Ties that Bind

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Summary

He'd always thought there wasn't any meaning in life. But now he's beginning to wonder- Maybe the point in life is finding something precious. Something worth protecting. And then protecting that something with this life he's been given by chance.

//Wherein the conversation between Itachi and Orochimaru goes differently, and the two keep in touch after Orochimaru leaves Konoha.//
Once again, Yaodai forced my hand- so here I am starting yet another AU fanfic because why the fuck not!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Autumn is finally sinking its fangs into the Land of Fire, the last lingering warmth of summer chased away by the biting wind. Red and gold slowly consume the heavy mantle of green which cloaks Konohagakure no Sato.

In the gilded light of afternoon, Orochimaru walks through the graveyard alone.

Bearing his usual wreath of vibrant spider lilies, he approaches his parents’ gravestones, he lays the flowers on the grass, folding his hands neatly in front of him.

Here, he can calm his restless mind. Escape the million burdens that weigh so heavily on his shoulders. Only here, in the quiet, lonely corner graveyard, away from those mourning the casualties of war, he can feel some semblance of peace. He can pretend the scattered thoughts in his head make some sort of coherent sense. That the ugly feelings in his heart aren’t slowly eating him alive.

That the tremors in his left hand, the perpetual fog in his brain, the stiffness gradually setting into his muscles like rigor mortis, weren’t promising to ruin everything that made his life worth living.

If he closes his eyes and tries—really tries—he can almost (almost) feel his mother wrap her arms around him, petting his hair, telling him he’s going to be alright, “Don’t be afraid, poor pretty boy. I’ve got you.” (even if it’s a lie). That his father is telling him he’s proud of him, that he shouldn’t be afraid (even though he’s terrified).

But of course, it’s all just an illusion, and when he opens his eyes, his mother and father (Mama and Papa, he remembers, he still remembers and he used to think he wanted to forget. But he doesn’t, he wants to remember and God please don’t let me forget-) aren’t there. They never are.

However—he’s no longer alone in his secluded corner of the graveyard.

He first catches a glimpse of the child out of the corner of his eye, surprised that they’d managed to sneak behind him unnoticed. He turns his head toward the child—a boy who can’t be older than three or four. A tiny, frail thing with wide, black eyes and downy black hair to match, dressed in the same dark attire as the others. The little child’s eyes bore into Orochimaru as though he wished to burn a hole through him.

Orochimaru raises an eyebrow—a silent what are you doing? to his unexpected companion.

“...What’s the point?”

“Hm?”

The boy gestures toward the graves, and the flowers, then at the group of solemn shinobi a few meters away.

“Mourning. What do we do it for?”

Orochimaru blinks, surprised to hear such a question from one so very young.

(In truth, he’s never given much thought to it himself.)

“...I suppose there isn’t a reason,” he answers, after mulling it over for a few precious moments. “After all—grieving for the dead is meaningless.”
“Then why do we grieve?”

(Such big questions from such a tiny thing.)

“I suppose we grieve the loss of the life they could have had,” Orochimaru answers.

“But what’s the point of life?”

The child looks so very serious- Orochimaru almost laughs.

“There isn’t one,” Orochimaru answers, smiling pitifully at the boy. “After all- if life had any sort of meaning, why would it ever end?”

This is evidently not the sort of answer the child was hoping for. His little brow knits together, a frown pulling at his mouth.

“If there’s any sort of point to living and dying, it’s to take advantage of them, don’t you think?”

The boy is silent.

Orochimaru supposes this isn’t the sort of conversation such a small child could understand, so he turns to walk away-

“-Wait!”

The boy catches him by the sleeve. His lower lip trembles, those huge, black eyes full to the brim with tears.

“If there’s no point to living, then why do we live?!” he demands, that minute voice cracking under emotions too heavy for him to bear.

“-We fight each other and we kill and we die but what’s the point if life doesn’t mean anything?!”

The tears overflow, spilling down round little cheeks. A great sob wracks that tiny little body, sharp and painful to listen to.

Orochimaru cocks his head, a twinge of pity stirring at the depths of a heart he thought had dried up years ago.

So, rather than leave this poor child, as he intended to, he stays.

He kneels down, though his body is stiff and aching. He takes one of the boy’s tiny hands in his, allowing the other to rest on his head, atop that hair that’s as soft and as black as a crow’s feathers.

(Such a strange thing, he muses, for the briefest moment, that something so small could grow into a man someday.)

“Hush, now,” he commands, though he keeps his voice gentle. “Crying won’t solve anything.”

A sniff. A grimace. How terribly pitiful.

“Perhaps there isn’t a purpose in life. But, if you linger here awhile longer, you might find something to make it worthwhile.”

The child makes a small, mournful sound. Like a sad puppy.
“...I thought for sure you would know,” he whines.

“Hm?”

“You’re one of the Sannin. If you don’t know, then-”

(How strange, that this boy so very, very young would recognize him. Though- he supposes he’s one of those types who stands out in a crowd.)

Before Orochimaru has a chance to ask the child his name, he receives his answer.

“Ttachi, we’re leaving.”

A tall, grim-faced man places a firm hand on the boy’s shoulder, perhaps shocked to see his son so bold as to talk to one of the legendary Sannin.

(Or alarmed that his son had so obviously been crying.)

Uchiha Fugaku leads his son away without another word, and Itachi obeys without a protest.

Ah. Uchiha Itachi. A few things make sense, now.

He’d heard whispers. Rumors about the child that circulated through the village. The *scandal* that’s been bubbling since the day Fugaku and Mikoto brought home their too-tiny, too-early firstborn from the hospital.

The Uchiha are such a strong, proud clan, after all. Weakness was something they shunned, for fear of sullying the bloodline. And for their head to produce such a sickly heir- well.

Not many people got the chance to see the boy; most of the time (or so Orochimaru has heard), he’s confined in his home, like a caged bird (or like a prisoner), a revolving door of physicians his only company.

Rather than the celebration the clan held with the birth of each new child, the Uchiha clan’s strong, steadfast leader had been planning a funeral for his unfortunate firstborn. Little wonder, then, that he’s already so preoccupied with death.

But his firstborn child did not die.

Uchiha Itachi. Orochimaru has a feeling he’ll want to remember that name.

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Shimura Danzo is agitated. Orochimaru can tell that much before the old man opens his mouth. The air in his underground hideaway instantly drops several degrees the moment he steps in.

“Is something the matter?”

(It’s an obvious question with an obvious answer, but Orochimaru can’t help but ask it.)

“Namikaze Minato is to be the Fourth.”

Orochimaru isn’t surprised to hear it. How *could* he be surprised, when he’d so long ago fallen out of
his Sensei’s favor?
Despite being thoroughly unsurprised, however, the words still sting.

(His mind’s eye can see that old childhood ambition at last slipping from his grasp.)

“...And I suppose you’re unhappy with this decision?” Orochimaru inquires, even though the answer is obvious.

“He’s far too young. He’s got no experience in diplomacy, or any sort of political background. He’s not the sort of person you’d put in as a strong leader.”

“That’s because Sarutobi isn’t looking for a strong leader.”

Orochimaru turns his head, unwilling to look at the old man any longer. He fiddles with his beakers, his research notes—anything to keep his hands and his eyes occupied.

“But that what Sarutobi-sensei wants will matter for much longer, anyway.”

He knows what Danzo wants to hear, and—though it eats him alive—he’s willing to say it for now.

“If my research is successful, the Hidden Leaf will be in your grasp.”

These words don’t soothe Danzo’s anger at all.

“Everything is going Hiruzen’s way at the moment,” he growls.

“Hm.”

Orochimaru doesn’t let the vile badger see his face, lest he catch just how tired he feels.

“Sandaime intends to use Minato as a puppet,” he agrees, and curses himself for how weary he sounds. “To keep running the village the way he wants.”

He takes a breath. Slips on the mask of the unflappable Orochimaru he knows he must maintain. He bears his teeth in a semblance of a grin when he finally faces Danzo again.

“If you want to take that power from him, you’ll need to think of other measures.”

This seems to set the wheels in Danzo’s head turning. He stands wordless for a few moments, leaning heavily on his cane, lost in his own thoughts.

“If I expect you to complete your work soon,” he says, then turns on his heel and storms out as quickly as he’d barged in.

The moment the heavy door slams shut, Orochimaru slumps against the metal work table, pent-up breath escaping him. He grinds his teeth, silently cursing that rotten old man who plagued him.

But he can’t dwell on that too long. Time is a luxury, and he has precious little left.

He fishes in one of the pockets of his flak jacket, popping the top off a small pill bottle.

He swallows three of them dry, with a sigh and a grimace.

The medication goes to work immediately, taking some of the stiffness from his limbs, soothing the tremors in his hand.
Danzo is right about one thing. He has work left to do. And he has to finish it soon.

A few days later, in the early hours of the morning, Orochimaru is once again in his lonely corner of the graveyard. Legs folded beneath him, he stares, without really seeing, at the graves before him.

Exactly like the other graves. Blending into the endless rows of fallen soldiers. Shinobi and kunoichi who faded into the crowd of the nameless dead the moment their bodies failed.

The thought of one day joining them sends a shiver up Orochimaru’s spine.

“-Orochimaru-sama?”

That voice. That tiny, quiet voice.

“You’re up a bit early, aren’t you, Itachi-kun?”

Itachi musters up a small, sheepish smile.

“I snuck out,” he admits, bashfully, hands behind his back. “Please don’t tell my parents.”

“Oh? And what did you do that for?” Orochimaru chuckles, suddenly quite amused.

“Well- I hoped you’d be here again.”

Itachi kneels beside him, in a miniature mirror of Orochimaru’s posture. His cherubic face is almost comically grim in its expression.

“Did you need something, Itachi-kun?”

“...I’m gonna be a big brother.”

“Hm?”

“My mom’s gonna have a baby. In the summer, I’m gonna have a little brother or sister.”

“Is that so.”

Itachi fidgets with his little hands.

“The war is over now, right?” he asks. “So my new brother or sister isn’t gonna have to-”

He trails off, sadness casting clouds over those lovely eyes of his.

“Nobody knows for sure,” Orochimaru answers. “This war is over, yes- but I’m sure there will be others. There have always been others.”

Itachi flinches as though the man had slapped him, his head hanging heavy.

“I’m sorry to upset you, Itachi-kun. But lying to you won’t do you any good.”

The boy nods.
“So, how do I protect them?”

“Eh?”

“My brother- or my sister. How do I protect them, if a war comes back? What do I do?”

Orochimaru reaches out, and ruffles the boy’s downy hair.

He remembers asking that same question, so many years ago. At this same pair of graves, accompanied by Sarutobi-sensei.

The answer he gives is the same answer Sarutobi had given him back then.

“When that time comes, Itachi-kun, you’ll know what you’ll have to do.”
“Good, perfect. Let’s try that new jutsu out today, shall we?”

Orochimaru’s students watch, riveted, as he walks them through the hand seals for their new technique. One by one, they mirror his motions, three sets of eager eyes fixed on him.

He keeps up his facade. The patient Sensei. This is what he needs to be right now. Nothing else matters in this moment except the three children copying his movements. Not Danzo, not his research. Nothing else.

(His poor students. They have no idea this is the last time they’ll get to train together.)

“Watch your fingers on the bird seal, Hakuto-kun. If the angle is off, it won’t work properly.”

“Yes, Sensei.”

“Anko-chan, be careful- you want your left hand to overlap the right on the snake seal.”

“Right, sorry-”

“Very good- Amai-kun, you’ll need to get your wrists flatter on the boar seal. Like this, see?”

“Understood, Sensei.”

“Good, good…”

He trails off, finding himself distracted.

“Sensei?”

Orochimaru chortles. The leaves behind him rustle, and a blur of black disappears behind a tree trunk.

“-You can join us if you like, Itachi-kun. No need to sneak around.”

Head bowed bashfully, the boy pokes his head out from behind the tree.

“Sorry,” he mumbles. “I wanted to watch-”

“There’s no need to apologize. We’re glad to have you with us.”

Itachi creeps closer, shyly averting his eyes.
“How much have you caught, Itachi-kun?”

“Um- I think-”

His little hands glide effortlessly through the hand seals, one after the other.

“Is this right? I’ve never tried a fuinjutsu before, so I’m not sure-”

Orochimaru can’t help but smile.

“Oh? How could you tell it was a fuinjutsu?”

“My parents have a lot of books about all sorts of jutsu. This one is almost the same as the basic sealing jutsu I was reading about last night.”

“Eh? Aren’t you a little young to be reading books like that?” Anko interjects, squinting at the little child that’s interrupted their training.

Itachi shrugs. “Maybe.”

Orochimaru steers them back on track.

“You’re quite right, Itachi-kun. I’ve truncated the basic sealing jutsu to make it quicker to perform. It’s useful for keeping weapons on you without taking up too much space- especially when you’re small and don’t have much to begin with.”

He pulls out a few blank paper scrolls, and hands one to each of the children.

“We can try it out on a couple shuriken.”

“Yeah!” Anko bounces from one foot to the other in excitement. “Gimme-”

Anko lays her scroll out flat, tossing a handful of weapons carelessly on top of it. Her tongue pokes out of the corner of her mouth, eyes screwed up in concentration. Her teammates copy her- albeit with a bit more composure.

After some hesitation, Itachi does as well.

“Good- now, just as I’ve shown you-”

They perform the seals in unison; the shuriken vanish in small puffs of smoke, replaced by small, black circles of kanji on the paper.

“Perfect,” Orochimaru praises, clapping his hands together. “You’ve picked it up faster than I’d thought you would!”

His three students light up at the praise. A faint pink dusts Itachi’s cheeks.

The boy sticks around for the rest of their training- mostly silently observing. Occasionally joining in when it’s time to practice ninjutsu.

(He’d known the boy was bright for his age, but Orochimaru didn’t suspect just how much of a natural shinobi he seems to be.)

It’s around noon when they finish. Anko tries to make some excuse to stay later, to stay with Orochimaru, but he scolds her gently, and sends her on her way home. Eventually, he and Itachi are
alone in the spacious training grounds. Itachi fixes him with a determined stare.

“I want you to teach me.”

“Oh?”

Itachi curls his little hands into little fists.

“I want to be strong enough to protect my brother or sister. I wanna be strong enough to lead my clan. I wanna be strong enough that people stop looking at me like I’m broken.”

Suddenly, he bows deeply, eyes scrunched up in an effort to hide his emotions.

“Orochimaru-sama, please take me on as your student!”

Orochimaru laughs from sheer surprise.

“Oh, Itachi-kun. You’re adorable.”

Itachi splutters, looking thoroughly offended at being called adorable. Orochimaru shakes his head, laughter giving way to a sigh.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that for you, Itachi-kun.”

“Huh? But why-”

“It’s not for you to worry about,” Orochimaru interrupts. “But I won’t be around in the village long enough to be a good teacher for you.”

Itachi’s little brow knits together.

“What do you mean?”

Orochimaru shakes his head once more. He slides his fingers under the boy’s chin, tilting his head upward.

