Naberius Heir

by Liam_G

Summary

Rias Gremory is asked by her brother to care for a human suffering from memory loss. The moment she meets Ichigo Shiba, she knows her life might get interesting in the future with her new roommate. AU. Starts during Rias's second year at Kuoh Academy and several months after the end of the Winter War.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu"

Sitting around the unconscious orange-haired youth are three adults who patiently wait for their comrade to finish his preparations. The young man has been hidden in the shouten for the last three weeks by the one person who had forever changed his life less than nine months prior. Looking down, the young man's father struggles to hold back the tears that want to fall as he gazes at his son's comatose form.

His baby boy - the victor of the worst war that Soul Society had fought in over a thousand years - is to be exiled.

Next to him, the purple haired woman keeps wiping her tears away as she helps stand guard over the young man until the last two people in the room finally announce that their preparations are done.

"I'm finished boss, whenever you're ready to start." The corn-braided man says with a spark of anger in his voice. It is directed at the people who are responsible for this mess.

Nodding, his boss turns his head to speak to the grieving father. "Isshin, I'm sorry but this is his only chance now. You heard what Central Forty-Six said." The man, wearing a green and white striped hat says while suppressing his own rage with the current situation.

"FUCK 'EM KISUKE!" The former Squad Two Captain spits out venomously.

Squeezing his son's hand for the last time before his memories are erased, the head of the Kurosaki family stands up and places his hand on the woman's shoulder. "We have no choice Yoruichi. It's like Kisuke said. They wanted him executed. At least...At least this way he gets to live."

"Isshin you call this living!? We're going to erase his memory forever! Don't you get it? This is the end of your son!" The woman next to him shouts, slapping away his hand. The father rounds on her with a furious expression on his face, unable to contain his own anger anymore.
"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT ME TO DO YORUICHI!? KILL HIM FIRST!? I FUCKING HATE THIS AS MUCH AS YOU DO, BUT HE GETS TO LIVE! THEY FEAR HIM, FEAR HIM BECAUSE HE NOT ONLY KILLED THAT FUCK BUT DESTROYED THE HÔGYOKU! SOMETHING THAT COULDN'T BE DONE BUT HE DID IT, DID IT WHILE HE WAS…!"

"…While he was in his Vasto Lorde form." Kisuke finishes as his old friend runs out of words to say.

However, Kisuke leaves out the most important part of what really happened that day. The fact that Ichigo tore Aizen apart had not been the problem; it was how he had done so, with something not believed possible. It was only after Kisuke spoke to Isshin in private later that he learned the secret of Ichigo's true heritage. A secret that Masaki's family kept even from her. It was only after her death that Isshin himself had learned of his wife's other family, when he was approached by Masaki's grandfather after the funeral. Kisuke hid his surprise when he finally added everything up and then he used it to come up with a last-minute plan to save Ichigo, the plan that they are now going to execute.

He is furious that things have turned out this way, as are much of the surviving Gotei Thirteen when they learned that the newly reinstated Central Forty-Six wanted Ichigo executed simply because they feared his power. It wasn't until Kisuke had offered them a way out, one that all the Captains reluctantly agreed with, that the possibility of a civil war breaking out between the Squads was averted. The plan was the complete erasure of Ichigo's memory and replacing them with new ones. Isshin had finally ended the loud and contentious debate over it when he openly agreed to Kisuke's plan at the last Captain's meeting, in exchange for Central Forty-Six's promise to leave his son alone after this.

Placing his hands on the shoulders of both his distraught friends, Kisuke gives them a squeeze before he nudges Isshin aside and gives Yoruichi a look to make her back up and give him some space. Moving to the middle of the boy's body on one side of the bed, he looks up to see Tessai taking off his glasses and wiping the moisture away from his eyes, before he moves to the opposite side across from him.

Swallowing what feels like a desert in his throat, Kisuke finally rasps out his question, knowing that there is no turning back after this. "Tessai are you sure?"

"Yeah boss. Let's give him a second chance at a normal life."

"Isshin?"

"Goodbye my son. I'm sorry none of us are strong enough to save you." The father's eyes fill with tears. The woman beside him takes his arm in support, her own eyes moist with unshed tears.

Kisuke takes a deep breath. "... Then let us begin."

With that, the two Kidō masters begin to channel their Reïatsu into a forbidden Kidō, using a special seal to wrap it around Ichigo's memories. Soon the light grows brighter and then just as suddenly as it begins it is over. Kurosaki Ichigo, hero of the Winter War, oldest son of the Kurosaki family...no longer exists.

'I'm sorry Masaki, but I have to give him away to your family now.'

Wiping his tears away, Isshin walks out into the night alone, before taking out an old piece of paper. Channeling a small amount of Reïatsu into the well-preserved parchment, he watches as a
phone number illuminates itself on its previously-blank surface. Taking out his cell phone, he dials the number and waits until a voice picks up on the other end.

"Hello." He waits for a reply. He doesn't have to wait long.

"I need you to come to Karakura, it's important." A question from the other side.

"It's about Ichigo. I need you to take him." He closes his eyes as he listens to the angry voice on the other side demanding an explanation.

"It's better if you come here and let me explain. I… we had to do something." More angry shouting.

"Give me a minute before you come." His dead voice silences the other side, and an agreement is reached. Isshin turns around; he wants to see his son one more time.

Walking back into the shouten, he sees Kisuke and Tessai still sitting around Ichigo; Yoruichi is missing and probably seeking some space to vent out her anger. Ichigo's face remains calm as he continues to lie in a Kidō induced coma, the same one he has been in since the end of the Winter War. Not even his friends were told where he has been since Kisuke spirited him away from the battlefield that day. Taking one last look at his son, Isshin speaks one more time into the phone, his voice as broken as his heart.

"We're ready."

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Several months later…

Rias Gremory quietly waits outside of her father's study as he finishes an important meeting with a Devil from another Clan. Sitting next to her is her Queen, the black-haired Akeno Himejima; both of them were summoned not more than an hour ago by Grayfia Lucifuge, the family head maid. She is also known by two other titles: the Strongest Queen and wife to Sirzechs Lucifer, Rias's brother, the current Maou Lucifer of the Anti-Satan faction. Now she and Akeno are waiting for an audience with her father to find out what is so important for them to be called back home to the family estate in the middle of a school day.

Akeno looks at her friend and her master with an expression bordering on boredom. "Do you think this has to do with your engagement Buchou?"

A flash of anger darts across the face of the crimson-haired heiress of the Gremory Clan before she answers. "I am not going to marry that womanizing Rizer; I don't care what my father and brother say otherwise. I will marry for love Akeno and that's final."

Smiling softly as she looks at her best friend, Akeno gives her some encouragement. "We have at least six to seven years before we are done our schooling Buchou, maybe by then a better solution will present itself to you."

Sighing softly, Rias looks at her friend and whispers to her. "I hope so Akeno. I don't think I could survive being his wife. I… I don't want to marry him even if he is one of the few pure-bloods left. I'd rather marry a human before I marry him."

Before Akeno can console her master further, a brief but powerful wave of magic emanates from the study of Lord Gremory. Soon after that, Grayfia opens the door and motions for the two younger Devils to enter. Getting up together, Rias and Akeno walk into the room to finally find out
what the Gremory Clan's current head wants of them. As they walk in however, they are treated to a pleasant surprise; sitting next to Lord Gremory is Sirzechs Lucifer, Rias's older brother.

"Brother!" Rias says as she makes her way to give him a hug.

The current leader of the Four Great Satans smiles as his sister hugs him. "How is my cute little sister doing today?"

"I'm still mad at you and Father, Brother." She tells him.

The three adults in the room share a joint grimace at her declaration. Looking at his wife before she can say anything, Sirzechs's shakes his head fractionally to keep her from rebuking his younger sister. The silver-haired maid keeps a neutral look on her face as she gives a responding shake back to him. She then moves to the center of the room and speaks to all of them.

"Rias, Akeno, have a seat please. We have something we wish to discuss with you." She waves to the chairs now arranged two-a-side around a table in the middle of the study.

When everyone has taken a seat, the head maid serves everyone a cup of tea before she goes and stands behind the head of the family and the Maou. At this point, her husband begins the discussion about why his sister and her Queen have been called to this emergency meeting.

"Rias, we have been asked an unusual favor from an old family acquaintance of ours, which we would like your help in facilitating for us." Sirzechs says without hesitation.

Rias and Akeno look at one another; both find it odd that they would be asked to help in a family matter on such short notice. Rias then looks at her brother and asks. "What can I do for you Maou Lucifer?"

"Now, now sister. No need to be so formal, I'm still your brother first even if…OWWW!" The sudden pinch to his face ends his sentence as the woman standing behind him finishes her punishment.

"You are the Maou of the Devils; as such you must remember your place, even here and now Sirzechs."

Giving his wife a sheepish look, the Maou Lucifer begins again. "As I was saying Rias, we have been approached by a family acquaintance for a favor. One that normally we would have said no to, but this case is special because of who asked and why."

Rias scrunches her brows together as she first looks at her brother, then her father before looking at the ever stoic maid of the family. Giving her Queen a quick look, she sees that Akeno is very interested in what the favor could be, so she looks back at her crimson-haired brother and gives a nod of her head.

"Thank you Rias. Now I will tell you what we want you to do for us. As I just said, usually we would have passed on this request, but the person asking needs our family's help in fulfilling his request. And that request is for us to take care of the son of an old family friend. A human."

Master and Queen give each other a baffled look before Rias begins her questioning of her brother. "Why us in particular, and why do we need to watch over this human Brother?"

Sitting back in his chair, her brother gives a shake of his own head. "This human has recently experienced a serious head injury and lost most of the memories of his life. The only thing he seems to remember is his name and his schooling. Other than that, he has no recollection of his life
except for the past few months as he recovered in a hospital in Europe."

"A head injury is very serious Brother, I'm not really sure if Akeno or I should be the ones to help this young…"

"His name is Ichigo Shiba, Rias. And yes, I think you and Akeno are more than capable to help us in this matter. The only stipulation is this, he must stay with you for the time being and he will be going to school with you as well."

"A boy?" Akeno asks in disbelief.

Grayfia then speaks. "Yes Akeno, a young man. He is as Sirzechs said a member of a human family that served our friend's family a few generations ago. At this point Ichigo Shiba is the last living descendent of that family, and they hold a special place in the heart of the Devil asking for our help. So do you think you can do this Rias?"

Looking at her sister-in-law to see if there is anything she is hiding but seeing no hint of deception, Rias gives her answer. "Of course we will try and do our best for this human if you so wish Grayfia. But Father, why us exactly? I mean why me and Akeno, wouldn't any other Clan have been acceptable?"

Her father finally speaks. "No Rias, we are the only ones he would approach in regards to the care of this human. As such we said yes after listening to the story he told us, and of course we did ask for and receive proof as such. The young man is all that survives of this family now and our friend would like to make sure he is taken care of. As for his expenses, they will be handled by Grayfia and a monthly allowance will be sent to his account. All we want for you and Akeno to do is allow him to stay with you and to help him get acclimated to Kuoh Academy and the town."

"Then we will do as you ask Father. Is there anything we should know before we meet him?"

The question brings a mixed reaction from the three adults. Rias's father and brother both hold back a chuckle, while Grayfia clicks her tongue in exasperation. Sensing something is being withheld, Akeno dares venture to ask.

"Is there something the matter Grayfia?"

The silver-eyed woman glares at the two Gremory men as she answers bluntly. "Yes, beware of his manners. They are severely lacking."

"Come now my lovely wife." Sirzechs says as he dodges her hand deftly. "He isn't that ill-mannered, just not used to nobility is his problem."

"I beg to differ Sirzechs. I watched the same thing you and Lord Gremory did as well. His lack of tact and his utter disdain for his elders and superiors is horrifying. I can only hope your sister and Akeno don't send him to oblivion for his impudence." She tells him.

Shrugging his shoulders, the Maou looks at his sister and her Queen again. "There is one last thing Rias, Akeno. He must never see you using your powers, but if he does you must not use any powerful or aggressive magic on him. If you need to render him unconscious, use one that simply induces sleep or drowsiness to aide you in restraining him. As I said any more injury or shocks to his brain may cause irreversible damage to him."

"If that should occur, what do you want us to do brother?" Rias asks with a small amount of worry.

"You will send me a message and I will take care of it Rias. It is very important that we let this
human live as normal a life as possible. I know this will be very hard for you and your peerage, but I must insist that you try to do your best.”

Sighing heavily, Rias asks one last question of her brother. "Is there anything else we should know Brother?"

"Yes, he will be arriving at your school tomorrow and his belongings will be delivered to your house then as well Rias. We are counting on you and Akeno to do this for us."

Akeno and Rias both get up and bow to the three elder Devils before Akeno creates a magic circle and transports them back to Kuoh Academy.

Frowning at the place they used to be, Lord Gremory looks at his son and daughter-in-law. "I'm not sure if they are up to this Sirzechs. What happens if they find out who he really is?"

Sirzechs looks at his father and responds in a serious manner. "Then we will show them why our enemies fear us and our Power of Destruction Father. We owe this young man and his family for failing in their protection all those years ago. I will not let it happen again."

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Akeno stands at one of the windows in their homeroom with Rias as they watch the courtyard full of students heading their way to class for the last semester of the year. Watching her crimson-haired friend intently, she notices Rias chewing her bottom lip as she waits for the announcement from the principle. Today they are finally going to meet the human that has the Gremory Clan bending over backwards to help him. She sighs as she goes back to staring out the window as well, noticing Rias's Knight and First-year Yuuto Kiba as he walks past with a pack of fan girls shadowing him.

She laughs silently as she watches Kiba do his best to ignore the seven or so girls right behind him as he makes his way to his own homeroom. She waves when he notices her and Rias standing at the window looking over the first boys ever allowed admittance to Kuoh Academy, and he politely nods in her direction. None of the other boys have caught her attention, most being intimated by the beautiful teenagers that make up a majority of the school’s overall population. Well, three of them do promise to offer some entertainment at least, the Three Hentai, as the girls dubbed those three perverted First Years. Hopefully, as the only Second year boy and as their new roommate, Ichigo Shiba will be different than all the other boys and change that perspective.

Soon a familiar presence makes her way to the two girls at the window. Souna Shitori with her black hair and glasses covered violet eyes lets them know that it won't be long before Rias has to meet with the new student. Coming to a stop next to the other two Devils, Souna quietly speaks to them.

"I saw your new housemate Rias and I must say he is quite the specimen.” A faint blush actually adorns the usually serious class-rep's face.

Rias can't help herself as she whispers back. "Well what does he look like Sōna?"

At hearing her real name, the girl decides to bait her friend some. "I think it would be best for you to see for yourself Rias. Wouldn't want to ruin the surprise your brother and Grayfia have arranged for you and Akeno."

"Ara, ara Souna that's not kind. Holding out like that is very unsporting of you." Akeno says while smirking at the class-rep and future heir of the Sitri Clan.
Still blushing, the hidden Devil turns towards her fellow Devils and gives them a wink. "All I can say is this. He isn't like anyone I have ever met before Rias, Akeno. He is definitely a man among boys."

Before anyone can speak a word, the announcement is made.

"Rias Gremory report to Principle Yamato's office. Rias Gremory report to Principle Yamato's office."

"Well Buchou I guess that is your cue to meet our housemate. I can't wait to see what he looks like now." Akeno's eyes begin glinting dangerously.

"Have fun Rias, I'm sure you and Akeno will need it. By the by, if you ever tire of him, let me know. I...WILL...TAKE...HIM...GLADLY."

Both Akeno and Rias can only stare at Sōna as she walks away to join her own queen, Tsubaki Shinra, at her desk. They see her bend down and whisper into her Queen's ear and both begin to giggle as they turn to look back at their friends and rivals. Akeno sighs as she grabs her Master by her shoulders and starts pushing her towards the door.

"It can't be that bad Buchou, let's just do as your brother has asked and get this over with. I will take notes while you get this Ichigo. So take your time."

Nodding as she walks out the door, Rias can only wonder if her friend is joking or being serious. She has never seen Sōna ever act the way she just did. If it wasn't logical, she usually had nothing to do with it. As she walks down the hallway towards the principal's office however, she has to deal with many admirers, both female and male. Putting on a genuine smile, for she truly does care for her fellow students, all she can do is try and feel happy as she walks through the hallways. This school and her home in the human world are the only two places where she can feel happy and be herself. When she is at home in the Underworld, she has to be the Heiress of the Gremory Clan, a fake model of happiness when in the presence of other nobles.

Now that her family has arranged her marriage to Riser Phenex, all she has left is school and a hope that a miracle will occur or else she will have to marry that pig of a man. For a second a frown forms on her face as she recalls the first time she had met the overbearing man. He was standing with both his sister and his Queen at a formal dinner party where the Gremory's were guests, and she had to watch as he felt up each member of his peerage right in front of her. It was a few weeks after that first meeting that her family had informed her that he would be her future husband. No matter what she said to them that night, they wouldn't budge, saying that they had already agreed to the marriage. The only concession she got was that the marriage wouldn't be until after she graduated from University.

Before she knows it, Rias is standing in front of the principal's office in no time at all. Knocking first and then entering after an older woman's voice tells her to come in, Rias doesn't see anyone other than the secretary at her desk. The woman while typing doesn't even look up as she motions for Rias to enter Principal Yamato's office. Knocking again before entering the room, she can't see anything of the new student as he sits in a high-backed chair opposite of Head Master Yamato's desk. Soon that changes however when she makes her way to the second chair and comes even with it and the other chair's occupant.

Rias does everything she can to keep from exclaiming as she sets her eyes upon Ichigo Shiba for the first time. The first thing she notices is his bright orange hair that sits on top of a well-chiseled face. His body is richly defined, not an ounce of fat evident if the muscles on his chest bulging against the white shirt he is wearing is anything to go by. His jacket is casually lying over one of
the arms of the chair he is sitting in. Her next impression comes as he stands to greet her; he seems to tower over her at just over two meters in height, far taller than most Japanese males are. As he looks at her she finally gets to see his eyes, his warm brown orbs searing into her soul, as he gives a small bow in greeting. As she extends her hands almost shakily towards him, she can't but help but think one thing.

'Oh my God! He's hot!' She winces slightly but suffers the pain of using HIS name.

"Ichigo Shiba." His baritone voice finally snaps her out of her stupor.

"Ah sorry, Rias Gremory." She replies with flushed cheeks.

The man sitting behind the desk finally speaks to the two teens. "Now I understand Gremory-chan that Shiba-kun will be staying with you and Himejima-chan for the time being. I am aware of his medical condition, so if there is an emergency, we have his medical records from your family. Also he will be in all of your classes this year as well. So why don't you escort him to his first class and get him up to speed with our fine school."

"Hai Yamato-Sensei. Shiba-kun if you will, follow me please."

"Sure."

After leaving the office, Rias decides she is taking the long way back to class so she can ask her new housemate a few questions.

"So Shiba-k…"

"It's Ichigo."

"Huh?"

The male walking next to her glances at her as he walks beside her easily. "Ichigo is fine."

"Okay then Ichigo. I've been told that you are recovering from a head injury." She says as they walk the now deserted hallways.

"Yeah, I guess. I don't really remember anything. All I know is that I woke up in an Austrian hospital. I don't even remember how I got there or what I was doing is Austria. The only thing I remembered was my name and that I was a Second year in high school. The only other thing remembered is having a guardian that lives in Japan who came for me as soon as I was well enough to travel. We had to take a train from Austria all the way to the coast of China, and then a privately chartered yacht brought us back to Japan. Something about the air pressure from flying could cause me to relapse into a coma."

Just as the two pass by a window, Rias looks up at her taller companion's head and has to yet again suppress her delight towards her new roommate. His orange hair lights up brightly like spun gold as the sun's light filters through his spiky locks. Turning her head forward and hoping he doesn't see the red bleeding into her cheeks, she distracts him with yet another question.

"So Ichigo, are you okay with staying with me for a few months until the doctors clear you?"

The young man looks at his guide and shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly. "It doesn't bother me Gremory-san. It's what my guardian has arranged for me because he can't look after me like he wants to. His job has him traveling all the time and according to him, your family and his are close. So I guess I'll have to deal with it."
"Tsk, tsk Ichigo. If I have to call you Ichigo then you must call me Rias. I insist." She says while a smile forms on her face.

"Okay then Rias. So is there anything I should be aware of? This is a new school for me, so I'd like to know if there any quirks or social taboos I need to know about."

"Nothing major Ichigo, except that the male to female ratio is very lopsided, this used to be an all-girls private academy up until last year. So there are not many boys who qualified to get in this year."

Ichigo looks down at Rias with a raised eyebrow. "How many boys are there exactly to girls?"

"Oh, I guess for every boy there are about ninety or hundred girls give or take." She replies with a grin at seeing his face go blank.

Soon they pass the first set of students who are walking down the opposite side of the hallway, and Ichigo gets a hint of exactly who Rias is to the school.

"Did you see that? Rias-senpai is with a hottie too."

"AWW! Why does she get him?"

"Is his hair really that color or do you think he dyes it?"

As the two girls walk past them, Rias wants to laugh as she sees Ichigo's calm demeanor rapidly changing to a scowl on his face, which she thinks looks oddly cute on him. Taking an extra hallway to buy more time, she leads him away from their class by taking the Northern stairs instead of the Southern set. Gaining an extra few minutes she accidentally passes by Yuuto's classroom and sees him stepping out of his classroom just as they walk past.

"Ah Buchou, I didn't see you." The young blonde-hair male says with a bow.

Both Rias and Ichigo stop as she introduces the older male to the younger one. "Yuuto Kiba this is Ichigo Shiba. Ichigo this is Yuuto."

"How do you do Shiba-senpai?" Yuuto says as he sticks his hand out politely.

Taking the hand of Yuuto and shaking it once, Ichigo answers honestly. "I am doing as well as I can Yuuto, and Ichigo is fine."

As they release hands, a new face appears behind Yuuto and the others. The brown-hair male goes wide eyed as he sees Rias and Ichigo standing in the hallways. Ichigo shifts to stand in front of Rias when he sees the new male's eyes never going above her chest level. An odd feeling takes over Ichigo as he glares at the first year student.

"Hey, moron, her eyes are not on her chest. I suggest you look up more." His tone allows no argument from the pervert.

"A-Ah, sorry Senpai! I'll be on my way then! Sorry!" The boy apologizes and begins to sprint down the hallway, sending a glance over his shoulder as he rounds the corner.

"Yuuto, who was that just now?" Rias asks curiously as her eyes follow the boy until he disappears.

Scratching the back of his head, the blonde boy chuckles as he looks down the same hallway the
boy ran down. "I think his name is Issei Hyoudou, Buchou. He is part of that 'trio'."

Ichigo however is glaring in the same direction with confused thoughts going through his head. He shakes his head wondering why he is feeling so bothered; an odd feeling had come over him as he saw the boy leering at the crimson-haired beauty who is escorting him to class. He turns back around and stands there listening to the young woman as she speaks to the other male student.

"Well Yuuto, Ichigo and I have to get to class. I'll see you at club after school, okay?"

"Of course Buchou. Nice meeting you Ichigo."

"Yeah, same here." He nods.

Rias takes Ichigo's arm this time and begins to lead him towards the stairway when she hears a question coming from the taller man.

"Why did he call you Buchou? Are you in a club?" He asks curiously.

Rias smiles at him. "That's because I am actually the president of the Occult Research Club Ichigo. We search the local towns for ghost stories to see if they are real or not. I was able to get it reinstated my first year here because I have a fascination with the supernatural. What about you Ichigo, do you believe in ghosts?"

Shaking his head while walking, he answers. "Nah. Don't believe in the afterlife."

Quirking an eyebrow at that, she smiles at him again. "Well maybe you should go with us one time, just to see maybe."

"Sure, if I got nothing better to do, why not."

"Good, you'll have a lot of fun, I guarantee it Ichigo."

Coming to the stairway, they begin their ascent up as Rias looks again at Ichigo, she wonders why he did what he did so she asks him about it.

"Ichigo, I know we just met but why did you do that to the First year?"

Ichigo stops and looks at Rias with disbelief in his eyes as he asks her. "You're kidding right? You didn't see how hard he was staring at your breasts just then?"

'Wow, I've never had anyone defend me like that except my peerage.'

Out loud, Rias says. "Well, I get that all the time Ichigo; I guess it doesn't bother me as much anymore. But thank you for what you did." She gives him a warm smile.

Grunting before he continues back up the stairs, Ichigo gives her a surprise with his next comment. "If it happens again when I'm around, I'll run them off again Rias."

"My own knight in shining armor then Ichigo, I'm flattered." She giggles as they make it to the top of the stairs.

Soon they are walking down the long hallway and it hits Ichigo as to where their class is when they finally stop in front of the classroom. Looking at the nearby stairway suspiciously, he gives his guide a look and sees her smiling right back at him, confirming that their class is right next to a stairway that is closer to the principal's office than the one they used. Shaking his head in exasperation, he stands outside while Rias goes in and gives the teacher his paperwork. Soon
afterwards he hears a female voice telling the class that they have a new transfer student joining the class, then she calls for him to come in. As he walks in, he immediately sees that he is the only male in the class, and the only empty seat happens to be by the window right next to Rias.

The teacher hands him a piece of chalk so he can write his name on the blackboard. After he is done writing, he turns around and makes his formal introduction to the class.

"Hello, my name is Ichigo Shiba. I hope we get along and we can take care of each other." That is the wrong thing to say he finds out.

"Yeah, you can take care of me all night Ichi-kun."

"Ehmm, Berry-tan you look delicious."

"Even if you dye your hair, I like what you are offering."

Thankfully a voice saves him as Rias suddenly voices her objection. "Ichigo is staying with my family."

A chorus of groans and complaints are voiced by the rest of the female students, except three students that he notices right away. The first one is sitting directly behind Rias. Her long black hair is tied back into a simple pony-tail and it looks like it reaches almost to her feet. Her violet eyes are slightly lidded as she looks him over from the feeling he gets. Next to her and one seat behind is another black-haired girl with shorter hair styled into a bob cut, wearing a pair of oval-shaped glasses that don't quite hide her contemplating violet eyes. The last girl is directly next to the second girl in the next row; her square rimmed glasses also don't hide her - to his surprise - heterochromatic eyes, one being light brown and the other being violet like the first two females he had noticed. She also has black hair as do most of the girls in his class, but her long hair is left hanging over her shoulders down to her feet.

"Ichigo please take a seat next to Rias and we can continue our lesson." His new homeroom teacher says.

Nodding and then making his way down the last row to the empty seat, he swears he can feel almost every set of eyes watching him, including his teacher as he catches her watching him as he sits down. Internally smirking, he takes out a notebook and a pen and begins to copy the notes from the board. A hand touches his and when he looks over, he sees Rias mouth to him.

'Don't let it bother you too much; they'll stay away from you now.' Her smile makes him nod back to her and soon the lesson picks up and he is lost in his writing.

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The lunch bell rings and Ichigo leans back, stretching his arms high over his head, not realizing that once again he is on display until his self-appointed crimson-haired shield stands up and puts an immediate end to it with a fierce glare. One that makes sure it will spread that he is off-limits, or at least she hopes so. Turning back to Ichigo she can see him packing his books away and looking up at her from his seat.

"Ah Rias, can you take me to the cafeteria, I didn't have time to stop for a bento."

She grabs his arm and pulls him from his seat as she guides him from the classroom. Right behind them are the three girls he had noticed earlier who had watched him differently from the rest of the class.
"Buchou are you going to introduce us properly?" The first girl asks with a hint of jealousy as she walks behind the two.

"Yes Rias, you should show some proper etiquette with our newest student." The shorter haired girl says with a smirk.

Stopping in the middle of the hallway, his red-haired guide turns on the three students following them and in a very hard voice she replies. "I was going to do so once we got to the cafeteria and allowed him to at least be sitting. But if you insist, Ichigo this is Souna Shitori, Akeno Himejima and Tsubaki Shinra."

"Ah, nice to meet you all." Ichigo says as he stands next to the fuming Rias.

"Nice to meet you as well Ichigo-kun, I'm Rias's vice-president for the Occult Club." Akeno chimes in as she extends her hand for him to shake.

Shaking her hand and then shaking Souna's and finally Tsubaki's hand, he gives a quick glance at his informal guide to see her eyes narrowing dangerously for some reason. Instinctively he backs up a step and waits for her to blow up. He isn't too far off his mark.

"Akeno, keep your hands off him. He is still recovering and I don't think your ideas of fun would be beneficial to him, do you?"

Pouting at that, the secret sadist rebuts. "But Buchou, you are already…"

A stare-down begins between the two best friends at that point. Rias wins.

"Fine, you can have him for now Buchou, but sooner or later…" Akeno says in a sing-song voice as she walks around Ichigo, sliding a finger down the length of his arm. "In case Rias didn't inform you as of yet, I'm your other roommate Ichigo; I do hope you and I can become good friends as well."

"Akeno." A now villainous-looking Rias utters quietly as she voices her displeasure.

"Ara, ara Buchou don't you think we should get to lunch now?" The smile on Akeno's face reminds Ichigo of a shark circling a drowning man.

A sudden jerk on his arm has Ichigo once again moving down the hallway. The mutterings coming from the crimson head of hair next to him and her choice of words has even him trying to stifle his laughter from her imaginative vocabulary. Deciding that it would be best to appease his new roommates, he finds that keeping quiet is the best course of action. However, his smile becomes a scowl as the passing comments to his current piece of decoration hanging off his arm makes him a fearsome sight. Together the hallway of staring and quietly gossiping students clear a path all the way to the cafeteria for the five students. No one wants to make the scowling red or orange head even more pissed than they seem to be already.

As soon as Ichigo enters the cafeteria, almost every head swivels towards them to see the number one, two, three and four school idols with the newest male student. Everyone collectively groans when they see him walking arm and arm with Rias Gremory as they make their way to the lunch line. Soon the talking starts up again and most of the student-body wisely ignore the normally smiling Crimson Princess and her entourage. Glancing down at the food seems to have a positive effect on Ichigo, as he sees a lot of Japanese cuisine being served. After eating out of store-bought bento for the past few weeks, he is really happy to see fresh cooked food finally.

Once he fills his plate, he follows Rias and Akeno to a window table and sits down to eat. Souna
and Tsubaki sit at a different table.

"Itadakimasu." He says quietly to himself.

The first few minutes are spent in silence as he eats before Akeno picks up her own chopsticks and asks her first question. "So Ichigo, how is your first day going so far?"

Swallowing first he answers. "It's okay I guess, I don't think I'll have a problem catching up it looks like. Most of the subjects are like my old school, if I could remember it at least."

Rias gives him a look before she jumps in with the next question. "So, is there anything you need to tell us about your condition other than what your guardian included in his letter to us?"

"Nope, not that I know of. Listen Rias, Akeno, don't treat me like an invalid please; I've had enough of that the past few months already. Between the doctors and nurses, I was getting pretty sick of the looks of pity and false words of sympathy from them. So please treat me normally."

The King and her Queen exchange a look. "Sorry Ichigo, we didn't mean to. Your guardian left pretty vague instructions but he wanted us to keep you out of any of the clubs that are physical for the time being. Other than that, he didn't leave anything more specific." Rias says to him between bites of her own food.

"I see, thanks then for helping out. I really can't tell you anything honestly. The first thing I remember is waking up in a hospital with doctors and nurses speaking a language I didn't know. It took them two days to find a translator for me and then it was two weeks later I found out I was in an accident from my guardian. He told me I had been on holiday and fell off a steep cliff while I was walking a mountain trail. That's all I know from that point, anything from before is a blank slate."

Akeno gives him a predatory look that Rias knows all-to-well but she can't stop her Queen in time. "Well then, we will just have to make sure your new memories are…more memorable then Ichikun." She finishes by licking her straw slowly.

"Akeno, what did I say?" Rias's voice once again regains her earlier venom.

Akeno gives her an innocent look. "Buchou, I was just saying that he shouldn't have to worry about bad memories when he starts living with us."

Ichigo watches with amusement as the crimson-haired Rias duels verbally with her best friend, the black-haired Akeno, over what is to be deemed proper or not. Soon the argument causes him to break out in a chuckle as they start to list the bad habits that each other has, quietly of course, then they begin reminding each other of the practical jokes they have played on each other. He almost spits out his tea when one of them brings up one the oldest and funniest but also messiest jokes, one that somehow caught Rias's older brother instead of its intended victim. Missing memories or not, he still knows that plastic wrap and toilet seats don't mix well.

"Ichigo. Ichigo. Hey are you there Ichigo?" Rias is in his face, and he realizes he must have zoned out.

Not moving an inch, he looks into her blue eyes and finds himself staring deep into them. "Ah, sorry Rias, I guess listening to you was helping me feel normal. Sorry."

Sitting back down, Rias keeps her eye on him as he sits there eating. A ghost of a smile forms on his face as he looks between the two girls. She blushes as does her Queen when they both see his smile.
'He is so hot! / I can't wait for tonight!'

Rias stares out the window at the top of the center stairwell watching Ichigo as he walks towards the gate, satchel in hand as he reads a piece of paper. The direction to their house was well written by Yuuto so Ichigo wouldn't get lost hopefully, but just in case she had Yuuto write all of their phone numbers down on it as well. Soon her Queen is standing behind her, as is the class-rep, Souna, as well as Tsubaki.

"So, Rias what do you think?" Souna says as she joins her rival at the window.

Not blinking or moving, Rias sighs. "I don't know Sōna. He is friendly enough and he isn't having trouble with the school work, but there is just something off with him. I admit he is handsome but there this underlying vibe I'm getting from him. The last thing that bothers me is that for someone with a serious head injury, I haven't yet seen a scar."

"Well tonight you and Akeno-chan will get better answers. I suspect once he is living with you, he'll relax and his true colors will let themselves show." The serious-minded woman says.

"I hope he isn't a danger to Koneko, she is very young." Rias says as she watches Ichigo disappear around the wall.

"I would feel sorry for him then. Koneko is very strong; no human should be able to harm her."

"Hopefully he proves himself. I asked him to pick her up from middle school and escort her home. I left a message with the school telling them that someone new would be picking her up today."

Sōna then spots Rias's familiar making her way out the gate as well, following discreetly behind the young man. She gives a sideways glance at the Gremory Clan Heiress with a small amount of respect. At least Rias has someone watching over him even if she can't be there in person; someone will be there as back-up for the young reincarnated Neko if things go bad.

"I'm not a complete fool Sōna." Rias says with a smirk.

"I never said that Rias."

"But you were thinking it."

"Come Tsubaki, we have a student council meeting to attend. Rias, Akeno." She nods to her rival.

Akeno bows slightly to the two departing teenage women. Turning back to her Master, she speaks up.

"Are you sure of this Rias? I mean we are supposed to watch over him for your brother and father."

Finally turning from the window and heading down the stairwell with Akeno following in her wake, Rias speaks softly. "I have a feeling Akeno, that Ichigo Shiba is more than what he appears to be, but I don't think he will harm us. I have this feeling that he is a good person, even for a human he is very nice."

"At least we get to see what he is like when we aren't around." Akeno speaks up consolingly.

"It should be interesting to see how he reacts to Koneko."

"I think he will melt just like everyone else."
Ichigo stands scowling as the woman who accosts him at the front office as she continues to lecture him on his 'dyed' hair. After getting lost twice going to the middle school, he finally made it twenty minutes late only to run into the woman now hovering before him when he was trying to apologize to Koneko for his lateness.

"Now young man, as soon as you get home, you will remove that dye and present yourself with your proper hair color the next time you come to this school. Do you understand me? If you do not, I will have the school security throw you out, I don't care what excuse you have for being here!" The demonic-looking woman says while tapping her foot impatiently.

His last nerve finally fraying after the five-minute tirade, her threat only pushes him over the edge. "I'm only going to say this once Sensei; this is my real hair color, if you don't believe me how about I show you proof." He slowly begins to reach for the front of his pants.

His action causes the woman to stare wide eye at him before stuttering her outrage. "H...Ho...How dare you say that! You can't do that here, are you some sort of hentai?"

Smirking, Ichigo decides to push her buttons once last time as he pulls out his wallet instead. "I'm not the one whose mind is in the gutter Sensei. But I think I should report your comment to the staff, I am sure when I tell them what you said it will look negatively on you when I know I meant my ID."

Koneko Tōjō is watching the teen her Master has sent to escort her home with hidden fascination. Rias's familiar had snuck her way into the school once she was sure Ichigo wasn't going to get lost again so close to the school; she informed her that her new housemate was on his way. When she first saw him, she couldn't help the blush that formed; her 'older brother' was indeed handsome. Also despite his appearance he was quite kind to her when he first apologized to her for being late, then asked if he could do anything to make up for it, at least until Hikō-Sensei spotted him. Then his kindness evaporated rapidly as the older woman began to berate Ichigo and his choice of hair color, his eyes narrowing in anger as she called him a delinquent and interrogated him on why he was at the middle school.

As it is right now, she is glad she did so. Once Ichigo had enough of Hikō-Sensei's barking, he had baited her with obvious innuendo, and she despite being young knew what his innuendo really meant. Fighting back her urge to laugh while keeping her face innocent, she watches as Hikō-Sensei sputters her denials out.

"I-I did no such thing young man! I'll have you…"

"I don't care if you think you are all high and mighty, you accuse me of dying my hair without proof and when I do tell you I have proof, you automatically assume I was going to do something like that. I hope you can explain yourself to your superiors, I'm sure Tōjō-chan will prove an excellent witness against your accusations." Ichigo says while stepping closer to the now flustered Hikō-Sensei, intimidating her with his greater height.

At the mention of Koneko Tōjō's name, Hikō-Sensei's eyes widen and they dart to the blonde-haired girl previously standing unnoticed behind the orange-haired young man. Her eyes begin darting back and forth between Ichigo and Koneko. The younger girl makes her choice easy when she grabs Ichigo's hand and steps behind him, acting as if she is hiding, but staring at her with those hateful golden eyes. Knowing that she won't win now that the middle-schooler has chosen to stand with the orange-haired young man standing in front of her, Hikō is forced to accept her defeat.
"Very well Shiba-san. I will accept your explanation, but if I find out you're lying, I will see that you are punished severely."

"Come on Tōjō-chan, let's get going." The orange-haired male ignores her threat and turns, starting to walk away with Koneko still holding his hand. The blonde-haired girl turns to regard her just once with narrowed golden eyes, before turning away and continuing to walk forward again.

Ichigo waits until they are several minutes away from the school before he lets out a relieved sigh. "Next time Koneko, make sure you wait outside the gates, I don't want to run into the dragon lady again if I can help it."

"Next time, don't be late bakamono." She admonishes him lightly with a blank face.

Running his hand through his hair, he huffs out irritably in return. "Yeah, yeah sorry about that, I got lost a few times. I am new to this place, so give me a break would ya?"

"This time I will Onii-san, though next time I won't."

Looking down at the blonde-haired girl still holding his hand, he has a flash of a different face.

'Ichi-nii can we go for ice cream?'

'Sure we can…'

The name of that face eludes him as he continues to stare at Koneko. She notices him staring which makes her tense warily. "Are you one of those people Onii-san? I don't want to be holding the hand of a lolicon."

As soon as she says that he breaks free from the memory and looks at her in utter disbelief. "What makes you think that!?"

"You're staring at me Onii-san." She deadpans.

"Sorry Koneko, it's just that for a second I was on the verge of remembering something." He sighs as they continue down the street. "Déjà vu maybe."

Although her expression does not change, Koneko grips his hand tighter when she hears the longing in his voice; he might act tough, but when he spoke just now, his voice was filled with a sense of loss. "Come on Onii-san, we can stop by on the way home. I want to get some sweets at the shouten nearby."

She steers the two of them down a familiar street not too far from the Gremory residence. Soon they are in front of a beautiful and traditional building; its décor from the early Edo period, the sign over their head proclaiming the largest selection of sweets from across the world. Ichigo opens the door and lets the younger girl enter first before he follows her inside. Spotting a place for their shoes, he kicks his shoes off and grabs a pair of disposable slippers, then sees that Koneko has already done so and is waiting for him inside. Watching her move around the store with purpose, he guesses that she comes here a lot by herself, especially when the store's proprietor greets her by name. Deciding he might want to get something for himself, he gets lost down an adjoining aisle while checking out the sweets on display. Soon he finds the chocolate aisle, and an urge comes over him as he picks out a variety of items.

"Onii-san, are you done yet?" Koneko asks when she joins him.

"Yeah, I've never seen this many different kinds of chocolates. I guess you come here a lot?"
Shaking her head, she holds up a basket full of sweets, making Ichigo laugh as he gently grabs the basket from her and walks up to the counter. Placing his items next to hers, he starts to take out his wallet to pay when the old man behind the counter holds his hand up.

"No need young man, she has a tab here that Gremory-sama pays once a month. Thank you for the thought, but there is no need to pay for her or for yourself."

"You sure? I don't want to presume..." Ichigo gives the man a wary stare.

"I'm sure..." The old man waits patiently for his name.

"Sorry, Ichigo Shiba."

"Shiba-sama, it's okay. We'll just add your purchase as well, so please take care."

"Fine, if you say so, but it's just Ichigo," Ichigo picks up the now packaged goods.

"Well Ichigo, please take care of Koneko. She is one of my best customers." The old man smiles.

Looking down, he sees the blonde-haired girl smiling back at the old man, the expression brightening her usually stoic face. "Thank you Kazuhiro-san."

Holding out a piece of hard candy to her, the old man smiles as he speaks to her like he would a favored grandchild. "Seems like you got yourself a strong Onii-san now, Koneko-chan?"

Looking up at Ichigo to see him smiling at her, she can't help but return her own smile as she replies back to the old man. "I just met him today Kazuhiro-san but he is very nice. Thank you for the candy."

"Don't plan on eating anything else until after dinner Koneko." Ichigo remarks as he picks up their purchases.

"On second thought, maybe not." Koneko says out loud, causing Ichigo to trip over nothing as he sends a glare back at her.

Laughing at the two, the old shopkeeper waves them off and watches as they leave his store. Turning to a shadow that forms the shape of Rias's familiar, he informs it with a wry smile. "Tell your mistress, they are on their way home."

Bowing, the familiar disappears via a magical circle.

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Following Koneko as she leads them back to the Gremory place, Ichigo realizes they are in a very exclusive neighborhood. Very few houses line the street they are walking down now, and most of what he can see over the walls or fences shows that their architecture is heavily influenced by Western European styles. Soon the young blonde-haired girl leads Ichigo to a gated house surrounded by a tall brick wall that is covered in thick and prickly ivy. At the gate, Koneko punches in a security code into the console and a smaller gate opens up next to the main gate, the sounds of mechanical whirring making him glance up to see several cameras facing their direction. Shaking his head at the security, he follows behind Koneko but stops dead when the house comes into view.

"What in the world!?!" Ichigo blurts out as he sees the massive three-story house in front of him.
It easily covers a few thousand square feet from what he can see. Not many houses other than the mansions that he remembers seeing on his way back to Japan can compare to the house he now finds himself staring at. The front lawn is lush and dark green; the huge water fountain serves as an aeration system for the koi pond that stretches along most of the front of the house, giving it a moat like appearance. The front entrance has six Roman columns that are evenly spaced along the high eve that give the house a Pantheon look. Huge windows line the entire first floor and smaller ones line the two higher floors, all with lights brightly lit in the middle of their rooms.

Shaking his head at the wealth being displayed, he continues walking along the stepping-stones lining the path to the entrance until he's next to Koneko, who waits outside the front door. He is about to ask her what she's doing when the door opens and a young woman steps outside to greet them.

"Welcome home Tōjō-sama, Shiba-sama." The woman wearing a typical black and white maid's uniform bows.

"We're back Harumi-san." The young blonde-haired girl says as she walks into the mansion. Following her, Ichigo realizes that the entryway is a typical Japanese genkan, a place where guests can remove their footwear and put on in-house slippers. He sees Koneko take off her shoes off and put on her house slippers, then turn to wait for him.

"Ah, I don't have any house slippers Harumi-san." He apologizes as he sits down to take his shoes off.

The maid walks up to the wall cabinet and pulls out a pair of grey slippers, handing them over to Ichigo. "Here you go Shiba-sama, these are yours. Gremory-sama gave us a list of items you will need for your stay. Everything else has already been delivered to your room. I can show you to your room before or after your dinner, Shiba-sama."

"Ah, before dinner is fine. I don't want to try to put away my stuff on a full stomach. Also, just call me Ichigo."

Nodding in agreement, Harumi replies back. "As you wish, Ichigo-sama. Then please follow me."

"Ichigo's fine Harumi-san." He repeats.

He watches her eyes go wide scandalously. "Ichigo-sama that's not allowed. You're a guest of Gremory-sama and as such you are to be treated as your station demands it to be."

Slightly annoyed, he insists again. "And if I demand to be called just Ichigo, then what Harumi-san?"

Taken aback, the maid looks between him and Koneko a few times before she settles back on him. "Is that your wish Ichigo-sama?"

"Yes, just Ichigo."

Closing her eyes, she bows formally towards him. "As you wish, Ichigo. Then if you will, please follow me and I will show you your room now." She steps to the side and motions with her outstretched arm towards a pair of spiraling staircases.

Following Harumi up the right stairway to the second floor, he is soon led to a room two doors down on the right side of the hallway. The maid stops and waits for Ichigo to reach her before she opens it for him and gestures him inside. As soon as he enters the room he stops, then stares at his new room in shock.
"Ah, you sure this is mine Harumi-san?"

Harumi peeks into the room and looks around before she answers. "Yes Ichigo, this is your room as Gremory-sama informed me earlier. Is there a problem?"

"No, it's just I didn't expect all of this." He gestures to the contents of his room.

In the middle is a king-size bed covered in red satin sheets and a heavy quilt. On one side of the room is a large Cherrywood desk with a brand-new laptop sitting on top. Next to the desk is a large bookshelf filled with books and spots for his music. On the opposite wall is a new LCD television with a complete entertainment center. Finally he sees his own private bathroom through an open doorway towards the back of his room.

"I would have been fine with a futon and small sitting desk Harumi-san."

Harumi bows again to him and offers him an explanation. "Ichigo, our instructions were very specific as to what we had to furnish your room with. If this displeases you, we can make other arrangements."

"No, I guess if this is what you were told to do, its fine. Thanks Harumi-san."

Bowing once again the young maid starts to close the door, as she does so she informs him. "Dinner will be at seven Ichigo, do you need us to send someone for you or will you eat in your room?"

"No, I'll be down."

"Very well."

As she turns to leave, he calls out to her again. "Wait. Will it be just me and Koneko or will Rias and Akeno be there as well?"

"Gremory-sama and Himejima-sama may attend. It will depend on when they come home from their club activities." She says.

"I see. Thanks Harumi-san."

As soon as the door closes, Ichigo looks over at the few boxes that hold all of his possessions. Two boxes contain his clothes, the others boxes contain his few books and his collection of music. Taking his time, he finishes in less than an hour, first putting his clothes away in the walk-in closet where he finds twice as many clothes already hanging up or folded-up on shelves. He looks at them and sees that whoever shopped for him got not only his sizes right, but his tastes as well. He moves on to his music, and finds plenty of room for his collection. Soon he is done unpacking all of his boxes and realizes that he still has time for a quick shower. Looking around in his closet, he finds a pair of sweats and a black t-shirt to change into afterwards.

'I guess this is my new home.' He thinks to himself.

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"Onii-san? Onii-san are you awake?" Koneko asks as she slowly opens the door to Ichigo's room. Stepping inside, she sees him lying on his bed sleeping, a pair of earbuds hanging out from his ears.

Walking up to his sleeping form, she decides to wake him the quickest way possible. She jumps on
his bed, landing right next to him. In an next instant he grabs her around her waist and flips her onto her back with him hovering over her, his eyes glazed over slightly as he stares down at her without seeing or recognizing her. After a few seconds, his eyes return to normal and a look of chagrin appears on his face.

"Koneko are you okay? I didn't know it was you, I'm so sorry." He jumps off of her and falls off the side of his bed in his hurry to get away from her.

Koneko blinks in surprise. 'Fast.' It's all she can think of as she slowly gets up and looks down at Ichigo on the floor. She isn't afraid of Ichigo, her Rook piece makes her far more powerful than any human, but his reaction is still surprising to her.

"I'm sorry Onii-san, I shouldn't have done that." She apologizes.

"Are you sure you're okay Koneko?" He asks, looking somewhat confused by her response.

"Yes, I'm fine Onii-san. I just wanted to wake you up for dinner. Harumi-san tried knocking on your door earlier but you didn't answer, so she thought you might be asleep. She was correct."

"Sorry, I must have been more tired than I thought. Again I'm sorry for that Koneko."

She gives him a blank stare before she climbs off his bed and walks over to the door. "Come on Onii-san, Buchou and Akeno-chan are waiting for us downstairs."

Slowly getting up to his feet, Ichigo looks at the emotionless blonde-haired girl with a mixture of confusion and guilt. He still doesn't know why he reacted the way he did, but he fears that it will darken his relationship with her. As he starts to follow her however, her voice intercepts his thoughts.

"Onii-san, don't worry so much about what happened just now, I'm fine." She tells him bluntly.

Ichigo cracks a small smile then. "As long as you're sure Koneko." He tells her.

"I'm sure Onii-san." She walks away, but her thoughtful expression is hidden from him.

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Rias and Akeno are sitting at the dinner table, waiting for both Koneko and Ichigo to arrive for the evening meal. Both of them are looking forward to finally having dinner after a long night of fulfilling contract requests. Soon they hear the sounds of two sets of footsteps making their way to the dining room, announcing the arrival of their two housemates. Koneko arrives first, walking into the room with her usual blank expression, with Ichigo just behind her. Koneko sits down next to Akeno, while Rias pats the seat next to her for Ichigo.

"Good evening Rias-Onee-san, Akeno-chan." The young Neko greets them as she sits down.

"Hey Rias, Akeno." Ichigo greets them far more casually.

Akeno smiles as the two of them sit at the table. "Hello Koneko-chan, hello Ic..hi..kun…" As she does so, her eyes become half-lidded and a seductive smile forms at Ichigo.

As Ichigo stares at the dark-haired girl, he feels the air stir as the young woman next to him makes her displeasure known again. "AAKKEENNOO! What have I said about that!!?"

"But Buchou, I didn't do anything…yet." She pouts with an innocent smirk.
"That is what I'm worried about Akeno. I won't have you acting in such a manner. He just got here today and needs time to recover. So as of today, you will keep your mitts off of him. Understood?"

Placing a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles, the sadistic Queen agrees. "Fufufu, I understand Buchou. You want Ichi-kun all to yourself."

Ichigo looks between the two feuding teens as Rias tries to deny the accusation, then he turns his attentions to the youngest member at their table. "Is it always like this Koneko?"

"Only when a man is involved Onii-san. You are that man now." She says as she waits for dinner.

"Hey! / Hey!" Two voices object together.

Seeing identical expressions of outrage, Ichigo can only laugh at the two women he now lives with. Both females turn their attentions towards him and a questioning look is sent his way from the crimson-haired princess.

"Sorry Rias, Akeno but it's been awhile since people acted normal around me." He explains finally.

"I see." Rias replies coolly.

Akeno takes the opening given to her. "Well Ichi-kun, if you want I can show you around town later?"

"Ah, thanks Akeno, I'd like that." Ichigo says while keeping an eye on the woman next to him.

A smile forms on Rias's face as she turns to her Queen and again makes her anger known. "Akeno, a word with you in private if you don't mind?"

Watching as the two young women get up and leave the room, Ichigo looks at Koneko, who sits unfazed by the situation. The blonde-haired girl glances at him and just shrugs her shoulders. The two of them sit silently as they wait for the staff to begin serving dinner. Just as the first trays are brought in, the two young women return to the room, each looking a little worse for the wear. Ichigo shoots the blonde-haired girl a look in question. She again shrugs.

'Well Uncle Amyntas, you certainly picked a lively group for me to live with, you old goat.'

Rias and Akeno sit back down and act as if nothing had even happened. They continue to send playful glares at one another across the table, while Koneko eats her food as if nothing is amiss. Ichigo surprisingly finds that he is just enjoying himself; between the antics of his two older housemates and the quiet little blonde-haired girl across from him, he feels only one thing. Normal.

"Ichigo, how was your first day?" Rias asks between bites of her meal.

Sipping some tea that was provided, he answers truthfully. "Well to be honest, I was getting a little annoyed by the fan-girls. You'd think they never saw a guy before or something."

"That's because most of them haven't been to school with any male other than family Ichi-kun. This is the first year of integration between boys and girls at Kuoh Academy. You are even more special because all the other boys are only First years. You're an...anomaly." Akeno explains as she puts more rice on Koneko's plate.

"Oh, I guess that is why I found my shoe locker stuffed with letters then. Anyway both of you can spread the word that I'm not interested in dating right now, you know the memory thing could be a bitch later on if I find out I'm engaged or something." He can't hide the smirk on his face at seeing
the shocked looks that show on both the older girls faces.

"Ichigo are you engaged?" Rias asks breathlessly.

Shrugging his shoulders like his little Kohai would have done, he begins. "Don't know. I wouldn't put it past my guardian to do something like that to me. He is pretty old-fashioned about things like that. Something about continuing the family line or something like that. I guess since I'm the last of my family, he's afraid of it dying out. Only thing is, if I do marry, it will be for love."

Hearing his words, Rias can only look at her plate with jealousy. She wants what he has, a choice in marriage. A hand touches her leg under the table, making her look up to see her Queen giving her a look of understanding. Nodding her head at Akeno, she slowly begins to eat again when Koneko asks a surprising question.

"Onii-san, did you really have proof? Or did you bluff her?"

"Bluff? Proof? What are you talking about Koneko-chan?" The three of them look at her with confusion.

"Onii-san was late today and the dragon lady yelled at him. Called him a delinquent and accused him of dyeing his hair. He said he had proof but whatever he did made her get really angry at him."

Nearly choking on his food, Ichigo shoots the young blonde-haired girl an accusatory look, before turning to see his two new housemates looking at him with curiosity. "I was late and I ran into this teacher, who got on my nerves, so I…I…"

"You what Ichigo?" Rias asks.

"I…"

"He pulled his wallet out of his front pocket and she got mad at him." Koneko informs them.

This makes both the crimson-haired and black-haired girl nearly choke with laughter. Akeno smiles in her seductive way once again, while Rias has a look of amusement dancing across her face. Ichigo closes his eyes as he grimaces at them.

"Look, I was late and she just started on me and I lost my patience with her, so I did something to throw her off and she DID take it the wrong way. It's not my fault!"

Smiling at him, Rias lays her hand on his and immediately feels somewhat flushed; while it looks rough, she feels a 'warmth' flowing through it. She takes a deep calming breath to steady herself, one that neither Akeno nor Koneko miss.

"I'm not saying that I'm mad at you Ichigo, I'm just surprised you would do something like that." She clarifies to him.

He snorts in relief. "Good, for a second I thought you would yell at me and it's only my first day here. But to be honest, it just came to me to do it because she was really getting on my nerves. I'm sorry if I'm going to get Koneko in trouble, if she does I'll take the blame."

Rias exchanges a look with the blonde-haired girl, seeing her Rook shake her head minutely. "I think it will be okay Ichigo. If anything does come of it, I'll let my father handle it. But I see both of you are fine, and that's all that matters. So can I ask if you will be able to walk her to school from now on?"
He is wondering how to reply, then Koneko leans forward and whispers softly. "I'd like that Onii-san."

"... Ah, I don't see why not. Anything to help repay you for your family's kindness for letting me stay here Rias."

At his words, the heiress then gives him a smile that makes his heart skip a beat. He looks away from her, feeling his face flush a little. 'What was that about?'

The rest of dinner is spent on getting Ichigo caught up with school work and talking about the local attractions of the town. Soon he has two tours lined up, one with Akeno tomorrow after school and the second with Rias on the coming Sunday. Soon they all say their good-nights so they can finish their own home-work in their room and get ready for the next day. Ichigo however has an itch he needs to address, and decides to go take a walk. After picking up a pair of sneakers, he grabs his headphones and iPod and puts them in the pocket of his light jacket, then exchanges his house slippers for his sneakers at the genkan. Leaving the mansion and walking down the long path and out the front gate, he picks a direction and takes off for a long night run.

Unknown to him, following behind him are several chibi demons belonging to Akeno, each demon tasked with different jobs as they follow the orange head as he begins to eat the miles under his feet.

Back in Rias's study, both Akeno and Rias watch Ichigo remotely through the use of scrying magic as he makes his way around the neighborhood.

"Why do you think he is out running so late Buchou?" Akeno asks.

Rias looks thoughtful. "His guardian told my brother that Ichigo likes the nights more since his accident. It seems he has been active at night for the last year or so before his accident."

"I wonder whose Clan his family served. It must be a very powerful one for your brother and father to take such measures to ensure his well-being. This house is one of the few things I never would have thought we'd need."

The crimson-headed princess sighs. "Mother only said to keep him close to us, that he is a special person. She said she heard from someone who knew him from before his accident. All that woman would say is this: 'He who protects' has never meant more to anyone than it does to him."

"Then why is he here Buchou? Why isn't he living wherever it is he came from?" Her Queen wants to know.

Closing her eyes, Rias can only answer with what she has been told. "His past has an end Akeno. All I know is that whatever happened to him had to have been very traumatic for him. All that woman asked of Mother is that he be kept safe at all costs."

Turning back to the scrying spell, Akeno nods once. "Then we shall attempt to make sure that we keep our promises then, Buchou." She says as her chibi demons begin to report back in.

XXXX

Music pumping through his headphones, Ichigo lets the night surround him effortlessly, his legs carrying him along the miles without his notice. He is lost in thought as he pays little attention to his surroundings, just concentrating on trying to remember his past like he does every time he runs. All he has of his memories is waking up in the hospital, his guardian coming for him not long after. Spending a month in the hospital and making it hard on the staff that did their best to keep him
confined to a bed. He had a feeling his head injury was much more than a simple fall but no matter what he did, nothing had helped.

That was until he started running one night a little more than two weeks ago. All he felt then was a familiar peace as he ran under the moon and stars, as if he had nothing to fear of the night. Since then, he had made an effort to run at least five to seven miles a night regardless of the weather. If it brought him a sense of peace, then he would run. Tonight however was different, after giving up on trying to remember his past, he finds himself beginning to think about his new housemates. His guardian had told him they were the children of clients he had served for a number of years, and his clients had agreed that a responsible man living in the house would make them feel better about having their children live alone.

That he did find strange, especially since he was a stranger to the clients, but he kept his opinion to himself, even after meeting the older brother of Rias a few days ago in Tokyo. His guardian –Uncle Amyntas- had arranged the meeting so that he could make a good impression on the other man, Sirzechs Gremory. Not that it had gone well, as he remembers the aftermath of that meeting, though he has the feeling that Sirzechs was more amused than offended by his behavior. Ichigo had ended up spending most of that night wandering around the ancient city and had not bothered to take his phone with him. When he finally got back to his hotel room, his uncle, a grey-haired middle-aged man with piercing black eyes was there waiting and visibly upset with him. Not wanting to argue that he was feeling cooped-up, he simply went to bed, where he tossed all night, images flashing repeatedly through his head. None of them had made any sense to him. The only one that kept recurring was the silhouettes of three people. He had no idea who they were, but he knew they had to be important to him somehow.

Slowing as he reaches an intersection, he looks around, then palms his face.

'Dammit, I'm lost…again.'

"Sir, can I help you?" Ichigo turns to see a very attractive woman holding what looks like a bunch of flyers standing nearby.

Deciding that he doesn't want to know why a pretty woman like her is handing out flyers on the streets at night, he runs his hand nervously through his hair, then looks around one more time before finally deciding to ask for directions. "You wouldn't happen to know where Kōbi Street is by chance?"

Giving him a smile, the woman points down a side street. "Follow that alley for a few blocks and you will be on Kōbi Street in no time."

Thanking her with a nod, he heads in the direction she has indicated, glancing behind him once to see that the woman is walking away in the opposite direction. Soon he is jogging down the alleyway, cutting across the blocks as he get closer to his destination, until he is nearly at a dead sprint, making it back to the house just barely before ten P.M. Wiping the sweat from his eyes, he makes his way to the gate, then he stops and groans.

"Dammit, I forgot to ask how the hell to get back in."

Looking around, he finds what looks to be an intercom system by the security console that Koneko had used to gain access. Pushing the green talk button, he waits until a familiar voice speaks to him. "Ichigo, is that you?"

"Ah, yeah. I forgot to ask for the code to get back in, sorry if I woke you." He says with a bit of embarrassment.
"Enter four six three nine two nine Ichigo." He detects a bit of laughter in her voice at the end.

After punching in the code, the sound of the lock disengaging in the smaller gate greets his ears. Pushing the smaller gate open and making sure it's locked behind him, he walks to the house where a sight greets him, one he isn't ready for. Standing in the doorway is Rias wearing a simple red yukata and from the looks of it, nothing else. He can also see she is eyeing him as he walks closer to her, her eyes traveling up and down his sweating form and he nearly stumbles at the last part when he could have sworn she was licking her lips at him.

Somewhat cautiously, he approaches her. "Rias?"

Giving him a smile, she simply opens the door wider for him to pass by her; as he does so, she whispers to him. "You should take a bath Ichigo; you look like you need one."

Nodding while trying to keep his eyes off the red-headed beauty behind him, he kicks off his shoes and starts to make his way back into the house when her voice reaches him again. "Ichigo, will this be a common occurrence?"

"I like to run at night Rias. I don't have to if it makes you guys uncomfortable with me being out late." He replies honestly.

"No. I just want to make sure the staff knows from now on, that's all."

Ichigo apologizes to her. "Sorry, I should have told you guys earlier. I didn't think about it because I've been mostly on my own. Usually no one is around to keep tabs on me, so I'm not used to others wondering about my whereabouts."

Uncle Amyntas doesn't count in his mind.

Rias gives him a serious look however. "Just be careful Ichigo. Before you argue, this isn't about your condition or your guardian's wishes. It's this town. It changes people Ichigo."

"How so?" He asks curiously.

Her face doesn't betray any emotions as she makes her way to stand in front of him. Cupping his cheek with one hand, she gives him a small smile. "Kuoh Academy caters to very rich and influential families Ichigo; I don't want to see you get mixed up with any of it."

Placing his hand over hers, he gives her a grin that makes her eyes sparkle at the sight. "Then you don't have to worry Rias. I like peace and quiet. Hopefully you, Akeno and Koneko will help keep me out of trouble from now on."

Rias smiles at him again. "We should get to bed then Ichigo. You have to get up early to walk Koneko to school from now on."

"Rias, I didn't ask this earlier, but is Koneko a member of your family?" He asks.

Shaking her head sadly, Rias keeps her eyes on his. "No Ichigo, she has no one left; just like you she is alone in this world. Her only living relative left her to my family to care for after she got into some legal troubles. No one has seen her relative in over five years."

"I see then. Well then, good night Rias." He finally removes his hands from hers and a nagging feeling hits him almost immediately.

"Good night Ichigo. Sleep well." She takes her hand away from his as well, and almost
immediately she wishes she didn't.

Opening the door, he steps backwards and as he does so, he is slightly surprised to see that Rias turn to the door opposite of his and enter. She closes it without turning to look at him. He sighs as he closes his door behind him.

'What is with me? I've only just met her today and I feel…'

XXXX

The morning sunlight breaks through the window and falls onto the face of the sleeping young man, causing him to mutter in complaint against the gods for waking him. He starts to shift in his bed, when he finds an unfamiliar weight is holding him tight, wrapping itself around his torso. Slowly opening his eyes, a head of crimson hair greets his blurry vision.

'Wait? Why the…Rias!'

"Rias." He gently pokes her ribs where he discovers something soft and cushiony. She's naked under his blankets.

"RIAS." He shifts a bit violently to nudge her awake, his own body not daring to move too much.

"Five minutes Ichigo." She whines.

"Rias Gremory!" He shouts finally.

A very annoyed Rias lifts her naked body off of his, much to his amusement at seeing her pouting face, then his eyes inadvertently drift lower. She shifts until she is sitting next to him, completely exposing herself to him without any care. Soon a blanket covers her body, courtesy of Ichigo who drapes it over her shoulders as she looks to see his eyes looking back into hers, a slight blush dancing across his cheeks as he does so.

"Rias, why are you in my bed? Naked?" He asks as he tries to calm his beating heart.

"Can't sleep. I…I just wanted a hugging pillow, so I found one last night." She says with a smile forming on her lips. "I must say, you are perfect for it."

Pinching his nose, he calmly admonishes her. "Next time wear clothes. I wouldn't want your family to walk in on us like that."

She looks at him with some surprise. "That was easy. You like having girls sleep naked with you Ichigo?" She teases, and sees him blushing even harder.

"Well not really Rias, but to answer your question, I was told to expect your unusual…well let's just say I was forewarned by your brother about certain…things."

"He did, did he now?" Her smile grows larger.

'If brother told him, does this mean?' She wonders as she continues to look at Ichigo.

He sees a look on Rias's face that if he had to guess, was pure happiness and hope. "Rias, are you okay?"

Pulling the blankets around her, she stands from his bed and makes her way to his bathroom; throwing a look over her shoulder she asks him a question. "Ichigo, can you wash my back for me please? Shared baths are still common right?"
Not saying a word, he follows behind the crimson-haired teen and closes the door behind him.

XXXX

Ichigo sits in class staring out the window, his mind going over the events from his impromptu bath with Rias Gremory this morning.

XXXX Flashback Start XXXX

"Ichigo, thank you." Rias said with sadness in her voice.

"Are you okay Rias? I didn't do anything wrong did I?" He asked as he finished rinsing the rest of the soap off her back.

"No Ichigo. Just thank you for making me feel normal for once." She replied while pulling the towel around her.

Standing up while keeping the towel tightly wrapped around her body; she bent down slowly before kissing his cheek and walked away without a word. He just sat on the stool, still in his sweats thinking that he must have done something wrong. Looking at the door she had just left through, he was half-tempted to follow her to make sure she was alright...but frowning instead, he began to get undressed for his own shower, all the while thinking about the woman who just left him, and more importantly why after less than a day she was treating him so...

XXXX Flashback End XXXX

"Ichigo, the lunch bell sounded, are you coming?" He slowly turns his head to see Akeno bending down next to him.

Just nodding, he stands up and notices it is only him and Akeno today. Giving her a quizzical look, he sees Akeno shake her head in understanding. "Rias has a private matter to attend to Ichigo, she'll meet us at home later tonight. Come on and keep me company at least. I'll tell you about our date today after school, you'll have fun I promise."

As they exit the room, she loops her arm through his, a smile playing on her lips at all the faces that look at the two with stunned expressions, especially on the majority of the female population. He shakes his head with amusement, knowing what Akeno's doing: a little ammunition for her to use at dinner later. He learned pretty quickly that Akeno, while being Rias's best friend, took every opportunity to tease her at any given moment, and this will be just another such an occurrence for her to use for teasing later. Soon they enter the cafeteria, and after getting lunch, she guides him to an empty table near the windows.

"Ichigo, did you have a good night?" She says innocently after they sit down.

Not rising to her bait, he smirks internally. "Best I've had in a while Akeno. I wouldn't mind waking up like that every day."

"I knew it. She snuck in last night didn't she? Don't answer, I know already." She proclaims.

"Smart-ass. So are there any other habits I should know about the three ladies I am living with?" He says as he chews on a piece of fish.

"Do you really want to know or would you rather we just surprise you, Ichikun?" She says as she slowly licks her straw again. Laughing at the scowl that appears on his face, she pipes up with an explanation. "Nothing serious Ichigo, we do tend to come home late at night because of our club,
we can be pretty moody from time to time, and we love to have fun at each other's expense. That about covers it all, I think."

"You're not going to sneak into my room are you Akeno?" He deadpans as he begins to eat again.

"Maybe when Rias isn't home Ichigo." She gives him a lidded look.

Ichigo snorts at her honesty. "I guess I'll just have to lock myself in at night."

"Awww Ichi-kun don't be like that. It's not fair you only let Rias sleep with you." He can only gape at her audacity for saying it out loud.

"It wasn't like that, we didn't sleep with each other you nut-job; she only used me for a damn pillow." He tries to explain, his eyes rapidly darting to the people around in the cafeteria. To his surprise, none of them seem to be paying him or Akeno any attention.

The Queen of the Gremory peerage tries to hide her laughter at seeing his panic. "Ichigo, you are wound way too tight, something I plan to loosen up today on our date by the way. So you best be ready for me Ichi-kun."

"That's what I'm afraid of Akeno." He immediately retorts, but her small laughter makes him smile however.

"Akeno, how are you and Rias friends by the way? If you don't mind me asking that is?"

He sees her face falter for an imagined second, but the brilliance of her smile is back before he can even blink. The faraway look in her eyes doesn't fade however as she recites her own story.

"My mother died when I was young, she was a well-respected Miko for our Clan until she met my father." Ichigo tenses when she says that. "She died in front of my eyes by some criminals looking to steal from us. My father didn't show up until later and then he left me again in the care of my relatives." She snorts in disgust at the mention of her father.

"However, that didn't work out too well as my relatives didn't see me as one of them because my father was a foreigner, so they kicked me out when I was ten." She doesn't see the look of anger that crosses Ichigo's face. "So for about a year and half I just wandered around Japan until I ran into my Clan again, but I had done something they felt 'dishonored' them, so they tried to hurt me in retaliation. Thankfully, I was found in time by the Gremory Clan and was taken in by them. Ever since then I have served the Clan faithfully and over time I became Rias's best friend. I think if that didn't happen Ichigo, I would have died before I was thirteen, so I have little regrets about my life now."

"...So you and Rias have been friends for a while? Is there anything I should be aware of then, she seemed rather sad this morning after our bath. Almost distant, actually." Ichigo finally comments.

"Nothing at the moment Ichigo, but…"

"But, what Akeno?"

"Just be a friend if you can Ichigo. Treat her like a normal average school girl. I think she tires of being the future head of her Clan, so if there is one thing you can do for her, it's to make her feel normal."

Chuckling out loud, he responds back. "Kinda hard to treat someone normal when they sneak into your room and use you as a pillow Akeno. And naked on top of that."
"Fufufu Ichigo, I thought someone your age would give anything to see a naked girl in his bed?"
She giggles, seeing him blush lightly.

Sighing as he looks out the window, Ichigo speaks distantly. "I don't mind Akeno, but I don't want
to fall in love and then find out there is someone out there looking for me already. I know what my
guardian said but what if I held back some things I didn't want to tell him about, or a life I kept to
myself...you know. I just don't want to hurt her or anyone else."

Akeno looks out the window as well. "Then you are one of kind, aren't you Ichi-kun? Less than a
day and you already treat us better than most of the men we know. If for some reason you do fall
for Rias however, don't let her go. No matter what, don't let her go."

XXXX

"Onii-san, are you okay?" Koneko says as she fans Ichigo with a large paper fan, the latter lying on
the couch with his face red and sweaty.

"I hate shopping Koneko. I will never, ever do that again." He croaks while holding a cold towel to
his forehead.

Standing behind the couch are the two young women, Rias giving Akeno dirty looks as they turn
to the assorted bags lining the hallway leading to the living room. "Really Akeno!? How many
bags are there!?"

Looking back at the pile, Akeno silently counts them before she answers. "Only eight bags
Buchou, he said he could handle it, right Ichi-kun?"

A hand with a thumbs-up rises up before their eyes, which is then followed by Ichigo’s
accompanying moan. Rias shakes her head again at the two, they had come home almost an hour
ago and he is still lying on the couch. Koneko surprisingly being the one to take care of him after
he staggered into the house with all the bags he was carrying. Dropping them in their current
position, he had made his way to the couch where he collapsed and hadn't moved since then. Rias
eyes her Queen questioningly and cringes as she sees the twinkle in the sadist's eyes as she looks
down at the tired young man.

"Akeno, where exactly did you two shop?"

Putting a finger to her cheek and acting as if she was thinking deeply, the sadist replies with a grin.
"At the new shops that just opened about four blocks away from the Academy, why?"

A tic forms over the heiress's left eye as she knows exactly what shops are located there, all of them
catering to women and young girls. She also knows that Akeno frequents that place to find new
contracts as well, the men there always lowering their guard around a pretty face and seductive
smile. Akeno has both.

"You didn't do anything right?" A visibly upset Rias asks her.

A predatory gleam answers the princess. "Of course not Buchou, not with my handsome escort
holding on to my arm like he did at lunch. No one would dare approach me and my…"

"AKENO!"

Ichigo groans at the shout, his head pounding not because of the walk or from the bags he had to
carry, no he is in pain at the memories of the shops she had taken him into. The worst part was the
private showings that Akeno had subjected him to. He had no idea that panties could be so, so, so
sheer. That one memory has his face heating up again as he could see that she had no modesty when it came to her body. Just like Rias, he learned that she didn't mind being nude in front of him.

"Onii-san, your face is getting redder, do you need an icepack?" The youngest girl asks him.

"God yes Koneko, an ice pack would be great, thank you." He tries to stop the blood from rushing to his groin as well.

'Sirzechs you bastard, you never said anything about their total lack of modesty.' He thinks back to the meeting with Rias's brother.

XXXX Flashback Start XXXX

"Ah Ichigo-san. I am Sirzechs Gremory, nice to meet you finally. Your guardian has told me quite a bit about you."

Walking into his guardian's room, Ichigo saw both him and a red-headed man standing up, the latter with his hand stretched out. As he approached them however, he sized up Sirzechs, thinking that he looked young for someone in his mid to late thirties. The middle-aged man's crimson hair and blue-green eyes stood out as much as his orange hair did. Although he gave the impression of being a dandy, Ichigo for some reason could tell that it wasn't the case, that the man standing in front of him was strong. The grip of his handshake only confirmed it for him, strong and firm with no hesitation at all. However, the smile on Sirzechs's face was genuine and warm, and Ichigo felt at ease almost immediately.

"Sorry for being late Sirzechs-san, I was up late and didn't set my alarm clock. Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it Ichigo-san, is that fine with you?"

"Ichigo is fine with me."

"Then just call me Sirzechs then."

"Okay."

The two newly introduced men sat in empty chairs opposite of one another, while the third person in the room watched the interactions of his charge with the person he was intending to place him with.

"Ichigo, Sirzechs is going to take care of you from now on. I'm sorry but because of my businesses I can't continue to watch over you."

"Not a problem Uncle Amyntas. I know you are busy and I'm not exactly happy with traveling a lot, so I'll be fine."

Ichigo saw a look of hurt on his guardian's face. "Uncle?"

"I apologize Ichigo; I know this is a hard time for you now, your memory lost and being alone except for me as your only family. I wish I could stay, but I have too many people depending on me. I will visit as often as I can however, I promise."

"Don't worry about me Uncle, I'll be fine. But I do have a few questions though, if you don't mind Sirzechs?"

The red head nodded his assent, and Ichigo started his questions. "Okay, I guess first question is
where exactly am I going to be living now?"

"With my cute sister and her friends Ichigo. Also you will be going to the same school as them, Kuoh Academy."

"Kuoh Academy, isn't that is some sort of private all-girls school? How am I going to go, dressed up as a girl?" He looked at the crimson-haired man as if he was mad.

Laughter erupted from the two older men. "No, no Ichigo. It's the first year that males are allowed to enter the school, mostly as First years. So you won't be alone. However, I must warn you about Rias and Akeno though."

"Warn me about what?"

The two men shared a knowing look between them. Amyntas had a small smile on his face as he grinned at his young nephew. Sirzechs on the other hand stifled a small laugh as he looked at the young man he was going to send to his sister to watch over her and be watched over in turn.

"They are very close to their friends Ichigo. So they have developed unusual habits that I don't want you to be too surprised about."

"Unusual habits, like what?"

"Oh, just things like sleeping in each other's beds, cuddling pillows, nothing much really. Just keep an open mind Ichigo; I'm sure you will get used to them. I promise nothing bad, but maybe unusual."

XXXX Flashback End XXXX

Muttering to himself, he sighs in relief when Koneko places a new icepack on his head. Unwittingly, he says his thoughts out loud. "Unusual my ass."

Rias and Akeno both hear him and begin giggling. Both of them know exactly what he is referring to, Rias's brother had told them of the meeting he had with Ichigo shortly after it had taken place. Akeno and Rias then left Koneko in charge of 'curing' Ichigo of his headache as they grabbed the bags to put them away. Walking by him however, Akeno couldn't help but tease him again.

"Ichi-kun, you wouldn't mind helping me put my stuff away would you? That way you will know where it is for later."

"Go away you succubus." His head begins to heat up even more at the thought of the clothes he had seen her in.

"Oh I see, you would rather that I was a sex demon, you naughty boy Ichi-kun." Again both Rias and Akeno giggle as he starts to sputter at them.

"Go, for the love of all that is holy, Go!" He shouts as he points for them to leave.

The two leave him on the couch, their now open laughter following them as they make their way out the room.

"Onii-san I'll get you some tea." Koneko says as she walks away.

Waiting for a few seconds, he peeks to see if the girl is still there before he takes the icepack from his head and places it on his groin.
'They'll be the death of me yet.'

Dinner is served an hour later and as before, Ichigo dresses for a late night run afterwards. This time he takes his phone and plots a course in it so he doesn't get lost like he did the night before. Just like the previous night, he finds himself lost in both the run and the music playing in his ears as he runs through the town. Never noticing the chibi demons following close behind him as he makes his way through his seven mile run. During the time he is running his thoughts go back again to his lost memories. Last night his dreams were the same, but at the end something different had occurred, the last part where a figure had reached towards him. He knows this person in his gut, just like the three figures of a man and two girls; he knows they were once important to him. But no matter how hard he tries, he simply cannot remember who they are.

Since his accident all he can remember is his name and his years of knowledge, other than that nothing else surfaces. Until he is dreaming, then the images come to him. He knows they are his, but he cannot grasp what or who they were. The other feeling he gets the most is that of betrayal. Stopping in a park to take a break, he walks to a fountain and sits down as that thought overwhelms him. He frowns as he sits there thinking about that feeling. As far he knows, his uncle had said he had lived a normal life, so where did that feeling of betrayal come from?

A normal life that he has no recollection of, no matter how hard he tries to remember it. Home schooled up until middle school, where he had been a student of an all-boys school until his accident, or so his uncle said. Not wanting to leave him there, he had been brought back home to Japan to stay with his uncle's business associate's family. Not that he minds that his uncle is leaving him here, and the girls are nice, if a little…

He shakes his head in amusement. They had no problem with him living here and they had quickly made him feel normal, not an invalid thankfully. Rias was the head of their family dynamic, he had noticed rather quickly. Akeno he thought of as her lieutenant, and Koneko was the little sister to them both. Yuuto he learned was also a close member to the three, not only as a member of the Occult Club after the Kendo season ends but close to the Gremory Clan as well. Again, it seems that he too had been an orphan until Rias's family took him in and made him a part of the family, just like they had done for Akeno and Koneko.

Ichigo sits back on the edge of the fountain and looks up at the sky, the moon drawing his attention quickly. Again a feeling of déjà vu comes to him as he looks at the celestial body hanging in the night sky, its white radiance bringing peace to his troubled spirit. He closes his eyes and sits there until his phone vibrates suddenly. Looking down he sees he has a text message.

'Ichigo pick up some chocolate from the shouten, Kazuhiro-san has it ready.'

Snorting as he looks at the message, he texts back that he will and enters the destination into his phone. Seeing that it will only add an extra mile to his run, he gets up and makes his way to the shouten, following the directions his phone gives him. Half an hour later he is in front of the shop, surprise on his face as he sees the lights are still on and the old man sitting behind the counter.

"Hey Kazuhiro, came to pick up something for Rias." Ichigo says as he takes off his sneakers and walks to the counter in his socks. He chooses not to put on the store's slippers, knowing that he wouldn't take too long.

Picking up a bag from under the counter, the old man grins at the younger man as Ichigo walks towards him.
"What's with the grin?" The orange head asks.

"Didn't take you long, did it Ichigo?" The old man says with a chuckle.

Giving the shopkeeper an odd look, Ichigo asks what he means. The old man obliges him.

"You're already wrapped around those three pretty ladies' pinkies." He teases the young man.

Ichigo just shrugs. "Maybe old man, maybe. Who wouldn't?" He grins as he grabs for the bag, then the bell behind him sounds as someone else enters the store.

"No one move, just give us your money and no one gets hurt old man!" One of the two men who just entered commands from under a ski mask.

Not waiting for a response, the two robbers rush the counter and one makes the mistake of grabbing Ichigo's arm but not keeping an eye on him, just on his partner and the shop owner while trying to force him to the floor. That is when the old man watches first hand at what the young man who lives with his mistress can do. Barely taking a second to process the assault, Ichigo's instincts kick into high gear as he grabs the man's wrist and in a quick twist frees his arm, spinning himself behind his assailant. Kicking the would-be robber's knee, he drops the first man to his knees and snaps his wrist in the same motion.

The scream from the first man alerts the other robber, who turns but is too slow as his face meets the flying fist of the now enraged orange-haired youth. The robber's head snaps back, causing the arm holding the knife to dip at the same time, he never has a chance to block the knee driving into his lower rib cage and expelling all the air from his lungs, nor the elbow to the base of his skull as he is forcibly bent over from the gut shot. Seeing his partner fall, the first robber tries to get to his feet to face the orange-haired threat only to have his head violently smashed against the counter with a round-house kick, letting him join his accomplice in unconsciousness.

Neither the old man nor the heavily breathing youth say a word for the first few moments until the old man snaps out of his daze. Quickly he runs out from behind the counter, a phone in his hand as he dials for the authorities. As he does so however, he makes no effort to touch the young man who is still standing over both the would-be robbers, his eyes never leaving the two unconscious bodies.

"Ichigo. Ichigo, come on son. It's over. Ichigo." The shop owner lets out a relieved sigh as the young man's head slowly focuses on him. Keeping his composure, Kazuhiro waits until he sees Ichigo's eyes begin to fixate on his face then he slowly approaches the young man. Gently grabbing Ichigo's arm, the shop owner pulls him away from the two unconscious criminals and sits him down on a stool that he uses to reach the higher shelves. He then hurries behind the counter again and grabs a bottle of water, along with a pack of gummy candy and brings it back to the now pale-faced student.

"Drink."

Not answering but following the order, Ichigo opens the bottle and drinks it without stopping once. When he finishes, Kazuhiro hands him the packet of gummies and motions for him to take one. Eyeing him skeptically, Ichigo does as he instructs, and finds that the fruity flavor of the gummies actually helps to settle his still-frantic nerves.

"Thanks." Ichigo quietly replies.

After that, neither says a word until the police arrive and see the two sitting guard over the still unconscious men. Quickly handcuffing both robbers before rolling them onto their backs, smelling
salts are used to rouse the two men up from their forced nap. When the two robbers wake up, they immediately struggle to break free until the bell signals a new arrival entering the shouten, and the two men quickly stop, their faces going pale with fear as they look at him. Ichigo himself has to swallow a gulp as he looks at the newest arrival, whose eyes scan the shouten once before fixing themselves on him.

Intimidating doesn't even cover what the man exudes with his presence. Standing well over two and half meters tall and looking like he weighs close to two hundred kilos, massive cords of muscle are easily seen under his clothes as he strides inside the shouten. His black piercing eyes and his dark grey hair swing from each individual in the room before locking on Ichigo, and his booming voice sounds out.

"Ichigo Shiba."

Everyone in the room turns to look at the young man who is still sitting on his stool. "Yeah, that's me." Ichigo speaks up.

"I am Surtr Second, I work for Sirzechs Gremory, and I'll be taking you home."

Ichigo looks at the rest of the room, seeing almost everyone in the room pale after the man mentions Rias's brother's name, all except the old man that is. Wondering just how important the Gremory name is in this city, he looks at Kazuhiro, who gives him a short nod indicating that the man can be trusted. Ichigo still feels he can return home on his own however.

"Ah that's okay, I'm fine walking."

"Excuse me Shiba-san, Second-san, but we need a statement from both him and Kazuhiro-san as to what happened here tonight." One of the police officers ventures bravely.

The tall man turns to the police sergeant and gives him a business card. "Shiba-san will be down tomorrow to give his full and complete statement, and Kazuhiro-san will give you a copy of the surveillance recording for tonight's altercation. Kazuhiro-san, if you please."

The old man bows and walks behind the counter, where he bends down and a clicking sound is heard. After standing up, he walks around the counter again and hands a small thumb-drive to the waiting police officer. The sergeant gives the shouten owner a respectful bow and walks out of the shouten, followed by the other four officers who are dragging the two cowering criminals with them. As soon as the door closes, Surtr Second turns to face Ichigo once again.

"Shiba-san, I must insist that you allow me to drive you home. I'm sure you understand." As he does so the taller man lightly touches his head, a reminder of Ichigo's persisting memory loss.

Ichigo drops his head in understanding and sighs with annoyance. "Yeah, yeah. I'm coming. Just let me get my bag and sneakers and then we can leave."

"There is a black sedan out front Shiba-san, the doors are unlocked. I just need a moment with Kazuhiro-san." The tall man informs him.

"Sure. Sorry Kazuhiro if I did any damage, I'll pay for them when I get my stipend from my uncle."

Chuckling at the young man's generosity, Kazuhiro waves him off. "I think after tonight Ichigo, you won't have to worry about your standing with me. Thank you for your kindness, but I won't accept anything from you. Now you best get going so those girls don't bite your head off for making them wait."
"SHIT! Hey Second-san I hope you can drive fast." Ichigo dashes to grab his sneakers, then with the delivery bag out the door he goes.

He doesn't see the magic circle appearing in the back room, or the three girls who appear from it and make their way up front.

"Thank you Second-san. I don't know what to say." Rias says as she looks out the window towards the sedan where Ichigo is now waiting impatiently.

"If I may Gremory-sama, but I don't think you should worry too much about young Shiba-sama. If anything else, I feel sorry for whoever takes him on in a fight. I know from what I just saw, that he has seen his fair share of fights or combat. He isn't weak and I highly doubt that his head injury is something to worry about either." Kazuhiro says politely as he speaks to the four Devils.

He then gives both Surtr Second and Rias Gremory a thumb-drive each as well. "You'll see what I mean after you view the footage."

The four Devils exchange looks. "Rias-sama, I'll take him straight home. It would be best if you are there before him. I'm sure your brother will be by tonight as well to check up on him." The reborn Giant tells the Gremory princess, his voice a deep rumble.

"Of course Second-san. Come Akeno, Koneko." Retreating to the back of the store, she casts one last glance out of the window before the red light flashes their departure.

Surtr then turns to the shopkeeper. "Kazuhiro-san, do you really believe what you just said?"

The old man nods at him. "His reflexes say trained warrior, Second-sama. No one but those who have seen war react the way that young man did. He didn't hesitate and any advantage he had, he used without mercy. I'd be willing to bet he has seen his fair share of fights." He guesses.

"Keep that to yourself then Kazuhiro-san, Lucifer-dono wants nothing to harm that young man. He is very important to the Gremory Clan and to others."

Bowing deeply, the old man replies. "Of course."

As soon as Surtr Second walks out the shouten, Kazuhiro waits for the car to pull away before he snaps his fingers. All the lights shut off and the blinds pull themselves down, then the old man morphs into a young blue-haired man with deep grey eyes. He smiles as a magic circle appears under his feet.

'Ichigo Shiba, you are truly interesting for a mere human.'

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The ride back to the house is silent as Ichigo stares out the window. The events of the night flashing through his head as he tries to figure out what happened back there. He didn't even think when he started the fight and he wasn't even worried about what would have happened to him, all he thought about was protecting the old man. But as he went through his movements in his mind, he saw no flaws in his actions, and that makes him wonder if he had formal training of some kind in his life before.

Knowing his uncle, he would have to say yes. People in his Uncle's world had to know that kidnappers and the like would target their family members, so he would likely have had some kind
of training to help him in avoiding capture, or even to fight back against his attackers the way he did tonight.

"Ichigo are you well?" The driver, Surtr Second asks as they begin to pull up to the house.

"I am now but I'm not too sure about after that." He says as he sees three young women waiting out by the front door.

A small laugh in the deep voice of his grey-haired escort tells Ichigo that he agrees with his assessment. Sure enough, as soon as he gets out of the passenger side of the sedan, three sets of arms are all over him and the questions begin.

"Ichigo are you alright, you didn't get hurt did you?" Akeno says as she hugs his left arm.

On the right side, Rias pulls his other arm in between her breasts. "Ichigo did they harm you, did you hit your head?"

The young blonde-haired girl snuggles into his stomach as she wraps her arms around his waist. "Onii-san are you okay?"

The laughter from Gremory driver makes Ichigo look over his shoulder and send a glare towards the taller man. "I guess that answer that." The huge man chuckles as he re-enters the sedan.

Not giving him a choice, the three girls drag Ichigo inside the mansion, all the while fussing over him until he puts an end to it.

"Enough please. I'm fine, and no I didn't get hurt or even get touched. Stop with the worrying, you guys promised me that you would treat me normally. Getting mugged is part of life so please guys, just stop."

He regrets his words as three sets of puppy-dog eyes meet his eyes, and he unexpectedly staggers as a vision floats through his mind of a younger brown-haired girl with brown eyes giving him the same sad look. He doesn't hear the shouts of the girls or Surtr's name being called as he falls backwards to the floor and blacks out.

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The brunette makes her way through the hot-springs while ignoring the stares being sent her way by both men and women. Her towel wrapped around her perfect body helps keep her covered as she walks towards the private bath she has been invited to for the night. She is here to meet someone who has information on the young man now living with her daughter and her peerage. The voice on the other side of the phone had asked to meet at this particular spot at nine P.M., saying she had used this place before and it was a good spot for private conversations. Her contact was right, almost every spring has thick privacy walls and each has their own private changing room, though she had made use of the main changing room instead. Going over the layout of the hot springs, she concludes that there is little to no chance of them being walked in on, or of being over-heard, unless it was deliberate.

She finds the private hot spring soon enough and slides open the door. Glancing around, she sees a set of folded up clothes already in a basket, and she places her hand in the next basket, transferring her clothes from their basket in the main changing room to this one. Stepping out into the open air hot spring, she sees long purple hair tied up in a loose bun on the dark-skinned woman she is here to meet. Walking to the opposite end of the hot spring, she drops her towel and enters the water, settling down until she is sitting on the ledge with the water just covering her shoulders. Leaning
back, the brunette closes her eyes and lets out a content sigh.

"It's nice isn't it Gremory-sama?" The other woman says without opening her eyes.

"It is, but I must say you have me at a disadvantage. You know me but I don't know you."
Venelana Gremory replies.

The purple-haired woman opens her golden eyes then she sits up straight and gives her best cat-like grin as she introduces herself. "Forgive me, my name is Yoruichi Shihōin. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

The two of them finally relax after formally meeting each other in person. The wife of the Gremory Clan head leans back and begins the conversation rather bluntly.

"Is Ichigo Shiba a threat to my daughter? My husband and son assure me he isn't, but I am her mother."

Yoruichi stares at the woman coolly, not liking the fact anyone would consider her student a threat, but she does understand her concern. "How much did they really tell you about Ichigo, Venelana?"

The frown on the other woman's face speaks volumes. "Not much, other than that his family were servants at one time to another Clan but he had lost his memories from an accident."

"Stole his memories is more like it, Venelana. Ichigo was never a threat, but a bunch of old fools saw him as a threat to their power and chose to get rid of him before it could happen." Yoruichi spits out. "They don't even know what they have done, but one day I hope I can find a way to bring back his memories. I might have a way in the near future if I am sure it will work, but until I am sure he will safe from Central Forty-Six, I dare not do anything more but watch over him from a distance."

"And you Yoruichi, why did you agree to see me with this?" The Devil matriarch asks calmly.

"Because I know who and what you are Venelana. Oh, Kisuke and Isshin tried to hide it from me, but I'm still what I am, a master spy and an assassin. Information if you know where and how to find it isn't hard to find at all. So now my turn, are you a threat to my Ichigo?"

An eyebrow rises at that statement. "Your Ichigo? I didn't know anyone had a claim on him."

Golden cat-like eyes meet her gaze. "Ichigo is special to me Venelana; he is the son I can never have. My children will all be girls, it is sort of a family tradition; no matter what I want, I won't be able to give birth to a boy. He is the closest that I will ever get in having a son, and ever since the first day I saw him as a baby, I knew he would be special."

"Not every day a Shinigami and a human woman have a child, is it Yoruichi?" Venelana asks, smirking as a flash of surprise shows on the other woman's face.

"You did your homework I see. Yes, he is the son of a Shinigami Captain and a human woman. Ichigo was a Shinigami himself."

"Was?" Venelana asks her curiously.

