

Crossing Over

Von konpaku

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Prolog: Arising Problems

Prologue – Arising Problems

Rukongai

"Get outta the way ol' man!" A rough voice yelled at the man who was trying to defend himself against a gigantic hollow.

Unfortunately instead of running the man was only able fall backwards as the other forcefully approached the beast and sliced it into halves with one smooth swing of his saw-like whip.

As the monster's remains vanished; the Shinigami turned around to look at the victim for the first time, taking in his appearance.

The man had long white hair kept in a low ponytail with a bang on either side of his face. A crown-like metal plate with tiny horns and the word "oil" carved into it adorned his forehead and red tear-like streaks ran down his cheeks starting right underneath his eyes.

He had encountered several weird looking people, but this one was definitely among the oddest ones.

The combination of the short green kimono, the red cloak and the fishnets around his chest, arms and legs made the other look rather funny in his eyes. It was not quite clear to him whether or not his assumption of him being an "ol' man" was correct.

The saved on the other hand was staring blankly up at his savior. Rarely had he seen a man like him. Nearly blood red hair put into a high ponytail along with black marks at the sides of his neck, that could be seen at the hem of the completely black Kimono with a white Shitagi and Obi and a sword tugged into the latter one. Especially the marks on his forehead, which could be seen underneath the white headband though it tried to hide them, where somewhat off putting.

That was something he was surely not used to.

"W-what was that?" Was his first question as he found his voice again, gesturing behind the Shinigami, where his attacker had been just moments ago.

"A Hollow," was the other's rather short reply.

"A Hollow?" Became his next doubtful question.

"You've just arrived, haven't you?"

"Arrived?" He asked confused.

"You've most likely died recently. You're in Soul Society now. That thing was after you because of your spiritual pressure."

As he caught the uncomprehending and disbelieving look on the other's face, he proceeded after a heavy sigh.

"Well, let's start at the beginning..." he tried a new approach, scratching the back of his neck.

"You do remember dying, don't you?"

"Yes, I think I was sinking underwater and slowly losing consciousness." He explained after a pause and while sitting up to a more comfortable position.

"That would explain why you awoke near a river...

Anyway, you died back then, that's why you're here. This is the place most souls come to for their afterlife. I can clearly sense you know how to use the spiritual energy you possess and that's also what caught the Hollow's attention. They usually eat souls with a certain amount of Reiryoku and that's where we come in.", he waved in the direction of three more black clad figures and himself.

"We're Shinigami, the ones able to use our spiritual powers to kill Hollows. With the Reitsu you're emitting you would probably be able to become one yourself." He ended offering the sitting man a hand to stand up.

"I still don't understand..." the other simply replied.

"Geez...how can I explain this?" The Shinigami thought loudly and seated himself next to the rescued.

After thinking for some time he exclaimed: "Yeah I know! This'll work!" and punched a fist onto his open palm.

"Ok, you probably know ghosts, right?" He asked not waiting for a response.

"We call normal ghosts 'Plus' and if one of them has a strong attachment to the world of the living or simply grieves a lot he probably becomes a Hollow. That means he loses his heart and becomes a desire driven monster that eats Pluses or souls of living humans with spiritual powers - simply put: People like you. In killing a Hollow we cleanse their souls from the sins they committed after becoming a Hollow. If that's done they can return to the circle of rebirth as they are supposed."

Awaiting a reaction he went silent.

"So you cause souls that should not be among living people to go where they belong to?" The white haired man concluded after thinking everything through, one hand at his chin, while the other supported his arm.

"Uhm...basically yeah." The other replied sheepishly scratching his head again.

"Abarai - fukutaicho!" One of the men called for his attention.

"Seems like I gotta go. Maybe we meet again in Seireitei. Take care." The called ended the conversation and stood up.

He turned away to meet up with his colleagues, waving at the still sitting in the process.

"Wait! Where is that place?" The other asked while standing up and putting his hand on the officer's back to halt his movement.

"Ah yes I forgot to tell you!", Abarai replied grinning as he turned around again to explain.

"Well, we're currently in Rukongai. This place is divided in four areas: The north, south, east and west. Each of them is split into eighty districts. Starting with the first in the center and ending with the eightieth at the borders. So you have to go down the numbers of the districts to the very first. There you can already see the walls surrounding the Court of Pure Souls. Good luck finding it." were his last words before he disappeared in a blur leaving only some swirling dust behind.

Later in the Seireitei

"Renji. You have to concentrate." Came the advice in the usual monotone voice of Kuchiki Byakuya.

"Ha-hai, Taicho, but it's not easy with everyone talking in the background and ... stuff..." the lieutenant replied sheepishly.

He was referring to the group of Shinigami that had gathered to watch him train Kidō

The Kuchiki had offered him the chance to become his instructor, so he "would not put his division into shame any further."

To not upset his Taicho, Renji accepted immediately.

Though as he was a rather well known member of the Gotei 13 his colleagues caught wind of it and wanted to give their own advice as well.

As he was not told about this the Kuchiki saw this as a nuisance and informed them that if they were to disturb the training he was to make sure of their leaving, personally.

Which caused the group to gulp and shudder in fear for a moment, but settle down anyway.

They just wanted to see their team-mate suffer.

For this the lieutenant of squad ten brought in addition to the ones of the third and ninth some bottles of sake which were passed among them and the eleventh divisions third and fifth seat.

Their laughter resounded throughout the training area and kept distracting the red head.

The encouragements of the fifth's lieutenant and his childhood friend didn't help him controlling his spiritual powers either.

Looking around he caught glimpse of his captain being rather annoyed by the situation, so he decided to try it once more as a harsh voice interrupted him again.

"The hell? Now it's our fault you suck at this?" The now enraged Madarame Ikkaku yelled, after just realizing what has been said.

"Of course it is idiot!" Renji yelled in return, losing his concentration once more.

"Silence." The Kuchiki ended the argument.

Glaring at each other the two Shinigami mumbled curses under their breaths, but kept quiet as to not enrage the sixth squad captain any further.

"Once more." Was all he said after a moment of complete silence.

With some effort Renji tried to gather Reiatsu into his palms to create the Kidō spell.

While he was doing so the door to the training room burst open and the angered captain of squad ten entered yelling: "MATSUMOTO!"

In the very same moment an explosion erupted from the trainee and enclosed the room and everyone in it.

When the smoke subsided no one was to be seen. The officers had simply vanished without a visible trace.

Soul reapers nearby who witnessed the accident reported it immediately and the search for the missing began as soon as possible.

Somewhere in between

In the depths of his soul Renji slowly opened his eyes only to be met with a pure whiteness surrounding him.

Being disturbed by the brightness he closed his eyes again.

"Renji." "Renji." Came the calls of his Zanpakutou spirit. Lethargic he sat up rubbing his eyes mumbling "What happened?" Before he was able to comprehend the situation.

In front of him was a large cell door parting him and the Nue spirit, not the vast forest he was so used to seeing in his inner world.

"The hell happened to ya?" He exclaimed grabbing the bars and shaking them violently.

"Dunno," answered the snake.

"From one moment to the other our world faded and we had been trapped in this thing. We are not able to open the door." The baboon explained.

Shaking the door even more and trying to open it forcefully he couldn't help but curse at his inability to do anything for his soulmate.

Kapitel 1: First Contact

Chapter 1 - First Contact

In a distant forest

"Should we eat him?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea. We should ask Tobi."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. Maybe he knows what to do with this one."

"He looks weird..."

Upon hearing the foreign voices Kuchiki Byakuya awoke from unconsciousness with a low grumble. Trying to sit up some more he noticed something hard behind his back, accompanied with the smell of grass and trees he concluded that he might be in a forest. As a nauseous feeling rushed through his body he settled for stopping to move any farther and to have a look at the ones who have just talked. After opening them carefully he laid his eyes on what was in front of him. Even though he expected to see two people, there was only one. Halfway out of the ground was something that looked remotely like a person that was hiding between two large, sturdy, spiked leaves. If this thing wouldn't have shown signs of human behavior earlier, he would have thought it to be a Hollow. Still it did not possess any traces of the usual aura such a being was always surrounded by. Nevertheless the different colored halves of its face suggested otherwise. While one side was completely black and had a mere yellow dot for an eye, the other was white and bore resemblance to normal facial features, except the iris that held the same color as its counterpart. The thought struck him, that he was not the weird one of them as he looked remotely normal. This even with the headpieces, the Kenseikan, in his hair, the long silken scarf around his neck and the long white captain's Haori he wore. Even with his sword he would have looked more like an average person than this thing. Thinking of his weapon brought back memories of a dream he seemed to have had during his blackout. A dream about Senbonzakura being caged within his soul. Putting the thought aside he focused again on the other one.

"Who are you?" The Shinigami asked in the cold tone of his, still sitting on the ground near the tree.

"Zetsu." "Can you move?" The creature answered, again in two different voices.

"Yes." The Kuchiki replied.

Even if he didn't trust himself to stand up at the moment, he could not let this thing stand above him.

At first he attempted to go at it like he wasn't the least bit dizzy. When his legs started to wobble he moved his hand to the trunk behind him for support. Nearly stumbling he caught his breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He felt that something was not right. There was an emptiness inside him that was not supposed to be there. Focusing his strength and thoughts on the task at hand, he managed to hold himself upright after nearly failing twice. All the time being watched by the giggling creature.

As Byakuya finally regained his composure he simply ordered: "Bring me to that man." Accompanied by a glare that suggested immediate danger if the other would not obey.

The white half wanted to complain, but the black cut him short by saying: "So you've listened. Very well, follow me then".

Ascending from the ground Zetsu's appearance became more human like or so it seemed. The leaves gave the impression to be part of his body as they emerged from around the waist line to end above the head, giving him the look of a venus fly-trap. Furthermore, his body was enclosed in a long black cloak as well as plain trousers and sandals. If it would not be for the plant he could be counted as human, even with the short, green hair.

Looking at the man with the cold gray eyes for a moment Zetsu decided that caring about him any more than this would be just a waste of time. He did not seem to be armored in any way. Still he did trespass on their territory and therefore needed to be reported. If they would kill him now or later it would not make a difference. Either case he would get to eat him afterwards.

Turning around he led the way, asking: "Ya coming?"

Not knowing where he was and what exactly had happened the Kuchiki used this creature to find answers to his unasked questions. This seemed to be the most rational choice of action.

In the desert

A warm breeze blew through her hair and the always present strand in the middle of her face tickled her nose. Awakening slowly Rukia scratched it and stretched a bit opening her eyes anticipating to see her room in the Kuchiki mansion. But what she saw was totally unexpected. Surrounded by walls she found herself in a deserted alleyway. Different to any other town she has been in. This one was build completely out of sand. Never had she seen anything like it. Only memories of small sand castles at the beach crossed her mind, but never anything this big. Cautiously she stood up and tried to find traces of her brother's or Renji's Reitsu or at least a familiar one. But she could not find anything. Dusting herself off she decided to take a look around for information.

Still deep in thought the Soul Reaper continued her search while slowly moving forward in this foreign sandy city.

It ended when her nose met a giant gourd causing her to land on her rear.

"Oww," she grumbled holding her nose.

"Are you alright?" A concerned male voice asked from above.

"No. I think my nose is broken, damn it!" She cursed still trying to figure out whether the organ was really harmed.

Taken aback by her actions the young boy stared at her for a moment before the girl beside him stepped in.

"Hey, let me see your nose." She requested kneeling down in front of the other girl. Slowly Rukia lifted her head to look at the blond female that was smiling down at her. Her hair was divided into four ponytails in a symmetric pattern with two on each side of her head. Underneath short bangs was a metal plate, with an engraved hourglass, on top of a headband. Aside from that the other also wore a plain black, short-sleeved

Kimono held by a red sash, completely contradicting her dark green eyes. After a measuring glare Rukia let the taller woman proceed lifting her hands from her nose.

"It's not broken. Just a bit bruised." She concluded after examining the wound.

"You're lucky that it's not broken!" Rukia growled at the boy who bore a minor resemblance to her childhood friend.

Even though the boy was much shorter and had rather short hair the color just struck her.

Being reminded of the other red haired male in her life, she couldn't help but point her finger at him and yelling in her Runkongai accent: "What'cha wearing that fuck'in vase for anyway?"

"It's a gourd damn it! And who do you think you are, talking to the Kazekage like that?" A boy she hadn't noticed before burst out causing Rukia to back away, which wasn't easy as she still sat on the ground.

"The what?" She asked astonished after a moment of taking in what has been said and his looks.

He wore a complete black outfit with a hood covering most of his head. Oddly a similar metal plate was enclosed in the headgear that also had two catlike ears. His face was painted with purple streaks that reminded her of stories about a human group that painted themselves for rituals. She just couldn't remember their name. However, if the boy didn't look that serious right now, she probably would have laughed at his appearance.

"Don't tell me you don't know what that is!" He dared her coming a bit closer and leaning down as well.

"Kankurou." The shorter boy simply stated silencing him and causing him to halt his movement.

"The Kazekage is the leader of this village." The blond girl explained shortly.

After a moment of realization Rukia's education as member of the Kuchiki clan clicked in and she fluently stood up, bowing respectfully.

"I am deeply sorry for my earlier rudeness." She apologised.

"The hells with you?" Kankurou tried again, but was again silenced by the glares of the others.

"You are not from this village." The Kazekage stated.

"That is correct."

"Then where're you from?" The other boy wanted to know.

Fidgeting for a moment she answered pointing behind her: "From that alley, I do not know how I got there and where the rest of the people I have been with are."

"What happened?" The red haired boy wanted to know.

"I do not know." She sadly replied, looking down.

"Do you know anything?" The cat boy asked impatiently, dramatically flailing his arms in the air.

"Kankurou!" The girl scolded him this time.

"What?" He wanted to know, but was met with a measuring glare, that sent a shiver down his spine.

"I am sorry. I did not want to bother you. I will continue my search on my own. Thank you for your concern." Rukia concluded, bowing again.

"We will help you." Decided the head of the village and which was met by his

companions questioning gazes.

From her position she looked up to him, seeing the sincerity in his light blue eyes. She also noticed the black circles surrounding them and the Kanji for love on his forehead. A small smile graced her lips as she bowed even deeper replying: "I thank you very much."

In another village

Stretching, the bosomy lieutenant of squad ten awoke from her slumber. Feeling a rather hard ground beneath her and not remembering falling asleep in the first place she felt confused as to what had happened.

"Where am I?" Was the first thing that came to her mind, the next being: "Ugh I'm starting to get hungover..." as she shielded her eyes from the sun and sat up to take in her surroundings.

Right away Matsumoto noticed that she was on a rooftop in a place she had not seen before. There were several wooden buildings around her looking like they either had just been constructed or were still in the process of completion. In the distance she could see trees as well as a mountainside with large faces engraved into it.

It looked like a peaceful little village, but definitely not like Seireitei, where she knew she had been previously.

"Are you alright?" A foreign male voice suddenly asked from the side.

"Do I know you?" The blond countered squinting her eyes as she looked in his direction.

"I don't think so. I'm Umino Iruka."

"And you are sleeping on the academy's rooftop." He continued after a short moment of catching himself to not look at her assets.

"What academy? Where am I? And where is everyone else?" Rangiku wanted to know, boisterously looking around once again, wobbling all the while.

"T-the Ninja Academy. I-in the village of Konohagakure. And who is everyone else?" the man tried to answer and concentrating solely on her face.

"Everyone I have been with earlier..." she told him, simply waving off his question.

"Why don't you explain everything inside instead of on the rooftop?" He suggested motioning to the ground.

Thinking about it Rangiku studied the awkwardly smiling man. He had dark hair put into a ponytail and a scar that ran across the bridge of his nose. Around his forehead was a cloth that adorned a metal plate with a weird bird symbol engraved into it. Not seeing bad intentions in the man's eyes, that did not even dare to drift downwards, she stood up with a sigh answering: "Sure why not, but you have to give me something against the headache first..."

Kapitel 2: The Lion's Den

Chapter 2 – The Lion's Den

In the village of Konohagakure

"Why is the first thing you guys build an academy?" Rangiku asked as she sat down in one of the classrooms.

Iruka had given her some medicine against the headache. Now she waited for his many questions to come as she was certain this would become some kind of interrogation. She knew she couldn't answer all of them. Especially as she simply wasn't allowed to tell certain things to mortals.

Yet she tried to distract him as long as possible so she could make up a good story.

Looking around, the room reminded her of her time in the Shinigami academy. The gradually lined up tables just looked similar to those in Seireitei. With the difference that these benches were only suited for two people and the students here seemed to be much younger than she had been back then.

"We didn't build it, we rebuilt it." The man replied as he sat down across from her.

As she looked at him with an uncomprehending expression he continued:

"The village Hidden in the Leaves was destroyed in a fight. We are rebuilding it in order to regain some normality in this war ridden time...", he looked down, sadness clear on his face.

"Oh, I'm sorry I didn't know!"

"Don't be! Don't be! We are making the best out of this situation. Besides the students don't mind not having classes." He assured her waving his arms.

"You said this is a Ninja academy. That means you're a Ninja too, right?"

"Yes I'm a Chuunin and also an instructor of the ones who are not yet Genin's." He answered proudly puffing himself up a bit.

"Chuunin? Genin?" The Shinigami asked, not understanding him.

"Ah, so you're not used to our rank system are you? Well, let me explain: The first grade as you want to see it is Genin. Every student that passes the exams here in the academy becomes one. The next step is becoming a Chuunin. Which is done throughout the so called 'Chunin exam' that culminates in a tournament, where the most capable in skill and leading abilities are selected. After that a Shinobi is able to become Jounin or a Tokubetsu Jounin, if he or she is specialized in one field rather than being an allround talent. The highest of all ranks however, is the Kage. In our case the Hokage, which is Tsunade – sama, whom you'll be meeting later." He taught Rangiku.

Even though she already had the suspicion that she was held here to figure out whether she was an enemy, she now was certain that he tried to stall time till this Hokage – person would arrive. Pretending that she did not grasp this she smiled and asked: "So that means you're strong?"

Positioning herself to present him two arguments that she hoped would imply her innocence to him, her smile became mischievous.

"A – ah...well...uhm...there are stronger ones, b – but I'm not that bad myself." He answered bright red and awkwardly scratched his head.

"Don't be so meek. You wouldn't teach the kids if you hadn't one thing or the other up your sleeves." Another male interjected.

His face was nearly completely covered by a cloth over his mouth and nose and a similar bird – headband over his left eye. His messy gray hair reminded Rangiku of something Orihime told her about humans touching electricity.

"K – Kakashi – san!" Iruka exclaimed surprised.

"Yo." The man merely greeted lifting one hand, while the other remained in his pocket, a grin plastered on his face.

Even though she could only see his right eye, she could clearly guess his expression from that. The squinted eye reminded her of someone she had lost not long ago. Catching herself before showing the sadness welling up inside her she returned the smile.

"And you are?" Rangiku asked innocently laying her head on her folded hands.

"I'm Hatake Kakashi. Pleased to meet you." He answered tilting his head, never breaking the grin.

"Pleased to meet you too, Hatake – san." She cooed, obviously flirting now.

"Oh just call me Kakashi. Everyone does so." He offered holding his hands up in defeat.

"If you insist." Rangiku kept her grin.

This man was so similar to Gin, yet so different. Like her lost one he had the silvery hair, still his was wildly standing up and not smoothly covering his face. He had a sly, yet so warm grin unlike the other's coldness. Suppressing a sigh she brought the smile back into her eyes.

"Is something bothering you Miss ... ?" Kakashi asked having noticed the change.

"Matsumoto, but you can call me Rangiku." She flirted again, trying to get him off the track.

"May I ask you what is bothering you, Rangiku – san?" He reformulated his question.

The still reddened Iruka could only stare at the two of them without being able to say a word.

"Of course Kakashi – san." Rangiku answered leaning back and showing more of her bosom, fanning herself she continued: "It is awfully hot in here and I don't even know where here is and aww everything's so confusing...", she theatrically laid one of her arms over her eyes leaning back even further, leaving both men staring.

"Then we should find out where you are from first." A new voice suggested.

"Hokage – sama!" The Shinobi yelled in surprise breaking out of their trance.

Slowly lifting her arm and looking past where it had been the Shinigami concluded: "You're a woman!"

"Yes I am and you won't fool me like these idiots. So tell me who you are and what you want in my village!" She demanded, slamming her hands on the desk.

Anger shone in her brown eyes and her deadly expression promised pain if she wasn't obeyed. Her face was enclosed by strands of blond hair and in difference to the men her forehead sported a rectangular point instead of the headband. She wore a green Haori over grey colored robes that barely covered her well endowed chest. Feeling slightly intimidated by the other woman Rangiku sat up straight so she could be seen clearly as well.

In the village of Sunagakure

After she had properly introduced herself to the Kazekage and his siblings, as she knew, led her to the Kazekage's office. There they would probably start interrogations right away. Desperately she tried to think of a suitable story that wouldn't be too much of a lie. Rukia knew she was a brilliant actor, but without a good background all her talent would be wasted.

"How do these buildings hold together?" She asked curiously when she was satisfied with her preparations.

"Ah...that's easy! They just...", Kankurou explained crossing his arms behind his head while he turned his face towards her.

Rukia bit her lip as to not break into a grin. She still had a hard time stifling a laugh at his attire.

"Why do they hold?" He then wondered himself.

"Kankurou you idiot! They hold because they..." His sister tried, but stopped when she realized she didn't know it either, her face turning some shades darker.

By now the little group had come to a halt in the middle of the street, trying to find a solution.

"It is some sort of special clay mixed with the desert sand." Finally the Kage himself spoke in a calm tone.

By this the Shinigami was reminded of her older brother, as he used a similar tone to explain something he himself didn't know, daring people to oppose him.

"Of course...what else could it be?" Rukia agreed after shortly contemplating this.

Her arms crossed she nodded her head and smiled slightly.

Not noticing their brother's blunt lie or rather completely made up answer the others nodded in agreement.

"Yeah makes sense." The cat boy spoke his thoughts.

Catching Rukia's eyes the red haired boy asked through his own, why she played along, but she just shrugged it off with another smile.

Even though he held a high position he seemed young and a bit uncertain, so she tried to assure him that a little lie didn't hurt occasionally. Turning his gaze away he concluded that she tried to be nice so the interrogation wouldn't be too painful.

"We should move on" He then suggested taking the lead.

Advancing through the sandy streets Rukia used this chance to search for the presence hidden from her since she awoke. The usual tingling that accompanied her Zanpakuto spirit was gone. Though it didn't feel like that time when she lent Ichigo her powers, where Sode no Shirayuki had been gone for months. Trying not to dwell on the sadness of her parting with the boy the Shinigami again focused her attention on her sword.

Calling out her name didn't bring the result Rukia hoped for. There was no reply.

Nevertheless she could still feel the power etched into her very being. Due to the heat she could also see it.

She was surrounded by a slight sheath of snow causing her every step to leave little icy footprints on the ground.

Fearing that she would collapse like she did so long ago in the hot summers of Rukongai she tried to focus the snow to keep her head cool and her body chilled.

In the forest

The Venus flytrap man lead him through the vast forest Byakuya awoke in. However they soon reached a clearing that showed them the base of a mountain.

Looking up Byakuya could see several caves. Wondering if the other's lair would be located in one of them, he tried to think of a way to get there without showing what he was capable of.

"We're here"

"Just up there" The man told him in his different voices pointing to a cave far above them.

Just as he'd done several times before he then vanished into the earth beneath him to reappear some steps ahead. Keeping track of this on the ground wasn't hard, but spotting him between the rocky cliffs proved difficult.

Still Byakuya wasn't fooled easily. While he looked for the best route to take, he contemplated for a moment whether he should use Shunpo as the other was far ahead of him by now.

Glaring at the mountainside as if he wanted it to build a stairway just for him; he resigned himself to his fate and started climbing. Telling himself again and again why he had to do this.

After he had retrieved as much information as possible he would make a tactical retreat to use them to find his sister. And maybe locate the others as well.

Even though he considered leaving the eleventh division's officers behind, at least for a while.

This way he wouldn't have to endure Zarak's complaining and especially not Yachiru's, for that long, but on the other hand his own lieutenant would get less distracted from his duties and training if Madarame and Ayasegawa weren't around.

He definitely wouldn't leave behind his fellow captain. Though that one would probably like to get a vacation from his lieutenant. But he wouldn't leave her either. With Matsumoto staying his already small circle of friends would be reduced to two persons. With one of them being mad at him for abandoning his subordinates and the other still obsessing over her returned crush. No he didn't want to be left alone with them.

As the remaining people all held high enough positions, he didn't wanted to be made responsible for even more gaps in the hierarchy either. As result he would have to search for everyone. Therefore he needed information.