(He wants to tell him the truth. That he’s ill, that he’s dying- and if what he’s planning doesn’t work, he’s going to fade away, and nothing anybody could do could save him. But that’s a burden Itachi doesn’t deserve to bear.)

“It means I won’t be able to stay in Konoha much longer.”

“I’ll go with you!” Itachi declares.

Orochimaru falters.

It’s tempting, oh so tempting, to take this poor, bright child away from here. Away from this wretched hole of misery, before it can break his tender heart.

And yet-

It would be cruel- so very cruel- to take him away from his parents. From his home.

(And in the event what he’s planning fails him- and it very well might- it would be cruel to make Itachi watch him die.)

“No,” he finally answers, firmly.
“But-”

“-Don’t start crying again.”

The boy bites his bottom lip, swallowing a melancholy sound, and it hurts. It hurts to listen to.

“Itachi-kun. Which do you want- a brother or a sister?”

“Huh?”

The child blinks in his surprise.

“Do you want a little brother or a little sister?” Orochimaru repeats, wanting to comfort him. Wanting to persuade him not to follow.

“...I want a little brother.”

“And that little brother will need you there for him, Itachi-kun. He’ll need you to protect him, and look after him. Don’t you think?”

Itachi whines, but manages to nod in understanding.

“Good boy.”

Orochimaru tucks a stray wisp of hair behind Itachi’s ear.

“You don’t need to be sad. It won’t be forever.”

His words don’t seem to be reassuring to Itachi.

“Here- you’re good with jutsu- so let me show you something.”

He walks Itachi, patiently, through another series of hand signs. When they’ve finished, a pair of identical snakes, small and snowy white, appear from a little puff of smoke.

“If you need me, this jutsu will let you find me, no matter how far apart we are.”

Itachi’s dark eyes light up; he reaches down to let one of the snakes wind itself up his skinny arm, its forked tongue flicking in and out, before vanishing along with its twin.

“...So, you’ll still talk to me?” he asks, some happiness at last coloring his cheeks. “Even when you leave?”

“Of course, Itachi-kun. But you can’t tell anyone, alright?”

Orochimaru presses a thin finger to his thin lips, smiling playfully at him.

“It has to stay just between us, alright?”

“Yeah!”

Itachi is smiling now, too.

(He feels so sneaky, so wonderfully naughty, to finally have a secret of his own.)

“Well, I think you should go home, Itachi-kun. Your mother will worry if you’re gone for too long.”
The boy pouts a little.

“...I guess so.”

Orochimaru watches as the child leaves, a little sadness tugging at his heart.

He’d wonder if he’s doing the right thing- but he’s long, long past the point of wondering such things.

In this world, he knows there’s no room for uncertainty. That’s the sort of thing that eats you alive.

Orochimaru thought he’d been prepared for the all-too likely event that Sarutobi would discover what he’s been up to. Thought he could face the old man’s anger, his sorrow, his horror at what Orochimaru had done. He’d thought, really thought, that he had banished any warmth he’d once felt toward his sensei, thought he could face him coldly.

And yet- that look of stunned betrayal on Sarutobi’s face breaks something inside of him. As the old man takes in the sight around him- the scrolls of forbidden jutsu, the half-dead body on the gurney behind him, the splatter of blood across Orochimaru’s face- he slowly loses color.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demands, his voice weak. “Orochimaru, what have you done?!!”

It’s so tempting to tell him the truth- to expose the dirty secrets he’s kept hidden all these years. But he knows, even if he tells, that it’s too late, far too late, to fix everything he’s done.

So he lies. Feels the mask slip over his true self, so natural it’s a part of him now.

He hears himself say words that he doesn’t really believe, like some alien creature has taken over his throat. He talks about immortality, about all those secrets of the Universe he wishes to unravel. He watches Hiruzen’s eyes grow wide, watches him become afraid, and it hurts even though there shouldn’t be any bond left between them to hurt Orochimaru anymore.

He hears Sarutobi calling for him as he flees, hears the old man’s heart breaking (breaking like Anko’s heart is going to be broken, all alone because he’s abandoning her, the poor thing-) and he almost feels regret.

But he pushes that aside, because regret is something he can’t afford. Not anymore.

Leaving poor Anko hurts even worse than leaving Hiruzen.

He turns his back to her, because he can’t stand to see the sorrow on her face. But he can’t block out her voice, her voice and it's painful to hear.

“Orochimaru-sensei, it hurts!” she cries, curled up tightly, clutching at the bleeding wound in her neck.
He wants to turn around, wants to cradle her in his arms, wants to pet her hair and comfort her because *hold on, just a little longer, you'll be okay*. He wants to stay with her, to hold her hand and ease the pain until the Cursed Seal of Heaven finally takes hold of her.

*You’ll be okay, just bear with it, it’ll make you stronger, it’ll protect you-*

He can’t bring himself to face her, or the misery he knows will be in those lovely violet eyes.

“*Orochimaru-sensei please-*”

Her words garble together into incoherent screaming.

Orochimaru walks away, shutting the door behind him, shutting off whatever tender feelings he’d felt toward his pupil.

(Poor thing. Poor little child. It’s his fault, all his fault. She doesn’t deserve this. But she has to be strong, strong enough to protect herself, since he won’t be able to anymore.)

He needs to go now. There’ll be ANBU on his trail soon, desperate to take him down. Every second he stands here is a second he’s wasting.

He can’t waste time anymore. Not even for Anko.

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Leaving Jiraiya hurts even worse than leaving Anko. Hurts worse than he ever thought anything could.

Jiraiya can’t move anymore- the venom Orochimaru had turned on him is doing its work, rendering his body very nearly useless. But he tries- oh how he tries.

And he speaks. Oh, he speaks.

Orochimaru had expected Jiraiya to curse him. To scream that he *hates* him.

But instead-

“‘Tell me what I did wrong, Maru,’” Jiraiya pleads, nearly choking on his own spit as the venom made swallowing near impossible. “Just tell me- whatever I did, I’m sorry-”

Jiraiya is crying, and that’s almost worse than his begging. He’s trying so hard to pull himself up, to reach for Orochimaru.

“Please, Maru- what’s going on?! I don’t understand!”

For a brief flash, Orochimaru feels the intense desire to rip Jiraiya’s throat out, if only to stop those *pitiful* words spilling out of his mouth.

But he doesn’t. He can’t. Because it’s Jiraiya.

With a heavy sigh, Orochimaru undoes the knot at the back of his Konoha headband. The headband he’d been taught to treasure. The headband he’d once been so very *proud* to wear.
He kneels down, and lays it in front of Jiraiya.

“That sentimentality of yours has always been your weakness,” he muses, in a teasing tone he doesn’t really mean.

He cups Jiraiya’s face in his hand, and it’s rough and weather-worn, wet from tears and sweat. He looks into those gray eyes one last time, hoping Jiraiya won’t catch his longing.

“I won’t be sentimental anymore, old friend.”

With those words, he stands, and turns away from Jiraiya. Listens to him rage impotently, shout his name until the syllables mean nothing.

He runs until Jiraiya’s voice fades into the veil of leaves. And then he keeps running.

Chapter End Notes

So if anyone is curious, "Hakuto" refers to a type of peach you can find in Japan, and Amai literally just means "sweet." I decided to go with a whole dessert-theme because why the hell not.
This chapter is shorter than the others cause I kinda wanna use it to bridge the gap between a couple years’ worth of time. Please enjoy like 1500 words of Itachi being a sad and adorable bean.

... Orochimaru has done it.

After endless hours of painstaking research, of searching, of hoping- Orochimaru has finally done it. He hurts. Oh, he hurts everywhere, and moving in this new body is strange and alien, but his hand doesn't shake anymore, and his muscles aren’t stiff, and his mind is so blessedly clear that he almost relishes the agony.

It had been a gamble, very much so. He’s far away from any village, from anyone who could help him if something went wrong. But, as all the best things are, it was worth the struggle.

So now, he rests, alone, in one of the underground lairs he’s been secretly setting up and securing since it became clear that he would never be Hokage. He rests, and savors the knowledge that (for now, at least) he won’t have to die. He rests, more peacefully than he’s rested for years.

(He won’t have to die, and all that it cost him was everything he had.)

He’s been away from Konoha for maybe a month now, hidden in the mountains, trying to adjust to this body that isn’t really his. Marvelling over this new flesh and its lack of scars- a blank canvas yet to be written on. Trying out the new jutsu which are embedded in his memories now, borrowed from the unfortunate soul he took this body from.

It’s bitter cold outside, snowing, but inside, underground, is warm. Orochimaru curls up with a mug of tea and some books he’s recently acquired for his research, intent on studying them thoroughly. He becomes so absorbed in his reading, and his furiously scribbled notes (his handwriting is different now, how odd), that he jumps about a foot in the air when there’s a small poof and a puff of smoke behind him.

A thin white serpent slithers onto the tabletop, flicking its tongue at him.

Oh. Oh.

It’s been so long now that Orochimaru wondered if, perhaps, Itachi had forgotten about him.

He allows the snake to wind up his arm and around his shoulders; it shares what the serpent on the other end is seeing.

Crisp white linen, harsh, bright lights, immaculate white tile.
A hospital?

“Orochimaru-sama!”

Itachi looks- well, Itachi looks dreadful.

The raccoon circles under his eyes look like bruises, harsh and deep and horrible. His skin is sallow and sickly, a thick IV needle jutting out of his tiny left hand. His voice sounds raspy and weak, his breathing reedy and strange. But the poor little bird still smiles.

“Itachi-kun?”

“I’m really sorry we couldn’t talk earlier. I got really sick right after you left- I think this is the first time I’ve been alone since-”

His sentence is cut off by a wet, hacking, horrid cough that wracks his entire little body. It’s a miracle his lungs don’t force themselves up out of his throat.

Orochimaru tries not to let the concern show on his face.

“It’s quite alright, Itachi-kun. I haven’t been feeling all that well myself.”

(It isn’t entirely a lie.)

“Are you alright? Are you feeling better now?” Itachi asks, and his innocent concern melts the coldness in Orochimaru’s heart.

(Here this child is, looking on the brink of death, asking if he’s alright.)

“I’m just fine- no need for you to worry about me.”

Itachi makes a small sound- something like a squeak.

“I’m glad!”

Itachi leans closer to the serpent, so close Orochimaru can hear the thin, paperlike fabric of the boy’s hospital gown crinkling.

“I’m really happy I got this room, Orochimaru-sama. There’s a nest of crows right outside my window, and I can see them perfect!”

“Oh really?”

Itachi turns the serpent’s head, pointing it toward the window. Indeed, a pair of rather large crows are attending to their young, nudging them toward the edge of the nest.

“The babies are learning how to fly today!” He chirrups. “And they’re gonna migrate with their mom and dad and the rest of their flock!”

He sounds so jubilant, so elated, that for a moment he seems to have forgotten he’s so gravely ill- even his thin, labored breaths sound less painful.

“Orochimaru-sama, did you know that crows remember faces? I’ve read that they recognize people who are nice to them and people that are mean to them, and they tell the other crows in their flock who’s good or not- isn’t it cool?”
Orochimaru raises an amused eyebrow.

"Is that so?"

"I know it’s true! Dad always chases off the crows in Mom’s garden, and now whenever he passes one they try to chase him too!"

Itachi is so emphatic about this that Orochimaru has to chuckle. The image of the stoic, level-headed Uchiha Fugaku being chased down the street by a gang of angry birds is an amusing one, to say the least.

"I believe you, Itachi-kun."

Suddenly, Itachi yelps, and the snake’s vision goes black as the boy shoves it under his pillow.

"Itacchan, it’s time for breakfast!"

Orochimaru hears footsteps, as the cheerful nurse approaches the bed.

"I’m not really hungry-"

"You still need to eat," the woman scolds him. "You’ve lost weight since the last time you were here. That’s not good for a boy your age."

Itachi is pouting- Orochimaru doesn’t have to see him to know that.

"I’ll be back to check on you later- I expect you to eat all of that!"

More footsteps, and the sound of a door shutting. Itachi huffs, and tugs the miffed snake back out from under his pillow, scowling at the miso and rice in the tray on his lap.

"I’m not hungry," he grumbles again.

"You should still eat," Orochimaru tells him. "You won’t get better if you don’t."

"The medicine makes my stomach hurt," Itachi protests. "I feel like I’m gonna puke all the time."

"At least try."


His throat works hard- it takes Itachi a great deal of effort to fight back his nausea enough to swallow a few mouthfuls.

"I’m gonna throw up," he complains, hand clamped over his mouth.

"It’s alright, you’re doing well," Orochimaru assures him.

With a little more coaxing, Itachi manages to get half the bowl down before he absolutely refuses to eat any more. He curls up on his side, caressing the little white serpent with one hand, the other pressed against his stomach.

His eyes are fluttering shut, unfocused as he grows drowsy.

"Orochimaru-sama," he says, voice heavy, "I’m not gonna die, am I?"

The unexpected question causes an uneasy fluttering in Orochimaru’s stomach.
“...Why would you ask that?”

The arm around his middle tightens.

“I feel like I’m dying,” he whimpers. “And Mom and Dad are having another baby- is it because I’m gonna die, and they wanna replace me?”

Orochimaru isn’t sure what the white-hot anger that surges up in his throat is directed at.

“I don’t want to hear another word like that out of you,” he commands, making Itachi flinch and making tears well up in his eyes.

(Guilty. Why does Orochimaru feel so guilty?)

“Your parents aren’t trying to replace you, Itachi-kun, and they couldn’t even if they wanted to. Because you’re one of a kind.”

He wishes he were there, to properly comfort that poor, poor child.

“Shh, you’re going to be okay. Tell me more about your crows, Itachi-kun,” he urges, wanting to make that sad face go away. “What are they doing right now?”

Itachi glances upward.

“They’ve flown away,” he says, melancholy. “I don’t think they’ll be back.”

“I bet they will. They remember faces, don’t they?”

“Yeah-”

“I’m sure they’ll remember you, Itachi-kun. When they come back, maybe they’ll find you again.”

Itachi half smiles.

“...I’d really like that.”

He allows his eyes to close fully, the snake’s flickering tongue ghosting across his forehead.

“When you come back...I’d like it if you found me, too.”

(When. What a joke.)

“Of course. How could I ever forget you?”

The twin snakes suddenly disappear- the boy must have fallen asleep.

Orochimaru tries to get back to his books, his research- but finds it rather hard to concentrate, now, with Itachi’s words echoing in his mind.

“‘I’m not gonna die, am I?’”

He knows that fear all too well. It’s what he’s been running from for years now.

He wonders-

It’s true, he knows precious little about the cause of Itachi’s condition. But that’s the sort of thing he could find out, with a little digging. He can use the connections he has left in Konoha to get a hold of
his medical records. Find some texts about whatever’s wrong with him. With a little time-

Maybe he can spare the poor child the fear of having to endure the terror he’s endured. After all- he has all the time in the world, now.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your support!
Chapter Summary

Lil Itachi has a lil crush on Shisui. Sasuke is a little asshole even as an infant. Oro is closing in on Akatsuki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s funny how time passes, when you suddenly have so much of it.

