

Clouds of Thunder

Von Karu

Kapitel 6: In summer, it is the night...

I have to look extremely stupid as I just stand there and stare into space, but I can't force myself to snap out of my stupor. There's simply too much going on in my head right now for me to spare more than the absolute necessity of my attention to the outside world.

The Second Raikage. Aoki. The Kinkaku Force. Tobirama. The First Shinobi War. Aoi... this is madness. Utter madness.

"Saeko-sempai!" Daichi shouts into my ear, and only then do I realize that he must have been shaking my shoulders for some time now. His green eyes are full of confusion that I can't alleviate because how should I explain to him that his son is the biggest hope for his country right now – *unless he dies before Aoki can teach him the Black Lightning and therefore doom them all*.

"I'm sorry, Daichi," I try to reassure him, forcing myself to return his worried gaze, "I just remembered something important... it could help win the war."

"Oh," he whispers, stunned, and steps away from me immediately. He obviously thinks me important enough to believe at least part of what I'm saying, and catching him off-guard fortunately gives me time to try and get back my bearings.

"I told you she's *strange*, papa!" Aoi takes that moment to speak up, drawing both our attention, "She's not like the other ninja... can she teach me how to be a ninja, please?"

The situation is slipping from my grasp. I have no idea how to handle Aoi's demand, nor do I know what to reply to that question, and then Daichi is kneeling down beside his son and explaining to him that this isn't how it works and that I have *real* work to do and-

"Saeko, there you are," Akemi exclaims, suddenly standing between me and the Utsumi family.

Oh thank god!

"Akemi, I'm so happy to see you," I mean it when I say it, taking a step closer to my

blond savior, "Are you here to get me? Aoki ditched me with Daichi but he didn't come back for me."

"Jiro is still in a meeting with the Nidaime," Akemi answers, "He asked me to find you and bring you back to headquarters since he will be indisposed for another few hours and they don't really need me there at the moment."

She smiles at me but it is a tight smile and even I as a non-shinobi recognize the tension in her posture and light shadows under her eyes – she must have been up longer than Ichiro, Aoki and me... did she sleep at all? I've no idea really, and just hope that whatever kept her up that long wasn't anything *too* bad.

"Okada-sama," Daichi greets and pulls Aoi's head down along his as they both bow to the kunoichi, "It is a pleasure meeting you."

It's the most formal I've ever heard him talk and it reinforces my belief that Akemi is either a very powerful ninja, a very important one, or both. I wouldn't have guessed either at our first meeting, which only highlights how I have no idea about how to recognize a shinobi's status without seeing them interact with others. If I only could feel chakra....

"Likewise... Utsumi Daichi, isn't it?" she makes it a question but I highly doubt that it really is one. To me it feels more like- she's reminding him of his rank. I have no clue why, but for some reason Akemi feels like she has to remind him of who he is, or *isn't* for that matter.

"Yes," he bows *again*, "I was a student of Aoki-sensei, and this is my son Aoi."

Her dark gray eyes wander from the father to the son. For once Aoi isn't talking back but just standing there rigidly, holding her gaze with his. Something passes between them, I think, and a part of me wonders if she recognizes, recognizes who Aoi could be ten years in the future. Akemi's sensor ability makes it a possibility, however small.

"I see," she finally drawls, slowly turning her eyes away from the boy and back to me, "Saeko and I have matters to attend to, however. It was nice talking to you."

I only manage to stammer some hasty goodbyes to Daichi and Aoi before Akemi links her arms with mine and leads me down the road and away from them – her dismissal of them is so obvious that it leaves me embarrassed. A look back over my shoulder shows me Daichi waving in silent goodbye before taking his son by the hand to walk away into another direction.

The moment they have turned their backs on us I come to an immediate stop, "*That* was impolite. Very much so. Daichi treated me well, there was no need be rude to him."

"He's just a Chuunin teacher," she retorts, her frown somewhere between peeved and confused, "You have better things to do than them. They aren't important."

