

Chapter 19: The Samsara Hypothesis

“- July 24, 6 ANB .-“

Shikaku led us out through a different passage than we came in, one that led to the surface right above us, which did turn out to be the Forest of Death. In fact, the tunnel opened into the basement of the tower situated in the very middle, where the baby shinobi of the latest generation would be called to prove their worth in six or seven years. Enma wanted to be shown to the highest possible vantage, so eventually we were all standing on the uppermost balcony of the place.

There, Enma waited quietly while Nara Shikaku explained the situation. He waited with his back to all of us, suspended in the air while balanced on the utmost tip of his tail, with his hands on the knees of his crossed legs. In complete stillness.

“Lord Enma,” Shikaku asked once he was finished with his summary. “Should I guess by your silence that even Senjutsu is turning up no trace?”

“No.”

He's being deliberately obtuse, I thought privately. And he's not searching, he's building up his strength.

“Do you expect it to be a long-term effort? If so, will you accept guards for the duration?”

“What you do or don't will make no difference.”

Akimichi Chouza grimaced. “With all due respect-“

Shikaku raised a hand for silence. “How long do you expect to last in this realm?”

“Are your senses so dull that you cannot tell? If so, perhaps I should wonder if you can be of use in retrieving Saru at all.”

Yamanaka joined Akimichi in tightening his expression, but Nara didn't even twitch. “All the more reason to join our strengths.”

Now that I had the anti-Obito field up, I didn't need eyes to see up to a certain range, so I saw the big monkey smirk humourlessly even though he had his back to all of us. “I've half a mind to simply let the matter be.”

If I'd needed any more data to confirm my theory about the nature of summons and summoners, just that reply would have earned its own dissertation.

Akimichi Chouza was far less sanguine. "Lord Enma! How can you possibly say that?!"

"How could I not, when it would finally end his misery? Saru's best students failed him, his children failed him, his successor failed him, his greatest student betrayed him, and now Saru's oldest friend has also betrayed him!" Enma laughed darkly. "Betrayed him to the least of the students of Saru's self-same failure of a successor, with the help of the *greatest* of Saru's own students returned for a repeat of his first treason! Betrayal from failure, failure from failure, failure from betrayal, betrayal from failure again, now failure from betrayal again also! And in the wake of his ignominious fall, Konoha but squirms and wanders astray at the most unfortunate behest. At least Saru himself only failed once."

And betrayed himself, his people and the world too, when he let Orochimaru go, but I didn't say that. All things considered, this was a very mild reaction to effectively being told by Shikaku to 'put up or shut up.' Even if 'the unfortunate behest' – meaning me – spelled rather terrible things for my near future.

The shadow ninja remained undaunted. "Then you should be willing to help us make it right."

"I do not question your heart but your *competence*, for it must be unsightly indeed if it drove you to accept the poisoned help of one such as this."

Shikaku looked from him to me. "Masanari, what is he talking about?"

I considered my situation, and the theories and musings I'd had no way of verifying until now, but which were otherwise very thoroughly reasoned indeed. Six months are a long time when your brain is a quantum supercomputer.

I considered Enma in particular, and what conclusions he might draw from being faced with someone like me. Someone whose nature and, more importantly, chakra was ahead of anything humanity had ever conceived, even the Sage himself. "The summoning technique... The contracts are kept by the noble beast clans themselves, right?"

Chouza and Inoichi emoted that deliberate blankness shinobi resorted to when they were hiding their confusion, but Shikaku didn't. "That's right."

“Do ninja ever get to study those contracts, or do they just get to see the end where their blood signature has to go?”

Shikaku frowned. “I’d have to check with Lord Jiraiya to confirm, but for the cases *I’m* aware of the latter has always been the case.”

“So, for people like Hatake Kakashi who summon their partners from home via space-time manipulation, the summoning seals were made wholesale by us humans without having the noble beast ones as reference.”

