

Chapter 51:

I sighed as I walked into the room, giving a nod to Uzumaki Ise, the dark-haired man having become something of a point of contact for me with the hospital, if only because of simple familiarity and his membership in the Uzumaki clan. Of course, he was only aware that I was a fuuinjutsu prodigy expanding their talents into the medical arena. Passing him over, though, I saw someone who I normally would have been tolerant of, but in this instance, it was...

Well, a bit troublesome, to quote Shikamaru.

“Kota-kun,” Guy grinned, whipping out a raised thumb as I stepped over to his unconscious student laying on the table in the center of the room. “I have been fully-briefed on the situation by the Hokage, who has given me permission to oversee the operation and provide my services as a guard while it is ongoing.”

Despite, for once, speaking at a normal volume, Guy's voice had a gravity and seriousness that so many lacked. I nodded as I stepped up to examine my patient. “Itachi made sure I was informed of the change in plans.” I gave him the side-eye. “I'm told you were quite insistent.”

Guy nodded, his expression sobering as he looked down to where Lee had been sedated. “I... needed to see it with my own eyes. To be there for him. Thank you for this.”

I hummed. “I won't say it's *nothing*, but... I have my own reasons for helping Lee, so don't mistake my help as something wholly altruistic.”

Guy snorted, his lips twisting into a smirk.

Ise stepped up from the wall. “Are you sure you don't need anything else? Your requirements were... rather sparse.”

I pulsed a tiny spark of chakra through one of my nearly-invisible ear-piercings and caught the thick case of supplies which appeared mid-air. “I'll be fine. For something like this, I have to make a great deal of the equipment myself to ensure compatibility and quality.”

“I see. I'd read the notes for the operation, but...” Ise stated, looking over the array of small metal orbs, inks, talismans, and brushes I'd laid out. “You won't need any help?”

I shook my head. “It will just take a few hours to properly lay out the matrix for the room, then a few more for the one on the patient, but the activation should only take a fraction of that time.”

“I had hoped to ask earlier, Young Kota, but... this truly is safe, yes?” Guy asked, rubbing at his chin as he doubtless recalled the conversation he, Rin, and I had on the matter during the aftermath of the gathering at the Uzumaki compound. Even if I'd suspected Guy already knew of my involvement in the offer, we hadn't exactly been free to discuss things given Rin hadn't indicated the same knowledge. In fact, Rin had hinted that this wasn't the *only* 'miracle operation' she knew of and had asked Guy for any information he had on the possible source of Konoha's new edge in the medical field, even going so far as to inquire about Tsunade's return.

Fucking ninja mind games...

“As safe as I can possibly make it,” I replied at length to Guy, then tapped a small mole on my wrist, triggering a diagnostic mode for my own seals. The normally-camouflaged designs shifted to solid black, standing out starkly against my skin.

Both Ise and Guy's eyes widened as the seals took up every visible part of my body.

“Considering I use a variant of this design myself, I'd like to think that endorsement matters,” I continued bluntly, tapping the diagnostic mode off, then pausing. “While I'll be including the same functionality to hide the seals in the ones I'm putting on Lee, I've recently been made aware that a Hyuuga can discern them if they take the time to study a target either closely or at length.”

Guy nodded seriously. “That... isn't a major concern given the vast majority of Hyuuga are loyal Konoha shinobi, but it is something to keep in mind, especially in spars. I will ensure Lee knows of this.”

I frowned as I snapped a few hand seals and scoured parts of the room with boiling water before dispersing the liquid with another jutsu. “With that in mind, I'll be redesigning my own seals to cover that weakness. If Lee wishes for the more advanced seals to be applied at a later date, I'll ensure you know when I finish them.”

Guy smiled. “Your concern for your comrades does you much credit, Kotaro.”

I snorted. “Still not a ninja, Jounin-san.”

Guy barked a laugh and smacked a fist into the opposite palm. “Ah, yes! How foolish of me to forget. I will run fifty laps around Konoha in penance!” Then, after the burst of energy, Guy quieted again. “Thank you, again, for this. Should you ever need anything, Young Kotaro, you need but call on me.”

I opened my mouth to deny him, but mentally stumbled over something I'd been contemplating since the Hokage's determination that I would take a 'team.' “There is something...” I hesitated once, before sighing as Guy stared at me intently. “I want to arrange an exhibition match later on. You probably won't consider it adequate repayment for helping Lee, but it would solve a number of problems for me.”

“Consider it done, my young friend! Just tell me when and where!” Guy cried, his teeth sparkling like dew in the morning sun. “Now, I must see to my other students while you take care of Lee!” I rolled my eyes as the Beast vanished through the door.

Turning to Ise, I gestured to the table Lee lay on. “If you'll help me move him to a corner? I need the room to start laying out seals.”

“Of course. If you would do me the favor of walking me through the script you're using? Your annotated notes are...” He seemed to struggle for words, and I chuckled.

“Substantial? Verbose? *Thick*?” I guessed, amusement showing through.

Ise laughed awkwardly. “I didn't want to offend.”

“You're not,” I assured him. “I won't tell you not to be polite, but honesty is at least as important. Do you want me to start from the beginning?”

Ise sighed with relief. “Please.”

“Okay,” I spoke, drawing the word out as I considered my words while we carefully negotiated moving Lee's table into a corner of the room. “The first thing that's important in this case is that the patient's chakra network is incomplete. While his gates and primary coils are properly developed, his secondary coil system is malformed to the point of non-functionality. What this means, for us, is that we have a solid foundation to work on as long as we don't depend on the tenketsu to serve as 'mounting points,' so to speak, for our seals.”

“Because they wouldn't be able to draw and regulate chakra properly given that his system isn't properly delivering the energy to them on its own,” Ise replied, showing he was following my approach.

I nodded. “Now, the *second* thing you need to keep in mind... and this is very important for virtually *all* fuujinutsu applied to living beings, is that the seals themselves aren't really important. Little signs and marks of ink laced with chakra aren't going to do anything on their own.”

Ise nodded hesitantly, the older man tapping his chin as I took my largest brush and a tall pot of ink before squatting on the floor to begin the pattern. “I... think I understand. Just as hand signs are fundamentally just complex gestures without intent and focus, even if you push chakra through them.”

“You're halfway there,” I congratulated him. “The metaphor holds up when you apply to inorganic sealing, such as I'm doing right now, but it misses an element when you look at living beings. That would be...?”

Ise was quiet as I danced my brush through exacting motions, creating a tapestry of designs that soon grew to move across the walls and ceiling. Eventually, the man spoke, though, taking a guess judging by his unsure tone. “The living being itself? I still don't see...”

I hummed. “A wall, a rock, a jar, a door, a sword, a roll of cloth... these are material objects. There's nothing more to them than the substance you can observe with your senses. An organic material... a living being, is just that. Alive.”

I glimpsed a proverbial light going off behind his eyes as he made the connection. “It's not the living being, then, but their *chakra*.”

“Close,” I admonished. “Chakra, after all, isn't *just* chakra. You have to account for excess spirit and physical energies, life energy beyond that, and a small mixture of more *exotic* things beyond even *that*.”

Dark chakra, I'd come to learn, was something like the trace gasses in an atmospheric sample. Only, when talking about metaphysics, those same trace parts of a mixture could have much more... volatile consequences.

“You say that like it's the subject-er, *patient's*... bodily energies that are the defining factor in applying seals to them,” Ise frowned, running a hand through his dark hair contemplatively.

I stilled my brush, resting it over the open pot of ink as I turned and raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him. “You mean to say that you think otherwise?”

Ise blinked at me as I smirked. “B-but...”

I chuckled again. “When you perform *jutsu*, you are applying energy from your own body onto the world around you. Whether that effort is coercive or cooperative is beside the point. The energy of the world, for the purposes of jutsu, is placid. It has no will of its own, not that you can recognize or interact with in so basic a manner at least. The energy of an individual person? Or even a frog or dog? Creatures such as they have their own spirits, their own *souls*. This means that they have *agency* over their energies.”

Ise stared blankly at me, his expression that of a man who had just seen light for the first time after living a lifetime in darkness.

“Th-that... *makes so much sense*,” he muttered, beginning to pace in tight circles as he shook his head. “That would mean the theory-no, of course not. You'd have to... but then... yes, yes. It could work.”

I gave him the time to think while I finished my diagram.

Of course, I wasn't going to explain how the seals on my own soul/body differed from the ones I'd be putting on Lee. I had to keep *some* secrets, after all. The primary difference was mostly academic, anyway. My own seals were fundamentally an external chakra system that, through a series of metaphysical valves and sockets, plugged into my own. The seals I'd be applying to Lee were going to be part of his chakra system, completing an incomplete web to allow full functionality.

It was, in other words, the difference between a suit of powered armor and implanted cybernetics.

I could already hear Ise's question on the topic were I to enlighten him, though. It was the same question anyone would ask if it was explained.

Why?

Because even if Lee's chakra system was incomplete, the parts that had grown in fully were exceptionally *sturdy*. His gates and primary coils were perfectly functional, as I'd contemplated before. It was just that he couldn't properly meld physical and spiritual energy to manifest it because of his secondary coils not properly 'growing in.' Lee's body and soul could take the strain, in other words.

Mine could not.

The way my soul and body interacted with each other introduced flaws into the system that couldn't just be papered over or augmented without endangering the whole of it. More importantly, even if I were able to force some level of 'normal' functionality, it very well could mean the end of my ability to pull knowledge from the aether.

More than anything, I did not want to fuck with that unless absolutely necessary.

The result was the creation of my current system. A series of seals which *overlaid* my chakra network, but functioned as their own semi-independent pool to store and draw from. It also made sure I wouldn't *poison myself* by handling increasingly toxic and dangerous combinations of energy. Those same energies were also increasingly necessary for my research and crafting now that I was getting into the deep end of metaphysics.

But as long as I took precautions, such as wearing an 'exo-suit' of metaphysical armor to ablate the effects...

I carefully tapped out the brush into the pot of ink and looked to Ise. “If you're quite finished, I need to move Lee's table again to mark that corner. Please be careful not to smudge anything as we do so.”

“Of course, of course!”

Then we got back to work.

...

Mikoto watched her daughter *skip* through the house, a very un-Satsuki like smile on her face as she bit into a tomato with a vacantly-happy doe-eyed expression and occasionally giggled.

Her daughter:

Giggled.

Exhaling a long sigh, she set her husband's lunch down in front of him, grateful he was taking a bit more time off these days. “Well, at least we know he'll make her happy.”

Fugaku grimaced, showing his desire to leave the elephant in the room unaddressed, then grunted his assent.

Mikoto looked after her child, her own frown more thoughtful. “Although... I do wonder if I should be jealous. I don't seem to remember my own first time leaving me in such a state.”

Fugaku paused in his chewing, swallowed, then looked at his wife. “Dear, if I promise to take you out for dinner tonight, then have a relaxing night in, will you stop discussing our daughter's sex life?”

“I thought you'd never ask,” Mikoto smiled, comforted by the knowledge that men *could* be taught a new trick or two now and then.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota) I

Metaphysical Cosmology: Reincarnation Cycles

Metaphysical Physiology: Reincarnation (Aberrant)

Metaphysical Physiology: Respiration of the Soul

Metaphysical Cosmology: Akashic Records

Blacksmithing

Cognitive Performance Enhancement

Meditation

Mechanical Computers

Horology

Cooking

Prana-Bindu Disciplines I

Blacksmithing: Ninja Tools

Mechanical Computers II

Prana-Bindu Disciplines II

Prana-Bindu Disciplines III

Swordsmithing

Automation
Metallurgy
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu
Chakra Control
Medic-Nin Training
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho (II)
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu II
Prana-Bindu Disciplines IV
Weirding Way
(Nothing New for Chapter 9-11, Same Month)
Ruggedization
Yin-Yang Manipulation
Blacksmithing: Chakra-Conductive Metals
(Nothing New for Chapter 12-15, Same Month)
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo I
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho (III)
(Nothing New for Chapter 18, Same Month)
Fuinjutsu I
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo II
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo III
Fuinjutsu II
Fuinjutsu III
Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota) II
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu III
ANBU-Ne Operational History
Medic-Nin Training II
Medic-Nin Training III

Demon Slayer Breathing Styles I-V
Ninja Puppetry: I&II
Cyberpunk: Cybernetics I-III
Gunm/Battle Angel: Cybernetics I-IV
Dark Chakra I&II (New)

Chapter 52:

Yuuhi Kurenai walked into the Hokage's office with all the poise and grace one would expect of a newly-minted jounin, her firm gaze belying the attractive form she'd spent long hours coaching her body into through harsh exercise and diligent attention to detail. Coming to a respectful stop before the desk of the man who might, someday, be her father-in-law, she gave a short bow as he refilled his pipe and lit it with a near-ghostlike pulse of chakra, so invisible was it to her senses. Beside him, the much younger form of Uchiha Itachi, his heir-apparent, carefully picked up a series of forms and scrolls to organize.

“You wished to speak to me, Yuuhi-jounin?” He asked, leaning back in his chair even as he looked her over.

“It's about the boy, Lord Hokage. Kotaro.” She spoke shortly, then gestured to her hip where her new blade hung. “May I?”

The older man sighed out a cloud of ash, reaching up to rub at his forehead tiredly. “I swear, that boy... Itachi, make a note to have a conversation with him on the topic of discretion. Again. Not that it will help.” After a few shakes of his head back and forth, he spoke. “I take it he has defied conventional wisdom and produced some sort of powerful unheard of blade for you as a personal token of peace?”

Startled red eyes blinked. “Ah... it is as you say, yes sir.”

Hirzuen nodded tiredly. “Yes, that fits with the reports from the men watching him.”

Kurenai continued to stare at the older man, unsure of the turn this conversation had taken. “Ah, I had thought...”

A hand-sign was made and the walls of the Hokage's office seemed to *shimmer* with energy as another wave of nearly-imperceptible chakra rolled over the room.

Neither of the two men made any move to explain what had just happened, and Kurenai was beginning to realize that she had just trespassed across something she might have been better off leaving alone.

“That he was merely an interesting oddity who made excellent swords and was unusually-adept at the shinobi arts despite his handicap?” Hiruzen asked rhetorically, taking a drag from his pipe. “Yes, that is the general feeling we've worked hard to maintain in regards to him. Given his recent association with your young Hyuuga student, though, it seems as if I will have to bring you in to some of the more sensitive information regarding him.”

The man who wore the mantle of 'The God of Ninja' leveled an even stare at her. “Now, obviously, you have come before me today to air concerns. I think it best we start with those and move on from there. Speak freely.”

The jounin kept a blank facade of emotion over the sheer *relief* and satisfaction that the most powerful ninja in the village had truly understood what she meant when bringing the boy to his attention in their previous meetings. Granted, she knew *much more* of Kotaro than most, having associated with him during her attempts to steer him away from the Kurama heiress... even if, admittedly, those had ultimately proved wrong-footed given the girl's acceptance into the rank of genin.

Most people, as she'd come to learn, had very limited interactions with the boy that she'd surveilled over the past few months. They knew him as an excellent blacksmith, *or* a budding master of the art of fuinjutsu, *or* a skilled combatant and swordsman, *or* an associate of the daughters of several clan heads. It was all very neatly compartmentalized outside of the boy's inner circle.

That same inner circle which *just so happened* to include Uchiha Itachi, heir apparent to the Hokage. As well as Uchiha Obito, one of the surviving students of the Yondaime. And the head of the Uzumaki clan, who's child closely associated with Kotaro and received training from him.

Now, Kurenai did not consider herself *stupid* and it followed that no single individual would be able to deceive so many highly-trained and accomplished shinobi, but their willingness to simply *overlook* problematic incidents he was involved with simply rubbed her the wrong way. She wasn't precisely a fan of telling an individual that they needed to stop learning or accumulating skills, either, but there had to be reasonable limits set for someone who so blatantly and carelessly abused the title 'civilian,' especially when the excuse laid down for him to do so had more holes in it than an academy practice dummy.

Put simply, it was not Kotaro receiving special treatment that irked Kurenai, no. She'd grown up in a village dominated politically, economically, and militarily by groups of blood-related clans practicing all sorts of favor-trading politics. That was normal.

It was the fact that Kotaro's treatment was *inexplicable* that grated.

Yes, he was skilled. He was well-connected. He was intelligent and capable in his given trade. He produced, by all accounts (her own recently added to that list), *excellent* blades that doubled as works of art. He'd even apparently taught himself (or, more plausibly, leaned on the Uzumaki for tutelage) one of the most arcane and esoteric of the shinobi arts.

And yet still had the brazen gall to hide behind a 'disability' that seemed anything but, particularly aggravating in light of his coaching Yakumo through her own troubles and his interactions with Guy's protege.

By all accounts, Kotaro should be in the field representing the village.

Yet, for some reason, he wasn't.

Even if Kurenai hadn't explicitly ruled out Kotaro being some kind of plant by a foreign power within the village, there were still a number of more likely alternatives that painted a sobering and dire picture for her home's security. Foremost among her considerations was that the boy had embarked on some half-baked scheme to accrue influence using his talent for forge-works, essentially *bribing* his way into the upper echelons of the village in a play for personal power. Close 'friendships' with the Uchiha, Uzumaki, and Kurama clans... and now a budding closeness with the Nara, along with more personal interactions with other jounin such as Might Guy.

It was more than concerning to watch a jumped-up child manipulate the levers of power for what seemed to be his own benefit.

All of this, she explained to the Hokage as the man waited patiently, Itachi sending a shadow clone for tea at one point.

At the end of what she *hoped* was a composed and sensible explanation of her points and why she felt they deserved to be heard by her kage, Hiruzen nodded. "You raise good points, Yuuhi-jounin, and are

a credit to your station.” Kurenai released the tiniest exhalation of breath. “That said, your fundamental assumptions regarding the situation are, sadly, wrong-footed.”

Honestly, she'd *hoped* to hear that response, insomuch as anyone ever wanted to hear someone tell them they were wrong. Personal validation could take second place to the security of her village.

