

## Chapter 14: The Abandon of Monsters

“- July 23, 6 ANB .-“

C-catastrophic damage – susss-spend ex-ternal s-sensory innnn-p-put, r-reset internal receptors, activate – pain, pain, p-*pain overwhelming* – deactivate! Suspend fight or flight response, abate signal strength, splice neuron axons to divert half of incoming impulses to circular loops, reactivate pain receptors, p-pain... reduced, still overwhelming, repeat process, repeat, repeat, repeat – pain manageable, examine internal sensory input for–

The ground shifted under me as *something* cracked the earth that I couldn't see or hear while deaf and blind from sixteen rock-shattering blows to the head, groaning, languorous. Everything downward from my upper spine felt absent, everything upward *hurt*. The Sword of Kusanagi *wrenched* out of my back as I tasted dirt along with my blood, it wasn't – it wasn't only – not just-

Ignore pain, assess homeostasis, minimal surface damage thanks to skin and muscular tissue density, ceramic carbide ossification prevented skull damage, serious lung and diaphragm damage due to stab, devastating general damage, severe traumatic brain injury due to kinetic shock, severe damage to all internal organs, catastrophic damage to skeletal-muscular apparatus, countless muscle lesions, tendons intact but anchoring cartilage torn at all major joints, radiuses fractured, ulnas fractured, tibias broken, left femur warped, right femur fractured, pelvis *shattered*, spine –

Good god, my spine – so many places – the cervical broken – the middle third of my thoracic section was *paste*.

Suspend combat dynamics modelling! Reallocate resources to damage recovery, repair sprains, repair microfractures, begin simulations for major damage repair, assign priMArY – abort, abort, assign *tertiary* mental partition, first and second streams unavailable due to brain damage, fourth thought stream crashed at unknown point, restart, assign to sensory processing, reassess internal sensory input, re-activate external sensory input, cross-examine sensory input for abnormalities, illusions not detected, telepathy not detected, hypnosis not detected, no new hostile biological agents detected, physical agony impairs cognitive tasks, *massive incoming threat*, p-preliminary assessment.

*I didn't die in one hit.*

“Amazing,” Orochimaru’s voice slithered its way to my ears as he landed in the groove he’d dug through the forest with my broken body. “You survived even that.”

Block fear neuromodulators, supplement adrenaline production, adjust acetylcholine and dopamine and norepinephrine production, begin –

“But oh, my dear doctor,” Orochimaru pulled my face out of the dirt by my hair - *lock vertebral muscles!* “Could it be that you are finally reaching the limits of your regeneration?”

Lock muscle tension around spine, tissue state suboptimal to sustain effort, concentrate Anami cell remnants, lock energy state of local anatomy to prevent any and all shift in marrow positioning, skip every second sinew to minimise fragmentation, distribute Anami remainder to skin cells, initiate alternating current circuit, milliamperage at 33, 44, 55, 66, attempts failed, assimilate enemy tissue, tissue not found, only oil, compound is nonconductive with consistency of tar, enemy using it to insulate self, direct skin contact prevented, cannot paralyze, cannot repel, can't-

“Come now, Doctor, I can't have overestimated you by *that* much.” Orochimaru stomped *hard* on the back of my leg from behind. It didn't break. “Oh?” He made three more attempts, then he dropped me back on my face and an oil-coated python spilled out of his sleeve to wrap around my legs, then up further up to my waist and higher all the way around my chest and my neck, it began to tighten, tighten, tighten, *tighten-*

Resist, resist, resist, enact counter-contractions, initiate muscle fiber recruitment, effort insufficient, desired contractions misfiring, signals not reaching below diaphragm, current tissue density cannot compensate, energy insufficient, mental resources unavailable for biomodification, physical resources insufficient after recent duress, biomass critically depleted after having to recently replace lethal burns, fire remains the ultimate regenerator killer, flayed layers likewise irrecoverable, tissue density – my strength – so much... lower than it was just that morning, I –

SNAP

My remaining intact femur snapped and my hip dislocated.

“Hgn,” I grunted. The pain – even so much reduced, it *burned*, having redundant ganglia independent of the spinal cord was showing its double edge.

“Aha!” the Sannin exclaimed delightedly, stroking the serpent as it dumped me back on my face in the dirt. “My oh my, seems I’ve yet *underestimated* you, how wonderful!”

D-defer on musculoskeletal realignment, c-commence damaged biomass reabsorption, commence nerve regeneration, performance – suboptimal, Anami cells majorly spent, remainder require micromanagement, available mental partitions already assigned to critical operations, cannot divert, biofeedback – biofeedback *redlining*, I need – I need Yemo, I need-

“I read your Dummy's Guide to Effective Science. Brilliant work, it gave me no end of ideas and accelerated my research by decades, the centrefolds were particularly illuminating.”

“I – “ I coughed out bloody dust. “I don’t give autographs.”

The kick to the face wasn’t surprising, only the fact it didn’t split my lip was.

“I am surprised, truly, what happened to the strength you showed during the earlier battle? Could it be that even your healing ability has a cost?” Many new snakes appeared, smaller this time, but still strong enough to wrap around each of my limbs and individual fingers, snapping my joints out of alignment one after another. “But then, should that truly hinder you?”

POP

“The nervous system plays the ultimate role in combat, is that not your ultimate asset?” POP “If you perform a movement you're familiar with, your nerves can get a large portion of the available muscle fibres to contract. You yourself called this muscle fibre recruitment.” POP “I suppose you truly have no experience in battle at all.” POP - SNAP went my knee next. “If it was something at all familiar to you, your nerves would be much more capable of getting your muscles to produce the desired contractions, even lacking the brain’s coordination. Alas for your current state, your muscles only know to keep you from injuring yourself attempting something you have no competence in.” POP

“Orochimaru,” I wheezed. “Y-you-“

SNAP. “Oh? I’m sorry, Doctor, I didn’t realize you wanted to say something, I am after all a poor, uneducated swine.”

