**Twiceborn: A Tale of Two Friends**

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**Twiceborn: A Tale of Two Friends**

by thatdamnuchiha

**Summary**

She knew something was wrong the second she woke up in the body of a three-year-old toddler called Masaki Risa.

**Notes**

Well, this is my first fanfiction up on this site...
Un-Betaed, so beware for any typos and slips with honorifics (I did try and do my research, but I'm no expert).

This is seriously AU, but here's to hoping you understand the gist of what's going on. The OCs are younger than Naruto and co, so be prepared for lots of them.

I regret nothing.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Toddler Troubles

Pain.

That was the first thing she registered as the memories flooded through her head and she remembered who she was. Hands went to her head. Small hands. Hands that weren’t hers, and a face came into view – peering down at her, concerned.

“Risa-chan, what’s wrong?”

Tears spilled down her cheeks, the pain in her head growing. *It felt wrong. Everything did.* Her face felt too small, her skin too tight, and more importantly *she wasn’t Risa-chan*… whoever the hell that was. She couldn’t be. Her name wasn’t Risa. It was Lilly. She couldn’t be two people, *could she?* That was impossible… unless… something had happened to her. To Lilly. Static filled her head, buzzing like that from an old television crackling over everything, the world whitening as she tried to piece things together. Memories blurred together, overlapping one another as if to prove her wrong. Memories from *Before*, when people had called her Lilly, and fuzzy memories from *Risa-chan*. What kind of a name was that, anyway?

Who added a chan onto the end of someone’s name… unless…?

Maybe Risa – *she* – was Japanese? Chan, from the little she could remember clearly, was an honorific.

*That was right,* she realised, mulling over the strange new memories. *She was Risa now.* There was no mistaking that little fact. Dimly, she could remember learning how to speak in this new *strange* life, and the small bit of what looked like weird squiggly symbols that were no doubt kanji and kana. It was foreign to her old memories, though thankfully Risa’s mind – *her mind*… *it was her mind now, not Lilly’s* – seemed to automatically convert it for her. She could remember learning it – and what’s more, she actually understood it. Well, what Risa… *she* had actually learnt, which was no doubt lacking… considering *she* was now, biologically, three years old.

It was odd for her to actually accept that fact, but then again, as *Lilly* she’d always been good at adapting to new situations. *Good at pushing all her worries and fears to one side to focus on the job that needed to be done.* She needed to be logical. She needed to figure out what was going on… what had actually happened to Lilly… *her old body… because the only reason she could think of for a sudden body switch was the fact that Lilly might’ve*… Risa shook her head. She couldn’t think about that. She wouldn’t think about that. Not yet, at least.

The fact of the matter was whether she liked it or not, she was going to have to be Risa.

She couldn’t be Lilly anymore.

She was Risa now.

The memories told her that much. *Her name was Risa. Risa. Not Lilly.*

She didn’t have time to dwell on the fact she had no idea what had happened to make her end up in the body of Risa. *She couldn’t think about it.* Memories would return in time, she assured herself. *They had to.* Though she had a sinking feeling she’d always been there, always been Risa, *not Lilly.* Her younger brain just hadn’t been capable of processing those *old* memories till that very moment.

So maybe she hadn’t ended up stealing someone else’s body… *That was right. She wasn’t a body-
snatcher. She was Risa. Only Risa now… Lilly was from Before. Lilly was gone. Lilly didn’t have Risa’s memories too… but what happened to Lilly?

The last of her memories from Before were greyed out and fuzzy, which was never a good sign in her opinion. Not that she’d ever been displaced from one body to another before.

She’d never become someone else before… but was that really what she’d done? Was she some amalgamation of Risa and Lilly? Or was she just Risa? Lilly’s body was gone, and somehow she doubted it was coming back anytime soon. That made her just Risa, didn’t it? Risa had always had those memories… she just hadn’t been able to remember them, up until that very instant. She’d been nothing more than a child up until that point.

Memories had merged, the mind of an adult melding together with that of a child, and Risa had remembered. She remembered being Lilly. So she’d had to comb through both sets of memories in an instant – which was probably what had given her a horrible headache – looking through the greyed out fuzzy memories from Before and the fresher, sharper memories of her apparent new life.

She wasn’t going into anything blind. Lilly never had, so she shouldn’t either. She’d learn from her mistakes when she was Lilly and try and be the best child she could. That was going to be her goal. She needed those – needed to strive towards something.

After all, there was not mistaking the fact she was now an orphan.

Risa could see it in her newer memories.

Still, she hadn’t lacked much in the short three years. Everything she’d needed had been provided, aside from some decent clothing – everything at the orphanage was basically threadbare. The Matron was nice enough to her, even if she was run ragged by all the other children she was looking after.

“Risa-chan?” The words yanked her attention back onto the face peering concernedly at her. She, the Matron, wasn’t young by any means, the signs of crows feet appearing around her eyes all the more prominent by her alarming closeness. Her hair was dark, tied back tightly in a bun likely to keep the younger kids from pulling on the dark brown locks. Eyes of a honey brown colour stared into her own, and Risa found herself wondering what she looked like. Did she have a more interesting eye colour than Before?

“’m fine,” she muttered, her tongue feeling oddly heavy as she spoke the foreign—familiar—language for the first time after her memories had surfaced. “Head just… hurts.”

The room was annoyingly bright, and cool, if she was completely honest. The walls were a faded yellow, the floor a sanded dark wood. The windows which let all that light in weren’t that well insulated, so the living room of sorts they were in felt cold. The worn out clothes she wore didn’t help all that much either, nor did the cool hands which examined every inch of her head in a matter of seconds. A frown appeared on the Matron’s face, her short examination having yielded nothing – no injuries, because Risa hadn’t hit her head. There were no outward signs to the trauma going on in her mind.

“Did you hit your head?” she asked, speaking and looking at her seriously just the way she liked. How the Old Risa, from before the memories, liked.

She hadn’t liked being babied either.

It wasn’t like it mattered too much, though it’d no doubt make the transition between Old Risa, Lilly and… who she was now – Risa, the girl who had Lilly’s memories.
Old Risa had been oddly distant from the other toddlers and children, preferring to curl up and attempt to read... occasionally pestering one of the older kids to help her with understanding new words which cropped up every now and then. Pain spiked through her head again, an odd newer buzzing sound coming with it that time, and Risa froze. It was nothing like the sound of static from before. It was unnatural, scary and utterly confusing. She could feel something inside of her humming too, as if resonating with the world around her. Oddly enough, it energized her somewhat, though the pain remained.

“No.” She shook her head. “I didn’t.”

“If it isn’t gone by the end of the day let me know, and I’ll take you to see a med-nin... You’re around the age when your chakra might unlock... though it’s more common for clan children to unlock theirs naturally,” she mumbled, her voice fading towards the end.

Somehow, Risa doubted she was supposed to understand the entirety of what the Matron was saying. She understood it a bit though.

Still, what the hell was chakra?

The word sounded oddly familiar, particularly from Lilly’s memories. Perhaps, she mused, it was something connected to both her lives. Maybe she’d been reborn into some spiritualist church-based orphanage?

Risa could only wonder.

“Anyway, Risa-chan, I suppose you can go and rest if you’d like,” the Matron said. “The other children can take over preparing for our annual visitors.”

She blinked, curiosity pricking at her. “Visitors?” she asked, tilting her head to one side, staring up at her newest source of intel.

She’d need it, no doubt, if she wanted to survive wherever the hell it was she’d ended up.

“Oh, silly me,” the Matron mumbled, a soft smile forming on her lips. “You probably don’t remember the last two visits—”

No kidding.

She couldn’t even remember what Risa had eaten yesterday. Most of the details were fuzzy, Old Risa not having paid attention to much outside of her books.

“—but all the Hokage always come and visit both orphanages once a year. They drop off donated clothes, and Tsunade-sama always does a health check on each of you.”

Risa’s eyes narrowed.

Hokage?

Tsunade?

Chakra?

Her senses were tingling, her brain furiously trying to figure out why she’d flagged those words up. The answer to her questions was close, yet still just out of grasp. Her brow furrowed, annoyance flickering across her face.
“The Fourth Hokage’s wife and son are also coming this time around, and he’s only two years older than you,” she continued, seemingly oblivious to Risa’s confusion. “His name is Naruto, so make sure you’re nice to him. They’ll all be around for a few hours.”

Naruto.

Risa blinked, eyes widening as realisation set in. She recognised those names… but the universe was messing with her. It had to be. She couldn’t have been reborn in a world from a manga… a book she’d read whilst she’d been Lilly… but then again, she could hardly believe in reincarnation either. Yet it still seemed to have happened.

She pushed her worries to one side as quickly as she could. She could freak out later. Heck, she could do whatever she wanted to later, but for now, she needed to maintain her composure.

Just brilliant.

It was rather hard to forget the fact of her apparent new world.

Survival of the fittest.

Strong shinobi had a greater chance of survival, and civilians… they could be killed far too easily. Shinobi were the superheroes, and the villains, of this place. Civilians weren’t any better than cannon fodder.

Well, in times of war, anyway.

Risa bit her lip. She was two years younger than Naruto… which meant she would theoretically be a shinobi by the time the Fourth Great Ninja War rolled about. Did she really want to—

Wait.

Risa paused.

The Matron had said he was the son of the Fourth Hokage… and implied that the Yellow Flash himself would be turning up on their doorstep too.

Which meant…

The place she was in wasn’t canon.

Fear ran through her. She was in the same world, yes, but the events were completely different. It was unknown. Things weren’t meant to be like this. She had no way of knowing what was going to happen. Would the Uchiha Massacre occur now that the Namikaze was alive? What about the Akatsuki? In fact, Risa just really wanted to find the nearest history book and read up on it. Were their nicknames all the same? Was the Third Hokage still alive? What happened to the Kyuubi?

Risa scowled, irritation flooding through her. Basically it was like living as Lilly again, but in a world where she could be killed in the blink of an eye by a mistimed kunai or shuriken throw. She was so totally learning how to manipulate chakra… and dodge all things pointy and shiny. But beyond that… Risa had no idea what she wanted to do – no idea what she could do. She was an orphan. Her choices were limited.

She might be forced into the Academy.

The thought sent a thrill of fear trickling down her spine. She wanted to choose, but above else, she
wanted to be strong… needed to be strong… She’d watched the show and knew the scale of fights. It would be nothing like Lilly’s world.

“Risa-chan?” The Matron waved a hand in front of her face. “Earth to Risa?”

“Eh?”

She smiled. “I was just asking if you could go and fetch Tsuki in from outside,” she said, pointing towards the door which no doubt led outside. “They’ll be here within the hour, and no doubt they’ll all want to see each of you.”

“Tsuki?” Risa asked, sifting through her memories, trying to remember what the girl looked like. She’d seen everyone at the orphanage at least once.

“White hair, red eyes… you can’t miss her,” the Matron said, holding out her little battered green coat and the red scarf she vaguely remembered wearing everywhere when she’d first received it as a gift.

“OK,” she mumbled.

She didn’t have anything else to do and keeping herself busy kept her from thinking about her… predicament.

She wasn’t too sure about meeting with the infamous Yellow Flash – assuming he’d fought the same way in the Third Great Ninja War and actually got the moniker. Hokage were no doubt intimidating. Plus, she was far more intelligent than what she’d been yesterday, with a lot more focus. Even if the Matron couldn’t really tell, shinobi might be able to. Especially the best of the best.

There was no way in hell she wanted to get flagged as a so-called genius. Nothing ever ended well for them – canon Itachi was a prime example.

Besides, if she was going to do the whole shinobi thing, then she’d want to bring her muscles up to scratch before she was thrown in front of enemy nin. It was something she’d need to do… well, unless she wanted to die within ten seconds.

