

Chapter 11:

I clenched my fists so hard each knuckle popped in sequence as I stared at Obito, my eyes tracking him off to my right side and my face blank. The obvious answer to his thrown gauntlet was to refuse. I owed this man no favors to sate his curiosity and I had no desire to show off my meager abilities. I *could* simply leave, citing sudden illness, but it would no doubt sour any potential further invitations to the Uzumaki clan compound. Not that I *wanted them*, but Yakumo's words about Naruko's near-pariah status were still heavy in my mind.

"I wouldn't mind a chance to have a proper match with *sensei*." Satsuki replied, her eyes never leaving me, a tiny smirk on her lips.

...and, now I kind of wanted to wipe that smirk off the little shit's face.

As Naruko turned to her mother with a pleading expression, grabbing one of the woman's sleeves in her hand to speak lowly and urgently. As she did that, I slipped more food in my mouth to avoid answering, taking my sweet time chewing as I considered the further ramifications of refusing the challenge. One of which was the deeply foreboding feeling I had when I looked at the young Kurama girl. It was an unnerving sensation that pushed at me to *do something* to help her, even if I couldn't remember anything specific from my prior life.

Besides my concern, though, I generally *liked* helping people... or, at least, setting things to rights. Order from chaos, one might say, and the impulse to do so was hard to fight sometimes especially considering I'd nurtured it in several of my professions over the years. Even now, taking rough cuts of ore and turning them into beautiful works of art fed the urge. Tenten, Satsuki... they were raw and unworked in the same way.

Winning an 'exhibition match' against Satsuki would earn me a chance at helping to mold another diamond in the rough.

That wouldn't be why I would concede to this irritating little stunt, though. No, the real issue was that Uchiha Obito had seized upon a chance series of happenstances to corner me for whatever reason he felt was justifiable enough to do so. Be it simple curiosity or a more professional desire to ferret out my secrets, he'd demonstrated not only the ability to do so, but a *willingness* as well. This became a problem when one understood that *refusing* to disclose information to a person seldom made them inclined to walk away and let sleeping dogs lie. If I declined here and now, Obito would likely keep pestering me, escalating either social or legal consequences to compel me to show him *something*.

This situation was... *not optimal*, not at all, but I had no doubt he could probably achieve worse if he really put his mind to it.

Even if the Kurama clan was an unknown quantity to me at the moment, anyone who was willing to associate with the Uzumaki and Kushina in particular weren't likely to sell me out to Danzo knowingly or willingly, if the crippled old bastard even cared about a crippled *young* bastard no matter how skilled. While I wouldn't put it past anyone in this group to argue for 'mutually beneficial' favors in the future to whatever extent I could perform them, it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing to have patrons who might notice if I suddenly disappeared. Sadly, my impulse to help Tenten combined with Satsuki's discovery of the tutoring and subsequent demand for lessons of her own meant that I could no longer rely on my fracturing anonymity.

I swallowed and took a drink of the slightly-fermented fruit juice that had been on offer for the youth before nodding as I looked to Obito. "I suppose I can be convinced, but I hope you're ready to offer some type of payment, Uchiha-san. Since you seem so *eager* to see what I can do."

If I was going to be forced to dance like a monkey, I'd at least want to be paid more than peanuts.

Obito twitched, laughing awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his head. "Oh, hey-hey, it's not like that, I just-"

"I agree." Kushina interrupted her husband's former student with a sharp look as she brushed off Naruko's hand and began rolling herself back from the table. "It's the least you can do for putting the poor boy out like this on short notice, Obito. Why don't you *think of something* while you go get a set of *bokken*."

Obito winced more fully as Mikoto hid a smile behind her hand and the Kurama parents looked on in amusement. The jounin stood with a clatter of his chair and stalked off with a click of his tongue to retrieve the practice weapons.

I sighed and nodded to Satsuki as I began planning out the way the matches would go...

"Are you going to be okay?" Yakumo asked, reaching over and tapping me on the hand with a concerned frown.

"I'm going to try not to humiliate Satsuki too badly." I stated with a sigh, leaning back in my chair and noting from the corner of my eye the way the Uchiha girl's face twitched at the comment I'd made in the wrong tone of voice to be properly quiet and private. Still, without looking directly at her...

Yakumo frowned more deeply and shook her head. "I've seen Naruko and Satsuki spar before, it won't be easy to beat her."

I breathed out through my nose, not quite a *snort*, but... "She's talented, but she lacks perspective because of that," I spoke in a true undertone this time. "A warrior goes to fight and then wins, a soldier wins and then goes to fight."

"I don't understand." The eleven-year-old stated after a moment's contemplation.

"That's fine, you will." I nodded, then turned my attention to the matron of the house as she approached. "Lady Uzumaki."

She rolled her eyes. "Kushina, Kota. Call me Kushina." She smiled tiredly. "You know you don't have to do this if you don't want to, right? Obito's like a son to me, but *sometimes*... that boy just doesn't know when to quit and leave well enough alone, ya know."

I shrugged. "I've piqued his curiosity for some reason and, if I don't give him *something*, he's likely to pull another stunt like this again, isn't he?"

Kushina sighed and combed a hand through her hair. "I hate to say it, but you're probably right." She snorted. "Smart kid." I frowned at her as she reached up and ruffled my hair. "Alright then, you need anything?"

One side of my lips rose up devilishly and my voice changed tone again, something that Satsuki could hear if she was listening. *Because* she was listening, really. "Bet hard on me, take him for all he's worth, and give me half."

Kushina's mouth dropped open before mirth filled her eyes as she barked out a loud laugh. "Oooh! You think you're hot shit, don't you?! Alright, let's see you back it up!"

As Kushina rolled herself away, I watched the irritation and frustration build on Satsuki's face as she stewed in the off-hand insults I'd let her hear. In the meantime, I picked out dessert and exchanged further pleasantries with Yakumo as if nothing were wrong with the situation. I liked to think that Musashi would be proud of my performance.

...

"Fifty-thousand ryo on Kota." Kushina spoke as Obito sat down next to them. The younger man jerked a bit, turning to the woman who'd become something of a surrogate mother in the last decade after the fox's attack and stared at her in surprise.

"That's a lot of money." He noted, looking between the two combatants and wondering if she knew something he didn't.

"No confidence in your cousin?" Kushina prodded, raising a red eyebrow. "Or did you blow all your money on some new get-rich-quick scheme again?"

Obito felt himself being baited and didn't know what he could do to stop it. "It would have *worked* if they hadn't skimped on the building and had it burn down. With all the stock in it. The *Shinobi-Slicer* was going to be in every kitchen in Konoha!"

Kushina sighed, shaking her head in fond exasperation as the two combatants limbered up... or, well, *Satsuki* did. Kota had taken his plate full of food and utensils onto the spot they'd cleared for the match and was still eating even as her goddaughter glared at the boy while he finished off a piece of cake. If Satsuki were a genin already, she might not fall for something as simple as the trick Kota was employing, but she hadn't yet gotten experience under a jounin, which-

"Okay, I'm in. Fifty-thousand." Obito finally grumbled. "Gotta have some clan pride, right?"

"Good." Kushina nodded, then looked to Kurama Murakumo with a nod.

The Kurama clan head nodded in reply, clearing his throat as he stepped up to the long stretch of stone-supported wooden walkway that was serving as their impromptu sparring ground. Kota sighed, setting his plate aside and yawning wide and long as he walked up to the opposite side of Satsuki, wooden sword in hand, swinging it a few times seemingly to get a feel for it.

"We will have a best of three matches between Uchiha Satsuki and the civilian blacksmith apprentice Kotaro." Murakumo announced. "A winner will be declared either at my discretion, an obvious incapacitation, or when one opponent should yield. Further attempts to continue a match after I call halt will result in disqualification. Do both parties understand these rules?"

Nods from both children.

"The winner will receive..." Murakumo paused and looked over to Kushina and Obito. "What was the prize decided on?"

Obito jerked and snapped his fingers. "I'll teach the winner a jutsu of their choice!"

Satsuki's eyes lit up, but Kota's expression soured. "I'd prefer money."

"Aw, c'mon! What kid doesn't want to learn a shiny new technique?" Obito whined, Kushina refraining from palming her face in exasperation, wondering if Minato would laugh or cry if he could see Obito now. Ah, if only Rin weren't on extended medical duty out of the village. Obito always got worse when she was gone for long periods...

Kota rolled his eyes, looking skyward for a moment in thought before frowning and sighing. "Fine, yeah, I guess there's a technique I wouldn't mind knowing."

At her side, Obito exhaled in relief, painfully glad he wouldn't have to fork over more money.

"Very well, make the seal of confrontation." Murakumo instructed. "Then take five steps back."

Hands met, Kota gave Satsuki one last smirk and she heard Mikoto sigh nearby as her daughter's hackles rose from the gesture. Reaching over, Kushina grabbed Mikoto's hand and gave it a squeeze as she looked back and smiled thankfully. Both of them knew this probably wasn't going to end well for Satsuki even if she did manage to scrape out a victory.

Kota took up a somewhat lazy, weak stance with two hands loosely gripping the hilt of his blade while Satsuki crouched slightly, a tight grip on her own. Murakumo had stepped back several paces himself, clearing the area between the two combatants.

"Begin!"

It was over in a flash.

Satsuki moved forward in a burst of chakra at a speed that was frankly *jaw-dropping* for someone not out of academy yet, hurling herself forward three paces before leaping into the air and, her body twisting in a spiral, calling out, "*Ryutsuisen!*"

Kushina's eyes widened as she realized that the leap had been carefully calculated in a way that used the body itself like a *whip* in order to reverse upward momentum and redirect it downward instead of simply relying on the energy of the fall. No, in fact, if she could see it again, she'd be sure of it, but it seemed to treat the body *and the sword* as one, placing the axis you spun on in such an extreme place that it *had* to be intentional-

"Ah!" Satsuki gasped, halting in the air above her opponent, her eyes bulging wide as her jaw opened in shock and pain and Kushina blinked, cocking her head as she realized that Kota's hands weren't gripping *his* sword, but *Satsuki's*, having clapped together at the exact time to catch the wooden sword one-third up from the grip, but then...

"No fucking way." Obito muttered, cocking his head. As Kushina followed suit from curiosity alone, she saw that, mostly hidden by their bodies, Kota's sword was now stuck on the tip of his shoe, jutting upwards on the lifted foot to catch Satsuki *precisely* in the breastbone.

As they watched, Satsuki dropped breathlessly to the ground, catching herself on her knees and gasping for air.

"W-Winner Kotaro!" Murakumo stuttered out in surprise.

"He dropped his sword and used his *foot* to catch the butt of the grip so that he could strike her using her *own* falling energy." Kushina realized in surprise, her eyes widening. "...and he supported her weight through the grip on her sword so that the blow didn't do serious damage!"

"Alright! Go Kota!" Naruko cheered happily, raising her hands above her head energetically.

"That's not fair! He cheated!" Enkai cried, pointed out over the dining table, and Kushina had to snort at the accusation, opening her mouth to-

"Fighting 'fair' is an insult to a proper ninja." Kota replied in that blankly-serious tone she'd seen on some shinobi who were especially good at controlling their tells. "It means you aren't taking them seriously enough to cheat; letting them win when they haven't earned it." His lips twitched as he looked down at the gasping Uchiha girl on the ground. "Or do you disagree, Satsuki?"

Taking another heaving breath, Kushina could tell that the expression on the Uchiha girl's face was a mix of terrible delight and vicious anger.

Mikoto giggled to her side, Kushina seeing her old friend bite her lower lip. "Oh dear."

Kushina sighed, giving in to the urge to palm her face this time. "My daughter's going to try as well, I just know it, if only because yours is hanging around him."

Mikoto smirked at her friend's observation and nodded. "I'll have to take steps so Fugaku doesn't find out. He's always so stoic about these things."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries as Satsuki recovered, while Kota took up a resting position next to the swords he'd picked up. Once Satsuki had gotten her breath back, the girl took her position back on the opposite side of the broad walkway and centered herself with a calming inhalation as she righted her sword and grip. Kota, on the other hand, took up an even lazier stance, sword held in one hand dipped to almost touch the ground as he stood with his right shoulder facing his opponent, coolly staring her down with none of the mockery he had earlier.

"Match two, begin!"

Satsuki still rushed forward, but instead of the wild move from earlier it was a calculated series of quick steps that held an almost dance-like pattern of evasion and aggression to Kushina's eyes. It was definitely part of the same style she'd been taught by the mysterious boy, a series of fast feints that would open up imaginary opponents to lethal attacks and counter attacks while Kota slowly pivoted his sword and tracked her with his eyes, keeping to his low-guard. Finally, Satsuki closed the distance and raised her sword-

Then had to duck out of the way as Kota's wrist snapped up and his sword spun into the air, forcing Satsuki to move her own arm wide lest the blade make contact. It was a fraction of a second's worth of opening that Kota exploited ruthlessly as he stepped in *unarmed*, reaching up with his thrusting left hand to catch Satsuki's *face* and slam her back into the ground in a single fluid movement even while the girl had been following the upward arc of the sword...

...which now descended, slapping into Kota's raised right palm to be brought down on Satsuki's throat while his left moved to catch Satsuki's own hand trying to bring her blade to bear even from her prone position on the ground.

"Winner Kotaro!" Murakumo called, to the delight of Kushina's daughter and the irritation of her son.

Obito groaned and placed his head in his hands as Kushina shook her own in vague disbelief while Kota lingered a second too long *on top of* the Uchiha girl, her lips moving even if distance and low volume didn't allow the words to be heard. Kota's lack of reaction didn't lend any clues either, to Mikoto's obvious irritation. Honestly, Kushina wondered if the boy didn't have some Uchiha ancestry somewhere a few generations back to maintain that lack of expression. Though as they stood, the fact that Satsuki deigned to accept a hand up from two otherwise humiliating defeats was plenty telling in and of itself.

"I want the third match." The Uchiha girl declared as Kota began to walk away.

The boy's shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly and his head tilted back as if he were looking to the heavens for salvation. Kushina wished him luck, she'd *seen* how tenacious an Uchiha girl could be when they set their mind to it.

"Fine." Kota agreed with a barely-there sigh, moving back to his place. "Tell me what you did wrong in the first two matches."

Satsuki grimaced, her eyes crossing the crowd watching them. "The first match I... I let you get to me. You said things you wouldn't normally say to provoke me into being angry."

Kota nodded. "Correct. Ego has no place on the battlefield, even in a spar. Next?"

"Your sword. I watched it when you threw it. I should have used the time to hit you instead." She stated, confident in her tone.

The boy nodded again. "Your opponent's sword is not your opponent. You should be aware of where it is, in case they can call it back to themselves, but you shouldn't disregard an opening they give you to pay attention to an abandoned weapon." He gave another sigh, then took up his stance again. "Very well, if you have no objections Lord Kurama?"

The man shook his head and stepped back to his place. "Very well, third match. Begin!"

Unlike the past two matches, this time it was *Kota* who leapt forward, throwing himself at Satsuki in a motion so fast that he became a whirl of images. His entire body twisted, spinning on the long axis as he went nearly parallel to the ground, Satsuki shifting to match the blade coming at her midsection in a way that would put her in the optimal position to counterattack when-

"Ryukansen!"

-crack-snap!

The sound of wood hitting wood was sharp and unexpected for all that this was the third match of the exhibition, but the sound of *shattering* wood was even more surprising. Even as Kota's blade swept through Satsuki's, Kushina scowled. She would have to check the inventory in the dojo, because that *shouldn't* have happened unless someone had intentionally-

Ah.

That cheeky little fuck.

The redhead smiled as Kota smoothly reversed his grip and stepped forward to press his blade against a shocked Satsuki's neck once again. "Never trust a weapon that has been in an enemy's hands without verifying it has not been tampered with."

"Winner, Kotaro!"

Kushina chuckled softly under her breath even as Obito hung his head further in dismay. This kid was a riot! She'd have to have him over again to embarrass some more clan kids! She grinned as she turned to Obito. "I think I can at least see why you're obsessed with this kid. Kakashi basically taught himself swordsmanship too, didn't he?"

Obito grimaced and looked away, as good as confirming Kushina's suspicions.

Good, let the brat think twice before he's that rude to my guests again.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 11, Same Month)

Chapter 12:

I rested my chin in my palm and closed the file folder with my free hand. Closing my eyes, I ignored the anxious look on Yakumo's face and drummed my fingers on the desk between us. After my performance in the 'exhibition match,' her parents had tentatively agreed to give me a chance to try and help her, explicitly acknowledging that there was likely little I could do to *hurt* her chances at successfully graduating. Well, as long as nothing I did actively hurt the girl, but I had no doubt her mother and father would dismiss me the first time she collapsed or otherwise suffered from a serious downturn in her health.

Which, given what was in her medical records, was *very likely*.

Shinobi medical capabilities were extremely advanced given their relative technological primitiveness, but there were limits. A number of diseases, conditions, and problems were diagnosed based on how chakra interacted with whatever they were attempting to treat. Injuries, specifically, were child's play to a well-trained medic. Most of *that* was beyond the scope of the single dip I'd taken into medic-nin training, but I could pretty easily patch up most simple to moderate wounds and keep someone alive long enough to get them to the hospital as long as we were within the village walls.

The problem came when one was dealing with bacterial or viral infections, because techniques like mystic palm just didn't differentiate between tiny lifeforms that *should* be in the body and tiny lifeforms that *shouldn't* be in the body all that well. Usually focusing on relieving the symptoms offered some relief and took strain off the body, but attempting to directly treat an illness was very hit-or-miss. A lot of medical treatment when it came to these areas relied on meager institutional knowledge in the time since the Warring Clans period and traditions inherited from one's ancestors.

Pharmacology in particular was *extremely* spotty, superficially resembling eastern medicine from my previous life, but *far* more effective than I remember it being which I accredited to '*something-something-natural chakra in the herbs*.' But any given drug that *wasn't* used in combat tended to have a not-insignificant chance of failure.

The issue with Yakumo's case was somewhat more *complex*, sadly.

The information contained in the girl's medical files attested to the fact that the Elemental Nations had a kind of *rudimentary* form of genetic testing that focused on bloodline traits, parentage, and a few other key factors. When one understood how important those factors could be in terms of internal and external politics, it wasn't too surprising. The complicated part came when you read between the lines a little and realized that while the medical establishment properly understood *heritage*, they didn't actually understand anything *about genetics*.

So when someone had a medical condition that mysteriously recurred, they knew what to *expect*, but not *why it occurred*.