Deep in thought he got to the opening of the cave. As he reached out to lift himself up a hand grasped his and helped him.

"Thank you." Byakuya shortly said fully standing up.

"You're welcome." The man replied.

He wore a white mask that had black circles with three comma shapes, two of them trumped out , leaving open slots for his eyes. One of them had the same comma shapes and circles as the mask, but was otherwise red. While the other only had circles and a violet color.

"Whom have you brought us here Zetsu?" The man asked not looking away.

"I found him sleeping in the forest..."

"and thought we should tell you before we eat him." The creature explained.

"So you are either dumb or brave to follow Zetsu here. I can assure you that nothing

you see or hear will ever leave this place." The other then insulted and threatened the Kuchiki.

"I am aware. Though I would prefer dying knowing where I am instead of being eaten in a forest I have never been in before." Byakuya calmly stated not wavering a bit.

"Is that so? Then it seems I would be a bad host to not at least fill this void of information." He suggested motioning for the Shinigami to enter the cave.

"I would appreciate that." He nodded shortly and stepped forward.

He had to be careful as he did not know what powers these men possessed. Knowing he wouldn't be able to call upon Senbonzakura he would have to use only Kidou and Shunpo to fight his way out if necessary. Bracing himself for what would come he entered the cave.

Kapitel 3: Gathering Information

Chapter 3 – Gathering Information

In Suna

When entering the building Rukia felt relieved. It was a lot cooler than the heat outside would have suggested. The youngsters let her into a room that was barely furnished. A table with a well matched chair stood in front of a large window side that seemingly had no glass in them to block the desert winds. Yet the heat wasn't too hard to bear here either. Across from the large desk was a couch where she was told to sit down. The young Kazekage seated himself behind the desk while his siblings positioned themselves between him and her attentively, most likely to interfere if she tried to do anything to their brother.

"Let me ask you again Kuchiki Rukia – san: Where are you from?" The Kage demanded, his folded hands in front of his mouth.

"May I see a map, so I could show you?" Rukia asked politely.

Nodding to his brother Kankurou left to bring the item. A deep silence befell the remaining. Feeling the boy's gaze Rukia kept her head lowered. This wasn't the interrogation she anticipated, but that still could happen. Therefore she needed to act wisely and according to her plan. Some minutes had passed when the cat boy returned with a huge scroll in hands. Rolling it onto the desk Rukia stood up to get a better look. Only to stare at it in disbelief.

"What is wrong Kuchiki – san?" The Kage asked slightly concerned.

"N – nothing Gaara – dono...", she managed to reply still shocked about this revelation. Staring blankly at the map Rukia sat back down. This was not what she had expected. This wasn't the human realm Ichigo lived in, neither was it any place she had ever heard of. Thinking about it she noticed that the kids were able to see her, even though she was certain that she was in her spirit form and not in an artificial body, a Gigai.

"What happened?" She mumbled ignoring the concerned questions of the others.

"What do you mean?" Gaara wanted to know, asking in a tone that made her snap out of her thoughts.

Remembering the situation she was currently in she answered honestly: "I have never seen a map like this before. I do not know how I came here and why. The last thing I remember is an explosion. The next waking up in the alleyway. My brother and my friends are somewhere out there and I don't even know if they are alright..."

The last part she had planned to show with some fake tears, but the real worry for everyone made her eyes water. She wouldn't cry, she was too proud for that, but the aching in her heart was real concern. Looking at each other the siblings decided that she couldn't be lying. The sadness in her eyes and words was real.

"Maybe one of the other villages encountered some of your friends." Temari suggested, sitting down beside the smaller woman, putting an arm consolingly around her shoulders.

"There are more villages like this?" Rukia asked moving out of the hug.

"Not exactly like this, but they are Hidden villages as well."

Still looking confused Rukia waited for someone to continue.

Picking this up Gaara said: "I will write a note to the other Kages if they encountered someone like you. When I'm done we'll explain the concept of the Hidden villages. Is that alright with you Kuchiki – san?"

"Yes Gaara – dono. Thank you very much." She bowed again.

The red haired boy took out a piece of paper and some ink to write while his sister left the room for reasons unknown to the Shinigami.

Having an idea Rukia suggested: "If it may help I could draw pictures of everyone."

"That would probably be a good idea."

Fetching her notebook and some markers out of her robe Rukia started to draw the missing people. Wondering about the odd pencils she was using the brothers shared a look before Kankurou got to Rukia's side trying to catch a glimpse of the picture. Noticing this Rukia pressed the notebook to her chest and sent a death glare at him, telling him angrily: "No peeking!"

"Ok, ok" He exclaimed in defeat causing his brother to grin slightly.

Fascinated by her eagerness Gaara couldn't write his letters. The girl had her tongue stuck out while the weird pencil scratched over the paper. Some minutes past till she contentedly exclaimed: "Ready!" presenting the result to the boys.

Not knowing what to say Gaara kept silence while Kankurou burst into laughter and ended up getting hit by a pillow. For a moment fearing she would throw the next one at him the Kazekage tried: "That's..."

"Nii – sama, Renji, Rangiku – san..." Rukia picked up pointing at each figure while calling their name.

After she had finished Gaara tried again: "Do they all have bunny ears?"

"No silly, that's just the way I draw them." Rukia explained as if that would be the most obvious thing in the world.

"Alright we should send that along then.."

"You nuts?" Kankurou yelled, still holding the pillow, but was silenced by his brother's glare.

"It is better to have some description than none." He explained holding out his hand for the picture.

Carefully Rukia removed the paper from her block and handed it to him.

Ignoring the doubtful expression of his brother Gaara finished the letter for Konoha. He hoped at least the Hokage would understand this picture.

In the mountains

"Now as you know where you are it is about time for your departure." Madara concluded his explanations.

"Who's that?" A young boy, who had just entered the room asked.

He wore rather short black hair and his irises held the same color. Next to him stood a cloaked figure with the hood pulled up, his face hidden deep within. Third was a man who seemed quite familiar to Byakuya. Though he couldn't place where he had seen him before.

"This is our guest Kuchiki Byakuya – san, but don't get too used to him Sasuke. He will leave us soon."

Looking at the foreign man the boy left with a shrug, muttering: "Whatever."

Seeing recognition in the third man's eyes and him starting to speak up Byakuya interjected:

"And who is this scum?"

"Well, well, aren't we uptight this close to our departure?" Madara asked rhetorically. Meanwhile Byakuya noticed the plant – guy shifting behind him. He had to distract the others long enough so he could make his escape in time without losing his cover.

"This is Yakushi Kabuto, one of my allies. And this is one of our famous Ninja, revived from the dead to serve our purposes."

When addressed the revived soldier stopped knowing what the Kuchiki had implied.

"Interesting" Byakuya stated uninterested, an eyebrow raised.

Hearing these words and seeing the man in front of him proved, that these men had powers beyond belief within them. If they could revive the dead, which he could verify through remembering the soldier, then it was best to leave as soon as possible. But he didn't have much time to think.

Right this instant the man behind him tried to enclose him with his parted body. He more than not looked like a carnivore trying to devour its prey. Using Shunpo Byakuya evaded his attacker leaving an afterimage behind.

Thinking he had caught him Madara smirked only to see the image disperse. Where formerly there had been Byakuya with a fearful and surprised expression, there now was only thin air.

"What?" The masked man then exclaimed.

Bearing witness to the Kuchiki pushing himself from the edge of the cave into the sky Kabuto screamed: "Don't kill him! He's special!"

Rushing to where he had been just moments ago they only could watch him falling farther and farther to the ground, only to stop shortly above it and to vanish again.

"What the hell? Where is he?" Madara yelled angered.

"Don't look at me stupid! Catch him!" He then ordered Kabuto and Zetsu, nearly pushing them off the mountain.

Byakuya meanwhile made his way back through the forest passing several meters with each Flash Step. As he now knew what he needed to know, he started the second stage of his plan: Finding Rukia. And everyone else.

In Konoha

"Leave." Tsunade ordered the two men, who obeyed with little protest.

"So who are you and what are you doing here?" She repeated her question.

"Honestly ma'am? I have no idea about the second part." The Shinigami confessed.

"You don't know?" The Hokage replied surprised.

"I don't. One moment I was having fun with some friends of mine. The next I was here on your rooftop." Rangiku explained sighing.

"Then where did you come from?" Was the next demand.

"It might sound ridiculous, but I think from another realm as I don't recognize anything on this map." Rangiku revealed waving one hand in the direction of the map, that hung on one of the walls.

"Another realm?"

"Have you ever heard of something like that?"

"Well..yeah there have been theories about it, but no one ever really crossed over to one before...at least I don't know about it..."

"So what are you going to do with me now?"

"As this is too absurd to be a lie you are obviously telling the truth...so I will have some of my Nin examine and interrogate you to find out how you came here."

"Sounds fair to me." Rangiku agreed.

"I will have Iruka and Kakashi supervise you then. Don't take advantage of them or I'll put you into a nice cell within our prison." Tsunade threatened, causing Rangiku to shiver a bit.

"I'm far too pretty for jail. I'll behave." She replied eagerly grinning.

Returning the grin the Hokage straightened herself and turned to leave, swinging her long ponytails behind her.

Shortly after her departure the teacher returned.

"Iruka – san would you happen to have little pins and small pieces of paper?" Rangiku asked innocently.

"What do you need that for?"

"I feel a little creative today." She smiled at him making him obey her wish.

Kapitel 4: Traces

Chapter 4 - Traces

Back in Soul Society

The buzzing Shinigami cleared a path for her to enter the partly destroyed training building. Not even an hour ago it exploded causing several high officers of the Gotei 13 to disappear. It was hers and the head of the Department of Research and Development's duty to investigate what happened.

"Have you found anything useful yet, Kurotsuchi?" She asked her fellow captain.

"Don't rush me." The man retorted his back turned towards her.

Rummaging through the rubber he let her wait for quite some time. Growing impatient she crossed her arms in front of her chest, glaring at his back and stomping her foot nervously. Losing so many people at once was not a good thing. Not this close to the winter war where they already had lost three captains. Yet putting this man in charge might not have been the wisest of decisions in her opinion, as he clearly loved to dwell in the details of his work and let other people suffer through making them wait.

"We found traces of a Reiatu that doesn't belong to any of the officers or even any Soul Reaper in my records." He finally informed her, facing her this time.

Looking up at the weird grin the man always wore she glared daggers at him. They had wasted nearly an hour and all they found out was that they didn't know who did it. Typically.

"Ano...Soifon Taicho? Kurotsuchi Taicho?" A timid voice called out to them.

"Who are you?" The Twelfth's captain barked.

"Kyuubantai Kyuu – Seki.." She started while bowing deeply but was cut off, by a rather sharp: "What do you want girl?"

"Anoo...ma'am...I think...I know that Reiatu..."

"What? Why didn't you say so earlier! Stupid woman!" The tall man snapped at her, lifting his arm to hit her.

"Wait. Explore." Soifon ordered him and then the woman, stepping between them.

"I think I remember that Reiatu from my previous life. It has been so constant in it that I didn't recognize it at first. But this is definitely him." She tried to explain, suppressing a smile, though the others wouldn't be able to see it, as she still held her head bowed.

"If you are that certain, then who is that man and what would be a reason for his Reiatu to be here?" The Second Squad's captain demanded to know.

Feeling confident enough she lifted her head and looked at the captain's face. Not daring to stare into the shorter woman's eyes.

"The man is called 'Jiraya', where I'm from he also bore the name 'Toad Sage' and his Reiatu held traces similar to that of an amphibian, that's how I recognized it. Well, I don't know why it is here, but I'm sure he wasn't here himself. He probably used one of his techniques on one of the officers...but that is just my assumption."

"What makes you think that?" Kurotsuchi asked lifting an eyebrow.

"Well..uhm...I just know it must be him..." She nearly mumbled looking down again.

"What nonsense!" He barked again, ready to hit her again.

"Very well...would you be able to track him down?" The shorter woman asked, holding her arm up to halt him again.

"It might be possible..."

"I don't want to hear guesses! Are you able to do it or not?" The short captain demanded.

"Yes ma'am!" The seated officer saluted and left at once, before the Taicho could scold her again.

It had been quite some time since she had seen the old man, but she was sure that she could find him, by tracking down the trail one of the officers had carried with him. She would just have to find it.

On top of the Kazekage tower

Standing on the flat roof of the Kazekage building Rukia again tried to find traces of her family and her sword, as someone interrupted her thoughts.

"Is something bothering you Kuchiki – san?"

Turning around she bowed slightly: "No, not at all Gaara – dono."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Well, I could ask you the same question..."

"I asked first, so tell me what is bothering you." He more demanded than asked.

Looking at the sincerity his eyes displayed Rukia sighed. Lowering her head she shared her thoughts.

"I am worried, sir, even though I know I shouldn't be. I'm afraid Renji will get in some kind of trouble as he always does..."

"Renji is that the brother you mentioned?"

"N – no, my brother is able to manage difficult situations! Renji is my oldest friend and he can be pretty retarded at times..." She waved off his question blushing slightly as she remembered all the ridiculous things her friend had done before.

"If I may say so, you remind me of those two." Rukia then revealed.

Her blush only increased through this and she looked down again.

"To what extent?"

"Well, you have the same hair color and ...uhm...your eyebrows are just as weird as Renji's. Other than that your attitude and demeanor is similar to that of my Nii – sama..." She explained unable to look at Gaara.

"So you are telling me that you trust me, because I remind you of people dear to you?" He concluded.

"I guess you could say that..." Awkwardly Rukia scratched the back of her head and smiled at him.

"How foolish..."

With this the Kazekage enveloped the Shinigami in the sand he had prepared behind her. Not being able to move Rukia could only stare at him and curse herself for being caught off guard.

"What – " She tried to speak but was interrupted.

"What are you doing in my village? Are you an accomplice of Madara? Or are you even one of the warriors they resurrected?"

Where formerly his arms had been crossed, one of them now was extended the hand balled into a loose fist. But not just his stance also his facial expression had changed. His hairless eyebrows were creased into a frown and he glared at Rukia awaiting her

answer.

"Madara? Resurrected warriors? I don't even know what you're talking about!" Rukia yelled at him trying to struggle against the claw of sand that held her firmly in his grasp.

Searching her mind for a way to get out of this a faint whisper reached her ears.

'Rukia – sama...'

'Rukia – sama stay calm.'

'Just breathe slowly. My ice will rid you of this sand.'

Feeling tears of joy welling up inside her she murmured: "Mae Sode no Shirayuki"

Locking eyes with the young Kazekage she took a deep breath and exhaled a waft of icy mist, freezing the sand grains. All Gaara could do was release his technique.

"As I thought, you can use Ninjutsu." He simply stated having his sand surround him, ready to attack again.

"It's not..." Rukia responded panting.

"Then what is it?" Gaara asked threatening.

"Hard to explain. What did you mean by resurrected warriors?" She asked instead, still in a kneeling position.

"Madara summoned dead warriors to enlarge his powers to get the remaining Jinchuuriki."

"I don't understand."

"We are in a truce currently, but soon Madara will attack again to get the remaining two tailed beasts which are sealed within two Shinobi, called the Jinchuuriki. For this they use dead warriors put into immortal shells." He tried again.

A look of utter surprise on her face Rukia yelled: "What is this place? Why would someone destroy the cycle of rebirth to gain power for a war?"

Shielding her head with her hands she tried to comprehend this. As Shinigami she knew about the importance of souls staying in their rightful place. She also knew about the exception Hollows created, but forcefully bringing a soul back into a realm of the living was beyond her imagination. Remembering a report her Taicho had given her she realized that this seemed to be the reason for the disappearance of several Shinigami some weeks ago.

"This can't be...", she mumbled realization dawning on her.

Had they been summoned as well? Has one of them lived in this realm before and dragged the rest with him?

No, no it couldn't be. As far as she knew everyone was either born in Soul Society or brought there as child, like she had been. Shaking her head she stood up regaining her composure.

"I am not an accomplice of that Madara – person. I am not using Ninjutsu or whatever you called it." She assured him.

"That technique you used to free yourself from my sand was definitely Ninjutsu."

"Would you mind defining Ninjutsu then?"

"It is utilizing Chakra into an attack."

"Well, what's your definition of Chakra then?" She asked, getting more and more annoyed by this.

"Chakra is the combination of one's physical and spiritual energy." Gaara added trying not to show his own annoyance.

"That would explain why you can see me..." Rukia concluded, while standing up.

"Why shouldn't I be able to see you?" He asked confused calming down again.

"Believe me or not, but I am a spiritual being, consisting only of spiritual particles, Reishi, as we call them." She laid her cards on the table, putting her flat hand on her chest, the pose suggesting honesty.

"The ice I used earlier was pure spiritual energy unlike your Ninjutsu stuff."

"And this is the truth?" He asked suspiciously.

"Why should I be lying? Wait don't answer that one." She held her hand out to stop him from interrupting her, causing him to quirk one of his brows at her.

Sighing and letting her arm sink to her side she then offered him: "If you don't believe me, then bring someone with no spiritual powers at all. You will see that he will not be able to see me."

"I will prove that. Now rest we will depart for Konoha early tomorrow." He ordered dismissing her for now.

Carefully Rukia passed him, making sure he wouldn't attack her again. Though she wasn't too sure as to why they would be leaving for another village. As promised he had told her about the different Ninja villages, but she didn't really see a point in this decision. Unless one of the others was in Konoha. Realization dawning on her made her eyes widen and a slight smile grace her lips. Maybe she would see her brother again soon, or even Renji. Feeling slightly relieved she made her way to the chamber they had given her for the night.

Not breaking eye contact until she had passed him, Gaara had watched her leaving the roof. The letter he had written had reached the Hokage sooner than expected and the reply said that she as well had encountered a foreigner – Matsumoto Rangiku. According to Tsunade's suggestion they would bring Rukia to the Hidden Leaf, as not only were their interrogators well known for their talent in extracting difficult information, but the village itself was located more centrally than his own. Giving it a better position for gathering people. Still he wanted to see for himself if this woman was a threat. Staying a bit longer he thought about Rukia's words, trying to find a lie in them.

Earlier in the Hokage's Office

"We received a letter from Suna!" A messenger entered the room and handed her a scroll.

Opening it the Hokage read the Kazekage's message. When turning to the second page she burst out laughing.

"Hokage – sama?" The messenger and Shizune asked in unison before she put down the picture that had been enclosed.

Bunny eared people with neatly written names beside them could be seen on it.

Looking more closely and stifling her laughter she asked: "Could that be that big breasted woman Iruka found?"

"Well it does say Matsumoto Rangiku..." Her assistant murmured quietly.

"I can see that! Bring her here!" Tsunade demanded somewhat annoyed, slamming her fist on her table and shooing them out of her office.

Yet all her anger faded when she again looked at the picture. A snicker passed her lips as she continued with her paperwork.

It didn't take long for Shizune to find Rangiku, as Iruka had brought her to the Yamanaka household, where she would be staying until they found out more about her. To not raise suspicion they also had given her new robes, making her look more

like someone belonging to Konoha. Somehow she still had managed to find clothes that displayed her well endowed bosom perfectly. Sighing Tsunade waved for her to come closer.

When Matsumoto stood in front of her table she asked her: "Do you know any of these people?" pointing at the paper.

"Oh my god! That's Rukia – chan's drawings!" Rangiku exclaimed joyfully, picking up the picture and hugging it tightly.

"Where is she?" She then asked.

"She is in Sunagakure. The village Hidden in the Sand." Tsunade explained.

"Is she alright? Is someone with her?" The questions sputtered out of Matsumoto's mouth.

"She seems to be alright. The Kazekage and his siblings found her. No one else was with her."

"Poor Rukia – chan, all by herself..." Rangiku pouted, putting down the picture.

"While I waited for you I thought of something." She informed her.

"And what?" Rangiku asked curiously, a smile on her lips.

"How about I allow you to gather your people here in Konoha?" Tsunade suggested.

"You would do that? That'd be great!" The Shinigami exclaimed happily, bouncing up and down and clapping her hands together.

"So when will Rukia – chan be here?" She asked a bit calmer this time.

"Well, first I have to tell the Kazekage about this, then it will probably take about three days for them to come here. So while we wait for their arrival you can tell me more about your realm."

"Sounds good. Do you know what sounds even better? I'll tell you some of my stories and you tell me some of yours over a nice cup of my good old friend Sake here." Rangiku suggested pulling out a clay flask and a cup, presenting it to the village leader.

"Well, I cannot not accept this offering..." She replied with a grin, taking the cup.

Kapitel 5: First Stages

Chapter 5 – Early Stages

In the Kazekage Tower

Early in the morning Gaara had ordered someone be brought to him that would fit Rukia's description from their talk last night: A man that was dense enough to not feel or possess any spiritual energy at all.

Not knowing what his Kage wanted from him the man waited as Gaara simply sat there staring at him. Squirming under the unwavering gaze he looked around the room to see if he could at least find something to fill the suffocating silence. Time and time again looking at the door as if he would flee any minute.

Without warning said entrance opened, but the Kazekage's siblings weren't there as he expected. There was nothing.

"Kazekage – sama is this some kind of joke?" The man asked nervously.

"What do you mean?" He replied looking from the man to Rukia.

"See. Told you." The Shinigami remarked crossing her arms in front of her, glaring at him victoriously.

"Well...uhm...first you order me here and don't say why and then you open the door, revealing no one..." He tried to explain becoming rather scared now.

"I do not know what you mean. You're dismissed."

"Huh?" The man couldn't comprehend this, looking at his Kazekage in disbelief.

"Leave or I'll make you." Gaara threatened the annoying man, causing him to flee and ran right through Rukia.

For a moment he stopped and shook off a feeling of coldness before running away as fast as he could.

"What a coward." Rukia commented looking at his retreating form and rubbing her arms.

It always felt odd when a mortal passed her spiritual body.

"Presumably, but he proved your point." Gaara acknowledged while standing up and coming closer to her.

"Tell me what kind of spiritual being you are." He demanded, looking down at the slightly shorter woman.

"I'm a...soul... you could say." She tried, struggling not to add the "reaper".

"A soul?" He repeated locking eyes again.

"Yes."

"So you're from the a –"

"Another realm, yes." She interrupted him trying to get him off the track that she was indeed from the afterlife, as humans would call the Soul Society.

Sensing that she would leave it at that he let it slide and instead said: "We should depart now."

About the same time in Konoha

She had spent almost two days in Konoha now. When the Hokage had allowed her to stay Rangiku had been brought to the Yamanaka household. One of the villages'

Shinobi families. Her host was called Inoichi and owned a flower shop where his daughter Ino and his wife carried out the business, when they weren't on a mission. All of them had rather long blond hair so she suspected that this was the reason Tsunade had chosen this place. She would more or less fit into the family's appearance. Even though her hair held a darker color and she wasn't as skinny as the other girls.

So far they have been pretty nice towards Rangiku, which made her awfully suspicious, but she didn't dare to show it. Instead she settled for being grateful as she was granted their guest room. It was a nice room with a quite comfortable bed, much like the one in her own quarters. She didn't notice how exhausted she had been until she laid down to sleep and drifted off shortly afterwards.

Nevertheless it felt like someone had tried to enter her room during the night, but retreated as soon as she had opened her eyes.

Rangiku had been awoken by an unfamiliar Reitsu – like presence that lingered near her door. As much as her captain despised her sleeping in his office not even he could argue that her senses were as sharp as when she was awake. But she wasn't as good in distinguishing different presences as she would have liked to be. Therefore she couldn't place whether it was the curious girl or her father. She had tried to figure it out throughout the breakfast, but they just had a too similar presence. It was irritating. To not get distracted by it any further she put it at the back of her mind and focused on her task at hand: Shopping.

Before Tsunade had informed her about Rukia's upcoming arrival Ino had taken her to get her clothes that would make her fit into the look of the people living in this village.

Rangiku was quite satisfied with the choices they had made. She now wore a really comfortable jacket and fitting short trousers. But as she would be staying for some more days she talked the girl into accompanying her.

Hence she now again was in one of the few clothing stores in Konoha, chatting with the girl.

"Say, was Iruka – san your teacher?" Rangiku asked while looking through some tops.

"Yes of course! He was the teacher of a lot of people." Ino retorted as matter of fact.

"And what kind of teacher is he?"

"Aww...he can be pretty annoying at times." Ino stared at the older woman a flat look on her face.

Was she really asking her about Iruka – sensei while shopping?

"I figured."

"Really?" Now her look was a mixture between curiosity and surprise.

"Yeah, he explained some things about the village yesterday and it was...well you know..."

"Yeah I know..."

Just like that they fell into a comfortable silence continuing their search.

Later that evening Matsumoto and the girl sat in her room and still chatted about the village, its inhabitants and general stuff that was going on.