Irritation flashes across the Goddess of Flash's face as she retells to the Gremory matriarch the story of the Winter War and the aftermath of that war's last battle. The decision of Central Forty-Six to execute Ichigo for unspecified 'crimes' until her friend had come up with an alternative plan to forestall a civil war when it became clear that the Gotei Thirteen would openly revolt against
any decision that would bring harm to him, his family or his friends. How a father, torn by his love for his son and the guilt to keep his other two children safe, had made a choice that no father ever should. How she, without anyone else knowing, had placed a tracking Kidō on Ichigo so she could find him afterwards and hopefully find out whom he was living with. How she had finally decided to get in contact with Venelana, although she didn't explain just how she had found a way to contact the Gremory matriarch in the first place.

Listening quietly until the story is done, Venelana sits in the water, sipping a saucer of sake that Yoruichi had poured for her earlier.

"I am sorry Yoruichi; I didn't know how important he is to you. I just want to make sure my daughter is safe." The Gremory matriarch finally apologizes.

"She'd be safer still if he had his powers; with his memories destroyed, he will never be who he once was. No Shinigami should be separated from their own soul, it is completely unnatural, and Ichigo would never harm Soul Society, at least he wouldn't back then. But if by some miracle I can help him recover his memory, I'm not so sure what he will do then."

The older brunette turns to her purple-haired companion. "Exactly what did they do to him Yoruichi? I know you said that his powers are sealed, but his memories have been removed? That I don't understand."

Yoruichi sighs. "His powers are linked to his memories. Without his memories, he can never enter his inner-world, never speak to his Zanpakutō, and never be a threat to those old fools in charge. He surpassed everyone else in the war, and that is why they fear him. Because he would never bend his knee to them in servitude, not with their casual disregard for the people he cares about. Back then, Ichigo had only one priority in his life, and that was to protect everyone he had ever loved or cared about. Even with his memories gone, that part of him hasn't changed."

The Devil matriarch gives her a look of understanding. "Then I will do my best to keep him safe for you Yoruichi, on my honor as a member of the Gremory Clan."

"Thank you Venelana."

"There is one question I do have to ask though, and I hope you don't mind me asking?"

"Sure." Yoruichi takes a sip from her saucer.

"Was he ever romantically involved with anyone?"

Spitting out the sake she had just taken a sip of, Yoruichi stares at Venelana with wide-open eyes before she finally answers. "Ichigo never gave any woman that kind of attention. Even though a few gave it to him, but he never acted on those feelings. Why? Is he getting involved with someone now?"

Smiling, the Devil matriarch remarks back. "I think your Kisuke and his guardian have done something to make him change his attitude lately."

"Really? How so." The purple-haired woman asks curiously.

Giggling, the woman leans forward and begins to tell her own story. Soon Yoruichi is on her third saucer of sake, and laughing as the woman across from her tells her everything she has seen and been told of since Ichigo had arrived at the Gremory residence in Kuoh town.
'Oh Isshin, how you will miss out on teasing your son, now that he is showing interest in women.' She thinks to herself sadly.

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Darkness. All he can see is black, but he hears sounds, voices maybe as he struggles to find his way back. The last thing he remembers is a girl with brown hair and eyes, but she means something to him, something important.

'Fuck! Why can't I remember!?'

A voice he knows; he can hear her clearer.

"Brother, I am sorry. I don't know what happened, one second he was fine, the next he just fell unconscious to the floor. He didn't say a word, he just fell."

"It's okay Rias. It's not your fault. I'm sure his injury is the cause of his fainting spell. Luckily Amyntas and I were on our way here, so he will be able to check on him and make sure he isn't relapsing."

He knows that voice as well. Gremory, Sirzechs Gremory.

"Why is he here? Uncle Amyntas is too? What is going on?"

"Rias, Akeno my dears, you shouldn't work yourselves up so much over things you can't control. His injury will act up from time to time and affect him. All you can do is what you did tonight. Call either me or one of your brother's servants. As for what I think happened tonight is pretty obvious, he had a delayed reaction to the robbery attempt. Somewhere his mind finally caught up to his actions and he just overexerted himself is all. Nothing a little rest won't cure."
"Delayed reaction my ass Uncle. I know what I saw, she is important to me and I'm going to find out why."

"Uncle Amyntas, is there anything else we should know about Ichigo besides his head injury? Like how does he know how to fight the way he does? I've have seen things like that before, but what he did isn't normal."

"Akeno, you must understand this as well as anyone, a person of his position must know how to defend themselves. He has had extensive training in the past because he needed it."

"I'm sorry if I stepped out of line Uncle Amyntas, please forgive me."

"Akeno, please think nothing of it. Just keep a watch over him; he has a long way to go before he fully recovers, if he recovers his memories at all."

"Why are you all talking like I'm dying or something?" Ichigo decides to interrupt the oh-so-joyful conversation then.

"Ichigo! Ichigo! Onii-san!" The three teen women shout in sync when he opens his eyes.

"Omph!" He grunts when the smallest girl jumps on his bed and squeezes her arms around him.

"Onii-san! Are you okay?" She whispers to him, while staring into his eyes.

Freeing one of his arms, he ruffles Koneko's blonde hair as he looks at her and then the rest of the occupants of his room. The first two he sees are his crimson and black-haired roommates, both looking a little worse-for-wear around their eyes. He then spies the older brother of Rias grinning slightly as he looks down at him. Finally, his uncle is standing behind Sirzechs with a small frown on his face.

"I'm fine Koneko. Maybe I over did it at the shouten." He keeps his eyes on Amyntas, and sees the frown lessen just a bit.

"Ichigo, you had us worried." Rias says as she sits on the bed beside him, with Akeno taking up the other side and grabbing his free hand.

Sirzechs watches as the three girls hover over the young man, noticing that when Koneko finally releases her hold on his hand, Rias quickly takes it. He can't help the feeling of giddiness that forms at seeing them get along so well. Glancing over to the older man in the room, he can see that Amyntas has his own speculative look as he watches his nephew getting doted on by the three girls, especially Rias.

"Ichigo." The older man suddenly calls.

Looking at his uncle, Ichigo gives him a questioning look. "Uncle."

"Do you know what happened to you?"

Ichigo frowns. "I saw something." Why he said that, he would never know, but the effect was immediate.

"You saw something Ichigo. What?" His uncle gently asks him.

Looking at his hands still being held, Ichigo decides to tell the truth. "I saw a girl, a girl with brown hair and brown eyes when I looked at Koneko earlier. I...I know her somehow, but I can't
remember how or where I know her from."

Looking up, he sees that both his uncle and Sirzechs and he sees nothing betrayed by either man on
their faces. By nothing, he means no reaction at all, and somehow that makes the hair on his neck
stand straight up. Then the moment is broken as his uncle closes his eyes and crosses his arms,
exhaling slowly.

"Ichigo, you must have remembered something about your past. Your doctors said it might happen
from time to time, that you might have these episodes as well. As for what you remembered
tonight, I honestly don't know but I don't want you to worry about it."

"Don't worry about it?" Ichigo asks questioningly.

"Yes, don't worry about it, it just means you are healing. Brain injuries are very delicate. You
might regain everything or you might gain only bits and pieces for the rest of your life. I don't want
you to dwell on it and get depressed. You have your whole life ahead of you yet. Make new ones."
As he finishes, his hand sweeps to the three girls sitting on him or next to him, and his meaning is
more than clear to them.

Ichigo can see blushes form on both the older girls' faces and sees Koneko give him a smile, a shy
smile. Squeezing both hands holding his and returning Koneko's smile, he looks back up at his
uncle.

"Thanks Uncle Amyntas. I'll not question it for now...I just want to know who she is one day. I
have this feeling she is very important to me somehow."

Amyntas nods. "Ichigo, we…haven't been close for a number of years. My traveling and your
home schooling didn't make a lot of time for us. I wish I could help you but this is something that
only time can heal. Just try to be patient, don't give up hope but be ready to accept the fact that you
may never get it back."

"I know Uncle. I'll deal with it."

"Not alone you aren't Ichigo. Me, Akeno and Koneko are going to be with you every day to help
you. So no, you aren't going to just 'deal with it'. you are going to deal with it with us. No more
heroics either mister. Two close calls in one night are enough. From now on you are going to listen
to us. That's final." Rias tells him.

Eyes going wide and sputtering soon after, the orange head yells back. "No way in hell Rias! For
all I know between shopping and my mornings, it could be the reason I had my blackout as well.
Who the hell sleeps nude and uses a guy for a damn…"

'Shit!'

'Dumbass.'

'Hentai.'

'Moron!'

Four teens turn slowly to look at the two older men and see something that three of them had
expected but the fourth hadn't. The older brother has a huge smile on his face, while the uncle is
trying his hardest not to laugh, his red face however betrays his own amusement.

"Ah, I can explain Sirzechs-sama..." Ichigo tries to begin his defense only for a raised hand to put a
"I see you haven't changed much Rias, but I must say your tastes have improved Sister." The crimson-haired elder brother smiles at his deeply blushing younger sister.

"Wait! You're not pissed at her, me, us Sirzechs!?” Ichigo asks incredulously.

"Of course not, Ichigo. She has always slept naked but this is the first time she has had a living hugging pillow. I must say, you must have made an impression somehow Ichigo."

"When we first meet, you only warned me about her having unusual habits, not about using a person as a damn pillow, while nude!"

"Ehmm, must have slipped my mind Ichigo, I apologize." Sirzechs says with an unapologetic smile as he turns to the other adult in the room.

"May I speak to you privately Amyntas?"

"Certainly Sirzechs."

"Wait! Ah, Uncle just one question before you go." Ichigo says before either man can leave.

"Of course Ichigo. What do you need?" The older man asks.

"Not to be nosy, but why are you here and how did you get here so quick? I thought you were in India."

"That's because I arrived back in Tokyo yesterday and I was planning on seeing you this weekend. To make sure you were settling in and if you need more funds." His uncle tells him.

"So does this mean I won't see you then this weekend now?"

"I still have to find a hotel but …"

"No, you will stay with us Amyntas-san. We have plenty of spare rooms and the staff will be more than adequate to serve you. I must insist you stay with us this weekend." Rias insists firmly.

Bowing back to the young woman, Amyntas gives his thanks. "I thank the Gremory Clan for their kindness and accept. Until this Saturday Ichigo, Rias, Akeno, Koneko."

"Night Uncle."

"Good night Uncle Amyntas."

"Safe travels Uncle Amyntas."

"Good night Amyntas-san."

Ichigo and the girls watch as his uncle and Rias's brother leave his room. When they are alone the three girls turn their attention to the young man, and Ichigo quickly begins to feel fear when their three sets of eyes turn hard.

"ICHIGO YOU IDIOT!"

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The two adults keep their thoughts to themselves until they are outside the house and at the
driveway, where Surtr awaits both men. The younger man turns to the older man and begins the
topic of discussion.

"Amyntas, what happened to him? Who is the girl he says he saw? Is he going to be a threat to my
sister and her peerage?"

Amyntas looks back towards the house, organizing his thoughts before he speaks to the Maou.
"The girl is his younger sister Yuzu. She is the daughter of Isshin and my granddaughter Masaki, as
is Karin, her twin. But I think what just happened is something that was hidden even from me
Sirzechs. I believe the shouten owner Urahara has a few tricks up his sleeve and is pursuing his
own agenda. The other fact is that for Ichigo to have even had that vision of his sister, means that
Urahara lied to everyone. He never erased Ichigo's memories, he only hid them and now Ichigo is
slowly starting to awaken those memories. As for being a threat to your sister and her peerage, then
I must be honest and say I don't know. If you wish me to remove Ichigo, I will do so at once."

The Maou slaps the shoulder of his friend and shakes his head. "I think we will just have to keep a
closer eye on my sister and her friends, discretely if possible. As for your great-grandson Amyntas,
I think he should stay here, especially since it seems my sister has taken a liking to your young
heir. Who knows? Maybe, just maybe, he might save my father and me a beating from our
respective spouses."

The older male frowns. "Are you suggesting…?"

"Who knows what the future may bring Amyntas, who knows? Now that is taken care of, how
about some dinner? My treat."

"Fine, but I get to buy this weekend for your sister."

"Agreed. Come Surtr, we are going to do onigiri in Osaka; I'd rather the ones in Kyoto, but now
wouldn't be a good time to intrude upon her domain."

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Ichigo is silently enduring his current treatment. Being hand fed his dinner by his red-headed
amateur nurse-maid.

"Open wide Ichigo." She smirks as he gives her his best scowl, but she doesn't budge while holding
a pair of chopsticks with a piece of beef dangling from it.

"I can…" Chew. "feed myself…" Chew. "Rias. So…" More food is quickly placed in his open
mouth.

"Ichigo, we talked about this. You are in bed until tomorrow. I am going to take care of you and
that is final."

Still chewing his food, Ichigo stares at her with mild annoyance before he swallows and tries once
again to argue with his faux nurse. "Rias, there was no discussion; you told me what I was going to
do. I got no say in the matter and you then you kicked Akeno out for wanting to help. And poor
Koneko had to hear what you two insinuated about me and the bath, AGAIN!"

Grabbing his cheeks and making his lips look like that of a goldfish; she gives him a glare as she
speaks. "Ichigo, you got into a fight with two thieves. You blacked-out because of a memory and
lastly you are under the Gremory Clan's care both physically and mentally. I am in charge of your
well-being Ichigo and what I say goes. Do we understand each other? I will not be the one to tell
your uncle that you got pig-headed and wound-up in yet another coma."

He sees the look in her eyes and hears in her voice that she is deadly serious about what she is saying. Soon he relents. "Fine, you bwin."

"Good, now time for your bath, so get undressed and I will help you." She gets up and makes no effort to turn away. Nor is she intimidated when he points to the door for her to leave. Shaking her head and grinning she starts to undress herself. "Nah huh Ichigo. You saw me the other morning, my turn now, so let's go."

"Wait a minute dammit! I didn't ask you to sneak in here naked, I didn't take a bath in your bathroom and I certainly didn't ask you to take care of me now. I can at least bathe by myself." He tries to argue.

"And if you should have another flashback and you black-out again, how are we going to know you aren't drowning? Well, I know how."

"We will just have to make sure one of us is with you during baths from now on. So get up and get in there." By now she is down to her panties and nothing else.

"Are... you...kidding...me...Rias?" He sputters at the woman standing nearly nude in front of him. "You can't make that decision on your own Rias; I mean what would your mother and father say if they knew you were doing this?"

"Nothing."

He stares blankly at her. "Huh? Nothing? What do you mean nothing?"

"Exactly what I mean Ichigo, nothing. My parents trust me and they must certainly trust you to let you live here with me, Akeno and Koneko. So they will do...nothing." She ends in a sing-song voice.

"I hate you." He whines as he is being dragged out of his bed by the panty clad woman. Not even fighting it, he lets her guide him to his bathroom and realizes there are no towels inside for him to hide behind. Turning around, he sees Rias smirking as she holds a few towels in one hand while motioning for him to undress with the other hand.

Shaking his head he gives up and faces away before he undresses in front of the young teen girl, blushing when a comment on his tight rear is made as he pulls his boxers down. He however gets to cheat the girl out of her prize as he immediately sits on the stool while covering his groin area. Looking over his shoulder, he sees her smiling at his ingenuity. She then throws a towel at his face, which he quickly uses to cover himself with as she fills the bucket with hot water for washing his back.

"Rias, seriously, your parents really wouldn't get mad at you and me for doing this?"

Soaping the wash-cloth, she begins to wash his back while explaining her family's disposition. "Ichigo each of the servants you see here are not servants, they are part of my Clan. We treat them fairly and never abuse them, not ever. My family is seen as a rarity for our treatment of those that others see as below them in status or station. Akeno, Koneko and Yuuto are my precious friends even if they do serve my family. Akeno is my best friend, Yuuto while he doesn't live with us is a trusted companion, and Koneko is like a little sister to me. Each has pledged their loyalty to me and my Clan, and as such I will see to it that no harm comes to them if I can help it."

As she washes lower, Ichigo sits there and thinks about her words. "So where do I fit in Rias?"
"You Ichigo are our guest. It's my duty to make sure you recover and nothing happens to you. Your uncle has been a trusted friend of my family for a number of years I am told. Before you came to live with us, I had never met your uncle, so it's an honor to help him anyway we can when he asked my family for help. So you, Ichigo, are now precious to me as well."

Twisting his head so he can talk to her easier, Ichigo begins again. "You still haven't explained this though." He gestures to her nearly nude form.

She pushes his arms up so she can wash the sides of his chest and under his arms. "Nudity has never bothered me when I am with someone I trust Ichigo. Oh, I know you think I might be naïve but the truth is I know you won't do anything to me without my permission. Even now while you undressed in front of me, you didn't stare openly at me and you are still hiding your modesty from me, not out of embarrassment but because I believe you are worried about my person presumably. Thank you for that by the way Ichigo, but you don't have to worry about it though. I like being nude, but I'm not ready for that level of intimacy, not yet."

"So you and Akeno just like to tease me then?" He gets an answer with a small laugh from her.

"I'll be honest, it's nice to see you blush Ichigo but you are still sweet judging by your intentions." He feels her kiss his back between his shoulder blades.

"I just wish I had met you earlier Ichigo." Her words are muffled when she pours a bucket of water over his head to rinse off the soap suds.

"I need to talk to my uncle, soon."

"Ichi-kun."

Turning he sees the dark-haired Akeno standing in his doorway, a tray in her hands. She smiles as she enters the room and Ichigo sees three cups on the tray and full pot of tea. He watches as she pours tea in all the cups and then picks up one and hands it to him, while she picks up another for herself. The person that the third cup waits for then comes out of the bathroom, thankfully wearing clothes, even if it is a slightly sheer négligée but still better than nothing.

"Thank you Akeno." Rias says as she picks up her cup and sits on the bed with Ichigo and Akeno.

Soon the three teens drink their tea in silence as Ichigo watches both girls give each other the evil eye. He shakes his head in disbelief, even now they are willing to tease or even argue with each other. Deciding it is in his best interest to avoid being in the middle of a war, he breaks up their match.

"Thank you Akeno, Rias. I think I'll turn in now. School and all tomorrow."

"Of course, Ichigo. Thank you for the tea Akeno. We will see you and Koneko in the morning."

She waves goodnight to Akeno, but doesn't move.

"Buchou?"
"Rias?"

"I am sleeping here tonight Ichigo."

"What!?"

"I told you Ichigo, I have picked you for my hugging pillow." The crimson-haired woman says while smirking at her Queen, who is pouting.

Resisting the urge to bodily throw both girls out, he exhales slowly before he tries to argue with his roommate. "Rias, I'm not a damn pillow."

"Your right Ichigo, you're better."

"Fufufu, Ichigo you can't and won't win with Buchou. Once she makes up her mind, no one can make her see otherwise." His dark-haired roommate giggles.

"And you Akeno, are you going to sneak in as well or should I just…" He can't finish as a hand on his mouth stops him, and a glare is sent to the other girl who continues to giggle.

"I think you are spoken for Ichigo, but no I think I will stay in my room if I value my life. She can be so evil when she gets mad." Akeno begins to smile as she takes away the tray before retreating out the room.

"Goodnight Ichi-kun, Buchou. Don't do anything I know I would do if I slept with him."

"Akeno!"

The door closes on the giggling teen, leaving Ichigo and Rias alone in his room. Shifting to one side of the bed, Ichigo looks over at the girl still in his room, alone.

"Rias, I know you are worried about me, but seriously I'm fine."

"And I was being serious Ichigo. You help me sleep, so I'm staying."

Before he can argue she gets up and walks to his door and switches off the ceiling lights in his room, leaving only a small night-light on. Walking back to his bed, she pushes him to the middle of the bed before she pulls the covers over the both of them.

"Ichigo, turn off the light and sleep."

"Yes ma'am."

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Blue eyes stare at the face of the young man as he sleeps restlessly, his orange hair damp from the night-sweats that started shortly after his first nightmare began. The worried creases around her eyes give away her thoughts as she watches to see if he is going to start screaming again as he did during his last bout of nightmares. She didn't understand a word he said, mostly because he was either mumbling or his screams were animalistic in nature. Rias had held him tight the moment he began to thrash about when the first of his dreams began, tossing and turning such that he had woken her up almost immediately. Now, after almost three hours, she had no choice but to use her most passive magic to surround him with her essence, to help create the illusion of peace. Her own nightgown had been tossed aside early on, his sweat drenched body clinging to hers as she helped him finally calm down enough for him to rest easier.
What really happened to you Ichigo?

Sitting on either side of the bed is her Queen and her Rook. Each had been summoned by Rias early on to help her if she needed it. But now they too look like her, worried and scared for their home's newest member. Koneko, who seldom shows her emotions, has to wipe away another stray tear as his last raged filled screams fill the room and finally fade. Akeno sits with her arms around her knees as she rocks back and forth; watching his face finally relax is enough for her to give a relieved sigh.

"What was that Buchou? Not even Koneko-chan or Yuuto-kun had nightmares that powerful. And those screams, I've never heard such rage or anger from a human before. Exactly what have we gotten ourselves into?"

Rias can only keep Ichigo still, her head keeping his tucked next to her chest, her arms holding his body close to her as she finishes her last incantation to soothe his mind. Nothing more than the whisper of peaceful images to help his tortured psyche find a way to shut down whatever images have been driving his night-terrors. She finally lifts her tired head and looks at her Queen.

"I have no idea Akeno, but I think one of you should go and get my brother or my father. They will want to know about this."

"I'll go immediately Buchou. Koneko, have Harumi call the Academy and report us in as sick for tomorrow. Buchou should we tell Sōna as well?"

"No Akeno, just my…" Rias's answer is interrupted when a magic circle appears in Ichigo's room and a familiar woman makes her presence known.

"Mother." Rias exclaims, trying not to shout or let her mother see her worry.

Venelana only has to take one look at her daughter to see the emotions clearly evident on Rias's face as she holds the young man in her arms.

"Venelana-sama." Both Akeno and Koneko say as they bow to the wife of the Clan head.

She turns to them and begins to take charge. "Akeno, go back to the estate and inform my husband and my son that I am taking charge of the young man's well-being as of now. Koneko, can you have Harumi make me some of her special tea? Rias, I want you to take a bath now and then you can come back. Hurry now."

Akeno and Koneko both leave to do as the Gremory Matriarch instructs, neither of them questioning her instructions. Rias slowly disentangles herself from the now still Ichigo, her hand running down his face, making sure he stays still. Looking at her mother, she tries to keep her tears back, but when she walks over to her mother and begins hugging her, her tears silently fall with her quiet sobs as she holds onto the older woman's dress. Venelana hugs her daughter back, kissing the top of her head in comfort.

"Shhh Rias. You can't let him see you like this, it will only make him hurt if he knows he is the cause of your tears daughter."

The nodding of crimson answers the gentle admonishment of her mother. "I have never heard anyone scream like that Mother. They were inhuman, so much terror, rage, and despair. What did he live through to cause him that kind of suffering?"

"Rias, all I can tell you is this: keep him close to you and the others. Make sure he knows he is never alone, no matter what kind of day he is having. He will need you in the future my lovely
Daughter, just be there for him."

Her daughter looks up at her with teary eyes. "Mother, what is it that no one is telling us?"

Cupping her daughter's cheeks, Venelana tilts her youngest child's head back and soothes the tears away as she speaks. "All I will tell you Rias is that he is very special. Now go take a bath and put something warm on."

Watching as her child leaves the room; Venelana turns her attention to the now sleeping youth in his bed. Walking up to his side, she caresses his forehead, a soft light from her hands envelopes him briefly. When the light fades, he is in a deep sleep. She doesn't react when yet another magic circle appears and her oldest child arrives.

"Mother."

"Sirzechs."

The current leader of the New-Satan faction walks to the unoccupied side of the bed. He stands there looking at the now still young man, his face a worried frown as he peers down at the rough appearance of the sleeping war veteran.

'War hero at sixteen and suffering in ignorance, not knowing why he does.'

"I understand that you are taking charge Mother. May I ask why?" Sirzechs asks while keeping his thoughts hidden from his mother.

Still sitting next to the sleeping Ichigo, Venelana gives her son a slight look as she answers. "Sometimes Sirzechs its best not to ask, this is one of those times my son. Let me do this my way."

"You understand the situation then? Who he really is?"

"I know that he is a former Shinigami Sirzechs. Although I am surprised by what I learned, I won't betray his trust and I will help Rias keep Ichigo alive as you, my husband, and Grayfia have sworn to do as well. You should go and tell his 'uncle' the news and tell him I will be keeping a closer eye on Ichigo as well."

"How did you find out if I might ask Mother? The only ones who know are Father, I and Grayfia, so who told you?"

Turning to face her son with a smile she has picked up from her newest acquaintance, she sees her son take an involuntary step back at her disposition. "A little black cat told me, Sirzechs Lucifer."

Trying to keep his laughter down, her son starts to make a circle of magic, then he bows to his mother. "Then I wish you the best of luck Mother. I will inform our mutual friend of the new arrangements."

"Good night Sirzechs, give my love to Grayfia and Millicas."

"Good night Mother, let Rias know for me as well." She watches as her son disappears as quickly as he came.

Turning her attention back to the young man in bed, she brushes her hand once more across his forehead, infusing a dream into Ichigo's psyche as she used to do for Rias when she was younger and had her own nightmares. Smoothing away a stray bit of his sweat-soaked hair, she studies the face under her. Despite her and her daughter's magic, he still wears a slight scowl on his face. She
chuckles as she remembers Yoruichi's description of Ichigo.

'The easiest way to recognize Ichigo is by his prominent scowl and his orange hair.' The werewolf woman said.

"If you have the strength to survive what your mentor told me Ichigo, I will make it my mission to make sure we restore what has been taken from you, if we can." Venelana whispers into his ear.

A noticeable sigh escapes the young man then. Smiling, Venelana moves to a nearby empty seat to wait for her daughter. Soon a knock at the door announces that both Koneko and Harumi have brought the tea she had asked for. The young Neko takes her place again next to Ichigo's side while holding a glass of milk for herself. Harumi moves to serve tea to the Gremory Clan's Mistress. After asking and being told that the tea is fine, the young maid bows and leaves the room. Not soon after, the feeling of a magic circle in another part of the house marks the return of her daughter's Queen. Akeno makes her way into the room with a yet another bow before she too takes up her place again. The last to return is her daughter, freshly showered and dressed in another suitable nightgown.

Rias quickly takes up her spot next to Ichigo, sliding under the covers once again before she lays her head down on his slowly rising chest. Just before she falls asleep, she sees her mother give her a knowing smile.

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Ichigo slowly blinks his eyes and the familiar sight of crimson meets him once again. However, when he goes to nudge Rias awake he finds that she is wearing different clothes. Then he senses more than sees that he and Rias are not alone in his bed. Slowly craning his head to one side, he sees a head of black hair on the other side from his red-head sleeping partner and then looking down, he can't help the small yelp that escapes when he sees the youngest girl is using him as her personal futon.

"Koneko. Rias. Akeno. What happened last night..?"

"Shhh Ichigo." A new voice interrupts him.

Looking around, he finally sees an older brown-haired version of Rias sitting comfortably in a chair beside them. Next to her, sits a tea-pot and an empty plate. Knowing instinctively who this is and swallowing the terror he wants to give life to, he sees the woman smiling at him, not in an 'I'm gonna kill you' kind of way but in a strangely kind way, thankfully.

In a low whisper she begins to speak. "I am Venelana Gremory, Ichigo. I'm Rias's and Sirzechs's mother."

"Ah, this isn't what it looks like Gremory-sama?" Ichigo ventures; hoping he appears sufficiently cowed enough.

The woman giggles at him. "Ichigo, Ichigo, Ichigo your attempt at humble doesn't suit you. I know what is going on better than you." Her face keeps him from protesting his innocence. "You have done nothing wrong, so put your mind at ease. However, you do seem to be useful as a pillow and a futon for the girls." Her soft laughter at the end finally allows him to relax.

"Yeah, that I can see. When I went to bed it was only with…" His eyes go wide at what he is about to say.

"With Rias because she has decided to use you as her hugging pillow. Correct Ichigo?" Venelana
asks again with a friendly smile.

Just nodding his head in answer, he starts explaining again. "Yeah, she said I was her new pillow and since the first night, I've found her in my bed. These two are a surprise though; I figured I was off-limits or something. Sorry Venelana, if I or the girls are offending you in any way."

That brings a smile to the brunette sitting next to his bed. "Ichigo, I have known of Rias's particular habits since she was a baby. She can't sleep without something to curl her body around for quite some time. Go back to sleep Ichigo, you and the girls will not be going to school today, call it an unscheduled holiday."

Letting his eyebrows fall, his consciousness quickly succumbs again to darkness.

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Upon waking a second time that day, he is mildly worried when he wakes up alone. Since his first night with his new roommates, he has awoken to the sight of crimson hair every morning. He lies there wondering what is going on when a sudden shout lets him know that all is well in the Gremory house.

"AAKKEENNOO! What did I say about trying to sneak into his room!? I told you yesterday about that didn't I Akeno!?"

"Ara, ara Buchou. You said I couldn't sneak in at night. It's now afternoon and still daylight out; therefore I can't be sneaking in."

"That doesn't matter Akeno, you are sneaking in because you are wearing your white yukata, your see-through white yukata!"

He cringes as his door opens and a figure starts to step inside, however he breathes out when the small form of Koneko shows herself, her back to him as she carries a tray in. The first thing he notices is her hair is no longer just dark blonde but some pure white has started to bleed through at her roots. She turns around and sees him watching her; a smile comes to her face, when she recognizes the relief evidently forming.

"You're awake Onii-san. I brought you lunch if you are hungry." The youngest teen says as she walks to his bedside.

Taking the tray from her, he puts it on his lap and points to her hair as he begins to lift the cover off of his plate. "Your hair is changing Koneko. Is there a reason why?"

She touches her hair subconsciously before she frowns. "No Onii-san, the dye is washing out again."

"Washing out? You dye your hair dark blonde Koneko?"

"Yes Onii-san, because when I was in primary school, the other kids would tease me. Call me names like albino or Shiro, even..."

"They teased you because of your hair color Koneko?" The Rook shivers when she hears the anger entering Ichigo's voice.

Nodding slowly, she almost jumps when his arms grab her and lift her to his side. "Well, no more dyeing your hair Koneko. From now on I want to see your real hair color and if anyone bothers you, I'll set them straight, got it?"
"Yes Onii-san." She smiles at him and sits next to him when he begins to eat again.

However, the peace is destroyed when a fuming Rias marches into the room, stopping as she takes one look at Ichigo sitting up in bed eating with Koneko sitting off to the side of him. Both are staring at her with neutral expressions.

"What!? Can't a girl walk into her room without being stared at!?!"

"Your room?" Ichigo's voice becomes dangerous but it has no effect on the Gremory daughter.

"You're right Ichigo. Not my room but our room." She finishes with a smile.

Downstairs, as Akeno and Harumi are finishing making tea for everyone, a loud crash is heard from upstairs with shouts following shortly from the room of their orange-haired roommate.

"Fufufu, I'm guessing Ichigo just found out about his new sleeping arrangements Harumi-san."

"I would have to agree Akeno-san, but I don't think he is in agreement with it as of yet." The maid says while continuing to make a light lunch for the teens and the Lady of the Gremory Clan.

Koneko soon files into the kitchen, a smile on her face causing both of the older women to stop what they are doing. "Koneko?"

"I am fine Akeno-nee-san. They are funny though, Rias-sama and Onii-san. I didn't know a plate could dent bricks."

Harumi starts shaking her head as Akeno and Koneko sit for lunch, then the maid leaves to retrieve Rias and Venelana. The two Devils wait for their Master to make her way to the dining room after the commotion finally dies down.

"Koneko-chan, exactly how angry was Ichi-kun?"

Shrugging her shoulders as she plays with a stick of celery, she retells her version of what happened. "He was very angry at first but it didn't take long for Buchou to argue that he was a guest, an injured guest and it would be her fault if anything should happen to him again. He then tried to tell her that across the hall was good enough, but she hit him with his new position as of now."

"Her new hugging pillow." Akeno asks.

"Yes. He isn't happy about that either."

"I did say he was going to lose that argument. Now he has lost that and it seems he is losing his room as well."

A familiar voice speaks up, taking the two sitting somewhat by surprise. "He sees the error of his ways Akeno. So there will be no more disagreements from now on." Rias says as she joins them in the room.

Akeno smirks as she asks the obvious. "How did you manage that Buchou?"

"I took care of it actually Akeno-chan." The older Gremory woman says as she rounds the corner behind her daughter. "I have never seen a man so red in my life when you just mention the word father, daughter, nude and bed in the same sentence."

"Speaking of Father, is he coming with brother and Lord Amyntas, Mother?" Rias says as she takes
a place next to Akeno.

Handing her daughter a plate, she shakes her head in affirmative. "Yes, your Father, brother, and Amyntas will arrive around three p.m. I think they are going to make sure of his condition for themselves and then have dinner with us. Amyntas will then stay until late Sunday night before he returns to his estates. Your brother and Grayfia will go home tonight; I'll be staying for a few weeks before I need to return home. Maybe I can convince Grayfia to let Millicas stay for the weekend as well."

Akeno squeals when she hears the name of her Master's nephew. "Oh, I do hope he can stay Venelana-sama. I'd love to see him and Ichi-kun in the same room together. They are both so serious at times it makes me wonder if Millicas-kun would be how Ichi-kun's son might act someday." A dreamy look overtakes the sadist's eyes.

"Well, before we marry Ichigo off, we need to get a room ready for Amyntas, Zeoticus and myself for our stays. Also, we need to shop for dinner tonight because I think it would be nice if both yourself and Rias cook for us and our guest. You know your father and brother love your cooking Rias, as well as yours Akeno."

"I think food poisoning sounds better Mother." Rias says with a grumpy tone in her voice.

Venelana frowns at her daughter as she speaks. "I know you are upset with what they did Rias, but they had to do something about the Clan. I know you have been promised at least until after you graduate, but I don't want you to deny yourself fun, even if he does have orange hair and brown eyes by chance."

Rias stops chewing as she slowly looks over at her mother. 'Did she just say what I think she did?'

"Now Akeno, you and I will go out after lunch and I want you to take me to those quaint shops down in the old section of town. We will leave your moody Buchou here to take care of her roommate. Koneko you can join us or stay."

"I'll come Venelana-sama." The young teen says.

"Then it's settled. Rias, have fun with your Ichigo. I'm sure he might be calm enough to approach soon."

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'She didn't. No, she did. I can't believe this. I…I have to share my room with her!'

Ichigo lies in his bed, staring at the ceiling. His mind trying to wrap itself around the fact that not only is Rias going to be sleeping in his bed every night with him, but her mother approves of it.

'I live in a house of crazies. That's it, a house of crazies. How could she? And Rias was smirking all the while, letting her mother blackmail me into this.'

'It could be worse; she could have said all three would be sleeping with me.'

"Ichigo?"

'Speak of the Devil and ye shall receive.'

"Yes, Venelana."
"May I come in?"

"Ah sure. Come in."

Ichigo doesn't move from his back but shifts when Venelana's weight settles next to him, a hand touching his forehead. He feels somewhat down after learning he had developed a high fever last night that caused him to act out his dreams. The girls had taken turns during the night to keep him cool as they called the Gremory family as well as his uncle, who is coming back later today after checking on him last night. He frowns deeper at the trouble he is causing not only the Gremory family but his own as well.

"Why the frown Ichigo?"

Shifting his eyes, he stares into the purple eyed gaze looking down at him. "I'm sorry about making everyone worry last night Venelana; I should've listened to her then."

Venelana looks at Ichigo before she speaks to him. "Do not trouble yourself Ichigo; I am satisfied that Rias, Akeno and Koneko are safe in your hands as you are in theirs. I heard about what you did at the shouten."

"It was nothing Venelana; they just got unlucky in picking that place." He drops his gaze to stare at his hands, wondering what else he doesn't remember.

Understanding his silence and that he doesn't want to talk about the attempted robbery; she does change the subject to one she also knows he really doesn't want to talk about. "Ichigo, I hope you don't think badly of me or Rias, but if it helps my daughter sleep better, I have no problem with her sleeping with you."

He struggles to sit up then. "Venelana are you crazy?" He hisses softly. "What happens if her father, YOUR HUSBAND, walks in on us? Will he even give me a head-start to run or does he like to skewer his victims first?"

Venelana's melodious laughter then unnerves him before she replies to his question. "Oh Ichigo, you really don't know us that well I see. Don't worry about what my husband is going to think, just worry about what Rias is going to do if you try and keep her out. You, Ichigo, are her safety valve. She needs you as much as you need her at this point young man."

"That's what I mean Venelana, why me? Why did she choose me of all the people in the world? What about Yuuto?"

"Because Ichigo, you treat her as Rias. Not Rias Gremory. You treat her as a person, not as a thing or a person of status. You see her only as a woman; even now you defend her honor, even if she doesn't care what others might think of this, you only think and act for her honor. Even if you do argue about offending us, which you won't by-the-way, you are still only thinking of her. That, Ichigo, is why she chose you."

"After a few days?" He tries to argue.

"My daughter's instincts are first-rate Ichigo; she knows who is out to harm her or who is out to use her. I have watched my daughter all my life and she hasn't been wrong once in whom she keeps close to her. If she feels this comfortable around you already, she must know you can be trusted."

"I can't talk my way out of this can I?"

Laughter once again fills the room. "No you can't. Now rest up, your uncle will be here in a few
hours and I want you to rest until then, understood?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Smarty-pants."

XXXX

Dinner didn't proceed the way anyone, including Ichigo had intended.

When he first arrived, with Rias as his escort/nurse maid, he was stunned by the feast in front of him and by all the people sitting there waiting for him and Rias. Besides Venelana, Akeno and Koneko, there was Zeoticus Gremory - Rias's father, Sirzechs and Grayfia, and their son Millicas. Also his Uncle Amyntas, the man from the store - Surtr Second, and Yuuto Kiba have been invited.

Ichigo tries to sit away from Rias, but between Venelana and Akeno he doesn't stand a chance.

"Ichigo, why don't you want to sit with me?" The crimson-haired beauty pouts.

"Because dammit, you are going to try to force feed me again, I'm not that helpless Rias! I'm sure I can use the chopsticks just fine."

"I know that Ichigo, but I just want you to sit next to me." Her words sound hurt because of his reaction.

Taking a quick glance at the expressions of everyone else around the table, he senses that maybe he has just pushed the verbal jabs once too far with the teenage girl who has only done just about everything for him.

"Sorry Rias, everyone, I guess my temper got the best of me. I apologize for my rudeness; I think I'll just head back to my room if you don't mind."

Before anyone can stop him, he turns on his heel and walks away heading back to the stairs to his room. No one at the table makes a move to follow or stop him, all stare at the crimson-haired teenager whose blank face follows Ichigo as he ascends the stairs to his floor.

A voice breaks her out of her own thoughts. "Are you going to let him leave Rias, or are you going to keep your promise to yourself?"

Rias turns to stare at her mother with confusion evident in her eyes. "Mother, I don't understand?"

The older Gremory woman gets up and stands next to her daughter and whispers something that no one else in the room can hear. Whatever is said makes the younger woman blush and then a brilliant smile forms that nearly lights up the room with her happiness. Grabbing two plates and quickly covering them with food, she dashes upstairs after her pig-headed roommate to make some things clear to him. The mother smiles as her daughter leaves the dinner guests to themselves.

"Dear?"

"Save it Zeoticus. It's for our daughter and me alone." Venelana takes her place once again between her husband and her only grandchild at that point.

Turning to their guest, she smiles as she looks at Amyntas. "Quite the nephew you have there, Lord Naberius. I hope one day to see what he once was."

Hidden shock forms on the faces of those who know the truth.
The addressed man shakes his head then and before he drinks his wine, he smiles back at the Gremory Clan's mistress. "I hope so one day as well Lady Venelana, I hope so myself."

XXXX

Ichigo isn't even in his room more than few minutes before the bedroom door is slammed open, quickly turning he sees Rias glaring at him with two plates of food. The teenage man takes an unconscious step back as she marches into the room and forcefully hands him a plate.

"Eat. Now."

"Rias?"

"Shut up Ichigo. I said eat now, we'll talk afterwards." She then leaves the room for a short time only to return with a bottle of wine and two glasses. Not saying a word to her roommate she pours two glasses and hands him one. Shifting on the chair while holding his plate, he looks at the glass then at her with a questioning look.

"Drink."

'Oh damn, she's pissed.'

Ichigo instinctually drinks when commanded; somewhere inside him, he knows not to piss the woman off any more than he already has. As the red liquid touches his tongue, he gives a surprised grunt at the sweet taste. He doesn't recall any memories of drinking before but he has to admit the taste of the wine isn't bad. Placing his glass down, the two eat in silence, him on the chair, Rias on the floor. As he eats, he can see the emotions flying across her face. Some he knows, like the pout of her lips when she is brooding over something or the narrowing of her eyes as she gives him the look of death, yep, anger for sure. However, he's curious as to why her cheeks and the rest of her face match her nickname at one point, that he isn't sure of but if he had to guess, embarrassment maybe.

Rias's mind is racing from the words her mother spoke to her downstairs. She couldn't have been serious but her mother had given her a wink no one else could see. She is desperate to know why her mother would even say anything like that to her as she sits there on the floor. Not that her current company is unpleasant, no, he is downright infuriating to her for the moment, she even gives him her best look when she gets mad. She smirks internally when she sees his unconscious flinch at that point but as she looks at him a new thought comes to mind. Now she has to hide her face lest she sees how just looking at him now makes her long for what her mother had said.

'Take what you want Rias and damn the consequences later.'

What she wants is a life of freedom, one that she has control of, not one dictated to her by her family or other nobles or a man she does not love. If that means the man in the room with her right now is going to be the start of her independence from her family obligations, then so be it. She wants what Ichigo has, a choice. He even said that he wouldn't marry for anything less than love, not duty. The orange-head that now sits quietly eating has what she wants the most, freedom.

"Ichigo." She suddenly starts.

Startled at the suddenness of her voice, he almost drops his plate. "Ye…Yes Rias."

Biting her lower lip, the heiress makes up her mind. "Do you not want me to stay with you?"

Ichigo can only stare at the head of red in front of him; he sees her head looking down, afraid to
look at his face when he does answer. That is when a feeling comes over him, a foreign feeling but a feeling he swears is right. Placing his meal down, he gets up from his chair and sits in front of Rias, his hand hesitant as he lifts her chin gently so he can see her face. What he does see makes him berate himself. The normally cheerful, happy and confident Rias is now anxious and scared as she looks back at him. Again the unconscious flinch marks his features as he looks at the timid woman sitting across from him.

"Why?"

She blinks once. "Why what Ichigo?"

"Just tell me why you picked me Rias. Out of everyone you know, why am I the one you want?"

"Because I don't feel alone with you."

"Alone? But you…"

Shaking her head to cut him off, she speaks softly to him. "I am Rias Gremory. My family and I are - as you would say - nobility in our social circles Ichigo. I am the heiress of my Clan and one day I will be the head of my family. But unlike you, one who is free, I have certain obligations that must be met, no matter what I feel about it. I am not like you. I can't choose my life's course Ichigo, but I want to and I want you to show me the way. I want what you have Ichigo and need you to be the one to help me find my own way. I chose you because…because I trust you not to hurt me. I trust you to treat me as a woman and not as an object. I trust you to be my real friend Ichigo, without worrying who or what I am."

"Free? You're your own person Rias, why…"

"Because I'm…I'm not free Ichigo. My life has already been decided for me. Who I'm going to marry, what I'm going to do with my life, and how…how to spend it until the end of my days." Her voice finally betrays her fear.

She can see his face contort from puzzlement then slowly the realization of what she said, she sees something she hasn't really expected to see, fury. True anger induced fury begins to creep into his face as he mouths the words she winces from.

'Arranged marriage.'

She nods her head slowly in answer. "Yes Ichigo, my husband has already been decided. I am engaged."

"LIKE FUCKING HELL YOU ARE! THIS AIN'T THE GODDAMN FEUDAL ERA RIAS! WHO THE FUCK STILL DOES THAT SHIT!?"

"Ichigo please listen to me! Please!" She looks at the door of their room, panic setting in if someone should hear him. But no one will as she sees a spell has been placed on the door, keeping their conversation to themselves.

'Thank you Mother.' It's all she can think.

Turning around she finds herself staring at Ichigo's groin and a blush ensues but then her mind catches up and her logic kicks in. He is trying to leave the room, while enraged. She acts out of desperation and trips him by grabbing both of his legs and forcing him to fall over. As he falls, he twists his body so he lands on his back, not on his assailant. Taking advantage of his position, she crawls up his body and before he can say anything she places one hand on his mouth and the other
on his chest as she bends down. Nose to nose, she is staring into his brown orbs, filled with both fury and shock.

"Don't." She whispers pleadingly.

'Why? Why? WHY?' His eyes are shouting at her.

"Please Ichigo. Not yet. Please for me, don't." Resignation fills her whisper.

He stops then; his anger slowly changing into worry at her pleading voice, her body he notices is shaking while she lies on him. Slowly, he wraps her in his arms as he pulls the now visibly upset woman closer to him. Her face finds its way to the crook of his neck, her breath heavy on his neck as she pants rapidly.

"Ichigo, I can't do anything yet but I'm not going to stop trying to find a way out of this. Just do me one favor, this is all I beg of you to do, just treat me like you want me to treat you. As a person. And I promise not to hover over you anymore or make you feel like an invalid."

She feels his chest heave then and his voice is filled with his own resignation. "Panties and a nightgown."

She bolts up at that. "Huh?"

He glares at her then. "If you are going to use me as a damn pillow, you have to wear panties and a damn nightgown or no deal. Got it?"

"I guess." She pouts.

"Now, tell me why you are already engaged at sixteen Rias."

"Our families are very old Ichigo; it's tradition for us to marry those of our station. But since I've been in Japan, all I want is a real life and a real future. I want to travel and see the world, not stuck at home as a baby factory for someone I don't even love. I want what you have Ichigo, the right to choose what to do with my life. Shhh, I can see you getting angry again but I want you to swear to keep this to yourself for now."

"Yeah, I'll keep quiet for now Rias, but so help me, if anything happens to you, I'll find a way to hurt who ever does."

She shushes him again with her finger and she leans down and places a kiss on his cheek, a long kiss. "Thank you Ichigo. We should rejoin the others though. We are the hosts after all."

"I should apologize anyways. I don't want to leave them with a bad impression of me. My hair already does that on its own."

"You have nothing to worry about Ichigo. My family will understand but if Grayfia gives you a death glare, please do your best to ignore it."

"I'll try."

"Good, now we better get up before any…"

"Anyone does what Buchou?" A click from a camera shutter is heard.

Two heads turn and see the black hair of the club's vice-president standing in the doorway, a phone in her hand as she smiles at them. "Ara, ara Buchou, such a scandal could ensue if this were to get
out, don't you think?"

Downstairs, all heads turn to the sudden shout that threatens to shake the very foundation of the mansion.

"AAAKKKEEENNNOOO!" Both the orange-head and red-head screech at the top of their lungs.

The only one not reacting is Koneko. "I guess Onii-san and Buchou made up."

XXXX

Ichigo and Rias are standing in the kitchen doing the dishes, Rias humming a tune as she dances to the imaginary score in her head. Ichigo can only chuckle to himself as he places another dish into the rinse water for her. Next to Rias is Yuuto who dries the dishes and hands them to the young Neko, whose hair is now white after Venelana helped her wash the dye out before dinner. Akeno sits at the kitchen counter making bento with the leftovers as is Grayfia, who is glaring daggers into the back of Ichigo's head.

XXXX Flashback Start XXXX

It had started after Ichigo and Rias rejoined the rest of the family and Ichigo apologized to them for his rude behavior. He gave no other excuse other than he had overreacted and had jumped to the wrong conclusions. To his relief he was quickly forgiven and told that he shouldn't worry about it anymore. At least dinner had been peaceful after that, even with Akeno and Venelana giggling conspiratorially with Akeno's cell phone. Rias just gave her mother and her best friend a snort and turned her nose up at them, effectively ignoring them for the better part of the dinner hour, at least until dessert arrived. Then all the girls, including mothers and wives, shouted with joy when a double chocolate and fudge cake arrived. That was the last of the peace at the table.

The opening skirmish was when Grayfia nearly had a fit when Ichigo got up with his and Rias's empty plates and started towards the kitchen. When she voiced her objection, he nearly set off the battle with the silver-haired sister-in-law when he told her he wasn't a cripple and could do his own dishes. She told him to sit and let the servants take care of it and that's when the war nearly started when Ichigo scoffs at her and tells her he isn't above doing his own chores. She tried to start lecturing him on the duties of the household staff as that was what they were being paid to do. That is when Ichigo told the maid that came to get the dishes to leave them alone, he was going to do his own and that was final.

"Grayfia dear, I think maybe we should leave this to them. This is after all their home." Her husband interjected.

Then Ichigo understands why even Grayfia's husband cringes in fear as the wife of Sirzechs turns on her husband with a smile that even, he at the age of sixteen, knew meant trouble for any man alive. "Dear, when I wish for you to tell me how to run a household, I will. However this mansion does fall under our domain as property of the Gremory Clan as such it falls under my purview. Now Ichigo…" Grayfia turns her gaze back on to him. "…You will let the ser…"

"No." He stared hard at the woman, his earlier anger leeching through finally.

All heads turn and look at the now dead-man walking when he cuts off the woman standing in front of him. Her eyes began to bulge out and before she can even think of retaliating against him; he cut her off again with a smirk.

"Grayfia, you may run the property per se but we are going to do things differently here from now
on. Yes, the staff can stay on and help but when it comes to chores that we can handle, like doing our own dishes, cooking our own meals, even cleaning our own rooms, we are going too from now on. I know we can't clean the whole place, so that will be the staff's responsibilities, but anything else we are on our own. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to start cleaning up soon." With that Ichigo slid by the now catatonic woman and headed off into the kitchen.

Soon a few of the other chairs slide back and Yuuto, Akeno and finally Rias got up and followed Ichigo into the kitchen where a few shouts are again heard and then the sudden exodus of the kitchen staff followed.

'He…kicked…us…out.' Harumi said with disbelief.

Venelana and Zeoticus began to laugh uncontrollably then. Soon Sirzechs and Amyntas followed the other two in fits of open merriment, only for the younger husband to quiet somewhat when a pair of silver eyes zeroed in on him. Holding his hands up in surrender he did the smart thing and grabbed his son as a shield. Millicas at first was confused, but when he followed his father's eyes, he showed his father how much smarter he was than him. He quickly jumped out of his father's lap and ran for his grandmother and hid in her arms.

'Traitor.' His father grinned at him.

He smiled at his dad and mouthed back to him. 'I'm not that crazy.'

"Fine. If that is how Ichigo wants it, then I will show him how it will be done." A head of silver marched her way into the kitchen and shortly afterwards a few more shouts are heard and then a quick silence followed afterwards. Each of the remaining Devils watched the doorway to the kitchen warily, including the staff. Grayfia is seen being scooted out by Rias who is shaking her head in objection to her sister-in-law demands.

"He said you can help with the bento when we are done with the majority of the dishes Grayfia, and that is all you are going to be allowed to do. Now stay with Mother and Father and help keep Ichigo's uncle company. You are here only for the night; we get to see him all weekend."

XXXX Flashback End XXXX

And that is how the current situation was created. Ichigo hiding his smirk from Grayfia, Rias happy that he is doing what he promised her, Yuuto and Koneko finding the situation amusing and Akeno secretly happy that Ichigo is making her best friend happy. But also those two are bound to give her loads of material to share with the Gremory peerages, if they do become a couple, back in the Underworld.

When the last dish is put away, the bento put in the fridge for school next week, Rias leads everyone else out into the living room to end the night with a family gathering. Ichigo soon has Koneko sitting on his lap with Rias on his right and Akeno sitting on his left. After a while the talk turns towards school, how it is going, how is Ichigo adjusting to the courses and so on. As the night begins to get late, Koneko is the first to go to bed and surprisingly Millicas follows the white-haired girl to bed. Giving his roommate a glance, she whispers into his ear.

"He always sleeps with Koneko when he stays over, ever since he was four."

Soon Yuuto is saying his goodnights as well and when Ichigo gets up to see if he wants company walking home, the blonde refuses. "Thank you but no Ichigo, I can manage. I don't really live too far from here and the streets are a lot safer here than other parts of the town."
Sirzechs and Grayfia decide that they should go home as well and soon Ichigo watches as the family give each other hugs and kisses. Akeno and Rias promising them they will take care of Millicas until Sunday night for the married couple. As they leave, Grayfia sends one last look at Ichigo and what he sees makes him do a double take. She is actually smiling at him.

'Strange.' But he gives her one in return.

After they watch the car carrying the older brother and his wife leave the driveway, Zeoticus and his wife are soon following Akeno upstairs to a guest room leaving Rias, Ichigo and his Uncle Amyntas alone in the sitting room. Each has a glass of wine, much to Ichigo's surprise when he learns that the family allows them to consume small amounts at and after dinner.

"Ichigo, I trust you are doing okay now?" His uncle chimes after sipping his wine.

"Yes Uncle. I'm sorry by-the-way for making you leave work because of me."

"You are my nephew Ichigo."

"Still Uncle, I should have…been careful."

"Nonsense Ichigo. From what I understand you saved the proprietor of the shouten that was being robbed. Who can say what would have happened if you didn't, the youth today are very prone to violence after all. Makes heroes like you a rare breed Ichigo."

Almost spitting out his wine, Ichigo stares at his uncle like he just grew a new head. "Hero? I'm no hero Uncle Amyntas, nowhere near. Heroes are people that…"

Rias speaks then. "People like you Ichigo. You didn't hesitate, didn't think about your own welfare and you acted to save an old man and his livelihood. You are a hero Ichigo, I believe you are one."

"Hear, hear Rias. See Ichigo even Rias-chan thinks you are one. It's a good thing you had all those lessons."

"I wish I could remember them. I wonder what else I can't remember."

His uncle chuckles then. "You have extensive hand to hand combat training Ichigo. Plus some kendo and fencing courses. And if I heard right, you are running again. Before your accident, you used to run a lot as well, I think around ten miles every other day."

"I'm running around six miles a day now Uncle, so I guess I'm improving."

"That you are. So tell me what was it like Ichigo, how did you feel honestly after you apprehended those two?"

Staring into his glass, he gives a soft sigh. "I didn't really feel anything Uncle. I just reacted without emotion or thought. It wasn't until Kazuhiro-san gave me the water that I began to think again. And the only thing I could think at the time was 'fuck, what did I just do?' Uncle Amyntas I didn't hesitate, no thought, and no remorse for either of those two men. Now that I think about it, what else was I taught?"

"Your instructor taught you a very unorthodox form of unarmed combat Ichigo; I don't even know what it's called. She also…"

"She? My sensei was a woman?"
Now a grin forms on his uncle's face when he looks at his nephew. "Yes, a woman Ichigo, and she was quite the looker."

Rias gives Ichigo a hard stare that he picks up on. "ICHIGO!"

"Hey are you trying to get me beat Uncle? Damn."

His uncle starts laughing at his nephew's suddenly jealous roommate, if you can even call Rias Gremory a roommate now that it's out that he is her new bedtime accessory. His sniggering at his thoughts makes the sudden irate Rias turn her hard eyes on the Devil sitting across from them. "Uncle Amyntas is there something you wish to add?"

Shaking his head and getting his laughter under control, the older man just looks at his nephew. "Ichigo, Rias you two should enjoy yourselves as much as you can. Time has a way of making things work out in the end if you are patient enough to wait. But before I go to bed, one last thing Ichigo."

Giving his uncle a look. "Yeah."

"If you do find someone, you don't need me to tell you what to do." Before they can ask him any more questions, he leaves the room as he sips the last of his wine.

Ichigo and Rias sit on the couch staring at the wall across from them. Each sipping their wine in silent reflection in regards to the events of the day.

"Ichigo."

"Ehmm Rias."

"I think we should get to bed soon. It's been a long one already."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." He gets up and turns around with his hand out-stretched.

She gives him a gentle smile but declines his offer. "I'll be up shortly Ichigo; I just want to sit here for a few moments if you don't mind?"

Ichigo bends down and squats in front of her. "Rias, I meant it. I will help you get out of it. No matter what I have to do, I'll help you find a way to get you out your engagement."

"I know you will Ichigo." She leans down and gives him a kiss on his cheek again. "Thank you."

Staring at her, he finally nods and with one last look, he leaves her alone in the sitting room.

She waits until he is gone before turning to a shadow in the room. "You can come out now Mother."

Her mother smiles at her daughter's astuteness as she reveals herself. "Rias, I didn't think you would notice me."

"I almost didn't. Not until you choked when I kissed him."

Her mother laughs as she makes her way around the couch and sits next to her daughter. Pulling her daughter closer until her head lays on her shoulder, the older Gremory woman gives a content sigh. "He is very handsome Rias, and I can see why you are attracted to him now. Not many men are that honorable and noble Rias, so I will allow you some leeway with him, but if by the time University finishes and nothing comes of it, I won't be able to stop it."
"Then I have my work cut out for me Mother, because there is no way I am marrying Riser Phenex, in this life time or the next. I want to fall in love with my future husband Mother, not have him forced on me."

"Then do what I said Rias. Take what you want."

Turning to look at her mother, she point blanks asks. "If I want Ichigo?"

"Then take him, but be discrete about it Rias. Prove that he is worthy of your hand if you so choose, but be ready for the consequences if you do this."

"Damn the consequences. Right Mother?"

"Damn the consequences."

XXXX

Monday comes too quickly for the teens and adults at the mansion. Ichigo and his uncle spent most of the weekend talking about his past. He learned that his father's name was Daisuke and his mother's name was Mikoto. Both had died in a car accident when he was only one year's old. His uncle had taken him in as his only living relative and raised him the best he could. He was home schooled until he was in middle school and then sent to a boarding school in Europe until his accident. His free time had been spent studying martial arts and kendo with a woman named Tomoko Kinjo until he went to Europe for school.

Ichigo honestly didn't remember any of it and when he got to school Monday morning, the first thing he did was seek out Yuuto in his homeroom. Knocking on the frame, he gains the attention of the entirety of the girls in class when his baritone voice asks for the young man by name.

"Excuse me, is Yuuto here by chance?"

All the girls are almost fawning at the older boy except for one who stands up and admonishes the rest of the class. "Mind yourselves girls, he is your Senpai. Sorry about their behavior Shiba-Senpai, but Yuuto-kun doesn't come in until the last second." She waves to the girls around her to prove her point to him.

"Ah thanks. Ah…"

"Sorry Senpai, I'm Momo Hanakai, class-representative. If I may offer a place for you to look, try the courtyard, he can sometimes be found there."

"Thanks then Momo." As he turns away he waits until he is out of sight of the class before leaning heavily on the wall next to him while pressing a hand to his forehead.

'Fuck, again?'

Looking around to make sure nobody saw his brief moment of weakness, he pushes off the wall and makes a bee-line for the courtyard. He thinks about the brief spell just now and why the hell he reacted to Momo's name. Deciding that he must have known a Momo at one time or another, he begins to feel a bit better as he passes the numerous fan-girls calling out to him, but he doesn't even respond. He has long since learned to tune them out after, ever since his arrival actually, or else he'd just give both Akeno and Rias more ammunition to use on him. Just thinking what will happen if anyone finds out about his new sleeping arrangement with Rias makes him chuckle.

Now that the weekend had passed, the only one still at the mansion is Venelana, who wants to
spend more time with her daughter and isn't needed at home for at least a few weeks before her husband requires her to attend some upcoming function for his businesses. It had also made for an awkward first morning after his and Rias's agreement when she walked into their room and Ichigo woke up with his head firmly entrenched somewhere. Before he could remove his head or say anything, he heard that damnable click again, but this time he had almost fainted when he realized who took the picture. The mother of the girl in his bed gave him a wink and made her way out of their room without so much as a word to either of them.

'She's right; I guess I have no choice.' He smiles though as he walks out into the courtyard.

Glancing around, he finds Yuuto pretty quickly by the large pack of girls not bothering to hide their actions of spying on the so-called cutest boy among the first years. He decides to shake things up by walking up behind all the fawning girls and giving them a scare.

"Hey Yuuto!"

Nearly a dozen girls scream in fright by the loud voice coming from behind them. Turning to see who it is disturbing their gazing, they see the formidable and imposing figure of the scowling second year Ichigo Shiba staring back at them. He gets the desired effect when they immediately scramble away while mumbling apologizes to him.

"Sorry Shiba-san."

"Ah, excuse us Shiba-san."

"We're late for homeroom Shiba-san."

Yuuto walks up to Ichigo and watches the fan-girls basically scamper away from them.

"Thanks Senpai."

"It's Ichigo, Yuuto. Use it please. We are after all friends, right?"

"I guess we are Ichigo. So what can I do for you then?"

Turning towards the first year, he begins to grin. "I hear you help out with the girl's Kendo team."

"Yes I do. Why may I ask?"

"Do they have any equipment that would fit me? I want to spar with you to see what I can remember if you are up to it."

Yuuto begins to smile then at the thought. Most of the team consists of young teen girls that he would never harm, even if they want to spar with him. He knows his strength would most likely harm any of them but Ichigo, he has a feeling he would get a good match out of the taller man. However, he quickly remembers his mistress's warning and as such he voices them.

"Ah Ichigo, Buchou…"

"She'll allow it Yuuto. She and I came to an understanding this weekend. So are you up to it or not?"

"I'm pretty good Ichigo. Are you sure about this?"

"Only one way for me to see how much I remember, don't you think?"
The blonde nods. "The only way Ichigo."

"Good, see you after school and don't worry, I'll talk to Rias so you don't get into trouble."

"Thanks Ichigo. I'll see you at practice then."

Ichigo watches the young blonde move away before his smile falters. Now he has to tell the Crimson rage.

'I am so screwed.'

"NO! NO! NO!" He cringes at her shouts. They are in the stairwell between classes when he tells her.

"Rias, it'll be alright, I'll be wearing equipment including a men. So please calm down."

"It's not that Ichigo. It's because Yuuto despite his small size is no push-over. He could seriously hurt you." She says forcefully.

"You promised me Rias." He hates using doing it but he needs to know she'll keep her promise.

Glaring suddenly, she gets in his face and in a low but dangerous voice she lets him know. "If you get hurt, I'll personally nurse you back to health, my way."

His eyes bulge out then, this weekend she had also informed him of her only condition to their agreement. One she knew he would fight, but lose against.

"You wouldn't?" He replies.

"Not a stitch." She haughtily responses.

"She-demon."

"Carrot-top buffoon."

"Red-headed menace."

"Orange-headed drooler."

"Oh, would you two just kiss and get it over with already." Souna Shitori says as she and Tsubaki Shinra walk past them down the stairwell.

"What!? / Hey!"

A new voice joins the class-rep as Akeno walks up behind Souna. "Fufufu Buchou, Ichigo. A lovers quarrel already? It's only been what, three days and trouble in paradise surfaces."

Two very red faces turn on the dark-haired woman who hides her laughter behind her hand. The Occult Research Club's president right eye begins to tick violently as she stares at her vice-president.

"Akeno, if you know what's good for you..."

"Ara, ara Buchou, everyone can see you two would make a great couple. Why deny it?"
Akeno doesn't miss the tightness around Ichigo's eye when she says that. She then turns her attention to her Mistress and gives her a pointed stare then. Rias stares back but nods ever so slightly, anyone not looking for it would miss it. Ichigo doesn't miss it.

'So Akeno knows.'

Souna and Tsubaki stop at the top of the last set of stairs and watch the three as they stand there not saying a word. She decides to break-up the dead-lock by reminding them they do have class to get to. Seeing that there is no point in arguing with Ichigo anymore, Rias huffs out as she lets Akeno grab her arm and lead her down the stairs. As she does so, she shoots one last glare at her family's charge.

"If you get hurt Ichigo, I will keep my end of our bargain."

"Yeah, I know." Deciding to see how much he could get away with, he pushes his luck. "Maybe I should get hurt."

"Nice try Ichigo, but I have one thing you don't have."

"What's that Rias?" He is still smiling.

"Akeno."

"Fuck me."

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Ichigo is scowling in disgust. Somehow word got around about his and Yuuto's spar after school day ended. And it seems that almost the entire student body had decided that they had nothing better to do but watch the most popular First year and the only male Second year student's match. Looking at the shinai that Yuuto gave him, Ichigo takes a few practice swings to get used to the weight. Standing behind him is Rias, who is helping him put on the various pieces of his equipment.

"You're pretty good at this Rias." Ichigo finally comments.

Pulling tight on his Dō, she hides her smile. "Thank you Ichigo, but it's only because I've helped Yuuto in the past that I know how to do this."

"Still, thanks."

"There, you're done Ichigo. Turn around so I can check one last time."

Knowing it's useless to argue with her, he turns around and lets her inspect him one last time. She pulls and pushes on each piece and when she seems satisfied, she hands him his men. Then, she gives him one last look, but the look she gives him makes him smile. She is smiling as she steps away.

"Be careful Ichigo, and please avoid head blows."

"Yes ddeeaarr." Her eyes fill with amusement.

Turning, he sees that Akeno is finishing with Yuuto and he is standing there waiting for the older teen. When Ichigo walks up to the smaller teen, Yuuto asks him how he wants to do this.

"So Yuuto, I think I remember the basics, so how about we just spar and see how it goes? No
standard rules unless of course you want to."

"You just want to go head to head then? No time or points?"

"I'm fine with that."

"Okay then Ichigo."

Both teens walk to opposite sides of the practice mat they are using and then place their respective men on, then they bow to each other and then to Rias. She shakes her head and then gives them the signal to start. Everyone watching sees two explosions of speed, and some don't even see that.

Ichigo launches himself into a downward strike that Yuuto blocks easily but underneath his men, the blonde's eyes widen at the strength that his older partner hits him with. Pushing aside Ichigo's shinai, he tries to follow-up with his own strike only to find empty air. He dodges forward and barely misses getting hit by the next downward swing. Still rolling forward he regains his feet and blocks Ichigo's overhead swing by getting his own shinai diagonally above his head. Twisting in place while his shinai still holds Ichigo's strike at bay, he steps back letting the strike follow through then steps to the side and swings down, catching Ichigo in the back once he stumbles by Yuuto.

"Nice one Yuuto."

"Thanks Ichigo." Yuuto is grinning behind his men. No one at the Academy had put up that much of a challenge until now.

Both teens face off once again and this time it is Yuuto who makes the first move, but he finds Ichigo somehow anticipating his actions. Yuuto sees Ichigo's shinai aiming for his knees but Ichigo is down to one knee as well. Yuuto has no choice but to stick his shinai straight down to block the swing, but it never comes. His eyes shoot wide when he sees the shinai coming straight down from above him suddenly.

'When did he move his shinai to his other hand and change direction?' Is all Yuuto can think when the blow hits him lightly.

Ichigo had seen Yuuto's feet shift slightly before he charged, indicating a horizontal strike coming, so he dropped down to force him to either take the hit or somehow get his shinai down in time to block a nonexistent strike. The moment he saw the shinai shifting downwards, he quickly shifted his own blade from one hand to the other for a downward strike. He smiles behind his own men when he gets the timing just right that Yuuto can't block the second hit, and at the last second he pulls back on his own strength just to drop the blonde to the mat without injury.

Watching as the two continue to spar, there is no sound from any of the spectators, just the grunts and the sounds of two shinai hitting either the mats or on the rare occasion, the padding of their respective sparring partners. For close to forty minutes the two teens move across the mats in a dance of fluid motions. Each seek but fail to find any opening from the other to exploit. Yuuto however is smiling internally; Ichigo feels alive. Neither want this to end, but soon an end has to come to the two peaceful combatants.

"One last time Yuuto?"

"One more Ichigo. How about we go all out?"

"Okay."
Neither hears the shout of Rias as they rush one another and in a final display of power and finesse, Yuuto scores the final hit but he hits the wrong spot. He was aiming for Ichigo's arm, but Ichigo trips on a small tear in the mat and lunges forward headfirst. The younger man can only watch as his shinai smashes into the head of Ichigo, who drops to the mat as dead weight.

"ICHIGO! / ICHI-KUN!"

Yuuto is next to the older teen's side quickly; gingerly he turns Ichigo over and begins to remove his men as both Rias and Akeno rush to his side. Looking up he sees the head of the Sitri Clan looking at them.

"Shitori-Senpai, please get the nurse if she is still here. I think I hit him hard."

Rias wants to grab Ichigo but her Queen stops her. "Buchou if he is seriously hurt, we shouldn't try to move him too much. We should wait for the nurse."

Blue eyes bore into Yuuto's own blue orbs. "Yuuto-kun what happened just now? Why did you hit him in the head?"

"Buchou I didn't mean it. He stumbled at the last second and I couldn't stop in time. I'm sorry Buchou."

Rias closes her eyes; she is desperate in trying to calm herself at Ichigo's recklessness. "Fool. Now…He…Is…Mine."

"Forget it Rias, it's gonna take more than a twig to knock any sense into my head." Ichigo's voice breaks her out of her victorious gloating.

"Ichigo Shiba you damn fool!" She shouts so loud everyone in the gym hears her. Soon snickers and suppressed laughter drifts throughout the space.

Giving a glare towards the assembled student body, it quickly marks the end of the exhibition match. However, there is one thing for certain, Ichigo and Yuuto's popularity rose to new heights among the fairer sex that day.

Laying there on the mat makes Ichigo restless but as he raises his head, he finds himself his head being directed elsewhere. Someone's lap. Rias Gremory's lap. Looking up at her face as she stares down at his, he wants to cringe when she smiles devilishly at him.

"Sorry Ichigo-kun but until the nurse checks you out, I can't risk you moving."

"Rias. I'm fine, honest."

"No moving Ichigo or…” The rest is lost as she whispers into his ears.

"Fine! Fine! You win Rias," He mumbles the rest to himself.

"Buchou, Ichi-kun, are you sure you don't want to wait until you get home to…”

"Say it and you're going to get it Akeno.” Rias directs her glare towards her best friend only for that damnable click to sound again.

"Ara, are Buchou. Such an intimate position you two are in." Akeno skips out of range.

Before either red or orange can retaliate, the school nurse arrives; following in her wake is Souna with Tsubaki Shinra in tow.
"Shiba-kun what happened?"

"Ah, I tripped and took a blow to the head but I'm fine." He says from his noticeably comfortable position.

Taking out a small flashlight, the nurse waves it in front of one eye and then the next eye. Seeing what she is looking for she holds out her fingers. "How many do you see?"

"Two."

"What did you eat for breakfast?"

"Usual. Rice, some fruit, and a piece of toast."

"What is the capital of Japan?"

"Really? Fine, Tokyo."

"Whose lap are you on?" This she says with a smile.

"My pain-in-the-ass..." He doesn't finish when he sees Rias's eyes go wide.

That makes the group of teens and the school nurse break out in snickers and snorts.

"Well, you are fine Shiba-kun; you can get up...if you want." The nurse gives him a small grin.

Looking up at the evil floating in the set of eyes belonging to the woman he has to share his room with, he slowly gets up without so much as a complaint. Turning towards the worrying Yuuto, Ichigo holds his hand out.

"Nice spar Yuuto. Anytime you get bored or need someone to practice with, give me a shout."

Looking over Ichigo's shoulder, Yuuto can see the promise of pain if he agrees. Swallowing, he tries his best to keep his composure. "I would like that Ichigo, hopefully sometime in the future will be fine."

"Quit it Rias, even I can feel your glare and I don't need to look to know." Ichigo snaps over his shoulder.

Throwing her hands up in frustration, Rias spins on her heels and walks away. The spew of curses and comments about his lack of brains and his stubbornness follow in her wake, leaving Ichigo and Yuuto staring at the back of the departing red-head. Soon, only Ichigo and Yuuto are in the now empty gym before the younger teen turns to the older teen.

"So."

"Next time we spar in a private dōjō and we don't tell anyone Yuuto. No one."

"Agreed."

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The blonde-hair man stares at the board in front of him. Across from him is his friend of close to twenty plus years - Isshin Kurosaki, or formerly known as Isshin Shiba - former Shinigami, former Captain of Squad Ten, self-exiled uncle of the Shiba siblings. Now the two men are staring at the shōgi board in front of them, passing time before the doctor of the Kurosaki Clinic has to go home.
to deal with two still grieving twins.

"Kisuke, they still haven't accepted his... I thought that maybe after a few months they would at least start to come around but they haven't. Yuzu while she acts cheerful in the day, I can hear her crying almost every night. And Karin, my baby won't talk but a grunt or two and her grades are beginning to suffer as well. She is taking on the things her brother used to do at his age, but she doesn't have his strength. I...I don't know how much more they can take."

"I'm sorry Isshin. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

The man leans back on his hands and stares up at the ceiling. "What choices did we have? What choices did he have? Fucking Central Forty-Six. Who the fuck are they to take my son from me!? They accepted Shinji and the others back. They ended yours, Tessai's and Yoruichi's exile and exonerated you all. But my son, NOOO, they sentence him to death. He fucking saves their ungrateful asses and that's the fucking thanks he gets. A death sentence."

"Isshin you of all people know why they fear your son. He did the impossible, and I know it's impossible because I made that damn orb. The only thing that they don't know is how he really did it. If they had found out, I don't think anything would have stopped them in time. That, Isshin, is our only saving grace."

"Now he is living with them Kisuke. I hope and pray for my son's safety every day. He is literally living with the very race that killed his mother's entire family. Only Amyntas and Masaki survived that day but how much longer before they find a way to get rid of Amyntas? And what happens if they find out who Ichigo really is? I have made nothing but foolish mistakes since his birth."

"Stop it Isshin! You are not the only one at fault here! I am the one most at fault and I alone caused all this to happen. If I didn't let my curiosity get the better of me, the Hōgyoku would never had been created and Aizen would never have had the power to challenge the Soul King let alone the Gotei Thirteen. No Isshin, I have a greater burden in Ichigo's fate more than you. You did what any father in your position could do. Saved your children, all of your children, the best way you could."

"We should have fought harder for him."

"Yeah, we should have but hopefully things will turn out for the better."

"I hope so Kisuke because this game you're playing is more dangerous than Aizen. Does Yoruichi know?"

"She suspects I think. I do know she checks on him frequently though." Both men snort then. Isshin shakes his head then. "A bit older and I think she would have taken a run at him."

Opening his fan, Kisuke drops the bomb on his old friend. "She has teased him enough but I don't think she ever would have crossed that line, not with him. You know how she feels about Ichigo, but it didn't stop her from transforming in front of the hapless lad a few times."

"WHAT!?! My boy got to see the Goddess of Flash nude? Oh Masaki our boy got to see his first naked woman finally!"

The two men quiet down after that and as they set upon the board, the black-haired doctor looks up at the blonde-haired scientist. "Kisuke, you realize that when it happens we are both dead men, right?"

"I know, that's why I created specially made Gigai for us."
"EH!"

"Two programmable Gigai that I hope will throw Ichigo and Yoruichi off our trail for at least a day or two. That way we can give them both the time needed to calm down."

"I'm not just worried about them. Karin can pack it when she wants to."

"Sucks to be you Isshin, you and Masaki have some incredible kids."

"Yeah, she would be proud of them."

"Come on Isshin, time for one more game."

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Two weeks later:

Blue eyes and brown orbs are fighting a battle of wills; the man is slowly giving ground judging by the smirking woman's demeanor. He knows if he gives in, it's all over for him, part of him wants to. A big part of him does want to lose, but his pride demands she earn what she wants. His eyes watch as her hands make the final move towards her back to release her final weapons on him, only then does he give in.

"Gahh woman, you win dammit. We'll watch Casual Soul Realm Assault Trip that stars that moron. Now put your clothes back on."

"Yeeaahhh! Thankyouthankyouthankyou Ichigo!" She gives him a kiss on his cheek while she pulls her shirt back on.

"You know stripping is not legal warfare for deciding what to watch on the damn television, especially for a rerun at that."

"But Ichigo, you like it. Don't deny it."

"One of these days."

"One of these days what?"

"One of these days things are going to go too far Rias." He says quietly.

"And?" She doesn't hide her smile or blush.

She can't hear what he says as he stands up and leaves their room, turning back he gives her a look but it's followed by a smile. She smiles back at him. He can't say what he is thinking because it honestly scares him. He is beginning to see her more and more as something else lately; he knows that sooner or later it's going to come-to-a-head between them. Since the day of the spar, they have been inseparable from each other; they don't do anything alone except Rias with her Occult club. She and Akeno sometimes come home late at night, but he has Koneko to take care of. With Venelana still staying with them as well, he doesn't mind too much when Rias comes home late. The younger teen waits every day for him to walk her home, of course they hit the shouten everyday as well, and then he makes them dinner and helps Koneko with her homework.

The first day she went to school without her dyed hair, he dropped her off but didn't leave right away; he hung out keeping an eye on her. That's when he saw what she had talked about when a group of boys started to tease her. Ichigo's temper flared and as he quickly came up behind them,
he wanted to make sure everyone heard him that day.

"Is there something wrong with my Imouto-san's hair color punks?" His voice growled out.

When they turned to see who was behind them, he secretly grinned to himself at seeing the punks began to shiver and shake at the menacing orange-haired brother of their so-called victim standing behind them. He must have made the impression permanent because she hasn't complained about them since that day. Even better, some of the other girls in her class wanted to know how to get the hair color for themselves. The last thing he noticed was that everyday afterwards when he dropped Koneko off, a new group of fan-girls are waiting for him and fan-boys for Koneko. She doesn't mind, but he does...Fortunately, he hasn't seen the dragon lady teacher again.

Also, since the spar, things have become uneventful for him and the rest of the house. Every day he wakes up with Rias's mop of crimson hair in his face, she has even kept her word about wearing clothes to bed but they were getting thinner and thinner every other day he notices. Soon it won't matter what she wears, she will be where she wants to be.

He smiles though as he walks down to the kitchen, most of the staff is asleep or in their own rooms now that the teens have started doing a majority of their own chores and cooking. Rias and Akeno assemble most of the lunch bento, with him and Koneko slowly learning how to cook better. Yuuto comes over a lot of nights to eat dinner with them, especially if club runs late, and he even has his own room for the really late nights. As for him, his nightly runs have increased from six to eight miles in length. He has thankfully learned most of the town's streets and knows many of the shop owners on sight, since almost every night during his runs he gets text messages from the girls to pick-up various things, mostly sweets thankfully.

Arriving in the kitchen, he turns on the light and almost freaks out at seeing Venelana sitting at the counter. A glass of wine in her hand and a smile on her face as she faces him, then innocently quips to him.

"Jumpy Ichigo?"

"Venelana, did anyone ever tell you not to sit in the dark like a damn creeper?"

His answer is her infectious laughter. "Now, now Ichigo, it's not polite to call your elders such names."

"Sorry, but damn, you could give a ghost a run for its money." He says as he opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of juice for Rias and a bottle of water for himself. Seeing the bag of grapes he opts for them as well.

Turning to see the woman still sitting there, he notices her watching him over the rim of her glass. Her eyes trail him as he makes his way around the kitchen, gathering glasses and two bowls. Finally satisfied that he has everything, he turns to the Gremory Mistress and gives a nod.

"Good night Venelana."

"Ichigo."

"Yes Venelana."

"You will do well."

"Huh? Venelana?"
She gets up from her stool and glides over to Ichigo and as she passes him, she cups his chin and whispers into his ear. "Good night Ichigo." She kisses his cheek before she leaves him standing there dumbfounded.

'What the…'

He slowly turns around and robotically walks back to his room, his thoughts shut-down except for one.

'What the…'

Entering the room, his face must have still had the same expression since his run-in with Rias's mother. He numbly walks to the bed, hands Rias her drink and a bowl of grapes before he gets in on his side. During this time, Rias has watched him with a worried look, and she finally breaks the silence.

"Ichigo, what's wrong?"

He turns to her and tells her what happened. "Your mother told me I'd do well and then she kissed my cheek."

"She…kissed…your…cheek?"

"Yeah."

Neither say a word for the rest of the night.

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The next morning there is a note on the fridge for the kids from Venelana.

'Rias, Ichigo, Akeno, Koneko.

Zeoticus and I have a business getaway to attend to. I'll see you all in a few weeks and I'll be staying until the end of the school year. Please keep your grades up, eat good meals and take care of each other. Also have fun.

Love,

Venelana."

"Well I guess we are on our own again." Ichigo says while making his and Koneko's bento for the day.

"Ara, ara Buchou, your mother will be staying for the rest of the year. Unusual."

Rias chews on her thumb-nail as she looks over the note. She knows her mother approves of Ichigo but can she do it? Can she, when the time comes, can she find it in herself to change him, will she even want to? Looking at Ichigo as he packs Koneko's bento with the things she wants for the day, she wonders what his 'uncle' will think of her trying to make him a part of her peerage. Will he even allow it? All she has learned about Ichigo's family is at one time they had served the Naberius Clan in some capacity or another, but how or in what way she doesn't know.

All Ichigo knows of his uncle and his business is that he travels a lot and that they only get together for a few holidays each year, according to Amyntas. The rest of the time, they lead separate lives from one another. Ichigo said he mustn't have minded because now he has them to
keep him company instead of strangers. Rias looks at him and sees him looking at her, a smile on his face. She smiles back because over the weeks his scowl had slowly disappeared to be replaced by the happy face now watching her.

'I think…'

"Buchou, Ichigo we should get going. Koneko you are staying with your friends tonight for a study session, and Buchou and I have an overnight with the club at that haunted house the town over. So let's get going before we are late." Akeno begins shooing them out the kitchen.

"Ichigo, what are you going to do tonight?" Rias asks as she leads the way.

"I have to finish that project for English Lit and then I have to get our notes done for both math and history. After that I think I'll just watch some movies. You know, guy things."

He knows he made a mistake when the black head of Akeno stops and she slowly turns around with a suggestive grin firmly fixed on her face.

'Oh shit, where's Koneko?' Ichigo panics trying to find his walking partner before she hears the sexually charged comment he knows is coming.

Seeing the white head behind Rias, he desperately points to her but it's too late.

"Fufufu Ichigo, a boy alone at home watching movies while his pretty bed-mate is gone for the night. I think we will have to check and make sure there are no white stains tomorrow."

"AKENO!"

"Onii-san?"

"Dammit!"

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"Onii-san what did Akeno-san mean by white stains?" The young teen asks of the now red-faced man walking her to school.

Looking down at the young girl, he tries desperately to think of a lie but he can't think of anything that would work, so he wings it. "Your Onee-san is a very naughty person Koneko, my suggestion is to ignore her when she speaks to me about anything. It's safer that way and I'm not sure how much Rias wants you to know about… well about those things."

"What things?" She asks innocently. She is grinning internally because despite her appearance she knows the sadist's true nature, but it's fun having her Onii-san try and get out of this conversation.

"How about we save it for when Rias is around, because...well, because I'm not comfortable with, you know."

"No, I don't know Onii-san."

"Koneko. Ah dammit, why can't anything be easy?"

"Onii-san."

"Yeah Koneko."
"I already did my sexual education course for the year, so if you need me to explain anything to you, I'll be more than willing to teach you Onii-san." She keeps her face its usual stoic self, even when her older chaperone stumbles over nothing and falls flat on his face.

"I live with…with…"

"Get up Onii-san or I'll be late."

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Rias and Akeno watch Ichigo leave the school grounds going towards town today instead of his usual route to pick up Koneko. Soon a magic circle appears behind them in the room that serves as their club and meeting room for their nightly gathering. Yuuto and Koneko both arrive via that magic circle and quickly find a seat in front of Rias's desk. Koneko, having some extra sweets, passes some to both Yuuto and Akeno who has tea already made and sitting on the coffee table.

"Buchou, we can't risk him finding out. These orders come from the Maou Lucifer, your brother, to find out who these new arrivals are without being discovered."

"I know Akeno; we will proceed at midnight and find out who these people are. No one is to approach, only observe. I just hope whoever they are; they aren't here to cause trouble."

"Of course Buchou. I'll let Harumi know Ichigo will be by himself tonight and to make sure he is well guarded."

"Thank you Akeno."

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Ichigo is doing the one thing he never thought he would ever do in his life. Moping. He is moping because everyone else is spending the night doing something that keeps them away from the mansion. That leaves him alone with just Harumi, Nobvi the grounds keeper, and the now bored and restless chef Jean. He had finished his homework, the notes and his English project hours ago and now he is dressing to take another run. Changing into his dark sweats and grabbing his sneakers, he makes his way the genkan to grab his keys.

"Ichigo, are you going out for a run?" Harumi asks as she sees him walk by the staff room.

"I am Harumi. You guys need anything while I'm out?" He asks as he stands in the doorway to their room.

He sees the blonde-haired Jean shake her head no, while the brownish-black head of Nobvi also shakes his head no. Harumi tilts her head and smiles at him when she does ask him.

"Can you stop by the shouten and see if Kazuhiro-san has my order in yet? I plan on making homemade fudge ice cream for the girls when they return tomorrow."

"Yeah I'll stop by for you. Well, I should be back in an hour or so." With that he makes his way to the genkan and puts on his sneakers, puts his earbuds in and walks out the door.

Jean's blue eyes follow Ichigo as he leaves the mansion, her vision settles on the green eyes of Nobvi as he too follows the direction that the young man's run had started in. Both turn to see Harumi talking to her shadows and giving them their instructions.

"Follow Ichigo closely but allow no one to sense your presence. You may act if the young master's
life is jeopardized. Now be good and behave."

Jean smirks then. "Still having trouble with them Harumi?"

As the head maid watches the shadows all disappear under the door-jam, she turns back to face her fellow Devil. "Sometimes they are worse than children. Most nights I can't even find them, other nights they just don't leave me with one second of peace."

Nobvi stands at this point and stretches. "I think I'll go to bed now. If anything happens, just get me."

The two women servants both wave to him as he makes his way deeper into the staff's portion of the mansion. Once alone, the two settle in for the night watching their favorite dramas, all while Harumi continues to watch Ichigo on his run.

'For a human, he is a catch.' Her giggles makes the other woman shoot her a questioning gaze that is never answered.

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Eating the night away again as he runs, Ichigo pays no mind to his surroundings. As he passes the fountain marking the halfway point of his run, he is surprised when he sees two people walking along the same path. What is noticeable to him is that they didn't look like a normal couple by the fact that one wears a drabby violet trench-coat and a cheap fedora on his head. His companion is a much younger woman with long silky black hair and her violet eyes seem to dismiss him as he runs by the two, not hearing the woman say something to him in passing.

Ichigo doesn't see the indignation that shows itself when he doesn't answer and the woman turns and begins to raise her hand. Before she can do anything however, the man stops her and points to the shadows.

"He is not worth jeopardizing our mission for. He is only an ignorant human boy who probably didn't even hear you. Now come, we have to search three high schools in this area to find this Sacred Gear holder."

"You could have at least let me have some fun you know. Nobody would have missed him, judging by his hair I would venture he is part of a local gang. But still, if this has to be done in secret, I'll curb my 'hobbies' for the time being."

"Make sure you do Raynare. Now let's infiltrate the first school and find this person and eliminate them as soon as possible."

"Oh, alright." She turns and sees the orange-headed boy has disappeared into the distance.

'One day I hope to find you again my young prey, I do so miss seeing the young beg.'

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After stopping at the shouten and retrieving the order, Ichigo makes his way home by ending his run with a full-blown sprint. Heaving as he stops in front of the sally port, he punches in his code and waits for the buzzer to sound. Not a moment later he is through the gate and making his way to the mansion. Stopping he looks up at the full moon, when yet another vision hits him again.

*Standing on the edge of a cliff, he stares down at a city, a city of white that seems to be torn from the pages of history. A woman's voice interrupts his thoughts.*
Ichigo, come back inside, you still need to sleep. We have two days left yet.'

'I know, sorry. It looks so peaceful at night.'

'It does.'

'I hope to see it under different circumstances when this over.'

'I hope so too.'

'Do you miss living here?'

"Not really. I had to…live as someone I wasn't. Now that I've lived in the World of the Living for over a century, I don't think I can come back now or want to.'

As he turns to face his companion, his head explodes in pain. Black rapidly advances on him as he sees the outline of a face. Just before it claims him, he can see twin golden irises.

The woman stands over the young man once again. Her face full of concern as she stares at his sweating face; his moans are thankfully quiet now that she has infused him with yet another soothing spell. Turning to the assembled staff she stares hard at them.

"Speak."

"Lady Gremory, as I said before he was almost to the front of the mansion when he suddenly stopped and looked upwards. Ichigo stood there for but a moment when he suddenly grabbed his head and started screaming again. By the time we got to him, he was unconscious and shaking violently, all I could hear him say is one word over and over again."

Arching one of her eyebrows, Venelana waits for Harumi to say what it is she heard.

"All he kept saying was…was Yoruichi."

Chapter End Notes

Originally posted on FF.net.
Discovering Emotions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Original Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess.

Edited by regfurby April 30, 2018.

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"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu"

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"All he kept saying was...was Yoruichi."

Harumi

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Brown eyes glance down at the time on his phone and a small sigh escapes his body. Looking back up the stairs, Ichigo decides the girl he is waiting for needs a helping hand.

"Koneko! You don't want to be late for your last day of middle school do you!?" He gives a loud shout up the stairs.

Silence greets his announcement at first. Pinching his nose, he quietly reflects upon the past few months of his stay with his gracious hosts. Grimacing as he thinks about the occasional black-outs he still suffers from, though not as frequent as the early days, but having one every other week or so is still causing him some concern. His uncle and Sirzechs both maintains that he is healing and the lengthening time scale between each of his bouts proves that he is improving. What he hasn't told them yet is that the last time he blacked-out, his vision wasn't about the small brown-haired girl or the other newer vision of the small black-haired girl, but was that of a young man. The young man had only frowned as he stood and stared back at Ichigo during the vision.

Ichigo hasn't told his guardian for one main reason: the man was the exact copy of himself but pure white for the most part, with the only difference being the color of his eyes. At first they were demon looking with black sclera and golden-yellow irises but they shifted to black surrounding red orbs as the face grew frustrated for some reason. Strangely, he didn't feel any fear of the person, but he had the sensation that he was missing something very important. As the vision faded, he could have sworn the face twisted into something akin to agony just as he slipped back into consciousness.

Thinking about his black-outs also makes him shift his thoughts to the three ladies of the house. Rias, Akeno and Koneko are the ones who deal with the fallout each time he has one of his blackouts. Rias especially takes to his care with a measure of seriousness that makes him question
whether or not he should continue staying with them. He never wanted to be a burden, but that's what he feels like every time he wakes up after his blackout. The one time he spoke out loud about moving out however, he was rebuked by an angry Venelana stating that he was their responsibility and that any notion of him moving out was out of the question. The glare the four women gave him at dinner that night made any more conversation about this idea a non-starter.

As he thinks about his crimson-haired roommate, remembering that now that she shares his room with him has the young man wondering exactly what she really thinks about their sleeping arrangement. He has to admit to himself, he does sleep better and knowing that he is waking up with her by his side makes him feel…special. Of course, the hugging pillow thing was okay with him after a few weeks, but she has now moved on to sleeping nude with him, and it still gives him some discomfort. After her mother woke them up that one Saturday with nary a word however, he stopped bringing it up. If her mother was fine with it, who was he to argue anymore. The only time he does get mad about it now is when Akeno tries to slip in again.

Akeno, now she is the bane of his male existence, the succubus, who does every and anything to get a rise out of him and Rias. It seems that anytime he is involved with doing something with or for Rias, the sadist will show up and take great pleasure in teasing her best-friend with never-ending jabs until the crimson rage goes ballistic. He almost feels bad about whatever punishments Akeno suffers for it in private, but when he gets down to it, she deserves every ounce of misery Rias deals her. But then again, Akeno is always smiling afterwards, a slight chill runs down his spine just thinking about the seductive glaze in her eyes. At least he has Koneko to balance the older two females out.

Quiet and polite, the little white-haired girl sometimes reminds him of a robot with her lack of emotions. While she is more animated with her feelings lately, he still has a feeling that she is hiding a deep hurt. Whatever it is, she doesn't speak of it and neither will Rias. All he knows from Rias is that it is a private matter and it stemmed from Koneko's family when she was a child. Not wanting to push his little walking partner, he always makes sure he is around for her when she needs anything, even the occasional just-made-it-time-before-closing trip to the shouten for candy. Ichigo also knows not to keep it from her lest he earns a shot to his shins or feet when he tries. Smiling, he knows whoever pisses her off will pay dearly; her hits are not weak at all. Speaking of Koneko, he glances at the time on his phone again and begins to frown in worry.

Shaking his head to focus back on his current task once again, he begins to suck in his breath to call out to her again when the sound of two small feet thumping down the stairs causes him to smile instead. But as he looks at the white-haired girl that comes into view, the look of displeasure on her face causes his smile to slip.

"Onii-san, I heard you the first time but I wasn't done putting my uniform on. Did you want me to go without it so I could maybe perhaps fulfill your hidden lolicon fetish?"

