relatives. How could we not hate you?” Tenma demanded.

First, false charges; then, a broad interpretation. It was in precisely these kinds of human feelings that the origin of war lay.

A person wants to bury, somehow, the sense of loss after losing someone they love. This feeling, a feeling they don’t know how to vent, snatches away their power of judgment, and runs wild. And then they hurt someone.

Each and every word out of the older boy’s mouth made Itachi feel more and more weighted down.

“Apologize.” Tenma leaned back. Then he pointed into the now-empty space between himself and Itachi, and shouted, “Get down on your hands and knees and apologize! Say ‘I’m sorry on behalf of the entire Uchiha clan’!”

“I will not,” Itachi said dispassionately, stifling all emotion.

The looks on the faces of the older students changed at once. Flushed with fierce emotion up to that point, they now suddenly paled. The superficial impulse to threaten the cheeky first-year boy, and maybe vent some of the helplessness they felt at the loss of their families in the Nine-Tails incident, changed in that moment to resentment toward Itachi himself.

“Y-you ...”

All three reached hands around to behind themselves. They grabbed hold of kunai hilts.

Itachi stared at the older students, his own arms hanging loosely at his sides. If it came to that, he intended to get through this with a substitution technique that made use of cloning.

His substitution technique was unconventional. Normally, the ninja switched out their own body for a log with a tag attached immediately before an attack, in order to confuse their opponent. But rather than a log, Itachi’s version used countless crows.

He had come up with the idea when he was training with Shisui, and saw a flock of crows flying in the dense woods. If you used the usual log, the confusion effect on your opponent was meager. But the instant you switched out for crows, they flew off in all directions, so your opponent was surprised and bewildered, generating an opening that wasn’t even on the same level as with the log.

This was the first time he had tested it in an actual fight.

Will it work ... ?

He planned to do it when one of the three thrust a kunai into Itachi’s body.

All four were taking shallow breaths. Both Itachi and Tenma and his gang were watching every move the other made. A tense silence rolled down the hallway.

“Stop it!” The high-pitched shout of a girl shattered the quiet.

Izumi appeared in front of Itachi. With both hands raised up high, she faced the older students. “I’m Uchiha too! But I have no intention of apologizing to you! I mean, it wasn’t the Uchiha clan who summoned the Nine-Tails!”

Tenma and his gang were taken aback at the sudden development.

“The Uchiha clan lives in the village, too. People we care about died in that whole thing. That’s why ...” Even from behind, Itachi could tell she was moved to tears. “Whoever did it isn’t Uchiha!”

“Out of the way,” Tenma said, with a grim look.

“I’m not moving!” Izumi shouted firmly.

“Then you’re also gonna—” As he glared at Izumi, the look on Tenma’s face changed suddenly.

“H-hey, look at that!” Katsura put a hand on Tenma’s shoulder and pointed at Izumi’s face with his free hand.

“I-it’s the sharingan,” Hagiri muttered, his fear showing.

“L-let’s get out of here,” Tenma said, and the three turned and ran.

“You all right?” Izumi turned to face him, round eyes burning a bright red. In the center of them, small circles floated up, with patterns like comma-shaped magatama jewels on them.

The most powerful visual technique, passed down through the Uchiha clan, the sharingan ...

“Sorry for butting in,” Izumi said, smiling, and the strength ran out of her body.

Itachi ran over and caught her by the shoulders.

Izumi passed out.



It wasn’t until after school that Izumi regained consciousness in the bed in the nurse’s room. No sooner had she woken up than she was smiling, somewhat embarrassed, at Itachi, who had been by her side since classes ended for the day.

“You didn’t need me to butt in. I’m sorry,” Izumi apologized, red all the way to the tips of her ears.

“I didn’t need you to?”

“Well, I mean, you’re *Itachi*. Someone like me’s just in the way, right?”

“You actually saved me.”

Maybe it was just like she said. But thanks to her eyes, the three older students had fled without doing anything.

“When I get mad, I get those eyes without even knowing it.”

“How did you activate it?” Itachi still hadn’t activated the sharingan. Apparently, the trigger was in the heart somehow, but even Shisui wouldn’t teach him about it. Given that he had gone beyond the average ninja to master basically every skill, the fact that he hadn’t awakened the sharingan was a hard truth to bear.

Izumi did it ...

He wanted to know how.

“My dad died in Nine Tails’s attack.”

This was the first he’d heard of that. Izumi’s father would have been a member of the Uchiha clan. In which case, there was a strong possibility that he had worked under Itachi’s father. But Itachi hadn’t heard anything about any of his father’s subordinates being killed in the line of duty.

“Oh! My dad’s not an Uchiha. My mom’s Uchiha. After my dad died, we came back to the clan, and I became an Uchiha, too,” Izumi told him, as if reading his mind.

“Is there a connection between your father’s death and the sharingan?”

“Yeah.” Izumi sighed, and met Itachi’s eyes. Her own had returned to normal. “I was there with my dad when he died. He died right in front of me. He was protecting me. So I ...” Tears ran down her cheeks. “It was like, if I just had more power, my dad wouldn’t have had to die ... During the funeral, and the whole time after that, I blamed myself. ‘If only I had more power,’ I said.”

Looking as though she couldn’t stand it, Izumi lowered her face. “And then suddenly, something started throbbing inside my eyes. My chakra gradually collected there, and I fainted. When I woke up, my mom told me it was the sharingan.”

“Huh. I’m sorry to make you remember something so painful.”

“No, it’s all right. Don’t worry about it.” She smiled.

He reached out his right hand.

Confused, Izumi tilted her head to one side.

He waited wordlessly until she pulled a slender hand out from under the blanket and slowly lifted it up.

He grabbed onto her pale palm. “Thanks.”

Izumi smiled slightly.



Danzo tossed the white file onto the desk and looked at the subordinate standing before him, wearing a white tiger mask. Red shading stretched out to the sides from around the eyeholes, slanted upwards as if expressing anger.

“Uchiha Itachi, hm ...”

The photo attached to the file showed the face of a still-young boy. The eyes that stared back at Danzo, however, contained a strength that belied their owner’s age.

“All involved assert that the academy has never before witnessed such genius. He completed the graduation examination four months after he commenced his studies, and he is scheduled to graduate in the springtime of the next year.”

His gaze still on the file, Danzo listened to the excessive formality of his subordinate, and a smile crossed his lips. “I can just see the different departments fighting to get him.”

“Yes.”

Danzo lifted his weary hips from the chair. As the shadow behind the third Hokage, he had carried the burden of the village’s darkness, but recently, he had felt bitterly the weight of his own body. He wasn’t so old that he knew death was upon him, but he was of an age to start thinking about his own life and the length of it.

Ten years from now, twenty years from now...he would certainly die. And there was something he had to do before that happened. Cutting out the root of the evil that had been growing since the birth of the village of Konohagakure was

Danzo's life's work.

“A prodigy not yet colored by anything ...”

Danzo turned his gaze to the darkness visible beyond the window. The black void had fallen deathly silent, as if devouring the fleeting peace. For men who lived in times of war, the night, with its swirling air of murder, was something yearned for.

“Well, let's meet him first, hm?”

4

“Although the Great War is over, we cannot yet say that the world is now totally at peace. Even now, there are those who struggle through difficult days because of the sad incident of two years past. So how do we break this down? As young ninja, this isn’t someone else’s problem. Today, we take our first step on the path of the ninja. In this chaotic world, it is most certainly not a peaceful path. But despite this, we vow it here. Ninja are precisely those who dare to advance down a difficult path. Ninja are those who push forward and endure. Using everything we have learned at the academy, we will fulfill our duties as ninja of Konoha.”

Itachi read the scroll in a sonorous voice before slowly rolling it back up. And then he turned his gaze out over the sea of graduates and current students, guardians and teachers, below him.

“Valedictorian, Uchiha Itachi.”

His grades had all been nothing but perfect from the day he started school until his graduation. He had passed the graduation exam in his fourth month at school.

Although there had been some exceptional graduates during the urgent days of the Great War, such as Hatake Kakashi, Itachi was the youngest post-war graduate and valedictorian.

And thus, the curtain fell on his school days.

There had apparently been all kinds of quarrelling among the teachers about Itachi reading the formal reply as the valedictorian.

The majority of the graduates were twelve years old. There were some who, like Itachi, had managed excellent grades and were younger graduates, but at seven, Itachi was indeed far too young. Even if he did have the grades, the thinking, and the ninja skills far beyond his seven years, there was concern that he was simply too immature to hold up before the other graduates.

And there was one more thing.

There were complaints about the fact that Itachi had been born into the Uchiha clan, mainly from the teachers with lineages connected to the Senju clan. In the end, however, they bowed before his overwhelming abilities and grades, and the way he excelled in all things, despite the issue of his age and the prejudice toward the Uchihis. There could be no other valedictorian.



Itachi walked through the schoolyard, petals of sakura blossoms fluttering through the air.

Before him were three people. His father, mouth pulled down at the corners despite the felicitous nature of the occasion. His mother, smiling gently to greet him from the other side of his father. And his baby brother, whose recent mastery of his ability to walk delighted him to no end.

His family.

Spotting his big brother in the throngs of people coming and going, Sasuke opened his adorable round eyes wide. "Itaaa!" he cried in a clear voice.

Their mother told him to call his big brother "Itachi," but he still couldn't talk properly, so that turned into "Ita." And seeing his little brother calling out so happily and tottering toward him, Itachi felt something overwhelming.

He adores me unconditionally ...

And as his older brother, Itachi had to protect Sasuke unconditionally.

His mother followed along behind the baby and his tottering steps and bright smile, hands outstretched to catch him.

"Be careful, Sasuke," he called, calmly. And then Sasuke disappeared from his field of view.

Someone stood between them, blocking his view. A man ... a dark man. Itachi couldn't exactly put into words just what was dark about this man. Basically, everything about him was dark.

"Are you Uchiha Itachi?" the man asked, looking down on him. The right side of his face was covered by bandages. He was clad in black, but his arm from his

left shoulder was exposed, revealing the white robe he wore underneath. His left eye alone glared at Itachi. "I see ..."

Unflinchingly, Itachi met the gaze of the man clouded in a sinister aura. Behind him, his mother grabbed the shoulders of Sasuke, as the baby attempted to continue his stroll.

"You are the bearer of bad luck."

"Bad luck?"

"They call chaos, those lines," the man said, pointing at the lines running from Itachi's eyes down his cheeks. "Chaos will follow you throughout your life."

The stain of a single drop falling on a clear day ...

Who exactly was this man?

"I have a question for the most talented genius ever to grace the halls of the academy."

Itachi silently waited for the man to continue.

"Ten of our brethren have been shipwrecked. One of them has caught a nasty, infectious disease. If he is allowed to live, the other nine will also get sick and die. If you were the captain of that ship, what judgment would you hand down?"

The question of why the man would ask Itachi something like that when they were meeting for the first time flitted through his mind. But in the next instant, he was offering a response, his own thoughts in simple words.

"No matter what happens, the one who is sick is destined to die. If I were the captain, I would think that my first priority would be to save the lives of the other nine. I would choose to kill the one and save the nine."

A bold smile crossed the man's face. "A very unambiguous response." He moved toward Itachi. "I look forward to the day we meet again," he almost whispered as he passed the boy.

Itachi felt the malicious echo sully his heart with darkness.

"Itachi ..." His mother came racing over, Sasuke in her arms.

"What did he say?" his father asked, having come chasing after his mother at

some point.

“Nothing important.”

“Oh, really,” his father said, turning his eyes on the man’s departing back.

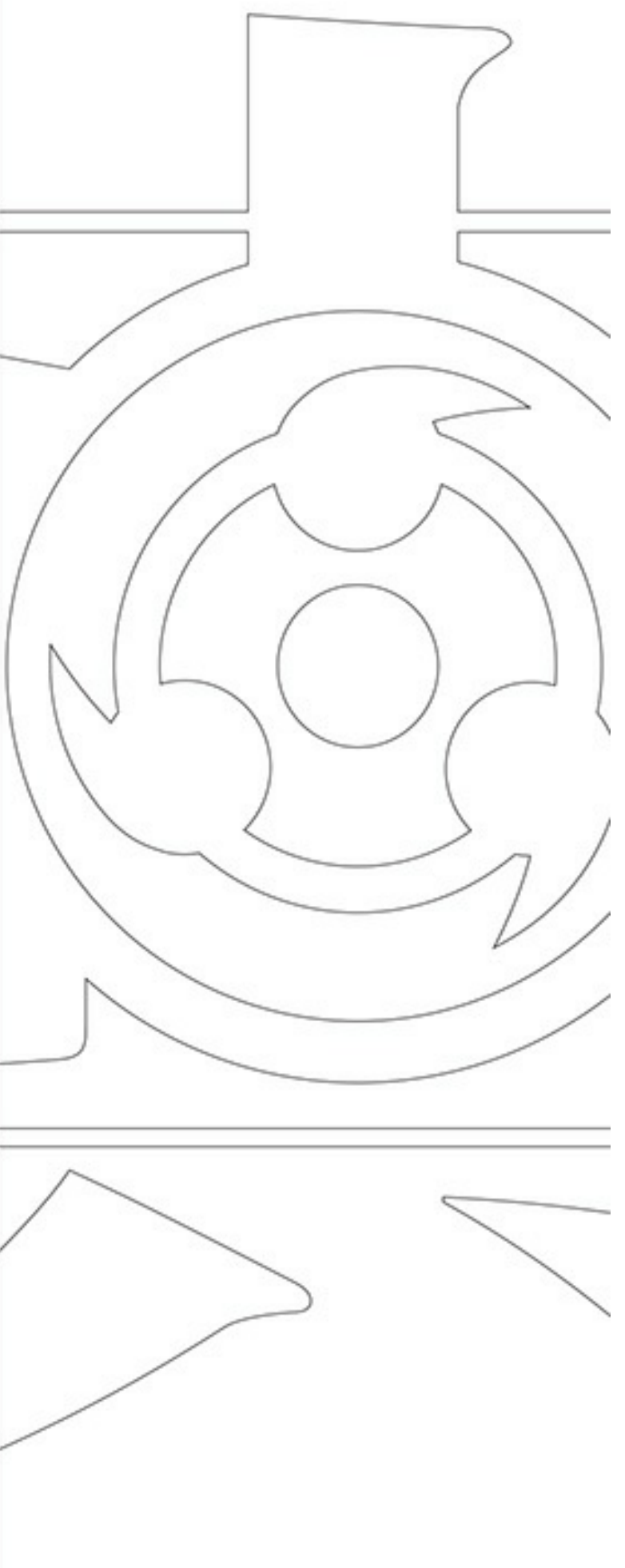
“Who is he?”

“Shimura Danzo. He’s a close aide of the Third.” A dark shadow lurked in Fugaku’s voice as he answered Itachi.

“Chaos will follow you throughout your life.”

The words Danzo left lingering in the air became sharp thorns and pierced Itachi’s heart.

Placing a hand on his aching chest, Itachi stared at the man’s back as he walked away, until it disappeared.



Brilliant young bird,

unaware of the stillness

that follows the night

CHAPTER 2

**Brilliant young bird,
unaware of the stillness
that follows the night**

1

“Starting today, you three will be working under me as genin. Some of our missions will be tough. So you need to rely on each other, and make it out alive together!” the man in his forties standing before Itachi shouted loudly, forehead protector tied so tightly it looked painful.

Minazuki Yuki. He had been assigned to be the jonin supervisor for Itachi and the two other new graduates of the academy. In contrast with his lyrical name, he had a burnished face, and beneath the forehead protector digging into the short dark hair on his head were eyebrows like old, used brooms. The eyes that sat below the unkempt brows were round like a fish’s, the nostrils were large, and although the man’s lips were quite thick, his mouth was absurdly small.

“Rely on one another. As if,” the genin next to Itachi muttered, too quiet for Yuki to hear.

Izumo Tenma ...

He was the leader of the group that had tried to force Itachi to get down on his knees and apologize, back at the academy. While Yuki continued his superficial lecture, Tenma sat holding his knees, and stared at Itachi.

“We got the village albatross hanging around the neck of this team. To hell with teamwork.”

There was one more person, a girl, there that day, sitting on the other side of Tenma. “Look, you, could you just shut yer yap already?” the girl shouted angrily, interrupting Yuki’s lecture. Her name was Inari Shinko; she was the same age as Tenma. “Ever since school, you been yammerin’ about Itachi on and on and on, but you’re genin now, yeah? So just quit with all yer whinging already!”

“Shut up!” Tenma said. “You’re just a girl. And you know, this has been bugging me since we were at school—your accent’s so messed up, you stop making sense halfway through a sentence!”

“I only moved house to Konoha three years afore. I kint help it!” Shinko

shouted, pursing her lips.

“Would you both stop it, please?” Yuki timidly tried to calm the bickering pair. But they simply glared at each other, and gave no sign of stopping.

“Girls are always nice to good-looking guys, anyway.”

“Wh-why would I be all up in here for Itachi like that? Looky you, the lad’s only seven. I’m thirteen, hear? I def don’t fancy him!”

“Age doesn’t matter when it comes to love, right!”

“Wh-what on earth are you talking—”

“Haah.” The three of them were so pathetic that Itachi couldn’t stop an unconscious sigh from slipping out.

Naturally finding fault with this, Tenma raged, “What’re you all exasperated for?!”

I can’t spend time with these people ... Itachi stood up, eyes closed.

“You jerk! You running away?!”

“Itachi, go on and give this arse a piece of it!”

Ignoring both of them, Itachi looked at Yuki. “I was told that today was just a meet-and-greet?”