“... I can’t categorically confirm or deny that, but the baseline seal used by Konoha ninja was developed by Uzumaki Mito, if that helps?”

“Before or after the final Madara-Hashirama battle?”

“Before.”

“What summon contracts, if any, did the Uzumaki have?”

“None on record,” Shikaku was... actually, I couldn’t be sure if he knew where I was going, he didn’t make it easy to read him without going full-throttle on my cognitive capabilities. “Whether or not this reflects reality, I can’t say.”

It’s all as I suspected. “After Uzushio’s destruction, was there a sudden uptick in summoners or new gargantuan beast sighting in Stone, Water or Cloud?” *Like there was for redheaded child agents and broodmares?*

Shikaku probably guessed my thoughts, but didn’t indicate either way. “No.”

“So they probably didn’t have any.”

Enma remained still, but my sage senses could feel natural energy not just pervading him but being *absorbed*. My theory that noble beasts didn’t, in fact, teach everything about sage mode to their summoners was now confirmed too.

Even to Naruto, in the future.

“Hanzo, what are you thinking?” Shikaku pressed me.

“I’m thinking that it’s awfully strange how summons use chakra techniques when summoned, and such a short list of them too. They predate Kaguya, and Hagoromo – the Sage – only gave chakra to humans.”

Enma’s fingers twitched.

My Third Eye of the Anchorite began to perceive frightful changes within him too. “Was there ever a case of a summon being killed outright, instead of just puffing back to their realm in a whiff of smoke?”

“None on record.”

Sasuke managed to get Manda killed in the future, supposedly, but he also didn’t have nearly enough chakra left to summon him to begin with. That was objectively bad writing no matter how you viewed it, but that didn’t necessarily mean the events on page weren’t true. Like, say, if Manda decided to pop over on his own. Perhaps because he was put under a geas or mind-control beforehand. The kaleidoscope sharingan could do both, and Sasuke almost certainly knew where the Ryuchi Cave was.

“Masanari, skip the filler and spit it out, or maybe you’d prefer ninshu again? I hated it the first time, but I’ll do it again if you can’t use your words.”

Enma’s energies surged like a cauldron bubbling in an oven, though I was sure the others couldn’t feel it. Yang, Yin, they were moving and concentrating within him but carefully not escaping past his skin. They were growing and vibrating as the power of the world fed them. It was like a whirlpool now fed him. His body felt like a rising tide of life force, and his spirit was rapidly thickening and roiling like the rumble of the ground ahead of a rockslide.

The mention of Ninshu set him off, why...? Oh. Just as Ninshu allowed full mutual understanding, it could surely also serve to demoralize and gaslight, if someone happened to be evil and devious enough. And rotten. Wilful. “Best not do that,” I finally told Shikaku. “The good Monkey King seems to believe I’ve got you brainwashed.”

“Excuse me?”

Bad things come the same as the good do, it seems. In threes. “To answer your original question, Shikaku, I don’t think the standard summon technique is a *summoning* technique at all.”

A blood seal could be used for a lot of things, and the function of diverting chakra towards something else was common practice. Blood seals were how chakra of people who *didn't* have good enough skills could contribute to group medical ninjutsu. It was hardly a stretch to believe that one could divert the energy delivered via space-time techniques into something else. Summoners no longer had to draw the seal script in blood on their hands after signing the contract, which meant that the other end controlled where and what that chakra actually did.

If I was right...

Then contract summons weren't space-time teleportation at all. "Rather than space-time, I think it's something completely different and much, much simpler."

Shikaku got it instantly. "Clones," he muttered. "You think they're all just clones."

"Unless they aren't. Like now." I did my very best not to tense visibly. "My technique reached Mount Huaguo but did no more than that. Lord Enma wasn't summoned here. He came here all on his own. In full."

The coin dropped for Chouza and Inoichi, and to my gratification and astonishment... when the other two thirds of the Ino-Shika-Chou trio tensed and drew their chakra up, it was for *my* sake.