"I swear to god, if Akeno gives you the facts-of-life again, I'm going to strangle her. And no dammit for the last time I AM NOT A LOLICON! Damn sadist is what she is. Always giving people the wrong idea about me."

Walking by him, she gives him her best 'I don't believe you' look, before she sits down at the genkan and puts on her shoes. "Come on Onii-san. I don't want to be late for my last day with dragon lady."

Muttering at the thought of that teacher, Ichigo sits next to her and pulls on his own shoes before he stands and gives Koneko his hand. After pulling up the younger girl beside him, he grabs their bags and they proceed out the door with her just behind him. After leaving the front gate, their
usual morning walk takes them through the park, passing by the stone fountain where Ichigo has started tossing in ten yen pieces shortly after one of his 'episodes'. Koneko smiles as she watches him toss in another coin, and offers a small wish for his memories to return as well.

After passing through the park, they make their way up the street leading to Koneko's school, and she feels his hand tense as they start to make their last trip to the front gate of her school. She sighs internally as she too has had to put up with grown women, the mothers of her classmates, who suddenly started finding reasons to stay by the front gate longer than normal each morning. When Rias had walked with them one day, the red head had a near meltdown after hearing several of the grown women admit among themselves that the eye candy was worth the extra time spent waiting. Eye candy as in Ichigo. Fortunately, they have to endure it for only one more day, and then they would never have to come back here again. Next year both he and Koneko would be walking to school with Rias and Akeno and those two weren't ones to put up with anyone's silly nonsense.

"Ah Shiba-kun, Tōjō-chan I'm happy to see you made it for the last day on time." A fake smile adorns the dragon lady, Hikō-sensei. Her presence is enough to dissuade the other women from hanging around the front entrance of the school; it brings its own problems with it however.

"Yeah, I'll be glad when Koneko is in high school with me next year. It'll be a shorter walk and with less 'stress' involved." Ichigo replies with his own smirk.

"Humph. I don't know how any of your other Sensei put up with you Shiba-kun. Your complete lack of respect for your elders is troubling to say the least."

"Well, thankfully I'll be out of your hair then Hikō-sensei and I'll trouble you no more with my lack of respect. I should also point out that respect is earned not expected, but then again you and I got off on the wrong foot and never got back on, didn't we?"

The woman just gives him a glare before she turns away and speaks to the young woman still standing next to her older brother figure, eyes radiating silent disapproval as she looks at the head of white hair. "Come Tōjō-chan, you don't wish to be late, do you?"

Both younger teens ignore her disapproval. Rias had explained to Ichigo that the Gremory family had warned Hikō-sensei to keep her bias to herself, and the teacher hasn't tried anything with Koneko since then. She also hasn't tried anything with Ichigo since their first meeting, but her dislike of him is still evident.

"I will see you after school Koneko. Have a good last day okay."

"I will Onii-san. Don't forget we have a stop to make as well."

Watching as Koneko walks through the gate, he waits until she disappears into the building before he turns around to see he has to walk through the gauntlet on the other side one last time. This time it seems that every mother has stayed behind longer than needed, and although the dragon lady prevents them from staying right outside the gate, they have effectively surrounded the road from all sides. He can almost feel their hungry gazes eyeing his muscular frame. Closing his eyes, he silently prays that their whispered comments aren't as brazen this time as they have been on other previous occasions.

"Ichigo, you forgot your bento! Again!" The voice of a goddess breaks him out of his dread instantly as he sees his crimson-haired savior walk up to him, with her sadist of a best friend walking beside her and staring daggers at the gathering of suddenly disappointed mothers.

Rubbing the back of head, he gives Rias his best sheepish look. "Sorry, we were kinda rushing
today and I couldn't find it in time. I wanted to avoid Hikō-sensei, but it seems we didn't have luck on our side..."

Himejima watches as the crowd slowly dissipates while giving him a smile. "We figured you'd be hounded once again, so I 'found' your bento after you left. Strange where it was, but then again it did give us an excuse to show up and save your cute little self."

'Five, four, three, two and …'

"AKENO HIMEJIMA YOU SAID HE FORGOT IT!"

"Fufufu Buchou I thought he did, my mistake if I failed to mention that I moved it for him last night."

Ichigo and Rias both glare at the black-haired mistress of pain. Ichigo then quickly grabs them by either arm and begins to drag them away from the shocked looks on a few of the lingering women.

"You two are going to be the death of me yet. Now let's go before that dragon lady finds me still hanging around her school."

"Ara, ara Ichigo, you still at odds with Koneko-chan's Sensei?"

"Yeah, no thanks to you Akeno. Because of you, most of these mothers think I have a thing for older women, and ever since that day, they circle me like a pack of wolves, hungry for even one moment of weakness and crowding the school entrance. As if Hikō-sensei didn't have enough reasons to dislike me already."

Rias develops a tick over one eye, but seeing how Ichigo purposely keeps them separated the Gremory heiress knows she has to wait until either lunch or gym to exact a little punishment on her Queen. However, her anger is unwillingly tampered at the fact her arm is nestled in the crook of his arm. Smiling, she wonders when he stopped being the shy young man that showed her great respect, and became the young man who now seems to accept anything she does when it comes to them being close. Close, but not in any romantic sense yet.

'Soon I hope to change that.' She smiles sadly as she walks next to the human, who unknowingly owns her affections.

"Rias. Rias?" She looks to see Ichigo looking at her with squinted eyes.

"Ah, sorry Ichigo. What did you say?"

"I was telling Akeno to stop worrying about me when you guys go away with your family. Uncle Amyntas and I are going to Kyoto, Singapore and then Vietnam while you are away."

Rias gives a pout but there is little she and her family can do. She and her entire peerage are required to attend a few of the social events planned for the young Devils who are about to debut or even take part in their first Rating games. She still has a year or two before she will be able to take part in her first Rating game, but just the thought of 'him' brings a shudder to her. Her so-called fiancé already has his first victory in the Rating games, and more importantly has used all his pieces wisely. He now has a full set of fifteen in his peerage.

'If our marriage comes down to a Rating game, I don't think I can win as I am now.'

"I'm glad to see you and your uncle making an effort to spend time together Ichigo. I just wish we didn't have to leave for three weeks, but when we do get home, I'll make it up to you. Promise."
Rias says before leaning her head against his arm, keeping her troubled thoughts to herself.

Akeno smiles from under her hair as she walks with Ichigo's arm firmly planted in-between her own valley. Between knowing she and her best friend would have a spat later on, and the fact that she could feel his heavily muscled limb nestled between her breasts, the sadist gains an unseen shiver down her spine that ends with a tingling sensation just shy of her...

"You know Ichigo; I could always come with you. I'm sure Buchou could excuse me so I could take care of you." The Queen says to throw some much-needed fuel on the fire.

As expected, the moment the three of them get within sight of the school, Rias grabs her best friend and gives him his usual morning orders.

"Ichigo, meet us in homeroom after you get your indoor shoes. Me and Akeno have something to discuss in 'private' again. Don't be late and when you see Yuuto, make sure he has his bags ready for us to take home after school." However unlike any other day, she does something she has never done before.

He stares at her as she and Akeno, who has her own look of disbelief in her eyes, walk away. He gingerly touches his cheek where the Number One school idol just kissed him in full public view of every student standing outside. Turning he sees an equally shocked Yuuto, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

"Who are you, and what have you done to Ichigo-senpai?" It is all the blonde haired boy can ask.

Ignoring his only guy friend, he scans the many faces of students that just saw the kiss.

'Oh, fuck me!' He groans internally.

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Rias is fuming as she drags her Queen through the hallways until she gets her alone in one of the girl's restrooms. Turning to put her friend through hell, she pauses as she looks at her best friend's face. Tilting her head in confusion, she snaps her fingers to wake the stupefied Akeno to her senses.

"Akeno. Akeno what's wrong with you? Hey, are you even listening to me!?!"

"Bu…Buchou…you…you kissed Ichigo. On his cheek…in front of everyone." The young woman stutters out.

Rias shrugs.

"Buchou?"

"I'm not ashamed of what I did Akeno, and I'm sure it won't be the last time either. Now that's settled; let's get a few things straight."

Akeno's eyes grow wide when a barrier seals the two away from prying eyes.

'Well that was unexpected.' Is the last thing Akeno thinks before the tirade begins.

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Ichigo is trying his best to ignore a classroom filled with staring faces, even Souna and Tsubaki are watching him with just a small amount of amusement on their faces. He just sits there quietly
replaying the kiss in his head over and over again.

'Does she have feelings for me? I know I'm her pillow but we have never done anything beyond friendship. So why did she kiss me like that? What are her parents going to do if they find out? What's her fiancé going to do if he finds out? I'm so screwed Geta-Bōshi.'

His head hits the desk with a dull thump as he blacks-out at the sudden image of a blonde-haired, grey-eyed man flying at him with a drawn katana.

Sōna flies out of her desk and rushes to the orange head; she carefully lifts his face to see his wide-open eyes staring blankly ahead. She places him back on the desk before she starts barking out orders to her fellow students.

"Tsubaki find Rias and Akeno! Yumi go get the nurse, tell her Ichigo-kun had another relapse! Someone go to class 1-A and find Yuuto Kiba, we'll need his help if we have to move him to the infirmary! Now move it people!" She turns back and kneels down alongside the young man, keeping her eyes on his breathing and his eyes to make sure he isn't suffering from something else other than a sudden memory recollection.

'Hang in there Ichigo; just hang on until Rias gets here.' Sōna worriedly glances at his glazed over eyes.

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Brown orbs stare across the divide once again at the white version of himself. He can see the other being is talking but he hears nothing. He shouts back but again he can't make the other him hear him either. Growing frustrated he bangs his hands against the invisible wall that keeps him from finding out exactly who the person living in his dreams is. More frustration seems visible on his reverse self as well as he runs his hands along the great divide between them. Ichigo watches as the white version once again throws his hands in the air and walks away before vanishing slowly into the glowing distance.

"Who are you!?" Ichigo screams one more time before he sees the familiar tunnel indicating his departure for the waking world. 'Why do I have to find out your name?'

He keeps still as he hears the worried voices around him speaking, again.

"Gremory-san, when was the last time he had a memory that caused him to lose consciousness?" He hears the nurse ask.

Rias's answers back with obvious strain in her voice. "He's been fine the last month. He does sometimes talk in his sleep but never anything coherent though."

"You are there when he talks in his sleep Rias? My, my that is newsworthy." Ichigo internally groans hearing the future class president speaking.

"He sleeps on the couch a lot after school you ninny. Ask…well ask Koneko and she'll tell you."

"Ara, ara Buchou that's…"

"Say anything Akeno and you and I will have words after school."

He hears soft giggles emanate from a few different sources. A lone harrumph answers them in kind.
"Gremory-san, I can at least say he is resting well. Well enough in fact that he has been awake for the last few minutes even. Am I correct Ichigo-kun?" The sweet voice of betrayal asks him.

Cracking one eye open to see the smiling nurse watching him and the narrowed eyes of his roommate, Ichigo cringes inside that once again he will be at her mercy for at least three days before his uncle comes and rescues him.

"Thanks a lot Umagi-sensei."

The nurse's smile grows wider as she stands up and leans over him. Gently prying his right eyelid back, he knows not to react to the examination. Last time she pinched his cheek when he tried to fight her off. The bruise lasted a few hours before healing. After checking both eyes she gives up her place for Rias and Akeno to sit on either side of him before she asks him the question he dreads.

"Ichigo-kun what did you see this time?"

Shaking his head, he denies seeing anything different. "Nothing that you haven't heard before Umagi-sensei. Just the brown-haired girl again."

Rias and Akeno tense at the obvious lie but neither will say anything until they are alone. Even the nurse knows he is lying but she doesn't push it this time.

"Then I suggest you rest for the rest of the day Ichigo-kun. I know you finished your exams earlier in the week, so until the end of the day, you will not move from that bed. Gremory-san, Himejima-san if you don't mind, will you both keep my patient here for me?"

"Of course Umagi-sensei. And thank you again for checking on him. We will be sure to send your findings to our own doctors as well for future reference next year."

"Very well. Rest now Ichigo-kun, and when I get back I'll check you one last time before I release you. Until then you are not to move from here." Turning she walks out of the room with Sōna and Tsubaki in tow.

Closing his eyes, he waits for it.

"Ichigo, I won't ask why you lied, but you did see something different this time. It hasn't been this bad since the last time something new showed itself to you in your visions. Whatever it was, we will wait until you feel the need to tell us." Rias says as she holds his hand.

Akeno adds her own opinion as well. "Ichigo we will always be here for you."

"I know Rias, Akeno but this time it was different. I didn't want to say it front of them because I think I'm losing it."

"Ichigo what did you see this time?" The crimson-haired bijou asks.

Shaking his head he begins to tell them everything this time, including the white version of himself in a strange world of sideways buildings. He then gets to his latest vision of the crazy man attacking him with a katana.

"The thing is I heard him just before I completely passed out. He said, 'There is nothing, but fear reflected in your sword. When you dodge, you're afraid of getting killed. When you attack, you're afraid of killing someone. Even when you try to protect someone, you're afraid of letting them die. Yes, your sword speaks to me only of absurd fear. What's necessary in a fight isn't fear. Nothing"
can be born of that. When you dodge, 'I won't let them cut me'. If you protect someone, 'I won't let them die'. If you attack, 'I will kill them'. Well, can't you see the resolve to kill you in my sword?" I mean who says crazy shit like that?"

The two women can only stare at him with unease when he recounts his last two visions. Rias gives Akeno a look and the Queen gets up from the bed with an excuse to use the restroom. Ichigo watches her with a sullen look, knowing she is going to call his uncle and Sirzechs again.

"I'm sorry for not telling you Rias, even after I promised you back then. It's...it's just that these last two seem too real to me, so much more than a dream. I think they really happened to me. I can't explain why, but I do."

She lies down next to him and pulls his head under hers before she speaks to him. "Ichigo, I don't know where to begin with you about this. Yes, I'm disappointed with you but I understand your reluctance after describing what you saw. Mother has to be informed though in case there was something in your past that your uncle feels is necessary for you and us to know. I am tempted not to leave you alone at all now because of this."

Sighing he lifts his head to look at her. "You have to go Rias. Your parents said this is important for you as well as for them. Don't worry too much okay. I'll have Uncle Amyntas with me anyways and I'm sure he will keep a closer eye on me now because of this. I want you to have fun for at least a few weeks without having to worry about me. I promise I'll be fine."

She looks down into his brown eyes and sees the distance in them. "Ichigo, you are a terrible liar. You're not leaving my sight until your uncle collects you for your trip. As of now you are not allowed to leave my side at all."

His objections come in the form of laughter as he thinks of one thing she won't insist upon being with him when he does. The fool even voices that exception.

"You...you...you...arrgghhh!" She shouts out much to his amusement.

"Got you though Rias. Now let me get a nap in before the final bell rings." Soon his eyes close and his breathing turn into a steady and deep pattern while he rests his head in the crook of her neck.

Running her hands through his locks, she watches him as he sleeps peacefully. "I still don't want to leave you Ichigo."

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Venelana and Yoruichi are sitting in a quiet alcove of a European-themed restaurant on the outskirts of Fukushima. The waiters make sure not to linger too long after the last nasty glare sent towards them from the former Onmitsukidō commander. Her irritation heightened by the brash young men trying to flirt with her unsuccessfully at least twice in the last twenty minutes. The Lady of the Gremory Clan isn't far behind in her distaste for the humans' behavior.

"Make sure we are not disturbed again." Venelana directs her irritation at the proprietor of the restaurant. "If it does happen one more time, I will see to it that you and your establishment suffer for the actions of your staff. Do you understand Endo-san?"

"Yes! My apologizes, Gremory-sama! I will see to your privacy and I will reprimand those young men who insulted your honor! Please give me a few moments and I will serve you personally!"

The were-cat watches with narrowed eyes as the balding man scrambles out of the alcove and begins shouting at the offenders loudly. A few yells later are soon followed by doors slamming and
feet shuffling quickly away from the two women. Yoruichi searches their surroundings with her senses, and once she is satisfied she nods to her new friend. Violet eyes scan the other woman across the table from her before she weaves a spell and seals them in a privacy dome to keep anymore unwanted guests from eavesdropping on them.

Venelana begins the conversation without any preamble. "He has suffered two more black-outs Yoruichi but this time they were very different from before. I think you should hear the details and form your own opinions about what is happening with him."

The Shihōin listens intently as the other woman describes the conversation she has had with both her daughter and her daughter's best friend. Venelana's description of both Ichigo's Hollow and the training he received with Kisuke makes Yoruichi realize exactly what her best friends have done and hid from her. Her Reiatsu begins to leak dangerously as she thinks of the different ways she is going to help Ichigo with killing the two of them. But then her thoughts shift to the positive side of these new developments. They never erased his memories as they swore they did, they just hid his old life from him and that means someday he might be able to get his memories back. But then she remembers exactly why he was put in this position in the first place, his power made Central fear him.

"Venelana, I can't say for certain if this is good news or bad."

"Why is that Yoruichi? Is there something I should be made aware of?"

"I'm gonna be honest, I don't know what Kisuke saw that day. He won't speak of it, and I think Isshin might know something but he ain't talking either. All I know is that it must have something to do with his 'uncle' and his relationship with Masaki and her family."

Venelana sighs as she thinks about the Naberius Clan and the horrible events of that day, when the Clan was for all intents and purposes wiped out. Amyntas was the lone survivor of the ambush orchestrated by members of the Old Maou faction for his refusal to support them in the Civil War. His wife Cornelia had been the aunt of the current Clan head of the Sitri, a woman both beautiful and intelligent. She can still remember the woman as if it was yesterday, from her long black hair to her deep blue eyes. She was also a prodigy with the violin; when she had played at the Sitri parties years ago, the room would listen with breathless rapture until she had finished her performance, and then the room would erupt into thunderous applause.

Amyntas and Cornelia were graced with only one child, a son named Vincent, who was very much like his father in appearance, from his strawberry blonde hair to his dark hazel eyes. However, Vincent seemed to have inherited his mother's personality. All scowls and stubborn determination, yet both with an artistic bent, and while rarely seen outside of their family, a gentle side to them. Although instead of the musical arts like his mother, Vincent was a lover of the literary arts, and he was fondest of Shakespeare's works in particular.

He was also the only Naberius to break his father's declaration of neutrality during the Civil War, when he had sided with her son's alliance and thus sealed his fate. His wife was the anomaly though, a Devil born through reincarnation from the Evil Pieces - Kiku, his Queen. Her background was shrouded in mystery though. Vincent never said where she had come from or the circumstances surrounding the reasons why she became a Devil. She possessed an abnormally high amount of magical energy; more than any normal newborn Queen piece a Devil should be capable of.

The most striking features about Kiku was her appearance, as she stood out with her bright orange hair and chocolate brown eyes.
"Yoruichi, did you know anything about Masaki's parents by any chance?" The Gremory Devil asks suddenly.

Yoruichi shakes her head. "No Venelana, I never met them. All I knew is that they had passed away years before when Masaki was about a year old. Ryūken never spoke about them, nor did Isshin for that matter. Why do you ask?"

Venelana licks her lips nervously before she asks her next question. "You don't happen to have a photo of Masaki do you?"

Yoruichi digs into her shirt before she pulls out a much weather-worn photo. Handing it over to her dinner companion, she has a sad smile on her face. "This was taken a week before she was killed by a Hollow. It was the last picture of Ichigo smiling for years to come."

Venelana hands shake as she looks at the picture. Staring back at her is a smiling woman who couldn't be anything but the daughter of Vincent and Kiku Naberius. The face, the hair, her eyes, even the smile was the same as Vincent's wife.

"Kurosaki was Masaki's family name, wasn't it Yoruichi?"

Yoruichi nods her head again. "Yes, Isshin took it after he married her when he lost his Shinigami abilities saving her life."

"Lost his Shinigami powers?"

Yoruichi eyes gain a distant look as she remembers the year she met both Masaki and Isshin for the first time.

"It's quite a story Venelana. Do you want to hear how Ichigo's parents met?"

Venelana smiles as she says yes.

"Well you should first know that Isshin was the Captain of Squad Ten of the Gotei Thirteen and a member of the then Fifth Noble Clan, the Shiba."

Venelana sits listening to every word her new Shinigami conspirator tells her about the night Isshin and Masaki met. Starting with the night Isshin engaged and nearly died while fighting a powerful Vasto Lorde Hollow, to Masaki stepping in and destroying it with a single shot to the head with an arrow. How in the attack, Masaki had been bitten and thus infected with a Hollow based pathogen created by the traitor Aizen to infuse into spiritually based beings Reiatsu from Hollows for his experiments. How Isshin had come back to visit the young woman, when he found Ryūken running towards Karakura with his cousin and then fiancée Masaki in his arms, only for the former Quincy to run into both Isshin and Kisuke.

Venelana's thoughts are in shock as she listens to the story. She begins to put things in prospective as she comes to the sudden realization why her friend, the Guardian of the Damned, has such a vested interest in the human boy. The Kurosakis never served the Naberius clan at all, Ichigo is his great-grandson and Masaki was his granddaughter. Which means...

"Those son-of-bitches!" Venelana shouts as she slams her fist down on the table.

The Shihōin Princess pauses in her story. "Venelana, what's wrong?"

"They know. They all know. My son, my husband, Grayfia, Kisuke and your friend Isshin. They all know who Ichigo really is Yoruichi."
Venelana's purple eyes narrow in anger and hurt as she speaks her conclusion. "Yoruichi, the picture you showed me of Masaki. She is possibly the granddaughter of the Naberius Clan head Amyntas and the daughter of his only son Vincent. Ichigo might not be just a Vizard and of one of the Quincy bloodlines; he is possibly the next heir of the Naberius Clan. He is more than likely a Devil, a member of the Seventy-Two Pillars nobility."

"What!? That's not possible! Ichigo is a Vizard! He never…" Yoruichi pauses, then goes quiet.

"Yoruichi, what is it?" Venelana asks with worry at her friend's sudden hesitation.

Licking suddenly dry lips, two golden-cat eyes stare back at her across the table. "I always wondered how Ichigo got his Zanpakutō. He said he pulled it out of his soul during the Shattered Shaft trial, but that shouldn't be possible. All Zanpakutō start as an Asauchi, a blank, nameless blade. But Zangetsu was always there with Ichigo in its Shikai release. Then that would mean that his Zanpakutō was really a Quincy spirit weapon, not a real Shinigami Zanpakutō. Oh my! That means…means…"

"What Yoruichi? What are you trying to say!?!"

Swallowing the moisture in her mouth, the former head of the Onmitsukidō looks at her friend.

"It means that Ichigo has never been truly tapping into his true potential. He has been hampered by Masaki's Quincy bloodline."

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The walk to pick up Koneko is pretty much a free-for-all between Rias and Akeno. Not once have the two friends stopped talking about who is going to take care of the now amused Ichigo as he walks between the two beauties, his body keeping the two from making their little argument into something physical.

When Rias finally shook him awake from his dreamless nap, he was greeted to a room full of smirking women and one embarrassed looking Yuuto. Rias was the only one not smirking; instead her face was a well contained volcano ready to erupt. When he asked what was going on, Rias answered for the group.

"If they know what is good for them, they'll keep quiet." Her voice spoke with finality.

Quirking an eyebrow at the young man in the group, he could see the blush develop on his friend as he shook his head. "I'd rather not repeat what was spoken Ichigo. I suffered enough blood loss for one day."

He didn't push Yuuto knowing whatever was said had to be bad for the younger man to suffer such a serious blush just from thinking about it. Ichigo shudders himself, thinking about some of the conversations he had been forced to listen to between Rias and Akeno. Over time he has gotten so used to them, it no longer bothers him that they can be so open about their feeling or thoughts. Whoever does marry either one of the two women hanging off his arms are in for a very rude awakening however, followed by a pleasant surprise as well.

Thinking about marriage brings his thoughts to Rias, more so after the kiss this morning from her. It is something he has to figure out before she leaves, to know if she really means anything by that kiss or was it just a kiss. Sighing to himself, he wishes he has someone he can talk to about all of this, but if he ever did, he can't remember them. Looking up, he sees Koneko standing outside of the gates waiting for them to walk her home. She smiles at them as they walk up to her.
"Hello Onii-san, Rias-san, Akeno-san." Koneko says as she greets her older roommates.

"Koneko-chan, how do you feel now that you will be going to Kuoh next semester?" Rias asks as she leaves Ichigo's side.

"I am looking forward to it very much." She glances back at the only teacher still standing outside. Hikō-sensei is glaring at the only male in the group, but she also seems to be uncomfortably aware of Rias's presence. "I don't think Ichigo's presence would be tolerated for much longer."

Ichigo snorts as he gives a mock salute to the bristling woman. Akeno places her hand over her mouth to keep her giggles suppressed as she too waves goodbye to the woman.

"It's still your fault you know Akeno. Ever since you asked if I thought older women like her looked hot, I've been ganged up on every morning by single mothers and married ones too asking if I could 'help' them."

Rias sends her own glare at Akeno as she remembers that day all too well. Unfortunately, she couldn't walk to school with Ichigo and Koneko every day to help keep the older women at bay, but on the days she did, she made sure they knew he was off-limits. But now that was in the past as Koneko no longer has to attend that middle school, she is now the last of her current peerage to enter the safety of Kuoh Academy. Rias smiles, knowing that Ichigo will no longer be on his own and they will all be walking to school together.

Koneko slides over to Ichigo and hands him her bag before she proceeds to grab his free hand. The older two women watch as the young Neko begins to drag her Onii-san in the direction of the shouten. As always, her last stop before home is for candy.

XXXX

Sirzechs sits at his desk, staring in awe at his mother and the other woman she had brought with her. Less than an hour ago, the two women had showed up at his office shortly before he was supposed to leave for the day. After their introductions, he was grilled for a lengthy amount of time by his mother and the woman he now knows is Yoruichi Shihōin, a Shinigami. She was one of Ichigo's mentors from his old life, and from how she acted, there was something else going on with the Shinigami woman.

'Shinigami, I thought they no longer bothered with the other realms. At least directly, and the ones they have mostly interacted with in the past were the Japanese gods, mostly Tsukuyomi, who was rumored to be the divine ancestor of the royal family of the Soul Society, like how the living Imperial family of Japan is rumored to be the mortal descendants of Tsukuyomi's sister and the Japanese Shinto sun goddess, Amaterasu; along with the Yōkai Faction.'

Pinching his nose, he finally interrupts his mother. "I'm sorry I had to hide what he is Mother, Yoruichi, but I couldn't expose who he really is to anyone, not even my own sister. Amyntas was very careful in destroying any information regarding his relationship to both Masaki and Ichigo and his twin sisters. The only reason he even agreed to take on Ichigo is because of your Central Forty-Six Yoruichi. He never wanted this for his great-grandson or his great-granddaughters, but now that you two have figured it out, you must make sure his secrets are kept safe."

"None of you really have any clue about Ichigo do you Lucifer-sama? That is easier said than done. He is an enigma and one that finds trouble whether he wants it or not. It's only a matter of time before someone or something finds out about him." The Flash Goddess says in resignation.

Venelana looks at Yoruichi with sympathy; she knows what it means to have your loved ones in
danger. Her own memories come back of her son and the vicious battles he and Grayfia had engaged in while on opposite sides of their own Civil War. She now has a real reason to worry about her daughter's safety as well as Ichigo's, because whether she knows it or not, Rias has feelings for the young man now staying with them. Deep feelings that surprised even herself when she was staying with her youngest child and watched the two of them interact, feelings that she can see now.

Now that the truth about who the young man really is has been revealed to her, it makes one thing easier for the mother to accept and that has her smiling on the inside. Now she has an option that wasn't previously available to the Clan, one that hadn't been known before but is known now. All they have to do is to find a way to nullify the Kidō that Yoruichi is sure is keeping Ichigo from his inner-world. Force is out of the question, the Shinigami had informed them her friend would certainly have thought of that and had placed counter-measures to deal with them. So, they have to figure out what trigger is needed to unlock his memories instead.

"Mother, what do you want to do about this now that you know?" Her son asks.

Venelana looks at Yoruichi who gives her a head-shake. "For now we do nothing Sirzechs, just keep a closer eye on them is all. Yoruichi will be staying in the town as well from now on and will help out if she can, but she can't be seen by the children if we can prevent it. Also, I think it might be a good idea for her to find out why these Fallen Angels have taken an interest in our territory as well. Rumor has it that a group has settled near or in our lands and I want to know why."

Sirzechs Lucifer nods his agreement and gets up. "Mother, Yoruichi what do you want me to tell Amyntas?"

The Shinigami speaks then. "Tell him the truth Lucifer-sama. When the time comes, he, Isshin and my idiot of a best friend will have a lot to answer for. Until then, we allow Ichigo to live as normal a life as possible. Because if I know Ichigo's Zanpakutō spirit, it won't take long before he breaks through and frees Ichigo's memories himself."

XXX

Black hair whips around the face that frames violet eyes of the newest Lieutenant of the Gotei Thirteen as she Shunpo's her way to her lunch date. Rukia's face though is a mixture of both happiness and sadness, as she can't stop thinking about the human she had called her best friend. It has been close to a year since his disappearance, but none of the Captains would speak of the circumstances surrounding him or the events of Aizen's death. Even the Shiba's and Ichigo's father have no idea as to what happened to him right after the battle. That had been one of the biggest shocks of her life, finding out that Ichigo was related to her late mentor by blood, Kaien Shiba. Kūkaku had let it slip during her visit to the Shiba family during a memorial service being held for those Shinigami that had fallen over the past century.

Rukia had always thought that the orange head was more than familiar to her, but upon finding out how true it was, it made not knowing where he was that much harder for her and others. Not even Renji or Rangiku could pull her out of her depression quickly enough when it came, only her brother seemed to know what she was feeling and had become her biggest pillar of support during those times. A smile forms again as she thinks about how close she and her brother have become since the Winter War ended. He even allowed her to become Captain Ukitake's Lieutenant after she had proven herself during her battles with the Espada and other powerful Hollows since then.

Thankfully though, those days were also behind them as Tia Harribel and Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck had taken over ruling Las Noches after the defeat of the renegade Captains. Peace, as close as it could be called that, was achieved when Captain Zaraki, Squad Eleven and the Vizards helped the
two former Espada put down the threats to their reign. Now Nelliel and her Fracción would visit them in Soul Society from time to time keeping them informed of the going-ons in the Hollow world. Nelliel also hadn't taken the news about Ichigo well, not after Rukia had told her that no one had seen him since the end of the war. Even the Vizards had been tight-lipped about their missing member, though for some reason Captain Hirako had insisted that one day Ichigo would show up with a lame story as to where he had been, but Rukia and the others had the feeling that the Captains of the Gotei Thirteen truly knew what had happened that day.

Now however, she is on her way to meet up with Renji, Rangiku and Momo for lunch. Another smile forms on her face as she thinks about her pineapple-haired boyfriend. The fool had finally gotten up the nerve to ask her brother if he could officially court her shortly after the war. Even she had been surprised by his request and though she aware of the rumors surrounding her and Ichigo, what no one knew but her, was that Ichigo didn't feel that way about her or any of the other women in his life. He never looked at any of them as more than family at best, which she knew included her as he told her that himself during her last stay in the World of the Living. She always was grateful of his admission because they both knew the boundaries they had with one another. Stepping down from the last rooftop, she sees her friends waiting in the little shop near the southern gate of Seireitei.

"Hey guys." She says as she takes a seat next to Renji.

"Hi Rukia." Momo says as she scans her menu.

"Ah Rukiiiaaa." Rangiku slurs as she nods her sake saucer in her direction.

Renji gives her a kiss on her cheek before he gives her hand a squeeze. "Hi Rukia."

"AAAAAWWWW SO CUTE!" Two voices sigh out after the display of affection.

"Shut it you two." Rukia says jokingly.

Momo grins as she still continues to look over the menu. "So Rukia, what did Captain Ukitake and Shiro-kun want with you today?"

"Yeah, what did Shiro-kun want with ya?" Rangiku fumbles as she picks up her own menu.

Rukia face scrunches up as she answers. "I'm going back to high school."

Three faces freeze upon hearing that statement. Renji looks at her askance before he asks for the details of her mission.

"I'm not going right away; it seems the school I'm going to just let out for the semester. I'll be going there as a Third year."

"Why would they send you to a human high school Rukia? It makes little sense." Momo says as she taps her chin.

"Well, that's because my girl has had the most recent experiences with the modern human world. Something many of us lack, and I'm guessing as a Lieutenant she is strong enough to face whatever it is they want her to investigate while she is there. Right Rukia?"

"Yeah, something like that. But also Nii-sama says he …"

"What?" The voices ask at the same time.
"I said Nii-sama wants Re…." 

Now three very confused Lieutenants look at each other before looking at the now red-faced Rukia.

Renji gives her nudge. "Rukia, what does your brother have to do with this?"

Rukia sits up straight, closes her eyes, folds her hands on the table and takes a deep breath. Opening her eyes, she turns to her suitor and announces to him what she is having trouble saying.

"Renji Abarai, it is the judgment of both Nii-sama and the Kuchiki Elders that after your duties with Squad Six you are to train with your Captain after work on the following. You will be required to learn the Kuchiki Clan history; you will take classes in both nobility and etiquette with Nii-sama as well. And finally, you will learn the proper ways of treating your future wife, the Heir of the Kuchiki Clan. These terms are not negotiable as you will someday provide the Clan its future heir as well. Onii-sama thinks that my time away would be beneficial for you to learn without me being a distraction."

Two silent Lieutenants stare first at the raven-haired woman before shifting their eyes to the now frozen red-haired man as he stares at his future bride with a mixture of both horror and fear in his eyes.

"A…ah…Ru…Rukia. I…I…I have…to what now?"

"You heard me Renji Abarai. Don't make me repeat myself. Now do you accept or do I have to tell Nii-sama you wish to withdraw your name as my suitor? Well Renji!?" Rukia says as she narrows her eyes on her fiancé.

"I-I guess so Rukia. What I mean is yes! I'll do as your brother and the Elders demand of me! Anything for you, you know that." He says with a look of growing despair in his eyes.

"I-I guess so Rukia. What I mean is yes! I'll do as your brother and the Elders demand of me! Anything for you, you know that." He says with a look of growing despair in his eyes.

Glares at him, she huffs in agreement before motioning for the waiter to come to them. Pointing at her menu she gives her best smile and in her sweetest voice she orders. "I'll take the lunch combo number seven and he's paying."

"Yeah, we'll also have the number seven and like she said, he's paying." Momo remarks as she and Rangiku hurriedly hand their menus over to their waiter.

Renji still in shock dumbly nods his head as he simply hands his menu over as well. Rukia turns to the young man and points at the menu again. "He'll have the number seven as well."

Rangiku chirps up when her sake comes and as she pours herself another saucer she begins to asks some more about the mission. "So why are you going again?"

Rukia grins as she begins. "Well Captain Ukitake and Captain Hitsugaya both said that the school and the surrounding towns have been experiencing unknown and highly unusual spiritual events. And because I have stayed in the World of the Living the longest, they felt I would be the best choice after the Vizards declined the mission. So, I'll be leaving about a month from now and I'll be posing as a Third year high school student for my cover. The best part though is I won't be going alone this time."

Momo sighs as she whines out. "I wish I could get a mission to the World of the Living. The only time I have gone was during our Academy days and during that time."

The two other Shinigami women wince in remembrance at hearing Momo's recollections before
Rukia's face brightens up.

"Funny thing you should say that Momo." Rukia says with a grin forming.

Momo's face begins to show excitement as she asks. "Don't tell me? Please don't be joking Rukia, please don't!

"Yeap, you and me will be going as sisters for our cover. Since this is your first mission you will be my support though, but still it's going to be me and you. Captain Hirako thought it would do you some good to get out of Soul Society and have some fun for once. So are you up to it Lieutenant Hinamori?"

"YES! I'll go! I'll go Rukia! OhthankyouthankyouthankyouRukia! ! !"

"Great, you just created a monster Kuchiki. Now that that's settled, I have a few things I need for you guys to pick up for me when you go. I'll give you my list later."

Momo and Rukia blanch at that, Rangiku's lists were infamous for the outrageous clothes she had some of the younger women get for her during their tours. Renji, after finally coming to his senses, also pales when he hears Rangiku's statement. Shaking his head to clear the horrible images that flashes through his head, he looks at the woman next to him.

"So, where are they sending you Rukia?" Her soon-to-be husband asks.

Taking a sip of her tea, she shrugs her shoulders. "Some place called Kuoh Academy south of Tokyo I think."

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Rias wonders what has been bothering Ichigo since he woke up in the afternoon. He acted fine during the walk home and during dinner, he even went out for his nightly run after he argued that not once has he suffered two episodes in the same day. After his three housemates finally yielded however, he did something she didn't expect. He kissed her on her cheek, the same cheek she was gently running her own hand over now.

"Buchou if you keep rubbing that spot, you're likely to rub a hole in your cheek." Akeno says as she reads her current BL manga.

"He kissed me Akeno. Ichigo Shiba kissed me. What do you think I should do?" The Gremory heiress asks in a silent whisper.

Two hands gently slap her head. Koneko and Akeno both give her vexed looks before the older of the two teen women speaks. "It's pretty obvious Buchou what you should do. Don't you agree Koneko-chan?"

"Yes Akeno-senpai. Buchou I think you and Onii-san have feelings for each other but because you two are so stubborn and dense neither of you will admit to them. So, I think you should ask him tonight when you go to bed what he feels towards you."

Rias and Akeno both look at the young Neko with a measure of surprise and a hint of affection that she has been growing more confident since Ichigo's arrival to their little family. Rias smiles as she hugs the young white-haired girl tight.

"You wouldn't mind if me and Ichigo do have a relationship Koneko?"
"Not as long as he can visit. Then no Buchou, I don't mind."

"Ara, ara Rias-sama, you got his younger sister's approval, now you are good to go." Akeno says with a chuckle.

"And what about you Akeno, do you mind?"

Setting her manga down, the young thunder priestess sighs as she organizes her thoughts. "I will admit I'm very jealous of you Rias, Ichigo is not just some man off the street. He is almost perfect in every way. From the way he treats us despite our own flaws, to taking care of Koneko as if it was second nature. To putting up with you and me and our fighting. But most of all Rias, he is nothing but honorable in his actions, not once have I seen him do anything at home or school that could be construed in a negative light. So in all honesty, I'm happy that you decided on what you want and I won't stand in your way if you truly wish to pursue this."

Rias turns to her oldest friend and grabs her in a two arm hug. "Thank you Akeno. You don't know how much this means to me."

"Oh you have no idea how much fun it will be for me when I send the Gremory peerages the stories of your pursuits of Ichigo."

The King of the Rias Gremory peerage laughs in her friend's shoulders as she replies. "I knew that you'd find a way to ruin this."

Patting her friend's back, the sadist smiles sadly however as she mentions one fact. "What are you going to do about Riser?"

"When the time comes Akeno I will fight for my freedom. No matter what, I won't marry that playboy."

"Then I guess we should think about expanding our peerage then Rias. It won't do us much good with just the five of us. Three have yet to see any real Rating Games and I think it would be a good idea for them to see at least one or two when we are in the Underworld." 

Rias sits back and slowly nods her head in agreement as she places a hand on the young Neko's head. "You're right of course Akeno; it would be a good idea for Koneko and Yuuto to see a game or two. But Gasper isn't ready to leave his room and I'm not sure if I'm ready to train him yet."

Koneko heads shifts towards the front door. "Nii-sama is home Rias-sama."

With that the three women get up to meet their only male roommate before he walks in.

XXXX

Ichigo's run had definitely cleared his head, his thoughts solely on the person he shares his room with. Starting with the beginning of their new arrangement, he just knew she would eventually do away with her pajamas. Sure enough over the weeks she wore less and less until he woke up in defeat to a nude body squeezing him tight. The first day he tried desperately to get her to wear just panties and nightgown but she just pouted and told them they bothered her while she slept. She then used her best weapons against him as she explained with her sad eyes and pouting face that she could only sleep nude with her hugging pillow, him.

He smirks as he remembers her easily defeating any argument he could think of until finally Akeno and Koneko both told him to give it up. As he was turning to face the two, he could have sworn she had a smile on her face but he wasn't able to catch her with it. From that night on, he just went with
it and gradually he grew accustomed to it. However, it did lead to some pretty interesting mornings. And that lead to his next issue, he knew he was developing feelings for her, not because of her body, but more for who she is as a person in private.

Despite that one unusual habit as he calls it now, he found Rias is actually a very intelligent woman and not just a spoiled rich girl; she is friendly and courteous to everyone around her. He felt guilty for assuming that because she was of a higher social status, maybe of noble birth in her homeland she would be a stuck-up bitch. Was he ever proven wrong he thought with a grin; she had time and time again, ruined that notion with her actions both at school and at home.

At school despite her and Akeno being the number one and two school idols, they never treated anyone with nothing less than respect unless of course you gave either one reason not to. Only one girl had made that mistake by calling her a whore during one of the Third year's group gossip sessions. Unfortunately, Rias had overheard the unflattering remarks and proceeded to tear into the Senior with not just malice but had downright terrifed the foreign exchange student, the teen left school for her own country the next day.

When Ichigo learned about the confrontation, he asked what had happened and all she said was she wasn't just defending her honor but someone else's as well. Akeno told him later that day what the girl had actually said. Ichigo could remember the anger that coursed through his own veins that he was also the subject of those rumors. Rias had heard the girl say that the only reason Ichigo was with the two of them was because he was sleeping with one or the other every night and that he was only using them to gain popularity and status among the students.

For the next week the school walked on eggshells when they walked the hallways, no one dared get near them as both projected angry auras. Even Akeno had sense to keep her usual teasing on hold until the pair calmed down, but for a very long time, no one made mention of their relationship out-loud again. It had been the only time Ichigo was unapproachable by the lower classmen except Yuuto who would spar with Ichigo after school at a local dōjō. That thankfully helped Ichigo to lessen his own anger over the week, which in turn made Rias's own anger seep away.

After that, no one would mention their unique relationship ever again, at least on school ground or within hearing distance of any of their friends. It did however draw the two of them even closer together than ever, both never leaving the other's side except when Ichigo went to pick up Koneko, or Rias and Akeno had club. Other than the occasional ghost hunts, he, Rias, Akeno and Koneko were always with one another. The only time they spent alone was during their shared bath and bedtime. He respected her during those times, and she teased him unmercifully for it, but never did she hint at wanting anything more until this morning. That kiss and his kiss before he launched himself out the door for his nightly run marked a change. A change he had to know if she was willing to take with him. Arranged fiancé be damned, he wasn't going to let her go like that, not if he had…

As he walks through the sally-port gate, he pauses just inside the wall looking towards the house. He knew he would have to confront her about their changing relationship and if he was honest he is scared that maybe he had read too much into her kiss. Doubts plague him until he realizes one important thing that they have all told him over and over. Make new memories with those around you. She is who he wants to create new memories with, Akeno, Koneko and Yuuto as well have become his friends and more importantly his family of sorts. Over the months, not once have any of them shunned him because of the set-backs of his black-outs. Not once has he felt unwanted, unwelcomed or anything negative from his housemates.

Smacking himself in the head, he groans at the most obvious fact. He has a nude girl sleep with him every night, who the hell else would do that but…but the 'what' is what he wants to know. He
knows how he feels now, but would she, could she return his feelings? Would they change if she said no? Could he find it in himself to stay if she did say no? No is a possibility that can only be answered by him asking that question. Can she see them becoming more? There is only one way for him to find out, as he makes his way up the path and stands before the front doors.

The door opens just as he reaches them and standing there waiting for him are his three roommates, two with smiles and the last with a very visible blush. Not a word is said as he sits on the genkan and takes off his running shoes and puts on his house slippers. Standing up he comes face to face with the very person so completely occupying his thoughts, and Rias smiles as she grabs his arm and leads him upstairs.

"Ichigo and I are taking a bath and we'll be down afterwards so we can watch our movie of the night together." She announces.

"Of course Buchou, Ichigo. We'll see you when you two come down. Koneko could you come and help me with the snacks? I feel like chocolate tonight."

The young Neko scampers ahead of the older woman as Akeno watches her best friend, silently hoping she changes her fate.

'Good luck Rias. You'll need it after you land that one.' She smirks as she thinks about all the pictures she has stored, just waiting for her to send them to the rest of Gremory Clan. 'Definitely fun times ahead.'

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Ichigo undresses in the bathroom, while Rias undresses in their room. He then sits on the stool with hers behind him as he waits, it's routine for her to wash his back first and for him to wash her afterwards. After that he, he covers himself with a towel and gets in the bath first and keeps his eyes closed until she gets in. Usually they just soak and talk about the day's events but tonight he knows it is going to be different.

"Ichigo are you ready for me?" Her voice asks with an unusual pitch.

"Ah…yeah. Sorry I was daydreaming Rias." His own voice cracks as he replies.

Soon he feels the wash cloth traveling over his back and down between his shoulder blades. The warmth only comparable to her soft hands as the cloth washes away the sweat and grime of his run before she begins to wash the sides and the back of his neck. When the rinse water begins to clear away the suds, she places a hand in the middle of his back.

"Ichigo, why did you kiss me?" That was not what he was expecting.

"Why did you kiss me this morning?" Is his rebuttal.

Her hand travels to the front of his chest over his heart as she answers. "Will you protect my heart as I would yours?"

"Yes."

The young man turns on his stool, his eyes boring into her blue orbs. "You don't know what you have done to me Rias Gremory. I…I want you Rias. All during my run I haven't been able to stop thinking about that kiss. Innocent or not, it had an effect on me that I am certain I haven't felt before. It doesn't feel wrong to me, nor do I feel like I am betraying someone from my past. I don't care if your family arranged your marriage or not, I won't let you go without a fight Rias. I just
know, I feel that this is right. That you are right for me."

Rias Gremory sits there stunned by the words of the man she has known for less than six months. Stunned by the admission he just spoke to her. She had thought that he would simply blow-off the kiss and her own words; she didn't expect him to declare his feeling for her so openly. She does the only thing she can think of then, she leans in and takes his lips with her own.

'I guess that answers that.'

Neither wants to part as their soft skin meets for the first time in such an intimate gesture, however it is Rias who makes the first move as she gently pushes her tongue forward. Her reward is the parting of his mouth as he concedes to her delicate urgings. Touching his tongue for the first time sends a chill down the young Devil's spine as she finds her own appendage liking his exhilarating taste.

Ichigo isn't too far behind in his own feelings after he granted Rias access during his first kiss. Her lips are as soft as silk and her tongue tastes sweet as it explores his mouth. Leaning forward he gently pushes his own tongue forward and she allows him to do so. The sensation of the kiss is overwhelming to the young man as he wraps his arms around the young woman and pulls her forward until their chests are touching.

They slowly and regrettably pull back after a few minutes, their breaths fogging the air between them, but only far enough that their foreheads can lean against one another. He sums it up the only way he can.

"That was...wow."

"It was for me too Ichigo. You should know that was my first time."

"Huh?"

She smiles as she rewards him with her next question. "Is it still a custom for Japanese women to cherish their first kiss Ichigo?"

"Yeah, for some it still holds those meanings."

"Then I will treasure mine always Ichigo."

"Me too Rias."

When she pulls back, she sees he isn't lying by the huge blush now adoring his face. Her eyes narrow seductively then.

"Maybe we should try it again Ichigo."

XXXX

Koneko shakes her head as she watches the older black-haired teen dance a jig in the dining room, a glass sphere in her hand, the one she uses to spy on the couple in their bathroom and secretly recording them for future embarrassment when they have children.

The young Neko walks to the kitchen to finish setting the table, as she walks by she makes one observation.

'Onii-san and Onee-san are not going to be happy when she shows them these years from now.
God, oowww, help her.'

The white being glares at the Kidō barrier keeping him from his King. The moment he learned the truth of who and what they were, he was pissed. The lies and the withholding of information from his wielder had the white version of Ichigo in a state of agony. All this time he was supposed to be the true ruler of this world, not that fake who tried to keep his partner from his heritage, his true heritage. Filthy mongrel that he was, serving another master under the guise of being his wielder's 'true Zangetsu', the newfound knowledge has the Hollowfied Zanpakutō in a fit of rage. But the cage surrounding Ichigo's mind is what is slowly driving him into despair, he knows that it must be the work of that blonde-haired pervert that keeps him and his King separated.

The only positive aspect that Zangetsu can see is that he is now the true Zanpakutō spirit of Ichigo and he has his name finally, Tensa Zangetsu. He smiles as he thinks about what he can show his King now, now that he controls the slowly changing inner-world, a world of sand and a bright moon replacing that deplorable side-ways city of glass and steel. However, for every positive action, there is a negative one to offset his thoughts. The worst being he could see his King frequently but still couldn't speak to him. No matter how hard he tried, the invisible wall kept the two of them apart.

"I'll kill that sonvabitch Geta-Bōshi when I see him next! ! !"

Just as he is about to walk away from the wall, he hears a crack, snapping his head back he sees it. A fine line running down the impossible wall of separation appears. Grinning, the Zanpakutō walks up and taps the crack and watches as it slowly spiderwebs out from the point of contact. He begins to genuinely smile for the first time in his existence as he closes his eyes and reaches out for his King's emotional state.

'So, the King found us a Queen did he?' The Hollow turns on-a-dime and walks back to his own resting place.

'Soon King, soon we will be one again. And this time we will dictate the terms of our power, together. Soon, I'll help protect what is ours once again King.'

Venelana can only stare at the image sent to her with a certain amount of glee. For a High-class Devil, such an emotion is not normally associated with the sight of one's daughter in tongue-a-war with a naked male. However, exceptions can be made from time to time and this is one such time. Looking around the room to see she hasn't been caught, she hits speed dial and sends the photo to her newest but secret friend for now. She only wishes she is there to see the look on her friend's face when she finds out what her student is up to now.

'Damn the consequences.' The mother smiles softly as she touches the screen and darkens the image from prying eyes.

Mocha skin stretches as she flips her phone shut and her body completes the stretch. Golden eyes stare out the window of her modest apartment; soon the cat would be on the prowl for her prey. She has had glimpses of them from time to time, but just as she is about to pounce, someone
miraculously manages to interfere. Always the same someone by the energy left in the air of their departure. Whoever he or she is, they are very good, but sooner or later she will sink her teeth into her prey and then they would pay. Pay because she had seen the aftermath of their behavior, not even Hollows did the things these Fallen Angels did. But it didn't make her feel better knowing she could kill these beasts without worrying about her own soul. Fallen Angels when they truly died went straight to the cycle of life, protected by their former master even in death.

"Well time for dinner and a late night stroll, maybe I'll see what my favorite peeping tom is up to."

Yoruichi still can't believe the audacity or the ingenuity of the First year living next door to her. She had caught him on more than one occasion trying to see her nude; tonight he is hiding under his windowsill using his mirror to see into her room. Feeling a need to tease him again after seeing the light's reflection, she gets up and as she begins to slowly pull her shirt up, she draws down the shade, leaving only the bedroom light to silhouette her figure. She almost loses it when she hears the kid, Issei, screaming at the unfairness of the universe.

"Ehmm, just like Kisuke."

'Where did the days go?' Ichigo thinks as he sets down his last bag for his three-week trip. He looks to see his uncle coming down the stairs with Akeno and Rias beside him as he gives them their travel itinerary.

The older man had arrived two days prior and had instantly noticed the changes within the dynamics of the household. The first and most obvious thing is that his 'nephew' and the Gremory heiress are now nigh inseparable from one another. The next clue had been how the other two girls seem to defer to Ichigo and Rias jointly on major decisions. Lastly but most importantly, is the fact that he can tell that Ichigo and Rias have taken the next step in their relationship, something he has both hoped for but feared at the same time.

It will only be a matter of time now before Rias approaches him to ask for his permission to bring Ichigo into their world. He knows it is impossible, but how is he going to explain to her why she cannot without revealing who and what Ichigo really is, an act that will endanger them all? For over a thousand years, Devils and Shinigami have had an unspoken truce. The souls of the departed had only three destinations for those of their beliefs but now the modern world has made that vision askew. He can see with his own eyes however that they may have no choice but to wake the young man's memories up; he has to get word to both Isshin and Kisuke that trouble is brewing.

The other problem is that he, Sirzechs, and Zeoticus have to tell Ichigo's friends and his great-granddaughters what is really going on with Ichigo and how he and the twins are just more than Shinigami/Quincy hybrids. They had been able to keep Ichigo's birthright a secret until Sirzechs had called him one night to tell him that Venelana and her Shinigami friend had somehow figured out the secret. The lie about Ichigo's memories being erased is now the worst kept secret in his Clan, the Gremory Clan and those affiliated with the shouten owner. Even his own peerages are getting antsy in wanting to meet his great-grandson and see the 'Hero of the Winter War' for themselves in person. Many had harbored guilt that they had not been there, or worse, hadn't known of Masaki's survival until he told his peerage and the remaining members of his son's peerage the truth.

Now he has deal with something he thought he was done with centuries ago, teenage love.

"Rias, Akeno, you both have my private number so if anything happens, just give me a call. You have Ichigo's number as well, so there shouldn't be any problems in reaching at least one us during
our trip. Now remember to have your own fun and no more worrying about Ichigo for the time being. I'll be able to handle him if he should have any more episodes but I don't think that will be a problem for now."

"Of course Uncle Amyntas. Please keep him safe and if you could..." Rias begins to whisper in the older Devil's ear.

Ichigo develops a twitch as he sees the smile growing on his uncle's face, knowing that his girlfriend is more than likely asking him to keep tabs on him.

"I'll see to it Rias, don't worry about him 'straying' while we are away. Now, give your parents a hello for me and Ichigo, and we will see you three weeks from today. Remember what I said, enjoy yourselves, next year is your last year in high school, the best times of your young lives are yet to come. Ichigo are you ready?"

Ichigo is about to say yes, when he gets an idea in his head. "Oh shit! Forgot my wallet. Give me a few while I go get it."

As he walks by Rias, he gives a subtle sign for her to follow him, which she immediately does as the rest of the house watch the two disappear upstairs quickly.

"Fufufu, Buchou and Ichigo haven't even separated yet and off they go to sneak in a few more kisses." Akeno says behind her hand.

Koneko palms her face as she mutters about hentai, bad up-bringing and other remarks lost in her mumbles.

Amyntas is sending a text to Venelana to tell her she is right about Rias and Ichigo being more than just friends now.

Yuuto, who went to bed earlier last night, is finally awake and rocking on the heels of his feet as he wishes both senpai the best for their relationship. He had been surprised at first about his mistress's choice, but then again, he knows how much she hates Riser Phenex and her arranged marriage to him. Ichigo is the exact opposite of the flamboyant playboy of the Phenex Clan, a womanizer who uses his peerage in less than acceptable ways. The one real problem he can foresee is when Ichigo learns the truth about what Rias really is.

Upstairs, two minds are not thinking beyond what they are doing now; arms around each other, bodies as close as their clothes will allow them and their mouths fighting for dominance and that last memory that has to last them for three weeks. It also helps Rias that Ichigo is holding her up as he leans her against the bedroom wall as their tongues wage a war in each other's mouths. Finally breaking apart while panting, they both speak at the same time.

"I don't know if I can make three weeks Rias / Ichigo." They both grin then as Ichigo lets Rias's feet touch the floor.

"I'm going to miss you Rias."

"I'm going to miss you as well, my Ichigo." She replies back with a hint of sadness.

Brushing her hair out of her face, he gives her one last chaste kiss before he gently guides her to their bedroom door. "I know he is going to be there Rias, but at least keep Akeno or Yuuto close to you. I don't want you alone with him if he is half as bad as I think he is from your descriptions."

"Trust me Ichigo, I'd rather become a nun than marry him or even be in the same room as him. He
isn't anything like you."

Squeezing her hand, he draws her in for one last deep kiss before they leave the privacy of their room. Pulling apart, they both give each other a sad smile as they make their way downstairs to a room full of amused faces and one openly leering smile.

"So Ichigo, did Rias help you out one last time or did your tongues get in the way?"

"AAKEENNNOOOOOO! ! !"

Five days later…

Ichigo and his uncle are sitting outside a small café, taking a break from their tour of the ancient capital of Japan when they begin to hear shouting.

"Stop! Stop thief! Stop him someone! Please stop him! He stole my purse!" A young girl's voice screams after a man in his late twenties who dashes by the two vacationers.

Before Amyntas can stop him, Ichigo is up and running after the man, easily catching up to the purse-snatcher. The weeks of long-distance running pay off in less than a block as Ichigo tackles the man to the ground. Not stopping to see if he has a weapon, the young pugilist puts the man into a submission hold and chokes the man unconscious. Getting up, he turns to see the young woman already there as well as the heaving chests of two police officers and the gawking looks of numerous by-standers. His uncle on the other hand casually strolls up behind them all, a look of pride on his face.

He walks over to the girl and places her purse into her eager hands. The young blonde-haired girl smiles brightly as she bows to him.

"Thank you kind sir for stopping that thief. My name is Kunō and I'm in your debt."

Taking a step back, Ichigo raises his hands defensively. "Ah, thanks but no, you aren't in my debt. I did what anyone would have done Kunō-san."

The small girl gives him a smile again as she bows once again. "Then at least let me treat you to dinner. My family is well known here, so it would be my pleasure if I could at least do that for you."

"Uncle?"

Amyntas walks up to his nephew and when he turns to greet the girl, he almost steps back as does she. The two eye each other warily before the Devil extends his hand.

"Amyntas Naberius and this hero is my nephew Ichigo Shiba. We would be pleased to accept your offer Kunō."

Raising one eyebrow as she gingerly takes the older man's hand, she responds in kind. "I am pleased to be of service to you and your nephew. Please if you would wait a few moments while I'm filing a complaint with the police."

"Of course, we will be waiting by that shop over there." Amyntas says as he points to a flower shop.
The two men wait as they watch the girl use animated gestures to tell the police how she had gotten off a bus and was then accosted by the man now in their custody. How as she ran past numerous people, only one had actually offered help as she pointed at Ichigo. He didn't have to make a statement as Amyntas simply handed them a business card and explained they were only in the city for two more days and they would be happy to answer any questions when they arrived back in Japan at a later date. As the crowd disperses, the police take the criminal to the local kōban; Kunō then approaches the two men with a smile.

"Well Naberius-san, Shiba-kun do you have any particular place in mind for your dinner?"

Watching as Ichigo looks down at the young girl while clearly pondering how to tell her that they just ate a light brunch, Amyntas keeps a slight distance as he observes her behavior. He knows that the Yōkai of Kyoto have a neutrality treaty with all the major deities but the girl in front of his great-grandson isn't just any ordinary Yōkai. Her mother is the Kyuubi of Kyoto and thus the leader of the local Yōkai faction, a being one must respect due to her strength, a strength that is on par with an Ultimate-class Devil, further amplified while here in her seat of power.

Watching Ichigo try unsuccessfully to negotiate a rain-check with the young Yōkai girl proves to be entertaining, however. He can see why the young man always gives into the Gremory women the moment he even thinks he sees tears forming.

"I'm sorry Kunō, but we just did eat brunch. I really do appreciate the offer but…"

"Well if you are here to sightsee, then I'll just have to be your guide until dinner Shiba-kun. I won't take no for an answer. Mother would never forgive me if I treated a hero so rudely, now if you and your uncle will follow me; Nijo-jo Castle is nearby. After that we can visit one of the local shrines, they are open to all, no one will be turned away." The Yōkai girl says as she shifts her eyes to the older Devil, with Ichigo unconsciously mirroring her actions.

"Uncle, you don't mind do you? I…well I guess I…"

"Its fine Ichigo, I haven't seen the Castle since my last visit to Kyoto, and if the shrine is open to all, we should go pay our respects. So, if you would lead the way Kunō-chan, we can get started."

In a flash, the young girl grabs Ichigo's hand and begins to drag him down an alleyway before he can say a word edgewise. Amyntas walks behind the two calmly, listening to Kunō as she recites the history of the ancient city to her own private tour group. The older Devil keeps a watch on Ichigo and sees that he is indeed listening to Kunō as she recites the history of the ancient city to her own private tour group. The older Devil keeps a watch on Ichigo and sees that he is indeed listening to Kunō as she points out different places as they come out of the alleyway. He also notices that she has sent signals to the various Yōkai watchers that have grown alert at her presence in the company of two strangers, watchers who would have quietly 'snatched' the snatch thief from earlier if he had managed to get away from the Yōkai princess. Every now and then, said princess would pause before a shop or local attraction and speak to the people there, allowing Ichigo or himself to look around or even get a sample of their wares.

By the time they leave Nijo-jo castle, the sun is just about to set on the western horizon. Turning up a small street away from the castle, the young Yōkai leads them to a small outdoor market. Amyntas watches as Ichigo and Kunō stop at almost every food cart and discuss whether they should eat there or see if something better is being offered at the next stall. Finally, the two younger members agree upon an udon stand run by a couple that the experienced Devil can sense are Yōkai in disguise.

"Ah, Kunō-chan how are you today my dear?" The elderly man asks as he prepares their bowls.

Watching with wide eyes, she responds back. "I'm a tour guide tonight Hoshi-san. This young man
helped apprehend the thief who tried to steal my purse today. So I am treating him and his uncle to dinner as payment."

The man, Hoshi turns to Ichigo and gives a small bow. "I believe that in honor of your bravery young man, tonight's dinner will be on the house."

Again, the Devil grins internally as he watches Ichigo's eyes go wide and he once again tries to downplay his actions. His attempt is a failure as he is firmly pushed onto a stool by an elder Yōkai woman, Aki, the wife of Hoshi.

"Young man, we are a small community and if Kunō-chan insists that you have done her a great service, we also feel you should be rewarded for your deeds. Now sit and enjoy the best udon in Kyoto. Come, come now. Sit. Sit."

Sighing in defeat at the hands of the elderly woman and her young cohort, Ichigo and Amyntas find themselves eating what is truly some of the best udon they have ever had. Ichigo's face can't hide his happiness as he slurps the thick noodles in the tasty broth. As they eat, Kunō again retells the events of her assault and the heroic actions of the now red-faced Ichigo. Praise is heaped upon him once again as he is served a second bowl and told to eat up and not to worry about the bill again. As they are eating, Amyntas feels the presence of a very powerful being watching from the shadows. Keeping his emotions in check, he nods slightly to Yasaka, for it can only be the Ruler of Kyoto watching over her daughter.

Hearing a familiar ringing from his shirt pocket causes Ichigo to start smiling. "Ah, can you guys excuse me? I have to take this."

As he gets up and walks away, his uncle can't help himself. "Tell Rias hello for me as well Ichigo."

The three disguised Yōkai and one disguised Devil watch as the orange-haired man stumbles but doesn't say a word as he walks a distance away to answer his phone call. After a moment, Amyntas speaks to the disguised Ruler of Kyoto taking a seat next to him.

"Good evening Yasaka-sama."

"Good evening Lord Naberius. It's been years since you visited our fair city. I hope all is well."

Before he can respond, Kunō is standing before the older Kyuubi and begins to explain what is going on. Well, she tries to at least, but her mother put a finger on her lips.

"I know all about it Kunō, so you don't have to worry. I'm not angry; I just wanted to say hello is all." The older but more mature version of the Kyuubi says to her daughter. "Kunō, I need to talk to Amyntas-san in private, so could do me a favor and watch Ichigo for me please?"

"Of course, Mother." Both Yōkai and Devil watch the young girl make her way to where the young man is talking on his phone, his back turned to the observing adults.

"So, that is Ichigo Kurosaki. Funny, he doesn't seem as threatening as the Shinigami claim."

Amyntas keeps a straight face but feels panic building in his chest, the first time since his family was assassinated. "They contacted you?"

Yasaka fixes him with a level gaze. "Just because I'm neutral, doesn't mean I'm staying deaf to the winds Lord Naberius. Ichigo Kurosaki, a human born to a Shinigami Captain and one of the last pure-blooded Quincy families. Also, the bearer of a Hollow being, the one he inherited from his mother when she was infected during a skirmish in Naruki City when she was but a teen herself."
Strange that she survived though, usually a Quincy will die almost immediately when they are wounded like that by a Hollow and the wound is not purified quickly enough. Unless of course she wasn't…"

Emboldened by the Kyuubi deliberately trailing off after those words, Amyntas speaks his mind. "Not many know Yasaka. I...I don't want this life for him but he has made a choice recently that will inevitably draw him in."

A small laugh sounds from the nine-tailed fox as she answers. "I've heard she's quite the woman. The heir of the famous Gremory Clan, a clan of the Seventy Two Pillars, Rias Gremory. Also known as the Crimson-Haired Ruin Princess because of her Power of Destruction. Yes, that would be a very powerful union indeed."

His face pales slightly, but he still offers a formal request. "Yasaka-sama, he and his sisters are all I have left. I hope you will keep this to yourself."

The golden-haired woman nods at him. "Lord Naberius, you have my word that I won't speak of this to anyone else. I was shown what your heir did for my daughter and I will reward him as I can later. But before I leave you, I must warn you that events are moving throughout our worlds. Factions are forming with or without alliances; old gods stir in both the West and East. Even the Great Dragons are starting to rise once again. And the most important news I can speak of is this, the Red Dragon has found a new host. A host who just happens to live close to your great-grandson and his friends. So I ask, will you stay neutral this time or will you choose a side for his sake?"

The Guardian of the Damned sighs as he gives his honest answer. "You, most of all know why I cannot choose a side. I can't and won't endanger the worlds because I died before I could pass on my secrets."

The Yōkai ruler nods her head in understanding. "If Ichigo becomes himself again, will you help or hinder him if he chooses to follow his path once again Amyntas? You know he has always protected those he loves and will fight no matter what the odds are in order to keep them safe. What will you do then, Lord Naberius?"

Looking at Ichigo, he smiles this time as he answers. "If, and only if that time comes Yasaka, I will train him myself. His powers, though incomplete, were enough to defeat his previous foe easily. Imagine what he can do once he gains his true powers."

Standing up, the Yōkai ruler turns to the elder couple. "I'll cover the cost of the meal Hoshi-san. Come by tomorrow and your payment will be waiting." Seeing the couple about to protest, she holds up a hand. "Don't argue with me old man. Your family has been a staple of our people for centuries, and you have always treated my daughter kindly. It's the least I can do for such a noble soul." She turns to Amyntas. "Until we meet again Lord Naberius, safe travels."

"As for you as well Yasaka."

"Tell Kunō she has an hour past the setting of the sun before I require her to return home Amyntas."

"We'll walk her home if you wish, I'm certain Ichigo will insist upon it."

"I would like that old friend." Then she is gone just as quickly as she had appeared.

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She stands with her 'date' waiting patiently for Ichigo to call her back. She sent the text five
minutes ago when she desperately wanted to get away from the man and his Bishop who both stand next to her kissing. Not even caring how he acted in public, Rias knows that she will never marry this Devil, even if he is a pure-blood. Never in her life would she imagine giving herself to such a person, who openly uses his peerage as his personal play-things. While it is still socially acceptable among Devils, Rias wants to be the only one in her future husband's eyes. The...thing next to her certainly won't submit to her point of view, nor does he seem to care about the glare she is giving him.

"Rias, you don't seem to be enjoying yourself my love." Riser says as his hand slips farther down into the back of Mihae's dress.

Taking a sip of wine, she responds icily. "You seem to be enjoying yourself enough for the both of us Riser."

Shrugging as he rubs his Bishop's behind with a growing leer. "If you want, we could indulge in our marriage night now. I'll make you feel like a woman by the morning."

"Not in this life-time or the next, will I ever allow you to touch me that way. I will never sleep with you, so give up on this arrangement, because I won't stop fighting until I am free of you."

Riser's eyes narrow. "I'd like to see how."

Rias hides her smile when she feels her phone vibrate inside her purse, taking a sip of her wine; she pulls the phone out and sees his number. Flipping it open, she speaks with a hint of joy.

"Ah, there you are. Can you give me a sec please? Thanks. I'm sorry Riser but I really must take this call. Please excuse me." Not even waiting for a response, the heiress simply turns and begins to walk away.

However, a strong grip on her arm stops her, an angry whisper follows. "Where do you think you are going Rias? You embarrass me in front of the other Devils with this attitude of yours. I am y...."

"You are nothing to me Riser. Now get your hands off of me this instant and continue playing with your Bishop, I am not a dog to obey your commands. My father and your father may have agreed to this arrangement. However, I did not, nor do I ever intend to be your bride, let alone be your wife. Now release me or suffer the consequences."

He tosses her arm away in disgust as he spits out in a low voice. "You will be mine Rias Gremory; I am the best choice you have among the pure-bloods. So remember this, you and I will marry and you will bear my family an heir. Don't forget your obligations are to your race, you are nothing but breeding stock."

"SLAP!"

Grayfia is between the two in an instant. "Rias Gremory, I believe we should retire for the night. Phenex-sama forgive us but we must leave now. Thank you for such a lovely party. Come Rias-sama, your peerage as well."

Zeoticus and Sirzechs watch as Akeno creates a magic circle and teleports the younger Devils back to the Gremory Estate. After witnessing the hatred Rias has for the son of the Phenex family, the father takes a large gulp of his wine before turning to his son.

"Well son, I hope your Mother knows what she is doing, if not you and I will be in an unfavorable position, especially if Lord Phenex presses for an early marriage."
The older Gremory raises an eyebrow as his son laughs quietly before he replies. "Don't worry Father, because when he does become who he once was, we have nothing to worry about but paying off the collateral damage he will cause."

'I can't wait to see how powerful he truly is when he has all his powers.' The Crimson brother thinks as he and his father offer apologies for his sister's actions. 'You have chosen well little sister.'

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"I'm sorry Ichigo, I am so sorry I hung up on you." Rias says quickly after she makes her way into her room. "I had a small argument with my unwanted fiancé. No, I'm fine. No, really nothing happened. I…I slapped him after he insulted me. No, no, please don't worry about it. I won't see him again while I'm here. Ichigo please stop worrying about me, I am fine. Promise. Yes, I'll call again tonight. No, you and your uncle finish your tour and I'll call soon. Yes, I promise, now go and have fun. Yes, I miss you too. I'll talk to you soon Ichigo, now go before your tour guide leaves you."

"Come in Grayfia." Rias says without even looking at her bedroom door after she closes her phone.

Grayfia enters and shuts the door behind her and places a ward around the room. "Do you wish to tell me what that was about Rias?"

Answering sadly, the younger woman looks down at the photo of her and Ichigo. "He insulted me Grayfia. Whoring with his Bishop not only in front of me, but also my peerage and my family; and worse, he even called me breeding stock. As if I am just something for him to have sex with and to give his family children. That thing will never touch me Sister. I want to marry for love only Grayfia. Just like you and brother. I won't, I can't marry that pig. I'd rather give up my titles than be forced into a loveless marriage. If I marry him, I fear I will die a slow death."

Sitting down next to her younger sister-in-law, the older woman pulls Rias into a familial hug. "Rias, you know why they did it. They fear that without the pure-bloods, we will suffer badly should there ever be another war. We lost so many Devils the last time we were at war, little more than half of the original Pillars still stand. You and Riser are among the few young Devils not married to another pure-blood that it only made sense at the time for them to agree to your nuptials. You still have a few years before you must come back and marry him. Don't make this harder on yourself later."

"I have someone already Grayfia." Rias says quietly.

"The human, Rias. Nothing will come of it and you know that. Why would you even consider him, he's not like us."

"It's because he's not like us that makes him worth the risk Grayfia. You don't understand, he loves me for being me, not like Riser who sees me as a Gremory, just a trophy to hang on his wall."

"And when he finds out what you really are, then what Rias? Will you force him to become one of us? Will you take his freedom from him to allow you to escape your responsibilities?"

"No Grayfia! I would never force him to choose. And I will tell him the truth soon and let him make up his own mind then. But I know it in my heart what he will chose."

Grayfia kisses the top of her head as she speaks. "I wish for you to marry for love as well Rias, but if the time comes and you and your human haven't made a commitment, or he refuses, you will
come home and marry Riser."

"Yes Grayfia."

"Now let's get you out of those clothes and into a bath, we will talk like we used to when you were little. Besides, I want to know if it's true what Akeno showed us about him."

"Huh? Showed you? What did she show you?"

Pulling out her own phone, the silver-haired maid of the Gremory taps it a few times before a faint blush appears on her face. Looking up at the Crimson Princess, she hands the phone over and waits for the fireworks. She sees the instant rage that blossoms on her younger sister's face when she sees the picture of a dripping wet Ichigo getting out of the school pool with a towel hiding his face and nothing but a water soaked bathing suit, outlining his…

"AAAKKEENNNOOO! ! !"

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"So I guess she finally knows." Akeno giggles as she feels her mistress's power fluctuating.

Koneko, who is climbing into her bed, turns to the Thunder Priestess. "What does she know now Senpai?"

"Oh, the picture I sent to all the women of the Gremory Clan, her family too."

"And that picture is of whom exactly?" Koneko already knows, but hearing it will clear her conscience when she feels her master drawing closer.

Smirking, Akeno shows her the photo. A blushing Neko hides her face as she feels the killing intent coming ever closer. "I will miss you senpai. I get your manga collection, okay?"

Both heads snap to the door that just blew off of its hinges and a single word says it all. "YOU!"

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Ichigo watches as Kunō waves goodbye to them before she disappears through the doors of the traditional house that their young guide claimed had survived from the Muromachi era. Ichigo insisted they walk her home after his uncle informed the girl of her mother's request. Seeing that they wouldn't make it to the shrine in time, they just walked around until it was time to take Kunō home. Unknown to him Amyntas stayed behind the two the whole time, allowing the young Kyuubi to show his nephew the sights while she explained the history behind some of the older structures. The hidden Devil was impressed with the knowledge the fledgling nine-tailed fox had for her age, but then again she is a kitsune of the old gods.

"Well, that was interesting Uncle." Ichigo says as he begins to walk in the direction of their hotel.

"It was indeed. So how did it feel to have your own personal tour guide?"

"I am so out of touch with my history Uncle. I mean she knew dates, names, and any significant event associated to every place she pointed out to me. I guess it helps that she has lived in the same neighborhood her entire life and remembers everything she has been taught."

Amyntas nods his head in agreement as they walk away. Looking back, he can see the vague shape of Yasaka watching them leave. Turning back around to catch up to the young man he calls his
nephew, the older Naberius speaks again.

"Ichigo, why don't we go somewhere else instead of our original plans?"

"Huh, why Uncle?"

"After tonight, I think it might be a good idea to go somewhere random. What do you say?"

"Are you serious? What about our tickets, our reservations? Won't you lose your deposits?"

Waving off the questions, the older man shrugs as he answers his nephew. "Life is short Ichigo. Live each day as if it was your last. Now come on, pick somewhere you really want to go for the rest of the trip."

Ichigo stops and begins to think. 'Where do I really want to go? What do I really want to see? Ah, I know!'

Turning towards his uncle, he answers with a smile. "I want to go to England Uncle. I want to see where Shakespeare got the inspirations for his works. Is that okay with you?"

Walking up to his nephew, Amyntas wordlessly nods, seeing for a brief moment the image of another young man superimposed over his great-grandson. "...Yes, we can do that Ichigo. Let's head back, and I'll make a few calls. Tomorrow we will be on our way to the other side of the world."

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Rias is lying in her bed looking at the photo she had Grayfia send her after she and Akeno went a few rounds behind the mansion. While she was mad at Akeno, she has to admit it felt good to have a proper rumble with her Queen. She and Akeno are the only ones in her peerage that have seen any real fighting against stray Devils. Yuuto and Koneko had observed their battles, but they had yet to fight a stray themselves. The only thing she can hope for is that they learn all they can while watching the Rating Games over the next few days. She won't be going herself; instead, she will be training with her brother to expand her own powers. She has only one hope to defeat Riser if it ever comes down to a Rating Game between them to decide her future, and she isn't going to waste any opportunities to train with the strongest user of the Power of Destruction.

As her eyes grow heavy, her phone begins to ring again. She smiles as she sees her beloved's name and answers her phone with her best seductive voice.

"You want to know what I'm wearing right now Ichigo?"

She hears him snort, causing her to giggle but she waits for him to answer anyways.

"Let me guess. I'm thinking you commissioned the same tailor that did the clothes in that old folk tale. You know, the Emperor's New Clothes."

Rias laughs as she does remember that story; the fool was convinced the 'clothes' he was wearing were so fine that no one could see them.

"You are correct Shiba-san. So do you want to know what your prize will be when I get home?"

She hears him groan as he guesses correctly again. "My own private show?"

"Ehmm, you're good at this Ichigo."
"I just know my girl that's all."

'His girl! Holy…'

She looks to the empty spot next to her, as she talks to him all she can imagine is his sleeping form next to her. "So Ichigo how was your day today?"

"Well, you could say I did it again…" Ichigo goes into detail about how he got into another scuffle with a purse-snatcher this time and meeting the young victim who became their tour guide. Rias listens to how happy he sounds as he tells her all the places the girl took him and his uncle, and how impressed he was with her knowledge of the history of the city. Ending the retelling with the udon stand and meeting the old couple who ran it.

"Only you Ichigo, only you. I had hoped your crime fighting days were behind you but it seems you can't help yourself can you?"

"Sorry about that but it just happens you know. So, anyways I wanted to tell you that me and Uncle are changing our plans."

Rias rolls in her bed and lies on her stomach. "Why? What are you two planning on doing?"

"Well, you know how much I love Shakespeare; so we are going to Great Britain tomorrow for the rest of our trip. We'll be back on the same day, but I'd rather go there instead. I hope you don't mind, but I really want this Rias. I know our time schedule will change but I'll make it up to you when you get home." She hears the wince in his voice, knowing he just gave her an opening.

"Aannywwhheerree? "

Grimacing, the young man answers back. "Within reason Rias."

"Fine, I'll tell you when you get home. And Ichigo."

"Yes Rias."

"Make sure you bring your bathing suit with you."

"Huh? Why?"

"Oh nothing Ichigo. Just make sure you don't forget it." She smiles as she stares at his picture. "I just like seeing you in it, that's all."

XXXX

Rias, Akeno, Koneko, Yuuto and Venelana arrive back at the family estate late that night. The three weeks have been hard on the young Devils. Rias is still sore from her training and the other three still have much to go over after seeing four Rating Games in a row. Venelana is tagging along because she wants to meet up with Yoruichi and this is the perfect excuse for her. Walking into the mansion, they notice how quiet everything is.

"Where is the staff I wonder?" Akeno says as she places her bags down.

Koneko slips off her shoes and makes a beeline for the kitchen with Yuuto following behind her. Yuuto is staying the night in his usual room, but tomorrow he can pick out his permanent room. After discussing it with her Mother, Rias wants her peerage around her at all times from now on. Since they all go to Kuoh, it makes little sense to her why her Knight should live outside of the
family mansion anymore.

"I gave them the night off," Amyntas says as he walks out of the library. "Besides, I think no one is going to do anything but sleep tonight."

Venelana inclines her head to her fellow noble. "I see you and Ichigo made it back early, Amyntas. How was England by the way?"

"It's amazing how much has changed in such a short amount of time. We got lost a few times but when we got to the old sections of London, but it came back to me well enough."

Amyntas then turns to Rias and Akeno. "Rias, I think Ichigo is in your room sleeping, he has some jet-lag."

Rias nods her head before she turns and gives her mother a goodnight kiss. "I think I'll take a bath and then go to bed Mother. I hope you don't mind if I don't stay up with you and Lord Amyntas?"

"Let him sleep Rias, I know you miss him but he isn't one of us." She kisses her daughter back on the forehead with the added thought. 'Yet.'

"I'll retire as well. Good night Venelana-sama, Amyntas-sama." Akeno says while bowing to the higher ranked Devils.

"Good night Akeno." Both Devils reply.

As the two younger women make their way upstairs, Amyntas motions for Venelana to join him in the library, where he seals it after closing the doors. She gives him a questioning look, but he simply motions for her to take a seat as he stands by the fireplace.

"I met an old friend when we were in Kyoto. She had a few interesting things to say Venelana."

"Oh, who was it?" Venelana asks.

"Yasaka."

Venelana is shocked by the name. "What? I thought she avoided us when we are in the city? Why would she speak to you?"

"Did Rias tell you about Ichigo's time there?" When he sees her nod, he continues. "Well it was Kunō, Yasaka's daughter who was the victim of the purse-snatcher. She was our personal tour guide and she was the one who took us to dinner that night. It was when Ichigo was away talking to Rias, that Yasaka approached me."

"Did Ichigo meet her then?" She asks worriedly.

"No, but she knows who he really is though."

Venelana's eyes grow wide at the news. "How does she know? I didn't even know until a few weeks ago, and I certainly didn't speak of it to anyone."

Amyntas grimaces. "Yasaka has always known the secrets of our worlds Venelana, and it seems she knows about the Shinigami world as well. It seems they even sent her an official warning about Ichigo Kurosaki being a threat, but she seems to have seen right through them. More importantly though, at the end of our conversation she gave me a warning as well as advice."

"A warning?"
"She said war is coming, and we better start preparing."

XXXX

Chapter End Notes

Originally posted on FF.net
Chocolate brown eyes watch as crimson hair rises and falls with each breath he takes as he looks at the sleeping teen contently. It's been three weeks since he last woke up to the sight of her crimson hair, but this time it holds a special meaning to him. This time he is happy to wake up to her smell and her body entwined with his as she sleeps peacefully. He had woken in the middle of the night to use the bathroom but was surprised to find her in bed with him. So he went back to sleep and now that he is awake again, he just lies there, stroking her hair and smelling the herbal shampoo she uses.

Soon she begins to stir as his hand continues to thread its way through her hair; his other hand is wrapped around her waist to hold her in place. He had tried to stay awake the night before by reading his new book, a first edition copy of 'The Taming of the Shrew' in mint condition, how his uncle even found it was beyond him, but he gave it to Ichigo as a present when they got home. After hugging his uncle, they let the staff go for the rest of the day and ordered takeaway from a nearby Chinese restaurant. Finally retiring for the night, Ichigo began to read while he waited for the girls to get home but sometime during the evening he fell asleep.

But the surprise upon his waking was well worth it to him. He didn't realize until they had separated how much her missing presence made him feel lonely at night. Now they are together again, and his feeling of peace is returning after so long without her. As he watches her head begins to twist towards him, he waits to see those bright blue eyes again, another facet of her that he knows signals why he had missed her so much. Those eyes now also hold a different meaning after the night he had confessed to her. He grins as those very orbs begin to flutter and focus in on his face, a smile forming as she raises one of her hands and runs it down his cheek.

Softly she whispers to him. "I missed you so much Ichigo."
Kissing her forehead, he whispers back. "Not as much as I missed you Rias."

Grinning suddenly, she rises to her hands and knees and lifts her body over his before she leans down and kisses him. Taking the hint, Ichigo pulls her body flush against his as he returns her feelings when he kisses her gently in return before they let it go up a notch. Neither of them notices the woman standing in the bedroom doorway watching the two of them express the happiness of their reunion with such a physical display.

"Ah, you two might want to get up so we can have breakfast." Venelana says with a hint of amusement when the two of them roll out of their bed, with Ichigo wrapping Rias up in the quilt.

"Venelana!" Ichigo screeches out with a growing blush.

"Oh Ichigo you poor boy, you'd think a young man your age wouldn't blush after being caught kissing his girlfriend. Now both of you take a quick shower each and get dressed. We're going out for breakfast, the staff is still off and I don't feel like cooking. By the looks of you two, you don't feel like doing anything but lazing in bed all day either. Now, chop, chop and get a move on!" The older woman says as she leaves the gaping teens behind.

Ichigo points at the empty doorway. "Did…did…did…"

"Yes, she did Ichigo." A stunned Rias says as she too stares at the same place.

Ichigo slowly gets up and pokes his head out the door, looking both ways, then he shuts and locks the door before he turns to see a standing Rias before him. Walking up to her, he grins as he leans in and kisses her deeply again before the two separate.

"You know Rias; she said nothing about me being in there with you."

Giggling, the young woman pulls him along behind her, the bathroom door slamming shut behind him.

"ICHIGO! Don't! I'm ticklish there!"

XXXX

Every set of eyes watch as the two last members of their household finally make their appearance of the day. Ichigo and Rias are both sporting slight blushes the shade of pink as they sit at the table.

"So nice of you to make it Buchou, Ichigo. When the water went cold due to the lack of hot water, we knew we would get breakfast finally." Akeno says with a huge grin on her face.

Koneko and Yuuto have the decency to hide their smiles while Venelana eyes the two of them with a knowing smile. Amyntas is again wondering who he made mad in the past that he has to once again deal with raging teenage hormones. Hoping to keep the bloodshed to a minimum, he gets up and announces to the group that it is time.

"Well now that we're all here, let's get breakfast. I believe there is a place not too far from here that serves very good omelets."

Koneko, Yuuto and Akeno follow behind the older man closely, while Rias and Venelana walk arm in arm leaving Ichigo to lock up the house. As they begin the short walk, Yuuto asks Ichigo about his trip.

"It was great. First we went to Kyoto for the first part of the trip. I'm pretty sure Rias told you guys
what happened there?" As he sees the various nods and the scowling face of Koneko looking back at him, he hurriedly pushes on. "Well, we decided to change our plans and flew to Great Britain for the rest of our trip. I got to see where Shakespeare lived during his time. The old sections of London were pretty amazing, but to see his home and The Globe Theatre in person made the trip worth it. Uncle Amyntas even bought me a first edition copy of one of his plays."

Sensing an opening, Akeno asks innocently the name of the play.

"Oh, The Taming of the …" Ichigo abruptly stops and begins to eye the black-haired temptress of mayhem.

'That…'

"The taming of what Ichigo?" Rias asks with a bit of curiosity and what he fears, the hint of annoyance.

"Ah, you know the tam…" He hopes his girlfriend doesn't push the issue, but his hopes are dashed.

Amyntas and Venelana are both laughing inside knowing just how much the kids love to poke fun at each other. Ichigo however is beginning to sweat bullets when he sees Rias let go of her mother's arm and stop. She turns around, her eyes narrowing in on him and her fists firmly planted on her hips, the worst sign of her impatience is when her foot begins to tap on the sidewalk.

"Well Ichigo, what is the title of the play? Ehmm, I'm waiting for your answer."

Gulping, he knows he is going to commit murder after this, the victim standing behind the irate woman he has to share a room with. He sees Akeno sending him a concealed smirk behind her hand as her eyes dance with merriment.

"Ah, it's nothing really Rias. Come on, we rea…"

"Not until you answer the question Ichigo. What…Is…The…Title?" Her voice now has a dangerously angry edge to it.

"The Taming of the Shrew." He mumbles out.

An eyebrow shoots up with his answer. Turning her back to him, she grabs her mother's arm again but before she takes one step, she leaves him in dire straits. "We'll see who the Shrew is and who is tamed tonight Ichigo."

'I'm going to kill her!' He thinks as he watches Akeno gleefully act innocent.

As he jogs to catch up with the rest of the group, he sees Yuuto has stayed behind to walk with him. Both men give the women of their group a wide berth until they get to the restaurant. Just before entering, the younger man speaks quietly to his older friend.

"Good luck Ichigo-senpai, I think you'll need it."

"Tell me about it."

XXXX

Raynare watches as the group of Devils make their way into the restaurant; among them she notices the head of orange. Grinning to herself, she wonders if it's the same young man she ran into at the park that night. Keeping a low profile so as not to arouse their awareness of her, she proceeds
to slit the throat of the young man she has just finished playing with. Dropping the body with little
care, she redresses herself before she transforms into her school girl persona once again. Yuuma
Amano steps out from the abandoned structure to see her colleague waiting for her across the
street.

Not wasting any time after making sure that no one has seen her, she makes her way over to
Dohnaseek.

"So did you enjoy your sport Yuuma?" He asks with a bit of humor.

"Oh, he was doing so well until nearly the end, and then he blew it before I could, so I had to finish
myself."

"We should leave though, that strange energy source is nearby and whoever it is, is an even match
for the two of us."

Raynare wants to snarl in rage, but her comrade is right: whoever it is and whoever they are
working for is making their task harder but not impossible to complete. She has finally identified
her target but now they have to wait until the rest of the pieces are in place. Glancing around, she
leads the man away, never noticing the black cat that just misses seeing them as they walk deeper
into the park.

Golden eyes search the outside of the abandoned building before the black cat trots inside. Making
her way upstairs, she finds the body of another young man, throat slit like the others before him.
Pausing, she walks up to the corpse and senses that the soul has already left the body and gone to
Soul Society. Tsking to herself, she decides she needs to see her former pupil.

'Well, I wonder if Sui-Feng is busy at the moment.'

XXXX

Ichigo stands nervously watching as Rias reads through his book, he tenses every time she reads a
part and snaps to the next page. So far she has refused to even acknowledge his existence;
breakfast was a disaster as she made him sit next to Yuuto and his uncle with Akeno and Koneko
in between them at the table. Any time he tried to speak to her, she simply turned her head away
from him. He gave up after ten minutes and ate his meal in silence, except for the daggers he sent
Akeno's way whenever the sadist looked at him.

The moment they got back home, Rias grabbed his hand and dragged him upstairs where she took
the book from his nightstand and after looking over the title with a heated glare, she made him
stand there while she started to read through the book. At least the parts his uncle told her might be
of interest to her. Finally, a sense of dread began to creep up his spine when Rias closes his book
and sets it back on the nightstand. Standing up, she walks until she is standing directly in his face.

"Well, it is an interesting read Ichigo, so I'll let it slide this time." She then changes her attitude and
jumps into his startled arms.

"Rias?"

"Oh, come on now Ichigo. Did you really think I'd stay mad at you forever? While the title did put
me off, once I read the parts your uncle told me to, I can see why you love Shakespeare's plays
now."

Still holding Rias up, he sees a mischievous look forming in her eyes, it's then he notices their
position. His hands are firmly holding her up by her bottom, her very firm, toned bottom which he
squeezes. She leans in and begins to kiss him after he leans forward.

"CLICK!"

Two heads turn and there once again is the cause of their joint ire, acting innocent while she looks down at the screen of her phone.

"Yet another one to share later on." Akeno muses before she retreats from the twin auras of death now running after her. Laughing all the way down the stairs, she avoids being caught by the two as she dashes out the back of the mansion and in an instant before Ichigo rounds the corner, she teleports away. Ichigo comes around a second later and stops when he doesn't see his target in the back. Looking around, he is scratching his head confusedly when Rias stops beside him.

"Where did she go!?" Rias says before she scowls at the spot where she senses the fading remnants of her Queen's magic.

"Don't know, but if she knows what's good for her, she'll stay hidden for the time being."

"Come on then Ichigo, Mother wants us to make dinner tonight for your uncle before he has to leave. I was thinking we could make that udon dish you liked so much in Kyoto."

"I don't know Rias, I'm not sure even if Akeno had stuck around whether we could duplicate it. Besides, I think curry would be better, neither of us had any while we were away."

"Curry, ehmm, I guess we could do that. What do you want to use, pork or beef?" Rias says as they begin to walk back inside.

"I guess pork; I think Harumi-san bought some fresh cuts if I remember reading the package label right last night."

Rias and Ichigo walk into the kitchen talking about what to make with the curry, never noticing the looks that Venelana and Amyntas are giving them as they pass by.

"Well, they seem to be getting along better Venelana." Amyntas says with a raised eyebrow.

Venelana smiles as she sips her tea. "Indeed they are Amyntas. A much better match than the Phenex boy would be."

"Are you serious about that Venelana Gremory?" Amyntas speaks with a business-like tone.

"I know as well as you, that he is a better match for her. She doesn't hate him and he has already confessed to her."

"And what about the obvious problems that will occur if we do this?"

"Those problems being?" Venelana says as she sets her tea down and folds her hands over.

Looking to make sure they are alone, the Guardian of the Damn speaks. "One, he has no idea that he is even a Devil. Two, his bloodlines are still dormant because of Masaki's sealing. Three, he is still not free of his other handicap. So Lady Gremory, what are you proposing to me?"

"I am proposing this Lord Naberius: if Ichigo regains his memories, still loves my daughter upon learning the truth, and accepts what he is, then all I want is this. An arranged marriage to seal them together, one we will tell them about of course, but one that will spare both our children from any outside suitors including the Sitri Clan now that Sōna has escaped her own arrangement."
Looking first at his folded hands, Amyntas then looks up at his fellow conspirator in helping him secure his great-grandson's future, a powerful ally who could protect his great-grandson and great-granddaughters better now that they know who had targeted them in the past.

"If they agree to the arrangement, then I will accept Venelana."

"I was hoping you would say that Amyntas, and this time we will be able to openly protect him. Sirzechs included."

"You and the Gremory Clan have my gratitude."

XXXX

"That is an excellent idea Rias; the summer-house has just undergone renovations so it would be an ideal spot for you five to spend the last week of your break before school starts again." Venelana says to the group of teens sitting around the table eating dessert.

