

Clouds of Thunder

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Kapitel 1: In spring, it is the dusk...

Cold. Freezing, biting cold. That's the first thing I notice because... well, I'm prone to having strange dreams. I'd had a phase as a kid where I'd had nightmares pretty much every night. The world being in strange colors, animals in shapes they absolutely shouldn't have, monsters trying to eat me... there had come the time where I'd just rode with it and concentrated really hard on opening my eyes until I really did, ending the dream. No one ever gets *used* to such dreams – or so I think – but acceptance and not freaking out that much helps a great deal in overcoming crazy dreams.

The cold however is another matter entirely – because I have never, *ever*, felt temperature in a dream. Hunger yes, thirst yes, the need to pee definitely, but not a single time any change of temperature.

I open my eyes and realize at the same time that what I'm lying on is *definitely* not my bed, and it's hard with edges, and did I mention the friggin' cold?

Ok, don't freak. I'm staring at a sky gray from clouds, and there is wind and something that *sounds* like a bird somewhere and by now I'm shivering from the cold. What the... no, no, no, you don't panic. There is some explanation for all that – there has to be, because as far as dreams go that tops every single one I've ever had and that says-

Fuck. I manage sitting up and pulling my old, black, *thick*, graduation-sweater closer around my body as I cross my arms in front of my chest in an attempt to defend against the cold. It doesn't help. My sweatpants are even thinner, but at least my socks are warm and fluffy – at the moment.

Hills- no, mountains. Everywhere. This has to be the fucking Himalaya, or at least the Alps with the way their peaks vanish into the misty clouds. It would fit the cold at any rate, and the rocky ground beneath me, but then again if this was the Himalaya there would have to be snow but there is none, so it could be the Alps because it's summer and-

Something moves. Or someone walks, because that's the sound of feet on gravel. I recognize it, because we have too many hiking trails no one ever bothered to asphalt for the simple fact that gravel is *so* much cheaper, no matter how shitty it is for cycling or walking in shoes that aren't sneakers or hiking boots.

My head snaps to the right.

The man's dark chocolate skin stands out against the grayish color of the sky, his peroxide blonde hair reminds me of those native African tribes with the light blonde, really curly hair, but his is straight and- you have to be fucking kiddin' me!

No, just no. This is *not* happening right now, because what is going on here is not right no matter how you turn it, and just fucking no.

I'm creative, sometimes in the strangest way, and I dream crap alright, but this is just...

He doesn't say anything. Just stops three or so meters away from me – of course, he doesn't know me, I could be an enemy, he has to *assume* I'm an enemy – and I stare. Staring is all I'm good for right now, because that fucking Kumo headband is all *in-your-face*, and I'm going crazy, have to be because this is just too real to be anything but.

I was lazing in my bed a minute ago, and now I'm face-to-face with that Kumo-nin who's staring at me like I'm an alien – can't blame him, I am kind of... or more than kind of, and I'm cold and he's a freaking ninja for god's sake, and he could kill me, and this is just too much.

"Who are you? Where are you from?" his voice is deep and the word's sound terrible to my ears because his dialect is just too strong.

He has to think I'm stupid the way I still gawk at him, but my brain just turns what he said over and over and over again, because I understand but I don't, not really, and what is- he's talking Japanese, of course.

Naruto, Kishimoto Masashi, manga. Japanese. The guy is talking fucking Japanese.

Fuck my life.

"Do you understand me?" he asks while coming closer. I'm a shivering, confused, horrified bundle of female on the ground, he has to see that I'm not a threat – no one can act that good, or at least I can't.

Breath. In. Out. Breath. In and out and in and out... I desperately try to slow down my galloping heart and stop staring, but neither really works. Come on, talk to him. He doesn't seem hostile as of right now, and I don't want to give him any reason to be.

"Y- yes, I understand," I choke out, fully knowing my Japanese sounds foreign – I fucking am, no matter if this is Japan, or me going nuts, or the Naruto- better don't think about that right now. Some kind of communication is essential here. Communicate, focus, don't scream, don't run, *don't fucking panic*.

His eyes narrow for a moment, then he steps up to me, pulls me up by my right arm and before I know what happened he's put his white cloak around my shoulders. His grip is tight and he won't let go, but the cloth helps against the cold.

"Who are you? Where are you from?" he repeats the questions from before. His tone is firm and now that he knows I understand him – or at least thinks I do, because my Japanese is definitely not on a conversational level – he obviously expects an answer.

I rummage around my head for the words, but the situation is not best for making me relaxed enough to come up with something that is both comprehensible and tells him what I want to say. Shit, shit, shit, I'm so not up for this.

"I'm human... not from here," is the best I can come up with, and when he gives me a calculating look I can see that he most likely doesn't believe me, though my Japanese seems to be bad enough to convince him that I'm really not used to speaking the language.

This close I can see that his eyes are really dark brown and he has a fine scar running down his right cheek. It would have been easier if he wasn't clever, but his gaze clearly shows that he is and his mouth is one thin line of displeasure. I probably confuse him, but well that's true on both sides right now.

With one sudden movement he has pulled me to his side with one arm and I see his hands coming together, but the moment I think *jutsu* it's already too late and we're, well... vanishing. To the naked eye that's probably what happens, but I actually feel the air rushing past me in a speed that reminds me of a rollercoaster but faster, and before I can even try to see the world passing by us we have already stopped.

So that's *Shunshin*, the Body Flicker Technique.

The shinobi looks at me as if he expected me to scream, or collapse, or do *something*, but I just stand there dumfounded – knowing the technique, theoretically being aware of what it does, and actually *feeling* it work is something else entirely, and just for an instant I'm awed, awed that I'm here and this is really happening, that this is a world where ninja create chakra-

He knocks on the door in front of us and pulls me from my thoughts, the grip on my arm still firm and telling me to behave.

Honestly, where should I run? And why, for that matter? He is a ninja and if one measure's in standards of this world I'm- a civilian. Maybe. But he doesn't that know that. I know that I'm helpless here, but to him I'm the unknown, the wild card.

If I wasn't still terrified I'd be laughing now, because *oh the irony*. I'm small and weak and don't speak their language well, but then they probably can't sense chakra from me, because I have none. I know it because I know this world, however fucked up whatever is happening right now is, but they don't know *me* and they don't know what I can do.

I should have landed in Konoha, I realize with a pang of... regret maybe, even though it's not like I actively did anything to strand here. I *know* Konohagakure, I could have manipulated Sarutobi or Minato or Tsunade or whoever is Hokage right now, could have told them that I can see the future and-

From beyond the door comes the command to enter, the voice muffled but still much more understandable to me than the one of my captor.

He all but drags me in even though he wouldn't have had to if he'd just let me walk, but telling him that nicely is not in my vocabulary right now – not to mention that it wouldn't have been a good idea to talk back to him.

The room is dominated by a huge, curved wall of windows that overlooks the village.

I know where I am just a second before my eyes turn to the table in front of us and admittedly I'm curious, because if the one sitting there behind the desk is the right *kage* than the situation is not that horrible... because the Yondaime may be stubborn and more than a little frightening, but I don't want to be in a time where everyone is at war with everyone else.

"Raikage-sama," the ninja bows and I hurry to follow his lead. The Japanese value their bows highly – they are important, polite, a sign of respect – and I'm glad that they taught us how to bow properly at university. The first of three bows is just a better nod and the last highly formal, and honestly I can't bend my spine that way, but the second will do and I try to look formal while bowing, hands at my sides, back straight. In karate they taught us to look the enemy in the eye while bowing, but I'm not stupid, so no looking properly at the Raikage before my head comes back up.

Well, shit. I don't know his face.

The Raikage I know the least of are the first and the second, and the Shodaime I'd have at least recognized by his birds nest of black hair, so this has to be the Nidaime – I have absolutely no idea how long he was in office, what he did in his time as *kage* or how he died. Crap, so much for even thinking of manipulating him.

