

i took it and i ran for it

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by [pennydaniels](#)

Summary

Sasuke always feels a little discomfited when bringing in captured missing-nin. That may be because he often wished he was a missing-nin; free from the politics of the village and the clan. The ties that keep him tethered to the village on a bad day can be simplified to just the stress him leaving would put on Itachi.

This may be why when the Hokage approaches him to spy on Orochimaru he accepts a little too fast.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Sasuke is already most of the way back to Konoha when Itachi finds him.

“Otouto.” Itachi’s face is all radiant with relief and soft the way it only ever is with him.

“Aniki.” Sasuke lets himself stop and drop to sit on the ground. Itachi immediately kneels down next to him and begins fussing, pulling out bandages and checking him wounds with practiced gentle hands.

Sasuke rolls his eyes, “I’m fine nii-san.”

“You’re late.” Itachi says firmly while cleaning out the cut on Sasuke’s arm. His hands glow green with the familiar colour of a healing jutsu, “Of course I was going to come looking for you.”

Sasuke doesn’t outwardly display the way that makes him feel warm on the inside. He’s way too old to continue being coddled by his brother especially as his brother is the clan heir and *should* be busy with a thousand other things (though he's still not going to tell Itachi to stop).

“I thought you were also on a mission.” He comments as his brother moves to heal a different abrasion on his leg.

Itachi hums, “I finished early and I have some time off. What I do with that time is my own business.”

Sasuke snorts but just leans further into his brother’s hands. He can’t help a yawn then, “I got jumped by some missing-nin two hours ago, not even related to the mission.”

Itachi’s face has that tiny frown on it which usually prompts his enemies to go running, “I see.”

Sasuke nudges his brother, “But they seemed to have forgotten that I’m the younger brother of *the* Itachi Uchiha and that covering my eyes isn’t enough to stop me from casting a genjutsu.”

Itachi gives him a smile then, “That’s very impressive otouto.”

Sasuke yawns again, “Do you have any solider pills?”

Itachi shakes his head, “No solider pills. They’re bad for you, I’m not having you get addicted like one of those ANBU who are always running carelessly into danger and skulking around the headquarters begging for new missions.”

Sasuke makes a face, “That’s pretty harsh nii-san, I feel like you’ve got someone in mind.”

Itachi just sniffs slightly, “The whole of ANBU is a mess.” Is all he deigns to say but it absolutely delights Sasuke. He’s the only person Itachi would ever be undiplomatic around, the only person Itachi ever really drops his guard around.

“Are you gonna change it when you’re Hokage?” Sasuke nudges his brother and Itachi just sighs.

“I would rather not talk about that.” He turns his attention to diligently rewrapping an injury Sauske is sure he’s already tended to.

“It could be Shisui.” Sasuke nudges his brother again, “You don’t know that Uncle Minato will choose you.”

“But then who will be clan head for the Uchiha?” Itachi sighs again, “Currently there’re only two of us, unless you would be willing.” He turns his gaze to Sasuke who immediately mimes retching.

The political situation in the village concerning their clan has always been tenuous. An Uchiha Hokage would go a long way to smoothing everything out. Unfortunately for Itachi there are currently only two options that are well-regarded enough by the village and clans that their appointment will look natural rather than a power grab or a consolation prize. Itachi is the best of his generation but Shisui is more well-liked amongst the public due to being friendlier (Sasuke thinks it's bullshit. Just because Itachi doesn't go around smiling like an idiot at every nobody he meets doesn't mean anything). Currently the position is that whoever doesn't get the Hokage's seat will be the clan head. Sasuke is maybe the only person who knows that his brother doesn't want either. The clan head position *should* naturally fall to Sasuke if Itachi can't take it as the second son of the current head.

Unfortunately for Itachi Sasuke would rather die than be clan head.

“Leave me stuck with the elders all day? No fucking way! Besides, you know they don't like me.”

Itachi's lips go thin at that, “Their opinions are worth very little in my mind.”

But that doesn't mean they're worthless to the clan as a whole. The elders have a very specific view of Sasuke; they think he has all the worst characteristics of the Uchiha (too much like Madara, Sasuke's heard a few of them say, which is serious bullshit considering none of them are old enough to have met Madara so what would they know) with none of the good that his brother has inherited. While they see Itachi as calm and rational they see him as overly emotional and liable to fly off the handle at any moment (all that Uchiha tendency towards obsessiveness). Sasuke doesn't take it personally, anyone who thinks he's *more* emotional than Itachi is full of shit. Itachi is maybe the most emotional person he knows; he's just had to hide it his entire life. Itachi is good at reading social cues, Sasuke just ignores all of them as is his privilege as the second son and likely inheritor of nothing. Under Itachi's boundless protection Sasuke got to grow up without any censure and now he's too far gone for the Uchiha to pull back, Itachi's fault for spoiling him of course.

Sasuke finally decides to lever himself to his feet with a groan lest Itachi start trying to heal injuries that don't exist, “I'm already late so why don't we go get food? We're close to that village that does really good mochi right?”

Itachi smiles, “Are you trying to tempt me with sweets otouto?”

“Of course, not even subtly.” Sasuke yawns, “C’mon, I’m hungry! And tired!” He puts on his best whine and predicts rather than sees the moment Itachi gives in.

*

Later after Itachi has eaten too much dango for it to be either humanly possible or healthy Sasuke turns to him with a grin. He’d filled himself up on okonomiyaki and now feels pleasantly full and personally more than ready to have a little fun after his long and tiring mission.

“So aniki, this time I’ll bet two weeks of dealing with father.” Sasuke watches as his brother raises a delicate eyebrow.

“Two consecutive weeks? Or two weeks worth of time?”

“Two weeks worth of time.” Sasuke confirms, “During which the loser has to deal with him, that includes family meetings, liaising with the outside *and* reporting to him on the state of the village. Oh and if he asks to carry messages to the elders or speak up in clan meetings on his behalf. *And* it also includes dealing with him at home, so if he’s being testy during dinner the winner gets to bow out while the loser deals with it.”

Itachi hums consideringly and takes a sip of tea, “That’s a good prize.” He concedes, “The time-frame and area?”

Sasuke pumps a fist internally knowing that Itachi is firmly into it now, “Twelve hours and a straight line from here to Konoha.” He uses Itachi’s discarded dango sticks to lay out a crude map on the table, “So here’s Konoha, here’s where we are, and here’s the route.” He points, “So you can hit these villages and these settlements within this radius.”

Itachi hums, “Proof?”

“I think we can trust each other.” Sasuke holds a hand out to his brother, “Good?”

Itachi considers it before swallowing the rest of his tea on one gulp and taking Sasuke’s hand, “Fine. But don’t think I’ll let you win otouto, the stakes are too high.”

Sasuke grins, “I would never dream of it nii-san.”

*

Itachi had gone West and Sasuke can already picture the entire looping route he’ll use. Everyone might think Itachi is some untouchable genius but he’s Sasuke’s big brother and he knows him inside out.

Itachi will go to the village by the lake first and then to the one with the unavoidable bandit problem from being so close to a main road, not bad choices. But Sasuke has an ace, Itachi has been in the village which means he doesn’t have all the gossip whereas Sasuke knows there’s recently been a bad landslide triggered by too much spring rain, where there’re natural disasters there’s always help needed.

So with that he zips off to the affected mountains.

*

He and Itachi meet less than an hour from Konoha in the vast forest Hashirama had grown all those decades ago. The soft green filtered light blankets them as they compare winnings.

“How many?” Sasuke demands.

Itachi smiles, “Rebuilt three farmhouses, stopped four groups of bandits, captured a missing nin from Hot Water that I have sealed in this scroll,” He holds up the scroll for evidence, “Ploughed two fields, helped a woman fix her cart on the way to market and stabilised a dam.”

Sasuke whistled, “Not bad not bad.” He then grins, “But not enough to beat me.” Sasuke begins to list on his finger for emphasis, “Rebuilt *four* villages after they had been all but destroyed in a landslide.”

“Entire villages?” Itachi looks impressed.

“Technically part of the same mountain community *but* with four separate village heads so I’m counting it as four separate villages.”

Itachi nods magnanimously at that, “I’ll allow it.”