“R-right.” Yuki was clearly the most concerned about Itachi, the youngest member of his team.

“So then, haven’t we finished what we came here for?”

“I-I suppose we have.”

“Then I’ll take my leave.”

“Oh! We have a formal mission tomorrow, so make sure you’re on time.”

About to walk away, Itachi stopped and looked at Yuki over his shoulder. “I understand.”

“You’re just running away, you jerk!” Tenma shouted, standing up.

“An’ I’m not done with my talking yet!”

Shinko grabbed onto the hem of Tenma's trousers.

"What are you doing?!"

"Yer such a loudmouth!"

The sound of their bickering in his ears, Itachi didn't turn around again. He could tell this wouldn't be easy.



"You on your way home?" Itachi called out to a familiar back.

The face that turned around abruptly grew bright upon seeing him. "Itachi." It was Uchiha Izumi. "You have a mission today?"

"We were just meeting each other. Missions start tomorrow."

"Huh." Izumi was still attending the academy. When he thought about the fact that a mere month earlier, he had also been going to school like this, he was overcome by feelings of nostalgia. Their road home was the same, to the Uchiha compound. They started walking again.

"How's your team?" Izumi asked.

"That senior's on it."

"Huh?"

"The one with the loudest voice that time you took out those three seniors for me."

A light of understanding flicked on in her eyes. "Took them out, I mean, I didn't ..." She hung her head as if she didn't know exactly what to say.

As he watched her, laughter abruptly welled up, and exploded out of him.

Izumi stared with wide eyes. "Why are you laughing?"

"It's just funny."

"'Just funny?' You're awful."

"Sorry."

This time, they both laughed. Even though no one had actually said anything funny, for some reason, the pair laughed together.

“Can you use the sharingan now?” Itachi asked.

“If I could do that, I’d be graduating just like you did.”

Itachi didn’t look at her, as she pursed her lips in vexation. “I haven’t even activated mine yet.”

“But you still graduated. You’re a genin already. So, like, what kind of ninja are you gonna be when you *do* activate the sharingan?”

“Dunno ...”

Before them, the wall sectioning off the Uchiha community came into view. The family crest was drawn on the magnificent tiled gates separating the village from the compound.

“So lately, the grown-ups have been kinda scary, right?” Izumi asked, quietly, as they approached the compound slowly.

“You hear something?”

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head from side to side. “But sometimes, when I’m walking around in the compound, I’ll just get scared all of a sudden.”

Izumi might have been seven years old, but she had activated the sharingan. Even if she hadn’t totally mastered it, she still had plenty of training as a ninja. Plus, the Uchiha clan had sharp intuition to begin with. Izumi’s gut feeling now was no doubt the early blooming of that ability, so he couldn’t necessarily brush it off as fantasy.

“What’s scaring you?” he asked the fearful Izumi gently.

“Like maybe the grown-ups are thinking about bad things or something ...”

Bad things ...

The childish way that she put it got closer to the truth than any more adult way of speaking.

In the back of his mind, the faces of the three subordinates who came and went from his father’s place floated up. When the fourth Hokage had been decided on, when the issue of moving to the compound after the Nine Tails incident came up, and then the meetings at Nakano Shrine his father went to all

the time ... He had to assume they all affirmed Izumi's instincts.

"Izumi," Itachi said, as they slipped through the compound gates. He didn't look at her, but instead kept his gaze focused ahead of him. "You probably shouldn't really talk about this with anyone else."

"R-right," Izumi nodded powerlessly. "If you say so, Itachi, then I won't."

They were silent then, as they returned to their respective homes.

2

Countless crows assaulted his enemy. The large man cried out, surrounded by a crowd of beaks so dense, there was no opening for him to flee.

Itachi's enemy had been neatly caught by his Shadow Clone technique.

"Now!" Itachi shouted from the trees above, far from the flock of crows. Looking down, he could see the enemy shrieking, and Tenma on the ground below him, too stunned to even get to his feet. Yuki and Shinko were also there, surrounding them.

"Here we go, Shinko!"

"All right!"

The pair sprang toward the enemy, and the crows flew up into the air and disappeared into the woods.

"Aaaaah!" the man cried out in agony, and collapsed.

Carefully watching over the particulars of the situation, Itachi quietly leapt down from his branch.

"Nice call there, Itachi," Yuki said, clapping. Tenma stared, annoyed, as he pulled himself up off the ground. Shinko didn't pay the boys any attention, but instead went to check on the dead enemy.

It had been discovered that one of the vegetable peddlers who came and went from Konohagakure was a spy for Iwagakure. Itachi's Team Two had been given the order to dispose of him, and so they had left the village to find him. Normally, it was the Anbu's job to eliminate intelligence agents from enemy nations. But the Anbu were all currently busy with a certain urgent mission; not one member remained in the village.

The attempted kidnapping of Hyuga Hinata ...

The head ninja of the village of Kumogakure, who had had an antagonistic

relationship with Konohagakure for many years, journeyed to the village to sign a peace treaty. The mood in the village was celebratory, but then Hinata, the daughter of the Hyuga clan chief, was very nearly kidnapped. The kidnapper was killed, and the girl returned home unscathed, but since the kidnapper was actually the head ninja of Kumogakure, the situation developed into a standoff between the villages. Their head ninja murdered, Kumogakure insisted on compensation, in the form of the body of the Hyuga family head. Konoha pretended that the man's twin brother was the actual family head and placated Kumogakure with that, somehow managing to avert a descent into war.

Given the urgency of the situation, the Anbu were all sent out, and the village's key ninja were all on standby in case fighting did break out, so they couldn't make any careless moves. That said, they couldn't exactly let an Iwa spy slip out from under their noses.

And here, Team Two was selected. In truth, rather than Team Two, it was Itachi who had been chosen. His practical abilities were already on par with the average chunin, even though he was only seven. Thus, he had drawn the attention of the leaders of Konoha.

The job itself had gone smoothly enough. The spy was caught so easily by the trap Itachi set outside the village that it was almost comical; the man made his own position blindingly clear. With Itachi in the lead, Team Two spread out around the man and closed in on him.

But Tenma was in too much of a hurry.

The mission would have been nice and easy if they had simply taken the time to track the man—but, eager for recognition, Tenma had charged out ahead of the others. And just as a cornered mouse will lash out at the cat, the desperate spy launched an attack at Tenma's throat. Itachi swept in to save him in the nick of time.

The spy's kunai dug into Itachi. But he had used a substitution technique, transforming into an enormous murder of crows, and then counterattacked. The rest of it went as noted already.

"Not costum' himself none," Shinko muttered, crouching down in front of the spy's corpse. Having mainly studied healing ninja arts at school, she was

assigned to the team for just such times as this. Assessing whether an enemy was in disguise, possessing knowledge about poisons, and treating the injuries of their comrades—a squad needed to have someone versed in the healing arts.

“He isn’t? Well, that’s good,” Yuki remarked calmly.

“You.” Shinko stood up, put both hands on her hips, and looked at Tenma. “Don’t s’pose you got a word or two to say to Itachi?”

“Huh?” Raising a single eyebrow with force, Tenma looked off in a different direction.

“Weren’t for Itachi’s quick thinking, you’d be dead right about now. You can’t at least thank ‘im?”

“I’m telling you, I got no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Seriously, you. What kinda—” Shinko took an angry step toward him.

Itachi stepped in between them. “Enough.” He stretched out his right hand in front of Shinko.

“I-it’s basically cos of you takin’ that attitude that this boy runs off all wild, yeah?” Shinko asked. “You might be a little one, but you’re a right genin too. Got to give him the what-for sometimes.”

“It’s fine, Shinko.” A smile played on Itachi’s face, and she let out a sigh.

“Don’t let ‘im do what all he wants, yeah?” Shinko said, and turned away.

Yuki watched over them nervously.

“Even if you hadn’t helped me out, I wouldn’t’ve got taken down.”

“Uh-huh.”

Bloodlust ... Itachi coolly followed it to its source.

Tenma. His fist, coming toward him. With the minimal amount of movement, Itachi grabbed it.

“I really can’t stand that attitude of yours, like you just see through everything and anything,” Tenma muttered, his clenched teeth squeaking.

“Will you get over it if I apologize?”

“I’m telling you, that kind of answer drives me nuts!” Releasing his fist, this time Tenma sent a kick flying.

Itachi avoided this simply by throwing back his upper body.

With the force of his leg cutting vainly through the air, the older boy spun around twice. And then, with his back to Itachi, he dropped down to sit on the ground. “Not like my physical techniques’d reach you or anything,” Tenma muttered, back still turned. “You can do anything. You got no idea how I feel.”

Itachi didn’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry about what happened at school. And that thing before ...” Tenma hung his head, motionless. “Thanks.”

Itachi stared silently at the other boy’s rounded back.



“Well, go in.”

At his father’s urging, Itachi placed a hand on the closed sliding doors. On the other side of the spotless paper, the room was silent. And yet the intense aura there, in that room separated from him by a single sliding door, came though with such intensity that it practically prickled his skin.

An aura of unrest ... Itachi’s heart sank.

“Itachi,” his father pressed him.

With no other choice, he opened the sliding door. The hall, fifteen or so tatami mats large, was filled to capacity. But because there was no light in the room, the figures were all silhouetted.

“Sorry to make you wait.” Gesturing Itachi into the room, his father crossed the threshold, and then reached back to close the door.

The darkness grew even more concentrated. With no one shadow leading, several of the human forms stood up, and together lit the candles in the four corners of the room. A faint light illuminated the interior.

“Sit down there, and listen.” His father pointed to a seat at the very back of the room, the only open space on the floor jammed with people.

Itachi pushed through them to make his way to the designated position, and sat down quietly. His father watched his son get settled in, before stepping through the assembled group to sit at the front of the room, facing everyone.

“We’ll now begin our regular meeting,” Yashiro announced from beside his father. “Lord Fugaku’s son Itachi will also be attending the meetings from now on.”

“My son is seven,” Fugaku said. “Although he has the genin status required to take part in these meetings, he is still very much a novice. Due to my admittedly selfish desire to have him learn about the clan status from a young age, he has been allowed to take part. I appreciate your understanding.” He bowed his head.

In response, the clan members sitting before him bowed their heads simultaneously.

“Now then, to pick up where we left off last time, I’d like to discuss the issue of the submission of a written opinion to the Hokage, with regard to the segregation of the clan’s compound.” Yashiro had barely finished speaking before the people at the meeting all started talking at once.

Some insisted on a show of force for Konoha, others said they should keep a calm eye on things and proceed amicably, and still others looked at the faces of those around them, unsure which opinion to agree with. Even though their purposes were all different, it seemed that everyone there wanted to actively participate in the conversation.

Abruptly, Itachi felt someone’s eyes on him and immediately turned his own eyes in that direction.

Shisui.

He met Shisui’s eyes. The older boy was silent, and seemed unaccustomed to the boisterous atmosphere of the place. Then, his good friend smiled at him, and Itachi felt an indescribable sadness.

The clan’s evil feelings hung heavy here. Itachi was also not accustomed to it.

I feel the same as you ... Itachi put his heart into the smile he flashed back at Shisui.

3

It was coming up on a year since he had graduated from the academy. Itachi turned eight.

His career as a ninja was going smoothly. He hadn't been sent on any particularly difficult missions. Looking back on his year, the mission first accomplished after becoming a genin, that of taking care of the Iwagakure spy, was maybe the hardest he'd been on.

His relationship with his teammates was the same as always. Tenma still wouldn't accept him, and Shinko flared up, annoyed with Tenma's attitude. Yuki watched over them half in a panic. Itachi didn't do anything special, but simply stood there on his own.

He thought it was a bit of an unnatural, warped team, but even so, do the same thing over and over for a year, and it becomes the norm. Even if they were still unable to really open up with each other, they somehow managed to execute their missions without fuss, and Itachi was satisfied with that. Because he had no intention of hanging around for that long.

He would pile on the achievements, rise up to chunin, then jonin, before becoming the best ninja in the world and eradicating all war. For that reason, Itachi couldn't stand still. Instead of spending any of his precious time worrying about his teammates or his supervising jonin, he poured his heart into polishing his own skills. So naturally, he had mastered ninjitsu to the extent that missions went almost too smoothly.

If he had one bone to pick, it would be the fact that Yuki hadn't recommended him for the chunin selection exams that year. Ostensibly, this was because Tenma and Shinko still hadn't reached the level where they could take the chunin exams. Participation in the chunin exams was based on the three-person cell.

When he learned he wouldn't be able to take the exams, in a move unusual for

him, Itachi pressed Yuki about it.

Normally, whatever was said to him, Yuki didn't bother to react, but just this once, he pushed back against Itachi forcefully. He insisted that it was simply impossible that year, with a look on his face that said he wasn't the least bit interested in what Itachi had to say.

Itachi had no choice but to give up.

But even if he wasn't allowed to take the chunin exams, he could still be promoted directly to chunin if the village administration and the jonin recommended it. And looking at Team Two's results, it was immediately obvious just how much Itachi contributed to the team. It was a fact that his judgment surpassed that of even his supervising jonin, and he had reached the highest levels in everything from ninja arts to fighting techniques, all of which had allowed him to rescue his team from danger any number of times.

The administration will definitely say something ...

This belief firm in his heart, Itachi pushed on with the mission before him each day.



"The lands have all relaxed now that the war is over, so travel between countries is so much safer now. Which is why we can assign this sort of mission to a genin-centered team," Yuki said, eyes on the document in his hand. Itachi held the same document in his own hand.

Mission to guard the daimyo of the Land of Fire.

The village of Konohagakure was within the territory of the Land of Fire, and the ruler of the Land of Fire was the daimyo. But although the village was located in the Land of Fire, it functioned semi-autonomously, with an independent government structure that had the Hokage at the top. On paper, the daimyo of the Land of Fire was ranked above the Hokage, but currently, the land's military might rested with the ninja of Konoha, so the relationship between the two was more like an alliance of equals, rather than master and servant.

The Land of Fire's daimyo visited Konohagakure annually. This regular event

was extremely important for both sides, one that had been faithfully held, even during the Great War.

Team Two had been assigned to guard the daimyo on his trip.

“So the four of us are going to guard him?” Tenma asked, looking at the document.

“Officially, yes, it will be us. But behind the scenes, there’ll be a four-person Anbu cell keeping an eye on things from the shadows. And before that even, the daimyo has his own Twelve Guardian Ninja, an independent corps made up of only the most skilled ninja in the land.”

“So we’re like a formality, yeah?”

“Well, basically, yes,” Yuki said, nodding. “The roads are quite safe since the end of the Great War, so the team with the genin who distinguished themselves the most during the year is selected to guard the daimyo. In other words, this assignment is a great honor.”

Tenma and Shinko both turned toward Itachi. Feeling their gazes on him, he kept his eyes on the document and stayed quiet.

“We meet tomorrow morning at four. At the A-un main gates. Don’t be late.”

Tenma and Shinko both assented aloud. Itachi nodded, still silent.

“All right then. Adjourned!” Yuki vanished, almost before he was done speaking.

Only the three genin remained.

Tenma’s eyes were on Itachi. “Guess you’re the village pet.”

“You don’t gotta go wording it like that!” Shinko said.

“Tch!” Tenma spit at the ground. “Yer attitude is just the worst!”

The usual, unchanging day-to-day ...

How many years could he stay here like this? A sigh threatened to spill out of him. But, remembering that his teammates were still there with him, he swallowed it before it passed his lips. He stood with the force of the repressed sigh, and turned toward the other two.

“All right, see you tomorrow.” The words had no sooner passed his lips than he had disappeared.

“He always acts like he’s all that.” Tenma’s grumbling reached his ears like an echo.



“I know I say this every year, but Konoha is so faaar,” the old man said, sitting on a stump and staring at the teacup in his hand. A fan-shaped crown sat above his wrinkled face. A regular old man, simply fooling the world by clothing himself in gaudy finery.

The daimyo of the Land of Fire.

Behind the old man, a luxurious palanquin awaited its master’s return. Around him were two of the Twelve Guardian Ninja, and a dozen or so attendants. And Itachi’s Team Two, spread out in a loose circle.

A main road led from the capital of the Land of Fire to Konohagakure. They had already covered half the distance, and the village was just up ahead. Flat in and around the city, the road started to climb into the steepness of a mountain road. The new green of the woods hung over the heads of the party.

“It might be best if we hurry,” Yuki said, ever so timidly. “Otherwise, we won’t reach the village before nightfall.” Tenma and Shinko watched with exasperation at the jonin bowing his head to the point of servility, humble before even the Twelve Guardian Ninja.

“I know ...” The daimyo sighed and lifted his bulk up, the enormous fan-shaped crown on his head rocking. The two Twelve Guardian Ninja watching over him each took one of his arms.

“Master Minazuki,” Itachi said, staring at the road ahead, listening to the exchange between the daimyo and his men.

“What?” The instant Yuki let his eyes chase after Itachi’s gaze, his previous looseness vanished, and his face grew grim. At the change in their teammates, Tenma and Shinko stiffened as well.

“The daimyo,” Yuki said to the Twelve Guardian Ninja.

The two Twelve Guardian Ninja grabbed the old man from either side and lifted him into the palanquin. The four members of Team Two stepped out in front of the daimyo's party and spread out in a diamond formation, with Yuki at the tip.

The four stared at the man before them. He was approaching with a jaunty step, practically bouncing up off the ground. Nothing particularly suspicious about this. So then, why were all four of them uniformly on guard?