"Aoki-san," the second Raikage calls the shinobi and at least I have a name for him now, and then they start to talk and I'm lost. Aoki's dialect is even worse than I thought and the words are too fast for me to get much out of the conversation.

The only word I really catch – Aoki says it a lot but I only really understand when the Nidaime repeats it, surprise in his words – is *Black Lightning*. And my captor indeed has the tattoo, the kanji for lightning standing out in black ink on his right shoulder. He's probably the creator of the technique, though I don't know what this has to do with me... did he try to do something with the lightning and it backfired? Is this how I got here?

Then the Raikage turns to me and I'm not prepared for looking at him. Not as a leader, nor a potential enemy or someone I can use to get out of this mess, but as a person – because he smiles at me, his dark eyes warm and features relaxed.

He's a nice person. I honestly don't know why it hits me that hard, because Naruto and Sakura and other people in this world are nice people, too. I just didn't expect someone from Kumogakure of all places to be so nice I guess, not when all the characters I ever knew from here are, well, different from him.

"You understand what we say?" he asks, his voice somewhat hopeful and the words more polite than strictly necessary when talking to a possible foreign shinobi.

"Yes, some of it," coaxing Japanese words out of my head is hard when there is so much else going on. I try to pay close attention and shove all other thoughts to the back of my mind.

He smiles almost encouragingly at me and goes for the next question, his words taking me entirely off guard, "What's your name?"

Fuck, why did he ask that? I think of my name automatically, and the nickname I'm being called by most of the time, and then of the people who use that name, the fact that I'm in a world that shouldn't exist, away from everyone I know, alone in that world, and what if you they decide to kill me? *Panic*. It's nothing I do, it's useless, as useless as tears because it changes nothing, but in that moment it makes me close my eyes, my heart hammer, my head hurt... my mouth tastes like bile.

I swallow and then tell him while opening my eyes. He looks intrigued and tries to repeat the word, but fails miserably since it's nothing Japanese can properly pronounce. His look is kind of apologetic and in the end he just nods.

Then comes a question too long and complex for me to understand the gist of. The Japanese they speak is not exactly like the one I'm used to, I realize then. More *bungo* perhaps?

"Can you repeat that? Shorter sentences, please," I hate this, the stumbling for words. I'm good with words, I know it. I'm a good writer, I know how to sound sophisticated when I have to and – most importantly – I know how to present my opinion. The fact that I can't do either right now just makes me cranky.

"How did you get here? Where are you from?" the Nidaime repeats in quick, precise words and this time I understand.

"I don't know," I couldn't even explain what happened in English, it's not about the language this time, "I was sleeping in my bed... and then I was here. I- I don't come from here."

A partial truth is the best course of action right now for the simple fact that I don't have a clue what part of the timeline I'm actually in. Telling them I'm from Konohagakure in hopes of Kumo handing me over would have been a gamble, and I never gamble. Either you win or you lose, and the odds are never in your favor. Let the Raikage and Aoki think of me what they want, but I'm sticking to *confused and overwhelmed* for the time being.

Telling them that I'm from another world would lead to the question how I know that, and I'm so not ready for telling them that they're just a product of imagination in the real world. The more real world. Whatever.

His eyes have become sharp at my answer, "What is the name of the place you come from?"

I have no idea what the actual Japanese word for the earth-earth is called, but I think I know at least the kanji, "I can write it?"

It's more of a question than a statement, but the Raikage nods and hands me a sheet,

brush and inkwell – I *really* should have taken those calligraphy lessons – and Aoki makes a strange sound beside me. When I look at him he stares like he can't believe I'd be able to write. At any rate I can make them realize that I'm not dumb that way.

Those are far from my best kanji because my experience with a brush is *very* limited, but they are legible. That's all I need for the moment.

After he has studied the word for a few seconds the Nidaime points Aoki to come over and take a look. They talk in hushed voices for a minute or so and I don't understand a word, *again*. Whatever conclusion they come to, when their heads turn back to stare at me two dark pairs of eyes regard me with more calculation than before. They are intrigued, or at least curious.

The Raikage asks something along the line of "Can you write better than you speak?", and my nod is probably a little too enthusiastic, but I *understand* kanji. I get what each one means and then I simply put them together to get the meaning of the word I'm reading.

We pass the sheet back and forth as we "talk". He wants to know how I speak their language, and I answer that a country in my world has similar language and that I studied it. He is surprised again when I tell him that there are many countries with many different languages where I come from. It's interesting that they obviously know that there are other languages but never seriously come in contact with the people who speak them.

Something about the language-issue obviously has caught the interest of both the Nidaime and his subordinate, but I can't pinpoint what exactly it is. They even have me say a few sentences in English, and listen attentively to what comes out of my mouth.

I have almost blocked out what my actual situation is when the word *chakra* and a question are written on a new sheet and handed to me. For a while I just stare at the paper – not trusting myself to look up for fear of giving myself away – and then slowly write an answer that is wholly incomplete, but still manages to convey that I know the *theory* and that some countries I know think of it as something like a science that uses the mind to make the body stronger. My last words are "It's complicated, I don't understand everything." and then I ask for the reason they wanted to know.

Aoki smirks, and it's not nice. It's like he understands that my chakra is not like theirs and that no, I'll never be a danger to them or their world – because I obviously don't have chakra or they would have told me. For a moment I'm both disappointed and devastated that I'm here in this- this Naruto-world and still have no chakra.

The sudden sound of lightning makes me jump in the comfortable chair the Nidaime was so nice to offer me, and then my eyes focus on Aoki on their own accord.

Pitch black, small bolts of lightning are zipping around his right hand and forearm. I can't help it, I stare.

It's not just close to the lightning bolts coming down in a storm, it's the actual, *real*

thing. The scale is way smaller, but it's still the same – and he is making it, creating something I know he shouldn't be able to. The rational part of me, the one that lived in a normal human world for over twenty-three years, tells me that this is *impossible*, that no one can just make lightning, but he *does*, and it looks effortless.

I'm jealous. I want to be able to do that, too. It's as easy as that. It's different when you just imagine it, when it's your fantasy, when you know something like this will never be real... it is real here however, in that world of chakra, and even enough I'm here now I'm still not really part of it. The knowledge burns.

"This is chakra," Aoki sees the awe and envy written all over my face, and it conjures that spiteful smirk on his lips once more.

"Aoki experimented with his lightning ability. That brought you here," the Nidaime interrupts our silent staring contest, and the man in question grumbles something unintelligible in return as the lightning on his arm vanishes.

I don't know what to make of that news, especially since I don't think anyone of the two of them is eager to get me back where I belong. Shite.

"Will you bring me back home?" I have to ask anyway, because even though I'm a nerd and fascinated at being here in the- *don't think it*, here, I'm hyper aware that this world isn't where I belong – these people can kill me in seconds and what stops them is a law that the Raikage can change at will or simply decide that it doesn't apply to me.

"He will try," is all the Raikage says before abruptly switching the subject, "I am the second Raikage, leader of the village you are currently in, called Kumogakure."

It's nice having confirmed what I already know, but there is no new information there and everything I can do is bow to him for a second time and say, "Raikage-sama."

"Sadly we cannot speak your name," he makes the appropriate pause before going on, "We need to give you a name that people from here can pronounce."

"Usui," Aoki cuts in from besides his *kage* without missing a beat, eyeing me with amusement in his eyes. He isn't sure I understand, but I do and I know that it's a badly veiled insult.

I don't have to respond though, because the Nidaime's chastising glare pretty much says it all and a mask of indifference slips on his subordinate's face immediately, Aoki bowing in apology just as far as absolutely necessary.