Orochimaru throws himself into his research, trying to unravel the secrets of the Universe with his own two hands. It’s a rush, a thrill, gathering knowledge like a magpie collects shiny trinkets. It hardly even matters to him that Danzo is still breathing down his neck, still making his ceaseless demands.

His new method of immortality is too crude, Danzo had said. Too basic and unrefined. Too uncivilized. Too reliant on other people. Orochimaru had some choice words he would have liked to tell the old man, but he’s been in a good mood lately, so he had merely smiled at Danzo and told him to be patient. The anger on Danzo’s face when he doesn't get the reaction he wants is far more amusing than arguing, at any rate.

(Though, of course, he has absolutely no intention of sharing his newfound treasures with Danzo. And, of course, he still wonders why, if Danzo is so keen to cheat death, he’s being so damn picky about the method he uses to cheat it.)

He researches and tests and works to his heart’s content- and before he knows it, a year and a half has gone by.

Jiraiya tries to find him, but he’s successful in staying one step ahead of him. Tsunade has left the village, and Orochimaru isn’t quite sure where she’s gone to. Hiruzen has put a huge bounty on his head, but that just makes him laugh- he isn’t afraid of a few scumbag bounty hunters, nor is he frightened by whatever wannabe-hero Chuunin who would dare to challenge him. He just keeps moving, keeps studying.

And, of course, he keeps in contact with that special little boy he’d left behind.

It’s quite late at night- probably too late for a child so young to be awake. But Itachi has such a hard time sleeping, they often wind up talking at ungodly hours, discussing new jutsu, some bird or another the boy’s been observing, or whatever adorable antics Itachi’s baby brother happened to get into that day.

“Orochimaru-sama, check it out!” Itachi chirps. “Shisui-niisan taught me how to do the shadow clone jutsu today!”

He looks around his bedroom first, making sure his curtains are drawn tight, and the clothes he’s tucked along his door to keep the light from spilling out are still in place. He goes through the hand signs as fast as his little fingers can form them. There’s a puff of smoke, and another Itachi appears.
“Oh my- that’s impressive, Itachi-kun!” he praises, his full attention finally pulled away from his writing.

“...We’ve been using it to skip class,” Itachi admits, sheepishly, his cheeks dusted pink.

“Well, that’s no good, is it?”

“It’s not my fault class is boring!” Itachi whines in protest. He crosses his arms with an indignant huff.

“Everything is so dull- we can learn more stuff if we do it on our own, and it’s not like we get caught!”

“Is that so?”

Itachi lets the shadow clone dissipate in another cloud of smoke, pouting.

“I don’t feel like I’m getting anywhere at school. And nobody seems like they really like me, anyway. So why shouldn’t Shisui-niisan and I do stuff on our own?”

Part of Orochimaru knows he should scold the boy, but the other part feels a great deal of sympathy for the boredom. And another-

“What do you mean they don’t like you, Itachi-kun?”

Itachi turns his head away.

“Someone tried to get their big brother to hurt me the other day. He said he thinks I’m full of myself.”

“Oh?”

Itachi hugs his knees to his chest; the serpent winds its way around his ankle, raising its head in curiosity.

“What did you do?” Orochimaru prods.

“I stopped him from hurting me,” Itachi answers. “That’s all.”

Itachi fiddles with a loose shuriken, still frowning.

“Orochimaru-sama, is there something wrong with me?”

“Eh?”

Carelessly tossing the shuriken aside, Itachi picks the serpent up, looking into its gold eyes as though they were Orochimaru’s.

“I don’t have any friends at the Academy- the girls all talk behind my back, and the guys all look at me like I’m weird. I don’t have any friends besides Izumi and Shisui-niisan- am I doing something wrong?”

He whines, hanging his head like a sad puppy.
“I want people to like me-”

“Itachi-kun.”

Orochimaru’s tone is scolding, but not harsh. It gets the boy to raise his head again.

(He remembers what it’s like to be so lonely. To want the approval of your peers is natural, after all.)

“So you don’t have a lot of friends- it’s not the end of the world. You haven’t done anything wrong, so if they can’t accept you, that’s their loss. You don’t need their approval to be happy as you are.”

Itachi lets out a small sound, picking at a loose thread on his blanket.

“I know it sounds impossible now. But it’ll get easier as you get older.”

(Maybe it’s a lie. Even Orochimaru isn’t sure.)

Faintly, Orochimaru can hear the sound of a baby fussing. Itachi snaps to attention in a heartbeat.

“-I’ll be right back!”

Itachi leaps from his bed and out his door, vanishing from view for maybe thirty seconds. When he returns, he’s carrying a fussing bundle of blankets.

“It’s okay, Sasuke. It’s okay, I’m here-”

Mindful of the infant in his arms, Itachi clambered back onto his bed.

“Sasuke look, Orochimaru-sama is here,” he says, trying to redirect the cranky baby’s attention. The white serpent flicks out its tongue; Sasuke makes a shrill, frightened sound.

“Hey, hey, don’t be scared, it isn’t gonna hurt you-”

Orochimaru can’t help the smile that crosses his lips.

Even at this early age, he could tell that Sasuke was quite a different creature than Itachi. He was a chubby, vivacious little child, with round, rosy cheeks and stubby little limbs and a gregarious disposition. Strong lungs, too- Orochimaru had heard more than once how loud that boy could scream when he wanted to.

“Shh, it’s alright- Sasuke c’mon, we don’t wanna wake mom up, okay? Here-”

He sets Sasuke down on his pile of pillows, and smiles apologetically at Orochimaru.

“I need to get him back to sleep. I’ll have to talk to you later, okay?”

Orochimaru chuckles- that child has Itachi wrapped around his finger already.

“Alright. Try to get some sleep too, okay?”

“Yeah!”

Sasuke’s fussing abruptly dies away, and the snake on his desk evaporates into nothing.

The clock on the wall reads ten minutes to one in the morning.

His eyelids are starting to feel heavy, but he doesn't feel like turning in just yet.
He scribbles out a few more notes, before he’s finally satisfied that he’ll have everything he needs to start his latest batch of experiments. It’ll take him longer than he’d hoped, but he’s confident he’ll be successful. He folds his notes up neatly, using them to mark his place in his book. Then, he stands, stretches, and yawns to chase away the tiredness and he stiffness in his limbs.

Before he starts on that, though, he has something else he wants to do.

He’s been chasing rumors lately- rumors about an uprising in Amegakure, risen from the ashes of the purportedly disbanded group of renegade teenagers known as Akatsuki.

And, there’s his suspicions about the sudden radio silence he’s received from Hanzo of the Salamander.

He hasn’t told Danzo yet- and depending on what he learns, he probably never will. But he’s got a sneaking suspicion as to why Hanzo hasn’t made contact in over a month, when he man normally had an opinion on everything.

So, Orochimaru has decided he’s going to see for himself.

If Hanzo is alive, he can inquire as to why he’s gone silent. And if he isn’t- well, Orochimaru won’t complain that he doesn't have to play messenger boy between him and Danzo anymore.

“Well then,” he mumbles to himself, feeling the sudden weight of his solitude all around him. “Now the real fun begins.”

“Shisui-nii?”

“Yeah?”

Shisui flops downward, hanging by his legs from a tree branch, his messy mop of curls bouncing wildly.

Itachi wrings his hands, feeling his face grow warm.

“-Do you think I’m weird?”

“Huh? Sure I do!”

Shisui giggles at the offended expression on Itachi’s face.

“Hey, it’s not a bad thing! All the best people are weird, y’know!”

With a flip and a flourish, Shisui dismounts the tree, landing deftly on the forest floor.

“I’m pretty weird too, y’know,” he says, with a sly grin.

Itachi blinks.

“C’mon, don’t be stupid, ‘Tachi! You should be proud of being weird! Who wants to be normal, anyway?”
Itachi mumbles something.

“C’mon, ‘Tachi. I’ve got some new stuff I wanna try today!”

Shisui takes his hand and leads him deeper into the forest, chattering on about how excited he is, about the jutsu he’s gotten for them to learn, how much cooler it is in the forest, shielded from the summer sun, how beautiful the sun looks as it bounces off the leaves-everything and absolutely nothing, all at once.

Itachi loves it when Shisui speaks.

He never really says much back, but Shisui never really seems to mind. He chatters away to fill the silence, pointing out pretty flowers and interesting bugs and oddly-shaped rocks, still beaming in that way that only Shisui can.

Shisui doesn’t treat Itachi like the others- he isn’t mean to him, like the boys at school, and he doesn’t treat him like he’s made of glass, like his clansmen do. To Shisui, Itachi isn’t the frail prodigy, or the strange, withdrawn child in the back of the class. To Shisui, Itachi is just a friend.

It makes Itachi happy. Makes his cheeks grow warm and makes his stomach flutter.

He bounces on his heels while Shisui pulls out the scrolls and other etcetera he decided they’d need for the day.

“Hey, I brought some snacks too- catch!”

Itachi catches the small bag of candy Shisui tosses at him.

“You’re really skinny, so I figured you could use it, y’know?”

Itachi scowls, but he isn’t really angry, and he pops a piece of candy in his mouth anyway. Shisui unrolls a scroll on the ground, dark eyes scanning over the kanji at a lightning pace.

“Alright, I wanna try this one first- it’ll take a few hours, cause it looks kinda complicated. Then maybe we can try this one, and maybe this one here if we’ve got time left after we do our shuriken training-”


“Alright here goes-”

Itachi finds himself distracted by the ease of Shisui’s movements. Shisui makes everything he does seem easy- sometimes it makes him jealous, makes him wish he had that sort of confidence.

Maybe someday, Shisui will share some of that effortless confidence with him. And maybe, someday, Itachi can stop feeling so afraid.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks again for all the love!
Akatsuki

Chapter Summary

Orochimaru gets his life threatened a couple times, and Itachi and Sasuke do cute shit together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No matter how many times it happens, Orochimaru is always excited whenever life finds new ways to surprise him.

He looks into the endless pools of the Rinnegan, and smiles placidly at this young man who calls himself Pain. This hopeless fool claiming to be a god, but who is still practically a child.

This boy who Orochimaru recognizes as one of Jiraiya’s adopted brats.

(How interesting things have gotten all of a sudden.)

“So, should I assume Hanzo met his untimely end by your hand?”

(He asks, even though he already knows the answer.)

Those strange eyes narrow.

“That’s right.”

(He answers, although he knows Orochimaru already knows.)

Orochimaru claps his hands together.

“Congratulations on accomplishing what I and my old friends couldn’t. That’s quite the feat- I’m sure Jiraiya would be proud.”

The man who isn’t really a man yet frowns.

“I suppose I should say the same for you sneaking into my village unnoticed.”

(He sounds so annoyed it’s almost comical.)

“So it’s yours now?’”

(Again, he asks though he already knows.)

“That’s right.”

(-And again, he answers though he doesn't have to.)

For a few moments, the endless downpour of rain is the only thing that breaks the silence.
“...Well,” the one calling himself Pain finally says, “Why are you here?”

“I was chasing rumors,” Orochimaru answers. “And it seems like I’ve got my answer; if you’d like, I can be on my merry way, and you’ll never see me again. I can assure you I’ll never tell a soul what I’ve seen here.”

He turns like he’s going to leave, but a pretty young woman suddenly materializes from a million sheets of paper, wearing an uncannily blank expression.

“What makes you think I’d just let you walk away?” Pain asks, his voice dark. “You’re a friend of Konoha. Of Jiraiya. What does your word mean to me?”

A thrill runs through Orochimaru’s blood. The young woman looks toward her companion. It’s a nervous glance—though what she’s afraid of is anyone’s guess.

“Ah, so you think me untrustworthy? I wouldn’t worry your pretty heads about it— I don’t belong to Konoha anymore. And dear Jiraiya and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms anymore.”

He can practically feel the young man’s glare burning the back of his head.

“You’re the one who wanted to kill us, back then. Why shouldn’t I kill you here and return that favor?”

Orochimaru has to laugh.

“Oh dear. I’d forgotten about that.”

(He hadn’t— not really. Who could really have forgotten the sad, emaciated little children who they had bumped into so long ago? Those hopeless, haunted eyes had floated through his dreams for months afterward.)

The girl is still deathly silent, and still as a statue. He hears the boy take a step toward him.

“Answer me.”

His voice is so cold it sends a shiver up Orochimaru’s spine. It’s a demand so insistent he feels compelled to answer.

“I suppose there isn’t a good reason,” he replies, still calm on the surface (though his heart is racing). “Although, I think I could be more useful to you alive.”

The girl’s orange eyes widen the smallest fraction; Orochimaru turns around to find a similar look of surprise on Pain’s.

“I’d also heard rumors that you’re looking to add people to your organization. I have no village or alliances of my own. I’ve got piles of secrets I’d be more than happy to lend to your little group—what do you think?”

Pain scowls, obviously distrusting. He glances at his companion, and have some sort of wordless conversation with their eyes.

(They must be lovers, Orochimaru muses to himself. The way they can communicate without speaking is one of those things that only lovers truly share.)

“...Fine, then,” Pain answers, after some time has passed. “From today on, you’ll be one of the Akatsuki. But—”
Again, his voice turns to ice.

“-Try anything, and I will end you.”

It’s not a threat. It’s a promise- Orochimaru decides it best to test that promise.

“Fair enough,” he chuckles.

A look that’s probably annoyance crosses the young man’s face. He jerks his head in a gesture for Orochimaru to follow, which he obeys, the young woman with sky-colored hair following close behind.

When he looks up at the endless rain, it almost seems like the sky itself is crying.

“Sasori, he’ll be your partner from now on.”

From the hunched-up form of a rather ugly puppet, a young man looking no older than fifteen emerges. Strange eyes somewhere between brown and gray look Orochimaru up and down, pretty face perfectly blank.

“Fine,” he says, after a moment, and Pain takes that as his cue to leave; now, Orochimaru and Sasori are alone in the huge dim, dreary expanse of Akatsuki’s headquarters. Sasori starts walking around him in slow, deliberate circles, cocking his head from one side to another like a little bird. Absentmindedly, he starts to fiddle with a lock of messy auburn hair.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, too.” Orochimaru’s voice drips sarcasm; Sasori doesn’t acknowledge that he’s spoken.

He finally raises those oddly colored eyes to meet Orochimaru’s gold.

“I suppose you’d be more useful as a partner than a puppet,” he muses, pulling a frown and scratching his chin. “But if you can’t keep up with me, I won’t hesitate to gut you.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Orochimaru replies, unafraid of this strange boy with the strange eyes.

His lack of fear doesn't sit well with Sasori- the boy scowls at him, resting his hands on his hips and narrowing his eyes.

“I should warn you that I’m not a very patient person, so I’d be careful if I were in your position. It's not a good idea to try me.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

Orochimaru thinks, rather amusedly, how funny it is that he should have his life threatened twice in less than an hour. Usually he gets at least a day between death threats.

(He supposes it can’t really be helped.)

