Knitting Fate

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by KillerGirlFuria

Summary

Continuation of Swapped Patterns.

Or
An epos on how Uchiha Ren is an idiot, Inuzuka Hana deserves the world, and so does Shiranui Genma, Rookie Nine are adorable and Ren really, really does not care for actual canon because she's here to attack people and she's having so much fun right now. Also her luck might need counseling, with just how severely bipolar it is.
First Thread

“Anybody can become angry — that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way — that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.”

— Aristotle

Hokage’s estate is… She doesn’t know what it is. She doesn’t even know what she’s been expecting, to be frank, because neither manga nor anime ever really covered the inner workings of the Narutoverse. A little bit of – painfully obviously – Japanese culture, a bit of laws, a bit of scenery, and that’s it. No actual inner workings of society, and civilians? Absolutely nothing about them. Nothing, zero, null. Not that she cared for non-ninja people, but it was annoying.

As to where who lived – that, too, had much too little content thus, when following Hokage to his house, Ren had a little idea as to what she will get. Traditional Japanese house on that funny, short terrace-like foundation? Or a villa like from wet American dreams? No idea whatsoever. Do they live alone, or with servants? Do they even do servants in this universe? Does he live alone, or does he live with his family? Will there be a four-years-old Konohamaru running on and about? Will there be Asuma, or is he still with Twelve Guardian Ninja?

Ren finds herself frustrated. It’s not also lack in social activities, laws and culture, but what about timeline? Kishimoto never cared about it – Kakashi became chunnin at age of six, and still took part in exams five years later with Team Minato. But then, Naruto timeline is painful thing, and almost impossible to make sense of without alterations, and she sincerely hopes that she will make sense of it now. This is real world now, and it’s highly doubtful that time and space machinations alike of those in media will occur.

Ren sighs and shakes her head, pretending to not to notice how Sasuke clings to her sleeve, lest he shakes him off. She doesn’t suppose it would to any good to the boy, since she has already decided that he doesn’t leave Leaf – not under her watch.

“Will there be someone watching over us? You will probably be busy, old man,” she asks as they turn into one of smaller streets. She’s long since stopped trying to keep track of where they exactly were, except for the obvious – in forest. Currently, that is. She always marveled as to how Leaf – big village with many residents, still managed to have about half of its area covered with trees. Not so much after Pain Shinra Tensei’ed it to the ground – yet another thing to prevent. She was here for how long? Five days, and most of it in hospital, but Leaf was pretty, and she preferred it to stay that way.

“Oh, yes,” Hokage smiles. “I assigned two ANBU to watch over you; Hound and Tiger. If anything happens, you can contact me through them.”

Ren almost choked on a snort, but managed to keep the outburst inside, with only her lips bending into a smirk. Hound, or rather, Hatake Kakashi, assigned to be two brats caretaker. He sure must be delighted in thought, but Tiger? Distantly, she realizes, Yamato alias Tenzo alias Kinoe wore something tiger-like. Then, the duo would make perfect sense – the two were strong, and, above all, actually were in ANBU squad with Itachi. Had he decided to return (which was unlikely, yet, she was here so canon was already partly ruined), they would be able to at least take her and Sasuke to safety.
“We don’t need caretakers,” Saskue mutters, puffing his cheeks.

“Oh but Sasu, darling!” Ren chirps. “Imagine all the possibilities for bothering not one, but two ANBU – Leaf’s very elite! I always wanted to see how far one needs to go to annoy one…”

“Not too far, brat, I assure you,” a new voice cuts in, and Ren’s head snaps in that direction. That’s… A lot of Kakashi in Kakashi, honestly. And the fact that he confronted them head-on, mask and all, means that they aren’t supposed to be watching Ren and Sasuke from shadows, but actually be there, had they need anything.

“Hey, ANBU-san, can you cook?” she asks, fluidly changing the topic. Kakashi – Hound – looks at her through the mask, surprised, and she completely ignores the very amused Hokage, and somewhat suspicious, yet amused, Sasuke.

“You will have someone to cook for you,” he answers after a while, but there’s something uncertain yet hopeful in his voice, and Ren bends her face into a pout, crossing her arms on her very flat chest. If she’s in a body of a kid, she might as well act as one – and, honestly, it’s been a long time since she had luxury to do so last time.

“But- But I wanted to see you in pink apron!” she bemoans. “It’s so unfair!”

There’s a sound that sounds oddly like choking, and something falls of a tree but apparently manages to either catch on a branch or land fluidly, since there’s no characteristic thump to be heard. Kakashi gives Hokage a look that means something in between help and what the hell and oh god why me, but old man just smiles at him, and Ren can actually feel Sasuke’s smugness behind her.

“That…” Kakashi says, visibly at the loss of words. Surely, it’s not something he’s been expecting; and, truth to be told, Ren wasn’t expecting to say it either. It just happened, but she was more glad than not that it did.

“Even if I ask nicely, ANBU-san?” she asks, cocking her head and morphing her face into the most innocent expression she can muster at the moment. And world be damned if Renee Archer wasn’t a good manipulator; she did, after all, learn from her mother and grandmother, and those two always got what they wanted.

“Ren, Sasuke, we’re almost there,” Hokage reminds them politely, saving Kakashi in the process, and the silver-haired man looks really relieved at that. Ren is willing to bet that he also regrets showing up to say hello. And… Well.

If in about six years from now Team 7 will make it their life goal to make his life harder than it should be? Ren might or might not have her own input in that.

(It’s not because she dislikes him; quite the opposite, actually. And, she loves seeing her favorite people suffer from embarrassment and antics of others.)

The house is quite big, really, and somehow in weird, nostalgic way reminds Ren o her childhood home, when world was brighter, her family nice and world didn’t seem to hate her almost at all. The days when Renee Archer was a happy child were long, long gone, and for Ren – she would graduate Academy soon, if what people said was to be trusted, and thus, she would become a shinobi (if she passed), thus becoming an adult according to law. But before that, she had about half a year to be a kid again. Whether she intended to use it or not… She would decide some other time.
But back to the house, it was Japanese alright - it was big, built like a wall to embrace the small yard with gigantic weeping willow in the middle of koi pond. But then, it also wasn’t exactly Japanese, even with the roof and specifically painted walls. The windows were normal, the door leading into the house – big, two-winged – were more suited for a modern European villa rather than Japanese estate.

The garden, however, surrounded by the house, was as Japanese as it could possibly get, if not more. There was said koi pond with weeping willow (Ren wasn’t the one to argue, her knowledge about Japanese flora ended with cherry blossoms, bamboo shoots and red maples) surrounded with stones and grass, and there were only small passages leading around it and into the house. There were some bamboo shots in the corner, few red maples scattered around, but no cherry blossom. Instead, there were flowers Ren couldn’t name, but they looked like a rainbow.

She felt like in a story or something.

…wait. She was in anime. Even if it was hardly explained how she got there, remembering this small detail would make understanding world easier. A bit.

“Do you like it here?” Hiruzen asks, smiling, and Sasuke nods his head shyly, only twice. Ren, however, smiles widely, spreading her hands.

“I’m gonna have a garden like this once I have enough money to keep it,” she decides, ruffling Sasuke’s hair, who only buries his face in her shirt to hide his face and its expression. “And you, squirt? Sure you can do better than nod.”

“I… I like it,” he admits weakly, but there is a gentle smile dancing on his lips. That’s good, Ren decides. Keeping him occupied from thinking about the massacre and Itachi is something she definitely can do.

And once she schemes Sasuke into befriending Naruto (or the other way around either works, really) she won’t be alone. And she doubts he’ll have much time to think and mop with the little hellion dragging him around. Honestly, she doesn’t even mind Sasuke growing up into a prankster, really. As long as she gets to keep his smile. (When did she become sentimental?)

“You will be staying in left wing,” Hiruzen says, “we have guest rooms there.”

“I want to sleep with Ren,” Sasuke promptly decides, “I don’t want nightmares to come,” he adds, lowering his head, and Ren sighs heavily, wrapping her arm around the boy in half-hug. He’s so short he can fit under her arm just fine, and Ren doesn’t really know if that’s correct height of an almost-eight-year-old or not compared to hers, but she isn’t going to ask.

“You can sleep with me,” she agrees, but doesn’t think to mention that she likes how Sasuke is basically a heater and she always liked warm when sleeping. “But you need your own covers, remember.”

“Okay!”

(This is good, she decides. Seeing Sasuke like this, a bit happier, a bit brighter, a bit better. And maybe, just maybe, she dislikes him a little (a lot) less, but there’s no way in hell she would ever admit such a thing.)

Hiruzen just smiles at them fondly, and Ren has hard time fighting an eye-roll, but somehow, she does.

“Don’t you have duties, old man?” she asks, cocking her eyebrow, and he tries to hide a nervous
chuckle with a laugh, visibly not very fond of idea of returning to piles of paperwork on his desk. She can understand how it feels, really, paperwork was big part of her former life, too, but somehow she can’t muster any empathy to feel bad for the man, as she’s never been able to before.

“OLD MAAAAN!” something yells in even tinier voice, bursts through the door and barrels into Hiruzen, and old man actually almost trips over the bundle of yellow shirt and green scarf, and Ren doesn’t even bother fighting a snort, while Sasuke looks pretty much just flabbergasted. Konohamaru, all of three and barely even walking, honestly, latches onto his grandfather’s leg and doesn’t let go.

“And what is this little monkey supposed to be?” Ren can’t help but ask, crossing her hands on her chest, which most likely looks slightly comically, witch Sasuke still latched to her side. So, she just settles her elbow on the top of his head and decides to call it a day.

“I’m Konohamaru!” boy yells, but it sounds more like a shriek with his tiny voice, “and I’m goin’ to be next ‘okage!”

Yeah, right, Ren rolls her eyes. Good luck getting there with Tsunade, Kakashi and Naruto at hand. As far as I know, you end up as a sensei of your rival’s kids while he gets the hat, sunshine.

Of course, she doesn’t say any of this, but lets sheer amusement to flood her expression instead, and takes way too much pleasure in seeing the brat puff his cheeks like a Fugu fish.

“Who are you?” Konohamaru demands, letting go of his grandfather’s leg and crossing his hands on his chest. It doesn’t look very serious, really, since he barely reaches to Sasuke’s belt, being three and all. Sasuke quite confused, frankly.

“I’m Ren, and my shadow is Sasuke,” she says. “We’ll be living here until I make genin this year.”

Konohamaru narrows his eyes, and then asks; “you don’t have youl home? Youl mom will be mad at you if you stay hele.”

Ren feels Sasuke clench his fists at her shirt, and she knows exactly what’s coming, and she isn’t fast enough to stop it-

“My mother is dead!” he yells so loud she winces. “So is my father, and everyone else! He killed them all, and we have nowhere to go! Our parents are dead, and we’ll never see them again, never hug them again, never… Never…”

Ren wraps her hands around the boy tightly, pressing him to her chest and gives Konohamaru the most ‘I’m so disappointed in you brat’ look she can possibly put on, and it’s very much like that, given the situation. The boy looks close to crying, but she doesn’t feel bad about him.

“You think you’re so smart? So great? So untouchable?” she growls. “All because you have parents, and your grandfather is the most important person in the village? Well, not everyone does!”

Why is she jumping at him for Sasuke, though, she doesn’t know.

“I wanted Konohamaru to show you around,” Hiruzen admits quietly. “I don’t think it will work now.”

“It won’t,” Ren growls, and hauls wailing Sasuke up, allowing him to wrap his legs around her, and she carries him into the house.

And if she smacks Konohamaaru on the head as she passes, well. If thirteen-year-olds, sometimes
even much younger kids, are expected to be acting like adults, she can expect three-year-old to be at least *smart*.

(She doesn’t hear him sniff and cry, and see him latch onto Hiruzen for comfort. She doesn’t care, because she has Sasuke in her arms, kid who just lost his *entire family* one way or another, and she can’t occupy her mind with some kid who tried to be too smart for his own good.)

If only she could be smart, and not so emotional. That would help a lot.
Second Thread

“The best index to a person's character is how he treats people who can't do him any good, and how he treats people who can't fight back.”
— Abigail Van Buren

It only takes her five minutes to deeply regret jumping at the kid who’s almost a decade younger than she is. Five minutes of her being angry and Sasuke latching onto her for dear life, and she’s already cursing her stupidity and inability to control her emotions better. Five minutes, and she so desperately wishes she retained her former ability to dull her emotions and listen to reason alone.

But she can’t, apparently. She either lost the ability, or has to re-learn it. Or, most likely, both.

And… Renee was never like her grandmother – and Ren is even further from that, she decides. She is a person capable of admitting her mistakes and acting to fix them, not the one to claim she did nothing wrong. So, after brief consideration, she sets Sasuke on the couch, pats him on the head, and walks back outside, into the garden. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a kid or not, she really should not have jumped on him like that, and is it even fair to blame Uchiha blood? No matter.

“Hey, squirt,” she calls when she sees the boy, sulking by the koi pond. He flinches and looks up at her, arms around his knees. She just sighs and swallows a curse, because this is a small kid and she hates kids, but she sits beside him anyway. “I wanted to say that I’m sorry. I really shouldn’t have gotten mad at you. You couldn’t have known what happened.”

“But everybody knowsh,” he sniffs, “I heald mama talk about it yeshtelday. That youl clan wash… Uh, what did they call it?”

“Massacred, kid,” Ren sighs, rubbing her temples. Maybe it was just her, but children Renee could get in contact with were at least two times dumber than kids in this world. Konohamaru was three for crying out loud, and perfectly capable of constructing sentences that made actual sense.

“Yesh, mash… Masha- I don’t know how to shay it,” he admits solemnly, and she can’t help a chuckle.

“You’re only three, you’ll learn to pronounce them soon enough.”

“Yay! And… And I’m sholly, too,” he says. “I should know thingsh like thish.”

“Maybe you should,” Ren agrees, “But I shouldn’t have gotten all defensive. Now, how about we go and you say sorry to Sasuke and show us around the house then?”

“Okay!”

Kakashi sighed from his place on the roof. Crisis, thankfully, seemed to diminish itself, and thank gods for that, because if it hadn’t, he would have to go down and consolidate Hokage’s grandson. That wasn’t something he was all too eager to do, really, but then – every child was a nightmare to
He could even stand Tenzo and Shisui’s bickering, but then, Shisui was dead, yet another casualty of Uchiha Massacre even before it happened – maybe its catalyst of a sort, and nobody was happy with the outcome. The ANBU was pretty much shaken to the ground, if he was to be honest; because Itachi was a former ANBU, and Shisui was still active one, and there were other Uchiha in it, so they lost quite a bit manpower. And morale.

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Tenzo asks, crouching on the tiles next to him. Kakashi just sighs, and shakes his head.

“Sasuke doesn’t really look like Itachi at all,” he settles for saying instead of any other nonsense he might’ve blurted out. “I hope he doesn’t turn out like him.”

“Yeah, me too,” Tenzo agrees. “But he’s got Ren, and she’s unlikely to let go of him. And I’ve heard that Genma took interest in them.”

“Genma?” Kakashi cocks his brow. “I thought he stopped taking strays after Iruka, honestly. But then, it is Genma, so I shouldn’t be so surprised.”

Tenzo just hums in agreement and leans back on the tiles, relaxing a bit. They’re Leaf’s very best, and they have been assigned to watch over two kids, and that’s less than ideal scenario for them. But then, there’s no guarantee Itachi won’t come back – and even if he doesn’t, there are other things to be wary of.

Third had warned them about Danzo especially, but he really had no need to do so. They both, Tenzo especially, experienced firsthand as to what the war hawk is capable of, and to what to be aware of.

Kakashi was out there, behind the window. Don’t ask her how she knew, she just… Sensed him, somehow. But then, she figured, he wasn’t particularly trying to hide his presence. He was supposed to be there for them, after all, no matter how much (and she could bet it was very much) he disliked his current situation.

But on the other hand, it did make sense. He and Yamato – well, Tenzo, still – were the most capable of stopping Itachi this village had. Partly because they worked with him before, partly because of Kakashi’s sharingan and Yamato’s wood release. But then, Itachi shouldn’t exactly come back; he wasn’t to resurface up until Team 7’s Chunnin Exams, which were about six years or so away.

Currently, she sat in the living room with Sasuke in her lap and Konohamaru on her shoulders, reading them a book, aloud. She knew Sasuke was perfectly capable of reading himself, as he traced the text with his finger as she kept reading any only Konohamaru was actually to be read to, but she found herself surprisingly not minding the fact. She realize that, partly, it was because two kids were giving her their attention and perhaps even affection without wanting anything in return.


Renee was used to people being nice to her only when wanting something, and even then not always, and maybe, somewhere deep down, she was slightly missing the attention she once received freely. Even if it was from two kids.
For whom she was either the only remaining relative or cool older almost-ninja.

Well.

The book she got he hands on was, obviously, The Tale of Gutsy Shinobi. She wasn’t even surprised that Hiruzen had the very first book his student ever wrote in his stash. And honestly, she was absolutely certain he had collection of Icha Icha as well. But Icha Icha wasn’t exactly a thing to read to two kids, had she ever found it.

“There’s a kid named like the protagonist in my class,” Sasuke says just as she turns the page to start the third chapter.

“Oh?” Ren asks with interest even if she knows exactly who is he talking about.

“Yeah,” Sasuke agrees, “he’s loud, and obnoxious, and hopeless, and an idiot.”

“No, Sasuke that’s not nice,” she scolds him, ruffling his hair slightly with her chin. He just puffs his cheeks in answer, but says nothing, bending his body and burying his face in the crook of her neck.

“Can you keep leading?” Konoahamaru asks from where he’s perched on her shoulder. “I wanna know what’sh neksht! And mama won’t lead it to me becaushe she shaysh I’m too young.”

“Okay, okay, squirt,” Ren sighs theatrically. “Just move to my other shoulder, would you. It’s getting stiff.”

“Okay!”

Honestly, what has she gotten herself into?

First night in Hokae’s Estate is a bit weird. It’s not like Ren has problems adapting r something, especially given they actually have normal bed, but rather that it finally dawns on her and settles in, that she most likely will never be Renee again.

And that… That makes her happy. She perhaps should mourn for who she used to be, but she can’t bring herself to. Renee was a failure, a part of her story that is already written and unchangeable, a part she’d preferably just forget about. She believes that… That she’s been given a chance, no matter how stupid doesn’t it sound or even feel. That she awoke here to start again for a reason, even if just as trivial as to live her life unhindered by people who just knew better.

This world she knows enough to fit in, and will learn enough to adapt to it. For the first time she actually has a chance to forge her own path through nothing, instead of choosing one of (few) options someone else presented to her. She feels free, even if she was responsible for much more than just herself now. She feels as free as she never had, being Renee and living only for herself.

Now, there is Sasuke, and what he does in the future will change the world, but she doesn’t feel that it’s dragging her down, or hindering her.

It’s more of a motivation, really. And a dare; what would happen had she actually successfully managed to keep Sasuke’s mind away from Itachi and revenge? If she managed to become the anchor keeping him in the Leaf?

She had no idea, obviously. And every intention to find out.
It helps, too, the fact that she seems completely okay with a child clinging to her side, that is. Even if said child is one of characters she (thinks, she isn’t so sure anymore) dislikes, but he’s warm and that compensates it, maybe. But he clings to her like a monkey, save for the fact that monkeys creep her out and no, this is not a good comparison, but they even share a blanket! It’s not that difficult with how Sasuke latched onto her and refused to let go, instantly falling asleep yet retaining his iron grip on her, and she finds herself slowly lulled to sleep by his steady breathing and warmth.

She wonders, is the way that he act around her some post-traumatic disorder? Or a trauma itself, or a way of coping with it? Is he clinging to her only because she’s the only remnant of his ruined world? She isn’t sure about it, nor about how she exactly feels about that.

Renee Archer was always alone, and never allowed herself to depend on others nor others depend on her. This… This escalated quickly.

Fuck that, she promptly decides as her consciousness slips away into warm nothing. We’ll see what gives, won’t we?

Ren – the original one – used to have a dairy. Used to, because Renee believes diaries are utterly useless, ridiculous waste of time. It doesn’t matter, though, before with it, she can re-learn this world through the eyes of someone who lived in it since the beginning. Through the eyes of former inhabitant of her body, no less.

She sees the diary through Ren’s (original’s) eyes as she dreams, as her body feels lighter than it should. But it’s dreaming; or, revising memories of this body, more like, and she has no use for a body to do that.

(She still marvels at how is this even possible, to have both her and original’s memories, but she figures that, well, ninja magic and other reality-bending anomalies.)

Ren kept her diary hidden away neatly under the floor. She found a mobile plank few years ago, and found it useful ever since. She always kept a small table over it, atop of a woven carpet and nobody ever suspected she had a dairy where she wrote down each and every secret and thought of her. Or did she? That Renee can get into only distinctly. But even if they got into the diary, nobody would really be able to access it; it was chakra-locked, and the paper itself was blank for those without sharingan.

End even for those with it, who didn’t know how to look.

Chakra, though, that was an odd feeling, to be honest. It sparked under her skin, both hot and cold, but not unnerving. Something natural, really, even if she never ever had it before. But, thanks to Ren’s experience, she had it now, packed up with knowledge on how to use it – how to cumulate it to jump on trees, walk up on them and hell, she was pretty damn sure she could even water-walk.

And she had head start of knowing Gōkakyū and Hōsenka. And, she was very pleasant to find in her dreams that her chakra reserves weren’t as pathetic as she would expect a girl to have, no. In fact, her reserves were easily one of the biggest in her class. She could, perhaps, write it off to Uchiha standard training. Can’t have an useless clansmen among the ranks, now could they?

(Distantly, she wonders whether Uchiha didn’t manage to mingle an Uzumaki into their family tree, and said Uzumaki somehow ended up her ancestor. That would very neatly explain her reserves without dwelling onto how body and spirit development affects one’s chakra coils.
And Renee was, first and foremost, person of simplicity and blunt statements.)

When the very next day she states she’s going to Uchiha Compound and they can fucking try to stop her if they will, Sasuke looks pretty much exasperated, somehow hurt and slightly betrayed even. But the bodies should be gone after a week, and they start Academy again this Monday, which is in three days, and she needs the goddamn diary now or else she’ll fall too much behind.

Muscle memory and glimpses are one thing, but solid facts and remarks about the work, she has a gut feeling about it, can save her ass in this world. Unless she wants to have it handed to her on a silver tray, which she doesn’t.

“Hey, squirt, I won’t be there for long,” she informs the boy, trying to pry him off her. “I need my diary, okay?”

“I’m fairly certain it was found by now,” Hound inquires, hands crossed on his chest, and Ren just rolls her eyes. She really adores the guy, but right now she just wants to punch his face in.

(Note to self; train hard enough so one day you actually can.)

“It was in the floor, under singing panel,” she informs him helpfully, and the man looks puzzled. “Every other one creaked. Only the one who could be moved was singing when you stepped on it.”

“What if I just go and get it for you?” Kakashi asks, and it’s almost funny that one of Leaf’s very best, ANBU’s captain no less, is absolutely clueless in how to address a child. If he only knew.

“What if you just give me a piggyback ride there?” she inquires, cocking her eyebrow and crossing her arms on her chest. And he actually gives in, much to her surprise, with a weary, heavy sigh, turning his back to her and dropping onto one knee. Sasuke isn’t very pleased, but for now he has to settle for a blanket. Ren, smug like a cat and very happy, climbs onto the future sensei of her brother (since fucking when?!) and his two misfit friends. She grips his shoulders and gives him an okay, and suddenly the world is a blur and its fucking amazing.

She can’t really jump around like that yet, because damn healing ninja magic was spared on her only to cover the greatest damage and now you’re on your own, thank you very much, so she has one or two more weeks’ worth of lazing around, but jumping around is so cool already.

They reach the compound soon enough, and she knows Kakashi is in a haste because oh god small children let it be over with already why me or however train of his thoughts might be going right now, so she just pinpoints a house she remembers living in for almost twelve years, while he doesn’t remember it at all.

But it’s there, and it’s grim and dull, and, to be frank, she hardly bothers with feeling anything. Instead, she effortlessly navigates straight to Ren’s room, with ANBU in a mask of a hound trailing behind her like a loyal pooch. The room is pretty much like in Ren’s memories, and she knows exactly where to look.

Kakashi moves the table for her, and she rolls the carpet and sets it aside, before gently putting pressure at desks.

Creak, creak, chirp, creak.

She falls down to her knees and gently pries the plank that chirped, ripping it out nearly effortlessly,
reaches into dark, cold hole and retrieves something that actually looks very much like a normal book, if rolled and kept together with a ribbon. But that’s it, where secrets of her former life are kept in greater detail.

She puts the plank back in, but that’s all.

“Let’s get out of here,” she tells Kakashi. “I hope I’ll never return here again.”

And if Kakashi sees something flicker through her coals of eyes, he doesn’t say. He knows she just survived the massacre, but that’s… That’s something else. Something he cannot name but maybe, in time, he will know.

(He won’t, never will. In the end, how could he possibly understand how it is to be misplaced, in a body that never wasn’t, nor will truly be, yours? A body that was once someone else’s?)
Ren hates Mondays, and that is a stated fact. Renee hated Mondays, original Ren hated Mondays, she knows, and just… Honestly, there must be something wrong with person who actually likes said day when it’s not free from any sort of activity, because there’s something definitely wrong with the day itself.

So, when around six in the morning (what the actually fuck, what a masochist gets up this early?!) Konohamaru’s mom enters their room and announces that breakfast is ready and they better get going or it’ll cool down, Ren curses her existence, and everything live. So hard that Sasuke sputters and Konohamaru’s mom actually says something about washing her mouth with soap.

(She, very smartly, changes her mind when Ren flashes red at her. The woman isn’t stupid, and Ren never was below intimidation. Especially given that the woman is, in fact, younger than her.

And she might be twelve in body, but her mind is thirty-one. And she will not be disrespected by brat who’s barely turned twenty-three!)

She really had to figure out how to make a proper bento, though. A very much rice-less one, because Konohamaru’s mom (was she like Moomin’s mom here, with her function much more important than her name? Ren suspected she might be) didn’t really comprehend how could she dislike rice. Up until she took it out and threw at the floor, because goddamnit, she was trying and trying to tell her like a civilized person, and it just didn’t work-

No, she did not feel bad for being a moody brat. If the damned woman couldn’t understand after being calmly told five times, then told louder three times, then yelled at twice, she felt fully justified.

Instead, after some wait, she got katsu sando, and only then she decided that she’s content and it’s time to face something she was fully free off for five years. Thank gods that in this world she was going to attend it for half a year and some change, and then she would be done forever, as well. Like, forever-forever.

Unless she would warp to yet another dimension, which she didn’t exactly want. Being in Naruto, a world of super-powered, logic-defying child-soldiers was, in fact, better from… Dragon Age, for example. It was ordinary, but with magic and medieval. Ren wouldn’t be able to survive in hygiene-deprived, mind-clouded medieval. Ever. Naruto was quite advanced, to be honest.

If she was to guess, it was about twenty years behind in development to her old world, which, honestly, really wasn’t that bad. She was around ten again, too, if only physically, and it seemed oddly… Fitting, and perhaps even reassuring.

And armed with a proper, rice-less bento and Sasuke latched onto her hand as if his dear life depended on it, Ren sets off to school.

(She was so not ready for this. She’s been there, she’s seen that. And yet, she was so not ready for
In revision, she was so not ready for the sheer annoyance she would feel after mere five minutes after stepping into the academy building. And why would that be? Well, teachers and some students apparently decided her to be some sort of a glass doll, or, better yet, and holy cow. Was this anywhere near Hindu religion and had her vitiligo been better visible than on her Uchiha-pale skin, it would be, in fact, almost adequate.

Still, she hates it. It’s pissing her off, to be honest. Like, so, so much. Lessons are far from starting yet, and she already feels like destroying something. Preferably levelling the Academy itself, but rearranging someone’s face will do in a pinch. As much as she shivers in fear of any thought of Nagato/Pain at this point (and perhaps forever will), she really does envy his ability to Shinra Tensei things into dust within mere seconds right now.

So, after bidding Sasuke goodbye by forcing bento into his hands and pushing him into his classroom (*let him be flooded with all the fangirls for all she cares, she isn’t going to do anything with them, yet*), she is royally pissed at... Well, everything. She makes her way to her own classroom seriously starting to plot Great Fireball-ing at least one of the fretting people, just to make an example, really. Her chest still aches, but it’s dull and merely annoying. Or, she’s just used to it by now. Her heart has to both heal and beat at the same time, after all.

(The secret as to why she wasn’t healed enough was, apparently, the fact, that they haven’t medics skilled enough to do so, so they just let her body to heal itself as it saw fit, instead of, possibly, ruling out her life as a ninja by permanently distorting her heart’s function. Both bullshit and *way to fucking go, Leaf*, if you’d ask Ren, leaving almost-ninja kid with a nearly-lethal injury and hoping for the best.

If it hinders her future badassery, Ren is very much going to strangle Hiruzen for not dragging Tsunade’s ass back to the village even if just so the Sannin could patch her up and then flip at the Leaf again. And then, she will find the Slug Sannin and force her to fix it over, and she neither doesn’t nor won’t give a single flying fuck about just how serious Tsunade’s hemophobia is.

That’s a promise, *believe it.*)

But, of course, that’s just the tip of the iceberg called ‘making Ren’s life harder in many unnecessary and perfectly avoidable ways’. Because, well, this:

“Back from the dead already, Uchiha?” a snarky, pre-pubescent, boyish voice asks the second she steps into the classroom, and Ren’s head snaps around to follow it, laying her eyes on him. Short, straight, brown hair, bandaged forehead and those creepy, soulless, glassy white eyes, so starkly different from her own dull, charcoal ones. Of course, why is she surprised. That’s just how her luck goes with her life. Filling it with perfectly avoidable nuisances.

“Still haven’t removed that stick from your ass I see, Hyūga?” she retards nearly instantly, promptly throwing her bag and planting herself in one of free spots left in the classroom. The fact that a girl with three puppies around her occupies next spot might or might not be a direct reason and the fact that she decided to live with sitting basically right next to the snarky Hyūga brat.

Hibiki, she thinks, is his name, which the original bothered herself with remembering only because the boy was a constant nuisance, and only because of that. He was nothing special, really, not outsmarting anyone, not a taijutsu prodigy, and his clan never did actual ninjutsu anyway. He was
just… The generic Branch Family member, Ren would guess, who will hardly make it anywhere past chūnin. Well, the Hyūgas could have only as much geniuses.

(A.k.a. Neji, perhaps Hanabi, and very wasted Hinata’s potential.)

“Please, you two, could arguing not be the first thing you do once you enter the classroom?” the girl sitting next to Ren says, and her tone is warm and kind, yet somehow underlined with a dangerous, feral trace of a growl. So, Ren completely ignores the Hyūga brat and focuses on her instead.

She is pretty, alright, even at this age. Her hair is long, chocolate-brown and in a loose ponytail, her eyes dark enough to rival Ren’s, but not nearly as empty-looking, and there are red triangle-shaped markings on her cheeks. Three puppies, almost identical save for differing shades of grayish-brown overcoat, were definitely ninken.

Better yet, Ren was almost certain that those were Three Haimaru Brothers.

And the girl next to her was, obviously, no one else than Inuzuka Hana, older sister to Inuzuka Kiba, one of Rookie Nine. Of Sasuke’s classmate.

“Doesn’t Sasuke have an Inuzuka in his class, too?” she asks, cocking her eyebrow, which instantly morphs Hana’s face from a scowl to delight.

“Yes, Kiba!” she chirps. “He’s my younger brother!”

Perfect older sister alert.

“Well, Sasuke is basically my younger brother now, too, so I guess we have that in common.”

“Oh,” girl sighs. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…"

“No pity, Hana,” Rn growls. “No pity. Compassion. Unless anyone wants to become my training dummy. I could use some work on my fireballs lest I’ll get rusty,” and if she makes extra certain to speak the last sentence loud enough for whole classroom to hear, well. Uchiha Massacre was not her tragedy, per say.

“You know my name?” Hana asks, surprised. “You never bother to remember anyone’s name!”

“Well, I bothered with yours, because you’re apparently worth it,” she just shrugs in answer.

“And me?” Hibiki cuts in. “You remember mine?”

“Get lost, Hisoka,” Ren growls, and then coughs to stop herself from laughing hard at boy’s expression.

“It’s Hibiki!” he yells at her, and she just rolls her eyes in obviously ‘what-the-fuck-ever’ motion. She has a feeling that this might become her favorite form of tormenting the boy over and over again; getting his name wrong. Always.

Yes, it’s cliché, but never gets old.

And it’s about a time when a female shriek cuts through newfound silence, and everyone look towards the source. A girl, with blond hair and very civilian clothing, raises her book with every intention of smashing it down. On a spider.

On a very much albino Japanese Huntsman Spider.
Ren moves before she even registers herself moving – because it’s a spider, that stupid hoe is going to smash a poor, innocent spider, that dumb blonde bimbo is going to murder an innocent and useful creature for no reason – and snatches the creature before the book can hit the wood, protectively covering the spider with her other hand.

“Are you fucking nuts?!” she hisses and almost headbutts the mortified girl, but restrains in the last moment. No violence at school.

“But, but-“ she tries. “It’s a spider!”

“So?” she cocks her eyebrow.

“It’s big, and ugly, and-“


The girl looks like crying when she shakes her head. Good, it’s not like Ren feels bad for her. She never felt bad for stupid people. Also, Renee always liked spiders. She had a goddamn Gooty Ornamental Tarantula, true beauty she was, who she allowed to crawl all over her when she was doing paperwork at home. It’s also worth mentioning that Cobalt - the tarantula, because Renee was genius with names, let’s name cobalt-colored spider ‘Cobalt’ – was never de-fanged, and never once bit her.

Ren sighs heavily. Cobalt died about half a year before her own ‘death’, and she would lie if she said she didn’t miss her pet, for she did. And now, maybe to honor her friend (Renee was such a looser, with her only friend being a spider, wasn’t she?), she saved spiders whenever she could. So, she took this one outside, crouching on the windowsill and placing the spider on a bush behind the window.

The spider, however, had different plans, as it showed with swiftly jumping back onto her hand and making its way up, before it seated itself on her shoulder, visibly content with its life choices right now. Oh well.

“So, that’s how you want to settle it?” she asked the spider, even if she didn’t expect any sort of answer. “Well, whatever, little one, you may stay. You’re less annoying than some,” cue meaningful look towards Hibiki.

Today was going to be… Fun.
“You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.”
— William Faulkner

Otherwise, the lessons were just as boring as she remembered they could be; medium-advanced mathematics you usually did in high school, Will of Fire indoctrination… Oh, pardon, ‘Theory Lessons’, then Japanese writing and reading practice. She had no idea ninjas did literature, honestly, but she really enjoyed the change. Then, there was physical exercise, from which she was banned for at least next two weeks. She had, though, aced the katas other students were struggling with already. Ren, that is, shortly before the Massacre.

(The Uchiha just had to keep spewing geniuses left and right, hadn’t they? Madara, Shisui, Obito, Itachi, Sasuke. And those were only those that were named in the show! Then, there surely was Izuna, and perhaps even Kagami, as he became known as the only Uchiha ever tolerated by the Second Hokage, Senju Tobirama.

They had a history, okay. Of spewing ridiculously-overpowered ninjas. And Ren really, honestly hoped that she wouldn’t be a rule-confirming exception.)

The fact that there was a quite big spider on her shoulder, though, made things more… Entertaining. Literature teacher, a civilian woman, nearly fainted at the sight, which greatly amused Ren.

Renee wasn’t, after all, a good person. Not with tendency to find immense joy in suffering of others – a feat she tried and failed to fight. Many times. So, when someone cried in her presence, she had hard time choking on a snort.

The spider itself – himself, Ren knew her way with determining such things – had seemed to be very comfortable crawling all around her. He was on her face when the civilian teacher stopped reading and took a look at the class. That time, she shrieked and actually ran out of the class, which made total of sixteen definitely shinobi children laugh out loud, few civilian kids snort, and only some civilian girls either whimper or send her a murderous look.

Of course, they were instantly put in place when she send them her own version of it. She might or might not have mentally scarred them for life. Not like she cared, alright. Or no, she did care. She found joy in the fact.

She finds Sasuke on the roof, and can’t help a snort, as he is being crowded by girls, each and every one of them trying to force her bento on him. He looks puzzled, confused, scared and angry all at once, and as much it was amusing, Ren knows that he would never forgive her had he known she could help him and didn’t. Not when it came to fangirls.

So, she made her way through the swarm of seven- and eight-year old girls with good, old elbow-knee-very-not-sorry manner, and threw her arm over Sasuke. Right now she was dwarfing the boy – as every other person her age, most likely. Only later he’ have time to catch up, but then, he had typical Japanese height of 174-or-something centimeters, while Renee was a tall woman, reaching
nearly 180-centimeters. Which meant that if she reached her original size, she would be the tallest woman in whole Naruto cast, taller than even most men, and almost on par in height with Kakashi. (She was hopeful.)

But seeing as even now she stood above all of her class (even if it was normal for girls to be taller at this age), she figured it was possible. Or hoped. The same darn thing at the moment, really.

But she had to snap out of her train of thought, since Sasuke was looking less and less well, as one of the girls actually tried to hug him. It was abstract to her, really, they were seven- and eight-year-olds, and they were already swooning over him. Honestly, even kids in her old world hadn’t stepped that low (yet) and she was feeling thoroughly disgusted with the class. Her current physical age was the age to start having crushes, as puberty was right around the corner (and gods, don’t you remind her about that).

So, she knee-elbows her way through the pack of rabid fangirls and easily snatches Sasuke and leads him slightly away so that she can easily shield him from the girls. Some of them shriek in offense, but she hardly cares, as Sasuke’s fingers latch onto her plain, gray-blue kimono.

“Who are you?!” one of the girls shrieks at her in tiny, annoying voice. None she recognizes, although tiny versions of Sakura and Ino were, indeed, among the crowd. Ren just rolled her eyes.

“I’m his cousin, thank you very much for asking,” she says. “As in the only living relative left that hasn’t gone on murder spree, although that can still change,” she growls, narrowing her eyes, and the crowd wavered and backed. The best part was that she wasn’t really joking with relatives; Madara gone power-crazy, Obito gone heartbroken and Itachi gone rabid left her the only at least semi-sane Uchiha around Sasuke. He didn’t, though, need to know about the two older men, though.

“But… But Sasuke-kun is…” tiny-Sakura says in her high-pitched, childish voice, and Ren only rolls her eyes at that.

“Sasuke-kun needs silence and space. Which you, obviously, fail to provide,” she says, turning around and heading towards the playground. Sasuke, of course, follows close behind, face stern and irritated but hands still clenched tightly on her robe. “Ah, one more thing,” Ren turns towards the girls with fakest, sweetest smile she could ever muster in her life. “The second I hear Sasuke complaining about you will be the second I’ll let my friend here to get to know you. He loves giving kisses,” she says, pointing at the spider, currently sitting curled on her shoulder. Girls, however, shriek as one and suddenly Ren can’t tell which ones are ninja pre-trained kids and who are not, with the speed they all vanish.

“It’s a spider,” Sasuke notices, looking up at her, wide and bland, charcoal-Uchiha eyes staring through the soul and she does not like the feeling. “Where did you get a spider?” he asks, his eyes narrowing, and Ren snorts.

“I found it in my class,” she answers. “One dumb civilian girl tried to kill him.”

“Oh. Are you keeping him?” boy asks, deciding that he prefers holding her hand to clutching her robes as they make the way down from the roof and to the playground.

“Yeah, I think I will,” she answers truthfully. It might not be her Cobalt, or nothing even remotely close, but she’ll take it, honestly. “Why?”

“You should name him then,” Sasuke informs her, and she wants to say ‘I know, duh’, but she just smiles in return, letting the kid bask in his knowledge. “Every pet has a name.”
“Meh, I was never good with naming pets,” she answers truthfully. “But since you brought that up, I’ll just do what I always do, and call him Awai, since he’s an albino and thus, pale.”

“Wow,” Sasuke actually snorts. “You’re really awful with names, nee-san.”

Ren actually stops for a while, but since Sasuke doesn’t really seem to notice he called her like that she just brushes it off. Her plan on stopping him from turning into such an asshole would, at some point, involve him opening up to her so much he’d call her that, and sooner was better than latter.

The things started going awry that day, though, when another teacher, a chūnin girl, all of seventeen (what?! Who even allowed her to teach?!) came up to the class by the end of the break and sated that Kunoichi Classes are next. Boys would have a whole hour longer pause, and girls would go learning arranging flowers and applying make-u and other things like that.

Little to say, Ren wasn’t having that.

“Excuse me sensei,” she starts, standing up. “But I will not be attending Kuchoiichi classes. Not now, not ever,” she states as firmly as she can.

“Oh?” the girl asks, walking over to her. “Why? Those classes are important. Women should know how to arrange flowers, and sew, and-“

“Maybe,” she cuts, harder than intended. “But how can applying makeup help, when I’m being interrogated? How can sewing clothes help, when I’m on infiltration or retrieval mission? Better yet. How can arranging flowers help, when I’m sent off to kill someone?” she asks.

“Uh, I-“ the chūnin starts, but is visibly at the loss of words.

“Understand one simple thing; I’m training here to be a child soldier, often a murderer, because every ninja kills at some point. I’m not attending this school to become a florist, I’m attending it to become an asset to the village. A soldier, an information gatherer, a murderer, if need be,” Ren says, voice stern, as girl’s eyes widen with every word. “I’m a fucking Uchiha with a fucking sharingan and unparalleled talent for Fire Techniques, chakra stock bigger than most people my age and decent abilities in wielding blades. If you think I will end up a Housewife, well, think again. Because I’m head of my fucking clan and I’m going to become one of Konoha’s best soldiers since the creation of the village,” she growls.

“You could never know that!” chūnin shrieks. “You could always fall in love and-“

“I’m cutting my ovaries out as soon and I hit puberty and can afford it, and I’m aromantic, too bad for you,” Ren answers truthfully. Renee had hers removed at age of twenty-three, and it was such a blessing for her, and she kept cursing herself for not doing it sooner. “I’m so sorry, but your argument is invalid. Now, if you excuse me, I have a cousin to spar with.”

So, she leaves the chūnin girl flabbergasted, just as many other people present in the courtyard at the moment. Nobody really expected her to do such thing, did they? Well, as much as original Ren attended the classes, it was because that was expected, and she slept through them. This time she wasn’t going to waste her time, preferring to do something actually productive and beneficial for the future instead.

Like befriending Sasuke with Naruto, for example. Ren knew just fine the two danced around one another for a long time until they were put in the same team, so giving them opportunity to bond
much earlier would be beneficial in tightening their bond. Thus, once they actually were teamed up, they wouldn’t have so much teamwork issues.

Also, Sasuke desperately needed friends. And optimism.

She found him trying to get some other kids to play with him, but to not avail. Around this time the kids were already sharing their parents’ irrational fear and hate and refused – aggressively – to play with the small blonde in orange shirt. That actually made her quite sad. Sure, Naruto was a loud, hyperactive idiot, but there was something in him that made her like him nonetheless.

(Except, of course, the Epilogue version of him. Gods, how was it even possible for the author to make his own characters so terribly OOC?)

“Sasuke, I have a mission for you,” she whispers to her cousin conspiratorially, and he looks at her with interest. “See that blonde kid there?”

“Of course. It’s the moron, he’s bad at everything-“

“I want you to befriend him.”

Sasuke blinks at her once, twice. Then looks at Naruto, then again at her.

“Why?” he asks blankly. Uh, so here it comes. The Talk, that is.

“Because, my dear, cute, little cousin, you need friends,” she starts, kneeling in front of him. “So do I, but let me take care of it myself. You need friends, just like everybody else. You can get strong alone, but when you have friends who got you back, and something precious to protect? That is when you get really, truly strong.”

“But I’ve got you!” he argues. “Can’t you be enough?”

“No,” she answers firmly. “You need friends your age. I will graduate soon, and start with missions, while you’ll be stuck here. Completely alone. Don’t you want someone to help you fend off the fangirls?”

He visibly shivers at the thought, and nods. “But why the idiot?”

“Just exactly because of that,” true and not at the same time. “And more. Opposites attract, don’t you know? Because they make each-other whole. He’s an idiot, and you’re smart. He’s always happy and energetic, you’re sad and de-motivated. You can learn from one another, how to be better, how to be stronger.”

Sasuke winces, looks at Naruto again, and sighs. “I’ll try, but only because you asked,” he agrees, and Ren can’t help a smile. Trying is enough, she’s sure of it. Naruto has no one at this point, perhaps not even Iruka yet, and even if, their relationship is still rocky. She’s certain he will leap at the chance of friendship.

Even with Sasuke. Or maybe, especially with Sasuke.

“What do you think, Awai?” she asks the spider as her little almost-emo cousin walks over to the hyperactive ball of sunshine, and chases older kids away. And then actually starts talking to the blonde. “I’m such a genius, am I not?” she asks sarcastically, because given chance, she’s sure every fan of the series could come up with the solution alike.

Awai only makes a motion as if he’s clapping, earning a chuckle from the girl.
“So, mister Hound,” she calls slightly louder. “How do you think will friendship between our local Jinchūriki and one of last Uchiha survivors will bloom?”

Kakashi drops by her with a sigh, “so, you know.”

“Please, who older than ten doesn’t?” she snorts. “I wonder why we do know, though. Wasn’t that supposed to be, like, secret? What if somebody spread it?”

“What do you mean?” Kakashi asks her, leaning against a tree.

“I mean that as much as some ninja could know, how the hell do civilians know?” she asks. “I remember the previous Jinchūriki. Pretty woman with long, red hair. Spent a lot of time with miss Mikoto there, and nobody really knew, except for our clan. I knew only because I overheard elders talking,” true, for that’s exactly what happened. She was three, or something, and nobody minded her.

She knows Kakashi stiffened, because he apparently just now realized that it was off, everyone knowing. Because it, indeed was. He only made a soft hum of acknowledgement, though, and nothing more.

“So, what were you plotting with your spider?” Kakashi asks, and she sighs, ruffling her hair.

“Sasuke needs friends, and choice of Jinchūriki is accidental. I just needed the most optimistic and energetic kid his age to level him,” she answers in a half truth. Jinchūriki part is an accident, yes, but Naruto himself is not.

“Naruto is always alone,” Kakashi agrees. “It’ll be good for him, too.”

“Why I’m not surprised you know his name?” Ren snorts, and Kakashi scratches back of his neck with a chuckle.

“Being ANBU and all,” he answers. “Knowing things. Like you not wanting to partake in Kunoichi classes.”

“Was flower-arranging ever useful to you in your career?” Ren asks him, and a shake of his head is the only answer she gets and needs.
It’s Hana who finds her after school, when she, hand in hand, walks with Sasuke towards Hokage Estate. She’s quite content, as her little cousin deemed Naruto ‘not as hopeless’, which gives her hope. For both of them. And id Sasuke asks her about her own friends, well. Before she can answer, three grayish-brown puppies barrel into her legs out of completely nowhere and nearly cut her down. Thankfully Sasuke is already stronger than he seems and manages to keep her up, because otherwise she would definitely kiss the ground.

“Hello to you to, Hana,” Ren sighs as she regains her balance, three puppies attacking her pants. Other girl laughs aloud, catching up fast, with a boy even smaller than Sasuke trailing close by, cradling small white ball in his and’ it’s so very obvious that he would one day grow into very loud Inuzuka Kiba.

“Hey, Ren, you left so fast I had to chase you,” Hana smiles, and Kiba puffs his cheeks, hiding behind his sister. It’s cute, seeing how unsure he is, while Sasuke is standing next to Ren, albeit gripping her robe, but still, quite brave.

“Sorry, but Sasuke gets overwhelmed by his fangirls the second they get a chance, so I weren’t too keen on lingering around,” she sighs, patting her little cousin’s head and earning a huff. “Anything you want?”

“Well…” Hana starts, scratching her neck. “I wondered if you wanted to spend some time together. I know it’s not exactly you style and all, but… Maybe?”

“Sure,” Ren shrugs. “It’s not like we have anything better to do, do we, Sasuke?” she asks, and boy just shrugs.

“Whatever,” is his only answer, and Ren smiles.

“That way you can befriend Hana’s little brother, too! Because I assume this is Kiba, yes?” she cheers, and Sasuke gawks at her, while little Kiba looks at her as if she’s some sort of alien. Hana only clasps her hands together.

“That’s a great idea! Kiba is so shy among other kids still, so that would really help!” she smiles, and Ren can’t really portray Kiba as shy no matter how much she tries. Because that’s Kiba, goddamnit, and the ones more exuberant than him re only Naruto, Lee and Guy. So, obviously, that’s much beyond her cognitive skills.

“I find it kinda hard to be able to put an ‘Inuzuka’ and ‘shy’ next to one another in the same sentence, you know,” she voices her standing, and Hana just snorts at that, visibly amused, and mini-Kiba just puffs his cheeks, clutching his hands tighter against a ball of fur that Ren thinks can only be a mini-Akamaru.

“He’ has time to get there yet,” Hana winks at her, lacing their arms together and Three Haimaru Brothers switch their attention from Ren to Sasuke who doesn’t exactly seem to mind the fact.
“So, how about a Yakiniku bar?” Hana asks, and the other girl gives her a toothy grin in an answer.

“As long as it’s nothing with rice,” Sasuke admits. “Nee-san hates rice.”

“Woah,” Inuzuka girl looks at her companion. “Why?”

“Because of taste, and texture, and everything else?” the Uchiha answers. “I honestly hate everything about rice, and can’t really change it. Makes me wanna throw up whenever I try eating it and I can’t help it.”

“That sucks,” Hana agrees. “Given that most food here is about rice. Oh well, meat was always more appealing to me, too,” she grins.

“But I like onigiri,” Sasuke puffs his cheeks suddenly, and Ren laughs.

“I’ll make you some once I know how to,” she says. “As long as I don’t have to eat them. You’ll be my taste-tester, okay?”

“Should I be afraid?” he asks, cocking his head to the side and maybe the effect is tripled by three puppies at his legs, but he really, really looks like a puppy himself that moment. Sasuke should not be allowed to be cute. Very much not.

Ren sighed, and continued walking, arms laced with Hana and she decided that befriendung the Inuzuka could actually benefit her, too. They were known for loyalty, and Ren can’t remember if Renee even had an actual friend, save for the fact that none of them were made in real-life. Yet another thing bound to change, but she didn’t really mind. Between Hana, happily walking beside her, Sasuke, trying avoid having his pants ripped, and Kiba, trailing close by with uncertain expression, it was actually very… Very what? Soothing, maybe. Fulfiling in a way, too. Having friends – real friends, was something she would very much enjoy.

They walk by the playground, when Ren spots an orange-and-yellow shape, sitting miserably on one of swings and sighs heavily.

“If you excuse me for a moment, I think me and Sasuke need to fetch one more person,” she sighs, looking at her cousin. “Don’t we?”

He makes a face, then puffs his cheeks, but eventually nods, and Hana looks at her with unreadable face. However, it’s Kiba who speaks.

“Nobody likes Naruto,” the boy says, looking at Ren.

“And why don’t they like him?” the Uchiha asks, un-lacing her arms with Hana and kneeling before the boy.

“Uh…” he starts. “Because adults say he’s a demon or something. So we don’t play with him.”

“Which adults?” she asks, trying her best to not to sound scary.

“The civilians,” boy admits solemnly, and Ren gives and exasperated sigh, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Listen here, pup,” she starts, and his eyes widen ridiculously at the sound of the nickname. “Before you believe adults, look at it yourself and decide if you really want to believe them. Does Naruto look like a demon? Does he act like one?”
“No, but adults-“

“Hear me now, pup,” she cuts him. “If there’s one thing adults love doing, it’s lying. Adults absolutely love lying, especially civilian adults. They love doing it, and they do it constantly. Never believe adults before looking at the matter yourself, okay?”

“Uhm… Okay,” he nods. “I don’t like liars.”

“Good, neither do I,” she says, standing up, and Hana offers her a small smile. It’s obvious she herself has been quite skeptical to all the murmurs about demons going around Naruto, as they never actually came from shinobi families. Shinobi families just didn’t care, believing their kids to be smarter than civilian kids. Which they, in fact, weren’t.

“Well, let us go, then,” Inuzuka laces her arms with Uchiha again, and leads her towards the swings, and two boys can do nothing other than follow.

“Idiot,” Sasuke greets the blonde the second he’s within earshot, and Naruto shots to his feet, happy yet alerted.

“What do you want, bastard?” he calls back, crossing his arms on his chest.

“If I may say something,” Ren cuts in, “Sasuke is very much legitimate child, so why on earth would you be calling him ‘bastard’?”

That catches Naruto out of guard, as he gapes at the older girl before him, before he bristles visibly.

“And who are you?” he asks, pointing his finger at her.

“I’m Ren, and this is Hana,” Ren answers, and Sasuke rolls his eyes.

“Hey, idiot, you wanna go to Yakiniku Bar with us?” he asks, and this time Naruto looks at him as if he literally fell from the sky, green-skinned and all. Although given the universe, Ren wouldn’t write it off as completely impossible. “It was her idea,” Sasuke corrects himself fast, pointing at the older Uchiha with his thumb.

“You’re in class with Kiba and Sasuke, aren’t you?” Hana smiles. “It’s important to be friends with your classmates, so we thought it would be perfect opportunity!”

“I, uh…” Naruto starts, and he’s very much at the loss of words.

“Idiot, yes or no?” Sasuke asks, cocking his eyebrow, and Ren thinks that for the moment there might be tears glistening in Naruto’s eyes.

“Yes!” blonde says. “Free food!”

“Hm, maybe we could go eat ramen some other day?” Ren asks Hana and pretends to not to notice how Naruto’s eyes lit up. “I’ve heard there’s very nice place somewhere around…”

“It’s Ichihraku, dattebayo!” Naruto shoots. “It’s really, really, really good!”

“Well, since you apparently go there,” Hana starts. “Then we must take you with us, since you know what’s the best in there.”

“Sure do!”
There are people who glare at Naruto, of course. Many, many people including the guy behind the counter, and the waitress. Ren makes sure to glare right back at them, which makes them scurry around without looking twice, to try again in a while. Too bad for them, Hana picks up the motion, and having two pairs of angry, black eyes – one soulless, one feral – proved to be enough to scare them into behaving like people for longer periods of time.

Which, in turn, lead into Naruto relaxing and having a good time, and Ren even had to ask Hana again if she said anything about Kiba being shy, because around the blonde hellion he was anything but. The Inuzuka girl just shrugged and smiled at the fact to which, in turn, Ren gave her an eyeroll.

“I see you’re enjoying it?” Hana asks with a smile, as Ren works her way through second serving of well-cooked meat, because fuck diet, she needs them calories to build her muscle mass so hard now and forever more. It’s a way she herself tested, feeding herself lots and lots of protein and then working them all out.

“I’m a carnivore,” Ren answers after a while. “Meat is my favorite type of candy.”

“But meat isn’t candy!” Naruto argues from above his plate.

“It’s a saying, moron,” Sasuke interrupts. “It means nee-san likes meat the most.”

“Ooooh! Just like I like ramen!” blonde cheers.

“Everybody knows you like ramen,” Kiba huffs, letting mini-Akamaru lick the fat from his fingers. Dog is apparently too young to have a fully meat diet yet, but boy apparently deems him old enough to taste it.

“I also like vegetables,” Ren nods, and Hana snorts loudly at the faces all three boys make all at once. Like cats thrown into cold water, almost.

“Eew!” Naruto calls. “Vegetables are awful!”

“Second!” Kiba calls. “Second much!”

“But I like tomatoes,” Sasuke mutters, uncertain whether he should side with them or stay by his own decision.

“Well, tomatoes are, actually, fruits,” Ren says smartly, earning a wide-eyes looks. “So are cucumbers and peppers,” she continues, and this time even Hana gives her a disbelieving shocked look.

“No way,” Inuzuka girl snorts. “You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“Nope. They develop from plant’s ovaries and contain seeds, so they’re fruits. Scientifically, that is,” Ren explains. “Cooks may disagree, though, since they’re used in savory dishes, unlike other fruits.”

“The things you learn,” Hana sighs bemused. “All the wonders of the world. But then, you Uchihas are always a smartasses.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Ren snorts in return.

“But what about actual vegetables?” Sasuke asks. “Some of them are actually… Not so tasty.”

“Because they’re being prepared but idiots, duh,” Ren rolls her eyes.
“So, I take it, you know the secret to tasty vegetables?” Hana asks, a smile dancing on her lips.

“Other than ‘close your eyes, plug your nose and gobble it up’? Yeah, I do, actually,” she answers with a smile. “How, however… Let this remain my sweet, sweet secret for now.”

It’s already pretty late into afternoon when they say their goodbyes – Hana, Kiba and their dogs turn towards the Inuzuka compound, which was the totally opposite way all along, and all Ren can do at them is just shake her head hopelessly and smile, because dog people. Awai, previously safely tucked away in the pocket on the inner side of her haori now resurfaces, and places himself on her shoulder instead. Naruto still walks with them for a bit, as he, surprise, surprise, lives quite close by Hokage’s Estate.

Blonde and her little cousin walk shoulder by shoulder and are actually talking. Or, more like it, Naruto is talking, which earns variety of reactions from Sasuke. The boy, actually, snickers once at whatever the blonde had said and Ren didn’t pay attention. Instead, she just smiles, because it’s Naruto, and it’s obvious he’d get on Sasuke’s good side soon. Like we-just-met-and-we’re-friends-now kind of soon.

Well, maybe not entirely, Sasuke still mostly scoffs at the blonde, but they will be attending the same school in the same class for five years or something, and actually storyline doesn’t start until they graduate. So, yes, they have time. A lot of it. Ren suspects (hopes?) the two will be conjoined at hip by the time their third year rolls about. In all honesty, she doesn’t even mind Sasuke picking up the pranking from Naruto, as long as it’s not directed against her.

“So, I live here,” Naruto says, as they stop in front of tall, obscure and visibly cheap apartment. The very same one features in first episode of the show overall.

“Just please don’t tell me you live on the top floor,” Ren whines, but she knows the answer just fine.

“I do live on the top floor!” boy cheers, and the girl groans.

“How the fuck are we supposed to visit you when you live thousands of fucking stairs away?” she bemoans, and both boys make a face.

“Nee-san, bad language,” Sasuke notes, and she just rolls her eyes. The fact that she managed to act like a well-mannered person in school and with Hana doesn’t mean she’s going to keep the façade any longer.

“Bite me, squirt,” she answers. “Trust me, I’ll become a legend in the ninja world known as ‘The Cursing Shinobi’. I tell you!”

Sasuke snorts, and Naruto actually laughs, loudly.

“And I’m gonna be Hokage, dattebayo!” the blonde answers, jumping up. So high that for a moment she faces his feet on her eye-level and this is not something she had seen in her old world. Really, not.

“And I’m going to avenge our clan,” Sasuke says emotionlessly, crossing his arms on his chest, which makes Ren snort, as she places her hand on his head.

“For that, my cute little cousin, you need to stand in line,” she snorts, ruffling his hair. “Don’t think about it, squirt. Go, make friends, be a kid. Become strong with friendship, not with hate he wants
you to use. Because hate is a fragile thing, and it will just leave you one day. It’s uncertain, and toxic.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?!” Sasuke yells, and Ren glances at very much flabbergasted Naruto, before grinning widely.

“First, you make friends,” she says, still looking at Naruto. “And then, you’re gonna become the exact opposite of what he wants you to become. Strong in your own way.”

Sasuke puffs his cheeks, glances at Naruto, then back at Ren, and sighs.

“Come on, nee-san. We have, as you put it, ‘thousands of fucking stairs’ to go, don’t we?” he says then, smug smile cutting his features.

“Squirt, watch your mouth!” Ren nearly shrieks, smacking Sasuke in the back of the head, but boy only laughs – actually, really laughs – and races Naruto to the top of the building.

And Ren… Ren hates stairs.
Sixth Thread

“There is nothing better than a friend, unless it is a friend with chocolate.”
— Linda Grayson

It took Ren only to Tuesday to promptly decide that Hyūga Hideki was, indeed, a mediocre she thought him to be when she saw him for the first time. One would think that all of his clan were at the very least decent, but no. There’s Neji, boy with face like he’s suffering from particularly bad constipation but can land a hit on older kids while he’s only nine, and there’s Hibiki, who tries very hard to have the same face all the time but… But.

But Ren, still on medical leave, technically, and told by everyone to still take it easy for a week or two wipes the floor with the guy’s face. Twice. Without even breaking a sweat, and only a mild sting in her chest, like when she walks a bit faster. What.

First time is in the classroom, right before lessons start. Hibiki, being Hibiki and all, was particularly annoying that morning (although, Ren isn’t sure still, that’s the third day she actually knows him personally), so she got mad and punched him so hard he flew through the classroom like a particularly ugly bird, and the class (most of it) burst into applaud just as very confused chūnin teacher had appeared.

Second time was when they had taijutsu practice. Ren was just sitting calmly on the bench, enjoying the whole hour of nothing, because bless medical leaves. She might not be loathing activity, but she sur didn’t mind a moment of idle laziness. And, as if on cue, here came Hibiki, left side of his face red and swollen, and started calling out on her. That’s she’s a coward and stuff, and she surely wouldn’t be able to beat him in a fair spar with a supervisor.

So, what did Ren do? She snapped her former self’s diary (she’s taken to reading it quite a lot), instinctively chakra-locked it, and stood up without a second thought. She was never one to turn down a challenge, not even from someone like Hibiki. Long story short, he wasn’t as smug when, not even a minute later, she pressed him down to the ground with her whole body, while practically breaking his arm with how hard she bent it back.

Public humiliation, of a sort. Especially since, as she learned later, her class wasn’t the only to witness it. Not when the exercise took place on the main training ground, onto which most Academy classes had a good look.

“Nee-san,” Sasuke says the second he catches her on the lunch break. “That was amazing.”

Of course, if there’s someone who knows how to catch Ren off-guard, it’s Sasuke. It’s always and only him, and so, she looks at him both confused and questioning.

“You kicked that mean guy’s ass, dattebayo!” her answer comes from Sasuke’s shadow, that recently took form of overly-active ball of sunshine. She was still amazed at the fact that it took Naruto the total of one and half a day to latch onto her little cousin and not let go, without Sasuke even minding. Astounding, even. Not that she minded, though, no. Sasuke desperately needed
friends, and who’s better than the kid he would end up befriending anyway later on?

And, honestly, who even allowed those two to be so adorably amazed by her?

“What do you mean by ‘mean’, huh?” she asks, her eyes narrowing as Awai just casually jumps from her shoulder onto Sasuke’s hair. Boy doesn’t seem to mind, really, but Naruto lets out a slightly startled ‘eeew’.

“He picks on younger kids with other older guys,” Sasuke explains to her, pointing with his thumb to where Hibiki sits with some guys she doesn’t bother to remember. They are from her class, that much she knows, and they appear civilian.

“That’s not what I’d expect from a Hyūga, really,” she murmurs, crossing her arms on her chest. “They’re always so fractious and proud, but bullying?”

“He stole my food once,” Naruto mumbles, puffing his cheeks. “And hit me real hard when I tried to take it back.”

At this, Ren smiles. She smiles the way even Sasuke looks at her wide-eyes, remnants of color suddenly drained from his face. Naruto himself looks quite scared, too, because, well.

“Just you wait for when I’m completely healed and greenlit to kick asses,” she says so sweetly that Sasuke looks even more frightened and Awai actually curls around his hair. “Just you wait, you fucking piece of shit, and you’ll see what I have to say about you bullying my little adopted brother and his friends.”

Somehow, neither of the boy doubts in the promise for even a second. And if Hibiki glances at them with a glint of uneasiness in his eerily pale eyes for split of a second, well, nobody really bothers to notice. Not when there’s Hana startling Ren by suddenly glomping her and really what the fuck, how did you sneak up on me, stop. With Kiba right behind her, of course.

“What are you plotting, huh?” Inuzuka girl asks, and Ren just shrugs.

“You know, what’s for dinner, and a bit of mass murder here and there. You know, a colorful genocide, so we can make garlands out of Hyūga Hibiki’s intestines, and maybe gloves out of his skin-“

“Oh god, Ren,” Hana just facepalms. “What did he do this time?”

“Fun fact number one; did you know who’s been bullying younger kids?” she asks, and Hana’s eyes narrow as she shoots a glance at Kiba. Boy just smiles sheepishly, scratching back of his neck.

“You told me those were street hooligans,” she says. “Not my own classmate!”

“Oh, you know…”

“Okay, Ren,” brunette turns to her, face stern. “What were you saying about that mass murder?”

“Hm, well, first, we lure him into a dark street-“

“Man,” Naruto says, turning from the plotting girls. “Older sisters sure are scary, aren’t they?”

“You realized that just now, moron?” Sasuke huffs, allowing Awai to climb up his arm and onto his shoulder.

“Mom’s scarier,” Kiba admits quietly. “But Hana can be pretty scary when pissed, too.”
“Do you really think they’ll kill that mean guy?” Naruto whispers to other two conspirationally, and earns a sigh in return.


“Those are girls,” Kiba admits solemnly as if there was something more to that than just the obvious. “Girls are scary.”

Somehow, the other two find it hard to disagree.

On Friday, Genma finally comes back from his secretive mission, whatever that was, and actually bothers to walk up to the Academy once lessons are over. So Ren, just like that, glomps him so hard she almost trips the man and refuses to let go, because it’s Genma, he’s so beyond awesome and she missed the smug fucker, too.

“Well, I see I’ve been missed,” he chuckles, patting her head, but she still doesn’t loosen her chokehold on him, burying her face in his flak jacket instead.

“You’re too cool to not be missed,” she admits, muffled but the Tokujo still makes the words out, somehow. “Why are you here anyway? I doubt you bothered just to see that one kid you visited in hospital after they had their entire family slaughtered.”

Genma just chuckles, shaking his head. “That, too, but not only. I also-“

“Genma-nii!”

“Hello to you to, Iruka,” Tokujo says, waving the senbon with his lips at the boy approaching. Well, that is very much Iruka, but… Younger. “I heard you passed the tests just fine?”

“Yes!” boy admits cheerfully, and really, he can’t be older than seventeen or something around it. Ren never really thought of it before, but he did start teaching young. But hey, it was ninja world and ninja logic. “I will be a full-time teacher next year!”

“Shame,” Ren mutters, letting go of Genma. “I’m graduating this year, and if Genma likes you, then you must be awesome, too. I would’ve loved to have you as a teacher.”

“Really?” Iruka asks, his eyes shining, excited and proud.

“Really,” Ren agrees, nodding her head. “Everything touched by miracle of being with Genma is a good thing.”

At that, Iruka just snickers, and then bursts out laughing, and Tokujo in question rolls his eyes with a smile.

“Not just touched,” he says, glancing at Ren. “I’ve been raising him for, like, seven years now.”

“So you’re the local hen mother?” girl asks, very seriously, and Genma pales for a second, but then coughs into his hand and regains his composure quickly.

“I swear to god, if you start clucking I’m going to commit a mass murder. On Aoba, most likely,” he says seriously, but his face isn’t that serious, so Ren just laughs in answer.

“Nee-san, what the hell are you doing?” Sasuke’s tiny voice sounds behind them, and the girl
growls, turning around to face the boy.

“Squirt, language,” she says, looking down at him. Awai also, the sneaky little bastard he is, seats himself on her shoulder and looks at the boy judgingly, his front legs crossed. It’s comical, in all honesty. Enough for Naruto, trailing behind Sasuke like a shadow he’s become (at least throughout whole Academy day, and Sasuke tolerates it, because, honestly, it’s either Naruto or the fangirls), to actually snort at the spider.

“You really bother?” Genma asks, clicking the senbon between his teeth. “Of course he’s going to imitate his role model.”

“Me, a role model? That’s such a load of crap, Genma!” Ren disagrees, only earning a chuckle from the man, snort from Iruka and yet another wave of smugness, this time from Sasuke. Overall, Ren notices, her life is full of smug people. Genma drips with it, Sasuke grows up to be smug little shit- Not that she minds, as long as he doesn’t become the power-hungry, revenge-driven maniac she dislikes so hard.

“Well, nevermind,” Genma sighs. “Oh! Now as I’m back, how about I treat you some food? I’m freshly paid and all,” he smiles, and Ren just sighs.

“If you’re willing to feed me, squirt, that little ball of sunshine and two Inuzuka, well, I’m game,” she shrugs, receiving a confused look in return.

“Two Inuzuka?” Genma asks.

“Hana and Kiba, kids of current clan head,” she answers, as if that was the most obvious thing ever. “We promised Naruto ramen last time-“

“Ramen! Yay!” the boy pounces at her without a second thought, and Ren grunts, as it flares her nearly-healed wound with new pain. Not nearly as much as before, though, so it’s a good sign. In a week from now she should be perfectly fine to kick Hibiki’s ass on a daily basis via taijutsu practice. However, she wasn’t so sure they would team the class’ very own Dead Last against one of most serious ‘Rookie of the Year’ candidates.

(If Hibiki wasn’t a Hyuga and to be teamed with Inuzuka and Aburame as part of Tracking Team, Ren would actually fear he’d end in team with her in order to level his ridiculously low-level performance.)

Genma, it turns out, really was on some sort of important mission, and his paycheck apparently reflected in, since he didn’t even flinch as Naruto made his way through his fourth bowl and didn’t even start to seem content yet. Ren, eating much slower, was only at her second bowl.

And as much as the boy seemed to like every single type of ramen (there was, like, more than ten variations and Ichiraku apparently knew every single fucking recipe), he wasn’t limiting himself to any. Ren, however, found herself favoring the most unoriginal, boring, ‘primal’ variation of the broth; shōyu ramen, topped with additional Narutomaki and Menma (ever wondered where Naruto’s dark counterpart’s name from ‘Road to Ninja’ came from?). Still, she made her way through it much more slowly, always favoring eating slow and savoring the taste, but she was pretty certain she could eat at least half of what the boy was eating. Ro her right, there sat Sasuke, finishing his own miso ramen in silence, and a bit further, Hana and Kiba bickering over their portions of tonkotsu.

Genma, smug bastard, was watching them all from above of his bowl, goddamn cat pleased about
Ren didn’t-know-what.

“What’s so good, huh?” she asks finally, as she sets second bowl aside and motions Ichiraku for another one.

“I remember you, week ago,” he says quietly. “A broken kid, confused and scared. And look at you now. You almost have a gang now.”

“Hn,” for lack of anything better, she just gives him the Uchiha™ response with a shrug, to what tokujo only chuckles.

“Besides,” he says again, bending towards her. “I’m so glad you’re friendly to Naruto. He doesn’t exactly have many friends. And we… Well, people closely related to him or his parents are for some reason forbidden from approaching him.”

That was Danzo, Ren thinks. There’s no fucking way it’s someone other than Danzo. Also, as to why nobody ever took Naruto in, neither Kakashi, nor Genma, nor any closer friend of Minato and Kushina? Mystery solved. Not that she likes this particular turn of events, but she’s already plotting.

“Don’t worry,” she says finally, digging her chopsticks into her fresh, steaming food. “I’m already plotting. I’ll have an army of tiny Academy-sized minions in no time, trust me.”

“What?” tokujo actually laughs this time, attracting attention of others.

“You’ll see,” she winks at him, and grins in quite mischievous manner. The man eyes her suspiciously for a while, then wiggles his eyebrows, earning a snort. Too bad, exactly when Ren has a mouthful of noodles, so it ends in coughing fit and threats of murder, Sasuke’s exasperation and a lot of laugh.
“There is an innocence in admiration: it occurs in one who has not yet realized that they might one day be admired.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche

Next three weeks were majorly uneventful, except for the fact that somewhere in the middle Ren suddenly realized that, hey, it’s winter out there. But then, she was in the Fire Country and it was mildly climate-wise, or rather cold, but never below zero this time of year – so imagine Ren’s surprise, when she woke up one day to world coated in pure whiteness outside the window. Only then she bothered to check that it was, in fact, the middle of February, and also, her birthday was due in two weeks or so.

( Maybe it wasn’t most normal that Renee, too, had her birthday due the second of March, like Ren, but she didn’t even bother freaking out over it anymore, really.)

Also, another very notable thing was that Sasuke invited Naruto and Kiba over. Actually invited – not Ren, not Hokage, not Naruto inviting himself. Sasuke, in his full, mighty and broody, eight-year-old form. It basically happened because he finally took pity of the boy and decided (quite angrily) that they’re going to study together from now on, every single Tuesday, and Kiba just happened to be around so he told him that the Inuzuka boy is free to join if he wants.

So, it wasn't just any invitation. Sasuke actually had Naruto coming over every single week because of him. He didn't seem to count it as a friendly interaction, but Ren knew her fair share and Naruto was overjoyed, so she let her little cousin's awkwardness slide. And also, of course, Konohamaru had instantly taken liking to Naruto more than to Sasuke. But then, Naruto was (quite literal, mind you) ball of overactive sunshine, with his charisma and slightly bratty attitude, so, of course, Konohamaru would tag along in delight.

(They actually managed to lure Tenzo into trap, and would catch Kakashi, too, wasn't he a tad faster. Those children were frightening when need be, and Ren was so damn glad they were growing from her ducklings into faithful underlings/minions. So very glad.

In the end, Tenzo had to walk around with hair dyed glittery blue. Ren could bet that other ANBU were going to have have a field day – the secretive secret that they were just very well paid bunch of gossips was somehow known to majority of ninja ad minority of civilian population who actually paid attention.)

Ren’s wound, thankfully, gradually stopped being such a nuisance as well. In four weeks from massacre she was finally, finally greenlit to kick Hyūga Hibiki's ass. And she did exactly that. Every. Single. Time. It wasn't difficult, though, as Ren placed near the top in the class ranking, and he was near the bottom. Teachers still majorly paired them up against each other, as things actually could've gotten hairy, had Hibiki decided to use his Byakugan for once. And he actually did – and gods bless Sharningan, because even with it Ren wasn't able to block all the Gentle Fist hits the first time around he surprised her with it. Well, at least he got detention afterwards, for 'endangering other students'.

Also, meetings with Hana and Kiba became sort of regular way of spending Monday's evening.
They would just gather before Academy after school hours and then spend some time together, up until the sky would darken, most often. They wouldn't exclusively go to eat out; in fact, two weeks ago, they went to the park and had a giant snowball battle. It was, actually, a good training of accuracy, sneak and dodging. And if Ren and Hana put extra strength and precision into throwing extra hardened snowballs at people who eyed Naruto wrong, well. Accidents happen and so do stray snowballs.

Then, Genma magically appeared and they decided to build a giant snowman, trying their best to make it look like the tokujo. There was also that other Jōnin who stumbled by – Aoba, if Ren remembered correctly – who started making clucking noises upon spotting Genma dogpiled by kids on snow. Eventually, Genma got so fed up with it (Goddamn Aoba, don't you have work to do?!) that he tried to strangle the other man. Maybe, just maybe, Aoba would stand a chance against Genma alone – but against Genma and five kids? Not so much.

Things began to change on the beginning of fourth week, though, around the evening, on Friday, after school. Naruto somehow managed to drag Sasuke and Kiba away somewhere, and they would go pranking, she was goddamn certain, thus giving Ren some free time all for herself. So, she randomly decided to just take a stroll through the woods. And somehow in the middle of her walk, when she was pretty certain she's alone, she started singing.

In past weeks she also discovered that she doesn't sound like a dying chicken anymore. Of all things, it was the voice that differed between Renee and Ren, with Ren's voice resembling more and more that of Sawashiro Miyuki, Ren's second favorite seiyu ever. First was Paku Romi, but that was Temari's voice, so… She apparently wasn't going to sound like a yowling cat or retarded donkey, thank the Sage. Actually, Miyuki could sing much better than Renee would ever dream about, but-but, well, she was technically an anime character now, and she could have her own seiyu, yes?

And so, she starts singing. Not at first, of course, firstly she thoroughly checks abut people around, of course. She still isn't taking chances in scarring minds for life, not really. But then, she likes humming around – humming that would turn into full-out singing had she forgotten the world. And, of course, she did.

"There are three things I do when my life falls apart
Number one I cry my eyes out and I dry up my heart
Not until I do this will my new life start
So that's the first thing that I do when my life falls apart."

She intones slowly, taking deep breaths of frosty, February air. Snow croaks underneath her feet as she walks.

"Oh the second thing I do is I close both of my eyes
And say my thank-you's to each and every moment of my life.
I go where I know the love is and let it fill me up inside
Gathering new strength from sorrow,
I'm glad to be alive."

Birds apparently all ran away from her. She kind of expected that to happen, so it's no big deal, really.

"The third thing that I do now when my world caves in,
is I pause I take a breath, and bow, and I let that chapter end.
I design my future bright, not by where my life has been.
And I try, try, try, try again."
Yes I try, try, try, try, try again."

She didn't particularly feel like yowling the refrain, so she felt justified from not doing it. And if she messes up the number of 'try', singing and counting at once is difficult. Well, at least no one is there to hear her poor cover of Jason Mraz's 3 Thing-

"That was very pretty, miss."

_Fuck._

Ren's head snapped around instantly, and then just stopped, because she is greeted with most ludicrous pastel-pink hair and giant, mint-green eyes so full of wonder it was amazing they didn't pop out yet. So, yes, Ren basically just faces tiny-Sakura, who apparently heard her singing.

"How long were you listening?" she narrows her eyes at the miniature version of a person that, in ten years or so, will become very frightening and very talented second coming of Tsunade. Who, currently, is just another good-for-nothing Sasuke fan girl, really.

"Uh," mini-Sakura blushes, "from the second thing. You were so caught up in it that you didn't notice me, so I followed you, because the song was very pretty, and your voice is kind of pretty, too…" she smiles sheepishly and looks down, at the snow, and Ren brings her eyebrows together.

"Why are you here alone?" she asks then, and Sakura bites her lip and sighs. Suddenly she seems as if she's about to cry.

"Because…" she croaks. "Because Ino-chan was my friend, and now she's not- Or I thought she was, but she was friends with those mean girls who bullied me all along too, and I don't know anymore!" she wails, and Ren's waist is suddenly attacked by mini-kunoichi and used as crying pillow, and honestly, what's a girl to do? Wrong time, wrong place, and now she pays for it.

But… Wait. Wasn't Sakura and Ino the best friends forever before they started fighting over Sasuke? But then, the only post-war filler Ren ever watched was the one where Kakashi pretended to be Sukea and amused himself in Team Seven's hard tries in order to see his face whereas it was there all along. Well then, it was kind of obvious she missed thing or two. Or many. (Or were fillers even a thing?)

"There, there," she sighs, patting girl's back. "Then she apparently wasn't your friend, you know."

"But I want to be friends with Ino-chan! Because she's so pretty, and smart, and, and-" Sakura sobs and Ren grows more and more exasperated by the second. _Sweet Jashin, why her?_

"Look, kid," Ren sighs and somehow manages to pry the girl off of her, so she can kneel down. "If she can't get over the fact that you like the same boy and still be your friend, then she doesn't deserve you."

"But I was the one to say we're rivals now!" Sakura wails, and Ren fights the urge to roll her eyes, hard. To think that at this age all she cared about were dolls and cartoons, really. "I said that if we both like Sasuke-kun we are rivals now!"

"And if she didn't just laugh it off, then she never was your true friend!" Ren says louder, and the girl finally silences. "And, by the way, what exactly do you like in my little cousin, huh?" she cocks her eyebrows, and Sakura stills for a second.

"You're that mean lady who keeps Sasuke-kun away!" Sakura says, suddenly the only trace of her crying being the slowly-freezing tears on her cheeks, and Ren can't help but laugh.
"Oh dear Sage," she snickers. "It doesn't matter now. What do you like in Sasuke?"

"Well, I- I think he's very smart and cute," girl says with small smile, and Ren rolls her eyes yet again.

"And…?"

"And what?" Sakura cocks her head.

"Is that all?" Ren questions, because surely, that can't be all, can it?

"Uh, yes?"

Ren stops for a moment, then groans, and then facepalms so hard, that at the sound of desperate 'slap' of her palm connecting to her forehead, remnants of birds rise up and scatter away in fear.

"I had no idea your 'love' for Sasuke was so shallow, like what?" she whines, hiding her face in her hands. "Sweet Jashin, Lord of Carnage…"

"Is this wrong?" Sakura asks, cocking her head, and Ren sighs again.

"Yes, yes it is!" she whines. "Except for the fact that you're eight and not supposed to be interested in boys at all for at least next six years? Yes! All you like in the boy is the fact that he's cute? Dear lord, this is a reason for one-night-stand, not pursuing a long-term relationship!"

"What's an one-night-stand?" Sakura asks, and Ren facepalms again, this time at her own stupidity.

"It's when two people meet, have sex and then part ways. Like in relationship, just… Without relationship," she explains, scratching back of her head.

"And what's sex?" she asks again.

"You're going to learn that in class in few years. Perhaps," Ren sighs. "If not, and if your parents won't say it, then come to me, okay? That's not a kind of thing to learn from a total stranger, really. And not at the age of eight, either. Right now I can tell you, though, it's how the ugly, good-for-nothing, shrieking larvae called newborns are made, so they can, maybe, and just maybe, evolve into proper people one day."

"Woah, you know a lot!" pinkette smiles.

Duh, of course I do, Ren thinks. I'm thirty-one, for crying out loud.

"Yeah, I kinda do," she shrugs, because knowing things is what she do. What her former job was all about, in fact. And in the matter of one-night-stands… For someone unable to love, that's the closest to relationship she's ever had, really. "What are you doing?" Ren asks, as Sakura undoes her headband and allows her fringe to fall freely onto her face, making her look even more miserable.

"Ino gave me this, I don't want it anymore," she puffs her cheeks, and that's a new thing, really. Ren sighs, and kneels by the girl again, extending her hand.

"Give me that," she says, and the girl obediently places the material in her hand. Then she motions at Sakura to come closer, and so the girl does, and Ren starts working at taming her fringe. Slowly and without a proper comb, but somehow she manages to part the hair into something akin to what she would wear during The Last Movie and up. Different from what she wore in actual Naruto, but Ren always found that other hairstyle working with her aesthetics much better.
"Uhm, what are you doing?" Sakura questions.

"Something so you wouldn't look like such a scarecrow… Okay, done. Can't show you though, but looks better than what you had before," Ren smiles. "It would look better if you god hairclips for it, though. Or I'm just shit at doing hair. Or both."

"Bad words!" Sakura giggles, and Ren rolls her eyes.

"Sure, sure, you're not the only to complain," she sighs. "And you know what? I couldn't care less."

"I'm Haruno Sakura, by the way!"

"Sure, sure. I'm Ren. Uchiha Ren."

"Oh, Uchiha! Like Sasuke-kun!" girl squeaks in surprise.

"Well, duh, I'm his cousin, I've said that before. Few times," Ren rolls her eyes. "Third…? Yeah, third. So we're pretty closely related still. But then, who isn't… Wasn't, related within our clan?" she sighs, running her hand through her hair.

"Could you…" Sakura starts, digging in the snow with her shoe. "Could we meet here tomorrow?"

"Why not just after school, before the Academy building instead? I go there too, you know" Ren asks before she can bite her tongue, and Sakura's eyes light up.

"Yes!" she chirps, and just runs away.

And so, that is how it starts.

(And if, when coming back home, Ren stops by accessory shop and buys black hairclips with pink cherry blossoms and proper red headband, well. She just doesn't have better things to waste her money on, okay?)
“Attitude is a choice. Happiness is a choice. Optimism is a choice. Kindness is a choice. Giving is a choice. Respect is a choice. Whatever choice you make makes you. Choose wisely.”

— Roy T. Bennett, The Light in the Heart

Ren uses Sasuke to pass the hair accessories to Sakura for many various reasons, really. Firstly, because that simply delays her being glomped by a grateful and amazed eight-year-old for about six to seven hours. Secondly, she realizes that Sasuke himself is very much wary of and uneasy around any of his fangirls, Sakura included. And what's better for treating such uneasiness other than placing him right before the cause? Thirdly because, Ren noticed before, Sakura isn't exactly popular with other people in her class, especially since she drove Ino off (yet Ren starts to doubt that there really was that glorified by the show, close bond between them at all, given what she learned and then saw), and suddenly the most popular boy in school gives her a gift. Must have been quite a shocker.

Fourth, and perhaps most important reason for Ren was to see what Sakura would fawn over; that Sasuke was the one to bring it, or that Ren was the one who was behind it all.

And, much to Ren's surprise, Sakura actually cares more about who it's from, not who brings it to her. But that's not an unpleasant surprise – it means that Sakura doesn't 'love' Sasuke in completely blind way if at all (assuming eight-year-olds are even capable of romantic love, of which they aren't), but wants someone to acknowledge her instead, and thus follows the crowd. And that needs rooting out, Ren decides. Even if she's to gain yet another shadow, she decides she can live with that. Sakura is, after all, one of those characters she liked more as Renee.

"Thank youuuuu!

Ren only grunts when Sakura collides with her legs and waist with a force even Naruto can't really muster, and after tiny pinkette nearly damages her hips in bone-crushing hug. That kid is already frighteningly strong, she decides. Also, what doesn't slip past Ren's attention, Sakura has her hair held firmly in the style she managed yesterday, with help of three black hairclips with cherry blossom flowers, and a cherry-red headband.

"No problem, kid," Ren huffs, "but you don't really have to thank me by trying to kill or damage me, I'm okay being fine, you know."

"Oh!" Sakura squeaks and lets her go with an embarrassed blush. "Sorry. But… But when Sasuke-kun brought me those hairclips from you, I was so happy! And they're so pretty! Thank you, thank you a lot!" girl beams at her, and Ren rolls her eyes, but with a small smile on her lips. It was, after all, (arguably) better than the scrap of fabric Ino tore from the sheet she had with her, really. It wasn't just a scrap lying around without purpose, but accessories that were actively chosen and bought for her.

(As to why exactly, don't ask Ren, really. She was just walking by the business street, saw the store and thought, well, why not.)

Hana joins them shortly after and Sakura is in awe again, because it's another older girl who wants to
talk to her. It appeared to be quite a big deal to pinkette, in all honesty – bigger than Ren would think. But she and Hana let themselves indulge the girl, as Sasuke, Naruto and Kiba are apparently running late.

When they finally show up, fifteen minutes later than usual, Ren can't exactly fight her eyebrow going up. Because there was an addition to the trio in the form of no one else than Shikamaru and Choji. And Naruto seems very uneasy, even more so as they approached her. Enough for Ren to know that he perpetrated something.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" she asks, crossing her arms on her chest as boys approach, making Hana raise her eyebrow, too.

"Naruto slept during the lesson with the new guy, Iruka," Sasuke says, earning a choked shriek from the blonde, that sound suspiciously close to 'traitor'. "He made him, and those two," boy motions to Shikamaru and Choji, "stand outside the class, and then gave them a lecture, because they fell asleep again. Kiba made me wait for Naruto, and they just tagged along."

Wow. That's perhaps the longest Ren heard Sasuke speak… Ever, at once.

"Say what you want," Kiba huffs, "But I didn't even ask you to stay. I stayed and you could go, but you stayed, too."

Sasuke shoots him a look that promises a homicide, but the Inuzuka remains unaffected by it, and Ren snorts, as faint pink graces her little cousin's cheeks.

"Guilty as charged, huh, squirt?" she asks, ruffling his hair. "Can't deny you care now."

"I don't care!" he hisses, but it's not… Well, strong. As if he doesn't mean it in the first place.

"And you two?" Hana asks the newcomers, and Ren somehow knows that they will end seeing the Nara and Akimichi heirs on greater frequency from now on.

"Iruka-sensei made us stand outside the class, too," Choji admits from above his chips. "And then he asked if we wanted to come, so we did."

"Troublesome," Shikamaru rolls his eyes and yawns, but otherwise doesn't seem to be negative towards being dragged around by the blonde. And, well, Naruto just does that to people.

"A Nara, huh?" Ren asks. "And Akimichi, I'd assume. Well, I'm Uchiha Ren. It's nice to meet you, and even nicer that Sasuke is finally making friends."

Sasuke might or might not have mumbled something about that he's not making friends at all, but nobody bothered to notice.

"I'm Inuzuka Hana," Hana smiles. "And you two are?"

"Akimichi Choji!" boy offers with a smile. "Want some chips?"

"Troublesome," the other huffs. "I'm Shikamaru."

"So…" Hana starts. "What do we do now?"

"Hm…" Ren pats her chin, and then snaps her fingers. "M. Hound!"

There's a crash, and a snap, and maybe a cat's yowl, but someone very soon and very loudly answers with a very firm "NO!".
"Aw come on, don't you have a heart?" Ren smiles sweetly and everyone except for Sasuke appears to be very, very confused. "Be a good ANBU babysitter."

"I quit!" Kakashi calls at her. "I quit right now, what on Earth did Third even thing assigning me to you, you monster?" he shunshins suddenly, appearing before Ren, clad in ANBU attire and all. The girl, however, seemed nor amazed by his appearance at all.

"Why not?" she asks, and poor Kakashi (oh how she loves tormenting the man, it shouldn't be allowed) facepalms his mask.