My laugh is loud and maybe a slight bit on the mad side. It's certainly not pretty but I don't care. I just stand there and laugh at her, at her audacity to overlook the strongest Raikage in history just because his father is an academy teacher. *Doesn't she know anything?* If he doesn't survive this war they're fucked no matter what and I- I can't-

It's a close call. *That boy is the Sandaime*, the words are on my lips, those and many more, but instead of saying them I laugh. I laugh until my throat hurts, because that's the only option I have right now.

"*You know nothing*," I tell her to her face when my laughter has died down, hysteric glee at both the quote and the fact that Akemi doesn't understand a word of English filling me.

"What were you saying?" she immediately asks, body tense and eyes hard. It's the first time she looks at me like Aoki does – like I could be *the enemy* – and I actually relax at her reaction. I'm sure that she's more of *herself* right now than I've ever seen before, that she finally shows me the side she never revealed before, calculated, cool, assertive.

We stare at each other in silence for a second, almost angry gray eyes holding my blue ones.

"*You are the leader of the Kinkaku Force, not Jiro*," I suddenly realize and wonder how I never noticed before.

Aoki is strong, he's a very dominant person from what I've seen so far, he's clever and mistrusting the things he doesn't know, he works for his advantage... his strength lies in force, the strength of both his body and mind. Akemi in contrast is almost gentle and easy to get along with – a people person. She has no Black Lightning or raw force to fall back on. She uses her mind. Her strength isn't in her non-threatening appearance but the fact that she knows how to use it. Akemi can *manipulate* people.

"Yes, I am," she affirms, calculating gray eyes meeting mine, "What did you say? Why do you care for that teacher and his son?"

I cross my arms in front of my chest, "Why don't you? I said that *you don't know* because you don't. They can make a difference in that war you want to win so badly. You don't like him, right? Why?"

"No, I don't like him. He reminds me of things I don't like to be reminded of. He's useless," there is a certain sadness behind her sharp words, but we're trading truth for truth here, not back stories, "I want to know your language. We *need* to win the war when it comes and I'm willing to pay much for that. If I can use you I will. What do *you* want?"

"I want to go home!" I'm positively hissing now, because the alternative would be screaming and I don't scream, "I want Aoki to send me back, I want my family, I want chakra to *survive* in this world and not die like you will. You won't give me any of that

because you want my knowledge, I know that, but I *don't* want to watch you die and be stuck here forever."

"You don't want to die alone," realization flashes across her pretty face and I wonder why it leaves her looking like I just punched her right in the gut. What did she think I wanted? Influence? Power? *This is ridiculous.*

"Yes, yes, yes," I throw my hands in the air, exasperated, "I want to be back with the people I love. I know how *this* will end. Dying here is *worthless*."

Our gazes lock again. Mine and the one of the kunoichi who has so much I want to have but whose knowledge is worthless to me because I'd rather be with the people I love and normal than a shinobi and lonely for the rest of my life.

She sighs. The sound goes bone-deep and is full of fatigue. Maybe Akemi is in some way as tired as I am, maybe she doesn't want to fight either.

"Listen," she runs her right hand through her long hair, "Jiro, he- he'd rather have you back where you came from. He says that you shouldn't be here and I get it now... but we want your language. The *Nidaime* wants it, and I don't wanna see you sent to the Ginkaku Force because we refused his request."

"They want me?" I know that I look dumbstruck, but that thought never entered my mind. Yes, they told me that the Ginkaku Force does politics, but I never thought that that would apply to me in any way.

"Of course," she says and laughs a laugh as humorless as mine must have been earlier, "Kurozawa wants you *badly*. The only reason the Raikage didn't give in to his demands is that Jiro claims you're his because he brought you here and the fact that I could convince him that you'd be a lot more suspicious of them than you are of us."

"I-," I'm struggling for words, "Thank you."

Akemi waves me off with her left hand and the atmosphere between us suddenly becomes a lot more relaxed, "No need to thank me. They know my stance on torture. You didn't hurt anyone, so we won't let them get their hands on you... we owe you that much."