I opened my eyes and stared at Yakumo. Her eyes were unnaturally yellow and her skin sickly pale. There were sketches of her blood particles on file, too. Specifically, her red blood cells. When I'd seen *those*, it had clicked.

"I can't get you ready to graduate in four months." I stated unceremoniously, abruptly stopping the drumming of my fingers. Her shoulders drooped, then stiffened as she realized what I'd *implied*. I sighed and nodded. "Sixteen months? I might be able to do that." I raised a hand as she started to speak. "The catch is that I'm going to teach you taijutsu, not genjutsu."

Yakumo snorted, scowling at me in surprise as she gestured to the folder in front of me. "If you read *that*, you know I'm not going to be able to do it. I can manage maybe an hour or two of form practice before the pain gets too bad to continue."

I sighed and shook my head. "When you say 'genjutsu,' someone who has no idea what that means assumes you're just talking about techniques that scare people, right?"

Yakumo's face turned fierce. "I *hate it* when my classmates do that. Genjutsu is *so much more* than that! It-"

"-is a complex and subtle art that can ensnare any or all of your senses and manipulate enemies." I paraphrased from the textbook, quieting her. "What barely anyone understands, though, is that there are just as many and nuanced techniques in the physical arts as there are in the illusionary ones."

Her brows furrowed in unspoken disbelief and I sighed as I extended my left hand. "Take it and feel my joints. I want to show you something." Her frown turned quizzical and her cold fingertips brushed the back of my hand, a symptom of poor circulation. I took a deep breath, and flexed my muscles in a way that popped the first joint of my finger out as Yakumo took in a shocked breath. Then the second joint, and the third. Then the next finger's first joint, second, third. Soon enough, each and every finger joint was dangling loosely.

Yakumo looked up at me with wide and terrified eyes only to see my blank expression. "Taijutsu is more than punching an enemy. Where genjutsu controls *others'* bodies, taijutsu is the control of *the user's* body. I control when I feel fear, when I feel pain, how the blood in my veins flows." I flexed again, beginning to pull the joints back in place, the process only taking a handful of seconds under Yakumo's unwavering gaze.

"Th-that's... I've never heard someone explain it like that." Yakumo swallowed.

"Sixteen months might not be enough time to teach you what you need to know." I stated, looking her dead in the eye. "It'll be tight, but you might be able to do it."

Yakumo grimaced, but nodded, then smirked. "Teach me, sensei."

I glared at the girl. "Let's start out with how to relieve muscle cramps."

The amusement in her eyes faded almost immediately.

...

"*Shunshin*?" Obito asked, frowning at me. "That's all you want?"

I shrugged. "It's useful."

"Yeah," he nodded slowly, still frowning, "but don't you want, like... some big fire technique or to learn to shoot lightning or something?"

I shook my head. "The body-flicker is fine."

Obito crossed his arms and shook his head in disbelief. "Ugh... yeah, okay, I can teach you that. I guess." He stopped and his frown turned into a scowl. "But first... I gotta' apologize."

I raised an eyebrow at Uchiha Obito. "I wouldn't understand why, jounin-san."

Obito winced as I kept my face and tone carefully blank. Turning away from me, he looked around the clearing he'd asked me to meet him in and scratched the back of his head in awkward embarrassment. Honestly I was just happy that two weeks after the party, the call to pay back his offered 'prize' of a jutsu hadn't come with an ambush by a squad of ninja to carry me off to Ibiki. Instead, it had only been a napping jounin waiting for me at the designated time and place.

He sighed. "Okay, look, I'm sorry I pushed you into a corner like that, alright kid?" He paused, ducking his head and spreading his arms in a gesture of surrender. "Kushina-oba is really riding my ass about being rude to one of her guests. I just..."

The words hung in the air for a moment before he sighed again and dropped back onto the fallen tree he'd been napping on when I'd walked up.

I waited, not saying anything as he obviously searched for words before looking me in the eye. "Okay, you know what? I'm just going to come out and say it. You're really weird, you know that, right?"

I blinked at him, cocking my head as I controlled my facial tics. Shrugging, I nodded minutely. "You wouldn't be the first to say it to me."

Obito snapped his fingers, not-quite-glaring at me. "*That!* Right there! A normal kid would get angry or frustrated or something. What's *with that?*"

I stopped, frowning at the older man and considering the question. Judging by the fact that I *hadn't* been abducted by a group of ninja and shoved in a cell... could it really be that this was just some *personal crusade* for Obito? Kushina wouldn't have been irritated if he'd explained that this was for the security of the village, would she? Then again, she might have been *more* so if it looked as though Obito was using Naruko as some kind of lure for me, though that didn't track with how honest her micro-expressions seemed during the party and the Uzumaki weren't exactly famous for being able to conceal their emotions...

If I go too far down the rabbit-hole here, the only obvious conclusion will be that I'm already in the Eternal Tsukuyomi and nothing I do matters.

So my choice is whether to trust that Obito is genuinely a decent person who wants to do right by me as long as I'm not a danger to him and his loved ones... or that this is all an enormous double-think ninja mind game that could be bypassed by dragging me in for interrogation.

When in doubt, trust in Occam?

I reached up and scratched at my chin idly. "Uchiha-san... if I actually give you honest answers to your questions... will you leave me alone after this?"

The ninja grimaced and looked away, apparently uncomfortable with how forthrightly I'd addressed his stalking of me. "Ugh... you make it sound like I'm picking on a child or something."

I, very pointedly, said nothing.

Obito winced again, then rubbed at his face. "I can't *promise*, but depending on the answers I hear and you being honest, yeah, that can happen." He rolled his hand around in a vague way and repeated himself. "It's just... you're a weird kid. You act like a ninja, you know?" I blinked in mild surprise. "You've got this *look*, like you're primed for something to happen wherever you go, even when you look like you're at ease. It's something you only see in ninja that have a few years field experience under their belt or someone who went through hell."

Prana-Bindu, but I can work with this...

I nodded slowly, then moved to his side and, after gesturing to the empty stretch of log, he nodded and I sat. "If you don't mind me asking, Uchiha-san... how old are you?"

Obito blinked, pursing his lips for a moment. "Twenty-five, what's that got to do with-"

I waved him off. "But are you twenty-five? Really? Do you have twenty-five years of memories?" Obito looked at me speculatively. "I'd guess that most people start making permanent memories around age six or seven." I paused. "Barring specific incidents like a broken bone in your early childhood or something."

"Yeah, okay. I can see where you're going with that." Obito drummed his fingers on the log and stared up at the sky for a moment. "That tracks... I think I can remember my mom singing to me back when I was five or so, but I might be just imagining it." He huffed a laugh. "Heh, I've never thought about it like that." He turned to me with a curious look. "So how long do you..."

I stared back at him, eye-to-eye. "Eleven. All eleven years. Almost twelve now."

Obito jerked his head back in surprise.

"Not... every minute or anything like that." I explained slowly, looking away and off into the foliage. "But I remember straight back to being born. It probably has something to do with the way my chakra system is messed up." The truth, yes, but not the way he would take it.

"Huh... okay, that's *weird*, but how does that-" Obito cut himself off abruptly, his eyes subtly widening and I was pathetically grateful I didn't have to actually spell it out for him. Even now I prefer to lie to myself about those earliest memories, using the neuro-chemical control my advanced lessons in prana-bindu leant me to cloud them and *forget*, at least for a time.

Yeah, I'd taken prana-bindu so deeply 'just to see what happens,' sure... not because that third expenditure allowed me to stop waking up in cold sweats, or because the fourth allowed me to fully tame my nightmares...

"So you remember..." Obito began and, abruptly, a flash of red death and flames overtook me and I was *back there*, being held in a dead woman's arms. Then it was gone, as if it had never been. Even as hard as I pushed, I was still human, and the Uchiha saw my flinch and the instinctive tightening of my fists. He closed his eyes and looked away. "Sorry."

For a moment, there was silence between us.

Obito sighed, then, breaking the short tableau. "Can I ask... is *that* why you don't want to be a ninja?" He paused, running a hand through his hair. "I mean, I know this is probably insensitive as fuck and everything, but I feel like I should go ahead and ask if you really want me to leave you alone, right?"

I grimaced and pondered how much I should tell him. "Do you remember your time at the academy?" When he nodded, I continued. "Since we're being insensitive, do you mind if I ask how many of the people in your age group are dead?"

Obito flinched as if struck, something angry and hateful flashing over his face as he narrowed his gaze at me. "Yeah, actually. I do mind."

I nodded, feeling a vague gust of what might be killing intent on the wind. "If you could go back and try to get them to train more, to push their skills to get stronger, would you?" I asked quietly, remembering the faces of the students I had shared a classroom with. As Obito frowned in regret, I sighed. "And do you think they would listen to you? When you told an eight-nine-ten year old that they were going to *die* if they didn't practice their taijutsu another hour each day? Or push themselves to focus on chakra control just a little longer? Would they thank you for the advice, would they *listen to you*, or would they just think you were a teacher's pet and a suck-up and no fun? Then go off and play a stupid game that you weren't invited to because *you're a weird kid*."

I told you that you wouldn't have been the first to call me that.

The residual anger that had clung to Obito's face faded now, to be replaced by something like sympathy and pity, things I had no use for.

"When Itachi-san asked, I told him I don't want to kill people." I stated, looking off into the forest surrounding our tiny clearing. "And that was the truth, but only part of it. The other part is that I can't take knowing that the people who become my friends are going to die because they're children who don't understand death, won't train as hard as they should when their lives will be on the line one day, and I won't be able to save them because I'm barely able to be a ninja myself."

My eyes burned, but I refused to cry.

"The girl Tenten, Satsuki, Naruko..." Obito trailed off. "You're giving them extra training." His voice had the breathy quality of an epiphany and I nodded to confirm his guess.

"They want to improve, they jump at every chance. Even with how little I've known Naruko..." I trailed off, shrugging. She hadn't asked for too much, yes, but she *had* wanted to know what I'd done to those thugs in the alley, and that had stretched into a longer and more in-depth discussion on taijutsu. She was picking up bits and pieces of the Weirding Way to add to Uzu's Whirling Fist style, but wasn't suitable for the art as a whole.

There is something I know she could use, but it's so brutally dangerous I don't think I can justify teaching it to someone with her temperament.

Yet, at least.

Obito inhaled deeply and stood, pacing with some nervous energy. "Okay, that was depressing as hell and I'm sorry I ever asked."

"There are reasons I don't usually talk about these things." I stared at him blankly, because he *had asked*.

"I hope this doesn't uncover another hidden explosive tag, but... what about the swords? Any explanation for those?" Obito asked with a frown.

I shrugged minutely, glad to be away from heavier topics. "That's like adding two and two to get four for me. I like swords, I wanted to make sure I could use them because my chakra is so weak. That's it."

A bit of a bluff, but if he'd believed me so far and I think he had, then it wasn't beyond belief I could do something like this.

He raised his hands up. "Fine. Makes just as much sense as anything else today.." Sighing, he nodded to himself. "Okay, yeah, that answers pretty much everything I never actually wanted to know. Whatever-" He turned away, muttering something about '*crippled traumatized genius*' that I wasn't supposed to hear. "-anyway, word of advice, kid." He stated, turning back to me. "What you're doing now isn't anything super special and with Aunt Mikoto and Aunt Kushina knowing who you are you'll have a bit of wiggle room, especially if you can help that poor little Yakumo, but try to keep your head down with your skills, okay? You're weird, but tolerably weird as long as no one with a kunai to grind notices. You make too much noise or draw attention to yourself and... well, best case it's just hard for a shinobi to ignore a puzzle until they've solved it."

"I'm beginning to understand." I commented dryly.

Obito snorted and looked like he wanted to correct me, then shook his head. "Anyway, there aren't any laws or anything about a civilian having shinobi training, especially since it'd be impossible to enforce." He sounded as though he was thinking aloud now, rather than actually speaking to me. "Between shinobi who have to file section two for injury, section three for mental instability, and the rare ones who section-eight'd for old age there are probably at least a couple hundred inactive or retired ninja with full training, effectively civilians legally-speaking. The only thing strange here is that he's *never* been on the active roster, just the academy rolls, but plenty of the civilians are *half-trained* and there's no law that says you *have to* wear the headband if you're capable unless we're actively at war..."

Obito sawed his head side to side as he mentally chewed on the issue while I raised an eyebrow. "You seem to know quite a bit about this."

He shook his head. "Nah, just a bunch of stuff I picked up from doing paperwork for the Military Police. It can get kind of tricky when you're dealing with prosecuting edge-cases and whether someone who failed out of the academy in their last year should get an interrogation and tribunal or questioning and put before a magistrate." He turned and pointed at me. "Since anyone who does any kind of digging will figure out you know your shit, you'd *definitely* get a tribunal so I'd say try really fucking hard not to break the law."

I nodded gravely. "Noted."

Cracking his knuckles, Obito nodded. "Alright, that's basically all the advice I have for you. Still want to learn that technique?"

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 11, Same Month)
Ruggedization

Chapter 13:

I woke up to a vision of a sterile white ceiling and a feeling of bone-deep tiredness. "Ow."

A shuffling near the edge of my vision caught my attention and I turned my head to see a dark-haired man wearing a white coat approaching. "Awake, are we? Can you tell me your name and where you are?"

I worked saliva into my mouth. "Kotaro... and, I'm guessing this is the Konoha hospital?"

"Good, good. I'm Uzumaki Ise, your attending physician." Something in my gaze must have given me away because he chuckled and nodded. "I get that a lot, the name's by marriage." The doctor nodded with a slight smile as his fingers blurred through a casual set of activation seals before masking his hands in blue-green energy. "Alright, this is a basic diagnostic jutsu to check things out, but I think your diagnosis is just simple chakra exhaustion. Judging by your medical records and what your teacher said when he dropped you off, you attempted the body flicker and collapsed when it drained you. I don't need to tell you how serious this is, but—"

No, he really *didn't* need to tell me.

Lesson fucking *learned*.

...

"Hu-hu-how am I this-hu-*tired*?" Yakumo asked, huffing for air as sweat poured down her face and soaked the training outfit she'd worn for our session today. Exhausted, she flopped back from her sitting position to lay on the sunny grassy hill we'd seized. Below, on the wider expanse of the Kurama clan grounds, their 'backyard' so to speak, Satsuki and Naruko were sparring as they danced around each other with acrobatic strikes and lightning-fast chakra-enhanced moves. As Satsuki was using a wooden sword and Naruko was superhumanly tough on her worst day, I'd given the green light to anything they would normally be allowed to do in the academy.

It was, at the very least, better than the two of them deciding that I was made of glass and needed to be constantly attended to outside of Sagara's shop.

"How do you think?" I asked, wiping off my own forehead as I stared back at her, my question curious.

"What?" Yakumo blinked, staring at me.

"How and why are you tired?" I rephrased my previous question, sincerity in each word.

Yakumo frowned in thought. "I... don't know." She looked down at the grass we'd been meditating upon. "We've been just... *sitting here* for hours as I worked through the exercises you've been explaining, but it's not like we've been *doing anything*."

I chuckled, shaking my head as I spread my hands. "That's a basic misconception of how your body works. I've explained the various muscle groups and how they grow stronger through use, yes?" She nodded. "Each flex of a bicep or twist of your abdominals you go through, if it is tight enough, will strain and damage the fibers of the muscles in that group. What most people do not understand is that you can leverage these muscles *against* each other."

Turning my hands so that the heels of my palms met each other, I pressed them together with force as I exhaled. "Here, reach out and touch my arms." Her fingers, warmer now two weeks into our sessions, slowly felt along the lines of taut muscles underneath my deceptively soft skin. "This is a more obvious example, but the principle applies to the whole of your body." Releasing the tension in my arms, I reached down and pulled my simple short tunic off as Yakumo's eyes trailed down my chest and her cheeks pinkened at the sight of the clean-cut shapes of my abdominals.

I took a breath and *moved* my muscles in a way that made my student's eyes widen. Looking to me for permission, I nodded, and her fingers began tracing the tense patterns along my stomach.

"Every day, every hour, every minute." I instructed her in controlled breaths. "This is the art you must learn. An art of precision control of oneself and one's own body."

Yakumo took a deep breath, the conscious exertion clear in her frame as she pulled air in the way I'd been coaching her to. Getting adequate oxygen to her tissues and organs was going to be the real challenge, but that wasn't for a few months. As it was now, all I really needed to do was instill the basic foundations that a *true* practitioner of Prana-Bindu should have learned at infancy. Thankfully, it seemed that the enhanced learning curve common to chakra-users was aiding and abetting my attempt to condense the curriculum.

It had intrigued and bothered me, just a bit, how quickly Tenten and Satsuki had picked up the sword-styles I'd been teaching them, something which I knew was more than a bit hypocritical of me. Eventually, with the pool of metaphysical knowledge at my disposal and my own understanding of human physiology through the Bene Gesserit's art, I'd deduced that the *yin* component of chakra was definitely increasing their learning speed, something which I had *very, very carefully* started to emulate a few months back by cycling chakra in controlled patterns through my body.

It was *incredibly* dangerous, though, even under controlled conditions.

Still, the way that a *natural* chakra-user seemed to use it as an innate and unfocused skill... it had allowed Tenten and Satsuki to learn sword styles that took *years* in mere months. True, they were nowhere near mastery yet, but they were far closer than they had any right to be. So close, I was likely going to need further investment fairly soon if I was going to teach them much further. As it was, though, I had them practicing permutations of the various patterns

I'd personally created in addition to moving them to chakra-enhanced training with the inclusion of a third axis of movement.

It helped that, gratifyingly, I'd managed to get to the point where I could hold my own for a good half-hour in combat before my reserves gave out.

"If that's what it takes, that's what it takes." Yakumo nodded as she took a deep breath and began to work on the cool-down exercises I'd taught her the week prior. She sighed and shook her head as she did so.

"Something wrong?" I asked patiently, running my own body through another cycle of raising my metabolism to its limit, working each and every muscle as if I were running a marathon at full sprint... all while keeping my voice perfectly level and maintaining a civil conversation as well.

"Mostly I just regret not being able to achieve being a kunoichi without learning taijutsu." Yakumo stated with a sigh as she took a long gulp from the thermos of water sitting nearby. Seeing me looking at her in curiosity, she quickly waved a hand as if to wipe away her previous words. "Ah, I don't mean that this training isn't important to me, it's just..."

"Naruko told me you wanted to be like Lee Rock." I nodded in understanding. "A ninja who adhered to only one of the three schools due to your physical disability."

The Kurama heiress smiled in relief, happy that she hadn't offended me as she swept a lock of hair over her ear. "Yes, exactly."