"Kid, no. It's not even about how many of you are there, or that I'm an ANBU- But him and him?" he points at Naruto and Choji respectively. "And you added to that?! You're going to eat me out of my wallet!"

"Pfft, s if," Ren waves her hand. "I know just fine that with all the S-Rank pays you get you could build yourself a palace by now, so don't you use that against me. I know perfectly well that what you fear are, in fact, all the gossips," she wiggles her eyebrows, and Kakashi stiffs, mortified. Then, he looks around in slightly hectic manner and sighs, apparently having spotted anyone anywhere near. It helps that they are in rather secluded portion of the Academy's courtyard.

"You," he points at her, "are a monster. And manipulator." He then bends his fingers and whispers something, and suddenly, instead of crazy-haired, dog-masked ANBU, there is a tall man looking like schematic Leaf citizen, with short, brown hair and gray eyes, and a dog-mask in his hand, except it's all black. "And I hate you. And your minions. And now I understand what you meant by creating your own minion army. You may call me Ryōken while we're at."

"Still a Hound, huh?" Ren raises her eyebrows.

"Maybe he's secretly an Inuzuka?" Hana proposes, making Kakashi – Ryōken – wince.

"And I think he's old," Sasuke butts in, making Kakashi suck in his breath. Way to go, squirt, Ren thinks. Offending your future teacher like that, he'll surely love you. "How else do you explain his gray hair?"

This time there's a chocked, muffled sound of laughter coming from somewhere, and Kakashi groans.

"How about you actually help me handle a bunch of… One, two, three… Eight monsters, Tenzō?" he calls. "See how fun is that?"

Tenzō shunshins before them gracefully. At least as gracefully as he can while his body is still shaking with poorly-covered laughter.

"It's just…" he manages. "You hate children, senpai, and here you are, ordered around by one like she owns the place."

"Because I do!" Ren throws her long braid back and crosses her hands on her chest. "Someone has to be in charge of dis dysfunctional family, no?"

_Especially if this someone is, in fact, mentally oldest of everyone present_, she adds in her mind. Kakashi will be her age by the end of Shippuuden, which is in about… Ten years from now, actually. Wow, he's twenty-one. And she called Jeremy, who was twenty-six, a kid. The fact had given some sort of odd satisfaction, honestly.

"I'll pass herding them," Tenzō snickers. "I'll make sure no one mistakes your Henge for hostility or
anything weird, though, okay?"

"Fair," Kakashi agrees, and they shake hands, before Tenzō shunshins away. Ren makes a mental note to learn this 'ninja teleport' as soon as she can.

"Ren-onee-chan, you're so awesome!" Naruto, previously silent, cries out of the blue. Ren doesn't miss the way Sasuke's face morphs with pang of jealousy at the honorific. "You can tell ANBU-san what to do! This is so awesome, even awesomer than awesome!"

"No, I'm just mean kid who will throw a fuss if a polite adult won't heed my orders," she rolls her eyes. "You see, kids. Key to being a kid is making adults do what we want. It's a natural ability most people loose in time."

"With you, it's all to prominent," Kakashi muses, earning a grin in return. "Okay, kids, since I already stepped as low as to agree to take you somewhere, where you want to go?"

"Ramen!"

"Barbecue!"

"Sushi Bar!"

"Curry Stand!"

"Uh…" Kakahi looks at the kids a bit horrified, and Ren chuckles.

"Yakiniku," she says. "I got nice ANBU-san buy us food, I decide where we go. And I feel like quality meat."

"But you always eat meat," Sasuke huffs.

"I'm carnivore, what else can I do?"

"Eat tomatoes!"

"I'm not you, squirt, I can't live off of tomatoes alone."

All in all, it went just exactly as Kakashi feared it would go. And Ren? Ren almost managed to outeat an Akimichi. And that was not the order those two words appeared in the same sentence, ever, even if said Akimichi was all of eight and reaching his hips. In all honesty, the only ones who didn't eat inhuman amount of meat that day were Sasuke and Shikamaru, who ate moderate. But then, the Nara heir appeared to be too lazy to move his hands so much, and Sasuke ate half worth of his share in salads. The Inuzukas, also are a lot and, what he didn't expect, the little pinkette trailing behind Ren wasn't too far behind. Reluctant at first (her parents were most likely civilians or long-retired shinobi and adapted civilians dumb dieting habits), after she realized just how much Ren herself ate, girl apparently made her point to eat at least half that.

And Uzumaki. The son of his beloved sensei. Kakashi grieved at how the kid was treated, but he himself couldn't take him in. And it wasn't only his ANBU job, no – it was the fact that, for some reason, people with the closest connection to his parents, were forbidden from directly approaching the boy. Wasn't that the cause, Kakashi would perhaps even gotten over his hate for children and adopted the kid right away.

At least the Uchihas seemed to take him under their wings now.
But the amount he ate almost made the wallet in his pocket hurt no matter what.

"Why so gloomy, Ryōken?" Ren asks with a sly, borderline malicious smile, looking at him from across the table. He eyes her with his henge-concealed Sharingan and winces.

"I hate you," the man hisses, but hardly finds any venom to put in his words. "I hate you all so much."

"Of course," Inuzuka Hana chuckles, wiping her brother's chin with a tissue. "You hate us so much you fund us all a dinner. What's next? You'll clean our rooms? So much hate, I can't even stand it!"

"You," he hisses, "spend way too much time around her," he motions his head at Ren, who apparently can't help herself and bursts into quite malicious, villain-ish cackles. It's befitting to her as of now.

"Oh, Ryōken, we're just beginning," the Uchiha manages through the cackles, and she's doing it so hard that the pale spider decides to relocate itself from under folds of her kimono onto Kakashi's shoulder.

"Oh, Awai," Sasuke notices. "Haven't seen him in a while. Guess he's just been hiding in nee-san's clothes all that time."

The pinkette – Saskura – visibly winces at the creature, but manages to forcefully relax herself, and Kakashi just sighs in exasperation. ANBU headquarters will be buzzing with gossips by the time sun sets properly, he's certain.

God damn his life. God damn those kids. He should quit the business the soonest he can. He really should.

(And he knows he won't. He still really, really hates kids, just this bunch… This bunch he can stand. Yes.

*His wallet still hurts.*)
"I hate you all so, so very much," Kakashi hisses under his breath after another of his ANBU-mates asks if he's really planning on starting family, since he's so good with children. And it's not even sarcastic question, but actual, genuine curiosity.

"For once," Tenzō says, "this is not my fault. I kept quiet."

"I know," Kakashi growls and glances at the purple-haired woman, sitting atop the lockers and practically radiating smugness.

"Is there any problem?" the woman – Yugao, if he remembers correctly, she's the one who found Sasuke after Massacre – asks with a very, very smug smile.

"No, not at all," Tenzō brushes off with a smile, and tugs his senior away, so maybe, just maybe, today in Headquarters will not end in brawl. Even if Kakashi never starts them, Tenzō is not sure it wouldn't change today.

She awakes to Sasuke, clinging to her for dear life, face nuzzled in the crook of her neck and fists gripping her oversized shirt-turned-pajama. Sasuke himself is still deeply asleep and Ren actually sighs in relief. He's calm, which can mean one thing; he isn't having yet another one of his nightmares.

(God damn you, Itachi.)

It's Saturday morning, so she only sighs, and closes her eyes again. She's already used to getting up at six (which wasn't difficult to achieve), but today is free, so she hardly thinks she will be up before ten. Getting up before ten during the weekend was inhumane, at the very least.

"Nee-san," Sasuke mutters into her collar, shifting a little, and then mumbles something complexly incoherent.

"It's okay, squirt," she whispers into his hair. "Sleep, we don't have school today."

He mumbles again and nods so slightly, that wasn't good portion of his head touching her directly, Ren wouldn't have even known. But, what becomes apparent to her, even he likes to sleep in sometimes.

As for Ren… Each time she closes her eyes for longer, she re-lives memories of the original Uchiha girl. It had become frequent static in her current life, and she doesn't even bother fighting it. Why in the first place? Those dreams of memories are her only source of information on her predecessor's actual life.

Spoiler: original Uchiha Ren was a mean, uptight little shit who just knew everything better. Kind of like pre-chūnin Neji, just… Mean…er. And so full of herself, she could burst any moment. Because
she was an Uchiha, because she awakened her sharingan early, because she mastered the Grand Fireball. It was annoying, really, to Ren(ee). Also, the original didn't seem to get along with anyone. Didn't even try to, so assured that she's better, rarely speaking and thus appearing cool and aloof to bystanders.

Wrong.

And here she thought she was the antisocial one. Well, it happens, and Renee couldn't bring herself to feel bad about replacing the girl. Not anymore. It was still weird, wearing someone else's skin (which was whole foot, if not more, shorter than what she was used to), though.

But then, better this way than dead.

"Sasuke, is this my shirt?"

"Mhm."

"Why are you wearing it then, if it's mine?"

"Because I like it."

"Don't you have your own clothing?"

"Hn," he just Uchihas at Ren, crossing his hands on his chest and looks at the girl in almost daring manner, but refuses to answer whatsoever.

"Aa," she Uchihas right back, mimicking his pose and narrowing her eyes. They stay like that, staring at each other for a while, when Sasuke eventually gives up, after what feels like eternity.

"It has your scent," he admits, soft shade of pink gracing his cheeks. "I like your scent. It makes me feel better. Like… Like he isn't going to come after me any second. Or after you," he looks up at her with those big eyes, as black as the void itself, and Ren sighs, ruffling his hair affectionately.

"That's why we train, you know," she says, kneeling before him. "So when he comes, we can kick his ass. How about that?"

"I'm going to kill him," Sasuke says, his demeanor change so sudden from the embarrassed child to revenge-driven madman that Ren almost takes a step back.

"No," she says firmly, grabbing his small hands into her, not much bigger ones. "We are going to intercept the bastard. And then explain to him that what he did was so undeniably, completely idiotic- And that committing suicide through his younger brother's hands is not a way to go. Alright?"

Sasuke blinks at her, surprised, and asks; "suicide?"

"Why else would he want you to kill him?" she asks, and doesn't even have to feign surprise in her voice. Sasuke told her exactly what happened not even a week after they first meet, and she's been thinking out a way of getting him out of his revenge ever since. In all honesty, she was the only person Sasuke opened to after the Massacre. But, well, shared blood does that to some.

"I… Uh… I don't know," boy admits solemnly, all hate fleeting from his features, much to Ren's relief. "I just… I don't know, nee-san."
"It's okay, squirt," she sighs, patting his head. "I'm here for you, remember? And your friends are, too. Naruto, Kiba, Hana."

"Hana is your friend," he winces his nose.

"Yes, and because of that, she is also yours," Ren chuckles. "Now, how about we do some taijutsu practice? I know it's about time you start going through basic katas--"

"They're easy and boring," Sasuke sniffs.

"-and I know they're nothing. So, I'm going to teach you some more advanced stuff. How about that?"

"Okay, but breakfast first," he says, looking at Ren expectantly, and she chuckles.

"Don't worry, I'll make you your salad," she smiles.

(She lets Sasuke wear her shirt in the end. It looks like a dress on him, too long, too loose, but he doesn't mind, so she just brushes it off.)

They catch her by absolute surprise, really, those brats. Honestly, she hasn't suspected a thing, and the execution of their plan is as flawless as it could get for a bunch of kids. It's simple, really – Sasuke and Naruto avert her attention from what is happening (though there, really, is no need, she would hardly expect it even if it hit her in the face, this kind of situation), and Hana orchestrates everything.

At first, she doesn't know what to do. Why is it happening. For her it's another day, another date, the same as every other.

Not for them, apparently.

So, when bunch of people jump up from literally everywhere in the living room of Hokage Estate, yelling atop of their lungs 'Happy Birthday Ren', she's really, sincerely caught off-guard. Shocked, even, because, really-

It's the second of March. Her thirty-second birthday, and twelfth as well.

And Ren… Ren doesn't know what to do. It's been years since she stopped celebrating yet another year of her life passing by, and those big parties with tons of kids, and a cake, and everything? Yeah. Those she has ever seen only in television, in movies. She never even thought that they were actually real, as she never participated in one, or even heard about someone having it. Up until now.

And it's not only kids who greet her, no. There's Genma, of course, and the Hokage, too, and his family – his daughter and Konohamaru, because Asuma really is away and training – and somewhere in the corner there are also Kakashi and Tenzo, still clad in ANBU uniforms and all, but somehow less sneaky this one time. And, of course, a horde of small children. Kiba, Sakura, Choji, Shikamaru. And Naruto with Sasuke, holding her hands one each, one with big grin and the other with a faint imitation of smile that isn't a smirk, and she's absolutely speechless.

"Holy fuck," she manages, because this is the best birthday party she has ever had in her life and it hasn't even began. "Holy fucking fuck," because there are more people in the room than she thought it was possible to have positive relationship with.

"And here she is," Genma snorts, senbon clicking between his teeth. "Our beloved, flowery-
mouthed birthday girl."

Ren doesn't even bother to pretend being offended.

"No, it's just… I've never had a birthday like this, ever," she admits honestly. "Actually, no. I never even cared at all, so- Well. I kind of forgot that I have birthday today? I didn't intend to celebrate it, really. But- But I appreciate. I really do. And damn, old man, don't you have, like, shit ton of paperwork to do?"

"I do," Sarutobi Hiruzen smiles, "but I do believe I can spare few minutes or so for your birthday. But true, I must soon depart to the tower to take care of all that… Gracious… Paperwork."

"Why you don't do birthdays?!" Naruto shrieks, hanging himself on her hand almost tripping her to the side wasn't it for Sasuke latched at the other. Boy looks at her with those wide, wide sky-blue eyes in shock, and Ren just sighs.

"I never saw the point, you know" she admits honestly. The Archers – her family, or people that she should feel were her family, but she hardly does – never made a big deal out of it. Or maybe she was just a special case, because birthdays and name days of all her uncles and aunts usually tended to be such a big deal.

"But you'll play with us, right?" Sakura asks, eyes wide and hopeful, and Ren would really like to say no, just because, but she can't. Because she's a kid again, and suddenly she can have all those things she never had before.

"Yeah," she agrees instead. "Yeah, I'll play with you."

And so she does. Because she's the birthday girl today, and the world seems like it hates her a little less (actually, it seems like this ever since she woken up as Ren, two decades younger and with actual possibility of future, and no orthodox family to drag her down each step).

She's on the verge of crying, in all honesty, when they all wish her happy birthday and give gifts, and share cake and laugh. There's that pressure tightening her throat, hot and unyielding, and she has hard time fighting it. But she manages, in the end – barely, but she manages.

Konohamaru with his mom give her a cookbook with various recipes. It's something that will be of use a lot in later date, since Ren already started taking over the kitchen when preparation of her and Sasuke's meals is in question.

Sakura gets her a necklace, custom made, obviously, a glossy piece of metal resembling a fan, Uchiha-painted and hanged on rather short chain. Just fine to be tucked under her turtleneck and remain there.

Shikamaru and Choji, apparently not knowing her long or good enough and unsure on what to give, just settle in with regular sweets. dango, Uchiha-predisposed food (much like Uzumaki and ramen) however prove to be a good bet. There is more than a dozen different flavors, she notes, and they might have actually went on and bought her every single flavor.

Sarutobi gives her a scroll on basic fire techniques with a motion and aura she always wished her grandfather would show more. But she'll take this, and the scroll, and if the way Sarutobi flinches at her almost-sadistic enthusiasm about burning things with ninja magic, well.

Kakashi, perhaps out of spite, perhaps because he's just a shit like that, actually gives her a wallet with a piece of paper inside. 'Start making your own and stop leeching off of me, you little piece of
shit. Love, Hound.' it says, and Ren perhaps should feel offended, because it was only once- But she's just amused instead.

Tenzō gives her weights. They're not that heavy, but a start, and he just hit the jackpot, because Ren hasn't really thought about them up until now. But wearing those all the time? That was going to improve her strength and speed like a magical spell and she straps them on her hands and legs right on.

Kiba and Hana actually buy her a glass tank, fully equipped and all, and decorate it with something that resembles a small forest with a plaque that says 'Do not disturb the spider'. Ren is honestly amused, and Awai takes instant liking to his new home and refuses to leave it for the remaining time of the day.

Naruto gives her a plushie, and Ren has hard time fighting a snort, because it's a blue llama with a pink ribbon around its neck. But she accepts it gratefully, because she's always loved plush toys, only never truly managed to get herself to collect them like she wanted. He tells her that he bought it himself, and Ren can't help but wonder just how much that means. For the boy to go to the toy store, just to get something for her. Into the place where everyone makes it widely known that he's not wanted. And she's grateful for him for that he did, for her.

Genma gives her additional set of basic ninja tools, for which she's grateful, because one can't have too many kunai, and gloves. But not just any gloves – those are hardened on knuckles with wire-induced fiber, and metal plaque on the outer sides of palm, withwhirly symbol of the Leaf engraved, and if Ren's smile grows even more sadistic, he doesn't comment, or about how lovingly she slips them on. Genma is just so nice, that he pretends that he totally doesn't wonder about how many jaws is she going to break with those.

Sasuke brings her a katana, and not just an ordinary one. It's a heirloom, that much is obvious, and it's something Sasuke fearlessly waltzed into the compound for yesterday. She knows, because he asked Tenzō if the man couldn't take him there to get something. And the sword itself? It's amazing, really, well-crafted and thrumming with unspoken power. A blade that has been in family for years, pale blade, almost white, singing with every move. Black handle and cherry-colored sheath with a motif of a dragon on it.

And then she runs and plays with other kids up until the night falls, and then plays some more, and she's actually, genuinely happy. It feels great, to be a kid again, to gang on Genma and watch the Tokujo allow himself to be caught and found repeatedly. To spin the kids around just for screams of pure glee.

They even manage to drag Tenzō and Kakashi – who does it very, very reluctantly – into their game of hide and seek, and, actually, Naruto is the one who somehow never fails to find the two, even if they cheat and hide around ANBU-style.

That's… Amazing feat, honestly.

In the end, Ren is happy. Like, very happy, ridiculously so, giddy and tired, but that day was really, really well-spent, and maybe, just maybe, she's going to like the idea of birthday.

But with those gifts she got? She's going to put them into a damn good use on her way of becoming one woman army, a frontline heavy-hitter that as much as mention of whose will give enemy a second thoughts, starting yesterday.

Graduation is in two months, and she can't wait.
(She doesn’t even know yet, or begin to realize, but she’s been on her way of becoming the ninja equivalent of Boogeyman ever since she made up her mind on changing the fate.)
Tenth Thread

Chapter Summary

Apologies for lateness in advance. Simply forgot to update AO3 ;-;

“The capacity for friendship is God's way of apologizing for our families.”
— Jay McInerney, The Last of the Savages

"Um, Sasuke-kun?" Sakura asks, uncertain, stomping from one leg to another. She did mostly get over her crush on the boy (and might've developed something akin on someone else), but he still made her nervous with his cool and aloof demeanor. "Hm?" he hums, looking up at her, and few girls glare at the pinkette.

"I was wondering..." she starts, and digs in her pockets, producing a small, blue, decorative paper. "Would you, um, like to go to my birthday party this week?" she asks, and some of the girls smirk at her. Surely the great and perfect Sasuke-kun would never attend birthday party of someone like her...

"Sure," he nods once, taking the blue paper into his hands.

For a brief moment, the classroom is so still and silent that Sakura is nearly certain she hears the tiny spider in the corner, as it stretches the webbing.

Then, there's an outcry of rage.

"FOREHEAD!" Yamanaka Ino bellows, rising from her bench. She growls, as do some other girls, and makes her way towards Sakura, and the tiny pinkette feels like she's shrinking even more.

"How dare you invite Sasuke-kun to your birthday party!" one girl, her bully, she recognizes, bellows. "What did you do to make him agree?!!"

Sakura feels like crying, and running, or both, but Hana and Ren are not in school today, having already left on the trip to Hokage's tower and will be gone for at least three hours. And against those girls – those shinobi-raised girls – she stands no chance, even if she tried to run.

"Back off, Yamanaka," Sasuke hisses out, suddenly, so full of venom that Sakura can't help but flinch. And the class goes eerily silent, again, as girls look at him in complete and utter shock. "Sakura is my friend, and I will not tolerate you bullying her. Is that clear?"

Sakura's mind is very, very blank. Before Ren came, she was just one of his rabid fangirls. Then, Ren happened and she... She didn't even spend so much time with him at all, too absorbed following Ren and wanting to become absolute kickass like the older girl. Or, at least, kickass of eight-year-old Sakura was.

"But...!" One of girls starts to protest, but Sasuke just huffs and rolls his eyes. And Sakura be damned, because that's a glint of mischief in his eyes.
"How about you sit with me, Sakura?" he asks with a smirk, and some girls make a sound like they're choking or through heart attacks. Sakura, however, is not dumb, and she catches what he means just about outside of his question instantly.

"Of course, Sasuke-kun!" she chirps and plops onto the seat on his right. With Naruto on his left, who somehow managed to slip into the classroom during the fangirl alert, and Kiba, Choji and Shikamaru sitting before them, he's safe and secluded from everyone that he isn't comfortable around — or, simply putting, everyone else in the classroom, because they sit in the very back bench by the window. Sakura is fairly sure that this is the way they are going to remain seated for majority of their time in Academy.

Pinkette smiles very sweetly at other girls, who send her glares. However, they don't send much of a glare — there are five boys who glare at them right back.

(That is Ren's influence, for sure. She calls it 'all for one and one for all'.)

"Guys," Sakura says after majority of class settles back onto their seats, and digs into her backpack. "I have invitations for you, too!"

"Sweet!" Naruto chirps, eyes glittering as he gently looks at his invitation.

"Cool, you got Akamaru covered, too," Kiba grins, and his do just barks.

"Will there be food," Choji asks, and almost everyone snort at the fact.

"Of course there will be food," Shikamaru huffs. "It's a birthday party, for crying out loud. Getting you a present will be so troublesome, though. What do girls even like?"

"You tell me, Nara," Sasuke huffs. "You're supposed to be geniuses."

"I don't have an older sister who knows what other girls like," Shikamaru bites back instantly, and Sasuke just rolls his eyes.

(Shikamaru is right, though, and Sasuke knows it, even if he'll never, ever admit it.)

Her parents will most likely flip at the fact that majority of people she invited are boys, and the only girls she had listed are nearly graduating from the Academy. Honestly, she really, really wants to see their reactions.

"Naruto and Sakura already briefed me on what happened in class this morning and I even understood most of it, somehow," is the first thing Ren says as Sasuke runs up to her. He puffs his cheeks at that, and she only laughs and wraps her arms around the boy. "I'm so proud of you because of that, Squirt."

Sasuke doesn't answer. Instead, he just buries his head in her side, into the folds of her blue kimonocoat. Ren winces ever so slightly even, if she isn't hurt at all, not anymore. But the sole fact that such motion would leave her screaming in pain one and half of a month ago is enough. Because Uchiha and Sharingan-induced memory are evil, and Ren does have sharingan. Actually, she should start training it soon, unless she wants to have her ass owned the second that more serious fight ensures. If she's understanding it right, her vision will change, and sudden transition from four hundred and eighty pixels to full HD? That might be startling.

"Sakura asked me to come to her birthday," Sasuke murmurs into her shirt, barely audible at all. "I said I'll go."
"Don't worry, she asked me, too," Ren chuckles, ruffling his hair. (How on earth does something so soft stay so ridiculously shaped?) "I'm going, too. Do you know that me and Hana will be the only girls there?"

"Really?" he asks, looking up at her in surprise.

"Really," she nods. "You see, Sakura didn't have many friends before us. Only Ino."

"Ino?" Sasuke squints his eyes, trying to connect face with name. "You mean that Yamanaka blonde? They hate each other!"

"They used to be friends, but they aren't anymore," Ren sighed. "Sakura should have more female friends. I understand she likes hanging out with you, but you deserve a breather once in a while."

"Nee-san!" Sasuke whines, partly offended which causes Ren to instantly fall into cackling. His face is absolutely priceless.

After some coaxing, Ren manages to convince Sakura to invite Hyūga Hinata over to her birthday. It's not at all difficult, really – Hinata is a loner, especially now, too shy to actually approach someone herself. It's easy for Sakura to take pity of the girl, because she partly sees herself in the white-eyed Hyūga heir. At least now she has the girl covered and could just talk to her on Sakura's birthday party. And yes, Ren does feel very, very, very stupid for forgetting about one of her main favorites. That's what life does to people, kids.

(Ren isn't going to admit it out aloud, but she genuinely forgot about the girl, flooded over with Hana and those members of future Rookie Nine she managed to gather. That is a fact that needs changing, matter to address. Actually, aside Hinata, there's one more person she needs to split her attention for. As soon as possible, too, given that he's not alone around, yet.

This means that certain piece of shit hasn't made its move yet, and if she can help it, gods be her witness, she will.)

Speaking of which.

"Hi," Ren says, walking over to the two boys seated under the tree. She finally managed to shake off Sasuke and Naruto, as they went to play with others under Hana's guard. She allowed herself to wander away to them to see what could she do. "Are you an Aburame?"

Tiny-Shino looks up at her from the gigantic cicada carcass he's holding (where the fuck did he even get that?!) and narrows his eyebrows, and tiny-Torune follows his example. She can't see their eyes through Aburame-glasses, but she knows they're suspicious. Who wouldn't be.

"Yes, why?" Shino asks finally, and Ren smiles gently, falling onto her knees and sitting on her heels by them.

"You talk to bugs, yes?" she asks, and receives one enigmatic nod. "Can you talk to spiders, too?"

"Are you, by chance, Uchiha Ren?" Torune asks, catching her off-guard. Honestly, was she so famous in Academy already? (Although, better that that hair dyed hot pink. That one was not fun.)

"Yes," she agrees. "How did you know?"

"Uzumaki and Haruno just won't stop talking about how awesome and amazing you are. Uchiha adds in sometimes too," Shino admits. "What is it that you wanted?"
"I was just wondering if you can talk to spiders," she says, reaching under folds of her kimono and pulling out a handful of Awai. Big huntsman spider barely fits in her twelve-year-old hand, and his legs just dangle around. "Sometimes I wonder what goes through his head."

"Hm, I could try, but I never talked to a spider before," Shino admits, reaching slowly towards the creature. "But I'll try. Why? Because I don't refuse a challenge."

Whether or not Ren had to bit the inside of her mouth to not to squeal at Shino's famous 'why', she'll be taking the secret to the grave.

And that is basically how Ren came to spend rest of the afternoon with the Aburame kids. In all honesty, who would've thought that vivisecting a year-old carcass of massive cicada (that monster was at least twice Awai's size!) could be this fun? On the contrary, it also gave Ren insight on the horrors of summer in Konoha. Although those monstrosities were found majorly outside the walls, some did find their way inside, and for Ren, whose sleep could be interrupted with a slightest sound? A cicada outside the window would be a living nightmare.

The Aburame Twins, as she started to jokingly refer to Shino and Torune, as the two did everything together, were very okay with mutilating the corpse of the monster. When asked, they just shrugged it off.

Aburame affiliate with small bugs, Shino had said. Ren shuddered, because she knew that he meant Aburame make holes in their skin and allow little bugs to crawl in and out and run along under their skin through their veins and muscles and chakra system and-

No. Fuck no. She was not thinking that. Not now, not ever. Never.

She likes Shino. Like, she really, really likes him. It doesn't, sadly, make him any less creepy, though, (said the girl with a giant spider on her head.)

Sakura's parents really throw a party. It's as big as the one that was thrown for Ren, but obviously planned and made by adults rather than bunch of children ranging from thirteen to four, one woman who can't understand how you don't like rice, two absolutely socially awkward secret-murderers-and-also-gossips and one overpowered old man who's also a ninja president.

No. This party was made by adults, and it shows. Everything is… Clean, and clear and so even. There is commitment, but it's of a different sort. It's shown in quality rather than in that every single decoration was made by hand, messily but with love. No, decoration here are all from a store, and Ren actually even knows which one was that. She and Sasuke pass it when they return to Hokage estate from Leaf's eastern park, where their little gang of Ren's minions (as Hana took to calling them) tends to meet and play at local playground more often than not.

And one look on their faces is enough to tell that they sure as hell did not expect their daughter to invite five boys over. Damn the fact they're all in the same class, because Sakura invited only three girls, two of which are six years her seniors.

"Uhm, welcome?" Haruno Mebuki says with a polite yet nervous smile, and Ren has hard time fighting a scowl. Right by her she feels that Hana hardly remains neutral face-wise, as well. Everything in that woman screams 'civilian' to their faces, loud and clear and deafening. From her sluggish greeting and no knowledge on how to act around shinobi up to her perfect outfit, perfect hair and delicate hands that bear no kunai-induced callouses. Right up to her perfect, flawless skin that was never marred by more than a needle or kitchen knife.
"I'm Uchiha Ren," Ren answers instead of a growl that stubbornly keeps forcing itself to build up in her throat, and produces a pale blue card. "This is my cousin, Sasuke, and those are Inuzuka Hana with her brother, Kiba, and their ninken. Sakura invited us over."

"Ah, yes," the woman eyes dogs warily. "She was pretty… Ecstatic about you coming. Do you… Do you mind leaving your animals outside?"

Both Kiba and Hana make very offended noise very instantly. Kiba already opens his mouth, most likely to trash-talk the woman up and down, but his sister slams her palm against his lips instantly and smiles. It's a dangerous, feral smile. Enough so that even Ren takes a step back – Inuzuka are like dogs. Playful, honest, loyal. And dangerous as hell when provoked.

"Yes," she says, voice low and almost a growl. "We are Inuzuka, and our ninken are vital parts of us. I assure you, though, they behave well indoors."

Mebuki gulps gently and then closes her mouth so hard, that her lips turn into a thin line. Then, she nods and steps aside, allowing them in.

Ren sighs heavily, ruffles her hair, then ruffles Sasuke's hair for a good measure, and looks around. It's a picture-perfect modern family house. Civilian house. Honestly, Ren isn't there just to wish Sakura happy eighth or to talk to Hinata. Or to give Sakura that dress she and Sasuke bought her, with Sasuke being her measure and actually having to try it (which, by the way, was absolutely precious moment). Actually, she's there to see how Sakura acts around her parents, and how they are, how they act.

And then, to plan every single move of her fight with it. Sakura is not going to become the useless girly girl she was in Pre-Shippuuden. Not as long as Ren can help it. With the way they eye them, half-suspicious, half-surprised already shows that they don't their daughter's decision to be a ninja seriously.

'She'll grow out of it', they surely say. And Ren is there to show them just how wrong they are.
Eleventh Thread

“People tend to complicate their own lives, as if living weren't already complicated enough.”  
— Carlos Ruiz Zafón, The Shadow of the Wind

They're wary of her. Of them. Of course they are – which civilian by their senses would not be wary of child killing machine in-training? They perhaps think they hide it well, but that thinking only makes Ren feel like laughing like a hyena on big dose of laughing gas.

Mebuki does that with distance of a civilian woman, borderline hostile. She spares short glances in their direction – mainly Ren, Hana and Naruto's – when she thinks they won't notice. Naruto might not, the airhead he is, but everyone else? They do. Better yet, Ren and Hana practically feel it. Kizashi, on the other hand, does it with a grace of a man who never really made it past genin. Almost-chūnin, but not quite there. He's harder to notice, but they do fairly soon.

And Ren isn't exactly in mood to be victim of those weary, distrustful glances. Not with the way her muscles ache, dull and distant but present, stained from having to support additional weight. But she still sits, perfectly straight, and smiles, gently, politely and perfectly fake when Mebuki offers her a cup of tea.

(It's not much different, she concludes, from when Renee would visit her family home. It's, in fact, similar enough to cause barely-hidden annoyance and resentment. She's dead to that world, but Sakura is in similar situation than Renee once was. And she's even more determined to help the girl now.)

"They don't like us here," Hana says to her quietly, when both parents leave them alone for a while in the living room, with the table full of sweets.

"No, Hana," Ren shakes her head. "They don't like the fact, that Sakura isn't joking about becoming a ninja."

"This bad?" Inuzuka heiress asks, glancing at the pinkette.

"I heard her mother say, few days ago, that she will have hard time finding suitable husband if she's too muscled," Uchiha whispers back, so quiet that she barely hears herself, but she trusts Hana's doglike ears. She hears and nods.

Ren sighs heavily and looks at the pinkette. Sakura is in process of eagerly explaining something to nearly all the children invited, but visibly focuses on Hinata. Shikamaru is pretending to be napping on the side, but it's easy to notice that he's actually paying attention. Naruto and Kiba, however, have literal sparkles in her eyes.

"Do they even realize that their daughter invited over majority of future clan heirs, and they actually came?" Hana asks, and Ren hums, because the other girl is right. Two Inuzuka, both children of current Clan Head, two Uchiha, the only ones that are still alive and with the Leaf, a Nara, a Akimichi, a Hyūga, an Uzumaki. Most of the people who would become important in ten to twenty years in the future.

"I don't think they do," Ren whispers back. "And even if, I don't think they care."

That was as painfully honest as it was true.
Ren was honestly very, very, very fucking angry right now. And why? Well, that was painfully simple – Mebuki had refused her third serving of (delicious!) cake because lady should take care. And she was fairly certain that, weren’t Hana and Sasuke holding her down, she would lash at the woman and tell her just exactly how much of a lady there is in Ren, and will ever be. But the real icing of the cake (pun very much intended) was the fact, that Mebuki refused to let Sakura eat more than one serving – quite a bit smaller than that of anyone else.

"You see, Sakura, it's very easy to gain weight when you eat sweets like this," Mebuki says with a smile, taking the plate from her daughter, who looks quite a bit unhappy and, much to Ren's amusement and very little to anyone's surprise, it's Choji who speaks up.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I don't think she'll gain much weight from one piece," boy says from above his plate, where he is right about to finish his second serving. "Especially with so good cake."

Mebuki presses her lips in a thin line, and looks at the boy. "I do believe that I am the one who knows what's best for my child," she says, and, actually, it's Hana who snorts and throws herself back on the hair.

"Starving your daughter like a civilian when she's to become a ninja is knowing what's best for her?" Inuzuka heiress asks, and doesn't miss how the Haruno Matron sends her quite a judging look.

"She will grow out of it!" Mebuki says, visibly having forgotten that there are many other people witnessing the exchange. "And she won't be able to marry well if she scares the boy away!"

Hana already opens her mouth to say something, but then, out of the blue, Sakura cuts in; "but I like girls better!" and promptly clasps her hands on her mouth under utterly shocked gaze of her mother. There's silence, as every other person looks at the pinkette, and then Mebuki growls.

"You'll grow out of it, too!" she yells, and Sakura whimpers, and Ren cuts in, because she will not be listening to her bashing the girl, who grown on her quite a lot. (And also because Mebuki had Sakura aged seventeen or something and is barely in her mid-twenties or something, and also, Ren is so very fucking done by hearing lectures from people younger than her who seen absolutely nothing. Period.)

"When I look at this girl, do you know what I see?" she says, voice firm and allowing her chakra, hot and dangerous like fire it can turn into on a whim, lined with anger, to bleed through her skin. World sharpens, too, and she sees Mebuki’s face go few tones paler, as she stares into blood red orbs of sharingan, arguably the creepiest Blood Limit there is. Ren raises from her seat, and crosses her hands. "I see a girl with passion. Girl with a cause. Not a child who wishes to be a ninja just because that's cool thing – I see a girl who wishes to become a ninja because she is inspired to do so. A girl who, frankly, can make it much farther than her father. I see raw talent, a rock – ragged and rough and tattered which, if polished in time, will reveal a gem that just might amaze everyone. I see a girl with a cause, that will have her name written down in history, perhaps even more than others!"

"This is not…" Mebuki starts, but Ren cuts her off with a motion of a hand. She is thirty-two with some experience in life (or so she likes to think) for crying out loud! She will not be interrupted by her grandmother an old-fashioned woman who only thinks about herself, about fulfilling her dreams through the child she's supposed to support through thick and thin!

"I don't care what you think!" she hisses. "Because you know what I also see? I see a woman, trapped in her own mind, in her own dreams, trying to force them on her child! On her child which she ought to support through thick and thin! On her child, from whose successes, no matter which
Because even if she succeeded, her grandmother did, too, in turning Ren into selfish, arrogant, money-oriented sociopath.)

"That being said, wake. The. Fuck. UP!" Ren roars, slamming her fists on the table. "Grow up, like you are supposed to, and care for your daughter like am other is supposed to!"

"And what can you know about raising a child?!" Mebuki shrieks then, still pale and frightened, but also angry.

"Nothing," Ren shakes her hand. "But I know exactly how it is to be raised like that. Like you raise her. And I know that all awaits on the end of that road is resentment, grudge and even hate. All directed towards the parent who failed to see their child as their own person instead of their tool to fulfill their dreams."

"I… I don't…" Mebuki started.

"You do," Kizashi counters, standing by the doorframe. She snaps at him, surprised and already opening her mouth, but he's faster; "I tried to tell you, dear, but you fail to understand. I… I made only genin because my mother got crippled on a mission and her resentment towards ninja grew, and her husband was civilian. I… I always wanted to make it to at least chūnin, you know, but they held me down. Tried to talk me out of it, and succeeded – and I was so stupid to actually listen to them! I tried to talk to you about it, but you never listened. And, Ren is right, you know. I never once spoke to my parents since the wedding day, because I blame them for my failure. Because if only they supported me… If only they were there for me, instead of trying to convince me otherwise…!"

Man stops, only to prevent himself from choking on his tears. Sakura is crying, too- But then, the only ones who aren't crying are Shikamaru, Saskue, Hana and Ren.

"I forgot how it is, but Ren-san here… She reminded me, of all I felt as a child. I wished to be a ninja so bad, maybe even become and ANBU one day!" he gasps. "But now, to think that Sakura could feel about me, about us, the same way that I think about my parents? It hurts, Mebuki."

"You hate your parents," Mebuki sniffs. "Even when they greet you on the street, you pretend you don't see them. And when they visit, you hide away and pretend you're not here… Dear, I-" she turns and looks at Ren. "Would Sakura, truly…?"

"Yes," Ren nods.

"No!" pinkette disagrees.

"I thought the same when I was your age, too," Ren sighs. "And then I didn't anymore, because I grew up, matured and opened my eyes. And all I saw was my family trying to force me into a role that I was neither willing nor meant to play."

She was Ren now, but she would never forget how it was and what it meant to be Renee. How it felt, being forced to run half a country, if only to escape clutches of the Archer Matron. How she didn't even miss them at all.

Then, there were presents.
Naruto, it seemed, felt like giving people plush toys would solve all the problems of the world – best part of this way of thinking was that he might not be entirely wrong. Thus, he gave Sakura a pink plush pudgy, one-piece cat. Kiba thought it a good idea apparently, and thus brought Sakura a matching, pudgy, blue dog that looked distinctly like a shiba-inu.

Shikamaru, visibly having decided that he's guy for puns and so smart beyond all, gave Sakura a small sakura bonsai. Or maybe he was just so lazy that he choose to give the girl the source of her name – or both, perhaps. Choji, because he and Nara apparently did everything together, gifted quite thick book on bonsai and garden overall – however, with great deal of herbology within it.

Hinata, still not entirely sure as to what she was doing there with all those children who weren't ignoring her as per usual, brought Sakura an empty album, with hopeful wishing that the pinkette would fill it with best memories.

Hana, following Ren's subtle advice, decided to give Sakura her scrolls on basic Chakra Control and even more basic Med-Jutsu. Not much, just pain soothers and ways to heal small bruises and papercuts, scrolls Hana has long since read, memorized and learned, but Sakura's eyes lit up nonetheless, making Ren all too smug about subtly pushing the girl in the right direction.

Lastly, the gift from both Uchiha was a full ninja-suitable attire. Because, honestly, the girly and tight clothes girl usually wore, all pastel pink, blue and yellow, mixing rather oddly with her hair color, usually ended up torn or dirtied beyond what normal materials could recover from. Thus, few days back Ren promptly took Sasuke to the ninja part of shopping district and had him try various dresses, causing the owner and assistants coo and fawn over the boy – however, his figure was very much like Sakura's, even if he was slightly shorter now, and in the end they managed to choose – a Qi-Pao, cherry-colored, sleeveless and trimmed with white, reaching just above girl's knees, and white pants ending mid-calf, rather form fitting. Quite odd mixture between Pre-Shippuuden dress and Boruto: The Movie pants, but pinkette looked nice in it.

And, most of all, it was made out of special material most ninja clothes was made of – easily cleaned even from the worst, and absolutely immune to any accidental tears and holes.

But the best part when Mebuki looked at her daughter after the girl changed – it was so very apparent that she was absolutely convinced that there was no way for kunoichi to actually look pretty in ninja clothing.

They leave when it's already dark and Ren with Hana agreed to walk everyone home, one after another. However, just before they depart, Sakura latches to Ren and locked her in, maybe not bone-crushing, but already strong embrace.

"Thank you," pinkette whispers. "For telling mom."

"'s okay, kid," she sighs, patting girl's head. "I know how awful it is when your own mother tells you that your dreams are dumb and you should focus on 'reality', just because she thinks she knows what matter."

"You do?"

"Yeah. And I really wouldn't want you to end up like me."

"But…" Sakura whispers. "But your mom is…"

"Dead? Ren asks, and then snorts. "You see, grudges like these go past the grave. I will never see
any of them again, and somehow... Somehow I'm just happy they can't reach me here."

It's not like her mother was dead, not she actually admitted it. But the fact that there was little-to-no chance of her meeting her family ever again? Her real 'family'? That was true. She was just happy she was here without them. Without their venom.

"Ren, move or we'll go without you!" Hana calls, and Uchiha just rolls her eyes, prying the pinkette off of her.

"Remember today, okay?" she says. "And if your mom starts being dumb again, talk to her, or to your dad, or to me. Okay?"

"Okay! Thanks, for today. Really."

"Ren!"

"Oh sweet Jashin, coming! Bye, kid."

Sakura just smiles widely, and waves.
Twelfth Thread

Chapter Summary

This time it was delayed on FF.net, too. Lack of time is a bitch, I tell you. Especially since I re-discovered Minecraft ._.

"I'm surrounded by idiots!"

- Scar, The Lion King

Days came and went, just like that. They turned to weeks, which turned to months, and Ren spent it all learning and thanking whoever would listen (Jashin, Sage, hell, even Kaguya would do) that 'learning' in Naruto World didn't exactly equal 'studying'. So, instead of hitting the books, she hit training grounds. She was bound do to well on theory anyway – she could pretend 'Will of Fire' indoctrination well, and she had knowledge of thirty-two years of life.

So, she spent her time training – or, she liked to put it as 'learning her body', which was actually true. She technically knew what Ren was capable of, she saw it in her dream-memories, but she, of course, had to try it all out herself. All the fancy taijutsu katas, all the fancy, explosive techniques she used to burn the trees with, much to kids' glee and Kakashi and Tenzo's dread.

Speaking of kids – she apparently gained her own row of ducklings, and she didn't even realize just when the hell did that happen. Every member of future Rookie Nine except Ino, with Torune instead, kept following her whenever they had any seconds to spare. She understood that she and Hana had that 'older sister authority' to them, and as they most often hanged together it doubled, if not tripled, but this? Nine first-years kept following them, watching them train and, eventually, demanding to be trained, too.

(Not that Ren minded all the gleeful shrieks and giggles when she burned yet another dummy with only slightly too big fireball.)

But then, she was happy with the things as they were, she figured. Sasuke smiled, more and more throughout the time, Naruto finally had actually friends – and many of them, neither of which had been discouraged by their overly-dramatizing parents. Kiba was becoming more… Well, Kiba-y, exuberant and loud. Shikamaru and Choji were pretty much the same, but Ren watched with amusement at cautious friendship blooming between them and the Aburame.

Sakura, free of her parent's idiotic ideas (they actually thanked Ren later on), was dead set on becoming a medic-nin, which might or might not have been the direct reason of Ren and Hana's plotting. Hana herself admitted that she did, indeed, see talent in the pinkette. Hinata had very much taken to following Sakura around, and eventually got wrapped up in their spars, wishing to mimic their older friends. It actually helped – Hinata was becoming gradually better at taijutsu with patience and correcting, instead of withering under her father's stern gaze, and Sakura… Well, she was already making small cracks at the boulder she decided to be her punching dummy.

That might or might not have frightened boys. Quite a lot. Ren just smiled at them, and encouraged
Sakura more. Boys apparently took it as a sign that Ren was grooming Sakura to be her successor once the older Uchiha graduated – which might or might not have been true – and already regarded her more than one another. Sakura apparently liked this sort of attention, because she took to leading the boys – and Hinata – with more and more confidence, especially since Hana managed to convince Ren that firepower was not all and actually dragged her away to hit the books the good, old-fashioned way.

Ren was uncertain of leaving kids to their own antics – of course, having Hinata around resulted in having Neji around as well, with his permanent scowl and 'I'm better than you' aura, even this age. He did not join kids train and have fun – he just watched, as if they were all below him. That made Ren want rip him apart in frustration and anger – and, honestly, fear of upsetting Hinata was the only thing actually in her way.

So, she sneered right back at him whenever she had a chance, and she knew that he was, indeed, quite responsible. Or appeared so.

(Ren wouldn't even have him care for a rat, honestly. His glare could make milk sour, and definitely did that to her mood.

But then, Ren always disliked those pretty boys with posh aura around them. She usually ended up wondering how to make them less pretty in the end – and had few various sophisticated plans laid for when she could actually scratch Itachi. Especially to make sure he was not going to be happy about their... 'family reunion'.

Still, even if he acted better than anyone in the Village, he was bound to care for Hinata, and Hinata was too nice to ever leave any of her new friends. Especially with the newly-found determination to keep those friends close, as she never had any chance to have them before.

In fact, her father would've never let her attend Sakura's party if the invitation wasn't passed by two only remaining Uchiha, that much Ren was certain of.

Then, there were interceptions in forms of, in order, Hana's and then Choji's birthday. Ren had to admit that she was, actually, quite intimidated by current Inuzuka Clan Head, Tsume, and even her aggressive nature paled by the woman. Still, they growled at one another a bit, and then Tsume promptly decided she liked her, much to Sasuke's relief – boy seemed sure that his cousin-turned-sister actions would lead to having her head chewed off. Ren didn't mind some shows of Inuzuka-adequate temper, effectively getting herself rid of the 'up-tact, emotionless Uchiha' stigma. And she never ran out of excuses to spend time with Hana.

(Sasuke, than Jashin, was slowly getting hand on this whole 'friendship' thing. With Naruto and Kiba to introduce him to it he was bound to do so anyway.)

Then came along Choji's birthday, which was abasically just one huge feast. Akimichi people had to, after all, keep proper figure – nearly all their clan techniques were all about heavy mass and enough fat to not to run out of it while in the middle fight. Ren promptly decided that Aburame might have suited her better than Uchiha, in fact. Eating with no restrictions and beating people with it? Count her in. In the end, she joined her forces with Naruto and they both dared Choji and his father, Choza, to an eating competition, or something like that. No one really remembers how it started, but how it ended – with the Akimichi only barely managing to out-eat the Uzumaki&Uchiha combo, which absolutely shocked everyone.

And then, before she managed to notice, it suddenly was May.
Ren wasn't happy upon learning that her life somehow managed to just... Well, slip by through her fingers at good fun and learning hard. She was pretty shocked to learn that the May started a week ago, but that did not stop her on passing all the yesterday tests flying. The written test? Flawless, because those were pre-High tests and she had an university major.

Physical tests? She wasn't drilling herself so hard she usually collapsed from exhaustion every evening to do anything less than best. Clones? She made quite a nasty habit of using them when they played tag with kids – it was a short-lived one, though, as kids were very united over her unfair ninja-cheats, much to her and Hana's amusement. She passed those flying, too.

Hana, herself, was pretty good, too. Top ten, but not quite class top five, but it still was pretty high, considering that the class included thirty people total – thirty, three of which (was this purposeful?) failed the tests. One of those people, Ren noted with satisfaction, was the civilian girl who tried to smash Awai with her book few months ago. The spider himself seemed quite happy with the fact, too – he apparently remembered the girl and acted with nothing but hostility towards her.

And so, today, Ren stood before the academy, tying her forehead protector to her blue, sleeveless coat, and straightening her dull-purple pants. She looked... Ordinary, save maybe for the Uchiha Crest sewn onto the right sleeve of her black, turtleneck T-Shirt. She also had her boots custom made – she absolutely detested having them with open toes, and was not going to suffer just because Kishimoto liked drawing toes.

Her hair was pretty long, too, reaching past her shoulder-blades and woven into tight braid. As Renee she enjoyed her hair long, but not she was Ren, and long hair was not going to be very useful when rearranging people's faces. She made a mental note to cut them as soon as she remembered to.

"Okay," the teacher says, upon spotting that twenty-seven of total graduate candidates have made their way to the classroom, all sporting Leaf forehead protector. The man smiles to himself – only about one third will prove themselves worthy of keeping it. "Now I'll announce your teams!"

Class shushes the chatter, but erupts into frantic whispers instead. The teacher makes sure to read louder, though. Let the kids have a little slack cut before hell begins – that's a sound reasoning, according to him.

"Damn, I'm going to be teamed with our favorite Hyūga, I tell you," Hana hisses to Ren, nudging her. "He's our class' dead last, and I'm not sure how I'll cope," she whines miserably.

"Don't worry," Ren pats her shoulder. "I'm mentally supporting you."

If Hana wanted to answer, she was cut off by the teacher;

"Team Four; Inuzuka Hana," she just sighs in defeat, "Hyūga Hibiki," and she sighs again, "and Uchiha Ren."

The class goes eerily silent for a moment – they know that Hyūga and Uchiha are Leaf's resident powerhouses, even if there isn't much hope for Hibiki, but for Ren to still be placed on team with him? Not to mention that she'll most likely cause an 'tragic accident' for him in the future.

Then Hana squeals in pure delight and shows no shame whatsoever, almost mauling her friend, as she gives the Uchiha very much of a bone-crushing hug. Ren is still too shocked to answer, but then the realization hits her hard.

"We don't have Aburame in our class, do we," she states more than asks, and Hana nods in confirmation.
"Nope!" Inuzuka cheers. "I didn't expect to fill in the gap with an Uchiha, but I'm so very not complaining," she smiles, showing off her pearly-white canines, and Ren finds it difficult to not to return at least portion of the smile.

Today wasn't that bad, really. She was still with her friend, now perhaps even more so, and they would work very hard to either make a proper human out of Hibiki, or make his existence a hell on earth – that much was certain.

Future Team Seven only visits them briefly to see how it's going before they are going, and basically only to be greeted by very smug Ren and Hana, and jeering Hibiki, who looks like the world is ending today because of his two new teammates – which, for his world at least, wasn't exactly too far from the truth. Then, the tree (or six, if Hana's ninken were taken into account) just waited for their new teacher. He, thankfully, did not take long.

And, just like that, gave Ren yet another shock.

She had absolutely no idea what to do and how to greet Aburame Shibi standing before them, looking at the three of them with a thoughtful look. But then, if this is how the village choose to compromise the lacking genin Aburame, well, she wasn't one to argue about something like that, really.

"You don't appear hopeless, thankfully," Shibi says finally in deceptively monotone voice. Hibiki just beams at him, and both girls roll their eyes. "Except for the Hyuga," Shibi corrects himself, and Hibiki's smile drops instantly. Then, the Aburame Clan Head urns towards the two girls with slightly saddened expression – or whatever that is they can read from behind high collar and shades.

"Something wrong, sensei?" Hana asks.

"Yes and no," he shrugs. "You two will have to work hard to balance out your teammate's incompetence. I'm Aburame Shibi, and I'm stuck with you until you mage chūnin, and perhaps even after that, if you prove worthy of creating positive and lasting relationships with me," he says, and eyes Ren a bit longer than ones. Uchiha currently has Awai crawling over the left side of her face, so the smile she offers him is quite creepy and unsettling.

But then, Shino and Torune both claim that she was 'okay', so if his son said it was fine, he was willing to give her a chance.

"Do we get to introduce ourselves or whatever?" Ren asks finally. She doesn't quite like to copy Team Seven, but she really feels the need to do something similar now. Not to mention she knows nothing of Hibiki (it's hard for the boot to care for the worm it steps on) and even less of Shibi, whom she meets for the first time in her life, actually.

The Aburame sighs at that, and just motions her to go first with whatever.

"Oh. Well, I'm Uchiha Ren. I have younger cousin-turned-brother, Sasuke and a small army of Academy first-year minions. I like dango, but I'm carnivore, so I prefer meat over anything. I also like cats, spiders and Hana. I hate dresses, buffoons and blind, homophobic hypocrites, aka civilians. This is my pet, Awai, and my current plan of action is to be above chūnin by the time Sasuke graduates. I'm aiming tokuju for now," she says as counts the facts on her fingers. Renee had long since stopped playing in dreams – she just set herself a long-termed goals she strove to complete, one at a time. Six years to go two ranks up seemed like a decent amount of time.

"Quite interesting," Shibi nods, and then motions at Hana.
"Well, I'm Inuzuka Hana and I have younger brother, Kiba. Me and Ren share a lot, and I'm really happy to be in team with her, even if I have to endure Hibiki for that. I'm carnivore like her, but I like fruit-flavored tea. I like dogs," she motions to her three ninken with a snort. "Those are the Haimatu brothers, Shinku, Sora and Shiro, my ninken. I hate liars, plotters and Hibiki," she huffs, and Ren managed to slip a small 'me too' to her monologue. "I want to make chūnin at first try, it's like a dream of mine. Then I'm going to give it a go at medic-nin apprenticeship," Hana finishes, and that has Shibi nodding. Finally, he nods at Hibiki.

"I'm Hyūga Hibiki and I have no siblings. I don't have any friends either – I don't need them," he said, and, perhaps involuntarily, started emanating that 'I'm better than you' aura. "I don't like animals, they're all just dumb, especially dogs," well, that wasn't going to gain him any love from Inuzukas, "and I like Unagi. I don't have pets. I hate the posh Uchihas and my cousin, kiss-my-boots-Neji. I'm going to show him who's the best one!"

"Strong words for the dead-last," Hana snorts, rolling her eyes. Ren chuckles, too – Neji was at the top of his class and made Jōnin before Naruto returned from his training, likely around age of fifteen/sixteen. She really wanted to see Hibiki go and try to beat that little monstrosity.

"Sensei, and you?" she asks instead, and Shibi sight.

"Aburame Shibi, I'm your teacher. I have a son, Shino, and nephew, Torune. They're both in first year of Academy. My clan tends for many various bugs we're known for. I like calm evenings with a good book, and dislike people who disrupt the peace. I'm making up my goals as I go," he says off-handedly. "Meet me tomorrow at eight by the school gates. I'm going to see if you're really fit to be a ninja."

Ren just smiles. Now, the fun begins.
Ren was quite nervous, to be honest, when she politely trotted towards the Academy next day, but it was hard to blame her. The only test she knew was that of Team Seven, and it was, really, very Kakashi-specific. About other teams of rookie nine – there was absolutely no data, neither on Team Guy (were they even the only ones to pass their exams or not?). And Shibi? How on earth was she supposed to know what was running on and about Shibi's head? He was head of THE secretive clan of emotionally repressed people, goddamnit!

(Also, she, once again, forgot to cut her hair. It was now in a tight braid, hanging between her shoulder-blades, but she really should do something with it, soon, unless she wanted to get it used against her, which she really did not. She really should keep in mind to cut her hair before ending up like Sakura during chūnin exams. Besides, long hair were difficult to properly keep.)

She made it to the gates of Academy shortly before eight, with Hana and Hibiki already waiting. The Hyūga was, apparently, throwing a hissy fit, and Hana was very much not amused, giving him the best of 'the villain speech, seriously' faces. Shibi was also there, hidden away on the treetop and not particularly bothering to hide his charka signature. This, however, most likely slipped right past Hana and Hibiki. With Ren, who was used to be around ANBU and still be more-less oriented of their whereabouts, he could've, just as well, been screaming where he was. Not that he would – screaming Aburame would, most likely, fracture the pattern of the universe and it would go to hell altogether.

"I see you're all here on time," Shibi says, jumping down the second it ticks eight.

"We're ready for our first mission!" Hibiki promptly announces, and Hana rolls her eyes, while Ren just snorts. He glowers at her.

"To go on mission, we have to be ninja," the Uchiha clarifies, and the Hyūga boy crosses his hands on his chest.

"We are ninja, we graduated the Academy-"

"Sixty or more percent of students returns to academy today, you know," Hana says wistfully. "Because they'll fail the actual test."

Hibiki's eyes go wide, as he gawks at her, then at Ren, and then, finally, at Shibi. The man just shrugs.

"They are right," he agrees finally. "Today I will test whether you're worthy or not to become full-fledged genin. If you are, missions will start tomorrow."

"WHAT?!" Hibiki shrieks, wide-eyed and all, and both his teammates roll their eyes in exasperation. Life seems so bright and colorful, indeed.

"Sensei, can we still have him switched for... Well, anything else?" Hana asks unhappily, glaring at the pale-eyed boy, who growls in return.

"No," Shibi answers flatly. "Follow me."
And, just like that, he jumps up and onto the roof and, presented with no other options, genin-(hopefully)-to-be just follow. Shortly, they reached a forested area by the edge of the village. Definitely not a typical training ground – the open area was not nearly big enough. But then, ninja were reluctant to fight I the open to begin with – especially Leaf ninja, much preferring to play monkeys on the trees.

"Today's task is very simple in theoretical way," Shibi says as they stop, and turns towards his genin team (hopefully) to be. Suddenly, there were four puffs of smoke around him, and instead of one, there were four of Shibi. Ren cursed under her breath – she should learn the Shadow Clone as soon as possible, otherwise the life would suck. "I go into the forest, and you have to track me, while clones interrupt you. Don't worry, they will do it only one at a time," he explains, and all three nod in agreement. One of Hana's nin Ken yips in confusion.

Shibi's clones bent their fingers together in a recognizable gesture, and colors of their coats changed to mossy green. Henge was, indeed, a quite useful skill.

"Also," Jōnin says, "shadow clones are specific in they only take one hit and then disappear."

"Assuming a Genin can touch a Jōnin, let alone hit him," Hanna rolls her eyes, and Ren nods in agreement. They're good, but are they really that good?

(Pfft, of course not!)

"Is that all?" Hibiki asks, and Ren bites down the urge to tell him to shut up. Or, better yet, punch him until he does. "That sounds like an easy task."

"Sounds, sure," Hana growls. "Let's see how you manage in practice."

"Children," real Shibi cuts in, borderline exasperated. Hana glares at Hibiki, and then shrugs. Hibiki, however, is still glaring at her. "I'm having one minute head start. I'll try to tone my tempo down to your level. You go once the alarm goes off," he points at the clock he places on the ground. "If you fail to track me down within two hours, you fail. If you get apprehended and slowed down by my clones, you fail. If you get offed by my clones, you fail. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir!" they all answer in union. Shibi nods, sets the clock off, and bolts, almost too fast to see.

"Well, that's going to be interesting," Ren raises her eyebrow.

"Pfft, please," Hibiki waves his hand. "With my Byakugan, we'll find him in to time!"

Ren and Hana just exchange knowing glances and sigh in union. The sole remaining a three-man-team and not killing Hibiki out of rage of his arrogance and uselessness might prove to be task even harder than actually tracking Shibi down.

This is not exactly how Ren imagined her great ninja upbringing, but, well. Beggars can't be choosers, really.

God damn her life.

This is not good. This is so not very good. Or it's bad. Many ways of wording one line, really. The point was: they were forty minutes into their test, lost and ambushed by one of clone! Shibis. The chakra construct was, of course, giving them a lot of openings and wasn't really going hard on them, but between a fully-trained Jōnin and Hibiki, who not only could stand his ground only barely, but also got in Ren's way on purpose, well-
It wasn't going well. And Ren wasn't going to let Hibiki sabotage their test only because he felt offended by something she had said and done, and long since forgotten. It was getting absolutely ridiculous.

"We're never going to pass like that!" Hana roars in utter frustration, when Ren tries to attack only for Hibiki to get before her and fuck up a perfect opening, trying to hit the clone.

Okay, maybe he wasn't doing that exactly on purpose, only wanted to prove (who?) that he was actually better than Ren. Except, that put their test and passing under big, fat, red question mark. At least Ren had no qualms against using him as a meat shield against Shibi's attack. Hana's dogs try their best, but they're only dogs. Smarter than most, but still pretty dumb, and young to that. They're barely the size that Akamaru was while Kiba was genin – so, obviously, they really couldn't do much.

But exasperated Hana, apparently, can. Let's just say that Ren... Isn't exactly happy with the solution, as the Inuzuka grabs her by the collar, sidesteps Hibiki and hurls her at very shocked Shibi, but when Uchiha's back collides with the clone and it goes poof out of the existence, like magic, she finds it hard to complain. She's too busy trying to choke Hibiki few seconds later, anyway.

"For fuck's sake, Hyūga!" she roars into his face, when his lips go purple, and loosens her grip only slightly. "You better have a good fucking reason for trying to sabotage our future, or else I really won't care that we must all pass and I swear, I will strangle you here and now!"

Hibiki looks at her briefly, clawing at her gloved wrists with a snarl, but one glance at her face – twisted with anger, sharingan spinning frantically and teeth clenched hard – he stops. Ren lets go of him some more, hoping she won't regret allowing him to talk.

"Why would you care? You're the perfect miss Uchiha," he snarls right back at her, the amount of spite almost enough to make Ren flinch. Almost. "One of the last of your clan, born in good position and that won't change- What do you know of failure?"

Oh-oh.

Ren snorts. She actually snorts- And then she starts laughing, hysterically almost. She even lets of Hibiki's throat, and Hana, being Hana, is both annoyed, amused and somewhat concerned, too.

"Seriously that's all that it's about?" Uchiha asks, borderline disbelieving. "Just because you're a branch Hyuga, basically a slave to the main family, and you, just like that, decided that I'm, what, a pampered princess? Is it really all about ridiculous clan rivalry and even more ridiculous jealousy? You're really going to forsake your future as a ninja, a chance to prove yourself to your family, over a petty revenge?"

Hibiki, wisely, doesn't answer. Even more wisely, he refuses to look Ren in the eye.

"All that idiocy, just because you feel need to give your life some worth," Hana sighs, holding an armful of dogs. "Petty reasons of petty, pitiful, pathetic bully."

"I'm not a bully!" Hibiki hisses.

"Oh? Then what are you?" Ren dares, and the Hyuga clenches his teeth, but refuses to answer. "Tell me, Hibiki," she says, and for the first time she really, actually gets his attention, because she calls him by his first name. Not surname, not any other name just to piss him off. His actual first name. "Are you so mediocre at everything only because your clannmates refused you training?"

"They say I'm a mistake," he answers, closing his eyes. "That I'm just a halfbreed-"
"Halfbreed?" Hana asks. "As in, only one parent of your is a Hyūga?"

"They think it makes me less," he confirms. "That my Byakugan isn't going to be as good as everyone else because of my blood."

"Oh my Jashin," Ren facepalms, and then looks at Hana. "In a case anybody wondered just how fucked up Hyūga are, here you have it. But I'm still mad. You're trying to sabotage us because of rivalry, jealousy and... Well, and because you think you won't do well as a ninja, am I right?"

"Yes," Hibiki hisses, still refusing to look at her.

"Sweet Sage. Okay, I don't believe I'm saying this, but let's have it like that; try. Try to pass the test with us, and in turn we'll train you," Ren sighs, and really she doesn't believe she just said that, because that's Hibiki, and she hates Hibiki so, so much- But she also wants to become a ninja. More so than she hates him, really. And she always considered herself as someone able of hiding their pride in their boots in favor of greater good.

"Y-you would?" he asks, and for the first time dares to look her in the eye. "But- I thought- I thought that you were a stuck-up, I-know-better Uchiha!"

"And you're an asshole and a bully, and are we judging?" Hana bites at him. "What do we do?"

"I was thinking on having Hibiki use his Byakugan to try to locate Shibi, since Hana's ninzen are confused by clones, who have the same scent and now it lingers all around the forest, basically," Ren says, standing up. She even offers he boy a hand to hoist himself up. "But of course, the second I opened my mouth to him, he would already be throwing insults at me."

Hibiki at least has the grace to appear abashed.

"We good now?" Ren asks. "No more hissy fits from you?"

"But-"

"Notice that she never started with you," Hana notices, walking in between the two. "Whenever the conflict was, it was always because of you."

"But that time in the alley-"

"You were bullying first years," Ren quirks her eyebrow. "Her brother and my cousin included. You thought what, we'll just let that go?"

"Oh.," Hibiki lowers his head. "Well- I guess I don't have a choice, do I?"

"My offer on strangling you still stands," Ren says off-handedly, but serious enough for Hibiki to understand that she might actually mean it. His neck is sore from her iron grip already (how can other genin be so strong in the first place?) and it will surely bruise. All would it take for her was to hold a little bit longer, and Uchiha were known of their temper and acting on it.

(Her cousin did, after all, slaughter almost an entire clan and- And she actually survived being stabbed in the heart, did she not? Hibiki pales at the thought, as it dawns on him only now; Ren might as well be indestructible. The only other Massacre survivor wasn't even attacked to begin with.)

"What?" Ren asks, impatient.
"You- You were stabbed through the heart!" he gasps, wide-eyed.

"Yeah, and?" she asks, eyes narrowing in annoyance, and the Hibiki's eyes widen considerably. Did she just shrug off being almost killed? "Do me a favor, stop with dumb questions and on the creepy eyes. Make sure to look underground, too. Jōnin usually think they're so smart, hiding in the plain sight and stuff."

And so, Hibiki activates his Byakugan, and looks-

"Oh come on!" he cries finally, eyes wide. Both his teammates shot him a questioning looks. "He is underground!" Hibiki turns to them. "In the exact spot where we met before we started!"

Ren expected many things, but for her teacher to be a sassy shit? But then, they didn't say 'watch out for the silent ones' for nothing.

"That's…" Hana sighs, bringing her palm to her forehead. "Let's just- Let's just go and be mad about it, okay? Seriously, mom will be giddy if she learns I was outsmarted by her former teammate – the 'emotionally repressed' one! And she will know, for sure. I mean, they're meeting up for drinks today evening and- God, I won't see the end of it now."

In the end, it turns out that the test was easy. Easier. And all about teamwork, too.

"It might've taken a death threat, but I see it worked," Shibi hums.

"The test was designed for a Hyūga," Hana huffs, offended. "Why?"

"Because Hibiki was resigned and ready to sabotage us," Ren shrugs. "We have to be a team until we advance in ranks, and it's Sensei's duty to make us into one. Or to point directions, anyway."

"You didn't have to strangle me, Uchiha!" Hibiki hisses, back to his usual cheek, red finger-marks slowly turning purple around his neck.

"Nothing else works on idiots, sorry," Uchiha shrugs. "But don't worry, now that we're ninja'd, we'll beat the idiocy out of you. Won't we, Hana?"

The Inuzuka only grins in answer. Hibiki looks at Shibi in exasperation, but the Aburame just shrugs. No solitary at all! He was going to be beaten by girls! But then, it's quite understandable, with all the effort he put into assholery instead of learning something useful.

"You might not be so hopeless," Shibi sums up. "Let's see what can we do with you from now on. Missions start tomorrow, of course."

"Oh fuck, the D-Ranks," Ren whines, suddenly remembering. *Glorified chores*, that's what they would be doing now. Respectable ninja, what a joke! "Just please, don't make us retrieve any pets for stuck up aristocrats-"

Surely it was too early for Tora, yes? **Yes?!**

"Well," Shibi coughs. "Daimyo's wife recently acquired a kitten. It has already made both a habit of running away and made a name for itself-"

**Oh fuck.**

Damn the fact her body was eleven. Her thirty-two years old mind really, really needed a drink.
Vodka, preferably.
"If cats looked like frogs we'd realize what nasty, cruel little bastards they are. Style. That's what people remember."
— Terry Pratchett, Lords and Ladies

It was either just her sheer, pure-black luck, or Shibi was a very sophisticated troll of shinobi world. Or both. It had to be something, for certain. Or life just randomly decided it hated a girl named Uchiha Ren very, very much. Like that would be anything new, given her record in past life. Or maybe it was karma. For all the bad Renee Archer ever did.

Long story short, their first mission, predictably, was: 'Retrieve Tora'.

Before Ren even managed to reach the battlefield – she's been looking through possible flats to rent through better half of the night, she was so not living off of Gramps Hokage for much longer, she technically was adult by law by the time she graduated (which was laughable concept, really), so she might have slightly overslept, but she did send Shibi note beforehand – it was already turned into crime scene. Hibiki was lying face-flat on the ground, curled up to semi-embryonal position, his perfect hair in absolute disarray, and he was very openly whimpering about some evil, abhorrent spawn of the devil. Said spawn was currently hissing loudly on top of one of Hana's dogs, while smacking the other dog with clawed paw – efficiently so. The dog whimpered in answer and ran with tail between its legs.

Tora was… Very Tora-ish indeed, if smaller than what was shown I first episodes of the show. It was quite obvious that this was pretty much still a kitten. Almost grown, but still a kitten, with all that kitten fluff all around – but still huge. It looked like miniature brown tiger, honestly. And it was spiteful little fucker, from what she saw.

"Not going to run and help your teammates?" comes Shibi's slightly bored voice, and Ren looks up with a sigh. Sure enough, her sensei-since-yesterday is up and is reading some sort of book with levelled interest. Judging by the cover, it's about bugs. Such a surprise.

"I'd rather not be meet head-on with… That monstrosity," she sighs heavily, allowing Awai to crawl out of her jacket, onto her face, and through it, to sit on top of her head. "Honestly, all the cats I've meet before definitely weren't so rabid.""

"They hardly were pets of posh aristocrats," Shibi mentions off-handedly, and Ren can't do anything but agree. The strays she seen here and there and shared some of her meal of during Academy days when she was done leading her mini-army of minions were much more pleasant. Some even sat by her when she feed them, and one was bold enough to let her pet it!

(Of course, no hissing, yowling, scratching and biting included.)

"Yup," Ren nods and starts walking forward slowly just as Hana growls louder than usual, startling the cat. It bristles, but this time it's more frightened than angry, because, apparently, it finally realized just who is the real dangerous one out in the field. And that's what she's been waiting for. "I have chicken," Ren promptly announces, startling Hana. Even Hibiki shuts up for once to look at her. But Ren doesn't look at either of them; her gaze is focused at the cat instead. "I made it today, it's still even warm," Ren kneels down, and then sits on her heels, and produces a mini-bento box from a pouch she had attached to her belt.
"Ren, seriously, I don't think-" Hana starts.

"Shut it, Inuzuka!" Hibiki hisses. "The monster is actually listening to her!"

And it was, indeed, the said monstrosity. Bug, brown, fluffy, hissy monstrosity sat down for once, and stopped yowling, and eyed Ren with suspicion in those unnerving, dark eyes, and the Uchiha stared right back, steadily unwrapping cooked meat. The cat visibly perked up at the scent, and then eyed Hibiki and Hana very cautiously and without an ounce of trust.

"I'm going to have to ask the two of you to move your presence from between me and target to behind me," Ren muses as she's dividing meat into rather small pieces. She throws first one, and Tora jumps high, effortlessly catching the piece with a snap of jaws. Jaws that gave small, yet pretty ugly gash on Hibiki's forearm that Hana was currently in process of healing. In was slow and quite sloppy, but she needed practice, and that was better than anything for her, really.

Ren, with a grunt, switches her sitting position to cross-legged and looks at the cat again. Tora was licking its mouth and eyeing her with curiosity right now. Success – as this was not a feral stray, but feral, spoiled pet of fat aristocrat. She threw another piece of chicken, and another, and then stopped. Tora actually had the cheek to look betrayed.

"Sorry, kitty, but you gotta' move your fat, furry ass over here if you want more," Ren says with a smile, reaching with her hand – chicken between her fingers. Tora seems to contemplate it for a while, but then slowly and cautiously stalks forward, sniffing, glancing at Hibiki and Hana in passing. The duo, however, seemingly have just given it up, sat behind Ren and watched. Tora snaps at the meat, and only ninja-induced reflexes are what keeps Ren's fingers intact. Uchiha glares at the cat, cat glares right back, its fur bristling-

And Ren growls. Actually growls - throaty, deep sound effectively stupefying the cat. Apparently, it was beyond Tora that someone might just strike back.

"You can expect me being nice only, if you are nice," Uchiha addresses the cat sternly, eyes narrowed. "You bite me, and you're going to regret it."

Tora seemed to consider the words, before it (seriously, was it a girl or a boy?) slowly approached again. Curious, s Ren had nothing in her hands and the box laid securely locked next to her. But then, Tora sat right before her and yowled. Loudly.

"What?" Ren asks, quirking her eyebrow, and Tora yowls again. "Come on, we'll take you to your mommy, okay?" she says, opening her arms. Much to Hana's startled gasp and Hibiki's astonishment (god damn Uchiha, the only one unscratched!), Tora jumps onto Ren's lap.

Maybe, just maybe, this mission won't end in disaster.

It does.

Because Hana's dogs decided it would be fun to try and commit vengeful act when Tora was not a raging hellcat atrocious monstrosity from the depths of hell anymore. And that, in short words, is how Hana's dogs were grounded by very angry Uchiha, sporting three ugly, if shallow, gashes on her cheek. They wouldn't even think to scar, yes, but currently they bled quite hard and stung painfully.

Not to mention it took bleeding, hurting and very, very angry Ren about an hour to calm down and restrain herself from roaring her lungs out at ninen, and another two hours to coax frightened Tora off the tree. And that was how they greeted the daimyo's wife; confused Hibiki, embarrassed Hana.
sill sending glares at her dogs, and Ren, with a giant albino spider on top of her head, leaves in her hair, quite bloodied left cheek and armful of quite content cat.

"Tora is a big, growing cat," she says, narrowing her eyes, as she hands the cat to the woman. Aristocrat or not, she is fucking supposed to know how to care for her 'beloved' pet. "And, under any circumstance, cannot be kept idle, or forced to do so."

"And who are you to teach me that?" plump woman scoffs with a disdain.

"The only person this cat seems to tolerate," Ren shrugs, as Tora yowls, loudly, and bites woman's finger. "Cat is not a toy. You have one, do everyone a favor and take damn responsibility. Cya!"

And she waltzes out.

"That was idiotic," Shibi admits later, as he supervises the trio as they sweep the park clean from all rubbish and fallen branches. "But true. However, you shouldn't speak that way to people better than yo-"

"Sensei," Ren cuts in from where she throws yet another branch into the bio-trash container. "Just what makes her better than me? Is she smarter or more powerful?"

"No," Shibi says, narrowing his eyes.

"Does she have more money? I'm not certain, as entirety of Uchiha inheritance falls to Sasuke and me, but she's wife of the daimyo-"

"They are royalty," Shibi explains.

"Oh," she stops for a moment, then shrugs, cuts on her cheek already only a memory. "Well then, she's absolutely no one. A nobody I have to pretend to respect. Well, I'm technically the head of the clan now, so I couldn't care less," she shrugs again, collecting some more branches and a stray paper, and throws them into respective bins.

(Not to mention that all the 'better' people reminded her of her grandmother – so full of themselves, always right and can't do no wrong because they were married or born into a family that should, in fact, mean nothing. Oh well.)

"You shouldn't speak this way about the nobility," Shibi says off-handedly, but there's no real reprimand in his voice.

"They need us. They have money, but that's all they have – and they think they can do anything with it, well," Ren giggles. As in, actually giggles. "I'll play along, sensei. For now. Right now I'm nobody too, but if things work out as they should, I should end up one of most wanted child-soldier killing machines this village can offer."

"It frightens me a bit," Shibi admits, his gaze focused on her, "that your thinking goes beyond what eleven-year-old should be thinking."

"I was nearly murdered by my dear cousin," she smiles. "It failed only because my heart was on the wrong side. And I was absolutely defenseless then – and, well. Such experiences change people. Responsibility and stuff, you know. I'm technically a clan head now."

"Okay, okay, quit plotting," Aburame sighs. "Go to the others, help them, and we'll be off to next assignment-"
"Ha! You're not even calling this mission! I know everybody thinks that's just a glorified chore."

Shibi only rolls his eyes, "and tomorrow we'll actually train a bit. I want to see your taijutsu, what you lack and what to work on."

"Sweet!"

"Sasuke, why is onee-chan muttering about evil hellcat at-atro-atrosh-

"Atrocious abominations straight from the deepest, lowest circle of hell, along with three dumb dogs and one bratty Hyūga?" Sasuke finishes for Naruto, and the blonde nods eagerly, because honestly, the words Ren and Sasuke sometimes speak are so difficult, but they sound so smart! "Well, I think that nee-san's first assignment was to catch some important lady's cat. It went well, until Hana's dogs started to try to eat the cat, and Hyūga most likely was no help at all," he shrugs with a sigh, looking at the puzzle he's holding.

Recently, as in about two or so weeks ago, he noticed that Naruto was spending more and more time at Hokage's Estate. At first, Sasuke had been quite jealous, because, of course, he assumed that the blonde followed in his adopted sister – but he soon realized that Naruto didn't spend as much time with Ren as he thought blonde would. Naruto apparently decided that Sasuke was just as good company.

That had taken the younger Uchiha by surprise. When Ren first said he needed friends, he just complied because, well, it was she who said so. Ren was the only family he had left, after all, and the only one who, upon seeing him after massacre, did not look at him with even ounce of pity. Surprise, annoyance, confusion, a bit. But no pity at all.

Before, the only friends he had were those his father choose for him. He never liked his father. Then, there was the forever-kind and cheerful Shisui, and… and He-Who-Must-Be-Punched. Hard. Preferably in the groin, too, just to make it nastier.

(Ren was adamant when it came to his plotting of revenge. It was his brother, yes, but her parents were just as dead, so were the people she once called friends, and that kind, grandmotherly woman who grew herbs in pots on her window. Sasuke suspected that Ren was actually sneaking out to water those, every once in a while, but he didn't really have anything to confirm this theory with – but every once three or four days, Ren, along with one of 'their' ANBU would vanish for half an hour, to take a 'walk' without saying him a word. And Ren always said where is she going – except for when she went to the compound.)

"I don't want catch cats when I'm a ninja," Naruto huffs, puffing his cheeks and crossing his hands on his chest. "I'm too awesome for that, dattebayo!"

"And I tell you, that the very first mission you'll have, will be to retrieve a big, fat and very nasty cat," Sasuke counters with a sly smile, and Naruto grows. "Bet?"

"Bet!" Naruto agrees, because he simply cannot comprehend that he, Great Uzumaki Naruto, could be ever tasked to retrieve a fat lady's cat;

(If Sasuke only knew that he basically already won.)

He could live with that, Sasuke decided. With the blonde idiot invading his personal space with his yelling and cheerfulness. With how he never seemed to be out of energy and how he infected everyone around with his idiocy.
Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't that bad to actually have a friend. Especially one Ren basically pushed at him – and Sasuke trusted her. She was, after all, al he had.

She, and Naruto, and maybe Kiba, and Sakura, and Shikamaru, Choji, Hinata-

Well.
Chapter Notes

And here we go with missing three chapters. I keep constantly forgetting that I'm publishing CPwUR on AO3, too >.<>

"Success is getting what you want, happiness is wanting what you get"
— W.P. Kinsella

About three months into her career of child soldier murdering machine aka the loyal ninja of Leaf, and Ren still hadn't found a proper flat to move into. It reminded her of her life as Renee – that finding a suitable place for both one's tastes and wallet was, indeed, a challenge. There were cheap places, but way too cramped, or there was something wrong with neighbors, or it was in purely-civilian district. Ren would rather have a run-in with S-Rank missing-nin than live among civilians, honestly.

But at least her career was flourishing – as much as it could for genin as in; they were already running short C-Ranks. So far none of them turned out to be anything harder, as it most likely still would for Team Seven, their only problems bandits. But with Hana's nose and Hibiki's Byakugan, they knew they come even before bandits did. And Ren? Ren wasn't good at finding her opponents, without nose or eyes that have radius of action counted in miles. But she was damn good in taking the opponents down once they were found.

Shibi called her vicious, but that was apparently a good thing, especially in a battlefield.

She also created a new, very, very mean move to aid her fighting. In terms of Awai, who was constantly with her and was apparently affected with her chakra, making him basically a half-summon, especially considering how smart he's got? She started throwing him at people's faces. At first it was quite desperate move, because a bandit was about to hit the client, so she acted without thinking, and it worked. Magically almost. Arachnophobia was the phobia since forever for a reason.

And their surprised, frightened screams? Ren could get used to that.

But back to important matters, Ren really, really needs to find a place of her own. She doesn't mind being a bother to Hokage, he's the grandfather she always wished she had, and the estate is big, but… But it's in the middle of goddamn nowhere, and Sasuke, having re-started school month ago after holidays is starting to get annoyed by it. It was fine when he walked with Ren, because they could talk, but walking for half an hour, all alone in the morning? That was boring, even if he was joined by other rookies from time to time – but that was once a week, maybe, when someone slept over. Majorly Naruto, but he lived quite far from the estate.

In one of worst districts, actually, one right next to Red lights Districts. That did spark ire in Ren, because jinchuuriki or not, who by their senses would put a child in such place?

Danzo, most likely, because Danzo was an asshole of assholes.
(An asshole she found lurking around Aburame compound lately. She didn't bother waiting, but went with the fact to Shibi straight away, because she knew that he was eyeing Shino – even if canonically he would snatch Torune instead – as a potential ROOT brainwashed doll. So, she brought matter up with Shibi, he with Hokage, and soon Danzo was nowhere to be seen around Aburame grounds. For a while, Ren's nerves were partially soothed.

Danzo would prove to be the menace of menaces, as, according to her at least, he was the villain of whole Naruto series. Ren would honestly rather sit in the same room with Kaguya, Black Zetsu and Madara – at the same time – than him. But she still kept lookout when she was visiting the compound, which was quite often, as Miwa – Shibi's wife and Shino's mother – absolutely adored having them come over for dinner.)

Sakura was troubled, that was clear to see. Maybe she thought she was good at hiding it, but she wasn't. At least not from Hinata, with whom she grew really close ever since the birthday party. And that's how Ren learned of it – from Hinata, and when she looked a bit closer, fighting the haze of training and missions, she saw it, too.

And she had quite a bit of footing to make wild guess on what it was about.

And that's how Sakura had gotten cornered by annoyed Ren, confused Hana and concerned Hinata the very same day.

"Is it about Yamanaka?" Ren asks the dumbfounded pinkette, when Hinata quietly explains Hana what on earth is going on and why the hell was she dragged along with. For no particular reason, actually, other than Ren decided to just take her with.

"Ino keeps ignoring me," Sakura sniffs. "Now that I know I don't like Sasuke-kun that way, I wanted to be friends again, but… At first, she was mean to me, she and those new friends she has, but Sasuke-kun told them to go away. And now she ignores me all the time, even when I try to talk to her. And she doesn't listen at all!" now the pinkette is crying, and, to her horror, Ren realizes that she feels bad for her. Ren, who never felt bad for anyone – better, who usually got all giddy and warm and fuzzy inside whenever someone was crying within her hearing radius. She was actually, legitimately feeling bad for Sakura.

"Explain how she ignores you," Ren pushes those evil, positive thoughts deep down in favor of asking. "She says she doesn't have time, make excuses, doesn't talk to you at all?"

"She acts like I don't exist!" and the dam breaks. Sakura lunges with a power she most definitely should not have, and wraps her arms around Ren's midsection. "When I try to talk to her, she just turns around and doesn't listen at all! And she walks right past me, and when I call to her, she doesn't react at all! It's so unfair!"

"Well then," Ren sighs, patting girl's back, "I suppose we have a problem. Do you think Ino still likes Sasuke?"

"Um, I think she d-does," Hinata stutters meekly. "I heard her t-telling her friends th-that it's unfair that Sakura-chan gets to s-spend time with him."

"Ren, what are you plotting?" Hana asks, cocking her eyebrow, and Ren's lips quirk a bit.

"A devilishly evil plan, that's what," she answers sweetly, and her grin is all teeth.

"Yamanaka."
Ino nearly chokes on air when Sasuke suddenly speaks to her, basically out of the blue. Sasuke – Uchiha Sasuke, the guy half of the girls from school are crazy about – is talking to her. So, obviously, Ino gets all giddy.

"Yes, Sasuke-kun?" she asks, all sweetly, because is that possible, is he finally coming to his senses enough to realize that she's the prettiest girl in school? Is he finally asking her out?!

"Why do you keep being mean to Sakura?" he asks instead, and for a second Ino is dumbfound. She was mad that he let the pinkette to stay around him, but- But she really did not expect for him to care! Not for her!

"I-" she starts, but his onyx eyes narrow dangerously, and for a second there she's actually intimidated. This is so very no the dreamy Sasuke-kun she envisioned!

"She's hurting, you know," he says instead. "And she really wants to be your friend again. She's not interested in me anymore, so what's your problem, Yamanaka?" he asks, crossing his arms on his chest. And for that, Ino can't exactly find a proper answer. Just why is she avoiding Sakura? Yes, Sakura was the one to break their friendship before it even properly started, but then she apologized, and Ino was just so mad, because Sasuke acknowledged Sakura instead of her-

"Sasuke-kun, I-

"Don't bother," he hisses. "Sakura is my friend, do you understand? And she wants to be your friend, too! And she's hurting because you don't want to be. So go on and choke on your pride if you want, but give her a chance!"

And with that, he walks away. It takes Ino quite a while to comprehend the fact that Sasuke not only took Sakura's side, but also called her a friend. Sakura, the only one who gave him up, he allowed close to him.

That was so unfair I made her want to cry. She was so mad at Sakura for that – for stealing Sasuke-kun away! But maybe, just maybe, she might give her a chance. A real chance, this time. If even Sasuke-kun thought Sakura was worthy of his friendship, then maybe…

Maybe Sakura was worth more than her mindless cronies.

"Nee-san, you really think that me talking the Yamanaka girl down will be enough to open her eyes?" Sasuke asks later that day when he, Ren and Naruto (who became pretty much a constant addition to their duo, and Sasuke really doesn't mind him 'stealing' Ren away that much anymore) sit down at Ichiraku after school, once Ren had completed a particularly nasty mission that included chasing and putting down a rabid, crazed dog.

"I sure do hope so," Ren sighs, slowly rubbing her bandaged forearm. The dog actually managed to get at her and mangle her arm and muscle quite ugly, to the point she received three-day-leave from missions, and a full-week prohibition from using her arm too much. She was still slightly 'drunk' on all the painkillers she was fed, because the dog actually had rabies, and she got two doses of antidote before healers even thought of letting her go. At least Hana's dogs were safe, as Shibi straight-out refused to take them with, but, on the contrary, that pretty much reduced Hana to a mere support.

"I don't know, she looked pretty stu-stupe-" Naruto starts, and both Uchihas smile. From being around them he tried to start using difficult and 'smart' words that he had trouble pronouncing – which was mostly Ren's influence, who liked using difficult words just because when they were at home.
"Stupefied," Sasuke snorts. "Stupefied is the word you want, moron."

"Oi, don't you call me a moron!" Naruto cries.

"Your academics are shit-"

"Sasuke!"

"What?" he huffs, looking at Ren.

"Did you just say shit, or are my ears finally failing?" she asks, cocking her eyebrow.

"I did," he confirms. "You curse a lot, what else do you expect?"

"That you will be smarter on the matter than me, you duck!"

"I'm not a duck!" Sasuke shrieks, nearly falling off of his bar stool.

"But your hair really looks like butt of a duck!" Naruto chimes in, and when Sasuke glares at him, he starts laughing so hard that it ends up in a coughing fit.

Ren just smiles, digging her chopsticks into her noodles, and shrugs at Teuchi. Old man smiles at her brightly and reassumes his work. Life is good, as of now – and even if they don't seem much still, Ren knows she caused some events vital to the future already. As in, Sakura hit the medical books and doesn't care about Sasuke anymore, and Sasuke in turn thinks less and less about revenge, and Naruto has people who openly care for him and help him get at the people who are stupid enough to voice their hostility. Not to mention the two dorks are on very good part on becoming practically inseparable.

Ren wonders just how much will that change their respective character developments, but then she decides she doesn't care all that much. As long as they're happy, life is good.

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Genma is a bloody revered saint, and no one can ever convince Ren otherwise, not in this life and this reality. Because guess what is the first thing Genma says to her after he's back from yet another 'go there and kill this person' S—Rank, on the second day of Ren's leave?

"By the way, a flat in the compound I live in was recently freed, the family finally bought their dreamed cottage and moved there," and if Genma had an input in them buying said cottage, well, Ren doesn't know and she doesn't care. Because the flat had two possible bedrooms, bathroom and living room with kitchen, it wasn't too spacious, but definitely not small either, and Ren could totally rent it with few D-Rank pays. Also, the landlord was an elderly lady who was everything Renee's grandmother wasn't – she was grandmotherly, nice and caring.

So, Ren was sold. Sasuke seemed quite convinced himself, too – as long as he wouldn't be awaken by Konohamaru jumping on his stomach. Besides, the flat was much closer to Academy and – most importantly, perhaps – only two streets from where Nauto lived.

