

## Chapter 15: The Meditation of Heaven and Earth

“-. ??? .-“

“Dadyyy!” My daughter Yui tearfully barrelled into my arms. “I’m sorryyy! I was so scared and Kenzo was a stupid head and then I was a stupid head too and I didn’t mean it! I didn’t want to go, we didn’t want to go even though mom told us we should, we wanted to stay with you and you went all boom – warm and shiny, I thought you were telling us to stay!”

Can I buy a vowel?

“I thought it would be okay, it should’ve been okay, you always made it okay, why wasn’t it okay? You were so big all of a sudden! But we just went and made you want to die! For years! We’re terrible! And then the *dad stealer* showed up and the bad ninja snooped around and I thought I finally had a way to make you notice me, those squiggly things actually reacted to me, I didn’t mean to do it! I didn’t mean to make them fall on you, I’m so sorry daddy, please forgive meee!”

My dead wife had just pulled me into heaven despite the fact I was very much not dead. Hagoromo Ootsutsuki was ever so conspicuously floating with his eyes closed over yonder in the middle of the infinite white. His two sons were *also* waiting with him over yonder. And my dead daughter had just apologized for making me spend six years wanting to kill myself. And whatever the rest of that was.

What is even *happening* right now? “... Yui, honey, Daddy’s really sorry but he’s going to need you to go over that again, very slowly.”

Alas, my long-dead daughter completely lost her nerve and proceeded to wail snotfully in my make-believe dress shirt. Yes, snotfully. It’s the afterlife, I can make up entirely new words if I want to.

*This had better be happening at least a thousandth of a fraction of normal speed or I’m gonna... do something.*

I hugged my daughter tight and delighted in our reunion for... a subjective eternity, my neurons seemed to be firing at the speed of tectonic plates back in the living world.

*Good enough.*

I reached out blindly for where my wife stood. When she knelt next to me, I gathered her into my arms until Yui was wrapped up in both of ours. Then I just... held them both. I held them tight until my daughter's sobbing wails petered out. Then a bit more until my eyes dried too. "I miss you both."

That set my daughter off all over again.

I felt no shame in using that as an excuse to hold the both of them even longer. I raked my fingers through my daughter's hair and buried my nose in my wife's. Her scent was of the rain. How ever so appropriate.

It was a long time later that I finally started to have mind to spare for other things again. Like the three voyeurs over there. And the wave form patterns making up my mind and my memories, shaping in and out of my spirit, up and down through dimensions all the way to the living plane. Even those patterns moved so slowly, but that only made it possible to see them better. They looked like fractals and facets of a whole, made of prismatic spectrums flowing with sinuous arcs of lightning all throughout. Altogether, combined they looked like... me. A bright and rumped, me, but still me. I looked...

Actually, I looked kind of terrible.

*Fuck me, I have brittle spirit disease.*

Like brittle bone disease, but for the parts that my *soul* relied on to... exert Self-hood. Do anything. If the physical body was a flesh and bone mech that my brain piloted, and the mind and memory were what my soul used to pilot the brain itself, then the spirit was the underlying system interlinking all of them. The body of my will and *personality*. And the body of my will and personality was not in the best state at all. Like a sheet of paper that had been crumpled as tightly as possible for all my life. Now that I was finally unfolding back into my proper shape, I was at risk of bits of me shearing or tearing off at every crinkle. Some already had.

There were gaping rips running through me too. Ripped right out as if something had been pulled out of me. Two of them. Big ones. One very recent, and one about half a year old. The parts of me around the wounds were the thinnest. Threadbare.

*I'll fold to any Yin attack like wet paper, won't I? Wet paper, that's practically what I am.*

Thinned and crumpled paper breaking apart under its own freedom after being folded over and over into a progressively smaller ball for my entire life. Like a sketch of me as the Vitruvian

man, except someone had snatched it, folded it over and over around two hooks countless times over the course of my life, squeezed it *also* for my entire life, tore the hooks right out, then dropped me into a puddle of my own blood in a filthy ditch where I only now began to unfold back into my proper shape in the mud. With chunks missing. And more falling apart at the overstressed edges.

*If I try to exert any will, my spirit in any way, never mind Yin release, will part of my spirit just... permanently break off from the strain? Now that the chakra pathway system isn't pulling it all in one place anymore? It's already happening even without me doing anything.*

The chakra pathway system did this. The shinju implant did this to me. How like a parasite, to make the host body unable to endure after its removal.

My wife finally reached up to stroke my cheek sympathetically. “What our daughter is telling you, dear husband, is that she’s ever so sorry for completely ignoring me when I *tried* to take them along with me to the hereafter when the Kyuubi killed us. Also, she’s the reason your furniture almost killed you back when the Uzumaki boy broke into your house. Well, half the reason at least.”

What. “...Ume, my dear wife, if that’s really who you are.”

“I am.”

“You know how I’m, reasonably speaking, relatively intelligent.”

“I know that better than I ever did while I was alive, I’ll tell you that much, dear.”

Not for the first time, I contemplated how Yui and Kenzo had to have gotten it from somewhere, and it certainly wasn’t me. “That doesn’t mean I just know everything ex nihilo. I need context.”

My wife pulled away and rose. Waited for me to do the same.

I reluctantly complied, lifting Yui into my arms as I did. She clung to me hard and refused to let go. Good. I wasn’t ready to let go either.

“Death was sudden and confusing,” Ume told me, knitting her fingers with mine. “It took me a while to realize I’d perished, but our children didn’t realize it at all, even as they saw the world so very differently because of their sudden out of the body experience. That was when you had your past life awakening, and it came with a massive surge in your Yin energy, several

times over. It was bright and enthralling. In their dying dream, Kenzo and Yui thought you were casting some sort of protection technique. It didn't matter to them that you weren't a shinobi, they weren't thinking. They latched onto you, and you latched onto them right back in your moribund desperation."

While buried alive, the time in the darkness, the pain, the air loss, all of it had given me plenty of hallucinations. If not *all* of it was hallucinations, then I knew exactly what she was talking about. "So it *was* Yin bestowal gone wrong, just in the opposite direction. It was from me to them."

"Yes," my wife said sympathetically. "For six years."

Fuck my life.

"You gave and gave and gave them so much that they, like the selfish children they are, decided that meant they were entitled to it forever. Most of what your spirit draws from the ether has been going to them all this time."

So *this* is why I can't stand kids anymore, I've been forced to suffer a couple of the clingy brats every moment of my life since they died, fuck my life on repeat.

"I thought we were dreaming," Yui sniffled into my bosom. "It was weird. It's still weird. But it was so nice! It didn't even take that long, how were we supposed to know? I dreamed about being a giant talking duck once, for three hundred and fourteen years!" My daughter deflated and clung to my neck even tighter. "M'stupid, I shoulda known the difference."

Why that specific number?

"They wouldn't hear a word to the contrary," my wife said. "Not in the few days I was able to cling to the living world. After that, it was either pass on or become a sore on your spirit myself." She looked at me with self-deprecation. "There was no family Kami waiting to greet us, and I wasn't nearly enough to become one all on my own. It took years for our children to realize what they were doing to you in their selfishness. And it took you practically dying for *one* of them to let you breathe and come running to me in shame."

I rubbed my face, then looked at Ume in despair. "Wife. Why are both our children such complete morons?"

"Daddy!"

Yui, Kenzo, Naruto, even Shisui by association, all the brats in my life almost killed me, they got closer than Orochimaru and even Uchiha Obito, how in all the heavens and hells is this my life?

“I don’t know, husband,” Ume replied dolefully. “They don’t get it from me, and they certainly don’t get it from you.”

No shit they don’t, fuck my life on a never-ending loop

*At least I endured. I didn’t disappoint them completely.*

Wait, hold the door. “Kenzo only just now unhooked from me,” I said slowly. “Yui, honey... what did you mean about squiggly things?”

My daughter whimpered.

Ume huffed. “There *were* nin-who-must-not-be-named in your house before you finally caught the Third’s ear. From what was explained to me,” she side-eyed the trio keeping their distance. “They put some manner of seal on the wall, specifically made to be triggered later, remotely in case you needed to be disposed of deniably. It would have induced some manner of decay effect in the wall that would have made it easy to tip those shelves over, even through several walls and a street away.”

And crash the upper floor on my head too, I bet, if that wasn’t enough.

“Unfortunately, Yui became jealous of the Uzumaki child when you didn’t immediately throw him out of the house when you caught him breaking and entering. Since the seals actually reacted to her ghostly tantrum, a function of fuinjutsu’s partial Yin-based mechanics I’m told, she decided to throw as much as she could at it just to see what happens. And what happened was the seals activated while you were handing duct tape to the boy.”

“I wanted you do fidally nodice be,” Yui blubbered into my collarbone. “I didn’t bean do gill you, Daddy.”

“What was that?”

“The Pure World is abundant in ether,” Ume answered me. “The human spirit feeds and heals even idle here. Once it’s strong enough, a soul can venture down to the other realms, for however long our spirit has energy. After the shelves bashed you on the head, I appeared to her

and lied to her and her brother that it was lethal, and the only way for you to come back was if they let you go.”

“What?!” Yui hiccupped, twisted in my arms to glare at her mother accusingly. “You lied about that? Mom, how could you?!”

“Don’t give me that look, young lady, it was either that or watch you actually succeed in killing your father next time you had a tantrum.”

Yui shrunk in my arms.

“I’m only sorry that Kenzo didn’t also believe me. He believed I *meant* it, but he also believed I was wrong to ‘think dad could possibly be so weak’ in his own words.” Ume gave me a chagrined look. “He always believed in you over anything and anyone else. Even when it was plain to see that the longer he stuck to you like a leech, the more you went on without getting better.”

*So it was either become a liar in Heaven, or watch them be even more traumatised when they finally drove me to suicide.* I appreciated my wife not outright saying so, though. I also liked to think I was strong enough not to give up like that too, despite... living for three? Surely I couldn’t complain *that* hard, when there are people who strive and provide for families in the double digits. My situation was just... a bit more literal. Magically speaking.

*Yeah, I can’t picture myself saying that with a straight face either.*

Could I, perhaps, be the best dad ever?

Then again. “How did I not get the slightest hint about this? I had to have dreamed too, sometimes.”

“They ate up all the energy you’d have used for that,” Ume shrugged her dainty shoulders. “Dreams are the mind wandering around, but it takes Yin energy for the spirit to stretch after it, never mind feed it. The moment your sleeping mind drifted where they were, all the Yin energy went out of it too and your mind slipped into numb torpor. Every night of insomnia, every dreamless sleep, every morning when you woke up feeling just as mentally burned out as the night before, it all came from the same place.”

Good God.

Well.

Wasn't that something?

It was at that point that a voice other than ours intruded upon our heavenly reunion.

“Even the deepest well will dry up if enough mouths drink from it unceasingly.”

“Hagoromo Ootsutsuki.” The Sage of the Six Paths. He was talking to me. I turned so Yui was on the other side of me from the horned man and his two non-horned offspring that had finally approached. “Sage. And sons. Hello.”