The reason was the man's face, which was hidden behind a bizarre mask. The surface was painted a burnt orange with horizontal black stripes at uneven intervals. A jet-black hollow around the right eye allowed the man to see. On his body, he wore a long black coat with an open collar that reached below the knee, loosely tied with a thick white bandage. His appearance was reminiscent of a clown. He was not a ninja.

But Itachi's instincts were telling him there was something ominous about this man. His nervous tension was communicated to his three teammates, setting them on edge as well.

"Hey, are we all right?" one of the Twelve Guardian Ninja asked from behind.

"We're just going to check this out," Yuki replied. "Please wait there."

The man moved lazily forward during this exchange, and then threw his right arm up into the air. "Umm, I have a question I'd like to ask, if you don't mind?" He sounded extremely drowsy.

Yuki unconsciously smiled broadly at the anticlimactic nature of the man's tone. "This road is closed today. How did you get onto it?"

"Oh, it is, then?" The man spread out both arms in an exaggerated fashion.

All eyes were on him.

The air shook.

Itachi felt a subtle disturbance in his chakra. "Master Minazuki!" he shouted, but he was too late.

Genjutsu.

Itachi immediately dropped down into a defensive posture, while before his

eyes, Yuki was frozen in place, standing rigidly straight. Through his skin, Itachi felt the people behind him freezing as well. The daimyo, his close aides, and the two Guardian Ninja had also been caught in the genjutsu.

“Oh ho, that there would be anyone who could dodge my genjutsu, hm?” In a flash, the voice of the buffoon of only moments ago was brimming with intelligence. The hole in the mask seized on Itachi. “And that there would be two ...”

Itachi caught his breath at the fact that he was not the only one to avoid being caught up in the genjutsu. And then he felt a chakra and aura racing up on him. Something was squirming beside him.

“What did you do?!” Tenma.

Before he knew it, his teammate was charging the man. As he ran, Tenma glanced at Itachi. “My specialty is genjutsu. You can’t get me with a technique like this!”

“A technique like this. Oh, well said,” the man murmured.

He’s laughing ... That’s how it looked to Itachi.

“Guy like this’ll just take a second, if we both go at him.”

“Tenma!” Itachi called out to stop him. “We need to look carefully and calmly at our—”

Tenma thrust a kunai into the throat of the muttering man.

“A ninja who cannot objectively assess a situation ...”

“Wh-what’s happening?” Tenma asked, sounding scared. And for good reason.

His arm had been sucked into the man’s throat and shot out the back of his head. At first glance, it looked like his fist had smashed through the man’s head, but the man didn’t look the slightest bit uncomfortable, and not a drop of blood was spilled. Tenma’s arm had passed right through the man’s body.

“... will die.”

“Heenyah!” Tenma uttered a sound so strange, it was hard to believe it came from a human being. His body flew up into the air. The fulcrum was the man’s

arm, which pierced Tenma's body.

This time, it was no illusion. As proof, fresh blood gushed from the boy's torso, flowing to the ground like a waterfall. Tenma convulsed in tiny seizures, but gradually grew quieter, until he finally stopped moving completely.

"Those who would rush forward, recklessly seeking distinction, die young. That is the reality of the world of the ninja." The man looked at Tenma's eyes, focused on an empty spot in the sky now. "But it's already too late to teach you that, hm?"

The man forcefully shook the arm that penetrated Tenma, and the corpse slid off and hit the ground.

"Of course, you did not fall, hm? And you did not foolishly charge like this child, but attempted instead to coolly assess both your power and mine. Wonderful, Uchiha Itachi."

"How do you know my name ..."

"I expect that I know everything about the Uchihis." The masked man's bouncing was replaced by a no-nonsense step as he moved toward Itachi. He walked very much like a ninja now. "My objective is that old man's life. If you sit and watch quietly, I will spare yours."

"I'm a ninja of Konoha—" He felt a pressure like he was being choked, but he desperately forced his throat open enough to spit out the words.

Like a frog under the watchful eye of a snake, his body wouldn't move the way he wanted it to. Perhaps because of the man's wordless pressure. Perhaps his instincts, sensing the difference between his own abilities and those of the man, refused to let him fight. Or perhaps all the blood in his body had collected in his head, as his brain frantically tried to analyze the inexplicable phenomenon that was the man's body.

Whatever it was, the fact remained that he could not move.

I can't come up with a clear solution to a situation I've been put in ...

This was the first time in his life anything like this had ever happened to him.

The masked man came up beside him. On his approach to the daimyo, it felt

like he stopped next to Itachi. “Could you say what you said before one more time?” The man cocked his head to one side.

“I am a ninja of Konoha,” Itachi said, hoarsely.

“Does that indicate the you wish to die?”

Die ... he thought vaguely.

“You can become a good ninja. There’s no need for you to rush to your death here. Still, if you say you wish to die, then I won’t try to stop you.”

Move, Itachi ordered his body.

“Ngh!” As the half-groan escaped him, Itachi managed to move just his right arm. He beat at the mask with his right hand, bereft of even a kunai.

Just like Tenma’s hand, his fist slipped through the face, and came flying out the back of the man’s head. He was sure the man was standing there before him, but no sensation of touch was communicated to his brain. The fear that he had already fallen prey to the man’s genjutsu grew in Itachi’s heart.

“I see. So you wish to die.” The man brought his arm toward Itachi, and swung it downward.

The palm stopped inches away from his face. The man looked up toward the sky, blotted out by the thick canopy above. “That chakra,” he murmured. “Hatake Kakashi ...”

The man turned his face back down toward Itachi. “A narrow escape for you, Uchiha Itachi.”

The mask’s shaking.

Itachi had no sooner had this thought than something incredible happened.

The man was sucked into the hole in the mask. Before Itachi’s eyes, the black body concentrated on a single point and was swallowed up by empty space, like the water in the bath after the plug is pulled out, until finally, even the hole in the mask disappeared.

As Itachi stood there dumbfounded, four figures dropped down from the sky above. They wore animal masks. Anbu, an elite group under the direct control of

the Hokage.

“Are you all right?!” The shortest of the four, a boy with gray hair in a fox mask, shook Itachi by the shoulders. “Hey! What happened?”

The other three Anbu were going around releasing the daimyo and the others from the genjutsu. As he awoke, the daimyo spotted Tenma’s body, and shrieked.

“Everyone but me was suddenly hit with a genjutsu, and it took a while to release them all. Sorry we’re late.”

Itachi stared vacantly at the fox-mask boy. “Hatake Kakashi ...”

“How do you know that name?” the boy asked.

Itachi instinctively knew that the boy in front of him was Kakashi.



Even with the warmth of the blanket wrapped around his body, he couldn’t stop shaking. The man’s attack felt like a memory of a distant day, but it had only happened a few hours earlier.

Given the urgent nature of the situation, the daimyo’s visit was postponed, and he returned that day to the Land of Fire. After hearing reports from the Anbu and Yuki, the Hokage and the other village officials decided to have Itachi report in a few days. He was sent home immediately after he returned to the village.

But he didn’t feel like doing anything. He couldn’t muster an interest in even eating supper; he just lay there under his blankets, despite the fact that it was still early evening. Even Sasuke was awake. Itachi wrapped himself alone in his blankets, and endured the incessant shaking.

In his heart was a disappointment with himself.

Tenma died. Right in front of him. He was the only one who could have saved Tenma.

And yet ...

He hadn’t been able to do anything.

“Is Itachi all right?” He heard his father’s voice from the other side of the sliding doors as he arrived home.

“He left his dinner. He’s still lying down in his room.” His mother’s voice.

“He’s a ninja now. Teammates sometimes die in front of you.”

“But he’s still only eight. He should really still be playing at the academy with his friends.”

“A testament to his talents. It’s precisely because he attracted the attention of people in the village that he got assigned the mission of guarding the daimyo. And precisely because it was an important mission, it carried an element of danger. Living through the carnage time and time again is how a ninja grows up.”

His father’s words pushed through the warmth of the blankets, and pierced Itachi’s heart.

Still green ...

He was lacking. He was lacking, and so his teammate died. His father was saying all this because he was not good enough yet.

He wanted more power. Enough power to defeat that man.

“Can’t you get him into the Military Police, and have him working under you?”

“He won’t be joining the Military Police.” His father’s words dug into his heart. “I’m thinking about his future here. He needs to keep working hard as a genin right now.”

“But he’s just—”

“It’s fine. I’m sure he’ll get over it.”

Itachi clutched the blankets even more tightly, as if he could use them to escape the sound of his father’s voice.

“Nnngh!” Emotions he couldn’t suppress became a groan of anguish, and forced their way out of him. His body shivered and shook.

He wasn’t shaking because he was afraid. Anger at his own useless self rocked his body. A sense of helplessness, defeat, emptiness, disappointment. He shook

with these waves of emotion, turned inward to race through his body.

He wanted power. He didn't have enough power to protect his teammates. Nor enough to put his father's mind at ease.

More, more ...

He would go beyond even that masked man. No, he would have the power to go beyond anyone and everyone in this world. And then, he would grab onto the root of all fighting with his own hands.

He felt something hot beneath his tightly closed eyelids. Not tears. Something hotter than that.

Throb.

He felt a pounding at the nape of his neck, and then something hot like fire shot through his body and concentrated around the pounding, before pouring into his eyes.

Itachi finally realized that the source of this blazing power was chakra.

Those born into the Uchiha clan were cloaked in a chakra with fire attributes. But he had never before in his life experienced this kind of heat from his chakra. Still, he managed to coolly assess what was occurring within his own body.

Eyes still closed, he pushed the blankets off and sat up in his futon, before gradually opening his eyes.

Awakening ...

The world was colored red. Everything was different from the scene of only moments ago. On the other side of the sliding doors, three flames of different sizes flickered. The lives of his father, mother, and Sasuke.

He focused his attention on the flames. The sliding door faded and he could clearly see into the neighboring room. Three people lived in this red world. If he squinted and concentrated, he felt like he would even be able to see their hearts beating.

I'm dizzy ...

He was wasting chakra. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he

slowly lifted his lids again, the world had returned to normal.

“The sharingan ...”

He remembered the masked man. Itachi had seen an eye on the other side of that small hole in the bizarre mask and clearly remembered three magatama floating in that red iris.

“You won’t beat me next time,” Itachi murmured, as red colored his eyes once more.

4

The man had been waving his kunai up at the sky for a while, before Itachi finally placed a gentle hand on his back.

“You done yet?”

The man’s shoulders shot up, as though Itachi’s voice had awakened him from a dream, and he whirled around.

“The thing you’ve been trying so desperately to cut in half is my genjutsu.”

“Wh-what ...”

“Do you want to have the dream again?” Both of Itachi’s eyes were a deep red.

“Ee! Eee!” The man dropped his kunai and cowered the moment he saw the sharingan. “H-have mercy!” he begged, tears streaming down his face.

Itachi’s eyes turned black again.

“Itachi!” a voice called from behind. Yuki. Two ninja trailed along behind him. The new additions to Team Two.

Tenma’s death forced Shinko to confront the reality of the callous nature of the world of the ninja, breaking her spirit. So she resigned as a ninja, and now worked in a tea shop in the village.

The new ninja had both graduated from the academy that year. They had been ahead of Itachi at school, but as a ninja, Itachi had a year’s seniority on them.

“Did you catch him?”

“Mm.” Itachi turned his gaze back to the man quailing on the ground.

Yuki came over to stand in front of the man, the two new recruits behind him looking relieved. “You can’t sneak into the village and misrepresent your history just because you want to be a ninja, you know. That’s not how people become ninja.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“By the way, this kid’s only nine. We got kids like this all over the place; that’s the world of the ninja.”

The man opened his eyes wide in surprise.

A resident of the Land of Fire had slipped into the village, with the intention of becoming a ninja. They were to secure the man, and put the fear of the ninja in him. That was their current mission. Of course, it was the lowest mission rank, a D. But it was the right level for the two newcomers, so that was how it had to be. Naturally, however, Itachi couldn’t get completely on board with this.

It had been just over three months since they started doing nothing but D-rank missions, and Itachi felt a growing sense of urgency. Did he really have the time to be doing this sort of thing? He had the absurd thought that he was actually training himself to master the sharingan through these sorts of missions.

“Way to go, Master Itachi! As always!” the new girl called out, cheerfully. Even though she was four years older than he was, she called him “Master.”

Her name was Himuka. She had a face that didn’t make much of an impression.

The other newcomer was a boy. It had been three months since he joined Team Two, but Itachi had never once seen him talk. His name was Yoji, and he was from the Aburame clan, but so far, Itachi hadn’t seen him use insects.

“All right, let’s head back to the village.” Yuki’s bright voice made Itachi’s heart that much heavier.



“Hah!” Expelling a breath full of ambition, Shisui looked at Itachi and smiled. “Yeah, training with you forces me to really put my back into it.”

Itachi looked at his cheerful friend and felt refreshed in both mind and body, as he stood there drenched in sweat.

They had been sparring seriously for three hours or so, as a way for Itachi to vent his anger with his assignments. They had already gone fifteen rounds, with breaks of about three minutes after each one, resulting in six wins for Itachi and nine for Shisui.

The only rule was no sharingan; everything else was fair game. Sharingan was off limits because the visual technique used up a large amount of chakra, and they wanted to spar for as long as possible.

The shuriken they flung at each other clashed in the air, and flew off in some unexpected direction. Neither Itachi nor Shisui watched to see where they went. They were already leaping at each other, and closing the distance between themselves.

“Chi!”

“Hah!”

Their fighting cries blended together.

Their bodies collided in midair, tangled together, and crashed to the ground.

Shisui got to his feet and in position first, and launched a kick at Itachi, who was propped up on one knee. Itachi immediately thrust his right arm out to block it. His field of view shaking with the impact of the kick, he saw his friend quickly weaving signs.

“Fire Style! Great Fireball Technique!” Shisui shouted, and an enormous ball of flames shot out of his mouth.

Itachi stared at the flames streaking toward him, a smile pulling up his lips at the corners.

Just like Shisui ...

Itachi was thrilled. He gloated to himself that even among the people of their clan, only his father and Shisui could release a fireball this massive.

Shisui wouldn't be able to manage a counterattack in time. His defense was slow, too. Direct hit.

“No way!” Shisui cried out at the unexpected result.

The giant ball of flames ripped Itachi into countless pieces, which transformed into a myriad of crows that attacked all at once.

Substitution.

The real Itachi was running around behind Shisui.

Before Shisui could sense his aura and whirl around, the smaller boy had a kunai at his throat.

“So you win, huh,” Shisui said, regretfully.

In the end, they sparred thirty-five times. The result was eleven wins for Itachi, and twenty-four for Shisui.

“You’re beyond genin level already.” Shisui took a swig of water from his canteen. “Your chunin exam being put off again this year?”

“Yeah,” Itachi replied, before tilting his own canteen back to pour cool water into his mouth.

“You said your supervisor jonin was Minazuki Yuki or something, right?”

Itachi nodded silently.

“Is he maybe jealous of you? Maybe he’s not into what a genius you are, so he’s putting off recommending you for the chunin exams?”

“There’s nothing I can do, even if that is what’s going on with him.” There was no point in thinking about Yuki’s thought process in not recommending Itachi. He wouldn’t get to take the chunin exam again this year. That was a fact.

“But I mean, you’re already so—”

“Let’s just forget about it.” If they talked about it anymore, all that would happen would be that his regret would just grow stronger.

“That reminds me, what happened to that girl Uchiha Izumi?” Shisui awkwardly changed the topic, and Itachi turned wide eyes on him. “It’s usually hard to figure out what you’re thinking, but I guess this at least, is pretty easy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Go take a look in a mirror,” Shisui said, a playful smile spreading across his face.

Itachi averted his eyes. “I don’t have an opinion on her either way.”

“And yet, the minute I said the name ‘Izumi,’ you looked like you had a pretty strong opinion.”

Strong opinion ...

Did he? There was no doubt that Izumi was one of the few friends he had. But he also felt like that's all she was. But then, when pressed by Shisui like this, he felt like maybe she was different. Still, that said, whatever his feelings for her were, they didn't seem romantic.

In short, he didn't really know either.

"Anyway, how's your father?"

"Don't change the subject," Shisui said with a grin, before his bright expression clouded over the slightest bit. "Same as always."

His father had lost a leg in the last Great War, and fallen ill because of that injury; he was currently bedridden. Shisui lived alone with his mother and father, and was the family breadwinner.

"He's gotten a lot weaker lately. He's even stopped recognizing me."

"Really ..."

"Well, everybody dies someday. I'm ready for it."

Faced with Shisui's sad resolve, Itachi didn't know how to respond.



"I saw the lineup for this year's chunin exams," Danzo started abruptly, in front of Hiruzen, seated in the Hokage's chair. "It seems that Uchiha Itachi is not on the list once more."

Hiruzen lifted his eyes from the papers on his desk to look at Danzo curiously. "Now that you mention it, you went out of your way to speak to Itachi when he graduated, didn't you?"

"I felt I should lay eyes on the face of the academy's top graduate of all time."

"I had no idea you were so fixated on the members of the Uchiha clan."

"It is a loss for the village to make someone with such a promising future waste several years."

Hiruzen frowned. "But he can't take the exams without the recommendation of his supervising jonin."

"Itachi's supervising jonin, Minazuki Yuki, is below average among the jonin."

The corners of Danzo's mouth abruptly shot up. "He's likely jealous of Itachi's abilities."

"Yuki's not that sort of—"

"He *is* that sort of man," Danzo asserted, as if to beat back Hiruzen's opinion. "Perhaps you are unaware, but that man has already sent several genin more talented than himself back to the academy. He can't do that this time, because Itachi so obviously excels. The boy's name is known throughout the village."

"That's ridiculous."