“Kotaro has, we believe, a new form of bloodline,” Hiruzen explained, and the jounin felt her eyes widen slightly. “It has elements of the enhanced cognitive abilities of the sharingan, in speed of thought, the ability to analyze material, and depth of understanding. We have not yet plunged the depths of what he is capable of, but we are optimistic that his value is... substantial, such that allowances have been made to retain him within the village in the name of fostering his abilities during this time of peace, when we are allowed such extravagances.”

“I see,” Kurenai nodded slowly. “Then the girls-”

Too late, she realized that of the young kunoichi she was about to imply were part of a breeding project, one of them had a sibling within the very room she now occupied. Said sibling, who was *also* slated to take the place of her ultimate superior. While the village valued a certain amount of brutal honesty in the chain of command, there was a world of difference between that and addressing a superior on the subject of his younger sister spreading her legs in the village's cause.

There are easier ways to commit career suicide, Kurenai. Such as actual suicide, which would probably be less traumatic.

Sarutobi, no doubt having followed her train of thought to its ultimate conclusion, gave her a singularly unimpressed look, but remained silent.

Instead, Uchiha Itachi, infamously blank-faced as always, released a small sigh. “In the future, it would help to be less impolitic about these things, Yuuhi-jounin, but... as the topic has been brought up, and for all that it is your business to begin with, the affection between the Kurama girl, my sister, Might Guy's student, and Kotaro appears to be entirely legitimate.”

Kurenai stretched an unsure smile over her face. “That is... good to hear. I had hoped such a cruel necessity, as sometimes it is, was not being invoked.”

She was reminded, intimately, that regardless of the fact that Itachi was years younger than her, he was also both higher-ranked for a reason and much more experienced.

“We haven't ruled out the possibility of inducting him into the shinobi forces at a later date,” Sarutobi explained further, languidly drawing from his pipe. “Still, pressures from... *interested parties* are pushing back against the notion and, as much as I would like to imagine myself as the final arbiter of all decisions, there are allowances that must be made to keep Konoha in proper order.”

Which, to Kurenai, sounded like a roundabout way of saying, 'politics.' Being careful to not allow her gaze to shift to Itachi, she mulled the thought over. It was obvious that the Uchiha had some kind of play in the whole affair, and truthfully she could see their motivation. Whatever this bloodline was, if it could be successfully replicated and melded with the sharingan, it sounded as if it would either add to or outright amplify any descendant's abilities.

The Kurama were *less clear*, but... the kind of increased speed of thought and analytic ability would doubtless be useful for the genjutsu-focused clan, even putting aside what he'd done for their heiress. Though, thinking of that...

“If I am allowed, may I ask how such a bloodline relates to his physical abilities? His control over his body, in particular, seems unrelated,” Kurenai stated politely.

“It is our understanding that Kotaro, at a young age, either focused his understanding on his own body or that there is some level of increased coordination and physicality as a secondary trait,” Itachi explained calmly. “In theory, if the latter is correct, that would allow him a greater efficiency of action in conjunction with his increased speed of thought. One without the other would be of extremely limited effectiveness, after all.”

It... did make a certain amount of sense, Kurenai supposed. She'd heard from an Uchiha comrade that the activation of the sharingan did not make one *faster* so much as capable of more effectively putting one's natural speed to use. If this new bloodline was similar to the Uchiha, then there might be a similar trait within it as well.

“Given he's so capable... we are sure he's loyal?” Kurenai asked, then grimaced. “Not that it is my place to make that judgment, Lord Hokage.”

The old man chuckled and waved off the potential offense. “Truthfully? We are still evaluating his loyalties, but it is my belief that his personal ties override any institutional allegiances. When I've had the pleasure of speaking with him, rare that it is, he's come across as incredibly intelligent and cynical, yet possesses seemingly-contradictory idealistic aspirations. One of those is... not quite *pacifism*, but a general unwillingness to instigate conflict.”

Kurenai frowned thoughtfully. “That is definitely... *unusual*, but not necessarily bad. Or, at least, it could have been a much more problematic personality trait. I-”

Hiruzen raised an eyebrow as she cut herself off. “I did say to speak freely, Yuuhi-jounin.”

The red-eyed woman frowned. “It very much is not my place, Sandaime-sama, but... would not that same tendency result in a disdain for the... necessities we, as shinobi, undertake? I only ask because it would seem... potentially problematic regarding those relationships which constitute his ties to the village.”

Hiruzen nodded, stroking his beard as he visibly considered the matter.

“If I may?” Itachi asked, turning to the Hokage, who gave his assent in a silent gesture. As the Uchiha looked back to Kurenai, he spoke. “As noted, Kotaro is extremely intelligent. He is also pragmatic and realistic in his expectations and willing to compromise should he believe it necessary. Having lightly probed my sister on the subject, he has made it clear that, although he disapproves of instigating violence on a philosophical level, he also acknowledges there are sometimes few good alternatives to a preemptive strike. On a personal level, he also understands that it isn't feasible to force his system of beliefs on others, especially when one lives in a world such as ours.”

Before she had time to properly consider a response, the Hokage's lips quirked in one of his rare displays of impishness. “Unless, of course, you are asking because of *personal* interest, Kurenai?”

It took a moment for the thought to properly register, blood rushing to her cheeks once it did. “I-ah, no. That is, no, I had not intended-I am committed-er, *involved* with Asuma and-”

The old man chuckled, showing the question for the joke it had been intended as. “Peace, peace, Kurenai. Though I am happy to hear that with the return of my son, your relationship has picked up once again. Perhaps I may yet live to see another grandchild.”

Even if the comment was idle, it made her uncomfortable. Taking care not to show it, she composed herself. “That is unlikely in the next year, at least, Lord Hokage, with the team I'm currently training, but potentially afterwards...”

She restrained a sigh of relief when the man seemed willing to drop the issue, for now. It was a subject that had come up a few times in the past year since Asuma had returned from his time in the Guardians of Fire. During his term there, their childhood romance had been put on hold, both of them pursuing other options in the interim. Kurenai had even taken a few 'honeypot' missions in addition to a lover or two among the shinobi of Konoha to scratch the occasional itch. She knew Asuma had done the same, especially given that being posted to the daimyo's court almost required intimacy with a few bored handmaidens, rebellious noble sons and daughters, and even the rare eunuch from the eastern lands.

Still, she knew that her youth was soon to be behind her, if it wasn't already so by some accounting. She was twenty-seven now, and it was time to consider children. Her time with Team Eight would likely be her last hurrah unless Asuma proved more willing to stay at home and raise the next generation than she suspected.

Oh, she wouldn't be *retiring* for another decade or two, certainly, but once children entered the equation, there'd be preferential filing for in-village postings, such as guard duty, teaching in the academy, retraining as a medic for the hospital, or classified clerical work.

None of which were poor job prospects, she knew.

It was just a shame to leave the field.

Such was the role of women, though.

With her worries resolved, Kurenai made to close the conversation after one last warning from the Hokage on the confidential nature of their discussion. Her head now full of very different considerations, Kurenai left before the old man could take another jab at her and Asuma. Perhaps she could put in some time training with her new blade to salve the notion of her future benching?

...

Sarutobi leaned back and reached for his pipe again. “A sword able to store five genjutsu at a time and bestow them directly into a target's chakra system upon piercing their skin, thus bypassing most conventional defenses. For anyone else, it would be a masterpiece a family lineage could be built upon for generations to come. For our young prodigy, it is a careless gift given to someone over a past disagreement.”

Itachi hummed and nodded. “I'll speak to him about the proper methodologies for disseminating his creations. This is why we have Sai and Torune report blades of exceptional quality or ability. It would draw too much attention if such weapons began to circulate among the general populace, and buying them

out reduces Sagara's more mundane workload, allowing the store to work on more important things.”

Sarutobi chuckled, nodding. “Perhaps... inform counter-intelligence to passively spread a rumor that it was commissioned from a foreign master. Kurenai and my son's relationship is not unknown to interested parties and it would make sense for me, or my family at least, to have paid her something of a dowry.”

“I take it we will spread the rumor after she takes her team on a few field missions?” Itachi asked idly.

“Of course, of course,” Hiruzen smiled, glad his successor was on the same page. “You have more interactions with the boy than I do. Do you think he's attempting to court the Hyuuga girl?”

Itachi was silent for a moment, considering. “If pressed, I would say that I do not believe so. He has made no move to induct her into his group. If anything, he seems to enjoy their spars as a means of stress-relief. The manner in which he goes about instructing her is very different from how he approached my sister.”

Sarutobi inhaled smoke and exhaled a cloud of ash. “Do you believe it would become an issue if that were to change?”

There were several unspoken layers to that question, both knew. “Kotaro is very mature for his age. I trust him not to do anything unwise.”

Sarutobi chuckled at the implied threat and shuffled a few papers around his desk. “Very well, the next meeting should be with Inoichi. I don't see anything out of the ordinary, so I think I'll remand you to the ANBU offices for the remainder of the day to prepare for the mission to the Land of Stone...”

Chapter 53:

I'd cleared some time after the operation to recover.

Honestly, though, it was just out of a desire to take a break. I'd been working non-stop for a while now and had resented Obito trying to force me to be less active, but... he'd had a point. I was just being stubborn. It wasn't even that I was close to burning out or getting tired. Being able to control my own neuro-chemical balance, meant those were concerns for other people. I was always precisely as tired or exhausted as I wanted to be, physically and mentally at least. There were occasions where I felt myself somehow *wearing thin* and I had to wonder if I was somehow taxing my very soul with how strenuous my schedule was.

In any event, I'd taken Obito's request/demand to heart all those months ago and made a bit of time for myself here and there... even if I really did have better things to do.

Like fine-tuning the plans for Kushina's operation or drawing up lesson plans for my new team.

I exhaled a breath and forced the thoughts away.

I was taking a break. This was me-time.

Work could fuck off for a few hours.

Besides, contrary to my bitching and moaning, I was actually in a good place in terms of my various projects. A newer generation of my matter-printer was soon coming online and would allow me further refinements on shape, composition, and mass. Lee's operation had finished successfully. I'd been on recent dates with Tenten, Yakumo, and Satsuki and used the time to appease each of them with attention. Kushina's planned surgery did need a few tweaks, but the modified sandevistan was complete and ready for implantation to support the work I'd need to do rebuilding her internal gates.

A number of my other projects, such as the newly-dubbed 'shinobi gauntlet' was entering more widespread service among the seasoned chunin. Or, at least, one of the prototypes was. The complete version wasn't slated to be rolled out for another three months at best. My swords were selling well, being picked up by people I pretended not to know were off-duty ANBU at a price I could live with, and my commissions per weapon were netting me a sizable amount of cash.

Sai and Torune were also coming along nicely. I didn't think they'd ever really be 'normal,' but what did that word even mean when you were dealing with ninja? Still, they could hold regular everyday conversations for extended periods without insulting or offending anyone... most of the time. I'd even managed to force Torune to take a boxed lunch while following me around today. After all, there was no reason for him to go hungry if I was just going to hike up to the top of the Hokage Monument and spend a few hours in peace and quiet. Even now, his chakra signature was a few dozen meters off to my seven o'clock, likely hidden in a tree.

I reached down and picked up a potato chip before idly placing it in my mouth. The bite of salt and pepper hit my tongue with a pleasant shock before I bit down with a satisfying crunch.

There *were* a lot of other things I'd put on the back-burner that I might pull out and finish off, but they were... well, not *bad* exactly, but after running them by Obito, Sai, Torune, and Itachi I'd had to concede that they were of questionable practicality.

The problem, as with all things in this world, stemmed from the ninja themselves.

It was easy to think that, by giving a shinobi body armor they'd be harder to injure or kill. That simply wasn't the case, though. Unlike in my previous life where the primary concern was firearms, in the Elemental Nations there were a myriad of ways to kill someone which were just plain hard to deal with as a whole.

Any given ninja could use any combination of fire, water, wind, earth, and electrical attacks as a baseline standard. So that meant any 'armor' you gave someone would need to be flame retardant, moisture-wicking and resistant to constricting forces, piercing and slashing resistant, and able to at least deflect crushing damage.

Oh, there were exceptions to the rule. Things like bracers, greaves, *actual* gauntlets (not my jutsu-casters), chest plates, and various *pieces* of armor were often picked up to bolster someone's defense in an individualist's style. Which was the other problem with shinobi. Each and every piece of gear was almost always either bespoke or symbolic. Chunin vests, the forehead protectors, and various other smaller marks given out for promotions or recognition were... *debatably* useful, at best. This was testified by the fact that most jounin dropped the vests after their promotion, it having become more of a tradition to mark advancement from genin than anything else. The headbands were more of a political flag-waving affair than anything else.

The best things *currently* on the market for generalized defensive gear were actually Aburame-crafted clothing, at least for Konoha. Some of their clan members specialized in extremely durable, damage-resistant, and protective clothing. That and a few high-end luxuries like honey and silk were apparently how their clan had the largest fluid cash reserves in the village. Which probably shouldn't have surprised me, but still did.

The armored cloaks I'd gifted my girls and Naruko were made of an advanced carbon-weave material with a few key body-plates that wouldn't inhibit flexibility or speed. Because *that* was another consideration. Shinobi lived and died by their mobility, so anything that slowed them down needed to be worth its weight in platinum. As it was, the cloaks were only slightly superior to what was available in the Aburame's catalog, though I could do a lot better at this stage. No, the real perks were the seal matrixes I'd woven into them.

That would make them utterly priceless from what I now understood. With how thorough I was, too, it was about the only real way to create any realistic 'armor' that would be worth it.

I mean, sure, there were shinobi who specialized in some kind of 'absolute defense' technique involving, for instance, armor-plating themselves, but all that meant was that you were going to die slower unless you could still land a hit on your enemy. In reality, the *best* defense a shinobi could muster outside of dodging the attack altogether was being able to adequately reinforce their own body with chakra to the point where they could simply tank whatever attack came their way.

But not everyone was Might Guy.

All of this was to say that I was actually fairly limited in terms of things Konoha *wanted* which I could readily create. Or, at least, I was limited when it came to 'high tech' stuff. The gauntlets and prosthetics I'd made were extremely well-received, after all, and I was likely going to be developing more along those lines for reasons I'd already considered.

There was also the limitation that Sarutobi had handed down, of course. I wasn't to create any sort of flying castles or giant bombs that could take out an entire nation or weird super-tech cities that could self-repair. Given that those were all things previous individuals with my brand of bullshit had shown off, it would be a dead giveaway that Konoha had a 'Dreamer' on their payroll and precipitate an immediate continent-wide war.

In a rare moment of real irritation with the man's cautious and good-natured mindset, I'd thought of Danzo's approval if I were to simply remove the rest of the villages from existence. Then I'd immediately recalibrate my thought patterns because agreeing with Danzo on *anything* was grounds for accusations of insanity.

But, no... Sarutobi had a point. There was a fine line between maintaining military dominance and amassing the firepower to annihilate entire civilizations because it would be convenient.

Or, as some asshole once aptly put it, *'there's a difference between being too scary to fuck with and too scary to let live.'*

The sweet spot that I'd been trying to hit with my innovations, in other words, was the vague area between 'useful' and 'revolutionary.'

Oh, and one couldn't forget the fact that I was reinventing the wheel in many cases. Quite a bit of the scientific advancements of the ninja world were hidden behind the veil of 'clan secrets.' The most famous being the somewhat-jointly held catalog of medicines by the Ino-Shika-Cho families, who had been famously allied even before Konoha was founded. Even with my status I couldn't exactly demand to see whatever I wanted from various clan archives. Satsuki and Yakumo had, on rare occasions, brought me a few bits and pieces when I'd been working on something relevant to their families' specialties, but without marrying them I don't think I'd have any luck even with their clans.

So the only other 'big' project I was now working on was Kokoro's body.

That wasn't to say I hadn't made *any* contributions to the village, though. My knowledge in Battle Angel and Cyberpunk cybernetics wasn't precisely *medical* in nature, but the necessary preparation, surgical techniques, post-surgery treatments, and associated drugs were a *wealth* of useful information. In particular, Sarutobi was putting a rush-job on a new secure facility within the village that could produce a type of wound-foam I'd finished developing from their incomplete project archives.

They were also working on developing the infrastructure to make more advanced bone splits and outright replacements, something that had been a pipe dream before I'd shown up. The first stages of real antibiotics and vaccines were getting off the ground, too. I wasn't entirely sure what excuse Hiruzen was using to pull all of this out of his ass, especially since I'd begun writing entire volumes worth of medical theory down for limited distribution, but whatever lie they were going with *had* to be a doozy. Personally, I thought they were crediting Tsunade.

I looked out over the village of Konoha again, the urban sprawl really more of a city in truth. Focusing my vision with the superhuman talents of prana-bindu combined with a thread of chakra allowed me to pick out individual people on the various streets going about their daily business.

Good people, for the most part.

People who, just like me, wanted to be left to their own devices without the fear of violence or oppression. My medical advancements would take time to filter down to them, but it would make their

lives substantially better over the next few years. Konoha shinobi would be more resistant to disease, harder to put down, quicker to get back up, and we'd see the start of those missing arms and legs cycling back into active service with my new prosthetics. Genin and chunin would become more dangerous with the proliferation of the gauntlets, meaning more would survive to gain veterancy and, perhaps, promotions.

It doesn't feel like it's enough.

Which was the crux of the issue, and why I couldn't truly take my mind off work even now.

I reached down and picked up another potato chip as I thought about things more deeply. One of the big questions was *Akatsuki*, still. There were a number of good reasons why I'd avoided looking into them just yet, but... the time where that excuse was valid was coming to an end. I would need to start building intelligence on the bigger situation soon enough. The only thing that had been holding me back was completing the design for Kokoro's brain, and the last full moon had allowed me to seize the potential to build '[brain bio-chips](#)' to anchor her spirit to in the new body.

It would also allow me to give her something approaching a conscience as well, just in case.