“Hey now, no need to hide the little one from us,” Asura said brightly. “After all, we’ve been around for quite some time. If we wanted to do something to her, we could easily have before this.”

I gazed evenly at the man. “And you can just as easily do good and ill after this, I’m sure, depending on how much I irritate you.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry,” the man said as guilelessly as I’d expect from Naruto. “It takes a *lot* to actually annoy us.” Asura glanced at Indra, who was standing aside from him and his father with his arms crossed, looking at me like I wasn’t worth all this attention. “Well, most of us – but don’t worry! I’ll protect you from the mean ol’ grump over there!”

If this were a story, this is where I’d find out the ever so grand – or petty – circumstances that led to my reincarnation and remembering my past life in this heretofore fictional world. Now that the moment had finally come, though, I just wasn’t interested. And it wasn’t just because I was all out of fucks to give about grand revelations. The reason was a lot simpler. “Unverifiable information.”

Asura blinked. “Eh?”

“Unverifiable information,” I handed my daughter off to my wife.

Yui squirmed until she was put down, though, and hid behind me. She grabbed onto my shirt while peeking around to look.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t pretend you’re all shy and scared now, girl, I saw where you came running to me from.”

“Daddy!”

“Brat.” I ruffled her hair, but she didn’t pull away so I left my hand on her head. I looked to Asura. “As I was saying, I don’t know you any more than I know your brother. For all I know, he’s a great guy.”

Asura’s smile disappeared as his eyebrows rose. “I suppose I should have seen that coming, seeing as it’s you. I admit, I’m still on the fence about what you truly aim to do with those writings and drawings.”

“We all know where all written history comes from.” When the victors have to censor and reframe events, it doesn’t necessarily mean the good guys lost, but only because there probably weren’t any good guys involved at all, at least by the end. “Also, he’s up here in the Pure Land instead of down in Yomi or whatever.” In other words, Indra couldn’t have been all that bad in life if he reincarnated upwards. Or did he reincarnate as a man a few more times before he finally got it? Also, unless the other two were projecting down here in ‘Heaven’ from one of the four upper realms of enlightenment, they probably hadn’t made much more progress either, in terms of, well, enlightenment.

I frowned and looked at Indra. “If you’re here under duress, I had nothing to do with it and presume no claim on your time.” No reply. Not even a flicker on his face. I looked between Asura and the Sage. “You two didn’t browbeat him into being here, did you? He clearly isn’t interested in... whatever you’re here for. What are you here for anyway?”

“We’re just here to witness.” Asura said blithely. “You are not the first to go through what’s about to happen, but you *are* the first to do the physical part to yourself instead of someone else doing it for you. Well, mostly.”

“And what, exactly, is about to happen?”

“You cannot go back as you are,” the Sage himself told me this time. “You understand that, don’t you?”

I was afraid of that. My spiritual body was so torn and fractured that I already wasn’t sure it could fulfil its half of the Yin-Yang cycle. If the Sage of Six Paths was telling me I was right, I was right. “My spirit’s going to fall apart, isn’t it?” It already was, even in maximum slow motion.

“Heaven is a calm place,” said the Sage. “The human realm is not, to say nothing of the others”



A trail of smoke could be used to sketch the most complex figures and images in the absence of wind, but the slightest breeze will destroy it. The living world was quite a bit more dynamic than a breeze, and a body needed more than faint wisps and vapors to breathe properly. Even metaphorically.

I had a broken spirit. Literally and figuratively.

*This is why I'm feeling this big hunk of nothing too, isn't it?* I was in literal Heaven, I'd just been reunited with my dead family and was breathing literal soma, nectar, ambrosia, whatever you wanted to call it, with every breath taken and word said. Forget my little emotional lapse in the hug just now, I should still be astonished and *elated* by my present circumstances, not... whatever this is. *I'll freely admit I'm the grumpy sort, but this is ridiculous.*

Meanwhile, my wife was capable of puling me into the afterlife without me even realising it until she spoke to me. The three shapers of history were all here to watch whatever was about to unfold. All peppered with ever so casual mentions of whatever 'this' is having happened before. Once.

I looked at the three debatably pure ones. "What have you three been putting in my wife's head?"

"I'm sure you've figured it out by now," Asura said blithely.

"Oh, I have an idea."

There was a myth back on Earth about Zeus eating his wife Metis. The most popular classical myth said it was about preventing the birth of the children that would have dethroned him, but older traditions treated it as an allegory for Zeus acquiring the royal wisdom required to be a successful and worthy king. Metis literally meant wisdom, skill and craft. Her personification as one of the Oceanids was only a religious-political element to symbolize the inheritance of authority from the prior generation of rulers (the titans) to the new generation of gods.

Then, too, I was more fond of the myth of Heracles' death and ascension, where he becomes a god after he burns on the pyre and 'marries' Hebe, the goddess of youth. The goddess responsible for keeping even the gods themselves eternally young, because yes, the Greek gods *did* age and die like the Norse ones without certain... sustenance. I had certain suspicions about Eris' 'golden apple' as well.

The myths that survived to our time were just the revisionist propaganda that vastly post-dated the *actual* truth that was only shared by the Mystery Schools of Heroic times. If you treated the myth as allegorical, as all myths were intended, then Hebe was just an allegory for the inexhaustible life force that Heracles gained after he ascended to a higher state of being.

I crossed my arms and looked at my wife. If, hypothetically, I allowed for the possibility that the myth could be both allegorical and literal at the same time... “Yin bestowal.” It always came back to Yin bestowal, but this couldn’t be the same thing as for the Mangekyou Sharingan or Susanoo or whatever. “Except *my* Yin can’t sustain itself, never mind an extra graft. It’s not about Yin *energy* at all, is it? The Shinju cannibalizes the spirit to generate it, but that goes against nature. The spirit is a body, not an energy pool.” My wife was only ever roundabout when she was building up to something I wasn’t going to like. “Ume, you... It’s an all or nothing deal, isn’t it?”

Yui looked at me sadly, but resolved. “It’s the only way, husband.”

My spirit won’t amount to jack shit in a few real world minutes, she couldn’t plan to merely infuse it, so what did that leave? There wasn’t even enough to stitch together, there were no shreds dense enough for that. She...

I...

I raised up my hand and reached out. My wife reached back and twined her fingers with mine. When I initiated... not ninshu, but maybe what ninshu imitated? My spirit shook all at once, slightly, barely a vibration, but more than enough to start a cascading breakdown effect in its current sorry state.

Still, all at once was still slower than the speed of time here in Heaven, so it lasted me long enough for my wife’s plan to become clear.

She planned to *replace* my entire spiritual body with all of hers. Sacrifice it to then... graft it onto the rest of me in place of *my* failed spirit, and grow anew into... me. What I *should* be. All her potential, realize and unrealized, would become *mine* in place of the one the Shinju parasite ruined as its final act.

In return, the ‘worst’ that will happen is that she’ll get a fresh start in cycle of reincarnation. Which was a nice way of saying she’ll die, except in Heaven this time. As a *spirit*. Lose all her will and current identity.

The Yin, the spiritual body, it was a lot of things, but more than anything it was accumulated *experience*. If she gave that up... wouldn't it be like starting from scratch? She'll be like a new soul added to the cycle of life and death. How was she so at peace with it? Would she even start as a human this time? Would she last long enough to be born at all, for that matter? Contrary to what many religions claimed, souls weren't immortal. If Buddhism continued to hold true, then the eternal fire, the empyreal motive force of self-determination may or may not be eternal, but identity *wasn't*.

I pulled out of the connection.

Ume did not let go of my hand, looking at me peaceably. "You've sacrificed so much for so long, husband. Let me have my turn for once."

Since when was it routine? For that matter, since when was it a competition?

I looked at Asura, making very sure I kept my true thoughts to myself. "I'm not the *first*, you said."

"You walk the same path as the Uzumaki themselves, if from the opposite direction," Asura told me. "Where you walked it for yourself, the Uzumaki *created* this path for another. They didn't shy away from trying to walk it themselves, later, but it does not change the fact that they put all their grandest hopes and effort into someone else at first. You've already divined the identity of your forerunner."

"Senju Hashirama."

"Yes," Asura nodded proudly. "My greatest legacy."

Exhaust all chakra to induce a death-like state, use sealing to maintain that state, use sealing to induce senriki instead of senjutsu in controlled conditions, repeat regularly, for longer periods each time until the sage-like state – the *chakra-independent* sage-like state – is inculcated into the cells themselves in the shape of dual-layer plasma structures. The inexhaustible nature energy in the cells would empower the body independent of chakra techniques, *and* also be used to generate chakra indefinitely. Sage power is essentially a power tap into the spiritual and dual-plasma body of the world itself.

That's how I theorised the Uzumaki did it – that's how *I* would have done it.

There was just one problem. "That would have led to an excess of Yang energy. And even if that didn't backfire somehow, it was still more power than a shinobi could use."

“Unless he attained a commensurate mass of Yin to assert his will,” Asura nodded, pleased to see me following along. “Yin to conjure the grandest and loftiest dreams of imagination and *convey* them onwards, unto the world.”

“Yin to conceptualise,” I said, putting together the last of the puzzle pieces from my own theories and research. “Yin Release to use spiritual energy to control imagination, creating form out of nothingness. And Yang to give life to any dream and make it *real*, using physical energy to control vitality and give substance where it is lacking, granting life and structure to forms that have none.”

“You got it,” Asura clapped. Literally applauded. “As expected of you, Masanari-san!”

The Uzumaki weren't aiming for any mere power boost, they were trying to reverse-engineer the Creation of All Things.

But Hashirama... he *didn't* achieve it. He didn't even achieve Yin-Yang release, he 'settled' for ninshu with plants. Scaled nigh-infinitely thanks to unlimited chakra derived from sage power, and the vast awareness from the same, but still just a consolation prize. Senju Hashirama...

He was a *failed* experiment?

Unbelievable.

*Or at least an unfinished one, maybe.*

More than that... while wood release was not all that amazing by itself, the scale *was*. For Hashirama to achieve it would have still taken a supreme amount of spiritual power, to go with the infinite Yang energy drawn from natural energy. “He couldn't have had the Yin for it, if his situation was in any way a mirror of mine.”

“There are feats of might that cannot be attained without Yin grown mighty and vast from an age here in heaven,” Asura took a deep breath of the ether making up the white expanse we stood within. “You cannot conceive of the exaltation that has been prepared for you, Masanari-san. You may be questioning your wife's commitment now, but once you get even a taste of the boon she has prepared for you, you will never question its worth again.”

*It's not her commitment or its worth I'm questioning.* “Who was it?”

“Hmm?”

“For Hashirama,” I pressed. “Who made this sacrifice for him?”

Asura’s smile turned soft. Proud, even. “Kawarama Senju.”

I needed more than a moment to process the sheer audacity of that answer. I needed even longer to not explode at the *fatherly pride*. “Kawarama Senju.” I prevented my hands from following through on their semi-autonomous impulse to throttle the nearest neck. “The little boy that died because his father decided he was old enough to be killed in bloody warfare before his age even hit double digits.”