Even though Rangiku had expected the girl to interrogate her it was the other way round. It was always easy for her to manipulate younger girls into talking about certain topics. One of her talents so to speak. So she by now knew a lot more than she had wished for the girl seemed to be a gossip.

She was in the middle of another tirade about some random topic as a knock on the door interrupted her.

"Come in," Ino answered, offended.

Slowly the door opened to reveal a pink haired girl around her age.

"Sakura!" She greeted her friend excitedly.

"Hi Ino," the other girl replied smiling.

"Ah so you're Haruno Sakura! Ino – chan told me about you!" Rangiku greeted as well grinning at her.

"She did?" Sakura replied smiling, though carrying a violent undertone.

"Yeah, she did. She told me about your little forehead problem." Rangiku told her giggling, trying to aggravate the girls into revealing more about their relationship.

"YOU WHAT?" She yelled as expected.

"Of course why should I leave that out, billboard brow?" Ino replied rather coolly.

"You..."

"My, my don't get angry at each other. Your forehead isn't that bad. I don't think the boys would care much about that." Matsumoto tried to change the topic.

"The boys?" Sakura mumbled with a sudden change in demeanor.

"Did I say something wrong?" Rangiku asked looking between the girls who were now sulking.

"N – no not really..." Fidgeting with her hands Sakura looked down.

"Come on girl sit down and tell me." Rangiku demanded, patting the bed next to her.

Complying reluctantly she sat down between Ino and the Shinigami.

"Well, uhm..." She started but stopped again, folding her hands.

"This is about Sasuke. He i – was a crush of both of us. And well uhm..."

"He betrayed the village and is trying to destroy it." Ino helped her finish the sentence as Sakura was having difficulty doing so.

They both still couldn't completely accept what had happened, but Ino had a bit more control over her feelings. The girls then told her about the betrayal, the war and everything that has been on their mind regarding this topic.

"So you love him?" Rangiku wanted to know, now standing in front of the girls.

"Well, I shouldn't..." Sakura mumbled.

"Do you or not?" She repeated.

"...I do..." She whispered, tears forming in her eyes.

"What makes you think it is love?"

"What?"

"Why do you think it is love and not just mere affection?"

"Because I love him!" Sakura now yelled, not able to comprehend the difference.

"Baka. You are young. Just because you like someone and have a fluttering feeling in your stomach doesn't mean you love him or her. Love is something that is build over time and experience with a person. From what you told me your feelings are anything but mutual and nothing more than affection for an idol." The older woman explained bowing down a bit, her hands at her hips.

"That's not true!" The girl protested again.

Straightening herself she used her index fingers to illustrate her point.

"Look there is a difference between loving someone" She lifted her left finger.

"and being IN love with someone." Lifting the second one and moved them apart to either side of her body, opening a gap between them.

"And you, my dear, have an unhealthy crush on someone who does not feel anything

for you." She concluded poking Sakura's forehead.

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Believe me, I do." Rangiku told her, leaving both girls agape.

"I loved – no love a man that always left me without telling me where he'd go. That toyed with me and my feelings. I tried so many times not to love him, but the feelings remained. Even when he betrayed everyone to join another traitor. Little did we know that he wanted to stop him by himself. To get revenge for something that man had done to me while I was still a child. He carried the burden of the betrayal to make sure I'd be alright. Opposite from you I know he loved me, but our happy ending never came. He just died without leaving even a memento of him." She then confessed, now having tears in her eyes as well.

Wiping away a tear she continued: "Your Sasuke is nothing like that. He sounds evil and even insane. Try to get him out of your head. You have to see him as your enemy. Because if you meet in this war, he will not hesitate to kill you. Even if you would. You have to keep that in mind." She nearly begged the girl kneeling before her and taking her hands.

"But how? I tried, but..."

"I never said it's easy. It was hard for me too. And even if you do not want to or can't erase your feelings than at least be prepared to act against them. To be able to kill him if you need to."

Standing up again Rangiku patted the girls head.

"Besides there are a bunch of cute boys running around this village. Why not pick one of them instead?"

"Did it help you?" Ino wanted to know this time.

"A little. But I had always looked at other men. For example Kakashi – san: I'd totally date him right away." She tried loosening the mood, grinning at the girls.

"Ewww..." Both girls retorted in slight disgust, making Rangiku laugh.

She again managed to turn a conversation a way she wanted. Even though talking about Gin still hurt, she hoped to at least be able to ease some of these two kids' pain.

Back in the Desert

For their journey to Konoha they had given her new clothes. Rukia now wore thinner robes and a cloak that would protect her from the sand. Not that much different to the one her brother had given her for her trip to the realm of Hollows, Hueco Mundo. By now they've been in the heat for the majority of the day. Making it nearly unbearable for her to walk, let alone run anymore. She hardly had a chance to keep up with the others.

'Rukia – chan can you hear me?' A voice suddenly echoed in her mind.

Ripped out of a trance like state she stopped in her tracks, looking around to find the source of it. Unfortunately she couldn't. Thinking this might just have been a hallucination due to the exposure to the sun she continued walking on, shaking her head.

'Rukia – chan, it's Rangiku. I'm using Tenteikuura to contact you.'

"Rangiku – san?" She mumbled stopping again, relieved that it wasn't her mind playing tricks on her.

'Listen: If you move a bit to the left you will be able to pick up Yumichika. And I guess you don't need to speak out loud.' She told her shortly via the communication Kidou.

'Alright I'll try to lead them to Ayasegawa – san then. Thank you.' Rukia replied in her

mind.

'See you in Konoha.' Rangiku ended the mental connection between them, making Rukia realize that everyone was staring at her.

"What happened?" Gaara wanted to know.

Deciding that lying to him wouldn't be the best idea she told him:

"A friend contacted me just now. She said that there is another one of us if we alter this route to the left."

"Then we should do that." He accepted the explanation right away.

"Thank you Kazekage – dono." She bowed shortly before they started off again.

Not that much time had passed until she could sense Ayasegawa Yumichika's spiritual presence.

"That way!" Rukia yelled pointing towards it.

Sensing her as well, Yumichika changed his route to meet them.

"Kuchiki – san!" He screamed as loud as his throat and his dignity allowed him.

Which wasn't loud at all.

"Thank god you found me in this godawful desert!" He exclaimed waving his arms theatrically, before sitting down trying to catch his breath.

"Ayasegawa – san!" Rukia rushed to his side concerned.

Building a mound above them Gaara decided: "We should take a break. He would slow us down otherwise."

Nodding in agreement, his siblings sat down as well, enjoying the shadow the sand had created.

"Here have some water." Rukia offered him her share.

"Thank you Kuchiki – san." He said as he took it and gulped down the refreshing liquid.

"Hey slow down! Don't drink everything in one go!" Kankurou yelled trying to stop him.

Yumichika looked at the boy over the rim of the jug.

"Uarg...what awful face paintings!" He then cried out, covering his eyes.

"The hell?" The boy yelled at him, feeling insulted.

Catching the water container the other had dropped, Rukia noticed him trying to avoid looking at the puppeteer. Not knowing how she could explain this behavior, she simply gave Kankurou an apologetic smile.

"How long will it take to get out of this place? I can't stand this sand anymore. It's everywhere. In my beautiful hair. In my beautiful robes. Every pore of my beautiful face is clogged with this horrible substance...it will take weeks to get it out..."

Yumichika started complaining, running his hand through his hair and picking at his robes and cheeks.

"Ayasegawa – san we will soon reach a village, please endure it for a little while longer." Rukia tried to calm the nearly hysterical man, still holding the jug in her hands.

Staring at him bluntly, the sand siblings didn't understand what this was about. Barely a spot of dust or sand could be seen on him, yet the man seemed to feel filthy. The clothes he wore were like Rukia's when they had first met. Additionally he wore an orange, collar – like thing around his neck that went down to his upper chest. One strand of fabric went down from this to a similar clothing around his right arm. It looked far too warm for this kind of temperature. Following the others' look Rukia inspected her fellow Shinigami as well.

"Ayasegawa – san what happened to your feathers?" She asked him, noticing the

missing accessories.

Carefully he took the items from his robes.

"I had to take them off so they wouldn't be damaged in this awful wind..." He sadly explained, placing them back in their secure place after everyone could take a look.

Blinking the Suna Nin decided that it was a safer choice to not ask any further questions regarding this topic.

"Are you able to keep up with our speed?" Gaara asked as he has had enough of the man's rambling.

"Of course." He responded throwing his hair behind his head.

An arrogant gesture meant to not just show an offended pride in his own abilities, but also superior feelings towards the other.

As if he – a member of Squad Eleven, the fiercest and most powerful Squad in Seireitei – wouldn't be able to keep up with some mere kids. How ridiculous.

"Then let's move." Releasing the sand Gaara then stood waiting for the others to follow him.

Kapitel 6: Gaining Trust

Gaining Trust

Between Konoha and Suna

Towards the end of the day they finally reached the first trees of the forest that started shortly after the borders to the land of fire. Hosting the Village Hidden in the Leaves within its depths. When the branches grew thicker and provided more cover they stopped to make their camp for the night.

"Thank god, I'm out of that filthy sand!" Yumichika praised when he sat down.

Only to hit quite a wet spot.

Jumping up again he yelled: "This can't be true! After enduring so much I have to sleep in a swamp!"

For a brief moment Gaara considered if going back to old habits and just killing him would be a good idea, but decided against it. He was a Kage now after all. And this person, though seemingly unimportant could provide them with useful information later on. Eying the strange – and utterly annoying – man he sat down on a dry root.

"Ayasegawa – san just some more. The village isn't that far away." Rukia assured him, trying to calm him, like she did in the desert.

Even though she knew it was a three days journey from Sunagakure to Konohagakure, she hoped this would help him keep quiet to not strain everyone's nerves even more. Yumichika was someone she barely could be around herself. She was close to snapping at him, but she knew that wouldn't help either.

"I know, I know, but this place is just as filthy as the stupid desert..." He complained again picking at some weeds on the ground.

"Bear with it." Kankurou told him, throwing a mat and a blanket at him.

"Here so you won't have to sleep on the ground." He offered sarcastically settling down himself.

"How generous of you." Yumichika remarked making his bedding as comfortable as possible.

They weren't sure whether he really appreciated the gesture or was simply making fun of the Sand – Ninja.

Temari then lit a small fire to prepare a small meal for them, while the others finished the camp for the night. Rolling out her mat as well Rukia then used her Shinigami robes to form a pillow.

This would be a rather uncomfortable night, but she had had worse.

As he had offered his mat and blanket to the complaining stranger Kankurou would have to sleep on the mere ground, bracing himself for this he crossed his arms in front of his chest to keep the warmth of his body.

"Take mine." Gaara offered holding his own stuff in front of his brother.

"Gaara, but..."

"Take it. I don't need it anyway." He ordered him this time.

"Thank you." Kankurou reluctantly replied taking his brother's offer.

When everyone had eaten their small meal, Gaara sat down on the root again.

He watched as the others slowly fell asleep one after the other. Normally they would take turns guarding their camp, but whenever he was on a mission or journey with his

siblings it would be his self-imposed duty to do so.

Feeling his own tiredness settling in, he tried to fight it off. But as it was harder for him to do so since the Shukaku had been removed, he simply closed his eyes, submitting to his urges. Even if he would fall asleep, he would awake if someone tried to ambush them.

He could hear the steady breathing of his companions, the quiet rustling of the wind in the branches, small animals rushing through the grass. It was a calm night.

The soothing sounds calmed him as well and helped him to find some much needed rest.

But as usual his sleep didn't last long.

Even without the sand demon inside him he still couldn't sleep easily.

He would wake up after short periods of time. Sometimes even more restless than before, looking around frantically. As if the demon still was inside of him providing danger to everyone around him. Other times, like tonight, he would just open his eyes and realize that he was awake and it would take him hours to fall asleep again.

He still just wasn't used to it. Making him one of the best guards.

After several failed attempts he tried what helped him most in his sleepless nights: Taking a walk.

The rustling of clothes and footsteps, accompanied with the feeling of an approaching spiritual energy caused Rukia to slowly open her eyes. Growing up in Rukongai left her aware of her surroundings, even while sleeping. Seeing the young Kazekage walking off of their campground left her curious and suspicious as to why he would do so.

She decided to follow him.

"What are you doing here?" He asked when he finally noticed her, a good while later.

"I could ask you the same thing." She replied mimicking their previous conversation.

"Why did you follow me?"

"I wondered why you left our camp in the middle of the night."

"There is nothing to wonder about. I just felt like going for a walk." He told her ending the topic.

With this Rukia again was reminded of her older brother, but the boy wasn't as skilled in it as him, so she tried again: "What is bothering you Gaara – dono?"

"Nothing."

"I told you my story, now it's your turn to tell me yours. Don't you think?" She stated.

"No I don't think so."

Getting impatient Rukia crossed her arms and leaned against a nearby tree.

"You try to be all high and mighty in order to show people that you are the Kazekage, but you still have a long way to go and to learn a lot of things to make people acknowledge that." She stated causing him to turn around in surprise.

"Leading a vast amount of people is not always easy. I know that from my brother and my...uhm...other people. You hold a great responsibility for all their lives, but you also have to take care of your own. You have siblings you can talk to about the things on your mind and they should be able to do the same. I am not one of them, but please tell me what is bothering you, so both of us will be able to find some more sleep tonight." She continued her speech walking closer to him.

"Nothing is bothering me." He told her again not looking away.

She somehow had hit a right spot. He didn't know why, but he somehow felt that he

could trust this woman, so he added: "I'm just not used to sleeping."

"How come?" Rukia asked confused, tilting her head a little.

"You remember the Jinchuuriki I mentioned last night?" He asked, which was received with a nod.

"I was one of them. Within me the One Tailed Shukaku was sealed. A sand demon that would cause harm to everyone around when I either would fall asleep or lose consciousness. I didn't sleep for as far as I can remember. The Akatsuki removed the Shukaku not long ago. So I am able to sleep again without fearing an outbreak of the beast. But I still can't. I just don't know how to..." He told her, looking down again.

"So your dark rimmed eyes are due to insomnia..." Rukia concluded, adding: "You will learn to sleep. It will be hard, but it is possible." Rukia assured him.

"How would you know that?" He distrustfully asked her.

"I never suffered insomnia the way you did, but I grew up in a place where you had to be aware of what was around you all the time. If you lost your concentration just once you could easily have been killed. It was hard for me to get rid of the habit of waking up at every unusual noise. Even today I woke up when you passed by." She told him.

"So you say you learned how to sleep?" He asked a bit gloomy this time.

"Yes I did." Rukia assured him again and continued:

"You remember the friend I mentioned earlier? We grew up together. Even fearing I might fail I could sleep better knowing I was safe as long as he was with me. And so did he. Taking care of each other helped us through that time. When we finally managed to leave that place and our paths parted I had to learn sleeping again. He wasn't around; I was on my own again. I still feared someone would get me in my sleep as it was imprinted into my very core.

In my first nights in my new so – called home I couldn't sleep one bit. I was scared. I was so scared I didn't even dare to lie down and close my eyes. When exhaustion finally caught up to me I realized my worries had been to no avail. That I wouldn't have to fear anything anymore. As now I would be protected by the people around me, rather than harmed. Especially by my older brother." Pausing for a moment she remembered her first night in the Kuchiki – estate. The fear of the unknown. The doubt that it was for any reason other than as a sick joke that she had been brought into this situation. That she wasn't truly allowed to be there as new member of the Kuchiki – clan.

"I can see that your brother cares deeply for you. He would do everything to protect you. Just like mine. As would your sister. You have to have faith in them. It is hard, but you have to trust the people closest to you. If you are able to do that, then finding sleep becomes easier." She then prodded him.

"When I was a child I trusted my uncle, thought he would be the only one to truly understand and love me. Everyone hated me for what was sealed inside me, but he always assured me that I was his 'precious person'." Gaara revealed, staring directly into her eyes. After a slight pause he added: "He tried to assassinate me."

Shocked for a moment Rukia then caught herself.

"He had his reasons for doing so. As did my brother when he strove for my execution not long ago." She retorted calmly.

"But you said he protects you?" The boy now asked even more confused.

"He does. As I said earlier he has to take care of a lot of people, just like you as Kazekage. Additionally, he is the head of our clan and has to uphold the rules of both society and the clan. With the sentence put on me through an intrigue I was a shame to the family and the punishment had to be fulfilled. That's what he would have done

by himself. Luckily he became aware of the failure in the law in time, so in the end he saved me."

"I don't understand."

"He was torn between his loyalty towards the law and his sense of protection towards me. As he would have upheld the rules to the bitter end he would have had me killed personally. Still, as soon as he realized the rules he had obeyed were faked, he came to my rescue."

She tried again in a more simple way, leaving out her adoption and her sister's promise not to confuse the boy even more.

"All he ever did was to protect me and the thought of me being killed, by his own or someone else's hand was unbearable. He told me later. I now know that he deeply cares for me even though he doesn't show it that often. I told you, you have a similar attitude like him. So for your siblings it is probably the same as it is for me. They know that you care for them. That you love them. But also that you are not able to show it. I'm sure they care for you just as much." Rukia ended putting her hand on his shoulder. Feeling sand between her fingers made her slowly remove it again, still her look was unwavering and she returned his gaze.

"Now let's return to the camp and rest before we move on tomorrow." She then suggested motioning in said direction.

"We probably should do that..." He said with resignation, taking the lead again.

When they reached their camp again Gaara sat back down. Contemplating Rukia's words he felt calmed somehow. He had met another person that seemed to understand him. Without noticing he soon found sleep again. To his own surprise he awoke when the sun started to rise. The conversation had managed to ease his ever racing thoughts enough to pass through the rest of the night. Smiling slightly he waited for the others to wake up so they could continue.

On the streets of Konoha

Strolling through the streets of Konoha, Rangiku was on her way to meet up with Tsunade. They had agreed on telling each other stories about their lives over some really nice Sake.

She knew that neither would reveal everything so she had to be cautious as to what she would say.

Still there was the problem that the rest of her group was scattered across this strange world.

Reminiscing on what she had found out so far, the Shinigami became lost in her own thoughts. When she had first talked with Iruka she had asked him for pins and paper. With these she had tinkered some flags. Each held a drawn symbol for each of her friends. A bunny for Rukia, a snowflake for her captain, a Sakura – petal for Byakuya and so forth. With a map and the tracking Kidou Kakushitsuijaku she had almost located everyone's position.

As it seemed that the Shinigami arrived in different time intervals, she had found Rukia and Hisagi right away. Yesterday she detected Kira and Yumichika. Early this morning she had found Byakuya and her captain. The last time she had used the technique she had detected Hinamori.

By now Rangiku knew that Rukia was on her way here. Accompanied by some Ninja

from another village. Before reaching Konoha she would meet up with Ayasegawa and her brother.

Her own captain was a bit too far away from the others, in some godawful desert. She was relieved when she found Momo – chan close to him. Hisagi and Kira where in an icy region where she would have liked her captain to be. Only Renji and Ikkaku were the only ones left whom she haven't found traces of so far.

When Ino had shown her the village Rangiku had been looking for a quiet place where she could use this and the other Kidou to contact anyone. It wasn't easy for her to skip out of things and get there. She was under permanent surveillance it seemed. For telling Rukia about Yumichika she had used an argument between Ino and her friend to make her exit.

She hoped to soon find a way to get enough time to tell everyone what she knew so far and where they would be gathering. Even though she was on her own right now, she couldn't do it, as two people were still absent.

Grumbling slightly she entered the Hokage building.

Reaching the office she could hear the rustling of paper and mumbled curses over far too much paperwork. Even this realm had to suffer from it.

Joyfully she opened the door and greeted the busy Kage.

"Hello~o"

"Ah, Rangiku. You're early." Tsunade returned her smile, shoving the papers aside.

"But, Tsunade –sama!" Her aide protested.

"There is time for that later, Shizune!" She declared and took out a large bottle of Sake from underneath the table.

Just then a rush of wind ran through the room.

"Tsunade – sama we detected a high amount of Chakra in the forest!" A black cloaked man wearing an animal mask declared right after this, kneeling on the ground before the large desk.

Looking at the unwelcome intruder Tsunade eyed him angrily, then sighed.

"Send a group to investigate then." The Hokage ordered resigned.

Letting her senses drift around the village Rangiku recognized the source of it immediately.

Rangiku also remembered what Iruka had told her about the ANBU Black Ops of Konoha. An elite group of Ninja used for assassinations and espionage quite successfully.

Thinking fast she decided that it would be best to reach those two before the ANBU did.

"I better let you do your job now." She said and waved at her new friend before skipping out of the office.

Noticing the strange behavior Tsunade was left staring at the door in confusion. This was most suspicious. Therefore another ANBU was ordered to her side and followed her swiftly.

As soon as she had closed the door Matsumoto started running and later on used Shunpo to reach the forest as soon as possible.

Not noticing the figure close behind her.

In a short distance from Konoha

"YOU STUPID BASTARD! THIS IS ALL YOU'R FAULT!" The bald man yelled at his taller companion, standing right in front of him.

Their noses nearly touching they stared and growled at each other.

Recently the two of them had woken up in this forest. After strolling for a while they had met and ended up in this contest of insults, yells and pride. Trying to find out who would give in first.

Their clashing Reaitsu surrounded them and built an uncontrolled orb enclosing them. Flying into every direction it looked like a red tentacle bubble.

"It's n – ..." Renji started but was silenced as he and Ikkaku were hit violently.

Causing both of their heads to clash together.

"Would you two cut it out?" Rangiku yelled, standing beside them fists raised.

Standing there in disbelief the other Shinigami subconsciously lowered their spiritual pressure.

"R – Rangiku – san?" The red haired lieutenant asked, a look of utter confusion on his face.

They both only held their heads where she'd hit them looking surprised at her.

Kapitel 7: Small Reunions

Chapter 7 – Small Reunions

Near Konoha

“Your quarreling caught the attention of the guards from the nearby village! They are on their way here to find out what the ruckus is about! If we don't leave here right now they will catch you and they will ask even more questions than they already do!” Yelled Rangiku gesturing in the direction of the Hidden Leaf Village.

Seeing that the other two did not comprehend her words she grunted and simply grabbed them by their collars and dragged them a little farther into the forest. Away from the direction in which the ANBU were searching for them.

After a short while of stumbling behind their colleague the men just entered into a jog beside her.

When she saw an old rundown shack they finally stopped and entered it.

Waving her hands and whispering the incantation of a barrier-Kidou she hid their presence from any possible follower.

“Well, this should do...” She mumbled, turning to the others who just looked at her in disbelief.

“What's the meaning of this?” Ikkaku demanded to know when he got out of his stupor.

“The explosion brought us to this place. It's...”, Rangiku started her explanation, but was interrupted by “SO IT WAS YOUR FAULT!”

“SHUT UP!”

Raising her Reiatu she hit the men again, causing them to cower in fear.

“Would you stop it so I can explain?!” She tried again.

Glaring at each other and looking at her angry face the two decided that keeping quiet was the safer choice.

“May I?” She asked with an innocent smile, but murderous intent in her eyes.

“Sure go ahead.” They replied at once waving their arms in defeat.

“It's like this: The explosion Renji caused – “

“Told ya!” Ikkaku interrupted again, elbowing the other.

“AS I WAS SAYING...”, Rangiku started again staring intensely at the bald man.

“That incident caused us to enter this realm. It is a realm of the living, but not the Karakura Town one. The people here still live in a feudal system, having Daimyo's and stuff. Also they have several Ninja villages...”

“Ninjas?” Renji interrupted this time.

“Yes Ninjas, would you...”

“You mean like a whole bunch of Squad Two cowards?” The third seat wanted to know.

“They aren't cowards. Any of them. And if you interrupt me one more time...”, she threatened, leaving the result untold.

Gulping the two motioned for her to continue.

“Where was I? Ah yes, Ninjas.” Rangiku tried to remind herself tapping a finger at her chin and snapping when she found her answer.

“The village closest to us is the Hidden Leaf. I've been there for some days now. They

are really nice people though they try to get information out of me every night...”, she paused thinking of what to say next.

“You've been here for several days?” Abarai asked using her pause.

“How do they try to get the information?” Madarame followed suit.

“Yes I've been here for several days. I also noticed that you weren't here til today. I set up a map with cute, little flags that I made and...” She put her fingers together, showing the size of the flags and was about to talk more about her artistic abilities, but stopped herself from that. This was no time to goof off.

“The map I made contains the information where everyone is. If you hadn't made such a commotion I would have started searching for you this evening and wouldn't have to skip out of a talk with the Hokage that suspiciously.” She answered the first question.

“What's a Hokage?” Both of them asked, forgetting about the other question.

“The Hokage is the leader of the Leaf. Every village has their own Kage. From the amount of people underneath them they would be akin to a captain.”

