

## Chapter 24: The Reflective Account from Hell

“-. September 12, 8 ANB .-“

Two years were barely enough for World War Three to stumble at the starting line, even this shockingly painless version.

Two years were also ample time for a lot of other things to go wrong. Like Kakashi losing sight in Obito's mangekyou sharingan. Like Kakashi also being effectively benched, and not just because Minato ordered the eye removed. Like Shisui going blind in his *own* eyes from an unexpected consequence of playing host to the same organ.

Like Sarutobi Hiruzen being gaslit into insanity by Uchiha Obito's 'last spite.'

None of which would have been discovered, and would have instead been judged as the Third going schizophrenic in his old age, if Minato wasn't a nearly unparalleled genius.

Kakashi and Shisui had been well positioned to liaise between Minato and Hiruzen during the transition of power, and they had also visited the Third occasionally even after that, for both professional and personal reasons. The result of this was that some genjutsu or other activated without any of them knowing every time their eyes met, and inflicted all manner of mind bending and decay on the former Hokage.

“It slipped past all of us,” the Fourth Hokage told me after we arrived at the Sarutobi compound and I was introduced to Hiruzen's son and daughter, who did a great job of not openly showing how hopeful they were at seeing me. Even though we'd never met. My reputation was really something, wasn't it? “For quite a long time too.”

The room we were in now was designed with privacy in mind, and Minato had secured it with seals too once we were here. But it didn't impede me any, because my spirit reached beyond a mere room's confines now, even with just a pittance on this side of the tunnel. Surely seals existed – or could be made – that could interfere with the Yin directly, what Minato used against Obito

certainly did something like that. But I had similar powers now, and their counters too, and Yemo could extend my reach everywhere *he* reached.

Sarutobi Hiruzen was just three walls away, practicing calligraphy.

Blindfolded.

Because he'd ripped out his own eyes.

"It started with small things," Asuma grimly told me as he turned a shogi piece between his fingers. "We feared he was losing his memory, it's one of the mildest issues we expected after such a rough fight in his advanced years."

"Small things like what?"

"Waking up every day to find out that someone had rearranged his furniture, the futon being across the room, or the inkwell on the wrong desk, father would ask us if we knew where his calligraphy brush was, or if we'd been in his rooms."

I already hated where this was going.

"Then it turned into steadily bigger things, we'd find the scroll he left out to dry before going to sleep in a different room, the chest of drawers with his clothes would be in the sealing workshop, his desk would be swapped with the one from the guest room at the other end of the house. Soon enough, even we started losing our calm, there was actually one time when we found all his tatami mats gone from his room and stacked inside Konohamaru's nursery."

I grimaced over my tea bowl. Hiruzen's daughter performed as flawless a tea ceremony as anyone, but tension radiated off her as much as it did her brother. "Either it meant one of you was crazy, or someone else had been infiltrating your house to play mind games."

"Even that wasn't as bad as when father started to write sinister messages on the mirrors, not that we knew it was him. We questioned all the servants, and the relatives who were here. We started to suspect we had a traitor in our clan. We even started questioning if it wasn't one of us, father was adamant his wits hadn't left him. Everything he did that we *were* there to witness seemed to bear out that claim. He was as normal as anyone could be after all he went through. Well, anyone with their chakra pathway system sealed."

“Yes, I did notice that.” There wasn’t a point in hiding what I could anymore, not with these people. “It started to consume his life force faster than he generated chakra, didn’t it? It was killing him. The older you get and the less Yang you make, the likelier it is.”

“Yes,” Asuma grimaced. “It’s not like we didn’t know it could happen, but shinobi who reach his age are rare, and even then they don’t all suffer from this. Of course, they also tend to stay benched instead of going out to fight high-stakes battles to the death for days.”

“So how did he do those things?” I asked. “If he had his chakra sealed, is he just that quick and light on his feet?”

“He’s the Third Hokage,” Asuma sighed. “It would have been an insult to question him when he claimed to be fully able to hold his own seal key.”

“The seal has to be loosened once a day in order for the suppression to not impact his health even more than the chakra system itself,” Minato explained what I already knew about parasites and the consequences of removing them after they got entrenched. Replaced too much. “Even I could not get around that. Given what we now know happened, we weren’t wrong to give him all due respect.”

“I see. That must have been some really sly genjutsu.” I didn’t really consider it mere illusion after a point, but this wasn’t time to debate vernacular. Or refresh everyone’s memory on what terrible ways of mind control Konoha had produced.

*Only* Konoha seemed to produce.

This world’s designated protagonists have the most sinister powers, I swear.

“The genjutsu was very discreet, or at least it ensured *he* would be as discreet as possible.” Asuma grunted, unaware of what I was thinking. “Eventually, the messages started becoming really sinister, and they even began appearing on the walls too, even as everyone still claimed to not have put them there.”

“Like what?”

Minato reached into his leg pouch and held a scroll out to me.

I took it and unfurled it. It was a chain of transcriptions. A really long one, with comments and notes on the margins that I really didn't need in order to get the picture.

"Imagine one day your life is taken over by strangers," Minato spoke clinically. "They swagger into your home like it belongs to them. They look like your friends, they settle in your place of work, even your home, call you honorable lord."

I could imagine quite a bit already.

"Imagine that they kill your family. They dispose of them, take their faces, replace them. They sit at your table and call you honorable father while conspiring to take the last thing that you have – your legacy. Not your very *self*, no, because that was the first thing they took. They didn't steal any faces, it turns out, they look like they always did. You're just made to think and behave like they did. Like they *want* while your real self is locked inside your head. It's been locked inside your head the whole time, where you can see it all happen, screaming with a voice you can't hear, pounding on walls that you can't feel. Imagine that, and you know what Sarutobi went through."

"He attacked you," I told Asuma, turning almost all my attention towards the old man three rooms over. Not just to re-evaluate him, but also because Naruto was in the same room as the man right now, babbling effusively about my return from beyond.

"Father stopped recognizing our faces," Asuma said. "Or, rather, he began to believe those sinister messages were his true self trying to tell his waking self the 'truth'. When he undid his seal and 'escaped' with Konohamaru, that was the last straw. I followed him – even unsealed he isn't as formidable as he used to be – while my sister finally contacted the Fourth, though I'm sure he'll say we shouldn't have waited so long."

"Knocking him out unawares did not help his delusion. I refrained from posting non-Sarutobi guards on the premises for the same reason," Minato admitted regretfully. "But by then I had finally mastered the mokuton bunshin. I used them, and many shadow clones too, to spy on this compound and stalk everyone in it at the same time. I did the same to anyone who came in or out. That's how I found out it was Kakashi and Shisui inflicting genjutsu on him."

Yeah. That tracked with where I thought this was going.