"You are every bit as brazen as I feared," Enma said mildly, though he otherwise remained completely still even now. "Are you also as devious as I fear?"

There had been no pretense when Enma uttered 'fear'. Nor hyperbole. "Well this is just perfect," I pinched my nose. "Curse me for acting like a bloody wombat, and I'm not even from that place."

"As far as first dissemblances go, denial is a terrible choice," Enma mocked me, misunderstanding me completely, still motionless even as his sage power mounted and mounted and mounted and empowered his-

"Masanari," Shikaku grunted, the only one present not raising his guard. Seemingly. "I swear to the sage himself."

I interrupted him. "During forest fires, wombats open their nests to other fleeing animals, and even go out to actively herd them and carry them to the safety of their den. Unfortunately, my wombat-like empathy is being entirely misconstrued because of confirmation bias."

“*Hanzo.*”

“Enma believes I’m-“

The palm strike smashed into my chest before I realized I’d blinked.

The world distended into ripples in front of me as the air exploded around the hit, away from my chest, around Enma’s hand where he’d struck me after moving so fast even the Ino-Shika-Chou trio couldn’t react in time. Unlike before, he did move me this time. And then some.

Faster than the blink of an eye was supposed to be hyperbole, I thought as my cognitive resources came alive all at once. *I’m going to feel this later.*

Some manner of seal or spell tried to paralyze me. I unmade it and swung to block his follow-up, but Enma’s practiced movements outpaced my reactions even with my mind at its fastest. Also, I was in mid-air and not by choice. The monkey king skipped forward and grabbed the front of my clothes with the same hand, so tight that my shirt and tie *shredded* in his clawed grip, if I hadn’t discreetly sent Yemo away before we left the underground – if his natural camouflage wasn’t so good, he’d be-

Suddenly we froze. Enma mid-leap where I’d previously been standing, and me in mid-air just short of grabbing on his arm. I didn’t fall, and this time it wasn’t through any action of my own.

“I will have no more senseless fights!” Shikaku barked as his shadow immobilized us both – no, it just immobilized *me*. Enma was forced to unclench his hand and step back, Shikaku could control people individually.

On his sides, Chouza’s arms were growing in size and Inoichi was doing... something.

“Enough!” Nara grunted, unaware that Enma had more than enough power to overpower his technique if he wanted. “The two of you will-“

Enma’s ear flicked.

A black needle with golden ends shot forward and suddenly expanded when it was right beneath me.

Sideways.

The golden shin-high disc swept Enma himself off his feet, but he just flipped forward overhead when it went on to destroy the *successful* Ino-Shika-Chou Third Formation in the same way.

Then the air exploded like a shock bomb as the *real* Compliant Golden-Hooped Rod finally expanded lengthwise too.

From right beneath me.

Up.

- BOOM -

“Agh!” My voice was lost to the sonic boom as the staff’s golden disk top swatted me into the sky at the speed faster than sound. The force of the air slammed me down spread-eagled against the flat end, the top of the staff was wider than I was tall. My bones rattled, my spine *hurt*, even my brain shook in my skull despite the ceramic carbide ossification and everything else I’d done to protect myself.

Assess scenario actors.

Per Shisui’s disclosures, Enma had been part of the Third’s fight against Root yesterday. Going from that to me banging on his realm’s figurative door was clearly a shock. Finding out Sarutobi was missing must have been an even bigger shock.

More importantly, noble beasts predated Kaguya’s arrival, so they would know the differences between the world from before the Shinju and after. From before Hagoromo and after. The Great Toad Sage Gamamaru even proved that at least *one* noble beast still lived from those times, so their knowledge was not merely theoretical.

Of all the other summons I could think of, a sapient monkey called *Enma* wielding the Nyoiki Kinko Bo was at the top of the list of the old frog’s potential age peers.

