Beyond Death

by Gal_of_Action

Summary

Hit by a drunk driver of all things, Ichigo's human life comes to an abrupt end. Believing he knows what is beyond death, Ichigo expects merely to reappear in his shinigami form - not flung over fifty years into the past, to when Aizen's plans are coming into fruition and a single misstep can change the entire course of the future as he knows it. Time Travel AU~
Hello everyone! This is new member 'Gal_of_Action' here~ Someone suggested on my fanfiction.net account (my username there is Girl-of-Action) that I try this site out, and so here I am with the first chapter of my multi-chapter fanfic 'Beyond Death'. I'm still getting the feel for this site, but the rest of the chapters should hopefully be up soon enough. Anyways, thank you for reading! Ja ne~ (Cya~)

Screeching. Eyes widening. I dodge, but it's useless. Stars dance in front of my eyes, then a mess of black and gray splotches. My head hits the ground. Hard. Shouldn't I be unconscious? But no, I can feel everything. Everything from the excruciating pain in the back of my skull to the countless pebbles digging into my ripped, bloodied skin. All is quiet, there is ringing in my ears. I gasp, blood spurting out of my mouth like some type of broken water fountain, and the world is thrown back into motion. Someone screams.

"Dear Kami-!"

"Is he alright?!"

"Of course not, you baka! Do you see all that blood?"

"Kachan!" A child's cry.

"Look away, sweetheart, it's going to be ok… Hello? I need an ambulance. Yes, we're at…" I groan, turning onto my side and setting the palm of my hands on the bloody gravel below. I need to get up, get to Urahara's. I'm supposed to save Orihime. I will save her!

There is a hand on my shoulder, gently prompting me to lie back down while stuffing something soft, a shirt, underneath my head. "Hey, just… just lay still, alright? It's going to be ok." Some college guy. I snort. Even he doesn't believe it, I can hear it in his voice. The action makes me cough again, cough up blood.

"He'll drown on his own blood if you leave him like that. Turn him around."

"But we're not supposed to move-"

"Really?! Do you think that'll matter if he drowns in a few seconds?!" I'm painfully turned onto my stomach, but I make no protest, not even a groan. I don't want to start coughing again, even though I numbly process how I'll need to for everything it's worth soon if I don't want to die. There is the sound of a car door opening. "Damn drunk! Look at what you did!" Someone screeches, trying to act tough but the fear and panic in his voice is plainly evident.

"Sorry…” Someone slurs, taking a few shaky steps forward. "So sorry-" he stumbles and hits the ground next to me- unconscious, but not a scratch on him. Lucky bastard. I'm pissed at this whole situation and this guy for being so blatantly careless, but even so I feel no hate towards him. I just want the pain to stop. I have stuff to do.

Another cough. Blood and spittle drip from my lips and despite the situation I'm conscious of the
shirt that was offered to me earlier on the ground, trying to keep all of my bodily fluids off of it. A
hand rubs circles on my lower back where for the most part my skin is intact, unlike my upper back
that took the brunt of the fall and skidding. I don't... need to be comforted though. I'm the
protector. I'm the one that's suppose to help people... Like Orihime. I need to save... Orihime! I try
to swat the guy's hand away, but pitifully I don't have enough energy and only manage to grip it.
He takes this as searching for more help. "Orihime? Is that your girlfriend? Sister? Do you have a
cell with her number in it? I can call her for you..." Huh. I must've said her name out loud. I shake
my head some and is promptly thrown into a coughing fit. My eyes water, head pounds. I feel like
I'm about to throw up a lung and yet still, blood and vomit continue to pour from my mouth.

A child screams and cries loudly. "I told you not to look!" A mother scolds, frantic as she
simultaneously tries to comfort her child and talk on the phone.

My arms shake at the strain of holding my upper body up and I wonder... Is this how my life will
end? After everything? Everything I've been through and still need to do... Hit by a drunk driver,
drowning and soaked in my own bodily fluids, dying next to complete strangers, no matter how
kind... Is that the way I'm going to go? I find myself inwardly calling out to Zangetsu, who I find
to have already been slowing my blood loss, but he knows and I know... There is too much torn,
broken and punctured. What he's doing is only the delay of the inevitable. If I don't get help in the
next couple minutes, that'll be it... After being so immersed in the world of the dead and knowing
for a fact exactly what is beyond death, you would think I wouldn't be afraid, but that's not true. I'm
damn well terrified. All I can think of is how I can't die. I can't die. I can't die! Not now, not here,
can't die, can't die can't die can't die Hollow!

I'm desperate. Usually when someone is so desperate, instinct takes over and the person does
whatever they can to survive but... didn't I just lock that instinct, that strength of desperation and
terror, to the farthest corners of my soul? I've never regretted any decision in my life, my life that
could very well end momentarily, more than I do right now. Only now does it finally occur to me
how much I've relied on my hollow- how many times he's saved me... and how many times I've
shoved him down, swearing to myself that I would be rid of him, and now that he is... I find
myself hoping, begging even, if he can somehow still hear me, that I am wrong. That he isn't as
truly gone as I had joyfully envisioned just a few minutes before... but wasn't it justified? He'd
threatened countless time to consume me and kill, devour, my friends and family! It needed to be
done, didn't it? Of course. So why, why, why...

Another coughing fit. Or is it the same one, and it just has yet to stop? Zangetsu sends waves of
calming Reiryoku toward me and my mind clears of all panicked thoughts, giving me a moment of
clarity to plan. I work at a family clinic for Kami's sake, I can do this! Alright, so I have ribs
broken, which is probably responsible for why my lung (I think it's one, Kami I hope it's just one)
0is full of blood- the broken bit punctured it. Ok, so I need a better way of draining it out than just
coughing because I kinda need my windpipe to breathe. I push myself further up with one arm
despite the protests of the guy still frustratingly rubbing circles on my back. I try to communicate
what I have discovered to them while sounding like I am about to throw up my insides (which I
probably am), leaving us to communicate through a messy array of bloody charades. I mimic the
motion of stabbing myself in the lung. Through my blurry, disorientated vision I see them... stare
blankly. I scowl deeply and repeat the motion urgently.

"What's he..." One murmurs, voice trailing off.

The other college student isn't much better. "I'm sorry, I don't...."

Fortunately it clicks for the mother and I can just hear her chattering urgently and nervously over
the sobbing screams of her panicking child. You'd think the kid is the one in pain by all the racket
she's making… I think with some sense of dark amusement. More coughing. For a moment, everything goes dark, and even though it's only for a moment, that really scares me. *Oi, hollow! You damn bastard, get out here! I'm your king, aren't I? Answer me!.. Hell, when I finally want you to interfere…* They have forced me onto my side. All of them, minus the drunk and the little kid, are crouching next to me and I stare at them through swollen, streaming, red eyes. A hollow needle attached to a syringe is clutched in a white knuckled grip by the mother and I look at it dubiously, wondering where she got it. When the wife of the town vet leans over to get a better look at me my unasked question is answered. She's on the phone now too, probably calling my dad. Although the veterinarian is a good deal older than Oyaji, the two of them are still pretty good friends and I see him and his wife from time to time. The mother of the crying child leans forward, bringing the syringe close to me and I hold whatever remains of my breath… As she abruptly tries to pass it over to one of the guys who promptly falls on his butt and scrambles away like she just offered him a poisonous snake. In other circumstances I would roll my eyes and even crack a smile at the sight, but right now I just want them to hurry up. And for me not to die.

The syringe guided by shaking hands somehow manages hit home. I silently applaud the lady's strength and fortitude, and my own when I only wince slightly. She carefully pulls out a good deal of blood with the syringe, looking horrified at the amount. It fills up the tube. She stares at me incomprehensibly. They all do, including the veterinarian's wife who can't seem to get ahold of my family. *So this is it then...* I think, and give them a small smile. I don't want them to believe they've failed me. They've done everything they can… One of the college students finally loses his nerve and has only enough time to turn his head from the group before he vomits. I wrinkle my nose. *Somehow I thought it would end better… Less vomit and drunk drivers, more blood and self-sacrifice, and if I am extremely lucky, a comfortable bed in my old age… Then again, do I really want to look like an old man my whole time in the Soul Society?* These are my thoughts as I stare blankly ahead, unblinking and without breathing. The sunlight takes on a brighter and brighter hue until I can barely see anything but. Vaguely I process paramedics hopping out of an ambulance at a dead run, but by the time they slap an oxygen mask over my mouth, it's already too late.
I wake to near complete darkness. Sweaty and eyes wild, my head swings back and forth, attempting to catch sight of anything, really... Nothing. I automatically reach for Zangetsu to find it where it's supposed to be, much to my relief and confusion. Had I expected any differently? My head is pounding. I reach back, expecting now to touch blood, but come up empty handed. Still, I feel like I just underwent one of Urahara-san's "training" sessions. The ground underneath me is not rocky terrain however. It's moist and soft. The air is palpably sticky, thick humidity in the air. I almost feel like I'm breathing in water with how thick it is. I struggle to my feet, using for support what I assume to be a tree by the feeling of it.

Despite the dampness in the air, my throat is raw and dry. I'm parched and the eighty degree weather doesn't help one bit. Zangetsu...? I call out silently, struggling to find something familiar in this confusing mess. My memory is hazy, as though I just walked into a room with purpose and promptly forgotten what I wanted to do, only this is much worse. I also notice something else as I take my first woozy steps forward; I feel... much lighter. I grip Zangetsu's hilt tighter, and it hits me. This is... I pull Zangetsu out of his sheath. Since when have I ever had a sheath? That's right. Back before I learned shikai. Even then though, has my zanpakuto ever been so... small?

My eyes are adjusting to the dimness of this forest and in front of me I can just make out what is now my zanpakuto. The hilt is reminiscent of Tensa Zangetsu's with the black and red diamond pattern. The blade however, although normal for an average katana in width, is long, nearly as long as I am in height like my shikai, and it glints silver in the faint moonlight. I carefully wrap both my hands around the hilt, testing the weight. Lighter than Zangetsu's shikai, definitely, but I don't feel unbalanced by the offset between the two. My grip on the hilt is comfortable- familiar, and when with a slash I whip the blade through the air, it sings. I let out a small breath, my heart's raging pounding subsides to its usual pace. Without the blood thrumming in my ears and with my vision sharpening as it becomes used to the light here, I pick up on other things. Like, for example, the absolute absence of life besides plants, whether it be animals or insects.

I take a step forward, wondering what I'm doing here, when I pause. One of my hands go up to my throat, and for a brief moment I still feel like I'm choking as flashes of memories play before my mind's eye. No way... I... died? But if I really died, I would have just appeared over my body in shinigami form, right? So, what am I doing here?

I shiver, despite the heat, something- "H-" I freeze, straining my senses. There's a groan. Scratching. Whimpering. I walk, then stop. I'm making too much noise. The sound of foliage crunching underneath my feet is almost deafening in this forest's unnatural silence. I solidify reishi underneath me and walk on the air a foot above. I wander uneventfully through the forest. Several times I pause, my sense of direction disorientated. If I listen though- truly listen, I can pick up the faintest sense of something towards a certain direction, and hear gentle cries in the distance. It takes a while, or at least I feel it does, when I think I see a clearing through the thick grouping of bushes up ahead. With a few quick slices of Zangetsu, I shred the bushes and pave the way forward.

I... I almost wish I didn't bother.

Groans.

"Help…"

"Anyone.... there?"
Quiet whimpers. The occasional muttered names of loved ones. In front of me is a clearing of bodies, blood and carnage. Zanpakutos are scattered about- all in sealed form. Shinigami, many of them ranked, but none of the zanpakutos released... Whatever had hit them had hit them hard and left them… alive? Something latches to the bottom edge of my Shihakushō and I nearly jump out of my skin. Looking down I see a girl lying on the ground, looking no older then me, with ragged black hair snaking down her back and blood from her mouth, dripping down her chin. She smiles at me, eyes disturbingly void of emotion or color as she whispers. "Niichan? Hi Niichan."

I rip my clothing away from her grip and quickly back away, eyes wide. She continues to stare at me for a few more moments, still smiling, then collapses face down without any warning. I take a shaky breath, then steel myself and step forward. "Hey… Are you okay? Talk to me." No answer. Not even the slightest twitch. Hesitantly, I bend down and grip her gently by the shoulders and turn her onto her back. I promptly gag and throw up one arm to cover my nose and mouth. Her stomach is ripped open, contents spread out on the ground. I unceremoniously drop her, the body turning into reishi and floating away in nonexistent wind just as I do. She's not the only one. Several of them follow. I'm at a loss at what to do as I shunpo from person to person, trying to patch them up to the best of my ability. They all have a wound in the stomach, most just as bad as the first girl. I do what I can to ease their passing, going as far as to play into their delusions. That night I am cousin, nephew, uncle, grandfather, father, brother, son…

"Hey, kid…" I blink. That's a new one. There is no sense of familiarity in this voice. Hands soaked in blood not my own, I turn to face my newest 'patient'.

"Yeah?" I respond automatically, then wince at how apathetic it sounds. These people are dying (again!), for Kami's sake! "What is it?" I ask again, this time significantly softer.

There is a bitter chuckle. "What? You mean besides the obvious?"

"I… sorry," I say, at a loss.

"Don't be. Just make sure this all's not for nothing."

I eye his slumped shadowy figure both hopefully and apprehensively. "You're a lot more, erm, lucid than the others. Who are you?"

"We can blame that on my reiatsu reserves, I have a lot of it, not that it does me much good in the end." The figure leans forward, revealing a tired looking middle aged man with dark hair and even darker eyes. "Name's Okubo Meiji, Third Seat of the Fifth Division. My own fukutaicho did this to me."

"Your fukutaicho?" I echo, disbelief coloring my tone. I don't know this 'Momo' girl, having only really heard of her through Rangiku. She is Toshiro's childhood friend, isn't she? A kind, innocent and extremely loyal girl who was manipulated by that scum Aizen then left to rot after stabbing her right through the heart, both figuratively and literally. That's how Rangiku described her.

The man grunts. "The one and only Ichimaru Gin-fukutaicho; damnable, psychotic brat and bane of my soon to end existence. Hell, it feels good to speak my mind after everything." I stare at him like he's just lost his mind as the gears in my own head work overtime to figure it all out. He seems so sincere, yet at the same time he is mortally wounded… Maybe he's not as sane as I first thought?

He smirks at me. "I know that look. You think I've gone crazy, like the rest. But think about it. Who else could catch off guard this many high ranking shinigami except one of our own?"

"No, I believe you, but…" Why does this guy think Ichimaru is fukutaicho of the fifth division?
His gaze hardens. "Don't you think that I would remember with all of my strength, the identity of
the person who sliced open me and all of my comrades before stuffing some type of sick, reiryoku
eating experiment inside us?"

I don't know what the hell is going on, or what to believe, but I do know one thing. "I'll figure out
who did this, I swear, and I'll make them pay."

"Not bring them to justice?" he asks lightly, tight smile strained by the pain.

"I'll make them pay," I repeat, voice strained as well with stress and held back rage. I have seen
what the Soul Society's form of justice is like and want no part of it.

He gives an approving nod. "There can't be any justice with a crime like this. Remember that." Just
then another two bodies dissipate into reishi. He glances at them before returning his attention to
me. "They were both fifth seats. I don't have much time left, so listen up." I straighten my posture,
expression hard as I do. "That Ichimaru brat is only a foot soldier. The real megalomaniac behind it
all is Aizen." A pause. "You don't seem surprised."

I shrug, face darkening. "Never liked the guy." That is the understatement of the year, and it seems
like the Third Seat Meiji has picked up on it.

"What squad are you from, kid? What's your name? I know you're not a seated officer." He
inquires quickly, obviously wishing to get onto more important stuff but extremely curious at the
same time. I suppose I would be too, if I was in his situation. This forest appears to be extremely
dangerous- not a place some unseated shinigami would be running around alone without having his
companions killed off, and it doesn't look like I have been in a fight despite me feeling like I have
and then some.

"Kurosaki Ichigo… I don't belong to a squad, I'm a Substitute Shinigami."

"A what now?"

"Substitute Shinigami. You know, someone with shinigami powers but still alive…" I know
substitute shinigami are rare, but come on, you would think word of me has spread by now- what
with invading the Soul Society and all. But then again, this guy thought Aizen is still a captain.
"Just how long have you guys been out here?" I ask out loud, returning the skeptical look the guy is
giving me with one of one own.

A flash of understanding appears in Meiji's eyes. "Too long, apparently," he admits grudgingly.
"You say you're still alive?" I give a firm nod. I wonder if I also should tell him of Aizen's betrayal,
but then brush that thought aside. I wanted Meiji to live out his final moments in sanity, and if
clinging to a hope that he could in some way help stop Aizen before he makes his big move helps
him do that, then there is no way I'm going to take that away from him.

"Is that a problem?" I can't be dead. It just doesn't add up.

"You seem dead as doornail to me kid, but whatever. I don't give a damn who you are in the end as
long as you're willing to do what needs to be done."

"I am," I say in heartbeat. First Aizen rips that thing out of Rukia, nearly kills me and Renji not to
mention murdering a whole bunch of other people... Now he takes Orihime and there's this.

He spreads his arms wide in a welcoming gesture. "Then no, no problem what-so-ever," he tells me
wrly, then proceeds to turn his head and cough up a glob of blood. He grunts afterward to regain
my attention, as I have turned politely away in order not to see his weakness. Now he tells me
everything he has found out about Aizen. "And there you have it. Half of my life, devoted to finding out his plans, and in the end I come up with a few minutes worth of information and a hole in my gut as reward." He tells me with a sort of dark amusement.

"That's more than I ever knew." I offer off-handedly, trying to ease his sense of failure.

"You knew there is something wrong with him. That's more than most, who think he's some type of God-sent."

He laughs at the expression I make. "A wannabe God maybe, but not that."

Meiji cuts his laughter off, something having occurred to him. "How did you overcome the illusion then? I looked up to Hirako-taicho and when he was branded a traitor I decided to dig deeper." So Shinji was a captain, huh? I knew he was a shinigami, but he never told me how high ranked… "Kid?" Meiji prompts, reminding me of his question. I say the first thing that comes to mind, since technically I didn't even know who Aizen was until he gutted me that day I saved Rukia. What comes out of my mouth surprises even me.

"Instinct."

"Instinct…" The man murmurs, studying me carefully and nodding slowly. He grunts. "Maybe that's the real trick to ripping away his illusions from people's eyes. Now that I think about it… all this time, I've been using logic and reason to try and figure out what the nutjob's aims are. That never got me far. The farthest I've ever gotten is when I threw logic and reason out the window-the day Captain Hirako was labelled a traitor. They had all the evidence there, stacked up against him. Everyone was so convinced… And what did I have? My trust in the man I served and gut instinct." He snorts. "Can't believe it took me all this time to figure that out, and here you come along…"

I let him rant, becoming more and more solemn as I hear him speak, both because of what he has gone and going through and because of what he said, my hollow… "My friend you don't have that, you try to use your brain to win a fight, you attempt to defeat your enemies with reason and logic, you don't tap into those pure base instincts that exists within your core waiting to be released! And the simple matter is that it doesn't work, you're weak ICHIGO! I won't put up with that, am I clear?" The memory of his words echo in my mind.

"So what now?" I break the somber silence, mind whirling as I force myself to get back on track. This is no time for inner revelations, not when someone's spirit is turning to dust in front of my eyes. "How can I convince everyone about Aizen when you couldn't?" I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. I have gotten to mixed up in this- forgotten that this could all be a man's delusions of the past or his last wishes based on outdated information. I sternly remind myself that the real Aizen is already out in the open- I shouldn't be saying these things.

To my relief though, he doesn't take it in a bad way. He has been expecting this, and if I hadn't said something along these lines he probably would have been suspicious. "Well, that's up to you now. Be creative." He pokes me on the stomach. "Follow your gut instinct. It seems to have served you well so far."

"Guess it has…" I murmur.

He scoffs. "Don't guess. Don't doubt it. It knows what it's talking about." I take the dying man's words more seriously than even he probably meant them to be taken. Suddenly he reaches up and grips my chin, tilting it up to the light. I slap his hand away automatically, knitting my eyebrows and wondering what the hell that was about. "You said your name is Kurosaki? Not Shiba?"
I stare at him, thrown off by the sudden questions. "Yeah. Why do you ask?"

"You look just like a Shiba, minus the hair…” He smirks. "Hey, you might have a better chance than I first thought."

I scowl in mock anger. "What? You think I didn't have a good chance to begin with? And what do you mean? How does looking like a Shiba help with anything?"

He chuckles, eyes widening. "You really aren't from around here. The Shibas are-" His chuckling breaks off into another coughing fit and I wince, hand automatically going to my own throat. I'm rattled, I know it, but I can't show it. I reach out an arm and grab his shoulder, trying to steady him as he coughs up all over his uniform- My eyes widen. That's not blood. That looks like…” The hell…?" The man mumbles, finally showing the fear he has been doing a great job of covering up.

"That's…." It dawns on me what's happening. "You said Ichimaru put something inside of you. Can we take it out?" Kami, I really don't want to stick my hand into some guys gut, but if it stops what I think is about to happen... "If we can stop this, I could shunpo you to the Fourth Division-" I hadn't bothered with the others. They were too far gone to know up from down and I am completely lost, but if this guy can show me the way-

"It's no use."

My free hand form fists. I refuse. I refuse to give up on a good man just because he thinks he's ready to die. "You don't know that-"

"I do." He cuts me off. Through-out our whole conversation he has had an air of carefree dark amusement, but now he only looks tired and grim. "I can feel it inside me. We all could. Some tried to take theirs out. They disintegrated as soon as they did- some type of fail safe no doubt."

"But Unohana-taicho-" I continue on doggedly.

"Can't help us if we can't get to her. There's some type of kidou on this forest. We're actually just right outside the Seireitei, but we've been stuck in here for hours. I know this forest, but now everything looks the same. Even closing our eyes, choosing a random direction and going straight without stopping or turning didn't get us anywhere. We found ourselves right back in this clearing, each and every time." I'm trying not show how much the information freaks me out. My sense of direction sucks as it is. Will I spend a couple months in this forest myself, like they seemed to have? How'd I even get here? Wasn't I on my way to Geta-boshi's place when… what? So many questions, so I might as well ask one that I know he can answer.

"What were all of you doing out here? I've seen people from the Twelfth, Third, Thirteenth and Fifth…" I remember some armbands- not the Lieutenant type- on a few of the shinigami with what I'm pretty sure are meant to show their division pride.

He gives a grunt of confirmation. "Third and Fifth… several birds with one stone. Most of the people here were close with our old captains in some way. Some like me might've suspected. The Twelfth and Thirteenth people are probably just for show, unlucky bastards who got dragged in because we're supposed to be investigating a unique and high hollow reiatsu…” His voice trails off and he grows distant. It seems to be getting harder and harder for him to stay awake… I hate feeling helpless, but for the life of me I don't know how to help. I know trying comfort him beyond a hand on the shoulder would only really shame him. Not only that, I have to be strong for him- for all of them. They've placed their hope in me now, not for justice.

For vengeance. And for the assurance that something like this never happens again.
I was not able to protect them, but this… This is how I can help.
Chapter 3

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV

I slash, hack and smash my way through the forest, but true to Third Seat Meiji's words, there seems to be no end to this place and more than once have I tripped over branches I myself cut off earlier- like now. I grunt as I stumble forward, throwing my weight backwards at the last moment so I land on my butt and not my face. I sit there for a moment, seething at my own incompetence and general, screwed up situation. If only there is something I could slash, hack and smash besides trees and bushes- meaning someone, preferably Aizen. Amazing how I only meet the guy once and for only a few short minutes, but he still managed to make me hate him more than I've hated anyone before... except the Grand Fisher. Still, that has to be some kind of record.

Could he be responsible for this? The thought suddenly hits me and my fingers curl around handfuls of mud beneath me. By 'this' I mean me being here, period, and finding... I don't want to think about the clearing and what happened to Meiji, not now. There'll be time to mourn later, but if Aizen is responsible for leading me here, and then leaving me to run around in circles like an idiot 'cause he knows I know next to nothing about kido... "Well, that'd just be the icing on the cake, huh?" I mutter out loud, then abruptly jump to my feet and throw my head back. "Hey!" I yell to whoever is watching. "Don'tcha have something planned for me too?! So what's the hold up?" I spread my arms wide, new form of Zangetsu clutched tightly in one hand. "I'm right here." I wait, tense, but after about five minutes I let out my breath. Nothing is going to happen. That doesn't stop me from being prepared for anything though. I find it extremely strange that I haven't come across one hollow yet- not one! After all the carnage I've seen... Could it all be the cause of that Ichimaru guy several months before? Just what is this kido that slows time and warps space? It can't be that powerful...

My gaze wanders and I find myself staring up at the sky. It's beautiful, I can see the crescent moon perfectly... My eyes widen and I facepalm. I can't believe I haven't tried it before now! Jumping into the air and solidifying the reiatsu underneath my feet, I smirk and speed up into the air. Further and further- just a bit more and I'll be above the trees! The wind rushes past, brushing away sweat and grime and I almost feel like I can touch the- "HOLY-!" I scream, when suddenly the sky I am speeding toward is replaced by solid ground.

-DIVIDER-

Shiba Miyako's POV

A small smile dances across my lips as I make my way back to my house near Division 13th's barracks. It's a warm night, comforting to me and a relaxing stroll. I should feel bad for waking that poor seventh seat up this late, but I had to know even though I was sure I was correct. Like I always tell Rukia, a woman's intuition is never wrong, and sure enough my words continue to hold true. I begin mentally making plans- the decorating of the room, the cards I will send out- so much to do! But it will be a labor of love, and one I will take pride in. I envision my husband's face at the news and a hand flies to my mouth, trying to stifle a small bubble of laughter. It dies on my lips on it's own however at the sound of a shocked scream. "HOLY-!"

My dark eyes widen as a stab of fear hits me. Has something happened to the scouting party?! The party that I am supposed to lead? I never should have left! Guilt hits me like a sledge hammer next. Would it have been so terrible to wait one more day to find out the news? I push the thoughts aside as I rush forward in a flurry of shunpo, hoping I'm not the only one to hear the scream.
Red tentacles wrap tightly around my neck, cutting me off from air and from chanting any more kido. My dear, broken Shizen no Ikari lays at my feet, useless in a place where she is the strongest. My eyes burn in a mixture of pain and rage as another of the murderous hollow's tentacles reach toward the unseated shinigami laying face down in the mud. I let out a voiceless snarl, unable to force the sound out of my throat with it being slowly crushed. The twisted thing chuckles at me, convinced I'm no threat. "Is saving that shinigami so important to you, woman? I see no recognition in your eyes when you look at him. What is his life in comparison to yours?" He loosens his hold just enough for her to get out some choked words if she tries. "If you start something that sounds even vaguely like kido, I'll snap your neck wench," he threatens harshly.

I nod as much as I can in it's grip, grappling tightly to the thing wrapped around my neck and reaching my foot to the left. I can just tip toe on a broken stump if I stretch, giving me some leverage. "Every... shinigami... under my rank, is under my care, but I... doubt a thing like you would understand a-a concept... like that..." I manage to get out, disgust creeping into my tone.

The hollow is largely unconcerned with my insult, besides one part. "A thing like me? Now what's that supposed to mean?" It loosens its grip even more, leering at me.

"It means," I breath in a whisper and it leans forward curiously... before my sandaled foot slams down onto it's face as I use my meager leverage on the stump to throw myself at it. The beast stunned; I use all of my strength to rip it's tentacle and free myself.

The thing screeches. "I was going to let you choose which one of you I take, but now..." It begins swelling, like some grotesque balloon about to explode. I ready myself, dropping into my casting position and chanting under my breath as it morphs.

"Hadō Number 33," I incant, nearly finished! "Sōkats-"

-DIVIDER-

"True, but... I don't know..."

"What do you mean you don't know?! Our Third Seat is with them! You heard that scream and felt that reiatsu, right?"

"It's not like a reiatsu I ever felt."

"He has a point. We were ordered to stay here..."

"You cowards can stay here then, I'm going with-"

"Third Seat Shiba!"

"What- Miyako-san! Thank Kami! We heard the yell and we were worried that... Uh, Miyako-san?"

"Miyako-dono, are you... feeling alright? Should we call for someone from the Fourth?"

"Third Seat Shiba?"

-DIVIDER-

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV
I inhale sharply, startled into awakeness, and something grimy instantly fills my mouth. I throw myself backwards, hacking up what I now realize to be mud and… is that blood? Fear and what I believe to be adrenaline shoots through my system. I'm panicking, and I don't know why. What woke me up? Why is mere coughing making me panic further? I bring my hand up to my mouth automatically and to my surprise find my nose bent at an odd shape. What…? Awareness and understanding flows into me as I remember the last few seconds before I blacked out.

That kidō is crazy strong… I think, a new respect for the art rising up inside of me despite what it has recently done to me… Probably because of what it has recently done to me. I never thought that I would need it, believing I could take on anything kidō could throw at me and return it ten fold with a Getsuga Tenshou, but really, until now, I've only seen the destructive kidō and very low level binding spells. I'm a master in all the other Shinigami arts though- Hohō, Hakuda, Zanjutsu (debatable considering who you talk to, but considering I'm a melee fighter and have taken on captains without dying…). They came naturally to me, all but kidō, despite the midget's efforts to teach me otherwise. All Rukia gained for her efforts was an extra crispy new hair due. I take on a fond look at the memory of my friend, and a not so fond one at the memory of the kick to the face I received afterwards.

Shaking my head, I sigh and concentrate on carefully resetting my nose and stopping the bleeding, only to realize I don't have to worry about the latter. Sending my mental thanks to Zangetsu, I shakily rise to my feet once more... What now? I reluctantly recognize the only answer. Closing my eyes I try to envision the Reiraku, the Spirit Ribbons. The last time I was able to force down my own reiatsu enough to see them was when I was regaining my shinigami powers, and the only time before that being way back- just before my competition with Ishida. I haven't even attempted since I've gained shikai, knowing it's a lost cause, but now it seems I'll have to rethink my stance. I run through the colors Ishida has told me for each ribbon as I calm myself, much like trying to calm a rushing river to hear several, various streams… Hesitantly, I open my eyes. A multitude of red and white ribbons are before me, but three red ones are particularly vivid- along with a deep black one alongside it. A hollow...

-DIVIDER-

Kuchiki Rukia's POV

I run, breath erratic and tears threatening to spill over. Was that… Was that torn Shihakushō really Miyako-dono's…? I grit my teeth tightly, steeling myself. No! Miyako-dono is so powerful and intelligent! The forest is her domain, how could I have thought something like- like that, even for a moment?! My breath evens out and I share a worried, borderline fearful look with my captain, Ukitake-taicho. It is not for our own safety that we do this, but for Miyako-dono, and what Kaien-dono may do if his wife is hurt or... or something more. Because... Miyako-dono may be powerful and intelligent, but she is also loving, generous and amazingly kind. There is no way she could have murdered so many of our squad members, not even one!

There's... just no way... I think, worked up into a light sweat and hyperventilating slightly when suddenly slow to a halt. I look up to see Kaien-dono kneeling next to a zanpakuto. It is Shizen no Ikari, Nature's Wrath. It lays abandoned on the forest floor, looking far less wrathful and more mournful. Kaien-dono reaches out gingerly to take hold of his wife's soul cutter when the trap is sprung. Something flies out of the many shadows surrounding us, but Kaien-dono is faster. He dodges with a practiced ease that I have come so much to admire. With a reiatsu enhanced leap he gracefully lands on a tree branch high above, the captain and I quickly following. I look down apprehensively, a hand instinctively straying to the hilt of my zanpakuto as a hollow crawls out of the darkness and into the light. It is grotesque, with several blueish green limbs and red tentacles spurting out of it's head.
It begins laughing at us—first quietly, then louder. I let out a small gasp as a wave of twisted spirit pressure rolls from it, pressing down on me. I look to my superior officers, but seeing them stand there like true, unwavering soldiers of the Seireitei, my lips twist into a downward frown as I flare my own reiatsu somewhat to withstand the pressure. I go to swallow, only to find my mouth dry. Taking a short, soft breath I lean forward to stare intently at the beast below and say out loud, "I'll go first, sirs." I remove my zanpakuto slightly from her sheath. "I'll scout out what the hollow's abilities are." It could prove to have something powerful and surprising, the only option to have won against Miyako-dono. There is no sense in risking other important individuals like my lieutenant and captain on little to no information, but an unseated officer like myself however…

I glance up, startled when I see Kaien also leaning forward with a look far more intense than my own. "Taicho, I beg of you." My purple tinted eyes widen. No… But I know there is nothing I can do. "Permission to go fight the hollow—alone."

"So, you're the first, eh?" More of that laughter. "You're nothing but a boy!" I watch on in the highest of apprehension, my heart in my throat, but at this I can't help but feel the tiniest bit arrogant. Fool… I think spitefully at the hollow. Kaien-dono has been a lieutenant for over two centuries, a seated officer for a century, an academy student for some years before that and alive for a century before even then. He is far from being a boy.

But Kaien-dono takes no heed to the insult, his mind on one thing only. "So… You took control of her, forced her to commit those atrocities. It's all your fault, then." His face is slightly downcast, his bangs swept in front of his eyes creating a shadow over his face.

"Control?" The thing chuckles. "Oh, not in the way you're imagining it… I forced my way into her body and allowed her to watch, squirm and scream as she slew her pitiful friends with her own zanpakuto! Then I ate my way out of her being from the inside! She was… delicious." It went off into a cackling fit and I felt like throwing up at the news just revealed to us. It would have been horrible enough if it was just some mind controlling ability, but this… The hollow took away Miyako-dono's very dignity, her friends, clean conscious, and then her life in the most painful, disrespectful way possible… I force my hands to stay still, clutching with a white knuckled grip my zanpakuto, but cannot hold back a single tear then runs down my cheek and to the forest floor somewhere below.

Kaien-dono handles it no better, but at least he handles it in a more productive way. With an angry flourish he draws his sealed zanpakuto from her sheath and flares out his bright blue reiatsu in palpable rage. I cringe at the strictly directed fury behind it, the only thing keeping me from running being the fact that it is not directed in anyway towards me… That, and I want to see that hollow scum drown.

"Ooh! Do you want to see how it works for yourself? Well then come on boy, come at me so I can have you like I had your beloved wife!" But it doesn't even get a chance to laugh before two of its limbs are severed from its body in a spray of red blood! But wait, since when has a hollow's blood ever been red instead of coal black? It doesn't matter! I think fiercely, heart soaring for Kaien-dono and his sure victory as he appears on the hollow's head, gripping one of it's tentacles tightly and zanpakuto ready for a killing blow. If it can bleed it can die!
"So you're fast…" The bleeding hollow hisses, looking back at the shinigami through the corner of its eyes. "But it won't save you!"

