

Clouds of Thunder

Von Karu

Kapitel 5: Are drawn into thin streams.

"Would you take a seat, please?" Daichi asks, and I can't help but notice that that's what it is: *a question*. He could have phrased it as an order but didn't, and I'm curious about what made him use this very polite wording instead of a simple command.

I nod to tell him that I will do as he asked, and wander over towards the three rows full of young shinobi staring at me like I'm the second coming of Namikaze Minato – well, the first actually, since Minato isn't even born yet... that thought creeps me out a lot.

They are teenagers. I'm bad at guessing the ages of kids, but all of them seem to have hit puberty to some degree, so they can't be that young. They're maybe fourteen on average, the oldest boy in the class looking close to sixteen. There are some younger ones as well, I guess them to be twelve or thirteen, and I also notice the gaping absence of girls. *No gender equality in this world.*

Most seats are taken – I count sixteen kids all in all – and in the end I decide that one evil isn't worse than the other in this case, and sit down between a small kid staring at me with huge, dark eyes, and an older student who examines me sharply when I slide into the seat beside him.

Luckily for me the walk was a short one, because otherwise I wouldn't have been able to hide the shaking of my legs. Those rounds took more of a toll on me than I'd originally thought, and the last thing I need is stumbling face first to the floor in front of a group of adolescent ninja. I may be able to laugh about myself on occasions, but there is a difference between honestly funny and humiliating – not to mention that I'd rather have them guessing about my possible strength than knowing that I can't even use chakra.

My stomach of course chooses that moment to rumble, telling the people around me in no uncertain terms that I'd really like to have some food now. Well, that can't be-

"Would you like some water?" the small boy on my right asks, bowing his head to avoid eye contact.

"That would be- yes, thank you," I use the polite language again, careful only to use words I'm able to pronounce as Japanese as possible. Since I've heard the Aoki

brothers talk I'm positive that I can get away with having a accent without anyone getting suspicious.

The boy gets up and walks over to a side table I hadn't noticed before. He picks up a carafe with water and fills one of the stony cups standing beside it with the liquid.

I follow his movements with my eyes and also take the chance to look over his attire. He is basically wearing the same Kumogakure ninja gear I am minus the shinobi vest. I see no headband on him either, but he is definitely too old to not at least be a Genin – it's war time, and from what I've seen of Madara, Hashirama and their siblings, children basically became ninja as soon as they could walk some decades ago. Yes, one usually becomes Genin at twelve in Naruto's time, but I doubt that this is already the case.

"Thank you very much," I take the cup when he offers it to me, drinking half the water in one go. It's surprisingly cool, maybe it's mountain water from a spring around here.

"You're welcome," he bows his head again. His hair is as bleach blonde as Aoki's but longer and messier I notice while staring at the back of his head, waiting for the chance to get a good look at his face. When he lifts his head again his gaze fixes on the blackboard at the front of the room as fast as possible and I wonder why he won't look me in the eye.

Daichi has resumed his lesson meanwhile, but whatever he's teaching about is totally over my head. He writes numbers on the blackboard and then transfers them into a chart, remarking here and there on what have to be important points, pressing the chalk down on certain numbers for emphasis.

Since the younger boy doesn't want to talk to me I turn to the older one on my left. He's a lot taller, has blonde hair, dark skin and a muscular build – that seems to be the *default setting* for Kumogakure ninja I muse in my head, careful to not outright snicker.

"Excuse me," I address him, keeping my voice low enough to not drown out what Daichi is saying, "What is this lesson about?"

His eyes snap around to look at me immediately, as does his whole body. We're of the same height, which is kinda depressing if I think about it since the kid is maybe fifteen and I'm a fully grown woman. I try to ignore it however, and focus on the brown eyes staring at me.

For a second he doesn't say anything, but then starts to slowly explain what Daichi is teaching at the moment. His voice is calm, steady, and his wording extremely deliberate even to my ears, like it is very important to him to not say anything wrong – it helps me to follow his words, but I still understand less than half of what he is trying to tell me.

All I gather is that the lesson has something to do with calculations, writing down expenses and keeping stock of what food is available and which has to be rationed. It

seems purely theoretical and even if I'd understand what Daichi is saying I'd still think it to be hellishly boring.