"He normally doesn't show it, but deep down, Minazuki has a dark nature."

A member of The Foundation had investigated him. The Foundation, the Anbu training division under Danzo's direct control, had a vast information network within the village. The thinking, the philosophies of every ninja in the village, what kind of tendencies they had—The Foundation looked into everything very diligently. All for the security of the village.

If the Uchiha clan's Konoha Military Police Force was a police organization to maintain public order on the village's surface, then The Foundation was something like a secret police force that maintained public order from underground. Inheriting an undiluted version of Danzo's ideal of protecting the peace with darkness, The Foundation leaned even more strongly in that direction than the Anbu, which was under the Hokage's control. In other words, the Military Police Force and The Foundation were two sides of the same coin.

Heaving a great sigh, Hiruzen slowly opened his mouth. "If Yuki won't recommend him, then we can simply promote Itachi to chunin through an official decision."

"It's better for the village to have him take the exams."

"Hm?" Hiruzen brought his pipe to his lips.

"The chunin exams is a place where the officials from all the countries come together in the same room," Danzo continued. "Which is to say, it's an opportunity to display the future fighting potential of each land. If we demonstrate Itachi's abilities there, it will enhance the threat our village poses to other countries."

“Itachi is indeed a gifted ninja, but does he really have that kind of ability?” Hiruzen had only seen the surface evaluations of the mission results, which is why he could ask such a question.

“How could he demonstrate his true abilities on missions where he is forced to go along with a supervisor and teammates who are so clearly inferior to him? Keeping Itachi buried out in the fields any further will be a loss to the village, such that we may never recover.”

“I’m surprised you value the Uchiha clan so highly.”

“The boy Itachi has precisely such value.”

Hiruzen had no idea of Danzo’s true intentions. He might have at least been aware that Danzo had ulterior motives, but even the astute Hiruzen would not realize just what those motives might have been.

Uchiha Itachi. Danzo believed the boy was the very person to fulfill his own dearest wish.

Konoha and Uchiha. A trump card, to sever the link that had continued since the establishment of the village.

That was Itachi.

How could he get him under his control?

That was the issue.



“I’m home.”

“Itachiiii! You’re home!” Small hands hugged Itachi’s back as he took his shoes off. “Is your mission today over?”

“Uh huh.” Standing the hallway, he patted his four-year-old brother’s head.

“You tired?” Now able to speak properly, Sasuke seemed overwhelmed by his desire to talk to Itachi. The smaller boy took great, swinging steps and followed him, as he walked down the hallway to the room they shared.

“From the minute you leave the house, Sasuke’s waiting for his big brother to come home, you know,” his mother had told him, and he had been embarrassed

but also delighted, and somehow self-conscious.

“I wanna go on missions too!”

“Still too early for you,” Itachi said, laughing as he walked.

The sliding door before him was open. His father’s room.

“You’re home?”

“Yes.”

His father came out with a sour look on his face, and stood in front of Itachi.

“Lord Hokage called me in today to talk about you.”

“About me?”

“On the recommendation of village officials, he wants you to take the chunin exams next year. The other examinees will be working in groups. Naturally, this will put you in a difficult situation. But ...” His father closed his eyes and lowered his face for a moment, before lifting it again to look straight at Itachi. “I told Lord Hokage that you would take part.”

“Th-thank you ...”

For so long now, he had endured a disappointment he couldn’t completely push aside, no matter how he tried to make himself accept the situation. But those days were finally coming to an end. He had wondered how many more years he would have to continue as a genin on that team. He could see the shroud of heavy clouds over his heart clearing away.

“The village officials recommended you directly, instead of your supervising jonin. So make sure you do it right.”

“I will.”

“Hey, Daddy, what’s happening with Ita?” Wanting to be a part of the conversation, Sasuke wedged himself between them, and looked up at their father.

“You hurry, and be a brave ninja like your brother, too,” Fugaku said, reaching down to lift his younger son up into his arms. Sasuke’s smile wavered.

“All right!”

“Good boy.” Sasuke’s innocent grin brought a smile to their father’s face, as well. “Apparently, it was Shimura Danzo who pushed hard for you to take the chunin exams.”

Shimura Danzo ... Itachi recalled the shadowed face he had seen on the day of his graduation.

“What do you think of the Anbu?” Itachi asked. In his father’s voice was a darkness, out of place with his sunny grin.

“Boys!” His mother’s voice came from the opposite end of the hall. “It’s almost supertime!”

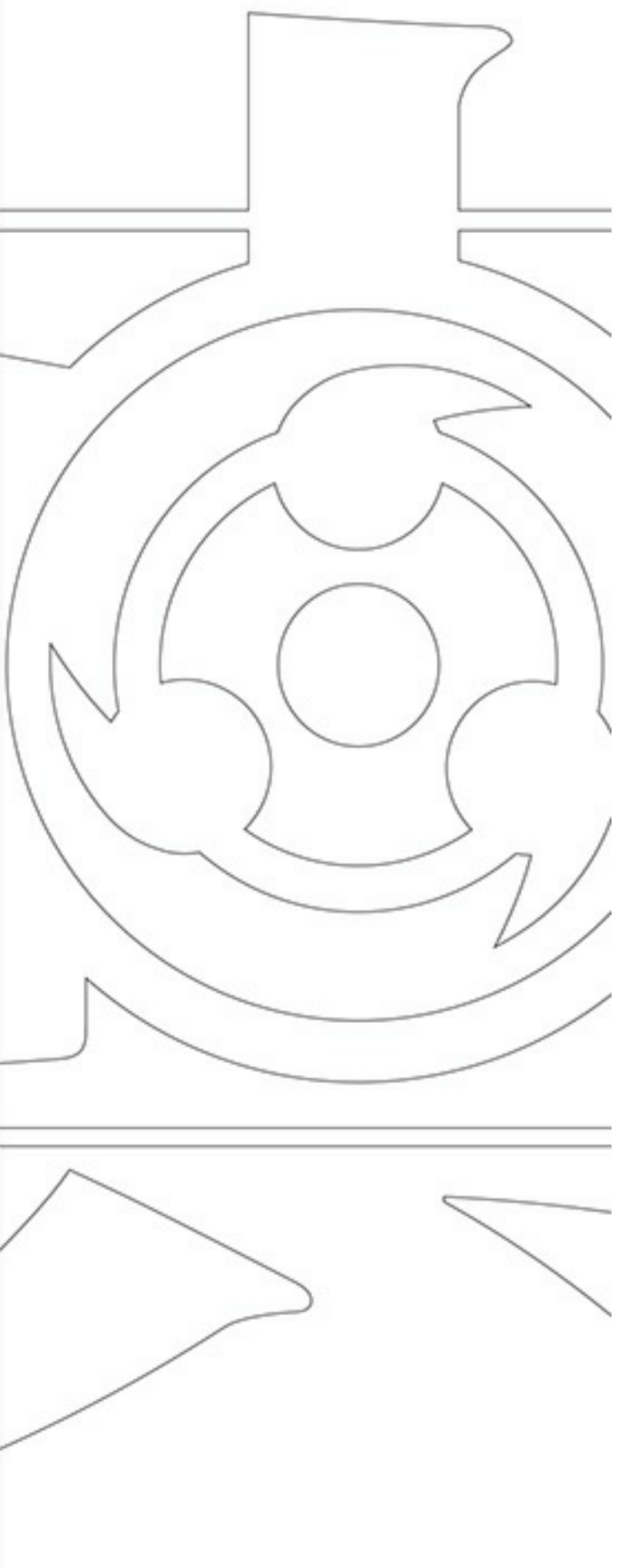
“First, the chunin exams. As long as you show off your true abilities, you’ll get through them without any problem. We’ll talk after that.”

Anbu.

Talk after that.

His father, still holding his little brother, disappeared toward the dining room where his mother was waiting, leaving his ominous words hanging in the air.

Itachi saw light and darkness on the path that stretched out into the future. Left alone in the hall, the vividness of both dazzled Itachi, toyed with his heart.



Jet-black bird,

shuddering at the lamentations of its

3 brethren withing in the moonlit night

CHAPTER 3

*Jet-black bird, shuddering at
the lamentations of its brethren
writhing in the moonlit night*

1

For Itachi, the written exam was easy. He had seen when it started that the point of the first exam was to make use of ninja techniques, and cheat without getting caught by the examiner.

He had confidence in the strength of his memory. Ever since he was little, he had read a lot of books in between bouts of training, to develop his ninja techniques. That habit didn't change when he started at the academy, or after he became a genin. So Itachi had all kinds of knowledge tucked away in his brain: The history of the ninja continuing from the Sage of Six Paths. Alliances, treaties, laws of uniformity among the different lands. Fundamentals, advanced techniques, practical strategies in fighting. Theory on physical ninja arts, kekkei genkai. Introduction to chakra. Tailed beast, ninja beasts. Overview of sage barriers and natural energy fundamentals. And many other documents, books, theses.

Thus, there was no need for him to cheat.

A balance between brain and brawn. This was the most important element of Itachi's ideal ninja.

When there was first a clear mind, superior physical abilities could be amply shown off. But no matter how skilled in the ninja arts the body was, if a ninja was unable to make appropriate decisions, failure was almost inevitable. And in the world of the ninja, failure was directly linked to death.

The face of Tenma, killed by the masked man, came to life in the back of Itachi's mind. He slid his pencil across the page as if to banish the terrifying vision. His answer sheet was already ninety percent filled in.

After finishing his own test, Itachi observed the other examinees as one after another was ordered to leave, suspected of cheating. Who was cheating in what way?

His face remaining expressionless, he sent his chakra out in all four directions.

Some were slipping into the minds of their targets; others, watching the movements of hands. Still others traced out the answers from the sound of pencil rubbing against paper. They were all cheating with the technique they were best at. Itachi coolly picked out who was using what type of technique.

Everyone there was his rival. If he could study their skills, he would be able to choose the most advantageous circumstances when they fought.

Everyone else was in three-person groups. Itachi was alone. He had no teammates. It was quite plausible that in one of the tests before him, he would end up in a three-against-one situation. Obtaining information now on his enemies was also an important fight for him, in order to turn the tables in an unfavorable situation.

“Time!” the examiner for the first test called out.

“Put your pencils down. Everyone still here, go to the second exam. The results of the first exam will be announced once the second exam is complete.”

“Question!” One of the test takers raised a hand. The supervisor nodded permission to speak. “Does that mean that even if we pass the second exam, we won’t be able to proceed to the third exam, depending on our score on the first exam?”

“That is what it means, yes.”

The examinees all started to talk at once.

“Quiet!” the examiner roared. “You are on the road to become chunin. And once you are chunin, you will be in the position of leading a team. Not all missions yield immediate results. There will sometimes be cases where you will turn all your mental energies toward the job at hand, while you are waiting on another result. During this exam, you should have expended every effort. In which case, trust in your own abilities, and fight in the second exam with all your might.” The rousing cry of the jonin left the test takers speechless. “Now, off you go to the second exam.”

Itachi stood up, the words of the examiner in his ears.



“Not like you can surround all three of us,” the boy said with a grin.

Itachi dropped his eyes to the scroll in his hand.

Those who would become chunin were scattered about the area known as the forty-fourth training ground, nicknamed “Forest of Death.” The scroll in his hands had the character for “heaven” written on it in bold, black calligraphy.

“Taking the chunin exam by yourself is suicide,” a different boy shouted down to him from behind.

And then the laughter of a girl came, ear-splittingly high-pitched.

The three ninja were spread out in a triangle formation around Itachi. On their foreheads, they wore the protectors of the village of Kirigakure.

Itachi looked at the boy standing in front of him, the most assertive of the group, maybe fifteen or sixteen. He seemed to be the leader.

“If you hand over the scroll like a good boy, we won’t kill you. But if you’re gonna fight back, then I can’t promise anything.” The boy had the scroll that paired with the one in Itachi’s hand. It would have “earth” written on it.

The aim of the second exam was to reach the tower in the center of the training ground, with both Heaven and Earth scrolls in hand. In small squads of three-person cells, the examinees were given either a Heaven or an Earth scroll, and sent scattering throughout the training ground. There, they were to take the complementary scroll from its owner, wherever they might be in the field. After getting both scrolls, they had to make it through the Forest of Death, with its man-eating beasts, poisonous insects, and all kinds of dangerous creatures, to reach the tower standing in the center.

The time limit was five days. In other words, the examination required exactly that much time.

On the first day, Itachi was suddenly attacked by the enemy, the Kirigakure ninja before him.

Rather than making the foolish move of searching for the matching scroll, Itachi was heading straight for the tower. Just like he wanted the Earth scroll, his opponents wanted the Heaven scroll. If he moved toward the tower, his opponent would certainly come to him. It was just as he planned.

The Kirigakure ninja had already confirmed that Itachi held the Heaven scroll—he had deliberately held the scroll open as he walked toward the tower for that purpose. These three were the ones who had fallen into Itachi’s trap.

“So, three against one. Be good, and—”

“There’s an item in the examinee qualifications for this test,” Itachi cut off the boy in front of him, “that you have to participate in a three-person cell. So why am I here alone like this?”

“Maybe your teammates ditched you,” the girl called out from the left, like she was making fun of him. The boy in the back laughed.

Turning his head the slightest bit towards the girl, Itachi noted, “The other two are waiting in ambush. Can’t you anticipate that much, at least?”

Careless smile still on her lips, the girl’s face grew pale.

“Relax. I was alone right from the start,” Itachi said, and turned his gaze back to the leader. “The only conclusion you can come to from this three-against-one situation is that it’s to your advantage. As a leader and as a chunin, you’re a failure.”

“Y-you watch your mou—”

“You’re even using my childish appearance as fuel for your carelessness.”

“Hey, Kiruru, let’s just finish him already,” the boy in the rear called, sounding uneasy.

The leader, Kiruru, swallowed with a gulp the saliva building up in his mouth, sweat running down his forehead.

“Why doesn’t it make you uncomfortable that I’m here alone? Why don’t you consider the possibility that I was allowed to take the test alone? Don’t you think there’s some meaning behind the fact that I’m taking the test alone, when the basis for the test is the three-person cell?”

“Kiruru!” This time, it was the girl.

The opposing team was starting to lose themselves in an unfathomable fear.

“G-get him!” Kiruru half-shrieked, half-shouted, and shuriken were launched at

Itachi from three different directions.

In the next instant, the leader before Itachi, and the boy to his rear, both started running. The girl leapt up, aiming for the top of his head. He was caught in an attack from both sides, and if he fled upward, the girl would catch him.

Physical Fundamentals for the Three-Person Cell, Chapter 1, Paragraph 3. Such a childish strategy.

Itachi didn't move.

The shuriken dug into Itachi. Countless shuriken stabbed every part of his body.

Without pausing, the two boys racing at him from in front and behind tried to catch him in a pincer attack, and drove kunai into his belly and his back.

Blood jetted out of Itachi's mouth. The two boys didn't have the luxury of watching this; as they yanked their kunai out, they took a half step back. Immediately, the girl landed on Itachi's shoulders, and plunged a dagger through the crown of his head.

"Got him!" she cried out, happily.

Itachi burst open.

Each and every one of the black fragments scattering in all directions transformed into crows. In a cacophony of caws, they started to peck at the heads of the three ninja.

Itachi watched for a while from the top of a remarkably tall tree nearby, observing the silly way his enemies were being taken down, all three frantically trying to beat the crows back, while covering their faces with their arms. Eventually, he dropped down in front of them.

"Release!" The crows disappeared at his cry.

Not understanding what was happening, the three ninja stood dumbfounded, their eyes finding Itachi all at once.

"Be good and hand over the scroll." Itachi held out his hand toward the leader. "If you do, I'll let you go."

“D-don’t underestimate us.” Kiruru dropped his hips and began weaving signs. The boy and girl to his left and right also wove the same signs. “Got it?”

“Right,” his teammates responded.

“Water Style!” Kiruru shouted, and that’s as far as they got.

The wall of flames that abruptly materialized before them scared the three senseless, to the point where they actually forgot to activate their own techniques.

At a speed three times that at which the three were weaving signs, Itachi had activated the Fire Style: Great Fireball Technique. He used chakra that he had been building up the whole time, during the first exam, and from the start of the second exam. The field of view of the opposing team should have been swallowed up by flames in an instant. He had released these flames with such control, that they were at a distance that was just barely not a direct attack on the three. The flames were meant only to be threatening.

This was a test. There was no need to kill or injure anyone. All he needed was for his opponents to lose heart.

The flames danced up to the heavens, and disappeared.

Legs trembling, almost giving out from under them from fear, the three still managed to stay on their feet somehow. A thin veil of tears welled up in the eyes that stared at Itachi.

“If you still want to go, I don’t mind.” Itachi closed the distance between them. “But if you do, then this time, I’ll be forced to pull out my trump card.”

What?” Kiruru asked, looking about ready to burst into tears.

Itachi stared at him and focused his chakra in his eyes. His field of view was colored red, and the waves of chakra flowing through the bodies of the three before him began to hazily come into view.

“Sh-sharingan,” the boy next to Kiruru muttered.

The threatened tears began to spill from the eyes of the stouthearted Kiruru.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever seen eyes like this before, but if you’re ninja, you should know what they are,” Itachi said.

The girl moved her pointed jaw up and down several times. All three of them were completely ruled by the fear of death.

“Your techniques don’t work on me.”

“H-have mercyyyyy!” Kiruru pressed his forehead to the ground, and then reached a trembling hand into his bag, and dug around for something. Itachi stared at him for a moment, until the boy thrust the Earth scroll at him.