"Wait, you got a summer-house too!" Ichigo sputters out.

"Yes Ichigo, we use it quite often when we want to get away." Venelana answers. "It is up in the mountains away from prying eyes and it even has its own waterfall and lake for diving and swimming."

"Do you have a summer-house Uncle?" Ichigo asks of his relative sarcastically.

"No Ichigo, I don't." Ichigo begins to nod until he hears the rest of the answer. "I have a small cottage up there for use during the winter. For skiing, snowboarding and many other winter activities. I can have a key made so you can have full use of it this year if you wish."

Ichigo just stares blankly at his uncle. "Just how rich are you Uncle?"

The older man pauses before he shrugs and takes a sip of wine. "I really don't know Ichigo; I have yet to speak to my accountant and assuming nothing is wrong, she hasn't yet brought any business I need to attend to personally other than my normal duties. I do however know how much you have though if you like to know?"

"I have money?"

"Yes Ichigo, you have quite a bit of money set aside for you when you decide to attend University and then afterwards to help you when you look for employment. It's part of your trust funds as you make your way through life. You have the same accounts as they do Ichigo."

The amnesic looks around him and sees each of his friends slowly nod to him as he looks at them one at a time.

"Are you surprised Ichigo?" Akeno asks of her housemate.

"Well, yeah I am Akeno. I never had reason to ask about money before now. I knew Uncle gave me an account for the Gremory to use for me staying with you guys, but I never once thought it extended beyond that."

He sees the sheepish looks form on both his uncle and Rias's mother's face as well. "Sorry, I thought someone might have told you, you have your own money. We are so used to having accounts; I really did forget you might not remember your own."
Amyntas pulls out his phone and taps on the face as Ichigo and the others watch and wonder what he is doing. After seemingly satisfied by what he sees, he passes the phone to Ichigo.

"These are your accounts Ichigo, most are in trust until you finish University of course but you shouldn't have any problems later."

Ichigo's eyes go wide before he faints from the numbers showing next to his name a dozen times.

"I think he wasn't expecting that Amyntas-san." Koneko says as she gently pokes her Onii-san's face.

Amyntas looks at the screen again and then down at his nephew. "I guess he really isn't used to this much money."

Rias gets up and kneels next to the passed out Ichigo; a thought comes to her which she acts upon. Pinching his nose and using her free hand, she keeps his mouth closed. Soon enough, he shoots up gasping for breath, as Rias and the others begin to laugh at his expression.

"Dammit woman, you could have killed me!" Ichigo shouts out.

Slapping his forehead, she retorts playfully with a side of sarcasm. "It'd be an improvement for you."

Growling as he gets up, he pinches her ass much to her surprise and the surprise of the rest of the Gremory Clan. "Improvement my ass Rias."

"Fufufu Ichigo you are such a brute. Pinching your girlfriend's butt in front of her mother and your uncle no less."

Ichigo and Rias suddenly remember what she had done earlier in the day; in unison the two teens turn their evil grins onto the black-haired menace. Her eyes go wide when she realizes they haven't forgotten nor forgiven her for the sneaky picture-taking. She tries to get up but Ichigo is suddenly next to her grabbing one arm as Rias grabs the other arm.

"Did you know Ichigo that Akeno has only one weakness?"

"You don't say Rias. What might that be?"

Rias slowly takes a finger and runs it under Akeno's armpit then down her side; the effect is immediate as the priestess tries and fails to wiggle her way out of their strong grips.

"Please Rias, not that!"

Ichigo having no mercy begins on the other side. "Paybacks are a bitch Akeno."

Then the two other peerage members watch in rapt amazement as Rias and Ichigo bring the Mistress of Teasing to her knees, ignoring her begging for them to stop. Soon the black-haired Devil is a laughing mess as the two finish her off by tickling both behind her knees and the front of her abs where she is secretly the most vulnerable to their tickling.

"I...'gasp'...hate...'gasp'...you...'gasp'...both...'gasp'...I...will...'gasp'...get you both...'gasp'...back for this...'gasp'..."

"Remember Akeno, we will use this against you if you pull your stunts again, but next time we won't stop until you pee yourself." Ichigo threatens with a sadistic laugh.
Rias smiles at the thought of Ichigo actually carrying out that threat. "I'll help again when you do Ichigo."

Akeno is lifted to her still unsteady feet by Ichigo, who gets an elbow in his ribs for his troubles. The dark-haired young woman plops down in her seat and lays her head on the backrest as she keeps gasping for much-needed air. Koneko looks at her senpai and says it all for the room to hear in her deadpan voice of reasoning.

"At least they didn't decide to make you pee yourself tonight."

XXX

Ichigo sits next to Rias as she drives the oversized and beefed-up version of a golf-cart. The wheels are made for rough terrain and the roll bars had been added for safety, but it still doesn't reassure the young man as he holds on to the bar and his seat with a death grip while his girlfriend is laughing like a loon as she speeds up the mountain path.

"Are you sure it wouldn't have been safer to have Akeno or even Koneko drive, Rias!?" Ichigo shouts above the laughter of the red-headed young woman.

"Are you scared of my driving Ichigo?" Rias shouts back without taking her eyes of the bouncing path.

"YES!"

"You're no fun, you know that Ichigo?" Rias says as she slows down.

Ichigo exaggerates his complaint by clutching his shirt over his heart, earning him another laugh from the less-than-stellar driver. Behind Ichigo, Akeno is smiling from the thrill of the ride, while Koneko has somehow managed to fall asleep. Behind all of them, Yuuto is catching up with the other off-road vehicle the Gremory Clan uses to get to the mountain retreat. Yuuto had insisted they split up, with Rias taking Ichigo and the girls, while he drove the second vehicle with their luggage and any food they wanted to bring. Ichigo, having not yet learned how to drive, was fine with the arrangements until the second Rias's foot hit the accelerator.

"You are mad! You know this don't you Rias!?" Ichigo pants out his exasperation.

Lightly tapping his closest arm, she smirks at him. "Of course I've been accused of such before Ichigo, but it hasn't stopped me yet."

"Crazy ass woman."

"I heard that Ichigo."

Soon the end comes in sight and Ichigo is again reminded that he lives with insanely rich people. When he was thinking of a small place, he pictured something small like a cottage or log-cabin, but the home before him isn't exactly small. It is a small mansion. It has large windows on both floors, the doors are wide enough for four people to walk through side by side, and it looks to have two wings coming off from the main house. Looking to either side of the mansion, all he can see is a forest stretching far into the distance.

"This is your idea of outdoor living?" Ichigo says as he gets out his side.

Rias looks at him, then the house. "Is it too small Ichigo?"
"No Rias, it's not too small. ITS FREAKING HUGE!"

"Oh."

"......"

He just stares at her with disbelief in his eyes as she innocently looks back at him. Seeing that she isn't kidding in her expression, he sighs as he walks up to her and pulls her into an embrace.

"It's fine Rias, really it is. I just thought it would be like those log-cabin houses that Americans have."

"Oh, I'm sorry Ichigo." She doesn't expect him to laugh as he lays his head on her shoulder.

"Don't worry about it anymore Rias. Let's just get inside and get some food in us."

Rias leads the way into the house and after everyone kicks off their shoes, they make their way to the kitchen where a note addressed to Rias waits for her. Leaving it for later, she and the others begin to put away the food they brought. Not that they needed much, as the refrigerator seems to have been stocked before their arrival. Ichigo notices something in the back of the fridge however that makes him want to palm his face. A few bottles of very expensive champagne sit chilling in the rear, and he is certain that whoever stocked their fridge was the one who placed them there.

'I just hope things don't get out of hand now that no one else is around.'

XXXX

Suì-Fēng sits with her mentor at a small ramen shop in the South Second Rukongai waiting for their order to be served. It had been a surprise when Lady Yoruichi showed up last night, and she found her already sleeping in the Squad Two Captain's bed of all places, nude of course. Fortunately, Shaolin had a set of clothes ready for her Sensei just in case she showed up like she tends to do out of the blue. Soon however she is interrupted in her thoughts by an embarrassing remark.

"If you keep staring at me like that, people might get the wrong idea about us." Yoruichi says loudly.

Suì-Fēng's face does indeed get bright red as she stutters back. "La...Lady Yoruichi! You know I don't think of you like that! I'd never..."

"What!? I'm not good enough for you yet Little Bee!? Don't I measure up to your...your taste!? I know I'm no Rangiku but please look again!" Just to get a bigger reaction, Yoruichi begins to pull her shirt up.

"LADY YORUICHI!"

Yoruichi has her former protégée on the ropes, just one more push and..."I...I know you're the Force Commander Captain Suì-Fēng, but you use way to much 'FORCE' to make me compliant in bed! Please "FORCE' Commander I will submit willingly if you..."

"YORUICHI! ! !"

Slapping the table, the werecat yells out in triumph. "I did it! Yes, I did it! You lose Shaolin!"

A multitude of gaping faces stare at the two Shinigami display. "You lose Little Bee; I have all
these witnesses to back me up. Do you not remember our bet?"

"Bet? What bet La…."  

"Nope, you lost Shaolin. Try and remember that night, the night you and I slept under the stars during my last mission as your Captain."

Sui-Fēng begins to argue when she remembers that night; a night that Yoruichi used her legs to take a nap like always. She remembers that towards the end of the conversation her mentor had forced a bet on her. If she ever said her Captain's name just once without any honorifics, she wasn't allowed to use honorifics for her Captain ever again. Confident that she would never disrespect her Captain like that, she had agreed to the bet.

"You…You cheated Yoruichi! I can't believe it, you cheated."

"Yes, but you forget Shaolin." The older woman says with a gentle flick to Sui-Fēng's head. "We are Onmitsukidō, we use any means available to succeed in our missions, any means."

Crossing her arms in defeat, a pouting Sui-Fēng dejectedly surrenders. "You win…Yoruichi, but it doesn't mean I have to like it. And I still get to call you Lady Shihōin at formal affairs; you didn't include that in our bet." She says as she sticks her tongue out childishly at her own victory.

"Fine Shaolin, you still get that. But I do need a favor of you."

"A favor? Anything within reason L…Yoruichi, if I can."

Grimacing, the former assassin keeps her voice low as she asks her favor. Explaining the reasons to her successor that she believes an unknown killer is loose in the city she is staying in, claiming she was doing research on a project for Kisuke when she came across the trail. Sui-Fēng listens without interruptions until Yoruichi gets to the end of her explanation.

"You want me to use the Stealth Force along with the Patrol Units to scour the Rukongai for recent arrivals from Isehara and the surrounding towns, south of Tokyo?"

"Yes."

Sui-Fēng eyes go wide as she sputters this time. "Are…Are you nuts Yoruichi!? You do remember how long it takes to circle the outer Rukongai districts right!?"

"Well, since you are the Commander-in-Chief of the Onmitsukidō now, you should have your command squared away by now. If not I could always ask, I don't know Shinji or even Jūshirō if he is well enough for their squads to help out." Yoruichi eyes the petite but deadly assassin out the corner of her eye.

Sui-Fēng knows she's getting worked over, but she has no choice but to comply. She owes it her former Captain; after all she did help prevent the destruction of Soul Society when she disappeared with Urahara and Tsukabishi over a century ago. Groaning, the female ninja drops her head down before she perks up again with a small grin. She'll get something out of her idol.

"I'll do it." She fakes her annoyance before she brightens up. "On one condition Yoruichi."

"Sure, what?"

"You spar with me at least once a month to help me improve my Shunkō."
Grinning as she pulls Suì-Fēng into a headlock, the Goddess of Flash gives her a wet smooch on the cheek. "Anytime you want Little Bee."

"YORUICHI, YOU SLOBBERED ON ME!"

A pair of brown and black eyes stares in disbelief at the two adult men sitting across from them. The black-haired girl is doing her best to keep her anger in check, but failing to do so, while the auburn-haired girl is trying to understand what she was just offered.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MINDS!? YOU WANT ORIHIME TO DO WHAT GETA-BÔSHI, KUROSAKI-SAN!?!" Tatsuki Arisawa screams at the two men.

"You heard us Arisawa-chan. I need Orihime's help with the twins. Yuzu is breaking down each day and Karin almost failed her grades last year. I can only do so much, but if she agrees to become a member of my Clan, she can move in with us and not worry about her future anymore. I need her Tatsuki-chan; I'm at my wit's end. I don't know what else to do for them. Orihime and Yuzu are alike, so I think Yuzu would respond better to her, as for Karin, she has always looked up to you and Rukia as role models besides…” Isshin bows his head as he still can't say his own son's name.

"Ichigo. Ichigo Kurosaki. His name is Ichigo dammit!” Slamming her fist on the table she continues with her raged filled screams. "And no one and I MEAN NO ONE HAS TOLD US WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM YET! AND YOU WANT FAVORS FROM US!? TO HELL WITH YOU ALL! AND TO HELL WITH THE SOUL SOCIETY!"

"I'll tell you what I can, if and only if you agree." Isshin counters.

"I'll do it." Orihime whispers out.

Tatsuki's head whips around to stare at Orihime with anger. "WHAT!? No! You can't Orihime! They have lied to us all! How can you even say yes!?"

Wet eyes filled with grief and anger meets the fury filled eyes of the karate champ. "BECAUSE I WANT TO KNOW TATSUKI! I want to know where he is and what happened to him." Orihime softens her voice. "I know Kurosaki-kun didn't have the same feelings for me, but I still love him Tatsuki, even if all I will be to him is his sister. All I want to know is what happened that day."

Turning to the older Kurosaki in the room, Orihime sticks her hand out to him. "I will accept adoption into the...Shiba Clan, Isshin Shiba. I will become your third daughter and move in to help with the twins."

Taking her hand, Isshin bows deeply to the Shun Shun Rikka user before shaking her hand. "You have my deepest gratitude, Orihime Shiba. What about you Tatsuki?"

Throwing her hands in the air, the dark-haired young woman growls. "Fine! I'll do it too Kurosaki-san...Shiba-san… or whatever your name is really but I'm not being adopted, I got my own family still."

"Fair enough." Isshin shakes the hand of his son's oldest friend as well.

"Now, talk. What happened to him?" Tatsuki demands.

Isshin folds his hands on the table, mirroring Kisuke who has yet to say a word. "It began right after Ichigo left with me to stop Aizen and Gin. We used the Dangai to train when we realized
Aizen had…"

For over an hour, Isshin and at times Kisuke tell the two young women the events that had happened during the battle between Ichigo and Aizen, except the one detail that had to be kept secret. How Central Forty-Six had got it in their heads that Ichigo was deemed too dangerous, just as dangerous as the man he had killed, and demanded for his execution. How Kisuke and Tessai had come up with an alternative plan using forbidden Kidō to allow Ichigo to live, but forcing him to be relocated for his safety. They told the now sobbing Tatsuki and Orihime that in order to keep him alive; they had to destroy the very thing that made him a perceived danger to Soul Society.

"So, where is he?" Orihime asks between sniffles.

"Orihime, please understand I can't tell you because in order to keep him safe, he had to disappear so completely that not even I can find him. It...it was the only option we had. All I know is that he is alive and doing well. The people taking care of him, well, they are old friends of Masaki's parents but I don't know them that well. They agreed to take him in and keep him as their own because of Masaki. I'm so, so sorry you two, but you have to understand. If we had tried to help him escape, there was a good chance Central Forty-Six would hurt or kill anyone they even thought was helping him."

Tatsuki's pale face shows she understands the meaning. "They wouldn't?"

"They have done so before, and they would have done so again Tatsuki-chan. I not only did it for him, I did it for each of you. Uryū, Chad, the others as well." Isshin says solemnly.

"As long as he is alive, I'm okay with that...Otou-san." Orihime feels the weight of worrying lift from her as she accepts her new role in life.

Isshin gets up and in a moment of understanding, gently pulls her into a hug. "Thank you Orihime-chan. Remember, we can't tell the twins, I know I couldn't face them if they knew he was alive, but not. They wouldn't understand why we did it. Just be there for the girls is all I ask."

"I will."

"So when does she have to go to Soul Society?" Tatsuki wearily asks.

"The three of you will leave the weekend before you begin your Third year." Kisuke says from behind his fan.

"What!? Why do I have to go!?"

"Because Tatsuki-chan, as her best-friend and the only person any of us considers her family, you have to agree to the adoption before the Elders to make it official." Isshin answers.

"You are so going to owe me you bastards."

Isshin and Kisuke exchange knowing looks that somehow she was going to collect on that promise.

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Ichigo and Yuuto are standing around a fire-pit turning over the kebabs and Yakiniku so they don't burn. Akeno and Rias are preparing the rest of the dinner in the kitchen, while Koneko is setting up the table inside the outdoor gazebo. It's the second night of their stay at the secluded home and the day had been filled with nothing but relaxation and fun. They had walked down to the lake and had gone swimming during the late morning and early afternoon before heading back in to start dinner.
Even though it is still mid-spring, the water was quite warm for swimming. Ichigo had found out that the spring feeding the lake flowed from deep within the mountain which somehow keeps the water warm. Tonight after dinner they were going to sit outside and watch for meteorites while roasting marshmallows because Koneko had seen it done once in a movie.

"Ichigo, I think we're done."

Looking down at the food, Ichigo nods his head in agreement. "Yeah, give me those plates and I'll put the food on them Yuuto."

Taking a few minutes to fill the three large plates, Ichigo and Yuuto then carry them inside and let the others know they are done.

"Rias, Akeno, the meat and kebabs are done!" Ichigo shouts out.

"On the table Ichi-kun!" Akeno shouts back. "We're almost done ourselves! Koneko-chan can you get our drinks please?"

"Okay Akeno-nee-san."

Soon the twin beauties of the kitchen file out of the kitchen with two serving dishes each. Yuuto comes out as well with the last dish for the table. Everyone finds a seat and after filling their plates they all give thanks.

"Itadakimasu." Five voices say in unison.

Digging in with gusto, Koneko is the first to compliment the cooks. "This is good Onii-san."

"Hey, what about us?" Akeno says with fake hurt.

"You too Akeno-nee-san, Rias-nee-san."

Ichigo is eating what Rias said is called macaroni and cheese. A dish she had picked up during a visit to America two years ago with her family. She had informed him that it was a pasta dish made with one to as many as four types of cheeses depending on taste, plus her favorite, a breadcrumb crust on top. Akeno had made a bean dish that Ichigo found tasty as well, while Koneko had asked for his favorite food as well, French fries. Yuuto only asked for pasta salad. All the dishes had represented different parts of the world the Gremory heiress had visited over the years, something he hoped he would get a chance to do once he graduates from University.

"How does it taste Ichigo?" Rias says as she spoons some garden salad into a bowl.

"It's all good. I had no idea of the foods you two knew how to cook. Usually you guys only make Japanese or Chinese when we are home."

"Well it's because we didn't know how you would react that we never bothered Ichigo. We'll start making different dishes for you if you want." Akeno says as she hands bread over to Koneko.

Nodding his head as he bites into a kebab, he swallows before he replies. "Sounds great, I'd like to see what else you two can make."

Rias and Akeno both blush at the same time. Yuuto just listens while he eats, feeling that things within the group are going much better since Ichigo's inclusion. He has a sparring partner that he feels is more than a match for almost any human he may face. But there was a nagging feeling he had, during the spars, when Ichigo showed movements that weren't normal. He doesn't know if it
is old muscle memories or something else, a darker past that Ichigo cannot remember. Either way, the Knight had been hard pressed on more than a few occasions.

Sitting across from him, the youngest of the group listens to the conversation with mild interest. She is listening to her Onii-san's praise of the older women's cooking while thinking how much she is changing herself. Ichigo has made her life easier to deal with, ever since the day he made her stop dyeing her hair, she feels she is growing stronger in her confidence. She still has her own secrets that she hides from him, especially the fact that she isn't human, but she also finds herself no longer thinking about them every day like before. The Rook has someone who doesn't care about what others think of her, something she hopes she won't lose if he becomes a Devil and learns the truth of her sister.

Akeno is in heaven. The food while delicious isn't the cause of her happiness, but it's the looks she sees on the faces of her best friend and her orange-haired housemate. She has the feeling they are up to something and she wants to make sure she is ready to capture it all on her phone for the Clan to see later on. The smiles, the subtle touches they give each other, and oh, the hot kisses they think no one sees, that is the icing on top. Smiling as she takes a bite of her kebab, she sees Rias and Ichigo fighting for a piece of Yakiniku while actually using it as an excuse for them to touch each other. They think no one will notice, but she does every time. Her best friend has found her true King and nothing will get in her way of seeing the two of them together in happiness.

"Hey Ichigo, that's not fair." Rias says as her boyfriend swallows the piece she wanted.

"Yub tao slopt."

"Too slow am I? Then how about this?" She says as she steals his last kebab and eats it in front of him.

"Dammit Rias, that was my last one."

"Too bad Ichigo. That's what you get you thief." She fist pumps in victory.

Shaking his head, he asks them in general. "So what are we going to do tomorrow?"

"Homework Ichigo. I hope you didn't forget yours." Yuuto replies drily.

"Nope, didn't bring it."

Rias gives him a stern look as she admonishes him. "Ichigo, how are you going to do your homework with only four days left when we get back?"

"I'm not."

"...?..."

"What do you mean by that Onii-san?"

Ichigo smiles at his little partner. "Because Imouto, I'm done."

Akeno asks what they are all thinking then. "Wait? What? When did you do yours?"

Ichigo shrugs. "When I was with my uncle. I did some on the plane, other times when we were stuck inside because of weather and mostly before I went to bed."

Yuuto chuckles then. "Well I can see why you are ranked fifth for the second years now senpai."
Always ahead of everyone else."

"You're helping me then Onii-san." Koneko declares before anyone else can.

"Oh no he's not Koneko-chan. You are doing yours on your own. No help from your Onii-san unless it's really hard or you need a better explanation." Rias tells her young Rook.

Frowning, she agrees. "But he can't help you guys either then."

"Hey! That's not fair to hog your brother like that Ko-chan!"

"Well, he isn't helping you either Akeno." Rias says with a smirk.

"Who says I only want his help that way Rias?" A Devilish smile forms.

'Great, here we go.'

"Akeno Himejima, if you even try and do anything with Ichigo, I swear I'll...."

"Ara, ara Rias. You're much to easy."

"Enough you two. If we don't hurry we might miss the meteor shower. Now, let's finish up so we can spend as much time as we can, watching them." Ichigo says putting an end to their argument before it goes too far.

"Fine. / Sure."

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Five figures are lying on their backs under the cover of night, each covered in a blanket as they stare at the sky. The annual shower brilliant due to the altitude they are at, with a clear sky and no city anywhere near them, giving them an unobstructed view of the Milky Way. Each of them has their heads pointed towards the center so they can point to the sky whenever any of them spot a streak of light.

"There!"

"Oh, look at that one!"

"Hey, did you see that bright one?"

Ichigo is lying there with his eyes closed as he listens to the other four call out the meteorites. For some reason, he finds the night peaceful to his being, as if he had done this before but in a different way. Thankfully, no memory comes crashing down and causing a black-out, this time he only gets the feeling of peace. A hand touches his under the blanket and as he opens his eyes and looks over, he can see Rias's smiling face and her blue eyes watching his. Rolling on to her side a bit, she reaches over and caresses his face.

"What are you thinking Ichigo?" She says in a low voice only for his ears.

Squeezing her hand, he touches her cheek in kind. "I was just thinking how peaceful it is up here Rias. Thank you for bringing me here."

"You're welcome Ichigo. Ichigo?"

"Yeah Rias?"
She leans over and whispers in his ear before getting up. "I think it's time for us to get to bed everyone."

As the group gets up, Ichigo doesn't. "I think I'll stay out a bit Rias."

The three others start smirking to themselves as they walk back to the house. Rias does her best to put on her most innocent act, but what she and Ichigo don't realize, is that the other three teens already know what they are planning on doing. Akeno puts her arms on the back of the other two and guides them to their side of the mansion, leaving Rias alone as she walks to their room. Once inside she hurriedly changes her clothes and grabs his swimming trunks and a few other things before dashing back outside. Taking the path back to the lake, she finds Ichigo waiting on the shore. The moon reflecting off the water sends the light up through his hair, giving it a ghostly white look for a second.

"Ichigo."

"Hey Rias."

She hands him his bathing suit and gets an excited look as he takes off his shirt but then shoots him a disappointed look when he spoils it by putting on a towel around his waist before he takes his pants off.

"You're still no fun Ichigo."

"It's not that Rias, it's just you never know who might come along." He says with a knowing grin.

Walking up to him after he takes off the towel and shows only his bathing suit, she follows his lead by taking off her silk summer dress and watches as his eyes go wide at the sight she gives him. She grins at seeing him go slacked-jaw the moment she reveals her white bikini that hugs all her curves while covering her without being too revealing.

"Rias." He breathes out.

She grabs his hand and leads him to the water before she dives right in. She surfaces and watches as he dives in after her, before disappearing under the water. She waits for him to surface, but then begins to get worried when he doesn't. Just as she is about to dive under and search for him, a pair of arms suddenly wrap around her waist from behind her and a kiss on her necks tells her where he is. Turning to face him, she wraps her arms around his neck and kicks her legs in time with his as they circle idly in the water.

"Is there something you want Ichigo Shiba?"

"Yes, there is Rias Gremory."

"Then tell me what you want."

"I'll show you." His lips slowly touch hers as gently as possible.

They tread water together as they kiss chastely at first, but as they stay in each other's arms, the kisses become deeper and more passionate. Ichigo opens his eyes as the sounds of the waterfall become louder, when he tries to pull Rias away from the falling water, she smiles before slipping under the surface with him in tow. Unable to see because of the night, he can only trust that she knows what she is doing as they swim deeper before she leads him back up. As his head breaks through, he blinks his eyes as he tries to adjust to his surroundings.
As his eyes focus, he sees that they are in a cave, a naturally formed grotto behind the waterfall. Rias is hanging on to him from behind, her arms wrapped around his chest. She pushes him forward until his feet touch bottom, standing up he turns and pulls his girlfriend up.

"What is this Rias?" Ichigo asks as he scans the cave in wonder.

She can't hide her joy as she guides him to a ledge that lines one of the walls. "It's a natural formation Ichigo; we found it by accident when we were diving one day from the top of the falls. When we found it, we used it to create a spot for couples, leaving as much of the natural formations intact as possible. We shaped some of the ledges just below the water line and a small room in the back of the cave." She points to a short tunnel.

"A room?"

Blushing, she answers. "I'll show you someday Ichigo, but not tonight."

Pulling her close, he sits her on his lap. "So this is what you meant by a surprise in the lake."

Feeling relaxed in his arms, Rias shifts until her back is flush with his chest, pulling his arms tighter around her. "It is Ichigo. I wanted us to be alone without anyone interrupting us tonight."

"You mean Akeno."

She doesn't answer, instead she turns around and her arms slink around his neck all the while staring into his eyes. Closing the gap, she closes her eyes before taking his lips again.

'I'll take that as a yes.' It's the last cohesive thought he has for a long time.

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"Are you sure of this?" "Yes. They have been spotted in the Gremory territories many times. There is something else important as well."

"What? What is more important than the news you brought me?"

A new voice speaks. "A Shinigami is hunting them as we speak."

"A Shinigami? Why would a Shinigami hunt one of us?"

"She appears to be in alliance with Venelana Gremory."

"What!? Devils and Shinigami do not; I repeat do not have any dealings with each other. The Shinigami haven't bothered with our world since…since their war a thousand years ago. No, I don't believe you."

A photo is placed before Azazel showing Venelana and an unknown Shinigami woman sitting at a table having dinner. Azazel shifts the picture around to look closer at the woman in black and orange. He had to admit, she is beautiful for a death god. Snorting, he looks at the other two Fallen Angels.

"Any idea why she is there?"

The two Fallen Angels look at each other and another photo is placed on the table. "We believe it's because of this human."

The photo shows a tall young man with orange hair, arm in arm with the last person he would ever
suspect of having a human near her. Rias Gremory, the fiancée of Riser Phenex, does not looking one bit displeased by the expression on her face.

'It seems the rumors are true. She has no intentions of marrying into the Phenex Clan.'

"Who is he?"

No one answers, which causes Azazel to look at his subordinates with a questioning look.

Finally the first Fallen Angel speaks. "All we know is who his sponsor is."

"Sponsor? He isn't a servant?"

"No Lord Azazel. He has the protection of the Naberius."

Azazel's eyes bulge out. "The Naberius! What does that Clan have to do with any of this!?"

"We don't know. Any attempts at getting close have met with undesirable results. He is also protected by the Gremory Clan, which means he is also protected by…"

"Sirzechs."

"Yes, my lord."

Tapping the table with his fingers, he looks at the pictures once again. One is a Shinigami who might be in league with the matriarch of the Gremory Clan. The other, is a human boy who is being protected by not one, but two of the Underworld's more powerful and deadly Clans. Almost any other Clan and he would have taken a shot at the orange-haired man, but not the Naberius. Not with who rules over the damned in that tower.

"For now we leave them be. Whatever our little Raynare is up to, will have to wait until we know why the Shinigami are once again making their presence known so openly."

"Agreed Lord Azazel."

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Ichigo wakes up with Rias nearly on top of him, tightly holding his body close to hers. Snuggling up to her closer, he feels her body heat permeating his now that she has gotten him to do one thing for her; he is now down to wearing only his boxers to bed. When they had gotten home late last night, they took a quick shower, separately of course, just that he didn't leave nor did she when he took his turn. The only thing different that had occurred was when he went to put on his usual bed attire, she had stopped him by shaking her head and then guided him to bed where she pulled him under the covers with her.

'Ichigo, I want nothing to be between us anymore. I know you won't do anything, nor will I, but I want to be as close as I can to you when I sleep. Can you do that for me?"

"Are you sure of this Rias?" He said while gesturing to how they were sleeping.

Moving so she was behind him, she encircled him again and murmured as she fell asleep quickly. "I'm sure Ichigo; now turn off the light so we can go to sleep."

Watching her as she breathes, he rubs her smooth back slowly from between her shoulder blades to just above her cleft. He doesn't see her open her eyes when she feels his hand traveling up and down her back.
"If you want to go lower you can Ichigo." She feels his hand freeze for a second before it continues its previous actions.

"Trust me Rias; it's hard enough as is. Don't tempt me please."

"I'm sorry Ichigo, it's just your hand feels so nice when it touches me like that, I can't help but want you to touch more." She sighs out wistfully.

Never stopping his caresses, he kisses the top of her head before he uses his other hand to gently tilt her head up so he can see her face. "Rias, you're in a bad spot you know."

Scrunching her eyebrows, she looks at him before she questions him. "How so?"

"I can't reach your lips."

"...?..."

"...!..."

"Oh..."

Rias twists her body from his side and allows him to move. Waiting for him, she sees what he wants to do, liking what he wants, she moves into her spot. Soon the two are in a much more comfortable position with Ichigo on his back, one arm around Rias's waist, while his other hand keeps her steady by holding her back. The skin to skin contact not lost on either as they relive the passion from last night. Until a heavy knocking on their door brings reality crashing back into their lives.

"Onii-san, Rias-nee-san. Time to get up. Akeno and Yuuto are making breakfast now."

"We'll be down in twenty minutes Koneko." Rias calls out.

Both listen to the retreating footsteps before Rias drops her head on his chest. "It was fun while it lasted Ichigo."

"Yeah. You take a shower first Rias."

"I've been thinking Ichigo, and hear me out first before you argue."

"Come on Rias, I know what you're going to ask. Just that when we get home we can't while your mother is staying with us; I don't want her in the middle if we should ever get caught."

"Ich...Ichigo are you...are you saying..."

"Yes Rias, I'll take a shower with you but no hanky-panky. We have already crossed so many lines already, but this will be the last line we can cross until we get you out of your arranged marriage. After that..." Ichigo pauses when he sees her eyes widening, then he finishes his thoughts.

"What I'm saying Rias is this. When you are free, I want to be with you completely."

XXXX

Rias, Akeno and Yuuto are sitting at the dining room table after breakfast doing their summer homework. In the living room, Koneko has the best spot to herself, using Ichigo as her lounge chair while he lies with his back on the floor reading his book. Every now and then, she points to a word or phrase and asks Ichigo if he can explain the meaning, which he tries to do as simply as he can.
for her. Every once in a while, he sees Rias sneaking a look at the two of them and a look comes over her that Ichigo can only surmise is happiness or longing. Whenever he catches her, she blushes and turns back to her own homework or sometimes to hit Akeno with her pen when the sadist murmurs something he cannot hear.

"Wonder what's going in that head of hers?"

Sitting opposite him, Yuuto is the second smartest man in the room right now. Playing deaf as he does his homework, he listens to his mistress and her best-friend converse about the smartest man in the room.

"He makes it look so natural." The Queen says without looking at the Neko and her living armchair.

Sighing wistfully as she keeps her eyes on her own books, the King quietly agrees. "I wonder if in his past, he did this before. It looks so natural the way he helps her with her homework, as if he had a younger sister before."

"Lord Amyntas said he was an only child. His parents passed away when he was only one, so if he has done this before, perhaps with the staff's children?" Akeno ponders softly.

Rias chances another peek, seeing Ichigo's foot swinging back and forth as he turns a page. He suddenly smiles as she sees his eyes staring right at hers. She averts her eyes quickly back to her books, as Akeno chuckles under her breath at their antics.

"Why don't you just take the other side Rias?"

Shaking her head no, the red-head nods towards the two pseudo-siblings. "Right now, he is her Onii-san, she wants her time with him as well, so I shouldn't interfere with them."

"You are such a liar Rias."

"What?"

"Your eyes say it all, you're jealous."

"No…no I'm not."

"Then why the stutter Rias Gremory-sama?"

"I so hate you right now Akeno."

The black-haired girl snorts. "And that's news worthy how?"

Yuuto just keeps his nose to his books, but inside all he can think of is how much happier his mistress and her friends are now. Before they were happy but not like this. Casting his own glance at his fellow Devils, he sees no worries, just normal, peaceful faces. He hopes that when Ichigo does become part of the peerage, the feeling the group has won't change. He would pray but he knows the last time he did that, the friends he had from before were killed to the last, so he won't pray again. Now a new breath of life has found its way into the group, due to a young man that has slowly changed each of them in small but noticeable ways. The biggest changes though are still with his master.

'Love is a funny thing. The ability to change the world.'
Before he can contemplate any more, the two on the floor start again.

"Onii-san, are you sure that this right? It doesn't seem like it should work."

"I'm sure Koneko. Look, let me show you how you did it, and then I'll show you how I would do it. You're close, but you're missing the smallest step."

The group at the table watch as Ichigo shows the Neko the steps in her Algebra equation and how she wasn't moving her variable over to isolate it. Handing the sheet back, they watch as she does the next one with Ichigo giving her clues but not outright telling her. Simple things like, are you sure you want to move that there or you switched your signs. When she got it right, they watch as she hugs the older teen and dives into the rest of the problems with him still keeping an eye on her work.

"Yuuto, are you going to be able to keep up with the Kendo Club this year?" Akeno asks out of the blue.

"No Akeno-senpai. I think between the Occult and Kendo Club's schedules, I'll have to give up helping the girl's team this year."

"A lot of your fans will be disappointed then."

"Don't remind me. I almost gave it up last year but when Ichigo began to help, it got better because of how serious he was during training. He even threw out those not directly involved with the team."

Rias looks over at the orange-head then and wonders if it might be a good idea if he took over coaching the team. Admittedly, the team had improved dramatically between Ichigo and Yuuto helping out, so much so the Kendo advisor had tried more than once to get Ichigo to join the boy's team this coming year, but Ichigo said no each time. He told her it didn't feel right to him, like it wasn't a challenge enough to him. Helping the girl's team train was alright with him but he wouldn't compete.

"I think we should just ask him to take over for you Yuuto." Rias says as she watches him and her Rook study together.

Yuuto nods his agreement to her suggestion, while Akeno waves her affirmative while still working on her French. Rias then gains his attention.

"Ichigo, can I ask what club you're joining this year?"

Tilting his head up, he squints his eyes in thought before he lays his head back on the small pillow and answers. "I wasn't thinking of joining a club this year Rias. Why?"

Getting up, she walks into the living room and kneels down next to him, arms crossed around her knees, she tells him her idea. Looking up at her, he looks over at Yuuto wondering what's going on.

"What gives Yuuto? You're not going to help this year?"

"No Ichigo-senpai, I have a more challenging class schedule this year, and unlike you I'll have to study harder." Which is perfectly true, just not the real reason for Yuuto having to give up his Kendo club practice.

"I guess I'll do it for you Rias, but you tell Souna I want anyone not part of the team out when they practice. I won't put up with their behavior again, last year was bad enough."
Smiling, Rias places her hands on his chest and bends close to his face. "Thank you Ichigo. I'll make sure Souna keeps your practices clear of the 'fan-girls' for you." Before he can say any words of thanks, she kisses him lightly on his lips.

When she pulls away, a slightly pink cheeked Ichigo softly speaks. "If that's my reward for helping the Kendo Club, I wonder what…"

Placing a finger on his lips, she winks at him. "The rewards will only get better in time Ichigo."

Sipping her sake, Yoruichi watches as Venelana looks over her notes of her surveillance. She can see the brown-haired matriarch is no slouch when it comes to the safety of her daughter, Ichigo and their friends. The former Captain can see the woman's eyes grimace as she reads over the details of the killings, even at one point clenching her fist when she realizes what had happened to each of the victims.

"She…she…after they…she kills them Yoruichi." Venelana finally voices her shock and anger.

Leaning forward, the Onmitsukidō's former commander shakes her head yes. "She always kills them right after their release from what I can tell; she must finish after or during the killing. Either way she is very skilled to kill so openly. I came close twice but each time someone else got to her before me and they made their escape. But there is good news."

Venelana looks up in surprise and a bit of anger. "What can be so good about this?"

"They are getting sloppy. Taking bigger risks in their deeds. I think it means they are close to finishing what they came to do. The killings are getting rushed and the evidence is mounting. I think I even found where they are staying. It's an abandoned church on the outskirts of the city, and from what I can tell there are humans with them as well."

The Gremory wife pinches her nose as she leans back. The news while good is also the worst.

"Yoruichi, I'll have to ask that you not to attack them for time being."

The woman assassin snaps her head up and loudly objects to the suggestion. "Are you kidding me!? I have them, I know where they are and I have a good idea of how many there are! Why can't I take them out!?"

"Because we have an uneasy truce with the Angels and Fallen Angels, Yoruichi. Unlike our peace with Soul Society we only have a fragile peace with the other factions; we simply can't attack them without it starting a war between the three factions. I know you are angry but we can't afford a war. We…we lost too many pure-bloods the last time we went to war and if we did so now, we would go extinct."

"What? What do you mean by that Venelana?"

Folding her hands on the table, the pure-blood Devil explains to her Shinigami friend. "Unlike your world Yoruichi, only pure-bloods and a few select reincarnated Devils have the ability to use Evil Pieces, the chess pieces used to turn other races into Devils. Over half of our Pillars, our pure-blood Clans were lost in our previous war with the Angels and Fallen Angels. If we were to go to war and we lost too many pure-bloods again, we as a race would face extinction. I'm sorry Yoruichi, but we simply can't attack with the risk of war unless we have concrete proof of their deeds, then and only then can we justify attacking them."
Yoruichi can't believe her ears. The Devils, the caretakers of the Underworld and the Gates of Hell, could go extinct. She looks at the woman across from her and suddenly realizes why she is pushing for Rias and Ichigo.

"Ichigo by blood is a noble, but the Phenex boy is a pure-blood. Wouldn't the marriage between your daughter and their son make a better union?"

Venelana smiles sadly as she speaks. "Two reasons Yoruichi. First, I want my daughter to be happy in her marriage, much as I am, and her sister-in-law, Grayfia. Second, and this must stay a secret, Yoruichi. Out of all of the Seventy Two Clans, the Naberius has a uniqueness that is theirs alone. No matter who they marry, the children of that marriage will always be a pure-blood. In Ichigo's case though, I think he will be something far greater. He became a Shinigami first, with the bloodline of the Quincy coursing through him and the power of the Hollows within him. If he was ever to awaken his last bloodline, he will be a pure-blood regardless of his other powers. He will be close to my son and the other Maou in power, but in time he could even surpass them."

Yoruichi sits there stunned. Her protégé, the boy she had watched growing up, would be a noble of the Underworld, as well as the next Head of the Shiba Clan. Ichigo was royalty in two worlds. Untouchable. Central Forty-Six would have no sway over him or his family, but they would use his friends against him, to keep him in line. That, she wouldn't allow. If she has to choose, she knows right then who she will side with. As she knows what side Ichigo will take: his own.

That was why the Captains had nearly come to blows during those three weeks. The divisions between them had been over the boy who saved their collective asses and they argued over whether or not to follow Central's commands, then over Kisuke's plan to erase Ichigo's memories while sparing his life. She was livid as was Isshin. Thankfully they had numbers on their side. Kyōraku and Ukitake were the first to support letting Ichigo go, and reluctantly agreed to Kisuke's plan. Suī-Fēng begrudgingly agreed after she and her Little Bee spoke in private. Hitsugaya and Zaraki stood for Ichigo as well, and to her surprise, so did Byakuya. Retsu also thought that killing the savior of their world was far too extreme. But with no Captains yet for Squads Three, Five and Nine, the Lieutenants had little choice but to follow the dictates of Central. No one bother to listen to Kurotsuchi, as all he wanted was the boy's corpse for study. Komamura indicated he would follow the Head Captain regardless. And that left the Head Captain himself.

She could see the age in Yamamoto's face as he sat at those meetings, the arguing slowly getting to him over the course of the week, until Kisuke brought up his plan. Isshin himself came with her oldest friend and when he stood up and spoke in favor of Kisuke's plan, she rushed out. She couldn't and wouldn't stay any longer. For the first time in her life, she was ashamed of herself, her Clan, the very society she was born into. For the first time in years, she cried in grief. Yoruichi didn't return to the shouten until a few days after the vote had been taken. She slept next to Ichigo, holding his comatose hand until the last day. It had taken Kisuke and Tessai that long to weave the Kidō she thought was going to erase all memories of his life.

For weeks afterwards she just slept all day and most of the nights, only getting up to eat sparingly or stretch her legs with a walk. She refused to speak to Kisuke for the first month, just gave him a cold glare as she walked by him. The hardest part was when she would look in on the twins. Karin and Yuzu had not responded well to the news that their brother wasn't coming home. Isshin couldn't outright lie to them but his silence to where he was just as damaging to the girls. She couldn't let them know about her, because only Karin would be able to see her then. Yuzu's spiritual awareness was just starting to gain strength and because of Tia and Nelliel, the stronger Hollows were forced to stay away from Karakura under pain of death.

This of course lead to the four older teens left behind and in the dark as well. The worst of them
had been Orihime. The burnt-orange-haired healer spent days in her apartment sobbing to herself. All Tatsuki could do was hold her best friend until she fell asleep and when she was awake, the black-haired teen had to bathe and feed the soulless healer for the first few weeks. When she finally left her apartment, she, like Yuzu, projected a face of false happiness, a face which her closest friends could easily see past.

Of those friends, her nearest and dearest friend is Tatsuki Arisawa, who despite her tough-girl image was hurting just as much as Orihime. The dark-haired martial artist had to endure not only losing her oldest friend; she had to keep her best-friend from imploding from her grief. But she did find a way to keep Orihime going, through the long weeks; she got the goddess-like healer to eventually find a reason to move forward. Yoruichi checked on each of Ichigo's friends weekly just to keep an eye on them, but when it came to the young martial artist, she knew to look for her at the local dojo. She could see the difference in Tatsuki's demeanor almost immediately. From seeing Ichigo just before his battle with Aizen only to be told he wasn't coming home without any reason given, had driven the young woman to find any excuse to let her rage loose on the world. A few of her sparring partners had borne the brunt of that anger and paid dearly for it.

At least she was showing her hurt unlike the gentle giant Chad, he wouldn't speak at all anymore, unless it was with Orihime and maybe Uryū. Other than those two, he kept to himself mostly; though his Hollow hunting did speak for him. She noticed that he went after anything he could use to release his stress, she even saw him extend the fights longer and take more risks than needed, borderline suicidal in some cases. The Shihōin princess should have known that without Ichigo, without anyone watching his back, Chad would become reckless in his actions. Without Ichigo to remind him that he had his back, Chad took on the burdens of his missing friend by himself. Not even waiting for Uryū or the Squad Thirteen Shinigami now posted in Karakura, he went out of his way to fight the hollows.

This had her thinking of the young Quincy teen. Since their return from Hueco Mundo and the news of Ichigo disappearance, the young man was all but invisible. He showed up for school but had reverted to his former loner status, not even staying as part of the group any more. Whatever was going through his head, Yoruichi had no idea. She didn't check on him as much because truthfully she felt he would adjust to the situation the best. All she could do was take Ryūken at his word that his son was doing fine. Fine, all she ever heard from him was that one damn word. Isshin had been a little more forthcoming about the boy; he was training every night in his father's basement. Punishment is what the former Captain thought, he had heard from Ryūken what had really happened in Hueco Mundo, and figured Uryū didn't want to feel that useless in front of stronger enemies again.

Four teen's lives forever changed because the adults in their lives failed to defeat the three traitors. All four still suffering now because the fools that replaced their predecessors had failed to learn from their mistakes, they just made the same ones and called it law. Lowering her head, Yoruichi did something she never thought she'd ever do.

"Venelana."

"Yes Yoruichi?"

"Thank you for taking care of Ichigo. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking care of…"

"Your son."

Yoruichi nods her head. "He is special to me Venelana; Masaki wanted me to be there for him if anything ever happened to her and Isshin. I wasn't. I was so busy with trying to stop Aizen; I failed to keep my promise to her. He still got involved and because of that, he died twice and came close
Looking up from her sake, Yoruichi tells the Devil the exact requirements Ichigo had to endure to regained his Shinigami powers to save Rukia. Then the horrors she heard from Ryūken on exactly what happened in Hueco Mundo when he went there to save Orihime. Then to the battles with the various Captains and Espada that almost cost him life several time during those occasions.

"He is dead? Then how…how is he here?"

"His body is still human Venelana, even with his Soul Chain cut, he is still considered a human, well a hybrid because of his Hollow, but still he is categorized as a human. He wasn't born a Shinigami, he just has our powers, and that power is both abnormal and so insanely powerful that it scares Central Forty-Six. Not to mention he has no allegiance to us. For him, it has always been his family and friends first; Soul Society just coincided with his goals. We needed him, he didn't need us."

"And now?"

"Now, he has no reason whatsoever to ever serve them."

The last day of their vacation is upon the five teens sooner than any of them are prepared for. Especially for the two now in the shower washing themselves after spending the day at the lake. Ichigo is currently washing his girlfriend's back as she holds her hair out-of-the-way. Since the first night they had taken a shower together, they had maintained a delicate balance when they were naked together. It wasn't easy for them, but they both knew the consequences if they crossed that last line. Ichigo wouldn't and Rias couldn't, not yet, not until she is free and he has her father's permission.

"Rias." He says quietly as he kissed her neck.

Leaning back against him, she replies just a quietly. "I know Ichigo. I wish we could stay here forever and not go back."

"I like that plan, I really do but…"

"But we have responsibilities don't we?"

"Yeah, we do."

She turns around and brings her arms up and around his neck. Standing there under the water, she looks up at his face as the water cascades down his back. Leaning forward she begins to kiss the man she wants to openly say is her future. Soon, she is lost in her feelings when something pokes her. Pulling back in confusion, she sees only a very red-faced man trying to hide his eyes from her. As she goes to ask him what is wrong, she feels it again and then it clicks what is going on. Before he can stop her, she looks down.

'It…it…IT'S HUGE! ! !'

"Ah sorry Rias, I got carried away and…and with you….you know….so close. I…I ah couldn't help it. I'm so…"
"Shhh Ichigo. I…I don't mind…it is only natural after all." She says as her own deep blush forms.

However, it's a different thought in her head. 'I…oh my…DAMMIT WHY DO I HAVE TO WAIT!?'

Rias gives him a quick kiss before she saves them both from crossing the threshold. "We should finish Ichigo; we don't want to make the others wait, right?"

"I guess not."

"Ichigo are you moping?"

"Well yeah, I mean this is our last shower, our last real vacation day and starting the day after tomorrow I'll be helping coach the women's Kendo Club. So no, I don't want to go yet, and yes I'm moping Rias." He adds to his displeasure with his scowl, something she hasn't seen in some time.

"Ichigo Shiba!"

"I know, I know. But I had to at least try right?"

"NO!"

"Spoil sport."

As he gets out, he grabs the first towel and holds it open for her to step in. As she does, he wraps it around her chest and folds it in the back before grabbing his own towel and wrapping it around his waist. Bending down, he kisses her forehead before he takes her hand and guides them to their room. As they dry off and begin to get dressed, she hears him beginning to talk to her.

"You know Rias, I think this year I'm not going to worry about my past anymore."

Rias stops putting on her bra and turns to him. "Why? I thought…"

"Not anymore Rias. I know what I want now and who I want to make new memories with." He says causing the woman to start smiling brightly.

"ICHIGO!" She says before rushing and then tackling him to their bed.

She proceeds to kiss him all over his face as she whispers one word over and over. "Yes."

However, through fate or as if she knows somehow, the Devil of misery makes her presence known yet again.

"Click!"

Yuuto and Koneko both pause when they hear the oh-so-familiar war cry.

"AAKKEENNNOOOOOO! ! !"

Koneko looks at Yuuto as she makes an observation. "You know Yuuto-senpai, I feel sorry for Akeno-senpai."

"Why Koneko-chan?"

"Because if he does become a Devil, he is going to remember each time that camera clicked."
Looking at his younger fellow peerage member he begins to smile. "Should be fun watching him get revenge."

"I'm sure the house will be much livelier then."

XXXX

Orihime and Tatsuki are staring at the assembled group of Soul Society's Elite. From the Captains of Squad's Four, Eight, Ten, Eleven, and Thirteen and the many Lieutenants as well as the Clan Elders of Shiba, the two are both nervous as they sit through the ceremony marking Orihime's status as both Isshin's daughter and as a noblewoman of Soul Society. Orihime has to declare she understands what she is agreeing to and is asked if she would uphold the Clan's honor and keep to her oaths until her last breath.

"Yes, I Orihime Inoue do pledge my life to the Shiba Clan for all the days of my life."

The old woman sitting before her takes four sips from the sake saucer before passing it to the young healer for her to drink. Orihime takes the saucer and takes her sips before passing it to her left for Tatsuki to seal her formal adoption.

"I now name you Orihime Inoue Shiba, adopted daughter of Isshin Shiba and Masaki Kurosaki, member of Shiba Clan. Welcome home Daughter."

At those words, everyone in the room begins clapping and hollering their congratulations to the newest member of Soul Society's noble clans.

"Ganju break out the rest of the sake! It's time to party!"

"Wait!? What!?" Tatsuki shouts.

Grinning and taking the young woman in a friendly headlock. "You here to celebrate Tatsuki-chan and the best way to do so is with some friendly drinking."

"But we're underage!"

"And?"

"And we can't drink legally Shiba-dono!"

Slapping the girl upside her head, she points a finger at her. "You are in the spirit world Tatsuki and here we don't mind if you drink a little and stop calling me Shiba-dono. I got a name, use it!"

Orihime giggles at Tatsuki and Kūkaku as the two begin arm-twisting with each other, Kūkaku winning easily over the younger woman. As she looks she sees many faces but she frowns when she doesn't see three that she thought should be there. Rukia and Renji she would have assumed would have been here, as would Byakuya since he was a noble himself. Walking around, she finally finds Rukia's Captain standing with his oldest friend and his Lieutenant.

"Excuse me Captain Ukitake, but do you know where Rukia is?"

"Sorry Orihime, but she and Renji are spending their last night with Captain Kuchiki before her mission to the World of the Living tomorrow." The kindly Captain says with a smile.

Orihime brightens at the news. "She's being assigned back to Karakura?"

She sees his smile falter for a moment before he corrects the young Shiba woman. "I'm sorry
Shiba-dono." Orihime blushes at hearing her title. "She and Lieutenant Hinamori are going to investigate a town south of Tokyo. We have detected unusual activities near a prominent human high school; I believe the town is called Isehara."

"Oh, I just thought…" Orihime eyes drop towards the floor.

Captain Kyōraku places a hand on her shoulder. "We'll see if she can visit on one of her days off. We know that you and the others haven't seen her since the end of the war. But between her promotion and her upcoming wedding, she has been very busy."

"She's engaged!? Is it to Abarai-kun?" Orihime asks in surprise at the news.

Nanao steps in and in an excited voice exclaims the answer. "YES! Isn't it so romantic!?"

Orihime eyes go wide and a smile, a real smile forms after hearing her first good news in months. "She must be so happy."

Nanao tugs Orihime's arm and leads her away from the two Captains and begins to fill in the details of how Renji gained her brother's permission and how he got on one knee in a Lieutenant's meeting and proposed to her. The Shun Shun Rikka wielder giggles as the story goes on.

"So Shunsui, what do you think?"

Taking a sip of his sake, Kyōraku watches as the woman he counts on, his ever-trusty Lieutenant Nanao once again saves the day. "It wasn't fair what we did to him Jūshirō; we should've at least given him a chance to prove himself before exiling him."

"Nor was it fair to them." The white-haired Captain says as he nods towards Orihime and Tatsuki who are both laughing as Nanao repeats the details of the engagement and the actual proposal.

"But we did what we did to save him and them in the short amount of time that we had." Kisuke says as he joins the older two Captains.

Both men frown at the reminder. Kyōraku, keeping an eye on the three women, quietly agrees. "What choice did they give us? At least Isshin knows he is still alive, but I fear what this will do to his twins if they ever find out what we did to their brother."

"That is why we are here today, for them to have an older sibling for them to count on. Those two will fill in for Ichigo for now, as well as give them a sense of normalcy. Besides, since Nelliel and Tia have taken over, the Hollows haven't bothered our little town for weeks. It will give them time to develop their spiritual power easier and allow us train them properly, unlike their brother." Kisuke muses as he too watches his students.

"So when do you think she will realize what she is Kisuke?"

A smile forms on his face as he watches his next possible project. "Arisawa will be ready soon enough."

XXXX

Rukia and Renji are sitting by the back gardens looking up at the night moon. Byakuya had given them the rest of the night to themselves before Rukia leaves for her mission. Of course the servant watching them didn't count according to the rules of courtship.

"Renji, once we're married, we won't have to worry about them or anyone else watching us."
The red-headed Lieutenant looks down at his fiancée. "I'm not worried about them Rukia, it's not
knowing when you are coming home. I mean you could be gone for weeks or months while you
and Momo are on assignment. I'm gonna miss you, that's all."

Rukia leans against his body and grabs his hand. "I'll be home before you know it. Then you and I
can start planning our wedding. How does that sound?"

Squeezing her hand, he kisses the top of her head. "You'll be careful right? You don't have…"

Both tense at his slip but she looks up at him. "Renji, it's okay you know. I miss him too."

"How he disappeared is what's still bugging me Rukia. By the time anyone got to the area, all they
found was 'his' remains and nothing else. Captain Kuchiki and the other Captains refuse to even
speak on the matter, no one knows anything, and if they do, they won't tell us. It's…It's frustrating
not knowing what happened to Carrot-head."

"He is our best friend Renji, the three us have been through so much with Orihime, Chad and Uryū.
We are a team and him not being here is slowly tearing all us up inside. Captain Hitsugaya told me
that Rangiku had voiced concerns about Orihime but they were denied by Central Forty-Six to
leave for the World of the Living to visit her. They are trying to enforce the rules about Shinigami
and human interactions. But now that Orihime is one of us, it's going to be harder for them to stop
us."

Rukia frowns about missing Orihime's induction into the Shiba Clan, but she and Renji have to stay
with Byakuya after their meeting with the Elders. Also, she doesn't want to miss spending her last
night with Renji before they are separated by her mission.

"Come on Renji, I don't want to spend our last night feeling sorry for ourselves. We did that enough
already."

Renji leans back as Rukia shifts so she can lie across his legs. "Renji, I want to wish you good luck
with Nii-sama when I'm gone. Please do your best."

"I will Rukia; I promise you I won't embarrass you or Captain Kuchiki."

"Thank you Renji. I'm going to miss you, you know." She says as she laces her fingers with his.

Responding, he squeezes her hand back. "I'll be counting the days until you come home."

The two sit in silence, letting the night claim their last moments together before Renji has to leave
for his small room back at the squad's barracks. Shifting so she is looking out into the back garden,
she gives her fiancée something to help him in the coming weeks, something for him to strive for.

"Just think when I get back, we'll be planning our wedding Renji." She whispers just for him.

"I'm looking forward to calling you Tsuma." Renji says as he looks at the Sakura trees in full
bloom.

Rukia, also staring at the trees wipes a tear discretely as she thinks about their wedding; a sense of
loss however mars her thoughts. 'It wouldn't be the same though. Not without our real friends being
there. Maybe we should hold the wedding at the Shiba's so they can come. Now that Orihime is a
Shiba, they can't refuse a noble of her stature.'

Renji gets up and helps Rukia to her feet as well. Kissing her on her cheek, he steps back, still
holding her hand as he speaks to her. "Good luck tomorrow Rukia. Keep Momo out of trouble and
both of you come back safe, okay?"

Smiling she kisses his cheek back. "I promise Renji."

She watches as he leaves through the main garden to the front of the mansion.

"He is right of course Rukia. You and Lieutenant Hinamori must return home safely upon completion of your mission."

Not even turning, she says with confidence. "Hai Nii-sama, we will."

Before he turns to retire to his own rooms, Byakuya pauses. "Rukia, I haven't said it enough in the past, but I do so now with great humility, you make me proud to call you my Imouto."

Rukia spins around and instead of her brother's back, she sees him facing her directly; she almost steps back, but his arms stop her when they encircle her. "Hisana would be proud of you as well Imouto."

"Thank you Nii-san." She smiles as she returns her brother's hug.

'Thank you Ichigo Kurosaki for helping me get her back.' The noble thinks as he looks down at his sister.

XXXX

Momo is staring at her friend wondering why in the world she is the one who has to suffer with this task. Rangiku lists the clothes, perfumes and certain X-rated manga she wants the two Shinigami to buy when they are away on their mission. As the Squad Five Lieutenant looks at the ever growing list, she simply gives up trying to write it all down.

"No."

Rangiku pauses in her drinking. "No? No what Momo?"

Crossing her arms and taking her own Captain's advice when dealing with the now out-of-control Squad Ten Lieutenant. "I'm not going to spend hours doing your shopping Rangiku. You'll just have to wait until Shiro sends you on your own mission. Besides, me and Rukia have a serious mission to complete. And the quicker we do so, the quicker she can return and get married to Renji-kun."

"But Momo…"

"No buts Rangiku, if you want these things either get your own mission to Karakura, or sneak out with Yumichika next time he goes for his beauty supplies."

"You know about that?"

"Everyone knows he does it, but he at least has his Captain's permission to do so. Now if you want, I'll tell you when his next foray to the World of the Living is."

"OH, THANK YOU MOMO! You're the best friend a girl can have!"

Momo just smiles as she congratulates herself for pushing Rangiku onto the Fifth Seat of the Eleventh Squad. 'Sorry Ayasegawa-kun.'

In the Squad Eleven barracks, a chill goes down the spine of a certain beauty-obsessed Fifth Seat
who sneezes, causing their Captain to start an impromptu sparring match to 'toughen them all up'.

Rangiku fills her saucer before she turns to the petite Shinigami. "So if you two are posing as sisters what name are you using? Kuchiki or Hinamori?"

"No, we decided to honor both her Lieutenant and Ichigo."

Tessai watches as the hell butterfly flies away after delivering its message to him. Going to the room where they store the Gigai for Soul Society, he grabs the new experimental models for the two Shinigami coming shortly for their assignment. Kisuke had sent the message after he stated he, Isshin and the girls were going to be delayed until late tonight. It seems they were missing Orihime and Tatsuki after a night of drinking with both Kūkaku and Lisa Yadōmaru. Now Squad Two and Squad Eight were sending out search parties for the four missing women, most likely they had crashed at another Shiba hideout. Until then he told Tessai to give them the Gigai and any other equipment they deemed necessary and charge Soul Society the usual twenty-five percent mark-up.

"Jinta, Ururu, we'll be having guests soon; please get the items requested ready for them so they can leave as soon as possible."

"Yes Tessai-san." The two say in unison and with practice ease they move the Gigai into a separate room with a choice of clothes.

Tessai walks up to a wall and opens a secret panel to reveal a variety of items for visiting Shinigami to use on their various missions. He begins pulling new model smart phones, a laptop, and money for them to get themselves basic necessities when they reach the safe house that Squad Two should have already procured for them. After gathering the required items, he calculates the cost with the mark-up; he takes them to the same room with the Gigai and places them on a mat nearby. Looking at everything, he is satisfied by what he sees and leaves the room and makes his way downstairs to wait for the deploying Shinigami.

Sitting as he waits, he thinks back to the night he helped send Ichigo to his new life, a life without his memories. He didn't utter a word when he felt Kisuke manipulating the Kidō, not once questioning his boss's motives, because knowing Kisuke; he had something up his sleeve. His stoic face expressing neither his sadness nor his anger as to what they had been forced to do that night. The only thing odd was the man that had come for Ichigo that night, a middle-aged gentleman with graying hair and deep blue eyes. Isshin simply introduced him as a friend of Ichigo's mother's family and the two asked to be left alone with Ichigo. For an hour the two men spoke in the room that was shielded by a barrier, a barrier he couldn't find a way past as he probed it for inspection purposes.

When Isshin and the man later introduced as Amyntas stepped out of the room with Kisuke, Isshin was blanked face while the older man had thunderclouds in his eyes. Amyntas had told Kisuke he had a car coming for him and when it arrived, he and Ichigo would be leaving immediately. Going back inside the room with Ichigo, Tessai didn't see the man again until the car arrived. He carried Ichigo out with him swiftly, indicating his more than human strength, and that was the last time he had seen the young warrior.

"We should have tried harder Kurosaki-san." Tessai whispers just before the Senkaimon opens up just above the surface of the training room.

Standing up, he has to hide his surprise when a head of raven black hair and violet eyes greet him with a smile.
"Been a long time Tsukabishi-san."

"Indeed it has been Lieutenant Kuchiki. Hello Lieutenant Hinamori."

The black-haired woman bows to the older Shinigami. "It is a great pleasure to finally meet you Commander."

Laughing, Tessai waves his hand to the Lieutenant. "I haven't held that title in over a century. But thank you for the honor Momo Hinamori."

Momo smiles and begins to look around the cavernous space and asks about it. "Tsukabishi-san how is it that no one knows this is here?"

"You may call me Tessai, Hinamori-chan. And to answer your question, you are in a dimensional space under the shouten."

"Wow, I heard that certain Kidō could create space like this, but to actually see it is amazing."

Wiping a tear, he begins to speak with a small amount of pride. "Thank you Hinamori-chan, you are only the second person to compliment me on such a thing. I thank you."

"You're welcome Tessai-san, but who was the first?"

Neither she nor Rukia miss the slight tenseness in his face despite his glasses. He pushes them up and as he turns he speaks to them. "Ichigo Kurosaki. Now if you will please follow me I'll show you to your Gigai."

As Tessai walks away, Momo turns to Rukia slightly. "Rukia, why is it whenever we speak about Ichigo near a Captain, they all get weird?"

Rukia sighs. "I don't know Momo, but one day I swear I'm going to find out what happened to him. And then someone is going to pay for it."

XXXX

Ichigo is seething right now. Out of the twenty members of last year's team, seven had graduated and the rest are now present. What has him in such a foul mood however, besides waking up early and leaving his nice warm bed and its equally nice warm occupant are the twenty four new students standing apart from the returning members. Looking over at his team Captain, Tomoe Meguri, he growls as she shrugs her shoulders at him. He had honestly been surprised when she came to the first practice with the Class President recommending her as team Captain. He was going to refuse until Souna had him spar with her. His ribs still hurt from her cheap shots early on in the spar, but overall he had to admit she was better than good. Yuuto is slightly faster and stronger than her, but he and the younger man do spar whenever they can sneak away from Rias and Akeno, so it is only expected.

Growling at the fawning fan-girls as he fights to keep his bile down, he begins to grin evilly as he decides upon his favorite tactic to weed out the groupies.

"All right, for you newbie's, we will be doing a simple exercise while the returning members under Tomoe practice their katas. Now this is a very simple exercise designed to test your endurance. Very simply put, whenever my Shinai hits the floor, you will sprint from end to end of this dojo in full gear, including your men. You will do so until I am convinced that you are giving me your every effort. Any questions?"
Hearing no one speak, he walks to the middle of the gym and faces the wannabes. Striking the floor once, he is severely disappointed to see only three put any real effort into their runs. The rest choose between a walk and a light jog for his exercise. As they make it back to their starting point, he immediately hits the floor again but this time he gets angry.

"What do you call that!? What!? On my worst day, I'd be kicking your asses! Now move your asses like you mean it! If not this will be a long, hard and very miserable day for you ladies, now move it, move it MOVE IT! ! !"

Soon after his little pep talk, he begins to see the first of the girls dropping to their hands and knees before they begin to vomit from the heat and exertion. Turning, he sees the nurse and a student aide going to each of the now heaving girls. After she is sure of their conditions, she points them to take a seat against a wall where a small fan is blowing cool air. Soon, there are only three girls still running with each strike, not as fast as before but they still aren't giving up. When they finish their latest lap, he calls to them to stop.

"You three are on the team. Go and take off your equipment and get some liquids in ya." Turning to the wall where the rest of the tryouts are still resting, he turns his scowl on them. "Now, if you are serious about being here, line up and get ready to go again, if not, turn your equipment in."

Soon, he internally grins as he watches the first girl or two think about the commitment he wants from them before getting up and heading to the girl's locker room, soon the exodus begins. As the last girl walks away, Tomoe steps up next to him.

"Very interesting technique Shiba-senpai."

"Thanks. Now about the three that are still here, I think tomorrow after opening ceremonies we should test them on their skills. And thanks Tomoe, I'm glad I got someone of your experience on the team this year. We should place well."

Bowing slightly to her coach, she grins at him. "Thank you senpai for getting rid of the dead weight before I had to do it myself."

Nodding as he and his Captain walk back to the remaining members, he notices he is still two members short for competition.

'I hope I can find a few more before our first meet.'

XXXX

The four Devils watched the practice through the glass ball, Rias openly smirking at how easily Ichigo got rid of the fan-girls. Sōna was impressed as well that the new Kendo coach made it nearly impossible for the girls to find the desire to stick it out. Akeno and Tsubaki had watched with growing amusement when each time the young man hit the floor with his Shinai, the waves of agony from the teens trying out for the team could be felt even in the Student Council room.

"I'm jealous Rias, if you really do add him to your peerage; you will have a second Knight of excellent character. Between Yuuto and Ichigo, their attacks would be merciless even for Riser's pieces." Sōna says as she pushes her glasses back up.

"Ara, ara Sitri-sama, that isn't the only 'attack' Buchou hopes for." Akeno says with a knowing smile.

Rias surprises the room when she just snorts at her Queen. "I won't deny what I want from Ichigo but I will not make him a Devil until he understands exactly what is expected of him. Not only that,
we have no idea of how to even defeat Riser if it comes to a Rating Game. I won't have him killed because I want to rush my desire to end this engagement."

"Gremory-sama, do you know how exactly his human family became to be so respected by Lord Naberius?" Tsubaki asks as she watches the Sitri Knight and the Kendo coaches lead the remaining members through the basic Kendo stances.

"Not really Tsubaki-san, my parents and my siblings will only tell me that Ichigo's family had been servants at one time; not reincarnated Devils, but actual servants in the human world. How that came to pass, even 'Uncle Amyntas' won't say, but whenever the subject does come up, I swear I see sadness in Lord Amyntas's eyes."

"It's funny, but I tried to see if I could find out anything to help Ichigo, but every time I put his name in to the search panel, I kept getting errors, almost as if someone was hiding him from me. I even tried using magic but failed to find any answers." The Queen of the Sitri peerage speaks with a hint of curiosity.

Akeno places a hand on her friend's shoulder. "That's because the Naberius Clan has made sure that you won't find anything on him. Lord Naberius wants him to live as peaceful a life as possible from what he has told us. Ichigo's parents died when he was a young child and left him an orphan. Lord Naberius adopted him but never told Ichigo that he was alone in the world." See looks at the ball again. "Ichigo is the last of his line."

Sōna pauses as she watches him suddenly stare at the air with a narrowing of eyes. "Does he feel the spell?"

The other three watch as the orange-haired young man stares hard at the spot they are watching him from for a length of time, frowning in confusion before Tomoe interrupts him and pulls him away.

Rias tilts her head. "I think he knows something was there."

XXXX

Ichigo can't help the weird feeling as he walks back to change after practice. During the entire session, he had a strange sensation that he was being watched. After it finally got too much for him, he stared hard at where he thought his unseen watcher was, and he almost thought he saw a slight distortion in the air after a while, but just as he was about to get a closer look, Tomoe pulled him away to give them their last instructions of the day. Afterwards when he went back to the spot to check, he didn't see anything of that sort.

'I must really be losing my mind.'

XXXX

Zangetsu stares at the ever increasing fractures in the seal with a growing sense of hope, for him such an emotion is alien but he is learning that as he grows to be what he was supposed to be, his inner-self is changing as well. He will always lead his King into battle, but now it is the changing of his own emotions that are surprising to the Hollowfied version of Ichigo.

"So I wonder who was spying on King. I hope someone fun because as soon as I'm free, heads are gonna roll."

He turns to the now fading fake. "Not much longer old man. I wonder how he is going to feel
once he finds out you were trying to lead him astray. You know he has always protected life, but your kind has no regard for life or the souls you destroy."

The older man, still dressed as he once was, simply turns and vanishes into the shadows on the now radically altered landscape of his former home. He knows he cannot stand against the young man any longer, he has grown too powerful and once he holds his power again, his mission is over. The Emperor will lose his greatest chance of winning against the Shinigami that forced him into exile. Looking back at the slowly shattering barrier, it is only a matter of time or one life-threatening event away from utter failure.

'I'm sorry Masaki-sama, but I failed to keep him away from both of your Clans.'

Tensa Zangetsu watches the false spirit leave without a word, he used to think the old man was powerful but once he had gotten a taste of his King's true power, he knows in his heart he has to keep him alive at any cost.

"Ichigo Naberius. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think my little buddies?"

As he stands before the crumbling division, the sounds of metal against metal ring in his ears as he looks and sees the shimmering of the next stage of his wielder's evolution.

"Soon my Queen, I'll set your King free and then your bitch fiancé won't know what hit him."

His laughter rings throughout his reclaimed home as he walks back towards the symbol of Ichigo's power, a Tower of Black rising out of a sea of blue flames.

XXXX

Kisuke, Isshin and the girls get home very late that night, the night before school is supposed to start. Tatsuki reminded them of it the entire trip through the Dangai by beating them both with a sandal she had gotten from Kisuke's old Lieutenant.

'I swear I'm going to give Shinji that ring to really ruin her day.' The Geta wearing shop owner thinks darkly as he rubs the aching bruises on his body.

Passing by the room where the Gigai are stored, he sees his two newest versions are gone. He had hoped to get home earlier but the beating he and Isshin had to endure from Kūkaku and Rangiku for taking away the two teens went on longer than he hoped. Sighing to himself, he casts out his senses; the other members of the shouten are asleep and Yoruichi still isn't home yet. She hadn't really stayed but for a few hours here and there before she left for whatever it was she was doing, and as a betting man, he has a pretty good guess who it is she is doing it with.

Going outside and jumping to the roof, he lays back and stares at the moon. Putting a hand in front of the celestial body, he wonders out loud.

"Ichigo Shiba you lucky bastard."

Closing his eyes, Kisuke finally falls asleep after being awake for the last forty-seven hours. It doesn't last long enough.

"Boss. Boss wake up. It's morning."

Grey eyes blink open blearily, and the effects of three days of drinking suddenly catch up to the
'Never again will I try to match drinks with Shunsui and Jūshirō again.' Moaning as he sits up, Kisuke curses the fiery orange ball in the sky.

Sliding off the roof and dropping to the ground, he looks at one of his oldest friend and trusted comrades to see a glass in his hand, and he hurriedly steps away in fear.

"Ah I'm good really Tessai, no need for anything."

"Nonsense Boss, you look green around the gills. Drinking with the two oldest Captains will do that to younger men such as yourself. Now drink up." Tessai grabs the former assassin easily and forces the concoction down the throat of the struggling man.

Coughing, he is about to berate the man when that ole-so-deadly feeling begins. He Shunpo's to the bathroom, barely making it in time again.

"Tessai!"

"Yes Boss." The corn-braided man says with a smile on the other side of the door.

Grunting as his stomach and his intestines are relieved of their contents, he asks about his Gigai. "So did the Shinigami get what they needed yesterday?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Kuchiki and Lieutenant Hinamori appropriated their Gigai and gear and left for their assignment yesterday afternoon. I suspect they are getting ready for school even as we speak."

Kisuke's eyes narrow and then grow in thought as to why two Lieutenants would be sent on a mission together, unless…

"Tessai, they didn't happen to mention where they are going by any chance?"

"Yes Boss. They said it is near Isehara. The school I believe is Kuoh Academy, which is strange. I looked up the school and it is one of the top five in Japan but it was a private girl's school until recently, it went co-ed this past year due to the founding family's insistence."

Fumbling for his phone, Kisuke hopes and prays that Yoruichi is nowhere near that place.

To Yoruichi:

From Kisuke:

Kuchiki & Hinamori Assign: Kuoh Academy, Isehara. RU there?

A few minutes later.

To Kisuke:

From Yoruichi:

What!? Why r they here? Must Stop! Danger for them!

He types his reply as soon as possible

To Yoruichi:
From Kisuke:

Too late. Assign as students Kuoh Academy, Ichigo?

He waits and waits but he gets no answer from the Princess of the Shihōin.

'Well, now I know where he is.'

XXXX

"KONEKO! HURRY UP!" Ichigo shouts to the top of the stairs again as he slides towards the kitchen to grab the bento for him, Rias and his little partner.

"DAMMIT LOLICON I'M ALREADY DRESSED! LOOKING FOR MY...FOUND IT!" Then the rushing of two feet sound as she explodes down the stairs in her new Kuoh uniform.

Deftly dodging her swing, he grabs her by the waist and spins her around until she is sitting in her seat at the dining room table.

"Eat. You aren't eating enough in the morning which is why you are so grouchy."

Three sets of laughter greet the newest high school student as her older housemates greet the last two, one acting more like a father than a brother.

"I hate you Onii-san."

Kissing the top of her head, he replies back. "Love ya too Koneko, now eat."

Sitting next the white-haired girl and his crimson-haired girlfriend, he begins to eat his own breakfast as he looks over his schedule again. All of them advanced classes and all of them he is sharing with both Rias and Akeno; he has also found out that he is coincidentally in the same classes as the Class President and her best friend as well.

'Well, looks like I get to keep my fifth place again.'

"So how was your first day of practice Ichi-kun?" Akeno asks as she takes a bite of her tamagoyaki.

Swallowing some of his miso soup, he grunts. "After getting rid of the fan-girls and the groupies, it went pretty good. I'm glad I got Tomoe as a Captain this year. Only thing that would make it better would be if Yuuto joined and I wish I had at least two or three more alternates."

"Sorry Ichigo-senpai but I'm part of the Occult Research Club this year. Rias-senpai let me go last year because I was helping the team but now that you are there, I can do what I really want."

Shaking his head, he stands up with his empty plate. "I still don't believe in ghosts but if you're sure, that's fine with me."

Rias gives him a sympathetic look as he walks away, she knows that he is really trying his hardest this year to bring home a championship for the Academy. Looking at Akeno and then Yuuto, both of them also watching his retreating back, she decides she will look at other schools and see if she can get any others recruited to Kuoh in time for the competition.

Soon the five teens are walking through the park, Ichigo and Koneko in the lead as is their custom. Rias and Akeno are behind the two, chatting away about their last year as high school students, and finally Yuuto is trailing behind, keeping an eye out for trouble. Passing by the familiar fountain,
Ichigo almost stops to toss in his usual coin, but Koneko pulls him away to help him keep his promise. Smiling down at his reminder, he lets her take his hand and pull him along.

Rias watches Ichigo with a loving smile as he laughs at something Koneko said to him.

"Penny for your thoughts Buchou?" Akeno says as she gently tugs on Rias's linked arm with hers.

"Just about the future Akeno."

Smiling as she walks alongside her best-friend. "You mean Ichigo."

"Yeah, him."

Speaking lower so they can't be overheard, Akeno looks at her King. "Do you plan on speaking to Lord Naberius soon then?"

"After the season is done Akeno, I don't want him distracted as he pursues his goals. I have five years left as long as Riser doesn't press the issue."

"If he does?"

"Then I have no choice but to agree to a Rating Game."

"Then we will do our best for you Buchou."

"As will I Akeno, as will I."

XXXX

"Rukia, I'm sure it was just the light. This is a very prestigious school in Japan and I seriously doubt they would let a delinquent become a student here."

Frowning at Momo's automatic dismissal of said person as a delinquent as it reminds her of what Ichigo had to endure, Rukia's violet eyes stare hard in the direction she swore she saw a head of orange hair. She knew of only one person who had orange hair, well two but she knows that Orihime is still in Karakura and would be for the year.

"I'm sorry Momo, it's...it's just since he disappeared I haven't felt complete."

"What about Renji-kun? I mean you are engaged to him, so why do you need Ichigo?"

Turning to the other Lieutenant, she speaks to her friend, her eyes looking distant. "Momo, I do love Renji, but Ichigo is my partner. Ever since that night, it...it was our unwritten rule to watch over each other. Besides Nii-sama doesn't like anyone other than Renji or Ichigo guarding me, overprotective assholes that the three of them are at times, but still he does make me feel safe like Renji."

"I didn't know Rukia, I'm sorry."

"It's okay Momo, not many do know, not even Rangiku, you understand?"

"Yes Rukia." Looking at the time, she panics and grabs her 'sister's' arm. "Oh shoot! We have to hurry and get our class assignments."
The ringing of the first bell spurs most of the lingering students to start moving in haste lest they are late on the first day.

**XXXX**

Ichigo is in his usual seat but this year he is surrounded by the school's entire entourage of idols. Rias sits to his right with Sōna in front of him with Tsubaki to her right, while Akeno sits behind Rias. Looking out the window in boredom, he doesn't hear the knock at the door or notice his teacher, Ms. Kai as she goes to the door and speaks to the person standing outside. Coming back in, she starts tapping on her desk.

"Class, we seem to have two new students joining us this year. Please come in now."

Walking inside, raven-black hair and violet eyes, and black hair and black eyes stride into the room with an air of confidence surrounding them, neither of them notice a head of orange that is now lying on his desk with a hand absently running through it. Rukia stands as tall as she can with Momo standing next to her. Both bow to the class as Rukia begins to speak.

"My name is Rukia Shiba and this is my sister Momo Shiba. Please take care of us."

Ms. Kai and the class give the two women stares of disbelief as the teacher stutters out to them.

"Shiba? Are you related to Ichigo-kun then?"

Two heads snap towards the teacher in surprise, Rukia unable answer, but Momo does.

"I'm sorry but did you say Ichigo? Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"No. Ichigo Shiba." The teacher now points to a chair in the last row just as every head slowly turns in the same direction.

Rias, Akeno, Sōna and Tsubaki are watching Rukia as she - with now glistening eyes - stares at the now curious Ichigo with disbelief, hope and more importantly, recognition. When he looks to the front of the room, he sees the two new girls staring at him.

"What?"

"These are the Shiba sisters, Ichigo. Are they related to you by chance?" Ms. Kai asks.

"Nope, never seen either of them before. Why?" He replies.

Rukia breaks for the door with tears beginning to pour down her cheeks after hearing his answer and seeing the truth in his eyes; Momo stops to offer apologies before running after her 'sister'.

The four Devils however make no move, each staring after the two women not because of the reaction on their faces, but because of the unfamiliar energy they felt coming from the running girl. Rias turns a hard eye towards Sōna who nods and gets up.

"Sensei, I will see to the new students. I'm sure that there has been a misunderstanding here." She looks at Ichigo who is still looking around in confusion.

"Rias what's going on?"

She turns towards him and speaks low to him. "Those two have the same last name as you. Are you sure you don't know them?"
Shaking his head, he answers truthfully as he believes. "Like I said before Rias, I have never seen them before in my life."

Wanting to wait until she can speak to the new girl in private, she smiles at him. "Then it's nothing Ichigo, I just thought that maybe that you're not really alone. Their family name being Shiba, I was just curious."

"Nope, no sisters that I can think of."

XXXX

Rukia slams the door to the girl's restroom open before diving in to the last stall. Holding the sides with trembling hands, she is trying desperately to calm herself.

'It's him! It's him but he didn't recognize me! What is going on here!? That is Ichigo, right!?'

"Rukia! Rukia!"

"In here Momo, I'm here." Rukia speaks out, the hurt not missed by Momo.

"Rukia…"

Rukia's phone buzzes as a text message comes through. The Princess of the Kuchiki begins to laugh bitterly as she reads the message.

To: Kuchiki, Rukia

From: Shihōin, Yoruichi

Stay away from Kuoh until you see me! Danger! Your presence could endanger someone there! Stay Away!

She lets her tears fall as she reads the message again.

"Too late Yoruichi, too late."

XXXX

Chapter End Notes

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Alignment

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XXXX

"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu"

XXXX

"Too late Yoruichi, too late."

Rukia Kuchiki

XXXX

Sōna Sitri and Tsubaki Shinra had followed the two new students easily and with an air of readiness they wait outside the bathroom trying to listen in on the conversation. All they hear is the soft sniffling of one of the girls, most likely the one named Rukia. Sōna is about to knock on the door when a voice stops her.

"Sōna, Tsubaki please come with me." The Heir of Sitri turns and stares at Venelana Gremory with a calculating stare.

"I assume this has something to do with our new 'students' then?"

Nodding once, she turns away and walks to her daughter's classroom. "I can see how you beat your fiancé so easily Sōna, but this is best left to me and my friend for the time being. I can't explain everything to you right now but I will tell you what they are."

Sōna looks at the bathroom one last time before she and her Queen follow behind the Gremory matriarch.

Tsubaki walking one step behind her King watches as the older Devil stops before their classroom and enters. A few moments later a stunned looking Rias and a confused looking Akeno are following Venelana out the door. Looking at the four, she gives them a look.

"Sōna, is there somewhere close we can talk in private?"

"Yes, follow me Lady Gremory. We'll use the Student Council room. It will be private."

Venelana allows Sōna to lead the way, asking the young women not to ask anything until they arrive at the room. As she walks, Rias sees her pull out a smart phone and type in a message before sending and putting it away.
"Mother?"

"Rias, be patient for now." It's all she gets from the older woman.

The five women arrive at the room in question and Tsubaki and Akeno ask for leave to make tea, which Venelana allows so. The three sit and as the Student Council President again tries to ask a question, she is again asked to wait.

"When the others arrive we will speak."

Rias and Sōna look at each other in surprise at the information. As they wait, Akeno and Tsubaki come back with tea for five.

"Akeno we need three more cups."

"Three?"

"Yes, they are arriving now."

Soon the door opens again and the four Devils stare at the beautiful woman now entering the room. Her mocha skin and her deep purple hair make her golden eyes stand out like glowing beacons. Her physique however is unmistakably that of someone who takes her body seriously. Behind her though is the next cause of surprise as the 'sisters' Rukia and Momo trail in behind the older woman.

"Yoruichi."

"Hello Venelana. I wish we didn't have to meet this way but the dumbass didn't get to me in time."

Momo gasps at Yoruichi. "Shihōin-dono!"

"Momo-chan, Kisuke maybe the smartest Shinigami alive but sometimes he…is…a…dumbass. I can see why Hiyori beat on him so much when she was his Lieutenant back then."

Rias and the others are now gaping at the three women.

Rias is the first to make the connection. "You're Shinigami!?"

Golden eyes turn on her. "Yes Rias, we are Shinigami. I didn't want you guys to meet so soon but as I said things got out of hand too quickly. I didn't even know that Soul Society had an interest in this place until this morning after speaking to my protégée when I got a message from Kisuke. She just thought it was a normal recon mission assigned to Squads Five and Thirteen. If I had known this earlier, I would have been able to intercept these two earlier and explain things to them. But life's a bitch and you have to deal with the hand given you."


"And he didn't recognize you Rukia." Yoruichi says softly.

Rukia fights to keep her tears from falling again but fails. "He is my best friend Yoruichi, but that thing down there didn't know me."
"THING? ARE YOU CALLING ICHIGO A THING?" Rias, her own nerves now raw after the yelling shouts back.

Rukia's shifts demeanor and aims her anger at the unknown crimson-haired woman. "Yes, a thing, that thing down there is not our Ichigo Kurosaki. I don't know who the hell that is."

"Kurosaki?" Akeno says.

"Yes! His real name is Ichigo…"

Venelana stops them all. "No, his true name is Ichigo Naberius."

Six teen women shift their gazes towards the older Devil with looks of confusion, shock and in the case of Sōna a look of disbelief.

"He…he is a Naberius?"

"Yes Sōna, he is your second cousin once removed. He is really the great-grandson of Lord Amyntas Naberius and Heir apparent to the titles of Guardian of the Damned, Keeper of the Skeleton Tower and the Watcher of the Gates of Hell. Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius will be his complete title." Venelana says before sipping her tea.

Rias stares at her mother in shock as the words hit her. Then it all makes sense why her mother told her those words.

"He's a pureblood?"

"Yes."

The four Devil teens explode with questions, only for Venelana and Yoruichi to hold their hands up to silence the women.

"It is not our place to tell the story Rias. So I will call Lord Amyntas to come and explain." Venelana says as she pulls out her phone and dials a number.

"Hello Amyntas." A pause

"I need your help with a delicate situation." Another pause.

"Hello Amyntas." A pause

"I need your help with a delicate situation." Another pause.

"Shinigami are here."

Moments later a black magic circle appears in the empty spot in the room and a man surfaces from it. Standing before the six silent teens is a man appearing to be in his late twenties or early thirties with burnt-orange hair and dark hazel eyes. The eyes scan the room full of women, before settling on Venelana and Yoruichi; he pauses though as he looks at the Shinigami princess a moment longer than the others. Bowing graciously he begins.

"Venelana. I assume she is your 'contact' on Ichigo."

"Yes. This is Yoruichi Shihōin. Also, I assume this is Rukia Kuchiki but I'm afraid I haven't been properly introduced to her friend."

Bowing deeply to the powerful Devils before her, Momo squeaks out her greetings. "I am Momo Hinamori. I am the Lieutenant of Squad Five and my Captain is Captain Shinji Hirako. I am pleased to meet you Lord Naberius."
No longer able to stand it both Rias and Rukia begin together. "Mother! / Yoruichi!"

Both women however stare back with hardened expressions before Yoruichi commands them to be quiet. "Rias Gremory, Rukia Kuchiki you will sit still and allow us to explain before you ask anything and I mean anything, UNDERSTOOD!!"

Both begin nodding as a heavy weight falls upon their shoulders from the now cranky former Onmitsukidō commander.

"Good. Now I know the six of you have questions but allow Amyntas-san to tell his story and I will fill in the gaps. If you please." She points to the remaining seat.

Amyntas looks at the golden eyes staring at him with respect. Not many would dare to command a Devil, but to do so to one of the Lords of the Seventy-Two clans is gutsy.

Looking at Sōna is always hard for the Naberius Clan leader. "Sōna, your family knows this part well, but it is the beginning of Ichigo's life. You know that your father's aunt was my wife and we had Vincent shortly after our marriage began." Looking down at the ring he still wears but on a different finger he starts again. "Vincent came home one day with a Queen and as his wife-to-be when he was fighting in the unrest during the Civil War. Her name was Kiku Kurosaki and she was Ichigo's grandmother."

"But Kiku-sama was childless when they passed away." Sōna couldn't help interjecting.

"No she wasn't, we hid her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter from everyone, including the Maou. A mistake, but one that was fortuitous that we did, since if we did not then Soul Society as it is now wouldn't be here."

Now Rukia looks shocked. "Masaki-sama!?"

"Yes Rukia-san, Masaki was my granddaughter. After the assassination of nearly my entire Clan by the old Maou faction, I hid her in the human world until she was old enough for marriage. I allowed the Ishida's to take her in with the hope she would marry their son, her distant cousin."

Momo looks shocked by this. "Her cousin? Why?"

The Guardian looks at the Shihōin, waiting for her to give an answer, which she does with a slight nod.

"Because Momo-san, Masaki was a Quincy, she was among the last of the purebloods left."

Rukia gasps as she is learning something new about her best-friend's life. "Masaki-sama was a Quincy but how? Ichigo said she died at the hands of Grand Fisher!"

Rias and Akeno are now also in shock. "Ichigo's mother was killed!? By who!?!"

Yoruichi looks at Rukia. "He entrusted you with the story Rukia, you also know it is what drives him to be the man he is today."

Rias, Akeno and the two Sitri members wait as Rukia folds her hands on the table and then listen intently when she recounts the day that the Kurosaki family visited Masaki's grave on the anniversary of her death. The day Ichigo had to once again face his mother's killer. How in the end it was his actions and words that made the Shinigami realize how far her friend would go to protect his loved ones. She ends the story with how Ichigo drove Grand Fisher away but failed to kill him.
"So this Grand Fisher is still out there then?" Akeno asks with anger boiling in her, only for Yoruichi to put out her fire.

"Isshin, Ichigo's father killed him. It was shortly before Grimmjow and his merry band of psychos invaded Karakura, before your reassignment Rukia."

"Good. I'm glad that Isshin killed that bastard." Rukia mutters out.

Rias is staring at her bleeding hands, she had clenched them so hard she had driven her nails into her skin without even noticing it.

"Buchou! Your hands."

Looking down, she unclenches her hands and see the deep furrows in her skin. "I'm okay Akeno, they'll heal."

Momo stands up and walks over to the crimson-haired woman before bowing slightly to her. "I can heal them now if you like. I don't think it matters if you are a Devil or not. Please allow me."

Nodding and then watching as a green light covers her hand, Rias questions the story. "Lord Amyntas, if…"

"Rias, you are forbidden to use those titles with me. I have a good feeling about yours and his futures now." The older man tells her.

Blushing quiet red, she sputters out her question. "Thank…Thank you, um, Amyntas." She gives her mother a look and sees a blushing but smiling Venelana looking back at her, then Yoruichi quirks an eyebrow at the older Gremory. "As I was trying to ask, how is it possible for Lady Masaki to be both a Quincy and a Pure-blood Devil?"

Amyntas looks at his future great-granddaughter-in-law, even if she doesn't know it yet, and continues the history of the Kurosaki family.

"Rias, Sōna you might not know this part of my Clan's history, but Vincent disobeyed me during our Civil War. The war that saw your brother, Rias, and your sister, Sōna, win in the end. I had forbidden anyone from my Clan to take sides but he did, he chose the side of the Sitri and Gremory Clans. Vincent cared too much for Sirzechs and Serafall, and believed in their cause too much, to stand by and let them put their lives on the line without fighting alongside them. It would come back to haunt us years later when Kiku gave birth to Masaki. She wanted her human family to see her daughter, so we came to the human world without our peerages. Vincent and I failed to realize the danger, and the lengths the old Maou Faction would go to exact their revenge on us."

He pauses as that day plays out in his head, the day he lost almost everything. "We were on our way to her family's home when we were attacked. I don't remember how many attackers there were, but they had surprise on their side and set up several very powerful spells that forced me to deal with them before I could get to my family. In the end, I was too late. Vincent and Cornelia had died protecting Kiku, and she was grievously wounded as well. She knew she wasn't going to survive so she begged me to take Masaki away, to have her raised as a normal human, to keep her out of our worlds. I teleported their bodies home, but when I made my way to the Kurosaki's family home, I realized they weren't spared either. I left with Masaki and hid in the human world until I found a place for Masaki to stay. They were distant relatives of her family but they weren't Quincies, and the old Maou Faction had overlooked them. During the years afterwards, I would check in on Masaki from time to time. It was during one such time, I noticed what her mother had feared, Masaki had become spiritually aware. That is when I decided to arrange for her to become
part of the Ishida family, to marry their son Ryūken."

Amyntas then turns his gaze upon Yoruichi before starting once more. "And that is how she and Isshin would eventually meet. It wasn't until after her death that I learned about Ichigo and the twins from Isshin. I wanted to kill him then, but he told me what had happened and when I looked at Ichigo for the first time, I could see the haunted look in his eyes. I made Isshin swear to keep him and the twins away from the Underworld, Soul Society and anything not human, but little did I know that your friend Urahara had other plans for Ichigo. The one thing Isshin had withheld from your friend after Masaki died, Yoruichi-san was the fact that Masaki was an unawakened Devil. I had sealed her power when she was a baby, to hide her from the Underworld, but I had no way of sealing her other power, her mother's Quincy power. It's the same thing for Ichigo, he gained his Shinigami powers from his father, but his Hollow and unawakened Quincy powers come from Masaki, and his Devil power is sealed."