“I agree with your misgivings completely,” Asura told me, only to prove in the same breath that he had not perceived my *real* misgivings. “But for all that, his harsh life and even harsher death did nothing to impede his youthful idealism, nor his love for his brother.”

“... He-but-he wasn’t even ten. Was he?”

“Nine,” Asura said with that same vicarious pride. “It just goes to show that all evil is turned to the purpose of good eventually. Kawarama was young when he died, but that only worked to the better. All that unrealized potential readily becomes reality in the Pure World, here.”

“And Hashirama agreed to it?”

“What resolve can there be, in the face of youthful innocence and hope for the future such as that? How could a man spurn his infant sibling’s gift of new life so freely given?”

*Is this why Hashirama acted so bipolar and childish in his Hokage years?*

More importantly, what sort of person makes that a rhetorical question? “Youth is a real resource around here, then?”

“The power of youth mixed with enthusiasm and idealistic hope that only a younger brother can bring forth when star-struck by his big brother’s dream, Hashirama could have asked for no better soil for his spirit to sprout anew.” Asura looked at me with that same guilelessness that had driven him through this entire conversation. “A loving wife is not on the same level as the boundless energy and raw potential of childhood still unwritten, but all the same... I envy you for what you’re about to experience.”

Asura Ootsutsuki envied me. For reasons. *Those* reasons.

“I won’t be able to muster that sort of miracle,” my wife told me, just as oblivious to my inner turmoil as the Sage’s favorite son. “I spent so much of myself in life... But it will be enough to see you through to heights you never fathomed, husband, I promise you.”

“You are being gifted with power enough to change the world,” the Sage rumbled, his ringed staff clinking softly as he laid it flat over his lap. “I pray you will not take this boon lightly, in the days to come.”

*I’ve already changed the world.*

Heaven was just full of assumptions about power overwhelming and foregone conclusions, wasn’t it?

The most earth-shattering part was that I could actually see how it might work. The last scraps of Yin energy from the dying was enough to evolve a sharingan eye into the Mangekyou Sharingan. What heights of might could an *entire* second Yin body lift you to? The younger the better too, apparently. The Power of Youth was not an empty phrase in the least, it seemed, Maito Gai was channelling something altogether real and amazing.

*The spirit is a body, but it’s also extremely malleable.*

Just being in heaven made you realize a lot of things about spirit, and not just the fact that it wasn’t the same thing as the soul. You. The Yin reflected the physical self more than the reverse in all ways that mattered. It was both the propagator and the function of your experience and Self-Concept. Some impression of you would always linger, but if you gave your spirit to someone else, the structure would shift to accommodate the recipient, and everything that *didn’t* fit would just... alchemise into the purest, densest Yin energy. Which the Self can then use to sprout and grow in its own ways, the best ways. Even if that means feeding the Yang energy itself until it catches up to match the Yin half of the cycle, in quantity and quality alike.

*The power of ages-old wisdom is no empty boast either.*

This was how the Sage empowered Naruto and Sasuke, wasn’t it? He untangled their spiritual bodies on the spot, then wove his power boons through the rips and cracks until they attained some manner of metastability. Did he do it all spontaneously using Creation of All Things? Or does the Sage spend his afterlife preparing gifts like that in advance? Could he be working on those very same boons of power even now?

*It was **only** metastability though, with Naruto and Sasuke, not true stability. Otherwise the power boons wouldn't have decayed over time, like the imperfect kaleidoscope eyes.*

This lot really planned this out, didn't they? They chose their words most carefully to make sure my misgivings were as easy to brush aside as possible. I even believed them. I completely believed they were wholly genuine and acting in my best interests.

There was, however, one problem.

None of them even touched on the most important matter. All of them avoided, and distracted me very skilfully, from the issue of whether or not this would give me what I need to save my idiot son.

Who was currently undergoing the same spiritual self-destruction that my wife was offering to put herself through.

"I should be the one doing it," Yui's mumbling ripped me out of my paradigm-shifting epiphany.

"Not a chance in hell." My words belatedly caught up with the many thoughts I was straining to keep off my face. "Heaven either."

"Relax, husband, she doesn't have anything to give anyway." Like everyone else, my wife failed to grasp just how much I was saying 'no' to. "She and her brother spent everything they had on themselves, all those years they wasted selfishly attached to you like leeches. That's why you remained so depressed for so long – your spirit did grow stronger despite the strain of their burden, but they gradually became bigger and heavier burdens too, as their own spirits waned and they needed energy from elsewhere."

*So it only takes a little Yin to maintain continuity of self, **very** good to know.*

Yui whined. "Mom's gotten so much meaner since we died."

*Well, if we're going to devolve into trivialities anyway...* "Lord Sage," I said. "Do you know how I came to be in this world?"

"The same way all other souls that are not born to it, I'd imagine." Hagoromo Ootsutsuki wasn't being facetious at all.

When the world was associative instead of causal, lies were easy to see though, if you cared enough to pay attention. Neither the Sage nor his son realized how completely I disagreed with

my wife's – and their – grand plan for me, but... That could speak more to their restraint and discretion than anything. This consideration for my privacy and autonomy was why I didn't have it in me to be upset with them.

Yet.

Barely. "Could you elaborate?"

"Even I cannot see the origin of all things," the Sage calmly admitted. "The Wheel of Samsara extends well beyond this lone world, the soul streams come and go as they will. It is plain to see that you have tapped into your past life experience, and that it is particularly world-shaking. But that comes from my own observation and reflection on your interactions, not some ineffable insight. As you yourself have deduced by now..." The Sage smiled wryly. "Heaven is below the realms of enlightenment for a reason."

Which didn't exclude him having reached one or all of them, and was only down here by choice right now. But I found that I didn't care enough to ask. "Do those interactions include the one with Kurama?"

"Indeed so." The man beheld me kindly. "As worried as I am about the implications that you saw some shape of the future, the changes you've wrought on the world have already rendered it null and void. I am more thankful for the kindness and respect that you showed him."

"You're welcome." It felt strange to say that, when it meant the Sage *also* knew my less than flattering opinions about his judgment calls. But I wasn't in the right mindset to bring that up right now either. Not after what I just heard. Not while my other child is dying – again – all the way back down in the human world. And worse.

I pondered my options, then I decided to just throw it out there, because otherwise I'd just spend my whole life wondering. "Are you at all interested in a debate about ideology?"

"Not particularly, no."

Huh. "What about philosophy?"

"That I *am* interested in." That – that was a compliment, right? Not a warning. Or threat. "But my own desires do not take precedence over your current crisis. I am perfectly content to wait. And if no future opportunity arises again, I am also content to let reality provide what answers it will, to whichever questions of mine still matter."



Beside his father, Asura huffed. Not Indra though, interestingly.

“Huh.” Imagine that. “Well, that puts you two points above Sarutobi Hiruzen, so thanks for that. You’re an alright guy.”

Hagoromo chuckled. “Thank you.”

*And now to rudely spurn all of Heaven’s grace.*

I dropped down from Heaven and returned to my body, no by your leave no nothing. My spirit began to break apart immediately, even as I accelerated my cerebral sense of time to the maximum subjective time dilation I could attain. Just the languid flow of the world’s own forces and energy were enough to send pieces and chunks sloughing off of me, into the earth and the stones around me, and the planes and dimensions around and below.

Not upwards though. My spirit was like a ghostly tree made of filaments thinner than spider webs, and it was collapsing. Pretty soon it would be coming apart, violently and down.

Oh well, even though I’d lost the advantage of almost unlimited time, I could still think fast enough to stay ahead of the breakdown of my personality, for a while.

*First thing first – maximise assets.*

Anaerobic and lightless environment is lethal to present biological configuration, deploy autotrophic phenotypes to derive sustenance and energy from own biomass. Even if my spirit and my mind shut down, my body would now last for quite a while. Certainly much longer than the seventeen minutes I had before Kenzo’s bizarre dragon form began to take a toll *he* won’t afford. No more than I could afford mine.

*To die because I lost my will to live, what a ridiculous way to go.*

What would happen if I lost enough spirit? Yin energy? Depression again? Narcolepsy? Spiritual malaria? Catatonia? Fifteen years in a coma until I pricked my finger on a spindle tip?

*Perhaps I should also do something about the rapidly growing Yin-Yang imbalance.*

Hashirama cells tended to erupt into random plant life when people like Danzo lost enough chakra that they couldn’t keep them under control anymore. The ignorant might expect my cells to go haywire too, without enough of me there.

But no, I wasn’t worried. I had something no one else had – the most devoted little spirit children.

*I need your help, little ones.* I looked at the mess my spirit had become. Everyone else saw a tragedy. I saw opportunity. *For Science.*

For the first time in my life – and death, now – I actually felt and *saw* the chunk of Yin shedding from me at the thought. But before it could be lost, the Yin was absorbed by the Anami remnants. The next thing I knew, a fair multitude of the plasma cells spit into twins. All those twins then merged together into one, single entity that grew and overlapped all the others around it while still staying distinct. The new life form then stretched down and up from the centre of my spine, through my nervous system all the way into my brain.

Yemo may no longer be with me, but his role wasn't vacant anymore.

*Is that what happened before as well?* I wondered, thunderstruck. *Did the Yin that birthed Yemo come from me, or from Kenzo?*

“Hanzo!”

My wife's voice reached me across the dimensions. Even that much was enough to send ripples across my spirit, accelerating the breakdown, but for now I could still see and interact with the other realms.

“Husband!” Ume was all haste and soul-stricken dismay as she appeared in the darkness above of me. She descended from Heaven through the packed earth and stone to the depths I'd been dragged down to. She barely stopped short of barrelling into me and making the damage even worse. “What are you doing? Why did you leave? Are you *trying* to kill yourself? How – how do you still live?”

*Either the three didn't tell her just what my little spirits can do, or they don't know the full extent of their capabilities either.*

“Husband, please, what are you doing to yourself?”

*Recreating the Impure World Reincarnation Technique from first principles.*

Seeing as how she was here anyway, though, that gave me an idea.

~*Wife*~ I couldn't speak when pressed from all sides and with my mouth full of packed earth, but I reached out with ninshu just to see if it worked. It did, though mostly thanks to her. It widened the tears and cracks in my Yin body dramatically, but it worked. ~ *Rather than*

*committing ultimate suicide, can you give me another hug instead? Hold me together? Just for a little while.~*

“Hanzo you-“ she cut herself off. “I’ll try.”

She vanished. Stretched, practically extended up and wide through the fabric of reality like only spirits could. It was like a hug, but wrapped around and diffused *through* my spirit, somehow.

*Hopefully I won’t put too much strain on her.*

No more than what I was about to do, at least.

Her rapid compliance revealed its underlying duplicity when I felt her try and do what she said she would earlier, despite my wishes.

*Yeah, no.*

I flatly refused to accept anything she bestowed.

*Sorry, wife, but Kintsugi just isn’t good enough.*

Just because it works on a broken plate doesn’t mean it can work on people.

More importantly.

*~Our vows were only until death, woman, there is no binding or debt here. I can understand not moving on for our children’s sake, but this? No.~*

Faced with her grandest sacrifice going to utter waste, she resigned herself to doing as I asked. If she was infusing what she could anyway, in the major cracks where my will no longer held any sway anymore, I had neither the awareness nor the will to argue about it.