“Even so, I almost missed it. Obito’s chakra would have gone unnoticed if not for how sharp my sensory skills are now, since you gave me this body and its abilities. But there was no mistaking the activation of their Sharingan. Kakashi was more blatant, since he had to uncover his eye ahead of time before every face-to-face meeting with Sarutobi. But I also caught Shisui working some manner of jutsu on him, and he’d only had Obito’s eye for a few days. Neither of them remember the incidents, but the rapid onset of blindness for them both was very persuasive evidence.”

What a mess. “Obito doesn’t rest even dead, it seems.”

“I don’t know when he could have done it,” Minato continued, not realising I had meant it quite literally. “I don’t know how Obito could have had genjutsu skills beyond even Shisui, at least in subtlety. The only explanation I can think of is that Obito must have somehow left a jutsu behind in their chakra.”

I could see why he’d think that, even though he was wrong.

“To think he could implant techniques in others long-term, just because they had his eyes, to outright reach across dimensions to do it, unless he was already hedging his bets during his and Orochimaru’s second attack... It seems absurd. Shisui has informed me that he can also implant techniques in others long-term, even give his very eyes for the purpose. But it requires close proximity, and Shisui swears no such thing happened during their short fight when you were abducted. Either way, Obito did it somehow, and this is the price.”

I couldn’t blame him for drawing the wrong conclusion, even geniuses could only work with what they had. He didn’t know everything I knew about Uchiha nonsense. Especially this one.

“It sounds incredible, but my jutsu-shiki are equally persistent once applied,” Minato misunderstood the look on my face. “And once I forbid all contact between the three, the incidents stopped.”

“Not when Sarutobi ripped out his own eyes?”

“That happened only weeks later, after he finally began to believe the truth and realized he’d tried to kidnap his own grandson in a chain of events that could only have ended with either himself or his family dead. I’m afraid he was not willing to indulge any chance of it happening again.”

“Is that why you’re fine with Naruto being alone with him?”

“I have an Eye Spy seal on him for things like this,” Minato admitted with something like shame. “I am using it right now to see and hear everything going on, as if I’m standing over his shoulder. I can be there instantly if anything goes wrong.”

*I wish you good luck when Naruto starts becoming a man, I thought but didn’t say. Maybe much sooner, depending on how much of my love of liberty rubbed off on him.* “Does he know?”

“Yes.”

Well, at least there was that. I looked down at the tea. I looked up. Watched Hiruzen’s daughter use her small ladle to pour the steaming water.

I lifted my hand and lit a black flame upon my palm.

Minato didn’t twitch, but the other two did, and I felt the change in all their emotions.

“Fascinating,” Minato said idly, bending to give the flame a closer look. “It looks just like the flames of Amaterasu, but gives off no heat.” He straightened again. “I assume there is a point to this.”

“Demonstrating a misconception,” I replied as Triton appeared around me and accepted the tea bowl proffered by the good hostess in my stead. “Just because this is black fire doesn’t mean it’s Amaterasu. Just because Triton is a giant humanoid mystic field thing doesn’t mean it’s Susanoo.”

“Does it matter if they serve the same ends?”

“That’s the thing – they don’t.” I let the fire wink out. “Good lady, do you happen to have some salt available?” It was very bad form to interrupt a tea ceremony, but-

“Here,” Minato gave me a small paper tube of salt from his side pack.

“Always prepared, huh?” I took it, broke it and poured the salt into one of the still empty cups. I almost asked him for a scroll of continuous flame, just to see if he had one too, or if he’d make it on the spot. But a normal flame would do best for this completely unnecessary diversion.

When the salt was well enough dissolved in water, I pulled one of the lit candles close. Then, I crumpled one of the provided napkins and soaked it in the salt water.

“Don’t you all freak out now,” I advised as I infused Trito into the atmosphere around us, then used him to gather all the dust in the chamber – and several adjoining ones – until I had enough to transmute into a low pressure sodium vapor lamp. There were no power sockets in the room, but I could produce my own electricity just fine.

“Could I bother you to pull the blinds?”

Asuma waved his sister to stay and got up to do that himself.

When it was as dark as it could get, I turned on the lamp, which cast us into monochromatic light.

When I pushed the soaked napkin into the candle flame, the fire turned black.

It was surely unnecessary when all three of these people were willing to take me at my word, but that just made it even more important to advance the cause of empirical science. “Salt is Sodium Chloride, it has sodium atoms in it. When those atoms evaporate, they absorb the wavelengths of monochromatic light cast by the sodium vapor-fed fire, because the flame is also produced by sodium atoms, so it’s the same atoms and the same wavelength and can be reabsorbed. Same if you drip a stream of salt water in it.”

I demonstrated that by squeezing the napkin over the flame, which caused it to look exactly like the flames of Amaterasu. I wondered how many of the people in this room had actually seen them in action.

“...Huh,” was Sarutobi Asuma’s sole reaction. Our hostess, having decided that meant she had given her guest all due attention, returned to her tea ceremony.

Namikaze Minato, however, understood what I was getting at immediately. “You’re saying our conclusions are wrong.”

I set the items aside. “It strikes me that all I’ve done for Konoha and its people entitles me to some form of compensation.”

“Yes...” Minato said lowly as incense smoke trailed between us, still an unbroken thread despite all that had just been done. I had an image to maintain now, unfortunately. “I suppose our prior talk *did* stay mostly within the realm of informality. Is this where we move on to formal talks?”

“Just to be clear, I’ll fix this whether or not you say yes.”

Minato smiled as if I had just vindicated him again, somehow. I didn't bother processing all the possible reasons behind it, you didn't need to do that sort of thing with true friends.

"You'll fix this," Sarutobi Asuma finally couldn't contain his true thoughts anymore. "Just like that."

"Well, it might take me a while if the answer is no, since I'll have to go looking the long way, but yes." I made the blinds on the windows withdraw themselves, allowing light inside again. "Just like that. No offense to you all, your handling of the situation was about as good as it could possibly have been. But as to your conclusions about the why and how, those, unfortunately, were made without, shall we say, the benefit of my particular frame of reference."

"Heaven's perspective," Minato said with something between calm and honest wonderment. "That's what you really mean, isn't it?"

"No."

Minato blinked, thrown off for the very first time since we met. So much so that he didn't even bother explaining to Hiruzen's children how literally he meant what he just said.

I didn't blame him for this reaction either. Kakashi's eye, the lingering chakra in Shisui's system after hosting the same, they were certainly a factor. Both worked *somewhat* like a backdoor, or at least a relay. But it wasn't that Obito had implanted long-term techniques like Shisui might have to Itachi in another life, with his crow eye.

Alas, there wasn't exactly a sane way to explain that Uchiha Obito could teleport over from the afterlife to mess with the people on this side thanks to Kamui.

There was even less of a sane way to explain how I knew that because I'd seen it in my past life in a cartoon.

