

## Chapter 17: The Hearsay of Eminent Distraction

“-. Uchiha Itachi, Head of the Uchiha Clan .-“

Itachi hadn't expected Lord Nara to show up with new orders in person, especially so soon after the briefing, but he was glad for the diversion. He sent Shisui a summons but wasn't given time to wait for him to also arrive, and perhaps it would be for the best. If there was any grounding to Lord Nara's concerns that their... unexpected returning objective might not be entirely authentic, he'd much rather it be him who dealt with the matter. There was no one still alive among the Uchiha who was not emotionally compromised, but this matter would be an ordeal for Shisui in particular if it proved to be yet another trick.

Lord Nara had brought Owl, the Hyuuga ANBU with him, so the Commander was obviously not leaving anything to chance either.

Mercifully, their worries proved unfounded. When they reached the western gate and were led by the guards into the waiting area – who were most surprised at their arrival, as they had only just sent a runner out with the report – they learned Masanari Hanzo had somehow come back alive and in one piece, and even had an all-new set of his same attire that had been destroyed in the battle. More importantly, however...

“Is he taking a nap?” Lord Nara asked incredulously, after applying the standard set of privacy jutsu. “Seriously?”

“He fell asleep waiting for you, Sir,” the ninja confirmed while Owl used his byakugan and Itachi his mangekyou sharingan to confirm the sight was no trick or disguise. “He just came over and surrendered himself to our custody, submitted to all our security protocols – save one, for which he invoked Clan privileges – and then nodded off soon after he sat down.”

“Did he seem tired? In pain? Distracted?”

“Not very tired and not in pain, but he was definitely some manner of distracted. It was strange, he kept up with everything going on around him, even startled us with how well he heard even

through walls. He just didn't seem to tell the difference anymore, after a while. We wouldn't have known it, but then he replied to things he heard in the other room a couple of times before we realized what was happening. He clammed up after that and sat to wait for you."

"At which point he nodded off."

"Quite so, sir."

"Alright. Give us some privacy."

"Before that," Itachi interjected, deactivating his eyes. "When you mentioned security protocols, what did you mean 'save one'?"

The nin nodded in the direction of Masanari, or rather the item held in the closed fist he was using as a pillow, whose nature Itachi's eyes had already divined. "He refused to let go of the scroll there, or allow it to be inspected beyond non-intrusive means. In light of recent events and his newly unveiled status, we felt it prudent not to push until explicit orders."

At this point the only one who hadn't made any claims or assumptions about Masanari being an Uzumaki were Masanari himself. Never mind the Clan Elder.

Or Chief.

"Fine," Nara decided. "That will be all, unless there's something else Lord Uchiha?"

"No."

"Leave us."

The nin on duty left.

"Is he faking?" Lord Nara asked lowly.

"Not that I can tell," Itachi replied just as softly. "I can see a lot less than I hoped, but that is not because of any obfuscation. His breathing rhythm is in line with slumber. I see no illusion or physical transformation either, and I doubt he is a clone. In all cases there would be *some* chakra lost through convection. Even the Zetsu creature showed some, once he was no longer hidden in the tree. But his aura is just as elusive to the sharingan as before. I expected the mangekyou to pick up *something* more, but that does not seem to be the case."

“Well, that’s more than I got,” Owl grumbled. “I can confirm his visual health indicators, but that’s it. I could at least see something of his chakra and pathway system before, but now I don’t see anything at all. The byakugan is telling me he’s not even there, even though I can see him with normal sight just fine.”

“So what you’re both saying is that our resident Uzumaki somehow achieved an all new level of being annoying,” Lord Nara sighed. “Either the enemy has somehow improved his already peerless disguise technique in the last few hours, just so he could turn himself in for more mischief, or we have our man.”

“I can only defer to your greater insight, Commander,” Owl said, to which Itachi grunted softly.

“Figures. Owl, you go outside too, keep scanning the area for anyone looking where they shouldn’t, but don’t peek.”

“Roger.”

Shikaku waited until he and Itachi were the only ones in the room with the other man before ambling over to the table. Masanari didn’t even twitch at their approach. He only roused when Lord Nara re-cast their privacy techniques to include him.

“Unlike other people, you don’t need to keep reminding me that you’re not a ninja,” Lord Nara told the man in place of greeting. “But with what I know about you now, I *will* be expecting better awareness of your surroundings.”

Lord Hanzo blinked several times, then stood and stretched. “My body was fully aware of everything at all times, I just didn’t deem you a danger.”

“That *sounds* like something you would say, at least.”

Itachi agreed.

Hanzo cracked his neck, then turned his eyes from Lord Nara to Itachi and paused, before his face went grave. “I am very sorry, Itachi.”

*What does he see this time?* “For what?”

“There’s a new burden on your spirit, twice over, and the Yin energy in your eyes is no longer all yours. I know it’s an empty comfort when I have so many other reasons for it, but I’ll do all I can to see you avenged for the deaths of your parents.”