*Sarutobi, Hatake, Hirano, who blabbed?* The first two were unlikely, the third... the doctor... *drugs and nightly visitations*, Shisui’s ‘off-hand’ comment rose and fell amidst my runaway thoughts. *Fuck you too, Danzo.*

“Please, Doctor, do speak your mind.” Orochimaru raised me by the throat with his python and grabbed on my hair so hard my spine nearly snapped in a completely new place. “I insist.”

I squinted at him, my head turned forcefully around to see him. “Y-you...”

“Yes?”

“You still don’t know shit.”

CRASH

I didn’t see the tree but I felt it when I flew through it, saw its shadow as it collapsed under its weight, experienced its mass as it fell on top of me. I struggled to inhale with my chest pressed down, I choked on the tossed earth and splinters, such pain, suspend – no, if I don’t feel pain I don’t know what to heal – cough – if I don’t cough, I’d choke and suffocate to death, I didn’t have –

A loud, distant roar shook the wind, and it sounded like nothing I’d ever heard.

“What was–?” Orochimaru sounded startled. “No, it does not matter, seems our leisure is past.” Orochimaru dug me out none too gently, dislocated every other one of my joints with clinical precision, then dragged my limp form over to a drum-shaped barrel covered in seals that wasn’t there before. “We’ll have to continue our *bonding* later.”

*That’s-*

Orochimaru’s throat suddenly elongated, then his open mouth descended to bite the side of my neck like a snake.

“Hng!” My body lurched as if hit by lightning. *It – it burns, like necrosis and fire all at once but – not just in my flesh!*

“I’d say don’t resist,” the snake man hissed in my ear as his fangs injected me with venom and natural energy and *pain*. “But I’m not delusional, regardless of what *some* may think.”

Orochimaru ripped his fanged maw from my neck and shoved me inside the container. I suddenly understood with humiliating clarity why the madman had gone to such lengths to disconnect all of my joints. I barely fit even when stuffed like a pulped corpse, agh, I – I couldn’t move – even enough to breathe, I could go without air for so long I could set up camp underwater, but a little bit of air was still -

“Don’t worry, it will be a long and fruitful joining, just as soon as you heal of course. Yes, I can tell, you may have fooled everyone up to this point, but no longer.”

*I – know this thing.*

“Don’t worry, it’s just the sort of scientific endeavour I can guarantee you will appreciate.”

*The barrel – the drum Sasuke was sealed in during the Sound Four flight!*

“And if you don’t, well, you’ll have all of eternity to come around to my way of thinking.”

Orochimaru had already – he wanted me for –

“Try not to die in transit, will you? Though I promise, even if you do, Edo Tensei will make sure your secrets do not die with you. I’ve yet to perfect it, but I’m sure your amazing body will help me make the final leap, and I don’t need the technique perfect to get all I want out of you.”

The lid came down just as the curse seal began to burn inside my flesh, plunging me into complete darkness.

*The Living Corpse Reincarnation!*

I squinted in the dark, cycling animal sight types to look for other spectrums. I felt chakra burning within me, and natural energy gone wrong and twisted. I felt chakra around me too, felt it condense into the planks of wood, and outside *on* the wood. The darkness became absolute no matter how far into infrared or ultraviolet I looked. I couldn’t see at all. I couldn’t see. I couldn’t feel any movement anymore either. But we had to be moving, it was the whole point, but I couldn’t feel it. I couldn’t see. I couldn’t feel. I couldn’t hear.

*Juugo has got to be an Uzumaki*, I thought dazedly, struggling to breathe enough to maintain consciousness. *Or maybe Juugo’s clan is just a result of Uzumaki cellular tampering research?* Their whole thing was sage mode gone horribly right. I’d forgotten back before I had my cognitive tune-up, but Juugo was a redhead too, wasn’t he? A bloody ginger –

My awareness underwent the bizarre experience of witnessing discontinuity of consciousness right as it occurred.

Suspend external sensors! Reallocate mental resources to systemic transmutation, phenotype – phenotype... phenotype cutaneous respiration!

My skin rippled and moved, and suddenly I could breathe through it like an amphibian.

*Won't last me long, but I have a little time – however long this pocket of air lasts me – what was that?*

It was like I experienced my consciousness cutting off without it actually cutting off, it was – like sleep paralysis turned into an out of the body experience.

I accelerated my internal sensory processing as fast as it could go, then looked inward through my brain, to the neurons and axons, then deeper, all the way to the – abort, ABORT, that's just another distraction!

*I need – I need – focus on living – I need options!*

The seals on the drum...

*Sensory deprivation?* But all attempts by the foreign energies to do *something* by burrowing into my chakra system were failing because the chakra was being expunged along with all the rest through the Gate of Death. The Cursed Seal... one third was absorbing natural energy, the other two had latched onto my chakra pathway system, trying to pull my chakra but not finding any because the outer flow was too strong, too ingrained, my skin, my muscles, my blood was calcifying, petrifying because the natural energy was just going in without counterbalance.

Suspend external sensory input, reallocate mental thread, insulate affected tissue, metabolise, repeat, repeat, repeat, loop procedure.

Close Gate of Death, observe... The curse seal was taking my chakra and converting it *back* into Yin and Yang like the chakra pathway system *didn't*.

*Fuck me.*

Study process 1%, 2%, 3%, 5%, 11%...

Orochimaru had somehow encoded his own trained ability to convert chakra back into Yin and Yang. He'd already achieved what I've been building towards all this time. He had managed to *reverse the Shinju's function*. Did he even understand what he had achieved here?

*But for what?*

The Cursed Seal... it was pumping sage chakra into my chakra system and steadily increasing rates the more it spread. There was a tendril of Orochimaru's Yin inside, to which the chakra was being converted to match, my chakra system would be gradually converted to have affinity for the same, but this was... just the secondary effect?