Enma was there for the infinite Tsukuyomi, I thought grimly as the wind buffeted me against the top of the extending pole. He’d surely know the difference between men with chakra and without chakra. He’d know the *limits* of humans with chakra. Being a sage, he’d be able to perceive even those layers of reality that were imperceptible to everyone else. And if those fiery eyes with golden

pupils had even an imitation of the fires of Samadhi of myth, if those eyes of his could see deeply enough, if he saw the Tree of Life and didn't know what it was...

The first thing he faced today upon crossing time and space was *me*. Someone with chakra superior to the best that the Sage himself had ever come up with. Someone with control of chakra and its generative system potentially superior to even Kaguya and her children. Someone who demonstrated all this only after Hiruzen was no longer in the picture. Someone who'd spent years and years of going around as a harmless civilian, which could now be looked back on with suspicion. Someone who was also a shapeshifter.

Enma thinks I'm an Ootsutsuki.

As the constant explosion of wind began leaving its own cloud trails in the wake of my unbidden ascent, I wondered if maybe the Yin Shinju lingering in the other planes might not be a literal curse. 'May you live in interesting times' didn't quite cover this mess.

Enma thinks I'm the great threat that Kaguya had been fearful of. Or thinks highly enough of that possibility that he won't take any chances.

At the same time... the great ape could have done much worse if he'd meant to kill. His approach was calculated, delayed until he adjusted to this realm and collected a proper expression of his true power. He also hadn't aimed to kill but to subdue. A clawed stab would have been better than a shove and grab. Previously he'd said that he hadn't tested his claws against my neck because I didn't dissemble, but now he had ample reason to think I *did* dissemble. For my whole life. That he *didn't* strike to kill just now meant...

He wants to capture me.

He wasn't aiming to kill but to *subdue*. His opening strike had been a *paralysis spell*.

He wants me for interrogation or to seal away.

I could respect an immortal ancient taking immediate responsibility for the safety of the world, instead of hemming and hawing over far-off visions that served only to drive procrastination.

At least he's being considerate, I thought grumpily.

Considerate towards everyone else, that is. He chose a battlefield where he could easily unleash his full strength, but the first thing he did was move the fight elsewhere. Perhaps it was to eliminate interference, but at the same time it was the perfect measure against potential collateral damage. If Enma knew the true strength of the Ootsutsuki, even just Kaguya's, then he'd know that Shikaku and the rest of today's shinobi were too weak to withstand it. By blasting me away, he was protecting them as well. Them and Sarutobi Hiruzen's beloved legacy.

From his perspective, Sarutobi was made to disappear just after he began to do the right thing again.

And then the 'mere civilian' who drove him to it revealed himself to be too strong for even the Monkey King to face lightly. The very same day. The same mere civilian who'd gotten Sarutobi to dance to his tune, one might say.

This is what's called suffering from success, isn't it?

Amidst the base clouds, the Compliant Golden-Hooped Rod finally stopped growing.

I looked up at the blue sky and sighed.

How do I fix this misunderstanding?

I couldn't do it through battle. Maybe in a couple of years I'd be able to give my best showing for long enough to force a time-out, during which he might be willing to indulge words for a while. Unfortunately, right now I had minimal odds. We'd fight for ten or fifteen minutes, *maybe* half an hour, but then my Yin deficiency would see me get increasingly weary and distracted until he beat me down.

At that point he'd probably kidnap me and seal me someplace where he can interrogate me with all due ruthlessness for the next year or three. Probably under his mountain, just for the extra irony.

He certainly isn't inclined to listen to words right now, not unless it's on his own terms.

I could try to dissect his actions back at him, but that would just make things worse. In this world, bragging about seeing through the other guy's plans was a form of combat escalation.

Why is this happening to me, I'm practically a saint!

I climbed to my feet just as the Monkey King shot past the edge of the pillar and higher. I looked up at him. The sun was behind him, no doubt on purpose, but I wasn't bothered by such things now. This creature who bore the name of the Nipponese Judge of the Dead, this creature who'd recognized the name Sun Wukong, he was clad in full warrior gear with a golden chainmail.