Wrapping herself up, she pulled the screen door open, shivering slightly as the cool air hit her skin. It was the middle of winter still, snow piled up everywhere. The tracks made by Tsuki were obvious, and easy enough to follow.

Who knew the ninja world would make a tracker out of her so soon?

She snorted at the thought. No way in hell was this the mark of a good tracker. More like the mark of someone with a decent amount of common sense.

At least she hadn’t lost that with all the craziness going on around her.

She was still slowly getting over the fact she was somehow in the Naruto-verse with her previous memories intact.

“Tsuki-san?” she called, silently wondering whether she was addressing the girl with the right honorific. She was going of the basis of calling people by their last name, if she knew it, and adding a san to it, unless it was someone rather important. Then she’d use sama.

Risa smiled. Her anime and manga knowledge from Before, though limited, was coming in handy somewhat. She’d at least sound somewhat polite, unlike the rest of her peers.
Though she didn’t know Tsuki’s last name, so she was just going to roll with what she knew.

Snow crunched under her feet, forming another clear trail just behind the other. It led to the back of the garden, and surprisingly it seemed the orphanage had a large amount of garden space. Trees lined the back of the garden, a few bushes dotted here and there, and the trail of footsteps went past them all… leading straight to the fence where they abruptly stopped.

Risa peered curiously at the wooden slats, knowing in an instant Tsuki was no longer in the garden.

It seemed like there was a secret exit from the orphanage, out into the park behind.

Gingerly, she pushed the slats out of the way, stepping out of the orphanage grounds and into the unknown. She’d never really ventured out of the orphanage, having no desire to do so. The wind was quiet, tall trees bordering what looked like a little wood. It scared her ever so slightly, especially with her new tiny body, the shadows looking anything but inviting. In fact, she was half tempted just to go and tell the Matron that Tsuki had snuck out… but who knew when the Hokage and co would be arriving. The longer she was out, the better chance she had at missing them.

The odd buzzing in her head was getting better the further away from the building she got. It was like the hum of crickets, slowly fading away till it suddenly just stopped.

Was that what chakra felt like?

She trudged further into the forest, still following the footsteps left behind by the mysterious Tsuki. A buzzing started, faint and smaller than what she’d felt back at the orphanage, but still there. It was Tsuki. It had to be.

Skirting the edge of the strange clearing, she searched for the source of the strange humming. It wasn’t too hard to find, despite the fact she was new to the whole humming-she-suspected-to-be-chakra business.

Soft sobs met her ears, and Risa suddenly understood exactly why Tsuki was out there alone.

“Umm… Tsuki-san?” she asked, peering around the next snow-covered tree.

Red rimmed eyes met her own, half covered by a mane of white hair. Risa tilted her head, silently envisioning three red marks on her face. She looked awfully similar to how she presumed Tobirama Senju would look – seeing as the world was no longer animated the way it had been on TV.

Speaking of which, did they even have that?

Silently, she mourned the loss of Lilly’s favourite TV shows before she shook herself out of her stupor. There was a crying child in front of her. One she needed to deal with and drag back to the orphanage preferably in such a way that she’d be able to avoid meeting their guests.

“You OK?” she asked, mentally facepalming herself.

Tsuki was crying. Of course she wasn’t OK.

“You gonna make fun of me too?” Tsuki glared up at her with a surprising amount of venom.

Still, Risa had seen worse when she was Lilly.

“’bout what?” Risa tilted her head, staring down at the white-haired girl in confusion.

What was wrong with how she looked?
“My hair and my eyes.” She folded her arms with a huff, sneering at the ground, seemingly preparing for the worst. “They’re weird. Hurry up and say it ‘n go.”

“They’re pretty,” Risa said, a slight whine in her voice.

She wasn’t lying either.

It was a far cry away from the locks of hair on her head. She hadn’t really had the chance to look in the mirror, but from what she could tell her hair was ridiculously fluffy and it was coloured like reddish rust. It didn’t have anything on the silky white locks the other girl had.

In fact, Risa was overcome by an odd feeling of jealousy.

“Liar!”

Risa scoffed. “Tch. Look at my hair, imbecile. It’s a flipping birds nest!” she ground out, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “Yours is really silky… and it’d probably look great in a ponytail,” she muttered, thinking of canon Itachi.

Damn… what she wouldn’t give to have hair like that…

But fate apparently hated her – hence her spiky mane.

Scowling, she jerked her head to the side, her ears burning as she thought over what she’d just said. Hopefully Tsuki would forget that. Though she doubted a three-year-old was supposed to know what an imbecile was. Something to file away for future reference.

In fact… she should probably just not say anything in front of anybody… not for a while at least.

Tsuki’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts. “You… you really think so?”

Risa stared down at her, resisting the urge to squeal and yank the girl into a hug. Tsuki was oddly adorable, especially considering her mental age was twenty-something from what she could remember.

“Duh,” Risa mumbled. “I wouldn’t have said it otherwise.”

“Oh.”

“The Matron sent me to get you,” she said, eyes narrowing as Tsuki shivered. Obviously, she’d been out far longer than she had thought. “’Pparently the Hokage are coming soon.”

“Don’t wanna go back,” Tsuki muttered. “Everyone always teases me.”

“They shouldn’t do that with the Hokage around.”

Well, if they had any common sense, that was.

Any hopeful shinobi needed to actually be able to work with their teammates.

“How’d you know?”

Risa sighed. “I’ll get rid of them if they start bothering you, OK? Just stick with me,” she said. She just wanted to go back inside the house, dammit. It was freezing outside. Maybe she’d be able to find a nice quiet spot in the house and escape anyone’s notice for a little while. Tsuki just needed to hurry up and get up from where she was sitting. She was probably frozen to the bone, which wasn’t
helping her. Biting her lip, she pulled her scarf off, barely able to stop the shiver as her neck met the cool winter air. She wrapped it around Tsuki as carefully as she could, stepping back, surveying her work with a satisfied nod. “Come on.” Her hand found the slightly smaller one, gripping tightly, pulling the girl to her feet. “Let’s go.”

“OK…” Her voice was quiet, barely above a whisper, but Risa still heard.

A wide smile broke out on her face as she stomped back through the trees, walking hurriedly across the strange clearing. Something about it unnerved her.

She soon found out what.

They were barely halfway across the untouched snow when she heard a muted crack, the ground shifting ever so slightly under her foot, a faint sloshing sound making her eyes widen and her mind start sputtering curses. Of all the things that could’ve happened on a freezing winter’s day, why on earth did she have to stumble upon an ice-covered lake?

Her body reacted without much thought, and Risa realised how much of a self-sacrificial streak she apparently seemed to have as she shoved Tsuki to one side with as much force as her puny body could manage.

Several more loud cracks met her ears, the ice concealed beneath that layer of snow splintering under her slipping feet, and then she hit the freezing waters with a loud splash.

Risa gritted her teeth, sucking a long breath in through her teeth, fighting the urge to gasp as the cold water surrounded her. Her head went under, arms wind-milling as she struggled to pull herself back above the surface. Small feet kicked furiously, and she was surprised her shoes hadn’t slipped off in the commotion. Her heart was beating a mile a minute, the sheer coldness of the lake making her voice stutter, her chest tight as she frantically sought out the white-haired girl. She’d be able to get help. She just needed to hold on till then.

“Get…” she panted, staring at Tsuki, a sinking feeling in her chest as she felt her arms ache. “Help…”

Her tiny body wasn’t cut out for swimming, so pure relief flooded through her when Tsuki did as she’d said without question. She was already tired, and Tsuki wasn’t even out of her sight.

Risa wanted to cry.

Of all the things she could’ve done, she just had to fall into a frozen lake in the middle of winter.

Her clothes were already waterlogged and heavy, her arms already slowing in their frantic movements, and silently she willed Tsuki to hurry up.

She was going under.

Into the darkness.

Weakly, she clawed at the water, panic in her eyes as she peered up at the blurry light she could see above her.

Just another minute.

She just needed to survive for another minute… and maybe then Tsuki would’ve gotten her some help.
But it was no use.

She was falling through the water.

*Down.*

*Down.*

*Down.*

Her lungs were burning, air escaping her in small bubbles.

*It couldn’t end like this… could it?*

The sound of a single drip of water made her blink, the world shifting around her all of a sudden. Where was she, Risa had no clue. All she could gather from what she saw was that she was in a sewer of some description. A really clean sewer that sent chills down the back of her neck. The walls were a sandy brown, the metal pipes having a strange golden tint to them as she peered around the corridor of sorts she’d ended up in.

It looked oddly… familiar…

She pushed herself to her feet, eyes narrowed, her legs carrying her forwards. They felt oddly light all of a sudden – like she hadn’t just been kicking for her life.

“Hello?” she called, wincing slightly as her voice echoed, her sloshing footsteps horrifyingly loud in the silence which followed. “Anyone there?”

The hairs on the back of her neck pricked, her steps hesitant as she rounded a corner into a wider area, and all of a sudden the familiarity of the place hit home.

Sandy tile covered by a thin layer of water. Bars of a cage lining part of the wall, the two sides of the closed gate seemingly held shut by a piece of paper with the kanji for *seal*.

“Looks like my jailor has decided to pay me a visit…”

Risa’s mind went blank.

Part of her was screaming inside – she was apparently a jinchuuriki. The other half of her was squealing. *She wouldn’t be weak. She could survive this world…*

Orange fur. Red slitted eyes. Nine tails swishing behind the beast.

*Kurama.*

Her memories supplied the name, *Lilly’s memories*… though she probably ought to stop referring to them as such. They were hers.

“Come closer, fleabag… and rip off the seal and set me free.”

Risa blinked, the logical answer she’d had ready on the tip of her tongue vanishing – instead being replaced by the first words which came to mind as she stared down the humongous fox. Vaguely, she realised she was somewhat hysterical… the sheer insanity of her day having driven her there.

“So… Fluffy…”
A growl ripped through the air, red eyes gleaming dangerously as she stared up into them.

She had to be on an adrenaline rush or something, Risa mused, because she didn’t really feel that scared at all.

“You dare—”

Smirking, she folded her arms, cutting him off before he could get another word out. “I dare.”

“Do you have any idea who I am, fleabag?” Kurama towered over her menacingly.

“No clue,” she lied.

“I am the Lord of the foxes, the mightiest of all the tailed beasts, called the Kyuubi by mere mortals, granted the name Kurama by the Sage of Six Paths—”

Risa stared at the fox blankly, masterfully hiding her glee and her urge to giggle. “Too long.”

“Excuse me?”

It was far too fun – messing with the fox, that was. Perhaps it was her way of trying to regain some sense of normalcy… by arguing with a giant fox who could kill her in the blink of an eye. When she’d been Lilly she’d always loved him, and that trait had passed onto her in its entirety.

Though Risa wasn’t too sure whether to be alarmed at the apparent sadistic streak she seemed to have. A blinding grin lit up her face, her finger pointing itself at the fox decidedly. “From now on, you’ll be Rama-nii-chan.”

The silence that fell was deafening.

“Are you mentally retarded, fleabag?”

Her eye twitched in indignation. “OY!”

“Nope, we’re just awesome.”

The new voice made her jump, her body freezing for a split second. If she was seeing the fox, then she was inside her mindscape, or whatever the hell it was called. She was the only person meant to be there.

“Who the hell are you?” Risa spun, blinking as she came face to face with an… odd white outlined version of herself.

It couldn’t be…

“I’m your Inner, duh?”

Risa blinked, her mind supplying images of one Haruno Sakura. She had an Inner too? “The fuck?” The words escaped her mouth, along with a slight giggle. Things were becoming far too much for her to handle. She just wanted to lock herself in a room and get out all the hysteria somehow – either by screaming, running around, banging her head against the wall, or lamenting in silence… maybe all of them. She needed time, dammit. Time and space to deal with the insanity that had become her life.