I smiled and shook my head. "Tai, Nin, and Gen-jutsu are false abstractions." I sighed as she furrowed her brows in obvious incomprehension. "That is to say, the groupings of techniques are for the ease of reference, not strictly because there are stringent divisions between them. Ultimately, all three reduce to the manipulation of your internal reserves of energy."

Yakumo frowned and shook her head. "But Lee-san *can't* manipulate chakra."

I huffed quietly in amusement, my heart rate peaking as I let myself slow down to a relative 'jog' for a few moments. "I'd need to investigate more thoroughly, but I imagine that's not quite true. In all likelihood, whoever is teaching Lee is doing much as I am for you, save in different ways." I reached out and took a drink of my own water. "Much like how the use of illusions and medical techniques can alter the flow of energy through the body, the state of mind and the flow of the body can do so as well. Where a 'normal' shinobi would manipulate their internal reserves to boost their strength, speed, and stamina, I imagine Lee is being trained to manipulate his *body* to force his energies to cooperate."

Yakumo's eyes slowly widened as she stared off into the middle-distance. "Th-that's... but, no-how..." Her mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. "I never thought of it like that."

"I imagine most don't." I replied. "But it is something you'll need to get used to. If the idea of learning taijutsu truly bothers you, though, think of what I am teaching you as a style of *kugutsutsukai*."

"Puppetry?" Yakumo asked in surprise, then nodded slowly. "Puppetry using *myself* as the puppet, manipulating my chakra in order to properly move without straining or damaging my muscles and tissues." She giggled, a smile crossing her face. "Thank you, *sensei*, that does help. At least a little bit."

I rolled my eyes. "If you've got enough energy to sass me, I want to see you run through a cycle of abdominal muscles. Ten seconds tense, ten relaxed while relaxing the rest of your body and keeping it from moving."

She took another drink of water even as I finished my own cool-down cycle and began to work my arms and legs in tandem as if I were swinging a sword. Once I got Yakumo through the 'basic' muscle control techniques in about two months, I'd move on to another four months of nerve-feedback control. After that we'd move deeper into her body step-by-step, focusing her attention on the glandular systems, then building on what she'd already learned to manipulate her autonomic nervous system and involuntary physiological processes. I estimate it'd take her about eight-to-ten months depending on how talented, focused, and motivated she was during that time.

Once she got to that point, though, she should be able to adequately compensate for her condition. If that *didn't* pan out, I had a far more dangerous ace up my sleeve that I could give her a crash course in the last few months.

I really hoped it didn't come to that, though, and I could spend the remaining time coaching her through a few more advanced neurological-control techniques.

...

This month, the last of the year, featured a rare second full moon. It was a phenomenon I'd heard referred to as a 'blue moon' during my first life, but never truly paid attention to. In this life, though? It was cause for serious celebration. With Satsuki and Tenten squared away for the moment, my *Prana-Bindu* training paying dividends for Yakumo, and Naruko lacking enough of an attention span to demand anything more than specific bits and pieces of any given art...

I *finally* had time to advance my own plans. Even if grabbing 'ruggedization' was somewhat basic, it would allow me to multiply the durability of not only my swords, but my clockwork creations, which I had *ideas* for creatively applying at some point in the future.

Truthfully, though, the plans I'd once had were very thoroughly shot to hell. Keeping in mind the sunk-cost fallacy, I didn't want to *permanently* leave the Elemental Nations, which... rather put me between a rock and a hard place, because the Elemental Nations had a great many very serious problems, of which Otsutsuki Kaguya was arguably only the most readily and easily apparent. There were any number of potential civilization-ending cataclysms hiding just around the corner, especially if any of the content I remember from the movies was actually *real*. If that was the case, there was a thousand-year-old potential regional-scale implosion carving buried somewhere in the wastes between Konoha and Suna.

Just as one standout example.

So to refer back to my original thoughts on plans and goals many months prior... *what* was I going to do and *how* did I plan on doing it?

I'd... have to get back to myself on that one, given I really wasn't sure at this stage. My reasons for not wanting to be a ninja held true, but I couldn't deceive myself over how important my contributions could be to victory over Orochimaru, Zetsu, and Pain. Assuming, of course, that they hadn't been swapped with Jiraiya being the Traitor, Yahiko being the leader of Akatsuki, and Zetsu... fuck, I don't know, maybe Madara went rogue and fucking *Danzo* is his dupe in this timeline instead of Kakashi?

That's not a terrifying thought, not at all...

Before any of that, though, I was going to learn the *goddamn body flicker*.

"You don't need to do this." Satsuki stated, crossing her arms and trying very hard not to look as though she was concerned.

I sighed and shook my head. "Don't worry, I learned my lesson, but I'm *going* to learn this stupid jutsu."

Satsuki grimaced, but nodded before reaching into her backpack and pulling out a container and thrusting it at me. "Here. For lunch."

I blinked, belatedly recognizing the container as a *bento*, before taking and opening it to find a standard, if high-quality layout of traditional lunch-foods. I smiled softly, closing the box again and tucking it away. "Thanks, Satsuki."

She grunted, still not looking at me and not aware that I could see the trail of her blush at the tip of her right ear. "...Mom helped me, so it's not all my work."

I shook my head. "I'm sure it will be delicious."

Her chakra jumped a bit, an unusual sensation for my preternatural senses, but one I could easily interpret.

Then a buzzkill landed in a flash of orange and blue. "Hey there, lovebirds! I hope I'm not interrupting."

Satsuki sputtered and I sighed as I stood, extending a hand. "Do you have the long-form of the technique?"

Obito frowned as he pulled a small scroll out of his belt and rolled it over his fingers. "You know, I had to do some digging for this? *No one* uses the long-forms of techniques these days. I actually had to poke Shisui *himself* to get it." He sighed as my hand stayed out-thrust and my expression didn't change. "Look, all I'm saying is that you better appreciate this and not put yourself into the hospital again, okay? 'Cause if Lady Kushina and Satsuki's mom hear that you passed out on my watch *twice*, I'm in deep shit."

Satsuki, still blushing slightly, smirked in satisfaction.

"Duly noted." I nodded, flexing my fingers. The ninja sighed and let the scroll drop into my waiting grasp. I greedily unrolled the scroll and memorized the twenty-plus set of hand-signs, complete with focus notes and time stamps for how long you were supposed to hold each one. "Hmm..."

"So, enlighten me as to why you wanted this?" Obito asked, popping a joint in his neck and dropping onto the fallen tree nearby to sit. "Because, like I said, no one uses the long-forms of the techniques anymore. You can either do the short-form or you probably shouldn't try it at all."

I sat down in the grass as I studied the scroll more intensely, taking care to walk through the hand-signs in slow motion as I felt the nascent draw of an unactivated technique building, but not *forming* given my lack of focus.

Yes, this is exactly what I needed.

"Because the long-form technique actually tells you what chakra gates you're supposed to draw from in the proper sequence and amounts." I stated, my tone that of someone explaining the basic facts of the universe, which I *was*. Ugh... god save me from people who get to jounin-rank and don't know the fundamentals of the fundamentals. I'd *hoped* that was solely a feature of the anime, where Naruto was an idiot so the audience could get an explanation of how things actually worked.

Eh, maybe it's just because he's an Uchiha with cheaty-eyes.

Obito cocked his head, his eyes focusing on me as he frowned while Satsuki turned to give me her full attention out of the corner of my eye. "Sorry." The older ninja stated, dipping a pinky into his ear and wiggled it around. "Say that again?"

I sighed. "So, basically, you know that hand-seals are instructions for your chakra on how to perform a ninja technique, right?" Obito and Satsuki nodded. "Alright, so the deal is that specific hand-seals and specific sequences actually correspond to drawing chakra from specific gates within your body, because the different gates each process chakra in different ways. Chakra cycles through the pathway system from your cells and tissues *into* the gates where your soul connects to your body and refines the energy into a more usable form before redistributing it throughout your body." Both Uchiha stared at me vacantly and I shook my head. "Think of it like your blood having to go through your heart, into your lungs, and back to your organs before making the same trip again to keep you alive."

"...and the specific gates?" Obito asked leadingly, rubbing his chin as he stared at me intently.

"I'm not going to do a full breakdown of every gate; find someone else for that." I waved him off. "But, just as an example, the Gate of Opening and the Gate of Healing contribute primarily to yin-yang transformations, although the Gate of View contributes a bit to yang refinement and the Gate of Wonder does the same for yin. But View and Wonder are much more strongly linked to linkages *between* the different hand-signs. The Gates of Life, Pain, Limit, and Death do most of the elemental transformations, but that depends on what order the signs are in and the proportional pauses you add when performing a technique. That's *probably* where things went wrong for me, since I was using the short-form technique that generalizes the types of chakra you need to apply as well as the sequence, especially since my system is fucked up."

There was silence for a moment as I went through the set of hand-seals again, faster, and inwardly observed the partial formation of the technique again. I still didn't allow the chakra

to properly form and disperse to activate it, but I could see *exactly* how the body-flicker did what it did.

I grinned and pulled out a pencil before making a few sketch marks on the scroll as I personalized the technique properly so it wouldn't *nearly kill me*.

"So... where'd you learn all this?" Obito asked casually.

Deep in my after-market alterations of the body-flicker, I shrugged. "It's obvious, isn't it?"

"Why do they only teach us the short-forms in the academy?" Satsuki asked, leaning over to watch what I was doing.

I shrugged again. "You don't *need it*, really. The short-forms of the technique hand-signs are good enough for people who have moderately-sized pools of chakra to work with." Even if 'pool' was something of a misnomer, really. "It probably *helps* that when someone teaches someone else a technique, there's this kind of... *chakra resonance* between the two. It's not like... telepathy or mind-reading or anything, but the one teaching the technique is feeding their students a lot of unconscious tells through their chakra about how to form the jutsu properly." I reached up to scratch at my temple. At least Satsuki had the excuse of being a student. "Basically, you learn a bunch of short-cuts in the process of being taught the technique that you use subconsciously to cut out steps that you'd have to go through normally."

Because, surprise-surprise, hand-signs *actually meant something*. Which, considering that they descended from the ancient space-faring Otsutsuki... Well, it *shouldn't* actually be a surprise that they weren't just arbitrary finger-puppets with a complete lack of metaphysical significance. No, it was bizarre to consider, but hand-seals were *somehow* tapping into the underlying human soul-psyche to properly form techniques and allow jutsu to happen.

They weren't a programming language for reality or anything like some forms of magic were characterized as, but... at a stretch, you could describe them as a way to hack the human soul in order to force metaphysical energy produced by it to do your bidding.

Satsuki gave a surprised hum and nodded. Obito made some kind of movement that I didn't really catch, but Satsuki's next question took my attention. "What's that?" She pointed at my scribbles.

I frowned, but decided to throw the hospital under the metaphorical bus. "While I was recovering from chakra exhaustion I asked to read a few medical texts and one of them had some stuff on how iryo-nin write out complicated medical techniques when they need precision work on certain patients. Since *they're* using the short-form of the technique too, it's less about making the jutsu perfect and more about making sure it targets exactly what you need it to and *how* you need it to, because with the technique scripted on a scroll you don't need to concentrate on forming or maintaining it. That frees the medic performing it to focus on application instead of the technique itself, but I figure you can write out the long-form technique with a proper formula notation and personalize it to your own needs."

I stood and nodded. "If you do it all *correctly*, you should be able to maximize the effect while cutting the chakra cost far below what most people would consider the minimum. Of course, I can't exactly write down the formula for this, but knowing all the proper notations is an extra layer of insulation against something *really bad* happening." That last bit was something

of a lie, since I didn't want them to suspect I was going to simultaneously draw the full formula in my mind *and* perform the hand-signs as well to further optimize the technique.

Taking a deep breath, I *focused* as I built the full jutsu formula within my mind, adding various notations for distance, elevation, and specifying speed instead of relying on the general multiplier. "The drawback to all of this is, of course, you're modifying a technique on the fly and if you get a single detail wrong the best case is that the entire thing collapses and outright fails."

Another breath and untyped chakra settled into my fingers an instant before I spun through two-dozen hand-seals. *Prana-Bindu* pushed my proprioception to a degree likely beyond that of most amateur ninja, allowing my fingers to dance like lightning and complete the series at a speed comparable to some academy kids I'd see doing the basic clone jutsu. Of course, a basic conception of the *simulfow* technique allowed me to maintain both the design of the formula *and* build the technique the old-fashioned way, something I doubt all but a few could do.

A fraction of a second passed as chakra flowed along the technique formula held inside my own mind and drawn with exacting precision by *three-times* the 'short-form' number of hand-seals.

Then, in a cloud of dust, I was ten meters away.

Take that Shunshin!

Obito and Satsuki merely blinked at my triumphant smirk.

Unbeknownst to them, this success had given me a *much* more firm idea of what and how to apply myself.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 11, Same Month)
Ruggedization
Yin-Yang Manipulation (Upcoming)
Blacksmithing: Chakra-Conductive Metals (Upcoming)

Chapter 14:

Sarutobi Hiruzen exhaled a cloud of smoke as he considered the young man before him, delicately fingering his long pipe as he leaned back into his cushioned chair. One of the few luxuries allowed to the office, traditionally at least. He, personally, was fond of abusing his privileges to use his pipe even in the face of visitors who found it irritating. In his defense, he only indulged in such an act when the official had proved themselves to be especially rude, but that seemed to be a strangely common trend with most people who were given any inkling, however false, that they held authority either within this village or within his own office.

“...and this young man just *'rattled off,'*” Hiruzen quoted intently the words which had been spoken to him, “esoteric and detailed knowledge on the inner-workings of not only the human soul, the internal chakra gate system, and intricacies of hand-signs, but also seemed to believe that such things were common knowledge?”

Uchiha Obito, the eternal sloucher, nodded as he reached up to scratch his head. “Pretty much, *Jii-san*. Squirt had that look in his eye like an academy teacher when you ask an especially stupid question.”

Hiruzen nodded absently, drawing in another cloud of thick smoke to fill his lungs as he thought over the matter being presented to him. Internally, he was quite glad he'd already dismissed his ANBU guard for the evening. Given that it was New Year's Eve, he'd hoped they would take the time to spend the night with their friends and families, even if it was more likely they'd be drinking themselves to sleep or training to exhaustion. The organization attracted a specific sort of shinobi despite his best efforts.

Finally releasing twin streams of smoke through his nose, Hiruzen nodded. “Well, apart from everything else, I can say that young Kota is, in fact, correct.” Obito's eyebrows rose and the Hokage allowed himself a sly grin. “The information regarding jutsu construction, at that level at least, is considered a forbidden technique. Much like how the *kage bunshin* is deceptively easy to perform, but will exhaust an unwary shinobi to the point of death if they overuse the technique, when dealing with the fundamentals of something even as simple as the body-flicker, it would be easy to miscalculate the parts of the technique that control movement and end up catapulting part of you in one direction and the rest in another.”

Obito grimaced. "The kid *was* pretty hard on both me and little Satsuki. Really read us the riot act on not trying it without adequate supervision since it could easily cause the technique to rupture and damage our *tenketsu* even in a best-case scenario."

"I'm glad he understands the weight such knowledge imparts." Hiruzen nodded slowly. "Granted, such knowledge is forbidden in spirit, not by actual law, and even then simply due to its danger. I'll advise you to hand down further cautions to the boy, but if it seems as though he knows what he's doing, there shouldn't be any harm as long as he doesn't carelessly teach others. If you want to read up on the process, I can point you in the direction of several scrolls in the restricted portion of the jounin's technique library and loan you one or two scrolls from the Hokage's personal collection on the topic that will give you a more detailed picture of the matter."

Albeit, none of them were *quite* so detailed as the lecture this orphan boy Kotaro had given on the subject, which combined with the ANBU supplier documentation Itachi had *personally* filed...

"I'll... have to think about it," Obito demurred politely, his eyes drifting away to the fading light of sunset. "But he wasn't just spouting bullshit, then?"

The Third Hokage chuckled and shook his head. "No, he was not. It's truly a shame that the boy's chakra system is malformed given he could derive such things from so basic a pool of understanding."

Obito grunted. "...and it's not a bloodline? Kid's just crazy smart?"

"Likely very bored as well." Hiruzen nodded. "Perhaps I'll see if we can't add a student or two to his little improvised courses or give him some form of formal recognition as a trainer." Tapping out his pipe, the older man took his time refilling it before lighting it again with a snap of his fingers. "Be that as it may, I'd like to impose on you to accompany me to the secure archives vault," Hiruzen subtly ordered as he rose from his seat.

Obito groaned, but a stern look from the old man had him acquiescing as he trailed after the Fire Shadow. Hiruzen smiled amicably at his secretary on the way out. "Chie, if you would send a hawk for Itachi-*kun* to meet myself and his cousin in the secure archives at his earliest convenience? Once you do so, please head home, I'll find my way to my own home once I have a word or two with these young men."

"Of course, *Sandaime-sama*." The impeccably-polite special jounin smiled, rising from her seat to follow his orders.

Taking the elevator down into the bowels of the administrative tower, Hiruzen wondered at how things had come to this. The duty he was about to impart on what should have been Minato's shoulders would now be laid on someone barely ready for what was to come. Pushing such thoughts away, he consoled himself with reminders that, though there might be storm clouds gathering on the horizon, the next generation would be up to the challenge. "I trust you will be enjoying the festivities with Kushina and Narumi-*chan*?"

Obito snorted. "You know she doesn't like that name."

Hiruzen took a puff from his pipe and shook his head. "Such a silly thing to get so caught up over, a single syllable. If memory serves, Kushina still gives Jiraiya hell over giving little Naru-*chan* a copy of his book."

"Even if she thought it was a sweet gift, too," Obito snarked with a grin. "I guess I can't fault *obaa-chan* for not knowing her daughter would spend the next year demanding to be called 'Naruto' instead of her name."

Hiruzen chuckled, blowing a ring of smoke. "...and this young man, Kotaro, he's become acquainted with Narumi?"

Obito nodded. "Apparently he's taken to helping her with her homework these days after she spent one of their training sessions moping and not wanting to go home to her mother."

Almost against his own will, Hiruzen's smile widened. "I hope her scores are getting better, then."

"It's only been two weeks, but given her marks rose by ten points on yesterday's test, Lady Kushina's talking about paying him if Naruko keeps improving. That little game he made up is working wonders for her."

"Game?" The Third Hokage asked casually, with the merest hint of interest.