Her eyes shine with determination and I'm proud and relieved in equal parts that she won't let the squad that tortures people get near me. I wouldn't even have known the difference between-

"That's why Aoki left me with Daichi," I murmur, a little ashamed that I swore revenge the minute he dropped me in that class – he may dislike me for whatever reason, but he still had the presence of mind to leave me with someone he trusted instead of giving the Ginkaku Force the chance to come close to me. *Maybe he's less of a bastard than I thought.*

"He dislikes you, that's all. He isn't stupid," the blond woman says lightly, shrugging at

my inquiring look.

"The question is *why* he doesn't like me," I add in the same tone of voice and am rewarded with an involuntary twitch of Akemi's lips. *I knew it*. There is something she doesn't tell me, but I can't even say if the reaction she suppressed was a grin or a grimace.

She turns around and motions for me to follow her into a tiny backstreet, "That's for you to find out. I wouldn't go there if I was you, but who am I to tell you what to do?"

Basically she just told me that I *could* find out why he hates me if I really tried but that she won't help me with that – *bloody Slytherins*. I can't help but grin at her back however, because she not only implied to me that there *is* something to find out but also deliberately issued a badly-veiled challenge to me. She wants to see how I work, I guess.

The street gives way to steep stone stairs after a couple of meters and Akemi purposefully starts to climb them. I follow in abject misery since enough time has passed since my morning workout to make the muscles in my legs ache like hell. Every step hurts and I can see no end to the stairs in the dimly lit alley. The buildings on both sides of the way are high and barely leave enough space for two people to walk beside each other. Only few windows open to the stairs and they are all tiny, barely big enough to stick one's head out of them.

If I didn't know better I'd say she's leading me along a secret passage – the place certainly looks the part.

I pant for breath in-between steps and silently curse the fact that I was always too lazy to become a regular at my local gym. A little above-average fitness would have benefited me a great deal here.

Asking Akemi for another *Shunshin* would be a good idea about now, but I'm too stubborn for that. She can't always be there to carry me around, plus I need the training. Therefore it's one step at a time in a slowness that Akemi must have noticed but mercifully doesn't comment on.

"Tell me something about Aoki," I ask my companion to kill time and take my mind off the agony that is walking, "Jiro, I mean. He's a Jounin, right?"

Akemi turns around in a whirl of light blonde hair and gray kimono folds, standing still for a second to make eye contact before letting me catch up until we're walking beside each other. Despite her slim figure she has no problems at all climbing those stairs, I note jealously.

"Yes, he's a Jounin," she answers conversationally, "Has been since they introduced the system. He was one of the highest ranking shinobi in the village even before he joined the Kinkaku Force. His Black Lightning is self-taught."

None of that surprises me. His Black Lightning jutsu became legendary in later years

and the sheer power of the technique must make him one of the strongest ninja in the village. The Nidaime may be stronger, but I honestly wouldn't bet on that. I've seen that lightening with my own eyes and it's damn *terrifying*.

"My question," Akemi interrupts my thoughts, "How educated were you in your world? What was your work? Jiro said you're a scholar, that means you're upper class I guess?"

The sigh that leaves my lips for once has nothing to do with the stairs, "My family is middle class. I- I went to school for many years and then started studying language. *Scholar* isn't an uncommon profession in my world, but still higher class. People pay language scholars like me to translate for them."

It's a little vague but I certainly won't try to explain to her what culture studies are and how hard it is to find a satisfying and well-paid job with a degree in Japanese Studies. *So not*. I don't have the language-skills for that anyway.

Since she doesn't ask any follow-up questions I guess that my answer was good enough in her book and that it's my turn again – or at least that's how I hope that game, or whatever it is we're playing, works. A question for a question, a truth for a truth.

"You're not from a ninja family," I don't phrase it as a question but I'm more or less sure that I'm right. Clan members usually have clan symbols on their clothing, a signature jutsu and an uncommon surname, but neither of those is true for Akemi. *Okada* sounds too common a name to point to a specific clan.

Her steps falter for a moment and I know that I've taken her by surprise when she turns her head to stare at me with a deer in the headlights look. Her gray eyes are wide and her mouth open. I can't help but grin at her reaction.