Sasori’s gaze is still fixated on him, examining him like he were some museum artifact. He reaches to touch his hair, seemingly drawn to it like a magpie drawn to something shiny. Orochimaru
reflexively swats his hand away like he were a child reaching for the stove.

“You’re about a hundred years too young to be touching me so casually,” he warns.

Sasori makes an annoyed sound, looking miffed.

He mumbles something that sounds like “frigid” and stalks off; perhaps Orochimaru has wounded his pride. When the boy vanishes into the maze of corridors, Orochimaru takes in his bleak surroundings.

It’s funny, he thinks. Here he is, allying himself with Jiraiya’s pet orphans for- what reason, exactly? A whim, probably. Or maybe it’s just spite.

Still, he can’t help but be curious as to where this quaint little organization is going to go. And what better way to study it than from inside it? And to be so close to someone with Rinnegan- he’d be a fool to pass that up.

So, he belongs to an organization once again. He can’t wait to see where it’ll go from here.

“Your clothes are different.”

Itachi’s little brow furrows while he takes in the heavy red and black cloak draped over Orochimaru’s shoulders.

“Well, I’ve made some new friends, Itachi-kun. I’ll be staying with them for awhile.”

“Oh!” Itachi grins at him. “I’m glad!”

He leans forward a bit, and a hint of excitement lights up his eyes.

“Orochimaru-sama, I’ve been meaning to tell you-”

Orochimaru tilts his head, an amused smile gracing his lips.

“-I’m gonna be graduating really soon!”

That smile turns into a look of surprise.

“Oh? After only a year?”

“Yeah! Mom and Dad signed the paperwork today- as long as I don’t get sick before then, I’m gonna graduate with the older kids at the end of the month!”

Orochimaru knows he should be happy, and that the boy is hoping for his praise. But it’s hard to swallow up the distaste welling up inside him, and the venomous words which dance on his tongue.

He can understand the boy’s parents giving their approval, wanting desperately for their sickly child to not appear weak in the eyes of the village. But the others-

-For one to graduate so young, they need approval of not only their parents and teachers, but from the Hokage as well. Hiruzen looked at this frail, soft-hearted little boy and said he was okay to be a
Shinobi. That he’s okay to go out and fight and kill and maybe die for him.

(Orochimaru feels like breaking something.)

“Orochimaru-sama?”

Itachi’s smile has faded; he peers into the serpent’s eyes, at Orochimaru. Those worried dark eyes ask *did I do something wrong?”*

The man shakes his head.

“I’m very proud of you, Itachi-kun.”

The boy lights back up at his praise.

“-Just wait and watch me, Orochimaru-sama! I’m gonna be the best shinobi the clan’s ever seen! A- and I’ll.”

He turns pink in the cheeks, and hesitates out of embarrassment.

“...I’m gonna be Hokage!” he blurts out. “I’m gonna be the best Hokage the village has ever had!”

Orochimaru snorts in surprise, not expecting so bold a statement from one so small. It warms the heart he thought had gone forever cold, gives him a hope he thought he couldn’t have again.

“I’m sure you’ll be a great Hokage, Itachi-kun.”

“And when I’m Hokage, you can come back too, right?”

“Hm?”

“When things here are better, you can come back home, right? Maybe you can even bring your new friends, too!”

Itachi is so bright, so excited, that Orochimaru couldn’t bear to burst his bubble.

“I’ll look forward to it, Itachi-kun.”

“-Niisan!”

Itachi jumps about a foot in the air.

“Niisan! Niisan where go?”

There’s the tapping of a small hand on Itachi’s bedroom door.

“Niisan play!”

“It seems like your little brother is looking for you,” Orochimaru chortles.

Sasuke’s tone becomes ever more childish and petulant, his hand beating on the door more insistently.

“-Want Niisan! Want Niisan!”

Itachi sighs.
“I should probably pay him some attention,” he says, with a small smile. “See you soon?”

“Of course.”

Itachi sends the snake away with a quick hand sign, and at last opens his bedroom door.

“Niisan!” Sasuke squeals, clapping chubby hands and beaming his adorable gap-toothed smile. He reaches for his older brother, tugging impatiently on the leg of his pajama pants.

(He’d felt far too lazy to put on proper clothing just yet.)

“Niisan, want up!”

Itachi gives in to Sasuke’s demand; Sasuke giggles, patting his big brother’s cheeks with his tiny hands.

“Wanna play!”

“Alright, alright, Sasuke. What do you wanna do?”

“Wanna hide!”

Sasuke ducks behind his arms, then pops back out again, throwing his arms outward.

“Hide and seek! Wanna hide ‘n seek with Niisan!”

Itachi sets Sasuke down.

“Alright- who should hide first?”

“Sasuke hide! Niisan find!”

“Okay, then.”

Itachi covers his eyes and starts to count; he can hear Sasuke scampering off to find a hiding place.

“Ten! Alright, ready or not, here I come!”

Although Sasuke’s muffled giggling gives him away, Itachi pretends he can’t hear it. He deliberately wanders past Sasuke’s hiding spot under the kotatsu.

“Where could he have gone?” he muses aloud. “Oh dear, I don’t think I can find him.”

Sasuke’s giggling grows louder still.

“Oh no, he must be lost! What will I tell Mom and Dad?”

“Sasuke here!”

Sasuke leaps from his hiding place, beaming from ear to ear. He toddles over to Itachi on his chubby little legs.

“Oh there you are!” Itachi cries in mock relief. “I was worried for a minute!”

“Sasuke hide! Sasuke ninja! Like Niisan!” he declares.
“Yeah, just like Niisan.”

Itachi pats his little brother on the head.

“Alright, now it’s my turn to hide. Got it?”

“Yeah!”

Itachi heads off to find a place while Sasuke struggles to count.

He ducks behind the living room curtains and waits.

After a minute or two, Sasuke moves the curtain, and cries out in triumph.

“Found Niisan!”

“That’s right,” Itachi laughs. “You found me.”

Chapter End Notes

I know the hide n’ seek thing seems pointless, but try to remember it- believe it or not, it’s gonna be important later!
Inside-out

Chapter Summary

The dissolution of Itachi’s genin team- spoilers for the Itachi Shinden

“Who’s this, Orochimaru-sama?”

Itachi cocks his head like the birds he’s so fond of. Sasori peers over Orochimaru’s shoulder, the barest hint of a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“He’s a friend of mine,” Orochimaru answers, deliberately ignoring the sudden invasion of his personal space. “Sasori, this is Itachi-kun.”

“Oh. I-it’s nice to meet you,” Itachi mumbles.

“So that’s who you’re always muttering to,” Sasori remarks. “Here I’d thought you just lost your mind.”

His deadpan tone means it takes Orochimaru a moment to realize he’s joking. The way Itachi’s brow furrows, though, he doesn’t seem to have understood.

“You had something to tell me?” Orochimaru prompts him.

“Right!”

Itachi leans forward on his hands, breaking out in a grin.

“My team got picked to be the Daimyo’s escort for this year!”

“Oh?”

“Yeah! We’re leaving today, actually! I’ve got all my stuff packed, and I’ll be meeting up with Shinko and Tenma in an hour!”

“Hm. Your parents must be very proud of you.”

Itachi’s cheeks turn pink, and he nods an affirmation.

“Sensei says he’s got something special planned for when we get back,” he says, gathering his hair back into a ponytail. “But he won’t tell us what it is.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fun for you, Itachi-kun.”

Itachi looks over his shoulder.

“I should go. I’ll see you when I get back!” he chirps.

A small poof later, and all that’s on Orochimaru’s desk is the set of dusty old scrolls he’d managed to retrieve on their last mission.
“You seem fond of him,” Sasori remarks, going back to the puppet he’s been busy repairing.

“What of it?” Orochimaru asks.

“I wouldn’t get too attached, if I were you.”

“Hm?”

Sasori yanks a broken cable out of his puppet’s back.

“He looks like the type to die young.”

“What makes you so sure of that?” Orochimaru asks, raising an eyebrow despite being turned away from his companion.

“Sometimes you just know,” Sasori replies.

There’s a brief interim of silence between them. Orochimaru goes back to his scrolls, copying bits he finds interesting into a leather-bound notebook. The repetitive, familiar sounds of Sasori’s craftsmanship are oddly comforting.

“...I bet I could make a good puppet out of him,” Sasori muses, out of nowhere. “He’d make a pretty one.”

Orochimaru bristles; perhaps Sasori catches that he isn’t keen on the idea, because he doesn’t say another word on the matter.

They lapse back into the companionable silence which comprises most of their time together. The sound of pen on paper mingles with the sound of Sasori working as they fall into their familiar rhythm.

This new research should be more than enough for him to plot out his next batch of experiments. All he has left to do is gather up his test subjects and he should be set for the next month or so. Sasori will be glad to make use of whoever doesn’t make it through. Danzo will probably be more than happy to point him toward convenient lab rats.

There’s no clock in their shared room, but he can guess it’s very late at night. He stretches out, feeling his back crack in a satisfying way (he really hates being still for so long).

“I think I’ll get some air before I turn in for the night.”

“Whatever you want.”

The air outside is pleasantly warm. Far out in Rice Country, the world is quiet apart from the soft sounds of nature. It’s perfect for when he just wants to sit in the grass and let his mind wander to nothing in particular.

The full moon is so bright above him. He wonders if Itachi and his little genin team have stopped for the night. Maybe he’s looking up at the stars too, those wide eyes full of curiosity. Surely that adorably awkward charm of his will have won over the Daimyo by now.

“He looks like the type to die young.”

No. He shouldn’t concern himself with Sasori’s musings. How could he presume to know anything
about a child he hadn’t even met in person?

Besides- Itachi looked better during their last conversation than he had in ages. So Orochimaru is pretty sure that Sasori is pulling his prediction straight out of his-

Well.

Running his hands along the soft grass, he decides he won’t waste any time worrying about it. He’s got plenty to keep his mind occupied for the next long while, anyway.

It’s rather remarkable that, despite the different uniforms and headbands of each village’s ninja, despite the wild variants in ideology, the chest-beating declarations of superiority- they all look the same once he’s got them cut open.

About two months have passed, and his experiments all but concluded, before he realizes he hasn’t heard from Itachi in a long time.

Normally, he waits for the kid to approach him on his own terms- he doesn’t seem like the type to like any surprise intrusions into his private life. But he can’t shake that nagging worry in the back of his mind that maybe something awful happened.

So, when he can’t bear to wait any longer, he forms the seal and makes contact himself. The snake pokes its head out from under Itachi’s bed, slithering up onto the sheets and nudging the boy gently.

He’s a bit surprised, to say the least, when Itachi grabs the serpent rather roughly, and shoves it against the wall.

There’s a wild panic in his eyes which, rather than their usual charcoal color, are the familiar, bloody crimson of the Sharingan.

After a moment, Itachi realizes who it is. He releases a pent-up breath, and lets the agitated snake go.

“What on Earth is the matter, Itachi-kun?” Orochimaru asks, gently.

Itachi lets out a sharp whine of distress. He presses a hand over his mouth; his wide, red eyes are luminescent in his dark bedroom.

“...Tenma’s dead.”

“Hm?”

Hugging his knees tightly to his chest, the boy fights against the urge to cry.

“Tenma’s dead. Sensei, too.”

Orochimaru blinks, brow furrowed in confusion.

Surely that can’t have happened? The Daimyo’s escort is one of the safest missions one could ever be sent on. He remembers doing it himself once upon a time, with Jiraiya and Tsunade and Sarutobi. The worst that’d happened on that mission was Jiraiya’s constant whining about being bored. It was just ceremony, a way to honor talented genin teams. Surely nobody has ever died on it. Let alone a
jounin instructor and one of his students.

“...I-I was a coward. I c-couldn’t even move-” Itachi hiccups. “Orochimaru-sama, I couldn’t move-”

“Shh, it’s alright. Did you get hurt at all?”

“N-no. Me and Shinko are okay. But Tenma-”

He chokes, pressing his little hands to the sides of his head and screwing his eyes shut tight.

“I know what Tenma’s guts look like,” he whimpers.

(Orochimaru feels an invisible, icy hand grip and twist his insides.)

A knock at the door sends Itachi’s head snapping upward.

“Itachi, honey-” the boy’s mother calls, gently. “I know you aren’t feeling well, so I’ll leave your dinner here, okay? You should at least try to eat something.”

When Itachi doesn’t answer, Mikoto’s footsteps retreat from his door.

“...You really should eat,” Orochimaru urges him.

Itachi shakes his head.

He’s very familiar with the sort of feelings Itachi is enduring right now, so he doesn’t nag the poor child further.

(Poor little bird. He’s trying so very hard not to cry in front of Orochimaru.)

Again, Orochimaru finds himself contemplating snatching Itachi away from that awful village. And again, he has to squash that thought down. Before he can even contemplate it for too long, Itachi has sent his serpent away, anyway.

He writes out a letter he intends to send to his contacts back in Konoha, probing for details on what happened. Maybe try to get the information from the Daimyo himself, if he can manage it. He’ll coordinate it so there’s no chance of word getting around to Shimura. Then he’ll decide what he needs to do next.

(If there’s anything he can do.)

Once Itachi is alone again, he’s crying.

He curls up into a tight ball of misery, letting the sobs rack his tiny frame while the suppressed tears finally overflow.

Coward. He’s a dirty, rotten, no-good coward. He froze up when his team needed him, and now his Sensei and his friend are both dead.

He can still see his sensei try desperately to stay calm, throwing out an arm in some vain attempt to shield them from danger. Still sees how red his blood is when he’s cut down by that masked figure
like he were just a paper doll.

Tenma’s panicked screaming still rings in his ears. Shrill and afraid and panicked but Itachi still can’t move-

“Itachi! Shinko! Come on!”

But Shinko couldn’t move, and Itachi couldn’t either. He can’t even twitch a muscle through the blinding, overwhelming fear in his veins.

Tenma, charging forward foolishly, plays out behind his eyelids. The slash of the masked man’s blade, the horrible, horrible sound it made-

Tenma’s torso, falling a meter or so from his lower half, a few last spasms running through it before it goes still.

That man crouching down to look Itachi over. Not saying a word, but laughing at him. The man pinched his cheek in a sickeningly playful gesture before getting up to leave.

Itachi finally had been able to move again. He lunged after the man, but the Daimyo had grabbed his wrist with a shaking hand.

“...Let him go,” he managed, his face bloodless, his voice unsteady. “There’s nothing you can do.”

They’d all sat on the ground for a good, long while, after the Daimyo had sent out a signal for help. Shinko couldn’t stop shaking.

Itachi bites down on his wrist to stifle a sob.

It isn’t fair. Tenma didn’t deserve to die.

“Niisan! Niisan, I wanna play!”

Itachi whimpers at the sound of Sasuke’s voice on the other side of the door.

“Your brother doesn’t feel well right now,” he hears their mother scold softly. “You should let him rest.”

“But Mom-”

“Come on, Sasuke. Let’s go out in the garden instead. I think some of the tomatoes are ready to pick.”

“One sec-”

He hears Sasuke’s little hands press against the door.