Itachi had to forcefully control himself. “Your sentiments are appreciated.”

“I’m glad at least Sasuke’s alright.”

“...My brother indeed lives,” Itachi replied just so he didn’t need to think about the rest. “He is sound of body at least. Is that part of the same insight?”

“No, his aura is actually distinctive enough that I don’t need to put effort into finding him. I’m something of a sensor, in case it wasn’t obvious at this point.” *From all the way over here? He’s in the Hokage Mountain with the rest of the VIP evacuees.* “He’s changed too, though. Probably has the sharingan now, because why not fuck the poor kid over in every possible version of the outcome.” The sheer contempt that Masanari Hanzo levied against the very notion of Sharingan in children left Itachi feeling... he didn’t even know. “Should I change to more formal styles of address from now on?”

A quick glance with commander Nara confirmed to Itachi that they’d both achieved the same conclusion.

This was almost certainly Masanari.

“You’re not part of the force,” Lord Shikaku replied just in time to make it look like their silent communication was just about who got to answer and nothing else. “And I won’t pretend to suddenly care about stuff like that outside traditional settings, so I’ll say no. For myself anyway.”

Hanzo nodded, then looked at Itachi.

“...In professional settings it would be recommended,” Itachi said. “At least for the near future.”

“Fuck, okay.”

*Why did he react so strongly?*

“No, not okay since you snapping would be the second worst thing to come out of this mess.” For the first time, Itachi found the man’s honesty galling. “Alright. I don’t know the proper Uchiha protocol for this, as I’m sure there is, so here.” The man stepped around the table and bowed just

enough so he wouldn't break line of sight, holding the scroll out with both hands. "I hereby return what was taken by common foe, now reclaimed."

Itachi accepted the scroll, already expecting and dreading what would be in it.

"As an honored guest of the clan who never got to take his proper leave, honor demands I still conduct myself as a guest under your roof. I therefore could not relinquish these to anyone but my host."

"My father is dead," Itachi said woodenly. "But I appreciate the show of respect. As the new head of my clan, I will accept the return of our eyes in his stead."

The emotions that played over Masanari's face should have been revealing, but they flowed just as quickly as every other time Shikaku had been there to witness them. Itachi felt himself relax slightly. The chaotic cognitive patterns of the clan Uzumaki, this, at least, was a trait no infiltrator was at all likely to imitate.

"It's only the ones Orochimaru had on him, I don't know what became of any others, but I can confidently say they are all the ones *he* made off with."

Unfurling the scroll, a cursory glance over the sealing characters was enough to intimate the nature of the contents. Itachi's grip went very tight on the paper, and it took an effort of will to roll it back closed without activating his Kaleidoscope Eyes.

"Lord Uchiha," Lord Nara sounded stern all of a sudden. "Control yourself."

Itachi quickly shut the chakra flow to his eyes, belatedly realizing that his normal sharingan had still gotten away from him, and was quickly headed for more than that. What a turn his life had taken, that the second-best eyes in the entire Clan now only qualified as *normal*. "Apologies. It seems I cannot entirely control this new power. I will be sure to redress this through training as soon as time allows."

"No, that's a terrible idea, you need to rest and grieve. Don't give me that look, more duress is the last thing you need right now, especially of the self-inflicted kind. You don't want a foundational experience to be anything less than gracious. You literally just got two different Yin chunks shoved into yours, none too gently either."

Itachi opened his mouth, the chastisement not to overstep his bounds on the tip of his tongue, but he changed his mind at the last moment. “You can see such things?”

“I’ve had a breakthrough,” Masanari said by way of non-explanation. “I very strongly recommend not using your Sharingan for anything *but* the happiest occasions for the foreseeable future. Yes, I do mean even the kaleidoscope eyes. I know that’s very unlikely right now, but you should still be able to find closure, at least. I’d personally recommend a one-off where you create a very meaningful and blissful illusion and share it with whoever is most fundamental to your sanity. You can do that now, right? It sounds like something a friend of Shisui’s would get.”

Itachi barely managed not to react at how closely the man guessed the nature of his new power. *Or is it even a guess?*

“I strongly advise against mind magic of any sort on Sasuke though,” the man said with positively rude bluntness. “Until the new Yin settles, you’re not in the frame of mind to make anything approaching good choices for people with more sway on you than yourself.”

“Alright, that’s quite enough out of you,” Lord Nara cut in again, this time aiming his harsh tone at the older man.

Hanzo seemed poised to speak anyway -

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Arrest and gag me then,” Masanari said, shocking them both. “Because this is more important than my freedom, as usual.” With that ultimatum, the man turned to Itachi again. “The chakra pathway system is a *parasite*. For all that we’ve learned to use it for feats of power, its effect on the Yin is *always* deleterious. It compresses, tangles and *consumes* the spirit the stronger it becomes. This is why ninja become less and less empathetic and more eccentric the stronger they grow. Unless you actively cultivate interpersonal ties and really invest your spirit in others – genuinely, like Lord Sarutobi did – your life will only get worse and hollow.”