The fact that Obito was apparently vengeful and petty enough to not only do so, but single out Hiruzen over Kakashi and Obito themselves, well...

Don't ask me to explain how a madman thinks. I could do it, but I didn't want to. After all, unlike any of those hacks, I was actually sane.

"Fine," Minato huffed softly. "Alright, Hanzo. Let's hear it. What do you want?"



“Obito’s Eyes.”

As I expected, my statement was met only by the silence of the unconscionably aghast.

“And maybe round up all the monster shapeshifters you collected, plus the orphans too, why not?”

Asuma outright gaped at me. “You –“ He cleared his throat, tried to hold back the words he clearly wanted to say despite not believing what he was about to say, and failed. “You’re... not going to start sacrificing people to some dark god, are you?”

I snorted. “The only thing I’ll be sacrificing is Buddhahood.” Only... was that really true?

*Supposedly* you couldn’t attain a higher state of being without giving up all worldly attachments. Family, the love of your life, those were almost always given as an example there. But all of mine were dead and in Heaven, so did they really qualify as *worldly* attachments? Also, I could already go to and back from Heaven just fine with or without them. And the five other low realms too.

The Four Realms of Enlightenment did exist too, but I hadn’t floated much in that direction during my time on the other side. Or the other way, even. I had only come back from my coma because there was still the Ootsutsuki to deal with in the future, and still I hadn’t done near enough about that as the world needed me to.

I had Naruto here too, and Yemo, and I suppose Gama Two as well... But they didn’t really worry me either. Enough fell together to make sure they were looked after, after I went out, thanks to Minato.

Who was now my son, I suppose. Genetically. What little DNA he now had that didn’t come from me came from frogs. Of course, I *did* bring him back to life so I could dump everything in his lap, a decision that had wholly been vindicated. Even Naruto agreed. So he reduced my attachments to this world even further, if anything.

Could... it be that I’m finally faced with empirical data that *doesn’t* fit all my preconceived notions?

Oh well. I’m sure I’ll find out in the future.

“Bring everyone to where you’ve been keeping my frogs, say in an hour or two? If I’m going to cross over back to this side properly, I may as well put all that overflow to use for something

useful. I'm sure you have enough clones to handle the paperwork, don't you honourable son? Speaking of sons, I have one I've been terribly neglectful of, these past couple of years."

I got up and teleported out without explaining anything.

“-. .-“

“Pops!” Gama Two hollered the moment I materialized in the Forest of Death. “You deadbeat bastard!”

On the other hand, a few days' respite might be better.

“How could you, huh? You brought me into the world and then immediately went off and didn't come back for years! What gives, huh?! Make a kid and then immediately dump him on strangers and their mentally challenged urchin, how could you?!”

*I went into a coma*, I wanted to say but didn't. I *could* have come back sooner. Not *much* sooner in the grand scheme of things, but still.

“I don't care how nice your sleep was, you abandoned me!” Gama Two unloaded his quiver of pathos right into my heart. “And you didn't even have the courtesy of giving proper brains to the rest of these idiots before you conked out, look at 'em! Drooling morons the whole lot, how am I supposed to live like this? We frogs are social creatures you know! Not like them *toads* that the white-haired weirdo keeps bringing over, where's my colony dammit?!”

Oh dear. I thought Naruto would be the one to make me feel bad, but apparently not?

Gama Two seemed to have settled really well in his new species, though. This was nothing like what a potato fairy would behave. Too much neediness and not enough burrowing under sand. Also, no glue.

“What the hell is up with that anyway?” Gama Two was still ranting. “Frogs and toads are not the same thing! Ask anyone! At least anyone who isn't *Naruto*, that brat! He keeps trying to make us all become friends, be glad he's your kid too or I'd have eaten him!”

This didn't make as much sense though. The summon toads were obviously a social type too, otherwise they wouldn't be organized like the yakuza. Then again, they *were* of a solitary species biologically, so I could understand his confusion.

Clearly, it was the human soul at work.

“What even is with his naming sense anyway? Why did you let him name me at all?! I don't want to spend my whole life being called Gama Two! It's demeaning!”

“I'm sorry,” I told him honestly. “I could explain myself, but it won't matter. Personal tragedy is only ever an explanation, never an excuse. If you decide you never want anything to do with me again, I'll understand.”

“Don't you dare! You don't get to use my feelings against me just so you can wash your hands of me twice, you get that you old fart!? You're gonna take responsibility, and you'd better like it!”

I bowed in thanks to cover my smile. Kids weren't *all* the same, exactly, but they were damn close.

Gama Two spent over an hour giving me the what for, then proceeded to give me the cold shoulder. Or well, cold tube foot. Though not before I came up with a more appropriate name for him. This, at least, I *had* spent some time in the Beyond thinking about, so I had one ready.

Unfortunately, that only pissed him off even more, doubly so when he couldn't honestly claim he disliked it. There was just something about 'Kek' that simply fit perfectly as the name of a mystical wonder frog.

He would surely change his mind when Naruto started calling him 'cake' but that's why I had 'Pepe' in reserve.

Since the Tree of Life let me get around the pesky issues of distance and lag, I transmuted an extra body out of earth and split off part of my consciousness into it. Clones were nice, and I'd use them too, but not as nice as a second you in every sense of the word.

Getting used to being in two places at once took practically no time at all. I had way too many mind threads for a single body anyway, at this point, may as well use them.

The little spirits inside me were overjoyed to populate it too, such that there was no shortage of eager settlers. It was a good thing I was just projecting my fancies of sentience on them, because

otherwise I'd feel really about how little time they had to live. No one wants to come back from heaven, so they don't unless they have something very important to do. I was no exception.

What I didn't have on this side yet was most of my Yin, which meant I was limited to just two of me for now. Oh, the woe of artificial limitations! The bane of all scientists everywhere.

While that me stayed with the toads, I teleported over to Shisui.

There weren't histrionics with him, but there were a couple of hugs, and even a few shed tears. I healed his eyes, gave him a good Yin infusion as a stopgap measure so he could see again, and obliged his request to act as a training dummy while he reacquainted himself with having all senses functional. Seems that Uzumaki vitality *was* enough to prevent the physical degradation, but the spiritual alchemy that might have otherwise evolved the Rinnegan never happened.

Perhaps getting someone else's kaleidoscope eyes was an actual requirement? It would make it easier to differentiate between native and foreign Yin, maybe, such that the spiritual alchemy could happen *only* for the eyes? The Shinju DNA in Shisui's sharingan definitely indicated something along those lines – the eyes being foreign allowed them to act as their own, separate life form, one that was the *least* parasitic of the lot, *and* sufficiently small that it *could* actually reach its fill from the host's Yang.