The Medical Inspection Bureau of that world had used them to replace the brains of the entire population after copying over the data in an attempt to police the problematic free will of a civilian populace. Their design had included blinders meant to keep someone from realizing just what kind of surveillance state dystopia they were living in. Mine was more a loose collection of guidelines to value human life, obey the local legal structure, and function as a part of human society.

Not *orders*, mind you. Not even *directives*.

Just suggestions.

As with every child, they needed freedom to be themselves, but firm boundaries to stop them from hurting themselves or others. Besides, I'd put in a few more safeties just in case she decided to disregard what morality and ethics I could imbue her with.

But... the design phase of that was coming to a close. I had all the knowledge I needed, now I just needed to finish building. It would take me the better part of a month to get everything online, but I would make my deadline with room to spare.

I'm sure my new 'team' wouldn't mind an extra member.

Another reason I'd agreed to Sarutobi's little scheme, one he would likely realize sooner or later, but my daughter would need socialization opportunities and having friends in the children of powerful people made it more likely that others would speak up in her defense if she got herself into trouble. Or someone else did.

After double-checking that none of Torune's insects were within listening range to relay sounds, I decided...

“Fine,” I resolved with a nod. “Information on Akatsuki it is. I'll use one of my two choices on that. The other one...” I cocked my head and then smiled. Something new. Something a bit odd that would serve the purpose of impressing the daimyo for a noble title.

Elven Bladesinging.

I chuckled aloud and reached for my drink. “Yeah... that'll impress alright. Especially if I make a few changes...”

Then a flare of intense chakra burst against my senses, the familiarity of the sensation stopping me from snapping a chakra blade into existence in my hands to defend myself.

“Kota!” The burnt orange-clad girl grinned at me brightly as she leaped at me. “Long time no see!”

“It's been a week, Naruko,” I sighed good-naturedly.

“That's too long to not see a best friend, believe it!” Naruko chattered, then looked to my other side. “Oooh, snacks! I mean-” She shifted guiltily. “Uhh...”

“Smooth,” I complimented dryly, then held up the box. “Half. I made plenty, but I have to eat, too.”

A wide and infectious grin split her face as she quickly nabbed a handful of chips. “Oh, uhh... I was supposed to give you something from Obito-sensei.”

I cocked an eyebrow upwards as she handed me a scroll.

Odd, he'd usually use Sai or Torune to hand things off. Hmm...

I cracked the document after a cursory examination and, after a quick read-through, nodded in understanding. “Practice match, huh?”

“Whazzat?” Naruko asked, looking up from the pigs in a blanket I'd made as a treat for myself.

I snapped the scroll closed with a snort. “Nothing much. Just favor trading and politics. Standard stuff.”

Naruko made a bored sound, then perked back up. “Ooh, hey! Can you show me a new technique? That new sword style is so cool! Even if I'm not good with them, they're awesome to watch!”

I chuckled and stretched as I laid back. “In a bit. I came up here to do some thinking and chill a bit. So either take some quiet time with me or head on back to your jounin now that you've been fed.”

Naruko snorted and rolled her eyes, pulling her canteen to drink. “Hmm... I guess I could do with a nap. Sensei let us off with a half-day today since we already finished our D-rank.”

In the span of a few minutes, Naruko had curled up next to me, quietly snoring as I allowed myself to drift off as well. It *had* been a while since I'd had a nap.

Chapter 54:

My half-day vacation had been a pleasant experience.

So much so that I'd decided to take a bit more time to myself, here and there.

Well, as Yakumo sat down next to me, smiling as she leaned against my arm, it was enough to resolve to take *any* time off, even if it wasn't particularly 'to myself.'

"How's your week been?" She asked, looking over to the man behind the stall to place her order.

"It's been... eventful," I replied, accepting a large plate of skewers. "I helped out one of Tenten's teammates, if you'd heard?"

Yakumo chuckled as she cuddled next to me. "I think *everyone's* heard. I'm surprised their team leader isn't here forcing you to celebrate with him."

I snorted. Everyone *had* probably heard by now, given Guy and Lee gallivanting around doing chakra exercises and intensifying their training. I'd glimpsed Tenten and their third teammate briefly, a boy wearing the traditional long black fabric mask which hung down to his upper chest. As Tenten had told me when she'd joined the team, he was a member of the reclusive and mysterious Akado clan. They were a minor group within the Konoha political scene, having joined somewhat late in the game compared to many of the other clans. They weren't regarded terribly well either, what with their ability to drain chakra from others.

I remembered a few genin vaguely daring each other to approach their small clan compound back when I was still in the academy. The rumor was that, if you looked inside the gate too long, one of them would appear and drain you dry.

So, basically vampires.

Murta, the boy I'd seen lagging behind Tenten and Lee, had certainly looked as though the exposure to the sun wasn't doing him any favors. The look Tenten had given me, on the other hand, had promised a significant amount of pain coming *my way* in the near future. The fact that I'd smiled and waved at her probably hadn't done me any favors either, but I'd give her a nice meal and massage the next day she had off and see if she could hold a grudge through that.

"Considering Guy thinks that the best way to celebrate is through training..." I trailed off with a chuckle. "I don't think I'd be able to make the time to party that hard."

Yakumo giggled as she picked up a spear of her own order. "I think Naruko, Satsuki, and I got lucky in that regard. Obito-sensei is... *unconventional*, but far less intense than Guy-sensei."

"I've lived through natural disasters less intense than Guy," I replied dryly, earning another giggle even with the look of mild reprimand that accompanied it.

For a moment, there was nothing but companionable silence between us as we enjoyed a quiet meal out together.

"How's your new technique coming?" I asked, making conversation.

Yakumo smiled and swallowed her most recent bite. “Ah, it's actually coming along very well. Thank you for the advice. I never would have thought of pre-painting smaller cards to align them into a larger image like that.”

I nodded, happy the idea was panning out. “It's nothing, just a random thought I had. Most of the combat tactics I have require extensive preparation in the same way yours do anyway.”

“Your seals are amazing,” Yakumo stated suddenly, apropos of nothing.

The statement left me feeling a bit uncomfortable, though I snuffed out the emotion as quickly as it came. While there might be truth in the idea that the praise was undeserved, there was also truth in the fact that my ability to pull knowledge out of the ether was only half of the equation. The other half was my own effort at manifesting designs and esoteric powers into a functioning whole. Praise still wasn't something I particularly enjoyed, though.

“I'm sorry,” Yakumo continued, shaking her head as she cast her eyes down. “I shouldn't have-I mean, I know you don't like compliments like that.”

I cocked my head and eyed her in surprise. “I'm surprised you noticed.”

She huffed, faux-offense taking over her expression. “I'm a genjutsu-specialist. Of course I notice details like that.”

I hummed thoughtfully, not expecting the warmth that bloomed inside of me. It was still a bit odd, having people in this world that cared about me. Even if I suspected that Yakumo's ability to notice my emotional states stemmed less from her genjutsu focus and more from the lessons on bodily control I'd given her. I allowed a small amount of my chakra to seep into her through the contact we shared, the energy instantly relaxing her as I checked on the seal.

As my ghostly presence within her slid over the flows of energy, I felt the barest stirrings of another consciousness reach out.

Hmm... not yet, but soon. Another month, maybe two before it breaks.

Part of me had contemplated extending the seal and keeping my 'daughter' asleep. Hiruzen hadn't actually been *wrong* when he'd lodged the various objections he had. Kokoro was dangerous. Or, at least, she had the capacity to very easily *become* dangerous at even the slightest provocation. I understood that, but...

I could somewhat sympathize with the creature that wanted to be my daughter. It wasn't precisely the same, but Konoha's walls were nearly as much a prison for me as Yakumo's unconscious mind was for her. More than the fact that I simply didn't approve of the kind of betrayal I would need to engage in to place her into sleep permanently, I simply *didn't want to*.

“Mmm... that feels good,” Yakumo whispered, leaning against me contentedly.

“Just checking the seal,” I replied quietly, picking up my last skewer and pulling the first piece of meat off with my teeth.

“I think... I might be meeting her in my dreams, sometimes,” Yakumo admitted, sighing. “I can't remember them well, but I think she's getting ready to come out.”

I made a wordless noise of agreement, the scroll in my back pocket feeling as though it was weighing far heavier all of a sudden. This would really be it. There'd be no going back after this. Instead of meditating further on a decision I'd already made, I slid the last bit of vegetables, peppers, and meat off before quickly chewing and swallowing.

“I've got a surprise for you,” I stated, patting her on the arm.

“Is it-is *she*?” Yakumo asked excitedly.

“Not quite,” I replied, standing as her expression faltered. “But I can let you see her.”

Yakumo's eyes widened and she smiled widely, jumping up to hug me as a few people around the stall we'd been eating at either sent us looks of fond amusement or irritated unhappiness. Nearby, I felt Sai's chakra shift as we began walking away from the food stall and towards the blacksmith's shop. Given I'd planned this out, I hadn't wanted to make her wait too long before getting her 'surprise.'

Which was a good thing, because the normally-reserved girl was bouncing against my arm as each step she took seemed more like a hop or skip than her usual graceful trot.

With Sagara giving me his traditional grunt of a greeting, Sai entering the building soon after to take over the counter, I led Yakumo into the back, past Torune, and down into my workshop.

“It always surprises me, every time I come down,” Yakumo admitted with a smile, looking around the expanded space.

“I'm kind of glad you didn't see it when I'd just set it up,” I sighed, looking things over. Nothing was out of place, which was good. After a few incidents in the early days, I'd banned Sai and Torune (then Obito on one of his visits) from touching anything that they hadn't been explicitly granted permission to touch.

“Oh?” Yakumo asked, intrigued.

I shrugged. “It was about a third smaller back then, I didn't have proper lighting in place, and I'd ended up not laying the foundation correctly. When I fixed all that, I actually added the arches you see here and there for extra support with those pillars on the sides. Installing the plumbing was a bit of a headache, too, but you don't want to hear about that.”

Her nose scrunched up. “No, I imagine I don't.”

I huffed a laugh and led her over to where the skeletal form of a body was beginning to take shape. Snapping the lights on, Yakumo gasped as she took in the body which would house our daughter's spirit for the first time.

“It looks... almost like a living thing,” Yakumo observed softly, then shook herself. “N-not that it doesn't make sense for it to or anything, I just... thinking about the other things you've built...”

“You thought there'd be more gears and springs,” I guessed, chuckling as she nodded with a blush. I ran a finger absently along the half-finished musculature of winding cables. “I suppose I could

have done things that way, but I wanted something more... elegant? Something like that. More *human* as well. She's already going to be so much different than anyone else..."

There must have been something like melancholy in my voice, because Yakumo reached down to take my hand in hers, squeezing it supportively.

"You never talk about your time in the orphanage," Yakumo observed quietly.

I worked my mouth for a moment, then swallowed. "No. No, I don't."

Yakumo sighed. "If that's the way you want it, Kotaro. Just remember that I'm here if you need me." She stopped and I felt a shift of energy through her chakra. "And if not me, then Satsuki or Tenten."

"You're still not happy Satsuki found out about my blood limit before you did," I stated, my voice neutral and objective.

"I... no, I'm not happy about it, I suppose," Yakumo admitted with another sigh as she turned and kissed me, her cheeks aflame as she did so. "I *understand* why, especially with the circumstances and I appreciate that you didn't want to distract me from mastering the techniques I needed to graduate, but I still wish you would have told me earlier."

"I'm sorry," I replied, bending slightly to kiss her back. Even if the apology was empty, sometimes it was better to offer them for a relationship to work. It meant I gave Yakumo the tactical victory in the conversation in order not to need to fight a strategic battle to put the entire thing behind us.

Feelings, after all, seldom cared about the reality of the situation. Even if I was already extending her a large amount of trust at the time by teaching her an entire personal style, regardless of compensation, she felt that not knowing substantial secrets in my life constituted a personal wrong I had dealt her. In some sense, given I was trying to treat her, Tenten, and Satsuki equally, I understood that. On the other hand, though, my secrets were mine to hand out as I wished, and Yakumo shouldn't attempt to make those judgments on my behalf, especially when it came to something which involved personal bias.

I *could* bring up the fact that Tenten, not being a clan heiress and having grown up in similar conditions as myself, did not feel entitled to such things and had taken the revelation that I had a secret 'bloodline limit' with a bit more grace than Yakumo had.

But I didn't.

The apology cost me nothing to give, but saved me the time and effort it would take to rebuild the emotional closeness I would destroy for the sake of some arbitrary 'victory' that wouldn't mean anything in the long run. It was both easier and better, by my accounting, to acknowledge that *moving forward* in the relationship, Yakumo (as well as Satsuki and Tenten) *would* have some claim to a part of my life and I'd need to keep that in mind.

"I had to promise the Hokage some things for him to let me embody Kokoro," I stated.

Yakumo stiffened slightly. "Oh? Do you need help? My family can-"

"It's alright," I replied, planting a kiss on her forehead to reassure her. "I don't want to create a schism in the village by pitting the clans against the Hokage. That way lies drawing me more deeply into

politics and risks burning good will with the old man on top of everything else.”

Yakumo grimaced, but nodded. “You’re... probably right. A favor like that from my father wouldn’t come cheap. Even with how you’ve raised our clan’s standing with the gate project, I think he’s still a bit irritated that I’m set on marrying you. Especially with Satsuki in the mix.”

Clan politics, no doubt.

“I’ll be explaining this to Tenten and Satsuki soon, but I wanted you to hear it first, since you’re closest to the matter,” I stated, making her perk up and in no small way reassuring her that she now had a one-up on Satsuki to match the girl’s earlier one from knowing about my ‘bloodline.’ “I’ve put in safeguards so that Kokoro won’t be able to use her full strength at first. This body is... *extremely* powerful. The bones are a special alloy I’ve developed using rare metals and a blend of titanium and wolframite. The muscles are carefully corded bands of carbon-weave fibers, and-”

“Kotaro, my love,” Yakumo interrupted me by holding a hand up so that her fingertips covered my lips. “This is all very fascinating, but I have no idea what much of it means. Please? In terms I can understand?”

I huffed and rolled my eyes. “Spoil my fun, woman.” She grinned in amusement. “Fine. I don’t think the average chunin will be able to do substantial damage to her body considering her baseline durability. I’m not going to be giving our daughter a *fragile* body.”

Yakumo stared at me for a moment, her eyes firming as she nodded. “Good.”

“The downside is that, while she’ll still be able to feel pain and other stimuli like a normal person would, being so tough will likely give her a certain disregard for authority, simply because she’s able to ignore the consequences of her actions in most situations.” Yakumo nodded less firmly this time, understanding what I was driving at. “Which is why I’m going to be tying you and the other girls into the control matrix for Kokoro’s body. You’ll be able to disable certain aspects, like her ability to project chakra externally into jutsu, or limit her speed and strength should the situation call for it. Up to and including disabling her body entirely and putting her to sleep.”

Yakumo’s brows knit as she contemplated what I was telling her. “Do you really think all of that is necessary? I don’t want her to hate us if we use that against her. Kotaro, I *know* what it’s like having my body betray me. I don’t want that for our child.”

“Which is why I think you should have it,” I replied, stopping her. “You know what it’s like and won’t use it lightly. But, still, Kokoro is an unconventional child, born largely of dark chakra. I promised the Hokage that she would behave. I promised him *on my life*, Yakumo.”

She inhaled sharply, her eyes widening.

“That’s how much this means to me, and that’s how much I’m willing to commit. I need you to be able to discipline Kokoro if she decides to push her boundaries too far. Which is why I want you to make time over the next month and I’ll walk you through the ways to limit or disable her body. Otherwise... I won’t be able to trust you to keep her in hand well enough to let you take her out on your own.”

Yakumo’s eyes hardened, her hands clenching as her jaw firmed. “I-I understand, Kotaro. Thank you. I can’t tell you how much this means to me, that you’re willing to do this. To go this far.”

I accepted the tender kiss she offered as she leaned up to meet my lips, her arms wrapping around my neck and mine about her waist in a close embrace.

Eventually, we pulled apart, our breathing perfectly even where it should have been heavy and rapid. That was one of the perks that came with *prana bindu* training, though. “I’ll walk you through the first lesson and then I’ll activate a seal and we’ll see about talking to Kokoro directly, okay?”

“Okay.” Yakumo nodded, laying her head against my chest for a moment. “I love you, Kotaro.”

I waited for a heartbeat, pressed my lips to her hair, and replied. “I love you too, Yakumo.”

Was it the truth? I wasn't quite sure yet, but I believed so. Perhaps it was closer to a *promise* rather than an absolute statement of fact. Regardless, it was one of those little compromises I was willing to extend before I was truly ready to admit the feeling.

If only because of the smile I got in return made me more sure of the statement than I had been before I said it.

Chapter 55:

“Art of Manifestation: False Summoning.” I intoned, my hands racing through a series of signs faster than the eye could follow.

Yakumo held her breath as the seal I'd placed on the back of her neck did its work and, a moment later, the body of a clothed little girl flashed into existence with a tiny burst of chakra-smoke. In the back of my mind, I made a note to fine-tune the process a bit more. The *ideal* performance of a technique was to manifest as little 'smoke' as possible, the ephemeral gas being a physical manifestation of excess energy. The fact that there was any at all meant you could improve upon your skill with an art.

Producing so little meant that I was well on my way to mastery, which was admittedly exceptional for a technique I was actually performing for the first time, but I'd long-since developed habits to minimize my chakra expenditure and wasn't going to allow myself to relapse now.

Yakumo's eyes, rather than track the swiftly-dissipating burst of smoke, were quite thoroughly locked onto the girl which my technique had brought into the physical realm. “She looks... a little older than the last time we saw her.”

“The aging shouldn't be one-to-one,” I replied thoughtfully, “for a number of complicated reasons, but she *does* experience some amount of time passing in your subconscious even as she's been nominally asleep for the last several months.”