Itachi took the scroll. “As long as you all understand.” He sent a little chakra down his legs. Flicker feet. He quickly went around behind Kiruru, and brought the edge of his flat hand down on his neck. “I can’t have you attacking me from behind. Take a little nap here.”

Kiruru collapsed on the ground as if prostrating himself, and Itachi moved swiftly around behind the girl and the boy, to deliver similar blows to each of them.

The two Heaven and Earth scrolls were together. Now he just had to head for the tower in the center of the training ground.



“Time elapsed in the second exam: five hours, thirty-seven minutes. This is a new record for the exam held in the Forty-Fourth Training Ground. Taking also into consideration the fact that the exam is based on three-person cells, this record is astounding.”

As he listened to the weirdly hard voice of the Anbu in the white tiger mask, Danzo smiled faintly. “That’s what happens when you graduate from the academy in a single year. Nothing strange at all about that boy managing this.” He stood up, the white tiger mask nodding in the corner of his vision. “It’s about time for the third exam to start. We should be on our way.”

“With regard to that, I have a single report.” The man stopped Danzo as he was about to step forward.

“What?”

“The genin of our village who were to be his opponents in the first round defaulted.”

“Afraid of Itachi’s power?”

“Naturally.”

Danzo tossed his head back toward the ceiling and laughed loudly. The white tiger stayed silent, waiting for his master’s words. “I’ve thought any number of times how much better it would be if he wasn’t Uchiha. But I’ve never felt it so keenly as now.”

“The Uchihis have their own utility.”

“I don’t need someone like you to tell me that,” Danzo replied, and started walking. “Who is his opponent in the second round?”

“If the first battle is chosen properly, it will be a Kumogakure genin who advances. Nemui.”

“‘Sleepy?’ What a ridiculous name.”

“The boy is known as Shunmino Nemui. Among the young ones of Kumogakure, he is a quite popular ninja.”

“A ninja with a pseudonym is second rate.” Danzo snorted with laughter. “A true ninja does not need a pseudonym.”

The man walking alongside him nodded.

“How will the pseudonym-free Uchiha Itachi cook up this genin with the foolish name of Sleepy Hibernation whoever? I am indeed looking forward to it.” Surprised at himself for sounding more excited than he had in a number of years, Danzo composed himself as he walked toward the competition ground.



“To repeat, there are absolutely no rules. The contest continues until one side admits defeat. However, when I judge that continuation is impossible, the match will stop there. You both understand?”

The half-asleep face before him listened silently to the announcement of the high-handed supervising examiner. He had yawned any number of times now, to the point where Itachi wondered if he might actually fall asleep on the spot.

The boy’s name was Nemui, which meant “sleepy.” Apparently, he was a ninja from Kumogakure.

“Maybe we should have them push our turn back, so you can get a proper sleep?” Itachi asked, gently.

Nemui looked at Itachi, his eyelids hanging halfway over his perfectly round eyes, exhaustion playing at the corners of his mouth. “No need to worry,” he said, smiling, but even his smile looked sleepy.

A curving wall swept in and around the circular grounds, while the ceiling was rounded and open. The ground was covered in dirt, and trees grew here and there. Scaffolding stretched out horizontally, protruding from the top of the wall, where a large number of spectators watched the matches on which the futures of the genin depended: daimyo and people from the ruling classes in all lands, officials from the villages in the ninja world, chunin, jonin. Among them were even the faces of black marketeers who had disguised themselves, and snuck in.

Which village would stand with the responsibility for the future of the ninja world on its shoulders? Everyone held their breath as they watched over the battles of the young ninja.

This place, where capable genin from every village risked their lives in battle, was a microcosm of the battlefield. Not infrequently, the fights here were directly connected with the power structures among the villages several years later.

Which was exactly why Itachi had to show off his true power.

Konohagakure has Uchiha Itachi ...

He had to demonstrate such overwhelming strength that the adults gathered there wouldn't so much as think of laying a hand on Konoha. That would be his first step toward a world without fighting.

He had absolutely no intention of going easy on anyone. He was going to give this everything he had.

“Second round, third exam. Konohagakure ninja Uchiha Itachi against Kumogakure ninja Shunmino Nemui. Start!” the supervisor shouted.

“Haaaah.” Nemui opened his mouth in a great yawn as the start signal was given. There was a smattering of whispered laughter in the venue.

Itachi got into position. He leaned forward slightly and braced his feet. He had no weapons in either hand. He relaxed his entire body and set his awareness adrift, not concentrating on any particular spot. He was ready to react immediately, no matter what his opponent did.

“I’m so sleepy.” Nemui stood up straight, arms dangling loosely at his sides, looking as though he was not in any kind of ready position, and then started to wobble from side to side.

“Maybe you should just go to sleep.” Before Itachi’s response had even reached his ears, Nemui’s eyes were closed. His stiff body pitched forward, like a stick falling to the earth.

Immediately before he slammed into the ground, the other boy disappeared from his field of view. Itachi took a sharp breath. He hadn’t felt a hint of movement in Nemui. His action was too sudden. He hadn’t seemed to be shifting his weight to either side.

He had been slow to anticipate his opponent’s movement. In that momentary opening, Nemui had gotten the jump on Itachi.

He heard a snore from behind.

Thunder ...

Itachi immediately tumbled forward in a basic somersault, and the right arm brandished by the sleeping Nemui grazed the front of his face. The arm pushed past him with incredible force, white electricity turning into countless bolts of lightning, enveloping the arm.

So is that the true form of lightning, Itachi wondered absently as he landed, getting some distance from his opponent.

As before, Nemui remained asleep.

Standing up.

Was it an act? Or was he really sleeping? The only way to find out was to just attack him directly.

Itachi pulled a kunai from his breast pocket and threw it. The blade flew in a straight line toward the face of the sleeping Nemui.

His body, rocking from side to side, shook violently, and just barely evaded the kunai.

Was he awake?

At any rate, the other boy's eyes were closed, so Itachi couldn't use the sharingan.

Nemui stood upright, still sleeping, as though the attack of the previous moment hadn't happened. Just when Itachi noticed him swaying violently once more, Nemui disappeared from his field of view again.

Faster than the eye could follow, Itachi danced up into the sky.

Nemui's lightning-covered arm swept through the spot where Itachi had been standing.

Itachi landed near the wall to put some space between them, and caught his enemy in his field of view. His thoughts were racing at a dizzying speed, trying somehow to analyze the phenomenon happening before his eyes.

He couldn't use the sharingan, and all the chakra that consumed. In the formula for an overwhelming victory, the sharingan was essential. He needed to keep it aside until that time came.

But he was confident he could unravel the phenomenon before him, using the decade of experience he had already. He didn't need to rely on the power of the sharingan.

Think ...

He stared at Nemui, wobbling off in the distance.

He had to assume that his enemy was using a type of technique that brought out the full potential of his physical abilities through the selfless state of mind that was sleep. By sleeping, he kept the ego in check, and he could carry out specialized movement through pure instinct and animal intuition alone.

His opponent's somnolence had surprised him, so he had lost sight of the fact that this fight was basically about physical abilities. If he simply concentrated on his physical abilities, he could easily stand in the same arena as this boy. He focused all his attention on the enemy before his eyes.

Wobbly Nemui twitched. He was coming.

Vision, hearing, scent, all his senses. He felt Nemui with everything he had. He caught his aura tracing the wall to his right.

Lightning.

He dodged.

It's all right ...

So Itachi was better physically superior, after all. Once he knew that, it was possible to deal with this. With flowing movements, he evaded the attacks launched from Nemui's selfless dream state.

He had a flash of insight: Why did his enemy specialize in a technique that relies on sleeping?

He imagined what his enemy thought about while he was asleep. If he was sealing away his self to increase his physical abilities, then there was a real possibility that he lost his memory, as well. If that were true, then Nemui didn't remember the self who fought.

If I can wake him up, I can win ...

Why did Nemui need a technique like that?

Because he was a coward. He was totally terrified of hurting anyone, of being hurt. So he escaped into sleep. If Nemui was a coward, then he would be afraid of the endless sleep, the one no one woke from.

You had to have your eyes open in order to carefully examine a situation.

That moment would clinch his victory.

The back and forth of Nemui attacking and Itachi dodging gracefully lasted about ten minutes. Just when people in the arena were starting to fuss about the lack of any real developments, it happened.

Nemui stopped abruptly, shook faintly, and lifted his closed eyelids the tiniest bit. Their eyes met.

This was the moment Itachi had been waiting for. He poured his chakra into his eyes.

Sharingan. It took less than a hundredth of a second to activate. Itachi was betting on that moment. He hammered into Nemui's pupils the detailed image he had drawn in his mind while dodging attacks.

"Eee!" Nemui shrieked. Awake for a mere instant, he fell asleep once more.

I did it ...

He slipped around from the rear, and slit Nemui's throat with his kunai.

The image Itachi had imagined so faithfully, down to the very last detail, became reality, replaying in his enemy's mind. Nemui died, his throat slashed. But he was aware that he was still alive, and he opened his eyes again. But he couldn't sleep as soundly anymore.

Itachi dodged Nemui's attacks for a few minutes, but then his opponent's eyelids fluttered once more. In an instant, his field of view was dyed red.

This time, the image was of Itachi gouging into his stomach.

Repeat.

Each time he was killed, Nemui's sleep grew lighter. Stabbed, strangled, beaten, poisoned; Itachi killed the boy any and every way possible.

Finally, Nemui couldn't sleep at all. If he closed his eyes, Itachi would kill him. After being subjected to brutal deaths over and over and over, he was now completely ruled by his fear of the final sleep.

"Eee ... Eee ... Eee ..." Chest heaving, almost hyperventilating, Nemui trembled and shook.

The spectators had no idea what was happening. At best, only a few people there had realized Itachi was using the sharingan.

Itachi continued to evade his attacks, while Nemui's movements gradually grew sluggish. Sweat streamed down Nemui's face; he started to cry. Itachi hadn't once used a physical attack on him.

"H-help me," Nemui groaned in supplication. He fell to his knees and began weeping loudly. "I-I don't want to die anymore! Please, help me ... Please."

"We have a winner!" The examiner stepped in between the two of them.

The arena fell silent. Everyone seemed to be confused by the incomprehensible situation.

Nemui wailed and wept, half-mad, right up until he disappeared, carried out in the examiner's arms. "I don't want to die," he cried over and over, the terror in his voice reaching into every nook and cranny of the arena, sending shivers up spines.

He would probably give up on being a ninja. That was the level of fear Itachi had put into him.

Ninja were the main cause of fighting in this world. One fewer ninja meant that much less fighting. Itachi hadn't been wrong to break Nemui's spirit so utterly and horribly.

The venue felt the same. Itachi had, all by himself, produced the aura of death that wafted through the entire arena. He had demonstrated an incomprehensible power, and the ninja from all lands now knew his unfathomable strength.

We mustn't make an enemy of this boy ...

The more people who thought that, the less likely that Konoha would get dragged into battle.

Using the sharingan to cast genjutsu was an effective means of making his opponent see visions. But if he used this trick the right way, he could turn it into the famed genjutsu of suggestion on a large number of people like this.

It's all to rid this world of fighting ...

Itachi was grateful from the bottom of his heart to the Konoha officials who permitted him to take part in the chunin exams. He turned his back on the arena, now empty of Nemui and the examiner, and started walking.

In the silence, he could hear someone clapping. He lifted his head, and looked in the direction of the sound.

A face, covered on the right side with bandages.

"Shimura Danzo," Itachi murmured, not attaching any of the honorifics he should have to the name.

A dark, twisted smile stretched out on Danzo's lips as he looked down at Itachi.

2

“My son has been promoted to chunin,” Fugaku noted dispassionately, before the assembled brethren. Beside him, Itachi stood smartly in a Konoha jacket.

“Congratulations.” It was his father’s trusted aide Yashiro who spoke. His normally narrow eyes narrowed even further as he smiled. The brethren quickly followed suit, shouting out their congratulations in unison.

“Say a few words,” his father urged.

“Yes,” Itachi replied, in a voice devoid of emotion. He bowed deeply toward the brethren. “I am prepared to continue to devote myself body and soul to the path of the ninja, for the sake of Konoha, and for the sake of the clan. I look forward to walking it alongside you all.” Itachi’s short speech was far more grown-up than his ten years would seem to allow.

In the first exam, he had gotten a score second only to the record holder, Namikaze Minato, and he had completed the second exam in the shortest time ever on record, even though he was alone, and not in the usual three-person cell. In the third exam, his opponent in the first match had defaulted, leaving him the win, while his performance in the second bout led officials to decide there was no need for him to take part in the third match. And so, his exams ended.

Obviously, Itachi was promoted to chunin.

Fugaku’s son was a ninja blessed with a terrifying talent. Occasionally, Fugaku almost forgot the boy was his son, and felt jealous of the genius he possessed.

“If a ninja of Itachi’s caliber joined the Military Police Force, it might perhaps improve the standing of the Uchihis within the village,” the long-haired Inabi said joyfully.

Looking down on that head of shiny black hair, Fugaku gave voice to his own thoughts. “I have no intention of letting Itachi into the Military Police Force.”

At once, a stir rose up in the room. But Itachi simply stared silently into space,

giving no outward sign of surprise.

Had his son understood? A feeling of doubt welled up in Fugaku, but he couldn't exactly question the boy here in front of everyone. Changing gears, he spoke to the brethren. "I would like to have my son go into the Anbu."

"The ... Anbu?" Yashiro spat out, a note of animosity in his voice.

Fugaku nodded silently.

"Our Military Police Force and the Anbu have clashed any number of times in pursuit of public order in Konoha—" Yashiro began to reproach him.

"I know that better than anyone," he snapped.

To maintain the peace in Konohagakure, the Konoha Military Police Force had been established with the Uchiha clan as its center. Even now, with Fugaku as the chief, the Military Police Force worked day and night for the sake of Konohagakure. In other words, the Military Police Force policed the village.

However, there was another force that maintained the peace: the Anbu.

Under the direct control of the Hokage, the Anbu was a unit composed of capable ninja, and basically always made an appearance on important missions inside, and in the vicinity of, the village. Major crimes committed in the village were taken out of the hands of the Military Police Force, and entrusted to the Anbu.

There was no clear line between what was the jurisdiction of the Military Police Force, and what was the subject for investigation by the Anbu. At the discretion of the Hokage, the nature of the investigation would simply shift from one to the other. This led the Military Police and the Anbu to clash every so often. And each time they did, Fugaku would stand at the head of the Military Police, and negotiate with the Hokage and the Anbu. He knew better than anyone the friction between the two peacekeeping forces.

The main building of Nakano Shrine erupted in raucous discussion. Some criticized the Anbu, others tried to guess at Fugaku's true intentions, still others noted Konoha's treatment of the Uchiha clan. The different resentments they each held in their hearts exploded into the closed space of the shrine, all at once.

“Listen to me!” Fugaku roared.

The main shrine fell silent, filled with an undirected bloodlust.

“I understand how you all feel.” Fugaku began speaking slowly, choosing his words carefully. “I feel the same way. Which is exactly why Itachi will join the Anbu. I intend to have my son act as a conduit between the village and the clan.”

Everyone present held their breath.

“As you all know, members of the Anbu Foundation are secretly watching over our compound. In which case, we will also bring watchful eyes to the village.”

“And you’re saying that’s Itachi?”

Fugaku nodded at Yashiro’s question.

The people of his clan stirred once more.

“But we are all comrades of the same village,” he heard a murmured voice say—and it seemed he was not the only one to hear it. Hitting in a moment of silence, the voice had reached the ears of everyone in the building.

Its owner stood beside him. Itachi was silent now, head hanging as if to avoid their eyes, a sad look on his face.

“What did you just say?” Yashiro asked.

Eyes still turned to the ground, Itachi started speaking without seeming to direct his words at any one person. “The Senju clan and the people of Konoha are still our village comrades ... We should stop creating this distance and doing things to fan the flames of rivalry.”

The bloodlust blanketing the room grew thicker.

Itachi appeared to notice this, too. But regardless, he continued to speak. “One side does one thing, the other does it too. You kill your opponent, someone comes for revenge. And then a fight breaks out.”

“Are you siding with Konoha?”

“You’re looking at things from the perspective of who is your ally, so you can’t see the big picture.”

“You—!” An enraged Yashiro leapt to his feet, reaching as if to grab hold of

Itachi's collar.

Fugaku stopped the hand of his trusted aide.

"Chief!" Yashiro shouted, anger bleeding into his voice.

"Calm yourself."

"But!"

"It's fine. Calm yourself."

With an ostentatious sigh, Yashiro sat. Itachi didn't so much as twitch, but instead stayed silent, head still hanging.

"Apologize, Itachi."

Everyone turned angry eyes on the silent Itachi.

"I understand what you're trying to say." Fugaku said. "But ideals and reality are two different things. What you're saying is at best an ideal. Fighting and war are indeed linked with hatred. But you are too young to understand the true predicament of those who are persecuted. If you could see what a difficult position the Uchiha clan has been driven to since the founding of the village, you wouldn't speak so lightly, or impulsively."

"I'm a member of the Uchiha clan, too. I know about the predicament of the clan."

"Then apologize!" Yashiro shouted.

A sad look in his eyes, Itachi slowly turned his gaze on Yashiro. "I'm very sorry," he said in a voice that nearly disappeared.

Fugaku clearly heard the cry of pain in his son's heart. He understood, almost agonizingly well, Itachi's desire to avoid fighting. But he understood to an equal extent the dissatisfaction of their brethren. Or rather, Fugaku himself had had trying experiences any number of times, in the life he had lived thus far as a Konoha ninja.