“Niisan, dinner was really yummy tonight. You should eat some!”

With those words, his tiny footsteps retreat with their mother’s.

After a brief hesitation, Itachi gets onto his hands and knees, then onto his feet.

Peeking out of his door, he spots the still-steaming bowl of curry and rice Mom left for him, sitting on a tray next to a glass of water and a few of the strawberry mochi she knows he’s fond of.
He brings the tray into his room and sets it on his desk. He stares at the food for a long time, trying to convince himself to eat it.

*Orochimaru-sama said I should eat. And Sasuke said it’s delicious. I should at least try-

Itachi takes a deep breath, and pops a spoonful in his mouth.

...Sasuke is right. Of course he’s right. Mom’s food is always good.

After he swallows the first mouthful, he finds his appetite. The bowl is empty in a matter of minutes, and Itachi turns his attention to the mochi.

The mochi are sweet and wonderful and everything he had expected. He’s crying again, but more from happiness, this time.

Because he’s glad. Glad that, even when the world has turned inside-out, and he worried he couldn’t return to normal life, his mother’s food is still as delicious as ever.

He waits a few hours before he brings the empty tray into the kitchen to wash the dishes. Mom is sitting at the kitchen table like she’s been waiting for him.

“Mom-” he mumbles, fidgeting in discomfort.

Mom rises to her feet, taking the tray from him.

“...It was good,” Itachi says sheepishly.

Without a word, Mikoto gathers him up into her arms and hugs him tightly.

(Crying together somehow makes him feel less lonely.)
“You got something on your mind?”

Fugaku peers up from his coffee mug, raising an eyebrow at his eldest son. The boy’s eyes are a bit glassy, unfocused, staring at nothing while he picks idly at his breakfast. He shrugs his skinny shoulders, swirling his spoon around in his bowl of oatmeal and jam.

Frowning, Fugaku sets his mug down.

“Something wrong?”

Itachi jolts back to reality.

“Hm? No, nothing really...”

He takes a bite of his oatmeal to appease his father and mother, feeling their concerned gazes burning into him. But his mind still wanders.

“...Mom? Dad?”

“Hm?”

Itachi takes a breath.

“Would it be alright if I went to the library today?”

His parents blink in surprise, and Itachi feels his face go warm from embarrassment.

(He should’ve expected them to be shocked, really. As hermit-ish as he tends to be, wanting to go out in public- especially by himself- is probably not what they were expecting.)

After the initial shock wears off, Fugaku smiles.

“Heh. Of course you can. What sort of books are you looking for?”

Itachi shrugs again.

“Genjutsu stuff, mostly.”

“What’s got you interested in genjutsu all of a sudden?” Mikoto asks.

“Well-”

Itachi taps his spoon against the edge of his bowl repetitively.
“...When my team got...well, when we got attacked, the man used a genjutsu. I was so scared I couldn’t move.”

He sets his spoon aside so he can fidget with his fingers.

“I want to be strong enough that I never have to go through that again.”

He averts his eyes so he doesn’t have to see his mother and father’s worry.

“...A-and since I have my Sharingan now, I should be able to learn genjutsu pretty easily, huh? It’d be good for me- I don’t know when I’ll get sick again, after all- it’ll help me still be able to fight even if my body isn’t working right.”

Itachi feels his cheeks grow hot once more when his father laughs and ruffles his hair.

“That’s my boy!” he declares, glowing with pride.

“Well- tell Sasuke I’ll be back this afternoon,” Itachi says, rising from the table and abandoning his breakfast before his embarrassment becomes too noticeable.

“Be careful, sweetheart!” Mikoto calls after him.

“He’s a shinobi- he’ll be just fine!” Fugaku gently chides her.

“I’m just-”

Itachi doesn't get the chance to hear what his mother is “just” doing- he grabs his bag and shuts the door before he does anything to humiliate himself further.

Itachi takes a deep breath, steeling himself as he steps into the library. The building is mostly deserted, with only the staff around this time of day. He keeps his eyes intent on his goal, not meeting the curious look a librarian gives him. He scans around for the section on genjutsu, zeroing in on his goal and quickly hiding himself amongst the shelves.

(It’s one of those times he’s grateful to be so small- it’s easy for him to find places to hide.)

After a half hour of perusing the volumes upon volumes of books and research scrolls about genjutsu, Itachi encounters a problem- he knows this stuff already.

It’s so...basic! Boring! A lump of frustration lodges in his throat; he swallows it down, and tells himself how stupid it is to start crying over something so trivial.

( A shinobi never lets his emotions run away with him- it’s better to focus on important things than to trouble yourself with minutiae- shinobi guideline thirty-nine.)

A deep breath of the crisp, papery air of the library successfully soothes his aggravation. He peers out from his hiding spot, trying to analyze the situation to see if there’s anywhere else he could look. His eyes settle on the section that sits behind a closed door, marked with a sign in big, red kanji.

Restricted: Access is forbidden to those below Jounin rank without proper permissions

Well.

Itachi lets out an angry puff of breath that sends his bangs fluttering upward. He has a better chance
of getting struck by lightning than getting permission to those archives. He knows that well.

He stands there for awhile. Furrows his brow. Regards the bored Chuunin watching the door. Slowly, an idea takes shape in his brain.

...Oh, how delightfully devious!

The world around Itachi becomes sharp and more defined; the Sharingan lets him see so much it almost makes him dizzy.

The bored Chuunin casts brown eyes dully around the room, perhaps desperate to find something to hold his attention. When his eyes briefly connect with Itachi’s, he takes his chance.

The Chuunin’s eyes go hazy, and he starts to sway back and forth. His back hits the wall, and he slumps onto the floor.

Perfect.

Making sure nobody else is around, Itachi darts over to the now-sleeping Chuunin, looking him up and down to make sure he’ll be alright. Then, before anyone comes around, he ducks into the room and shuts the door behind him.

Oh, this is so bad. So naughty- he imagines all the trouble he could get into if (when) he gets caught poking around where he shouldn’t be, even as he browses the shelves.

He finds an enormous, ancient book, laying forgotten in the corner of the room. The cover is blank, but when curiosity entices Itachi to open it, he finds exactly what he came in here for.

Scarlet eyes wide, he eagerly takes in the archaic writing, the faded diagrams. He runs his fingers along the pages, committing every detail to memory. He becomes so absorbed in his reading that he doesn’t register when the door opens again.

He nearly jumps out a skin when a hand taps on his shoulder.

“I’ve got a sneaking suspicion you’re not supposed to be in here, little one.”

Instinct takes over, and Itachi is aiming a fist at the sudden arrival before he can stop it. Just as quickly, however, the man catches his fist, stopping the boy cold.

A single dark eye looks him up and down, a low chuckle escaping him.

(It’s that man. That same man he’d seen at his Academy graduation. Shimura Danzo, the chief advisor to Sandaime.)

“Easy there, boy. I don’t bite.”

From one blink to the next, Itachi’s eyes fade back to charcoal; he swallows audibly while the man stares straight through him.

“...Am I in trouble?” he mumbles, sheepishly.

“Well, I’d say that depends what you’re in here looking for.”

Bashfully, Itachi holds up the book in his hands.

“I-I wanted to learn more genjutsu. So I can- I mean, I want to-”
Itachi knows he’s rambling, and it nearly causes him physical pain. But something inside him is desperate to explain himself.

“-I never want to be helpless like I was again! I want to be stronger! Strong enough to keep everyone safe! I want-”

The man lays a hand on top of his head, the barest hint of a smile gracing his lined face.

“-I suppose a boy like you wouldn’t find much of use in the main library, eh, Itachi?”

Danzo laughs again when Itachi turns a bright shade of pink. Reaching over, he plucks the book out of Itachi’s hands, and strolls lazily over to another shelf and starts browsing.

“If you’re truly serious about mastering genjutsu, you’ll need to do better than that old thing— half the research in it is probably decades out of date by now,” he muses, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Itachi wrings his hands anxiously.

“You’re...not mad at me?”

“How could I be? It’s rare to find one so eager to learn these days— ah, this should do it.”

Danzo pulls out a book far newer than the one Itachi had been reading.

“This should be a good starting point for you. If I checked it out in my name, I don’t think there should be a problem if you took it home.”

Itachi’s eyes go so wide they might fall out of his head.

“You’d really let me?!”

“Well-”

Danzo pulls a face like he’s mulling it over. Itachi’s stomach ties itself in a knot.

“I’m a very busy man, see. I don’t have much time to sit and read a book myself. If I let you borrow it, would you be able to report back to me about what’s in it?”

Itachi lights up.

“Yeah! I could do that!”

“Well then-”

Danzo turns his head toward the door.

“It seems our little friend won’t be waking up for a bit. It might be best if you went and picked out a few books for yourself. I’ll meet you at the front desk.”

Itachi can hardly believe his luck; he beams at this man who has been so kind to him out of nowhere.

“Yes sir!”

Itachi keeps his eyes glued to Shimura as he speaks to the pretty lady at the front desk, trying very hard to act casual. The knots in his stomach are back— he’ll get found out, he’s sure of it-
“-Here you go, sweetheart,” the librarian says, handing Itachi the stack of books he’s grabbed. Itachi does his best to smile back at her, because he knows it’s polite.

“Just this one for me, thank you,” Danzo says, handing over the book from the restricted section. He has an impressive poker face- Itachi can’t read any hint of emotion on it at all.

“That’s all set for you, Shimura-sama!”

“You might want to scold that young man at the restricted session, as well. Disgraceful, falling asleep on duty.”

“Oh? Of course, Shimura-sama.”

The lady offers a bow. Danzo doesn’t acknowledge it, merely gesturing with his head for Itachi to follow him out. The boy obeys, trailing after him with his head down, unable to believe what he’s just gotten away with.

Outside, the air is warm, and people mill about happily- although the occasional passerby casts Danzo a wary glance.

Deftly, Danzo slips the heavy book into Itachi’s bag alongside the others. Itachi opens his mouth to utter a thank-you, but it dies on his lips when the man reaches out to brush a stray wisp of hair out of his face.

“I expect a detailed report from you, Itachi.”

“How did-”

“Sandaime and I met with the Daimyo last week to discuss the unfortunate circumstance that dissolved your genin team. He spoke very highly of you, boy- he believes you’ll be a top shinobi despite that minor setback.”

Minor…?

Itachi doesn't dwell on his uneasy feelings for too long. He shakes his head to clear the fog away.

“...Nobody else I care about is ever gonna get hurt again,” he says, steeling himself. “I’m gonna make sure of that.”

There’s a glint of something wicked in Shimura’s eye, but Itachi doesn’t catch it.

“I look forward to it, little bird,” he says, before strolling off like and disappearing in the crowd.

Itachi frowns, tilting his head and watching the man leave his view. Then, he can’t help but giggle.

He feels so wonderfully naughty. So sneaky and devious. He barely manages to restrain himself from *squealing* in delight.

Excitement coursing through his veins, he bolts off down the street toward Shisui’s house, his heavy bag smacking against his side with every step.
“You seem distracted.”

Orochimaru doesn't turn his head or scold Sasori for interrupting his work.

“So you killed another one, eh?” Sasori muses, strolling up behind Orochimaru to peer at the corpse strapped to the steel gurney.

“...It appears so.” Orochimaru answers, trying to keep his annoyance out of his voice.

Sasori reaches out and touches Orochimaru’s shoulders, working cold fingers up his neck before working them into silken black hair, pulling it back out of his face. Orochimaru makes a point of not reacting.

“What a shame. He was pretty strong, wasn’t he? I thought he’d last longer.”

“Do you have a point?” Orochimaru grumbles, miffed at both the intimate contact and his failed experiment.

Sasori leans in closer, resting his chin on his companion’s shoulder.

“Mmm. I just feel it’d be a real shame to let him go to waste. If you get what I’m saying.”

Orochimaru pauses, his hand hovering over the corpse’s open torso.

“Planning one of your art projects, are you?” He asks, with a soft smile.

“Always,” Sasori replies, lifeless doll hands sliding around Orochimaru in some simulacrum of an embrace. “You break your toys so very quickly- but I think I could get a little more life out of them yet.”

The way Sasori speaks is chilling, unsuited to that lilting, childish voice. Orochimaru would shiver, if he weren’t well past the point of being unnerved by Sasori.

“If you’d like to play around with my failed experiments, I suppose it’s no loss to me.”

The man in a boy’s body practically purrs in delight.

“Being your partner isn’t so bad after all,” he coos cheerily.

Orochimaru reaches for a rag to wipe his bloody hands.

“Well if you don’t mind, I need to mop up the mess before you go fiddling around with cadavers.”

“If you insist,” Sasori pouts, withdrawing his arms and watching as Orochimaru cleans up his failed test subject (some Jounin or something from Iwa, he vaguely remembers).

“It’s best to have fresh bodies for my work,” Sasori states, in a flat, almost bored tone. “It’ll be nice cutting out the busywork of getting them.”

Orochimaru doesn't feel much like responding, too concerned with trying his experiment again to care much about his chatter.
Oro is not too happy to find out who Itachi’s been talking to. Itachi continues to be an oblivious lil bean.

“Holy hell, Itachi- where’d you get this!!”

Shisui’s dark eyes go so wide they might pop out of his head. He snatches the book out of Itachi’s hands, greedily rifling through the pages.

“There’s no way this was just laying around the library- how the hell did you get it?”

Itachi winces a bit at the profanity, then shuffles around nervously.

“Promise you won’t be mad at me?”

Shisui quirks an eyebrow.

“Eh? Guess it depends on what you did.”

Glancing over his shoulder toward Shisui’s bedroom door, Itachi makes his confession.

“I uh- I snuck into the restricted section.”

“You what now? ‘Tachi, you could get into serious trouble if you get caught doing that!”

“I didn’t though!” Itachi huffs, imperiously. “I mean- I got caught, but I didn’t get in trouble!”

“Eh?! Who caught ya? What’d they say?”

Itachi diverts his eyes again, shuffling his feet.

“Um...Danzo-sama caught me;” he mutters, bashfully.

Shisui blinks.

“...Shimura Danzo? Sandaime’s guy?”

Itachi nods.

“Holy sh- and he didn’t get pissed?”

Itachi shakes his head.

“He checked the book out for me. He said I just have to report back to him about what’s in it.”

“No way. That’s insane! There’s gotta be some sort of trick!”

Itachi shrugs off Shisui’s confusion.
“If he wanted to get me in trouble he would have. Now help me out- there’s kanji in this book I don’t understand yet.”

Shisui half-scowls, but he lets the matter drop.

“Fine, fine. Get something to write with, I guess.”

Itachi grabs a notebook and pen from Shisui’s desk, and the two of them sit on the bed.

While the older boy reads from the text, Itachi scribbles notes furiously, taking down anything he thinks might be even a little interesting. He gets lulled into a comfortable state by Shisui’s voice, drawn in by the confident way he speaks.

(Shisui is always so confident. Itachi wonders where that confidence comes from- and whether any of it will ever rub off on him.)

“You might wanna copy this diagram down,” Shisui prompts, turning the book around so Itachi can see it. “Might be helpful.”