Obito waved a hand, as if dismissing the topic. "Just this weird card game he slapped together with a bunch of six-sided tiles and a deck that has pictures he cut out from an old bingo book."

"Hmm... I'll have to see if little Narumi will show it off to me the next time I call on Kushina," Hiruzen temporized.

Obito shrugged. "Anyway... Lady Mikoto realized that Satsuki's been bumming meals off him and insisted on buying him a new wardrobe to pay him back. Even got him a kind of pricey kimono for tonight's celebrations." Obito grinned. "It was fun seeing the kid squirm for once."

"Squirm?" Hiruzen asked, the slightest hint of a rebuke in his tone as the elevator doors opened and admitted the two into the lower levels of the tower.

"Ehh... it's not really *squirming* when he does it," Obito winced, prevaricating slightly. "It's just, he goes *perfectly still*... like, *Itachi* levels of still while he tries to figure out how to get out of whatever he's being asked to do or whatever. It took me a bit to pick up on it, but even he's got a few tells."

Hiruzen hummed in consideration, keeping his thoughts to himself on the matter.

The chakra-rustle of a movement-technique dispersing drew the two ninja's attention to the end of the corridor, where a dark figure quietly pushed open the door to the stairs, nodding respectfully as he neared. Hiruzen noted with some regret that the young man was wearing what was obviously a festival kimono with various small additions to his appearance that indicated he'd had plans for the evening.

"Itachi-kun." The third nodded with a sigh. "I promise this won't take too long, then I'll let you get back to Izumi-chan."

"She understands," Itachi stated with barely a hint of his own regret.

"As my Biwako once did." Hiruzen nodded sadly, remembering the empty bed which would be waiting for him again tonight, as it had been for more than a decade now. "Would that the world were less demanding of us and our loved ones. Still, the sooner we have this over, the sooner you can return to your lives and I can follow Konohamaru about the festival myself."

The two Uchiha clansmen followed the Hokage further into the sublevels of the tower, deep into the secure bunker beneath the main structure and into the secure filing rooms for the most important mission records and highest-clearance personnel files. Eventually, after passing three checkpoints manned by partially-disabled jounin, the three men found their way into a small records room with a scroll rack on one side and a series of rectangular document bins on the opposite, each guarded by a thick wrought-iron grate that nearly *sang* with the powerful seals the Fourth Hokage had crafted for this specific area. As the heavy metal door shut behind them and the shinobi took their seats at the heavy wooden table in the center of the room, the Hokage activated the secondary set of chakra barriers to lock them off from the outside world for a time.

Finally, the old man reached under his arm for the bundle of documents he'd carried from his office and set them on the table. Blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, Hiruzen sighed. "If you will, allow an old man to digress a bit with a story or two in order to give you youngsters a bit more understanding of the current situation."

Obito and Itachi shared a quick glance at each other, though the latter did not echo the shrug of the former.

"Some... fifty or so years ago now, Salamander Hanzo rose from his position as the Land of Rain's most powerful shinobi into something approximating a Head Ninja as he brought the various clans of the region under his influence in the lead up to the First Shinobi War," Hiruzen said, eyes cast into the middle distance as he recalled the tale his teacher had told him. "A gifted merchant from the Land of Iron had secured permission from multiple daimyo to move goods through the various countries and across the less-than-firm borders. His name was Gato Suoyo and he was, by all accounts, a genius of trade and money. Remarkably, he prided himself on ensuring that no customer ever left his business unsatisfied and made sure he could facilitate any need no matter how great or small."

Sarutobi paused and took another puff on his pipe. "Unfortunately for Gato-san, he was unaware of the fact that Hanzo had toppled the Daimyo of the Land of Rain and declared himself a Warlord. While I will spare you a more lengthy lesson on how this directly contributed to the causes of the First Shinobi War, I *should* mention that the result of Hanzo's actions was for several familial relations of the departed lord to pay foreign shinobi to wreck utter havoc on Hanzo's new fiefdom. This culminated in the complete destruction of the former capital city of the Land of Rain."

"So this super-merchant showed up to a burned out husk?" Obito guessed somewhat irreverently.

Hiruzen nodded. "Further, Hanzo confiscated the entire caravan and was going to have the merchant put to death on grounds of smuggling due to the fact that he had not obtained *Hanzo's* permission to cross the border with goods nor paid taxes. Gato Suyu begged for clemency and promised to bend his not-inconsiderable skills to any task Hanzo laid before him to earn it."

Obito winced and even Itachi grimaced slightly.

"According to legend, Hanzo was in a particularly cruel mood, declaring that the only way the merchant would earn forgiveness would be to construct him a new capital city. A proper hidden village from which Hanzo could rule all of the Land of Rain. After which Hanzo threw the man into a boggy marsh and ordered two ninja under his command to massacre the entire caravan if any more than ten of them left at a time without the previous party returning. Suyu himself, of course, was to remain until the new city was done."

"How did he succeed?" Itachi asked, his brows furrowed slightly. "Amegakure is renowned in the Elemental Nations for its advanced infrastructure, robust power and water systems, and generally high technological level."

"Truthfully, no one knows." Hiruzen admitted. "Gato Suyu managed, in ten years, to raise what is arguably the [greatest capital city of any land](#) despite having only passing experience with architecture beforehand and being given arguably the most difficult terrain imaginable to work with." The *Sandaime's* eyes narrowed at the two. "In fact, his achievements were so impressive that after Hanzo killed him to ensure he could not duplicate his results for an enemy, fragments and designs from the city were secreted away by other hidden villages, Konoha included, which we have used to create our own infrastructure and advancements from."

Both shinobi jerked a bit at this revelation.

"Though we are still unable to replicate much of Amegakure's technology, especially whatever form of technique or seal allows parts of the city to repair itself in the wake of attempts to destroy it." Hiruzen grimaced.

Itachi and Obito exchanged a significant look.

Hiruzen produced a pouch which he tapped the ash of his pipe into before reloading it and absently activating a small technique to clear the air within the room. Once done, he snapped his fingers and produced a small spark of chakra-fire to ignite the pipe again. "Twenty years following that, on the eastern continent in the Land of Sky, a minor rural noble by the name of Lady Vuruka accused a higher noble from the court of the Daimyo of the Land of Sky of stealing her poetry to present it as his own. The man, who was the daimyo's personal friend, refuted the accusation and the daimyo moved to put her to death for her baseless accusations. She begged for a chance to do something to prove her case."

Hiruzen sighed and shook his head. "The daimyo at that time was a vain and pompous man enamored of food and drink, especially the latter. He burst out laughing at the woman's begging and told her that he would grant her a single chance to avoid immediate execution, but if she failed to meet his challenge within five years he would execute her entire family, all of her household servants, and all the villagers who worked on her land for wasting his time with her lies."

Obito grimaced, having seen similar games in the court of the Land of Fire. Even if the daimyo himself had a more sensible temperament, he couldn't control every single noble within his realm. "What'd he ask her to do?"

"According to what I know of events, he reportedly said something to the effect of, *'Though I am Lord of Sky, I do not hold it in my grasp. Ensure that I rule the sky itself and I will grant you all your heart desires!'*" Hiruzen took a moment to allow that to sink in. "Five years later, [the first of the Sky Castles took flight](#) and the daimyo turned on his former friend to ensure the loyalty of the woman he would name *Sorakage*, the first and last Sky Shadow, before she was assassinated during the Second Ninja War during the destruction of the second Sky Castle which had moved to invade the lands of Wolf and Bird to the east and south."

"I remember a few of the old-timers telling stories about that." Obito noted, grimacing. "It was decided to let Sky keep the first one as long as they kept to a treaty that it would never leave their borders since the death toll from the operation to take down the other one was so high and, without Vuruka they couldn't make any more, right?"

Itachi nodded. "The downed castle was thoroughly inspected to duplicate its secrets, but the seal-work, chakra formulas, and technology was too complicated, even if retrieved fragments are still kept in bunkers underneath Konoha should we be able to one day make use of them." He turned away from his fellow clan member and back towards the Third. "This is about the boy. Kotaro."

Hiruzen sighed out a fog of smoke and drew in fresh air from his nose. "Tobirama-sensei called them 'Dreamers,' though I've seen them addressed by various titles in other villages' recovered documentation of them." The old shinobi quirked a smile. "I do wonder if even the boy himself knows what he is at this stage of his development, though, given his lack of more... *grandiose* accomplishments, shall we say. It is possible he does and is merely unsure of what it means or is actively attempting not to make anything too impressive. The tales I told you were among the *better* ends his kind have." He waved a hand and explained at the curious expressions on the other two men's faces. "Little Kota is either going out of his way to avoid attracting attention to himself or acting slowly and surely in such a way that his behavior can be explained away as the work of a prodigy. Rather than someone who can, by all accounts, draw knowledge and skill out of the ether for any subject they like. Even now, were it not for his recent slip I would not be completely convinced he is as I believe him to be..."

Obito crossed his arms, frowning. "So when you said that he could have figured out the whole thing with the gates and how hand-signs work earlier..."

Hiruzen shook his head. "It was simply too volatile a subject to discuss even within my office. While it is theoretically possible for an individual to divine the deeper truths of technique construction and application, in practice only those with a lifetime of experience and learning in the subject even begin to probe such things. The fact that Kotaro was able to do so at his age, with little formal training? No. His other achievements are within a comparatively narrow vein of talent and overlap enough with the records of previous prodigies that even *I* couldn't be absolutely sure based solely on them. This, though, is very nearly an absolute declaration of his true capabilities given in a moment of inattention. We cannot risk *anyone* discovering the truth of Kotaro's abilities, lest it make Konoha a target for the rest of the ninja world as a whole."

The two younger men inhaled deeply, resolve settling on their faces.

"If he is a portent of such potential danger, should we not remove him?" Itachi asked quietly even as Obito shot him a look of scorching disapproval.

Hiruzen shook his head. "No, the boy represents an opportunity of enormous potential. Individuals with his gifts have shown themselves throughout the history of our world and always proven a great boon for the side they develop strong ties to. As long as Kotaro can be kept loyal and coached to develop whatever he produces incrementally or properly secret them away until such time as they are needed."

Itachi's shoulders slumped in a barely-visible display of relief, Hiruzen being gratified once again in his heir apparent. For it to affect the stoic young man so much as to make a visible display of emotion...

Obito cocked his head. "You know... now that we're talking about this, Lady Kushina once told me a story about a guy back in Uzu a few hundred years ago and how he helped found the village. She said he was the same type of person, who could just pull random skills and abilities out of nowhere that were way too advanced for anyone else to understand." His face curled a bit. "It's usually told as a cautionary tale since the guy ended up going insane and ranting about the shadows coming to kill him before he died in a *fuuinjutsu* experiment gone wrong. Supposedly it's to keep clan members from studying seals too deeply and going crazy trying to figure out secrets humans weren't meant to know."

"There are many examples one could point to if one were to go digging in the correct records." Hiruzen nodded. "Still, now that you two are appraised of the situation, I'll be asking one of you two to always be within the village to check in on Kotaro daily until further notice. Either overtly or covertly. As it is, formally recruiting the boy would only draw more attention to him. Itachi, I'll ask you to seize the boy's medical records and secure them here, you're authorized to apply discreet genjutsu on anyone you deem necessary. Obito, I'll need you to evaluate Kota's ties to the village and see if you can't develop them further without drawing attention to what you're doing." Hiruzen took a long draw from his pipe. "Perhaps see if you can encourage Kushina to give him remedial lessons in sealing to pique his interest and I'll see what can be done to give the boy more space to develop things as well."

Obito timidly raised his hand a bit as if he were in an academy class. "Uh... are we going to confront him about this? I totally get why someone wouldn't be forthcoming with it, especially if he thinks he's going to get dragged off and locked up-" He shot Itachi another intense look. "-or killed, if he's a Dreamer or whatever, but... I think he's a good kid. We could just ask him up front and see if he'll work with us."

To his credit, Hiruzen didn't allow himself to dismiss the notion out of hand as he hummed in thought and rubbed his beard. "The fact that, despite his personal distaste for violence, he is willing to make tools and instruct his friends on matters thereof *does* lend itself to the idea that he would be amenable to such an arrangement, but..."

After a moment, the Hokage shook his head. "Putting aside all other matters, I want to move slowly on this." He nodded to Obito. "We *will* approach the boy with the truth soon, within a year at most, but if he is anything like his predecessors he will require a great deal of resources, space, and reliably discreet personnel. That will all take time to vet, move, build... especially if we are to be vigilant against possible sabotage or discovery by another village." Hiruzen nodded to himself. "Keep an eye on the boy, do what you can to ensure that he is... if not *loyal*, then at least willing to work exclusively with Konoha and the Land of Fire. Friends,

connections, attachments... it will be especially important for you, Itachi, to establish a working relationship with young Kotaro."

Itachi took a deep breath, then bowed his head briefly. "As you order, Lord Hokage."

Obito hesitated for a fraction of a second, then nodded to himself. "I had a conversation with the kid right before I tried teaching him the body-flicker for the first time. You should probably know..."

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 11, Same Month)
Ruggedization
Yin-Yang Manipulation
Blacksmithing: Chakra-Conductive Metals
(Nothing New for Chapter 12-14, Same Month)

Chapter 15:

"Oh, Kotaro! You look just wonderful!" Mikoto smiled as her eyes traced me up and down.

I sighed internally, but chose to accept the compliment gracefully instead of arguing. "If I do, Lady Uchiha, it is only because of your excellent taste in clothing." I bowed gracefully as I held out the wooden box. "In appreciation of the clothing and to thank you for welcoming me into your home tonight."

The rope handle was taken from my grip and Uchiha Mikoto sucked in a breath as she revealed the glass vase and beads holding an array of metal flowers. "Oh, thank you dear. Now I don't have to listen to Shina-*chan* bragging about *hers* every time I come over, hah!"

I rose with a smile. "I thought they might be appreciated in something like that sentiment." My back straight, I walked through the doorway to slip off my sandals, sliding into a pair that Mikoto indicated with a subtle gesture as she passed me with her gift, humming happily.

"Satsuki! Kotaro is here!" Mikoto called out as she hurried down the hall. A sudden ruckus on the far side of the building echoed through the thin walls and sliding doors as I-

"So you're the blacksmith boy."

I turned to take in the stoic older man in Uchiha robes and bowed to the necessary degree even as the man's eyes flashed red and I parried a thrust of his chakra with my own as I tried to settle into my own system.

"Father." Itachi's voice rose up, rasping with the barest hint of reproach as he stepped into the hallway as I straightened myself.

"My apologies." Uchiha Fugaku stated, looking nothing of the sort as a miniscule twitch of his lips barely-apparent as he stepped forward. "Itachi had been... unusually-lavish with his praise where your skills are concerned and I wished to see them for myself." He paused, looking me over again. "In recompense, I will cover your expenses tonight." One of his hands reached into his robes and produced a bulging purse, testifying that the man had *entirely* planned this affair out.

I could entirely make an issue of this, but...

Nothing good would come of raising hell over a comparatively minor illusion, especially when it was obviously some sort of test. I reached out to take the bag of money, pausing just before I reached it. "As long as it is only a matter of worry this once, Lord Uchiha. I would hate to feel unsafe when visiting a friend."

As much as it was a veiled not-quite-a-threat, the way Fugaku's face shifted told me I'd made the right move. With a single nod, he spoke again, depositing the coin purse in my hand. "Outside of the sparring field, you have no need to worry of such things in my home, young man. Simply brush this off as a father's concern."

I nodded, slower than the older man, now understanding where he was coming from.

I can't say I entirely disagree with him. If my daughter were such a potential target, I would have concerns about a crippled civilian being widely known as her playmate as well. If

that teacher from the academy could have been a double-agent, then it's entirely possible someone within Konoha could target me to get her to come quietly.

“So *this* is the Kotaro I've heard so much about.” Another voice spoke up from around the Uchiha clan-head's form.

“Izumi-*nee*.” A plaintive, if atonal whisper sounded from near where the first voice had spoken from.

As Fugaku stepped away, the taller of the two revealed girls caught my attention first. She was a slender young woman in her late teens with a solid spring in her step that spoke of formal training. Her outfit for the evening was an adult's full kimono, if not quite as refined as the one I'd glimpsed Lady Mikoto in earlier. Beside her, though, Satsuki was...

“Cute.” I stated with a barely-there smirk, watching as the girl's face nearly caught fire. She'd been brushed and primped to within an inch of her life, bearing little resemblance to the usual rough-and-tumble nearly-tomboy that ambushed me to 'play ninja' so often. Her yukata was the standard Uchiha black-and-blue with a flame motif around the edges that tied into a red sash across her waist.

Izumi giggled as she stepped into Itachi and reached an arm around him before rising on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. “That was fast. I was afraid we'd have to leave without you. Did Hokage-*sama* really not need you for longer?”

Itachi hummed in negation as he reciprocated the affection. “Something of a false alarm, nothing to be worried about.”

“Good, then you can help me tease your little sister and her boyfriend.” Izumi declared with an understated grin.

A tiny smile crawled across Itachi's face, something which inexplicably warmed my own heart. Seeing the coolly stoic man who had averted so horrible a one-time future now happy and at peace with himself for the most part... it truly *did* restore just a bit of my faith in humanity. Of course, it also made me wonder when the other boot was going to drop.

No Uchiha Massacre meant Itachi would never join Akatsuki, would never inform on them however-much he actually did, which would mean Konoha had less of a grasp on the organization...

I had to wonder about Danzo, too, and what that asshole was doing in the shadows as well. If I ran exclusively by what I knew from my past life, the man was an unmitigated disaster of a human being and a constant yoke around Konoha's neck. I had to wonder if there was any worth to him in this world, if he'd done *anything* to justify the power he was given beyond the bitter scheming against Hiruzen's regime and Konoha's ideology as a whole.

I shook myself from my latest musing as Satsuki stepped up by my side. “I... really look good?” She asked tentatively, her Uchiha mask cracking slightly.

I smiled and nodded. “You look great.”

Satsuki reddened again and gave a barely-there smile back to me. "You look good, too. I like the yukata."

I shrugged slightly and looked down at myself. The earth-brown silk was cut through with a pattern made up of silver lines that, if you squinted, looked like swords. The gold sash at my waist holding everything together with brown accents matched well. The overall effect was an outfit that, while very nice, wasn't so far outside my social strata or income bracket that I'd get odd looks for wearing it.

"Thanks." I nodded, offering her my arm out of courtesy. "Your mother caught me while I was over at Naruko's one day and insisted on getting my sizes to buy clothing for me, so any compliments are due entirely to her."

