

Chapter 18: The Space-Time Conundrum

“- July 24, 6 ANB .-“

‘Calm down’ proved to be far too optimistic, and for once it wasn’t Naruto’s fault. The poor kid was curled up on the bunk bed with his face to the wall. The ground-level one, thankfully.

Since I was operating on emergency safe mode and thus had most of my extrasensory and super-cognitive capabilities on pause, I couldn’t tell if he was shutting out the rest of the world, or sleeping. He certainly didn’t react to the door opening to allow us in.

In comparison, Sasuke turned out to be a tear-streaked, gloomy creature that instantly tackled Itachi and became a hoarse, clingy avalanche of questions and curses and complaints that Fishcake had ignored him all night. Intermixed with eternal vows of vengeance unto death and beyond against the monster that killed their parents and half their clan and ruined their life.

I might have, on any other day, maybe, *potentially* expected Itachi to try and urge Sasuke towards something at least *remotely* approaching moderation, but that didn’t happen. I wouldn’t be surprised if the elder brother completely agreed with everything the younger one was babbling right now.

Since this was a secret VIP bunker bigger than the other refugee lodgings, I could at least pretend to walk far enough from the two Uchiha to give them – or at least the smaller one – an illusion of privacy. Even more conveniently, the bunk was on the far side of said room, so I could stop waffling. I went over and sat on the edge of the bed. Naruto didn’t react. I allowed the Third Eye of the Anchorite technique to activate for a moment, along with everything else I could sense and see now, just enough to give him one scan.

He was awake but grieving twice over, one of them for me. I appreciated that, but I didn’t like the behaviour of his chakra. It was more dense than yesterday, and moved a lot more quickly. Like something I saw in adults, except with the underdeveloped pathways and tolerances of the seven-year-old he still was. His chakra system pathways were wider but also more strained. Worst of all,

his tenketsu were three times as wide as yesterday. Whatever Minato did, it taxed him well beyond all limits.

The chakra system had tried to compensate, and was still adapting in an effort to finish catching up... but this was not good news.

If your chakra system evolved to the point where it made chakra faster than you generated the component energies, *and* your tenketsu were so wide that you lost as much or more chakra through them than you produced, you didn't become a stronger shinobi anymore, you *died*. Feverishly and/or slowly depending on the difference.

It was like a continuous version of overtraining, losing too much chakra for too long. People had literally trained themselves to death on this world. Normal, sane people couldn't really go overboard because chakra system activity was exothermic – i.e. you got a horrible fever if you went too far. Even the crazies didn't manage it easily because they tended to faint before they reached that point.

But ninja were steadily less sane and more stubborn the stronger they got, and when you *did* go too far, especially with chakra-heavy techniques...

Treatments for 'net loss syndrome' were few, all boiling down to temporary reprieve via Hyuuga gentle fist, or chakra infusion and transfer if you found someone with *very* similar chakra. Both stopgaps were substandard for obvious reasons.

Other than that, if a seal master was available – Konoha had precisely three yesterday, Danzo, Hiruzen and Jirayia – you could maybe subject yourself to a chakra system suppression seal. In *theory* you could also suppress your own chakra, increasingly so with a good grasp of Yin transformation... up until you had to sleep.

None of the cases had lived long enough to make a good try at either solution. Naruto definitely wouldn't be able to.

His chakra system thankfully wasn't quite at that point yet, and would maybe, *barely* not be even after the chakra system settled, if I read him right. I hoped.

But at the very least this meant that, even if Minato's shadow clone ghost could repeat his possession feat, it would destroy Naruto's life if not kill him outright.

I've already been pushed to human trials once in the past 24 hours, even though I was nowhere near comfortable enough making that leap, this better not become the new standard.

Maybe a surface-level flash-treatment to contract or rebuild his chakra points? Thicken the valves? Or add new ones? Would it even work, with the pathways themselves so much wider now? Moreover, did I want to encourage Naruto or Minato to enact self-harm of that sort again? Could I afford to?

Could Konoha afford *not* to? Or Naruto himself, if Obito came after him?

I wasn't even sure if Trito's Tribulation technique could do it, considering the secondary factor of Kurama's chakra in Naruto's system. The plasma cells were better about nature and *my* energies now, but Kurama's chakra was not just territorial but also corrosive. As it currently was at least. It was very possible that any Anami I tried to dedicate to the matter would still be eliminated or devoured, making the issue worse.

Completely destroying his chakra system to give him a Tree of Life was also a no go, with that seal grafted to his spirit. The moment the seal structure was undermined, he'd probably explode. I might be able to stop that, *or* the rapid tearing and degeneration of his Yin, but not both at the same time. No, even one would be too much in my current state. I'd not be able to handle it for at least another two years.

If I *didn't* come up with something and Minato has to do the same thing again, we'd probably have no option *but* a (semi?)permanent chakra system suppression seal. One that would need to stay on Naruto up to puberty, if we're lucky. And for which we'd need Jirayia to finally show up from wherever he was diverted. Whoever had done it.

Unfortunately, Naruto already had a much more intricate and powerful seal on him, whose purpose – the secondary one at least – was the complete *opposite* of suppression. I doubted even a seal master could completely work around that.

A seal master I was decidedly not. Seals, unlike everything else, weren't something I had a good idea how to work with. Or around. Nor was it something I could expect to find a solution for overnight. Especially now that I had to go without my supercomputer brain as much as possible.

I *had* been studying up on seal script, just so I could keep Naruto's education up. My suggestions to teach him logographic communication was a smash hit, much to my grumpiness. But my forays into the art of sealing itself were practically non-existent beyond that. I'd memorized every symbol I could find well beyond the basic fluency of 2000, I was around the 50,000 mark. But actually putting them to work was an art you could only gain skill in through extended practice.