Kaien-dono tilts his zanpakuto, the blade flickering in the moonlight as he commands in full confidence, "Surge through the seas and rage through the skies, Nejibana!" I have never before seen my lieutenant's shikai, but it is said Nejibana is the most powerful water based zanpakuto to have ever existed! This is it! That murdering filth will drown in water and blood! My eyes dance with bloodlusted anticipation as the blade waviers, as if made of water, then explodes. A few droplets of water splatter around, leaving behind only the hilt. My heart seizes and lungs contract when by the look on Kaien-dono's face I can tell that this is not supposed to happen. His look is one of shock and horror. "What… the hell?" He manages to get out.

"You fell for it boy," the hollow calmly explains beneath the now weaponless shinigami. "Every night, anyone who touches my tentacles will have their zanpakuto destroyed."

"Impossible…! I've never heard of such a power!" The Shiba clan head protests, using reverse psychology to dig for more information.

Unfortunately, the hollow either doesn't fall for it or doesn't care to brag anymore. "Believe it, boy, or die anyways." Another tentacle slams against Kaien-dono with such a force than when it also hits a tree beside it, the tree shatters. My lieutenant has just enough time to raise his arms in defense.

"Kaien-dono! Get back!" I scream, and go to jump down to help when someone grabs onto my wrist. I whirl around to see it is my captain of all people! "Ukitake-taicho!... But, why? Can't you see, he's been disarmed, we have to help him!"

"Stop. If we were to interfere, what would become of Kaien's pride? If you somehow managed to save Kaien without being killed, Kaien's pride would surely be killed tonight."

"Ukitake-taicho…" But then as I watch Kaien get hit once more by the hollow, my resolve reforms and I do something I have never done before- speak out against a superior. "I don't understand. What good is pride to a man whose dead?!"

My captain's gaze, usually kind and indulgent, becomes stern and unrelenting. "Rukia, listen well to what I am about to say. There are two types of battles in this life. One to protect lives, the other to defend honor. Kaien is fighting with all of his strength, heart and soul to defend the honor of his men who were slain, that of his own honor and above all, the honor of his wife…" He sets a hand on my shoulder as I close my eyes, trying to absorb all of what I was just told. While I have been alive for a measly sixty some years, Ukitake-taicho has been alive for well over a thousand years, even more than Unohana-taicho. If anyone can tell me what this life is like, it's him. And… I think I'm beginning to understand. If I step in now, Kaien-dono will never be able to put his wife to rest, knowing he was not able to avenge her life and honor. What worth is a life lived in misery? So, my hand falls away from the hilt of my zanpakuto and I pray. Pray that somehow my mentor and friend would survive this and come out with both life and honor intact. I don't care how it happens, just… Kami-sama… please, help him!

I force myself to watch on with a mixture of awe and despair. I have never seen Kaien fight so ferociously, ripping out tentacles with brute strength alone and sending out multiple, blazing red Shakkahōs without saying a single word. I didn't even know that was possible! Furthermore, all of these kidos are at least more powerful than any academy student I have witnessed could manage, even if they used the whole incantation! But despite all of his battle prowess, Kaien-dono does not come out unscathed. The tentacles… Every time he touches them he seems to become weaker and while the Thirteenth Division's fukutaicho has been able to negate most physical damage, he has a
nasty cut somewhere on the top of his head that is bleeding steadily. I am sure he must have a concussion to some degree and am amazed at how he can manage to stand up straight, much less fight, but am none the less the less fiercely thankful.

"What's wrong, shinigami?" The battle has come to a pause bellow. "To full of yourself to call for help from your little friends? Not that it would do you much good."

Breathing hard, Kaien glares at his enemy with gritted teeth. "Shut up," he snaps. "I don't need a zanpakuto or anything else to kill scum like you."

The hollow chuckles. "We'll see. We'll see when I take you like I took your beloved, delicious wife and play you like a puppet from the inside. And against your will you'll slay your comrades with your own hand!" It cackles madly and eagerly, the tentacles left wrapping around itself and swelling. It's not the only thing that rises. Reiatsu skyrockets and there are- streaks of red, black and- orange? There is a splattering of blood, a scream not my own. A hollow's scream. A mass of something (the hollow's tentacles?) squirms on the ground with what looks like its shredded skin behind it. Kaien stands still, arms raised in front of his face, no doubt unable to dodge with his concussion, too dizzy and unbalanced. Between the two stands a figure clothed in a plain black Shihakushō, with a zanpakuto drenched in crimson and a mop of bright, orange hair.

-DIVIDER-

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV

I find myself standing in the middle of chaos again, the disgusting, writhing mass of a hollow to my right and a fukutaicho I somehow have not yet managed to meet to my left. He slowly lowers his arms and I move my head up slightly to look at him. We stare at each other for a moment, stunned though he shows it more than me. It's like looking into a mirror, albeit he looks roughly ten to fifteen years older than my fifteen years of age and with dark, bluish-black hair instead of bright orange. Meanwhile the hollow's mask is reforming, along with a new skin. It stays quiet despite the hate rolling off its reiatsu in waves, but I know only a few more moments and it'll be ready to strike again. I speak. "Every night... Anyone who touches its tentacles loses their zanpakuto, huh? Well then, I guess I shouldn't try fighting it." I comment almost lightly, and without another word toss Zangetsu hilt first to the fukutaicho. This isn't my fight, not after what I've overheard about the man's wife. Although it pains me to do so, just the same, I step back, out of the shinigami's way.

To his credit, the man doesn't fumble in surprise to catch it like many would- merely extending a hand in a flash and snatching it out of the air. He runs a finger over the flat side quickly, as if testing Zangetsu in some way, but then falls into a battle stance and gives me a firm nod. I curtly nod back. The hollow besides us roars, reformed, or not quite. It's skin it was trying to bring back has crumbled away, having failed. To make up for the loss, its tentacles wrap around each other, forming limbs and a body instead; the mass of red, organic tissue pulsating like a heart. The stranger-than-normal-strange hollow now towers over us, as large as an elephant. Its mask, the only thing that has managed to truly reform, is tilted down toward me with a gaping maw. "Damn you! I should have devoured you then and there!" I squint my eyes at it. The hell is it talking about...? I've never seen this hollow before today!

"Keep your eyes on your opponent, hollow!" My black haired look-alike commands, appearing several feet above me and at the hollow's eye level just he swings down at it with Zangetsu. Its head and mask just manages to shy away from the long, slightly curved, silver blade as it approaches; instead it jutting it's shoulder forward to take the blow. Although the hollow has next to no defense now, it's body and limbs are extremely thick and will take time and strength to cut all the way through. Although I know the shinigami has the strength after seeing him fight earlier,
time he doesn't have, not with his injuries. He needs to finish this battle, and soon. The hollow brings up it's right fist and smashes the shinigami, or tries to anyway. The fukutaicho manages to take out Zangetsu and shunpo back, however appearing a little green from the effort. Probably because of a concussion of some type. Still, he holds it in, even using shunpo several more times (though at a decreased speed I'm guessing) as the battle rages on. What the hollow has abandoned in defense, it makes up for now in sheer offensive power. Each punch decimates anything it hits and several craters are formed in seconds. Every time the shinigami wielding my zanpakuto gets close enough to the mask for a final blow, the shoulders swell up, covering its mask in the nick of time.

The scene is far from hopeless though. As the man lands back on the ground next to me, there is the same resolve in his eyes that I know shows through my own when fighting. What he does following however puzzles me. He falls into a stance that I have never seen before, his feet in a perfect front stance but his hands cupped and held in front of himself, like he's trying to catch some nonexistent rain. "Bakudo #59!" He shouts, before bringing his hands up in one swift motion as the monster throws another fist towards us. "Kurōtorappu!" There is a loud screech of agony as three, large, black bear trap looking things snap up from the ground, clamping on tightly to the hollow's limbs. The would-be punch falls short, smacking into the ground so the hollow can support itself as it throws itself around, trying to shake its limbs free from the traps, but the more it struggles the tighter the traps get until its limbs, minus the one still free, are nearly severed! Finally it stops its frantic tugging and instead bends down it's head to viciously gnaw at one of the traps holding it captive, but it doesn't even make a scratch.

"You're finished," The shinigami announces, face dark and furious as he brings my zanpakuto up in a diagonal slash across the distracted hollow's mask.

All is still, then it screeches its furry. "You… bastard! You think, you've won, but far from it! You're... the ones who are finished! You're all already puppets!-" It looks like the hollow wants to say more, but it promptly explodes into a shower of reishi before it can, leaving the shinigami and myself with its final words fresh in mind.

What did it mean by that? I don't feel any different. And why did it act like it recognized me earlier?... Zangetsu? I mentally prod at the presence of my wise zanpakuto, but find myself irritated when I garner no response. Can't you speak to me whenever I'm not dying? I grumble internally, sighing and pulling myself back to the presence to see Lieutenant Look-alike staring at me oddly over one shoulder. I respond by returning the gaze evenly and open my mouth to speak right when I suddenly hear Rukia cry out in relief. I automatically extend an arm toward her direction, ready to embrace and comfort her… also ready for a smarting on the back of the head and emotional scolding of "Idiot!" that's sure to follow afterwards.

Rukia runs into Lieutenant Look-alike's warm embrace. It's now I realize that it's not my own name Rukia had called out. "Kaien-dono!" she repeats, burying her face into the other male's chest and clutching the uniform material over his shoulders while I stand a few feet away, dumbfounded. She sobs silently against him as Lieutenant Look-alike staring at me oddly over one shoulder. I respond by returning the gaze evenly and open my mouth to speak right when I suddenly hear Rukia cry out in relief. I automatically extend an arm toward her direction, ready to embrace and comfort her… also ready for a smarting on the back of the head and emotional scolding of "Idiot!" that's sure to follow afterwards.

He sets a hand on her head and ruffles it affectionately. Rukia looks up to him and even though she is facing away from me, I know there are tears on her face. "Kuchiki… Don't cry for me. Tears don't belong on your face… or on my uniform, you'll drench me if you keep this up," He jokes quietly, carefully wiping the tears away with one thumb. He smiles, seemingly in response to her own. "That's better."

I grunt, snapping them out of their moment. I stretch out my hand forward and make a gimme
gesture with it, all the while keeping my face turned away from the pair. "Right," I hear this Kaien
guy say, detangling himself from Rukia and holding my zanpakuto up. However, instead of
handing it to me I see him begin to clean it with his own Shihakushō instead of say, the grass, or
not at all. I turn to him finally, surprised at the care he is showing for my Zangetsu, and he grins at
me. "It's a good zanpakutō," he complements. "Longer than I'm used to, but there's nothin' wrong
with that." He tosses my now cleaned zanpakutō to me. My eyes widen slightly, but I manage to
catch it without making myself look like an idiot. "Huh. Pretty good." I scowl at him, but mumble
my thanks none the less as I then turn to the girl doing her best to hide the fact that she was just
crying. I smile a bit at the scene- same old Rukia.

"How about me, Rukia?" Her gaze snaps up to me, as if noticing me for the first time. I scoff at the
stupid expression she gives me. "What? He gets a hug and cried all over, but I don't even get a
hello?"

"I- I-" she stutters, face reddening with both anger and embarrassment, but then she pauses,
studying me closely and seems to regain her bearings. I stand stock still as she bows to me out of
all things- to the waist! What's that all about?! Not even one kick to the gut, but a bow instead?
"I'm grateful for your assistance to my fukutaicho and happy to see you unscathed, shinigami-san."

"What… are you talking about?" I mutter, scowling at her as she straightens her posture, blinking
owlishly, and I stiffen even more at what I see… Or more precisely, what I don't see. Recognition. I
don't see any sign of recognition. Not in her body language or her eyes. I had thought before, for a
moment when she was stuttering, that things were going to go back to normal and after a loud
scolding she would introduce me to presumably the Lieutenant of the Thirteenth Court Guard
Squad, but…

There is a rushing of air and I turn again, this time to see the Thirteenth Squad Captain- Ukitake-
taicho, right?- standing next to me. He smiles at me gently and I try to return it, only to fail
miserably. Not only am I rather suspicious of him now that I know that the substitute shinigami
badge he gave me doesn't work, but nothing makes sense. I quickly make a mental list of why this
is true.

I don't know how I got to or why I am in the Soul Society.

Zangetsu looks nearly completely different.

Ichimaru is, according to Third Seat Meiji (who I feel is, or was, trustworthy), still a fukutaicho of
the fifth division.

Therefore that Momo girl can't be the fukutaicho of the fifth division?

Aizen is still a taicho?

There is a shinigami who looks almost exactly like me.

He is the fukutaicho of Rukia's squad, but I've never seen or heard of him before now.

He and Rukia are very close.
Rukia does not remember me.

"Are you alright?" A hand is laid carefully on my shoulder and I look up to see Ukitake-taicho staring worriedly at me, apparently having been speaking and garnered no response. Again, I see no signs of recognition. Only signs of worry for a friendly stranger.

"I... Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks." I shrug off his hand, which seems to stun the man somewhat, and sheath Zangetsu. I begin to trudge my way away from the shinigami. I need some time to think. I need to get away from here.

"Hey, wait!" I don't.

-DIVIDER-

Kuchiki Rukia's POV...

"Hey, wait!" Kaien calls out, reaching a hand out and about to shunpo when he stumbles. I gasp, quickly positioning myself underneath one of his arms in order to support him. I look back to where the mysterious shinigami was standing a moment before, only to find it vacant. He has already shunpoed away. Why... What was that all about? But after this, I don't give it much thought.

"Kaien-dono! You're injured! Please, allow me to escort you to the Fourth Division," I plead, ducking my head some in respect.

He shakes his head at me. "No, that guy, there's something..." His face twists into one of intense, emotional pain barely held at bay. "And my Miyako. I have to find her!"

Ukitake-taicho goes to the other side of Kaien and supports him on that side. "Kaien, we'll find Miyako-san. I'll send out a search party as soon as I am able, but you won't be able to do much in this condition. Let us take you to Retsu-san." Kaien opens his mouth to protest, but Ukitake-taicho is firm and quickly interrupts, "That's an order." Kaien frowns tightly but reluctantly nods and quietly asks his captain to pick up his wife's zanpakuto. He complies and I look up at Kaien-dono... At the expression I see on his face I tighten my grip on his arm. We'll find you, Miyako-dono! I promise, but deep down, I know that there is a chance we'll be searching forever, because there will be nothing left to find.

-DIVIDER-

"Gin. Welcome back. I presume your mission was a success."

"Well, I suppose tha' depends on your opinion, taicho..."

"Gin..."

"But it was interestin'! That's for sure."

"... How so?"

"Our dear Third Seat had a change of heart, so to speak."

"Ever amusing, Gin, but I already knew that. Go on."

"Right, right... There was this kid."
"A child? Girl or boy?"

"Mhm… Boy. And a shinigami."

"A prodigy, like you were?"

"Heh. No way. He has 'lots of reiatsu, but that's 'bout it as far as I could tell from the few minutes o’ watchin' him."

"... I will begin to get very… exasperated if I have to continue asking a question every few seconds. Please don't make me exasperated."

"Heheh… Sorry, taicho. Don't mean to upset you, never do."

"You are forgiven."

"You're so kind, taicho! Anyways, this kid just appeared out of no where. Literally. From what I observed he has no form of reiatsu control- whatsoever, not even the natural type, and his reiatsu is constantly overflowin' from his spirit. I find it, erm, unlikely that he was able to hide himself from me for so long and then suddenly go crazy like tha'."

"I hope… this is not just your pride speaking, my dear fukutaicho. I am well of your prowess and intelligence, both on and off the battlefield. If this boy is strong as well, there is no shame in admitting it."

"..."

"..."

"Thank you for sayin' that, but I assure ya, captain'o'mine, I'm merely telling it how it is. I don't want to give ya inaccurate information, after all…"

"I'm pleased to hear it. Continue."

"'Course. So this kid stumbles along for awhile, seeming lost and a little freaked out if I do say so myself, though he put on this brave face that was kinda cute. He also seemed surprised by his zanpakuto."

"This sounds like a newly deceased plus soul… but one that became a shinigami as soon as he arrives? If that is truly the case, a rare find indeed, Gin."

"Isn't it? And he's such a cute kid to boot; I could just pinch his cheeks! Maybe that would help stop it from gettin' stuck into a permanent scowl. I gotta feelin' he had that expression before he even came 'ere. Got it down to a pat… So, naturally he stumbled across our little experiment-"

"Naturally."

"-and besides the first few seconds, he overcomes his shock quickly. He barely bats an eyelash before he tries helpin' everyone. Tries patchin' up some of the less serious stomach wounds while ignorin' the more critically injured, but when he realizes nothing he's doin' is working he aims more at making everyone more comfortable, though he still tries to stop 'em from dyin'… Even pretends to be family members so they can say their goodbyes, or at least think they've said their goodbyes."

"And what do you draw from all of this, fukutaicho?"

"Um, lemme think… He's seen lots of death in his previous life, actually remembers his previous
life, and knows a good deal on human medicine. One of his parents was probably a doctor, nurse, or some' em. He knows when and how to cut his losses, but hates doin' it and refuses to whenever possible. Bull headed. But he is a good kid, kind and generous. He'll charge head toward danger and linger, even with jus' a chance of helping out complete strangers."

"Mmm, interesting…. Maybe he just needs a guiding hand to direct his passion. He could be put to good use and help renew this fallen universe?"

"Maybe, taicho, but I wouldn't get your hopes up. Our dear third seat had a chat with him and although I wasn't able to hear the whole thing, the kid seemed to accept everything the man said as gospel."

"..."

"I know. I speed up the process as much as I could."

"Tell me more."

"Well, erm… He did kinda swear vengeance on you and anyone helpin' ya."

"... Oh dear."

"Heh. Yeah."

"Unfortunate how Third Seat Okubo was able to stay coherent for so long. Exactly how did he stay coherent for so long, Gin?"

"He blamed it on his own reiatsu reserves, but the man, although 'coherent' as ya put it, was too far gone and full of himself to realize what was in front of his face. It was actually the kid's reiatsu. It was bizarre. Soon as they got close, the kid's reiatsu started flowing into Okubo and patchin' up his soul."

"And you are sure this is what you saw? You saw this child's reiatsu… heal a third seat's soul undergoing our experiment?"

"Eh, not heal exactly… Patch it up, like I said. Nothin' was healed. It was like the kid's reiatsu was filling in the gap the maggots 'ere making and was trying to make Okubo's soul even stronger than before. Maybe if the kid actually realized what he was doin', he may have been able to speed up the process long enough to take Okubo somewhere for help, but as it were he didn't and the maggots soon adjusted enough to the pressure and the rest is history."

"You didn't happen to catch the name of this unique child, did you, Gin?"

"I did actually."

"And?"

"Kurosaki Ichigo. But I haven't even gotten to the best part yet!"

"I'm at the edge of my seat."

"This kid- he looks like he could be Shiba Kaien's son."
Chapter 4

*Shiba Kaien's POV...*

"Kaien-sama…. I'm- I'm so sorry," the woman, an unseated shinigami in my squad, breaks out into tears. Although separated from my wife due to rank, they have become close friends. Everyone is a friend of my wife, or is a friend of mine, I have quickly learned this morning.

"So am I," I murmur, giving her a chaste hug before letting her go and continuing on.


"Kaien-san… I heard what happened, and I just wanted to let you know that I'm always here if you need to talk." Nanao. A young shinigami and even younger fukutaicho, barely a hundred and some years old, but ever since she became lieutenant of the eighth division we have fast become friends. She has a good head on her shoulders, a kind heart, and what she lacks in reiatsu she far makes up for in intelligence. I give her a warm smile and promise to keep that in mind. She bows and we are both on our way again.

"Kaien-dono..." One of Kuchiki's friends… Hinamori Momo, isn't it? A newly seated officer from the Fifth Division? I ask her this and she confirms it. She gives me cookies of all things, nervously explaining how she eats when she's sad or stressed. I find that hard to believe considering her size and how every time I have seen her she seems nervous or stressed (except when around her captain), but keep my thoughts to myself and accept the gift with warm gratitude. In all honesty, it's the most anyone has done for me so far minus my captain and Rukia. They both have been working tirelessly, the former to arrange a continuous stream of search parties while taking on as much of my duties and his own as his poor health allows, while Rukia makes it her duty to be with me on every single search party I manage to get myself into. A difficult task in it's own, with Unohana-taicho breathing down my neck.

I guess it's understandable however, it has only been ten hours and I'm barely healed after all, but… Every moment I'm stuck in the Fourth is another minute Miyako could be somewhere out there in that hollow infested forest. What was once her favorite training spot- now a place of infestation? It infuriates me and it's slow going to clean it out. Far too slow.

"Shiba-fukutaicho! I'm sorry to hear of your loss." Do I even know this guy? I give a silent sigh and return his bow nonetheless, along with all of the other bows the shinigami who have overheard have now stopped to give. News spreads fast... It's only a matter of time before my family hears of it and pandemonium breaks loose. Well, at least more so than it already has... Shibas pride themselves on putting family and friends before all else, and to hear that one of their own has gone missing… Many of them, my siblings included, will demand to join the search parties- no matter how underqualified they may be to face hollows.

These are my thoughts as I almost mindlessly return bows and give thanks to the countless condolences and "I'm sorry"s offered.

"I am so sorry, Kaien-sama."

"Kaien-san, I can't even begin to imagine what you are going through. I offer you my most sincere condolences." Why is almost everyone treating Miyako like she's already dead?! I shut out the tiny voice of reason in the back of my head that gives me a logical answer. *Because she probably*
already is.

"Shiba-dono." A bow.

"I pray we find her soon, Shiba-fukutaicho." I pray too. I pray to see her gorgeous eyes, laughing dimples, long flowing hair and radiant smile. I pray. I feel as if I haven't stopped praying since yesterday.

"We'll never stop looking, fukutaicho, not until we find her."

"If you ever want to talk,"

"I'm sorry, fukutaicho, still nothing."

"My condolences."

"-can't imagine what your going-"

"-keep search-"

"-and if you ever need anything-"

"My most sincere-"

"Congratulations! Shiba-fukutaicho." I whirl around on the pleasantly cheerful voice.

"What. Did you say?" I manage to get out. My reiatsu is, like always, strictly restrained but my expression must be terrifying because the girl instantly starts and steps away like she just burned a hand. I run a critical eye over her. She's… who is she? Fourth Squad, Seventh Seat Isane… something. She has struck up a distant friendship with my wife the last few weeks. So what the hell does she think she's saying? I don't think I can bare anymore pitying words, but congratulations is just revolting. My face darkens, but the newly revived Nejibana stays my hand.

Listen… Look at her, Kaien, she means no harm.

I take in a calming breath and as I do realize my mistake. There was and is no malice in the girl's voice or countenance. I inwardly berate myself for automatically thinking so poorly of a Fourth Division member, and friend of my wife. "Well? What are you talking about?"

"I- you d-don't know. I thought, by now- I'm very sorry to have bothered you, Shiba-fukutaicho," she bows and backs away, quick to make her escape.

But not quick enough. I lay a firm hand on her shoulder and whirl her around. "What don't I know? Tell me."

"But, sir-"

"Tell me." She winces, and I feel a pang of guilt, not at all used to having people afraid of me. I soften my expression and say, "Please, Isane-san. Is it… about my wife?" She nods mutely, looking very uncomfortable. "Do you know where she is?" I tighten my hold on her shoulder slightly. Isane momentarily overcomes her fear and nervousness to blink at me in confusion.

"Isn't she… at home?"

"No…" I say slowly. She looks genuinely alarmed, and looking at her I realize she must have yet to hear her work gossip.
"Oh," she replies faintly.

I put two and two together. "She came to see you last night? About what?"

"About what…" she echoes. Then her eyes seem to clear as she swallows thickly and says, "About her baby. She's going to have a baby."

-DIVIDER-

Kurotsuchi Mayuri's POV...

"Oooh- how interesting! How interesting indeed!" I, the Seireitei's scientific genius and newest taicho, positively coos over the results flashing on his modified portable reiatsu scanning device, and why wouldn't I? Ever since that insufferable man Kisuke was framed and forced to flee like a rat to that World of the Living, I have been utterly bored out of my mind. Even- oh, forbid the thought!- to the point of wishing that he could somehow return. Of course, I hate the man, but at least he always managed to keep me occupied. He had contacts, and morals just skewed enough to allow me some fun. After he left, I was thrilled, both with the way it happened and the realization that not only was I free from him, I now run the Burrow of Research and Development! But once the experiments that was already in my hands… expired… I was left with the reality of it all. I have no contacts to bring in materials and specimens, but still must to keep up appearances, and that means dealing with incompetent idiots like the one currently scraping and whining at my side.

"Kurotsuchi-taicho? Find something, sir?"

"What, you? Are you still alive?" I inquire airly, glancing at the sniveling fool out of the corner of one eye.

"Um… Yes, sir?" The worthless shinigami forced into the position of my lieutenant doesn't seem quite sure of how to take this, or, at least, he's trying to convince himself of that. My plans to make a perfect subordinate are well under way- the only mildly interesting thing that has kept me sane through these last two decades of utter boredom- so I must really come to the tiring task of disposing this… thing.

"Ugh, fine. Make yourself useful then and bring these results to the soutaicho and whoever he has decided to share it with. Tell them I will translate the findings into the most dumbed down report I can manage within the hour if their puny minds cannot comprehend the implications of these results." I really could care less if I'm quoted word by word to the soutaicho himself or otherwise. It is well known that without me the Burrow of Research and Development would have fallen the moment Kisuke left, and with it, the Seireitei that have come so much to rely on it. There is no one more qualified than me now for this position, and no one could ever manage to substitute my genius. That fact alone will give me the leeway to do as I desire.

"Y-yes, sir, Kurotsuchi-taicho!" He scampers off with the appropriate results, somehow managing to embarrass himself further with his antics. Somehow.

Meanwhile I mull over my findings, coming up with hypothesis after hypothesis to the meaning behind it all. Reports of it's capabilities is fascinating. Able to enter and take control of a shinigami? Why, it's reminiscent to the hollow/shinigami merging research Kisuke was so fascinated with, but the blasted man never allowed me to help beyond that of a meager assistant with those projects and he managed to destroy all of his notes and studies before leaving, bringing with him his most closely guarded creation. Still, I don't mind starting from scratch too much, even if it is not preferred, and this hollow is the perfect starting point! …. If only they managed to bring the specimen to me alive. Instead, I am left with it's molten skin and quickly fading reiatsu imprint
that leaves me with more questions than answers, and no matter how delightful the questions are, I prefer answers… Like the answer to why the hollow's reiatsu is returning to Hueco Mundo instead of returning to the cycle of souls.

Reluctantly resigning myself to reality as it is with my limited information, I go to take a sample and study the shedded skin of the hollow. I lose track of time as I work, ignoring my incompetent division members and multiple shinigami guards anxiously surrounding the clearing. At one point however, I am bothered by a Division One member.

"I apologize for the disturbance, Twelfth Division Kurotsuchi-taicho, but I come here on orders from the captain commander regarding two things."

I turn on him, eyeing him impatiently. "Well, what is it?" I snap.

"First, the soutaicho demands an update of your findings at once," he is quick to answer.

One of my eyes twitch as I suspect what the second reason is. "And the second reason?"

"The soutaicho desires an explanation as to why your fukutaicho just resigned and left the Seireitei without any given explanation."

"..."

"..."

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. Now I do not have to worry about disposing of him, true, but he really couldn't have picked a more inconvenient time! At the least he could have delivered the results to the soutaicho before running off in terror! Blast it all. "How should I know?" I whirl around to my twelfth seat. "You, girl."

"Y-yes?!" she snaps to attention.

"Take these results to the captain commander and tell them I will have a report soon enough." She nods quickly. "And don't get distracted!" I add heatedly. "Or you'll find yourself on the other side of the scalpel." I ignore the alarmed look on the first division member. It's ridiculous really; he looks more shocked than the girl herself.

"Of course sir, yes sir!"

It only takes a matter of seconds for the universe to counter attack. I hear the girl scream and resist the urge to groan. "What is it now?" I ask tiredly, turning about once more to see the girl nearly fainting from shock and a filthy shinigami carrying what seems to be a dead body wrapped in his kosode. All but the body's head, one dangling arm and bare feet, are left uncovered by it, though the body's face is covered by her long, black hair.

"You! How did you get in here!" shrieks one of my shinigami 'guards'. They have long since created a ring of soldiers so that myself and my associates may work in peace, but somehow the buffons allowed this one to stroll right inside without proper clearance.

The shinigami, an orange haired, brown eyed, mud caked male ignores as the majority of the surrounding shinigami, minus myself and a few of the other scientists, draw their zanpakuto. He insteads steps forward and orders bluntly (the nerve!) to me, "Help her." I glance between him and the apparently not so dead body, as a small river of blood trickles down her dangling arm and drops to the ground below.
"Fool. Do I look like a medic to you?" I question in disdain, wrinkling my nose at the pairs' appearance. So insanitary! "Now go, before you foul the air here with your smell and corrupt the reiatsu remnants here with your own." Doesn't the boy understand the meaning of the word restraint? Just what was that silly shinigami academy teaching them anyways?

"Don't move," One of the shinigami threaten, point of his blade at the back of the disturbance's neck. The squad one member's zanpakuto is also drawn and at the ready nearby. Again, the nuisance ignores the warnings and has the nerve to shunpo (frustratingly before his neck can be sliced) right next to me and grips my arm tightly.

"Don't bullshit me," he says tightly. "I know you know more than enough to help her!"

I open my mouth to snap at his insolence when I notice something peculiar. The fast movement has prompted the woman's hair to fall away from her face, revealing… "Ah. Maybe I can. You are in luck." I raise my voice. "Everyone, stand down."

-DIVIDER-

**Kurosaki Ichigo's POV, a few minutes before...**

I find her at the mercy of a hollow, a woman- dangling by her feet above it's disgusting maw. Her clothing is shredded, mere parts of her uniform protecting her dignity. She's spent, zanpakuto no where in sight and obviously unable to perform a single kido, even though I can hear her murmuring an incantation as her eyelids droop. She's not giving up. Not screaming. Not pleading. Not crying. And not giving up.

"No! Ichigo!" I ignore her, reaching out a hand to save the little girl in front of me, but then she's gone and something is above me. "Ichigo!" But then kachan is also above me, orange hair whipping in wind the storm above us brings. She snatches me up and jumps back just as something powerful slams down where we just were. The impact sends us flying. When I open my eyes again, my vision is blurry but I can just make out kachan being held upside down by her ankles. Blood is dripping from her mouth, but she doesn't scream. Doesn't cry. Doesn't plead. Doesn't give up. She lights up a bright blue. Grand Fisher roars.

"Leave her alone!" I scream. Zangetsu is in my hand, glowing a bright blue as I use him to cleave messely through the creature's arm, catching the woman as I go. I round back one more time to slice it's mask and it dissipates with a roar. I catch my breath, looking down at the woman I saved in my arms.

A cold hand reaches up to touch my cheek. "Kaien?... No, it's you… At least, you're safe… I'm glad." Her eyes fall close, unable to stay awake any longer.

"Hey, stay awake! You hear me?! You need to stay awake!" No response. I allow myself to float down to the forest floor. Laying her down, I quickly wrap her body in my black kosode to keep her warm. I don't understand. Sure, she's injured, but the cuts are shallow and I see no signs of infection. What's going on? Is it just exhaustion? Somehow, I doubt it. I need to get her help! Unohana-taicho...? I know how to get to the Fourth from here now. After relearning that reiatsu sensing technique Ishida taught me and finding out that kido from last night has worn off, I figured out this forest really is right next to the Thirteenth Division at the edge of the Seireitei… But, isn't the fourth on the other side of the Seireitei? Would she make the journey? I… I think her spiritual pressure is fading.

As it turns out though, I find another solution. It's the twelfth captain, Kurotsuchi? It doesn't matter. I shunpo to the middle of the group before anyone can question me, and somehow manage
to gain his assistance without outright threatening him. I stand close by, wary in case he decides to change his mind, but it looks like he's doing healing kido as I've seen Rukia perform often enough. I realize something then. Almost everyone who is supposed to be keeping watch is constantly throwing looks at the captain, woman and myself. "What are all of you looking at?" I snap coldly, glaring at the lot. "Do you want a hollow to sneak up and gut us all or what?"

"You can't-" it's the shinigami from earlier that almost stabbed me through the back of my neck. I turn the full force of my glare to him. He shrinks away, before pulling himself back together going back to his original duty with the rest and without another word.

"U-um, sir," One of the scientists pips up and I turn to face him.

"Yeah?"

"I mean no disrespect, b-but could you please lower your reiatsu? You are disturbing our readings and probably attracting hollows…” His voice gets smaller and smaller as he rambles.

I stare at him for a moment, reminded of Hanataro, then give a curt nod. "Sure, I'll see what I can do."

He blinks at me, then bows. "Thank you very much."

"Don't mention it…” I mumble, already trying to focus on reining in my spiritual pressure. Should I use the visual imagery that Ganju taught me? But no, that's supposed to help me tap into my power, not tone it down. Instead I decide to do what I usually do when trying to sense spirit ribbons. The feeling is akin to holding ones breath, and I can't do it for long, but for now it seems to help. Somewhat.

-DIVIDER-

Unohana Retsu's POV...

"He completely ruined my samples!" Kurotsuchi-taicho rages in front of me. I've seen him worked into a frenzy before, but I must admit he seems slightly more animated in this particular hissy fit. His findings must have truly been something curious. "The utter buffoon left his dirty reiatsu signature all over the clearing- I can't find one bit of it that's not reeking with his stench!"

"I am sure he meant no harm, Kurotsuchi-taicho," I remark pleasantly, accepting the pen my fukutaicho is offering me and promptly begin signaturing the needed paperwork for my newest patient. "The boy was probably in a panic to save the Third Seat and had a momentary lapse of control."

"No." Kurotsuchi whirls on my, one finger in the air- the one with the ridiculously long nail. He points it at me, the nail inches from my face. I merely raise an eyebrow at him and continue to smile softly, shooing my nervous lieutenant away after returning the pen to him.

"No?" I inquire lightly.

Kurotsuchi nods sagely. "This was no momentary lapse. This lapse, if it can be called that, seemed indefinite. In fact, I believe he was making some type of attempt to hold back, no matter how measly and pathetic it was. Just what are they teaching those brats at the Academy?! This boy, although the worst by far I've come across, is only the tip of the iceberg. I can not stand for it any longer. How do they expect me to tolerate new recruits if they are of such poor quality? I must insist at the next taichos' meeting that the Academy's teachers and programs be reevaluated and
corrected immediately."

"And you wish for me to second the motion..." I conclude thoughtfully.

He gives me a mildly appreciative glance. "Your reason of deduction is... refreshing, Unohana-taicho. Yes, that is what I desire. I am even willing to go to that brute in the eleventh division for assistance, he has been making more of a ruckus than even me, though naturally I would prefer a more intellectually appealing ally."

I mull over his proposal. It is true, the shinigami of today's generation are significantly weaker and of less character than of my generation and those immediately following. It is also true that the methods used in the old regime were... unnecessarily harsh, but it had built character and strength. Those students, when first becoming full-fledged shinigami, did not freeze up at first signs of an actual hollow. They never thought of surrendering. Surrendering to hollows? As of recent, many have tried. Any survived? Not a one, but they don't seem to understand this, especially the nobles. The academy students are soft. Pampered. And it is having them killed left and right, leaving my division to clean up the blood stains after them.