I nod to the boy in thanks, not bothering to say anything more, and he takes it as a dismissal to go back to listening. His facial expression is completely blank, and I guess that this is the polite way to listen to something that you absolutely don't give a fuck about – either that or he always looks like that, and I hope for his sake that he doesn't. It's uncomfortable looking at someone who gives you no clue *at all* whether they like or dislike what you're talking about.

Since both of my neighbors are now following Daichi's lecture that I don't understand most of I instead turn to look at the students around me. All of them are giving me sidelong glances anyway whenever they think they can get away with it.

Like the two nameless boys sitting on either side of me they neither wear headbands nor shinobi vests – by now I think that it's some sign of status and that they're not allowed to display it for certain reasons. Maybe combat vests aren't allowed in classrooms? ...that doesn't explain the missing headbands however. Since I still think they're too old to be Genin there has to be reason that they don't wear them as well, but I'm unable to make head or tail of it.

The other thing they all have in common is that they avoid to make eye contact with me, even the oldest ones. Usually I'd say that they're intimidated by me, but that makes no sense at all. The other reason would be that I'm a pariah of some sort, but I look like them and appeared beside who I guess is a well-known ninja of Kumogakure, so they should have no reason to reject-

Of course. I was brought in here by Aoki, a most likely famous shinobi of the time, was wearing full combat gear, still a little disheveled from those runs earlier, and – probably most important of all – they can't sense any chakra coming from me. *None.*

All the ninja in the room have to think that I'm a shinobi, a *damn good* one, and so they treat me accordingly: as their *superior* – I just so manage to suppress the urge to put my forehead down on the desk in front of me and grown.

Their behavior just makes a lot more sense to me, but sadly enough that doesn't bring me much closer on how Kumo's ninja system works. In Konoha the children are taught in classrooms until they pass their Genin test, after which they are assigned to a teacher in teams. They stay in that team until they graduate to Chuunin – or until the team is dissolved.

So far I haven't seen *any* team of a Jounin with their Genin, and by now I'm questioning if something like that actually exists here... but if they don't form teams how are the upcoming ninja trained? If I take that class as an example I'd guess that they maybe go through classroom lessons and field training simultaneously, which poses the question whether that field training is taught in classes as well or if they each have their own sensei for that. It would require a lot of teachers that way, but then again I don't even know how many shinobi live in Kumogakure.

I don't think I'll get an answer to any of those questions soon, so I stare out of the window instead. The sky is still gray – I get the feeling that it always is above the Cloud Village – and the only other thing I can see are the steep mountains with buildings inside them. We aren't on ground level obviously, maybe two stories up, and the view is towards the mountain ridge.

My legs are still done for from that run earlier, I'm hungry and Daichi's lesson sadly hasn't become any easier to follow from when I listened in last. It's kind of boring, even when the surroundings are new to me and I welcome the break.

Somewhere along the line of looking at the sky I must have dozed off, because my eyes are suddenly closed where they should be open, and when I get around to finally opening them everyone is staring at me. *Well, fuck.*

Pro that I am – *not* – I try to not let it show how surprised I am. The kids are whispering to each other anyway, it's not like I can stop them... at least I don't snore, and a ten minute nap fortunately isn't deep enough to get me to talk in my sleep. Maybe they just think that I closed my eyes in concentration which-

"Pay attention," Daichi chides his students in that exact moment. He has crossed his arms in front of his chest and gives everyone, including me, the evil eye.

It's not like I actually did anything, though. Yes, I'm distracting the children, but I didn't encourage the staring and whispering in any way. They're probably just as bored with this lecture as I am, can't fault them for being more interested in the fake upper class kunoichi sitting in their middle, really.

"But it's boring, Utsumi-sensei," some kid wails. From my place in the second row I don't see who says it, but it doesn't really matter. All the other students around me are nodding in agreement, and maybe I wasn't the only one nodding off here – honestly, trained ninja my ass, those are kids and at their age I would've stopped paying attention to a presentation as theoretical as this one hours ago.