That, unfortunately, I just never brought myself to consider the most productive use of my time. Certainly not the most pleasant. If anything, just the thought of it was exhausting, because it inherently had to do with Naruto, who was himself exhausting. Naruto was a source of stress I always had to put very real effort into tolerating, when he was present, and put out of my mind when he wasn't.

Had been, anyway. For reasons that weren't *all* down to what I'd just found out about my other children.

I'd had to actively avoid thinking about him when he wasn't visiting, just to retain my sanity. This, on top of everything else, ensured that the topic of fuinjutsu never found a place in my heart.

I did try to experiment with it on and off, but it was like trying to cook my most hated food while moving all the pots and pans and cutlery with two arms fewer than I had back then. If anyone else knew that, all rumors that I was Uzumaki myself would vanish overnight.

It's barely been more than half a year, I thought testily as I lifted one leg on the edge of the bed. *Even supercomputers have limits, and everything else I put my time into at least paid off.*

I poked Naruto in the ribs. "Hop and holler, whirlbrat."

Naruto gasped, lurched around with wide, teary eyes, then he tackled me with a hoarse cry. "Uncle! You're alive!"

I caught and hugged him without flinching or grimacing on the inside for the first time in my life. "Hey kid. What's got you so down?"

"Everything's wrong," Naruto burst into tears. "Everything's *stupid*, nothing works now, everyone's tired and all messed up and nobody knows anything and they're *awful!* They're all angry and scared and they hurt and they want to hurt! Even some of the people who still want to be good don't think they can stay good, and some never thought they were good so they think they

can't be good after this – another one!” Naruto gasped, then hiccuped a sob. “There's another one, he decided he can't be good so he's gonna do bad things like bad people, but it's not enough so he's gonna *be* bad people! And he thinks the Old Man will let him!”

Shit, he either got interrupted mid-way through enlightenment or he's got Kurama's emotion sensing ability now. “Naruto, how does everyone else feel to you right now?”

“They're *horrible!*” Naruto blubbered, not realising or caring (anymore?) that he shouldn't know where anyone even was, being just one of two – now four – people in the room. Never mind sense their emotions across – what distance even was it? “How can people want other people not to exist so easily? Is that why they did it to me? Most of them don't even hate me, but they still wish I didn't exist!”

Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if a bunch of people assumed that the target had been the Kyuubi, and thus felt even more justified than before in wishing that jinchuuriki didn't exist. No wonder Naruto felt like they wanted to erase him.

The saddest part was that I didn't even disagree with the root sentiment – jinchuuriki *shouldn't* exist.

“Sit tight, Naruto, I'm gonna try something.”

This will do terrible things to my ability to keep my thoughts straight, but it can't be helped.

I looked past and above flesh and blood and bone to see the Yin and Yang, and the wave-form patterns making up the mind at their juncture. The entire world of psychic and spiritual emanations became visible to my sight, sprawling and flowing all through the world like an ocean. Each thought was a drop, each thought shared by enough other minds was a wave and a current influencing and being influenced by similar minds. And many of the minds in between.

Since I couldn't afford splinter thought streams, I forced myself not to go on any tangents. Instead, I determined where and how Naruto's Yin did anything out of the ordinary that could account for his new ability to perceive emotion and intent. And want.

I was surprised this was a problem at all, since in the future I knew Naruto hadn't suffered any negative side effects from the ability to sense negative emotions across country-sized areas. He just knew what he needed to know to act best.

Then I determined that there was a conspicuous lack of Kurama's energies where Naruto's Yin interacted with all the wandering thoughts and emotions. But I could sense the history of its presence there. Past activity. Ninshu. Three-way.

Kurama must have done all the work and just conveyed what was relevant to Naruto via ninshu, in the other future, I concluded. He's one huge bleeding heart regardless of what he claims.

Fortunately, I now had enough insight into how thoughts and spirits worked, including the cognitive wave-form patterns and their functions. I couldn't *translate* them on the fly just from sight – not without resorting to Ninshu myself anyway, yet – but I could see enough of everyone else in a hundred meters to determine what all in Naruto's psychic processes was anomalous. After some cross-examination anyway.

The Anami plasma cells could work as an automated gestalt if there were enough of them. I called some up and sent them forth into the poor brat curled up in my arms. They could be completely transparent when I had them doing tasks for which they stayed collision-less, so no one got startled. Or turned into a question-firing motor-mouth, which Sasuke could apparently be. He'd grow up saner than his counterpart for that alone, if nothing else.

Previously, this wouldn't have worked because the chakra system would cannibalize the plasma cells. But my little spirits had evolved since then, they could withstand predation *and* sustain themselves indefinitely from the plasma sheathe of the planet now. Natural energy.

Also, the Shinju parasite's efficient design worked in my favor for once. Its spread was minimal in those areas that *didn't* produce energy to cannibalize. This included the meninges, the three protective membranes that enveloped the brain and spinal cord.

I directed the Anami to settled between Naruto's outer and middle meninges, until the plasma cells had populated all of the physical cells and interstitial fluid making up the nervous system's protective envelope. I didn't stop until they wrapped Naruto's entire brain. Well, minus the place where the spinal cord stuck out of the cranium, but that was thankfully outside the area of interest. I made sure to tell them to purify Naruto's cells *slowly*.

Then I risked my full cognitive *and* spiritual capability and spent a few minutes determining what should and shouldn't be allowed through, based on all the other brains and spirits in my range.

Which was barely anything now, alas. I had to rely on Trito again, spreading him out as far as he could go through the mountain, cheating by way of forming mokuton fibers through the walls. And using the ones already there, seems Senju Hashirama had dug the original superstructure in the same way.

I made sure to strengthen rather than undermine the load bearing parts, but otherwise focused on my main task, viewing and comparing as many people as I could reach.

Thankfully, Trito could also remain invisible for something like this, unlike when I needed him for more physical applications, so I didn't startle anyone or ruffle any feathers.