“I’m a mental construct formed from… well, I guess the split in the memories,” Inner explained,
folding her arms across her chest, leaning back against the sandy wall.

She stared at the weird outline, brain racing as she tried to connect the dots. “You mean… you’re Lilly?” Risa questioned, peering closely at the figure, latching onto something to pull herself out of the dangerous spiral of thoughts she was getting sucked into.

She did look awfully similar to how Sakura’s Inner was portrayed, aside from the fact that she looked exactly like her. Well, she presumed. Old Risa hadn’t exactly spent much time in front of mirrors. Something she’d no doubt have to rectify.

“No.” Inner shook her head, looking oddly bored at the prospect of explaining things, and silently Risa was jealous of her outward calm. “We’re no longer Lilly, just like we’re no longer Old Risa.”

One eyebrow rose. “So we’re something sparkly and new?”

Inner scoffed, rolling her eyes. “If you want to put it that way, then yeah, but if you start calling us Sparkly Risa or New Risa, then I will hit you.”

“Aww.”

“Now, listen here, Outer,” she said, straightening up. “The main difference between us right now is our mental ages… and possibly how cynical and exasperated we are with this lovely new life.”

“But I’m not,” Risa mumbled. She wasn’t fed up with her new life. It was insane, terrifying, and the reality of it likely hadn’t sunk in yet, but she wasn’t bored that was for sure.

“Exactly.” Inner sighed. “I have a slightly older mentality, and I’m far more cynical than you – just like Lilly was, in a way. You get to be the bubbly sunshine child, well, after you’ve finished freaking out, while I get to organise our memories and process as much information as I can so I can prevent us from dying. Why do you think you could ‘flick’ through your memories in an instant? That was me giving you a hand.”

“That makes you sound like a computer.”

Inner huffed. “We’re both Risa now, but I’ll be handling everything behind the scenes while you try and interact with others.”

“Ugh,” Risa grunted. “I don’t even know how a three-year-old is supposed to act!”

“Just do you best, Outer. You’ll do a better job than I could.”

“Brilliant. There’s more than one annoying fleabag,” Kurama glared at the pair of them, red slitted eyes narrowing, tails thumping loudly behind him. “Leave already and let me rest in peace.”

“So I don’t just have an angry fox to befriend, but a weird mental construct too?”

“Friends? With a pathetic fleabag like you?” Kurama snorted.

“Shush. You don’t get to have a say in this,” she said, pouting. “I’m gonna befriend you whether you like it or not!”

“What part of ‘I don’t want to be friends with a pathetic fleabag’ don’t you understand?”

“You’ll change your mind.” Risa smirked. “And then I’ll braid pink ribbons into your fur.”
“Outer…” Inner stared at her. “You’re so weird.”

“I try my best.”

Inner shook her head, reminding her of their situation. “You probably ought to return… and get that water out of our lungs before we y’know… die.”

Risa startled, eyes snapping open all of a sudden. She winced at the sudden bright light, rolling onto her side as she coughed up a load of water. Her lungs sucked in the air greedily, her breathing fast as she realised she was no longer underwater.

No.

She was lying on the ice, eyeing the dark spot of water she’d evidently just been pulled from. Hands turned her over, rather roughly in her opinion, tucking her against a human-shaped warmth. She peered up at her supposed rescuer, passing out only seconds later from the sheer amount of processing her brain needed to do on top of everything else.

Because either she was hallucinating, or her rescuer looked exactly like Senju Tobirama in his prime.
Risa yawned, her brain feeling fuzzy as she snuggled into the warmth surrounding her, pulling the blanket further around herself. Her pillow was strangely warm and firmer than she remembered. Old Risa had loved cuddling up to it whenever she read.

She paused.

That was right… she wasn’t Lilly anymore. She was Risa. Her small hands moved, pulling at the curiously soft fabric covering her heated mattress, her confusion growing as she tried to piece things together.

What had happened again?

The memories of earlier came back in a rush.


Sounds of pages being turned broke through the stillness, the feeling of eyes on her making her hairs stand on end. She’d barely noticed it up until that moment, but something became increasingly obvious the longer she lay there.

Her mattress was moving.

Not very much, but the motion was there… and it was regular, almost as if it were breathing…

Her fingers dug in, her brain freezing as she patted the mattress again, examining it curiously with her hands. She needed to figure out where the hell she was, and her eyes felt like they were glued shut, so touching her apparent new mattress was one of the few methods she could think of to work out what was going on. Her palms padded against hard muscle, her brain short-circuiting as she realised exactly what it was she had her hands on.

Were those abs?

Really nice ones?

‘Get your mind out of the gutter, idiot.’ Inner’s voice blared out in her mind, and something told Risa she’d have to get used to her strange, slightly more mature personality doing that. She’d no doubt get bored, stuck inside her mind with nothing to do. Though Risa would admit, she didn’t mind the company. It felt nice to have someone to talk to about everything… someone she wouldn’t have to hide from… even if it seemed she had the personality of a middle-aged man. ‘You’re far too young to be thinking about things like that.’

Shut up.

Risa stiffened, hands tentatively pushing at the seemingly living mattress as she pushed herself up
onto her elbows, knees digging in. Her eyes cracked open, sleep lining them as she peered around the room she was lying in.

It was the visiting room of the orphanage, technically, where all the adoption paperwork was supposedly signed when new budding parents came along. It was sparsely furnished, simple cream wallpaper, wooden floor, two sofas, a coffee table and a nice blue rug. Though there were two sources of buzzing, two chakras which almost drowned out the noise of all the other ones nearby, one of which she was lying on top of. Presumably to keep her warm and keep an eye on her at the same time. She doubted anybody would be stupid enough to just leave a toddler unattended after they’d just had a nice unplanned swim in a freezing lake. That would just be idiotic and asking for trouble.

“Nii-san, did you just get felt up by a toddler?”

Her sleep-crusted gaze honed in on the owner of that voice, eyes narrowing on the figure.

Black hair. Moderately long bangs on either side of his face, a choppy fringe covering the rest of his forehead. Ponytail. A face which could be mistaken for a girl’s, but the voice couldn’t. He was definitely a male. Which meant there was only one clan it could possibly be…

Uchiha?

“Izuna…”

The body she was lying on rumbled, black eyes flickering over to glare into the matching set as her mattress put his newspaper to one side.

Izuna?

Risa blinked, taking a few moments to mull over that name and the ridiculously spikey hair of the man she’d been lying on.

As in… *Uchiha Izuna, brother of THE Uchiha Madara.*

Dammit, why were the Uchiha so pretty? Why did they get all the good genes in the Naruto world? Though, more importantly, why the hell had the scary Uchiha been acting as her pillow and mattress rolled into one? Not that she was saying he didn’t do a good job at it, but—

She froze, thinking over what had just happened, realisation striking in seconds.

*Oh God… She’d just had her hands on his abs.*

Sure, they’d been covered by that blue high-collared mantle he’d always seemed to wear in canon, but still…

*No. Bad Risa.*

She was three-years-old technically, which meant she wasn’t supposed to be thinking about things like abs and other body parts. Heck, she probably wasn’t even supposed to know what most of her body did or have an unfounded attraction to nice ones… but unfortunately, or fortunately, she didn’t quite have the mentality of a three-year-old. Sure, she was as cheerful and happy-go-lucky as one, but she could still be serious when she needed to be… and a tinsy bit perverted too.

A soft smile lit up her face. *She liked this distraction… it helped her not to think about the chaos her life had become… helped her to feel a little more ordinary. Well, as ordinary as one could feel in a*
world of rampaging forty-story tall monsters and the tiny squiggles which could seal them.

Besides, it wasn’t like it was everyday you got to nap on top of one of the main villains of the Naruto series, so Risa was totally just making the most of it. *Totally.*

She mentally shrugged.

Inner could not judge her for this. Not in the slightest.

‘On the contrary, I can and I will,’ Inner added snootily, reminding her that she could hear everything Risa thought.

*She could never hide anything from Inner.*

‘Correct, so don’t even bother.’

Risa sighed, head falling back down to rest against the warmth that was Uchiha Madara’s chest region, ignoring the curious eyes she could feel on her as she thought over exactly what it was she was witnessing. Uchiha Madara and his brother had not only both seemingly survived the Warring Clans Era, but somehow they were still wandering around looking like they hadn’t aged a day since then. She wasn’t going to stress about the details. *Not yet, at least. She had far too much to cackle manically about before driving herself into unconsciousness via any means necessary. Her head was already hurting. But the way she saw it…* She was in the ninja world. People could breathe fire, seal gigantic beasts away with weird scribbles, and move faster than the speed of light without breaking the sound barrier.

Looking into all those interesting new topics was something she had to look forwards to, despite the headache it would no doubt bring. *She needed to look forwards to something.*

She’d already somewhat come to terms with the fact that she was in a strange new world which didn’t line up with the manga it was supposedly from. *Things were different.*

She was also, by all rights, a toddler to the rest of her new and downright terrifying world. One who shouldn’t even know what the words ‘felt up’ actually meant. A grin almost twisted at her lips. She was totally going to play the cluelessness up to the max, and act like the sweet adorable three-year-old she was on the outside. ‘That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you to do…’ Inner reminded, and Risa could just picture her sitting on the edge of her seat, ready to watch the show unfold. Carefully, she sat up, slowly pulling herself off what had been a rather comfy pillow, wincing as her feet slapped onto the cold wooden flooring.

“Seems the munchkin is finally awake,” Izuna said with a foxy grin, crouching down till he was on her level.

Risa tilted her head, an odd form of playfulness welling up inside her, perhaps due to her new childish form… or maybe it was to do with the apparent merging of Lilly’s and Old Risa’s personalities. “Ojisan… What does ‘felt up’ mean?”

Rather than shying away from the question, like she’d expected, he slung an arm gently around her tiny shoulders. “Well, when a man and a woman like each other a lot—”

“Izuna.” Madara’s voice rang out again, sharper that time, eyes narrowed on his younger brother.

“Aww.” He pouted. “You never let me have any fun, nii-san.”

“Take her back to Hashirama’s brat,” he ordered, ignoring his brother as he picked his newspaper
back up, covering his face from view. “She wanted to check up on the child once she woke up.”

“You do know the Labrador will be in here in seconds once he finds out you no longer have an excuse to ignore the rest of the kiddies,” Izuna said, ignoring the confused face Risa was wearing as she glanced between their apparent argument like a meerkat.

What the hell were they on about?

Labrador? What did a dog have to do with anything?

No. She shook her head. No more questions… she couldn’t take much more before she hit boiling point… and she didn’t particularly want to start laughing hysterically in front of anyone… seeing as how she’d be living around them for the foreseeable future.

“Come on then, munchkin,” Izuna spoke, grabbing her tiny hand in his much larger one, pulling her out of the room and into a far more familiar one.

One that was filled with noisy toddlers and various other small children. They were giggling and doing other annoying things too. Things Risa was in no way shape or form going to take part in.

Finger painting?

So last year.

Building blocks?

No thank you.

Jigsaw puzzles?

Maybe, if there were actually any that were more than six pieces.

“Tsu-chan!” Izuna all but sung, skipping towards a tall, extremely well-endowed woman with blonde hair tied back in two familiar ponytails. He looked oddly happy, the smile on his lips out of place when she considered the scowls his older brother had sent his way.

Risa was quite quickly beginning to wonder what on earth had happened to the younger Uchiha brother, pushing away all the different questions which arose. There was a time and place to deal with those – and it wasn’t there. The anime had portrayed him so differently… but then she hadn’t seen much of his life outside of the numerous battles. He was just so cheery for an Uchiha and he spoke in actual full sentences rather than just grunting.