"No, I'm not," her voice and the tilt of her head *dare* me to mock her for it, "My parents were merchants... and how is it that you always notice the things I didn't think you *could* notice? No one ever told you about the clans."

"We were trained to notice different things, maybe," I say and try to shrug nonchalantly, "Jiro and Ichiro have the same surname, they look similar, they both wear the same symbol on the hem of their vests. Daichi and Aoi have exactly the same eyes and they wear the same symbol as well. I just guessed that they were ninja families, as you call them."

I'm telling the truth. The Aoki brothers both display the same clan symbol: a circle with a barren tree on dark blue with a hill in the background. I only noticed when they were sitting beside each other in the kitchen this morning, but she doesn't need to know that. Plus Aoi actually wears the Utsumi symbol across the front of his shirt where you can't miss it.

"Fine," she eventually agrees though the expression on her face makes it plain that she's not entirely convinced, "Why were you so upset about the teacher?"

That's the second – or the third maybe, I'm not sure – time she's asking that question. Her interest seems genuine, but I'm clever enough to be able to differentiate between her wanting to get a better grasp on my motives and a trained professional wanting to solve a puzzle. She's a bloodhound and instinctively senses that there is a possible secret for her to dig out.

A part of me wants to tell her. It's the part that wants world peace and to obliterate racism, that thinks that all people are equal and that everyone should be given the same opportunities in life – that's not how the world works however. I *know* that. Not everyone is the same, not everyone can be saved, some people *want* to be assholes... me telling her would not only take the lesson away some of them will learn the hard way, it would also change the future, and I'm neither brave nor stupid enough to open that cat box.

"It wasn't about the teacher," I tell her casually, hiding one truth in another, "And his name is Daichi, which I'm sure you will chose to continue to ignore."

Akemi looks at me funny then and opens her mouth for a follow-up question only to close it a second later when she realizes the next question isn't hers to ask. She patiently awaits her turn instead, folding her hands easily behind her neck as we continue on our way up.

I envy her for her stamina while panting to get enough breath inside my lungs and asking my question at the same time, "Where did Shoji come back from?"

Gotcha! She doesn't even flinch, but a sudden stillness overcomes her features and she takes her arms down from their self-confident but also vulnerable position in the air. That two-time read of the book about body language pays off in situations like these.

"I'd ask you where you heard that but that would be unnecessary, won't it?" she asks wryly, "Shoji was out of the village meeting a liaison from Konohagakure, another village. He arranged a meeting between our Nidaime and theirs, *Senju Tobirama*."

Of course. So the meeting between the two *kage* will take place. Whatever treaty they'll try to negotiate, the Gold and Silver Brothers will crash it, almost killing Tobirama and maybe the Raikage. It won't even matter if they'll be able to convince the Konoha side that it was a coup and no staged attack on Tobirama afterwards, because they'll either think Kumo untrustworthy because they don't honor their word or untrustworthy because the Raikage is incapable of controlling his subjects.

Honestly, it's a pity that I can't just-

"What's it about the boy, then?" Akemi drawls, sounding so bored I *almost* believe her.

As I said, *bloodhound*. I give her a sidelong glance and read from the intensity behind her stare that whatever half-truth I could throw her way wouldn't satisfy her curiosity on the matter.

There is *nothing* I can answer to that question to get her off the track. I can't make up an on-the-fly lie that is elaborate enough to distract someone as sharp-minded as the kunoichi beside me, and trying and failing will only make her more suspicious of what I'm hiding.

Heavens help me, I'm fishing – for what I have absolutely no idea. Just *something* that will distract her, get her to focus on something else and drop the topic for now...

Desperation makes me creative. It always has.

I stubbornly stare at the steps in front of me, not trusting myself to make eye-contact, "Who is Shiori?"

Akemi stops dead in her tracks.

She doesn't say anything, just stands there, rooted to the spot, and looks at me with cool gray eyes devoid of any emotion. It's an eerie stare, especially given that I've never seen such *stillness* in a living person.

