

Clouds of Thunder

Von Karu

Kapitel 3: Slightly brightens,

It doesn't even take Akemi a minute to be back with another plate of *yakitori*, chopsticks and two bowls of rice. While the girl from before pours us some more water I wonder why Aoki bought potatoes instead of rice, since this is- well, this world is *like* Japan at least and I can't remember a single occasion where I saw food with potatoes there.

I know that their culture can't be identical to what I'm used to, but the question still lingers in my mind as I try to fit as much food into my stomach as possible – knowing Aoki he won't get close to anything serving food with me from now on, and I simply don't weigh enough to go on a multi-day starvation diet.

"You like it?" Akemi asks, and I honestly don't know if she's talking about the *yakitori*, the shop or Kumogakure in general.

"The food is really good," I answer carefully, but she only smiles at me in return, a glimmer of *something* shining her eyes. She doesn't press for more however, leaving me to ponder whether she is just a genuinely nice person or clever enough to not be obvious about her agenda.

We just sit there and eat for a while, a comfortable silence between us. It's the complete opposite than with Aoki actually, because Akemi really seems interested in me – whatever her reasons for that may be – without pushing me around at every step. If her tactic is to get information out of me she's very likely to get it, especially since there is also the good chance that she'll tell me something about this village and the people living in it in return.

When both our bowls are empty the woman points towards the door with her head and I nod eagerly, excited at the prospect of finally *seeing* the village instead of just being pushed through all the streets, Aoki's frown telling me to hurry all the time.

"Where do you wanna go?" she wants to know, and only then do I realize how much *younger* her accent sounds compared to that of Aoki or Ichiro. They both seem to be in their thirties, close to forty perhaps, and Akemi looks more like... twenty-something I guess, a few years older than me.

"There was a-," I stumble over the word and then have to use another one because I

have no idea how to say that in Japanese, "A small well. It was up the road, past the shop with the katana in the window and then to the right."

Never, *ever*, have I been that thankful for a full semester of learning how to give and understand directions in Japanese – I could have showed her, of course, but then again I have no idea if the area is off limits or if Akemi would have actually let me lead her through the streets.

"You want to see *the shrine*?" she asks, the widening of her eyes and emphasis on the word telling me that there has to be something special about this place, "Sure. I bet Jiro shooed you past it. He never liked the place... thinks it's stupid, doesn't like that the Raikage won't use *it* for the war. He's just sulking, don't take it seriously."

I don't know if I've understood quite right, but she doesn't let me wonder and links her arm with mine before I can complain to lead me up the hill.

For a while we walk along the cobbled streets in silence. I am just watching the people going past us, the shinobi as much as the civilians, and then look at the shops I didn't pay attention to on the way down, the way some buildings show the wear and tear of wood having withstood the seasons for decades while others almost shine in their newness. It's fascinating – all of it – and Akemi doesn't interrupt me at all in my staring, instead tugging me gently in this and that direction to let me admire the ornate roof of a particular chic house or take a street that I didn't see on my walk with Aoki.

It's... well, *nice*. My side is warm where she leans against me, and if I don't look at her I can almost pretend that I'm here with Mimi, and that we're just walking through some random street in some random Japanese town and that-

Better not do that, I remind myself. Enjoying the moment is significantly easier if you concentrate on what is there rather than on what is missing.

"There's no chakra in you," Akemi's voice is perfectly conversational and she only gives me a short glance before steering us into a *marvelous* back alley without shops and only a handful of people moving about.

"Yes," mutter in return, "I know that."

She laughs at that, loud, effortless and without a care, and for a second I can do nothing but envy her – she's beauti- no, she's gorgeous, she's a ninja, she was born and lives in this world that's still half a dream to me, she *belongs* here...

"Civilians don't have chakra," this time she looks at me as she speaks, her gray eyes unreadable, "You don't have the *potential* for chakra."

Talk about a slap to the face... the implication isn't lost on me – how could it? – but there's no way for me to respond without giving myself away. Yes, neither the Raikage nor Aoki forbade me to talk to anyone else about what happened, but then they didn't have to. Honestly, who would believe me?