Then again, Madara hadn’t once said ‘hn’ yet.

Yet.

Tsunade sighed, looking oddly fed up as she turned to face them. Risa could hardly blame her – she’d probably be annoyed if she had to put up with the obnoxious bundle of Uchiha happiness. Madara hadn’t deigned to make an appearance with them, having stayed back in the nice quiet room. She kind of wish she’d just stayed there. No doubt it was a bit awkward, using the man as a mattress, but it was quiet and it would’ve stayed that way. There wouldn’t have been any screams or yells deafening her, and she probably could’ve just moved to the other sofa and started reading. Of course, the universe just had to decide Izuna would be there to take her away from the small piece of solace she’d found.
“She’s awake then.”

Risa’s eyebrow rose. Was it not obvious enough?

“Come on then, brat,” she said, turning away, walking off down towards the room where all the first aid equipment was kept. Risa followed, not bothering to watch as Izuna went back to play with the rest of the kids. For an orphanage, the equipment they had on hand to deal with injuries was oddly plentiful. No doubt it was thanks to Tsunade. She’d always been pushing medicine forwards, especially with the hospital in Konoha, only now it seemed to apply to her new place of residence too. Well, it could only be a bonus for her. If she’d had to survive off a few plasters and no antibacterial, she’d probably wind up with an infection in a matter of weeks, with all the cuts and scrapes she was no doubt going to get from her self-inflicted training. Her luck seemed to have failed her the minute she entered Risa’s body – her body, now. Falling into an ice covered lake only proved her point.

Though she couldn’t deny the satisfaction she got from having the Kurama stuck inside her mindscape. Wait.

What did her seal look like? Was it similar to how Naruto’s was? Would it let her use fluffy chakra? And, more importantly, did she have the healing factor and the boost in reserves?

That could quite possibly save her life if she did… though she supposed it was all down to what seal had been used. The gates looked exactly like the ones from the anime, so it was possible the Eight Trigrams Sealing Style had been used. Risa paused, her brain working overtime, and Inner noticed. She was far too close to breaking point as it was.

‘The Eight Trigrams Sealing Style belonged to the Uzumaki…’

But had Uzushio been destroyed in this time?

That was the real question. Apparently the Founders were alive this time around, and that could’ve changed everything.

‘Stop worrying about these things, Outer,’ Inner said, sighing deeply. ‘When we’re old enough to toddle about the village we can go and look up the history section in the library. We can look forwards to finding out all that information in the future… we just need to be patient for now – adjust.’

Risa smiled.

Inner had her back.

‘Damn straight.’

“Most brats don’t smile when they come into this room, you know.” Tsunade stood in front of her, staring down at her with a calculated gleam in her warm brown eyes. It was strange, comparing how she looked in the anime, and how she looked in real life. For one, her proportions were no longer obscene, though she was still incredibly pretty. No wonder young girls were always saying they wanted to be like her. Skilled and beautiful.

‘Turn off your inner pervert, already, Outer.’

I am not perverted! Risa hissed back. Just because you can’t appreciate the finer things in life…
‘Seems like you’ve inherited all the perviness from Lilly. I’m rather glad I got away without that part of her personality.’

Risa rolled her eyes, mentally of course. She wouldn’t dare do that in front of a woman who could kill her with a flick of her finger. She did have some survival instincts buried in that brain of hers, no matter how much of it was occupied with coming to terms with her weird situation.

“Now. Lift up that shirt,” Tsunade ordered, yanking her back to reality. And what a reality it was… “I need to make sure that lake water didn’t have any adverse effects.”

She did as she was told. Something in the older woman’s tone told her it was best to obey. That and the fact the blonde was probably the strongest kunoichi alive.

Not for long.

The thought arose without much prompting, her mind having already come to the conclusion of what she needed to do if she wanted to survive… no matter how hard it was. Risa set her jaw, glaring determinedly at the wall.

She was going to do it.

Her lips wobbled. She wasn’t some naïve little girl. She knew the risks. She knew she might die… might experience fates worse than death.

She was going to have to become a shinobi.

Her fists clenched. It wasn’t like she could just remain an ignorant civilian. Not only would she regret it forever, but she could die far too easily. Risa had never liked being helpless. It wasn’t in her. In fact, it was a vow she’d made as Lilly. She’d never be weak and helpless again… she’d never choose that path. Not voluntarily… and choosing to be a civilian was doing just that. She’d learnt self-defence as Lilly for a reason, because that was what it had taken to be regarded as strong in that world. As Risa, though, it was a completely different story.

She was going to have to kill.

Air rushed out from behind clenched teeth, heart pounding along with her brain as she made the connections – figured out what she needed to do.

Just so she could survive in this mad, mad world.

‘Maybe our goal should be to promote world peace?’ Inner chimed in, having sensed her distress. ‘It might make it easier to survive in this insane world.’

Risa resisted the urge to snort.

Her? Bringing about world peace? Hardly.

‘What’s with the pessimistic attitude?’ Inner asked, and Risa could just picture her resting her head on a hand. ‘You’re supposed to be the optimistic one, you know.’

“Right,” Tsunade’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts. “Looks like you’re all good to go.”

Risa nodded, jumping off the small bed she’d been sitting on. The less time she spent between those four small walls, the better. She didn’t like the clinical smell of the cleaner used in places like that. It kept out the germs, yeah, but something about it unsettled her. Probably something from her
memories from Before.

She couldn’t keep calling them Lilly’s.

They were hers too. They were simply from Before, just like Old Risa’s were from After.

She didn’t know the significance of the events separating the two. Those memories were still eluding her grasp, despite Inner’s assurances that she was helping her too.

Risa wandered out of the room, turning sharply around the next corner, seeing stars as her head collided with something equally hard. Her back hit the floor, eyes staring blankly up at the ceiling as the pain sunk in, and she finally registered the miniscule buzzing of whoever was now lying opposite her. “Oww.” She sat up, pushing herself to her feet, pausing when the small figure in front of her started crying. It was no wonder she hadn’t been able to hear the girl’s chakra, especially with the other much louder sounds going on around her.

Feet slapped against the wooden floor, a small figure rounding the corner, and she recognised him on sight. How could she not? A headful of spiky blonde locks, bright cerulean eyes and three whisker marks on each cheek.

Uzumaki Naruto.

Or rather Namikaze Naruto in this world.

“You OK?” He padded over to the pair of them, offering a hand to the fallen girl, pulling the slightly smaller girl to her feet.

The other girl rubbed her head, nodding frantically before she ran down the corridor, heading back to the noisy room.

Risa sighed.

It seemed her plan to avoid that room and everyone inside it wasn’t going as well as it should’ve. Naruto proved that much.

“Hi,” he chirped. “I’m Naruto, nice to meetcha.”

She nodded slowly. “Um, likewise…”

He tilted his head, spikes of hair swishing from side to side. “Like…wise?”

‘Simple words, Outer,’ Inner muttered. ‘Simple words.’

Risa rolled her eyes. As if she needed to be reminded by her snarky Inner. “It means same. It’s nice to meet you too,” she said. Since when had likewise become a difficult word?

‘Since now, you idiot.’

I love you too Inner, she whispered mentally, smiling as she got a slight chuckle back. Operation befriend mental construct was going well, though she wasn’t sure she’d needed a plan for that in the first place. Inner had been friendly from the get-go. Though she’d have to start on Operation Fluffy later that night though. Kurama apparently couldn’t communicate with her outside of her mindscape, it seemed. Either that or he was ignoring her, but she doubted it was the latter.

Why on earth would Rama-nii-chan want to ignore her?
“We should head back,” Naruto said, grabbing her by the hand before she could make a speedy getaway, dragging her back towards the sounds of yelling and annoying giggles. She was not looking forwards to this. Not in the slightest. Scowling, she let herself be dragged out of the darkened corridor and into the bright room. It was the play room crossed with the living room, where they all usually hung out when they weren’t in their bedrooms. Not that she’d done much of that before. Not that she wanted to do any of it, if she was completely honest with herself.

Red eyes caught her own from across the room, a mop of silky white hair half covering them as Tsuki stared at her pleadingly. She was sitting by one of the table with a crayon in hand, looking almost as scared as Risa felt.

The buzzing in the room was ridiculous, and she pinpointed the source almost instantly.

Senju Hashirama.

Risa wanted to back into the corner quietly and pray he didn’t notice her. It was already hard to breathe and he was still a good few metres away. God help her if he came any closer. Madara’s chakra hadn’t been anywhere near the level his was…

‘He was probably supressing it,’ Inner said, ever the voice of reason. ‘I don’t think ridiculously large amounts of chakra are good around kids… Haven’t you noticed?’

Noticed what? she questioned.

‘The chakra signals of all the shinobi around us. They feel muted.’

So why isn’t his? she grumbled, biting her lip as Tsuki slid out of her chair. Risa froze. The source of that god-forsaken buzzing was moving closer, all thanks to Tsuki.

She was running towards her and bringing Hashirama along for the ride.

Though it seemed like she was ignoring him for one reason or another. Perhaps that was why he looked like a kicked puppy.

‘She looks scared.’

Oh, Risa blinked in realisation. Tsuki was scared of him too, although it seemed she wasn’t that much of a sensor. She was running without any problems. Risa, on the other hand, could hardly move her legs. Her body was rigid, instincts screaming at her to get the hell away from that man. He could kill her in an instant. Any of the shinobi in the room could, if she was completely honest, but with him the feeling was ten times worse.

Probably because of his unrestrained chakra.

“Anija!” Red eyes so similar to Tsuki’s own glared at the brunette. “Supress your chakra – just like I told you to before we got here.” He rolled his eyes as his elder brother rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “They’re sensor types.”

Risa stiffened.

Tobirama had figured her out in an instant.

Her brain blared the warning signals.

He was the one she’d have to be careful of while he was there at the orphanage. The infamous Senju
genius. She bit her lip, meeting the dark eyes which peered at her curiously. Hashirama smiled gently, his expression apologetic before he turned back to his brother. “Where’s Madara?”

“Where do you think?” Tobirama scowled.

Risa got the odd feeling he did that a lot.

The elder Senju was gone in a flash, voice ringing out down the halls as he yelled the name of his best friend. “MADARRAAA!”

Risa sighed. That was one problem dealt with. Her eyes flickered over to the white-haired man, before she spun to face her new friend who was still hiding behind her. “Whatcha want to do?”

*Just a couple more hours*, she told herself. *Then they’d be gone.*

She just needed to survive till then.
Toddler Tears

Chapter Summary

Risa: Adjust

She kept it together until evening, curling up in bed before she finally dropped the fragile mask she’d been wearing ever since she’d figured everything out. Some part of her had been giddy with excitement, but the emotions lurking under the surface were anything but, and now she was alone they were creeping out. Tears rolled down her cheeks, soaking her thin sheets as she let her walls fall down, bashing her head into the pillow all the while. She was scared. Terrified. She was a goddamn Jinchuuriki in a world of demons and blood, and those like her were never treated right. Not once everyone knew what they were. Her body shook, burying her face into her pillow as hysterical giggles started escaping her lips, even as the tears continued to fall. She was in Naruto. People threw around kunai and shuriken without a care in the world. She was totally going to die. Who knew? Maybe the Akatsuki would come along and extract the ball of fluff? That was right… it was only a matter of time until something of that sort happened… especially when everyone knew she was a Jinchuuriki.

‘But do they?’ Inner’s voice cut through her tears.

