

1

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

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

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

Battlefield ...

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

Bodies, bodies, bodies ...

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

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

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

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

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

But the tears came naturally spilling out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

power, he would stop being himself somehow.

“What’s wrong?”

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

I will change it.

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

Itachi never forgot that day.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Will it be a little brother or a little sister?

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

“Were you training by yourself again today?”

“Yeah.”

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

“Is Dad in his room?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Itachi winced slightly.

"What is it, Itachi?"

He noticed me ...

Rookie.

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

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

"What is it?"

"I wanted to ask you about shuriken."

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

Five years old.

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

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

"So?" Mikoto asked, lying back on the floor.

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

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

Itachi gently touched the baby's cheek.

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

"Sasuke." The child's name. His own little brother.

Uchiha Sasuke ...

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How old’re you?” the boy asked.

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

“Five.”

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

“I’m—”

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

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

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

“If you don’t need anything ...”

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

Itachi’s eyes chased after his aura.

The sky.

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

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

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

kunai either, right?”

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

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

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

“Nice meeting you, Itachi.”

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



He looked up at the moon.

Just me and Sasuke ...

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

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

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

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

Sasuke began to cry.

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

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

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

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

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

Something’s coming ...

All Itachi could do was tighten his arms around Sasuke.



The village was abruptly thrown into total chaos.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But ..."

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Chief!” Yashiro drew in closer.

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



“Itachi!”

“Mom.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

War ...

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

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

"I'm all right, Mom."

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

He wanted to be a strong ninja.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" Hiruzen glared at him, brow furrowed.

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

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

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

“I don’t agree.”

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

“That’s a long-standing—”

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

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

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

Hiruzen faltered.

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

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



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

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

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

Discrimination.

Persecution.

False accusations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right."

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

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

The family in the kitchen started eating again.



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

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

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

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

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

“Huh?”

“They meet regularly at Nakano Shrine.”

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

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

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

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

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