Pausing once more, he looks down at his tea. "And that leads us to where we are today. Even with just his Shinigami and Hollow powers, Ichigo became too powerful too quickly, and that made Soul Society's Central Forty-Six fear him. They ordered his execution but Urahara got to him first and hid him away. It was only then that Isshin told him the full truth about Masaki's real family. He knew what would happen if we Devils found out that they had killed one of our own without just cause, it would have caused war between the Devils and Soul Society, a war we would have won but at a steep price."

"The worlds would have become unstable as it did during the war with the Quincy." Yoruichi finishes for him.

"Yes. So Urahara devised his plan to keep Ichigo safe but free from Soul Society by sealing his powers and his memories. However, I think we all know he had other plans now, don't you agree Yoruichi-san?"

The Shihōin Princess looks at the Devils and nods in agreement. "I think he knew if he was around other Devils, eventually Zangetsu would find a way to break free and at the same time break the seal on his latent bloodline, his Devil powers."

Akeno speaks up. "So, is that why we were chosen to watch over Ichigo then? To awaken his powers?"

Shaking her head no, Venelana speaks up. "No Akeno, we were chosen because we were the only Clan other than the Sitri that Amyntas trusts. He wanted to fulfill his promise to Kiku to keep her daughter safe, but this time it was her grandson he was trying to protect. But as he pointed out, it seems that Ichigo's mentor has other plans once again. What they are, not even we know. He is a rather dubious person Yoruichi."

The room watches as the former Captain's head hits the table in frustration. "He is always one or two steps ahead of the rest of us. Even now he and Isshin must be having a good laugh at our expense."

Looking up she turns to Rukia and with soft eyes, she bows in apology to her. "I wanted them to tell you and the other Lieutenants the truth, but Central overruled us. They wanted the whole thing swept under the rug and the facts buried in the Daireishokairō from prying eyes. The only reason Ichigo is still alive, Rukia and Momo, is because too many Captains including Byakuya and Shinji voiced objections, treasonable objections."

Momo and Rukia both gasp, Momo recovers first and with a shaky voice asks if it means what she thought. "The Captains threatened civil war within the Seireitei?"
"That is why this insane plan was agreed to. Kisuke and Isshin knew that it was the only way to save Ichigo, stop a possible civil war and now that we have talked this long, I suspect it was also to give Zangetsu time to break the Kidō for Ichigo. Just one problem exists though."

Everyone turns to the former Captain as she finishes her thought. "We have no idea what the key is to breaking the Kidō from the outside might be. Kisuke wouldn't have made it that simple, he knew he couldn't contain Zangetsu for long but he did make it nearly impossible for Zangetsu to break two layers at the same time. This is why as of now, Rukia and Momo, you two are reassigned to help Rias and her friends in keeping Ichigo safe. I'll keep Soul Society from learning the truth, I do have a little bee to help me with that, so keeping you two out of it will be easy, just observe and if necessary keep any Hollows from them."

"But Yoruichi-san, what about Rukia and…"

"It can wait Momo." Rukia interrupts with a hard voice. "He'll understand why I didn't come home as soon as I promised. He…he wants to know too, so I don't think he'll be upset once he learns why. Yoruichi do you think you can get a message to him for me?"

"I can Rukia, but whatever you do, don't tell him the whole truth until Ichigo is himself once again."

"I understand."

Rias looks at her mother. "This is why you wanted me to pursue my dream."

"Yes Rias."

"Ah, what dream?" Rukia asks with a hint of curiosity.

Rias's blush isn't missed by anyone; unfortunately she isn't aware of the Shihōin's teasing ways. "It seems Rukia that Ichigo has found his future wife already. Rias here has succeeded in doing what every other woman has failed to do. She has captured our Berry's heart romantically. She's even sleeping with him already."

"WHAT!?" Four of the teen women scream out.

Yoruichi falls to the floor laughing at their expressions. "Not that way, you perverts, she just shares Ichigo's bed with him."

"That's still sleeping with him Yoruichi!" Rukia shouts with a blooming blush on her face.

"Well, he is my boyfriend Rukia, why shouldn't I?" Rias says defensively.

Sōna eyes pop out then. "He's your boyfriend? When did this happen?"

Venelana giggles then. "He confessed before all you went home to the Underworld. It was when they were taking a bath together."

Rukia face gets a deeper shade of red to match the Crimson Princess's own red face. Momo almost faints while Sōna and Tsubaki look at each first before turning to Rias.

"What about your engagement to Riser Phenex, Rias?"

The crimson-haired teen growls. "I have said this before, I am not marrying him. My father and brother made that arrangement, not me. I will not honor it, nor will I allow it. I love Ichigo and he
is the one I will marry one day. I'd rather die than marry anyone else."

Yoruichi smiles then, at least she can keep that promise to Masaki. "Then I will help you Rias Gremory, if you really want to marry my boy, you will need to know as much as you can about him. Rukia will fill you in on his Shinigami history, I'll tell you about his life."

"What about his family, are they Devils as well? His sisters I mean?" Rias asks her mother with hesitation.

"Yes my dear, but unlike Ichigo they haven't become Shinigami or Quincy and they certainly haven't become Devils. Which is why everything said in this room is to be kept between us. It will only endanger them until Ichigo's powers return. You do understand now why you and Akeno were given this task Rias, you were his only protection but now..." She points to Rukia, Momo and Yoruichi. "You will have help. I'm sorry we kept this from you for this long, but please understand if the wrong people had found out, he would have become an immediate target."

Rias looks at Akeno and the Shinigami before she answers. "We will do our best Mother, Amyntas, Yoruichi."

The three adults get up at this point and move to a spot away from the teens. Venelana turns to the teens before they leave. "There is one other thing I need you to be wary of. It seems there are Fallen Angels in our territory; Yoruichi is keeping a close watch on them and may have found them using an abandoned church on the outskirts of town. Watch out for them and keep them away from Ichigo. I don't know why they are here, but one of them has already killed at least seven young men. If you come across them, call me or Yoruichi but do not engage them at this time. The truce we have is fragile even now, I don't want any mistakes. We will see you tonight for dinner and whatever you do, do not tell Ichigo anything."

"Yes Mother. / Venelana-sama." The group of teens replies back to the departing Gremory.

Soon the six teens are alone in the Student Council room. Sōna breaks the ice then.

"Since we haven't been properly introduced I would like to welcome you to Kuoh Academy. I am Sōna Sitri, but in school I am known as Souna Shitori, Student Council President, this is my Queen and Vice President of the Student Council Tsubaki Shinra."

Momo bows and introduces herself again and then Rukia introduces herself. "I am Rukia Kuchiki, Lieutenant of Squad Thirteen, and Heir to the Kuchiki Clan."

Akeno bows to the two Shinigami and makes her own introductions. "I am Akeno Himejima, Queen of Rias Gremory's Peerage."

"I am Rias Gremory, Heir to the Gremory Clan."

Silence settles over the women before Rukia looks at Rias. "Is he doing well Rias-san?"

"He is for the most part, but he does suffer from black-outs. They happen when he remembers things about his past."

Rukia looks at her with worry. "Can you tell me what he has seen?"

Rias nods her head and begins to tell her of the different memories, when she is done Rukia smiles sadly. "The light-haired girl is Yuzu, the black-haired girl is Karin; his younger sisters, they're fraternal twins. The white version of himself is most likely his Hollow but it's strange that he would see him."
"Why?"

Rukia frowns as she recalls Captain Hirako's explanation of him fighting for control over his Hollow. "It was when he became a Vizard, a Shinigami with the powers of a Hollow. In order to gain dominance, he had to defeat his Hollow, which he did. But you're saying he is seeing his Hollow again which I don't understand. Does Yoruichi or Venelana-san know about this?"

Akeno and Rias both nod yes to this.

"I am sure she has told Venelana-san this Rukia-san." The Queen answers.

Rukia then turns to Rias with an odd expression in her eyes. "So, you and Ichigo?"

Rias blushes once again but holds her head high. "Yes, we are in a relationship. He... he doesn't have someone waiting for him does he?"

"No, there is someone who does love him, but I know Ichigo doesn't see her as more than another sister, which is kinda funny now. She became his sister by adoption recently."

"That's why the Shiba Clan announced an official adoption ceremony then! It was for Orihime-chan!" Momo exclaims excitedly.

"Yes Momo, she is now his sister. I don't know why Isshin did it but I think it has to do with the twins. I heard from those that have seen them that they haven't been doing well since Ichigo's disappearance."

"Can you tell me about him Rukia, what he was like when he had his memories, about his family and his friends? I... I want to know so that I'm not lost if he does gain them back, I want to know as much as I can about the man I love."

"Don't we have to get back to class now?"

Sōna shakes her head and answers. "No, Rukia. Today is just the first day and all that was planned was the Opening Ceremony. We don't have to attend it. So we have the rest of the school day to get to know each other and for you to tell us what the real Ichigo was like, and hopefully will be once again."

Rukia barks out a laugh then. "Well the first thing you should know is that Berry can be a very rude bastard. The first time I ever talked to him was when I was tracking a Hollow..."

Walking down the hall with Yuuto and Koneko to lunch, Ichigo can't help the feeling he has had ever since Rias and Akeno left with Venelana. He thought that they'd be back by now, but they have yet to show up. As his worry increases, he is tempted to look for them, but Venelana had given him a smile to assure him that things were okay.

'Hopefully they'll be back in time for lunch.'

"Onii-san, are you okay? You are spacing out."

"Sorry Koneko, I'm just worried about Rias. Venelana pulled her and Akeno out right as homeroom started and they haven't come back yet."

Yuuto and Koneko both share a glance, they had felt two powerful Devils arrive separately earlier,
one they knew was the Gremory matriarch, but the other was one they hadn't recognized. They can only assume that something is going on and when they see their Buchou, they will find out what it is then.

Koneko grabs Ichigo's hand and guides him to the cafeteria. "Come on Onii-san, we'll look for them after lunch."

Smiling down at the young woman, he and Yuuto are herded to the cafeteria, where along the way they pass by a brown-haired boy who is openly staring at them along with two other students. He growls when one of them speaks too loudly though.

"Look at that Issei. Shiba-senpai has all the bishoujos hanging off his arms. First it was Rias-senpai and Akeno-senpai, now it's the first year Koneko-chan. Why can't we be lucky enough to get in on that action!?"

Swiftly twisting his head with a snarl beginning to form, he is cut off when both Yuuto and Koneko grab his arms and drag him away, both using more strength then they normally have to before. Yuuto glances at Ichigo and sees something that gives him pause. Ichigo's sclera had somehow darkened and his irises have a slight golden shine to them, he glances at his fellow Devil and sees that Koneko has seen it to.

"Onii-san, please come along. They are hentai so ignore them please!" Koneko's voice betrays her worry.

Snapping out of his sudden anger, Ichigo looks down at his worried little sister. "I'm… I'm sorry Koneko…I don't know what came over me just now."

He releases her hand and steps away from the two younger students. "I think I should go to the infirmary, I don't feel too good right now…"

They watch as he turns away and disappears down the hallway, then Yuuto realizes too late that the nurse is in the opposite direction.

'Where is Ichigo-senpai going?'

Looking down to see the Neko is now getting anxious, he gently nudges her. "Koneko go find Buchou and tell her what happened, I'll try and find out where he is going and send word back to you. Hurry Ko-chan."

Watching as his fellow Devil sprints down the hallway towards Buchou's and Akeno's last known whereabouts, the Knight dashes down the same hallway looking inside empty rooms and asking anyone if they have seen the taller man. Some point down the same hallway, but no one remembers anything after seeing him walk by briskly. Yuuto is starting to get nervous himself after fifteen minutes of fruitless searching when his cell phone rings.

"Hello."

"Yuuto, go to the roof. Look for him there." His master says.

"Okay Buchou." Yuuto hangs up and sprints up the closest stairwell to the roof top.

Cautiously, he opens the door and peeks around before sticking his head outside. He pauses when he sees a head of orange lying down on the roof, looking up at the sky without a care in the world. Slipping back inside, he redials the last number.
"He's here Buchou, how did you know?" Yuuto asks her with genuine surprise.

He hears voices in the background before she answers. "Keep an eye on him until I get there Yuuto. I'll explain everything at club today. We...we will have guests today."

Kiba looks at the phone after his mistress hangs up and nearly jumps when a voice calls out to him.

"I know you're there Yuuto."

Sheepishly coming out from the stairwell, he runs his hands through his hair as he addresses the older man. "Sorry Ichigo-senpai."

"Don't be Yuuto; I'm the one that should be saying sorry. I don't know what came over me back there, but I just got this feeling when those idiots began to sprouting their crap."

Yuuto stands near Ichigo, not saying a word as he leans over the railing looking down at the courtyard at the milling students below.

"She's coming isn't she?"

"Yes Ichigo, she is."

"I guess I'm going to hear it for scaring Koneko."

"Possibly Ichigo, she was pretty worried when you walked away. I was too."

"Sorry."

"It's okay; just remember to keep your cool when Buchou rips into you though." Yuuto ends with a short laugh.

Groaning, the older man sighs then. "I'll do my best."

"You better do more than that Ichigo. Yuuto will you give us some privacy please?" Rias says as she walks out onto the roof.

Bowing to his mistress, the young Knight disappears back down the stairwell. Rias frowns as she walks up to where Ichigo is lying on the rooftop.

"Please come down Ichigo." She says softly.

Turning his head, he slowly gets up and looks at the roof below before he jumps down from the rooftop and lands next to his girlfriend. She surprises him by wrapping her arms around his waist and just squeezes him tight.

"Koneko is worried about you Ichigo."

"I figured as much, especially after what I did."

She looks up to see his face is still looking away, not liking that she gently pulls his face until she can see his eyes. She doesn't see any difference but she can see a distant weariness in them, just like he had whenever one of his black-outs are of a new memory, haunted by what he'd seen.

"Ichigo, you know I'm here for you so please tell me what happened?"

Looking and seeing the same worry as his little walking buddy, he tells her. "I heard them talking
about me and you and the others like I was…like I was some sort of pervert and this anger came out of nowhere. I…I wanted to punch their lights out Rias. If it hadn't been for Koneko and Yuuto, I may have done just that to those three punks."

Keeping his face in her hands, she glares at him as she gently admonishes him. "You are no pervert Ichigo Shiba. You haven't done anything but be the kindest, gentlest and a loyal friend to each of us. Koneko sees you as her big brother, Yuuto sees you as a trusted friend, which is hard for him. Akeno, well just remember that because she loves to tease you, she sees you as important figure in her life as well."

"What about you Rias Gremory, what am I to you?" He asks with a smile as his mood begins to change.

Deciding that she needs to reaffirm her position in his heart she steps back and taking up the thinking pose at first, she places one hand on his abs before slowly circling him, telling him as she finishes her circuit in front of him. "That is easy Ichigo Shiba, for me, I want to call you husband one day."

She finds herself being pulled into his embrace before he closes the distance. "Care to show me then Rias Gremory."

"I'd love to Ichigo."

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Rukia and Momo are sitting at the table with both peerages of the Sitri and Gremory heiresses. They had been publically invited by Sōna and Tsubaki so they would be seen as acquaintances to the groups and no one would question them or their activities later on if they were seen with both the Student Council and the Occult Research Club. Rukia had begun to worry when they didn't see Ichigo in the cafeteria and then she got really worried when the short white-haired girl came sprinting up to them and began whispering to Rias and Akeno. She heard Rias's side of the conversation and remembered that Ichigo loved high places. She offered advice as to what Ichigo used to do in Karakura when he wanted to get away from people and spend some time alone.

After watching Rias leave just after she received a call from someone named Yuuto, all she could do was wait and see if Ichigo was okay. During the wait, a young blonde-haired boy joined their table and whispered something into the ear of the young student who was introduced as Koneko. She saw the young woman perk up, and sighed internally when she realized it means Berry is okay. She sat and watched as everyone at the table idly chit-chatted until the two they are all waiting for finally arrived hand in hand.

Rukia feels Momo's hand clench her arm tightly, and a firm shake of the other Lieutenant's head keeps her in place when she tries to stand up. Mouthing thanks back to her fellow Shinigami, she remains uncomfortably in her seat until the two teens finally sit at the table with their lunches. Rias smiles at Rukia, and the Devil then makes the introductions.

"Ichigo, this is Rukia Shiba and her sister Momo Shiba. They are in our classes this year."

Ichigo extends his hand to Rukia first. "Nice to meet you Rukia. I hope everything is okay with you, you rushed out pretty quick."

"I apologize for that Ichigo-kun; it's just that you are the spitting image of our cousin. He passed away a few years ago and if you changed your hair and eye color, you could have been his twin."
"Sorry to hear about your loss."

"Thank you Ichigo-kun."

"Knock that off would ya."

"Knock what off?"

"Ichigo-kun. Name is Ichigo, that's it."

"Well excuse me Berry-kun; I was being polite just now."

Momo stares at Rukia as if she is mad. She wants to palm her face when she realizes they are going at it again just as Rangiku told her they always did. Before she can stop her however, Ichigo's face sets in with his famous scowl.

"Well excuse me midget, I thought we could do away with the formalities."

"Midget!? Have you looked in the mirror lately you overgrown giant, I'm surprised that the lack of oxygen has not made you dumber than you look."

"Rukia! / Ichigo!" Momo and Rias yell at the two only for them to round back on them in response.

"He started it! / She started it!"

Sōna pinches her nose and ends it all. "Quiet both of you! You are Seniors and you have to set an example for your kohai, now stop this nonsense or both of you will be on cleanup duty for a month straight."

"Sorry Souna." Ichigo says as he glares at the woman across from him.

In her best Kuchiki tone, Rukia speaks as well. "I apologize as well Shitori-san. I shouldn't have let him get to me."

Akeno giggles as she nudges Rias and whispers into her ear. "I see she wasn't lying about their arguments. I wonder why he didn't have a relapse though."

Shaking her head, she whispers back. "It might be because that person, Geta-Bōshi might have prepared defenses against any familiar faces he might see."

"Do you think his sisters…"

"No, I think the stronger the emotional ties are, the stronger this Kidō or whatever it is gets as well."

Rias looks at Sōna and then Rukia before she turns to Ichigo. "Ichigo, you said you needed two more members for the Kendo Club right?"

"Yeah, why, do you have someone that might be interested in joining?"

His eyes turn to horror as Rias and Sōna both point to the very same young woman he was just arguing with.

"Oh, hell no! I doubt she can even lift a Shinai. Look at her; she is shorter than the equipment we use."
Kuchiki pride offended the Squad Thirteen Lieutenant grins with malice as she makes her bet. "Well then Ichigo, if you are so certain of that, then you wouldn't mind a spar between you and me at your little club then after lunch, or maybe you're scared that little-ole-me might kick your ass?"

Scoffing, he accepts.

"Then Ichigo Shiba, I hope you don't mind eating some humble pie when I'm done wiping the floor with your goofy face."

"Bring it shortness." His eyes bring back her own memories when she sees that familiar spark in them.

"I'd love to Berry-kun."

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Slowly the Zanpakutō spirit walks along the ever crumbling barrier, he still has no idea on how to break the second one as it has yet to react to anything he has done. However, it's during his walk that a feeling stops him dead.

"No way."

He knows this feeling, knows her Reiatsu, it's her, the Ice Princess, the King's Shinigami friend and she's close to him. And the source of his greatest amusement with how she kept his King in line before the Queen came. He is smiling once again as he feels a shift in the second barrier, it seems to have gotten stronger but he knows it is something else happening. Keeping his eye on the damnable wall, he sees it shimmer briefly.

"Soon. Very soon I'll be free King."

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Ichigo is sweating his ass off as he faces the tiny terror across the mat from him. He is getting tired but she seems to have an endless supply of energy. Breathing hard, he raises his bokken in readiness, which is another mistake he has made so far with this evil woman. After baiting her some more during lunch, Rukia upped the ante by sweetly asking if he would rather use the heavier solid bokken instead of the more flexible and safer practice shinai. He fell right for it, which is only evident to him now as he backs away from yet another blindingly swift attack from her.

'Fuck, who the hell trained her!?' He rolls out of the way as she viciously swings for his head again.

"What's wrong Berry-chan? Afraid of little-ole-me still?" The midget taunts him.

God he hates that voice already, and what is worse is he has to deal with it for the entire season now. He knows she is going to place at least first in her division regardless of her competition. All he has left now is to try and find a way to save what is left of his pride...and he knows he doesn't stand a chance of that now.

"Damn midget."

He is too slow this time as she hits him with consecutive strikes to his shoulder, arm and finishing with a debilitating shot to his sternum. Dropping to his knees and gagging, he feels her bokken whap across his neck, and he glances up to see her pull her men off with a smirk that crushes the
last of his manhood.

"That would be a kill Shiba-kun." Panting from one knee, he pulls off his own men as he shakes his head in defeat, he has to concede to her. "You...are...not...normal...Rukia."

She sticks her hand and pulls him up once he takes it. "Thanks Ichigo, I'll take that as a compliment then." She ends it with a smile.

As he goes to reply, he sees her smile and a vision hits him like a ton of bricks. He is holding a juice-box and as he hands it to a blurry figure, all he feels from the image is that of gratitude. Falling back he doesn't hear the room fill with yelling, all he hears is a voice.

'Soon King.'

XXXX

Orihime and Tatsuki stand in front of the middle school waiting for the twins to get out for the day. Since she moved in with the Kurosaki's last week, Orihime has had her hands full with Yuzu. She had no idea that you could make so many dishes with five ingredients or less. The healer spent the first two days learning how to make the most common of dishes for the family, she was slightly disappointed when she was told no wasabi or honey were to be added to the dishes. Bean paste was also stricken from the diet the family had, her only concession was she could use it with her own food as a condiment only. Looking at her best-friend, she sees Tatsuki biting her lower lips again in anxiety.

"Suki you need to stop worrying so much, I'm sure Karin will come around soon."

Her spiky-haired friend frowns before she answers. "I know Hime; I'm just not used to dealing with kids, especially Ichigo's sisters now that he isn't around. I don't want them to feel like I'm trying to replace him, ever."

"I know. Yuzu still cries in her sleep but now she crawls in bed with me to sleep for the rest of the night. Karin hasn't cried or anything else since I moved in, but you can see it every time she is reminded of him by something. Otou-san is trying but he was right when he said it's going to take time for them to resemble anything that can be called normal."

Tatsuki sees the twins coming out of the building now and points her head in their direction. Orihime begins to smile when she sees Yuzu waving at them; Karin has her hands in the pockets of her light jacket as she walks next to her sister. Her face showing a prominent scowl she has adopted from her brother.

Tatsuki can see it's going to be the same thing today with Karin, but she promised Isshin and Kūkaku that she wouldn't leave the girls alone. Deciding she is going to be her usual self this time, she narrows her eyes as Karin and Yuzu make their way to them.

"You know, if you don't get rid of that face Karin, you won't find a boyfriend, you'll scare them off."

"Fine. Don't want anything to do with boys." She continues to walk by the older teen.

"Stop!"

The dark-haired twin subconsciously stops at the command; Tatsuki doesn't even turn to face Karin but speaks anyway. "I miss him too Karin. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about your brother, but I know damn well if I let anything happen to you, he would never forgive
me. I'm not asking you to be my friend or anything else Karin, I just want you to know you are not alone anymore. He isn't here, but when he does come back, I doubt he'll be happy with what you are becoming."

The dark-haired twin spins suddenly and rushes the older dark-haired woman, fists flying as she tries to hit the veteran martial artist.

"WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU KNOW TATSUKI!? WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MY PAIN!? HUH! EVERYDAY I WATCH MY FAMILY FALL APART BECAUSE HE'S GONE! I KNOW WHAT HE WAS AND WHAT RUKIA WAS! I HEARD GOAT-FACE AND THAT WIERDO CALL THEMSELVES SHINIGAMI WHEN I WOKE UP THERE! NOW HE IS GONE! JUST LIKE MOM! FUCKING GONE! HE'S NOT COMING HOME! IF HE WAS ALIVE, HE'D BE HERE NOW, WITH ME, WITH YUZU! BUT HE'S NOT TATSUKI; HE'S DEAD, DEAD LIKE OUR MOM!"

Her fists failing to hit the martial artist, Karin finally collapses to her knees, pounding the ground beneath her. "I just my brother back, I just want my family back the way it was! I want... I want Ichi-nii..."

Tatsuki drops next to Karin and pulls her into her arms, waving Orihime and Yuzu away as she pulls the younger pre-teen deep into her chest and begins to whisper. "I can't be Ichigo, Karin. But...but I know he wouldn't want you to be living your life in sorrow like he did for years. He'd want you to do the same thing he did, to get stronger so you can protect your sister. Besides, they didn't find his body Karin; I think they lied to us."

Karin looks at the older woman in horror before shooting a look at her twin, whispering she asks what she dare not hope to hear. "You know something, don't you?"

"Come with me to the dōjō tomorrow Karin, we'll talk there in private. Just you and me."

"YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS!? HE'S ALIVE ISN'T HE!? I WANT TO KNOW NOW!" The twin snarls out quietly.

The older woman shakes her head no and nods in the direction of the other two. "I'll tell you what I know, but Yuzu can't know until we are sure Karin, until we find him. I'll tell you at the dōjō, I promise. But first I need to talk to your Otou-san and the shop keeper."

Nodding her head in agreement, she allows Tatsuki to pull her to her feet and brush her knees off. "I'm sorry."

Ruffling the tougher twin's hair, Tatsuki grins at her. "It's fine, nice swings by-the-way, with some practice Karin; you'll be better than your brother was at fighting me when he was younger."

Yuzu and Orihime walk towards the two tentatively as Yuzu looks at her sister. "Karin?"

Karin hugs her sister while apologizing to her. "I'm so sorry Yuzu, I am so sorry."

Crying, Yuzu hugs her sister back. "Don't ever scare me like that again Karin, please, you, Daddy, Orihime and Tatsuki are all I have left."

Orihime's eyes are tearing as her best-friend wraps an arm around her waist. "I think it's time I collect on what those two morons owe me."

Orihime simply nods as she watches the two twins cry in each other's arms.
He finds himself having that familiar feeling but as his eyes open, he notices that his dream in much different from before. Instead of the sideways world of glass and steel, he finds himself surrounded by a forest of trees stretching high into the sky. He sees a few crows, ravens and Black Crowned Cranes drinking from a nearby lake, and as he tilts his head, he watches a strange beast walking in the distance. It looked like a large three-headed dog. As he turns back around, he sees his white-self again looking back at him behind a now cracking barrier. Walking up to it, he sees his side is still smooth mostly, but the other side has whole sections missing.

He notices something very different as well from his altered-self, faint-like objects coming from the back of the being, who simply grins at him. He watches in amazement as the white version of himself punches the barrier and another part falls away. Looking at his other-self, he looks as his copy points to something in the distance. Ichigo turns towards where he is pointing and steps back as he sees a tall tower rising in the distance, surrounded by a moat of bluish flames. His attention snaps back to the other side where he gets his biggest shock yet when he watches as the being he is separated from writes a word in kanji with a fingertip on the barrier.

'Soon.'

He snaps awake and instantly regrets it the moment he does as his head begins pounding in pain. A hand finds its way to his back and chest and gently forces him to lay back.

"You had a bad one Ichigo-kun." Nurse Umagi says as she places yet another cold compress on his head.

Her voice says it was worse than she is letting on. "How bad was I?"

She picks up a belt and he grimaces as he sees a piece literally bitten out of it. "You were thrashing and screaming out this time. They had to use that to keep you from biting your tongue as you kept yelling out over and over."

"What was I saying?" He knows what she is going to say.

"All you kept saying was 'soon' over and over. Do you have any idea why Ichigo-kun?"

"No."

"You're lying to me, Ichigo-kun. I know when one of my students tries to hide something from me and your eyes are also telling me that you are lying. Now what did you see this time?" She pins him to the bed with a hard stare.

He drops his head and tells her what he saw, the place, how it had changed, to the being who was him but not him always there now waiting for him. When he glances up at the nurse, her face is no longer the woman with a deadly glare but one of compassion as she pats his head with the cool compress a few times.

"I don't know what to say Ichigo-kun, but whatever it is you're seeing is most likely a traumatic event you are trying to block out. Or your visions could most likely be interpretations of some event that has a very deep meaning to you or was life-changing for you."

'But why do I feel like I need to talk to this person so badly? It's...it's like he is my missing self.' He thinks to himself, remembering the look that it gives him every time now.
"Well, I am ordering you to stay away from practice today and before you argue I already told your team's Captain to take over for you. As of now Ichigo-kun, you are to go home and rest. I would expect you to obey my orders but your sudden obstinacy lately has forced me to tell Rias as well."

"Damn. You know how she gets Sensei."

"I know it's what all good girlfriend's do for their hardheaded boyfriends." She gets up laughing when he gapes at her.

"I'll see you before homeroom tomorrow Ichigo-kun. Rias will be here soon, so stay in bed until she collects you."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Lying back down, his mind goes back over the spar with Rukia, for some reason he felt happy despite her beating his ass. During the fight, she had talked trash and he talked it back, even if he couldn't back it up like she did, it felt normal to him. She had obviously taken to kicking his ass seriously enough that he was happy that she didn't treat him with kid gloves. Every now and then, he could see Rias's or even Souna's eyes tighten during particularly brutal exchanges. But to him, it was exciting, more than when he sparred with Yuuto, Rukia didn't hold back, every advantage she saw, she took. He had to admit, she would make a great Captain for the team, even telling her so during their spar; but she said that Tomoe earned it but she wouldn't mind being a co-Captain or an alternate if Tomoe couldn't make it to a match.

But it was what had happened after the spar that has him scratching his head. Why in the world would opening a juice box bring back such a powerful response? Seeing his other-self has also made him anxious. 'Soon', what did he mean by that? Was Nurse Umagi right? Was he running from something from his past or was it just coincidence that he had the visions to begin with? Was his 'accident' really just an accident, or was it something else?

"God I hate this."

"Hate what Ichigo?" His crimson-haired Angel says as she sits by him.

"Eppp!" Rias suddenly finds herself being snuggled against.

"Sorry, but I don't want to be alone Rias."

"I know, she told me what you saw Ichigo."

"Figures." He says.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Tonight, okay?"

"Okay Ichigo." She slips into the curve of his body with her head on top of his.

Rias watches as Ichigo slowly begins to fall asleep as she runs her hand through his hair, something that she has found both calms him and helps put him to sleep. Soon his breathing evens out and his body relaxes completely in her arms. She motions for the rest of the group to file in, Rukia and Souna leading the way. Koneko pulls a chair up to his bed and grabs his free hand, never taking her eyes off of his face.

"Is he going to be okay Rias-nee-san?" The young Neko asks.
"For now, Koneko-chan, for now."

The Gremory princess turns to the violet-eyed Shinigami. "Do you know what that was about Rukia?"

Looking at Rias and then Ichigo, she points at Ichigo. "Will he hear me?"

"No, Nurse Umagi put him under with a slow acting sleep spell, it helps when I run my hands through his hair. He won't wake until I remove it. You are free to speak Rukia."

Rukia's body shifts and a small smile forms as she recounts that day. "It was my first day at Karakura High. I had no idea of how the World of the Living worked back then. It was lunchtime and I had a juice box, but the problem was I had no idea of how to work it, I mean open it. Ichigo with his usual gruff style grabbed the juice and showed me how to put the straw into the little foil-hole. If it wasn't for Ichigo, I would have been lost trying to live in his world."

"What about his Hollow? Any idea why it might be back now?"

"No idea, and without giving away my reasons why I'm asking, I can't ask any of the other Vizards. Captain Hirako might be able to tell us something, but he was just reinstated as Squad Five's Captain again. I don't want to place him in a tenable position of trying to help Ichigo without being accused of treason by Central Forty-Six again."

Yuuto pulls another bed and few chairs closer to Ichigo's sleeping form for the women to sit on as they decide to talk between themselves; he then goes outside to cast a barrier to keep any one from spying on the very unique group of otherworldly beings.

"Why does everyone from this Central Forty-Six fear Ichigo so much?" Akeno directs her question to Rukia, but it's Momo who answers her.

Looking down at Ichigo it is the Squad Five Lieutenant that answers for her friend. "It's because of my former Captain, a man I used to admire, that caused Ichigo to live with a terrible burden on his soul. He manipulated events in order to obtain a device called the Hōgyoku. Ichigo gained an inner-Hollow to obtain his powers so he could save Rukia, and for that I can only offer my deepest apologizes for what he has suffered already."

Rukia looks at the petite Lieutenant with admiration, it had taken nearly every friend of Momo's to convince her that there was absolutely nothing she could have done to change Sōsuke Aizen's quest for power. It was only after she was told that Aizen was dead that she finally broke down and accepted in her heart that he had betrayed her and twice tried to have her killed by her childhood friend's Zanpakutō. It was said that Captain Hirako had told her she could either stay on as his Lieutenant or she could retire. Feeling she had to redeem herself and her squad's reputation, she threw herself into her work and her training. Because Rukia had seen the changes, she had convinced her own Captain and Momo's to allow the other Lieutenant to come on this mission with her. Seeing Momo now standing with poise and composure, she knew she made the right choice in bringing her along.

"So young, and to have been through so much Rukia-san, it is unbelievable to me." Sōna says as she looks at her newly revealed cousin.

"Wait until you meet his human friends. Orihime, Chad and Uryū. Each of them is powerful in their own right, but they each suffered as well. Especially Orihime." Rukia finishes with a distant look in her eyes.
"She is the one you were talking about earlier then? The one who loves him?" Rias asks as she continues running her hand through his hair.

"Yes, she does, but I think she knows he won't return her feelings, especially now."

"If and when we meet her, I'd like to speak to her alone if I can Rukia. I think it would be best if what happened between Ichigo and I came from me before anyone else."

Bowing slightly, Rukia agrees. "I think it is best if you and Ichigo did that together Rias-san"

Rias looks at the clock when the bell rings, ending the official first day of school. "I think it's time I wake Ichigo up."

Rias stands up and gently waves her hand over his head until he begins to move about slowly, then his eyes flutter open and he looks into her eyes. Smiling up at her, he shifts his gaze and his eyes shoot open when he sees his room is filled with, well almost everyone.

"Ah, what's up guys?"

"You blacked-out again Onii-san." Koneko answers sadly. "We were worried because you had a really bad episode this time."

Rukia chokes as she hears his moniker from the youngest student, but she tries to cover for it when she sees Ichigo glaring at her.

"Oi Midget, you're still here too?"

"Yes Strawberry, I am. I felt bad because I thought that maybe I hit your empty head too hard."

Before either could continue, Momo and Rias slap a hand over their respective partner. "Rukia Shiba! / Shut it Ichigo!"

"Both of you! One month cleanup duty!" Sōna loudly adds on.

The two in question both shoot glares at her. "If you can't behave, then I will punish you both until you learn to be civil with one another, and if you continue, I'll add to it by including every Third year classroom to your duties. Do you both understand me?"

Two heads nod their acknowledgement at her threat and punishment. "Good. Now Ichigo-kun, Rukia and Momo are both officially on the team, I expect you to treat them like any other member of the women's kendo team, any word otherwise and it's me you will have to deal with. Rukia, you will refrain from antagonizing him or retaliating if he taunts you."

Again both heads nod their agreement. "Now Rias, take your boyfriend home, all club activities for you two are cancelled for today, you will be given time tomorrow to make up for it. Now if you will excuse me, I will see you all tomorrow, but now I have a headache to get rid of thanks to you two."

Watching as the Student Council president leaves, the Gremory peerage shoot glances at the two causes of her misery. Akeno is the first to give it them.

"Ara, ara Shiba-san, Ichi-kun nice going, you didn't even make it through the first day. Not only did you get cleanup duty for a month, but you managed to get on Shitori's hit list already."

Ichigo goes to retort but a glare from Rias's blue eyes shut him up quickly. "I wasn't going to say
Narrowing her eyes at him she watches to see if he is going to renege on his promise before she turns to Rukia and Momo and bows to them. "Thank you Rukia, Momo, we will take him home and have him ready for the team practice tomorrow."

"Of course, Gremory-san. We look forward to helping the team in winning against the competition this year. Good-bye Shiba-san, see you tomorrow Senpai." Momo says as she stands and drags her 'sister' up with her.

"Yeah, see ya tomorrow Shiba-kun."

"See ya Shiba-chan." He gives a half-hidden smirk behind Rias's back.

"OWWW! Koneko, what was that for!?" He yells after getting a head-slap.

She glares at him before she reprimands him. "You will be late every day for a month already Onii-san, stop being an ass by trying to goad her still."

He sees Rukia smiling at him just before she and Momo leave the room. Somewhere inside him, he feels that something good is going to come with his new classmates. For some reason, Rukia being around feels normal to him.

"Come on Ichigo, let's go home."

"Sounds good Rias. By-the-way what are we having for dinner tonight?"

Akeno shrugs her shoulders. "I don't think we decided yet. How about stopping at that new shouten and see what they have."

"What new shouten?"

"I think it's called Urahara's or something. I heard it opened today from some of the other First years." Koneko says.

"Sounds like a pervert's name." Ichigo says.

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Kisuke sneezes suddenly and gives Tessai a look of fear.

"Boss?"

"Nope, I'm fine. Just this weird feeling is all. So did you get the shouten set up in time Tessai?" Kisuke successfully diverts his assistant from giving him any more of his weird and stomach emptying remedies to take.

"Yes, and I also established a point to point Senkaimon as you asked. We should have no trouble traveling between the two shops." The Kidō master replies.

Looking at his maps of the town surrounding Kuoh Academy, Kisuke is about to ask for Tessai's help when the door to the room slams open and Tatsuki is standing there with a very angry look on her face.

"You and I need to talk right now. Get Goat-face here too. I'm not lying to Karin any longer. Before you ask why, she knows who each of you are. Your little memory erasing thingy didn't work. So I
am going to tell her what Orihime and I know from you two idiots. We'll keep Yuzu out of it until you either find Ichigo, or he comes home. It's not negotiable Geta-Bōshi; I'm not letting her drown in her pain any longer, not after this afternoon. So what's it's gonna be?"

Before Kisuke can answer a familiar woman's voice answers. "I agree Tatsuki, but we must keep Ichigo's whereabouts a secret for now. He's still not himself and if we upset him now, it could prove disastrous."

Tatsuki slowly turns to find herself face to face with a mocha-skinned woman. "Who are you?"

Smiling, the woman grabs Tatsuki around her waist and draws her tight against her body. "I'm your new Sensei Tatsuki Arisawa, my name is Yoruichi Shihōin and I'll tell you everything you need to know while we wait for moron number two."

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Ichigo had just finished sweeping the classroom, when Rukia comes back from taking out the trash. Both had divided the other chores between themselves to get clean-up done quicker. Working as a team, they had finished before the other classrooms did allowing them to get to practice on time. As he turns around after putting the broom away, he finds Rukia standing behind him with his school bag.

"Come on Ichigo, let's get to practice now."

"Sure. Ah, Rukia I just wanted to say thanks for splitting up the chores like that. We'll finish quicker now that we have a system in place." Ichigo says extending an olive branch to her.

Hearing his sincerity, but with doubt still lingering in her head, Rukia nods her head. "You're welcome Ichigo. We should hurry though, I have to change still."

She eyed him when he doesn't say a word as he walks away, but she still spies a smirk on his lips. She begins to smirk as well, knowing he is dying inside to start with her.

"You know Ichigo, when we're alone; I don't mind you being yourself."

"Oh thank god, because I think it would have killed me trying to keep it in when you give me openings like that."

"I KNEW IT YOU ASSHOLE! WHAT WERE YOU GOING TO SAY!??"

Keeping his own voice down but filled with sarcasm. "I looked for keikogi and hakama your size but I had to ask the middle school to lend me a set of theirs for you to borrow."

"You sonofabitch! I'm gonna kill you today Ichigo!" She misses hitting him as he skips out of the way and runs for the gym.

"Keep up Shiba-chan; I know it's hard with those short legs of yours but still…"

"YOU…ARE…DEAD…STRAWBERRY! ! !"

Neither notices the two Devils watching their antics from afar. Rias is watching in awe, while Sōna is pinching her nose in annoyance.

"Well Sōna what are you going to do? You saw them."

"Nothing I guess Rias, as long as they don't cause a disturbance during school hours, I guess I'll let
'em be. But did you notice?"

Smiling but feeling slightly jealous of the pair, she answers. "Yes I did Sōna. But from what Rukia told us yesterday, it was how they treated each other every day. She said they were…are best-friends, even after she admitted to having feelings for him once. She told me it secretly hurt her when he told her the truth that he couldn't return her feelings; but he still treated her better than most of the people in her life. Even her own brother at the time couldn't compare to how Ichigo treated her. Rukia did say it has improved since the end of their war because of Ichigo. He made her brother realize how he should be treating her, like a sister, not as a stranger in his home."

Taking her crimson-haired friend's arm and looping hers through it, she leads Rias away from the two reunited friends still antagonizing each other as they recede down the corridors away from the two Heiresses. Sōna walks the hallway in silence until she knows that they are alone near the Student Council Room.

"I've set up a rotating schedule between us and the Shinigami to watch for the Fallen Angels. Lady Shihōin feels that they are close to finishing whatever this task is of theirs. She will take most of the Shinigami duties herself, as she has the most experience out of all of us, we will give her our support. Her advice on how we should divide the city into search zones closer to that abandoned church as the epicenter was very insightful. She must have been a very good Captain when she served with the Gotei Thirteen."

"Did she tell you anything else when you spoke to her?"

"Not really, she said she had to return to their hometown to check on Ichigo's sisters and friends. She said she should be back sometime tomorrow morning. Momo and Tsubaki will take the first shift tonight; I will take the second shift tomorrow with Rukia. Shihōin will be out every night as well covering what we can't."

"What do you think they are like?" Rias asks.

"What, the Fallen Angels? Just scum if they are killing as indiscriminately as they have been."

"No." Rias begins quietly. "I mean his sisters, his friends, those he was forced to leave behind. Do…I…?"

"You're worried about what they might think of you Rias."

"Yes. I'm a Devil Sōna; I'm the Heiress to the Gremory Clan. I am a noblewoman coming from one of the Seventy-Two Pillars in the Underworld. I am in love with him but what if they don't, can't accept me?"

"Rias, you shouldn't doubt yourself. She said they are very understanding of those that are different, so I think they will accept you fine, just as Ichigo has. If Shihōin is correct, Ichigo isn't really that much different from his old self. Just a bit nicer and ehmm, a bit more open with his relationships with those of the opposite sex."

Rias bluses a deep red. "He is no pervert."

"I never said he was, but…"

"Don't you dare finish that Sōna."

"I won't, but the pictures do say differently."
"Akeno-nee-san, why do I feel such a large killing intent coming from Rias-sama?"

Waving off the younger Neko while she prepares her escape, the sadist just grins. "I would assume it would have to do with the photos I showed the Shinigami last night."

Palming her face as she shakes her head at the stupidity or sheer lunacy of the older Devil, she replies. "I'll tell her you went to the Gremory clan manor on an errand."

"Thanks Ko-chan, love ya." Akeno says just a few seconds before the doors fly open from the force coming from her mistress.

"WHERE…IS…SHE!?"

Feeling a bit mischievous, the young Neko shrugs her shoulders as she reads the recently abandoned manga. "She didn't say Rias-nee-san."

She watches as her master conjures her own magical circle and disappears.

'Sorry Akeno-san, but Onii-san must be rubbing off on me.'

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Karin is sweating worse now than at any other time in her young life as she struggles to get to her feet. She eyes the woman standing across the mat from her with not wariness, but outright amazement. For the last twenty-five minutes, she has tried and tried to land just one hit on the woman she is fighting against, and yet she is the one whose body is covered with bruises from 'love taps' she has yet to see coming. Just as she rises to her feet, she collapses back to her hands and knees, a sign she is finished. Tears threatening to fall when she knows she can't continue on, a condition the woman set if she wanted to know where her brother was.

"Orihime, heal her." Yoruichi says with an expressionless tone.

"Hai…hai Yoruichi-san." Orihime walks up to Karin. "Sōten Kisshun, I reject."

Karin watches dumbfounded as an orange shield forms over her body as she watches and feels her injuries heal in seconds. When the shield vanishes, she notices that even her Gi is unrumpled too.

"What was that?" Karin says as she stares at her older sister. "How did you do that Orihime-nee-san?"

"It's a part of her powers Karin. It's what happened to her when she was exposed to both your brother's Reiatsu and the power of the Hōgyoku. She gained a power unlike anything we ever seen. Just as Chad did, just as Tatsuki has yet to awaken."

"What!?" The person named shouts out. "I have powers!?!"

Yoruichi turns on the woman martial-artist. "Not yet Tatsuki, but when the time comes, I will give you and him a choice. Until then you and Karin will train everyday afterschool with both Tessai and Kisuke."

"What about Yuzu?" Karin asks dejectedly.

"Her path is yet to be determined Karin, yours is set."
"I'm a Shinigami aren't I?"

Walking up and stopping before the preteen, she answers. "Yes and no Karin. Yes, you are a Shinigami but no because until the time comes, I have to keep secret a part of what you are, what you can be. But because you did so well at your first time playing 'tag', I will tell all of you now that I know where he is, but I can't tell any of you for his safety and yours. His life is still endangered because of Central Forty-Six and because someone very important to him has asked that we keep it secret for now. As for you Karin, I don't want you to keep wallowing in self-pity or try replacing him and his shitty attitude because you can't pull it off as well as him. No one can."

The three women begin laughing or giggling at the Shihōin's dead-on description of Ichigo's attitude. Karin sits down between Tatsuki and Orihime after the older woman directed her to do so. She sits across from them and pulls her legs up to sit cross-legged.

"Now that you know he is doing well, I'll try to tell you what I can. He is a student at a very prestigious school here in Japan, but he is living under an alias, which I won't tell you. Karin, Orihime and Tatsuki both already know this, but it's fair that you should know too. The real reason your brother didn't come home is because Soul Society forced us to exile him."

"Why!? What did Ichi-nii do!? Didn't he save you guys? So why did he have to get sent away?" Karin rapidly shoots off her questions.

Yoruichi leans back on her hands as she looks up at the ceiling, before tilting her head towards the group. "Your brother did the impossible Karin. I know you saw him and the man he was fighting right?" She sees Karin nod her head yes. "Well he...he killed that man Karin. He did something that wasn't supposed to happen. Because of that, the people that Isshin, Kisuke, and I once served, demanded he be executed because of his power, but we were able to save him by sealing away that power. However, it did come at a cost. To seal his power, we had to take his memories away from him as well, without them; he can't use those powers anymore. Your father had to make a very difficult decision, Karin, and I hated him for a while because of it. I didn't know how wrong I was about his choice until I found Ichigo, and well let's just say it turned out for the best that your dad did what he did."

Karin just stares at the woman numbly. Her brother killed someone. Her brother was responsible for taking someone else's life to save them. And because of the power he used to do it, he was the one that had to be sent away by them.

Karin's voice is filled with venom when she finally speaks. "Ichigo saves all of you, them and this is his reward! He is threatened and Dad has to send him away, without his powers! WHO GAVE THEM THE FUCKING RIGHT TO MAKE THAT DECISION!? WHO!? I HAVE TO LOSE MY BROTHER SO THEY CAN FEEL SAFER, EVEN AFTER HE KILLS FOR THEM AND HE IS THE ONE BEING PUNISHED! WHY!? WHY!? WHY YORUICHI-SAN!!?"

Tatsuki and Orihime grab the girl before she breaks down completely after hearing why her brother isn't able to come home.

"Why?" Karin begins to sob in Tatsuki and Orihime's arms. "Why does my family have to suffer all the time? Why do all the bad things have to happen to us?"

Yoruichi Shihōin watches as yet another of Masaki's children has to pay for Soul Society's mistakes and injustices, she again finds herself thinking the impossible. Getting up she walks to the younger Kurosaki woman and drops to a squat before her. Nodding to both the older teens, she pulls the young dark-haired girl into her arms and begins to rub her back as she lets her cry into her chest. Laying her head across the pre-teen's head, she makes a solemn vow to the shock of the other two.
"I promise you Karin, from this day forward, anyone that threatens your family again will be dealt with by me."

XXXX

Koneko is watching the scene before her with a heavy blush as she listens to the noises coming from her Onii-san.

"YES! THERE! RIGHT THERE AKENO! AHHHH!"

Turning she sees her mistress is also watching the spectacle before her with her own red face, her eyebrow twitching at each sound coming from her boyfriend's mouth. She reaches her boiling point when he again cries out in ecstasy.

"ENOUGH YOU TWO!"

"But Buchou, it's not my fault that you said I was better at this than you. You were the one who said I should do this for him."

"Yes I did, but…but…but you two sound like you're…"

"Like we're what Buchou?" Akeno asks with faked innocence.

"You know damn well know what you…you…"

"Rias, would you calm down, it's only a message and she's only using her feet. And we're both dressed and doing it in front of you." Ichigo mistakenly says while offering his thoughts on the issue.

"But you two sound like you're having sex dammit!" Rias shouts at him.

"You are a dummy Onii-san." Koneko says as she gets up and goes to the kitchen.

Rias glares at the Thunder Priestess as she steps off her boyfriend's back, and as she walks by, she giggles as she whispers to her friend. "Now you have an idea of what your first time will sound like."

She sprints upstairs before Rias can say anything. However it does bring a new shade of red to her face as she closes her eyes and tries, and tries unsuccessfully to banish the images in her head.

"Ichigo! Upstairs now! Bath!" She begins to stomp up the stairs in her stocking feet as she mumbles to herself about how right the pervert in her peerage is.

Ichigo just follows behind, stretching his arms over his head. Used to how the two friends use any means to get under each other's skin, he has to admit that Rias really did set herself up for what happened this time. Thinking back to what had happened in practice today also makes him glad that it was only sore muscles he was suffering from.

XXXX Flashback Start XXXX

"Come on Momo, I know you are as good as your sister, now show me." Ichigo yelled as he rushed the more feminine sister.

As he closed the distance and reached her with a downward strike, she surprised him by ducking under him and twisting her body, so he was unable to avoid what was about to happen. In a movement he had done before himself, she lifted her body just as his center-of-gravity passed over
her back and she flipped him while he was in mid-flight. Crashing heavily to the mat, he opened his eyes and found himself looking up at the ceiling with his back on the mat, his muscles aching since unlike before he was unable to brace himself for impact.

"Damn." He groaned out. "Are you both out to kill me or something? Where did you two learn your Kendo, the penitentiary or something?"

Rukia snorted as she answered him. "Something like that coach. Don't worry; we won't use any illegal moves during the competitions Captain Strawberry."

Unlike her sister, Momo rushed over him and began to fuss and apologize over him. "I'm so sorry Ichigo-senpai! I…I didn't mean too! It was reflex! I am so sorry!"

"He's fine Momo, he's just pissed that a girl kicked his ass...again." Rukia chimed up with that voice he swore both mocked and belittled him.

"Shut it midget."

He glared at her when she just winked and sent him a smirk as he slowly got to his feet. Turning to his team's Captain, he gingerly walked over to the sidelines as he handed the class over to her.

"Tomoe, take them through the rest of practice, I gotta sit for a minute. Momo, nice spar by-the-way."

As his Captain nodded in acknowledgement, the younger Shiba sister replied with a smile. "Thank you Ichigo-senpai."

"Yeah, thanks Berry-senpai." Rukia added mockingly as she lined up with the rest of their team.

Too sore and knowing that Tomoe might slip to Sōna anything they tried to do; he just flipped Rukia the bird when Tomoe wasn't looking.

"God, I need a massage when I get home."

XXXX Flashback End XXXX

It wasn't his fault that when he got home, he dropped to the floor because he was too stiff to sit properly. It also wasn't his fault that when Rias asked what was wrong and he told her, Akeno mentioned that she could help massage his back, and his girlfriend also agreed that she was better at such a task. So why was he…oh.

'I am the stupidest man alive."

Peeking into their room, he leans against the door frame as he watches Rias get undressed while spitting out curses, some of which make him smile when she mentions his name and a few suggestive activities along with it. Soon, she is down to her bare skin before she turns and gives a start of surprise.

"Ichigo!"

Ichigo walks up to his girlfriend and gives her a peck on her cheek before he begins to undress himself. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees her watching him with intense hunger as he begins disrobing for her. Not bothering with formality, he simply pulls off his shirt and tosses it into the shared hamper, then takes off his pants and boxers at the same time before tossing them into the hamper as well. He hears Rias hitch her breath as he has never fully undressed in front of her, even
when they shared their baths or showers. Turning around he stretches his hand towards her.

"Come on Rias, you said you wanted a bath."

She takes his hand and lets him lead her into the bathroom, where he sits her down first on the stool and gathers their toiletries for the bath. Turning on the water, he lathers the wash rag and starts to wash her back first this time.

"You shouldn't worry Rias. I know where my heart belongs and who it belongs to. No one can, or will steal me away from you."

"I'm sorry Ichigo; I should have known she would take advantage like that. She has always known how to get under my skin, especially now because of you."

Sighing, he lifts her arms and as he washes her sides, he snorts out. "I admit she did a good job today. First with the massage and then what she made you say as you were walking up the stairs. You surprised me by wanting to…"

"Ichigo, don't! Please! I…I can't help myself when it comes to you anymore." She grabs one of his hands and places it on her chest. "I'm not sure if I can wait much longer Ichigo. Everyday I'm with you; it's like a test I find myself wanting so badly to fail now. But I know we can't, just not yet."

Rubbing the spot where his hand is, he slowly leans forward until he is leaning against her back. "Then I'll ask my uncle what I can do to break up this arrangement you're in. I'll find a way for us to be together Rias."

Rias turns around on her stool, and looks him in his eyes before she kisses him. Ichigo leans in more and soon his hands are slowly traveling down her back and soon his hands drop further than they have before.

"Icchhiiggooouoo." 

XXXX

'Yuuma Amano' is waiting on the bridge that crosses over the busy highway below her, waiting for the one she has been searching for since her arrival in this Devil infested town. Her orders were simple: find the sacred gear holder, then kill him or her. She was highly amused that it was in the body of such a perverse human like Issei Hyoudou, a second year at that damn Devil school. A smile begins to form as her target begins to approach her, unaware of her presence as he begins to walk by her.

She sees his face react in surprise as she speaks to him, asking if he is indeed Issei Hyoudou, Second year student at Kuoh Academy. Inside she is laughing at how pathetic the human is as he attempts to speak to her. Oh, how cute, he's trying to act like the stud he isn't. She doesn't even find him attractive enough to think of using him for her pleasure, no, she will simply lull him into a false sense of security on their date, leading him on by showing some cleavage, and then she'd get him to the park. Then she will kill him and be done with this stupid assignment.

After exchanging information with her gullible target, she acts like a shy schoolgirl and runs off while giggling. She turns her head to see him waving at her, and she acts the part by waving back to him, watching as he runs off shouting that he has a date.

"So cruel of you Raynare. Why do you lead him on with such promises?" Kalawarner asks as the other Fallen Angel appears from behind a tree.
"Oh, you know how I like to play with my food Kalawarner. Besides he is a hormonal teenager, he wouldn't last a second if he even thought he had a chance of having sex with a woman, let alone a teenage girl. It's going to be so much fun when I kill him after our date."

"Just make sure he is dead Raynare. Our master wants no mistakes this time. Whatever sacred gear he is in possession of must not fall into the hands of the Devils." A male voice speaks out as the speaker, another Fallen Angel appears behind both of them.

"Don't worry about it Dohnaseek, I'll have it wrapped up tomorrow night. Then we can bring in that stupid girl and take her powers as well. I only wish I could see the faces of those Devils and their cohorts when I kill him so publically and right under their noses."

XXX

As he runs his nightly course, Ichigo comes to the fountain that he has dropped so many yen in before his holiday with his uncle. Pausing as he looks at the bottom of the fountain, he sees his wishes still sitting there. Once he did want to remember, but now he has made up his mind to only look forward in his life. Except the white being in his dreams that seems dead-set on not leaving him alone, even as his side of that invisible wall lies in ruins. His side is still intact, but it is showing signs of stress cracks as well. Ichigo wonders if it's some kind of psycho-mumbo-jumbo imagery representing what's blocking him from remembering who he really was, or whether he is just plain crazy.

Sitting on the edge of the fountain, he runs his fingers through the water and looks at his reflection as it breaks up in the waves.

'If I'm not really crazy, then do I really want to remember who I was?'

Staring at his face in the water, the moon shining behind him gives his face a pale-white look; he closes his eyes and sees black and gold eyes looking back at him. Calm comes over his body whenever he thinks of the man in his dreams, always the same word in kanji greeting him: soon. The same word over and over, and each time he sees the man, the wall that divides them seems to be getting weaker. His doppelganger's side is now completely destroyed, while his side is the only thing standing between the two of them. Each time he visits his dream, it is becoming clearer and clearer. The details remaining longer each time he regains his consciousness in the morning. Whoever that white being is, he is somehow connected to his past, and Ichigo wants to know why that is; if that is all he learns of his past then that would satisfy him.

Standing up, he looks down at the water one last time. Fishing out a ten yen piece, he bounces it once in his palm before putting it back in his pocket with a huff.

"My past is just gonna have to wait for now."

"Your past?" A female voice suddenly asks him.

Spinning around, he sees a teen standing before him. Dressed in the uniform of a neighboring school, she walks under the moonlight until her black hair becomes visible.

"My name is Yuuma Amano. I'm sorry, I couldn't help but overhear you talking to yourself..."

Just as he is about to answer her, a strange feeling invades his body. Stepping back instinctively, he sees the girl narrow her eyes but a fraction when he does so. She makes to move towards him again when her head snaps to one side, looking over her shoulder before she turns to him and smiles. A smile that makes his skin crawl from.
"It seems we will have to run into each other again sometime." She turns and walks back into the shadows of the trees behind her, disappearing from view after a few moments.

Standing there with his body tensed, Ichigo continues to stare in the direction Yuuma Amano went, but sees nothing and no one. Deciding that maybe he should finish early tonight, he makes his way back to the busy street, and more importantly, the lights. For the first time since he came here, Rias's warning comes back to him.

'This town changes people.'

Scoffing, he smiles as he reaches the lighted sidewalk and starts to jog back to the mansion. "Well it certainly changed me Rias, for the better."

XXXX

Momo watches the young man jog down the sidewalk away from the park, once he is out of sight, she opens her phone and dials a number. After several rings, Rukia answers.

"Momo, what is it?"

"Rukia, I just saw a strange woman trying to approach Ichigo just now. I think it's the Fallen Angel Yoruichi-san wants us to keep a close eye on, the one who might be responsible for the recent murders."

"Did she say anything to him?" Rukia's voice sounds tense.

"She must have...because he backed away and I could see it in his eyes clearly Rukia, he seemed to know something was wrong with her. I flared my Reiatsu to alert her to my presence but I didn't dare attack her with him so near. I'm sorry Rukia for letting her get so close to him."

"Momo it's okay, he's not hurt and that's all that matters now. Follow him until he is back at the Gremory house and then meet up with me and Tsubaki when you can. I've just joined up with her, and she's calling Sōna and telling her the situation as well. I think Yoruichi is right, something big is about to happen in this town."

"Hai Rukia, I'm a block behind Ichigo now and he should be home in twenty-five minutes give or take."

"Good, Akeno might join up with you, so if you see her, bring her to our location. We're about seven blocks from the church. There is a lot of activity going on there now. Mostly humans but one or two more Fallen Angels are here as well."

"Okay Rukia, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Momo, thanks for keeping him safe."

"He saved us all Rukia, least I could do is save him now."

"Don't ever let him know that Momo, we'll never hear him stop bitching about it if he does."

XXXX

Rias is waiting outside with Koneko for Ichigo to get home, the call from Sōna has her fighting every fiber of her being from rushing the abandoned church and obliterating everyone and everything residing inside that structure, ceasefire be damned. Looking down at her young Rook,
she can see from the hard face of the Neko that she also wants to thrash someone, preferably that strange woman that tried to accost Ichigo. Since the orange-haired teen's arrival in her household, Rias has noticed that each of her friends and peerage have changed, with the young white-haired First year student changing the most. No longer solitary and quiet, Koneko is becoming more vocal and social within her peerage. She has even seen her smile whenever Ichigo is paying attention to her or just sitting with him when he is reading his books. She smile the most when she uses him as a pillow as she reads her 'approved' manga that Ichigo allows her.

Behind them, Yuuto is also waiting for his Senpai to get home, although he has taken to waiting just inside the open door. Since Ichigo had come into her Knight's life, she has seen Yuuto genuinely smile more as well. Not the fake polite one that he plasters on for the sake of his fan-girl following, but one that shows his inner emotions. Not that he would admit it yet, but he already has great respect for Ichigo's prowess in Kendo. Yuuto had said that Ichigo must have been in some very real fights because some of his improvised moves were killing strokes, even before learning of Ichigo's real identity. It also helped him to have an older man in the group for him to talk to now; he shyly admitted that he had felt uncomfortable being the only man in the group. Her musing however is cut-short when the very same man they are thinking of walks through the sally port and into the grounds proper.

Watching as her future lover walks distractedly up the path, she sees a worried look on his face. Stopping just in front of them as he suddenly realizes they are there, then gives them all a look, before glancing back over his shoulder almost unconsciously.

"Rias, Koneko, Yuuto. Something wrong?"

"No Ichigo, just waiting for you that's all." Rias says as she watches his face carefully.

Frowning at her, he again looks over his shoulder, causing the three Devils to share a quick look with one another.

"Onii-san, is there something wrong with you?" Koneko asks worryingly.

"I...just had a strange thing happen; it made me think about your warning Rias, about how this town changes people. I ran into this girl in the park and she introduced herself to me as 'Yuuma Amano' but something was...well, something was off about her. I don't know how to describe it but she seemed...I don't know. All I know is that I had to get away from her and just now as I was coming home, I swear..." He stops again as he looks at them.

Rias prods him gently. "What is it Ichigo?"

Running his hand through his sweat-soaked hair and looking back yet again, he shakes his head before he tells them. "I think I was being followed home. I didn't see anyone, but I swear I could feel someone was watching me all the way home."

Rias has her own frown now as she thinks about what he has said. Never before when he was close by to them has he ever reacted to any of them using magic, but the first time a Shinigami is close to him, he reacts almost immediately to them. She is aware that Momo Shiba was discreetly tailing Ichigo during his run, Sōna had mentioned it to her during the call, so she is not too worried about that. However, what has her pissed is the fact that a likely Fallen Angel has taken an interest in her Ichigo. She had to calm herself a lot before he showed up, just to keep him from seeing how incredibly angry she was at the thought that she could have lost him to a killer.

"Ichigo come inside then. I want you to take a bath, and I'll reheat you something to eat okay?"
He looks at her and sees the tightness around her eyes, and as he looks at each of the others, he can see the same thing in theirs as well. Now he knows that they are hiding something from him, but after tonight he doesn't want to push the issue, he'll wait for tomorrow before homeroom to ask what's going on. Besides she's right, he does want to soak, and some warm food does sound appealing to him.

"Sounds good Rias." He kisses her cheek, kisses Koneko's forehead and nods to Yuuto before he enters the genkan.

Rias and Yuuto look at the sally port themselves and watch as Akeno and Momo leave through it.

"Do you think his powers are beginning to grow Buchou?"

"I don't know Yuuto, but from now on, one of us will be with Ichigo at all times. I'll call his Sensei and let her know as well before I join with Sōna, Rukia and the others tonight."

"Koneko and I will make sure he stays asleep once you put him under then Buchou."

"No Yuuto-kun, I will."

Both teens spin around as Venelana appears behind them. She kisses Rias on her cheek as she gives Yuuto a smile. "Rias come inside. We have much to talk about."

"Mother what is going on? Did Sōna call you? Did she tell you about the Fallen Angel that spoke to Ichigo?"

As she walks into the genkan, she spots a weary Ichigo trudging up the stairs with Koneko holding his hand and asking him what he wants reheated for his meal. Her eyes never leave his form until he disappears down the hallway leading to his and Rias's room.

"Yes she did Rias. She told me everything that Lieutenant Hinamori was able to observe between Ichigo and the Fallen Angel. Yoruichi can't come back until tomorrow; a family issue has come up."

"Something happened to her family Lady Gremory?" Yuuto asks as he trails behind the two Gremory Devils.

"No Yuuto. One of Rias's future sisters-in-law, Karin, found out the truth about her brother and the circumstances surrounding his disappearance. Yoruichi has to stay until she is sure that Karin is going to be okay."

"His sister found out? How Mother?"

Venelana begins to smirk as she turns to the two younger Devils. "Did Lieutenant Kuchiki tell you anything about his human friends?"

"Some Mother, but not in great detail, why?"

"Well his oldest friend, Tatsuki Arisawa I believe her name to be, forced Ichigo's father to tell his daughter the story of her brother's life as a Shinigami and why he had to send him away. Last I heard, Karin put her father through a wall."

Rias and Yuuto look at her mother with gaping mouths, before Yuuto nervously asks. "Ah, Lady Gremory, are Ichigo's family and friends always this violent?"
"No, just Karin and Tatsuki. Orihime and Yuzu are both pacifists in nature, but I wouldn't discount Orihime if I were you, her power is…is something to fear."

Yuuto glances at his mistress to see she is also wondering what the Gremory matriarch meant by that, but before he can say anything, Rias stops suddenly.

"Mo…Mother did you just say future sister-in-law?"

Yuuto stops when he too remembers what he heard as well.

Stopping when she too realizes her own slip, Venelana turns and looks at Rias. She smiles as she nods her head. "I did Rias. I know Ichigo is who you really wish to be with, and I have decided with Amyntas that when Ichigo regains his memories, if he wishes to stay with us, we have agreed to an arrangement between you two. I hope you don't mind me taking you away from your current fiancé Rias."

Blushing bright red, the Gremory daughter stutters out her answer. "Of…of course not Mother. I thank you and Lord Naberius. But what do we do about the Phenex Clan if Ichigo agrees to the arrangement with me?"

Turning a hard gaze on her daughter, Venelana speaks firmly. "Then you and Ichigo will deal with it as you see fit. Rias dear, Ichigo is…is something Yoruichi called a 'force-of-nature', she said once his mind is made up, nothing will stand in his way of his goals, nothing. That is why he was able to defeat their rogue Captain when all of Soul Society could not."

"Do you think he'll still wish to be with me then Mother?" Rias's voice betraying her fears when she asks.

"Rias, I believe this was meant to be. He loves you and he has already confessed to you. Rukia and Yoruichi both said there is no one in his life romantically. Despite not having his memories, they agree with each other that Ichigo is still basically himself mentally. The only difference is that he has chosen you to pursue a relationship with. All you can do is just be yourself when he does regain his memories and everything will work itself out."

"I hope so Mother."

Yuuto watches mother and daughter disappear into the kitchen where Koneko is reheating Ichigo's meal. Looking up the stairs, he shivers to himself.

"Is Ichigo-Senpai really that strong?"

XXXX

Ichigo lies in bed with Rias soundly snuggled in her usual spot, her arms wrapping around his waist and her one leg draping over his. He stares up at the ceiling as he thinks about what happened after his bath. When he came down, he could have sworn he heard hushed voices, but when he walked into the kitchen, only Venelana was there, which surprised him as he wasn't aware she was staying with them again.

XXXX Flashback Start XXXX

"Hey."

He saw her quirk an eyebrow at him before she gave him a grin. "Hey yourself Ichigo. Rias and Yuuto are out on an errand for me, they'll be back shortly. Anything I can do for you?"
Sitting down and taking the cover off his plate, he shook his head no before giving thanks. After taking his first bite, he saw Venelana watching him with a slightly calculating look.

"Venelana?"

"Yes Ichigo?"

"Everything okay? I mean you been watching me since I came in here, so I was wondering..."

She folded her hands on the table and organized her thoughts before she dropped her bomb on him. "Ichigo do you really love Rias?"

Spitting out his tea, he gave her an incredulous look before scowling at her. "I think you know the answer to that Venelana. I'd do anything for your daughter; even stop her damn arranged marriage by any means available to me. Why?"

"Then if you wish to ask for her hand, I will allow it."

"What?" He was stunned by her admission. "What about your husband, your son, don't they have some say in this? I mean...if Rias and I do break this arrangement won't they lose face?"

"I'll take care of those two when the time comes Ichigo, but before you come to me, I want you to think very hard before you act. I don't want to see my daughter hurt if your feelings aren't true."

"My feelings for her will never change."

She got up and cupped his cheek before she leaned in. Looking into his eyes, she saw what she was told to look for; then she gave him a gentle kiss on his cheek like she did before.

"You will do well Ichigo."

XXXX Flashback End XXXX

Looking down at Rias's sleeping form, he rubs his nose into her hair as he sighs deeply.

"What's wrong Ichigo?" Her sleepy voice breaks the silence of the room.

"Nothing Rias, just can't sleep, things on my mind."

Not looking up at him, she nudges his side. "Tell me Ichigo."

"Your Mom again. Just caught me off guard tonight."

"What did she say Ichigo?"

"She asked what my plans for the future were."

"What did you say to her?"

"Nothing much, just as long as I was with you, I'd be okay."

Shifting around until her chin is on his chest, she looks up at his face as she thinks about what he just said. Her eyes go wide when she figures out what he means.

"Are you serious Ichigo?"

Looking back down at the woman on him, he wraps his arms around her and pulls her up until they
are nose to nose. Closing his eyes, he whispers to her.

"Yes."

She softly kisses him at first before he pulls her tighter against his chest. As the heat of the moment builds, he pulls the covers off of them and rolls them over until he is straddling her.

"Ichigo?"

"Shhhh Rias." He continues to kiss her before he leans in and whispering to her. "I won't go far promise."

This time he kisses a spot not on her face.

XXXX

Venelana watches the morning chaos as the five teens rush around getting ready for school. Ichigo taking command of Koneko as Akeno makes sure Yuuto is ready. Rias is in the kitchen gathering their bento for the day. Soon the sounds of two sets of feet come bouncing down the stairs as Ichigo leads the white-haired Neko to the living room.

"Onii-san, stop running so fast."

"Come on shortness, you have to keep up if you are going to be chasing ghosts."

"Ghost float you…"

"Watch your mouth Ko-chan; I know Akeno isn't the best role model but still…"

"Hey! I resent those implications Ichi-nii!"

"Well you're at fault Akeno! Between your pranks and your facts-of-life talks, I'm surprised she hasn't…never mind!"

Well, I certainly understand what the staff mean about their mornings now.' Venelana smirks as she watches the group dynamics.

"Ichigo! Akeno! Koneko! Yuuto! Move it! I won't tolerate being late for school!"

"Yes Rias!" Four voices shout back.

As the teens gather at the genkan, Venelana calls for Rias. "Rias, can I speak to you a moment in private."

The four teens look between Rias and her mother before Ichigo takes the lead. "Come on guys, we'll wait for Rias outside."

The two Gremory women watch the other four teens walk out the door until Ichigo looks back at Rias before closing the door. The crimson-haired beauty then turns towards her mother.

"Rias, be careful tonight, Yoruichi thinks that tonight may be the night the Fallen Angels make their move. We still don't know what they are planning. Keep Ichigo close to you until tonight, I'll watch him when he gets home from club."

"Yes Mother." As she turns to go out the door, she pauses. "We've made our decision Mother."
"I thought so. You two weren't as quiet as you thought you were."

Not even a blush forms on her face as Rias grabbed the door knob. "We didn't go that far Mother, but he did..."

"Go before you can't hide it Rias. I'll talk to Amyntas tonight."

"Thank you Mother, for everything."

"You're welcome Daughter."

Ichigo and Yuuto are walking the hallways; the groups of girls whispering in huddles has the older teen wondering what is going on. Ichigo would catch the name Issei a few times but nothing other than that. Looking down at the frowning blonde next to him, Ichigo nudges him.

"What's going on Yuuto? You get the inside dirt from your fan-girls, so what's the news?"

"Do you remember that kid from last year, the one who kept looking at Buchou your first day here?"

"Yeah, the pervert that's part of the group the girls call the Three Perverts or something like that, why?"

"Well, it seems he got a date for tonight."

Ichigo can't help the look of incredulousness that forms on his face. "You're kidding right?"

Yuuto shakes his head in agreement. "I'm afraid not Ichigo. He was overheard bragging to his two buddies this morning when they tried to..."

Ichigo stops when Yuuto stops mid-sentence. "When he tried to do what Yuuto?"

Yuuto backs away when he sees his older companion trying to pin him with his scowl, knowing he has to make a quick getaway, he deflects the news to his fellow Knight. "Ah, why don't you ask Tomoe-Senpai, I'm sure she'll tell you."

Before he can grab his friend, Yuuto is down the hallway using the gabbing girls as cover. Ichigo glares at the people surrounding him until they sense his anger and open a pathway for him. Needing to know what happened, Ichigo makes for his Kendo Captain's homeroom in quick time, only to pass one of the three so called Hentai, Matsuda, limping around with an icepack on his eye. Putting two and two together, he begins breathing through his mouth to calm himself. After feeling calm enough to continue, he approaches Tomoe's homeroom to see her standing outside.

"What happened this morning Tomoe?"

"Senpai! I didn't see you!" She bows to him.

"Tomoe quit that, you know how irritating it is to me when you act that way."

"Sorry Ichigo-senpai, force of habit."

"Well, what happened?"

"Oh, you mean the Perverted Trio? Not much really, we had an early practice because we wanted
to loosen up before class and when we went to shower and change, Momo-Senpai stopped us and pointed to a hole in the wall. She motioned for some of us to follow her outside where we found those idiots trying to peek on us. Well, let's just say, I don't ever want to piss off Momo-Senpai. She didn't even give them a chance to defend themselves before she was in the middle of them. I never seen anyone move so quickly and beat up three boys as badly as she did."

"Momo kicked their asses?"

"Oh yes, and she gave them a warning as well. She told them they were lucky it was her and not her sister Rukia."

Mumbling softly to himself. "Too bad she wasn't there, I doubt the three of them would be walking let alone breathing."

Tomoe begins giggling when she hears him. "I agree with you Senpai. Rukia-Senpai can be..."

"A violent, cold-hearted bitch." Ichigo finishes for her.

Tomoe's eyes go wide as she stares past him, sensing the doom standing behind him, Ichigo palms his face. "She's right behind me, isn't she?"

"Yes I am Berry-Senpai. I think today at club I'll practice against you sseemmmpaaaii." Rukia says as she passes him with an evil smirk.

'Why me!'

XXXX

Ichigo is having a really, really bad day so far. First, the run-in with Rukia this morning, then at lunch having to eat with only Momo and that same she-demon, while Rias and her club did inventory for the year. She did give him a small kiss to make it up to him, but she did it front of the now teasing raven-haired demon sitting next to him.

"So Ichigo, you looking forward to practice today? I know I am."

"Look how many times do I have to say I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"That's not the point Ichigo, you said it. And you're lucky that Tomoe-chan was there or else I would've beaten your ass then, but now I get to do it under the guise of practice." Rukia ends with her sweetest voice.

"I hate you Midget."

"Same here Berry-chan."

Momo shakes her head in disbelief, despite the venom of their words, there isn't any heat to them, and it's like they were...flirting.

"Stop it off you two. I swear if you two don't knock it off, people are going to think you're a couple." She says in exasperation at them.

"What!? / Not in a million years!" Rukia and Ichigo shout their combined denials at the other 'sister'.

Tapping her chin in a mocking gesture, she adds to their growing horror. "I don't know you two. You both treat each other worse than the plague, but neither of you really sound like you mean it."
So what is it then? If not flirting, than maybe it's a forbidden and hidden love?

Both faces freeze then before Ichigo's eye begins to twitch violently. "I'd rather marry a blind monkey than this…frigid bitch!"

"I rather gouge my eyeballs out and have my skin peeled off before I'd let him touch me that way!"

Momo jumps up and points at them then and shouts. "See that's what I mean! You both treat each other so badly but there is no real hatred in your voices! You two are like a married couple already!"

"We're just friends! ! !" Both shout at the same time.

Fist pumping, the black-haired sister shouts in triumph then. "I knew it! You two do like each other!"

Ichigo at first stares at Momo with wide-open eyes before quiet sniggers escape him, he glances at the violet-eyed demon next to him. She glances at him before her own sniggers begin as well. Putting out her hand she says the simplest thing to him.

"Friends then Ichigo?"

Taking her hand, he grins back. "Yeah, friends Rukia."

"I'm still going to kick your ass though."

"I never doubted it Midget."

XXXX

Yoruichi sips her tea as she and Venelana sit in the café not far from Kuoh Academy waiting for the waitress to leave after setting their lunch down. When the young woman leaves, the were-cat gives her friend a look.

"So what's so important you had to drag me out to lunch?"

Smiling, Venelana says nonchalantly to her purple-haired friend. "Rias got a taste of her future with Ichigo last night."

Almost spitting out her tea, the cat-eyed woman sputters out. "How do you know?"

Laughing musically she answers. "The whole house heard her screams last night, and not screams of pain either."

"Holy shit!" Yoruichi says as she begins grinning at how much she is going to love teasing her student once again.

"Yes, I thought so too. Now we just have to find a way for Zangetsu to break through."

"Leave it to them Venelana, between Ichigo and him they will figure it out when the time comes. And if he felt Momo last night, it won't be long."

"And what about his Hollow Yoruichi? What do we do if it gains control?"

"If and only if it comes to that, it will take all of us to subdue him then. I won't lose him to Soul Society; I certainly won't lose him to his Hollow Venelana."
"Is it really that powerful Yoruichi?"

"I managed to get some details about what really happened in Hueco Mundo from Ryūken; Uryū told his father that Ichigo's Hollow was unlike anything he had ever seen or felt before, even compared to the strongest of the Espada. His Hollow was, in a word, monstrous."

"Then we better prepare ourselves for the worst then."

"I hope it doesn't come to that Venelana. For his sake and Rias's sake."

XXXX

Ichigo lies on his back as he holds an ice pack to his ribs; true to her word, Rukia didn't hold back and again and again he was made to pay for it. Watching as Tomoe and Rukia take the club through their katas once again, he grins internally. Since their arrival, Rukia and by extension Momo has brought more stability to his life. He thought that when he first got here, he would be treated as an outsider by the Gremory group, but they did the opposite with him. Allowing him to become part of their group rather quickly, he soon found himself surrounded by people he could call friends. And one he now calls his girlfriend. He smiles as he thinks about his crimson-haired Angel; Rias had been very open about herself with him since the first moment they met.

But tonight, she and the others have their first real club meeting of the year so they wouldn't be home until possibly early morning, leaving just him, Venelana and the staff home alone. After last night, he finds himself thinking more about Rias's mother. The short conversation she had with him this morning has him thinking about how he was going to convince the Gremory men that he was a better match for Rias. All he has is his family's name and a small fortune, but he still isn't a part of their social circle, something if he remembers from his nightly talks with Rias, is of great importance to her family. Hearing Tomoe call an end to practice, he painfully sits up on his bench and watches the women of his team head for the showers, leaving only Tomoe, Rukia and Momo hanging back to chat with him.

"Hey Ichigo, you okay? I didn't mean to hit you so hard...again." Rukia says with an evil smile.

"Fuck you Midget. Sooner or later I'll figure you out and then you'll pay."

"Yeah, yeah Carrot-top, in your dreams."

Slowly getting to his feet, Ichigo waves them off as he makes his way to the men's locker room. "I'll see you in a few minutes Rukia, Momo. Tomoe, nice job again with the team, I really think we have a shot at taking the championship this year."

Bowing, the Sitri Knight agrees. "I agree Ichigo-Senpai. This year's team has more talent than we have ever had before. With Rukia-Senpai and Momo-Senpai I have no doubt about our chances either."

As the three women watch him disappear into the locker room, Tomoe quietly asks as they walk to their own locker room. "Is he really that good Rukia-sama? I heard the story from Sitri-sama last night, but I can't believe he is that strong."

Rukia can't help the smile she has as she replies. "Ichigo is that strong Tomoe-san. What I did to him today is nothing in comparison to what he can really do. If we were to spar as Shinigami, I wouldn't last a minute against him. Especially when he Hollowfies, he gets stronger by tenfold."

"Wow!" Tomoe says in hushed shock.
"Have you ever seen him in his Hollow form Rukia?" Momo asks as they approach the doors to the locker room.

"No, but Orihime and Uryū have. From what Yoruichi learned, neither of them will speak of what they saw that day in Hueco Mundo. Orihime especially was affected; whatever they saw, she blamed herself for what happened during his fight with the Cuarto Espada."

"Were these Hollows really that powerful too Rukia-san?"

"If we ever get the chance to travel to Karakura, maybe you will get to meet Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck, she's the former Tercera Espada."

"You meet with your enemies?"

"Nelliel isn't exactly our enemy; she is one of the few Hollows who no longer have a need to eat souls. She and Harribel-san now jointly rule Hueco Mundo, they wanted peace after the Winter War and now they sometimes ask Squad Eleven for help in weeding out those who don't want that. It makes for some interesting stories when they come back."

"You Shinigami live a strange life Rukia-sama."

"You have no idea Tomoe-san. Come on, let's get changed before Berry blows a gasket."

The three women giggle as they enter the locker room; however, Rukia looks at where the hole was earlier that day. No one had changed yet, waiting until the petite woman nods her head.

"I don't think we'll have any more problems from now on girls."

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Outside, thick thorn-covered bushes line the brick wall along the entire women's locker room much to the shock of the three boys looking at the sudden growth.

"When did this happen!?!" Three frustrated voices shout out.

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Ichigo waves to the two Shiba sisters as they part ways; him heading home, while they said they were going shopping for dinner. Walking by the park, he doesn't notice a black cat watching him from a nearby branch as he walks down the sidewalk on the way home. Ever since that night, he hasn't run through it, the thought of seeing that strange woman again makes him run an alternate route now. Shaking his head, he gets lost in his thoughts until he finds himself in front of the sally port. Soon he is inside the genkan, where he frowns at how quiet the house is without the others. As he sits and takes his shoes off however, he is reminded how alone he isn't when Venelana speaks up behind him.

"Welcome home Ichigo."

Jumping up and spinning around, he sees Venelana covering her mouth with her hand to muffle her giggles. "Dammit Venelana! I'm too young to have a heart attack!"

Smiling at him, she waves for him to follow her. "Come on scaredy-cat, Harumi made us dinner because all of you had late clubs today. Don't worry about the girls and Yuuto; they'll be home before you know it, so it's just you and me for now."
Shaking his head in defeat, Ichigo walks behind Venelana into the kitchen where Harumi has two plates of food ready for him and his girlfriend's mother. He pours tea for the both of them and they give thanks for dinner before eating.

"So." Venelana starts up. "How do you think your team will do this year Ichigo?"

Swallowing his food first, Ichigo nods his head as he answers. "We have a really strong team this year Venelana. We have a good shot at winning a championship this year barring any injuries to our starters. And I have to admit those two new girls will put us over the top. Especially Rukia, despite her attitude."

Giggling, the matriarch laughs then. "I hear she does quite well against the coach when they spar."

Growling as he stuffs his mouth, Ichigo's response is lost in his food. "Freekdo, she'bd lusy I'd letp hebr bin!"

The rest of dinner is spent in idle chit-chat as Ichigo and Venelana talks about the rest of the team, the upcoming school year, and finally where Ichigo is thinking of attending University when he graduates.

"I told you already Venelana, wherever your daughter goes, I'm sure it'll be fine with me. I'll find something to do with my life."

"But don't you have your own dreams Ichigo? Anything you would want to study?"

"Well if I had to pick something, I'd pick teaching Literature."

"Well if that's the case Ichigo, do you know that Kuoh alumni get special considerations when it comes to teaching positions? To be frank, much of the staff, they have spoken favorably of you since you started there last year."

Pausing as he carries the dishes away to clean, he speaks honestly to his girlfriend's mother. "I appreciate the gesture Venelana, but if I want to be a teacher, I want them to hire me based upon my merits, not for who I know."

"Ichigo, I think you misunderstand me. No one, but the best, become teachers at Kuoh Academy. I think you have the intellect to be among them someday."

Looking at Venelana, he gives a short bow of his head. "Thank you Venelana."

"My pleasure…son." She laughs as Ichigo nearly drops the dishes.

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Taking a bath after dinner, Ichigo lies in bed bored out of his mind. Rias had called to say they had to stay a little later, but she would be home for them to spend some time together. Deciding he couldn't spend the whole night in restless wait, he makes his way downstairs to an empty house, by the lack of sounds in it. Not bothering to leave a note, he puts on his running shoes, picks up his iPod Nano and throws on a hooded sweater. Stepping out into the night, he sees that the moon is particularly bright tonight. Stretching for a few minutes, he then makes his way to the sally port and then he is out starting his run. As he makes his way along his normal route however, he becomes lost in the thoughts of becoming a teacher.

'Well, it does sound like a plan. It will keep me close to Kuoh and my Uncle should approve of my choice. I just wonder what Rias is going to take as a major though? I hope she finds a career that
doesn't keep us apart for long periods of time.'

Lost in his thinking, his feet take him along his old route of going through the park before he takes notice of the darkness around him. Slowing down as he approaches the place where the fountain is, he sees two people standing nearby. Pulling out his earbuds, he notices that one of the people standing there is the hentai Issei Hyoudou, the other is a girl who has her back to him. Getting closer, he hears the boy asking the girl a question in a very confused voice.

"Sorry, could you repeat that?"

Before Ichigo gets any closer, he is forced to jump back in surprise when a pair of wings covered in black feathers emerges from her back.

'What the fuck!?'

She speaks loud enough that both Issei and unknowingly Ichigo can hear her.

"Can you please die right now?"

Before Ichigo can even move a muscle, he feels his chest explode with pain. Looking down, he sees a sharp rod of light sticking out from the left side of his chest where his heart is located. A woman's voice begins speaking quietly in his ear.

"Like Raynare just said, 'can you please die right now?"

XXXX
"Like Raynare just said, 'can you please die right now'?!"

Fallen Angel

"SNAP, TOBIUME!" Momo screams as she watches the hooded figure fall flat on their face, a Fallen Angel standing behind them.

'How did it come to this!? How did we miss the human!? It wasn't supposed to be like this!'

Not wasting time, Momo launches a fireball at the Fallen Angel once she jumps clear of the fallen human, then hurriedly puts up a shield when a light spear is thrown at her. Sparing a glance, she can't help the feeling of hopelessness as she sees the blood pooling around the person's body.

'Forgive us dear soul; you weren't supposed to be here.'

Earlier at the Occult Research Club….

Yoruichi watches through the glass ball as Rukia and Momo walk with Ichigo away from the school. Wanting to see him up close she turns to the group of Devils in the room and speaks.

"I'm going out for a while, I'll be back soon."

"Going to see Ichigo then Yoruichi?" Venelana asks.

Pausing as she disrobes, she stops and looks at the Gremory mother. "I haven't seen him up close since the day Amyntas took him. I…I just want to see him. So I can assure his sisters and Tatsuki that he's fine."
"We understand Yoruichi." Sōna says as she watches her cousin as well.

Rias and her peerage are also watching as the orange-haired teen walks away with his unofficial escorts. They will break away from him later to 'shop' for dinner before doubling back to regroup with them. Rias's familiar will then take over the escort and alert them to any threats and, if she has to, teleport him to safety.

The room fills with purple smoke as they witness the Shihōin transform into her feline form and leap for the window sill.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Then we will prepare for tonight's surveillance."

Everyone murmurs their responses as the cat disappears in a burst of Shunpo.

"Damn, that's fast." Yuuto expresses when his eyes can't follow her movement.

Venelana, who is sitting on the couch, stands shortly after she finishes her tea and walks over to her daughter.

"Rias, I should be at home to greet him. Don't forget to call him as scheduled so he doesn't worry about why you and the others are out late. If this is indeed the night they make a move, it would be best that you are here to receive the summons."

Akeno watches a different glass ball that shows the boy now at the center of everyone's attention for tonight.

"Are we sure that this boy is the holder of a Sacred Gear Gremory-sama? I mean, look at him, he is only known for his perversion within the school."

Venelana moves to a clear spot in the room as she answers the Queen of her daughter's peerage.

"We believe so Akeno, the teen girl who calls herself Yuuma Amano doesn't exist anywhere. She is a Fallen Angel in disguise and may be the one responsible for the rash of killings in Kuoh. If she does intend to carry out her plan, tonight will be her best chance. That is why all of you must make sure he is able to call for Rias through a summons. The Shinigami don't approve, but they understand that this is the only way for us to control an unknown holder of a Sacred Gear. I will take responsibility if this fails."

"Onii-san will not like this. He already has a dislike for him." Koneko says as she sits with Tsubaki.

Rias nods her head in agreement. "If I have to make him a servant, I will have to find a way to keep Ichigo calm. The last thing I need is for him and the boy to be at odds, especially since he already knows of the boy's habits."

"Fufufu, we could always give him to Sitri-sama, I'm sure she could do with another Pawn."

"No, I have my eyes on someone already, a powerful Pawn if I'm correct." The Sitri Heir says as she watches the brown-haired boy run home for his 'date'.

"Rias, you are in charge until Yoruichi returns, after that we will follow her plan and allow her, Rukia and Momo to take point. The rest of you will hold back until it's time to reincarnate the boy. Hopefully this will go smoothly, but if not use any means available to keep the boy alive."

"Hai Venelana-sama. / Gremory-sama." The room chorus in answer.
"Mother."

"Yes Rias?"

Blue eyes turn to look at her mother. "If you can, keep Ichigo from his run tonight please."

"I will...try Rias."

"Thank you Mother."

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Yoruichi jumps from rooftop to rooftop as she follows behind the group of three unnoticed. She couldn't admit it out loud to Venelana, but she just has to see him with her own two eyes, the boy who is like a son to her. The years she had watched over him secretly as he grew-up, changing from the happy young boy he had been to the sullen teen after Masaki passed away, those were her among her greatest joys and heartbreak. She knew it was wrong to feel the way she did, but Ichigo had become like a son to her in the short amount of time she spent around him. Masaki would always be his Mother, but she will step in if she has to. He and the twins have slowly wormed their way into her heart, even Yuzu, though she has yet to meet her in person. But that will change soon though.

She chuckles to herself, thinking back to when she had arrived just after Tatsuki did the other night, she almost fell over as the black-haired teen ripped into Kisuke and he just shut his mouth when he saw her standing behind the younger woman. Tatsuki herself is an interesting one for sure; the Reiatsu slowly spilling out of her marks her as a Shinigami just like her oldest friend. She cannot wait to start training the martial artist. If Tatsuki is anything like her Little Bee, she will be one serious threat later on. And the one she picked to change her soul is walking alongside her as she jumps from branch to branch, silent as a ghost.

'It's only fair you should be the one to give her a choice Ichigo.'

Ghosting from tree limb to tree limb, she follows him until he reaches his home with the Gremory Clan. Watching him disappear inside, she waits until the sally port closes before turning away. Being as close as she was to him, she has to give Kisuke and Tessai credit for the Kidō they used; he was oblivious to her presence. Except for extreme emotional responses, no one would ever know that the Kuoh Academy's Kendo Club coach is a walking Death God and Devil. She chuckles to herself thinking about the day he finally learns that he is nobility in two realms.

'I almost feel sorry for you Ichigo; you'll have fan-girls in the Underworld as well. At least until they find out you're off the market already. I wonder if the Shinigami Women's Association will let them in. The stories we could get out of Rias alone would be worth the admission.'

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Sōna Sitri sits with her sister, the current Leviathan Maou, at her family's home in the Underworld. Venelana had gone to speak to her son, Sirzechs Lucifer, while she herself has the unenviable task of talking to her older sister.

"So, we have cousins which we knew nothing about."

"Yes Serafall, the boy is named Ichigo, and the girls are Yuzu and Karin."

"Did Lord Amyntas say why he hid this from us?"
Sōna gathers her thoughts before answering her older sister. While Serafall is one of the current Maou, she can be very child-like if she gets distracted. When she is satisfied with what she has to say, Sōna begins to speak.

"Serafall, Ichigo isn't any ordinary pureblood; he and his sisters are also of Shinigami and Quincy noble lineage."

Serafall's face goes blank as she processes the information her younger sister just gave her. Shinigami and Quincy. As she turns her head to look at Sōna, she looks for any sign her sister is lying to her.

"How?"

"Before I tell you everything Leviathan-sama, I need your word that should anything happen tonight, that we will have your support in approving any actions we are forced to take. I...I don't want to see anyone punished for starting a possible war, including the three Shinigami who are helping us."