Was this man ever *not* going to reveal some terrible truth that spelled doom for his clan and the world?

“You’re even worse off because now you have two chunks of freshly-torn Yin adding their own weight, and your chakra system is already tangling with it. Ravenously, you might say.” Where

before Masanari had spoken more philosophically and speculatively of the parts of the self and what the Spirit might be capable of, now he spoke as if it was all fact. “You will have terrible nightmares for some time, Young Lord. You’ll also feel all emotions either three times as strongly or not at all, and you’ll never know which until after the fact. This is the inevitable result of external spiritual influences – in this world where the spirit is snared and tangled in our chakra since conception, Yin bestowal is *never* easy or clean. Your emotional state and judgment *will* be impaired for some time, this is not speculation.”

Itachi had to force himself not to say something absolutely unkind. As always when he had this problem, he thought of what Shisui would do instead. *Treat it like an interrogation*, his friend’s glib tone seemed to sound in Itachi’s mind, though in Fugaku’s voice. *Make the best of your cooperative yardbird*. “What would you advise?”

“What I just did and always will – use the Sharingan to record only good and happy things for as long as possible. Again, I do mean even the kaleidoscope eyes. I know they cause progressive blindness – “ how *did* he know all this, Itachi wondered not for the first time, did he have some manner of eye technique of his own now, or did Shisui not have a shred of discretion at all? “- but it might serve to have your first grand use of them be in the same vein regardless. That’s what I meant about the illusion. You’re nothing like Shisui save for your tendency to get attached, and of course your overreactive idealism – “ *Excuse me?* “But you wouldn’t be such good friends with him if you didn’t really, very strongly *wish* you were at least somewhat like him. It’s impossible that it didn’t influence the evolution of your powers.”

There was dead silence.

“Well, that’s all I had to say. I apologize for all offense, but hope you will make full use of my insight regardless, however unpleasant.”

“... It is, indeed, most unpleasant.”

Hanzo grimaced, as Itachi’s refusal to commit to anything was patently obvious in his reply, but said nothing more.

Itachi put the storage scroll inside his coat and nodded at the other man. “I accept your gift. It seems the Uchiha Clan is twice-over in your debt.”

“... You know what, I think I’ll go ahead and call in that debt right now. My price is for you to do everything in your and the clan’s power to foster your own mental health above and beyond all other concerns, as per my previous recommendations.”

You could hear a pin drop.

“Do this and there is no more debt left between us.”

“You’ve made your point,” Nara said coldly just before Itachi would’ve. “Don’t dig yourself any deeper.”

A strange flux of emotions colored Hanzo’s expression, eventually settling on something ironic and resigned. “Fine. I’ve said what I needed.” He sent Itachi one last glance. “The eyes of Shisui’s mother are in there. Next to last.”

Itachi’s fists clenched of their own accord inside his sleeves. “I will let Shisui know of the service you did him.” However he did it. Did he escape Orochimaru, or was he rescued? Or perhaps he defeated him outright, after today Itachi wasn’t ruling anything out, no matter how ridiculous.

Mercifully, Masanari didn’t say anything else until they reached the hospital. The man could roof hop now at least. And body flicker. He’d had more than one breakthrough, it seemed.

Once arrived, Doctor Hirano was called – under their supervision for her own safety – to perform what tests were necessary to confirm that this was not an enemy under Obito’s substitute technique, as that was the only possibility their doujutsu could not categorically dismiss.

The all clear brought a burst of relief that Itachi was conflicted to realize was purely on Shisui’s behalf. That... worried him. While he was of the opinion that Masanari had drastically overstepped himself earlier, that didn’t equate to not feeling anything at all. After all the man had done relative to his clan... there should have been *something* there, surely? If not relief, then at least chagrin over yet another debt between them. That Itachi felt *nothing* of his own, especially after how strong his emotions had otherwise been all day, forced him to reconsider what the man said about his... spiritual predicament?

*Is there no such thing as good revelation in this world?*

Perhaps Masanari was not the only one self-centred.



Finally, Lord Nara was comfortable enough taking the man down to the barrier room for a proper debrief.

The relief Itachi felt at not being invited to stay for that talk shocked him. What could have been a personal slight from the Jonin Commander, at least an inconvenience, instead came with the first positive emotion he'd felt since the Uchiha compound stopped burning.

His relief was dampened on realising he now had no excuse to delay in delivering Shisui the eyes of his mother. But that led to its own mixed feelings upon return to the compound. Shisui had answered Itachi's summons after he'd already left, and somehow deduced from Itachi 'ghosting' him – as relayed verbatim by the attendant – that this somehow meant Masanari was back. Shisui had long since gone searching for the man himself. So now Itachi was torn between irritation at being snubbed – he'd not even been at this a day, and he hadn't been gone for *that* long, not even an hour – and relief at being able to put off the matter of Shisui's mother for a little longer.

He decided on relief. There was not much else to feel relief over. He could not afford to be sparing with it.