"What does your name mean?" he tries, a coaxing smile brightening his dark face, and it makes me *want* to answer the Raikage, simply because he is a good man that doesn't need to actually be nice to me but still is.

I struggle for the Japanese words, "*Protection... and advise.*"

He draws kanji on another new sheet. *Moriko* is the name, but I like neither the sound

nor the kanji combination. It can be mistaken too easily. Sighing I shake my head and almost feel the impatience of Aoki in my back, who clearly thinks that this whole procedure is ridiculous.

Three more names follow the first, but they all aren't right. These names aren't mine – will never be – and it makes me somber and unhappy as I realize that there is the possibility that I'll never hear- I concentrate on the new kanji in front of me, the ink still drying. It's a combination of three this time and it looks pretty enough. I ask the Raikage to write the pronunciation above the symbols for me.

Saeko. It's... something I guess, better than the others. Honestly speaking I won't ever like any name they give me, so this one is as good as any other.

"This is good. I like that one," I answer, because he made an effort and if I don't appreciate it I'd show him that I don't care, which I do. Not in the way he probably thinks, but it's better thinking of myself as not as alone as I actually am here, in this world that is not mine and that I obviously don't belong in.

"Very well," the Raikage puts the paper and brush away, "I'm busy at the moment, but we'll talk again in a few days. Aoki will take care of you and show you around the village."

I don't need to know him to recognize that Aoki hates that he's going to have to babysit me, and I'm looking forward to this as much as he is – which means not at all. No objecting the will of a *kage* however, and if I'm lucky Aoki'll be so annoyed with having me around him that he'll actually try to replicate the experiment that brought me here.

Ironically, *this* is what I'd given up a lot for yesterday if someone had actually made me the offer: to come to this place, to experience *shinobi* and *chakra* for myself, to walk around in a world that is not real in my world. *This* however is different. It's Kumogakure, a place I don't know in a time I don't know anything about, without actual chakra to defend myself, surrounded by people I doubt care about me beyond my benefit to their own agenda. I'm completely alone here.

I want my friends. The thought is clear in my otherwise empty head for a second, and it damn *hurts*, but then Aoki takes me under his arm as brusquely as he did when he brought me before the Raikage, and the rush of the Body Flicker takes us away to wherever he wants to go.

Kapitel 2: The slowly whitening mountain ridge

This time Aoki – probably because there is no superior in the close vicinity – pretty much dumps me the moment we're out of the Body Flicker. I stagger two dangerous steps forward at the rough handling, but at least I don't end up face first on the floor.

He's already off my side the moment I get my bearings, having walked up to a counter at the far end of the room he brought us into. I thought he'd take me back to his own place probably, or drag me through the village, and don't really know what to make of this environment and the various ninja staring at me from all over the room.

We have to be somewhere in the shinobi head quarters, maybe even still in the Raikage's tower. It's an administrative room or something similar, for getting information on missions or the likes, because most ninja carry scrolls or papers with them and from their general age I guess them to be too old to be Genin.

Most of them have the dark skin color that seems to be native to the Cloud Village, are male, tall and muscular. There are some women however, and I spot three people with skin just as or maybe even more white than mine.

They don't seem hostile, simply curious for who I am, but I nonetheless hurry over towards Aoki, who is talking to the guy manning the counter – a Chuunin then, because Jounin are too valuable to spend their time standing around and handling daily paperwork. The boy is younger than I am and gives me a curt nod before turning his head back to my captor, who is rattling down a list it seems.

"...pants and a cloak," Aoki pauses for a moment to sneer down at me, "Usui freezes easily."

The clerk studies me then, obviously having gotten the message that Aoki meant me when he said "Usui". He doesn't comment however, just stares a moment longer before hurrying off with the promise to be back shortly.

Of course it will be like that. When he apologized after the Nidaime had scolded him I'd thought that Aoki would stick to Saeko, just to not have to go against orders, but that had been too much to wish for, obviously. Now I'm stuck with that fucking nickname, and he'll probably tell it to everyone he introduces me to, just because he can – yes, he's a total asshole and ninja food chain says that no one will object as long as the Raikage won't hear...

"Aoki-sama," the Chuunin bows before holding out a big bundle of cloths to the man, who just indicates in my direction with a shrug of this head.

So the cloth gets pressed into my open arms instead, the bundle almost too much for me to carry without dropping something on the floor. That's what Aoki wants to happen I guess, but I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Follow," he orders me around like a dog and the urge to just stand there, ignore him and go somewhere else is damn strong, but then where would I go? I don't even have a clue where the hell I am in this village, and even if I did Aoki could fetch me back to his sides in seconds. There is no outrunning a ninja for ordinary humans, and I'd rather spare myself the humiliation of having him dragging me around like a disobedient child, thank you very much.

He leads me through a hallway before stopping in front of a random door so suddenly that I almost run into him. *Bastard.*

"Change," he points at the door for emphasis before ignoring me altogether and pointedly leaning against the wall beside it.

With a sigh I'm through said door and find myself in a windowless room with two long benches in front of the niches in the left and right walls respectively. It's obviously the dressing room for shinobi coming from or going for missions or training, and for a second I'm tempted to grab into one of the niches and take out what is inside – then I remember that this ninja-land and that I'd better not touch anything that could be protected by a seal or jutsu.

I let the bundle fall on one of the benches and take stock. There is a gray sweater, black pants and socks, a mesh-t-shirt – seriously, what are these things good for anyway? They don't keep you warm, they don't protect you from *anything*, and have to be a pain to get in and out off – plus a white cloak like the one Aoki had lent me a few hours ago and high, black boots.

That Chuunin has to be really good at guessing sizes, because everything fits nicely. Even the boots have the right size, and that's gotta be hard to see from one glance. They don't have much of a heel though, and there goes my idea of appearing to be at least a little taller than I actually am.

When I pick up the cloak to check if it's not too long another white piece of cloth slides to the floor from within its folds. I pick it up curiously and then look at what appears like a wide, solid, white band of something that is *not* normal cloth.

For a while I just stare at the thing, clueless as to what it's purpose could be. I hold it away from my body to get a closer look, then squint at the thick seams in concentration. Maybe if I turn it- ah, that looks familiar. I've seen that somewhere... it clicks after a few more seconds of staring: it's a modified version of the Kumogakure shinobi vest. I've seen some of the modern kunochi wear them, actually.

A little fumbling and I'm fully clothed, even though I still have no idea why Aoki has me wear shinobi gear. He's probably just too cheap to buy me something from his own money, but I can't be sure.

I'd really like to see myself in a mirror right now, just to know whether or not I look completely ridiculous in shinobi gear, but there is none – guess that Kumo-nin don't give a shit about how good they look when they go out to slaughter enemy shinobi.

At least I fit in rather well with the general appearance here: light skin, blond hair, blue eyes. The majority of people has dark skin and eyes of course, but I've seen enough inhabitants of Kumogakure to guess that they tend to either be one or the other extreme, light or dark. With my small height having become mediocre here – gotta love these Japanese standards on height – I shouldn't attract much unnecessary attention.

Straightening my new shirt one final time as good as the protective vest over my belly allows, I grab my things and open the door to the dressing room. Aoki's gaze sweeps over me from head to toe but he doesn't comment on my new attire.

His eyes narrow however when he sees the bundle under my arm, "Leave that here."

He looks at my sweater and sweatpants like they carry a lethal disease, and I instantly know what's coming. It had to happen at some point, because while I will be obedient and shut my mouth to avoid trouble, there's a line you better don't cross with me. He's just saying that because he *can*, because he's a ninja and that automatically makes him top dog between the two of us. This is him being an asshole for no other purpose than to get at me, and I won't fucking stand for that.

"No," I look into his eyes when I say it, just so he knows that I mean it. I won't *ever* bow to him, and he has something else coming if he thinks that he can push me around and I'll let him. Not happening.