“Rescued sixty-three villagers that were trapped in a cave system and helped restabilise their mines so their future income wasn’t lost. I also helped them find their lost cows, sheep and chickens.” Here Sasuke gives Itachi an unrepentantly smug smile, his brother is patently terrible with farm animals and Sasuke will never shy away from reminding Itachi of the things he’s bad at. Someone has to, “*And* helped a girl escape her arranged marriage to a terrible man, took her to her friend’s house in a separate village.”

“Oh?” Itachi looks intrigued, “Tell me more about the arranged marriage.”

Sasuke scowls darkly, “He was a disgusting roach. I met her crying in the woods. She was arranged to marry this idiot by her aunt who thought it would be a good match. She loved him but thought he didn’t love her and was just generally sad. I had a bad feeling so I decided to pay him a visit.” Sasuke’s scowl darkens even further, “He was going to spread a rumour that she had been unfaithful to drive her from the village so he could be with his mistress. Scum.”

“Hmm, yes he does sound like scum.” Itachi agrees. “So what happened with the girl? How did you convince her?”

Sasuke shrugged, "It didn't take much. She already suspected that he wasn't faithful to her. Oh, and she gave me loads of umeboshi so that's what's in this pouch." He patted his waist.

"She certainly sounds grateful." Itachi teased and as usual when it came to anything remotely to do with romance it went right over Sasuke's head.

"Yes, she was nice I guess."

"Hmm, a handsome shinobi comes across her crying in the woods and saves her from her arranged marriage to an unworthy man." Itachi taps his lips, "I'm sure Jiraiya-sama couldn't have come up with a better premise."

Sasuke shoves Itachi roughly, "Shut up nii-san."

"I barely said anything." Itachi raises his hands in supplication, "Though it does bring the question of who won."

"What question? I obviously did!" Sasuke argued, crossing his arms, "*Four whole villages* nii-san! Plus I did more for the long term. Because of me these people's futures are secure, we agreed ages ago that deserves more points."

Itachi hums, "I suppose you're not wrong."

"C'mon aniki." Sasuke nudges his brother again and pouts in that way that he had learned years ago would get him whatever he wants. "Concede defeat."

Itachi sighs, "I suppose I will have to deal with father then."

Sasuke laughs and doesn't mention that Itachi is always the better option for dealing with father, "Yes!" He punches the air, "I win!"

When he looks back at Itachi his brother is watching him with a wholly indulgent expression which doesn't bother him because *he's won*.

"You're quite sneaky otouto." Itachi comments as Konoha's gates come into view, "You knew beforehand there was landslide didn't you?"

Sasuke shrugs, "I was planning on going to do something anyway, just makes it better than I could use it to win."

His brother smiles again in that bright proud way that gets wiped off his face as soon as they come into view of the gate guards. "Well I suppose you win this round." He says quietly enough that only Sasuke can hear. "But I won't be so lenient next time otouto."

Sasuke just grins, uncaring if anyone sees, "I wouldn't expect you to be."

Itachi then hands him the scroll for the missing nin he nabbed, "You can take this one, since I'm off duty." He murmurs.

Sasuke nods and then says at normal speaking volume, "I'll go report to the Hokage then." The band of missing-nin had upped his mission ranking which meant he couldn't just go to the regular sign-in station no matter how much he would have wanted to avoid the hassle.

"See you at home Sasuke." Itachi didn't smile but it didn't matter, Sasuke knew his brother would hug him if he could get away with that much lack of Uchiha decorum in public, before walking away in the direction of the compound.

Sasuke himself didn't wave at the already gossiping gate guards and headed off in the direction of the Hokage tower. Everywhere he went the whispers followed him, he was the hot-headed second Uchiha son who could never stay out of trouble (not even true). But he

didn't mind being the bad one if it meant Itachi could be the good one. Itachi was better at it than him anyway.

"Oi Sasuke! You're late! You get lost again on your way back again?" He heard Kiba Inuzuka yell from where he passed him and the Hyuuga heir together with the Aburame on their team sitting outside a teahouse.

Sasuke just flipped him off.

He knew he had a reputation for being a piece of shit. He also had a reputation for taking too long on missions *but* he always got them done to a high standard so who cared? It wasn't his fault there was always so much shit going on out there, if someone came up to him and asked for help what was he supposed to do? Say no?

Probably since they weren't paying but he didn't give a fuck. Itachi was the only one who indulged him with their contests while he knew the rest of Konoha viewed him as a loose canon with no regard for anything. It was the main reason he could never progress past chuunin (amongst others). But hey, he didn't only get chuunin level missions so who the fuck cared?

He got waved into the Hokage's office and gave Uncle Minato enough respect to wait until the man was done with whatever he was doing before handing him his mission report.

"Oh and I got this missing-nin from Hot Water on the way back." He said, passing over the scroll with Itachi's catch alongside the other scroll with the group that had jumped him, "And this is a separate group of missing-nin that tried to jump me on the way back."

Uncle Minato raised an eyebrow, "Very impressive Sasuke. I suppose that's why you're late?" He teased.

Sasuke shrugged, this was the reason he gave Uncle Minato respect, the man also let him do his thing. "Yeah, not that late though."

“No only by three days.” Uncle Minato hummed, “I heard that you and Itachi re-entered the village at the same time.”

“Coincidence. We bumped into each other on my way back. Itachi was just out for a walk.”

Uncle Minato laughed, “Yes yes. I know how it is. Your life is full of coincidences, isn’t it?”

Sasuke shrugged, “What can I say Hokage-sama.”

Uncle Minato laughed again, “Well I could use a break so why don’t you take a seat and entertain this old man.”

Uncle Minato didn’t look old at all, in fact the man had remained unchanging his entire life. Technically he was *Itachi*’s godfather (by virtue of the late Kushina Uzumaki’s friendship with their mother) but since Sasuke had spent so much time with Naruto growing up and Itachi had always been untouchable even back then, it meant that Uncle Minato was more his godfather than anything else.

So with a hmph noise Sasuke collapses in the chair opposite Uncle Minato, “Men are disgusting.” Is the first thing he says.

Uncle Minato’s eyes twinkle with amusement, “Is there a reason why or are you making a general statement?”

Sasukes scowls, “I met a girl who needed to escape a terrible arranged marriage on the way back.”

“Another reason why you were late?”

“Hn.”

Uncle Minato laughs again, “Only you Sasuke”, He picks up the small missive that the client Sasuke escorted had wanted him to pass on to the Hokage and scans it briefly, “Did you read this?” He asked when he's done, waving it at Sasuke who shakes his head.

“No.”

“Well, it’s a letter of praise for how well you conducted yourself on this mission and how the client would like to specifically request you for all further missions of this type. Apparently Lord Tanabe’s niece was quite taken with you.”

Sasuke hummed, “She was okay I suppose.” He doesn't rememeber much about her.

“Well with praise like this how could I begrudge you being late a few days.”

And there’s the rub. Sasuke is given more leeway to do what he wants because when it comes to his missions he gets results. No one can accuse him of special treatment of leniency if he's doing well (and not being allowed to progress but that's a whole different thing).

“And the missing-nin you captured are also sure to be very helpful.”

“Hn.”

Uncle Minato hummed and turned away from the mission talk, “How is your sealing practice going?”

Sasuke groaned, “I can’t seem to get the fire radicals to react properly when I’m drawing the smoke tag freehand.” It was deeply embarrassing.

Uncle Minato's eyes got all interested as he did when it was anything to do with seals and he quickly pulled out some paper, "Show me how you do it."

Later after Sasuke's head was swimming with seal work Uncle Minato said (very causally so it was obviously anything but), "I haven't seen you around Naruto in a while, we miss you back at the house. Why don't you two make plans?"

Sasuke resisted the urge to roll his eyes and bit back every reply that threatened its way out of his lips, "If we run into each other we'll make plans I'm sure."

"Good good. You were always such good friends, I know you're all busier now but I would hate to see you grow apart." Uncle Minato looked so earnest Sasuke had to resist the urge to gag.

He knew Uncle Minato's big thing was "not growing apart from people" which he demonstrated by being the only Hokage who was good friends with all the other clan leaders. They had all grown up together and somehow through whatever magic friendship juice Uncle Minato secreted he had managed to stay actual friends with all of them, even Sasuke's father who was a certifiable bastard.

"Yeah sure. Would hate that." Sasuke levered himself up with a yawn, "I'm gonna go now and let Hokage-sama do some actual work."