But he didn't have the feathered cap, and when he stopped to hover in the air it was by crouching on a copy of his staff rather than a nimbus. No cloud-walking boots either then. While it was possible he'd just left them back home, it was unlikely he'd do so for such a useful piece of equipment.

Now the big question.

Does he not have his artefacts yet, or anymore?

Alternatively, maybe he never had them at all.

Or...

He only had them in a dream.

A dream like, say, the Infinite Tsukuyomi.

"Battle etiquette demands I give at least one call for surrender," the Monkey King called down from on high. "Surrender!"

Yeah, no. "Everything you think you figured out is probably wrong!"

All the space around me became full of Ruyi Jingu Bang copies until there wasn't space enough for me to pass between them.

"Well, I tried."

The cage of bars closed around and towards me every bit as fast as before, but this time I didn't blink. Just as the fastest dozen of Ding Hai Shen Zhen were about to hit me, I vanished.

The 'summoning' technique that had dumped me on Shikaku earlier now did the same, but this time I remembered to fly. I sprung off his back and landed next to him on the roof of the tower instead.

"What the-!" "Masanari?!"

There was no gargantuan staff growing up from the roof of the tower, it seems the old monkey had made it retract in my wake – and his – to prevent pursuit.

“Hanzo, what happened?”

The last one was Shikaku, and he was who I answered. “This is a terrible misunderstanding and there’s only one way I can think of to make him pause now that his blood is up.”

“Masanari, I need more than that!”

I’d have gladly given him more, but we had no time. My eyes were turned up towards the cage of staves, a mere speck in the sky – he’d pushed me very high indeed – when it suddenly vanished. A much smaller dot began approaching our position. Very fast.

I held out my fist.

Shikaku’s next words died in his throat. He pinched his nose, but after looking up to see what I saw coming, he took a deep breath and returned the gesture.

I conveyed my understanding and plan at the speed of thought.

Shikaku returned the favor, and even refined my hasty idea into something more practicable, at least on his side of the equation.

“What a mess. Again,” the ninja said. “Dammit, Hanzo.”

“I *am* sorry about this.”

Nara made to say something, stopped and thinned his lips in frustration. “No, this time it’s not your fault. Go.”

I smiled awkwardly and vanished again.

This time I materialised in my own back yard, right above where my little dragon was flying back and forth in the air above the pond, stressed and worried.

“Father!”

“Yemo.” I landed on the bank and welcomed him when he curled around me like a clingy serpent.

“You made it so far in so little time, very well done my boy.”

“I swam most of the way, and made myself small the rest of it, nobody saw me! Or I think they didn’t...”

“It’s alright, even if someone did spot you it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Enma had amazing senjutsu but also the Flames of Samadhi, or whatever technique allowed his eyes to evoke an extrasensory effect. Whatever he saw clearly wasn’t just ‘evil,’ but such minutiae didn’t matter. What did matter was that he’s surely pinpoint my location soon. I might be able to conceal myself if I first *escaped* his range, but I hadn’t done that. My house was still inside Konoha, and a sage’s detection range extended well beyond that.

Gama’s eight siblings – and Yemo’s now – were scattered about the little orchard and shrubbery around my water wheel. They’d long since grown too big for terrariums, most of them were as tall as my waist. They were watching us, startled and silent. But on sensing my attention, they relaxed and came crawling or hopping forward. They were too big now to jump on me and hang off my sleeves and my back, but they were content to crowd me and sing their croaky songs while I went around petting them and rubbing the skin between their eyes.

I envied their ignorance. Their utter lack of hardship and concerns.

I experienced the nearly overwhelming desire to drop everything and... go. Just go. Leave. The past few days had been horrible, I’d been skewered, burned to death, beaten six ways to Sunday, kidnapped, I had every bone in my body dislocated or broken, and then bloody Orochimaru even went and r-

That. To me.

To *death*.