"And naturally, I will support you in this endeavor. It is for the children's benefit after all." My eyes narrow ever so slightly, smile becoming a bit strained.

His face contorts into something resembling a twisted smile. "Naturally, for the children." He walks toward the door, but not before mentioning, "I do urge you to reconsider your other decision, by the way."

"It is not my decision to make. You will have to talk to her husband."

His face twists into a derisive snort and is about to speak when the door is thrown open, throwing him off balance and in an undignified heap against the wall. A volatile looking Shiba Kaien-fukutaicho comes bursting through, mind no doubt set on one thing, even while Kurosuchi is quietly cursing with words that I never thought the self-proclaimed sophisticated scientist would use. "Where's my wife?" The Shiba snaps, out of breath.

I give him a cool smile. "Right this way."

-DIVIDER-

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...

"When confronted with the illogical, the rational mind will grope for the logical." I heard someone say once. I have never been exactly known for my rationality, but I'd like to believe I have a good head on my shoulders. Being born with the ability to see spirits just allowed me to be more open minded about everything in general, which is why I accepted the existence of shinigami, quincies and hollows so quickly.

Which is why I now accept the fact that people I know and should know me, no longer remember me. It didn't take that long to figure out really, and has nothing to do with 'rationality', but a whole lot to do with common sense. Rukia would never brush me off like that without an extremely good (in her mind) reason, and as far as I could see, there is none. Add that to the complete lack of recognition from all of the shinigami I've come across since waking up in the Soul Society, and I come to that conclusion. No one remembers me.

I guess I should be panicking, or at least deeply concerned, but I'm not, at least not yet. Maybe because the fact hasn't hit home yet. Maybe because I'm in shock. Maybe because... Well, it seems
I'm not as open minded as I first thought. This is when my mind starts gasping for its version of logical. Is this all an illusion created by Aizen? I don't think I saw his shikai, and this illusion, if it is one, seems to only worsen my opinion of the man. Why would he want that? If this is one of his illusions, why aren't I dead already?

And… that's it. No matter how unlikely, that's the only option I can think of. I'm not stupid enough to believe this is all just some type of crazily vivid, but natural dream. For one, I'm not creative enough. For another, while waiting for the captain of the twelfth to heal the woman I found, I heard the other scientists mumbling a jargon of scientific mumbo jumbo that I know I've never heard the like of ever before. Then again, I'm seeing a lot of things that I know backfire in my face lately.

Ugh. Enough of that for now. After figuring out that no one knows me and making sure that the shinigami woman winds up in the capable hands of the Fourth Division captain, I left. It may seem a kind of stupid thing to do, being as grimy, relatively tired and confused as I was, but try to look at it from my point of view. If no one knows me, what will happen when they ask for my identity? Nothing good. The Gotei 13 isn't exactly the forgiving sort, or welcoming to outsiders. Look at what they did to the quincies, vizards, Toshiro and Rukia! Makes me wonder why I always feel so protective of them, almost as much as I do Karakura.

I've decided it's because of the individuals inside. I don't give a crap about the organization as a whole. Heh, I can just hear Byakuya's stuck up, monotone voice drone on about me seeing some type of 'higher wisdom' in needing the Gotei 13 to 'balance the cycle of life and death'. I call bullshit, imaginary Byakuya. Jii-san is what, 2,000 years old? He's the one that started the Gotei 13, and life and death has been around for a hell of a lot longer than that. The cycle continued on without the existence of the Gotei 13 (shocker! right?) so excuse me if I don't find the need to protect a genocidal organization.

Like I said, it's the people inside that I protect. There's a difference. A big one.

Right, back to what happened. For a while I kept myself busy with thinning out the newly arrived hollow population in the forest, but that soon turned out to be impossible. Shinigami flooded the place, and it got harder and harder to avoid them. So, I left and found myself in the higher districts. People there gave me disgusted looks at my appearance, but refrained from saying too much. I think it's because they realize I'm a shinigami and shinigami are higher up the totem poll here then well-off citizens. With that in mind, I also realized that the nobles were above the majority of the shinigami in this society, and many of them visited these higher districts. I should probably not to be seen by them either, at least, not until I had some type of idea of what I want to do. I shunpoed further away from the Seireitei.

I'd soon come to a point that I didn't know what to expect. I'd never been that far away from the Seireitei, and the time I was when on my mission to save Rukia with the others, the streets were strangely desolate. I nearly find it hard to believe my own memory, because it's pretty obvious to me now that the Soul Society has a serious problem with overpopulation. I don't know what district I'm in now, but there's people everywhere, all of whom are extremely jumpy and some of whom are as nearly dirty as I was. I had really hoped this is not the Rukongai where newly deceased souls wind up. I get this queasy feeling in my gut even thinking about it. How many children I performed konso on and sent them here, alone? Just when I arrived here I saw two men standing over the dead body of what I assumed to be a newly arrived plus soul, as he was still in his modern clothing, a traditional westerner's suit. Not to far away I found another body, this one in the dreary, plain attire the people around here seem to where. Closer inspection revealed a pouch of money on his person. Pretty sure I walked right into a robbery, and the scum from earlier ran as soon as they saw me, probably because of my recognizable (no matter how dirty) shinigami clothing and zanpakuto at my side.
I'm not proud of what I did next, but I took the money. I may be powerful, but that doesn't mean I'm immune to starvation. I'd planned on finding some type of blanket or something to cover the bodies, but they turned to reishi before I could. They left nothing behind, not even their clothing. It makes me feel hollow inside- empty, I mean, knowing that when someone dies here nothing of them remains, like they never existed. I guess it's the same thing in the World of the Living, eventually your body will decay and everything, but…

Suffice to say, I decided to avoid the city (if the assemblage of shambles deemed buildings can be called that) for at least awhile. Lady Luck finally found it in her heart to give me a break, because soon after I found a freshwater creek. Turned out to be an ambush, some lowly gang ready to prey on thirsty pedestrians, but after nearly cutting off some guy's arm they skedaddled pretty quick. I drank as much as I wanted and bathed as swiftly as I could, wanting to be out of there before they came back with friends or someone happened to pass by. Wish I could take longer baths, the water was the perfect temperature, but I'd rather not risk another ambush without my clothes. I would've preferred a shower, but the moving water worked more than well enough and I looked a whole lot better afterwards, clean, even if I still don't exactly smell clean. No soap and all.

In fact, no one seems to have soap. The air in the market place reeks, especially with so many bodies pressed together as they tried to go about their shopping. I kept my money in a tight grip, walking around and pretending to browse. That turned out not to be the best idea. Shopkeepers gave me the evil eye. Who I think were hired guard shifted toward me, eyeing me carefully. I realized then that everyone at the market seemed to know already what they wanted to get, or at least a vague idea, before they got there and seemed to be trying to buy their things and leave as soon as possible. And me? Well, I didn't and still don't really get how the money system here works.

Even trying to closely watch the exchanges doesn't do me much good. People there are instinctively very protective of what little money they have and only take out enough money to pay for what they need. Closed hands dart to the stall keeper, only to quickly retract and the person to leave swiftly with their products once the transaction is done.

Near the end of my first complete day back in the Soul Society though, hunger completely took hold, forcing me to try and buy something with my limited knowledge. It went something like this:

"Ah, Shinigami-sama, welcome back," a cheerful stallkeeper in a large straw hat voiced, waving at me.

This was the first time anyone at the market had ever tried to talk to me, the rest dissuaded probably by intimidation or just general lack of giving a damn. Therefore I was kinda taken aback, but I played it cool and returned the wave. "Thanks, but drop the sama."

He continued to give me this awkward, beaming smile. "Shinigami-san, then." He didn't ask for a name, and doesn't offer one either. After a moment's hesitation he speaks up again. "Are you perhaps searching for some form of nourishment?"

Keeping my default expression in place, I responded offhandedly. "Yeah, actually. You know of anything?"

Turns out food is not something common by any means in the Rukongai (his words, so my guess was right, this is the place where new plus souls show up). I'm pretty sure he took more than needed for a basket of nearly rotting vegetables, but at least I have a source of food now (if I continue to bring money) and I still have my creek. The gang that had it before has steered clear of it and me for awhile now, and I like it here. It's a place I can use it to sort through my thoughts when I'm not exploring, trying to contact Zangetsu, fighting stray hollows or in the market place.
"Shinigami-san! Shinigami-san!"

I'm rudely knocked out of my trip down memory road by the call. I bite back a curse when the sudden call prompts me to give a jolt and I smack my head harshly against the stone I'm leaning against. "What is it?" I ask, annoyed as I gingerly rub the back of my head. It didn't really hurt, I've been through so much worse, but still...

A seemingly young lady stands before me, looking about twenty with long brown hair done up in a bun and tanned skin, a testimony to how much time she spends out in the sun working, probably. She is out of breath, bright honey brown eyes wide with fear and desperation. Alarm shots through and I'm quick to my feet. "Is someone chasing-"

She lowers herself to her knees and bows, right in front of me. "Shinigami-san- I am Nakashima Hatsu, niece of Nakashima Yasuo, the merchant who provided you with food. I have heard rumors of your strength and bravery and beseech you now to help my uncle. Please, sir."

I shut my gaping mouth with a click, struggling to recover from my shock. I prod her arm with my toe. "Hey, get up." I urge quietly, face set into a scowl. She looks up at me, startled, but does what I ask her to.

"Where is he, what's going on?"

Her eyes widen further, but she is swift to respond. "Down the road the way I came, but our shipment was robbed. They would have killed us too if my uncle hadn't given them a tall tale of having merchant relatives a town over, willing to pay ransom. I was allowed to leave to go fetch the ransom."

I look down the road, mind whirling. The creek that I have preferred spending my time at was about a ten minute walk from the city, or a few seconds shunpo. "Do you think they're still on the road?"

"No, not by the time-"

"I mean right now. Do you think they are still on the road now?" The road is less of a road and more of a dirt path, but my question stands.

She seems taken aback. "Well, yes-" She let's out a surprised squeak when I unceremoniously pick her up and shunpo down the road.

-DIVIDER-

Shiba Kaien's POV...

I blink my eyes open, a terrible crick in my neck, body stiff and drained. I narrow my eyes in confusion. Sure, I am used to waking up with these aches and pains, sleeping on the cold, hard ground with only a thin blanket beneath you on missions will do that, but as far as I remember I- My vision clears, and memory seeps back to me as I gaze at her. "Miyako," I kiss her hand. "I was so close to losing you..." I hold her hand a bit tighter. I am in a room in the Fourth Division. My soul mate lays on a bed, a reiatsu transfer strapped to her wrist and the end of it strapped to mine. I hope I'm enough. They were able to stabilize her and heal the majority of her physical, internal injuries. Unohana-taicho saw to that. But she also told me...

"Shiba-fukutaicho." She eyed me carefully, and although her face gave away nothing, I could tell she was wary of me, like I was something fragile in her hands, something capable of breaking with jagged, sharp edges at any moment.
"Please, go on," I said quietly. "Unohana-taicho, tell me what needs to be said. I can't say I'm ready for it, but I promise to keep level headed while in your division."

She gave a nod of appreciation and understanding, and goes on without sugar coating, but not without heart. "Your wife was gravely injured. She had several internal injuries, many of which were fatal if left untreated for any amount of time. It is evident to me that she used healing kido on herself to stay alive. However, as you know, healing kido is very taxing on one's reiatsu reserves when used on oneself... I have been able to heal the majority of her wounds and stabilize her, but if she is to survive she needs a constant, steady supply of reiatsu."

"If?" I asked, voice strained, but true to my word I reined my feelings in.

Unohana-taicho dipped her head in confirmation, expression solemn. "Your wife is in a precarious situation. She was nearly completely drained of all reiatsu, maintaining the barest amount when found to survive. Her body can not survive anywhere near this extremely low level for long. At the same time, it is weak, and cannot accept large amounts of reiatsu, especially foreign reiatsu, without becoming deathly ill." She paused, giving me time to absorb this information.

After a short, shaky silence I took a deep breath and inquired, "So what needs to be done?"

"Usually I would ask close family members, (siblings, parents,) to take turns with prolonged, low level reiatsu transfers. As Shiba Miyako has no known biological family, the next best, and only, option is her husband."

I let out my breath. 'At least there's an option,' I thought, trying to cheer myself up. "Then please, hook me up."

"Of course." She brought out the machine, connected Miyako and I, and then chanted an incantation, hand toward the machine. A moment later the machine sputtered to life and I felt the sickening sensation of my life force slowly being drawn out of me. Having had reiatsu transfers done to myself several times before, both as recipient and donor, I knew what to expect. Letting the initial dizzy spell wash over me, I silently reminded myself to breath. Soon I could see clearly again. Unohana Retsu set a comforting, or maybe warning hand on my shoulder.

"I must remind you to be sure to take short breaks, at least three times a day for a period of two hours each." I frowned, but gave my agreement just the same.

It's been a few hours and Miyako, although stable, has yet to wake up. Although it's against regulations for an officer of my ranking to be absent from his division during a time of crisis, Ukitake-taicho and Unohana-taicho know better than try to pull me away. The most important thing to a Shiba clan member is family. Not even duty may trump it.

THUMP!

I raise an eyebrow toward the door, a smile making it's way to my lips. "Oh~? What's this?" I hear someone outside this room ask.

"I-I- I have a reason! Wait, who are you?"

"Nee-san," comes a familiar whiny voice. "You're stepping on my finger!"

"Not so loud," a feminine voice snaps lowly. "Geez, one smashed finger has you bawling. Still the baby of the family, Ganju, even after all these centuries."

"I'm not even crying, much less bawling!" Ganju protests loudly. "Ouch-"
"Didn't I just tell you to be quiet?" The older scolds.

"Sorry, Nee-san," Ganju says in what he must believe to be a whisper. I chuckle softly and shake my head.

"Look, if you two are civilians I'm going to have to escort you home. I'm sorry if you have someone in the Fourth, but they are being well taken care of here and martial law is not something you can just brush off. I'm willing to give you two a warning, but I will have to escort you both home."

The voice I know belongs to Kuukaku chuckles goodnaturedly and speaks up. "That's cute, honey, but it's gonna take more than a little girl with an attitude and questionable motives to stop a Shiba from going to their family."

Rukia's professional attitude it quickly lost in her temper. "Attitude?! I was being polite! And what do you mean questionable-..." An embarrassed pause. "That was his fault, he fell on me, and I have a reason for being here..." she mumbles stubbornly, if a bit dejectedly. "Hold on a moment, did you say Shiba?" At this point I decide to rescue her from further embarrassment via Kuukaku and speak up.

"Rukia, they can come in, and so can you." Another pause, this one in surprise.

"Nii-san!" cheers Ganju, kicking open the door and barrelling toward me.

My eyes widen. "W-wow, hold on a second little bro- Ughff-!" I nearly fall out of the chair, somehow managing to regain balance after a precarious moment of tipping and nearly ripping my wrist away from the reiatsu transfer.

I give Kuukaku a mock evil eye when she chuckles at the doorway, hands on her hips. "How long are you going to let Ganju treat you like that, Nii-san? He's bigger than you now," she notes with a smirk, ignoring Ganju's indignant squawk. His size has been a touchy subject for him for the last couple of centuries.

"What are you talking about, Kuukaku? I'd never stop my little bro from giving me a proper hello. Just be a bit careful next time, huh, Ganju?"

"Absolutely, Nii-san!" He turns his head slightly to peak over his older brother's shoulder. "Miyako-chan..." Ganju mumbles softly, pulling away from the embrace.

Kuukaku's countenance also softens significantly, and she strides forward to stand at the foot of her sister-in-law's hospital bed. "How's she doing?" she asks after a moment, laying a hand on Miyako's lower leg.

"She's doi- Hey, Kuchiki!" She jumps, startled and caught in the act of trying to get away, the little sneak! "Just how long were you outside this room anyways?" I'd been so tired, with the constant reiatsu transfer, I didn't even realize she was out there...

"Er, Shiba-fukutaicho..."

"Well?" I prod with an amused grin.

She sighs, looking sheepish as she answers, "Since I got back from my patrol."

Kuukaku smirks at the girl. "We found her all tuckered out, sleepin' just outside. Well, more like Ganju found her." She gives Ganju a knowing look, who reddens a bit and turns his head, giving a
conspicuous cough.

I chuckle and motion for Rukia to come inside. "You would be a lot more comfortable on a chair, you know."

"But Kaien-dono- Only family can be in a patient's room after visitor hours."

"Perfect. Then come on in." She gapes at me.

"Rukia, right? Well, don't just stand there, gaping like a fish out of water. If Nii-san says you're family than ya are." Kuukaku rolls her eyes when Rukia continues to stand there, unsure, and my sister drags the child in by her hair.

"Ow, ow, ow," she cries out quietly, struggling to untangle the woman's fingers from her hair. Kuukaku pushes her down into a chair and let's go. Kuchiki does this cute little pout as she rubs her head, cheeks puffed and all.

"Eh, a new niece, huh?" Ganju asks, leaning forward with arms crossed and eyeing Rukia critically.

"N-niece?" she asks, glancing between the three of them with an almost panicked look. Poor girl, she still isn't used to this type of affection, or any affection really. My lip twitches downward at the thought of her brother. I know he must care for her, but would it kill him to treat her like a proper big brother should every once and awhile? When Rukia talks of her 'Nii-sama', it's more with overwhelming awe and respect than genuine sisterly love.

I reach out a hand and set it on her head. "Don't think about it too hard, you might burst a brain cell or two," I tease, ruffling her raven locks.

She chuckles quietly, hand quickly reaching up to rub at something just below her eye before we can take a good look at it. She ducks her head underneath my hand and says, "I am humbled to be an honorary member of the Shiba clan."

"Honorary?" Kuukaku mumbles, squatting down next to her new niece. "Look, Rukia-chan- Mind if I call you Rukia-chan?"

"Not at all," Rukia responds, voice barely above a whisper. Her posture is straight as a board with hands neatly folded in her lap, but with a nearly indistinguishable smile at her lips.

"There's no 'honorary' to it. Anyone who is willing to sleep on the cold floor for Miyako is family. Just family. Get it?"

"Yes, ma'am!... Oba-sama."

Kuukaku smiles and sets her hands on her hips, giving a curt nod. "Well, that's a start."

Ganju gives Rukia a hearty pat on the back. "I've decided I like you, Rukia-chan!"

"Thank you-"

"You can call me Ji-chan!"

"Um-"

"Miyako will be thrilled," I input with a fond chuckle.
My sister makes an affirmative sound. "And Miyako could do with a good shopping companion. You're a prodigy, great at a lot of things, Nii-san, but shopping isn't one of them, and I can't be there to help her all the time. Rukia-chan, on the other hand," Kuukaku nods to the girl with a smile.

"It's not that I'm bad at shopping," I respond diplomatically. "It is just that everything Miyako chooses looks wonderful on her."

"Are you taking notes, Ganju? This is how a real man should talk about his lady."

"Yes, Nee-san!" Ganju replies obediently, frantically look around for something to write on. Salvation comes in the form of a drawing pad and marker Rukia somehow manages to produce. Ganju grins at her, giving her a tight hug before taking the offered supplies and scribbling down his 'notes' on the top page.

"So then," everyone looks toward Rukia whose face although downcast, is certainly staring at Miyako's still form. "Miyako-dono will be alright?"

All is silent for a moment, as Kuukaku and Ganju turn toward me for an answer, concern written over their face. Unohana-taicho… she'd also said… she also told me that, that the… "Of course she will be," I say quietly, leaning forward and giving Rukia a small kiss on her forehead, gently tilting her head downward some so I can do so. "After all, we have a daughter now, just like she wanted. She wouldn't miss this for the world."

"I'm so glad…!" she whispers in quiet relief.

The Shibas give her warm smiles. "Welcome to the Shiba Clan, Rukia," I say.
Chapter 5

Nakashima Yasuo's POV...

Just beneath my straw hat I anxiously scan my surroundings, all the while trying to make my form as small and unassuming as possible. Decades of experience allows me to succeed, mostly. They pay attention to me just enough to make sure I don't try escape, something I am indeed planning. This is it; either I run sometime very soon, or I become yet another corpse on the side of the dirt road. Not to mention my niece...

My stomach twists into knots at the thought of her, taken away by one of these vile animals in rags (I can't think of them as men). We had been close. So close to our goals. We knew the dangers too, but I had hoped we'd at least make it farther than our town's front door step so to speak. I have faith in Hatsu's chances of getting away from the animal, but what will she do, what can she do, afterwards to survive? There are not many options. Still, she is a smart girl. I can only pray that she'll be able to use those sharp wits of her to make herself a decent living.

Over my wagon, the goods covered in blankets and hay in the best disguise we could manage, I can just make out the staggering, pained form of one of the gangsters. One hand covers an eye that is dripping with thick trails of blood. His comrades, once catching sight of him, nearly fall over themselves laughing. "Man, what happened to you?!" One of the raggedly clothed gangster crows in glee at the shape his 'friend' is on, by the sounds of it already knowing the answer. I myself feel a strong sense of relief, and silently send my gratitude to Kami-sama, for it was the animal who had taken my Hatsu away.

"Shit, you already know. The bitch stabbed me!" He points furiously to his eye with his free hand.

"Is she dead?" another gangster from the group of five muses, rubbing his hairy chin in thought. A sense of dread pools into my stomach, but I stubbornly cling to my faith and hope.

"Nah…" He responds in a grumble. I let out a small breath. "Still out there…"

"Maybe we should go get 'er then. She would fetch a pretty price on the market. It'd be a pity if someone else get her, which is only a matter o' time since we got her precious uncle." They spare me a glance and I stiffen, pulling my straw hat a bit more down to shadow more of my face, not willing to give them the satisfaction of any real reaction. "Speaking of which, get out here and give our buddy somethin' to hold up to his eye." The cagey looking man, animal, yanks me out from behind my rickety, but faithful old wagon made of aged, hardy wood. Of course, I'd rather do something radically different to the man, but just the same I give a stiff nod to my captors and shuffle to the back of my wagon, where I ruffle through my hidden goods to find what is demanded of me. While the other gangsters go back to discussing what they plan to do, the one who needs the cloth walks up to me, grumbling profanities under his breath all the while.

I meekly offer him an unassuming, thin piece of cloth for the injured gangster's eye. As he brusquely goes to snatch it up, I dive for his throat. An arm is raised and I catch his open palm instead. It is sliced open, the cloth falling away that moment to reveal the sliver of a blade that was inside. He let's out a pained howl before I can do anything, alerting his friends. The rushing blood in my ears is roaring as I dart away, making a last ditch effort for freedom. I force myself to keep my eyes trained straight ahead, knowing that looking back will only slow me down. I can barely hear over my own fear the sounds of my pursuers hot on my heels. My favorite hat I've had since childhood flies off, but I don't spare it a thought in face of my danger.
My efforts are in vain. A bulky, calloused hand close around my arm in a vice like grip and I give out a cry of dismay and defiance as the hand forcibly yanks me around. I have one moment to witness the animal's self-satisfied grin before a splattering of blood covers my vision and lands on my face, neck and chest. I look down with a sense of awe and revulsion at the severed hand still clutching my arm, before I look up a split second later to see him and my dear Hatsu-chan, tucked under one of his arms like a very stunned, very confused sack of potatoes.

-DIVIDER-

*Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...*

In a flurry of shunpo I appear in front of Nakashima Yasuo just as one of our neighborhood gangsters here makes a grab for him. I don't hesitate to cut off the offending hand, lest he pull my rescuee closer and use him as a hostage. I glance at mentioned rescuee out of the corner of one of my eyes. The stall owner is a tall, thin, middle aged man with grimy dark blonde hair and brown eyes. Overall he appears much the same, albeit now he's without that hat of his and generally looking scared out of his mind. A one-eyed gangster makes to slash at me with his a dagger after a brief pause of aghast surprise, forcing me to look away from Nakashima. I don't even need to block or use Zangetsu for opponents like this. Impaling Zangetsu into the ground, I just dart forward, grabbing him by the face and slamming him into the ground. I'm unsure if he's dead or just unconscious, not that I care too much. I might not be aiming to kill, I usually don't if I don't need too, but if they do happen to kick the bucket, I won't be shedding any tears. They had murder in their eyes when going after the defenseless shop keeper.

Remembering my somewhat less than willing traveling companion, I carefully set down Hatsu, who had been safely tucked under one of my arms in the shunpo over here. Her hair is a complete mess and she seems in a state of shock as she automatically finds her footing. She tilts her head to look up at me, mouth slightly agape, and I give her an apologetic expression. Noticing something, I gently rub the offending speckle of blood that had landed on her cheek. She silently touches her cheek also as soon as I pull my hand away, now seeming more thoughtful and less panicked.

"What? Shinigami! When has your kind ever cared about a pathetic Rukongai rat or two?!

I turn my head towards and narrow my eyes at assembling gangsters. "The hell are you talking about?" I bark, more than a little ticked. "It's the shingami's job to protect the people of the Soul Society!"

They stare at me for a moment before who I assume to be the head honcho gangster gives a deep bark of laughter. "That's rich! You're no more a shinigami than I'm the damn Spirit King! Shouldn't have tried playing dress up, you whiny little brat. It's about to cost you your life." That's not right. I know that the shinigami are spread thin and the Central 46 were a bunch of assholes, but if a shinigami came across a situation like this I know they'd give a helping hand! After all, they're always going on patrols around the Rukongai and...

I side step a slash from a chipped katana, giving the gangster a irritated, unimpressed look as I quickly grab onto his wrist and plant my sandaled foot firmly in his gut. He let's out a high pitched squeak and crumbles to the ground while the one I have mentally labelled gangster #3 comes at me with a roar, poorly maintained katana held high. I guess I could shunpo away, but I don't want to be dancing around them for this whole fight or leave the Nakashimas' sides, even for a moment, so I remove Zangetsu from the ground without another thought and slash at his chest before he can bring his katana down. I don't particularly like using Zangetsu against pathetic opponents like these- he deserves better, but I'll do what I need to to get the Nakashimas out of danger as soon as possible.
My current opponent yowls in pain, dropping his weapon and writhing on the ground. I do much the same to head huncho gangster and smack gangster #4 in the side of the head with the hilt of zangetsu, kicking him harshly away in the ribs for good measure. I blink at the group of them now huddled on the ground, not quite believing it's already over. "That's it," I murmur, almost feeling disappointed. *That was beyond pathetic..."

I hear a shuffling noise behind me and turn slightly around to see Hatsu-san rushing to her uncle. They embrace tightly and I smile a little. They speak quickly to each other and I turn politely away until they finish, making sure the gangsters stay down all the while. That's not a problem. The ones still conscious are so frightened that they don't even dare to twitch as I silently glare at them. It doesn't take the Nakashimas long to finish their discussion. Soon they are walking up to me, Hatsu holding onto to her uncle's arm and both having relieved smiles. They bow while I stand there awkwardly. "What can we do to repay you, shinigami-san?" Nakashima asks, peering up at me, seeming careful to ignore his former captors' bleeding and beaten forms.

I wave a hand around dismissively and he raises an eyebrow at the action. "It's no problem. When your niece came and told me about what was happening, I couldn't sit there and just do nothing after all." They straighten their postures and exchange a glance in between each other, obviously believing otherwise. "But..." They look back to me when I tentatively add. "I could use some more food. I still have some money left over and- what? What's wrong?" I study their uncomfortable expressions.

Nakashima clears his throat after his niece nods to him and he says to me, "Shinigami-san, after all you have done for us it is only fair that we tell you the truth." I glance between the pair as he speaks, and taking a closer look at the packed (when you look closely) wagon, the answer dawns to me. "You don't have a steady supply of food, do you?" They shake their head no. My lips twitch slightly. "You're leaving town?" They nod. I take a deep breath. I should have known. "...Just how much did you overcharge me?"

Nakashima dons his large straw hat he snatches up from the dusty ground and responds sheepishly to me. "Well, the amount you gave me... Is about as much as I make a month."

I gap at the pair, probably sporting my worst derp face yet. I shove a finger in Hatsu's direction. "And you! They didn't let you go to collect a ransom, did they?"

She gives me a weak smile, fluttering her little eyelashes at me all innocent like! Why the little, deceptive... "No, Shinigami-san. When one of them left with me to... do something he would never get a chance to, I was able to catch him by surprise and make a run for it. I thought it best to avoid telling a stranger just how good my self defense is." I don't see a knife or any weapon on her, but I guess that's to be suspected if she caught her assailant by surprise.

My indignation is quickly quenched by this and sympathy for their plight takes over. "That makes sense... So where were you two headed?" The just stare at me. They still don't completely trust me, even though I just saved their lives. I guess old habits are hard to break, and technically I'm still just a stranger. I try not to let it get to me. "I have no where to go, nothing to do... You guys barely got away from your city before being attacked. If you want, I could make sure you can get to wherever you're going safely. The only thing I need is food and maybe some help finding a few places once we get to your destination?" If they don't accept, I know it's only a matter of time until all this sitting around drives me stir crazy and I invade the Seireitei (again), though this time for answers I direly desire. Direly need. So it'll have to be addressed eventually, though I'm not exactly looking forward to knocking my supposed friends around until something jogs a memory of me,
since there's not much else I can do. Or, at least, nothing else I can right now think of doing.

"No pay?" Nakashima-san asks, obviously interested much to my relief.

"No. Just the food and pointing me in the right direction once we get to your destination." After brief deliberation they agree, even offering to teach me about how the money system works here! We find their runaway mules that had apparently scattered early on in all the commotion, and after hooking them back up to the wagon we are off.

-DIVIDER-

Change of POV, hours later...

Being a gangster in West Rukongai is a hard afterlife. Once a part of a gang, ya can never leave, not that'd I want to. See, anyone who's not in a gang is free game. No protection, no money, no nothin'.

So I'll take what I can get, even if I get stabbed in the eye by a surprisingly feisty bitch, my hand slashed open by a pissy merchant and slammed into the ground by a orange haired freak of a brat. I've woken up several hours later I think, since now the sun is setting in a bloody red hue. Around me my buddies stir and groan, in just as bad or worse shape than me. One or two are probably dead, having bled to death and no one having cared to help. Big surprise. At least I'm still in one piece. Mostly.

There is the sound of soft, rhythmic footsteps. Obviously I doubt whoever's coming 's gonna offer me a get-well gift. Groggily I rub my head and force myself to prop my upper body up with the help of my elbows. "My, my…" comes a smooth voice with a slight accent, an accent that is common in the West Rukongai. He makes this hella weird 'tch'ing sound, as if scolding some kid. "Lil Ichi-chan- what a mess ya've made! And so lazy, too, just leavin' without even botherin' to clean up..." There is a sound of an exaggerated sigh as this guy continues with his woe-is-me BS. "Children, what can ya do? 'cept watch over them and clean up after their messes, I suppose..."

Suddenly I feel something dig into my scalp and tangle itself in my hair. I grunt as this guy has the nerve to lift me up by my hair with one hand. I open my eyes slightly to get a better look and after the initial blurriness, I can make a few features out. He wears the common beige rags that most outer Rukongai citizens possess, and at his side is a katana with it's hilt wrapped in bandages and placed in an old, scratched sheath. I force my heavy head up slightly to see his face and my lips automatically pull back in a disturbed snarl. His eyes are squinted so much that I can't even make them out; his skin paler than anyone's should have the right to be. His ruffled hair, if clean, would be a bright silver, but these things aren't what disturb me.

It's his grin. Nobody smiles like it's New Years Day everyday in the outer districts of Rukongai. Friggin' nobody I say.

He's speaking. "Unfortunately, it's a bit difficult to do the former when I don't know where the child is. Think you can help me with that? Orange haired young fellow, playin' dress-up with shinigami clothes? Can't miss 'im."

My hand darts out, dagger in it, but before I can end the ugly grin he catches my wrist and pushes my face into the dirt underneath me. I struggle, a string of curses pouring out of my mouth, but he doesn't budge and I hear him comment lightly, "That's not very nice. Better wash your mouth out."

I sputter on dirt as more pressure is added to the back of my head and my face is forced down further. I start choking, panicking, but after a moment I'm pulled back up somewhat. I spit out grains of dirt, trying to regain my breath.
"Look, man…" I choke out. "I only saw him once, just for a split second."

"That's enough," the freak assures me, trying to act all pleasant like.

"... He was protectin' the Nakashimas."

"And you think I'd know these people because….?"

"They're stall keepers, an uncle and a niece…." I give them their descriptions and told him which way they were headed. "Alright, now jus' let me go…" He says nothing, but instead slowly opens his eyes. I freeze, feeling like something is being wrapped around my neck and squeezing and squeezing and- "I swear, I won't tell anyone yer lookin' for 'im," I promise in a rough voice that I know is cracking like some pubescent brat. His smile only widens, but somehow I knew at the moment he opened his eyes that I am a goner.

"That's right, you won't~" I don't even see him reach for his sword.

-DIVIDER-

**Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...**

"Shinigami-san….""

I don't do anything for a moment, just staring up at the night sky. There are no stars, only a moon. I'm not sure how I feel about this, or what to think. I guess the Soul Society really is it's own dimension, a world all by itself. The Soul Society, the center of their own little universe… "...Ichigo."

"I'm sorry?" Hatsu-san inquires in confusion beside me. The three of us lay on thin blankets a good deal off to the right side of the dirt road going northward. We had all decided that it would be best to make camp as far away from the road as is reasonable. Nakashima-san has had no problem falling asleep as soon as we finished making camp, but Hatsu-san and I are still wide awake.

"My name's Ichigo. Not shinigami-san." I turn over on my side to look at her a few feet away. Her long brown hair and spread around her like a halo and she looks at me curiously with her honey brown eyes. "Nice to meet you, Hatsu-san," I tell her with a wry smile.

Her lips turn upward in a slight smile and she responds, "You too, Ichigo-san."

"So what's up?" She seems confused by the term I use, but understands the gist of it.

"I was just… Forgive me, but are you really a shinigami?"

"That's right. You've seen my zanpakuto.." I hold up to her my zanpakuto that I'd laid by my side. The black sheathe shimmers in the moonlight as I hold it up to the light. With my thumb I slightly push the blade out of it's sheathe. "His name is Zangetsu." I hear Hatsu-san give a small gasp and I look to her to see her holding up a fisted hand to her mouth. I blink and let Zangetsu slide back down. "I'm sorry…" I offer uncomfortably. I sit up somewhat. "I didn't mean to freak you out or anything…""

She lowers her hand and smiles again. "No, no, it's just… I've never seen anything so beautiful."

"Oh," I say oh-so-intelligently.

"Who crafted it?"
"No one, actually…" She tilts her head at me. "Zanpakutos are born out of people's soul… or something… I'm not really an expert on those type of things." I give a small chuckle that trails off awkwardly, at least in my opinion. She's still looking at me all starry eyed until I can't look at her any longer.

"So you were the one that crafted it then; amazing."