Uncle Minato honest to god *pouted* as he eyed the stacks of paperwork.

Sasuke left the man to it with not a shred of remorse.

*

Sasuke chewed at his dinner without any enthusiasm. He had gone home and managed two hours of sleep before he was being woken up for a "family dinner" (rare that they were all in the same house at the same time) which he was now doing his best not to participate in.

Father was currently reaming out Itachi for using his time off to leave the village (well it was also Itachi's job this time to take it because Sasuke had won), but still; it always happened like this.

“And if your brother needs help completing his mission then perhaps he shouldn't be trusted with such high level assignments.”

Itachi replied with the kind of extreme calm that was learnt from years of having to deal with this shit, “Like I have already said it was a coincidence that Sasuke and I ran into each other on his way back. Sasuke completed his own mission to a high standard and was praised by the Hokage for it, his prowess cannot be called into question.”

Sasuke continued to chew.

“If that is the case then why has he not progressed past chuunin?”

Ah, it always seemed to come back to that. Sasuke knew that if he engaged he would just end up loosing his temper because that was the kind of person everyone said he was so he kept chewing and pretended he was somewhere else. Preferably somewhere quiet.

“That's due to the internal politics of the council of elders which I'm sure you're already aware of.” Itachi said very politely.

Well, it was also due to the fact that Sasuke was a known bastard who the establishment hated but that was a separate thing.

“Hn. I'm sure.” Father didn't sound convinced but at least the rest of the meal's conversation wasn't about Sasuke.

That night he collapsed onto his futon and slept more than thirteen blissful hours.

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“Too slow aniki!” Sasuke grinned as he reappeared behind Itachi and swept his brother’s legs out from under him. Or at least he tried except his brother turned into a murder of crows and Sasuke swore lowly.

The fight ended with Itachi holding a kunai to his brother’s neck while Sasuke had a fist full of crackling lightning less than an inch away from Itachi’s chest.

“Draw?” Sasuke asked, panting.

“Draw.” Itachi agreed and they both withdrew.

“You should really be promoted to jounin.” Itachi commented as they drank water, “It’s embarrassing for everyone at this point.”

Sasuke yawned, “I don’t care. I still get good missions.”

Itachi hummed “As long as it doesn’t bother you.”

Sasuke shrugged, “Why should I care what everyone thinks?” He yanked one of his kunai out of the tree it was impaled on and proceeded to seal it away with the rest of his weapons.

“That’s a good attitude.” Itachi praised.

Sasuke shook his head, “I’m allowed to think this way because I’m the second son. You don’t have that luxury.”

Itachi hummed, “I still admire it. I may have to consider other people’s opinions but that does not mean I have to take them personally.”

Sasuke made a face, “Aniki you’re not a bastard, that’s a good thing.”

Itachi sighed, “You’re not a bastard either Sasuke, you need to stop playing into people’s incorrect perception-“ His brother was halfway into scolding him when Sasuke cut him off.

“I don’t care, it actually works better for me like that. People leave me alone.”

Itachi sighed, “When was the last time you spent some time with your friends?”

“You mean the annoying losers that I was at the academy with?”

“Sasuke.” Itachi scolded.

“Itachi.” Sasuke said in the same tone.

His brother sighed again, “I think it might be nice for you to spend some time with your peers. I know you’re still... friendly with a few of them. And what about Naruto? You haven’t seen him in months.”

“I’ve been busy.” Sasuke said honestly, “Y’know Uncle Minato brought up the same thing when I gave my mission report.”

“Well Naruto probably talked to his father about it.”

“Why?” Sasuke asked, honestly baffled.

Sure it had been a few months which would have been *unthinkable* when they were kids but in the past few years had become entirely ordinary. He could still remember the way Naruto would hold his hand with his own sticky palm when they were younger and proclaim nothing would ever separate them. They tried to get matching tattoos at eleven. Naruto invented a seal for him when they were nine (in Uzumaki speak that was practically a proposal) and now they barely talked ever six months.

Sure, things between him and Naruto had never really been the same since his best friend had started dating Sakura, but that was mostly because the two of them ended up spending *all* their time together (it was so annoying when they were all still on a genin team) which meant that Sasuke had to either be a third wheel, which he already did way more than enough of when they were on missions together, or left out. Sasuke had happily chosen being left out and from there on life had progressed.

Though if anyone asked he would still say Naruto was his best friend.

“Sasuke, you can be rather oblivious sometimes.” Was Itachi’s only comment. “Isn’t Ino Yamanaka having a birthday party tonight? You’re on leave so why don’t you go? I know you’ve been invited.”

“I have?” Sasuke asked, still feeling baffled. He hadn’t known that.

“Yes Sasuke, you have. You received your invitation to the house a few days ago, I accepted on your behalf. In fact I heard from Inoichi that his daughter is very happy you agreed to attend.”

“Itachi!” Sasuke lunged for his brother who danced out of reach.

“Oh? If you want a rematch otouto you only had to ask.” Itachi had the worst smile on his face, it was the same smile he used when talking to people he thought were stupid.

“You’re dead!” Sasuke vowed and leapt for Itachi again.

They ended up wrestling in a way too undignified manner for the clan heir, the venerable Itachi Uchiha, but there was no one else around so it was fine.

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That night found Sasuke outside the bar the Yamanaka heiress had rented out in downtown Konoha.

He hadn't had time to change out of his training clothes since he hadn't realised how late it had gotten, staying on the training ground long after Itachi had gone home. He'd tried to brush the worst of the dirt off his body and thanked kami for his dark uniform, he hoped it was vaguely party appropriate. He did another quick shake of his hair before making his way inside.

Itachi had ended up winning the second spar which meant he could demand a prize which of course was that Sasuke had to stay at the party for at least an hour. Sasuke wanted to bang his head against the wall, or maybe bang Itachi's head against the wall. But either way Itachi still had to deal with father for another weeks worth of time so really Sasuke knew he was still winning overall.

He made his way inside as inconspicuously as he could but it was immediately ruined by Ino's shrieking as she spotted him.

"Sasuke-kun! You came!" She all but jumped him and Sasuke tried his best to keep her at arm's length. He had no idea why she was so excited, they weren't even friends, not really.

"Happy Birthday." He said, trying not to sound stiff. "Here." He shoved her present at her.

Itachi had picked it out and wrapped it and handed it to Sasuke at the training ground before he left because he knew Sasuke and knew Sasuke would have no idea what he was doing. Sasuke didn't even know what it was.

“Ooooooh! Thank you!” Ino ripped off the paper in a smooth move, “Oh my gosh! Wow! These look so fancy. Thank you so much Sasuke-kun!” The gift turned out to be a set of Uchiha made kunai, good quality too. No one but an Uchiha could buy them from the compound shop though they did make good gifts for outsiders. Impressive but also lowkey. Sasuke approved.

“They have an inbuilt mechanism to dispel genjutsu.” He told her, feeling on firmer ground now that he could talk about the kunai.

“Oh.” Ino’s eyes became considering, “An Uchiha family secret? How are they made?”

“It wouldn’t be a secret if I told you.” Sasuke said dryly.

Ino laughed longer and louder at that then he thought the comment deserved before taking his hand and leading him through the bar to where the main group was gathered. Sasuke didn’t really enjoy the contact but he endured it.

Only fifty more minutes until I can leave.

“Sasuke-kun’s here!” Ino announced to the group.

Sasuke had no idea why she always referred to him so familiarly. She’d been doing it since they first met and he had no idea how to ask her to stop.

“Sasuke.” Shikamaru nodded at him, “Heard you grabbed some pretty useful missing-nin on your last mission.”

Sasuke relaxed fully. This he could talk about easily.

“Yeah one from Hot Water, the others were a mashup. Y’know where they ended up being from?”

“Two were actually Konoha.” Shikamaru said, “So yeah, useful.”

Sasuke hummed, “They weren’t wearing any identifiers so I wasn’t sure. Also they made sure to cover my eyes when they jumped me. I didn’t bother to check them when I took them down.”

“Yeah, another thing is that they were all alive.” Shikamaru raises an eyebrow.

Sasuke shrugs, “Why would I kill them? I didn’t have to.”

Shikamaru just sighs, “What a drag.”

“Only you Sasuke.” Kiba jumps in, “The most overpowered chuunin I know.”