And now this nonsense on top of everything, no good deed goes unpunished my ass, where the fuck is my dharma off to, on vacation?

I could adopt the phenotype of a random person and teleport away. Never look back. Even better, I could call up the genes of some distant borean or tropical creature and summon myself blindly onwards. Maybe even a sea creature, I ate oysters regularly, even had shark meat that one time. I’d even come across whale blubber when I bought some oil lanterns as backup lighting. I could survive a sudden displacement into the sea somewhere. I *could*.

Naruto was the only hangup, but not much of one. I could easily take him with me now, and I could even do it without dragging the superweapon problem along with us. I could release the Kyuubi at any time just by unmaking Naruto's chakra system, and I could heal him better than new afterwards. He would be better off without the entity in him, even without all the other improvements I could affect. I even had enough of an understanding with Kurama that I was relatively confident he wouldn't go on a genocidal rampage just because.

But...

This isn't a world where you accomplish anything by running away.

I played with my toads while I waited for Trito to spread out and permeate my property from top to bottom. A diffuse field of anami spirits soon had my home, yard and even three meters outside my fence enclosed in a full sphere. It was too wide and the volume too big to control or maintain awareness of, with my paltry Yin. Not without wearing my spirit and mind out too quickly. Doubly so if I needed to deploy them for anything, like, say, protection.

As always, though, nature provided the blueprint for every solution. I directed Trito to create a shell of invisible plasma around my property, a sphere with a wall thick as a palm's width. Inside, though, I concentrated the anami spirits into roots and branches, focusing my awareness to a volume I *could* perceive and control. Soon, all the space I owned was run through with an invisible match of the Tree of Life that now lived within me. Like a double crown of roots and branches with and without leaves, both above and below.

It would be... not entirely ideal as defense against space-time techniques as *I* conceived their logical extremes to be. But as long as Obito continued to be unable to teleport in bits and pieces smaller than a man's head, this would be sufficient. The option of a diffuse field remained to me in any event.

Regardless, practice would need to wait until this latest trouble was settled. Right now, my needs were for more immediate and physical modes of defense.

Is there really nothing I can do to give him pause?

At the end of the day, I was acting on inferences borne of speculation. What was actually going through Enma's head right now? What did he actually see when he looked at me?

... Or maybe it's not what he sees, but what he *doesn't*.

I cut myself off from my self-perception and beheld myself only from outside, exclusively through Trito's field of view. It was a jarring change, like having a third-person view of myself, except from all directions at once. But this wasn't beyond my tolerances either, anymore.

I compared what Trito sensed and saw of me with what *I* sensed and saw of myself.

Everything was the same, save one thing.

I couldn't see my Yin.

My spiritual body was so small and dim, it couldn't be seen through the chakra.

Oh dear.

To Enma's eyes...

I must look like a *soulless demon*.

"... Dear, I think I might need a bit of your help with this one."

I couldn't know if my wife was listening. My Yin was too weak to feel anything from the Otherworld while I was awake, which was not reassuring at all.

But...

She had stood by me even dead. If it was her, even the blindest of trust would be enough.

And if she was otherwise busy, that was fine too. I was no worse off than before.

I went inside, walked to my kitchen and prepared two small trays of food offerings. Then I went outside in front of my front gate to wait. Due to the martial law, none of my neighbours were out and about to peer from their gates or over fences, which was good.

Shisui, however, was waiting on the bench just outside my gate. Shikaku had been as good as his word, apparently, which meant we'd all be suffering from success in a minute or two.

Damn.

"Whoa!" Shisui jumped to his feet with a start. "Hanzo! And the dragon can fly apparently, how – no, never mind that! Where the heck did you two come from?"

“Shisui,” my face fell. “I don’t suppose you could pretend you have literally anywhere else to be? At least five miles away?”

“Hanzo, what’s wrong? The Commander told me you needed a bodyguard-“

I put one of the plates on Yemo’s scruff and held out my fist.

The ninja blinked, but turned serious and returned the gesture in kind.