Itachi can definitely see something though, I noticed. His Sharingan's going full pinwheel.

Alas, I couldn't study what his chakra was doing, or the foreign Yin in his eyes regardless of what I wished. I had to be spare with multitasking. I kept my focus on solving Naruto's problem instead.

After a few minutes, during which Naruto continued to cry and blubber in my bosom, and then suspine and hiccup when he got too tired, I decided I'd learned as much as I could. I collated my findings and determined the proper instructions for the Anami spirits. Then I sent them over.

The plasma sheath became a filter.

A moment later, the kid went slack. "It... i-it stopped..."

"It better have," I grunted, shutting myself back down until I was – relatively speaking – within the bounds of humanity again. Not counting the unlimited benefits of sage power. Both kinds. "If that didn't work, my next solution would have involved a dragon."

Alas for my brilliant plan to distract the kid from his woes by way of the ultimate dragon surprise, Naruto was completely asleep.

I shifted him in my lap and stroked my tie. "Sorry Yemo, I'll have to introduce you two later."

The knot at my neck became a head just long enough for Yemo to blow smoke in my face.

I flicked his snout in warning, but I just hit cloth because he'd already turned back. "Pushing boundaries already, are you?"

My tie did not reply.

“Try to be more circumspect about that when you get out of here,” Nara Shikaku told me with a huff, having come in while I was solving the proverbial unintended consequences of Naruto’s even more proverbial mid-battle powerup of the day before. “People already thought you were strange. We really don’t want them thinking Orochimaru or the other guy managed to drive you properly insane.”

“I’ll remember,” I agreed, because he was right.

“Until the next ridiculous thing happens, I’m sure.”

He was right about that too. “Kurama,” I said lowly. “Bring me into the seal.”

I saw a glimmer of red with my second sight – short-range was minimally taxing on my Yin, so I didn’t have to be *completely* blind again – but nothing more happened.

Crap, I thought, acutely conscious of Itachi watching me silently, having finally calmed down his small brother. *What does that mean?*

Fortunately I had my own means now, of going straight to the source for answers.

I laid Naruto on his back and reached under his shirt to put my hand on his belly. Then, having had ample time to come up with ideas and workarounds despite my diminished condition, I held out my other fist.

Nara scoffed but pushed his fist against mine.

I moved mine under his and glanced pointedly from him to the other ninja. “Lord Uchiha.” It took effort not to add any inflection to my words, he was still so young. Too young to have to do this just because everyone else better suited was dead. “If you have any control at all over your Yin, now is the time.”

Itachi’s flat look was about what I expected. “You’ve had yet another idea?”

I was positively cursed with them these days. “If you find yourself unable, connect instead with me as you would while trapping me in a genjutsu. If you can do that, and then relinquish control to me over just the part of the technique handling *your* sensory feedback of what I’m experiencing, I should be able to act as a relay for what goes on even if you can’t engage in full ninshu yourself.”

“... I will accept this once, but only because of the extreme circumstances, and because I am fully confident in the power of my new eyes, regardless of anything else.”

Also because you want to find out any limits or issues as early as possible, I bet, if given the opportunity. But I didn't say that aloud. I waited for him to bump fists instead.

I extended my chakra outwards, overlapping it with the chakra of the other two men until they were properly blended. Now came the hard part, where they had to *let* me pry it away from their actual energies and connect our Yin directly.

I was very impressed that Shikaku managed to engage in proper ninshu again, despite how traumatic the first time had been. Itachi couldn't bring himself to be as open, so I waited until he followed my alternative suggestion. As expected of him, he easily improvised the method.

“Alright,” I murmured. “Here we go.”

I extended my chakra down over Naruto, overlapping it with his all the way into the seal, and through him the one – no, *two* presences that were inside. One was massive and familiar. The other was unfamiliar and small.

Naruto was not among them, and both of them were waiting for me.

“You've already deduced the repercussions of what I was compelled to do,” Namikaze Minato uttered the moment we materialized between him and the bars in the watery dark hall, wasting absolutely no time. “But not all of the limits we will have to operate under from here out.”

“Lord Fourth,” Shikaku breathed, rattled despite himself. “It really is you.”

“A figment of me,” Minato replied grimly. “One that is much less than it was just yesterday. This chakra was meant to wait dormant until the seal was about to break, at which point I would be able to repair it. Once. However, I could not discount the possibility that Obito might get to Naruto again, so I added an additional condition to trigger when or if he attempted to do to him anything resembling what he did to Kushina after childbirth.” The Fourth looked from Shikaku to me. “You know of what I speak.”

I glanced behind me to the looming shadow of the fox, whose nine tails swished through the air in the darkness behind the bars. “You can't have attempted ninshu with Kurama,” I said immediately,

turning back around. “It would have dispersed you. Or at least exhausted too much power to serve your original purpose.”

“No indeed, but we’ve been speaking.” Minato replied, a grim smile briefly ghosting over him. “He was most eager to explain all the ways in which I failed, and will fail again. Very thoroughly.”

“That I can believe.”

“Possessing Naruto was never the plan,” Minato said. “That isn’t even what happened, technically. The option only became available after you shared the technique of ninshu with us, when you bade the kyuubi teach you the method. I am grateful for the consideration, even if it exposed a vulnerability in the seal I did not know before.”

“What exactly did you do, lord Fourth?” Shikaku asked.

“I had hoped to cast a technique through Naruto, at least to make it impossible for Obito to take him, or touch him. I did not even conceive of being able to provide direct support in battle. The kyuubi, however, was able to pull my son’s consciousness here, and convinced him to *stay* here so I could exert actual control over the experience of ninshu, instead of just sharing in it.” Minato turned somehow even more solemn. “To be quite honest, the outcome was beyond what I hoped, and far beyond what I’d have risked, had I forewarning of what it would do to my son to have all three of our chakras run through his system simultaneously.”