Sasuke sighs, already exhausted with this conversation, “I don’t really care about advancing.” That just drew more looks from everyone around him that he didn’t understand.

“You could make ANBU.” Neji commented, “If you were so inclined.”

Sasuke remembered the brief period his brother was in ANBU and how much it had fucked Itachi up, “Yeah hard pass.” He said, “What about you? You interested?”

Neji hummed, “I couldn’t say.” Well that was just another way of saying yes.

He’d definitely been approached and with that stupid seal on his head there was no way he could say no if it was what his clan elders wanted. Sasuke tried not to scowl to himself, that

stupid slave seal made him angry every time he was reminded it existed.

“ANBU’s a mess.” He said, “Bunch of suicidal morons.” And this was why no one liked Sasuke, he regularly said shit like this.

Kiba just laughed like he’d told the funniest joke. The Aburame hummed as he leaned back in his chair but no one refuted him so that was good enough.

“Where’s Naruto?” Asked the weapons girl, “Are he and Sakura coming?”

“They said they would.” Ino sipped at something distressingly pink.

“Naruto’s always late.” Shikamaru had his eyes closed at this point.

“Bet he and Sakura are tryna squeeze in a quickie.” Kiba chortled to himself.

“Kiba-kun!” The Hyuuga heiress squeaked in reprimand.

Ino laughed loudly at the joke, “I wouldn’t be surprised.” She shot a sly look at Sasuke then, “What do you think about that Sasuke-kun?”

Sasuke had been debating whether or not taking out his weapons and polishing them here would be considered rude or not; if he waited until he got home they might get rusty.

“What?” He asked when he realised Ino was addressing him.

Shikamaru snorted, “I don’t think he gives a shit Ino.”

Ino hmphed, “Still! It’s rude that they went off and left Sasuke-kun alone! Especially Naruto.” She places special emphasis on Naruto's name when she says it, like there's something in the subtext that Sasuke should understand which everyone else is already in agreement on. The truth is Sasuke can see "underneath the underneath" like the very best of them but when it comes to stupid social shit like this he's mostly always lost. That's why he needs Itachi, that's why things were easy with Naruto; the two of them are remarkably better translators.

“What?” Sasuke was sure that he had lost the thread of the conversation somehow.

Choji reached out to offer him some chips as if in consolation for his confusion, “Don’t mind it, Ino’s just tipsy.”

“Am not!” Ino shot back and soon the two of them were fighting good naturedly.

“Out of interest, when was the last time you saw Naruto?” Asked the weapons girl.

Sasuke blinked. Kind of a random question. But he still had no idea what was going on and there was no harm in answering.

The last time he had seen Naruto... four months ago maybe? But no, that was when he was leaving the Hokage’s office and Sasuke was going in so they hadn’t had time to do more than exchange greetings no matter how much Naruto insisted they should hang out some time. He tried to cast his mind back further but couldn’t pin down an actual time.

He shrugged in response to her question, “Few months ago.”

“Huh, I remember the days when you were attached at the hip. I swear Naruto used to look at you like you were the second coming of Hashirama or some shit.” Kiba snickered to himself, “Y’know I always thought that you and Naruto-“ He was cut off by the Hyuuga elbowing him.

“Ow! Hinata!”

“Right.” Sasuke still had no idea what was going on. He decided to steer the conversation onto safer ground and turned to Shikamaru, “They decided what to do with the captured missing-nin? Are they going to send them back to their villages?”

Shikamaru blew out a low breath while everyone around them seemed to decide to start their own conversations, “Not sure. I think they’re gonna execute the ones from Konoha, y’know how it is. And the others will be used for info and then maybe exchanged back to their village if needed.”

Sasuke nodded and tried to ignore the discomfort he felt.

He always felt conflicted about picking up missing-nin and that was for a simple fact; Sasuke had a secret.

Well, all shinobi had secrets but Sasuke’s big secret was that he sometimes wished he could *be* a missing-nin. He would travel the world and help ordinary people with their random problems and he wouldn’t have to kill for no reason or deal with the stupid politics of a village or clan.

He always felt a little guilty about the missing-nin because he could imagine what had led them to that point, he could empathise which was always a shitty thing to do as a shinobi.

Thankfully he didn’t think anyone knew about this stupid treasonous pipe dream apart from Itachi and it was fine with Itachi because, well first and foremost Itachi was Itachi, and secondly Itachi had a secret and Sasuke was the only one that knew it so they were equal. Though Itachi’s secret (that he was a pacifist and abhorred killing) was a lot less of an issue than Sasuke’s. Sasuke would personally set Konoha on fire if it meant Itachi would never have to kill ever again, but he also knew Itachi would absolutely hate that so he kept his peace for now.

Sasuke discretely checked the time. Only ten minutes to go thank Amaterasu.

He went to the bathroom to waste another five minutes and then when back talked to Neji about his training regime for two minutes. They made plans to spar, Byakugan against Sharingan which would be interesting. Finally the hour was over and Sasuke nodded, cited clan business, ignored everyone trying to get him to stay, and left in a flash.

When home he went to Itachi first and told him he'd done the full hour and even made plans with Neji to spar.

Itachi reacted with appropriate praise and agreed Sasuke had fulfilled the agreement well.

"How was Naruto?" Asked Itachi.

Sasuke shrugged, "I wouldn't know. He wasn't there."

"He wasn't?" Itachi frowned, "That's a shame."

Sasuke just shrugged again, he didn't really have an opinion on seeing Naruto. He would have liked it, but he no longer missed Naruto with the desperate ferocity he had all those years ago. Sasuke could live without his company as long as he could still call Naruto his best friend in the privacy of his own mind.

He didn't tell Itachi that, instead choosing to shove his brother one more time before going to his room to finally polish his weapons.

*

Sasuke spun away from Neji using a fire jutsu to get distance between them and dodging the palm strike that followed. Sparring with the Hyuuga was always good, their styles were different yet somehow complimentary. Besides, that 360-degree vision was nothing to laugh at.

After they were done Sasuke (in an effort to be nice) offered Neji some of the snacks Itachi had packed for him to share. Often times Itachi felt more like a mother than their actual mother, it was through no fault of Mikoto Uchiha's. Itachi was just a great deal more doting and up in his business than anyone else in Sasuke's life.

"Thank you." Neji gracefully accepted a rice cake as they settled themselves on the warm grass.

"Mn." Sasuke wasn't sure what to say to keep the conversation going so he let silence settle between them.

Despite everything he still couldn't help his eyes from flickering to the slave seal he knew was under Neji's hitae-ate.

The other shinobi must have caught his fairly unsubtle staring because he hummed as he took a sip of water, "You really do hate the Hyuuga caged bird seal." It was more of a comment than a question but Sasuke couldn't help but answer.

"It's disgusting." He didn't bother to pull back on his words.

Neji didn't answer immediately, taking time to finish the rice cake first. Eventually he spoke and it wasn't a question Sasuke had anticipated, "What discomforts you so much about it?"

Sasuke shrugged, "It limits your freedom for the sake of something you didn't choose." That was all he had to say on the subject and thankfully Neji didn't ask any other questions so they could sit in companionable silence before finishing their water and parting.

A while later at the compound as Sasuke was making his way to the weapons store he saw a harried looking Itachi obviously returning from the village proper. It was the kind of harried expression that Sasuke was sure no one but him would notice. Maybe Shishui if he wasn't always so busy nowadays.

“Aniki?” Sasuke walked right up to his brother and bumped shoulders with him, “Want to spar?”

Itachi sighed, “I wouldn’t mind.” Which was code for *“I need to be alone away from everyone somewhere where I can relax”*.

Sasuke led Itachi into the woods behind the compound, down to the waterfall that Itachi enjoyed listening to when his head was buzzing. Sasuke loved his brother but Itachi was always willing to give too much of himself for the sake of too little, it was without a doubt his biggest flaw.

After they had been sitting side by side for a little while listening to the crashing of the water below them Itachi sighed and finally unburdened himself, “The jounin meeting this afternoon was a mess.”

Sasuke hummed, “Too many egos in one room?”

Itachi sighed, “Tensions between the clan and the village are rising slightly. Only this time it’s not just the Uchiha, various clans are pushing back against Hokage-sama’s quest to devolve power away from the clans towards the village proper. He wants to give the jounin and council greater power.”