Itachi painstakingly copies out the diagram, doing his best to capture it perfectly. Shisui nods his approval when it’s finished, then goes back to reading. He absentmindedly reaches up to toy with a stray lock of curly hair (though, really, all of Shisui’s hair could be described as ‘stray’) while he reads.

And Itachi is happy like this. With a friend to read with him, and sunshine coming through the window.

He could spend forever this way.

“Well, that’s all very impressive, Itachi-kun. Of course- I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

A great wave of pride swells up in Itachi’s chest at Orochimaru’s praise. He hides his blush in his pages of notes, and suppresses the urge to squirm. To be told he’s done good work from someone he admires so much is nearly too much for his little heart to handle.

“What sent you on this little project?” Orochimaru inquires, fiddling around with some dark blue fluid in a beaker.

“Danzo-sama asked me to do it,” Itachi answers, head still turned aside, rather than looking at the snake directly. “He said he’d let me borrow the book if I-”

But the sound of glass shattering gets him to turn around again in a hurry.

Orochimaru utters a string of curses under his breath, reaching blindly for a towel to mop up his bleeding hand.

Orochimaru-sama!” Itachi cries out, horrified. “What’s wrong?!”

“I’m fine,” Orochimaru snaps, gingerly picking bits of glass out of his palm.

“...did I say something wrong?”
Orochimaru shakes his head.

“No, no, Itachi-kun. You’re fine. I’m just—"

He trails off, like he’s lost the thought before he could finish it. Itachi turns his head away again, going red in the face.

“...I’m sorry,” he mumbles, despite the man’s insistence.

For a moment, Orochimaru looks like he might reply. Instead though, he performs the seal to send away the twin white snakes, cutting off their contact.

Itachi’s vision goes blurry. He quickly wipes the tears away, silently scolding himself for crying.

He crawls under his bed covers, deciding that he’d best try to get some sleep. He’ll go down to the office in the morning and take some D-rank mission to keep his mind off things. If Orochimaru decides to talk to him again, he’ll apologize for whatever he’s done wrong.

“Someone’s in a foul mood.”

Sasori doesn’t need a verbal confirmation. The menacing aura bleeding off his partner is more than enough.

Orochimaru has been fuming for hours now, slamming down his books and notes with far more force than necessary. He shoots daggers at the lifeless body strapped to a steel gurney like it’s the one causing his bout of temper.

“I don’t suppose you’re gonna tell me what’s got you upset?”

“Would you care if I did?” Orochimaru hisses back.

Sasori shrugs dismissively, strolling past him to examine the fresh corpse on the gurney.

“Is it about that pet Uchiha of yours?” he asks, half-distracted.

“Is it any business of yours?”

“Only because it’d be a bother if your shit mood ruins our work.”

Orochimaru groused under his breath, stacking his papers and books into one tall pile for the sake of venting some of this nervous energy.

Danzo. Fucking Shimura Danzo. Every time he hears that name he wants to put his fist through a wall.

And now the fucking vulture’s started circling around a new target.

If he gets his claws into someone so vulnerable, Itachi will never be able to get them out. Orochimaru knows that from experience.

He’s still so very young. Orochimaru remembers being that age, being small and gullible and
impressionable. Danzo can fucking smell that on people, he’s sure of it.

For a moment, he debates telling the boy’s parents about the danger he’s putting himself in. But, Orochimaru being who he is, he’s confident that he’ll not get a friendly response if he goes that route.

Danzo on the other hand-

That might be another story.

It might be a tricky matter to get his message across without putting Itachi on the receiving end of the badger’s anger, but it’s not impossible. He has a good idea of a few in the village that can pass his warning on- then wait to see if Danzo heeds it.

(He probably won’t. And if he doesn’t- well.)

“You still with me?”

Sasori waves his hand in front of Orochimaru’s face to get his attention.

“I’m fine,” Orochimaru lies. “Say- do you mind if we take a bit of a detour on our mission tomorrow?”

“Hm? What for?”

“Oh, I just need to send a message to an old friend of mine.”

Sasori seems to accept that answer. He shrugs again.

“Alright then.”

He seems vaguely amused by the situation, the barest hint of a smirk crossing his lips. He runs a hand through his messy red hair, pulling it away from his face.

“So long as it doesn’t delay us it should be fine.”

“Oh, I won’t take long,” Orochimaru assures him. “I promise you that.”

“Sensei?”

Hakuto puts his arm out, to stop Amai from leaping forward.

(they’ve shot up like weeds in the past few years. They’ll be taller than Orochimaru soon.)

“How- where did you- why did you-”

Orochimaru puts a hand up to silence the boy. He takes a quick look around the dwindling forest that thins between Konoha and Suna, and decides it’s safe to speak.

“I won’t bother with any excuses or apologies. They won’t do either of you any good.”

“...How did you find us?” Amai asks, trying not to let his surprise and betrayal show.

“It’s not difficult,” is the only answer that Orochimaru is willing to give.
Despite the cryptic reply, neither of his former students questions him any further about how he intercepted them in the middle of a mission.

Sasori folds his arms and scowls, letting Orochimaru know that he’s growing impatient.

“It might be presumptuous of me, but I was wondering if I could ask a favor of the two of you.”

The boys tilt their head in unison- a habit carried over from when the pair of them were very young.

“I don’t suppose either of you would have access to the ANBU office, do you?”

(He asks the question like he doesn’t already know the answer.)

“We will after this mission!” Amai says. “This is our last mission to prove we can cut it!”

“Hm.”

“...What do you need from us?” Hakuto asks, suspicion in his eyes.

“A message passed on to Shimura, that’s all.”

“Message?”

Orochimaru nods.

“I know what you’re doing. Watch yourself around that boy.”

The two young men furrow their brows in unison.

“That’s all?”

“That’s everything. Except-”

Orochimaru has a fleeting moment’s hesitation before asking his next question.

“-What’s Anko been up to lately?”

The pair frowns.

“Her application got denied,” Hakuto answers. “She’s not allowed into ANBU.”

A wave of relief washes over Orochimaru.

“...That’s fine, then. That’s all I need.”

He motions to Sasori that it’s time for them to depart.

“-Wait!”

Amai fidgets with his glasses, his cheeks going bright red.

“...Will we ever see you again?” he asks, in a soft voice.

Orochimaru sighs, and forces out a low laugh.

“With some luck,” he answers.
Amai lets out a disappointed whine.

“Still so childish,” Orochimaru gently scolds. “You won’t cut it in ANBU with that attitude.”

Even with his back turned, Orochimaru knows Amai’s face has gone an even deeper shade of scarlet.

“You’ll be alright, Amai-kun. Hakuto-kun, take care of him and Anko, will you? I’ll be in touch.”

Neither boy moves to stop him or Sasori as they leave, though Orochimaru thinks he hears Amai start to sob. It tugs at his heartstrings, but he doesn't allow that to make him falter.

(He can’t help but feel the smallest bit guilty for not seeing them in so long. But it would have been far too dangerous to stay in touch, given Danzo knew full well how fond he was of his students.

It’s good though, he can’t help but think, to know for sure they’re alive and well. And that Anko is as well. That will carry him forward for a long time.)
Mangetsu makes a cameo because why not?

Danzo isn’t entirely able to keep the surprise off his face when he looks up from his stack of paperwork to see Itachi standing in front of his desk.

(Because honestly, how long has he been standing there?!)

“Who let you in here?” he asks, with a raised eyebrow. The boy shuffles his feet nervously, clutching his notebook closer to his chest.

“Um...nobody,” he admits, hanging his head. “They didn’t believe me when I said you wanted me to come here, so they told me to leave. You uh- you might wanna check up on the guards out front. It was just a genjutsu, but I think one of them hit their head when they fell over.”

Danzo might laugh. But instead, he just stands up from his desk, and walks around it, making Itachi go rather pale.

“...Please don’t be angry,” he mumbles.

The boy flinches when the man reaches a hand out toward him.

“Well then? Let’s see what you’ve got for me,”

“Oh!”

Itachi relinquishes his treasure.

Danzo rifles through the notebook, full to bursting with Itachi’s meticulous handwriting. Itachi keeps his owlish eyes trained on him, anxiety keeping him still.

“I uh- I fixed some stuff from the book I think the author got wrong. You’d have to do more research on your own to be sure but I really don’t think he’s right. I filled in what I think is really going on if you wanna test it later.”

The man contemplates Itachi’s words for a moment.

“Hm.”

“Danzo-sama?”

“...It’s a shame,” Danzo muses.

“What’s a shame?” Itachi whimpers.

Danzo sets the notebook aside, and grasps Itachi by his skinny shoulders. Itachi’s saucer-wide eyes grow wider still.
“It’s a shame you won’t be able to receive proper credit for the work you’ve done.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll get resources together to look into this theory of yours, Itachi. I think you’re on the right track.”

The boy lights up.

“You mean it?”

He sounds breathless, unable to believe what he’s hearing.

“I do. As a matter of fact, I think I’d like you to review the research when it’s finished, if you don’t mind.”

It takes Itachi a moment to register what Danzo has asked of him. When he does, he breaks out in a grin from ear to ear, lighting up at the high praise.

“I’d...I’d be honored.”

Danzo gives Itachi a brusque sort of pat on the head.

“I’ll let you know when I get it all sorted- and I’ll see to it that you don’t have to use that Sharingan of yours just to get in here to speak with me.”

“Thank you, Danzo-sama-”

Itachi hides his blush in the fringe of his black hair, acutely reminding Danzo of another child who once was prone to doing that same thing.

Well then, Danzo muses to himself, when he’s alone in his office once more. No wonder Orochimaru has taken such a shine to that cute little bird.

Such a precocious young man- he’s not seen a mind like that since- well, since Orochimaru, really.

Danzo drums his fingers against the cover of the notebook Itachi had left behind, brimming with calculations and theories more befitting of a lifetime scholar than one who was still a child.

A clever boy, indeed. With a steady hand to keep him on the right path, he could become exactly the sort of shinobi Konoha needs. And, at least one member of the Uchiha clan could, at last, have an uncontested loyalty to the village.

Of course, he knows Hiruzen might be cranky with him if he found out. But what Hiruzen doesn't know won’t hurt him. And, after all, one could fill a book with the things Hiruzen doesn't know.

He won’t trouble himself with that, for now. Neither will he pay much mind to Orochimaru’ threat. He’s got some work to organize. This idea Itachi is onto could prove very useful for interrogations later on. Not to mention that genjutsu which are harder to break are always nice to have on hand. And all thanks to one curious little boy.

He’ll get to work and worry about petty details later.

And in the meanwhile, he has one other thing he'd also like to get done.
Itachi finds himself in better spirits than he’s been in ages, sitting on the dock by the lake shore, splitting a box of matcha mochi with Shisui and Izumi while they watch a small family of ducks paddle along in the water.

One trails behind the others, absentmindedly looking around while its friends swim onward, until it bumps into a branch floating on the water. Izumi giggles.

“That one’s like you, Itachi-kun!”

“Huh?”

Shisui lets out a small laugh of his own.

“She’s right, ‘Tachi. You’re such an airhead I’m surprised it doesn't float away!”

Itachi’s face lights on fire.

“I am not!” he squeaks.

“You can’t fool us, ‘Tachi!”

“You are a bit of a space-case, Itachi-kun,” Izumi says, still giggling.

Itachi hides his face in his hands so neither of his friends can see his embarrassment.

“...I don’t mean to be,” he mumbles.

Shisui’s smile falls.

“...Hey, I’m just kidding, ‘Tachi. We’re just kidding.”

Itachi whines, clearly not comforted.

“H-hey, we’re sorry, Itachi-kun!” Izumi stammers. “We were just teasing-”

Itachi removes his face from his hands and forces himself to smile.

“...Yeah. Sorry. I’m being dumb.”

“No, no it’s okay!” Shisui insists. “Here-”

He shoves another mochi in Itachi’s mouth.

“There! This’ll cheer ya up!”

Itachi makes a muffled, scandalized sound; however, he still eats the sweet his friend forced on him.

“Anyway,” Shisui says, trying to change the subject, “why didn’t you tell us you were signing up for the Chuunin exams?!”

“Eh? I never-”
“I saw your name on the roster just this morning! Don’t play dumb, ‘Tachi!”

“But I never-”

Itachi puffs out his cheeks in an annoyed pout, realizing arguing is pointless.

“Anyway, since you’re gonna be in it, I decided to sign up too! Took forever to get my team to agree, but fuck ‘em! I’m not gonna miss out just because they’re chicken!”

“You mean you just signed up without even thinking?!?” Izumi gasps, scandalized. “But you could be seriously hurt doing that!”

“Yeah, I know. But like I said, I don’t really care! Besides, this way ‘Tachi doesn’t have to do the exams all by himself!”

Izumi’s protests fade into the background of Itachi’s mind while his thoughts wander.

He knows for sure that he never signed up for the Chuunin exams- he tried, sure, but was turned away for being too young. But now, suddenly he’s on the rosters? How could-

…he wonders if, maybe, Danzo decided to do it for him.

It would make sense. After all, Danzo-sama would think he was capable. Of course he’d want Itachi to get up the ranks quickly, so they could work together without having to sneak around. So, even though he’s not too keen on going into the exam with so little notice, he’ll do his best to pass. Because that’d make Danzo happy, and would help prove that he’s useful. His parents would be proud of him, as well.

Heck- it might even make Orochimaru happy, too.

It’s been awhile since Orochimaru has bothered to talk to him- maybe it’d get him interested enough to speak with him again.

Right. So he’s taking the exam at the end of the month. Looks like he’ll have to start preparing.

Fugaku blinks from surprise, looking up at his son from across the dinner table.

“Huh? The Chuunin exams already?”

“I know it’s a little short notice, but I thought-”

Itachi peers around the dining room, trying to quickly come up with a lie.

“...I just thought it was time I tried, that’s all. I’ve been a genin for three years now, and I’m ready to move up.”

Fugaku and Mikoto exchange a quick look, then smile.

“That’s my boy,” Fugaku says, brimming with pride.

“What’s a Chuunin exam?” Sasuke asks, tiny brow furrowed.

“It’s a test to see if I’m ready to make Chuunin,” Itachi answers. “If I’m not strong enough they
won’t let me.”

“So of course you’re gonna make it!” Sasuke chirrups. “Niisan is the toughest ever!”

Mikoto laughs.

“Of course he’ll do well,” she assures her youngest, tousling Sasuke’s messy hair. “He always does, after all.”

“Yeah yeah! Niisan is gonna make everyone run off scared!” Sasuke squeals, brandishing his chopsticks like a kunai. “He’s gonna kick all their butts!”

“Okay, okay, be careful!” Mikoto advises, gently taking Sasuke’s wrist and guiding his hand back toward his dinner. Itachi turns his attention back toward his half eaten yakitori as well.

“I’ll help you train until then,” Mikoto offers. “Since you’ll be taking time off to get ready.”

“I’d like that,” Itachi agrees.