“What did you have a talk with the captain for?” Ikkaku asked misusing the title.

“Kage. Hokage to be precise.” She corrected him.

“They do have captains, but they are way lower ranked. Anyway...we were just about to have our usual talk over some Sake. She's one awesome woman. Exactly how I like 'em to be.” Matusmoto fancied over Tsunade wiggling a bit back and forth.

“So she's hot?” Ikkaku concluded imagining a woman like Rangiku and starting to blush a little.

Blushing as well Renji cleared his throat and asked more seriously: “So you've gained her trust?”

Ignoring Ikkaku, Rangiku answered: “No. I don't think so. She lets me stay. And as I told her that there are more of our group she even allowed me to gather everyone in the village. Still the place I'm staying at belongs to a man that tries to use his...what do they call it?...Jutsu to collect intel from me.”

“Jutsu?” The anticipated question came right away.

“It's a bit like Kidou. Though it uses physical and spiritual prowess...”, seeing their uncomprehending faces she simply told them: “It's like Kidou only different.”

They nodded, even though they did not understand a word. Being as inept with the Deamon Arts as one could be.

Sighing Rangiku went on.

“Anyway. Your show earlier caught the attention of the ANBU, an execution group like our Omnitsukidou, and yes they have a Squad Two among the Squad Two people.” She answered Ikkaku's unasked question, causing him to close his mouth reluctantly without saying a word.

“These guys are probably searching the forest right now. So I skipped out to warn you and get you out of their way. And now we have to find a way to get you properly into the village.” She closed her explanation, releasing the Kidou.

Not too far away the ANBU gave up on their search. They had lost track of both Rangiku and the strange force. So they couldn't do any more than to return to the village. Reporting an unsuccessful mission and hoping the Hokage would not be to mad about it.

In another forest

After running and Shunpo-ing through this forest for a long time Byakuya finally

found the Reiatu he had searched for so long. Rukia was close, so he picked up his pace again.

Sensing her brother's presence as well Rukia stopped and changed her direction immediately. Too relieved to finally meet him again in this strange land she used Shunpo to reach him.

Stopping when they noticed her absence the group followed the trail Yumichika had picked up.

"Nii-sama!" Rukia cried out loud when she saw her brother in the distance.

Halting their movements when they came close to each other the Kuchiki siblings stood before each other. Looking up with watering eyes Rukia couldn't help herself but to launch forward and hug her brother around the waist. Unsure and still unused to this habit Byakuya remained calm and unmoved by his sisters actions. Moving away Rukia respectfully bowed down.

"I am sorry Nii-sama."

"Don't be." He responded placing his hand on her head.

"I am glad to see you unharmed as well." He then told her, smiling slightly.

Feeling his touch and the warmth accompanying it Rukia lost a weight on her heart. Her brother was here with her. He really was here. She let a single tear slip down her cheek. As she straightened herself she met his gaze and returned his smile.

"And who's that?" A now familiar voice asked from behind her.

"Kuchiki Byakuya-dono." Yumichika told the cat boy without hesitation and bowed down respectfully.

"You gotta be a big shot if everyone's bowing to ya." Kankurou concluded further.

"He is the head of one of the four noble families in our realm, insolent brat!" Rukia scolded him.

By now she had turned around to face the youngsters. Looking surprised the insulted wasn't able to say a word.

"We should take a break so you can regain some energy." Gaara suggested.

"No, we should keep moving." Byakuya declined.

"Are you being followed?" The Kazekage asked locking eyes with the noble.

"It may be." The Kuchiki simply answered unwavering.

"Well than we shall move on." He decided breaking the gaze.

They returned to their previous route using the branches of the trees to jump through the top of the forest. Following it for some time Byakuya slipped more than once and barely managed to come to a halt in a way that wouldn't be caught as unusual. As it occurred more often Rukia suddenly requested: "Could we take a break?"

Exchanging looks of understanding the group knew this wasn't for her own sake, but for her brother's. Nodding in agreement they returned to the ground and took a rest.

Crossing his legs Byakuya sat down leaning against the trunk of a tree. Inwardly thanking his sister for the opportunity to regain some energy. With this many people they would be able to hold off anyone who might still be following him.

Using this chance he focused his mind on his sword trying to find a way to release it again.

'*Senbonzakura*' He called out.

At first he didn't gain an answer, but faintly he could hear:

'*Byakuya-sama*'

Going deeper into his mind he searched for his Zanpakutou spirit. Following the calls he soon reached a completely white room. Looking more closely he could see bars

that separated him from the huge cherry tree on the other side. A wooden frame surrounded the bars, making it almost seem like a huge door. Yet the doorway itself seemed to be sealed, judging by the two papers with the Kanji for "seal" written on them.

'Senbonzakura.' The Shinigami called out again.

'Byakuya-sama' The voice of the tree echoed accompanied by the rustling of his blossoms.

Cautiously Byakuya stepped closer. Slowly he ripped off one of the seals, but it didn't bring the result he had hoped for. Neither did tearing off the other. Instead of freeing his spirit from its prison they simply reappeared again, causing a puzzled look to appear on Byakuya's face. Only in company of his most trusted companion – beside his wife – would he allow himself to show this kind of emotion.

'What is the meaning of this?' He demanded to know from his sword, pointing at the papers.

'I do not know Byakuya-sama' The tree replied reluctantly, fully knowing the Shinigami would be disappointed by this.

'But I think I can still lend you my strength so you will be able to move onwards.' He offered his master instead.

Slowly the blossoms fell and floated through the bars, surrounding Byakuya and granting him some of his own energy.

In the outside world a whirlwind that smelled of cherry blossoms and held a rosy colour had enclosed Byakuya. He hadn't moved a muscle and this phenomenon would seem rather unusual if they hadn't all known their own ways to muster strength in the time of need. Yet this was different. Temari didn't dare to think of it as pretty. Pretty was a girly way of thinking and she was not at all girly. Looking at her brothers she could see confusion in Kankuro's and consideration in Gaara's face. She didn't know what to make of it herself. The other girl, Rukia, glowed nearly in admiration, while that annoying twit sparkled with joy. He definitely thought this to be pretty.

Opening his eyes again the Kuchiki looked at the people around him, discarding their different impression by simply turning towards Rukia.

"Are you able to move on?" He then asked his sister trying to cover his own display of weakness earlier.

"Yes I think I'll be alright." She helped her brother, knowing that he had seemingly found a way to still gain power from his Zanpakutou.

She had expected nothing less from her brother; one of the most powerful captains of the thirteen court guard squad's.

Near the entrance of Konoha

On their way to the village Rangiku had told her comrades more about the village and the war that was going on. Besides that, she told them about Inoichi and his family and what she had learnt about their abilities.

"So you think he uses that Yuzu stuff to get into your mind?" Renji asked after a moment of silent contemplation.

"I don't think so, I know it. Ino-chan told me about it. And she only made me promise not to tell her father that she did so." Rangiku corrected, smiling brightly.

She could still see the flustered girl, when she realized what she had told the foreigner.

"Do you think they will do the same thing with us?" The other lieutenant asked then, stopping in his tracks.

"Probably." Matsumoto concluded sighing, stopping as well.

"But you said, you talked to that chick about us, what's different to that dude forcing information out of us with his little tricks?" Ikkaku wanted to know, standing before them.

"Are you stupid or something?" Rangiku asked before adding "Wait don't answer that one."

Offended the other Shinigami huffed, but was silenced by the woman as she explained:

"When I voluntarily tell her about the structures and traditions of Soul Society then I am not breaking my vow to not tell a mortal about our realm. But if they just take every available piece of information from my memories, then it is not clear whether they would understand them correctly."

"They might even feel threatened by it" Pondered Renji folding his arms in front of him.

"So we better not let them do that?" Madarame concluded.

"Exactly. So be careful while sleeping. As he would probably attempt it at night." Rangiku warned them.

"Have you found anything else, where we could get more information on this realm?" The red haired lieutenant asked.

"Of course, silly. There is a library that holds just about everything this village has ever known." The other replied.

"Can we go there like that?" He wanted to know next.

"You think there is something important?" Ikkaku interjected.

"My gut says so..." Renji mumbled, looking down.

"Mine as well." Rangiku assured him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Everyone thought Renji to be just another brute from Squad Eleven, but his time in the Sixth Squad had helped him to expand his strategic thinking. Rangiku knew better than to judge a person by mere appearance and attitude. Though the boy still seemed insecure at displaying it. With a former superior like Zaraki Kenpachi, the most brutal and thoughtless captain in the Gotei 13, this was no surprise. Some things just stay with you longer than you wish.

"But I don't think we could freely enter the library. We probably would have to sneak in to look if they have anything about Shinigami or akin to it." Matsumoto told them after a pause.

"Sneaking into a building of Squad Two like people. Sounds like fun." The third-seat exclaimed grinning widely, grabbing the place where his sword would have been. Witnessing this Renji added another question:

"What happened to our Zanpakutous?"

"I wish I could tell you..." Rangiku replied sadly.

Kapitel 8: Information Gathering

Chapter 8 - Information Gathering

In the Yamanaka Household

It had been a long day when the three Shinigami were finally able to sit down and take a breath in Rangiku's room.

When they had arrived in Konoha the female had brought them to the Hokage for a formal introduction. Even though Tsunade was still suspicious as to why Matsumoto had left that fast and how she found her friends right when there was a fluctuation of Chakra not that far away from the village, they somehow managed to convince her that Renji and Ikkaku had nothing to do with it.

Their in-adeptness with the Deamon Arts came in handy with this. Even though Matsumoto had tried to explain the concept of Chakra to her colleagues they had failed at understanding it. Therefore they did not understand Tsunade's questions as to whether they were responsible for the incident either.

Still, the Hokage made sure they would stay at the Yamanaka household as well. For this Ino had to share her room with Rangiku – not without complaining about losing her privacy, but she was assured that this was only a temporary measure – while the guys used Rangiku's room.

And that was where they currently were sitting and discussing what they should do next.

Pulling out the map she had made from below the bed Matsumoto urged the men to come closer.

"This is the map of this land. And these things are where everyone is last time I checked." She explained pointing at the flags.

She then reached underneath the bed once more to get two more flags.

"And these two are for you." She handed them theirs.

"An ape?" Renji asked with a frown.

"And I got a moon..." Ikkaku noted dully.

"Well...it seemed fitting..." Rangiku defended herself.

"How does that seem fitting? I have nothing in common with an ape and if you go for fitting images then a snake or even a tiger would be more fitting than an ape." Renji complained.

"Or a pineapple." His bald colleague mocked him.

Glaring at him Renji grumbled: "Shut it Panchiko-Head." Using the much despised nickname given to the Third Seat by his Lieutenant.

As both men seemed to be ready to get into another fight Rangiku intervened.

"Well, well, boys. Keep it low." She ordered them.

"Besides Renji isn't your Zanpakutou spirit a baboon?"

"A baboon with a snake as tail, but baboons are monkeys not apes." He explained still a little mad at her.

"Well, can't you try seeing this drawing as that of a monkey?" She asked him innocently.

"It does look like an ape so, no." He told her flatly.

"Then you have to live with that..." Rangiku gave in rubbing her temples.

She was about to explain some more as someone knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" She asked innocently.

Inoichi slowly opened the door and looked inside.

"I just wanted to tell you that dinner will be ready any minute. So if you would like to come down..." He informed them smiling.

"Dinner!" Both males echoed joyfully raising their fists, their anger already forgotten. Rolling her eyes Rangiku answered, smiling as well: "We will be there."

With a nod he exited the room, closing the door behind him.

"Let's go get some food!" Madarame exclaimed his mouth already watering.

"No. Didn't you listen? They aren't ready yet."

"But they will be soon, so why waste time?"

With a sigh Rangiku could not really argue with that.

"Just wait until I put away the map..."

"Sure. Hurry up." He agreed, crossing his arms.

"Do they know about the map and how you are able to locate everyone?" Renji wondered.

He had seen the way the blond male had looked at it and tried to figure out what it meant.

"Well, Ino saw me making the flags and came in when I put the first few into place. But she never really asked how I was able to tell where everyone was....I mean she asked if I could sense you, which I replied to with yes, but that was it."

"But you couldn't have actually sensed anyone that far away." He said pointing at the flags made for Kira and Hisagi that were the farthest away from their location.

"Well, she believed me and didn't dig any further. So I guess they have people that are able to sense others that far away." Matsumoto answered with a shrug.

"Could you hurry up? I'm starving..." Madarame interrupted the conversation.

"Alright, alright I'll move the map. No need to fuss about it..." Rangiku complained as well carefully tugging away the map.

On the other side of the door Inoichi had waited for a moment to hear what the strangers were talking about. Even though the woman had stayed here for several days he hadn't been able to get any kind of intel on her. Only what she was willing to give.

Hearing that Ino had not asked further questions made him cringe a little. She'd had a good opportunity to find out about some of Matsumoto's techniques and failed to use it. He would have to discuss that with her later.

When he heard them get ready to move out he used the Shunshin no Jutsu to get to the dining room before them.

"Everything alright?" Shikaku Nara asked him alarmed.

"Yes, they're coming." Inoichi informed his old friend, sitting down beside him.

As the Hokage hadn't been convinced of the men's innocence regarding the Chakra occurrence, she had asked the Ino-Shika-Chou formation to have a look at them.

Therefore the Yamanaka had decided to hold a dinner for his friend's families and their guests. This would be a good opportunity for Shikaku and Shikamaru to analyze the strangers.

While the women were preparing the table the Shinigami entered the room.

"Woah, are you throwing a feast for us?" Ikkaku asked astonished seeing all the food already lined up on the table.

"Haha, well, you can see it as feast, but it is an annual feast we hold with our befriended families and you happen to be our special guests." The Yamanaka explained with laughter in his voice.

"Guess we have good timing then." The Shinigami grinned, rubbing his belly.

"Don't you want to introduce us?" A man with a scar across his face and a high black ponytail asked their host.

"Yes, yes of course." The blond man stood up again a little flustered.

"These are Nara Shikaku, his son Shikamaru and Akamichi Chouza and his son Chouji." He introduced his friends pointing at the scarred man, a young boy with a similar hairstyle and keen eyes, a bulky man with wavy streaks on his cheeks and long, spiky red hair and an equally chubby boy with swirls instead of streaks and brown hair instead of red, respectively.

"Nice to meet you I'm Matsumoto Rangiku and these are Abarai Renji and Madarame Ikkaku." Rangiku introduced them as well, waving at the males.

"Why don't you have a seat?" Inoichi's wife suggested moving one of the chairs away from the table for one the guests to be able to sit at it.

"Thank you." Rangiku cooed and took the seat.

Renji and Ikkaku sat down on either side of her.

When they waited for the remaining food to be placed Renji couldn't resist asking something that has been on his mind.

"Rangiku-san said that this is a village of Ninjas, does that mean you guys are Ninjas too?" He asked pointing at Inoichi, Shikaku and Chouza.

"Not just them. All of us." The boy with the swirly cheeks piped in waving at the rest of them as well.

"What? But...You're kids. You're not older than 16." Renji exclaimed confused.

He couldn't grasp that children that young would have to lead a life of assassinations and dirty work.

"It's an honor to serve your village and clan as a fine Shinobi." Chouji told him proudly.

"You're brainwashed." The Shinigami concluded.

"I am not!" The boy objected.

"He really isn't. That's just how it is here." The other boy defended him as well.

"Are you insane? You voluntarily teach your children how to kill people? What kind of childhood is that?" He angrily asked the older Shinobi, rising from his seat.

"Renji!" Matsumoto tried to stop him rising as well, but she knew how he felt.

Both of them grew up in Rukongai, a place where they had to learn killing and stealing to survive. But these kids seemed to live a good life, without the need to do so. Yet, their parents had decided to turn them into stealthy killers nevertheless.

"I – I don't understand how you can do something like that. Robbing them of their childhood and –" He started another complain, using his arms and hands for emphasis.

"What is your problem? We had a great childhood. With the best of parents and the best friends you can wish for. Being taught how to be a Shinobi is our way of living. That's who we are. And to learn the traditions and techniques of our clans is an honor!" Chouji yelled, interrupting him.

Usually he was meek and quiet and usually only when someone called him fat did he rise up in anger. But this time, this stranger, this man that didn't know anything about them had just insulted the childhood he had loved so much. His family's efforts of making sure he would grow up to be a good man, have a good heart, and love the people closest to him. He could not let that stand. He stared directly into the eyes of

the other guy, waiting for him to continue.

Surprised at his friend's outburst Shikamaru stood up as well standing beside him. Looking from Chouji to the other on full alert.

"Why do you agree to do all this? Why continue with this way of living?" Renji demanded to know, still unconvinced at the boy's reasoning.

"Because I want to protect my friends. And my family. And my village." He sternly told him, not breaking eye contact.

"To protect and to die for the children and the people close to us, that is the Will of Fire. We inherited it from our parents and our teachers and we will pass it on to the next generations." His friend explained putting a hand on the other boy's shoulder.

"To protect..." Renji repeated, looking at the boys once more before he sat down again.

'To protect my friends.' That was what the boy had said. And that was the reason why he himself had gathered strength, improved his skills and fought the worst battles of his life. To protect. He couldn't argue with that reason. Resigned he looked up again.

"I'm sorry." He only said nearly whispering.

Rangiku sat down as well looking at her colleague. She knew how protective Renji was of his friends. When she sighed in relief she could feel the tension of the room loosening up.

Throughout the ordeal Ikkaku was watching the Shinobi in distrust. He saw the men move their hands together into weird gestures and remembered that Rangiku had told them that these people used techniques like their Kidou. And Kidou, he knew, used hand signs. These people didn't trust them at all.

After a moment of silence Chouji asked: "Why the change of heart?"

"Because you have a good reason to seek strength." Renji told the boy with a genuine smile.

"You think so?" He asked sitting down as well.

"Gaining strength to protect your friends is always a good reason. And if you've chosen this path yourself then you weren't pushed into it. There is no more reason for me to be mad." Abarai continued.

And it was right. He didn't know where this conversation would have gone if their parents had forced them to become what they were. But a self-chosen path is something to be respected. Besides he couldn't be mad at anyone for long. He always found a way to change his view on what the person had done. Heck, he even wasn't mad at the Kuchiki anymore for taking Rukia away. He respected him as his captain and as someone he would one day defeat, but he had put all the blame on himself. He wasn't able to offer Rukia a proper life, but Kuchiki Byakuya was. And he was grateful for the chance that she got with that. Though it still bugged him how he had treated her all those years, yet even this was understandable to some extent. Renji had seen a picture of Hisana-sama and Rukia looked that close to her that he didn't know how he would react if he was in his captain's shoes. Hopefully he would never have to make a decision like he had. Abarai only hoped that both of them were fine, wherever they were right now.

Rangiku placed her hand on her fellow lieutenant's shoulder and got him out of his thoughts.

"Sorry...I was..." He tried but didn't really want to continue.

"Worried about Rukia-chan?" Matsumoto teased, nailing it.

Blushing a little Renji averted his gaze, causing the Third Seat to break out in laughter.

"That's so typical. First you yell for some weird-ass reason and next you're all mushy

worried about the little missy."

"Shut it." Renji grumbled, blushing even more.

Not knowing what to say or do Chouji and the other Konoha Nin just watched the strangers.

"Renji has a big heart. Clearly you wouldn't understand his worries in your pea brain."

Rangiku defended her friend, poking Madaramé's forehead with the insult.

"Hey!" He complained, but was ignored.

"A big heart is a good thing." Chouji commented.

"Yeah, but gets ya into lots of trouble at times." Renji agreed grinning widely.

"Yeah..." The young Akimichi agreed as well.

He now was sure: This guy was a good guy. Despite his bold attitude and fearsome appearance he had a good heart. He cared for his friends and would do anything for them. He thought that maybe he'd even be someone he would be willing to share his last chips. But just maybe. Smiling Chouji was glad that they would stay for a while. Regardless of what they hid from them, they had to be good people.

"You're sooo cute with kids." Rangiku teased her colleague pinching his cheek.

"St-stop that!" He tried to get away from her.

"I can't wait for you and Rukia-chan to have some little ones."

"RA-RA-RANGIKU-SAN!" He screamed frightened – as if either of the Kuchikis could hear her words.

"Relax, that was just a joke!" She laughed at his reaction.

With this lightened mood they indulged in comfortable conversations and later the food that just waited for them on the plates.

Later that night

It was late when they finally entered the boy's room.

Dropping on one of the beds Ikkaku exclaimed: "Man I'm stuffed!"

"Yeah, me too." Renji acknowledged rubbing his belly.

During the meal they had learned more about the village and the life of the Shinobi. As sad as it was it seemed reasonable for them to teach their children the skills of their family while they were children, as the average dying age of a Shinobi was pretty young. So teaching them when the age would be appropriate was not always possible. The lieutenant kind of regretted getting mad earlier without really explaining why. But he didn't really want to ruin the mood again.

Hearing his colleague starting to snore he lied down as well. Rukia would arrive soon and they would gather enough information until then to be able to return home by that time. Closing his eyes he drifted off into a light slumber.

When he heard the door opening Renji rose alarmed, only to see Rangiku enter the room.

Puzzled he watched her when she moved closer and motioned for him to be silent.

"What's wrong?" He asked her whispering as she sat down on his bed.

"Ino's asleep. I think now would be a good time to have a look into that library."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, everyone's tired from the meal, so they will assume we are all sleeping off all the food."

"Sleeping off all the food....Guess you're right." He agreed.

"Of course I'm right." She huffed with a smile.

"And how do we leave without waking anyone?"

"Duh, the window?" She responded rhetorically waving at said exit.

"Right...sorry..." Abarai agreed slightly embarrassed.

"What about Ikkaku-san?"

"Guess we need to wake him..." Matsumoto offered with a sigh.

After they had managed to wake the Third Seat they sneaked out through the window and made their way to the library. Being able to use Shunpo and other techniques it was easy for them to reach their destination without being seen.

"So, how do we enter?" Ikkaku asked annoyed at having to be up this late.

"Let's see if we can find a conveniently opened window..." Rangiku thought out loud and started searching.

Being able to stand in thin air was rather helpful for this task.

And indeed there was a window that was unlocked and just leaning in its frame.

"You think this is a trap?" Renji asked suspiciously.

"Might be. Maybe they want us to get the information we want to see what we looked for and figure out what we want from that." She acknowledged his thoughts.

"But maybe they really only have lazy librarians." She then said carefully opening the window.

"This place is huge. How are we supposed to find anything? I mean, what are we even looking for?" Madarame complained as he entered the room.

The sight that greeted them was a long room with long lines of shelves filled with books, scrolls and randomly some artifacts.

"We are looking if they have anything about us. Us as in Shinigami, not us, us." Rangiku explained, clarifying the latter as she wasn't sure her comrade would understand it right away.

"Still, how are we supposed to do that? It's nearly pitch black in here." The bald man exaggerated.

In reality they could see well what was in front of them, but wouldn't be able to read any titles or papers.

"I knew I forgot something..." Rangiku reluctantly admitted.

"So you didn't bring torches?" Renji asked skeptical about his comrade's preparations.

"Weeeell...we could use Kidou!" She then tried to give an alternative, hiding her embarrassment.

She had wanted to sneak into the library for some time now, but she hadn't thought it would be this dark in here.

"I mean even you two should be able to do this." She assumed and opened her palm to gather some Reiatsu into a Kidou-ball.

"Nope." Ikkaku stated and folded his arms behind his head.

"I'm not sure if I really should do that." Mumbled Renji and tried to avoid the other's eyes.

"How so?" Madarame wondered, lowering his arms.

"Last time I did that we ended up here..." He reminded them.

"Guess this wouldn't be a good moment to risk that..." Rangiku concluded dissolving the ball.

"Maybe we can find candles or torches at the librarian's desk..." She then wondered, moving forward to said location.

The men looked at each other for a moment, then shrugged and followed their

comrade.

And indeed they found several candles and holders in one of the drawers. After they managed to light them, they walked through the rows of shelves. Careful to not drop any wax or burn something by accident.

It felt like hours had past when Rangiku exclaimed: "It think I've found something!"

Hearing this the others rushed to her side.

"Hold this." She ordered Renji handing him her candle holder.

Cautiously, so as to not let all the other scrolls fall down, she took out a leather tube that had the Kanji for "Shinigami" carved into its top.

"What do you think?" She asked the men showing them the carving.

"Jackpot" Stated Renji grinning at her.

"Open up!" Ikkaku urged her, trying to grab it.

"Wait, wait!" She reprimanded him and backed away.

This caused the Third Seat to move his candle holder in a way that the wax spilled over the foot of the candle holder and landed on the floor.

"Crap. Look what you've done!" He cursed.

"I? You did this!" She hissed back.

"Calm down!" Renji tried and earned angered looks for this.