"Ah... Mom wasn't happy when she heard I've been going over to Sagara's store for lunch so often." Satsuki admitted with another blush, though for different reasons this time. "Between that and asking you for swordsmanship lessons..." She looked away in embarrassment.

I snorted. "As long as I have enough to feed myself, keep clothes on my back, and I'm not sleeping in the streets... I don't care that much about money." I paused. "Once you start taking missions, though, I was going to ask for something small if I'm totally honest."

Satsuki nodded in quick affirmation. "Next year, when I'm a real kunoichi, I'll pay you back, I promise."

I shook my head. "Don't worry, I trust you. Let's just enjoy the night."

...

"Kota!"

Satsuki hissed like a startled cat as a blur of orange, blue, and blonde hair rammed into my free side. I sighed as I flipped the money pouch I'd been drawing from into my free hand and began tapping out change before looking back at the amused civilian behind the stall. "If you could, add an extra three sticks of dango to the order as well? Same type as mine."

"Yay! Free dango! Kota's awesome!" Naruko cheered as she practically humped my arm in glee. "Ooh-ooh! I'll buy you ramen at this great place later!" She paused, then leaned over and grinned *directly at her classmate*. "Satsuki can even come!"

She grinned widely, then *stuck her tongue out* at the other girl.

I made eye contact with the stall owner again and discreetly reached up to scratch at my neck, running an extended thumb across it in a very distinct pattern. The old guy lurched with restrained laughter, snorting loudly and shaking his head as he turned away to prepare our food.

"I thought you were supposed to stay in the compound on festival nights?" Satsuki asked pointedly, her own grip on my arm tightening as she glared at the blonde.

"Hehe!" Naruko smirked, grabbing the food I'd ordered her and quickly snarfing a bite. "Mom said since I'm in the last year of academy I can go out and do stuff now as long as I have

an escort!" She pointed over at a redheaded couple some dozen or so feet away wearing Uzu spirals, one of them looking *remarkably* like Karin and the other tickling a memory that had long-since faded. "Oh, oh! I had to wear makeup, too!" She grinned, distracting me from her clansmen as she pointed to her face with her forefingers. "See!"

I blinked as I realized her 'whisker-marks' had been deliberately covered up, along with the fact that her usually twin-tails had been braided together into a more elaborate design with lacquered wood and beads bound into it. The overall effect was to make her look different *enough* that people would at least double-take on a busy festival night. Especially since she wouldn't have been seen during them before, she could likely pass unremarked upon, though not unnoticed, for a single evening.

"I see. Well, Satsuki and I were just going to hit the games. Wanna' come?" I shrugged.

The Uchiha girl at my other side gave an offended *harumph* and turned away to pout.

"Hehe! That sounds totally fun, believe it! Let's go!" Naruko squealed, clapping her hands together energetically as she hopped off to do just that.

I'd mostly avoided the various festivals before this due to various reasons. Mostly, I just wasn't a party-person and needed a pretty good excuse to drag myself out to partake in the noise and lights and *people* I'd have to deal with. Then there was the fact that the food, games, and craft booths all generally required money to do more than window-shop, something which I'd been largely without until fairly recently. Even here and now, though, I'd probably have stayed in the shop with a book or something if Lady Mikoto hadn't *volun-told* me to escort Satsuki around for the evening.

Even with that, though, everything was... nice.

The food was marginally-overpriced, about par for the course given the fairs and carnivals I'd attended previously, but fairly high quality too. Naruko's bottomless-pit of a stomach demanded we visit several different food stalls over the course of the night, returning to Ichiraku's cart *twice* while we worked our way around through the various games.

"Do you want to trade in for anything?" Satsuki asked quietly as Naruko rocketed ahead like usual.

I fingered the necklace of beads I'd collected over the course of the evening, various colors of the rainbow dotting the black band I'd been threading them onto. "I don't know. I was actually thinking of keeping the beads this time, since it's my first festival and everything."

Satsuki hummed thoughtfully at the reminder, her eyes tilting towards the prize stall as she touched the multi-looped bracelet she'd created out of her own beads she'd 'won' at the various stalls throughout the night. Given the fact that anywhere from a third to a half of the party-goers were trained ninja, the traditionally-rigged booths didn't actually offer prizes *themselves*, instead giving anyone who won a glass bead they could put on a string or leather strap to collect them. A more central booth kept walls of semi-cheap prizes that you could trade in a certain number of beads for once you'd collected enough. They would then be cut free, sorted, and handed back out to the shops for use in the next festival.

Or you could be *boring* and just buy a certain number of beads off the secondary-market that sprang up each season, or even just hand over ryo for a prize directly, albeit at a larger markup.

Of course, the tradition was that you *kept* the necklace you made out of the beads for your first time through whatever festival you attended... and I was feeling a bit sentimental tonight.

"If I got you two stuffed animals..." I began slowly, catching Satsuki's attention as she brooded over the decision to trade in her beads or not. "...would Naruko take me getting her a fox badly?"

Satsuki's brows furrowed as she looked at me, then shook her head. "She wouldn't like it, even if you just wanted to tease her. She probably wouldn't say anything, though."

I frowned, but nodded. "That's fair. I'll get her a toad, then. She's mentioned her godfather a few times."

We walked on together, the noise of the New Year's Festival winding down slightly as we got closer and closer to midnight and the fireworks display. I pretended not to notice the way the Uchiha girl was staring at me pointedly. Finally, as Naruko danced back with a bag of cookies, I smirked and shook my head. "I'm not telling you."

"Telling what?" Naruko asked, holding out her bag for us to take before popping one into her mouth. "Asdfjklj! You guys have to try one!"

I rolled my eyes, but selected a cookie anyway. Satsuki glared at me for a half-second, then grabbed one herself.

"I'm going to buy you two stuffed animals, but I'm not telling you which until we're done making our rounds." I smirked as I raised up the cheap souvenir bamboo thermos on a rope handle some marketing *genius* had created for the occasion to take a drink of the fruit juice inside.

"I'm going to the bathroom." Satsuki declared, turning and marching away in the kind of huff that was mostly-performance instead of real anger.

Naruko giggled as she passed out of hearing range, popping another cookie in her mouth. "You two are *sooo~cute* together!"

I snorted and took another sip of my drink. "Should you really be saying that since you're doing the rival thing with her?"

Naruko danced a little in place, shifting her already out-of-place yukata in another show of her frankly *exhausting* energy. "Eheheh, nah! If I left Satsuki alone about it, she'd just sneak around waiting for you to do something, so I've gotta', uh..." She paused, tapping her chin with a finger. "That word where you make someone do something?"

"Manipulate?" I asked, amused despite myself. "Provoke?"

"That one!" The girl grinned. "I hafta' tease and provoke her an' stuff, or she wouldn't do anything on her own." Satisfied with her declaration, she popped another cookie in her mouth.

I narrowed my gaze at her, not really appreciating the matchmaker she was playing, but equally unwilling to divulge a good reason for her doing so. From her point of view, after all, it was all in good fun and would either end with nothing happening or with Satsuki and I in some form of relationship. There was no consideration for me wanting to leave the Hidden Leaf Village or what it would do to Satsuki in the event she developed feelings beyond an innocent crush.

So instead of doing the smart and painful thing, I fell back on the old reliable of engaging the trickster on her own level.

It would make things more painful when... *if* I left, but...

...I also didn't want to ruin the night.

"It doesn't seem fair that we're both getting to tease Satsuki and you're getting to tease both of *us*." I stated as I leaned against the wall, edging into the girl's personal space as she grinned. I raised an eyebrow and dropped my voice a few octaves into the kind of low baritone that would reverberate through your chest. "*Narumi*."

Instantly the girl's eyes went wide as her hands flailed awkwardly to catch the half-bag of cookies she'd nearly dropped. "Eeeeeeeehhhhhh! No way, no way, *noway*, don't call me that! It's not cute at all!"

My only response was to laugh loudly at her deep blush, visible even through the makeup covering her jinchuriki marks. My good mood lasted through the rest of the evening, Satsuki's own temperament rapidly improving once she learned of the new game I was playing. The stuffed toad I bought Naruko and the stuffed crow I picked up for Satsuki ended up soothing their egos after long hours of teasing each other into stuttering messes.

For some reason, though, they joined forces to purchase me a *beaver* plush.

The night's fireworks more than made up for the sinister moment of collusion between the two, as did the energetic hug I got from Naruko and the hesitant one I got from Satsuki.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 11, Same Month)
Ruggedization
Yin-Yang Manipulation
Blacksmithing: Chakra-Conductive Metals
(Nothing New for Chapter 12-15, Same Month)

Chapter 16:

"You've been making good progress." I stated as I dropped a stack of canvases, the girl's full paint set, and metal cage full of squeaking rats near a grimacing Yakumo. "So as a reward, we're going to be doing genjutsu testing today instead of advancing your other training. I'll still want you to do your daily basic exercises, but other than that..." I waved my hand aimlessly around the large, open training room we'd seized for the day given the thundering rain outside.

"Why so many rats? Is that what you meant when you told my parents you needed ryo for training materials?" Yakumo asked, making a face at the two-dozen rodents I'd purchased from the same ninja 'pet store' I'd bought Satsuki her rabbit from.

I sighed and frowned as I thought again how to properly organize my words.

"So, when I started training you, I asked you to tell me what your techniques were generally capable of, right?" I asked rhetorically, and Yakumo nodded. "Recently, I had to explain some things to... another ninja when he asked what I was talking about."

Obito had, after doing some digging, produced a number of scrolls he'd had me look over and explain to him in greater detail. I'd... gone on a *bit of a rant* about proper scientific procedure and how these things *should be tested* and Obito had ended up getting a weird look on his face before we'd gotten into the meat of the discussion and I'd finally understood exactly what was going on. Because whoever wrote those scrolls he dug up?

They were absolute shit at research.

"To cut a very long and involved story short." I curtailed my own thoughts on the matter as I looked at Yakumo. "I took some things for granted when I initially asked you questions about your family's techniques and it would be remiss of me to move forward without understanding *exactly* what you're capable of in your specialty."

Yakumo nodded hesitantly, still not *understanding* I think, but willing to follow me down the rabbit hole and see where it went. I reached into the bag I'd brought with me and pulled out a thick notebook I'd been scribbling in over the past few days. "So, we're going to do some tests."

Then the door to the dojo slid open and a damp Tenten stepped in, huffing as she toweled herself off. "Sorry I'm late! The teachers are really pushing us and I had to stay late since I got last draw on testing order."

I turned and nodded. "It's fine. Yakumo and I are just doing some genjutsu stuff today. Go ahead and run through the sets I gave you last time as a warm-up and I'll be with you in just a bit."

Tenten barked an affirmative, then looked around again. "You know, I would have expected Satsuki and Naruko to beat me here even with the rain."

I shook my head. "Satsuki has clan stuff today and Naruko promised to play ninja with Enkai and Konohamaru."

Tenten paused, then nodded and finished toweling off before moving to practice the stances I'd shown her. Satisfied, I flipped open my notebook and grabbed a pen I'd splurged a bit on before tapping the first point I'd made. "So, first off you're going to kill a few of these rats in different ways. Cut one, drown another, and so on and so forth." I paused. "Questions?"

Yakumo frowned pensively. "Can I ask why?"

I nodded. "I'm going to be observing how you channel your chakra while you paint and I want to see what precisely happens with the rats when you kill them as well as what happens when you cancel the genjutsu afterwards."

"Observing?" Yakumo asked as she began to set up her canvas and paints. "But... you don't have any way to see chakra." She grimaced. "No offense, of course."

I shook my head. "The easiest way for me to do so will be to place my hand somewhere on your body and activate a medic-nin technique while you paint. I think it would probably be best if I used the back of your neck, if that's okay?"

Yakumo blushed slightly, but after a moment's thought, she nodded. "That... I suppose there shouldn't be anything wrong with that."

What followed was a series of experiments that told me quite a bit and confirmed an insidious suspicion that had been forming since Obito had tracked me down again to explain his homework to him. As payment, because he was a grown-ass man and could damn well afford to pay me for being his tutor in shit he should *already know*, I'd requested various long-form techniques and that he ask some *very specific* questions to certain people on my behalf. Of

course he'd given me another one of those weird *looks*, but had been surprisingly willing to make the deal.

The answers had been *illuminating* and *damning*.

The Elemental Nations, quite simply, did not have the scientific method.

Oh, the word 'experiment' was in their vocabulary, that was for sure, but it didn't have the same *connotation* I was used to. In some ways, of course, this explained *so goddamn much* about every aspect of their society that I wanted to bash my head against something for not seeing it sooner. Development of technology and chakra techniques wasn't a matter of careful sequential methodology you explained at every step. No, instead it relied on an intuitive grasp of any given subject held only by a *genius* in that given field and even then they were prone to randomly throw shit at the problem until they got something that kind of worked well enough for their purposes until the next genius came along and refined it further.

I swear I almost goddamn strangled Obito when he looked at me gormlessly and asked what a fucking experimental variable was.

As Yakumo killed the tenth rat and I removed my hand from the back of her neck to deactivate my modified diagnostic technique, I noted that Tenten had moved in to observe our practice now that her initial exercises were complete. Disregarding her for the moment, I moved over to examine the suffocated rodent and reactivated my technique to do a thorough autopsy. On a tray nearby, nine other rats *very permanently dead* still showed their cause of death despite the technique having been used *supposedly* being a genjutsu.

I took a deep breath as I laid what was likely the last rat we'd have to *kill* today alongside its brethren. Grabbing a bottle of pure alcohol, I sterilized my hands before returning to my notebook and beginning to make various notes on the things I'd realized. Nothing *conclusive* would be put on the paper, of course, but it should be enough to tickle my memory in the unlikely event that I happened to *somehow forget this absolute bullshit*.

"Did you find something out?" Tenten asked, looking between us.

"Yes." I nodded, continuing to scribble.

Yakumo perked up, looking interested suddenly. "Really?"

I sighed and set aside my notebook and pen before looking up at them. "Okay, so explain to me in your own words how genjutsu work."

The two girls exchanged looks before Yakumo tentatively started talking, as if she suspected there was some kind of trap. "Genjutsu are techniques which, unlike ninjutsu, interact with the target's chakra system itself and largely bypass the physical body. As most illusion techniques are composed of heavily yin-aligned chakra, they use that imbalance to create a sympathetic bond with the target's own yin chakra and manipulate the perception of the individual through that means."

Tenten nodded eagerly and pointed at Yakumo. "Basically that."

I gave her an unimpressed stare and she winced. "I'm not good at that stuff!"

My stare did not abate. "You still need to *know it*. We'll be adding you to Naruko's review sessions for the next month just to make sure you know your basics."

Tenten clicked her tongue, but merely looked away instead of arguing with me.

That settled, I turned back to a rather smug Yakumo and nodded. "Okay, so that's the accepted explanation and *mostly* correct, but there's a misconception or two." Her eyebrows rose. "You see, *most* genjutsu actually use a nearly-identical set of hand-signs somewhere in their long-style formula, but they're so basic that they get edited out when you're taught the technique by someone else. This is because you *already know them*. It's the *bunshin* jutsu, the basic clone technique. It's embedded in virtually every genjutsu you'll find that you actively cast on another person." I paused to emphasize that statement. "Some area-of-effect genjutsu don't use the clone as a basis, but they tend to be the ones you cast on a *place* rather than a *person*. Given what I just said, either of you care to venture a guess why?"

Yakumo leaned back in her chair, thinking hard on the subject. Tenten looked a bit confused, but willing to toy with the puzzle before cocking her head as something struck her.

"Is it..." The bun-haired girl started hesitantly as we turned to her. "Um... like, when you cast a genjutsu on someone, you're... making a clone *of them*? Except they think whatever the clone is seeing or feeling is what they're seeing or feeling instead? Like that kind of fuzzy feeling in the back of your head when you use the clone technique to tell your clones what direction to go or what attack to use, but *reversed*?"

In other words, the clone was a 'universal adapter' template composed of a tiny bit of yang chakra to give it physical form and properly bond with the yin of other people's chakra. That would let the jutsu interface with the person because they were feeling sensations that the illusory clone body overlaid onto them was feeding them.

Yakumo's eyes widened as it clicked for her and I nodded with a genuine smile at Tenten. "Very good."

"But even if the genjutsu I get taught work like that, my own painting techniques don't!" Yakumo blurted out in confusion, a first for the normally-withdrawn girl. "I-I think I know what you mean, Kotaro, about there being a similar base to most genjutsu. I think I could *feel it*, even if I didn't realize it, but that's why my techniques never felt the same as normal genjutsu!"

"No, they don't." I nodded in confirmation and Yakumo heaved a sigh of relief. Gesturing to the dead rats, I took a breath to explain further. "Your techniques don't have the tiny core of yang chakra common to the basic clone. They are *almost completely* pure yin-chakra. Because spiritual energy likes to bond with physical energy, genjutsu uses the kernel of yang-chakra to bypass that tendency. Your painting techniques bond your yin chakra *directly* to a target's yang chakra, effectively substituting the target's own spiritual energy to manipulate their physical."

"That would mean... the reason why fatal injuries don't go away when I remove the genjutsu is because there's no yang-chakra left in the target to revert their physical form." Yakumo frowned as she contemplated what I'd told her, her brows furrowing. "Physical energy and therefore yang-aligned chakra is directly related to stamina, so this is because of my condition, isn't it?"

There was... *something* in her question, a dark suggestion of certainty that implied I didn't need to answer, but I nodded anyway. "I can't conclusively prove it, but I strongly suspect it is, yes. Or, well, your ability with yin chakra and your weakened physical condition are *related*, it would be more accurate to say. I don't think it's accurate to say that either caused the other."

Yakumo took a breath and nodded to herself. "I... see." She shook her head, then, looking back to me. "What does this mean for my techniques?"

I drummed my fingers against my thigh. "It means I want to do more testing, but... I have some *ideas*." Rubbing at my chin, I slowly nodded. "I actually want to try something *else* first, though. Specifically, I want you to do a painting of a landscape that you can project around us and change the environment. I think I'm starting to get a grasp on how your techniques work on people, but I want to see how they bond to a location that doesn't have yang chakra."

Yakumo nodded decisively and pulled up a new canvas as I turned to Tenten. "While she's doing that, I'm going to be teaching you another move set. You've only got another two or three months until you get your genin team, so I'm going to try and get you as close to mastering the rest of the style as I can in that time."

In fact, I'd probably be putting in a month's expenditure to master both Shii-Cho and Hiten Mitsurugi soon, but what I'd just discovered with Yakumo's techniques *more* than made up for the delay I was going to suffer from expanding both styles to their full mastery.