We had a decent time discussing it. After that, I sat with him while he caught me up on everything I'd missed, and a fair bit I hadn't.

There was some good. For example, after two years of me not being there to complicate his life, Itachi didn't hate me anymore.

There was a lot more bad. Which was to say, a lot of guilt and self-loathing on Shisui's part over everything that had happened with Hiruzen. I could have said and done many things in response to that, but I didn't need to.

The ghost of Shisui's mother was hovering nearby the whole time, quiet and soulful. Seemed she'd been watching over him since her death. She'd self-actualised enough in her retirement that most of what was important survived intact even after the Shinju-induced Yin disintegration. Usually, a shinobi had to die young to be so lucky. Like Nohara Rin.

I made a body of living wood that would require almost no Yin infusion to function, and helped her possess it for one last reunion.

There were still no histrionics. For all that he was animated and outgoing, Uchiha Shisui afforded himself much less of that energy than he did others.

The tears, however, were somewhat more numerous this time.

She'd be able to animate it for hours before her Yin depleted and she finally crossed over, but I expected her to be much more willing and at peace when she finally did. Hopefully, Shisui would be in a better place too, by the end. I didn't stay to make sure.

I didn't overstay my welcome.

I teleported instead to my house.

Then, after I was sure things there were also in order, I translated to the new outer ring of Konoha and finally went to meet my wayward kin.

It was nice.

“-. September 15, 8 ANB .-“

Good news, Shisui did achieve an all-new level of peace after his ordeal.

Bad news, everything else didn't move nearly as fast as I wanted. And not for the expected reasons.

Minato, to my continued amazement, provided no resistance whatsoever to anything I asked, even before I joined in ninshu with him to give him all the relevant information. The issues were in logistics. Also, in the sudden worry from everyone who was anyone that I was about to produce a couple hundred people 'as unconscionably troublesome as myself' in Nara Shikaku's terms. Which was fair, that was exactly what I was going to do. For Science.

Also, the answer to nindo wasn't eliminating ninjutsu, it was spreading ninjutsu to everyone. Well, that or alternatives. Technology. The Earth would do better with more power in the hands of the common man, not less. Consolidation of authority, but decentralization of force. Self-sufficiency.

The right and ability to kill thieves and brigands by yourself. And challenge assholes to honor duels to the knockout, to keep everyone honest.

Senju Tsunade was another source of delay, since she wanted explanations for things I didn't want to waste time explaining, and she wasn't open enough to engage in ninshu with anyone.

I could see her visibly restraining herself from asking if I could bring her fiancé and brother back from the dead too. They, for better or worse, weren't haunting Tsunade like Shisui's mother did him. Fortunately, she managed to restrain herself so far, so I wasn't forced to explain that I wasn't going to start ripping people out of Heaven.

Or that I was going to do something that would make all extant methods for it practically useless. At least without the dead crossing over to haunt the living first.

"You have a castle," Juugo said in amazement. Or at least what passed as amazement in such a level-headed child.

"Place looked like it could use one," I replied.

"I suppose that's true," the orange-haired monster boy who would, in another time, be Sasuke's unappreciated minion, accepted my words of wisdom with utter seriousness. "The wonder frogs are big, defenses should be their size too."

*That's not the reason though.*

My frogs had definitely crowded me as well as they could without endangering my life, and spent almost the whole day before singing their croaky songs in happiness to have me with them again. But they were also smart enough that none of them tried to climb on my head. I could handle it, even with some of them as big as apartment blocks, but it would've been weird. Regardless, I'd not have put them in a pen even then.

I'd raised the castle from hard stone and wood ash cement so that it would be, in a word, enormous. So enormous that even the biggest of my old test subjects wouldn't be able to casually jump them in a single bound, if they somehow panicked at the sight of their fellows going brain-dead as I finally reincarnated them.

I could've knocked them out, but consciousness made it easier to see where and how the spirit entwined with the body in the trickier ways.

The huge bodies were now sealed away in a sub-dimension anchored to a tattoo along my arm, anami cells and all. I'd learned it from Minato, he'd been very generous with his fuuinjutsu knowledge during our ninshu communications.

"Ey Pops," asked Nu from his pocket on my new bandolier, where he was lounging and croaking alongside the rest of the all-new Ogdoad. "Where do you find these kids? So far it's been one speed-on nutcase, one rambling nutcase, one dead-eyed nutcase, and Kek One."

"That's 'Big Brother Pepe' to you, you brat!" 'Kek One' snapped from where he was pointedly looking away over yonder.

"Still think Gama Two was better," Kek – the new one – said gloomily from my harness. "Honouring our honourable forebear would have been an honour."

"An honour," Hehu agreed.

"Great honour," Qerh nodded.

"Most honourable," Qerhet blinked.

"The honourablest," Kekuit croaked.

"Don't make me come over there!"

The Ogdoad's vernacular was still coming along. Also, Kek never laughed, which was all sorts of jarring. But I probably shouldn't expect this world to confer the same memetic natures on words.

"Big brother's just being cringe," said Naunet, because she'd gained too *much* of my old earth vernacular. Somehow. Ninshu can do some crazy things when you're reincarnating people. Or frogs, in this case. "If he was as wise as he is big, he'd act a lot more natural about everything, especially when he doesn't mean it. It's just common sense!"

Common shinobi sense, maybe-

"People should imitate the selfless earth, which holds everything," Juugo said sagely just before Pepe could explode. "The earth should imitate the selfless sky, which covers everything; the sky

should imitate the selfless Way, which spreads everything; the Way should also imitate the selfless nature, which transforms everything. According to the teachings of the Spirit Sage, the Way is the way of nature.”

Since when? If I did ever utter those words, I’m pretty sure I’d remember. Was this the right time and place to disclaim them though? They sounded pretty good.

Further diversion was prevented by the arrival of the Fourth Hokage with Uchiha Itachi, who carried a sealed tube.

The young Head of the Uchiha Clan gave me a cordial nod. “It is good to see you hale once again.”

I smiled at his honesty. “I’m relieved the sentiment is genuine now. I know I was not the easiest person to suffer, before.”

Itachi quirked his eyebrow with the air of someone still withholding judgment. “Whether that has changed remains to be seen.” He walked forward and handed me the tube with what I already sensed were the eyes I asked for. “As requested. While they would normally be kept as family heirlooms, these renegade eyes have caused us more grief than any outsider. If you can force a final conclusion to their legacy, I will welcome it.”

“And you’ll be standing by in case they try to take me over, or something silly like that.”

“Of course. The best counter to the sharingan is an equal sharingan.”

“I’ll heal yours after. And I should be able to make blindness a non-issue too, if you want? It might take a Yin donation, so I can’t do it to everyone. And a full body tune-up of course, but I’m told Uzumaki vitality is one of the better gifts I could put on offer.”

“... We will discuss it.”