Simply because he was Uchiha, he had been excluded from the village center. The dreams he had in his youth had been cruelly shattered, for the sole reason that he was of the Uchiha clan.

Hokage ... A fleeting desire that would never be achieved.

“We’ll talk about this at home,” he said, pitching his voice so that only his son could hear him.

He got no reply.



“Master Itachi!” The voice was shrill enough to pierce his eardrums.

Itachi turned around. Konoha was full of people coming and going in the evening. He himself was on his way home from making an appearance at the Hokage Residence to take care of procedures for his chunin promotion.

Standing before him was a girl he had seen before. Older than he was. The girl who had been his teammate until six months earlier.

“Himuka. Suzukaze Himuka,” the girl told him her name as if reading the confused Itachi’s mind. That was the first Itachi had ever heard of the surname Suzukaze. “Congratulations on your promotion.”

“Thanks.” Himuka was older than he was. But as a ninja, Itachi was more experienced. Given his strange position, he was at a loss for what sort of words to use. Should he speak more politely? Or should he talk informally? After a minute of indecision, he had landed on “Thanks.”

Not noticing this indecision on his part, Himuka looked at him with shining eyes. “I really admire you so much for getting such incredible results in the chunin exams! I’m proud that we worked on the same team together, even if it was only for a little while.”

He didn’t know how to respond. He wasn’t fighting so people would praise him, or be proud of him. “Are you still on the team with that quiet guy?”

“You mean Yoji, right?” That was his name. “Around the same time as it was decided you’d be taking the chunin exams, Yoji was transferred somewhere else, and I haven’t seen him since.”

“Transferred?”

“It was pretty sudden. He didn’t even say goodbye.”

Something felt weird about this. What kind of transfer happened so suddenly

you couldn't even say goodbye? There was only one thing he could think of.

The Anbu.

But Yoji had only just been made a genin. And Itachi couldn't remember him ever doing anything vaguely amazing when they went on missions together.

"I'm working hard now, with Master Yuki and two new teammates!" Himuka recounted in a bright tone.

As he looked at her, Itachi carved the name Yoji into one corner of his heart.

3

“Lately, every time you come over, you end up talking about Uchiha Itachi,” the Hokage said, sitting in his chair and puffing on his pipe.

Danzo stood at attention, watching him. He had advised Hiruzen before that a ninja shouldn't smoke, given that the scent of tobacco would linger on him. Hiruzen had laughed, and replied that the Hokage didn't go on secret missions, so it was fine.

Danzo hadn't been talking about the present. He was talking about being prepared. Hokage or genin, a ninja must never forget that at any given moment, in any given place, they were at war. If they needed to not be noticed by an enemy, the scent of the smoke hanging around Hiruzen would give them away.

Nothing was absolute in this world.

Unaware of what Danzo was thinking, Hiruzen emptied the ashes from his pipe into a dish on the desk, grabbed a pinch of tobacco from the container to one side, and put a flame to the bowl of the pipe. Purple smoke rose up and rolled out the window, disappearing on the wind, piercing Danzo's nose. Even as he winced at the unpleasant smell, his expression did not change in the slightest.

Hiruzen was an “acquaintance” from his genin days. Danzo had never once used the word “friend.” Friendship was the product of feelings of collusion between human beings. People used the word “friend” for the wretched idea of leaning on another person. Danzo had never wanted to lean on someone or be leaned on himself. So he never used soft words like “friend.”

Exhaling smoke, Hiruzen turned his eyes on Danzo. “Just as you said, it's been five months since he was promoted to chunin. And Itachi has carried out his missions almost too perfectly. Even on missions using genin, he has such a grasp on each of their areas of specialization, and gives such impeccable orders, it's hard to believe he's only eleven. The reports he sends in, too, are very nicely in order, strictly following the format.”

“So those two years as a genin were a loss to both Itachi and to the village, hm?”

“Better to think of it as necessary experience.” Hiruzen always considered things in a positive light. This way of his was likely what earned him his popularity among the ninja out in the light. However, ninja were essentially creatures of the dark. Danzo always thought it was funny that they set up the Anbu, as if they could keep the light and the dark separate.

“Speaking of ...” Hiruzen dumped ashes into the dish, and sighed. Then he sat up a little straighter in his chair. “Lately, long hours of desk work tire me out. Maybe I’m just old.”

“That’s your job.”

“Not a single word of sympathy for me?”

“Tell me the story you were about to start.”

Snorting a little at Danzo’s unapproachable manner, Hiruzen opened his mouth. “Uchiha Fugaku made an interesting proposal.”

Fugaku ... The sour face of the head of the Military Police Force popped up in Danzo’s mind.

“He sounded out the idea of Itachi joining the Anbu.”

The instant he heard this, Danzo’s heart leapt up, and nearly did a little dance. He was not foolish enough to allow this glee onto his face, however. He simply replied, “I see,” and waited for Hiruzen to continue.

“Fugaku says that Itachi likely won’t be able to use his abilities to the fullest in the Military Police Force. He’s not looking at him as his own son, but from an objective perspective: he thinks Itachi possesses unparalleled talents as a ninja. He says it’s his duty as a father to guide his son to a place where he can fully use that genius. And so he came to me about the possibility of the boy joining the Anbu.”

A darkness in the depths of his eyes, Hiruzen turned a questioning gaze on Danzo, but he hadn’t gotten to the end of the story. He wrapped up by stating his own opinion. “Homura and Koharu are totally opposed. They say it’s

preposterous to have an Uchiha in the Anbu, given its status as a special unit under the direct control of the Hokage. They asked me if I'd forgotten about how the Second Hokage established the Military Police Force."

"The Military Police Force was created to drive the Uchiha clan away from the central functions of the village."

"Mm." Sighing, Hiruzen packed tobacco into his pipe for the third time.

"Maybe you could stop while we are discussing important business, at least."

Like a child scolded by his father, Hiruzen shrugged his shoulders slightly in dissatisfaction, before setting the pipe down on his desk. "They went so far as to bring up your name, you know. Even if they did eventually agree to the boy being in the Anbu, what would you say, given your dislike of the Uchiha line? Nothing but pushback from those two."

Homura and Koharu, of the Konoha Council. They were also "acquaintances" of his since childhood, old people with no great talent who had not stood out in any way during the harder times of the fierce Great War, when so many of their comrades died. They had managed to live such long lives through luck alone. But they had the self-awareness at least to know that they should gratefully accept the honorary positions on the Council. They didn't have the power to push their own opinions through without leaning on someone with a bigger, more authoritative, voice.

"So you're also—"

"Can't we just let him in, then?"

Hiruzen's eyes widened slightly, a note of suspicion rising up in them. Naturally, he also thought Danzo would be opposed.

But Danzo was not opposed in the slightest. Quite the contrary. Fugaku's proposal was a godsend. Right from the start, he had planned for Itachi to join the Anbu, whatever he had to do to make it happen.

Uchiha Itachi was an essential element in fulfilling Danzo's ambitions. So much so, that Danzo feared that Fugaku would harden in suspicion when he recommended the Anbu. The fact that the proposal had come from that side was nothing other than a windfall.

“I know you’re partial to Itachi, but I thought you would’ve shown some disapproval of putting him in the Anbu.” Hiruzen didn’t try to hide the probing look in his eyes.

Danzo was calm in the face of the other’s man suspicion. “Itachi is the sort of ninja you see maybe once every hundred years. Even if he is an Uchiha, we cannot afford to not take advantage of everything he has to offer the village.”

“That answer’s very you.” The third Hokage nodded deeply as if convincing himself. “If you approve, then I don’t have any objection to Itachi joining the Anbu, either. To eliminate this rivalry between the village and the Uchihis, we need to first win over the hearts of the young people. Bringing Itachi into the center of village life should be a good opportunity for that.”

Danzo would never agree with Hiruzen’s optimistic thinking. But he was grateful that the Hokage approved of Itachi’s entry into the Anbu, whatever his reason.

“But Itachi’s only eleven. We need to see that he’s ready for the Anbu.”

“A mission to join the Anbu, hm?”

“Exactly.”

“Would you leave that to me?”



Break time ...

Itachi coolly watched the the version of himself that drifted up to the surface when he was relaxed. Izumi walked alongside him, laughing.

Five months since he became a chunin.

Concerned about Itachi never taking a proper day off, the village ordered him to take a longish break of a week. They were going to force him to rest. His father nodded at this order, noting that the timing was right, and told him to also take a break from training with Shisui that week.

Given that Itachi had no idea what to do with his time other than missions and training, he couldn’t stop feeling like he had suddenly been set adrift in a calm sea. He tried to sleep all day, but his body, used to missions, woke him up before

the crows started cawing in the morning. Having no other choice, he was forced to kill time playing with six-year-old Sasuke, and helping him with his training before he started at the academy.

Sasuke's gotten really big ...

Just yesterday he had been crawling around babbling, but now he could speak like a proper person. He followed Itachi everywhere, calling his name constantly, and telling his big brother all about himself. He was beyond delighted to have Itachi there spending time with him, given that the older boy was normally never at home.

After Itachi had spent three days watching over Sasuke like this, his father told him to go out and talk with someone his own age. "You're tired. Take some time and enjoy this vacation. If you do, you'll stop saying things like that."

Things like that ...

Fugaku meant the incident at Nakano Shrine.

Itachi still regretted giving voice to his true feelings when his brethren had been shouting about how they hated the village. He could have talked until he was blue in the face, but people carried away by passion like that had no ears to listen with. Speech alone was pointless.

But he meant what he had said then. Not a word of it had been a lie. The more a person hated, the more the object of their hatred hated them back. And this inevitably led to fighting. He understood his clan's distress, but what exactly would come of holding hatred in their hearts?

His father crushed Itachi's complicated thoughts with one word: "tired."

"Hey, are you listening to me?" The high-pitched voice broke into his thoughts and echoed in his brain.

Itachi blinked for a moment, before turning in the direction of the voice. Izumi was walking beside him, a bounce in her step. Her eyes caught his, and didn't release them.

"You should watch where you're going, you know," he remarked.

"Uh-huh." Her voice also had a bounce in it. "You wanna take a break over

there?" She pointed at a tea shop ahead of them.

They had left the clan compound, and come into the center of the village. Itachi wasn't worried about what people would think seeing them together like this. He was taking a walk with a friend. There was nothing else to it.

"Two, please!" Izumi called out, and sat down on a long bench in front of the shop, where a scarlet carpet was laid out. Itachi sat beside her.

"Comin'!" He heard a familiar voice from inside the shop. "Oh! If it ain't Itachi!" The accented voice was that of an old teammate.

"Shinko."

"Been ages, hm?" Shinko had been with him on Team Two, the team he had first been assigned to after becoming a genin. He was told that confronted with the reality of the world of the ninja, she had given up her genin certification. "I'm workin' here now."

"So it seems."

Izumi hesitantly watched Itachi talking so familiarly with the older Shinko.

"So? Yer girlfriend?" Shinko asked, eyes glittering as she set two cups of tea down on the bench.

"Friend."

"Oh! I bet she's all disappointed now!" Shinko teased, and Izumi jumped up, surprised. The older girl laughed, and turned her eyes back to Itachi. "Heard you made chunin. Nice one."

"Thanks," he said.

Izumi sat quietly, her face turned to the ground.

"Knew I chose right when I quit the ninja." Shinko hugged the tray she had brought the tea on to her chest. "There was all that with Tenma dyin'. But halfa why I quit the ninja was cos of you."

"Me?"

"Seein' a genius like you up close, I saw the limits of my own talents so clear, I hated it. An' then I got sad, y'know? Started wonderin' if I should really keep at it

and all. So the very next day, I went and quit it.” She laughed loudly and delightfully, before he heard a voice calling her from inside the shop. “Right, then. Can’t be lazing about here. I’ll be back when you’ve got your order sorted.” She disappeared into the shop.

“You really are amazing, huh, Itachi,” Izumi murmured, head still hanging, after watching Shinko leave. “I don’t have the kind of talent that would make anyone just give up on being a ninja.”

“But you’re going to graduate this year, right?”

She was eleven, so her graduation was about a year early. It wasn’t as if she didn’t have talent herself.

“That doesn’t count as talent, you know,” Izumi noted sadly; as he watched her, Itachi felt a faint joy.

Half of the reason Shinko quit is me ...

That meant that his power had removed a ninja from the world. One fewer ninja meant one less fight. Shinko’s confession was proof, albeit meager, that he was not headed down the wrong path.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he said.

Izumi lifted her head and looked at him, a thin veil of tears in her eyes.

“Why do you want to be a ninja?”

“What?”

“Being a ninja means actual battle. Which means you’ll have to deal with so many awful, terrible things all the time. A girl like you shouldn’t have to go through that.”

“But I mean, my dad’s a ninja, so ...”

“Is that the only reason?”

“It’s not just that,” Izumi replied, almost a declaration. He caught a glimpse of anger in the black eyes beneath her long lashes. He didn’t know what it meant. “Walking down the same path as the person you like...maybe I shouldn’t want that.”

She stood up. "See you." When she looked back to smile at him, tears were spilling out of her eyes. She turned around, and didn't look back again.

"What's this? Made yer girl cry?" Shinko teased, having come to stand behind him at some point.

"If you can hide your aura that well, maybe you should become a ninja again?"

"No, thanks!"

4

“Fugaku already told you, then.”

Itachi listened expressionlessly as Danzo spoke, taking sidelong glances at the boy. They were in the living room of the man, the leader of an organization separate from the Hokage’s Anbu.

The Foundation ...

The organization Danzo ruled over was, at least in name, affiliated with the Anbu, but it had a different command structure. The Foundation was an elite squad that recruited the finest in the village when they were still children, and faithfully carried out its work in the shadows, to maintain the peace from the darkness in the village.

Itachi himself had only learned all this after Danzo summoned him here. The majority of people in the village weren’t even aware of the existence of The Foundation. Danzo had been Hiruzen’s right-hand man since they were young, and most people thought of him as something like an administrative official, who managed the surface Anbu.

Danzo’s rooms were in the depths of the building at the foot of the mountain with the Hokage Monument—the faces of previous Hokage—carved into it, located due north of the village. On the surface, the building was for the storage of documents and materials related to administration. Most people normally never went anywhere near it. The back gates, where the members of the Anbu slipped out of the village on missions, were nearby.

It was a shadowed place, no light hitting it, even at midday. And this particular room was in the center of this dark place, so dark that although it was past noon, large candles burned in the four corners. In the flickering flames, Danzo appeared bewitchingly otherworldly, a statue of the Buddha in the middle of the night. A more cowardly person would no doubt cry and cower at just standing here like this.

“So I assume you have also agreed to join the Anbu.”

“Yes,” Itachi replied, briefly.

The corners of Danzo’s mouth turned up the slightest bit. His eye, so narrow it was nothing more than a line in his face, was focused intently on Itachi. His gaze seemed to catch every breath, every tremor of every hair; it was so sharp, it filled Itachi with horror. The boy almost felt like he was on the battlefield with an enemy.

“There’s resistance from above at having an Uchiha in the Anbu.”

Even here, that black darkness twisted up around Itachi. The enmity of his father and the others at the clan meeting. The prejudice and discrimination of the village ninja toward the Uchihis. As long as he stayed in Konoha, he would be shrouded in darkness.

Which is exactly why ...

It had to be the Anbu. Not because of his father’s order. This was what Itachi himself wanted.

The Anbu was an elite squad that only accepted select ninja from the village. If he distinguished himself there, the idea of building an unshakeable position for himself as a pillar of the village moved out of the realm of dreams, and into reality.

To change this village, he would have to become important. If he became Hokage, he would be able to change everything. The first Hokage of the Uchiha clan ...

Bit by bit, he was starting to see clear signposts on the path he must walk in order to remove war from this world. First, he would join the Anbu. He would distinguish himself there, and establish himself as a central figure in the village. After that, Hokage. He would become Hokage, and get rid the village’s prejudice toward the Uchihis.

And Itachi’s dreams didn’t stop there. Once he was Hokage, he would be able to meet regularly with people of influence from other places. If he worked together with ninja from other villages, he should be able to eliminate ninja rivalry. Ninja would disappear from the world. Once there were no more ninja,

the daimyos would lose their means of making war. What lay beyond that was a world without war or fighting.

For Itachi's dreams, the Anbu, and becoming Hokage, were nothing more than checkpoints.

First, step number one: join the Anbu. He had no time for the opposition of the village officials or the members of the Anbu. He intended to overcome all resistance.

"An *achievement* is required to show us whether or not you are suitable for the Anbu."

"Do you mean a mission?"

"Precisely." Danzo didn't move a muscle, frozen like a strange doll.

Itachi had also not moved. He felt like if he so much as twitched, Danzo would see right through to his true intentions.

A silent battle was unfolding between them.

"I have been put in charge of giving you that mission." Danzo's being in charge meant that it would be a dark mission, where the light of the sun did not reach.

Itachi had long been long prepared for just such an eventuality, and simply stared resolutely at Danzo.

He cut to the heart of the matter. "There is a man in the Anbu, age thirty-four. From your perspective, he is already an old ninja, I suppose," Danzo said, in a monotone, perhaps sarcastic or joking.

Itachi didn't bother to react.

After a period of flowing silence, Danzo started speaking once more. "Although not as great as your own, many have seen great talent in him, from the time he was a child. This man came up the ranks through genin and chunin without incident, and joined the Anbu at the same time as he was promoted to jonin. But —" he cut himself off, and the flames in the four corners flickered together. "Recently, we learned he has been colluding with Kirigakure."

A traitor ... The general framework of the mission coalesced in Itachi's mind.

“Only a very few people in the village know of the man’s collusion.”