Serafall Leviathan stares at her sister with shock, never has Sōna ever addressed her with her title in private, but it is clear this time her little sister understands the implications of what could happen if things didn't go as they planned.

"You have my word Sōna Sitri. Now tell me all about our cousins."

"Well first you should know this. We will most likely be calling Rias our cousin-in-law soon...

Serafall listens to her sister with full attention, the first time ever now that the woman Maou thought about it.

'I guess when you find out that you still have cousins that are of Naberius blood would do that.'

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Sirzechs is looking at his mother with an empty stare; Grayfia standing behind him however is trying her best to contain her amusement. Venelana keeps shooting looks at her son, her daughter-in-law and lastly her husband as she waits for the eventual...uproar perhaps.

Her husband breaks the stalemate. "What have you done Venelana?"

"I have saved our daughter Zeoticus. She does not love the Riser boy and I will not allow her to live through a loveless marriage. Now do I have your support Lucifer-sama?"

Only his mother and his wife could make a demand sound like a request and expect him to comply without argument. "Of course, Mother. I will give Lord Amyntas and you complete discretion with Rias and Ichigo's marriage arrangement. As for the Fallen Angels, they did invade our territory and kill humans indiscriminately."

"Son?"

"Face it father, we never were happy with this arrangements, we let our pride get in the way of doing what we should have done in the first place: make Rias happy. If she loves Ichigo and she has even thought about making him a part of her peerage to ensure her happiness, why not give her what she wants? As for the Fallen Angels..."

"You would trust Shinigami with this?" Grayfia asks them.
Looking up at his wife, he gives her a nod, then turns to face his father once more.

"Father, this actually works to our advantage. Allowing the Shinigami to pursue and eliminate the rogue Fallen Angels would be deemed justifiable; they are the 'Balancers'. Their truce with us will not be called into question by the other factions, and if I remember correctly, Fallen Angels would normally not kill humans senselessly; I'm sure the proof Mother and Lady Yoruichi have gathered will clear us of any wrong-doings."

Zeoticus falls back into his chair; he knows he has lost his arguments. Naberius, out of all the Clan heirs for his little Rias to fall in love with, it would have to be one of them. He had his peerage check in on the boy from time to time himself, as well as receiving reports from Kazuhiro whenever he and Koneko visited the shouten for the little Neko's sweets. All indications are that the young man is an out-standing role model for the younger members of his daughter's peerage. If he has to get down to it really, his daughter cannot do any better. Sighing in acceptance, he gives his son a nod.

"We will support the actions that they take with the Fallen Angels. And when the time comes, I will allow Ichigo to put forth his name as a suitor for Rias's hand."

Grayfia snorts uncontrollably then. "Forgive me Father, but I think we have little say in that. Between Ichigo and Rias, none of our opinions would matter to them anyways. I have learned that Ichigo...has an unusual sense of right and wrong."

"How so Grayfia?"

"Husband, Father, to him it's not laws that he follows, but his heart."

"His heart?" Sirzechs questions to his wife.

Venelana smiles as she speaks. "Yes, his heart Sirzechs. He followed his heart to save a comrade, one of his best-friends from execution. Then he followed his heart to save a friend against the orders of Soul Society after they mistakenly declared her a traitor. He will always put his family and friends first, all others can choose to stand with him, or..."

"Or get swept aside."

XXXX

Rukia and Momo Shunpo back to Kuoh Academy after splitting away from Ichigo. Along the way, Momo looks up and down the sidewalk to ensure their privacy before she speaks to her friend.

"Rukia, do you have any misgivings about what they might do with that boy, Issei-kun?"

Frowning as she Shunpos with her fellow Lieutenant, the Kuchiki answers back with some remorse. "Some, we have no idea what a Sacred Gear really is, maybe Kisuke might know, but other than what they told us, we have to trust them to take the lead on this. Yoruichi-san seems apprehensive as well, but if it doesn't upset the balance of souls with its power, we really have no choice but to allow them to take the boy into their custody. I just hope that whatever it is, it doesn't attract the attention of you-know-who."

Momo shudders at the thought of the mad Squad Twelve Captain. Even Nemu puts her on edge sometimes with her emotionless mask, though she at least shows signs of being somewhat normal.

"Rukia?"
"Yeah, Momo?"

"Are you worried about getting involved like this?"

Rukia stops and waits for Momo to stop as well. Making sure no one is around; she gives her friend a look. "Listen Momo, I know that you don't know Ichigo as well as I do, but I will do anything, and I mean anything to help him. If it means helping Venelana-san and Yoruuchi-san with their plans, then I will. But you don't have to Momo. This isn't why we came here to begin with, and technically our mission was over the moment we stepped foot in that room with the Devils."

"But is it really over Rukia? I mean we did find out what Squad Twelve was looking for, but we don't know why they are here...technically, do we?"

Rukia grins at her friend when she sees something in Momo's eyes. "You like this don't you Lieutenant Hinamori? The danger? The stealth recon? You are secretly an adrenaline junkie aren't you?"

"N...No...No I'm not Rukia!"

"Liar! You can't even say it with a straight face. You get your first Living World mission and you don't want it to end do you? Oh, you are so busted Momo!" Rukia laughs at her friend's growing blush.

"Oh shut up Rukia! Fine! I do love this! I mean this is what you, Renji, Shiro-kun and the others got to do while living here during the Winter War. I was recovering in Squad Four and unable to do anything, not even in the last battle against...against Aizen."

Rukia places a hand on her fellow Shinigami's shoulder. "Well, I can promise you one thing Momo. Whenever Ichigo is involved, things get interesting, so if you want adventure, you might just get it. Now come on before we're late."

"Hai!"

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Yoruichi watches through the glass ball as the teams spread out across the town, Rukia, Sōna and several members of her peerage making up the first team that will respond if the Fallen Angels do carry out any plans. Momo volunteered to follow Issei Hyoudou, which left Sōna's Queen and the rest of the Sitri peerage to cover the area between the church and arcade district of town after they learned that is where the date is supposed to start. The last group would be Yuuto and Koneko who would watch for any Fallen Angels who leave the church. The former assassin is just thankful that there are only three Fallen Angels to account for. Anymore, and she'd be forced to spread out what they have between covering the human male and keeping other innocent humans from getting drawn in, which would place an almost impossibly large burden on the two Heiress's peerages.

"Yoruichi-sama, is there nothing I can be doing other than sitting here?" Akeno asks as she pours tea for the three of them.

"No Akeno-chan. This is really the hardest part of any operation. The waiting. I could tell you stories, but I'd have to kill ya afterwards." She says with a toothy grin.

Akeno laughs back as she sits next to her King. "Rias, please try to relax. This isn't your first time approaching someone in becoming a Devil."
Yoruichi listens in as the two Devils talk; it isn't every day that she gets the chance to listen in on the inner workings of a different race, especially since the race in question is as powerful as the Shinigami are. She has learned from both Venelana and Amyntas that over a thousand years ago, the then younger Head Captain Yamamoto had agreed to a secret truce with the Three Factions. She couldn't believe that Central and the Head Captain had kept that information secret from them. Now that she has spent time with the Gremory Clan, she finds herself admiring the women. The only tales relating to Devils they have in Soul Society while growing up as children are about the Gates of Hell and the Kushanāda, the large sentinels of what she knows now are nothing but a small part of the Underworld. A dimension within a dimension unto itself.

The few other tales she learned about the Devils had been the old folk-lore tales that she had come across during her exile, but after learning of and approaching Venelana, she has since formed a different opinion of them. Devils are just like any other spiritual being, they live, love, fight, and kill, but they had evolved just as the Hollows had with the Espada. They had become more businesslike in their dealings with humans. Gone are the Old Maou Faction, defeated and mostly exiled, as well as their soul stealing methods. Now, only the most hard-core of humans would offer their souls to a Devil, but those cases are far and few between. Most Devils these days just ask a human with any special abilities whether they are willing to reincarnate as a Devil in their peerage, but often their targets are near death when they are given the choice. Yuuto Kiba was one of those offered that choice when he was on the verge of dying.

Yoruichi looks at the younger women to see them still talking normally, but as she looks at the crimson-haired teen, she can't help the sudden image of younger versions of Rias and Ichigo. A happy sigh escapes her, drawing the attentions of the other two women.

"Yoruichi, are you alright?" Rias asks.

Holding up a hand, she regains control of her breathing before she slips into her teasing voice. "I'm fine Rias. I was just wondering what they would look like, that's all."

Rias and Akeno give each other a quizzical look before the young Queen pushes for more information. "What would who look like Shihōin-sama?"

Yoruichi can't help it. "Ichigo and Rias's children."

Akeno begins grinning widely, as the named young woman begins to blush a deep shade of red. "YORUICHI-SAMA! WE HAVEN'T EVEN..."

"Haven't what Rias?" Yoruichi senses something good has indeed happened between her student and his girlfriend.

"Nothing." Rias says as she crosses her arms under her chest.

Never one to miss an opportunity, Akeno starts laughing behind her hand. "What she meant to say, Shihōin-sama, is that she and Ichigo have only just started down the path of physical acts of affections. In other words, he gave Rias her first..."

"Say it and die slowly Akeno!" Rias shouts as she tries to cover her Queen's mouth.

Yoruichi is about to fall to the floor laughing when Akeno's phone starts ringing, causing everyone to pause as the young woman answers with a stifled laugh.

"Yes, Yuuto. What's going on...What!? What do you mean there are more than three!? How many!? Eight!? No, Yoruichi and I are on our way now! Stay put until we arrive!"
Akeno stands suddenly and informs them. "Yuuto and Koneko spotted eight Fallen Angels leaving
the church. They went in different directions."

Yoruichi stands with a snarl. "Dammit, I should have guessed! They know about me and the others
then. Akeno get me there as quick as you can! Rias, your part still hasn't changed, until you are
summoned or we bring the boy back, stay here."

"What about my mother and the servants? They can help you." Rias replies, knowing that things
just got more complicated.

"I'll call her once Akeno and I get there. Akeno, if you please?"

"Hai Shihōin-sama."

Rias watches as the older Shinigami and her Queen disappear in a magic circle of red.

'Be careful Akeno, Yoruichi.'

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Venelana reads the text messages she got from both her daughter and Yoruichi. Looking up at the
three servants, she takes one last look at the glass orb. Ichigo is in bed, his eyes closed and with his
earbuds in place.

"He's asleep. We must hurry if we are to find them in time. Spread out and find whoever is nearest
to you and assist them."

The three simply nod and disappear in magic circles of their own. She takes one last look at
Ichigo's sleeping form before she too disappears. She misses him yawning and moving to sit on the
edge of the bed.

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Momo reads the message once again.

To Momo:

From Yoruichi:

You're to follow the Fallen Angel and the human boy at all costs. Eight targets have left the
church. Be on guard.

She frowns at the thought that the odds have now shifted to almost even. They still have the edge
with Yoruichi being here. No one alive in the city can match her speed or her skill; at least from
what she can comprehend so far. Looking down, she watches Rias's familiar give the boy, Issei, a
pamphlet with a summoning spell engraved upon it. Soon enough, the disguised Fallen Angel,
dressed in a simple dress meets up with her 'date'. Momo wants to vomit the moment she hears the
fake voice of 'Yuuma' speaking sweetly to the human boy. Keeping her Reiatsu suppressed as
much as possible, she trails behind the two as they embark on their date.

Not once does she lose the two during the course of their date. Watching Issei actually go out of his
way to make the night a fun one does make Momo giggle as his first attempt of wooing a woman is
rather cute. Between the arcade and then taking 'Yuuma' to a family restaurant for food and dessert,
she can tell he is making a genuine effort. As the date progresses however, she notices that it's
getting darker and night is rapidly approaching. Soon, she is almost at ground level watching the
two of them enter the park. Taking a chance, she sends a text to the group that she has followed them into the park.

Only Sōna responds to her text, telling her that the others are also converging on the park.

"Well I guess this is really it then." Momo sees the two approaching a fountain. Seeing a spot behind the 'teen girl', she Shunpos to a branch above and behind the disguised Fallen Angel and watches the scene unfold before her eyes. She looks down when the sounds of someone walking past reaches her ears.

'Who is this? Another Fallen Angel?' She thinks as the hooded person stops several meters away from the other two.

Then to her horror, another Fallen Angel suddenly appears behind the hooded person and stabs them through the chest, just as she hears the chilling question spoken out loud again.

"Can you please die right now?"

Then everything happens all at once. She sees the woman she had been trailing spear Issei in her moment of stunned horror. Then Rukia Shunpos into the middle of the clearing, touching Sode No Shirayuki in front of her, releasing her Shikai.

"Tsugi no Mai, Hakuren!" Rukia sends her attack at a different Fallen Angel who had appeared next to the now angry 'teen' Yuuma.

"Shunkō!" A visibly pissed Yoruichi yells as she appears next to yet another Fallen Angel, successfully punching her in the face and smashing her through the trees.

Momo drops out of her branch and as she passes the fallen human, she can't help the small prayer she gives him.

Rias stands as the summoning spell activates. Walking calmly to the center of the room, she casts her magic and steps into the middle of a war zone. Her eyes go wide as she is grabbed by Akeno, who rushes her to the boy who is now bleeding out.

"He's the one Rias! We'll keep you covered as you reincarnate him! You have no time to ask, he's close to dying already!"

Nodding, she forms her Evil pieces and sees that only her Pawn pieces are reacting to him. Placing one on his chest, she watches as it disappears but nothing else happens. Taking a quick look up, she sees the three Shinigami fighting, and then more and more of her peerage and Sōna's peerage show up to join in the fray. Placing one Pawn piece after another on his chest, she grows more anxious as each is absorbed by the human until finally there are no more Pawns left. She begins to breathe a sigh of relief when his wound starts to close, until a scream pulls her eyes towards Momo, a scream that makes her own soul turn cold as the Shinigami roars out in grief.

"IICCHHHIIIGGGGooooo NNNoooooo!!"

Momo is holding her own against the taller but slower Fallen Angel. The woman had yet to land a hit on the Fifth Squad Lieutenant, but she is slowly herding her in one particular direction. Having gotten lost in the heat of the battle, Momo finds herself falling backwards suddenly as she trips
over the body of the hooded person who was killed earlier.

Trying to buy herself time, Momo points at the now attacking Fallen Angel and screams out. "Hadō Number Four: Byakurai!"

Watching as the Angel hastily forms a shield and jumps out of the way, Momo pushes herself up and as she does so, the body she has fallen over moves with her. Her eyes unconsciously focus on the person's face, familiar amber orbs and wisps of orange hair appearing under the hood as it shifts away.

'NONONONONONONONONO! ! !'

The scream she lets out stops everyone. Her eyes begin to tear up as she sees Ichigo's glassy eyes staring back at her blankly. Looking up, she sees Rias screaming his name as she rushes recklessly towards her once she sees his uncovered orange hair. Yoruichi's and Rukia's Reiatsu both spike as they try to break their power limiters at the same time. Akeno and the other Devils begin attacking the Fallen Angels with pure killing intent.

Rias skids to her knees next to Ichigo's cooling body.

"No! No! No! Ichigo! You can't leave me! You can't die! Dammit we're supposed to get married you..."

She again creates the first Evil Piece can think of and tries to push it into his chest but watches as it gets launched away from his body instead of being absorbed. She stares at his body in shock as she tries the next piece and the same event happens.

"Why!? Why!? What's wrong!?!" She screams at her pieces.

Momo stands up and launches another fire ball from Tobiume as she too tries to break her limiter in her quest for vengeance. She stands over both the screaming Rias and the murdered human who had saved Soul Society. Fighting her tears back, she solemnly swears to kill any Fallen Angel that gets near her.

'You will be avenged Ichigo!'

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The Hollow feels his world shifting drastically around him. A smirk forms as he knows what is happening to his wielder now.

"Well, I guess it’s do or die now, King."

In a burst of Sonído, he arrives at the barrier and stops as he watches Ichigo's body slowly drift down on the other side of the divide, this time he lands next to it as the world shifts again.

"We have time, but not much."

Squatting down, he stares at the orange-haired youth with a studying gaze, until he senses that Ichigo isn't going to get up on his own. Standing up, he begins to pound on the still standing barrier, yelling at the unconscious youth.

"WAKE UP KING! WAKEY, WAKEY ICHIGO!"

He waits for a few minutes, but still nothing happens. Frowning, he hits his head on the barrier and
leaves it there as he yells again, his eyes never leaving his King.

"WAKE UP ICHIGO! GET YOUR ASS UP KING! WE HAVE THINGS TO TALK ABOUT!"

"Stop yelling dammit!"

The Hollow blinks, baffled that his King can hear him, then he notices that Ichigo's hand is just touching the barrier as well.

"Well I'll be damned. We could have been doing this the entire time."

"Doing what?"

"Talking you dimwit."

Ichigo turns his head slightly at the white version of himself and glares at it. "Who the hell are you?"

Smirking, the Hollow looks at the amnesic Shinigami and cracks an evil smile. "I am the one who can answer all your questions King."

Ichigo furrows his eyebrows as he looks up at the standing ghost of himself, trying to make sense of that statement. His head feels fuzzy, and when he tries to move, he finds that he can't, he feels very heavy as he lies there. But now that he is talking to the apparition after so many dreams of silence, he finds himself wanting to talk, instead of closing his eyes as his body is demanding of him.

"So tell me, who are you really? A ghost from my past? A memory I have to keep blocked out so I can stay sane? Tell me truthfully what or who you are!"

"I am a part of you Ichigo Naberius. I am a part of your soul, one that was kept from you for far too long."

"What?"

"King, I can't tell you everything because truthfully you're dying right now and we need to get you back in the game."

Ichigo shakes his head as he tries to remember what has happened to him this time to make him land back in his delusion. His mind goes through his day and his late night run then he finally comes to the part that makes his body scream out in pain.

"Finally feeling it, eh King?"

"Why do you keep calling me that? And what do you mean Ichigo Naberius? My name is Ichigo..."

He freezes as he suddenly can't recall his family name. He can feel it on the tip of his tongue, he knows his own name. It...It is...

"Can't remember, can you King? Well, I'll tell you what I'm allowed. You are not Ichigo Kurosaki, nor are you Ichigo Shiba; you are much, much more than that Ichigo. In fact I didn't even know it myself until we killed Aizen."
"I didn't kill anyone dammit! I've never kill..."

"YOU HAVE KILLED ICHIGO! YOU KILLED THE ONE WHO THREATENED OUR FAMILY! THE BASTARD THAT THREATENED TO KILL YUZU AND KARIN! THREATENED TO KILL TATSUKI AND ORIHIME! THREATENED TO KILL EVERYONE YOU EVER CARED ABOUT OR LOVED! YOU...KILLED...TO...PROTECT...ICHIGO! WHY DO YOU THINK YOUR NAME IS ICHIGO!? ONE GUARDIAN! OUR MOTHER NAMED YOU AS A PROTECTOR! DO YOU REMEMBER NOW ICHIGO?"

The youth stares at the heaving chest of the white version of himself, the words echoing deep from within his soul. Images begin to form in his mind, but he can't grasp them, like water flowing through his fingers. He scowls at the person on the other side of the barrier and demands one thing.

"Prove it!"

"Prove it? You want me to prove it? Fine, I will King. Place your hand completely flat against the barrier and I will try and send you proof. But be warned King, we get only one shot at this. Do you want to take it? Do you want to truly remember who you really are?"

"Yes. Yes I want to know. I want to know who I really am."

"Then prepare yourself Ichigo Naberius, this will hurt."

Using his waning strength, Ichigo places his hand flat against the barrier and watches as the other copy of him does the same thing. He stares into the black and yellow eyes of his clone to see, for a fraction of a second, pride. Then the pain begins and he screams as a vision is forced upon him.

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Ichigo lay on the ground, watching as Aizen began to regenerate his broken body. Lying there, he could only watch as Aizen's Zanpakutō began to disintegrate and the hideously morphed Shinigami traitor began to speak.

"You have lost Ichigo Kurosaki. As you can see..."

Unable to move, Ichigo could only listen to the former Captain claim to have transcended both Hollow and Shinigami alike. He watched helplessly as Aizen pointed and laughed at him, gloating that the Hōgyoku had allowed him to transcend to an even higher level than the one he thought Ichigo had obtained. Then a red light pierced out of the deranged former Captain's chest, but after a brief stunned moment, Aizen only smirked.

"I see...I was right about your sensei Ichigo Kurosaki, but I already knew he would try to put a sealing Kidō inside another with one of his useless attacks. This cannot stop me. Now watch as I truly become a god."

Ichigo felt the air around him thickening once again, but this time his breathing became harder, almost as if he was drowning. To his shock and utter horror, the red light that was once sticking out of Aizen's chest began to recede back until once again flawless skin appeared. Two purple orbs are then directed down to his prone body, and a hand reached out and grabbed him by the neck.

"I admired your growth Ichigo Kurosaki, but in the end it wasn't enough to stop me. Before I kill you, I will let you agonize in your last seconds as I tell you what I plan to do. I will use the strength
of your father and sisters to help create the Ōken, and then I will ascend the throne. After which I will kill everyone you have ever known, cared for or even loved in your life. But before I kill the women of your life, I may amuse myself with each and every one of them, starting with your Sensei, Yoruichi, then your princess, Orihime. But the one I will enjoy the most will be your partner, Rukia Kuchiki."

'No! No! No!' It's all he could think as his windpipe was slowly crushed by the hand holding his body up.

"Such an asshole."

'Hollow!'

"Hey there partner. I see I have to save you once again King."

'How!? I thought...'

"Not quite Ichigo, but he did use a lot of our Reiryoku up, that fucking bastard." Ichigo felt the bitterness coming from his Hollow.

Looking into the face of the laughing god-like being, he shut his eyes and felt the world slow around him as he desperately entered his inner-world. Looking around, he saw it collapsing around him and the water crashing and flooding even more of the slowly sinking landscape. Twisting around he found what he was looking for, his Hollow standing on the edge of one of the last few remaining skyscrapers.

'Hollow."

"I don't know how, but I'm still here King. I can still fight for you."

'How? I don't have Zangetsu anymore, I...I used it for the Saigo no Getsuga Tenshō. How are...'

"We are going to use your true power. But I have to do it King. It's the only way."

Ichigo stared at his Hollow in shock before asking what he meant. 'What do you mean 'my true power' Hollow?'

Facing his wielder for the first time since the battle with Tensa Zangetsu, the Hollow spirit smirked at the now panicking Ichigo. Strangely enough, the Hollow's expression quickly became serious however.

"I'll tell you this Ichigo; we weren't the ones in control of our inner-world. The old man...that imposter had other orders and plans for you, plans that would have put everyone around you in danger. He kept you from using all your powers, giving you just enough to accomplish what Geta-Bōshi wanted. He had hoped that by using Saigo no Getsuga Tenshō, it would put an end to your Shinigami powers and give his true master time to...time to make you see his side."

'Who!?'"Look into your heart King, and you will find your answer." Ichigo stared deep into his Hollow's eyes and watched the range of emotions play across them as he went over his life as a Shinigami. Each time he remembered the Zangetsu he knew, he saw rage
reflected in his Hollow's eyes. Up until the end, when he remembered his training in the Dangai with his father, then it all suddenly fell into place. Why part of him didn't want him to learn the technique to begin with, why the part that didn't want him to learn fought him so hard but wasn't able to sway his decision from it.

'No.'

"Yes."

'The old man...'

"He lied to you Ichigo. He was never your Zanpakutō. I am!"

Ichigo stepped back one step as he felt his Hollow's anger course through his soul, his soul from which his Zanpakutō had been born from. His eyes hardened as he stepped forward again until he was face to face with his Hollow.

'What do you want me to do...Zangetsu?'

Smiling, his Hollowfied Zanpakutō held his hand out to his wielder. "Give me control Ichigo. Let me out. Let me give you a taste of what you've been missing, King. Let me have control and when this is over, I'll tell you everything I know."

Grabbing the hand of his Zanpakutō spirit, Ichigo gave only one demand. 'Make him pay for threatening what belongs to us.'

"It will be my pleasure King."

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Somehow a floating spectator, Ichigo watched what happened after he and his Hollow made their deal. The hand crushing his throat was in turn grabbed by his now possessed body, and a bone crunching sound could be heard as Aizen's wrist was suddenly crushed. Shocked by the sudden development, the being that had been focused on killing Ichigo quickly stepped back, the Hōgyoku fixing his mangled wrist as he looked on in confusion and wariness at the orange-haired boy in front of him.

"How!? How are you doing this Ichigo Kurosaki!? You have NO POWER!"

To those who had heard it before, the voice that spoke from Ichigo's body would send shivers down the spines of even the most battle-hardened of veterans. "How you ask? You want to know how we are going to kill you Sōsuke Aizen? I'll show you then."

Ichigo watched his possessed body lift his head, fixing twin crimson orbs on the treacherous Squad Five Captain who looked completely unsettled by this development. Seemingly too preoccupied with trying to understand what is going on, Aizen didn't seem to notice the black Reiatsu that rose from the feet of Ichigo's body, swiftly encircling and encasing him in obsidian black plating. By the time Aizen's eyes snapped back to Ichigo, it was too late; Ichigo's body was fully armored by black obsidian plating, releasing a powerful surge of Reiatsu that forced Aizen to the ground for a moment. Ichigo could see Aizen visibly straining to keep his head up, then the former Captain's eyes widened as black chains formed from tendrils of black Reiatsu that still swirled around Ichigo's possessed body.

"What are you, Ichigo Kurosaki?" From the expression on Aizen's face, it was clear that he was
feeling true fear for once, and it only intensified when the black armored creature looked towards him with a face clad in obsidian.

"We are unlike anything you could ever imagine. But the time for talking is over. You threatened Karin and Yuzu. You threatened Orihime and Tatsuki. You threatened Yoruichi-Sensei and the King's Midget. You, Sōsuke Aizen, fucked up when you threatened everything we swore to protect. Now it's time for you to defend yourself, if you can...you who call yourself Kami."

The attack came without further warning; Aizen failed to dodge the first attack swiftly enough, three sets of chains tearing into his arms and his stomach with sickle-like blades. The former Captain visibly gritted his teeth as the blades pulled straight out of his flesh, leaving behind bleeding, gaping wounds that the Hōgyoku began to seal almost immediately. Looking up again at the black armor of Ichigo's possessed form; it was evident that Aizen was still struggling to comprehend what Ichigo had become. What should have been a former experiment had instead become something that had never before been seen in Soul Society, let alone Hueco Mundo, a being that was nothing like 'White' should have been.

"What are you!" Aizen demanded, his features twitching with barely restrained anger and frustration.

The answer came in the form of a dozen chains streaking ruthlessly towards him, forcing him to Shunpo away; unsuccessfully, as his body was jerked back by the chains lodged into his spinal column. Aizen hit the ground hard, then as a familiar red and black ball of destructive power surged into existence, he forcefully Shunpoed away again, a horrific crack and spray of blood indicating that the chains had severed his spinal cord, which barely allowed him to escape the Cero that engulfed the spot he had just vacated, turning it into a blasted crater. Tumbling to the floor even as his ruined body struggled to regenerate, the former Captain looked up only to go wide-eyed when his arms and legs were pierced through by even more chains, holding him in place as a second Cero hit him from point-blank range in the back.

Between his severed spinal column and his flesh being seared off his bones, Aizen finally let a scream rip from his throat, the combined damage too much for even a Transcended being like him to endure. As the Cero finally died down, it is clear that the outcome of battle is all-but determined: the self-proclaimed God was healing at a much slower rate now, his ruined and warped flesh no longer healing with the same instant regeneration that it used to have. Ichigo watched as the Aizen shakily reached up to touch the red orb once again exposed on his chest, but nothing seemed to happen and a look of panic appeared on Aizen's face. Before he could do anything more, even more chains pierced through his arms and legs, dragging him back towards the black armored figure striding up to him. Writhing and twisting painfully in the grip of the chains, Aizen managed to turn completely around and thrust his hand towards Ichigo's body, a deadly chant on his lips.

"Seeping crest of turbidity! Arrogant vessel of lunacy! Boil forth and deny! Grow numb and flicker! Disrupt sleep! Crawling Queen of iron! Eternally self-destructing doll of mud! Unite! Repulse! Fill with soil and know your own powerlessness! Hadō Number Ninety, Kurohitsugi!"

Countless strips of black suddenly engulfed Ichigo's black armored body, the razor-sharp edges of each strip slicing through the chains that extended from him. As the dimensional prison collapsed even further on its victim, Aizen slowly staggered to his feet, a smirk of victory now on his face and completely unknowing of Ichigo still watching from his disembodied perspective. Limping from the destruction behind him, the former Captain suddenly stopped then turned to look in a certain direction where Ichigo could sense a very familiar Reiatsu on the edge of the battlefield
coming closer. A cruel smile appeared on Aizen's face.

"You shall see firsthand your…"

A black-armored arm burst through Aizen's chest, grabbing the Hōgyoku as it passed through his body before pulling it back through the new hole in his chest. Dropping to his knees as blood gushed from the wound, Aizen's face held a mixture of shock and disbelief as he looked over his shoulder to see the menacing mask of Ichigo's body staring down at him, a bloody fist holding the source of his incredible powers in hand, and the shattered remains of Kurohitsugi falling to pieces behind him.

"It... it belongs to me you fool. I am its Master now. It will never serve you, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

Aizen wheezed out, blood spurting from his lips with each word, the gaping wound on his chest struggling to heal.

The black armored mask tilted slightly as it looked down at the orb in its hand, before turning its crimson gaze upon the fallen Shinigami. "We never wanted the Hōgyoku; we don't need it in fact Sōsuke Aizen. We just wanted to take it from you to free the souls inside of it once we kill you. We also know something you don't."

"W-What!? What can you possibly know that I haven't thought of yet, you human!?"

Ichigo wasn't sure how, but somehow the solid mask seemed to morph into a smile as chains burst forth and impaled themselves into Aizen's body once again. "We know it no longer sees you as its Master, Sōsuke Aizen. Now it's time to end you."

Aizen's mouth opened again, but whatever he wanted to say would forever remain a mystery as the chains embedded in him ruthlessly tore him to pieces, his limbs ripped off his body and his torso torn apart. Black armored hands clamped on the sides of Aizen's head as his mouth widened in a silent scream, then with a sudden and violent jerking motion it was wrenched from his shoulders. The last vision Sōsuke Aizen would ever see was the pair of glowing crimson orbs watching him die. The black armored body of Ichigo finally dropped Aizen's severed head when the light left the eyes of the monster he had just killed, then it turned to look at the disembodied Ichigo.

Tossing the glass-like orb up and down in his hand, Zangetsu asked the obvious. "Well, what do we do with this King?"

Ichigo responded back, wondering if he now sounded like a voice in Zangetsu's head. "Well the dumbass gave us a clue didn't he? He said the thing answers one's truest desires, so why don't we just desire for it to free the souls trapped within it and disappear after that?"

"You think it's that easy?"

"Only way to find out is to try."

Nodding, both human and Zanpakutō looked at the orb and wished for the same thing. The black mask smiled again when the orb slowly began to crumble away in his hand, each soul that was stolen to create it passing through them with a little flicker of joy before disappearing. The last soul, the first one ever taken which is that of a little boy smiled and waved at them before he too disappeared into Reishi particles.

"It's over King. I think we should take a vacation after this." The Hollow Zanpakutō said in exhaustion as he finally released Ichigo's body back to its rightful owner.
Blinking in disorientation and dropping to one knee as the black armor on his body began to dissipate, Ichigo muttered out his reply. "For once...I agree."

The last thing Ichigo saw was himself falling face first next to the dismembered body of Aizen, then a familiar pair of wooden Geta approaching his fading vision.

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Brown eyes slowly blink the pain away as the memory stops flowing into him from…

"Zangetsu."

Ichigo feels strength flowing into him at a steadily increasing pace now that he is no longer falling into the abyss that he knows was signaling his death. Shifting his body around until he is leaning against the barrier that keeps him from the rest of his memories and more importantly his Zanpakutō. Swallowing the blood he feels in his throat, he looks at the Hollow figure before him.

"So, what now Zangetsu? How do we get out of this?" Ichigo taps the barrier.

His Zanpakutō shrugs his shoulder and points at the sky. "I think the Queen is trying something, but because of this barrier, she can't. I think the only way is for you to break it by using your new power King."

"How do I use it? I don't even know what it is?"

"My guess is that it came from Mom. I think she was more than human King. Before you ask, I suggest you talk to those two jackasses that probably hid this from you."

"Goat-face and Geta-Bōshi." Ichigo says as he places names to two of the faces he remembers.

"Don't forget your 'Uncle Amyntas' either Ichigo. I have a feeling he has a lot to do with this too."

"So, how do I summon them Zangetsu?"

The Zanpakutō looks at the darkening sky before he points up at it again. "I think you just do it King. She has the same power as you and it's flooding your soul as we speak. Just use it to get yours."

"You mean Rias."

"Yes, your Queen Ichigo. She's in a lot of pain right now, and if you don't get out of here she will probably do something that we both might regret later on. So Ichigo, are you ready to try?"

Nodding his head once, Ichigo struggles to his feet, using the barrier for support until he is standing on his own feet once again. Closing his eyes, he lets his senses reach out for the energy surrounding him and allows it to flow into his body. Feeling strength rapidly returning, he imagines the same chains that Zangetsu had around him, slowly he feels them forming. A voice breaks him out of his meditation though.

"I see you can still pick up new things quickly Ichigo. Now how about we get rid of this fucking barrier once and for all?"
Watching as his Hollowfied Zanpakutō steps away from the shimmering barrier, Ichigo looks at the floating chains at his sides and hardens them into spikes before turning his gaze back at the glass-like wall before him. Forcing as much of his power into them as possible, he sends them straight at the barrier and throws up his hands to cover his face from the explosion of light. Blinking tears away to clear the sudden overload to his vision, he sees Zangetsu standing on the other side still smirking at him.

"Should have warned you about that Ichigo."

"Ass."

Laughing, his Zanpakutō crosses over the now destroyed divide. Walking until he and Ichigo are less than a foot from each other, then the Hollow smiles before grabbing his wielder into a bone crushing hug.

"Gagh! What the hell Zangetsu!?" Ichigo yells trying to get out of the death grip.

"Shut it King. I don't think you have any idea what this means to me do you? I am finally whole and you are my true wielder. I am no longer bound to that fake."

Ichigo stops struggling and lets himself hug his Zanpakutō spirit back, but he does get in his own quip. "Don't you ever mention this to anyone, got me?"

Snorting as he pushes Ichigo back, Zangetsu rolls his eyes as he answers. "What, and ruin our reputation King? As much as I'd like you to stay, you have to go back. But before you do, I have two things to tell you."

"What?" Ichigo sees a half serious and half playful expression on the Zanpakutō's face.

"Before you come back, talk to Goat-Face, Geta-Bōshi and Uncle Amyntas."

"And the second thing?"

"I like the new you, so when I give you your memories back, don't revert back to your old sullen self. This new you is much more fun, a lot happier, and you already know the other perks you gained. So try to stay as you are now King."

Ichigo stares at his Zanpakutō incredulously before asking about what he just heard.

"Ah, what do you mean by giving me back my memories?" He shivers as the face grows a familiar evil grin.

Two spikes form and point at Ichigo as Zangetsu tells him with a certain amount of glee. "You know we never did things easy King, this time is no different. In order for me to give you back what's yours…I have to inject them back into you."

Ichigo never gets the chance to protest as Zangetsu drives one spike into his heart and the other into his forehead. The Zanpakutō spirit watches as his wielder disappears from his now freed inner-world and then turns to look at its newest occupant.

"What?"

"Did you really have to do that Zangetsu?"
"No, but he doesn't need to know that kid. Besides, just because I'm his Zanpakutō doesn't mean I can't have a bit of fun at his expense now and then."

"You will never change will you?"

"Nope, but why are you still here kid? I thought you would only hang around for a while before passing on."

"Well, I'm curious to see how it ends now Zangetsu. You two make me happy, so I think I will stick it out some more, that's if you don't mind?"

Waving his hand, he holds out the other for the little girl to take. "Come on, I think King is going to be in a foul mood when he wakes, best be inside before the weather breaks."

"At least this time you have a place to hide out in Zangetsu."

"Yeah, that fucking city drove me nuts, all those buildings and windows and not one damn door."

Giggling as she is lifted into the air and placed on the white Zangetsu's shoulders, she screams just after he tells her to hold on before bursting away in Sonído.

XXXX

Rukia struggles against the Fallen Angel, Sode No Shirayuki locked with the light spear to keep herself from being hit by the weapon again. Her leg is bleeding, but she now has the blonde-haired bitch right where she wants her. Uttering softly under her breath, she springs her trap.

"Bakudō Number One: Sai!"

The Fallen Angel can only stare at the Shinigami in front of her with shock and sudden realization that she is about to die, her spear forced from her hands as they are suddenly twisted behind her. She sees the petite violet-eyed women take one step back and raise her pure-white katana with both hands wrapped around the Tsuka.

"This is for killing my friend." Rukia says without emotion as she slashes her Zanpakutō through the head and down the center of the Fallen Angel in front of her. It stops just below where the heart should be. Placing one hand on the now split chest, Rukia pushes the corpse off her blade before she turns and stops at the sight she sees.

"What the fuck are they doing!?!"

XXXX

Tsubaki and Akeno are tag-teaming the Fallen Angel that has been trying to escape the now closing trap of Shinigami and Devils.

"Fufufu, did you really think we would let you escape after killing Ichi-kun, Fallen Angel?"

"I agree with my fellow Queen, you did just kill a member of the Naberius Clan and a cousin to the Sitri Clan as well." Tsubaki chimes in as she twirls her naginata in her hands.

Breathing hard, the Fallen Angel points back behind the two as she huffs out to them. "You… you…mean…him?"
Both spare a glance behind them to see a sight that brings smiles to both of them, but Akeno quickly turns back to the now recovering Fallen Angel before she can take advantage of it. "Well, it seems things have changed for you, Fallen Angel."

Tsubaki also turns back on the Fallen Angel. "Shall we Akeno?"

"Yes, let's continue." Both she and Tsubaki launch renewed attacks at the now fatigued dark-haired woman in front of them.

Yoruichi is spinning and twisting each of her limbs against the male Fallen Angel in front of her. She knows this is the one who had kept her from capturing the killer she now knows as 'Yuuma Amano'. Her anger boiling over after seeing Ichigo's body lying in his own blood allowed her to break her limiting Kidō by forcing everything she had at it at one go. If she was going to break a few rules by getting involved with the Devils, what's one or two more? But her prey got away again when this damned male Fallen Angel got between her and her prey again, after the bitch killed the boy they had under surveillance. Picking up speed, she begins to show her opponent why she is called the Goddess of Flash.

Disappearing and reappearing around him, each time a foot, hand or knee lands a strike on the bleeding and confused Fallen Angel he is blasted back in a shockwave from the impact. Striking out blindly, hoping to land a lucky hit on the ghost he is fighting, the Fallen Angel cheers when she appears right in front of him and throws a lazy punch, which he immediately grabs hold of with both hands.

"Not so fast now, are you Shinigami?" The man snarls out through the blood dripping from his face.

But the feral smile that responds to him is anything but comforting as she speaks. "You know who we are, but just as we forgot about you, you forgot about us." She places a palm just above his heart and utters her Kidō.

"Hadō Number Eleven: Tsuzuri Raiden."

She watches as he is blasted away, the front of his chest torn and burnt black from her Kidō. She starts forward with the intention of killing the Fallen Angel, when a sudden familiar Reiatsu causes her to turn in shock, then she stops and stares.

'Why you little pervert!'

Momo stands above Rias as she tries to reincarnate her boyfriend with what looks like chess pieces. She had seen the first two shoot away from his body, before she has to deflect yet another spear of light thrown at her and the Devil heiress. Swinging Tobiume at the closest Fallen Angel, she smiles as the fiery explosion tears one of the wings off the pinkish-haired woman's back. Taking this opportunity to concentrate, she utters under her breath the full incantation of her favorite Kidō, before she lets it loose on the screaming Fallen Angel.

"Hadō Number Thirty One: Shakkahō!"

The green eyes of the Angel widen just as the fireball hits her square in her chest, burning away her skimpy clothes and then the underlying flesh in an explosion that leaves a shallow but lethal cavity in her chest. Momo watches in grim satisfaction as the Fallen Angel slumps to her knees before...
falling flat on her face, dead before she even hits the ground. Looking over, she hears Rukia's own Kidō and then witnesses her fellow Lieutenant nearly cleave her opponent in half. However, some movement by her feet catches her attention, and when she looks down to see what Rias is doing her mouth drops wide open.

Rukia looks at Momo curiously as her face forms her famous, or to those who know her, infamous gold-fish stare. It's not hard to figure out what has captured her friend's attention; a short glance down has her blushing furiously and wanting to palm her face.

'Now I know what they mean by his skewed priorities.'

XXXX

Rias begins to break down as her third Evil Piece is rejected by the man she loves. She can't understand why this is happening, why he is here to begin with, why he is dying in her arms and why is she powerless to stop it? Dropping her head as she begins to sob into his blood-stained chest, she begins to gather her power around her. Soon her grief begins to fuel a new emotion, one she hasn't felt since the day she learned she had been betrothed to Riser Phenex. Lifting her head, she looks at the scene around her. Momo is standing in front of her, keeping her shielded from the battle. Rukia is fighting her own opponent despite the wound to her leg. Yoruichi is just a blur of movement and sound as she fights; Akeno and Tsubaki are fighting a Fallen Angel who had gotten too close to the young human she had made a part of her peerage. Looking towards the sky, she sees a magical dome overhead that is keeping the private battle from spilling out into the streets and among the unsuspecting humans.

Fueled by her grief, she takes one more look at Ichigo's still face and drops down and kisses him.

"I love you Ichigo." She begins to get up to seek vengeance on his behalf when her wrist is suddenly caught in an iron grip.

Looking down at what is grabbing her wrist, she grows confused when she realizes the hand holding her wrist belongs to Ichigo. Slowly, she looks to his face to see his eyes are no longer glassy looking, staring back at her with obvious warmth. Unable to move even a muscle as his other hand cups her face gently, she blinks as he smiles at her.

"Ichigo." She whispers in shock to him.

He doesn't say a word, but moves his hand from her cheek to the back of her head. Looking at him with even more confusion, she allows him to pull her closer to his face, and then he stops just shy of her lips.

"Shhh Rias, it's okay now. I'm here with you now."

Before she can say a word, he closes the distance and begins to kiss her deeply. Soon the two of them begin to fiercely kiss each other all while their friends are still fighting around them, forgetting about everything else until a shout reminds them of that fact.

"Dammit Berry, if you can kiss your girlfriend, you can at least give us a hand first you inconsiderate asshole!"

Breaking apart, he looks into her watery eyes and his face breaks out in a smirk as he finally lets her go.

"She's got a point Rias. Mind giving me a hand up? Still kinda weak here."
Shaking her head in disbelief at his cavalier attitude, she moves until she is able to lift one of his arms over her neck and before she can stand, Momo is there as well, placing his other arm over her shoulders and helping him up. Both young women give each other a tear-stained smile as they lift the weakened young man to his feet. Unaware of the slight glowing in his eyes as he takes in the entire battle, his scowl coming back in full force as he surveys the wounds on his friends, the blood around a familiar looking boy and the black-winged assailants still fighting. Straightening up, the two young women supporting him are startled as black energy begins to surround them, then the sound of metal on metal emanates from behind them. Momo is the first to see the chains as they slither past her eyes, stunning her as they move on their own with what seems to be their own kind of intelligence.

Rukia and Yoruichi both freeze as they feel Ichigo's Reiatsu flooding the area around them, it is familiar to them but they also notice the changing feeling of his powers. The familiar warmth is there, but now it feels heavier than they remember, from before he left with Isshin to travel through the Dangai. For Yoruichi, she understands what she is feeling now; his Reiatsu is changing because his Devil bloodline is finally free as she spies the sentient chains flowing from behind Ichigo, Rias and Momo. Rukia on the other hand begins to shed tears now that she knows her best-friend has freed his mind and his Zanpakutō spirit from their seal. She can't help herself as she looks at him being held up by the teenage Devil and her fellow Lieutenant.

"You know Berry; if you are that weak, you should've stayed home and kept out of the way of us women."

"Bite me you closet dwelling Midget, I do know trolls with better manners than you!"

Yoruichi wipes a tear away as she turns back to the wounded male Fallen Angel, glaring at him as he dumbly stares at the sight now unfolding in front of him.

"Ichigo, if you don't mind, we really could use your help. I need at least one or two alive."

Sending a smirk at his Sensei, he concentrates on his chains and sends them at each of the surviving Fallen Angels, catching all but the male, who frantically dives out of the way as a magical circle appears under his body and allows him to escape.

"Dohnaseek get back here you traitorous bastard!" A dark-skinned Angel screams at his vanishing form.

Ichigo sends a command to the chains holding her, and sees them tighten slightly around her wings to prevent her from slipping out. However, he notices them digging deeply into her skin instead of gently squeezing her.

"Not so rough King, you want to hold her, not shred her."

He must have sounded crazy when he replies out loud to his inner-spirit. "Well, this is my first time actually using these damn things Zangetsu; I'm not really proficient with them." His eyes go wide and his cheeks sport a blush when a certain sadist begins to smile at his words.

"Well Ichigo, if you need a test subject to help you learn how to use them 'properly' I'll volunteer will...ing...ly." She sways her hips with her suggestion.

"Before you play with your friend Ichigo, why don't you wrap them up for now?"

"How do I do that?"
"Concentrate on the chains and they will do what you want. When they finish, they will separate from you and hold them."

Looking at each of the captured Fallen Angels, he thinks what he wants done and watches as more chains flow from behind him and encase each of them until they are inside cocoons of metal. Once that is done, the chains slowly disappear from behind his back as the last of his strength leaves him.

Rukia stops everyone from saying a word as she sheaths Sode No Shirayuki with a loud click then walks towards Ichigo, never taking her eyes off of him. Standing in front of him, she cocks her head to one side before delivering one of her patented skin kicks to the offending giant in front of her.

"What the fuck Midget!?"

Watching as his scowl comes back full force, she wraps her arms around him with a bone jarring hug. "It really is you Ichigo. You're back."

Rias and Momo, straining under the combined weight of Ichigo and the now limp Rukia, get some help when Yoruichi takes over for Momo and supports both their weight easily.

"You okay Ichigo?" Is all the former Captain asks him.

"After I eat and get to sleep in a bed for a night or two, I think I will be." He says tiredly. "Hey Rukia, ah, if you don't mind, but I'd like to breathe sometime soon ya know."

Pulling away but grabbing his blood-stained shirt, she blows her nose in it before stepping away from his failed head smack. "Dammit Rukia, why?"

She shrugs her shoulders as she pulls her eyelid down and sticks her tongue at him.

"Real mature Rukia, real mature." He says as a smile begins to form.

"Ah Yoruichi, I think we should go now. Someone is bound to investigate what has happened here." Sōna says as she and her peerage walk into the now much quieter clearing.

Looking around, the former Captain sees the boy still lying on the ground and points to him. "What about him Rias? He is one of your servants now right?"

Ichigo's eyes narrow as he slowly looks down at his crimson-haired girlfriend. "Rias, what is going on here?"

Before she can answer, a new magic circle appears and four figures appear before the gathered Devils, Shinigami and one confused hybrid.

Ichigo eyes the man who calls himself his 'uncle' as the older man begins to speak. "Akeno, would you take care of Rias's new Pawn? Sōna, you and your peerage should head back with Serafall and give your side of tonight's events. Yoruichi, I think you and the two Lieutenants should come with me and Ichigo, as well as move them into the Gremory house. Koneko, Yuuto, I need you two to go back to the house and see to their arrangements. Sirzechs and Venelana will take care of our 'guests' for the time being. Ichigo, Rias, I believe we have things to discuss tonight."

"Yeah we do 'Uncle Amyntas', like for starters who the hell are you really?" Ichigo asks with a hardening voice.
If the current Watcher of the Gates of Hell is offended, he doesn't show it as he begins to walk towards the newly awakened Devil. "You are correct Ichigo. I am not your uncle. I am your Great-grandfather on your mother's side of your family, Amyntas Naberius, and yes, your father Isshin knows who I am."

"I knew it! I knew him and Geta-Bōshi have been hiding even more shit from me! I will kick their asses when I see them next!"

Yoruichi begins laughing then. "Oh, you don't even know the half of it Ichigo, but as your great-granddaddy said, we should take this elsewhere now."

"Yeah, like where Yoruichi?"

A magic circle forms underneath the assembled Devils as Amyntas answers his great-grandson. "I believe our ancestral home will be a good place for us to talk Ichigo."

"Wait!? What!? Hold oooonnnnnn!" His voice is the last to be heard in the now deserted battlefield.

Soon, shadows and other familiars appear and begin to use magic to restore the place back to its former state. A lone woman walks around and inspects the park for missed damages, nodding in satisfaction before calling her own magic circle to take her home.

As the magic circle flares in activation, Harumi smiles as she fades away. 'Now that wasn't what I expected.'

A few minutes later, a man in a trench coat steps out from the shadows, then walks straight to the fountain where a single feather lies hidden against the side. Bending down and picking it up, the man smirks as he knows who it belongs to.

"Well Raynare, let's see how you get out the hole you dug for yourself."

Black wings emerge from his back as he disappears in another circle of magic.

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"Hang on Ichigo, it's over now." Rias says while holding on to him.

"What was that?"

Ichigo keeps his eyes closed as the vertigo takes over his body; feeling sick, he tries to push the two women holding him away from him, but neither of them let him go. He begins to sweat heavily, his gut churning as he recognizes what is happening and tells them to let him go.

"Let go! I think I'm gonna be sick!"

Instead of doing so, Yoruichi and Rias both continue to hold his arms as he suddenly bends over and empties his stomach on the marble floor beneath him.

"Let it out Ichigo."

"We really should have warned him about that." Yoruichi's voice says to Rias while trying to calm him down.

Always the sarcastic one, after he finishes upchucking everything in his stomach, he sends a glare at the grinning mocha-skinned woman. "Thanks for the head's up Yoruichi."
"I'm sorry Ichigo, I should have warned you." Rias apologizes to him.

Looking at the crimson-haired woman, he gives her a subtle smile. "I'm fine; I just need to wash the taste out of my mouth now."

A cup suddenly appears before him, making him look up at the strange woman standing in front of him. She is almost as tall as he is, with long straight black hair and large emerald green eyes, her skin a shade paler than Yoruichi's, but it is her pointy ears that draw his attention the most before her voice takes him by surprise by how beautiful it sounds.

"Here Lord Naberius, this will help settle your stomach."

"Ah, thanks." is all he can say as he carefully grabs the cup and begins to drink.

Feeling the queasiness leaving quickly, he downs the entire contents of the cup before holding it back up for the woman to take.

"Thanks again…"

"Ichigo this is Merti, she will be your personal assistant when you are home at the Estate. She is a reincarnated Woods Elf, the last of her family's lineage." His 'uncle' informs him from where he had been watching them from the side.

The Elf bows to Ichigo while addressing him formally. "I will serve you faithfully My Lord."

"Like hell you will!"

The Devils look at Ichigo in shock, especially the Elf, who looks between him and Amyntas before focusing on Ichigo with a hint of anger. "My Lord?"

Ichigo straightens up with what little strength he has as he looks at his 'uncle'. "I don't want a servant. I don't need one and I'm sure as hell ain't going to take one that sees me as some kind of stuck up noble, no offense Rukia, Yoruichi."

"Moron, you're one too." Yoruichi says with a ghost of a smile.

"Huh?"

Amyntas looks at his great-grandson with an open smile as he clarifies to Ichigo what Yoruichi meant by her words. "Ichigo, as a member of my Clan, you yourself are a noble by blood. I am Lord Amyntas Naberius of the Naberius Clan. We are one of the Clans that form the Seventy-Two Pillars of the Underworld. Our Clan is the only one that can control the Gates of Hell as it has always been since the beginning of our race. You, Ichigo, as my great-grandson, are my heir."

When Amyntas finishes speaking, he lets his older human persona fade away and in its place stands a younger man who looks no older than thirty.

Ichigo feels his head spinning again as he lets the information sink into his being, swallowing hard he whispers hoarsely. "I…we are the rulers of Hell?"

"No, just the prison for the souls of the damned."

"Oh. I see."

Yoruichi and Rias are suddenly straining under Ichigo's dead weight as he collapses silently. Amyntas quickly takes Rias's place as he easily hoists up his great-grandson while looking at the
purple-haired Shinigami. "Too soon?"

"Yeah, probably too soon."

XXXX

Black-clad figures jump from rooftop to rooftop, making their way to three separate target areas. The first group breaks off and heads towards the safe-house for the two missing Lieutenants. The second group heads towards Kuoh Academy, the school in question and the reason for the mission the Lieutenants are on. The final group arrives in the middle of a park, next to a water fountain. They pull out various items courtesy of Squad Twelve to take samples of the air, water and grounds. Also they take samples of the unknown Reiatsu still lingering in the area.

"Got it, but no ID on the person who’s Reiatsu this belongs too." The first Squad Two member says.

"What about the rest of the samples?"

The rest of the squad gather around the seated-officer and give their samples to him. When he has everything packed away, he opens his comms to Soul Society.

"This is Third Platoon, we're ready to return."

"A Senkaimon will open in three, two, and one."

The six man unit flows effortlessly and soundlessly through the gate back to Soul Society. With them they carry news that one man is not looking forward at all to seeing come to light.

XXXX

Koneko folds each piece of Akeno's uniform as she is handed them, all the while looking at the nude boy lying under his blankets still unconscious. Frowning as she watches her older Senpai strip down until she stops without removing her panties. Koneko places the last item on the neatly folded pile before she sighs out loud.

"What's wrong Ko-chan?"

The little Neko points at Issei Hyoudou. "Why did it have to be him with a Sacred Gear in him?"

Akeno smiles sadly at the younger girl before answering. "Who knows why they are chosen to be the vessels of such things Koneko? All I know is that this young man has a Sacred Gear and he became the target of the fallen ones. It will be our job to help him use it wisely."

"But why such a pervert? Are we cursed now that we have such a perverse person in our peerage?"

Akeno begins giggling in genuine amusement. "I don't think we should look at it that way Koneko-chan."

Koneko looks at her in worry before asking. "Then why?"

"Think of all the fun we will have as we watch him and Ichigo when they are near each other from now on!"

Koneko facepalms as Akeno slips under the covers and surrounds the young man's body with magic.
"Oh Issei, how you will drive our Ichi-kun up the walls with your perversion, but Kami help you if you ever direct that lust at Rias. You will not live to see your next birthday." She scrunches her eyebrows with the slight pain from thinking of the Fallen Angel's leader, but that is soon followed by a smile.

XXX

To: Tessai

From: Yoruichi

Subj: He's AWAKE!

Tessai grins in happiness as he reads his message, after powering down his phone he walks out into the yard behind the shouten were Kisuke is sitting on the roof looking up at the sky. Standing underneath the slanted roof where his comrade of over a hundred years sits lost in thought, Tessai folds his arms and stares at Kisuke impassively.

"...Okay, what is it Tessai? You wouldn't of come out here if it wasn't important."

A broad grin breaks out on the large man's features. "He has his memories again."

Kisuke shoots straight up to his feet before leaping off the roof and landing silently next to the former Kidō Corps Commander. Spinning on his feet, he makes his way back into the shouten and into a room not once opened when Ichigo, his friends or any Shinigami from Soul Society were around, Tessai following in behind the former Onmitsukidō Detention Unit Commander. They both place their hands on two separate sides of the back wall and let their Reiatsu flow into the Kidō spells guarding the secrets hidden behind the panel. As they step back, the wall separates into four pieces exposing the various items behind it. Kisuke walks up to an object that he had created before he was forced to flee from Soul Society. Grabbing it in the middle, part of the cloth covering falls away as he lifts it, revealing the handle of a blank Asauchi.

"He'll be needing this soon Tessai."

"I agree Boss."

XXX

To: Isshin

From: Kisuke

Subj: Get ready to run! Your boy is AWAKE! Be a good idea if we aren't around when Yoruichi comes home!

'Asshole! Now you tell me?'

He is about to get up when his phone buzzes a second time indicating a new text message. Looking down, his eyes grow wide in horror at the sender's name.

To: Shiba, Isshin

From: Princess Yoruichi

Subj: Ichigo and Zangetsu are free. I'll be there to collect you and the other dumbass the day after tomorrow. PS, I got both of the special Gigai, dumbasses!
His head hits the dining room table with a thud after seeing her message.

"Otou-san, are you okay?" Orihime's concerned eyes fill his vision as his head lifts up.

Scooting back, he yells out. "Orihime! Where did you come from!?"

Orihime giggles as she points to the kitchen. "I just finished cleaning up Otou-san when I heard you groan and then saw your head hit the table. I got worried."

Isshin changes to his goofy persona as he laughs with confidence. "Oh it's nothing my Third Daughter. Daddy's okay, just Yoruichi pulling my leg about Kisuke, that's all."

Orihime's happy face slips slightly before her happiness returns. "I'm sure she's only relaying good news to you, I hope?"

Isshin wants to tell her, but until he sees his son first, and he is sure there are things that Ichigo is going to demand from him, he has to keep the news to himself for now.

"She will be back in a day or two; she has to grab Kisuke for something Soul Society related."

"You don't have to lie to me Otou-san. I know it's about Ichigo. That's the only time she comes back anymore. To give us assurances that he is still doing well."

Stunned by her words, Isshin stands and pulls the young woman into his arms. "I wish things were simple Orihime, but... but until we can get things straightened out with Central Forty-Six, it's still best if he stays away."

Returning his hug, she nods in his embrace. "We just want to see him soon Otou-san. That's all we want at this point."

"I know my daughter, I know."

XXXX

When Ichigo wakes next, he realizes he is in a bed, a very comfortable bed except one thing, he knows he is missing something, actually a someone. Looking around as he slowly sits up, he sees that the room he is in is very large, far larger than their room at home. Tossing aside the blanket covering him, he finds that someone has dressed him and, to his embarrassment, has cleaned him as well. Testing his strength, he feels a lot stronger than he did when he...

"Great, I fainted. Rukia is never going to let me hear the end of it now."

Walking to the partially opened door in the room, he turns on the light to see it's only the bathroom. Frowning, he walks around the room until he finds what appears to be an intercom system. Pushing the green call button, he hears the voice of the woman he met earlier.

"Yes...Ichigo?"

"Ah, Merti right?"

"Yes. How may I help you?"

"Could you send someone to give me a hand? I...I don't see my clothes."
"I'll be there momentarily. Are you…are you dressed now?"

"Yes."

The previously unnoticed door to the bedroom opens as the Elf walks in and gives him a short bow. "How may I be of service to you…Ichigo?" He notices the slight hesitation in her words.

Looking at the woman in front of him, Ichigo walks towards until he is front of her. He sticks out his hand to her, which causes her to look at him in confusion.

"It's called a handshake. You take my hand and shake it when you meet someone new. This is how it works." He gently takes her hand and begins to shake it. "My name is Ichigo. How do you do?"

Merti looks down at her hand in his, and then she looks up at him before she smiles at him. "My name is Merti Longoak."

"Nice to meet you Longoak-san."

"Merti will be fine Ichigo."

"Good, about earlier Merti, I'm sorry about that. I wasn't expecting to have someone tell me that sort of thing. So, just give me time to adjust because I really don't know what is going on right now."

Merti nods to him. "I understand Lord Naberius."

"No more of that Merti, I'm not a lord."

"If I may…Ichigo, you are a member of the Naberius Clan, as such you are noble by blood, but." Holding her hand to stop him when she sees he is going to try and interrupt her. "I was informed by Lord Amyntas that you grew up in the Human World not knowing who your family really is. That is why he allowed me to become your assistant Ichigo. While there are Clans that do treat their servants badly, there are Clans such as yours and the Gremory that do treat us respectfully, which is why we continue to serve them faithfully. I am not now nor will I ever be a servant again, I am a member of his staff, now your staff Ichigo. My duties are to see your education into our world goes smoothly and that when the time comes you can take your position as the next head of the Naberius Clan."

"So…why exactly do I need a staff for?"

"You will learn tomorrow what being a member of the Naberius really means Ichigo. That must come from your great-grandfather. But may I ask a question?" He nods to her. "Did you not have a staff when you lived with the Gremory Clan?"

"We do, but I and the others took over most of our chores. They only help maintain the house and do the gardening and other things. I guess now that I remember everything I have always done things for myself, except cook. Yuzu has always cooked for me. My cooking skills are more than likely a false memory."

"Is that why you do not wish to have me then Ichigo?"

Running his hand through his hair, he sighs out loud. "Merti, I am used to doing things for myself, but listening to you now, I'm guessing I still have a lot to learn. So Merti, how about I just call you my Sensei and we'll call it even?"
"Then I'll do my best Ichigo. Now I believe you were asking about something you needed? Your clothes I believe?" She watches him frown for a second.

"Do you know where Rias is?" He asks instead.

"Yes, she is in her room."

"Her…room?"

"Yes. She is next door to you."

"Thanks."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah, that's all." Ichigo says as he forgets about his clothes.

"Goodnight then Ichigo." Merti bows as she walks back out of the room.

"Goodnight Merti." Ichigo doesn't notice her bow as he falls on the edge of the bed and stares down at the floor in confusion.

"Why isn't she here?"

"Because King, she's probably confused about who you are."

"Confused about me?"

He hears his Zanpakutō sigh as he tells his wielder the possible reason why. "She doesn't know who you are King. You got your memories back, but she doesn't know where she stands with you. The Queen doesn't know what she means to you. So King, tell me, where does she belong? In there alone, or in here where she DOES belong with you?"

"Zangetsu, thanks."

"Like I said King, I like the new you. Now get the Queen back to where she belongs."

'Pushy bastard.'

Getting up, he walks to the door and opens it to see a maid waiting outside his room. As she starts to bow, he stops her with a wave of his hand. "Which room is Rias in?"

"That one…Ichigo."

"Thanks." He walks down the hallway and without knocking, opens the door to see Rias sitting in the middle of her bed. Her head snaps up when she sees him, but she doesn't move or say a word to him. Narrowing his eyes, a soft growl forms in his throat as he walks up to her and then leans down and places his fists on the bed.

"Mind telling me why you are in here Rias? I clearly remember us having an arrangement."

"I…I…ah."

"I…I don't…ah."

"Come on Rias, we'll talk back in 'our' room." Not even waiting, he stands up, turns on his heels and walks away, smiling when he hears her feet hitting the floor, then following him all the way back to the bedroom he woke up in. Holding the door open, he lets her go in first before he looks at
"Ah, do you think we could get something to eat?"

"I'll bring you something right away Lord Ichigo." He groans as he watches the Devil bow and disappear in a magic circle.

Shutting the door, he sees Rias still standing in the middle of the room wearing just a light nightgown. Walking up to her, he can see the hesitation in her eyes still. Deciding he needs to make her understand, he cups both her cheeks and draws her to him.

"I remember everything Rias, my past and just as importantly my present life with you. We'll talk after I eat, and then you can decide if you want this still, but I already know what I want Rias."

"What Ichigo, what do you want?" Her eyes slowly tearing.

"You." He kisses her lightly. "That hasn't changed Rias."

"Then I want to know everything Ichigo, there can't be any secrets between us. I promise to tell you anything you want as well."

A sudden knock at the door interrupts them. "Come in." Rias says irritably.

The maid from before, plus Merti, enters the room while pushing a tray filled with food. Merti nods to the maid who leaves the food with them and departs without a word.

"Ichigo, please ring me if you need anything else."

"No, I think this is plenty. Thank you Merti and please thank the …" He looks at Rias helplessly.

"It's okay Ichigo; I think they are trying to understand that you are different, not many are used to having Masters treat them the way you and I do. Merti, please we will be fine, if we need anything we will ring."

"Of course My Lady. Goodnight then Ichigo, Lady Rias."

Ichigo arches an eyebrow as he watches Merti leave the room, then he looks at Rias as she pulls him to the cart with his dinner. Pulling the cover off the delicious looking food, Ichigo realizes he hasn't eaten in quite some time. Sitting at a table, he has to endure Rias smoothly transitioning into playing nurse for him, before she sits down with a plate of her own food as well. The two of them begin to eat, then Ichigo looks at Rias again.

"So, I guess this would be a good time for us to talk Rias. I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

She pauses for a moment before she nods her head. "I would like that Ichigo, but only if you feel like it."

"Well other than being hungry, I feel fine Rias." Taking a sip of his tea, he gathers his thoughts and begins his tale. "I guess it started when I was a little kid, I could always see ghosts but at the time, I didn't know the difference…"

Rias sits listening as Ichigo describes his early life with his family, beginning from his first encounter with a ghost. How it was because of his ability to see ghosts that he felt he was responsible for the tragedy that befell his family. She feels her chest tighten when he comes to the hardest part of his story so far, the death of his mother. He tells her how he saw a little girl standing
by the river that night, only to find out years later that it was a lure used by a Hollow named Grand Fisher to hunt spiritually aware humans. How after his mother's death, he had changed, rarely ever smiling and focusing entirely on training to get stronger so he could protect his sisters, so they would never have to deal with the pain of losing a loved one again. He smiles then as he tells her how he had gotten involved in the afterlife, when a certain midget ended up crashing into his life while doing her duties and he allowed her to stab him in the chest to give him her powers.

She openly laughs when he tells her about his time with Rukia, how she scared him when she jumped out of his closet the first time wearing Yuzu's clothes. How over the course of time that she was with him, he had felt deep down that she would be a part of his life forever. Rias sees his eyes soften when he tells her how Rukia's brother and his Lieutenant had arrived to take her into custody, nearly killing him and badly wounding Uryū when they attempted to interfere in the arrest. He explains that Kisuke Urahara had saved him after the Shinigami had left, but the exiled Captain had then informed him that his Shinigami powers had been severed, Rukia was going to be executed, and there was a way that Ichigo could both regain his power and save Rukia. Before Ichigo tells her how he regained his powers however, he visibly hesitates.

"Rias, I guess this is where things get complicated even for me."

"What do you mean Ichigo?"

"Because, Queen, this is where I was imprisoned by King's false Zanpakutō spirit." Rias's eyes go wide as a white copy of Ichigo appears next to him.

Ichigo quickly grabs Rias's hands to keep them still. "Sorry, I should have warned you about that. This is Zangetsu, my Zanpakutō spirit. He insisted on coming out to tell you himself."

"He...he looks like you Ichigo." The Gremory says as she stares at the white Zanpakutō spirit.

"He's the ugly one toots. I'm the pretty one." Ichigo simply rolls his eyes at Zangetsu.

"Zangetsu this is our Queen, Rias Gremory. Rias, Zangetsu."

The white being clearly flabbergasts Ichigo when he takes Rias's hand and kisses it lightly. "Thank you for helping free us. It was your power that allowed the King to breach the last barrier. I'm sorry I couldn't do it before, but that asshole Geta-Bōshi somehow managed to seal me away completely."

"Nice to meet you as well Zangetsu, but...what is a Zanpakutō spirit, and how are you doing this?" She looks between the two.

Ichigo smiles then. "Well, we'll tell you because it's part of how I saved Rukia. As I...as we were saying..."

Rias Gremory listens to Ichigo and occasionally Zangetsu explain how Ichigo had met his previous Zanpakutō spirit, an imposter according to Zangetsu, then continue on to describe the various and escalating battles that Ichigo and his friends had gone through in their quest to save Rukia. She cringes as Zangetsu points out the gory details Ichigo tried to hide from her, which she warns Ichigo to stop doing with a few choice words and a nasty glare to not hide anything from her. The Shinigami shoots his Zanpakutō spirit a nasty look when Zangetsu sniggers at the byplay, before they pick up the tale again and reach the point where Ichigo began to train in the underground training room with Yoruichi in order to gain his Bankai.

"Bankai?"
"The Bankai is a Zanpakuto's second release, very few Shinigami obtain it which is why all the Captains are required to have one... well, except Zaraki Kenpachi, he is a special case and a nut job. I also know of at least two Lieutenants who have gained their Bankai, but other than them and the Captains, I am the only other one that I know of."

"Which reminds me Ichigo, as soon as you talk to them; you and I have to train. I get the feeling that our Bankai has changed." Zangetsu suddenly pipes up.

"How are we going to train without your physical form?"

"Hopefully Goat-face or Geta-Boshi have an answer to that problem." Both Ichigo and Zangetsu grimace at the thought.

"So..." Rias says as she waves between the two. "Bankai?"

"Oh, sorry, as I was saying I had to train three days to obtain my Bankai. I had to defeat the imposter or force him into telling me how to release it..."

Soon Ichigo gets to the worst part of the rescue, facing not only the remaining Captains but having to fight Rukia's brother again when he refused to stop hunting down his sister. It was during that fight that his Hollow, he points at Zangetsu, made himself known for the first time. Zangetsu shrugs unapologetically as he tells Rias he had no choice, Ichigo was dying at that point and would have lost again. Ichigo huffs out but admits that Zangetsu was right. The two bicker for a minute before Ichigo finishes describing the fight, and then both the Hollow's and former human's faces harden in hatred.

"It is when we were retreating down Sōkyoku Hill that Sōsuke Aizen, the Squad Five Captain previously thought to be murdered, suddenly showed up and began his open betrayal. He was too strong... he stopped my attack with one finger, nearly cut me in half after nearly killing Renji for the Hōgyoku in Rukia, and still successfully escaped with two other Captains revealed themselves to be traitors as well. We, that is to say me and my friends were exonerated and released to go back to the World of the Living after that. But it didn't last long; shortly after that we encountered our first Arrancar..."

A brief explanation of Arrancar is given, then Ichigo launches into the tale of fighting them and nearly losing control to his 'Hollow', which led to the Vizards, the Shinigami version of Arrancars, come for him after that to help him learn to suppress his inner-Hollow. He and Zangetsu get pretty heated about the battle, but ultimately Zangetsu shrugs it off and tells her that it wasn't truly either of their faults: he had no idea back then who he really was, with only his basest instincts to go by, and Ichigo had no reason to trust him either. Ichigo then begins to describe the invasion of Hueco Mundo with Chad and Uryū in order to save the falsely accused Orihime, who was kidnapped by the same Arrancar who had fought Ichigo initially. Rias can see his eyes glow slightly when he talks about how Soul Society simply branded her a traitor without even trying to get proof.

"Ichigo, she means a lot to you, doesn't she?" Rias can't help the jealous feeling she has; even knowing he doesn't love the woman that way.

"Of course Rias. She is...she is one of us. Besides, I promised Tatsuki I would bring her home no matter what. There was no way I was leaving her alone in that place, but..."

"But what Ichigo?"

"We found out something later that we didn't realize until it was too late."
"What? What did you find out?"

Both Ichigo and his Zanpakutō spirit look at each other for a moment. "We'll tell you when we get to that part."

Zangetsu takes over to allow Ichigo to eat and to rest for the moment. The monochrome Ichigo clone describes the trip to Hueco Mundo and how they met up with Rukia and Renji, who had secretly gotten passage there from Kisuke Urahara or Geta-Bōshi as they called him. He cracks up when he tells her that Ichigo had somehow made friends with several Arrancar there, and that it was fortuitous that he did. He tells her how the eclectic group of Humans, Arrancar and Shinigami had infiltrated Las Noches, followed by the many battles that Ichigo had to fight, and then he begins to grin as he tells Rias how when Ichigo was losing to the Quinto Espada, the little Hollow, named Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck suddenly grew up and revealed herself to be the former Tercera Espada. How Nelliel had lost to Nnoitra Gilga anyway, thanks to the crippling injury that the Quinto had inflicted on her in the past through underhanded means, and the unexpected reinforcements from Soul Society that showed up at the last moment, allowing Ichigo to get past Nnoitra Gilga and continue his search for Orihime.

"That's when we fought him." Both Hollow and his partner's eyes go blank, a very unsettling sight for Rias.

Guessing that the two are remembering something very dark about that event, she asks carefully. "Ichigo, Zangetsu, what happened?"

"He wouldn't let me have Orihime, so we fought...and in the end I was defeated, and it took him killing me to…"

"To finally allow me to fight as we were meant to. For just a few minutes, I became his true power without any interference from the fraud, and it was enough to..."

Ichigo's eyes drift down with his next statement. "I killed him Rias. I killed him because he was in my way of keeping my promise to save and bring back Orihime. I was fighting entirely based on my instincts, but it doesn't change the fact that I did kill him... and as he was dying, we saw it."

"What did you see Ichigo? Why do you look guilty for defeating this enemy?"

"The King's not so sure if he was our enemy at all. As he was fading away, he and Orihime spoke to each other and at the end; the Cuarto reached out for her, and she to him, only for him to fade into ash before he could…"

"Before he could touch what he had found. Someone to show him what he was missing." Ichigo eyes are distant and grieving.

"Ichigo, I have no idea what to say."

"It's fine Queen. But you should prepare for the last part. It's the hardest for both Ichigo and I what happened that day."

Rias slowly nods her head as Ichigo once again resumes the story. How upon arriving in Fake Karakura with Captain Unohana, he had tried to fight Gin Ichimaru but lost when the former Squad Three Captain told him he didn't have the conviction to face Aizen yet. Ichigo admits that Gin was right, and it was only after the two traitors had left and he and his father Isshin made it into the Dangai that Ichigo had found that resolve to face and defeat Aizen once and for all.
"Rather falsely I have to say, King. The imposter did give you what you needed, but he still kept us apart. But he f…screwed up when we use that last move and it failed. He had no way to contain me after that, not after I touched that power for the first time and was able to break free from his control."

"Touch what power Zangetsu?"

"Our mother's hidden power, the one that the fake's master doesn't know about. The same power that you have Rias Gremory, the power I leave up to you to explain to the King." She watches in surprise as Zangetsu fades away.

"What is he talking about Ichigo, what happened in Soul Society?"

"I no longer had my Zanpakutō, so I thought I had no more Shinigami power left, but Aizen, he wasn't through. Kisuke tried to stop him, but somehow Aizen knew and beat whatever it was that Geta-Bōshi put into him. That…that was when he threatened everyone in my life and I let Zangetsu take control of my body Rias. We tore him apart and ripped his head off his body. We took his power from him and killed him like he was nothing. I…we have no regrets for what we did, but after that I don't remember anything until I woke up in Austria and my 'amnesia' began."

"How did you win Ichigo?"

Ichigo thinks about one of the chains which then materializes behind him before he lets it fade away. "We used those chains to tear him apart. He wasn't fast enough to avoid them because my power is both speed and strength. After we took the Hōgyoku from him, he had no way of regenerating his body, so we…killed him."

Rias is still staring at where the chain used to be. "You used Hell Chains!?"

"Is that what they are called? I didn't know they had a name Rias. I just think and they appear, or at least that is what me and Zangetsu can do. So I'm guessing you know what they are then Rias?"

"Yes Ichigo, I know what they are." She stands then and walks to a clear spot in the room. "Ichigo, I want to show you what I really am now. What we really are." She slips her nightgown off to pool at her feet, then he sees two black bat wings emerge from her bare back.

Ichigo stands up and walks towards her, and when he stops in front of her, a slight blush forms as he stares at her naked form in awe. "Can…can I touch them?"

She nods a yes then. Ichigo hesitantly touches her left wing and is surprised by how soft it really is. Despite the tough leathery appearance, her wing feels soft as fur as he runs his hand down its length. Going from wingtip to wingtip, he is fascinated by them.

Rias feels a rush in her body as she feels his touch on her wings, never have they been so sensitive before now, but with his hand stroking them, she shivers just from the touching. She starts to take his shirt off and when she unbuttons the last button, simply pushes it off his shoulders.

"You have them too Ichigo. Just concentrate and they should form, just don't move when they do, you might accidentally…fly or something." She giggles then.

"Very funny Rias." He begins doing as she says and soon enough he feels two pulling sensations behind him.
Curious, he glances over his shoulder and nearly freaks out when his wing hits him in the face.

"Nice one King! Just knock yourself out dumbass!"

'Bite me!'

Rias grabs him and steadies him at the same time. "That's enough Ichigo, now think about them folding away and they should go back."

"I hope so, or I got a lot of explaining to do when we get back to Kuoh."

Her head snaps up at him. "You're coming back?"

He nods to her as his wings retract and she pulls hers back in as well. Taking her hand, he leads her to the bed and pulls back the sheets. Letting her get in first, he sees her blushing as he strips down to his underwear and climbs in beside her. Turning off the light, he wraps Rias in his arms from behind.

"I guess I'm not human anymore am I Rias?"

"No Ichigo. You and I are…" She pauses as she tries to prepare him and herself.

"If I had to guess from what my great-grandfather said about us being the jailers of Hell, I am guessing we are…we are Devils." He finishes her sentence.

"Yes Ichigo, we are Devils. Your great-grandfather will tell you how this is possible tomorrow Ichigo. I promise you that I won't leave you to deal with this alone."

"I guess tomorrow I'll find out how I am the most screwed up individual in not only the World of the Living, but the spiritual realms as well."

Rias snorts then. "It's not that bad being a Devil Ichigo. It does have a unique trait."

"What's that?"

"When we say 'until death do us part' it won't apply to us. We Devils can live forever."

'…!…'

"…!…"

'Zangetsu?'

"Yeah?"

'We are so going to kick Goat-face and Geta-Bōshi’s asses for not telling us sooner!'

XXXX

Yoruichi, Rukia and Momo sit in the hot springs, letting the amazing feeling of the Naberius Clan's private and most luxurious hot springs seep away their aches and heal their wounds. Yoruichi grins as she thinks about the three days she had spent with Ichigo doing just this.

'Oh, how shy Ichigo pretended to be, even though he was peeking…'

Yoruichi looks at the two younger Shinigami as they relax in the pool of hot water; both have their
eyes closed, letting their wounds heal and their fatigue wash away. Just like the hot springs Kisuke has under the shouten, and inside their secret training grounds under Sōkyoku Hill, the water of the Naberius hot springs has healing properties. Thinking back on the battle, she is impressed by how much the raven-haired Rukia has improved her Zanjutsu; she even recognized some of her old student's unique Hohō style in some of Rukia's movements. It must be why Byakuya allowed her to become Jūshirō's Lieutenant after all these years; he had made sure she could defend herself first.

Looking at Rukia's fellow Lieutenant, Momo Hinamori, Yoruichi can tell that she has gotten stronger under Shinji's tutelage as well. Momo's Kidō and Zanjutsu have gotten far more polished than it used to be, and she no longer hesitates before attacking. Shinji always knew that she could become stronger; it was only Aizen's treachery that kept the Squad Five Lieutenant from seeing that. But last night, Momo had stood over Rias and Ichigo, not yielding her ground as the Fallen Angels who killed Issei and Ichigo, not yielding her ground as the Fallen Angels who killed Issei and Ichigo had tried to kill Rias as well once they saw the crimson-haired heiress trying to save Ichigo's life. Momo had become an immovable barrier defending Ichigo's fallen body, holding off their attackers and killing one herself, and that is not even counting the one she had defeated before discovering Ichigo's murder.

Yoruichi smiles as she realizes that there still is hope that Soul Society has a chance to change with the younger men and women coming up through the ranks. From Rukia and Momo, to Renji and Tōshirō Hitsugaya, the new generation is stepping up to prove their worth, each of them changing for the better after meeting Ichigo. It had started when he came to rescue Rukia against the full might of Soul Society, the first signs of respect given from those who had fought him and been defeated by him. He proved himself time and time again as he grew stronger with each of his battles, learning from his defeats and forging new bonds with his victories. But it was his time spent with Shinji and the other Vizard's that allowed his power to grow the most exponentially, displaying for the first time the strength of his inner Hollow and the power they could wield together. However, Ichigo had also shown that he would never be a part of Soul Society, not after what they had done when Orihime was kidnapped. Not only telling him that he wouldn't have their support if he tried to mount a rescue attempt for a 'traitor', the Head Captain had even ordered him to abandon his friend and defend Karakura, resulting in Ichigo doing what he always did best, ignoring those orders and following his heart.

He, Uryū and Chad had left on their own, with no support at first other than Kisuke and herself covering for them in Karakura to rescue one of their own. She had smiled when she watched the three leap into the Garganta without hesitation, followed by Kisuke talking to Tatsuki, Keigo and Mizuiro after they came out of hiding. That was the last time she would see Ichigo until the battle over Karakura, but Aizen had proven too powerful even against the combined forces of Shinigami and Vizards. It had taken one single human boy to bring down the power-mad Transcended Being, and then he was rewarded for it by a death sentence handed down from Central Forty-Six, along with an underlying threat to both his family and friends if he did not comply. She is only thankful that a majority of the Captains stood for Ichigo, threatening civil war and stonewalling Central's decision until Kisuke came up with his alternate plan to handle Ichigo's 'threat'.

Now however, Ichigo is back and for the time being Central Forty-Six has to be kept in the dark, for as long as possible ever. Sighing, she leans back into the pool of hot water, letting it do its magic on her own aches and pains. Soon the water ripples against her and she feels two new bodies join her in the hot springs. Yoruichi cracks open an eyelid and recognizes Venelana, but the silver-haired woman with her is someone she hasn't met before.

"Good Evening Venelana, I see you're back from wherever." Yoruichi cracks a grin at the woman. Momo and Rukia both sit up and bow to the arrivals, Venelana giving them a nod in return. Gesturing to the woman who arrived with her, she makes introductions between them. "Grayfia,
this is Yoruichi Shihōin, Rukia Kuchiki and Momo Hinamori. Grayfia is my daughter-in-law; she is married to Sirzechs and is the Queen of his peerage.

The women exchange pleasantries before settling back into the springs as female servants of the Naberius Clan bring the five women fruits and sake before politely withdrawing. Soon, each of them has a saucer of sake in hand, when Yoruichi makes a toast.

"To Ichigo."

"To Ichigo." The others respond.

"Now we can talk." Venelana says, sipping her sake then putting her saucer down.

Rukia and Momo look at her with confusion. Yoruichi turns to Venelana and shocks them all with her next words.

"So as soon as Isshin and Kisuke get here and tell Ichigo the truth, we can get down to omiai negotiations."

Rukia begins to laugh. "Does he know you are about to marry him off Yoruichi-san?"

"Not yet, however I believe they have made that commitment clear with their feelings for each other." Venelana remarks.

"And what about the Devil she is arranged to marry currently?" Momo asks of the older women.

"We have decided to let Ichigo and Rias deal with that in their own way Momo. He must prove his strength to the nobility of the Underworld and to those who would challenge him." Venelana speaks with an edge to her voice.

Seeing them nod, Venelana smirks then. "Those two are joined at the hip already; we're just going to make sure no one tries to come between them. Ichigo, whether he knows it or not, is a very handsome young man, and by the tales Yoruichi has told me, he is highly sought after in Soul Society and the Human World. Imagine what will happen when the young noblewomen of the Underworld see him?"

"But aren't they too young?" The Squad Five Lieutenant speaks up curiously.

Yoruichi grins and answers in a lazy drawl. "I think Ichigo has already staked his claim."

Venelana and Yoruichi then begin laughing at their inside joke, leaving the other three to wonder if they are already drunk.

"Ah, is there something you're not telling us Yoruichi, Mother?" Grayfia questions as she suspects it is something good for Ichigo and Rias.

"I don't know if we should tell you three." Yoruichi says with a conspiratorial smirk.

"Yes, I think we should respect their privacy. There is no telling how those two will react if that particular secret gets out." Venelana agrees with her own smirk.

Venelana and Yoruichi then grin at one another and at the same time they declare. "He gave her, her first orgasm!"

"WHAT!?" Multiple voices say in disbelief.
"Oh yes, it was just the other night, they were…well let's just say the whole house heard those two." Venelana sighs out fondly. "My little girl has found her future husband."

"But you don't know if he, well, you can't assume that he…"

"I assure you he has made his decision." A tall, reddish-brown-skinned woman with pointed ears and dark hair says as she walks towards the water, removing her clothes and putting them in a basket before she joins the others.

"Lady Grayfia, Lady Venelana." The newcomer bows slightly as she acknowledges the two powerful Devils.

"Merti." Venelana nods to the Elf. "May I introduce to you, Yoruichi Shihōin formerly of Squad Two, Lieutenant Rukia Kuchiki of Squad Thirteen and Lieutenant Momo Hinamori of Squad Five, they are Shinigami and members of Soul Society's Gotei Thirteen."

"An honor to meet three Shinigami, we haven't seen one of your kind in over a millennium." She responds politely.

Momo looks at the woman's ears and begins blushing in embarrassment. "Merti-san, may I ask what you are?"

Merti nods in answer to the Shinigami's question. "I am a Woods Elf; my full name is Merti Longoak."

Rukia can't believe her eyes, first the shock when Yoruichi showed up at Kuoh and quickly told her and Momo that they were intruding on the territory of Devils, and now a human fable straight out of fantasy novels is sitting across from her. The next thing she realizes is how beautiful the woman is. Her reddish-brown skin, a shade paler than Yoruichi's, her wide emerald eyes, her black hair just as long as Orihime's and Rangiku's. But it's her chest that gives the petite Shinigami the most cause of jealousy: if she has to guess, her breasts are slightly larger than Yoruichi's and with no sag at all.

"Are all Woods Elves as incredible looking as you?" Rukia can't help but blurt out.

Yoruichi and Venelana begin laughing again, while Momo, Grayfia and Merti blush at the statement.

"I…I thank you Lady Rukia, but I don't consider myself to be beautiful. My sisters are the ones you would call beautiful; I am what you would call the tom-boy of my family."

Rukia can't help but facepalm while Momo lays a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. Momo then looks at the new arrival and takes up the conversation for Rukia.

"You said that Ichigo has made his decision. How do you know?"

"After he and I talked, he immediately went to Lady Rias's room and brought her back to his room, where the two of them are now having a late dinner. I might have 'overheard' him saying that they have an arrangement."

"Yes, he is her sleeping pillow." Venelana supplies the answer.

"Oh, I see. Well, then we have nothing to be concerned about. He seems intent on keeping the arrangement by the smile he had on his face. I must say, he is different from the stories I have heard recently. Is it true Rukia, that he invaded Soul Society to rescue you?" She directs the
question towards Rukia.

"Here we go again. Yes he did, it really started out a month before when we first met…"

An hour later Rukia finishes her story by ending it with. "And so after that, he went back to the World of the Living, I stayed on in Soul Society, but we did partner up later during the Arrancar invasion and then again when we went and rescued Orihime in Hueco Mundo after her kidnapping."

Merti sits quietly for a few minutes before she smiles. "Then I will do what I promised Kiku all those years ago. He will make a fine Lord, and so I will keep my promise."

"Promise, what promise?" Yoruichi cuts in.

"I promised Lord Naberius that if Ichigo proves himself to be one, I will continue my duties as the Head of Household as I once was for Ichigo's grandfather and grandmother. From Lady Rukia's own words, he is truly a good person, and worthy to take Lady Kiku's place."

"You knew his grandmother?" The violet-eyed Shinigami asks with wonder.

"Yes, she was…she was the kindest person I have ever known. I was devastated by her death, and when Lord Amyntas told me her child didn't survive, I cried for nearly a month. Had I known he lied, I would have left the Underworld and kept watch over Masaki, but I didn't know until after Lord Amyntas left several months ago and brought Ichigo back that she did indeed survive and had children of her own. I understand now why he hid her survival from all of us, but when he first told his peerage and Vincent's peerage the truth, it was a very…emotional meeting. We…we were upset that he didn't tell us and that Masaki-sama died at the hands of a vile Hollow because we weren't there to protect her. But now, now I have a chance to fulfill my oath to Kiku, to take care of her children and her grandchildren. So I should thank you, Rukia Kuchiki, for granting me the opportunity to keep my promise to my mistress."

Grayfia suddenly looks at her mother-in-law and then the Elf before questioning part of the story. "I thought no one knew of Lady Masaki? How is it that you knew Merti?"

"We all knew of her pregnancy, but we were sworn to secrecy to keep the child safe. Lord Vincent had made many enemies in the Civil War, but it didn't matter, they still found out and waited until he was vulnerable. We all know what happened then." Merti wipes a tear away.

"I'm sorry Merti. None of us even knew until recently that Ichigo existed, or who he really was." Venelana quietly says to the Elf.

Smiling sadly as she looks at the water, Merti speaks softly. "I won't allow anything to happen to Rias, Lady Gremory, this I swear on my life to you. Your daughter will never know the lengths I will go to keep her and Ichigo safe."

"So, you're really like me then?" Yoruichi says with sudden understanding.

"I hope we can learn from each other, Lady Yoruichi, I would like to know what I might expect should your former rulers come after him."

Rukia catches on what they are talking about then. "You're a…a…?"

"Yes, I am. I will inform Ichigo in my own time Lady Rukia. For now I think I will assist Lady Rias with teaching Ichigo in understanding our way of life."
"Speaking of that, shall we Yoruichi? I want to get most of the details out of the way before his father arrives. As you have said, nothing shall interfere with their happiness." Venelana smirks at her fellow co-conspirator.

"You know Venelana, you and I are going to be the most hated women in three realms." Yoruichi muses.

"I don't see why Yoruichi, he made up his own mind the night he confessed to Rias. I just hope he is ready when he faces Riser Phenex."

Rukia chimes in at that point. "Well that's the easy part Venelana-sama; we just have to knock the rust off of him. If there is anything that will drive Ichigo to train, it would be anything that dares threaten his family or friends. I think Rias counts as family now."

"More importantly Rukia, Momo, I will need your help in an area he is severely lacking in. His Kidō is atrocious, as is his control; I can feel his Reiatsu even now all the way out here." Yoruichi points out.

"So that's what I have been feeling." Grayfia says. "I wondered what that was."

Momo groans out loud. "Yoruichi-sama, are you sure we can even do that? I mean he has always been known to have utter lack of control of his Reiatsu."

"Well, you know what happened the last time he stayed near normal humans Momo. Imagine what's going to happen to the humans in a school of Devils as well."

Rukia gulps downs her sake before refilling her saucer. "Why do I have the feeling we are in for a long week with him?"

Yoruichi lifts her own saucer. "If it is anything like him getting his Bankai, it will be an interesting week for Rias."

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Amyntas has his hands folded behind his back as he finishes addressing his peerage, as well as his son's peerage.

"I will not allow a repeat of that day. As of now, anyone not of the Gremory or Sitri Clans, as well as those Shinigami and humans that Yoruichi has cleared for me, are to be considered threats to our Clan. You are allowed to use any means necessary to keep my great-grandson and my great-granddaughters safe. Soon, word will spread that Kiku had a daughter and that I am no longer the only pure-blood left of our Clan...and then the vultures will start to circle."

Turning, he faces the myriad reincarnated humans, mythical beings and even a Cerberus pack Alpha that guards the ancestral grounds of the Naberius Clan.

"Ichigo Naberius is my designated Heir. As of now, all of you will treat him as if he is already your Lord, am I understood?"

Smiles, smirks and small chuckles break out at his words; all of them are firmly approving, and the one to speak on their behalf is one of Vincent's two bishops, the only female of the pair, a woman who looks to be of Native American ethnicity, Isi Armstead.

"We will protect our King's grandson with our lives, Lord Amyntas."
Family History Part One

Original Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess.

Edited by regfurby May, 2018.

XXXX

"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu"

XXXX

"We will protect our King's grandson with our lives, Lord Amyntas."

Isi Armistead

XXXX

Blinking eyes slowly open as the young man yawns tiredly. Sitting up, he looks down at his naked body in confusion as a question forms in his head.

'When did I get naked and go to bed last night?'

His unspoken question gets an answer from the beautiful and playful but fully-dressed Akeno Himejima as she sits by the side of his bed.

"I see you're awake now Issei Hyoudou. How are you feeling by-the-way?"

Light brown eyes go wide as he stares at his school's second most famous idol, while Akeno just smiles as she watches his face contort through several emotions ranging from horror, to confusion and finally embarrassment when he notices he is sitting there, legs open, facing towards her. Quickly closing his legs and pulling the blanket over his lap, he points a finger at her and whispers out to her hoarsely.

"What…what are you doing in my room Himejima-Senpai?"

"Do you remember anything at all from last night? Maybe, perhaps about your date Issei-kun?" Akeno asks with a sly grin.

"My…my date?"

Issei sits there and tries to remember anything about his date with Yuuma; slowly the details start coming back to him until his eyes grow wide and his hand moves up to cover the spot he knows she had stabbed him through. Feeling no injury there, he looks back up and sees a frown on Akeno's face.

"I see you do remember Issei-kun. I am sorry, normally a person is given the choice of accepting
an Evil Piece, but we were forced into reincarnating you to save your life. What happened last night was an unexpected situation, one that left us with no other option. Issei, as of now you are one of us. Before you ask, come to the Occult Research Club after school today and Buchou will inform you of what has become of you. Now close your eyes, and I'll see you after school today." She stands and folds her hands in front of her.

Closing his eyes warily, he asks the only question on his mind. "What really happened last night, Senpai?"