I bet. “Has Hiruzen been warned?”

“He has,” Minato said. “And he agrees that ‘postponing our reunion until he can fix all my problems in one fell swoop’ will do more to reassure him of reality’s authenticity than the slow way.”

“Alright.” I uncapped the tube and poured out the formalin contents, until Uchiha Obito’s sharingan eyes were in my hand. “Here we go.”



With a few moment's focus, I turned my own eyes into biomass that my body quickly absorbed, leaving my sockets free to implant the new ones.

Connecting the tissues was a trifle. Inculcating the eyes themselves with anami soul cells took a bit longer, but only because I was taking things slow, so as to not risk damaging any of the precious genetic footprint. The normal sharingan levels were quickly unlocked, decoded and recorded for later experiments. The Magnekyou Sharingan took a fair bit more Yin, but still a drop compared to what I had available, even without the rest of me that was still in Heaven.

Perhaps if I still lacked Indra's understanding of the Shinju genetics, it might have taken trial and error to figure out how to use the techniques, but it didn't. Kamui was suddenly open to me, both to travel to and from, and to skim the edges so that I existed there more than here.

I examined, deployed and replicated the chakra involved, and its behaviour during the jutsus. Even if Minato and I had already defeated this method of intangibility, it would still be useful against everyone else in the future. Also, I was getting other ideas too.

That just left Yang infusion, and...

Rinnegan already? Did it really take just this much? And the things it could do...

Well. I wasn't going to complain that my Tree of Life was already superior.

With one very debatable exception, which would shortly become a thing of the past if I had my way.

Having gleaned all I could of Sharingan and Rinnegan functionality from the user's perspective, I recorded samples of all the different chakra types in them.

Then I dismantled the eyes like I had my own, and proceeded to devote all my mental resources to reverse-engineering everything. User-friendly functionality was all well and good, even if it took a few cheat codes, but I had always been more about full comprehension from the *maker's* perspective.

Also, what I was getting here was that two eyes were redundant, and in fact a single eye that *didn't* also need to sort apart its special input from normal eyesight would actually be superior. Both in efficacy and efficiency. This was probably why Kaguya had just one rinne-sharingan to her name.

A Third Eye, as it were.

After all I'd done and experienced, growing one just from my spirit was straightforward, though I still made a physical counterpart for redundancy's sake. The pineal gland was practically made for it, and it was almost an eye already anyway, what with having its own retina and everything. Were I still a regular man, I'd have left it alone because of its role in tapping into natural energy, and I didn't want to lose the powers of a sage.

But I could do that in multiple other, quicker ways now, so I didn't have to grow an extra eye at the middle of my forehead like the rest of the weirdos.

Besides, I liked my own green eyes more than the fancy rings anyway. I might add byakugan functionality to them at some point, if Hiashi lets me temporarily transplant some, but I could mimic even that ability with the Eye of the Anchorite too.

I opened my eyes, and the third one too now, which was inside my brain. I looked up at the cloudless blue. I reached up and pointed my finger at the sky. At the same time, I spread Trito through the ground all the way to the lake on the other side of the Forest of Death, and channeled my chakra through it to vaporised a meter off its top layer.

Hundreds of frogs and fish balked and thrashed in shock as they fell down into the much reduced water level with ungainly flops, but I was careful not to boil them.

The vapors rose along with my chakra into the air. Within minutes, the sky was covered in the thickest, darkest, most angry-looking storm cloud Konoha had ever seen.

"I assume there's a point that that!" Minato shouted over the sudden wind I'd had to induce in order to get it all done quickly. "Because people are getting antsy."

"I'll need it shortly," I said calmly, because Trito made sure I didn't need to shout. I glanced at Itachi, whose Mangekyou Sharingan was wide open and spinning, pinned on me. "Stand by now. I'm going to tune out for a bit."

"Is it going to be dangerous?" Juugo asked from where he huddled behind me.

“Hey!” Naruto hollered from where he hung off his father’s shoulders. He’d been around all day, practicing Jiraiya’s transparency jutsu, and I’d been doing my most middling to act as if it worked. “Don’t take the words out of my mouth! Uncle, is it gonna be dangerous?”

“Only for a handful of orange-haired zombie-people who refused your Dad’s offer of peace to the chief necromancer.”

“Ehhh?”

Even as I stood there with hand aimed at the sky, I closed my eyes and tuned almost completely into my *other* body, who’d been with Enma and Yemo on Mount Huaguo this whole time.

Then, I crossed dimensions.

Kamui’s power had integrated quickly once I’d made the requisite modifications to my other body, and that was what I used to translate across realms. But the Kamui dimension proper wasn’t what I was aiming for. Calling up the imprint of Obito’s chakra I’d just assimilated, I used what I now knew of summoning magic to follow *that* to the best available match instead.

The direction still pointed down to Yomi. Naraka. Hell.

But not in the same direction, and much further down.

*Imbas Forosnai*, I thought wryly, *that which illuminates the path to the realms beyond, and through it the future.*

Through my Tree of Life that spanned all the six realms, I projected in an instant all the way there.

“You,” spoke the voice of Uchiha Obito, through a parched mouth that was threadbare, broken, and only holding together because he’d grown through and *been* growth through by the Shinju’s tendrils. Barely half his face and a few fingers were visible atop the twisted bark, and even those were crumbling. Disintegrating in the air of this empty place like dust. “When will you stop meddling?”

I beheld the last scraps of the most unfairly exalted tragedy in the history of this planet. Then I looked beyond and up, to the thing that was using Uchiha Obito as a mouthpiece.

The King of Hell. I'd thought it a victim of the Shinju, like everything else. But it wasn't. It wasn't damaged, it was grown wrong. Misbegotten. It wasn't native, it was part of the Ootsutsuki foul arts. Not a consequence of the Shinju's infestation of the Realms, but an instrument.

An instrument of the Rinnegan.

"You," the King of Hell spoke through its own voice this time, dropping the pretense. "You think yourself accomplished, but you will fail like the rest. Many others have walked your path, on countless other worlds. They all failed."

"I have literally no reason to believe anything you say." Honestly, who did it think it was, that I'd take anything at its word? Who did it think *I* was, to assume I wouldn't see through its nature?

"Many have said that," the King of Hell rumbled, ignoring my rebuke completely. "High on their petty triumphs and self-importance, they denied the truth until the end and beyond, never willing to realize it was too late all along. For them, and for their world."

Those words were every bit as hollow as the first. For all that the Ootsutsuki prided themselves in making increasingly ridiculous powers, their works were otherwise remarkably transparent. This thing wasn't sapient. It wasn't even sentient. If not for Obito, or the many people whose spirits it gorged on when offered by Kaguya, Madara and Nagato, it wouldn't even be able to communicate.