*Inference: the true aim of the Cursed Seal of Heaven is just to force the chakra pathway system of the host to grow faster.*

Cruder than I expected by miles, but it made sense if the whole point was to prepare a body so it handled your full power, or at least your full chakra output.

... 31%, 67%, 100% analysis complete.

The Cursed Seal was a chakra pathway system *graft* programmed via fuuinjutsu. But it didn't look artificial, it... was this taken from his own body? Did he excise a bit of his own chakra system? I wouldn't put it past him, if he was expecting to get an entirely new one out of the deal. Maybe he even figured out how to grow it, that would be an essential step on the path to transferring himself wholesale, wouldn't it? Absent of ninshu, he needed *some way* to interface with the victim's own system.

The energy flow was so small though. Even if the acceleration rate continued, it would take over a day for my pathways to even feel the strain, my own pathway system had spread and thickened a lot during the last six months, despite my best efforts, just from practicing with the Eight Gates. And if I go ahead and *Reopen the Gate of Death*...

The chakra was back to being expelled faster than it was generated.

*I've seen enough.*

Expunge infestation.

The whole upper third of my trapezius muscle rent itself free in a burst of gore. The venom glutted on misqualified natural energy sizzled and smoked on my skin, foul and rancid but as harmless as a fish on land, flopping and churning in between the bloody folds of my twisted body until it expired with a last, grinding burble and turned to rock dust.

Mental partition freed, reactivate external sensory input, survey surroundings.

Complete environmental insulation still in place.

If that was true...

Then Orochimaru couldn't see, hear or feel me any better than I could the outside world.

Prioritize general damage repair, phenotype transmutation partition idle, reallocate to acquired asset management, confirm assimilation of enemy biomatter, analyse, rinkaichu success, Uchiha blood plasma success, zetsu blood plasma success, Sharingan tissue inconclusive,





*General tissue repair complete.*

I loosened and contracted all my muscles, tested where to expand, where to contract, when, how, then I pushed out in all directions as hard as I could. I was – I was so *weak* again but – I could still ignore the biological lock on strength and *get this fucking thing off me!*

The drum *shattered* around me.

I fell.

I fell and fell and fell down from the crown of the great treetops that I was being carried through, flopping in free-fall as I spilled out of that stuffed ball into something vaguely shaped like a person, y-yank-

*Yank everything back into place!*

Crack – snap – POP were heard like fireworks three hundred and fifty times in a second.

I hit the ground with a hard thud, tossing earth, dust and leaf mold in the air. Impact damage... minor but still bad on top of everything else that still – that didn't – it hadn't-

The forest above me *ripped* to gory splinters with a shrieking sound as if drilled through by buzz saws.

“ ██████████ — — ! ! ”

The roar was scratchy, gravelly and *wet* as if the voice was screaming through a bubbling brew made of blood and phlegm. It was so loud that I almost didn't hear Orochimaru cursing and yelling technique names in the chaos.

I tried to move, but my fingers barely twitched. I tried to look around, then I stopped. Every scrap of thought dedicated to my outer senses were resources I wasn't using to *rebuild my spinal cord*. Priorities, priorities, keep sight of priorities...

But... my out of body experience, it... it was an *inside* the body experience at the same time, but without using my body, somehow, it... had no effect on my recovery? Good or bad?

I looked inside... then further. I felt... my body felt horrible, but everything else... my spirit... it felt *light*.

I accelerated my internal sensory input as fast as it could go, then looked inward through my brain, to the neurons and axons, then deeper, all the way to the electric oscillations in the brain's

fine-fibered dendritic webs, then went beyond even them to look past the Yang to see the Yin. I was... I was looking at myself. From both directions but without double vision, it was... I couldn't find words for it.

The oscillations... they were waves. They created wave interference patterns in which memory was being encoded naturally into something *not flesh*. The record... it had momentarily cut off earlier, but my awareness *hadn't*. I could see memory being formed from them in my consciousness, but my consciousness didn't *need* them to continue, I just... I just *was*.

I...

I was...

I didn't understand, how, why, I didn't know but... But I could understand something else.

The Yin leech.... It was *gone*.

I could... see through the wave interference patterns in my brain, past the Yang and through the ragged tapestry of my Yin all the way to where the burdensome lump used to be. A giant void of ripped spirit, slowly being contracted and patched by wave form patterns and manifest memory sewn together by my will to live. Badly. Weakly. But it was better than what I had before, dammit, I don't have time for more life-altering realizations right now!

*Cartilage reconstruction complete.*

The kyuubi's purified golden chakra had done something, had been *doing* something back in the Uchiha clan hall, filling the Yin leech, feeding it so I didn't have to anymore, all the Yang I'd never have mustered enough of, all of it fed to the leech at once. I didn't know – I didn't understand, *hadn't* understood, even Kurama hadn't been aware of it until the very last moment of our joining, he didn't understand anything even after, but –

*I left the leech behind somehow*, I thought dazedly as my spiritual perception – I had *spiritual perception* now, a whole new sense and it was – it was flooded with the feeling of snakes clashing with a palpable will to destroy even the whole world in my defense all over the forest. *I left the leech with Yemo – no, it stayed behind! It can act on its own? It can **choose**? The gold... the Yang that had been coursing through it, Kurama what did you do?*

My Yin was loose now, more than half of its burden gone, like a tapestry balled up around a single, thick knot that had been suddenly torn off. It was unrolling, unfolding, unspooling as I watched, the longer I lingered at the threshold of death the more I got to see of myself as the –

the Yang – *my* Yang was flowing into the Yin. Not any faster than before, but more than the Yin needed now that the burden was gone.

Yin too, what had been going into the leech, that trickle of Yin was now seeping back into *me*, not nearly enough to balance the scales but... the beginning of a cycle, Yin and Yang were supposed to be a cycle and I'd been deprived of it all this time!