Akemi seems to have figured it out on her own however, or at least come pretty damn close. She has to be a sensor, and a particular good one of those if she can actually distinguish between me and a ordinary civilian of this world – at least I think so, because in reality I have no idea if I just feel like everyone else to people like her or if my non-existent chakra is something that's noticeable for anyone who knows how to look.

"Ask Aoki," I eventually say, not trusting myself to make up a story on the fly that will hold for the rest of my stay here.

When she opens her mouth I think she's about to ask a follow-up question, but then she closes it again without having uttered a word. I only notice that we have arrived at our destination when her silence makes me aware of the sound of running water.

A traditional fountain for ritual washing is build beside the entrance to the shrine, completely with a small roof and the statue of a dragon from the mouth of which the water pours into the rectangular stone basin.

The building itself is all wood and not that big. I've seen a lot of larger shrines and temples in Japan, with additional rooms, entire wings, gold embellishments and whatnot else. Compared to them this one is tiny. A few wooden steps lead up to the entrance, the two doors open and almost spanning the entire front of the two-story pagoda.

What catches my eye is the wooden plate above these doors. This is where the name of the shrine is usually writ- *oh my god*. I have to be staring, the really obvious kind, but I can't help it – this isn't at all what I expected.

Hachibi Shrine. The shrine of the Eight-Tails.

And really, inside the shrine I can see a wooden statue of a Buddha that wears a flowing robe, his right hand raised, palm pointing away from him, and the left hand holding a little box with ointment. It's the Healing Buddha, I know that much, and from the incense sticks burning in front of the statue I can guess that the Eight-Tails is sealed inside it.

Akemi is suddenly standing beside me, first bowing to the statue and then turning her eyes on me and giving me a quizzical look, "You can feel it?"

No, I can't obviously, but it's better if she keeps thinking that – I know that Hashirama distributed the Tailed Beasts of course, but I didn't consider that by now one of them could actually still be sealed. The villages fought wars with their Jinchuuriki, used them as weapons, and seeing that the Hachibi has remained inside his first prison for I don't know how many years comes as a surprise.

"Why is it in there?" I manage to bite back the *still* part of the sentence when asking. Giving my cards away now would be utterly stupid.

"The first Hokage, the leader of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, sealed all nine of the great beasts," she explains with deference for that man larger than life in her voice, "He gave eight of them to the other villages as gifts, and so the Two-Tails and the Eight-Tails became ours... the Two-Tails was sealed into a woman, as the Nine-Tails was sealed in the Shodaime Hokage's wife, but it killed her. The power was too great and it destroyed our land until we sealed it a second time, this time into a child. She lived."

I urge her to go on with a nod even though I know the story about Hashirama of course. The bit about the Nibi is news to me, and it want to know why the Hachibi is still set in wood.

"The Eight-Tails is the second most powerful beast after the Nine-Tails, and the Raikage was advised against sealing it after what happened with the Two-Tails," she lowers her voice then, "Now the war has started, and many say that we should use its power and find a human to contain it in, a *Jinchuuriki*."

So that's how it is, then. I'm not sure if this is the First Shinobi World War – it's not *yet* anyway. It sounds only like a matter of time however, since they want to find a vessel for the Hachibi.

"They must be powerful," I whisper. I *know* that they are actually, and this isn't good news. It means that I'm far far away from any part of the Naruto timeline I'm familiar with. The manga only tells you so much, and with my luck I got dumped in the part it almost says nothing about.

"Don't worry," Akemi assures me, "The Nidaime will find a solution. I was always against this war happening, but he's extraordinarily good at waging it. He'll protect us."

For want of anything else to say on that topic I turn back around after a short bow and look at the village. The clouds are still thick on the sky, but I guess that Aoki summoned me at mid-morning and that it's sometime in the afternoon now – so we still have a few hours to kill.

"Show me something else, please," I ask the kunoichi beside me with a pleading look, "Your village is very beautiful. I'd like to see more."

She seems to ponder the question for a second, but then a smile spreads on her lips and she takes my hand to pull me along to whatever she wants to show me. She doesn't even look at me, just gives me an excited, "I know exactly where to go. You'll love it."