*My spirit is failing, so my body will just have to make up the difference.*

And if even that proved not enough...

*I’m fine putting my faith in my tiny creations.*

A subtle but heartfelt response came through my intuition, and I was, for the first time ever, both willing and able to take it for what it was.

*Not projection.*

*I love you too, little ones. Now let’s all of us do our best.*

Create record of neural configuration, store DNA backup archive for later retrieval. Create dynamic record of neural chemical bonds, 2%, 11%, 23%, 47%, 79%, 97%, 100%, store DNA backup archive for later retrieval. Create dynamic record of synaptic activity, 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 13, 19, 29, short-term memory cycle discerned at 31 objective seconds, store template as DNA backup archive for later retrieval. Create dynamic record of the wave-form patterns in the fine-fibered dendritic web, 1 minute, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, maximum length of continuous holonomic cycle discerned at 31 *subjective* minutes before self-actualisation, create DNA backup archive for later retrieval.

Create secondary backups, repeat, repeat, repeat, insulate archives, seal for long-term storage, thread carbon-nanotubes as intracellular reinforcement, enclose archives in bone tissue sheathe, integrate calcium in bone structure with carbide silicates, process complete.

Define custom Yin resonance footprint, record pattern 2%, 23%, 97%, 100% complete. Assign pattern as personal identifier, set pattern as trigger for primary backup retrieval. Set failure of primary backup retrieval as condition for ancillary backup retrieval in case primary backup is corrupted or lost.

*And that's about as much effort as I can put into contingencies when things are so time sensitive.*

Calculate time differences between physical and heavenly planes. Estimate heavenly time frame until beginning of physical decay – three hundred and fifty-nine subjective years. Estimate heavenly time frame to irreversible spiritual breakdown and loss of continuity of self – three hundred and sixty subjective hours.

*That's the bold part of science done.*

Now for the courageous part.

*I'll be back soon. Wait for me, little ones. Live.*

Without another thought, I died.

Which is to say, I abandoned my Yang body completely and climbed my collapsing Yin body upwards, like Jack climbing the beanstalk from down in the human realm all the way back to Heaven.

*How like a plant to always be seeking the highest reaches, I thought sardonically as I felt less and less buoyant with each moment. How like a tree.*

I made it to the top of the metaphorical abyss with more time to spare than I expected, my wife having buttressed my collapsing spiritual structure and then some. When I finally clawed my way over the metaphorical edge, I didn't even bother climbing to my feet.

I just stretched flat on my back on the make-believe not-ground, a tired soul breathing in the life-giving ether that was responsible for the unlimited energy pool of the ascended dead. And ninja zombies.

I breathed in, and breathed out, and in, and out. I breathed and breathed the spiritual matter, feeling myself heal, relax, and finally begin to rebuild my energy and force of will. Until, finally, after 96 cycles of that spontaneous meditation, I felt a new Yin root begin to sprout from deep inside my soul.

Like everyone else, I, too, still had plenty of untapped potential.

*Heaven... it works like a dream.*

“You chose death!” Asura shouted, outraged and shocked and *sad*, all but storming forward to stand over me.

For one, long moment, I seriously considered fucking off.

“Your ego is as large as my brother's!” But his anger dispersed as soon as it came and Asura sunk to his knees at my side, looking dismal. “To be offered the purest self-sacrifice, would you truly choose to spit in the face of those who would carry you on?”

I should be able to keep to myself if I want to, regardless of anyone else's thoughts on the matter. That's why it's Heaven – you can make it whatever you want most. I should be able to think myself to someplace beyond the access of anyone else. Maybe cocoon myself inside a personal bubble of infinity for good measure, to get some peace and quiet. What Minato and Kushina did to talk with Naruto without Kurama there, but better.

That's how reincarnating upwards works, doesn't it? Buddhism, anyway. Some schools of it. People make entire realms to rule over as gods. Up until they deplete all their power and reincarnate downwards again, because they didn't advance themselves. But in the meantime, even the Sage himself couldn't just barge in uninvited, right?

“Why would you do this?” Asura had never been anything but stubborn. “Why choose to die when you could've –“

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who let a snot-nosed brat do that to himself.”

“That – no, your attempts to provoke me are wasted. You are not one to look down on the selflessness of others, so why?”

Because I couldn’t speak for Kawarama and Hashirama’s situation, but I could speak for my own situation. And my situation was that I still remember being Irish. I celebrated *death*, not *waste*. “It’s completely unnecessary, that’s why.”

Asura opened his mouth, then closed it and looked away, eyes going distant. Then the same eyes went wide and he vanished from my sight altogether. He appeared next to his father again a few moments later, and the look he gave me was completely amazed, which was not something I’d expected all the way up here. I took that to mean my body was, indeed, still alive despite everything.

*Good boys.*

Asura stared at me, then turned to his brother and opened his mouth to...

But he closed it and turned away again, giving me one last, intense glance before disappearing again.

Indra scoffed and pointed did not look in his brother’s wake *or* mine as he vanished as well.

*The feud continues, does it?*

Just how much did these people know? What *didn’t* they know? The Sage and his sons, shouldn’t *they* at least see clearer and deeper than anyone else? They’d earned their way up here, didn’t they?

Then again, Heaven was still *below* the four realms of enlightenment. This Heaven, anyway.

*Puzzling out the limits of non-omniscience would make for a great long-term project, if I planned to stay here.*

“I apologise for them,” the Sage sighed, because he was here too. Still. “Karma and character growth are not consistently entwined.”

I still wanted to disappear into my own bubble. For all I knew, this white place *was* such a world bubble. Maybe my wife’s even, though I couldn’t imagine she’d countenance behaviour like this if she were the host – ah, there she goes. Well. Since Ume had just fiercely interposed

herself between me and the Sage himself, I decided not to bother and just laid there, making the best of my three hundred and sixty hours.

My soul healed. My spirit formed anew, young, undefined and formless. Not strong, nowhere near as strong as I felt even in the worst of my depression, but stout. Resilient. *Sated*. Ready to grow stalwart, far and wide unto many years hence.

I wasn't mighty right now, but for the first time I felt confident that I *could* be. One day.

I pushed myself off the ground until I was sitting up. I looked at my family and opened my arms. Yui broke free of her mother and ran at to me again. Ume hung some way back, looking at me with conflict on her face, but she came over too when I held my other arm for her. Soon we were embracing like we had before. "Hope you don't hold my harsh words against me, from earlier." I murmured. "I don't consider myself any less your husband either, despite death doing us part and then some."

Our feelings communicated clearly through spiritual communion. Both of us reaffirmed our commitment. All the while, our daughter basked in it. The only thing missing was my idiot son.

*Time to be a proper father again.*

I broke the hug. Waited for my daughter to pull back with her mother.

Then I gathered myself, gave my small seed of Yin all the power I'd absorbed this whole time, and bid it to sprout forth straight and strong.

Downwards.

*In asymmetrical warfare, the side that wins is the one that reverse-engineer things best.*

Instead of wide, I built deep. My new Yin was young, but whole and healthy. Strong. Strong and primed to feed and grow on whatever nourishment was offered. And the nourishment I offered was the infinite energy of Heaven, along with every chunk and scrap of my *previous* spiritual body that was in its path and still hadn't dissolved.

Perhaps in the future I'd be able to grow further – and wider – but it was not this day. Right now I was barely enough to drop a knitted rope from one realm to the next, never mind six of them like the Shinju root over yonder that gave me the idea to begin with.

But barely enough was still enough.

I rode my makeshift rope ladder all the way down to the living world and overlapped my own body again. It was like returning from a lucid dream, just in the nick of time.

Or, at least, that had been the plan.

Just as I was about to reach it, Indra Ootsutsuki appeared in a blur and flash to block my path.

*Shit.*

“Unlike my brother and my father, I *am* determined to interrogate you and your philosophies.” Indra’s presence surrounded mine, vast and ominous. “However, I also value brevity so I am willing to accept it in turn. What is your judgment of my father’s actions?”

Indra had enveloped me like my wife had done before, but stopped short of outright communion. Was it hesitation? Courtesy? I couldn’t tell if he was buttressing my little rope ladder from Heaven to Earth, or preparing to cut it.

*Oh well*, I thought fatalistically. *It’s not like I can do much if he chooses violence. As usual.*

Thankfully for my rejuvenated fatalism, I’d long since made my mind about that. “Hagoromo Ootsutsuki wanted us to adopt his world views and change our entire nature to fit his notion of an ideal world. We were never consulted on whether or not we agreed to be spliced with an alien organism. And even if he *had* succeeded through the Shinju implant to change the fundamentals of human nature – which he didn’t – it never would have worked anyway. He came to mankind as a liberator, but treated us like a conqueror. No peace can ever emerge from doublethink, certainly no joy, and utopia is fundamentally impossible anyway.”

“What of my brother?”

Not even the slightest time taken to process my words, did he really care what I thought? “He’s the quintessential hyperenergetic extrovert, but charisma is never enough on its own either. A lot of people don’t want to play to any tune but their own. Also, some people are just plain crazy or evil. A hive mind is horrifying enough, but a hive mind shared with the unfiltered thoughts and urges of monsters is poison.”

“On that, at least, we agree,” Indra nodded calmly. “What of me, then?”

I hesitated. “If you want an answer to your family feud, it’s the same one I’d give your father – do your thing and leave everyone else alone.”

“That is not what I asked.”



*No, it wasn't.* “Ninjutsu, ninshu, none of them are the problem. The problem is that morons with too much power keep trying to convince everyone else that unity and self-determination are mutually exclusive. It's false duality nonsense. The solution to your disagreement is that it was never going to be resolved. You should have left Asura and his followers to do their own thing, Asura should have let you and your followers do your own thing, and your father should never have decided that only one of those choices was valid.”

“Also true,” Indra nodded tolerantly. “But that is not what I asked either.”

*Shit, all my distractions failed.*

Oh well.

*Those who are offended by the truth cannot do anything but lie.*

I'd yet to hear a single lie.

“You were fine up until you went off trying to impose your individualistic philosophy on others. Instead of embodying the philosophy of self-reliance like you had been before, you adopted the philosophy of hypocrisy and proceeded to dance to Black Zetsu's tune like a little bitch.”

Our Ninshu almost fell apart.

“Pffhahahahahah!” Indra laughed. Not madly or menacingly. Heartily. Like someone who'd just heard the most hilarious and validating thing in the world. “Oh, on that we also agree! My thanks for annihilating the wretch. I thought I'd feel cheated for not getting the chance to throw *my* answer in his face. But then...” The spirit smiled contemptuously. “We both know what he would have said about the hopes and dreams of mortals and mongrels.”

Well... good to know he was so self-aware?

“Your earnestness is appreciated. In recompense, allow me to bestow upon you the second great disappointment of your chosen vocation.” Indra held up his hand. Glowing filaments of iridescent shades sprout into sight in his palm, weaving together in the glimmering shape of a tree. “You are not the first to seek insight into the Shinju's nature and essence either.”