Yakumo nodded slowly, reaching out to touch the younger child's cheek softly as her chest rose and fell. It was still a bit surprising to me how readily Yakumo had accepted Kokoro as her own child, but the answer to that conundrum was a mix of differing cultural norms and Yakumo's own personal concerns.

Simply put, female shinobi were expected to bear children. They didn't necessarily need to *raise them*, as having a child and then offering them up to an orphanage was considered acceptable for active-duty kunoichi. It was frowned upon for those who *weren't* active-duty, but not actively penalized beyond the social stigma for laziness. Regardless, a woman fulfilling their basic obligation to the village of reproducing forgave a few sins on their part. The fact that many kunoichi would either get knocked up on a mission or simply pick a random partner while outside the village *probably* had something to do with their reputation as easy women.

Being from a *clan* magnified the responsibility to bear children to the point where it wasn't even an unspoken expectation, it was an expectation that *didn't need* to be spoken. If you were born female within a shinobi village to almost any clan and had the capacity to bear children, you understood from a young age that you were expected to get pregnant and continue the bloodline... if not at the *earliest* opportunity, then at least within a reasonable timeframe.

The Kurama were not a large clan, unfortunately, which meant under normal circumstances Yakumo would be expected to have more than one child. The only reason she didn't have brothers and sisters herself was because her mother's last pregnancy had ended with a still birth that had ended any chance of producing further children.

Under *normal* circumstances.

With Yakumo's congenital weakness and what I was now sure was sickle cell anemia, she was unlikely to survive the rigors of childbirth more than once... if even that.

In that light, Kokoro was something of a miracle child, even beyond her existence in the first place. Possibly even more than achieving her goal of becoming a kunoichi, having produced an heir validated Yakumo's own life as being worth something.

“Is it okay to wake her?” Yakumo asked, sparing me half a glance.

“No, I only embodied her for you to stare at her while she's sleeping,” I replied dryly, drawing a pout from Yakumo.

Shaking off my comment, I reached down and gently shook... my daughter.

Still taking a bit of time to really sink in, I suppose...

“Mmm... what is...” Hazel eyes blinked open sleepily, squinting against the electric lights I'd installed in the workshop. There was a lengthy moment between Kokoro gaining consciousness and realizing that she was now awake, but once it happened...

“Daddy! Mommy!” Kokoro cried, her eyes widening as she launched herself at the two of us.

Somewhat disconcertingly, her arms stretched a bit further than expected to encompass both of our bodies in a giant hug.

Yep, that was one of the reasons I went with an artificial body. An organic one would have been much more susceptible to alterations or mutations from dark chakra.

“Kokoro!” Yakumo squealed, her arms worming their way against me to hug our daughter back. “I've been waiting so long to see you again!”

“I've been waiting, too!” Kokoro complained energetically. “Sleeping was *boring!*”

Internally, I sighed. That was pretty good confirmation for a nonstandard neuro-typical setup.

Then again... these are the Elemental Nations, anyone of real significance is essentially a freak of nature and thinks at right angles to common sense. Maybe she'll fit right in.

“I'm glad to see you too, Princess,” I stated, edging my arms out of her near-crushing hug to return the embrace while interfacing with her chakra via my ninshu skills. “Your new body isn't quite ready yet, but I thought we could have a little family meeting before you're ready to wake up for real, okay?”

Kokoro looked up at me with a quizzical expression colored by slight dismay as she released us from her grip, her arms collapsing to a normal length again. “Aww... can't I just stay awake until then? It's not long, right?”

Yakumo looked at our daughter, frowned sympathetically, then looked back at me with a pleading expression. I rolled my eyes, then gave her a flat look in return.

I really hope this won't set the precedent of me being the 'bad cop' parent.

“She's bound to you, personally, Yakumo. More than that, the seal is drawing from your chakra. Trying to keep the technique up for more than a few hours will seriously injure you,” I reminded her, and she winced.

Kokoro's eyes widened as she looked between us. “I don't want to stay awake if it hurts mommy! I'll go back to sleep!”

I laid a hand on the young pseudo-child's head as she panicked, calming her. “It's okay, Kokoro. Remember, I said Mommy's got a few hours before anything bad happens. Once she recovers and we have more free time in a week or so, I think we can do this again, even. You just can't stay out right now until your body's ready, okay?”

“Ooooo~kaaaay,” Kokoro groaned, slumping as she did so. “It's almost done, right?”

I nodded, gesturing towards the table where the near-complete body lay under a sheet. “You can have a look at it if you want, but some of the internal workings are exposed right now.”

Kokoro cocked her head, then nodded. “I wanna' see!”

Meeting Yakumo's gaze, I shrugged, then stepped over to pull the sheet off. Kokoro's eyes widened as she looked the still form. “Oooooh~”

I snorted and began walking her through handling a few bits and pieces she seemed particularly interested in. Once she'd had enough, I knelt down and tapped a piece of exposed titanium-alloy 'bone.' “Now, Kokoro... this body is a lot stronger and more durable than most children your age have, so I'm going to put protections on it to keep you from hurting people, okay?”

Something flickered deep in her eyes. “Protections?”

“It means there are going to be things you won't be able to do until you prove to everyone that you can behave yourself,” Yakumo explained as Kokoro frowned. “That's a rule for everyone out here in this world, not just you.”

“But I wanna' do *everything!*” Kokoro cried in dismay, small tongues of dark chakra manifesting around her form. Yakumo's eyes widened in alarm.

“And you will,” I stated firmly, discreetly activating a series of seals on my body before reaching through the dark energy. Kokoro froze, instinctually surprised I'd been able to do so when I touched her hand, ninshu directing me to calm her and analyze the reaction of her chakra. “Just not all at once. Daddy has had to make promises to important people. They want to know you can be a big girl and be responsible, so we're going to show them you can play nice with everyone out here in the real world, okay?”

I punctuated the question with a small poke to Kokoro's abdomen, making her giggle as the dark energy dispersed. “Mmm... okay! But I still get to eat whatever I want!”

Another flicker of darkness behind her eyes.

Yeah, that's going to be a problem. Perhaps some kind of inhibitor? Maybe intent-based...

“You can eat anything you want to as long as it's not alive,” I stated pointedly. While some people might fight a child to ensure they have a healthy diet, another reason I'd gone for an artificial body was to hopefully be able to distract Kokoro with sweets and traditionally unhealthy foods. Realistically, there was no reason she couldn't indulge as she wanted in that regard, at least, and I didn't really want to fight an uphill battle trying to make sure a being that was at least as much chakra beast as human ate her vegetables.

“But I wanna' eat bad people! They have chakra like mine in them!” Kokoro complained.

Yakumo grimaced, dismay on her face.

“You can't eat people,” I told her firmly. “There are a lot of people who do bad things that work with Daddy and Mommy and they'd get upset if you ate their friends. If they get upset, they'll try to hurt Mommy and Daddy. Do you want that?”

Kokoro frowned, ducking her head and whining. “Nooo~”

I sighed and mentally reviewed my options. The pragmatic approach was probably best here. Kokoro *wasn't* entirely human. Dark chakra was... *interesting* in its implications, but problematic for humans who drew on too much of it at a time, to the point that it could be self-reinforcing for negative emotions. Kokoro, however, seemed at least somewhat immune to that aspect given she hadn't spiraled out of control earlier.

Hmm... I'm not sure it's realistic to attempt to keep her from violence in this world, given what she is. Moreover, she needs training and socialization. I can accomplish the first, but the second... and like it or not, there are skills outside my umbrella...

“If you really want to eat bad people who draw on chakra like yours,” I began slowly, “then you have to go to the shinobi academy and learn how to be a ninja.” Yakumo eyed me in surprise. “They'll teach you about how to tell friends from food. Until you learn how to do that, though, you can't eat people.”

I'll invent some kind of excuse for the general academy. A bloodline? Always a good fallback. Besides, Aburame have a history of devouring enemy ninja and, in emergencies, corpses using their swarms. That's cannibalism by proxy.

There was more Yakumo and I had to talk about with her, though we did get to spend a bit of time letting her draw pictures with crayons while we watched. It was surprisingly wholesome, even if her art was probably more akin to a developing serial killer than a small child. Eventually, though, Yakumo's chakra began to run low and I had to trigger the safeties on the seal to slowly put the girl back down for another 'nap' after promising another playdate in a week or two.

Yakumo sighed as our daughter's immaterial form faded into chakra smoke and quickly dispersed. “That... wasn't what I thought it'd be.”

I shrugged. “We play the hand we're dealt. Second thoughts?”

There was a moment's hesitation, then she shook her head. “No. Just... coming to terms, I guess? She's not going to be like a normal child and I need to get used to the idea.”

I nodded. “You should. Expecting Kokoro to act like a normal human won't do her any favors. Other people are already going to treat her strangely because of what she is.”

“I understand,” Yakumo sighed, then turned to look at me with a slight frown. “I was surprised to hear you recommend the academy.”

I scoffed as I began cleaning up my sealing materials. “Just like you can't expect her to be a normal human, Kumo-chan, I can't expect her to keep to my sense of morality. The most I can do is try to teach her how to use what she is as constructively as possible.”

Yakumo leaned into me, wrapping her arms around me and squealing quietly.

“Hmm?” I asked, smirking slightly.

“You called me *Kumo-chan*,” Yakumo replied, snuggling up to me further.

I hummed faux-thoughtfully, then nodded. “I suppose I did. You like it, then?”

“I love it!” Yakumo cried happily.

Chapter 56:

“Sarutobi-Jounin, correct?” I asked, offering the man a shallow bow to get his measure. As I suspected, though, he casually waved off even that level of formality, gesturing with one hand that still held a smoking cigarette between his fingers even as I busied myself tracing the backdrop of the new training ground I found myself in. New for me personally, of course, not for the village.

“Just Asuma is fine,” he replied in a voice that spoke of years of smoking and rough use, even at his age. The similarly-seasoned eyes raked over me in all my visually-unremarkable glory. Brown pants, white shirt, a heavy brown jacket over that with a forest-green sash around my waist with black gloves and shoes.

The only hint of martial capacity was a wooden bokken slung across my back.

“So you're Kotaro, huh?” He asked rhetorically, taking a drag on his cigarette.

I shrugged. “That's me. Obito said you wanted me to do a training exercise with your genin?”

“Obito, huh?” Asuma asked thoughtfully, and I shrugged again. He hummed, then immolated the butt of his cigarette with a twist of chakra as he stood from where he was sitting on the upraised root of a tree. “Yeah, I recently saw his team in action, bunch of little monsters.”

Thankfully, the last part was added affectionately rather than maliciously.

I really didn't want to have to make an issue of something like that, but given that Satsuki and Yakumo were my lovers and Naruko, my friend, I would have had to confront Asuma if he'd decided to be that petty.

“And you want me to help your team?” I asked skeptically, cocking my head. “I really don't have the kind of time it would take to get your kids up to their level. Satsuki, Yakumo, and Naruko are the

work of years of effort on my part to say nothing of what their clans brought to the table training them. Besides, I wouldn't want to undermine your authority by being too hands-on with them.”

Asuma grimaced, nodding slightly as he conceded the point. “Yeah, the Old Man would have my hide if he thought I was foisting an Ino-Shika-Cho trio on a civilian. I just...” His eyes cut sideways and he cleared his throat awkwardly. “...was wondering if you had any tips?”

I stared at the jounin, my face a blank mask over my incomprehension. “You want me to... teach you how... *to teach*?”

The older man's cheeks heated slightly, then his expression firmed and he bent down slightly and began speaking in an undertone. “Look kid, I just don't want to look like a lazy asshole in front of my girlfriend, okay? You'd be doing me a solid if you just gave me a few pointers and maybe showed up once or twice to get them properly motivated. That's your *thing*, right? Helping other kids your age?”

I chewed on the question as I quashed my instinctual response. Instead, I carefully measured my tone. “No. My *thing* is helping my friends and romantic partners. For what I hope are obvious reasons.”

Honestly? Asuma would have had a better shot at asking Shikaku to get me more involved in helping his son. Then instructed Shikamaru to, in turn, draw me in to help his team. I made a quick mental note to watch for that and, if it started happening, to at least exact a price for it if I couldn't head it off at the pass.

Asuma stroked his beard contemplatively. “Hmm... how about a price to do it, then?”

I frowned, mentally drawing up my balance sheet of expenditures and withdrawals. While more money, in principle, was never a *bad thing*, there was a point where the opportunity cost represented by work of a specific kind was greater than the potential of doing a different kind. Or doing work for a different client. Asuma, as a jounin, likely had a fairly large disposable income. I'd spoken with Obito, Itachi, Mikoto, Kushina, and a few others on the topic of money over the last several months and come up with a good estimation of what I could charge people for custom blades and other bespoke projects. Sagara, of course, had helped out, though even the, ah... 'cutting edge' (pun intended) of his smithing prowess was nowhere near what I could create and, therefore, nowhere near what I could charge.

Which, to be blunt, meant that making a single sword would likely be a more productive use of my time than accepting Asuma's offer.

Although the man *was* a jounin, he was also on teaching duty. That meant he was detached from the general forces and, more or less, under the direct command of the Hokage instead of the Jounin commander. Why? Because Jounin-sensei almost always had politically valuable individuals under their watch. Granted, they were granted an enormous amount of leave to decide their (team's) mission roster, but the Hokage could (in theory, at least) force or bar said jounin (and their team) on any specific mission.

What this meant, *in practice*, was that the village subsidized the pay of jounin-sensei while they were actively teaching and allowed the actual mission pay of D and C-ranks to be split among the genin themselves. A long-term 'teaching mission' nicely solved both the income problems of the jounin and actually incentivized the genin to accomplish their missions instead of arguing about how much of their pay the 'lazy jounin teacher' was going to get.

It really says something that the goddamn shinobi have figured out that unpaid internships to 'learn important occupational skills' don't fucking work.

So... in short, I knew how much Asuma was making on a monthly basis. It was enough to live comfortably on, but not enough for massive expenditures. I distantly recalled he'd served with the Twelve Guardians of Fire in the Fire Daimyo's court and likely had a significant nest egg saved up from his stint there, but...

There comes a point where asking for an inordinate amount of money when a man's pride is on the line comes across as more of an insult than a simple refusal. I think the technical term for that point is, 'Dick Move.'

“You know how much my swords sell for?” I asked.

Asuma blinked at the non-sequitur, then grimaced. “Hmm... point. Alright then, kid, you've got me in a tough spot. What *do* you want?”

I cocked my head in thought. What *did* I want? Now *there* was a loaded question. I had Guy for the exhibition match I was planning, I had everything set for Kushina's operation, there wasn't anything *pressing*...

Hmm...

“Two things,” I stated slowly, and Asuma nodded, standing back up to his full height as he watched me expectantly. “First, a banked favor.” He grimaced, and I shrugged. “It won't be anything too bad. Worse comes to worst, I have you roll your genin team out for a mission on my behalf and you shoulder the fee.”

That stipulation gave a level of monetary value and applicable danger to the favor, or at least a valid range thereof, to which Asuma nodded slowly. “Okay, I can do that. The second?”

“I heard through the grapevine you just got back from the Daimyo's court,” I led with, seeing him frown once again. “Your nephew bragged about it while I was over at the Uzumaki Compound,” which, thankfully was both true and a valid excuse, “but I'm cashing in a bunch of favor's with the Hokage to try and get a minor noble title-”

Asuma huffed a half-laugh. “Why'd you want one of those, kid? Even if you get one, everyone around you will treat you like shit. The only reason would be-” He stopped, realization in his eyes as he nodded slowly. “I was *going* to say the stipend, but if what I've been hearing from Obito and Guy is true, you're in it for your girls.”

I shrugged, not bothering to deny it. “The Hokage might have said something about a bunch of blades I made disappearing into unknown hands earning me some credit in that regard.”

Asuma sucked in a breath through his teeth. “And you want me to see about putting in the good word for you.” It wasn't a question, and I waited patiently as he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it with a small flash of chakra. He took a long drag, likely enjoying being back in control of the conversation for a moment, then nodded again. “Okay, I can do that. Nothing *obvious*, but you don't want obvious for this. Still, I've got a marker I can call in.”

“Alright then,” I stated, crossing my arms as I thought over the matter. “The first thing you need to understand as regards getting your genin to perform is that it's a question of motivation. The main issue here is that I'm not entirely sure involving me is going to create the kind and longevity of motivation you want. While it's true I could provoke Shikamaru, Ino, and Chouji into working harder, the fact that only Shikamaru knows who I am, and distantly at that, means anything I do to them would be a relative flash in the pan.”

Asuma frowned and scratched his beard. “Hmm... that makes *some* sense, I suppose. Still, it better not be a lead-in to an excuse to get out of doing anything.”

I barked an unexpected laugh and shook my head. “Ah, no. I'm just trying to temper your expectations here. Well, that and also trying to look at what kind of approach you specifically want.”

Asuma nodded again, his gaze still speculative. “Hmm... okay, then. I'll hear you out.”

...

There were a number of reasons behind the meeting, but the most significant one in Asuma's mind was to get a feel for Konoha's newest oddity. His home, the Village Hidden in the Leaves, had a long and storied history of attracting and raising particularly weird ninja. He, himself, remembered the halcyon days of the Sannin. Although he wasn't old enough to remember their rise, he'd been an academy student while they were at the height of their power.

He also remembered what that had done to his father.

Asuma sighed internally and dismissed the pang of emotion those thoughts brought up.

Kotaro, the clanless orphan didn't particularly strike him as the second coming of the seal master Jiraiya had been, nor was he the rising star Minato Namikaze had been. In fact, Kotaro's particular brand of strangeness seemed to be how *normal* he was.

Or, well, how normal he *appeared* to be at first glance.

It was fascinating, actually, the boy reminding him quite a bit of his hobby of people-watching while working in the Guardians of Fire at the royal court. The younger nobles that had debuted during his tenure often had imperfect etiquette, learning it piecemeal as their days at court went on. Even if many of them had received extensive tutoring on the subject, practical experience was often a more instructive process. In the meantime, though, they would have patchwork habits as they pulled together different affectations from the appropriate levels of nobility and formality.