After what feels like an eternity she blinks, only once, and then life comes back into her body, slowly taking away the unnatural motionlessness. She starts resuming her climb then, eyes firmly fixed on mine, and even as she's moving it's not like before and I know that in those few seconds of silence something has *changed*.

Only when she strides past me do I notice that I've halted moving as well, mirroring her sudden stop. I hurry to keep up with her, glad that the end of stairs finally has come in sight.

We passed the last building some minutes ago and the path is bordered by walls of mountain on both sides now, the stairway coiling between them in an irregular pattern. The end of the way is marked by a platform of sorts that I can't see that well until we're suddenly right in the middle of it.

I blink against the low sun and I need a moment to get a glimpse of where we are.

It's the most north-western point of the cloud village. We're so high up that the only thing towering above us is the Raikage Tower in the east. Everything else extends below us: buildings, streets, parks... the view goes on to the city wall at the far end of the village and beyond that, to a land full of mountains and tundra and maybe forests just below the horizon – I can't see that far without my glasses.

"It's..." I whisper, struggling for words, "Beautiful, truly beautiful."

Akemi grins proudly when she takes in my fascination. She indicates with her hand towards the village, "A sight to behold, yes. I wanted to show you the last time, but you were too afraid of the height."

For once I am left completely speechless. Akemi didn't have to go out of her way to

show me this, especially considering that we were arguing not an hour ago. She could have just used the Body Flicker to get us up here if she'd wanted to simply impress me. There would have been a hundred easier ways to manipulate me, all of them associated with a lot less effort on her part.

That leaves only the one conclusion: she did bring me up here *because she wanted to*. It implies genuine interest, that she *cares*. The knowledge dazzles me. I expected her to only want my secrets, not my approval.

"Why do you care?" I ask her after a pause I know has been too long, "You don't need to become my friend, I'll give my language to you anyway. I know I have no choice."

She blinks, confused, and then gives me a look that asks me whether I'm really that stupid. *Way to make to me feel good about myself.*

"You are interesting," she declares, leaning closer until she's well into my personal space, "You don't back down, you talk back, you *fight* us when you can. You respect that we have power but you don't seem to want it for yourself. You aren't a trained ninja but you think like one... you fear what we can do but you don't fear *us*."

Well, I don't really know what to reply. Akemi is right in some way, but I can't explain to her that I know their world, their future even, and that just sitting around passively and waiting for them to get on with stuff will most likely result in my death. Giving up or cowering in fear won't help me survive this trip – and that's what I want, to *survive*.

"I cannot give up," I admit, "I want to go home. If I have to teach you my language to achieve that I will."

For a while she doesn't move, just stares at me with a hands width of space separating us, and it makes me uncomfortable. I can't read Akemi, not *really*, and I suspect that I'll have to be able to if I want to come out of this in one piece.

"You will teach me," she suddenly says, "You will teach me and I promise that you will go home. I will do everything in my power to get you back."

There is no need for her to promise me anything. She'll get what she wants anyway, no matter how this turns out for me. I don't understand why she-

Akemi interrupts my musings, "You are *special*. I've never met someone like you. You don't deserve what is happening right now... I don't want to be your enemy in this. So I'll promise. A deed for a deed and everything else is just between us. I won't tell the Nidaime and you won't try to sabotage our war effort."

"You're offering... a truce?" I ask, overwhelmed by the situation.

"No," she denies sharply, shaking her head for emphasis before lifting her chin, puffing out her huge chest and squaring her shoulders, "I'm offering *friendship*."

I'm floored. What she offers makes no sense to me and I tell her so with a whispered,

"Why?"

"If you could use chakra," there is a tone to her voice that could almost be regret, "We wouldn't be having this discussion. *You don't see yourself*. Not as we do at least. You don't shrink from power and you don't resent it either. You could hate us but you don't, you were sitting in a room full of Jounin with a Jinchuuriki in your back and actually *fell asleep*!"

"I was tired," I defend myself immediately, but recognize from her hissed intake of breath that that wasn't the right thing to say.