Risa thought back, biting her lip as she recalled all her memories from After. Not once had the Matron ignored her when she was hurt or upset, not that she’d been like that much. Her heart leapt, eyes narrowing as they continued to leak tears like a broken faucet. Maybe no one knew she was a Jinchuuriki… maybe the Hokage had kept it a secret. She stiffened. Did they even know themselves? They’d made no effort to socialise with her in particular, nor had they singled her out. But then again, why would they? She was supposed to be a clueless child. There were bigger things to worry about, anyway, like how the hell had Kurama gotten inside her in the first place? Still, it wasn’t as if Kurama was the source of all her troubles. No. She was in an unfamiliar world, surrounded by unfamiliar people, and she had the distinct impression she wouldn’t be seeing any of her old friends or family again.

She was alone.

Alone in a strange and scary world, trapped in the body of a defenceless child. She wouldn’t be defenceless for long, though. Not if she had any say in it. She just needed to pick herself up from the odd slump she found herself in. Easier said than done. Risa didn’t know how long she just lay there, crying, but she felt better after it – lighter. Not perfectly happy, but more… resolved and resigned. She was a child again, and she had the chance at a whole new exciting life – even if it was no doubt destined to be filled with blood and gore.

She was going to do it. She promised herself. Risa was going to become a shinobi. She’d be stronger than ever. Sure, there were downsides to everything – the blood and the killing – but, as her obnoxiously cheerful friend once told her ‘every cloud has a silver lining’.

‘Of course there is,’ Inner chirped. ‘You have me now, duh.’

A smile tugged at her lips, a small laugh echoing around the dark room. Two minds are better than one, eh?
Risa grinned, teeth showing as she made another little promise to herself. One to help keep her somewhat sane, and possibly emulate the original Uzumaki Naruto. She promised to keep a smile on her face no matter what and see the best in whatever she could. She didn’t know whether she’d survive the colder, harsher world than the last one she’d lived in if she couldn’t see the little sparks of hope everywhere. Not to mention it was the original Naruto was the one who befriended Kurama in the first place, so she had no doubts it’d take something of a similar mentality to do it again.

She was getting a head start on that.

She was going to be best friends with Kurama before she made Genin, believe it.

‘No.’

What?

‘I draw the line at that – besides, it’s dattebayo if you want to do it correctly.’

Her smile widened. No matter what she had to do… She was glad she wouldn’t have to go through it alone. She thought of Inner, and her weird white outline. She’d always have someone in her corner – ever if it was a snarky split personality of sorts.

‘Told you I’m awesome.’

She pulled her covers up, sighing as she curled up underneath them. Sure thing, Inner.

‘Now shut up and get some damn sleep.’

Risa chuckled, her chest feeling slightly less hollow than it did before. She could survive this. She would survive this. Well, so long as she figured out how to tune out the annoying buzzing come from all around her. It was keeping her awake, and it was annoying as hell. How the hell was she supposed to sleep?

A smile lit up her face. She could do this.

Though maybe having sensory abilities were overrated. The constant hum was proving that much.

Besides, she wasn’t about to go up to Senju Tobirama and ask him how the hell he slept. Because A) that was weird and completely random, B) somehow she’d probably turn it into an inuendo, or at least her mind would warp it into one, and C) she did not want to go near the Senju genius with a ten-foot pole. He’d already figured out about her sensory abilities after being in a room with her for less than ten minutes. She had no desire to find out what else he’d figure out if she stuck around him longer than that.

Groaning, Risa rolled over, a smile tugging at her lips. A day at a time, she whispered to herself mentally. Live every moment like it could be her last… because in this place, it could. She pulled her quilt up to her chin. Make her old friends and family proud. Her face hardened, teeth sinking into her lower lip. They were gone now. More tears slipped from behind her closed eyes. But they wouldn’t want her to waste away. That was right. She was doing the right thing. The buzzing she felt in her own chest racked up a notch as if agreeing with her.

“Dammit,” she grumbled, eyes snapping back open. How was she supposed to get some shut-eye? It was noisy, and somehow she doubted it’d go away anytime soon… well, unless she got rid of the sources of chakra. “Stupid, annoying buzzing.”
‘Maybe try… what’s it they do here?’ Inner hummed. ‘That thing they do to access their chakra or help them focus or something.’

Meditation?

‘That’s the one.’

Risa paused, a – dare she say it – fox-like grin forming. Won’t I be able to access my mindscape that way? she asked, trying to direct the question at her partner in crime.

‘Yep. Come and say hi to me if you manage…’

She smirked. Her main crying session and pity party was over.

Operation Fluffy was a go.

::

Risa stared at the bars blocking her from her new Rama-nii-chan – not that he’d answered once she’d finally made it into her mindscape. Surprisingly enough, mindscapes took a lot of focus to gain access to without the threat of imminent death. If she’d tried before her memories… returned… then there were no doubts she’d have been unable to do it. Ordinary three-year-olds weren’t made for sitting around doing nothing – unless they were either a Nara, or in a similar situation to her own. She pouted, staring at the shadowed form of the Nine-Tails. He had his back turned to her and was blatantly ignoring her. “I will keep talking at you, you know,” she said, folding her arms as she sat in the shallow waters a little ways away from the cage. “And there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” A challenge. “We’ll be BFFs before you can blink, ‘ttbayo,” she pointedly determinedly at his swishing tails. “Just try and stop me, I dare you.”

“Can you not start using that damned verbal tick?” Inner sat a little ways away, peering over at her as she flicked through what looked like a black and white book in the darkness of her mind behind where she sat. “It’ll become permanent and annoying before you realise.”

“Seconded.”

Risa blinked, head snapping back around to stare at Kurama. He was still facing away from her, evidently annoyed with her for some strange reason. “Rama-chan! You spoke!” she yelled, leaping into the air, bubbling with enthusiasm. She could work with this – annoying Kurama to the point where he had no choice but to accept her presence in his life. That was the way forwards. It had to be. “So, how was your day?” she asked, leaning forwards. “You know, aside from the whole issue of me nearly drowning…”

No answer.

“I get the feeling the old fox doesn’t like us,” Inner said, sighing quietly. “Probably because he’s a ball of angst and hatred, but still… we’ll get through eventually.”

“I am hatred incarnate! As if any of you pathetic fleabags would be able to understand that. I’d sooner be sealed in a teapot before I become friends with the likes of you – puny little fleshling. I haven’t fallen so far that a little child can influence me!”
“Puny little fleshling?” Risa tilted her head.

“That’s a new one.”

“I know.”

Kurama growled, turning back in on himself, pointedly facing away from them. “Get out, little human. You have no need of my power just yet, so I don’t want to hear anything from you.”

“So you really would lend me your power?” she asked, staring up at his back – his super fluffy back. Damn, how she wanted to snuggle there… Risa bet it’d be nice and warm too… warmer than those threadbare things she called sheets back at the orphanage.

“So I guess the seal weakens when you use his power… just like the one in the anime… Rama-chan isn’t friendly enough yet to actually want to help you just because,” Inner theorised, making Risa blink. She should’ve been thinking about things like that, and yet instead she’d focused on Kurama’s nice shiny, fluffy fur—

Risa shook her head. She needed to focus, not think about how soft the old fox’s fur was. “I guess the Eight Trigrams Sealing Style was used then… but who was the one who used it… it’s an Uzushio technique,” she mumbled.

“We’ll figure out more as we go on,” Inner said, being the voice of reason she always seemed to be. “For now you should get back to reality and get some damn sleep. We’ll need it if we want to start working on out ‘puny little’ body.”

She smiled, nodding quickly. “Will do,” she mumbled. “Keep bothering Kurama for me?”

Inner’s grin was wicked, and Risa felt surprisingly scared.

Just what was she unleashing on Rama-nii-chan?

“Of course, Outer.”

::

She didn’t know exactly how she did it, but somehow she managed to nod off despite the cold and the irritating buzzing. It faded to the back of her mind, and when she focused – really focused – she could ignore the constant hum. It took her a good few hours that morning to make it fade, and if she had a major lapse in concentration then that was that. She had to go through the whole drawn-out process again. It was minorly irritating, but as a good person once said, practice makes perfect. A whole lot of practice.

Practice she was going to have to do unless she wanted to get a headache every single day. Though the training itself would probably do that anyway. Not only was there the whole sensor training, as she was calling it, but then there was also the physical and the chakra stuff to take care of as well. Risa stared at the four walls of her bedroom. Admittedly it wasn’t solely hers. She shared it with three other girls, taking the top bed of one of the bunkbeds. It was a good location, being relatively quiet – aside from the perpetual hum of chakra – and best of all, she could practice jumping down. Silently, she prayed there’d be no broken ankles in her near future.
Risa flopped back on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. It was just past noon from what she knew, and the Matron was taking all of them to the park in an hour so they got to socialise with other children. She smiled half-heartedly. There was no way she’d get along well with other kids her age, perhaps aside from her newfound stalker – who was hovering outside her room that very moment. *Being a chakra sensor might not be too bad after all.* It was Tsuki, from what she could guess, although she had yet to memorise anybody’s specific chakra signature so she couldn’t exactly be sure. Who knew? She might have other mini stalkers for all she knew.

“You can come in you know,” she called, having finally grown bored of their little waiting game. “There’s no one else here.”

‘*Propositioning someone already, Outer?’* Inner teased.

*Shut up.*

Laughter mentally rang in her ears. Sometimes she hated Inner… *and Inner called her the perverted one*…

Sure enough, a white head of hair poked around the door frame, Tsuki shuffling in like an adorable baby fawn on shaky legs. “Umm… Hi!” she squeaked, staring determinedly at her fingers. “I… didn’t get your name yesterday… after everything… and I…”

Risa stared blankly, a soft smile pulling at her lips as she jumped down to land in front of the stuttering girl.

Tsuki’s face screwed up, her eyes shut, hands curled into fists at her side as she all but shouted. “Would you be my buddy to the park?” She flinched, lips wobbling as she waited, her shoulders tensed.

*It was almost as if she expected to be rejected.*

Risa blinked, realising that it was exactly that.

The others thought she was weird… but Risa had spoken to her yesterday… called her pretty.

*Which meant there was no getting rid of her.* Risa sighed. *As if she could do that. It would crush the girl… and that was the last thing she wanted to do. She wanted to be a nice person, but if she had a friend they’d no doubt notice how weird she was. Connections were important in this world, especially to a shinobi.*

Tsuki seemed nice, though, Risa mused.

*Damn it all to hell and high waters.*

She plastered a bright grin on her face. “Sure!”

There was no way Risa was ever being mean. Not to someone as adorable as Tsuki… even if she was ridiculously jealous of her silky white locks. *Speaking of which,* Risa mumbled to herself, it was about damn time to find out what the hell she looked like.

“I’ll go and brush my hair for when we go to the park,” she said, grabbing Tsuki by the hand. “You can come with me if you want to.”

The smaller girl nodded, following rather obediently after her as she led the way to the bathroom – one she knew had a mirror, even if she had to use the step box to reach it. *It felt oddly embarrassing*
to be that small again.

“Thank you,” Tsuki murmured, blushing as she stared at the tiled floor of the bathroom. It was a small room, but it was clean and well kept. It even had all their labelled toothbrushes kept by the sink.

‘Pinch her cheeks, go on… you know you want to.’

Again, shut up, Inner, Risa hissed internally.

The lighting was harsh in the bathroom, the mirror in front of her large as she let go of Tsuki’s hand to heft the step box over. It was oddly heavy, considering it was meant for toddlers and small children. Either that or her body was just pathetically weak compared to everyone else. The thought made her laugh nervously, picking up the hairbrush as she stepped up to the mirror.

She couldn’t afford to be weak.

Not here.