The woman obviously has a plan so I just follow her lead, taken a little off-guard by Akemi's sudden enthusiasm. She seems be genuinely happy however, her cheeks reddened from excitement and the smile still on her face. The sleeves of her kimono are blowing in the wind I'm and actually overwhelmed with how pretty she is in that moment.

I'm holding her back of course, because as a ninja she could just run on the rooftops if she wanted, but my current partner in crime doesn't seem to overly mind. We're running uphill though, and even without any pollen at that height my 80% lung capacity are approaching their limit fast at our current speed.

Fuck, I need to get some training in if I want to survive in that world, that's for sure...

Akemi notices of course, slowing down her tempo. Deep gray eyes give me a worried look and her head drops a little to the right while she examines me, "Are you okay? Sorry, I didn't pay attention... hold on."

Before I can ask what she means with those words muscled arms have wrapped around my waist, pressing me close against the other woman's chest – then I'm in a rollercoaster again as we flicker out of existence and appear somewhere else in the blink of an eye. I know that the Body Flicker isn't teleportation but a form of unbelievable, chakra-induced speed, but to me it well could have been.

Did I mention that while being slightly funny on the stomach this method of transportation is impossibly genius? You don't need to wait for some means of transportation to arrive, it costs no fuel, and of course *it's fucking instantly*. I wish I could get to university like this in the mornings...

"There we are," Akemi explains, slowly stepping away from me. Her hands remain on my sides however, as if she expects me to sway and fall over any second.

For the first seconds after I have opened my eyes I see no difference in the world around us. The sky is still as gray as Akemi's eyes, the wind having picked up since we left the *yakitori* shop a while ago. When I look down however, I see that I'm standing on solid rock instead of cobblestone.

That's what makes me suspicious in the first place – then I realize that we aren't surrounded by buildings anymore, because they are now *below* us. She brought me on top of one of the steep mountains and we're standing on an observation platform that is maybe five on five meters. There is no railing or anything else to keep hold of, just the rough stone beneath my feet and what...? Fifty, seventy... meters of abyss in front of me.

I squeak, and not in a dignified way. *Fuck, I'm gonna die.*

"No... down! Down, now," I beg Akemi, standing still as a statue in the knowledge that one wrong step here could be the last one I'll ever take. The edge is *everywhere* around me, down, down, down, meters and meters of free fall leading to certain death...

"Everything is fine," she assures me, frowning, and what she says after gets eaten by the panic clawing at my brain and telling me to *get down. Now*. Yes, I see Akemi's mouth moving, but don't register a single word that comes- I shriek when her hands leave me and instantly jump her, my arms coming around her middle in a death grip. I'm not letting her go, no fucking way.

"Height, bad. Very bad," is all that I manage to articulate. The fear is paralyzing me, I *know* that, but there is only so much you can do in the face of death and with no way to get yourself out of the situation.

"I don't understand," she says to me – and of course, she's a friggin' *ninja*, of course she won't understand. She can jump up and down here as she wants, even if she'll ever fall she can just use chakra or a damn jutsu and catch herself before-

"Danger, dangerous..." I struggle for words, my eyes fixed on her huge breasts because she's the only thing here that *isn't* abyss and I know that if I look anywhere else I'll only get more panicked than I already am. *Breathe, breathe*. Hyperventilating isn't an option right now. I have to try and make her understand, "This is wrong. I want down. I'm afraid. Please."

This time she at least seems to understand what I want her to do, because I'm pulled through space a few seconds later, not daring to look around for a moment. Please, let this be like normal ground, solid, lovely earth, no damn mountain again...

"It's fine," Akemi whispers, her hand awkwardly petting my back when she slowly lets me out of her embrace. My pulse is racing in anticipation of seeing another edge in front of me, but it's really fine because we're actually back down and there is solid ground beneath my feet as I look down on the street I'm now standing on. *Thank god*.

"Thank you," I mutter, not liking the look she is giving me in the least – she looks angry and worried at the same time, eyebrows raised and intense gray eyes studying me.