It was late, but he could not waste time on sleep any more than everyone else left of the Uchiha. His parents' bodies had been processed by the medics. As he had no other relatives, besides Sasuke who was too young and safely ensconced in the deepest safehouse under the Hokage Rock, it would be up to him to see Fugaku and Mikoto prepared for the wake, and the funeral after.

The bodies were not yet in the kamidana when he got there, which was good as it gave him time to cover the whole shrine with white paper to keep out the impure spirits. When he was finished, he sent for the items and amenities for the rite of matsugo-no-mizu. He got them laid out just in time for his parents' bodies to be delivered. Dismissing all others, he closed the home shrine and went about moistening his parents' lips with water.

Perversely, only Fugaku had been spared the indignity of having his eyes stolen in death. Itachi had always considered it morbid that the Uchiha had to remove the eyes of their relatives ahead of the nokan encoffining ritual. Those feelings were only redoubled now, as he took out Fugaku's sharingan and inserted seal pins in each from behind, careful to puncture both the retina and lens but not the cornea. He experienced a strong impulse to set off the seals and destroy the eyes. To just fill Fugaku's eye sockets with cotton like he had to do for his mother, so the emptiness would

not be obvious beneath the coins later. After an all too long moment, the urge finally passed and Itachi put the eyes back in their place.

He very carefully didn't activate his sharingan for even a moment throughout all of it.

As the medic-nin had already washed the bodies, the rest of the encoffining ritual would be carried out by the nokansa. That would need to wait till dawn, however, due to the emergency curfew now in place. Thankfully, his clearance exempted him from it, so Itachi covered the bodies with white sheets and went to the Naka Temple to undergo purification before the clan deity. He used to believe it strange that ninja considered it impure and defiling to handle dead bodies, given their profession, but after what he'd just had to do he definitely felt like an untouchable.

That feeling still hadn't completely disappeared when he was finally done with his morbid tasks, around three in the morning. He still did not feel inclined to sleep, and it might be for the best if he skipped it entirely this once. Regardless of Masanari's manners, Itachi completely believed him about the dreams. He considered training, but ultimately decided against it as well because he did not want to prove Masanari right there either, as he would be doing it at least partly from spite.

He went instead to his and Shisui's usual spot by the river to get away from the smell of smoke and dead flesh.

The moon was fading and the morning star casting its last rays when Shisui finally emerged from the woods. He looked disturbed.

"Ho there, Lord Chief."

"Don't call me that after you snubbed me at your first summons."

"Ouch." Shisui paused. "No, actually you're right. I formally apologize."

Itachi grunted.

Shisui came to stand next to him and looked at the river. "Nothing's going to be the same, is it?"

"Quite."

"I don't usually mind change, but did it all have to be so bad? All at once? It's absurd, what happened in the past 24 hours."

Not a small thing coming from a ninja, especially from the Uchiha Clan. Especially from who was quite frankly the most dangerous living shinobi from the Uchiha Clan. Until today at least.

Perhaps.

Itachi walked off to sit down on the grass where he had the fullest view of the forest and unsealed a bottle of sake. He poured each of them a saucer and waited for Shisui to join him. Shisui sat down in front of Itachi and slightly to his left, which gave him the fullest view of the ravine behind him.

They clinked their saucers together. “May they have a restful sleep,” they both intoned.

The rice wine was the strongest Itachi could find in the family stores, but it barely burned going down. Didn’t compare to breathing so much smoke and flame on the way to utter failure.

“Did you find what you ran off to look for?” Itachi finally broke the silence.

Shisui winced, as well he should. Itachi had long since learned to choose his words for the greatest impact. It was the only way to live when the one person you needed to influence had no patience for argument beyond one minute. That person being Fugaku Uchiha. “I got what was coming to me there, no question about that.”

Itachi waited.

“I’m told you have my mom’s eyes.”

Itachi passed them over without a word. He’d had ample time to move them to a separate scroll while he brooded.

Shisui stared at the scroll for a long time. “You know, the most messed up thing is that I’m not even that upset that she’s dead. She’s been in chronic pain since before I was born, and ever since dad died she’s been looking forward to joining him as a release. I’m really just pissed she didn’t get to make that cake, she’d been looking forward to my reaction to her ‘surprise’ more than I was.”

Itachi said nothing. What could he? He couldn’t relate to such closeness, never mind such an enlightened ease to let go of those he loved, and the only other thing he felt was envy.

“Orochimaru’s dead, apparently,” Shisui just threw it out there. “Except he might still come back because of some messed up sealing technique, or that’s what Hanzo said.”

Itachi blinked slowly. “Explain.”

The explanation wasn’t much of one, unfortunately. All they knew was what Lord Hanzo conveyed to Shisui, and Lord Nara before him. Orochimaru had apparently developed a way to reincarnate himself by possessing the bodies of others. That chilled Itachi, but there was more. The sannin actually tried to claim Lord Hanzo, failing only ‘because I’m better at biomodification than he is.’ Unfortunately, the traitor ninja might still come back ‘because he’s much better at body horror than I’ll ever have the stomach for.’