Kurama had to convince him, not Minato? I guess Naruto’s as angry at his dad here as he would have been in the other future.

“The kyuubi’s chakra is corrosive, but also multiplicative,” Itachi deduced, surveying the bubbling red in the water around us while being careful not to face the nine-tails directly, with those eyes of his. “You displayed physical ability beyond what the boy was known to be capable of as well, so enhancement was also taking place.”

“It worked well enough for the battle,” Minato nodded grimly. “Unfortunately, I have neither the chakra left, nor the willingness to do it again. I’ve inflicted too much harm on my son as it is.”

“You saved him, and many more people.” Much as I disdained the principle of child soldiers, choosing to inflict temporary pain on your kid so you didn’t need to outright sacrifice or *abandon*

him to the whims of a madman was something I would always respect. “The consequences are manageable as they are. I’ll figure out better healing in time.”

“Of that, at least, I no longer have any doubts,” Minato smiled sadly at me. “Thank you for all that you have done for him, despite everything.”

“... I’d say you’re welcome, but you’re not the real Minato, so I’ll wait to meet *him* for a definitive ruling on that.”

Nara and Itachi looked at me askance, but Minato only nodded. “That is fair.”

Shikaku cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Lord Minato, there is much you have to know, and much you could do to help even if just through advice. But before that, is Lady Kushina here as well?”

“Her chakra is, but her awakening has not been triggered yet. Unless the situation becomes truly untenable again, I have chosen to leave that part of the seal unaltered. Her purpose is to help Naruto subdue to kyuubi and claim its chakra when he is ready.” Minato looked above me to the kyuubi. “Should that prove unnecessary, then she will be able to last longer than I, and give Naruto guidance and support I am unsuited for.”

“Bullshit,” I scoffed. “A kid needs his dad every bit as much as his mom.”

“Yes, but I am not long for this world anymore, and now he has you.” Minato said seriously. “A father, or an uncle, I will not argue parenting roles with you, certainly not morality. You do not believe a father is replaceable, and I appreciate it. But you have proven able enough to give him what guidance I would have. A *mother’s* love, however, is beyond us both.”

What was that saying? A kid deserves unconditional love from both parents, is entitled to unconditional support from his mother, but has to earn the father’s approval? Something like that? “Good luck to me,” I huffed.

“I’m not asking for favors or sacrifices. I know you’ll do the right thing when the time comes.”

“Ugh, use my own words against me why don’t you.”

“Some lessons you teach well.”

“Some’ lessons he says.” I decided he could have insulted me much worse.

Minato looked from me to Itachi. “Lord Uchiha. My condolences for your loss.”

“... My thanks, Lord Fourth.”

“But unfortunately that’s not why we’re here,” Shikaku said what Itachi respected protocol too much to say himself. “That technique you used on the enemy, Lord Hokage. Can it be taught?”

“Yes.” A scroll unfurled itself in the air behind Minato’s ghost. “Please pay close attention, all of you. There is very little of me left, but still enough that we needn’t rush this. With the time difference between the outside and here, you have ample time to learn this right. After that, we’ll talk strategy and anything else of import, starting with what exactly happened on that night.”

“Including anything Kurama sees fit to add,” I tossed in. Because the way the fox was just sitting and staring behind me without saying anything was beginning to weird me out.

“If we must, but any outlandish claims he makes you’ll have to verify yourself, Hanzo-san.” Minato smiled wryly. “My strength is far too little now to fulfil my original purpose, so I will dedicate the energy and time left to me to act in an advisory role for as long as I can.”

I’d just recruited myself to play ninshu relay.

Alas for the fatalism of shadow clone ghosts, I already had ideas about fixing that.

“-. .-“

Minato’s technique wasn’t *easy* by ninja standards, especially without the uncannily helpful chakra chains of Uzumaki persuasion. ‘Ninja standards’ being the key words there, because it needed pure Yin manipulation, which ninja could only do if they figured out how to turn chakra *back* into the energies it cannibalized.

Good news, Itachi was sure the effect could be adapted to be conveyed through both genjutsu and medical ninjutsu.

“It’s will be no more perfect than the fourth’s own approach,” Itachi was warning Shikaku while I rubbed my eyes next to Naruto on the bed. I felt like I’d been up for days. “The disruptions are not constant, because unlike a genjutsu which you can constantly adjust, you cannot tell what the victim experiences at the same time.”

“And since he has the Mangekyou Sharingan too, illusions on him are impossible anyway,” Shikaku deduced.

“Visual ones, yes.”

Bad news, this drastically cut the number of shinobi that would potentially be capable of using it, outside the Uchiha, Nara, and maybe Yamanaka clans. Worse news, medics were more useful exactly where they were, and Obito had the Mangekyou Sharingan. At the very *least* that meant that any illusion used as delivery vector would have to be completely non-visual. Even worse news, the Hashirama Cells made it very unlikely illusions could work on Obito at all, Sharingan or no.

“I believe my eyes may be uniquely suited to this crisis,” Itachi eventually said. “Though it appears I will only be able to verify that on the enemy’s time, as things currently stand.”

He was right about that one, at least. That was the rub as things *currently* stood.

There had to be a reason why genjutsu didn’t decide the Madara-Hashirama fight, despite that the former did have the kaleidoscope eyes. I was betting on the answer being Hashirama cells. But Itachi’s confidence in his Tsukuyomi wasn’t misplaced either, though he didn’t outright name the technique. I could only hope he was right, because the other options were substandard.

One was delivery via physical contact, which was problematic because taijutsu specialists were taijutsu specialists exactly *because* they weren’t all that good at the rest. Two, fuinjutsu on an entire area, for which we’d need Jirayia to finally show up, wherever he was. Minato had designed a seal for it and copies were already being made, but it needed certain on-the-fly adjustments that would only be achieved through time-consuming practice for the average ninja. Also, it couldn’t be moved on the fly, so if Obito escaped its bounds, that was it.