"Are you ill?" the blonde asks, pressing a hand to my forehead and taking it away a second later when she finds it cold, "Something is wrong with you. Jiro should have told me... he never pays attention, always war, war, war, forgetting what is important..."

She's babbling now I guess, because I can't make coherent sentences out of the words that leave her mouth. I think that she's angry actually, and would have probably been happy that it's on my behalf, but my head is still mush and I rub my temples to ease my beginning headache. Ninja are fucking crazy, all of them – to think that I'd have *wanted* this yesterday... all I want now is a bed and probably alcohol, because fuck this I'm stuck in a world full of shinobi and chakra and Tailed Beasts where literally *everything* can kill me. Getting drunk isn't going to make it any worse.

Akemi however has other plans. She has linked her arm with mine and is ushering me into the building we landed in front of. I have absolutely no idea where we're going, but if I have to take a guess she's hunting for Aoki. Her words from earlier certainly imply it.

The place is a lot smaller than the Raikage Tower and we don't meet a single person while walking through the narrow corridors – now that I think about it there wasn't a front desk either, and the entrance was suspiciously small too, compared to the other buildings I have seen. This isn't a public place then, or probably just rarely used.

Instead of going up a few floors as I expected, Akemi suddenly takes a turn and leads me down a flight of stairs into the basement. The building is carved right into the stone of the mountain below us, the aisles now having rough walls of dark rock and the light coming from naked bulbs.

We stop at the first door to the right, but instead of knocking the blonde woman beside me just walks inside, the voices coming from inside dying down when we enter the room.

Inside there's a lot more space than I expected underground. A big table laden with notes and papers dominates the room, but maps and what look like profiles of various people have been pinned to two of the walls. There is also a wooden cabinet standing in one corner and lots of different weapons scattered all around the room. *This is interesting.*

"Sit," Akemi says and pretty much pushes me down into a free chair. Then she tells a man called Isao to look for me – he's a healer I guess? – and from the fact that the look he gives me is as *concerned* as it is curious I deduce that I'm probably still white as a sheet.

He comes over without another word, and I have to close my eyes for a moment because taking that much information in all at once makes my headache worse.

Not counting me there are seven people in the room: Akemi, Aoki and his brother, the Isao-guy, two other men one of which has striking blue eyes and- I know her. Remembering where I have seen that woman before takes me a few seconds, but then it comes back to me. She was there in the Raikage Tower when Aoki lead me outside, and once more I can't stop my gaze from being drawn to her golden eyes.

There is something about her... I honestly can't pinpoint it, and *that* really sends a throb of pain through my head. She's- what is she? The funny thing is that I feel like I should know what's so special about her, but no matter how hard I concentrate I don't come up with anything useful.

Akemi is starts talking to Aoki then, I dimly realize as Isao kneels down in front of the chair she placed me in – her voice suddenly has an edge to it I can't make sense of at all, but if you try to take everything in all at once you'll miss some details, and that seems to me what's happening to me now. The timing is shit obviously but I'm still aware enough to know where my limits are.

"Are you hurt?" Isao asks me, black eyes scanning me for wounds from behind his shaggy red hair. A dark hand takes hold of my wrist and he takes my pulse.

"My head hurts," I mumble, trying to listen in on Akemi and Aoki, but his accent is still shit and I'm way too slow in translating the words I actually understand. It seems to be general bitching at each other at the moment, but they could just as well be discussing who to seal the Eight-Tails in and I wouldn't be any wiser.

I flinch in surprise when cool hands are placed on my temples and stare at the concentrated face of the shinobi in front of me. A faint green glow – goddamn he's using healing chakra on me, *healing chakra!* – invades the edges of my vision and I suspect that I should feel something, anything, but there's nothing but the faint sensation of a cool breeze blowing over my head. If I hadn't paid attention to it I wouldn't have felt what he's doing at all... is that how it's supposed to be?

"She's my duty!" Aoki shouts suddenly, his voice rough and angry, "My mistake, my duty."

Whatever Akemi says in return is spoken too fast, but there's no mistaking the acid behind the words or the sharpness of the stare she sends the other ninja. Aoki actually avoids her stormy gray eyes after the first eye contact, and I'm surprised that a woman that nice- no, *she's a kunoichi*, I remind myself, and right now she is telling the shinobi opposite her in plain words that she won't tolerate his bullshit behavior any longer.