As silence answers him, he opens his eyes to see an empty room; blinking his eyes in confusion, he hears his mother coming up the stairs to wake him.

"ISSEI! ISSEI! TIME TO GET UP FOR SCHOOL!"

"Yeah, I'm up Mom!" He looks around his room, the closed window and then his locked bedroom door.

'How?'

XXXX

Momo sits and watches the scene before her as Ichigo and Rukia sit across from each other while trading insults about one another as they eat breakfast with Rias, Yoruichi and Amyntas.

"I know we haven't seen each other in a while Rukia, but since when did you start eating for two?"

Throwing a piece of toast at Ichigo while retorting back at him, Rukia answers sarcastically. "I'm not eating for two yet you overgrown fruit. I just haven't had food that originated from a western country in almost a year, and I miss it."

Quirking an eyebrow at her answer, he grows curious. "So, not yet eh? Who is Bya gonna kill when he finds out Midget?"

"'Nii-sama' knows about me and Renji you jackass, he did give us his blessings after all for us to marry each other!" The Squad Thirteen Lieutenant snaps back.

"You…you…you and Renji are getting married? Hahahaha! Oh man, what the hell was that baboon thinking when he decided to marry your violent ass? Hahahahaa! God, he must have a death wish or something. Between you and your crappy Chappy drawings and Byakuya and his stick-up-his-ass emo self, he is going to be…” Ichigo's head snaps back when an apple hits him squarely between his eyes.

Standing to her feet, Rukia reaches for her glass of juice only to have Yoruichi snatch it from her. "He does have a point Kuchiki; your brother is pretty much a block of ice when it comes to expressing himself." She turns to glare at Ichigo. "And you, idiot, need to think before speaking ill about someone's fiancé. Wait until Isshin finds out about yours, Ichigo."

The two Shinigami Lieutenants look at Yoruichi curiously, then they look at Rias, then Ichigo before Rukia begins to smirk knowingly. "So Ichigo, why is it that you don't want Goat-Face to know about your 'fiancée' yet?"

Rubbing the throbbing spot on his forehead, Ichigo glares at Yoruichi before he answers them.

"It's nothing Rukia. Nothing is going on yet that Goat-Face needs to know about, so get it out of your heads, all of you." He finishes while glaring at his Sensei's grinning face.
"Oh, no you don't Berry-kun. When he finds out about you and 'your' fiancée, it's all over for you."

Ichigo scowls as he quietly mutters out. "She's not my fiancée yet Yoruichi. I still have to find a way to end her arrangement."

Rias looks him in the eyes as she grabs his hand. "We will find a way Ichigo. You aren't doing this by yourself like you always do, not after hearing about your exploits. This is about me as much as it's about you, so we are doing this together."

Looking at her, Ichigo nods his head in acceptance, much to the surprise of both Rukia and Yoruichi. Amyntas however is grinning inside, knowing his great-grandson has chosen his future wisely. Momo slumps in her seat as she mutters to herself about when it is going to be her turn.

"Now that we have eaten, if you would excuse me and Ichigo, ladies, we have things we must discuss today. It would also be helpful if you, Rias, looked in on your newest Pawn, he might have some questions for you. Rukia, Momo, I believe you need to get acquainted with your new home today, as well as go over your schedules with the others on Ichigo's eventual return to school next week."

Ichigo snaps his head up at that news. "What do you mean next week!? I'm going ba…"

"No. You have things to learn Ichigo, and until we are assured you can handle your new powers, we can't afford to let you go back. I'm sorry Ichigo, but you haven't a fraction of the experience I do when it comes to handling your Devil powers. I am going to teach you until I am certain you can handle them." Ichigo still wants to argue until two sets of hands touch his arms on either side of him.

Looking to one side, he sees Yoruichi giving him a sympathetic look as she tries to calm him down. "He is right Ichigo. You just found out about your heritage only yesterday and we can't let you loose in the World of the Living until we are sure you can handle it. In any case, they will be back every day to help you train as well." She says while pointing to Rukia and Momo.

"Training in what exactly Yoruichi? My Zanjutsu is pretty good, my Shunpo is nearly a match for yours and my Hakuda isn't bad, so what are they going to train me in?"

The former Onmitsukidō points at Momo with a grin. "Teach Berry a nice one Lieutenant Hinamori."

"Disintegrate, you black dog of Rondanini! Look upon yourself with horror and then claw out your own throat! Bakudō Number Nine: Geki!"

Ichigo eyes narrow at the sudden paralysis on his body, but when Momo lays her Zanpakutō across his throat the message is delivered loud and clear. He flexes his Reiryoku and breaks free of the binding spell without too much trouble, but nods to Yoruichi in understanding. Momo sheathes her weapon and bows to him.

"I'm sorry Ichigo, but that is what Yoruichi wanted me to do. It would only take a mere fraction of time for someone who does wish to kill you, to do so using such a simple Kidō. This is why she wants us to train you in the use of the Demon Arts, to prepare you in how to counter them."

"Why would Soul Society want to kill me Momo?" He then notices the looks of anger and resentment on each of the three Shinigami women.

"What aren't you telling me? Yoruichi? Rukia? What happened after I defeated Aizen?" His rising anger is clear in his voice.
"Central Forty-Six ordered your execution Ichigo, and they also ordered the execution of anyone who would try and help you if necessary. Luckily, most of the Captains refused to do so, and Kisuke hid you away until he came up with a plan to save you, as well as your family and friends, by sealing away your memories and telling Central they were erased Ichigo." The purple-haired woman responds to him.

"Why...Why would they...?" Before he finishes, his Zanpakutō spirit gives him the obvious answer.

Ichigo stares at his hands as memories flood his thoughts once again, the blood, the chains, the destruction of the Hōgyoku by him and Zangetsu replaying in his mind. The power he had gained made people fear him, and fear what he could do if he turned on them. Fear was a mighty weapon in the wrong hands, and Central was always fearful of threats to their power, real or otherwise.

"They had to know I wouldn't turn against them. So why didn't they give me a chance?"

"Because Ichigo, you aren't a true Shinigami." Yoruichi says to him quietly. "You are too much like your Mother; you put what is right before law or tradition. You are incorruptible in their eyes; they know you won't obey them if you think their orders are wrong. You proved it by rescuing Rukia from her execution, going rescue Orihime after Head Captain Yamamoto declared her a traitor and ordered you not to, and you did what all of Soul Society couldn't do, defeat Aizen personally. You don't fit in with Central Forty-Six's ideals on what a Shinigami should be, Ichigo. For that I'm sorry."

"So that's it Yoruichi? I'm no longer a Shinigami? No longer wanted by the people I saved? Well screw that bullshit then! I'm going to keep doing my duties and continue protecting my family, my friends, and the lives of the souls that need me, us! And if that means I can't be a Shinigami with Central's acknowledgement and blessings, then so be it!" His eyes are starting to glow with a fierce crimson light as he speaks.

"You are a Shinigami to me Ichigo." Momo says as she places a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Rukia huffs out her answer as well. "Fine, I guess you are a Shinigami, even if you do suck at Kidō right now Berry."

"But you won't for long Ichi-kun; between the three of us, and then Tessai later, I think we can get you up to at least Master Practitioner of the Arts, maybe even better than Byakuya." Yoruichi claims.

Fortunately, the old Ichigo doesn't appear, as the new Ichigo smiles and gratefully acknowledges their declarations. "I will be in your hands then Sensei."

Rukia stands up and walks over to Ichigo before she hugs him. "I mean it Ichigo. I'm glad you're back with us."

Letting go, she steps away before turning around to walk back to her room; he calls out to her before she leaves though. "You know Midget; you're still my partner even if you do marry Renji."

Not even looking at him, she answers him back. "I'm the only one who can keep you in line when you are hunting Hollows baka. Of course I'm your partner. Come on Momo, we have to get ready for school."

Bowing to the table, Momo gives them her thanks. "Thank you for breakfast Naberius-sama. We will be waiting Rias-sama."

The four watch as the two petite Shinigami disappear down the hallway before Yoruichi stands up
and gives herself a stretch. She walks over to Ichigo and bends down next to him, cupping his face and turning it towards hers.

"She's right you know Ichigo. Byakuya trusted only you and Renji to watch his sister, Rukia told me that last night when we were in our room. You should also know this about him Ichigo, he does like you in own strange way, but don't tell him, he'll deny it to his dying breath."

"I get it Sensei. I'm just tired of being left in the dark all the time Yoruichi; it would be nice to know the truth once in a while."

"It will be over soon Ichigo, I promise. As soon as Isshin and Kisuke get here, we will tell you everything, and I mean everything."

"But I'm not the only one in the dark, am I?"

Lifting one of her eyebrows, she nods in understanding as she answers. "When we bring those two idiots, we'll bring the rest. I'm assuming you'll want your sisters and Tatsuki, as well as Chad and Uryū then?"

"Orihime too, Yoruichi."

"That's what I said, your sisters Ichigo." She gets up grinning as she walks away.

'3…2…and.'

"Wait!? What the hell do you mean by that Yoruichi!?" He sees her Shunpo away. "Yoruichi? Yoruichi!? What…what did Goat-Face do now Yoruichi!?"

A hand touches his arm and shakes him out of his irate state as he looks over to see his crimson-haired girlfriend smiling at him. "Rias?"

"I have to go too Ichigo. I'll have to get your homework for the next two weeks and meet my new Pawn today after school. He will have questions that need to be answered, and since I'm his Master, it's my duty to tell him of his new state of being. But I'll be back before dinner Ichigo; I'm staying here, not at home until you come back with me."

"Just use the Great Dome when you return Rias, I've made adjustments to my estate to allow a select few entrance from there. Once it becomes known that I have three great-grandchildren, I fear the past will catch up to us rather quickly again." Amyntas informs her.

Bowing to the Clan head, Rias gets up and kisses Ichigo on his cheek. "I'll see you tonight Ichigo. I think you and Uncle Amyntas have much to talk about today, so don't worry about me or the others, we will be back before you know it."

Standing up, he looks at her before he bends down to whisper in her ear. "Be careful Rias, I'll train as hard as I can and get back to where I belong, I promise."

Stroking his cheek, she whispers back to him. "I learned one thing from your friends Ichigo and that is you have never broken even one of your promises. So don't dally too long."

Letting her hand go, he watches as Rias walks away from him and soon she is out of his sight. Turning back and grabbing the back of his chair, he gives his great-grandfather a look.

"Well, where do we begin Uncle? And yes I'm calling you that because I'm not wasting my time or breath saying great-grandfather all the time."
Nodding his head in agreement, Lord Amyntas stands up and waves for Ichigo to follow him. "I guess we should start with the beginning of our Clan's history Ichigo. I am not the first of our Clan to be the Guardian of the Damned, I am the third. My father and grandfather both perished in the numerous wars between Devil-kind, the Fallen Ones and the Angels. Back then, our Clan was much larger and we had no fear of our future…"

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Issei sits with his two friends near the front gates, when Matsuda spots the most popular group of students walking in together.

"DAMMIT! Look at that! Now both the Shiba's are part of that group Issei! Issei, are you even listening to me you bastard!!?" The shaved-headed teen turns to see Issei's eyes locked with that of the Occult Research Club's president and resident idol, Rias Gremory.

Turning back around, he sees that all the members of the group are glancing at the brown-haired youth, then Matsuda watches as the second most popular school idol whispers into the ear of the only male in their group before they head inside the school. The blonde male from their age group however heads their way; the trio size up Yuuto Kiba as he approaches them and waves to Issei.

"Issei-san, Buchou would like to invite you to the Occult Research Club after school today. You will find out what it's about when you arrive. Have a good day, and I will be waiting outside your class to guide you to the club when school's over."

Motohama and Matsuda both turn and start glaring at the now shocked third teen of the Perverted Trio.

"You forget to tell us something Issei?" Motohama says as he uses his middle finger to push his glasses up.

"Yeah, Issei, when were you going to tell us about you being part of a club, especially that one you dick!??"

Issei tunes out the two mouths shouting in his ears as he watches Yuuto rejoin the girl from his room this morning. When he is walking alongside her, she turns and glances at him before giving him a slight smile.

'What happened last night?'

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Rukia watches the three young teens run for the building as soon as the first bell rings, she also notices a certain young man shielding his eyes from the bright light momentarily just before he enters the school building. Turning to Sōna who stands next to her, she sighs softly.

"What's wrong Rukia?"

"That boy, Issei, reminds me of Ichigo the day after I gave him my powers. He…he doesn't realize how much his life has changed yet, and I worry what it might do to him when he does find out."

The class president turns to face the filling room of students as she whispers to the petite Shinigami. "It will be hard for him Rukia which is for certain. He is the possessor of a Sacred Gear, which makes him different from normal humans. Now that he is one of us, it will take hard work on his part to advance in our society: although we have become more 'civilized' than our forefathers, we still follow our basest instincts. Greed being one of them."
"Does it bother you Sōna? To make contracts with humans I mean."

"No Rukia, we are what we are. Besides they do get what they want as well, so it is a mutually beneficial relationship."

"Do any still; you know, sell their souls as the old-wives-tales suggest?"

"Only the very foolish do or still try Rukia. Few Clans even consider such a contract anymore; it no longer serves the purpose it once did, now that we have our Evil Pieces, we can openly approach them and recruit prospective Devils. Just like Issei-kun's case however, it does sometimes happen without permission. It was either that or let him die."

"I feel sorry for him though." Rukia says as she moves to sit at her desk.

Sōna pauses as she walks by. "Why is that?"

"Ichigo will kill him if he tries anything perverted with his friends and family, especially Rias. He isn't known for his constraint."

"I see. Then I hope Rias and Akeno stress those points today when he meets with them. Are you attending the meeting?"

"Yes, then Momo and I are going back to the Estate with Koneko so we can see Ichigo. Koneko wants to make sure her 'Onii-san' is okay." Rukia smirks while thinking about how Karin and Yuzu are going to respond to the fact that they now have yet another sister to deal with for Ichigo's affections, well, two more sisters.

"Do you mind if I tag along? I would like to see my cousin train. Also, Serafall would like to meet him officially as well, she…she knew Lady Kiku and Lady Cornelia, and knowing that Kiku had a daughter, a grandson and granddaughters has brought back memories of those days. She wants to know about Lady Masaki as well."

Sōna sees the Shinigami stiffen at that. "I…I'll talk to him first Sōna, his mother is a very touchy subject with him. I found out the hard way just how much she means to him still. Just give me a few minutes to talk to him first, okay?"

"Of course Rukia, you do know him best after all." Sōna looks around the room before bending down to speak to her again. "When you have time, would you tell me what he is really like when he thinks no one is watching him?"

Rukia nods her head just as Akeno and Rias enter the room, walking down the aisles of desks before taking their seats next to her and Momo. Akeno digs into her pockets before pulling out keys and small packets that she hands to each of the Lieutenants.

"These are your house keys, and the packet is for the new security systems that Sirzechs-sama had installed last night, he thinks we might need it soon."

"Is this really necessary Akeno? Rukia and I were fine where we were, there wasn't any need for us to move in with you guys." Momo says as she looks into her packet.

Rias answers for them. "Amyntas said that Ichigo will be targeted by the Old Maou Faction once they learn of him. It would be easier if we stick together until Ichigo learns to use his Devil powers efficiently enough, also as you said earlier, to knock the 'rust' off of his Shinigami powers. Akeno and I will join up with you later, I have to introduce myself to my new Pawn tonight and explain what he is and what is expected of him."
"Good luck with that." Rukia says with a bit of worry.

Rias, Akeno and Tsubaki all look at her in confusion until Sōna repeats part of their conversation to them. Akeno begins to giggle then, much to the annoyance of her Master.

"We will see how things go tonight Rukia-san, and as for his 'reputation', I'll be sure to impress upon him the need to tone it down when Ichigo is around. Now that he..." Rias's blush gives away her inner thoughts then.

Rukia speaks suddenly and solemnly then. "Thank you Rias, Akeno for taking care of the fruit. I... I don't know...when he was missing, we thought he was dead. No one would speak of what had happened to him after the fight with Aizen. It was like it was taboo to speak his name; even my Nii-sama wouldn't speak about it. But now knowing that you and the others have been taking care of him, it makes me happy to see him...to see him so alive again."

"He wasn't always like this, was he Rukia?" Momo asks.

"No. He...he was different back then."

"This has to do with Lady Masaki, I take it then?" Sōna questions the petite Shinigami perceptively.

Nodding her head, Rukia answers. "Yes. She was his light, the whole family's light. Her passing changed him, and he became very..."

"He said he died inside." Rias finishes for her.

Before Rukia can ask, their teacher walks in and begins their homeroom session.

'Did he tell her?' Rukia sends a glance at Rias who is biting her lower lip and frowning.

XXXX

Ichigo sits on the balcony railing overlooking the lush fields that surround the main Naberius Estate. Dotting the landscape, surrounded by high fences, are the famous hot-springs. Each is heated by the nearby inactive volcano, which can be seen in the distance from the estate that helps make the Clan money from their usage among the Devils of the Underworld. He keeps going over everything his Uncle has told him about the origins of his Mother's side of the family. They had been a low ranking Clan back in the beginning of the Underworld, until the Skeleton Tower was created to house the damned souls being sent to them. Hell itself resides in that black tower that he now stares at, the same tower that is also at the center of his inner-world. Zangetsu has been mum so far on what is going on in there, and until he talks to his father, Kisuke and Amyntas and gotten the complete picture of his heritage, his Zanpakutō is keeping him out.

About to sip his luke-warm wine, he is slightly startled when a dark-skinned hand takes his glass from him and replaces it with a colder one.

"Thanks Merti." Ichigo says as he easily recognizes her presence.

"You're welcome Ichigo. Are you well?" She asks as she sits in a chair beside him.

He waves his hand around him. "As well as one can expect. I just found out that I am in essence going to be in charge of the souls of those who have sinned and can never be freed from their punishment, until the evil in their souls is purged, and then they are sent back into the Cycle of Life. To be honest, I have no idea about how I should feel at this point Merti, I don't like hurting
people or souls without reason. This though, I just don't know."

Merti stands up when he grows silent and walks to the railing until she is next to him; she then looks towards the Skeleton Tower in the distance.

"I have heard the stories about you from your Shinigami friends, Ichigo. They told me the lengths to which you would fight for them and those you care about. You took the power to save your family that night, and from there you kept on growing to overcome your opponents, no matter how strong, no matter how many. Now that you have awakened your Devil blood, you will grow even stronger. Your blood, Ichigo is that of a great Clan, but how you chose to head the Clan one day will be your discretion alone. Think about what you will do when the day comes; when Lord Amyntas wishes to step down, and hands you the responsibility of that tower and its inhabitants."

Ichigo keeps staring at the Skeleton Tower, feeling her words resonating in his soul. As he continues to look at the imposing tower in the distance, a dimension in itself that holds the worst of the worst, he begins to accept what he is, what his sisters are and what his mother truly was. His future, should he accept it, is to rule over the damned souls imprisoned in there as he sees fit. Looking at Merti, he asks the question that forms in his head.

"Who is in there that you know?"

Placing one of her hands on his, she looks into his amber eyes. "The human who forever changed my life Ichigo."

"What did he do Merti?"

Smiling sadly, she turns and stares back at the tower in the distance. "He murdered my mother, father and…my sisters and I were…"

"Stop! Don't say it Merti. I'm…I'm sorry."

"I used to visit him every day, to watch him suffer in there. Over time though, the sight of him no longer brings me the joy it once did. You must think me horrible Ichigo, but the Sinners are in there for a reason. I know you are different from us because you weren't raised as a Devil, which is why I want to see what you will do when you take your place when the time comes. Will you change, or will the Tower change for you?"

"I'll always be me Merti, so there you have your answer." Ichigo says before he takes a deep drink of wine and stares out over the plains of his future estate.

"Then I will assist you Lord Ichigo Naberius, as I did for your grandmother Kiku, so will I be there for you."

"What was she like Merti? Uncle told me some, but he said you knew her best. What was grandmother Kiku like?"

"Well, the first word that comes to mind when thinking of her personality...is blunt. Lady Kiku was not afraid to speak her mind, especially when she found something that went against her sense of justice. She also had a huge dislike for old, stuffy traditions with no sentimental value, due to her upbringing in a Quincy noble household. She once told me that she had always held deep regrets for the souls that were destroyed by her own hand before she became a Devil. And that she had jumped at the chance to no longer be a Quincy due to those same regrets. Although Lady Kiku could be incredibly stubborn at times, once you earned her loyalty, she would be willing to storm Heaven itself for you. Lady Kiku also had a great fondness for wine, both drinking and collecting
it, as well as pairing it with food. This is why she went through the Italian Sommelier Association to become a certified sommelier. In fact, the wine you are drinking comes from her vast collection in the estate's wine cellar."

Ichigo stares at the wine in his hand, a wine that his grandmother must have handled at one time when she was still alive. Ichigo feels a strange emotion build in him as he thinks about his family, really thinks about them. All he has ever known is that his family consists of him, his mother when she was alive, Goat-Face and the twins. But now he knows that he had, at one time before he was born, a much larger family, but like his mother, they were killed off by those who opposed them due to a twisted sense of justice and vengeance. Swirling the wine in his glass, he sips it and silently vows that as long as he lives, his sisters, his children and their children would never be deprived of their family ever again, an echo in his mind agreeing with him wholeheartedly on the issue. Smiling now, he looks over the fields again.

"Merti, did my grandmother change as a person when she became a Devil?"

"Do you mean whether she lost her humanity? The answer is no Ichigo; she stayed the same person that she was as when she was human. She brought life to this place that has been sorely missed since her passing, something I hope you and your sisters bring back Ichigo. I understand that Lady Yuzu is much like Lady Masaki from what Yoruichi has told me. Is this true?"

Ichigo smiles genuinely as he thinks about his youngest sister; Yuzu had become the new cornerstone of the family, having taken the position by default once she took over running the household. Karin and he made sure that she was protected, made sure that she never cried again, made sure she had a reason to smile. The only hard day was the anniversary of their mother's death every year when they went to visit her grave. Looking at the curious face of his new assistant, he grins at her.

"You're gonna love Yuzu, Merti. If you want to know what our mother was like, she lives on in Yuzu."

Merti turns away then looks back over at the hot springs. "I look forward to meeting your sisters Ichigo. Do you still have any questions about the Clan?"

"A few questions Merti, but they have to wait for now. Uncle Amyntas said I had to meet with his peerage and my grandfather's peerage."

"I see, then I hope you don't mind if I tag along."

"Yeah, that's fine Merti; after all you're my personal assistant now." He gives her cheeky grin. "One question though, what is a peerage?"

Out of nowhere, she has in her hands fifteen red chess pieces that she hands him. He misses her eyes widening slightly as each of the pieces begin to turn from red to black, like proper chess pieces, as he holds them. Regaining her composure before he notices, she begins to explain the different aspects of each chess piece.

"This, Ichigo, is the most powerful piece, the Queen…"

He stands there as she goes through each of the pieces from the Queen, to the Bishops, to the Rooks and Knights and finally to the eight Pawns. She then looks at the pieces in his hands and throws him through for a loop.

"Those pieces in your hands represent the future members of your own peerage one day Ichigo."
Snapping his head up, he narrows his eyes in intense anger, but Merti knows he is missing the importance of what he is holding.

"No Ichigo, it doesn't mean you will force them to become Devils, you can offer them the choice and they can refuse if they so wish. Before you get angry Ichigo, you do realize that Akeno, Koneko, Yuuto and now her new Pawn were each made into Devils by pieces such as the ones in your hands?"

Staring at the red and black pieces, he whispers out his question. "They are Devils by choice Merti?"

"Yes Ichigo, most are given the choice, except in the case of Rias's new Pawn; that situation was beyond anyone's control that night, the others accepted for reasons of their own. Do not fault them or Rias for that Ichigo. Most of them willingly chose this or else they wouldn't be a part of Rias's peerage. I myself am a Devil not of my own free will; I and my sisters weren't given the choice back then. It was different under the rule of the Old Maou Faction; they took what they wanted whenever they wanted. I want to tell you it was the happiest moment of my life Ichigo, but that didn't come until later, when Lord Vincent killed my previous Master and gave me the freedom to choose. I did so under the condition that my sisters were set free, which he fulfilled. My sisters live nearby on the lands belonging to the Naberius Clan, maybe one day you can visit them with me?"

"Yeah, I would like that Merti." Ichigo runs his hand through his hair as he considers the fact that the people he lived with were at one time human before volunteering to become Devils, an offer given to them by his girlfriend. Looking at his new acquaintance, he thinks about what she said about his grandmother.

"My grandmother, was she a…"

"She was Lord Vincent's Queen, a very powerful woman; not as strong as Lady Grayfia, who is known as the strongest Queen in existence now, but she wasn't that far behind though. Not many Queens come close to their strength anymore...well that was until Akeno became Lady Rias's Queen. Akeno's situation is a very unique one, you will have to find it out on your own though."

Merti finishes with a small smile.

"Do you ever wish you could change what you are now Merti? Live your life the way you wanted to?"

"Would you ever change what you became Ichigo, when Rukia first ran Sode No Shirayuki through your heart?"

Finishing his wine, he smirks at her then. "Not in a million years Merti. She changed me, and I thank her every day for it in my thoughts."

"That is good to hear Ichigo." A male voice speaks up from behind the two.

Ichigo and Merti turn to see a man standing behind them. His red hair and beard only being outshone by his bright blue eyes which themselves have a calculating gaze in them. Ichigo stands to his full height, but still has to look up slightly as does Merti.

"Ichigo, this is Conor O'Madaihin, your grandfather's Knight. Conor O'Madaihin this is Lord Amyntas's great-grandson Ichigo Kurosaki…Naberius."

Both men notice the hesitation, but neither say a word.

"Greetings my Lord." The man's speech has an accent that Ichigo has never heard before.
"Ah, Ichigo is good O'Madaihin-san. Not really big on the honorifics shit."

The man begins to laugh then. "Just like your grandmother Ichigo. She also lacked what the nobles would call 'manners' when addressing those that felt she were undeserving of their position. I was reminded of her just now."

Ichigo twists his head at that statement, turning towards Merti he blurts out his reaction. "Just how old are you guys!?"

Lightly slapping his arm, the Devil-reincarnated elf laughs at him. "Ichigo, even women of our race don't broadcast our age, I believe humans would say it's rude to ask such a question. But to answer your query, we are ageless Ichigo, just as you and your sisters are, we are immortal."

"We…we really can't die?"

"Of course we can die Ichigo, just like any other, it just takes an act of violence to end our lives or an accident. When we say immortal, it means we can live forever barring any outside occurrences. Like your…"

"Like my great-grandmother, my grandparents, and my mother." Both Devils feel an uneasy feeling stir in the room as Ichigo's eyes glaze over for a few seconds.

Conor nudges the elfin woman. "He hasn't been told yet?"

"No, you and the others along with Lord Naberius are to see to it today, as well as his training."

The tall, broad-shouldered Irishman grins as he thinks about how happy the rest of his former Master's peerage is going to be. To train Lord Vincent's grandson is an honor none of them will pass up, especially the woman standing next to him, she had lost more than just friends on that day, she had lost those who had named themselves her family. Watching as their young lord's eyes return to their normal chocolate brown, he shifts when Ichigo sets his empty glass down.

"Well Merti, Conor, what's next?"

Merti and Conor give him a short bow, the dark-skinned woman replying for them both. "It is time, Ichigo Naberius, for you to meet your great-grandfather and the peerages that help him guard the damned souls of Hell."

Kisuke and Isshin are sitting, well, being forcibly held in place, by the three women now standing before them. Isshin is looking at the smallest of the three women and in the back of his mind, he can't help but wonder exactly how things could have gone differently if his son and daughters had known about the black-haired, blue eyed Devil standing before him. Her childlike demeanor however doesn't diminish the fact that she had them both pinned by a binding spell before either of them had even known she was there.

The petite woman speaks in a voice that doesn't match her status. "So, you are Ichigo's father, I guess that makes you family, so I will let you off easy today. You, however…" She points at Kisuke. "…Are not family. Tell me why I should let you go after what I have heard you put my cousin through with your schemes, trickster?"

Sweat-dropping at the power being used to hold him, Kisuke is reminded of the day when Yamamoto showed him what getting on his last nerves entailed. Keeping his goofy persona isn't going to work on the powerful being standing before him, even if she does wear a Lolita outfit.
Deciding that the truth might save him a beating from one or all of the women standing in front of him and his cohort, the former Head of Research and Development answers her candidly.

"Because he was all I had Leviathan-sama. Ichigo Kurosaki is a being of tremendous Reiryoku reserves, one I think we all can attest is due to both his parent's lineages. His sisters, while powerful in their own rights, being born of the same parents, don't have what he has. An inner-Hollow that has fused with his Zanpakutō making him one-of-a-kind as a Shinigami, well, now as a Devil. He is the secret weapon I had been looking for to put an end to Aizen's treachery and save Soul Society, although to my great shame, I didn't account for Central trying to execute Ichigo afterwards due to their unjustified paranoia. However, I did save him the best I could Maou-sama."

Serafall's eyes narrow dangerously at him. "He was only fifteen years-old Urahara-san. Hardly an age one should be thrown into the middle of a mess your Soul Society created in the first place."

"He had aspects that every other Shinigami lacked Leviathan-sama."

"Being what exactly Urahara?"

"First and most importantly, he is, or was, human. His growth potential was and still is astronomical compared to me, Isshin, Yoruichi or even Tessai. Second, his powers helped create the seeds of power in his core group of companions, his friend Chad, and his newest sister, Orihime. He befriended a Quincy, one whose own family has power that shouldn't be scoffed at, turning what could have been a bitter enemy into someone who was a friend and rival in his campaigns against both Soul Society and the Espada of Aizen's former army. His charisma and ability to draw others of strength to him is already unquestionable; now that he has also accessed both his last two powers completely as both a Devil and a Shinigami, he will be a very scary kid to have as an enemy, wouldn't you agree Leviathan-sama?"

Feeling the bindings release from his prone body, Kisuke adjusts himself after being held in an uncomfortable position for so long. Looking up from under his trademark bucket hat, he gives a small nod to the woman in thanks.

"I'm not going to say I'm sorry for choosing him, Serafall Leviathan-sama, for that will disrespect everything he has achieved and will continue to achieve, but Ichigo is and will always be my student, my greatest protégé to whom I can pass my legacy on to when I see fit to retire from the daily grind of the afterlife."

"WHAT!? / ARE YOU INSANE!?" The two other Shinigami shout in unison at him.

Yoruichi's eyes roll when he flips open his paper fan that everyone hates, but listens when he begins his explanation. "Why him? Simply put, I don't trust anyone else. Ichigo won't use what I teach him to conquer or subjugate, he will use it to protect and defend those who are powerless instead. Ichigo has never thought about himself other than to become stronger for the sake of others. He charged into Soul Society blindly to save a friend he thought was being unjustly punished for helping him save his family. He disobeyed the Head-Captain to rescue another friend accused of being a traitor with only the help of his friends. Each time he grew stronger and stronger to save his companions, his friends and family, not once asking for anything in return. Now, knowing all that, who better than Ichigo to give my wealth of knowledge to? Isshin? Yoruichi? Can you name one single person you would trust completely with my knowledge other than Ichigo? I can't. Nor can Tessai."

Venelana and Serafall are looking at the Shinigami, both Yoruichi and Ichigo's father sitting there looking distant after Kisuke had finished speaking. Whatever the hat-wearing man is talking about, it is clear that the Shinigami know what those words are implying. Serafall breaks the silence after
the moment stretches too long.

"What do you mean trickster? What is it that you know that…"

Isshin abruptly fills in the gap for her. "Kisuke is not just any ordinary Shinigami, Serafall-sama; he is...he is the smartest Shinigami alive, an actual genius."

"Then again, he did make that one mistake with Aizen." She hears the burly man mutter almost to himself.

Flapping his fan somewhat violently, the shouten owner snorts out. "It worked out in the end didn't it? Ichigo found the strength to overcome our greatest adversary while awakening his real Zanpakutō at the same time."

Venelana had been listening to the conversation with quiet reserve all this while, but Kisuke's words puts the last piece of the puzzle together for her.

"How did you seal his Devil powers Kisuke Urahara, if I might ask?"

"I had a little help." He answers her vaguely.

The room grows quiet until Yoruichi growls at her oldest friend. "Spit it out then Kisuke, who helped you?"

The hat-wearing Shinigami sighs. "I believe Serafall-sama knows him as my Devil counterpart, and as a fellow brilliant mind; she does rule the Underworld with him after all."

Serafall looks at him in shock. "Ajuka Beelzebub helped you!?"

"The one and only. It was amazing the insight he had with Ichigo’s problem. His ideas were used to create the Kidō Tessai and I needed to give Ichigo time to heal his body and mind. Regardless of what I may or may not have told the Head-Captain and Central Forty-Six, Isshin, Tessai and I had no intentions of ever destroying his mind or permanently sealing away his powers. I'm sorry for lying to you Yoruichi, but you were far too close to him, and we couldn't afford letting anyone know what we were planning if we were to pull it off without a hitch. But despite that, you found out much quicker than I had anticipated, something I must say is a very troubling trait you have my dear, always finding out things that were hidden for good reasons. Maybe you'd like to give us a clue as to how you did it?"

Yoruichi scoffs at him. "I made my own agreements Kisuke. So no, I won't tell you how I did it. More importantly as of now, you, Isshin and Tessai are going to help me, Venelana, and Amyntas to tell not only Ichigo the truth, but also Orihime, the twins, Uryū, Chad, Tatsuki and anyone else who needs to know. And I mean the whole truth, all of it, tomorrow."

Isshin and Kisuke hang their heads in defeat and they both begrudgingly accept her demands. Isshin gets up and starts to leave the room, but pauses just shy of the shoji doors. "You do know how hard tomorrow is going to be on all of them Yoruichi; I expect your help afterwards in dealing with the fallout."

"Of course Isshin. I was given the responsibility of keeping them safe, you know I will this time."

"Then tomorrow our world changes once again. Good night Yoruichi, Kisuke, Venelana-san, Serafall-sama."

After Isshin leaves, Tessai enters the room with fresh tea for the remaining guests. Placing a cup
for himself as well, the tall former Kidō Commander bows to the two Devil women present.

"Please forgive Shiba-dono; it isn't easy for him to admit he was wrong about keeping this from his son or his daughters. Masaki-sama didn't want them to be a part of our worlds, and he did his best to fulfill her wishes, but Aizen managed to drag them into it despite all our best efforts."

All us here, including myself, failed in that respect. Now that we are aware of Ichigo's true heritage, and aware that he and his siblings will become targets of not only Central Forty-Six, but also the Old Satan Faction, we will do everything we can to keep them safe until Ichigo is once again ready to fight and protect them."

Venelana and Serafall nod their heads at the Shinigami, and the current Leviathan smiles approvingly as she leans back. "I guess all there is left to do is wait for the fireworks tomorrow. In the meantime however, there is a question I would like to ask you three."

"What might that be?" Kisuke asks as he tries to avoid looking at his silent and visibly moody best friend.

"Can you tell me about Masaki? I don't...didn't want to ask Ichigo, because I was warned by my little sister that that particular subject is a very touchy one with all of her children, especially Ichigo."

"As it is with most of us Serafall-sama. She was and always will be our greatest loss." Yoruichi responds immediately, dropping her head in remembrance.

Sensing that Yoruichi is in no mood to continue speaking, Kisuke picks up the story for his best friend and former Captain. "We all knew that Masaki was a powerful Quincy, since she took over the protection of their family after Isshin sacrificed his Shinigami powers to keep her alive. However, on the night that she died, she was rendered defenseless by one of her ancestors on her mother's side of her family..."

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Ichigo stands between his uncle and his assistant, looking at the ensemble of Devils standing or sitting before the three. Looking first at his uncle, then at Merti, he turns to face towards them then bows slightly towards the group.

"Yo."

For a few minutes no one says a word, until a small giggle suddenly bursts out from the back. A few heads turn towards the person who is making the noise, several others chuckling or giggling with her as the woman steps forward through the crowd. Ichigo looks at the woman, whose white hair and amber eyes seem very familiar to him, and notices that she also seems to have a very...generous figure, as the woman reaches the front row and faces him.

"Ah, my name is Hanako O'Madaihin; forgive me Lord Ichigo, but that's it? Yo?" The woman asks him with a slight grin.

Ichigo rubs the back of his head sheepishly and shrugs his shoulders. "What else did you want me to say?"

The laughing dies down somewhat as another member of the two peerages, a white-haired man, steps forward and gives him a nod. "Please forgive Hanako, Lord Ichigo, but she, we were not expecting you to be so..."
"Informal? Well I get that a lot, especially among the nobles and Captains of Gotei Thirteen. Call it bad upbringing or something, but if you want me to bow and scrape at someone's feet, the short answer is 'kiss my ass'."

Now the entire room begins to resonate from everyone's laughter, even his uncle is laughing hard along with them. Merti is trying her hardest to keep a straight face, but she can't keep the thoughts off her face that prevails in everyone's heads then. As Conor had said before, Ichigo is just like his grandmother.

Ichigo waits for them to recover patiently as his own inner dialogue is taking place.

"I like them King. At least they aren't like that prick Kuchiki."

'True, but we don't even know them yet. And they do belong to my grandfather's peerage so maybe we can learn a few things from them about my family.'

"Maybe they can tell us who you inherited your infamous scowl from too."

'Asshole.'

"I aim to please Ichigo. Back to the real world King, I think you got 'em worried."

Coming back to focus on the real world, he steps back in surprise when he sees emerald eyes which are attached to a woman with shimmering gold hair, and who seems to be of Spanish ethnicity, staring into his worriedly from a short distance away. Quirking an eyebrow at her, he holds his hand up to stop Merti from checking on him.

"Zangetsu and I were talking, sorry."

"What's it like Ichigo…Ichigo?"

"Ah…?"

"Remei Armistead, I am Edmund's wife, as well as Carles's mother and Isi's mother-in-law, and Lord Amyntas's Bishop. So, what is it like to have a voice inside of your head all of the time?"

Smirking at first, Ichigo looks blank for a second before he answers truthfully. "It is weird at first, but you get used to having someone to talk to anytime you want. When I was…was an amnesic, I kept getting these visions. At first I didn't know what they meant, but now I know that it was my Zanpakutō trying to break free and the only time he could try was when I associated a feeling, thought or even a smell to something he knew of my past. That is why I kept passing out, the rush of his emotions when he thought he was close to breaking free put a strain on my body as well as my soul. It was a reaction to his emotional state as much as it was to mine."

A few murmurs and hushed whispers greet his statement and then another of his uncle's peerage, a woman with brown hair that is held back by a pair of goggles, shining blue eyes, pointed ears, a pair of black tinted fairy wings, and a body so short that she only comes up to his knees, asks the next question of him.

"Ichigo, I'm Aisling Coghlan, Lord Amyntas's other Bishop…"

He can't help himself as he blurts out in shock at the shortness in front of him. "You're smaller than Midget!"

For a brief second her blue eyes go wide before a feral snarl rips from her mouth and she disappears
from in front of him. Looking around for the short fairy, he learns the hard way not to mess with her when his shin explodes in pain from a swift kick from the offended Irish legend.

As he bends over in pain, his hair is grabbed by the now violent fairy, who stares at him in the eyes. "Lord or not Ichigo, I take great care to chastise those who would comment on my height. Do we have an understanding lad?"

"Yes." He groans out as he rubs his now throbbing shin. 'Bloody Hell, just like Rukia, damn midgets are all the same, can't hit you in the face until they drop you to your knees.' He's smart enough not to voice it out loud, he doesn't want the Midget to get any ideas.

"Now before I was rudely interrupted, I was going to ask about your inner-Hollow, Zangetsu is it?"

"No, he is my Zanpakutō spirit, well sort of I guess, he hasn't explained it fully to me yet, but it has something to do with my other spirit or something. I have to wait until Goat-Face and Geta-Bōshi tell me the whole story as to who I really am before he explains it to me."

"Wait, what other spirit Ichigo?" His uncle asks suddenly, but no answer is given as the true spirit phases unexpectedly into the room.

"Not'un Gramps. We're gonna wait until them other two morons get here before we delve into the King's true lineage. Then he and I have some unfinished business to tend to. After that he's all yours to ehmm train, yeah train. So until Dad and his Sensei get here no more talk about his other heritages." Just as suddenly as he appeared, Zangetsu disappears again just as quickly.

Ichigo facepalms and mutters to himself about how unfair life is that he got such an obnoxious Zanpakutō to begin with. Looking between his fingers, he sees looks of wonder and shock on a few faces, but a majority of them have looks of…oh hell, glee?

"Well, well, well Lord Amyntas, it looks like we are going to have fun training this one. I have never had the pleasure of training a Devil that had Bankai." Says the white-haired man who looks to be related to Hanako, due to having the same eye and hair color that he can swear he has seen before on someone else who has a mustache and goatee. The white-haired man also seems to have a very calm and dedicated aura about him.

"Bankai? What is Bankai Daiki?" A woman with a...similarly generous figure and look as Hanako, except for having bright red-orange hair and silvery grey eyes, asks as she holds the arm of the white-haired man.

Turning to the red-haired woman, Daiki kisses her forehead before explaining to her and the rest of the room. "Bankai is the highest release a Shinigami can obtain, the first step is learning your Zanpakutō's name, the second is learning the 'Shikai' release and the last and greatest achievement is Bankai. It is when a Shinigami and Zanpakutō are at their greatest release of power, or so I've been told. Is this correct Ichigo?"

Nodding his head, he answers. "It is. I take it you have seen a Bankai before…"

"Yes I have Ichigo. Forgive me, I am Daiki Kimura, Lord Amyntas's sole Rook, and this beautiful Kitsune is my wife, and Queen of our peerage, Akiko Kimura. A pleasure to meet you finally."

"Nice to meet you as well Daiki and Akiko Kimura, and yes, Bankai is the final release of a Zanpakutō. Mine however is always in its Shikai release and can never be sealed because of my Reiryoku."
"So what does your Zanpakutō do Ichigo?" The foxlike woman, Akiko, asks with half-lidded eyes.

"It increases my speed and strength, it's a melee type Zanpakutō, so it's best when I get in close to my opponents, though I do have a long range attack when needed."

"When can we see it?"

"I…I lost it." He says awkwardly.

"Lost it? How is this possible?" This prompts his Hollowfied Zanpakutō spirit to reappear again.

"He didn't lose it; it wasn't his real Zanpakutō to begin with. As I said before Kimura-chan, no more on his background until pops and pervert get here. Now if you want to see how strong he is right now, then train him as you would a Devil, I and his Sensei will train him as a Shinigami until he is where he should be. Have fun King, I get the feeling from this group you're gonna need it. Hahaha sucks to be you Ichigo!" Zangetsu nudges Ichigo before retreating back again to Ichigo's inner-world.

Ichigo can see the anger building up in the woman standing in front of him, the insult caused by the casual use of a close honorific by Zangetsu clearly showing on her face as her features begin to morph into those of the Kitsune he had read about in folklore. Her reddish fur flickers as the flames of both her heritage and the race she is now part of begin to race up and down her transforming body, her clothes burning away to reveal a black leotard like battle outfit, and the deadly grace of her position.

"Ichigo, I would normally hold back on a first-timer, but you will one day rule over the Skeleton Tower as the Guardian of the Damned, so I think it would be best to see if you are fit to hold that title." Not even giving the young man a chance, she sends both flames and Hell Chains towards his chest.

Dodging by rolling to his left, he reaches for what isn't there anymore and this causes him to hesitate briefly. Taking advantage of his lapse, the Queen of his great-grandfather's peerage snakes one of her chains forward and grabs his ankle. Snapping his head up, Ichigo sees her grinning madly with a mischievous light in her eyes before she snaps the chain like whip and he goes flying backwards into the wall behind him. Crashing into the wall, Ichigo rolls again instinctively just moments before a set of chains slam into the wall where his head just was. Getting to his feet, he glares at the now flaming hot Kitsune as she begins to gather the flames in her hands.

"Is this all you can do Ichigo, run?" The fox woman snarls at him.

Narrowing his eyes, he begins to think of how to get close to the pissed-off fox woman, but comes up short until a voice sounds loudly in his head.

"What are you doing King?"

'What the hell do you think I'm doing!? I'm dodging you idiot! I don't have my Zanpakutō, and I don't know shit about Kidō, I'm fucking defenseless right now dammit!'

"Defenseless? I don't remember being defenseless when we fought Aizen. I don't remember being defenseless fighting those Fallen Angels the other day. So again Ichigo, tell me how we are defenseless? In case you forgot, you do have two means of fighting still."

Ichigo dodges yet another set of chains as he concentrates on the words of his Hollow Zanpakutō. Letting the memories flow back as he keeps dodging both chains and flames and the additional jabs
at his manliness, he let the image of chains form in his thoughts.

'What's with his eyes? He looks as if he isn't even here fighting me, as if he was...' Akiko wonders to herself, then her instincts blare a warning.

Throwing herself back quickly, with just the barest of margins she dodges the chains that crater the spot she has just vacated. Looking up and through the dust, she sees Ichigo's head hanging down, his face obscured by his orange hair. She readies her own defenses as she spies the young man starting to slowly circle around the room, matching her position across the room as she moves to keep him in her sights.

"Kimura-san, that was an interesting little spar, but I think you're right about one thing."

"What would that be Lord Ichigo Naberius?" She can't help the feeling that she is standing before Lord Amyntas the first time she fought him in combat all those centuries ago.

The room suddenly becomes heavy when Ichigo's eyes finally level their gaze upon Amyntas's Queen. Instinctually she steps back, startled by the black bleeding into his white sclera. But the worst surprise comes for her when both her legs are suddenly captured by chains he had somehow slipped behind her, trapping her in place. She feels the destructive light appear before she can actually see the power forming on his fingertips.

"I won't use a Cero on you Kimura-san, but I think this should be appropriate enough. Bala." His frighteningly calm voice sends shivers up her spine, worse than the thoughts of actually being hit by the ball of condensed Reiatsu that flies at her chest.

Unable to move, she closes her eyes with a grimace, bracing herself with her Yōki for the direct hit she knows she is going to experience, but it never comes. Blinking her eyes open, she sees a wall of chains blocking the path of the energy projectile that had her dead to rights, a large number of the chains shattered and warped by its passing before managing to stop it. Scanning the room in shock, she sees everyone looking at where she knew Ichigo was supposed to be standing; she also sees her husband wiping the sweat off his forehead as he gives her a look of relief.

"Uncle?" She hears the confusion in the voice of the orange-haired teen.

"I'm sorry Ichigo; I should have known it was too soon for such a training tactic. I should have realized your survival instincts are still as high strung as when you fought Aizen. For your friends and family it has been over a year, but for you it has only been a day at most. Your body still remembers being in a state of combat now that your memories have returned. Forgive me Nephew."

Ichigo looks stunned at how he had trapped the Kitsune, gaining a look of both surprise and resignation on her face as he makes his chains release her and then dissipate. Taking one step back, he simply nods to her before turning on his heels and walking out of the room without a word. The peerages stare at the back of the retreating figure of Ichigo, and then that of Merti as she follows him at a safe distance.

"Well that was a cluster-fuck if I have ever seen one." Edmund Armistead, a man of British ethnicity with black hair and hazel eyes, says as he walks up to where Ichigo's chains had popped up from the floor from behind Akiko.

Daiki places a hand on his wife's shoulder and quietly pulls her in. "You okay?"

"His eyes Daiki, they were dead. What exactly happened when he fought this Aizen, Lord
Naberius?" Being the Queen of Amyntas's peerage, she had seen and fought in her fair share of battles during the war, but she is still visibly shaken by Ichigo's personality change.

Looking down the passageway his great-grandson and Ichigo's head of household have retreated through, all the Lord of the Damned can say is one thing. "We will find out by tomorrow night when the rest of my family, his friends, and more importantly his mentors arrive."

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'What was that!?'

"Sorry King, even I didn't see that one coming. He's right though, you are still in that survival mindset. I should have seen it first, but I didn't because I've had my time to recover, and you haven't. We should take a…"

Ichigo stops in the middle of the hallway. 'NO! I want to go home Zangetsu! We will find a way to deal with this now! I'm not staying away from them, any of them, not anymore, and not a moment longer than I have to, do you hear me!?'

"Yeah King, I hear you." Manifesting besides his wielder, he looks over at the newest addition to Ichigo's ever growing circle of influence in the young Devil's life. "Merti, I will need your help with this."

Looking at the being that had suddenly appeared out of thin air, the Elf looks between the two versions of Ichigo standing before her. A sense of understanding dawns upon her as she looks at the major source of both Ichigo's Shinigami and Hollow powers, the white version of Ichigo studying her with a look of resignation. Bowing her head slightly, she responds to Zangetsu.

"How may I help, Zangetsu?"

"We need a place to fight that won't be missed. He needs to get this aggression out of his system, and the only way to do that is for him to fight me, and me alone. Do you know of a place close by?"

"Of course, it is what we use for Rating Games, a temporary dimension. Will that suffice?"

"Perfect. Take us there now if you can Merti. The King and I have things to work out before his family and friends arrive, things that we have to talk about in private."

Striding to Ichigo, she waits until Zangetsu disappears back into his wielder's soul. "Are you ready Ichigo?"

"Lead the way Merti."

Forming the magic circle beneath their feet, she lays her hand on his arm. "Be careful Ichigo, I think this will be a difficult battle for you both."

"You'll find out soon enough Merti, you're coming along with us. If you want to see what you have gotten yourself into, this will be the perfect opportunity for you to witness it firsthand."

A blinding light soon envelopes them as the Elf shudders at the thought of seeing them fight. 'If what he did was just a hint of his prowess, I can't even imagine what they are like when they go all out.'
Confused brown eyes scan the room as well the people sitting around him, Issei himself standing between the two couches in the room. On one couch sits the school's youngest idol, Koneko Tōjō, while sitting to her are the school's two newest heartthrobs, Rukia and Momo Shiba, on the opposite couch sits both the school's number two most popular idol Akeno Himejima and every fan-girls' first object of obsession, Yuuto Kiba. In front of him, sitting at her desk with her hands folded in front of her is Kuoh Academy's number one idol, Rias Gremory.

"Excuse me Gremory-san, but did you say I'm a Devil?"

Smiling at her newest Pawn, the crimson-haired princess nods her in answer to his question. "Yes Issei, you are now a Devil. Specifically, you are now the newest member of my peerage, my Pawn. I am sorry for the circumstances that led to this, but things got out…out of our control that night. If I hadn't of used my Evil Pieces, you would have surely died that night."

Unconsciously touching the spot in the middle of his stomach where his date, Yuuma Amano had speared him, Issei begins to sweat as memories of that night flood back suddenly. He is about to collapse when a set of arms on either side of him hold him up. Looking left and right, his eyes grow wide as he sees both Rukia and Momo keeping him from falling; he hadn't even seen them move, let alone feel them grabbing him.

"How did you do that? Are those the powers of a Devil?" He asks Rukia shakily.

Snorting, the violet eyed idol smirks at him. "You have a lot to learn Issei-kun, but it isn't my place to tell you what you need to know, that is your mistress Rias's job tonight. Momo and I have somewhere to go now with Koneko, so we will drop by to see you all later. Try and stay out of trouble would you? It would be best if you…kept certain habits in check."

Momo place a hand on his shoulder as she whispers to him. "Issei-kun, please take care and listen to Gremory-sama and Akeno-san. It might mean the difference between life and death." It is scary how sincere she sounds.

Koneko stares up at the new member of their peerage and shakes her head in disgust as she walks by him, muttering softly. "Hentai."

Issei stares dumbfounded as the three young women leave the room before turning back to face his new 'master' as Akeno had explained to him earlier.

"What are they trying to warn me about?"

Akeno and Rias both look at each other before Rias speaks to him. "Issei, you must understand that the man I am in a relationship with…"

"What!? You're in a relationship already!? With who!? Dammit I was so hoping…"

"Issei-kun! Quiet now!" Akeno admonishes the young man. "It would be best if you listen very carefully right now to what Rias has to say."

"Sorry."

Rias stands up from her desk and walks around until she is standing in front of her Pawn, briefly touching his face. "As I was saying Issei, Ichigo is very…" Hesitating, she looks at her Queen for help but sees Akeno shaking her head.
Sighing, Rias continues her explanation. "Ichigo is very protective of me Issei. He may not appreciate certain activities you have been associated with in the past while in my presence. I highly recommend that you curb your less than reputable habits when he is around not only me, but the rest of my peerage or any other woman that he is friends with. I need you to understand this; Ichigo grew up differently from the rest of us, so please Issei whatever you do, do not antagonize him with your, ehmm 'habits', lest you have a repeat encounter with Momo and the kendo club."

"Is Ichigo-senpai a Devil too?" He asks them warily.

This time Akeno does speak up. "I think we should give Issei-kun a crash course Buchou, it will make his time with us easier if he understands exactly what your future fiancé is capable of."

Issei is directed to sit on the couch opposite from Rias and Akeno. Rias crosses her legs, noticing his eyes widen slightly and she just knows that it will take more than one lesson about who Ichigo is and what he is capable of that her Pawn is going to be in need of. If he had just done what she thinks he was doing, both she and Akeno are going to be spending a lot of time healing the brash young man...and considering what their healing techniques entail, it will only get him beaten up again.

"Issei, Ichigo is not just any Devil; his Clan is one of the most prestigious of our families. His great-grandfather, Lord Amyntas Naberius is also known by these titles..."

Issei Hyoudou begins sweating profusely as he sits there learning about the Clan that his Senpai belongs to, however his first thought isn't about what he is hearing.

'I wonder if I can use my powers to create a harem; maybe, just maybe I can convince Buchou and Himejima-senpai...'

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Rukia, Momo, Koneko and Šōna teleport to the Great Hall according to Amyntas's instructions only to find themselves surrounded by a pack of Cerberus. The heir to the Sitri Clan quirks an eyebrow as the largest of the mammoth sized beasts approaches the four young women. Sniffing the Clan heiress first, he proceeds to sniff the white-haired Neko next, then shifting to the wide-eyed Squad Five Lieutenant before he finishes with the Squad Thirteen Lieutenant. Seemingly satisfied, the pack leader of the Cerberus sits on his haunches before bowing his three heads to them.

"Forgive me Lady Sitri, but I must verify each and every visitor to our Estate until otherwise ordered to do so. If you had arrived in any other location but here, you would be considered an intruder, and Lord Amyntas has authorized immediate attacks upon any and all intruders. So please remember to set here as your teleport destination when coming to visit your cousin."

Šōna Sitri bows back to the large canine as she speaks. "I thank you for your warning Kane; we will use the Great Hall as our destination point from now on."

The pack leader swings his head to the two Shinigami then. "I haven't met a Shinigami in a number of years. Lady Kuchiki, Lady Hinamori, a pleasure to meet two who are comrades of our young lord."

Both Shinigami bow back as well, with Momo replying. "Thank you Kane-san, I am not as close to Ichigo as Rukia is, but I do hope that I will learn more about the man that saved Soul Society and my friends. He is...he is someone I owe a debt to."
Rukia looks at her friend and nudges her. "A debt? What debt Momo?"

Smiling sadly, the black-haired Lieutenant answers her back. "If he hadn't forced Aizen to destroy his Zanpakutō, there is no telling how long my recovery would have been Rukia. Kyōka Suigetsu's illusions were very powerful, I wouldn't have been able to see the truth if it had continued to exist, but with its destruction, its illusions have no more life to cloud our minds."

Patting her friend on the back, Rukia gives her an encouraging smile. "We were all fooled Momo, even the Head-Captain and Nii-sama. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"Thanks Rukia. So where is Ichigo? I thought he would be here to meet us for his lessons."

The canine looks around the room before he turns towards the four women. "He is indisposed at the moment; it seems that he hasn't quite recovered from the sudden recovery of his memories. There was an incident this afternoon when he was meeting with Lord Amyntas's peerage; he got… carried away with his first training session with Akiko."

Rukia frowns as she hears that. Ichigo has always been impulsive when it came to his training, but never did he…

"Dammit! Where is he!?!" She shouts as she realizes what had happened.

"He is with Merti as of now Lady Kuchiki, in a place where he can fight without holding back against his Zanpakutō spirit from what I was told. Something about blowing-off some steam, if I recall the term correctly." A woman's voice says from behind the group.

Turning around, they see a woman with a dark complexion, straight black hair, and large brown eyes, but it's her legs that draw the attention of both the Shinigami women. They are not human legs, instead they look like the legs of a deer, her hooves clicking on the marble as she walks towards them.

Kane gives the new arrival a grin as he speaks to her. "Good evening Isi, may I ask how your daughter Millaray is doing?"

"Quite well Kane, thank you for your inquiry." Turning towards the four Kuoh students, she smiles as she waves them to follow her. "Ichigo and Merti should be back shortly, they had issues to work out with Ichigo's temperament. No one should fault our young Devil Lord; he hasn't had time to decompress now that he has his memories back, and for him it has barely been a day since his last memory of battle. One so young shouldn't have to carry the burdens of a war on his shoulders alone. Something that we will teach him about, now that he no longer has to do that since he is back with his family Lady Kuchiki."

Momo and Rukia share a guilty look that even Sōna and Koneko take note of. Sōna places a hand on each of their shoulders as she dips between them and whispers. "No one is blaming you Rukia, Momo, but I have heard the stories from my sister Serafall about the horrors of the Devil's Civil War. If Ichigo was exposed to similar horrors at such a young age, I'm very surprised he is still able to function as he has. In fact, I would not be surprised if he has PTSD like many human warriors do after coming back from war."

Rukia nods her head in guilt. "If I hadn't of been so stubborn and so damn focused, I might have been able to sense his Reiatsu that night, and things…"

"Things would have gone horribly wrong for your people Lady Kuchiki; even we know the story now from Lord Amyntas of what had transpired during the Winter War, except for what happened
at the end. It seems that this Urahara has kept the details of the final conflict to himself. What happened exactly has yet to be told." Isi says without looking at them.

"We don't know either." Rukia sighs out.

"Don't we? I believe not even your Head-Captain made it out of that conflict without serious injuries. Yet Ichigo survived and defeated his enemy. One must surmise as to the events that day."

Rukia and Momo both sigh, though Rukia shrugs helplessly at Isi. She knows that Ichigo was responsible for killing Aizen, thanks to confirmation from Yoruichi and Venelana, but she still has no idea how Ichigo had done so. Momo on the other hand hangs her head as she remembers the weeks after the Winter War ended, where many of the Lieutenants, including herself, and the few seated officers who took part in the battle over fake Karakura, spent days recovering their depleted Reiatsu in the Squad Four hospital. Orihime had taken care of their physical wounds easily enough, even the crippling ones, but it had put a lot of strain on her and she had to rest her healing abilities due to the extent of some of the injuries she had to heal that day. At that time, Momo hadn't paid much attention to Ichigo's absence, only remembering Ichigo's close friends worrying as to where he was. It wasn't until a month later that his 'fate' was announced by the Head-Captain and Central Forty-Six, a fate that many Shinigami had trouble believing, but they were not allowed to question the validity of the announcement. Anyone who broached the subject was warned the first time to let it go or be branded a traitor, and a second warning wasn't necessary after that. Looking at her fellow Lieutenant, she sees Rukia's brows scrunched in deep thought.

Soon, the group arrives at another room where many members of the two peerages have gathered together. Ichigo's uncle is standing on the balcony overlooking the many hot springs, a glass of wine in his hand. Isi calls out a greeting towards them, and many of them stop chatting amongst themselves to call back their own greetings to her.

"May I introduce Lieutenant Rukia Kuchiki of Squad Thirteen and Lieutenant Momo Hinamori of Squad Five? They are Ichigo Naberius's fellow Shinigami and comrades from his battles during the Winter War."

Both women bow to the assembled group before Isi begins the introductions of the gathered Naberius Devils.

"I will start with Lord Amyntas peerage first. His Queen, Akiko Kimura, and her husband, Daiki Kimura, who is the sole Rook of the peerage. His sole Knight, Edmund Armistead, and his wife Remei Armistead, who is also a Bishop of the peerage. His other Bishop, Aisling Coghlan, and lastly his two mated griffin Pawns, Charis, the female and Nikias, the male."

"Wow, are you all related to each other?" Momo says in wonder.

Laughter answers her question as Isi steps in front of a separate group. "You could say that Lady Hinamori. I would now like to introduce you to the peerage of Lord Vincent Naberius, Ichigo's late grandfather. We stayed because we loved and respected our King and Queen, they were our precious friends, and so their descendants are just as precious to us. I would first like you to meet my husband and fellow Bishop Carles Armistead; our parents are Edmund and Remei, my in-laws. Our sole Knight is Conor O'Madaihan who is married to Hanako, who is the daughter of Akiko and Daiki; Hanako is also our first Rook. Our second Rook is Akio Kawaguchi, who isn't here now since he is tending to the Kushanāda today. Our two sphinx Pawns are Donkor, a male Egyptian Sphinx, and Euphrasia, a female Greek Sphinx."

Rukia looks over the room in stunned silence before she voices her thoughts out loud. "He is so screwed now."
Before anyone can ask what she means, a young female Cerberus comes crashing into the room. "Lord Amyntas! Lord Amyntas!"

"Yes, what's wrong Nadine?"

The female canine pants out. "Quick! Merti has returned with Lord Ichigo; he is unconscious and bleeding heavily! He needs help!"

Rukia disappears with Momo right behind her, soon the members of both peerages locate their presence with Ichigo and teleport to where the young Devil is now located. Amyntas puts his glass of wine down before he too teleports to his great-grandson's location.

'I hope you worked things out Ichigo, I'll never forgive myself if something happens to you or to the twins. Not after accepting that I finally have family I can be with.'

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Merti is pacing next to the body of the bleeding and heavily injured Ichigo, replaying the spar, as he called it, with Zangetsu over and over in her mind. She is, to put it simply, stunned by the sheer ferocity at which Ichigo and Zangetsu had gone at each other during their battle. No quarter was given or expected between the two titans of battle from what she could see. Zangetsu took the early advantage, egging on his wielder with taunts and insults while Ichigo responded in kind with deadly silence and a frozen mask of emotionless expression on his face. At first they only exchanged simple blows, but somewhere along the line his Zanpakutō had suddenly gotten furious and accused Ichigo of holding back. Then the Hollow began to insult Ichigo's abilities to protect his sisters and his friends.

The fight became deadly almost immediately after that, Ichigo no longer holding back and making a serious attempt to maim if not kill his Hollow spirit. Each time they traded vicious blows, Zangetsu's expression became more and more joyful, but he still kept on pushing his Shinigami partner with more and more vicious taunts and accusations as their battle raged on. It was near the end that she felt truly fearful of her new charge's life, when both Ichigo and Zangetsu donned the armor of the Naberius clan at the same time. Ichigo's light-eating black armor a perfect opposite of Zangetsu's pristine white armor, and the clash between the two armored titans was the culmination of their fight. She had felt Lord Amyntas battling at his zenith before, but she could already tell that the two powerhouses battling before her would be far more monstrous than that in the future. Her only thought as she watched Ichigo's body fall to the ground unconscious with a smiling Zangetsu standing over him was what he would be like when he gained a real Zanpakutō? And the last thing Zangetsu said before retreating back to Ichigo's inner-world was an amusing observation, amusing to her at least.

"Make sure the Queen knows he needed this Merti. Just let him rest and he will be fine by the morning, I'll speed up his healing when I get back. See ya toots."

Shaking her head in exasperation, she had sent the young daughter of Kane to get help with moving Ichigo to his room while she continued to watch over him, and she can see his wounds healing at an astonishing rate. Her thoughts are interrupted by the sudden arrival of two Shinigami women in the room with her.

"Ichigo!" Rukia is on her knees next to Ichigo, looking over his wounds as her hands begin to glow green with Kaidō.

"What happened to him Merti-san?" Momo says as she too begins to use Kaidō on Ichigo.
"He and his Zanpakutō were sparring."

Rukia looks up at the stoic Elfin woman with a look of incredible disbelief. "This is from a spar? He looks like he just fought a battle by the wounds he has. We might have to get Orihime if…"

"Zangetsu said he will be healed by the morning, so I believe you should just concentrate on stopping the bleeding for now Lady Rukia."

The petite Shinigami huffs as she shifts her attention back to the young man lying on the floor, all the while uttering soft curses and promises of making him pay dearly for scaring her like that again, all of which is heard by the members of both peerages who had arrived shortly after her. Momo keeps shaking her head at her friend's continuing curses, though an occasional giggle escapes her at the more violent examples of future inflictions on Ichigo that Rukia comes up with. Soon the two Lieutenants have the bleeding stopped, and after checking his almost healed wounds, they agreed that he can be moved back to his room. Conor and Carles lift the softly breathing Devil up, and they follow behind Merti as she leads them to Ichigo's room. Rukia, Momo and the others trail behind them, many of them making quiet observations as to the wounds they had seen on Ichigo's body before they healed up on their own.

"Did you see the large burn on his chest; it was like looking at a piece of leather that sat in the sun for years."

"I was worried about the gouge in his shoulder; it looked like it was stopped by his bones. I thought he had the ability to harden his skin like armor?"

"You mean Hierro, an ability those Espada Hollows have, right Daiki?"

The white-haired man nods in agreement. "Yes, it means steel skin if I remember right. But I'm not sure if he has to be in his Hollow form to use it though?"

"Hollow form?" His wife asks as she walks beside him.

Many of the two peerages turn and look at Rukia and Momo, the Squad Five Lieutenant also turning to look at Rukia in confusion. Rukia however is frowning as she considers their question.

"I didn't see it personally, but Orihime and Uryū did. Kisuke and Goat-Face might have a better idea of his Hollow form when we gather with the rest of his family and our friends."

Isi looks at the petite Shinigami and asks the question that is on everyone's mind. "Who is Goat-Face?"

Rukia snorts her answer. "Ichigo's dad."

Looks of stunned shock greet the Shinigami heiress. "What!? I didn't start calling him that! Ichigo and Karin did! I just call him that because he acts like an overgrown child most of the time, and he's an imbecile as well when it comes to how he treats Ichigo. You don't believe me? Wait until you meet him, then you'll understand."

Merti shakes her head as she knows that the raven-haired Lieutenant isn't exaggerating, not after the stories she has heard from Ichigo himself during one of their talks after breakfast. She grins inwardly as she recounts the ambush wakeup calls that Ichigo's father had tried to wake him with every day, even when there was no school that day. Ichigo's face always shifted into one of annoyance every time he talked about his 'insane jackass of a father'. Seeing the door to his room already being held open by another maid of the Estate, she enters first and quickly scans the room for any possible threats, then steps aside to let Conor and Carles in. She stops when the two men
place Ichigo on his bed, then look at each other and then Merti before Conor asks in his Irish brogue.

"Who's gonna undress him?"

Before she can answer, the women of the two peerages immediately clamor over who has the rights to do so. Rukia's bright red face doesn't match the wide-eyes of her fellow Shinigami who is smiling as she looks over the unconscious man.

"Momo, what are you doing? We can't be in here when they undress him!"

The Squad Five Lieutenant huffs out at her teammate. "I'm not the one who is getting married to Renji, you are. So there is no reason I can't stay and help, just in case his wounds open up I can stop them from bleeding again."

"You...you...Oh no you don't Hinamori! I know what you are up to; you want details for the Shinigami Women's Association! You want a scoop on the Berry! Well if you're staying, so am I!"

"All of you but Merti and myself are leaving." A very familiar voice says from behind everyone. The two petite Shinigami leap aside as Yoruichi steps in-between them.

"Yoruichi! I thought you were..."

"I was, and I will be soon again. I just wanted to check on Ichigo, but seeing that something has happened, I think it would be best if I stay until his nursemaid gets here, which should be soon." The former Captain says as she strokes Ichigo's sweat-matted hair.

"I agree. Move along everyone. Yoruichi and I have to tend to Ichigo and with of you standing in the way..."

Laughter greets the Elfin woman's declaration. "We know, we know Merti. He's your charge."

Soon the group of Devils and two disappointed Lieutenants leave the room. Golden eyes shift to stare at the emerald ones on the other side of the bed.

"How bad was it?"

"Is it true that when he gets his Zanpakutō, his power will be even greater?"

"You have no idea." Yoruichi says as she starts to strip the bloody clothes off the now unmarked body of her student. "It will take a miracle if he is ever to return to the World of the Living."

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Watching her Pawn leave for his first night of handing out flyers, Rias turns to her Queen. "Are you sure you and Yuuto can handle him for a few weeks?"

"Yes Buchou, now go. I know you are going through withdrawal of a strawberry nature." Akeno says with a sly grin.

Not even bothering to hide it anymore, Rias grins as she picks up her bags. "Thank you Akeno. I know you must have feelings for him."

"I won't stop teasing him Rias, but I know who he has decided on." The thunder-priestess says off-handedly.
"You know, he does have friends we have yet to meet Akeno."

Smiling suddenly, the Queen sends a wink to her mistress. "You best go Rias; I have a feeling you are going to be in for a hard few days. We will come when we are sure Issei-kun is ready."

"Take care of him Akeno; I don't think we have heard the last of those Fallen Angels. Call me if you need to."

Bowing to her King, Akeno moves her along. "Get going Buchou, I'll handle things just fine."

"See you soon Akeno." Rias cast her magic and soon she finds herself in the Great Dome where she finds herself surrounded by numerous Cerberus.

"Kane, is everything okay?" Rias says to the pack leader.

"Ah, Lady Rias, it's nice to see you again so soon."

"Is Ichigo around?" She sees the guardians of the Naberius Estate stiffen with tension at her question. "Did something happen to Ichigo?"

"You should go straight to Lord Ichigo's room Lady Rias; I believe Merti and Lady Yoruichi are watching over him."

Dropping her bags, Rias runs straight for the room she shares with her orange-haired boyfriend. Not even stopping to exchange greetings with anyone, she rushes until she comes to the hallway in front of her door. Standing outside are the members of both peerages and the Shinigami women.

"What happened!?"

Rukia pushes herself off the wall and walks up the slightly panting Devil. "He's okay Rias. He and Zangetsu got carried away in their spar this evening. Merti and Yoruichi are tending to him right now, so…"

"Zangetsu? Why would he do this to him? How can a spirit even hurt Ichigo?"

"It's possible because Ichigo has his Bankai; he is able to bring his Zanpakutō spirit into the material world, it's how Bankai is achieved actually, by defeating your Zanpakutō in the real world. As I was trying to say, Ichigo and Zangetsu had a spar to try and help Ichigo alleviate some of his aggression and stress before he meets with his family and friends. None of us had thought about his state of mind earlier, that he had only just regained his true memories so when he was provoked his body and mind immediately reverted to his last state of mind, that of war. He…" Rukia pauses as she looks at the Queen of Ichigo's great-grandfather's peerage, only to get a small nod from her.

"He was going to seriously wound Akiko-san with a Bala, a very dense Bala."

Rias herself turns to see the Queen of the Amyntas's peerage, the Kitsune looking sheepish and somewhat regretful. "I got a little carried away myself Rias-sama, I…we thought we could jump right into it with him, but as Rukia-san said, we had no idea of his condition until he…he almost…"

"He wasn't himself Rias-sama, so please go easy on him. He is going to need some time to adjust to a normal lifestyle again, a much quieter atmosphere if possible. Also, we should see about getting him to see a therapist, preferably a Devil one, if we can convince him to do so. He'd eventually need to see one anyways after he starts visiting the Skeleton Tower. Heck, we all see one regularly, except for the kids. We only let those who reach the age of maturity for their race enter the Tower once they have been granted their Hell Chains. Ichigo-sama himself is almost eighteen and quite
mature for his age, as one must be to fight in a war. We'll probably need your help convincing him
to visit a therapist when we get the chance to talk to him about it Rias-sama." Daiki says as he
holds his wife.

"The Naberius clan has a saying about the Skeleton Tower; 'When you gaze long into the abyss,
the abyss gazes back at you.'" Akiko says with a shudder and a haunted look in her grey eyes,
which causes Daiki to place a kiss on her forehead and hug her a little tighter in an attempt to
comfort her.

Nodding in understanding, Rias approaches the door and takes a deep breath before she opens it
carefully. Inside, she sees Ichigo lying on their bed, blankets up to his waist, exposing his
unclothed upper body and arms. Although she doesn't see any injuries on him, his skin is pale and
his eyes are closed. Yoruichi is sitting in a chair, while Merti sits on the other side of the bed, both
women turning to see who had entered. As Rias enters the room, Merti stands before giving a
slight bow of the head.

"Lady Rias."

"Merti, is he…okay?" Rias fights the urge to launch herself onto the bed.

"He's gonna be fine Rias, his injuries are all healed and he's just recovering from the healing.
Although this was a little worse than normal, he'll be up soon enough. Before you get upset or bent
out-of-shape however, know that this was necessary for him. Ichigo is still living with a wartime
mentality; he hasn't had time to come to terms with the fact that the Winter War is over. For us, it
was over a year ago; for him, it literally just ended days ago."

A white copy of Ichigo suddenly appears in the room. "She's right Queen, King hasn't had time
to adjust to peace yet. That is why we had a go at it today, he needed to get his rage,
frustrations, his pent-up emotions out of his system, and I was the perfect person for him to
vent it on. So I'd appreciate it if you took it easy on him and helped him as much as you can
Rias. He...we need you to keep him calm for the next few days, especially since we have his
family coming here tomorrow. I don't want him to react out of instinct when the twins are
here. Goat-Face is allowable, he can defend himself from Ichigo if things go pear shaped, but
none of the girls can. The one called Tatsuki is also one you need to keep a close eye on; she
might have a bone to pick with King, and she usually doesn't think before she acts. I gotta get
back and continue healing him; he's got to look pretty for the girls, so the surface injuries are
gone, but the deeper wounds will take some more time to heal." The Zanpakutō then disappears
again, leaving behind three women staring at the place he previously occupied.

"Well that was insightful." Merti finally says with a raised eyebrow.

Turning to the youngest woman in the room, Yoruichi stretches out before she grins at the
 crimson-haired princess. "Well, I have to gather the horde for tomorrow. You and the others should
get plenty of rest as well, the next few days will be...well, I don't know how it's gonna go to be
honest." Her expression falls slightly, as if remembering something else, but she simply gets up
without saying another word.

The former Shinigami Captain slips out of the room to a chorus of questions; just as the door closes
however, they hear Rukia shouting that it wasn't fair that Yoruichi was the one to...

Rias blinks at the door after it cuts off the statement. 'Did I hear that correctly?' She turns to look at
the other female occupant of the room.
"Merti, is what Rukia said true? Did you and Yoruichi undress him?"

Merti smiles at how possessive the Gremory heiress's voice sounds, but wisely keeps her tone as business-like as possible. "We had no choice Lady Rias, his clothes were almost destroyed and his body was covered in blood. Yoruichi needed my help and since she has already seen him nude, it wouldn't bother her as it might have with his other two female friends. I apologize if I have overstepped my boundaries Lady Rias, but it was an urgent situation and we did have to tend to his injuries quickly."

Huffing out at the sound explanation, Rias can only sigh as she replies. "No, it's okay Merti. If it was to take care of his wounds, I really can't fault you or Yoruichi for that."

Merti watches as the young woman makes her way over to the bed and gently sits down, then moves to lie down next to Ichigo. Seeing that she is no longer needed, the Elfin woman gets up and moves for the door until Rias stops her.

"Merti, can you tell everyone else we are resting? And that we will see them at dinner if Ichigo feels up to it?"

"Of course Lady Rias, is there anything I can get you before then? Tea or some refreshments perhaps?"

"No, I'll be fine until then. Thank you Merti."

Walking out the door, Merti sees that the two peerages have mostly dispersed except for Akiko and Daiki along with both the Shinigami women.

"How is he?" Momo speaks up immediately.

"He is asleep Momo, but his Zanpakutō says he will be fine by morning. I'm afraid your lessons will have to wait a few days however."

"As long as the Carrot is fine, it's okay if we skip a few days. Come on Momo, we got to do some studying tonight, that History test is next week and I want to go over our notes."

"You took notes?"

"Yes, didn't you?"

"No, I…I didn't think we were really going to blend in that much Rukia." Momo squeaks out.

Rukia shakes her head in disbelief, pulling her fellow Lieutenant along. "Momo, first rule, do everything like the humans and you won't stand out as much or be singled out for being different. When we get to our room, we'll study and I'll show you how to take notes."

"Oh…oh okay. Good night Merti-san, Akiko-san, Daiki-san."

The five exchange farewells, Akiko and Daiki deciding to follow the two to their room since it is in the same direction. Merti stands in the seemingly empty hallway before turning to look behind her. Standing behind her is Amyntas, who is looking at the closed door pensively.

"My Lord?" She asks with a hint of curiosity.

"Is my…Is Ichigo well?"

For the first time, Merti sees the effects of time on her Lord; he no longer has that youthful and...
exuberant appearance, now he looks aged and worn-out instead.

"He will recover quickly Lord Amyntas, Yoruichi and Zangetsu both assure me that his recovery will be finished by morning."

The older man sighs. "Walk with me Merti, I wish to discuss his training with you."

"Me, my Lord? I thought it was to be handled by yours and Vincent-sama's peerages?"

"It will be, but I want you to teach him Kiku's magic Merti."

She stiffens. "I… I can't My Lord, please don't ask that of me."

"Merti, I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it would be of use to him, but this afternoon showed me differently. I want you to teach him Kiku's magic because it's his birthright, she was a Quincy, and he has the potential of using it. I know she showed you how to, and I know you still practice the katas of her forms in private. Teach him Merti, please."

The Elf looks uncomfortable, but she finally relents. "Yes Lord Amyntas. I will show him the way, but I don't know if it will even work."

"If anyone can use it, it will be Ichigo and his sisters Merti. No one else has wielded that magic since her death, if that magic will mean the difference between winning and losing, then I want them to have that edge."

"Of course Lord Amyntas, I will teach him after he sees his family tomorrow."

"I miss them Merti, my wife, my son, my daughter-in-law. Not a day goes by that I don't think about that night. I should have listened to you. I didn't want to overwhelm Kiku's family, but not listening to you caused that night to end in disaster."

"We all made mistakes that night Lord Amyntas, but it is in the past. Now... now, we have a future to look forward to. Ichigo will succeed you one day, and I will be at his side as I was at Kiku's and Vincent's. I won't fail them a second time."

"Nor will I Merti. Come, we have to make arrangements for our guests. I think after tomorrow's meeting, our Clan will be changed forever."

"I am looking forward to this 'morning ritual' I heard so much of from Ichigo. I wonder what Ichigo will do if Rias is with him?" Merti queries.

"Best prepare a hot spring for Isshin; if the stories are true, Ichigo is going to put him through a couple of walls at least."

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The dinner table has a very lively atmosphere hanging over it as one of the two male adults watches the teens and his daughters laughing and joking as they eat dinner. Isshin had a long talk yesterday with the only other parent with knowledge of the afterlife about his son's required attendance at the dinner meeting tomorrow, one that Ryūken himself had tried and failed to get out of, but the two Devils that visited him earlier had made that attempt futile. Now Isshin is grinning at the other end of the now extended table, where the white-haired Quincy sits with a hint of both annoyance and amusement by the stories he is finally getting to hear from his son's classmates. Uryū, sitting by his side, at first sits with a stone-cold face, until both Yuzu and Orihime get him talking about the handicraft club's upcoming fair and his role in it. Soon the spectacle-wearing young man is deeply
engrossed with his sewing tips and other ideas he is discussing with the two adoptive sisters, completely oblivious to the bemused looks his father is giving him.

On the other side of the table, Tatsuki and Karin are talking about their training and the ways they have tried to increase both their strength and stamina. Isshin wants to hit himself for not doing this much sooner, but sometimes one has to make mistakes in order to learn some very valuable lessons. It had almost cost him not only his son, but his daughters as well. Now he has to tell them the reason for this little dinner party that Yuzu and Orihime had worked hard to prepare since this afternoon.

Tapping his teacup, he gains everyone's attention. Once everyone's eyes are on him, he makes the hardest announcement he has ever had to make in his life.

"I want to thank each of you for being here. Especially my newest daughter and her best friend, Chad, you and Uryū are good friends of not only my daughters but of Ichigo as well. Which… which makes what I'm about to say very hard for you to understand, but I want you to know that I had to do it to keep each of you safe. Kisuke and I…we didn't tell you the truth about Ichigo."

Yuzu's eyes get wide and watery as she looks at her father. "Daddy, what do you mean...you lied about Ichi-nii?"

Getting up and dropping before his daughter, he gently takes her upper-arms and holds them before him. "Yuzu, the truth is...your…your brother is alive and well. I…"

'SLAP!'

"YOU LIED ABOUT ICHI-NII! HOW COULD YOU!? WHERE IS HE DADDY!? WHERE IS ICHI-NII!?"

Spying the grin hidden by Ryūken's folded hands, Isshin sends a glare at his former cousin-in-law while rubbing the spot his youngest had hit him. Frowning, he looks around the table and sees that a few others are also getting pretty pissed at him; knowing that tomorrow is going to be the worst of the beatings however, he begins to tell them the truth as to what had happened that day with Aizen and the subsequent events afterwards.

When he finishes the tale, he is getting shocked glares not only from his daughters, all three of them, but Ichigo's closest friends as well, each of them stunned by the news that they had been targeted by Central Forty-Six in an attempt to force Ichigo to submit to his own execution.

"We…we were going to be executed if they thought we aided Ichigo?" The shocked voice of Chad breaks the silence.

'I'm sorry Chad, but yes. We…I made the decision on my own to keep all of you safe. My daughters' lives and yours made my choice for me. I never thought they would fear Ichigo so much as to order his execution, but they did, and they threatened to execute anyone they thought might have helped him. His family, his friends, anyone who was connected to him, they threatened. Luckily Kisuke was able to keep Ichigo hidden and safe until he came up with a solution to save him. One that involves Masaki's side of the family."

"Mom's family? We have family Goat-Face?" Karin asks in astonishment.

Ryūken answers for the elder Kurosaki. "Yes, indeed you do Karin-chan. I myself wasn't aware of it when I first met your mother. She was my cousin and I had no idea that she had any other family. As far as anyone of us knew, she was an orphan from birth, her parents and family died
mysteriously, but now we know she had one surviving relative on her father's side of her family that we are to meet tomorrow."

However, Yuzu isn't deterred by the explanation and other conversations; she keeps her glare on her now sweating father. "Where is he Daddy? I won't ask again."

Isshin can't help the chuckle that escapes, nor can he avoid another slap that reminds him that he still has a problem literally sitting in front of him.

"Okay! Okay Yuzu! Stop hitting Daddy! Just like your brother and sister."

"Good! Now tell me! Where is Ichi-nii!?"

"I can't tell you." He intercepts her newest swing almost gently. "Yuzu, I can't tell you because I don't know where Ichigo is exactly, which is why someone who does know where he is, is coming to get us tomorrow and then they'll take all of us to him, hopefully without Central Forty-Six finding out."

The entire room of teens and preteens explode at the same time with questions and demands. Isshin lets it wash over him until he whistles for them to quiet down.

"Listen! Listen to me okay!? I know you want explanations, but it has to wait until tomorrow. The reason why is because there are others who have to explain things to all of you, including Ichigo. So, that is why we are all here tonight, because tomorrow all of us and everyone at the shouten is going to where Ichigo is."

Yuzu's eyes narrow as she stares at her father. "I want to see him now!"

"Baby, we can't because it…it's complicated. I have no way of getting us to him now. We have to wait for our guide tomorrow. Please Yuzu, I need you to wait less than a day. For Daddy and Ichigo, can you wait until morning?"

Crossing her arms under her chest, she stares at him for a few long minutes; Isshin can feel the sweat dripping down his head. He hasn't faced a seriously mad woman like this since Masaki; Yuzu is doing a good job imitating her mother as she silently glares at him.

"Fine, but if I don't see Ichi-nii tomorrow, you're on your own for dinner for the rest of your life Goat-Face."

"Damn Goat-Face, you best deliver on your promise, I think Yuzu is serious this time." Karin snidely injects.

Looking around the table, he sees that the others have questions still, but his promise at least gives him one more day before he has to tell them the truth himself, his and Ryūken's history is already going to be a dangerous subject. The deaths of both Masaki and Kanae are going to come out tomorrow and their two sons are not going to take it well. Neither will the twins for that matter. Sighing, he stands up and for the first time in their lives, Karin and Yuzu see their father takes a drink of the sake that Ryūken had set out in front of him.

"I've already gotten you excused from school until next week, all of you. I want you to stay with Ichigo as much as you can when we get there, but I think it's only fair to tell you guys, he isn't quite himself anymore, he has changed."

"How so Otou-san?" Orihime finally speaks up.
Isshin smiles sadly at his third daughter. "He has changed according to..."

"Me." The were-cat says as she enters the room.

The golden-eyed woman is greeted by a chorus of voices calling her name as she makes her way to the closest saucer of sake. "Hey kids, Isshin, you too Ryūken. How are you guys doing?"

"Is it true Yoruichi? We're going to see Ichigo tomorrow?" Karin blurts out.

Yuzu looks at her sister in shock. "Did you know about this Karin?"

Swallowing hard, the black-haired twin nods to her sister. "I'm sorry Yuzu, I really am. I had to promise Yoruichi not to say a word until we were sure we would get to see him."

Yuzu looks around the table, before standing up suddenly. Not saying a word, she stalks out of the room and up the stairs. Yoruichi sighs as she watches the brown-haired twin stomp up the stairs, turning to Isshin, she places a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll take care of it. You guys have done enough it seems." She then leaves the table and quietly makes her way upstairs after the fair-haired twin.

Tatsuki nearly coughs as she downs her sake. "Well Goat-Face, you best deliver on your promise, or you and a few others, me included are in deep shit tomorrow."

Orihime sips her own sake before she agrees. "We all made mistakes Suki, I just hope she can forgive us."

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Yuzu keeps her back to the door after hearing someone knocking on it.

"Go away." She mumbles softly, as she tries hard to keep her tears from falling.

However, the person on the other side of the door ignores her and comes in anyways. Yuzu doesn't move when she feels the weight of the person depressing her bed when they sit down beside her. For a few minutes, silence reigns over the room until a woman's voice speaks to her.

"I'm not so good with talking to kids Yuzu, so forgive me if I blunder through this."

Sniffling, Yuzu grunts to her. "I'm not in the forgiving mood...miss?"

"Sorry, but I guess this is the first time we have formally met. I am Yoruichi Shihōin; I'm a friend of your Dad's and more importantly, a friend of your brother. He is my Deshi after all."

Tilting her head over her shoulder, Yuzu looks up at the pair of golden-eyes that the woman has as she looks down at her calmly. Rolling over until she is on her side, she hoarsely asks. "You're Ichinii's Sensei? I don't remember him ever talking about you Shihōin-san."

Leaning backwards onto her hands, Yoruichi smiles while looking across the room. "I'm like your brother and father Yuzu, I'm a Shinigami. As is Rukia."

"Rukia-nee was a Shinigami too? I thought it was just Dad and Ichigo."

"You are part Shinigami too Yuzu, how do you think you can see and talk to me now?"

The brown-haired twin's eyes get wide as she gapes at the woman on her bed. "You are a spirit?"
"You could say that. I was born in Soul Society, just like Isshin and our friends, Kisuke and Tessai. We weren't born like you, Karin or Ichigo."

"Me, Karin and Ichigo? I don't understand Shihōin-san."

Turning her head until she can look into the pre-teen's eyes, Yoruichi gently touches Yuzu's hand. "Your mother, Masaki, was human when she married your father. Isshin has a special body we call a Gigai that lets him stay in the World of the Living. Only you, Karin and Ichigo have human bodies out of all the Shinigami alive today. No other human has the power you three have, and then some." She ends with a chuckle.

"But that doesn't explain why Ichigo isn't home. Why did he leave me and Karin? Did we do something wrong or doesn't he love us anymore Shihōin-san?" Yuzu shifts suddenly.

Seeing the small frown and look of concentration on the older woman's face, Yuzu waits patiently, hoping for an answer. She is still shocked that the two people closest to her have been hiding something so important about Ichigo from her all this while, and she doesn't know what she will do if this woman chooses to avoid her question as well. Fortunately for her, she doesn't have to wait long before the woman speaks to her again.

"Yuzu, all men make mistakes with the best intentions in mind. Your father is no different than anyone else, and he had to face a choice, a terrible choice. Keep his family alive, but be on the run for however many decades, or centuries before the assassins find all of you. Or sacrifice his only son, so he could save his daughters and his son's best friends. He knew Ichigo would never forgive him if he did not pick the second choice." Yoruichi sighs as she turns to face Yuzu fully.

"Your dad did the best he could for you and your sisters Yuzu. He gave your brother a fighting chance while keeping all of you safe. We shouldn't have kept it from you, but we didn't want to get your hopes up and then see them dashed because we...well we screwed up a few times already with our own problems. The same problems that eventually dragged your brother into our world, and into our war. I'm sorry for everything that happened to Ichigo, Yuzu, but your brother is perhaps one of the bravest and most courageous young men I have ever known. You should be proud of him."

"I am proud of Ichi-nii, I always will be proud of my brother. I just miss him Shihōin-san; I just want my brother to come home to where he belongs." Yuzu cries as she wipes her eyes.

Yoruichi drags the young girl into her arms. "You'll see him tomorrow, I promise you Yuzu. I know because he wants to see you and Karin very much. So why don't we take a bath, get you cleaned up, and get some sleep, okay Yuzu?"

"Okay Shihōin-san. But...I'm still mad at them."

"Of course you are, but don't be too hard on them, they are hurting too."

"I know, but...but it's...I guess I'm mad that Karin knew but she didn't tell me."

"Well, I'll explain a few things to you in the bath and then in the morning you can decide how you want to handle it."

"I guess that's fair enough. But I have one question for you."

"What would that be?"

"Did you own a cat named Yoruichi? I know I heard Ichi-nii and Rukia-nee talk about a 'damn cat'
named Yoruichi a few times."

"Oh, really now? Well I guess I'll have to mention that to them when we see them tomorrow..."

"Them? You mean..."

"Yes, your Rukia-nee is with your brother, she didn't know either Yuzu, but don't worry, she's keeping him in line already."

"Well, someone has to keep him out of trouble."

"You'll be surprised by who is looking out for him now. Come on, bath time."

"Okay."

Yoruichi watches as the young girl crawls out of her bed and gathers her bath items. When she is ready, she waits for the former Captain to follow her. As they walk out of the bedroom, Yuzu turns to the older woman and makes a comment that has the Shihōin princess holding in her laughter.

"Are you sure you don't mind taking a bath with me?"

"I don't have a problem with it Yuzu, after all I took a few baths with Ichigo not too long ago."

"ICHI-NII DID WHAT!?!"

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Chocolate-brown eyes open slowly, his eyes adjusting to the darkened room that he wakes up to.

'Damn, I guess we over did it Zangetsu.'

A very tired sounding Zanpakutō answers him back. "We had to do something about your aggression King, couldn't have ya going off the handle with the twins around, could we?"

'I guess I should thank you, but knowing you, you'd see it a sign of weakness.'

"Back then yeah, I would've. But things are different now Ichigo, I know who I am and what I am now. I'll still get a little homicidal in battle, but I know what you won't do or what line not to cross. So snuggle with the Queen and get some more sleep, we both need it."

'Queen?'

"God, sometimes you are dense King, who do you think is lying on top of you right now?"

'...?...'

'...!...'

'Oh....'

"Duh!"

'Sorry...'

He feels his Zanpakutō shake his head as he disappears back into his inner-world, soon he is alone with his thoughts as he looks down at the familiar crimson hair that is fanned out across his chest.
Shifting until she is lying in the curve of his body, he pulls the still clothed young woman into his arms.

"I love you Rias."

"I love you Ichigo." She responds sleepily.

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Blue eyes open slowly as the light shines through the partially opened window; rubbing her eyes, she finds herself alone in their bed. Sitting up, she sees that he isn't in the room or in the bathroom either. Getting out of bed, her stocking-clad feet touch the floor as she stretches her arms above her head. She makes her way over to the door, when it is suddenly opened and the very person she is missing enters the room, carrying a tray with two covered plates.

"Ichigo?"

"Come back to bed with me Rias, we're eating in today."

Following his lead, she makes her way back to the bed, where Ichigo sits down and pats the sheets opposite of him. Taking the covers off the plates, she sees he stacked them high with waffles and has several types of cut-up fruit and syrups lining the tray as well as two cups of tea. Handing her a plate, he hovers over the dressings waiting for her to pick what she wants. Pointing at the blueberries, she watches as he scoops the berries, swimming in sugary liquid, and ladles them on top of her breakfast. She then waits for him to pour what looks like boysenberries on his before the two utter their thanks.

Both eat silently for a while before she finally breaks it with a question.

"Are you okay Ichigo?"

"Better than yesterday Rias. I guess you know what happened?"