Kotaro reminded him a great deal of those younger court members.

Only... not quite. There's something else in him.

Even the highest court officials hesitated to speak so frankly to a shinobi. In particular, those who knew the difference between a green genin and a seasoned chunin or jounin at least made the pretense of feigned respect. Even if, in reality, they feared, shunned, or outright hated ninja. Monks and samurai could be depended, to a certain extent, to be loyal to ideologies. Even if they weren't especially convenient ones, and even if they also had political motivations.

Shinobi, though, only had two loyalties... and that was if you didn't have the misfortune of meeting a diehard patriot.

The first loyalty is always to the village. The second is to the mission.

There were ways to interpret both of them, of course. Being loyal to 'the village' varied between the political leadership of your home and the true best interests. Likewise, loyalty to the mission could mean the terms you agreed to with the client, whatever the village had actually told you to accomplish, your own teammates, or a personal interpretation of the objective which fit with your own morality.

...but those who don't understand the life of a shinobi never care to grasp the subtext of those decisions, either. For those people, ninja are bloodthirsty mercenaries bound only by gold.

And apparently Dear Old Dad was trying to get a 'civilian craftsman' into a key position as a mole within the court. It was, in its own way, as clever as anything the aging Hokage had come up with. Holding a prodigy back from graduating for superficial reasons that appeared legitimate, but training him as an 'off the books' agent of the village who could act as both an influence peddler for the village to the daimyo and a way for the Uchiha and Kurama to more closely associate themselves with the levers of political power.

Every generation, a few clans tried to make a play in the court and there were some success stories. A distant cousin of the daimyo had married a member of the Akimichi clan, in fact. It helped that the clan was sufficiently straight-forward in their traditions that they could impersonate samurai should they feel the need to in their heavy armor.

It did worry him, on occasion, how powerful the Uchiha seemed to be on the verge of becoming within the village, but... Itachi and Satsuki were cast from a different mold than their father, at least.

“So, what you'd suggest is finding ways to subtly provoke the kind of reaction that would motivate them without appearing to have deliberately intended it,” Asuma frowned contemplatively, pondering the advice. It was a kind of generalist approach to deception that he hadn't considered using on the brats.

“That's if the straightforward approach doesn't work,” Kotaro stated with a shrug, once again surprising Asuma with how casual the boy could be in conversing with someone so high-ranked. Definitely his father's hand there, if his suspicions for Kotaro's purpose were on-point.

“Put them through a personalized training hell. Nothing quite as brutal as what Guy does, but...” Kotaro explained.

Asuma frowned. His own sensei had been much more... free-range about things, he supposed was the best way to put it. Then again, his old team had been much more motivated than his current students. He'd thought getting this generation's clan heirs of the famous trio would have meant his own contributions would be limited to refining their basics and holding their hands through early missions. The opportunity would give him a chance to reacclimate to the village, shake the rust off some skills that hadn't seen use in the court, and... well, get him used to the idea of kids. Someday soon, at least.

But if it came down to putting in extra effort or having 'his' kids be the disappointment...

“So just run them ragged?” Asuma asked skeptically, imagining Shikamaru's reaction to the ultimatum. Chouji would put up with it after an obligatory period of whining, but Ino would be almost as

bad as his Nara student.

“It's your job to prepare them for the life of a shinobi, not be their friend,” Kotaro told him bluntly. “Friendship comes later, after the funeral they didn't have.”

Asuma winced, irritated by how sharply that barb cut. He hadn't been treating them as *friends*, had he... Memories of the past months flared, casual interactions over games of shogi, tables of snacks, and arrangements of flowers as he guided them through rudimentary exercises. Looking at those same situations more analytically, his position had been an authoritative one, but less of an *authority* than a first among equals.

Shit. The kid might have a point... I might have been out of the regular chain of command too long. Ugh, at least I'm getting a good deal out of this. It'd be humiliating to have Dad or someone else dress me down for improper conduct, even with how loosely genin teams are run.

“I think I'll see about putting some pressure on them,” Asuma mused aloud. “Tell them the period I've given them to acclimatize to their new position is over. Give that a week or two and check the results-”

“At least a month,” Kotaro interrupted, Asuma's blue eyes flicking back to him consideringly, waiting for an explanation. “Changing pedagogies too frequently without giving them time to *show* results can be more damaging than sticking with a poor methodology. It's important to set expectations and hold students to them regularly to show that their progress is both being tracked and evaluated in a way that they can understand. If you shift from one teaching strategy to the next without warning or explanation, it confuses them as to what metric they should be judging themselves by and can feed bad habits instead of good ones.”

That... was the first time Asuma had ever heard anything on the topic laid out like that, but it made good, logical sense.

Hmm... I can see why those girls turned into the freaks of nature that they did. It's not every day you find a prodigy that's good at teaching. Probably another reason Pops didn't want him on the front lines.

“A month, then, and if that doesn't work I'll explain to them why we're changing things up,” Asuma agreed, his mind having long moved past an evaluation of Kotaro and into a re-evaluation of his own team and teaching style.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota) I

Metaphysical Cosmology: Reincarnation Cycles

Metaphysical Physiology: Reincarnation (Aberrant)

Metaphysical Physiology: Respiration of the Soul

Metaphysical Cosmology: Akashic Records

Blacksmithing

Cognitive Performance Enhancement

Meditation

Mechanical Computers

Horology

Cooking
Prana-Bindu Disciplines I
Blacksmithing: Ninja Tools
Mechanical Computers II
Prana-Bindu Disciplines II
Prana-Bindu Disciplines III
Swordsmithing
Automation
Metallurgy
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu
Chakra Control
Medic-Nin Training
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho (II)
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu II
Prana-Bindu Disciplines IV
Weirding Way
(Nothing New for Chapter 9-11, Same Month)
Ruggedization
Yin-Yang Manipulation
Blacksmithing: Chakra-Conductive Metals
(Nothing New for Chapter 12-15, Same Month)
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo I
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho (III)
(Nothing New for Chapter 18, Same Month)
Fuinjutsu I
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo II
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo III
Fuinjutsu II
Fuinjutsu III
Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota) II
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu III
ANBU-Ne Operational History
Medic-Nin Training II
Medic-Nin Training III

Demon Slayer Breathing Styles I-V
Ninja Puppetry: I&II
Cyberpunk: Cybernetics I-III
Gunm/Battle Angel: Cybernetics I-IV
Dark Chakra I&II
Education II & III (New)
-(Education Rank I is already possessed due to having a mundane degree in the subject.)

Chapter 57:

I looked over the puppet I'd built and nodded.

As much as Nohara Rin was more than trustworthy enough to be made aware of my secret, the Hokage had judged her a high-risk asset due to how much time she spent out of the village. As such, while he couldn't *forbid* me from telling her, he'd made it clear that he strongly discouraged it.

That complicated matters given she wanted to meet the medic who was going to perform the surgery on Kushina's spine before she would grant her blessing.

Which... well, Kushina probably *suspected* I was behind the offer of a new spine, but couldn't prove it and also knew how important it was to keep such an asset on the down-low if they could be.

So, in the great tradition of supervillains everywhere, I'd constructed an LMD.

Wild blonde hair, tan skin, blue eyes, somewhat fat, wearing the robes of a monk and bearing the scars of a man at least fifty years older than me. Rihaku would be the new face for any surgeries I needed to conduct.

With a small gate implanted in his chest cavity, I could even control him from great distances without anyone the wiser, having fixed the mistake that had allowed Hinata to pick my seals out.

"Hmm... okay, let's think personality," I muttered, cocking my head as I pursed my lips. "I'm thinking... Jiraiya-esque? Little bit lighter than that, but still kind of an asshole. Mix in a bit of neuro-divergent and paranoia? That would explain the lack of any official ties. Just a general kind of weirdo."

I nodded in approval of my idea, then picked up the fabricated history Sarutobi had drawn up for my life model duplicate. This would be a long surgery and I didn't want to mess anything up if Rin decided to ask probing questions while I was doing the setup.

Hopefully by the time I was done Satsuki and Yakumo would be on their way back from their mission. Even if that ran long, though, Tenten had probed me about arranging a date during the off-period after her own mission, so I did have that to look forward to.

I sighed, centering my thoughts. Yakumo had been distracted and worried ever since meeting Kokoro again. Hopefully she was holding herself together well. If not, I trusted Satsuki to look out for her.

I wondered what they were getting up to...

...

Not for the first time, Kurama Yakumo pressed her hand to her lower abdomen in an absent-minded motion that seemed to rear its head every time her thoughts turned to her unborn child. The revelation that she would, indeed, be able to bear an heir for the clan had been a powerful and uplifting one. Ever since Kotaro, wonder-worker that he was, had confirmed he would be able to realize Kokoro into a physical form, she had spent several of her precious off-days wondering what it would be like to have a child.

The reality, as with so many things in her life it seemed, was far stranger than she'd been able to contemplate.

“You okay?”

Yakumo blinked, looking over to where Satsuki sat on a branch above her, the other girl's eyes keeping a watchful bead on the forest around them. Even if the mission was, as Kotaro had termed it, a 'milk run,' Obito-sensei was correct in that these low-level jobs were still good opportunities to engrain proper habits.

“Fine,” Yakumo replied shortly, going back to mixing the ration packs to make something approaching a proper meal. She would have preferred to simply unseal one of the packs Kotaro had given them for food, but sensei had another good point about holding the 'good' food in reserve for emergencies. They should use the rations while they had time and weren't in a difficult position. Should things escalate, they could get an easy morale boost by eating Kota's dishes on the go.

If they were being overly cautious, they could enjoy them at leisure on the way back to Konoha.

Satsuki gave a short grunt, the noise somehow conveying disbelief. After a moment, the dark-haired girl spoke up again. “Communication.”

Yakumo grimaced, wishing that Naruko and sensei would come back to interrupt the awkward moment. It was a foolish thought to have, given that would mean their scouting operation would have been blown and they'd need to break camp and clear out.

It was ironic, she considered in her more thoughtful moments, that she'd end up sharing a man with Uchiha Satsuki of all people. There was... not *bad* blood between the Uchiha and Kurama clans, but certainly *complicated*. Her clan had splintered off from the Uchiha a hundred years before the founding of Konoha and reconciliation between the two groups over the differences which had *caused* the split were slow in coming.

It was only recently, after all, that the Uchiha were beginning to shed their taciturn and cold-blooded reputation among the greater part of Konoha.

No, Yakumo would have *much* preferred that, if she could not have Kotaro to herself, the other party in the relationship would have been more personable. Naruko, for instance, would have been less objectionable...

But Satsuki was, in her own awkward way, *trying* here and now to initiate dialogue.

Something she was usually only truly comfortable with Kotaro around.

“Kota called up Kokoro so we could talk,” Yakumo stated without preamble.

Satsuki was silent before making a wordless noise that somehow managed to combine surprise, interest, and disappointment.

"It was spur of the moment," Yakumo shook her head, not quite sure that was actually *true*, but willing to obfuscate the matter for the sake of harmony. "Kota had a conversation with the Hokage. Since Kokoro isn't entirely human..."

Although Yakumo trailed off, the way Satsuki's eyes narrowed and flashed red told her that she didn't need to give explicit details about the talk their mutual boyfriend had with the village leader.

"Will she put Kota in danger again?" Satsuki asked bluntly, forgoing roundabout information-gathering attempts in a way that, and she could tell, made them both uncomfortable.

Still, Kota was correct in the fact that it was better to be honest when dealing with important subjects rather than so circumspect that none of them could tell exactly what had been decided.

"Kota has put safeties in her new body," Yakumo replied, knowing that both of them had more faith in their man's skills than anything else. "But he wanted to talk to Kokoro and make sure she understood that there would be rules once she's out in the real world. I'm..."

Yakumo chewed on the thought for a long moment, trying to find the words she wanted to say.

Satsuki, to her credit, waited quietly for the other girl to get her thoughts in order.

"Kokoro... I thought it was going to be like having a... a *normal human* daughter," Yakumo admitted, weight lifting from her shoulders even as something heavy settled in her gut with the admission. "She just... she just seemed perfectly fine until... she talked about *eating people*, Satsuki!"

Yakumo shook her head, taking a stabilizing breath and drawing upon her boyfriend's lessons to properly center herself emotionally. Tears that were threatening to gather were reabsorbed in a blink, and the riot of feelings within her began to calm. Distracted as she was for the moment, though, she was startled when she felt a pair of arms encircle her.

Her breath caught.

"It sounds rough," Satsuki admitted, leaning against her. It was an awkward embrace, what with both of them wearing full mission gear, but... the fact that Satsuki was even *trying*... again, that meant more than the act itself. "Sorry I wasn't there."

"It's... okay. I just-I need to get used to the idea. Kota was able to talk me through some of it, like how the Aburame clan's insects are part of them and they're known to eat corpses. Or how the Inuzuka and their dogs occasionally eat human flesh when there aren't other options. There's even shinobi like Sasori of the Red Sand, in Suna, who uses human bodies for his puppet materials." Yakumo regurgitated the list that Kota had given her like a mantra, trying to normalize the revelation once again.

Satsuki grunted, making no move to extract herself. "Sounds like him. I-I love him, but he can be a dumbass sometimes."

Yakumo snorted. "He can, can't he? I like the way he cuts through the drama, but every now and then it would be nice if he understood emotions better."

Satsuki chuckled, the sound dying away as they were silent for a moment.

"You okay now?" The Uchiha heiress asked.

Yakumo sighed. "I will be. I have to be, don't I?" She paused. "Even if things aren't perfect, they could be worse. I'd rather Kokoro have strange urges or a... *diet* that I can't understand the appeal of instead of being born like me."

"There... have been Uchiha like that," Satsuki admitted slowly, audibly grimacing. "It... it's not pretty, but it sounds like Kota's fixed it."

"Yeah, he... Kota seemed to understand what was going on immediately. He handled it a lot better than I did." Yakumo sighed, leaning back against Satsuki. As irritating as Kota's tendency towards hard logic and straight-forward courses of action could be, his streak of realistic pragmatism so elegantly cut through the bullshit around them that she wouldn't trade it for the world.

"You have two choices. The first choice is to accept our daughter for who and what she is. She will kill people and she will enjoy it."

"What's the second choice?" Yakumo had asked, hand pressed against her lower abdomen.

"You can try to force her to spend the rest of your life pretending to be something she's not. Even if it works, and that's not likely, it will be a constant uphill battle and she will fight you every step of the way. Whatever relationship you have beyond that, you will doubtless build a great deal of resentment over it."

It wasn't quite the same as her own parents' attempts to force her out of the shinobi life, but there were enough commonalities that she could see them without them being pointed out to her.

Even if some part of her wanted to call Kokoro, the child she'd been so looking forward to bringing into the world, a monster... well, Kotaro had the unfortunate point that a great many people the village looked up to and acknowledged as heroes and saviors would be termed such by Kumo or Iwa. Just as their own village called the great ninja from those villages 'monsters.'

It wasn't about how many people you killed, it was about what symbol those people were wearing when you killed them.

Kotaro could be so *damn* irritating when he was being insightful.

"Hey."

Yakumo blinked, turning her head to look at Satsuki.

The other girl took the opportunity to close the distance between them, pressing their lips together. Yakumo's eyes widened, then slowly closed as she felt Satsuki tighten the embrace

around her. For all that the other girl's kunai pouch was pressing against her shoulder blade at an angle she almost believed would bruise, the gesture wasn't something she would ever spurn. Certainly not at this point.

For a long moment, only the sensation of the kiss occupied her mind, banishing all of the worry and self-recrimination and anxiety she felt over the oncoming future.

Then, finally, Satsuki pulled away, breaking the embrace as she removed her lips from Yakumo's with a thoughtful hum.

Yakumo was left blinking as the Uchiha heiress took two steps before launching herself back onto her perch. Absently, her hand trailed up to her lips and she blinked at the girl blankly. "I... thought you didn't like girls?"

A tiny dusting of red appeared on her teammate's cheeks, something which could just as easily have been an artifact of the late afternoon sun. "*Don't like*' doesn't mean *'hate*."

Yakumo couldn't help the giggle that burst free.

Satsuki visibly rolled her eyes and turned, ostensibly, to watch another approach to their camp. Yakumo was sure it had nothing to do with the fact that it obscured her face. "Besides, you made it pretty clear you do like girls."

Her laughter cut off and shifted to an embarrassed squeak as she turned away as well, hurrying to finish making dinner. "Ugh, can't you and Tenten leave that alone? It was just a stupid illusion!"

This time, the grunt she got in reply was heavily laced with amusement.

Still, it was heartwarming that Satsuki was willing to go so far as to kiss her to ease her worries. It meant the usually cold-blooded Uchiha viewed her more than simply as a function of her relationship with their mutual love interest.

It was into that moment that Naruko and Obito-sensei finally arrived, approaching from one of the two sight-lines her Kurama-style genjutsu hadn't covered. The rest of the approaches had been obfuscated with pastoral nature scenes that would, with a little seal work, allow anyone looking to traverse the space their camp sat within without actually covering the ground itself.

"Seal the camp," were the first words out of Obito's mouth once he and Naruko had cleared the illusionary line between the exterior and interior of the space.

Barking a quick affirmative, Yakumo pulled a pair of playing-card sized pieces of paper from her waist-pouch and flicked them like shuriken into the ground with the ease of long practice. Instantly, a film-like shade slid up, joining itself to a similar translucent fabric-like sheen circling the rest of their campground.

"Good," the jounin nodded, relaxing slightly as he looked over the encampment. Finding nothing amiss, he turned to Naruko. "Okay, you're up. I want a report for your teammates on everything that happened."

Naruko, who had been clearly about to do just that, took a deep breath and visibly attempted to calm herself, her hands pulled anxiously on the jacket Kotaro had made for her. “Okay, so like Obito-sensei and I made for the coast and saw the bridge the guy is building. We did some recon and saw the builder-guy-”

“Tazuna,” Obito inserted.