I stared at the sight, utterly stunned.

Indra didn't withdraw his hand.

I held out mine.

Ninshu conveyed to me the full code of the Shinju's genetics, every bit as alien and counterintuitive as I expected it to be, but completely legible.

“Faith, bejaysus and begorrah!”

“Quite.”

It was also every bit as inimical to human biology as I'd theorised, but that was fine. The whole point of cracking the code was so I could *change it*. He – this – all those theoretical techniques I'd thought up, I... I could –

“You would have figured it out by yourself eventually,” Indra idly said while ninshu *also* delivered to me the full scope of his insight as the one who invented ninjutsu from first principles. “I'm just saving you the tedium. I know you humans in the lower realms still care about such paltry things as the passage of time.”

My... *everything* stalled under the sheer breadth of the knowledge being gifted – so *that's* how you mess with inertia, finally! – but I still didn't run out of words.

Somehow. “It's not *all* paltry things.”

“Oh, I know.” Indra smirked at me as he began to fade. “I'm still burdened with fondness for a few of them myself. Civilization, poetry, creativity.”

“Warmth,” I said pointedly. “Friendship, family.”

“...Faith,” he replied just as pointedly. “Legacy. Inherited will.”

“Modesty.”

“Good humour.”

“The pursuit of happiness.”

We looked at each other. Ninshu still bound us.

““And leave everyone else the fuck alone even if they make you the fucking king.””

Indra vanished, but not his mirthful laughter from my ears.

And so it was that the first thing the Anami spirits experienced upon my return to life was euphoria.

*Indra, you drama queen, will you one day ascend beyond this world and become my old Earth's Father Sky?*

Restart biological function, retrieve cognitive backups, assess viability archives, no corruption detected in primaries, deploy, unpack, initialize.

Align cognitive processes from stored records with wave-form patterns of new Yin body, 2%, 13%, 23%, 43, 73%, 100%, reorganize neural chemical bonds to match backup configuration, adjust synaptic activity to match record, match neural quantum wave-form form patterns to backup dynamic record, match new Yin wave-form patterns to cerebral patterns, overlap, entwine, integrate physical self with para-physical elements, mind reintegrated, memory reintegrated, new Yin body successfully rewoven into fine-fibered dendritic web.

Re-initialize Yang generation, match Yang generation to Yin capacity, establish new Yin-Yang cycle, 2%, 13%, 23%, 43, 73%, 100%, body repossession completed successfully.

Assess individual systems and apparatuses, biomass capacity nominal, energy efficiency optimal, energy generation minimal – autotrophic function barely sufficient for continued survival, further biological activity requires blood oxygenation. Assess brain function 13%, 23%, 43%, 73%, 100%, brain function sufficient for consciousness, all partitions present and practicable, general function sufficient for only a further four minutes and three seconds of *continuity* of consciousness under current environmental conditions.

Return to native environment urgently needed, sourcing additional biomass strongly recommended, explore options, approach identified.

Reassess homeostasis, adjust all systems for enhanced cellular function, create new chakra system based on newly acquired template, progress 3%, 13%, 23%, 43%, 73%, 100% complete, connect chakra pathway system to all individual cells, initialize chakra generation, integrate new chakra pathway system with Yin body, evaluate Yin-Yang cycle, suspend, adjust, re-initialize.

Integrate ninshu functionality into new chakra apparatus, 1%, 3%, 7%, 13%, 23%, 43%, 73%, 100% complete.

Deploy acquired ninshu template – floral.

*Wood Release: Underground Roots Technique.*

The tree roots far above me responded to my will. The deepest ends grew further down until they stabbed into me. The other ends grew upwards through rocks and soil until they breached the surface, spreading in all directions looking for every creature that had been killed or trapped, by the fight between a certain fool dragon and the very dead hive mind of snakes. Every last forest animal I found, dead or alive, was skewered and drained of all biomass, which was then delivered back to me as quickly as my body could assimilate it, the tissue, nutrients, water, precious *oxygenated* blood.

Re-assess individual systems and apparatuses, replenish, realign, repair.

I was using the veins of trees as auxiliary blood vessels for the purpose of blood transfusion. As far as improvisation went, this was particularly morbid, but really, it was all in theme. This was ninshu, not ninjutsu.

Though speaking of ninjutsu.

*Earth Release: Earth Defense Dome of Magnificent Nothingness*

The earth fell away from me, finally giving me space to move, if not breathe because of how thin the air was. I grabbed a few select rocks and roots that I'd excluded from the technique and proceeded to eat them.

Then I cut my palm.

*Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees*

I didn't know what frame of reference Hashirama had that he could just create whatever plants he wanted out of nothing. Maybe senjutsu was enough, perhaps if you communed with a specific type of flora for a long enough period it became embedded in your chakra or essence. I didn't have that experience, but I had options of my own.

A drop of my blood became a seed. The seed became an ash tree. The ash carried me up and out of the darkness towards the shining sun, fresh air and freedom.

My mind was already sprinting far ahead, though, processing physical input, taking in all-new *extrasensory* input, and running dozens of scenarios at once about what I could or couldn't do when I finally burst free. What I could or couldn't do about what I saw up and ahead of me through the spirit world. The Five-Fold Rashomon, a sealed tomb where the dragon of blood and lightning that my dumbass son had become was roaring and dying alone in the dark.

*Orochimaru, I hope hell sucks.*

I looked around me, and past the trunk of the ash tree that had grown around me with sight beyond sight. At the big clouds of subtle matter and Yin energy that were dispersing from where my previous spiritual body had died. Just now. Right here. All around me. At a rate that would probably see it completely dispersed into nature in two or three days. Mine. And Orochimaru's too. And those animals. All of it going to complete waste.

I looked at Kenzo. To and from the still not-quite-dead spirit, and the ocean of discarded yin all over the place.

Oppor-

“ ████████ ! ! ”

-tunity my ass!

What was I supposed to do with this? How was I supposed to deal with this? The dragon-shaped bloodstream was thrashing, screaming, every moment and every effort was another part of him irreversibly consumed to keep himself going in his single-minded rampage. Every bit of spiritual death I'd almost undergone myself, what my wife would have put herself through, he was experiencing it at an accelerated rate. Like me, maybe *because* of me, he'd turned himself into an autotrophic life form, except instead of physical mass he was burning his very spirit away. How...

How could I stop it? Reverse it?

Also, human minds and souls do *not* do well in reptile brains, never mind floating blobs of gore from a mutant toad pretending to be a flying lizard, what can I do?

*You've sacrificed so much for so long, husband, let me have my turn for once.*

I looked around at the ocean of lost Yin. *My* lost yin. Then to my dumbass of a son. And back.

*Well, I thought glumly. There's worse ways to go than dying for your kid, I guess-*

“It seems that even now I come in second.”

This time it was Asura that appeared to me in the darkness beneath the earth, seated cross-legged in front of me as my improvised transportation system struggled to catch up to the speed of my thoughts and memories.

“My brother didn’t put any undue pressure on you, I hope?”

Sacrificing myself to myself was not the same thing as saving someone else’s spirit from their wilful self-destruction, I only had administrative control over myself, not anyone else. It certainly wasn’t the same thing as excising a child’s soul and spirit from an actively self-destructive pseudo-organism while they were in the middle of spiritual suicide.

“You’re really a very rude man, you know?”

Maybe I could yank him out of that mess? But no, my young stringbean of a Yin body was the worst tool for that. Trying to snatch my idiot boy out of the jaws of spiritual death would be like trying to save him from the hangman’s noose by yanking on his foot with a second rope. He was spread out and hooked through all of it. Every time a splatter sloughed off, every time a drop of blood was consumed to generate the lightning buoying him, a part of himself was consumed for good.

“Then again, it’s not like I’ve ever been all that good at holding attitude against anyone.”

I could see spirits. If I could see spirits, I could see what comprised them. If I could bring myself, a *human*, back to life, then plucking a screaming child out of a hastily improvised blood blob should be easy, right? You’d think.

“Alas, I remain a sucker for self-sacrifice, always so moving and morally superior to any other sort, at least when it’s worthy. This once, though, I feel like being petty.” Asura held out his fist. “Which is why I’m going to make *your* perfectly noble and worthy self-sacrifice as worthless as you made your wife’s.”

I stared stupidly at the extended fist.

“■■■■■■■■■■ ! ! ”

I held out my own fist and beheld the motions of the world.

*Hand seals – they’re grasping motions!*

The final cataclysmic clash between the Sage’s children, its setup was a multitude of causes and reasons, but the ultimate catalyst was *betrayal*. Specifically, the betrayal of *Indra* by his own disciples and adherents *to* Asura. To the point where there were more of them on Asura’s side than Indra’s own, by the end. By miles. And almost *all* of them joined in ninshu with Asura at one point or another, directly or not.

*Oh dear, this is the real final straw that drove Indra to commit fratricide, isn't it?*

Indra was the creator of ninjutsu, but Asura was a literal repository of all the ninjutsu knowledge and experience of *everyone else* in their time. For all that ninshu was his and the Sage's own preferred choice, Asura's understanding and skill in ninjutsu had actually surpassed his brother's.

"I hope this helps, Masanari-Dono." Asura grinned as he began to fade. "I'm rooting for you, you know! Believe it!"

*Holy fuck.*

...

Create biofeedback and at-will control for overall chakra system function, integrate function into homeostasis, create biofeedback and at-will overrides for all individual functions, create new node in pineal gland to centralize control, synchronise chakra flow with Yin-Yang cycle, examine process of Yin-Yang to chakra generation, process discerned.

*Indra... did you withhold this insight, or is Asura not the only one who doesn't appreciate what he has?*

Hand seals – they were *grasping motions*. Grasping motions for the causal forces and associative sympathies making up the world, the universe. I could see them. I could perceive them. I could deduce what some of them did just from how they interacted with me. I didn't try, but only because I didn't need to. Chakra was just the medium of interaction, and now I had experience. All of Asura's experience, and everyone else's who shared theirs with him. I *knew* all of the seals and the strings of existence that had ever been grasped by a human mind during Asura's time. The twelve seals, the non-standard ones, and many others besides. Ever since those olden days... so much of them had been hidden and lost.

*I know what I'm going to do.*

Even the totality of Asura's collected insight made up just a narrow field of view of the grand scheme of strings making up the tapestry of reality, even all of them combined, but...

*I don't need nor want to grasp for all of them, do I?*

I just needed a firm hold of the strings on *me*. My place was *mine* to decide in the universe, no one and nothing else's. If I managed to do that, maybe I'd be able to do it for someone else too.

And even if I didn't, more options would surely reveal themselves to me. They always did before.

I reassessed my conclusion via all my mental partitions in parallel. Then once again with them all working in tandem. The conclusion remained the same.

*That's it then.*

Assign experimental resources, ready deployment, decelerate cognitive processes to match objective time.

The ash tree burst up through the soil, but I bid it to carry me further up and up. When I broke through the canopy to see the sun, I made the wooden tree even taller still, made it carry me further up and up until I was higher than the tallest boughs in a hundred miles. The top of the trunk, the junction of the mightiest boughs, it split down the middle to free the perfect sphere within, which had been acting as my egg-like shell.