"Hypothesis." I extended my spirit to overlap Obito's remains. It was a sad thing to commune with, but he'd used up all he had to project into the living world with Kamui. Wasted his time in purgatory tormenting the living, instead of using that to take a good look at himself. "You gain the ability to grant language comprehension to any being just by feeding them gruel made of a ground up dictionary. Chosen subject: a tapeworm. Would the tapeworm, now capable of speech, qualify for personhood?"

"You would presume to try and drag the divine down to the level of parley with base creatures," the thing spoke, through Obito's mouth and its own. The realms all seemed to creak with its lumbering movements, so tightly wound it was through their substrate. "Insolence. Always, it presages the downfall of the proud."

The thing was clearly just calling up what passed for wisdom in the victims of those who used its powers. If it actually had something resembling its own mind, it would've had a much better reply. Like pointing out how I had put my hopes in a monkey.

It still would've been wrong, but at least the insult would have been maybe half-way inspired. "I'd say the same to you, but you're not enough of a person to feel anything, never mind hear sense over the screaming of all those dead people in your belly."

I reached through the bark of its foot, and pulled Obito out. He came loose like water seeping out of a sponge.

The only reason I'd kept talking was so I could distract the thing from me literally replacing Obito's Chakra system with a new one grown from my own.

"R-Rin..." The broken form of the unredeemed mumbled as he finally self-actualized, for the first time since Uchiha Madara got his hands on him. It was a cruel thing, to force him to acknowledge the truth in everything everyone ever told him that didn't fit his own preconceptions. But that was what you got, when your only hope for *some* manner of salvation was left entirely in someone else's hands. Here, after the end, his fate was ruled only by my pity. "I-It was never worth it, in the end... Any of it..."

I watched quietly as he faded into the darkness, and onwards into the cycle of Samsara again. There was nothing to be learned down here for him, and certainly nothing to suffer that was worse than what he'd already gone through.

There was barely anything of the original person left, but it was enough for the soul to endure, just a while longer. Personal tragedy is only ever an explanation, never an excuse, but...

Hopefully he would make better choices in his next life. Perhaps enough of them that it wouldn't be the last.

"Pointless," the King of Hell said the first thing that had any chance of actually being true. "He is not even fit to be reborn as an animal."

"I'm going to destroy you now."

“Foolishness,” it said instead of smiting me, kicking me, or otherwise attacking me. Even opening its maw to try and ensnare me with one of those strange spirit tendrils Nagato used would’ve been *something*, but it just kept talking instead. “Delusion. No matter what you-“

The darkness of Hell was speared through by the most brilliant Heaven’s Light.

I stood within its glow – *my* glow – and fed it all to the Tree of Life within me. The ethereal construct grew beyond me, as above so below. The roots sunk down into the base of the lowest world, deep, wide and thick, pushing, displacing, crushing and breaking the Shinju’s own as they did. The trunk grew upwards through the light, even as the roots followed after it, sprouting new ones through every realm. Further up, the tree grew just as many branches from the top to pervade all places.

The king of hell thrashed, perhaps it had some in-built self-preservation after all. But it had been formed wrong to begin with, and in the centuries since, the realms themselves had crumbled in on it, trapping it where it stood. Keeping it in place every bit as much as the Shinju itself did from inside, grown out of control as it had through every limb and innard.

Inevitably, inexorably, I brought more and more of myself down to Naraka until I had entirely descended from Heaven into Hell. As I did, the Tree of Life grew through me, then beyond me and further, through and over *it*. It felt like ages, it might even have been ages up in Heaven, but finally I had the King of Hell completely encased. Hell’s Tyrant held in the grip of the Way to Paradise.

“Heavenly Art – Bodhisattva Path: World Tree Propitiation.”

The Tree of Life detonated with the entire potential force of the Earth exploding.

For an instant, I was completely unmade along with everything else.

But even as the blast unfolded with realm-shaking force, I reformed in its midst. Spirits may die, but souls were hardier things. And I was hardier still, because the purest and most complete Form of my Self was safely stewarded by my wife up in Heaven, even though I’d just sacrificed all I’d grown and become, in my time up there. As was the plan all along. This was the only reason I’d found it in myself to come back at all, even though it was also why I resented it.

I felt stirrings all around me, flickers and sympathies, and all manner of fragments that were no less me than me.

Correction, I'd just sacrificed *almost* all I'd grown and made. Again.

There was a groan ahead of me. And above me. Coming from all around, and down and up, like something rumbling through several dimensions at once, thrashing in what *might* have been pain if the source was truly alive.

The King of Hell. It was still there. Still alive, for whatever it was worth. Shaken, cracked all through, but standing even as it crumbled. Holding on just from inherited spite, even as the many souls it had eaten escaped through its many gaps and cracks, like swarms of glow beetles fleeing a landslide during a forest fire.

No longer immobile from the weight of the realms that had just been lifted from its burden, along with so much of itself.

“Failure...” It groaned hoarsely, making as if to grab a weapon, or a handhold to finally stand up for the first time and prosecute my death. And worse. “The fate of all who-“

“Heavenly Art – Bodhisattva Path,” I grunted through the drifting bits and pieces of my sacrifice. The loose spirit particles were spread in scraps through six different dimensions, but were still *me*. They were enough to simultaneously assault at least as many places. As it was, I only had options for four. Four targets. Four people that could make a difference worth a damn, here at this far too belated end to the *last* end of the world.

Just as planned. “Summoning Technique!”

“Ninshu: Sublime Spiritual Objection!”

“Ninpou: Five Elements Overcoming!”

“Nintai: Rampage of the Victorious Fighting Buddha!”

“Onmyouton: Destruction of all Things.”

In the Realm of Asuras, a six-armed golden Titan matched spirit against spirit with the King of Hell, and found him so wanting that both it and the Shinju's branches were completely unmade.

In the Realm of Pretas, the most Wrathful of all Departed unleashed an assault so mighty that the living infection was reduced to pulp and bloody sap, which the Hungry Ghosts in that realm descended upon ravenously. The King of Hell's own victims got to feast on its corpse, as was their right.

In the Animal Realm, the Monkey King's Compliant Golden-Hoped Rod multiplied a thousand-fold and smashed the trunk of the Shinju to powder for the flies. In his wake came Yemo the Sky Dragon, cloaked in thunder and rain and casting lightning bolts everywhere.

And from Heaven, following down through the conjoined spheres, pulled by the temporary conjunction I had opened through my sacrifice, the Creation of All Things enacted *Destruction* of all Things all the way down to the very bottom of the lowest realm I stood in now, leaving no remnants of the demonic or alien behind, no matter how well they hid.

It was a focused funnel, up until it passed below the other five realms. Then it unfolded in an expansive, diffuse thing. I watched in vindication as the trunk of the Shinju, and its boughs, and every last tendril and leaf was disintegrated and transmuted back into its primordial constituents, a true and proper part of Realms' own nature again at last.