“Hmm, let me guess, most clans don’t want outsiders interfering with their business.”

Itachi scrubbed a hand over his face in a move so undignified no one would believe Sasuke if he tried to tell them, “Hokage-sama is not wrong to do this. Abuses occur within the clans without oversight.”

Sasuke snorted, “Uncle Minato has always been too optimistic. There’s no way the clans will willingly give up power to outsiders, not with the current clan heads at least.”

Itachi hummed, “I have to agree, Hiashi Hyuuga in particular is resistant.”

“He knows Uncle Minato has always been working to outlaw that stupid slave seal; he even has the counterseal and everything already ready, he just needs the powers to do so.”

Itachi leaned back, “It’s a noble pursuit.”

“It’s not going to happen while Hiashi is clan head.” Sasuke said rather dryly, “No matter how noble.”

Itachi sighed again, “And the question of what to do with the captured missing-nin came up again. I wanted to make a point against execution as I’m sure Hokage-sama did but the mood in the room was firmly against it.”

Sasuke frowned, “Shit.”

“Sasuke,” Itachi set a hand on his arm, “It’s not your fault.”

“Yeah I know. But I still brought them here. Should have just killed them when they attacked me instead of the torture and shit they’ll have had to deal with now.”

Itachi sighed, “Maybe it would have been more merciful for them, but either way Konoha managed to recover valuable information and that was down to you.” Itachi had an uncharacteristic frown on his face, “You should have been promoted to jounin years ago, you should have been in the meeting today. I’m afraid I found myself thinking about how absurd it is that you weren’t.”

Sasuke shrugs, “I would rather not have to go to those stupid meetings.”

Itachi hums in response and they once more sit in comfortable silence.

*

Whenever Sasuke is summoned to the Hokage's office he's never sure if it'll be a social visit or a mission related visit.

Sasuke had always been close to Uncle Minato growing up but they really began to bond after Naruto and Sakura started dating. After one too many times of Naruto inviting him over only for Sasuke to turn up at his house and Naruto to have forgotten and been out with his girlfriend, Uncle Minato had taken to inviting Sasuke to hang out with just him. That's when Sasuke began to learn some basic seal work.

"After all," Uncle Minato had said with a fake pout of sadness on his face, "Naruto also promised to hang out with me today, so it turns out both of us were stood up."

It had completely eased Sasuke's already fairly limited embarrassment. He had always been more offended than hurt. Offended that Naruto obviously valued Sakura more than him. It was an emotion that he had trained himself out of over the years until barely anything offended him, whether that was a good thing or not depended on who you were talking to.

Besides, what he usually did if Naruto broke plans was either to go bother Itachi or if itachi wasn't around he would train. Both of those things were his favourite activities anyway, so he found that he didn't really miss Naruto's company all that much. He missed *Naruto* but he didn't need to see him face-to-face to feel secure.

Uncle Minato was probably the only person (apart from Itachi) who really understood that.

"Sasuke, come in," Uncle Minato's usual benevolent smile welcome Sasuke into his office, "Have you made any progress with your chakra storage seals?"

Sasuke plonks himself down in front of Uncle Minato, "I've been trying but it hasn't been going great."

Uncle Minato hummed, “How about I teach you an Uzumaki family secret?”

When he said that it was basically code for “*secret mission, I’m going to activate the privacy seals and send away my guards*”. They had done this song and dance less than a handful of times but he knew the drill.

Once the room was sealed Uncle Minato (Hokage-sama) leaned forward, “You don’t have to choose to accept this mission.”

“What is it?” Sasuke asked. The previous two times this had happened they were intensely private but altogether not very high risk missions that Uncle Minato assigned to him because he knew he wouldn’t gossip. Mission pay was proportionate to rank and if Sasuke was the only one competent enough in his pay grade that was that. Shisui had once joked that was the real reason why they refused to let him advance.

The Hokage passed Sasuke a stack of papers, “Orochimaru has been a problem for the village since he defected. He’s been too powerful for our squads to take down, but the recent intelligence gathered from the missing-nin you captured hint that he might be trying to move against the village. Unfortunately, we have no information apart from that and no spies able to get close to him or even to Otogakure. We need more.”

“You want me to spy on Orochimaru?” Sasuke looked down at the file on the man he had been passed.

“He’s interested in the sharingan so there’s a strong possibility he would approach you if you left the village.”

Sasuke turned it over in his mind, “This is a long-term undercover mission, you want me to become a missing-nin.”

The Hokage nodded, “It’s a big ask, no one will be able to know the truth apart from me and your handler. Once you’re in extraction would be next to impossible, you would be on your own.”

Sasuke's heart-rate was beginning to pick up, "How long term are we talking?"

The Hokage sighed, "I don't know. Our end goal is to have the threat Orochimaru poses completely eliminated."

"So until he's dead." Sasuke considered it. "I want to pick my own handler."

"We can arrange that. Who?"

"Itachi. If I'm really doing this he has to be in the loop, he wouldn't stop trying to bring me back otherwise and would compromise the integrity of the mission."

The Hokage nodded, "That's acceptable. Itachi is of high enough rank that it makes sense for him to be involved in this mission." He didn't need to tell Sasuke that no one else could know, that the entire village, his entire clan, would think he had turned traitor for real.

Sasuke found that he didn't care as much as he thought he would.

"Do you have any ideas on how you're going to instigate it?" The Hokage asked politely, "It is up to you how you leave, the less I know the better."

Sasuke nodded, "Restrictions?"

"No unauthorised execution of Konoha shinobi unless in self-defence."

Sasuke wondered how much of being Hokage was ignoring the extreme hypocrisy of the job.

“When will you bring in Itachi?”

“Within twenty-four hours of your leaving.”

Sasuke nodded to himself. “This mission seems a little high level for a chuunin doesn’t it?”

The Hokage smiled but this time it seemed a little pained, “You were the best person for the job.”

Sasuke knew what that meant, if Orochimaru wanted the sharingan all the other options would either refuse this mission or were too important to the integrity of the village to send. Sasuke was both the best option to send skills wise and the one who’s loss would matter the least to the village.

“I accept.” Sasuke stood, “Thank you for the opportunity Hokage-sama.”

Again the Hokage’s expression was pained, “Don’t thank me Sasuke.”

But by that point Sasuke was already leaving, his mind working in three different directions at once.

*

Breaking into Konoha’s cells was easy. Breaking out of Konoha’s cells with a tag-a-long was easy.

Escaping Konoha’s boundaries while said tag-a-long was injured and mostly useless was harder especially when he was being pursued by no less than three ANBU teams. Luckily Sasuke only had to make this look good.

He dodged a burst of mokuton from an ANBU member and painfully jostled his passenger in the process. The woman let out a low groan while he threw a great fireball to scatter the ANBU and dodged again.

“SASUKE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Shisui was faster than sound and maybe light. Stupid shunshin. But Sasuke knew his moves too well from years of watching his cousin and trying to emulate him. He dodged the side strike he knew Shisui would attempt and didn’t reply to his question.

He had his exit route, he just needed to make as big a fuss leaving as possible.

Sasuke spun to avoid capture by another masked member.

“Sasuke.” Kakashi at least wasn’t yelling, “Let’s at least talk, it doesn’t have to be like this.”

Dramatic. Sasuke scoffed to himself before using a burst of chidori to fend off another attack from the right.

“Sasuke.”

Ah, that was who he was waiting for.

The other shinobi seemed to peel away; knowing instinctively that if anyone was going to end whatever breakdown Sasuke was having it would be Itachi.

“Itachi.” Sasuke stopped trying to attack while also remaining aware of who was around him. It wouldn’t be good to get taken out right now. That would just be humiliating.

“Sasuke, please, what are you doing?”

“I brought her to Konoha, I’m not letting her get killed through my actions.” Sasuke shifted the woman on his back, she groaned slightly.

“Sasuke, we can talk about this. Don’t do this.” Itachi’s voice was pitched perfectly. He was pleading. Itachi didn’t plead.

“Itachi.” Sasuke almost choked on it, for some reason even though this wasn’t real it *hurt*, “I’m sorry.”

“Please Sasuke. Please.” Itachi moved closer and as he did Sasuke could see the look in his eyes.

It was calculating.

Ah.

Sasuke wanted to hug his brother so badly.