(And by that, only three streets from Red Lights district. Ren found it difficult to care – it was by Naruto, Genma next door, at reasonable price and, most importantly, it was theirs. Their own four walls to call home.)

"By the way," Shibi says on the third and last day of Ren's leave, as he and his Team Four are seated under the tree, after Hana and Hibiki have completed the mission, "I signed you up for Chunin
exams in Rock. They're next month."

For a moment, there's only silence.

"What?" Hibiki shrieks. "Isn't that too early? We've barely been ninja for three months!"

"I need you to go there and see what is it all about," Shibi explains. "Even if you fail, I don't care, because I'm not signing you to the next two ones, and nothing can convince me otherwise."

"Why is that, sensei?" Hana asks, surprised, and Ren thinks that she might actually know the answer.

"Because they're going to be hosted in either Cloud or Mist," Shibi says. "Cloud will do all it can to get the Byakugan," he looks at suddenly pale Hibiki, who apparently just nor remembered what happened at Hinata's third birthday.

"And Mist is widely known for its non-discriminating hate for Bloodline Limits of all kind," Ren finishes for him. "Which means, obviously, that neither Hyūga or Uchiha will be welcome there."

"I don't want you to pass, just to see what it's about," Shibi clarifies. "Although I definitely won't be mad if any of you actually makes it chūnin," he says, glancing at Ren, who grins.

"I think Ren could pass just fine, if she wasn't so repulsed from using her sharingan," Hana chimes in, and Ren's grin drops.

"What makes you think I'm repulsed from using it?" she asks.

"Because you never do!" Hibiki arguments, and the Uchiha sighs.

"I'm not going to be using it against rabid dogs and cats from hell!" she huffs, waving her almost-healed hand in the air. "Besides, I do train it. In private. With Sasuke, because nobody knows when he will awaken his, so he should at least know theory. Besides, it's not like there's any other person who could teach me about-"

Ren stops dead in her monologue, words choked down in her throat. She's so stupid, isn't she?

"You've forgotten about Sharingan Kakashi, didn't you?" Shibi asks with a smirk, and Ren groans, face-palming so hard the sound startles both her teammates.

"Fuck, fuckitty fucking fuck, I'm so stupid," she groans, because for crying out loud, Kakashi is the ANBU that was watching her most of the time before she made genin, and now, albeit more sporadically, tends to shadow Sasuke or Naruto. She's so stupid that she didn't think of him. "Can you contact him for me, or something? When do we leave?"

"In about one and half a week, your arm should be good by then," Shibi says. "And don't worry, I'll get him for you. You can at least ask for pointers, as you don't have much time."

"Somebody hit me, I've been so stupid," Ren groans in exasperation, drawing an amused chuckle from her sensei.

"I don't hit wounded patients, it's against the medic code," Hana raises her hands.

"I don't hit girls. And even if I did, I definitely wouldn't hit girls who like choking me anyway," Hibiki shrugs, involuntarily rubbing his neck.

"That's a history!" Ren shrieks.
"Shut up, I still have nightmares!" Hibiki shoots right back.

Awai, at least, can be trusted and, albeit light, because what a spider can do, smacks Ren with one of his legs.
Sixteenth Thread

Chapter Notes

For once I've managed to update it in the same time as on FF.net. I'm proud of myself.

"I like long walks, especially when they are taken by people who annoy me."
— Noël Coward

One day after Ren's temporary leave has ended, her team is trying playing Jesuses by waterwalking. And promptly failing, honestly. Well, maybe except for Hana, who has damn good charka control (she is shaping up to be a medic-nin) and does it after few tries. Hibiki and Ren? Not so much. Hibiki is an airhead who can't put enough attention into doing so, and is currently shrieking as he falls into the water. It's only knee-deep, but fucking freezing.

And Ren? Ren is not a person who pulls their punches. Never was. She is not subtle, she is not gentle, she is hardly precise. Standing on water isn't all that hard. But when she tries to walk? The water promptly explodes underneath her feet, because she might be natural at drawing her white-hot, so very Uchiha-y fire chakra, but it does not mix with water at all. Trees were easy. Trees were steady, and hard, and had uneven surface to which she could just glue herself to stick, but water? Water is a bitch and Ren hates her. Water is cold and slimy and constantly moving, and Ren feels like a cockroach trying to imitate water pond skater. And, which is easy to conclude, she is failing. In quite epic manner.

The worst thing is she knows what she does wrong. She pushes too much of too hot chakra into her feet. But the water is cold, and she doesn't control it — also, the only solution she ever faced before was 'if it doesn't work, do more', not 'do less' or 'be precise'. Precision was for surgeons, and she was a detective. She chased people, punched people and shoot people. No need for precision there, just stamina and semi-accuracy.

Want to know a super secretive secret? Water and fire did not mix well. Or at all. Surprising, isn't it? It wasn't helping that Hibiki was having as much — if not more — problems than her. He, for instance, was putting too little charka into his feet. So, instead of exploding underneath his feet, he was walking as if on gelatin or pudding. He was sinking slowly until he broke the little the focus he had once cold water reached above his ankle-high ninja shoes. And went down with a quite pathetic shriek.

Ren wasn't all that better, only instead of shrieking she took to cursing. At the top of her lungs.

"Why is it so hard to tone my chakra down?!" she whines eventually, just as pathetic as she feels, which is very, as she falls onto her ass next to Hana. "I never thought that my inability to pull my punches would be such a disadvantage."

"Oh come on, don't do that," Hana pats her shoulder. "I managed only because chakra control is something natural for me. Otherwise I wouldn't even dream of going medic."
"I'm not going medic," Ren huffs. "I'm going to be the reason other villages will need more of them!" she bellows, much to her friends' amusement.

"Hardly, if their patients will just run onto the liquid surface where you can't reach them," a new voice chirps in, and Ren bends her head backwards and grins.

"Hi, Hound," she says. "You look weird without the ANBU attire."

"I'm not even going to ask," Shibi says from above the scroll he is reading, and Kakashi actually pouts at her.

"Maa, Ren-chan, ANBU identities are supposed to be top-secret!"

"You've been my babysitter since when? Like, January, I guess, yeah?" she states the obvious. "It's your voice. And the hair. Actually, it's more the hair. Any birds nesting there this year yet?"

"Cocky," Kakashi says, but there's a bit of amusement in his eyes. "And do refer to me as Hatake-sensei, or at least –senpai for the time being, okay?"

"Sure thing, Kacchan!" if possible, Ren's grin grows even wider. Kakashi stiffens for a bit, and Ren can't even feel bad for using Izuku's nickname for his best-friend-turned-nemesis from Boku no Hero over all the giddy, warm, fuzzy feeling blossoming in her chest over the sole fact that she did. Shibi just stares between both of them, curious of where will that take either of them. Kakashi is mildly annoyed but also somehow resigned.

He does, after all, know Ren. The first thing she asked him was if he would cook for them wearing a pink apron, for crying out loud! If he expected timid, shy kid, he was very, very wrong. Because Uchiha Ren was exuberant, hotheaded badmouth, wo made her opinions known. Loudly. Often spiced up with a foul word or three, if opinion was negative.

"Right," Kakashi sighs heavily, "I have forgotten about your... Qualities."

"Oh quiet you, unless you want to actually take up the task of cooking in that pink apron I saw in the shop. I can even buy it for you -" the jonin eyes her, eyebrow twitching "-or you can give me some sharingan pointers and call it a day. Me, personally, I'd actually prefer the former idea of spending time, but, well."

Shibi openly stared at them as if Ren just dyed her hair hot pink and dressed up in a very girly, equally pink, even more frilly dress and started dancing Macarena, Hibiki had the dumbest face on and Hana was choking down on her laughter in very futile attempt to stop it. Kakashi shoot Shibi a look of 'are you fucking kidding me'.

"I hate you, kid," he says finally, and Ren laughs at the statement.

"With the same fierce hatred you felt when you bought us food few months back?" she asks, quirking her eyebrow, and Hana grins in acknowledgement, because she does remember. "Yeah, I think I'll manage that kind of hate just fine, yeah?"

"Oh, seriously, Ren," Hana chimes in. "How could you possibly doubt Ryōken-san here?"

Hibiki is very much stupefied, but this time even Shibi looks curious.

"I hate both of you," Kakashi answers blandly, and then turns to Shibi. "Remind me what pushed me onto agreeing to help this Uchiha brat?"
"Free food, Hatake-san," Shibi says politely, and Hatake Kakashi, one of the strongest brainwashed killing machines this village has, lets out a heavy, pained sigh.

He hates his life so much. It just loves stranding him with overly-emotional Uchiha who are pain in the ass by the sheer default of existing. But unlike Obito, Ren actually does what she can to get stronger. That, he appreciates.

(But, also unlike Obito, she's downright mean. She has every intention of insulting people with her actions and words, and she makes the fact known. It was only yesterday that she made a civilian girl cry. Sure, the wench dared to insult Naruto, but Ren's retaliation was immediate and painful, mentally.

Kakashi found himself silently appreciating the fact. This should be his role – if only he was allowed to interact with Naruto before he graduated! But Ren… Ren should be enough for next five/six or so years. She had to be.)

If he only knew to what extent she planned to become involved in blonde's life. If only.

(If only his hair could get any grayer than it already was.)

Training her sharingan was draining as fuck, period. Also, prolonged usage of the creepy eyes™ made her eyes hurt to the very sockets, and her head was spinning. Sure, her vision was the purest HD ever, but the sheer amount of details made her sick. She could count leaves on the tree that was fifty meters away from her, and it was ridiculous. But did it do wonders for her fighting style. She never actually trained fighting with sharingan – she didn't know where to start even, let alone what to do, and fighting in HD, nearly in slow-motion? It was awesome. And holy shit, it helped quite a bit.

"You're better at this than I expected," Kakashi says finally, and Ren looks at him, eyes red and three tomoe spinning. (Three? Weird, Kakashi thought, for someone her age and experience to have fully matured base sharingan, but okay, what gives.) She sat down and took a hold of her head, eyes hazed before red faded to the dullest, most boring black he's ever seen. "Quite admirable that someone like you is actually able of following orders and directions."

"If they're useful, Kachhan, I see nothing wrong with doing what I'm told," she huffs, curling fists and pressing them to her temples. "Shit, I feel like I'm gonna throw up."

"You've never used sharingan much before?" he asks, quirking his eyebrow.

"Actually, only to find things in the morning when it was dark," she shrugs, and this time Kakashi gawks at her. For her to use it for something so trivial- "I actually gave Sasuke quite a scare, honestly, when I forgot to turn it off as I woke him. He tried to strangle me with a pillow!" she barks out a laughter. "I think he'll do well as one of your precious brainwashed child soldiers."

"Did you seriously…” Kakashi hides his face in his hands. "And you just managed two hours of nonstop sharingan training? You have stamina as ridiculous as Guy!"

And, of course, this was the moment that mighty Beast of Konoha heard the call of its sworn rival, and somehow teleported to quite near to where they were with the loudest 'my eternal rival recognizes my youthfulness' and waterworks. Seriously, so much waterworks.

"What the actual fuck," Ren instantly voices what she suspects to be the thoughts of both her and Kakashi. One look into his mismatched eyes is enough of a confirmation. And then, just to keep up appearances, because seriously; "who the fuck are you."
"Me?" Guy asks, pointing his thumb at his chest – clad, of course, in green spandex – and, completely unfazed by her language, beams, and says; "I am Might Guy, the Youthful Beast of Konoha! And who might you be, young lady?"

"Uchiha Ren, yo, and you kinda interrupted quite important training me and-" Kakashi's eyes widened and he shook his head in horror, "-Kacchan here are going through some sharingan basis so I don't die on my chūnin exams in Iwa."

Guy looks at her, then at Kakashi, and Kakashi is looking at her that if looks could kill- Wait, no, this is Ninja Land, if you have proper eyes looks can kill, fuck. So, Kakashi was looking at her as if he wished he had set of killer eyes, that's for sure. And then, Guy bursts out.

"Ah, that's most youthful that you allow yourself to be acquainted with the prime of youth of out flourishing village!"

And then, just like that, Ren gets the most devilish, deliciously evil idea she could possible get where life concerns Kakashi.

"Hey, Guy," she calls to the man, and very much ignores the waterworks that start immediately, and pretends no not to see Kakashi's expression, suddenly horrified again, and asks; "you're a ninja, yeah? What you're good at?"

The mighty Beast of Konoha, the guy to take her beloved monster of a top third character that is Kisame down, is wailing like a child and waterworking so hard it's ridiculous.

"Taijutsu," Kakashi answers for him. "His chakra work is mediocre at its best, so her works physically," he says, hoping that mentioning mediocre chakra work will be enough to scare chakra-oriented Uchiha off. Ho boy, he's up for a nasty surprise, that one. Because instead of shrugging the man off like Kakashi expects her to, Ren's eyes suddenly light up and he knows he's fucked. Like, very much.

"If you focus on nothing but taijutsu, you must be good, aren't you?" she asks, and Guy, for once, shuts up. He looks at her, then beams (it's blinding – like, literally, his teeth fucking shine) and then nods. "Well then, how about you give me a pointer or two after I'm back from the exams? In about two months, so, yeah, but still. Currently I'm relying on taijutsu quite a lot, so an advice or two from someone who essentially specializes in it would do me some good."

Guy's reassumed waterworks are enough to flood Ren's sandals. Thank fuck she always had them custom made so they would have covered toes, otherwise she would really feel like Jesus. Her grandmother was fanatic Christian, so she did know a thing or two about bible – and there was that woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears. And Ren walked on water only earlier today, however sloppily and failing that wasn't.

"You're spawn of the devil, I tell you," Kakashi groans once they manage to rid themselves of overly-excited, green menace that is Guy. He looks at her, unimpressed and unamused, but she knows he's annoyed and currently regrets his life decisions hard. "And I hate you."

"Sure, sure, Kacchan. By the way, why are you here? Aren't you an ANBU? When I asked Shibi yesterday, I really didn't expect him to get you the very next day!" she exclaims, because that's something that was bothering her entire day as Kakashi was trying to pound some sharingan knowledge into her. It was working, honestly – the only things she had to remember was to not to overuse it, really.
"I'm on a leave, week long," he says, and Ren nods. True, she did not see him much for last weeks, if at all. She looks at him, expecting the man to elucidate. He looks at her and sighs. "A mission. Got hit. Hokage-sama hooked me off to heal up. I hate hospitals."

Ren laughs and adjusts her hands under her head. They're currently on a hill, watching clouds. Kakashi told her to do that, after sun dimmed a bit, with sharingan, and she would tell him the colors she saw in the clouds. At first she was skeptic, but when she looked up, into a very HD sky, she was rendered breathless for a bit. Because who knew that clouds were fucking fluffy rainbows?!

"Hey, Kachhan, wanna know a secret?" she asks suddenly, and she herself doesn't know why she does so. She feels him shift and look at her as she sits up. "Yes or no? Of course, you can't tell anyone or I'll find you, find out where you live and then plant catnip all over your place. Okay? And that's going to be the least of your troubles."

Kakashi eyes her, because he not only dislikes cats, he's actually allergic to their fur, and knowing Ren she was actually more than capable of turning her threat into reality. But I she threatens him with more, in such childish, innocent, yet somehow serious manner… Kakashi sits up, looks at her and stills. He finds himself unable to breathe, actually.

"Startling, eh?" Ren asks with a smile, and Kakashi just can't stop staring at the shuriken-shaped black lines, swirling lazily on startling, eerie red.

Why nobody told him Ren had fucking Mangekyo Sharingan?!
ATTENTION CONTEST

So, hi, I know last chapter was literally just posted, technically, but I really don't feel like spamming in my thread, so I just wrote next one to post a contest info here? xDDD

(Yes, I did cook up a chapter only because I wanted to post a contest info. Sue me.)

There's that one thing I've always wanted to do with a fanfiction but always failed, so I really hope that I –we – will manage this time. The contest is laughably simple, really. The 'go and draw me my character' kind of simple. So, yeah. Go and draw me my Ren - with your OC, actually, because I would love to see how they interact!

You can find her actually appearance in my folder on deviantArt. My nickname there is KillerGirlFuria (don't ask, please, I was eleven) and all I got about Ren is stashed in folder named oh-so-cleverly Narutards.

There will be three possible winners, and the contest is extended between both and AO3. The prizes will consist:

1st – a fullbody pixel drawing of their OC, like my newest drawing called AT: Magical Girl on dA, and a short one-shot, no longer than three pages in word, Calibri 11 with default margins.

2nd – a fullbody pixel drawing of their OC.

3rd – a halfbody pixel drawing of their OC.

I might also choose one or two distinctions. They will get bust pixel drawings.

If you have any questions, feel free to PM me, I don't bite. Usually?

The deadline is 31st of March. As for winners, I will choose them within a week. The prizes will, however, be drawn after May, because in May I have Matura Exam, and if I fail it, I can just say bye-bye to University and future whatsoever. I hope you understand me.

You can send all the contest works to me on my e-mail address, angi98 amorki. pl , or PM it to me via deviantArt. Just remember to state it's for my Naruto Contest!

"The only way that we can live, is if we grow. The only way that we can grow is if we change. The only way that we can change is if we learn. The only way we can learn is if we are exposed. And the only way that we can become exposed is if we throw ourselves out into the open. Do it. Throw yourself."

— C. JoyBell C.
Kakashi paid attention. Like, his attention was completely, fully focused on her and not on anything else. It was slightly weird, as the Kakashi she knew was a lazy asshole with his nose constantly buried in his porn book. But then, that Kakashi was six years away from now, and Ren wasn't even sure if he would turn out to become the same man with her around. Well, she could try, anyways. She could, for example, bet him to read it. Maybe that would work? Who knows.

But back to important matters, Kakashi was staring at her. Into her soul, almost, and Ren offered him a big grin, cutting the chakra she was pumping into her eyes, as they faded from red to brown, and then to black. And also, world stopped being so insanely HD, but she was pretty sure that she could draw Kakashi's face by heart with striking detail, if she only could draw. Pros of Sharingan, really – it was the copy-wheel eye for a reason, and it granted photographic memory. She forgot about that one, but she would have to use it later. It would be handy one way or another, that's for sure.

"How on earth do you have that?" he asks finally. "I don't know much about Mangekyo, but you must kill someone to attain it-"

"Kacchan, what you know is a piece of shit," Ren snorts, raising her eyebrow at the man.

"What?" he asks, dumbfounded, and girl sighs in disbelief.

"Sure, yeah, let a genin freshman tutor a fucking ANBU veteran on the matter he should know, why not," she snorts. "The thing is, Kacchan, that it's not it. Sharingan technically resolves around precious people, but that's a sack of bullshit, actually. It's all about certain emotions releasing certain types of chakra. Base form you get from a strong desire to protect or to save, not necessarily a precious person, while it's fueled by rage. That makes brain send special chakra around, and awakens Creepy Eyes Stage One. I for example got mine when I was seven. That bitch, Fugaku, threw a puppy into the pond to let it drown, and I was like 'oh no bitch you don't' so I jumped after the dog. Into a freezing-cold pond in fall. But I wanted to save the dog, and then preferably pound Fugaku's face in, which I, sadly, never did, but that awakened my base sharingan," she explains, gesturing in the air for no reason in particular.

"So," Kakashi says, "basic sharingan requires desire to protect and anger combined?"

Ren nods. "Now, Creepy Eyes Stage Two, that's just sweet, you see."

"Why is that?" the man asks, and Ren offers him a very unpleasant grin.

"Because that shit not, it requires trauma. Quite severe one, to awaken. Usually, death of someone close to you is traumatic enough to let you awaken it, that's why it's usually said you have to kill someone close to you or other bullshit," she snorts. "The truth is, trauma is trauma, the end. And me? Apparently being killed was traumatic enough, because I definitely did not have Mangekyō before the massacre, and after massacre it just was there, fucking shuriken of an eye."

Kakashi just stares at her, then blinks, then stares some more.

"What?" she asks, narrowing her eyes, and ANBU just shrugs. "Surprised that I'm talking about my dearest cousin-gone-homicidal putting a blade through my chest as if it was comparable to accidentally nibbling my finger while throwing ninja stars?"

"Maybe," Kakashi agrees, and for once looks away, into the sky, and so does Ren. It's starting to darken, Sasuke will most likely set out to hunt her down and haul her ass back to Hokage's estate pretty soon to help him with homework. Naruto will most likely be with him, and, with any luck, ant
other of her minions. Sakura, most likely, because her parents know little about being ninja. Her father might've been one, but it's been years since he's gone civilian, and he remembers nearly nothing. And Sakura, for all the brightness and sharpness she has, still would rather do homework in group, and study with other people. Because that way she could exchange remarks with others. Actually, there was a talk going on, about them starting a study club or something like that. Oddly enough, it was Shino's idea, but it was widely accepted. So far they were still arguing over dates.

Shikamaru voiced the idea to be troublesome, of course, but Ren doubted he would pass the occasion. Sakura did prove to be a challenge to him in shogi once she got a hang of the game.

Hell, there was even a talk about inviting Ino in yesterday, had she proved to have some common sense. Oddly enough, it started with Sasuke's remark.

"What are you thinking about?" Kakashi asks, and Ren lets out a sigh.

"My minions, Kacchan. As in, the band of children that tails me every time they can catch me, basically, with leadership of my brot- My cousin," she huffs. Just when did she start thinking about Sasuke as her brother? It must've happened gradually, for the fact to slip past her. Ren was crude person, sure, but she was not oblivious to people and the mood.

"Ah," the man says, and maybe here's a hint of smile underneath his mask. "Got yourself quite a following, don't you? All of future clan heads from Sasuke's class, and one civilian girl."

Ren wonders if he accounts Naruto among clan heads – because he sure as hell is one of the last Uzumaki – or just wisely doesn't mention him. It must hurt to be Kakashi.

"Sakura, huh?" she addresses that topic instead. "She has some good brain in that head. And her chakra control? With some pointers from Hana she can actually heal a papercut."

"Wait," Kakashi stops. "A civilian kid, seven years old, no prior training whatsoever- Can heal?"

His uncovered eye, as black as an Uchiha, widens in shock.

"That kid is something else indeed," Ren snorts. "She has the temper, and can throw a really mean punch. I really pity the bastard who will get her in his team once she graduates."

"Yeah, I kinda pity them, too."

It takes all Ren has to not to burst out and start laughing like a cross between a hyena that's high on something bad and a drunken donkey. She manages to slip up a cough the very last second, and covers her mouth with her open palm, because she's grinning like an idiot. If Kakashi notices, he doesn't address the fact.

"What are chūnin exams?" is the first thing Naruto asks after he's feed the news that Ren, in a week from now, will be gone. For two entire months. "What are chūnin?"

Both Sasuke and Sakura slap their foreheads at the same time so hard that the sound is enough to startle Hinata, who was sitting quietly, with Shikamaru and Choji on her either side, reading a book that was apparently interesting enough to keep the Nara heir in sitting position. Shino definitely looks like he wishes to slap his forehead as well, but has enough decorum to not to, Torune tries so hard to pretend he's not amused, and Kiba looks dumbfound but eagerly nods at Naruto's question. Because today, on Thursday, after Ren got back to the estate after getting her ass handed to her on a silver plate by Kakashi (sparring with the man was very, very bad idea), she somehow found entire Rookie Nine minus Ino but with Torune instead, seated comfortably in living room like they owned
the place. From what she gathered, they were apparently trying every day to see which suited their study sessions best. So far most dibs were on Friday, though.

Wonder why.

"Don't you two pay any attention in school," Sakura wails, looking absolutely hopeless. "Sweet Jashin."

Also, the kids are apparently picking out her sayings. Sakura, at least, is frequently addressing Jashin – the very same god that Hidan revers when he puts various sharp objects through his body, yes – and Sasuke occasionally slips a bad word or three, when something sets him off. Usually it's people who are mean to Naruto but lately they seem to think twice, because Naruto is hardly alone anymore. Oddly enough, out of all the people he spends time with, it's Shino and Torune who seem to be the most dangerous to the environment. But that might be just because the nature of their clan, because both boys don't think twice about sending their bugs after offenders. Kiba and Sasuke, though, are cutting close second. Kiba actually growls and, if he can reach, bites people. Hana brags on how Tsume is continuously proud of her son, and Ren is pretty sure that this is not how you raise kids.

"Look, all of you twerps," Ren sighs, sitting cross-legged so she's more-less in the middle of all the kids. Thankfully, she's the authority in the room, and even Konohamaru comes running, quite suddenly, and then falls onto his ass right next to Naruto. Apparently she's more of an authority that she thought. "They might told you in class that there are three types of ninja, but I actually recognize seven in total," cue collective gasps, even one from Sakura. "Ninja ranks show how strong a ninja is, and what kind of missions can he do. Easy missions for freshies, hard and potentially deadly for the strong ones. Like killing people and stuff. Hell, there is actually a rank of ninja that basically specializes in killing people."

"Really?" Sakura gawks, horrified, and Sasuke just grins. Good to know where he aims to end up.

"Really. But starting, first we have Academy students, such as yourself, and yes, I count you as a rank. Glorified civilians, really, but everybody starts out somewhere, yeah? So, out of the Academy, you start as a genin. This is what I am now, too, it's the most basic rank. Many ninja stay genin, actually, and then go civilian. Then, after genin, there's chūnin. Higher rank, more dangerous missions, better pay. And also, your team technically gets dispatched. Because, you see, genin are placed in three-man teams for a reason."

"What reason?" Sasuke asks.

"Because some missions might be solo missions, but even fucking ANBU work in at least pairs," Ren sighs. "Teamwork, squirt, teamwork. But, back to matter at hand, Academy instructors are all chūnin, I believe. Umino Iruka totally is one. I believe you like him?" there were collective nods from all of the kids except Konohamaru, varying in intensity. "Okay, off to next rank, we have Tokubetsu Jōnin. They're... Well, special. Like, normal jōnin will specialize in few things, they in one or two. Genma is a Tokujo."

"You like Genma a lot," Konohamaru muses with a smirk.

"Because he's awesome!" Ren scoffs. "He buys me food, and can spit senbon with enough speed and power to shoot a kunai down or pin a fly. And I'm going to live next to him, too! Actually, I'm currently aiming to go Tokujo myself. Then we'll see how it goes."

"Next is a jōnin, yes?" Sakura asks.

"Next is a full jōnin, yes. Technically the highest rank, and only the best people become them.
They’re also an genin babysit duty, like my sensei, Shibi. Then, we have ANBU. They’re mostly jōnin, too, but they have tokujo among them, I think. Kachhan is an ANBU."

"Kacchan?" Naruto asks.

"Hound, Kakashi, whatever," Ren rolls her eyes. "That guy who bought us food once, the one that transformed."

"Oooh!"

If there was a gawk, and then a cackle behind the window, Ren pretended to not to notice. Let poor Yamato have a laugh once in a while.

"And then there's Kage, the leader of the village," she claps her hands. "It's not necessarily the strongest ninja in the village, really. It's someone strong, sure, but first and foremost, Kage deals with shit ton of paperwork."

"Like old man!" Konohamaru chimes in. "That's why he's hardly ever at home!"

"Exactly," Ren nods. "Now, as we have that covered, which twerp needs help with homework?"

Quite predictably, Kiba's and Naruto's hands shoot in the air instantly. Sometimes Ren feels like she's the only one who actually can get them to learn, and that makes her dread next two months. Are they going to fuck up much?

"Remember to bother the ANBU as much as you can, you two," Ren says not a full week after, ruffling hair of both Naruto and Sasuke. They both groan at the motion, trying to swat her away, but they don't really mean it, she knows. Otherwise they would be successful. "Also, you have very much green light to prank people. But, if you get caught, you're going to be in a big trouble, understood?" they both nod at that quite eagerly.

"Maa, Ren, are you encouraging young generations to do mischief?" comes flat voice from her left, and the girl snorts, looking at the covered face of her tutor of last few days. She noticeably improved her synchronization with sharingan thanks to him. Maybe even enough to not to die in Iwa. Ren knows that Kakashi has no good memories from Iwa.

"Naw, Kacchan, just to be the little menaces straight from hell I know they are," she admits with a wide grin. Kakashi grimaces. "Don't worry, I'll bring you souvenirs. Maybe even a vest!"

"Get that vest," Sasuke says, "so I can brag to everyone."

Ren snorts and ruffles his hair again, "I'll try my best, squirt. Don't be too much of a menace to Genma, though, okay? Genma is alright."

"I'm glad you think I am," says Genma, lazily approaching them. He's also currently being tailed by two gangly boys, one with dark, spiky bush and one with fringe poking out of bandana. Unmistakably, Kotetsu and Izumo.

"Are those your kids," she asks, pointing at the duo. They both gawk, and Genma snorts. "Because they sure do seem so."

"Maybe," Genma moves his senbon to the other side of his face. "The porcupine is Kotetsu, his shadow is Izumo. You got all you need, Ren?"
Ren sighs, and cranes her neck to look at where her team is slowly approaching. They're at the village gates, and there are quite a few genin teams around, but none that she recognizes from her class. Hana is walking towards her, and before long, Ren has Inuzuka's arm draped around her shoulder. Kiba instantly materializes next to Sasuke and Naruto.

"Ah! I almost forgot!" Ren gasps suddenly, swats Hana's hand, and pulls out a kunai. And then, just like that, she grabs her braid – which reaches to her waist – and promptly slices it off at the base of her neck, accompanied by gasps and surprised shrieks. Her newly-freed, short hair fall quite nicely around her ears, natural Uchiha spikyness keeping them from her eyes.

"Nee-san!" Sasuke cries in utter horror as Ren puts the blade back into her pouch.

"Well, at least your blades are sharpened," Genma snorts, and the two chūnin behind him gape openly. Ren shrugs and pushes her murdered braid into hands of mortified Sasuke.

"Keep those, I'm going to sell them to a hairdresser or something when I'm back, okay?" she says, and the younger boy can only manage a numb nod in return. "What?"

"Holy fucking shit, Ren, you just chopped off few years' worth of hair!" Hana cries, gaining attention of some people, and Ren shrugs again.

"Long hair is a fucking disadvantage!" she arguments. "It gets everywhere, is hard to keep, and even if I would turn a person that would decide that pulling my braid was a good idea into a bloody pulp… Well, I'm not a fan, you know? Short hair rules! Besides, Hibiki has long hair, one of him is enough."

Genma just puts a hand on top of Ren's head and ruffles her hair. Not like it looked anywhere near well-groomed in the first place.

"You'll do just fine. Now, off you go, kid," he smiles, and Ren smiles back.

"Sure thing, mom," she laughs, and barely evades a playful smack to the head.

And now, mission: get the damn vest for Sasuke to brag and to have better pay. Because Ren knew that advancing was not beyond her – but was she actually able to pull that off? She was going to compete against people with more experience than her, most likely, both in ninja branch of business and life in ninja world in total.

No matter, she was going to give them hell anyway. She and Awai, and some very mean, and very Uchiha, fire-spitting techniques.
The journey to the land of Earth was rather swift and majorly uneventful, save for accidental run-in with bandit group. It's not even worth mentioning that the bandits were even less of an obstacle than a small river. But, there were nine genin teams with their nine sensei and additional four chūnin as an escort, why would anyone be surprised by the ending? And then, they had two possible ways to go; they could reach Land of Earth by crossing either Land of Waterfalls of Land of Grass. The one leading, whoever that was, choose waterfall, because they decided to go straight to Iwa. As in, straight line drawn from the ruler.

Nice vision, Ren had to admit. Idiotic, but nice.

Long story short, the voyage took four days of jumping and running, and three nights, half of each for sleeping and half for jumping and running. Not many wanted to go to Iwa, not really, but Ren couldn't help but note that almost every team had a Hyūga in it. Hell, some teams had two Hyūga in them. Which meant that Knohoa was sending out majorly their Bloodline Limit users to Iwa, because prickly bitch as it was along with its people, Iwa was neither bloodline-hating Kiri, nor byakugan-thirsting Kumo. Ren was willing to bet that next two exams would be spammed with countless Konoha genin, but no Hyūga whatsoever.

And Iwa itself was… Rocky. And barren. Being used to everything being so very, vibrantly green, Ren was confused, because Iwa was all brown and gray, with little to no plant life, and how the fuck was this country supplied with air? Or maybe it wasn't, because she was already having troubles with breathing. Not only she, many other genin, in fact, paled and tried to even out their breaths. Not to mention all the dust that was in the air, sweet merciful Jashin. Ren, however, was still willing to bet that Suna was even worse, because, well, it was a goddamn desert.

"It's so… Not-green," Hibiki huffs, covering his lower face with his Hyūga-purple sleeve and squinting his trademark pale eyes. "It's awful."

"For once you're not talking like a total idiot," Hana chuckles. "But yeah. I was expecting… More green. A tree here and there, a bit of grass. And here we have… Bigger rocks, smaller rocks, weird-shaped rocks, pale rocks, dark rocks, and- Oh! Did I mention rocks?"

"Sarcasm at its finest," Ren snorts, clapping her hands slowly. "I'm so proud of you."

Hana grins widely, showing off her canines, Hibiki actually laughs and Shibi, walking next to them,
pretends to not to notice the show. Few other genin eye them with mixed reactions. Some are annoyed, some amused, others plain ignore them, some are too stuck-up to care. Majorly Hyūga who think they're better than them only because they have few years of experience more. Maybe they're better, yes, but Ren is not the type of person to get discouraged by just that. She went against people better than her many times, and sometimes came out on top, actually.

"Now, I want you two to be careful," Shibi says suddenly, putting his palms on heads of Hibiki and Ren each. "There will be teams from Mist. Try to not to engage them, if you will. Ren can be easily mistaken as non-bloodline user, but Hyūga eyes are unmistakable. Oh, and stay away from ninja from Cloud, Hibiki."

"Okay," Ren says with a smile. "I'll try waiting a day or two before getting in trouble. Can't promise, though."

"It's not-" Shibi huffs, his eyebrow twitching above his shades, and he sighs. "Just, no collateral damage, please. If anything burns, I'm going straight to you."

"Sensei!" Ren makes a hurt expression, and the Aburame clan head just groans. He really, really should've found a replacement sensei instead of replacement clan head. Let someone else suffer Team Four, maybe. He would have most likely asked Tsume, hadn't she been the head of her own clan, but on the other hand, that… That was not a good idea. Tsume was Hana's mother and seemed to be fond of Ren. That would perhaps end up even worse. He at least tried to contain the destructive force that was - so very un-Uchiha – Uchiha Ren. Tsume would probably have just triggered her further instead.

"Anybody knows any Earth techniques?" Ren asks suddenly. "Because I have a feeling that they would be hell of an asset here. Me, personally, I just burn stuff down."

"Hyūga don't do ninjutsu," Hibiki scoffs, and Hana only shakes her head.

"My affinity is water to begin with," Hana answers. "But even if, I majorly rely on my dogs. I'm a medic, anyway, so I shouldn't really be fighting. I'm here to make sure the two of you can fight."

One of her dogs yips, and her saying she relies on them is a bit funny, seeing that they barely reach to her mid-calf, but whatever – Hana has a point. She's the support, and it's Hibiki and Ren who are supposed to do majority of dirty work. Ren can work with that.

"I'm surprised that you actually are already thinking about specializations," Shibi says as walls of the village Hidden Among the Rocks appear on the horizon. "Hana is the support, Ren is the frontline powerhouse- Only Hibiki is a wildcard, but then, many teams have two people in frontlines and one making sure those former two don't kill themselves."

"Well, before mom bullied me into Academy I really wanted to be a vet," Hana chirps cheerfully. "So I decided I'd be just that, except not only for dogs, but also for other ninja."

"I'm being compared to a dog. Many thanks," Ren snorts, shaking her head, and Hibiki looks mildly insulted, but wisely stays quiet.

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Iwa is pretty much like the rest of Land of Earth. It's all about rocks, maybe differing more in color, shape and size, but still, all is rock. Except for some actual plants, which are sparse. Trees are hardly any taller than houses, that are two-story at most, actually. It's a bit sad, but then, Ren is more used to Hashirama's mokuton trees that are tall, thick and lush, and just so green.
After stating their business at the gates and dispatching their things in the hotel room they will be staying at, Shibi washes his hands off them and now, his precious Team 4 has to fend for themselves in Iwa, as he is, most likely, having tea with some other jounin teachers. Hibiki, of course, ditches Ren and Hana the second he spots twin Hyūga sisters he spent with quite a bit of his time traveling. Enough for both his teammates to know that those girls are his cousins, his mother's brother daughters, and three years his senior.

But the twins seem genuinely enjoy menace's presence around, maybe it's shared blood thing, but Ren won't complain about the newfound peace of mind. Because they have three more days until exams start, and Ren must first do something very important. Critically, even.

(Thank god Haimaru brothers stayed in hotel room, fast asleep.)

"So, we scouting for any good places to eat?" Hana asks, as if reading in her teammate's thoughts.

"Of course we are, duh," Ren rolls her eyes. "You know me."

"I now that you and that blonde menace of a tornado are a match for Akimichi kid. That says something."

Ren snorts, thinks about a reply, and then promptly collides into something hard. And there's a grunt, so it's obviously not a wall or a lamp. It's something living, breathing and tall enough that Ren's head collides with said 'it's' stomach.

"Watch it brat," a distantly familiar voice grunts, and Ren instantly takes back and looks up and-

There are many things she wants to say currently, but the only thing she actually says.

"Holy shit you're blue," she gasps, eyes wide as she stares into beady, annoyed, surprised and borderline amused eyes of none other than Hoshigaki Kisame. Someone right next to the shark-man bursts out laughing, and it sounds like a hyena suffocating, honestly. Ren doesn't care. It's Kisame fucking Hoshigaki. It takes every ounce of her self-control to not to start screaming and hug the hell out of him. He's definitely not an Akatsuki member yet, nor he has Samehada anywhere on his person. Actually, his jaw isn't so very defined yet either, and- Ren does some math very quick and easily concludes that he is twenty-three or something.

"Yes, I'm blue. So what?" Kisame asks, and Ren loses inner battle.

"May I hug you?" she asks, and the only answers she gets is the fact that someone laughing on Kisame's left promptly chokes on his laughter, Kisame's shocked, wide-eyed stare and someone, eho suspiciously sounds like Hana, whispering 'oh my god' behind her.

"I think that's the first reaction like that you ever got, eh, shark bastard?" both Kisame and Ren turn to shark-nin's left only to see Momochi Zabuza's bandaged face. At least he's wearing a shirt, because otherwise Ren would do something that a twelve-year-old should not be doing.

"Why would it be first?" Ren asks innocently, and then spreads her arms before Kisame, vividly gesturing before shark-nin. "I mean, he's so awesome! Who wouldn't want to hug him?!"

"Everyone," Kisame huffs.

"Okay, maybe, but still, may I?"

Zabuza just bursts out laughing again, and Ren is pretty positive that she actually hears Hana
sneering behind her, too. Kisame looks pretty much exasperated, but under a pretty intense stare, and maybe perhaps he really, really did not expect such reaction, he opens his arms, and Ren instantly latches onto him. He smells like the sea, like salt and moist air, and, for some reason, a bit like pine tree. And he's warm, so Ren just sighs in pure bliss, then and there, in the middle of road in Iwa, and refuses to let go for a good while.

"Damn, you're ripped," is the first thing she says after she un-latches herself off the humanoid shark. "Are you a jōnin instructor? You look way too strong to be a genin, and that's not Iwa symbol on your forehead," she says.

"I'm a jōnin, but I don't have a team," Kisame admits, and jerks his thumb at Zabuza. "But Momochi, the bastard, has a team. I was sent to make sure he doesn't accidentally murder them."

"You're from mist, aren't you?" she says, and then widens her eyes and hopes that she plays shock of realization just fine. "Wait, wait, wait! Hold up! You mean to tell me that this twig with bandaged muzzle is actually Momochi Zabuza, the Demon of the Hidden Mist?"

It's priceless to see Zabuza bristle, his fur ruffled, and actually reach for his sword with a growl, only to be intercepted by grinning Kisame. His teeth are really sharp and it's damn impressive.

"Yes, this twig," he chuckles. "And I'm Hoshigaki Kisame."

Ren makes her eyes widen, and been has the audacity to force a blush. "I just hugged Monster of the Hidden Mist?" she asks, because she did snatch Shibi's bingo book and go through it, and it doesn't contain rogue ninja only, and he already has his moniker. But then she shrugs and shakes her head. "Nah, you're cute and nice. Too fluffy to be a monster."

She is being ridiculous, but Kisame looks positively baffled as a kid half his size tells him he's cute.

Hana chooses the moment to step forward and nudge her in the ribs. Ren hisses at her, but the Inuzuka only grins in answer. "Right, yeah," Ren rolls her eyes. "I'm Uchiha Ren by the way, and this is Inuzuka Hana. We're from Leaf, obviously."

Kisame looks at Zabuza, and Zabuza looks back at him. Ren feels as if they're having a full silent conversation, because they sure look like they do.

"And when Mei said that Leaf ninja are weird, you didn't believe," Kisame actually snickers, and Zabuza growls, elbowing him. Only, shark-nin sidesteps and Zabuza almost loses his balance.

"Wait, Uchiha?" Zabuza asks. "Wasn't your clan, like, slaughtered?" he asks, absolutely tactless, before Kisame has a chance to strangle and shut him up. Zabuza, apparently, wasn't the most tactful person, and Kisame? Kisame appeared to be just nice and well-behaved.

"Oh, yeah," Ren shrugs. "My precious prodigy of a cousin, violence-loathing pacifist went homicidal on the fam, big deal," she rolls her eyes. "Traumatized his brother a great deal, though."

"I might be interrupting you making new friends," Hana butts in, "but I'd like to remind you that we were looking for food. And I know you get insufferable if hungry."

"Correction, Hana," Ren raises one finger. "We were looking for meat. I'm carnivore."

"We're just coming back from Teppanyaki," Kisame says, pointing behind with his thumb. "They have some good pork and chicken there."

"Oh shut it," Zabuza grumbles. "You're just being nice because she ain't cowering in terror."
"No," Kisame snorts. "I'm being nice because she called you a twig."

Zabuza glares at his – comrade, friend, colleague (?) – and Ren knows a brewing fistfight when she sees one. But Kisame is taller, heavier and definitely more muscular, so guess who her bets are on. She looks at Hana and shrugs, and Hana shrugs right back.

"Have fun feeding each other dirt, and thanks!" Uchiha calls to the two, who are openly head-butting and snarling already, and she's pretty sure she goes ignored. But then, Kisame glances at her and raises his hand and gives slight goodbye wave. Ren doesn't think her grin will fade soon.

They find the Teppanyaki restaurant easily enough, because it smells like heaven to both of them. But before they have chance to step inside, this time it's Hana's turn to get collided with. And it's not her fault either, because this time a tiny shape runs into her and slams bodily into Inuzuka, who grunts. Said tiny shape has long, straight hair that are as bright as the sunrise, and when it pries itself off of Hana, they both get stared at by one cobalt blue eye, while the other is hidden by long fringe. Not even Iwa forehead protector keeps it out.

Deidara - who looks like a girl, is at least a head shorter than either girl – apparently decides that he has little to lose as he squeaks, grabs Hana's sleeve and twists, hiding behind the Inuzuka, so that she comes to face with very angry and even more drunk man.

At least today won't be getting boring, Ren thinks, racking her knuckles as she eyes the man. And mini-Deidara looks disturbingly like mini-Naruto, so Ren feels completely justified when her protective older sister streak just takes over.
It's not like Ren has anything against the drunkard, no. She doesn't even know him. But Deidara, mini-Deidara, with hair like the sun and eyes as clear as the sky is disturbingly similar to Naruto. Maybe not with the shape of his face, but definitely with his sad, blue eyes. And Naruto, Ren realized a while back, she cares for unconditionally – almost as much as or Sasuke, actually. So, it's not like she holds a grudge against the drunk hobo, no. It's just that Deidara reminds her of Naruto, and whenever Naruto is even merely insulted, Ren strikes. Very, very viciously. As in 'you insulted him? Wait, hold up, let me just punch you very hard in the face, and, oh, did I just break your nose? I'm so not sorry' kind of vicious.

And the drunkard is on the ground and wailing, his nose a bloody mess, before Ren even fully registers that she decided to throw a punch. And her knuckles are aching. She might've over-done it, but, meh. She doesn't care. Neither does Hana, when man tries to scramble to his feet. When he plants his arms on the ground near the Inuzuka, she simply stomps on his hand. Thankfully for the man the ninja shoes are, if durable, rather soft. If she wore heels or combat boots, he might not even have hand anymore. It still crunched under her heel, and he would perhaps howl, if he didn't nearly choke on that sound. And then he crawled away.

(It was a bit weird that nobody paid any mind to that happening.)

"You okay there, brat?" Ren asks, looking at, quite shocked, mini-Deidara, who just stares at both of them, mouth agape and eyes wide. Actually, the sight is quite adorable. Very, even. And that's maybe exactly why, this time, it's Hana's brakes that fail. Spectacularly, like most fails that happen in or around Ren's life.

"You are so adorable!" Hana squeals, wraps her hands around stupefied child and twirls around with him. "Oh my gosh, look at you!"

"Put me down!" Deidara choked, digging his nails into her shoulders and kicking his legs wildly the second he regains control over his body. Hana doesn't even seem to notice his flailing, the thick-hided as she is.

"Doesn't she look a bit like Naruto?" Hana keeps cooing, and Ren almost chokes on a snort. Deidara's face redden, he shrieks and starts kicking harder.

"I'm a boy!" he informs older girl furiously. "And let me down! Hm!"

"He does look a bit like Naruto," Ren agrees. "He's absolutely adorable."
Deidara reddens more, and very visibly regrets hiding behind the Inuzuka when he had a chance to dart past and maybe loose the man himself.

"I'm not adorable, hm!" Deidara argues. "I'm a ninja! And I'm not Naruto or whatever, I'm Deidara!"

(Hana makes a sound that is definitely an 'aaaaaw'.)

"We're ninja, too, obviously," Ren snorts, and finally takes pity on the kid, gently freeing him from Inuzuka's grip. Mini-Deidara only folds his arms on his chest, holds his nose up high and scoffs. The brat.

"Why were you running from that guy, if you're a ninja?" Hana asks then, quirking her eyebrow, and Deidara stills. He looks up at them, and then, his eyes actually gloss, and he bites his lower lip. He's very much fighting the tears. Ren also notices that he's wearing gloves- Well, glove. One, on left hand. His right hand is bare, and he very much tries to hide it with the gloved one.

"My clay," he whines pathetically, and he might be a brat, but spending her time with Sasuke and Naruto, basically every single while she has free had honed her 'protective older sister' streak to ridiculous levels. (Sasuke still sleeps with her. As in, in the same bed, under the same blanket. He's quite a cuddler, really, and Ren finds herself she doesn't mind – at least she is not woken by his screaming bloody murder in the middle of the night. That happened. Every fucking time Konohamaru's mom tried to make him sleep alone. Twice or thrice a night. Ren really thinks that woman has no brains whatsoever sometimes.) Levels so ridiculous that all it takes for Deidara, future pyromaniac, terrorist mass-murderer, is to look a tiny little bit like Naruto. So, she sighs, places her palm on the top of his head and just leaves it there. Deidara stiffens, and then relaxes.

"What about your clay?" Ren urges him to continue, but she has a vague idea as to where is it going, judging by ripped straps by his belt. Where he usually keeps his clay pouches.

"That idiot Kurotsuchi thought it would be a good idea to steal my clay pouches!" he whines. "And Akatsuchi, that bigger idiot, stole my glove!"

"What's wrong with you not having a glove?" Hana asks, and boy stills, gulps and tries to hide his hand in his sleeve. "Okay, no, forget I asked. But how come this drunk started chasing you?"

"Many people don't like me here, I'm weird," he says and Ren has to look away. Seriously, this kid. Too much Naruto in him. And he apparently got ostracized, too – because he has lips on his palms. Great reasons, people, great fucking reasons. She also doesn't miss how he clenches his un-gloved hand while saying this.

"Fuck that, I'm hungry," Ren gruffs, because she has nothing else to do. She takes off her gloves – they're black, and fingerless, and have metallic platting all over them, she fell in love when she saw them in store – and she hands them to Deidara. "Here, don't cry."

He looks at her as if she just dropped from heavens above and promptly declared that the sky is yellow and pigs fly. Or something equally ridiculous. Basically – he was not shocked, but stoned.

"But-" he starts. "Those are your gloves!"

"Exactly!" Ren nods. "And that means I can do with them whatever I want. And I want to give them to you, because you look pathetic when sad, and look quite a lot like my cousin's best friend. So cheer the fuck up, would ya'? Also, how about we just enter this damn Teppanyaki?" because seriously, that scent. Cooked vegetables, one thing, but that meat. So much meat.
"That's a good idea. Dei-chan, how about you join us?" Hana offers him her best 'older sister authority' smile. "I'm sure some good food will cheer you up after what those meanies did to you!"

"Uh… I don't even know you?"

"Oh! I'm Inuzuka Hana, and this gruff is my friend and teammate, Uchiha Ren. We're both genin from the Leaf!"

"I'm not a gruff!"

"But she has really big heart!"

Ren just smacks back of Hana's head, and doesn't feel bad about it.

"Hm," is all Deidara has to say about their antics.

Deidara just sticks with the duo for the day, but can he really be blamed for it? They're both older and definitely physically stronger than him – who is pretty useless without his explosives. But, most of all, they're nice, both of them. Ren gives him gloves, and then they both invite him to eat, and he is kind of surprised, because just… Just how much can those two fucking eat? Waiters, too, were surprised, but then… Binge eating clients mean better income.

So, in return for their kindness, Deidara gives them a tour around Iwa. Ren is, quite predictably, interested in food and weapons. She actually ogles at the displayed blades because Hana look at those, they're so shiny, so solid, imagine how well you can stab people with this!

And then comes another shock of the day.

"Twig-Man!" Ren calls suddenly, and there's a snort, and a very offended squawk. Deidara shrugs, looks to the entrance of the weapons shop, and stills. Because holy fucking god in pink knickers, did Ren just call that to those two men walking out of the weapon store? As in those two ridiculously tall men with so much muscles Deidara didn't think it was possible to imagine, let alone have? And, oh god, one of them is blue, has sharp teeth and definitely looks like he eats little genin for breakfast. And he is a little genin!

"Don't you fucking call be twig, you brat!" muscle number one growls, the one with normal skin, and lunges at the girl, only to be stopped by firm grip that his blue companion has on the neck of his shirt. And the blue guy is grinning, and his teeth look so sharp… Deidara is pretty certain he's about to faint. He's a distance fighter, a recent graduate! He blows up people from distance! He really did not sign up for this!

"But you're a twig, Twig-Man!" Ren pouts, and Deidara knows a tease when he sees one, alright. And Ren apparently takes great pleasure in shamelessly teasing a guy who is twice her size. The blue guy just starts laughing.

"I knew I liked something about you," he says with amusement, as he effortlessly hold his companion at bay by the back of the latter's shirt. "Why are you here?"

"Meh, just casually ogling those weapons," Ren shrugs. "Imagining just how well you can stab people with those- I think I will actually go buy something, just… Not on my first day in Iwa. I'll have plenty of time to buy souvenirs after the exam. And Genma can really use new pack of senbons with how he constantly chews on them," she shrugs.

"Genma is weird," Hana snorts. "Awesome as hell, but still, weird."
"That's just part of his awesomeness, shaddup!"

"He spits senbon at people!" Hana waves her hands in the air. "He's actually good at that!"

"And that's so awesome," Ren snorts, looks at the blue man and Deidara can almost see a lightbulb flare above her head. The very next second she's already latched herself to the blue man, who lets the twig-man go, who just trips and falls face-first into the road (not that the blue man seems to care), and Ren says; "Kisame, teach me kenjutsu! You're from Kiri, they're famous for it! And you have a katana!"

"…seriously," twig-man grunts from where he – quite literally – eats dirt. Blue man – Kisame – seems both amused and impressed, and Deidara realizes, full of dread, that he doesn't seem to mind being the jungle gym for Ren. Hana on his side is just mildly amused and quite resigned, by which he concludes that things like these happen often.

And when they told him that Konoha is village of loony ninjas, he didn't believe them. Old man Oonoki, he's sorry. He believes it now.

(Because the blue- Kisame, ahem. Kisame is scaring him to the very bones right now, with that heavy, nearly-suffocating yet moist aura around him. Kisame is a monster, literally. And Deidara really, really doesn't want to cross his path with that monster on the battlefield. Because no matter how strong he is, and how good his bombs are – he is not going to stand a chance against that. And Ren is cheerfully chattering to him about kenjutsu while dangling from his back!

And he actually humors her by answering his questions! Konoha, what the fuck?)

Shibi is Not Amused™. Shibi is Very Not Amused™.

His life, why.

Just- Ren and Hana. Those two, when joined together, are menace, or even worse. And he knows a thing or two about menaces – he was in genin team with Hana's mother, Tsume! And yet, here he is, exasperated and gaping, because what the hell, he told them to stray from trouble and hoped they would actually do just that for longer than an evening! What on earth even happened during this time?!

"Oi, this your brat?" Momochi Zabuza, Demon of the Hidden Mist asks, pointing his thumb behind him, and gets promptly swatted on the back of his head by Hoshigaki Kisame, Monster of the Hidden Mist. Also, it's worth mentioning that Ren is comfortably perched on said monster's shoulders with a too-wide and too-smug grin.

His genin, why.

Hokage, why, you old fool, did you think it would be funny to torment one of your best trackers? Actually, why him, not Hiashi? From what Tume says, they're both equally emotionally stunted. (Wow, Tsume, rude.)

"I'm sorry for my idiot friend," Kisame smiles, and from somewhere down the road there's a retort that sounds suspiciously like 'we're not friends'. Kisame ignores it.

"This is the second time in ten minutes that Twi- Uh, I'm sorry, Zabuza eats the dirt," Hana smiles. "As a medic in training I don't think that's too healthy."
Hana looks smug. The little Iwa-ninja behind her, all flowy red cloth and blonde hair, looks slightly shell-shocked. Ren laughs.

"Seriously, Hana, just call him by name. Twig-Man is Twig-Man!" she snorts, and Shibi is happy for his high-necked coat because his jaw drops. Zabuza growls, but Kisame holds him back easily.

Uchiha Ren, why.

Just. Why.

(He quits. He's too old for this shit. Let Hiashi handle them for a bit, so he can feel his pain. Tsume is so very out of question, she would only enable them further. That… That's a scary thought, now that he realizes just what they're capable of.

Using Hoshigaki Kisame as jungle gym? Seriously, Ren?!)
Now, to clarify ages. I know Naruto timeline itself is really, really a wonderland and its own organism, and I'm trying to organize it. And, guess what? I fucked up already! But now I'm going to state some facts that I will stick to from now on:

• I know I depicted Rookie Nine as being 8 in this current year, but they are actually 7. All the birthdays that occurred were 7th birthdays. It all comes from the fact that there is ~5 year gap between them and Ren, and Ren is currently 12.

• There's anywhere between 2 to 3 years age gap between both, Rookie Nine and Deidara, and then Deidara and Ren. Since his birthday is May 5, he's actually 10 right now in the fic.

• As for other ages – Kakashi, Yamato, Guy and Zabuza are 20, Kisame and Genma are about 23 and Haku is around 9.

• Itachi and Ren are actually around the same age here. Surprise.

"It cannot be seen, cannot be felt, Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt, It lies behind stars and under hills, And empty holes it fills, It comes first and follows after, Ends life, kills laughter."
— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Hobbit

Three days of spending time with Kisame (he was cooler than manga and anime ever showed him as in person, but that might as well have been rooted in the fact that he didn't go Akatsuki yet), bothering Zabuza (who was just angry at everything; smol and angry, actually, because Kisame dwarfed everyone) and being not-so-subtly stalked by Deidara. Also, Hibiki was introduced to Ren and Hana's new acquaintances, and at the sight of Kisame, he promptly fainted. Ren just kept laughing at him for that for the rest of the day.

(Ren also realized that Haku was slightly younger than Deidara, currently most likely around eight-to-nine. She doesn't know when exactly they met, but she does know that there's no Haku running around right now. Only three Zabuza's genin, who were scared shitless of both men and apparently thought Hana and Ren to be batshit insane, so they kept their distance. Half a village, most of the time..)

So, long story short, before Ren realized, she found herself before the building where first part of the exam would take part in, Hana and Hibiki in tow, and her nerves put to test. Because, yes, she was nervous, and she had absolutely no idea what was going to happen, and what if she failed-

"Ren, calm down," Hana hums. "Your fidgeting isn't helping."
"Hush you, I'm nervous!" Ren hisses "What if we fuck up?"

"Then we blame Hibiki, duh," Inuzuka heiress informs.

"Hey!" said Hyōga lets out and offended cry, and both girls sigh at him. They have started trying to teach him something, and the guy is… A fail, Major one. Three months down the road of ninja and he only has taijutsu to barely-passable. Save for Gentle Fist, that he somehow nails down, but he can't just spam that one technique – it's easy to work out, and after, like, tenth time he tried to surprise Ren with it, she realized she remembers every kata of it and he didn't even come close to hitting her, unlike the very first time he surprised her with it, when she almost lost. To Hibiki of all people. She'd rather not remember that.

"Well, let's try to not to fuck up," Ren sighs, eyeing the entrance. She can make see a team or two with their respective tutors, that hadn't entered the building yet. "If we fuck up, then Sasuke won't stop complaining t how ha can't brag that I made chūnin at first try."

"Kiba knows I most likely won't make it, so no biggie," Hana shrugs. "Medic-nin get promoted after some time and experience anyway, if they prove capable on the battlefield."

"So you're more into specialized field promotion?" Ren asks, and Inuzuka girl nods.

"Who knows, if I'm good enough at this, and also good in something else, I might even make a Tokujo," she smiles. "Basically without breaking a sweat."

"Cheater," Hibiki huffs. "But I guess it makes sense?"

"Well, I hit hard, but I'm also susceptible to getting hit hard myself, so," Ren circles her fingers in the air. "I can appreciate a good medic to save my sorry ass."

"You ready?" Shibi finally asks, looking down at his genin, and is met with three collective sighs and weak nods. They were (not) ready. It's what they came here for, after all, into territory of one of most passive-aggressive countries (honestly, Iwa was always in constant 'fight me' mode), just to partake in the exam. There was no going back now. Ren was unsure – she knew she was pretty decent fighter, but was it really enough to get her into the finals and promoted? It would be really nice to rank up on the first try, but she was brash, aggressive fighter. She doubted she was going to even think about showing off her analytical, more calm, thinking demeanor. The raw power she currently wielded made her drunk with this, feel nearly unstoppable – which she knew was very much not true.

But then, she was an adult from a world which may have been much more tame than this, but on many fields it was also much, much more dangerous and demanding. Before, she was just brawl. Now, she had to re-learn how to use her brains. And that was not going to be easy.

(Hana's hand squeezing hers is actually quite comforting.)

Deidara was taking part in Chūnin Exam. Of course Daidara was taking part in the Chūnin Exam. Ren was so royally fucked against him and his long-range explosives, no matter which part they were facing. Well, at least the blonde himself wasn't outright hostile towards them. Unlike everyone else, pretty much – especially gray-haired kid with Kiri sign on his forehead protector. One of Zabuza's brats, maybe? But Team Four weren't the youngest genin there, actually. That honor belonged to none other than Deidara and his team – most likely Kurotsuchi and Akatsuchi, if Ren remembered them correctly. Akatsuchi was already quite big in size, Akimichi-worthy, almost. She wondered if he ate as much, too.
Ren tried to remember what she knew of the two from the anime, as the youngsters, undoubtedly, would be one of most formidable enemies. Kurotsuchi did become a Tsuchikage, after all. She definitely had Lava Release. Akatsuchi had no prominent releases, but his physical strength was not to be taken lightly, and he was very, very proficient with Earth Release. Later, but everyone starts somewhere, and the fact that those three – oldest of them being ten – were nominated spoke of their skill. Ren felt completely justified to be scared shitless.

Especially since she had no idea what first two stages of exam might possibly be whatsoever. And there were quite a few teams in there. Most of them would fail first stage already, and Ren knew that she and her team just might count themselves in that most.

"No matter what gives," Hana says suddenly, looking between Ren and Hibiki with a lap full of dogs. "My clan is all about loyalty, you know, and for a reason."

"We're stronger together," Ren agrees.

"You can't do much alone," Hibiki shrugs, and it's actually a great relief that he agrees. If he tried to sabotage them like on their genin exam, Ren would most likely strangle him for good. He most likely knows it, too. Even if all that pushes him is wanting to survive, Ren will take it.

Few next minutes went by completely uneventful. They just sat there, kept being nervous and waited until something happened. And it did, in very ordinary manner. Because the doors opened, and a person – a man, tall, brown hair, typical Iwa uniform – walked through it and then to the front of the room. It was honestly weird. He clasps his hands behind his back, looks around the room with disdain, clears his throat and says:

"Most of you won't even make it past your fifteenth birthdays," and that alone doesn't get him sympathy, at all. And it's also untrue – statistically, only about a quarter of what's gathered in the room dies before reaching this age. "Here and now we will test you and see who is more likely to actually survive. This test is simple. Each team will get a hint, and then is supposed to follow it. Rest is simple and will be understood as you follow it."

That was a load of information, alright. Answering about all the questions they could possibly have, and then some more.

(Ah sarcasm, you beautiful thing.)

"The hell," Hibiki muttered numbly, and he was just one in the sea of murmurs. Some shocked, some suspicious, most thoroughly annoyed. However, without any further word, some chūnin waltzed into the room and dropped small papers before each. Ren cocked her eyebrow and looked between her teammates. Neither appeared all too happy. So, Ren unravels her paper and reads it.


"Riddles, how sweet," she sighs, as Hana unravels her paper.

"You have an hour to find a solution to your riddles," jōnin says helpfully, and mortification dawns on nearly everyone. It's so dense it can be felt. An hour to solve them and follow them? Oh god. Hibiki looked pretty pale, paler than usual.

I am gentle enough to soothe your skin, light enough to fly in the sky, strong enough to crack rocks. What am I? Hana's riddle says.

I have seas without water, coast without sand, towns without people, mountains without land. What am I? was Hibiki's riddle, and Ren felt like laughing, because it was one from Mage prologue in
Dragon Age, and one she knew answer to. Annoying, since two former seemed actually easier.

Within minutes they were outside and sour. Ren was slightly less sour, but – still.

"How on earth are we supposed to understand this!" Hibiki raves.

"I heard your riddle once," Ren admits. "The answer is map."

"Oh, really?" Hana perks up. "Then, we most likely have to find a map somewhere where two other riddles say. What could they say?" Inuzuka asks, and all three tap their chins in thought. Nothing came to them, really, and that was infuriating. They didn't have forever. And, in conclusion, if they had to find a map, they most likely had to follow it, too. Their time was more limited than she thought. An hour, good one! Fifty minutes now, actually.

"Let's sit and think," Ren sighs, scratching her head. "What eats and breathes to live, but drinking kills it?"

"Drunkard," Hibiki scoffs, and is promptly swatted at his head.

"By drink, I think it means all drinks," Hana says. "Including water… Oh! It's fire," she snaps her fingers with a wide grin. "Fire needs air and wood to sustain itself, but you can put it out with water!"

It made sense. Ren was eternally glad that she was stuck with at least one teammate not afraid of using their brain. She wouldn't really get mad if Hibiki started doing that, too, to be honest.

"Gentle, light and yet strong that second one,” Hibiki huffs. "What can be like that? It makes no sense!"

"Every riddle makes sense," Hana argues. "…usually."

"Fire is too little to tell us where to look, except someplace hot or something," Ren shrugs.

"Blacksmith, baker, every damn restaurant," Hana counts on her fingers. "Hell, every fireplace. No, the other riddle must say something more," she says, and both her teammates nod in agreement. But the time is ticking. Forty-five minutes. Ren really, really hates working under stress with passion. She can do it, but she doesn't have to like it – and she doesn't. She had her own deal of it while still working in the office, thank you very much.

And so, they thought, and failed to come up with anything good. Ren was getting more and more frustrated. She was locked in a body of a twelve-year-old, sure, but she was still very much thirty-two! She shouldn't be struggling this much. Really shouldn't. She hated her life.

Twenty minutes later, and they still have no idea, and that makes them even sourer.

That was about the time that Kisame decides to show up in their field of vision.

"Oh, hey brats," he greets them. "Don't you have an exam right now?"

"We do," Ren huffs, stomping her foot. "But it's more field stuff, and we're failing. So, don't mind us being sour and stuff."

"Nah, I'm pretty sour myself, don't worry," he chuckles. "With how little water there is here, I get annoyed. I'm all about that element, if you hasn't guessed by my appearance. Being out in dry is… Not very preferable."
Ren almost feels a lightbulb flare above her head. Hell, she hears it.

"Water!" she shrieks and wraps her hands around blue man's midsection. "Oh my Jashin, blue, I love you. Thank you, we are so stupid!"

Hana, Hibiki and Kisame all look stupefied by this outburst. Ren looks at them and then snorts.

"Seriously, we were being idiotic, you guys!" she says, letting go of Kisame. "The answer is water! It soothes skin, like in summer, and it can be rain. And what else it does than drill through a solid rock? That's what riverbeds are! Rocks cut through with water!"

"Oh my god," Hana hides her face in her hands. "Why. Just. Why. This answer is so simple, I hate the idiot who came up with it!"

"Your test is riddles, okay," Kisame snorts, pats Ren and Hana on the head (Hibiki is visibly scared shitless of his appearance, so he's spared) and walks away.

"But what water and fire give?" Ren asks no one in particular.

"Sauna?" Hibiki proposes and, coincidentally, they're actually standing before one. His idea might be actually coming solely from the fact that he's standing right before the welcoming sign. "What? I can have a good idea sometimes, too!" cue skeptic looks. "But it's better than nothing?"

"Byakugan it, if there's any map inside," Hana orders. Hyūga boy huffs, rolls his eyes, but obeys.

"Well, there is a chūnin there, with what looks like folded paper in his pocket," he informs.

"Okay, we barrage in, then," Ren shrugs. Hana slaps her forehead, but follows anyway, and the chūnin is, actually, slightly surprised to see them. "Oi, you from exams?" Ren asks when she spots the guy. "Give us the map."

And that's exactly what he does, which itself is slightly weird and gets him a raised eyebrow times three – enough to startle a chuckle.

"Don't look at me like that," chūnin says. "The riddles are major issue here, you have to find an answer to them, first, and then conclude your task. Missions often require solving mysteries with seemingly no answer and then connecting pieces that appear to have no connection. Without a bit of luck it's rather improbable. The first task is to crumble out the weakest links, anyway. Those with no luck, or wits, or enough strength to make it in time to their destination. Speaking of which, you still have to follow the map. You have… Fifteen minutes. I'd suggest you hurry."

Hibiki opens up the map, blanches and, in very un-Hyūga manner, says; "fuck."

Both girls look over his shoulder at the paper, and heir reactions, as they bolt through the streets seconds later, are much the same as Hyūga's. Why nobody told them it was so far?!
Twenty-First Thread

Chapter Notes

My tumblr name is KillerGilrFuria. Come spam my askbox - I'm open to talkign about pretty much everything.

"Leaders are interested in gains. However, they acknowledge that there is no gain without pain. They embrace the pain." — Israelmore Ayivor, Leaders' Ladder

They make it in time, of course – with five minutes to spare, no less. At first, the sheer distance from Iwa to some sort of mountain frightens them, but it turns out that ten minutes of chakra-enhanced sprint is really all it takes to get there. Hana complains that if her ninken were big enough to carry people, they would've made it in under seven. But then, how on earth can simple, two-legged humans, even chakra-enhanced ones, outrun an animal, with the perfect build for running and four legs at that? Ren knows for sure that the Haimaru brothers can keep up with them almost without using any chakra. Damn dogs and their four legs.

But hey, they've made it, and they don't even look on the verge of death from exhaustion! Even Hibiki, because Ren and Hana may or may not have been targeting him specifically for the last three months in order to force the Hyūga to move and build up his stamina. To bystanders – and Hibiki himself – it most likely seemed like they were making it a point to ruin his life (which, actually, they were – but hey, who said they couldn't kill two birds with one stone?) but they were sneakily forcing him to make an effort. And it worked!

Somehow, Deidara gravitates towards their team, which doesn't escape Ren's attention. He is standing closer to them than to his own, in fact, though the two of them don't really seem to notice. This time, it's actually Hana who makes a move first, even if it is just a small wave and a smile at the blonde. He looks uncertain for a bit, then shrugs and actually half-smiles (Ren is willing to bet that he still thinks them both batshit crazy) and jogs up to them.

(The fact that he'd rather spend time with two Konoha ninja who he apparently deems crazy beyond redemption than with his own team is more than just slightly concerning. It speaks volumes, actually – volumes Ren does not wish to hear. Ever.)

(Volumes she hears every time she looks at Naruto, whenever there are more people.)

"Stupid riddles," Deidara mutters, dusting his brown ninja-pants. He is wearing a red, high-collared shirt, without a right sleeve, but with the left side long and open.

"Gotta agree with you on that," Hana huffs. "We got the third one right only because we met Kisame-san. And then found the map only because we were lucky."

"They hid ours in a goddamn flower pot, can you believe that?" the tiny blonde (seriously, he was something like two years older, yet still smaller than Sasuke) scoffs, nose raised high in the air.
"Our was in a sauna," Hibiki mutters. "And the chūnin who had it was a troll."

"He's just exaggerating," Hana rolls her eyes.

"Troll," Ren agrees instead. "Gave us a scare for no real reason, the douche."

But before any of them can say anything else, something in the front explodes with a lot of white smoke. It fades fast, however, and reveals three people – jōnin, most likely – who looks at the gathered teams with quite a bit of disdain. One whispers to another, and then they all nod, moving forward.

"The hour has passed, no more teams will be accepted," one of them says in an unnervingly monotonous voice. "Now, as the pathetic were weeded out, we will proceed onto the second stage of the Exam in order to remove the weak and mediocre, which will be more than half of you."

The Iwa jōnin either has no social skills or his hobby is offending people. Probably both.

"Within this mountain is a complex maze – an ever-changing one. Your task is simple; you must find a scroll and then deliver it to the center of the labyrinth within the set time limit. You have three days, but if you laze around, you might face a few very unpleasant surprises. Being late never pays off – being greedy rarely does, too."

His smile turns feral, and Ren narrows her eyes. The fact that there is more to 'find that and bring it there' is quite obvious, because otherwise the task would be too easy. And they have a time limit, but it is implied they should do it even faster. Why?

"You have twenty minutes to prepare and to sign the mandatory documents," one of the other jōnin says, as they start handing out pamphlet-looking papers.

"Why?" one of the genin – from Suna, most likely, Ren doesn't pay much attention to his appearance – asks, to which the jōnin snorts.

"Because brats like you die out there," he says with a grin. "And this way we won't be held responsible. Listen up, brats! We aren't letting you any further without signed papers! Last chance to step down!"

"We're going in?" Hibiki asks, and Ren can't decipher whether he's scared or excited; whether he wants in, or out. Probably both, because he's just like that.

"Of course we are," Hana nods, and one of her ninken yips in agreement.

"So sure of yourselves?" Deidara asks, raising his visible eyebrow.

"Well," Ren claps her hands together, "we either do it, or we die trying. I didn't become a ninja to be a genin forever, and, as someone wise once said, no pain, no gain. And no game, no life," she grins, even though she knows that none of the three understand the reference she had just made. Deidara only response is to nod and look at his paper, then look up at them again.

"Anyone have a pen?" he asks. "I honestly don't care if Kurotsuchi and Akatsuchi chicken out like the cowards they are-"

"Deidara!" a feminine voice shrieks, loud enough to gather the attention of some people. She sees a girl, with hair and eyes black enough that had she been any paler, she'd be able to pass as an Uchiha, stomping towards them, and an instant later Deidara is next to Ren. His hand clutches her belt – or rather the forehead protector she's using as one – as if for protection and reassurance, as he glares
dagger at the girl.

"What do you want, Kurotsuchi," he hisses. Ah, so that's the mighty future Fourth Tsuchikage – a short brat, a year younger than Deidara who will make a name for herself later by spitting lava at people. Sweet. Right now, though, she doesn't seem like anything special. At all.

"So that's how this is, huh?" Kurotsuchi taunts. "Iwa ninja are too hard for you, huh? Need to hang with the Konoha softies?"

Ren suddenly feels very tempted to bring her fist down onto the kid's head. Hana most likely does as well, judging by how she moves forward and squeezes Ren's hand until it hurts. Ren does the exact same thing, and, though just a tiny bit, it works, since neither of them end up mauling the brat.

"Or maybe Iwa ninja are just too mediocre for him, and he wants to spend his time with someone better," Hibiki scoffs, and for the first time in forever Ren feels like there might be hope for him yet. Kurotsuchi blanches, then reddens, and throws herself at them with a shriek – only to be intercepted by one of the Jonin grabbing her collar.

"I expected better from the apprentice of none other than Sandaime-sama," the Jonin says. "I'm thoroughly disappointed, Kurotsuchi. You can settle that within the maze."

Ren shoots the kid a glare that promises bloodshed. Kurotsuchi wavers, but perhaps it's because Hana also sends her the exact same glare. Neither girl lets go of the other, and Ren is fairly certain that her palm is bruised now. She doesn't care. She'll fry the brat if she finds her.

"See you in the center," Ren says in a voice still lined with anger, but when she looks at Deidara, she's mostly calm. "Who knows, maybe we'll be set against each other in final tournament?"

"Maybe," the kid shrugs, but red has already crept onto his cheeks. "Thanks. I mean. For saying I'll make it there."

"No problem," she snorts and pats his head, having finally let go of Hana. He huffs, but doesn't swat the hand away. "See you, brat."

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The maze is dark, cramped and moist. And boring. But, with nothing better to do, they walk. And walk. And walk. And then walk some more. To the point they lose their sense of time, actually. Ren and Hibiki had agreed to carry one Haimaru brother each, so that no one can possibly determine by their footsteps that there are more than three of them. Currently, in the dark tunnel, they can rely on nothing but their sense of hearing and touch. Or, in Hana's case, her sense of smell – and that's exactly why she is the one leading them. Hibiki can't just waltz around with his Byakugan activated, because that would strain him a lot, and neither can Ren, with her Sharingan. They do flash their respective creepy eyes every once in a while, but mostly rely on Hana and her heightened senses that just are, and don't need chakra to be maintained.

But they are going forward. After a while Hana manages to catch a scent in the tunnels – the scent of a person, quite recent but definitely too old to be one of the participants. It smells like the rest of the tunnel, from what Hana claims, but also smells like sweat and cheap cologne. And explosives.

(Iwa ninja and their love for making things go boom. Ever wonder where Deidara gets that from? They have entire troops whose sole purpose is blowing stuff up! They actually train terrorists. And they say that people from Konoha are insane. Ha!)

One person in the team had been given a timer, which counts backwards. It had started at seventy-two hours, and will gradually tick down until then. Useful little thing, really – except for the fact that
the jōnin who had given it to them had said that if they fail to get to the center by the time it stops, well. The watches are set to blow up – hard enough to take a hand. Or, at least, that's what they said. They are torn between scoffing at this ridiculous idea and actually believing because, well, *Iwa ninja and explosions*.

Before long, they find the source of smell. It takes them about two hours through the slippery, dark tunnels, which is actually decent timing. None of them complain, not really. The faster they're out of there, the better. Now, they find themselves in something that looks like a cave. It is lit, at least, however dimly, and they can see a man – a chūnin, Ren determines, and Hibiki agrees, after having Sharingan'd and Byakugan'd him, respectively, to check his chakra level – sitting on a chest. Hibiki verifies that within the chest, there are many identical scrolls - the objective of this portion of the exam.

"Oh my," the chūnin says, grin apparent in his voice. "Honestly, I did not expect the first team to find me to be Konoha. I was betting for my homies."

"We have to get through you to get the scroll, don't we," Hana asks, eyebrow raised. The dog she carries yips, and it actually sounds like an insult. From Hana's face it's easy to read that it's exactly that. Her only answer is the sudden appearance of three mud wolves that spring up from a wet patch in front of the chūnin and lunge at them. Before she can even react, Ren is in front of her and already going through hand signs.

Tiger, Ram, Monkey, Boar, Horse, Tiger.

Fire flickers in the glossy coal of her eyes milliseconds before a massive fireball speeds towards the wolves and the chūnin behind them. The mud wolves, dried and almost burnt, crumbles to dust, no longer active, as the man shields himself with one loud *Doton: Doryūheki*, raising a slab of stone. The fireball crashes and crumbles apart, both fire and earth, but the wall holds true, if charred.

Before they can move, the chūnin darts from behind the wall and right at them, muttering something that sounds suspiciously like 'Doton: Domu' – the very same jutsu Kakuzu had used to take down the door of the temple, and she knows she doesn't want it meeting her ribs. Hibiki comes forward, veins running from his eyes to his ears, a cry of "*Jūken!*" on his lips. The Haimaru brothers leap from three sides - left, right and behind - biting and immobilizing with their painful bites, and Hibiki's palm strikes the chūnin's kidneys. He gawks and falls onto his knees, hands around his stomach.

"You fucking little monsters," he breathes, tears dancing in his eyes. "Fuck. Take the fucking scroll and get lost," he wheezes, and there's a chuckle from somewhere. Two more chūnin appear next to him, and one promptly slaps the back of his head.

"This is why we're here in groups, you're hardly able to test any more genin," she chuckles, and motions at Team Four with her hand to, indeed, get lost. So, they do just that. They take a scroll, checking the chest beforehand (*just one, Hana says, greed doesn't always pay off*) and rushes to try to find the center. The venture is… boring. Most of the time. There are giant centipedes, bloodthirsty moles and a giant spider in one of corridors. A giant spider, with which Ren actually converses through her own spider, who *lets them through and actually points the way*.

*(Uchiha Ren, what the fuck, Hibiki thinks. Just what the actual fuck.)*

Nothing happens. At all.

And then something does.

"Yōton: Sekkaigyō no Jutsu!"
"Katon: Gōkakyū no Jutsu!"

A fireball, moderate in size this time, clashes with quicklime halfway through and promptly explodes. It's not a good sign that the tunnel shakes slightly, but Ren doesn't really have the time to worry about that right now, too busy staring into the crazed eyes of Kurotsuchi. Some sort of personal vendetta, maybe, for talking the twerp down? Ren doesn't care.

She just burns things until they stop being a problem.
Kurotsuchi has Lava Release. Lava Release is essentially a combination of two other nature transformations: Fire and Earth. Ren has only Fire Release. By all means, she should be at a disadvantage here – but she isn't, not exactly. Because Ren is older and bigger – she has more stamina and therefore more chakra than the eight-year-old twerp and thus, technically, they're about fifty-fifty.

"Stay out of this, she's mine!" Ren snaps at Hana when the Inuzuka steps forward and, reluctantly, her friend withdraws to the back again. Ren is dead set on wiping that smirk off the brat's face herself, after all. So, with a loud 'Katon: Hösenka', small fireballs with mean shuriken inside charge at Kurotsuchi and Ren charges right behind them, Sharingan glowing eerily in the dark. Akatsuchi and Deidara wisely take a hint and stay back themselves.

Kurotsuchi dodges, and in one instance even deflects, the tiny burning shuriken, just as Ren basically pounces at her. Taijutsu in the dark, slippery, cramped space is difficult and not really advised, but Ren is a shinobi, and shinobi is just another word for dirty fighting. No ninja who wants to stay in the business and live to see their twentieth birthday plays fair – that's a fact. So Ren jumps, runs a few steps on the wall (as much as she can without making it explode), leaps onto the ceiling and promptly throws Awai at Kurotsuchi's face. The girl shrieks, first from shock, then from pain when the spider mercilessly bites into the soft skin of her cheek. Then she almost burns him by literally spitting lava, although Awai manages to jump to safety before darting towards Hana.

Ren uses the momentum that the ceiling gives her upon leaping down and elbows Kurotsuchi square in the face so hard her elbow actually hurts. By the time her feet touch the ground, her left hand is already raised and Ren aims and throws a mean punch right to where she knows her kidneys are. It connects, and Kurotsuchi wheezes in pain. But, somehow, she manages a hand seal and suddenly there's lava bursting from her mouth, right onto Ren's left thigh. It eats through her pants almost instantly and Ren actually howls when the hot magma touches – and burns – her thigh. Her howl, though, is cut in half when she bites her lip, reaches for a kunai, and plunges it down to the hilt in her opponent's thigh in retaliation.

She's nothing if not vindictive, after all.

There's a hard tug on her collar, and Ren gives in almost bonelessly, her back colliding with Hana's chest, and suddenly she's running. In a haze she manages to register Akatsuchi closing them off, dividing the corridor with a wall of solid rock. So, Ren grits her teeth harder and runs, allowing her teammates to lead. It hurts like hell, yes, but if she ignores it, she can run. She has work to do and no time to care about the pain.

(Nobody cares, anyway. Nobody ever does. Just grit your teeth and stop whining-

Shut up, mother. You've never cared, but it doesn't mean others share your lack of sentiment.)

After she realizes that Ren is pretty much out of commission (seriously, how is that girl even running? Doesn't she feel any pain? Her leg is fucking charred!) Hana takes the lead and absolutely
no shit from anyone, be it Hibiki or her dogs, and methodically leads them towards the exit through
the ever changing tunnels of the maze. They do stop, of course, about fifteen minutes after the
encounter. She takes the opportunity to sit Ren down with a stern glare and check her leg. Thank
god it's mostly only the skin that's beyond saving and the muscle isn't really that damaged – nothing
beyond fixing, at least. And it will scar. It'll make a very ugly and massive scar, actually, but Hana
suspects that Ren, half-crazed from pain, hardly cares. So, Hana does what she can right now – she
rineses the wound with water from a jutsu (she's not wasting resources, they don't know when they'll
make it out) and, after about twenty minutes, when Ren starts to look a bit less like she'd pass out,
wraps her leg loosely with gauze and further numbs the spot with chakra. The numbing is shallow,
though, and will wear out soon, so they'd better hurry.

(They find another giant spider no more than an hour later and Ren, still as pale as death and heavily
relying on Hibiki after the adrenaline left her legs soft, actually manages to convince it to lead them
out to the center. It feels like cheating, honestly. Like cheating in an especially mean way – it makes
Hana feel like a real shinobi.

Also, by that time, Hana is willing to bet her savings that Ren's connection to spiders is very much
the same as Inuzuka's connection to dogs. There's just no other explanation.)

They're out in about three hours after that, because even the spider gets confused from time to time,
and Ren can't really run anymore without adrenaline fueling her. Still, they're the second team that
makes it out – and it takes them only thirteen hours to do so. And when Ren mutters something like
'Jareth would be fucking proud, yay', Hana is very much certain this is some sort of reference she
fails to catch. But Ren is just weird like that.

And in need of medic. Thus, Hana ushers her team to the waiting medic-nin, and doesn't even bother
glancing around the arena in the center of the labyrinth. She'll have time later.

(It turns out that the watches really are bombs, and are deactivated upon entering the center of the
maze. Better yet, the scrolls are set to explode, too – within forty-eight hours of being removed from
the scroll chest.

Even better, for each additional scroll, their timer shrinks by twelve hours. So, yeah. It really does not
pay off to be greedy.

Also, what the fuck is with Iwa and explosions?!)
"I guess," Ren shrugs. Or, tries to, with how she is lying on her right side – and fails. "When did you get here?"

"About an hour ago," Deidara answers. "Took us twenty-two hours because Kurotsuchi just doesn't know what teamwork is, and when you're dragging your team down, you let them handle stuff," he says with annoyance. "We would've been here like, ten hours ago, if she'd only let Akatsuchi carry her," the blonde growls, and Ren chuckles.

"You think there will be preliminaries?" she asks, and he nods.

"I've seen, like, five teams already. You're the first and only team from Konoha, but I've seen, like, two from Kiri, one from Suna and three or so from Iwa," he explains. "So, with this amount of people, I think there will be, un."

"Fuck," is Ren's bright answer. "My leg's gonna be a bother, but I'll manage to burn someone, I guess."

"Are all Konoha ninja this crazy and thick-skinned, or just you?" Deidara asks, raising one eyebrow.

"Nah, just me," she smiles.

"Good to know, I guess?"

"But why are you here?" Ren asks, and looks around. The room doesn't really look medical, more like a lounge or a cheap hotel room, with three beds. The two others are unoccupied, so she guesses Hana and Hibiki are… well, somewhere.

"I want to rest, but I don't want to listen to Kurotsuchi's whining," he mumbles. "My head is hurting already."

"Why don't you rest here, then?" Ren asks, and the boy shakes his head.

"This is your team's section, I can't take their beds," he says. Ren looks thoughtful for a moment, and then, slowly and very ungracefully, scoots away from the center of her bed to the side of it. Deidara looks at her and asks, "What the fuck, Uchiha, un."

"You say you want to rest, and your idiot of a teammate is not allowing you to. You can't take the beds in the other rooms, so I guess we can share," she explains. "I'm used to it, don't worry – Sasuke's made a habit of sleeping with me because of his nightmares, even if he rarely has any now. Just mind my leg and we'll be fine, okay?"

Deidara looks at her like she's a complete idiot (which might not exactly be a false impression), but he also seems tempted. And thus, after contemplating for a long while, during which Ren almost dozes off again, he finally makes up his mind and carefully climbs into the bed and lies next to her. This is a bed for one person, yes, but they're both children; even if Ren is quite tall, they're still relatively small and fit with no problem at all.

"Anyone tell you you're weird yet, un?" Deidara whispers, and Ren snorts.

"Everybody," she whispers back. "Every day. At least once."

"Good. Cause you are."

"You want me to sing for you or something?" Ren asks off-handedly. In the first few weeks she would usually sing to Sasuke to lull him to sleep.
Deidara looks at her, eyes wide and shocked. He looks very much ready to furiously decline, but he falters, for some reason, and actually considers it, which honestly surprises Ren – she had expected instant rejection.

"I… I guess, yeah, un?"

Ren closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and searches for words. And, after a short while, starts singing softly – at least with the pre-pubescent voice of Sawashiro Miyuki it actually doesn’t sound half bad.

"Hush now, my storeen
Close your eyes and sleep
Waltzing the waves
Diving the deep
Stars are shining bright
The wind is on the rise
Whispering words of long-lost lullabies

Oh, won't you come with me
Where the moon is made of gold
And in the morning sun
We'll be sailing
Oh, won't you come with me
Where the ocean meets the sky
And as the clouds roll by
We'll sing the song of the sea…"

And, before she knows it, Ren is dozing off again, but this time with an armful of tiny blonde who will most likely grow up to be one of the most dangerous criminals of this world.

And that is the scene that Hana and Hibiki, the former coming from the library and the latter having finally been kicked out of his clansmen's lounge, stumbled upon about four hours later when entering their lounge room. If Ren had seen their faces, she would've never let them live it down, but, fortunately for them, she does not. She is too busy being asleep, curled around the small blonde, after all. And as for Deidara, well, he's pretty much melted into her chest, golden hair all over… well, everywhere. The sheets, the pillow, and Ren's face and shoulder.

"Go to bed quietly," Hana advises, and Hibiki only nods, albeit grumpily.

"She's bad enough when well-rested," he murmurs. "I don't wanna know what kind of monster she turns into when sleep-deprived and cranky."

Hana snorts softly, ushering her ninken onto the bed so that their claws stop scratching the floor, shrugs off her coat and kicks off her shoes, and lies down herself. It's somewhere around three in the morning, actually, or something like that. Hana really doesn't know, nor does she care, and there are preliminaries awaiting, so she'd better rest up.
Twenty-Third Thread

Chapter Summary

Attention, contest; go to Seventeenth Thread for details.

"Older men declare war. But it is youth that must fight and die."
— Herbert Hoover

For the next day and some change, Ren either sleeps, eats, or allows Hana to fiddle around with her wound. Perhaps it isn't medically advised for someone so inexperienced to mess around with it, but honestly, all she actually does is re-wrap it with new, pleasantly cold, gel bandage, and run a scan. Really, even if it hurts like hell, the wound itself turns out to be less serious than it seemed at first – her skin got pretty charred, yes, but… but only the skin, basically. She would just end up with a pretty big, marred scar on about half of the surface of the outer side of her left thigh. She could walk it off, no biggie. Her pants – her rather expensive, but very durable, loose, ninja-specific material, god bless it – got it the worst, and if she hadn't been wearing it baggy, as she does, she would have suffered much worse. Her muscles did suffer some damage, but it's shallow and nothing that the medic-nin can't heal. For her skin, they would have to take her to the hospital, to which Ren had responded with a resolute no. She has to kick ass at the preliminaries, and a hospital visit would technically disqualify her. And, afterwards, the wound would actually be a bit too old for actual skin transplant, so she'd have to make do with artificial scarring. Not that she minds.

(The transplant would be possible for Senju Tsunade at any given time, technically, but Jashin knew where that woman is, drinking and gambling her days – and money – away.)