"Not really- but sort of, since Zangetsu is part of my soul, and…" I mumble on, still refusing to look at her. "Hey." I finally pipe up, an idea coming to me and giving me more confidence. A subject change is in order I think.

"Yes?" She questions in that light, polite tone of her's. In the dark she almost reminds me of Orihime, expect older and… something else.

"Where are we going anyways? Not that it really matters, I'm just curious." I explain, folding my arms behind my head and laying down once again.

"District fifty-nine." She responds, seeming suddenly distant. "A city was developed there years back, and is now a bustling trade center according to the rumors… My uncle and I, we've been saving up to move for all of our lives in the Soul Society, and when we heard the rumors we knew we had to go there… It's every Rukongai citizen's dream to move to a lower district."

"Lower… district?" I repeat slowly, frowning somewhat.

"Yes. I mean lower numbered. The lower the number, the better life is."

I nod, remembering how everything appeared closer to the Seireitei. Clean, organized, more modern… "Ah…. And what district did we come from?"

There is a pause and I turn to see what's wrong. She is looking at me quizzically and says just as slowly as I had, "District sixty…"

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Huh. Doesn't sound like much of a difference to me." They're only one district apart... Could life really be that much better in fifty-nine?

I hear Hatsu let out a small breath. "There may not be any at first glance for those who are used to living the high li-" Her breath hitches and she quickly adds, "in the Seireitei, forgive me. I didn't mean any disrespect." I really wish she didn't act like this around me, all afraid and hesitantly polite.

I shrug easily, looking idly up at the pale moon. "I understand. Don't sweat it."

"…. Thank you, Ichigo-san."

"Sure. What were you saying?"

"Oh, well. At first glance there might not be much of a difference, but for those of us who survive out here… Even one district is a complete life changer."

I close my eyes tightly at this. "I'm sorry…"

"Sorry?" Hatsu-san sits up, prompting me to do the same. "Whatever for, Ichigo-san?"

"… I didn't know just how bad it is out here until now. If I had known…."

"You'd… what, Ichigo-san?" I open my eyes to see she has scooted over to sit right next to me,
almost touching my thin blanket that served as a poor sleeping bag. I wonder… Just what would I do? Saving one person from physical harm is one thing. All I need is strength—physical strength, strength of will… resolve. But completely rearranging more than half of the after-life? Not quite something I’m cut out for. I wouldn’t even know where to start. When I say nothing, I feel Hatsu’s tentative fingers lightly shaking my shoulder. "Ichigo-san… Please answer me honestly. Why did you help us, really?"

"Hatsu-san…” I say, pursing my lips some and looking at her intensely. How do I explain to someone my drive to protect? "I can't turn a blind eye to someone who's in trouble, especially when they ask me for help. I just… I did because you needed help and I was there and able, that's all there is to it." Ugh. I sound so cheesy, but it's true.

"I see…” she murmurs quietly, reaching up a hand to gently push her flowing brown locks over one shoulder. And then, ever so carefully, leans forward, and closer and closer.

I look on in stunned fascination as she leans in and one of her sleeves drops from her shoulder and to her elbow, but when I can feel her soft breath on my skin, the realization of what is happening hits me full force. Giving an undignified yelp, I scramble backward. One of my hands slip out from behind me in my hurry and I fall painfully to my back. A grain of sand I accidently kick up hits me in the eye and stings some, but I’m too distracted to do really anything about it. "W-what the heck?! Just what type of guy do you think I am?!" I bark in… anger? Not exactly, but definitely frustration.

"What type of guy…." comes that soft voice. I practically jump out of my skin at what I hear next. "What type of guy? I don't know. I don't know! What do you want from me, hm, Ichigo-san?" That soft, sweet voice turns into one of anger and mocking.

"I don't want anything from you! How many times do I have to tell you, woman!?!"

"Nothing?! Yet apparently we're on given name basis and you did it for me, didn't you?"

"Yeah! For you and your uncle!"

"You didn't say you and your uncle. You said for me."

"I meant you as in general, for you and your uncle," I bite out tersely, mind whirling. Just what the hell is going on?!

"That doesn't make any sense! And what do you want?"

"I don't want anything!" I nearly yell back once again.

"That's impossible! No one would do what you did without a catch!"

"I was just being nice!" I blurt out.

"Nice?!" I hear her laugh incredulously. "No one is that nice."

"I'm a nice guy!" I practically screech frantically, pointing both hands at my chest to emphasize my point. My eyes are probably red and streaming by now, and I blink constantly to get out the sand from earlier. I'm not even sure what I'm saying anymore. I'm just ticked and confused and she's yelling so of course I'm not going to take that lying down and hey-! When did we stand up? We face each other, about a foot apart. Even in the faint moonlight I can tell her face is red and her hair, that looked like an angel's halo earlier, looks more like Medusa's snakes to me now. We glare furiously at each other and my mouth starts moving before my mind has a chance to catch up.
"Why am I the one on the defensive anyways? You're the one who was coming on to me!"

"Coming on to you?!" She sure does repeat what I say a whole lot. She looks befuddled by that phrase, but seems sure it is something bad so screams it back in anger.

"Yeah! You know, flirting and trying to get into my bed, or thin blanket, whatever!" I reiterate tensely.

Her hands form tight fists and she sputters at me. Finally I make out the words, "I was only testing your motives."

"Testing my…." Great, now I'm repeating things. My voice trails off and Hatsu is staring at me like I just grew another head.

"I thought that's what you wanted in trade for assisting us," she tersely explains further. Her tone is calm, but very bitter as she goes on. "Why else would the likes of a shinigami help us?" She stares at me accusingly, and I can't help but wilt a bit underneath the harsh gaze. Do I really come across as some lewd, advantageous creep? I'm not Kiego; neither, Kami forbid, of the likes of Chizuru.

"Nevermind! Listen. I'm no saint. I don't go out looking for people to help, but I'm not some heartless bastard either. If there's someone right in front of me who needs help, I'm not just going to sit there while it happens!" I reiterate firmly. "And that is all there is to it. Got it?" I gaze at her dead in the eyes, making sure she realizes just how serious I am.

Finally, she's speechless.

"Hatsu… Shinigami-san. Is everything alright, you two?" asks Nakashima groggily, having just woken up to our yelling it seems.

I would be surprised if we didn't wake the dead from all that noise… I'm glad I didn't just say that metaphor out loud.

Hatsu meanwhile pinches the bridge of her nose, throwing me an irritated look that I wholeheartedly return. "Yes, uncle. Please, go back to sleep. We all have a long day tomorrow."

"Well, if you're sure," he mutters, throwing a doubtful look at the both of us before settling back down.

While he goes back to sleep, Hatsu and I just stand where we are for several, long minutes. I let out a sigh and address Hatsu reluctantly. "We should get some rest, al-" I pause with a frown when she suddenly raises her hand, motioning for me to be quiet. "What is it?" I inquire, grimacing.

"Do you hear that?" She asks faintly with a distance expression.

I strain my ears for any out of the ordinary sounds. "Hear wh-"

"There it is again…." She cuts me off, prompting me to scowl, but she seems serious enough so once again I strain my senses. This time, I hear it. The sound of multiple things moving through the foliage somewhere down the hill we set out camp on. The two of us share an alarmed expression.

Perturbed and worried it might be a group of hollows (who or what else would be running around this late at night, and so noisily?), I whisper to her urgently, "Wake your uncle and pack up camp. I'm going to go check that out." I swing down to snatch up zangetsu and go to slip on my sandals when I feel Hatsu clutch onto my left arm with a death grip.

"You're leaving us?" she hisses frantically to me, her earlier anger from earlier being overshadowed by fear.
I yank my arm out of her grip. "Relax, I won't go far or take too long..." I say, planning to make quick work of the hollows. With their sense of smell, they'll be on us sooner or later and I'd rather not wake up to a slobbering, grinning, bone-white mask if I can help it. "If something happens, just give me a holler. I'll be back before you know it." And with a quiet, short burst of shunpo I'm gone from our camp and halfway down the hill. Once there I take it slowly, walking slightly above the ground by temporarily solidifying reishi above, so I won't make any noise. I make my way down the hill, following the growing sounds of scuffling feet and movement below. I soon find myself hunched behind a few bushes and watch in stunned disbelief as at least fifty people in white, off-white or light gray busy themselves in the valley. Their faces are covered by those colored clothing, and while some are wearing proper cloaks and masks, others are in what look to be old bed sheets with two holes cut out of them for their eyes. I force myself not laugh at the thought of actual ghosts wearing poorly made ghost costumes.

"Brothers and sisters; offer your allegiance to Mimihagi-sama, give to your community that follows he, believe that life can be grand and eternal and it will be!" crows what I assume to be their leader, an obviously old man if his voice and shaky, bony hands and arms (the only visible parts of his body) are anything to go by. As he speaks the other people set down what they've brought with them on a blanket next to their leader. They offer the coins used in West Rukongai and other odds and ends that are apparently of some worth. After doing so they bow and walk backward and out of the way, allowing someone else to step forward. "Thank you, thank you..." The leader murmurs as they do so. "Mimihagi-sama will reward you thrice fold- you will be gods in your own right once all is said and done."

I'm pretty weirded out, especially by that last bit, but besides that I'm relieved that it's not a group of roaming hollows or something equally sinister making all that noise. Still, although they seem harmless enough (despite their overall dual hilarity and creepiness), the Nakashimas and I should probably make camp farther away. I don't want to wake up in the middle of the night thanks to their chanting or some shit like that... Now deciding I should leave before someone in this little, uh, club meeting spots me, I am about to turn away when leader speaks up. "Thank you for your faith and sacrifice. It will not go unrewarded. In fact, tonight a moment is upon us that we have all been waiting for. A moment of triumph against those who continually lord over us from behind their walls and those who terrorize us with what should be their spiritual gifts!" Excited murmuring breaks out and one of my eyes twitches as leader gets even further carried away. "I speak of the Seireitei cowards, fat off of our suffering, and their shinigami lap dogs!" There is a general outcry of agreement to the insults and questions of what he has planned. "In other occasions I would ask for patience and would explain, but there is no need. Bring him out!" Old man leader croaks and a few of his cronies respond. They disappear behind the clearing, into the darkness. A hush falls over the crowd when they return with...

You've got to be kidding me...

Held in what no doubt is an uncomfortable position between two masked cultists is Madarame Ikkaku.
Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...

Now that I think about it, hollering out for Ikkaku to get his lazy ass moving before he got sacrificed to the "great and powerful Mimihagi-sama" (leader's words, not mine), may not have been the best way to approach the problem. Still, it worked well enough. A bunch of cultists lugging him around like a sack of potatoes may not have been enough to wake up Ikkaku, but insulting him got him right up on his feet. Geez, he was pissed. At me, that is. Idiot. Then the cultists once he got a better look around. He started screaming, something about being drugged, and that's when stuff really hit the fan. Whatever special bindings they had tied him in didn't last long. In a flare of red, Ikkaku managed to tear through them all in three seconds flat.

People started screaming and running. Leader shook his bony fists at me and Ikkaku, ranting about how they would 'no longer be subject to the shinigami oppressors' and that 'Mimihagi-sama will smite down the blasphemers'. I don't think Ikkaku heard; he was too busy scaring runaway cultists by swiping his zanpakuto (don't ask me how or when he got that back) at them. The swipes are close enough to make them fear for their lives but far enough away to miss by several inches… Well, either he was purposely just trying to frighten them or the "drugs" hadn't completely worn off yet and were making him see double. I vote for the latter. Like I said, he was pretty pissed, and didn't seem too keen on holding back.

I almost joined him in his hunt until a cultist accidently ran into me, his mask having been slightly twisted in all the hassle and momentarily unable to see right. Curious, I grabbed onto his mask and yanked it the rest of the way off. In panic, he fell on his butt and scrambled backward. I had momentarily froze. In front of me was… a completely ordinary guy. Seriously. Black hair, dark brown eyes, medium height and build… I could have brushed shoulders with him in the marketplace several times a day and never once suspected him to be a crazy cultist. It was bizarre. Pulling the masks/old bed sheets off a few other club members revealed the same. One was even a skinny, elderly lady who'd you think would be more suited to knitting socks on a front porch than readying to do a blood sacrifice to some obscure god.

When I was busy doing this and Ikkaku was busy being drunk (sure looked like it), we didn't pay too much attention to what leader and more of the hardened cultists were doing. That turned out to be a mistake. They started chanting (surprise there) with a "Mimihagi-sama, Mimihagi-sama, open thy eye…" etc. etc. A black shadow like thick ink or oil descended on leader, seeming to make him very happy, but then he started screaming and promptly fainted. The shadowy thing vanished. So this turned out to be a mistake not because it hurt us, but because we weren't in time to stop leader from doing something very stupid. After rounding up those cultists who didn't get away fast enough, I demanded some answers. Apparently this group had planned on sacrificing someone of great spiritual pressure to Mimihagi-sama in turn for the god granting all of them moderate amount of reiryoku... And Ikkaku, who just happened to get drunk at their town's Inn after a hollow killing spree, would have been a perfect sacrifice. The cultists believe that the key to a long and happy life is possessing reiryoku and, honestly, looking from their point of view... I can kinda see why. Only those with a significant amount of spiritual energy were allowed to freely (at least for awhile) live in the Seireitei and to become shinigami, while the rest were never allowed to take one step in according to the cultists and Ikkaku who confirmed it. I remember what Hatsu-san said about it being every Rukongai citizens' dream to move to lower district; the idea of of living in the Seireitei must be the equivalent of (finally) going to heaven for them...

As for what happened to leader, he had tried to become host to their god, only to be promptly
rejected. The cultists were very depressed that their chosen leader wasn't actually chosen— it was all sorta pitiful actually. When leader woke up, he seemed generally alright until he opened his mouth. It's like whatever happened to him had made him gone senile and turned him into a harmless, forgetful old man. One thing's for sure, he won't be leading any more of these club meetings any time soon. After that, I wasn't quite sure what to do with them. According to Ikkaku, attacking a shinigami is punishable by death, and although what they did or try to do is no doubt wrong, I didn't have it in me to sentence them to death. Ikkaku didn't either, and told them to stop having these stupid meetings and go back to their lives, never to speak of what happened here on pain of death. They agreed, were allowed to leave, and by how swiftly they ran they couldn't seem to get away fast enough.

Then Ikkaku turned on me. Having grabbed the upper hem of my Shihakushō, he yanked me right up to his stupid face and stinking breath, leaving me in my current predicament...

"The same goes for you!" He's yelling in my face, spittle flying. "Tell anyone of what happened here today and I'll rip you to shreds, got it?!" I punch him in the face. It feels good. "You have some nerve," he growls at me with a glower, wiping a few specs of blood away from his now slightly swollen upper lip. "Don't you know who I am? I'm part of the eleventh division, punk, Madarame Ikkaku!” He puffs his chest up proudly, waving his zanpakuto at me.

Now I'm really starting to get frustrated. "Don't you know who I am? It's me, Ichigo! C'mon, don't give me that stupid look. I know you have to remember me somewhere in that empty head of yours!"

"The hell is your problem…” Ikkaku mutters, looking at me weirdly. One of his eye twitches as I roll my own eyes some. Still nothing then… This is like our first meeting all over again. "And what's with the arrogant look…? You think you can take me on?" He smirks, bringing up his zanpakuto and flexing his fingers before falling into a battle stance. He looks fine on his feet now and ready for a fight, but just to piss him off I say...

"... Ikkaku, go home. You're drunk."

A tick mark appears on his bald head. "I already told you, I was drugged!"

"Yeah, by yourself and with alcohol…” I mutter snidely, which he ignores as he continues on.

"And don't call me by my given name; I don't know you!" That comment stings more than it probably should. My gut tightens and the confusion and fear I have been avoiding comes crashing back down on me. My expression must have darkened or something because soon Ikkaku is smirking. "That's it, that's the look. C'mon, let's see what you got!” And without another word he charges at me.

-DIVIDER-

Shiba Miyako's POV...

I force my eyes open, taking in a shuddering breath as though it's my first in a long time. I blink my gray eyes, trying to focus on what is before me. I am laying on a bed in the medical squad, several chairs next to my bedside but only two of them currently occupied. One has my husband, who's head is leaning back at an uncomfortable looking position, but is sleeping and snoring loudly nonetheless. I raise a hand to my mouth, stifling a giggle. Thanks to his job he could sleep practically anywhere, in any position, and not even notice the pain until come morning, the poor man. I'm about to wake him up before I notice two other things. One, the wires attached to my wrist and connected to my husband at the other end… Reiryoku transfer, I realize with a frown. It's
quite dangerous if not handled properly, I do hope Unohana-taicho has been keeping a close eye on him, but knowing her character as well as I do significantly puts my mind at ease. Lastly, but certainly not least, is a young girl dozing lightly, her head resting on the side of my bed. I smile fondly, running my fingers through her short black locks. "Rukia… Rukia dear…” I prod lightly, tapping her shoulder.

She stirs, mumbling incoherent words underneath her breath as her eyes flutter open. She stares at me for a long moment, then the most beautiful smile breaks out across her face as show throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around my shoulder. "Miyako-dono!" I let out a startled gasp at the sudden glomp and then laugh cheerfully, returning the embrace. The sweet girl rambles on for a bit as I pet her hair, as she's saying how she was 'so scared' and how frantically they had been 'searching for you, day and night' and 'so happy you're alright'.

I purse my lips, crevices forming on my forehead as I remember just how many times I believed everything was never going to be alright again… and maybe that's still true. I stare down on my hands. They're clean, but no doubt everyone knows the blood on them by now. I saved one, yet murdered how many? I squeeze my hands closed, the nails biting into my flesh. "Miyako-dono…” I look back to Rukia to see her worried expression. I smile calmly and cup her cheek in one of my hands.

"Don't worry about me- my family is here for me, so of course everything is alright." She smiles again but then I pause, blinking. "But… where is Kukaku and Ganju?"

"They went out to go get food, Ganju just wouldn't stop whining." My husband gives an exaggerated sigh, having woken up moments before. "Such a baby, it's only been a day since we last ate. Kukaku won't forgive him for making them miss the moment you woke up." He notes with a teasing air and I chuckle.

"Well bless his heart, or stomach as it were. If it wasn't for him, you'd all starve yourselves." I remark, body slightly shaking with suppressed laughter. I then hold out a hand toward him and make a 'come hither' motion. He complies and I lean over, grabbing him by the collar and pulling him down without further ado. I kiss him deeply on the lips. His aqua green eyes give a spark of surprise, but then he smiles into the kiss, wrapping one arm around my waist and setting the other hand behind my head. His fingers tangle themselves in my long locks and I sit up straighter, wrapping my free arm around his back. I give a small sigh of bliss and happiness. He doesn't think any less of me, he still loves me as strongly as he did the day we were married- I can tell.

My eyes are about to flutter closed when I notice Rukia out of the corner of one eye. I can't help but laugh, consequently breaking the kiss. The poor girl is as red as a tomato! It's then that I realize that Kaien and I have never shown so much affection around her, as we always try stay professional in front of our division members. We're not just husband and wife after all, we're also fukutaicho and third seat of the Thirteenth Division. "Sumimasen!" Rukia is quick to apologize, bowing and making her escape.

"Rukia-" I call out, but she's already out the door. I give a slightly exaggerated sigh.

My husband stands up straight and give my hand a squeeze. "Don't worry, I'll get her." He gingerly takes off the reiatsu transfer and makes a move towards the door, but I hold on tightly and don't let go of his hand. He comes to a halt and looks at me quizically. I keep my head down, staring at the blankets on my lap. "Kaien… You know, don't you…?"

"Yes…”

"Is he… is she…?" He shakes his head in a silent no. I squeeze my eyes shut. I barely knew a few
minutes before all the insanity of that night occurred, but still… Still I…

Kaien sits down on my bedside and holds me. Nothing is said as I stare blankly down. My hands are shaking. I don't bother to hide them now. Before I can formulate any real response the door swings open and in rushes my sister-in-law, brother-in-law and Rukia, the latter of whom is being firmly steered inside by Ganju. Ganju lets go of Rukia's shoulder and gives me a toothy grin, some sauce from the sandwich in his other hand smeared on his face. I force myself to smile back, and seeming to sense how strained the atmosphere is, Kukaku tones down the rough edges of her character and gives me a soft smile. Kaien scoots over so his sister can give me a hug. "Hey there, girl."

"Kukaku, it's good to see you," I say, returning the hug. My eyes water, all of the emotions in me just bubbling over. The other woman rubs comforting circles on my back.

"Hey sis! Wanna sandwich?" asks Ganju, offering one of his messy sandwiches, somehow managing to get twice as much of the sauce smothered on his face in the brief moment I looked away. This time, my smile is sincere. I can still remember that young, chubby little boy I meet all those years ago, when Kaien and I were still just friends, smiling at me and offering a piece of cake, his face smeared with the food much like it is now…

I chuckle quietly. "Thank you Ganju, but no thank you. I'm not hungry right now." I admit, a small grimace marring my face for a brief moment at the thought of eating anything and one of my shaky hands rests on my stomach...

But then I see her between my brother and sister and my grimace disappears. That cute little girl that I've adored from the moment she first joined my squad, standing here now with chin tucked into herself, her hands folded politely in front of her and a bashful expression still on her face. My heart softens. I've always thought of Rukia as the daughter I've never had, but now I realize the truth.

She might be the only child I'll ever have.

-DIVIDER-

Kurotsuchi Mayuri's POV…

I walk through the halls of the Institute of Research and Development, a skip practically in my step. Behind me is my most remarkable creation, a perfect fukutaicho and assistant, artificially crafted using my specialized gigai and gikon technology. She is speaking, but instead of the useless prattling I am used to hearing, she is actually saying things worth while. Remarkable! Barely half a day and she has already managed to complete several tasks that would take my usual subordinates thrice as long, and she seems to only become more faster the more she learns. Really, if her kind didn't take so long and so much money to create this perfect, I would suggest at the next taicho meeting that we just get rid of that useless academy altogether and replace it with the mass production of artificial souls of this kind.

"And with that I completed project #1034, Otousama."

I miss a step, my foot hanging a few inches over the cold, polished floor. "Otousama…" I pause and murmur in disdain, then set my foot down and turn around to face her. My creation has the appearance of an average young lady with dark eyes and even darker, long hair, the latter of which she has decided to braid. She has obediently and respectfully halted her own steps and now calmly stares up at me with a facade of innocence, as if she didn't just address me by that ridiculous title. "Girl. I am your master, not your father," I inform her tersely, lips twisting downward slightly in
disgust.

She bows low to me. "As you say, Master Kurotsuchi; my apologies."

I wave one hand dismissively. "Yes, yes. Come along then." We resume our walk, the girl two steps behind me as is proper.

"I have also completed an analysis of the unidentified shinigami's reiatsu that came to Shiba Kaien-fukutaicho's aid."

"Oh?" I say, only half listening.

"Yes, sir. I have come to the conclusion that he has a high level reiatsu. At least a fifth seat's. Perhaps even a captain's. With only these samples, it is hard to determine."

"Mmm… Perhaps a captain level amount of spiritual power? That's not interesting at all. We already have thirteen of those." I note offhandedly.

"There is more."

"Well, go on then."

"His reiatsu imprint show signs of being a newly arrived."

Now this makes me pause. Without turning around, I ask, "Just how new?"

"At the time at which this sample was taken?" is the rhetorical question. "Within the day." I make a 'give me' gesture and she hands me her results. I quickly skim over her work.

"Hm, yes… Everything seems to be in order…. Well, well, sotaicho, it seems you were right to be interested!" I smirk, slowly lowering the results. "Yes, indeed. And a most interesting specimen you will be, boy."

-DIVIDER-

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...

Hozukimaru clashes against Zangetsu in a powerful, overhead strike.

The blades meet with a resounding cling that seems to echo through out the now nearly empty clearing. Ikkaku's smirk widens as he presses down, but I don't give an inch. He seems more concerned with testing my strength right now then actually winning the battle. Well, his mistake. If he doesn't remember me by just words, I'll have to beat some sense into him. Maybe if he sees the way I fight, something will click… I begin to shove back instead of just holding my own, and with Ikkaku surprised at my sudden aggressiveness and newly revealed strength, I manage to gain an inch or two with our locked blades. I hear him chuckle. "Hey, you're pretty strong…"

I smirk. "Yeah. And so are you."

"Well, seems like I can't just rely on my strength in this battle. Let's see if there's more to you than muscle, huh?" And with that he pushes our locked blades higher and goes for a vicious roundhouse kick, one that I am thankfully able to avoid with ease by quickly hopping back some. I use the brief moment where he still has his leg up to my advantage. I don't even need to dart forward, the length of my blade taking care of the space between us while Ikkaku's sword cannot reach me. I manage to get a shallow, bottom to top diagonal slash on his thigh before his blade meets mine and he sets
his foot down. "Heh, fast. Good to know. Guess first blood goes to you, but I'll be the one to draw last."

"Not a chance, Ikkaku," I boast as we quickly disengage our blades, trying to get through the other's defenses but our zanpakutos still meeting each try.

He frowns slightly. "I told you not to call me by my given name…!" His words are punctuated by a fierce offensive, but I'm able to match his offensive with equal vigor. I ward him off and keep him at a distance with my longer zanpakuto, getting in several more quick, shallow slashes, having just enough time to mar him so before he brings around Hozukimaru to counterattack. I see his eyes widen at the sudden multitude of his injuries, while I remain completely untouched. Then he grins forcibly, chuckling as he spirals further downward into his bloodlust and comes at me with renewed spirit, one I somewhat balk at as I really don't want to critically injure my friend... I'm not used to fighting non-lethally with anything other than my fists, and it's difficult to decide how to counter attack without going into my usual, all-out fighting style myself. At one point however he slips up, raising his blade too high and I see my chance. I thrust forward with Zangetsu, keeping in mind where I aim to hit least I accidently kill the crazy bastard...

Cling!

My eyes widen slightly.

Ikkaku laughs. "Gotcha!" Between Hozukimaru and the sheathe he just brought into play, Zangetsu is trapped.

But now it's my turn to grin. "Getsuga…." Ikkaku balks when my reiatsu suddenly skyrockets. I push enough of my reiatsu into Zangetsu to make the attack hurt, but not decimate. *This is it! My signature move. If this doesn't make him remember, nothing I do will… "Tenshou!"

"..."

"..."

"...Ha! That was a pretty good bluff, you almost had me for a second! Moon Fang Heaven-Piercer… What a joke." He chuckles. "Time to finish this." He pushes my zanpakuto down, leaving me in close quarters and open for a beating of a counter attack. It's all that I can do to defend myself.

What. The hell. Zangetsu! I cry out internally, panicked. Not because I'm scared of Ikkaku- No, I'm panicked because I really did try to use a Getsuga Tenshou and nothing happened! Sure, Zangetsu and I have had spats, but he's never denied me our signature move! What have I done to deserve this?! Even worse... What if it's not his fault? What if something is wrong with him? I haven't been too worried over his change in appearance since it has happened so often, but what if this time it signifies something's wrong? I feel my chest tighten at the thought of something happening to him. I'd rather have to deal with my inner hollow all over again than lose Zangetsu.

"Che," Ikkaku scoffs, abruptly backing off. He eyes me critically and shakes his head some, as if in disappointment. "What's with you? You should have the advantage over me right now. You're faster, have a longer reach and just as strong as me… But your grip is all wrong, too tight. It's like you've never picked up a sword before, yet the way you stand and move is like an experienced warrior."

I don't know what to say. Well, actually, I want to say that I was holding back, but I still have a hard time believing that even with such a disadvantage, Ikkaku could get this good of a hit on me...
Am I really still that bad with a sword then? I've been fighting with Zangetsu for over a year now, managing to defeat several high ranking opponents in sword battles, including the person who stands before me!... But the proof of what Ikkaku says is plainly evident. A long slash, from shoulder to my chest. Deep, although not deep enough to be truly life threatening. Blood trickles down my toned chest and right leg, collecting into a small puddle on the ground below. I notice my bleeding is already slowing, but I have done nothing. Zangetsu? It has to be. But why is he helping me now, yet denying me just moments earlier?

"Nothing to say, huh?" He takes a threatening step forward and I drop into a front stance, scowling at him. He looks at me up and down in what I think is approval. "Lemme help you out. Three words for ya." He holds up a hand, putting up one finger after another as he says the three words. "I'll. Get. Stronger."

There is a long pause as I resist the urge to fling myself back into a fight with him. It's obvious by now that fighting won't help, he still has no idea who I am beyond what he knows from our meeting today. I narrow my eyes and growl out, "I'll get stronger." It's a promise! And I'll figure out what's wrong with Zangetsu and find a way to Hueco Mundo without Urahara's help if I have too! I'm sick of running around without rhyme or reason. As soon as I get Hatsu-san and her uncle to where they need to go, I'm going for Orihime! I'll figure out this mess later, after Orihime is back safe in Karakura. Oh, and after I pound that blue haired bastard of an arrancar into the ground.

With my renewed sense of purpose in mind, I look up to see Ikkaku's infuriating smirk back in place. "Sweet. That's what I like to hear."

-DIVIDER-

Madarame Ikkaku's POV...

I waddle back into my division, tired, sweaty, my head painfully pounding and just generally miserable. The thrill of that fight with that orange haired guy from last night has long since worn off, leaving me pissy and all around hurting. I grumble in dismay as I eye a batch of new 11th division recruits in the distance, all wide eyed or arrogant, like they own the whole freakin' world. The brats are blocking the entrance to the barracks, where a bunk bed with my name on it resides. I halt stiffly, straightening my posture. I had long since stopped using my zanpakuto as a crutch for my injuries, but now I'll have to stop slouching as well unless I want the fresh meat to think I'm fresh meat. Usually I would take pleasure in beating the new recruits into shape... Now? Not so much in the mood.

"Oh my.... How ugly," remarks a familiar voice from behind me. I turn to see Yumichika, my long time friend for reasons I'm still not quite sure on. He stands there, picture perfect as ever with one feathered eyebrow raised in mild startlement. He delicately pinches his nose. "And smelly. Just what happened to you?"

"None of your damn business," I spat at him, just wanting to get some rest. I'm very aware of how I appear (and smell) and don't need him to remind me, best friend or not. My uniform is shredded in a few places and dried blood practically covers me from the countless, shallow slashes that orange haired kid gave me. At times, he went so fast I could barely keep up at some points, so it's really no wonder why I have so many. By now fortunately the wounds have clotted with the beginnings of scabs, making me feel stiff and uncomfortable. Several layers of sweat cover me with a stench hard to ignore and there is no doubt in my mind that there are deep, dark circles underneath my eyes from how tired I feel.

"Baldy, baldy!" comes that screeching giggle I have so come to loathe and I internally groan. As if
a nosey Yumachica, a bunch of bratty recruits and my other current issues aren't bad enough, now my insanely annoying and clingy fukutaicho is here and standing on my shoulders!

"Get'ff of me…" I say gruffly, adding my neck to the parts of me that hurt as that pink haired devil uses my head for balance while jumping on my shoulders. Why does she always have to target me and Yumichika (but most of the time me)?! We're not even seated officers yet!

Of course, the spawn of all things annoying and pink ignores me and continues her abuse. I wish I could stop her, but even if I was in better condition she could still beat me to next week, not to mention how ticked taicho would-

"Madarame. The hell happened to you?"

I whirl around, Yachiru squealing loudly in my ear at the swift motion. I force myself not to wince at the pain the loud sound causes while saying, "T-taicho!" I give him a quick bow, Yachiru still happily clinging to my neck.

He simply gives me an amused snort. "Well?"

"I- Well, I-" And then a bright idea comes into mind. I slowly begin to grin and start my tale. I stay true the source, if somewhat embellished to make things a tad more interesting of course… A minute later I'm still at it. "And then the nutjobs tried to summon their god with some weird-ass name, Mimihagi-sama or somethin' I think. It suddenly got dark, even darker than before that is, and the cultists mutated right in front of us! Getting claws and fangs and shit." I hear a noise that sounds suspiciously like laughter coming from Yumichika's direction, but when I look he is 'only' coughing.

"Please, continue." He says in all seriousness and I do so, trying to ignore all the while the gathering crowd of mainly new recruits with their stupid, slack-jawed expressions that only worsen in amazement as I spin my tale. At least all those stories I gave at the sake houses weren't for nothing…. Yachiru does something good for once too and appropriately coos in amazement. At least she's a good listener (when she wants to be).

"What was the orange haired shinigami doing?" she inquires curiously.

"Oh, yeah." I'd forgotten about him. "He took down their leader while I was holding off the rest single-handedly." Gasps from the newbies.

"But you said he was friggin' thirteen feet high, with four arms and shit!"

"So what?" I ask, glaring at the one who interrupted me. He quickly seems to lose his voice. "Anyways, it's no big deal. I challenged the shinigami right after and managed to defeat him." More gasping and appropriate cooing (and a slight eye roll from my best friend).

"But was he strong?" My taicho. I blink up at him in surprise, somehow almost forgetting he's there until now, before seriously taking into consideration his inquiry.

"Yeah…" I say slowly, remembering just how much he cut me up. One bad move on my part and he could have done some serious damage on me. It was only our vast difference in experience that let me one up him. "In a couple decades, he may even be a bit of a challenge for you," I note truthfully, remembering that heavy spiritual pressure. Taicho suddenly gives a shit-eating grin that almost makes me feel bad for saying anything. Poor guy.

"Did you go drinking afterwards?" Yumichika suddenly asks drily.
I look at him strangely. "What?"

"Eww, Feather-Brow is right! You smell like bad sake!" complains Yachiru and I grunt as she hops off my shoulders and onto her usual perch on Kenpachi-taicho.

Yumichika's face twitches in a strained matter. "What did you call me?" he asks our fukutaichō lowly. Yeah, definitely strained.

Yachiru just puffs up her cheeks at him childishly (I still find it hard to believe that she's older than us). "What? It's truuuuue~" she informs him in a sing-song voice, but like me, my friend doesn't dare try anything.

"Madarame." My taicho prods impatiently.

"Right." I say, quickly getting back into the groove of things. "Once we had our fight the kid and I stopped by a nearby town to have a drink."

"At night…?" One of the newbies mutter dubiously, but a quick elbow to the ribs from one of his smart friends makes him shut up.

I hear taicho chuckle in approval and I swell up in pride. "You've done the 11th good, Madarame."

"Yes, sir."

"You're a true man's man. Good enough to be my third seat even." Suddenly, all the crap I went through the night before doesn't seem so bad.

But then something occurs to me. I look hesitatingly at Yumichika. I can't go on without him… Our division is pretty huge, and with us so differently ranked I'd probably hardly see him. Yumichika notices my gaze and scoffs at me, probably about to get all uppity up and brush off my concerns, but just at that moment Yachiru speaks up.

"Aww, Ken-chan! Pin-cushion is scared that he won't see feather-brow any more~" Did she just call me Pin-cushion?

Kenpachi grunts. "Yumachica, right?" he asks my friend gruffly, who promptly snaps to attention and gives a bow.

"Yes, taicho." Taicho gives him a once over while I wait anxiously (not that I'd admit it on pain of death).