Naruko bobbed her head. “Tazuna, yeah! The drunk! Anyway, like, he's *totally* coming back from Kiri with the last of the shipments for the bridge right now! It looked like him and a bunch of workers were unloading barges at the docks!”

Satsuki, who had dropped down from her perch, frowned. “I thought the client had control of the docks on the island?”

Naruko grinned, holding up a finger. “See, that's the thing! The boats came in under a heavy bank of fog. You could barely even see 'em before they landed! Then a bunch of ninja jumped off and started tangling with the guys in uniforms around the docks!”

“What village?” Yakumo asked worriedly, her brows creasing.

“Hidden Mist,” Naruko answered, her glee at knowing a secret fading as she spoke more seriously. “Sensei and I think it was, um... a team of three chunin and a jounin. The three chunin all had these weird red and white masks too, ya know!”

Satsuki blinked, cocking her head as she turned to regard her cousin. “Kiri *hunter-nin*? What would a squad of those be doing here? Aren't they deployed like ANBU? To capture renegade ninja?”

Obito nodded, taking a sip from his canteen. “Good catch. Yeah, it's unusual. Keep going, Naruko.”

Naruko nodded eagerly, bouncing on her heels. “So it looks like we've got about a week to destroy the bridge before it gets finished! Once we confirmed that, Obito and I went around the other side of the island to meet one of uh... *Gato's* boats. He's like, totally got that yakuza-type feel to him! Like, I can't even! Ugh. Anyway, he was all, '*Just get the job done! I'm paying you, aren't I?*' And told us to leave. Total asshole!”

Bright blue eyes turned towards Obito-sensei for approval, the man in question sighing deeply as he reached up to rub at the bridge of his nose. “Let's call that... serviceable and move on to more important things. We got here too late to just attach some explosive seals and take the easy way out. Plus, the client has offered us a bonus if we're able to take the bridge over for him instead of destroying it, but the priority is that Tazuna and the rebel islanders don't keep control of the bridge.”

Satsuki frowned. “Why does he want to control it? Everyone knows big bridges like that are a huge target for enemy ninja. He'd be better off just leveling it and leaving it at that.”

Naruko paused, looking as though she didn't want to admit the Uchiha had a good point. “Yeah, it's weird. Kind of makes you wonder why they're building it at all.”

Obito waved a hand. "It's not too strange. Wave isn't in the center of any major trade lanes, they don't have a hidden village, isn't easy to travel to, and the area at large doesn't have any exploitable resources outside of seafood. A place like this can sometimes get away with major infrastructure projects even without having ninja around to defend them every waking moment."

Obito paused. "Alternatively, there are a great many civilians who just don't have any idea what ninja are capable of and believe they're the first one to come up with a great idea like building a bridge or rail line or whatever."

Satsuki grunted uncharitably. "They're idiots, then."

"Ignorant, not stupid," Yakumo commented idly, then nodded towards Satsuki. "But, yes, I can see why someone would be inclined to think less than charitably towards a man like this bridge builder. He's endangering the status quo of a shipping company, building a large infrastructure project that is temporary at best, and creating a large target for shinobi, monks, or samurai to take hostage in the event they choose not to destroy it."

"So... basically exactly what we're here for?" Naruko asked with an amused snort.

"More or less," Obito nodded, smirking in amusement briefly before sobering. "The presence of the Kiri team complicates matters, especially given their apparent status as hunter-nin. It's possible that their mission is deeper than simply guarding the bridge-builder and his construction project or they might simply be here on a training mission to break them in. They seemed like fairly green chunin if I read them right."

The encampment was silent for a long moment.

"Are we gonna' fight them?" Naruko asked, the other two girls perking up at the question.

Satsuki hummed, giving Obito room to think things over further. "Open conflict between two teams on village-sanctioned missions should be a last resort. It would be one thing if they were missing-nin themselves, but..."

Obito willfully kept his eyebrows from climbing. It always surprised him when Satsuki spoke up as the voice of reason in situations like this. They'd only been on a few C-Ranks so far; one bandit-clearing, a minor noble wanting a package shipped, and a protection job for a survey crew in the south of the Land of Fire, but each time it seemed like there was an easy avenue for violence, Satsuki had taken the high road.

It was a little bit eerie how level-headed his excitable little cousin had become under Kotaro's guidance.

Something he didn't know whether to thank him for or not, given how powerful his influence on her decision-making paradigm apparently was.

"Eh... if tha' Kiri team is here, isn't this all, like... *political*, now?" Naruko's question brought him up short, surprising him that he hadn't needed to broach the topic first. Even Satsuki's appraisal of inter-village conflict avoidance was far above what he would consider the skill level of genin to be. Contrary to the understanding of many shinobi, conflicting mission parameters didn't *automatically* mean you tried to start a fight.

They were *ninja*, after all. There were multiple ways of achieving an objective.

Naruko continued. "I mean... isn't this like Hidden Mist making a move on Konoha's turf? Since the island is really close to shore and now they'll have a bridge? So couldn't they invade easier or something?"

Yakumo shook her head, fielding the concern. "Not for an *invasion*, I don't think. But you're right that expanding their influence into the area is a bit worrying, Naruko. This strikes me as some kind of catpaw, distraction, or possibly the construction of a new smuggling route."

All good guesses, Obito thought, though she had missed the possibility of using the island as a recruitment base. Hidden Mist, while not as small as Hidden Sand, was never the largest of the villages and would always welcome the possibility of a larger population to draw from, even if they were only skilled craftsmen or unskilled labor. The other possibility, and one he thought just as likely, was that they would be using the route to funnel money and supplies to dissident groups within the Land of Fire. Even now, there were still a rare few temples, ronin houses, and ninja clans who remained outside the modern system headed by the daimyo and nobility.

Satsuki grunted. "We need more information."

Yakumo paused thoughtfully, then nodded. "They aren't going to finish the bridge for almost another week anyway. We have time to do further scouting and planning before we have to act. In theory, we could even wait for the Mist team to just *leave*. Unless they plan to station more teams here on a rotating basis, the bridge will be just as vulnerable to attack next week or next month as it will be tomorrow."

Obito made a mental note, once again, to try and squeeze some teaching tips out of that brat Kotaro. It was *breathhtakingly* rare to see a team of green genin actually realize they could *wait out a problem*. Kids *always* wanted to take the most expedient course of action, which was seldom the smartest one. From the way Naruko was bouncing on the balls of her feet, he could tell that strategy didn't appeal to her, but she was still contemplating it.

"Naruko, are you good to throw off a dozen shadow clones?" Satsuki asked, her dark eyes flicking over to the blonde bundle of energy.

"You know it!" Naruko grinned, bringing her hands up to-

"Hold on!" Obito called, raising a hand. "Not here, Naruko!"

The Uzumaki princess froze, the hand seal half-made, but dropped her hands with a pout.

Satsuki snorted. "So let's use Naruko's shadow clones and transform them as local fauna like we did for the bandits. We can see what we're dealing with before we act. In the meantime... Yakumo."

The Kurama heiress perked up.

“Can you set up a painting to make the bridge disappear?”

Yakumo's eyes sparkled, then she grinned. “I'll have to see how big it is, I might need Naruko to provide chakra for it.”

“Hehe, you prolly will,” Naruko grinned, stretching her arms. “It's *super* fuckin' huge. Like, maybe half the Hokage Monument.”

Yakumo and Satsuki's eyebrows rose as they looked to their teacher for confirmation. Obito chuckled. “She's exaggerating, but not by much.”

Yakumo nodded slowly. “I'll need a big canvas and some time to properly treat it with seals then, but a week is more than enough and I have my supplies with me.”

All three genin paused, then turned to look at their teacher.

Obito huffed a laugh and nodded. “Not bad. Not bad at all. I'll fill you in on some of my thoughts, but it's a workable plan for now. How about we break for dinner?”

Chapter 58:

Nohara Rin looked over the man explaining the procedure the closest thing she had to a mother was about to undergo. The slightly overweight monk's name was apparently Rihaku. A wanderer who had taken up in Konoha now that he was getting on in years and no longer wished to travel the Elemental Nations in search of ancient and forgotten lore.

...and honestly, she could see it.

As annoying as it was, he had the air of a well-traveled man. His bald head bore a few small scars and discolorations that she knew to be old wounds. Likewise, his face had a few more lines on it than she remembered Jiraiya-sama's. Though that was a few years ago now and might have changed.

He was also, like Jiraiya... or perhaps Tsunade, an undisputed master at his art. Really, his skills were so niche that they slid into the thin overlap between the two great Sannin. Having had the privilege to briefly study under the latter some years prior during her wanderings, Rin knew exactly how rare specialists in medical seals were.

Rihaku's hands danced through complex patterns, his fingers tracing shapes that made her eyes hurt to focus on too closely. “Use those pretty little hands of yours and seal those vessels,” his voice flowed out in a slow drawl even as she scowled at him.

“Of course,” Rin nodded, already moving to do the work before he'd asked. Tsunade had treated her much like he did, as a green recruit who needed to be told every step lest they forget something. “Where did you come up with the idea for something like this?”

Rihaku hummed deep in his large chest, his digits not pausing for even a moment. “This is the fruit of my observations over many years. Life, death, peace, war... it seems that the thing each and every person longs for is more time. Time to experience the world, time to consider choices, time to avert their own demise...”

“So you're a wanderer?” Rin asked, her own hands working as they danced with green healing chakra.

“To a pretty young thing like you? Maybe I just haven't found something worth sticking around for.” Rihaku chuckled, tapping the ink from one of his fingers as if punctuating a sentence before pushing a mote of energy into it. “There we are. That will stabilize her while we move forward.”

Through her connection to Kushina, she could feel the body beneath her go into a sort of stasis, all functions seeming suspended. Rinsing her hands, she ignored the second comment in as many minutes about her appearance. Much like Jiraiya, the older man seemed to be harmless unless you indicated you were fair game. As long as she didn't engage on his level, he wouldn't push too hard. She'd put up with *much worse* on her own travels. “What's next?”

Rihaku turned and pulled a cloth cover off the intricate artificial spine and Rin felt her breath catch in her throat at the sight of it. Even after studying the designs...

“So that's it, then?” Rin asked, stepping around the operating table and leaning close to it. “Amazing. The quality of these seals... I haven't seen anything like it since my sensei passed. How did you manage it?”

Rihaku huffed and shook his head. “These hands are no good for forging and shaping metal, Nohara-*chan*. After I did my work on that crippled boy, your Hokage gave me a few other patients' records to look at, this lady included. I mentioned I could fix her if he had someone who could craft me an impossible design I've spent most of my life creating. Imagine my surprise when he showed this off.”

Rin felt her eyes narrow at the confirmation. She'd doubted the old monk had actually *created* this by himself. Honestly, she'd half-thought it was a discarded relic or something he'd found and looted from a ruin. This kind of thing was the work of an ancient master lost to the sands of time, like so many other creations that were uncovered from time to time or handed down as priceless heirlooms.

“I'll have to see if I can find out who made it,” Rin nodded to herself, already having an idea of where to look. In all likelihood, the answer wasn't the prodigious orphan she knew of through little Narumi, but instead whoever taught him the secrets of the trade.

Although... it wasn't as though she had the kind of pull to arrange a meeting like that, student of the Fourth or not. She'd been out of Konoha for too long for all her favors to still be good... or the people who owed them *alive* to pay them back.

"I ask you to introduce me, but you ninja are always so tetchy about your secrets," Rihaku snorted, then eyed her form with a pervert's gaze. "Besides, I'd rather spend the time getting to know you instead."

Rin gave him a mild glare. "I'm starting to see why you never found a home at any of the temples."

Rihaku barked a laugh. "True, true. My brothers were always sticks in the mud about that sort of thing. Probably why I took up the wanderer's way in the first place."

"Perhaps I *would* be willing to share a few drinks with you if it meant hearing a few stories about the skills you've learned," Rin offered.

Rihaku paused, blinking as he was obviously taken aback at her reply. He hummed again as he activated a healing technique. Rin watched as he lifted the artificial spine with a firm, but careful grip, his hands coated in soothing green energy. "Perhaps I will have time for that, it would be enjoyable, but we've got work ahead of us before we play."

Looking at Uzumaki Kushina's back, which had been reduced to a giant gaping wound the color of raw meat and twice as bloody, Rin steeled herself. "Yes, of course."

"I must compliment whoever did the initial surgery on this woman, though. I could not find a single bone shard from when her spine was shattered. It is extremely impressive that the damage was even reconstructed to the degree it was," Rihaku stated, pulling out a stack of sealing tags.

Rin nodded. "That's Lady Tsunade's work."

"She truly is every inch her legend, then," Rihaku replied, pressing his hands together and saying a short prayer. "Now, let us begin."

...

"So, what have we got?" Obito asked as he sat down at their makeshift camp on the island of Wave.

"They're definitely here for more than the bridge," Satsuki started out, running her finger along the handle of her blade thoughtfully. "Their patrol pattern is off. It's too varied around settlements, they focus in on inns and boarding houses and skim over forested areas."

"You're sure they haven't detected you?" Yakumo asked with a frown, rubbing her chin.

Satsuki rolled her eyes. "You remember that time Kota *sealed* our chakra off? I've been running on that level."

Obito blinked, his eyes scanning the girls with the new tidbit. Cautiously, he raised a hand, "I'd like to hear more about that, actually."

All three girls grimaced, but it was Naruko who spoke up. "Ugh! It was the worst, Obito-sensei! Kota slapped these seals on us and made us run through all of these exercises

using *basic* stealth. Through mud and forests and everything! And if we left a trail he could follow we failed! We were doing that for a *month!*”

Satsuki twitched at the reminder, her thumb bumping the blade out of its sheath in a nervous tic. “Shut it, Naruko.” Her eyes tracked to Obito. “Kotaro always said that chakra is a tool like anything else, so he wanted us to be able to perform even if we were completely tapped out, met a seal master, or received an... *unusual* injury.”

Which, Obito noted, hadn't been the word she'd originally gone to use. “Back on topic, then. We can be reasonably sure the *trained hunter-nin* didn't see you-” Which, again, made him wonder about the specifics of the training Kotaro put them through. “-so they're looking for something instead of just patrolling. Very likely someone.”

Satsuki shrugged. “Whoever it is, they're laying low. I haven't picked out any other ninja lurking around.”

Obito rocked back and forth on the log he'd picked out. He always hated puzzles. Well, no. He hated puzzles he couldn't solve easily. But honesty was for people who weren't shinobi. So he hated puzzles in general. “I think the most likely possibility right now is that they're trying to double-dip with bad intel.”

The girls turned their heads towards him and he sighed. “Sometimes a village gets information that a missing-nin is in a general area and either sends an over-qualified team to pick up an easy mission or picks up a mission they'd normally pass on to have a reasonable excuse to put boots on the ground in any given area.”

“What about the idea we had before, about trying to, um-*political stuff*. With Wave, Konoha, Kiri, and the Lands of Fire and Water?” Naruko asked, squinting her eyes.

Obito shrugged. “That was always a longshot, but nothing says they can't be trying to hit *three* or *four* birds with one stone. You'll learn this later, but oftentimes the best position the higher-ups can manage is one that means they get something they wanted even when a mission fails.”

“We're familiar with the concept,” Yakumo noted, cocking her head. “How so in this situation specifically, though?”

“Well... lately Suna has been pulling away from Konoha's nominal alliance with them, which is a major stabilizing factor in the continental balance of power between the nations. In the scenario where Suna thinks it has more to gain from allying with Kumo and Iwa, that would leave Kiri as Konoha's only viable partner. Manufacturing an international incident, especially a small one that can't blow up into something serious, would give Kiri political leverage to use against Konoha in the event Suna goes through with its move. Or in the event the Hokage and his advisors *think* that Suna is going to go through with it.”

Naruko rubbed at her forehead with a look of confusion on her face. “It's like listening to Kotaro all over again. Ugh, I *hate* politics!”

Satsuki scowled. “What if they're here for a trade-off? Like, they're looking for someone, but not to bring them in. Maybe because they have someone or something from the Land of Fire that needs to go to Water.”

Obito rolled the idea around in his head, then shook it out. "Trade-offs like that are usually pretty precise. It's not *impossible*, but my gut says it's unlikely. If it was something like that, I don't think they'd have taken a mission that would have them in the field this long. They'd have wanted to get it, grab whatever it was, and get back to Kiri as soon as possible."

Unless they knew whatever it was, was going to be hot enough that someone would be in close pursuit. In that case, having an ongoing 'we're just here to do a normal mission' team would be a good deniable double-bluff while the thief led them on a wild goose chase.

But... nah, that's too deep for what we're seeing here. No need to confuse the issue further.

"The best way forward, I think, would be to flush out their prey." Yakumo suggested into the sudden silence, looking around the group. "This would sufficiently distract them that we could act on the bridge and accomplish our own mission. Provided they believe the bridge is destroyed and their target is either captured or escapes, they would then have no reason to remain here and leave. Which would allow us to turn over possession of the bridge to the client."

Obito could feel himself nodding. It was a decent plan. More importantly, it put his precious little genin in the least amount of danger. "A classic, '*Let's You and Them Fight!*' We can do that. We should also be ready in the event they actually find whoever it is on their own. If it looks like they'll get their capture too easily, we can play a little low-key interference and distract them."

Satsuki frowned and slid over the map she'd been using to plot the enemy's patrols. "Okay, but where is the target? They've searched pretty much every settlement on the island the last few days. At least, the ones within easy reach."

Yakumo leaned over, "so our choices are these remote fishing villages, the monk temple in the mountains, and the Daimyo of Wave's capital on the other end of the island."

"Probably not the capital," Obito waved them off. "I stopped in there a few years back and unless something big's changed, there's nothing worth calling it a 'capital.' The daimyo of the island is mostly a figurehead since the area is under the Fire Daimyo's suzerainty. So the Wave Daimyo spends most of his time in the Fire Daimyo's court, by personal preference too. Still, it's *enough* of a capital that there are some shit-postings for spies who've fucked up other missions."