Risa blinked, staring curiously at her face, feeling Tsuki’s eyes on her all the while. Her hair was long, reaching just a bit beyond her shoulders, looking like a reddish burgundy. It wasn’t an awful colour… but if she’d had the choice she would’ve gone for purple, or maybe a nice Uzumaki red. Maybe if the light hit it right it wouldn’t look so dull…

‘At least you’ll blend in with the crowd, dimwit,’ Inner said. ‘That’s what we want. Aren’t you forgetting the basics of what ninja, shinobi, were in Lilly’s world?’

She stared at the mirror blankly, pulling the bristles of the brush through her tangled mane. It was soft, and oddly fluffy. She had suspicions that if the had her hair cut shorter she’d either have a duck-butt, like a certain Uchiha, or a head of spikes. Even with its length, she still had numerous spikes. It fluffed outwards, even after she’d brushed it, making it look like she hadn’t even done anything.

‘Shinobi are often meant to fight from the shadows – they don’t have to do flashy jutsu or parade around with neon yellow spikes,’ Inner spoke, her voice soothing as she splashed water over her face. ‘Sometimes the most significant battles are the ones fought in secret.’

Black eyes stared back at her from the mirror, narrow, similar to Tsuki’s, though she reckoned them to be a little bit bigger. They were sharp, long feminine lashes surrounding them.

It was completely different to Lilly’s appearance.

She wasn’t even half the height for one.

Sighing quietly, she pulled her hair back into a ponytail, tying it tightly at the back of her head before she turned back to her newfound friend. She was ready for the horrors that the park would bring. Though somehow she doubted it could be worse than her last walk through one.

There wasn’t much which could top nearly drowning in an icy lake.
Toddler Turmoil

Chapter Summary

Risa: Exercise

Water sloshed under her sandals, cooling her aching feet as she stared out across the clear waters. They were at the park, though it was a different one to the last. Slightly smaller feet dangled next to hers, pale toes barely brushing against the water’s surface. Tsuki stared at the unfrozen lake beside her, evidently thinking about what had happened yesterday – exactly like Risa was doing. She’d plummeted down into icy waters just like the ones in front of her only hours before, and everyone remembered it… well, if the eyes boring into her back were any indication.

“You OK, Tsuki-chan?” Risa asked, after a few more minutes of peaceful silence, quietly wondering what the other girl was thinking.

What did three-year-olds need to think about, anyway?

She nodded. “Un.”

“Wanna run around again for a bit?” she questioned. It wasn’t like they could play ninja with the others anyway. Most of the boys involved didn’t want the girls playing, like the little half-blind idiots they were no doubt going to grow up to become, and the others were content to either sit quietly on the side or maybe play in the sandbox, should they feel adventurous enough. The other girls at the orphanage were another story entirely. Since when did three-year-olds gossip? Risa wondered, half amused, half alarmed at the situation. Admittedly, it bothered her a bit, especially since the topic of what’s hot seemed to be focused entirely on her. She’d struck up a quick friendship with the girl with the freaky hair and eyes, whilst managing to get the now not-so secret gate at the back of the garden shored up, so it was safe to say she wasn’t well-liked. Risa shrugged. Kids would be kids. She ignored the irony of that statement. No way in hell was she marking herself with the same label as them. She wasn’t a kid – she was a fully grown adult trapped in the body of a child. That was in a completely different ballpark.

“Sure,” Tsuki chirped, humming happily as they both stood. Risa led the way, ducking into the trees, keeping an eye on her friend to make sure she didn’t get into any trouble. Though, knowing her luck, she’d probably be the one more likely to end up in a sticky situation. She’d woken up only a day ago, and she’d already had one near-death experience.

‘All good practice for later on in life,’ Inner added snidely.

Risa rolled her eyes, trampling through the forest at record speed on her short and chubby legs. She needed as much exercise as she could get, given her pitiful state, and what better way to do that than by running about the park? It didn’t seem all that suspicious either, much less so than a three-year-old doing press-ups and sit-ups. She had no desire to attract any attention to herself, especially when she didn’t know who was watching her. After all, she had no idea about Danzo Shimura and his whereabouts. Canon Danzo had been awfully fond of kidnapping gifted orphans and training them into baby assassins, a profile which she now, unfortunately, fit into. Risa hardly wanted the start of her new life to be filled with brainwashing and other manipulative tricks. That wouldn’t be fun in the slightest. Not to mention she’d be way more likely to get killed. Danzo’s privatised army was disposable, all for ‘the good of Konoha’.
“Risa! Risa! Come and look at all the pretty flowers!” Tsuki tugged at her sleeve, pulling her towards a clearing filled with lavender and a few other assorted flowers. “They’re sooooo pretty, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. The lavender bushes were oddly tall, especially to her, considering they were both only three-years-old. Purple buds were level with the tops of their chests, and Risa knew if they sat down they’d be perfectly concealed in a sea of purple and green. “Wanna run around here for a bit? Or d’ ya wanna sit down and look at flowers?”

“Tired,” Tsuki mumbled, yawning all of a sudden. It was like a switch had been flicked, moving from energetic Tsuki to an I-want-to-sleep-now Tsuki. On the whole, it was slightly alarming, but Risa was Risa. She could deal with that. Besides, it was hardly surprising though, considering they’d been running around like mad a couple of hours previously. Her legs were aching a bit still from all of that. She couldn’t start slacking on the whole getting-ready-for-shinobi-life training thingy she was doing. She needed to be ready. She had to be.

“And just a minute ago you were ready to run about screaming,” she said, smiling as she plopped herself down on the grass next to her friend.

Arms tackled her around her midsection, a head burying itself into her stomach. “Risa’s comfy,” she muttered.

“Well I suppose we can rest here for a bit,” Risa said, ruffling the silky white locks that she was not jealous of in the slightest. “Nap if you want. I’m gonna meditate.”

Tsuki peered up at her, curious. “Medi-date?”

“Meditate,” she corrected. “It helps with learning to control your chakra.”

“Chakra?” Tsuki blinked.

“How was she supposed to explain it to a child? She barely knew what it was anyway. “It’s the stuff… err… you know… the stuff that ninja use to do stuff… like making things go boom.” She mulled over what she’d said, wanting to bash her head against the wall. Silently, she prayed no one had overheard her rambling. It was embarrassing enough that Tsuki had heard.

“Oh, cool.”

Risa blinked. She actually understood that?

‘Kids are weird, Outer.’

‘True, true.’

‘You coming in?’ Inner asked.

Risa nodded, quietly sinking into the meditative trance she’d only recently learnt to slump into. It took far too long, and the wind rustling around her as well as Tsuki’s snores didn’t particularly help. In fact, she was surprised nobody had come to fetch the two of them so they could head back.

Either way, she made it to Inner’s domain without too much trouble.

“How goes Operation Fluffy?” she asked with a smirk, sitting in front of the low table in between them. Where it had come from Risa wasn’t sure, but it was there to stay in her mindscape.
“He’s been ignoring me.”

“Aww shucks.”

Inner rolled her eyes. “We’ve only known him for a day. I think we just need to show we’re here to stay.”

“Well, he’s kinda stuck inside us, so he’s the one who’s here to stay,” she said, shrugging. “He’s our roommate now.”

“I suppose you could look at it that way,” Inner mumbled. “Either way, it’ll probably take us a few years to get the idea of friendship through that thick skull.”

“What to do in the meantime though?” she asked, hunching over the table, resting her head against the smooth wood.

“Train – just like you’ve been planning, idiot.”

Risa sighed. “In what though?” She scowled, absently scratching at the wood. “I don’t want to ever have to rely on Kyu’s power,” she said. “I won’t use him like that. I don’t want to… so I need to be strong enough on my own.”

“Well… that’s adorable…”

“Inner!” she hissed.

“Lemme pinch those cheeks of yours already,” Inner demanded, grabbing her cheeks, stretching and squishing her face in ways Risa hadn’t thought were possible.

“Geroff!”

Inner smirked, letting go of her abused cheeks. “I guess we need to decide what we want to specialise in now, huh?”

“Yeah,” Risa bit out, rubbing at her reddened cheeks. “I was thinking maybe on trying to become a medic like Tsunade…”

Inner clicked her tongue. “Not a good idea.”

“But—”

“That takes some extreme chakra control, imbecile,” she explained, folding her arms. “What are the guarantees we have that? Think about it… besides, you said you wanted to be strong, didn’t you?”

Risa scowled, sinking down on the cushion she sat on. “Tsunade is strong.”

“She’s an exceptional medic, with ridiculous chakra control that rarely comes around once in a generation. Most medics are half as good at best, and they’re stuck following the three rules governing the whole Med-Nin shebang,” Inner continued.

“OK… so it wasn’t the best idea.”

“You got that right.”

“You’re mean, Inner.”
“Tell me something I don’t know,” she said, sitting back, eyeing Risa from head to toe. “Any new ideas?”

Risa sulked, pouting as she racked her brain for any more ideas about where she was going to take her life. In her last one she hadn’t started planning her career until she was sixteen, but apparently her new life wouldn’t wait that long for her to make up her mind. “Strength without the medic side?”

“You should work on chakra control, that’s for sure, but I’d say it shouldn’t really take priority,” Inner decided. “You don’t know whether you’ll have the chakra control for Tsunade punches, so pick another attribute to work on. We can wear basic weights to bring our average strength up to par – but don’t expect anything extraordinary.”

“You’re so fussy…”

“Shut up and think, idiot.”

“OK, OK…” she mumbled, chewing on her lip as she thought. “Weapons?”

“We don’t have any, and I doubt we’ll be able to get our hands on any for a few years at least.”

“Ugh,” Risa grunted. “Speed?”

“I was thinking that’d be a good one to work on…” Inner said, tapping her fingers against her arm.

“So why didn’t you say so?”

“Patience, grasshopper,” she grumbled. “You need to learn to think for yourself – I won’t always be on hand to help you.”

“So I’ll focus on speed then?”

“I’m thinking speed and stealth… so you can run away and hide from opponents, because let’s face it, your body won’t hold up against an adult shinobi seriously trying to kill you.”

“Speed and stealth, huh?”

“You probably ought to look into some fuinjutsu too, but those will be the main things to work on – along with the basic strength and chakra control and the like, OK?”

Risa gave her a set of thumbs up.

“Good, good.” Inner nodded. “So our main goal over the next few years is—”

“—to become really fast and ninja-y.”

“—to become a master thief.”

Risa paused, blinking as she processed what Inner had just said. “Wait, what?”

“Thieves are fast and stealthy when they steal… some traps around objects might also involve fuinjutsu…” Inner trailed off, a wicked grin quirking at her lips. “Also, you can steal either some money, valuables or even weapons, which we sorely need, because I doubt any pocket money we’re going to get will cover what we need to stash up on.”

“But—”
“Think of it this way – if you ever get a mission as a shinobi that involves thievery, you’ll have plenty more experience and you’ll be able to trash the opposition.”

Risa scowled, sticking out her lower lip as she huffed. “Fine… I suppose that’s not too bad of an idea.”

“Why would it be? My ideas are awesome!”

“Sure, sure…” she mumbled, blinking as she was yanked out of her mindscape by a hand shaking at her shoulder gently.

“Risa-chan, it’s time to go back,” the Matron said, waking Tsuki with a soft nudge.

Risa blinked, staring out at the setting sun, smiling slightly as Tsuki latched onto her once they began their walk back.

By the time she turned twelve she’d be ready. There would be no mistake about that.
His back was always turned whenever she entered her mindscape, just a bundle of darkened reddish fur with nine tails just about visible as they flickered out behind him. He was ignoring her, and Inner, as per usual. Risa sighed. *It wasn’t like she’d thought befriending him would be easy.* It had taken Naruto a few years and a devastating war to actually become friends with the ball of fluff currently curled up inside the seal. “Today was really awesome, Rama-nii-chan!” she called out, a wide smile on her face. Her happiness had been on the up ever since she and Inner had figured out the goal they needed to work towards. “I managed to sneak a book on basic fuinjutsu out of the library… though I think it’s only the stuff that’s taught at the academy, so it was in the civilian section.”