Deidara has been actively avoiding his teammates in a very obvious way. Whenever he gets bored of sleeping, he follows Ren or Hana around, hiding behind the girl he is with at the time when she glares daggers at Kurotsuchi in passing. Ren just does so to piss off the younger girl, that much the blond has deducted. But Hana, it seems, feels genuine dislike for the girl on account of her basically crippling her teammate. It's a dog thing, that loyalty.

(Hana's dogs are really cool, though, Deidara decides. And when Hana tells him that they will grow big enough so that people can actually ride them, he almost, almost wants one. But then, he has his clay. His clay is more awesome – and doesn't leave fur everywhere!)

But, of course, the blissful laziness has to come to an end. Thus, at the end of the third day, they are all called to the main arena in order to participate in preliminaries. In the end, there are exactly sixteen people that still willing to compete. Hana is amongst those who forfeit and decide not to advance in the exam. (I'm a medic-nin, we get field promotions.) Hibiki, on the other hand, much to Ren's surprise, is actually still willing to participate. It's kind of tear-jerking, how fast he is growing up.

And thus, on the third day, at around the same time they had gone into the maze seventy-two hours ago, all the genin and their sensei, whether participating or not, gathered around the arena. It looks very much like the one the Rookie Nine's Chūnin Exam preliminaries would take place in – complete with random generator – except with a simple, huge obelisk in place of the hand sculpture. Also, instead of some pathetic pavement around the arena, there are actual bleachers. Just three rows
of seats, actually, but more than enough to fit something around forty people and still have plenty of space.

Everyone attends, of course, but not everybody is up to fight. Oddly enough, the amount of people in the preliminaries – sixteen – is basically a perfect number for a thing like that. Eight people would move to the finals, and then there would be three rounds in total.

The one thing that bothers Ren is that they have to stand in the center of the arena in order for old man Ōnoki to give them The Speech. Not to mention that, when he looks at Ren, it is with borderline irritation, but also, very slightly, something like gratefulness? Who knows, maybe he, too, is sick of Kurotsuchi being so full of herself and had decided that she did need a wake-up call. Ren is more than happy to deliver. She knows she herself isn't invincible, of course – otherwise her leg would be perfectly fine – and she really has to hit the training grounds if she wants to pummel Itachi into the ground at a later date. Gods know the bastard deserves it.

"Welcome to the preliminaries, kids," is what Ōnoki says when all the jōnin sensei of the passing teams finally gather in line behind him. There's Shibi, of course, some dude in a turban from Suna, Zabuza, who Ren grins at, and some other person from Kiri, whose gender Ren would have to give some deeper thought. Assuming the villages are all idiotically traditional. Thus, for now, Ren would just stick to calling the willowy figure 'they'. There's also a woman from Kumo, another Konoha ninja, and a woman with ridiculous, electric-green hair and a Taki headband. Related to Fū, perhaps?. There is no Iwa sensei, however, despite Deidara & co. participating, so she figures that they are, indeed, trained by the Tsuchikage.

Ren pretty much tunes out the entire speech that old man Onoki gives them, really. She has little to no interest in all that 'bring honor to your village' blabber she knows is only to put on a show to not scare brats away. Because it's not like they are training to become child killing machines, brainwashed and ready to fight and die for their village, right?

"Let the preliminaries start!" Ōnoki sounds, and Ren's attention finally snaps back to him. At least she isn't the only one to not pay him much heed – Deidara sways on his legs, visibly dozing off, before he wakes up, once again aware and completely unaffected by his Kage's glare. "Names will be randomly selected on the screen. The two competitors selected will ascend to the arena and fight until one of them is unable to continue fighting or is down for ten seconds and longer. Forfeit is also an option. Now, give us the first set of names!"

The screen flashes to life, and white letters above and under the 'vs' flare and twirl until they stop. Ren stops, too, and tries to smother the urge to groan. Because how- just how could she have missed that? Missed him? Dear Jashin, she's so stupid!

Chōjūrō vs Goro

Chōjūrō is here. Competing. And she had completely missed him until now. In his baggy blue coat with a hood over his head, and a tantō strapped to his belt- God damn it, standing right next to her, too. She hates her life so much right now. The other guy, Goro (Mortal Kombat much?), has very pale hair and dark skin – Kumo, definitely.

They leave them in the arena, whilst everyone else evacuate to the bleachers. Ren wastes no time standing, and sits herself down right next to Hana. The fight itself is quite… anticlimactic, really. All it takes is Chōjūrō knocking the Kumo guy back and then locking him in a Water Prison. From then on it's an agonizing four minutes of waiting while the Kumo guy thrashes and curses, losing his breath in the water bubble, before finally losing consciousness. The winner of the first battle is promptly announced to be Chōjūrō, future member of Seven Swordsmen.
And then the white letters spin again. Ren looks up, slightly bored, and, when they stop, sucks in a breath. Hana, right next to her, stills, and then promptly groans, hiding her face in her hands and whining something that sounds like 'oh my god'. And Ren? She can't help it, at all, when a very wide, slightly feral grin cuts her face almost in half.

**Kurotsuchi vs Uchiha Ren**

Whoever made this randomizer, Ren feels very inclined to give them a bear hug. Because it's her and Kurotsuchi, and she can finally make a proper statement to the brat without having to mind a very cramped and dark tunnel. And so, Ren jumps down and only slightly winces at her leg. It's bandaged rather tight with fresh wraps and gel dressing, so it's not as irritating as it could be. Anyway, there's adrenaline rushing in her already, dimming the pain even further. Kurotsuchi does the exact same thing as her – leaps down from the bleachers, despite Akatsuchi's pleading to take actual stairs – and hisses in visible pain. Maybe it's because of Hana, the wrappings, and adrenaline, or maybe just Ren's own will to ignore the pain and move forward, but Kurotsuchi is worse off than her. Or maybe the fact that in Ren's case, only the skin is beyond saving, because Ren is pretty sure that her kunai had gone deeper than just skin-deep.

(She might have even grazed the bone, come to think of it.)

"Payback time," Kurotsuchi growls, readying her stance and waiting for the proctor's signal. Ren doesn't answer, only offering a grin that has a few too many teeth to be pleasant. Above all, she has to evade the brat's Lava Release, that she knows. Better yet, from what she remembers, Lava Release can also produce rubber. How? Don't ask her. It's Naruto World's logic. Or the lack of it.

"Ready," the proctor says.

"Not gonna answer back?" Kurotsuchi sneers, and Ren actually chuckles at that.

"I'll let my fists speak for me," she says, because that is exactly what she's going to do. Just you fucking watch.

"Go!"

"Yōton: Sekkaigyō no Jutsu!"

"Katon: Gōkakyū no Jutsu!"

Quicklime and chakra-induced fire meet once again, slamming into one another halfway through, and both girls jump back. Upon the sheer force of one hitting another, the jutsus disperse and technically explode. Kunai are sailing towards Kurotsuchi before they've even fully dispersed, heading the right direction in the light and smoke only thanks to the red and black whirling in Ren's eyes. A Sharingan, a fully matured one, even if most likely only because of Ren acquiring the Mangekyō when her dear cousin slaughtered their family, is a force to be reckoned with.

Kurotsuchi dodges, of course, but hisses curses all the while. Ren smirks, shifting her weight to lean on her right – uninjured – leg more, and leaps from it towards the girl, initiating a short taijutsu exchange. While, of course, thoroughly abusing the fact that she is older, bigger and has longer reach. Kurotsuchi, fed up with her, takes a breath and actually spits lava at her without seals, what the fuck-

Ren yelps and leaps back, tearing off the burning sleeve of her shirt without a thought, before the flaming liquid can get anywhere near her skin. The sleeve, with the Uchiha Clan's red-and-white target mark, falls to the ground and burns. Ren growls, hands already working through seals, and
spits a few smaller fireballs at Kurotsuchi. What the younger girl doesn't know, or perhaps doesn't even suspect, is just how *mean* Hösenka is. Because she dissolves the fire with some quicklime, but shuriken hidden in the fireballs still spin towards her, Ren following right behind them. Kurotsuchi evades the shuriken and ducks beneath Ren's fist. And then does something Ren will never, ever forgive her for. Ever.

Because she grabs Ren's left thigh and *squeezes*.

Ren howls in both agony and anger and brings her head down, hitting Kurotsuchi's forehead with her own. The girl wears her protector where it is meant to be worn, so Ren's at a disadvantage, but adrenaline and pure, unadulterated rage dim the pain. She lunges for where her kunai had reached two days before and gives it a squeeze herself. She feels her palm make contact with a wet, sticky substance and puts even more force behind it. This time, it's Kurotsuchi who howls, but her grip on Ren's thigh doesn't waver. It's ridiculous, this pathetic excuse of a duel.

Ren, being Ren, decides to do something stupid. So, leaning on her bad leg, she raises her right leg and kicks, hard. Right at Kurotsuchi's injury. While standing only on her wounded leg, which is still in the brat's painful grip. So she kicks again, and again, and then brings her fist to Kurotsuchi's jaw when she's sure the girl is too focused on her wounded leg, causing Kurotsuchi to gasps and let go. Seeing her chance, Ren clenches her teeth together and aims her next punch at where she knows the kidneys are supposed to be. The Uchiha's breathing is fast and shallow, and the red of her eyes is dimmed by the mist of pain enveloping them. But she's standing, gritting her teeth and not even bothering to fight the tears of pain running down her cheeks, blurring her vision even further. No matter, the Sharingan sees what it's supposed to see.

She charges for what she knows is the last time, because while she can ignore the pain, the pain won't ignore her and her body will just give up at some point. So, before she has a chance to make a conscious decision about it, she calls on all the chakra she has left and runs through hand seals. She hasn't perfected the jutsu yet, but she can do it well enough to try, and she needs the *firepower*.

"Katon: Karyū Endan!" she roars, and a giant flaming dragon roars with her and charges at Kurotsuchi. Ren is pretty sure she hears her call 'Doton: Doryūheki' as a wall of earth springs to life. The flaming dragon, an extension of Ren's will, her chakra ablaze and nothing more, curls around the earth dome, scorching and drying the mud, searching for a weak point. Upon finding none, it roars once again and rises up high, to the ceiling, only to fall back down, slamming into the dome and dispersing in the process. Kurotsuchi is still within the half-burned, half-crushed artificial cave when it falls, and she's pale. Very pale.

Chakra exhaustion, Ren deducts, from being forced to create five walls instead of one. And Kurotsuchi is smaller and weaker than her, and those jutsu are both B-Rank. Ren is swaying on her feet, but manages to stay upright, if bent. Kurotsuchi, having fallen onto her back from the sheer impact of the dragon's attack, is having trouble standing up. Standing at all, actually.

"Ten, nine, eight..." the proctor starts to count down, and Kurotsuchi's efforts to stand up double. Ren grits her teeth through the tears, Sharingan fading away, as she fights to stay upright and even to breathe. "...three, two, one. The winner of the second match is Uchiha Ren!" the proctor announces.

The wave of relief that washes over her is enough to knock her off her feet, but Ren doesn't even feel her back hit the concrete. She doesn't feel Hana appearing next to her before she does, hands flaring green. She's already unconscious by then.

Hana is not happy. She's very unhappy, actually. But what else can she be, having such an idiot as a teammate and friend? Because don't tell her otherwise, she knows that Uchiha Ren is nothing more
than a borderline suicidal and very insane pyromaniac. Well, that's what Hana loves her for…! Save for the 'suicidal' part, of course. What was that idiot thinking, spewing a B-Rank jutsu just like that? The only thing that saved her from dying from chakra exhaustion right then and there is the fact that, for someone her age, she really does have a lot of it. Even more than boys. (*Her abysmal chakra control is a different matter entirely. That's why, despite being an Uchiha, Ren and genjutsu don't mix. At all.*)

So, Hana is fuming, because her idiot friend is a reckless idiot. Who she loves anyway. And perhaps that's why she's going to get yelled at when she wakes up. Honestly, only Kiba is worse. Maybe she would yell at mom, too, if mom isn't an even bigger idiot than Ren and completely beyond understanding just why she should even be slightly more careful.

(Seriously, with these three Hana knows she is guaranteed to have prematurely gray hair. Very prematurely. She hates them so much. So, so much.)

It doesn't bother her that she misses the rest of the matches, though. Shibi-sensei is still there and promised to relay everything to them once it was over – Ren is sure to be grateful. Hibiki, upon entering the medical wing, seems dazed and away, but seeing the marks on his arm that without a doubt pointed to electrocution, Hana doesn't ask. He's entitled to be unresponsive for a while after something like that.

Ren is pale. Deathly pale, almost, and Hana is already plotting how to force the most disgusting chakra pills down her friend's throat in large quantities in a way that would help her get over the exhaustion. Hana briefly considers also coating them in extra-hot sauce, but decides against it. Ren loves spicy things. The blockhead also seems all too resilient and with some sort of unexplained energy working in there, because she wakes up only half an hour and a drip later.

"I won," she mutters meekly, turning her head to the side. The motion is slow and visibly required a lot of strength Ren currently doesn't have. Hana sighs and glares at her idiot friend, hoping it would convey the message. It most likely does, because Ren offered her that dumb, if weak, grin in answer. "Oi, Hyūga, you alive?"

Hibiki jerks his head upwards, white eyes clouded, if something like that is even possible, and huffs. He is so pale he seems translucent, and his black hair stands out starkly.

"I fucking won," he exclaims weakly in a very un-Hyūga-like manner. "I fucking advanced to the third part of the exam," he said, and this time he sounds very, very surprised with himself. He blinks once, twice, and then suddenly jumps to his feet. "Oh my god I *advanced!*" he yells, realization dawning on him, and then promptly faints. Had Hana not caught him, he probably would have injured his head on the floor.

"Well, that was unexpected," Hana says with a small smile, and Ren answers with a weak snort. And then the building shakes, sounding with an explosion. "What the hell?" Hana gasps, turning towards the door in a defensive stance.

"Iwa ninja and explosions," Ren mutters. "Or just Deidara."

"How do you know it's Deidara?" Hana asks, cocking her eyebrow, because she spends most of her time with Ren, and haven't seen the blond blow anything up even once. Ren just smiles, closes her eyes and dozes off. Way to dodge questions.

God damn you, Uchiha Ren.
"My best friend is a semi-suicidal imbecile."
— Inuzuka Hana, repeatedly

Chakra exhaustion sucks. A lot. Ren has been bedridden for three days already, and she is bored out of her mind – well, she isn't exactly bedridden, but the second she brought up the idea of 'walking it off', Hana promptly smacked her head, and Ren is one of those people who can understand a definitive no, underlined with the threat of pain and suffering. So, she endures, even if she can wobble her way around, and, instead of preparing for the finals (woo, she advanced, yay!) she just does nothing. It kind of does set her off.

More than just a little.

In all honesty, if the process of regenerating chakra hadn't been taking most of her energy, she probably wouldn't listen to Hana and just walk it off anyway. And submit herself to some major pain and suffering due to her best friend losing her temper over Ren's idiocy. Yeah, no, her lack of energy is a good thing right now. She isn't, however, surrender to it completely. Even if it is exhausting, she can still walk around.

Hana was initially absolutely livid, to the point she actually almost bit Ren. Like, really bit, like a dog. It was honestly quite frightening? And then, having regained consciousness for good and having just enough strength to sit upright, Ren was subjected to a two-hour-long tirade (just. How?) that she promptly named 'My best friend is an absolute, semi-suicidal imbecile of an Uchiha, and I don't like it so I will be mad for hours on end at her'. Ren was amused, too, but more scared, actually, because Hana had a lot of Inuzuka in her. What a surprise, wow.

So it's a lose-lose situation. Is that even a thing? Nevertheless, Ren is now bored out of her mind, and confined to her bed for the next few days under pain of death. Ah, Inuzuka best friends, aren't they amazing? Also, there is the matter of her leg, which… isn't so bad, honestly? They wrapped it in something that speeds up forming new tissue and numbs it – the sensation is quite annoying. She can't feel her leg from the knee up, if that even makes sense. Nevertheless, the scar tissue would actually be present on the edges of the wound, as far as Ren can understand, and from what she pictured, would perhaps be even uglier than just one big scar. Oh well, not that she cares, as long as she is up and running.

As for Hibiki, he is still deep in denial. It doesn't appear that he believes that he actually advanced, upon Jūken-ing his way through a very persistent Kumo-nin who could literally cover his arms with lightning. That is also how Hibiki got electrocuted, too. And it is quite amusing to watch him be literally flocked by every other Hyūga currently in Iwa – all older than him – who seem to want nothing more than to give him pointers and train with him to make sure he doesn't screw up. If he actually listens to them, instead of pretending nothing happened, he would definitely have a chance in the finals.

(Ren is still bored. Out. Of. Her. Mind.)

But they don't say that fate favors the foolish for no reason, do they now? Because her salvation comes in the evening. It's blue, almost two meters tall, and offering a smile that still manages to slip some of the shark teeth in. And honestly, Ren wants to pray to the heavens when he pulls up a chair and sits next to her.
"Hi, Blue," she chirps instead, sitting up slowly (because otherwise Hana would learn and magically teleport right there and just bite her head off, Ren is sure), and smiles right back at one of the most dangerous ninja Kiri will ever produce. "What's up?"

"That stunt you pulled in the preliminaries was pretty impressive," he says with a nod, still smiling, but Ren knows that's not all there's to it, "if absolutely dumb," he finishes.

"I know, my friend kinda presented an entire speech on my idiocy to me already," she chuckles, scratching back of her head sheepishly. "But seriously, I do. I rely on taijutsu quite a bit, too, but the leg-

"And that's why I decided you need a blade," Kisame cuts in, and his smile goes a tiny bit wicked, as Ren's brain just stops for a while. Is he really, truly saying what she thinks he's saying? Because if he is, she's going to just fly, perhaps. So, she looks at him, eyes wide as saucers and blacker than night, and just gapes.

Kisame actually laughs at her, the blue bastard.

"Did you just say you're going to train me?" she chokes, because yes, she does recall actually asking him for it, but she never, ever really thought he would take her seriously – she was half-joking herself! And here they are, an idiot pyromaniac Uchiha and a shark that's too good with blades to be good for anyone, and, just-

"Not train per say, we don't have nearly enough time for that," he says, mirth still lining his voice heavily, "but I can give you pointers, can't I?"

Ren hums, taps her chin, and then snaps her fingers, as her dark eyes suddenly blend into crimson. It's enough for Kisame to send her a weird, confused look.

"This thing," she says, unfazed, pointing at her eyes, "is the Sharingan. It allows my clan – all dead, for the most part – to copy stuff, like taijutsu, kenjutsu or ninjutsu. Basically everything that's not other bloodline limit, or some other specific power, like the jinchūriki and their abilities. And it's also why I'm here instead of Kiri in half a year. But! The point is, you can show me moves once or twice, and I will just remember them. I dunno if I will be able to just do them on the spot, or if I'll have to practice, but I will know them, so even if I need to train, I won't need anyone, because I will know if I screw up," she shrugs, and Kisame grins again.

And yes, even using it for all of about ten seconds makes a difference. It's not much, really, but it's equivalent to Ren spitting three huge fireballs at once. Has she mentioned that chakra exhaustion sucks? Perhaps, but once again - chakra exhaustion is absolutely terrible.

"Well, that solves a lot of problems, those eyes," he says. "Well, first things first, we need to get you a blade," he starts, leaning on his chair, and Ren nods. Her mind flashes her an image of a pale blade in a cherry-colored sheath, with a dragon embroidered on it in golden thread.

"I have a katana that's an Uchiha heirloom, Sasuke got it for me on my birthday," she says, and then looks at the shark-nin again, "but I was thinking about a tantō, because a katana is still a bit too big for me. I'm twelve, for crying out loud, and if I survive, my reach and balance points will change drastically over the next few years," she mutters, and Kisame laughs.

"I like your thinking," he says. "It's surprisingly logical for a ninja. Are you sure you're not a prodigy? At least with the way you think. Hell, I can name elders who don't take such things into account," he chuckles, and Ren smiles.
If being actually thirty-two in spirit and from a completely different world is what you call a prodigy, then sure, she thinks, but doesn't even attempt to say.

"What can I do," she says instead, spreading her arms in the universal 'I don't know' motion, "But, sweet Jashin, somebody get me out of here. I'm going to actually go insane if this keeps up, and I'm totally fine now!" she whines, and Kisame gives her The Look. "Aw come on, I'm a bit wobbly still, but I can stand!"

"You can stand, but can you walk?" Kisame asks, and Ren just shrieks and throws a pillow at his face. It doesn't do anything, of course. Even in her current top form she could manage to swat him at best. And so, the shark-nin just booms with laughter.

"But seriously, if I just sit here the whole time I will have no chance in the finals!" she whines again. "Let's at least go to the weapon store to see if they have anything good. Please? I'll try not to adopt every stray that comes our way, and we'll walk slow, so there's a tiny, little chance that Hana maybe won't kill me on the spot- Please? I wanna go see shiny pointy stuff."

"Are you twelve or two?" Kisame asks, bemused, and Ren shrugs.

"Somewhere in between, I'm guessing. Growing up is a pain, you know," she sighs. "Especially if you're like, one of only two living family members and the other one is, like, half your age and you have to take care of them- You know what, Blue, let's just go, or I'll start rambling for good."

Kisame only shakes his head and leaves the room with an 'I'm waiting outside.' And, since escaping from hospitals is one of the major traits of the coolest people (that's what Kakashi and Genma do all the time), Ren decides it's as good a time as any to train in this art. As for Hana, well. Ren is being accompanied by a responsible adult, is doing no sudden movements, and it's not like she's going to train or use chakra, yet. So maybe, just maybe, she won't die today because of her overly protective, raging friend.

(But honestly, she's preparing herself for it nevertheless. Hana is going to murder her, no matter what Ren tells herself, period.)

They go to the weapon store. The very same one where he and Zabuza met Deidara for the first time, but Ren thinks it might be because he just doesn't know Iwa very well. Neither does she, and it's not like the people here are very helpful. Especially to a bad-mouthed Konoha brat and a man who literally looks like a shark given human form. Except more blue than gray.

They walk slowly, of course, and stop more than Ren would have liked. Kisame is patient and allows her to catch her breath, but honestly, chakra exhaustion sucks so much it's not even funny, and Ren hates it, but they make it there, eventually. (She feels like that might become a common occurrence, though, with how she just has no limits to spewing ninjutsu around. She really should start minding her chakra levels, or she might end up dead.)

"I hate chakra exhaustion," she promptly announces, much to Kisame's amusement.

"Taijutsu and kenjutsu reduce the possibility of getting it," is Ren hallucinating, or does he actually chirp that? Nevertheless, he's smug. Bloody chakra tank who just slashes through everything anyway. "With killing enemies off like that. Less people to burn, less chakra to waste."

"But I like burning stuff," Ren whines, puffing her cheeks.

"Do you like chakra exhaustion?" Kisame asks, quirking an eyebrow, and she shakes her head.
vigorously. Enough to make her world swim for a bit, and if Kisame hadn't grabbed her head to hold her upright, she would've fallen down. He laughs at her. "Thought so. Come on, let's see what they have. You said you wanted a tantō, yeah? Good choice for a beginner, actually."

So in they go. The store is actually bigger than Ren had thought, because from the outside only a small room with the shopkeeper can be seen. The true wonders start in the backroom, and Ren bashfully admits that she actually giggles upon seeing the stash. She completely, absolutely understands Tenten's love for the stuff, it's amazing. But Kisame is the one who knows what to look for so, instead of running off on her own, Ren follows him, occasionally asking him about what she sees; she honestly had no idea that tantō could come in so many various shapes and sizes. From fifteen to thirty centimeters, and the amount of blade types makes her head spin, actually. Shinogi, Hira, Shobu, Unokubi and, like, ten more, and she feels really stupid right now because she feels like she is supposed to know this kind of stuff already. Lesson learned, but definitely not in the Academy.

(Thank you, teachers, for indoctrinating tiny little genin instead of teaching them useful things like, I dunno, maybe identifying and choosing a proper weapon?! So the death rate might be a little lower?!! Seriously, ninja schooling needs so many reforms it is starting to be scary. And here Ren thought that the education system in her original world was bad – here you could literally get killed. Because of the sheer incompetence.)

In the end, after testing and weighing a few tantō of various proportions, a twenty-three centimeter long (**the blade, of course, not the whole thing**) kissaki-moroha is thrust into her hands. The handle is wrapped with violet cloth and the black, shiny sheath is tied with the same color thread about three-fourths of the way up. The tip of the handle also has a hooked 'tooth' that allows her to attach things to it. Like, for example, bells.

"That'll do," Kisame says approvingly. "Although it's not the cheapest thing here."

Ren snorts, "Come on, Blue. I don't waste money on stupid things like clothes or make-up, so I can waste it on pretty ninja stuff. The deadlier the better," she grins at him. "Also, you were muttering about quality, weren't you?"

"For a blade not from Kiri, it's surprisingly good quality, actually," he nods, and Ren snorts again. But, hey, it's advice from a pro, so she just buys the blade (**she likes it a lot, anyway, it just fits in her hand**) and happily follows Kisame outside, almost skipping, filled with a new sort of energy.

She feels perfectly fine, so maybe they can start training-

"UCHIHA REN!"

Ren's head snaps to the side, only to see very livid eyes, almost as black as hers, and-

"Oh fuck," she whines, and looks at Kisame like he's the only salvation in the world. Actually, in her case he might just be. "Blue, have a heart, help me, she's going to murder me!" Ren whines. Kisame chuckles, but moves to the front, between her and Hana, who stares at him dangerously.

"Was it your idea to go for a walk, or did that imbecile here," Inuzuka looks pointedly at Ren, who winces, "convince you to go?"

"A bit of both," Kisame admits, and if anything, Hana bristles even more.

"Hana, come on!" Ren whines. "I've been bedridden for days! And besides, it's not like anything bad happened! We were walking slowly, and I was with a responsible adult!"
Said responsible adult only snorts at that. Hana sends them both glares.

"Hana, please, I can't stand the hospital. I don't have time for this shit!" the Uchiha whines pathetically, half-begging. Hana clenches her fists and takes deep breaths through her nose.

"Bloody knucklehead," she growls, and she seems halfway to punching her best friend, only stopped by her state. "You can't be left alone! Oh my god, you're growing up to be just like Genma! Soon you'll stop going to the hospital at all!"

Hana perhaps just now remembers the moment when they found Genma after some D-Ranks around the Academy, bleeding out in Iruka's classroom. Hana was livid, Iruka was even more livid, Hibiki was perplexed and Ren maybe would be amused if not for the amount of blood Genma was losing, so she was perplexed, too. All because he refused to go to the hospital.

Okay, so maybe her idea of avoiding them completely isn't so good. But she sure as hell isn't going to stay bedridden for **days**!

"I love you, too," Ren chirps, and this time she does get punched. Square in the face. Hard enough to only bruise, but still-

"That's it, I'm shadowing you," Hana huffs. "At least until we're out of Iwa. And don't even think about pulling a stunt like that one during preliminaries! Ever again!"

"But I'm a ninja," Ren pouts. "We live fast and die young."

"Do I look like I care?! You bloody idiot!"

"Can I at least train tomorrow, mom?"

"We'll see about that tomorrow, and don't call me mom!"

"Sure thing, mom."

"Ren!"
Hana, true to her word, starts following Ren around. Not that Ren minds, or that it's any different from usual, though, so it goes by basically unnoticed by the Uchiha. The Inuzuka just fits into her life, her routines, as if they were made specifically for her. Or, that's just how being best friends work. Not that Ren would know, it's her first time ever having one, after all. She didn't mind either, because having one was a nice feeling. But Hana actually (out of pity and resignation, Ren is sure, but nevertheless) greenlit her for minor physical activity, which was specifically mimicking kenjutsu katas. Of course, mimicking them slowly and without any sudden movements, and Ren knew Hana would be there and watch her like a vulture or something, in order to prevent her idiot friend from doing anything more than just that.

And the scary thing was, that, despite being a medic, Ren knew Hana definitely wasn't below tackling her if she crossed the line. But hey, that's Hana for you, and she apparently decided that if Ren was feeling good enough to train, she was feeling good enough to get tackled.

"I apologize for inconvenience, Ren," Shibi says before the two of them leave in the morning. "That you must seek tutelage elsewhere instead of your sensei. I don't think there's much an Aburame could teach and Uchiha, though."

"But aren't I a replacement Aburame since there weren't any in our class?" Ren asks, raising her eyebrow, but Shibi shakes his head.

"That might be true, but you have an affinity for bugs. Nor you are any good at sensing chakra," he says, and the girl sighs heavily. "And I'd rather not have you taught any more ninjutsu for the moment. That would prove a danger for you, and for the environment. Especially for the environment."

Ren snorts, and Hana sighs while nodding, and still manages to glare at her friend.

"What?" Ren asks.

"Nothing," Hana shrugs. "You're just stupid and reckless, is all."

"Thanks for the compliment!" The Uchiha grins, and the Inuzuka splutters in offense, because it was definitely not a compliment. Shibi only sighs in exasperation. He adores these kids, and they do have potential, but that doesn't make them any less taxing on one's psyche.

He had no idea how Ren had managed to rope a ninja from another village entirely to actually tutor her, though. It did further prove to him that Ren was more of an experience and a force of nature than a person sometimes, but still baffled him. Not to mention the ninja in question was Hoshigaki Kisame, who had every making for a future member of the Seven Swordsmen. But Shibi didn't mind. He was shinobi for long enough and could catalogue people well enough, and Kisame was a good person. Insecure about his appearance, obviously, but a good person. And a patient one.

(He allowed Ren to use him as a jungle gym, for crying out loud.)
Ren arrived at the selected training ground *(dubbed Rocky the nth because they were all the same, goddamnit)* with a bit of time to spare, because she wasn't Kakashi and was definitely not planning to emulate him. Never. One Kakashi was really, truly, annoying enough. Nevertheless, when Ren and Hana finally reach the training ground, Kisame is already there. Better (or worse) yet, he's not alone – Zabuza is there, vividly arguing with the shark, and with them, the Generic Bitchface Kiri Genin that Ren knows qualified for the finals from Hana.

Ren did interrogate her teammates and sensei for the scores, so she knew. The matchups were to be posted in two days – the tournament ladder, because eight people have passed. She knew that Chōjūrō did, she saw him, and that Hibiki did. Deidara passed, of course – she just hoped she wouldn't have to face off against him, because his distance attacks were a pain. As for people she didn't care for, there was the Kiri genin snarling at her, but also some kid from Konoha she didn't know – apparently an Akimichi, from what she gathered – also one from Suna, of course a puppeteer, because how else would a suna nin fight, and some random chick from Taki.

But, back to matter at hand, Zabuza was yelling at Kisame and the genin was looking at Ren and Hana in very, very unfriendly way. Ren did not like that even one bit.

"Just what the fuck man!" Zabuza argues, gesturing vividly. "My brat advanced, won't you train him?"

"Zabuza, I'm not his sensei," Kisame sighs, and it's clear from his mimic that the same arguments have been thrown around for a while already. "Besides-"

"Besides what?"

"Besides I already called dibs on Blue," Ren calls from where there are approaching, instantly gaining the attention of the three. "Sorry, Twig Man, first come first served," she says, and sounds nowhere near apologetic. Smug, if anything.

"You?" Zabuza asks.

"Me," Ren nods with a smile that's definitely borderline smirk. "Now, if you don't mind, Blue really promised to tutor me today, he even helped me get a blade, so if you could so kindly go and check if you're not somewhere else. I would really, really appreciate that, okay?"

"You little-" Zabuza growls and almost lunges, but Kisame catches back of his shirt and hauls his back, while giving him disapproving look to the point that Momochi actually falters.

"Zabuza, take your genin and leave," Kisame says, voice stern. "I agreed to tutor Ren, and I will tutor Ren, because you know I never get back on my word. Your genin is your responsibility, not mine."

"But-"

"Zabuza," this time the shark-nin looks at his colleague with so much disappointment that if it was directed at Ren, she would probably suffer a minor heartbreak and instantly burst into apologies and promises of betterment. But Zabuza isn't Ren, so he just scoffs and walks away, his Generic Bitchface Kiri Genin trailing after the man.

"So," Kisame claps his hands together, looking down at the Uchiha. "What do we do today?"

"Something not too taxing," Hana says without even looking at the two, as she plants herself on a nearby rock, a scroll with some medical jargon unravelling on her lap. "I'm watching you. Both of you," the Inuzuka says, and Ren actually shudders, before her friend's eyes venture to the scroll's
content. Hana won't look up from her lecture, but Ren be damned if she doesn't have some sort of sixth sense. Because she just knows. Everything.

"Is that a spider on your shoulder?" Kisame asks, taking out his tantō from where it was strapped to his belt. He quirks his eyebrow, looking at Ren quizzically.

"Yep," she nods. "His name is Awai, because I'm creative as fuck."

"Naming an albino spider 'pale'," Kisame snorts. "Nobody will ever beat that."

"Of course not," Ren puffs. They look at one another, and then suddenly burst out laughing. Well, Ren does sound like a drunken donkey, and Kisame is more snickering than laughing, but still.

They eventually come to stop, and Ren mirrors Kisame in taking her tantō out, and the fun starts.

"The tantō is a relatively small weapon," Kisame starts. "Bigger and heavier than kunai, but you don't throw these around. I mean, you might, but it's not advisable. My point being, with its size, weight, and the shape of its handle, you have much more freedom with the grip than on a katana. You can easily hold a tantō in one hand and modify your grip however you see fit within seconds."

Of course, Kisame demonstrated two simplest grips, the one where the blade is pointing from the wielder, and the one where its lining with the forearm. His swap from grip to grip was fluid, and Ren passionately cursed her short fingers while trying to do the same. She managed, but it took much longer and was much clumsier. Still, apparently, for someone who never held a proper blade, it was passable, so Ren would take it. Grip change was all about practice anyway.

"Now, I will show you some katas," Kisame continues. "Thrusts and undercuts. There's, of course, no real recipe for a fight, neither it's like this with taijutsu, because fighting isn't dancing and doesn't have choreography. However, proper movements can save a lot of grief. What swordplay truly relies on, is your speed and situational awareness. You must have good eye-to-hand coordination and fast thinking, but that's something you can work through. However, do not think – never think – that kenjutsu is something anybody can do. An amateur with a best-grade blade is nothing compared to the master with a twig."

"I've heard that one somewhere before," Ren smiles, "but it went along the lines of shuriken and a stone."

"You are stubborn and passionate," Kisame flashes her a grin. "I can only do so much in three weeks, but if you take up on the art, enjoy it and pursue it later on, you can come really far. I, at least, am sure you can."

Ren feels her brain stop for a moment, and then suddenly her face burns because oh shit, oh shit, Kisame is praising me, oh my god.

"What?" shark-nin quirks an eyebrow in question at her.

"Well, nobody ever really praised me, you know," she mutters. In either this, or in former life, she doesn't say. Never.

"Oh," Kisame smiles, and this time it has less teeth, as if attempt at something gentler. "I don't see what I shouldn't. Now, give me more reasons to, yes?"

"Yessir!" she chirps as her coal-black eyes suddenly bleed into eerie red.
When the time of dinner rolls around, Ren's head is spinning. It might or might not be her using sharingan constantly to copy the moves, or it also might be the sheer number of various thrusts one can perform with a short blade. It's baffling. If Kisame hadn't taught her that, she would have never, ever guessed herself. Ever. Hana eyeing her like a vulture ready to strike doesn't help at all, but at least, aside from starring, she decides on a break to go and grab some dinner, because Ren apparently really doesn't look good. On top of that, her leg itches again, this time with sweat under bandages, and it's infuriating, so she instantly jumps at the idea. She's getting hungry anyway.

Somehow, they end up by the same Teppanyaki restaurant where they meet Deidara the first time. And maybe it's fate, but a tiny blonde bundle collides with Hana once again. She doesn't appear to be amused in the slightest.

"Hi Dei," Ren waves at the blonde, who looks at her and sighs.

"You're stupid, you know that?" he asks, and Hana snorts.

"I've made it pretty clear to her, so I believe she does," the Inuzuka says.

"Oh Dei, have you been worried for me?" Ren cooes, bending slightly forward to him, and Deidara's face suddenly bursts aflame.

"No I don't, un!" he shoots back instantly, and then looks at Kisame. "What are you three doing, though, un?"

"Having a break from my idiot friend trying to handle a blade properly, why?" Hana asks. "Ren qualified to the finals, you know, even if she fainted shortly after."

"Hana!"

"I know she did, un, I'm not stupid," blonde huffs.

"Any news on the matchups, though?" Ren asks, because Deidara is Tsuchikage's apprentice, so maybe-

"Not much yet, but tomorrow they should be done," the blonde says. "I do know, though, that if you want to fight me, you gotta get to the final round, because we're going different routes. That's all I know, though."

"Oh," Ren says. "So I have to fight two idiots for the honor of fighting you?"

"Yeah, un," he nods. "I'm just that awesome!"

Ren snorts, and bends down more, so that she's on his eye level.

"What makes you think that you're not fighting for the honor of facing me?" she asks, and Deidara snorts.

"You're on, un," he glares at her, and she glares right back.

"Weren't we going to get food?" Kisame asks, finally breaking their bickering, and the kids just sigh. "Why won't we take pipsqueak with us, so you can talk more inside?"

"Hey, I'm not a pipsqueak!" Deidara squeaks, and Ren promptly bursts out laughing.

It's dangerous as fuck, and will probably come to bite her in the ass countless times in the future, but she loves this life.
Due to total of one participant in my contest, I decided to cancel it.

"Use only that which works, and take it from any place you can find it."

— Bruce Lee, Tao of Jeet Kune Do

Ren is getting progressively better, both physically and in terms of handling the blade. By the time the third week of the 'break' rolls around, Kisame is quite proud of her progress, especially considering that the first time she gripped her tantō to begin with was with a soft, completely wrong grip. They spent some time on those, drilling and drilling until Ren could naturally grip the handle properly. She did cut her hands a few times because of it, and her fingers as well, from her training in shurikenjutsu. She's not exactly bad at these, but she isn't good either.

The point is, Hana, the medic, refuses to heal her, much to Kisame's poorly-hidden amusement, leaving Ren a brooding mess. But Hana is right, that he has to admit – Ren has to learn to avoid danger whenever possible, rather than relying on a medic. Sometimes it's impossible, but, well. Besides, Hana insists that the pain would make her learn faster, which Kisame personally agrees on. And even if Ren's fingers are stiffer when wrapped, she doesn't give up and tries her best to make up for the advantage. Kisame would be lying if he said he didn't appreciate it – people with drive usually go far.

Not to mention Ren's resilience. Not that he has ever seen one, but he is pretty sure that she could be on par with even that of an Uzumaki. Quite sad Kiri wiped them all out out of fear. Yes, they were allied to Konoha, and their fujinjutsu was frightening, but Kiri hasn't gone to war with Konoha in a long time. They should not have acted that way, in Kisame's humble opinion. Besides, from what he heard, they made amazing blades that rivaled Kiri's, and he would be really happy if he could manage to get one of Uzushio's famous chakra-conductive blades.

But Uzushio is now a half-ruined city of ghosts, so he can only dream.

"What's up, Blue?" Ren asks, apparently having finally exhausted her shuriken stack for the day, as she drops down and sits cross-legged between Kisame and Hana, who is, once again, deep in some medical scroll. The Inuzuka doesn't even react this time.

"Thinking about Uzushio," he answers matter-of-factly. "Wondering if we really had to wipe them out."

"Dunno, but it was a dick move, anyway," Ren shrugs. "I mean, what the hell did they do to you, aside from being freakishly powerful?"

"As far as I know, nothing," he shrugs.

"Then wow, rude," she snorts. "By the way, people in Konoha sometimes keep saying that I might have an Uzumaki ancestor. Apparently, my chakra reserves are bigger than those of your average
Uchiha, especially for my age. But I'm not a redhead, so I don't know," she sighs and shrugs. "Not that anyone could match you in chakra. I can feel it leaking through your ears even now, and I'm not really all that good at sensing it. Like, wow, dude, how much do you even have?" she huffs, pulling out her tantō and inspecting the blade.

"You haven't named it yet," Kisame notes, and Ren looks at him in surprise.

"I thought only legendary blades had names," she counters, slightly confused.

"And how exactly do they become legendary?" Kisame quirks an eyebrow. "By being used by shinobi. And trust me, said shinobi don't name them after they become legends."

"Sumire, then," Ren decides after a brief consideration, and Kisame snorts.

"Why after a flower?" he asks, visibly very amused.

"Because I might have flunked out at kunoichi lessons, due to their useless nature, but I read about interesting things on my own," not quite, it was original Ren who did it, but still, she did do so, and she had the memories now. "And violets symbolize honesty, something you're fond of. Also, they're blue, too," she huffs, and this time Kisame looks surprised.

"You're naming the blade after me?" he asks, visibly very amused.

"Well, yeah? I mean, you helped me choose it, and now you're teaching me how to use it," Ren holds the blade up, letting the sun reflect in the pale metal, giving it a golden halo. "It seems only right to do that. Why?"

"No one has ever named anything after me, you know," Kisame sighs. "Let alone someone from another village."

"You're welcome," Ren snorts, "besides, you're amazing. Your fellow villagers are fucking blind if they fail to see that."

Kisame looks thoughtful, assessing Ren as if to make sure she is actually being honest. But Ren knows that Kisame isn't entirely human, if only for the fact that he can just feel someone lying or evading the truth. But Ren's heart doesn't skip a bit, she doesn't start sweating, and she most definitely does not stutter. She looks him straight in the eye, hands crossed on her chest and doesn't even twitch her fingers.

Ren knows how to tell when people lie. Even if she can't hear a change in heartbeat, she can see any odd behaviors that indicate dishonesty. And that, aside from being completely certain of her words, is how she knows that Kisame is looking at her in vain. She's being perfectly sincere with him.

(Why wouldn't she be? He's awesome!)

"Are all Uchiha so weird, or is it just you?" he asks after a moment, offering her a toothy smile.

"Of the Uchihas? Right now only me, but I'm converting my precious little cousin to the only true way of being awesome," she chuckles. "Besides, Konoha is a madhouse as it is, even without the clan. Every shinobi who makes it past chūnin has quirks. One dude, for example, runs around wearing only a tight, green, spandex suit."

"No," Kisame blanches at that, eyeing Ren as if she's lying. She's not, and he grows even paler.

"Yes," she counters. "He's our local taijutsu nutjob. And you know what? He's good. I actually
asked him to train me a bit after I get back home, and I'm already regretting it."

"What, he might dress you in green spandex, too?" Kisame snorts, but Ren shoots him a very pointed look that screamed 'yes, he might' that shuts him up and renders his skin, only just returned to original hue, a few shades of blue paler once again.

"Are you talking about Might Guy?" Hana asks suddenly, looking up from her scroll. It's sudden enough to startle Ren into yelping.

"Fucking Jashin, don't do that," she gasps, but the Inuzuka only flashes her a grin. "But yes, I've been talking about Guy, why?"

"The power of youth," Hana wiggles her eyebrows, and Ren groans. Of course she would know Guy. Who the hell from Konoha doesn't?

"Don't, or I'm going to tickle you," she mutters, hiding her face in her hands. "I did it only to piss Kakashi off!"

"So, your spite finally came back to bite you in the ass?" Hana chuckles, and her question doesn't exactly sound like a question. "I heard he does fifty laps around the village walls. Every day. On his hands."

"He sounds very… interesting," Kisame ventures, which makes Ren grimace and Hana start to laugh so hard she falls off her stone and topples right into Ren's lap. The Uchiha mercilessly exploits their situation and starts tickling her, making the Inuzuka laugh even harder.

Ren herself regrets every single choice she'd made in her life so far. Except maybe asking Kisame to tutor her. He is patient, has a sense of humor, and knows what he is doing and where he wants to go with it. Thank fuck. Ren is nowhere near a kenjutsu master, but she is decent for a beginner. She still needs to hone her skills quite a bit, but if she keeps it up, she might actually get good enough to be called a swordsman. Or a swordswoman? She doesn't really know which, but it doesn't matter for now.

(Shit.

Maybe she really should start actively trying to get out of harm's way. She wouldn't like it if Hana got hurt either.)

Time is a bitch, that much Ren can deduct. Because before she even realizes it, the Exams are suddenly tomorrow. And so, she lays in her bed in the hotel and decides, fuck that, I'm taking a day off. She's been working her butt off for the past three weeks and she is now pretty confident of her wobbly swordsmanship.

What amuses her are the matchups. Her first fight is with the Kiri Generic Bitchface that Zabuza tried to get Kisame to train, apparently. But what really cracks her up is the fact that, if she and Hibiki both win their matches, they would face one another. Hibiki himself is very unamused by the discovery. Especially given that the Taki chick he is to face doesn't seem to be anything special, so he has a chance. It is up to him whether he would take it, though.

Deidara and Chōjūrō would meet in the second round because Ren has no delusions – the Suna kid
has his puppets, but Deidara is a vicious little terrorist, and the meek Random Konoha Brat has no real chance against Chōjūrō. She kind of pities the kid, too. But what she is getting at is the fact that, even if she makes it to the third round, she's fucked.

Because, honestly, Deidara with his distance attacks is no better than Chōjūrō with his suiton, which is more than capable of countering her katon. Not to mention his swordsmanship-

Okay, logically thinking, she actually would have better chances against Deidara if it comes to that.

Either way – fuck.

"Are you stressed?" Hana asks in the morning as they walk towards the arena. Ren is muttering under her breath and seems to be counting on her fingers, gazing around absently from time to time. It's honestly quite scary, given Ren's usual 'fuck it all' attitude.

"I'm plotting," Ren mutters, and even Awai, tucked in her pocket, seems fed up with the fidgeting. Hana honestly had no idea spiders could frown.

"And what are you plotting?" Hibiki asks off-handedly. Hana is convinced that his coping mechanism – which is basically forgetting the problem exists until it slaps him in the face – is quite stupid.

"How to win the exams, duh" Ren rolls her eyes. "Kiri Bitchface might be a problem, but if Hibiki tries and passes, then round two will be a breeze-"

"Gee, thanks," the Hyūga huffs.

"The real deal is the final round. It'll either be Deidara or Chōjūrō," she whines, looking up. "So I'm either fucked or screwed."

"But that's the same thing," Hibiki says, looking at his teammate, who glares at him.

"That's the point, Hyūga," she growls. "That's the fucking point. I'm going to die."

"If you die, I'll kill you," Hana chirps, earning an exasperated groan from Ren.

"That doesn't even make sense!"

There's a lot of people on the rafters, and if Ren is to be perfectly honest, she would say she's quite unnerved. She can't help but feel like a gladiator in the ancient Roman Coliseum, going up to fight and kill mindlessly to appease the masses. So, yeah, Ren is very unhappy about her situation because, frankly, that is precisely what is happening.

Not to mention that it stands against everything that ninja are about.

She kind of wishes she could attack the audience instead, actually. They are completely unessential, and highly irritating with their constant buzzing.

"Nervous?" Hibiki asks as they make their way to the terrace meant for participants and whoever else is allowed to be there.

"More like immensely annoyed," she retorts absently.

"Scared?" someone sneers to Ren's right side, and yes, when she turns around she's faced with the
Kiri brat she's supposed to fight. But she's better than that. So, rather than answering him, she shoots him the most pitying look she can muster and just shrugs before walking past him. And, because actions speak louder than words, he growls, grabs the back of her shirt, and tries to pull her back – only to be apprehended by the ninja staff nearly instantly.

Ren only shoots him a smug smirk. She is aggressive herself, yes, but she isn't stupid. And her opponent, with his brash behavior, has already lost favor points – ninja must after all, know how to keep their tempers and emotions in check. Not always, of course, but when it matters. And Ren be damned if she had survived her manipulative, fanatic grandmother just to fail to realize when the situation matters.

And now? Now she is out for blood.

(And, hopefully, a rank-up.)
"If you can't go back to your mother's womb, you'd better learn to be a good fighter."
— Anchee Min, Red Azalea

It's the last five minutes before the first match, and Ren's thinking so hard that she's pretty sure there's steam coming out of her ears. Given that Uchiha body temperatures are higher than the person's to further their clan affinity for burning things and setting the world on fire, Ren wouldn't be surprised if that is actually true. The thing is, the more she thinks about it, the more her 'do not do' list grows.

First off, she needs to hold back as much as possible if she wants to have any chance at all in the last round, if she gets there – and the Kiri Bitchface she will go against first is actually the only one she really doesn't know anything about, except the obvious: he's most likely a suiton user, probably good with blades (he carries an actual katana, for crying out loud) and definitely hates her. So Ren can rule out using her own tantō on him. She might try scorching him a bit with Gōkakyū, try to read him with her Sharingan, and maybe, just maybe, get him with taijutsu.

What she, under any circumstances must not do, however, is use Mangekyō Sharingan. It's a technique that's not even known around Konoha, let alone the world. Outside of the Uchiha, actually, only Kakashi knows, because he has it himself and, even if it really, really pissed off the clan, the Hokage pressed them to lend him some scrolls. Or that's what Ren heard, anyway. Other than that, Ren doesn't know who else might know. Her team doesn't – Hana would be mad at her for having such an irresponsible power, whether it makes sense or not, so Ren would rather not tell her too much about it, preferably at all.

Ren also can't use any flashy jutsu, not until the last round anyway. She does have a lot of chakra for a kid her age, and that might also be because she's mentally much older – her spiritual chakra is her main source, actually – but she can't go very far on B-Rank jutsu. Actually, she knows only one, which Shibi most likely regrets teaching her, but still. She doesn't have that much chakra. She's not a bloody Uzumaki, alright, and for her current reserves B-Ranks can be really taxing.

"First match!" the proctor suddenly yells. Just another nameless Iwa nin, honestly, in the red and brown uniform. "Uchiha Ren versus Shimizu Hyosuke!"

Ah, so that's what Generic Kiri Bitchface's name is. Not that Ren cares, the chances of the two of them meeting ever again are zilch. It doesn't matter, she shouldn't underestimate him, no. He is from Kiri, and that alone makes him dangerous – Ren honestly has no idea how the hell the timeline actually works in Narutoverse now that she is here and world is supposed to make actual sense, at least in terms of placement of events in time. Zabuza has long since graduated, though, so maybe they have already slightly mellowed out.

With a sigh, Ren heaves herself over the railing around the balcony and allows herself to fall freely a good fifty feet down, only to coat her legs with chakra, easily landing in a crouch without any danger of breaking or straining them. There's a spring to her step as she makes it over to the proctor with an almost serene smile to match her opponent's sneer. She knows what she needs to do; for once, she has to not be the hothead that Ren is. She must go back to being the cold, calculative Renee, pushing people's buttons like it's her life's calling, causing them to trip and fall. And then, only then, she will strike. Or, if something happens and he pisses her off. That's a possibility, too – but Bitchface is the only opponent she actually doesn't know much about, and that makes him perhaps the most difficult one.
"Stop smiling, bitch," he sneers, and Ren scoffs before she can stop herself.

"Wow, rude," she says right back at him, but otherwise appears unaffected.

"The rules are simple," the proctor cuts in, complete disregard of the genin's bickering so blatant in his voice that it makes Ren wonder if maybe he's an Academy instructor. Not to mention Kiri Bitchface apparently takes offense at the proctor's tone, and Ren almost facepalms at him. "You fight until your opponent either surrenders or are unable to fight any further. After the fight the winner will receive basic medical attention and after the first four matches are done, face against the winner of the second match. Understood?"

"Yessir," Ren says clearly while Bitchface growls something under his breath.

"Good," the proctor glares at the boy. "Now turn away, take ten steps back and start when I say. Go now."

Ren sighs, rakes a few moderately long strides back and turns around again. As she goes, she stops forcing her body to relax, and allows her muscles to tense in anticipation. She lowers her point of balance, bending forward on half-crouched legs and feels Awai crawl from under her kimono and latch to the back of her neck where he's relatively safe and easy to reach. And like a mantra, Ren repeats a litany of names.

Sasuke, Hana, Naruto, Shibi, Kakashi, Kisame. To name a few, that is, among those she intends to do proud.

She feels more than she hears the proctor's loud "GO!" as she leaps across the distance towards her opponent. They clash halfway through, followed by churned up dust and an exchange of hits that Ren has to avoid thinking about in order to keep up. She naturally pulls out the best of all the katas she knows, but she wouldn't be Ren if that's all she does. So, when her opponent – clearly older than her, she'd never paid any attention before but he must be at least fifteen – manages to overpower her with his sheer size rather than speed and strength, she, of course, switches. He shouts out in surprise when Ren's shin suddenly connects with his ribs in a textbook roundhouse kick, then falls back under the rain of jabs, crosses and hooks with few additional roundhouses, all executed with merciless strength, speed and precision.

Because taijutsu being taijutsu, Ren learned kick-boxing first and has always been fond of the style that tended to save her ass when shit went down, be it at work or through some bad luck.

(It didn't, of course, work when being stabbed from behind with a katana, but she finds it hard to mind that one slip, especially when it led her to where she is now.)

Ren doesn't notice the shine of metal until it's right by her face, and even then she's too focused on raining her fists down at her opponent to wonder how he had managed it. She slips under the blade – an ordinary kunai, really – and it only scores some of her hair and a scratch on her cheek that doesn't even bleed. Before he can make another swipe at her, Ren jumps up and spins in the air, using the momentum to try to give him a good kick to the face. He manages to duck under it, but Ren lands on her palms, pushes herself up while bringing both her knees to her chest and then kicks, as hard as she can. Her opponent flies back with a grunt, but doesn't land on his back as she had hoped. Instead he rolls in the air and still manages to land in a crouch from which he instantly springs at her, kunai in hands.

Ren dodges all those thrown at her except for one, which she manages to catch and hurl back at him, but he can apparently dodge, too, and quite well at that. He still has two kunai in his hands, so Ren falls back when he reaches her and slashes nothing but the air where her neck had been moments
ago. Bloodthirsty motherfucker, this one.

Ren tries a roundhouse kick once again, which connects—with her opponent's palm as, much to her horror, he catches her leg and slashes again at her head, while she can't run. She can feel her spine screaming as she bends so that he slashes her face, not her carotid artery, and for a second all she sees is red, and all she feels is scorching pain. Thinking is not easy that moment, because he had slashed her nose, and even if he only scratched the bone, there will be blood in her respiratory system if she breathes again through her nose. A cut from the second kunai hits the right side of her nose and it hurts even more than the other one.

Ren cries out in pain, rather involuntarily, before grabbing her opponent's hand before he can strike again.

"What now, Konoha softie?" he taunts. "Your village is pathetic—"

He doesn't finish, because Ren headbutts him square in the nose, black eyes bleeding into red before she even makes the decision to use the Sharingan, and she really, sincerely hopes he bites his tongue off. She manages to free her leg out of his grip and decides, well, fuck it, as she digs her heel, with all the force she can muster, right into his crotch. Her opponent bends with an outcry as he loses his hold on his kunai. Ren doesn't waste any time as she kicks him in the face. She's pretty sure she sends some teeth flying among the blood splatters.

"Let me show you," she growls, pinching her nose for a second, blood running from it all over her lips and chin and onto her clothes, as her Sharingan spins wildly, "just how soft Konoha is, you pathetic excuse for a shinobi." She executes another roundhouse kick, connecting her shin with his ear. He screams, the sound turning into a growl halfway through as he gets his hands on his dropped kunai, but Ren is quicker in unravelling ninja wire and wrapping it around his wrist and tugging, hard. He cries out again, when the wire cuts into his flesh and veins with how strong she pulls, and involuntarily lets go of the kunai when his hands stop working as they should have.

It's not the end, however. Even with his dominant hand out of commission, he is still angry and not in the mood to be defeated by someone like Ren—younger and from a hated village. He fights through the pain, springs to his feet and kicks Ren in the stomach, and then in the ribs before she can tug the wire and throw him away with it. It's probably bit to the bone already, but she doesn't care, falling to her knees and wheezing. Her ribs are throbbing, overshadowing the pain from the hit to her stomach, and she's willing to bet at least one of them is broken. All that's left is praying they don't puncture a lung as she finishes this piece of shit.

She growls, springing to her feet as her opponent cuts off the wire connecting them but doesn't touch what's cut into his flesh. He reaches down to his pouch and unsheathes a tantō with his left hand. Ren takes a steadying breath before reaching for Sumire herself, as she locks her vision on her opponent, still making sure to remain wary of her surroundings. She's pretty confident that, with the Sharingan, she can take him on. After all, she has both hands, and his right is out of the equation. Ren takes another deep breath and charges.

Blades clash with sparks, but for Ren this is only a distraction; during the exchange she aims and stomps down on her opponent's foot with all the strength she can muster, then, using this momentary distraction, slashes across his inner forearm, making him gasp in surprise and let go of his blade. That's the opening Ren has been waiting for, with him disarmed and within immediate reach. She goes for the wire again as she puts Sumire's hilt between her teeth, and wraps the wire around his neck as she twirls under a rather pathetic excuse of a punch.

"Yield," she says, as she takes Sumire and sheathes it back. She growls, spits blood and remembers to breathe through her mouth. "Yield or I'll take your head off."
"As if I–"

He stops with a gasp when the wire around his neck tightens until it starts biting into the flesh.

"You have your larynx, two major arteries and spine in here. Even if I don't behead you, I can still kill you, or make you mute, or invalid. Your choice," and, as if to back her words, Ren tightens the wire a bit more. Her opponent knows better than to move, and for a while he glares at the girl standing behind him at an angle, as if waiting for his glare to kill her. It doesn't work, of course.

"I yield!" he spats as if the word is the worst curse in the world. Ren just walks back to the balcony, glad she didn't waste any chakra. She needs ninja wire. And Hana. But more Hana, actually, since she would like to breathe through her nose sometime soon. And have her ribs looked at. She doesn't want to go into another fight only to realize that her lungs are flooding with blood instead of air.

Hibiki looks at her contemplatively as she heaves herself over the railing again.

"If you chicken out and yield, I know where you live," she growls at him.

"I like myself not mauled by a crazy Uchiha, thank you very much," he scoffs at her. "You're a goddamn animal, you know that?"

"I'm a shinobi," she bites back. "If you wanted honor and fair fights, you should've become a samurai, because this – mauling each other in the name of practically nothing – is our reality. We kill, because that's what we have been taught to do. And only that. Except for kunoichi classes, that teaches girls how to be proper wives and mothers. That's why I ditched them."

Hibiki looks at her, then bites his lower lip and looks down at the arena again. There's wisdom in these words, wisdom that comes from life, not books, and so he repeats in his mind like a mantra: 'shinobi don't play fair.'

"Hana?"

"What? I'm busy patching up this idiot!"

"Can I borrow your weapon pouch?"

"I thought Hyūga don't do weapons?"

"Forgive the moron, Hana, he's just made a very important realization. One that might save his life one day."
Twenty-Eighth Thread

Chapter Summary

Hi, I'm back. My USB died, but I'm semi-alive and maybe even kicking.

“There are no ‘ifs’ in combat. When you win, you win, when you lose, you lose.”
— CLAMP, Tsubasa: RESERVoir CHRoNiCLE, Vol. 06

“I had no idea Konoha was capable of producing proper ninja, with how fluffy your policies are,” Kisame says, and Shibi isn’t even remotely surprised, to be perfectly honest. The Swordsman apprentice has spent the better part of the month with the girl, drilling the basics of swordplay into her head. And yes, Ren is a force of nature in both personality and talent. One that Kiri wouldn’t be shy to claim as their own if they could, kekkei genkai or no.

But…

“She’s also a hothead who rushes in and hardly thinks. Proper ninja or not, she will not get far if she continues thinking herself invincible. That’s one of the shortest routes into the grave I know,” Shibi answers, arms crossed, looking at the balcony where Hana is fussing over Ren, as usual. “Hana, however talented, is still merely an apprentice.”

Kisame hums thoughtfully.

“But she is working on Ren’s recklessness, isn’t she?” he says, looking over at the bickering pair. He watches with amusement as Ren furiously spits out some blood and barks out something that earns her a smack to the head and a glare. And then she actually puffs her cheeks, like the brat she is.

“I’m just glad to see that she can still be childish after what happened to her clan,” Shibi responds flatly. “That’s perhaps the reason, too – she survived what no one else did and now thinks herself invulnerable?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Kisame sighs, “but rather… she forgets herself. Forgets that she’s a shinobi in dangerous situations. And that she can get hurt. As if she lived in a different reality up until now or something. To be honest, many genin are like that, until they taste real danger. Assuming they survive, that is.”

“Speaking from experience?” Shibi asks, and Kisame can swear to god that he heard sass somewhere in there. Bastard.

“Maybe,” he grins instead. “Or maybe I was just surrounded by enough idiots growing up,” he finishes with a pointed look towards Zabuza.

Ren doesn’t even want to know how Hana was allowed to remain on the contestants’ balcony when even their teachers aren’t, not to mention teammates that didn’t pass the preliminaries. But then again,
Hana can be quite frightening when she wants to be, and if one of the ninja by the door flinching each time she looks at him is any indication, well.

Ren really, truly does not want to know.

She hisses, swatting away Hana’s hand and shaking her head. The Inuzuka huffs and rolls her eyes, but otherwise allows Ren to prod at the freshly patched wound on her nose. It’s by no means healed – Hana is good enough to try, but in the rush of training and everything, she hadn’t had enough time to actually go to the hospital and do an apprenticeship. So aside from bruises and small cuts, she hasn’t had much experience with healing.

“You’re an idiot, you know,” Hana grumbles at Ren, who snorts, only to hiss and press her fingers to the sides of her nose.

“Fucking fuck that bitch,” she growls, as her friend moves her hands to Ren’s chest, willing a green glow to bleed out of her palms. “I hope he never regains full mobility in his hand, that motherfucker,” Ren groans instead, and Hana sighs heavily, but with relief.

“None of your ribs were broken, but some are pretty badly bruised. If you strain yourself in the next few fights – and knowing you, you will – some of them will most likely break,” she explains. “Now, if you feel sharp pain in your chest area, experience any difficulty breathing and possibly spit blood, I want you to forfeit because that most likely means one of your ribs has punctured a lung. Are we clear?”

“Like hell I will,” Ren grumbles. “Not if I can win, I won’t. Now, I want to see how Hibiki does, let’s go.”

Hana just groans and swats her head with an exasperated, but fond “you bloody moron.”

Turns out the Taki chick is pretty pathetic, to be perfectly honest. And the only comparatively worse match she could find among the competitors would be Ren herself. The reason? Simple – she is a genjutsu type, and the Byakugan is a dōjutsu that could easily spot signs of genjutsu, especially if it’s a lower-level illusion.

The fight went like this:

The Taki chick set a genjutsu, Hibiki dispelled it immediately after. She used it again, he dispelled it again. And so on for another three times until she finally understood that genjutsu isn’t going to help her here. So she resorted to other methods. Namely taijutsu. Against a Hyūga. Unsurprisingly, a Jūken later Hibiki was named the winner as he glanced rather nervously at a grinning Ren.

Victory is one thing. The idea of facing Ren on the field in his next match? That is straight-up terrifying. He saw what she did to that guy from Kiri, he really doesn’t need to experience it firsthand.

Doesn’t mean he is going down without a fight, of course.

“Why are we taking a break?” Ren complains, tapping her foot impatiently while leaning her back on the railing.
“It’s just how it goes,” Deidara chimes in, hopping up and over the metal fence separating their balconies. “There’s a twenty minute break between each set of fights, to put the competitors on the same page, un. This is not a real battlefield, it’s a tournament that sees how ready we are to go onto the real field. Can’t go in ragged and tired, un.”

“How do you know all these things?” Hibiki asks around the rice ball he’s been nibbling on. Eating something is a good idea, but it can’t be too heavy. However, between eating rice and eating nothing, Ren opts for eating nothing. She doesn’t want to eat while fighting a gag reflex with every bite, and eating rice would cause just that.

“My team and I are apprenticed directly under the Tsuchikage,” he says, and then scoffs. “That’s about the only perk to being in a team with his grandkids. They’re impossible and rude. Brats!”

“Look who’s talking,” Hana mutters, but Deidara ignores the remark.

“Thanks for beating Kurotsuchi though, un. Satisfying,” the blond says with a smirk.

“So I’ve been told,” Ren snorts. “Many times. By you.”

Deidara only scoffs, puffing his cheeks in a way reminiscent of another blond ball of energy. Ren sighs and shakes her head, looking to the sky as a sudden wave of nostalgia hits her out of the blue. Had someone told her she would start feeling nostalgic in the middle of the last stage of the Chūnin Exam, she would punch that person in the face. Repeatedly.

But here she is, sad, miserable (ha ha), and missing a bunch of children.

Goddamnit.

Twenty minutes after the announcement of the break Chōjūrō is already in the arena along with some generic, unremarkable Konoha genin, with generic brown hair and black eyes. To be honest, Konoha is the most mundane when it comes to the appearances of its citizens, unlike Kiri’s blue, green and white hair, Suna’s redheads, Kumo’s white and blond hair on dark skin or even Taki’s green hair. Actually, the Taki Chick Hibiki faced and her teammates all had hair in varying shades of green. Enter Uchiha Ren, with generic dull black eyes and unruly, shaggy black hair that makes her feel like some skewed version of Harry Potter.

Ren sighs, ruffling her hair and leaning against the railing. Her bet is on Deidara making it to the finals, but who knows. She’d much rather keep herself informed just in case.

As much as neither of the participants is anywhere near as strong as to be able to stand against a seasoned chūnin, the Konoha genin actually doesn’t seem like a pushover. It might have come from the fact that he is too massive to be a preteen, and Ren is sure he is actually in his late teens. So, yeah.

And then there is Chōjūrō, thin and scrawny and in the middle of growth spurt- but also silent, focused, and wickedly fast, not to mention his skill with the blade. In all honesty, Ren has some doubts that she would ever reach that level herself, even if Chōjūrō is still only a genin. But you don’t become one of the Seven Swordsmen for nothing, do you? Also, even with his awkward gangliness, Chōjūrō is still fast and horrifyingly in control of his body. Ren’s fighting style, compared to the boy, feels… crude, for lack of a better word. Crude, aggressive, brutal. Nothing of the fluid, almost elven motions the Kiri genin is currently going through with ease.
Also, cutting the tendons in the knees of his opponent? That was smart and effectively put his opponent out of commission.

Beside Ren, Deidara, who can’t be bothered with returning to his balcony, bites his lip with a hiss.

“Problem?” Ren asks, eyeing the smaller boy.

“Not really, but if I let him get close, I’m as good as done,” he mutters.

“Ooh, finally getting scared of the competition?” Ren chuckles, but instead of flaring red, Deidara looks at her and smirks.

“Out of all the lot that’s gathered here for the Exams, only you and that Kiri kid down there are interesting, un,” he shrugs.

“Ooh, so I’m not interesting?” Hana purrs from behind them and Deidara jumps up with a squawk. Given that he’s a ninja, he jumps rather high. Given it was sudden and he was absolutely not prepared, Ren gives him some leeway due to lack of experience and catches the boy midair. She doesn’t know if it’s her magical ninja-enhanced strength or something, but holding Deidara up at the moment is comparable to holding a housecat.

“Hi,” she said smugly, and Deidara let out a whistling breath through his clenched teeth.

“No, you aren’t interesting, un,” the blond says to Hana, apparently deeming that his spot in the arms of her best friend is the safest he’ll get from her. “You’re just weird.”

“And scary,” Ren adds with a smile, leading Deidara to curse at her and huff. She sets him down then and pats on the head with a smile. “Off you go, Dei. Your turn.”

“Time to show the bastard true art,” he grins like the maniac he most certainly already is. “Besides, dolls? Who the hell plays with dolls at that age?” he scoffs, and Ren has to stop herself from cackling out maniacally, because she’s suddenly seeing a flashback of every interaction that he has with Sasori in the-future-that-hopefully-won’t-be-because-fuck-Kishimoto.

Deidara does exactly as he said in regards to showing his opponent, a puppeteer from Suna, what ‘true art’ is. Well, in Deidara’s understanding. Ren is more into art that translated into fancy and tasty dishes.

(Things like these happen when you’re living alone in a flat during the third decade of your life, bored out of your mind outside of work because even the fauna and flora in the Sahara are more lush and lively than your social life.

That, and she really likes to eat, so she learned to cook and make it fancy. And, to be perfectly honest, she’s kind of longing for a kitchen of her own. She’s hoping that Genma will take care of it and she’ll come to a stocked pantry and full-equipped kitchen.)

Other than her musings, Ren is also reassured in her standing that Deidara is a little monster in the making, and a driven one at that. The Suna genin isn’t the most experienced, his only real advantage being his puppets and poisons – but for them to take effect, he has to actually cut Deidara. And the blond had blown up his puppet before that could happen, then glued his clay all over the other boy, threatening to blow up his opponent. When the other refused to yield, he actually detonated some of it, causing his opponent a scorching, ugly-looking wound reaching from his neck to about past the
With Deidara named as the victor, another twenty-minute pause is called.

Hibiki seems quite dazed at the fact that he is part of the four that have advanced to the semi-finals. He knows there is little chance of him advancing further – he only ‘got his shit together’, as Ren would say, not too long ago. And she’s been training herself ragged for gods know how long. Since the Massacre at the very least, but she was at the top of her class long before that.

Ren is calm. It is all she can do right now, letting the rest play out. In twenty minutes she would face Hibiki – a formality, to be honest, she is lucky that he was lucky to get to this point – and then, it’s up to fate.

Whoever wins the round after hers – be it Chōjūrō or Deidara – she is equally fucked against either prodigy with only her determination and aggressive strength, and lacking in areas that are exactly their specializations.

It isn’t going to be easy, but she’ll be damned if she goes down without a fight.
"You're not obligated to win. You're obligated to keep trying. To the best you can do everyday."

— Jason Mraz

Ren takes a deep breath and clenches her fists slightly. She's been fighting to stop herself from touching the itching, still slightly open wound on her nose. Fortunately, Hana, ever prepared, had sealed it from all the dust of Iwa with a bit of cloth after flushing it with some liquids – peroxide and... herbs? So, there's that.

Aside from her itchy nose, she was also starting to get anxious. She is pretty confident that she can beat Hibiki – she has been doing so ever since she woke up and was allowed to attend the Academy, really, even when he went at her with Jūken. It's the actual weight of the final match that has started taking its toll on her. Regardless of who she gets matched with, she's pretty much screwed. Her only hope is that they would still be worn out from their previous match.

When the proctor signals the end of the break, she sighs and looks at the rapidly paling Hyūga. Honestly, she'd never thought he could get paler than his clan's usual complexion, but, well. You learn something new every day.

"Good luck," she smirks before jumping off the railing.

"Fifth match!" the proctor yells as they take their places, "Uchiha Ren versus Hyūga Hibiki. Same rules apply as before – fight until the other party yields or is incapable of continuing the fight. Turn away and take ten steps."

Ren turns and does just that, then turns again and looks at her teammate, who is visibly trying to put on a brave face. However, as much as Ren likes to joke about his limited mentality, he knows full well that this, unlike Academy scuffles or training with Shibi, is a real fight. Ren had, after all, pretty much effectively cut off her opponent's hand – and would have decapitated him, or at least severely injured him, if he hadn't chosen to yield.

"Begin!" the proctor says, loud and sharp, and Ren bolts forward instantly, Sharingan spinning wildly. The only thing she has to truly look out for are Hyūga clan techniques, due to their destructive power and little to no field to counter them. She's pretty sure that, if she's actually hit with a Jūken, she would have problems winning this one, and doesn't even want to think about what would happen in the next round.

That, and his ability to block Tenketsu separately even when not using Jūken. He'd never done this before, but-

Okay, Ren had not expected him to actually throw kunai at her. She is glad to see that he's taking all this seriously, but he should know better – between him, who never really used ninja equipment aside from mandatory Academy training (fucking Hyūga traditionalists) and Ren, who'd grown up using them, well.

Dodging two, she grabs the third and, involuntarily pushing chakra into the metal, jumps up and spins above him, hurling the blade with all her might at his back, where she knows the Byakugan weak point is. However, he manages to jump away as the blade knicks his sleeve before imbedding
itself into the ground. Deep. Ren blinks at it while landing, and while she did push chakra into it, hers is fire natured, so she would expect it to scorch the clothing, and not-

And not act as if it were wind chakra. Huh. If that was actually wind chakra, and not her mind making stuff up, then, well. Having a secondary nature would probably be pretty useful. That is, when she actually has the time to think about it.

She ducks under a punch and brings her own fist to strike him in the jaw. He sees it coming – that mean uppercut is one of Ren's favorite moves, after all – and moves to the side, thinking himself safe. And that's exactly when Ren decides to provide further proof that she was right to cut her hair up to her neck.

She grabs a fistful of his hair – long, in a low ponytail, because Hyūga are vain above all, even their clan techniques, fucking ninja elves – and tugs hard, spinning him around. Hibiki cries out in pain and surprise and tries to reach behind him to grab her hand. However, the attempt backfires as Ren tugs his hair even harder and grabs his hand, pulling it back hard. Hibiki bites his lip, nearly choking on a scream, and takes a deep breath. With his free hand, he reaches into Hana's pouch, now strapped to his back, and grabs a handful of shuriken. He then hurls them at Ren, forcing the Uchiha to let go in order to jump away, surprise evident on her face.

Hibiki is actually learning. Looking past his clan techniques at real shinobi life.

Ren is actually kinda proud.

It doesn't last long, though. Ren reaches into her pouch with a rather menacing glint in her eyes that has Hibiki going pale as chalk instantly. It might also be her slightly (very) maniac grin, as her fingers curl around a ball of ninja wire. Hooking it around her pinky, Ren takes six shuriken and hurls them at the boy in two waves. In the moment it takes him to dodge them, she uncurls the wire and suddenly, he finds himself with it looped around his neck, already tightening.

"Shit," he grumbles, shooting Ren a glare as she shrugs. The boy only sighs, raises his hand and says; "I yield, I like my neck the way it is thank you very much. But I'm getting back at you for the hair!"

"Should've cut them," Ren shrugs, re-curling the wire as if it were yarn, "like I did."

"I'm not barbaric!" he huffs, and Ren snorts even as the proctor, rolling his eyes at their antics, declares her the winner.

"And I'm not fucking stupid," she grins at the Hyūga, who lets out an indignant squawk.

Pitting a long range fighter against one specialized in melee is bound to turn up interesting results. So it's not that surprising when the fight between Deidara and Chōjūrō quickly devolves into a game of tag, featuring explosives and a very sharp sword. Ren watches with amusement as Chōjūrō chases Deidara around with his sword and Deidara does his damned best to keep a good distance between them. As he apparently is not yet able to use his clay as a means of transportation, this involves a lot of running – and very loud cursing.

Of course, Chōjūrō finally gets fed up with it and starts using actual jutsu – which Ren knows he's been restraining from. Since there is no convenient source of water lying around, he would have to make his own with chakra, which is very chakra extensive.

And it is then that she realizes it. Deidara has an overwhelming advantage in this fight. Sure, he would go down easily if Chōjūrō gets in a good slash, but the blond is proving that to be nigh
impossible. And he can counter any taxing water jutsu with his clay fairly easily. Deidara would win, Ren decides. He would either manage to tire out Chōjūrō, or actually get him with his explosives.

In any case, between bad and bad, Ren is royally screwed. Her statement is only further proven right when Chōjūrō falls down onto his knees, panting heavily, and angrily strikes the ground with his fist. And Deidara, being the mean little shit he is, detonates a clay spider in his face, the impact not meant to injure but to effectively knock out the swordsman.

"Fuck," Ren said resolutely, "fuckitty fucking fuck."

"Is that even a word?" Hana asks blandly, unimpressed, as the proctor declares Deidara the winner.

"Dunno, don't care, I'm fucking screwed," Ren sings, her demeanor changing instant as she whines, "that little monster is going to obliterate me."

Hana just huffs, rolling her eyes, and slaps the back of Ren's head, "you're clever, crafty, driven, and aggressive, you can do it," she said.

"And barbaric!" Hibiki pipes in, his arm, dislocated during his fight with Ren, already wrapped up in a sling. "If anything you can just charge in and bite his head off. We all know you're capable of it!"

"But I like the brat," Ren scoffs, rolling her eyes, "so, I would prefer to go with a painful, non-lethal route. I already know it's going to be painful for me."

"I, for one, am looking forward to seeing you get owned for once," Hibiki adds smugly and only barely ducks under the fist thrown at him. Instead, it hits the wall he's been leaning on, making a deep crack in it. "That could've cracked my skull!" he whines.

"It was supposed to, but you just had to dodge," Ren huffs.

Some twenty-odd minutes later, Ren stands opposite mini-Deidara, glancing heavenwards in search of guidance. In her past life, she was a proper citizen, and yes, she did wish a most horrible death onto her family nearly every day, but they deserved it! Thus, she really has no idea what she did to deserve to be here – about to fight a boy who would soon grow into a teenager powerful enough to be considered for the bloody fucking Akatsuki. The same Akatsuki that would house a Rinnegan user, bloody Orochimaru, and even a fucking immortal guy. So, yes, that says quite a bit about his power level, even if he's not quite at that point yet.

"Again, the same rules apply as before," the proctor drawls, "fight until the other party yields or is unable to continue fighting. Now, turn around and take ten steps back."

They do just that.

When a loud 'Go!' resounds, Ren immediately bolts, not giving Deidara a chance to get a lock on her, fingers already forming seals as she goes. She quickly sends a flurry of shuriken wrapped in small fireballs at the boy, followed rapidly by two smaller versions of the Gōkakyū no Jutsu. Deidara responds in kind by sending hummingbird bombs that collide with each fireball and explode upon contact.

Ren doesn't stop moving. She knows she has good stamina, she always had, more inclined toward taijutsu than ninjutsu, even if due to her true age her spiritual chakra still overpowers her physical at a three-to-one ratio. The point is, she is bigger, stronger, faster, and can last longer. She can tire him out, if she uses her jutsu carefully and doesn't drop out due to chakra exhaustion. If she can make Deidara run out of clay – even better.
Her flee-and-shoot technique seems to irritate the boy; as much as she can't land a hit, neither can he, and thus, he's growing more impatient – more careless. Deidara's temper is something she can and will exploit mercilessly. But for that, she has to annoy him even more. It goes on for a while, this running around and shooting projectiles at one another.

Suddenly, Deidara crows triumphantly, and the next thing she knows, a barrage of clay bombs is suddenly rushing at her, and there is only one way she's getting out of this. She's risking a lot, but it's either this or get blown up. So, yeah.

"Katon: Karyūdan no Jutsu!" she yells and takes a deep breath, infusing the air entering her lungs with flaming-hot chakra, even as her injured ribs protest the movement. She lets out all the air in her lungs in a mighty breath of fire that transforms into a massive roaring dragon that curls around her, covering her entirely and shielding her from the bombs. Maybe it's a result of the lack of oxygen, or the beginning of chakra exhaustion, but Ren sways on her feet as the edge of her vision begins to darken and the massive chakra construct starts to fade. If she doesn't end this soon, she will be the one who gets ended.

To her satisfaction, Deidara sways, too, cursing audibly. Ren cracks a grin and launches herself at him, as the dragon dissolves into nothing but hot air. Before the boy can register what's happening, she punches him in the jaw. Deidara flies backwards with a yelp, landing on his back. He tries to rise, but fails to do so – apparently his final frontal assault with the bombs took too much from him.

And so did the dragon from Ren, she realizes, falling to her knees as her body refuses to move. Yet again she is reminded of how weak this body is, how little chakra it has. She can no longer move.

Neither can Daidara, as the proctor starts the count.

Ren groans as her hands give up and she falls face-first into the dirt with a general 'fuck it' attitude. Neither genin moves as the proctor counts to ten. Ren huffs despondently as he announces a draw. Her last thought before darkness fills her vision is that it's high time she passed out anyway.
Ren comes to with the weight of Awai on her forehead and the groggy feeling of mild chakra exhaustion that, with some luck, will go away within a day. She's laying on a bed that's too hard to be the one in their hotel, surrounded by a smell that can only be associated with Hospital. The room is silent, but she can hear chattering outside of it. And there was something lying on top of her (or, at least, on her stomach) while wrapped around her body.

Ren huffs, bringing one hand to rub her eyes, before opening them to scan the room. Her gaze soon falls on the cascade of gold covering pretty much all of her chest and stomach. She groans, rolling her eyes, and pokes the head with her finger a few times. Deidara only sighs and presses his face more firmly into her stomach. And as much as Ren doesn't mind being a pillow, right now she really doesn't feel like laying down and waiting for salvation (thy name is Hana) to come. She needs to know the results of the third part of the exam. The last thing she remembers is passing out.

"Deidara, wake up or I'll fucking throw you off the bed," she grumbles, gently rapping her knuckles on boy's head. That gets her a response – the boy raises his head abruptly, hair all over his face turning him into some bastardized version of Samara from Ring, and looks around. Finally he huffs, brushing the hair off his face, and looks at Ren. His gaze is sleepy and only semi-focused.

"What the fuck, un," he shares his sentiments with the world, and Ren rolls her eyes.

"That, too. The fuck are you doing in my bed?" she grumbles.

"They put us in the same room," the boy shrugs. "And you're comfortable to sleep on, un."

"Gee, thanks," Ren snorts, brushing her hand through her unruly mop of Uchiha hair. At least she had hers short, instead of the Madara-level mane, and still spiking out everywhere. By all means, gravity should bring hair of such length down, but when did Uchiha concern themselves with something so trivial?

"Ya' welcome, un," Deidara yawns, and lets his head drop onto her stomach again. Ren gasps and lets out a string of curses when he does that, because his head does weigh its share, and even if she does have some muscle lining starting to form, it's still not springy enough to be any kind of cushion between her organs and the outside world.

Deidara, the little shit he is, doesn't even move.

"What am I supposed to do now?" Ren huffs grumpily. "I don't have time for this shit."

"They should come in a bit, un," Deidara hums, wrapping his arm around her waist. Ren, used to Sasuke using her as his personal teddy bear, doesn't even bat an eye.

"Fine," she grumbles after a while, pressing her arm across her eyes. She's still tired, after all, and there's no better way to deal with chakra exhaustion than to simply sleep it off. And that's exactly what she's going to do.
When Hana walks into the room, it takes quite bit of effort on her part to not laugh. Because there is Ren, the aggressive, grumpy pyromaniac who always has a snide remark or three about how awful children are and how much she dislikes them, once again showing that she is, in fact, a child magnet.

It apparently applies not only to local Konoha kids, of whom Ren already has a mini army trailing behind her on every occasion, but others. Ninja from different – semi-hostile, in Iwa's case – villages being no exception.

"Don't you fucking dare," Ren growls sleepily, opening one eye and looking at her friend accusingly. "I know what you're fucking thinking, and don't you fucking dare."

Hana looks at Ren for a second and then snorts into her hand, biting it to stop herself from laughing out loud. And the glare Ren is sending her – while basically cuddling Deidara – is not helping at all.

"I love you, too," Hana manages in between poorly muffled snickers.

"He came here himself," Ren huffs, turning her head away.

"I believe you," Hana chuckles. "But he wouldn't have if he doesn't like you."

Ren only growls in answer.

"By the way, I came here to check on you," Hana says once she's calm enough to do so. "It's late evening now, so they will be announcing the chūnin promotions tomorrow. Since you made it to the very final round, it's a good bet that you'll get the vest. Shibi-sensei was actually very impressed and even surprised that you could strategize your fights and use the resources available instead of charging head-on."

"Wooo, me not wanting to kill myself, what a surprise indeed," Ren says, rolling her eyes.

Briefly, Hana wonders whether this is or isn't Ren's usual response to almost everything. That's a conversation for another day, though, she decides.

"His words, not mine," she says instead, shrugging nonchalantly. "But that thing you did with the dragon was pretty amazing. Didn't think you could use fire to shield so effectively, to be honest."

"Its form aside, that dragon was still my chakra," Ren huffs. "And I needed it to shield me, so it did, simple. By the way I think I might be secondary wind nature."

"Oooh!" Hana claps her hands. "Natural secondary natures are rare. I think Sharingan no Kakashi has natural secondary, but his are opposite, lightning and earth. You would have fire and wind, and wind tends to amplify fire techniques. That would be useful!"

"Would you two shut up?" Deidara grumbles, pressing his forehead to where Ren's ribs start. "People are trying to sleep here."

"No," Ren answers matter-of-factly. "If you want silence, find yourself another bed. This one is mine, and I will talk here as much and as loud as I want."

"Ugh, I hate you," he mutters grumpily. "So, so much, un."

"You sure do, pipsqueak." She huffs, and then looks at Hana. "So, tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"And then we're going home?"
"Uh-huh," Hana smiles, as Deidara makes some sort of incoherent but definitely unhappy sound.

"Can't you stay?" he mutters. "Iwa is awesome, un!"

"Nah," Ren waves her hand, "but if you ever want to defect to Konoha, just ask for me and I'll get you settled. It's not the best place in the world, but some people there are worth fighting for."

"Oh," he says, raising up on his elbow. "Okay. If I ever need a new village I'll go to Konoha then un."

"I knew you were smart."

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"Chōjūrō of Kiri, Deidara of Iwa, Uchiha Ren of Konoha. Step forward," the tiny Tsuchikage intones, floating before the group consisting of all the teams who had taken part in the Exams. Ren takes a deep breath and steps forward, just as Deidara and Chōjūrō do. "Follow me."

And so they walk after the man who might not look it, but is powerful enough to level entire cities on a whim. Nobody else follows – becoming a chūnin means you have no need for a team anymore, no need for a sensei. Thus, there's no need for their sensei to walk them there – it's something they must do alone. If you'd ask Ren, chūnin is actually the first stage of being ninja. Real missions, real danger, no more babying. Genin are trainees. It makes sense, actually – they'd technically left the Academy, but they aren't ninja yet, not truly. And Ren is leaving that period behind her already.

They reach the Tsuchikage's office, and the man floats behind the desk, with the three new chūnin standing before it. Ren looks at Deidara and sends him a thumbs-up, to which he responds with a grin. She nods at Chojuro, too, kind of salty about not having the chance to get to know him better. But then, she can't really befriend every prominent character of the show, yes?

(Doesn't mean she wouldn't try. Except for Itachi. Fuck Itachi.)

One of the ninja – the proctor of the fights – walks toward them with three vests. One blue, one red and one green. It would appear that each Jōnin had brought a stack of their own village's vests, many of which will be going back home in packs or sealing scrolls, and not on freshly-minted chūnin. Ren accepts hers, the green vest, with a sharp nod and throws it over her shoulders without a question as the others do the same with their own vests.

"You three are chūnin now," the Tsuchikage jumps straight into the matter at hand. "In Iwa, we value both your power and resourcefulness. You three are here today because you showed us exactly that – that you have power, and skills, and know how to use it all. Chōjūrō of the Mist, who in an alien and unforgiving terrain still managed to effectively use Water-based techniques, if a bit sparsely. Deidara of Iwa, who showed pure, raw power in an artistic way, and great control over the timing and placement of detonations. And Uchiha Ren, who, by strategically bidding her power, could use it all when needed. Congratulations, kids, you passed."

"Thanks, old man," Deidara grins, and the Tsuchikage rolls his eyes fondly. Well, it would appear the Hokage is not the only Kage who allows himself to like bratty, loud kids.

"Thank you, Tsuchikage-sama," Ren answers, almost perfectly in sync with Chōjūrō, bowing respectfully.

"Given that teams from other villages depart today and tomorrow's morning, enjoy your last day in Iwa. We don't get many visitors," the proctor says, looking at them.

"Gee, wonder why," Deidara huffs and ducks under the pen thrown at him by the Tsuchikage. Ren
only snorts and ushers the blonde outside, bowing respectfully in goodbye. And that's about all the respectfulness she's willing to show for a month.

"KISAAAAAMEEE!"

The deafening shout is Kisame's only warning before something crashes into him with enough power to make him stagger and wraps itself around his midsection like an octopus.

"Hey there," he laughs, grabbing a fistful of her brand-new green jacket and trying to tug her away. Which, of course, doesn't work. "Care to explain why you won't get off?"

"I just won't, duh," she rolls her eyes and smiles widely afterwards. "I wanted to thank you."

"What for?" Kisame asks, eyebrow raising. "You didn't even pull out your tantō during the fights. Not that I actually expected you to."

"I mean for training me in general. And for the moral support, rather than any of the actual skills I learned – which I promise to hone further!" she grins. "Thanks to you, Shibi-sensei could focus on Hibiki, and therefore the idiot had a bit more resolve than usual."

Kisame snorts, ruffling her already messy hair and finally managing to free himself from the surprisingly strong hold, and finally looks at her fully. Dressed in a dark, grayish purple turtleneck and black ninja pants underneath the vest, with her forehead protector tied around her hips right below where the vest ended, she looks like a mini-ninja. Well, given that in a few months her head would likely reach his shoulders if she kept growing, she isn't actually that small, but still.

"I'm all packed up, and I'm going to go hunting for souvenirs. I was thinking maybe you could come with me," she says with a grin. "And then we can go to a bar. I'm paying."

"To a bar? You?" Kisame asks, cocking his eyebrow, and Ren shrugs.

"If I'm old enough to kill people for money, then I'm old enough to have one beer a month, yeah?"

"Fair enough," the shark-nin chuckles, unable to argue with that logic. "Just don't spend too much time in other shops, if you could."