"So they'd see whoever we're looking for if they were hanging around there," Naruko translated with a frown as she looked over the map herself. "Hmm... what about there?"

The rest of the team followed her gesture as she tapped a blocky icon on the map.

Satsuki looked up to stare at her with a deadpan expression. "That's the client's trading compound, dumbass."

Obito opened his mouth to reply automatically even as he felt his stomach drop precipitously.

"It's still a place we should look, *bitch*," Naruko replied with a raised finger. "Someone could totally hide there! When Obito-sensei and I went to check it out, it's huge. They've got lots of crates and warehouses and stuff!"

Given that the exchange wasn't as loud or vitriolic as it could have been, both were caught off-guard by Obito's groan as he dropped his head into his hands. "Or Gato could have hired a wandering nin to run security on his place if the locals are really giving him shit and building the bridge as a protest."

There was silence around their camp.

"In that event," Yakumo stated thoughtfully, sounding the words out as she spoke them. "The villagers might have resorted to banditry or sabotage of the client's property. Having a skilled individual to make a proper example out of them would be appealing to someone interested in protecting their assets."

Obito resisted the urge to let loose a string of curses as he let out another groan.

Just my luck. Just my fucking luck.

"I don't suppose there's any chance the client would be willing to let us... *borrow* their security nin?" Satsuki asked, the question awkward even to her. "With return optional?"

Naruko snorted. "Look who's the dumbass now!"

"Children," Yakumo called, just as Satsuki opened her mouth to reply. The Kurama heiress' gold-flecked eyes were deeply unamused as she stared them down. Most would have thought that either the Uzumaki or the Uchiha would take the top spot on the three-man team, Obito reflected silently. Those people obviously weren't familiar with clan egos. No, neither of the two girls would allow the other to hold the position. So Yakumo was the only reasonable compromise if they wanted to get anything done at all.

Which led to the normally introverted and quiet girl developing a no-nonsense stance for their bullshit, Obito noted with amusement.

That was undeniably a good thing. I'd have hated to step into the leadership squabbles of genin. It would totally harsh my cool-older-leader persona I've got going on.

"Okay," Obito clapped his hands to draw their attention back. "This is what we'll do. Keep in mind, this is a quick and dirty plan, so if you see an area for improvement, speak up. Consider this a training exercise, even."

Three days later, Obito would look back on the entire mission and regret that he hadn't knocked the genin unconscious and booked it back to Konoha at the first sign of complications.

Chapter 59:

I moved like lightning.

Every centimeter of the way, the flash of red followed at my heels.

“C'mon, boyo! I know you've got some fighting in you!”

Under other circumstances, I would have groaned or cursed at the jeer. In the current situation I found myself, that was just counterproductive. The breath in my lungs was better-used to run as fast as I could. And, believe me, I was *fast*. Synergistic factors in multiple skill sets I'd developed over the past few years meant the real issue wasn't speed, but *control*.

The Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu was a style that *heavily* emphasized speed.

Prana Bindu and Weiriding Way did so as well, in an entirely different manner.

Then there were the 'Breathing Styles' taught by the Demon Slayer Corps, which required superhuman speed to fight inhuman monsters.

All of that, then, was added onto the basic building blocks of shinobi training. Which, contrary to my academy record, I wasn't a slouch regarding. My chakra control was *beyond* top-notch, likely edging into the realm of Tsunade at this point.

So when I say I was *fast*, I mean that I'd had to gerry-rig the body flicker technique into something that would allow me to actually turn corners without running into anything. As far as ninety-nine percent of the population of the Elemental Nations went, I had long-since passed the edge of what was regarded as human limits.

Monsters, however, don't care about anything so *mundane* as 'human limits.'

And Uzumaki Kushina?

She was *definitely* a monster.

I hit a wall in a crouch, hanging there from my momentum as I inhaled to the limits of my lungs. Kushina, appearing in a flash of red-tinted chakra and rictus-wide grin right in front of me, stopped as she thought I'd been cornered. Instead, I pushed hyper-oxygenated blood into artificially-strong leg muscles and bled off the slightest tinge of elementally-aligned chakra into the mix. In an instant, I was shooting forth in the jagged pattern of a bolt of raw lightning, my movements a precise mixture of the two different schools of physical training nevertheless combining into a masterpiece of poetic flow.

I *barely* dodged the flurry of blows sent my way.

Then I was gone in a burst of speed that might have made The Flash envious.

Unfortunately, Kushina was right behind me; mere fractions of a second behind me, to be precise.

“Look, I just wanna' shake off the rust, Kota-kun! All your girls are out of town! You can make time for a quick spar!”

Belatedly, it has occurred to me that I may, in fact, be both too intelligent and capable for my own good.

This was the *third day* Kushina had been chasing me around like this, abusing her new sandesvistan to a childish degree. That wouldn't have been so problematic had she still been confined to her wheelchair with muscle atrophy. However I had, in my *incredible wisdom* *decided* to overachieve once again and repaired *that damage* as well. Although, to her credit, it hadn't been all that difficult. Uzumaki lineage being as bullshit as it was, Kushina was much healthier overall than she should have been were she even a normal variety of ninja-bullshit chakra-using superhuman.

With the notes Rin had taken on the operation and the conversations we'd had during the short aftercare session, I think even *she* could have repaired the atrophied muscle groups without too much issue. The real issue was just the kind of knowledge base required to do something like that didn't really exist in this place and time. It was just one of the various blindspots in the shinobi medical fields given that long-term rehabilitative medical care wasn't a huge priority as opposed to combat-medicine and field surgery.

It was what it was.

Still, I had not expected what I now knew to be a very traditionally *Uzumaki* response to being in perfect health after a debilitating injury. In short, she'd decided to express her affection for the individual who had done that by having a little throw-down with him. Because the 'monk' who had performed the operation was nowhere to be found, Kushina had decided that I was the next best candidate as the individual who'd *created* the device now taking the place of her spine.

Which, on a side note, I'd over-engineered to a point I now regretted as well.

The sandesvistans of the world of Cyberpunk, much like all of their cyberware, were... *subpar*. Extremely interesting and variable in their designs and applications, no doubt, but extremely suboptimal in their design and implementation with no inherent incentive to make a better product. With no inclination to offer something so obviously flawed to the mother of a friend, a powerful clan leader in the village at large, and a potential combatant who would help defend me on a personal level should such a situation arise...

Well, naturally I'd done a redesign.

After all, I was still going to have to 'reinvent the wheel' in transferring the futuristic technology over to a more sustainable ninja magitechnology supported by esoteric sealing. I might as well smooth out the potential for rejection, the interface between the implant and her mind, cut back on the potential damage it can do to her nervous system, and a few other things.

So, yes, if Dr. Frankenstein and I ever meet up in a potential future existence, we can bond over our mutual mistakes.

Suddenly, as I was cutting through a training ground, I decided I'd had enough.

Deploying my altered body flicker, I spun on a ryo and ran directly back at Kushina. The woman's eyes widened dramatically at my unexpected move and she tried to avert her course. Still, it had only been three days since she'd had the thing implanted. Even with her life experience and seasoned shinobi status, there was still a learning curve. That curve, specifically, did not take into account someone with reaction times on par with your own executing a surprise trip attempt.

Stopping just as abruptly as I'd turned, I snorted at the tumbling form of Uzumaki Kushina flying head-over-heels until she impacted a rather large tree face-first.

Part of me wanted to cut and run at that moment. With how stunned she was, I could probably make it back to the shop and barricade myself in the basement before she figured out where I'd gone.

The other part of me, though? The one that won out...

It was *sick of her shit*.

No, I was sick of it.

I had *shit to do* that didn't involve running or hiding from a red-headed maniac.

"The day after your surgery, I intentionally led you to the Uchiha Compound and let you pick a fight with Shisui. The day after that, I took you on a merry chase to the Hokage Tower and duped you into fighting Itachi. I really, *really* think that those were better fights than I would offer if you're being honest about your intentions. So, Kushina... *what the absolute fuck?*"

Rolling over from where she'd fallen, groaning and cursing as she rubbed at her head, Kushina sighed. "Damn, brat... you can asshole with the best of them when you want to, you know?"

I stared at her, unmoved.

"Shit-alright, alright... you really are a weird one, you know? Most kids would at least decide to put up a fight before getting their asses kicked," Kushina stated, cautiously getting back up and shaking off the grass and dirt she'd accumulated.

"Pick a date, set a time, and draw up rules if you want a spar. Chasing me around town is counterproductive if you want to fight me," I replied stoically.

"Oh, and why's that?" Kushina asked. "I figured all I'd have to do is get you to the point where you'd stop running, and looks like I have, ya'know!"

My eyebrow twitched as she popped her knuckles.

"It's because I'm unwilling to exercise the amount of energy or variety of techniques it would take to put up a proper fight in a populated area," I stated bluntly, reaching out with a hand and grasping a blade that hadn't been there a moment before.

Blue eyes blinked as her grin widened. “Careful there, boyo! Promises like that get me worked up!”

I took a measured breath and mentally ran through my stockpile of more esoteric tricks I was saving for a rainy day. The blade in my right hand was something I'd put together recently, a vast improvement on what I'd forged for Kurenai. For my left hand, though...

Eh, why not. It needs a test drive anyway.

Decision made, I reached out with my left hand and produced the second blade.

“Oh, two swords?” Kushina asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Really making me feel special. So... when do you want to call it?”

I gave the blades a once-over. Both were full-length katana in the traditional style, neither looking as though they were anything special. Given that I wanted them available for use immediately, I hadn't even stored them sheathed, so they were bare to the world. Perfect, unblemished steel crafted with the newest version of my personal alloy formula. With tungsten in the mix, you didn't need to fold the steel very much, but I'd gone through the old process anyway.

After all, each fold gave me a new surface to engrave another seal on.

“Just... try not to die,” I advised her seriously, the statement lingering in the air for a heartbeat before-

-I pressed the curve of steel against her throat and the 'me' that had been speaking vanished. “Because I'm not holding back.”

Much.

Kushina's entire body was tense as her form flickered out of existence in a burst of speed as she vanished across the training ground to reappear where the illusion of me had been standing just a moment before. A thin line of blood was forming on her neck as she stared at me with a blank expression, reaching up to confirm the pain with a finger to gather the red liquid.

“What the fuck?” She whispered.

I moved, an illusion remaining where I was while I walked under a cloak of invisibility. The illusionary clone spoke, affecting a casualness as he swiped the blade in his right hand and threw off a few drops of crimson into the dirt. “Did you ever wonder why my swords command such a high price? Why I've taken commissions from jounin for special blades now? They aren't normal swords, Kushina. Each blade I make is special in a different way.”

Her breathing shuddered as I felt her chakra ignite into a tangible aura.

“Admittedly, some are *just* very nice blades which can cut boulders in half without taking a single scratch, but... *most*, most of them have a few tricks up their sleeve.” I looked down at the blade in my right hand. “This is Kyoka Suigetsu, and you're blind now.”

“Kai!” Kushina shouted, slapping her hands together as a *visible* pulse of energy shuddered through the clearing. There was a moment where the masterpiece illusion I'd cast held... then it lost the fight and shattered under the weight of Kushina's brute-force break.

Okay, maybe I didn't make her a monster, so much as make her a better one.

“Good to know you'll at least stand a chance,” I stated, drawing a deep breath and flashing out of existence just as Kushina's fist impacted the space my head had been in a moment before. Despite my bravado, I was worried. I pushed through that emotion, though, and let it fall away as I dodged a series of attacks and feints that shot my way at dizzying speeds.

Then she fired her sandesvistan and the work of a few seconds of interweaving fingers became instantaneous as three water dragons emerged from nothingness to flow my way.

My left sword came up.

Transmute and Manipulate, Tenchi.

Light blossomed.

Lifeless water dropped to the ground as the energy of the technique was drained away and a petal of pure chakra shone into existence, both shield and weapon. Even if I hadn't looked into recreating this specific pseudo-technology from the Jurian bloodline, I thought I'd done a pretty good job recreating it under an alternate system.

Kushina *stared* at me, shock dancing across her face as that same wild grin slowly took its place once more. Without saying anything, thick chains began to manifest along her arms, composed of pure chakra. Once they were fully formed and dancing like snakes in the air around her, she nodded. “Alright, boyo. Let's try this again.”

Proving Naruko came by her intelligence honestly, she fired the chain through the illusionary clone, attacking it again. Quickly to capitalize on the attack being ineffective, though, she began to sweep the chains across the field, but...

It was already too late.

They began to *evaporate*, small droplets of chakra being pulled away from the manifestations, which drew back towards her as if they'd felt real pain. Even with the retreat, I'd gotten enough energy to form a second glowing panel in the air. The diamond-shaped energy construct wasn't anywhere even close to a *pale shadow* of what its conceptual progenitor could do, but they aided greatly in absorbing the blows which came shortly thereafter, Kushina charging me with her fists. The impact was nearly enough to rattle my teeth from a foot away, a massive gust of wind knocking down small saplings behind me at the edge of the clearing.

“Now *this is what I'm talking about!*” Kushina cheered.

-and the fight was on in earnest.

Absently, I wondered how the girls were doing on their mission. When Satsuki and Yakumo had told me they were going to *Wave* of all places, having been hired by *Gato* of all

people...

Well, I'd handed off their birthday presents early.

...

Satsuki was glad Kota had begun teaching her the strange breathing techniques he'd worked out. She knew enough not to buy the 'reconstructed from a technique in the chunin library' story he'd fed Obito for the sake of public consumption. She knew her sensei *knew* about the broad strokes of Kotaro's 'gift,' though precisely how many specifics he'd picked up was between himself, Itachi-nii, and the Hokage. As far as Satsuki herself was concerned, and Yakumo and Tenten for that matter, anything Kotaro told them of his bloodline fell firmly under the banner of clan secrets.

No matter what the *official* rules regarding those were.

Satsuki banished the intrusive thought with a burst of will as she sucked in another deep breath through her teeth, tying her chakra into the motion of her limbs as she shot forward in a burst of superhuman speed to impact the giant blade coming towards her.

The deflection was good, her strike skating along the edge in a cascade of sparks instead of taking the blow head-on.

The taller man she was fighting against, a Kiri missing-nin with a strike through his headband, chuckled. The action revealed his jagged teeth once again, something the Uchiha heiress had been told was a common enough trait in the Land of Water. The jagged cross-shaped scar on his right cheek and vertical red lines along the lower half of his face flexed with every motion of his mouth even as he hefted his enormous sword, turning it into a shield as he fluidly spun the blade. Even with her sharingan running full-speed and the tricks she'd learned to maximize reaction time, it was a challenge to dodge the massive bulk of steel.

"You're pretty good, Uchiha! Don't recognize the style, though!" The lanky missing-nin grinned.

"Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu," Satsuki replied shortly, the banter unnecessary, but bought her time to catch her breath.

Biwa Juzo barked a laugh. "That's a hell of a name to live up to! Well, at least I don't have to worry about fighting some no-name dogshit style. Didn't even know Konoha had a new swordmaster, though."

There was a tinge of curiosity to his tone and, once again, Satsuki wondered what was keeping Obito-sensei. The heavy mist around them, laden with chakra cut visibility and sensory perception dramatically, but their teacher was strong enough she could feel him moving about fighting another large chakra signature. Out of the simple process of elimination, it was almost certainly the leader of the Kiri hunter ninja.

Where had it all gone wrong?

Again, Satsuki didn't *know*, but she could guess. As one didn't just go around casually accusing their employer of harboring a renegade shinobi from an enemy nation, they'd had to

poke around cautiously in order to ferret out the truth. Yakumo had, meanwhile, been working on an elaborate painting of the bridge to use as a conduit for her genjutsu. Given there was an enemy jounin in the area, they hadn't been able to take the 'quick and dirty' option and had, instead, needed the full power of anchor seals and a complete piece of art. It was just better not to take any chances, since the rest of the team was occupied anyway.

Then, a few hours ago, the cautious dancing around the hunter ninja had all fallen to bits when one of Naruko's clones, disguised as a member of Gato's staff, had discovered the secluded building they'd been housing the missing-ninja in.

Biwa Juzo.

A renegade elite swordsman who had taken the side of one of the lesser island confederations in Mist's latest brush fire of a civil war. Such things were fairly common every decade or two, given that the various islands enjoyed far greater autonomy than any similarly-sized region of the mainland. Every now and then, one or more of the many nobility decided to make a power play and some idiot shinobi would think *this one* had a chance of working out where all the others had failed. Biwa Juzo had, instead, betrayed the rebellion and stolen their entire treasury before fucking off entirely.

Or, at least, that was what the latest edition of the Bingo Book said.

Kiri would have *probably* just let him go for sabotaging their current enemy so thoroughly if he'd returned the legendary blade he wielded and kept his head down after that. Or, at the very least, they would have given him a significant head start.

Anyway, to make a long story very short, Biwa had realized there was something off about Naruko's clone, popped it, and thought the jig was up. He'd instantly decided to attack the nearest group of ninja, thinking that *they* were the ones specifically after him.

Unfortunately, the nearest group of ninja had been Satsuki's team, not the Kiri Hunter-nin.

Displaying all of the common sense and good judgment that had gotten him to where he was in life currently, Biwa had decided to double-down upon realizing they *weren't* hunter-nin, and actually employed by the same client, and *also* a team of relatively green genin. If Satsuki had to guess, he probably thought they'd be an easy mark to kill, loot their stuff, then frame Mist for the job. In the man's defense, it *probably* would have worked.

That was about the point where the actual Hunter-nin had arrived.

A thick chain of materialized chakra swept through the space Satsuki and Juzo were fighting, the Uchiha taking a desperate leap at the last second as their bloodline ability emerged from the thick mists. "Goddammit! Stick to your own fucking fight Naruko!"

"Sorry!" The blonde yelled out from somewhere beyond within the mist.

"Take your own advice, kid!" Juzo growled from *right behind her-*

Still in midair, Satsuki raised the sword behind her, but instead of attempting to block the strike, used the force of the coming attempt at decapitation to flip her. Then, using that spin, she landed on the side of the giant blade for a moment before jumping off and-

“Ryu Sui Sen!”