With eyes that weren't eyes, I watched and felt myself begin to untangle into something other than an *utter mess*.

*Vertebras reconstructed, marrow realignment complete, reconnecting nerves, assess homeostasis.*

I had no guns, my storage seal was back with my previous armpit in Kamui where Obito had tried to send all of me along with his branch trap. But I could finally think properly and move again.

Situation...

“Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” A colossal billow of smoke overtook the landscape. “Manda, stall that creature, whatever technique that is cannot last very long!”

“Orochimaru, you-!”

“I'll give you a thousand sacrifices, just stop him!”

*Spinal cord repair complete.*

Situation nominal.

Override fear neuromodulators, restart adrenaline generation, adjust production of acetylcholine and dopamine and norepinephrine, reset all sensory pain receptors, activate, cancel, cross-examine sensory input for abnormalities, illusions not detected, telepathy not detected, hypnosis not detected, psychosomatic pain detected, neutralized, physical pain not detected, contract all muscles, relax, review pain signals, results nominal, revert skin phenotype to optimal defense configuration, confirm homeostasis 1%, 2%, 3%, 5%, 11%, 31%, 67%, 100%.

Conclude disaster recovery.

Reallocate mental resources to combat dynamics modelling.

I climbed to my feet just in time to dodge the Kusanagi sword and grab Orochimaru's tongue-turned-snake under my arm. "Go fuck yourself."

My blood stabbed out of my skin into the snake, and so the shock of alternating current at 66 milliamps slammed right through Orochimaru's mouth into his brain.

"GR-HR-HR-HR-HR-HR-RRRRRRR--"

My moment of triumph lasted up until Orochimaru burst into brown mud.

*Well, I tried.*

I jumped onto the closest tree with all the speed the Gates could give me when I didn't have shunshin to pair it with, ran up to the first branch that could bear my weight, shoved a chunk of my chakra in it and jumped across to the other, bigger tree, crouching sideways on the trunk. *Of course it was a clone, fuck!* But then it shouldn't have conducted the current, the reactions were too lifelike, had Orochimaru substituted mid-way through? Despite being paralyzed?

Obito *had* fired the Izanagi... But he was a freak of body horror explicitly designed for survival and toughness. Orochimaru was a different sort of body horror entirely, his emphasis was on *utility* over anything else, he didn't have Obito's toughness or regeneration, even before he first swapped hosts, that's why he failed to attain sage mode, that's why he wanted *me*.

*Mud clones must have some basic casting abilities, at least enough for them to use substitution on the main.*

Kusanagi burst out the bark and through my back *again* – displace internal tissue! – but it broke skin and nothing else as I moved everything out of its way, then there was just a chunk of smoking wood in my place and I was running up the first tree again, because I can use Substitution too, so fuck you! "And fuck your snakes too, you bastard!"

The substitution technique was nowhere near as abusable as theorised back on Earth. Shisui had trained me, it turned out you need to infuse a chunk of your chakra into something roughly your mass ahead of time. Besides the exposure this meant against chakra sensors – which is why I didn't use it back at the party – this meant you could only have one primed at a time. When you used the technique, you weren't teleporting random things from the environment, you yanked on your own chakra. It was where the idea for space-time techniques originated. The technique was originally supposed to be a rapid movement technique, like a grapple hook

to pull yourself out of danger, but it overperformed, like every other lucky accident in the history of technology. Or magic in this case, because why the fuck not?

“ ██████████ — — ! ! ”

Far away but so close that my footing shook every time I jumped branches, Manda the Strongest Colossal Serpent clashed with... something equally serpentine flying around made of blood and thunder, what even *was* it? It had felt like my Anami in that moment when we were close enough, but it wasn't Yemo, what happened to Yemo?

*Mokuton discerned.*

I almost fell off the tree.

*That was still going on?!*

What? When? How? Where was this mental train when I was getting stuffed in a box? No, forget that, how did I forget?!

*The brain damage!*

It had affected a good chunk of the parts I used for partition coordination, the partition had been working all this time but the connections were only re-established now.

*How can I use-?*

Mokuton analysed, Mokuton is not ninjutsu, Mokuton is *ninshu* with *plants*, mechanics vastly distinct from ninshu with sapients, no mutuality, entire process must be centralized and controlled top-down by self, discerning appropriate mental framework requires trial and error, inculcating new automated function into chakra system requires extended repetition training, substituting magic for bioenergy or holonomic mind melding theoretically possible to directly interface with flora, all options are too involved and time consuming to explore in life and death combat, Mokuton cannot be deployed.

“Fucking chakra parasite implant *bullshit!*”

“Fuuton: Daitoppa!”

“Archaic languages don't make you any smarter!”

VWOOOM - CRASH

*Trash-talking remains my go-to way to cope*, I thought wildly as I failed miserably to evade the gigantic blast of wind that *ripped* my tree and two more right out of the ground. “Unh!” I grunted as the pressure slammed me against the wood so hard it cracked around me. *These things are the size of ten-story buildings, this is bullshit!* I tore a big chunk of wood, infused it with chakra and tossed it out of the danger zone. “Fuck you Obito, false advertising piece of shit, how is Orochimaru so much better at doing damage than you?!”

Orochimaru slithered into view above me and shot my way like a rattlesnake. “Compliments will get you everywhere!”

*Substitution!* The chunk of wood was in my place and now I was mid-air. “Stop sounding so aroused you freak!”

“Wind Style: Great Breakthrough!”

The plainly-spoken version of the technique was even stronger just to spite me, and so were the next three.

I swore all the way to the ground, so loud that it actually carried over the gale.

*Hashirama cell analysis complete.*

Dual-layer plasma without autonomy of their own, one layer own plasma sheathe (Yang), one layer formed of the plasma sheathe of the planet (Nature), Hashirama cells are constantly performing senriki and applying the process of shinju energy metabolism, explains why they act as infinite power batteries, explains why mokuton can absorb chakra, the whole role of the Shinju was to do that and feed it to the fruit.