Aoki makes a noise that is as much displeasure as it is disdain. He stares back and is suddenly, in the same moment, standing in front me. I didn't even see him *move*.

"This," he points at the clothes under my arm, "Is garbage."

Fuck, he is intimidating like this. No black lightning on his hand or blade to my throat, because he doesn't need any of that to beat me to a pulp. The knowledge is... disturbing. Nothing to make your throat feel like the desert and your heart want to spring out of your chest than an elite ninja standing half a meter away from you with that look in his eyes.

"It's *mine*," I answer him, trying not to let any of that fear I feel show on my face. He will pounce on that, it's what he's trained to do – but those pants and sweater are everything I've still left from my home, and dammit I will not give up the only *real* thing still in my possession just because Aoki's decided to show me who's boss.

"I can kill you," he whispers, the tone of his voice making an involuntary shiver run down my spine. He sees of course, his lips drawing into a predatory grin at my reaction.

So that's where we stand: *behaving* or death threats – oh no, you won't get away with that mister! I'm not that stupid, not with having seen the way the Raikage looked at me when he realized I can speak a language foreign to them. Whatever he wants of me was enough to make him appoint Aoki my babysitter, and killing the price isn't something he can get away with easily.

There is nothing I can do to threaten him back however, and I also haven't forgotten the fact that he seems to *like* treating me like shit for whatever reason. Fine, then. He can call me Usui all day long if he wants to, he can be mean and disrespectful and an outright asshole, but hating me can't equal taking my freedom away from me. I'm just as human as him, even if that seems to be only thing we have in common at the moment, *being human*.

"I know," is all I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest. It's not the argument per se I need to win here, just getting him to see that I'm not backing down.

Threatening Aoki would be ridiculous and remaining silent the admittance of defeat. I'm overly aware of both while at the same trying my damndest to not give away my own insecurity – if a bully thinks that they can get to you they'll never stop trying.

For a second the silence seems to just stretch and stretch between us, and then he actually laughs, a sound of pure amusement that startles me and makes me flinch away a little from his intimidating presence. His posture relaxes a moment later though, the tension leaving his body in an instant and the gleam of his dark eyes losing it's dangerous edge.

Without any warning he snatches my clothes out of my arm and I scream in both protest and righteous fury, livid now because *how dare he*, the bastard, I'll-

An annoyed growl leaves his lips as he holds me back with his left arm, pulls a scroll out of the pouch at his side with his right hand and seals my clothes into it while totally ignoring the way I'm trying to reach for my things over his arm.

The scroll is shoved into my hands before I can articulate my rage in my broken Japanese.

"Yours, keep it," that's everything he says, not bothering to explain before he grabs me by the upper arm and pulls me down the corridor beside him, stifling any protest I'd have voiced with his impatient stride.

I have no clue where he'll lead me to this time, but if you don't have the option of actually being included in the decision-making process you stop caring, I guess. The important thing is the scroll with my clothes clutched tightly in my right hand anyway. Since I don't have chakra I won't be able to open it on my own, I know that, but either Aoki can or I'll find a way to get the Nidaime to unseal the content for me.

We walk through two more corridors and end up in what has to be the main entrance of the building, with various stairs leading both up and down into the mountain. Shinobi are everywhere and this time some are small enough to be Genin, the youngest I see maybe ten years old – I force myself not to think of the moral implications of sending kids that young into battle.

Most people don't spare us a second glance, and those who do usually just nod to Aoki before hurrying on with their tasks. Only two really *look* at me, a man who is all

dark colors, hair, eyes, skin, uniform and all, and a woman with the same dark skin and eyes like molten gold. Her gaze fascinates me simply for the fact that her eye color should feel *unnatural* to me but doesn't. Instead it only makes me stare after her when she has passed us, my eyes drawn to the long sword on her back and the fact that she seems to *float* rather than walk.

A hard shake of my shoulder makes me turn back to face Aoki, who for some reason has a, well, *wicked*, grin on his lips when he first looks at the woman I was staring at and then back to me. I wait for him to explain himself, but he doesn't and just drags me out the front door.

Outside I realize that we were indeed still inside the Raikage's tower, and only from below can I see how high it really is – that thing could rival a skyscraper. The top of it vanishes into the clouds, as do several other buildings crafted into the other mountains – they rise from the ground like spikes, steep and sharp.

The whole area seems to be one giant mountain chain however, because the streets gently slope downwards from the tower, perhaps leading to the center of the village. If the layout is similar to that of Konoha than the tower marks the far end of the village, away from both the main hustle of daily activities and the gates where enemies would arrive should they ever besiege Kumogakure.

I look down the street we're standing on and *stare*.

Even in the dimmed, gray lighted that manages to come through the clouds this place is truly beautiful: the houses are wooden and two-storied with banners marking the entrances to various shops, the street cobbled and only interrupted by stairs where the drop of the hill is too steep to span otherwise.

Sometimes there's a tree in front of a house or a little garden, vines ranking up the odd building. People mingle freely on the street, ninja and civilians with children chasing each other through the crowd, laughing and almost knocking down an old man who angrily waves his cane as they pass him.

It's *old* on a level I can't explain, so far away from the streets I walked in Tokyo and Osaka or even the ancient capital Kyoto. This is a part of the traditional Japan I never got to see before.

"It's beautiful," I tell Aoki who is now walking beside me instead of trying to push me along, but he just looks at me as if I'm nuts.

All the streets aren't very wide, not enough to let more than one carriage through at a time, but I don't know if the design is deliberate or simply stems from the fact that they for whatever reason don't have any need to carry large objects through the village.

The burbling of water distracts me and I wander closer to the sound of what has to be a fountain, but then Aoki's hand is on my shoulder *again* and he's steering me away from the water and into another street. He's not being gentle about it this time

either.

"Why not that way?" I try to articulate myself as intelligible as possible, but my only answer is a low growl. My captor doesn't even spare me a glance, just goes on through the civilians who automatically clear the way for him. I wonder if he even notices, but then decide against it – Aoki has a frown on his face that could be either deep concentration or a dislike for people in general.

Well, if he wants to sulk that's fine with me... and if he thinks he is the only one of the two of us who can make the other's life unnecessary complicated he is sadly mistaken.

"Is it always cold here? What season do we have?" To hell with speaking perfect Japanese, he'll get the gist of it. I don't think the man will answer me anyway, so it doesn't matter how polite or correct or nicely I ask. *Two can play that game.*

His cold gaze is meant to get me to shut up, but we're playing by my rules now, and my rules say that I will only shut up if he gives me answers – I press my lips together to stop the smile from forming on my face. Let's see how long he takes to figure out how this works, or if he does so at all.

"Are those ninja, too?" I point to what has to be a group of Genin who stand in front of a weapons shop and stare at the katana on display for the customers on the street, "Why are they so young?"

He realizes that something is on now, his left hand seizing my upper arm harshly and staying there to pull me alongside him. Still no talking though, and I wonder if he thinks that talking to me would be pointless. Or is he just pissed that whatever he did with that Black Lightning backfired and he has to babysit me because he fucked up?

I open my mouth to ask about the buildings in the mountains, but the sudden grumbling of my stomach makes me close it and remember that my last meal was some too many hours ago – I hate going without food, it makes me cranky as hell. No idea how I missed how *hungry* I am for so long, but the smells coming from the street we just entered make my mouth water.

"Can we eat something?" I ask as politely as possible, looking up at Aoki with my best innocent face.

This part of town is busier, with the food vendors on both sides of the road selling every kind of Japanese food. There are many shops that offer grilled meat or fish, I see at least one that has noodles – no ramen, sadly – many sell sweets, and one something that looks suspiciously like bento boxes.