"I mean: Let's get to a table to look into this thing and then get rid of the wax. We can't get it off right now anyway." He explained and nodded in the direction of the reading tables and tried to not get any more wax on the ground.

"Guess you're right..." Rangiku agreed and walked off.

Grumbling Ikkaku followed her and Renji.

It took them a while to open the tube as it had been closed with several ties and knots. Inside was a large and thick scroll. Rangiku took it out and unreeled it onto the table. As it wanted to curl up again she put one of the books that already laid there onto the top of the pages. When she had fastened the paper, she shed some light onto it and they knew that she had found what they'd been looking for.

The page showed a rough sketch of the Court of Pure Souls and its symbol in the corner. Flipping through the other pages they saw notes and other sketches about the Court and the Squads, even some on the Zankensoki, the combat techniques of the Soul Reapers. But the most interesting part of the scroll came at its end. A formal document composed by none other than the Sou-Taicho himself.

"This is a contract." Rangiku told them skimming through the page.

"What does it say?" Ikkaku asked unable to read it from the angle he looked at it.

"It says that this realm has a natural defense against Hollows so we don't need to watch it that closely. They are appointing some research every ten years to make sure this hasn't changed. The Hokage has to make sure that the responsible Shinigami gets every bit of information he asks for. Well, and that this is not to be publicly known." She summarized.

"So Tsunade-sama knows about us?" Renji asked.

"I doubt it. If she did this would probably be in her office or somewhere else hidden from public view not in a library where everyone can enter." Matsumoto hypothesized.

"What does that mean for us?" Madarame wanted to know.

"I don't...wait..." Started Rangiku but was distracted by something.

"Look at this." She said pointing on the name of the contracts witness.

"Kuchiki Ginrei? Who's that?" Renji asked.

"You don't know?" Rangiku asked him surprised.

When he replied by shaking his head, she told him: "Kuchiki Ginrei is Byakuya's grandfather and well, Rukia's too."

"You think the captain knows something about this?" Abarai continued asking questions, processing the new information.

"We will find out when we tell him." Matsumoto simply said and rolled the scroll.

"But first we have to take this back to where we got it from AND remove the wax." The last part was directed at the bald man beside her that just snorted at her comment.

"And then we will contact them?" Renji inquired.

"You are full of questions today..." Rangiku concluded, raising an eyebrow at her fellow Shinigami. "But yes, I think we should try that right away. It's still dark, so we are able to get to the secure place I've been able to sneak off to before without being noticed."

With a slight smile Renji lowered his head and looked forward to hearing Rukia and the others.

Even later that night

Even though it was still dark it wouldn't take long for the sun to rise, so they had to hurry to get to the secure place Rangiku had found after they had cleaned up the wax-mess. Fortunately it wasn't that far away from the library and they were still able to use Flash Steps to get there.

The "secure place" ended up being on the top of the mountainside that towered over the village.

"This is what you call secure?" Ikkaku asked skeptically when they had stopped.

"Sure. No one expects you to be here as it is too open to be secluded." Rangiku told him with a grin.

"What now?" Renji continued looking around.

They had a good view on the village from up here. Still they couldn't be seen that easily thanks to the stone carvings and natural stone shields. It was open, yet no one would take this place as a hideout. It reminded him a little bit of the Soukyoku Hill in Sereitei. Shaking away the saddening thoughts that accompanied this place, he wondered if there were any caverns in this mountain as well.

"Are you listening?" Matsumoto asked the other lieutenant after she had answered his question and didn't get a reply from him.

"I'm sorry..." He sheepishly told her, rubbing the back of his neck and looking down with a light blush on his cheek.

"You two sit down as well and I'll cast the Kidou." Rangiku repeated with a sigh.

With a nod the red head did as he was told and sat down next to his comrades.

Matsumoto took a small round tin out of her sleeves and opened it. Within it was a black powder that she put onto her fingertips. She then drew lines on the ground and edgy ones on her arms before she put her palms in front of her in a swift motion, causing a glowing rectangle to appear and started the incantation. While reciting she moved her arms to weave a root-like network with which she would connect to everyone in her chosen perimeter. Once more she put her flat hand against the rectangle and caused it to glow even brighter as the spell was activated by her final word "Tenteikuura".

Throughout the realm several people felt the connection and woke up from their slumber.

"Everyone! This is Rangiku! I'm using Tenteikuura and I think it'd be better if you make a respective connection so we can catch up!" She joyfully told her comrades and then added the perimeter she was using, so they would be able to establish their own connection. A little worried if the Kidou could be seen in the village they hoped it wouldn't take too long for the others to establish their connections.

In their camp the Kuchikis and Ayasegawa silently decided to leave it. Without much ado they Shunpoed away, nearly unnoticed by their companions.

At the same time in a far off desert of the Land of Wind and the icy mountains of the Land of Iron Hitsugaya and Hinamori, as well as Hisagi and Kira shortly discussed who should set up the communication Kidou.

Nearly simultaneously Byakuya, Momo and Izuru incanted: "Black and white net. Twenty-two bridges, sixty-six crowns and belts. Footprints, distant thunder, sharp peak, engulfing land, hidden in the night, sea of clouds, blue line. Form a circle and fly though the heavens. Tenteikuura."

When the connection was set Rangiku cheerfully greeted everyone again and gave them a heads up on what she had figured out so far.

With the help of Rukia and Byakuya she told them about the structure and Ninja system of this land, as well as where everyone was right now and where her position was, so they would be able to get there.

Yet why exactly they had ended up here and why their Zanpakutous had been sealed was a mystery to all of them. Rangiku's captain volunteered in investigating the latter, so they would have to wait for his word. Who knew how long this could take.

Another thing she told them about was what they just had found out in the library.

Surprised at the revelation the Kuchiki said he would think about this, if he could remember his grandfather ever telling him anything about the contract.

Deciding to contact each other again when they figured out something new they bid their farewell and closed the connection.

"This realm is another of our responsibilities? But why isn't it more widely known?" Rukia wondered.

"I...don't...know." Byakuya answered, uncomfortable with admitting this.

"Yet." Rukia assured him with a smile, which he returned with a slight smile of his own.

"There is so much we don't know..." Yumichika complained, touching his forehead with his fingers as if he was having a headache.

"But we will figure it out. I'm certain." The younger Kuchiki tried to assure him as well. They continued to talk about what their next steps would be, not noticing the sandy eye that hovered between the branches. Gaara would have preferred to have a sense of hearing included in this spying technique, but being there himself would have been fatal, as they would have certainly sensed him. From what he saw of that technique it must have been how that friend of Rukia had contacted her. It was different than every communication Jutsu he knew, adding to the differences between their abilities. If they really could use pure Spiritual Energy then he wasn't sure if he really wanted to know how powerful they were compared to them. After all the others were not physically bound like they were, if they really were only souls.

Back in the desert Hitsugaya Toshiro and Hinamori Momo used the coldness of the night to advance farther into less heated areas. It would be better to not constantly fear for the Captain to lose consciousness while moving through the never-ending sand. And now they even knew the direction which they had to head to.

In a mountain-cave Hisagi Shuhei put another branch into their fire. He wanted to head out right away to make sure Rangiku was alright, but Kira reasoned him into staying in their shelter and continuing when the sun had risen. It would be a little less cold then. He also convinced him that if Renji was there he would take care of their friend. He still couldn't wait for the damn sun to rise.

Kapitel 9: Reunited

The next morning

"When the village was rebuilt after its destruction we didn't manage to get everything done as fast as we liked. So some places are still untouched and the grass even regrew there. One of these places is currently used by the Ninja Squads of our generation to train together. And that's where we're headed." The pink haired girl explained with a smile, leading the way.

Last night the three Shinigami had shared a feast with three of the most known families of Konoha and throughout it exclaimed their interest in the Ninjas techniques and ways of fighting. So this morning Yamanaka Inoichi suggested that they should watch the youngsters train and even participate if they liked. The latter was directed at the anxious Third Seat whose eyes started to gleam by the prospect of training. Curious they had accepted and had later followed Ino to her friend's house.

When Sakura had opened the door to greet them her eyes soon landed on the tall red haired lieutenant that smiled sincerely at her. Blushing slightly she was only able to get out a meek "Hello" when Ino had introduced her. When she realized her friend and Matsumoto were giggling at her behavior she shook her head. She was a fine Shinobi of the Hidden Leaf and not some little school girl. Though that fiery guy looked pretty handsome, the bald one on the other hand, not so much. As much as she tried to not look disgusted by his lack of hair, she still let a little of it slip onto her face, causing the women to laugh even more. The men however seemed to be oblivious to her antics.

Renji pretty much realized what the girls found so funny about this situation, but he was reminded far too much of Kusajishi Yachiru, the pink haired devil from Squad 11, to take her serious. And he was quite certain Ikkaku was as well, as he had cringed when the girl had stepped out her door.

After Ino had managed to introduce Renji and Ikkaku as well they started off to the training field.

As the village wasn't nearly as big as the Sereitei it did not take them long to get there. On their arrival they saw several people busying themselves on the ground.

The boys from last night were already there. One slouching in the grass, the other stuffing chips into himself. For a brief moment Shikamaru display of laziness reminded them of the Eighth Squad Captain Kyouraku Shunsui, who liked to slouch on rooftops and basically everywhere else, too. With a grin they continued their observations.

Two girls with long dark hair were practicing hand-to-hand combat, while another one with buns on either side of her head threw things at a guy with bushy hair and an upturned collar of his jacket that hid himself behind a black wall.

There also was a gigantic dog and a rather feral looking boy leaning against its side. Both of them simultaneously yawned deeply, showing off their clearly visible canine teeth.

The last of them was a green clad boy with a bowl-cut and pretty thick eyebrows that had just ran up to them.

"Sakura-san. Ino-san. Good morning!" He cheerfully greeted them.

"Good morning Lee-san." Sakura returned, smiling slightly.

"And you must be Tsunade-sama's guests!" Lee then added towards the Shinigami. His outburst now caused everyone to stop in their tracks and carefully observe the new arrivals.

"Yep, that's us and you are?" Matsumoto joined the conversation with a smile on her face.

"I am Rock Lee, Konoha's Beautiful Green Wild Beast!" He exclaimed, pointing his thumb at his chest.

For a moment the Shinigami just stared at him before Madarame let out the snort he was trying to withhold and started into full out laughter. Renji and Rangiku were better at keeping calm, but couldn't help to at least grin at his chosen nickname.

Lee not understanding what was going on, asked them puzzled: "What's so funny?"

Before Ikkaku could say anything Matsumoto elbowed him and answered: "Nothing. He is just irritating like that."

Still laughing Ikkaku roared with tears in his eyes: "Calls himself a beast and looks like a wimp!"

"Ikkaku-san!" Renji tried to stop him, while Rangiku just put her hand at her forehead at this stupidity.

"Lee would kick your ass any time." A deep voice from behind the boy chimed in.

Ikkaku stopped laughing and looked at the new person in confusion. It was one of the girls they had watched earlier, but the voice was way too low for a female.

"Neji-kun?" Lee wondered staring in disbelief at his teammate.

Neji never said things like that about him. With watery eyes he was about to say something when the girl with the buns added: "That's right! Lee-kun is the best Taijutsu-user of our generation!"

Tears of joy dripped down Lee's cheeks, but he kept himself in check to not lose his cool completely. By now the group of Shinigami was surrounded by the Shinobi. Matsumoto just hoped that Madarame would not accidentally cause a fight. But he seemed to be more concerned with the gender of the boy's first defender.

"You're a boy! And you don't have pupils!" He finally concluded after a moment of silence.

"You are bald." The other coldly replied.

"Oi." He threatened holding up his fist.

"What? I thought we were stating obvious facts." Neji just replied with a grin; shrugging.

"Neji-kun, since when are you so witty?" Ten-Ten interjected, but was ignored when Matsumoto pulled the Third Seat's ear to her, before he could say or do anything else.

"Remember, I will tell every foolish thing you do to Yachuri-chan." She whispered, so only he could hear it.

He gulped and looked up at her in fear. Renji could guess what she said and gave his colleague a sympathetic look. When Rangiku let go of his ear Ikkaku straightened himself again and cleared his throat as if nothing had happened.

"Well, what are you good at?" The feral boy now used the silence.

Madarame eyed him and returned his grin with an equally ferocious one.

"I'm more than good with the sword and pretty much every other weapon as well."

Ikkaku prided himself, still grinning.

"So you are like a Samurai?" Chouji innocently asked putting a chip into his mouth.

"Samurai?" Renji asked.

"You have those too?" Matsumoto wondered.

"Yeah, heavily armored and masters of the sword." Shikamaru explained.

"Pah, armor is for weaklings! Real man steel their body to make it impenetrable." Madarame huffed bumping his fist against his chest.

"Ikkaku-saaan..." Renji only said, rolling his eyes at his Sempai.

"If you're as good as you claim, how about a little spar?" The girl with the buns offered.

"A spar with a little girl? You don't want me to hurt you missy." He told her in a superior tone.

"We'll see who's going to get hurt. Choose a weapon." She said and motioned for her friends to move aside a bit as she needed space to unroll a large scroll to show him its content.

On the scroll were several rings alongside each other, each with the Kanji for a weapon in it.

Thinking this was just a list of choices Ikkaku started grinning manically after a moment and said: "Sansetsukon"

"Interesting choice." Tenten complimented putting the scroll onto the ground.

After that she bit her finger and put her hands on the scroll, where the Kanji for the chosen weapon was positioned. With a poof and a cloud of smoke it appeared right before them.

"Nice." Renji commented, then added curiously: "How do you do that?"

"Well, it's a Summoning technique. I can summon every object that I've put a seal onto. The seal is like a contract between the object and me." The girl explained.

"But you can't only summon tools, there are also people that have contracts with animals they can summon." Neji added.

"What for?" Ikkaku asked this time.

"Well, Kakashi-sensei for example has a contract with a pack of Ninja dogs, that help him track down people and stuff. Tsunade-sama has a contract with a slug that has healing abilities." Ino counted on her fingers.

"Naruto can summon toads." Her pink haired friend added.

"And Gai-sensei can summon a Ninja turtle!" Lee exclaimed proudly.

"Ninja turtle? Like those mutant things in Ichigo's world that that boy with the creepy sister showed me?" Ikkaku wondered.

When everyone looked at him in confusion he silently added: "Never mind..."

"So you just make a contract and then summon whatever you have the contract with to help you?" Renji concluded, trying to cover his friend's mishap of referring to Ichigo's place.

"Basically, yes." Tenten agreed.

"Can we do something like that too?" Renji asked Rangiku.

"I'm not sure, but I guess not in that way at least..." She answered.

She'd never really heard of anything similar that did not involve a special Zanpakutou ability.

"What a shame, could have been handy..." The other lieutenant said sadly.

Tenten herself decided to take a Nunchaku, with which she would have a shorter reach, but, thanks to their height difference, still an advantage in movement. Renji still didn't know if it would be a good idea to let them fight, as he knew how Madarame fought. When he looked at Matsumoto he also knew that she thought the same thing. Nevertheless the girl had decided to challenge him and turning back would be an act of cowardice in the eyes of the Third Seat. Reluctantly Abarai and

Rangiku made space for them, just as the Shinobi had done.

Swirling the supposed spear Ikkaku tried to get a feeling for the weapon. It felt far too different to be Houzukumaru, but he would make do with it. Deep within him he could feel the Sword Spirit steer at the opportunity to fight. Catching the spear with both hands he grinned and mumbled: "Now you wanna fight, you lazy bum?"

They had yet to learn how to unseal their Zanpakutous, but he could still feel the yearning of fighting alongside each other in a battle again.

"You ready?" Buns – as he had dubbed her – asked, jolting him out of his thoughts.

"Sure. But there is a tradition where I come from where you tell your opponent your name before a fight, so that in the case you lose you know who brought death to you. I'm Madarame Ikkaku." He introduced himself and the customs of the Eleventh Squad. Tenten gulped. She did not plan to make this a death-match.

"The name is Tenten and I was under the impression this is a training fight." She replied with a slightly shaky voice.

"Don't worry missy, just some courtesy before we get started." He laughingly dismissed her fear and got into a fighting stance.

"Okay. Then let's roll." She acknowledged and started the attack.

Launching herself forward she swirled the Nunchaku over her head to get it in the perfect position for a proper hit against his hip, while she slouched down to make it harder for him to aim at her. But Madarame just stood there waiting for her to come closer and when she was nearly before him he used the hilt of his spear to trip her and step aside. It was a cheap trick, but he wasn't really in the mood to harm a young girl. In the mood to fight, yes; in the mood to fight with a girl, not so much. Sure she was a fighter, but he knew his strength and doubted she would be able to cope with that. For two more times Tenten tried this move under the watchful eyes of her companions. Every time she tripped she rolled over and started anew. She knew this strategy wouldn't bring her far, but this way she could understand his defense a little better. When she next approached him, Tenten did not slouch at all and aimed higher. When he saw his chance Ikkaku swirled the spear to throw her off-balance again by hitting her in the side with the hilt. But when he just had launched his attack she ducked sideways and skillfully wrapped her weapon around the staff to keep it from splitting apart. The moment of surprise on her side, she dragged his weapon out of his grip, while she continued her turn. When she ended her circle she used her remaining momentum and all the strength she could muster in her position to hit him right across the face with the hilt of his very own weapon. For a moment rocking back and forth Madarame couldn't quite grasp what had just hit him and soon fully lost his balance and landed on his back. Accompanied by roar of laughter around him. When he had gathered himself a little, he was met with his colleagues words.

"Hahaha. The o-so-mighty Madarame Ikkaku defeated by a little girl!" Matsumoto laughed.

"Wait til Yachiru-chan finds out about this!"

"NO! She must NEVER know about this! This is..." he yelled, trying to stand up but he was still too shaky to do so.

"Rukia." Renji mumbled out of nowhere and grinned widely before he ran off without another word leaving everyone staring at his back in confusion.

In another part of the village

"RUKIA!" A yell met them when the group of the Kazekage had just reached the

middle of the village.

They stopped, waiting for the man to approach them.

Picking the small Shinigami up in a swift move Renji hugged her tightly.

"LET GO STUPID!" Rukia yelled back, trying to get rid of her friend.

She had missed him too but that didn't give him the right to treat her like this. Regardless of whether she enjoyed it, he still did it in public and more than that: In front of her brother. Embarrassing wasn't even a strong enough word for this.

"Abarai." Was the only word necessary to make Renji drop Rukia in an instant.

"YOU IDIOT!" She insulted him again; kicking his shin.

"Why you..." , Abarai cursed lowering himself to be on eye-level with her.

"You don't listen to what I say but obey right away when Nii-sama addresses you!" She complained poking him on the forehead with each word.

"Enough."

Both of them gulped and bowed immediately.

"My apologies Nii-sama."

"Sorry Taicho."

A look of confusion on the faces of the sand siblings could only stare as the next one approached.

"Rukia-chan!" Rangiku yelled hugging the little Shinigami close to her chest.

"Ra-Rangiku-san!" Renji stammered, who had just been pushed aside now sitting on the ground.

"Can't...breathe..." Was all that could be heard from Rukia.

Before fully suffocating her, Rangiku let go just as suddenly, moving on to the other Kuchiki.

"Bya-kun." She simply stated hugging him around the neck.

Knowing that she wouldn't expect him to return the display of affection he simply stood there closing his eyes just being glad that she was save and by his side again.

Renji and Rukia however exchanged a questioning look at this.

"Hey, shouldn't Yumi be with you?" The bald man that just approached them asked breaking the silence that had befallen the group.

Letting go of Byakuya Rangiku stood next to him looking curiously at the others.

"He dropped off as soon as he had seen the first sign of a bathhouse. He said he wanted to get rid of all the filth..." The taller of the two boys explained waving his arms in the air.

"Sounds like him..." Ikkaku acknowledged nodding.

"Why's the kid wearing a giant Sake jar?" He added when he had taken a closer look at the new arrivals, pointing his index at Gaara.

"It's a gourd." Kankurou replied already annoyed by the repeated question rubbing his temples.

"Isn't that some place with judges?" Madarame asked confused.

"No that's a court. A gourd is something like a vase." Renji explained confidently.

"It's neither a Sake jar nor a vase. It's a gourd damn it!" Rukia yelled this time mimicking Kankurou's earlier outburst at her and hitting Renji again for his stupidity, making him cringe in pain.

"So there isn't any Sake in it?" Rangiku asked slightly pouting.

"No there isn't." Gaara himself answered.

"What a pity...But you're far too cute for drinking any...huh?" Rangiku stated and tried to ruffle his hair, but her hand only met a sheet of sand holding her at bay.

"Sand?" She asked slowly taking her hand away again.

"Yes, it's the Kazekage's natural defense." Temari told her in a reprimanding tone.

"That's interesting..." Rangiku concluded smiling at them, before it hit her.

"You are the Kazekage? But you're so young! I mean: My apologies Kazekage-dono." She tried to excuse her behavior with a short bow.

With the information laid out in front of them Ikkaku and Renji exchanged a look. If a kid this young could be a village-leader then he would have to be prodigy like Hitsugaya-taicho.

"It's alright; I am after all one of the youngest Kages ever." Gaara forgave her courtly.

"Thank you." Rangiku bowed again.

After a pause she then moved to Rukia grabbing her arm then linking her other one with Byakuya's.

"Let's get you two some clothes before you'll meet Tsunade-chan!" Matsumoto exclaimed dragging them off, leaving everyone staring at them.

"That's Rangiku-san for you...", Renji simply stated while standing up, still rubbing his aching head.

"Yup." Ikkaku agreed nodding again.

"Whatever. I'm Abarai Renji." He then introduced himself; bowing and then holding out his hand.

"Renji?" Gaara asked curiously, remembering the conversation he had with Rukia.

"Yeah."

"I see." He then just said and started walking off.

"Gaara?" Temari asked confused.

"We should report in to Tsunade-san." He excused his actions.

Following him without complaint the Shinobi left the Shinigami standing on their own.

"Well, I better check up on Yumi." Ikkaku concluded.

"And I'll make sure Rangiku-san won't annoy Kuchiki-taicho too much..." Decided Renji and the two of them departed as well.

Later that evening in the bathhouse

The head of the village had welcomed the new arrivals and invited them to the bathhouse to relax from the journey. Alongside the Shinigami several of the Shinobi were present as well.

Renji walked in only wearing a towel around his hips. With a small smile he noticed that everyone still gave each other a lot of space. As if neither of them trusted the other. But who would actually trust someone so different and foreign this early on. On the left side of the pool a couple of young Ninja splashed in the water, while at the back his Taicho and the Kazekage sat on a bench to overlook everything. He figured it would be awful for the sand-kid to be covered in water and briefly wondered how he bathed in the first place without cracking his own defense. Grinning a bit more he stepped into the water and let himself slowly sink deeper.

"Renji get out!" Yumichika ordered him, just as the water had enclosed his abdomen.

"What? Why? I just got in!" The red head complained, raising a bit to look at his friend. The other one was sitting on a bench behind him and had been carefully combing his hair. But now he looked like he had seen a ghost.

"Just do it stupid!" Ikkaku echoed annoyed.

He tangled his feet into the water close to the Fukutaicho.

Grumbling Renji got out of the water again. This was not how he had planned to spend his evening of relaxation.

"So what?" He asked facing Yumichika who stood up and turned him around in one swift movement.

"The hell?"

"I don't think that sign is supposed to be on your back...", he concluded after examining the taller man's back and poking a peculiar looking pattern.

"What? What sign? I can't see anythin'!" Renji exclaimed trying to look at his own back.

"Baka Renji what are you yelling at?" Came a little slurred voice from the other side of the wooden wall from the women's hot spring.

"Yumichika said there's somethin' on ma back!"

"And you idiot are probably trying to look at it like a puppy trying to bite its own tail..:", remarked a colder voice this time.

"Shut up!" Renji yelled flustered, turning bright red, causing everyone to laugh even harder.

Everyone except his captain and the sand-kid of course, of course.

"I'll get ya for that midget..." He mumbled under his breath.

"Tsunade-dono would you agree on having a look at this obnoxious man as this sign clearly does not fit into his extraordinary appearance?" The older Kuchiki silenced the laughter.

"Tai-", Renji started but was cut silent by his superior's glare.

"Yeah. Think I could do that. Send the brat over. Don't want to get out of the spring yet." The Hokage replied, her speech slightly slurred as well.

"Very well. Make yourself presentable Renji." Byakuya ordered his lieutenant.

Blushing and cursing the man went inside again to put on some dry clothes to cover his lower body. So much for a relaxing bath in a hot spring.

When he slowly opened the entry door to the women's bath he had his eyes shut closely.

"You don't have to go blindly Renji, you know?"