Functionality comprehended, Anami – Hashirama cell incompatibility resolved, Hashirama functionality assimilated, regeneration optimized, regeneration automated, homeostasis recovery automated, mental partition freed.

Senriki discerned. Senriki solves all bottlenecks obstructing Mokuton deployment. Chakra generation is intrusive process, disrupts energy balance, overcoming limitation requires complete removal of chakra pathway system, Senriki cannot be deployed, assign newly vacant partition to develop alternative.

Senjutsu discerned. Senjutsu solves all bottlenecks obstructing Mokuton deployment. Anami cell homeostasis dependent on minimal chakra pathway system activity, sage energy state requires chakra quantity well beyond Anami tolerances, will disrupt biofeedback essential to

continued mental and bodily performance, overcoming limitation requires time-consuming exposure therapy, senjutsu cannot be deployed.

...

*...Mid-battle power-ups are stupid anyway.*

Assign newly vacant partition to sensory augmentation, apply mid-range audio-visual phenotypes, ninshu re-established, activate Third Eye of the Anchorite.

THUD

I landed on my feet. Which, because I'm ever so amazing at prolonging my own suffering, means I got buried all the way to my knees like the guy on the bad end of a wrestling match with an ogre, because why not play at being Prince Charming in the twilight minutes of my life?

"Fucking ninja and their inertia fuckery bullshit!" My native Irish spilled forth as I struggled to wrench myself free of the dry loam. "Fucking parasite, symbiosis my ass, tighter than a camel's hole in a sandstorm, getting anything out of you is like tossing an apple through a tennis racket, fucking dryshite pox bottle hoor!"

"My word, such a foul mouth!"

"You don't even know what language that is, fucking cunt--"

"Indeed, such novel words! I look forward to exploring their meaning together, doctor~"

*Substitution!* Yes, I *had* also shoved chakra into the trunk at the same time I performed the last one, impossible to most people but not when you could think twice or more at once-

[~~"GET AWAY FROM MY FATHER YOU SON OF A WHORE!"~~]

Ninshu buffeted my mind with such clarity that all my mental partitions crashed at once.

"... K-Kenzo?"

My voice was completely lost in the noise, the dragon of lightning and blood impacted right in the spot where I used to be, the spot where Orochimaru was, ahead and above the pile of fallen timber under which I'd managed to displace.

...

It...

It was...

It was... strange to dissociate. Dissociation should mean that your mind disengages in the face of overwhelming duress, leaving you in an unthinking or at least unfeeling reactionary mode than you're not supposed to be aware of, not supposed to be aware *during*, or even remember after the episode passed. Even if you're still aware, it should still feel like the world isn't real... And it all could take anywhere from minutes to hours, days, even months if the trauma is bad enough. At least that's the best way I understood it, I wasn't a psychologist.

To be aware during it... it was like I suffered it but also experienced it with total awareness while it was going on. Like a spectator in my own body listening to my thoughts getting away from me all at once. All the thought strings. All the partitions. All at the same time. All trying to understand the same thing but sliding down slopes that only went farther and farther from each other. Things I'd done to myself. Things I hadn't. Things I'd thought about myself. Things I'd thought about others. And then there were all the things I'd thought about everything happening to me, affecting me, latching to me... up until they weren't.

All of my thought streams deduced 'my son was the Yin leech all along after all' but they didn't *conclude*, just... kept running on and on, wondering how, why, whether it was all of him, part of him, why he was here, how. Whether he was the reason that so many things happened that that didn't make sense about plasma balls, when their structures started out so basic that some people might not consider them to qualify as life at all, never mind intelligence, sentience, *sapience*. All of them... such worthy questions and answers...

*Has Kenzo been haunting me?* I wondered incredulously, completely removed from everything going on in my brain. *Ghosts are a thing? Is Naruto's canonical fear of ghosts more than comic relief? Is this like... Like Kato Dan's Spirit Transformation technique?*

Not for the first time, I wondered how the Impure Word Resurrection Technique came about.

But I was past caring enough about that at this point. Or anything else.

I'd long since skipped past the whirlpools of my mind, straight to pondering...

That... creature.

It was running on Anami fumes. It was already half the size from when it started.



*Kenzo... If that's really you, what will happen to you in seventeen minutes?*

Belatedly, I remembered I was connected to the dragon thing via ninshu. My thought seemed to throw the apparition into a frenzy, the shredding impacts with the demonic doors escalated, the roars turned angry, defiant, frantic as it was suddenly torn between looking to tear Orochimaru to pieces and looking for me. Angry, defiant and frantic enough in its split focus that it gave Orochimaru just a second too long to act.

“Kuchiyose: Gojū Rashōmon!”

The Summoning Technique: Quintuple Rashōmon trapped the rampaging dragon in a colossal box made of demonic doors each the size of skyscrapers.

My mind... was aflame with many thoughts, but I was still hung up – hung up on...

*Am I about to suffer my baby boy's death a second time?*

When the hands burst through the ground and yanked me down by my ankles, I realized this was the first time in a year that I'd genuinely lost track of my surroundings.

*Orochimaru hasn't been losing, I thought grimly as the hold on my legs pulled me deep, deep, deep into the earth through the ground like it was water. He still has goodly chakra left, and he's been using his techniques sparingly. He'll outlast the blood dragon if their fight resumes.*

I simulated escape scenarios, but I'd seen enough of my surroundings to know I was too far from Konoha to make it back, before Orochimaru dealt with the distraction and caught up to me again. The trees here, they were big by my standards, but ten story-tall was still small compared to the ones around the carefully culled field of fire outside Konoha's walls, never mind the almost mile-deep combat crater known as the Forest of Death. We'd covered a *long* way. I simulated combat scenarios just to be thorough, but in all of them the snake man trounced me handily. Even the ones where I had all my biomass and strength and [The Sacrifice] with me gave me middling odds of escape.