"I'll try. I have, like, ten kids and then some technically adult people to buy for?" she sighs. "Good thing I have some idea of what to buy them."

"I thought you'd have Hana tailing after you, honestly," he says after a short while.

"Nah, we decided to split. She has a few people to buy things for, too."

When they finally make it to one of shadier bars a few hours later, Ren is dragging a bag of everything with her and cursing at her stupid idea to go shopping. Meanwhile, Kisame is trying, and failing, to not laugh at her antics. She slumps onto the chair like it's godsend, and slams her forehead onto the table, breathing harshly.

"It wasn't my idea," Kisame says, clearly very amused.

"I hate my life," she growls. To be fair, though, she's actually pretty happy with her findings.

For Kakashi, she bought eight dog collar tags of various sizes, all in the shape of a bone. For Gai –
which she probably shouldn't have done, ever – an obnoxious orange tube scarf to match his leg-warmers. For Sakura, a medical scroll on treating post-explosion wounds, for Sasuke, a beginner-grade tantō Kisame helped her to choose, and for Naruto, a scroll on beginner sealing. She doesn't know what pushed her towards that one, but she thought it was worth a try.

For Kiba and Akamaru, she bought a dog whistle which she knew a dog could be trained to respond to in certain ways, for Hinata, a pretty set of hairclips and necklace with a yin-yang symbol, and for Shino, a book on insect species found in the Land of Earth. For Shikamaru, she got a pillow, and for Choji a book on Land of Earth cuisine.

For Genma, a packet of poison made out of components found only in the Land of Earth, along with its antidote, and a plain, dullish-green bandana to wear on off-days. For Hana, a gift that has more sentimental meaning than anything – a necklace, a simple circle cut in half, each half with a chain of its own. On one half there is the kanji '親', and on the other, '友'. Together it's read as 'shin'yū' – 'true friend'. If that isn't the perfect gift for Hana, then she doesn't know what is.

Oh, and also a basic shinobi tool kit for Hibiki, so he would give Hana's back to her.

"You don't hate your life, in fact, you look rather happy," Kisame chuckles, waving at the waitress. He asks for a normal, bitter beer – piss that Ren would never drink, honestly. Ren, meanwhile, orders something that's more like beer mixed with apple cider, according to the menu.

They sit in the bar, talking like old friends and sipping their drinks until the moon is high in the sky and Hana barges in to drag Ren off to sleep. She leaves with laughter, a twinge of sadness, and a promise to write, even though she doesn't have summons to carry messages. She hopes that she'll be able to meet him again before the fiasco with Fuguki and Kisame's taking of Samehada, but she doesn't expect much of her life at this point.

As long as he stays Kisame and is happy with his life, she won't mind. Even if he joins Akatsuki, because if there's anything she believes in, it's friendship that stands true no matter what you throw at it.

In the morning, they depart with final goodbyes, bone-crushing hugs, laughter, and some tears that Deidara will never, ever admit to.
Ren has been back in the village for a grand total of ten minutes.

She's going to murder somebody.

Preferably a dozen nameless civilian nobodies.

There is Kiba, lip split, Akamaru snarling from his position on top of his head, as much as a puppy can snarl, anyway. There's Sakura, on her knees with arms spread as she leans over Naruto, lying on the ground and completely motionless, trying to shield him from the stones being hurled at them. There is also Sasuke, sitting on the chest of one of the civilians, his tiny hands gripping the struggling man's neck. His eyes are red, like he's a demon from hell.

Coincidentally, red is the only thing Ren can see right about now. Her heartbeat is deafening in her ears, the adrenaline making her heart beat louder and faster. Had she not been this mad, she would perhaps worry about the pace alone reopening her healed wound.

But, she doesn't. They should worry.

She charges forward before anyone can make a move to intercept her, a blur of black, red, and green, with a splash of white from the white-red fan stitched onto one sleeve. She reaches the mob before they can blink, and launches herself at them without a word. Some might argue that they are defenseless civilians. That she shouldn't do it.

Frankly, for Ren, a ninja attacking a mob of civilians is very much equal to said mob attacking a group of children. All of whom she holds dear to her.

She leaps, a mess of claws and teeth, punches and kicks. Her goal: to cause as much pain as possible. Her strikes break bone. Chakra-hardened nails split skin. Her breath, transformed into fire, sears faces.

Absentmindedly, she notes that Hana is right next to her, for once in sync with her in her fury. The murderous look on her friend's face is enough to stop a lesser man. And they're all lesser men.

One tries to grab Ren's shoulder. She grips his hand instead, so hard she's certain she crushes his wrist, if the scream is anything to go by, and throws him over her shoulder, slamming the body into the ground. She's already at the next vermin by the time he hits the ground.
There are screams and cries, but she doesn't care. She doesn't even know for how long she's at it, until she blinks and suddenly she's kneeling in front of Sasuke, gently coaxing him out of murdering his victim. Sasuke looks at her, face unreadable, but when she smashes her heel onto the man's arm, eliciting an anguished scream, he seems content.

She doesn't care when ninja arrive, horrified by the sight before them. She swats away the hand someone tries to place on her arm, just now noticing Gai's shocked, paper-white face as he stares into her eyes, red and glowing and bleeding. She doesn't speak. She doesn't know if she can. She wants to murder those people, put their heads on the palisade around her house as a warning to all of Konoha's so-called civilians.

She doesn't. Somehow. But, for that short, little second, the shinobi gathered get glimpses of massacre, carnage, and blood. For a second there, they don't see Ren. They see a demon. A second coming of Itachi.

But that is dispersed instantly when she kneels by the tiny blond, taking his unmoving form into her arms as gently as one would a newborn. When she allows Sasuke to climb onto her back and whispers sweet nothings at him, maybe to soothe herself more than him. When she places an arm on Hana's shoulder, motions towards the general direction of the hospital, and helps Kiba onto his sister's back as she cradles the half-conscious Sakura to her chest.

Nobody stops them when they depart.

Hana doesn't comment on the ugly tears of rage rolling down Ren's cheeks. Her own throat is tightening, her hands trembling with such fury that she fears she might drop Sakura.

(What the two don't see is Genma and Kakashi, just back from a mission and still in ANBU attire, drawn to the site of the commotion before even getting to Headquarters to report. They don't see the cold rage burning in Kakashi's eyes, or the horrified, half-haunted expression on Genma's face.

One man nods at the other and they instantly change course for the hospital.

The report can wait.)

Aburame Shibi sighs heavily, turns, and resumes his walk towards Hokage Tower, although now with double the speed. Ren's advancement in rank is the only information he carries now.

"Ren…"

"Do be quiet, old man," Ren growls from between Hana and Genma with Sasuke on her lap. Kakashi is pacing along the entirety of the hallway. Kiba has latched onto his sister, the ugly bruise around his now mended lip standing out with its starkly purple hue. Somewhere down the hallway Mebuki is screeching one of the nurses into submission, Sakura hanging off her skirt like her life depended on it.

Hiruzen sighs heavily. He's too old for this, he decides, looking at them. They're sitting right next to the door to the operating room that Genma is watching like a hawk. Inside the room, a surgeon is helping the Kyuubi's chakra save Naruto's life and making sure his bones mend correctly.

"I just wanted to-

"I don't give half a shit what you want, old man," Ren growls, glaring at him. He can see the anger there, on her haunted face; desperation, fear, determination, sadness, and even more anger. "I had to threaten the fucking doctor to work on him. He said 'the demon would heal himself anyway'; except
the internal bleeding would've fucking killed him before that could've happened!" she snaps, pushing Sasuke, surprisingly gently, onto Genna's lap. The boy only sighs and snuggles into the tokujō's ANBU vest that he had no time to change out of. Ren herself stands up and starts pacing.

"I'm sorry," Hiruzen sighs sadly, rubbing the side of his head. This- this should not have happened. Not before, not now, not ever.

"Tell me old man," Ren says suddenly, gaze distant and unfocused as if she's looking at something nobody else can see. Her voice is calm. Eerily calm. But Hiruzen can't shake off the feeling of bitterness in it. "Tell me, how do you expect Naruto to care for this village if this keeps up? How do you expect him to fight for you, fight for this village – the village that hates him. That nearly killed him. How is he supposed to fight for people who hate him for no real reason, and have shown themselves capable of attacking his hard-won friends, too, if they side with him?"

Hiruzen doesn't say a word, but hearing Ren's stricken words, seeing her face warped in pain, her dazed eyes overflowing with tears she has no intention of stopping. Seeing this girl, who hardly reacted to having her entire world breaking down on her head, now cry so freely for this boy she has known for mere months-

"Sakura has bruises all over her from protecting him with her own body. Her ribs are broken, along with three of her fingers. Her left hipbone is severely bruised and the stone that hit her there was sharp and left a rather large wound," she starts counting on her fingers. "Kiba took a hit meant for Naruto. His lip is split, his jaw is broken, and he'll be getting surgery for that later today. Sasuke- for crying out loud, the Sharingan awakens under extreme stress and straining trauma! He awakened two tomoe's in one of his eyes!" she hisses, pulling at her hair. Her gaze turns to the door of the operating room.

"I'm truly sorry," Sarutobi Hiruzen, God of Shinobi and one of the mightiest shinobi of the Leaf looks down and closes his eyes, holding back the tears threatening to fall. He knows he has failed Naruto. Severely so.

"Don't apologize to me," Ren snaps sharply, eyes firmly locked on the door of the operating room. "Broken ribs, broken jaw, crushed wrist, dislocated hipbone, severe internal bleeding, punctured lung, nearly completely destroyed eye-"

Ren's breathing hitches as her hand comes up to cover her mouth and she shuts her eyes.

"If it weren't for the fox, he would have been dead," she growls. "Is this truly how the last Uzumaki is to live? How the son of your beloved Fourth is supposed to be treated?"

Hiruzen flinches. He hadn't expected her to know that. But then, two and two aren't that hard to put together if one decides to do so, and Ren is smart enough to connect the dots.

"He almost died," Genna says hoarsely. Hiruzen notices that he, too, looks haunted. He looked up to Minato like nobody else. Minato saved him, in a way, and after his death, Genna had nearly broken down. Being unable to care for the man's child had been another hard blow – especially as he watched all the neglect befalling the boy. Genna takes a deep breath, and says, "those responsible need to be punished."

"I believe Ren has already done so sufficiently-" Hiruzen tries, but Kakashi cut him off.

"Either you do it, or we do. And we won't be nice about it," the Hatake growls, pacing angrily back and forth in the hallway. "This has gone on for long enough, don't you think? What would Minato-sensei say if he'd seen how his son is treated? Kushina-san would have already murdered most of
Konoha's civilian population by now!"

That Hiruzen can't argue with. He had been convinced it was for the better, keeping Naruto's heritage from the people. That it would protect the boy from his parents' enemies. Instead, it brought upon him an even worse fate.

"I'm adopting him." He is startled out of his thoughts by the firmness of Ren's voice as she speaks up. She looks at the old man, as if daring him to continue. "I'll have the paperwork ready within a week, in the meanwhile I'll be transferring Naruto's things into my apartment. I trust it's done by now?"

"Sasuke and Naruto both were overseeing the renewal and furnishing process themselves," Genma says with a smile. It's still slightly bitter and crooked, but it's better, somehow.

"You realize that the council-"

"Can shut the fuck up and comply," Ren hisses angrily. "I will not have a band of old farts tell me what's best, when they clearly have no idea what the right thing to do is! The only thing they care for is their own personal gain – look at the fucking War Hawk, Shimura Danzo! That man doesn't care for the village! He cares only for his pride and power!"

"Ren, enough!" Hiruzen nearly shouts, but that only earns him a glare as the girl remains unmoved by the interruption.

"I'm royally pissed off right now, old man," she growls, nearly choking on the intensity of the words. "And yet I'm still thinking clearer than you. Naruto needs a home. Someone to care for him. Yes, I'm not even thirteen – but I am a shinobi, a chūnin already! I became adult as per the law of the country upon graduation, thus I'm well within my right to apply for guardianship over a minor! Which is exactly what I'm going to do!"

"Hokage-sama," Kakashi says, his voice on the verge of breaking, "hasn't Naruto suffered enough? Even if neither of us," he motions at himself and Genma, "can take him in, Ren had no relation with his parents and no law is preventing her from sharing her home with someone who should have been given one years ago. Please."

This isn't a battle Hiruzen can win. Nor is it one he wants to win. He has failed Naruto, but Ren hasn't. And she won't.

"Okay," he sighs, nodding. With newfound resolve, he looks up, feeling older than he already is, so suddenly reminded that he should not be here; that this is the place of someone so much younger than he. "Okay. You will be Naruto's legal guardian by the end of the week."

The Hokage leaves. But somehow, his heart feels lighter.

"I've heard," Sakura says a while later as she wobbles to where they sit, her leg visibly painful, wrapped tightly with bandages. Her hand is already in plaster, to keep her broken fingers in place. She eases herself down on one of the plastic chairs and looks at Mebuki, now arguing with one of the doctors. "They were saying that it will be the anniversary of the Kyuubi attack soon. And that they should finally rid themselves of his spawn. Is Naruto really that demon's spawn?" she whines, and Ren clenches her hand on the metal armrest of the chair so hard she bends it.

"No," she says. "But they are. They are the worst kind of monster possible."

Sakura nods. Then, after a moment: "I'm going to become a medic-nin, like Hana-san," her eyes
shine with determination, "so that if something like this ever happens, I can help more."

"Medic-nin can do more than heal," Hana chimes in off-handedly, smiling gently at the girl. "They can also severely damage tissue if they choose to reverse the process."

"Every medicine is a poison if you use the wrong amount," Ren adds, standing up. Before Sakura can answer, the doors to the operating room open and the surgeon strides out. Ren looks at him for a while, and then says, "Once they are named, charge the bill for all their surgeries from the accounts of the attackers. And add a twenty percent bonus."

"I have no right to do so," the surgeon scoffs, and Ren rolls her eyes.

"No, but I, as the main victim's guardian, demand satisfaction in the form of full coverage of all healthcare costs and monetary satisfaction," she scoffs, nose up high. "It may impoverish them for all I care – they should have thought of that before attacking defenseless children."

The surgeon looks away under the gaze of the ninja in the hallway, and sighs. "He should be waking soon. Due to his… condition, I don't expect any post-surgical issues. Now let me see what can be done with the young Inuzuka's jaw."

"Kiba said Mom will be back tomorrow," Hana says, squeezing Ren's palm as she follows her brother into another room. "I'll make sure she sides with you in ripping those lowlives apart."

"Thanks, you're the best," Ren smiles, if only barely, and turns to Genma, still holding a sleeping Sasuke. "Naruto should be okay enough to get him home, and I really don't trust the hospital staff, so let's do that, okay?"

"Yeah," Genma sighs, standing up. "Look, I'm sorry."

"You were away," Ren cuts in. "You couldn't have known they would attack while you were gone. Now come on, we need to get Naruto somewhere safe, okay?"

"Yeah."

"I'll wait for Haruno-san to be done and escort them home," Kakashi says. "Then… I'll meet you there?"

"Sure, Kacchan. Stay safe."

Ren hates civilians. She might not believe in any type of deity, but she sure prays they burn in hell. They can get the same cauldron as she will, for all she cares.
Chapter Summary

In a case anyone is interested in my (now, thankfully, resolved, because I finally decided to be the mature one and blocked the offender) 'Hate Mail Epopeia', it went like this; I got hate mail, stood up for myself, the hater started falling over themself to apologize, they repeatedly ignored me asking just WHICH story I criticized, I got annoyed, told them I'm annoyed and they suddenly went back to hating. Lol. If anyone is interested in drama of 16 Wattpad chat screenshots, during which offender also managed to chage their nickname, here you go;

sta.sh/2nie5o1jr47?edit=1

“For the two of us, home isn't a place. It is a person. And we are finally home.”
— Stephanie Perkins, Anna and the French Kiss

The apartment is nice. It’s dark, and feels a bit cramped, but is decidedly homey. It’s the first time Ren sets her foot inside, and she already feels something distinctly hers within these green walls and dark, wooden floors. This is so different from her first apartment – airy, bright and so unbearably cold – that her mother had oh so graciously bought for her. The one she’d raved so hard about after Renee almost immediately sold it and bought herself a new one, as far away as she could while still staying in the country.

This one is so new, shiny, and clean, and made her feel cozy nearly instantly, like a comfortable, warm, dry hole deep in the ground. A sanctuary of sorts.

At the entrance is a large space for placing shoes, big enough to fit a rather massive closet as well. There is a mini-hallway with a kitchen to the left, an open sitting room to the front, and some more hallway to the right, with two doors to the bedrooms and one to the bathroom, directly across from the kitchen. Ren is also pretty sure that the sitting room had a door once, but it definitely doesn’t now. And the only thing that actually divides it from kitchen now is a pillar and a row of counters.

The kitchen itself is green and silver on plain brown linoleum. The sitting room is a brighter green than the kitchen, with much more silver and grey. The sitting-dining room hybrid is composed of deep brown furniture, plain rugs in various shades of gray, and dark-green walls. The green is the same as in the kitchen, except much darker, and it makes for a very nice transition. The rugs aren’t fluffy, because that would be ridiculous to clean, and the couches are also covered in gray blankets. The wall in front of the entrance is all windows and balcony door, all with heavy brown curtains and pale green draperies.

Ren is glad her instructions had been kept, even if all she said to Genma was ‘make it feel like I’m in a cozy hole underground’.

Still holding Naruto in her arms, Ren sighs, toes her knee-high boots off with a little difficulty, and walks into the sitting room, sitting heavily onto the couch. She sets the boy down onto the couch next to her and sighs wearily. Sasuke, after removing his own shoes, climbs up the couch on the
other side and clings to her arm so hard it’s almost painful.

“Go,” she says to Genma hovering where the door should be and, Ren is sure, once actually was. “Take a shower. Calm down, okay? We’ll talk in a while.”

“Okay,” Genma says with small, sad smile and exits through the door. But before he closes it again, he turns, motions to her vest, and says, “Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Ren smiles weakly back.

And if Ren’s voice is weak and on the verge of breaking, he doesn’t comment.

Ren doesn’t cry.

It’s not that she doesn’t want to, or that she wants to keep up a façade of being tough. No, she wants to cry. She wants to scream her lungs out. Scream until her throat is sore and bleeding and her body can’t afford to waste any more liquid and the tears stop. Better yet, she wants to go out into the streets and burn the houses of each and every person who was a part of the mob that had attacked Naruto.

But she can’t. She can’t afford the luxury, not with Naruto still unconscious and half-lying on her. Sasuke is crying for two right now anyway, the spasms shaking his tiny body enough to jerk Ren’s, too.

She can’t cry. She has to stay strong for them. That’s the only thought stopping the tears from seeping from her glassy eyes. Instead, she opts for anger. She knows both emotions, but out of the two, anger is easier. Sadness– it makes her feel hopeless. Like there’s nothing she can do. Anger, though, is different. Anger makes her want to go and crush the skulls of the offenders with her bare hands. With that, she can deal much better, even if she won’t do it. She wants them to hurt. To hurt as much, if not more, as Naruto had when they harmed him. When they neglected and abused him. When they turned and attacked him.

The world isn’t fair, of course. Here, the strong eat the weak. They prey on them. And Ren has every intention of showing the civilians that nothing can save them from her wrath – and the wrath of all those who had ever cared for Naruto, but were never allowed to do so openly.

If she only had a way to get to Danzō, and enough power to end him.

Still, if she had jumped at the Hokage like she did at the hospital, with the backing he had to take into account, a change could be made. Forced through, to be honest, but Ren didn’t care. As long as it meant the kids would be safe and happy, she would happily go out and turn Konoha’s streets into rivers of blood-

Huh.

Was that the same mindset Itachi had, except for the village itself? Ren still hates him, though, because what he did was not for the betterment of anything at all, except perhaps Danzō’s ego. It’s different, because Ren knows that she is gradually becoming capable of anything and everything when it comes to protecting what she holds dear, and she knows that there are better ways than bloodshed. As much as she enjoys it, she also recognizes that there are better ways.

Itachi, apparently, was too stupid to do the same. Smart enough to become Hokage at seven? Yeah,
right. He wouldn’t have been smart enough had he been fifty, if he continues this way.

“Nee-san, what are you thinking about?” Sasuke sniffs, and Ren blinks before letting out a rattling breath. It takes her a while to get her emotions under control enough to not cry or lash out.

“Various things. Like how to creatively murder those civvies in a hundred and one ways,” she smiles, and then sighs once more. “But I won’t.”

“Why?” Sasuke asks, resigned.

“Because,” she taps his nose with her finger, “there are so many ways to make them suffer, to hurt them without even touching them that I’m not going to bother getting my hands dirty. Besides, if you kill a person you can’t torment them any further, and those civvies deserve Hell and then some.”

“Oh,” Sasuke answers, looking at her with those huge, red, child-like eyes. They’re still glossy and his cheeks are still wet.

“How is your Sharingan?” Ren asks instead, because that is important. A Sharingan going haywire, even its base form, can be particularly dangerous upon awakening, especially in young children who can’t properly control their chakra yet. And Sasuke, at six, might be the youngest Sharingan user in the history of the Uchiha clan. In times like these, Ren is actually grateful they’re all dead and can’t put their sticky, oppressive fingers on who undoubtedly would be considered a prodigy.

“It’s okay,” Sasuke murmurs, “I felt it almost activating when the doctor was being mean, but it didn’t.”

“Good,” Ren says, “At your age, keeping it on is very dangerous, because you don’t have much chakra. It will drain you very fast and then you’ll get very ill because of it. You will be able to use it easily in a few years, though, when you start to build up your chakra pool.”

“Did you ever get ill when you ran out of chakra?” Sasuke asks, and Ren sighs.

“Up until the chūnin exams, no,” she says. “But in past few weeks, twice. The second time was much more mild because I was more careful, but it still fucking sucked.”

“Were they hard?” the boy asks, eyes gleaming as he digs his fingers into Ren’s new jacket. “Did you meet someone cool? Did you bring us something?”

“Calm down, brat,” Ren chuckles, ruffling his hair. “I will tell you everything when we meet up with everyone after it calms down, okay? And I did bring presents. But, just between the two of us, you won’t believe it; I met a man with blue skin!”

“No way!” Sasuke squeals, nearly falling into her lap and, in the process, onto Naruto’s head. Thankfully Ren catches him in time.

“Way,” she chuckles. “His name is Kisame and he’s a Jōnin from Mist. He’s really cool and extremely skilled with a sword. He taught me some kenjutsu actually! Not much, but everyone starts somewhere, yeah?”

“He sounds awesome!”

“He really is.”
Naruto comes to with the feeling of something being just.. off. He was attacked by villagers for once. Not a rare occurrence, but they were worse than usual. The worst part is that Sasuke, Kiba, and Sakura-chan were there with him. Were hurt, too. Surely, they’re going to hate him now, for causing them so many problems. They’ll hate him, and he’ll be alone again.

He isn’t hurt. He heals fast, but not so fast that he wouldn’t be hurt. It’s weird.

Also, there’s something wrapped around him. It’s about his size, and it’s warm.

Naruto tries to move away from the heat, even if it pains him to do so. He needs to find out where he is. Maybe he will need to escape or something-

“Don’t move, dobe,” the warm mass behind him, now identified as Sasuke, mutters sleepily into his ear. Naruto, of course, freezes, because Sasuke only does that when he’s sleeping over, but why would he want to sleep over now? Surely, he finally realized that Naruto is a monster and that he should hate him? And once Ren-oneechan gets back, she will hate him, too-

“Oi, brats, get the fuck up, breakfast is ready,” Ren’s voice sounds from somewhere across the room. “I know it’s the weekend, but get up. If I can wake up at seven, you can wake up at eight. And help me get Kakashi off the couch. Bloody bastard, doesn’t he have his own house?”

“Maa, Ren, are you truly going to refuse hospitality to a poor old man just back from a mission?” sounds the voice of the only ANBU who is actually able to catch Naruto – Hound, assigned to watch over Sasuke and Ren.

And then there’s a squawk, the sound of something metallic hitting something that sounds kind of hollow, and a chain of curses no child should probably ever hear.

For a moment, Naruto just lays still, eyes wide, barely breathing. Then-

“You don’t hate me?”

Sasuke snorts at first. And then, the bloody bastard has the gall to laugh at him! Into his shoulder!

“Bastard!”

“You really are a moron,” Sasuke says, still giggling. “Of course we don’t hate you. You’re stupid, and loud, and annoying. But you’re a friend, you know?”

“Really?”

Sasuke is silent for a while. Then, he takes a deep breath, burying his face in Naruto’s shoulder, and murmurs:

“You’re my first friend.”

Naruto grins. It feels like something heavy – very, very heavy – has fallen off his shoulders. He feels like he could fly. It’s amazing, honestly, and he loves it.

“Brats, breakfast!” Ren hollers from somewhere within the apartment as the front door opens and he can hear Genma saying hello as he walks in, and then laughs – probably at Kakashi, who gives a loud squawk – and for the first time ever, Naruto feels like he’s home.

Being wanted is something he could definitely get used to.
Chapter Summary

Sorry I'm late, but I have perfectly good explanation which is;
- I got accepted to my University of choice and was to deliver papers on Monday, my usually chapter-writing-day;
- I went to dentist on Tuesday and then shopping with my mom, and while I did finish chapter then, I ran out of time to both put it through beta and post it;
- Wednesday I went shopping for upcoming anime convention in Warsaw I'm going to this weekend, and stuff.

"That's what people do who love you. They put their arms around you and love you when you're not so lovable."
— Deb Caletti

Ren would really have liked some sort of heads up. Any sort of heads up, to be perfectly honest. It's not like she minds, no, but-

When, after waking up, she makes her way to the kitchen, still in her oversized pajamas printed with cat paws and heads, with her hair in even more disarray than during the day, everything appears as it should. However, as she stands in the kitchen, frying pan in one hand, she glances at the sitting room through the gap between the ceiling and the row of counters… and guess what.

There's Kakashi, giving her his best bullshit eye-smile and a small wave, asking what's for breakfast. Ren, perhaps predictably, blinks once, twice, and then hurls the frying pan at him. It connects with his head in a way that is both beautiful and comical. Ren is proud to admit that she'd kept a completely straight face though the entire thing.

The bastard just deigns to pout at her.

"And here I even went shopping and stocked your fridge!" he whines. "And you throw kitchen utensils at me!"

"Maybe had you started with 'I went shopping' instead of 'what's for breakfast', it could have been avoided," Ren grousers, head half-buried in the fridge as she takes in what's in stock. She really isn't in the mood for anything difficult, so settles for scrambled eggs with sausage and onion.

"Where's the fun in that?" Kakashi shrugs, and Ren rolls her eyes with an exasperated sigh, because he's the one who's supposed to be the adult, "By the way, why would Genma want me to buy half this stuff?"

"Explain half this stuff," Ren huffs, setting the things she taken out on the counter, wetting the knife with cold water and proceeding to dice the onion, wetting the knife a few more times as she goes. It's a neat trick she'd learned that effectively keeps onion fumes from reaching her eyes.

"Sausages," Kakashi grumbles, and then yelps, only barely jerking his hand back when Ren swats at
him with its sharp side. "Careful!"

"If you want to touch the food, wash your hands first!" she scolds, pointing the knife at him. "And the sausages are here because I like them, duh."

"But why?" Kakashi whines, and then makes the mistake of bending a bit too low above the chopped onion. He hisses, bringing his hands to his eyes, but Ren stops him before he can start rubbing.

"Press the backs of your palms to your eyes," she sighs, scolding the man like he's a child, and honestly, right now she might just be the most responsible person in the house. It's rather ridiculous, truth be told.

Genma comes somewhere in the middle of Ren calling the kids to breakfast and trying to murder Kakashi with a frying pan, all freshened up and looking better than before, and laughing at Ren's dumb antics. She can't really be mad at him, though, because she does like him; he's pretty awesome and he managed to get Kakashi flailing and sputtering like a cat in water with one sentence.

"Have you been to the hospital?" Genma asks, quirking an eyebrow at Kakashi. Given that Genma actually does look like he'd gotten away from the medics attention – which he most likely did, just dropped by to get his wounds semi-treated and was gone the second they weren't looking – he still sought it out. Kakashi, judging by his state, didn't even bother to go back to wherever he lives to shower and change.

"If you dirtied my new and perfectly clean couch with your dried blood, you will be cleaning my apartment for a month!" Ren hisses, raising her frying pan threateningly.

"You're way too threatening for someone your size, while holding only kitchen utensils!" Kakashi mutters, taking a step back.

"I don't keep knives duller than kunai, don't worry," Ren smiles, showing a bit too much teeth.

"Okay, okay, don't kill each other!" Genma huffs in rather fond exasperation, "I'll go wake Naruto and Sasuke up, if they aren't up yet."

"Cool," Ren says, and then turns to Kakashi. "Our dear Kacchan has oh so graciously volunteered to set the table, so I'll just go and wash my hands, yes?"

Kakashi huffs grumpily. Brats shouldn't be this scary or this bossy.

It's only a matter of time before the brood start filtering in – honestly, Ren never doubted for a moment that they don't know where she lives, because if Sasuke didn't tell them on his own accord, they would probably harrass him enough to do so anyway. And Genma perhaps planned it all, because Ren be damned, but there's just about enough place in the sitting room to accommodate all the rookie nine sans Ino, but with Torune instead. Plus Ren, Genma, and Kakashi.

Even Sakura comes, and Ren can hear her arguing in the hallway with her father before she is invited in. It's only a statement of her will, honestly, because her leg is still bandaged rather stiffly to ensure that the bone bruising healed properly and she doesn't come in for a broken bone instead.

Even though it's a self-appointed free day for Ren (maybe even an official one, she didn't bother checking) she opts to wear her brand new green vest over her very simple and very plain black, long-sleeved turtleneck.
Hell, even Hibiki joins, grumbling and fussy, but he's there, on her couch, with his cheeks puffed and arms crossed on his chest.

"Hey you lot," Ren says with a smile. "Sorry for yesterday, but some dumb less-than-human civvies had gotten in the way."

"What happens now, though?" Hana asks curiously. She knows Ren after all, and might be surprised with the non-physical route taken. "I mean, my mom is pretty angry and I had to stop her from going off to claw out the Hokage's face, but… you know."

"I will chew them out with all the legal and political power the Uchiha have," Ren's smile widens, and it has just a few too many teeth. "You might not know it, but I'm acting Clan Head until this twerp here comes of age," she ruffles Sasuke's hair as she says this. The boy grumbles something and tries to swat her hand away.

"Didn't peg you for the type to go political," Kakashi says, raising his eyebrow, making himself more comfortable in the armchair he's occupying. Bastard.

Ren shrugs, "Hana, would you be so kind as to pin the idiot down after we're done for a bit? I don't think he actually sought out medical attention after coming back from his mission," she says, and for a second there Hana gains a rather murderous glint in her eye, while Kakashi shifts from betrayed to afraid to wanting to flee to betrayed again. "And yes, I can and will go political – I mean, they harmed three clan kids. I mean, we're not ignoring the fact that Naruto is effectively one of the very last Uzumaki, as in, Konoha's supposed precious sister-clan from a sister-village from where they fucked up so badly they decided to forget the matter completely?"

That gets her curious stares from the kids, skeptical ones from her teammates and rather sad glances from both older ninja.

"Nevertheless!" she claps her hands loudly enough for Awai to jump on her head a bit. "I went, I fought, and I advanced!"

"How was the land of Earth?" Sasuke asks, and Ren sighs, scratching her neck.

"It was… earthy," she says awkwardly. "I just… I dunno, it was all brown and stuff, and if they have any plants there, they are few and far in between. The biggest trees they have are the size of big bushes, and you would be afraid to even climb them because they could break. Other than that, it was just rocks. A shit ton of rocks."

"Did you meet awesome new people?" Naruto asks, eyes gleaming, almost no trace of yesterday on him. Good.

"I met Deidara, an Iwa ninja," Ren says. "He's Torune's age, and he made Chūnin with me, too. He looks like a girl, and is very fussy, but he's kinda cool," she smiles.

And if she hears Kakashi ask Genma quietly if that means she found another one, and then sees Genma nodding- Well. She'll get back at them for it later.

"I also met Hoshigaki Kisame, and he's absolutely amazing!" she says with a wide grin. "He's a Kiri ninja, and holy fuck, the amount of chakra he has? I felt like drowning when he slipped and let loose! He's also wickedly good in kenjutsu. Taught me a bit, too, because I'm an annoying brat, I guess? But he's a nice guy, and you won't believe this; he's all blue and looks like a shark!"

"No way!" the kids chorus, and Ren only laughs.
"She also got chakra exhaustion, twice," Hana grumbles, half-heartedly slapping Ren's arm as the Uchiha grins unabashedly. "Bloody moron, that one. And ran right out of the bed, for crying out loud!"

There's an actual tear in Kakashi's eye as he clasps his hands before his chest and whispers an emotional 'I'm so proud' before Genma has the chance to slap the back of his head. Genma does it anyway, glaring disapprovingly at the younger man.

"Also, I have gifts," Ren says, and all hell breaks loose. Well- maybe not all hell, but she suddenly finds herself completely surrounded by children, even more than a while ago. She manages to suffer through it, though. Somehow.

She flings the packet of dog tags at Kakashi, and only shrugs when he glares at her, massaging his forehead where the packet had found its mark. However, when he unpacks them, he looks like he's debating whether or not to pounce on her, and Ren is rather happy when he apparently decides not to. She doesn't need to be smothered by an overly happy dog ninja, thank you very much.

She has a band of children that most likely will do it.

Sakura is first, and the only thing Ren gets as a warning is a squeal way too high-pitched to be bearable, before she's assaulted by a seven-year-old launching herself at Ren, engulfing her in a surprisingly strong hug. She may or may not be making herself a second Hana, but, honestly, Sasuke and Naruto really need someone to rein them in when Ren isn't around.

While Kiba is gushing over the dog whistle and already plotting with mini-Akamaru, Shino and Torune are already too engrossed in their joint gift, an encyclopedia on insects found throughout the Land of Earth, to even hear what's being said to them. Hinata asks Ren to put on the hairclips and, even if Ren really wasn't sure what to buy the girl, the accessories seemed a good bet. Hinata apparently never gets little sentimental gifts – and that makes Ren want to go and yell her throat raw at Hiashi.

Shikamaru is napping on his new pillow about a minute after he gets it, and Ren is pretty sure that prying Choji away from his new cookbook before he's done with it will be a rather futile attempt.

Genma smirks at her, taking the packages of poisons and their corresponding antidotes, before ruffling her going-to-sleep-and-hoping-for-the-best hairstyle, and switches his headband with the bandana, pocketing the protector. It looks good on him.

Hana's face does something weird when she presents her with the necklace, like she wants to cry, but then changes her mind, eventually morphing into something gushy Ren would rather never think too much about, and before she knows it, she's engulfed in a rather mighty bear hug a'la Hana.

Hibiki looks at her strangely when she presents him with a full ninja toolkit, but attaches it to his belt without a word after glancing at the contents. Perhaps it's the additional coil of ninja wire that speaks to him.

The glint in Sasuke's eyes at the sight of the tantō might be a bit scary, but the eagerness with which Naruto dives straight into his beginner's sealing kit? That's straight-up terrifying. Ren had made a good bet on that one, because Naruto – the same one who sincerely detests all learning – has to be actually forcibly pried away from the scroll when dinner time rolls around.

They end up ordering takeout at Ichiraku.
Shibi comes over to the flat later, when the only people left are the Inuzuka siblings and Aburame cousins, save for its residents. Kakashi, at Hana's insistence, was dragged by Genma off to the clinic, so those two are gone, too.

What catches Ren's attention, though, is the fact that Shibi is carrying a massive, dark-purple scroll.

"Congratulations on acquiring a higher rank, Ren," Shibi says, setting the scroll next to him. It easily reaches his hips when standing, and Shibi isn't a short man. "This is one of the artifacts that have been in the Aburame's vaults for safekeeping for a long time," he explains.

"Okay?" Ren says, cocking her head to the side.

"I have decided to give it to you as a gift for your promotion," Shibi says, and before Ren can say anything, continues, "What is inside is… incompatible with the Aburame clan's skill sets. You, however… I have not been your sensei for very long, but I have made an effort to get to know my team. I am confident that you will find it both useful and fitting to your… preferences."

Ren sighs, shaking her head, but accepts the scroll nonetheless.

"Thanks, sensei."

"You're welcome," Shibi tilts his head. "Shino, Torune, let us return home."

Ren sees them off with a smile, and then returns to the sitting room, the massive scroll at her feet. She unrolls the first portion a bit, then, reading the kanji on it, freezes, eyes wide.

"Ren?" Hana asks, looking at her friend. "What is it?"

"It's…" Ren says, and then blinks, shaking her head harshly. "It's a Spider Summoning Contract."
Thirty-Fourth Thread

Chapter Summary

My Discord channel is still open. Here, join me in my stupidity:
https://discord.gg/WQ7mNwk

"Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts.
Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts.
Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me...
Anything can happen, child. Anything can be."

— Shel Silverstein

"Two clan heirs! Two! And one of the last Uzumaki alive, not to mention our only Jinchuuriki!"
Tsume hollers so loud that even Ren, as used to people yelling as she is, winces from where she's sat at the woman's left. "And they're all not even seven years old, for crying out loud! Most of you have kids around that age! And every single one of them could've been with Naruto at the time!"

The Inuzuka's fiery diatribe is currently directed at the circle of grim faced ninja seated around a conference table. As she pauses in her tirade to let that sink in, Ren takes the chance to glance around the room again. While she'd expected to be at a clan head meeting sooner or later, due to her being the oldest surviving Uchiha in Konoha at the moment, it's still a bit strange to be here, at a meeting to decide what stance the clans will present to the Council. The Ino-Shika-Cho trio is there, as well as Tsume, Shibi, and Hiashi. To her surprise, even if he isn't present at the moment, there actually is a seat for the Hatake Clan Head. There are also some minor clans Ren doesn't really know, like Hōki, which apparently immigrated from Suna, Kurama - who Ren is pretty sure also got massacred at some point? – and a seat for the Sarutobi clan head which is currently occupied by Hiruzen's daughter, although Ren is pretty sure the old man is the Clan Head. Apparently he couldn't come.

But it's a Clan matter. Not even the Hokage comes to these.

So why the fuck has Danzō invited himself here?

There is no Shimura seat. Ren checked. Either they aren't recognized as a clan, or their time of greatness has passed. Although there is an empty Senju seat, it is most likely there to honor one of the clans who made the very existence of the village possible.

"Then they should stop being around the vessel, simple as that," Danzō retorts, and Ren feels an unstoppable wave of cold fury ripple through her body. She's been more-or-less fine ignoring the man before he spoke but this-

"Shut up, Shimura!" Tsume is apparently on a roll, as she barks sharply at the elder, not caring who he is. Ren loves Inuzukas so much. "This is a clan matter! What the fuck are you even doing here, old coot, eh?"

Danzō clenches his fists underneath the table, the old fool. Ren idly wonders if he's already
implemented stolen sharingans all over his arm.

"When it concerns the vessel."

"His name is Naruto, and you either use that name or get the fuck out," Ren cuts in, her voice just barely above a growl, and dripping with unfiltered hatred so thick he actually stops and blinks at her. If there's one person Ren hates more than anything at the moment, it's this old meddler. "We are here to discuss the matter of Uzumaki Naruto as a person who's been assaulted by a mob of civilians – to discuss what punishment will befall those who decide it's a good idea to attack a harmless child who will be turning seven tomorrow. Not the Kyuubi vessel. A boy and his friends who were brutally attacked by a mob of mindless sheep."

There's something that changes in the atmosphere, Ren realizes. Everybody is looking at her now, a child among the adults – even if, mentally speaking, she's actually older than most of the clan heads sitting at the table – speaking of matters they would probably rather ignore. Because it's easier to see Naruto as a vessel of the demon, a weapon, rather than a child that his parents – their friends – gave their lives to protect.

"You have assaulted civilians yourself," Danzō says calmly.

"Maybe. But I did so with only one aim – to protect the children those civilians would undoubtedly harm, beyond treatment, perhaps," she says, and takes a deep breath.

She realizes that talking back to Danzō will only make him her enemy, but he's been one from the beginning. And if, let's say, an 'accident' were to happen to Ren, she is already surrounded by a great many people who would be very insistent in learning everything that happened, and there's no telling what they would find. Danzō knows that, too, and Ren can see just how much of a thorn in his side it is. He would love to get rid of her, but she has become essentially untouchable to him.

"Kiba had to have his jaw operated on for crying out loud!" Tsume raves. "And I want the bastard who broke it to pay every single yen that's on the bill!"

"They must learn that such accidents won't be brushed under the rug," Shibi says, and honestly, Ren loves that man. She didn't expect him to back her, not really, but here he is. "The repercussions must be severe – this is, indeed, a clan matter. Two clan heirs were harmed in the incident, and one of this village's greatest assets to be. And, if I'm to be a judge, a very prodigious civilian child. But, above all, it's a matter for all of us who are parents. Nearly all clan heirs are, one way or another, close to Naruto, and if civilians are left to think that they can attack Naruto and get away with it, we are essentially putting all our children – all our heirs – in danger."

"I say we stop arguing over the matter," Shikaku cuts in lazily. "And just vote and get on with it. I propose monetary punishment and imprisonment up to half a year depending on the level of involvement for every civilian who played an active role in the incident."

Sometimes, though, Ren forgets that Shibi isn't the only amazing clan head. In the end, there is an overwhelming amount of votes in favor of Shikaku's proposition.

It's the tenth of October, the anniversary of the Kyuubi's attack on Konoha, and Naruto's birthday, a day after the clan meeting that Danzō invited himself into and was promptly shut up by furious clan heads after a while of his blabbering – it was beautiful, honestly; by the end of the meeting even Inoichi – who had the least to do with their circle of mutual adoration as Ino isn't a part of it – was glaring at the old coot.
But past meetings in the past, currently Ren is leading what would hopefully form Team 7 in six years towards the Inzuka Compound. The civilian festival celebrating the death of the Kyuubi (Ren has to work hard to not laugh at that) is under preparation to start by the evening, and Ren and Kakashi have to physically flank Naruto in case of stray flying rocks. And while Ren could miss which faceless nobody throws it, Kakashi wouldn't. Apparently, since he realized he could, he has become rather fiercely (over)protective of Naruto.

Ren isn't going to judge that, not really. Civvies, on the other hand, still felt blameless, perhaps even entitled to hurting Naruto. They have the gall to demand the imprisoned civilians released, for crying out loud, since they 'did nothing wrong'. They think the criminals were actually trying to do a service to the community.

There are times where it is impossibly hard to keep her bloodlust at bay.

"I don't like it," Naruto murmurs finally, one fist clenched at the back of Sasuke's shirt, and the other holding onto Sakura's wrist. Ren marvels at how easy and fast they've gotten together once they got past the initial dislike. "Why couldn't we have just stayed at your place?"

Sakura and Sasuke exchange knowing glances above the blond's head.

"But Kiba asked us to come, didn't he?" Sasuke huffs, rolling his eyes, and Sakura nods. It is beginning to be a common occurrence, for one kid to invite the others to their place – save for Sakura, whose civilian parents would be simply overwhelmed by the amount of shinobi children, and Hinata because, frankly, at this point in time and for many years to come Hyūgas are just dicks.

"Couldn't he do it any other day? Like, tomorrow?" Naruto whines, turning away from a glaring civilian.

"But he said he hates the festival," Sakura sighs. "And that he wants to have fun with us, didn't he?"

"I hate the festival, too," Naruto murmurs, and Ren sighs, pulling Sumire out and balancing the barren blade by the guard on her index finger, shooting daring looks at the people they pass. It works, if only because Ren's temperament and low tolerance for the sheeple of Konoha is a known thing by now.

And if they are steadily growing more and more afraid and resentful of her, well. She doesn't care about the opinions of people who can barely think for themselves.

"Everybody hates something," Ren says, maybe a bit harshly, but she's currently glaring at one civilian with a stone in hand, daring him to throw it. The man wisely backs down and Ren offers him a sour, mocking grin before turning back to the kids. "But we gotta suck it up, you know? The world isn't going to baby you at all. Not ours."

"Okay," Naruto says, nodding, and continues walking. They can already see the compound, too.

The compound is oddly empty, devoid of the usual barking and random Inuzukas mulling around, but Ren leads the group to the main building, where clan head lives, nonetheless. The building itself appears empty, as well, but since neither Kakashi nor Ren appear fazed in the slightest, Naruto remains calm, too. They lead the children to where he knows is the living room – it's dark, and appears completely empty.

Just before Naruto opens his mouth, Kakashi brings his hand to his face. There's a short, half-whispered 'release', and the sudden sharp crack of a failing genjutsu, and-
Suddenly the room is bright, and colorful, and loud. There are remnants of the future Rookie Nine, and Torune and Neji. There are Tsume, Shibi, Shikaku, and Choza, too. Genma is there of course and even Gai, who has yet to part with the tacky orange tube scarf Ren presented him with few days back. There's even Hibiki, sour but smiling, and Iruka, Naruto's Academy teacher who's slowly growing on him.

And everybody is either screaming or speaking loudly just one sentence:

"Happy Birthday Naruto!"

And Naruto just stands there, eyes wide and slowly glossing over.

And then he just throws himself at the nearest person, who happens to be Sakura, and starts wailing. Sakura just pats him on the back with a sigh, and Sasuke places a hand on the blond's shoulder.

"Hey, moron, it's your birthday, not time to cry," he huffs, rolling his eyes, and Naruto looks at him, sniffling.

"You really made me a birthday party?" he whines heartbreakingly, and Ren, while happy, smiles a tad murderously, clenching her fists so hard that her short trimmed nails dig into her palm rather painfully. For Naruto to be unable to believe that this is his party, even during it... Yes. Heads are going to roll, someday.

( Maybe even literally. She definitely could make it happen.)

"Yes we really did," Kakashi says from Ren's right, and while he wears his bullshit eye-smile, it's much more genuine and also a tad murderous, too. "We want you to be happy, Naruto."

Kakashi has about two seconds to regret his words, because it's all it takes for Naruto to let go of Sakura and latch onto the man's waist with another wave of wailing. Ren only chuckles at the sight of a clearly distressed Kakashi in contact with the small child who he's okay guarding but otherwise fails at taking care of.

It's nearing a late hour and the sky is already rapidly darkening when the festival noises start being really noticeable and annoying, but that might also be because the children have worn themselves out and are not making much noise anymore. Naruto has already opened his presents, and they are mostly ready to head out.

Sasuke got him a blinding orange shirt with the Narutomaki symbol on the front and Uchiha fan on the back, although for the latter he got a rather funny look in return. Sakura went on and gave him a customized necklace she most likely made herself, with a Narutomaki clay pendant. From Choji and Shikamaru he received a jacket and matching pants, mostly black and brown but with blinding orange accents and an additional spiral to the back and shoulders, while the Aburame cousins gave him some more tools for his sealing kit, as they know that he is really getting into the art, and Hinata, along with a reluctant Neji, gave him some high-quality sealing paper. Kiba and Hana opted to give him some more scrolls on the basics of sealing he had not yet acquired, and Kakashi gave him a dog plushie that kinda resembled Pakkun, and a book on Ramen, along with recipes, from Genma.

Others gave gifts, too, but since they don't know Naruto as well as the kids, it's all mostly sweets.

That leaves Ren as the only person who hasn't given him a gift.

"Hey, Naruto," she said softly, kneeling beside the boy and interrupting his intense spectating of the shogi match that Shikamaru had somehow managed to rope Genma into. "Can we talk for a
Naruto blinks at her, his black-orange shirt draped over his shoulders, and nods slowly, as if uncertainly. Ren gets to her feet, and he follows as they head towards the kitchen, where they would be alone for a moment.

"Is something wrong, Onee-chan?" Naruto asks finally, as Ren closes the door behind her and sighs deeply. She looks at him and smiles, a bit tiredly.

"No, not really," she says wearily. "You know, after the civilian attack, in the hospital- I had an argument with the Hokage."

"With Old Man?" Naruto asks, shocked. "Why?"

"Because I really hate how the civilians are treating you," she huffs at the obvious information. "And because I hate your living alone. It's not right," she basically growls kneeling by her bag, which she at some point left in the kitchen during the party, and digging around in it.

"Onee-chan?" Naruto asks again, walking towards her.

"Hey, Naruto," she starts, and then takes a deep breath, turning to face the boy fully, gripping a folder of papers in one hand. "Would you like to live with us?"

"Huh?"

"Well, wrong wording," she snorts at herself, at a loss for words for the first time. Towards a fucking six- Well, now seven-year-old. "I just, I really like you, and Sasuke does, too, and you're alone, so I thought- Fuck. Just, I… I wanna adopt you. If that's okay with you? Well, it's technically just guardianship since I'm not old en-"

Her monologue gets cut off by a wailing Naruto leaping at her and burrowing his face in her shoulder, while wrapped around her torso like a monkey, wailing perhaps even louder than when presented with the party.

"Hey, hey, isn't that enough waterworks for today?" Ren snorts, but wraps her arms around the tiny blond anyway. Naruto mutters something into her shoulder, gripping her shirt a bit tighter, and raises his head.

"You really wanna adopt me?" he asks, and those blue eyes are so heartbreakingly trusting and yet fearful that Ren almost just goes, then and there, off to murder Danzō and most of the council.

"Yeah," she says, burying her face in his hair. "If you want to live with us, yeah."

"I want to!" Naruto wails. "I will be the best adopted brother ever!"

"Tell that to Sasuke," Ren snorts, and Naruto laughs, still broken by his uncontrollable sobs and a bit too high-pitched, but happy nonetheless.

Ren will never regret this decision.
Thirty-Fifth Thread

Chapter Summary

Come join my on Discord server.
https://discord.gg/WQ7mNwk

"Our perfect companions never have fewer than four feet."
— Colette

She has no idea if it's like this for everyone, or maybe only for those truly attuned with it, but when Ren finally manages to put her foot down and take a day off—like, a day off of everything—missions, brats, social interactions—and grab the rather massive, purple scroll with a silvery spider web design, it starts singing to her. Well, not literally singing, but—she doesn't know how to explain it, except for that most basic and very strong idea of ‘want’ and ‘mine’ she feels towards the scroll’s contents.

It's not like she was going to say no to them, though. It's what she is here for now, in the secluded Fourteenth Training Ground that Ren can't remember ever being even mentioned in the show. It's a nice place, honestly, and visibly unused—it's a clearing, cut in half with a rather narrow and shallow river stream. The grass is lush and bears little to no signs of human passage—there's not even one article of discarded weaponry, no training dummies, nothing at all. If it wasn't on the list of training grounds, Ren would have been convinced it was just a clearing. To be frank, she still has no idea how it's possible for Konoha to fit not only its populace and buildings, but also training grounds—at least forty-four, if the Forest of Death's number is any indication—all within its walls. It only firmly reassures Ren that the bloody village is a small country all on its own.

Ren sighs, sitting on the lush grass, setting aside her backpack filled with weapons, food, and spare clothes, and sets the scroll in front of her, unfurling it from right to left like Japanese writing goes.

Huh.

Apparently summoning scrolls do have some sort of author's note—a bit of trivia, what it is keyed to, and a rather butchered manual.

This scroll, the note said, allows one to sign a contract in soul and blood with the inhabitants of Jören Falls and, on the basis of said contract, call upon them for aid. Once signed, the contract cannot be broken, but a new one can be taken. The author takes no responsibility over the contracted beings' reaction to that.

Jören Falls is native to a massive amount of different species of ninkumo, esteemed and very dangerous shinobi spiders.

To sign the contract, one must be capable of molding chakra. Signature and the fingerprints of dominant hand must both be done in either the blood of the contractor or ink mixed in equal or lesser ratio with the blood of the contractor. The technique signs are as follows: Boar, Dog, Bird, Monkey, Ram. It is best, especially for beginners, to slam their palm onto the ground at first. The drainage of chakra increases with power and/or size of the summon.
An explosion of smoke is to be expected. Increases with the size of the summon.

Ren blinks, and then huffs. Nothing she didn't already know but, she has to admit, it is rather useful for those who have absolutely no idea what the Summoning Technique is. But she does know – she’d seen it in the show and read about it when she had time, too. And, to be frank, Ren is very excited for the idea of her own summons. Especially since they are spiders. And, unlike a great many people, Ren likes spiders.

Also, they're useful. And dangerous. And creep people out. Just pros!

Ren only shrugs and pushes the roll of paper – is it even paper? It's so durable – to unfurl on the grass. There are spaces for names, divided in rectangular boxes just like the Toad Summoning Scroll in the anime, and- Only two names. That seem very old. Which is sad. Neither of them are anyone she knows or even remotely recognizes, so she just shrugs. She shrugs off her purple kimono overcoat, allowing it to fall onto the ground as she sits cross-legged, revealing a black tank top underneath. She's going with the smart approach, so she takes out a kunai and makes a small scratch on her left shoulder, just enough for it to sting and draw blood – the kind of injury that will be gone without a trace within the week.

She takes out a small calligraphy brush – because, seriously, with the Japanese alphabet it's either a brush or a pen, there's no in-between – dabs it in the blood from her shoulder and begins the tedious process of drawing proper kanji into the second box from the right. First come U-CHI-HA syllables -うちは - written in hiragana, and then her own name, Ren, with the kanji, 蓮 which stands for 'lotus'. To be frank, 'lotus' is preferable to 'love' it could also be written as.

It doesn't help that Ren finds it rather ridiculous, to have her surname written in a different alphabet than her first name but, well-

Nevermind. Spiders await.

Finishing her name, Ren smears some blood over the fingertips of her right hand and, with a sigh, presses them onto the paper. The second she does, there's that… feeling. It's odd. There's a hum, like a cat's purr except it courses through Ren's entire body with this overwhelming idea of acceptance soaking into her very bones with the force of a hurricane.

She takes a deep breath because- wow. Just. Wow. Is it supposed to happen like this? For some reason she isn't entirely certain. Nevertheless, she turns around, wobbly, so that the scroll is behind her, and sighs. There's no point in waiting.

She uses the almost-closed cut on her shoulder, gathering what blood is left that had seeped out and bends her fingers in seals in rapid succession. Then, she slams her palm onto the grass with a nearly-whispered 'Kuchiyose no Jutsu'. Seals that transcend space and time, that she has no hopes of reading, bloom under her fingers and slither onto the grass, and there's a feeling like an electrical current coursing underneath her fingers. And then, all of a sudden, a cloud of smoke explodes out of nowhere.

It's not much, really, the explosion is small but enough to have Ren reeling back, fanning in front of her with her hands in a coughing fit.

"Fuck," she groans between coughs, looking at the center of the smoke suspiciously. Did it work? Because if it didn't, she will-

There's suddenly a very childish and overjoyed squeal of "Summoner!" and Ren suddenly finds herself with an armful of blue fluff, eight legs, clicking mandibles, and sparkling, excited beady eyes.
Ren does a double take when the creature launches itself at her chest, because-

It kind of feels like fate has come to bite her in the ass.

Renee had always liked spiders, if only because her mother was deathly afraid of them. And, once upon a time, Renee had a pet spider – and doesn't it say much about her social life, that said spider was perhaps her only friend for a period of time? Said spider was a female, a Gooty Ornamental Tarantula, a *Poecilotheria metallica*, named Cobalt. Cobalt died, and it wasn't even that long before Renee herself did.

Then, would anybody care to explain to her why the first creature she ever summons is big and fluffy, dusted with white on top and yellow around joints, but otherwise so blue, so *cobalt blue* it looks like a picture?

So forgive Ren if "Cobalt?" whispered in a shaky, surprised tone is the first thing her summon hears from her. And it hears her, of course.

"Cobalt?" the ball of fluff – a spider, of course, what else – asks from where it's currently latched onto Ren's chest. "Is that my name?"

Ren can't deny it, her first summon sounds childish. Almost like a baby. Ren blinks at it – him? her? them? no idea – and wonders just how old it is. Given that it's the size of her ribcage and then some.

"Maybe?" she tries. "Do you have a name of your own?"

"No," the spider says instantly. "I'm too small. Mom says I can choose when I'm big enough. But you're a summoner! You can name me! Can I be Cobalt? Please? Pretty please?"

It's not easy to say no to an overjoyed bundle of fluff and legs and eyes, to be honest. And it helps even less that Ren finds the spider – baby spider, now that it's determined, a baby spider that's the biggest spider Ren has seen yet – rather adorable. The kind of adorable normal people find kittens and puppies to be.

And even though it's a name that Renee's beloved pet once wore- Well. She doesn't particularly believe in fate, but this time? This time she can indulge it, she thinks.

"Yeah," Ren says with a smile. "You can be Cobalt."

"Yay!" the spider – Cobalt now, it seems – cheers, and then stills, and blinks. Honest-to-god blinks. Which Ren finds ridiculous, because spiders have no goddamn eyelids, but then, this is a summon. "What is a Cobalt?"

Ren snorts, and then runs her hand over the back of the spider, gently scratching the hard chitin hidden underneath all that ridiculous fluff spiders normally don't have, evicting a deep, rumbling purr a spider should not be capable of producing.

"It's the name of the paler shade of blue of your coat," Ren explains, and Cobalt purrs a bit louder. "By the way, how old are you?"

"Uhh…" Cobalt hums. "I dunno. Three moons or something?"

Ren stops.

Three months. This blue tarantula the size of her ribcage and then some is three months old.
Okay.

This is going to be interesting.

(At least Cobalt doesn't mind Awai in the slightest. She happily waves at him with one of her legs, he waves back and it's pretty much that.)

You want an easy and nearly effortless way to scare civilians shitless and make them go running and screaming at the very sight of you? It's simple. Childishly simple, even.

Just walk around with an armful of giant spider.

It is also, as it turns out, a perfect way to make an eighteen-year-old, excitable, and bloodthirsty Mitarashi Anko notice you without even trying.

"Well, well, what do we have here?~" a vaguely familiar voice draws when, somewhere around noon, Ren and Cobalt seat themselves on one of the roofs in the civilian district and Ren proceeds to introduce her spider to the wonders of Japanese deep-fried chicken that she made this morning. It's only mildly spicy and Cobalt loves it.

"A brat socializing with her summon," Ren answers the voice offhandedly, and then sighs and looks up, and blinks. Mitarashi Anko, looming over her, blinks back, and then grins in a way that shows too many teeth to be nice. Ren only quirks her eyebrow in return and looks skeptically at the woman.

"Who are you?"

"Me?" Anko grins. "I'm Mitarashi Anko, Interrogator extraordinaire!"

"So you just hurt people for fun and they pay you for it?" Ren asks, blinking, and Anko seems to actually be taken aback. "Cool. I should probably consider working for the Torture and Interrogation when I'm older huh. I'm Uchiha Ren, and this ball of fluff is Cobalt."

"Ren, what is Torture and Interrogation?" Cobalt asks from where she's munching on the crispy slice of fried chicken.

"It's when you hurt or scare people into telling you what they know," Ren answers, and Cobalt's mandibles make a clicking sound.

"It sounds fun," the tarantula decides after a while, and Ren shrugs.

"I guess," she says, and then holds the box with chicken up to the unusually silent Anko. "Want some?"

And if Anko reaches in a bit stiffly, Ren doesn't comment.

It's a start.

If Ren had said that listening to Anko gush about intimidation techniques while chewing on a dango is boring, she would be lying. And Ren, blunt and honest person that she is, dislikes lying. Thus, she says nothing, but listens to Anko who's animatedly gesturing around, explaining one of her cases (long dead, most likely, no names or characteristics given), eyes wide and gleaming, and Ren, with her elbows on the table and chin supported in her palms, listens. Cobalt, half-perched on her lap and half dangling off the table, looking at Anko from between its arms, also listens rather intently.
The shop's clientele, at least those who are visibly civilian, send them very alarmed looks. Some ninja dude who sits in the corner, that Ren doesn't recognize, is doing is best to muffle his chuckling with his sleeve.

"I kinda envy you, you know," Anko sighs finally, drawing circles in the sweet soy sauce with one of her empty dango sticks.

"Why?" Ren asks, before biting into a chewy, gooey ball of dough that kind of seems uncooked but also kind of doesn't. Japanese sweets are weird.

"Because spiders freak most people out!" Anko whines. "Imagine it! Using spiders! Having them around, and then slowly creep onto the subject, more and more of them-"

"That's actually an interesting idea," Ren hums and sits back, rubbing Cobalt behind his eyes. The spider lets out a happy, rumbling purr and Ren only barely chokes down a snort. Purring spiders, goddamnit.

"I guess," Anko smiles widely, and there's a glint to her eye that Ren doesn't particularly like.

"What?" she huffs at the older girl, and her smile widens.

"I like you," Anko grins, and there's a shiver that runs down Ren's spine that's not exactly like fear, even if she knows that, by all means, it should be.

After all-

Hana is and forever will be Ren's best friend, and Ren would never trade the Inuzuka for anything in the world, and she knows that Hana's hissy fits over her injuries are how her friends cares.

But having only one friend is a sad existence.

"Yeah, feeling's mutual," Ren says with a smile that's not exactly soft but also not exactly showing teeth. "After all us bloodthirsty nutjobs should stick together in the village of nutjobs, yes?"

"Well said!" Anko laughs, and Cobalt purrs again.

Yeah. Ren could use some more (female) friends. And Anko is good.

They're not that different anyway.

Ren returns home late, with little to no light left in the sky, the scroll attached to her belt, backpack on her shoulders, Awai on the top of her head, and an armful of content Cobalt.

She is moving past a dark, shady alley when she hears it. Soft, and maybe pleading.

Ren stops and turns her head to the side, to the alley, and drops down, onto the pavement right next to the big, melt trash bin. There, covered in dirt and dried blood, and nearly colorless because of it, sits the saddest kitten Ren has ever seen, looking at her with huge, fearful, and yet hopeful eyes the color of vibrant, alluring amber.

It meows at her again, pitifully, and Ren sighs.

She's a weak person.
This is important! I'm in a need for a new beta reader, most likely temporary but I don't know for how long exactly, starting September! My current beta, Christie, is going to be buried under a metric ton of responsibilities from what I gather, and cannot continue checking my terrible writing for the time being.

***

My tumblr and deviantart name is KillerGirlFuria, in case any of you wants to spam by askbox. I'm pretty open person, and if anyone would like to discuss CPwUR, or anything else, really, you're very welcome. Also, for interested; my AO3 nickname is also KillerGirlFuria, while my Wattpad nickname AngelikaPorczyska because I was dumb and went on to create the account with my facebook, and didn't bother to change it ever since. So yeah, here's my real name.

Discord CPwUR discussion link: discord.gg/WQ7mNwk

"Being brave means to know something is scary, difficult, and dangerous, and doing it anyway, because the possibility of winning the fight is worth the chance of losing it."

— Emilie Autumn

After telling Cobalt for what feels like the hundredth time that no, she may not eat the cat and no, she may not hunt it either, Ren scoops up the pathetic feline resignedly, casting a longing glance at the door of her apartment complex. She hates her life, to be honest, and even more than that, she hates how squishy and warm her insides can get upon seeing a small, lost, fluffy creature in need of help. She also hates her inability to turn away. It has happened before, obviously.

With Sasuke. And partly with Hana. And everyone else, pretty much.

"The Inuzuka compound is on the other side of the village," she bemoans, "and my apartment door is right there!"

Life hates her. The mangy cat, cradled next to Cobalt, meows at her sympathetically. It's friendly, although probably has not seen human care for a long, long time. Maybe a runaway? Or, worse, thrown out? The cat seems young, not even fully grown yet. Can't be older than few months.

Ren hates people.

"Are we going home?" Cobalt asks, staring at her with those wide, black, beady eyes, and Ren sighs.

"Change of plans," she huffs, and she would scratch her neck, but she's run out of free hands. God damnit.
"What plans?" a familiar, amused voice asks from above her and Ren sighs long-sufferingly, craning her neck to look at Genma, sitting on the windowsill of his open window. He's smiling.

"I literally just picked up a cat," Ren groans, "so instead of going home, I'm going to the Inuzuka compound. Half a fucking village from here. Whereas here is right in front of my fucking doorstep."

Genma laughs, for once not gnawing on a senbon, and lets himself drop down without a sound right next to her. Ren sighs once again, glancing at him tiredly.

"Hi!" Cobalt chirps, raising one of her legs in greeting, and shaking it. "Are you a ninja, too?"

Genma laughs, scratching the back of his neck, "I guess I am."

"Cool!" Cobalt chirps again, and Genma looks at Ren, bemused. The girl only shrugs in response, and unstraps the giant summoning scroll she's been carrying all day long, setting it on the ground with one hand, somehow managing to hold both cat and spider with the other.

"Be a dear and put this in my living room? Also make sure Naruto and Sasuke do their homework," Ren sighs with a smile, and Genma chuckles.

"Sure," he agrees. "I'll tell them you're apparently getting a cat."

"Oh, shut up, you."

"Reeeen-"

"You still can't eat it, Cobalt."

"Aaaw."

---

She's darting through one of in-village miniature forest when she literally stumbles upon it and curses vehemently.

To save time, she'd decided to take the fastest route from her apartment to the Inuzuka compound. It takes her right by the Aburame Clan grounds, through the little forest they tend to use as a training field for their members to learn how to use their clan abilities proficiently. Where they can't creep civilians out.

She is drawn by the sounds of fighting. It's faint, but fighting nonetheless. It might very well just be someone training, and if it is, she'll just be on her way but... Ren prefers to be cautious and investigate. Or she's simply a fan of poking her nose into other's businesses. That might be the case, too, really, and there's no such thing as too precautious or too safe. It's never killed anybody, and has saved a great many lives.

In the end, she's glad that she chose to investigate, despite her armful of spider and cat and her nearly overwhelming wish to just be done with it and go home.

It's ANBU, except it's not, and Ren takes a deep, shaky breath. Their masks are wrong, distinctly shaped but otherwise undecorated, unlike every other ANBU mask she's seen that's painted, and their outfits are all wrong. It makes Ren grit her teeth. They're ROOT.

And they're trying to take Torune, who's currently covering Shino with his own body, his special deadly kikaichu buzzing around angrily. Shino is limp on the ground, and Ren curses as she sets Cobalt down on the branch before pressing her backpack against the trunk. By all means it's a stupid
idea – a suicidal idea. But it's Torune and Shino, and they're hers. And she's not letting fucking Danzō have what's hers, even if it means she will go down trying.

"Keep an eye on my pack and the cat," she all but growls, and propels herself off the branch, leaving it shaking. There are three ROOT members, and a fourth is on the ground, twitching but otherwise immobile. Torune might be young and still in the Academy, but never underestimate an Aburame.

Ren pounces on the ROOT member closest to her, somehow managing to surprise the woman with a kick to her side that sends her flying. Ren doesn't stop, rebounding from the impact and Sharingan spinning wildly as she hurls a barrage of kunai at the other two and lands next to Torune. His lethal bugs welcome her eagerly and almost affectionately, circling around her arms and legs even before the boy himself registers that it's her.

"Care to explain why you are attacking two Aburame clan heirs?" Ren growls, red eyes all but glowing in the rapidly darkening atmosphere. The sun is down, and it will be night in a matter of moments. "You know it's an act of treason against the village, don't you?" She cocks her eyebrow, and the ROOT agents, surprised by her appearance, don't attack for a second, even if the woman Ren kicked comes back.

"We work on behalf of the village," comes the emotionless, predictable reply, and Ren snorts. "If by that you mean endangering children and clan heirs, which, let me stress, is an act of treason, then sure, mister traitor in a blank mask," she snorts. "Look, I don't know what your business is-" lie, a blatant lie, "-but would you kindly leave Shino and Torune here before things escalate and you cause some sort of civil war?"

"This matter does not concern you, Uchiha Ren," the other ROOT agent says, and Ren makes a show of morphing her expression into that of shock as she reaches into her kunai pouch, grabbing a flare instead of a kunai.

"You know my name?" she asks, sounding surprised. "Wow, that's super creepy," she hisses in disgust and, as fast as she can force her muscles to move, raises her hand and sets off a slightly overpowered red flare. Standard emergency signal: 'immediate danger, send help'. The ROOT agents visibly tense even more. Ren sincerely hopes that they would just scatter and stop bothering them, but she knows it's a vain prayer. If Danzō sent them for an Aburame, an Aburame they will get, unless there's absolutely no way.

It's bad, but not tragic. They only need to hold off for the minute or two it will take for ANBU to come and investigate. Nobody, after all, fires red flares inside the village without good reason. What reason might be better than an organization that should have been disbanded years ago and is currently committing treason?

Ren manages to evade a lethal injury from the next attack only because her guard and Sharingan are still at their highest alert she can possibly muster. Her attacker's tantō grazes her left shoulder as the woman she kicked goes for her.

A mistake on her part, because Torune's bugs are suddenly there, and the woman grunts in pain, propelling herself back. Her right hand is limp and blackened and dead, and Ren can't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. The other two would probably have attacked as well, but Torune's bugs flare anew. Ren knows that Torune has run out of chakra to feed them, so she flares her own, and they latch onto her, feeding and buzzing anew.

Had she not found them, Torune would've collapsed from exhaustion and have been taken. He or Shino. But Ren has made it her purpose to change the plot of Naruto, and she likes Torune as not a
ROOT agent. It was honestly a godsend that she stumbled upon the fight. Danzō hates her, anyway – she was supposed to be eliminated, after all, during the massacre.

But she knows too many people who would become much too annoying if she suddenly disappears or winds up dead. If Danzō wants to remain in the shadows, he has to leave Ren alone, or try to sabotage her missions. Ren knows that on any mission that she is sent on with ninja she doesn't know, she would have to have her guard up in order to not end up with a kunai in her spine or gut, guided by the hand of her 'fellow Konoha' shinobi, but those are the dangers she signed up for when she chose this path.

It doesn't mean she would leave him alone. It's about damn time she introduces her foolproof plan of leeching information off him. With her method she can't reliably share it with anyone as it wouldn't generate any kind of hard proof, but seeing as she's here with Torune only because of dumb luck and a cat, she really needs to know what is going on in the meddler's secret office, and be a step ahead. Or two. Or three.

There is a nice colony of Jorō spiders not so far away from where she lives that she would recruit for help with that. They are absolutely adorable sweethearts, and exceptionally common for the climate. They are also very talkative when bribed with food.

(Ren does not need to know what kind and how many ladies the owner of the pawn shop a few blocks down invites home every night. She also does not need to know the details of what he does with said ladies, but that one spider nesting on the man's windowsill just wouldn't shut up-)

One of the ROOT agents appears behind them, only to be intercepted by the revitalized bugs. Ren makes use of his moment of distraction to hurl shuriken at him, embedding them deep into his right leg. She wishes that reinforcements would hurry the fuck up, thank you very much.

"Stand down or we will eliminate you," the currently only unharmed agent says, and Ren snarls at him, Mangekyō Sharingan flaring to life of its own accord. She can feel a prickling in her right eye, this weird sensation her bloody eye is sending her, the 'want' for chakra, and frankly, if it could, her eye would be making grabby hands for her tenketsu. There's something akin to an electrical current coursing through her chakra coils. But so many weird things have happened today, so Ren just complies, pushing chakra into the eye, and it soaks in it, bubbling power and-

Oh.

Ren blinks, takes a deep breath, and-

"Takemikazuchi!" she hollers, and there's a sharp stab of pain in her right eye as she forces the chakra through it for a jutsu that isn't a jutsu, and there's a warm, slick wetness on her right cheek now, but that doesn't matter at all, because-

Because the woman, who decides to charge at them again, is suddenly struck by a white-black lightning with the sound of a thousand chirping birds.

Ren collapses, gasping for breath, and hopes, begs for a miracle, because this, at her current level, is the very last trump card, her own Mangekyō ability she didn't know she had unless she was forced to use as the absolute last, life-saving resort-

The two surviving ROOT agents promptly disappear as real ANBU shunshin onto the scene, and Ren can't help but feel relief at the sight of an untamed mop of white hair and dog-stylized mask. Torune collapses next to her, on all fours and panting, his kikaichu retreating back into his body.
"What happened here," one of the ANBU asks in a somewhat awed tone, staring at the steaming, charred lump that was a ROOT kunoichi just moments ago. It's still twitching, somehow. The other agent, the one Torune's bugs got before Ren got there, is a mutilated black mass, flesh instantly rotted due the venom. It-it stinks, now that Ren has the time to actually care about things like that.

She groans, moving from her knees to sit on the ground, and looks at Kakashi. Her entire body feels like jelly and tomorrow will be a bitch. Also, Hana will probably kill her for getting chakra exhaustion. Again. Inside the bloody village.

"I was going to the Inuzuka compound," she says, and she knows she sounds something between drunk and half-asleep, when it becomes apparent that Torune is too busy trying to breathe properly. "I found a cat and wanted it looked over, you know. And I stumbled upon signs of a fight, and- Well, there were those three people in blank white masks against Torune. Or four, but one was already dead. No idea what they might've wanted, aside from ruining what the village stands for," Ren lies again, because she knows exactly what – or who – they were there for.

Kakashi reaches down for the mask of the rotten man, because the kunoichi is just a pit of ash and steaming charred tissue now, and yanks it off, turning it around in his hands. He moves to say something, but suddenly the bushes nearby rustle, causing everyone to tense. A second later Cobalt crawls from between the leaves, Ren's backpack on her back visibly straining the tiny-gigantic spider, and the mangled cat on top of the backpack, only barely managing to balance itself.

"Don't leave me like that again," Cobalt whines, crawling to Ren like a lost puppy, and she sighs, picks up the cat, unwrapping the pack, and picks up the spider, too.

"Sorry," she sighs, and looks tiredly at Kakashi. He sighs, but doesn't try to object what he knows is coming. "Hey, Kacchan, can you get us to the Inuzuka compound and then back home? I had to feed Torune's bugs with my chakra, and that, whatever I did with that lightning, drained me. I mean, you're my couch potato, so work for your keep. Also, I don't think I can stand up, let alone go anywhere. I don't think I have much chakra left, if any at all. Hana is going to kill me, isn't she?"

"We need to know what happened here," ANBU in the mask of a grinning cat says sternly, and Ren groans, promptly flipping him off. He makes an offended noise.

"I just fucking told you what happened, and if you want a fucking written report then you have to fucking wait until I can fucking hold a pen, let alone write with it!" she snaps, tired and angry and totally not looking forward to being dumped on Hana's doorstep in a state that will prompt her friend to rant about her idiotic semi-suicidal best friend, again.

Shibi chooses this moment to jump into the clearing, uncharacteristically disheveled for the normally unflappable Aburame Clan head and sensei she knows. He takes one frantic look around, and is suddenly over by Shino and Torune and Ren can swear he bloody teleported because there is no other way in hell that was even a shunshin. He scoops both boys into his lap, hugging them tightly, and sighs, turning his head to look at Ren. She must paint a rather weird picture, pale and barely even awake, sitting on the grass not far away from a charred corpse, a cat and a giant spider in her arms, a backpack leaning on her leg, and Kakashi, in full ANBU attire, crouching by her.

"What did you do this time?" Shibi asks in a tone that Ren is personally well acquainted with and has come to call it 'what is my life' that Shibi tends to use when she does something dumb. She sighs heavily, weighing whether she has enough energy at the moment to say anything, and doubles over, her shoulder and head finding support on Kakashi's armored side.

"Killed some hobo in a white mask who was, I'm pretty sure, trying to kidnap the midgets," she says slowly and tiredly, and Shibi's arms tighten around the two boys. Shino's head rolls bonelessly over
to rest on his father's shoulder, and Torune doesn't look particularly conscious anymore, either. "Oh, I also used my Mangekyō for real for the first time!" she says a bit more animatedly, and then grimaces. "Which also drained me of chakra. I'm getting used to chakra exhaustion, I think. Hana is so going to kill me."

"I doubt she will," Shibi says with a spark of amusement.

"Yeah, not really, but she will yell at me," she grumbles unhappily. "All I wanted was to give them the cat to look over."

"A cat?" Shibi asks, standing up and balancing the two children in his arms with grace only a shinobi could possibly muster. He doesn't seem to be bothered in the slightest with the ANBU examining the half-rotten corpse next to him. He seems to be rather acquainted with the rather specific brand of toxin Torune's bugs carry.

"Found a stray when I was coming home, there was a cat in the alley and I'm too soft to leave it there to die," Ren huffs, blushing faintly. "I gave Genma the summoning scroll to take home and headed straight for the Inuzuka compound. This place just so happens to be on the way. Jashin knows what would have happened if I hadn't gone."

Shibi smiles, even if his high-collared coat obscures the view, and somehow manages to pat Ren on the head.

"Come to the compound when you're feeling better, if you would?" he says, and Ren cocks her eyebrow, but nods nonetheless, and cranes her neck to look at Kakashi.

"Kacchan, can we go yet? I want to drop the cat off at the vet clinic and then sleep off this bloody exhaustion. I won't stay awake and coherent much longer anyway," she mumbles and, as if to back up her words, yawns loudly at the end. Kakashi sighs long-sufferingly, but scoops her up nevertheless, mumbling about ungrateful brats under his breath. And if Ren asks Cobalt to slap him, well.

If she wasn't half-asleep by the time they reach the Inuzuka compound, Ren is sure she would be getting an earful from Hana, because the girl is absolutely furious. As it is, Ren only shoves the mangled cat at her friend and nearly topples over, only to be caught by Tsume's ninen, Kuromaru, who catches her collar between his teeth and drags her back upwards, supporting her suddenly heavy body with his own.

"I'll tell you everything tomorrow, if I'm coherent enough," Ren sighs, fighting to keep her eyes open, and Hana rolls her eyes. "You can yell at me then, too."

"You're a bloody idiot, you know that?" Hana growls, smacking Ren's head, but Ren is too tired to react, or keep her head from falling onto her chest, before slowly raising it back up again. Tsume barks in laughter, and turns to Kakashi.

"Thanks, Hound. I'll take the brat home," she says, and Kakashi nods before disappearing. Ren honestly loves the Inuzuka matriarch. She may or may not be biased because she bit into Danzō like a rabid dog, but who cares.

Also, Kuromaru's fur is very soft, and he himself is the size of a small horse, which makes him very rideable.

So, yes. Ren rides a dog home. Cobalt seems to enjoy the ordeal a lot, if her happy clicks and squeals are any indication, but Ren is too out of it to do more than lean against Tsume's chest and try not to
fall asleep. When the Inuzuka matriarch leaves her at the door of her apartment, she realizes she looks like a zombie, because once she enters, Sasuke and Naruto take one look at her and just remain silent, while Genma gives her The Look™.

Ren would very much like him to decide whether he wants to be her friend, older sibling figure, or parent figure, please and thank you.

Ren has no idea how she manages to change into her tank top and loose sweatpants that are her pajamas. She doesn't even know when exactly her body falls over onto the soft mattress of her bed – she doesn't care, she's already managed to stay conscious way beyond her limit. Somewhere between awareness and consciousness she registers two shapes lighter than her climbing up into the bed and laying at either side of her, but they're so warm, and there's something soft and purring right by her head, so she just slips away and allows the land of dreams to finally claim her for the night.
Thirty-Seventh Thread

Chapter Summary

Today is my birthday. I feel so old.

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

— Winston Churchill

Given that she feels like shit warmed over, and rightly so, thanks to her bout of genius yesterday in using her Mangekyō ability which left her with mild chakra exhaustion, Ren probably should’ve stayed in bed. Hana, if she were there, would most likely have made her go back to lay down, but Hana is at the compound half a village away, and Ren feels restless.

Therefore, she chooses to raid kitchen. Well, maybe not exactly raid, but-

Well.

There is that thing about Renee back Then and now, too, that when she’s stressed, there are only two things that could de-stress her for sure. First of these things is sex which, for her currently twelve-year-old body is off limits for, at the very least, the next four years. Second, and much more effective in terms of availability and overall results, is, of all things, cooking.

Thus, here she is, at five o’clock sharp, having left the bed without somehow disturbing Naruto and Sasuke while detaching them from her person (and it should be worth mentioning that they had attached themselves to her like limpets, one at each side), standing in front of the fridge and cursing the unfairness of the world that, the one day she did not need to be awake at such hour, she is. Therefore, she decides to indulge herself and, while consciously acknowledging she’s in a country that’s Japanese to the bone, cook something as British as it gets.

Therefore, Beef Wellington, or whatever close to it Ren could make with the available resources. Actually, she found herself quite surprised; the only thing truly lacking is the puff pastry, so she only has to improvise the outer layer of the dish. Not that she minds, she was never a fan of the delicate, easily broken texture of puff dough to begin with. And then she decides to go a bit further and also bake the Battenberg cake. With a twist, of course, because while she finds the original design of the cake adorable, she figures that making each square of the cake in a different color would make it more attractive to the brats. And if she makes enough, they can share it with others from the Rookie Nine at school.

And since school starts at nine o’clock and she has all the ingredients she needs at hand, she immediately began to cook.

The sponge cake parts for assembly are on the counter, cooling, and Ren is pushing the assembled
beef dish into the oven when she hears shuffling coming from her room, and sure enough Naruto emerges from behind the door, rubbing his eyes and yawning widely, trotting towards the kitchen in a slightly zombie-like manner. Ren can honestly relate, except the kid is too young to offer him a cup of coffee.

Except, and Ren dreads what it means for her, she can practically sense that something is not entirely right. Not to mention it’s not even seven in the morning and Naruto is one to get every additional minute of sleep he can possibly get.

Therefore, something must be wrong.

“Hey squirt, what chased you out of bed?” she asks. Naruto looks at her, and sighs, rubbing his forearms. So she walks forward and kneels before him, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You can tell me, you know?”

“I-” he starts, and then looks down, shaking his head. “You’ll think I’m crazy, onee-chan.”

Ren snorts. “Squirt, all the best shinobi are crazy, one way or another.”

“Really?” he looks at her, eyes wide in wonder. “I- It’s just, when I close my eyes, I can hear something growling, you know? And it’s kinda scary, but when I open my eyes there’s nothing, only Sasuke-bastard snoring!”

Ren blinks, once, twice, because this- Isn’t the Kyuubi supposed to be sleeping at this time in Naruto’s life? Besides, how the hell is she supposed to help Naruto with communicating with his goddamned bijuu-

Oh. Okay, she’s dumb. Like, really dumb.

“Huh, let’s see,” she says, tapping her chin. “It growls only when you close your eyes?”

“Yeah!”

“Then how about you sit down in the living room, and meditate a bit?” Ren says. “Maybe try to look for whatever is growling in your head? Tell it to stop, or something? It’s your head, after all.”

“Oh. Ooh! Okay, I’ll do that, onee-chan!”

Ren smiles fondly at the brat as he settles down with his back to the couch, so that she can see him through the hole between the living room and the kitchen. He’s sitting very still in lotus position, and Ren sighs, sitting by the oven. To be frank, Naruto working out a truce with the Kyuubi – Kurama, but Ren isn’t supposed to know his name, so shhh – earlier would be an ideal situation. Preferably over a decade earlier than when it is supposed to happen.

Ren is selfish, but having Kurama as a guide or maybe even a mentor to Naruto would be a really good thing, especially in this Danzō-ridden world.

Honestly, the cockroach is as bad as Zetsu and as insane as Madara.

When Naruto opens his eyes next, he’s in a place that’s entirely not onee-chan’s apartment. It’s a dark and wet place, and it feels like he’s floating and swimming all at once, kinda like he feels when he’s dreaming. He’s standing on a narrow path in a tunnel, and to his side is a small stream of
disgusting, smelly water. Naruto scrunches his nose, because what the hell? Where is he anyway?

Shrugging, he presses the sleeve of his pajama to his nose. The last thing he remembers is onee-chan
telling him to meditate, and then he’s here. Maybe he’d fallen asleep while meditating?

Suddenly, something growls from the direction into which the disgusting water is flowing. It sounds
exactly like the growling that awoke him, except it’s louder this time, closer. Naruto narrows his eyes
in the dark, trying to see past it, breathing the stale air through his sleeve, and jogs down the
disgusting stream, towards the growling.

When the tunnel opens before him, he has no choice but to step into the yucky water, since the path
ends there. He squirms, making a face, because the water is as disgusting to the touch as it looks and
smells, and he can’t use his chakra like onee-chan to walk on it yet. He takes off his slippers and rolls
his pants up to his knees, before stepping into it. It’s shallow, thankfully, but he still squirms in
disgust, clenching his hands on his slippers.

There’s a growing rumble that catches his attention, and he looks up. There are gigantic bars, from
the yucky water up to the ceiling he can’t see, and behind them there are two big, red eyes. They’re
the pretty shade of crimson that onee-chan’s and Sasuke-bastard’s eyes can turn into, except the
pupils are slit.

“That’s interesting,” a deep voice states, and Naruto squints his eyes, barely making out the
silhouette of the owner of those eyes in the dark. Whatever it is, it’s big. “You don’t fear me,
child?”

“Who are you?” Naruto asks, crossing his arms on his chest, fluffy blue slippers still in hand. He
doesn’t look all too menacing in his seven-year-old, pajama-clad glory, but it’s the thought that
counts, right? “Where is this?”

“Puny human, I am the Kyuubi no Kitsune!” the giant behind the bars bellows. “And we are in
your mind, as I’m trapped within your body.”

“What?!” Naruto yells. “Since when?”

“Since a few hours after your birth, brat,” Kyuubi says. “It’s how Bijuu are sealed into
Jinchuuriki.”

“Bijuu?” Naruto asks, cocking his head to the side. “What?”

“I won’t waste my time explaining things you should already know, human,” Kyuubi growls.
“Now leave.”

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto!” Naruto squawks indignantly. “And I’m here to tell you to stop growling!”

“And if I don’t?”

“It’s my head!” Naruto argues. “I don’t know how you got in here, but it’s my head and you live
here, like Ren onee-chan lives in her apartment, and they have a cur-fee-w hour when we can’t make
noise anymore, dattebayo! I’ll set you a cur-fee-w too!”

“As if I care for your human devices,” the Kyuubi says, massive ears twitching. Naruto’s eyes,
more and more used to the darkness, can make out the shape of the gigantic fox and a mass of scarlet
fur.
“Are you lonely?” Naruto asks suddenly, and the fox’’s eyes widen, but there’s no reaction otherwise. “That’s why you growl? Because you’re lonely here, in my head?”

“Hah, as if I, the Nine-Tailed Demon would be-”

“It’s okay, you know,” Naruto cuts in, and the fox growls in annoyance. “I was alone, too, before Sasuke-bastard became my friend, and Ren onee-chan let me live with them, you know? I know it’s hard to be alone.”

“I don’t care,” the fox growls.

“So I will come here every day, okay?”

“I- What?!?”

“And I will talk to you, and you won’t be so lonely anymore, okay? We’ll be friends and you won’t have to growl anymore!”

“What? Brat, no, don’t you- Where are you going, get back in here-!”

But Naruto is already gone, and the only thing the Kyuubi can do is stare at the spot his current prison occupied a while ago and think, what the hell.

When Ren walks to the Academy later that day – with an oddly smug Naruto and a somewhat confused Sasuke – she does not expect to be assaulted by a bunch of children the second she steps onto the grounds. Kiba just straight-out barrels into her, and Ren doesn’t bother trying to keep her balance, still greatly weakened after yesterday’s stunt, so she falls down with only a minimal attempt to mildly cushion herself. Cobalt, the traitorous summon, jumps onto Sasuke to protect herself. It causes some of the children to squeal, and the civilian parents to hastily speed up.

“Hana, would you kindly control your brother?” Ren groans, and as if on cue, she’s suddenly assaulted by four puppies of varying sizes, trying to drown her in slobber. Ren unabashedly shrieks, the most girly sound she’s made in a long while, and tries to bat all five assailants away, to no avail. The Haimaru Brothers are growing fast, becoming more and more wolfish with each passing day. And also more and more massive. And Hana? Her dearest friend just stands to the side, smug to Naruto and Sasuke’s snickering, and Cobalt’s cheerful clicking.

She hates them all.

“Oh Ren, you bloody moron,” Hana sighs, kneeling by her as the dogs relent a bit and Kiba sits on her stomach. Hana is definitely irritated, but somewhat fondly and definitely not in a I-will-murder-you-for-your-idiocy kind of way, so it’s a win.

“Thank you for your insightful input on my personal qualities,” Ren mock-bows her head, which looks weird since she’s still on the ground and all, and Hana sighs once, and then twice when Ren makes grabby hands at her. But she does nevertheless help her friend up as soon as Kiba is off and standing to the side. Of course, the second she’s standing is the second Hana is all over her, inspecting and prodding.

“Well, be happy it’s only mild chakra exhaustion,” Hana grumbles. “You’ll walk it off in a few days and, honestly, what the fuck were you thinking?”
“Uhhh, saving Shino and Torune from weird masked lunatics?” Ren asks, scratching the back of her neck, and Hana sighs, swatting her head. “How’s the cat by the way?”

“Cat?” Sasuke asks, cocking his head to the side and honestly, he looks way more adorable than he should, holding Cobalt in his arms and all.

“I found a stray, and brought them to the compound yesterday.” Ren explains. “And ran into some issues on the way, but I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh,” Hana rolls her eyes. “The cat will be fine to go in a week. All the standard things, fleas, worms, malnourishment, lack of vaccines, spraying and neutering.”