How did I think her... *innocent*? Of course she isn't. She's a ninja, a top sensor from what I can guess, and I should've realized sooner that innocence is nothing that they can afford. In times of war less than ever.

"Captain," Isao interrupts the silence once Akemi has stopped scolding Aoki – she's still glaring daggers at him, though.

They both turn their heads in our direction at once and I can't be sure who of the two of them he actually addressed. I store that bit of information for later use.

"I don't know what's wrong with her," Isao sounds a little miffed, "She's fine, but... my chakra isn't working right with her, I think. I don't know why."

Rejecting the awesome medical jutsu of the awesome medic-nin that wanted to cure my headache... *check*. What did I expect, really? I get thrown into a world full of chakra and epic ninjutsu-battles and not only can't I use any of the good stuff, it doesn't even work on me properly. Great.

Akemi floods their team medic with a bunch of questions immediately, Aoki joining in shortly after when Isao says something that has to be half medical terms because I don't understand a word *again*. Whatever it is, it gets the three of them wrapped up in a conversation that is totally over my head.

Ichiro saves me from having to concentrate on listening to the gibberish they talk, fortunately. With one swift movement he has put one arm around me and pulls me towards the other side of the room, where the golden eyed woman and the other two men are sitting. None of them pays attention to what the other three are discussing, so I figure that I don't have to, either – which means that I'll have to face the unknown instead of the unintelligible. I'm not sure whether this is an improvement or not.

The blonde man gives up his chair so I can sit down instead, since obviously none of them trusts me to remain standing. He's the smallest of the group save goldy-eyes,

with light skin and bright blue eyes. His hair is pulled back in the back of his head into a short ponytail and compared to all the other men he is quite slender.

"Shibata, Raiden. Nice to meet you," he bows in perfect timing with the words.

I can't read him at all, but shrug it off when my eyes wander to the guy lounging in the chair beside me. He's almost the perfect contrast to Raiden... dark skin, very short black hair and warm brown eyes. His posture is lazy, eyes half closed, and obviously he can't be bothered to give me more than a nod in acknowledgement, "Takagi, Hideki."

"Saeko," I introduce myself, lowering my head as good as I can without provoking the headache into making me dizzy, "It's a pleasure meeting you. Excuse my language, I'm not good at speaking."

"You're good enough," her voice is right beside me and I jump in my seat in surprise when the words are whispered into my ear. Hands come down on my shoulders, *damn*, I flinch again, and her fingers slowly start digging into the tense muscles of my shoulder blades – it hurts, it hurts *fucking good* actually, because if you've learnt to live with a constantly cramped back as I do you come to anticipate the relaxation of your muscles after someone has loosened them, no matter how painful it is.

"Half your headache comes from your back," she lectures me, the thumb of her left hand pushing against a knot until I growl, "You should work out."

"Who are you?" I ask, because she is so *different* that it's puzzling me. Something is off about that woman, and the closer she is the more nervous she makes me. It's not that she's beauti-

I shriek when my chair is suddenly tilted back, two legs dangling in the air and my head falling back against the backrest with a soft clonk. The golden-eyed woman prevents me from tumbling over with a knee to the back of my seat, her hands still on my shoulders and her face now directly above mine.

"I thought you knew," her tone is just that little bit mocking, not enough to be easily recognized but enough to be a slap to the face to those who pick it up. *Bitch*.

She catches my gaze and holds it. Strands of messy black hair fall around her face, too short to hide her features, and a- a feral grin has spread on her lips, her white teeth contrasting strongly with the chocolate color of her skin. She is so close to me that it makes me uncomfortable and she has to know it with the stare she gives me. It's- it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up, because she looks at me like I'm *prey*, and-

"You're the Jinchuuriki of the Two-Tails," I think and say it at the same time, not being able to suppress the small hitch in my voice at the realization.