The shell unfolded around me like a flower. The moon was above me. The sun was a distant wonder watching me from the horizon's edge. The sounds in my ears were a rush like none before. The sensations on my skin spoke of all new life and awareness. The air entering my lungs was the first rattling gasp of new life. Elation.

“ ██████████ ! ! ”

The sight ahead of me was almost entirely taken up by a colossal box made of spiky doors with the faces of demons on them. They rattled but held. They rattled less and less with each blow from inside.

Accelerate cognition back to maximum speed and get to work.

*Don't hold this against me too much, world, I'm a really good man you know!*

Utilize acquired shinju comprehension and chakra transformation experience to develop inverse chakra loop, 3%, 13%, 23%, ~~43%~~, attempt failed. Desired functionality requires fundamental redesign of chakra apparatus, determine necessary modifications, 3%, 13%, 23%, 43%, 73%, 100% complete, simulate mental model, repeat, repeat, repeat, discerned preliminary model.

Destroy present chakra apparatus.

Create new chakra apparatus – again.



Integrate into cells, affect physical changes, integrate into Yin, affect spiritual changes, new chakra system deployment complete.

Synchronize internal energy and force and motion differentials with extrinsic influences, streamline para-physical functionality, compensate for environmental stressors, initiate chakra generation, integrate chakra into auric field to upscale reinforcement of natural limits and override the laws of physics as needed.

Integrate ninjutsu functionality into new chakra apparatus, streamline ninjutsu-ninshu chakra mechanics for ease of use, reassess homeostasis, reassess chakra apparatus functionality, inspect genetic template of implanted system, alien genetics reaffirmed as fully legible, evaluate, adjust for human biology, 3%, 13%, 23%, 43%, 73%, 100%.

I took a deep breath.

Deploy inverse chakra transformation process.

Execute.

My new chakra pathway system rooted itself within me. Its profile changed under my direction, though I quickly realized I was playing something closer to the role of a gardener half the time. Before, if you stretched out your arms and plated yourself like a tree, the chakra system, too, would have looked almost like a tree, albeit one with branches bereft of leaves and flowers, never mind a fruit. In reality, it was all just a root system masquerading as the rest of the tree, due to the Sage's modification and the subsequent ages of human make-believe inculcated into alien genetics and mistranslated.

This new one – mine. It was different. It was *true*.

*I'm not going to refer to this by that name ever again.*

This was *not* the Shinju parasite. Not any longer. And I was not going to give this miracle a name that could be mistranslated as double suicide.

*Crann Bethadh.*

The Tree of Life.

Its roots were six and *doubled* as branches, each one growing through me and out of me to plant themselves in all six lower realms even as I watched. My body was its trunk. My spirit was the rain. And the upper crown – it didn't exist, but only because the rain was so thin and

paltry that it couldn't grow. Not yet. If it grew, as *I* grew, would it manifest upwards and reach high enough to weave itself into the higher realms as well?

I exhaled. I gave myself an entire objective second to succumb to my feeling of triumph. It was the headiest feeling in the world.

Evaluate outcome.

Tree of Life retains all thaumovore properties of original organism. However, non-parasitic nature of chakra pathway system generates chakra free of incompatibility with human biology and spiritual anatomy.

Anami-Chakra incompatibility resolved, all limits on capacity and utility lifted.

Inverse chakra loop established successfully, chakra transformation into Yin and Yang energies now possible, encode as innate functionality, deploy, streamline, automate.

Addendum – alien genetic code fully readable means that human genome can be combined or substituted as desired. Coupled with inherent modularity of genetic phenotypes, this allows for any and all additional functions to be removed or added, also as desired.

*Log implications to memory and postpone, crisis management takes priority over new theories, afford no distractions.*

Deploy senriki at cellular level, deploy senjutsu at holistic level, maximise strength, maximise flexibility, maximize endurance, maximize awareness, maximize natural energy intake, metabolize excess, streamline, assess, confirm no negative side effects, automate.

Natural energy supply nominally infinite, divert excess to Yang generation.

Yang production rate maximised, Yang supply nominally infinite while cell-grade senriki persists, cell-grade senriki logs no drawbacks, will persist indefinitely unless wilfully halted, divert excess Yang to chakra apparatus, system confirmed as being capable of creating chakra from any one sort of energy type regardless of mix or imbalance, maximum chakra capacity reached.

*My word, already?*

Offload excess chakra onto Anami cells, limit reached, current amount and concentration of soul cells vastly insufficient to leverage full raw power, new directive discerned.

*Be fruitful and multiply, kids, you lot are the only ones who actually stopped after the one attempt at patricide.*

The swarm of living plasma complied eagerly. The Anami multiplied endlessly, spreading through me until there was once more no cell deprived of one, then kept going at an exponential rate, and faster. Trito emerged from my flesh and formed around me, a shimmering ghost-like form that seemed to weave itself out of the world and the sky above. His volume grew quickly, so quickly that it outpaced my new, vastly diminished Ninshu range before he even finished growing his second pair of arms. My Yin... so small and thin now, my range so reduced compared to what it was just this morning.

Trito grew a second head, then a third so I could see in every direction. His spear and shield vanished, but his mantle did not. It grew instead around and through me, out and downwards, following as much as he guided my ever-replenishing chakra through the tree beneath my feet, further still until he reached the earth and spread out through the roots. And further.

As that happened, I called my chakra and raised my hands into the hand seal of the Ox.

Ox, Dog, Horse, Tiger, Boar, ~~Ram~~

As I formed seals, so did Trito. But when I moved on, he didn't. The hand seal stayed formed, the chakra stayed moulded, nature's string remained in hand, and every next seal saw a new hand form out of his previous one to form the next sign in the sequence. Even so I felt the limit rapidly nearing, I needed something... something else. Something to act as a relay for my conscious will even beyond my newborn spirit's tiny range. I need...

I needed more mind. I needed more *hands*.

“Sage Art Wood Release: Svaraka of Unbounded Hands.”

I wasn't even going to try for Hashirama's True Several Thousand Hands, but a good scientist knows when to appreciate inspiration.

The wood release technique erupted around me, countless saplings spliced from the ash tree beneath my feet. First chaotically, then increasingly controlled as the new life absorbed nutrients from the earth and whatever was left of the many creatures that had perished. It seized and absorbed all the discarded Yin around me too. Mine, Orochimaru's, Kenzo's, every tiny scrap from all the creatures that were killed. The Ash trees grew tall and close, so close that they blended together with the original beneath me. The new life grew thicker and taller, lifted

me higher and higher as Trito fused with it, causing the tree to perfectly outpicture his image. A head grew from the wood, then, two, three. One arm, two, four. The trunk beneath me thickened and widened, flowing like liquid clay until it took the shape of a robe beneath me, wrapped around legs sat in my same, cross-legged pose.

Ox, Dog, Horse, Tiger, Boar, Ram, Hare, Monkey, Dragon, Rat, Bird, Snake. And all the other seals that Asura and Indra had conveyed to me. And all the seals I'd ever seen on a different Earth.

Four arms became eight, then 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, one after another forming around and behind me in an ever expanding wheel. Then three, then eight wheels of steadily grander hands. Each numbered 640 fingers and 128 hands. Every hand was positioned in a unique sign. One handseal, each different from all the rest. Each hand held one of nature's strings. Not *all* of nature's strings, not even close, but certainly all of *mine*.

Identify hand seals associated with fine world string manipulation, repeat whole test sequence with incrementally altered parameters, loop procedure with new variables each time, compile at maximum cognitive capacity in parallel on all thought partitions.

Cycle through spiritual states, observe the effects of – and by – reality's strings upon self, observe effect of reality's strings upon reality, repeat for inverse chakra transformation process, determine associated chakra nature admixture and mould pattern for each string, extrapolate for cause and effect, 3%, 13%, 23%, 43%, 73%, 100%, adjust all personal parameters.

Homeostasis of Self synchronized with homeostasis of World Sphere.

Wholesomeness of Self is both condition and function of Wholesomeness of the World.

*Is – is this is what Hasirama felt all the time?*

This feat – such effort, from my body, my mind, my soul, even with the Anami doing most of the work, arrayed along the Tree of Life and its grand fundament, my spirit – even buttressed and bulwarked by a colossal avatar grown from divine wood, it shakes. My body shivers. My breath... It trembles. Magnum opus, accomplishment, rapture, this is it, my one, great labour.

All this just to test out a technique. One theoretical technique. One theoretical technique that was itself just a rush job based on another theoretical technique I'd set aside two months ago as a pipe dream.

*Indra, Asura, do either of you truly understand what you've given me?*

The moment loomed before me as I realized that I had just secured what I needed to sidestep all the drawbacks that my wife would have taken onto herself. Here, now, with all this power. Chakra, sage power, the children of my spirit embodied in plasma souls and bodies, that very same spirit that was in my hands, spiritual matter that had been ripped out of literal *human sacrifice*, from me, from Orochimaru, from my son himself with every moment that went by...

I could take it, consume it, absorb it back into myself. Achieve... at least some of what grafting my wife's entire Yin to mine would have given me, with all of Heaven's light backing it. Reach for those heights I never fathomed, might still not be able to fathom even now, in the midst of all this. I might even achieve an all new baseline of power, instead of using it all up on this one, single act.

All I had to do was sit here. Meditate. Maintain this one technique to digest the Yin scraps and do nothing else for the next year.

All I had to do was let my idiot son lose everything left of himself and reincarnate as a hedge slug. Possibly, anyway. Maybe a reptile, if this last stunt imprints on his soul deeply enough. If he's lucky. A creeping animal for sure.

*I'm fine with being just another failed experiment.*

“Yin-Yang Release: Supreme Authority of Manu.”

I moved my hands along the outlines of my claim upon my place in the world. Triton's moved with me, tugging on nature's strings back and forth and wide. The wind howled amidst the colossal arms as they moved. The 1024 strings came together, scraped against each other, bent, locked, twined, interlocked into a shape that perfectly mirrored mine. All the control I could ever exert over cause and effect, no matter the method or moment, was folded and woven into me. Tethered through me. Imbued me. All the power exerted upon me *by* reality reformed in my image. Right in the place I stood.

*Charged particle manipulation discerned.*

That... could be anything from a gimmick to bloody world-upending levels of amazing, but still not what I needed right now.

My spirit – so small, it couldn't possibly anchor this working, if I were a loom it could barely qualify as a single weft thread at best, never mind the warp that would need to be folded on

itself over a thousand times. I had an overabundance of Yang to render an anchoring structure permanent, but I didn't have nearly enough Yin to fathom the structure to begin with.

*I don't need to pull on nature's strings, just mine.*

I didn't have nearly enough Yin to anchor such a working, but I did have an all new chakra pathway system I could manipulate as easily as the rest of me, now.

*Transcending personal limits is what chakra is for.*

The Tree of Life grew new filaments, wove itself through all my other strings, anchored the working, permeated it, spread tendrils to twine with each and every thread of the world in my hands. The branches grew past them and looped back through me like the clearest and finest warp thread. I wove them all together in my image until I had twined and knotted everything nice and tight through my entire form.