“Apparently he’s made some weird cursed seal that combines nature chakra and parts of his soul, or spirit, whatever,” Shisui muttered. “He injects that thing into you through a bite, which over time pushes his chakra and nature energy into yours to force your chakra system to grow and change enough to fit him. Then he literally crawls into you and takes you over from the inside, did I mention his real form is a huge white snake made of smaller snakes now? It’s freaky.”

After what he’d just heard, Itachi could think of a fair number of worse but equally appropriate words for that.

“According to Hanzo, odds are good there’s at least one more person out there with the cursed seal on them. If any of Orochimaru’s underlings know the release method for that seal – which, apparently, might be yet *another* Root double agent who, surprise surprise, is probably one of those who escaped – it could bring the freak back to life like some weird version of the Second Hokage’s Impure World Reincarnation, except alive. Don’t ask me how.”

Itachi wasn’t going to.

“Did you see Hanzo’s dragon?”

Itachi paused with the sake saucer almost at his lips. “His what now?”

“Yeah, he has a dragon now.”

Itachi lowered the saucer and reconsidered all he’d seen and heard that day. “Does this have something to do with that strange blood dragon technique that erupted from his toad?”

“Yeah, apparently it’s an actual creature now. It likes to hang from his neck when it’s not being bizarrely overwhelmed by first experiences. I had to make Hanzo swear he hadn’t taught Naruto how to transform, because the thing went into a food coma from eating *ramen*, for gods’ sake, it was just... you really had to be there.”

Itachi looked at his sake and seriously wondered if this was a drunken dream. He hoped it wasn’t, because if he woke up only to learn the rest of the day *wasn’t* also a nightmare, he didn’t know what he would do. “There was no sign of any creature when Lord Nara and I retrieved him.”

“Yeah, it can do perfect transformations too, apparently, shapeshift and control his own size and weight. It was disguised as his tie.”

And it went unnoticed to both Sharingan forms and the byakugan too? “That sounds like the perfect substitute technique Obito was under.”

“Yeah, I said so too, so did Lord Nara, but I was told you were there when they confirmed he was him and not a clone or combo transformation or whatever.”

That was true, as far as it went. “... Even the Zetsu creature had some slight energy loss through convection, at least upon being injured, and Lord Hiashi’s byakugan was still able to see Obito’s chakra, even recognize it as the ANBU Commander’s. For neither of that to be true here... The creature would only have gone unnoticed if it shared Masanari’s own nature, or at least whatever it is that makes his chakra undetectable.”

“Yeah.” Shisui was looking at his sake now, looking glum. “He’s not well.”

Itachi said nothing. He was quite frankly out of all patience and interest to spare for that man at the moment, but for Shisui he would endure.

“Back when he held his thesis, it took him five hours to start fraying, and that was after he almost died and was just discharged from the hospital. Also, he used to just get drowsy and cranky. But today, when I finally caught up with him, he’d not even been awake for *two* hours but was already barely able to pay attention to me. It was freaky, ever since that crazy experiment of his it’s been literally *impossible* for him to miss the slightest detail of his surroundings, he used to write and eat and do research *and* hold three conversations at the same time, easy. But today he couldn’t even keep *one* going without me having to call his attention every other sentence. Not because he didn’t

register me, but because... it was like I was being lost in the background noise, like he couldn't focus on me anymore, or anything else for any given time. I felt like I was like dealing with Naruto, but worse."

Itachi frowned. "I recall nothing of the sort myself."

"Yeah, according to Lord Nara, it started happening mid-way through the debrief and got steadily worse, especially after he used some 'method' to share info quickly all at once, whatever that means. Hanzo promised to explain once he had a nap, except since when does he take naps? He sleeps less than I do!"

He does? Did?

"Lord Nara was kind of a lot more slouchy than usual too."

*It seems even the illustrious Elder Uzumaki didn't come out of this unscathed.* "You think Orochimaru did something?"

"Or the plant man, or the nano bugs, or Obito, or maybe it was a side effect from his techniques or who knows what else out of everything that happened?"

Who knew what indeed?

For all that Itachi was irritated with the man, he could not deny that he'd done all he'd done for his clan without being asked, at great personal danger. And cost, now. Through it all, even with the physical and mystical abilities he'd recently displayed, the element most crucial to everything had been his mind. If even that was to be taken away, the victory of the enemy would objectively qualify as total.

The two passed the rest of the time to sunrise in silence, then they each went their separate ways to see to their respective funeral arrangements.

Not much time after, to Itachi's surprise, just as he was finishing his talks with the nokansa about how and where to get the bodies ready for the wake, an ANBU appeared with an invitation from Commander Nara. To participate in an 'experimental' procedure that might elucidate certain Uchiha, Uzumaki and *Namikaze* secrets. Of particular note was an explicit command to *not* bring Shisui along.