My companion just makes an annoyed sound of refusal, something that could be a grunt or a curse but isn't really language. He obviously doesn't want to be bothered with something as trivial as me wanting food. *Though look, buddy.*

"I want to eat. Now," I demand, stopping dead in the middle of the road. My face clearly tells him the rest of the sentence... *and I won't stop nagging you until you give*

it to me.

Aoki has two options now: doing what I want and getting me something to eat, or making a scene. He could try to drag me away of course, but he better doesn't dare because then I will shout, and it will be *loud*, and people will look. Good luck to him trying to stop me from making everyone in that street aware of the fact that he is shoving me around – if they don't have the chance to look away most people don't like seeing petite women treated badly by men twice their size.

We obviously have come to the same conclusion here, as he curses under his breath, let's go of my arm and motions towards a *yakitori* shop a little further down the street.

The inside of the shop is small but still larger than I thought it would be. Most people sit directly at the counter, but Aoki leads me towards the few tables that fit inside the room, choosing the one furthest from the entrance. He pushes me down on a bench with a grumbled "Sit!" that tells me to better behave or else.

There's nothing for him to fear though, because I'm certainly not leaving before I've had food.

A young women, no older than sixteen or seventeen, comes over to me immediately. She's fast in filling two glasses with water, but avoids my eyes when I give her a nod of thanks and has bowed and left for another new customer before I can get a second look at her.

It's probably the fact that she's a civilian and I'm dressed like a kunoichi that makes her uneasy. I'm not wearing a headband, but that doesn't have to mean anything and I have no clue what the general interaction between ninja and normal citizens is like here.

I flinch when a plate is brought down *hard* on the table in front of me – Aoki's movements are completely silent when he wants them to be... I guess he's a Jounin, and a high-ranking one of those. Satisfaction shines in his eyes when he sees my reaction, but he doesn't say anything. I just get a look that tells me to better hurry up, because he *obviously* thinks of this as a waste of his time.

Well, no need to tell me. The food smells delicious: it's two different kind of skewers, one with chicken and vegetables and the other at closer inspection turning out to be small potatoes soaked in some sauce before being put on the grill.

At least I'm lucky enough that I'm not allergic to any of those things, because right now I'd rather not explain to Aoki what an allergy is.

"There you are, Jiro," a male voice pulls me out of my musings, making my head snap up from that great food just in time to see two unknown ninja sitting down beside Aoki. The woman is light and tall with huge boobs and the man looks- pretty much like Aoki, if you discount the ugly burn scar through half his face.

His eyes are the pure white of those who have lost their sight forever and the bright pink of the skin around his eyes and on both his cheeks is a stark contrast to his otherwise dark color. It's a burn scar, the abused skin looking leathery and like a web of thin threads put on top of each other.

"Who's this?" the woman asks and leans closer to me, drawing my eyes to her breasts as they push up against the wood of the table.

She's pretty, very much so. Her hair is light blond and almost to her waist, she has very light skin and dark grey eyes. I need a moment to get used to the imagine, but then remember where I have seen her features before: Samui – same large breasts obviously, if that is any indication for kinship. She is her mother then- or more likely her grandmother, since this the Nidaime's reign and Samui lives under the Yondaime. Interesting.

Aoki manages to look bored and devious at once, "Usui."

Of course... the woman can't suppress a snort, her eyebrows rising high enough to vanish behind her bangs. It's not personal on her part *yet*, but I don't want that nickname to stick.

"I'm Saeko," I tell her, bowing as far as the table will allow, "It's a pleasure meeting you."

For a second she looks startled, her eyes wandering from me to Aoki and back, but then a small smile forms on her lips. She bows back, as is proper, and introduces herself, "Okada, Akemi. Nice to meet you."

"Saeko... how do you write it?" the blind man's voice is deep and gentle. If the burns from his eyes were from a fire he would have inhaled too much smoke for it to still sound that way – that's definitely a battle scar, then. One primarily made not to kill, but to hurt, to cause pain. I don't really want to know where and how he got it, if I'm honest with myself.

He holds one hand out to me expectantly and I don't really know what to do until Akemi stabs with the fingers of her right hand into the palm of her left. Ah, he wants me to write the kanji.

His hands are big, all but dwarfing mine. I try really hard to make my writing as clear as possible, but he still asks me to do the second of the three symbols for a second time. He is silent for a moment after that, most likely contemplating what the name means and how I got it.

"Aoki, Ichiro," he introduces himself at least, and my gaze wanders to Aoki – Jiro – who doesn't like that his brother plays nice with me. His face is sour, but he doesn't say anything and I wonder if it is because Ichiro would admonish him for treating me badly the same way the Raikage had done. That they are brothers doesn't mean that they have to be of the same mind.

"Let's go Ichiro," Aoki stands abruptly and places one hand on his brothers shoulder, "Akemi, you take care of Usui?"

Yes, *please*. At least with her I have a decent chance of getting information for once, not to mention the fact that she seems like a more agreeable person than Aoki. It would be nice to really talk to someone for a change instead of his grunts and shoving.

"Sure," the woman agrees, shrugging her shoulders. She asks him something right after that, but it's too fast and too low for me to make sense of the words on the fly – damn my shit Japanese. I'm really curious what she asked, especially since she doesn't know that I can't speak their language that well. Maybe I can ask her-

"Later," is all Aoki answers, and the sidelong glance he gives me when he says it tells me pretty much that he doesn't want me to listen in on whatever Akemi wants to know.

The men leave with a short farewell from Ichiro. I automatically look into his face as he talks, and regret it a moment later because his mutilation is as fascinating as it is horrible. If I see him more often I will have to learn to stop staring – he's a ninja, I'm sure he noticed my eyes on his face.

Akemi waves after them before turning her gray eyes back to me. My food is long gone, and she seems to take the empty plate as a signal to get us some more of that really good *yakitori*, "Wait a second, I'll be right back."

Well, I'm certainly not protesting against that.

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 an 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 Raidon 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.

Kapitel 4: And the purplish clouds

The Kinkaku Force.

They will kill Tobirama. They will ambush his group and he will sacrifice his own life to save those of the others, making Sarutobi the Sandaime Hokage in the process.

It didn't expect that. Yes, I know the story of course, *I've written that damn timeline for fucks sake*, but that doesn't make it any easier to stomach. There is war, enough people said that already, and I'm aware that it will be the First Shinobi World War, but there's a difference between *guessing* and knowing and-

"Something wrong?" Kin's voice is right beside my ear *again* and makes me flinch, "Relax, we won't harm you."

Only now do I realize that all eyes are on me. Especially the look Aoki gives me is highly suspicious, while the others just seem confused what to make off my reaction. It has to make no sense to them since I'm not- okay, I have to say something. *Say something*, don't make them second guess that you're ignorant of their world and absolutely no danger to their village.

"I- In my place," I'm struggling for words, "Kinkaku is a temple. It's made of gold, with a big garden. It's a sacred place. People go there to pray."

Well, that's not exactly accurate, but close enough to the truth. At least it explains my shocked minute of silence, and I try looking as confused as possible to get them to believe that I simply can't make a connection between the temple and their squad. There is none of course – expect for Kishimoto naming the brothers after the temples, but it's not like I can tell them *that* – and most stares turn from critical to puzzled.

"Our Kinkaku is one of the two best ninja of Kumogakure," Hideki explains, his eyes gleaming with pride, "He and his brother, Ginkaku, can destroy an army on their own if they want."

Everyone nods or at least makes a sound of agreement at his declaration, and *god* I want to laugh. They worship them. *The Gold and Silver Brothers* are the pride of Kumogakure, they are their heroes... and they will betray them, will attack the peace negotiations between Tobirama and the Nidaime Raikage, almost killing one and probably succeeding in killing the other.