*I don't generate chakra fast enough to spam the Celestial Gates long enough to make up the difference, and anything else would be too slow.*

I felt a last flare of outraged panic from the trapped blood dragon before I was once again pulled out of ninshu's range and kept going.

...

... It was just as well.

I wasn't going to let my kid die alone anyway. Not even one that had been actively driving me to suicide for the past six years by sucking out all my will to live. For some reason. Somehow.

*Are any other reinforcements on the way?*

I scanned around with Third Eye of the Anchorite, only to realize Orochimaru had already dragged me half a mile underground and was still going. Looking farther, I could sense four auras coming in, over twelve miles out, Hyuuga Hiashi, Aburame Shibi and two more, unfamiliar and weaker. Too far away to make a difference, especially if they happened to lack an earth specialist that could dig me out. Assuming Hiashi thought to look down here to find me at all, could his Byakugan see this deep? Not in omnidirectional mode, definitely.

*I can't get out of this on my own. Not as I am now.*

Even with my best asset deployment, all simulations concluded in complete certainty of my loss.

*There's so much I still want to do, I thought testily as I felt fangs at my neck again. Then again, last time I died I was feeling the exact same despite being a decrepit old man.*

A last hurrah maybe? Open all Celestial Gates and keep them that way, all the way to losing my other abilities? And my life, however long *that* took. I'd get at least a couple of good hits in. I could prevent him from carrying me off, if nothing else. I should be able to stay conscious longer than him without air.

We finally came to a halt.

... Why did we stop? I thought Orochimaru was trying to run away with me again?

"What have you done?" Orochimaru's voice hissed in my ear, muffled by packed earth from where he was injecting a second cursed seal. "How have you done this? Your chakra-" His words stalled. "-You defeated my cursed seal, unbelievable. Your pathway system, so wasted but so developed despite that. Your body truly has reached perfection, hasn't it? *Magnificent,*" the Snake Sannin's words all but *wantonly* shivered. "How fortunate, how convenient." Suddenly, there was more than venom and chakra pouring into me. "For *me!*"

The Cursed Seal's purpose was to make the victim's chakra pathway system strong and *wide* enough to handle Orochimaru's *own* chakra system literally entering it and taking it over from

the inside. Wholesale. That was why he needed to prepare hosts ahead of time. This was why he had no reservations about cultivating Sasuke Uchiha until he had such a ridiculous power output. And that was why he didn't need to do the same with me. Getting rid of his seal just made him more curious. In making him try to give me a new one *properly*, I'd gone and revealed I'm all ready for him without it *right now*, fuck me, right?

*This is what I get for only training with the Eight Celestial Gates.*

I'd focused on feats of explosive power too, activation and discharge as quickly as possible. As suddenly as possible. With as much power as was possible to deploy in a single instant so it wouldn't escape and cause problems to the Anami super cells or anything else.

"These channels, this body, such quality and – you've even recreated the Hashirama cells! My dear doctor, please don't tell me you've been preparing yourself for me all this time!" Orochimaru exclaimed as the fangs in my shoulders withdrew. The rocky earth shifted away, away from me, harshly.

I had ample time thanks to my accelerated perception to take in Orochimaru's true form, hazy and off-colour as it was under infravision. A massive white snake that was composed of a myriad smaller snakes.

"To think I was actually considering a retreat, perhaps leaving a somewhat larger piece of myself as a gift, but after such a display how could I *not* believe in you, my good doctor?"

*You mean believe that my body can cope with the Living Corpse Reincarnation just as it is right now?*

My chakra system had developed *ridiculously* since that first time. Because that's what happens when the nuclear option is also the only chakra-based option you have that isn't guaranteed to fuck up your ability to use everything else. Never mind what it would do to me if I allowed it to build up to the maximum, instead of constantly letting it drain out. My main chakra channels were middling at best, but the capillary-like sections responsible for chakra generation were a thick weave connected to every last one of my cells by now. More, each collector tributary was thicker and wider than Orochimaru's primary paths. If I were only interested in the Uzumaki 'vitality', my chakra capacity would be greater than anyone in the village by now.

*It really sucks when your tech tree is incompatible with everyone else's.*

The white snake opened its maw so horrendously wide that it swallowed me in a single bite.

*Joyful defiance it is.*

My surroundings were replaced by an odd, seemingly endless mental plane made of flesh. Flesh that began to wriggle and rise up, crawl up my feet, further up my legs and higher, higher and higher, thicker and thicker until I was completely swathed in wet, throbbing meat that wriggled with countless tiny serpents. They slithered their way into me through every entry point they could find, my mouth, my nostrils, my ears, around my eyes into my skull, down my throat, through my navel, up through my anus and even my urinary meatus –

*M-maybe not that joyful after all.*

I dissociated, intentionally this time. Better to be a disconnected observer while all my emotional investment went to something less traumatising. Orochimaru's behaviour, that was as good a mystery as any. Orochimaru...

How much *did* I advance his research? That he didn't even hesitate to use this technique without being in a hospital setting, never mind a mile underground? The technique... it was working.

*My body's already Orochimaru's ideal host, damn.*

The snake sannin – somehow he'd figured out how to possess his own chakra pathway system. It wasn't just the mind wandering off like everyone did naturally during dreams, he'd figured out how to detach his Yin from his actual body and anchor it onto the pseudo-Shinju instead. As for his memories, those were a simple matter for any ninja versed in clone techniques, the chakra could store them and even the emotions and instincts of the original, that's why clones can play out the choices of the original. And the soul...

I could see it, it was... sewn into the living world by threads, and those threads were the snakes making up his white body. It was a false life, undeath, but then... was there even a difference when your body was made up of so many different interchangeable components?