Re-examine all findings.

Collate.

Compile.

1%, 2%, 3%, 5%, 7%, 11%, 13%, 17%, 19%, 23%, 29%, 31%, 37%, 41%, 43%, 47%, 53%, 59%, 61%, 67%, 71%, 73%, 79%, 83%, 89%, 97%, 100%.

*Manipulation of foreign wave-form patterns tentatively discerned.*

Sacrifice. Choice. Might worldly. Might otherworldly.

With this power, I could achieve a miracle.

Or...

*A smaller miracle that keeps on giving.*

Mould chakra according to shape transformation principles, long-form filament, millimetre thick wedge, monoatomic edge.

I clawed my finger down.

The Rashomon gate right in front of me was sliced clean in half.

Metabolize collected subtle matter, distil spiritual energy, concentrate supply, prepare for Yin bestowal.

Decelerate cognitive processing rate to match objective time.

“██████ ! !” The gore dragon roared in mad frenzy as it burst out of its broken prison. Huge chunks and splatters of blood and lightning tore off its form as it literally *flayed* its way out. Out of the collapsing structure that was taking its sweet time returning to Naraka whence it came.

*Prime delivery vector.*

“██████—— ! !” The dragon roared madly, desperately. “~~You think this will hold me, you wretch! I am Van, the Avenger!~~” Oh no, he’s already delusional.

~~“I am begotten of the one who was there to witness the very origin of all things in this world! I am!”~~

“GROUNDED!”

“██████ ?!”

The dragon’s words went down the wrong blood splatter.

*Catch him, little ones, don’t let your big brother lose another drop!*

Yemo’s arms left their wooded coils and reached past me like a thousand glowing whirls of blue light to seize the dragon by the snout. And every other part of him too, until there was not a millimeter of surface still exposed to the outside. This dragon, so much smaller than it was just ten minutes ago, it had no chance to even attempt escape.

“██████—— ! !”

Subject brain structure absent, neural network absent, consciousness detected, will detected, scan holonomic structure, analyse, use Yin chakra transformation to buttress collapsing Yin structure, graft Yin matter from sacrifice to replace the gaps and decay, infuse distilled Yin to match the native wave-form patterns, repair, restore, heal, heal, heal, heal, *heal, there’s enough to heal, I know there’s enough, there must be enough, heal, heal, heal, please, please my boy-*

“Guh-DAD?!”

*Thank you, thank you, thank you!* “Kenzo... My dear boy...”

The dragon stalled. Its thrashing stopped. The dying spirit resurged brilliantly. “... D-dad?”

I took a deep breath. Finally, I could drop everything else and give voice to my tried and true feelings. I had all my emotional range back. I could do it! Just don't cry! "WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!"

"Wha-!" The gore dragon flinched like a pulped mess of blood and suffering in my spirits' grasp. "DAD! YOU'RE ALIVE!"

Oh god, his voice, it sounded like an eel sludge waterfall! "Don't you 'you're alive' me, you brat, get back to the Pure World this instant!"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN GO BACK, I WAS NEVER THERE!"

"Unbelievable, this is all it amounts to, my life, this is all I could buy with six years of suicidal depression, all for being unable to stand the mere presence of children like some freak sociopath, my own son!"

"I'M SO GLAD YOU'RE OKAY!"

"Oh for – dammit, boy! You don't have time for this. You're eating through that biomass like a swarm of piranha termites! Go to your mother before you soulmelt your way into a new life as a snail!"

"WHAT?"

"Oh for - no, NO, I am not doing this! I am not going to have my brand new hope for the future crushed in its first five minutes of life by the power of youth's stupidity! Not a single one of my children has gone through life without doing their active best to make me want to kill myself, I am *not* allowing a single second more of it, do you hear me boy? Where did I go wrong? How did I ever father such morons, Good *God!*"

"DAD, WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

"No, no, *no*, I'm not doing this, I refuse to entertain a single moment more of this nonsense, son, you're grounded!" Plasma fingers phased through matter, grabbed the spirit so very entangled with the monstrosity, and plucked Kenzo's unrestful ghost out by the scruff.

I gave my idiot son just enough time to see my glare. Then I promptly dragged his once more human shape into the otherworld, hauled him up to the top of my shiny spirit rope ladder, and tossed him into his mother's arms.

"I'll deal with you later!"



Just as soon as I'm not in danger of collapsing and crying myself to sleep in a deluge of fat, sobbing tears the moment I'm removed from my multi-threaded brain and its ongoing struggle to put off my emotional breakdown.

I returned – again – to my body with a quake of relief. Finally, the last of my dumbass children was properly dead.

*This, this line, this absurdity here that I just thought completely unironically, this is my life.*

Ugh.

*Man, I'm tired.*

Also, having all my mental partitions completely overflowing with emotional upheaval was... an experience. I barely managed to wrench one of them back under control.

Before me now was left a falling smattering of loose bloodshed. Rapidly dispersing plasma of both kinds was falling and spreading. Wisps and fragments of chakra escaped to join the leftover traces within Triton's frame. There were golden flakes of Yang energy that could only have come from Kurama too, flickering in and out of view less and less with each moment.

Ionized plasma was shedding off a presence I'd thought was gone but wasn't. He'd just been hidden behind my boy's loud glare.

*Yemo! You're alive!*

I grabbed him and nourished him as gently as I could. He was shocked, then disturbed. So disturbed that he lurched free of his sibling's grasp in favour of pressing against me. *Without* entering me.

Deploy ninshu.

He didn't even entertain the notion of merging back with his many siblings despite them literally cradling him. He felt shocked, then relieved, then he wanted to never leave me again even as he didn't want to return to how things were before. At the same time, he was conflicted about his 'replacement' and felt at once driven and guilty at his own weariness and hesitance to be reduced to such a state again. I felt them, his wants.

I felt *wants*.

Yemo was changed. He was more than he used to be. I wasn't ready to pronounce sapience after the day I'd had, but I'd just gotten evidence that I'd overlooked *sentience* all this time.

And there *was* sentience here, and more, now. Complexity. More than plants. More than animals. More than *Gama*.

*Kurama's Yang energy, it has to be.*

I flexed my chakra, finding it already at capacity again. I felt the last traces of distilled Yin. I considered Trito. For a long moment, I considered the dripping blood.

*... It's still not mad science.*

Recall all logged animal genomes, read collected blood to refresh amphibian genetic footprint, read biomass collected from recently slaughtered wildlife for additional blueprints, bring up physical phenotypes, retrieve cognitive phenotypes from own genetic code, combine, mix, match, simulate permutations, continue until ideal outcome is reached.

Final configuration discerned – body of a snake, belly of a clam, skull of an ox, antlers of a stag, snout of a boar, eyes of a rabbit, ears of a wolf, crest of a rooster, scales of a fish, whiskers of a rat, beard of a goat, legs of a horse, feet of the ape, the claws and teeth of a tiger.

*I'm not even surprised anymore.*

Integrate sensory phenotypes into optimal configuration, configure external phenotypes for optimal aesthetics, confect base genetic blueprint of theoretical organism, integrate Tree of Life sapling in final structural model, simulate, repeat, repeat, repeat, results nominal.

“Wood release.... Artificial Womb Technique?”

I was iffy on the name, but the technique did what I wanted, more or less.

“Yin Release: Trito's Tribulation.”

I'll probably name this application something else, because there was nothing to purge this time. But the vector of the ability was the same. My blood erupted through a hundred different enlarged pores and pierced into the wooden egg.

Determine necessary materials, extrapolate substance quantities, transfer collected biomass and energy from trees and statue, use Underground Roots technique to collect more raw minerals, donate missing elements and nutrients from own biomass, repeat for blood and gut flora, collect all elements in incubation shell, overlap Yin – no, still not enough of it – overlap *Trito* over container to enable precise molecular and cellular manipulation.

Create neural system, create skeleto-muscular apparatus, create digestive system, create reproductive system, create minor subsystems, create skin, integrate systems, test, assess, refine, repeat until homeostasis is achieved...

Process complete.

Create Tree of Life off-shoot sapling.

1%, 3%, 13%, 23%, 43%, 73%, 100%.

Process complete.

Initialize.

Attempt failed, Tree of Life doesn't have enough to work with, the Yin is not self-sustaining, something is missing.

*Like every other time before.*

I considered the issue. Then I turned my eyes to the spirit world and held Yemo up to get a moment's glimpse and breathe the ether of Heaven.

The heart began to beat. The yang began to flow. The Yin began to grow, slowly but surely.

Initialize Tree of Life.

Success.

I returned to the waking world. I withdrew my blood. I healed. The wooden egg cracked from within to reveal the new being inside.

The baby dragon jumped at me, curled around my waist, crawled frantically up around my back and chest, all the way up until his neck was wrapped around mine, and all four of his limbs hugged me tight, never intending to let go. He was long and sinuous, whiskered, his scales white with shimmers of iridescent blue. Like a cloud in the sky.

I felt his amazement. I felt his overwhelmed feeling at having his own physical senses. I felt his wonder at the world. I felt him initiate resonance between his soul cells and his still tiny siblings within me.

“Welcome to life, Yemo.”

My dragon croaked cutely.

I felt the last of the vast power finally escape my grasp. But even as I returned to a state of being... vaguely comparable to the me of yesterday morning, I could only feel triumph all over again.

I'd arrogantly projected sentience on non-living plasma structures before. Not anymore.

Now I've created life.

"Quite the chain of feats you've achieved today," Indra said from where he now stood to my right on the not-flower petal. He was transparent, but visible against the backdrop of living plasma that Trito provided just by existing in the same space. The spirit was speaking in that ancient language that Archaic Nifon only wished it still was.

I could only understand him thanks to ninshu, the one of earlier and the one of now.

"In fact," he continued. "It's enough that I can't believe even *you* could come up with all of this from scratch. Not on such short notice, never mind while *dead*."

"Imbas Forosnai."

Indra blinked at me. He ignored the approaching ninja that had finally caught up with this upended battlefield. "I know not what that means."

"Imbas Forosnai. In the ancient language of a people you'll never meet, because they're several centuries dead on a different planet, it means 'Great Knowledge that Illuminates'." The old ways are never as gone as moral busybodies like to think. "Man chews on meat soaked in mind-expanding solution, puts it on a flagstone near the door, chants an invocation over it to the gods, chants over his two palms – smeared from the meat, very important – then he locks himself inside a dark room not to be disturbed, puts his two palms on his cheeks – over his eyes if he can manage it – and sleeps." I smirked. "I didn't get anywhere close to the standard three days of complete isolation, but it sure felt longer."

The Art of Illumination of the ancient seers of Éire, Ninshu was practically its inversion. Instead of sensory deprivation, it was overexposure. Where Imbas Forosnai – *shamanism* – was all about getting possessed by ancestors and gods, ninshu treated the chakra system itself as a possessing entity. Leveraged its Yin incorporation and assimilation abilities for mutual cross-possession. *Partial* possession of humans by each other. The core was ultimately the same for both, deliberate and willing possession by a foreign entity for the purpose of gaining knowledge.