Itachi seriously considered declining. He had an all too important meeting with the Military Police next, which was in complete disarray but still guaranteed to look down on him on account of age, regardless of his ANBU experience. But it *was* from Lord Nara, and given the specifics of the note, this would practically *need* to involve the Uzumaki child somehow. Who was ensconced under tightest guard in the same place where Sasuke currently was.

Itachi found himself much more willing to reschedule important meetings if it moved up the timetable to be with his brother.

Itachi sent a messenger to tell the police nin that a time-sensitive opportunity had just opened up, which could prove important to reversing the dire straights the clan and village were currently in, and followed the ANBU to the meeting place. He ignored the small voice that pointed out he was doing as Masanari urged and prioritising his own mental health above all other concerns.

The Hokage Rock had considerable space inside, set up for practically Konoha's entire population to take shelter in, and indeed there was a point the prior day when Lord Nara had almost ordered a full evacuation. Ultimately, that hadn't happened, which made it a lighter burden to evacuate only the Uchiha Clan's non-combatants, and a number of other sensitive potential targets. With Danzo's organisation uprooted, but the all-new risk that Uchiha Obito might know where and how to get to the ANBU headquarters as well, it was decided to use certain top-secret facilities in the mountain that even the clan chiefs didn't know about until now, to hide the VIPs. Most notably one Uzumaki Naruto.

Sasuke had, in full childlike fashion, ignorantly taken advantage of Itachi's emotionally compromised state to weepily cajole him – and through him the Lord Commander – to stash him in the same place as 'fishcake' because that way they wouldn't have to be orphans all on their own.

Itachi would still have said no on grounds of security risk, as two objectives were always harder to steal than one, and he was sure Lord Nara would have agreed in any other situation. But the fact was that Uzumaki had been the only one who actually prevailed over the traitor. Sasuke was safer with him than anywhere else.

At least, that was the hope. Whether or not Naruto's 'possession' was repeatable was unknown. And getting less and less likely the longer they went without the Fourth's 'chakra ghost' being reachable. Through whatever means.

Perhaps that matter, at least, would be settled once and for all.

When he reached the security checkpoint leading to the housing facility itself, he found Lord Nara doing paperwork, and Masanari curled up in one of the wall recesses with his hands under his arms, once again fast asleep.

“Good, you’re here,” Lord Nara said without preamble, crumpling a sheet of paper in his hand and tossing it at Hanzo’s nose to wake him up. “Rise and shine, Nek-ossan.”

“Mmmhnnn... Fuck you, Nara.”

Itachi balked in shock. He then, very belatedly, remembered that Hanzo was not a shinobi, so that did not qualify as gross insubordination.

Lord Shikaku caught Itachi’s look and scoffed. “The answer to all the questions you’re likely to have for the rest of the week is ‘Ninshu with that bastard.’ I’d say feel free to indulge a little yourself, but I’m told it wouldn’t be healthy for you right now, if you can even do it.”

Not healthy – right now – for him, what? “The Sage’s art?”

“Don’t sound so awed,” Lord Shikaku huffed. “There’s still a couple of monasteries out there who keep the art alive, he’s not that special.”

“I’ll remind you,” Masanari grumbled as he rolled out of the hole in the wall. “That the one who talks me down the most has always been myself.”

“Well even that has clearly not been enough.”

“What’s that? Throwing *shade* again, Nara?”

“Please stop.”

“I did stop precisely two hours and five minutes ago.”

“What, you don’t know the exact time to the millisecond this time?”

“Well, since you asked it’s-“

“Oh shut up and play your dragon why don’t you.”



Itachi has hard-pressed not to gape in astonishment at the way they behaved with each other. He watched numbly as the burning candlestick next to the alcove turned into a blue-and-white dragon. It looked exactly like every artistic interpretation of such mythical beings that Itachi had ever seen, though instead of water streams it was smoke that puffed out of its nostrils. The creature cuddled Masanari, who played with it like one would a cat.

Itachi stared. "... I have questions."

"This is Yemo. Say hello, Yemo."

"Hello."

"It speaks?"

The dragon scowled at him, whiskers fluttering.

Hanzo actually had the gall to look baffled. "Of course it speaks, don't all the ones in the stories? He mostly only speaks when I ask, for now, and usually just single words since he's just a baby. He's only been alive for half a day, but he'll get there in time. His knowledge and understanding on some things is already beyond anyone else's. Well, except mine."

"Generally speaking," Lord Nara flatly cut it, "not believing everything you hear in a fairy tale is the sane thing."

"I'm not asking anyone to believe *everything* in fairy tales."

"No, just a lot of it, and a fair bit besides which you claim is not a fairy tale at all."

"It's not my fault you ninja have such a skewed sense of normality, you lot can do everything from controlling the elements to literally ripping people out of the afterlife to make all-powerful zombies without any bloodline nonsense, but somehow it's dragons that you draw the line at. Half of you on average don't even believe the Sage was real despite all three of Konoha's royal bloodlines swearing up down and sideways he was their progenitor. Which, by the way, is only true for the Senju and Uchiha. The Hyuuga are descended from Hamura, the Sage's brother, along with the Kaguya clan that's currently getting itself genocided over in Water, and the Ootsutsuki off-shoots that may or may not be inhabiting the moon."