For better or worse, Uchiha Shisui also had the appropriate mindset for ninshu. At least when he was doing it with me.

“Shit,” he breathed a moment later, breaking off. “I don’t suppose I can persuade *you* to go back inside and pretend you’re not actually here?”

I shook my head and walked up to the very edge of my property. Stood just within the invisible sphere of dual-layer plasma. I watched as a now familiar yellow dot appeared in the distant sky and shot straight for me once again.

With a flex of my will, the invisible shell that Trito had coalesced around my property locked the energy state of the air. Just like I’d trapped Black Zetsu.

This is gonna be loud, I lamented internally. When that thing hits the quintessential immovable object, will any windows survive? Does anyone nearby have their eye to the glass right now?

It was now or never.

I shut down the Tree of Life and pulled all chakra away from my center, away from my brain and my spine and my heart, until my Yin body was entirely unveiled in the unseen world. Then, with what could only be my wife and children bolstering me from the other side, I cast forth Heaven’s light into the world.

Just as Shisui jumped to my defense, the Compliant Golden-Hooped Rod stopped out of arm’s reach. It turned his deflection attempt into a wild flail, but I felt no amusement or levity. The young ninja landed back on the ground between me and the staff, which *didn’t* also fall. It stayed suspended in the air.

I watched as the far end shortened and shortened, not quite at the speed of sound but still faster than any pursuers or potential backup could hope to catch up. Within seconds the Monkey King

was in front of us, crouched on the top hoop of the iron pole and staring at me with those fiery eyes.

“You do have a soul,” Enma rumbled, straightening abruptly and jumping down to the ground. The Nyoï Bo shrunk and jumped back behind his ear. “But your spirit – it’s barely better than an infant, how can this be? How are you alive? To think you could call forth even a semblance of that light with such a weak spirit, never mind the real thing. What kind of human even are you?”

“There’s no such thing as a kind of human.”

Enma beheld me blankly, but his manner slowly lost its tension and its harshness. “In that, at least, we agree.”

“I dare say we probably agree on a lot more than that.” I held out my offerings, quietly thankful when Shisui cautiously stepped aside. “I will fight for home and hearth and those under my responsibility, if I am left with no other choice. But I am a peaceful man. Will you not accept my hospitality instead?”

“You can’t!” Yemo balked, swirling in agitation through the air behind me. “He doesn’t deserve your-“

“Hush, kid, grownups are talking.”

The dragon huffed but obeyed because he was a good boy.

The Monkey King looked at me. At the two plates I carried. In my left hand was a tray with a sliced peach and a marigold flower, which I knew were a favorite food of macaques. In my right was bread and salt, as per humankind’s most ancient rite.

Enma gave me a hard, meaningful stare.

Then chose the latter.

Like a man.

Am I ever going to stop being right about everything that’s completely dreadful and terrible?

The chakra system was an alien parasite that choked, twisted and ripped your spirit the more you used it, until there was nothing left to build a stair to heaven when you died. But Heaven was not

the only direction that the wheel of Samsara spun amongst, just the hardest to climb. Even with the spirit rendered unable to do its full job, the soul was still the soul. It was still there. It self-actualized even if it couldn't apply that self-actualisation properly.

When the spirit is so ripped and mutilated that you end each life as a baser creature than you started, what else can the soul do but fall?

The most atrocious thing was that it was more likely to happen the stronger and greater you became. Also, I was beginning to reconsider what the lore said about Hagoromo and how he gave chakra to the world. I'd questioned the feasibility of him giving chakra to mankind, when it would have taken the creation of the mini-shinju for each one. My standing theory was an inheritable retroviral implant that propagated over the course of generations. It would still have been during the sage's time, if he lived longer than the average human of today.

But on thinking further, I had to wonder if humanity didn't already have the mini-shinju grafted to them by then. To harvest our energy, never mind splice our genetics to make white zetsu out of us, the modifications would have had to occur while people were all trapped in the pods. Maybe Hagoromo didn't introduce the chakra system at all, and instead just used Creation of All Things to alter its function into something less predatory, after the Infintie Tsukuyomi was ended and the people released from the lotus eater machine.