Orochimaru was the ship of Theseus in real time, made up of unnatural things living an unnatural life in unnatural ways. Snakes were solitary ambush predators, but Orochimaru operated like a whole hive mind of them, numbering in the thousands but working as one. Because their will belonged to the same self-concept, the same soul, conveyed down via threads of spirit like puppet strings.

*Bloody freak sure knows how to make the best of his time*, I concluded as the foreign chakra pathway system that was the Orochimaru serpent colony overran my own, filled it from the

inside, converging on my primary pathways. I could see his purpose, the Celestial Gates and the complete control they could usurp through it. His Yin set itself against mine, but I gave no resistance, folding around it instead, brushing through its edges so that I knew him even as he knew only what I wanted him to know of me. The crude skill of a new ninshu practitioner facing someone with no skill at all.

*Nothing crude about his mad science though. Is it even mad when it can't blow up in your face anymore?*

Whatever had prevented him from pulling back out after Sasuke suppressed him, those limitations didn't exist here. I could see it, in ninshu and in the cells alike. At any time he could just snake back out and then leave while his pursuers stopped to save me from the pit. Maybe inject me with a whole bunch of cursed seals. He could even take a literal pound of flesh or three on the way out.

Then he could take his time coming for me later, assuming he didn't just use my cells to rework his own body. He wouldn't get most of the good stuff because Anami souls, unlike Hashirama ones, aren't cell-bound. Not a one had been stolen by Obito along with my flayed skin for the same reason. But both lunatics could still figure out a lot just from the biomodifications.

*S-rank missing ninja are terrifying.*

Unfortunately for both of them, I did know the meaning of discretion. Which is to say, nobody knows what biofeedback and control I actually have, no matter how many drugs may or may not have been breathed or injected at midnight.

*I wanted to figure out the mini-Shinju, I thought wistfully.*

The chakra pathway serpents reached my main pathways and found them to be no bigger than their tributaries. The snakes got tangled. The ones behind tried to push through only to make the tangle even worse. And when Orochimaru decided to push the matter by way of my brain, he absolutely stopped. Froze. Everything. All at once. His shock was visceral, bewildering, heavy both in my flesh and in our spirits.

*I really wanted to figure out the mini-Shinju, but I'll settle for righteous murder.*

*"What have you done?"* Orochimaru balked, both inside my head and 'outside' in the mental plane, beyond the meat cocoon. *"Where is the Kaimon?!"*

*Oh, you weren't there for my talk with Hiashi, I mused as my cells completed their counter-invasion of Orochimaru's own body. How fortunate, how convenient, for me. My cells hooked onto my own chakra system. More of them latched onto every foreign cell connected to every last trace of alien implant outside my body. More still poured and latched onto the alien thing directly. Then all of them, all at once, they pulled.*

With a shocked gasp heard inside and out, everything that was Orochimaru was fully pulled into me.

*Seal all major orifices, plug all tenketsu, close every last pore.*

My eyelids fused with the skin of my cheeks, thick muscle and skin grew to cover my mouth, my ears, my nostrils, my sweat glands fused shut, my anus disappeared, my urinary orifice and then the whole urethra all the way to my bladder, they all filled in, the skin on my body fused until it was all one continuous surface, so smooth as if it had been laminated. *Grow bone armor.* The Kaguya bloodline was easy to replicate at my level of biocontrol. *Subdermal, continuous structure.*

*"Wh-what is this, how are you – what are you doing?!"*

*Unambiguous good.*

Dismantle Kyumon.

The Gate of Healing ripped to pieces as my Anami cells got to work.

*"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"*

*Sacrificing 12.5% potential comprehension of the Ootsutsuki biotechnology one gate at a time.*

Dismantle Seimon.

The Gate of Life disappeared.

"What-"

Dismantle Tamon, the Gate of Limit.

"No..." The Orochimaru pathway system began to churn, thrash, push out every way it could, struggling to-

Dismantle Keimon, the Gate of View.

“No, you can’t!”

Dismantle Kyomon, the Gate of Wonder.

“Stop!”

Dismantle Shimon, the Gate of Death.

“I SAID STOP, DAMN YOU!”

I stopped. Not because of his plea, but because I’d deliberately left the Gate of Pain for last, so Orochimaru got to feel everything. Every last second, every last moment as I commanded the Anami cells to *destroy every last trace of the shinju parasite they could find*.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARH!”

Destroy, destroy, destroy, destroy, destroy, destroy, destroy, destroy!

“**CURSE YOU, MASANARI**!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Dismantle Shōmon.

With a final scream, the snake man died.

And as my Yin unspooled, free for the first time from the wretched pull of the thing inside me, I watched as *his* Yin came undone until it could hold nothing. I watched his soul as it fell loose of the last bounds to the living world and began to fall into the dark.

*It seems, in the end, that Yomi is not make-believe in this world.*

Orochimaru had been so close to ninshu. His Living Corpse Reincarnation was basically ninshu unto itself, almost exactly what Hashirama had achieved, except instead of plants it was snakes. It was honestly quite tragic.

But psychopaths will do as psychopaths will.

*And I will do what I will.*

Shinto placed the greatest emphasis on this life than on any afterlife, but it still espoused belief in a human soul. The mitama. Tamashii. The conception wasn’t a perfect overlap with mine, but the tamashii *was* believed to contain four aspects. Right now, I could see Orochimaru’s body, the mind, the spirit and the soul break apart from each other and each meet different ends. The body fell apart in its constituent parts, all the snakes dead or mindless. The mind

faded as it came apart from the spirit. The spirit, the Yin... According to Shinto beliefs it should survive bodily death and continue to assist the living, eventually becoming part of the family kami after 33 years... but what family did Orochimaru have? Who would even accept his help, even, before and after? Never mind seek it out? What gods would bother with him, even?

And the soul... It was bound to the land of Yomi.

*Rest in pieces, you poor, uneducated swine.*

It turned out that the Buddhist afterlife beliefs held some truth as well, on this world.