What – where – what was that about the moon – what in all unholy hells had Itachi just stumbled into?

Lord Shikaku cradled his forehead. “Next time I’m going to wait until you wake up on your own.”

“It would be appreciated.”

“I don’t care how you feel about it, just tell me – will it stop you from blurting out things that make even you sound insane?”

That... was not the same thing as saying what Hanzo had just said wasn’t true.

“Possibly. I hope so anyway.”

Itachi cleared his throat before his concept of reality suffered an even worse blow. “Shisui told me you have trouble... concentrating?”

Masanari peered at him, visibly weighing his options.

Unlike the prior night, Itachi could actually read his emotions this time, even without sharingan, which... he didn’t know if it was good or bad.

“Let’s just say I have the opposite of your problem. You have too much yin now, two chunks not even yours. Due to that mess with Orochimaru that I’m not going to be explaining twice –Lord Nara ever so kindly agreed to handle that for me-“

"Only because it lets me control the information.”

“-what Yin I have now is all mine, but there’s very little of it. And since Yin is practically your willpower, that means it’s taking all my willpower just to talk to you coherently right now, instead of my mind going off on every tangent at once and getting distracted. The body handles all the physical energy needs, but the want, the will, the *drive* to do anything has to come from the spirit, and mine is now, quite literally, that of a newborn. Let me tell you, I understand more than I ever wanted to understand about why babies and toddlers sleep so much, and doubly so why they wake up at the most inconvenient times with random wants and wishes. I have far too much insight in how and why they swing between sleepy and hyperactive at the drop of a hat as well. I’ll have to make like a cat for a couple years, or you’ll just be dealing with a bigger version of Naruto 90% of the time.”

Lord Shikaku twitched. “That’s a scary thought.”

Itachi had to agree.

“You think that’s bad, now put yourself in my shoes and realize that the more I think, the faster this happens. I literally have to actively stop myself from following more than one thought at a time or I’ll literally think myself stupid. I dread to think what Hiashi will report of my behaviour when he finally comes back. I apologize to both you and him in advance. I even forgot my research in my haste to come back, despite that I’d only just finished cussing Orochimaru out in my head for stealing it.”

How *did* he come back without Lord Hiashi and the others? Was he faster than elite shinobi now too?

“You can stop explaining any time now, I have far too much understanding of that and more besides, as you well know.” Lord Nara all but stabbed the file he was working on with his brush. “You bastard.”

“And how do you think I feel about it?” Masanari huffed, even as Itachi still wondered what ‘it’ even was. “Could I bother you for a bodyguard or two? I can afford it.”

“Are you sure? Can you afford it for two years? Not just any ninja will do for you, you know. Also, we’re about to go to war, I’ll remind you.”

“You still don’t know that.” For all that he proclaimed himself as a thoroughly fatalistic man, Masanari Hanzo could be stunningly optimistic at the oddest times. “War, huh?” At the same time, the man... didn’t sound as alarmed as he did melancholic. And resigned, again. It was so strange to see it in such a proactive man. “What would qualify as prevention at this point?”

“Get me back the hokage, then we’ll talk.”

“...You’re not asking for much, are you?”

To Itachi confused astonishment, Lord Nara did not reply except with a very pointed and noncommittal silence.

“I... *might* be able to find where Obito could be making his lair, but only the general region.”

Itachi's eyes snapped to Hanzo's, the mangekyous sharingan practically frothing beneath the surface of his will. At the same time, Lord Nara very slowly put his brush down and turned to him as well.

"You won't find the place fast enough to make a difference in the near or mid-term though," Hanzo cautioned them. "And I doubt Sarutobi is even there, if he lives. Obito's technique is-"

"Stop!" Nara commanded. "Stop. We're not *perfectly* secure here, keep... keep whatever that is to yourself for now. I still haven't processed everything else you showed me, and we need all our wits – *your* wits – for what we're here to do. Will explaining this make you need yet *another* nap before doing what we came here to do?"

"... Probably."

"Leave it for later then. This is too important, or at least as important."

*What is?*

Hanzo frowned. "Does my ANBU hotline pass still work?"

"Yes, but keep it in reserve. I'll be assigning you a bodyguard – yes for free, you skinflint – probably Shisui, unless you don't want him because he already failed at that once?"

Hanzo shook his head. "He wasn't assigned to me or even on duty then, it doesn't count."

"That's what I thought. I'll assign him a new rank and he'll get you in if necessary. Unless, of course, Lord Uchiha wants him for something else?"

Itachi almost reflexively answered yes, even though it would have been a lie. Or would it? If it was to comply with Hanzo's own advice to prioritise his own sanity above all other concerns? "I will leave it up to him."

"That'll have to do."