"You know shikai?"

"Yes; mine is Fuji Kujaku."

"Hm." Hm? What's hm? "I've seen you use it. You're pretty good. Work hard and you could soon be my Fifth." Relief washes over me, but then follows confusion.

"What happened to, what's his name?" I wonder out loud, trying to remember our fifth seat's name. Last time I checked he was still alive. I freeze as taicho gives me the evil eye.

"He lied to me," is the simple answer, hinting that the man is dead as all get out.

"Oh," I say, trying to sound tough, but it comes out more hoarse. All is silent for a long, agonizing moment. I only slightly exaggerated the story, I repeat to myself internally over and over. It doesn't help.
Then taicho starts chuckling. At first quietly, then progressively louder. Yachiru giggles, I join in (chuckling, that is, not giggling), and then everyone else, probably all wondering just like I am what the hell is going on. Taicho gives me a hearty slap on the back, nearly knocking me over and sending painful vibrations throughout my body. "You'll be fun to have around, Madarame. I can tell." And without another word, taicho walks away, leaving me to still wonder what the hell just happened.

-DIVIDER-

Shiba Kaien's POV…

It's my first captain's meeting since that night. I stand dutifully behind Ukitake-taicho as the soutaicho drones on, addressing each of the division's reports and needs in face of the latest influx of hollows and the catastrophe that followed. I try not to appear as tired as I actually am as the meeting stretches on, going from minutes to hours. The fact that we all have to stand and watch the soutaicho, who is the only one sitting down, doesn't help the matter either, though I understand the reasoning behind it. He is after all at least older than two thousand years and senior to all those present, though no one knows his exact age. Following him is my taicho and Shunsui-taicho, both of whom are two thousand. Unohana-taicho is next in line at one thousand years. I mentally go through my oldest to youngest list, trying to keep myself at least appearing awake and alert, pausing only once when my eyes land on the fifth division fukutaicho's empty spot. Gin, a mere decade more than a century, is among the youngest present along with Byakuya-taicho (who is slightly older), Nanao-fukutaicho (slightly younger), Yachiru-fukutaicho and the twelfth's newest fukutaicho, a strange and mysterious girl named Nemu. Although Ichimaru Gin is usually seen shadowing Aizen-taicho closely, it isn't uncommon for him to be out leading team missions or completing solo ones. So, when asked today where his snake of a fukutaicho is, Aizen had simpered 'reconnaissance' with an apologetic smile and it was accepted without another word.

Therefore, I have to accept it too, but that doesn't mean I like it. No, I don't like it one bit, especially considering it is apparently a solo mission. In my book, the only thing worse than an Ichimaru Gin by himself is one Aizen Sousuke on his lonesome.

Even with my strong suspicions on the pair's motives however, it would be foolhardy to ask for more information on Gin's whereabouts. Questioning the motives of a well-liked, if not completely adored, captain? It would not look good, especially considering how my own captain appears satisfied with the answer.

So I stand there complacently, the perfect fukutaicho looking content to have his wife back and no worse for wear. If only that were true. At least Kaname Tosen, the seated officer that had taken over in light of his taicho's and fukutaicho's… absence, is nearly finished with his turn. That man can be even worse than the soutaicho when it comes to talking, so dull and endless. The crazy thing about it is every part of his speeches (I can't think of them as reports), are relevant and fairly important in some fashion. Suffice to say the soutaicho loves him, and practically coos every time Tosen gives a speech, like some type of proud, doting parent. I feel a spiritual nudge and look up to see my captain glancing at me out of the corner of one eye, seeming amused but lightly chiding. Some of my annoyance must have started to leak through my reiatsu again. I give him a small, unrepentant smile but nonetheless reign in my feelings.

I'm very tempted to sigh audibly in relief with the ninth division member bows, once to the soutaicho and once to the other captains in general before returning to his spot in line. The soutaicho nods in gruff pride at the man before speaking. "Tenth Division Taicho, Shiba Isshin, step forward and give your report."
I look to my uncle as he steps forward, and seeing him once again reminds me of just how bad of a hit the Gotei 13 has taken in the past couple of weeks. No, not just the past few weeks, but the past few decades in general. Career advancement is usually rare in the Gotei, with how long-lived shinigami usually are, but as of late promotions were being handed out left and right, subsequently meaning shinigami were falling like flies... Or turned traitors, if you believe the reports.

Isshin, instead of his impish grin and devil-may-care attitude that so many in my family seems to possess and that he himself had before this giant mess, now has a small frown on his lips and what seems to be a few more worry lines marring his face. "Nothing of note to report in the World of Living." There is a tense silence, and more than one quick, accusing glance is thrown Mayuri-taicho's way. Mayuri himself is unfazed when my uncle boldly turns to give him a direct stare down. Everyone knew what he was thinking. The Soul Society could have really used the presence of another captain in these last few days, and it probably would have gone a long way to stem the list of casualties. Instead, however, he was in the World of the Living, investigating a powerful phenomenon signature, I don't know all the details, just the Isshin was chosen to go because of his level of power and knowledge on the World of the Living. He usually is the one sent after all when a captain is needed down there.

"Tch, tch, tch. No need to be so hostile, Shiba-taicho. I only gave you the facts." The man, if the "self-improving" mad scientist can be called that, spreads his hands outward in what no doubt is meant to be taken as an innocent gesture. "What you do with them; or in this case what you don't do with them, is entirely up to you." My expression darkens at his flippancy, and I share a look with Kuchiki-taicho across the room. As the heads of two opposing noble clans with their own sense of honor, one with family and personal loyalty as its centerpiece, the other with the law and duty as its centerpiece, it's understandable that we don't agree on many things. However, on the things that we do agree on... Such as our dislike for the second and twelfth divisions, and even more specifically, their captains, we can find some pretty good allies in each other.

Isshin is about give an angry retort when Kuchiki speaks up. "A discussion on fleeting facts will serve no purpose. We should continue with the reports." Yamamoto-soutaicho gives a grunt of agreement, but Mayuri can't resist trying to get in the last word, with his feathers ruffled now as it were.

"Facts are not fleeting," he informs the Kuchiki clan leader with a disdainful air, lips twitching downward.

Kuchiki meets his gaze and answers simply. "Your's seem to be." I'm left to happily cackle inwardly as hints of Kuchiki's hot-headed youth rears its head with these four, seemingly emotionless words. Mayuri huffs but at a look from the captain commander he says no more.

The meeting continues, and Isshin meets my eyes while he speaks, a look heavy with guilt. I realize he must hate himself for not being here, especially after what happened to my wife. I wish I could tell him it's not his fault, he had to go and couldn't have known this would happen, but now is not the time. I nearly wince after awhile as Isshin does his report, his voice so cold and commanding with an edge. Now I realize why nearly everyone has been so skittish around me lately. This is how I must have been acting before Miyako was found. Hm, not that it's any surprise to me, but a Shiba's rage really is something to behold. It can change us into something so radically different we'd hardly seem the same person besides our appearance.

Kenpachi's report is, like usual, the shortest. The only things he seems to be interested in reporting (or bragging about) is the accomplishments of himself or his men and whatever promotions have occurred. Apparently a 'Madarame Ikkaku' has been promoted to Third Seat. Kuchiki asks with blatant distaste if they have done something worthy of note to deserve such a promotion from
"unseated to high rank."

"Yeah, actually…" 

"And what did Madarame do?" My captain inquires with polite interest, always happy to hear of the progress of the younger shinigami.

"Stopped the summoning of some god and his minions."

"A god?" This is Aizen, raising an eyebrow in quiet disbelief. For once, although I loathe to admit it even to myself, I actually agree with Aizen.

Kenpachi grunts in confirmation. "One called 'Mimihagi' or some 'em along those lines."

Attention turns to Ukitake-taicho when he suddenly breaks out into another of his coughing fits. At least, that's what it seems to the others I gather. Through the connection all lieutenants have with their captains, I can just make out the signs of shock in his spirit. I step forward, quick to offer him an extra handkerchief to use, as he wouldn't stop coughing up blood. I grow worried and am about to ask for Unohana-taicho's help when Nemu-fukutaicho steps forward. She offers him something, a bottle-like object. I eye it critically, wondering why this fukutaicho has something on her at such a meeting that conveniently helps my captain. Sensing my anxiety for his well-being, Ukitake-taicho spares me a moment to send a reassuring wave of reiatsu. He promptly then accepts whatever she hands to him and inhales whatever is inside. His heaving dissipates, allowing him to breathe easier once more. Used to Ukitake's outbursts, nobody minds. Many in fact offer him kind, understanding smiles at his guilty expression for interrupting the meeting; among them being Shunsui-taicho, Unohana-taicho and Aizen-taicho.

Giving an improving nod to newly introduced Nemu-fukutaicho for her help to his one-time student, Yamamoto-soutaicho gets the meeting back on track. Everyone is surprised when our resident mad scientist next in line, instead of offering the usual report with a babble of scientific words that hardly anyone can comprehend (and that he probably throws in just out of spite), he instead makes a proposition…. So that's why his fukutaicho helped Ukitake with that little invention. They want his support for some project. As I listen though, I doubt my reasoning. Did they really think they needed to do anything to get Ukitake's support for recreating the academy's school curriculum? Of course he'd be willing to help the students garner a better education. Mayuri really does not understand my captain then; no surprise, considering how even the thirteenth hardly ever interacts with someone from the twelfth, always locked away in their Institute as they are.

Mayuri manages to garner a lot of support, at least for the decision that a new system in the academy is desired as it has deteriorated over time. Mayuri is rather long winded, but at least he isn't as dull as Tousen. That is kinda impossible, considering his appearance and personality. He even gets loud agreement from Kenpachi, who complains about having to send back several wimps (recruits) to the academy already this year for crying over 'scratches'. Another batch unable to bare the hazing required to become full members of the eleventh, is what he's really saying. A vote is held, not because the captains' vote actually counts in the end (the captain commander always gets the final say), but because the soutaicho thinks it important to listen to at least hear his captains' opinions, even if it's not entirely unusual for him to completely disregard them afterwards… It is unanimously passed that the academy's structure and curriculum needs to be looked into, especially with Unohana-taicho smiling ever so, ah, sweetly, to those who do not readily support the idea.

Soon everyone seems to think it is a great idea, to say the least.

The soutaicho is about move the meeting along when Mayuri suddenly adds, "By the way… That boy's results have come in with very peculiar implications!" At this I see the captain commander's
eyes light up, and so do mine. In all the panic with Miyako and her subsequent return, I'd nearly forgotten my young doppelganger. Kinda sad, considering he saved my life… So he'd fled my mind, until yesterday….

"What?" Miyako looked up, startled.

I blinked owlishly at her. "What?" I asked in turn.

"That's not right..." She was muttering with a deep frown. "It wasn't Kurotsuchi-taicho who found me." She visibly shivered. "I shudder just at the thought of that madman."

"It wasn't? I was told he was the one who found you and brought you to the fourth..." I was relieved- the idea of being indebted to that madman for anything left a sour taste in my mouth.

She shook her head firmly. "Brought me to the Fourth perhaps, but he was not the one to originally find me. No, it was..." I looked at her curiously as she turned to stare intensely at me. "You... That is, he looked like you just after our academy days." She then smiled wryly. "Except with bright orange hair, if you can picture that."

I gave a small start, posture instantly straightened. "I can, actually..."

And the conversation only grew more complex and interesting from there. It seemed that orange-haired shinigami was practically all over the place that night and part of the day following, helping fend off the sudden onslaught of hollow invaders and appearing where the need for back-up was most dire. The more we dug though, the less we progressively found. We couldn't even discover the name of the shinigami, unless the 'orange haired Shiba' counted, as we found most people referred to him as. As far as I'm aware though, no one has ever possessed orange hair in my family. We all have raven black.

So with our lack of subtlety when it comes to snooping around for information, it was only a matter of time until the soutaicho took interest and sent for a report concerning what happened that night and for specific details on the unknown shinigami who helped us. From there, the soutaicho must have passed down the information to the twelfth division taicho for more study.

"First, I would like to point out what I could tell of his level of power. As he was not in battle when I was present, and without performing the usual academy tests with him, it is difficult to assume his exact level. However, I can estimate that his base level is comparative to a high ranking officer, possibly even higher..." He allows us a moment to mull over his words. I already knew this though, so I found myself just staring at the scientist, forcing myself to retain my patience. He always likes to lord it over us when he has information that we want.

It's Soifon-taicho that speaks next, appearing mildly interested. The expression on her face triggers me to frown. Kenpachi also perks up. His expression makes me dangerously scowl. "Possibly how high could it be...?" the female assassin inquires.

"Well now, that remains to be seen," The mad man replies gleefully, and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. Sure, it is definitely interesting that an unknown shinigami swoops in to save the day, sporting a high amount of reiatsu, but we all know that if that was it Mayuri wouldn't care in the least. There must be more. And sure enough...

"You referred to this shinigami as a boy," Komamura-taicho notes with a thoughtful air. "Exactly how young is he?"

Kurotsuchi's face-splitting grin nearly makes me want to balk, but my own curiosity wins out and I
listen closely. "Ah, now we get to the interesting bit… The reiatsu sample I took from the boy shows signs of him being a newly arrived plus soul, so it would seem that he is as old as his appearance suggests, and to all appearances, he is in his mid teens."

Shock pervades the meeting room. Even the soutaicho is effected, as he heavily sets one side of his walking stick disguised Ryujin Jakka on the floor and rests his chin on the top. His half lidded eyes studies his captains and the rest of those present. My own mind goes into overdrive at the news, thoughts whirling and always returning to one simple truth. "He's a child!!" I blurt out, horrified.

What is a young child doing out there, with packs of hungry hollows?! He should be at home, taking lessons from his tutors, playing with his siblings and practicing beginner's kendo and low level kido in the backyard. Not fighting tooth and nail in the wilderness in a war that is not yet his own!

I hear Kenpachi grunt. "I don't see what the big deal is. So he's new in town. So what? I'm more interested in that power level of his." A mad, bloodthirsty grin splits across his face and my hands ball into tight fist. I resist to the urge to flare out my reiatsu some as he continues. "Hey, Kurotsuchi…"

"What is it, oaf?" The scientist inquires, sniffing in contempt at being addressed by the eleventh division captain.

"Just how high could his power level be…. captain level?" The happiness in his voice at the prospect does not go unnoticed, least of all by me.

Before Kurotsuchi has the chance to reply and fortunately before I snap at a taichos' meeting (again), Ukitake-taicho speaks up with a deep frown. "Please, stop this. He's just a boy, and even if he has that level of power, he is no doubt largely inexperienced and no challenge for a taicho, especially of your standing." Kenpachi grumbles under his breath, reluctantly agreeing with the older taicho.

"From what I have heard, the boy carried a zanpakuto. I wasn't aware it was possible for a plus soul to develop shinigami powers so quickly and on their own." Aizen remarks with that tentative, oh-so-polite demeanor of his, looking at Kurotsuchi expectantly.

Soifon shakes her head slightly, frowning. "Are we sure that it was not just a normal katana he carried with him?"

"I'm sure," I say confidently. "It was able to slay a hollow- several of them, actually, from what I heard." The taichos just nod in understanding, not at all perturbed by a fukutaicho speaking more or less out of turn. Already it is like I am the taicho of the 13th, with how often Ukitake is sick and unable to do his duties. I've even gone to several of these meetings on Ukitake-taicho's behalf, and everyone knows how very close I am to obtaining my bankai. I've been pushing myself hard to learn it and manifest Nejibana for the past century, despite her firm reluctance, quickly slipping through my mental fingers and fiercely lashing out at me every moment I try. They say water travels the path of least resistance. Those who say that have no true understanding of the nature of the element. Ever tried bottling a hurricane? A raging tsunami? I wouldn't recommend it.

"I find it more likely that he grabbed the zanpakuto off of some poor dead bastard than it really belonging to him," Soifon comments resolutely.

Ukitake-taicho frowns disapprovingly at the coarse language, but says nothing of it. Instead he asks, "And the Shihakusho he wore?"

Soifon shrugs, not seeing any issue there apparently. "Same way." Many of those present make
disturbed expressions at the thought of someone wearing a Shihakusho belonging to one of their deceased, myself included.

"As logical as that hypothesis is," Mayuri speaks up again, nonplussed by the assassin's reasonings. "It is most likely wrong. His reiatsu is certainly that of a shinigami as well, so it would only stand to reason that that Shihakusho and zanpakuto do indeed belong to him."

After hearing this, the captain commander seems to come to a decision. Raising his chin, eyes opening fully once more, his reverberating voice sounds around room as he asks, "Does anyone know the location of this promising young man?"
Chapter 7

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV…

I idly pick at the bandages wrapped tightly around my chest as I sit in the back of the Nakashimas' wagon, Hatsu-san giving me annoyed glances all the while. When I had returned from the fight with Ikkaku, the woman had, instead of panicking and fussing like I'd probably thought she would have before our, uh, argument, she instead quickly stitched and bandaged the wound while giving me a sound, verbal beating all the while. With the way she acts now, I honestly have no idea how I ever could have thought that she's even remotely similar to Orihime. Instead, she's currently more like Rukia, except less violent, more deceptive and much less chappy the rabbit obsessed, I guess...

On another matter, I've been thinking of ways to get to the World of the Living. Meiji told me the location of one of Aizen's hidden labs, but I'm leary of going there. I doubt Aizen left the place unguarded, and I wouldn't put it past him for it be completely full of booby traps. Even if I managed to get past all of that, I would have no idea what to do. They don't exactly discuss dimensional transportation in high school science labs. No, I'd have more luck making my way to the 12th and intimidating one of the scientists into help me. Of course, I'd have to break into the Seireitei, but that's not something I haven't done before. I'll have the scientist open a gateway to the World of the Living for me and will bring him along too, just to make sure he doesn't drop me half way around the world from Urahara's shop. After I'm back in Karakura, I'll ditch the shinigami and head straight for Hat&Clog's place. He'll get me to Hueco Mundo, and probably figure out what the hell is wrong with the Soul Society while I'm gone.

Yeah, that sounds like a solid plan. I nod to myself, relieved. It took me only, what, three days to get my act together? Pathetic. But at least I have my head on straight now. I'm coming, Orihime!

"We're almost there, Shinigami-san," Nakashima-san says, glancing back at me from where he sits at the head of the wagon, holding the reigns to the mulls. Already I can see the city in the distance.

"How long do you think?" I give a questioning grunt. "With us, I mean, after we arrive?" It's Hatsu-san speaking. I look at her, but she doesn't meet my gaze, merely watching the largely desolate scenery as our little group carries on.

I don't hesitate to answer. "As soon as you get settled in…. and I guess, after one last meal." After all, I've only had two meals over the course of the last three days, and I don't know when I'll be getting my next. It shouldn't take too long to scarf down a few things before heading out to the 12th. "But as soon as I finish, I've got to go," I reiterate firmly.

Nothing is said for the next few minutes.

Then, "It would take several weeks for us to become safely settled in," Hatsu-san says slowly.
"So… I suppose…. If you ever find yourself in need of a place to stay during that time, you would be welcome back with us."

I make a small sound of surprise, looking at her curiously. A few of her long strands of brown hair have fallen into her face, and as she speaks to me she delicately grabs them and winds them back into the fold of her high hair bun. Her honey brown eyes stay fixed on the side of the dirt road, and her light pink lips are pursed into a small, resolute line. I wonder what she is thinking. I'd thought she'd never want to see me again after last night's embarrassing miscommunication.

Although she isn't looking at me, I offer her a small smile. "Thanks." Even though there is no way I plan on sticking around any longer than I feel I need to, it's still nice to know that I have a friendly place with the Nakashimas if I need it, especially with all the crap that I've been through the last few days.

Finally Hatsu-san turns her gaze toward me, lips twitching upward into an almost half smile. Then she scoffs quietly and shakes her head. "Don't thank me. It is just practical that I offer."

Yeah. Friendly place with the Nakashimas, right here.

-DIVIDER-

*Hitsugaya Toshiro's POV…*

I lean again the ancient, moss covered tree, taking a moment to regain my breath. I look down, stretching my toes and feeling the cool mud underneath them. It is a relief, and will serve me well when treading on the scathing, worn and weathered ground of the city. At least, that is, until the mud dries into a disgusting hard shell. I might as well enjoy it while I can. I wiggle my toes deeper into it, giving a soft sigh of contentment. As I do so I hear quiet, quizzical sounds and give a small start of surprise, looking up to see a girl and a boy about my age. I've seen them around before; their family just moved from a lower numbered district, a rarity in and of itself. It just goes to show how well the newest trading settlement is doing.

I halt my rambling thoughts in favor of quickly reminding myself to smile. *Don't mess this up, Toshiro! First impressions are everything.* I tell myself sternly, and listening to my own advice I do my best, twisting my lips upward. My back is stiff as a bored as I wait for a response from the two. The boy looks healthy and lean for his age, dressed in simple blue with a dark blue sash tied around his waist. The girl is very pretty, with black hair that almost seems to shine in the sunlight and big, innocent looking brown eyes. She wears a plain green kimono with a large, red bow tied around her middle. The pair share a look, the girl seeming to question her somewhat older brother with it. Should I… Should I make the first move? I… don't have to do anything major, just a simple hi and- Ah, but no. The older boy offers his sister a small, strained smile and slight shake of his head. The pair run off together, their bare feet hardly making a sound as they flee deeper into the woods surrounding northwest side of the city. I stare after them until they disappear from view, which isn't too long of a wait. My head slumps downward and I stare mournfully at my feet, the small pleasure the coolness of the mud gave me earlier, now like a distant memory. I move away from the tree I've been resting by and continue my journey toward the city…

Why are they afraid of me?… I haven't done anything to them… But it seems to me, that everyone is afraid of me… Is it my bright silver hair? Or perhaps it is the unusual color of my eyes that frightens them. Could it be because I am distant toward people I don't know? A soft clinking comes from my fisted hand as I pick up my pace, and I slow down again at the sound to glance at the coins in hand. I feel a pang of guilt. *No, not everyone is afraid of me. Not Granny.* I remember how kindly she welcomed me to her home when I woke up for the first time in the Rukongai, lost
and afraid. Alone. And more recently, I remember the smile on her face when I offered to go buy us sweets. She… I'm worried about her. She's been looking rather ill lately, and now seems thinner. Could it have anything to do with them, those strange dreams I've been having? I think Granny became ill around the time I began having them, although she insists that she's fine, I know better.

I pick up my pace again.

Maybe, if I can figure out just what is wrong with Granny, the next time Momo visits I can ask her to buy some special medicine in the Seireitei for Granny… Well, if Momo ever visits again. The last time she visited, I said something I deeply regret. "If that academy of yours is so great, why don't you just stay there instead of visiting us?" I'd been so jealous and petty, hearing about all the friends she'd been making, and the kindness of the wonderful 'Aizen-taicho'...

.... Stupid. So stupid! She used to visit every time she had a day off... The last time I saw her was almost a year ago. She said before she left last that she has finals and would have to get settled into her new division-"Oh, I hope it's the fifth!" -, so it would be awhile until she could visit again, but surely it doesn't take this long!... When I told Granny my thoughts, she had only patted my hand comfortingly and told me to keep my faith in Momo, that a year is nothing in the grand scheme of things… I want to keep faith in Momo, I really do, but as each day slips by I begin to wonder… Maybe this is for the best. No doubt Momo has achieved her dream. She's in that 'Aizen-taicho's' division that I used to hear about so much, helping him with his vision for a better world, a better Soul Society as a whole, and not just for those in the Seireitei- for those of us in the Rukongai as well. This bustling trade center is a testimony to that, one of Aizen-taicho's social experiments he arranged only a few years ago, just before I arrived. Now Momo's a part of his plans, just like she's wanted from the first time she saw him. Part of something greater than just surviving… I'm happy for her. Why wouldn't I be? Momo and Granny have been the only people to treat me as an actual person, instead of some type of freak of nature.

Momo and Granny.

Now just Granny.

Because Momo is gone now, gone to a better place with higher goals. The sooner I accept this, the better.

My handtightens around the coins given to me. I should concentrate on the person still with me. I'll buy some sweets and start searching for help for Granny in the city. They may not like me, but if I tell them it is for Granny, they might help. She is one of the city's elders after all… After I make a less than pleasant trip to the sweetshop, I head to the marketplace. I'll start my search there first.

I perk up when the market place comes into view and I weave and bob my way through the mass of bustling people. Now that I'm at the market place, where exactly here should go to first…? Maybe if I-

SLAM!

"Just what do you think you're trying to do?!"

I nearly jump out of my skin at the brash yelling, and so do most of the people near me. We all turn to gawk at the exchange taking place. A young looking male dressed in a beige cloak and a simple rag wrapped around the top of his head stands nearby. One of his fists is pressed heavily against an expertly crafted wooden stall and the man leans forward with lips slightly pulled back into an angry snarl. Next to him stands a young lady, and although she is facing away from me, I can tell
she is beautiful, even with her simple kimono and long brown hair done up tightly in a bun. I watch
them with all the fascination one would an approaching train wreck, fearing for them, but having
no power to stop the oncoming crash. This is because the person the male is picking a fight with is
none other than Yasuda Kuma, one of the most well-respected and powerful people of this city,
with practically half if not more of the citizens at his beck and call, what with all the things he has
his greedy little fingers in. He also happens to set the price for several goods in the market, because
he can afford to sell products at outrageously low prices… So usually, if he tells someone to jump,
they don't even pause to ask how high. They're already up in the air.

I don't feel too much pity for the male though. It's pretty obvious he's a complete moron. No, I feel
sorry for the young-appearing lady with him. My worry over her fate is the only reason I dally
about any longer.

"Shin-" she starts to say, only for her companion to brush her off.

"No, Hatsu-san. This man," he spits the word out harshly and I nearly wince at the sound of it, and
when the guards shadowing Yasuda takes a threatening step forward, only to be ignored by the
moron and regarded frightfully by the woman. My breath catches in my throat, willing for her
companion to Shut. Up. He doesn't seem to get the deadly vibes I'm sending out towards him, nor
the ones from the imposing guards. "-can't talk to you like that." He's speaking in a yelling
whisper, somehow. As though he's trying to keep his voice down, but practically anyone within a
ten foot radius can hear him crystal clear.

"What are you, her husband?" Yasuda asks, chuckling good naturedly. He's amused, probably the
only reason why his bodyguards haven't acted.

The beautiful lady is quick to shake her head in a clear no. Smart woman. The moron on the other
hand only grinds his teeth and gives out a gruff, "No."

Yasuda spreads his hands out welcomingly. "Then what is the problem? The dear lady and I can
talk business tonight and we'll have this all settled by morning."

Slowly the moron's hand unfurls as he straightens his posture. "Business…” He mutters with an
eery calm, the surrounding market place suddenly so quiet you could hear a writing brush drop.
"Business you say…” One of the woman's hands wraps around the moron's closest arm, her nails
digging in in warning and as well as pleading, but her silent plea goes unheeded. A hand darts out
and suddenly the moron is viciously shaking a shocked Yasuda by his collar. "Business, my ass!"

Chaos breaks loose.

On second thought, perhaps it'd be for the best if I come back later. I duck my head, doing my best
to protect it and keep out of the way at the sudden stampede of people vacating the area. I see my
chance, a small space between buildings, only big enough for someone my size. I could easily slip
through a be on my-

THUMP!

I see stars. And feel a heavy, oppressing weight on top of me. I can't move. I can't breathe. I groan
quietly. So does, I now realize, the person on top of me. I squint, my eye sight clearing and I see…
My breath catches. It's Yasuda. Had he fallen on top of me? I look past him. No, there is the
moron, one hand outstretched. Had he managed to throw Yasuda one handed? And the
bodyguards? Whimpering at the moron's feet. I look on in horror as the man strides forward,
yanking Yasuda off of me and carelessly throwing him off to the side. The moron goes to crouch
in front of me. "Hey, are you-"
I stare at him as his brown eyes become more focused and his expression becomes disbelieving. "T-? Ah, geez, I'm really sorry." He tells me sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. He extends his other hand to offer me help back up.

I open and close my mouth like a suffocating fish on land. I notice out of the corner of my eyes citizens cautiously poking there heads of buildings doorways, from their crouched positions behind stalls and various other hiding places... It's at this moment that I realize; I can't be associated with this guy! If I do, I'll be even more ostracized than I already am. What little life I have here will be gone! So I do the only thing I can. Closing my eyes for this split second, one fisted hand springs forward and catches the moron right on the face. "You're insane!" I yell. "Get away from me!" Using the opening I created, I wiggle away from him and jump to my feet, running the moment they touch the harsh ground.

-DIVIDER-

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...

I slowly go to stand, watching Toshiro round the corner down the road as I gently rub where he hit me on the cheek. I guess I'm not really surprised anymore, about people I know and care for treating me like a complete stranger. What stuns me is not why he reacted the way he did, but how he reacted. Who closes their eyes while they punch? Moreover, when does a captain of the Gotei 13 punch like that? He definitely should know better. Then again, he wasn't dressed like a shinigami at all. Instead, he looked just like some kid, and with no shoes no less… In fact, right now, I think he is just some kid, and not a captain or shinigami at all.

The pieces fall into place.

I think I know now...

I think I know what's happened.

It's not that no one remembers me...

It's that no one has ever met me... At least, not yet.

"BEHIND YOU!" I whirl around, just in time to catch a katana aimed for my neck. By the blade. I grimace. Shit! It doesn't hurt me, but I'd agreed with the Nakashimas that I'd try to keep a low profile-...

I stare at the groaning bodyguards, in fetal positions on the ground, the reality of what I've done settles in. So much for that idea. I think solemnly to myself.

The man whose blade I hold stutters, looking even more terrified when he tries to pull it out of my grip and fails without even managing to make a scratch. Instead I scowl, pulling his weapon toward me and smashing my fist against Yasuda's would be rescuer's face. More follow, intent on impressing the big boss and getting his approval by taking me down, is my guess... In all honesty, I hadn't meant for it all to get this much out of hand. I only wanted to rough the guy up a bit, make him think twice about trying to coerce every pretty girl he sees into doing 'business' with him, even worse how he subtly threatened to drive them out of town if Hatsu didn't agree.

I tentatively step between the mass of beaten opponents, making my way to Hatsu-san. She's standing with her back pressed firmly against the building behind her. She stays very still as I stop in front of her. "Thanks for the warning earlier," I say. No response. I frown, waving one hand in front of her face some. "Hatsu-san, it's over. You can relax now." Nothing. Where's that subtly
intellectual, verbal spitfire personality that I've learned over the last day to be the real Hatsu-san? I'm starting to get worried. "Oi, Hatsu-san, are you hurt? Say something."

"Shinigami-san... You've..." Her expression darkens. "You've ruined everything!" I jolt back at the intense ferocity behind her hissed words. She goes on before I can get a word in edgewise. "I was seen with you, and after you've done this, do you think my uncle and I will be welcome here?! At best, we'll be boycotted and forced to move. At worst, we'll be dead as soon as you leave."

"I... Hatsu-san, I didn't mean-"

"She's right." At least, I think that's what the 'businessman' says, as his jaw must have been dislocated after I threw him. I look to see the man struggling to get up, face contorted into a vicious look. "Because of your actions I'll make sure they never have a life here! I want you all out of my city by sundown or else-"

"Else what, Yasuda?"

"Officer Suzuki!" Yasuda garbles in surprise. Quickly recovering he demands, "Arrest this man!" while shoving an accusing finger in my direction.

The officer ignores this and goes on bitterly, men in matching uniforms appearing on scene, all with solemn or angry expressions, but those expressions are thankfully not directed at me. "I asked you a question. 'Else what?' What would you do if you couldn't bully families into doing what you want? Kill them?" Yasuda sputters indignantly. "Of course, I wouldn't know. I don't know a lot about your business, not because I don't know where to look, but because of my own cowardice." He strides forward. "No longer." Taking Yasuda roughly by one arm, he drags the larger man to his feet. "Yasuda Kuma, you are under arrest for blackmail, theft, threatening law enforcement, invasion and destruction of private property, and host of other crimes no doubt."

As the city's law enforcement floods the market place, arresting the beaten mercenaries now just barely regaining their wits, Hatsu-san and I share a mutual look of hope and relief. I offer her a tentative smile, trying to communicate assurance and apology with the gesture. She only shakes her head some at me, her relieved expression transforming to one of determination as she marches off to speak with Officer Suzuki. As soon as she does, I spot a mane of orange, wavy hair some distance behind where Hatsu-san once stood. With Hatsu-san no longer blocking my view, I can blatantly see one Matsumoto Rangiku staring with wistful interest at me. Noticing that I'm returning her gaze, the vibrant shinigami flashes a coy smile and with a quick and playful wink, somehow proceeds to disappear into the growing crowd of the market place.

-DIVIDER-

Matsumoto Rangiku's POV, a few minutes earlier...

"If you ever want to become a man, then stop crying and stand up for yourself!"

"Hey, what happened wasn't my fault and I'm not crying, so let go of me!" The boy yells in my face as I hold him up by his clothing, tears of frustration near leaving his eyes, and- what is that? Reiatsu? It must be, and quite a bit of it too. All of that reiatsu in this little boy... It's pretty startling to say the least, could this be-? But no, reports said that that boy appears older, and with orange hair like mine, right? Some even said that he possesses Shiba-esque characteristics, none of which match this cute kid, who has bright white hair and ice blue eyes.

"Hmm," I mutter thoughtfully, tilting my head cutely to one side as I study the kid. I'd found him being more or less bullied by the store owner, when the man had the nerve to treat the boy like
some lower class freak he only tolerated for the money the boy brought with him. I became even more furious when the boy didn't even try to stand up for himself and decided to step in and speak out. However, now that I really look at the kid, he doesn't seem as weak-spined as I first took him for.

Fed up, the boy rudely slaps away the hand holding him and hops back. "I said let go!" Then snatching his candy and change he runs off. I try calling for him but he doesn't listen. I ponder for a moment catching up with him, something I could easily accomplish, but I quickly dismiss the idea. It's pretty clear that approaching the child with something as life changing as 'You need to become a shinigami pronto, hon, else you might really hurt someone,' will not go over well with him, especially after such a poor first meeting with a shinigami. I guess I'll have to swing by sometime tonight after my shift and find him. That shouldn't be too hard, untrained as he is and with his peculiar reiatsu now committed to memory.

Speaking of peculiar reiatsu, that other one from earlier still has yet to simmer down. For the past five minutes or so it has been in a constant state of… not panic, nor anger… more like intense agitation. And it's quickly rising. I give a small sigh. I suppose I'll have to go check it out then. It'll take me further from my patrol route, but if I use shunpo that shouldn't be too much of an issue… First things first though… I turn on the sweet shop owner, giving him a writhing glare that he's quick to shy away from. I demand what I want in a clipped tone and he quickly complies, before trying to insist I can have it for free. With a firm shake of my head, I set down what I owe and am soon on my way, head held high.