Even if I hadn't channelled the closest thing to *two* gods that this world had, possessing myself has to count after all this trouble, right?

*Traditions are answers to questions that have been forgotten.*

Once upon a time and place, being the channel between man's world and the other worlds, speaking *to* the gods on behalf of mankind, was the *fili* of Ireland's most important job. I wasn't a *file*, and not just because I wasn't a poet, I –

Actually no, never mind. I could definitely become a *file*. All I needed was to recreate *Teinm laída* and *Díchetal do chennaib*. From first principles – *again* – but what else is new?

“Expanded consciousness, solitary contemplation, sensory deprivation,” Indra mused just as *Hiashi* and company at last came into view. “You can do the former at will, and for the latter you were literally buried a mile underground the whole time.”

Hey wait a minute, we're about to have company and I'm naked! Wood Release-

*Charged particle manipulation discerned.*

I blinked. I sat up at the memory. I considered my senses. I considered my expanded senses thanks to modified phenotypes, the *anami* spirits, *chakra* manipulation, and sage power. I considered *Trito*. I continued considering him, and myself, and the strings of nature. *My* claim on nature.

I climbed to my feet. Watched the looming form made up of my swarm of dual-shell plasma beings. I thought about my multitasking ability, their multitasking ability, subatomic micromanagement, and particle physics.

*Collect materials, combine, transmute.*

Sand, dust and fiber flew towards me from all directions, wrapped my body in a thick layer, and transmuted in a wave of whistling lightning into a perfect recreation of my formal attire.

*Well I'll be.*

“The world should have loved for you to live during our time,” *Asura* said where he'd appeared to my right. “But I'll settle for seeing *Black Zetsu's* twisted idea of a world utterly destroyed.”

Now I had *two* ancient religious figures standing at my sides at the top of the world, bright, shimmering and visible against the backdrop of my living aura and the sky.

*What is this, the Transfiguration?*

That was when the ninja finally cleared the last stretch to land in front of us.

*Oh look, witnesses.*

Hyuuga Hiashi. Aburame Shibi. An unknown ninja from the Inuzuka clan. And Might Guy.

*Konoha. I'm getting seriously mixed feelings here.*

Maito Gai gave me a massive shiny-toothed thumbs up, then he joined the others in staring. They stared at me. They stared at Yemo doing his best impression of a neck ornament. They stared at Indra. They stared at Asura. They gawked at the massive statue with one thousand and twenty-four arms that I no longer had a quick and easy way to get rid of. They looked between it and me. Their eyes were the eyes of people who were looking at me while seeing someone else.

I looked up and behind me, at the three intense faces and looming wooden arms of the statue in whose lap we now stood.

Fact: Kaguya didn't need practice or training after she ate the chakra fruit, she just knew.

Whatever brand of moron the current Ootsutsuki may or may not be, whoever created the Shinju itself was a certifiable genius. He literally tested to see how cause and effect interacted with chakra, and then programmed the Shinju so that it associated each chakra pattern a specific sign. The inventor acknowledged that he had a limited perspective too. He programmed the Shinju itself with the ability to identify new causes and effects induced by its host organisms, and assign them new hand gestures too.

Grafting miniature root off-shoots onto native life forms may or may not have been part of the original genetic template, but the Shinju's maker had at the least predicted it. It was part and parcel of the biomass and energy harvesting functionality, now. The Shinju was literally designed to infest native life forms and learn all they knew, before eating them. Just as I had theorised before, it wasn't just a chakra fruit assembly line, it was also a self-updating knowledge base and technique repository.

*Note to self - hardocde the Crann Bethadh to human biology and encrypt the hell out of it as soon as I have time.*

I wondered about all the Ootsutsuki I'd seen on screen. All of them were obsessed with special organs and raw power, no exception. Also, all the ones I knew could charitably be termed one trick ponies. How did they all end up like that, when they have this?

*No, that's not really a question, is it? The answer is obvious.*

They went all in on ease of use at some point, and never really stopped. With every new generation, they turned themselves more and more fully into almighty idiots.

*... Best to double-check that it's not something in their genetics making them that way, though, just in case.*

But first.

Evaluate chakra cycle, Yin/Yang-to-chakra process optimal, intake of both energy types ideal for chakra generation but not strictly necessary. However, chakra-to-Yin/Yang inverse process has vastly suboptimal efficiency, precise percentages impossible due to abstract nature of Yin-related factors, future refinement possible but unlikely to achieve paradigm-shifting breakthroughs.

Techniques dedicated to this purpose possible but will likely depend on time allocation and exclusion of all other activities (meditation?). May potentially be supplemented by intake of Yin/Yang from external sources (assimilation?). Multi-threaded cognitive partitioning *may* overcome *some* of these limitations.

*However*, current process still represents a net gain on *top* of the total maximum Yin and Yang energies once homeostasis is achieved.

Simplified explanation: Yin and Yang regeneration is faster than their transformation into chakra when all are at capacity. Thus, new Yin and Yang made back *from* chakra will be a permanent net gain.

Conclusion: new chakra pathway system induces a *continuous* and *permanent* increase to maximum parameters while not otherwise in use. All parameters will increase naturally for entirety of remaining lifespan. Extrapolation: thanks to overcoming the telomerase bottleneck months ago, remaining lifespan in absence of suicide or murder will continue indefinitely.

*I'm going to be this world's daddy.*

“Lord Uzumaki.”

I looked from the statue to Hiashi and began pulling Trito back into my body while waiting for him to continue.

When he didn't, I decided I may as well say something instead. "I'm going to want ownership of this whole thing, I hope you understand," No mental partitions available at this time to divert emotional spillover. "Tourist traps are all well and good, but I'm not a fan of cheating the original creator out of his own accomplishment, if you get my drift."

I might, potentially, be running on something of a high at the present moment.

"What the fuck," said the Inuzuka, looking between me and Hiashi in disbelief. From reading his chakra and aura, he was clearly a medic. "No, really, what the actual fuck, Captain?"

"Succumb not to the vagaries of unyouthfulness, Inuzuka-san!" Gai erupted. "Clearly, we are looking upon a field of victory! Do not interrupt an ally when he is basking in the fruits of his conquest! It *is* conquest, sir, yes?"

"Excellent redirection," I nodded to the man now keeping me locked in his sights. "It was more along the lines of cruel and unusual self-defense with extreme prejudice, though."

I suddenly had the nagging feeling that I was forgetting something – oh! I forgot to loot the body!

Orochimaru had a whole bunch of stuff on him, didn't he?

I finally had a second thought stream available. My underground roots technique had remained viable even in my distraction, senjutsu was useful like that. I set about guiding it to locate the Orochimaru corpse pile deep beneath the ground and gather the proceeds.

"Masanari," Hiashi finally found his voice again. What and how much had he seen ahead, with his eyes? "What happened here?"

*What could possibly have happened in a world where grownups believe children are ready to visit charnel fields and kill when they are three years old?*

This was why I was always willing to put myself out there and damn the consequences, however painful or lethal. In a world like this, you couldn't hide or coast. Neither could you, as a completely random example, afford to hold a body-snatching experiment in anything but the most controlled of conditions, never mind a mile underground buried in loam and worms, no matter how seductive the prize.



I opened my eyes, ready to deliver the report I'd just compiled between eyeblinks, but then my roots found Orochimaru's leftovers.

*My research!*

My notebooks! From home! Orochimaru had my research notes in his travel bag!

*I should've made your death hurt more, you bastard.*

Also, he had a scroll pouch. With one thick scroll inside. Which the Third Eye of the Anchorite, with and without sage power, told me was riddled with trace chakra imprints, none older than four hours, from sixteen different people.

*Bring that over here right now.*

The root burst up through the soil ahead of the statue and curled through the air to deposit the scroll in my waiting hand. Sage senses gave me no warning, overlaying the object with my plasma body returned no warning, doing the same with my Yin gave no warning, neither did my chakra, Triton, or any individual anami themselves.

I unfurled the scroll.

*Seal release.*

A puff of smoke dropped two sharingan eyes into my hand.

*Shit, how long was Orochimaru in the Uchiha district before Obito did his second attack? How many Uchiha did he kill for their eyes?*

Obito and Orochimaru were allies at this point in time, they were both in Akatsuki, even if Orochimaru was playing double-agent as usual. How many layers did their plans have, how many contingencies? Was Orochimaru picking off the Uchiha *not* at the party the entire time? But I would have felt him, wouldn't I? Third Eye of the Anchorite would have detected something.

*Or maybe not, if he used senjutsu.*

Orochimaru had failed to achieve senjutsu, but he also hadn't died. It wasn't inconceivable he could at least tap into nature enough to hide himself in it. It would literally be a prerequisite of his cursed seal research. Failing that, Obito might have simply supplied him a white Zetsu clone for his own substitute ninjutsu.

*But then, how didn't I feel the victims die?*

Unless the deaths happened elsewhere. Maybe they were lured away. Or picked off from the people *not* in the district. Like... the people mingling with the rest of the village according to my own recommendations.

And the police force.

*How many people do I know, whose eyes are in this scroll?*

Morbidly, I unsealed and resealed all of the eye pairs one after another, absently absorbing a few cell samples from each. Good news, none of them were from people I knew. Better news, the Sharingan genetics were now fully legible. Bad news, one of the eye pairs shared half of their genetic code with someone I did know. Worst news of the day, that someone was Uchiha Shisui.

I looked at the two bloody eyes in my hand.

*Orochimaru killed Shisui's mother.*

I'm going to master the ability of astral projection just so I can travel to Hell and kill Orochimaru all over again.

"Lord Hyuuga." I said.

"... At this point, you may call me by name."

"Hiashi then. You may do the same in kind." I held out a fist. "If you have any control at all over your Yin, please be completely open with me for a moment."

Hiashi looked at my extended fist like it was a snake out to bite him, but he nonetheless took a fortifying breath and complied.

Ninshu – didn't work despite his best efforts.

Whatever else he was, he was a quintessential shinobi. Whatever else ninshu was, the technique needed cooperation from both directions. The Yamanaka were the only ones who applied its principles into a form of attack, whether or not they knew it. I *could* improvise something like that, I already had for what I did with Kenzo, and I was pretty sure Hiashi would forgive me.

Nevertheless, I withdrew my fist.

I considered the potentially world-shattering repercussions of the fallback plan I'd only just come up with.

Then I held out my fist to my second option and set Konoha up for potentially world-shattering consequences down the line.

For Science.

“MY WORD!”

Might Guy did, indeed, possess the proper mindset for ninshu.

“I SEE! I HEAR! I UNDERSTAND!”

“Maito-san can now tell you all you want to know,” I told Hiashi, somehow keeping a completely straight face despite everything. “Feel free to take your time with whatever secondary mission objectives you have, now that the danger is over. Now if you'll excuse me—”

“Masanari, wait – Hanzo, HANZO!”

I didn't wait.

I jumped.

I didn't fall.

*Gravity and static electricity are the same force at the planck scale.*

Children may need an entire character arc, stretched over years of personal drama, love drama, and just drama in general to get around to doing what they set out to do.

Adults get their shit done and go home.