Playing dumb is hard, but it's either that or telling them the truth and having myself be *interrogated*. I'm stubborn, incredibly stubborn, and I don't like to give up if I think I'm right, but there is a difference between that and people actually hurting me to get information out of me. I honestly don't want to find out how much torture I can survive before I *break*, especially since my knowledge of their world is the only advantage I have at the moment.

"So they have?" I ask, to fill the upcoming silence, "...destroyed armies, I mean."

Hit home there, didn't I? Even that thought in my head when I see Hideki grimace doesn't make me feel any better, especially with the headache now radiating from the middle of my forehead to the rest of my skull. Nora always said that it's migraine, but I never actually came around to have it checked by a doc.

It's not *that* bad right now, but I know the symptoms and I know that it'll only get worse from here. Sleep helps but nothing else, as that medic-nin proved earlier – seems like I'll have to endure at least until I can find a bed to sleep it off.

"Well, no..." he mutters, sulking, "The villages were formed after a long time of war, but those were smaller battles, mostly. Kumogakure was founded after our clans had agreed that fighting each other would only make us weak. Kinkaku and Ginkaku killed many until the Firs-"

"She doesn't need to know that part," Aoki interrupts him for a second time, looking even more impatient now. He obviously wants to keep me from learning anything that isn't common knowledge. It's vexing, but I know from the stare Akemi gives Hideaki that this is a topic she also isn't keen on me getting information on.

"Fine, fine," the dark man doesn't sound irritated, just annoyed that people keep interrupting his story, "They wanted to capture the Nine-Tailed for the Shodaime Raikage. It's said to be the most powerful of the beasts, and there is truth in that. When they found it they fought the giant fox, but it ate them alive. They survived however, eating it away from the inside for two weeks until it spit them back out. It's chakra made them stronger, they became *almost* Jinchuuriki then. No one else survived fighting the Kyuubi, and for their perseverance the First Raikage created two squads in their names."

Two squads? Well, that's interesting. I know about the Kinkaku Force of course, but I've never read anything about there being a Ginkaku Force as well. Knowing that makes me wonder what the main difference is between-

"*You're god*," I press the words out from between clenched teeth when Kin does *something* to a vertebra just below my neck that makes it pop back into whatever place it was supposed to be in from the beginning. The crack the bone makes when it's set right sounds painful but actually is only a minor discomfort to me.

"What?" it's Akemi who's asking, the others just stare. Wha- oh, wrong language, I guess. I'm not really surprised given that I'm not used to holdings more than basic conversations in Japanese.

"Sorry," I apologize slowly, my attention still on those fabulous hands that unknot the battlefield that is my back, "That's my native language. Talking Japanese all the time is hard."

The blonde woman gives me a very confused look and only then do I realize that she neither knows that my native language isn't Japanese, nor does she know what

Japanese is. Now that I think about it I doubt that the people in this world actually have a name for their language. If everyone speaks the same way there is no need to invent a word for the language itself.

"Say it again," Kin demands. Her fingers have never stopped loosening my back and I feel how the leaving tension both relaxes me and makes me just that little bit sleepy.

I laugh when she asks, but repeat the words for her. Various sounds of awe follow this second time, and when I look at Aoki his dark eyes are hard and calculating. Akemi gives me a similar look to my surprise, though hers is more interest than scheming and far from being as cold as Aoki's is. The stares of other two men with eyes to read lean more towards his side than hers.

"What does it mean?" Akemi asks eventually.

There is no way for me to explain to them what god is, especially not with my level of Japanese. Instead I settle on telling them that it means that I really like what the Jinchuuriki is doing.

"So," I stifle a content yawn in-between words, "How are you and the Ginkaku Force different? Were the brothers different? If you were named for Kinkaku and they for Ginkaku you are more like the one brother and they are more like the other brother, right?"

"Yes," Aoki answers curtly, and for a moment I'm disappointed that that's all the info I'm getting, but then he decides to add a little more, "Kinkaku and Ginkaku are different, and so are the squads... we are *soldiers*, we fight. They aren't, they stay hidden most of the time. What they do is not fighting but more *politics*."

It's the way he says it that gains my attention, and also the closed expressions of the other ninja in the room. I won't go as far as saying that they dislike the Ginkaku Force, but there is definitely no love between them – competition maybe, and incomprehension of the methods the other party uses. It could be used to play the Forces against each other, but I'm not that dumb.

"So they plan and you die," I mutter, and only realize what exactly I've said when the room suddenly becomes dead silent. *Shit*.

"I'm sorry, I didn't-" I'm already half through an apology when a hand that isn't mine clamps my mouth shut. It's small and dark, with a strong grip and calluses all shinobi must have.

The purring laughter in my back tells me that it is Kin's hand, and damn I swear no human being should be able to laugh and still sound so much like a cat. She does however, the sound slowly subsiding when she takes her appendage back to rub talented fingers on the very top of my spine where head merges into neck.

"That's what we do," she agrees, "But this is how the world works. Some plan and plot, and in the end a few people die so many others don't have to... and there are cowards

of course, who say they are planners because then they don't have to be fighters, who call themselves important because the important people die last. Or so they think. What kind are you?"

I'm totally not up for these deeply meaningful questions at the moment. Can't we just all leave that room and go to bed or something? Not that I have a bed, or a home, or *anyth*- writing all at scheming is fun, living it not so much.

"I want to *live*," I answer truthfully, because what do I have to lose? I could tell them that I want to be home, that it becomes harder and harder making sentences in Japanese, that I want someone talking to me in my own language, that I want a bed – whining doesn't change things however, and I know that lesson well enough to adhere to it.

They are talking. Oops, I missed who started the conversation, and with Aoki, Ichiro, the medic and –how is that blonde man called, Raiden? – all talking across each other there's not much I can understand. Raiden is on Aoki's side it seems and Isao on the other, but I honestly have no idea how Ichiro fits into all that. Hideki starts saying something then, too, and now I've completely lost them. Akemi and Kin keep silent to my relief, but it's not like it makes a difference.

Aoki insists that something *isn't right*, but I have no idea what that something is, Isao says *research* all the time, and Ichiro's voice has developed a dangerous undertone. Can't they just shut up? Trying to follow their conversation makes my head throb.

A soft purring distracts me. The Jinchuuriki has placed her head on my right shoulder, the gentle sound and warmth of her body a pleasant contrast to the still arguing shinobi beside me. I close my eyes to tune them out completely.

She asks me something, but again I don't understand. I have half a mind to ask her to repeat it but ultimately decide against it because *who am I kiddin'* I won't understand her anyway...

It wasn't that important I guess since she doesn't comment on my silence. Instead she flings her left arm over my other shoulders and leans onto me – I have to admit that the woman makes for a nice demon vessel blanket, cat sounds and all. I close my eyes and just listen to her almost-purr, drowning out the voices of the others.

This is so much better for my headache. It helps a great deal that for once my back doesn't hurt, and now that I'm not desperately trying to listen to all the words said anymore I can feel another set of tension that I didn't pay attention to leaving me. No *Constant vigilance!* for me... I'm not Moody, and I'm not fighting some goddamn war to save the world, which would be stupid anyway since I'm the woman without chakra here – though I'd like to have it, *chakra*, because why am I here if I don't get to reap the benefits of a universe where people can do impossible stuff with the power of their will?

I missed how their argument ended, I guess, because the shouting as quieted down. Someone is still talking – it's a deep voice with a heavy accent, Ichiro maybe? – but I

can't be bothered to open my eyes – when exactly did I close them again? – to look if they are talking to me.

Kin's body suddenly unwinds from mine, leaving me cold and complaining about it, though a series of *nos* probably isn't the most articulate protest I could have made.

Someone else is taking a hold of me now, and the sound I make at the unfamiliar touch is almost a hiss – or was that the Jinchuuriki beside me? I can't tell for sure. The only thing I realize is that I'm lifted up and then Akemi is whispering stuff in my ear, but I'm long past caring what the ninja do as long as they leave me *the fuck* alone. They just didn't get the message...