Maybe the four-elements barrier seal around it? That was Shikaku’s current plan for that at least.

The third option, and the one I was least enthused about, was me.

Which is to say, since I could use Yang or Yin energies directly at the source, the bottleneck of chakra-to-Yin transformation did not exist for me. Also, I could substitute the chakra chains for Triton in intangible form, so if I spread him out as much as I could even with my paltry Yin body... And then made it a flying saucer instead of a pure ball so I could reach as wide as possible...

I found that I could cover an area roughly the volume of my property from top to bottom, and the rest of the neighbourhood besides that, at least at ground level. Continuously and indefinitely with no need for concentration. With this, Obito shouldn't be able to teleport into my range. Or at the very least not do it unnoticed, and certainly not consistently while within that space.

Long story short, my odds of not being somehow directly involved in the figurative frontlines of the current mess had plummeted into near non-existence. 'Near' instead of 'total' because this also made Shikaku decide the best and safest place for Naruto was with me. All day. Every day. All the time.

My god.

"Masanari, are you back from whatever that was?"

Shit, I'd completely checked out for a while there. I opened my mouth, only to close it with a feeling of frustration as I felt a thought just... die in my head so that I didn't remember what it was between one moment and the next.

It felt like I 'd been entertaining a sudden idea, only to now realize it had taken me a full minute to cling to it, instead of a second. In vain. I didn't even know what the thought was anymore. I could *feel* as it vanished from my head, dammit, what was that? I'd had an acquaintance back on Earth who used to say this happened to him, but I had no frame of reference for it until now.

What was it? What was I just thinking about, and how did – it was such a disconcerting feeling, to literally be there when a thought escaped your mental grasp, like – like a valve emptying the wrong way.

"*Masanari.*"

"I think I had a thought, but it's gone." I admitted. "I need to find it again. I – think it has something to do with an older memory or idea, but that's it." I grit my teeth, hanging to the fading emptiness in my head to no avail. "Fuck, I already need to rest again."

"Can you do it here?"

"If that's alright."

“Hanzo, to be honest I’d keep you and your brat here for the rest of time, or maybe keep moving you between safehouses until we eliminated Obito as a problem, but I’m regrettably too pragmatic for that.”

“And good and kind and too attached to your sanity to deal with the consequences of trying to keep Naruto in one place.”

“Don’t push me.”

Shikaku left. Itachi stayed to spend time with Sasuke, who was also getting drowsy. I laid out on the bed and closed my eyes.

Sleep was all out-of-the-body experiences for me now. Unfortunately, using my newborn Yin body to remember how I spent it, in Heaven with my wife and kids, defeated the purpose of resting *it*. Absent of any actionable information, which was apparently not the case this time, I would have to content myself with only vague impressions on awakening for at least two more years. Just like everyone else.

When I woke up forty-five minutes later, though, I did manage to retrace my thoughts of before until I remembered the thought that had evaded me. It filled me with an extreme sense of urgency, so I quickly wrote it down on a note before rushing out of the saferoom.

Thankfully, Naruto was still sleeping, Sasuke was also sleeping now, Itachi was gone, and I wasn’t locked up with the children for my own good. The ninja on guard didn’t make me jump through any hoops to meet Shikaku again either. As it happened, he’d just gone checking over the rest of the evacuees instead of leaving the mountain, coordinating via ANBU and envoys on the go the whole time.

I didn’t wait for him to be retrieved and instead went with the ninja to him directly, when they didn’t complain. I could keep up with the average shinobi now, at least.

When I finally reached Shikaku, I wasted no more time. “Do you have a safe and sturdy, *indoor* training room somewhere? One with room enough for, say, Akimichi giant transformation techniques?”

Just in case things got violent.

“I can think of one or two, why? What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that it’s strange how Obito hasn’t come back for more decapitation strikes and harassment.” I glanced pointedly in the direction of the ANBU shadowing us.

Shikaku quickly wrapped us behind the privacy techniques without breaking stride down the shadowy corridor.

“Obito could and should be keeping up his new ‘decapitate Konoha’s chain of command until nothing’s left’ policy,” I said. “But you’re still alive.”

“How troublesome of you to notice.”

“The Kamui should let Obito murder and harass us constantly. While I’d like to think the Fourth scared him off for a while, I doubt the madman is ignorant to the limitations and consequences upon Naruto that surely must exist. Even if Obito somehow can’t get new eyes for Izanagi, he could easily snipe and sneak attack us constantly until we topple under the death of a thousand cuts. The Hashirama cells ensure he has unlimited healing and energy.”

“You figured it out too, then.”

“That he isn’t keeping it up means he’s either sulking – not entirely impossible – regrouping with allies or pawns – for which you’re already doing everything to prepare – or an additional factor is interfering.”

“You think Lord Sarutobi is still alive too.”

“I think he’s almost certainly still alive, and making himself a nuisance in whatever place the Kamui sends people. If the technique works by partially displacing Obito into that other space, then attacking him from inside would be his one, major weakness.”

Shikaku sighed, in relief this time. “I didn’t want to distract myself with unverifiable hopes.”

“You’ve sent for Asuma I’m assuming.”

“If the messenger isn’t intercepted too, we should have news in a couple of days.”

“Might I have a bit of time in that training place you mentioned?”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that maybe I can save you some time instead of waiting on news from the capital.”

“Follow me.”

Shikaku dispensed with all pretense of stealth and discretion and led me out of the mountain as fast as I could go, which I was gratified to find was as fast as *he* could go. He took me to the Hokage Tower, and from there through a secret tunnel below ground. Then we had to go a fair distance westward, until we emerged into a huge cavernous space. It was clearly of artificial make, but I could feel the strong, dense stone holding up the earth, and the many roots keeping *that* in place.