“You’ll have to eat more if you’re gonna be in the exams,” Fugaku insists, grabbing Itachi’s plate to load more on. “The exams are rough, and you don’t wanna be fainting in the middle of a fight.”

Itachi mumbles a halfhearted protest about already being full, but does his best to do as his father insisted.

He’s right, after all. Itachi is going to need his strength if he’s going to make it through. And he has a lot of people who want to see him make it.

(Besides, Shisui will never let him hear the end of it if he fails.)

“You’re not getting cold feet, are ya?”

Shisui elbows Itachi gently, jolting him out of his daydreaming.

“Huh? No, of course not,” Itachi mumbles, raising his head up toward the giant building where all the potential chuunin are heading.

“Good. You got me into this shit and you’re gonna stick through it with me.”

“Yeah…”

Itachi glances around, then frowns.

“Shisui- where’s the rest of your team?”

“Huh? Eh, probably running late like they always do. I didn’t feel like waiting around for ‘em to show up. I’ll find ‘em whenever they come around.”

Itachi makes a small sound of acknowledgement, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the path in front of them.

They make it through and present their paperwork to the woman at the entrance, who casts a
skeptical look at Itachi before reluctantly letting them through.

“Alright!” Shisui practically squeals.

Itachi, however, doesn't have his confidence.

He feels a bit like a mouse, lost in a maze of people so much older and bigger than he is. And like a mouse, Itachi is suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to scamper off and find a place to hide.

Shisui catches that. Of course he does- Shisui always does.

“Hey, you’ll be okay,” he says, grabbing Itachi’s hand. “You don’t gotta worry.”

When that doesn’t work, Shisui pulls Itachi into a hug. Itachi buries his face in the older boy’s shoulder like that could hide him from the world.

“I got you, okay? If anything happens, I’ll be there. I promise.”

“-Oi, could ya take that homo shit somewhere else?”

Itachi’s head snaps upward. Two older boys in Kirigakure headbands sneer down at him and Shisui. Shisui pushes the younger boy behind him, and scowls.

“I knew Konoha was full of fags, but I didn’t realize they started so young,” the blond one snarks, wrinkling his nose like he’s smelled something unpleasant.

“Yeah? The shithole people from the shithole village are gonna try to talk shit about Konoha?” Shisui snarls. “That’s pretty hilarious.”

The blond boy’s blue haired companion steps so close to Shisui their chests bump together. Shisui squares up his shoulders and stands firm. Itachi takes a step back from Shisui, placing a hand on his weapons pouch.

(Both these boys are far bigger than he is, and his endurance isn’t great. If a fight breaks out, he’ll have to end it fast.)

“Keep talkin’ like that and I’m gonna break your scrawny fucking neck,” the blue haired boy warns.

“I’d really like to see you try,” Shisui scoffs. “They’d be sending you and your shithead friend back to Kiri in a body bag.”

“You talk real big for a short little fuck. I swear to god, I’m gonna-”

“-You’re gonna knock that shit off is what you’re gonna do.”

Four pairs of eyes snap over toward the direction of the new voice.

Out of seemingly nowhere, a rather small boy who can’t be much older than Itachi walks up. Lavender eyes glare out from behind a fringe of snowy white hair, a scowl bearing two rows of razor sharp teeth.

“Are you idiots seriously trying to start a fight before the exams have even started? The fuck is wrong with you?”

He speaks with a sort of detached confidence Itachi immediately envies. The two other Kiri boys turn their anger toward him instead.
“Can’t you just mind your own fucking business for once, Mangetsu?!” The blond one practically whines.

“Not when you bastards keep doing your best to make our village look bad,” Mangetsu replies. “Knock it the fuck off or I’ll make you sorry.”

His tone turns into something deadly that the other two decide not to question. Muttering curses under their breath, they disappear into the crowd.

Itachi releases a pent-up breath he wasn’t aware he was holding in. Mangetsu steps toward them, dropping his voice low so he can’t be overheard.

“If you killed those fuckers during the exams I wouldn’t complain,” he mutters. “They’re fuckin’ useless as teammates and all they do is piss me off.”

Shisui and Itachi blink, exchanging surprised glances. Mangetsu smiles, baring those sharp, shark-like teeth again.

“Hey don’t gimme that look. Don’t let the teeth fool ya- I don’t bite.”

Itachi can’t entirely suppress a chortle. Mangetsu tilts his head, casting those strange purple eyes over the two of them.

“You two got names besides Uchiha?”

“How-” Itachi doesn’t get to finish the question.

“The crest, dumbass. Geez, you guys all walk around with that fan on your backs and still get surprised when people recognize it.”

“...Oh.”

Itachi feels a little stupid, feeling his cheeks grow hot. To his relief, Shisui answers for both of them.

“I’m Shisui. That’s Itachi.”

“Cool. Hozuki Mangetsu, by the way. But I’m sure caught that already.”

The boy grins, and that grin is just a bit too wide, a little unsettling on his delicate face.

“I’ll see you guys around, I’m sure. I’d wish ya good luck, but if ya needed luck you wouldn’t be here.”

He gives them a little wave, and vanishes into the crowd to find his teammates.

“...Well,” Shisui mutters. “Well.”

Itachi fixes his eyes on the ground, but he can’t erase that strange, razor-sharp smile from his mind. His cheeks are still burning hot, though he’s not entirely sure it’s from embarrassment this time.
Itachi huddles up as far as he can into the branches of the tree he’s nestled in, trying to find a spot where he won’t be soaked through by the storm that suddenly decided to roll in. He grumbles to himself, questioning every choice in his life that’s lead him to this moment. His stomach growls acutely, but he doesn’t have anything with him to eat. He’s wet, cold, and utterly miserable, cursing all his rotten luck.

He might cry, if he thought it would do any good.

“You look like you’re having a bad day.”

Itachi nearly jumps out of his skin, yelping.

“Hey, I told ya I don’t bite. Chill.”

“M-Mangetsu?”

“That’s my name. Glad you remember.”

The boy bares his teeth in that same toothy grin. He does a little pirouette on a tree branch, arms outstretched toward the sky.

“We don’t get rain like this in Kiri,” he remarks. “Our rain’s cold and shitty and I hate it. Your rain’s warm.”

“I’m glad one of us does,” Itachi mumbles.

“Oh? Here, you can have this, then.”

A squeak of protest escapes Itachi when the other boy drapes a canvas poncho over him.

“My teammates brought a few of these along, but I don’t really need ‘em, so you can have one.”

“...Won’t they notice it’s gone?” Itachi asks, pulling the hood of the poncho up over his head. Mangetsu only shrugs.

“Eh. Hard to miss stuff when yer dead.”

“Huh?! What happened?!”

“Nothing worth fretting over. They were dumb fucks who got themselves killed, that’s all.”

Itachi frowns.

“And...you’re not gonna try to attack me, even though we’re enemies right now?”
“Nah. I’ve already got both scrolls- wouldn’t be much of a point to taking yours. Besides-”

Mangetsu parks himself on a branch beside Itachi, pulling out a water bottle.

“It’s weird, cause we just met, but I’d rather you not die, y’know?”

Brow furrowed, Itachi ponders his words for a bit before nodding.

“I...don’t want you to die, either.”

Mangetsu’s smile falls. He takes a long drink from his water bottle before he speaks again.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Huh? I live here!”

“Not that, dumbass. I mean you shouldn’t be here. In the exams.”

Itachi straightens out, feeling quite offended.

“I can handle myself!” he insists. “I’m stronger than I look, you know!”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.”

Mangetsu sounds so utterly serious. Worried, almost.

“You seem like a good guy. Good guys like you don’t last long in a world like this. It’s like tossing a guppy in with a buncha sharks- you’ll get eaten alive.”

“Not like I have a choice,” Itachi retorts. “If I don’t- if I can’t- I won’t be able to protect Sasuke.”

Mangetsu blinks.

“Wait. Who’s Sasuke?”

“My brother,” Itachi answers. “He’s only five.”

It’s Mangetsu’s turn to furrow his brow. Then, he laughs.

“What’s so funny?!”

“Well what’re the odds?” Mangetsu giggles. “I’ve got a kid brother too, right about the same age as yours.”

“Eh?”

“Yeah. His name’s Suigetsu. Hold up, I think I got a picture somewhere.”

He rummages around in the zippered pouch on his hip, emerging with a folded up photograph. He opens it up to reveal a picture of Mangetsu standing alongside what Itachi can only describe as a miniature version of him, right down to the razor-toothed smile. With them is an auburn-haired girl, slightly older than Mangetsu, holding an enormous fish aloft, grinning in triumph.

“That’s Suigetsu, and that girl there’s Ringo. She’s lookin’ after him while I’m away.”

“How come your parents can’t take care of him?”
The moment Itachi finishes answering the question, he realizes how stupid it was.

“It’s just the two of us,” Mangetsu answers. “Been that way since Sui was born- mom didn’t make it, and my asshole dad decided to skip town. Nobody knows where he went, and I don’t give enough of a fuck to try to find him.”

“...Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Ringo ‘n her dad make sure we never go hungry, so it’s not like it’s hopeless, y’know? Hell-”

Mangetsu is smiling once again.

“-Have you been to Kiri? Compared to most of the village Sui n’ I have it pretty good. Your boyfriend was right when he called it a shithole.”

“He’s not my-!”

Itachi hides his humiliation in his borrowed rain poncho.

“Hey hey, I’m just fuckin’ with ya. I’m just sayin’- if I knew a guy that cute, I’d stick around too.”

Itachi very much wishes he could sink into the tree and away from this conversation.

“You don’t really see guys like that where I’m from. Half the dudes in Kiri must be allergic to showers or some shit. Konoha though- you have some cute guys walking around.”

Mangetsu lets his head loll to the side with a put-upon sigh. Itachi wants very much to talk about anything else.

“...What do you wanna do once you make Chuunin?” he asks.

“Eh? Well that’s easy!”

Curling his hand around an imaginary blade, Mangetsu makes a slashing motion.

“I’m gonna be one of Kiri’s Seven Swordsmen. The best the village has ever seen!”

“Oh?” Itachi frowns. “But to be one of those, don’t you have to-”

“-You gotta defeat the person whose place you’re taking,” Mangetsu affirms, with a nod.

“And if you don’t win…?”

“You usually get killed. It’s only fair.”

Itachi squirms in discomfort. Mangetsu is unperturbed.

“I know exactly which one I’m gonna try for, too!”

He’s got a manic gleam in his lavender eyes when he speaks.

“I’m goin’ after Samehada!”

“Huh?”

“It’s fuckin’ legendary in my village,” Mangetsu elaborates, his movements becoming ever more
animated. “It only lets the strongest people wield it! It just got a new master, but I’m gonna take it one day!”

He pantomimes holding what Itachi can only imagine is a massive sword.

“I can’t wait to see the look on Kisame’s face when I take it from him! I’ll pry it outta his stupid blue hands and bring it home to show off to Suigetsu!”

He sounds possessed, utterly consumed by his fantasy of his. Itachi wonders what it’s like to be that sure of oneself.

“I’m sure you will,” Itachi says, forcing himself to smile so the other boy will know he’s sincere.

For a minute or so, the only sound to break the silence is the pouring rain, and the distant roll of thunder.

Mangetsu tucks his knees up under his chin and hugs his legs close.

“Y’know, it’s funny. You’ve actually got me hopin’ another war doesn’t start.”

“I do?”

“Yeah. I actually don’t hate you- it’d really suck if I had to kill you.”

Itachi blinks.

“I...don’t want to kill you either,” he answers, his tone betraying his puzzlement.

“Well then, let’s hope we don’t end up being each other’s last opponents, yeah?”

Itachi nods.

“That would be nice.”

The sky grows dark as day gives way to night. Neither of them much wants to move from their perch. The rain finally dies off, the clouds parting to reveal a lovely full moon that casts its milky light through the treetops.

“You got both scrolls already, right?” Mangetsu asks, after awhile.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Let’s just hide out for tonight, and head out of the forest tomorrow. Then you can find that cute friend of yours.”

Itachi hums his agreement.

“I’ll stay up if you want to get some sleep,” he offers.

“Nah, I don’t need a lot of sleep,” Mangetsu says. “I just- got a lot on my mind, ya know? Too much stuff bouncing around in there at once.”

Itachi nearly smiles.

“Ha. Me too.”

They tuck themselves safely out of sight, tracing the constellations in the sky above them. They don’t
say much, but they don’t really need to.

It’s a bit strange, Itachi thinks to himself, to be so friendly with someone from a village so hostile.

Strange, but not entirely unpleasant.

“Alright,” Mangetsu says, as they approach the point in the forest where the trees begin to thin.

“There’s gonna be cameras soon, and I don’t wanna have you be seen with me- it won’t be good for you.”

Itachi frowns.

“...Please be careful,” Itachi says, hesitant to part with his new friend.

“Don’t get sappy on me,” Mangetsu implores. “I’m a big boy- I’ll be fine.”

He pauses when he starts to walk away, looking over his shoulder and offering his friendliest smile.

“You should hold your head up more,” he says. “You’re already short- it’s not doing you any favors always slouching like that.”

Before Itachi can figure out if he should be offended or not, he’s alone again.

Well then.

Pulling a face, Itachi spends a few seconds fiddling with his posture, pulling his shoulders back and his head up higher.

Well. It doesn't feel bad, anyway.

“‘Tachi, you made it!”

Shisui sprints over to capture Itachi in a crushing hug.

Itachi hugs him back hesitantly.

“Hi.yeah- I made it.”

“I mean- not that I thought you wouldn’t - but I heard like five people died so far, so I couldn’t help worrying just a little bit-”

“Nononono, I’m fine! I didn’t- I mean, I spent most of the time just hiding, anyway! You didn’t have to worry!”

“But I worried anyway, ‘Tachi. It’s what you and I do, right?”

Itachi smiles.

“Well, the worst part is over now. The rest shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I feel sorry for whatever suckers end up fighting you,” Shisui laughs. “They’re in for a shock, for sure.”
Itachi shrugs dismissively.

“We’ll see. I suppose.”

Shisui’s teammates hang back a short distance, almost like they don’t want to be around the two of them. But Shisui doesn’t pay much attention to that- he seems to be used to them avoiding him.

“Alright, everyone–”

A tall jounin walks into the room, and everyone falls silent.

“-The next portion of the exams is about to begin.”

A mixture of anxiety and pride wells up in Itachi’s chest as he watches Shisui fight. He moves with quick, fluid motions, without a hint of hesitation. His strikes are precise and efficient, and so fast that Itachi can barely keep up with them.

The unfortunate Iwa genin lasts about five minutes before he’s sprawled on the floor, out cold.

“Uchiha Shisui wins the match!” the officiant declares, holding the boy’s arm aloft. Shisui, for his part, looks quite bored. Like he’d expected more from the match.

Itachi zones out a bit after that, until his own name is called.

The boy he’s going up against scoffs.

“You’re just a puppy. How’s this fair at all?”

Itachi bristles up in annoyance, but tries not to let it show. He takes a deep breath, and lets his body take over from his mind the moment the match starts. Just like he’s done on countless missions before- don’t think. Don’t feel. Just do what needs to be done.