“Well, it’s a step in the right direction…” Inner said. “It only took you two weeks to actually get around to doing…”

“I’ve been busy with my physical training… it hasn’t exactly been easy trying to do it out of sight…” Risa mumbled, pushing the tips of her fingers together. “I don’t exactly want to get carted off by Root… well, if they still exist…”

“How did the library infiltration go? It was easy right?”

“Yeah…” she said, trailing off as she remembered exactly how many planks of wood had squeaked under her feet. It was a miracle she hadn’t been caught.

“Sure it was.” Inner gave her a knowing look. “You seriously need to get better at lying.”

“Oh goodie. More to add to the list,” she muttered, pouting as she plopped her backside down, ready to begin conversing with the stubborn fox in earnest.

Unsurprisingly, he didn’t make a single sound, except, perhaps a sigh of annoyance, but Risa would take what she could get. She didn’t have much to work with, except a child-sized body and the voice in her head. Before the latter would’ve probably garnered some concern, but she was in the Naruto World now, so a secondary personality of sorts wasn’t the strangest thing that could happen. Besides… at least she had a bit of a defence against Yamanaka Clan techniques. Not that she’d ever be on the receiving end of them, or so she hoped.

Kurama might eat the intruder if they were stupid enough.

Which would probably end up with her in T&I and she did not want to go there, so she was intent on staying as far away from the mind-walking clan as possible. If there was something she didn’t want revealed, it was all of her secrets. She had a lot. She was from another world entirely, and she had knowledge on key and important players inside the Naruto world – not that any of it was actually correct or up to date. She was in a very non-canon world, where the founders were somehow alive, and Uchiha Madara hadn’t gone insane in his quest for peace. Risa was fairly sure that was the furthest thing away from canon she could get.

Yawning quietly, she glanced over at Inner. “What time is it now?”

“Just gone half one in the morning,” she said. “You might want to get some shut-eye in while you can.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

Risa opened her eyes, staring at the frame of the bunk bed above her, sighing wistfully as she tried to
tune out the little hums all around her.

Sometimes being a natural sensor type sucked.

Ink exploded across her faces, the failed seal emitting copious amounts of smoke which made her choke as she sat in the tiny little attic. Her chakra fizzled, disappointment lining her expression as she stared between the template of the most basic seal that there was and her own failed smear of ink. She actually understood fuinjutsu somewhat, perhaps due to her mature way of thinking, and she grasped at the basics of the theory rather easily.

It was the application which was the problem, as well as her calligraphy skills.

The swirls and various shapes all had different meanings when it came to fuinjutsu, and Risa knew what the basic ones stood for. She could figure out which components she needed to make the formula. It was oddly similar to maths in some respects, or perhaps science. She put the base components all together in a specified order to get the desired outcome. Like mixing a recipe, only a hell of a lot more time consuming and a hell of a lot more dangerous. Badly programmed seals could blow up in one’s face.

Risa was only thankful it hadn’t quite been a full-blown explosion. She’d just got the smoky side of things… probably because it was such a simple seal… such a simple seal that she’d failed to even draw correctly.

The brush in her hand snapped, old lingering fear coming to gnaw at her as she stared at the puddles of ink and ruined paper. *How was she supposed to succeed at being a ninja – at staying alive – if she couldn’t even master a basic seal?*

She didn’t have a family to rely on. All she had was her wits and her non-existent fuinjutsu skills.

‘And me,’ Inner added. ‘Don’t forget about me.’

Warmth curled up in the pit of her stomach, a small smile appearing on her face as she stared at the mess she’d made. *That was right. She wasn’t alone. She had Inner… and the fox too… Dimly, she thought she heard a contented growl from the depths of her mind… though it was more likely the growl of whatever rabid animal was said to haunt the lofts. She wouldn’t kid herself. Kurama and her had a long way to go before they became friends, but with her talking his ear off every time she went into her mindscape… He’d become friends with her whether he liked it or not. Risa resisted the urge to cackle manically all of a sudden.*

She’d been getting that strange urge a lot as of late, and she had no idea why.

Shrugging, she turned her attention back to her seal, silently trying to figure out where she’d gone wrong… and then to possibly practice her calligraphy skills, because whatever gods up there knew she needed them.
Her back was braced up against the closest alley wall, hidden behind the nearby trash dumpsters as she tried to calm her pounding heart. Footsteps could be heard, racing all around as the yakuza group she’d just stole from searched for her. “I think the brat went that way!” Shouts could be heard, and Risa was honestly surprised no ninja came to investigate. But then again… She was in one of the seedier parts of Konoha and was most definitely breaking curfew as she hightailed it back towards her home. Well, more like her temporary home. She didn’t really have any family there, and one day she’d be forced to move out – likely once she graduated from the Academy and was granted funds from the Council… an orphan stipend.

If she’d graduate at all… though being able to run away from fully-grown civilian adults had to mean something. Either that or she just used spaces too small to creep away, but it was a strategy at least. ‘You shouldn’t have gotten caught in the first place, idiot,’ Inner reminded her as she stumbled through the trees behind the orphanage, climbing up one so she could jump over and into the small garden she was so used to playing in… or running around in at the crack of dawn. From there came to drainpipe crawl, and she’d shimmied herself up it so many times – without chakra – so it was somewhat ingrained in her memories. She made it to the window she’d left slightly open in no time at all, her haul from the night soon safely stowed away underneath her pillow. It was likely she’d transfer it into a storage seal as soon as she could make one, which was looking to be years off at least if her progress in fuinjutsu was anything to go off. After her last disaster, involving her eyebrows and a faceful of soot, she’d decided to focus on theory and improving her calligraphy – because that was what let her down each and every time. Her hands and wrists were too weak, and that was something only time and practice could fix, and if there was one thing Risa could do successfully, it was practice like her life depended on it, because it actually did. She didn’t live in a bubble of childish glee and ignorance. She knew what death was, and she knew how fast it could creep up on her. She’d got a second chance, and she wasn’t going to waste it. Yawning, she pulled the covers up to her chin, readying to enter her mindscape for a few minutes at least, but then the hairs on the back of her neck rose all of a sudden and the cause soon became obvious.

A loud buzzing made itself known almost instantly, quite unlike the quiet signals of the other kids sleeping around her. It was a powerful chakra – immense, and yet not threatening. That much she could tell with her meagre sensing abilities which she silently swore she’d improve on. Her heart thudded in her chest. What was such a powerful chakra signal doing there? Right outside her window? Ice clawed its way into her chest, shivers wracking her spine. It couldn’t be Root, could it? Her eyes cracked open a sliver, her heart thudding almost audibly as she caught sight of a black blur… and then the world shifted around her, moving so quickly she barely had time to register anything before she was dangling from the stranger’s grip on the rooftop. A single glance at his face had her relaxing ever so slightly. It was uncovered, no Root or ANBU mask in sight. Instead, he wore a short-sleeved jacket of sorts with a hood. A hood that was pulled up, casting his face in shade. There was also the black cloth mask, so similar to what she knew Kakashi’s to look like.

She squirmed in his iron grasp, opening her mouth, ready to cry out for help, but one gloved hand clamped over her mouth. This was it, Risa thought, panic overriding everything else. This was how she died…

“You’re a terrible thief.”

Shoot… Risa cursed internally. Was he working for those yakuza from before?

“And if you continued in that manner, you’d no doubt get caught… maybe die a painful death…”

She shivered, the cool night air biting at her clothes as she dangled there, too scared to do anything.
Too terrified to even breathe, let alone bite the hand keeping her lips captive. The man holding her could kill her in an instant. She was powerless.

“But fortunately for you, I have a certain interest in teaching a cute little redhead the ways of my craft.”

Risa clenched her eyes shut. *She was dead. So totally dead…*

“Oy.” A finger poked her cheek. “Stop looking so scared.”

Her eyes cracked open, peering into the matching black ones only centimetres away.

“I just said that I wanted to train you, idiot…”

Risa blinked, uncomprehending. *Just what the hell was going on?* She wasn’t supposed to be getting attention – anyone’s attention, especially not from a man who she had no clue about. *Besides… who saw a random child fail epically at things, and then suddenly wanted to train them?* Her gaze narrowed. *There had to be an ulterior motive…* That was it, it had to be.

A shadow fell over them both, the moonlight blocked, and Risa swallowed. She peered up, heart beating a mile a minute. *What did these people want?*

Scarlet locks blew on the wind, black eyes narrowed on both her and the man holding her, the glint of a hitai-ate visible. Risa squinted, blinking furiously as she tried to make out the allegiance of the man standing in front of her. Really, if her brain had actually been working, she’d have figured it out in an instant. It was a spiral. A whirlpool.

Uzushio.

Risa trembled. *That was impossible.* She’d looked up the history of the world she was now in, and just like in canon Naruto, Uzushio had been destroyed. Years ago. Yet the man in front of her couldn’t have been older that his late teens.

“What are you doing here?” The newcomer’s voice was cold, and it sent a frisson of fear trickling down her spine.

“Ryuichi-nii…”

“You weren’t supposed to make contact.”

She could feel the man in front of her pout – though suddenly she wasn’t so certain it was a man rather a boy instead. “But nii-san, she was going to get herself caught…”

“Tch.” He rolled his eyes, scoffing. “Just shut up and put her back where you found her. We need to leave. Our seals will only fool Tobirama for so long.”

Dangerous. Risa stiffened. *These men… teenagers… they were dangerous… Not that she hadn’t already guessed that,* her mind added snarkily. *But to be able to fool a genius sensor, and likely slip in and out of the village…*

“Fine, fine… spoilsport.”

She was back inside her room before she could blink, a hooded figure crouching on the window ledge, and somehow she knew… she just knew he was smiling at her, as though he hadn’t just terrified her half to death.
“See you soon, Risa-chan!”

He was gone, in the blink of an eye yet again, leaving her with a ball of terror and anxiety pooling in her gut as she sunk to her knees on the cold wood floor.

*She'd never told him her name.*
Toddler Tribulations

Each day after that one was filled with worry and other muddled thoughts. She could barely sleep, her senses always on edge as she waited and waited for the man to come back. He’d said he’d see her again. He even knew her name. Her. A little backstreet unremarkable orphan, and he’d picked her up out of everyone in the orphanage. Then there was the redhead… the same one whose eyes terrified her. They’d been cold. So cold. It’d felt like they’d pierced right through her. Then there was that same thought that she was going to die. Those two men were unknowns. Risa didn’t like unknowns… but then again, practically everything about her new world was unknown to her. Nothing was set in stone.

It had been a week since she’d seen the strange duo. A week since her life had been turned upside-down somewhat, and then instead of being tucked under her covers as she should’ve been, she was tucked under someone’s arm and dragged out into the middle of a forest.

Her heart pounded furiously, fear consuming her as the forest flashed by in front of her eyes. Oh god… what if she was being taken to Orochimaru or somebody else who’d use her as an experiment? What if they were part of a weird cult and wanted to sacrifice her to their strange god? She squirmed, half terrified of being dropped, but far more scared of where she was being taken to. They’d been running for ages and at ninja speed too – and that meant it was doubtful she was still safely inside Konoha. Why were they going so far to drag her out of Konoha? Less witnesses for the murder about to take place. She didn’t want to die… she’d only just started her new life. Risa swallowed, feeling oddly giddy, nausea swelling in her gut as she waited for her inevitable demise. She was dead. Her eyes screwed shut. Why couldn’t he just get on with it?