When I scanned the place with the Third Eye just in case, I could feel the lush and huge life signs far above even that. “Are we beneath the Forest of Death?”

“This is the Hokage’s private training area,” Shikaku told me after he activated a massive light array, which made the multi-kilometer-wide place look... uncannily similar to the inside of the Eight Trigram Seal on Naruto. Except with a few more support pillars. “Now what’s this idea you have for me?”

I made my way further into the place, examining the seal-based lights that had clearly been put in place in bits and pieces as the original system of lighting failed. The oldest, ugliest, most ungainly lightbulbs connected to the first version of what passed for an electrical grid. This place must have been built during the First’s time, and renovated a bunch of times by an amateur.

Did Sarutobi Hiruzen do it all himself? He must have been able to deploy a respectable number of shadow clones in his prime. “First, can we get someone else here, just in case?”

“Inoichi and Chouza are already on their way, now quit stalling and tell me so I can decide if it’s sensitive information or not.”

“Do we have any of Lord Third’s blood?”

Shikaku blinked at me, then he pinched his nose. “Elaborate. Thoroughly. And it better be good because there are, in fact, better things I could be doing right now, like debriefing the latest returning jonin.”

“You know how summoning is really, really rare?”

“Obviously.”

“And how it’s *not* just down to chakra supply? How many jonin in Konoha have tried to blind-cast the technique without a contract only for nothing to happen?”

“Almost all of them.”

I made my finger bleed and proceeded to write the technique’s seal script on my palm and fingers, as was *actually* the way to cast it. Only a special few people could do it with just a random drop of blood from a split lip, and only if a contract was already signed and active. I had a feeling my theories for that, and much more, were about to be validated.

Bear, Dog, Bird, Monkey, Ram seal.

“Summoning Technique.”

Nothing happened outwardly, but now I had ways to ‘see’ things happening beyond even the grandest eye techniques. My chakra reacted, the technique did *something*, reached out all around me, but it was aimless, directionless, up until it washed over Shikaku and latched onto him. Barely any of the technique did that, since it was so diffused, but that was all I needed to know. I could control my spiritual activity now too, and guide chakra – my new sort, even without Trito – to do what I wanted *exactly*.

“Summoning Technique.”

This time I was very focused on Shikaku, and aimed *all* of my technique at him.

Nara jerked in place. “What the hell was that?”

“Confirming a theory.” I walked over and held out my palm, already clean again. “Please write the fuuin for technique on my palm in *your* blood.”

Shikaku stared at me very intensely, but actually did as I said. Hope truly was a mighty thing.

I absorbed some of the blood and chakra for later analysis and moved back and slapped the ground, casting the technique a third time.

There was a tug on *both* of us now, weak, too weak to do much of anything, but the blood made the technique *perfectly* aimed. All it was lacking was power and force of will. If I just increase the

output and maintain the spell while I refine and increase the energy investment so it equals his *entire* supply... or more?

I had to escalate to *ten times* his chakra supply – the air was wafting away from me and my chakra was casting everything in a sheen as white as lightning – before I felt a sudden lurch. The next moment I was crashing on top of Shikaku and we both ended up on the ground.

“Ugh – ooph – the... what the fuck?”

I quickly got off him and hopped back and away. “Sorry about that. I’d expected something like the substitution technique, not that.”

“Masanari,” Shikaku muttered as he climbed to his feet. “Did you just summon yourself – did you just *teleport* to me?”

“That’s one theory confirmed.”

“*What* theory?”

“That there’s nothing wrong with us who don’t have an ‘affinity’ for a summons animal.” I looked at my bare hand. “Our ‘affinity’ is to *mankind*.”

“Masanari. This is *huge*.”

“I doubt it,” I shook my head. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s in the Forbidden Scroll of Sealing or someplace. And I’m not surprised it’s not disseminated either – the chakra requirements are *massive*. I had to put in ten times as much chakra as *you* have in order to make it work. I don’t want to think what it will take to do the reverse of this and summon someone to me. But maybe we don’t have to wonder at all, because I already have a way to make sure nothing can move or do anything else to me if I don’t want to. So I’ll ask again: do we have any of Sarutobi Hiruzen’s blood?”

Shikaku stared at me. Then he snapped out of it and gave me a look that promised everything good and bad that he could think of doing to me at once. “Wait here.”

I waited. For only eight minutes.

When he came back, the entire Ino-Shika-Chou was together. Inoichi and Chouza hung behind, though, as Shikaku came over and knelt down with a mid-sized scroll. “This here is the equivalent

of Lord Third's entire blood supply." He spread the scroll on the ground, revealing that it was all blood packs sealed one next to another. "The Third has his blood regularly extracted and stored in stasis in case a transfusion ever becomes necessary. I wouldn't normally move this around." He looked seriously at me as I crouched in front of him. "But I'm going to do what *he* did and risk a hope on you. Don't disappoint me."

"I can't promise that. This is all untested."

"But you have the chakra to try?"

"As many times as it takes." I smiled wryly. "Nothing on the scale of yesterday's *output*, but enough for any number of regular ninjutsu."

"Hiashi got back while you were asleep, you know," Nara told me as he unsealed one blood pack. "He told me an odd story about you and ancient ghosts that looked like a big purple man and a golden multi-armed demon."

Is that what Indra and Asura looked like to the others? "Did he bring back my research?" No, no, tangents were bad right now.

Shikaku gave me a flat look. "Yes."

"Good." I put it out of my mind. "Give me one of those packs and stand back."

Shikaku shook his head at me but did as I asked, taking the rest of the scroll with him. I uncapped the blood pack and took just the little I needed for the jutsu.

I carefully wrote the summoning seal on my palm and every one of my fingers in Sarutobi Hiruzen's blood. Then I formed the hand seals and moulded chakra very deliberately. I prepared myself for the second biggest and... probably longest *lasting* investment of power to date. In objective time.