The words roared out of her mouth, chakra erupting from her body in a way that *wasn't* something Kota had taught her, but an invention of her own. Given the panoply of mid-air moves within the Hiten Mitsurugi style, it was vital to be able to control your movement without leverage against the ground.

Juzo's eyes widened and he barely got the sword back up in an awkward block, but it was too late to prevent the monstrous blow of the impact as Satsuki rode the falling swordsman to the ground.

It's time. Roar and Devour!

“Jaou Ensatsu Ken!”

Instantly, the sword erupted in a painfully-bright blue glow flecked by poisonous black energy that curled outwards and took the shapes of long gaping jaws.

Then they hit the ground and Satsuki felt her sword cleave through the monstrous blade, black fire searing the edge of the legendary sword as the very tip of her own weapon managed to pierce Juzo's left arm.

Feeling chakra pulse in the precursor to a technique, she leapt away an instant before hurricane-force winds erupted from the ninja's mouth and resumed a ready stance standing a dozen meters away from the slowly-rising enemy. Juzo was battered by the exchange, scrapes from the shattered rock he'd landed on leaving his clothes damaged and bloody scrapes showing through. A particularly bad gash left liquid crimson flowing down his face as he leveraged himself up with one hand on the giant blade, the other with a line of blue-black flames tracing the cut she'd given the man.

“Well, fuck... that's not good,” Juzo chuckled darkly, looking over the wound as his hand twitched and flesh sizzled. “Fuck!”

Satsuki merely readied herself for another strike.

“Don't guess you'd put this out, huh kid?” The Mist swordsman asked, giving her a 'harmless' grin. The teeth kind of ruined it, though.

“Do you surrender?” Satsuki asked, reading herself to take another breath as the chakra-consuming fire ate another inch of flesh along his arm.

“Thought not,” Juzo nodded, leaving the hand dangling as he one-handed the enormous cleaver, slipping the wounded arm into the hole at the end of the blade and jerking as Satsuki's eyes widened.. “Well alright then! This fight just became more interesting!”

As the flame-covered arm fell to the earth, blood spurting from the wound, Juzo grinned maliciously as Kubikiribocho instantly recovered from the deep gouge she'd given the blade.

She *really* hoped the others were having a better time than she was.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota) I
Metaphysical Cosmology: Reincarnation Cycles
Metaphysical Physiology: Reincarnation (Aberrant)
Metaphysical Physiology: Respiration of the Soul
Metaphysical Cosmology: Akashic Records

Blacksmithing
Cognitive Performance Enhancement
Meditation
Mechanical Computers
Horology
Cooking
Prana-Bindu Disciplines I
Blacksmithing: Ninja Tools
Mechanical Computers II
Prana-Bindu Disciplines II
Prana-Bindu Disciplines III
Swordsmithing
Automation
Metallurgy
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu
Chakra Control
Medic-Nin Training
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho (II)
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu II
Prana-Bindu Disciplines IV
Weirding Way
(Nothing New for Chapter 9-11, Same Month)
Ruggedization
Yin-Yang Manipulation
Blacksmithing: Chakra-Conductive Metals
(Nothing New for Chapter 12-15, Same Month)
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo I
Lightsaber Styles - Form I: Shii-Cho (III)
(Nothing New for Chapter 18, Same Month)
Fuinjutsu I
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo II
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo III
Fuinjutsu II
Fuinjutsu III
Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota) II
Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu III
ANBU-Ne Operational History
Medic-Nin Training II
Medic-Nin Training III

Demon Slayer Breathing Styles I-V

Ninja Puppetry: I&II

Cyberpunk: Cybernetics I-III

Gunm/Battle Angel: Cybernetics I-IV

Dark Chakra I&II

Education II & III

-(Education Rank I is already possessed due to having a mundane degree in the subject.)

Elven Bladesinging 1&2 (New)

Chapter 60:

The silence in the office was suffocating.

That said, the Hokage certainly didn't seem bothered by it. The old man was sitting back, slightly reclined in his chair as he stared off thoughtfully into the middle distance as he puffed on his pipe. Lazy clouds of smoke wafted from the ninja's mouth as I occupied myself with pondering the health implications of a man of his age consuming so much tobacco.

Normally, I'd automatically regard it as a bad idea, but I'd never actually tested whatever variant of the plant grew here in this world. Nor had I conducted any examinations of the long-term effects of chakra reinforcement on lungs contaminated with tobacco smoke. It was likely unhealthy to some degree, as I can't imagine a scenario where breathing in those chemicals had even a *neutral* effect on one's health, however the *degree*-

“The training ground will have to be decommissioned,” Sarutobi spoke suddenly, his tone as languid and calm as if he were discussing the weather.

Beside me, Kushina twitched in her chair.

“Although Kushina is well aware of this, young Kotaro, I find it unlikely that it would come up in a casual conversation, so I will impart this lesson to you. The training grounds of Konoha are carefully selected to fit within a framework of natural energy which the First Hokage constructed when he grew the trees which give this village its name.”

He paused to allow that to sink in.

Reaching out to tap his pipe empty in an ashtray, the old ninja took his time reloading it. “The web of natural energy, when exposed to suitably large or powerful displays of chakra, takes time to heal and recover. Even now, we are only just bringing back into rotation three training grounds which were similarly damaged during the confrontation with the Kyuubi no Kitsune.”

His fingers snapped and the bowl of the pipe began to smolder.

“Of course, that ignores the other reasons why I called you both here,” Sarutobi stated with a long sigh before taking an equally-lengthy draw on his pipe. “Such as the wave of panic your clashing chakra sent the village into. It was a comparatively *mild one*, this is true, but incredibly bothersome to deal with

all the same. More problematic will be the subsequent wave of intense scrutiny and curiosity by both foreign powers and domestic ones over the battle.”

Finally, the Sandaime looked at us and it was clear the old man was *not happy*. “You are banned from *ever* sparring against each other within the boundaries of the village for the remaining tenure of my time as Hokage. Do you understand?”

We both nodded, releasing quick one-word answers. “Yes.”

Hiruzen nodded, accepting the agreement. “If, for some reason impossible for me to foresee, you *must* schedule a rematch, you will apply *in writing* at least a week in advance. After which, I will call you both before me, *again*, and you will explain why you feel this course of events is necessary before you are escorted well outside the village and supervised as you settle the matter. Is *that* clear?”

“Yes,” we both stated, the reply as firm as the question.

The Hokage nodded, exhaling a cloud of smoke as he did so, then looked to Uchiha Itachi, who stood behind us, hands crossed behind his back. “Now, I am given to understand that Kushina had been... let us use the word 'pestering' you, young Kotaro, for a sparring match for some days previously. Is that correct?”

I nodded and spoke singularly this time. “Yes, Lord Hokage. Lady Uzumaki herself informed me that, after my numerous escapes, she sought out Uchiha Shisui and Uchiha Itachi in order to, 'shake the rust off.’”

The old man's eyes flicked up towards the Uchiha standing behind us before nodding in confirmation of my words. “Given these circumstances and your relative youth, I am willing to be broadly lenient regarding any potential punishment that results from this. Though, I would like to ask what your specific motivation for deciding to turn and face Kushina today was?”

“Admittedly, it was partially a result of frustration relating to her constant pursuit of me and my inability to leave the shop to accomplish anything,” I explained, then paused for effect. “However, the larger part of my motivation came from the desire to display good faith in my attempts to keep up the promise I had given you.”

Sarutobi's eyes narrowed, though without any hostility. Instead, with a cloud of confusion over his otherwise neutral expression, he replied. “Refresh my memory, young Kotaro. I do not recall any such promise that would involve the near-total destruction of one of the training grounds or the panicking of my people.”

“You had asked that I be ready and able to subdue Kokoro should she not be willing or able to control herself,” I reminded him, and understanding bloomed over his face. “Given her unwillingness to cease pursuing me, I made the judgment call to seize upon the opportunity to fight the closest thing in Konoha to a chakra beast.”

I did *not* smile as Kushina choked on her own spit.

Hiruzen and I stared each other down as he narrowed his gaze at me once again.

Silently, the seconds ticked by.

One of the Hokage's cheeks twitched.

Slowly, the old man held up a single finger. “You will find that such an excuse will work precisely *once*, young man. That said, should you feel the need to *test* your abilities to keep any further 'promises' you feel you have made to me, you will inform me of such *beforehand*, am I clear?”

“As crystal, sir,” I nodded.

Sarutobi cast me one last lingering look before nodding and leaning back again. Waving his hand with fanned fingers, he ushered me off. “You may go, with the understanding that I expect a full write-up of the abilities of those blades you displayed and a quote on the feasibility of producing more.”

Not allowing my gratitude to show, I stood and bowed the appropriate depth. “I will have them on your desk by the end of the week, Lord Hokage.”

The old man grunted and I turned to excuse myself from the room.

As it closed, I heard Kushina's belated squawk of outrage.

...

With the door securely shut and a nod from Itachi, Sarutobi put his pipe aside and exhaled one last cloud of smoke before turning back to the two others in the room. “Now then, your estimation of his level?”

“Jounin,” Kushina stated before Itachi could speak up with a more carefully-worded reply. “I'd nick him a few points here and there for using his swords to do the heavy lifting, but it's obvious that he can both do it himself and can't readily be disarmed. That said, I am rusty as hell and he's still pretty green.”

The Hokage looked to Itachi, silently requesting his own assessment.

“I largely agree with Kushina,” Itachi began, then hesitated for a moment. “With the proviso that he is not as inexperienced as she believes. Her assessment was quite thorough, but had an overly-narrow focus on high-intensity physical combat, ninjutsu, and genjutsu.”

The redheaded mother cocked her head at him as he stepped forward. “As opposed to?”

“Perceiving an overall tactical and strategic grasp and to what degree he's willing to implement them.” Itachi reached up and scratched at his chin. “Unless something much different happened in the first minute or so of the fight, what I saw was that he only seemed willing to *react* to your probes and attacks. It was extremely rare that he made any of his own.”

Kushina blinked as Sarutobi adopted a thoughtful mien.

“I must be rustier than I thought,” the Uzumaki clan head mumbled, scowling, her mind obviously elsewhere as she reviewed the fight. “Damn.”

“So he's implicitly stronger than what he was willing to show off,” Sarutobi stated. “Moreover, what he *did* show us was a conscious decision on his part.”

Itachi nodded shortly. "For whatever it is worth, I believe him when he says the fight was to determine the effectiveness of his countermeasures. I don't believe he *wasn't* catering, on some level, to a desire to react to Lady Kushina's provocations, but the tactics and strategies he used were too refined to be off-the-cuff decisions on his part."

Sarutobi's fingers drummed on the desk for a moment before he gave into temptation and reached for his pipe. "I'll be blunt, then. Do you think this display is a threat?"

"Kid's not the type," Kushina responded instantly, shaking her head..

Itachi was more sedate in his consideration. "I have observed that people often display surprising and unexpected qualities when pushed, especially should they perceive their families are in danger."

Both Kushina and Hiruzen frowned at that.

Letting out another stream of smoke, the old ninja hummed. "I can't say I particularly enjoy or condone showing off like that in order to make a point, but it's reassuring to determine that the boy *does* have levers. A calculated reveal of his abilities like this is an encouraging sign when one considers the ties he's making with those girls."

Kushina's eyes widened and she snapped her fingers violently. "Dammit! And that was the whole reason for doing this, ya'know!"

Sarutobi put on his most attentive face and raised his eyebrows. "Oh really? I'm quite interested to hear *your* excuse, Kushina, considering that such an inexperienced young man had such a multilayered reasoning behind his own."

"Ah..." Kushina blushed, looking left and right for an escape route. "Well, obviously I wanted to test his skills like this! So I could report to you my suspicions that he'd reached jounin level!"

Sarutobi smiled at the redhead woman. "As I just told Kotaro, Kushina... everybody gets *one*. You used yours up quite a few *decades* ago. Now, if you would, the truth?"

Kushina clicked her tongue and clenched a fist. "Damn." She sighed. "Eh, I was gonna' see if I could get Narumi a spot in his little harem."

Itachi released an amused grunt.

Hiruzen's expression was skeptical, at best. "Putting aside the fact that I do not believe *either party* would take well to the announcement that you're invoking some ancient clan tradition now that Kotaro has matched you in combat, I *believe* Narumi has her own love interest at this point."

Kushina visibly rolled her eyes. "Look, the Sakurai kid is *fine*, and it's great that he's going medic, but--"

"Fastest examination pass since Tsunade put the tests in place," Hiruzen commented.

"-Huh, really?" Kushina blinked, cocking her head, then shaking it. "But he's got his heart set on Inoichi's brat and there's no chemistry. Believe me, I've seen it ya'know. Besides, how did you know how I was going to engage the two of them?"

Itachi, surprisingly, spoke up in a tired and resigned voice. “Lady Kushina, *every* clan has something of a rule like that. It may be a shinobi tradition to respect strength of arms, but actually invoking the tradition seldom reaps good rewards.”

“Sounds like a story, there,” Kushina noted.

Sarutobi cleared his throat, saving his subordinate from the coming inquisition. “Perhaps another time, Kushina. We still need to outline the punishment you'll be facing for this incident. I'm currently thinking of a round of testing and then a return to active duty just in time to chaperon the political delegations for the chunin exams.”

The redhead jerked, her expression almost painful. “Grk!”

...

Yakumo stared down the masked hunter-nin as the mirrors of ice formed around them.

The voice that spoke was androgynous. “I would rather not kill you, but shinobi combat can be unpredictable. You should surrender.”

Pulling free another senbon, the genjutsu specialist flexed her arm as she firmed her grip on the odd blade sitting in her hand. The entire length was studded with teeth, giving the thing a wicked and serrated-looking appearance. Feeling her chakra flow through it, she shifted into the careful and watchful stance her lover had taught her.

“I would advise the same.”

There was a long moment of silence between the two before the masked ninja's hands flew out in quick patterns.

Yakumo matched them, her blade skillfully deflected each and every senbon coming her way; the sound of steel hitting steel like the harshest of rains. In the blink of an eye, the Mist-nin charged, coming in close-quarters combat with a single needle held out to block against the coming blow. Their other hand, though-

Yakumo couldn't identify the rapid series of seals, but disengaged as soon as they began.

Instead of an immediate jutsu, though, the ninja leaped *backwards* and disappeared into a mirror, only to-

Instinct saved her, Yakumo's body contorting in a way most would find impossible as she spun out of the death-trap of a twin-senbon pierce aimed at vital organs. Her hand hit the rough ground before launching her into the air to land on the mirror behind her briefly before she bounced off into the clearing.

The hunter-nin slowly turned, looking at the coating of paint slashed across their wrists, following the trail of metal-gray color across to their prey. “Was that supposed to accomplish something?”

Instead of replying, Yakumo merely touched the tip of her blade to the line of paint, a few drops of it still dripping from one of the teeth as she focused her chakra into the instrument and through the liquid medium.

The Mist-nin tensed, then blinked as they looked down at their wrists again, seeing a long chain trailing the distance now as thick manacles were clasped over their forearms.

“You took me by surprise and destroyed the painting I was working on,” Yakumo stated evenly, irritation leaking into her voice. “That took quite a bit of time and effort. I will have you repay me.”

Haku grunted as he pulled against the chains, his mind racing even as the girl opposite him spun her own set of one-handed seals before-

He launched himself *forward* instead of testing the sturdiness of the chains in attempting to run away, as she'd most likely wanted him to. A mirror formed just as she finished her last seal, the name of the technique echoing out as pulses of lightning ran down the length of the binding on him. His bloodline took the brunt of the damage, the mirror shattering even as he teleported to another and used the effect to sunder the-

Haku looked down, seeing the *impossible* chains still connected to the Konoha girl.

“Like I said, I'd advise the same.”

...

Uchiha Obito *really* wanted to know how it had come to this as he crossed swords with the bandage-faced jounin, the steel-on-steel rasp sending up a stream of sparks even as water and fire jutsu met to further bathe the area in chakra-laden steam and mist.

“That's a good sword,” The Demon of the Mist growled approvingly.

“Thanks,” Obito grunted out, his sharingan spinning wildly even as he realized that the figure he was fighting was a clone. With a burst of power, he cut *through* his opponent's weapon, the sword biting deep into the man before he dissolved into water.

Even without any overt warning, Obito triggered the body flicker he'd been holding in reserve and snapped out of the way of the killing blow the *real* (?) Zabuzza attempted to land.

Missing entirely, Zabuzza chuckled while keeping Obito at the edge of his vision. The Uchiha, privately, reflected that smart opponents were a pain in the ass to fight. Normally, someone would have made eye contact with him by now.

“Really, I mean it though. That's a nice sword. Where'd you pick it up?” Zabuzza pressed.

“Eh, I know a guy who knows a guy,” Obito dismissed.

“Maybe one of my brats will capture one of yours and we can trade for the smith's name. I have my eye on Kubikirihochō, but I've been trying to get my kids to pick up the blade, too.” Zabuzza's absent comments reflected the natural ease he exuded on a battlefield.

Obito sighed. “Look, if you want the sword, that's between you and that dipshit nuke-nin. You don't *really* want to protect the bridge. Why not just dogpile the bastard and take your sword and leave?”

Zabuza chuckled. "Sorry, but one of my kids, he's a real bleeding-heart type. I keep telling him not to listen to the sob stories, but..."

Obito grunted, he'd been trying to keep Naruko away from the villagers for just that reason. He could break the news well after they were away from things. Then she could blame *him* and get over it instead of fouling up the works. "So I guess there's no avoiding this, then?"

"Fraid not," Zabuza laughed again, raising the double-thick katana before tucking it to the length of his arm and adhering it with chakra to roll out a series of handsigns.

The worst part, Obito reflected as the massive water dragon bore down on him, is that he won't even use anything new. I've already got, like, three versions of this stupid jutsu.