Because I hadn't told the girl everything I knew about her personal painting illusions.

There was *something else* in the chakra mix she was using, something roughly analogous to the clone technique in a normal jutsu, at least in the 'location' of the energy, but it *certainly* wasn't yang chakra. It felt oily and dark, strange and alien in ways I wasn't sure what to make of just yet, but I wanted to know. I *needed* to know, especially with the possibilities her techniques held.

Because if I was right...

Somehow the girl had stumbled on a bastardized imperfect version of the Sage of Six Path's *Creation of All Things* technique that *didn't* use Sage Chakra.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 11, Same Month)
Ruggedization
Yin-Yang Manipulation
Blacksmithing: Chakra-Conductive Metals
(Nothing New for Chapter 12-15, Same Month)
Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo I

Chapter 17:

Sagara and I had actually delayed the rebuilding of the forge until the new year for various reasons. The primary issue had been a sudden surge in orders from multiple parties that we'd had to deal with, even if many of them weren't *weapons*. It turned out that my watches and metal flower arrangements had seen some level of popularity and I'd had a few dozen people ask in regards to custom creations fitting specific themes or designs. Sagara had found the entire thing both very annoying and deeply gratifying given the store had never experienced anything like a 'holiday rush' before.

"You almost done, Kota?" Sagara grunted as he looked over the still-glowing bars of steel I'd poured out of the newest addition to our forge. The blast furnace wasn't exactly what I'd *wanted* to build, but I'd had to cut some corners with design and ended up needing to take into account the greater through-put the business was doing as well.

The end result was a Frankenstein's monster of a primitive blast furnace built into a new depression in the floor so that it could have the height it needed to achieve the temperatures I wanted out of it.

Why?

Well, because it turned out that making a material, or at least a *metal*, chakra-conductive necessitated fully and completely liquifying it before channeling chakra through it *as it cooled* so the metal could 'remember' how to handle the flow of energy without warping under the stress applied to it. Well, there were a couple of other steps that involved treating the metal chemically at specific temperatures when you were doing the actual forging, but that was the big secret.

"All done." I stated, my voice echoing behind the heat-mask I'd taken to wearing in the forge-room these days. The place had been hot *before* I'd installed the new features and, even with the water-cooling I'd added, it was still beyond anything anyone would find comfortable. I could probably bear it as-needed with the control I could exert over my physiology, a few nifty tricks I'd figured out while exploring nature transformation in my ever-rare off-time, but most of that was utterly obvious and drew attention. So even if I was using a few of the more subtle tricks, I was still going to be wearing the protective gear Sagara and I had fashioned.

If nothing else, it saves me on the hassle the girls give me when I burn my eyebrows off...

"Good." Sagara nodded, giving the room one last look as he took off his own mask while I closed the thick furnace valve to cut the flow of molten steel. The large man swept a hand over his dripping face and sighed. "That's it for the night. Go on and work at whatever weird shit you've got going on upstairs."

I rolled my eyes. "It's just a clock."

Sagara grunted.

Dropping my gloves, mask, and heavy apron, I made my way to the kitchen first and gave myself a quick wash before rapidly determining I'd need to hit the public baths tonight if I wanted to get anywhere near my preferred level of cleanliness. The fact that several of them remained open, if lightly staffed, throughout the night meant it wouldn't be a problem, though.

There were upsides to a village of soldiers that kept twenty-four-seven readiness.

After a quick wipe-down with a towel to get the worst of the mess off, I scampered up the stairs to put in an hour or two of work on personal projects, grateful that I didn't have to cook tonight since the old man was going out drinking with a few friends.

What awaited me in my room was *not* a clock.

Not anymore, at least.

The original device I'd built to spit out gear blanks and precisely cut them to proper size still had pride of place along one wall and frequently got used, but the strange amalgam of parts now sitting on my desk told an entirely different story. Once upon a time, it had started out as something akin to a typewriter, in spirit at least. Back when I'd first had the idea several months ago, I hadn't even been sure this little venture into madness would *work*, but I'd wanted the experience it would give me on larger-scale moving parts so I could design the mechanical parts of the blast furnace.

Now, it was...

Well, it was a two-foot by two-foot mass of incredibly tiny hexagonal plates that could be moved and shifted in a circular pattern and keyed into different places as needed. The actual mechanism involved was no more complicated than a hundred-year-old mechanical typewriter's striking arm that held a given letter plate. All you had to do was hit the key and the letter plate would strike the ink-tape and leave an imprint on the paper, then fold back into place.

What I wanted to do was, instead of having any given letter plate strike a piece of paper, well...

If I got this right, each of the different hexagonal keys would come into place whenever I triggered them, spinning on their circular track so that they would lock into place as I slowly built a pair of hemispheres out of the tiny hexagonal plates made of chakra-conductive metal. Each plate would have a specific part of a technique formula marked on it, encompassed with a special *fuuinjutsu* bordering the plate and allowing it to have energy flow between each one in order to activate the specific technique I was 'spelling out' with the plates.

I'd need a great deal more understanding of the sealing arts before I judged this as possible, of course, but my limited knowledge of the Sage of Six Path's skills and a gut instinct told me I was on the right track. It currently didn't *hurt* that Naruko had handed over a recent birthday gift of an Uzumaki-style sealing primer that I was carefully and eagerly working my way through.

So *far*... it seemed like my little idea might be able to actually come to fruition.

It was, after all, the primary reason I'd invested in the Sage of Six Path's personal skills in the first place. I'd *wanted* his Creation of All Things technique, but I hadn't been able to pull it to me during my monthly bout of inspiration. After taking the first increment of the man's wider skill set, I understood *why* that was, too. It turned out that there was a *very specific* mixture of sage chakra I'd have to artificially reconstruct in order to even *use* the damn thing, but it was *possible*.

In theory.

Which was *also* why I'd been so excited by Yakumo's apparent use of some kind of alternative version of it that could be easier to replicate. Not that it was actually *proving* easier to do so, since I still hadn't managed to identify exactly what the... 'dark chakra' for lack of a better term, was precisely.

I had an idea, but...

The 'clan politics' Yakumo had mentioned in reference to Satsuki, the looks I'd seen the Uchiha girl receiving from some of the Kurama clansmen, the oily and *evil* nature of the energy within Yakumo, the 'Curse of Hatred'...

Could it all be that simple, really?

It would explain quite a bit, and I'd confirmed that the Land of Sky did exist, but... did the Leech?

If I was *right*, and I had the worst kind of hunch that I was... I'd need to teach Yakumo the full measure of the Bene Gesserit's skills instead of just the practical applications I'd planned on. Which meant, I'd need to speed up her lessons and look at a few of her clan members', maybe even her parents, to confirm my guess about what their bloodline *really was* and not just what they might believe it to be.

I set aside the final hexagonal plate I'd finished filing down next to the others, then lined them up and pressed them together so that they smoothly interlocked. Right now, of course, they were simply *blank* instead of bearing the proper technique formula, but... I knelt down and manually focused my eyes with a flex of muscles and spark of chakra to look at the under-centimeter scrawl of the most bitch-basic boundary formula on the sides of the coin-thick hex-plates.

"Test one," I muttered quietly, carefully placing my finger on the larger chakra-metal rectangle the line of tiles was resting on and pushing chakra into it. After a moment, a weak barrier began to shimmer into existence and I let out a breath in relief as I slowly and carefully focused more energy into the arrangement.

The barrier was incomplete, of course, given that I was only using a small set of tiles, but the fact that it worked *at all* meant good things for...

"...well, let's call it what it is, right?" I grinned to myself, still amazed that this absolute bullshit might actually get me off the ground soon. "It's a ninja-magic replicator."

...

Sadly, all good things had to come to an end, and my exaltation over even the tiny increment of success I'd had was one of them. It would be *much* longer until I got this working in a way which I was reasonably sure wouldn't kill me by accidentally igniting nuclear fusion.

Before that became a concern, though, I needed a bath.

Stepping out of the shop with a bag over my shoulder, I checked the 'closed' sign was in place and then locked the door behind me.

"Ah! You must be the Young Swordsmith I have heard so much of!"

My entire body seized in a tight jerk of a response before I un-puckered my asshole and turned to look at the towering image of blue armored spandex stretched over a body that was harder than granite. Forcing out a breath, I smiled at Konoha's 'Gorgeous Green Beast.'

"I'm sorry, shinobi-san, but the store is closed for the day. If you like, I can give you an estimate on whatever you're thinking of while we walk, but my master will have the final word on pricing tomorrow." I stated with a short bow, the very picture of professional politeness.

Might Guy laughed as he threw his head back, the noise scaring a cat down an alleyway with an annoyed hiss. "No, no, I have no need for, well..." Giant bushy eyebrows furrowed as the man rubbed at his chin. "I suppose I could drop by to restock my shuriken and kunai supplies, but that can wait! What I have arrived at your establishment for is to speak to you in particular, young apprentice! My name is Might Guy!"

I closed my eyes for a split-second and sighed deeply, letting some of the professional attitude bleed away as my shoulder drooped. "Yeah, okay. I'm Kotaro. Can we walk and talk? I'm looking forward to a bath."

"Yosh!" Guy shouted, smacking one fist into another with a giant grin. "Very good! Cleanliness of the body is cleanliness of the soul!"

I sighed again and reached up to rub my forehead. "And, uh... if this is going to take long, could you do me a favor and not shout everything? I've been hammering metal all day and really don't need the loud noises or I'm going to get a beating headache."

I wasn't, not really, because I could control the blood flow to my brain and release some natural painkillers into my system if I really needed it, but all of that didn't change the fact that I didn't particularly enjoy loud people.

I could just *barely* tolerate Naruko, Guy was out of the question.

Guy's eyes widened and he inhaled deeply to shout a reply before wincing and nodded shortly instead. "My apologies, I had not understood the rigors of your work."

I waved him off as I started walking, the longer-legged man walking in time next to me. "It's fine. What did you want to talk about?"

Guy hummed in thought, then nodded. "I would appreciate your discretion, young man, but it is increasingly likely that your friend Tenten will be placed on my genin team in three month's time. To that end, I wished to make an evaluation of both her own skills and those of whoever taught her the sword."

I grimaced, not enjoying where this was going. "I'll demonstrate the form I created for Tenten if you like, but I'll have to make arrangements with my master to do so. I'm already taking quite a bit of time off in order to teach a few academy students some tricks."

Guy nodded judiciously. "I would appreciate it very much." His deceptively sharp gaze looked me over. "If I'm not being rude, would you mind telling me why you did not become a ninja?"

I hesitated for a long few moments, then shook my head. "I suppose if I said I was born with a crippled chakra system you wouldn't just take that at face value, would you?"

"Alas, your youthful skill and tenacity shines through even in a more humble profession." Guy grinned at me, offering me an approving thumbs-up. "While I did examine your academy records and the attached files, I did not believe they painted the whole truth."

I clicked my tongue. "I don't want to kill people and I don't want to see people, particularly my friends, die."

Guy grimaced, but nodded. "A sadly understandable concern, young man, and a very youthful attitude towards life in general, even if one that not many will likely understand."

I snorted, finding a bit of black humor in the situation as we walked. "Thank you for understanding, I appreciate it."

Guy sighed then, crossing his arms and looking down in disappointment. "Still, it does mean I will have to select another genin for my team. It is a shame, though, I think you would have been a good influence on my disciple." I stilled my movements in no small amount of shock. "But we have arrived at the bathhouse and I do not wish to keep you from your ablutions, young blacksmith! So I will return to speak with your master and buy many wares from him

tomorrow to soothe the wound of borrowing his apprentice for spars! And for intruding so deeply in a young man's affairs I will do fifty laps around Konoha on my hands! Yosh!"

I twitched as the green-clad madman did a half-flip and rocketed away into the setting sun on the palms of his hands. Despite the oddity of the meeting and the fact that I'd likely try to strangle the man if placed in long-term contact with him, the fact that he'd been considering taking me as a genin was... strangely touching in a way.

"He really is best ninja." I chuckled to myself, then paused, slow horror creeping in as my eyes widened. "Wait, did he say *spars*?!"

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 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) (New)

Chapter 18:

"Just breathe, flex your muscles like I taught you to." I murmured soothingly as I sat cross-legged in the tub of ice water across from Yakumo. "It will increase blood-flow to your extremities and keep them from getting too cold."

"I-I-I'm t-t-trying-" The Kurama clan heiress replied shakily.

"Do or do not. There is no 'try.'" I stated in return, closing my eyes briefly as I took in another breath and focused on my own inner control.

"You know, I was actually thinking about learning some of this stuff." Tenten stated as she sipped at a fruit drink off to the side. "But if *this* is the kind of thing you have to go through..."

Satsuki grunted in Uchihaese, a tone that meant she largely agreed as she looked the two of us over with narrowed eyes. "I want to know about the bruises."

I let my eye twitch slightly, a subtle sign of irritation on the topic even as I kept my eyes closed and concentrated on my other senses to build an image of the world around me. "I've already established we aren't talking about the bruises, Satsuki."

The Uchiha girl made an unhappy sound. "You said, I didn't agree."

My lips folded downwards minutely. "I ran into a pair of green monsters and had to fight them off. Ask your brother."

Satsuki's brows furrowed now, the barest trace of either confusion or irritation on her face as she grunted and looked away.

"I-I-I th-think I n-n-need to g-get o-out." Yakumo admitted, her teeth chattering as she tried to make her case.

"Not yet." I stated, reaching through the icy bath to grasp her hands and, with a pulse of healing chakra, I pushed energy into her. "Relax your heartbeat, you're breathing too fast. These are natural responses, but they're just going to hurt you. We want calm, placid, still. You're moving your blood by pushing it with muscle contractions. Here, do you feel that?" I pushed more energy into her core, working a set of tissues she wasn't quite aware of yet.

"Y-yes. Th-those are the... the muscles on the blood vessels near my lungs, aren't they?" Yakumo's voice had a breathy quality, the tense fight against the cold having gone out of her as she *accepted it*. "How are you-oh!"

"Mhm." I hummed in affirmation. "Now you try."

It was a clumsy motion as she pushed and pulled at the voluntary groups to try and get the involuntary ones to work as well, but it was there. "Good first effort, but keep going. Speed up your blood flow by working those vessels, but not your breathing. Don't let the environment control your responses to it, you are the master of your own body, nothing and no one else."

"Yes, teacher." Yakumo murmured, her absent mode of address still something which rubbed me the wrong way, but I'd learned to move past.

"No chakra." I reminded her as I felt a flicker of something within her body respond to her need. "I'm using it to help *teach* you, but you don't need it to master these techniques."

"Yes, teacher." Yakumo replied again and I nodded, allowing my eyes to slide open.

"You've been in there for over an hour. How long is this supposed to take?" Tenten asked, frowning as she reached into the wooden tub with a single finger. Leaving it in for a moment, she jerked it out quickly and wiped it against her leg. "Shit, how cold is that? It's at least freezing!"

"Adding salt to water, at least in certain concentrations, makes it unable to freeze." I replied. "And we've got at least another hour before I think she's made adequate progress." I frowned as I considered the *other* tests I'd have to put her through and how I'd manage to accomplish them. For instance, one part of the Bene Gesserit training involved operating at multiple levels of *atmospheric pressure*, which was easy when you could just vent a bit of atmo off a spaceship, but a bit more difficult in the here and now. Maybe if I had a body of water deep enough?

"Hey guys, what's up!?" An energetic voice called out as, with a great leap, an orange blur landed nearby with a wide grin.

"Taking a break from training." Satsuki replied with a cutaway glance. "Kota and Yakumo are meditating in a bucket of ice water."

"Huh?" Naruko asked, cocking her head and sending her twin tails shifting as she squinted at us. "Uhh... neat? I guess? Why? Isn't that cold?"

"It's supposed to be cold." Yakumo stated absently, her own eyes closed as she concentrated. "I'm practicing manipulating my body temperature."

"Okay!" Naruko nodded, clearly not getting it, but shrugging it off. "Oh, uh... Kota, I stopped by the Kurama house to ask her mom for snack-err, I mean, say hi and she said that Old Man Murakumo wants to talk to you about something. When we take a break or whatever."

Yakumo opened her eyes in surprise. "My father?"

"Did she say what she wanted?" Satsuki asked, frowning at the blonde as she stood.

"Something about thanking Kota and something?" Naruko said flippantly, tucking her hands behind her head so that her elbows shot up into the air. "She said he wasn't mad or anything."

My mind flickered back to a conversation from months prior and I nodded. "Okay, I'll go see what they want to talk about." Bracing my hands on either side of the tub, I smoothly pulled myself from the water as flecks of ice flowed off me. Satsuki's cheeks reddened and Tenten coughed to herself as she looked... *mostly* away while I lifted one leg, then the other out of the water to stand on the grass. Naruko, on the other hand, merely scrunched her eyes up in confusion.

"I thought those were supposed to shrink when they got cold," the blonde stated bluntly.

Yakumo choked on her own spit, Tenten's jaw dropped, and Satsuki glared at the girl blatantly staring between my legs. "Dumbass!"

I rolled my eyes as I grabbed a towel. "That only happens when you don't train to make sure it doesn't."

Naruko snickered, her fox marks twisting as her cheeks bunched up. "I gotta' tell Kiba that one, he'll flip his shit, believe it!"

"Anyway," I declared, drawing attention to me as I pulled my boxers on before grabbing for my near-t-shirt tunic and pants. "Satsuki, Tenten. You're on free spar while I'm away. Swords are fine, but if I come back and one of you has more than a nick I'll find a way to make your lives *interesting*." I glared at them pointedly. "Naruko, you're on Yakumo duty. Feel free to chat her up and distract her, she needs the practice doing two things at once. If her lips turn blue, pull her out and warm her up by the fire." I thumbed over to where a small campfire had been burning in case of an emergency.

"Will do, but I gotta' ask you something when you're done!" Naruko asserted, jabbing a finger in my direction.

"Sure, sure." I waved her off and, after a moment's hesitation, I decided to indulge a bit and focused on the distance between here and the main Kurama clan building before tapping a toe to the metal plate I'd hidden in my boot engraved with the full technique's formula before channeling a bit of chakra into it.

The world swept by in a rush of color and a blur of motion, not quite *instant*, but very close at the speed I'd flung myself at.

"You're very talented for one who doesn't wish to be a shinobi." Kurama Murakumo's voice called as I turned to look where he was sitting next to a small wooden tray with tea and rice balls on it. "Please, sit. I don't want to keep you from your students too long."