"Summoning Technique."

The spell erupted from me like bonfire, but bizarrely *downward*. The blood focused the technique every bit as well as Shikaku's had beforehand, but the scope of the magic quickly eclipsed it and every other effort I'd ever put into a single thing, save during that moment yesterday when godhood flirted with me. Twice.

The spell then went beyond what I'd *imagined* as the vastest possible scope of effort it might take. I felt myself become lightheaded, and then just *light* as the technique tried to take me... somewhere. Move me. Do *something* to me so I... fit the destination? The *nature* of the destination of... wherever the technique was headed, which was not *here*.

Not *this* nature.

No, I can't let myself be moved, I need Sarutobi Hiruzen here.

Trito emerged from me, shimmering into view as it anchored itself and me in the space I occupied. In any other situation, on any other day, I might have just pushed more power and leaped in with both feet. But I'd already been through something like this today, and no one was ever again going to pull on my string but me.

My position in time and space stabilized. The technique reached out and out and out and away...

And right at the end, when I was sure it had finally bridged whatever gap of space, time and whatever else, it missed the mark. Like... something had gotten in the way. Turned it aside.

“Shit.”

Shikaku sighed. “I guess it was too much to hope.”

I ignored him. The technique. It worked as if the man was alive. Sarutobi Hiruzen was still alive.

But the direction...

It pointed down to *Yomi*.

Crossing dimensions bypasses the issue of distance, I recalled, trying to make sense of this. Any spot on the other side of... wherever... would be just next to any spot on this side. If fourth-dimensional or fifth- or whatever-dimensional mechanics were at all real. Which they were, I was living proof. Dead proof too. Formerly.

Kamui was a particular brand of bullshit beyond any other in the Sharingan arsenal. But only *if* you assumed that the eye somehow created a seemingly infinite pocket dimension for use in the attached techniques. Since that was Yin-Yang release that even Creation of All Things had never matched, at least in scale, I was skeptical.

Kaguya *seemed* to be making entire worlds during that battle, but that was an unreasonable power level to attach to someone who could still be punched to death and sealed by the last dregs of power of two much inferior adversaries. *However*, if she *wasn't* creating new dimensions, and just altering existing ones who were inherently more malleable to mind over matter, *and* lacked existing authorities to contest her claims because there were no *gods* there.

Yet. Or not.

The Kamui dimensions is Yomi, I thought incredulously. *Or in Yomi somewhere. Part of Yomi. Like one of the personal worlds in Heaven maybe, like my wife's? Except in Purgatory.*

I was aghast.

To think that the Summoning Technique could reach that far, only to be deflected as if something had gotten in the way that shouldn't be there.

Mangekyou Sharingan techniques were named for kami. Grand ones that were absent or maybe *formerly* present before they and their origin stories faded into myth.

I'd met Hagoromo, Asura and Indra, but what about *their* children? They lived and died, where did they go? What did they do? And most importantly, what did they leave *behind*? Like, say, a pocket in one of the other Six Realms, where they spent time either during or after their lives on Earth. Access to which might, then, have been bequeathed as a Yin or blood gift?

Or perhaps invested into their own *chakra reincarnation*.

As crazy as it sounded, it was *less* ridiculous to believe that Kamui accessed a pre-existing place, even one in a different realm, instead of creating a pocket dimension wholesale. That was more than even Creation of all Things had ever managed, but less complex – arguably – that what the Rinnegan could do with the Six Paths of Pain.

Or maybe it wasn't Yin-Yang release after all? Maybe it was an illusion that was imposed on reality. Just not this one. Something like Tsukuyomi, but better. Perhaps what Tsukuyomi was based on? Or was a proto-form of...

If I gave Itachi a body like mine, the physique, the Anami, the Tree of Life, would he be able to turn his Tsukuyomi illusion world into a real world?

Here, probably not, because the laws of physics predominated. In one of the other realms though? The matter was more subtle and malleable than crude, the mechanics more associative than causal...

“Masanari, do you need another nap?”

I snapped back to attention. “Shit, sorry, no, I... was processing some findings.” Once again, I shut down all the tangents I couldn’t afford to pursue right now and considered what *was* relevant.

Sautobi Hiruzen lived. Sarutobi Hiruzen was in Yomi. Therefore, the Kamui dimension was also in Yomi. This was unlike Summons Realms, which were all in *this* dimension somewhere, you could literally reach them all on foot. Besides the notions of an Underdark or Hollow Earth that this inevitably raised, this also posed questions of why summons animals could be summoned for such low cost, as being on the same realm meant that distance was *definitely* an issue.

Then again, Kakashi could summon his dogs from his *home* for a pittance.

I considered the fuuin script on my hand, and what it meant. I wasn’t practiced in sealing, but I did know the symbols. And there was at least one interpretation of this which read as if the technique diverted through some other place, or the space in-between. Probably why the technique could find a path to Hiruzen at all, even if it was interrupted.

Fact: the summoning technique could be used as a very crude Flying Thunder God stand-in if you had as much chakra as God.

Fact: The sympathetic principle was critical to summoning working.

Fact: I had no sympathetic tie to anything besides humanity.

Or, perhaps, not *more* of a tie to any beast than I did to humanity.

I took a deep breath. I’d failed in my extremely long shot, but there was one option we could still try, if I could bring the *relevant parties* over to make the attempt. The same option that Shikaku had sent word to the capital to begin with.

“Kuchiyose means ‘drawing in to speak.’” I mused, watching the traces of blood on the ground where I’d made my last calling attempt. “Shikaku... I’m going to try something.”

“‘Something’ is literally what you’ve been doing all this time, but please, don’t let us stop you.”

I absorbed Hiruzen's blood and began adjusting my DNA to match his. At the same time, I began calling up as many inactive phenotypes as I could that belonged to the category of *ape*.