"Can't *she* tell us something?" another student asks. He doesn't really say *she*, but the word he uses is one I've never heard before, and I strongly suspect that it hasn't been used in modern Japanese for a few hundred years at least. The way he says it is highly polite however, and it drives home the point that they think me to be someone, well, *important*.

Daichi's eyes dart over to me and then immediately back to the dark-haired boy. He answers in a stern voice that it's impolite to impose on guests, and he should have better manners, and it isn't my job to teach them but his and therefore they should leave me alone and listen to him.

The kids naturally look disappointed. They want some kind of action I think, and Daichi isn't going to provide any to them in the near future.

They think I'm a Jounin or something, of course they're going to be more interested in me and what I say than the dry theory their teacher is trying to get them to learn –

and I doubt that Aoki is coming back for me any time soon, so that situation won't change unless I do something about it. *Sigh.*

"Maybe you could switch the subject," I finally suggest to Daichi, careful to once more be as polite as I can get without talking down myself.

He doesn't look angry as I half-suspected, but more taken aback by my comment, "What would you suggest I teach them, Saeko-sempai?"

For a moment I'm confused that he is addressing me in the form a student addresses someone who is in the class above them, but then I just ignore it in favor of thinking up on what I could propose he teach his students for the rest of the class.

"You could teach them how to plan, how to read their enemy, how to use the landscape around them in their favor, when to defend instead of attack and how to hold their ground on a battlefield. Something like that," I tell him, using the few words I know as good as I can to get across my point in the hope that it actually makes sense.

Daichi stares at me with his fascinating eyes, then blinks and finally nods, "*Strategy*. Yes, I can do that."

Thank you, now I know that word.

He turns back to face the class, "We will continue with this class after the break. I expect you to pay more attention to the subject then, I won't tolerate any more inattentiveness. Dismissed."

The boys take that as their cue to get up as fast as possible and hurry out of the room in groups of two or three. All of them give me badly veiled glances again when they pass my chair, but avoid their eyes as soon as I catch their gazes and stare back at them – pecking order seems to clearly dictate staring a superiors in the eye is at least impolite, probably even offensive. *I'm not protesting.*

Only when all of the students have left the room do I get up from my seat, moving carefully to not stumble and fall on my less than steady legs. Daichi is cleaning the blackboard and turns back to smile at me when he is finished.

"Would you care for some lunch?" he asks while leading me out of the classroom, motioning for me to follow him when he takes a turn to the left.

Well, he heard my rumbling stomach earlier. Still, he's probably only trying to be polite, and I can't fault him for that – overly polite is *leagues* better than how Aoki treats me after all. Therefore I simply nod in agreement and muse on how I'm really getting good at this *quiet, professional nodding* thing.

We walk past a lot of students – I see some little kunoichi now – who all bow to Daichi or at least greet him in passing. Most of them are of the same age as the class I just sat in on, some younger but none much older. It reinforces my belief that Kumogakure trains their students in the field and in the classroom at the same time. That many

academy students would be utter madness.

Food is served in a dining hall for the teachers, and many of them follow me with their eyes when Daichi leads me to a table beside the large row of windows. It's only adults in here and most of them are displaying Kumogakure headbands somewhere on their bodies.

I neither know nor care where the students get their food, and lose that train of thought altogether when Daichi places a plate of what has to be the in-universe version of curry in front of me. It has potatoes in it and is served with wild rice instead of the white one Akemi bought for me yesterday, but I'm so hungry I absolutely don't care about that.

The food is quite good for canteen standards. We eat in silence and I'm glad that Daichi doesn't try to make conversation, because I'd rather concentrate on eating instead of investing more than half my brain into finding the right words to say in return.

Instead of water we get green tea to drink here, and I note instantly that it's still as disgusting to drink cold as I remember it to be. There is no alternative however, and I'm thirsty.

Contrary to what I'm used to the serving Daichi brought actually wasn't too large for me, and I'm pleasingly filled by the time my plate is almost empty. I didn't manage to eat everything but there isn't much left when I'm done, plus I was surprised in a good way about the fact that the curry wasn't that spicy – I've never been a person for spicy food, as all my friends like to remind me.