Ren nods and then sighs, wiping her face with her sleeve where she’s been assaulted by dog kisses. Then, she puts her hands on her hips and looks around and, well, apparently they’ve attracted a crowd. Shikamaru and Choji are slowly making their way over to them, and a bit farther down there’s Hinata flanked by Shino and Torune. What’s surprising to Ren, however, is Sakura. Or, more accurately, who she’s walking with – because there’s Ino, too, hand in hand with each other and chattering happily. Huh.

Well, she did give the brats enough of the Battenberg cake pieces so they can share with Ino, too, so that’s not an issue.

The kids wave at her cheerfully as they go into the building, Sasuke hands her Cobalt back and soon all the younger kids excuse themselves to start their lessons. Only Hana and Torune linger with her, and the boy turns to her, handing to her a rather important-looking scroll. Ren takes it, but with no small amount of confusion.

“Father would like to meet you sometime this week,” he says and Ren blinks, before it dawns on her – because Torune is adopted by Shibi, after all. “He wants to thank you.”

Hana casts her a sideways look in inquiry, and Ren grins, patting Torune’s head.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go tomorrow. Today I have some training with Guy and I will be dead on my feet when I’m done.”

“If you over-exert yourself, I will personally end you,” Hana growls, pinching the bridge of her nose, and Ren just laughs, winking at her friend, which earns her another eye-roll. “I would go with you, but I have a lesson at the hospital in an hour. But seriously, don’t do anything taxing or I will be really mad at you, moron.”

“Scout’s honor, Hana, I won’t do dumb things.”

Hana glares at her for a moment. “You think what, I don’t know you well enough to believe that?”

“Eh, worth a try.”

“Ugh, why. Why must my best friend be such a moron.”

“Oh, but you love me!”

“Sadly.”
Thirty-Eighth Thread

Chapter Summary

My beta changed recently. Also, this chapter happened largely thanks to my friend, Eri.

"Permanence, perseverance and persistence in spite of all obstacles, discouragements, and impossibilities: It is this, that in all things distinguishes the strong soul from the weak."
— Thomas Carlyle

Sometimes there were days when Ren did things that made her wonder deep within if perhaps she might be a tad masochist.

Or there were certain days; like this one, where the only female Uchiha went off to do training-like torture with Gai. It's then with sweat dripping down her arched-fine brows that she realizes there is nothing secretive to her masochism.

"Your attitude today is nowhere near your usual youthfulness, Ren!" Gai booms, and the girl sighs, sitting down on the grassy part of the training ground. I-don't-even-bother-with-number that the man frequented uses unless told otherwise. Even looking at him makes her want to just throw the training for today in the bin and go to sleep, but she knows it won't work. She feels exhausted, yes, but it's a different, very odd kind of exhaustion, far from a physical one. While, yes, it takes toll on the body, chakra exhaustion compares more to emotional, psychological exhaustion which somehow affects the body creating the feeling of physical exhaustion. Her body had recovered overnight, though, regaining strength, so in order to even fall asleep she had to do something to burn the excess energy.

It would be all better in the long run, after all.

"You know, Gai, when you protect your friends from mad men in white masks and then get a mild chakra exhaustion in process, you can't really be too happy to train." she sighs, looking at the very… expressive… man. He was wearing the muffler-scarf-thing she bought for him in Iwa nonstop, really. And when she gave it to him, there were waterworks. And yelling, Like, seriously, so much yelling.

He also apparently decided that Ren was his friend forever and ever. Because of a scarf.

Seriously.

And- Wait, is he crying? Holy fuck, he is crying.

"That is most youthful that you did that, Ren! Protecting one's comrades shows that the Will of Fire burns strong within you!" he booms even louder and Ren winces at the volume. Honestly, Gai’s brand of mad is something special, but also a thing you become either resignedly used to, or get dragged in. Or something in-between. He also seems to cry even more, and Ren yelps when he falls to his knees before her. "You also have come to our training despite your weakened state! You truly are most youthful, my blooming friend, just like my eternal rival, Kakashi!"

God-fucking-damnit, there it was. The Sunset, and- Ren his her face in her hands with a sigh when
the tears comically pouring from Gai’s eyes prompted a three-ringed rainbow. Even the sun felt real, like what sort of genjutsu is this fucking thing?

Ren sighs, digging in her backpack, before pulling out two bento boxes that she definitely did not feel with bento, and proceeds to dig herself even further. "I made food, you want to eat it now or after the training?"

If she thought his crying was comical before, now it evolved into two bloody waterfalls and is that a rainbow glittering over Gai’s head? Ren was pretty sure it wasn’t a genjutsu anymore. All in all, magical ninja superhero world wasn’t all that different from where she originally came from, and then there was Gai.

Worst part of it all? She was starting to genuinely like him.

Ren gives up. She is genuinely just done. She's not one to overestimate herself, though she definitely can sometimes push past her limits, but also a person who knows when to stop. Which, of course, doesn't mean she actually does stop there. But when her breathing gets too ragged after a quarter of usual running (a quarter, for crying out loud!) it's not taken very well by her, and, oddly enough, it's Gai himself who tells her to sit down and rest up. That, of course, takes Ren by surprise, because there's no bigger training freak than Gai.

"That's fucking ridiculous I can do mo-" she starts ranting, only to be cut off.

"No, you cannot. Ren, as much as I respect your power of youth and determination, you barely can stand. I will not risk your health," Gai tells her very seriously and in concern, causing her to hide her face in her hands.

"Bullshit, Gai," she sigh, but she does sound tired – hell, she feels tired. "Pure bullshit but I guess I don't have a choice other than listening to your responsible whining, eh? Hana would be proud! " Ren chuckles dryly, and while she might say so, she knows very well that even if she tried, she would not be able to stand up again. Her legs feel like jelly or fresh marshmallows, and had she tried she would have ended up on her face, breaking her nose or worse. She sighs once again, rather longsufferingly this time, and makes grabby hands for her backpack, suddenly unwilling to move at all, even scoot the short distance to get to it. Gai doesn't really seem to mind, though – bless his weird but still ultimately good soul – and goes to retrieve it.

Ren places the backpack on her lap, rummaging through it and the man lowers himself down to sit next to her – another surprise, because she expected him to go on. Well, whatever, eating together is always more fun than eating alone anyways. She gives him one of the bento boxes. They're big and square, with four (technically five) partitions. In the biggest, where usually would be rice – which, of course, isn't, because Ren's dislike for rice in its most popular and basic form is becoming legendary – are two rather thick slices of Beef Wellington, halved and halves layered on each other to fit. In the second biggest partition, diagonally from the one with meat, Ren made in a wave of nostalgia in the barely last moment before leaving. It's simple, with lettuce and halved cherry tomatoes, bits of So cheese (which tasted somewhat like Cottage Cheese, which means barely at all except a bit like... Well, cheese) and various spices and a bit of oil. In third partition were potato fries Ren made for dessert, because Ren was creative like that.
Gai looked at his bento in silent wonder for a while, and then looked at Ren.

"It looks amazing, and smells even better," he says, and Ren flinches a bit, because for once his tone is absolutely normal, not the booming exuberant half-yelling he usually does, and it's… Weird. Like, really weird.

"Thanks, I cooked it," Ren says with a smile, and Gai grins.

"Then I shall gratefully eat this youthful meal!" he booms, and Ren winces at the volume, because he's sitting right next to her and she does value her hearing, but- Oh well, whatever. Back then when she was living completely alone, cooking was an impromptu hobby of hers, even if she had nobody to share her food with. Now seeing that people enjoyed her cooking, it was somewhat heartwarming.

"Bon Appetit then," she says. Gai laughs and cheerfully digs his chopsticks into the food.

"She befriended him," Kakashi whines pathetically from his perch on one of massive branches of the tree he occupies with Tenzo. They're having a break right now, which means lazy-but-alert scouting around the village for most ANBU. "Oh my God, she befriended him, it's done. He won't leave."

"You say it like you didn't know it was bound to happen," Tenzo chuckles, and Kakashi sends him a toxic glare. "But honestly, Senpai, Gai isn't that bad of a choice of a friend."

"Yesterday she was having dango with Anko," Kakashi says, rubbing his forearms. "It feels like she's collecting an army of people who stalk me one way or another!"

"Senpai, you're just being paranoid."

"No I'm not! You'll see I'm not! It's a punishment for messing up her new couch with my blood, isn't it?"

"Well, she's definitely vicious enough."

"See!"

Tenzo only sighs longsufferingly, looking at his senpai. Sometimes Kakashi can be such a drama queen, honestly. It's still better than the moping he used to prefer few years back, so Tenzo will take it without much complaining.

Somewhere around three is when she decides to make her way towards the Academy again. Those little brats classes will end in about half an hour, she thinks, trying to remember their lesson plan for today, and currently they should have throwing practice on the other side of the building. She opts to just sit on the bench before the building and wait for both them and Cobalt who scuttled away along with Awai when she went to train with Gai, when she sees him.

He's honestly quite adorable at early stages of his life, in traditional Chinese shirt, with evenly cut fringe that kind of looks like bowl-cut but also doesn't, and a long braid.

But no matter how he dresses or how he wears his hair right now, eight-year-old Lee is still every bit of Mini-Gai, from his eye shape right down to his determination. Honestly, if she didn't know that Gai was thirteen at the time Lee was born, she would suspect Lee was actually biologically his. The resemblance was uncanny, even if Lee was rounder, slimmer, more delicate in appearance. that could've been blamed on the mother. But alas, there were possibilities, probabilities, improbabilities and impossibilities. It was probable the two were related, but downright impossible for Gai to be
actually his father.

(Which was actually mostly because Gai was too honorable to be able to produce an oops!baby like some shinobi tended to sometimes.)

Lee was currently in the process of beating the crap out of the training dummy, and Ren had to admit, even at this stage he was pretty strong already. It was only when he stopped that she went completely rigid, because suddenly his shoulders shook and he brought his hand to his face in a manner that, even with his back facing her, absolutely unmistakable to Ren.

And Ren, being Ren, was already walking towards him before she made conscious decision to do so.

Fuck.

"Hey, you okay kid?" she asks, and he whips his head around so fast that his braid makes a whole circle and smacks him and the face. Lee squawks a this, and brushes his hair away, and when he looks back at Ren there's a furious embarrassed blush on his cheeks.

"Yes I am, ma'am!" he answers, and Ren whines, hiding her face in her hands.

"I'm twelve, don't call me that," she huffs, and then sighs. "I'm Ren. You?"

"Rock Lee!"

"What are you doing all alone out here, Lee, mutilating these poor training dummies?" Ren asks, kneeling before the boy, as he sniffs looking down at his shoes.

"Training," he says weekly. "Because I need to get stronger, so that everybody will stop laughing at me!" he says, looking off to the side.

"And why are they laughing?"

Lee is just about to answer, but there's suddenly shuffling in the leaves and something jumps at them. Lee's eyes go wide as saucers and Ren only sighs tiredly, as Cobalt with Awai on her back lands at hand's reach away from them.

"Because they're assholes!" Cobalt promptly says, and Ren facepalms. Awai, apparently, shares her sentiments.

"So when I was off training you were stalking around the Academy, huh," Ren says it more than actually asks, and Cobalt scoffs. "Also, don't curse around brats."

"Hey pot, I'm kettle," Cobalt huffs sarcastically, and Ren is pretty sure she actually sweat-drops at it. She made a monster already, and Cobalt was only summoned yesterday. She was such an adorable, innocent angel then! She could always blame it to Cobalt's exposure to Anko, though. "Also, I heard the other brats tell him that he's a loser because he can't use chakra," Cobalt says, and Lee's shoulders visibly lower.

"Let me guess, the brat who said that had white eyes and a surname that is Hyūga, huh?" Ren asks, crooking her eyebrow, and Lee looks at her in surprise.

"How do you know that?" he asks, and then looks at Cobalt. "Also what is this gigantic spider?"

Ren chuckles, "I know, because I was in class with a Hyūga, and then in a team with one. They're
uppity assholes, if you ask me," she says, and ignores Cobalt's chastising clicking, before motioning at her. "The big spider is Cobalt, and she's my summons. The small spider is Awai, he's my pet."

"Oh. They're amazing!" Lee cheers. "Scary, but amazing."

"Also, it's bullshit that you can't be a ninja without good chakra control," Ren says before she can bite her tongue, gaining Lee's attention. "To be honest, I'm just back from training with a person who is in a very similar situation as you. He can't use chakra that well if at all."

"Really?" Lee asks in childish wonder. "And he became a ninja?"

"Lee," Ren says seriously, placing a hand on his shoulder. "This man not only became a ninja. He's one of most powerful ninja our village has, a renowned Jōnin who can go on par with Copy-Nin Kakashi, despite not being able to use chakra almost at all!"

She's pretty sure that there are star in Lee's eyes. He has not yet even heard man's name, let alone meet him, and already idolizes him.

She's pretty sure she created a monster, then and there.

"Who is he?" Lee asks, gripping one of her hands.

"His name is Maito Gai," she says. "And if you want I can ask him to meet you."

"Yes, please!"

Ren is walking Naruto and Sasuke home from Academy, listening to their and Cobalt's chattering, when Kakashi appears before her out of nowhere, startling both boys and a spider, placing his hands on her shoulders and falling onto his knees.

"WHY?!!" he nearly shrieks, and Ren blinks. "Why do you hate me so!"

"Uh, what," Naruto asks smartly, and Sasuke only stares at the man.

"Is this about Lee?" Ren asks, bringing both her hands up to rub her temples. She can feel a headache forming.

"You have made a monster," Kakashi whines, and Ren sighs longsufferingly.

"Will you stop whining if I invite you over for dinner?" she asks, placing one of her hands on her hip, and massaging the bridge of her nose with the other. "Tenzo can come, too. Just, please, I threw some ideas into the head of a child that's a mini-Gai today, I don't need your flailing. I know I've created a monster."

"Yes, but the brat is only going to adore you!" Kakashi says accusingly. "Like every other brat you meet!"

"I was going to make some salt-broiled saury and miso with eggplant, but I feel like changing my mind right now."

There's a beat of silence.

"Have I told you I love you?" Kakashi asks sweetly, complete opposite of what he presented few seconds ago, giving her his best bullshit eye-smile, and Ren feels like kicking him in the shin.
So, she does exactly that.
Thirty-Ninth Thread

Chapter Summary

Today we celebrate anniversary of this story getting posted into depths of the netz. I can't believe I managed to semi-regularly update it for a year and I'm still going.

"The greatest gift of life is friendship, and I have received it."
— Hubert H. Humphrey

The thing about Ren when she is angry about something is that it varies on certain things that can cause her to have different reactions to her bottled fury. Therefore when hearing from Shibi-sensei that the investigation on who was behind the attack on Torune and Shino was going absolutely nowhere, was met with cold, carefully bottled ferocity Ren was, rather desperately, trying to reign in. Given that the traditional Japanese tea cup was only shaking and not yet cracking under the pressure of her grip, she thinks she was doing a pretty decent job at it.

It didn't help that they had little leads to begin with, because the three bodies that were left were mutilated beyond recognition – venom of Torune's bugs effectively instantly rot them, in a way, and Ren's Takemikazuchi left only charred corpses.

It was safe to assume that Ren was also mad at herself, even if she realistically knew that they couldn't have captured any of them, or, with their level of abilities, safely acquire body in semi-good condition. Still, she was mad at herself.

And at Danzo. He was the ever-convenient recipient of anger, even more so when it was actually his fault.

"You know something," Shibi says suddenly enough to startle a yelp out of the girl, who soon clenches her teeth, trying – and failing – to restrain a growl building up in her throat. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

"I do," she says, "and I do know for sure that my information is correct. However, I neither have any proof, and it will only put me at further disadvantage that I am now. I would love to tell you, sensei; but at this point I will only bring even more danger to myself and Sasuke, I'm sorry."

She perhaps shouldn't have said that, but Shibi-sensei was one of those people she just knew she could trust. And she could expect it from him, too, given that he was her sensei and all. Cobalt, pressed to her thigh, pokes her leg gently and Ren sighs, looking up at the man. He's looking at her, too.

"I understand," he says finally and Ren feels like crying. Oh how she would love to share her knowledge with someone, anyone, who could help her shoulder all this shit, and yet, how is she supposed to do that without ending dead, presumed mad or a traitor, or a spy or Kami knows what else that would endanger her everything?

Hey, Shibi-sensei, I'm actually thirty-two years old, I was murdered and somehow woke up in a
"You're endangered enough," Shibi says suddenly, ripping her away from the train of not exactly positive thoughts. Ren looks up at him, blinking, and he continues; "that's also why I invited you here, to be honest. Because now I actually have a reason to do what I was meant to have done before."

Ren quirks an eyebrow, "What reason and what is it you want to do? Sensei, what are you plotting?"

"Your're safety," he says, and it does sound kind of longsufferingly. "You will cause me a mental breakdown before my children or paperwork will, you realize that? But I have also grown fond of you, of entirely Team Four. And now I have a reason – which is you saving both my heirs – to extend an… Invitation to you and yours. It has rarely been done, but I would like to form an alliance between Uchiha and Aburame clans by giving you a status of a honorary member. This would place you – and anyone connected to you by law, in this case both Sasuke and Naruto – under our protection. It would of course require you to participate in our customary celebrations, but I would imagine it worth it."

Ren just unabashedly stares at Shibi as if he was relying the truth of the world's greatest secret to her. Or was godsend. Frankly, in this situation, he very well might be.

"Oh my Jashin, yes!" she honest-to-god squeals, and if she hadn't placed the tea back onto the table, her new formal hakama with haori (it wasn't like she was going to bother with kimono, especially if she meant to make a statement, and she might or might not have taken extra slow pace of a stroll through the village) would be all in tea due to her jumping up. "Sensei, you're godsend! Oh my Jashin, I'm so dumb I've nearly forgotten about something so important! Honestly, for all the Uchiha wealth and lands I govern, I have no manpower backing me up and frankly if the council decided they wanted to marry me off for 'clan restoration' shit, they would. With you as my close ally, you could stall them long enough for me to do something so they can't!, and as the protector of the current Uchiha Matriarch, you're basically oath-bound to aide me and mine, yes?"

"Indeed," Shibi says, nodding his hair gently swaying, and Ren smiles. In your face, Danzo.

"Thank you, Sensei," Ren sighs, moving her hand to scratch Cobalt's back, to which the spider lets out a content purr.

"No, thank you," he says. "If it weren't for you, who knows what would have happened to my sons. And protection over you? It's just me doing what is right. You might have potential, but you're still vulnerable, Sasuke even more so."

"And with freshly activated Sharingan," Ren catches on, "he's a juicy bite for many who don't particularly feel like denying themselves one of the last Uchiha and his eyes, now that the clan is dead and he doesn't have much protection."

"I realize that you have friends in high places, Ren," Shibi says, "but Sasuke and Naruto are still vulnerable, and you can't be by their side all the time to protect them."

"Like during Chunin Exams," Ren growls, and then straightens. "Yes Sensei, I understand. And I really appreciate the offer. I hope I'll make a good Honorary Aburame."

"Well, you do have affinity for insects already," he says with one of those rare, small indulgent
smiles.

"I'm not an insect, I'm an arachnid!" Cobalt squawks indignantly, and Awai hisses audibly, shaking in Ren's collar. She only laughs.

Life is good. For now at least.

(It will soon stop, Ren knows, because she showed off her Mangekyō to Danzo's brainwashed puppets, and she's sure he knows already. Fuck it. She needs advantage.)

Hoshigaki Kisame was many things. He was a soldier, a killer, a spy sometimes, too. He was a swordsman of the Mist, and damn good one at that, one of candidates for next generation of Seven Swordsmen. He was also peculiar looking, and therefore, found himself rather… Alone.

At least alone enough to not to have any pen-pals.

Therefore he was, of course, rather surprised when he was stared down by a rather massive black spider, that was decidedly not native to the region, carrying a scroll on its back. Well, maybe not quite as surprised as he simply did not know what to make of it. Even less when spider started talking.

"Hoshigaki Kisame?" spider asked in a rather bored, perhaps borderline annoyed tone, and he can only nod, because this might be the oddest thing yet he's ever seen. "I was told to bring a message for you."

"For me?" Kisame asks, eyes narrowing. The spider only unties the scroll from its back and rolls it towards him – it's one of the smaller scrolls, really, easily fitting into his palm – with a short "I'm to wait for a reply."

Kisame's eyebrows go up, because who on earth would write to him? Nevertheless, he checks the scroll for traps, and, finding none, unrolls it.

Hi, Blue, it says in a chicken scratch, that makes him let out a short bark of laughter that startles him a bit. It feels weird because, honestly, he had not expected any contact after the not quite stable Uchiha brat departed back home. It's… Heartwarming, actually. Kind of.

As you can perhaps see, I've gotten my hands on a summoning contract! It was actually a gift from Sensei for ranking up, and I can't say that spiders don't suit me. Frankly, I think I might be one of those rare people who actually genuinely like them and don't find them creepy at all. You should've seen my Cobalt, though! She's this small fuzzy baby the size of a small dog, and she's only three months old! She's all blue, like you, and she's my first summon, but I dread the size she'll reach in the future. Spider tend to multiple theirs by many times, and my new flat isn't all that spacious. If she becomes too big I won't be able to have her inside. Sigh.

The one who brings you this letter is Atsuo, but contradictory to his name, he's not a friendly man at all. I sent him to you instead of Deidara because they would most likely kill each other. If you could find a mouse or something and feed him, that would be appreciated and would make him decidedly less grumpy.

But, enough about me and me precious creepy summons, what about you? It's been awhile since we spoke, and ho boy the shit that went down in my life. I'm not really going to talk about the shit that goes down in village, since we're from different nations and all, I hope you understand, but a lot happened. I'm sorry it took me this long with the letter, but summoning something other than Cobalt or other kid-spiders was hard. Nevertheless, I finally have my own flat, and I ended up kinda
adopting another kid. He's an orphan without a clan, and Sasuke's classmate, and grows on you like parasitic fungus. And I started hoarding cats. I mean, so far I have one, she's all ginger with few white patches and amber eyes. I wanted to name her something other, but somehow ended up calling her Potato. What is my life?

Nevertheless, due to some, ahem, complications, (I managed to get myself a mild chakra exhaustion, in-village, in a case you doubted I'm talented above everything) and so that I could train some with my summons, I'm finally on duty again. So far it's all boring and pretty close by Konoha, but I hope I can be sent somewhere farther out in time. Maybe we'll even meet up?

I'm doing pretty well with Sumire, though, been training with it most of the time. There aren't nearly enough weapon specialists in Konoha, let alone swordsmen and swordswomen. Most of what I learn I have to learn from scrolls and they don't correct your stances when you mess up.

What have you been up to, Blue? I'd love to hear from you.

Your favorite social menace, Uchiha Ren.

Kisame laughs, wiping his eyes, because he might have teared up a bit while reading the letter – honestly, he just did not expect anyone at all wanting to keep in contact with him, and she seemed to genuinely want to – and looked at the rather massive spider that made himself comfortable on his knee.

"Reply?" Atsuo grumps in annoyed tone, and Kisame smiles.

"Yeah, in a second. Now, you want a slice of beef? I don't think I have much else in the fridge."

"Beef will do," Atsuo waves one of his legs in dismissing manner and Kisame chuckles.

Deidara doesn't appreciate sudden or early wake-ups. He appreciates even less when they're caused by a massive spider suddenly landing on his chest. Which might or might not have caused him to shriek out blue-bloody murder.

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to startle you!" the spider whines, making him shut up instantly. He stares at the creature, as it unwraps a scroll from its back and pushes to him. "I'm Emi, and this is from Ren," the spider says, and Deidara blinks.

"From Ren? As in Uchiha Ren?" he asks.

"Do you know any other Ren?" Emi asks, and he shakes his head. "Well then, go on. I'm here to wait for the reply anyway, as my brother goes to Kisame."

"She really wants to keep in contact?" Deidara asks, looking at the sealed scroll. "With me?"

"If she didn't, she wouldn't write," Emi says, and Deidara gets an odd sensation of the spider rolling its – her? – eyes. Is that even a thing for spiders? He sighs, shaking his head, and opens the scroll, and, revelation of revelations, Ren's chicken scratch looks even worse than his own. Huh. Well, it was legible (barely) so there's that.

Hey there Brat. I hope you didn't forget me already, it wasn't that long since I went home. I mean, it did take me a while to manage a summon who could carry the message across countries, sure, but it wasn't that long. Honestly, I find them all adorable, especially Cobalt. She's big blue tarantula that's native originally to Jashin-knows-where, decidedly not here, and she's really pretty shade of blue. Which is cobalt. I'm so creative with names, am I not? Nevertheless, she kinda became my main
summon, and she'll multiply in size, I know that. She's the size of a small dog still, but she's only few
months old. I dread her final size.

The one who gave you your message is Emi. She's really nice, unlike certain other spider who I sent
to deliver letter to Kisame. If you could feed her, that would be much appreciated. She prefers fresh
mice, but will eat all meat if needed.

No offense, but I will never like Iwa. It's been a while, but I'm still finding pebbles in my shoes and
luggage, especially when I think I've gotten all of them out. It's also so… Brown. Konoha is all green
and humid and there are a lot of bugs. Well, they don't bother me, too many spiders around.

I appear to be a kid-magnet, so don't worry that you're the only one who started following me like a
lost duckling. I know you might think I would forget you among all the eleven of the brats that
decided to stalk me, but I won't, don't worry. Also, when is your birthday? It would be nice to send
you a gift or something when due.

Don't go around blowing up too much things, you hear me?

Your favorite social menace, Uchiha Ren.

"Well," Deidara snorts, "she's a menace all right," he shakes his head, looks at the spider and then at
the clock. He has day off, and it's past seven, and normally he would just go back to sleep, but he has
a reply to write. With a sigh he gets up, grabbing the spider, which is surprisingly nice to the touch,
and saunters towards the kitchen.

Ren is walking through the park, yet another of her sightseeing walks through Konoha with Cobalt
(and a bit for herself, since she never had time to wander around before) when she nearly walks
face-first into a rather massive cobweb. She blinks, silvery, barely visible threads just before her
nose, and sighs. The air she breaths out of course upsets the thread and within few moments she
meets face-to-face with quite massive Joro spider, working her mandibles furiously.

"I don't really care it's not food, you know," Ren tells the spider. "Even if on a less-frequented road,
putting up webs like this is still rude, princess."

The spider starts gesticulating wildly, and Ren sighs, bringing one hand to rub her eyes, as Cobalt
starts laughing.

"I feel insulted," Ren murmurs.

"Well, she is insulting you," Cobalt manages between laughter, and Ren sighs heavily.

"I know, alright, I can understand her," she looks at the web again, and narrows her eyes, and then a
smile starts slowly spreading on her lips. "Hey, princess, I can feed you, and your friends – if you
help me."

Princess – Ren figures she'll just call her Ōjo - stills and looks at her with those tiny, beady eyes. And
if ROOT headquarters, wherever they might be, will suffer spider infestation from then on, well.

Ren likes to be step ahead.
At last, the long awaited (at least by me) time skip. And also it's time for me to ay – I'm off to hiatus. It should take me about a month, but I need to finally get my shit together and get my driving license, and also September is ending soon, and with it – my holidays. Hello university. So yeah, I'm taking time off to settle in, but I'm pretty sure I'll throw in an omake or two in the meantime – especially one about Ren getting her hand cut off, because I'm pretty sure you'd like to hear it.

See you by the end of September!

"If you love life, don't waste time, for time is what life is made up of."
— Bruce Lee

Ren got over her chakra exhaustion within a week, and basically right after that was put on active mission rooster. Because of that, soon next months have gotten pretty repetitive. It was a routine, but a quite pleasant one, to be frank. The kids were busy with school, Ren was busy with… Well, quite literally everything. She would go on missions of course, mostly boring C-Rank escorts and deliveries in the proximity, who eventually kept progressing in their difficulty and in fact that Ren was more often than not sent alone – and then, with time and experience, came B-Ranks. Which were basically C-Ranks that involved killing people who were either bandits or low-level ninja. Usually among bandits. And Ren, as a nice and well-trained, exemplary murderer for hire of a weaponized child didn't even bat an eye on spilling their blood.

Not to mention that her first kill (as Ren, Renee had her own luggage) was that ROOT woman trying to snatch Torune. Huh. It didn't even properly register, to be frank, what with Ren being much more interested in the fact that she unlocked one of her Mangekyo abilities and that Hana was angry, again, than the fact of the kill.

And who said she was alone? While she had to dodge going on missions with Danzo-planted ROOT-puppets – he was trying to cause her to have an 'accident' on mission, old asshole – which wasn't that difficult, considering her… Spy net. Spyder net, because Ren was a person for bad puns – but what mattered was that the things they had relied to her have been most disturbing, but allowed her to largely avoid trouble from Danzo – along with that one assassination attempt that he made when particularly aggravated, in-village. Ren unabashedly glued herself to Gai's side for entire week, and when her sent assassin actually finally ran out of patience and struck, he got taste of Takemikazuchi to the face, with witnesses.

Ren might or might not have gained an ANBU tail for her in-village stays because of that. Danzo wasn't pleased, but the same couldn't have been said about Ren.

Also, let it be said, spite and rage are amazing motivators. At least when it comes to Ren and Hana – because Ren is certain that the only reason Hana went and got the chūnin promotion instead of just remaining in the hospital was to go on field missions with Ren. Frankly, it caused Hana more exasperation than ever, but she never relented. Friends are such an amazing thing.
Although Hana wasn't exactly happy when Ren took a blow for her and lost an arm because of it. At all. But hey, she re-attached it, so Ren didn't really know why she was still angry weeks later.

If she wasn't on missions, she was training. Guy, who was the spawn from hell; when she wasn't on medical leave, and each session with him would make her ache in places that she's sure were not supposed to ache from physical activity. Hell, she was pretty sure that there were instances where the hurt itself was hurting – although, she could not deny the effects it was giving her. So she smiled and nodded at Guy's youthful screaming outbursts and ran fifty laps around the entire fucking village walls length. And then proceeded to be fed dirt by Guy in sparring – until she was more often than not able to hold her ground for a few short moments that seemed to lengthen every time they sparred. But she still ached to her very bones.

Lee was well on his way of being indoctrinated into being the mini-Guy and, while couldn't put as much effort as they, still did what he could. Guy was crying profusely and Kakashi was giving Ren a stink eye for introducing one to another. Ren just shrugged – all she did was speed things up, after all. And show Lee's talent – because the brat was, by all means, a genius when it came to taijutsu. All he needed was a chance.

But her physical form was not all she trained. As she wrote back and forth with Kisame (and Deidara, too) the shark man gave her many very useful pointers, and even sent some kenjutsu scroll copies straight from Kiri. And Ren didn't relent – when she wasn't on missions, running herself ragged happily with Guy or trying to set village on fire with new, more destructive fire techniques, she was training with both Sumire and Ryuuzakura – the sword Sasuke gave her on her first birthday in new world. Learning swordsmanship in Konoha was a tricky thing, because they had no true swordsmen to speak of. Yes, Genma did talk to Hayate and he sparred with her sometimes, but he was still sickly and Ren was honestly afraid to hurt the man.

And yes, she did remorselessly sic Hana on the poor kid. She was pleased to notice that after being thrown to her friend's tender mercies, he looked more like a human and less like a corpse.

Still, there were not much that she could learn except scrolls. Of course she did bitch to Kisame about it. And he laughed at her. Constantly. She could hear it when reading his letters. And then she found a Naginata in a weapon shop, fell in love and he stopped laughing. With that weapon, all she had were scrolls left by Senju Touka. She didn't mind. She didn't also mind the fear – formidable woman was from Warring Clan Era and Uchihas tended to piss themselves at sole mention of her.

So yes, Ren might or might not have had found a role model, even if she was technically an enemy from years past. But power was power, and that she could appreciate.

When she wasn't on missions or running herself ragged with taijutsu, swordsmanship and occasional bouts of ninjutsu that included usage of wind more and more often and more and more destructive fire, or fooling around with summons that accompanied her all the time – or at least Cobalt, Ren spent her time with the brats. She couldn't allow herself to grow distant with Sasuke and Naruto as her wards, so even if she was bleeding profusely, staggering on her feet, half-dead from fatigue, vomiting blood or any mixture of former and then some, she would still find time for them. No matter how her body hated her for that, she would sit down, ask for their day, and, if she wasn't completely half-dead, even help with their homework. Of course, when she was with Hana, or if the Inuzuka knew she was in village or coming back, her friend would track her and bodily drag to the hospital. Sasuke and Naruto, little traitors, would usually help her.

And then Ren would, of course, make her escape via window the very next day. Or even the same if she was feeling particularly stubborn. There was something with the idleness and sterility of hospital that felt wrong to her on too many levels.
At the very least hospital staff seemed used to ninja shenanigans.

(Kakashi and Genma trained them well and, to be frank, Ren knew she was being a bloody hypocrite, because she developed tendency to, in turn, bodily drag the two to hospital if they were hurt.)

Also, Ren was apparently in the Bingo Book. Of course it didn't happen overnight, no, but she did make a name for herself upon venturing farther on harder missions – usually low-level bounties. So, yes, she made herself a name enough to be put in Bingo Book - at least in its version from the Water Country that Kisame sent her in one letter that was basically dripping with pride. Apparently she made herself a name – and earned a C-Rank and even a 'Approach with Caution' order – by her habit of flinging spiders at people's faces. Legitimately. She wore long open sleeves littered with summoning seals on the inside, only to fling spiders at people's faces. And while, sure, she did sniff at being a C-Rank, she figured she had time to raise through the danger ratings. She was, after all, a crazed, spider-throwing teen at the time. Fourteen is still young, even for a shinobi, especially to make a name for themselves, so she had time and space to grow and terrify the hell out of people.

Funny how even her bingo book mentioned 'Curses Profusely' in her trivia. Well. it wasn't like she complained, not really. And it was true! Ren never held her tongue when it came to the more colorful aspects of the spoken word.

Also, let it be said, repeated and remembered; Uchiha Ren is a spiteful, petty, angry person. Also foul-mouthed, but that is hard to miss. Nevertheless, Ren was only nearing entering her fourteenth year of life when her period started. It had coincidentally collided with council calling her before them to propose her, as on behalf of Clan Restoration Arc, that she was to marry and bare as many children to pass Sharingan on as humanly possible.

Of course, they threatened her with removal of her status as a ninja, but could only imply things in the end – didn't remove them as a threat, because she knew better than most that they weren't above pulling not really legal strings to get their way. Ren was a chūnin, and she was a recognized clan head, but, on behalf of the clan counting only three members (four, but she wasn't going to tell them about Obito), the council – with Danzo on the lead – could pry. There were only three things that could get her out of the program completely – her eighteenth birthday, and therefore formal maturity in every aspect of law, attaining status of Jonin and therefore also formal maturity in every aspect of law, shinobi or civilian, and becoming permanently barren in unfixable way, that would rule her out of being a breeding stock for the village forever.

Let it be repeated again; Uchiha Ren is a spiteful, petty, angry person with little to no concern over the wants of others if they aren't people she very clearly adores or is closely tied to. Councilmen are not and will never be people she adores or is closely tied to.

At all.

And while she was content waiting and treating herself with hysterectomy as her fifteenth birthday gift from herself – which she knew was possible and safe with usage of ninja magic to perform on women before the age of twenty-five, she has done her research, thank you – she basically went under the knife the very next week after being summoned before the council. Money opened many doors, it would seem, and the surgeon – retired shinobi – didn't bat an eyelash at her age or her odd requests.

With the reign of Danzo, Ren was really not going to let doctors discard her removed tissue, because who knew if the depraved asshole wouldn't just recover it and use to, possibly, clone himself some Uchiha. Which was so very not happening. And thus Ren, rather morbidly, requested her surgeon to, instead of burning it, seal the removed tissue into a scroll that would keep them preserved and
contaminated, and she would keep it. It was a seal-and-chakra activation combo keyed to Ren and Ren alone. She promptly gave it to Cobalt to stash in Jōren Falls (spider summons dimension) for extra safety, because there was no such thing as too many precautions.

Not against a cockroach of Danzo's tier.

Also, the council promptly fucked off and left her to her own devices. And if civilians were somehow informed by a certain old meddling coot by the private surgery, well. Let it be repeated for the third time; Uchiha Ren is a spiteful, petty, angry person who hated most civilian population with passion. And, as a Clan Head, had much of a leeway. So she sued people for slander left, right and center, ran some nearly completely bankrupt, increased the already massive amounts of Uchiha wealth with this, and they eventually stopped – purely out of fear of getting sued next.

Ren was kind of sad, honestly. Having civilians pay her money for their stupidity was more profitable than missions on the long run! She had even seen Sasuke and Naruto with a stash of some books and scrolls about law. Well, talk about inspiring children to learn useful skills in life.

Other than that, she became some sort of crazy cat lady – she would rescue strays felines and then keep them. It happened thrice already – first, with Potato. Then came Minerva (yes, seriously she named her cat Minerva), a most ordinary Tabby cat who certainly did not morph into elderly witch to scold her, who got Ren's attention by dropping onto her shoulders from the roof. Lastly came Lady Sparkle who, after thorough washing, turned out to be Turkish Angora – assuming ninja world had Turkish Angoras.

As for her summons – just as Ren feared, Cobalt grew. And grew. And didn't seem to feel like stopping. Standing tall, the Gooty Tarantula already reached Ren's hips, and said she wasn't even halfway done. Given that Ren shot up like a bloody bamboo enough for Genma to joke she might outgrow him – and he was six feet tall – it wasn't reassuring thought. Ren also firmly decided that she needed to visit Jōren Falls to get acquainted with her more prominent summons. And maybe ask for Sage Mode.

All in all, life was good – and then interesting things started happening again. Well, interesting things that caused Ren a lot of exasperation. It all went down in February, a month before Ren's fifteenth birthday, when she was sent on a solo bounty hunt B-Rank in Iwa and meet a certain blonde she's been pen pals with again.

Shit, predictably, went down fast from there.
Forty-First Thread

Chapter Notes

I'm not off Hiatus yet! I just have no self control, I guess. But Uni life is hectic and waking up at 6AM? Yeah, no. I'm bloody nocturnal, okay.

"Each person you meet is an aspect of yourself, clamoring for love."
— Eric Micha'el Leventhal

It made her nostalgic, if Ren was to be honest. The rocky wasteland of Iwa, currently covered with a layer of snow – it was definitely much more to the north than Land of Fire, with its mild climate, hot summers and warm winters. During the beginning of her new life, Ren didn't even realize that there was winter when she woke up first – the climate resembled a chilly spring day more than anything. But in Iwa? Iwa, at this time of the year, was the fucking Arctic.

Ren sighs, puffing out a stream of hot air and then drags her scarf a bit higher, to cover her red, cold nose. It's not bad per say, but after few days in this weather, she grew more than tired of the biting cold. And yes, it was true that her body temperature was higher than normal – as with any Uchiha. It was one of their inborn traits, the buildup of fire chakra under their skin, that allowed them for such proficient use of fire techniques without overheating. It also allowed them to survive in lower temperatures – or, in Ren's case, to take less warm and movement-restricting garments in favor of weaponry and resources she might – and most likely will, knowing her luck – need.

Nevertheless, the time she had spent in calf-deep snow and chilling wind is starting to really get on her nerves – and she's yet to find her target, stalk them, kill them and collect their head to bring back nicely sealed in a scroll. Sometimes shinobi were tasked with bringing back entire bodies – that was, of course, when their target has some interesting ability. Ren's hadn't, it was just a chūnin-level missing nin who really angered one of richer people in the Land of Fire before taking off to Iwa – but the offended party did not let go and instead hired Konoha to deal with the issue. In all honesty, Ren could relate – she wasn't one to let go either, and from what she knew, her target, in drunken stupor, assaulted children of the customer, beating up his son and sexually harassing the daughter, who got pretty shaken by it.

So, yes. Ren could relate, because she would do exact same thing in such situation.

She sighs, tucking her long, open sleeves a bit more into her – currently with fingers – high-class reinforced fiber gloves. Normally she wouldn't wear such a garment in this weather, but Ren realized early in her life that comfort doesn't always go head-to-toe with convenience. Comfort would be narrow sleeves she wouldn't have to constantly fix. Convenience are long, open sleeves littered on the inside with tiny, intricate summoning seals, courtesy of Naruto, that can become an unlimited source of relatively small spiders to sling at people's faces.

Ren snorts. Funny how, throughout the years, tarantula-sized spiders became 'relatively small' for her, where they were way beyond other people's comfort zones with their 'gigantic' size. Given that
Cobalt barely fit, vertically, through the doors anymore, yeah. They were, indeed, relatively small. Or just Ren got used to having only bend her head down a little to gaze into beady eyes of her eight-legged summon.

Ren sighs, tugging her fur-lined hood a bit lower to shield herself from incoming gust of ice-cold wind and growls, at nothing in particular.

"You didn't have to accept this mission," says soft voice from somewhere in her hood, near to her ear, and Ren sighs. "There were a plenty in warmer regions, you sentimental goof."

"Thank you for this insight, Anri."

Ren huffs into her scarf, chuckling a little as she feels thin legs brush her neck and ear, before she has to tilt a little, as Anri perches on the side of her face, two legs and a bit of head poking out of her scarf. Anri is one smallest - if not the smallest - summons Ren managed to convince to aid her so far. She was a Redback Spider – and while about four times the original size, still small enough to easily fit on Ren's palm, legs included. Or huddle in Ren's scarf to be completely shielded from the cold. That works, too.

"Just looking out for you, dear," Anri chirps, and Ren rolls her eyes.

"Your sarcasm is greatly appreciated," she mumbles, glancing sideways at the spider. Redbacks – known also as Black Widows – were one of most venomous species Back Then, and they don't disappoint here, either. Anri, while small, was highly venomous – which, Ren admits, is the reason she's the one accompanying her for the mission. As part of the trio of highly venomous assassins, she will be vital if Ren finds an opening to just let her bite the target and wait for a bit for the venom to run its course.

She could've taken other two, too; Atsushi, a highly aggressive Atrax who usually trails after Anri like a lost puppy – which Ren still don't know how Anri managed to convince him to leave her alone for mission – and Akihiro, a Brazilian Wandering Spider. Surprisingly, also highly aggressive. While Ren admits that they made an efficient team, she was so not putting up with their bickering that happened every time in-between that could escalate into full-blown spider brawl. Which she was so not dealing with.

Therefore; Anri. And her well-meaning but still biting sarcasm. Honestly, Ren would very much loved to take her fluffy Cobalt to ride like some sort of horror-esque blue pony, but that was the point – Cobalt was cobalt-blue, and therefore would be rather visible on currently pure white landscape of land of Earth.

Her internal musings are interrupted by Anri suddenly digging three of her legs into her cheek, forcing it to the side, just as a rather meek 'poof resounds'. Surely enough, when gray smoke clears, on a boulder almost as high as Ren is tall – which is tall enough for Gemma to only half-joke that she might outgrow him soon – emerges a well-known shape of Emi, one of delivery spiders.

"Ren! Anri!" Emi chirps, waving some of her legs in the air. "Hi!"

"I didn't expect to see you so soon," Ren says, raising an eyebrow, and if a spider can look embarrassed, Emi certainly does now. "Okay, spill the marbles."

"Well, Deidara sent you a note," Emi says, unwrapping a bit of folded paper from around her abdomen, and it indeed is a note. A short one, instead of a proper size-changing scroll they usually conversed with. Ren takes it, unwrapping and reading quickly. It's not long.

It doesn't make matters any less complicated.
Hi, Ren.

Sorry it's so sudden, but many things happened during last week, and you said in your last letter that you will be in Earth country around this time. If it's not a problem, I'd like to meet. Emi will have coordinates.

"Well, fuck," Ren huffs, crinkling the paper under her fingers and involuntarily setting it aflame. Just as life was taking a turn for stable, nice, if a bit monotone routine, this happens. What is this? Deidara deflecting from Iwa. Ren knows. It can't be anything else – the time is just about right, too. Honestly, she thought he'd run off earlier. And the coordinates he gave? Not Iwa. Not even remotely around. But frankly, only a slight detour away – and even that from a rather wide area where her target supposedly resides.

Ren hums a bit angrily, biting the inside of her cheek. What to do?

But if she doesn't do anything now, Akatsuki can show up any second and snag him...

Does she want them to snag him? Should she change-

Oh fuck it, like that's even a question. She promised herself to rip the canon to shreds properly, had she not?

"Tell him I'll be there soon," she says, looking at Emi. "I could use his help, actually."

Deidara is cold and miserable and for a split of a second thinks that maybe leaving Iwa was a dumb idea – only to rip the thought to shreds, because of course it was a good idea! Those uneducated morons had no appreciation for his art! Too dangerous, they said, too explosive. Well, gee, that was the damn point!

So he ran. And blew about a quarter of the village. They deserved it!

But now he was cold and miserable in this god-forsaken cave which entrance he managed to mostly shield with an earth jutsu, but not entirely. The cave – more of a hole, really – wasn't overly big, and Deidara preferred some cold gusts of fresh air, instead of suffocating in a small, locked space. It also gave him insight to the passage of day. Right now it was afternoon, and sky was rapidly darkening. And all he had was meek, pathetic excuse of a fire.

Prospect of being alone frightened him, even if he would never admit it to anyone, even to himself.

Emi came back few hours ago, confirming that Ren indeed was in the perimeter and would come and meet him, though. So he sat, unnaturally patient, and waited. And then waited some more. He might've dozed off at some point, because a movement on the outside was what jerked him into awakened, his hands going to the clay pouches before he made conscious decision to do so. Outside was pitch-black, and his mediocre fire was already out, not even sparkling anymore.

There's a crunch of the snow, and Deidara is ninja enough to know that it's forced, that someone is deliberately making sound around him – that they know he is here, but signal their presence. Why?

"Brat, open up, it's cold outside," growl a voice he hasn't heard for two years, and Deidara sighs in relief, making a gesture with his fingers, molding the ground with his chakra for enough allowance for a flexible person to slip through. And surely enough, a shape slipped through it, wiry and cocooned in not quite thick winter jacket, not really gangly but with awkward, slightly too-long limbs of a teenager at the very peak of growing up. And those unmistakable, creepy red eyes glowing in the dark.
Deidara knows, she told him, that they allow it certain degree of night vision. Doesn't make it any less creepy.

He motions his fingers again, and the patch of the ground where cold embers and ashes lay drops down, and the stone closes above it again to make place for her, and then closes the entrance again, leaving some space for ventilation. He knows he won't be going out before sunrise, and he really doubts either will Ren, given how she angrily brushes the snow off her hood and shoes, muttering curses under her breath.

While it was okay just for him, with them both inside the cave-hole, it's getting slightly cramped. Enough space for two grownups, and they are two growing teenagers. Still, Deidara has to admit that Ren might actually be taller and overall more massive than most adults, so that evens it out.

"So, you finally decided to get the hell out of Iwa, huh?" Ren smirked, looking at him with thankfully deactivated eyes, and Deidara huffed, turning his head to the side.

"I can't help it that they have no understanding of art, un!" he says snootily, "art is explosion!"

"It sure is," Ren snorts, bringing her hand up and ruffling his hair under his cap in a fond gesture. Deidara huffs and swats at the hand, but it has no real heat. "I'll need your help."

"Un?" he looks up at her, and Ren sighs.

"I'm tracking down a bounty, a chūnin, and offender," she says and then groans, stretching tired limbs as much as the space allows. Given that they can only crouch before hitting their heads on the ceiling, not much. "I have a more-less location, but not an exact one. Can you use that clay of yours to make something that could carry us?" she asks, and Deidara hums, tapping his chin.

Had she asked few months before, he'd likely say no, as he was in the middle of applying expanding technique on his sculptures. They were very volatile then, and as much as he loves explosions, having something explode under their feed wouldn't be good. But now, he's pretty much figured it out.

"I guess I can," he says. "They can be a bit volatile at times, but won't blow up. I fixed that. I expand them, but they can suddenly re-shrink."

"That's okay," Ren huffs, furiously rubbing her calf before moving to the other. "As long as I won't have to walk a step in next bloody week."

"That won't happen," Deidara rolls his eyes. "You always have to walk a bit."

"Fuck," is Ren's very eloquent answer.

It's dark and late, and very, very cold. Enough for Deidara to start shaking. So when Ren throws her arm over his shoulders and drags him closer to her, he doesn't ever really protest, despite an offended, shocked squeak he lets out. He huddles a bit closer to her, to this warmth normal human body shouldn't be able to produce in such weather and temperature. And if he grabs the hand slung around his shoulders for comfort like a child without home he is, well.

Nobody has to know.
Ren wakes up to Deidara snuggling to her side as if his life depended on it, the shared warmth making the icy chill of winter bearable. It's still dark outside, or so the small airway-gap they have indicates, nothing but gaping darkness beyond it. If Ren is to guesstimate, she hasn't slept much longer than four hours – just the amount of sleep her enhanced, physics- and logic-defying ninja body has learned to require. The bare minimum for optimal function, and as much as she's perfectly capable of doubling the amount at home in her warm, soft bed, this is neither her home nor her bed.

This isn't even Konoha.

No, she's in a god-forsaken hole in the Land of Earth, in the literal middle of nowhere, with a mini missing-nin tagalong, who also happens to have an unhealthy obsession with explosives, and a man to hunt down and put down like a rabid animal. One whom she is yet to locate.

Fuck, to put it eloquently.

Still, despite hating everything about her stay in this frozen hell, Ren can't help but be pleased with the outcome. Mainly because she had met up with Deidara, basically right after his defection. And no matter what he says, it wasn't just because people didn't appreciate his art – there was something much deeper to this, especially with the way he had leapt at any and all chances of comfort that were offered. Just like Sasuke after the massacre, or Naruto, more used to everyone hating and ostracizing him. Someone deprived of all affection.

But... no. It's entirely possible that Deidara is a pariah in his village. With his blonde hair and blue eyes alone, he looked a lot like the Yondaime Hokage, Naruto's father – Minato. And Iwa as a whole hates Konoha's Yellow Flash with a passion. Not to mention his face shape is actually pretty similar to what she'd seen in pictures-

Wait. What?

No. No, no, nonono-

She is so not going that direction, to think abou-

No. Definitely no. She'll worry about possibilities later. Once they're back in Konoha.

...
Since when had she decided that they are going to Konoha?

Gods above, sans Kaguya, she's really turning into a mother hen. Genma 2.0. Wonderful, Aoba is going to have field day following her and clucking like he does with Genma. Ren thinks that Aoba's expert proficiency at evading attacks comes from running from Genma, actually. And his senbon.

The man has the patience of a saint, really – until Aoba starts clucking, that is.

Ren chuckles silently at that, but the motion is enough to stir Deidara awake. The boy sighs, then yawns, and finally blinks, moving slightly away from where he had been curled up, glued to her side. He looks around a bit, confused, before his eyes land on Ren sitting on the ground, and realization visibly flashes through his face. Deidara huffs like an annoyed kitten and rubs furiously at his eyes before looking around, much more awake, only to realize that yes, they’re in the same cave-hole they were in yesterday, and yes, he's not in Iwa, and also yes, Ren is here.

"Did you take anything with you from Iwa?" Ren asks, genuinely curious. She couldn't be bothered to notice yesterday, too annoyed by having to walk in the freezing cold, but now she sees that all Deidara has on him are his clay pouches, put away by the wall close to his legs.

"Yeah, un," he says. "But I didn't have much, so I just brought a small storage scroll to carry it."

Ren can't blame his reasoning, really. Especially since her tantō that Kisame helped her choose and her katana, which she received from Sasuke on her first birthday as Ren, are receiving much the same treatment at the moment. While she trusts in their steel, she isn't particularly fond of having them out in the subzero temperatures at all times – especially since she just recently started to imbued her katana's blade with fire chakra, and would rather not test how long-term cold exposure would affect that.

"Good. I have some food. We can eat then move out. You have any food with you?" she asks, grabbing for the backpack she had discarded upon entering the cave yesterday and starts digging in it for the scroll she sealed her food in. Honestly, how ninja can create storage seals yet not utilize them for maximum effect, Ren doesn't know, but she's definitely not part of the masses. Especially since scrolls actually preserve the state of the object sealed inside – in the case of food, while it does lose its heat, it's still as fresh as if she just made it.

"A bit, but for no longer than three days," Deidara says, and Ren grimaces. The food she has would have lasted her a week, but since there are two of them now, they probably only have enough supplies combined for five more days. While it should last long enough for Ren to track down and kill her target, it won't be enough for the way back to Konoha.

"We're going to have to hunt something. Or hopefully my target will have supplies," Ren sighs. "Honestly, I hate processing animals. Their guts are slimy and disgusting."

"Un," Deidara agrees. "Besides, I doubt you carry spices around."

"Yeah. Okay, here's what we'll do – we eat, set out, and hopefully find the asshole by today, and then kill him."

"Fine by me, un."
current predicament, and Ren will take any and all small mercies life serves and then some at the moment.

"It's too dark for me to do anything, un," Deidara decides, looking around, pointedly everywhere but Ren's glowing red eyes. "If I don't kill myself walking it'll be a success."

"It's fine," Ren sighs, looking around. Her sense of direction is decent, based on sensing the chakra in the ground, given that each side of the world has its specific flow, indistinguishable unless you look for it. A neat trick she roped Kakashi into teaching her. She kneels, pressing her hand to the ground through the snow, and focuses.

She detoured to the west when she went to get Deidara, but it's nothing that a few hours of trekking can't fix. She sighs, stands up, shaking snow off her glove and turns her eyes to the black sky, praying silently that her target is still within the area that he was said to have encamped himself. Otherwise, she's going to be really, really mad.

But all she has is the hope that winter has grounded her target in his encampment and he's waiting for it to pass – that, and he's not expecting anyone to be sent after him.

"Now what, un?" Deidara says, and Ren sighs, rubbing her hands over her eyes. She loves her job, but she also hates it with passion.

"Now, we head that way," she answers, gesturing towards the northeast. "You can try making a mount for us when the sun rises. Okay?"

"Yeah, un, let's go. I feel like killing something. Or someone."

"Oh so do I, brat, so do I," she sighs, fixes her scroll-filled backpack, and walks forward in the direction of her target.

Ren loves Deidara, truly, honestly and platonically, from the very bottom of her heart. While the thing he had sculpted with his clay resembles neither a pony nor a dog, but something in-between with some rabbit and frog toes mashed in, it still trots diligently through the snow, carrying both Ren and Deidara on its back without an issue. It's not even as wobbly as Deidara insinuated it would be upon sculpting the thing, but its face still screams for a mercy kill.

Ren, for once, doesn't comment on it. Deidara's art is explosions, not sculptures per say, and there is, no matter what Ren thinks, some sort of aesthetic to the pathetic construct. It's just... definitely not within Ren's highly limited understanding of art. At all.

"Any more information on the guy you're tracking, un?" Deidara asks from where he's comfortably seated in front of Ren, his back nearly glued to her torso and shamelessly seeping the warmth her body generates.

"Well, he's a chūnin, has been for a while now, so there might be trouble," Ren sighs, placing her chin on top of Deidara's head. "But I have my spiders, and they're usually very proficient in a fight, depending on either the super creepy 'nope' factor or on being overlooked. He's originally from some backwater village in the Land of Lightning, but, oddly enough, has wind chakra. No overly flashy achievements or difficulties he's bested. Regular guy who bit off more than he could chew, really. I don't expect issues with him."

"With just him, un?"

"Ah, yes," Ren sighs, closing her eyes. "There's a high possibility that he has made... friends, let's
call them. And those possible friends are a big, unknown."

"Well then, good thing you have me with you, un," Deidara says, fixing his scarf a bit higher and Ren chuckles.

"Yeah, if it all goes to shit I'll just have you blow it up."

"Why not start with blowing them up, un?"

"And if they have a Jōnin with them?" she asks, and Deidara huffs angrily. "Yeah, I know. Then we'd either run or die trying, most likely."

Deidara grumbles something under his breath, but doesn't answer otherwise.

The good news is, they manage to locate the target the very same day. The shit news is he's not alone and their encampment is much better made and guarded than Ren would like. Not to mention that aside from him there's actually half a dozen other people there. Or that's at least what Anri relays after returning from reconnaissance. During these last three years, Ren has learned that her assassin spiders are, while not chakra sensitive, hyperaware of their surroundings. If Anri says there are seven people in a well-made encampment, then that's exactly what they will find there. Fuck.

"Okay, so what do we do?" Deidara asks, rubbing his gloved hands together. Ren's eyes are closed, her breathing a bit harder than usual. She's angry, that much is easy to see. When she finally looks up at him, it's with her crimson red Sharingan painting her irises instead of her natural coal black.

"Well, we plot," she says a bit forcefully, visibly trying to restrain her disappointment and rage. Of course, things were expected to go south, but Ren is nevertheless very unhappy with this development. "Let's find somewhere nearby to make camp, and then... and then we'll figure out what to do."

"They don't have a sensor with them," Anri pipes in from where she's buried herself in the back of Ren's hood again. "Otherwise they would have found you already. And they are overly cocky and sure of themselves, and don't appear to be all that good at teamwork."

"And that is the flaw we can and will exploit the hell out of," Ren says, eyes narrowing.

"Indeed," Anri agrees, rubbing her two forelegs together. "They're disorganized, arrogant, and unused to working together. They make it work, surprisingly, but are not a unit at all, from what I gather."

"Just how long were you in there to get all that, un?" Deidara asks, looking at where the spider pokes grotesquely out of Ren's hood with wonder in his eyes.

"Long enough," Anri says. "I'm rather proficient at reading behavioral patterns, if I do say so myself. How they are not at each other's throats yet, I'm not certain, but perhaps the Jōnin is the case. They are aiming to form a bandit group, most likely, but are new to the idea. I will scout more tomorrow for their weapons and more information, but that's all I have for now."

"Damn, spider summons are useful, un," Deidara sighs. "Sneaky and easily overlooked, not to mention so creepy people just rather not see them at all."

"Indeed," Ren says, smiling a very, very nasty smile with way too many teeth. "Let's backtrack south a bit, there's a small canyon... ugh, rift? I don't know. But we can hide and strategize there."
"Okay, un."

"Also, Anri, do you think Niji and Kakagi would agree to come out here? I'm shit at illusions myself, but with them only the Jōnin would pose a real threat."

"I'll ask around. Kagami will probably want to come for field training anyways."

Ren sighs once more when Anri crawls out of her hood and onto the horse-dog-rabbit-frog thing Deidara made, salutes, and then disappears in a soft puff of white smoke.

"The canyon thing then, un?" Deidara asks.

"Yeah, but first, a short detour," she answers, eyeing something in the distance. After looking at where Ren is focused on for a while, Deidara realizes that it's actually a white deer treading through the snow, that would usually be otherwise unnoticeable at such a distance, especially without a Sharingan.

"Yeah, I can deal with a detour for food, un," he says. "Do you at least have salt?"

"I think I have some with me. And herbs that should technically be medicinal but can be used as spices."

"Well, that's neat, un. Today's menu is fresh venison."

"Yup."
Forty-Third Thread

Chapter Summary

So, yeah. Hello after university break. Merry Christmas, have a basically filler chapter. But action happens in next one, I promise!

"Adults are just obsolete children and the hell with them."
— Dr. Seuss

Ren pounces at the deer – or elk? She doesn’t know, it’s a Cervid, okay – without it even noticing her. Bless chakra enabling ninja to move around on knee-deep snow like bloody Legolas, without falling in or having it even creak under their steps. She jumps at it by the tree line, and the animal doesn’t even see her coming until it’s too late. She jumps on its back, making the fragile cervid cave under her weigh, and knocks it out with a surge of foreign chakra right into its spine. The attack cripples the animal, the rush of energy ruining its nervous system. It’ll probably die in an hour – not like Ren is going to allow it to, not really. Meat has to be drained, because bloody meat... ew. Not good for preparing due to the mess, and Ren would prefer to not to deal with blood stains on white, winter-geared outfits.

"Find me two trees to hang the deer between and dig a hole in the snow, okay?"

"Well, that was clean," Deidara comments with a nod, but otherwise doesn’t really stop as he marches between the trees. He slides his backpack off his shoulders, setting it down by a fallen log, and starts digging a hole in the snow between two fairly large trees. Ren, in the meanwhile, slings the deer over her shoulder as though it weighed nothing and flashes through a few hand seals before pressing her hand to the snow. There’s a telling poof of smoke, and a pale brown spider with a large, round abdomen crawls hastily up her leg.

"Reeeeeeenn," the spider whines, and Deidara can hear Anri scoff. "Must you summon me in this cold? You know I hate cold! Couldn't you have summoned Aki or Kyo instead?"

"Hello to you, too, Jun. I need you to help me suspend this deer between those two trees," Ren says, completely ignoring his whiny outburst. "Let's hurry, I want to drain it before it dies on its own accord."

"Oooh, you blew up its nervous system," Jun says, and, using Ren's shoulder as a springboard, jumps at a tree. "Okay then."

From there, hanging the deer between the trees and above the hole Deidara had dug in the snow is a matter of a few minutes. Spider silk, equally as sturdy, if not sturdier, than ninja wire, but much more delicate, is more than enough to have the animal hanging like laundry without fear of it snapping and falling down. Ren frees one of the scrolls from her utility belt when Jun finishes up, and with a poof of smoke, Ryuuzakura – the katana Sasuke gave her on her first birthday here – appears in her hand. With a nod towards Deidara, who moves to grab the deer by its antlers, she unsheathes the blade and cleanly cuts off the head in one fluid motion. As Deidara drags the head to the side, the fresh, warm arterial blood spurts right into the hole, steaming in the sub-zero temperature like boiling water. Soon,
the white turns red and pink, as the carcass bleeds its life-force out. With it hanging upside down, gravity does all the work for them.

They wait a while to make sure all the blood is drained, and then Ren frees the carcass, slinging it over her shoulder, and helps Deidara cover the red pool with the previously moved snow. It will seep through, sure, but hopefully it's in a secluded enough location that nobody will really notice it. And with that, they turn to their original destination – the canyon-like rift in the rock.

But this hunt for the deer had unintentionally brought back Ren's memories. Memories of Back Then, that she had grown to associate with the disaster that was half of the second and whole third decade of her life. Enough for her to forget that the first decade wasn't that bad – quite enjoyable, even.

Renee Archer grew up on the Archer Farm. It was mainly a dairy farm, but they did have chickens and the occasional pig. And because of that, Ren had very set and categorized views of animals – even if they, in certain aspects, disagreed with her family's views, they were still similar. It was something she grew up with, and nothing in the world would be able to change her views.

There were pets, like cats and dogs – those dependent on the owner. Renee's family thought they needed to earn their keep as any member of the household, but she herself though that all these creatures deserved was unconditional love for the sole fact that they existed. They were pure, knew nothing but loyalty and instinct. If they killed, they killed for nourishment or safety – never hated, never questioned.

(\textit{Even – or especially – now, Ren really wouldn't bat an eye on atrocities committed by humans to other humans – unless those were her humans. But if an animal were to be abused, she would attack the abuser without a thought.})

Cows were the producers. They were kept in prime conditions, because they produced milk – second main, next to the crops, source of income of the farm. Ren didn't have much opinion on the cows, but she did like milk.

And then there was food. Pig and pork, chicken and poultry, bull and beef. She used these words interchangeably, because they meant the exact same thing to her, and racked her head on how people could keep them as pets, and even more on catcalls of animal cruelty. These animals were, after all, bred and raised only to be slaughtered, cooked, and eaten. That was all they were for – all they lived for.

Ren still remembers the time when she was Renee and seven years old and the world didn't seem to want to ruin her yet. The day her grandmother decided that their broiler chickens were ready to be picked out, killed, and processed. She watched, morbidly curious, as her grandfather cleanly chopped their heads off without missing, and how she stole chicken heads avoiding the blood from the spasming corpses, and then ran around with those heads with Killer – the pit-bull they had then – hot at her heels hoping that she would drop one for him to snatch and snack on.

She knows that those poncy city people who were never in any proximity to actual processing of their food would start yelling that she was a monster, a growing psychopath. They would scream 'animal cruelty' like pigs before slaughter, and yet they would buy eggs of chickens kept in much worse conditions, eat meat of animals kept in horrid conditions, whereas the pigs on the Archer Farm at least had the shit taken out and new hay laid down every evening.

Fucking hypocrites.

To eat meat, you need to kill an animal. Some animals were kept and fed only to be killed. And that's
The meat doesn't taste bad, really. A bit bland, maybe, but not bad, and Deidara certainly can appreciate it over the dried shinobi rations he snagged upon leaving the village – but not over the cooking Ren could get up to with proper tools and ingredients. Alas, right now all she has are shinobi weapons, a mediocre bonfire, and some salt and medicinal-but-not-quite herbs. But he can also deeply appreciate Ren's sheer savagery, a necessary quality for ninja trying to survive outside of a safe village, and her ability to utilize it without hesitation.

Deidara isn't sure if they have a proper survival test at Konoha's Academy, but he feels decidedly better in the company of someone who knows what they're doing – most of the time, at least. Or pretends to know.

Honestly, everything is possible with one Uchiha Ren. One second she is the sharpest, most disciplined shinobi ever, and the next she turns into a suicidal clown whose survival to teenage-hood was either a miracle or a mistake. He hasn't decided yet.

Probably both.

"So. How do we go for them?" Deidara asks finally from above his meal. The two of them managed to find a small, but infinitely more comfortable, cave within the ravine, and set up temporary camp in there, safe from wind and snow. Without those two, the cold seemed almost bearable. The camp is about an hour at moderate speed to the North from them, so they aren't risking discovery.

"Dunno yet," Ren shrugs from above her plate. The fact that she had actually bothered bringing real cutlery in one of the scrolls affirmed Deidara in his opinion that she's an absolutely ridiculous woman like nothing she's done so far. She is also very... eccentric, for lack of a better word. Not that Deidara is complaining at this tiny imitation of luxury in a cave in the middle of nowhere – but that doesn't make the fact any less ridiculous.

Ren sighs, looks at Deidara, and says, "I'll be sending spiders in to see what we're really dealing with, and plan accordingly for tomorrow night. How does that sound?"

Deidara hums and looks down at his eyesore of a jacket, the Iwa-red screaming 'Hey, it's me, the target, aim right here'. It wasn't much of an issue before, because when escaping the village, he had explosions to turn the attention elsewhere, and then Ren would cover him with her white cloak when he attached himself to her like a limpet. Now, however-

He looks at Ren – dressed all in grays and whites instead of the blacks and faded purples he's seen her in during exams. Even her gloves are a pale gray. Spotting her in the snow, especially from a distance, would be highly difficult for someone without any sense enhancers, such as sensory awareness or fancy eyes. Deidara, on the other hand, looks like a bullseye on the snow.

"Hey, un. You have any spare clothes?" he asks finally after a slightly awkwardly long bout of silence. "I look like a target in mine."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, you mean like mine, so you won't be an eyesore in the snow?"

"Yeah, un."

"Well, they're gonna be way too big for you-" she starts to say, only to slap herself on the forehead in a very audible way that makes Deidara wince. "Okay, no, wait, fuck, I'm dumb. Jun and his brothers can resize them in no time. Okay, sorry."
Deidara just laughs at her flailing. That's Ren, alright.

With the additional food source in the form of bland, tightly sealed, roasted venison, Ren can happily say that they are no longer as pressed with time as they were before, when they were much more limited in resources. Therefore, she has no qualms against actually setting up a proper bedroll after setting Anri out to get a proper reconnaissance. Given that Deidara is capable of making small flying birds, he had helped in depositing the spider much closer to the nuke-nin camp than they were, without having to actually go there.

Knowing that Anri would take a while to get a proper look at everything, Ren decides to just go to sleep for the night, and Deidara, after changing into a resized, grayscale uniform made for sub-zero temperatures, can't help but agree.

A full night's sleep in a cave with the entrance tightly sealed with spider webs stronger than ninja wire turns out to be exactly what she needed after her trot through the snow, to regenerate what chakra she had used up and ease the pain in her overworked muscles. It made her feel like a human being once again, instead of whatever she felt like before. She awakens once more to Deidara latched to her side like a limpet and snuggling as if his life depends on it and Anri's sharp, slim legs digging insistently into her cheek.

There are seven people in the nuke-nin encampment for sure, and five of them are in various Bingo books – therefore, they are chūnin, or above. Two of them aren't. That gives two jōnin, three chūnin and two unknowns. Ren doesn't like unknowns. Ideally, she would have the spiders take out the jōnin, and she and Deidara would take on the rest, without the unknowns turning out to be something surprising.

Realistically, she knows this won't happen. Her spiders would do their best to incapacitate whomever they can, but one of the chūnin is a poison user, and spider venom, no matter how potent, is a simple toxin – a poison component. They will have to go for the poison user first, and hope the jōnin won't kill them in the meantime it takes for the spiders to bite and their toxin to work. And that the poison user doesn't incapacitate them instead – or that the unknowns won't pull aces out of their asses.

Knowing Ren's luck, they probably will, so she just resignedly readies herself for shit to go down, and prepares for every possibility she can plan for with her current limited resources and Deidara.

Then, as the sun starts to set, and they crawl onto the surface and head for the camp, she prays for a miracle she knows won't come, and readies herself for a bloodbath.
Forty-Fourth Thread

Chapter Summary

I'm late and I'm sorry for that, but we're here now! For all those who complained about lack of action in past chapters, have some fight scenes of questionable quality.

"Surprises are all part of life's journey."
— Steven Redhead, Life Is A Cocktail

Dusk finds Ren calm, surrounded by snow, cold, and fading light, waiting for an opportunity, for an acceptable opening. The quality of the nukenin encampment is surprisingly high. However, the quality of their awareness is... not. Which, considering that at least two of them are jōnin, is alarming. Right next to her, so close that their shoulders press together, Deidara is laying surprisingly patiently on the snow, newly resized white uniform fitting nicely and not hindering his movements, golden hair braided and tucked tightly under a white cap. Ren gently tugs her tube scarf upwards, almost high enough to touch her lower eyelids, and sighs silently, eerie red eyes taking in the scenery. They're currently laying on a higher slope under a tree, not far from where the encampment is. A chakra-enhanced dash will take them there within just a few seconds.

"Okay, let's go over it again," Ren says, voice muffled by the scarf. "We go for the jōnin while keeping an eye on the unknowns, and after the jōnin are down, we go for either the chūnin or the unknowns. Depends who proves to be more of an issue. Jashin, I hope this works out."

"What does it matter even if it doesn't go according to plan?" Deidara scoffs quietly. "We are shinobi! Flexibility and coming up with solutions on the fly comes with the job description, un."

"I know, but it really doesn't change the fact that I hate doing that. With a passion," Ren grumbles under her breath, eyes not leaving the encampment for a second. "Jashin, it's ridiculous how unprepared for an attack they seem. Makes every danger alarm go off in my head."

"Yeah, but didn't Anri say that they were just that, un? Unprepared, overly-cocky assholes?" Deidara asks, and Ren huffs in irritation.

"Yes, but it doesn't help my shinobi paranoia," she grumbles. Deidara sighs, but nods – he can understand it. If shinobi are not careful enough, they are basically signing their death warrant. It's always better to be over-prepared than underprepared. To overestimate than underestimate. It's the difference between literal life and death in their line of work after all. But that's to be expected, when said line of work includes getting paid for bringing in severed heads, among other things.

Ren shakes her head, takes a deep breath and moves.

It's going to be ugly. Uglier than normal, at the very least - Ren knows from the second they reach the perimeter of the camp, pass the makeshift palisade meant to keep wild animals at bay. Of course they don't go unnoticed – they'd known they wouldn't the second they decided to study the encampment better upon settling on the hilltop, which, in turn, left a bitter taste in Ren's mouth. She
would very much prefer to take her opponents out with the element of surprise, rather than openly fighting – she is aggressive, sure, and likes fighting, but seven-on-two? Yeah, no.

And the nuke-nin in the encampment, for all their vices, are pretty aware of their surroundings, despite not having any truly set guard rotation and the constant arguing.

Ren goes in first, leaving Deidara behind and hoping he will prove to be good firepower support.

One of the jōnin – with a slashed Iwa hitai-ate - throws himself at her, hurling a barrage of kunai, half of which she evades, half of which she deflects, as she leaps close and makes a move to punch him in the face. He evades, reaching for more kunai, but it doesn't matter. Anri launches herself from Ren's open sleeve right onto his uncovered face and digs her fangs straight into his artery. The jōnin makes a surprised sound as he falls to his knees, and Ren can hear a shriek. She spares a glance to the side to see a girl – a Suna nuke-nin – run towards her.

Ren narrows her eyes, glowing an eerie red in the dark, and launches herself at the girl. She reaches for some flasks, but Ren is faster, better. It's obvious that the girl hasn't been chūnin for long. Ren kicks the girl square in the chest, chakra-enhanced and all and the crunch of bones and a surprised gasp are a truly pleasing sound in that moment. She sends the chūnin flying towards the palisade and doesn't bother watching as the girl collides with the wooden construction, ruining it. There's a sharp stab in her calf and Ren hisses, glaring down. The jōnin whom Anri had bitten is, obviously, still alive, although the poison is already visibly at work. He still has enough sense and speed to use Ren's moment of distraction and dig a kunai in her calf.

Hana is going to kill her.

In the few seconds of this exchange the others manage to shake off their stupor and charge at her, weapons in hands, and Ren removes the kunai from her leg and hurls it at them along with a few others. With a whistle of wind they are joined by tiny clay birds, which explode once they get into range of the enemy shinobi, pushing the kunai off their trajectory and to where they weren't expected. The second jōnin fends them off without a problem, so does one of the unknowns – a woman with long, black hair and piercing blue eyes – while the remaining chūnin and the second unknown get grazed by them. This answers Ren's question as to the priority levels of their targets.

She uses the split second the barrage buys her and folds her fingers together quickly in well-practiced motions, slamming her palm onto the snow. There's a tell-tale explosion of smoke, and a familiar, gigantic blue shape hurls itself at the shinobi with a loud hiss. One of the chūnin – her target – actually screams and freezes for a second as Cobalt engages them, and Ren jumps back, throwing some shuriken. The jōnin and the woman, once again, evade both the spider and the projectiles, and instead focus on pursuing Ren.

She jumps to the side, between the tents, and the jōnin and woman follow her, while Deidara aids Cobalt in fighting the remaining three with his shrapnel-filled explosive clay. Ren grits her teeth and flings Atsushi and Akihiro at her pursuers, all the while dutifully ignoring the pulsating pain in her leg.

To Ren's absolute and utter horror, the woman slashes at the spider with a blade made of ice, and only Akihiro's quick-thinking allows him to avoid getting cut in half – he disperses, instead of taking the hit. Not good, but preferable to losing a summon. The jōnin roars as Atsushi digs his fangs into the man's shoulder, and he swats at the spider, who has no choice but to also disperse. She curses as the man folds his fingers and mutters something, and evades the volley of kunai coated in a genjutsu only thanks to her Sharingan and its ability to see through it.

If only she could call on one of her illusionist spiders. But no – she had tried, only to learn that both
of them are injured after some skirmishes when their realm briefly connected with the realm of praying mantis summons. Ren didn't know that summon realms actually exist elsewhere or that they circulate and interact with one another, but that doesn't matter now. She technically could summon her spiders, but for their safety, she would not. The ice user's slash at Akihiro only grounded her in this. Niji is currently in medically-induced coma to heal internal damage, and Kagami is not nearly trained enough to fend for herself when her illusions are broken.

(They were ambushed, Ren learned yesterday. Didn't notice, because mantises don't use illusions. they just blend in with the environment.)

She curses and jumps on a tree branch before she has to relocate a second after to avoid the creeping ice. Atsushi is an Atrax, therefore his venom should work faster than Anri's, but Ren knows better than to underestimate him because of the toxin now in his blood. An instant of inattention had left her with a gash in her leg only a minute ago with the other jōnin.

She isn't sure of the passage of time anymore, to be honest – she's hyperaware of everything now, Sharingan zooming over her surroundings, taking in everything and more, as she barely evades the onslaught of the jōnin's attack and the advancing ice. If not for the spider venom working nearly instantly, she'd probably be dead now – but instead her opponent's movements are increasingly compromised, and he knows it too. There's something akin to desperation in his eyes.

Ren throws some more projectiles at them both, gaining herself a few precious seconds to reach for her belt and unstrap a maroon-tinted scroll. A surge of chakra later, she's holding Ryuuzaakura, the blade glinting wickedly in the moonlight. She slashes at the ice spikes threatening to impale her and twirls, reflecting projectiles thrown back at her, before focusing chakra in the tenketsu in her forearms, a technique that had taken her a long time and practice to get down, and then a poof of smoke bursts out of her left sleeve. She takes a breath, pounces towards the woman, bends back, and hurls a sleeve-full of spiders right at her face. The scream that follows is not even human anymore, but Ren is already in mid-leap back at the jōnin, Ryuuzaakura held tightly in both hands. The kunai whistling right by her ear doesn't stop her, and performs a thrust Kisame would be proud of. Her opponent dodges, but thanks to the venom, not fast enough, and Ren still manages to put the blade through his side, but misses the kidney she was going for, most likely grazing his hipbone instead.

He grunts, and grabs the blade with one hand, most likely instinctively, and raises the other, a kunai gripped tight, with every intention of digging it into Ren's head. She catches his hand, however, gripping his wrist and pushing chakra to her fingers, clenching them until she hears the delicate bones crunch, and her opponent lets out an anguished noise in the back of his throat. She fixes her grip on Ryuuzaakura's handle, and yanks the sword out forcefully – and the blade is sharp, she knows, as this sword is probably the best the Uchiha had stashed, and Sasuke wouldn't have settled until he found the absolute best he could as a gift for her.

Ryuuzaakura's blade is sharp, chakra-conductive, wicked steel. And it cuts through Ren's opponent's gloves and fingers like they are made of butter, just as it had severed the deer's head, skin, muscle, bone and all, with no issue at all. He makes a pained noise again, but she can see his eyes clouding and can't help and marvel at how ridiculously fast her summon's venom works. She doesn't bother stopping for a moment, though, as every second counts – she moves forward and slashes with her katana, easily separating the head from the shoulders of the sluggish, poisoned jōnin.

She spins around, just at the right moment to slash at ice spikes headed her way, shattering them on impact. The woman – undeniably a Yuki Clan survivor, and boy, is Ren sad to actually be forced to kill one of Haku's kin, even if she's some three years from meeting him if at all – has finally thrown all the spiders off, and she does look even paler than she did before, and shaken on top of that.
Someone's afraid of spiders, huh.

There's an explosion just to her right behind the tents, more to the center of the camp than the outskirts they're in now, that is much bigger than any of the ones before, and a loud, manic cackle that sounds too much like Deidara to not be Deidara. Well, at least he's having fun.

Ren only hopes that he will leave the bodies intact enough to be recognized and collected for money. Shit, she's starting to think like Kakuzu.

Oh well. Cobalt is supervising him, they'll be fine.

She heaves a sigh, gripping Ryuuzakura in one hand and looks at the Yuki woman with determination. The other woman gulps and takes a defensive stance – it's obvious for Ren that she did not receive any formal shinobi training, but she seems very much in control of her bloodline limit, and that in itself will be a massive obstacle to brave.

Good. Ren likes challenges.

A breath of air, a blur of hands, and a fire dragon charges with a roar straight at a dragon made purely out of ice.
Chapter Summary

This chapter has been beta’d for you by hestia8693, who, just like me, is currently braving university exams, therefore if there are still mistakes present - blame the education.

I'd say sorry for the delay, but frankly, I'm so spent after chasing index signs, ironing out the kinks and waiting for 4h in line to take 10min oral exam. University is not fun. Who would've thought?

There's more blood and graphic descriptions of violence and gore than usual. You should probably get used to that, Ren is a quite gory person.

"Failure will never overtake me if my determination to succeed is strong enough."
— Og Mandino

Fighting an ice user in the middle of a winter wasteland, Ren realizes, is not such a great idea after all – formal shinobi training or not. The woman might not be particularly well-trained in other shinobi fields, especially mental fortitude, but she has great reflexes – as evidenced by her avoiding the projectiles from before – and damn good control of her bloodline limit. Frankly, it doesn't surprise Ren – whether she needs it or not, she still fiddles with her Sharingan nearly constantly, and while the things she does with it are mostly inconsequential – like remembering recipes or walking around in the wee hours of the morning without having to turn on the lights – it still makes her grip on the bloodline limit better, more secure, and lessens its strain.

Ren curses and blocks a spear of ice with Ryuuzakura's bloodstained blade, nearly staggering when she shifts most of her body weight onto her wounded leg. She can feel the rapidly cooling blood still oozing from the wound, half-cauterized by the raw fire chakra thrumming underneath her skin, and the bite of cold seeping into her flesh. It impairs her movements greatly, as she can't lean on that leg too much, and definitely cannot support herself on it. It hurts, and since the kunai tore some muscle, it doesn't even work properly, no matter how much Ren clenches her teeth and wills it to.

A few small explosions shake the air around Ren and her opponent, and she can hear more cackling above the sound of the explosions. Well, at least Deidara is having fun.

Ren jumps over the icicle charging at her and shatters the next with the blunt of her blade. Wrapping explosive tags around a few kunai, she sends them with a zap of chakra after the Yuki woman, who shields herself from the explosion and sends more ice spikes after Ren. She moves to evade and-

She's too slow. A minute ago she definitely wasn't, what-

Ren gasps in pain when the ice slams into her side, though thankfully the armor-mesh shirt she wears
underneath kept it from piercing skin, and falls to the ground, only able to propel herself up and away from the ground at the very last moment. Adrenaline is pulsing through her veins like crazy, but she somehow feels weaker now than she felt a minute ago. In fact, she can feel herself rapidly weakening. This—this isn't good.

"Fuck," she says, stealing a glance at her leg, only one answer floating in her head— the kunai she had gotten stabbed with must've been dipped in a slow-acting poison. And it was acting now.

The Yuki woman, apparently sensing her growing weakness, sends a barrage of ice spears her way, much more numerous than any before. There's no way for Ren to evade them all, so she clutches her teeth and wills herself to move, past the cold and the poison, bending her fingers together as fast as she could go and sending a massive fireball with a rush of chakra straight at the missiles. They all evaporate under the heat, and the Yuki woman manages to shield herself with a wall of ice. It half-evaporates from the onslaught of flames, but Ren pays it no mind, moving forward through the unpleasantly hot steam and right into the cold air behind it, slashing at the woman with Ryuuzakura. It's clumsy, Ren knows, and her opponent is able to evade as Ren forces herself to move past the kaleidoscope of specks dancing before her eyes. She spins and swings again and again, not nearly on par with what she is normally capable of but still somehow enough to keep the Yuki woman busy enough—

Ren hisses and lurches backwards when a cold, sharp pain erupts somewhere in her side—she hadn't noticed her opponent creating an ice blade and is now paying for it with a gash in her side that was non-lethal only thanks to her reflexes.

She hasn't heard any explosions for a while now. Should she be worried?

The Yuki woman suddenly makes a sound that's between a sob and a wail, which makes Ren realize that she had taken her attention off the woman. She rectifies that mistake as fast as she can, and—

Two pairs of bright-blue tarantula legs are wrapped around the woman's torso, efficiently keeping her in place. Cobalt's fangs, as long and thick as kunai, are embedded deep where the neck meets the shoulder on either side, her chelicera just big enough to wrap around the human's neck. The Yuki woman gurgles, mouth foaming as her eyes roll back from shock, caused by both Cobalt's venom and the blood rapidly leaving her body—Cobalt's fangs must have torn at least one of her arteries, judging by how quickly the patch of bright red is expanding down the woman's clothes.

"Ren!" she can hear Deidara scream as he bounds towards her. She still retains some attention span, which is good, but she can also literally feel the poison coursing through her veins, because her chakra is attacking the alien substance. All that she had accumulated under her skin to warm herself up was now up and running, trying to help her.

She's so cold without it.

"Ren, un, what's wrong? Did they get you?" Deidara asks worriedly, and Ren almost laughs, because he's an S-Class missing-nin hunting Jinchuuriki for fun—

She narrows her eyes. No, that's wrong—Deidara is a lost twelve-year-old boy with devastating power and an uncanny resemblance to Namikaze Minato from a village that hates the man with the burning passion of a thousand suns.

"Ren," Cobalt says hastily, having discarded the spasming Yuki woman and skittered to her summoner, and places worried legs on the Uchiha's shoulders and shaking gently. "Ren, you have been poisoned. Listen to me. You must summon Takuya-sensei. Can you do that? Ren, look at me. Summon Takuya-sensei before you're completely gone, okay?"
Breathing is becoming more and more difficult, Ren notes, but she mercilessly squashes the rising wave of panic, shaking her head and bringing her suddenly-heavy hands together, folding her fingers so clumsily she would probably be embarrassed if she had the energy to care. She forces her chakra through her coils and into her palms and slams her hands onto the snow, silently praying to anyone that is listening – Jashin, Sage, hell, even Kaguya – that Takuya answers her call.

He does.

"What on earth did you get yourself into this time, stupid girl!" he hisses at her. Like any ogre-faced spider, he looks like a cartoonish caricature, with a slim abdomen and long spindly legs, large mandibles, currently rubbing together in agitation, and two huge, round eyes. By all means, he looks more like an alien than a spider.

"I got poisoned," she says eloquently before her hands give up, and her upper body falls face-first onto the snow. She doesn't even remember her legs caving under her weight, but looking back it seems very plausible.

"Outside symptoms look like a type of Curare," Takuya says without prompting, mandibles clicking. One of his legs sweep the hair from Ren's sweaty forehead. "Your temperature is lower than usual, which means your chakra is working on the poison. Good, otherwise you'd probably be suffocating right about now. Fire chakra sure is handy in taking the brunt of the toxin, huh? Ah, there it is," he sighs, jumping as elegantly as his gangly body would allow past Ren's vision and nudging her injured leg, trying to turn it. With what seems like herculean effort, Ren twists it slowly, sluggishly, so that the open wound is facing the cold, winter air. Her breathing is becoming increasingly labored, but that doesn't stop it from hitching when she feels Takuya put his legs into her fucking open wound.

"Okay, that's disgusting," Deidara says in disturbed awe, and Ren finds the strength to curse, fighting against her reflexes to keep the muscles in her leg from clenching. It's painful, yes, but Ren is sure she will have difficulty finding something that could possibly top the ultra-weird feel of spider legs inside her wound. When the legs retract, Deidara makes a noise in the back of his throat that is more disgustedly horrified than anything else.

And then Takuya bites into the edge of the wound which, frankly, Ren realizes only because she was already focusing what's left of her attention into that area. She miraculously finds the strength to curse even more. She can feel Cobalt and Deidara wince at the language.

"Yes, yes, it's disgusting, we know," Takuya says, probably fiddling with his customary linen backpack if the rustle of fabric is anything to go by, before something audibly pops and then something cold, slimy, and gluey is pushed none too gently into her poisoned wound. "You're lucky this is one of the simplest Curares there are, and I always have antidote for those. Hey, boy, come here," the spider says, and Deidara blinks, before uncertainly moving closer.

"Un?"

"Give her this vial of antidote to drink now. This particular Curare paralyzes the airway, and it's already taking effect," Takuya instructs. "Ren, I know it tastes absolutely disgusting, but don't you dare spit it out, you hear?"

Ren mutters a short affirmation, focusing on her breathing instead.

Deidara grabs her by the shoulders and hauls her up easily, and she can see his ruffled clothes and loose hair now. He seems to have had fun fighting the lower-level missing-nin. He puts one palm on her forehead, somehow keeping her upright that way, and she obligingly parts her lips as he uncorks
the vial with his thumb and pours the cold liquid into Ren's mouth.

It is, in fact, absolutely, horrifyingly disgusting, and Ren battles hard against the urge to gag. She has no idea what's in it, but it tastes like bitter, fake lemon and honey that tastes more like a strange sweetener – all of it topped with mint. So, yeah, disgusting. Very, very disgusting. But, Ren is willing to bet, also apparently fucking magical, because she can suddenly breathe again, and it feels truly amazing.

She swallows down the bitter bile forming in the back of her throat and accepts a bottle of water from Deidara, who got it from Cobalt. Honestly, the Gooty Tarantula was the most precious, thoughtful little fluffy murder machine. Ren loves her.

She downs the whole bottle in one go, her body still sluggish and uncooperative, but still much more functional than a few minutes ago, when it was basically shutting down.

"Thanks, Takuya-sensei," she says weakly, and the giant-eyed spider sighs in what can only be exasperation. Yeah, Ren has that effect on most, and she knows it.

"What do we do now, un?" Deidara asks, and she can't help but notice the boy's nervous fidgeting, but doesn't call him out on it. She would probably fidget, too, if something like this happened to him. She likes the kid.

"Ugh, I can move but I doubt I can walk just yet," Ren sighs and rubs her arms from her seat on the snow as she assesses the aftermath of the battle, her wounded leg stretched out before her. Without adrenaline or burning-hot fire chakra underneath her skin to warm her body from the inside, she can already feel the cold settling into her bones. "Okay, this is what we'll do; Deidara, you need to get me to their tents so I can warm myself up. Then you'll gather the bodies – I really hope your opponents are at least vaguely recognizable still? – and stash them somewhere for the night. Sound good?"