“Konoha is rife with hypocrisy, I can’t be a part of it any longer.” He says lowly but loud enough for everyone around them to hear. Itachi’s expression doesn’t shift but Sasuke knows his brother. He knows Itachi will always always be on his side.

It was the one thing he could count on, like the sun rising or the sharingan spinning.

Itachi had shifted slightly to block him from the shinobi around them. He was close enough now that if anyone wanted to attack Sasuke they were at risk of hurting his brother (the Uchiha clan heir) too. Itachi was the best brother in the whole world.

“I’m sorry aniki.” Sasuke said and with the last of his chakra he pulled for the hiraishin marker he’d hidden miles away.

Itachi's carefully calculated expression of devastation was the last thing he saw as he disappeared in a flash.

*

"Don't move." Sasuke instructed as he bandaged the missing-nin's wounds.

The woman shifted slightly but stayed mostly still.

"Why?" She finally asked when they had made camp.

"Don't thank me. I saved you from execution because I brought you to Konoha but you attacked me first. Tomorrow morning we split ways."

The woman nodded, "Understood." She then settled down and turned over on her side, presumably to sleep. Sasuke was confident she was too injured to attack him but either way he wasn't taking any chances. Instead of going to sleep he settled down to meditate and did his best to put everything else out of his mind.

The next morning he did just as he said he would, "We're not in fire country anymore. Don't get captured again."

The woman nods back, looking pale and bloodless under the weak sunlight, but still making the effort to bow to him.

"Thank you Uchiha-sama."

Sasuke doesn't bother to tell her again he doesn't want to be thanked. He just turns and leaves.

*

Itachi sits in the meeting called to discuss Sasuke's defection and wants to wring several people's necks. The first would be Hiashi Hyuuga, followed firmly by his own father followed by the Hokage himself; because if anyone knows more than they're putting on its Minato Namikaze.

"The boy ran off! Taking a valuable prisoner with him, we need to be considering this with the upmost seriousness." Hiashi slams his palm down on the table.

Itachi doesn't react. He knows that whatever's going on, whatever Sasuke has become involved in, his brother will be helped the most by Itachi's heartbroken visage.

So that's what he does. For Sasuke's sake he sits there and does his best to look shellshocked and seconds away from tears while Shisui and Kakashi hover around him like concerned but irritating flies. He wants to swat them away, wants to wring *their* necks as well for being so faithless. How can they already have assumed Sasuke is lost forever? Are they really shinobi if they don't look underneath the underneath?

"The boy has been running wild for years." Danzo cuts in, "That was why we never allowed him to advance beyond a certain stage. He had no understanding of what was appropriate as a shinobi of his station. I'm afraid Hokage-sama's doting on him did not improve matters."

Everyone turns to the Hokage then who looks as though he's trying to hide visible upset.

This is another strike in Itachi's mind; Minato Namikaze is a skilled liar like any shinobi of his station no matter how much he looks like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. If they think he looks upset that means he's letting them see it.

The Hokage simply sighs, "Sasuke has always had his own moral code."

“He was asking questions about the missing-nin he captured the other day.” Shikamaru Nara speaks up in his usual lazy way, “It bothered him that they would be executed.”

“He is committed to the idea of freedom.” Neji Hyuuga adds unnecessarily. Itachi wonders if he can truly be a pacifist when he's having such violent fantasies.

“So this behaviour isn't out of character?” Inoichi Yamanaka asks, forever the profiler.

Shikamaru sighs, “I would have said he was definitely dissatisfied with the way shinobi operate in general but I wouldn't have thought he would ever leave the village, not least because he has things here that he cares about.”

No one needs to look at Itachi but he can feel the weight of their gazes anyway.

“Perhaps he was having an affair with the shinobi he captured.” Someone else suggests. Someone who is obviously an idiot. Itachi's baby brother has about as much of a familiarity with romance as Guy has with speaking at a normal volume or Kakashi and public decency in regard to reading material.

“Consorting with an enemy.” Hiashi scoffs, “Fugaku, what have you been teaching your sons?”

This whole thing is a farce. A circus, Itachi thinks dimly as he watches them go in circles. Arguments erupt around him.

Oh Sasuke, I hope whatever you're doing you're okay.

Itachi continues to look heartbroken until the meeting wraps up and Hokage-sama asks him to stay behind. Itachi is ready by this point. He ignores the looks everyone gives him as they file out and waits for Minato Namikaze's explanation what he did to his brother. Or rather what he asked his brother to do.

When he learns the truth he very graciously holds himself back from punching the Hokage. From taking advantage of everything Sasuke is; unconcerned with public opinion, self-sacrificial to a fault, powerful enough to be arrogant about this kind of thing...

Itachi takes the assignment to be his brother's handler because of course he does, but he knows that he will never forgive or forget the thousands of things he hears about Sasuke in the meantime.

*

Sasuke is almost disappointed when Orochimaru approaches him. So far being a missing-nin has been almost fun. He gets to help all the people he wants without any worries about timing or funds or missions.

Of course, that might be because the minute he was alone after his defection he took out a pocket mirror and cast a genjutsu on himself to erase the knowledge of the mission and leave only the memory of rescuing the missing-nin and leaving. The genjutsu will shatter the minute he sees Itachi again, he knows his brother will sense and remove it but for now Sasuke sees himself as a missing-nin proper. It makes infiltration all the easier.

Otogakure is a strange depressing place and Sasuke doesn't like it. Despite that he's learning a lot from Orochimaru, maybe if he was actually a missing-nin he wouldn't have stayed but there's some strange instinct telling him this is where he's supposed to be. Besides, Orochimaru doesn't demand much in return for his training and if there's anything Sasuke loves it's being *better*. He's debilitatingly competitive.

The months go on and Sasuke becomes integrated into Oto's structure. The village is more of a collection of settlements filled with broken people, but if there was anywhere he would never lack for things to do it's here. He straightens out systems, he throws himself into dealing with problems, he makes examples of bullies and those who are simply here to hurt others. He uses an iron fist to turn Oto into something that somewhat resembles the safe haven Orochimaru pretends it's supposed to be to lure people in.

But still he holds himself apart, he knows he's not truly meant to be here forever and the way Orochimaru eyes him sometimes makes him think that he might have to leave sooner rather than later.

Sasuke is helping rebuild a village after a nasty flood when he encounters Itachi. He knows even with his altered memory that his brother must have been looking for him.

“Aniki.”

“Sasuke.”

And faster than Sasuke can blink Itachi has grabbed him by the back of his neck and brought their faces close enough that he can't avoid eye contact.

The genjutsu breaks around him and he remembers why he's here. Why he left the village.

“Ah. You know?” He can't quite look at Itachi.

“Of course.” Itachi smiles then and it's like the sun, warming and promising better days ahead, “I'm so proud of you otouto.”

And well, everything's going to be okay, isn't it?

*

“Sasuke would never! He's not a traitor!” Naruto's voice rings like a bell as he defends Sasuke's honour in the middle of the street. This has become almost as common a sight as Itachi looking haunted as he makes his way through the village.

Itachi marvels at how Naruto is doing the most to uphold Sasuke's disguise without any idea

of what he's doing.

He stays in the shadows this time and watches.

"I'm not saying he's a bad person, but you can't deny he betrayed the village." Another nameless shinobi argues back.

"Yeah, but it's not for no reason, this is *Sasuke*. He does things his own way, that doesn't mean he's a traitor." Naruto bites out. He's shaking, entire body alight with outrage on Sasuke's behalf.

Itachi resists the urge to sigh slightly. He wonders where all Naruto's endless support was when Sasuke was alone and all but friendless of his own volition for years.

Sasuke and Naruto's relationship is the only thing Itachi has never been able to understand about his brother. They have a bond that confuses Itachi but seems to bring comfort to Sasuke despite how little regard Naruto seemed to give him from the point when he started dating the Haruno girl onwards. Sasuke never seemed jealous but Itachi often saw Naruto stare after his brother like he was waiting for a certain reaction.

The defence Naruto has now launched in Sasuke's name is the most straightforward attention he's paid to his brother in years and again, Itachi doesn't understand it.

Someone else jumps in then to debate the ethics of Sasuke's actions and Itachi resists the urge to sigh again.

Sasuke, he thinks with no little despair, *could you have been a little more morally reprehensible when you made a run for it. It would be so much easier if you were just evil.*

No matter, this will just make it easier for Sasuke to integrate when he comes back.