*Though with even the spirit realms in such a sorry state, fixing anything will take a lot more doing than even my most pessimistic projections.*

The Shinju's physical, living half may have been broken apart and sealed, but the fact it had been a living thing meant it had a soul. A soul, and the spirit to go with the rest. The Yin.

That Yin was grown through the dimensional layers, through the spirit of the world like its physical half had once grown through the living world. It wasn't eating anything now, but it had been, once upon a time. An ugly parody of Yggdrasil that failed to grow upward through the Four Realms of Enlightenment. That succeeded in growing through all Six Realms of Samsara. A long, thick shoot that went up into the land of the Devas and Asuras, and down from the Human realm through the Animal and Preta all the way into Naraka. Hell.

*As far as ancestral bequests go, this is the worst I've ever seen.*

Or was it? Maybe it was just a metaphor for the effect the Shinju had on the world, on the souls living in it, on the memories and beliefs that might have reflected upon the Six Realms during the time of the pods. What had been reflected in the ages since too, maybe, from within the individual realms of souls sleeping in their deathly dreams. The Shinju hadn't had time to even begin spreading its roots to fill the realms outward, surface-wise. Insofar as surface is even a thing in the other planes. But it dug deep, so deep that it got foothold in all six of them, had taken root in them, both up and down – no. Wait.

Now that I was stretched so far and so high, I could see over the branches and vines surrounding it. The Shinju wasn't grown through the realms, exactly, it was grown through the immense *thing* spanning them. Through its limbs, its body, its neck, one branch was even sticking out through one of the figure's eye sockets, like a dry worm made of white bone. A thing made of limbs and masks, mechanical and puppet. The King of Hell



*Is this why the Rinnegan can summon it? And Nagato's Paths, is this why he's able to do what he does with those eyes?*

What in Good God's name am I supposed to do about *this*? The Ten Realms were supposed to describe the degrees of enlightenment that course through them. If what I was seeing was a metaphor, it did not say good things about the world's sanity. If it wasn't a metaphor, that meant even the afterlife was broken on this planet, unbelievable.

*Why isn't anyone fixing this? Where are the gods? Are they dead too?*

Seemed like a bit too much to expect from even the Ootsutsuki, never mind Kaguya.

I reviewed what I knew of this world's human history. The very on the nose names of certain people and beasts flashed through my mind. The very on the nose name of the Monkey King *Enma* came to the forefront. Several different theories were updated and refined. None were dismissed.

*Maybe the gods just don't exist yet.*

This world, it's young. Maybe the kami from the Uchiha technique names were just that – kami. Family kami, at that. The Kotoamatsukami may or may not exist in the upper realms, where the Shinju didn't reach. Maybe they only disappeared because they went off to order new worlds long ago, once this was done. You could easily claim the same for Earth, given the identical myth. I wasn't in a position to speculate on them though, never mind their existence or motivations. But what about the god I *do* objectively know exists?

*What about the Shinigami?*

Looking upon the Ten Realms, I couldn't see anything like that horned thing. I wasn't surprised, the realms stretched beyond my fathoming and I was seeing them from far away, from the boundary in between. It wasn't like I could spot anything in Naraka from all the way here either, besides crawling or floating outlines of shadowy flames. Then again, space was definitely more of a suggestion in other dimensions. Knowing the thing, naming the thing should summon the thing, if any magic or occult phenomena is to make any amount of sense. Then again, 'shinigami' wasn't a name at all, it was a title. A qualifier.

More than that... it also made sense that a psychopomp entity *wouldn't* spend most of its time on the other side, didn't it? They wouldn't be able to do their job.

*Kami, daemons, dwarves, house spirits, sylphs, trolls, all spirits in any form of animism, they aren't extradimensional entities, they exist in the same living world as mankind.*

And in either world, this or my last, there was never a single entity called 'shinigami.' Shinigami was just a word used to refer to demons that drove people to suicide, or often double suicide. Like Minato and Kushina here. They did a sacrifice play, and while the Shinigami didn't instigate it, the situation, the outcome, its inevitability once the Shinigami became involved, everything else fit. The only question left was why it was an exclusively Uzumaki thing.

*No, that's not a mystery either, is it?*

If that entity was specifically tied to the Uzumaki, and even seemed to be controlled by them... Maybe it was one of those evil spirits bound into servitude towards the family it aggrieved. Nipponese folklore, here and on Earth, it was full of such things. Demons, Oni and who knew what else bound in prayer beads. Now that I thought about it, the Shinigami didn't do anything on its own when called through the Dead Demon Consuming Seal. Not unless you shoved chakra at it. If anything, it seemed to drag things out as long as possible. It certainly took your soul regardless of whether you got it to do what you summoned it for.

*All of which makes sense if the creature isn't serving willingly.*

Maybe all those cursed seals on it have nothing to do with the summoner at all, maybe they're there to force **him** to compliance. Hence the need to keep pumping him full of your chakra. It's not that you're paying it with it, after all, what need or use would a spirit have for it? Chakra isn't even native to humanity, never mind the astral and spirit planes.

*If the real purpose of the technique's chakra cost is to power the controlling sealing array to force the Shinigami to your will...*

But now I was getting distracted again, something I very much couldn't afford while my dumbass son was dying *again*, because the first time around wasn't bad enough on its own apparently.

"Fuck my life."

"You would make those your first words upon entering the Pure Land, only you, husband."

There was a hand on my shoulder. I reached up to it. I felt dainty fingers beneath mine. I turned around.

“Daddyyy!”

I barely caught sight of my wife and three unfamiliar men some yards behind her when my dead daughter crashed into my arms.

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Chapter 14 is available on [Patreon](#) (karmiacumen), [Ko-fi](#) (karmiacumen) and [Subscribestar](#) (karmic-acumen), along with the advance chapters on [The Unified Theorem](#), and [Reset the Universe](#).