"Yeah, un," he nods, and stands up slowly. "What about our camp?"

"You can pack it up tomorrow. For now, we both need rest, and it would be a good idea to look through the missing-nins' supplies. I'd like some new pants, and it's not like they'll need them anymore."

"Uchiha Ren and good, logical ideas. Color me astonished," Takuya-sensei snarks, but before Ren can snap back at him, he dispels himself. The girl blinks at the space he had vacated and narrows her eyes with a grimace.

"Didn't even tell me what side effects I'll be experiencing," she grumbles. "Asshole."

"At least he's consistent," Cobalt chuckles. "Besides, you can always re-summon him. But, for now, I'll have to say goodbye. I don't really do well in sub-zero temperatures."

"Thanks Cobalt, see you," Ren makes a tired salute, and the giant blue tarantula dispels herself with an audible poof of white smoke. For a moment after that, silence reigns. Then:

"Ren, you're an absolute fucking moron, un."

"I know."

"Don't do that again."

"Can't promise anything. I'm a danger-magnet."
"No, you're just stupid and reckless, un."

"...Fair."
Forty-Sixth Thread

Chapter Summary

Lookit, a pathetic attempt at getting back into consistent weekly updates. Only three days off! Might get it right back on sometime this year.

"Lies and secrets, Tessa, they are like a cancer in the soul. They eat away what is good and leave only destruction behind."

― Cassandra Clare, Clockwork Prince

The aftermath of poisoning is never fun, that much is obvious. Therefore, when Ren wakes up in the wee hours of the morning, after what can be classified as a nap and not really sleep, she feels like death warmed over. Repeatedly. Rather obviously, it's not a nice feeling at the very least. It's mostly due to the paralyzer that is slowly wearing off, but it still leaves a disgusting aftertaste in Ren's mouth, and an unpleasant tingling in her muscles. Well, at least she can breathe now.

"Will you be able to walk before nightfall, or do we need to stay here for another day, un?" Deidara asks in the morning, as he rummages through Ren's pack, which he retrieved at some point, to get to the scroll containing the venison. He was out for roughly the same time as Ren did, but he slept infinitely better and it shows. He looks almost fresh and well-rested, where Ren is grumpier than usual, completely disheveled with bleary eyes and bigger eyebags than she's ever had.

"No," she answers honestly, dragging her still mostly paralyzed, injured leg closer to her, so that she can finally rip the herbal paste intermixed with blood out of the gash. The antidote, while preventing any kind of infection, did impede healing instead of boost it, leaving Ren with a raw, untended wound. "Spiders don't really have medics, so we're on our own."

"What do you mean, un?" Deidara asks, nibbling on some meat he'd taken out of the seal.

"I mean they don't have spiders that specialize in healing. They're very offensive summons, basically all hit-and-run unless they have really hard chitin," she explains, finding a scroll with medical equipment in her pack and removing the contents. She grabs the high-grade herbal-infused liquid that Hana had forced onto her and flushes the wound with it, wincing at the biting pain. "But their assassins are very well-versed in anatomy, both in and out and can operate in a pinch, and their poison-makers know their herbs enough to make medicinal concoctions."

"Oh, that's pretty neat, un," the blond answers, wiping his hands on one of the discarded pieces of clothes of the tent's former resident, and hands Ren a medical, curved needle that he threaded.

"What I wouldn't give for an industrial stapler right now," she grumbles, forcing the edges of the wound together and beginning the painstaking process of stitching it closed. Thankfully, her leg is still paralyzed and therefore she hardly feels a thing, but she wouldn't have been able to do it if it weren't. "Bloody Jashin, put some metal staples, wrap it up, and call it a day. But no, got to play at a fucking seamstress, yeah? Bloody fucking asshole had to go and stab me."

"Less bitching, more stitching, un."
"You little smartass, you could help."

"Nope. You got yourself into this mess, you deal with the consequences," Deidara shrugs. "I already packed the bodies. I mean, heads... You only had two body scrolls, and you can only cram two bodies into one scroll. More just won't fit, un."

"So you improvised," Ren hisses without looking up from where she viciously stabs the edges of her gash with the curved needle.

"Yeah, un. The jōnin were both wanted whole, so I crammed them in. We'll cash them in at some bounty point. The others were just wanted dead, so I cut off their heads and crammed them into the other scroll, un. I wanted to burn what's left of the bodies but, meh, you're way better at that so I'm just waiting for you, un."

Ren briefly looks up. "And that ice-release woman?"

"Set to be burned whole, head and all. Nobody needs to know she existed, un," Deidara says, and then shivers. "God knows what would happen if somebody got a whiff of someone with her abilities. Bad thing, un. Bad things. Bloodline limits are as much of a blessing as they are a curse."

"No need to tell me about that, buddy," Ren looks up again, glowing-red gaze, as creepy as it only got, meeting his own sky-blue one. "Owner of creepy over-powered eyes here, remember? From a completely and utterly massacred clan with, like, three living members as of today?"

"Ugh," Deidara shivers again. "Yeah, no- No offense, un, but those really put a big target on your head. Actually, why are you even out here, alone, un?"

"Because Danzō wants Sasuke and won't mind getting rid of me to get to him, therefore hopes I'll suffer an accident on a mission and won't come back," Ren blurts out before she can bite her tongue, and the blond sends her a questioning look. "At least he's not sending me with partners to off me after that one time I lost my arm because of one and Hana punched them through some trees. He didn't survive."

"What the fuck. Who the hell is this Danzō, un?"

"A plague, Dei. A fucking menace, and a very dangerous one at that. Don't tell anybody, though, we're not supposed to know – he's a village elder, after all. But he does some... highly questionable shit."

"And nobody knows, un?" Deidara sounds scandalized. "Nobody does anything?! What the fuck is wrong with Konoha's management?!"

"A lot of things, Danzō keeping council members under his thumb and the Hokage unwilling to turn against his oldest friend, for example," Ren says, finally putting the needle away, and proceeds to wrap the wound. "But you didn't hear that from me. Actually, you didn't hear that at all, okay? It's not worth it, with how big target it would paint on our backs."

"What, don't tell me that this Danzo guy has some secret organization at his beck and call or something, un?"

"...

"Are you for real."

"...um."
"Oh, no fucking way in hell, un!"

"It wasn't illegal before, but the Hokage wanted it disbanded, but Danzō did not, so... Yeah. It is illegal now. And secret. Secret ANBU, basically."

Deidara just looks her dead in the eye, and says, "What the actual fuck is wrong with your village, un. What the actual fuck. That's the place I want to settle in now that I've told Iwa to fuck themselves? What the fuck have I done, un. What is my life even?"

"In the village's defense, the people are fun. Weird as hell, most of them, but fun," she says, tapping her chin. "Frankly, the weirdest people are usually the most interesting ones. But I don't want to spoil the surprise."

"Also what did you mean by losing your arm, un?"

"It doesn't matter anymore, Hana put it back on, as you can see."

"Are you for fucking real," Deidara deadpans in the flattest voice, with the flattest expression Ren has ever seen in her life. She just laughs.

Ren covers as much of her face as she can with the thick sleeve of her jacket, shielding herself from the disgusting, acrid smell that comes from the pile of burning bodies of the nukenin. It's, to put it simply, highly unpleasant. She sighs, leaning her weight on Deidara's shoulder as they watch, from not far away, as the bodies burn. Deidara had made a hole in the ground with his earth release, into which they threw the remains that Ren then set aflame, a good two kilometers from the camp.

She is so not spending the night with that odor around.

But also because of that she has to suffer through it again – to make sure the remains are properly disintegrated so that Deidara can cover them with earth. With enough jutsu, she could burn them all in under an hour, and she is fairly certain she has enough chakra.

"Can you please give it another round of fireballs, un," the blond grimaces. Ren coughs into her sleeve, but nonetheless braves the stabbing pain in her leg to walk towards the hole, and does exactly as asked. That, of course, sparks another wave of the acrid, disgusting smell, but it's not as strong as it was before. Ren, in all her viciousness, tops it off with her favorite jutsu ever, the Karyu Endan. The flaming, chakra-charged dragon roared, setting the dimming world ablaze for a moment, before heeding Ren's command and slamming into the pile of burned flesh with particular viciousness, rendering it even less recognizable from cinders.

"Okay," Ren says. "Once the fire dies down, it should be about it. I'm almost out of chakra again, anyway," she informs Deidara, grumbling the last part out unhappily.

"Don't worry, un," he says. "I found some high-calorie food in the nukenin camp. They'll get you right up and running tomorrow, un."

Aside from them cashing in the nukenin except for the mission's target and Ren's constant bitching at her injury and how Hana will probably get mad at her for it (and Deidara getting annoyed a few times), nothing worth mentioning really happens on their way to Konoha. It takes longer than it should, too, because Ren is not a fan of running on an injured leg unless it is paramount to the mission – making it to the warmer region takes them about four days, and even that only thanks to Deidara using his clay-made mounts. However, the longer they remain and the faster they move, the more volatile they become. That, and they are true chakra vacuums, so they end up being able to use
them for only four hours per day.

But the second they reach snowless lands with temperatures above zero, Ren instantly slams her hands on the ground, only to be greeted with Cobalt's super-creepy but also oddly adorable mandibled face. From then on the way to Konoha takes about three days of zooming through the increasingly thick foliage on the back of the gigantic blue spider, giving anyone with the misfortune of stumbling upon them a massive scare, much to Ren's and Deidara's amusement.

Hiruzen sets down his pipe in favor of massaging his temples with both hands. Before him, Ren stands with the most dishonestly innocent face he's ever seen, bracing herself on the arm of a young nukenin from Iwa. A young nukenin with golden hair and blue eyes that bear an uncanny resemblance to the Yondaime.

Trust Uchiha Ren to pull off something like that.

Hiruzen presses on his temples harder, fighting against the impressively stubborn migraine. He is decidedly too old for this. Not to mention Naruto – the boy has no idea who his father was, so if suddenly a relative on said father's side appears...

Hiruzen knows how against all the secrecy Ren is, and he can see the great improvement in Naruho ever since he 'accidentally' stumbled upon the Kyuubi in his mindscape upon Ren's insistence. He is certain she would find a way to have Naruto learn of his parentage now, as she had brought this former Iwa ninja with her.

He couldn't be older than twelve, but somehow Hiruzen doesn't doubt that the boy is capable of running from the village. People's hatred is a powerful thing, and the Iwa population at large hates Minato with a fiery passion. Sick of their hatred, the boy had-

Oh.

Oh no.

Hiruzen is really, really lucky that Ren has taken Naruto in, isn't he? That she protects him so fiercely from the people of his own village.

He looks at the fifteen-year-old girl, startled by his own realization, and Ren-

Ren looks smug. Like she knows exactly what he's thinking about.

"Drawing parallels between Naruto and Deidara, are we?" she asks, confirming his suspicion, and Hiruzen sighs tiredly. Deidara just glances at her questioningly, but the brunette shakes her head, mouthing 'later'.

"I realized I have made a mistake," the old Hokage starts, then rubs his temples once more. The headache hits him viciously. "I suppose I owe you thanks in the name of the Country of Fire for taking Naruto in."

"Mhm," Ren pulls out a body scroll. "The target, Hokage-sama. Only the head, because he wasn't alone and I took the liberty of cashing in the remaining bounties. There weren't problems aside from the typical risks."

"None of them had special abilities?" Hiruzen asks, and Ren's eye twitches.

"None," she confirms without a hitch, and Deidara nods in agreement. Hiruzen smiles at them,
knowing full well they're lying, but says nothing. Ever since the attack on the Aburame (one Ren got herself into as well) he has been even more suspicious of Danzō, despite his desperate attempts to believe in his friend.

"Any remnants of the bodies?"

"Spent an hour treating them with fire techniques. They're nothing but ash buried in earth and snow," the girl explains with a nod, and Hiruzen sighs in relief. Yes, better safe than sorry. "Now, if you don't mind me, I'd like to drop Deidara off at Torture and Interrogation and then leave myself to Hana's tender mercies."

"Yeah, leave me alone to convince Konoha's local crazies that I want to be one of them, thanks," the boy grumbles, and Ren chuckles, ruffling his hair fondly. Hiruzen sighs again, because he once more sees the parallel between this boy and their very own blond, three years younger than him.

That situation had ended in formal adoption. Of course it won't here, since Deidara is an emancipated minor himself, but Hiruzen has lived long enough to be certain that Ren could and would name him an Honorary Uchiha, even if just to spite others.

Ah, he really is getting too old for this.
Chapter Summary

Yes hello tis' I, raising from the depth of university and utter lack of motivation to battle my muse and squeeze a chapter out, three weeks late.
And it's not even an action-packed, just character development and relationships.

"Friends show their love in times of trouble, not in happiness."
— Euripides

Hana, by some weird Ren-oriented Hana-sense she has developed during the last almost-three years of their friendship, is waiting for Ren by the exit of the Hokage Tower, casual clothes, sleepy dogs, stern, unamused expression and all. Ren just smiles, waving tiredly and still very much preferring her uninjured leg. While her growth spurt has been quite massive, Ren was never really particularly gangly, budding muscle under a healthy layer of fat. She wasn't ripped, like Gai, of course. She would never be – physical form is not the icon of strength, after all.

(Chōji might've slipped out, once, that Akimichi are largely immune to physical attacks thanks to their layer of fat. It stops the kinetic force to a certain degree, apparently. Ren, having tried it – with a lot less fat, but still enough to rid her of the chiseled appearance – is inclined to agree. She can even take one of Gai's punches when before she couldn't. Only one though, she's not suicidal.

... Too suicidal. Is that even a thing? Can someone be just suicidal enough?)

"One mission that's C or above without injuries," Hana says. "Just one. Is it too much to ask?"

"Um..." Ren scratches the back of her neck. "In my defense, I fought two jōnin? And survived?"

"Ren..." uh-oh, angry Hana. On the other hand, Ren's words might've had a completely opposite effect than what she'd intended.

"Um, I was... left unsupervised?" she tries again, and Hana's eyes narrow even more. "I mean, come on, mild chakra exhaustion and a stab wound in my leg. That's, like, better than most of my missions!"

Hana is just about to answer when Deidara, following a girl in the grey T&I uniform towards the Intelligence building, appears and turns to the Inuzuka, saying, "the stab wound was also poisoned, in case she didn't tell you."

Little fucking traitor.

"It wasn't that bad!" Ren doesn't shriek. The sound she makes is in pure offense, but she doesn't shriek. Honestly.

"It was a strong paralyzer, she nearly shut down!" the traitor adds cheerfully, following his now-
amused lead, and Ren shivers. She can feel it, behind her, where Hana stands – the Inuzuka's barely-restrained fury. That's it. She's done for. Goodbye, world.

"I'm starting to think that you enjoy pain," Hana says mildly, but Ren knows the Inuzuka much too well to be fooled - but running is not an option anymore, so the only thing she can do is brace herself for the inevitable.

"I... don't?" she says uncertainly and it comes out sounding much more like a question than it ever should. "Um. I got used to it, though-

"You are RIDICULOUS!" Hana raises her voice dangerously, enough to stop a few passers-by in their tracks in shock. "Each and every mission I worry if you'll even come back at all, and how many parts will be missing if you do! You'll be the death of me!"

Wow, okay. Put it that way and Ren does feel bad about it.

"I didn't choose my shit luck okay," she grumbles. "It's a ninja's life, such risks are expected! I don't see you hounding on your patients nearly as much as you do me!"

"Because you're my friend, you moron!" Hana snaps and throws herself at Ren, trapping the Uchiha in a bone-crushing hug that knocks the air out of her lungs. "Of course I care for you more than some random patient! That's why I'm angry, you know. Because you getting hurt affects me way more than others. You get it, you idiot?"

"I'm sorry, too," Ren groans breathlessly. "Could you not crush my ribs though, please?" She pats Hana's back. The Inuzuka snorts and lets go before cuffing Ren on the back of her head. The Uchiha yelps, grabbing the back of her head, and mock-glares at her friend. Hana snorts in answer, rolling her eyes.

"Let's get you home," she says. "The kids will be back soon."

"Yeah. It's good to be back, you know."

"I know. Come on, I want to look at that leg of yours before your horde smothers you."

"Yes, mom."

"Ren."

Ren wants to say that she worries for how Deidara's interview-interrogation is going, and she kind of does, but she is definitely not fretting over it in the slightest, laying on her couch in her flat, stuffing her face with the okonomiyaki that Hana dragged her to buy on the way home, snacking in between bites on the remaining bonfire-cooked venison leftover from the mission, which definitely tastes better when dipped in a bit of soy sauce. Ren makes a mental note to take soy sauce on missions with her from then on; it made everything more palatable.

Of course, before she even thought about unpacking the takeout, Hana had demanded to see the leg. Ren doesn't know what her friend had been imagining upon Deidara's confession about it, but certainly something worse than it was, because what she was met with was a simple kunai stab wound, not very deep and not wide enough to even warrant sewing during the mission, already closing and oily from the ointments pressed to it by a rather tight but breathable bandage. The surprise is practically painted on Hana's face, bright as day.

"So you say the poison was a fact acting but otherwise simple curare type?" Hana asks, and the only
thing she lacks is a notebook. Ren knows that the Inuzuka is making mental notes, but she's also used to it by now. Whenever she comes back from a mission, she goes to give her report first, and after that it's only a matter of time until Hana descends on her and drags her, depending on Ren's wounds, to either her home, the Inuzuka compound, or the hospital.

"I summoned Takuya-sensei, don't worry," she says from over her food. "I'm reckless, not stupid."

"I've had my doubts," Hana snorts, and Ren sighs long-sufferingly. A person takes a hit for her once, maybe loses a hand in the process (temporarily!) and that's what she gets.

And then, as if on cue, many pairs of feet can be heard in the corridor. It sounds like a herd of animals, really, and sure enough, the lock turns, and the door to Ren's apartment opens, and the herd flows in.

"I did not buy enough food for a whole school trip," Ren complains loudly from where she sits in the living room, and the shuffling stops for a second. Then, she can hear audibly and carelessly discarded packs, shoes, and coats, someone kicking the door closed, and Naruto, with Sasuke on his heels, all but bursting into the living room.

"Oneechan, you're back!" the hyperactive ray of sunshine yells, and Ren winces. Her eardrums will eventually stop working because of him, probably.

"Nee-san," Sasuke greets her much more calmly, and she sighs, turning around to see whoever else her brats dragged here. Sakura is no surprise, as she's taken it upon herself to be the voice of reason when Ren isn't around (she probably should be even when Ren is around, please and thank you). Kiba is also no surprise, only his sister and Sakura visit more frequently than him, but Hinata kind of is, and without Neji no less. The stuck-up better-than-thou child hardly ever lets Hinata out of his sight – partly thanks to his Byakugan – and sometimes Ren feels like he enjoys ruining his cousin's fun. There are moments when she questions if she even wants to bother trying to work through his attitude to begin with.

"Hey brats," she waves. "I probably should've prepared for guests, but I'm tired and I almost died on the mission-

"Oh, really," Hana drawls, sending her friend a glare.

"-and therefore I'm drained and I want to sleep forever," Ren continues without even a blink. "You can have the deer I hunted, though. It's pretty good with soy sauce."

She glances at Naruto, practically ripping his double serving of okonomiyaki free from its plastic bag, and thinks. Plots, almost. She did want to reveal to Naruto his true parentage, somehow, but she never had an idea how – nor any real motivation, to be honest. But now, if Deidara really turns out to be somehow related to Minato, like she and, possibly, Sarutobi Hiruzen, suspects, then she has to do it soon. Somehow.

Hana sends her a sideways glance, as if she knows what Ren is thinking – a possibility Ren doesn't rule out, Hana somehow just knows things – and is trying to decide if it's a bad or a dumb idea.

"Hey, hey, oneechan, can you help us with homework?" Naruto asks, and Ren shrugs. She always does, why does he even bother asking?

"Sure, what is it about?"

"It's from history class," Sasuke explains. "We have to write an essay on one of the Hokage of our village."
Ren stops, and then she blinks.

Sometimes, she can't even believe her sheer dumb luck.

"Huh," she says from above her styrofoam box of almost-finished okonomiyaki. "Yeah, I'll get you a more detailed book on them, okay?"

"Oh, one of those that only chūnin or above can check out from the library?" Sakura asks, eyes gleaming. There wasn't much written shinobi detail available for genin and below, after all, and Sakura always enjoys learning information of all kinds. Hana never really bats an eye checking out advanced medical scrolls for the girl, and partly thanks to that and partly thanks to Sakura looking up to them – kunoichi like Ren, Hana and Anko – the pinkette is shaping up to be absolutely terrifying.

"Yes," Ren nods. "I'll try to find a detailed one. Preferably with color pictures, if available, although that might be hard for the first two Hokage."

The kids chatter happily after that, Kiba and Akamaru devouring the venison almost as fast as Naruto, and Hinata slowly sipping a cup of matcha tea that Hana brewed for her after stopping Ren from doing so, or even rising from the couch.

All the while, Ren plots. The kids have pictures and illustrations of the previous Hokage, but they are all grayscale for some reason. Of course, she can't outright tell Naruto about his parentage, that is – idiotically, might she add – forbidden. But she trusts the kids to draw parallels when she throws a stack of Minato's pictures at them.

They're smart cookies, the lot of them.

Ibiki is having a bad day.

He had known since this morning, when one of the many of the Hokage's almost-assassins confessed nothing and instead used a seal on his tongue to kill himself before they could've even called for a Yamanaka to look at his mind. He knew it was bad when an autopsy from a mystery murder case came back bearing no clues.

However that, that was not entirely unexpected. He could work through that.

But, in hindsight, he really should've called it a day the second a kid with the face of the fourth Hokage stepped through the threshold. Especially when he learned that the kid was there courtesy of one Uchiha Ren – the very same spider-wielding devil-may-care friend of Anko's that took in the Uzumaki brat two years prior and sued civilians left and right with a childlike glee for slander, effectively bringing some to bankruptcy – he really, really should've just gotten up and left.

He didn't, of course.

And now he is regretting it.

The kid – Deidara – as it turns out, is a former Iwa ninja who made tokujō before he was thirteen, left his village, and decided to give joining Konoha a shot – because Uchiha Ren once jokingly told him he could if he grew tired of his village, and that's just what he did.

Because of course.

Not only that, but also the impossible likeness of the kid to their Fourth Hokage, and a notice from the Third to also perform a genetic kinship test – and keep it under wraps. That alone is enough to
give Ibiki a headache.

Then, of course, the one to ‘talk’ to Deidara has to be Anko. The two of them are arguing now, in the interrogation room, over whether blowing the head off with miniature bombs is more amusing than simply ripping it off.

The worst part is that Deidara genuinely seems to want to join their village, and eagerly provides intel on Iwa with a mischievous smile. He doesn't like his old village, that much is clear, and, for some reason, his loyalty lies with Uchiha Ren now.

Ugh, whatever. Ren is a loyal Konoha shinobi crazy enough to befriend Anko. He could give the kid a pass, if only for being a valuable warrior to add to their ranks. Maybe he could teach their shinobi the techniques of the Explosion Corps? It's obvious his hands are his own bloodline limit, and he's plainly stated that no one else in the corps has them.

Yes, Deidara would be a valuable asset to the village. But is it wise to cart him off to Ren's doorstep?

No. No, that is not a good idea. That is a very, very bad idea, bound to end in either collateral damage or straight up genocide, depending on how much the civilians would piss Ren off this week by trying to target the Uzumaki kid.

But there is another option. A much smarter option, if he says so himself.

Ibiki turns to his side to look at where Kotetsu and Izumo are loitering around, free of their gate duty and playing interrogator assistants.

Yes, this is a good idea. Genma had managed to herd those two and Umino Iruka into semi-responsible adults, and he lives close enough to Uchiha Ren to prevent any complaining from Deidara.

Morino Ibiki gives himself a mental pat on the back. If anyone were to be able to reign in Deidara, it would be Genma. He is pretty sure Anko mentioned Ren calling him a saint, on multiple occasions, and if the Uchiha holds him in such high regard, so would their newest addition who, as of now, seems to take her word as gospel.
Forty-Eighth Thread

Chapter Summary

So, uh, this was not supposed to happen, but my muse is a fickle bitch and I catch her whenever I can. Even if it means whipping up a whole new chapter some twelve hours after I posted previous one. Enjoy.

This is a double update, remember to read chapter 47, that I posted earlier today, first.

"Life is what happens to us while we are making other plans."
— Allen Saunders

It's still overwhelming sometimes, over two years in, the feeling of waking up in an apartment that she works hard to upkeep, and to not be alone, and not in just any way. Not with some random family member who visits only to sneer at her and criticize her everything, nor someone in her life as a brief love interest. Renee always had the worst of luck with those, especially when she got older – many younger people eyed her, a woman with a stable income and a nice living space, to possibly leech off of for the rest of their lives. Because women like pathetic strays, right? To take them home, care for them.

Other women, maybe. But Renee – Renee believed in hard work, and loafers had no place in her life. Nor did her old-fashioned family that she moved across half a country to get away from and constantly weaseled out of family meetings with work.

But to wake up in the morning, and to know that there are other people in her house, her people, who care for her, who love her – that, she still isn't used to. Most days it still overwhelms her, and it isn't rare for Ren to burst into silent tears every time she wakes in her bed, in her home, with her kids still sleeping soundly in another room in the wee hours of the morning.

She still can't believe just how lucky she is nowadays, with actual friends and people who genuinely care for her, who love her for who she is despite all her many, many downs. So far away from her old family who, no matter what she did, was always disappointed in her. They're worlds away, now. In a whole other life, which is not hers anymore. It makes her glad, being away. The only thing she even remotely liked back then was her job, and that... that probably wasn't healthy.

Renee Archer was thirty-one when she died, murdered on a desolate street. That was three years ago; she is Uchiha Ren now, almost fifteen but also almost thirty-four, living in a world that is now her own, that before she knew only as a drawn story, and she's so much better for it. Is it odd, that she not only doesn't mind having been killed, but is actually glad for it? Because look where it brought her – into another, much more dangerous but also much better life, where she has people she cares for and who care for her back, where she can go out and kill people and it's a perfectly acceptable source of income, where nobody judges her for it or her scarred, muscled, masculine appearance that would send her mother and grandmother into a fit should they see her now.

She's fifteen, she's strong, she has friends and acquaintances in all the right places. When she's not on missions, she manages all the Uchiha businesses that haven't fallen with the clan's demise, and
teaches Sasuke how to do so, keeping their income stable.

Maybe, soon, she'll be able to repurpose the compound into something, maybe another merchant district, or a luxury district with imported goods found rarely and in small quantities if ever-

Almost three years have passed since the massacre. It's perhaps high time to dig into the ghost town and turn it from an uninhibited wasteland to an income-generating business.

But that can wait a few more weeks. For now, Ren has to get up, go to the library, and find the brats books with detailed information about the Hokage that she'd promised them. And probably some of the Fourth's pictures and decorate the whole apartment with copies.

Lady Sparkle meows from the pile of cat on the in-built bed of the cat tower, and Awai chooses that moment to drop from the ceiling right onto Ren's face.

Yes, she would go to the library. But first, she would go to the kitchen, feed herself and the critters, and make some more breakfast in case the brats wake up before she gets back, which is likely. Yes, that sounds like a plan. She isn't going to wake them up now, it's their day off from school, and besides, it isn't even five in the morning yet, and the world behind the windows is still completely dark.

The shinobi library is open twenty-four hours a day, though, with the clerk rotation, so that is no issue.

Genma catches her outside their apartment building when she finally leaves at half past five in the morning, wearing simple untucked ninja pants, sandals, and a loose turtleneck. His hair is loose and his bandana is sticking out of his pocket. He has a thin jacket thrown across his shoulders due to the chill of the early morning. Ren herself wasn't really dressed up either, in similar loose ninja pants and black turtleneck, with a beige trench-coat on and a scarf hanging loosely around her shoulders. Compared to Iwa, it's almost warm here.

"Hey," Ren says, shouldering her khaki civilian backpack that's definitely magical for being able to fit in way more that it seems to be able, and Genma nods. They're alone on the street at an hour when most of the world is still asleep, the earliest risers only now starting to wake.

"Hey," Genma says back, easily falling into step with her when she doesn't stop to talk. Genma is definitely not an unwelcome tagalong, her first real contact upon waking up as Ren, and one of the best people she ever knew.

"So, Kotetsu and Izumo came back from their shift in T&I and told me something very interesting," the tokujō drawls. "Apparently, Ibiki decided that it would be for the best if I was the one to oversee the assimilation of a certain individual named Deidara, formerly of Iwa, into the village. Do you happen to know the details?" he cocks an eyebrow at her. Ren glances at him, Awai crawling out of her turtleneck and into her face, and laughs into her hand, mindful of still-sleeping people in the houses they pass with much more thoughtfulness than the occupants would ever care to show.

"Oooh, that's gold," she says with a shit-eating grin, and Genma just gives her a deadpanned look. Ren stifles some more giggles before answering. "Deidara is a former Iwa nin, obviously. He's an explosives specialist with a sweet bloodline limit that allows him to make his own bombs, stronger and more effectively than anyone else. He's not even thirteen yet, and already a tokujō, but his village hates him. Like, a lot. I met him during my chūnin exams in Iwa three years back, and might've jokingly told him that if he's sick of his village, he's welcome here? In my defense, I didn't think he'd take me up on it!"
Genma gives her an unreadable look, but she knows him well enough, and knows how people usually react to her stunts, to decipher it as him trying to decide whether he's surprised, resigned, annoyed, or amused.

He settles for, "Really, Ren."

It's not even a question, with how flatly he says it, and Ren giggles again.

"But, if he's good enough to become a tokujō at thirteen, why would the village hate him?" he asks, and Ren sighs. Genma made tokujō at sixteen, and Ren, albeit recognized as a strong chūnin, is still a chūnin, while older than Deidara, and undoubtedly physically stronger.

"Uhh, well..." she sighs, scratching the back of her head. "He kinda looks like Namikaze Minato. A lot," she says finally, deciding not to sugarcoat it. She knows Genma was in the Fourth's guard platoon, and that he constantly beats himself over not being able to properly care for his son. Ren could physically feel how relieved he was when she took Naruto in.

It goes unsaid how ostracized Minato's lookalike would be in Iwa, where the population was raised and taught to hate Konoha's Yellow Flash as part of their heritage.

"What do you mean?" he asks, stopping in his tracks.

"Well," she stops as well, looking for words. "I've seen Namikaze's pictures. Deidara has nearly the exact same coloring, if his skin was just a tad darker. And before you rebuff me – save for the eye shape, their facial structure is very similar as well. So-"

"So you concluded that there's a high possibility that there's a familiar relation," Genma finishes the thought for her, and Ren nods. "This... this is not a stupid notion. How old did you say Deidara is?"

"Almost thirteen," she answers, resuming her walk, and Genma follows. "Which means he was born shortly after the third shinobi war ended. And he definitely was conceived during- say, wasn't Namikaze a clanless orphan for all his genius?"

"He was," Genma nods. "Nobody knows where his parents came from, but his mother died giving birth on the steps of the orphanage, or so I've heard. It's entirely plausible he had family elsewhere, so... um, let's- let's not jump to conclusions, though, shall we?"

Genma looks uncomfortable with the other possibility – that Minato would've actually gone and knocked up an Iwa woman, no matter how plausible it sounds. Stress relief and all that. Ren remembers when Kushina, who was Mikoto's teammate and best friend after all, came to the Uchiha matriarch to brag about getting engaged to Minato at last. Ren was almost three, which means it was a bit over eleven years ago.

"Test results come in this evening, so I guess," she shrugs, "just a heads up in case... you know."

"Yeah. But no matter what, he probably is- you know. Naruto's family to some degree. And Naruto has no idea who- Ren, I don't like that look in your eyes."

Ren grins, and it's not a nice grin.

"Whatever you're planning-"

"The brats have an assignment to write an essay about a Hokage of their choice," she explains easily, still wearing that unbearably smug look. "I'm going to the library right now, if you haven't noticed. I'm going to check out some detailed books on Konoha history. For research, you know. Preferably
with detailed, full-color pictures. Purely for academic purposes, of course. We have a study group set for the afternoon, Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, Shino, Shikamaru—"

Genma looks at her, eyes wide and shining, and suddenly she's yanked up and spinning, ribs nearly crushed in a tight embrace.

Awai, wisely, relocates to her back, between her shoulder blades, where he's safe from humans' sudden bouts of physical affection.

"Uchiha Ren, you evil, evil mastermind," he breathes into her hair almost giddily, and doesn't let her go, and so she stays, locked in the embrace, face pressed to his shoulder. God knows he ranted for hours on end about how dumb it is that Naruto be left unaware of his parentage. Of how hurtful it is to the deceased, to his mentor and friend, and to one of Konoha's greatest kunoichi, to remain forgotten in such an ugly way.

"I have no idea what you could possibly be insinuating, Genma," she manages to say somehow, with her face pressed into his shoulder. He smells like mint and iron, wind and soap. It's comforting. "I'm just going to a library to check out some books on Konoha history, for research."

"Yes, yes, of course," he laughs, finally letting her go and patting her rat's nest of a hairstyle that she didn't even bother brushing when she left the house. "Say, how about I see if I can't find anything in the jōnin section for your research, hm?"

Ren's eyes actually glow at that, and it is definitely not because of the Sharingan.

"You're my favorite person, ever, Genma," she says honestly. "Don't tell Hana I said that, she'll get all huffy, but really. You're the best."

"I aim to please," he laughs, throwing his arm across her shoulders. They walk like that to the library, chatting about everything they can think of – Ren's mission, Genma's mission, Deidara, how the brats behaved when she was away, how Kotetsu and Izumo behaved in the meantime, how Iruka is faring as the brats' teacher, how Hayate's health is improving thanks to him being Hana's second favorite target of Hana's tender mercies because of Ren.

They get books, detailed ones, and even manage to find some obscure, tucked-away tome in the chūnin section that actually mentions Minato being married to Uzumaki Kushina that they grab without a second thought.

Ren treats Genma to coffee and then makes him her own pack mule to carry groceries back home. It's nice.
This is turning into a bi-weekly, but at least I'm keeping it up? I've never had a story that I would drag along for so long, to be honest. I honestly meant to write during Easter break, but family visits are shit, and ye, and also I managed to write this chapter on the last day of break instead of studying for my today's Latin exam. Yes, hello, I'm an idiot. Also, I hope you guys had a Happy Easter!

“All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.”
— Galileo Galilei

She leaves in the morning after Shino and, surprisingly, Torune, come in, with a table full of snacks and stacks of books in which Ren marked some pages with colorful slips of paper. All of the information she could find on all of the Hokage, of course, but suspiciously more on the fourth. It's not like Ren is planning something now, is she? Of course not. Those brats are smart, they will figure out what they should. Or at least Shikamaru will, and he's at the age where his brain-to-mouth filter is not yet well developed, so there's a very low risk of him keeping his discovery to himself. So, there it is – a foolproof plan that circumvents the S-Rank classification of the secret, because honestly, fuck this order, and fuck this secret, the Hokage is an idiot.

Genma agrees, so it must be true.

She summons Takuya-sensei, the ever so grumpy poison master, who is the only available summon that's relatively small, responsible, and uninjured (The spiders are still reeling from the overlapping of their dimension with that of the mantises after all, and they won't be fully healed until they literally molt their injuries off.) Ren would have preferred summoning Cobalt, too, but she is simply too big and would take up most of the space in living room. Therefore, Takuya-sensei.

Ren, in the meantime, has some meditating to do.

She has been meaning to do this for a while now, to pester her summons about whether or not they provided teachings for sage mode, and if she can actually access it herself. But for that, Ren needs to summon one of the three boss summons. She has learned quite a lot about them over the two years of their partnership, mostly from pestering Cobalt for information. It was insightful and they had some cool lore.

First of all, spiders are matriarchal. What a shocker for a species that tends to see the males as dinner, no? This also meant that they are generally much more accepting of female summoners, and male summoners would have to do much more to prove themsevles than just signing the contract and summoning a random child-spider to bond for life with. Second, they have three co-leaders which, while unexpected, makes sense. One is the typical kaiju-sized boss, the other is much more compact but also battle-honed, and the third, with perhaps the most authority, is the eldest and wisest of them all.

Elder Kana, a legendary golden-eyed tarantula rumored to be immortal simply because of how long
she's been around – at least from way before even the Warring Clans Era. And also the only one who can help Ren. So yeah, forgive her if she's nervous.

She closes her eyes, standing in the middle of an empty clearing with her trench coat on and scarf wound around her neck, on the thin patchwork covering of snow on the ground, and breathes in the chilly air, gathering all the single-minded focus she can. The fire-natured chakra circulating underneath her skin neutralizes the cold almost instantly, and she opens her eyes again. She nicks her thumb with a kunai enough to draw a droplet of blood, and smears it on her palm, before flying through a series of hand signs and slamming her hands on the ground.

Intricate seals bloom on the soil and snow and explode in smoke and ozone.

Ren waits as it clears, hands shaking in anticipation and maybe a bit in fear.

Shikamaru sighs, taking off his shoes and pushing them onto the shelf by the door, moving out of the way so that Ino and Choji can do the same, and tries to ignore Naruto's energetic jumping from place to place. If he didn't know better, he would go as far as to claim that the blond had somehow learned to shunshin around, but he does, so he doesn't assume such an impossibility. Instead, he goes with a more plausible explanation – Naruto is ridiculously energetic and will probably sooner discard orange and cease eating ramen than stop moving on his own accord.

And while it sounds ridiculous, for those who know Naruto it's obvious that orange and ramen are the truths of life. For the blond, at least.

Troublesome, really. But also oddly endearing. On the other hand, Shikamaru wants to sleep. Forever, preferably, starting five minutes ago.

"Ino-chan!" Sakura flies out of the living room milliseconds after Ino finished putting her shoes away, and throws herself at the blonde and, consequently, knocks them both into the wall on which their jackets hang.

"Sakura-chan!" Ino cheers, not minding getting slammed into a wall, and reciprocates the hug giddily. Girls are scary that way, and Shikamaru isn't sure which he prefers – how they were before mending their friendship, all loud and troublesome, or how they are now, having made up and probably plotting people's untimely demises during their sleepovers. Well, as long as it's not his.

Also, what the hell, they saw each other yesterday. More than that, they spent an entire half of a day trailing after one another at the Academy, and then Sakura was at Ino's for dinner, so Shikamaru really does not understand why they suddenly behave as if they haven't seen one another in months. Ergo, his conclusion. Girls are weird.

(And scary. Sakura doesn't particularly hide that she wants to be like Ren when she grows up. That, and the medical scrolls Kiba's older sister throws at her, that give her rather uncanny knowledge of human body even now. And he heard she's been sometimes seen tailing that insane T&I lady, Anko, that Ren hangs out with. Worse, she does that with Ino, who has suddenly experienced a spike of interest in whatever it is that her father does. Which is torturing people for information, or serving as a therapist. Of course what Ino is interested in is much more of the former and a lot less of the latter. Is it too much to ask for a day to just laze about and watch clouds?)

Also, how Sasuke manages to live with Naruto full-time and not go insane, he doesn't understand either. But then maybe Sasuke is a bit insane, seeing how much love and effort he pours into literally spitting fire. Shikamaru saw it once, when they had a picnic by the lake, just the guys because Hinata
had Hyūga things to do and Ino and Sakura were trailing mad-Anko at that time. Sasuke decided he wanted to show off, and his idea of showing off was spitting a house sized fireball at the lake. Granted, they had to carry him home and he was absent from school next day from chakra exhaustion, but the look in his eyes had been positively manic.

Shikamaru would not want to be on the receiving end of it, thank you very much.

"Hey," Sasuke says walking out of the living room. "There's food and drinks, and neesan got us some better books than the Academy basics. They're library books so if we ruin them she'll probably come after us."

That's probably the most he's heard Sasuke say in a while. The Uchiha usually opts to remain silent and answers questions in clipped half-sentences or single words, that fully conveys the 'leave me the hell alone' message to everyone... well, almost. Sasuke's fangirls aren't exactly smart, and he would be the first to agree on that.

"Who else is already here?" he asks with a nod. Probably Kiba is still absent, because the only ruckus he can hear being made is by Naruto, no sign of the Inuzuka or his dog, yet.

"Sakura-chan an' Shino an' Torune!" said hyperactive blond suddenly materializes right next to Shikamaru and he doesn't bother trying not to startle. He probably would've jumped, but that's too bothersome and requires actual physical output. "And onee-chan left this giant spider to su-superv-"

"Supervise," Sasuke supplies with an eyeroll.

"Yeah, that! And Shino brought Torune. Because Torune has some free time before he and his team go to the Chūnin exams in Kumo next week, y'know?"

Shikamaru most certainly did not need to know what his classmate's cousin slash adopted brother is up to after having graduated from the Academy, but trust Naruto to supply the information.

"I just hope Hinata doesn't drag Neji with her," Sasuke mutters under his breath. "One more word about destiny and I'm setting him on fire."

At this, everybody winces sympathetically. Hinata's older cousin slash bodyguard was really a grade A asshole that even Ren and Naruto haven't manage to really get through to yet, at all. He is very stubborn about being a miserable prick, yapping about how this person is destined to do this, and the other one to do that. Also, he judges people based on first glance and hearsay and sticks to those no matter what.

Shikamaru has seen Sakura crack her knuckles one too many times at the sight of the Hyūga boy not to suspect how it would end if he doesn't change, fast.

The living room is just like he remembers it from his visit last week. The biggest room of the house, right next to the small kitchen and separated from it only by a half-wall that he's seen Naruto slip through to the other room instead of using the door-less doorframe. All browns and pleasing to the eye, and always a different air freshener. Last week it was conifer forest, and today it smells like a meadow, but more wildflowers than grass and soil. There are two couches, four armchairs, and two ottomans to sit on, with a table in between them that is a bit too tall and big to be a proper tea table, on a fluffy carpet. They probably shouldn't mess up the carpet either, because it looks like a bitch to clean.

Shino and Torune have squeezed themselves into one armchair – they are still small enough to successfully do so – and sure enough, there is a giant spider, lounging on the headrest of the chair
right next to the two Aburame. It has huge eyes, a long, thin abdomen, and very long, very thin legs that give it an even creepier appearance than it probably should have. It is by far the creepiest spider he's seen in the history of ever. Sakura breezes past him, skipping like the happy murder-child she is, and seated herself on the same armchair the spider occupied. It seems to grumble something, disgruntled, but nevertheless starts paying attention when Sakura starts pestering it about...

Wait, are they talking poisons?

No way in hell Shikamaru is going down that particular Valley of Nope.

Ino approaches Sakura and the spider much, much slower, visibly perplexed but also with determination shining in her eyes. Not that Shikamaru can blame her, any sane person would be leery of a creepy spider the size of a small dog, it's just Sakura who is special. Or very determined to be like Ren.

The doorbell rings again, and Naruto, who had just entered the living room with Chōji, bounds back to answer the door. Of course, since he has no filter whatsoever and probably never will, everyone hears his whiny sentiments.

"Hinataaaaaaa why did you bring this loser with you?!"

Whatever the girl might answer is way too quiet for them to hear, and Shikamaru sighs. Sasuke makes a sour face, and it stays, but when Neji walks into the living room, head held high and all, the Uchiha doesn't even acknowledge him. If by ignoring the Hyūga they can remain civil, Shikamaru will take it. Neji still looks as if he smelled something particularly bad, but he actually pales upon spotting their spider supervisor. Frankly, Hinata takes it much, much better – to the point where she easily sits by the Aburames, on the other side from Sakura and the spider. But then, for all her stutter and gentle demeanor, Hinata has always seemed quite brave, when she isn't on the verge of fainting from anxiety.

It's not long before Hana drops Kiba off and rushes to the hospital for her shift, all the while muttering darkly about reckless idiots, probably in Ren's general direction since Ren is out for now in favor of doing, ah, 'specialized training,' as she calls it, heavily implying it involves even more spiders.

With that – and more ruckus, because if Kiba ever doesn't vocalize his dislike of Neji, Shikamaru would suspect he's under a very poorly constructed genjutsu – they somehow start looking through the provided books. First, they need to decide which of the Hokage to focus on, and then read the information and compile it into a short essay about why this Hokage is their favorite. It's not bad.

"Let's just all read some things from the First to the Fourth, and then decide, okay?" Sakura proposes, with the spider – Takuya-sensei – now relocated from being draped over the chair's headrest to being draped over Sakura's shoulders.

It's a good idea, so they grab the books – of course, not enough for them all, so some need to pair up, which is probably better considering, well, Naruto, Kiba and – no matter how much Shikamaru likes him, he's still not the brightest kunai in the pouch – Chōji tend to be more focused on... other things. Like not paying attention.

But since Chōji actually wanders off to Hinata, which comes as no surprise because those two are just too nice but also somehow work well together because of that, Shikamaru has a book all to himself. So he reads, from the First to the Third. And then, he moves to read about the Fourth.

Shikamaru stills when he turns to the next page of the book, and for a second he thinks that Ren,
the spirit of a joke, had slipped Naruto's picture into the book, but it lasts maybe half a second, because the man in the picture is older, clearly an adult, with way sharper angles than Naruto will most likely ever achieve even once he loses his baby fat, and without the whisker marks. But those are unmistakably Naruto's eyes, and his yellow scruffy bird nest, if it were longer.

He blinks, tearing his eyes from the picture, and looks down, skimming the description.

Namikaze Minato, the youngest Hokage, the Yellow Flash of Konoha, something, something, known for killing a thousand enemy ninja alone, something, something...

Was confirmed to be in a relationship with Uzumaki Kushina.

Oh. That- Well.

Shikamaru grabs the book, closes it cover-to-cover so that he's holding up the picture of the Fourth, and nudges Naruto. The blond looks at him, confused, and Shikamaru blinks. There are a few differences, but he can definitely see the resemblance, especially in coloration. But that can only mean-

Oh. Oh no.

Call it Ren's bad influence, but what Shikamaru says next is: "Well, shit."
Fiftieth Thread

Chapter Notes

*rarely jumps out of the woodwork with a chapter and no reason or rhyme to the pattern* Hi. It is I.

There's still discord running for y'all.

Link: https://discord.gg/WQ7mNwk

Also I've made CPwUR tumblr blog, where you can find art, chapter notifications and, what you're probably going to like the most, the function to ask Ren and her spiders various stuff.

Link: https://cpwur.tumblr.com/

"In a time of universal deceit - telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

— Unknown

Nothing of this size should be this fast. Nothing of this size has the right to be this fast.

Nobody this age should be this fast either.

Or, at least, that's Ren's standing on the matter as of now, as she evades Elder Kana when the big, black tarantula crashes into the tree Ren had been standing on just a moment ago.

(Spiders are fucking fast, who would've thought?)

"Geez, what's got you so hot and bothered!" Ren yells at the giant spider. "I just asked a question, you don't need to try to kill me for it!"

"You have no idea what you're asking for," Elder Kana honest-to-god narrows her beady, golden eyes at Ren, and isn't that weird? Spiders aren't supposed to have eyelids, goddamnit. The thought doesn't stay with Ren for long, because the giant tarantula pounces again, and Ren jumps back, chakra pushed forcefully through the soles of her feet, through her shoes, propelling her forward faster and farther than humanly possible, Kana on her heels.

So, here's what happened; Ren summoned Kana, and nothing was wrong. Then, Kana asked why she was summoned, because you don't summon one of the most powerful summons you have for no reason, that's stupid. So Ren inquired – politely mind you, and she's hardly ever polite – about the possibility of learning Sage Mode.

Elder Kana lost her shit, and here they are.

"Come on, at least tell me what's got you so irritated!" Ren shrieks, bouncing off a branch and landing on another. She's tense, muscles screaming in exertion already and her breathing ragged, but
she doesn't move from there, turning to face the giant spider. Elder Kana stopped, too, and she's fuming, her mandibles moving in irritation.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous Sage Mode is? How dangerous our way of doing it is?" the tarantula hisses angrily, and Ren sighs, cupping her head in her palms.

"I know you're old and all-"

"Who are you calling old?!"

"But you could've, I dunno, first explained to me why is it so dangerous, and maybe then try to beat the idea out of me?" Ren asks, fuming. Kana looks at her, blinks, and then stops. Well, one more thing to add to the oddities Ren has seen in this life – an embarrassed spider. Who knew they're even capable of it? But here they are. Ren huffs, ruffling her hair, and jumps down onto the ground.

"Okay granny-"

"You're calling me old again!"

"-I know some things might become less obvious with age-"

"Why youuu-!"

"-but would you kindly explain to me why the spiders' version of Sage Mode is so dangerous that you'd rather attack me?" Ren asks, pointedly ignoring spider-grandma's outbursts – getting attacked like that makes her sassy, so sue her – and leans back on the tree behind her. Elder Kana sighs, moving her mandibles up and down in a way that reminds Ren of humans biting their lip, and looks at the Uchiha. Her eyes, now that she isn't trying to kill Ren and she can see them, are strikingly gold on an otherwise ordinary-looking black tarantula. She's smaller than Cobalt, and significantly so – she reaches about to Ren's hips, whilst Cobalt stands as tall as her shoulders.

"Huh," Elder Kana says eloquently, and honestly, if she can get any further from the supposed Esteemed Spider Sage she supposedly is, Ren is going to be surprised. "Well, there is one person we're actually teaching Sage Mode to at the moment-"

And if that didn't raise all the red flags in Ren's head, then something would be wrong.

"Someone else? As in a summoner?" she asks instantly, because that's important, because weren't summoning scrolls exclusive? As in, you had to sign them to do the thing, and Ren had the scroll, and there was no other active name than herself-

"It's complicated," Kana says, and then looks Ren up and down, as if assessing. "And while you wouldn't mind telling, we promised secrecy. It's... a delicate matter. Very delicate. Life-and-death delicate."

"Will I ever meet them?" the Uchiha asks, and the spider just glares at her. "Ahem, yes, okay, all in its own time, I get it. So, that Sage Mode."

"Yes, that Sage Mode," Kana is still looking at Ren. The old bat probably knows that this 'other person' will now forever be a matter in the back of her head until she learns who it is. Ren might have become somewhat... Possessive, of her summons. Spiders are hers, and she isn't particularly keen on sharing. "As I was saying, it's extremely dangerous, and not for the reasons you might think. Asking specifically for it, you probably know what it is, and what nature chakra can do to you."

"It can turn you into an animal you're most connected to," Ren lists. "It can turn you into stone, burn you to ash, overload your system and fry you from the inside. It can outright kill you if you're not"
"To put it mildly," Kana snorts. "For us spiders, it's Special, in a way. We're predators, you see, we were made for just one purpose – to kill, to kill better, faster, more efficiently. That's all we do, really, and those instincts, they run strong with us. If you were to gain Sage Mode through us, those instincts would never leave you. The more you use it, the less of you is left. Not to mention that our Sage Mode is always the type others would consider... incomplete."

"Huh, I dunno," Ren shrugs. "I think chitin-covered arms would be cool."

"...you are incorrigible," Kana grumbles, tensing.

"Hey, wait, what-"

Ren doesn't really have time to formulate proper question, because Kana once more launches herself at her, and Ren does not want to get mauled by a giant spider, thank you very fucking much.

"Let's see how your resolve holds then, in the face of danger!"

"That's not fair and also I've been in a plenty of life-threatening situations, go ask Hana! Never stopped me before, sure as hell ain't gonna start now!"

People cursing around them was not a rare occurrence – Ren cursed all the time, honestly, it was nothing odd. But to hear Shikamaru curse? Forget hearing him speak, however rare that was for the lazy bum, but for him to actually make an effort and curse?

Yeah, it didn't happen, he just couldn't be bothered to do it – and yet, here it was. Hence, piqued interest.

"What's wrong Shika?" Sakura asks from where she's sitting on the armchair with Ino and the creepy spider, and he gulps, not quit pale but visibly shaken. He looks at her, and then turns the book so that most people in the room can see.

"If the Fourth Hokage doesn't look even a little bit like Naruto to you, then I don't know you anymore," he says completely seriously. Sakura stares, then blinks, and then is suddenly furiously flipping pages from the Third Hokage's most notable disciples to the section on the Fourth and-

"But many people look similar," Sasuke brings up despite himself, because wouldn't that be nice for Naruto to find family? But on the other hand false hope would be really, really bad to the significant annoyance of his life.

"I think it is very plausible. Why? Because it says here that Namikaze Minato was in a relationship with a survivor of Uzushio, Uzumaki Kushina," Shino adds the final nail to the coffin, looking over Torune to skim Sakura's book with her.

"But if it's true, then why keep Naruto's parents from him?" Sakura asks suddenly, fists clenched and eyes ablaze. "I know they were famous and made many enemies, goddamnit, so it should stay secret, but why couldn't Naruto know?!"

"Old man..." Naruto whispers suddenly, and only now they look at him – he's pale like a ghost and looks somewhat haunted, both betrayed and yet hopeful. "Old man will know."

And he bolts, barely pausing to slip on his shoes, and he's out of the door nearly the same instant.
"Fucking shit," Sasuke hisses viciously, because Ren never reprimands them when they curse since that would be way too hypocritical, and bolts after the blond. "Don't make a mess! I gotta catch up to him!"

"Wait, I'm coming too!" Sakura yells, almost throwing Takuya-sensei at Ino and chasing after the boys, Shikamaru wordlessly following at her heels.

For a moment, the silence is deafening.

"Well, that happened," Ino finally says.

"What the hell," Kiba agrees.

Ren almost feels bad for the ANBU she crashes headfirst into, but honestly, it's their fault for suddenly appearing in her way, so, no, she does not feel bad at all. It's a woman, Ren knows because she crashes head-first into her breasts (not a development she's particularly angsty about, mind you), and between that and the long, dark purple hair spilling behind the woman, Ren is pretty sure it's actually Uzuki Yūgao – known better as 'one of those select few in Konoha who know which end of proper blade goes where and therefore are on Ren's radar for potential teachers'.

Also one of the few actually honest-to-god baddass female characters in the whole depicted Naruto universe, because yo, she made bloody ANBU at an age comparable to Itachi, or at least that's what wiki said. Also that one person who hounded on Hayate more than Hana, to whom Ren so happily charted him off a while back after he had a severe coughing fit in the middle of her pestering him for – surprise – more kenjutsu tips.

"Hi, gimme a sec," Ren says and grabs Yūgao's vest when her feet meet the solid surface of a branch for a split second. She focuses on the chakra in the soles of her feet and pushes, propelling herself up. Props for Yūgao for not stabbing her as she does so, dragging the ANBU woman with her to another branch as a big, black spider crashes to where they just stood. "Oi, old bat, this is important so chill for a second or forever, okay?!

Elder Kana clicks her mandibles furiously at Ren from where she's standing on the branch Ren had dragged Yūgao from, but aside from an angry string of unrepeatable profanities, even for Ren, she doesn't really answer. She does stop, though, so there's that at the very least. Ren stands straighter, letting go of the ANBU (and boy, doesn't she wish she could see Yūgao's face now) and dusting herself off, then turns to the other woman.

"So, hi, I'm kind of in the middle of something," she nods her head in the general direction of her summon, and now that she thinks of it, it does remind her of the time in the show that Naruto had to prove his worth to Toad Boss. Maybe if she's persistent enough, Kana will cave in and let her in on the secret? Hopefully. "But I have a moment so what brings you here?"

"Hokage-sama summons you," Yūgao says, and Ren suddenly shivers. It might be about Deidara, honestly, since he's an unknown to anyone but her, but also with the lowkey sabotage she's doing now, well. Pardon any morbid thoughts she has.

"What did you do this time, brat?" Kana asks, and wow, they've just met for the first time and Ren is already labeled as a troublemaker in her eyes. Talk about judgmental. Ren doesn't bother trying to rebuff her, though, because she knows there's no use - Kana is right in that preconception and they both know it.

"Nothing yet," she grumbles instead. "Ugh, I guess, let's go then," she nods at Yūgao, and the
woman nods back, and then they're soaring through the trees and above the buildings, Kana hot at their heels. She could dispel herself, but for some reason opts not to. If it's to hunt Ren more after she's done with official business, or to be a general bother, or maybe because she hasn't really met a human in almost a hundred years if the tales of various summons are to be believed, Ren can only speculate.

Not to mention that other mysterious Spider Sage. Another thing to grill every summon she can get her hands on about. Someone is bound to have answers. Probably Cobalt, because she is a curious, sweet child and would probably answer truthfully if properly bribed with some delicacy Jōren Falls doesn't have. Yes, that sounds like a plan. Ren doesn't like unknowns, after all – especially so close to home.

That, and she might be a teeny tiny bit possessive of her summons.

Whatever evil awaiting her in the Hokage's office Ren imagined on the way there, this... this isn't it. It isn't nearly anything like any of her morbid ideas at all, not even remotely connected to the brats realizing Naruto's parentage. Was she to doubt their deduction skills now? Honestly this, right then and there, is probably one of the best news she has got in her life here in the shinobi world.

"A field promotion... to Tokubetsu Jōnin?" she repeats, still slightly dazed from the revelation, because wow. Of course it isn't full Jōnin, but surely she isn't specialized in one of her talents enough yet to be considered for the position, is she? When did she get so strong in the first place?

"Yes," Hiruzen says with an indulgent smile, and Ren just gapes at him. "You were recommended by some people, and it was nearly impossible to rebuff their claims. You're very proficient with flame jutsus, show a predisposition to two additional chakra affinities to a lesser degree, have a good grip on your Sharingan," and of course by that he means 'you have the Mangekyo and you can more or less use it but we can't say that out loud just in case', "your summons are a force to be reckoned with and you work closely with them in a way I haven't really seen before," Ren could swear Kana waves at Hiruzen, if the smile he sends the spider's way is anything to go by. "And, most importantly, you are one of Konoha's top kenjutsu users, whether you recognize it or not. That, and a few smaller things."

"Huh," is Ren's eloquent answer. She didn't even realize, but then- is being one of the best at kenjutsu in Konoha really such a big achievement? Ren knows firsthand that the shinobi here who use it, and use it well, are few and far between and much less skilled compared to those trained in Kiri. Jashin knows she complains enough to Kisame about it in her letters. But then, the question of the day is, "who recommended me, if it isn't confidential?"

"Not really, but why are you asking?"

"So that I can hunt them down if I get shitty high-level missions?" Ren asks with a shrug, and Hiruzen chuckles.

"Among others, the recommendations came from Shiranui Genma, Maito Gai, and Aburame Shibi," he says indulgently and, huh, Ren kind of did-but-didn't expect that. She isn't surprised, really, that it was them. Just that they did it. Genma is a great friend, while Gai is something else entirely and seemed to think of Ren as a determined and a kind person. And Shibi, her beloved genin sensei who had given her an honorary place in his clan after she fried some ROOT puppets she'd accidentally stumbled upon, whom she had probably given more gray hairs than he'd care to admit. She could probably kiss him, and he definitely deserved a giant box of chocolate for all the shit he went through because of her.
"That's- that's fine, I think. Okay, whatever, I'll take the badge or something," she shrugs, a bit at a loss. "And the harder missions. More money, yaay. And probably more wounds. Hana will have a field day with me."

Naruto picks precisely this moment to burst through the window with a shout, Sasuke hot on his heels with Sakura and Shikamaru right behind him. The blond looks almost haunted, and his eyes are wild.

Oh.

Uh-oh.

"Old man!" Naruto yells, breathing hard, looking at the Hokage with wide eyes full of both hope and hurt. "Is Namikaze Minato my dad?!"

Hiruzen almost chokes on his breath, and suddenly looks at the kids, each and every one, with wide, shocked eyes. Naruto doesn't care, because he slams a book – wait, was he carrying it? Ren hadn't noticed – on the Hokage's desk, and pats the full-color picture of Minato angrily.

"U-um, Hokage-sama," Sakura says uncertainly, and all eyes suddenly turn to her. She meeps quietly under the attention, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt, and looks around the room quietly before her eyes land on Ren. She gives the pinkette a smile that is equal parts confusion and encouragement. Sakura gulps, straightens and looks straight at the old man. Brave girl. "With all due respect, Hokage-sama, we tried to stop him, but- um, in the books? We have homework to write about one of the Hokage, a-and-"

"We asked Ren-neesan for books," Sasuke says, and that's not really true but not a lie either, smart brats, "so that we could write it better. Because she can get books from the chunin section of the library."

"Namikaze Minato and Naruto look a lot like one another," Shikamaru drawls. "And the Fourth was confirmed to be in a relationship with one of Uzushiogakure's few survivors, Uzumaki Kushina, the Red Hot Habanero."

"Old man!" Naruto says again, even more forcefully this time. "Is it true? Is this Minato guy really my dad? And is Kushina really my mom?!"

There's a headache building right behind his eyes. He looks at Naruto, and says, "Yes. They are."

This was supposed to be a nice, calm day. He unabashedly gives Ren a stink eye as if he was eighteen again, and not eighty. He knows that she knows that he knows it's somehow her fault. When isn't it, really, when something like this happens?

"In my defense," Ren says, affronted, holding her hands up, "I wasn't even there when it happened."

It's not a denial.

Hiruzen rubs at his temples, trying to lessen his migraine.

It doesn't work.
"Don't deceive me. Give me the truth. Even if it breaks me. A painful truth is better than a pleasant lie."
— Yasmin Mogahed

Hiruzen looks like he's just bit into a particularly sour lemon, but Ren honestly just can't find it in herself to give a single flying fuck about the old Hokage's mood at this point, really. Once, a long time ago, in – quite literally – another life, she may have liked him as a character. But liking a character, and then liking someone in person, those are two completely different things.

And, as a person, Ren finds herself increasingly dissatisfied with their esteemed military dictator. He is old and wise, yes, but he is too old, and holds too many sentiments, and, to put it simply – is too soft. Not only that, but he lacks the real foresight – not that Ren claims to have it, but he lacks it even more than her – that would allow him to reach his goals and run the village smoothly.

Yes, true, you can only ask so much from a military dictatorship, but still. Ren isn't one to let go, not such a political and societal slight. Because, honestly, their appliance of logic? Or, rather, lack thereof?

Ren can only imagine what was going through higher-up's minds when they were making decisions about Naruto's future.

'Let's keep his parentage from him, it's dangerous for anyone to know, and once he learns we kept it from him, he will be very bitter and most likely will never trust us again, that's a great way to ensure his loyalty. What, you want us to tell just him, but nobody else? Now why would we do that?'

'Let's not tell him a word about what he is and what he contains, so that not only will he not receive specialized training but he'll also have no idea whatsoever how to deal with the Kyuubi once he actually realizes what he carries. That will surely help!'

Or, the highlight of it all:

'Let's turn a blind eye on the civilians ostracizing him his whole life, that way we will surely make him care for, love, and protect this village!'
Sweet fucking Jashin, see what Ren has to deal with? She is surrounded by idiots, and not just any idiots – the older they are, and the wiser they should be, the dumber (and more self-serving, in a certain case) they act. Uchiha Ren turns fifteen next month, but she is also thirty-four and from an entirely different world, with a very different outlook on the world and the people here are just...

Idiots. To put it mildly. Them and their convoluted schemes that do them no good but cause more and more problems, yet they still firmly tread in their swamp until they finally drown in the rancid mud of their grand plans.

And Naruto- Naruto looks sad, betrayed even. With those huge, innocent, sky-blue eyes it would be ridiculously easy for him to just grab a person's heart and rip it to shreds with the overwhelming feeling of guilt they incite. And, frankly, serves them right, in Ren's opinion. Or Hiruzen, at least, because boy, if she doesn't have a bone to pick with the Hokage at this point, if her previous actions haven't been proof enough... she has openly yelled at him, for crying out loud.

But then, maybe, just maybe, he is beginning to realize his mistakes. Because, otherwise, would he allow Ren to take Naruto in? Was it his guilt about leaving this boy alone to effectively rot, or maybe the knowledge that Ren would have taken him in no matter their decision, and they couldn't really stop her?

Maybe, just maybe, they have some teeny-tiny silver of logic, the council, because had they separated Naruto and Ren – the only semi-adult person to ever openly care for him that isn't Saint Teuchi – it would do much more harm than it could ever do good. It would only fuel the growing resentment blond has for the village.

And isn't that a whole new can of worms.

Ren can openly state that Naruto, at this point, holds very little loyalty to his village, if any at all. Yes, he does care for people, deeply at that, but the village? On that, his standing is much like that of the two Uchihas he lives with; Konoha can burn for all he cares, as long as his loved ones are safe.

(That may or may not have been partly due to Ren showing him that the way people treat him is not okay. That being not okay is okay, that resenting people for being hateful, spiteful morons is okay, too. Fake it 'til you make it is not the way to go; moreover, it is something Ren rather heavily condemns – especially when one tries to fake happiness.

That never works. That's something she's learned from firsthand experience.)

"Why," Naruto finally says, not really questioning but a question nonetheless. His voice is small, and hoarse, completely contrasting what he'd shown before. Worse yet, he sounds completely heartbroken. As if he is hoping that no, they were not his parents, that no, the Hokage – his old man, his almost-grandfather – has not been hiding such an absolutely vital piece of information about himself from him. The boy clenches his fists, shivering and sniffling, and the sight breaks Ren's heart.

"It had to be done," Hiruzen says finally, voice grave. "To keep you safe-"

"Like hell it had!" Naruto yells, tears welling in his eyes, all grief and rage.

"Naruto, you must understand-"

"No, I don't!" the boy snarls, his eyes flashing an eerie red, pupils slit and face suddenly feral, and Hiruzen gasps, taken aback. Naruto smirks wryly, an expression no child should really ever show, but Ren figures that his tenant bleeding through would do that. Oddly enough, she doesn't feel any
odd chakra. Then, is it just the Kyuubi's conscience surging? Possibly.

"Naruto," Sakura whispers sadly, but Sasuke grips her wrist when she makes to move towards the blond. He shakes his head at her.

"So, you knew about my friend, too," Naruto says, none of his childish stuttering or even simplicity present any longer. As odd as it sounds, it seems that right at this very moment Naruto and Kurama share the exact same amount of control over the blond's body. Perfect partnership, perfect cooperation. Ren still can't sense any chakra that could remotely be the bijuu's though. "And when exactly did you intend to inform me about him, huh?"

"Naruto-"

"Ku- the Kyuubi and I have a rapport going on, you know that?" Naruto quirks an eyebrow, and it looks so mature on his childish, yet feral face, that it's odd. Also he almost called the Kyuubi by his given name – they surely have a better relationship going on than Ren had suspected they would have at this point, or at all when she'd first told him to investigate the growling in the back of his mind. This is good.

Hiruzen's face looks particularly pinched.

"Oh," Naruto gasps suddenly, eyes temporarily bleeding back to blue. "Mom was his vessel before me," he says almost reverently, a second before his eyes snap back to crimson. "And you didn't think it important to inform me?"

"I did it to protect you," Hiruzen says finally, and Naruto-Kyuubi scoffs. This is no argument for his decision, this is justification and not even a good one.

"Yes," he says wryly, "I can see how keeping my parentage from me, what I hold, could be done to protect me. I really do. Protect me from knowledge. From growing up knowing that someone loved me. From knowing just why most of the people in the village hate me – I had to find him myself you know! The Kyuubi. I had to meditate, and go into my head, and find him myself and I had no idea what he was or why he was in there!"

There's a lot of Kurama bleeding through right now, Ren realizes. Naruto is bitter all on his own, but the fox takes it to a whole new level, and his speech pattern – vocabulary, grammar structure, fluidity – is of someone much older than a nine-year-old child. Not to mention he's half a step from being downright hostile. Kurama doesn't like Hiruzen, what a shocker – and Naruto, as of now, feels very betrayed. It's a pretty dangerous combination.

"Well, you fucked up," Ren sighs, ruffling her hair and walking over to Naruto-Kurama. His features are feral and there are tears of rage and grief still threatening to spill from his red, glossy eyes. Still, he doesn't hesitate to jump into her open arms and wrap himself around her torso, burying his face in Ren's shoulder and finally letting out a treacherous sniff.

"And just pray tell how did an S-Ranked secret get spilled like that?" Hiruzen asks, and Ren rolls her eyes.

"Ren didn't do anything," Shikamaru says, bravely stepping forward. She loves the brat, honestly. Would probably end up stealing him, too- but his mother is quite fierce, so on the other hand, Ren would rather not. "It was me. We were writing a paper for school, about the Hokage, and there was a section on the Yondaime in the book I was using. With a big, full color picture. And he looked a lot
like Naruto, so I made the connection..."

Hiruzen sighs, moving to rub at his throbbing temples. He probably should’ve expected that to happen eventually, but he somehow didn't. Maybe because Naruto didn't hit him as the bookish type, because he isn't, but his friends are.

"Well, what happened has happened, there's nothing that can be done now," he sighs tiredly, feeling his age once more, this time with an uncanny viciousness.

Naruto would probably never trust him again.

"With all due respect," Ren sighs, 'of which there's none' goes unsaid but still received as she hefts the blond higher, "but I'd like to take the kids home now."

"Yes, yes," Hiruzen waves his hands. "I have some things to think about now anyway," he says sadly. Ren almost feels bad for the man, but he got himself into this mess and never made a move to get out, so, frankly, she'd rather let him stay in it.

She turns to Sakura, Sasuke, and Shikamaru and motions at the door with her head, moving towards the exit, the three kids trailing after her. Elder Kana trots behind them, this time quiet and with a noticeable lack of quips until they have left the building.

"That," Kana says then, "was a mess."

Genma is in the flat when they make it back, sitting with Chōji and Hinata and explaining something about the Nidai. Naruto has largely calmed down by now, Kurama fully retreated back into his seal – and who would've thought the fox would be so protective of the boy? Ren still can't help but marvel at the sheer power of Naruto's Talk no Jutsu – and shifted from clinging to her front to clinging to her back in a piggyback ride. Sasuke walks right next to Ren, determinedly holding on to Naruto's shirt, Shikamaru moving leisurely next to him. Sakura is further back, trotting along with Kana and pestering the old summon about whatever comes to mind.

Genma takes one look at them, and knows – has probably known since he got here and the kids told him about whatever happened, but at least now he has confirmation. Ren smiles wryly at him, and it's more of a grimace, really, because she was the one listening to Naruto's sniffles most of the way, and it isn't something she enjoys. She wishes there was an easier way to reveal the truth, but the longer she put it off, the worse the backlash would probably be and, honestly, she is selfish and self-serving above all.

She cares for Naruto and Sasuke a lot, and honestly she doesn't care if others ruin their relationships with them. Of course, they are welcome to try and make amends – unless their name is Itachi, of course, and has no idea how to use a certain organ called a brain – but Ren isn't going to go and encourage it.

If Sarutobi wants to somehow fix this mess that his and Naruto's once good relations had become, he is welcome to. If Naruto doesn't want that, that's his choice.

"Okay, let's do those essays and be done with them, okay?" she asks with a sigh, finally letting Naruto down, but the boy latches onto her hand with an almost painfully tight grip, and Ren sighs deeply, wrapping her arm around his shoulders and pulling him closer to her side. "It's gonna be alright, okay?"

"I'm never going to forgive him," he says weakly, and Ren ruffles his hair with her free hand.
"Don't say things like that when you're still angry," she answers. "Think about what you're going to do when you've calmed down, okay?"

"Okay."

"For now, do you want to help me with dinner?"

"...okay."

"Oi, brats, who's staying for dinner?" Ren asks louder, and all hands, including Genma's, Takuya's, and – after brief consideration, Kana's – shoot up. Ren grumbles, "Are you fucking kidding me, I said brats, not everyone," but marches into the kitchen anyway, dragging Naruto with her. He still looks miserable, but there's a tiny sliver of a smile dancing on his lips.

"Can we have ramen?"

"I should have all the ingredients for it, I guess."

"Okay, I love you, nee-chan."

"...love you too, brat."
Yes, hello, it is I. I'd be sorry for the delay if I wasn't literally in the middle of exams concluding the current semester. Have a chapter.
Beta'd, as always, by irreplaceable hestia8693!

"The backbone of surprise is fusing speed with secrecy."
— Carl von Clausewitz

If this is some sort of skewed apology from Hiruzen, Ren isn't sure, but she does know for a fact that it doesn't even come close to making up for nine years of neglect and secrets. Although, to be honest, it is kind of nice that he's trying, if only for Naruto's sake. It at least shows that he might have a shred of care for, quite possibly, the village's most powerful weapon and doesn't want him to fully turn away from him.

(Too late, really, if Ren had a say, and she does.)

Still doesn't make Ren like him. Hiruzen might've been a compelling character, but that was from the other side of the screen, back Then. As a person, he leaves a whole lot to be desired. Like, really, a lot. Ren isn't going to beat around the bush in admitting her dislike of the man – not openly, of course, most of the time, but it's kind of an open secret. Also because he's old and not nearly as sneaky as he thinks.

So when she finds Deidara on her doorstep, not even two days after the incident, green vest on his chest and Konoha forehead protector holding his ridiculous bangs up, she can only sigh in exasperation. Who else has the power and reason to push Deidara's evaluations forward, when they should've taken at least a week? They don't even know the results of the DNA tests – or whatever the shinobi equivalent is – and the measly three days sure as hell can't be enough to thoroughly test Deidara's mental and physical capability. Or his knowledge about the village to decide what he would need to catch up on (everything, probably) since he's decided to be a Konoha shinobi now.

And yet, here he is.

"I wonder why they rushed your evaluation," Ren drawls in a way that would make Snape proud, probably. "It's definitely not because of the higher-ups most recent fuck-up and you seem like the most convenient way to start fixing it, is it."

"Whatever do you mean! They did a full, very thorough evaluation of my skills and mental health, nothing was rushed and nothing skipped," Deidara snarks right back at her, and Ren snorts. There is a reason why she likes this kid, and it's neither because he reminds her of Naruto nor because he likes explosions. Well, not fully, but the biggest part is that she loves how snarky and deadpan the brat can be.

"Alright, brat, come in," she huffs, allowing Deidara to enter. "I know you're supposed to be living with Genma, but he left on a mission and probably won't be back before the end of the week, so I'm
"Guessing they want you bunking with us?"

"Obviously," Deidara sniffs. "They didn't even give me a futon, cheap assholes."

"So, they dump you on us and expect us to cover the costs, cool," Ren sighs heavily. While the household never had monetary problems due to the amassed Uchiha fortune as a whole, Ren hardly ever actually uses that, leaving it to ferment in the bank and gain as much investment as possible, while living and providing for herself, Sasuke, and Naruto with only her paycheck and various society funds, for orphans, single 'parents', et cetera, et cetera. And yes, she can host Deidara and it wouldn't make that big difference, but it still irritates the Scrooge-y part of Renee that Ren never really bothered to rid herself of in this life.

"They demoted me to chunin!" Deidara whines then, with all the petulance of a thirteen-year-old, as he steps through the threshold. "They're going to keep me on desk missions for half a year before they even test me for higher rank! That's so unfair! They even assigned me a babysitter. Well, not really, since technically we're partners, but come on, he's younger than me!"

Ren half-listens to Deidara's babbling, catching the more important bits as they walk into the kitchen. It's a useful skill she learned after taking Naruto in – she loves this boy, really, from the bottom of her black, rusted heart, but the boy could talk a corpse awake, or her ears off. It is self-preservation to tune out some of it, especially the parts that just consists of yelling.

"Who's the unlucky bastard they assigned to babysit you?" Ren asks finally, and Deidara snorts at her.

"Very funny. His name is Aburame Torune. There was an accident on his last mission so they're taking him off the roster for a bit. He's actually a year younger than me-"

Ren clenches her fists in anger and in shock. Torune was there just two days ago during the now-infamous outbreak with Naruto's true parentage, and he seemed perfectly fine and everything, and now she learns he's being taken off the village mission roster? Shibi's decision, no doubt, but why? Unless...

Unless Danzo, that bastard, hasn't let go of the idea of putting his sticky paws on an Aburame, a plan that Ren foiled pretty permanently. The Aburame are now hypersensitive of their fellow family members. She made a mistake in having her spiders focus only on what concerned her – one she would have to rectify. She also could understand why nobody bothered to tell her, despite her being not only Shibi's former student, but also an honorary Aburame. Danzo is bad news all around, and nobody wants to run across the village name-calling, especially not a high-standing council member.

Not even Ren, who knows for a fact and with an evidence that she is right.

Oh, how she would love to dig her fingers in his eye-sockets, rip out the stolen sharingans in plain sight of the village, and expose the old bastard for the villain he is. He's the worst. Orochimaru? Akatsuki? Kaguya? Madara? Zetsu? Well, maybe save for that last one, but small fries, the lot of them are. Danzo is the real root of evil in the world.

...and she probably should control her ridiculous puns.

"Torune is one of... um, you could call them 'my kids', really," Ren says, and Deidara cranes his head up to look at her. "And so are you, honestly. So, don't give each other trouble okay?"

"I guess I can do that," he shrugs, but his cheeks turn suspiciously pinkish.
"Cool. Have you had breakfast?"

"No."

"Ugh, figures. Fucking useless bureaucrats," Ren sighs, ruffling her already messy hair, and looks at Deidara once again. "You okay with roasted shiitake mushrooms? I'm asking because I know people allergic to it."

Namely, and oddly enough, Sakura. She can eat it, but not much and it could really upset her stomach if she overdid it.

"Nah, I'm okay with it."

"Good, I have some leftovers."

"You? Leftovers? Miracle, with how much you eat."

"Did you know that fat acts as a shock absorber to your muscles and organs when you get hit? Also, are you going to tell me what the DNA test said?"

Deidara smirks, the smug little shit, and says nothing.

Awai drops from wherever on the ceiling he'd been, right on top of Deidara's head.

When she goes to get the kids back from the Academy, she takes Deidara with her. She's not going to leave him at home, alone, and not because she doesn't trust him – she does. But she wasn't lying when she said Deidara was one of 'her kids' – and boy, doesn't that sound weird as fuck – and that means including him in all the shenanigans they get up to. She can only hope that he and Naruto don't cause a scene.

(Probably in vain, if she knows any of her kids, and she does.)

Hana, barely off-shift and still in her white medic coat half-heartedly thrown around her shoulders, joins them somewhere along the third quarter of the way, easily picking up a conversation with both Deidara and Ren.

Deidara seems surprised that they want to include him in their talk at all, and that breaks Ren's heart a little. If she gets a tad more vicious towards Iwa ninja from now on, well. She's always had anger issues, why not take it out on enemy super-powered killers-for-hire?

"I'm kind of surprised they rushed the testing, though," Hana says when they reach the street just before the Academy. "That's unprofessional."

"Well, you remember the... ahem, 'incident, from two days ago?"

"Obviously, the first thing you did after things calmed down was to barge into my room, half a village across from your own, with Kiba on your back and relay everything in great detail, twice, with a lot of insulting the government included," Hana sends her friend a look, and Ren grins sheepishly. "Why?"

"They're trying to soothe us," Ren shrugs. "Me and Naruto, mostly."

"Oh?"

"I'm related to him," Deidara interjects. "They seem to think that 'giving back' Naruto's blood relative
”And the little shit won’t even tell me how related they are!”

”Wow, how rude indeed,” Hana deadpans with a completely straight face. Ren blinks at her, once, twice, and then, in a very mature move of a very mature adult, sticks her tongue out at the Inuzuka.

They make it to the front of the Academy a few minutes before classes end, but there are plenty of parents loitering around already. Younger years are usually taken by their parents, and only older ones go back home on their own. Some of the mothers start whispering among themselves, pointing at them, at Ren – regular-grade fabric clothes, soft limbs, wide doe-eyes, civilians no doubt – and she glares at them right back, because excuse them, she can hear, while not everything, then definitely phrases like ’the one who cares for the monster’.

Ren can easily deal with insults, they’re no novelty. Renee dealt with a bigger-than-fair share of them, hurled mostly by her own family, and Ren is fond of making questionable choices and generally doing whatever the fuck she wants, which civilians generally don’t appreciate, always with their own opinions but crying for help whenever something bad happens. And most of them are useless anyway, at least to the shinobi.

But people insulting those Ren cared for?

Yeah, no, excuse her for the extra-venomous sharingan glares that are one-hundred-and-ten percent meant to leave the hags with nightmares. The civilians hate Naruto, but since Naruto is simply too kind to hate them back, that duty falls to Ren, and she aims to fulfill it with a single-minded determination.

It’s not long before children flow out of the school with screeches, yells, and overall chatter, and a moment after that Ren has to brace herself for impact, because of course Naruto and Sasuke are racing towards her, and of course they body slam her with full force because why the hell not. She slides backwards a bit, breath knocked out of her when one of them head-butts her in the chest, but she catches them nonetheless, and, in retaliation, locks both boys in a crushing hug.

”Hey brats, how was school?” she asks after regaining her breath, and they both grumble something.

”What was that?”

”Mizuki-sensei was being a little bitch again,” Sakura supplies helpfully, skipping to where they are with Kiba and Ino hot on her heels. Kiba bounds to his sister and starts chattering a hundred words per minute, and the rest of the Rookie Nine slowly gather around Ren. Jashin, she’s more of a mother hen than Genma at this point, isn’t she?

”What do you mean he was being a little bitch again,” Ren grumbles unhappily, letting go of the two brats to rub her eyes. Mizuki, the class’s new teacher, is becoming increasingly annoying. Ren knows exactly why, but she doesn’t have anything on him yet; so far it’s only the rude quips and cold shoulder he gives Naruto, but the second Naruto comes back with a lower mark than Ren knows he deserves, all bets are off. She would come after Mizuki like hell on earth and won’t stop until there is nothing of him left.

”Can I punch him if he gets too annoying?” Sakura asks innocently, and Ren snorts.

”Punching things doesn’t solve all of life’s problems, kid,” Hana admonishes, but the pinkette shrugs.

”But it works for onee-chan, right?” she asks innocently, and Ren feels like cackling. ”She punches problems until they go away.”
"Uh, yes-" Hana sighs, giving her friend a stink eye, "but that doesn't mean you should follow her bad example!"

"Hey!"

"Who are you?" Sasuke asks then, black eyes settling their gaze on Deidara and the blond smiles, wide and a tad insane.

"Me?" he says with a shrug. "I'm Deidara. Namikaze Deidara, Uzumaki Naruto's cousin."
Chapter Summary

This chapter has been beta'd for you by hestia8693, who deserves sainthood for the sole fact that she didn't run away screaming yet.

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Chapter Notes

This chapter has been beta'd for you by hestia8693, who deserves sainthood for the sole fact that she didn't run away screaming yet.

Between people's asking for next chapter like, two hours after newest one was posted and my first real hater-flaming, last chapter reviews were fun. And maybe if the hate-anon was a bit more civilized about it, I would take their words into consideration, because they raised some interesting points. However, flames are flames, and hate shall fall on deaf ears. Either you say it like a person, or you don't get listened to. Simple. I'll admit that it annoyed me, but we all have our faults, no? ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Mine is that I bring you Yet ANOTHER cliffhanger after almost two months of inactivity for better part of which my only excuse is my laziness. Enjoy, and also sorry. For the pause, not for cliffhanger. For that I'm wholly unrepentant.

It turned into character study. Oooops. I swear action is coming due next chapter! But before that I'll probably finally write some canon-patching YoT chapters, especially about Kisame. I only now realized I apparently hadn't mentioned that he's in Akatsuki before? I was sure I had, gotta fix that. Dunno which'll come first, another chapter or Yarn of Time. We'll see.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity."
— John F. Kennedy

Ren should've expected Deidara would drop a bombshell like that in the middle of the fucking street, really, because that kind of subtlety apparently runs in the family, even if Naruto's seems to come
from his mother. Fortunately, there are very few people in hearing distance, and Naruto doesn't start screaming like Ren had feared he might, so that adds to the relative secrecy. She doesn't refrain from pinching the bridge of her nose, though.

The revelation is taken with a variety of reactions. From Hana's surprised blinking, to Shikamaru and Sasuke's suspicious gazes, Sakura and Choji's open mouths and Kiba's yowled 'WHAT?!' to Naruto's wordless tackle on his cousin that Deidara takes with some disgruntlement and a little grace. Ren knows that Naruto needs it still, after the revelation from a few days ago, and while it might be the Hokage's half-assed apology disguising a blatant attempt at regaining some authority in the boy's eyes (which won't work as long as Ren has a say in it, and she does). What she only half-realized until now is the fact that Deidara, too, has been almost entirely alone before this. No family, no true friends, to the point that it pushed him to befriend a person from another – almost-enemy to that – village just because he was lonely. But now he isn't, not alone anymore, and definitely not lonely, and Ren can clearly see just how hard he clings to the smaller blond, as if he is just now realizing he has people to depend on.

Which, frankly, is the truth. Even Ren wasn't someone he could fully trust when he was an Iwa ninja, and then even on the run, because she was Konoha's ninja first and foremost, even if she couldn't have truly been bothered to follow the village's doctrines. Even though she has her own brain and knows how to use it to make logical decisions rather than follow out of blind loyalty. Deidara doesn't know that.

Oh well, he would soon enough. Ren is blindly loyal only to those who deserve it, and while she liked Hiruzen the character, Hiruzen the actual person she does not, and therefore isn't particularly loyal to him. Of course, she would never endanger the village, but that's because she can't be bothered to find a new place to live, and the kids are here. She likes the kids.

She likes the kids. What a weird phrase that would've made her nothing but repulsed in the times Before. But, maybe- Maybe that was because she hated her mother and grandmother, genuinely loathed them, and yet found their traits in herself. Maybe she was just afraid that any kid she'd come into contact with she would treat like they'd treated her. With distain, where stellar performance was the minimum and anything less was a failure. But here- Yeah, here she could deal, be the elder sister, the surrogate kinda-parent. Real parent, never on her life; infants were simply disgusting. But a caretaker, temporary and in-between, yes. That is fine.

This is fine.

"Did onee-chan really meet a guy who was thiiiiiiiis tall," Naruto stretches excitedly in childish manner as far up as he can reach, "an' was blue an' looked like a shark?!!"

Of course this is the first thing the brats want to confirm when they get home, when they realize that Deidara is THE Deidara that Ren had met during her chūnin exams. Of course they want to know that she wasn't joking when she told them about Kisame. On his behalf, she's a bit offended. Bloody brats.

"He was taller," Deidara answers honestly. "And his skin was more gray than blue, but yeah, he really looked like a shark."

"That's so cool!" Kiba gushes.

"I'm offended you didn't believe me," Ren sniffs, crossing her arms on her chest.

"Will we get to meet him?" the small Inuzuka asks excitedly, and Ren sighs. They don't talk about
this, in their letters which they still exchange, and which Ren keeps sealed in a small scroll stashed in
Jōren Falls along with her... 'organic waste', but Kisame is an Akatsuki member. It's a vital position
that he has for her plans, and she sure hopes that their friendship will be enough for him to listen to
her and help her when she needs him, but-

For obvious reasons, they can't meet, he and kids. And also, fuck, she is only just now realizing she
misses him. Like, physically misses. She wants to meet him again, spar with him, laugh with him.
She got that feeling Before too, sometimes, when she wrote with people from across the globe, her
internet friends. It's similar and amazing, how a friendship could not only be preserved, but bloom
further just through words. Or, Ren hopes it could and that her feelings are reciprocated, because
honestly Kisame is one of the best people in the ninjaverse and that would be sad. She likes him
kinda like she likes Genma, that older brother slash friend slash mentor.

An actual honest-to-god positive role model she only now realizes she's been lacking for the first
thirty-two years of her life. Thanks mom. Also, what the fuck mom.

After that, life once more became uneventfully normal, because it apparently follows the 'one big
thing at a time' rule, at least until Naruto's class's graduation. Worst Generation of the Narutoverse is
what they are, really, frightening little monsters. Sasuke breathes fire with the conviction of a man on
a mission, Naruto often spaces out and gives the impression of talking to himself, but Ren knows
better because he has a monster in his belly, and Sakura- Sakura is just plain frightening, any day of
the week, any waking second, period. But then she swallows any and all medical knowledge thrown
her way, and any and all knowledge of poisons, even if only theoretical for now. So at the very least
Ren knows she would be leaving her two greatest troublemakers, who are apparently hell-bent on
giving her premature gray hairs (at fucking fifteen years old, at least physically, gods, children, chill-), in good hands after their graduation. They'd probably die without Sakura.

And that's without mentioning the other brats, which makes Ren realize that she has a full peanut
gallery. Or, almost full, if she were to count by the Konoha Twelve, not the Rookie Nine. Shikamaru
is, as always, frighteningly smart, Chōji is the nicest person ever but his passion for food translates
into heated debates with Ren that are very insightful on both sides, Hinata is starting to show a bit of
backbone, continuously dragged around by the forever-boisterous Kiba and the ever-present
Akamaru, growing at an alarming rate. Sakura is rarely seen without Ino these days, their supposedly
legendary friendship rekindled when they let go of their idiotic rivalry, and now Ren can actually
believe they are great friends. Also, Ino is quite frightening, too. Ren blames Genma for giving the
girl a packet of senbon for her birthday when she got interested in them. Evil enabler, that guy.
Lastly, there's Shino who, since Torune's graduation and subsequent promotion to chūnin – who is
saddled with Deidara now, good luck pal – has been a subject of Ren's worry, whether he would
mesh into one or the other friend circle or remain a loner. She was worried for naught, thankfully,
because first he was accosted by Sakura, hungry for any and all medical and poison knowledge, and
then Ren would often see him with Shikamaru. They are both silent and intelligent, so she can see
how that friendship came to be.