I was the last loose end. Me, here in Naraka. Yomi. Hell. This dark, dry, barren ground that I no longer stood upon. Because my Summoning technique had called not only friends, but also the One Thousand and Twenty-Four-Armed Enlightened Buddha Statue of Firefly Forest.

This next-to-last act might have been a tragic massacre, in any other place and time. But with all the torment and injustice the King of Hell and the Shinju inflicted on the dead, the only spirits with any mass or coherence that didn't end up in Heaven were all Preta. Any others just reincarnated as animals.

As for demons themselves, oni, whatever you wanted to call them, beings coalescing from the collected negative emotions or fractured animus of the living and dead...

I don't know what happened to those that predated Kaguya, if any. But in the time since, they just couldn't form with the Shinju devouring everything they could have been formed out of. Like the astral plane of the living world, and the other layers where oni, yokai or kami should be, this world's hell was quite literally empty.



“Mould chakra according to shape transformation principles,” I said while putting thought to action, because the quiet was too unnatural in this place. I collected every part of me I’d shed, and every scrap of power that had shaved off me *and* the King of Hell, now burned to nothing but two halves of feet, and even less of his face, fallen in the grey dirt. “Long-form filament, millimetre thick wedge, monoatomic edge.”

I clawed my finger diagonally across Hell’s expanse. And the statue’s fingers in every other possible direction at once.

Hell’s horizon was sliced clean in half.

One Thousand and Twenty-Four Times.

Plus one.

The Shinju’s roots were minced into stubs and slivers no longer than a yard, just as the Destruction of All things finally burned low enough to reach them.

And me.

“-. .-“

Back in the living world, in the Human Realm, the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path was on the Moon, beyond my reach. Beyond the reach of anyone on Earth. I could do nothing to it.

For now.

Which meant that all the power I *would* have invested in an attack against it was unspent.

When my tired self down in Hell succumbed to Hagoromo’s indiscriminate power, I shuddered and took a deep, rattling breath as I felt the shock of most of my Yin being permanently lost. Again.

I was still in a better place than I had ever been on this side of the veil, except maybe when I raised the statue the first time. But I was getting quite burned out on literally sacrificing myself over and over again.

Oh well. It was disappointing that I wouldn't get to change geography up here too, for the moment, but at the least I would redefine history.

I opened my eyes in the living world to find that only minutes had passed.

Even that was enough for everything to veer into near madness. The Ogdoad had all hid inside their pockets on my harness. Naruto was hiding behind me, clinging to my trousers. Juugo was hiding behind Minato now, the boys had changed places while I was off doing the Harrowing. But my body remembered everything that happened here even though I was away in the other me.

The two brats had a whole non-argument about it. Naruto came over fit to brawl, only for Juugo to calmly give up his spot to his 'senior hanger-on,' which left Naruto completely baffled and twice as frustrated. Enough that he might have kicked me mid-jutsu if my clouds didn't choose that same moment to break.

Half of Juugo's clan were huddled behind my eldest frog son, while the rest were inside a dome of earth raised by Tsunade and the dozen Uzumaki remnants who'd come to witness today's events. As were all the orphans with their ninja minders.

No one had taken shelter from the sudden rainstorm inside my castle. Likely because the space between it and them glowed ghostly blue. Trito filled all the space they would have needed to herd the little non-combatants through.

He was a grand thing. Looming above me, gargantuan, shimmering white and blue. Shaped in the same shape as the Enlightened Buddha Statue of Firefly Forest that had just been destroyed in Hell, complete with its one thousand and twenty-four arms.

To scale.

"Don't panic!" I shouted through the heavy patter of rain. Trito magnified my voice such that all of Konoha must have heard me. "This is all part of the plan!"

"You're crazy!" Someone shouted. I didn't recognize his voice.

My only reply was to turn to the all-new giant oak tree that none of my clingy brats had remarked on, even the one who *did* know it didn't exist until the day before. "Hey Naruto!" I called to the

kid, since he was my only hanger-on now that had any courage worth a damn. “Wanna see something cool?”

“No duh!” Naruto shrieked calmly. “You were gonna replace me with orange-hair, weren’t you? Admit it! If you don’t I’ll-!”

I dropped my hand to call down lightning from the clouds.

The bolt struck the oak so hard that the entire crown burst into flames with an ear-splitting boom.

Naruto yelped and tucked himself so tight against my legs I almost expected him to spontaneously invent a fusion technique and merge outright.

*He doesn’t know about Yemo, I reminded myself. He shouldn’t have gotten the idea yet. Right?*

A second bolt came down. Then a third. Then a fourth, and then no more because the fourth flashed and flashed and flashed and boomed *continuously* for almost a minute, until the biggest oak Konoha had ever seen was split clean down the middle. It was burning, black, steaming, and something much, much more important.

“Now, Naruto!” I called as the lightning finally died down. “What do you see?”

The kid peeked around my legs and squinted at the tree. He gasped. “It’s – it’s lightning! But round? And – and squiggly!”

My glass medium of anami birth was a fair crucible for controlled lab conditions, but ultimately a very substandard substitute for the real thing. Which, after far too much thought for any scientist’s illusion of self-aggrandizement, I had realized did *not* necessarily have to be in interstellar space. I didn’t know if it was nature’s happy accident, or if a man or a god had genetically engineered it that way, but a lightning blast achieved similar results when striking oaks.

When the blast struck the tree, it interacted with the very particular components of the oak’s leaves and sap in equally particular ways. The plasma took on a unique toroidal structure. That was how ball lightning formed. Ball lightning was what anami *are*.

If any reason existed besides its girth and size, for the oak to be considered Father Sky’s tree, it was almost certainly this.

I grandly waved my arms as if encircling the whole world. “Yin-Yang Release.” I rumbled the words as imposingly as I could too, because I wasn’t above performing for little kids anymore. Again. “Supreme Authority of Manu.”

Trito’s many hands moved with mine. Swarms of him flew forth and merged with the new lightning proto-lives.

Waves of anami cell souls poured forth, through forest, brush and even earth and rock to engulf everyone who’d been brought here on my say so.

There would be pain while their bodies expelled all the refuse, but brief or long they wouldn’t feel it. I knew how to selectively deaden pain receptors now, even during this. And if for any of them it failed to work, the relief after it was over would wash the experience away. Their bodies would revel in the near-godlike health of ensouled cells, and being freed from the burden of an extradimensional parasite. I didn’t need blood as a medium either, now that the anami knew how to get around chakra’s ill effects.

The rain stopped. The clouds began to disperse, now that they were used up.

I anchored myself in place, then called up a specific record of chakra and blood. “Summoning Technique.”

The Third Hokage appeared in front of me in a puff of smoke.