"I know Rangiku-san, but I prefer Kuchiki-taicho not to kill me for acting inappropriately." He answered blushing again, which made everyone to at least grin at him, again.

Carefully he tried to evade the different Reaitsus he felt before him on his way to the most strongest one that he knew was the Hokage. Feeling everyone's eyes on him he couldn't help but to blush even more. He was used to people staring at the marks on his body. It wasn't that he wasn't proud of them, but he still felt utterly uncomfortable if this happened when he couldn't do anything about it. In this situation it was required that he didn't cover up, so the village-leader could examine his back. Taking a deep breath he cast out his thoughts of insecurity and did what was expected of him. Reaching Tsunade he stood and turned to face the wooden wall that separated the springs.

"Now than let's have a look at...this..." She started and stopped abruptly as her eyes fell on the sign Yumichika had discovered.

From the pattern of the marks, that reminded her of strange tiger stripes it was clear that this sign wasn't part of the man's decorations. Right at the end of a stripe a different pattern started. It was intertwined and remotely resembled a circle filled with several lines. Reaching out with her Chakra she went to touch it, only for Renji to jolt away.

"Did that hurt?" She questioned him.

"No, it just felt weird. Sorry." He replied, lowering his head a little in embarrassment

and let himself relax again to let her proceed.

"It's alright." She acknowledged and tried again.

This time Abarai didn't move and she could feel the Chakra embedded in the sign. It was quite familiar, yet she couldn't pinpoint from where she knew it. In the back of her mind something told her, that she didn't want to, but she put that thought aside. What was in front of her was clear nonetheless.

"I think we now can reconstruct how you came here." She declared.

"Really?" Renji and several others replied.

Without second thought the Shinigami had turned around and was now trying his best to keep looking at the Hokage's face. The blush returning to his face.

"Yes, but I think it will be best if we have you properly examined in the morning. Now go back before you look somewhere where you are not supposed to look." Tsunade warned him with a look of anger and menace on her face.

"Hai." The lieutenant gulped and all but vanished from her side.

Only to reappear close to the door and hurriedly make his way inside. A little confused the Hokage looked at Rangiku for an explanation. Sighing the Shinigami explained to her what a Flash-Step was and how they used it to cover larger distances.

Back in Soul Society

"Freeze" She yelled at the retreating figure.

After days of searching Rukongai they had finally found the culprit that had caused several high-ranking officers to just vanish. She had organized a small group of trackers that would help her with her task. It wasn't easy to follow the trace, as it had just been planted on one of the disappeared Shinigami, who was highly trained in using Shunpo to move faster. Therefore the trace was thicker whenever the carrier made a step and thin whenever he was within the movement. But now they had finally reached their destination. As soon as the man had spotted the Shinigami, however, he changed his course. Probably anticipating some repercussions after what he had done. He didn't leave her a choice but to attack him. Or rather restrain him with a Kidou. She motioned for the others to cut off his way. But he dodged every last one of them. Cursing herself for picking trackers that were incapable of actually apprehending someone, she shouted: "Bakudou Yon Hainawa" as a lightning chain had formed from her hands and sent it off to capture the man. When he dodged her attack as well she diverted the course of the Kidou to catch him off guard. And it worked. Her natural abilities with binding-spells could be thanked for that.

Just as with the way that boy had helped him with the "Hollow" this attack was different to any Jutsu he had ever known. He couldn't break free from it, regardless of how much he struggled against it. He had been captured and now he would have to pay for the little Jutsu he had put on the red-head. Sighing he gave in and looked at his pursuer.

"Oh, it is YOU! Haha, how long has it been?!" He then cheerfully greeted, when he realized who had captured him.

"A while." She responded with a slight smile.

"You have to come with us. You need to answer some questions."

"I thought as much...But if it is you who is taking me in then I am more than willing to oblige." He agreed, a grin still in place.

If she was part of the interrogation then he could at least hope to get away with it a little more lightly. She would understand why he had to do it. At least he hoped so.

Kapitel 10: Progress

Chapter 10 – Progress

At night

With the arrival of the others they couldn't all stay at the Yamanaka household anymore. Renji had been relocated to the Akamichi's, while Yumichika had taken his place and the Kuchiki's were brought to the Nara's. Thinking about it, the accommodations couldn't be more fitting. He and the chubby kid got along well after their first argument, Ayasegawa would enjoy the beauty of the flower shop and his captain had fellow strategic thinkers with Shikaku and his son. It was well chosen and he had no doubt that this way they would not just try to gain more intel from them, but also let them believe they were safe. He also had no doubt that none of the Shinigami would fall for it.

With a sigh he got out of his bed and walked outside to sit on the porch. He couldn't sleep anyway, so he might as well have a good think in the night air.

The trip to the bathhouse had been supposed to be relaxing, but instead it left him more stressed than anything else. Some weird sign-thing was on his back and he had no idea how it got there and what it meant. As soon as this had been revealed the others had checked if any of them had a similar mark, but no one had and it was again him being the odd one out. Grumbling he rubbed his temples and eyes, this whole mess was giving him headaches.

"What are you doing out here?" A timid voice asked him.

Looking up he found Chouji standing there in his night gowns, holding what looked like a midnight snack in his hands.

"Could ask you the same thing." Renji replied, disguising his thoughts behind a grin.

"Was hungry." The kid replied shortly and presented the bowl.

"Couldn't sleep." The lieutenant answered truthfully, motioning for the other to sit with him.

"It's the different bed, isn't it? I always have trouble falling asleep on missions when we are constantly changing sleeping quarters." The Akamichi contemplated, while sitting down on the porch.

"Not really. I could always sleep in the weirdest of places." Renji explained with a laugh.

"It's the thing on my back." He added more seriously.

"You've probably slept with it the last few nights already, why should that be any different now?" Chouji wondered.

Looking at him, Abarai could only agree with the boy. If it was the case then there was no need for him to worry about anything happening while he slept.

"Guess you're right. I still don't like it." He gave in with a smile.

"Taiyaki?" The Shinobi offered him the content of his bowl.

"I love Taiyaki!" Renji exclaimed and took a pair of cakes out.

When they had finished the snack Chouji went to bed again while Renji had decided to

walk around a bit until he felt more sleepy. He was strolling through the streets until he reached the training area and noticed someone sitting there.

"Looks like I'm not the only one who can't sleep." He greeted the other person cheerfully.

"I am still not used to sleeping..."

"Huh?" Renji didn't understand the answer and sat down beside the other one, taking his reply as an invitation.

"I used to bear a demon within me. Whenever I fell asleep or lost consciousness it would take over my mind and cause mayhem." Gaara explained flatly, looking straight ahead and remembering the thrill of the Shukaku.

"Wow...must have been hell for you to be so close to harm your family every night...", the lieutenant concluded studying the young mans features, whom he recognized as one of the kids that had brought Rukia to the village.

After a pause of consideration Gaara told him:

"At that time I would have killed my siblings myself without falling asleep."

"You...what?" Shocked, this was the only thing Renji could come up with.

"I was consumed by hatred. I killed everyone who just as much as looked at me the wrong way. I was a monster."

Not knowing what to say Renji simply listened.

"I became the monster everyone always feared and saw in me. I was obsessed with the thought of having to prove my existence through killing the strongest that would cross my path."

Pausing for a while the Kazekage thought about his own words, about his past and why he was telling this again to a total stranger. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to get an approval of some sort or to simply talk about it. Indulged in the comfortable silence he decided telling the rest of his story wouldn't hurt either.

"When I first met him, I thought Naruto was just a no-one. Someone not worth killing, but as time passed by my view on him changed. I wanted to kill him. I fully released the Shukaku to defeat, no to kill him, once and for all. But I failed. He instead showed me that bonds with other people are important. That you can share feelings and have faith in each other." Again he paused turning his look at Renji who was still studying him with an unreadable expression.

"This war we are having right now is to protect him and the other Jinchuuriki. For everything he did for me, I will not fail to protect my friend." He ended his explanation, determination in his eyes.

Renji looked at him for a moment before he let a grin spread on his face.

"I'm sure you wont." He said before leaning back in the grass.

"But to do so you need to rest beside training and everything." He continued, stretching his arms and yawning.

He didn't really understand much of what the boy had said, but he perfectly understood the need to protect ones friend. Gaara did not reply anything and just sat there silently while Renji drifted off to much needed sleep as a shadow approached the two.

Looking up at the arrival the Shinobi recognized the man to be Rukia's elder brother. Upon looking at his lieutenant the Kuchiki sighed inwardly.

"You are accustomed to the streets of this village I assume?" He asked after a moment.

"Yes I am."

"Would you prefer joining me on a walk, rather than sitting here waiting for him to start snoring?" He offered then.

Looking at the sleeping man Gaara decided it would be better to let him rest rather than steer him awake by staying. So he carefully stood up to accompany Byakuya on his night walk.

"Can we let him sleep like that?" Gaara asked when they were out of earshot looking back at Renji.

"Do not worry. He is more than used to sleeping without cover." The Kuchiki promptly assured him.

Remembering what Rukia had told him about her childhood the Kazekage assumed the other was right and the two of them settled into a comfortable silence.

After a while Byakuya broke it by asking: "What does your enemy want with these Jinchuuriki?"

Gaara looked at the older man trying to figure out if he wanted to know it to take advantage of it, but he simply couldn't read him. Over the years he had learned to do that with pretty much every person he came across, but this man had perfected a solemn, emotionless facial expression. He now understood Rukia's description of him even better. The things she and her friend had said to him during these past days, however, caused him to decide that telling this man might even help the Shinobi in their predicament. Though a part of him still worried that these strangers were here to gather information on them and betray them when they had enough.

"They want what is inside of them." He started his explanation, knowing it would only lead to more questions.

Just as he anticipated the other wouldn't ask them directly but wait for him to continue. Gaara hadn't completely explained the concept of Jinchuuriki to Rukia before and assumed her brother didn't know about it either, so he did it this time.

"Jinchuuriki are Shinobi chosen to be the host of a Tailed Beast, powerful Chakra that was turned into a living form with a mind of its own."

"You used to be such a host?" Byakuya had to ask when the Kazekage refused to say more.

"Yes, they extracted the One Tail from me and I barely survived it." Gaara told him, fully knowing the second part was a lie, as he had indeed died and only the sacrifice of the village elder had brought him back.

"How are these beasts sealed?" The Shinigami inquired next.

Raising an eyebrow at his company Gaara wondered again why he wanted to know these things.

"Every village uses a different technique, but they all require enormous amounts of Chakra."

Unsatisfied with the insufficient answer the Kuchiki tried a different approach to get the information he wanted to hear.

"Yet you still could gain access from its energy and even release the creature?"

With this question Gaara was certain that the other had either overheard his conversation with Renji or had spoken to Rukia about it. He, however, couldn't tell why he wanted to know about it so persistently. For a moment he contemplated how much he should tell him, but hoped that with an elaborate answer the other would stop bugging him about it and see that having a Tailed Beast inside you isn't a good thing.

“Yes, as Jinchuuriki you at some point gain access to the part of your mind you are sharing with the beast. For the beast to grant you it's power you have to establish some kind of connection with it. To fully release the beast you have to make a deal with it and voluntarily open the seals put on its cage. Depending on the deal you made, you keep your own mind awake or the beast takes over completely and turns your body into his. Alternatively you lose control and it breaks out to wreak havoc, killing you in the process, if it isn't stopped before that.”

Contemplating this information Byakuya discontinued his interrogation for now. The way the boy had described the beasts and the sealing sounded much like how he had found Zenbonsakura within his own mind and if it was possible for the Jinchuuriki to release them, then it would only be a matter of time before they managed to do the same with their Zanpakutou Spirits. He would inform Hitsugaya about this as the younger Captain was in charge of figuring this out.

Walking in silence once more the men soon parted ways when they had reached a fork in the street. Gaara was still unsure what the conversation meant to the other and grew a bit more suspicious of this behaviour. The Kuchiki on the other hand felt like they were two steps closer to figuring this whole mess out. With the prospect of his lieutenant's examination leading to a reveal about their arrival and the knowledge he had gained about the Jinchuuriki, they would soon be in Soul Society again.

The next morning

Renji awoke to something wet on his cheek and it felt as if something was licking his face. Slowly opening his eyes he saw a long tongue and sharp teeth far too close to him. Scurrying away he sat up to his elbows recognizing the features to belong to the dog from the day before.

“Mornin!” A voice greeted him.

Puzzled he looked at the dog, only to realize that the voice came from the boy standing beside him. Snorting at the thought of a speaking dog, Renji sat up, wiping his face with his sleeve.

“Mornin!” He then replied the greeting.

“Chouji's been lookin' for ya for hours and you've been snoring away here all the time.” The boy explained with a laugh.

“I didn't plan on fallin' asleep here.” Abarai tried as an excuse rubbing the back of his neck.

“Ah, never mind there he his.” Kiba told him and the three of them turned around as the other boy and his friend came stalking towards them.

“Where have you been?” Chouji asked after catching his breath.

“Sorry, I went for a walk and fell asleep...” He explained embarrassed.

First night in a different place and he wanders off without telling anyone.

“Baka Renji, not even capable of staying in a bed at night.” An all too familiar voice teased from behind the boys.

Glowering at her when she emerged between them Renji struggled to find a proper reply and settled for a grunt. It was far too early for him to start another banter with her. Stretching his arms above his head he instead asked: “Where's Ikkaku-san? I wouldn't mind a little morning exercise...”

“He is probably still lying in his bed sleeping, like you were supposed to be.” Rukia scolded him, folding her arms across her chest.

Grumbling again Renji rose from the ground to stretch some more and easily towered over the others. The boys seemed a bit intimidated while the Kuchiki held her ground, she after all knew their height difference since they were teenagers.

"Guess I hav'ta wake 'im then." He concluded with a feral grin, receiving a warning glare from his childhood friend.

"I don't think that is necessary. Ino will probably bring them here soon anyway." Shikamaru revealed in a matter of fact tone.

Noticing Renji's confused look he added: "Your friend is a fighting freak and after what happened yesterday he probably wants to have a re-match with Tenten or at least fight someone else. As the Yamanaka's get up quite early to open the shop it is highly likely that they will come here any time now."

Nodding in agreement Renji accepted the explanation. What he described sounded like something Madarame would do.

It didn't take long for Shikamaru's prediction to come true. As Tenten wasn't in the mood to comply with the Shinigami's wish for a re-match, Renji took the opportunity and talked his colleague into a training match with him. The Kunoichi provided them with the necessary weapon's, a Bou.

The match was in full progress, the kids from the day before and the remaining Shinigami set on the side of their battlefield; watching as either of them attacked and dodged in a swirling dance of movements. With each strike the lieutenant could feel Zabimaru welling up inside him. His desire to fight a foe, the lust for his enemy's blood. Each of Renji's blows got more and more ferocious until Ikkaku couldn't bring in an attack of his own any more. His friend yelled something at him, as he retreated and dodged, but it was like Abarai was in a trance, his mind synchronizing with the spirit's. He wanted, no, he needed to finish this fight with the next blow. The Zanpakutou Spirits energy latched onto his own and settled around the staff, creating an image of his spiked, snakelike sword. Swinging the weapon behind his head, like he usually did, he launched it towards the other Shinigami. With a last jump Madarame managed to avoid the energy blade by mere centimeters, as it buried into the ground before him. Bits of the pasture flew to each side as energy surged into it like little lightning bolts. Still captivated by the attack he didn't see the next one coming: Another stream of energy heading straight for his upper leg. A deep howl emitted from Renji's throat and caused Ikkaku to look up, but it was too late. The attack went into his thigh and it felt like sharp teeth made its way into his muscles. His cry of pain caused the older Kuchiki to now fully stand and grab his second in command by the shoulder.

"It's enough." He stated and pushed some of his Reiatsu into the younger man to calm him down.

Renji shook his head and dropped the weapon almost immediately, the red energy fading. Looking up he saw Ikkaku clench his leg with bloodied fingers.

"What the hell, Renji?" The other asked him, but only caused more confusion.

Not understanding what had happened the lieutenant moved his head to the side, to see if something had attacked the others as well. Instead he saw some of the Shinobi stand there with Kunai and Shuriken in their hands, ready to attack. Each of them, as well as his fellow Shinigami had a frightened look on their face. Turning again he looked at his other side if the foe was hiding beside him, but there was only the remaining part of the training field.

"Abarai." A solemn voice behind him, broke him out of his wandering thoughts. Turning around he met his superiors eyes and understood that there was no foe. It was him. He, Abarai Renji, had attacked his fellow Shinigami in a way that had terrified everyone.

"What happened?" He asked in a raspy voice.

Calmly the Kuchiki bestowed him with a calculating gaze and explained what they saw from the outside. He told him about the blazing, red energy that had engulfed him and the changes in his features that made his already prominent canines look like fangs and his brown eyes turn into deep yellow. He also described how the wooden weapon gained a spiritual blade, resembling his Shikai and a snake like creature rising from the energy to attack Madarame. Renji could only stare in disbelief. Part of it explained what he had felt earlier, but he still didn't understand how it was possible.

"Is that why you asked me about the Jinchuuriki last night? Because your friend is one as well?" The Kazekage asked as he approached the scene, alongside the Hokage. They had felt the raised and strange Chakra and wanted to see for themselves what had caused it.

Diverting his gaze from his lieutenant to the new arrivals Byakuya simply replied: "Yes and no."

"You kiddin'? What the boy just did looked like a Tailed Beast striking out to me." The Hokage interjected.

Closing his eyes, to not tell her that *the boy* was nearly twice her age he contemplated how he could describe this as best as he could. Renji on the other hand simply slumped down, this was too much for him. Faintly hearing his name, he barely noticed Rukia approaching his side before he passed out.

After checking the red heads condition Tsunade stood up and crossed her arms underneath her bosom.

"Care to explain?" She demanded from the Kuchiki.

"He is no Jinchuuriki." Was his direct answer.

Byakuya still didn't know how to understandably explain what they were and tried stalling a more elaborate answer by watching Rangiku and Ayasegawa treat Madarames wound. The Hokage followed his gaze and went to examine him as well.

"Nii-sama?" Rukia asked from her kneeling position beside her childhood friend.

Her brother replied with a reassuring nod. He would find a way to make the others understand their predicament. Their interaction was closely followed by several pairs of eyes. The Shinobi had retracted their weapons, but were still highly alert for everything happening around them.

As the Hokage returned from patching up the Third Seat it was the Kazekage who spoke first.

"What he did looked like the Sabre Technique used by the Samurai. But also like a Tailed Beast trying to break free."

"Sabre Technique?" The Kuchiki only asked, while the remaining spectators moved closer.

"It is their way of enhancing their blades with Chakra." Gaara shortly explained so they could get to the more important point.

"So, how is he able to use that technique on a staff and produce a snake from Chakra

that doesn't feel like him and is surrounding him, if he is not a Jinchuuriki?" The Hokage asked again, waving in the direction of the lieutenant.

"It's not a snake..." Renji mumbled, while slowly propping himself on his elbows.

He had regained consciousness, but was still feeling dizzy.

"Let me tell you boy, I have seen many snake bites in my day and what your friend has on his thigh is definitely one." Tsunade reprimanded him.

"It's..." Abarai started and looked up at his captain, to see if he was allowed to continue.

He realized that if he said 'snake tail' it would sound even more like he had a Tailed Beast within him. The Kuchiki nodded curtly, giving his approval. Renji cleared his throat and sat up more properly, but still leaned against Rukia for support.

"It's a snake, with the actual tail being attached to a baboons ass." He described and added a bit more quietly: "Or the other way round..."

Looking at him with confusion clearly on their face, they didn't quite know what to make of this information. They claimed he was no Jinchuuriki, yet there still seemed to be a creature inside of him.

"In our realm the people, who are capable of molding Spiritual Energy meet a spirit that reflects their power and soul at some point in their life. These spirits, whilst having their own form and mind, become one with the...person. They grant them more abilities through inhabiting a special sword; turning it into an extension of the persons soul." Byakuya explained solemnly.

Even though he had nearly used 'Shinigami' and 'Zanpakutou' he was quite satisfied with his phrasing. He just had to add one more thought:

"The way it looks to us the spirits inside of us got sealed similarly to the Tailed Beasts on our arrival. Abarai's outburst, your descriptions and assessments prove this point even further."

Contemplating the new information the group stood in silence for a few moments. Renji felt uncomfortable whenever someones attention fell on him and just wanted anyone to say something.

"I think it is about time I examine you more thoroughly." The Hokage finally decided, offering the Shinigami a hand.

Again waiting for his superiors approval Renji let her help him up. At least this way they would find out more about the sign on his back.

Later that Day

After the Hokage and Renji had left the children started questioning the Shinigami about the spirit within them. While Rangiku and Rukia went into great detail describing the different Sword Spirits Ikkaku tried gaining access to Houzukumaru the way his colleague did with Zabimaru. Though Ayasegawa wasn't as good a sparring partner as the red head

Byakuya sat a bit outside their circle, his legs folded underneath him and his mind focused. With everyone occupied in their different ways of research he had managed to send a message to his fellow captain. Hitsugaya had gladly accepted the input and assured to look into it, as soon as they had found protection from the desert heat again. Since then he had reflected his own thoughts on the matter with Zenbonzakura and came to the conclusion that they needed to inform Soul Society as well.

On missions in the human world they usually were assigned to it wasn't hard to summon a Jigokuchou, but here it proved difficulty. As soon as he had focused on the sense of one of the creatures he lost it again, as if it was playing hide and seek with him. He didn't like that at all. Creasing his eyebrows he made another attempt. Blocking out everything and everyone around him, his sole attention was on the delicate butterfly. In his head he could feel a headache forming, but he ignored it. Even though he was a Kuchiki, THE Kuchiki and defeat wasn't officially a part of his vocabulary he was about to give up his trial. Just as he released his focus and loosened his concentration he heard the faint chiming of bells. The signal of the arrival of the tiny messenger. With a relieved sigh he mentally called it to him, lifting his index finger for the bug to sit on and receive what it should be delivering.

Sixth Squad Captain Kuchiki Byakuya speaking. Several high ranked officers including myself, the Captain of Squad Ten, the Lieutenants of Squad Six, Ten, Five and Three and other members of the Court of Pure Souls are currently trapped in an unfamiliar mortal realm. Association with it is known only through documents compiled by Sou-Taicho Yamamoto Ginryuusai-dono and signed by former Sixth Squad Captain Kuchiki Ginrei, declaring it a realm of high natural Hollow protection. It's inhabitants are capable of combining Spiritual and Physical Energy into techniques similar to the Demon Arts. The arrival in this realm caused the group to be scattered, but uninjured. Entering the realm furthermore caused the Zanpakutou Spirits to be sealed and its powers to be nearly inaccessible. The chosen place for regrouping is called Konoha Gakure, a Shinobi village whose leader has not yet posed a threat to us. Six of Ten officers already reached the village, the rest is said to arrive within the week. Assistance for a safe return to Soul Society is required.'

When he was finished with the formulation Byakuya gave the Jigokuchou the information as to whom the message was for and was about to send it off when he noticed a boy staring at it.

"It's beautiful." The boy with the sunglasses commented, leaning a bit closer.

Slightly moving his finger the Shinigami send the messenger on its way, before the boy would somehow interfere with it.

"What a pity. I would have liked to get a closer look at it..." The other rose up again, with pout in his voice, leaving the Kuchiki alone again.

Instead of worrying about the boy Byakuya caught his sisters gaze and told her with a short nod that he indeed had managed to summon the Hell Butterfly and send it off with information on their whereabouts. He just hoped it would reach home safely.

Kapitel 11: Bad News

In the Village Hidden in the Leaves

After her initial talk with Matsumoto, Tsunade had sent out word to the other Kages and they had agreed to meet up in Konoha. Incidentally when the Hokage and Renji were on their way to the infirmary, the examination was delayed thanks to the arrival of the Raikage and his entourage, including the two remaining Jinchuuriki. Renji was sent back to the group gathered on the training ground, so the Shinobi could be brought up to speed.

On his return Renji explained to the others what had happened and it didn't take long for the new arrivals to join them and back up his story.

In their talk with Tsunade the two Jinchuuriki had agreed to take part in the unofficial observation of the outsiders. Naruto took an immediate liking for Renji, thanks to the Shinigamis open nature. Byakuya on the other hand, he found to be quite suspicious due to the aloof air about him. Of course Sakura-chan considered him to be gorgeous, as she didn't miss to tell him, but for Naruto he was just a grown up version of Sasuke and that annoyed him a lot. That guy even had a similar attitude towards Sakura when he had told her with a mere look that her advances were not welcome.