“So the one to take care of him is me—”

“I’m not finished.” The cold voice shot through Itachi. “Those who belong to the Anbu do their utmost to keep the people of the village from learning of their affiliation. On the surface, this man lives an average life as a jonin. He has a wife and two children, ages three and one.”

What is Danzo trying to plant inside me? Itachi asked in his heart. Was he trying to test the boy somehow, by telling him that he had to kill someone with a family? If this speech was motivated by a suspicion that Itachi would be carried away by emotion, and hesitate to fulfill his mission, Danzo was seriously mistaken.

“Other than the fact that he was linked to Kirigakure, this man is capable, a great ninja, trusted by the Hokage himself.” Danzo spat out the words “great ninja” too theatrically; they had no truth to them. Itachi knew that Danzo was being sarcastic. He had had several times more experience than the average eleven-year-old child, and understood these subtleties of emotion.

“But if we permit a traitor, the village will never be strong,” Danzo continued.

“I understand,” Itachi said, with a hint of irritation at Danzo’s circuitous way of speaking. And then, as soon as the words were out, he regretted his own imprudence. Danzo had probably noticed that Itachi was annoyed, and also that he regretted it. Despite knowing the man had seen through him like this, Itachi didn’t let it show on his face. He felt, to an unpleasant degree, the unfathomable darkness of this man who walked in the shadows of Konoha.

“For someone as insightful as you, this tale is quite roundabout. Forgive me.”

“Not at all.”

“But it is all for the singular purpose of having you know this man.”

Itachi swallowed the question of why he had to know the man.

“Kill this man,” Danzo instructed.

“Understood,” Itachi replied, immediately. Family or no, gifted ninja or not, a traitor was a traitor. This was his mission. Whether he wanted it or not.

Danzo stood up. “It is likely obvious at this point, but I am convinced that the place you belong is the Anbu. You are permitted one comrade on this mission. I leave the selection of that person to you. Take whoever you trust the most.” He went around the desk in front of him, and leisurely approached Itachi. “Peace is actually a troublesome beast,” he remarked, looking down at the boy’s adult face and holding Itachi’s gaze. “It is hard to produce, but maintaining it is next to impossible.”

Itachi felt like Danzo was a tiny bit pleased with himself.

“People eat food. While one person is finishing that day’s supper, another is suffering somewhere, with nothing to eat. When one person gets something, someone somewhere loses something. Bit by bit, these trivial inequalities warp the days of rest.”

The faces of the Uchiha clan gathered at Nakano Shrine popped up in the back of Itachi’s mind. He clenched his teeth behind closed lips, unwilling to have the slightest change in his heart be noticed.

“There are always people suffering in the shadows of this fiction called peace. People burdened with darkness. Don’t you think we should actually hold in contempt those who forget this fact, and simply gorge themselves on peace?”

A smell that made him want to vomit penetrated his nostrils. When he realized that it was Danzo’s breath, Itachi silently endured it.

“Unless there is someone, someone totally free of emotion, to cut away the fraying bits on the edges of peace, this world will not see even a moment of tranquility.” In other words, in this village, the “someone” shouldering this responsibility were the Anbu and The Foundation. “Previously, I said you were the bearer of bad luck.”

Itachi remembered. The day of his graduation from the academy.

“Your life will be ever shadowed by chaos. That’s why you need to become strong enough to cut out the root of that chaos yourself.”

“And you’re saying the place where I can obtain that strength is the Anbu?”

The face covered in bandages on the right side nodded firmly. “They say a wise man only needs a word, but you only need half a word—no, the first letter. But

that cleverness will make you suffer.”

“I’ll suffer ...”

“Stop trying to hide yourself in front of me,” Danzo said, placing a hand on Itachi’s shoulder. “The desire for true peace, wanting a world without war, is making you suffer.”

“How did you—”

“I know everything about you.” Danzo opened his eye wide, revealing a darkness so deep it threatened to suck Itachi in. “The one who can bring about true peace is one who has the deepest darkness inside him. I believe you can become that person.” His wicked lips stretched out in a smile. “Come to me, Uchiha Itachi.”

Before Itachi had the time to even think, his instincts were turning his face away, as if trying to whisk him away from the darkness and its mysterious appeal.



“Assassination, huh,” Shisui murmured, as if to confirm the story Itachi had just told him.

They were facing each other on top of the cliff that only they knew about, but Shisui made no move to look Itachi in the eye. He kept his gaze focused on the ground to one side, as he quietly thought the situation over.

“When he told me to take someone I trusted, I thought of you,” Itachi said.

“Kohinata Mukai, he’s a pretty decent ninja,” Shisui of the Body Flicker noted, having himself grown up into a leading ninja in Konoha, before falling into thought again.

“I don’t have any right to ask this of you, given that you’re not connected with the Anbu in any way. But I don’t know anyone in the Anbu, and there’s no one else I can trust with a mission like this.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re bad with people,” Shisui said, with a grin.

Kohinata Mukai was the name of the man Danzo had ordered assassinated. His family was distantly related to the Hyuga clan, but they had branched off several

generations earlier, so they didn't have the Byakugan kekkei genkai.

"I can't believe he's secretly connected with Kirigakure."

"What's he like?" Itachi asked.

"He might be Anbu, but he's also a sharp jonin. He does regular missions, and the Hokage really trusts him. He was definitely following his orders as an Anbu when you were guarding the daimyo."

So that meant Mukai had been there when they were attacked by the man in the mask. Itachi knew that other than Hatake Kakashi, the Anbu had been caught in the masked man's genjutsu. And Mukai had been one of them.

"Do you know anything about him being susceptible to genjutsu?"

"It's not like we go around telling each other our weaknesses, you know."

Naturally. Itachi regretted asking such a stupid question.

"But I do know what he's good at." Shisui lifted his face and looked at Itachi. The light in his friend's eyes dispelled the shadow of unrest. From long years of opening up to each other, Itachi knew that this was proof of his friend's resolve. "Mukai's good at physical techniques."

Itachi felt like that basically made sense. If you followed Mukai's bloodline back, you reached the Hyuga clan, one of the most distinguished families in Konohagakure. If you traced the origins of the Hyuga, you arrived at the founder of the ninja, the Sage of the Six Paths. And the Byakugan kekkei genkai was a visual jutsu on par with the Uchiha sharingan. The Hyuga could see the path of chakra circulating in the body and seal chakra by severing the pathway in someone who had become an enemy. Their vision was also said to reach out in all directions, with no blind spots.

Once the pathway was sealed, the Hyuga clan used physical techniques. Their physical jutsu, known as Gentle Fist, aligned the flow of the user's chakra with the chakra extant in all living creatures, allowing the user to deliver a series of blows based on circular defensive movements, destroying anything inside their opponent's body, such as internal organs. Gentle Fist was a secret of the Hyuga clan, but given that they were a branch family, it was no stretch to imagine that at least some knowledge of it had been passed down to the Kohinatas.

“He uses Gentle Fist?” Itachi asked.

Shisui nodded.

“So as long as we don’t get close, we have the advantage.”

“Mukai’s pretty skilled. I can’t imagine he’d let you fight him from a distance.” It seemed that the hypothetical battle with Mukai was already happening inside Shisui’s head.

“Will you come with me?”

“Of course.” Shisui bumped his fist up against Itachi’s chest. “You got no one else you can trust, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You join the Anbu, and you’ll be closer to the center of the village. And if you do that, you’ll be invaluable for our clan.”

Itachi thought about just what those words meant.

He and Shisui were driven by the same thing, and they didn’t begrudge their own lives if it meant the peace of the clan. With each of the secret monthly meetings at Nakano Shrine, the atmosphere grew progressively worse. Both boys believed that resentment toward the village was already approaching the limit. They had to avoid an explosion, no matter what. This was their shared understanding.

If the clan rose up, the village would be dragged into battle. The last Great War, the attack of the Nine-Tails; the village had overcome both crises, and was finally starting to build a real peace. If the Uchiha clan were to start something now, the village would once more be shrouded in sadness and death.

The lone Anbu among the Uchiha clan ... It was just as Shisui said: Itachi would become invaluable to the clan.

“You becoming Anbu’s actually a dream for me, too.”

“A dream?”

“That the Uchihis and the village would become brethren in the true sense. And for that, I think we need a ninja in the clan who has a deep connection with

the central figures of the village. Someone who can tell it like it is, talk about the clan's suffering and hopes. If you join the Anbu, you'll be able to do that. And since you want peace for the clan more than anyone, I know you'll actually do it for us."

Itachi lifted his chin up and down slightly.

Shisui brightened abruptly. "I'll be a jonin of the village, you'll be Anbu, neither of us'll be in the Military Police. We'll be able to look at the clan objectively."

"My father and the others are closed up in their own shell. They can't see the world outside anymore."

"Itachi," Shisui said his friend's name like he was spitting out the suffering in his own heart. "The people in our clan are locked away in their own little world. They don't even try to take a look outside. They say it's the village's fault that our fate doesn't change, and their grudge just grows. They just blame everything on the village, the Hokage, the Senju clan. They never look at their weak spots. But ..." He opened his eyes and looked at Itachi. "You're different."

Itachi held his breath.

"You've always opened up your own road with your own power. You graduated from the academy in a year, you made it through the chunin exams all by yourself, and now you're poised to join the Anbu. You've never blamed your fate on your clan, and given up."

Was that really how it was? Itachi didn't know. He felt like he had simply been racing intently down the path he should be on. And that feeling wasn't going to change.

"I mean, you could even be the Hokage." Shisui grinned. "I believe that you'll be the one to break through the hostilities between the village and the clan, as the first Uchiha Hokage."

Itachi's heart beat faster.

The dream of being Hokage ...

He had never told anyone. It was a dream he hadn't even spoken of to his one and only friend, Shisui. He hadn't told anyone, because he was afraid it would

vanish in a cloud of smoke if he said it out loud.

That dream became words in Shisui's mouth, and reached his own ears. Surprise and joy surged through him.

"I'll always be your best friend."

"Shisui ..."

"I can hardly wait to see how big you get from now on."

Itachi desperately tried to hold back the hot thing that welled up from the depths of his heart. He had never once cried before someone else in his life. He believed a ninja should never expose their own emotions.

No ...

He had cried in front of someone, just once. When he was four. That time when his father brought him to the battlefield, once the fighting was finished. When he saw the mountains of abandoned bodies in the heavy rain, his tears had flowed freely. He still remembered desperately trying to keep himself from shaking so his father wouldn't notice.

Itachi hadn't changed since then. Fighting was something to be avoided at all costs. War must never happen again. That moment when he was four, he had decided this in his heart, as he cried in the pounding rain.

To that end, the Anbu.

To that end, Hokage.

"Let's do it, Itachi." His faithful friend grinned.

Itachi nodded firmly, full of gratitude.

5

In the silent woods, his heart pounded hard enough that it nearly leapt out of his chest. Feeling the lively aura of his growing baby brother on his skin, Itachi hid in the shadow of a large tree, and grinned to himself.

Hide and seek ...

For Itachi, it was a game, but for Sasuke, it was a serious contest.

“Where did you go, Itachi?” Sasuke muttered to himself, and his older brother watched, charmed.

Itachi knew it was childish, but he pushed his ninjutsu to the limits to completely kill his aura. For a child who had only just turned six, there would have been no way to find him.

His little brother would be entering the academy in a few days, and he was full of enthusiasm. He insisted that he wanted to get even the tiniest bit stronger as a ninja before he started school. Itachi hadn't even been given the chance to take his shoes off after his mission was over, before Sasuke was dragging him into the grove surrounding Nakano Shrine.

His little brother was so adorably full of hope, Itachi could hardly stand it. He surprised himself at how much he cared for Sasuke. Itachi had always been different from other children. The age of four or five, the age he had been when Sasuke was born, was a time to be coddled by mother and father.

But that was when Itachi had become aware of walking forward down his own path. He would become a powerful ninja, in order to create a world without fighting. He had thought about what was needed to do that, and put it into practice. So when his brother was born, he hadn't felt in any way that his parents were being stolen away from him. He had simply been delighted that there was now someone who shared his blood. And that feeling gradually grew greater, as Sasuke grew up.

When Itachi looked at his brother, at the way the younger boy openly adored

and trusted him, he felt like he had to live up to Sasuke's expectations. He felt like he wanted to be the self who would not shame Sasuke. These feelings became the power to propel himself forward. Sasuke gave him a motivation that he certainly couldn't have managed alone. He had nothing but gratitude for his brother.

"Itachi!" Sasuke called out, irritation in his voice. He couldn't find any trace of his big brother, so he was starting to get mad.

"No choice, I guess," Itachi muttered to himself and released just a little chakra.

"Ngh!" Sasuke, who had been whirling around in all directions, froze, and a single large shudder ran through his body. He had felt his brother's aura.

The faint smile on Itachi's lips grew more distinct.

It had been a minute flicker of chakra, the sort that an ordinary child definitely wouldn't have caught. But Sasuke had clearly sensed it. His talent as a ninja was unquestionable.

"I'm here, Sasuke," he said to himself once more.

Footfalls came straight at him. As they got closer, the pace changed to something more like bouncing. His brother's small feet stepped on the dry leaves as he advanced, and yet, his feet didn't make a sound. He could join the academy at that moment, and he could probably beat the older students.

"Found you!" Sasuke cried, shooting a finger out at the crouching Itachi. His little brother looked down at him, eyes glittering brightly with dreams and hope.

"Not quite," Itachi said, and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Shadow Clone.

The real Itachi was above Sasuke's head.

"Aah! No fair!" his brother cried out naively, and abruptly lifted his face.

"Ah!" Sasuke caught sight of his brother, looking down on him from a thick branch.

"Hee hee!" Itachi unconsciously erupted in laughter upon seeing the wild look

on Sasuke's face as he stared up at the sky, tilting his head so far back, it seemed like his neck would break. Although Itachi rarely let his feelings show in front of other people, he was able to naturally express what was in his heart with his brother. It was strange.

"Itachi," Sasuke murmured, dumbfounded, the energetic tone from earlier vanishing into the ether.

"So you found me, huh?" Still smiling, Itachi nimbly dropped down from the branch to stand in front of his brother, whose mouth still hung open.

Sasuke was supposed to find his brother through a deliberate act, but he had unintentionally stumbled upon his goal, and he passed through a certain regret to stand in a state of stupefaction. "N-no fair using Shadow Clones," he reproached Itachi with pursed lips, coming back to himself to a certain degree.

Smiling from ear to ear, Itachi looked down at his little brother. He noted fondly how big Sasuke had gotten. Until very recently, he had only reached up to Itachi's knees, but now his head soared up past Itachi's waist. "Nice work noticing my chakra."

"Well, I *am* starting at the academy soon. Only natural I can do that much, at least." Sasuke didn't realize that the chakra he had sensed was so faint that the average six-year-old wouldn't have been able to feel it.

"So it's only natural, huh?"

"Yeah."

Itachi deliberately didn't praise him. Because it wasn't a bad thing to think that being able to do that was only natural.

When people thought they were special, they got lazy. Thinking that what you could do was only natural meant knowing your own insufficiencies. You still couldn't do everything, so you weren't particularly admiring of what you could already do. So you didn't think you were special. People who thought like this would always keep pushing ahead. He didn't want to stop Sasuke's uncompromising path forward by praising him.

Abruptly, he remembered what Shisui had said: "*You've never blamed your fate on your clan, and given up.*" He didn't want Sasuke to give up either. He

didn't want Sasuke to be the kind of man who is held prisoner by the obligations toward, and dark feelings of, their clan, the kind who refuses to march forward toward his own fate.

He was sure Sasuke would be all right. His little brother had an innocence that he didn't. He didn't have the bad luck Danzo spoke of, either. Itachi believed that Sasuke would surpass him. And he didn't mind being overtaken by his little brother.

He didn't let it show on his face, but Itachi was more of a sore loser than most. He couldn't have become the sort of ninja that ends up joining the Anbu at age eleven if he wasn't. But sore loser that he was, he still thought it would be all right to lose, if it was to his brother. He himself didn't understand the nature of this feeling. He didn't know why he thought like that. But there was no doubt, at least, of the fact that he hoped for this in his heart of hearts.

"We should be getting back."

"What? Come on, hide one more time." But Sasuke shuffled forward when Itachi beckoned him.

"Forgive me, Sasuke." Itachi poked his brother in the forehead.

"Ow!"

This whole thing, from the beckoning hand to the poke in the forehead, was something they'd done any number of times before. But each time, Sasuke obediently approached, and took the finger to the forehead. This naiveté in his brother soothed his own heart.

Itachi could see a glimpse of Sasuke's growth in his reaction to being poked in the forehead. The first time he had done it, Sasuke was about three years old. He hadn't been speaking in sentences yet, but he kept bugging Itachi for "up, up," so Itachi poked him in the forehead, and made him give it up. At that time, Sasuke clutched his forehead and started wailing. Itachi hadn't intended to put much force in the prodding finger, but it had hurt his three-year-old brother immensely. But now he endured it with a little scowl. It was only natural, of course, but Itachi felt reassured at this growth, Sasuke getting used to stimulus from the outside world.

“Let’s go, Sasuke.”

Their shadows stood side by side in the evening sun, Sasuke’s never leaving Itachi’s side as if trying to catch up with the taller boy.



His feet touched the branch and leapt off again, moving to the next tree he had targeted. Repeat.

Itachi was in flight.

Around him were three ninja, teammates he was working with for the first time. Itachi knew only one of them. Kohinata Mukai, the target of Danzo’s assassination order.

One member of the mixed jonin/chunin team led by Mukai had been injured on a day off, so there was suddenly an opening on the mission, and Itachi had been hurriedly brought in to help out.

