

Clouds of Thunder

Von Karu

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 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.