It's so strange being here without them, to actually be in the *Naruto-universe* without Mimi beside me to bitch about the fact that we're in Kumogakure of all places because she'd want to meet Minato and- well, mourning what never happened is useless. Yes, it would be great to have *someone* here at least, a person who *knows* me, but that's just wishful thinking at this point.

The sky is still gray. It's a little brighter than in the early morning, but also without that certain glow in the east that told you that the sun was rising. Now it's just the same dull gray with darker clouds gathering somewhere far away.

At least the view is good from up here, maybe even better than the one from Aoki's flat because this building is closer to the center of the village. I can see some of the landscape outside the village now, but it's all harsh, rocky ground with only few trees and barely any-

"You look a lot like Shiori," Daichi suddenly says, his voice quiet but intent.

Luckily I don't face him, otherwise he would have seen my widening eyes and confused frown. Who the hell is Shiori?

I turn around to stare at him, and the man actually cringes when he looks me in the

eye – whatever that comment was supposed to mean he obviously thinks that it was dead on target, and not in a good way. How did he think I'd react? Why should I know this woman?

"I'm sorry," he adds hastily when he realizes that my reaction is far from positive, "I didn't mean it like that. If you-

He obviously doesn't know what else to say, just places his hands on the table in front of him and looks at me anxiously. I however don't know what to tell him to ease the tense silence between us since I don't even have clue what he was getting at in the first place – a change of topic seems to be in order.

"You are a Chuunin?" I ask more for confirmation than anything else, because using Jounin as teachers would be a ridiculous waste of resources.

"Yes," he answers, giving me a brief smile of gratitude for breaking the tension, "Aoki-sensei trained me, actually. We both can use Lightning Release and so he thought that he could teach me his Black Lightning... I never mastered it, though. My lightning simply isn't powerful enough for that jutsu. I tried but never managed to get it right."

"So he dropped you," I summarize. I've only known Aoki for a day, but simply can't imagine him having the patience or the will to train someone who obviously doesn't have the talent to learn his technique. *Poor guy.*

Daichi actually smiles at me before he eventually answers, "He saved me the embarrassment of having to give up. I was young, I was ambitious... I needed that failure to realize that I'll never be an outstanding ninja like *you* are."

It's a plural *you*, and I'm very tempted to laugh in his face at that. I manage to transform what leaves my lips into something of a snort however, may he think of that whatever he wants. He clearly thinks me connected to Aoki in some way and I won't say anything to the contrary – especially since I might be able to use that knowledge to my advantage in the future.

Before I can try to get some more information out of him Daichi gets up though, and when I look around I see that most of the other teacher have left the room already.

Break is over it seems, and we walk back to the classroom after handing our plates off to a chubby woman who greets us with a warm smile. She is maybe fifty and exchanges a few words with my companion before she sends us off to not be late for class – she's the first civilian I've seen so far who treats shinobi like ordinary citizens.

The students are already back and seated when we arrive and I take my place between them while Daichi walks up the far corner of the room and takes two scrolls from a shelf. He places them on the table in front of the blackboard and then unseals the content of both.

What emerges from within them are a map of some kind and a row of... tokens? The combination makes we think of a game of *Monopoly* and not a way of training possibly

deadly Kumogakure shinobi, but he's the teacher – plus I doubt that those things would have been stored in the classroom to begin with if there wasn't any practical utility for them.

As it turns out we'll be playing a game of *The Art of War* as I affectionately dub it.

The map shows different locations and different terrain, with points that can be defended or captured depending on what the momentarily objective is. The different tokens are used to depict supply convoys, different troops of ninja of various rank and specialties, unknown or known enemy troops and sometimes even civilians.

As usual I only understand half of what is said, but this time I actually don't have to listen that closely because the game is mostly strategy. I *have* read Sun Tzu two years ago, and even though I don't remember everything in detail it's still enough for me to know how to win this game – which I won't have to anyway because the lesson is supposed to be for the mini ninja and not me.

They're highly motivated and having some fun on top of that it seems. While Daichi is explaining the rules they are already whispering excitedly with each other, and most eyes are now at the front of the classroom instead of on me.