If he ever comes back.

*

Sasuke considers himself a pretty good spy. He gets good information and he doesn't get caught. What else does a spy need to do?

Probably not kill their source of information.

In Sasuke's defence Orochimaru had trained him to be good enough to kill the sannin so really whose fault was this?

Shit.

The old snake had finally revealed his evil plan which was to steal Sasuke's body. Sasuke had fought back and had managed to kill him. All very simple and easy to understand.

Sasuke sighs to himself. It wasn't that he disliked Orochimaru necessarily, in fact the man wasn't too bad. He was creepy and strange and power hungry but precious few shinobi lacked those qualities. Besides he mostly let Sasuke do his own thing when he wasn't training him and Sasuke was quite proud of all he had done in the past few years. Oto almost resembled an okay place to live now.

Sasuke sighed again dramatically as he dragged his battered body out of the room that contained his ex-master's corpse. He needed to figure out what to do next.

"Karin?" He called as he made his way down the corridor to where she was hopefully hanging around.

"Sasuke-kun!" She appears and immediately gasps, "Sasuke-kun what happened? No don't speak! Let me heal you!" She pressed her arm to his mouth and Sasuke bit in without protest

already feeling better.

“Thank you.” He told her once he was done, she beamed back but his mind was already on the next step.

It was clear that the Orochimaru mission was over but Sasuke felt slightly unsatisfied. He had been with Orochimaru for a few years now and had passed along quite a lot of useful information to Konoha but cutting his losses here felt wrong. He was sure that he could do more as a missing-nin, he'd developed quite a talent for it and if he was being completely honest he wasn't ready to go back to Konoha and all that red tape and baggage just yet. The very thought of having to painfully re-integrate into the village made him cringe.

“Karin, I'm leaving Oto for a while. You're in charge.”

Karin blinked, “In charge?”

“Yes, I killed Orochimaru and Oto needs some kind of head. I nominate you. You're already doing a lot of the work. Get Jugo to help. Suigetsu if you can be bothered to deal with that loser. And if you see Kabuto get rid of him.” With that done he turned to leave.

“Wait Sasuke-kun!” Karin grabbed his arm and when he looked back at her she was pouting. He wondered if his explanation was a little too bare.

“Will I ever see you again?”

Nope, turns out Karin wasn't looking for more details on his execution of the leader of Oto.

Sasuke felt vaguely exasperated which was how he usually felt when Karin got like this, “Didn't I just say I'm leaving for a while? I'll be back eventually.” Eventually when Sasuke figured out what he was meant to do next. “I just need to pack some stuff. You go find Jugo and let everyone know you're in charge now.”

With that he marched off and was gratified by Karin not following him. Grabbing a sealing scroll he went to Orochimaru's study, picked up anything he thought was useful and sealed it away. Then with a burst of chakra he felt for one of his hiraishin markers and left in a flash.

*

It only took Itachi a month to find him in a tea house in Jungle. To be fair Sasuke hadn't been covering his tracks that diligently. He had been more than confident his brother would have been able to find him with the usual markers he left behind.

"Here." He passed Itachi the scroll full of Orochimaru's secrets as soon as his brother sat down, "Orochimaru is dead." He told his brother whose eyes widened.

"Otouto, did you?..."

"Yeah. I left Karin in charge of Oto."

"Ah I'm sure Karin Uzumaki was a good choice." Itachi always sounded amused when listening to Sasuke's descriptions of his colleagues (or friends as Itachi liked to refer to them).

"Hn. That's a mess I'm glad to wash my hands of." Sasuke made a face.

Itachi laughed without any shadows in his expression, "So are you coming back with me then?" He must have caught something on Sasuke's face because even as he said it his lips pursed and his expression fell.

"Sorry aniki. But I think there's more I can do." Sasuke confessed.

Itachi took a deep breath and then let it out. "I have to confess I'm not surprised."

Sasuke shrugged, "I can still do more. My position right now is an opportunity that doesn't have to be wasted."

Itachi nods, "All right. But Sasuke," And here his brother puts a hand on his arm, "Please be careful."

Sasuke just grins, "How about one more contest? Stakes being how you're gonna tell Uncle Minato that I've basically decided to go full missing-nin."

Itachi presses a hand to his face, "I have gotten a lot of practice at not throttling the majority of Konoha the past few years."

"Yeah? Any good comments about me?"

Itachi gives him a dead-eyed look, "Naruto is still proclaiming that he'll 'drag you back home'. Really Sasuke, can you just put the poor boy out of his misery?"

Sasuke just snorts, "That moron. It's his own choice to do that, no one's forcing him."

Itachi rolls his eyes, "He's certainly... determined." His brother shakes his head slightly, "Alright Sasuke, area would be from here..."

Sasuke sinks into the familiar negotiation and later when Itachi wins and he has to write Uncle Minato a letter to explain he does so with no complaints.

*

Sasuke would easily admit that he was being selfish with his original desire not to go back to Konoha.

Sasuke wouldn't consider himself a particularly brave person. He gets himself into shit and has to deal with it, but he would never say courage is one of his biggest virtues. That's especially apparent in the way he keeps trying to postpone going back to Konoha and having to deal with that shit show.

He's managed to even avoid running in to any Konoha nin the past few years (apart from Itachi) and is very happy with that arrangement. It's not that he doesn't miss Konoha, it's just that he doesn't miss it.

He was never very close to the people anyway and he always had to contend with being measured to Itachi and found lacking. He never resented it because it was *Itachi*. Amaterasu herself would be lacking next to his saint of an older brother. But still, as the years had gone on Sasuke had pulled away (or maybe everyone had pulled away from him) and begun to forge his own path as misguided as it was.

It takes less than five months for Akatsuki to approach him.

Oh shit. Is what Sasuke thinks when he meets them because he knows who they are through Orochimaru's notes and they want the bijuu.

They want *Naruto*.

After all this time if anyone asked Sasuke would still say Naruto is his best friend.

*

Dealing with Akatsuki was surprisingly easier than dealing with Orochimaru had been.

That was pretty much all that needed to be said about that.

*

The day that Sasuke found out about Madara and the infinite Tsukuyomi and the ten tails he promptly turned around the ran like a bat from hell to find Itachi. Nii-san would know what to do, nii-san would help because Sasuke wasn't going to lie he was in way over his head.

Itachi found him heading towards Konoha from the mountain's graveyard and when he saw the expression on Sasuke's face he simply grabbed his hands, "Sasuke what do you need?" He asked, voice calm and steady and *Itachi*. Itachi had been the one to bear the weight of Sasuke's defection all these years without a word of complaint, Itachi is the one person in the whole world whose sword Sasuke would throw himself onto without question.

Sasuke looked at his brother and grabbed back.

"Nii-san. I need your help."

*

Despite how independent Sasuke was, despite how much he wanted to create his own path, no matter how he dismissed the stupid whims of the people around him, there was a reason Itachi was the older brother.

His nii-san had listened as Sasuke explained everything. From Kabuto and his plans for edo-tensei to their ancestor steeper in spite living in the depths of the caves to the dreams for a never ending genjutsu and the creepy plant man that dogged his steps.

Itachi listened to it all. He then nodded, hugged Sasuke close and poked his forehead.

Sasuke leaned into his brother and let Itachi think of a plan. Let Itachi send word to Konoha for reinforcements.

Later he led Itachi to Ame and had his brother speak to Pein and Konan. The thing, Sasuke reflects, is that as much as the world is cruel and imperfect and wrong at times there's still good. Sasuke himself has been able to experience and bring about much of that good. Things can change. Things can get better.

Sasuke is patently terrible with words so he lets Itachi do the talking and when Uncle Minato arrives he lets him deal with the negotiations with Ame. He lets Kakashi and his team destroy the gedo mazo. He lets Shisui and his squad track down Zetsu. He lets Pein and Konan dissolve Akatsuki.

Sasuke lets everyone else save the world.

While that's happening he takes time by himself and marvels at how much he could have lost. How close they all were to war. To losing everything.

Sasuke had always promised himself he would do anything for his brother. He would have razed countries to stop Itachi from having to fight in another war.

Sasuke has been the most successful undercover agent Konoha has ever had which is nothing to scoff at in a village of shinobi, but here at the end, at the fruit of all his labour, he doesn't feel much like a Konoha nin.