He looked around cautiously, even though he didn’t have eyes to do it with. I reached out, grabbed him over the blindfold and grew them back.

“Old Man!” Naruto glomped the Third Hokage almost too soon for me to finish the job. “You just missed the most *awesome* thing *ever*, you’ll never believe it!”

“Naruto,” I interrupted the display. “Hold that thought.”

Before Hiruzen could decide if he should react like a friend or a ninja, I had him wrapped in a wooden cocoon. Soon after, he was properly sedated. “Damn.” I said while everyone still inexplicably let me do whatever crazy thing I wanted. Minato’s control over his shinobi was really something else. “The damage is worse than I thought, I’ll have to do this in steps. Alright. Blood

infusion just for redundancy's sake, induce coma, suspend pain receptors. Yin Release: Trito's Tribulation."

I waited for a minute. Then another.

Shit, Sarutobi was in really bad shape, even for an old man.

"Any problems?" Minato asked, having come to stand next to me.

"No, just more of the expected ones. One."

On my other side, Tsunade had joined me as well. "Be glad those children aren't writhing and screaming in pain like I was told to expect. If they were, we'd be having words about patient safety." Her crossed arms were practically vibrating with her effort to keep from grabbing me by the collar, or whatever was going through her head. She probably wasn't staying back to watch over anyone because of her hemophobia, but I didn't ask.

Or check. I wasn't a Yamanaka, I couldn't read her mind. Well, I *could*, but I hadn't come up with a technique I was entirely confident in yet.

"And that's done, finally. Stand back." I put my hand on the surface of Sarutobi's improvised operation berth, then a visible spiritual hand went further, through the wood, and then *into* Sarutobi to wrap its fingers around the Gate of Opening inside his brain.

With my access to his nervous system, I ordered all his cells to physically disconnect from his chakra system. Immediately after, I turned myself and everything I held intangible through Kamui.

The pocket dimension itself was gone now, the isolated hidden realm destroyed from outside along with the King of Hell, and the Shinju by whose power it had existed all this time.

But I didn't need the pocket itself. After all, Hell was still there. I would be able to recreate the hidden realm too, if I wanted, or make a new one in my image. But that was for later.

In a single move, I pulled the Third Hokage's entire chakra system out.

There was much amazement from those watching, and just as much horror and dread, but I didn't waste time on questions or feeling smug about myself. I quickly reverse-engineered the host-specific adaptations of the thing in my hands, and created my own version as fast as I could without cutting corners. Even with the old man fully infused with anami spirit cells, I didn't like what was

going on in his brain chemistry, never mind with his spirit. It was cracking and breaking way too fast, even cradled in Trito's gentlest grasp.

Finally, I had as good an end result as I could hope for, without long-term observation. With Trito helping to maximize my sleight of hand, I pushed the new Tree of Life back through the temporary coffin and slotted it in the old man.

I kept him inside while I guided the new chakra system's growth back through his spiritual body, then a bit more while I fine-tuned things there, and in his body proper for a few more minutes, just to be sure. When I was finally willing to bring him out, I sensed Sarutobi's two children finally closing in on where we were. I gave myself until they arrived to triple check.

It was after they got here, and Minato did all he could do to assuage their fears, that I finally brought the old man out.

"Careful now," I told Hiruzen while I helped him stay on his feet. "You'll feel like you're floating for a little while, and I advise to wait before testing out your new chakra system. And body." I'd considered reversing his clock by a few decades while I was at it, but in the end that wasn't my choice to make for him. His new biology would add to his lifespan as it was, but that was just what perfect health got you.

"Old man!" Case in point, Naruto instantly zeroed in on the important things. "You lost your wrinkles!"

With that ice-breaker, the Sarutobi family finally had their much-belated reconciliation.

I discreetly moved away from the family and turned to Minato. "I think I finally know how to get around your furry little problem. And Naruto's too, I suppose. Which is good because taking care of overpowered children would be a problem without even more overpowered grownups around. Be a shame if the Fourth Hokage stopped being the most ridiculous ninja of them all, don't you think?"

Namikaze Minato stared at me, then shook his head with that same look of wonder that he seemed to wear so often since his revival. "Talk to me about it later. Right now, I still have work to do."

"Just so long as it's not a scheme to keep me here. I have travel and business aspirations you know."

“I know.” Minato gazed at me meaningfully. “Thank you for everything you’ve done. Truly. As for scheming, put it out of your mind. I will not allow any of it, and I’ve made that clear to everyone. What you’ve done is more than enough. What you did *before* this was already enough. I will never let it be forgotten or undervalued. You have my solemn vow on that.”

That was no small thing, was it? Naruto, Shisui, and now Namikaze Minato were giving me honour-bound oaths.

“My only worry were the manhunts that would be launched against you the moment you left our protection,” Minato admitted. “But after this display, even I can’t really raise credible arguments that you can’t take care of yourself.”

I stood aside while Minato and Tsunade helped lead the three Sarutobi inside the castle for some privacy and independent health assessment, now that Trito was no longer in the way.

I turned and walked away from the sight to behold the fruits of my *second* great labour.

On the day of September 15, year eight by a calendar reckoning no one used but me, I destroyed the last of Kaguya’s wretched legacy. In so doing, I made it impossible to use mere chakra to infringe on the cycle of death and rebirth. I didn’t know what it said about me, that a certain seven-bodied paraplegic was more likely to forgive me for it than a certain snake sannin.

Even Tsunade, maybe, once she found out even the Impure World Resurrection wouldn’t fulfil her wish anymore.

That I followed that feat by bestowing the Tree of Life on three hundred and twenty-five people, along with Hashirama-level bodies...

Well. It was nowhere as grand as giving the power of chakra to all of mankind, but then again... everyone was fresh out of the tree pods back then, which meant they were all in one place for the Sage of Six Paths to do his thing. Or near enough that the difference didn’t matter, even decades later. There weren’t nearly as many people around either, in total.

*Who would ever have thought that science would be a viable equalizer to ninjutsu, instead of just some measly enabler?* I thought wonderingly. *Could it be that I’m actually kind of amazing? Even by this world’s standards?*

I looked to my right. Juugo and his clan were revelling in the sudden control they now had over their monstrous transformations. I looked ahead, to the members of the reunited Uzumaki Clan who'd come to stand witness to events. I looked to my left, where wide-eyed shinobi were trying not to stare at me too long while also looking after the orphaned children. *All* of Konoha's orphaned children. Who were now almost all woken up and checking themselves over with amazed and frightened, confused eyes.

I pulled a deep breath.

"Oy brats!" Leaves fell from trees at the shock of my voice. Behind me, the oak still burned. "How would you all like to be adopted?"

So close and yet so far, Namikaze Naruto screamed in horror.

There.

Finally, life made sense.