A little while later I stand in the sky, looking down on the mess before me and the two young-appearing adults below, one of whom, the male, is the source of that rather heavy, agitated reiatsu. Now this… this one has to be the boy from the reports. He's definitely not a trained shinigami, and although the color of his hair is hidden (the most distinguishing feature he has according to the reports), just how many strongly spiritually gifted kids can be discovered in the Rukongai in just one week? One is a special find, two is a rarity. Three? All but impossible. Maybe I should get a closer look though, just the same… My sudden appearance on the market place ground goes largely unnoticed with what's happening, the defeat of a mass of mercenaries and the arrest of, not the assailant, but the merchant to have hired the mercenaries it seems. Huh, weird. But I'm sure the officer knows what he's doing, this is Aizen-taicho's pet project after all. Usually the only official law enforcement in the Soul Society are the shinigami, the kido corp and the onmitsukidō, so basically only those with substantial spiritual pressure can be, and moreover are expected to be, law enforcement. Only now and in this social experiment has those with little to none reiatsu been allowed to join any form of official law enforcement.

When the girl moves from the boy's side to speak with the officer, I see my person of interest clearly for the first time. He's not the cute kid I'd expected from a Shiba-esque child. The white haired little guy from earlier is more akin to that, he has the idea of cuteness down pat. But this one? Although he has the Shiba's signature features, his scowl throws me in for a loop. What I would consider a foreign expression on any Shiba (and believe me, I know the clan well!), looks right at home on his face. I wouldn't describe him as 'cute' either, though I have to say, he does look pretty attractive, in a ruggedly handsome kinda way. Too bad he's waytoo young for me. Still, nothing wrong with teasing him a bit… I see him staring back at me, and offer a sweet smile and a playful wink before stepping back and letting the growing crowd of the market place overtake me, hiding me from view. I leave the premises and return to my patrol route with a thoughtful air. I still plan on coming back for the younger looking one tonight, no one knows about him yet and he needs help, but as for the older… I think someone else will be more interested in seeing him.
I gnaw on my slice of watermelon with a look of intense concentration, determined to keep my gaze away from the taller boy next to me. *I'm only here for the watermelon*, I continue to mentally assure myself. *As soon as I finish every little piece he lets me have, and one or two he doesn't so I can take some home for Granny, I am leaving.* With that in mind and my favorite treat in hand, all in all I'm not actually regretting this meeting. I get free, juicy, mouth-watering watermelon out of it and the other has yet to say a single word to me since we sat down just outside of Main Street Ryokan Inn. He only stares at me while slowly eating his fruit, and while a bit unnerving, it doesn't bother me too much as long as I keep my attention firmly away from him.

This meeting, besides being one of good fortune in the end, is also ironic. When on my way back home, I'd purposely taken a longer route in order to avoid the marketplace and the one who started the brawl there, though in all honesty I hadn't expected to see him again either way, at least, not in such good condition. I'd expected him to either be in jail, dead, or beaten to near death. Not strolling by with his girlfriend, their arms piled high with groceries. I'd swerved to avoid the pair as soon as I saw them of course, but the apparently not-so-moronic male (he's still alive, isn't? He must be doing *something* right, though what that something is is a mystery to me) saw me before I could and caught up to me, even while carrying so much stuff. He'd smiled that awkward smile at me again and asked if I wanted to talk. He didn't seem so shocked when I returned his question with a flat 'No' and tried to walk away. Then he offered me food if I would just sit outside of the inn with him a bit. I'd eyed him warily, wondering why in the world this guy had taken an interest in me of all people, the freak and outcast of this city (not that he's much better, but still). I was about to refuse when I saw it, the watermelon. I haven't had a slice since Momo brought some home all those months ago, Granny and I just haven't been able to afford the succulent treat on our own…

Have I mentioned yet how watermelon has a way of making even the most unfortunate of meetings seem so much better and brighter? Now if I can just get through this without him speak-

"So…"

*Darn.* I try to ignore him. Maybe he'll drop whatever it is he has in mind if I don't recognize that he said anything.

"... You must be really hungry, huh?"

I give a small snort of seems incredibly happy by my small show of attentiveness to his words by the way he perks up, even with that default, slight scowl he has in place. He nods to himself. "Yeah, you do look kinda thin…" He rambles on. "You know, if you don't eat properly, you'll stunt your growth. Believe me, if you don't do something about it you could stay looking the way you do now for *decades.*" I turn to give him a weird look after his bizarre words. There is a glint in his brown eyes, like he's in on a joke that I know nothing about.

I roll my eyes at his nonsense and say, "Fool. There's no need for food in the Soul Society. Isn't it obvious that I just like watermelon?"

He seems dubious at my words for some reason. "Really? You've never felt hungry? Not once?" I give a grunt as I finish my slice, licking my fingers and spitting out the seeds. He raises an eyebrow at my actions. I stick out a hand towards him hopefully, wanting another slice. The older boy cuts one for me, but cruelly holds it hostage until I answer his questions.

I sigh and do as he wants. *For the sake of watermelon,* I think. "Really. No, not once." Though now that I think about it, I don't actually have any idea what hunger feels like, so I can't know for sure... but it's not like I'm going to tell him that. He just makes this thoughtful, doubtful 'hm' sound
as he passes another slice over. "Hm?" I ask before digging into the food.

He shrugs. "Hm," he confirms. As time passes by he seems to garner this depressed vibe about him. Is it because of me? Something I said? Or maybe something I didn't… After all, here he is sharing his food with me, seemingly only for the sake of my company, and I haven't exactly been a good companion… I feel a small pang of guilt for the way I've been treating him, having been treated that way myself earlier today. Here someone is finally trying to get to know me instead of avoiding me like the plague, and the only thing I can do is act distant.

I clear my throat and he glances at me. "... Where do you and your girlfriend come from?" I ask for lack of anything better to say, and half expecting him to refuse to answer. After all, the motive could easily be that they are running from something, or someone. Moving is particularly difficult in the Rukongai.

He straightens up some and throws the seed in hand to the side before saying, "Hatsu-san is not my girlfriend. I'm acting more of an escort or bodyguard for her and her uncle… and we came from district sixty." I nod thoughtfully. So he's a mercenary then. I give him a quick once over. I suppose that makes sense. We don't speak too much after this, and when we do it's over the simplest of things, from weather to city politics, nonsensical subjects that have no real purpose besides proving us to be poor conversationalists… But even so, for the first time in awhile, I remember what it's like to enjoy the company of a peer.

-DIVIDER-

Change of POV… Onmitsukidō Fifth Seat Operative

As part of the Onmitsukidō, it's often our job to locate lone targets in the vast nation and dimension that is the Soul Society. Our network spans it all, from the Seireitei to the outermost districts at the edge of known territory in this dimension. When something of note occurs, we know of it, some times even before it happens. Easy enough then, to locate an untrained boy with supposedly no understanding of our ways. Still, I'm a bit underwhelmed. It did not even take us a full day to locate our target, and when we, or at least I, find him, all he is doing is eating watermelon and other assortment of fruit with another young boy. I let out a small breath, backing into a shaded alleyway from my current observatory spot. I stretch out my senses, taking cautionary measures to make sure nothing is lurking about, watching me. I'm annoyed however when the target's overflowing reiatsu offers interference, and I can't be sure that no one isn't skulking around. It would not do if I was caught with my modified Denreishinki, as I am in average Rukongai attire and free from the usual masks and black garb of the onmitsukidō. Being caught with something like the Denreishinki would be a dead give-away for what I really am... I can't have my face associated with my duties, it could easily compromise future missions.

Reluctantly then, I distance myself from the target until I feel confident with my ability to sense for nearby threats. Behind an unoccupied shed of an old house, I slip out my modified Denreishinki and make a quick call to my partner for this mission, telling him of my location. He assures me that he'll arrive here within the hour and without any wasted commentary, we conclude the call. It's nearly done then. I'll wait for my back up before approaching the boy, for while I'm almost sure I could handle him, it is not the onmitsukidō corp way to underestimate or make assumptions of our targets- no matter how friendly he has presented himself to be and especially when he is largely an unknown. Until then I'll keep him within sight, a simple task with this target no doubt. In all honesty, I find this mission all too boring and ridiculously eas-

A sickening crunch and piercing pain that dulls into disbelieving shock.
A blade has pierced me from behind, right through the heart. If I hadn't ducked my head and tried to dodge at the last split second, there is no doubt that it would be through my head instead.

From the feel of the blade, it's no ordinary katana either. *Zanpakuto!* I twist my head around, looking with wide, bloodshot eyes at the source of the blade, or lack thereof. The long blade protrudes through a slight hole in what appears to be merely a pocket of air a few feet away from me. The small gap, similar to a garganta with how it floats in mid air, excludes a multitude of bright color. *Kido cloak!* How had my assailant managed to get so close to me while performing kido, and without me sensing any form of reiatsu?! I've used this spell so many times myself, a kido spell designed to wrap around your person, giving you perfect camouflage. I know the signs of it! *How-*?

My mind buzzes with a multitude of thoughts in the two seconds the shock makes me freeze up. Meanwhile the blade retracts from my gaping wound, leaving me breathless and my heightened reiatsu the only thing keeping me temporarily alive. Blood dribbles from my mouth; all is deathly quiet. I can't feel my heart beating anymore. I can't feel my heart at all. There's a gaping hole through my chest. I'm about to die. *I can't die in vain!*

In a split second one of my many poison dipped, hidden knives is out and flying toward my assailant. "Traitor!" I hiss with a vengeance. My assailant is either of the onmitsukidō or shinigami, of that there is no doubt. My knives are deflected with the zanpakuto, but I'm not deterred. I bring out my own zanpakuto, a wakizashi in sealed form. I need to get close, and quickly. My much shorter weapon is no good at this range. I use shunpo to augment my movements-

-and give off a strangled cry. He's fast! Bringing his zanpakuto about, the tip just manages to nick my eyes enough to blind them before I could completely pull back. However, I am not new to fighting blind, and if I must die then so will he! With a renewed burst of reiatsu, a series of complex movements, near break necking speeds and with just plain luck, I manage to get close and personal with my attacker. He catches my wrist before I can behead him in one, swift movement, but I am not deterred. With a flick of my free hand, another knife falls into place and I impale it into his closest body part- his thigh? I'm kneed harshly to my middle and sent flying. I land, crouched on my feet, but am kicked onto my back.

*Dodge! Roll! Move!* I'm stunned instead when for a split second an overwhelming spiritual pressure slams into me, holding me in place, and then- I die in vain.

-DIVIDER-

*Hitsugaya Toshiro's POV...*

"Something wrong?"

"... No," he responds after a moment, looking distant. "Just for a second though, I thought… Nevermind." He stands, brushing off a few seeds that had become stuck to his cloak. "Well, thanks for talking with me."

I give a curt nod, standing as well. "You're welcome." My eyes can't help though but to stray to the leftover watermelon one last time. I hear him chuckling quietly and force myself not to blush in embarrassment.

"Hey, feel free to take the rest home with you if you like it that much." My eyes light up.
"I- thank you. That's very kind of you."

"Sure, no problem." He gathers up his bags of food, letting me take what is left of the watermelon. "Later, Toshiro," he waves as he enters the Inn.

"Goodbye." I head home, a small smile forming at my lips. It's only a few minutes later that I realize that he never told me his name… and more importantly, I never told him mine.
Chapter 8

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...

I pause at the entrance to the Inn, ill at ease. What was that? Reaitsu no doubt, but where did it come from, and from who or what did it belong to? Should I go searching for it? It felt near, if not inside the city itself... Then again, I'd planned on leaving very soon, and I have no idea where exactly the power came from or if the person will still even be here. I try to sense any other disturbances, but with my skills lacking in that area, I fail miserably. Giving up (although reluctantly) I stride forward to speak the Innkeeper and find out where the Nakashimas went to...

"Alright, thanks." The elderly innkeeper accepts my thanks with small smile and goes back to her dusting. I try to recall any cabin open for lodging behind the Inn, like the innkeeper just mentioned, and fail. It must be fairly small, with the Inn itself barely being big enough to support its business. I stride toward the front door of the Inn, lugging my bags of food behind me, when a familiar face rounds the corner. I force myself not to sigh. I'd been hoping to say my goodbyes to the Nakashimas and sneak out of the city without having to answer any questions, but it looks like I'm out of luck. Officer Suzuki, whose role is obviously similar if not the same to a police chief, stands at the doorway and notices me immediately.

"Let's take a walk," he says. The bags' weight seems to almost increase at this, reminding me of what he's done for not only me by freely giving food, but for the Nakashimas as well. He basically guaranteed that they'd have a shop here, or at least a shot at creating one. I nod.

A handful of seconds later we are outside. It's quiet for awhile and I notice the sun just beginning to set. Geez, didn't realize I took so long talking to Toshiro. It was probably not the smartest move, considering what I now know. If what they say about the "butterfly effect" is true, I wonder just how much I screwed with the timeline by having a few hours conversation with someone who I am (was, will be, whatever) close friends with... To hell with that. What about all the stuff I've done since I've first got here? I've saved at least three lives (hope it's three, I don't know how that shinigami woman is doing), slew so many hollows that I've lost count, was witness to one of Aizen's massacres... What's one conversation with a friend to keep me sane in all this mess? I guess, even if Toshiro doesn't see me the same way currently, I can't think of Toshiro in any way but a close friend... and overall, he's pretty much just as I remember, except maybe a bit less dignified. It's kinda hard to imagine the proud 'Hitsugaya-taicho to you, damn it' going around barefoot and spitting out watermelon seeds on the side of the road without a care. 'Sides that though, Toshiro's still Toshiro.

I shade my eyes at a sudden glare from the setting sun, still outwardly silent and not in any rush to start the conversation with Officer Suzuki. I'm terrible at lying and don't like doing it either. I've always been a blunt, truthful person, even going as far as to be brutally honest when the situation calls for it... and I guess now that I know that Orihime isn't in trouble (or not yet, at least), there's no reason to rush back to the world of the Living. She may not even be alive yet. Hell, I may not be alive, not yet or not anymore. I'd died, hadn't I? A rather slow, painful and emotional death too.

This sucks.

I swear, either I have the shittest of lucks or the best of it, because even while I somehow find myself in these of absurd, near hopeless situations, everything always manages to turn out alright... And, well, I guess I have to believe it will this time too.

"You don't have to worry." I blink and look up at Officer Suzuki as he snaps me out of my pitiful
"Huh?" I respond automatically.

"I won't ask who you are or what you've done. I'm only interested in who you can be and what you've done here. Understand what I'm saying?"

"...Yeah, I get it." I find myself relaxing some, pent up stress leaving my posture. Officer Suzuki seems like a real down to Earth type of guy, and although he acted cowardly by allowing that bloated, jerkwad Yasuda to walk all over him and his city, I understand how that happened now. Personal threats against you and your family with muscle to back it up, shouldn't be taken lightly by any means. Now though, he's doing his best to make up for it all, and I can respect that. The added bit about letting me off the hook in every way, shape and form is a nice bonus too. "So what now?" I ask. This can't be all he wanted to say, after all.

"Now? Well, that's up to you." I cock my head. He nods at his own words and gives me a serious look. "I'll be honest with you. What you've done has commended a lot of gratitude, respect and fear- the right kind of fear mind you, the kind that makes criminals want to stay out sight and stick to pettier crime, or give up on crime altogether. I could really use someone like you on my force, especially after so many of us have been all around shamed."

I look at him appreciatively. I've only known Officer Suzuki for more than a few hours, and while this proposal could be considered a mixture of desperation and rationality, I find myself thankful to him for the opportunity to have a sort of safe house in this city… even if I have no plans of taking it. "In other circumstances, I would jump at the opportunity to become an officer like you…" I admit, a memory from long ago briefly coming to mind.

"-go-kun?" My fourth grade teacher snapped her fingers in front of me, an amused but reprimanding smile was on her lips. I didn't respond, only leaning forward into my work and clutching my orange crayon a little harder as I moved it. In my peripheral vision I saw Sensei frown. She gently but quickly pushed my hands away from the notebook paper and snatched it up. I gave a cry of protest. "You can have it back after class if, and only if, you pay attention. Alright?" I nodded reluctantly. "Now, everyone here is sharing what they would like to be when they grow up. Tatsuki-kun just announced that she wants to be a karate champion. What do you want to be, Ichigo-kun?"

"I... want..." Sensei didn't interrupt, only coaxing me to continue with a small nod and comforting smile. She always had to tip-toe around me, I was so fragile. I cried so easily, especially those last few weeks. I scowled, not frowned, at the thought. "Isn't it obvious?" I bit out harshly. My Sensei looked aghast.

"Ichigo-kun!" she cried out sternly, but before she could scold me for my unexpected burst of rudeness, I doggedly continued on.

"My name is Ichigo, that means 'one who protects', so of course that's what I'm going to do! I'll... be a police officer, so I can protect this city! And no one innocent here will be hurt again when I'm on the job, not ever!" There was a beat, and Sensei hesitantly looked at and laid back down my drawing, a nine year old rendition of the late Kurosaki Masaki.

"But...?" Officer Suzuki prods, having stopped to look back at me with a mixture of ready disappointment and curiosity when I abruptly stopped walking.

"I'll be a police officer, so I can protect this city!"
I intake a sharp breath and say, "But this is not my city." It's not my time either, but with any luck Urahara will be at the present Karakura to help me. As crazy as the truth may sound, if I have to choose one person in the entire universe to believe it, it would be Urahara Kisuke, Karakura's residential mad scientist.

"I see..." he says slowly. Officer Suzuki frowns. "Is there anything I can do to convince you otherwise?"

I give a small shake of my head, heart set. "Fraid not."

Officer Suzuki grimaces, disappointment evident, and I can't help but feel flattered. After a few moments he straightens his posture, a look of weary resolve, but resolve nonetheless, in his eyes. "Well then, I wish you luck on your journey, Kurosaki Ichigo."

I smile slightly, returning the bow he gives me and giving his hand a firm shake. "Thanks, same to you."

He offers me a fond smile as he releases my hand. "That city you're headed to better do you right. Otherwise, you know what city will, the *City on a Hill*. Our founder would be proud to have you as a part this community."

*City on a Hill?* I wonder, the name finally being revealed. *Who'd have a big enough ego to call their city that?* "That right?" I respond with some interest as my hand returns to my side.

Officer Suzuki gives a curt nod. "He lives in the Seireitei, but unlike the majority of those people, he's always finding way to raise money and improve the conditions of the Rukongai."

"Huh. Sounds like a good man."

"He is." We exchange our final goodbyes and after Officer Suzuki returns the bags of food to me, I head to the small cabin the Innkeeper told me about. Overall I'm feeling much better- lighter, almost- than I have since arriving back in the Soul Society. I feel the intense loneliness that I had been doggedly pushing to the back of my mind until I'd spoken with Toshiro, fade away into only a dull ache. I have a clear cut goal in mind and now friends I feel I can trust at my back. Two of them come into sight when I swing open the door to the evidently one room cabin. The room, although sparse in anything but bare necessities, is in good condition and pretty large, four times the size of my bedroom. So, all in all...

"Not bad," I remark with a nod.

Nakashima-san is first to recover from the small start I gave them from entering so suddenly and gives one wall a firm, fond pat. "Spruce it up a bit, spend some time in it, and soon it will be home sweet home."

"Knock next time, Shinigami-san!" Is Hatsu-san's less friendly greeting, an ordinary, old dusting rag in one hand and a small, glass, black vial of something in the other. Homemade cleaning solution, maybe? Hatsu-san's stare is piercing, but her usual foul mood towards me doesn't do anything to dampen my spirits this time.

I shrug some. "Well, it's not like you'll have to worry about me barging in ever again." The Nakashimas share a look. *There they go again.* I think with some fond exasperation as the pair's silent conversation goes right over my head.

"So, you're still going through with your plan, then?" The elder Nakashima inquires, making it quite clear that he has no idea what I plan to do after leaving the city, but whatever it is he doesn't
think is worth it. I know differently.

I grunt and give a curt nod. A pause. "Don't worry though, I'll be fine. I can look after myself." If I didn't have such thick skin, I would be offended by the dubious looks the pair gives me. I gather that while they seem to think that while I'm good in a fight, I'm much too naive. *C'mon, I'm not that bad...* I think petulantly.

Hatsu-san sniffs airly. "So why did you come back here?"

I scowl at her, feeling the reasons are obvious. "For one thing, I need to find a better way to carry around the food and, well, I wanted to see you guys one more time and say goodbye. Something wrong with that?" I know Hatsu-san and I don't exactly get along (at all) since what I've mentally dubbed 'the incident', but I don't think she hates me or anything. She has to care for me to some degree, or she wouldn't have extended me a place to stay for the next few weeks on the ride over here.

Meanwhile the elder Nakashima, who is holding his straw hat in hand, lightly taps it against his chest. "I could help you sort out your food, if you'd like." I agree with a small nod of appreciation. He gets out a hefty sack that would hold together much better than all of the smaller bags individually. I step forward to help him, but he shoos me away, assuring me that he has it handled and politely asking me to leave the food beside him. Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, I do so. Hatsu-san asks with her back to me from the lone table on the other side of the room if I'd like some tea. I politely refuse- tea's a bit too bitter for my tastes and would only make me thirstier. Hatsu-san lightly insists though and I give in, figuring this is her way of making amends before I leave with us probably never to see each other again.

I sit down on one of two old stools at the lone, wooden table as Hatsu-san sets the room temperature tea before me. I don't mind the temperature, though I'm still not looking forward to the taste. I steel myself though and take a sip. Turns out that it's pretty good... Not exactly sweet, but not bitter either. It's kinda hard to explain. I drink at a regular pace, not gulping, because I don't exactly want to rush this most likely final goodbye, and not sipping, because the more I think about my city, Karakura, the more determined I am to get back. I might be stuck somewhere in the past, but Karakura is still my home, and hopefully with Urahara skulking around there, I'll still have allies and a chance to get back to my time.

All is silent as Nakashima-san readies my things, I drink the tea from the scratched, alabaster cup, and Hatsu-san calmly watches from her stool on the other side of the table. I lean forward a bit to rest my elbows on the table and suddenly become pretty woozy, feeling like all of the blood is draining away from my head, but after a moment of staying very still it passes. "Everything alright, shinigami-san?" I give a confirming grunt. That momentary feeling gets me wondering... What are the effects of time travel to the traveler? I scowl, but brush off the thought. The honest answer is that I have no idea, and it will not do me any good to worry about that now.

I take the remnants of my tea in one gulp, slapping it down lightly on the table and move to stand. "Thanks for everything: Hatsu-san, Nakashima-san." They stand stock still as I take my first step toward the door-

-and promptly collapse onto the hard wooden floor. My hands snap forward, just saving me from doing a complete face plant. "The hell...?" I mutter, completely baffled and more than a little embarrassed. I go to push myself back up but my arms shake, feeling like jello. I groan in disorientation and slight pain. The room is spinning. *Don't panic,* I tell myself tensely, trying again to push myself back up. I only manage to push myself up one foot before I completely collapse. Meanwhile I hear footsteps. The front door swings open. I peer belatedly up. Plain, beige

"Hm, sure took awhile, didn't it?" he asks the Nakashimas offhandedly, shaking in one hand a small, black, glass bottle- a bottle identical to the one I saw Hatsu-san holding when I first entered the lodging. Hatsu backs up, as if physically repulsed by his presence, and her uncle is quick to go to her side. I turn back to the newcomer when he makes this disturbing 'itch'ing sound that sets my nerves on edge. "You know, for a kid, you're pretty scary Ichi-chan." I balk at the nickname he's given me and glare fiercely at him. He continues with his tirade unperturbed. "The drug amount I had your girlfriend give to you was enough to kill an average soul ten times over, and do it instantly. Not you though. Scar-y." He strides up to me and I crane my neck up to keep him without sight. My breath catches in my throat. The drug kills? Belated effects or not, is it going to kill me? I already died once, and am not eager to repeat the process... In my following, silent panic I see his smile dim, and for a brief moment, I think I even see him frown, though with my increasingly blurry vision it's hard to say. He bends down some and sets a cold hand on my head, tossing my hair in what otherwise could be considered a friendly, even comforting gesture. "Don't worry, Ichi-chan. You won't die. Yer just gonna take a lil nap, okay?"

His words do little to ease my panic. I know exactly who he's working for after all, and just what he's willing to do for that man. Being captured by them may be even worse than death. Not okay! I think acidly, struggling to fight off the lethargy that is claiming me whole. I feel numb all over.

I see two blurs to one side. The Nakashimas, about to leave through the front door. "Ichigo..." I hear Hatsu whisper, tears threatening to spill over I notice as my vision blurs in and out of focus. Her uncle lays his hands on her shoulders, avoiding eye contact with me and looking supremely guilty, although determined just the same. He whispers something urgent to his niece as he quickly guides her away, Hatsu's sorry gaze never leaving me. They don't make it to the door however; Ichimaru kicks it closed right in front of them.

"Oh, leaving so soon?" he questions with an air of nonchalance.

Nakashima grits his teeth. "You said all we have to do-"

"Yes, well, not quite." He pulls out something from his cloak as the Nakashimas tense up, but instead of a weapon it's... "Say 'Cheese!'" he exclaims something cheerfully in a foreign tongue (English?), and a flash from some modified Kikanshinki in hand leaves the pair frozen in place, expressions blank as the device replaces memories.

"I-Ich..." I try to force out.

"Hm~?" he inquires, tilting his head down at me and smiling widely.

"Ichimaru, you bastard!" I finish just as my head hits the cold floor.

-DIVIDER-

Soifon's POV...

I am a practical woman with simple wants. I want results. When I order for someone to be located within the week, I expect to be updated on the target's whereabouts within the week. A simple matter, made even simpler by the fact that the target is a boy with an uncontrollable amount of reiatsu and my squad members are trained professionals.

Simple.
But important nonetheless. This order came from the Soutaicho himself. His reasons for the order are unimportant. I myself would think this a wasted effort if the orders didn't come from such a wise mind. After all, who'd want a kid who couldn't do the usually innate, most basic of reiatsu manipulation and who leaves his spiritual footprints all over the place? Certainly not me, although the brutes from the eleventh may have use for him, and he may eventually be taught control... Yet apparently saving the lives of one fukutaicho and two seated officers makes one an all important priority.

So, simple and important.

Therefore I think it's entirely reasonable that I am this close to strangling the Onmitsukidō member in front of me or sending him to the Maggot's Nest. Whatever suits my fancy. Maybe both. And he seems to know what I am thinking if the prostrated bow is anything to go by. "My most sincere apologies taicho, I take full responsibility for this failure." He might as well have signed his death warrant by saying that, but I have to give him props, at least for bravery.

A sound kick to his back insures that we get back to the topic at hand and that some of my own frustration is spent. "Stop groveling and tell me how you managed to lose a child with uncontrollable reiatsu."

He knew better than to wait too long to reply, and after a brief moment of silently fumbling, admits that he doesn't know. "I had received word from my partner that the target was located in Aizen-taicho's pet project in the West Rukongai, the 'city upon a hill' as it's called. After arriving, both my partner and the target were nowhere to be found, though several testified to the latter's appearance in the city and his reiatsu still heavily lingers in the air... I can only assume that my partner is dead." He better be. Abandonment of mission and duty is worse than death- all of my subordinates know this. "As for the target... His location and status... is largely unknown." A moment of silence, as the operative holds his breath and I gravely mull over this sour turn of events. I can't even begin to imagine the shame that would befall my division and myself if word of this was to ever get out. One of my division members, killed by a child? No, that couldn't be true; the boy could not have even noticed him, much less kill him. Just the same, that is the embarrassing rumor that will most likely be spread.

That in mind, I remove my foot from it's spot on the top of his back and order him to stand up. "I am giving you a chance to redeem yourself." He says nothing, only listening intently, but the slight widening of his eyes portrays his eagerness to do just that. "Tonight," I say, "We will go together to fix this before anyone has a chance to know." He gives his wholehearted agreement in a few short, respectful words. While he does... As much as I enforce teamwork in my division, I can't help but believe that if you want something done right- do it yourself.

"By this time tomorrow, the fate of your partner will be discovered and that boy will be in our custody."

-DIVIDER-

Kuchiki Rukia's POV...

I watch in apprehension as Kaien-dono busies about the room, collecting a few, portable medical supplies among other things. As much as I respect the Shibas, my new adopted family so to speak (though Nii-sama is and always will be my big brother), I can't help but wonder... Is this the right thing to do? I voice as much out loud to my frenzied mentor. He smiles at me briefly before continuing his preparations. For a moment I thought that a dismissal, but then he speaks up. "Rukia, remember the announcement from earlier today?"
I feel a spark of warmth at the familial uses of my given name, something he has been doing more and more as of late. I give a curt nod even though his back is turned to me and say, "Yes, martial law has been removed, the state of emergency as well, along with invading hollows. The hollows that now prowl outside the Seireitei are back to… tolerable levels."

"Right. So what does that mean for someone like me?"

It's not hard to see where he is going with this, thought I dutifully go along none the less. "You are not required to stay with your division at all times…"

"And what did I tell you the soutaicho said?"

"That the Onmitsukidō would locate and quietly bring back the shinigami that helped us that night." That night naturally being the one where I almost lost my two dearest mentors and friends. Everyone had taken to calling it that night for lack of a better name, many not wishing to plainly speak of the atrocities that happened. No doubt the historians will come up with a much more dramatic name, but until the pain of the event fades to a distant ache, it will continue to simply be called that night.

"See. That's where the problem lies. The soutaicho always has the 'big picture' in mind, and while that's his duty and I respect him for it, I can't help but disagree in some instances. The Onmitsukidō will do as told to the letter, but think for a moment… how would you react to members of the Onmitsukidō appearing to either coarse or drag you back to the Seireitei?" He glances at me, and as he says this I see his point and grimace tightly. Imagine a more or less assassin bringing me to an unfamiliar place, perhaps against my will… I suppress a shiver. Kaien-dono nods, noticing my rather violent reaction to the suggestion. "I see that you realize my point. Anyone, even someone with a long military background would take… badly to this. Imagine how a young child must feel!" He throws his hands up in the air, appearing distressed at the notion, and rightly so.

I give a small start. "It's confirmed then?" I ask the older worriedly, biting my lower lip. Another nod. "Yes, by Unohana-taicho herself… Though how he gained his shinigami powers and a zanpakuto so fast still remains a mystery."

"Fortunately, Rangiku-san has noticed an increase of spiritual activity in Aizen's little pet project to the West." I can't help but notice the slightest notion of… disdain coming from my mentor as he mentions the esteemed and beloved taicho. I myself hold great respect for the man and all he has done so far for the Rukongai (even with his limited resources, Aizen-taicho isn't known for his wealth), and I can't figure out why Kaien-dono dislikes him so much. This isn't the first time I've noticed the disdain after all, as Kaien-dono has a tendency to lower his guard when it is just the two
of us or with his- our family. I know better then to bring this up right now however; we have more important things to focus on.

He pauses his preparations, throwing me another glance with a pensive expression. "She also located another bit of 'spiritual activity' in the same city, seemingly just as powerful as the first and from an even younger looking boy no less, though whether he actually is is unknown." My breath catches. Another? So soon? And in the same place! I can't help but feel a little dizzy, and a little giddy, only able to pay half attention as he goes on to explain how the tenth division fukutaicho will be seeing the other herself tonight.

The last time two spiritually gifted pluses were found in even the remotely same area… Was myself and Renji. Several decades before were Matsumoto-fukutaicho and Ichimaru-fukutaicho. Out of all four of us only Ichimaru Gin has as high spiritual pressure when discovered as these two newcomers are said to have. Matsumoto-fukutaicho had to work hard to get her spiritual pressure up to the level of a fukutaicho, and Renji and I still have long ways to go until we find our limits. But these newcomers are just what the Seireitei needs to tip the balance back in our favor. This couldn't have happened at a better time! I can't help but thinking this is Kami-sama, finally seeing fit to give us a much needed reprieve.

I don't care how it happens… Just… Kami-sama… please, help him! A memory from that night flashes briefly to mind. I exhale, feeling much more at ease than I have in days. "I'll be by the West Gate at first light tomorrow, sir."

Kaien-dono reaches down to give my shoulder a tight squeeze as he beams at me. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

-Kurosaki Ichigo's POV-

I wake to the sound of nearby thunder- the rumbling, booming sound startling me from my prostrated position with one cheek pressed up against cool, blue glass. I blink down at it, my breath casting a temporary fog along it's surface as I shift about, trying to regain my bearings. I almost wish I hadn't when I now come to the quick realization that I am on a sideways skyscraper, facing directly down to the distant city streets below. It's not as terrifying as the first time I saw the scene; I am slowly overcoming the shock of my screwed up Inner World, but it has yet to fail to throw in for a loop. I have to shut my eyes for a moment, breath quickening. I force myself to gather my nerves and roll over onto my back, that way when I open my eyes again, it won't be to the glass and the distant, hard concrete far below.

"I've often wondered what would be waiting for us beyond death, Ichigo."

I breathe in sharply, eyes flying open to see a blur of black as I scramble backward. My heart pounds rapidly as my vision focuses and I see… "Ossan!" I gasp in relief and happiness, having feared the worse for my partner until this point, but fortunately from the looks of things, he's just fine. "I was worried something happened to you. Your outer appearance changed and I-"

"Would we continue on as we have, in our shinigami form alone?" I frown a bit, as he completely ignores my words and continues his pensive monologue with gloomy countenance.

"Ossan…"

"Would we fall to pieces, the chains that held us all together, destroyed in such a meager, inevitable fate?" I keep silent, trying to keep up with what he's saying and only succeeding half-way. "Or
would we turn into a rabid, miserable beast, never able to truly end it on our own...?" I'm almost affronted by this. Zangetsu thought we could turn into a hollow after death? And what was that bit about chains and falling apart? I can feel his intense gaze behind his darkened shades. "Yet, despite my best reasonings, it was none of these... You never cease to amaze, Ichigo." I wet my lips, fidgeting under my partner's and mentor's scrutinizing gaze.

I struggle to my feet, careful to keep my mind off the sideways-ness of this world and from the ever present terror of falling. "Ossan... do you know what's happened? Your blade changed..." I peer up at him. Does he know? And does he realize what has happened to us?

He grunts. "I figured as much. I am in my sealed form, Ichigo. Not the hybrid version I was when that shinigami girl's power was within us," he sounds almost disgusted when he mentions this. "- but the form I would take if you ever managed to contain your vast reiatsu on your own."

"But I didn't!" I pause. "Erm, did I?"

He snorts disbelievingly and I rub my neck embarrassedly. "No. You have long ways to go before you have the means to do that. And-" he is sure to stare directly at me. "I would never want you too."

"Why?" I blurt as I stare back at him, stumped. I'm not ashamed of Zangetsu at all, and don't care if people stare at my zanpakuto's gigantic butcher knife shikai form with a mixture of amused incredulity and disbelief. Personally, I think Zangetsu's shikai is epic. But, it is sorta annoying to carry such a big blade across my back all the times. Sometimes, if I could just get him to the smaller form we now have, it would make my life easier...