Imperfect understanding led to imperfect results, but at least we weren't just fodder anymore.

Even if this wasn't the case, the Shinju pods themselves would have served the same purpose, and thus would have inflicted the same ruin on the human spirit.

And in those times of old, when Kaguya's Infinite Tsukuyomi enveloped the world? For a 'perfect' technique like that, without there being any free rebels around to pull your out of the matrix – or maybe not *yet* – the only way I could think to escape was to die.

Enma is the name of the judge of the dead in the far Eastern mythology of old Earth, but his other claim to notoriety is that he was the first man to die.

He obviously wasn't dead *now*, and it was supremely unlikely that he was the first mortal on this Earth, so for that to have the slightest grain of truth...

Monkey King Enma. Yama.

He was the first to escape from the Infinite Tsukuyomi, wasn't he?

It killed him, maybe he became wise to the fake nature of the world and committed some manner of ritual suicide. Perhaps when Sun Wukong jumped to the very edge of the Buddha's hand, he saw what truly lay outside. Whatever it was, whatever he did, it worked. And then...

He reincarnated into the animal path. The first of many. A monkey. Because with how the Shinju mutilates the spirit of the strong, there was nowhere to go but down.

Myths, folklore, legends, they're full of all manner of stories about sages and bodhis and gods reincarnating as animals and back.

Sometimes they lived out their lives as common animals, like when Krishna became a pig. Other times they retained or regained their faculties, even some of their power, like when Vishnu became a pig to defeat the demon who dragged the Earth to the bottom of the sea. On Earth, all of the legends happened in the human world, on the surface, with only rare mentions of the Underworld as the afterlife, sometimes accessible to the living, sometimes not. But here, the world was drained of all its power and its life until it starved.

'Surface' is the key word there, isn't it?

I thought about animals. About survival instinct. Everything I'd told Naruto about the selfishness and cruelty of most beasts was true. But capybaras were also true. The empathy of wombats was also true, even during fiery disasters that may as well seem like the end of the world. Exceptions proved the rule, but they still had to come from somewhere.

I thought about the existence of great caverns and maybe even greater realms beneath the ground, deep in the Earth. For all I knew, the Hollow Earth theory was true on this planet. The hollow moon almost certainly was, and it was even inhabited by aliens, why not the rest?

When I reached for Mount Huaguo, Enma sensed me immediately, but after he jumped over – how much power did that take?

He needed more than a few minutes of motionless meditation to achieve the sage state here on this side. In the interim, his sensory powers were middling at best. Even after that... He wasn't untouchable to Shikaku's shadow ninjutsu. He was not beyond mortal ken.

The depths of Terra. The megacaverns that were each their own ecosystem, the Underdark, Subterranea, the Underworld where people thought Yomi was placed... It was unknown to everyone on the surface – unknown to Kaguya – so it would naturally be the last place the Shinju reached, if ever.

Because of that, the energy of the world, its life force, the mystical matter that nourished life and could even substitute for the physical body for the purposes of revelation, *that* would remain most abundant and concentrated there. Undiminished from what it once was, what it *should* be up here too, on the surface.

Enough, perhaps, to allow a fallen human soul to predominate over the crude matter of its animal body until it regained its sapience. To sustain the slow crawl of self-determination for however long it took. Even if it meant growing in size over the course of decades or centuries until the pea-sized animal brain finally grew big enough to fathom reason.

My toads had failed to attain sapience because there was no basis for it in their soul. They lacked a sapient soul.

But summoned toads, snakes, salamanders, hawks, cats, apes, the summon beasts all did.

Humans with an inborn affinity for summon animals had at one point *been* one of those summon animals.

Now, I knew for certain that the reverse was just as true.

The noble beasts were all reincarnated humans.