According to his friends accounts she didn't have luck with the feathered weirdo either. Even though that one had accepted her compliment, he had repaid it by mocking Sakura-chans forehead. Well, that didn't end that well for him and there was still a blue hue on his pretty face and even though Naruto hadn't been there when it happened, he still was quite amused by it. Served him well to underestimate and mock Sakura-chan

Naruto snickered at the thought of his former team-mate hitting one of the strangers.

The man beside him looked questioningly down at him.

"Ah, it's nothing. Just thought of something funny!" He assured Renji and put his hands behind his head.

The Shinigami shrugged his shoulders and accepted that explanation. He liked the kid. Even though he reminded him a bit of Ichigo, did Naruto seem way more fun than the former substitute Shinigami. When it didn't seem like the Hokage would be free to look at him anytime soon, he and some others had agreed to accompany Naruto to get some '*super delicious*' Ramen.

Renji feared that the salesman would be overwhelmed with these masses of people that came with them – aside from him and the kid, there was also Rangiku and the Suna kids. Rukia had to stay behind with her brother for negotiations with the Kages and was also tasked to inform Hitsugaya about their newest information.

Ikkaku had send Yumichika out to get some food for Killerbee and them and had stayed behind with the Jinchuuriki. The rest of them either went home for lunch or with Choji and his friends to get barbeque.

They were nearly at the Ramen place, when all of a sudden the released force of an enormous Reitsu made its way through Konoha causing people to stop in their tracks.

Realizing who caused the breathtaking sensation Renji's first reaction consisted of one word that summarized his thoughts: "Fuck"

Having a bad feeling and the tingling in his guts that warned him of approaching danger he acted accordingly.

"Rangiku-san! We gotta stop them!" He urged his colleague laying his hands on the stunned woman's shoulder.

Snapping out of her daze she nodded and they started off into the direction of the spiritual pressure, using Shunpo instead of running; not giving a second thought to the people they just conversed with.

"I have a bad feeling." Renji informed her while they raced through the streets.

"Me too"

It did not take them long to arrive at the training ground they had just left.

"Holy cow." Was the Sixth Squad's lieutenant's reaction to seeing the fully released Eight Tailed Demon Ox.

Standing in awe for a moment gave their pursuers time to catch up.

"The hell they're doing?" Kankurou asked rhetorically.

Not getting an answer he just settled for watching the fight.

"How will you stop them?" The Kazekage asked calmly and curiously.

"I have an idea. Renji get Ikkaku's attention." Rangiku proceeded and pulled her sleeves up, preparing to intervene.

"Hai." He simply agreed seeing the woman's determination.

Moving closer to the fight scene he lifted his arms, waved them above his head and he yelled: "Ikkaku-san! Stop it!"

Being about to hit the ox with his weapon straight ahead the other stopped in mid air giving Killerbee the chance to wipe him away with one of his tails, causing the bald man to crash into the ground.

"Outta the way Spiky!" Rangiku yelled from above before she threw the glowing rod of a Hyapporankan at the Tailed Beast.

While thrown it duplicated itself a hundred times and rained down upon the Hachibi pinning him to the ground.

"Hey sista what'cha doing to this mista?!" The immobilized cursed.

"Conceal your powers or...", the rest of her sentence was left untold as a screeching roar emitted from the far distance.

"Fuck." Was everything Renji could come up with again.

He had jumped aside to not be in the way of the Kidou, Ikkaku was lying somewhere in the grass nearby and Rangiku still stood midair, but all three of them turned into the direction of the screaming Hollow.

It didn't take them long to sense a new, but now familiar Reiatsu nearby the creature, so Renji's next word, uttered in shock, became: "Whiskers!"

"Go! I'll handle them!" Rangiku urged.

Abiding to the given order he used Flash Steps again to pass the distance.

"What is the meaning of this?" Gaara asked again ready to fight if the other broke the trust they had put into them any further.

"I will explain this later, first we have to conceal this one!" Rangiku assured, turning her attention back to still bound Eight Tails.

Jumping over the rooftops Renji could see the Hollow from afar. Close to it was the

orange kid who eagerly tried to defeat the beast by slamming a ball of energy into its face.

Instead of inflicting the usual damage he was used to, his Rasengan and the Shadow Clone wielding it were simply slammed into a nearby building, causing both of them to disperse.

"Damn it!" Naruto cursed, preparing for another attack.

"Back off!" Came a yell as the tall visitor landed on a rooftop holding a red globe in his hand, followed by: "Hado No Sanjuuichi Shakkahou!"

Renji released the Kidou at the beast and jumped to the ground, in front of Naruto, causing the other to fall backwards in the process. The Hollow was enclosed in a cloud of smoke, but was otherwise not injured.

"Stay put!" He ordered the blond shielding him to defend him from the now attacking monster.

He raised his arms in front of his face and gathered his energy to prepare for the incoming attack as a cold "Hado No Yon Byakurai" emitted behind them.

Struck directly through the mask by the lightning bolt the Hollow was defeated in an instant and dissolved into nothingness.

Turning around Renji bowed slightly.

"Thank you, Captain."

"You still have a long way to go." The Kuchiki only replied letting his arm sink to his side again.

"W-what was that?!" The nearly forgotten Shinobi asked the man standing above him, motioning in the direction of the vanishing unknown.

"A Hollow."

"A what?" The kid asked again jumping up this time and starting to get into a rant of that thing being creepy and other things.

"It seems like we have to discuss a few things with the Hokage. Again." Byakuya concluded turning around to walk away.

Looking once more at Naruto Renji tried to remember where he had experienced something similar before. Bringing his thoughts into order he shrugged it off and followed his superior with a "Hai Taicho" leaving behind the now yelling Jinchuuriki.

Back in the Court of Pure Souls

The man was strapped to a chair. The Shinigami that had found him, had left him here and now he was waiting for the interrogation to start. He wasn't sure what he should expect. His captor had assured him that it wouldn't be that bad, but the people they had passed on the way seemed rather mad at him. It felt like hours had passed when a short and slim woman in a white armless coat entered the room. She crossed her arms and stood some steps away from him; eying him in distaste. It took another half an hour until a second figure entered. That one looked rather weird as his face was painted all in black and he wore white laboratory coat. He was accompanied by a girl dressed all in black with a short skirt. She looked timid and calm and he was still focused on her legs when the other woman suddenly talked, breaking the suffocating silence that had settled in the room.

"Who are you?" She wanted to know.

Startled from his thoughts he looked at her in confusion.

"Who are you?" Sui Feng repeated the question more forcefully.

He looked at her for another moment before he answered in a calm tone: "Jiraya"

"Huh. So the girl was right." The man in the mask concluded scratching his chin with a long fingernail.

"Nemu. The pictures." He ordered the girl in the skirt.

She took out a folder and opened it to reveal several headshots of different people. Jiraya could see many dark haired ones, but also a bald one, a busty and skinny blonde, a white haired kid and a red head that reminded him of the guy that had saved him about a week ago.

"Do you recognize any of these people?" The short woman asked him.

She now stood directly beside him.

"Wouldn't it be nicer if you introduced yourselves first?" He asked in return, feigning ignorance.

He preferred to not whom he was dealing with, before he gave away information.

"You cannot expect courtesy for what you did!" She snapped at him, her body language showing signs that she was ready to strike him, if he misbehaved.

"Now, now, Sui Feng. A little courtesy never hurt anyone." The other remarked.

The woman raised an eyebrow at him, as if he was the last person she would have thought to make such a suggestion, but only received a weird and bright grin and knew that he might play the nice card now, but was totally willing to dissect the man in a heartbeat. This exchange did not go unnoticed by Jiraya either.

"I am Kurotsuchi Mayuri. Captain of the Twelfth Division of the Court of Pure Souls. This is Captain Sui Feng of the Second Division." He introduced himself and the short woman.

"And this is my lieutenant Nemu." He added dismissively with a wave of his hand in the direction of the girl.

"Nice to meet you." Jiraya remarked and flashed them a warm smile.

"Do you recognize any of these people?" Sui Feng repeated her question impatiently. Jiraya took another moment to look at them before he nodded.

"Yes. I think I've met the red haired one." He answered truthfully.

He wasn't sure what to make of these people, but their rank at least suggested that his information were important to them. Otherwise he would have been interrogated by lesser soldiers.

"This one?" She asked pointing at the picture. "Lieutenant Abarai Renji of the Sixth Division?"

She deepened her question.

"Yeaah...I believe that is what the others called him." He answered trying to remember it.

"What have you done to him?" She inquired next, getting even closer to him.

"What do you mean? Has something happened to him?"

"Don't play coy! You know exactly what I mean!" She ordered putting her hands on his shoulders, looking him straight in the eyes.

"He and the other Shinigami on these pictures vanished without a trace and the only thing lingering behind was a hint of your Reitsu, even though you have never been to Seireitei. So you must have done something to that officer from the outside." She summarized, a tone of treat underlying her words.

Jiraya looked at her with wide eyes and open mouth.

"So it worked?" He finally got out.

"What worked? What have you done?!" The captain demanded to know, while putting her arm to Jiraya's throat.

"I'll explain!" He managed to say through the pressure on his wind pipe.

Back in Konoha

"What the hell was that thing?" Tsunade shouted when Byakuya and other Shinigami were gathered in her office.

"It's called a Hollow." The Kuchiki explained in a calm tone.

"And what the hell is a Hollow?" The Hokage asked next, her temper still flaring.

Byakuya sighed, he feared that this would be a long discussion.

"It's a spirit that lost all its humanity and now hungers after spiritual energy to fill the void of its heart."

"A spirit that is after spiritual energy? And you want me to believe that?" She demanded, crossing her arms.

"Believe it or not. That is what a Hollow is. How it managed to get here, however, I cannot tell, but I'm afraid that our appearance here might have allowed it to enter into this realm." Byakuya explained.

Tsunade looked at him and contemplated his words. They had told them, that they came from a realm where people used purely spiritual energy instead of Chakra and it did make sense that such a creature might have followed them, when they crossed over.

"And what about Naruto? Why did it attack him?" The Kazekage now continued the questioning.

"Hollows usually go for the highest source of Reiatsu. As Matsumoto had interfered with the foolish fight between Madarame and Killerbee-san that had attracted its attention, the next target became the other Jinchuuriki."

"It does make sense." Tsunade concluded, leaning against her desk.

"I have sent a message to our people. Until they manage to create a passage for us, I would advise you to forbid any high Reiatsu-emitting fights. It is possible that another such creature appears if such a thing happens again." The Kuchiki continued after a moment, eying the Third Seat in disdain.

Every head turned to Ikkaku for a moment. The fight had seemed like a good idea at a time. A possibility to finally let out some steam. And he was really curious about those Tailed Beast. He had not wanted to release a Hollow. Embarrassed by the attention and frustrated at the outcome of his own stupidity, he lowered his head.

"If such a fight cannot be avoided, how can we protect ourselves if even the Rasengan didn't work?" Tsunade changed the topic, drawing the attention back to her.

"The only way to defeat them is to use concentrated spiritual energy, if you have an attack like that it should work. Attacks that have a balanced amount of spiritual and physical energy might slow them down, but in case of the Rasengan we saw that it simply dissolved as the Reiatsu was not enough to cause any damage. Otherwise your only choice is to hope one of us is close by, so we can get rid of it."

"You seem to know a lot about these things." The Raikage interjected.

"Of course. One of our duties is to destroy Hollows." Byakuya admitted.

He did not say that they were basically reaping them, but he hoped the connection would still be lost to the present Shinobi. After all were there seemingly three Kages, who did not know about a contract with or the existence of Shinigami, but for now he wanted to stay on the safe side of this matter.

"How long will it take for your people to get here?" Tsunade wanted to know.

"As I do not know, if the message has even reached them, I cannot say." He admitted in defeat.

He knew their prolonged stay would cause more and more damage to this realm, if not change things that weren't supposed to be different.

The Hokage sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Is there a way we can send you back from here? No offense, but with the war on our heels, I don't think we can cope with evil spirits as well."

"None taken. I understand your predicament and I assure you that if the war breaks out again during our stay and Hollows partake in its course, we will assist you in diminishing them." He promised, knowing that this would be the interference they wanted to avoid, but it could not be helped.

"Very well then. Maybe we'll figure something out, when I take a look at your lieutenant." Tsunade suggested.

"Come along boy." She waved at Renji who followed her after exchanging a look with his captain.

In the infirmary

Awkwardly Renji removed the shirt he was wearing while Tsunade waited impatiently to examine him; Shizune was preparing the examination table in the meantime. This whole situation was embarrassing for the lieutenant. He felt utterly exposed, even though he knew they were medics, just like the people from the Fourth, but he was also afraid of what they might discover. It was already clear that their predicament was his fault.

When Shizune waved for him to lie down, he obeyed her without complains. Even though she had put a blanket on the steel surface, it felt cold on his skin and a shiver ran down his spine. Right away Tsunade went to the spot where the sign was and traced it with the tips of her fingers. It was a gentle touch, just as he expected from a healer. After a moment she pressed her palms on the spot and Renji felt her Reitsu and something else trickle into his skin, as she examined the sign with her Chakra.

She murmured something under her breath.

"Impossible." Renji at last managed to make out as the Hokage drew away from the table.

"What?" Renji asked craning his neck to look at her from the table.

Her face was even whiter than usual and her hand trembled. Somehow a phrase from Ichigo's world came to his mind: '*You look like you've seen a ghost.*' In his kind of work, he was technically seeing ghosts on a daily basis, not counting the times he looked into a mirror. Renji wanted to say something, but he didn't knew what.

"It can't be." She murmured next, placing one of her shaking hands over her mouth; tears were slowly building up in her eyes.

"Tsunade-sama?" Shizune asked, rounding the table and placing a hand on her masters shoulder.

As she didn't seem to do anything else, Renji sat up and waited for her to collect herself, his feet dangling from the table.

A tear dripped down her face, when she took away her hand to get closer to him.

"How is that possible? How can the Chakra used to create the seal on your back feel so

much like someone who's been dead for nearly a year?" She demanded to know, gripping his shoulders and shaking him with nearly every word, more tears streaming down her face.

"How?" She all but whispered when she hung her head down.

"Who was it?" Renji didn't know what else to do, so he tried to find out if maybe he really had met that person in Soul Society.

"An old friend. Heck, my best friend and the man I loved without realizing it." Tsunade told him in a whisper, still grasping his shoulders.

"What happened to him?" The Shinigami asked calmly.

"He fought to protect Naruto and was defeated." She gulped down the lump in her throat and added "I never saw his body, but we all know what happened."

"What happened to his body?"

"It's somewhere on the bottom of a lake in a different country. No one had had time to go down there to pick him up so we could give him a proper funeral." She told him, her fingers clutching his shoulders.

She didn't look at him, but he could feel her pain very clearly.

"What was his name?" He asked to break the silence.

"Jiraya." She only whispered.

"The Toad Sage." She added in a mocking tone, letting go of him.

"He was ridiculous and infuriating. You should have seen him. Bright colours as a Ninja and than that head plate...horns and oil...pfff...he was a moron..." She went on trying to not think of the sad things, hugging herself with one arm, while gesturing with the other.

"Oil?" Renji interrupted her. "Oil and horns on a head plate?" He repeated in confusion.

"Yeah. You've seen the head bands of the Shinobi, right?" She asked and waited until he nodded.

"He had a personalized one that was grey, bulky and had horns and the word 'Oil' inscribed on it." She explained.

Recognition dawned on Renji and it was clearly visible on his face.

"What? What is it?" She wanted to know, but could not get an answer out of him as they heard a knock on the door.

"Enter." Tsunade commanded after a moment that she had used to wipe away any stray tears.

A Shinobi stepped in and got to his knee.

"Tsunade-sama the Tsuchikage and his entourage have arrived." He informed her

"Thank you" She said and waved him off; he vanished within seconds.

"Our conversation is not over. You stay here!" She ordered Renji by pointing at him.

"Understood." He nodded in acknowledgment.

Then she was off to greet her colleague.

Kapitel 12: Strange Visitors

At the border of the Desert

After days of walking through the desert sands Hitsugaya and Hinamori had finally managed to get out of the deserts' heat and into the deep forest at the border of the Land of Fire. Relieved the Taicho slumped to the ground in the shadow of a tall tree. He could finally focus on Hyourinmaru instead of focusing on not passing out. Sighing deeply he concentrated on entering his inner world. As he had expected from the reports of the others was it completely white, except the wooden bars that separated him from the ice dragon. Hyourinmaru was coiled up and only slightly lifted his head to look at his master with piercing blue eyes.

'Toushiro', he whispered weakly, still feeling the effect of the heat.

'Hyourinmaru', the other answered, kneeling down before the bars. *'How can I break the seal?'*

'Remove it', the dragon merely answered.

'Kuchiki tried that and the paper just reappeared', Toushiro disagreed.

'Did he have the intent to break the seal?'

'Of course?! Why wouldn't he?' Confused Toushiro stood up again.

'True', the other only replied blowing icy mist out of his nostrils.

The young Taicho looked up to the Seals and ripped one of, only for another to reappear in its place. He repeated this again and again, his anger rising. In his cage Hyourinmaru stirred and lifted his head higher to watch his master more closely. Icy mist rose up around them and Hitsugaya could feel it engulf him while he continued to pull off one paper seal after the other. The mist formed crystals around his hand until it was completely enclosed like it was when he used his Bankai. As he next slammed his hand on the paper it froze instantly and with a desperate cry he pulled it off and heard a loud creak.

Meanwhile on the Training Grounds of Konoha

As Renji had went off to the infirmary most of the Shinigami and Shinobi had returned to the Training Grounds, while the Kages, their entourages and Byakuya remained in Tsunade's office to wait for more information. Either party was met with a barrage of questions regarding the appearance of the Hollow. Amidst all this Killerbee and Ikkaku had made a deal to properly fight once this whole thing and the war were over. The conversation had strayed as the first grumbling belly had announced itself and Sakura had offered to get the Ramen they had wanted to get earlier. By now the others who had gone to eat elsewhere had also returned and were given a detailed description of what had happened by Naruto. Rukia was barely paying attention by that time and Rangiku had laid back to sunbath, while Killerbee tried to teach Ikkaku – and Yumichika – how to release a sealed beast.

At some point Rukia had just wandered off lost in her thoughts trying to get her emotions under control. Her insides were boiling, there was the fear of being stuck here and the unknown dangers this could bring with it; there was worry about Renji and what it was the Hokage would discover and there was the dread she felt about

being unable to properly contact Sode no Shirayuki. She had felt it before when she was stuck in her Gigai with Ichigo. This was different, but it was still a painful experience. Suddenly hearing the fine chimes of bells she looked up, only to see a lightning strike across the ground and a bright vertical line form before her above the ground. The line glowed red and widened until it had the shape of a large square. The light faded and instead a sliding door appeared and Rukia eyes widened and a smile spread across her face. Behind her the others had gotten up to watch as well. White smoke rushed out of the door as it slid open. When the smoke cleared a large, white haired Shinigami stood in front of several others close behind. When she laid eyes on Rukia her stern expression changed into one of relief.

"Rukia-san!" She greeted her colleague joyfully and stepped out of the Senkaimon.

"Isane-san!" Rukia only replied.

"Finally!" Rangiku screamed from afar and appeared right before the other woman to pull her into a tight embrace.

Behind them the other Shinigami silently exited the gate and formed a line beside it. More appeared behind them, but before them walked none other than Squad Two Captain Sui Feng.

"Kuchiki, Matsumoto, I see you're doing well", she greeted them formally.

While Rukia bowed in return, Rangiku saluted mockingly.

"Get to work", the Taicho only ordered and the Shinigami behind her spread out, some of them carrying heavy machinery.

"Who are you and the hell you're doing?" Naruto called out, stepping forward.

The Shinobi had come closer, their weapons drawn ready to attack the Shinigami.

"Don't even think about attacking and get your superiors", Sui Feng only replied, threat in her voice.

For a moment they looked at each other, unsure what to do.

"Naruto, you're the fastest. Get Tsunade and the others", Shikamaru decided and with a nod the other was gone.

"We don't mean harm!" Isane called out to the remaining Ninja "We just want our friends back"

"Then what are the machines for? Do you want to attract more Hollows?" Shikamaru challenged.

Startled Isane looked in turn towards the Taicho and Matsumoto.

"We had a little mishap earlier. One of them broke through, but no one was harmed", the latter explained sheepishly.

"Then it's about time we get this realm into proper condition again", Kurotsuchi Mayuri declared cracking his knuckles, as he stepped out of the Gate.

"Now where is that red-headed lieutenant friend of yours?" He adds with a sinister grin. "Go look for him, Nemu"

"Of course Mayuri-sama", the girl behind him replied with a bow and vanished in a flash.

"You got Kuchiki's message! Awesome!" Ikkaku called out walking briskly over to them, Yumichika and Killerbee close behind.

"That's Kuchiki-taicho to you Madarame-sanseki", Sui Feng reprimanded him.

"Of course", he complied with gritted teeth.

"So, what do you mean with 'getting the realm into proper condition'?" Shikamaru changed the topic, but before anyone could answer an anguished cry was carried over to them from afar.

"Another one of those things?" Choji wondered out loud.

"Nah, that's Renji", Madarame laughed.

"What's happening?" Rukia worried, saying out loud what everyone was thinking.

They could here several more cries followed by loud crashes. In the direction they came from they could see clouds of dust rising up between the buildings. The sounds got closer and closer until the distressed and half-naked Shinigami plummeted into the ground of the Training Field. Close behind they could glimpse a black shadow and just when Renji's disappeared the shadow crashed unto the ground, releasing a cloud of dust and sand into the air. When the dust had mostly settled Nemu was visible or a moment, her right hand stuck in the ground, rotating like a drill, before she launched after the other lieutenant once more.

"Get her off me!" Renji yelled, between halts.

He jumped between the gathered crowd, trying to shake her off his heels and even if he was faster, she was just one step behind. As soon as someone noticed him they jumped aside, awaiting the impact, yet no one dared to step in. At some point Sui Feng had enough and Shunpoed in Renji's way. Startled he nearly ran into her, but with a swift move she simply subdued him and pinned him to the ground face first.

"Kurotsuchi, call back your lieutenant!" She ordered and added "Kyuuseki, get your ass over here and undo the binding!"

Mayuri merely rolled his eyes in annoyance, Nemu in turn made her arm stop spinning and returned to his side, awaiting new orders. Following the Captains command a Shinigami with long flowing, red hair knelt down beside Renji, greeting him with a warm smile. Sui Feng stepped off him and the other woman put her hands onto Renji's back. He could feel her Reitsu entering his body, much like Tsunade's Chakra had done. As if loosening a muscle he could feel the tension in his back cease and a deep sigh escaped his lips. The other Shinigami got up and held out his hand.

"Thanks Kyuu-chan", he accepted with a toothy smile.

"You're welcome and you should also be able to access Zabimaru again", she merely returned.

"Really?!" Renji exclaimed and without warning a low-ranking Shinigami knelt down before him, holding the sword that he had put aside back in Soul Society when all this had started.

Carefully he took it and made a step back, he looked in turn at Kyuu-chan, who was smiling encouragingly at him, Rukia, whose expression was a mixture of curiosity, relief and he believed a hint of jealousy and the others, who looked at him full of expectation. He took a deep breath and unsheathed his sword simply dropping the scabbard onto the ground. Holding the sword straight before him, he hovered his hand over the blade calling out "Howl, Zabimaru!" The blade glowed red and where his hand passed it on its way down to the tip the blade itself thickened and spikes grew from it. When he was done the form of the blade had changed entirely into some kind of saw. A large grin was plastered on Renji's face and laughing he held the blade up for everyone to see. The Shinobi stared at it in awe, as this was definitely different to anything they knew about the Samurai's way of fighting.

"Sweet cheeks me next!" Ikkaku interrupted this moment.

Noticing Kyuu-chan's hair rise slightly, Renji put a hand on her shoulder and warned:

"You don't want to go down that road, Ikkaku-san"

"Ladies first", Kyuu-chan coldly replied to the demand, anger gleaming in her eyes and turned to Matsumoto and Rukia.

"Nice to finally meet you in person, Rukia-san. I've heard a lot about you", she greeted the much smaller woman with a warm smile and knelt down before her, hovering her hand above Rukia's chest.

"Yes, uhm, likewise", she was only able to stammer.

"Don't fib, I know he hasn't talked about me", she laughed and felt Rukia relieve after she had undone the seal blocking her Zanpakutou spirit.

"Abarai, get dressed while we set up the perimeter and return with everyone's uniforms", Sui Feng ordered, not following the exchange.

"Hai, Taicho", Renji complied, realizing for the first time, that he was standing there without a shirt. He blushed even harder and went off to do as he was told.

"You're the girl from Shuuhei's squad we tried to hook up with Renji, right?" Matsumoto mused when Kyuu-chan had moved on to her.

"Yes. That is me", she acknowledged blushing and added with a smile towards Rukia:

"But there is a very good reason why that would never have worked out."