"Ah, of course," her voice is a purr now, or as close as a human- the vessel of demon made of chakra can come. Which is very close, I now realize. Well, she is half a cat I suppose, so it shouldn't come as that much of a surprise to me. Still, she's the fucking

vessel of Matatabi, she could make an entire village level with the ground if she lost control over the beast inside her. I have to admire that despite that she seems to be a rather sane person.

"Kin, let her down," Ichiro commands the Jinchuuriki from my side, and luckily for me she obliges tamely enough, her hands on my shoulders slowly putting the chair back on all fours before she resumes her massage – I'm not complaining, let the woman do what she's good at... besides killing, of course.

Raiden gives me a curious stare when my gaze sweeps over him, but I settle my gaze on Ichiro, trying not to stare at his scar but kind of having to since I automatically settle my eyes on where his should be. How he notices me looking at him I don't know, but his features become a little bit softer when I do.

"What happened?" he eventually asks, tilting his head in thought. There is a faint undercurrent of concern in his voice, and it shouldn't hit me as hard as it does that he actually cares a little.

A big hand is thrust in my direction before I can formulate an answer, and I accept it gladly. Talking with kanji is so much easier than having to find words to tell people what I want, failing at building what in English are easy, neat sentences. All I have to do is write the symbols for *height* and *fear* into his open palm before I hear Ichiro sigh. I add *danger* and *bad* for good measure, but I can already see that he understands what I couldn't communicate to Akemi.

"Why do you fear height? It cannot hurt you," he wants to know, not because he doesn't believe me but because he *does* – it's nice to not have people pulling at me or wanting words from me I don't have, for once. *Understanding*. The thought is like a warm, cozy blanket to my overworked brain.

"You fall, you have chakra, you're save," I answer, saying it out loud so the others will get it too and not simply laugh because I'm afraid of heights, "I fall, I have no chakra, I die."

Kin makes a strange hissing sound behind me and her hands stop their ministrations of my back for a second. I tense and expect a violent reaction, but her fingers go back to work seconds later and I relax. Hideki looks at me funny and Raiden simply doesn't seem to care, but that's better than anyone belittling me because I'm perfectly a normal, perfectly *useless* human being, thank you very much.

"Akemi would've caught you," the Jinchuuriki in my back finally points out, and I don't know how to feel about that – it's not like I can expect those strangers to rescue me when I'm about to die, that I can *depend* on them like they're my friends. They aren't obviously, and just assuming that someone like Aoki would rescue me is bloody damn stupid when my life is on the line. The Raikage thinks that he can benefit from me knowing an unknown language, yes, but how much is that information really worth? I don't know, and I'm not about to guess and die because I chose wrong.

My headache is back with a vengeance now. *Shit*.

"Are you a team?" I ask, motioning around the room to make clear that I mean all of them. Best to distract all of us in one go.

Hideki grins smugly and leans back in his chair, "Of course. We're one of the two best squads in Kumogakure, and one of the biggest, too. Twenty-one people all in all, the strongest shinobi of the village. We're doing the mission no-"

"Shut up, Takagi," Aoki snaps from the other side of the room, and the other ninja instantly obeys the order, his mouth clapping shut in mid-sentence. It's funny to look at, especially because Hideki does as he is told first and makes a sour face afterwards, his mouth still closed.

The other three have finished their discussion and are walking over, both Aoki and Akemi not looking happy with whatever they agreed on. The stare he gives me is full of scorn, but at least he isn't back to calling me Usui... *yet*. Depending on how bad his mood is, that and worse will probably come later when there are less people to object if he treats me like shit. Gotta love that guy. Not.

"You're... *famous*, then?" I raise my eyebrows in disbelief when I say it, just because I can and my head hurts and Aoki is an ass.

Aoki smiles smugly and bends down so we're almost face to face, "Damn right we are. We are named after one of the best shinobi in the history of Kumogakure. We're meant to be great."

I stare at him, just sit there and stare.

For a blissful instant my head is completely empty... and then my knowledge about the Naruto universe slams into me with full force. I remember everything, remember what I know about Kumo, and Konoha, and what time I'm in, and that the First Shinobi World War is about to start, and it dawns on me what they are about to tell me.

"We're the Kinkaku Force," Akemi explains proudly.