I opened my mouth to correct him, then closed it and sighed, before nodding. Walking towards the... weird Japanese wooden-porch thing that circled houses that I could *never remember the name of*, I eschewed decorum a bit and just sat down on the edge.

"Have my efforts met your expectations?" I asked bluntly.

The older man took a sip of his tea before nodding slowly. "You have to understand, after my daughter failed to impress Jounin Yuuhi with her capabilities, my wife and I were... *extremely skeptical* that a blacksmith's apprentice would actually be able to help her. No offense intended." He paused. "Where are my manners? Please, the tea and *onigiri* are for you as well, as an honored guest of this household."

I nodded and took the remaining mug, sipping and swallowing before replying with the customary acknowledgment. "Delicious." After a moment's thought, I continued. "I'm not offended. Truthfully, given my preference for the quiet life of a craftsman, teaching your daughter and drawing attention to myself is counterproductive."

The Kurama patriarch made a polite noise of interest. "And yet, here you are."

I chuckled in a self-deprecating manner. "I... do not enjoy having my hand forced. Seeing someone else powerless to stop their dream from slipping through their fingertips." I shrugged. "While I would not enjoy the life of a shinobi, I do understand what it is to wish for something so strongly as your daughter does."

Murakumo's mouth broadened a bit into a smile as his eyes fixed on the not-quite budding sakura tree in the close distance. "I had thought it might be something like that. You do wear your heart on your sleeve somewhat, young man."

"I suppose I'd rather be suspiciously honest than suspiciously deceptive," I replied with a bit of a smirk, drawing a laugh from the man, who reached to his other side as I took a bite from the rice ball.

Putting a small chest down as wide, deep, and broad as my hand he pushed it forward to me just a bit. "After having observed enough of an increase in my daughter's skills to lead me to believe she will graduate and become a kunoichi with the next class. Since you have proven your own abilities, here is the compensation I promised."

I actually wondered exactly how much it was as I reached down to take the small chest. The terms we'd agreed on had simply been 'adequate for my efforts.' The older man could have entirely stiffed me or dragged things out until I'd trained his daughter and then offered a pittance, but...

Well, first off, I wasn't doing this for *money*, not really. I was doing this to help Yakumo and because of some vague feeling of impending doom I felt when I thought about her circumstances and the dark chakra within her. If she really *was* denied entry into the shinobi forces with the kind of power she had at her disposal, I couldn't imagine anything good coming from that decision. Especially if she had time to stew and grow bitter on the village as a whole.

The village that I planned on *living in* for a year or two yet, still.

Opening the lid of the chest, my eyebrows rose considerably as I stared at one tray of solid gold coins sitting on another tray of coins. Looking to the Kurama Clan head, I closed the box. "If you're sure?"

"Compensation commensurate with your achievements. No one else has been able to help my daughter. You'll receive that much again after midsummer and again when she graduates." He declared.

I took a deep breath, then nodded as I calculated exactly how much this was. After a moment, I realized that I could *very likely* retire for several years after I finished teaching Yakumo. At least, if I was content to live frugally during that time. It would be enough to buy a small property within the village, none of which were *ever* cheap given that houses within the walls of Konoha carried a guarantee of protection in a turbulent world.

"I promise to do all that I can." I bowed to the man, tucking the chest under my arm and pushing the last of my rice ball into my mouth before downing the cup of tea.

"I will hold you to it." Murakumo nodded, turning back to the sakura tree in the back yard in a move that spoke of quiet contemplation. "I imagine you wish to return to your students. I will not keep you."

I bowed again, then turned and tapped the hidden formula in my boot before launching myself back towards the training ground. Yakumo, to her credit, was still in the chilled tub even as Tenten and Satsuki danced around each other's blades, the occasional use of the three academy-tier techniques being shot off as they matched steel against steel.

"Oh, hey, you're back Kota!" Naruko cried, grinning at me from where she was crouched next to the tub before springing up with good cheer. "I wanted to ask you for help with the stupid clone technique! Yakumo said you know a lot about how it's in genjutsu techniques and stuff and I've been having a *super-tough time* getting it down. My mom says I just have to practice more, but it's *totes* annoying!"

"Right." Unnecessarily, I snapped my fingers. "I thought you might."

Bright blue eyes blinked at me in surprise. "You did?"

"Your chakra is *extremely* dense and you have an enormous amount of it, the larger part of it being strongly aligned with yang chakra." I explained. "The clone is an essential building block for illusions, which are constructed with yin chakra and require more control than your average genjutsu." Naruko blushed and looked at her feet as I gave her a pointed look at the last part of my explanation.

She dug the tip of her shoe into the ground and twisted it petulantly. "Mom just said I would get it eventually."

I wagged my hand. "It's *possible*, but unlikely." In theory, she had smaller reserves than her male 'canon' counterpart would have, but... all things considered, it was a negligible difference. Between the Uzumaki and Namikaze bloodlines and the Nine-Tails, those were the more important deterministic factors here.

"So what should I do?" Naruko asked, cocking her head and whining.

Hard way? Easy way? Hmm... first the easy, then the hard if that doesn't work. Probably the hard anyway given everything else.

"Okay, so... we're going to try to do this the fast and easy way, then if that doesn't work I'll assign you some control exercises and you might be able to do it in a few weeks."

Hope, then despair filled the young girl's face before it solidified into a determined grimace. "I'll do it."

"Then I want you to do the chakra exercises *anyway* because they'll help you be a better ninja," I ordered and she froze before groaning.

"Alright..." She slumped. "I promise."

“Good.” I turned to the other girls and whistled harshly. “Time out. I want you all to hear something. Yakumo, towel off and hop out for now. We'll have another session later, your lips are beginning to go blue anyway.”

The Kurama heiress frowned, but nodded and rose from the icy water to grab a towel to dry herself off.

Soon enough, all four girls were gathered around where I was now sitting near the fire, Yakumo having taken the closest spot, and watching me as I was holding a stick and drawing the *not-quite-kanji* for 'knowledge' in a small font and then a much larger one. “Alright. So this is a bit different than what I usually instruct you on, but I think it's important.” I cleared my throat. “Where does knowledge come from?”

All four of them blinked and looked at each other.

“No wrong answers,” I promised.

“Books?” Tenten ventured hesitantly. “Scrolls? Like when you need to learn techniques?”

“Teachers?” Yakumo asked with a frown.

Satsuki paused, hesitating, before quietly replying, “Family.”

Naruko pouted as she realized she was the last one without an answer as she screwed up her face and scratched at her head before perking up. “Ideas!”

Satsuki's face soured and I held up a hand with a tolerant expression. “All of you have at least a part of the answer.” I tapped my stick at the two symbols in the dirt and drew circles around them. “Knowledge comes from many sources, but can usually be divided into three sources which produce two types of knowledge.”

I tapped the smaller of the two symbols. “Sometimes knowledge is subjective, this is what I call 'small knowledge.' Or 'small truths.' Things like who you are, how you feel about people, what your biases are... this is personal knowledge that comes from looking within.” I tapped my heart, then my head. “Then there's 'big knowledge.' This is the kind of thing which tells you how the world works, how chakra functions, what speed something will fall at if you drop it. These are *objective truths*, they don't care how you feel about them. Small knowledge, knowledge about yourself and your friends and family, enemies and allies... that can change as people change. Big knowledge, big truths, won't change. You can sometimes apply *other* big truths to bend another, but once whatever you're doing stops, things go right back the way they were, okay?”

Seeing only half-formed understanding on their faces, I elaborated with an example. “Water flows downhill, you all know this, right?” They nodded. “If I use a technique to send a spray of water *uphill*, once the technique ends, the water's just going to flow back downhill though, right?” Lights started going on behind their eyes, now. “This is me using my knowledge of how chakra works, a part of big knowledge, to bend another piece of big knowledge. You can also call these *laws* or rules. Not the same as the Hokage's or the Daimyo's, but they dictate how the world functions just like the Hokage's laws tell ninja what they can and can't do or the Daimyo's tell civilians and samurai what they can and can't do.”

Naruko's hand shot up and I sighed internally before pointing my stick at her. "What's this got to do with the clone technique, sensei?"

I stared at her, my expression deadpan. "I'm getting there." Promise made, I turned back to my simple diagram and pointed to it. "Knowledge, truth, laws... whatever you want to call them... they all come from three different places. The first, and most common in our world, is knowledge from ancestors. This is tradition." I pointed at Tenten, then Yakumo, and finally Satsuki. "Anyone or anything who teaches you based on knowledge taught to them by someone previously is drawing on traditional knowledge."

All four nodded seriously, looking thoughtful.

"The second is knowledge by revelation." I stated, drawing a line from each symbol to the edge of the fire. "Sometimes when people think long and hard about something or are just in the right place at the right time to have the right idea-" I pointed briefly to Naruko, who preened at the acknowledgment. "-they have a sudden understanding of whatever they're thinking about. This is knowledge that flows through you from your connection to the Pure World."

I pointed at the fire again for emphasis.

"How?" Satsuki asked, running her thumb over her chin as she stared at my drawing before looking up at me.

I nodded, accepting the question. "All of us have a connection to the Pure World. It is where we came from when we were born, it is where we will return when we die, and is where our spirits will cycle through reincarnation between lives. Under the correct conditions, a spark of inspiration can flow from it and into you and you will realize a sudden bit of knowledge which you did not understand before."

Granted, in my last life it was generally considered to come from 'God' or at least 'Heaven' by most western religions during the ancient and medieval periods, but...

"So when someone has a revelation from the Pure World," Yakumo wondered aloud, "then teaches it to someone else, it changes from knowledge by revelation to knowledge by tradition?"

I smiled widely. "Correct. Very insightful, Yakumo."

Satsuki pouted at the praise I handed the other girl, but was distracted by the girl next to her speaking.

"What's the third type?" Tenten asked, then shook her head. "I mean, the third way to get knowledge?"

I grinned. "Experimentation." I paused for effect as they shifted back to puzzled expressions. "Experimenting is the most powerful form of attaining knowledge, because if you *do it properly*, it's guaranteed to be true."

Because if Satsuki still goes renegade for some reason, she's at least going to teach Orichimaru a thing or two about experimental procedure! That lunatic's methodology makes so much more sense now, at least.

"The others aren't?" Naruko asked, good for nothing if not asking the most obvious questions.

I raised an eyebrow. "Have you ever had someone tell you something they *believed* to be true, but wasn't? Or just outright lied to you?" I leaned back and affected the stance of a gossip as I leaned over to an imaginary person to my side. "Did you know there's an easy way to master any jutsu? You just have to stand on your head for three days thinking about it, but no one's been able to!"

A few amused snorts rang out and I nodded. "You can *test* knowledge that someone else tells you or that you discover yourself, and I'm going to teach you."

"With the clone technique!" Naruko realized, grinning widely.

"By teaching you the clone technique in a *different way*." I stated firmly. "Because it's *supposed* to be the most basic technique and therefore easy to do. However, you have so much chakra and it's so dense that I want to test a new way to train techniques, because unlike you most academy students don't have huge pools of energy to use. Everyone *else* is telling you that you should use *traditional* knowledge to learn the technique, but we're going to experiment and see if we can do it more easily."

"Just tell me what to do and I'll make it work, believe it!" Naruko cried as she bounced to her feet energetically.

"Determining how much a technique costs in terms of chakra is measured by whether you use the long form of the hand-seals, the short-form, which is what most of you are taught, and if you have the written technique diagram to help you," I explained as I walked around Naruko thinking aloud. "Most people have to do the short-form countless times before they've practiced enough that it becomes ingrained in their chakra like muscle memory for exercises. This makes the technique faster to perform, but raises the cost because you're not being as careful with your chakra control. Speed, power, control; pick two."

Naruko nodded again as the other girls watched us, though I wondered if she really understood what I was saying now.

"With you, though, you have *so much chakra* that we need to make the clone technique *more expensive* instead of less. If my theory is right, you'll be able to make a clone if we just raise the cost of the technique to the point where you're not overloading it through your lack of chakra control." Naruko winced at my declaration, but firmed her face a moment later. "So what I want you to do is *not* try to channel chakra to the technique. Don't focus on it, don't think about the hand-seals, none of that. When I say so, you're just going to bring your hands up to the last seal in the technique, like you're a jounin who's been doing it their entire lives, and say-*don't shout*-the clone technique."

Naruko took a deep breath. "O-okay, I think I can do that."

"Don't *think*," I reiterated. "You're not *trying* to do anything. Just... *let it happen* on its own." Doubtless, she'd think about it to *some* degree, but trying *not* to think about it might make the technique even *more* expensive and... if what I understood of my rudimentary grasp on *Ninshu* was correct...

I placed a hand on Naruko's shoulder, focusing on the connection between our spirits. Even if she was the rising sun compared to my tiny bonfire, I could still...

"Do it."

Naruko exhaled, brought her hands up calmly, and made the final seal of the clone technique.

"Bunshin no Jutsu."

The world *exploded* into orange around us.

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 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)

Chapter 19:

Might Guy knew a taijutsu prodigy when he saw one.

Konoha's resident martial arts master had met many over the years, on both sides of missions. While somewhat prideful of him, he privately considered taijutsu masters to be the most dedicated and persistent of shinobi. Those ninja who focused on the physical side of combat had an eye for subtlety and finesse that even beat out most genjutsu users he'd come across. Perhaps it was simply hubris, but it often seemed as though the miniscule motions of muscle groups required to understand the various strikes and blows, when combined with the speed at which one was expected to shift and move through them, as well as the degree of personalization needed to fit each individual's unique body...

Intellectually, he knew that many of these difficulties had analogues in the other disciplines of shinobi techniques, but in the privacy of his own mind he allowed himself to consider his own the most complicated and under-appreciated.

"Yosh! Kota-kun, I will come at you again now, ready yourself!"

"Don't warn me! Just *come at me!*"

The point of his musings on his art though, was ultimately just that it was easy to learn, but difficult to master. Much like many different skills, amateurs or hobbyists often considered the words 'learn' and 'master' to be synonymous. He couldn't even *begin* to count the numbers of genin, chunin, and even *jounin* he'd tutored on the side in the spirit of YOUTHFUL CAMARADERIE to sharpen their skills who only thought to practice a move some dozens of times and believe they knew the punch, kick, lunge, or throw as well as it could be learned.

"You are truly the fastest opponent my age I have ever fought against, my friend!"

"If you can still talk, you can fight harder!"

"YOSH! You are correct, I will-AH!"

"Pick! One! Fight! Or Talk!"

There were slow, developmental levels to *true mastery* of any subject. One did not just watch someone perform a technique, then do so themselves for a few minutes, and attain 'mastery' over whatever the technique was. Even if one *hypothetically could* on an intellectual level, an individual's body would not understand the motions as well as their mind could. That was why many Uchiha tended to injure themselves, sometimes very badly, when they attempted to simply copy his taijutsu. Outside of a few very rare and strange bloodlines, there simply wasn't any substitute for ingrained muscle memory and dedicated practice.

Except...

Guy watched as the young orphan boy, Kotaro, struck Lee with a *perfect* Strong Fist blow he *knew* he'd used against the boy just the previous day. The form wasn't just mimicry either, it was an *adaptation* of the move, performed with the kind of breathtakingly-flawless finesse that took months of *very specific* practice to get right. Even Lee was only approaching the level of skill he needed.

"Hold!" Guy cried as the two broke apart.

Instantly, both of his students froze, holding their positions as they-well, no-as Lee began to calm his breathing. Kotaro merely stood stock-still, his breathing so even Guy would have more believed him to be taking a morning stroll instead of in the middle of a high-intensity spar. There was, if one looked closely, a very slight sheen of sweat over his skin, but nothing like the beads of perspiration flowing down Lee's face.

Approaching Kotaro, Guy laid hands on the boy's arm and moved his fingers slowly over the various muscle groups, looking closely for signs that he'd torn something or stressed a bone too far in applying that much force.

For the third time since he'd seen the boy adapt one of his or Lee's moves, he found nothing.

"Guy-san, you did say we were free to use whatever techniques we liked, didn't you?" The brown-haired boy asked pointedly. "If you'd rather I go back to only using *Shii-Cho* I can."

Guy took a deep breath, restraining his manly tears. Kotaro had been quite insistent that such patterns of behavior did not agree with him and, if he still wanted to lure the boy into being his student, Guy knew he would need to make small compromises.

Once young Kotaro agreed to some manner of tutelage, he could acclimate the boy to accept a more YOUTHFUL standard of behavior.

"I was simply making sure you applied the stresses to your body correctly, my youthful young student!" Guy declared with a wide grin, desperately restraining the tears which threatened to burst forth from his eyes. "That move in particular is deceptively difficult once you apply focused chakra to enhance the force behind it!"

Kotaro blinked, cocking his head. "Oh, I didn't use chakra."

Lee perked up, his eyebrows rising at that revelation. "But-!"

Guy held up a hand to his apprentice as he focused his gaze on Kotaro. "What do you mean you didn't use chakra?"

The boy shrugged slightly, a single jerk of his shoulders. "I have a very limited amount of chakra because of the way my system is deformed. I generally... well, instead of using chakra, there's a way that you can... hmm, the best way I can describe it is building up momentum and power by moving a certain way using your entire body as a single unit."

Guy stood from his position kneeling to examine Kota's arm and took his chin in hand as he puzzled out the words. "The entire body as a single unit?"

Kotaro nodded. "Yes sir. When I throw a punch, I throw it in a way that builds force through my entire frame from my feet into my hips, through my torso, and into my arm by flexing specific muscles in sequence."

Guy stared at the boy harder. "That runs the dangerous risk of throwing you out of balance with the requirements of various taijutsu techniques if your muscles are otherwise occupied boosting each other."

Brown hair shifted as he shook his head. "No sir, you just have to be able to do it in the split-second you anticipate the strike to hit, and only a fraction of your body will be occupied at any given point in time if you do it in the proper sequence."

To his credit, Kotaro gave no indication that he was lying throughout the explanation, because the taijutsu master's automatic assumption for anyone else would be that they *were lying*.

But this young orphan boy...

It would explain a great deal, actually. The way he moved, even among friends and civilians, was akin to how some taijutsu masters he'd seen had also moved. It indicated a hyper-awareness of each and every muscle being shifted at any given moment. What Kotaro was intimating here and now was beyond even *that* impressive feat. No, to use the body as a 'single unit' implied a level of control over his own body that dwarfed even Guy's own.

"Show me," Guy ordered finally. Turning to his apprentice, he nodded in approval at how the boy was still holding his position. "Lee! Cool down exercises, pattern three!"