Oh, I'm- we're moving. One step, then another, step, step, step, it makes for a nice rhythm. Up and down, and it's all very gentle, almost comfortable actually, and I try to concentrate on where we are going, but those steps are so consistent, and I decide that I like that rhythm. It's very relaxing.

~X~

Whoever is shaking me is going to die, slowly, painfully.

"Stop that," I mutter into my pillow, but it's loud and aggressive enough to make clear that I don't take well to being woken by tugging and shoving. At the moment I'm not keen on being woken *at all*, but of course whoever the person with a dying wish is doesn't take my warning to heart at all.

Another pull on my shoulder and my sleepy – very aggressive because it's obvious that I want to sleep some more so *fuck the hell off* – self has had enough. I roll around, my left hand striking out on instinct.

My hit is dead on, but it's always when I'm half-asleep. This is the only state where I don't have the presence of mind to stamp down the urge to slap someone, and it seems I'm not that bad at beating up people if I actually allow myself to do so. *Violence isn't a solution* my ass, they shouldn't have tried to wake me after I told them to stop.

I hear someone curse, and then a big hand has closed around my wrist in a vice-like grip. His voice has an edge to it, "Usui!"

Shit. My eyes fly open and suddenly I'm wide awake. I blink against the light of the rising sun a few times before my eyes have adjusted enough to make out the figure of Aoki, who is sitting beside me with his fist still closed around my left hand.

Of course. I woke up on the gravel in Kumogakure yesterday, and it obviously wasn't a dream since I'm still here, Naruto universe and all.

After giving me a nasty look Aoki lets go of my arm. I pull it back immediately, rubbing the place where he grabbed me – it hurts, but he could have broken my wrist if he'd wanted to, so I'm not about to complain – and trying to make sense of my

surroundings. It's a simple, small room with a window, a desk and a dresser, the *futon* I was sleeping on situated in the middle of the room.

"You learnt to fight?" he asks and lets his eyes drift to my hand for emphasis. It's easier to follow his words when I'm not as exhausted as I was last night, but his pronunciation is still crap.

"No," I vehemently shake my head to get that thought out of his before it can take root. Two and a half years of karate isn't being able to *fight* in my book, not to mention that that was some... five or six years ago. If pressed I probably could do some *katas* and I know how to stand and place my arms, but that's what shinobi learn before they even become Genin – at least they do in Naruto's time.

"I- I can do some *katas*," I finally add. It's better to tell the truth than have him thinking that I'm hiding things from him. There's enough I have to lie about as it is.

He gives me a look I don't know what to make of, but doesn't say anything else. Instead Aoki gets up, mumbling something under his breath too silent for me to understand. He stops in the doorway however – no sliding doors here, I'm surprised – and turns to face me, "Change. Bathroom is the door to the right, kitchen the one after."

The moment he has left I lift the blanket to look at myself and let out a relieved sigh. Someone pulled off my shoes and sweater, but while sitting here in a mesh shirt and bra is kinda embarrassing it could have been far worse. At least Aoki or whoever undressed me had the good sense to leave me mostly clothed. I'll need to get some pajamas, but that can wait for now.

After having pulled on my sweater I trot into the bathroom. It's... not as antique or Japanese as I thought it would be. There is a tub, a sink and a toilette that thankfully is rather western, though you have to pull a chain to flush.

There is no hairbrush, but ninja household and all dissuade me from simply rummaging through the cabinet above the sink for one. I'd rather stay alive than have combed hair.

I hear the clatter of bowls when I leave the bathroom, and smell eggs in a pan as I walk closer to the open door. This room faces away from the rising sun and towards the village, and we're pretty high up on the mountain range because I can oversee most of the village from here, down to the mixture of mountains and stone that has to be the outer wall of Kumogakure.

"Good morning," greets Ichiro, sitting at the table by the window with a plate and a cup of something hot in front of him. His scar looks different somehow this morning, and I need a moment to figure out that he has a white salve applied to the burns.

"Good morning," I echo his greeting, not knowing what else to say. His brother is standing in front of the stove with a pan in hand – so they already have electricity here, very interesting – and completely ignores me. I didn't really expect anything else

and decide to take one of the free chairs to sit down opposite Ichiro and stare out of the window.

Aoki wants to make it a habit to *hit* the plates with food down in front of me it seems, and I cringe at the sound of porcelain hitting wood harshly. He doesn't look like he cares though, just sits down with his own bowl of food and starts eating.

Since everything I saw before was more or less Japanese food I expected something similar for breakfast, but what I got looks like scrambled egg with roasted vegetables. I recognize cabbage and mushrooms, the rest is up for guessing however – taking my chopsticks in hand I try it in the hope that none of those veggies are rare and therefore a potential threat to my allergy-ridden body.

It doesn't taste bad, actually. I'm mostly used to western food and don't think I could've stomached rice for breakfast, but hunger always wins and this almost tastes like *okonomiyaki*.

We eat in silence. Ichiro seems content with taking his time for breakfast, and with Jiro ignoring me it's not as if trying to make conversation would've yielded any success.

When the brothers have finished eating Aoki takes their bowls and puts them in the sink to wash them off, but when I make a move to do so with my own he glares at me with his dark eyes and takes it from my hands before I can protest. He obviously doesn't trust me to know what I'm doing.

"Later," he tells Ichiro when he is finished, placing his hand on his brother's shoulder in the most gentle touch I have yet seen him give. When Ichiro has nodded his agreement he turns to me and motions towards the door with his head, "Usui, follow."

What else can I do but put on my boots and coat and obediently follow him?

At least this time we are walking and I actually get to see the way instead of being carried around via Body Flicker all the time: I was right in guessing that the house is situated in the further end of the village, somewhere in the northwest. The brothers live in an apartment in the second of two floors and the house borders on a small street without any shops or obvious landmarks.

As it was yesterday it's *cold* outside at this time of the day despite the sun having risen already. I don't know what time it is, but there aren't many people on and about – what could as well be a result of the neighborhood we're in. We only meet one other person, a ninja Aoki doesn't greet, on the road before he leads me on a trail through a landscape of rocks and some patches of grass. After not even five minutes we end up in a place I recognize, the graveled area I appeared in yesterday.

He takes his coat off, folds it and puts it on a stone beside the – I realize what it is now – training ground. After that Aoki looks at me expectantly, but *hell no* I'm not take off that cloak.

"You run," he tells me, pointing with two fingers towards another small trail that starts on the other side of the field. It curls along the training ground before vanishing between the trees at the western corner.

Well, that certainly wasn't what I expected. I furrow my brow, "Why?"

"Kin said you need training. Your body is weak so you need to train to become *less weak*," Aoki explains, and the small grin he gives me afterwards tells me pretty much everything I need to know about how he thinks about me. *Less weak* my ass.

"How often?" I eventually ask in return. It's not like I have anything better to do at the moment, plus disagreeing with the Jinchuuriki with the divine hands who made the pain in my back and shoulders disappear probably isn't a good idea.

"Ten times," he answers, looking a little startled that I didn't put up a fight.

I honestly have no idea how long that path is. Since he'll let me do it alone it can't be that hard – by shinobi standards at least – and will probably come back to the training area from another angle I can't see at the moment. I don't have my glasses with me so I can't be sure.

When I turn to look at him Aoki is already back to ignoring me. He is doing *katas* at the moment, his movements very slow and precise, and if three years of karate have taught me anything than it's how hard some of those moves are if he does them as slowly as he is doing them now. If you move fast you can add movement speed and the weight of your body to the technique, but gradual motions need a lot more stamina and control.

With a soft shake of my head I trot over to the beginning of the path, knowing full well that running full speed as an asthmatic without an inhaler at hand wouldn't be my best idea.