Next thing he registers, he’s standing on the older boy’s chest, while he groans and thrashes about.

“I give, I give!” he whines. “I forfeit already! Fuck-”

Itachi startles when the officiant grabs his wrist and pulls his arm upward.

“Uchiha Itachi wins the match!” he declares.

Itachi looks up at the sea of eyes staring at him, the low hum of the chattering onlookers ringing in his ears. Looking around, his own eyes go wide when he spots his mother and father in the crowd.

(he’d known Mom would come to the match, but he figured Dad would be far too busy.)

He’s never seen his father look so happy. Beaming with pride, Fugaku elbows the man standing next to him; Itachi can see him mouth the words “That’s my boy!”.

Itachi can’t help himself. He grins from ear to ear, and it feels so strange on his face, but he doesn’t care. How could he care, when his mom and dad are in the audience, looking so proud of him? When his precious little brother is leaping for joy, absolutely glowing in adoration, screaming “Niisan!” at the top of his lungs?

When he makes his way up toward his family, he passes by Mangestu. They exchange quick smiles,
before Mangetsu’s name is called for his first fight.

“Good luck,” Itachi says.

“I don’t need it,” Mangetsu replies.

Itachi keeps his eyes fixed on the other boy as he walks away-and runs straight into his father.

Fugaku chuckles at him, ruffling his hair when he lights up red from embarrassment.

“Something on your mind, kiddo?”

“Huh? I- uh-”

“-Itachi-kun, that was amazing!”

Izumi practically tackles him in her haste to hug him.

“Yeah, yeah! That other guy didn’t even know what hit him!” Sasuke gushes, punching the air and hopping from one foot to the other in excitement. “You and Shisui are the best out there!”

Itachi tugs at the back of his neck, the praise making him squirm internally.

“Hey, it was just the first match,” he mumbles. “You don’t know that yet…”

“Sure we do!” Izumi insists. “You cleaned the floor with that guy- nobody else stands a chance!”

No sooner has Izumi released him from the hug than he’s embraced yet again- by his mother this time.

“You did wonderful, sweetheart,” she encourages. “It’s alright to be proud of yourself.”

“I-”

A collective gasp rushes through the crowd, pulling their attention away.

Down in the arena, Mangetsu has gone stiff, his opponent’s kunai buried in the dead center of his chest.

Itachi’s blood turns to ice for a few paralyzing seconds, until that wide, toothy grin spreads across Mangetsu’s face again.

“That’s really rude,” he says.

His opponent blinks at him, confusion furrowing her brow.

Mangetsu cocks her head to the side. His torso goes clear, and he pulls away effortlessly, leaving the girl clutching a wet kunai and looking terrified.

“What’s up with that guy?” Sasuke wonders aloud.

Mangetsu’s eyes are wide and wild, his grin warped and inhuman.

His entire body goes transparent, falling into a puddle of water on the floor.
“W-what?!”

The puddle leaps up into the air, wrapping around his opponent’s head.

The unfortunate girl grasps helplessly at the water, mouth open wide in terror. Within about thirty seconds, she’s waving a hand at the officiant, her intent quite clear.

“Alright, that’s enough!” the man obliges. “The match goes to Hozuki Mangetsu!”

The water falls away, leaving the poor Kumo girl gasping for breath. Mangetsu re-emerges from the puddle, emanating an overwhelming smugness.

He says something that might be “did you even try?” but Itachi can’t hear him over the muttering of everyone around him.

“Niisan, what did that guy do?” Sasuke asks, tugging on Itachi’s shirt. “He turned to water.”

Itachi frowns.

“...I’m not sure,” he answers. Brow knitted, he watches Mangetsu sashay back into the stands.

“They said he was a Hozuki, right?” Mikoto chimes in. “That’s their kekkai genkai. No different than our Sharingan.”

“Oh!”

Sasuke beams with this newfound bit of knowledge.

“That’s so cool!”

A kekkai genkai…

Itachi remembers what Mangetsu had told him- that his little brother was the only family he had left. Thinking there’d once been an entire clan of people like him- and that all those people were gone-

It makes Itachi a little sad to think about.

Itachi stands in like with all the other new Chuunin, eyes trained on the Hokage while he speaks.

“-It’s my sincere hope that you, our new generation, can help maintain this new era of peace within all our villages,” he concludes, his tone somber, but hopeful. “Please do your best in your new role as Chuunin.”

Danzo stands silently beside the Sandaime, looking bored. His one eye locks with Itachi’s briefly; the old man nods at him, and Itachi is quick to look away.

There’s an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He just wishes he knew why.
Some other time

Chapter Summary

Someone needs to keep Danzo away from kids. That is all.

Chapter Notes

Anyone else remember the rad lil snek charm Anko has on her watch? I do, so now it's plot-relevant!

“Damn, check these out, Itachi!”

Shisui’s eyes are wide, his body shaking from excitement. They sit on the floor of the main shinobi office to go through the new equipment they’ve received- Shisui is far too impatient to wait until they get home.

“These can stop a kunai dead and not even bruise ya,” Shisui says, showing off his brand new flak jacket. “And this-”

Itachi can’t suppress a smile at Shisui’s enthusiasm.

The new equipment is nice, after all. And listening to Shisui ramble on about things that excite him is always nice to do. He could spend forever like this, honestly.

A couple guys in Anbu masks walk past, not paying any mind to the children sat on the floor.

Itachi hears a small thud when one of them drops something into his box. Reaching in, Itachi pulls out a small pendant. A bracelet charm or something, made of silver and shaped like a serpent.

He opens his mouth to say something, but the one who’d dropped the charm (the one with long brown hair) shakes his head, and disappears right after. Itachi catches the glint of an identical one hanging off both of their wristwatches as they vanish from view.

“-Something wrong?” Shisui asks, far too absorbed in his own world to have noticed.

“Nothing!” Itachi squeaks, shoving the silver serpent into his pocket. “I just-”

He thinks of a lie quickly.

“-I’m hungry, Shisui. Can we go now?”

“Huh? Fine, fine.”

They pick up their things and head out to find some place to get lunch.
“Itachi-kun?”

Orochimaru sounds surprised. He looks surprised. But that surprise fades when Itachi holds up the delicate silver charm that’d been slipped into his equipment box. And suddenly he remembers why Itachi would contact him again, after over three months of silence.

“This is from you, isn’t it?”

“It’s a good-luck charm,” Orochimaru answers. “You’re a chuunin now, so you’ll be needing all the luck you can get.”

“How did you know that?”

Orochimaru laughs, pouring himself a cup of tea. The warmth of the cup seeps into his hands, and it lifts his mood even more.

“You caused a little bit of an uproar,” he answers, still smiling. “Everyone’s been talking about the fledgling Uchiha who dominated the Chuunin Exams.”

The child’s face goes bright red.

“H-huh? People are talking about me?”

“Of course. You did very well- half the world probably knows your name by now.”

“Oh no-” Itachi hides his face in his bedsheets, letting out a mortified groan.

“-Don’t be ashamed of it. Talent deserves to be recognized, after all.”

“I spent half the time hiding in the forest! How’s that worth talking about?!?”

“Give yourself a little credit, Itachi-kun. It takes more than hiding to get people talking about you. You impressed a lot of people there.”

Itachi frowns into the pillow, suddenly recalling the Kiri genin who’d mocked him and Shisui.

“.I didn’t impress everyone.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Itachi pulls an unflattering face. He hesitates before asking the question that’s been playing on his mind.

“Orochimaru-sama, what’s a fag?” he asks.

Orochimaru nearly breaks the teacup in his hand.

“-Where did you hear a word like that?” he demands, his voice low and almost threatening.

“Please answer my question.”

Orochimaru heaves a sigh. He sets his cup down and leans forward.

“It’s nothing but a word used to hurt people who are different,” he answers.
“But what does it mean?”

Another sigh. A short pause.

“It’s a word used about men who love other men,” he finally admits. “To make them seem less than men who don’t.”

Itachi frowns, confusion creasing his brow.

“...am I-?”

“That’s something you’ll find out yourself, in your own time. Regardless, it doesn’t give anyone the right to call you such despicable names.”

The boy grimaces. Scratches at the back of his neck.

“How will I know?”

“You just will. For now, it’s nothing you need to concern yourself with.”

Itachi seems to accept this answer.

“I’ll keep this with me,” he says, looping the serpent charm around a thin cord, slipping it over his head and tucking it under his shirt. “For luck, right?”

“That’s right, Itachi-kun. I’m sure you’ll keep on surprising the world, right up ‘til you become Hokage.”

“Huh?”

“That was your dream, wasn’t it?”

Itachi opens his mouth, then closes it again. Then, he nods.

“I- yes. It is.”

“Then keep at it, Itachi-kun. Becoming Hokage takes a lot of hard work.”

Itachi nods.

“I’ll do my best,” he says.

Of course, Orochimaru knows this is true. Just as surely as he knows that Itachi has no idea what he’s gotten himself into.

But Orochimaru will have to worry about that some other time.

---

Itachi finds that he quite likes the new work assigned to him as a chuunin. There’s a lot of intel gathering, lots of quiet work where he spends most of the time alone. It’s quite nice, really. He also gets folders of reports from the experiments Danzo has been running based off his theory, and he’s more than happy to look them over.
It makes him glad to have someone as important as Shimura Danzo be so interested in what he has to say. To know that what he’s got to offer is something that the village needs.

(Although- it’s strange, just a little, to be getting so much attention. Makes him just a little uneasy.)

His father is happy with him, as well. He’s received so many pats on the back and “That’s my boy!”s from the man in the last few months that they’re starting to blur together in his head- though he still treasures every one of them.

If he were to voice a complaint, it would be that this new rank has him out of the house far more often than he’d really like. Based on how often Sasuke whines that he’s never home anymore, he’s certain he isn’t the only one with that objection.

( “I’m sorry, Sasuke. Some other time, okay?” He’s said that so many times these days it’s practically become a nervous tic.)

Even still- there will be other times for he and Sasuke to be together. He can make up for it then.

“So from what it looks like, I was right. All a genjutsu really does is alter the chemicals being released in your brain; really, it’s not a lot different than a hallucination you’d get taking a drug.”

Danzo seems intrigued by this concept. Itachi turns red when Danzo pats his head, the affectionate gesture just a bit too much to process. He keeps his eyes fixed on the papers in front of him.

“Um- what I don’t understand is what it is about the genjutsu that triggers that sort of response in someone’s brain. I mean- I’m not sure how something like my Sharingan would be able to…”

He trails off, getting lost in his own thoughts.

That seems to amuse Danzo greatly; the boy’s always drifting off mid-sentence, like the world in his head is so much more interesting than the one outside it. Wearing a smile that’s not really a smile, he puts a hand on Itachi’s shoulder.

“I’ll let you know if we figure that out. For now, why don’t we call it a day? You seem distracted.”

Itachi snaps back to attention.

“I-I do?”

His cheeks turn bright pink in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry-”

Danzo chuckles at him.

“It’s quite alright. You’re free to go for now.”

Itachi nods, standing up and bowing low before leaving the man’s office. He ducks and weaves his way through the sea of people taller than him, thrilled at the prospect of enjoying some unexpected time to himself. Shisui won’t be back from his mission until tomorrow, but-

“I’m home!” he calls, kicking his sandals off at the door.

“Already?” Mikoto asks, looking up from the pile of laundry she’s folding.
“Yeah, my assignment wasn’t hard so I got done early.”

“Niisan!”

Sasuke comes barrelling down the hallway, tackling Itachi to the ground in a crushing hug.

“Be careful!” Their mother scolds, though her tone is light.

Itachi hugs his little brother back, feeling on the absolute top of the world.

“C’mon Niisan, I wanna go play!” Sasuke chirrups, scrambling back onto his feet.

“Of course,” Itachi concedes, dusting his pants off as he stands up.

“Be back in time for dinner,” Mikoto reminds them as they head out the door.

“We will!” Sasuke yells back, hanging off Itachi’s arm.

“Niisan! There’s a nest up here!”

Sasuke hangs precariously off a high tree branch, straining to lift himself up to get a better view.

Itachi rushes up the tree to steady him.

“Be careful,” he warns, helping lift Sasuke up on the branch with the little nest in it.

“Yeah, yeah- look! There’s babies!”

Itachi lifts himself up to peer into the nest, and sure enough, four downy little hatchling birds peer back at him. They stretch their necks out toward him, peeping indignantly.

“They’re so small!” Sasuke squeals, eyes alight, grinning so wide he might burst. “Niisan, what kind are they?”

“They look like robins to me,” Itachi answers. “But they’re very young, so don’t touch them.”

Sasuke nods, continuing to coo at the hatchlings in the nest.

A short while later, the mother robin returns. She makes a sharp, warning sound at the two boys, fluffed up indignantly.

“We should go,” Itachi says. “Their mother doesn't want us around.”

“We’re not doing anything to ‘em!” Sasuke whines.

“She doesn't understand that,” Itachi explains. “So let’s give her some space, okay?”

Sasuke pouts, but obeys, following Itachi out of the tree.

“Come on, Sasuke,” Itachi urges. “Let’s go down to the river.”

Sasuke obeys again, but doesn't lose that letdown expression.

"Don't be like that," Itachi chides. "We'll see them again some other time."
“You’ve got something on your mind.”

Sasori is right, of course. He usually is. But Orochimaru doesn’t quite feel like divulging his thoughts at the moment.

“I like to keep a few secrets to myself,” he replies, still scratching away in a notebook.

Sasori pouts. A childlike pout on his childlike face.

(He doesn't like when Orochimaru hides things from him. Not that it stops Orochimaru at all.)

They’re holed up somewhere in Tea Country, waiting for Kakuzu to catch up with them. It’s dull, all this waiting, and boredom and impatience tend to make Sasori rather cranky. Orochimaru passes the time taking notes from a scroll he’d misappropriated from one of their last targets, but Sasori isn’t keen on such mundane tasks.

He disappears somewhere out of Orochimaru’s view; soft shuffling and quiet footsteps follow as Sasori decides to sit behind him. He works cold fingers into long, black hair, idly playing with it like a child might play with some pretty bauble. nb

“So your pet Uchiha took that gift of yours without questioning it, huh?” he asks, gathering up some of Orochimaru’s hair and starting up some sort of braid.

“He’s too trusting for his own good,” Orochimaru replies.

“He’s gonna end up dying young,” Sasori says, in a knowing sort of tone. “Or even worse.”

Orochimaru finally ceases his writing. He bites back a growl in response.

“Aw, do you want to protect him? That’s noble and all, but I wouldn’t count on keeping him safe from everything. You can’t wrap him up in cotton wool and hide him away after all, can you? Or is that what you want?”

“That’s my business and not yours.”

“Alright, alright. Someone’s crabby today.”

He can feel Sasori’s pout boring into the back of his skull, but he can’t find it in himself to care. Sasori ties off the braid he’s been working on, and gets up to pace restlessly around the room.

Waiting must be driving him absolutely mad.

End Notes
As always, all comments, feedback, kudos, etc. are appreciated!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!