He feels more missing than he had ever felt before.

*

Itachi sits in the debrief meeting and fights the need to leave and be with his brother.

Sasuke is back in Konoha. After all these years Sasuke is back.

For how long remains to be seen, this is Sasuke after all, and Itachi has seen with his own two eyes over the years that his brother craves freedom in a deep, almost painful way that Itachi can never understand.

Itachi knows that Sasuke hasn't been under his protection the same way he had been as a child for a long time now. But he still wants to be there for his brother in any way he can despite the years that have passed and Sasuke is vulnerable right now. Itachi knows that everything that had happened with Madara and the infinite tsukuyomi had shaken Sasuke to his core and even if his foolish otouto barely acknowledges it, it's impossible for Itachi to believe that all those years undercover haven't deeply affected his brother.

“And that is the current summary of what was averted.” The Hokage finishes. Minato Namikaze looks older now which would make sense consider the threat that these past years have been even with Sasuke running interference and allowing Konoha to emerge almost unscathed. The threat to Naruto most of all.

The Hokage opens his mouth again and Itachi knows that this is when it'll come out.

Finally.

“I have just one last thing to debrief everyone on which is the method by which we obtained all this information.”

The room visibly perks at that. Everyone is curious.

Good. Itachi thinks rather viciously. *Look at what my otouto did for you. Let this be payback for every unkind word spat or whispered about him the past few years.*

Itachi can't wait for the Uchiha clan elders to hear. For now he'll have to be content with the clan heads, heirs and high ranked jounin.

“Sasuke Uchiha has been a double agent since his presumed defection from Konoha. He infiltrated both Otogakure and later Akatsuki to pass along information to keep Konoha and its people safe.”

Itachi watches with vicious glee as the room explodes into whispers.

The Hokage clears his throat, “I would ask all of you to not question him on his time undercover. Sasuke has done Konoha a great service and deserves nothing but respect. He sacrificed much. Only myself and one other jounin knew the truth.”

More whispers. Itachi doesn’t react.

Instead he watches the way his father blanches. Sasuke had been disinherited due to political pressure. When Itachi had told Sasuke he had barely reacted but Itachi still hasn’t forgiven it.

He watches the way Shisui blinks dumbfounded, how Kakashi’s visible eye widens in shock.

Itachi watches and tries not to think something unflattering about everyone who had ever doubted his brother. He knows that was the intention, Sasuke had played his role to perfection, but in truth his brother had barely had to do anything to be abandoned.

“Sasuke was working for Konoha the whole time?” Naruto asks, voice loud in the sudden silence.

“Yes.”

“And you knew? You knew all these years?” Naruto had carried grief with him the past few years. Grief and hope and it’s hard to tell which emotion is winning right now.

“Yes. I knew.”

“You assigned him the mission?”

“Yes.” The Hokage stands firm, “I assigned Sasuke the mission and he chose to accept despite the risks.”

Naruto stands then, he looks shaken, “This whole time!” His fists are clenched, “Everyone said...” He shakes his head, “He was with us the whole time?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, “I have to go.” And with that the Hokage’s son leaves.

Itachi watches him go and wonders if he knows that Sasuke still calls him his best friend.

*

Sasuke is asleep when he jerks awake to the pounding on the door. He’s lying curled up in Itachi’s duvet like a large dumpling. In the years since Sasuke left he’d had the most contact with Itachi but they could never truly talk and when Itachi had taken him to his new apartment Sasuke had wondered how much had changed for his brother that he didn’t know about. The apartment isn’t even in the Uchiha compound.

Either way Sasuke groans and curses whoever’s at the door. He levers himself to his feet still with the duvet wrapped around him.

When he reaches the door he wonders if he should hold off answering just in case, everyone might still consider him a dangerous missing-nin, before decided fuck it and opening the door with a yawn.

Naruto stands frozen with his fist raised as if to knock again.

“Sasuke.” Naruto’s voice is breathless.

“Usuratonkachi.” Sasuke answers with another yawn.

Naruto gives a wordless cry of fury and that’s all the warning Sasuke receives before he’s being knocked to the ground.

“Bastard!” Yells Naruto, “You leave to become a double agent and don’t even tell your best friend?!”

Sasuke feels something warm that he hadn’t even realised he had lost slide into its rightful place behind his ribs. Everything with Naruto is always so easy.

“You know now don’t you?” He retorts, “Besides, as if you could ever keep a secret! You’re hopeless!”

Naruto gives another furious wail and tries to punch Sasuke who (tangled up in the duvet as he is) can’t do much to retaliate.

“You’re such a bastard!”

“And you’re an idiot!”

They roughhouse on the floor for a while longer until they both exhaust themselves.

“How’d you find me?” Sasuke ends up asking.

Naruto makes a face, “Sage mode. Didn’t expect you to be so close.”

“Oh yeah, that’s that toad stuff right?”

“Oi!” Naruto reaches out to hit at him weakly. “Better than all that emo shit you got going on. Plus why are your ninja clothes so revealing? Open shirts? Really?”

Sasuke rolls his eyes, “You’re just jealous you couldn’t pull it off.”

“Shut up.” Naruto hits him again and Sasuke sinks into how comfortable he feels.

“So,” Naruto starts after a little more silence, “Are you back for good now?”

Sasuke sighs, “I don’t know. I might not stay even if I’m not a missing-nin double-agent any more. I like travelling.”

“Okay... well. Maybe I could come with? I’ve always wanted to. It could be fun!” Naruto fidgets, “It wasn’t the same in the village when you weren’t here.”

“We didn’t spend much time together even when I was here.” Sasuke points out but when Naruto wilts he concedes, “But I know what you mean, it was enough to know you were around”

Naruto brightens.

“What about Sakura?” Sasuke can’t help himself from asking, “Won’t she be mad if you just up and leave her?”

“Huh? Whaddya- oh! Oh, we broke up ages ago. Like more than two years.”

“Huh.” Sasuke rolls that around his head and tastes it fully. A Naruto without Sakura. That’s a luxury he hasn’t considered since he was twelve. “Are you seeing anyone else?”

“Nope. Single as hell.”

“Hn.”

“Oi! What does that mean?” Naruto hit at him again before subsiding once more into calm, “So,” He asked in a very fake casual voice, “What about you? You got any hot missing-nin ladies in your harem?”

“Gross.” Sasuke deadpanned, “No. No missing-nin ladies. No harem. No missing-nin guys either.” He sneaks a glance at Naruto and finds his best friend looking right at him. Their eyes lock and its almost too intimate for a second.

“Oh.” Naruto wets his lips with his tongue, “So you won’t mind me tagging along when you next leave?”

“I think I could be okay with it. You better pull your weight though.”

A small but brilliant smile lights up Naruto’s face, “Okay. I’ll be the best travelling companion ever! You’ll see!”

“Hn.” And Sasuke makes the executive decision to nudge closer to Naruto so the both of them are cushioned by the duvet, “I need to stay a little longer. To spend time with Itachi and help him deal with the clan and everything. I’ve spent too long running from it.”

“I’ll be here if you need anything.” Naruto offered.

Sasuke hummed and closed his eyes, within moments he was back asleep dreaming about the next contest he and Itachi could do, the places he could show Naruto. The world had so many

good things, he wanted to see them all. He wanted to do it all.

But for now this was worth staying for.

End Notes

So there's that strange little Sasuke-centric fix-it! I banged this out in basically a day so I hope it's not too incoherent or riddled with errors! The plot is pretty much non-existent in this lol.

It actually turned into more unapologetic Itachi and Sasuke bonding than anything else! It's a bit of a fix-it in the sense that Minato survived the attack on the village (also where is Obito? No one knows, I kind of just abandoned him in this... maybe he survived the war! Maybe he was part of Akatsuki! Maybe he died in the war! Honestly I just kind of dropped the ball with him) but the kyuubi was still sealed into Naruto. However with Minato around Naruto had a good childhood and the Uchiha massacre was avoided.

Sasuke (with a pretty loving family and all of Itachi's attention) basically gets to indulge all his revolutionary fantasies and is remarkably not bitter about anything (his weird relationship with Naruto aside).

If anyone is interested in any more I could possibly do a sequel or exploration from another character's perspective but for now that's all I have! Thank you so much for reading, I appreciate it so much!

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