There is too much here that can kill me, even if one discounts all the ninja running around Kumogakure. Too high mountains, a bad back, asthma, allergies... at the moment I'm very glad that we seem to be too high up for there to be any pollen in the air. That saves me from constant sneezing and rubbing at my eyes at least.

My tempo isn't as fast as Aoki would have liked, I'm sure of that, but killing myself here isn't an option either. Without music it's harder to keep pace than I thought it would be, and I kind of miss my phone right now. Can't be helped though, and so I simply try to concentrate on the path beneath my feet.

As I expected it winds up the hill behind the training ground, curls along a rock formation and then goes back down towards the field through a little forest. The ground is even and the way down consists of serpentines to make it less steep, but none of that changes the fact that my condition while it could be a lot worse is still far from top notch.

By the fifth round I'd like to stop, the sixth makes me want a bottle of water badly, by

the sixth I'd *really* like to stop, I get through the eight by counting my steps in Japanese and starting anew whenever I miss a number – which happens at least ten times – the ninth I spend trying to recognize as much of the local flora as I can and nearly tripping over my own feet twice, and the only thing that even gets me started on the tenth is the fact that Aoki is done doing *katas* by now and gives me a very disapproving glance when he realizes that I'm still not done.

The urge to just give up and fall flat on my back is strong, but *dammit* I'm not going to give him the satisfaction! The walk up the hill is hell on the muscles in my calves and I finally decide to just stroll down the last part of the trail because I'm really done by now. It gives me time to watch the birds in the forest build their nests and I wonder if it's spring here.

Aoki doesn't *say* anything when I walk up to him, but his eyes pretty much tell it all – well, I'm a normal person by standards of my own world, of course I'm not going to fit into the mold of what is expected from the average shinobi.

"Sit," he commands, "Don't move unless I tell you. This is *dangerous* and the Raikage doesn't want you to die."

That's the longest he's talked to me all day and I have half a mind to respond in kind, but then remember that A is my Japanese not good enough for what I'd want to say and B I shouldn't antagonize him were it isn't necessary to get my point across. Therefore I settle on a silent glare instead while I seat myself Indian style six or so meters away from him.

It's pure bliss to not have to stand on my quivering legs anymore and I tune out the dark skinned shinobi beside me until a sudden hiss draws my attention back to the man.

Even without my glasses I can see the black bolts of lightning zipping along his outstretched right arm. They are small but make the air around them flicker with power, rising and vanishing again almost faster than my eyes can follow.

Aoki's eyes are closed in concentration and he's not moving a muscle. The only thing in motion are the black flashes around his arm, waving around the limb almost like a dark, living glove – it is eerie and fascinating to watch at the same time, the knowledge that he can create the power to destroy flesh and bone and earth and stone with his thoughts alone.

Slowly, ever so slowly, a storm is picking up around him, lightning churning not only around his right arm but his left as well, his torso and head, his hair sticking out wildly despite its shortness. It is like a tornado of lightning, quiet expect for the sudden cracks in the air, wild and radiating with a power even I – chakraless as I am – can feel.

He opens his eyes then to the sound of thunder and my eyes dart up to look at the gray clouds above our heads, but there is nothing there for me to see and I realize that the sound has to have come from him.

The lighting is *wandering* along Aoki's body now, for at least that's the closest word can I find for what is happening. The black sparks draw back from his left arm, leaving first his fingers and then his forearm bare. His hair is still spiked but there are no bolts running along it anymore and they are withdrawing from his chest as well, traveling up his right shoulder and over the lightning tattoo.

To my eyes it looks like the lightning is tightening around his right arm, the gaps between the bolts becoming smaller and smaller to the point where they are completely covering his skin. He holds his palm out in front of himself then, as if he'd want to create a shield, and that's when the sparks *jump* from his fingertips into the air in front of him and... solidify.

They are bolts of lightning – I *know* that – but they are building a surface now, a disc that is both solid and moving at the same time, lightning so concentrated that it takes an actual form.

It shouldn't be possible is all I can think as I watch Aoki create what can only be described as a wonder, because he is changing the nature of the lightning itself, is making it permanent where it should flash and vanish afterwards, is giving form to something too wild to be able to be contained in any way.

Somehow he does it however, and the black shield is steadily growing, the edges of the disc fraying with little bolts, its diameter now bigger than my head but still growing, reaching and surpassing the size of my torso-

"Jiro," an unfamiliar interrupts my thoughts and Aoki's as well obviously, because he swears and the shield falls apart in seconds. Without his will to hold it in place the lightning takes its natural form again, shooting away from his hand in fast, violent bolts of black energy. It's like a miniature storm being unleashed, but the whole process is over in a few seconds. Then the disc is completely gone.

We both turn around at the same time to look at the man that appeared out of thin air. He is one of the members of the Kinkau Force I met yesterday, with sky blue eyes and light blonde hair... Raiden is his name, I think.

"What is it?" Aoki asks sullenly, clearly displeased that his comrade interrupted his jutsu.

I swing my gaze from him to the newcomer and only now realize that he is wearing pants... and nothing else if you ignore his boots and headband. Yesterday I thought that he was slender compared to the other men of his team and he really is, but his chest is all hard, solid muscle and I can't stop my eyes from roaming up and down his torso.

"Shoji is back," he answers, a tad out of breath. I guess he was doing his own training, whatever it is he does to get a sixpack like this.

That gets Aoki's attention instantly. Whoever this Shoji is, he obviously did something important – probably was away on a mission or something. My watchdog seems to

think for a moment and then nods to Raiden, "I'll be there in a minute. Wait for me."

The blonde man returns a nod of his own and sinks into the earth a second later in a technique that reminds me too much of the way Zetsu just popped out of and vanished into the earth all the time. I don't think the two jutsu are related, but it still leaves me feeling uncomfortable.

"Hold on," Aoki's voice is right beside my ear and I wince internally because he has managed to totally catch me off guard.

It's all the warning I get before I'm pulled into the fourth body Flicker of my life – I will become used to that within the week if they keep this rate up – and we speed away to location unknown. As usual the process only takes the blink of an eye but still feels like a ride on a bona fide rollercoaster.

"Aoki-sama," a man greets us even before I have managed to adjust my eyes.

He has dark skin, dark brown hair in dreadlocks and the most *fascinating* green eyes. They aren't bright green but more sea-colored, with just a tiny hint of blue that makes me stare at him longer than is strictly polite. He's young too, probably as old as I am.

"Utsumi," Aoki greets back and then shoves me away from him and towards the man, "Entertain her. I'll be back later to collect her."

I open my mouth to protest being left with a complete stranger *again*, but he is disappearing in another *Shunshin* before I even get a word out. *Thank you bastard* for just throwing me around like a human sack of rice – I swear to myself that I'll be getting back at him somehow some day, no matter how long it takes me.

"Uh... nice to meet you, I'm Utsumi Daichi," the man introduces himself, clearly as surprised as I am. *I know how you feel, buddy.*

"Saeko, pleased to meet you," I reply, doing the first bow in greeting since he's young enough to have not bowed to me. It would have been the polite thing to do, but I don't know whether it is common for people of the same age or rank to bow to each other.

He seems a bit nonplussed that I bowed at all. So I guess I'm right – well, better having people view me as overly polite than rude. I can get away with the first, but the second could lead to problems.

"So..." Daichi seems unsure what to do for a second, but then catches himself and addresses someone behind me, "Let's continue with the class."

Slowly, dreading what I'm about to see, I turn around to face maybe fifteen pairs of eyes staring intently at me. Usually I'm not a person to blush, but this is a close call... because Aoki just fucking dropped me off in the middle of a class of shinobi.

At least it's not an academy class.

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 an 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 loose 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.

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 lightning 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 famil-clans, 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 were 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.