"Yes!" she all but yells, "And you didn't even care that Kin could have killed you in seconds. *Everyone* in that room could have."

"I know!" I snarl back, getting angry, "But I couldn't do anything about that. She was *nice* to me, you know? She treated me like a normal human being, she cared for how I felt and tried to help. She's carrying a demon inside her since she was a kid, every day for most her life. Maybe she looked out for me because she remembers how it is to have no one. What if she just wanted to *talk* to someone? What if she just wanted a *friend*?"

"*Exactly*," Akemi agrees, her voice suddenly gone soft, "And you simply sat there and trusted her to not rip you to shreds *because she could*... you don't have an inkling what that means, do you?"

I cross my arms in front of my chest uneasily, neither knowing that she wants to tell me nor how to respond to that gentle tone of hers.

She runs a hand through her blonde hair in frustration, "We don't need strength, we're the strongest ninja in the village. We have power, we have influence... our friendship cannot be bought. Trust is worth more to us than anything else you could have offered."

"Okay?" I finally ask more than state, wondering how fucked up this system is if they can't afford friends, and at the same time berating myself for simply falling asleep in that room yesterday. It doesn't really work since, as I said, they could have killed me at any moment no matter what – it is kind of ironic however how Akemi and the Kinkaku Squad place that much importance into trust while I never gave what happened a second thought.

We make eye contact again and her expression is absolutely serious.

"*Friends*, then?" I tentatively ask, still not believing that this is really happening.

Her smile is the sun, bright, full of happiness and disarmingly honest. *This means a lot to her*, I finally realize, stunned by the knowledge that in this world and time friendship seems to be worth more than money or influence.

Taking a step back Akemi holds out her hand to me. We shake hands and before I can

even think about pulling mine back she has started to drag me between towards a corner of the mountain into which the platform is build.

"*What the-*" is all I manage to get out when suddenly another flight of stairs opens before us – the entrance is hidden so well by the edges of rock around us that I'd never have noticed had the kunoichi not pulled me into the niche. It's not exactly a hidden passage nor anything, but you'll definitely have to know that the path is there to not completely overlook it.

"Since you liked the streets so much yesterday I think you should see that," she informs me, "The place is older than the village, it's been inhabited since long before Kumogakure was founded."

I have no idea what she's talking about but follow along none the less. The steps here are much more crudely done than the ones on the other side. It makes the narrow path with the steep steps much harder to walk and our progress is slow. Even Akemi is watching her steps very carefully now.

"This will take a while, I guess?" I ask between glances at my feet. Tripping and falling down these stairs looks pretty deadly to me.

"Yes," Akemi affirms immediately, "It's the only way down and... well, it's very old. We have to be careful or-"

Case in point. I make the mistake of looking at her while she speaks and my right foot lands on the edge of a step instead of in the middle of one. As a result I slip, then lose my footing altogether and before I can fully comprehend what just happened a strong arm has wrapped itself around my middle and pulled into my companion. She crashes into the wall of the mountain back-first with me hitting her chest, and I hear a pained moan when the air is pressed out of her lungs on impact.

"Shit!" she swears in pain, still hugging me close.

"*Bloody fucking hell,*" I agree in English a moment later, slowly breaking away from her tight embrace and making sure to not misstep again as I do so. One brush with death-by-mountain-stairs is enough for today.

We step away from each other carefully and I don't miss how she rubs her lower back when she moves off the wall – if have to do something to make that up to her later. Damn, if I just weren't such a klutz!

"What did you just say?" the blonde asks before I can even get a *thank you* in, her gray eyes shining with curiosity.

"Err..." I stammer, caught a little off-guard, "I was cursing."

The shine in her eyes becomes wicked and a mischievous smile spreads on her lips, "Teach me."

I never *ever* imagined that I'd someday be inside the Naruto-Universe of all things, still less teaching English to a Kumogakure kunoichi – especially not a pretty blonde one who grins with glee when I start reciting English swear words and laughs when I struggle with finding Japanese equivalents.

Maybe I will get out of here alive.