Itachi saw Danzo’s shadow behind the chain of events that led to the chunin’s injury, and his own selection. He could only assume that Danzo had used one of his own men to injure the chunin, and then intentionally had Itachi take his place. There was no other way the team his assassination target led would suddenly have a vacancy, and he himself would be brought in to fill it. Without a doubt, this was a silent message from Danzo to carefully study Mukai’s skills, as they carried out the mission together.

“It’s my fault. I’m sorry,” the chunin to Itachi’s immediate right said to Mukai’s back, flying in front of him.

“Forget it,” Mukai replied briefly, and moved indifferently through the trees.

If they went just a little farther, they would come out in the plains. Once they got that far, the border was dead ahead. The number of their pursuers would likely drop abruptly. Rather than chatting pointlessly, their first priority at that moment was to get to that place. Mukai’s reaction was the right one.

It was supposed to be a simple infiltration mission.

The Great War was over, and the villages were maintaining friendly relations. But from time to time, that exchange was excessive, to the point of impropriety.

Konoha had gotten a hold of the information that Sunagakure and Kirigakure were secretly trying to form a military alliance. In the event that Suna and Kiri went to war with the other villages, whatever the reason, they would be allies. In this time of peace, they would agree on the same hypothetical enemy, and cooperate to bring about the fall of the target village. A secret agreement, with the condition of war.

The current peace was more or less maintained through the ninja villages, with each of the five great nations keeping each other in check. If two countries covertly joined hands and started to move toward a single fixed enemy, the peace would immediately crumble, and the days of war would return. To avoid this, Konoha absolutely had to prevent the secret treaty from being signed.

Having learned that a Kirigakure representative would visit Sunagakure, Konohagakure ordered Mukai and his team to do reconnaissance on the meeting. They were to carefully investigate the details of the agreement, and report back. That was the whole mission. As long as the enemy didn't notice them, it was in no way difficult. Or at least, it shouldn't have been.

Itachi and the others snuck into the residence of the fourth Kazekage, and watched over the meeting from the shadows. It ended with Suna and Kiri basically comparing their positions and making small moves toward each other, and Itachi's team moved to leave Sunagakure. But there, an unforeseen situation occurred.

One of the chunin on their team was caught in a trap designed for intruders. Without a look back, the four started running. And now, they were somehow trying to escape their pursuers.

"The border's up ahead," Mukai noted. "Now that they know Konoha knows about the secret agreement, the two countries can't move forward with things carelessly. The fact that we were found out is good for that, at least," he remarked to the chunin who had been fretting the whole time about being caught in the trap.

The world opened up ahead of Itachi. They came out onto the plains and dropped from the trees to the ground. If they just kept running all the way to the border, they would definitely figure something out.

“Ngh!”

Itachi stopped and turned around.

Mukai was staring at the woods they had just slipped out of. He put a hand in his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and lit the end of it.

“What are you doing?” Itachi said. His other team members were perplexed at their leader’s sudden actions.

Ignoring Itachi, Mukai pulled a golden bottle from the back pocket of his trousers and brought it to his mouth. The sweet scent carried to Itachi by the wind told him that the bottle contained sake.

“Team leader!”

“Well, you just watch there,” Mukai said, without looking back at Itachi, cigarette smoldering. The wild wind carried away the purple smoke.

Even a village like Sunagakure, the majority of which was covered in sand, had a great deal of greenery near the border. Young grass stroked Mukai’s legs as he braced himself.

“We’ve already been found out. They’re not going to let us get home unscathed. And ...” He looked at Itachi over his shoulder. “We do happen to have the famed Uchiha Itachi here with us. I’d like him to see what I can do, you know?”

Itachi’s baffled teammates smiled faintly.

“Here they come,” Mukai said, as several human forms danced out of the woods.

There were more than twenty of them.

Their pursuers quickly spotted Itachi and the others and formed a ring around them.

“Best not to touch us.” Mukai put out his cigarette in a portable ashtray, and gulped back some sake.

“So you give up and resign yourselves, then?” one of their pursuers said. The mark carved into his forehead protector was that of Sunagakure.

“Dunno.” Mukai took another swig. Their opponents seemed alarmed at his excessive insolence.

A flash of light flickered, followed by a sharp noise in front of Mukai, as he brought his left hand up before his face.

“Aaah, you went and wasted my precious sake.” A kunai hung from the side of the sake bottle Mukai dropped.

“You got some nerve, standing there drinking at a time like this,” an enemy ninja remarked.

“I’ve got a weakness for alcohol and tobacco. It’s how I get myself all psyched up before a fight.”

“So you’re not going to come quietly, then?”

“Of course not.”

Their pursuers leapt at Mukai.

Some shinobi turned toward Itachi and the rest of his team. With no other choice, Itachi braced himself, when his chunin teammates grabbed his shoulders and leapt up.

“What are you doing?!”

“Just don’t get in the boss’s way,” the older chunin said, as they flew over the heads of their pursuers and escaped the circle.

Mukai noticed that some pursuers were leaping up to follow them. “Your fight’s with me!” He launched an incredibly fast kick that exploded in the stomach of an enemy flying up after Itachi and the others.

Without so much as a cry, the man hit the ground and lost consciousness.

Mukai dropped back down to earth. “So, let’s get started then.” His chakra swelled up suddenly. His left pupil disappeared, and concentric circles radiated out from his eyelids.

Byakugan. The kekkei genkai only passed down through the Hyuga clan.

Shisui had said it was unthinkable that any Kohinata would have the Byakugan, given that their family had split off however many generations ago from the

main Hyuga clan. But that impossible thing was happening at that moment, before his very eyes.

“Don’t usually show this off, but today’s special,” Mukai said to their pursuers, and his eyes caught sight of Itachi for an instant.

“Haaaah ...” Mukai took a deep breath, as if he were building up chakra in the bottom of his stomach. He dropped his hips the slightest bit, and leaned forward, before thrusting his left hand out and resting his right hand around his pocket. His hands were unclenched, held straight and flat.

“First, we crush this one!” the apparent leader of their pursuers shouted.

Twenty ninja attacked at once. Kunai rained down, a shower of blades that left no room for escape.

Mukai laughed, and flew up into the rain of death falling on him.

“Hah!” A light roundhouse kick. He caught the flat edge of the kunai before him perfectly. The repelled kunai hit another kunai, changing its trajectory. That chain reaction spread, setting most of the kunai on another course.

Still spinning from the kick, Mukai launched a backward-looking backhand blow. This hit the flat edge of a new kunai. His body began to descend.

Next, it was a front kick. The tip of a blade bounced off the tips of his shoes.

He spun around to the front. His heel downed a fourth kunai.

He landed. The rain of kunai pierced the surface of the earth.

Mukai was unharmed. Countless jet-black kunai stabbed through the grasses. But the area around Mukai’s feet alone was completely unsullied by blades. The surprising part of it all was that Mukai had protected himself from the deadly rain by repelling only four kunai.

Outside the circle, Itachi wondered if he could manage the same feat himself.

I could ... But although he felt like he could after watching the way Mukai moved, he didn’t know if he’d be able to pull something like that off through his own instincts alone.

“Get him! Get him!” the enemy shouted, his panic showing. Enormous

shuriken, katana, claws, cudgels; their pursuers closed in on Mukai with every kind of weapon imaginable.

And then Itachi watched it all play out. Mukai, dodging the bloodlust-filled attacks of his enemies. Launching his own attacks to hit exactly in the key spots of defenseless enemies, to take them down in a single blow. There was nothing wasteful about his movements. His physical jutsu was so skillful that Itachi could do nothing but watch admiringly.

One person, one blow. Once Mukai had struck twenty or so times, only the enemy leader remained standing.

“Just you, now.”

The enemy trembled, long katana in each hand.

“So, what? You wanna go? I can’t exactly let just you go home without a scratch, now can I?” Mukai pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it.

“Eeeeeaaaaah!” Giving a strange shout—it was hard to tell if it was a scream or a battle cry—the leader closed the distance between them.

The first blade came down from on high, to split Mukai’s skull.

Mukai shifted a tiny bit to the right to dodge it. A sideways slashing attack cut through where he had stood, and Itachi saw Mukai’s left eye release a flash of white light.

“Wh-what the ...” the leader mumbled, dazed.

“You just don’t get it, huh?” Mukai said, cigarette dangling from his lips.

His left hand was slightly raised, katana pinched neatly between the thumb and index finger. A vein popped up on the leader’s face, perhaps because the blade did not move an inch, whether he pushed or pulled it.

“I’m not gonna take you down with one blow,” Mukai said, letting go of the katana. Suddenly released from this restraint, the enemy crumpled, and Mukai brought his right foot down, cigarette still lodged in one corner of his mouth. The man’s forehead was almost touching his solar plexus.

“Eight Trigrams Two Palms ...” Mukai placed his palm on the man’s stomach, and launched two blows in succession.

“Eight Trigrams Four Palms.” Four blows.

The man opened his eyes wide in fear.

“Eight Trigrams Eight Palms.” Eight blows.

Blood shot out of the enemy’s mouth.

“Eight Trigrams Sixteen Palms!” Mukai’s palms hit the enemy sixteen times, from his face to his legs. The man danced up lightly into the air like a dead leaf blown away by a strong wind, but there was already no light of consciousness in his eyes.

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Mukai tucked his cigarette butt into his ashtray; more than twenty Sunagakure shinobi sprawled out on the ground around him. As he walked leisurely toward Itachi, his left eye regained its light once more.

“It’s what you call a throwback,” he noted. “The main family and the branch families might be separate in theory, but you can’t separate the blood. If the element’s in there, it’ll show up on the surface like this. Don’t run around telling people.” He rested a hand on Itachi’s head, and the boy shook his head to shake it off.

Perhaps thinking Itachi was annoyed at being treated like a child, Mukai smiled the slightest bit apologetically and walked over to their teammates. “Now, let’s get home already. My kids are waiting.”

“How is your son doing?”

Mukai shrugged. “Not so great lately. I’m a little worried about him. Gotta hurry home and report to the Hokage.”

“Right.”

This conversation between Mukai and the others didn’t reach Itachi’s ears. He also wasn’t the least bit angry at being treated like a child. He didn’t have the mental energy to spare thinking about something so trivial.

Shisui and I are going to kill this man by ourselves ... It was shaping up to be a difficult mission.

“C’mon, let’s go, Itachi.” A smile played on Mukai’s lips as he looked back, as if the man wasn’t at all aware of the aura of his own death creeping up on him.



The same air of gloom ruled the main shrine. Unable to stand the weight of it, Itachi let out a deep breath.

“I have something I want to tell you all today,” his father said solemnly, standing with his back to the altar where the avatar of the god was enshrined. Itachi saw an ominous shadow in his father’s tone, heavier than usual. “Itachi’s entry into the Anbu is at hand.”

His father sounded like it was already a done deal.

Assassinate Mukai ... Not a mission he could carry out as easily as all that. It was sure to turn into mortal combat, with his life on the line. There was a serious chance he might die.

“An Uchiha will join the Anbu. This is the most favorable opportunity we’ve ever had.”

“Then, Chief,” Tekka, his father’s trusted aide, said quietly.

Everyone held their breath. The air of unrest gradually grew thicker.

Itachi heard his own heart pounding fiercely in his ears. Unconsciously, he sought out Shisui.

His friend was three rows in front of him, staring at Itachi’s father, motionless, the strained tension loud and clear in his back.

Stop it, Father! Itachi shouted in his heart. He had no voice. It was like the malice of the clan had solidified and slid into his mouth, pressing into his throat.

“We have exerted ourselves any number of times until now on behalf of the village. But what have they done for us in return?”

No one answered, but instead silently bent their ears toward Fugaku, so as not to miss a single word he uttered.

“At their root is prejudice against us.” His father’s words mercilessly tightened around his chest.

What Itachi hated most in the world was on the verge of materializing before his very eyes.

Hatred.

Fighting.

War.

Whatever word he used, the essential nature of it was the same: the senseless deaths of a large number of people.

“We have endured it all this time. But we have reached our limit.”

Itachi realized he was shaking his head, when his field of view rocked slowly from side to side. Faster than his thoughts, his body was rejecting his father.

But no one was looking at him. Their eyes were all focused on Fugaku, in the seat of honor.

Leave it. Stop it, Father. Please stop ... The voice of his heart didn't reach his father.

Abruptly, Fugaku's eyes were colored red. Sharingan. The agitation in his heart had changed his father's eyes.

“Taking advantage of Itachi's entry into the Anbu, we will move toward a coup d'état.”

“Oooh.” Everyone raised their voices in unison, not a drop of confusion in the collective cry. The singular voice even had an echo of joy to it.

“Itachi.” Over the cheer, his father called his son's name.

To Itachi, it sounded like he was calling someone else.

Staring at his unresponsive son, Fugaku continued, “The true objective of you joining the Anbu is to investigate the particulars of the situation in the village, and report back to us.”

A spy ... Itachi thought about Kohinata Mukai. Even if they were all in the same village, leaking information about one side to the other when there were two forces in conflict was nothing other than spying.

So I'm going to be the same as Mukai? Itachi asked himself. There was no

reason to expect a reply.

“The information you bring us holds the destiny of the clan.”

All eyes were turned on him. A sea of red eyes ...

Even though he wasn't under any genjutsu, Itachi felt dizzy. Where on earth was he headed?



A single crow soared up toward the heavens. Sinister inky black arms tangled around its feet. The darkness tried to tie it to the ground.

No matter how he kicked and struggled, the arms yanked him down. The heavens receded.

Drops the color of blood spilled from the crow's eyes ...

“The day of action is near.”

Everyone stood at Fugaku's declaration. Itachi continued to sit.

The legs of the brethren all around him looked like trees colored by darkness, as though he had gotten lost in a forest at midnight. In the middle of the trees that filled Itachi's field of view, he caught sight of one other person sitting.

“Shisui ...”

His friend looked back and caught sight of him. There was a sadness in his eyes that Itachi had never seen before. Shisui smiled miserably.

“Our fight will certainly lead to the glory of the Uchihas.” His father's voice elicited a cry of delight from all present.

Itachi listened with a feeling of gloom.

He was not yet aware of the true nature of the darkness that would visit him.

The darkness held its breath and waited silently. Until the day came when it would hug him to its black chest ...

Continued in

NARUTO
ITACHI'S
STORY

[M I D N I G H T]

MASASHI KISHIMOTO

Author/artist Masashi Kishimoto was born in 1974 in rural Okayama Prefecture, Japan. Like many kids, he was first inspired to become a manga artist in elementary school when he read *Dragon Ball* by Akira Toriyama. After spending time in art college, he won the Hop Step Award for new manga artists with his story *Karakuri*. After considering various genres for his next project, Kishimoto decided on a story steeped in traditional Japanese culture. His first version of *Naruto*, drawn in 1997, was a one-shot story about fox spirits; his final version, which debuted in *Weekly Shonen Jump* in 1999, quickly became the most popular ninja manga in the world. The series would also spawn multiple anime series, movies, novels, video games and more. Having concluded the series in late 2014, Masashi Kishimoto has kept himself busy this year with the sidestory *Naruto: The Seventh Hokage and the Scarlet Spring* and writing the story for the latest *Naruto* movie, *Boruto: Naruto the Movie* both of which focus on the title character's son, Boruto.

TAKASHI YANO

Takashi Yano won the *Shosetsu Subaru* Newcomer Award in 2008 with *Jashu*. He has published a number of works since then as an expert on period dramas. He is also active in a number of other places, including writing the story for the *Assassin's Creed 4* manga.

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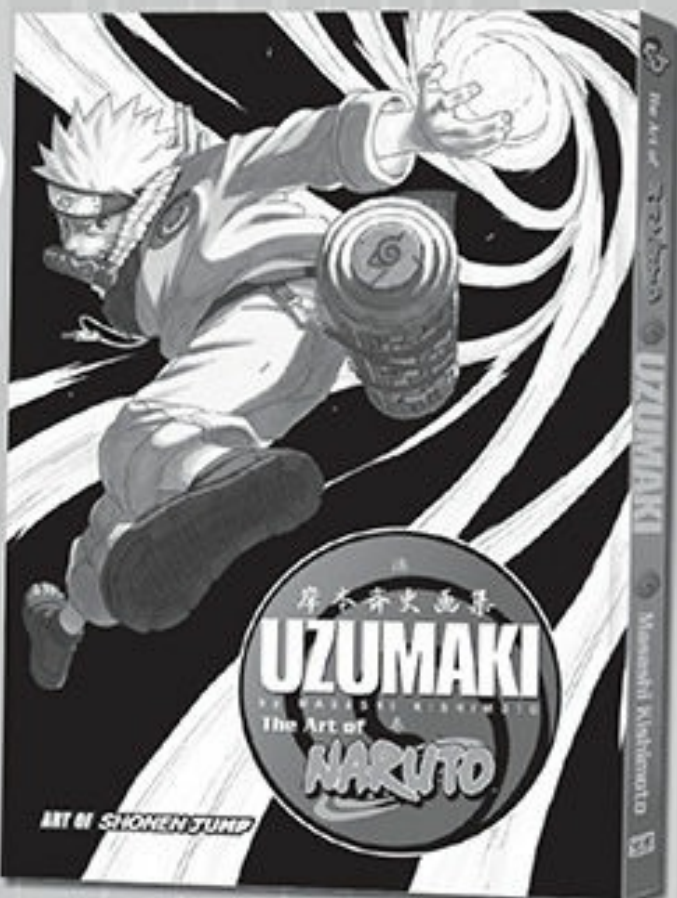
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