"Now come here so we can begin," Daichi orders, motioning for the class to stand up and build a semicircle around his table, "Tatsuo-kun, you are first. Remember what I told you earlier."

The one stepping up to begin the game is the shy boy that was sitting on my right before. He plays fairly good as far as I can tell, but since he's going up against his teacher it isn't surprising that he loses in the end – Daichi praises him when they are done before calling for another boy to replace him.

In most games the students are the attacking force, but some have to be defenders and Daichi plays one game against one of the older students where the objective of both of them is simply to destroy all enemy forces. That one is interesting but ends in a mess since the boy – despite being the best tactical player of all the participants so far – absolutely forgets that it's no win if his troops die defeating the enemy. *There exists no draw in war.*

"Saeko would you do us the honor of playing a game?" Daichi suddenly asks me, catching me completely off guard. There is challenging gleam in his sea-blue eyes, *he thinks I think this is below me*, and he knows full well that there is no way I can say no to that offer without losing face in front of his kids. *Slytherin much?*

"Of course," I agree, bowing first to him and then to the class, "Who would like to be my opponent?"

For once the *kami* – Japan-inspired world and everything, so I guess they're what you pray to here – seem to be on my side: one of the boys steps forward immediately, taking away the possibility of me having to face off with Daichi who is quite good at this game from what I've seen.

He has dark brown hair but light skin and is one of those I guessed to be around sixteen years old. His eyes are brown, his gaze sharp and head held high.

"Manabu-kun then," Daichi declares cheerfully, "Please come up to the board both of you."

I only listen to his explanation of our initial situation and individual objectives with half an ear. Most of my attention is fixed on the new map he just spread out on the desk. He has me playing the defender in this case, in a well-fortified but wholly outnumbered settlement, with the boy- Manabu as the attacking force. He wins if he captures or destroys my camp while I have no obvious chance of winning.

In principle it should be an interesting game with me at the disadvantage, but he makes a mistake. Only one.

Never lay siege to a strong city.

He better should have read *The Art of War*, too. The villages haven't existed long enough for people to have a broader knowledge on how large scale siege has to be done however, and that is his downfall. It's not that I'm *better*, it's the fact that I have hundreds of years of Chinese warfare behind me.

There simply comes the point where his army can't be feed anymore by his supplies, which I actively help make happen by using guerilla warfare to destroy his supply convoys – the look Daichi gives me when he sees that tactic lets me know that that isn't something they've been exposed to before. He terminates the game shortly after that by declaring it a draw, but the children around me take it to automatically mean that since Manabu didn't win I did.

This train of thought is flawed of course, since the only way I would've won in a real life situation would have been with the arrival of reinforcements. I don't bother to tell them, though.

"Thank you for playing with me," Manabu tells me when we step away from the game board, extending his hand in front of his body before suddenly pulling it back and hurriedly executing a formal bow, "I will not make that mistake again."

His brown eyes are honest, serious even, and that takes a lot of the fun of having won of a game of strategy against a real ninja – however low-rank he may be – away from me. I didn't really do it to teach him anything, I just wanted to have some fun.

"Thank *you*. It was a pleasure," I retort and hide my smile at seeing the slight blush on his cheeks by returning his bow.

Sadly enough ours was the last match of the day. Daichi calls off the lesson now with a final speech to his charges, reminding them *again* how important it is to *not* charge into a battle head-first and that they have much more to learn before they can become field commanders of their own.

"Do you know when Aoki-sensei will come back to collect you?" he eventually asks, and I have to suppress a snide remark about Aoki not giving a shit about me.

"No, I don't know," I answer, shaking my head, "Is that a problem? Can I stay with you for a while longer?"

To me it feels like I'm imposing myself on Daichi, especially since "sitting" me isn't something he should have to do in the first place. Aoki got that task, but of course he simply pushed his burden onto other people the moment he could get away with it – my dislike for that man just grows and grows, and he's got the talent to not even having to be around for that to happen.

"It's fine," he assures me, waving off my concerns, "I'll have to collect my son from daycare, you're welcome to accompany me. He likes meeting ninja... don't be surprised, though, he's young and rash. He can be a little *difficult*."