“Ringo?” a voice called, echoing through the trees. “What took you so—wait, what are you carrying?”

Risa cracked her eyes open, legs shaking as she was set down on the ground. “Tada,” the hooded boy, Ringo, said. “Look who I found…”

Black eyes narrowed, long red hair swishing about in the slight breeze carried to them from who knew where. She had no idea about the world’s geography – yet another thing on her list to learn. She shivered, squeaking when he took a step towards her. He could snap her neck in the blink of an eye. His eyes were cold. Freezing. “By which you mean you snuck into Konoha…” He pinched the bridge of his nose, looking utterly exasperated. “ARE YOU A COMPLETE IDIOT?”

“But nii-san—”

“Idiot!” he hissed. “Just because you’re good at—”

“Technically, I’m the best at—”

“Do you want to die?” he asked, smiling, and Risa felt her lungs constrict as something radiated out into the air around her. She felt like she was being stared down by a predator… like there was a blade pressed against her throat… like two hands were around her neck, squeezing… Tears leaked from her eyes, her cheeks torn between bone white and bright red as the scent of urine hit her nose and her pants grew uncomfortably warm. She’d wet herself. Her knees gave out, sobs choking from her throat as the sensation vanished as quickly as it’d appeared. Humiliating… couldn’t they hurry up and kill her? Her shoulders shook, her face burying itself in her arms to hide the mortification and terror written across her expression.
“You two are both idiots!” a new voice sounded, closely followed by the sounds of fists hitting flesh. “Using killing intent around a little toddler, Ryuichi-nii…”

“Yeah!” Ringo said.

“Oh and don’t get me started on you, Rin-chan!” that same voice continued. “Kidnapping a toddler and dragging her out of Konoha… expecting her to be perfectly OK with that… I think you’re well overdue for a beating and a half, imbecile!”

“But—”

Another voice sounded, a low sigh coming from right next to her as a set of warm arms scooped her off the ground. “Shhh… It’s OK, little one.”

Risa peered up, peeking between her fingers as the teenager holding her. He was tall, slightly shorter than Ryuichi, and yet he wore a hood like the other one – Ringo. She shivered, terror and embarrassment making her eyes water as he carried her inside the small hut in the middle of nowhere. How there was running water and electricity there, she had no idea, but the tub of warm water was calling to her.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.” Even inside, he didn’t pull his hood down, instead holding out a bar of soap and other toiletries. “Uh…” He scratched the back of his neck. “How much help will you need?”

She shook her head. She didn’t need any help.

“Oh, uh. OK, then,” he mumbled, spinning around so he had his back facing her. “I’ll stay here to make sure you don’t drown… that’s what you’re supposed to do for toddlers, right?”

Risa stared at him, eyeing up his broad back, looking between him and the bathtub. He seemed nice, if a bit nervous for reasons unknown. Looking down at her soiled trousers, she scowled, pulling them off, not wanting to stay in them a second longer. Glancing back, eyeing the unmoving teenager – she presumed – and stripping the rest of her clothes off when he remained unmoving on the little stool. She grabbed the bar of soap, lathering herself in it as best she could, rinsing off before soaking in the waters and relaxing ever so slightly.

She spent a good ten minutes just relaxing there in the blissful warmth, before the reality of her situation slammed back into her with the sound of loud arguing voices. Hurrying out of the bath, she wrapped herself in the towel provided, cautiously tapping the guy on the shoulder.

“Ah.” He stood, vanishing in a flash, reappearing moments later with a set of smallish clothes in tow. “There. Much better.” They’d dragged her off to the middle of nowhere and now they were washing her clothes. Risa didn’t understand them for the life of her. Still, she was glad she hadn’t been killed as of yet. The nice one had saved her from the idiotic one, Ringo, and the scary one, Ryuichi. There was at least one more, bringing the total to four. Four teenage boys who’d kidnapped a little toddler. Risa shuddered. What did they want from her? She pulled on the oversized clothing, toddling out of the bathroom, quickly scurrying behind the nice boy’s legs as the three others materialised in the room one after the other. She trusted them about as far as she could throw them, and with her pintsized body, it wasn’t very far. Two millimetres if she was lucky.

“Ringo.” The nice boy glared at her kidnapper. “Apologise,” he ordered, gesturing at his legs – where she was hiding behind, cautiously peeking out from behind, looking between the three of them. The nice boy and Ringo had an air of mystery about them thanks to their concealed features.
Ryuichi was just as scary as she remembered, scarlet hair and black eyes narrowing on her as he glared at her. “You too, nii-san,” the nice boy ordered, staring at the eldest of them, ignoring the glares thrown their way. “You used killing intent and frightened her half to death.”

“Hn.” He looked to the side. “She should get used to it. She’s living in Konoha with shinobi. It’s better she gets a feel for it.”

“She’s three.”

“As good a time as any to start,” Ryuichi muttered, sitting back on the sofa, gazing up at the ceiling, shoving Ringo’s face back as the younger boy hovered over him.

“Does that mean I can train her? Pretty please?” Ringo pleaded, and Risa shivered, hiding herself behind the nice boy’s legs as his gaze flickered over to them. “Please, Ryouto?” She assumed that to be the nice boy’s name. Ryouto. She was sensing an odd theme of R’s in the weird little group.

“Well she’s here isn’t she?” Ryuichi said, flicking open a book, turning his attention onto it. “Do as you wish.”

The third teen stopped him before he could rush over to her. “Ringo, read the situation for once in your life.” He glanced over at where she stood, trembling behind Ryouto’s legs, purplish eyes soft and reassuring behind his silky black locks. “She’s scared, so you’re gonna have to explain yourself if you want her to y’know… trust you even an inch. She’s not stupid, and from the looks of things she isn’t your every day bubbly toddler.”

“Hardly surprising,” Ryuichi said, cold black eyes flickering over her. “Especially given what she carries.”

Risa froze, ice shooting through her at those small inconspicuous words. Out of context, they’d be harmless, but Risa didn’t think she was carrying anything worthy of note – she had no bloodlines to carry, and that meant there was only one thing he could be talking about. The Kyuubi. Kurama. He knew she was a jinchuuriki. But how? She stared at his red hair… his spiral hitai-tai… He was an Uzumaki, undoubtedly.

‘And the seal on our stomach was designed by the Uzumaki, and probably implemented by one...’ Inner reminded her, having her back as per usual. ‘So calm down. They probably don’t mean us harm – they’d have done something already if that were the case.’

But they still wanted something from her...

‘True, but in case you forgot – the excitable one wants to train you,’ Inner said, no doubt folding her arms and sighing exasperatedly. ‘And guess who actually needs guidance and help with our training. Oh that’s right. We do. So stop freaking out and use him. It won’t matter about his motive if we get strong enough... just be wary about him, that’s all.’

“Ryuichi-nii, you’re scaring her, so I think you’d probably ought to leave this to us three,” he said, making shooing motions with his hands, unflinching at the glare sent his way as the eldest of the four hurried out of the room muttering about ‘ungrateful brats’. “Ryouto, congratulations, I think she likes you. Ringo, you’re an idiot, but you can train her if she lets you.”

“What about you, Ryuji-nii?” Ringo stared at him.

“I’ll be on my way. We need to earn money somehow, and you two will have the best chances with interacting with the little darling here,” he said, hovering around in the doorway their older brother had just vanished through. “Best not to outnumber her too much. Plus Ryouto will be the best for
ensuring you don’t accidentally injure her, I’d just get in the way.” He waved over his shoulder, heading out into the night. “Have fun and get her back before it gets too late. She’ll need her sleep, and Konoha will need her back before morning.”

‘I like him. He’s logical,’ Inner declared and Risa rolled her eyes.

“Yay!” Ringo was in front of her in seconds, hands under her armpits as he all but threw her in the air. “Let’s get you started on kunai and shuriken. Those are a staple of shinobi, and you’re probably gonna have to be one… or at least learn how to defend yourself from them.” He shrugged, and Risa relaxed ever so slightly in his grasp. The longer she stared at him, the less scary he became. “Hmm… I think you’re ready to begin throwing anyway, but I suppose we’ll have to see. If you really suck at it I’ll have to teach you something else instead.”

‘He really likes boosting our confidence, doesn’t he?’ Inner muttered drily.

Risa giggled despite herself, letting him carry her out of the little house and into the woods where some training posts waited. At least she’d be getting some instruction in the ways of things. There was a limit to how much she could teach herself without anyone there to correct her.

“These should fit in your baby hands,” Ringo mumbled, handing her over some small razor sharp kunai until Ryouto slapped him up the head.

“Have you ever heard of a thing called blunted kunai?” he hissed, switching out Ringo’s set for a blunted set of the same small size. She hadn’t even known kunai could come in sizes, but apparently they did. “Do you want her to cut her fingers off or something?”

Ringo scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Oops?”

“Oops won’t reattach fingers, otouto,” he said, hiding his face in his hand as best he could, watching on as Ringo showed her how to throw weapons for the first time. She’d never needed to throw weapons before, so it came as an unsurprising disappointment when she failed. Epically.

“Wow… you really suck at this,” Ringo said, peering into the darkness where her kunai had vanished.

“She’s three. Give her some time,” Ryouto mumbled, rolling his eyes at his brother’s antics before turning his attention over to her. “It wasn’t too terrible for your first time, Risa-chan.” His hand ruffled in her rusty-coloured locks. “Just think about it this way – you can only improve from here on in.”

So in other words she sucked. Epically.

Inner laughed at her, the git.

‘That’s not nice, Outer,’ Inner grumbled through her chuckles. ‘Though seeing as you suck, wanna ask them about stealth and speed training? They’d probably give you a hand, seeing as they’re trying to train you.’

What did Inner mean by trying? They were training her.

Mental snorts met her ears, and Risa decided to do as asked. It wasn’t like she could strangle her Inner from out there. She’d have to enter her mindscape to do just that.

“Uh…” She pressed her fingertips together, shifting nervously on her feet as she stared up at the strange brothers training her. “Do you, um, think you could help me with my speed and stealth too?”
Ringo beamed in reply. “Of course, that’s why I picked you up in the first place!” he said, yanking her off the ground, twirling her around in the air until she got dizzy and Ryouto smacked him over the head to get him to stop.

“But I think that might have to wait until tomorrow night,” Ryouto said, pointing up at the position of the moon. “We need to get her back.”

“But it’s only been a couple of hours.” Ringo pouted. “Can’t she stay a little longer? Pretty please.”

“No, now take her back and tuck her in,” Ryouto grumbled, glaring his younger brother into submission, relenting only to turn to her. “It was nice meeting you, Risa-chan… even if the circumstances were a bit strange,” he said, smiling gently down at her. “Ringo will take you back now, but if you want to see us again, then you need to keep quiet about this little excursion, OK?”

“I’ll take her back then,” he muttered, coming over to her, hands at the ready to scoop her back up and take her home. To Konoha.

Two fingers poked her forehead, and she stumbled back from the light flick, blinking in confusion as she stared at him. “Until next time, Risa,” Ryouto mumbled, waving in farewell, heading back towards the little house in the middle of the woods as Ringo picked her up and took to the treetops.

Numbly, she rubbed at the spot on her forehead, confusion making her stare blankly into space as the wind rustled through her long reddish tresses. Dimly, she was fairly sure she heard Ringo choking on them like the idiot he apparently was, but her mind was far too busy trying to process what on earth had just happened.

She’d been poked. On the forehead. Just like Sasuke.

*Oh god… She’d just been Itachi poked… and it wasn’t even Itachi who’d done it…*

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**End Notes**

This fanfic may have sporadic updates for a while, so that’s a heads-up for that, though I’ll be trying to make chapters as long as I can to make up for that.

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