And then February bled into March and the brats threw her a birthday party, and then Sakura's three
weeks later, and then April passed and they had Chōji's birthday party in the beginning of May, an
amazing dinner where his dad finally managed to squeeze some British recipes out of Ren, and
suddenly they were making Deidara cry by throwing him a birthday party. Ren almost ran to Iwa to
slaughter them all upon seeing the blond's genuine, happy tears – somewhat a mirror of Naruto's first
birthday party, the one during which she told him he'd be living with them from then on.

Deidara and Genma got along great, truth be told, same for Deidara and Genma's other hatchlings he
managed to hen before, Izumo and Kotetsu, the (in)famous gate Chūnin. It was fun, having them
around, although Ren didn't really interact with the two much – they are acquaintances, but their jobs take them someplace entirely different; they are stationed on various posts within the village while she is sent out solo or in groups, usually to kill people, sometimes to sabotage or gather intel. What surprised her was the friendship Deidara somehow formed with Torune, one she started to draw parallels with between hers and Hana's. On the outside, it might've seemed like the more responsible ones (Hana and Torune) were only tolerating their suicidal, airhead idiots (Ren and Deidara, respectively), but she knew. That fond exasperated look of 'oh my god why are we friends' Torune would send Deidara when he would be triggered into yet another artistic tirade said it all. They had each-other's back, and Ren was sure that as much as she'd risk life and limb for Hana (which she did before, actually got her hand cut off to protect Hana, it fucking hurt) and how much Hana looks out for her (she glued the hand back on, yay!) that Deidara and Torune also had each other.

She was proud of both brats, even more so when she started hearing whispers among other shinobi that it would be beneficial for the two to be put in a unit together for sheer efficiency. Ren and Hana couldn't have that for daily duty, their specializations too different, but both boys were mid-range fighters. They would work together well. Deidara isn't creeped out by Torune's bugs, Torune isn't creeped out by Deidara's hands, which are still a cause of his anxiety at times. Likewise, where Deidara is the flamboyant, explosive, expressive artist, Torune is the calm, grounding presence occasionally throwing a really sharp comment.

In canon, it would never have happened. Ren has never been happier with her meddling, truth to be told.

And so life went, as did birthdays and tests and missions, and life was good.

It is about a year after the mission with Deidara – a bit more, that was during winter and spring was already peeking around the corner, not to mention her birthday was coming up again – when Ren is assigned another assassination mission that, despite being just a normal, regular assignment like every other before in nearly every aspect, gave her an odd feeling in the pit of her stomach.

First, Ojo came by, chattering about how Danzō is planning something but she doesn't know what because, for all her usefulness as a spy, she is just a spider and can't read, Danzō is a paranoid little bitch, and even spiders have their limits.

Then, Ren is assigned a partner out of the blue, for no real reason, since she could complete the mission herself without much issue – she is a Tokujō, now, and the target is some Chūnin. That was enough to set off alarms in her head.

But, as she stands by the gates on the third of March, the day after her sixteenth birthday and the party the brats and Gemma threw for her, the weird feeling in her stomach shifts abruptly and mercilessly into that of dread, a cold ice shard in her gut, so out of place among all the fire. And yet, she doesn't move a muscle, doesn't allow her face to shift into a grimace of any sort, and she forcefully keeps her muscles loose and relaxed.

"Let's work together well, shall we?" the ROOT agent tells her with a fake, awkward smile, as unused to emotion as all of the other puppets, and Ren doesn't allow herself to bite into her tongue, no matter how much she wanted to at that moment.

So, the old bastard is finally making his move. An ugly, ugly move, sending a ROOT agent with her. There's only one reason he could have possibly done this for, and-

One of them wouldn't be returning to the village.
A/N: This is NOT Sai. It's random ROOT puppet.
Fifty-Fourth Thread

Chapter Summary

Once again sorry for my tardiness, but I have two exam retakes of whole semester worth of material in September. I'm past the first one, which I passed, but I'm only now studying for the second one - I have a week to learn whole history of British Isles from prehistory to now - so I don't think you'll see much of me until it's past the 18th. University is busy man, and I'm still on my holiday.

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"Things never go the way you expect them to. That's both the joy and frustration in life. I'm finding as I get older that I don't mind, though. It's the surprises that tickle me the most, the things you don't see coming."
— Michael Stuhlbarg

Ren would never call herself paranoid. Hell, some people would argue vehemently against her calling herself even just moderately careful, let alone paranoid, but-

Is it really paranoia when they're really out to get you, and the person sent to kill you is walking right beside you? Ren knows, she just knows that she's fucked because there is no way in hell Danzō would send someone weaker than her, and more likely than not someone a fair bit stronger, to off her. A surprise punch to the gut, if you would, the one you're definitely not expecting even if you should.

And Ren really should've expected something like this, and yet here she was, and has been for the past four years, convinced of her own untouchability. It would appear that she is not as untouchable as she'd thought after all. Accidents happen on missions. On assassinations especially, and Ren is known for her goal to beat Genma's kill count. She hadn't even realized that, in doing 'commissions' that are both enjoyable for her and gets her a sizable paycheck, she's been making herself open and prone to attacks such as this. Danzō has probably been waiting until she had made herself a reputation as a person who acts recklessly and prefers solo assassinations. She honestly got herself into this mess, at least partly.

She doesn't have as many issues recognizing her flaws and mistakes as regular people, so bite her. She knows she fucked up. Real bad.

If only she didn't have to pay for it by having to leave on a mission, alone, with her only companion being her would-be murderer sent by the character and person she hates the most in the whole world. Honestly, Danzō tops her grandmother's spot, and that is an achievement.

Fuck.

Renee Archer didn't mind dying, because her life was meh at best, and downright sucked most of the
time. But Uchiha Ren is not Renee Archer, not anymore, and she likes her life, her home, the people she has – that she has them in the first place – and, well. She doesn't want to die. She'd be very fucking pissed if she does, to be honest. And on top of that, she is fairly certain she would not be getting a third chance.

So forgive her for being a bit jumpy while traveling, alone, with a very obvious ROOT agent. The worst part is that she can't really do anything about it, because she has no proof that this is really Danzō's puppet, even if her getting sent with company is certainly odd – she is perfectly capable of going alone even while still a chūnin, and this mission is by no means above her competency level. But Danzō is on the council, a War Hawk, a renowned hero, and the person for whom Hiruzen still has that idiotic blind spot, even after repeated assassination attempts, and he is in a position to pull a lot of strings.

He didn't have to do it in such a way that reminds Ren that she is a real person, living a real life, not a character in a story or some chosen one. That she isn't untouchable or unkillable. She realizes, now, that she's always known, but it hasn't really... sunk in. She died once already, and she should've been aware she could die again, but despite all her distancing from anything that spewed the 'life after life' ideology, some of it... stuck, in some subconscious way. Maybe.

She can’t even send a letter, because that would most likely cause the ROOT agent to attack earlier than planned, and then go after her summon, too, and Ren hates endangering her spiders. Honestly, she hates seeing anyone she cares for get hurt.

(Does she care for herself and is just an idiot, or is this a maladapted coping mechanism that isn’t really a coping mechanism because Renee Archer hated herself, and Uchiha Ren is Renee Archer, after all and despite everything?

She can’t die. For the people she cares about, for the people who would mourn her death. Death – her death – is not a concept that she ever even bothered to acknowledge as a possibility. But sometimes she still wakes to the memory-nightmare of her grandmother's hissed you're worthless, you'll never amount to anything, you're nothing—)

She shakes her head and presses on, as if refusing to acknowledge the problem, forgetting about it even, will make it magically disappear.

She does admit that the number of spiders she now keeps on her person may be a tad ridiculous, but, well, she's feeling really threatened right now, so bite her. All three assassins are here, Anri, Atsushi, and Akihiro, as well as Takuya-sensei. Ren has half a mind to summon Niji, Kagami, and Cobalt, but the first two might still be training, and Cobalt is still resting after she decided it'd be a good idea to test her taijutsu against Gai the day before. Ren has never seen a more ridiculous match. Hell, she didn't even realize that spiders actually used taijutsu, which, actually, kinda makes sense what with all the limbs they have. Huh. Cobalt did give Gai a run for his money, but ultimately ended up a whining heap on the floor and requested some leave – Ren knows she would answer if she was really needed, and she was considering it.

Also, she needs someone chattering to drown the silence, and the three assassins did that just fine. Normally, Ren wouldn't mind spending hours upon hours in silence, but this? The ROOT agent creeps her out, to the point she has chills running down her spine that are not due to the knowledge that he is here to kill her. He is genuinely just that unsettling as a person.

Ren can't decide if his silence is a blessing or a curse. On the one hand, it is driving her up the proverbial wall, and she would like to see if she could probe him for intel somehow, but on the other, the chance of slipping and making him attack earlier is rather high, not to mention going back to Danzō with information he should not, under any circumstance, get. She opts instead to listen to
Takuya-sensei going on another spiel about natural toxins – that, at least, is interesting.

The real issue comes at night, one that Ren so conveniently choose to push aside until it was time to think about it, and now it's here to bite her in the ass. Should she sleep, and put herself in direct danger, or should she keep going and risk falling on her face and being even more defenseless later? Would she even be able to fall asleep in this situation?

...who is she kidding. Needs must, and she is in control of her body enough to force it to shut down and rest, so that isn't a problem. Does she want to? Hell no. But that doesn't matter, because she needs the energy and the focus, and for that, she'll just have to risk it.

"Let's stop and rest for a few hours," she finally said to her companion, stopping on a branch. They are almost to the Taki border, the trees becoming smaller and smaller; soon they would have to travel on the ground. "We'll be at the border soon. Let's slip through at dawn."

The agent stops and looks at her with those blank eyes. Is this how Sai would feel? Will? Will she ever even meet Sai? No matter.

"Agreed," he says finally. He told her to call him Taro, but Ren doesn't care, not really. She supposes she should feel bad for him, but this is not the right circumstance, or even the right world, to do it. They stop at a small clearing that's more an area with fewer trees rather than an actual clearing, and Ren wastes no time slamming her hand on the ground. With a small puff of smoke, she suddenly has an armful of dog-sized Garden Orb Weavers – three black and yellow Argiopes with sharp legs and elongated abdomens.

"Hello, you three," she greets as she sets them down. Aki, Jun, and Kyo are their names, and they're always eager to help. "If you could make two hammocks, that'd be nice."

"That won't be necessary," the ROOT agent says calmly, and Ren looks at him. "One of us has to keep watch after all."

"My spiders will keep watch," Ren says, keeping the guise of a slightly confused shinobi with no clue of who she's on a mission with, or why. "We both need rest to function properly, and they have better spatial and situational awareness than us."

"...fair enough," he answers her with a bland smile and Ren tries to ignore the pang of guilt that blooms in her chest when she remembers that if she doesn't kill him, he'll kill her and go to Danzō. She doesn't have nearly enough time, nor does she know how, to break his conditioning.

This world has little place for sympathy, she tells herself. Not everyone can be saved. It's me or him, now, and I already chose me. I will always choose me when it comes to survival. There are people I will help, more than I ever thought there would be, but ultimately, it's still me against the world. It always has been.

She pointedly doesn't think of bright, blue eyes, so full of love, of pale hands gripping her for dear life, of pink hair adorned with clips she chose. Of the clatter of senbon between teeth among the laughter, of blue hands guiding her through kenjutsu stances, of countless letters, of running laps around the village, of sticks of dango and mad cackling.

If she does, she might break. The knowledge that she isn't alone, after three decades of loneliness, is a staggering thing she can't afford to acknowledge now.

The only reason she sees the attack coming is because she's been anticipating it for the last two days, her metaphorical hackles raised and senses going haywire. It's also the only reason she survives the
initial attack, gleaming tanto aimed at her lower back, meant to sever her spine, grazing against her hipbone instead. It cuts through the reinforced fabric of her outfit, through skin and muscle, as if they were butter. She bites down a hiss of pain because *fuck*, that hurts like hell, and uses the millisecond during which Atsushi distracts the agent to parry another, much less well-aimed strike before grabbing the weapon between two kunai and twisting.

The blade breaks; she mentally apologizes to Kisame for the transgression, but a tanto with barely any blade is much less dangerous than a whole one. She kicks the broken blade hard and it clatters away, and then she's putting as much distance between her and the ROOT agent as possible. Takuya-sensei all but latches onto her wound, limbs wrapped around her torso, hanging upside-down. He quickly applies some cold adhesive that does absolutely nothing for pain, but stops the blood loss, for which she's grateful. It smells strongly of aloe vera and yarrow.

She deflects a barrage of projectiles, half-evading and half-swatting, without a word. She's focused like she doubts she's ever been before, eyes on her opponent and the surrounding area, mindful of traps, clones, body flicker, tunnel techniques, and anything else that he might use to finish her off. She doesn't know when the world bled into whole new level of sharpness and detail, maybe before the fight, maybe when she jumped away, but she doesn't care. She feels Atsushi un-summon himself, and she hopes the Atrax is okay, but there's no time because the agent summons up a mass of earth to hurl at her, and she breathes a dragon to parry it, but he *jumps through the flames*, and suddenly they're engaged in a merciless taijutsu spar, *thank you Gai I will never think a bad word of you ever again*. Akihiro tries to go for a bite only to be off-handedly swatted and un-summoned with a furious hiss, and Ren tramples down the anger that rises in answer because she can't afford the distraction.

The agent manages to drive a kunai into her gut nonetheless, though she manages to deflect it off-course so it buries safely into her side, into muscle and flesh and not her organs (her idea of ‘safely’ may be skewed, she will realize later). She grabs his hand and headbutts him as hard as she can, and she sees stars but doesn't stop even though her forehead hurts from hitting the metal plate with the engraved spiral leaf – *this traitor should not have it, he shouldn't, Danzo should just die* – and leaps back but not before he manages to slash upwards. Ren hisses as pain erupts in the right side of her face, tastes blood flowing into her mouth through her teeth, from the gash running through her lip and chin.

Anri manages to jump onto the agent's back, but he's covered from head to toe, so she has no option other than to bite though his clothes. She does, and has to un-summon before he can halve her with his freshly unsealed katana and Ren curses, reaching for Sumire because gods, she doesn't want to die-

He rushes at her and she ignores the pain, sucking at the blood from her cut lip despite the hot-cold sting, meeting him halfway. Ren is physically stronger, she realizes, and manages to push him back, and with the Sharingan she can match him in speed. That matters little, however, because he's still superior in skill and she's soon pushed to desperate defense. Takuya-sensei slips something into her mouth that tastes like bitter and burning, and then she feels the prickle of his fangs right below her ear so it must've been a poison and he must've realized what she's been doing all this time.

They clash again with flying sparks and Ren knows that custom-made, handpicked Sumire is a better weapon than whatever he has, or else his tanto wouldn't have broken so easily because that one was just a desperate bet – there's a lot of those in this fight, she realizes – but his katana almost gives in, the weapon longer than a tanto and he has to push with both hands to stand his ground, preventing him from reaching for anything else. Small mercies.

Then she spits the mouthful of blood and saliva and whatever Takuya-sensei slipped her, and it's a dark, ugly, bitter liquid and she feels like gagging but she won't, she can't. It hits the mark and the
agent splutters, jumping back in surprise.

Ren might just survive this, thanks to her unconventional methods.

The wound on her hip hurts, the stab wound in her side hurts, the many smaller cuts from where she didn't fully evade shuriken hail hurt, the cut on her lip hurts. She is at once furious and worried for her assassins, and she hopes they're all okay because they're not suited for open fights, but she really should worry about herself right now. She absent-mindedly notices Takuya-sensei rummaging by the stab wound in her abdomen, feeling the same minty-cold sensation of the adhesive from before. She mentally thanks the spider once more, since he's probably the only reason she hasn't bled out yet.

The agent jumps at her once more, this time in a somewhat more desperate way. He must have realized by now that Anri had bit him, and that whatever Ren spit at him had poison in it. It won't kill him. Anri couldn't have pierced the skin and whatever Takuya-sensei slipped her, most likely a paralytic, was diluted so if he didn't swallow any then it will only be partially effective anyway—

He goes for Takuya-sensei, and time slows as Ren's Mangekyō launches itself unprompted, or perhaps it was prompted by her fury and fear, collected just in time for her to block the katana. It slices through the fan on her right sleeve and through the skin as well but she doesn't mind, or maybe doesn't care. She pushes chakra into her mouth, coating her teeth with it more on instinct than anything else, lurches forward, and bites down hard. Her teeth, morphed by her chakra into something far more sharp and wicked and still coated with the bitter-metallic taste of whatever it was that Takuya-sensei slipped her, sink into the man's shoulder through the armor and fabric, tearing at skin and drawing blood and she feels something that's almost like his heart skipping a beat—

He kicks her hard, almost in a panic, towards a stone formation. She hits it hard enough that she loses her breath and she hopes her spine is okay, and that Takuya-sensei dispelled before she hit the wall because he was on her back. Her vision swims black and kaleidoscope and her eyes bleed when she calls upon her chakra, and calls upon the black lightning like she did before, and—he evades it. The lightning strikes with a deafening crack, and the gods-damned agent avoids it, by a hair! It fries the left-back side of his uniform, maybe causing some damage, but that's all, and he was meant to burn into a crisp and Ren wants to scream because that is not fair—!

There's another presence at her side, she realizes belatedly, just standing there and she realizes that she passed by someone when she was sent flying, but she doesn't care because she's going to die, and there are still so many things she wants to do, so many people she wants to see, this is so unfair—

The ROOT agent jumps at her and swipes his katana in a wide arc that is sure to catch the unknown third party, but she doesn't care because it will reach her, too, right at her neck, not far enough to decapitate but enough to cut through her arteries and tendons and throat—

Black threads shoot forward, wrapping around the agent, around his hands and torso and legs, immobilizing him. Ren chokes on something, maybe air, maybe relief, and looks at the person – man – next to her, and almost cries in relief. She doesn't know why, she honestly shouldn't, but she does anyway.

Kakuzu – in a dark and unassuming outfit that absolutely is not adorned with red clouds edged in white, not yet, thank you – looks down at her and narrows his eyes as the ROOT agent stops moving after a very satisfying crunch of shattered bones.
Chapter Summary

I have no excuse save for being a lazy loser. Sorry. Thanks again to hestia8693, my regular beta!

"Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won't come in."
— Isaac Asimov

Ren isn't stupid. She can be an idiot, sure, sometimes to the point of annoying everyone around her, but under no circumstance is she stupid. She has been a ninja for four years, and before that, she was a member of a much crueler society for over thirty years. And that is why, combined with her knowledge and even before the ROOT agent's body hit the ground, she finds herself blurting:

"I can pay you twice my bounty to let me live."

The black tendrils making their way towards her stop just short of her calf. Her bounty, despite being a B-Rank, is two million ryō, boosted mainly due to her eyes. Everyone wants Uchiha eyes, and she's been good at evading or outright disposing of the various bounty hunters that came her way hoping for easy cash. Ren is an absolute menace on the battlefield, especially when properly motivated.

However, this is Jashin-damned Kakuzu, and she isn't even going to try to go against him. It might not seem like it at first glance, but Ren does not, in fact, have a death wish.

"Three times," he says, and the tendrils don't retract. Ren narrows her now-black eyes at him.

"Two and a half, max," she haggles as if she were haggling at a market for groceries rather than in the middle of nowhere for her life. "Five million is still much better than two. And I suppose I can throw in half my mission pay too, if you insist."

Kakuzu regards her for what feels like a lifetime in the face of her stuttering heart and coursing adrenaline, before something flashes in his eyes, looking oddly like approval. Ren doesn't know if it's because she has the guts to haggle with him, or to stand up to him at all, but the threads retract back into his sleeves.

Ren sags in relief, suddenly remembering that she had been stabbed, repeatedly, and also slashed— and fuck, that hurts—so she hisses out a curse and wonders just what Kakuzu must be thinking, looking at her, bleeding from her split lip and not bleeding from her stab wounds only thanks to—

Ren's mind comes to a screeching halt as she sways on her feet, anxiety filling her in place of the fading adrenaline. She really hopes her spiders are okay.

"What makes me wonder," Kakuzu starts, giving her an unimpressed once-over, and Ren isn't even offended because she realizes how she must look, "is why one of your own presumably tried to
murder you."

"You saw the fight?" she asks.

"Most of it," he shrugs. "Enough. Pretty ingenious use of whatever you had on hand, though by your reaction I'd wager you were actually expecting the attack. And yet, you panicked."

"I pissed off a powerful person back home," she answers truthfully, because Danzō is powerful, and he's pissed at her. Probably more so once this gets back to him, and she shudders at the thought, because soon he might drop all pretense of subtlety, and Ren still has no idea how to confront him. "Granted, it's a person who should not, under any circumstance, be allowed to have power. Delusions of grandeur, 'our hands are the cleanest' mentality, zero accountability, shady underground organization, all that jazz."

Kakuzu blinks down at her. "And you're telling me this because...?"


"People do hold grudges," she nods. "Not worth it though, he has a lot of tricks up his sleeve."

"Well, aren't you an information mine," he quirks an eyebrow at her, and she shrugs.

"Yeah, but if you want that info, you gotta earn it. I'm already paying you five million ryō just to not kill me so, yeah," she pats herself down, hisses when she feels her wounds under her fingers, and spits some blood out. She needs to do something about that split lip soon; the blood is dripping down her chin and onto her flak jacket in a very unattractive manner. The jacket is beyond saving anyway, with two bloodied tears in it, dirtied further with the sticky resin-like salve that Takuya-sensei put on her wounds. Ren isn't sure what it is, but she knows it's a temporary thing that will dissolve soon enough. Probably. It's most likely that wound sealant Takuya-sensei was babbling about finally finishing a few weeks back.

Thanks for using Ren as a fucking guinea pig.

"Would you mind if I summon some of my spiders?" she asks, shrugging off her torn flak jacket and resealing Sumire back into its scroll. Kakuzu doesn't answer, instead meandering to the ROOT agent's mangled corpse and thoroughly ransacking his pockets. Figures. Ren rolls her eyes, dabs her fingers in the blood seeping from her split chin – it's a really ugly cut, she knows, without even seeing it, from above the right corner of her lip down to the end of her chin – and moves through the familiar handsigns. A puff of smoke later, she finds herself with an armful of some of the deadliest spiders in existence. Takuya-sensei, slightly ruffled but otherwise seemingly okay, just looks at her judgmentally.

"So you're alive," he states, and Ren rolls her eyes, smiling anyway – or, well, more like smirking, because that seeping wound on the right side hurts.

"Are you all okay?" she asks instead, as Takuya-sensei climbs her like a tree, and then begins to apply the same temporary adhesive on her lip. She hasn't lost that much blood – a miracle in itself, given her track record – but it is still enough that she is starting to feel slightly dizzy. Or maybe it's the pain, but she is used to pain.

And isn't that a fucked-up thought. Pain is not something one should ever get used to.
Her musings are cut short when a scroll collides with her head. Ren yelps in a rather undignified manner and fumbles a bit before finally catching the damn thing and giving Kakuzu a stink eye. Takuya-sensei, once again almost hit with something, hisses angrily at the man.

"Did you know about this?" he asks simply, crossing his arms on his chest. Ren wonders idly just how he managed to find the scroll and go through it in so little time, but obediently cracks the thing open anyway, and reads it.

Then reads it again. And every kanji makes her angrier.

That ROOT bastard was not only meant to kill her, he had been instructed to broker some sort of deal with Doku Romi, a very notorious Suna nukenin with an equally telling name. Better yet, whatever barebones information Ren could get from it without looking at the attached documents further sealed in the scroll very plainly state that it would eventually negatively impact Konoha.

What the fuck is Danzō thinking?

"What the fuck," she says, as she usually does, though it's not a question. More of a complaint, really. Doku Romi is notorious enough that people like her generally talk about and try to avoid her if possible, because – from what Ren has heard, anyway – she is even better with poisons than Sasori of the Red Sand. She then looks at Kakuzu, as seriously as she can right now, bloodied, tattered, and otherwise ruffled, and says in a rather offended tone: "Let's go kill her."

Kakuzu, clearly not expecting such an answer, snorts in surprise. "In your state?"

Ren huffs, handing him back the scroll – she's rude, but not rude enough to throw it back at Jashin-damned Kakuzu, and not only because he could snap her spine like a matchstick – and realizes that he's right. Doku Romi may not be the best hand-to-hand fighter, but she doesn't have to be. Wounded and weakened like this, Ren would be a prime target for the nukenin's poisons.

"Fine," she huffs like a brat, which she admittedly is, at least now, despite mentally being over thirty. "I have my own kill to take care of anyway."

Kakuzu harrumphs at her, pocketing the scroll, and Ren rolls her eyes. She needs to dress all those wounds she got from the previous fight – being friends with Hana comes with the perk of having more than just basic first aid hammered into her head until she can recite all the steps while half-asleep, especially after the Deidara situation – and on top of that, she could use an hour or two of sleep. All that stress and adrenaline had taken a lot out of her, something she only just now realizes. And there's also another question, one that Ren isn't sure how she's supposed to really handle.

And so she does what she usually does: blurts it out without any care for decorum.

"Do you want to team up?" she starts, looking at Kakuzu, "um, since I owe you money anyway. I might not be of that much help, but I have a wide variety of summons. Poisons, genjutsu, assassinations, you name it, I'll see if I have it. And I probably will."

Kakuzu looks at her, and she's looking right back, and for a moment, they just stare. Her eyelid twitches, because all she wants now is to just sit down, go to sleep, dress her wounds, and maybe eat something. And not necessarily in that order, given that she has basically been running purely on stress for the last few days.

"Fine," Kakuzu says grumpily, and Ren sighs. He starts walking away at a moderate pace, but Ren still pounces on the ROOT agent, looting the corpse of everything Kakuzu had apparently deemed unworthy to take – weapons and some equipment scrolls, mostly – that Ren might benefit from at
one point or another. Her task completed, she swiftly seals the body into a scroll and moves to follow him. She'll decide what to do with it later. Make it so it seems Doku Romi killed him, maybe dispose of the body, or send Danzō a crisp? So many choices. Except the last one, probably, because that might just provoke Danzō to attack her more openly, which, nope.

His latest attempt had almost cost her life, so thanks but no thanks, even for the higher purpose of pissing him off.

Kakuzu leads Ren and the spiders to some sort of encampment, or a remnant of one, at least. There are tents set up for more than one person, and the bloodstains are pretty telling in themselves.

Ren just plops down on a log, shedding her upper clothes until she's left with just the crop-top that she uses as a sports bra. She wants to wear her original uniform again, but it could really use a proper washing first to get at least some of the blood and gunk off, not to mention sewing in the case of her shirt. Thankfully, Ren is not stupid and always tries to be prepared – spare clothing included. Oh, the joys of storage scrolls.

"This is gonna need stitches," Ren grumbles, looking at the – for now – sealed gash on her side, and cranes her neck to try to see the one on the side of her back. There's no way she's getting to it without assistance, and spiders don't have fingers, let alone opposable thumbs. Fuck.

She looks at Kakuzu, and the man narrows his eyes at her.

"Can you help me with these?" Ren once again blurts out without any thought to manners or decorum, gesturing at the gashes. "I should have a curved needle and some thread in my pack-

He pinches the bridge of his nose, but gets up and walks over to her. Ren blinks up at him, and wonders what could possibly be going through his head, as he sits next to her, looking critically over her wounds. Money, or something else? He could've just ignored her. Hell, he could have – and still can – kill her at any moment, and compared to him, Ren is nothing in both power and experience. He doesn't have to do anything, let alone actually help her, and yet – here he is.

Maybe he's just misunderstood? Maybe he's actually a genuinely good guy? Maybe he's just a bitter old scrooge who wants her to shut up? Who knows; Ren doesn't. What she does know is that he did once care for Hidan, in a future that hopefully won't be, in his own twisted way that wasn't entirely healthy. And that he's sacrificing his own threads right now to stitch Ren's wounds back together.

Speaking of which, she doesn't jump when she feels the semi-sentient tendrils puncture through the skin and gather it together, though she does squeak and whine, albeit quietly, for the duration of the action- procedure? However long it takes Kakuzu to put the sutures in, which admittedly isn't all that long.

He even sews the gash in her face closed, grumbling all the while, after watching her attempt to do it herself. She was not doing a very good job in his opinion, apparently.

Ren just smiles gently, with only one corner of her lip, at the man, the monster, who had once tried to murder the founder of the village she's now a part of, remembering the not-yet member of an organization that would hunt one of those she cares for in an effort to bring about the end of the world, and can't help but think just how surprisingly one's life can turn out, for as long as they're open to the possibilities.

"Thank you," she tells him when her wounds are finally taken care of, and it's a heartfelt thing,
because she really is grateful. Kakuzu looks at her for a long moment, then turns and walks to the other side of the fire. He doesn't scoff.

Maybe, Ren thinks, he's just lonely.
Some people have asked me why haven't I updated in... Well, a while. There are a plenty reasons for that, trust me. First of all, I'm a lazy loser who needs a kick in the ass to get her shit together. Second is university - despite having Mondays free, I have lessons in the evening, but to get there on time I leave at early noon and I come back in the middle of the night. I barely have time for homework, let alone writing. Thirdly, I need to nail down work practices, 30 hours of them, and the only time to really do it is the time that I have free from school. So, basically, I suffer from the constant lack of time and willpower syndrome.

I do hope to write more sooner, but for now have a subpar character study that I'm best known for at this point. I just hope it's good enough you won't come at me with torches and pitchforks.

I'm not abandoning CPwUR. I never will. Fuck that, I'll write that from the other side if I have to because boi I've got PLANS. Well, not that foreboding, but Ren is going to say with you for a good while longer is what I mean.

(I might or might not be planning an post-CPwUR AU that goes 'what if Renee was instead reincarnated as Madara's older sister'. Actually, fuck that, I'm totally planning this post-CPwUR spinoff.)

CPwUR official Discord chat; discord. gg/WQ7mNwk
CPwUR official Tumblr blog; cpwur. tumblr. com

"Much unhappiness has come into the world because of bewilderment and things left unsaid."
— Fyodor Dostoevsky

Sometimes Ren wonders whether the canonical characterizations of characters in a show she'd watched a literal lifetime ago are even still viable, given that she is living it and interacts with those people in real life rather than what she had once watched hand-drawn and animated. Some parts carry over, but others? Not so much. Or maybe it is the fact that Ren met them at wholly different times than the show described them.

Kakuzu, for example, is more of a long-suffering mercenary. Not malicious, just... tired. So very tired. Ren can see it settled in his bones, that weariness and instinctive distrust in people. How long ago had his village betrayed him? Seventy years? Eighty? He might've been bitter once, but that must've been a long time ago. Now he looks almost like he's given up, only bounty hunting out of habit more than anything, hoarding money for- Ren doesn't know what for. He just does.

This is a Kakuzu unsullied by the Akatsuki, by Hidan's annoying, eternally youthful presence.

This Kakuzu is old, lonely, and too tired to bother with bitterness, on the verge of giving up
completely. In a way, Ren realizes with what she's seen, the Akatsuki had saved him. Given him purpose and a push to pursue it.

Or, that's what Ren managed to figure out about him so far. She is actually pretty good at reading people. When she bothers, that is, which is almost never. She has to keep up her façade of knuckleheaded semi-suicidal moron – can't have people knowing that she is actually pretty capable, after all.

Does she dare try and steer him away from this path, from the Akatsuki? She did manage to successfully snag Deidara and laugh in fate's face for it, and Kisame is halfway hers anyway. Could she pull off something like that for a third time, especially since the two times before were more pure chance and dumb luck than anything?

She could try, and then even if she fails, she'd know she hadn't just done nothing.

She just likes Kakuzu, okay? There are very few people in this world that she liked Back Then, that still manages to positively surprise her now, and he is one of them, in contrast to, say, Hiruzen.

Sometimes, she thinks, her life Back Then, with all the bureaucracy and issues and history was both less complicated and more dangerous than the one now.

After all, there she was dead, and here – thriving. More or less.

The silence is awkward.

Ren isn't sure she even remembers sharing an awkward silence with anyone in this world ever since waking up almost four years ago, or just not knowing what to say in general. There isn't even a dumb remark pressing itself insistently on the tip of her tongue, just- nothing. Complete, absolute nothing. Her brain just screeches to a halt every time she tries speaking to Kakuzu, and he himself isn't really good at (or willing to, if she were to take an educated guess) starting conversations.

All of her bravado from earlier is gone, as if with a snap. Avengers reference not really intended, especially since all of it is gone, not just half.

"This silence is awkwa~ard," Anri sings from her spot on top of Ren's head, and Ren just rolls her eyes at the spider like all of those moody 'I know everything about anything' teenagers. "Just saying."

"I know, Anri," Ren huffs, and combs her hand through her hair, purposefully disturbing the summon. Anri skitters away along her arm with an indignant squawk and settles on her thigh. She can feel Kakuzu's eyes on her for that, because the hairs on her neck rise, and she sighs. She wants to strike up a conversation, of course she does, how else is she supposed to try and form a rapport with him? Via creepy staring? She thinks not. But how does one strike a conversation with a mercenary who tried to murder the founder of your village, failed, and got punished for it so harshly that he went in and murdered the people who made him do it, and stole their literal beating hearts to prolong his own life?

Yeah, Ren doesn't really know either. She isn't supposed to know about his abilities either, and while she is generally a moron and she acknowledges that, she isn't dumb enough to go about blurting others' secrets, even if she doesn't know how half of them work- oh.

"Actually, Kakuzu-san," Ren starts, gaining the man's attention – and isn't using a suffix weird? She
uses them so rarely she honestly forgets she ever had. "How on Earth do your threads work? Are they a Kekkei Genkai? Or a technique? They're so cool!"

It's not even a lie. Kakuzu's threads are one of the coolest, and most underrated, abilities in the whole Naruto universe, right next to henge. Speaking of which, the sharpened teeth Ren used to tear into the ROOT agent are very adamant in staying that way, despite her having long dispelled the chakra. Huh.

Kakuzu regards her for a moment, eyes calculating, assessing – he's judging her, probably, looking for ulterior motives. He does that a lot, but in this case, all he's going to see is an excited and honest brat, because that's what Ren is. She'll even live through being called a brat in his context. He is, after all, a good sixty years her senior, past life accounted for or not.

(He sees him tense for a fraction of a second when she asks. Why?)

"They're a technique," he answers eventually. "A forgotten, forbidden technique."

"Huh," Ren answers eloquently. "That's interesting. Did it hurt, when you... um, you know, used them for the first time? They run under your skin, right?"

"They run everywhere," he mutters. "Under the skin, coiling around my organs. They replace most of them."

He says it in a pretty bitter tone. A side effect of the jutsu then? Ren wonders. Another few moments pass in silence, and surprisingly it's Kakuzu who speaks again.

"Doesn't it freak you out?" is what he asks. "Won't you call me a monster and run away screaming?"

"Wait, what? No?" she answers, rather confused. Why would she? "Why would I? That would only make me a hypocrite, wouldn't it? We're shinobi, super-powered contract killers and spies! You're a monster, sure, I won't deny that. But don't you deny that I'm a monster too, you hear? Because I am. I kill, and I like killing, and I get paid for it, and most people would find that lifestyle amoral and sickening, but I don't. I like it! I like slitting people's throats and ripping their throats out and cutting them open!"

She doesn't realize when she stood up and started pacing, throwing her hands up and gesturing wildly, but she had. Kakuzu looks at her, maybe slightly surprised.

Is that what has been going through his head? Was he actually afraid of... what? That Ren would run away screaming? Try to kill him? Because of his goddamned threads? What the actual fuck?

Then Ren suddenly stops, gasps, and looks at him, pointing a finger in his direction for dramatic effect.

"You're a fucking idiot," she says as if it were some sort of a divine revelation. Honestly, it just might be. This time, Kakuzu narrows his eyes at her, miffed. "No, no, hear me out. Your threads are cool. Like, seriously, amazing, and so versatile. Why would you be ashamed of them? Seriously?"

"I also have five actual human hearts beating in my chest," he says, standing up himself. Ren considers herself pretty tall, but he towers over her when he comes close. "None of them belong to me. I got rid of mine years ago."

Ren isn't even sure what brought the current conversation – and posturing – on. She had no idea that Kakuzu's abilities are a part of his insecurities about himself, that he is so self-conscious about being seen as a monster. She doesn't understand it, like the bull-headed, socially inept moron she is. She
just, doesn't pick up on cues like these. At all. Ever. Hence why she asks: "So?"

"What do you mean 'so'?" Kakuzu growls at her, and she shrugs.

"Exactly that. You have five hearts, none of them yours. So?"

"Doesn't that repulse you?"

"Kakuzu-san, I literally sleep buried under spiders. I've seen and suffered more than my fair share of really ugly wounds and even uglier people, I'm a child soldier who kills for money. The only things I find repulsive are parasites and Shimura Danzō," she answers honestly, and he takes a step back, looking deflated somehow. "Really, if anything your technique is really cool. Or so I think, and you know me. More or less. So my opinion matters more than that of some random that doesn't even know your name. Well, that's what I like to think at least."

The look on his face is indecipherable, especially since he's wearing that mask of his, so the only thing Ren sees are his eyes anyway, and they are kind of cold, maybe a bit distant. Ren doesn't know if she's done a good thing and, frankly, she's still confused as to why this conversation is even happening. Why did Kakuzu, of all people, open up to her? He is an old, seasoned shinobi who's lived a long, long time.

"Why did you tell me?" she can't help but voice her thoughts. "You literally only know my name and some of my techniques. I don't get it. I just-"

"Because, like it or not, you wear your heart on your sleeve," Kakuzu says, interrupting her. He closes his eyes, and the lines on his face relax. "Yes, I have known you for only a few hours, but you're not very good at fooling people."

"Hey!" Ren squawks indignantly. "I'm plenty good at fooling people!"

Kakuzu rolls his eyes and, of all things, pats Ren on her head. She freezes, more shocked than anything, before blinking up at him. He just raises an eyebrow, so she shrugs. She really does feel like a brat compared to him, but- she's still confused about his outburst. Was it genuine? Is he testing her? Is it something else? Why?

"Don't you have your own mission to take care of?" he asks finally.

"I do, but the target is still a day away from here. Or at least I think so. Huh. Actually, um, will you help me take him down? It's just a high chūnin assignment, but I'm injured, aching all over, and frankly, not in the mood."

"Didn't you say you liked killing people?"

"I do! I'm just not in the mood to fight to the death, geez."

"Hmph. Fine. We move out before dawn."

"That's, like, almost twenty hours away."

"Yes. So use that and rest."

"Huh. Okay. Um, thanks."

So, it would seem that Ren's fate, at least on this mission, would be to remain confused. If only she could catch a glimpse of his thoughts, because so far she understands nothing of Kakuzu's motives.
"Why are you putting up with me?" Ren asks finally, because she can no longer help it. "You let me follow you, you agree to fight with me, you spend time with me, you listen to me yap about my life, and not once have you snapped at me. Hell, I called you an idiot! I know I'm annoying, so why?"

*Your temper is a thing of legends, why haven't you killed me yet, money or no?*

"You're not that annoying," Kakuzu tells her, as if that explains everything. It doesn't.

Ren just gawks at him. That's not something anyone would say about her, at least not anyone who knows her.

All the way back in Fire Country, in the Inuzuka Compound in Konoha, Hana sneezes all of a sudden, so hard she almost drops her tea, and narrows her eyes.

"Damnit, Ren," she mutters. "I don't know what you did this time, but Sage help me if it's anything like most other times. And Sage help you. Mostly you, actually."

(A sense of dread so foreboding hits Ren, enough so that it paralyzes her for a moment, garnering an odd look from Kakuzu.)
Fifty-Seventh Thread

Chapter Summary

This chapter has been beta'd for you by hestia8693.

I have nothing to say for myself. I'm more disappointed in my work ethic than you are, trust me.
All the best in New Year and Merry Late Christmas. Mine sucked, but that's what you get when you're an atheist in near-fanatic Christian family.

CPwUR official Discord chat; discord.gg/WQ7mNwk
CPwUR official Tumblr blog; cpwur.tumblr.com

"A little thought and a little kindness are often worth more than a great deal of money."
— John Ruskin

They stay in the encampment for an extended break, for which Ren is very thankful. She applies various experimental herbal mixtures made by Takuya-sensei, along with some that Hana had made her pack, onto her stitched wounds, bandages them, and just rests for the rest of the time there. She manages to sharpen both her katana and her tantō, using the traditional water-and-whetstone technique she'd picked up from a scroll, and stalking some smiths around the village during some stealth training disguised as a game with the brats. The technique was efficient, looked badass, and required precision.

Everyone learned something in the end, and Naruto won the game, of course. Even at her current level, Ren had little hope of victory against a ten-year-old who notoriously evaded ANBU – though he hasn't pranked them.

Yet.

If someone could put the fear of god in those smug, animal-masked bastards, it was definitely Naruto. Jounin HQ already suffered his wrath once, after he heard some nobody that canon hadn't even been bothered to mention make a snide remark about Genma, when he had one of his downer episodes. The Hokage is a fuck and likes sending Genma on delicate but mentally taxing missions.

The extra even apologized the next day, so swift was Naruto's retribution. Ren was so proud that she made him ramen, which was deemed to be almost as good as Ichiraku's, which meant she did a damn good job. And then she had the kids trap Genma in a cuddle pile as she made him some pumpkin soup.

And speaking of kitchen work, Ren only recently felt brave enough to give baking Red Velvet Cake a try – with ingredients she never used before and had no way of knowing would turn out well. It came out... acceptable. Neither good, nor bad, but Ren was proud of it.

Proud enough, in fact, to offer Kakuzu a piece. That, and she knows that tempting anything with food is one of surest ways to get on its good side – although the fact that she even has some with her
is because of her massive sweet tooth. It should be a nice respite after how disastrous the mission had turned out before even really beginning.

"Here," she tells Kakuzu, handing him a slice of the cake. He eyes it suspiciously for a moment, but Ren pays him little mind, too busy inhaling her own piece. By the time she's done, he's cautiously eating it, so Ren counts it as a win.

And so they stay at the camp, and they talk. Well, Ren talks, Kakuzu largely just grumbles in response and occasionally sends her a withering look. It's only after she asks him about handling her clan's finances – which are mostly frozen ever since the Massacre, because Ren has absolutely no fucking clue how to manage such a large amount of assets complete with investments and real estates and they were meant to wait for Sasuke anyway, but the smug little fucker all but legally abdicated in her face and only waited to become thirteen to fully sign all rights over to her – that an active debate starts between her and Kakuzu. Ren racks her brain as best as she can about everything she read about the Uchiha finances and assets, dutifully jotting down notes about everything Kakuzu tells her. In a way, it reminds her of university, back when she'd been trying to pursue literature instead of just throwing it all away to go fully into the police force. Kakuzu has some ideas she probably could have reached on her own, eventually, after long evenings spent stressing over the papers, and some ideas she would honestly never have thought about that now seemed perfectly obvious. He has a talent for these kinds of things – as much as he is a frightening shinobi, he'd make an even more frightening bureaucrat. Not anyone Ren would like to cross in either life, or ever.

She is so glad they are on friendly-ish terms right now, previous severe spook with ROOT puppet or no. In retrospect, it was actually worth it – Ren managed to not only form a semi-positive (or so she hoped) relationship with Kakuzu, she even got some financial advice! And Jashin knows she needs it – the only finances she had to worry about before were rent, bills, and life from a much less sizable paycheck than what she has now. Once, she lived on a monthly salary equal to more or less ninety-five thousand Ryō – right now, the pay for one B-Rank assassination is between one and two hundred Ryō, and if she takes on an A-Rank, it could even go up to a million.

So yes, between paying rent, feeding the brats, and occasionally going on a shopping spree for tools or cooking ingredients, Ren already has more money than what she knows what to do with. Add to that the wealth of a collective of hundreds of clan members, many of whom were either high-profile shinobi (who, without Obito's help, Itachi would never be able to bring down, genius or no) or people with their own businesses.

Just the numbers she operates within makes her head spin.

But Kakuzu is a patient teacher when it comes to money. Or when someone obviously, eagerly, and somewhat desperately wants to learn. That, or maybe he knows he is saving Ren quite a bit of stress and maybe a few sleepless nights and just took pity on her.

While it was slow and progressive and oftentimes took a lot of trial and error, Ren was more than capable of realizing that in some things she was an absolutely pathetic loser. Not a sore one, just pathetic. And so, she scratched down on a fresh scroll as Kakuzu droned on about financial sharks and how to avoid them, her own recipe for success in a code only she could decipher.

Or not. But that sounded way cooler than 'chicken scratch that was legible only to Ren and even that barely at times', but kanji are difficult so bite her. Besides, it's nicely color coded!

They move out before dawn, Ren's wounds re-dressed and equipment either fixed or replaced. She's not even that sore anymore, and it's only now, running next to Kakuzu, that she realizes just how stressed she's been the past few days. Moving is easier, her body feels lighter, there's no urge to look
over her shoulder every two seconds to make sure there's not a kunai heading for her spine.

It feels great, to be honest, with the ROOT puppet's body sealed in a scroll in her pocket, instead of running next to her, alive. It's freeing – being without the very constant, very real, and very near threat of death.

Now she can focus on the target once more. Tanaka Akifumi, high-level chūnin, weapon specialist. Think Tenten on steroids, quite probably, and too much of a bother for Ren to rejoice at the prospect of fighting him after the recent spook. But she is with Kakuzu, and that really skyrockets her survival chance now. She is happy, and Kakuzu seems to almost like her even.

"Okay, we should be getting close," Ren says eventually as they run through the woods-lake-swampland-something that makes most of Taki's scenery. "He has an outpost he operates from, I don't know why but he coordinates common bandits, usually targeting civilians."

"If that's the case, why would a shinobi village care? More so, why would Konoha, instead of Taki?" Kakuzu asks evenly.

"No clue? But his goons attacked some people at the border, Fire country citizens, and so they went to Konoha, instead of Taki – or maybe Taki just didn't care?"

"Huh, disregarding civilians does sound like something they would do," Kakuzu agrees unhappily. "Especially if they don't have enough money, and people attacked by bandits wouldn't, I'd assume."

"That's fair," Ren nods. "Hey, we can loot their hideout after we wipe them out. See if they don't have valuable stuff there."

"And what, give them back to people?" Kakuzu snarks.

"Bullshit! No, I don't like civvies enough to do anything remotely like that. You can have the money, though."

"Fine by me."

"Of course it's fine by you, it's money."

"What was that?"

"You're an old, greedy miser! But don't worry, that's a part of your charm."

"Brat!

"What?! Tell me I'm wrong!"

They reach the outpost sometime past noon. It's hidden among the foliage, fortified against disgruntled civilians who might eventually take up arms against him – though not trained shinobi, at least from the outside. Tanaka most likely is banking on the bandits to stick to the civilians and stay out of shinobi's way – probably never planned on attacking Fire country merchants. And while Ren isn't particularly itching for a fight, she is more than ready for it.

She's always ready or a fight, no matter how she feels.

"Let's see then," Ren says, hidden in the foliage and behind some low-grade genjutsu that Kakuzu had woven, as she flies through some very familiar hand signs. Seconds later, spiders spill from her open sleeves like eight-legged marbles. It's nobody she knows, nobody that can speak, even – just
the lowest-grade fodder from Jōren Falls, glorified regular spiders just like Awai and Ōjo, whom she left back home to keep an eye on Danzō. Although everybody knows by now that it could only be that good.

Spiders are not a foolproof informant network, as she has proven, but they are less fallible than a human one, so it's the best she has anyway.

"These are useful," Kakuzu remarks approvingly, and Ren grins at him. He rolls his eyes, and she can't help but chuckle at it.

"They should be done in an hour or something, survey the place for traps and stuff. Do we go in as soon as they're done?"

"Depends on what they find," Kakuzu says, cozying himself up on the branch. "Wake me up when they're done."

Ren just splutters, but he's already asleep and that's a skill she can admire. She sighs, shaking her head. "You're so lucky I like you, or I'd fucking push you off," she mutters under her breath, but sits cross-legged on her part of her branch anyway, falling into a meditative state. She won't try tapping on the flow of nature chakra, but she might as well get better at sensing and differentiating it from that of humans

The spiders – most of them, anyway – return within the hour, relaying to her what they had found. By no means is it a shinobi-scale operation – just some guy trying to make a marauding career out of robbing civilians, but there are two genin nukenin-hopefuls with him. A nuisance, more than anything, at Ren's level and with her current company.

"Yo, Kuzu, rise and shine~"

"What?" he snaps.

"Just the target and two genin wannabes, not much in the way of traps – tripwire and logs and that's it," she explains. "Do we go in?"

"Might as well," Kakuzu says, waving off the genjutsu, and drops down. Ren can only sigh and follow, because she feels like shit and wants a part of the carnage. She realizes that the shinobi mindset is sick compared to what she'd been raised in, but here, in a society that accepts murder as a perfectly acceptable source of income, she finds it therapeutic. The murdering, that is.

And she needs it after that last spook. Fucking Danzō.

(Not to mention just how fucked up the Shinobi World is when one gains an actual perspective.

Except Ren thinks she might have sociopathic tendencies – otherwise, how in the fucking hell had she assimilated so fast from a policewoman in a world that frowns upon murder in any way into a child assassin genuinely enjoying her job?)

They move easily through the muddy terrain and foliage, their footsteps silent thanks to the chakra-laced soles of their shoes. The bandits on the outlook didn't even see them, taken out by well-thrown kunai. The traps inside are only tripwire and pit traps – they evade all of them easily.

Tanaka Arifumi makes a surprised noise when they burst in, managing to stand up as his chair clatters to the ground, but that was all he has time to do. Black threads spring forward, wrapping around Tanaka's neck, and tightens, executing what must have been an impressively strong grip. There is a sickening crunch, and the target convulses for only a couple of seconds, before stilling completely. Like a mouse in a trap, quick, efficient, ruthless, and a hundred percent deadly.
"Hey!" Ren squawks. "Rude! Leaving me just the small fries!"

Kakuzu looks at her and narrows his eyes, and Ren knows, she just knows, because she would do that, too- and sure enough, threads shoot towards the two nukenin-hopefuls and wring their necks too, before either of them – or Ren, for that matter – can really react.

"Or you could also do that," Ren says after a few more seconds. "Killjoy."

"You said you weren't in the mood to fight," Kakuzu answers her smugly. Bastard.

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be much of a fight!" she argues. "They were genin, I'm a tokujō!"

"First come, first serve."

"Fucking bastard. Be glad I like you, or I wouldn't share the rest of the cake!"

"Oh no, what would I do then," Kakuzu says flatly, looking Ren straight in the eye. She can't help but laugh, and he probably smiles under his mask, too.

His eyes definitely soften to almost the fond exasperation she sees on Hana and Genma so often.

"Doku Romi, then?" she asks, because this is her mission, but that target is important. Danzō wants to get all buddy-buddy with her, so it's imperative that Ren ends her life, once and for all.

"Indeed," Kakuzu says.

They have a week before they really need to hoof it to where she's at – her and ROOT puppet's mission coincided only that much. So, to avoid suspicion and making people worry, Ren scribbles on a piece of paper, as neatly as she can, a short missive to the Hokage.

'Target is away, whereabouts unknown. Will wait until contact and proceed with mission as planned.'

Or something. They don't need to know that she's out there with one of the most infamous nukenin of the time, one who tried to kill the Shōdai no less, cozying herself in the now-cleared hideout of her definitely dead and not at all away target, waiting to foil one of the many plans of Konoha's worst plague.

There are worse ways to spend time. She herself learns that Kakuzu does, in fact, have a massive sweet tooth, of all things, but hates red beans. Ren hates them, too, so it works out fine. She teaches him how to make apple pie and peach cobbler, and makes enough muffins to send to Kisame. For the sake of keeping up appearances, she refrains from sending any to the brats.

She was, after all, supposed to be sulking alone in the wilderness, waiting for her target to come back to his hideout, instead of taking over the limited kitchen of said hideout and going on a baking spree.
This chapter has been beta'd for you by hestia8693. I'd be lost and dead without her, probably. Praise thee!

***

Heeeeey. So university happened. I failed an exam, gotta buy me a retake. Life goes on, I'm perpetually late.

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CPwUR official Discord chat; discord.gg/WQ7mNwk
CPwUR official Tumblr blog; cpwr. tumblr. com

"Growth is never by mere chance; it is the result of forces working together."

James Cash Penney

Ren chuckles, reading the letter once again. Kisame is such a great friend, or just person in general. He even shared her cupcakes with Itachi – except Itachi scoffed at them because they could've been poisoned, and then proceeded to look angry when Kisame inhaled them all.

Honestly, her cousin's moods are worse than those of pregnant women.

"Who are you writing with?" Kakuzu asks eventually.

"A friend of mine. We're closer, distance-wise, than we've been in years so messages arrive much quicker than usual," she explains, because it's true. Kisame and Itachi are in Kusa, somewhere, near the Taki border.

"Can't you just meet, if you're close enough to send multiple messages a day?" he asks, and Ren grimaces, remembering all the shady shit Akatsuki would be up to and, most importantly, Itachi, who might actually try to kill her. The worst part is, Kisame would most likely go between them, and she'd hate to turn Akatsuki against him. Those fucks are dangerous.

"We're from as opposing factions as it gets, old man," she sighs. "I wish we could, trust me, but it probably won't happen anytime soon."

Not until they are dispatched to try and capture Naruto, post chūnin exams, at least.

"And even if it does, we're probably going to try to kill one another."

"Should we bother trying to impersonate the ROOT guy, or should we just go for the kill?" Ren asks two days before the appointed meeting with Doku Romi. She and Kakuzu are in the storage doing an inventory of everything they had looted from the hideout, preparing to leave at a moment's notice.
They both agreed that it would be best if they arrive in the area before Romi to get to know the terrain and maybe lay some traps.

Personally, Ren is itching to put a more lethal twist to some of the pranks Naruto loves to pull on the villagers.

"Why should we?" Kakuzu asks. "I know how Doku Romi looks like so I can confirm it's her. And with poison masters, it's best to take them by surprise and take them out before they can poison you."

"Fair, it's too dangerous," Ren agrees, because it's true. She has her spiders, and Takuya-sensei, but they're just summons, and the target is a high-rank missing-nin. Honestly, the only reason she's going after Doku Romi is because Kakuzu is with her. Contrary to popular belief, Ren isn't stupid, nor does she have a death wish – she knows when an opponent is too much for her to handle.

Arrogance is what kills people in this world, after all. She can't afford much.

It nearly cost her already, believing that her spiders were a foolproof method against Danzō. But there are places even they can't get into, things they can't relay. Hence her mission getting infiltrated.

Lesson learned, please and thank you. She'd be even more careful from now on.

Also, should she bother telling the Hokage? The senile old fool is so deep in Danzō's pocket it isn't even funny. There's no guarantee whatsoever that he would do anything about it, hell, he might even try to get rid of her himself.

That's about how highly Ren thinks of him, but she doesn't feel bad for doubting the man this much. He has repeatedly proved her right, after all.

(See: Naruto's treatment, Uchiha Massacre and Danzō and everything he implies.)

A weak-willed old man in power and a power-hungry tyrant with a killer puppet army. They sure are a power couple. Ren honestly doesn't blame any of the Sannin for hightailing from the village while they could. Doesn't mean she dislikes Jiraiya any less, or that she approves of Tsunade drowning her depression in sake instead of seeking help like, you know, the renowned medic she supposedly is. She doesn't have much to say about Orochimaru – he got involved with Danzō, and as it is with Danzō, everybody pays the price but him.

(See: Naruto's treatment, Uchiha Massacre and Danzō and everything he implies.)

She hates Danzō, and maybe is a bit weak for men of beauty of Orochimaru's caliber, so sue her.)

"Here," she is ripped from her thoughts by the pole suddenly thrusted in her face. She splutters for a second, grabbing the tool, and looks at it. It's heavy, possibly metal rather than wood, and- oh.

It isn't a pole at all. It's a naginata. The sleek shaft is quite long, though she's seen longer at the shop. This one is longer than she is tall, mounted by a blade that looks to be in the range of the longer ones, maybe half a meter. The whole thing is too tall to stand it straight in the room, because it grazed the ceiling.

"Oooo, that's a pretty one. Is it for me?" she asks, trying out a stance she saw in the scroll while scavenging for anything sword and tantō related. And as much as she loves Ryuzakura that Sasuke braved the compound of ghosts for her, and Sumire which she picked with Kisame, this time- it was as if something clicked. The weight, the length, the shape of the blade just fit with her, spoke to her. She found herself itching to use it, to dance with this blade.

"As I thought," Kakuzu said, giving her an appraising look.
"What?" Ren asks.

"I thought you'd be the type to wield naginata. You are well-versed in close-range combat, but a medium-range weapon like this just seems to fit you."

"I can't disagree with that," Ren chuckles. "It feels so right in my hands, makes me wonder what the fuck I've been doing for the past few years. Sure, I'm not throwing out my tantō or katana, but damn."

"The more weapons you are adept in, the more advantages you have," is Kakuzu's answer, and Ren doesn't even bother agreeing because that's just a fact. "This particular one is an ō-naginata, the type made for men. Or so they say, the truth is women are just generally smaller and need smaller, wider blades to compensate for that."

"Yeah, I can imagine how more petite girls would need slightly different blade for a better cut, but I'm tall and quite heavy so it should be fine," she agrees, examining the metal. It's a bit dull, and it's obvious that this particular weapon is no work of art. No matter, she'll just harass Tenten's parents' smithy for a naginata once she gets home.

Ren feels a bit embarrassed that she knows Tenten only as that kid-assistant in the weapon shop and honestly knew her parents better. Oh well, she can't be friends with every brat – not with how emotionally constipated Neji is, and Gai taking most of Lee's time these days. Even if the latter is actually Ren's fault.

Or maybe she would raid the Uchiha armory. It is only collecting dust these days, and there is bound to be some good stuff there.

Yes, she'd probably go to the armory and drag everybody down with her. What's the point of having a treasury full of weapons if you didn't use them? She is the clan head anyway, due to Sasuke being a little shit, so she can do with her property whatever the fuck she wants. If she can make those close to her happy along the way, then all the better.

"I won't be using this particular one because it's shabby," she finally says to Kakuzu, "but I will look into naginatas. Thanks for showing this to me."

"It's not my fault you're a moron who hadn't looked into them before," Kakuzu retorts, but without too much of a bite. Ren chuckles.

"Yeah, yeah, be grumpy all you want, I appreciate it nevertheless."

"Hmph."

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Invisible, thin spiderwebs are strewn all over the area, all separate but eventually all connecting to one spot, on top of which sat a massive garden orb-weaver, gently placing its long, slender legs on the threads and feeling for movement.

"This is actually useful," Kakuzu judges when she introduced the idea when they were on their way. "Nobody would care about a stray cobweb."

There are also traps scattered about, some hidden with genjutsu, some with just clever usage of the environment. Most of them are explosive in some way, capable of shooting shrapnel or full of sharp ninja wire. The area is mostly tree-covered swampland with rich foliage, so that made it easier to hide things there, but it also means that Ren's fire chakra stands out like a beacon in the water-earth-plant-cold climate. All she can do is mute it and hope for the best – you never know where you would find
a sensor. Kakuzu has his five hearts, but his primary nature is earth so he melds with the environment much better.

Doku Romi isn't stupid. You don't become a notorious missing-nin by being stupid. And since she's not stupid, she's also not alone, and because the clearing she enters, where she was supposed to meet the ROOT puppet, is empty, she's instantly on alert.

But Kakuzu has been missing-nin for longer than Doku Romi has been alive, and Ren is nothing if not creatively violent.

A spiderweb net falls on them, sticky and strong, not enough to stop them, but enough to stall their movements and allow Kakuzu and Ren a moment for an attack. The first two shinobi Romi is with are so unremarkable, that Ren barely notices slitting their throats. They were chūnin, maybe. But the third manages to cut himself from the net, just as Romi melts her bindings with some acid, and goes for the hit. Kakuzu outright ignores him, relentlessly going after the poison mistress, Takuya-sensei on his shoulder, as Ren is left to fight the third of her entourage.

And he's good, she'll admit. Jōnin-level, probably, strong enough that Ren has to brace herself for his strikes because they're heavy. He's using some sort of giant, glorified chopper and before long Ren has to bust out Ryuuzakura because kunai obviously won't cut it. She comes at him, all calculated anger, and, she realizes, she isn't really that afraid of his blows.

Not the way she was with the ROOT puppet, up until the moment his mangled corpse was laid by her feet.

Yes, her opponent is strong. Yes, he could realistically kill her if she's not careful. But all Ren can feel is a semi-serene sense of catharsis, a thrill and a quiver sent to her hands by the colliding blades. She has missed this, the calculated, weaponized anger and the underlying glee of fighting someone to the death. Someone somewhere on her level of skill to test against after the latest scare.

She needed this, she realizes. This assurance that not everybody is Danzo's ROOT, that not everybody is on their level. That they're the elite of elites, and that the rest of the world only rarely compares. That Danzō is the real threat that must be taken care of, but the outside world can be taken in without all this fear.

And with that, she realizes – she is anxious. She feels inadequate. First, nearly dying to a ROOT agent, and then spending time with Kakuzu, who has a good fifty years on her, even counting both lifetimes. She subconsciously started comparing herself to them, to this man who fought the Shodaime and lived, and to the child puppets who live for nothing but to kill and die for Danzō. Of course she would feel inadequate as a fighter next to them.

Parrying another strike, she threw her opponent's chopper up, making him stagger as he clung to it, and pouring her scalding-hot chakra into her muscles, she forced them into a burst of speed, stabbing him right through the side of his throat, impaling both his artery and spine. He convulsed for a second and stopped moving, as Ren pulled Ryuuzakura out, causing a fountain of blood to spurt from his neck. She sidestepped it.

Shortly after this, Kakuzu threw Doku Romi's corpse next to Ren's feet like a sack of potatoes, and then drank something Takuya-sensei gave him.

"How was it?" Ren asks, seeing the man a tad ruffled but otherwise fine. It probably wasn't much of a fight, with Doku Romi's only real talent being poisons.
"She tried to get me with gas," Kakuzu answers shortly.

"Paralysis," Takuya-sensei says. "Thankfully, she didn't know how to deal with Kakuzu-san here. She really didn't expect him. It was a clean kill and the antidote is already in his system."

"Eh, I just killed a guy with a huge chopper blade," she shrugs. "You know who he is?"

"He appears to be Honebami Eiji," Kakuzu says, examining his face. "From Kiri. I think his bounty was one million Ryo."

"Damn old man, do you know everyone's price by heart?"

"Yes."

"Somehow I'm not surprised. Let's get them to the bounty station, yeah?"

"Yes, the sooner the better."

It was slightly underwhelming for Ren, who had been preparing to face Doku Romi for the past week, but not everything has to end in an epic confrontation. For now, she is just happy to be alive; foiling Danzō's plan is just a bonus.
Fifty-Ninth Thread

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been beta'd for you by hestia8693. She forgot I sent it to her, but I tend to send a reminder every 2 days or so. I should probably write more often.

**
I have literally wrote this thing in class, one hand on my notes, another writing CPwUR. It wouldn't have been possible if I didn't have a habit of dragging my laptop with me on Mondays.

**
CPwUR official Discord chat; discord.gg/WQ7mNwk
CPwUR official Tumblr blog; cpwur.tumblr.com

"Though miles may lie between us, we are never far apart, for friendship doesn't count miles, it's measured by the heart."
— unknown

They travel in companionable silence at Kakuzu's direction towards the nearest Bounty Station. Ren doesn't know, she is aware of her general environment, of directions and how to get home in the shortest time, but she has no clue where the Stations are, exactly, or how to get to them, not without consulting a map, anyway.

(You is fairly sure Kakuzu would have to consult a map to go literally anywhere else, but his innate knowledge of all the Stations everywhere is, nonetheless, quite amazing.)

"You didn't call me to fight," Cobalt pouts, still salty that Ren didn't summon her for some good, old-fashioned murder. The giant spider had been relegated to a pack mule with cocooned corpses, all wrapped and ready to be cashed in, stacked on her back.

"There was no need to," Ren shrugs. "They were weak, and Kakuzu took care of the big fish."

"But you called in Takuya-sensei!"

"But Takuya-sensei can do poisons. Can you do poisons, Cobalt?"

Cobalt harrumphs and falls a few steps back to sulk for a while, unable to come up with any sort of counterargument.

"You seem more chipper than before," Kakuzu notices, because of course he does. It's nothing bad, but the old man definitely has sharp eyes and social awareness, regardless of whether he chooses to act on it. "You've seemed down for a while this past week."

"Awww, you do care," Ren coos, and he harrumphs at her in much the same manner as Cobalt not even a minute ago. "Now, now, Kakuzu, emotions are not a lethal disease, and caring for others won't kill you."
"Must you?" he asks, glaring at her. Ren grins.

"Yes, because you act as if showing that you care will burn you," she sighs in exasperation, kind of like you would at a child pretending to be a grown-up. Kakuzu obviously notices, but chooses not to comment on it. Ren continues to talk. "You know, for the past week I kinda had a mild crisis. I felt weak, inadequate, compared to that ROOT agent that almost killed me, and compared to you. And then I fought Honebami, and you know what? I realized that I'm not, in fact, a pathetically weak child. I mean, comparing myself to a brainwashed puppet with no regard for their own life, and a guy who fought our ridiculously overpowered clown of a First Hokage, and lived? Yeah, I'm going to feel fucking inadequate alright."

"He let me go, if that makes you feel better," Kakuzu says quietly. "Your First Hokage, I mean. He was strong, but he was soft-hearted. Kind, I suppose, and he pitied me—this scrawny teenager sent on a suicide mission."

Ren isn't quite sure just what on earth had sparked this heartfelt confession, but she doesn't want to ruin the moment. It's very flattering that Kakuzu is willing to open up to her even that much—or maybe this much.

She pats his shoulder in friendly gesture, and he lets her, and doesn't even flinch.

It feels like a milestone. It probably is.

They don't run, just walk at a brisk pace, which eventually forces them to camp out in the open, in a swampy meadow up in the trees by the road they've been following. If Ren didn't know any better, she would think Kakuzu just isn't in much of a hurry to rid himself of her presence.

They don't make a campfire because they don't particularly need it. They still have food Ren made on her semi-depression cooking-baking spree at the hideout, and the weather is fairly warm despite it being March and not in the Country of Fire. Ren calls forth her Orb Weavers easily enough, and in an hour both she and Kakuzu have their own spider web hammocks up in the trees, safe from excess moisture above he swamps. They throw in bug-nets too, because Ren doesn't fancy sleeping with various swampland monstrosities called bugs, and judging by Kakuzu's appreciative look, neither does he.

"Thanks," Ren says, a bit randomly, when they're about to settle in to sleep. She says it quietly, as if hoping that he won't hear her for some reason. She doesn't know how he's going to react, after all, or if he's even going to know what she is thanking him for.

Especially since she doesn't know herself.

But he answers nevertheless, in a somewhat sleepy, disgruntled voice, "You're welcome. And... thank you, as well."

Ren blinks in confusion. Why would he be thanking her? Unless it's for the emotional bombardment and her tiring friendliness, and unyielding wish to show him that not all people are assholes and it's okay to show a softer side to some people, sometimes?

"You're earnest," he clarifies, as if reading her thoughts, and Ren is pretty sure that she's briefly entered a Twilight Zone of some sort. "Thank you for that."

"You're welcome," she whispers, to keep her voice steady. "We're friends, after all."

And they are, maybe. Tentative, still somewhat wary, but friends, maybe. Or so she wants to think.
A stupid young girl who lives a second life far from the world that hated her and she hated right back, and a bitter old man who only ever lived once, and loathes the world that made him a monster.

And she made him comfortable enough with her to honestly admit to some of his feelings.

How? Why? She doesn't know, but her throat contorts uncomfortably and her eyes prickle with heat because she had somehow managed to chip at one of his many barriers, and most importantly, get to know Kakuzu the person over Kakuzu the fictional character, and she only realizes now but she thinks she's known since that week in the base.

Kakuzu was hers now. Is that how one acquires family members?

(You sure do, an annoying voice in her head supplied. Isn't that the exact same thing that happened with Kisame and Deidara? And look where you are now.)

And they would wake in the morning, and pack their camp and load Cobalt with corpses to carry again, and act as if nothing happened, but Ren would know, and Kakuzu would know, too, that he had a friend in her.

After they wake, gather the spiderwebs and depart, they walk in silence, but it's not an awkward one. They're both pretending that they don't remember last night's heartfelt words and they both know the other is a liar for it, though neither mentions it. But it's good. It's as if something's cleared, and Kakuzu no longer looks at Ren as if she were just another bounty as she bounces next to him, whistling a tune of a song that this world doesn't have from a movie that will never be made here.

She glances at Kakuzu, and he gives her a half-hearted, sideways glare, as if he knows exactly what she wants to do but wants to disagree just for the sake of it. Instead, he just rolls his eyes with a sigh, and Ren grins, taking it as a full-on 'go ahead'.

"Tell everybody I'm on my way,

New friends and new places to see,

With blue skies ahead, yes, I'm on my way,

And there's nowhere else that I'd rather be~!"

She hasn't sang in a while, not outside of the shower or to lull the brats that insist very hotly that they're not babies anymore and don't need to be coddled and then come crying for a lullaby five minutes later, so she grasps the occasion and sings, every single travel song she remembers until her throat is sore and she can only make sounds like a dying chicken.

Kakuzu suffers through it diligently and not once threatens to kill her.

She can swear she sees him tapping his hand to the rhythm of some of the songs, when he thinks she isn't looking.

They cash in nicely, Doku Romi and Honebami Eiji both, as well as the rest of the goons that were with them. They were petty thieves in comparison, but still had bounties on them from the disgruntled civilians that made up for the afterthoughts they were, even if those were just spare change.

Kakuzu himself appears to be in a decently good mood, especially ever since the morning and
despite Ren's sudden bout of singing. On top of that, Ren gets to see Kakuzu positively surprised—Doku Romi turns out to have been a menace who had her bounty raised to a whooping, whole ten million ryo between now and the time Kakuzu last checked the price on her head that was seven million at the time. Probably pissed off someone high-standing.

When they walk out, a few corpses lighter and over eleven million ryo heavier, Kakuzu promptly throws a packet at Ren's head. She yelps and sputters, having not expected anything of the sort at all, and she flops about before finally managing to grab the darn envelope.

It's thick with banknotes.

Ren looks at the packet, then at Kakuzu, then at the packet again, and then asks, "Yo, what the fuck?"

"That's something over one million Ryo," he answers matter-of-factly.

"I can see that!" Ren bristles. "Doesn't answer my question, though!"

"It's Honebami's bounty, and the spare change for the others. You killed them, so it's yours," Kakuzu explains, patiently, as if to a naïve child asking why they can't stick their hand into the fire, and Ren just keeps on blinking at him, uncomprehending.

"Yeah, but why are you giving this to me?" she asks. "I mean-"

"You killed them, so the money is yours, don't make me repeat myself. If you're worried about our deal, Doku Romi's head more than paid for it," he says, gesturing at a small case in his hand, the one packed with the equivalent of ten million Ryō.

"You sure?"

"If it weren't for your information, I would not have caught her, possibly ever, seeing as she was a decent escape artist. So yes, I'm sure."

"Awww, you do care!"

"Don't make me change my mind, brat!"

Ren laughs, shoving her envelope into one of her flak jacket's pockets, and draws a circle on her right palm with her left index finger. A puff of smoke later, there's a relatively small spider on her palm.

"This is Emi," Ren says, presenting the spider to Kakuzu. "She used to help me exchange letters with another associate of mine, but shit happened and now he lives next door. She's got nothing to do, and she's bored because her brother is still running errands, sooo... I hope you'll write?"

Kakuzu looks at her, as if contemplating her idiocy, but she manages to catch a glint in his eyes that looks as if he's touched. He sighs, but nevertheless extends his hand for the spider with a disgruntled 'fine'.

Ren laughs, says her goodbyes, dismisses Cobalt and turns southward.

Having foiled Danzō's plans, of both killing her and using Doku Romi for something decidedly nefarious, meeting and getting on Kakuzu's good side, Ren is decidedly ready to go back home and sleep for a week. While she was physically mostly fine, with nothing more than an insistent itch from the wounds she'd sustained the week before, she's mentally exhausted, to the point it feels like it's
Yeah, she could have used Cobalt to get home much faster, but she didn't exactly feel like company right now. Maybe later today, or tomorrow, she would call her again and ride the giant spider home, but for now she just wanted to relish in the solitude.

She senses it only because it's massive and dense, otherwise melding perfectly with the chakra affinities of the swampland. A massive pool of chakra, a literal beacon, moving towards her at high speed. And maybe she should react, but she doesn't sense any killing intent, so she does nothing. Maybe whoever it is will just pass her by and nothing will happen.

Except, something does happen.

Suddenly, there's water rushing about out of nowhere, rich in chakra yet lacking in ill intent. Ren jumps onto its surface from the small, mossy rock she had been on to avoid falling in before the stone gets swept in as well.

The water is alive; that's the only way she can describe it. She can feel the thrum of chakra, localized in just one place and somewhat... friendly?

She stumbles, because she's pretty tired at this point and running on water—especially jutsu-spawned water, chakra-rich and clashing with her own fire nature so much it almost hurt—had never been a strong suit of hers. It's instinctual, because while she's tired and dirty and the little lake is knee-deep at best, she's also a stubborn asshole who refuses to fall into the water, thank you very much.

She takes a few wobbly steps backward, until she feels her back hit something rather firm and vaguely human-shaped. She blinks, taking a step forward again and turning around to face that something, and for a second she thinks she might be seeing things.

"...Hi?" it comes out more like a question than a greeting. "The fuck are you doing here? Not that I mind. Also, please don't be a hallucination. That would be rude, after all the shit that just went down. Also, I'm tired."

Kisame just laughs, shaking his head, and ruffles her hair. He's dressed casually, black and red cloak forsaken in favor of loose cargo pants and a simple shirt, Samehada hanging languidly on his back, secured with a thick leather belt cutting diagonally through his chest. All things considered, he looks perfectly normal. He could easily pass for just another random shinobi, if his skin wasn't blue and a dead giveaway of his identity.

"Nah, I'm definitely real. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Ren just crashes into his chest without a word, hugging him tightly. He smells like salt and the sea and wind even this far inland, but he is a walking shark so she doesn't comment. He laughs, embracing her too, and Ren kind-of melts. They met exactly once in person, but have been writing ever since, and she really, really missed him, she just hadn't realized it until now.

"Fuck, Blue, I missed you."

"Yeah, I missed you, too," he says, patting her back. "Ditching your cousin was a pain, you know."

"I can imagine. I hate that bitch, he stabbed me in the chest. With a sword."

"Yikes. Come on, you look like you're about to fall over. Let's camp somewhere and talk, how about it?"
"Yeah. I'm about to fall asleep on you."

"Please don't, I just found you."

"'mkay."
I'm late, again, but there's plot. Like, actual plot. This story has plot 60 chapters in! Wooo!

CPwUR official Discord chat; discord.gg/WQ7mNwk
CPwUR official Tumblr blog; cpwur.tumblr.com

This chapter has been beta'd for you by hestia8693.

"You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world's problems at once but don't ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take a life of its own."

— Michelle Obama

Ren does fall asleep on Kisame in the end, but he doesn't seem to mind. She's blearily aware of being carried somewhere that is not the main road and not quite the swamp. He taps her awake after they had relocated to somewhere relatively dry, at least as far as swamplands go, with a fire cackling before them.

A typical camping setting—they're even sitting on a log. How nostalgic, just give her a guitar and a stick with some marshmallows. Actually, no, don't give her a guitar, just because she has a decent voice now to go along with the few singing lessons she'd had in the past doesn't mean she got any better than tragic in skill with instruments, especially having not played in years.

Come to think of it, she should try making some marshmallows, once she gets back, and send Kisame a batch. Kakuzu, too.

"Hey, Blue," she says, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "You won't believe the week I've had. I don't believe it, and I fucking lived it."

"You wrote me about most of it, remember?" Kisame laughs. "Did you get Doku Romi in the end?"

"Not me, Kakuzu. Also, we're friends now. I think."

"You made friends with Kakuzu," Kisame says flatly. "As in, 'you're only worth anything as a corpse to cash in' Kakuzu. That guy?"

"Mhm!"

"I honestly wish I could say I'm surprised," Kisame says, looking her dead in the eyes. "But that would be lying. You're weird enough to pull shit like that."
"I know I'm weird, it would be weird if I wasn't. If I'm the type of person who's dumb enough to give the Hokage a dressing down every once in a while, then I'm capable of a great many things!"

"I don't know if it's okay to call you dumb for that, more like reckless."

"Possessing a great deal of idiotic bravado?"

"Or that."

"I'm largely self-aware, thanks."

Because she is, self-aware that is, and aware in general. Aware that this man, who probably isn't even entirely human, yet she is so comfortable around, is perfectly capable of killing her, and likely would if he had to. She isn't looking forward to two years in the future, when he and her damned cousin would come and try to get Naruto.

They would fail, and she would be one of those who would see to it, of that she's sure—given how uncomfortable she is with even the thought of Sasuke being anywhere near Itachi, unchaperoned, but that really doesn't change the fact that she would probably clash with Kisame, and they would laugh, and banter, and genuinely try to kill one another.

And it doesn't scare her, because that's what respect is for them.

"Why the long face?" Kisame asks and she sighs. Why is the world so hard? Why is one of her best friends a man on the other side of wrong?

"We're going to fight each other in the future," she says flatly, and it takes her a few seconds to realize just how eerie it sounded in that moment. She blinks, turning to face Kisame. Predictably, he's looking at her oddly. "Sorry, that was creepy."

"Obviously," he huffs. "What do you mean? Because that sure as hell didn't sound like 'we might meet on battlefield somewhere', it sounded like 'I know exactly when we will fight'. What did you mean?"

She purses her lips.

"A secret, is it?" he asks.

"Yes. The same as always. The same thing. I-That- I've never told anyone, but you're the closest to a person in-the-know, with how many hints I've dropped in all my complaining," she explains, because it's the truth and maybe should be shared. She knows things she's not supposed to, about people and about the future, and sometimes, she says or writes creepy, almost-prophetic things, and other times she sits in her room, alone and cursing having retained her memories, while blessing it in the same breath.

It's hard, but she braves through it. With how paranoid, distrustful, and power-hungry most powerful people in this world are, she doesn't dare tell them anything more than dropping subtle hints that this is bigger than their narrow point of view is capable of seeing.

If she did anything more, she would surely be locked up on the spot, and that's the best outcome she can envision that doesn't end up in immediate death.

She shouldn't be trusting Kisame, either, with how uncomfortably close he is to two other sets of Sharingan, but if she wants to achieve the outcome she's been striving for, then she will have to tell him, two years into the future, post-chūnin-exams at the latest, assuming it wouldn't already be too
"I don't need to know," Kisame assures her, and she almost grimaces, because he kind of does.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," she says. "I need you to do some things for me, things you would be able to do only after I tell you everything, and they would sound ridiculous without explaining how I know them."

"Do you want to, then?" he asks. "To tell me?"

"I don't know? Maybe? Nobody knows, only me, and- It's hard, sometimes. And you probably won't believe me, anyways."

Kisame hums, and then promptly changes the topic to something mundane, asks about the brats, about Sumire, and Ren's blade training, about the spiders, and Ren is grateful that she doesn't have to tell him about Renee Archer just yet, even if she knows she would eventually.

Instead, she tells him about the brats and their approaching graduation, and how instead of getting Gekkō Hayate to help her with swordsmanship, she had strong-armed him into the hospital to get his lungs and immune system looked at. He, in turn, tells her about Itachi and his reactions to the world, sour, constipated, and sulking, the mighty teenager who knew everything about anything, and how Kisame once almost threw him off a cliff and into the valley below. He tells her about the things he saw and places he visited, from the northern coasts of Lightning to the unforgiving sands of Wind. He tells her about all the people he killed, and she recounts her own targets in turn.

She tells him about the ROOT agent, about the rot in Konoha, the fundamentally flawed system, and he tells her that Kiri wasn't much better, when he was there. That there was a reason the Bloody Mist became known as the Bloody Mist, and he expresses hope that, with Konoha's infamous maxim of bonding and teamwork, it won't happen there.

"Not when a madman has an army of emotionless, brainwashed child-soldiers at his beck and call," she tells him then and doesn't elaborate. He doesn't ask about it—it doesn't concern him.

"Just don't die, because I know you're going to pick a fight with him," he says.

"I'm not going to. I already did. I survived the Massacre, and he didn't like that."

"Wow, what an asshole."

"Right? Besides, it's Itachi's incompetence and not my luck anyway!"

Kisame laughs.

"What I'm afraid of is him finding out I survived last week's attempt."

"Don't be," Kisame says, standing up. He pulls a scroll from his jacket, and a puff of smoke later, he's holding a katana. Samehada is off to the side, gulping the chakra from its surroundings like a dry sponge would water. "Now, you've rested enough. At least half the solution to your problem is to get stronger, isn't it?"

Ren grins and grabs Ryuuzakura.

There's pain in her muscles. The good kind, a dull ache that lingers for a bit after a proper workout. Her lungs burn a bit, not with chakra-fire, but with the cold of too-fast breaths. She's happy to note
that Kisame, too, is breathing a bit heavier. Not quite like the gasping she is doing right now, but the spar did make him break a sweat. Just a bit.

"Well, you're definitely better than three years ago," he says appreciatively. "But that might very well be because you got bigger and stronger."

He isn't wrong—she'd grown quite a bit in height and muscle mass, both in Japanese standards and as a woman. Not that being a woman had ever stopped her before, she just took things at a pace a bit faster than her body was intent on tolerating.

"I also have a longer reach now. Not as long at you, because who asked you to grow so fucking tall, but it's decent. I also use katas as more guidelines than anything."

"Smart. No plan ever survives contact with the enemy, same goes with practiced stances," Kisame tells her. "They're there only to show you what you can do, really. Many fresh swordsmen don't understand that, and get killed in a fight against a person who does."

"Well, I'm nothing if not violently creative. See my teeth now?" she asks, tugging her upper lip to reveal her newly-changed teeth. They're still a novelty, and she's cut her tongue on them a few times, but if she can't revert them to their original shape, she might as well get used to them. "I had to bite a guy, I wrote you. But I'm a dumbass so the teeth stayed. Not that I mind- Or, well, not that I will mind, once I stop cutting my tongue on them."

Kisame laughs, showing his own shark grin. "Well, we match now."

Ren smiles, stands up, and unsheathes Ryuuzakura. They had sparred with their swords sheathed, but now she feels like live steel.

Kisame quirks an eyebrow up in an unasked question.

"As long as you don't kill me, there's no harm in it, is there?"

"Well," he says in consideration, "you could use the dodging practice."

He makes her lungs burn again when she's forced to dodge precise, fast strikes that wouldn't kill her but would hurt instead, and she laughs.

"Random question, but what would you say if I considered a polearm weapon?"

"Oh?"

"I found a naginata in the bandit hideout. Old and tattered, but I like it. I was thinking about getting one, you know, with proper quality that wouldn't fall apart mid-fight."

"A naginata- Hm. Kind of, but not really? I remember, once, there was a guy who came to Kiri, and he had this glaive. It kind-of looked like a naginata, but the blade was much wider, and wickedly curved. I think you would benefit from that kind of weapon more than a simple naginata, especially with your body build. Long reach, more attack power, but it's heavier—not that it would matter much with you, or, rather, I think you'd benefit even from the additional weight. But then, I only ever saw the thing, never actually used it."

"Ooooh! That sounds good! But if he was from faraway lands, where could I get a weapon like that?"
"How should I know? I'll ask around if you want, but you should, too. Go to a blacksmith, maybe 
they make customs. Or raid your Uchiha treasury, there's bound to be something good there, with a 
clan that used to be so big and influential."

"Fair. I often forget about that."

"Even if you can't find it, naginata is okay too."

Night soon arrives. It's late, and dark, the only source of light the campfire burning before them. Ren 
isn't cold because of her chakra though, and Kisame is comfortable in even lower temperatures.

There are crayfish sitting in a pot of boiling water and some fish impaled on sticks angled above the 
fire, roasting to a crisp in the flames.

It's comfortably quiet, nothing but the sounds of the swampland around them.

Soon they will eat, Ren will have her spiders make hammocks like they had for her and Kakuzu the 
night before, and in the morning they will part ways, Kisame going back to whatever he was doing 
with Itachi, and Ren back to the village, and they probably won't see each other for two years.

Knowing this, Ren opens her mouth, and just starts speaking.

"I died," she tells him. "Before the Massacre. I was someone else, in another world. I was murdered, 
there. And then I woke up here, wearing the corpse of Uchiha Ren."

Kisame looks at her for a moment, processing. She returns his gaze steadily, praying that he won't 
suddenly consider her mad.

"And that matters how?" he asks eventually.

"Because in that world, there was a story of a boy named Uzumaki Naruto, and in it, hundreds of 
other characters with their own pasts, motives, and futures."

For a moment, they're both silent as she gives Kisame time to ponder on that idea and come to the 
conclusion of what, exactly, that means for them. For him. After only a moment, realization and 
horror dawns on his face, and she continues.

"You died five years from now, for loyalty. For the world you believed in," Ren continues. She 
pointedly doesn't say whether or not she thinks it was worth it. "You were one of the bad guys."

"Why me then?" he asks, his reaction concealed behind a calm facade. "Why did you befriend me? 
If I'm one of the bad guys, then-"

"Because I loved Kisame the character, and then I met Kisame the person, and you were everything 
and more, and I'm honored to be able to call you my friend," she cuts in before he can continue that 
line of thought. "Because, even if you were one of the antagonists of that story, you still had a point. 
All of you, what the Akatsuki is doing. Everything. You have a point. You just have the shittiest 
approach to it, that's all."

"Really?"

"Really. The shinobi world is flawed— it is fucked up beyond imagination, the systems, the 
government, all of it is inherently broken and you all are right to try to change it, you are! And yes, 
this calls for a revolution, but there's someone leeching off of your idea, your dream, and using it as a
stepping stone to resurrect a monster, a god, that would destroy the world, should he succeed."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I need you, Kisame. I need your help." She stops then, having said her piece, and searches his expression for any indication of what he's thinking.

After a few agonizing moments: "What do you need me to do?"

Something changes in that instant. A shift. It's a simple question. He doesn't ask for an explanation, he doesn't look at her as if she's insane, and it's then that she realizes that he believes her. Just like that. And maybe there's something in her eyes that makes it so, but he believes her.

He wants to help her, she thinks faintly, and tries not to fall down with relief at the realization.

One drop of water can cause a great wave, and one flap of a butterfly's wings can create a hurricane. One tiny step at a time.

And maybe this is it. This is what she's here for. This is why she is alive, here, now.

Ren raises her head to meet Kisame's gaze, and speaks:

"I need you to help me save Uchiha Obito, from that very power that's using you to resurrect a monster and wipe out the world."

It will take years, and they're likely to fail, but she won't give up. Not in the face of these characters-turned-precious people, and those who could join them.

"Why?" Kisame asks. Because she's asking him to save a man who had helped slaughter most of her clan, who had unleashed the Kyuubi on her village and was directly responsible for the deaths of her foster brother's parents, the madman who's trying to destroy the world.

"Because I'm selfish, and it's time someone laughed at fate right in its ugly face. But I need you to be sure, Kisame. I'm going up against a god," she says softly, as if only now realizing the true weight of what her life might mean.

"I'm sure," he tells her. "If what you say is true, then, I—I would have worked for a lie. I don't want this. I can't have this. I can't live a lie."

"I know. The world that 'Madara' is trying to create is a world where everyone is trapped in an illusion: Eternal Tsukiyomi."

"That's even worse. What would you have me do?" he asks, determination glinting in his eyes.

"This 'Madara' of yours. He's really Uchiha Obito, he's been brainwashed, and he desperately needs a friend."

"A friend?" Kisame asks, eyebrow raised, momentarily surprised.

"Baby steps, Kisame," she tells him. "One tiny step at a time. Obito is broken, and he needs someone, anyone, he can rely on. And you're honest, he'll trust you."

"You're asking me to lie to him?"

"No. I want you to save him."
"Does he die, too, in this story?"

"Yes. Having rekindled the bonds he once had and breaking free of the evil that had him. He dies saving the world. He can save the world this time, too, for all I care. I just want him to live. Can you do it? Will you?"

Kisame looks at her, serious.

"I don't know if I can," he tells her earnestly, "but I'll try. I've learned, over time, that Uchiha make great friends."

"Unless their name is Itachi," Ren snorts before she can stop herself, and Kisame chuckles, too.

"Alright. So tell me. About this story, and the world you're from. I want to know."

"Well, the story starts around two years from now, with the graduation of one Uzumaki Naruto from Konoha's Shinobi Academy…"