He has a son? I didn't expect *that*. Daichi is maybe my age and I just generally assume that people my age don't have kids. Kids are for those in their late twenties or older and not a guy as young and good-looking as him. I'd just thought he would be *enjoying life* so to speak instead of having a family of his own already.

I can't deny the pride that shines in his unusual eyes however as he talks about his son, or the unconditional love of a parent that makes him almost radiate with happiness.

As it turns out the daycare isn't inside the same building as the Academy – or whatever this is supposed to be – but a normal two-story house standing beside it. Like all the other buildings which aren't crafted into stone it's wooden and even has its own garden where a few cherry trees are currently starting to bloom. It *must* be spring then.

We only meet three other people until we enter the garden, two of which are a kunoichi with her little son in her arms that pass us on the way inside the daycare, and the other is a civilian woman sitting on the porch by the garden and nodding to Daichi as we walk by her. She gives me a curious glance that I try to ignore.

A handful of children are playing tag between the trees and Daichi stops when we are in hearing range, "Aoi! Come on, we're going home."

At first I don't see any kid reacting to his call and think to myself that children will be children, meaning that Daichi will have to pry his son away from the game by force, but then a dirty brown flash is hurling towards us.

The father catches the son in mid-step, picking him out of the air and spinning him around himself once, the boy letting out gleeful cry at the motion, "Papa!"

Again he isn't what I expected. When Daichi said *daycare* I thought about a young child, maybe three or four years old. This boy is much older however, elementary

school age I guess... and he's strong, holding on to his father easily as said man spins him around.

"This is Saeko. Say hello," Daichi instructs his son as he places him back down on the ground to face me, "She's a very capable kunochi."

Well, I wouldn't have put it that way, but let the man believe that. I play along and bend down until I am eye level with the little boy who isn't so little on closer inspection, "I am Saeko, it's nice to meet you."

"I'm Aoi," he grunts in return. He's not being polite about the introduction and looks wary when he takes a step closer to me. His eyes are the same bluish green color as his father's and he has short, dirty blonde hair.

"I don't feel chakra from you," he accuses me, "You're strange."

I laugh, *he's cute*, and then catch his gaze, "Shionbi can hide their chakra if they want to, you know? Maybe I'm just really good at that."

"No, you're *strange*," Aoi insists, stomping his foot once, his lips twitching into an adorable pout. He catches me smiling at that though, and his pursed lips morph again to form a scowl. He scowls at me. *He scowls at me...* I can't help it, I stare.

His skin isn't the same color as his father's I realize now, the tone is considerable lighter, not light per se but rather *caramel* in color, for lack of a better word. That in itself isn't overly remarkable, as is his ash blonde hair, and even paired with his sea-green eyes I wouldn't have noticed the similarity if it wasn't for that distinctive scowl.

"Fine, I'm strange," I agree, "But maybe you are too, *A-chan*."

Somewhere in my head, behind all that rational thought and the knowledge that they would never *ever* believe me if I told them what really happened to me, a voice is laughing hysterically – I don't bother trying to quash it.

He actually *growls* at me this time, but the diaper version of the Third Raikage is only that, plus I'm having too much fun at the moment to care.

"Don't be like that, Aoi," Daichi scolds, and *god* is it fun seeing the mighty A being ordered around by his dad like the stubborn little boy he is. *I could get used to that.*

"But papa!" he whines, "She's strange and she's a ninja... I wanna be a ninja, why can't I be ninja? I wanna be a ninja now! I wanna be like you."

Someone has a temper. I'm not surprised.

"You *know* that you have to be seven to become a ninja, Aoi," his father reminds him, neither for the first nor second time I guess, "Another half a year and you can go and take part in the shinobi training, like everyone else. The Raikage will not make an exception for you just because you want it. *We talked about that.*"

And that's the end of *that* argument – though I'm curious if the Nidaime would make an exception if I told him that this little brat will become his successor and the strongest of all the Raikage one day. At the moment he's only a six year old kid anyway, he doesn't he even know the Black- he doesn't know the Black Lightning yet, the First Shinobi World War is about to start and Aoki is a member of the Kinkaku Force, likely to die on their mission to kill Tobirama.

Fuck.