"Yeah, we figured...", Matsumoto commented a little mopey.

Kapitel 13: Revelations

Training Field

"So what are you doing?" Matsumoto cheerfully wanted to know.

"We will set up a parameter that will help repair the damages done to this realm, while you fight off any Hollows that are attracted by the process", Kurotsuchi explained casually while typing something into a small device.

"Hell, yeah!" Madarame exclaimed swirling around the released Houzukimaru in excitement, "Now it'll be a proper fight."

Behind the gate a couple of Shinigami wearing the insignia of the fourth or the white cloaks of the Science Division set up several larger devices, while others popped in and out of the Gate and vanished into the distance.

"So, what do you mean with 'repairing the damages' and 'getting the realm into proper condition'?" Shikamaru tried his question once more.

"Patience. We will explain everything when your leaders arrive", Sui Feng answered this time, but did not bother to look at him.

"We want to make sure that no more Hollows can enter this Realm", Isane tried to reassure them instead, conscious of the Taicho's reaction, but she did not complain.

"What's taking that moron so long?" Ino complained and impatiently tapped her foot.

"He probably has trouble explaining it...", Shikamaru suggested with a facepalm.

Meanwhile in the Hokage's office

When the barrage of questions had stopped, the Kages started arguing about something Byakuya wasn't interested in. So he had stepped aside to try what Hitsugaya had mentally told him to do to release his Zanpakutou spirit. Quietly he had put up a barrier around himself that made it seem like he was just leaning against the windowsill and a second one that would disguise his Reiatsu. As he had just unlocked his sword again the whiskered boy burst into the room.

"Tsunade-san!" He yelled at the Hokage and then started into a rant about gigantic doors, black ants and clowns. None of the Kages could make sense of this, but Byakuya sensed something from the direction the boy had come. They were here. They had received his message. A small smile made its way onto his lips before it disappeared alongside the barriers.

Back at the Gate

"What's going on guys?" Sakura wanted to know as she got back with the Ramen "Who are all these people?"

"Our friends and colleagues", Matsumoto explained putting her arm around Isane and dragging the much taller, squirming, woman down to her level.

"Oh", the Shinigami only acknowledged and placed the lunch on the ground. 'Now no one would eat it, all for nothing!' She angrily thought in her mind. As she rose up again Renji appeared near her, holding a bundle of clothes and was himself fully dressed in a Black Kimono instead of the very nicely fitting shirt and pants he had worn before. On

top of the mostly black clothes laid a white one and weird white ornaments. Renji stepped aside and knelt down so Rukia could pick up the top layers as he had asked her to do, including her brother's Kenseikan and Haori.

"Isane-chan, would you be so kind? I don't think Rukia-chan wants to change in front of all these people", Matsumoto winked and the other lieutenant complied with a nod and set up a mirroring barrier for the women and the men to change into their Shihakushou. As Renji was already dressed he sat down beside the Ramen and ate his share.

Just as the Shinigami stepped out of the improvised changing rooms, the entourage of Kages arrived at the scene.

"Explain this!" The Raikage demanded pointing from Byakuya to the Gate and people busily gathered around it.

"You will not interfere", Byakuya stated coldly, stepping in front of A and blocking his way.

"The hell I will!" A yelled charging with his lightning blade at the Shinigami.

Not moving an inch Byakuya released the tiny blades of his sword, that he had prepared beforehand and sent them towards the other. Being met by a wall of seemingly swirling Sakura blossom pedals that came out of nowhere the Kage stopped in his tracks. The Shinigami used this to enclose him with Senbonzakura. Seeing their Kage being attacked the Cloud-nin launched at Byakuya. Though without much resistance they were either blocked by a cloud of ashes or frozen solid by ice.

"Your interference was not needed", he reprimanded his sisters' and his friends' actions.

"A simple 'Thank you' would have done it too, you know?" Rangiku complained, collecting Haineko's pieces.

Ignoring her he set his focus back on the still enclosed Raikage. Unable to get out of his pink prison A roared and charged at it in futility. Disappointed by the outcome Byakuya closed his fist and let the tiny blades attack vigorously. Seeing bloodstreams coming from every imaginable direction of the body a chorus of "No"s and "Raikage-sama"s emerged from the gathered Shinobi. Lowering Senbonzakura he released the attacked. Unscathed. Yells of "Thank god" made their way around this time, thinking it had only been an illusion.

"What the...", not able to finish his question the Raikage fell to his knees, fighting unconsciousness.

He lifted his arm too see the streaming blood he could clearly feel, but saw nothing but his unscratched skin.

"Brother!" Bee yelled coming to kneel beside him.

»He is badly injured« The Eighttails told him in a worried tone.

"Eights tellin me ya hurt, but I can't see a scratch", Bee nearly screamed gently touching his brother's arm.

"Bee leave!" He ordered his brother never breaking eye contact with the Shinigami.

"What cha sayin bro? Ain't leaving your side, no!" The Jinchuuriki protested.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Hokage demanded to know.

"Kotesu, you're healing services are required here", Byakuya simply ordered instead. Getting away from her post at the barrier, she knelt beside the Sixth Squad Captain with a "Hai Kuchiki-taicho", her head lowered.

"I don't need healing!" The Raikage yelled, struggling to get up.

Supported by his brother he stood wobbly glaring at Byakuya. Slowly rising Isane put

on a glove with a flame-enclosed skull imprinted on it. "I am deeply sorry Raikage-dono, but for a proper healing you don't leave me a choice", she apologized while walking straight forward, her head still lowered. Lifting her arm she put the gloved hand on the mans forehead, starting to push forward. With a plopping noise a resemblance of A started to appear behind the head of the original, causing that to collapse to the ground only partly held by Bee. Shocked at the displayed scene no one was able to mutter a word. Looking down at himself the Raikage saw the blood he had only felt before. Deep wounds cut into his flesh in every direction and place imaginable. Noticing a chain attached to his chest he tried to pull it out.

"Don't", Byakuya ordered, "Unless you wish to die, you should not destroy the Chain of Fate."

Loosening his grip he looked from the captain to the healer who had now started to wave signs he had never seen before, but when a glowing green light emitted from her hands he knew it was for healing.

"If I don't heal you at once, your soul will perish due to the blood loss", she explained calmly approaching him and hovering her hands over his chest. With every passing second he felt the life returning to his body or whatever this chained thing might be.

"How is this possible?" Tsunade interjected, coming closer to inspect the healing and the second body of the Raikage. "How is it possible to attack a soul without hurting the body and then extract and heal it like this? I've never heard of any Shinobi being able to do this."

"They aren't Shinobi", the Tsuchikage answered instead.

"Then what are they?" The Mitsukage entered the conversation.

"They're Shinigami, Death Gods. I wasn't sure, but now I'm certain", the old man revealed.

Staring blankly at their visitors a deep silence fell upon the gathered group.

"What is your business here? As far as I know the next report is due in two years", the Tsuchikage asked, confusing everyone even more.

"Ask the culprit back there, why he sent us here", Byakuya merely replied, as he had noticed a Reiatu that felt similar to what he had felt when Renji had accidentally brought them here.

"Culprit?" Trying to see whom the Kuchiki was talking about the short man used his Jutsu to fly into the air.

Hearing their cue two masked members of the Onmitsukidou lead Jiraya out of the Gate so he could be seen, their hands tightly on his shoulders.

"YOU!" Yelled Renji angrily, who had followed his captain's exchange from afar; vanishing in one moment and appearing directly before the "old man" in the next. Driven by his rage he punched the man as hard as he could, causing him to crash backwards into the nearly established barrier.

"RENJI!" Shouted Rukia, trying to stop him, but her brother held her back, both knowing that an interference was much unwanted.

"Do you have any idea what ya've done?" Renji rhetorically asked, before he proceeded yelling out his anger, as the other only stared up to him with a bloody nose. "Ya had us forcefully enter this Realm and sealed our Zanpakutou-Spirits! Ya put everyone in danger! An' ya put a frigging spell on me!"

"I didn't have a choice..." Jiraya mumbled, unable to look Renji in the eyes.

"You had NO choice? You had every choice!" The Shinigami still yelled.

"What choice would there have been?" He this time asked a bit more cocky, standing

up again.

"You coulda simply asked! You coulda told me that you feared something was wrong with your home-Realm! I woulda made sure someone would look into it! But forcin' us ta do somethin' we ain't gonna know what ta do, where we hadda figure everythin' out ourselves? Man, ya in big trouble and ya've no idea how much I woulda like ta make ya suffer for endangering ma comrades!" Falling back into his Runkongai slang, Renji's Reiatsu rose even more.

The former Shinobi started to tremble slightly. He was powerful, but being confronted with the Spiritual Pressure as high as that of a Shinigami that was capable of Bankai was too much, even for him.

"Abarai. Compose yourself", Byakuya called out to his subordinate.

Turning to meet his captain's eyes he saw anger in them as well. He knew the Kuchiki would like to torture the man as much as he would for what he had done to Rukia, but he would simply make sure that he would get the punishment he deserved back in Soul Society. Still, Renji had to pull himself together. It was no use arguing with his captain.

"Hai..." He reluctantly replied, lowering his Reiatsu and his head.

"Good. This culprit will get his suitable punishment when he's back in the Court", Byakuya congratulated his lieutenant on his choice of actions.

"You? You! How could you!" The Hokage now started to yell, hastily closing the distance between them and sending Jiraya flying again as her fist met his already bruised face.

Renji could not resist the sinister smirk that crept onto his face. That guy got what he deserved.

Being left without any more seals to break Kyuu-chan had watched like the others and was now looking dumbfounded at the figure slowly sliding down the barrier, again. Moving her focus to Tsunade she noticed the streaming tears and her pained expression, when a faint murmur caught her attention. Growing louder each time her own tears started breaking through her eyes as an orange flash launched himself into her arms, yelling at the top of his lungs: "MOM!"

"I'm here Naruto. I'm right here", Uzumaki Kushina answered her son, holding him tightly.

Kapitel 14: Deathgods

"I don't understand what is happening", Gaara injected stepping in front of the gathered Shinobi, "How can Naruto's mother and Jiraiya-dono be here? What are you calling yourselves Shinigami and why did you attack the Raikage?"

"Those are very good questions...", the Mitsukage agreed.

The Tsuchikage floated down again. "Right you're all too young to know this and your predecessors never had a chance to tell you...", he concluded with a sigh.

"Shinigami are Grim Reapers", he revealed after a pause.

The field fell silent except for the barrier preparations.

"It is their duty to guard the souls of the dead and to protect mortal worlds from those falling astray. Isn't that right?", the Tsuchikage tried to explain.

"Indeed it is", Byakuya acknowledged, "It was necessary to attack the Raikage, to show him that intervention is futile. Your kind is not capable of defeating the foes this incident has brought to your world."

"So what's the deal with this 'repair the damage to the realm' talk?", Shikamaru challenged, drawing attention to him.

"From what we could gather this man has put a travel technique on Abarai-fukutaicho. Through this technique he and several other high ranking officers of the Court of Pure Souls entered this realm and disturbed its natural defenses against Hollows. With this barrier we're setting up we're trying to protect the village from the Hollows that will break through while we analyze the damage and prepare to repair it", Sui Feng explained pointing at the mentioned things in turn.

"And what are we supposed to do? Just sit here and wait?", the Raikage yelled.

"We could prepare the portal to send you to your respective villages so you could overlook the preparations there, but any kind of interference might cause you more harm than good", Sui Feng offered, folding her arms behind her back.

Tsunade barely registered any of this, everything that was on her mind was: "Why? Why did you just die and leave me alone?" Tears started welling up in her eyes as Jiraiya stepped closer.

"Ahh, you're not alone...you have a whole village behind you...", he reminded her with a grin.

"You moron...", she only mumbled leaning against his chest, sobbing silently. He hugged her tightly, stroking her hair to calm her and whispered: "I'm sorry, Tsunade..."

"Look at you! How you've grown!", Kushina grinned, holding her son at arms length.

"Ha, you said that before...", Naruto replied with a sheepish grin.

"Ah, right! You've unlocked the Kyuubi's Chakra and you talked to the part of my soul your father sealed within you!"

"Yeah, you were there and helped me and told me everything", Naruto confirmed.

"So it wasn't just a dream...it really worked...", Kushina mumbled, running her fingers over Naruto's cheek and through his hair.

"A dream? Didn't you go to the afterlife after we talked?", Naruto wondered.

"No, I was already there, only a part of me was missing that returned to me through a dream", Kushina shook her head.

"Have you found Dad already then?", Naruto wanted to know, a wide grin on his face.

"No...but I will keep looking for him! You know it!", Kushina declared determined, raising up her fist.

"*Kushina*", a grave voice called out to her as the shadow manifested itself beside her.

"Ky-yuubi!", Naruto exclaimed, pointing at the shoulder high nine tailed fox standing in front of him.

"*Kushina...why does he feel like me...and...not like me...?*", the fox asked looking from her to the boy.

"Ahh...how should I explain that...", Kushina thought out loud, rubbing the back of her head. "You used to be a part of what is sealed inside of him?", she tried. The fox looked at her in contemplation.

"*I see...*", he merely replied and turned his attention back to Naruto. The fox raised his clawed hand and Naruto stared at it in disbelief. Unsure what to do he stood still. The claw came closer and closer until it pressed against his chest. Red energy started to engulf the two of them.

"Fascinating...", Kurotsuchi commented, as everyone's eyes were on them. The energy went from the fox and settled around Naruto before it got absorbed by the Demon Fox within him.

"*Now it's better...*", the fox nodded and disappeared.

"Wh-what?", Naruto asked in confusion, holding a hand over the seal on his belly. He felt stronger somehow, the Kyuubi chuckling within him.

"This is really fascinating...your Zanpakutou spirit looks just like that creature entangled with the soul of one of the prisoner of the maggots nest...", Mayuri pondered coming closer, "I've tried all the tricks I know, but I just couldn't separate them and you can release it just like that..."

"What?", Kushina exclaimed. "Does the prisoner look like him, just taller?", she demanded to know.

"It is possible...", the other merely replied.

"Are you telling me, you've been experimenting on my husband?! YOU-", Kushina started, but Renji put a hand over her mouth. She tried to free herself, but his grip was too strong.

"Don't. If you want to get your husband back in one piece you won't insult Captain Kurotsuchi...", Renji warned in a whisper. Kushina calmed down, but still glowered at the captain.

"I will have words with the Soutaicho about releasing my husband!", she declared.

"Why's Dad in prison?", Naruto wondered.

"That is a very good question", Kushina agreed.

"Everyone that is killed through that Shinigami-puppet-thing is send right into the Maggots Nest", Kurotsuchi explained with a shrug.

"You mean the Dead Demon Consuming Seal?", Tsunade stepped in.

"If your calling it that", he shrugged again, already bored, "I wonder what would happen if I bring him here..."

"No!", Kushina interjected.

"Hm? You were just adamant about getting him out of the Nest...", Mayuri's interest was piqued.

"We sealed half of the Kyuubi's Chakra within Minato. If you bring him here it might break free and I don't know if we could stop it...", Kushina explained.

"Kyuubi?"

"A being of immense Chakra only controllable if it's sealed into a vessel, a Jinchuuriki, like the boy", Tsunade explained.

"Fascinating...", Mayuri decided starring at Naruto.

"You won't experiment on my son!", Kushina declared stepping in front of him.

"We will see...", the other grinned.

"OI, is it time yet?", an annoyed voice yelled, causing the captain to roll his eyes.

"Can you gigantic oaf not wait for a simple command?", Kurotsuchi grumbled as he turned to see the large Shinigami emerge from the gate.

"What was that?", he asked, the bells in his spiked hair tingling with his movements.

"We're nearly done, Zarakī", Sui Feng interjected before they could start into an unnecessary fight.

"Hiya, Baldy! Yun-Yun!" A small pink-haired girl lifted herself up over Zarakī's shoulder.

"Kusajishi! You were supposed to stay behind!", Sui Feng complained.

"Silly bee", Yachiru shook her head, "Ken-chan would get lost without me!"

Sui-Feng sighed, but before she could say anything Yachiru exclaimed "Bya-kun!" and dangled from his arm the next second, only to appear right before Sakura next. "You have hair like me!", she discovered with a bright smile. "I do?", the Kunoichi replied with a confused smile. Like this the small Shinigami went through the ranks of assembled people.

Sui-Feng ignored this and asked the Kages instead: "Have you reached a decision, yet?"

"You seem to have everything under control, so I'd like to overlook the preparations in my own village", the Tsuchikage replied.

"Me too", the Mizukage agreed, "This trip was useless and we have a war to prepare for."

"War?!", Zarakī asked, a manic grin spreading across his face.

"Ah, that reminds me: Our foe has made use of a technique that allows him to resurrect fallen Shinobi into his ranks and control them. Is there anything you can do from your side to stop the souls from returning?", the Tsuchikage wondered.

"Resurrect?", Kurotsuchi wanted to make sure.

"I saw one of them shortly after I arrived", Byakuya revealed.

"Where?", several people asked at once.

"I'm not at liberty to say, as it would influence the outcome of your war", he replied with without looking at them, "He seemed to have knowledge of not belonging to this realm. And he also recognized me, but did not reveal it, so they seem to have some control over themselves."

"They have control over their words, but not their actions", the Tsuchikage nodded, "We can't kill them, all we can do is seal them."

"Fascinating...", Mayuri decided, waving with his long nailed hand "unfortunately is restoring your realm more important right now. So please move along, we'll talk about this later."

"As the Jinchuuriki will stay here, we will stay as well", the Kazekage made his choice.

"Same with me", the Raikage agreed.

"I see, Kotetsu, the portals", Sui Feng ordered.

Acknowledging the order the vice captain stepped into the portal relaying it.

When everything was prepared the Kages and their entourages stepped through the gate, accompanied by a few members of the Onmitsukidou.

"Can we finally get this started?!", Zarakī growled in annoyance, still leaning against

the frame of the gate.

"Patience, you'll get to fight soon enough", Byakuya scoffed.

Sui-Feng stepped forward: "If any of you have a low resistance to high amounts of Reaitsu, please leave the vicinity."

"Chakra", Kushina corrected, "It's called Chakra here."

"If you're too weak, get lost", the Taicho rephrased.

"We will trigger the barrier by releasing high amounts of Reaitsu. With this we can analyze the openings and close them accordingly", Kurotsuchi explained, "Afterwards you'll have to release that Chakra-thing and see if the barrier still holds."

"I see", Tsunade acknowledged and called out to her people: "You've heard her, I don't want any injured or worse on my watch only because you overestimated yourselves!"

A few Shinobi that had curiously gathered around them vanished, but Shikamaru and his former classmates stayed firm. They wanted to see this through to the end.

"All right, now you can go", Sui-Feng sighed.

Zaraki stepped forward and with that a wave of breathtaking Reaitsu washed over the gathered people. Not even the Kages were unaffected by this. Naruto saw how his friends trembled and some even fell to their knees and stepped before them, cloaking them with the Ninetails Chakra.

"Oooh, I would really like to examine the boy...", Kurotsuchi cooed clicking his fingers together in anticipation.

"You will do no such thing to my son!", Kushina warned him, a little breathless.

"Barrier nearly established!", one of the Shinigami yelled.

"I'll be off then", Zaraki decided and jumped up to the dome above them.

"Wait, Taicho!", Ikkaku yelled after him.

"Madarame! Release your Bankai first!", Sui-Feng held him back.

"But...", he tried, but she cut him off, "Follow your orders, Third-Seat!"

"You too Abarai! Kuchiki!", she ordered them as well.

Without further complaint the Shinigami complied. Byakuya manifested a sword from the cherry blossom pedals that he held blade first above the ground. Madarame swirled Houzukimaru over his head and Renji lifted up Zabimaru. Simultaneously they called out: "Bankai!" Byakuya's sword sunk into the ground and around him gigantic blades rose and scattered into cherry blossom pedals again. A whirlwind rose up around Ikkaku, when it settled down the large cleaver-like blade of Ryuumon Houzukimaru rested on his shoulders, while he held the other two parts in his hands. The skeleton snake of Hihou Zabimaru swirled around Renji as its large skull head with the red fur collar screamed menacingly above him. Already the first Hollows had emerged above them and Zaraki's laughter could be heard, but the Shinobi still stood in awe of the released Bankai.

"Let's go!", Ikkaku yelled and jumped up into the fray.

Just as he was through, the Hollows swarmed around the last opening, trying to get in.

"Hikotsu Taihou", Renji yelled whipping the bone snake towards it. Its spine segments parted slightly as red energy flowed through them. As it reached the snake's jaws they opened and the energy formed a large ball. Releasing it into the Hollows they dispersed with one blow. As the way was free he Shunpoed up himself to join the others.

"Woah, awesome!", Naruto yelled in excitement, his own energy cloak fading as the Spiritual Pressure wasn't weighing them down any more.

"Just like a Tailed Beast bomb...", Gaara commented as the barrier closed completely.

More and more Hollows emerged through the tears in the sky and surrounded the three Shinigami, but they slew them all the same. Each of them moved into a different direction on top of the barrier, which left the area atop the Training Field unprotected when two white hands tore open another gate.

"MENOS!", one of the analysts yelled as they became aware of it.

An ear piercing scream came from the white nosed head looking out. The Shinobi covered their ears, but the Shinigami worried about something else.

"The barrier won't hold much longer! Zarak-Taicho's Reitsu is too strong!", one of those, holding it up warned, sweat running down his brows.

"That's enough, I can bloody well protect my own village! Naruto! Inform the Barrier Team!", Tsunade bellowed.

As the boy sent off a Shadow Clone in a flash, a large white foot came out of the opening and landed on the Shinigami's barrier, cracking it further. Busy with their own opponents the three on top didn't notice so instead a cloud of cherry blossom blades gathered underneath it before they rushed upwards, shredding the Hollow into tiny pieces, leaving nothing behind.

"We have all the readings", Kurotsuchi notified them, "Initiate phase two!"

"Not yet! We have to stabilize the barrier first!", Isane interjected. As pushed more of her own power into the crumbling structure, she felt another crawl over her fingertips.

The Shinigami at the barrier stepped away as a second barrier build itself underneath the first one, black signs spreading across it; a yellow hue to it.

"Let me try something!", Kushina asked as it was completed. Sui-Feng nodded.

"Naruto, Jiraiya-sama, I need your help." The two of them stepped beside her and she told them what she intended to do.

"I haven't used the Sage Mode since I died, I'm not even sure I CAN still use it", Jiraiya complained.

"Just try it", Kushina asked, while Naruto already started to collect the natural energy around them.

"Fine", he gave in. It took him longer than it used to, but he finally managed. "Ha, it still works!", he exclaimed excited before his face fell flat when he saw that the only change in Naruto's features were the eyes and the orange eye shadow, while he knew his own nose was flat and warty again. "This is so not fair...", he complained to which Naruto only laughed.

"All right, now put your hands on my shoulders and push the Sage energy through me into the barrier", Kushina ordered and the two did as they were told. The former Shinobi focused her own energy around her before she laid her hands on the barrier. The energy went from her into it and spread across it. She pushed it in with all her might, grunting and sweating and screaming at it. Something changed in the energy signature of the barriers, another circle was added to the signs and finally Kushina collapsed to her knees, panting.

"Mom!", Naruto knelt down beside her, while Jiraiya sat down as well; both back to normal.

"A-amazing...", one of the analysts declared, looking up from his monitor, "She merged the barriers! They can now easily withstand the Reitsu from above!"

"Well, done", Sui-Feng complimented impressed, but only got a thumbs up from the exhausted Shinigami.

"Now we only need to get those three to come down again...", Sui-Feng thought out loud, "Before that, we need to get rid of the remaining Hollows."

"I felt something powerful and icy coming from the direction of Suna, I think it's one of you guys", Naruto told her pointing.

"That must be Hitsugaya, how far away is he?", Byakuya concluded.

"Not that far, he should be here any minute now", Naruto guessed.

"Matsumoto contact your captain and tell him to attack the Hollows he's approaching at once, without holding back!", Sui Feng gave the next order and added towards Naruto and Kushina: "Boy, tell me when he's thirty seconds away. And you bring down Abarai and Madarame when that moment comes!"

"What about Zarak-taicho?", Kushina wondered.

"Don't worry about him...", the Taicho only replied.

Naruto returned into Sage Mode and Kushina got ready as well. Above them the fighting continued.

"NOW!", Naruto yelled and his mother pushed her energy back into barrier.

Two man sized wholes opened up underneath Renji and Ikkaku and the two of them fell through. Upon realizing this was intentional Renji recalled his Bankai so it wouldn't get stuck in the closing barrier. Just as they had passed through a wave of ice washed over the barrier freezing everything in its path, causing frost patterns to blossom on the surface.