He gives me that look- the one that means I've royally screwed up again. But then he shakes his head, a slight smile on his lips, and I secretly give a sigh of relief. "With all you've already accomplished, I often forget how young you are." I wonder at this for a second. If he's part of my soul, shouldn't he be the same age as me? But I am unable to comment before he returns his gaze to me with an air of calm and patience. "Do you trust me Ichigo?"

"Of course!" I reply earnestly, without hesitation.

He gives a small nod of approval at my immediate answer. "Then remember my words- release my power as soon as you are able, and never seal me again."

I listen intently and give an understanding nod. I still want to know more, but if I've learned anything about Ossan from our interactions it's that he'll reveal things at his own pace, when he thinks I'm ready or I desperately need it, and never before.

But then I purse my lips, realizing something. "Wait- if you're in your sealed form, then don't I need your shikai release phrase?" I point out, looking at him expectantly.

His lips twitch slightly. "You'll know it when the time comes," he responds flatly in his usual, cryptic manner.

I try not to grimace or get annoyed. "Right..." I take in a sharp breath before speaking up again, stepping forward, "Zangetsu, you-"

Booming thunder seems to shake the very foundation I stand on. I jerk to a stop, my eyes darting around wildly for a moment. I don't see any storm clouds, and the sound... I carefully pad over to the edge of the skyscraper, Zangetsu following my every move as I peek over the edge. Far, far below I can see a mass of dark grey, billowing storm clouds mixed into a blanket of heavy fog. I
can't see anything inside or past the fog, including more skyscrapers. In fact, I get a sense of forbidding just by looking at it, and the added effect of a dark storm contained to that area and large black chains (just visible if I squint) hanging off the two lowest buildings before disappearing into the storm clouds, does not help matters either. "What's down there?" I find myself muttering out loud the question.

"..."

"..."

"I think you know." I stiffen.

Although it's slight, I can just see the chains shake and tremble, as if under a great strain from being pulled or yanked. Even though I'm sure I'm much too far away, somehow, someway, I swear I can hear them rattling.

In the distance, far below, thunder roars.

-DIVIDER-

Madarame Ikkaku's POV...

I recount for the third time this morning the story of my fight with the mysterious, orange-haired shinigami and the crazy, blood-sacrificing cultists—the encounter that got me my third-seat position. Now heavily modified by the rumor mill, the story has taken a life of its own, and the story of my luck and skill will definitely be all the talk of the patrons of this and nearby sake houses for several more years, and especially these next few days. Because of the most recent tragedies and surges of hollows, many shinigami have been coming earlier and earlier to drink their stress and sorrows away. I myself'm not here for the sake of sake—more so to enjoy my 'newfound fame and good fortune' as Yumi puts it. That and the women. Once when word gets out more, I'm sure there'll be women.

Everything is going pretty damn great for me and Yumi, all things considered. Neither of us have very many friends or people we actually give a shit about, so fortunately we're not one of the many poor saps who lost someone these last few days or years. Instead battles are a plenty; maybe not good, exciting battles that test the limits of our prowess, but there's always some sorry beast whose blood I can wet Hōzukimaru with. Enough hollow encounters and we got ourselves a decent workout. Now with our new, or quickly approaching, promotions and all the sake we can drink, all we need is some women... I crane my head around, trying to catch the eye of any females in the vicinity. Instead I find Rangiku and my mood is somewhat soured. Almost nothing good ever happens with that she-devil around, no matter how good looking she is. Not only is she something fierce in a fight (usually a good thing, usually), the crazy succubus also has the, uh, friendship of 'lots of influential people and is a member of several, powerful groups, the floral arrangement club or whatever being one of them... Lead by the fourth division captain, it's a surprisingly vicious lot.

I'm about to leave the sake house and get as far away from her as I can get, when I hear her mention something. "Yep! As cute *hiccup* as a button! Even cuter than the orange-haired Shiba kid. *hiccup*" This gets more attention than she probably bargained for.

"You've seen him too? Recently?" One person at her table asks eagerly.

"Mhm, last evening. Same place I found *hiccup* the other one. Aizen's City on a Hill. Interesting place. Not any other city in the Soul Society like it. Didja know that the city is not actually on a hill? It's all flat land, with one side of it practically *hiccup* desert and the other surrounded by
forest. I didn't know myself until I actually went there!" The she-devil breaks out into diabolical, innocent-sounding giggles.

Soon more than half of the sake house's patrons (most of whom are members of the eleventh) are expressing varying degrees of eagerness to go hunt down this shinigami that fought with and against me only a couple days back, myself included. "Heh, I wouldn't mind a rematch," I mention, lazily stretching and getting onto my feet. This only intensifies the din of excitement here.

Rangiku for her part is crossing her eyes with a look of extreme concentration. "No, wait. That's not right…" she protests in a mutter before raising her voice. "You can't do that! He's just a boy- you leave him be." I lean back a bit as the renowned she-devil walks toward me, shaking a finger in my face, before hiccuping and promptly falling over in an alcohol-induced daze.

All is momentarily silent. "……"

I raise my sake cup. "That settles that then." I give a wide grin. "To the City on a Hill, eh, boys?" A loud chorus of agreements.
Kurosaki Ichigo's POV...

I step away from the edge, as if repulsed by the powerful sound that fades into a deep rumble. My expression sours, as does my general mood. My initial joy from seeing Zangetsu again leaves me, instead replaced by a sense of dread and unease.

"You're afraid," Ossan announces in a monotone voice.

I look at him out of the corner of one eye…

"Why?"

"I'm not afraid," I deny.

"As it should be," he agrees. Or does he? He may be suggesting.

To this I say nothing and I draw away from the edge slowly. *I'm NOT afraid. I have no reason to be. I faced my fear- literally, and came out the victor. He can't hurt me now…*

*Just like he can't help me.*

I shake my head free of the thought. No, I'm not afraid, but still, there's a gnawing sense of… *something* at the edge of my psyche that sets my nerves on edge, and makes my stomach churn. I suppose that I'll always have that distant feeling, whatever it is, from now on if it doesn't fade with time.

"Zangetsu…" I turn further away from the edge and walk towards the solemn figure, tall on his unwavering poll. He doesn't react to my approach, just regarding me silently with what seems to be curiosity. It's always been hard to read him, if not near impossible. "I don't know if you've realized this, but something is wrong out there. Very wrong. We're not…*where we are supposed to be. Or even when, I think.*" I look at him uneasily from underneath my bright orange bangs.

"I've seen flashes…" the rumbling voice trails off. He proceeds to explain how he is in his sealed form, and without me having proper training and experience in Jinzen (whatever that exactly is), he has been "regrettably, almost completely unable to keep tabs on your progress". Then, "Please, tell me what you know." I do. From the very beginning of this mess with the car accident (of all the things to do me in!), all the way to what that bastard Ichimaru has done to me… and the Nakashimas' less than willing betrayal. That still stung, even though I understand they didn't really have a choice… Not with the likes of Ichimaru.

Speaking of Ichimaru… "We're not dead, I'm guessing?" I inquire, half expecting the skyscraper we stand on to crumble to pieces any moment and the gravity of the world to suddenly go bipolar. Suffice to say, I'm keeping light on my feet.

"In what way?" He asks somberly.

I hesitate. *Just great… "Both,"* I say out loud, expecting the worse.

"Your spirit is fine. The drug administered, true to his word it seems, has only put you into a deep state of unconsciousness."
"And the other way?" I ask, even more hesitant. There is a lengthy pause, as if Ossan is trying to decide the best way to say something.

"Your human body is dead, of that much I am certain," he reveals reluctantly.

I wince, anxiety rising. I'd expected this for awhile now, but hearing it confirmed is nearly a different thing altogether. "Does that mean I'm only a Vizard now?" I manage to inquire. It's a weird thought. The Vizards would have a field day, even if they would sorta feel bad for me at first. I really would be one of them, then...

He shakes his head, much to my relief. I really appreciate what the Vizards have done for me and would defend each and every one of them (even the violent, foul mouthed midget), but I don't fancy the idea of living in abandoned warehouses for the rest of my life. I guess, when I get back, I could ask Urahara for gigai to stay with the Living… But I dread to think of what the man will ask for in return...

"No; against all odds, your spirit still exhibits signs of humanity." I swear I can hear distinct relief in his voice, something I mirror, although more openly.

I visibly perk up, hope rising in me. "What exactly does this mean? And how so?"

He pauses. "It is… difficult to explain. For now, you must just accept what I've told you."

I grimace, but nod slowly. This isn't the time to be theorizing about these things. "Alright… At least there's hope." Zangetsu says nothing. I grimace even further, but try to turn my mind to other matters. "So what do you think happened to us? After we… died."

Zangetsu responds carefully. "We seemed to fall into the Cycle of life and death, like a plus soul would after a shinigami sends them away. However, something interrupted the flow and… pushed us off course. Something powerful. Beyond that, I do not know." He seems at loathe to admit it.

"Powerful enough to fling us into the past?" I ask.

"Apparently so, if that is indeed what has happened," is his grave reply.

"I wonder what the hell he's doing out there…" I ponder out loud, my chest tightening at the thought. What if I don't even get a chance to wake up? What if the sicko and his boss takes me apart piece by piece in that nearby lab Okubo Meiji told me about? There must be something interesting about me, if Mayuri offered to do it often enough… I decide that I'd rather not be so interesting. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Nothing beyond what is already being done."

I slump, sitting down hard on my part of the sideways skyscraper. My hands form tight fists, frustration at my helplessness mounting. I've never been the best at planning ahead; I usually leave that up to Ishida- and if I have to, Urahara. I'm not stupid by any means, but at the same time I'm not a genius like them. With Ichimaru, although I hate to admit it, I'm in way over my head... That guy… I just… "I don't get that guy." I grumble in reluctant admittance, tracing a finger on the cool glass below. "After what I've seen him do for Aizen, why would he spare the Nakashimas? I know what that weird contraption does- I've seen Rukia use it often enough; it's suppose to replace short term memories." Zangetsu gives a grunt of agreement. It's almost weird- I don't think I've ever had this long of a conversation with my zanpakuto, not that I'm complaining. I go on. "Is he that
I'm confident that whatever exactly that thing does will stick?"

"Perhaps."

"I mean… I'm not complaining- better than the alternative, but I didn't expect Ichimaru to be merciful in any way. Why leave something up to chance if there's an easy way to solve it?" The words are bitter in my mouth, but I think it's an important question.

Ossan seems to agree, as he answers readily enough. "Ichimaru Gin is a complex being who we know very little about."

I scowl deeply. "Complex? What is there to know about his character? From what Meiji-" my voice wavers for a moment, remembering the fate of the man I couldn't save, but I press on with my point. "...told me, the guy was raised by Aizen. Can you imagine being raised by that psychopath?" I almost feel sorry for Ichimaru. "No wonder fox-face is so screwed up..." I mumble. I think of those squinting eyes and leering grin. It fits.

Ossan, disagreeing, shakes his head reproachfully at me. "Ichimaru Gin is a master of a deceit, and you are only seeing what he wants you to see. I suspect him not be nearly as loyal to Aizen Sosuke as he would like everyone to believe."

I stare at him in unabashed, incredulous wonder. "What makes you say that?" I pipe up without hesitation.

"Do you remember fighting him?"

"Of course!" I frown. "Although, it was less of a fight and more of a… I dunno. More like he was toying with me? But..." I chew on my bottom lip, and Zangetsu motions me to go on with a slight inclination of his head. "...he didn't take any sadistic pleasure out of it. In fact, it was like he was barely paying any attention…. His mind was somewhere else completely, going over…"

"Plans behind plans," he finishes my sentence. "Whatever Ichimaru Gin may be- a mindless, blindly loyal follower he is not. He has his motives and reasons for following Aizen so closely."

"Like what? He was brainwashed by Aizen as a kid! Isn't that reason enough?" I exclaim loudly, quickly straightening my posture.

"Doubtful," Zangetsu replies in his own even voice, standing by his convictions. I shake my head some. This shit is way too over complicated. The way I look at it though seems common sense and pretty straightforward to me...

Ossan makes a small 'hm' sound at my obvious skepticism. "Do not close yourself off from me, Ichigo. Listen to what I have to say. This is your life at stake, and any shred of information on the enemy is invaluable in such cases."

I let out my breath in one quick, heavy sigh and reach up to massage my forehead with one hand. "Alright..." I agree wearily. "What…" I wave my other hand in the air slightly, as if fishing for the right words. "reasons could Ichimaru have for following Aizen, if he's above brainwashing?" An idea comes to me. "Do you think he actually believes some of what Aizen is spouting about becoming God 'n all, but actually plans on backstabbing him and taking his place?"


Frustrated, I throw my hands up in the air. "What, then?! What else could possibly drive someone so intelligent to follow a mass-murdering madman on his quest to become God?!"
"There is much about Ichimaru Gin that we have yet to learn," Ossan simply repeats with that unshakable calm of his. It's starting to piss me off, honestly.

"Well, this has been a lot of help," I snap back snarkily, then rear back at the harshness of my own voice. Zangetsu doesn't seem surprised. "Er... I'm sorry, Zangetsu," I apologize a tad shakily. "That was... I think the stress actually is getting to me, though that's a crappy excuse really." He must be under the same strain, if not more so since in the end he can only offer his advice and strength to my efforts of getting us out of tough situations. *I dunno how he can stay sane with this intense helplessness he must always be feeling...*

Thunder booms from far below, and the irony of my thought suddenly hits me. I shift uneasily in my spot.

"It is expected. Think nothing of it," he replies, tone not even altering in the slightest as he easily forgives and brushes off the apology. I find myself extremely relieved and grateful. The last thing I want to do is upset the one entity I can rely on in all this mess. I give him an appreciative smile.

"What should I do then?" I ask him, smile dipping. For once, I find myself actually feeling like a lost child so many people claim me to be, and at the same time, so often forget.

Ossan regards me solemnly. "Run." The one worded answer chills me to the bone- or whatever makes up one's "body" in an Inner World. "It's too dangerous to linger without knowing his true motives, and equally as dangerous to try and fight him. As soon as you get the chance: Run. And if you do not get a chance..." I feel the weight of his gaze. "Make yourself one."

-DIVIDER-

*Hitsugaya Toshiro's POV...*

"I'm sorry- Hitsugaya-kun, was it?" I nod mutely, looking up at the beautiful young lady I saw yesterday with the person I am currently trying to find. "I'm sorry Hitsugaya-kun, but Ichigo-san left yesterday evening soon after he came back inside from talking with you."

"Oh," I say offhandedly, masking my disappointment. That mercenary, Ichigo-san, is the only other person I can think of to talk too. I told Granny everything about my surprise midnight meeting with the shinigami Matsumoto Rangiku of course. She told me to follow my heart, to pave myself a destiny on my own merits, free of the prejudice of others. All things considered, the shinigami academy seems like a good place for that with the way Momo has described it. She said that nobles are given some special treatment, but that is to be expected. All in all however, you are judged only on your skill and abilities. Granny also pointed out I would also be able to see Momo again...

But do I really want to leave Granny? Is there a way for me to still make a living here while simultaneously taking care of Granny? If I don't, who will? Granny is well respected by the people of the city, and they will help her if she asks, but she doesn't like to be a "burden" as she puts it... So if not me, who will watch over her?

Then there is the deciding factor. If I can't find a way to control this, this power, I'll kill the person I'm trying to care for... and it's getting worse. When I woke up last night, the floor and blankets were covered in a thin layer of frost. It seems then like I have no choice. I either risk hurting someone I care about, or go with the shinigami, who said she would be back to check on me in a few days.

Still, I don't want to jump into this without at least trying to get a second opinion, and this Ichigo's opinion is as good as any other I guess. He wasn't nearly as bad as I thought he would be after our
initial meeting in the market place, and I have a strange feeling that he'd understand my predicament, and even try to help...

"Do you know where he went?" I ask, hoping he is just trying to find another client in the city, but the brunette only shakes her head regretfully.

"He didn't say." A pause. "Would you like to come in? I know my uncle and I won't be able to help you the same way you would probably like Ichigo-san to, but we can offer you some tea and some nice company..."

I smile at her appreciatively and give small, grateful bow. "Thank you; that's kind to offer, but perhaps another time?" I'm too nervous to sit down and talk with complete strangers with what's on my mind. If I do, I'll surely mess up in someway. Maybe though, if by some miracle I can stay, I'll take them up on the rare offer later.

She nods curtly. "Of course. My name is Nakashima Hatsu, by the way. Just stop by whenever you feel up to it."

I thank her and leave the little lodge, dragging my feet just a bit as I make my way back to the main street. So that's that then... I think darkly. After everything Granny has done for me, I'm just going to up and leave... and if I were to stay, I'll probably end up killing her. Figures. This is what happens to people who adopt freaks.

"Excuse me," I jolt to a stop, looking up to see- what... who...

"Ichigo-san?" I say out-loud, gawking.

Ichigo blinks down at me, arching an eyebrow. "Sorry?"

...He moves fast... I think in surprise, spying the beautiful young woman standing a respectful distance away, though unlike Hatsu this one is short in stature, with short, raven black hair instead of long, flowing brown. And did he dye his ha- No, wait, this guy looks older, doesn't he? And he's not even scowling, not even a little bit. I shut my mouth quickly. "Um... Can I help you?" I inquire quietly in confusion, curiosity piqued. Their clothes appear average for someone moving here and they are carrying traveling bags... They seem normal enough. Meanwhile the pair are sharing what I can't help but feel to be a knowing look. Not-Ichigo looks back down at me and offers an overly friendly, cheeky smile that instantly puts me on edge. Something's not right here...

"Yeah, actually... Mind repeating that name you said earlier please?"

-DIVIDER-

Ossan's POV...

"Well, Zangetsu, what do you want?" Comes the familiar dual toned voice as I make my way through fog and rolling storm clouds- the sound is mocking, and laced with repressed anger. I'd left Ichigo to rest and gather his strength awhile back, and while he did so I decided it is time to learn what we all need if we are to have any hope of surviving.

"You know what I want. I must know." I state firmly as he comes into view. Before me, stringed up like some type animal for the slaughter, is the pale, amber eyed carbon copy of my wielder. Black chains radiating barely tolerable heat are clamped around his legs, wrists, waist and shoulders, making red imprints on his otherwise pale white and deathly cold skin.
"Why should I tell you anything?" He taunts, defeated yet still spirited.

"Without it, he will die." I note simply.

"Again, why should I tell you? Let 'im rot." He dismisses offhandedly.

"It is your life at stake as well." I point out, countenance warning cautiousness.

"If you haven't noticed yet, Zangetsu, I don't have much of a life to stake either way," he sarcastically replies, sneering at me.

"...I've never taken you for a quitter before." Is my deadpan response.

"Are you complaining?" The being seems amused, neither agreeing with nor denying the unsaid claim.

"Hollows are driven by hunger. Shinigami and humans- by many things."

"You want to know what's been driving me, hm? I thought that would be obvious."

I say nothing.

"I want my freedom."

"I cannot give you that."

"I know. I just want another fair shot at it. Next time he cries out like a pathetic bitch for my help- tch, he even begged for it- loosen these chains."

My jaw clenches. "No."

He snorts, taking a brief moment to gather his thoughts before making his case. "I get why you hate me so much- it's natural, and believe me, the feeling is mutual. But think for a moment. I'm guaranteeing you something for something I'll only get a chance at... And so what if I win this time? It's not as if I'm like him. I'll crush him- and you; Sure. Grind you both to dust so he'll know his place. But. I won't chain or lock either of you away. He's more than welcome to try to retake the crown if he's so inclined. Heh! When he's not being a complete wimp, he can put up one hell of a fight! I wouldn't even mind coming down here to entertain him every once and awhile... It's more than he's ever done me... And, with me as King, at least you won't have anything to fear but me... Not even death."

"You're not invincible. Ichigo has proven that."

"Maybe not here; I underestimated him. Expected him to just stand there and take it like he'd been doing like an idiot for practically the whole fight, if it can be called a fight up until that point. A mistake I'll never make again... Besides," he leans forward as far as his bonds will allow, leering at me and grinning cheekily. "You know that things are much different out there, and you have to admit... When it comes to survival, I'm our best bet."

"...My answer has not changed."

He pulls back, chains rattling and expression souring. "...Then good luck keeping him alive on your own." I study him closely, but for all intents and purposes, he seems intent on (if not at all
pleased with) his suicidal ways. Is he truly willing to just say nothing and let us all die if he doesn't get his way?... If there is one thing this creature is not, it's a liar. Then again, there is a first time for everything...

"Are you asking for my help?" I change tactics, challenging his already wounded pride.

"No; you are asking for mine," he shoots back flatly, not taking the bait.

"..." I'm in a difficult position. Without this, what hope does Ichigo have? With this, I must ask the same question. Should I lie? Would he be able to tell? He's more intelligent than someone of his kind should have the right to be, and if I break my promise, will the temper tantrum he'll wreck be worse than what he'll do if I indulge him? Probably not, I'm more than enough to satisfy Ichigo's needs, but it would be… troublesome none the less. So many possibilities, yet time is running short, and he knows it.

"So~ What will it be?"

-DIVIDER-

-Kurosaki Ichigo's POV…

Consciousness fades in and out. I try to cling to it, but my eyes are heavy and body so sluggish… "Wakey, wakey~" A couple light slaps on one cheek finally jolts me to total awareness. I recoil at the first sight that greets me- that bastard's grinning fox-face. The grin dips slightly. He sits across from me on a backwards metal chair without armrests, his arms slung lazily over what usually would be the backrest and his legs rest on either side of the chair, like one would sit to ride a horse. "Aww, don' gimme that expression. I haven't even hurt a hair on your head, now have I?" He reaches out a hand to ruffle my hair and I pull back sharply, accidently leaving a small strand of hair behind. He glances at it unconcernedly. "Nevermind…" He lets it flutters to the ground as he trains his squinted gaze on me. I look around warily, taking in my situation. Sure enough to my suspicions I had in my Inner World, I am indeed in some form of a lab. The entire interior is white, painfully so, like whoever made this place has an obsession with the color. Ichimaru fits in here fine, besides his definitely fukutaicho, black uniform. I'm strapped to hefty metal chair. The restraints, while also metal in appearance, don't worry me. It the strange, blinking, electronic looking bracelet strapped to my left arm that has me worried. "Do ya know why you're here, Ichigo-chan?"

"That's not my name," is my immediate response. One-chan? What type of nickname is that…?

"Hm? It's not?" He goes on without waiting for a reply. "What about Strawberry-chan, then?" Whatever expression I make at this seems to amuse him. He chuckles under his breath. "I guess not. What about Kurosaki Ichigo?"

I'm about to say yes and insist that he calls me that from now on when it occurs to me… This is not the Ichimaru I've already meet. He shouldn't know me. So how does he? "No…" But I had hesitated too long before answering. I'm not even sure why I'm lying, considering that I technically haven't even been born yet if Toshiro's still a kid, and that name shouldn't connect me to anyone… But agreeing to it still doesn't seem like a good idea, just the same.

"It's not polite to lie, Ich-chan." He teases lightly.

I say nothing, figuring the less I say around him, the better. He's obviously fishing for information…At least for now. Fear starts to creep up on me and I try to subtly glance around for anything that even remotely looks like surgical and or torture devices. Fortunately, I find nothing.
The medium sized room with a strangely high ceiling I'm in is pristinely clean, counters void of anything. There is a medical cot a few feet away, but it's empty and also clean, free of any blood or other signs that would lead me to thoughts of sinister motives… If there is anything worthwhile in this room, it must be in one of the tall cabinets that hang above counters along the edges of the room. Something also of note, I don't see a door… The thought unnerves me, especially considering how Meiji told me the closest lab is supposed to be underground.

"Am I tha' boring?" Ichimaru asks drily, my wanderings not going without notice. He seems a tad annoyed.

I return my complete attention to him and answer bluntly. "You're as creepy as hell. What are you doing kidnapping some guy and locking him away in a lab? That should answer both of your comments." Both of his eyebrows rise, and I get the distinct satisfaction of actually managing to surprise the fox-faced bastard.

"A lab? Like for science experiments? Oh no, Ichi-chan. This is just a medical facility…"

"Bullshit."

"What makes you say that?"

"Where's the doors?" I ask dryly.

He grins at me.

"..."

"Do you know who I am, Ichi-chan…?" he asks in lazy, easy-going manner that would be more suited for his friends…. if he has any.

"You are the fukutaicho of the fifth division…" I say, nodding toward his badge. "And stop calling me that…" But my order is an empty one. For now, I have no way to back it up. Where's Zangetsu…? Damn it…

"That's right. Do you know my name?"

I hesitate, but remembering how I spat his name out in a fit of rage back at the Nakashima's lodging, I figure there's no harm in repeating. "Ichimaru…. Gin…"

"Mmmm…." He leans forward slowly, so much so that his chair tips forward and he has to keep his feet from falling down. This man has no sense of personal space…. I think. Or maybe he just does it to put people off balance…

"Have we meet before, Ichi-chan?"

I blink owlishly at him, the random, serious question throwing me in for a loop. "Uh, what….?"

"Have. We. Meet. Before?" he enunciates again slowly, as if trying to talk to someone particularly young or dimwitted. I scowl.

"Have we?" I echo, for lack of anything better to say. Could he actually remember something of me? Was I wrong? Did I not really travel back in time? No, he admitted to be lieutenant of the fifth division….

He taps one finger against the backrest of his chair. "That's not an answer…."
"I don't have one for you," I reply honestly enough. He scrutinizes me closely and I stiffen, feeling like a deer caught in the headlights… I scowl even further, countenance screaming back off! Surprisingly enough, he complies. He pulls back, allowing his chair to fall back to all fours again.

*I'm almost afraid to ask, but... "What do you want from me?"

He spreads out his hands in a pseudo-innocent manner. "Nothing."

I sweatdrop. "Don't kid around. Shinigami don't kidnap people for the hell of it, so what do you want?"

"What'd I just say? I want nothing at all from you… And you would know so much about the Shinigami, hm~?"

I balk some. "The hell's that supposed to mean?" I ask, trying to keep him distracted while behind my back I work on finding a way to free myself from my bonds and that weird bracelet hooked to my left upper arm... The metal-or whatever it is, is unyielding, but if I manage to scuff my wrists up enough to bleed, I may just be able to slip free…

-DIVIDER-

Ichimaru Gin's POV…

"That's my line really…. but I'm tryin' to be nice with all of this, so why not return the favor with a bit of respect?" My smile tightens a bit, not in rage but in clear warning. Really, it wasn't my original intention to interrogate the kid, I was gonna just get my orders over and done with, but… Something doesn't sit right with me about the boy. When he had said my name before succumbing to the poison, it was as if he knew me personally, and not once did I hear my former third seat physically describe either Aizen or I to Kurosaki. For all intents and purposes, from what I could hear, it seemed like Ichigo knew of us already... Aizen may be content to wait for word from his contacts concerning the boy while dealing with Kurosaki as soon as possible, but I don't have any contacts in the world of the living… and I don't trust Aizen- never will, leaving me to get what information I can from Kurosaki himself, now and quickly, before I'm missed.

"I know enough to realize that they're supposed to be the defenders of the afterlife," I hear Kurosaki say. "And not some- some crazed pedophile." His face goes blank as soon as he says it. Apparently he let his anger get the best of him.

My full attention snaps away from my thoughts at this, and to the kid in front of me. *Did he seriously just say what I think he did?* My countenance becomes more strained, though I still hold that light tone. "Sorry, what? I didn't hear that last part…"

He glares at me, seeming to figure if he got away with it once... "I said some crazed-" There is a brief gust of wind in this windowless, closed off room. The boy stiffens, as if frozen on the spot. A small droplet of blood runs down his cheek from the slightest of cuts. I doubt he even saw me move.

"Oh- I'm 'lots of things. A leader, a subordinate, an ally, a friend, a prodigy, mischief-maker, people-watcher… killer. But two things I'm not are," I hold up one finger. "Crazed and," I hold up a second finger, "pedophile… The second is disgusting, and the first is just plain not true~" I lean forward somewhat, demeanor relaxed yet menacing. "Understand?" He nods mutely, but beyond that appears defiant. How did I describe him to Aizen? Bullheaded. Yes, that about sums it up, though hopefully my little, ehm, demonstration knocked some sense into him. If at all possible, I want this meeting to go swiftly and painlessly. I say as much. "Now look, I know we both want this
meetin’ of ours to go on as short and painless as possible…” I pause for a moment, as if suddenly becoming thoughtful, and I tilt my head to one side. "Well, you probably want it more, now that I think of it. So in that case, let's just lay everything out in the open and get this little chat over with, hm?"

He doesn't respond. Seems like he's back to the silent treatment, though that didn't last long the first time and I doubt it will this time around too. "I know your name is Kurosaki Ichigo. I know you've very recently, ah, departed from the human world and your life there. I know therefore that you're just a kid," he doesn't seem to keen to being called a child, but I pay it no mind. "-though I don't know your exact age… So why don't we start there, with something easy?" I don't wait for a reply. "How old are you, Ichi-chan?"

His expression is blank, lips pursed and refusing to say a word.

I hum for a moment in disappointment. "Would it help if I introduce myself first?" Nothing. "Hi, I'm Ichimaru Gin, fukutaicho of the Fifth Division! I'm one hundred and eleven years old," I say helpfully in an indulging manner. His expression doesn't change, not even the slightest. "Does that surprise you?" I inquire. He shrugs nonchalantly. "...You're a scary kid, you know that, Ichi-chan?"

At this, he quirks an eyebrow. "I'm scary? I'm not the one who is drugging and kidnaping people for no apparent reason." To his credit, he keeps his head, speaking the words in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes, you. Normally a newly arrived plus soul would shocked by that information, and normally, they wouldn't show up as a shinigami. Any reason why it's different for ya?" The kid shrugs his shoulders, looking me straight in the eyes. "C'mon, you must h've some idea..." He shakes his head. "See? This is what happens when we don't start with the easy questions. Back to square one. How old are you? And don't-" I stop him halfway into the act. "-even try to shrug your shoulders. I know you at least know that much..." My hand drops to hang at my side, then idly tap Shinzo's hilt. The act does not go unnoticed. He shifts ever so slightly. Nervous. Good.

"Fifteen…" His voice so quiet, I can barely hear it.

I beam at him. "Good ta know! Fifteen, whew! I remember when I was that young!" Drunken mother. Absent father. Dirty. Ragged. Starving. Your average Outer Rukongai sob story. "I had so much fun!"

"Good to know…" He can't help but saying. "I'm a bit envious," he reveals, hinting oh-so-subtly at his current circumstances.

"Sarcasm! Really though, don't be," I tell him, tone sickeningly sweet. "Movin' on~ Where are you from?"

"Does it really matter? I'm here now."

"Sure it does~"

"Why?" he challenges, and I oblige.

"'Cause it seems that from wherever you lived in the world of the livin', you found out 'bout a certain death god named Aizen. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?" I keep rapt attention, alert for the tiniest tell in his expression or manner.

"...who?"
"Aizen. You really shouldn't act stupid, Ichi-chan." You don't need to act out something you already are, I am tempted to say, but that's not really fair! With a little kid, how much can you really expect?

"I said stop calling me that."

"Oh? Then what should I call you?"

"Kurosaki Ichigo." At least that's something; we're making progress.

"Good to hear you finally claiming y'r own name, Ichigo-kun." He rolls his eyes at the added suffix and I smirk. "But that still won't help you get out of answering my other questions."

-DIVIDER-

Kurosaki Ichigo's POV…

Managing to even make a cut with my metal-esque bonds turns out a lot harder than expected. I didn't take into account my durability in spirit form when I came up with the idea. Frustrated, I nearly decide just to try and skyrocket my reiatsu and rip the bonds that way. It feels like my spiritual being is being…. Stifled, suppressed, but I'm almost sure I can overcome it. From what I've been told, in hollow form I was even able to rip out of some pretty high kido… Though whether or not it'll work now remains to be seen, especially with my zanpakuto sealed and missing (stolen, the thought makes me seethe)… Then there is Ichimaru. I doubt he'll just stay still as it happens. Him, unlike the Vizards, probably are not to keen in keeping me alive if I get that out of hand.

Speaking of Ichimaru, I'm currently doing my darndest to keep up with his mind games. One moment he'll be chatting with me about the most inane things, and the next he'll ask a serious, intuitive question that leaves me speechless. So far I've been able to get off with half-assed answers and sometimes with just silence, but I can tell he's getting annoyed. If not with my response, then with my lack of concern to his slowly rising reiatsu. Yeah, I notice it, which can't be good. Apparently it took all of the vizards combined to make me notice where they're at… Then again, Ichimaru is not half way across town and I could just be hyper aware of what's going on, considering the circumstances…

I just... wish I could speak with Zangetsu. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up, especially with everytime I give a less than stellar answer, Ichimaru raises his spiritual pressure by several degrees. His newest intimidation tactic since the cut to my cheek…. Speaking of that… I barely saw him move, and forget about having time to react. Even if I could, I wonder what I would do? The chair I'm sitting on is stuck to the floor, how I'm not sure. It's not like it's nailed down to the floor or anything… Even the room is giving me trouble now! No entries or exit ways, unexplainably stuck chairs… How am I gonna to get out of this mess if I can't even find an exit? If I can't find Zangetsu? One thing at a time, Ichigo… I tell myself firmly and twist my wrists faster. Finally, I feel my efforts pay off and it's all I can do to keep a straight face as I use the newly running liquid to try to slip my hands out. Blood runs down my wrists and hands, dripping to the floor. I try to keep the conversation going with Ichimaru so he doesn't hear the quiet, rhythmic sound.

It works, and for several minutes I manage to slip out centimeter by centimeter… but I don't take into account one thing…

Ichimaru cuts himself off mid sentence, straightening from his slouching position to… sniff the air? "Hum? … blood?" I barely hear him mutter and my breath catches as his squinted gaze swings
toward me.

*Shit.*

His smile slowly begins to grow and tighten.

*Shitshitshitshitshit…. Now or never.* I come to the conclusion. My reiatsu, after a brief delay, skyrockets in a blaze of blinding, bright blue.
At the sudden rush of spiritual pressure I jump back, the chair I was previously sitting on flying off to one side and hitting the wall with a loud bang. I continue to squint through the glare of bright blue, ignoring as now the medical cot slides violently to the far side of the room with a resounding crash. I hear another sound, clinking, that's much softer. I tilt my head to one side, at ease even while being reduced to rely almost solely on hearing, with my sight and reiatsu senses temporarily overwhelmed as they are. It's not as bad as one might think, considering how I'm not in any rush to get to him, just as how he's not in any rush to get to me… And without me to open up, or even find the door for him? Good luck with that, Ichigo-kun... After several seconds of him scrambling aimlessly and then trying to forcibly bash his way out, I let out a lengthy, exaggerated sigh. "Ichigo-kun, why don'tcha just settle-" A splattering of a few droplets of blood not my own landing on my cheek and a slight whooshing sound is all the warning I have before my temporary ward does something stupid, but not totally unreasonable nor unexpected. He attacks me head on in flurry of surprisingly well-trained hakuda. As he relentlessly continues his assault, I notice his wrists and hands. They look terrible—blood-coated and ruthlessly rubbed raw, layers of skin forcibly peeled off. He really held nothing back when freeing himself.