"Yosh!" Lee nodded, leaping to obey. "Yes, Guy-sensei! Today I will endeavor to cool down twice as hard!"

"That's the spirit, Lee!" Guy grinned and gave the boy a raised thumb before turning his attention back to young Kotaro, who was looking between himself and his young ward, looking as though he *desperately* wanted to ask something, but could not bring himself to do so. "Retrieve your sword, Kotaro!"

Waiting until the boy was at his pack, he raised his voice again. "The blade, please. I do appreciate you using the reverse-blade to train Lee how to fight swordsmen, but I wish to see you at your best."

Kotaro paused, turning to watch the jounin with a single eye, before nodding once and selecting the other blade strapped to his training pack. "I suppose you are the boss. You're paying Sagara enough for it." He stopped again, turning back to Guy. "You said my best?"

Guy grinned and nodded, eyebrows rising as Kotaro drew the second blade from its sheath, holding the reverse-blade in what Guy assumed was his off-hand left grip. The boy casually spun the two blades with a confident and casual air as he stepped up opposite the green beast.

"Come at me with intent to kill," Guy instructed, his grin fading as he gave the grave instruction.

Kotaro grimaced, but nodded again. "If you die, I will never forgive you."

Guy's eyes narrowed and he took the signature Strong Fist stance. "Begin when you are ready."

Kotaro closed his eyes, inhaling deeply, before-

Instinct screamed in the back of Guy's mind and he hurled himself upwards.

-Kotaro flashed back into view, his sharpened blade flowing through a smooth diagonal strike which would have taken Guy's head off at the shoulders. Capitalizing on the extension, Guy fell to the ground with the force of gravity behind him as he spun himself into a punch-

Chakra surged into his fist as his weight rocked Kotaro before he bounced off the sharpened edge of the *reverse* blade held in a *reverse* grip guarding at the boy's back. It was a testament to how well-made the sword was that it still left the slightest of hair-thin cuts on the jounin's palm even with the reinforcement from his aborted strike at Kotaro's apparently-unguarded rear.

"I thought you did not use chakra?" Guy asked after he landed, clapping his hands together and feeling hot blood rush through his veins as his curiosity began to get the better of him.

Kotaro shook his head. "I did not use chakra in the specific strike I used against Lee. You asked me to do my best, so I am using what little chakra I have in this spar."

Guy chuckled as he caught the barest hint of *reprimand* in Kotaro's voice, then eased back into his stance with a dark grin. If *that* was how the boy wanted to play it-

Another body-flicker brought Kotaro within striking distance, this time a half-meter above Guy's own head as he twisted unnaturally to avoid Guy's retaliatory strike while his blade-

Both blades!

Guy threw his body into a spin at the sudden realization that the right-hand sword was coming at him in the boy's *other* style, the one he was teaching the Uchiha girl, while the off-hand left sword was moving in the style he was teaching Tenten. More than that, though, they were moving *independently* of each other, as though two different swordsmen were each holding a blade.

Rolling out of the pincer move, his eye caught the collision of blades, the left reverse-blade catching on the guard after sparking down the length of the other sword. Guy's hand caught the ground and his foot lashed out in a downward kick as he balanced on his single right palm.

In response, Kotaro completed his motion and pierced the reverse-blade into the ground as his own foot met Guy's descending shin with a force that could not have been produced by a child not yet out of the academy. It wasn't at Guy's *best*, true... far from it in fact, but Kotaro still should have *dodged* rather than-

The barest glint of steel made Guy's unoccupied hand lash out far faster than he'd moved so far, catching the blade held in Kotaro's right hand as it came for his neck again.

A moment passed as the two silently regarded each other, both still upside down; Guy balanced on his hand and Kotaro gripping a sword embedded in the soil of the training ground.

It was perhaps not the most bizarre position he had found himself in during a training match as his spars with his YOUTHFUL RIVAL Rin often saw the medic contorting him into strange positions, but... maybe it would make his top twenty?

"You have still erred in disarming yourself by using your sword to equate our heights in order to make this blow, young Kotaro." Guy stated with disapproval.

Kotaro's face betraying nothing, his other foot lashed out against Guy's free leg, catching the man by surprise as he felt something *pull*-

The boy's sword rose out of the ground as he felt Kotaro's chakra grip onto his own body, using him like a tree as Guy saw the sword coming and kicked out with *both* legs to throw the boy across the training ground, breaking the hold he'd had.

Flipping himself upright, Guy caught himself on his feet, looking to where Kotaro had landed against a tree before jumping off it onto the ground and-

Guy felt his leg give out from underneath him, dropping him to a knee as his eyes widened and he confirmed his suspicions. "You can use medical chakra *through your feet*! It's the only way to reliably use tree-walking on another ninja. Their chakra would fight you otherwise."

"I learned it in case Tenten or Satsuki got hurt while practicing," Young Kotaro stated with a short nod. "It's come in handy a few times since."

Guy considered that, if *he* could not have Kotaro as his student, perhaps his YOUTHFUL RIVAL could lure the boy into the medical profession instead. Chuckling again, Guy raised a hand coated in medical chakra to the muscles the boy had severed. "Still, you should capitalize on such an opening, Kotaro. It is not often even one so deep in their SPRINGTIME OF YOUTH as yourself catches a jounin off-guard!"

Kotaro raised a single eyebrow. "I applied an explosive seal with my other foot."

Guy paused, eyes widening as he noticed the seal on the thigh of his jumpsuit. The deafening explosion and blinding flash of bright light sent him careening backwards as Guy tried to get his bearings, pumping chakra into his body to reinforce against the coming blows as he reached out and caught each of Kotaro's swords in a tight grip as they came in for another decapitating blow.

Clearing his throat of the remaining smoke, Guy grinned at his student. "I see I have underestimated the FLAMES OF YOUTH which burn brightly within you, young Kotaro! I will hold back less in acknowledgment of your skill!"

Kotaro looked him dead in the eye. "This is the part where I try not to die, isn't it?"

Guy laughed. "I see you and my apprentice have been swapping training stories!"

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)
(Nothing New for Chapter 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

Chapter 20:

"Bunshin no Jutsu!"

A tsunami of orange-clad blondes swept over the edge of the Kurama compound where we'd set up for the day. My efforts at getting Naruko to the point where she could perform the basic clone technique had not gone unrewarded, even if the results were a bit irritating to deal

with. It'd taken a few weeks for her to perform the technique with any level of reliability, since I'd *somewhat* misunderstood the problem. The jinchuriki's reserves were only part of the problem, as it turned out. The other part was her chakra control which... well, it was awful. She gave off more chakra punching a training dummy than I gave off throughout an entire day.

Of course, her awful control was also a *function* of the size of her chakra reserves, which made the entire issue more complicated than it had to be. Larger reserves generally made it harder to build control and one had to have a certain level of control over their reserves, which was usually innate to the given individual, to even start to build their control. It was a bit of a catch twenty-two.

Naruko with her heritage from the Uzumaki, her status as the kyuubi's jailer, and her *probable* status as the reincarnation of Otsutsuki Ashura... well, it was easier said than done.

I'd ended up telling the girl to ask her mother for the most chakra-intensive yet *utterly useless* technique the woman either knew of or could find to exhaust her. Then I had Naruko do *that* for most of the days she wasn't in school before walking her through training exercises when she had drained most of her chakra.

We were making progress, if *slowly*.

The only bright side to the whole thing was that the training plan I'd constructed for the girl mostly involved tiring her out before dedicating a small amount of time to actual instruction. I at least tried to make the various 'missions' I sent her on to burn energy interesting.

Like today.

Tenten danced with her blade through a complicated series of movements that struck down illusionary clone after clone as they all hurled themselves at the budding swordmistress.

Beside me, Satsuki watched, her hand grasping her sword right below the guard, waiting for my signal. A drained bottle of water sat by her side, silent testament to the work she'd already put in the last few hours. Much like Tenten, her clothing was nearly soaked-through with sweat and drying perspiration still gleamed on her forehead in the evening sun.

"Kage Shuriken no Jutsu!"

I heaved another sigh as a hail of throwing stars rained down from on high, Tenten immediately switching to evasive maneuvers as her blade skillfully knocked select projectiles from her path. I couldn't fault the results of the technique Kushina had chosen, only the fact that she'd entirely underestimated the size and density of her daughter's chakra pool in determining the difference between 'useful' and 'useless.'

Shadow Shuriken was *draining*, yes, even to the point that Kushina had only given her daughter the technique because I'd volunteered to watch over her while she was using it. Given that *normal* shinobi tended to overuse the technique to the point of *killing themselves*, the logical assumption would be that it was sufficient to exhaust even a Uzumaki jinchuriki's enormous reserves.

Logic must hold one hell of a grudge against Naruko given the shit she's done to it.

Proving that Naruko came by a certain level of her air-headedness honestly, her mother had failed to realize the reason the technique was considered *useless* was because it was too expensive to use in the quantities required to be effective on a regular basis in any lengthy combat.

"Everything okay?" I asked Satsuki idly, waiting for things to calm down on the field of battle. "You've been quiet today." I paused. "More than usual."

Satsuki grimaced. "Bon-*chan's* been sick lately."

I grimaced, keeping any other emotion off my face. "I'm sure she'll get better soon. Are you feeling up for another round?"

"Of course." Satsuki replied sharply, obviously irritated I'd even questioned her.

"Alright then, you're up." I pointed two fingers at Satsuki and then flicked them towards Tenten as the swarm of unreal metal dispersed into a foggy haze of chakra smoke. Satsuki nodded, then leapt off the tree branch we'd been sharing, snapping a basic illusion in place to mix in with the latest wave of clones Naruko was sending in. My lip twitched as Tenten spun based on what seemed like pure reflex to parry the incoming strike Satsuki launched with the draw of her sword. In reality, I'd given both of them just a bit of the Bene Gesserit training to enhance their senses at will, so Tenten had likely heard the scrape of steel even in the awful din of the mock battle going on around her.

Satisfied at the turn of events, I jumped backwards and hit against a series of tree trunks to slow my momentum before coming to a crouched stop near Yakumo.

"Is Tenten still managing?" The illusionist asked, a canvas set up before her with a pallet of paints resting in notches I'd beaten into a metal bracer. In her free hand, she held a metal tool which she used to spread the paint quickly and roughly, but with all the exacting control I'd carefully ingrained in her.

"Well enough." I nodded. "I'll be joining Satsuki in a moment, which will be Naruko's signal to come down and try her hand in melee with us."

"I've almost got the genjutsu set up here." Yakumo stated.

"Excellent." My praise made her blush and preen, even if my next words brought her back down to reality. "I'll want one more out of you today; so once you finish, move to the final target and put us all in a desert."

The Kurama heiress took a careful breath as she put the finishing touches on a cave wall. "Yes, sensei."

I snorted and shook my head, then darted off to join in the fight.

...

"...hate... you..." Tenten gasped as a widely-grinning and sweating Naruko carefully poured tiny sips of water into her mouth.

"I'll make a note of that." I smirked at the barely-moving girl, hefting her bag as I looked through it to confirm what I already knew. "You found eight of the ten blue targets, destroyed seven of the ten red ones, and managed to get the five yellow ones to the dummies we marked as couriers without being seriously injured. All of this while being stalked by a larger force with at least comparable skills, then cleared the safe zone after a fighting retreat that earned you what would have been an interesting scar if Satsuki was using a real blade... but nothing debilitating."

For emphasis, I tapped the tip of my boot against the contact-paint in a line on Tenten's shoulder, the same shade as what I'd had the Uchiha girl smear on the reverse-blade sword I'd given her for this exercise.

Live steel was one thing for controlled spars, but a full-contact brawl like this? Only if I'd gotten Obito, Itachi, or Guy to oversee it.

"...pass?" Tenten asked weakly, hopefully.

I grinned and nodded, tension flowing out of her body as I spoke. "Pass."

The bun-haired girl flopped even more lifelessly against the ground, an ecstatic smile on her face as Yakumo and Naruko congratulated her eagerly. Even Satsuki was wearing a tiny grin, a muttered piece of praise lost in the racket the other two girls kicked up.

"That! Was! Awesome!" Naruko enthused happily, doing a little eager dance. "I wanna go next!"

I rolled my eyes as Tenten groaned and tried to move.

"This was for Tenten's graduation test next week, frog-for-brains." Satsuki rolled her eyes tiredly as Yakumo giggled. "Kota had to do a lot of work setting this up anyway. You shouldn't make him do more than he already does."

I raised an eyebrow at the girl, who blushed and looked away, virtually confirming that she was quoting her mother instead of voicing an honest opinion.

"Well, I'm a man of my word." I stated with a clap and a look at Tenten. "You lasted all eight hours, accomplished more than three quarters of the objectives, and didn't suffer a major injury. So we'll hit the baths and then you get to pick where we have dinner, my treat."

Tenten blinked, finally finding the strength to take the bottle of water from Naruko and taking a deep swig before dropping back to the grass. "I... thought I only found half of the yellow courier targets?"

I snorted, shaking my head. "There were only ever five. I just skipped the numbers two and four and marked them with seven and ten." Her mouth dropped in outrage and disbelief and I reached down to flick her forehead. "Bad intel is a thing. I wanted to see what kind of judgment you made under the kind of stress near-failure would bring."

"...hate you *so much*," Tenten whispered, closing her eyes and shaking her head as she chuckled to herself in disbelief.

"You prioritized the objectives you *could* complete instead, for the most part." I continued, approval in my tone. "I'll have a full evaluation for you, and everyone else," I swept my gaze over the other girls, "don't think you're getting off easy, but that'll be another now."

"Another now?" Naruko cocked her head.

I carefully controlled my face and took a deep breath. "Not this now, another one. Later" Affecting a fake grin, I reached down and grabbed Tenten's arms before hoisting her into a fireman's carry. All the while I pushed the words my father had been so fond of back where they came from and tried to *forget* again. "C'mon, we're all covered in dirt and sweat. Let's head to the baths."

...

We'd had to wake Tenten up when we finally got to the bathhouse, as she'd fallen asleep while I carried her on my back. Remarkably, Satsuki seemed to understand that this was simply Tenten's day for special treatment and didn't devolve into a pouting and irritable cat at the sight of one of the other girls getting to spend so much time in close proximity to me.

...eventually, I'd have to do something about that, I knew.

Between the three of us, we'd even managed to get Tenten and her hair washed, soaked, and dried over the course of an hour. The fact that I'd borrowed a bit of Naruko's chakra to perform some basic healing on the bun-haired girl's overstressed muscles probably played a big part in her actually being both conscious and sensate enough to choose one of the middle-upper-end Akimichi grills for our night out.

Which was where I handed over a storage scroll I'd been carrying around all day.

Tenten blinked, looked up at me, and cocked her head as she wiped away sauce from the corner of her mouth. "A scroll?"

I nodded. "You know Kushina let Naruko give us the Uzumaki's basic primers on them. Your graduation present is in there. The scroll is general-use, too, so you can consider it a bonus."

Tenten frowned. "Shouldn't I wait until next week when I find out if I've passed?"

I snorted and shook my head. "If you really think I've taught you enough to earn you calling me 'sensei,' then you should know exactly what I think of one of *my students* actually failing some test the academy will give you."

Satsuki snorted and crossed her arms.

Tenten blushed slightly, but nodded with a small smile and unrolled the scroll before running her finger over the center seal with a bright charge of chakra. In a burst of smoke a large blade snapped into existence in her lap, along with another, much more slim scroll.

"The scroll is just a bunch of recipes and stuff you might find useful out in the wilderness." I waved that off. "The blade, though-"

Tenten pulled it free from the scabbard by a single inch, her eyes widened as the blade hummed with energy even under casual handling. Immediately, she snapped it shut, her wide eyes staring at me in shock and surprise. "This is-!" She stopped and lowered her voice even as she looked to her left and right. "I can't accept this!" She whispered, taking the contradictory action of holding the blade tightly to herself while she did so.

"What is it?" Yakumo asked, leaning over as she daintily picked at her beef spears.

"It's just a really good sword." I stated firmly, drawing attention back to me as Tenten opened her mouth to explain what I'd given her. "It was something of a cooperative effort, actually. I needed Naruko to keep helping me recharge my chakra while I was working on it. Wolfram is a hungry beast to forge with, as it turns out."

With a better forge I'd finally, *finally* been able to hit the temperatures I'd needed to start messing around with the metal I knew as tungsten. It wasn't that the metal had any magical property, it was just *obscenely* durable to the kind of energy transfer you had to put chakra blades through. This meant that while you could *make* a blade from liquid metal you treated with chakra, the *best* chakra blades required an alloy of tungsten to take the heaviest kind of abuse a ninja would put them through.

"I helped too." Satsuki pointed out, and I nodded in deference, even if Satsuki's clan affairs had kept her busier than Naruko.

"Satsuki did." I affirmed, moving a few of the muscles in my body to massage the ethereal soreness in my coils. I'd pumped quite a lot more energy through them than usual, even to the point of asking Naruko for periodic recharges today to keep myself at peak performance to test Tenten. I was *still* bloated with her ultra-dense energy to the point where my metaphysical existence seemed simultaneously sluggish and energetic to the point of a sugar-high.

If that girl dealt with this all the time...

It honestly answered a lot of questions.

"I-if it's from *everyone*..." Tenten waffled, biting her lip as she considered the sword that she obviously didn't want to part with.

I nodded. "Yakumo's father is the reason I could afford the special metals I needed in the first place, so she contributed too, even if not physically."

The Kurama heiress perked up at that, smiling instead of frowning over her lack of involvement. While I could have easily dragged her into the project, I was still worried over her strange chakra mixture and what it would do to a sword like this. I fully intended to test that later, but not on a blade that someone I knew was going to depend on for their life.

"Then... thank you all!" Tenten grinned widely, blushing happily.

From there, things wound down until we all managed to stumble to our respective homes with full stomachs and tired muscles. The moon hanging high in the sky told me that the especially productive week I'd had wasn't quite through yet, the gibbous lunar body quietly declaring its intent to hand down greater wisdom to me tonight. Thankfully, it wasn't too late, so I

managed to get home and greet Sagara before doing a few chores and finally heading up to bed. Even with my impressive ability to repair my own body and minimize damage on the fly, the day had still been wearing on me. As soon as my time of the month triggered, I would-

My eyes shot wide as I felt my mind pulse-

-then pulse a second time!

Potential Spent:

Metaphysical Physiology: Unique Mutation (Kota)
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, Same Month)

(Nothing New for Chapter 10, Same Month)

(Nothing New for Chapter 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 (New)

Personal Techniques: Otsutsuki Hagoromo III (New)