My bones began to grow and shift. My height grew taller. My fingers grew longer. My ears, nose, lips, they all changed to become more monstrous, more beastlike. My hair became thicker and shaggier. My beard grew out, and up over my face until only the skin around my nose and eyes was free of hair. I anchored myself into place, in defiance of all space, forces, time and dimensions.

Then I re-did the summoning script in Saturobi Hiruzen's blood, formed the hand seals, and called one last time into the ether.

"Summoning Technique." My voice rumbled, deep and harsh as chakra fairly exploded from me and the stone floor began to tremble with rumbling sounds. "By my will and the power of nature, I will be heard. Come forth, I don't care who!"

With sight beyond sight, I watched the spell reach through dimensional walls, and back again into the reverse side of the earth to the sight of a grand, cloudy mountain full of flowers and fruit.

And then the great will at the top of that place stood upright upon sensing my sudden intrusion, followed it back to its source with his own second sight, saw me, was shocked, and then he grabbed onto my spell and pulled back in full wrath.

"WHO DARES!?"

I barely crossed my arms in time to catch the blow of a creature strong enough to smack around the First and Second Hokages at the same time.

The air exploded from us along with the smoke from the technique aftermath. The impact boomed like a cannon against my arms. The stone beneath my feet and behind me cracked.

But I didn't sway, nor did I move. I didn't hurt.

Such was the unparalleled might of stacking both kinds of sage power.

As the smoke dissipated between us, I had time enough to see the gratifying shock on the Monkey King's face at seeing me tank his opening strike. His skin was swarthy, but his hair white and his eyes were green. His snarl went from wanting to punish defiance to the shocked gape of a king and patriarch startled by the unexpected appearance of long-missed kind.

Why is he-? I didn't see this coming at all, what context was I missing? I'd only – wait. I must look like a Sage Ape version of Sarutobi Hiruzen, don't I?

Abruptly, my tie became a dragon, the dragon swirled around his arm, snaked around and over it as he grew several times the size, and wrapped around his neck just as the King of Apes jumped back from me.

“Give me a reason,” my dragon hissed, his teeth already pressing on his skin. “Go on, I dare you.”

“Oh give it a rest, kid,” I grumbled, shapeshifting back to my natural form. “We both know you're not comfortable pushing boundaries *that* hard yet.”

Monkey King Enma straightened. He watched with unfathomable eyes as I became less ape, more man, and nothing like Sarutobi Hiruzen anymore. He glanced down at his new neck ornament with cool eyes. I was awestruck by how much wrath he'd just shrugged off, and lust for blood and *outrage* at having his deepest vulnerability exposed.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Monkey King Enma,” I said. “Or should I call you Yenma? Yama, Yima, Sun Wukong?” I couldn't know what myths translated to this world, and how well... But as I saw him react to each and every one of those names with familiarity, I was becoming rather sure that the *oldest* of the myths held more sway than I ever assumed before. “*Yemo*, perhaps?”

The Monkey King's eyes slowly turned back to mine. “How do you know those names?”

“I remember them, and some of their stories.”

A tense silence wound itself between our words.

“Please forgive your namesake, great one.” I bowed. Not very deeply, but completely unironically.

“He's a child, barely a day old, and very defensive of me.”

“I can see that, and much more besides. Who are you? How did you call me – you named a dragon *what*?” Enma snarled at me, I was clearly lacking some context here too. Then he looked around.

“That blood... It's Saru's, what have you done? Where is Hiruzen? Where is Sarutobi?!”

“Held captive by the enemy,” I replied before another misunderstanding could happen. “We were hoping that you-“

But Enma had already slapped Yemo away and unsealed a very big scroll, which he unfurled and drew a long streak over in his own blood mid-air. “Gyaku Kuchiyose no Jutsu!”

Ninja Art: Reverse Summoning Jutsu.

The technique erupted into smoke, smoke and more smoke. I could feel and *see* the massive chakra quantity that Enma was pushing into the technique. I absently pat Yemo on the head when he wobbled over to tearfully curl himself back around my neck, but otherwise watched the spell unfold the same way as I had mine. Followed it across planes as it did almost *exactly* what mine did, except without as much waste because it didn’t fudge the pan-dimensional shortcut.

The spell ended.

The smoke dispersed.

Sarutobi Hiruzen was still nowhere in sight.

“How?” Enma breathed, then he turned absolutely murderous. “Who dares?” His fury went from flame-hot to nearly apocalyptic within the space of a single breath. “Where is he – Saru – who has him – what - ?” The murderous eyes of the Monkey king laser-focused on me.

The next moment he was already in my face and pulling me up by the neck.

Once again, I didn’t budge. He couldn’t move me at all, even to lift me off the ground.

He gave up and leaned down to snarl in my face. “Your strength is great but out of this world. I can account it not, and I know you not. It *vexes* me, and I’ve half a mind to erase you from existence right not. The world of man has learned the lessons already, of what it means for all lives to exist at the whim of demons and monsters. Especially the sort that look no different from them. It’s only because you do not *dissemble* that I haven’t yet tested my claws against your neck.” Just as suddenly, he let go, hopped back and incinerated every drop of Sarutobi’s blood in sight with a short breath of flame.

His eyes roamed over us then. To normal sight they were still green, but to mine they were more. Shining golden, like a certain holy flame that a certain monkey king from a certain epic in a different place had sat in for 49 days. Days of the *gods*.

He glared at me, unsure of what to make of me. He looked at my dragon with indecipherable feelings. Finally, he took in the others and instantly identified Shikaku as the one in charge. “You. Sarutobi’s advisor.”

“Lord Enma.”

“You will lead the way out of here, by the shortest possible path lest I break every wall and mountain standing between me and the open heavens. Then you will explain *everything*. And *then* we will do whatever it takes to track down whoever and whatever presumes to hold Saru against his will, so I may teach him the meaning of *displeasure*.”