In the midst of our back and forth blows, there is a kick and two swift punches on his part—simple, but well-executed. I block the last punch, feinting one of my own while delivering a swift, brutal roundhouse kick to his side. He winces in pain, jumping back to avoid my next kick. He shifts from a front stance to a back stance as he anticipates my next move.

I don't follow. Instead, smiling cheerfully, I reach towards the sheathed blade at my side. He panics, weaponless as he is, fear striking his expression as he rushes forward—desperate to stop me from releasing shikai, perhaps? "Just kiddin'~" From my other hand a golden Horin appears. It is too late for him to avoid, Ichigo-kun having already committed himself to the charge. The bakudo wraps quickly around Ichigo's left ankle, yanking him off his feet. "Bakudo #9: Horin," I announce to solidify the kido. A bit tricky, those Kōjutsu Eishō kido, with which the words are said after the fact, though this time my performance is flawless. My ward, not wasting anytime, reaches down to tug at the glowing spiritually entwined rope defiantly as I use it to drag him across cold tiled floor.

There is a small, hardly noticeable hitch in my breath. Power abruptly courses through the kido, power not my own. It matches and then quickly overwhelms the level of reiryoku I am using to fuel the technique, shattering my control over the low level bakudo and allowing it to dissipate into common reishi. Grin dimming ever so slightly, I allow him to struggle dizzily to his feet with cut wrists still freely dripping crimson red.

This leads me to look at the reiatsu suppressor in the form of an electronic appearing bracelet around one of his arms. Although he managed to get out of the cuffs, this other object remains untouched. Its use as a reiatsu suppressor may have failed spectacularly, but its other use still remains to be activated. The true purpose of the 'bracelet' is to trigger the remnants of the poisonous drug in his bloodstream. Once injected (as it has been), it will linger and cannot be purged naturally or even detected unless one knows exactly what they're looking for… In all honesty, it's rather dangerous to activate so soon after he's suffered under it's effect, but I'd rather take this chance than test continued resilience of the Sekkiseki walls surrounding us. If the walls fail, shinigami would be on us like flies to honey, and that just won't do~…
"What are you doing?" Ichigo demands gruffly, watching with all the alarm of a cornered animal as I reach into the inner pocket of my uniform and draw out a palm sized activation remote. Deciding the best way to deal with an unknown is to destroy it, he darts forward when I don't respond. I press a button… Ichigo is in front of me, a fist just grazing the side of one of my cheeks as I dodge. The medical cot behind me shatters instead at the impact. My heart is thumping wildly as I grin practically from ear to ear. It's been a long time since I've felt so… challenged. For some reason completely unknown to me, even though both the 'bracelet' and the remote show signs of the poison that worked so well before once again at work, Ichigo-kun seems completely fine. Better even. He's focused, radiating energy and fighting for all it's worth.

A downward kick is easily sidestepped a moment later, cracking tile where I stood moments before. Without missing a beat, the kid turns around to try to sucker punch me. I raise my hands to block and redirect the force of blow, grinning cheerily all the while.

Kaname Tousen's POV…

I frown with deep seeded mistrust as the scene plays out on the screen before me, and to make matters worse I'm entirely in the dark to the exact details with no reiatsu sense to help me. Beside me is the Aizen-sama, patient and at ease as always. Sometimes I wish he would be a little less patient and at ease. Ichimaru Gin, although greatly skilled and intelligent no doubt, is a liability in the end… He follows direct orders without hesitation, but he still has a way of acting on his own that doesn't sit well with me. Aizen-sama calls it 'initiative' and 'creativity'. I call it taking risky action without consent of superiors. Sometimes I fear Aizen-sama, although aware of the risks of having Ichimaru Gin around, dots on his fukutaicho too much to do really anything about it. He did after all raise Ichimaru from childhood...

But then I recall that Aizen puts the future and justice above all and would never let anything or anyone disrupt his plans.

Including Ichimaru Gin. The man believes he sent the surveillance system into an undetectable loop of some sort, leaving him to commit whatever he wishes in the lab in secrecy. Aizen-sama is not fooled; he has been keeping track of Ichimaru's progress closely. "Isn't this reason enough for punishment?" I ask.

From my vivid reiatsu sense, I 'see' Aizen-sama give me a placating smile as he rests his cheek on one fisted hand, propped up on his chair's armrest. His response is gentle and wise. "Tousen-san, my fukutaicho is an independent minded young man that seeks the same goals we do. His loyalty is unquestionable, but he sometimes feels that he can do more. As long as he does not allow his initiative to lead to folly, I am content to let him do what he will."

I bow my head in submission to his judgement. "As you say…" I still don't understand, but Aizen-sama's judgement is beyond reproach.

All is silent before the live video that plays before us, until, "Tousen-san? I can tell you still have questions. You needn't restrain your curiosity."

I silently start, surprised once again by Aizen-sama's intuitiveness. "I am curious… If you trust him so readily, why do you keep watch over him now?"

"To make sure his initiative does not lead him to folly," he answers simply, and with care. "Eager as he is to serve, he is not immune to… misguided judgements after all." That I do not doubt for a moment.
I nod in understanding, thoughtful. *Trust yet confirm,* the age-old platitude sounds in my mind. The sound of battle once more reaches my ears, and I briefly mourn my lack of true vision. I have largely been able to overcome my disability and improve myself because of it, even, but there are some instances in which nothing can be substituted for true sight. Watching videos is one of them, and besides sound and Aizen-sama's occasional, helpful commentary- I am largely unaware of what is transpiring between the boy named Kurosaki Ichigo, and my colleague Ichimaru Gin…

"Have you noticed, Kaname?" I hesitate uncertainty. "Excuse me. I mean if you have noticed the discrepancy in my fukutaicho's actions?"

I shake my head slowly. "I do not know Ichimaru Gin as well as I should. Much of what he does puzzles me." I reply honestly. I am humble man, who only wishes to follow the path of justice and lest bloodshed, which goes hand in hand. Ichimaru Gin is a snake of man whose silver tongue repulses me, and mocking politeness garners my ire. We have never seen eye to eye, for both practical and abstract reasons.

"It is of no issue. What I've noticed is that his interrogation of the boy was ill done. Usually, he would not waste time coaxing or attempting to trick information out of the detainee. Can you tell what may be different about this situation?"

I purse my lips. "... Nothing but the detainee."

"Exactly," Aizen replies promptly, straightening from his previously leisure posture. "It seems my dear fukutaicho may have some sort of fondness for children, to the point he would not be willing to... use more painfully persuasive methods."

I tilt my head slightly. "Isn't he only following your order concerning harming the boy?" I inquire quietly.

"Not at all. I specifically said not to permanently harm when bringing him in. If Gin-kun feels he simply *must* question the boy, there are more forcible interrogation techniques that does not involve permanent harm, but can be equally if not more painful. Yet. He has neglected to use any of these. Usually, he would dive right into these methods after a brief inquiry. My fukutaicho has little patience for such things."

"But here, he spent several minutes on intimidation and speech alone." I note thoughtfully aloud, my respect for the supposed snake of a man slowly rising. *Maybe the path of Justice is not yet completely lost to him...* The wish to avoid unnecessary harm when there is another path is an admirable trait, after all...

A surprised scream sounds from the video feed.

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**Soifon's POV… Hours later.**

I rest for a brief moment on the roof of the city hall, careful to keep low to the roof and away from the edges least someone below see me. I frown deeply, scanning the distant city life around me. *Somewhere out there...* I think with deep-seated ire. *That boy is laughing while I flounder here.* All night and all morning have I been searching for even a *trace* of where he could have gone or could be hiding. No such luck. It's like the boy vanished without a trace, even though I can feel the remnants of his presence all over this city like a peculiarly strong, lingering and unpleasant odor. Then there is my fifth seat who has *still* not contacted me and seems to have disappeared himself. The man was good, both in spirit and ability. A real pity and mystery then, leading me to suspect foul play. Had the boy attacked and killed my operative, before covering it up and leaving in
secret? From reports, it appears as though he has trouble reigning in his power, but then again appearances are deceiving. Is there a third party involved? Could a hollow have gotten to both of them?

*That'd be an easy answer to deal with, wouldn't it?* comes an irritating buzzing sound from inside my mind. *Face it- you've been outwitted! Now it's just a matter of finding out by who. So stop pouting you stupid pessimist and put those workaholic tendencies to good use!*

*I'm not pouting, Suzumebachi; I'm analyzing, so cease with your annoying buzzing.*

*That's not annoying buzzing! I'll show you annoying buzzing. Buzzzzzzzzzz~ There, hear that?!

**Buzzzzzzzzzz-**

**Enough!**

**BUUUUUUZZZZZ-** *Can't hear you! BZZZZBBZZZZ!

I sweatdrop. *I can't believe this is my zanpakuto…. I think to myself, but of course, nothing can stay 'to myself' with a zanpakuto sharing one's mental facilities.**

**Hey! You should be nicer to me. I am your sword, shield and saving grace after all. I am your very soul!**

I snort. *When did you become so poetic?*

*Since now! Seriously, stop being so lame and do something!* My eye twitches in irritation, but nonetheless I take heed. Closing my eyes, I fall into a deep trance, trusting my zanpakuto to notify me of any danger nearby. Meanwhile I try to find any trace of hidden reiatsu. Like all the other times I've attempted it, it is extremely difficult. In a city created of reishi and covered by subject's earlier lingering reiatsu imprint, it's more or less finding a needle in a haystack. None the less I persist. I can sense the Shiba Head and his little pet almost immediately. They have been here for awhile, and I am content to leave them to their own devices as long as they do not interfere with my own search. I become agitated though at the feeling of many eleventh division members in the distant, and silently hope they'll pass by. Dealing with those fools is the last thing I want or need.

I continue my search, expecting to find nothing more, and am pleasantly startled when I am proven wrong. A thin thread. Unmistakably reiatsu (reishi doesn't move this way on its own), yet there's so little of it I can't make out who it belongs to. *Was it there before?* I'm unsure. I really seem to have found a needle in the haystack. Without wasting any time, I dart off, scrambling to locate the source, although I am forced pause several times to reorientate myself along the way. Finally, after one last shunpo my surroundings blur and come back into focus to reveal…

Absolutely nothing. Frustration mounts as I scour the area. Some distance away from the city, I find myself in any empty clearing. Nothing but dirt. I squint my eyes, reaching out with my senses. *No. That reiatsu is definitely here…* My gaze lowers to the ground. *Underneath me?* Beyond this discovery however, I can discern nothing more. Resisting the urge to shake my head in frustration, I order my temporary partner that has followed me here to continue the search in my absence. I turn away and begin to shunpo. *Wait! Where are we going?!

*To get back up. I respond in a less than pleased manner. If I'm to comb that city and the surrounding area properly with so little to go on, I need more men. I'm at loathe to admit it, but I refuse to let my personal pride get in the way of completing the mission.*

*So why not just use the Denring- Deneren- ugh. You know what I mean!*
I blow some of my hair away from my face as I run in the air. *Denreishinkis. If you had been paying attention earlier, you would have realized that they are offline. Interference.*

*Denreishinkis! That's it. But why not send the underling then?*

*Why do you think? I am faster.* I snap in response- the answer should have been obvious.

*But aren't you afraid of him disappearing too while you are away, all the way out here by his lonesome?*

*Someone must continue the search.*

... That's cold~ So cruel, Sui-feng.

I glower at nothing, though I wish it was a certain sassy, big mouthed zanpakuto of mine. ...*I never hear of any of the other shinigami having a chatterbox for a zanpakuto. Why do you feel the need to talk into every silence?*

'Cause I'm not like the other zanpakuto. Do you want to know why I'm not like the other zanpakuto? I say nothing, not willing to encourage her if she is not willing to give me at least a semi-serious answer. *Hey! Don't be rude! Answer me... Answer me!... Fine. You asked for this. Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz-

Oh, for the love of- Fine! Why are you not like the other zanpakuto?

*Because they're so LAME!*

I sigh, inwardly and outwardly.

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**Madarame Ikkaku's POV...**

"Alright! Where are you, Ichigo-teme!?" I yell out at the entrance to the *City on a Hill*, random pedestrians turning around in alarm at the sudden abundance of shinigami at their front door step, and not just any shinigami! "The eleventh division would like to have a word or two with you." I announce, grinning wildly and clutching Huzikamru in hand with roughly a sixth of my division to back me up. *This will be fun.*

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**Kuchiki Rukia's POV...**

"What? Oh no..." I say, frowning worriedly, but sure enough I can't be mistaken. Many of the eleventh division members are flaring their reiatsu wildly at one of the gates to the city, and I can just make out one of their voices from where Kaien-dono and I are standing. We had let the silver-haired young boy go back to his life a long while back, and were about to give up hope of ever finding the mysterious orange-haired shinigami on our own when they showed up. "Why do you think they're here, Kaien-dono?"

I ask one of my mentors, and now my surrogate father, looking at him out of the corner of one eye. He purses his lips into a thin line. "Same reason we are, I suspect. Rangiku-san. She has never be to good at keeping secrets, especially when sake is involved. The tenth and the eleventh having the same haunt doesn't help matters."

I fully turn to stare at him with my dark eyes, surprised. "But surely Matsumoto-fukutaicho would be extra careful with such delicate information?" I ask, confused and having a hard time that such a
kind lieutenant could make such a terrible mistake.

Kaien-dono glances at me before making a regretful shake of his head. "Her, like many others, having been going to the bottle in the recent years in hopes of staving off guilt, fear and similar emotions. Rangiku-san is a good woman who feels strongly responsible for the people of the tenth, and the thirteenth are not the only ones who have lost people in this whole mess."

"I see..." I say quietly, mournfully, wondering how I would deal with the stress if put into a similar situation, wondering... "How do you deal with the stress, Kaien-dono?"

He pauses for a moment and smiles softly at me, taking my hand. "I share the burden with people I can rely on, and spend lots of time with the people I love." He chastely kisses my hand. "Like with you and your surrogate mother. My family is more than enough to keep me going..." I stand there, speechless and touched. This moment would be perfect, if only brother could talk to me this way too. If he could rely on me, and even love... No, of course he does. Why else would he have adopted me, so many years ago?

_Because you remind him of his dead wife. That's why he keeps you around, yet only at arms' length, if even that- all for the nostalgia._ That terrible little voice of mine reasons at the back of my mind. I've heard the whispers; I've just refused to accept them.

Kaien-dono squeezes my hand, bringing me back to the present. He speaks up in a casual tone, always acting as though he has things well-under control. "Come on, Rukia, let's keep tabs on those ruffians."

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_Madarame Ikkaku..._

_Did I miss him?_ I think grumpily, wondering if my target has already left town and I dragged my ass all the way out here (getting lost two times along the way), only to turn back. "Damn, where is he?!" I snap, kicking an empty wooden wagon over.

"Where's who?" comes the neutral toned voice of a man in strange uniform, not at all like regular shinigami garb. Much too tight, and of a different fabric. He peers at us with a disapproving gaze, backed up by a couple of men in similar garb who seems much more anxious than the one at front. These are no common thugs or gang members, but I'm not sure exactly what they are. They're not even town elders or city militia. I've heard Aizen has some weird ideas and weird people here, but I didn't exactly believe it until now.

Seeing no harm in it, I say, "An orange haired guy in shinigami garb. Seen him?"

"Shinigami garb? No, no one like that here."

I narrow my eyes disbelievingly, feeling the remnants of his spiritual energy all over the place. "You sure about that?" I ask with a threatening edge.

"Yes," is the flat response.

_At least the guy gots guts. "Listen...""

"Officer Suzuki."

"Right. I know that tene is here, so don't even try playing dumb. Where is he?"

"No one in shinigami garb with orange hair has been to this city," he repeats calmly.
"You're lying!" I yell, brandishing my zanpakuto dangerously at him, trying to get a reaction.

He doesn't give me one, doesn't even blink. "I promise you sir, I am not. There is none of that description here. Please call off your men and return peacefully to your home."

My eye twitches. "You're really starting to piss me off, ya know? I don't like your attitude."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

*Is he seriously mocking me?* I open my mouth to snap at him when I suddenly feel the reiatsu I've been searching for burst back into existence somewhere close by. I grin in anticipation. "You're in luck," I tell the man before running off with some help from shunpo. I find the guy I have been looking for some time later, sticking his head out of some stinking alley way, hair a mess and glancing carefully from left to right. I appear in front of him, laughing. "There you are! Where have you been hiding?" I jeer, grinning at him.

He looks up at me, startled, and takes a step back. "What…."

I roll my eyes good naturedly. "What do you mean what? You didn't honestly think our little spar was the last you'd see of me, didja? You're not half bad in a fight; I don't mind testing the edge of my blade with you every now and again. You can even consider it a lesson in sword fighting, free of charge! Mostly." I laugh boisterously. He laughs along with me, if a little less boisterously.

"Ahahaha- Right. Listen. I'd love too, but I think you have bigger issues right now…" he comments, stepping completely out of the alley way and pointing at something behind me.

Puzzled, I look behind me to see…. a planted cactus next to a wooden building. "Eh?" I turn back around and blink. Ichigo-teme is not there. I glance from side to side to see him running away for all it's worth. "Hey! The hell do you think you're going?" I speed after him.

"Away from you!" he yells back, running now with a low level shunpo.

"I can see that." I point out, exasperated. "What I mean is why?"

"Why do you think?!!" He picks up even more speed, and I'm honest-to-Kami puzzled. I know he isn't a coward, and from our interaction he seems to enjoy fighting, so why the sudden change of heart? Determined for an answer and another good fight that I've been craving, I doggedly keep after him.

Unfortunately, he proves to be one slippery son of a bitch. Even when I get some of my division members to help me corner him, it is hard to pin him down thanks to that heavy reiatsu of his that hangs around everywhere. *Interesting way of hiding yourself while on the go.* I grudgingly admit to myself. I perk up however when I just manage to see Ichigo-teme turn into a narrow street that we have been on before. From experience now, I know that there are only two entrances/exits- this one and another nearby. I motion to one of companions to slip around and cut our target. Getting the idea, he darts off to comply. He should make it in time, as the street curves around towards this direction again later on. With this in mind and inevitable, I eagerly make my way forward, eventually rounding the curve mentioned before-

-smacking right into the guy I told to cut Ichigo-teme off. I stumble, nearly falling, and now my forehead is throbbing. Snarling I slam my fist into a nearby wall, infuriated. *You sneaky bastard, come back here and face me!*"

He doesn't.
Shiba Kaien's POV...

We find him backing out of a private residence, apparently having used a window on the other side to escape his (other) pursuers and not being welcomed inside by the sounds of it. "Sorry, sorry, I'm leaving, ok?" he tries to placate the angry women inside, who are currently throwing things at him. He dodges a small tea cup only to be subject to an old shoe a moment later. That hits him square on the forehead and he stumbles back some, dazed. Immediately I step forward catching him by the shoulders and steadying him. He stumbles over his words to apologize to me, regaining his footing and stepping away.

"Hey, no worries," I respond cheerfully as he catches sight of me, eyes widening. "Fancy meeting you here," I comment with a friendly grin, stepping forward to get a better look at him, make sure he isn't hurt-

-and getting punched in the gut for my efforts. Rukia lets out an alarmed yelp and I let out a breathless wheeze. I guess I should've known better. I remark inwardly to myself, watching as the boy runs off the opposite direction from us. Rukia and I had changed back into our uniforms in order to draw respect from the 11th division members scattered about. With their ignorance, they're more likely to ignore me if I started ordering them about without blatantly appearing as a shinigami to them… Of course, this is a double edged sword as I've now discovered…

"Please wait!" Rukia shouts, stepping forward and waving her hands frantically. "We're not going to hurt you!" The boy seems surprised by this and after what seems to be a fierce internal deliberation, decides to stay. Just the same, he draws his zanpakuto (rather sloppily in my opinion, but surprisingly not too bad for a beginner) and tenses, eye flickering between Rukia and I.

Meanwhile I manage to regain some of my breath (the kid's strong!) and offer him an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that; I didn't mean to startle you," I assure while carefully drawing my zanpakuto out, sheathe and all. I watch closely as the child rears back, an alarmed and almost wild look in his eyes. I gently lay Nejibana on the ground and step back, motioning for Rukia to do the same. She complies, though reluctantly. I don't blame her. It goes against everything we shinigami know to leave our zanpakuto somewhere; it goes against our training at the academy, against common sense, and against just our gut instinct… But we'll do it anyway, if that'll help him feel more at ease.

Thankfully it does. He seems a little more wary now, and a little less wild. "We're not here to hurt you." I repeat Rukia's words.

He looks at me doubtfully. "Then what do you want?" he inquires after a tense moment, brows furrowed and brown eyes narrowed.

"To help." I bulldoze forward before he can get a word in edgewise. "I know you must be frightened- I would be too, if there were a bunch of strangers with swords chasing after me. Those lunatics from the eleventh didn't help matters at all…"

"Lunatics from the eleventh…" he repeats slowly, ever so slightly loosening his grip on his zanpakuto. "You mean the bald guy who was chasing me earlier, along with his merry band of nutjobs?"

I crack a smile. "Yes, that's them alright. I'm sorry about that, really. They have no authority to come after you- they did that without consent and on their own volition." I explain patiently. Of course, Rukia and I are doing the same technically, but I wisely decide not to share that tid bit.

He nods stiffly. "Why?" he then asks quietly, shifting from foot to foot restlessly. The small action
seems to bring him pain, though I can detect no signs of injuries on him. I read between the lines. **Why are you trying to help me?**

"Because…” I say slowly. "Not only are you someone in need," I start, looking him in the eyes."You are also more similar to us than you might think and have helped my family and I more than you can imagine." Now the boy seems confused, but also curious and willing to listen. I give him an encouraging smile and while suggesting, "Why don't we just relax for a moment, maybe find someplace indoors, and you can ask us all the questions you'd like?" He pauses, but after a lengthy hesitation he begins to straighten from his defensive stance and lower his zanpakuto, seeming hopeful.

A swift, sudden attack from above quickly ends that notion on both sides.

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**Soifon's POV…**

I pull back in frustration when my well timed and perfectly executed kick is blocked with a speed and readiness of which I don't expect. From the looks of it, he didn't expect any of this either, and reacted on pure instinct and succeeded on dumb luck. I had meant that blow to render him incapacitated for retrieval- with my uncertainty of what has happened to my subordinate and the sudden onslaught of brutes from the 11th, it is too risky to play nice... Yut it seems like things are going to be a bit more difficult now. **Fine, as long as I know where he is.** I grumble internally, readying for another assault when I hear a cry of protest.

"Soifon-taicho, stop this now!" A familiar voice has the gall to order me, and I briefly glance to see Shiba-fukutaicho glaring at me along with his Kuchiki pet, both with an expression of mixed concern and outrage.

I grudgingly drawback, not willing to fight a fight on three fronts just yet. The Shiba clan is just crazy enough to try something stupid like that, and they are one of the main, five noble families after all. From a lesser noble family, I am obligated to show the Shiba clan leader respect. "Shiba-fukutaicho," I greet with a stiff (but low) bow, all the while keeping a close eye on the target and being sure to address the raven haired Shiba by his military title. "This task has been delegated to my division and I. Please step aside." The Thirteenth Division members have positioned themselves in front of the target, much to my ire. The target himself is just as described, minus the uniform.

"Yes, but it may also be considered a diplomatic mission." Shiba replies with his usual quick thinking and wit. Damn him. "As Kuchiki Rukia and I are currently training with each other off duty, my role as clan leader takes precedence, in which case I have complete authority to speak for the Soul Society if I come across a dire situation that I feel requires my attention." Again, damn him.

"You are in uniform…?"

"Merely to make sure the Eleventh Division members are aware that I am not to be argued with." I could argue with this logic. At the same time I know in the end it'll get me nowhere.

"Sir," I say, trying my hardest to be reasonable and to keep a respectful tone. "You are not fully aware of the situation at hand. It'd be best for the safety of everyone, including the boy, if we do not waste time on niceties and bring him back to the Seireitei- immediately." I don't like sharing revealing even that much, but if it'll convince him to comply, I'll do it. There are too many unknowns in all of this, and arguing while twiddling our thumbs is not going to help matters.
He narrows his sea green eyes at me. "Then explain it to me."

_We can't waste anymore time! _But I bite my tongue and only glower at him in return, inwardly debating on an adequate response.

"Because the way I see it..." he goes on when I don't answer instantly. "You decided it was a _great _idea to attack a young child I was already speaking to, and who was just about to settle down to have a civil conversation with. What in the name of the Soul King drove you to do that?" He inquires, voice dangerously low. I grit my teeth, attempting to reign back my feelings with some difficulty.

"There you are you orange-haired ba-AH- UGFH!... Soifon-taicho!" Comes the alarmed, muffled exclamation from underfoot. I squint down at him as I would at an ant, my foot planted on the back of his head. I let him up and he scrambles back, a tooth missing and some blood flowing from his mouth. He quakes like a leaf under the combined acidic gazes of Shiba Kaien and I.

"And Clan Head Shiba! I didn't know-"

I scoff loudly. "Stop your blubbering, fool. Who are you?"

"Madarame Ikkaku." Behind him a few of his comrades round the corner, wearing identical idiotic looks of glee, only for their expressions to rapidly transform to ones of horror as they abruptly rush to stumble backwards and out of view.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes some. "Of...?"

"Of the Eleventh Division!" Even in his current position, the moron can't help but puff his chest out in pride.

I snort quietly. _Figures._ I'm about to tell him off when Kuchiki makes this Kami-awful squeaking noise and tentatively exclaims, "Kaien-dono, Soifon-taicho!" I turn to see her pointing at... nothing? My eyes widen. The target is gone. In the distance behind me I can just make out a flurry of unsettled dust, where he must have shunpoed through only a brief moment before.

_Great. Just great._

**-DIVIDER-**

**Hitsugaya Toshiro's POV... Several minutes later.**

"For the last time, stop laughing and tell me why I'm being followed by a bunch of asshole shinigami out for my blood!" A smack sends the already beaten and near toothless shinigami sprawling backwards. I wince, looking on with nervousness from behind the corner of a wooden home, abandoned for the day are off no doubt diligently laboring away at their job. Taking opportunity of the temporarily abandoned neighborhood, my wayward new friend has dragged in his former pursuer for, er, _questioning_. Neither has seen me yet, and I'd like to keep it that way. I would like to give Ichigo-san the benefit of the doubt, but in all honesty, it isn't looking good for him. The shinigami wouldn't bother with someone like Ichigo unless he did something _majorly _wrong, right? Or not. To my relief, it starting to seem to be the latter. Ichigo-san has no idea why he is being sought after by the shinigami and seems hopelessly confused and more than a little panicked by it.

The shinigami spits up blood and chuckles, still dribbling the substance. I wrinkle my nose in disgust. "They really weren't kidding. Yer crazy good, 'specially for a kid! Barely saw you
coming." My eyes widen. Is Ichigo really that fast? To be able to outstrip a death god in terms of speed? Unless… I stare down at my hands. Unless he's like me. Unless he has the potential to become a shinigami too.

My attention snaps back up when the agitated Ichigo-san takes the beaten shinigami by his collar, hoisting him up to the air and shaking his sword in a vaguely threatening manner with his other hand. "That's not an answer."

"Pfft- Isn't it obvious?" The blood coated shinigami, face pierced with several silver ornaments, sneers challengingly at the mercenary in front of him. "We came to fight you! To see if you're really worthy of all that praise Madarame gave you." His speech is pretty garbled, though I am fairly sure this is what he said after some brief deliberation.

"Who?" Ichigo-kun asks gruffly, scowling in bewilderment. "Hey! I asked you a question." No answer, even after a harsh shaking. The guy has fallen unconscious, leaving Ichigo-san with a look unease.

Mustering my courage and taking a deep breath, I step slightly out from behind my cover. "Over here!" I whisper fiercely, trying to gain his attention.

I succeed. He whirls around, unceremoniously dropping the shinigami as he goes. "What…?"

I give a small huff, motioning him to follow me. "Come with me. I know this city better than any shinigami! I can get you out of here." I slip back between the gap in the buildings. If he doesn't follow, that's fine. It would save me the trouble. Offering to help a fugitive get away from shinigami… Have I gone mad?! But despite my misgivings, I find my heart pumping in excitement- I've never felt this way before.

In the end, he does follow me. After a brief hesitation, and hearing the closer-than-he-would-probably-like sounds of some authoritative figure dishing out orders, Ichigo-san rounds the corner and follows me. I lead the way, weaving through the narrowest of gaps between buildings, through private gardens and abandoned buildings. Unfortunately though, we can't keep this up forever. I purse my lips, peering out from underneath a trap door at the dusty street in front of it. I've taken him through an old cellar Yasuda's men previously used for storing less-than legal goods. The cellar is actually a bunch of basements they had connected to store more and spanned several blocks, but we have now reached the last optimal exit, since beyond here it caved in.

I turn my head slightly to see the older male waiting patiently behind me. I can just imagine the oppressive anxiety he must be feeling, but surprisingly enough after I offered my help, he seems be largely impassive at this whole situation. "What's next?" he inquires quietly, resolutely. Putting his complete trust and faith in me. An odd, almost happy feeling wells up in me at the thought, but is swiftly doused at the knowledge of what we have to do next.

"There's no other way. To get to the next cellar, we'll have to pass the street in front of us. It seems abandoned now, but…" We both can hear the padding of feet in the distance. Several feet.

He nods curtly, striding forward. "I'll just have to take that chance… Tell me where it is, you don't have to risk yourself for my sake. You've done more than enough." I glance up at the orange-haired older boy in surprise. If I was in his position, I would take any advantage I could get… I mull over his proposal.

"... I still want to help you, but maybe it'd be for the best if we crossed separately…"

"Fine by me. Where's the next cellar?" I describe him the entrance, hidden underneath the front
porch of the house just across the street.

"Ok, got it. I'll go first." I silently agree and step back a few paces, giving him some room. I hold my breath when a few seconds later he slips out, closing the door with barely a creak behind him. Listening intently, I uneasily wait for any sign of my friend being found out, but to my relief hear nothing. Relaxing, I inch my way toward the rotting, wooden trapdoor and peek out. The cost is clear. With ease, I slip out and make my way across the dusty road.

A hand encloses around my upper arm, a hand belonging to a person who wasn't there a split second before. "Hitsugaya-kun."

Crap! I think internally, recognizing the person to be Shiba Kaien, one of the shinigami I meet earlier on… and is currently searching for Ichigo. *It's alright. I can play this off, he can't see Ichigo anyways. Ichigo's already in the other cellar. He'll be fine. I'll be fine.*

"Shiba… sama." I greet politely, offering a bow and peering belatedly up at the man. He is accompanied by that girl again, I note.

Shiba smiles at me and returns the bow, although as station and status dictates, it is not as low as mine. "I'm surprised to see you here with all the chaos currently," he admits. "Didn't you say you live somewhere just outside the city?"

I nod. "Visiting a friend," I explain shortly. *True enough…* I add silently, careful to keep my gaze on them and from wondering to Ichigo's current hiding place.

He seems to accept this readily enough. "I heard you may be joining us in the Seireitei. Is that right?"

"That is right. I've actually decided I will." His expression brightens and he pats me lightly on one shoulder.

"Congratulations then! If you ever need any help with anything, feel free to stop by the Shiba compound sometime. We aren't near as stuffy as the other nobles, and actually love visitors."

"I'll keep that in mind." I promise with another bow, this one of gratitude.

"Be sure to do that… Say, Hitsugaya-kun, have you seen Ichigo-san since the last time we spoke? I know he may not want to speak with me at the moment, but to just know he is safe…? He may be in some serious danger at the moment, and we're worried." For all intents and purposes the noble seems completely sincere, and he will soon be my superior in the military… It would only be wise to trust him, and could only benefit me later on to tell him what he wants to know… What's Ichigo to me, anyways? I barely know him. Helping him doesn't better my life in any way… right?

"No, sir," I reply mostly stoically, but with a hint of regret. "I barely know the man." How true. *I've really gone insane. Why am I doing this?*

"Well, we don't want to hold you up from visiting your friend… One last thing though. When would you like to be picked up by Rangiku-san?"

"Whenever she can come, please." *I can't afford myself any more time than that. The dreams, if that's what they indeed are, are getting worse.*

"Right then, I'll be sure to tell her. It'd be for the best if you get home quick Hitsugaya-kun." I promise I will and he smiles, waving as he begins to stroll away. Kuchiki-sama pauses to wish me well before following. I wish them farewell and idly stroll towards my original destination, but am
sure to completely avoid this trap door. I'll join Ichigo-san through another entrance further up ahead, when I am definitely out of view.

Shiba Kaien's POV…

A sparse minute after the encounter the 2nd division duo lands at my side, Soifon and her masked compatriot. "You do realize he was lying." It's not a question. "Why did you let him go?" The petite captain inquires coldly.

It's hard to tell where exactly Ichigo is, his reiatsu signature being less of a dot and more of an area of fluctuating spiritual pressure. However it was pretty plain to see by the way that it especially stuck to Hitsugaya-kun that they had been in direct contact, and rather recently too. "I have an idea that should satisfy everyone." Turning to face the woman, I patiently explain to her the details. As I do so, her eyebrows slowly raise in interest, and maybe even some appreciation, although I can still detect some agitation under the surface. My plan probably takes much more time than she would prefer, but the perks may outweigh it all if done correctly.

Her response is clipped and confident. "I see… No time to waste then."

Hitsugaya Toshiro's POV…

I let out a small sigh of relief as Granny's and my cottage comes into view. "Well, we're out." I glance back at him. Strangely enough, he doesn't even look relieved. He just scowls and nods his understanding. I grind my teeth in nervousness, looking away. I would offer him to stay at my place for awhile, but I need to remember that if we're found out, I'm not the only who would be in trouble. So would Granny. "It's not safe anywhere near here… But I suppose I could give you enough supplies to get you some ways away."

He blinks down at me in grateful surprise, that scowl easing up slightly. "I'd appreciate it. Already do actually- what you've done for me is beyond brave, and more than I could ever ask for." His words sounds earnest and genuine as he nods, as if to emphasize the point.

A rare, entirely sincere smile makes its way across my features at the sentiment. Heroic. He's saying I'm heroic. "You're welcome…" An idea comes to mind and I slyly add, "Ichigo."

He sputters a bit, blatantly flabbergasted. "What?"

I smirk. "Surprised? You really shouldn't be. You know my name after all, don't you?" I point out, remembering how he said me by my given name the last we saw each other. I wonder who he heard it from, and am about to ask him this when he speaks up.

He clears his throat, straightening his posture. "No offense, but… no, not really." He seems extremely sheepish as he admits this. "Have we… met before?"

"Er…" I stare blankly. Is this some type of bad joke? "You don't remember me?" I inquire dubiously, the smirk slipping off my face in a mixture of confusion and indignation, although mostly the former for the time being.

"It's not just you," he is quick to assure me, and I don't know whether to be relieved or just plain baffled by his words. He continues. "It's everything. I don't remember anything."
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