"Maybe not." Hanzo, as always, was the most contrarian person in the room. "Where's Hatake?"

"Not available."

"Fair enough." Hanzo said. "I'm almost surprised you haven't benched him."

“If you and Hiashi are right about what all Obito can do, the nutcase could get to him even in a locked and sealed room. That he hasn’t made a move to recover his eye despite being exposed makes me think he’s avoiding him, which could be useful. Also, while secrecy of place might be a thing, it would be like putting Kakashi in jail indefinitely for no crime of his own. I gave him the option anyway, and you will be no doubt shocked to learn that he categorically refused.”

“Now you’re just being mean, I can figure that out just fine on my own, thank you.” Hanzo grumbled. He looked just about to add something insolent – again – but unexpectedly stopped and changed from glib to grave. “I’m sorry you were exposed to all that, Shikaku. No one should have gone through it.”

Something like what?

Lord Shikaku sighed. “I know. And you warned me not to, but it’s done.”

Itachi glanced from one man to the other. “Dare I ask, or is it none of my business?”

Lord Nara looked at him with dead eyes. “What Orochimaru tried to do to Masanari involved forcing his way into his body through every orifice. And yes, I do mean *every* orifice. At once. In the form of a swarm of slithering, glossy, squirming, wriggling snakes.”

Itachi... didn’t shudder but it was a close thing.

Lord Nara did shudder, then returned to his paperwork like it was a rite of promised salvation. “Because I’m ever so thorough, I insisted on getting *everything* during the Ninshu. Against all warning to the contrary from the only one with the lived experience.”

“Only on the first topic of interest.”

“I’d like to think I know when to learn my lesson,” Lord Nara muttered. “Just the once was enough.”

“To be fair, anecdotal evidence isn’t really evidence, so I can’t really blame the head of the country’s armed forces for wanting to be thorough.”

“You should, when you’re the only agent on the ground and said commander is being a complete and utter dumbass,” Lord Nara grunted. “I’m certainly blaming myself.”

“Good luck having better luck with Inoichi.”

“Yeah,” Lord Nara said glumly. “Luck.”

Itachi took a slow breath and pinched his nose. His eyes were *vibrating* with the want to unleash themselves upon them both, but he managed to refrain. “Lord Shikaku. And Hanzo. Why have I been called here?”

Lord Nara waved vaguely at Hanzo. “You explain it.”

“I’m going to try to communicate with Kurama again.” What did he mean ‘again’, did he customarily talk to that beast? “And through him, hopefully, whatever remains of the chakra clone that Namikaze Minato left in Naruto. I’ve been told that he somehow possessed the poor kid and even managed to come up with some technique or other to affect Obito in his intangible state.”

“And there’s not one ninja who doesn’t want to know how,” Lord Nara said while Itachi was indulging his own thoughts on the matter.

“From my ninshu with the fox during the fight yesterday -“ His what? When? With *whom* – oh, was that why he shouted for ‘Kurama’ to bring him into the seal? “- I know for certain he’ll never willingly allow Shisui anywhere near him, with what those horrifying eyes of his can do. But whatever technique the Fourth came up with is too important to lose, and we obviously can’t afford to wait for however many years it takes Naruto to grow and learn it himself, if he even will. Ninshu *might* impart it to me, but that’s assuming the shade can engage in it, *and* is willing to do it, *and* there’s enough left of it to endure the procedure without dispersing. All are questionable because, as I’ve seen in the past little while, shinobi are not easily given to the sort of mindset ninshu requires. Most people aren’t, that’s why history is what it is.”

Itachi could see what the man had been talking about earlier, about easily getting distracted.

“Since you can’t literally, undetectably and permanently mind-rape other sapient creatures like Shisui can – you can’t, right? – I’m hoping I can prevail on Kurama to suffer your presence in the seal just long enough to copy the technique.”

Itachi did not dignify that with a response. “I see,” he said instead. “I assume you have a way to get me in?”

“If Kurama can’t or won’t, you should be able to use the Kaleidoscope to project yourself inside. I wouldn’t know how, but if anyone can figure it out on the spot it’s you. Obito was the farthest

thing from a genius, but he was still able to project into Kushina's seal without any prior experience. I suppose Madara might have taught him, but it's not like he would have had much opportunity to practice that sort of thing either, so I just don't know." That was understandable – wait, what was that about Madara? "Worse comes to worst, I'll pull you in myself and you'll all get to record first-hand empirical data on what it's like for someone to experience the spiritual equivalent of complete muscle failure."

If there was anything Itachi could judge Masanari positively for, it was that he'd never shied away from making the sacrifice play. Also, Lord Nara had just given a start at the mention of Madara's name, only to subtly shake his head at Itachi not to point out the – slip? Was it a slip, or something else? There was just so much Itachi did not know or understand anymore, it was infuriating. "Very well. Shall we proceed?"

"You two go in," Lord Nara told them, forming a seal which made a previously unnoticed script along the walls glimmer briefly. "I'll join you after your kids calm down."