Nodding as she places another bite in her mouth, she looks to see him grimacing. "I…I guess I owe Akiko-san an apology when I see her. I could have injured her badly if that Bala had actually hit her. Thankfully, Zangetsu and I got things handled yesterday."

"How did you do that Ichigo?"

"He kicked my ass is what he did. Made me fight until I had nothing to fight for, made me see that it was over and it was time to give it a break. Only thing he wants me to do is rest for the next few days and then I'll be allowed to train again. Nothing strenuous at first, just enough to start getting back into shape is all he wants from me. Didn't know how strict he could be until yesterday." Ichigo finishes with a laugh.

Rias shakes her head as she smiles. Picking up her tea, she makes an observation, one that she sees makes him smile. "You and I need a bath Ichigo. So after we eat, you want to join me?"

"I'd love to Rias."

Rias rushes through her breakfast as quickly as she can, after waiting for him to finish, she literally drags her Devil boyfriend into the bathroom, stripping as she goes. She turns the water on and as she waits for it to heat up, she almost jumps when a very hard muscled body encircles her suddenly. Turning in his arms, she blushes when she realizes what is happening.
"Ichigo…"

"Shhh Rias, nothing’s going to happen. I just wanted to hold you."

"You've never been so forward before."

"That was before Rias, but if I'm going to marry you, I think we should get used to taking showers together, right?"

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulls him down to her level. "I would have to agree with you Ichigo; it is only natural after all."

Dropping his head the rest of the way, he captures her lips as the steam rises around them.

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The Kurosaki dining room table, for the first time in years, is empty of breakfast. Isshin and Karin are both looking towards the kitchen, where everyone can smell food being cooked. However, it's the sound of two giggling females that has the eldest Kurosaki muttering under his breath about back-stabbing cats and foolish old farts for putting him in this position. Karin, having heard enough, slaps her father on the back of the head.

Whispering angrily to her father, she places the blame squarely on his shoulders. "This is your fault Goat-Face, yours and Kisuke-san’s, now shut up and deal with it. Get out and buy us something to eat, I'm not going to see Ichigo on a empty stomach."

Sighing, he gets up and walks towards the door when he is saved. "Okay, I guess I've had my revenge, but I'm warning each of you, if you ever keep anything about Ichi-nii from me again, I will carry out my threat. You will live off take-away for the rest of your lives. Now come and eat."

A chorus of 'sorry' answers the true Kurosaki household head as each of the teens jump up and rush to the kitchen for food, all except Isshin and Kisuke. Putting his hand out, Kisuke smirks as Isshin places a few hundred yen coins in his hands.

"Never doubt the power of the Shihōin Princess Isshin. I've never won a bet, when betting against her, not once."

"I wonder what she said to Yuzu last night. They were in the bath for at least an hour. It's not fair really, you know?"

"What's not fair Isshin?"

"Two out of three of my children have seen the Goddess of Flash naked." Isshin grins madly then.

Face-palming, Kisuke wonders exactly how the man standing next to him, became a Captain of the Gotei Thirteen. He wonders if he should tell him that Yoruichi has taken a bath with all three of his kids, Karin is her student along with Tatsuki on the days she comes back to the shouten. Deciding that the risk of an embarrassing situation occurring is too high, he lets it go, for now. His thoughts are cut-off when someone begins knocking at the front door, signaling the meeting that he and Isshin have been dreading since Yoruichi informed them that Ichigo regained his memories. Orihime is the one who answers the door.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello. Is Isshin Kurosaki at home?" Kisuke hears a young female voice ask.
Curious, he looks around the corner and sees a beautiful and a very buxom black-haired teen standing at the door. She wears a Kuoh Academy uniform but it's her energy that denotes that she is a Devil; if he is judging her correctly, she is surprisingly strong for someone of her age, although he senses much of her potential is untapped. Snapping open his fan, he casually walks over to the door as Orihime calls for Isshin.

"Otou-san! Otou-san! There's someone at the door for you."

"Whb Ist Ite!?" Isshin had somehow found a plate to steal bacon off from.

"Stop yelling with your mouth stuffed!" A heavy punch sounds out. "And that's for stealing my last strip of bacon!"

Kisuke notices the girl staring at him as she waits at the door. As he walks towards her, she begins to smile, a smile that instantly puts even Kisuke on edge.

"Kisuke Urahara, I was warned about you from Ichigo. He told me if you tried anything, I was allowed to use any means I feel like using to inflict as much pain on you as possible."

"I see he's been lying about me again."

"Rukia-san as well told me to watch out for you, she also told me to deck you if I feel your eyes undressing me. She called you a class one hentai. Worse than our newest Pawn."

Eyes going wide, he stutters at the young Devil. "I'm no such thing my dear…"

"Shut it Kisuke, you might not act upon it, but you are a creeper. Now come in Akeno, I think we should get them there as soon as possible." Yoruichi calls out from behind him.

"I agree Yoruichi-san. Ichigo has grown very anxious in wait when I left him just now."

"Come on then, let me introduce you to the rest of the family. And Kisuke, I hope you didn't forget it."

"Of course I didn't." He begins to sweat until Tessai discreetly shows him the long case on the floor next to the pile of luggage.

Following the Neko and the Devil into the living room, he grins as he sees the curious faces staring at the smiling young raven-haired teen.

"Everyone, I want you to meet Akeno Himejima, she is going to be the one to take us to Ichigo. Akeno, let me introduce you to everyone. Starting first with the twins, Karin and Yuzu." Yoruichi begins to introduce them to each other.

The former Squad Twelve Captain leans against the frame of the doorway as all the introductions are being made. He notices the speculative looks from both Isshin and Ryūken, both of whom look towards him. He simply waves his fan in front of his face to hide his own thoughts from them. When he had first met Ajuka Beelzebub, he honestly felt humble before the power the man held, power that was on par with the Head-Captain and Zero Squad. Considering he is one of the 'Super Devils' in existence at the time, a title he shared with Sirzechs and two others among them, it was no surprise in hindsight. Ichigo is likely going to be twice as strong, if not stronger as he grows into his power. Even as he is now, Ichigo can possibly be considered one of them, and in time he may become the most powerful 'Super Devil', due to his pure blood Devil status, Naberius clan heritage, and Shinigami-Quincy-Hollow powers. He cannot wait until the time his favorite student is ready to take his place. Ichigo might be hot-headed now, but in time he will gain the maturity needed to
become a wise leader, and Kisuke plans to be there watching him every step of the way.

'Besides, with whom he is going to marry, it will be interesting enough to stick around for the next few centuries. I just wonder what their kids are going to be like.'

"Kisuke, are you even listening to me dammit!?" He backs up when he sees his best-friend's glowing eyes glaring into his.

"Sorry Yoruichi, just having an interesting thought just now. So, are we ready then?"

"We're ready." Turning to the assembled group, she gives them her last instructions. "When we arrive, I don't want any yelling or anything else. We will be arriving in the middle of a very large group of guardians, so Yuzu, Karin; I want you to keep a hold of Tatsuki and Orihime. Chad, stick to them like glue, and Uryû, keep your hands at your sides. The rest of you better be on your best behavior, including you Ryûken, I know how you feel, but you are needed to tell your part of the story. Any questions?"

"Ah, yeah, I got one Yoruichi, where the hell are we going and how are we getting there?" Tatsuki says as she and Orihime grab the younger Kurosaki's hands.

"Akeno, if you wouldn't mind doing the honors?"

"It would be my pleasure Yoruichi-sama. All right everyone, it's time." As soon as she is done speaking a circle of glowing magic forms underneath their feet as a startled Karin screams out.

"Holy Shit! What's th….."

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Ichigo and Rias stand in the Great Dome, on either side of them is the Cerberus pack leader and his oldest child. Kane and Nadine sit as their official escort since Ichigo at the moment has no members in his own peerage. Squeezing his hand, Rias gives him a reassuring smile as the first sign of the magic circle forms. Licking his lips, Ichigo's eyes scan the backs of the group of arrivals and sees that everyone he asked for is indeed standing before him. He almost loses it when the first thing he hears is Karin's started yell.

"FUCK!"

"Karin! Language!" His youngest sister shouts out.

"Are you kidding me Yuzu, we just…well what in the world just happened Yoruichi?"

Taking a step forward, Ichigo speaks out from behind their backs. "You just had your first taste of magic Karin."

He can feel the air almost freezing as he watches his family and friends slowly turn towards the sound of his voice. His own eyes threatening to water as he gazes upon the faces that he has missed so much, their eyes finally meeting his own. Swallowing dryly, his last thought as he takes one more step towards two of the most important women in his life comes to him suddenly.

'Well, I hope this goes well.'

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Family History Part Two

Original Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess.

Edited by regfurby June, 2018.

XXXX

"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu / Ichigo in Hell Armor"

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'Well, I hope this goes well.'

Ichigo Naberius

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Taking a few steps until he is halfway to the group containing his family and friends, he drops to his knees and opens his arms. Taking the hint, Yuzu and Karin walk tentatively over to him; all the while he can hear his youngest sister praying a mantra over and over.

"Please be real. Please be real. Please be real."

His arms quickly pull his sisters tight to him, and he whispers to Yuzu. "I'm real Yuzu, and I'm never leaving you two again. I promise."

"ICHIGO! / ICHI-NII!" His sisters begin crying as they hug their brother as tight as they can.

Blinking his own tears away, he looks at his father and waves for him to bring over the rest of the group. Soon the others walk over to join him and he can see the myriad of emotions on their faces. Tatsuki's is as expected, both anger and relief. Orihime's face is conflicted between happiness and sorrow. Chad, always the quiet one, is openly smiling, and his rival and friend, Uryū, is smirking as he pushes his glasses up with his middle finger.

"Hey guys, long time no see." He greets them fondly.

"Jerk! Where have you been hiding?" Tatsuki says as she holds on tight to Orihime's waist.

"Ichigo, are you alright?" The young healer asks as she spies his worn looking eyes.

Smiling as he keeps hold of his two exhausted sisters, he nods to her. "Yeah, me and Zangetsu had a few things to work out yesterday."

Looking up at Chad, Ichigo gives him a nod, which is returned. No words need to be said between the two. Turning his head, he sees Uryū looking around the room while keeping his arms down, his unease is telling to the young Devil.
"If you keep staring at them Uryū, they might take you up on your challenge."

"What!? I'm not challenging them." He protests.

"But you are Ishida-san; your staring is an open challenge to us." The Cerberus Leader states as he sits behind Ichigo.

"A… A… Talking dog!" Yuzu gasps out as she squeezes her brother's neck fearfully.

"Hrk! Choking me here Yuzu, and no, he isn't a dog; he is a Cerberus, a Hell Hound. He's in charge of keeping our home safe from intruders."

Karin pulls back somewhat as she looks between Ichigo and Kane. "What? Hell Hound? Our home? What is going on Ichigo? Goat-face and Kisuke didn't tell us what happened to you when you disappeared, all they said is you couldn't come home. They made it out to sound like you died and they didn't want to tell us. So where the hell have you been?"

Patting his sister on her back, he looks at her with amusement. "Funny you should say that Karin. It's part of the reason why you and everyone else is here. We're all going to be told the truth, especially about our families."

"Families? More that one?" Yuzu asks as she shifts around in his arms.

"Yeah, let me introduce you to our great-grandfather." He stands then, helping the twins to their feet, then turns to the man who is looking at the twins with open wonderment.

"Yuzu, Karin, let me introduce Lord Amyntas Naberius; he is our great-grandfather on Mom's side of the family."

The twins watch as Lord Amyntas, appearing to be in his late twenties or early thirties with burnt-orange hair and dark hazel eyes, approaches the three siblings. Standing less than three feet away, he bows to the young pre-teens.

"A pleasure to finally meet you two, Karin Kurosaki, Yuzu Kurosaki. I see you have your mother's features Yuzu, you're just like your grandmother."

"Grandmother?" Yuzu asks stunned.

"You're our great-grandfather? You look younger than Goat-Face!" Karin blurts out in shock again.

"HEY! I'm not that old looking Karin!" Their offended father shouts out.

"Yes you are!" The three siblings shout back.

"You still haven't answered Karin's question Ichigo? Where have you been, and more importantly where are we now?" The second-strongest woman in Japan, and more importantly Ichigo's childhood friend asks him rather angrily.

"Well, currently we are at the main Estate of the Naberius Clan; mine and the twins' Clan, which is located in what is known as the Underworld Tatsuki."

Chad and Uryū both grab the fainting Orihime and Tatsuki, just as Ichigo catches his own sisters as they too faint from the news.

"Well that could have gone better Ichigo." Zangetsu mutters as he appears beside Ichigo.
"You think?"

"Meh. Who knows, anyway we have things to take care of before we have our big sit-down, don't you think?" The Zanpakutō starts staring at Isshin and Kisuke then.

All those in the room slowly turn to see the two men shifting nervously as Ichigo and Zangetsu continue glaring at them.

"Merti, can you take Karin? Rias, if you don't mind taking Yuzu for me? Me and Zangetsu are going to have a private chat with these two morons. If you hear any screaming, just ignore it for now. Oh, and can someone wake up Orihime later, we'll need her to heal them. Yoruichi, did you do as I asked?"

Holding out her hand, the grinning werecat holds a set of Gikongan in her hand. "Sure did Ichigo, there's no way they can escape now."

"Traitor!" Kisuke hisses as he drops his fan in shock.

"Yoruichi!" Isshin says as he steps away from his own son in fear.

"Now, now you two babies. It will only hurt until Orihime heals you. Besides you had it coming. Come on everyone, Rukia and Momo are waiting for us in the family room in the East Wing."

Isshin is the first to be grabbed by the Hell Chains, followed by Kisuke who is grabbed by Zangetsu. Chad and Uryū both pick up their respective passengers, as do Merti and Rias. Rias pauses to give Ichigo a kiss on his cheek.

"Don't be long okay Ichigo?"

"Won't take long, right Zangetsu?"

"Not long at all Queen."

"Kurosaki-kun let me explain things first." Kisuke says trying to squirm out of the chains.

"My son, you don't want your girlfriend to get the wrong impression about our family, do you now?" Isshin tries to escape as well.

"Don't worry Goat-Face, she knows all about you, so save it for someone who cares." Ichigo retorts, causing them to drown in despair.

Yoruichi passes the two now-chained morons. "Told you he'd be pissed the moment he saw you two. Oh, and Ichigo, do leave them intact, you know the strain it puts on Orihime when she has to heal missing limbs and such."

Nodding but not saying a word, the young Devil and his Zanpakutō wait until the doors leading from the Great Dome slam shut with a loud thud. Turning all their attentions onto the two men, both Ichigo and Zangetsu grin evilly.

"Well, let's get this started Ichigo."

"Couldn't agree more."

Outside, everyone half-turns when the first girlish scream sounds out from inside the room, the voice of a certain shop keeper crying out. "Not there Zangetsu, I need them to have children!"
Rias looks at the purple-haired goddess who is walking with them. "He really won't kill them?"

"Phss. Even if he does, which I doubt will happen, Orihime can bring them back. Come on now, we need to wake these four up." Yoruichi answers her flippantly.

Chad sends a look to his Quincy friend as they carry Orihime and Tatsuki respectively. "I wonder what he's gotten us into now." The gentle giant muses.

Uryū nods back to his quiet friend. "I wonder that myself Chad."

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Brown eyes slowly open as she hears several voices talking close to her; not knowing who they are, she keeps herself still and her breathing even until she hears the young Quincy talking, allowing her to relax.

"Rukia, what in the world is going on here? Why does Kurosaki have chains coming from his body and what in the hell was with that Hollow standing next to him!?"

"You have to wait Uryū, we all have to wait." Rukia replies while calmly drinking her tea.

Momo gives him a different answer though. "Ishida-kun, we were told that no one would be kept from learning the truth, but as Rukia said, we must wait just a bit longer."

Struggling to sit up, Orihime feels a hand on her shoulder; looking at who it is, she stares into a set of blue eyes belonging to the young woman sitting next to her. Looking down, Orihime sees Yuzu's head resting in the lap of the other woman.

"Welcome back Orihime. I'm Rias Gremory."

"He...Hello. Ah, where am I? Where's Ichigo?" She says while looking around for her crush.

She almost gives a start when a tea cup appears in front of her face; looking up at the tall dark-skinned woman whose hand is holding the teacup, Orihime's eyes grow wide when she sees the pointy ears of the woman.

"You...your ears are pointed." She whispers out.

"That is because I'm an Elf Orihime-san. My name is Merti Longoak; I am Lord Ichigo's Head of Household and Personal Assistant." Said Elf informs her.

"Elf? Lord Ichigo?" Orihime feels her head get woozy a second time, but Merti places the tea directly under her nose.

"It will help Lady Orihime, please drink it quickly." Not too sure what is going on, Orihime does as she is told and drinks the contents of the cup as quickly as she can.

Handing the cup back to the taller woman, she does feel suddenly energized as she shifts to a more comfortable position on the couch. Beside her, she sees Tatsuki stirring, as is Karin who is lying next to her on another couch. Turning back to the woman named Rias, Orihime watches her slowly thread her hand through the brown hair of Yuzu as if in a trance.

"Can I ask how you know Ichigo?" Orihime asks, wanting to start a conversation with the crimson-haired young woman.

Rias just smiles at her. "We should wait for that as well Orihime, it would be best if Ichigo was
here to tell you personally what is going on.”

"You won't have to wait much longer Hime. We're not waiting for dinner, not after what these two
told me." A very familiar voice remarks from behind her.

Turning quickly, she sees Ichigo's smiling face as he looks down at her. "Hey Orihime."

"Ichigo-kun."

"Sorry to do this to you so soon Orihime, but can you take care of that?” He points to the two
bleeding men holding each other up against the wall behind him.

"Otou-san, Urahara-san!” She yells as she sits up on her knees and sends her fairies out to heal the
two.

"Interesting." Merti says as she watches the orange shield envelop the two now-thankful men.

"That is only the tip of the iceberg Merti. Orihime is perhaps the most powerful woman I know, well besides…"

Orihime blushes deeply at the compliment; Ichigo has never openly acknowledged her powers in
such a way. As she heals both Isshin and Urahara however, her thoughts are stopped when Ichigo
asks his father a question.

"Why is she calling you Otou-san, Goat-Face?"

She sees Isshin get nervous, but it’s Karin who answers his question. "She got adopted into our
family Ichigo, some noble crap or something to do with Soul Society. Goat-Face screwed up, so he
asked Orihime to become our older sister to help around the house, and I suspect to keep us from
killing him when we found out what really happened to you and his part in it."

Ichigo eyes harden at the words Soul Society. "What do they have to do with this Dad?"

"Well Son, that is what I have to tell you guys soon. You wanted to know the whole truth, well you
will soon." Isshin says as he flexes his healing body. "Nice work my Third Daughter, Daddy can't
tell you how much he appreciates this. Your older brother can be such a bully."

Karin, who accepts her own cup of tea, snorts out at her father. "Well if you told us the truth when
you knew we could see ghosts, you wouldn't have Ichigo kicking your ass now."

"I agree with her Isshin-san." The now fully-awake Tatsuki says as she too accepts a cup from
Merti. "Thanks... um, whoever you are."

"My name is Merti Longoak." The Elf repeats with good humor. "And you are welcome, Tatsuki
Arisawa."

The Elfin woman then goes to stand next to Ichigo, whispering something in his ear. Nodding in
agreement to her soft voice, he looks at his 'uncle' then.

"I guess we should wake Yuzu and get this started Uncle. Merti, can you gather the peerages? I
think they would like to know everything as well."

"Of course Ichigo. Nadine can you send the pack out with instructions?"

"Yes Merti." It is the lone Cerberus in the room who answers her command.
The young female Cerberus disappears out the door, presumably to rope her pack into helping her. Ichigo sits down between Orihime and Rias, joining them in stroking his youngest sister's hair.

"I've missed you guys." He tells them quietly.

"We missed you too Ichigo." Orihime responds just as quietly.

"You don't have any idea of the hurt we had to go through because of them keeping things from us Kurosaki." Uryū says as he joins them.

"Not my fault Uryū. I have an idea, but Kisuke refuses to say anything until everyone is gathered. All I know is that it has to do with what happened with Aizen."

Looking around, Ichigo sees the faces of his closest friends harden at the mention of the hated man's name. Sighing, he gives them his reassurances.

"Look guys, it's no one's fault. Things got out of hand and well…Dad and Kisuke did do their best, even if it was a shitty way of going about it."

Rukia huffs out at that. "They all kept it a secret Ichigo, not just your dad and Kisuke, but the Captains and the Head-Captain too. I just want to know why, is all?"

"Open that fan Kisuke and I'll kill you myself." The golden-eyed former Captain suddenly snaps at Urahara from her place at the table with both Amyntas and Venelana seated beside her.

"Fine, fine, I think it would be best if we wake Yuzu now, it won't be long now." Just as Kisuke finishes speaking, the door opens and the humans' eyes widen as a myriad of beings, both human and mythical enter the room.

Among them Ichigo sees the Gremory Clan, minus their peerages; Sirzechs escorting a formally dressed Grayfia, followed by Serafall with Sōna as her escort, much to the blushing Class President's embarrassment. Behind them are Zeoticus and another couple that Ichigo has never seen before. He watches as his great-grandfather's peerage enters the room after them, followed by his grandfather's peerage.

Soon an army of maids bring in chairs and small tables as well as wheeled carts covered in a variety of teas and other drinks as well as food. As the last maid bows on her way out, she and another maid close the doors behind them. At Amyntas's signal, the pack of Cerberus in the room secure the open balcony and stand guard in front of the three entrances to the now filled family room. Walking to the center so everyone can see and hear him, he politely bows to the humans.

"As Ichigo has stated before, I am Lord Amyntas Naberius of the Naberius Clan. I am also known by these titles: Guardian of the Damned, Keeper of the Skeleton Tower, and Watcher of the Gates of Hell. I am also Ichigo's, Karin's and Yuzu's great-grandfather, father-in-law to Masaki's mother Kiku Kurosaki, as she was known before marrying my own son, Vincent Naberius. As the first part is mine to tell, I will begin my story first. I am a Devil, as are my great-grandchildren and those you will be introduced to afterwards." He stops when Yuzu gasps out loud.

"A Devil? Are we evil Ichi-nii!?"

Patting his sister's arm, Ichigo smiles down at her. "No Yuzu, we aren't evil. Let Uncle Amyntas tell his story and then the others before any of us jump to the wrong conclusions, myself included. I get the feeling we're going to hear a lot of things we didn't know before and get some answers finally. Right Dad?" He shoots a glare at his father.
"Of course Ichigo. Only the truth this time." He and Kisuke both hide their thoughts as to what they think is going to happen when it comes to their turns.

"You are half correct my dear Yuzu, at one time our race was evil as the term was defined back then. We did steal or make bargains with humans for their immortal souls. Today however, we have become 'civilized' if the term can be used as such. While our original traits still live in us, we have evolved to gain our power and riches in other ways. The greatest of these achievements are the Evil Pieces."

For the next hour, Amyntas speaks of the long history of the Naberius Clan, rising from the lower ranks of Devil Society to becoming one of the Seventy-Two Pillars that once defined Devil Society. How they became the jailers of the Damned souls that were gathered by the old ways, or by the overwhelming evil acts certain humans had committed while still alive. Pausing for a moment, he begins to speak of the wars that existed back then between the three factions, the Devils, the Fallen Angels, and finally the Angels. Each created and lead by the original deities of each group. His own grandfather had been the first Guardian of the Damned, a soon to be hereditary title which gave the Clan the ability to create the unique magic used by them in their duties to keep the Skeleton Tower secured and escape by its prisoners all but impossible.

If an escape did occur, which Amyntas said had actually happened from time to time over the past several millennia that the Tower has stood, it is their Clan's responsibility to hunt down and return the escaped Damned back to the Tower to finish their punishment. The Clan, he states, was quite numerous at one time, numbering over a few hundred pure bloods at their height, but as the wars and skirmishes dragged on, it was only a matter of time that their numbers dwindled to only the handful that remained when his own father took over as the head of the Clan. Then the Civil War began and his father was assassinated in the first weeks of that dark period of time, leaving him to take over his father's duties and subdue the Damned souls who had tried to escape. This is why he tried to forbid any member of his peerage or his only son from taking part in the war. If he and his son were both to fall, then the Gates of Hell would weaken to the point that they would fail entirely and Hell would literally be free to walk upon Earth.

Here, Amyntas looks down at the ring on his right hand and twists it slowly as he begins the last part of his tale. Looking at Merti, he gives her a sad smile which she returns as he speaks of the night he lost almost his entire family. How in the aftermath of the ambush, he had hidden his only granddaughter among the humans with an old family that had served his Clan from times before he was the Clan head. In exchange for their service, he freed them from their blood-contract, freeing the souls of those who had been sent to Hell from the deal an ancestor of theirs had made: one that condemned his entire family's line without their knowledge. Smiling, he spoke of how the young baby had grown into a beautiful young woman.

Looking at Ryūken, he finishes his part of the story.

"In time, it became obvious that Masaki had inherited her mother's Quincy powers, ones I thought would help keep her safe if she was taught to use them properly, which led me to arrange her marriage to her cousin. Ryūken Ishida."

Brown eyes slowly turn, first towards his friend and rival, and then to his rival's white-haired father. "He...they are my cousins?" He asks with shock.

"Yes Ichigo, you and my son are cousins, distant cousins, but we do share a bloodline. Your mother was my intended at one time. She came to us as an orphan, a baby without any knowledge as to who or what she was. A pure-blooded Quincy, one of the few left in the world. My mother took her in and began to teach her, well, she tried to teach her at least. Masaki...was obstinate at
best, she didn't believe in our ways as I or Uryū do Ichigo. It wasn't until she met your father that she made up her mind as to how she would live her life as a Quincy."

"Putting it together now King?"

'Why didn't they tell me? Why…?'

Narrowing his eyes, he gives his father a glare, but frowns when he sees Isshin stare back unapologetically. The young Devil then turns back to listen to Ryūken.

"I thought that one day she would see the folly of her beliefs, but that day would never come. It was during her last year of high school that her life, as well as mine, changed. This is when she first met your father Ichigo, when he was doing battle with an unusually strong Hollow; the one that we would learn later was named 'White' by Aizen. We both felt the battle between Isshin and White, but instead of going out to fight, I chose to ignore it and advised your mother to do the same. Your mother didn't, and to this day I hate myself for the words she said to me at the time. 'Because if I decided not to take action because of rules and customs and somebody died because I did nothing, I don't think I'd be able to forgive myself for that'. She rushed out then and fought the Hollow, saving your father, and he in turn saved hers when the Hollow destroyed itself."

Pausing, Ryūken looks first at his son and then at his son's cousins. The twins are looking between Ichigo and Uryū, their expressions conflicted, while the orange-haired youth is staring a hole in the floor with a hardened expression on his face.

'He knows it's going to get worse.'

"We didn't know the price she was going to pay for her courage, but it became clear the next night, when she suddenly began to Hollowfy. I ran out with her in my arms, I had no idea where to go, but it was then that these two…" Ryūken points first to Kisuke and Isshin. "…Came across us. Kisuke told us we could save her, but only Isshin could do it. Isshin had to tie his soul to hers, to keep the Hollow at bay until it was purged or she died, and the rest is now his story to tell us Ichigo."

"Goat-Face?" Karin whispers as she looks at her father.

Standing up, Isshin looks first at his youngest daughter, then at her black-haired twin, before settling on his son's hard face. There is no trace of his usual goofiness in his expression.

"I am the former Captain of Squad Ten of the Gotei Thirteen, Isshin Kurosaki. My Lieutenant was Rangiku Matsumoto, and my Third Seat was Tōshirō Hitsugaya. As you may have guessed by now Ichigo, my family name isn't actually Kurosaki, but Shiba."

Ichigo's face slips into shock as he openly gapes at his father. "Kūkaku and Ganju... they are…?"

The older man nods. "Your cousins as well. You and the girls aren't as alone as you thought. I'm truly sorry Ichigo, but you were never ever supposed to be a part of any of this."

"But...But Aizen…?"

Isshin makes a rude noise. "Yeah, Aizen made sure you did get involved. Bastard knew what had happened that night your mother and I met, he was the one who sent White after all. He always kept watch on us after that, probably wanted to see what you were capable of becoming because of us. Kisuke always suspected that you were going to get involved one way or another, even though we did our best to prevent it, but it only truly came to fruition after that fateful night."

Ichigo stiffens then, knowing, but wanting to deny what he was going to hear, shaking his head in
denial. "No…please Dad not that."

"I'm sorry Ichigo, but that night is the night that started you down this path. Did Uryū ever tell you what happened to his own mother that night?"

The faces of the boys morph into that of anger and deep sorrow. Both remembering the events of that night for different reasons as Ichigo looks over at Uryū and sees tears running down his Quincy friend's face.

"Uryū?"

"I never told you Ichigo, because I never wanted to remember that day." The Quincy youth whispers.

Ryūken places his hands on his son's shoulders. "We both mourn that day as well Ichigo. It was the day my wife and Uryū's mother, Kanae, lapsed into a coma and never woke up again. She died three months later."

"How? Why?" Ichigo is completely shocked to hear this.

"They need to know, Ryūken, Isshin. They need to end the burden of guilt over their mothers' deaths; they need to know that it was through the act of someone else's hand." Yoruichi says as she sits between Amyntas and Venelana.

"Who was it!?" Ichigo and Uryū both demand with barely contained fury at the same time.

"The ancestor of all Quincies, Yhwach, the self-proclaimed Emperor whose blood runs through all Quincies down through the ages, even yours Ichigo. He used Auswählen, a ritual, to steal the powers from every 'impure' Quincy to restore his own, all except for yours, Uryū; you alone out of all the other 'impure' Quincies survived that night. I don't know how, but you did. Ichigo, you survived because you had not yet awakened your blood and were thus invisible to his power...and you still haven't quite awakened it yet. Either way, that is why Kanae died in a coma and why…"

"Mom died against Grand Fisher."

"Ichigo, if I would have saved her, but I couldn't. I knew how powerful your Mother was and I honestly didn't worry about her situation, not until it was too late, when we realized something had gone terribly wrong. Even though I doubt I could have done much anyway without my Shinigami powers, I still would have tried to rescue her." Isshin recalls sorrowfully.

Kisuke looks at the young Devil clan heir then speaks up for the first time since the story started. "Ichigo, in order for your father to keep the Hollow from consuming your mother, he had to give up his Shinigami powers, using them to suppress the Hollow in Masaki and tying his own life to hers, becoming effectively human. With his Shinigami powers and the Hollow cancelling each other out, Masaki was once again a powerful Quincy, even a Hollow like Grand Fisher would have been nothing more than an afterthought to her. It was our fault for being too complacent; when her Reiatsu suddenly dropped the way it did, we were all caught off guard, and were too late in getting there to save her. That is how we found you that night, Ichigo, holding Masaki's body in the rain."

Rias glances at Rukia, who nods her head then. She already knew the story, but to hear the reason why it had happened is still devastating to her. Sōna is also sitting there, her fists shaking violently as are her older sister's hands. Both of the Sitri sisters are silently vowing vengeance against Yhwach in their minds. Uryū stands up and walks out onto the balcony, Orihime getting up to follow him. Tatsuki and Chad sit unmoving, but both of them keep an eye on their orange-haired
friend as he looks lost. Yuzu's head falls into Rias's lap as she begins to cry silently to herself, while Karin's eyes glaze over in hatred, knowing that their mother's own ancestor, their own kin, had crippled their mother and left her to die at the hands of a Hollow.

Kisuke, needing to keep Ichigo's mind on the path set before him, speaks up again.

"Now you know Ichigo, who you really are. You might have been human, but you now have the powers of a Shinigami noble, a Quincy pure-blood, a fully-evolved Hollow, and now you have awakened the last power of your bloodline, that of the Naberius." Kisuke lists off.

"W-Wait, I don't have any Quincy powers." Ichigo protests weakly, but it is overridden by Zangetsu.

"What do you think you were using all that time King? Ask him; ask Kisuke and the other Shinigami. Go on King." The Zanpakutō spirit urges.

"Dad? Kisuke? What Quincy power?"

The Shinigami in the room all turn to look at Tessai as the large man who had kept silent since his arrival suddenly gets up, turning to grab a long, thin case from behind him. Walking up to Kisuke, he hands it to the shouten owner then takes his seat once again with Jinta and Ururu.

Giving Tessai a nod of thanks, Kisuke holds out the case in front of him as he speaks to the young Devil hybrid. "Do you know what is in this case Ichigo?"

Ichigo stares at the long slender case in question. "No idea Geta-Bōshi."

"Do you want to know a simple fact that all Shinigami learn on their first day at the Shinōreijutsuin?" Seeing his student shake his head warily, Kisuke slowly opens the case and tilts it towards Ichigo, continuing on anyway. "All Zanpakutō begin as a blank Asauchi, Ichigo. No Zanpakutō can start otherwise, not a single one."

Ichigo's mind shrinks in on itself, going back to the day he 'regained' his Shinigami powers, the day he pulled Zangetsu out of that box representing his soul.

'Zangetsu is...is this true, that what I have been using wasn't a real Zanpakutō?'

Materializing next to his stunned wielder, Zangetsu turns to Kisuke. "Tell him the truth Geta-Bōshi."

Pulling his trademark hat down, the blonde-haired Shinigami answers him. "The truth Ichigo is that I knew the moment I saw your Zanpakutō that it wasn't a real one. I also figured out what it really was then: it was a side effect of your mother's Quincy power being passed down to you."

"My mother's... Quincy power? What do you mean?"

"Your previous Zanpakutō was a spirit weapon Ichigo, just like our bows are. Unlike our bows which are created from ambient Reishi however, you created your Zanpakutō out of your own Reishi. That is how you were able to gain what you thought was your blade, how your blade was able to purify spirits." Ryūken fills in the missing pieces for Ichigo.

"Why... why would the old man do that? What..." Looking at his father helplessly, Ichigo's eyes widen when his Zanpakutō answers his question for him.

"He wanted you to become a Quincy Ichigo. Just like your mother before you."
Balling his fists as tight as he can, he closes his eyes much to the surprise of the room, who nearly stagger when the weight of the world suddenly presses down on their shoulders.

"GET EVERYONE OUT!" Yoruichi shouts out, immediately leaping into action.

"TESSAI HELP ME SEAL HIM OFF!" Kisuke screams as he starts placing barrier after barrier around the raging young man.

"WE CAN'T DO IT ALONE BOSS! HE IS A DEVIL! WE NEED HELP!"

Sirzechs and Serafall quickly join the two Kidō masters as they erect a magic barrier around Ichigo's raging form, Zangetsu smirking to himself as he disappears back inside his wielder.

'Now we finish this.'

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Scanning the surroundings of his changed inner-world, the youth looks around for the one who had pretended for so long to be his Zanpakutō spirit.

"WHERE ARE YOU OLD MAN!? WHERE ARE YOU NOW!? WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME YOU Weren't MY ZANPAKUTŌ!?"

"He won't answer you King. He's trying to figure out how to make you his master's servant."

"What do you mean, 'his master's servant'? I'll never be anyone's puppet, especially not that of my mother's killer! He knows this! Where the fuck are you Old Man!?"

Silence continues to answer him as both Shinigami and Zanpakutō spirit stand firm in the middle of the lands surrounding the black tower that dominates the landscape of his inner-world. Trees, ruins of ancient buildings and other obstacles that sprouted up out of nowhere make detecting the wayward soul a challenge to them. Brown and yellow eyes continue searching their surroundings, feeling, waiting for the former spirit to make his presence known to them.

"He's hiding Ichigo. He should have known you would never become a Quincy, not after what his master did to Mom."

Shouting loudly, Ichigo lets his rage out. "He also knows I won't willingly condemn any soul, be it Hollow or whatever else, to oblivion! My grandmother Kiku willingly became a Devil to escape that! Come on out Old Man, we need to end this charade once and for all! I know who I am now, and I know what you are too! You are the Quincy bloodline I inherited from my mother, the blood we inherited from her murderer, but you lied to me Old Man! I want to know why!"

From behind them, the familiar voice speaks out. "It should be obvious Ichigo: you weren't meant to be a Shinigami. As a human, you were meant to become a Quincy."

"But Aizen and Rukia, and in small part my grandmother, had to fuck it all up for you, didn't they Old Man? So why lie to me, why pretend to be something you weren't?" He and Zangetsu turn to face the one who had ran their world for those past few months.

Seeing the fake Zangetsu standing quietly before them, Ichigo goes to step towards the being he has always looked towards for guidance, but his true Zanpakutō spirit gently grabs his arm and shakes his head. "Look at his hand Ichigo."

Looking at the left hand of the older man, Ichigo's eyes narrow as he sees a familiar black daitō
being held by the spirit. Quirking an eyebrow at the Old Man, the question comes out from his mouth unbidden.

"What's with the daitō?"

"I think he can answer you Ichigo." The blade points to the white Hollowfied version of the Shinigami standing beside him, and the Hollow spirit scoffs and answers for them.

"You know there can only be one Old Man. You can't exist anymore because of who he is now. Between me being a Hollow and him no longer being human, you can't survive here, not anymore. Your body is deteriorating even now, so you ain't got a choice, just like me. It's you or me Old Man, that's how it has to be."

"What?" Ichigo turns to stare at his Hollow spirit in shock.

"We can't co-exist with him Ichigo. Not anymore. He can't afford to have us around now that we have chosen a side; if we aren't going to be who his master wanted us to be, he can't let us live anymore."

Turning towards the pretender, Ichigo voices his thoughts, trying to hide the pain he is feeling at his first teacher's betrayal. "Is that right Old Man? We can't live if we can't serve your master Yhwach? Is this your plan, to kill us, and then kill yourself in the process? What then? What happens afterwards?"

The older spirit stares at him unmoving. "I was to guide you in the Quincy ways, Ichigo, but...but you just had to choose to become a Shinigami."

"TO FUCKING SAVE MY FAMILY YOU ASSHOLE! DID YOU FORGET THAT!? KARIN, YUZU WERE BOTH IN DANGER THAT NIGHT! WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME DO!? LET THEM DIE!" Ichigo rages at him.

As the older being stands there, Ichigo and Zangetsu's eyes both harden as nothing but silence answers their question.

"You did. You really expected me to let them die, didn't you?" Ichigo accuses quietly.

Again the silence lasts for a few moments, before the blade is gripped harder, the older spirit replying just as quietly. "Sacrifice is a necessity."

"Now you have your answer Ichigo. What do you want to do with him?"

"What happens if we kill him?" Ichigo seethes as he stares at the being that he once trusted, a being who would have let his sisters die.

"Nothing good King. He is a part of your soul; it could back-fire and kill us all anyways."

"How about it Old Man, what happens if we kill you? Because I am sorely tempted to right now."

Shaking his head ruefully, the Quincy spirit smirks as he stares back challengingly at both Shinigami and Zanpakutō. "Who says you will win Ichigo? You have always used your power amateurishly, so what makes you think you can defeat me now? Especially since you both have no weapons." He raises the daitō in his hand to remind them of the fact.

"Really?" Ichigo concentrates, then watches as the face of the old man shifts into surprise and
annoyance as both Devil and Zanpakutō release chain after chain at him, the chains striking just a
fraction too late to hit the Quincy as he dodges with Hirenkyaku.

"Did you forget Old Man, I'm not defenseless. I have one last question for you before we really get
this started however. Where were you, when Aizen was choking the fucking life out of me?"

Ichigo and Zangetsu both hold back their chains for the moment, waiting for an answer as the
Quincy dodges behind a boulder. Both then slowly move apart from each other as they circle
around the boulder in opposite directions, seeking to pincer the Quincy.

Touching the blade in his hand to his head, the Quincy spirit responses. "I couldn't help you any
longer Ichigo. You made up your mind when you were willing to sacrifice your power to solve
Soul Society's problems. You gave no thought to us, did you?" He immediately moves by
Hirenkyaku to another boulder as a chain pierces through and disintegrates the one he was hiding
behind, revealing a scowling Ichigo through the rubble.

"Wrong answer Old Man; you know why I did it. To protect everyone."

"And you forget, I never wanted to protect them as you did, I only wanted to protect you from
them. Now the time has ended for us Ichigo, Zangetsu. Today, either only I, or all of us must
die."

"So be it."

"Fine by me fake."

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"Kisuke."

"I know Yoruichi, I know." The former Squad Twelve Captain sweats as he, Tessai, Isshin and the
werecat all hold Ichigo's Reiatsu back, while the Ultimate Devils and High Class Devils keep his
demonic energy in check.

"What is going on with Ichi-nii!?

Turning her head, the yellow-eyed woman screams out at them. "What the hell are you kids still
doing here? I told you all to leave dammit!"

"We're not leaving Ichi-nii!" Yuzu screams back.

"Fine! Merti, you, Rias and Sōna are to teleport them the moment I say so! If this goes bad, I don't
want any of you to be here, understood!?"

"Yes, Yoruichi!" The Elf yells out as the sounds of Ichigo's chains hitting the barrier resonate
loudly throughout the room.

The first gash appears right after that, blood splattering the inside of the barrier. More than one
woman or teen scream out at the sight, the two most affected are the twins, neither of whom had,
until that moment, understood what their brother had gone through in his Shinigami duties.

Karin tries to reach out to her brother, only for Rukia to stop her. "Why are you doing this Rukia-
nee!?"

"There is nothing you can do Karin. This is a battle taking place in his soul; one that all we can do
is wait, and see who is victorious."

"But... but what if Ichigo fails?"

Rukia's eyes glisten, but her face hardens as does her grip on Sode No Shirayuki. Karin doesn't miss either action. Turning back to her brother as black Reiatsu begins to pour out from his sitting form and swirl menacingly around him, she whispers to herself.

"Please Ichi-nii, not you too."

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"Fucking bastard's crafty King."

Zangetsu and Ichigo both stand panting after fighting the sword wielding Quincy spirit for the last thirty minutes. Both of them have rapidly healing cuts, but their clothes are getting shredded. The last time Ichigo saw the Old Man, his clothes were still pristine, even his white shirt showing no signs of blood or dirt. Turning to look at his Zanpakutō spirit, he huffs out a response.

"Yeah, he is Zangetsu." Ichigo's hand reaches up to touch the shallow gash on his chest, feeling the wound healing quickly, but his Shihakushō is pretty much a lost cause.

"Can't get close to him because of that damn blade of his, and he dodges our chains with Hirenkyaku. And he can use Getsuga Tenshō just as well as us dammit. And we don't even have freaking swords to counter with our own! Fuck, this sucks!" Wincing as his hand leaves his chest, Ichigo begins to scan their surroundings once again.

"Well, we're getting our asses kicked by an old Quincy Ichigo, and I for one don't want to go out that way, what about you?" Zangetsu suddenly asks him.

"Not really, but you got any ideas as to how the hell we're gonna beat him?"

"One, but you ain't going to like it King, it's risky as fuck."

Before he can answer, both of them glance to their right as they feel the condensed wave of Reiatsu rushing towards them. Grimacing, they both shift their bodies and use their chains to shield themselves. As the energy wave crashes into their chains, they both Sonido directly towards their attacker, but once again their prey is missing from his position. The Devil turns again towards his Zanpakutō, but this time there is no anger or frustration as before.

"What's the plan?"

"One of us is going to have to don the armor and be bait."

"I thought that's what you were going to say. I'm guessing you want the armor then?"

"Nope, you have the strength, I got the speed. See where this is going Ichigo?"

"I do." Looking at the Hollowfied Zanpakutō, Ichigo grabs his white arm. "Watch yourself out there, understand?"

"Che, whatever." However the tone in Zangetsu's voice doesn't match the look in his black and yellow eyes.

Turning towards the open ground, Ichigo stands straighter and without hesitation begins to walk
out into the open. Slowly releasing his Reiatsu, as well as what he now knows is his Devil power, black plate armor begins to form on his body, with crimson stripes the same as the black ones of his full Hollow form. Instead of leading to a Hollow hole on his chest however, it leads to a ring of the same crimson color that is the size of said Hollow hole, with a strange crimson symbol in the center of the ring. The plate armor covering his body's vulnerable spots also allows surprising freedom of movement. Just as the horned black helmet forms on his head, he sees the reflection of those damnable glasses watching him again.

'Come on Old Man, I'm waiting.'

'**Do they really think this will work?**' The Quincy spirit scans the surrounding area, but to his frustration, the Hollow spirit is missing from his senses.

Slowly working his way towards Ichigo, he is amazed that his former student would be so sure he would fall for the oldest trick in the book. Taking cover behind a rock, he watches as the black armor forms over the young Devil's body. He realizes that perhaps he shouldn't have given either of them a chance earlier, now it is turning against him. Even if he holds Ichigo's Quincy power, he is going against not just the power inherited from a Shinigami Captain, but also the power of a super Devil.

'**Would you have forgiven me if I had killed him the first chance I had, Masaki-sama?**'

The Quincy spirit looks at the young man with a hint of sadness. It wasn't supposed to be this way, Ichigo was supposed to awaken his Quincy powers first and then they would come for him and make him one of the Elite. Instead, that damned Aizen sent not only Rukia Kuchiki, but a Hollow that night to his home. The Quincy spirit nearly screamed in frustration when he felt Ichigo's Zanpakutō stir, but knowing he still had time, he suppressed it and made it think it was nothing more than a Hollow. It worked, until he had to teach Ichigo how to use his fake Zanpakutō. Smirking, he remembers how gullible the Hollow had been at first, all the way up until he was forced into merging with that thing to teach Ichigo the Saigo no Getsuga Tenshō.

Then it went to pieces when Kisuke Urahara's Kidō spell failed to work as planned. He was powerless to stop the real Zanpakutō from surviving and in the process; the final insult to his pride took place. The blood line not even he was aware of woke up in the Hollowfied Zanpakutō, and shattered his remaining plans into pieces. Looking at the same black armored form from that day, he can only wonder if Ichigo would have ever truly become a Quincy. Setting aside his own doubts, he hardens his heart for what he has to do.

'I **must kill you Ichigo. I can't allow you to interfere with what is to come.**'

"Are you sure you can?" A young girl's voice asks suddenly.

Swinging his blade behind him, he hits nothing but air, and glances around warily for whoever it was who not only spoke to him but had eavesdropped on his thoughts.

"**Got ya!**" Comes Ichigo's cry and he immediately sprints from his cover with Hirenkyaku boosting his speed.

Dodging the numerous chains that sprout from literally everywhere, the Quincy spirit uses his blade to fight off the chains he cannot evade and multiple Ceros that fire at him as he is forced unwillingly into the open field. Sensing a direct attack coming from Ichigo, he rolls to his right, narrowly avoiding decapitation by the blackened claw-like armored hand. Rolling back to his feet,
he finds himself still thinking of the voice that had spoken to him.

'How did she know!?'

"BALA! / CERO!"

Swinging his blade and unleashing a wide-ranged Getsuga Tenshō, he is successful in blocking both attacks, but finds out that he had underestimated just how quickly the black armored Ichigo can really move when he gets hit in the back by an armored fist. Spinning into the dirt under him, he barely manages to stab the spirit weapon into the ground to stop himself and flip himself back to his feet. Only to find black filled golden eyes in his face and a devastating gut shot that sends bolts of agony through his body. Grunting through the pain, he gets a quick upswing and barely catches the retreating Zangetsu in the arm, but it is a minor victory all things considered.

"Nice one Old Man, but not good enough. You forgot about someone." The Hollow spirit taunts, and he is too slow to react by just a fraction of a second. The pain exploding in his back announces the arrival of Ichigo with a multitude of chains, but surprisingly none of them have blades attached to them.

"Still not willing to kill Ichigo? It will cost you again one day." The faux Zanpakutō spirit grits out as he staggers to his feet again.

Silence answers him as Ichigo raises his black-armored hand again, forcing him to dodge not one but several Bala that explode around the spot he had barely escaped from. Using Hirenkyaku to sprint into a grove of gnarled trees, he catches his breath as he hears the taunting of the Hollow.

"Look King, he wants to play Hide and Seek. Okay, we'll count to ten and you hide, then we'll come and finish this for once and all Old Man!"

The Quincy spirit leans heavily against a tree, wondering how Zangetsu was able to change Ichigo's inner-world so quickly; he is at a serious disadvantage here, he doesn't know the terrain, nor does he understand the rules of this place. Again, his musing is interrupted when a Cero followed by a spear-tipped chain bursts through the tree near his head. In a burst of speed he is now behind a building, wondering how it's going to end. Pushing his own emotions deep inside, he reaches out for the young Devil's energy with his senses, seeing it coming straight for him. Not running, but moving at a slow advance.

'The armor is weighing him down, he is slow and vulnerable. But why did he don the armor?'

"Because he knows that Zangetsu is faster in his Hollow form than he is in his Shinigami form." The voice of the little girl speaks up again.

Again, he misses striking at the owner of the voice. Backing up slowly, he peers into the shadows and finally sees a face, though he is unable to make out her features. Narrowing his eyes, he is about to ask who she is and what she wants, when he realizes he has lost track of Ichigo's Reiatsu. Hurriedly casting out his senses to try and find him again, he is distracted by the little girl's words.

"Too late, it's over for you now."

Without warning, numerous chains burst out from the ground all around him and pierce through both sides of his body. The black arrow tipped chains pass through his body completely unhindered by his Blut Vene, and when they explode out the other side, wicked barbs open like grappling hooks from the arrow tips before they are pulled back painfully into his body. Dropping to one knee, the Quincy spirit looks for the little girl who had distracted him once again, but she
isn't there anymore.

Closing his eyes in resignation, he hears the soft footsteps of Zangetsu and the heavy thuds of Ichigo's armored boots approaching him from either side. Looking up at Ichigo, he sees nothing in his former student's eyes as they look down at him.

"Ichigo."

"Old Man."

"So this is the end."

"Not quite Old Man. We can't kill you, because every time we hit you, we could feel it. We know what we have to do though." Ichigo's voice is completely lacking emotion.

A white hand lands on his shoulder, directing him to look towards the true Zanpakutō spirit of this world. "Nothing personal, but this is my world Old Man. You knew it would come down to you or me. I won't gloat, but it's time for you to go."

Narrowing his eyes as he coughs out a splotch of blood, he wonders out loud what that is supposed to mean. "So Devil, what are you going to do now?"

His answer is made clear as the chains piercing his body begin to glow black and blue. Ichigo and Zangetsu both push more chains into his body, and then he feels it. The most terrible feeling resonating from deep within him that tells him what they are doing to him.

"You can't!"

"I'm sorry Old Man, but I can't have you trying to kill me again or subvert me to serve your master. You're right; I can't kill you, but know this. The day will come when your master falls at my feet." Looking down for a second before righting his head, Ichigo's gaze shows remorse as he utters his last words to his former teacher.

"Your part of our soul will become one with ours, but your identity, your memories; your self will no longer exist in our world or our souls. Good-bye Old Man."

Pain fills the Quincy spirit's soul as he feels it being ripped apart and absorbed by both the Devil and Hollow. As his vision fades, he sees the little girl's face finally, and sees her mouthing her last words to him. The last words he will ever understand.

'The answer to your first question would've been no.'

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Outside, Sirzechs glances over at the Guardian of the Damned as he watches his future brother-in-law's body slowly covering itself in black plate armor.

"Is that what I think it is Amyntas!?" Sirzechs shouts over the writhing chains as they continuously crash against the multiple layers of Kidō and magic that keep them from hurting the others in the room.

"Yes it is Sirzechs, how he gained it, I have no answer except it must be because of Zangetsu." The Clan leader shouts back.
Still focused on channeling their Reiatsu towards the Kidō barriers, both Isshin and Yoruichi spare a glance towards their old friend, only to see narrowed recognition in Kisuke's eyes as he and Tessai continue to maintain their part of the barriers.

"This is what you saw that day, wasn't it Kisuke!?!" The former Onmitsukidō commander yells out over the din.

Just nodding his head, Kisuke dips his face to hide his emotions. This is what he wanted to hide; he knew if Central Forty-Six had seen this, they wouldn't have hesitated or waited. Everyone in the room who was not a Devil would have been sentenced to death without receiving a trial. They would not have cared about pissing off the Naberius Clan due to their fear of Ichigo overriding everything else in their minds. He still finds it hard to believe that Ichigo possesses such a terrifying power; he had always suspected Isshin had kept something from him about Masaki after her funeral, but it wasn't until he witnessed what Ichigo did to Aizen while wearing the same armor that he is clad in now, that he understood why Isshin had only begrudgingly allowed him to give Ichigo his powers back during the Shattered Shaft event.

Isshin had been stuck between a rock and a hard place back then when forced to make that decision. Either let his son save Rukia, and risk Central Forty-Six eventually finding out how powerful Ichigo could become, or let Rukia die and have his son hate him for the rest of his life after finding out that he could have saved Rukia, but Isshin had held him back out of fear for Ichigo's life. Looking away from the barriers for a moment, he sees Amyntas, Sirzechs and Serafall each giving him a speculative looks as well. To them, he simply shrugs his shoulders; the female Maou's face gives him a look that promises future pain as she turns back to help keep her cousin's unrestrained power and wild Hell Chains contained.

'Oh well, there's just no pleasing everyone.'

Helplessly watching from the sidelines, Rias, Sōna and Merti each have their magic ready to teleport everyone to the Gremory Estate in case they are ordered to do so. Rias's eyes can't leave the place where the face of the man she has fallen in love with is now hidden by a black horned helmet. Before his armor covered him, each time a deep cut, heavy bruise or angry red burn had appeared on his body, it was all she and the others could do to try and hold back their screams. Even now, she winces at the trails of blood that flow down his chest and back from under the dark armor.

The few times she does look around, she can't help but see the expressions on the faces of Ichigo's friends and family, the tears in the eyes of his youngest sister and his oldest adoptive sister. His darker-haired younger sister and the black-haired girl are both staring at Ichigo with worried eyes. The tall, dark-skinned male teen's eyes hidden by his long bangs with only the barest of frowns visible, but almost invisibly exuding an aura of anxiousness with his fists gripped tightly as he watches. The younger Quincy, Ichigo's cousin, with his hands balled into fists as well, and she hears him muttering to himself. She catches only a few words, but it is enough for her to guess the rest of it.

"You better not fuck this up Ichigo, we have plans to make."

Suddenly, the noise in the room stops abruptly, each and every person looking at Ichigo to see the chains have stopped flying around in the barriers surrounding her hopefully future fiancé. They simply hover in place before half the chains begin to glow blue and other half seem to absorb the light as the black seems to get even darker than is naturally possible while expanding outwards. Then white energy flows down the links, from the arrow-head tips to the stripes that are each leading to the ring at the center of the chest plate that Ichigo is wearing. Like creeks and streams
At first nothing else happens, then the chains gently fall to the floor before retreating into the armored back of Ichigo. When the last of the chains disappear, the armor begins to dissipate into mist as well, until nothing but the horned helmet remains. That is when Ichigo lifts up his head and she sees two crimson orbs staring at her from within the helmet. Then the helmet shatters, revealing an exhausted but normal-looking Ichigo. He looks at her and gives her a smile then he falls flat on his back, setting off an avalanche of anxious family and friends rushing to surround the still active barriers.

Gaining control of the situation quickly, Yoruichi whistles to the shouting teens and pre-teens. "Shut it! Let's see if he is alright or not!"

"My head is pounding Yoruichi, so if it would be possible, please for the love of all that is holy, please quit whistling and shouting." He groans out weakly.

Snapping open his fan, the former Squad Twelve Captain grins at his old feline friend. "See Yoruichi, nothing to worry about. He's his usual grouchy self as always."

Flicking a Hadō Number One at Kisuke, Yoruichi quietly growls at him. "Next time, I'll aim lower Kisuke."

Soon the Devils and Shinigami lower the various barriers surrounding Ichigo and the first ones to reach him are Rias and Yuzu. Yuzu's eyes grow wide as she watches the crimson-haired woman grab her brother's upper body and pull him into a tight hug. Her face gets red when she hears certain things being said to her brother, her confirmation comes from Yoruichi suddenly laughing out loud.

"Well Ichigo, if that wasn't an incentive, I don't know what more she has to do."

"Ichigo, why is she saying those kinds of things to you?" Yuzu's question marks the beginning of a conversation Ichigo isn't ready to have right now.

"Yuzu, why don't you and the others come to my room after I've rested a bit, and I'll tell you guys everything then. Right now I need to soak my sore body in a nice hot bath."

Struggling to stand, Ichigo waves his hand to the approaching Kisuke. "Not now Geta-Boshi, I need some time."

His father steps in front of him and takes his arms, then in a not often used voice, he looks his son in the eyes. "What happened in there Son?"

Swallowing, Ichigo looks his dad in the face, with grief evident in his own. "Saying goodbye, Dad."

The crowd of people then opens up so that Rias can help Ichigo walk away from them. Merti follows at a slower pace behind him, and closes the door as they leave the now silent room.

Karin turns to her sister and prods her for an answer. "What did she say to him Zu?"

Yuzu's face goes deep red again, and she squeaks out a different answer to avoid telling her twin what she heard exactly. "I'd rather not say Karin. I...I think we should wait until we talk to him again."
"It couldn't have been that bad Yuzu." Tatsuki says as she stares at the closed door.

Yoruichi and Venelana both begin to make their way through the group of teens. "Come on everyone, let's get something to eat and give them a few hours to rest. Now that we are all here, well, until Akeno and the rest of Rias's peerage arrive, why don't we get your rooms set up and then we will hear the rest of his story after dinner."

"Ah, Yoruichi, what's a peerage?" Tatsuki asks as she walks beside a silent Orihime.

A male voice laughs from behind her, and she turns around to see a red-headed male from one of the peerages walking with them. "Arisawa, we will tell you the basics at dinner, but it would take more than a week to teach you everything, even for one such as you."

"Such as me? What does that mean?"

Conor and his wife, Hanako, give the karate champion a startled look before Yoruichi clarifies it for them. "I haven't had a chance to tell Ichigo yet Conor. I want to give them a few days to decide on what they want to do."

Before she can ask her Sensei what's going on, the room fills with maids and butlers as they each bow before a person and asks them to follow them to their room. Wanting to keep Ichigo's friends and family calm, Amyntas gives them his reassurances.

"Fear not, each of your rooms are located in the same wing and hallway as Ichigo and Rias's room. So you will be very close to them."

He doesn't react to the shocked looks on their faces as once again Yoruichi ushers them out of the room along with their guides. Only Isshin, Kisuke, Sirzechs and Venelana are left in the family room, the only woman in their group turning to Isshin and giving him a slight nod of her head.

"Isshin, I understand that Yoruichi is going to be representing Ichigo in his negotiations. Is there anything you would like to speak to me about before we begin to formalize the details?"

"Only one. I want him to live a long, happy life Venelana, my kids are my life and all I want is for them to have a life I didn't have, one of peace if it's possible from now on."

"I believe Yoruichi and Rukia have both stated that is an impossible request as much as they wish otherwise, but I will do my best."

Suddenly, the goofy Isshin returns in full swing when he begins to chuckle as he walks away from them. "Now who is going to explain to them why my son is sleeping in the same room as that pretty young lady?"

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Ichigo lies on a very soft body, the person behind him rinsing his chest off with hot water. The two have been soaking in the tub for the last thirty minutes in silence. Since their arrival to their room, other than asking Merti to make sure they aren't disturbed, neither have said a word. He only had to give Rias a look of promise to make her understand that he wasn't ready at the time to speak about what had happened.

"If you want to know Rias, I'll tell you now."

Stroking his chest with a lazy hand, she moves her lips next to his ear. "Only if you are really ready to, Ichigo."
Taking hold of her hand, he places it over his heart. "I had to say goodbye to someone I had thought of as an old friend today Rias, the person I thought he was turned out to be a lie. Zangetsu and I… we had to…” He takes a deep breath before he finishes. "We basically ended his existence."

"Who Ichigo, I don't understand."

Keeping her hand on his heart, he begins to tell her about the Old Man. "I first met him on the last day I was trapped in the Shattered Shaft; I thought he was my Zanpakutō spirit, but it turns out he was my mother's Quincy bloodline all along. He took the place of Zangetsu and acted as my guide all throughout our rescue of Rukia, and then the battles afterwards; he…he even used me so he could take my Shinigami powers from me and hope that only my Quincy side survived. He didn't count on my great-grandfather's seal on my mother's Devil bloodline breaking; thankfully they awakened in time for me to defeat Aizen. If not, there might have been a different outcome to the Winter War."

Pausing, Ichigo turns his head back slightly so he can see her face and eyes; seeing her give him a reassuring look, he turns back and finishes. "I wish it hadn't ended the way it did, but he gave us no choice. If he couldn't turn me, he was going to kill me and Zangetsu for his master, even if it meant his death as well. His master is the one I now know is truly responsible for my Mother's death, the man I intend to kill one day."

Rias's arms tighten around him. "Ichigo…If you are going to go after this man, then you aren't going alone."

"Rias…"

"NO! No more doing things on your own Ichigo! You have responsibilities not only to me, but to your friends, your family, and your comrades! JUST STOP! Why can't you understand this. You. Aren't. Alone! Not anymore. I thought we had an understanding Ichigo." Her voice softens, but he can still hear the tone of hurt in her voice.

Turning around so his hands are gripping the edge of the tub on either side of her head, he goes to speak, but stops. Staring deep in her eyes, he sees it for the first time, her resolve and her anger at him. The narrowing of her blue orbs and the silent snarl forming on her lips makes him realize one other fact.

"You look beautiful, even when you're getting ready to fight with me." He changes the subject on her.

"Wh…what Ichigo?" His plan works.

"You. Look. Beautiful." He then slowly begins to take in the sight under him, seeing her face flush under his sudden scrutiny, he closes the distance without warning.

"Ichigo, if you are going to try and tal…MPHMM!" He covers her lips lightly before he begins to deepen their kiss.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she smiles inside. 'This isn't over by a long shot Ichigo.'

Pulling away, he looks at her. "You win Rias. If there is one thing I have begun to understand thanks to my true Zanpakutō, it is this: don't ignore your instincts. My instincts right now are telling me that trying to argue with you or anyone else I care about is going to be useless. So I promise you, I won't do anything alone."

Cupping his face, she holds him in place. "I'm not going to stop you from seeking vengeance
Ichigo, but I won't allow you to do it by yourself. You don't know how important you are to our people; you and the twins are literally the next ones in line in keeping the Damned souls from escaping. Without you or the girls, the magic needed to keep the Black Tower intact weakens to the point, from what your Uncle told us, that they would be able to escape at will if he were to die without an heir. Just promise me one thing Ichigo, that no matter what, you won't refuse help or someone teaching you what you need to become a powerful enough Devil to survive. That is all I ask of you."

"Are we really seen as that important?"

"Yes Ichigo, your position in our society will make what we are going to do, a lot easier now that you are a Devil and a noble as well."

"I would have done it even if I wasn't a noble Rias. You know I don't give a crap…"

"Language Ichigo, that will be one of our first lessons for you. Your language when you get angry or even agitated is atrocious." She chastises him with a nip on his shoulder.

He suddenly grins at her and whispers in her ear. "I can think of a few appropriate moments when my language wouldn't be an issue, ehmm Rias?"

Her face goes into shock at the implications of his words, only for the moment to get ruined when they hear someone knocking on their bedroom door despite Merti's orders to keep it from happening. Growling lowly, he is about to shout at whoever it is to go away, when a young woman's voice speaks up, a voice he recognizes as that of his youngest sister Yuzu, just as she opens his door and walks into his room.

"Ichi-nii? Ichi-nii are you in here?"

"Fuck!" Ichigo hisses out as he tries to discreetly get out of the bathtub, only for his girlfriend to make it worse.

"In here Yuzu, your brother and I just finished our bath."

"ICHI-NII!"

"Yuzu I can explain!"

"RIAS-NEE!"

"Yes Yuzu? Don't be shy, come on in."

"Are you nuts!? That's my sister Rias!"

"Ah, no…no Rias-nee, I'll just wait out here."

Fumbling to get a towel around his waist, he turns to see his vixen of a girlfriend getting out of the tub with a big smile on her face. She walks over to him and pats his cheek.

"Language Ichigo, language." She begins to laugh as she wraps her own towel around her body before she walks out.

"Rias one, King zero." His Zanpakutō's laughter is heard loud in his head as he walks out to see a very red-faced Yuzu standing there.

Rias stops before the blushing Yuzu and looks at the younger woman. "I'm sorry we were taking so
long Yuzu, Ichigo and I had things to discuss. Why don't you sit on the bed while we get ready for dinner?"

Nodding her head, she glares at her brother, but quickly averts her eyes when she remembers he is just wearing a towel. Ichigo sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose, wondering how Yuzu had gotten past Merti. Opening his drawer and pulling out a clean set of underwear, he turns around to head back into the bathroom and change, only to find Merti standing right behind him. Doing everything in his power to keep himself from jumping, he tilts his head at the woman that will run his future household.

"Ah, yes Merti?" His voice remains even, though he glances rather pointedly towards Yuzu who is sitting on his bed and watching Rias dress.

"Lord Amyntas has decided to make dinner a formal affair Ichigo; as such, Lady Yoruichi was... rather insistent that I personally bring you several kimono from which you may choose your evening attire from." It doesn't surprise him in the least that Yoruichi was responsible for letting Yuzu into his room, and judging by Merti's bland tone of voice, she is fully aware of Yoruichi's meddling.

Resisting the urge to palm his face, he watches as Merti turns to address the other two occupants of his room.

"Lady Rias, Lady Yuzu, your attire will be waiting for you in Lady Rukia's room, as will the attires for the other ladies." Turning to the door, she waves in six maids who each have a different colored outfit draped over their arms, and they head towards the suddenly apprehensive Ichigo.

Rias, after putting on a plain yukata, turns to Yuzu and takes the younger teen's hand. "Well come along Yuzu, why don't we leave your brother in the capable hands of Merti? It seems our talk will have to wait until dinner."

"I…I just got here Rias-nee." Yuzu begins to pout and tries to use her puppy eyes on Rias and her brother.

Rolling his eyes inwardly, Ichigo approaches a slowly smiling Yuzu, only for him to dash her hopes. "Yuzu, why don't you go with Rias and get dressed with the others, I'm sure you girls have things to talk about anyways. Rias, just not that until we've had a chance to tell them what has happened since I got to Kuoh, okay?"

Holding onto Yuzu's hand, she gives him a quick peck on his cheek. "He looks good in black, red and white Merti."

Waving towards two of the maids standing outside the room, the Elf bows back slightly. "We will do our best Lady Rias. Come now Ichigo, let's get you dressed."

"W-Wait, I can dress myself dammit Merti! Rias! Help…" His voice is cut off as the door closes behind Rias and the visibly embarrassed Yuzu.

Walking side by side, the older teen Devil and the quiet human follow the two maids to a room where a number of muted voices can be heard emanating from. Before opening the door, Yuzu lays her hand on Rias's hand.

"Rias-nee, are you and my brother…you know…dating?"

"No Yuzu, we both wish we were, but it's a bit more complicated than that. Why don't we get dressed and enjoy dinner? Ichigo, I and my peerage will tell you and the others what your brother
has been doing since he came to us."

"Rias, I think you should know that Orihime-nee might be in love with Ichi-nii." The youngest of
the Kurosaki siblings says sadly.

"I'll let Ichigo handle that if it's true. I think she deserves to hear it from him first if that is the
case." She replies kindly.

As they open the door a high pitched yelp is heard. "Stop moving so much Momo, I can't pin your
hair correctly if you keep fidgeting on me."

"I'm sorry Rukia, but I've only been to one formal dinner with nobles, and that was as Shiro's escort
for the evening." The Squad Five Lieutenant says as she sits in front of a mirrored vanity.

Rias looks to see Rukia clad in only a light robe, while Yoruichi and Venelana are both helping
the maids finish dressing a radiant Orihime and a blushing Tatsuki who stares at herself in shock as her
own beauty is reflected back by another mirror. Then the Crimson Ruin Princess spies both Akeno
and Sōna coming out of a back room with a fully dressed Koneko in between them. The young
Neko glares at the older women before she stalks out of the room.

"What's wrong with Koneko?" Rias says as she sits next to Momo.

Akeno sighs as she pulls out a deep red kimono, with green vines running down the front and along
the sleeves, and begins to help her mistress get dressed. "It seems our warnings to your newest
Pawn went unheeded Buchou. The moment he saw Akiko-san, he began muttering to himself
something along the lines of 'oppai, lots and lots of oppai'. He only stopped after she flashed him
her wedding ring and mentioned her grandson Takeshi in passing. Issei seemed to sulk for a bit
after that. At least there seems to be lines that even he won't cross, thankfully."

Rias cringes inside as she knows what Ichigo and some of the other men of the Estate might do to
Issei if he doesn't keep his antics to himself. Looking in the mirror, she and Akeno help her put on
her kimono in record time, then she rises from her seat. "Where is he Akeno?"

"I believe he is in the main library Buchou."

"Help Karin and Yuzu get dressed then, I'll be back as soon as I can. I need Issei to understand that
tonight is not a night for such behavior."

Most of the gathered women watch as the Gremory Heir walks out of the room without another
word. Yoruichi looks at her counterpart and quietly asks what will happen if Rias rescinds her
pieces from the boy.

"He would die." Venelana replies frankly.

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Yuuto looks up as the changing room door, guarded by one of the Cerberus, opens and a kimono-
clad Rias steps into the room. Looking at the Guardian of the Naberius Estate, she nods her head to
the Cerberus. "Please, may I have a moment alone with my Pawn?"

"Of course Lady Rias." The huge beast easily slides out the door, leaving the Gremory King with
her Knight and new Pawn.

Looking at Yuuto, she smiles as she takes in his kimono of browns and gold, her Pawn on the other
hand is dressed in a deep blue kimono. Giving her young Knight a signal, he quietly gets up from
his chair, taking his book with him as he bows to her before leaving through the same door. As he closes it, he gives his fellow peerage member a look of encouragement.

'Take care Issei.'

"Buchou, you look beautiful." Issei openly praises as he stares at her chest with awe.

Feelings she has never had before startle Rias, as she closes the top of her kimono unconsciously while giving her Pawn a stern frown. "Sit Issei, we must talk about what I expect of you tonight."

Swallowing nervously, the reincarnated Devil takes a seat near his Master, her face framed by still damp red hair, and her eyes lost in deep thought as she ponders how to get her instructions through his thick skull. Knowing from both Ichigo and his friends, that Ichigo's Hollowfied Zanpakutō is only a glimpse of the true carnage that her boyfriend can easily lay upon anyone he feels is a threat to his family and friends. Also, Ichigo knows who the young man is, and said young man's reputation doesn't help her cause. Tucking her arms under her breasts and not seeing the slight widening of Issei's eyes as they focus immediately on her emphasized cleavage, Rias begins to speak to him.

"Issei-kun, tonight I must implore you to keep your eyes higher than neck level at all times. You are going to be surrounded by very powerful members of the Seventy-Two Pillars, as well as at least two of the current Maou: my brother Sirzechs, and Ichigo's second cousin Serafall among them. Also, there are several humans here that are of great importance to Ichigo, and it would not look well on your part at all if you were to be seen staring inappropriately at them. Do you understand what I am saying Issei-kun?" As she gazes sternly at him, she sees the slight glaze on his eyes and she realizes he is staring distractedly at her slightly swelling chest.

"ISSEI-KUN!" She yells, snapping the Pawn out of his daydream.

"Ah…ah…sorry Buchou, what did you say?"

Pinching her nose, she reiterates her instructions for him as well as a warning to him. "Do not embarrass me Issei, or I won't be able to keep you out of trouble."

'I will do my best Buchou." The young man says as he smiles confidently at her.

'Buchou must like me.'

'This is not going to end well.'

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Amyntas stands with Serafall and Sirzechs when he sees Yoruichi enter the room wearing what he can only describe as the most beautiful kimono he has seen in years. Her purple hair is done up with several Kanzashi, keeping her hair high upon her head, and her yellow eyes are brought out by the dark red kimono that she wears. Her obi is of the purest white silk, tied behind her back to reveal her beautiful figure as he takes in her complete form. Then she smiles as she spots the three Ultimate Class powered Devils standing together, though she doesn't fail to see Ichigo's 'uncle' staring at her with awe.

"Lord Naberius, Lucifer-sama, Leviathan-sama." She says while bowing deeply to the high ranking Devils.

"Come now Yoruichi, I thought we would be considered friends by now." Sirzechs says as he too had seen his friend's unusual staring.
Serafall also bails out the quiet Amyntas by adding her own compliment. "I would be honored to have you as a friend Yoruichi; you did help my cousin achieve his Bankai after all."

The two Maou each sneak a glance at Amyntas as he slowly takes Yoruichi's hand in his and kisses the top of it. "Yoruichi."

"Amyntas." It's hard to miss the slight blush that appears on her face as she gives him a smile.

Before they can proceed, a shout from down one of the hallways is heard. "I told you Ichigo you look fine, now stop bitching and deal with it already!"

"Oi Midget, I ain't used to clothes this fancy like your 'nniiissaaammaa'? I d…"

"Umph!"

"Don't ever insult Nii-sama again Berry-kun or else!"

The door slams open as Rukia and Ichigo both enter at the same time; the sight of the two arguing back and forth bring back fond memories to the Shinigami already present in the room. Isshin sighs, remembering that at one time he had thought the petite noble might be the one for his son. After watching him distance himself from Tatsuki after his late wife's death, he had never thought his son would ever be capable of that kind of love again.

Yoruichi and Kisuke both sigh for the same reason: they know that the two partners are inseparable, even if they aren't married, they are still best friends, something that gives the two older Shinigami flashbacks to their own early days in Soul Society together.

Tessai stands with his two young charges, Jinta and Ururu, the three of them having dressed well before the others, being used to doing things quickly because of their lifestyle where time is always of the essence. Though it was not without a lot of complaining on Jinta's part, at least until it was mentioned to him that Yuzu would be here as well. Looking at Ichigo, Tessai can see Masaki's kindness and courage in the young noble in front of him, something that few nobles in Soul Society have these days. One of those rare few nobles happens to be standing next to Ichigo as she twists his ear so she can yell in it.

"I told you I was sorry for that Ichigo, but you did deserve it for calling me a Midget!"

"And I told you, you never did until just now you crazed bunny freak!"

"You two want a room?" Momo says as she glides by them dressed in a bright turquoise kimono, tied with a golden yellow obi, her hair pinned up as well.

Both stop arguing suddenly as they realize the room is occupied by more than just a few people. Ichigo eyes are glued to the grinning werecat who is playfully tapping a finger to her chin. Rukia's eyes are also focused on her, and she knows that this won't end well at the next meeting of the Shinigami Women's Association.

"Yoruichi-san, we…we can explain…you see we…"

"Come now Rukia, I'm sure Renji will understand completely. Ichigo is after all the guy who saved you; I'm sure Renji wouldn't mind sharing you with him, right?"

Slapping his hand to his face, Ichigo grits out to his Sensei. "I'm not interested in her like that Yoruichi, and you know damn well why."
"What!? I'm not good enough for you, is that what you're saying you over tall fruit!?"

"How in the hell do you get that out of what I said you under-short Lilliputian!?"

The peerages watch in rapt amusement that the future Lord of the Naberius Clan and his Shinigami friend absolutely love fighting with one another, no matter who's around.

Akiko leans towards her husband with a mischievous smirk. "I wonder where he got that from?"

Snorting silently, Daiki grins as he too remembers the fights that Kiku and Vincent would have over the simplest of things. He glances at a far corner, high up the wall; remembering one such argument that nearly cost Vincent his head when he accidentally insulted Kiku on her taste in wine when she was learning to become a sommelier. If it hadn't been for Akio being in the room that day, who knows if the room will still be standing today. He and the others hear the doors from the other hallway opening, and when he looks up, he can see why his King's grandson chose his mate as the lady in question enters the room.

"Holy Shit!" Both Hollowfied Zanpakutō and wielder are in agreement when Rias enters the room and locks her blue eyes with his brown.

Whispering angrily, Rukia elbows the dumbfounded Devil next to her. "Good grief, get over there Berry before she thinks something is wrong."

Not saying a word, he does as his partner instructs him to do. As he comes and stands before Rias, he can't help the first words out of his mouth.

"You look gorgeous Rias." He says for her ears only, but her blush is seen by the whole room.

Standing before him, Rias's kimono is deep red, the green vines running down her sleeves forming intricate spiraling patterns as they end as Rose petals. Her yellow obi, also tied in the back, help emphasize her considerably full figure. The final touches are the gold chains braided in her hair to keep it hanging loosely over her shoulders, and away from her face. Her eyes are only slightly accentuated by makeup, drawing his sight to her blue eyes as he stares deep into them.

"Thank you Ichigo. You look handsome yourself." She slides her arm through his. "Escort me Ichigo."

Taking the hint, he walks with Rias to where her brother, his cousin and his great-grandfather are standing. Both the teens bow deeply to them as well as giving them a formal greeting before they raise their heads.

"I see some of Merti's lessons have come in handy Ichigo." Amyntas chuckles out.

The famous scowl comes back as he tosses a look at the smirking Elf who stands by the door, waiting to allow the rest of the teens entry after Rias and the twins are done with their greetings. Karin and Yuzu had watched the entire exchange between the two, and both are openly shocked at their brother's seemingly new attitude towards women in general. Soon they are listening to the Elfin women as she whispers in their ears, giving them the same instructions she had taught Ichigo earlier.

Ichigo and Rias stand to one side waiting for them as they move towards the three Devils, Yuzu visibly nervous, but Karin with her brother's demeanor as she walks with a sense of purpose and a hint of attitude. Both she and Yuzu bow and give their own greetings to their hosts, then move quickly to the side. Soon Ichigo catches sight of the rest of his friends as Merti allows them to enter; the next ones to come and give their hosts their formal greetings are Orihime and Tatsuki,
both dressed in elegant and beautiful kimonos.

"Suki! Holy…" "Language Ichigo."

"Wow."

Orihime giggles as she walks up to the group, wearing an orange kimono and a yellow obi, her eyes sparkle with a hint of wetness in them. She had suspected that Ichigo and Rias have something between them, but now that she has seen the look on his face...

'At least he is happy.' She walks with Tatsuki holding her arm, keeping her from fleeing the room like she wants to.

Tatsuki gives her oldest friend a glare for his comment, but can't help her own blush as she walks up to three of the Underworld's highest ranking rulers. Her black kimono and white obi are homage to her friend's Shinigami heritage. She and Orihime bow and then move away as the last of Ichigo's friends make their way to the three to pay their respects as well.

Ichigo can't help snorting as Uryū is dressed in his cleanest, whitest and most overly starched Quincy uniform, he even smiles when the familiar eyeglass push is given in his direction only.

'Jackass.'

Chad is next to Uryū, he however is wearing a white kimono tied off with a red obi in honor of his powers. A fact that many of the servants hadn't been aware of at first, until they accidentally overheard Orihime talking to Akeno about their part in the Winter War. That had made the staff hurry to create a fitting kimono for Chad to honor his courage and his friendship with Ichigo.

As they move away, Rias's peerage enter the room next, things going well until Ichigo sees a new face among them. Scowling as the face tickles his memory, he is pulled away by a now nervous Rias as she tries to keep the two of them separated for as long as possible. Guiding him to the dining room table, she and Ichigo are given seats near the head of the table where Sirzechs has deferred the head position to Amyntas, the Clan's leader. Rias and Ichigo sit to his right, while Karin and Yuzu sit to his left. Sirzechs and Serafall sit at the opposite end of the table as visiting leaders. After that, everyone is allowed to sit where they please. When everyone is seated, Amyntas stands with a crystal goblet in his hand.

"It has been many years since we have used this dining room for any formal gatherings, the last one was in celebration of the marriage between my son Vincent and Ichigo's, Yuzu's and Karin's maternal grandmother Kiku. I…I wish I could say something profound about today, but all I can say is that I am deeply grateful that I can finally be with my great-grandchildren."

A chorus of 'hear, hear's' are made by his peerage and his son's peerage. The younger participants silently lift their own glasses towards him, waiting until he takes the first sip of his wine. When he does, they each take their own sips as well, signaling the staff to start serving dinner to them. Amyntas sits down and looks first at Ichigo and then the twins, before he finally allows himself to close his eyes and give silent thanks to his son and daughter-in-law for having Masaki.

"Ah, Uncle Amyntas?" Yuzu asks hesitantly.

"Yes dear?"

"Are we really Devils?"

"Ichigo is, but you and your sister have yet to have your bloodline awakened like your brother has.
Your brother can help you unlock your bloodline, since he has already unlocked his own Devil bloodline."

Ichigo snaps his head towards his uncle in anger, and he lets his feelings on that matter be known then. "Me? Well if that's the case, then hell no to them becoming like me."

"You don't exactly have a choice at this point my boy." Isshin says from his place down the table.

The three siblings snap their heads at their father. Their reactions are different for each: Ichigo ready to explode on him, Yuzu confused, and Karin with a look of excitement on her face. The father of the Kurosaki kids looks at his only son and for the first time in the Kurosaki siblings' lives, they witness the weariness in Isshin's eyes.

"Ichigo, no matter what you try and do to protect them, they are going to face our world sooner or later. Since the moment you first started to unlock your Shinigami bloodline, and even more so now that the seal on your Devil bloodline is broken. The genie is out of the bottle so to speak. Don't talk, just listen. You can't, I repeat, you can't always be there to protect them, and you know this all too well." His glance to a certain burnt-orange-haired teen quietly eating her food gives Ichigo pause in his argument.

Taking deep calming breaths in an attempt to control his temper, Ichigo opens his eyes and looks at his own father reluctantly. "I thought you of all people wouldn't let me do this Goat-Face, why the sudden change?"

His father waves his hand around the table to help emphasize his point. "Look around you Ichigo, what do you see? Devils, Shinigami, and humans with spiritual powers. Son, your sisters have been or always will be surrounded by powerful beings of both the Living World and the Spiritual World. You and I can't keep them out of it any longer Ichigo, and no matter what your Mother's wishes were, we can't ignore the fact that they are just like you, well except for the Hollow that is your Zanpakutō. Do you see what I'm saying Ichigo? They need to start learning now how to control their own powers. This time I won't keep them in the dark and I won't let you do it either. So you'll have to choose, but not tonight, what you and your sisters are going to do. Keep them powerless and always having to depend on us to keep them safe, or allow them to grow so they can become stronger like you, Orihime, Chad, Uryū and Tatsuki."

Swallowing the bitter feeling in his throat, Ichigo looks at both his sisters, knowing how much easier it would have been if his Dad had told him the truth back then; after their little get-together this morning, he finally understands his father's hesitance now, and why he cannot ignore what his sisters are going to become. Looking at Rukia, he sees her give him a nod as her answer, then he looks to each of his friends. Orihime, Chad and Uryū all give him the same answer as Rukia. Then as he is about to look at his sisters, he stops when he feels a spike in the air around him.

'Not her too!?' He looks to see a visibly pissed Tatsuki glaring at him yet again, and his mouth opens before he can stop himself.

"Tatsuki? You too?"

"Of course you dope! I'm just a late bloomer as Yoruichi-sensei says."

The woman in question quirks an eyebrow at him before explaining to him what his next surprise is. "Tatsuki is coming into her own powers Ichigo, and no, there isn't anything you can do to stop it from happening. But it's nice of you to finally start wondering why else she's here Berry-head."

"Well, didn't see that one coming." His Zanpakutō spirit mutters in his head.
'Ya think! Am I destined to drag all my friends down with me or something?'

"No Ichigo, you were just the catalyst for their own developments, it's really Kisuke's fault if you think about it, and the fact that we all live in the current Jūreichi. Damn Hōgyoku also screwed over the lot of them as well."

'None of them are going to let me do it alone anymore, especially since Central Forty-Six's little fuck up. I'm pretty sure Rias said something to the Midget when they were getting dressed.'

Looking at his oldest friend, he shakes his head in defeat. "I'm gonna guess you and me are going to talk tomorrow after I'm done with the twins?"

"Damn right we are Ichigo. I'm not standing on the sidelines anymore, and I'm not letting Hime out of my sight anymore either!" She replies with determination.

"Fine, you all win, tomorrow, Yuzu and Karin are going to come to my room and we will seriously talk about what we are going to do. Tatsuki, you and I will talk in the afternoon after I do some training with Rias and my grandfather's peerage."

Seeing all three nod their heads in acquiescence, he sighs as he grabs his own glass and downs it in a single gulp before a polite cough is heard from across the table from him. Looking to see his youngest sister looking at him, he arches an eyebrow at her.

"Something wrong Yuzu?"

"Ah, are we going to hear what happened to you now?"

"Oh…"

Clearing his throat, Amyntas chuckles then. "I believe your father should tell you exactly what happened that night Yuzu. I think it would be easier if we started at the beginning after your brother's battle with Gotei Thirteen's traitor."

Karin and Yuzu both look at the guilty looking Isshin, but he smirks as an evil thought comes to him. "I wasn't alone in this Yuzu, Karin. I did have help, and those three are also just as guilty as your dear old dad!"

The looks of shock and betrayal evident on Kisuke, Tessai and Yoruichi's faces are too much for Ichigo as he breaks out laughing. "See, I told you he was crazy, but nnnoooo, none of you believed us."

Yoruichi is the first to try and kill Isshin, but Tessai and Kisuke both hold her down as they send their own messages to the former Shiba.

"You told me to suck it up back there this morning Isshin, now you throw us under the bus just to save your own ass from your kids!" The shouten owner complains.

"Shameful Isshin, shameful." The former Kidō Commander states with disappointment.

Orihime and Rukia both groan out at Isshin's antics, Momo is stunned by the former Captain's behavior and Chad just shakes his head. Tatsuki leans on her hand and mutters to herself about things never changing.

"Are all Shinigami this crazy my dear?" Zeoticus asks his wife.
"Most are dear, most are." Venelana chuckles as she begins to listen to the story with the rest of the room.

Yoruichi huffs in anger as she decides to tell them the early part of the story, starting from when Kisuke showed up back at the shouten in disguise and with Ichigo covered in a Kidō powered blanket. How he had told her that Central Forty-Six was going to start looking for Ichigo after he explained to the other shouten occupants that Aizen was dead, and not sealed as planned. How he refused to say a word of what had happened, and just said that if anyone came looking, he and Ichigo hadn't come back yet. How they had hidden Ichigo in a secret room in the shouten that no one but them knew about, a room right next door to the healing Arrancars.

"Wait, you saved the Arrancars too!" Ichigo chokes out.

Kisuke, using his annoying instructional voice explains his reasons to his protégé. "Not all of them so don't panic! Just the ones that we were confident wouldn't try to attack us afterwards. Some of the Arrancar were screwed over pretty badly by Aizen that day. They deserved a second chance if we could give them one. Plus, we were hoping they would help mitigate the power vacuum left behind in Hueco Mundo due to Aizen's death."

"Did you see Nelliel?" Ichigo looks somewhat worried at the thought of his rather childish friend.

"We see her at least once a month Ichigo." Orihime pipes up. "She stays with me at my apartment, but she hasn't been to Karakura since my adoption... it's strange, since she's usually around to make her reports to Kisuke by now."

The room sees Ichigo relax at the news; Rias takes his hand and nudges him. "Something you want to share about this Nelliel person?"

"She saved Orihime and I when I was battling the Quinto Espada, Nnoitra Gilga. He was going to kill me when she forcefully regained her adult form to fight him. She was the former Tercera Espada before he ambushed her and cracked her mask, which resulted in her losing almost all her powers. She was beating him soundly until her adult form gave out. Luckily Kenpachi came by at that point and took over the fight, so we could find and rescue Orihime after she was snatched away again."

Orihime and Uryū both pale as they remember the dome and the events that took place there. Sneaking a glance at the healer, Ichigo can see the sadness in her eyes; whether it is because of him or Ulquiorra, he cannot bring himself to ask. The term 'Ignorance is bliss' seems to apply perfectly to this situation.

"Not your fault Ichigo, he was keeping you from your promise to Tatsuki."

'But the way he reached for her Zangetsu, it meant something, and I took it away.'

"Then we get stronger so we don't have put her or any of them through that pain again."

"Ichigo. Ichigo!" He hears someone calling his name.

"Sorry, what?"

Karin gives her brother a speculative look as she repeats her question to him. "So what happened?"

"Happened?"

"Yes, you moron, how did you get to Kuoh?"
"Ohhhh. Right. Well I guess I should start with when I woke up in Austria…"

Over the next two hours, Ichigo, and now and then Rias, Akeno, Yuuto and Koneko add their own comments or dispute said comments about certain events of his stay at the Gremory mansion. The looks he get from his sisters and Tatsuki don't bode well for him when they finally learn of his 'official status' as Rias's hugging pillow. Even the glare he gives to Rukia and Yoruichi aren't going to derail them from repeating that fact to the SWA when they get back. Yuzu and Orihime both admonish him for fighting the two armed thugs and putting himself in danger in the process when that part comes up, but Tatsuki and Chad only nod, knowing that their friend wouldn't have done any different, no matter what.

Soon they learn of yet another 'sister' as Orihime and the twins look at the white-haired Neko from Rias's peerage. Yuzu's eyes glow in excitement, Karin seems indifferent but curious about the young Devil. Orihime and Rukia are both smiling for different reasons however. Ichigo can see the smirk on the raven-haired Shinigami's face forming at the wealth of blackmail material she is getting on him. Orihime however is gushing on about how the Kurosaki-Shiba girls now outnumber the men in the family almost two to one. Then he comes to the point that he gulps before squeezing his future-bride's hand for strength.

"I know some of you know, and a few suspect what my relationship with Rias is, but the truth is that she is engaged to another Devil. Hold on before you get the wrong idea! I…we don't plan on letting that happen, which is why I will be challenging Riser Phenex to a duel a month from now."

The room grows eerily silent then, before Amyntas gives his great-grandson's personal assistant a look. "Merti, did you tell him of this?"

"I did Lord Naberius. When we were talking the other day, it came up, and I told him of certain customs and challenges he could use in order to free Lady Rias from her engagement. Lady Rias also knows of this, and has agreed that this would be the only way other than a Rating Game to get herself out of her predicament with everyone's honor intact."

"Ichigo." His uncle closes his eyes in thought.

"Yes Uncle Amyntas."

"You will need more than a few tricks to fight an immortal such as Riser. His Clan is nearly indestructible, hence the name Phenex, just as the immortal bird renews its life, so do the members of their Clan."

Materializing next to his wielder, Zangetsu's own face hardens in anger as he speaks.

"The King and I are not letting our Queen get married off to someone she obviously doesn't want to be with. So for the next month we want you to push us to the wall, and then push us through it. It ain't the first time we have faced the impossible and it certainly won't be the last. She belongs to Ichigo and I'll be damned if someone tries and takes her from him. Not anymore will I stand by and let someone else dictate his life, we will be making our own choices from now on. Got it Geta-Bōshi? No more sneaky bullshit plans, no more doing things Soul Society's way. As far as I see it, they tossed us aside, so we don't fucking owe them jack shit."

"Then Zangetsu, you better be true to your word. If you want our help, you will get your wish." Akiko says as her tails bristle at his challenge.
Smirking, the Hollowfied Zanpakutō sees each of the Naberius peerage members give him and Ichigo nods of acceptance. Satisfied, he looks at the Shinigami in the room with a challenge in his eyes.

Rukia snorts at his provocation. "Fine Zangetsu, if I have to get Berry in shape for you then I'll help you kick his ass as much as you want. Momo and I will get his Kidō up to at least par with a Lieutenant, and I'm sure between Tessai-san and Kisuke, he will at least do a Captain proud."

Momo begins grinning. "I get to help train Ichigo-kun, yes!"

Yoruichi's gleaming eyes make Ichigo smirk in her direction. "So Sensei, I guess a daily game of 'tag' to help me get my speed up to snuff then?"

"Oh my dear student, that is just the tip of the iceberg of the plans I have for you." Yoruichi's evil smirk indicates that her words are not a threat, but a promise.

"Then I guess that is all we can ask for, right Zangetsu?"

The Zanpakutō spirit places his hand on Ichigo's shoulder; a move that Ichigo knows is reminiscent of the Old Man.

"Well King, guess all we have to do is pour your Reiatsu into that blank Asauchi then, and we will get my true blade."

"Tonight Zangetsu, for now let's just enjoy the rest of our dinner."

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Ichigo and Rias are standing away from the others, the various humans, Devils, Mythical beings and Shinigami scattered throughout the room talking to each other and the peerage members. Holding a glass of wine, Rias sees the burnt-orange-haired healer sitting by herself on one of the terraces, looking lost in her thoughts. She turns to see Ichigo deep in thought too as his gaze falls on the lonely healer.

"You should talk to her Ichigo. I'm sure there are things the two of you have to talk about."

He sighs quietly. "I always knew, like I knew with Rukia, but…but I don't even know how to bring it up Rias."

"You're her brother now Ichigo, family always understands. I'll be here when you get back."

Looking down at Rias, Ichigo knows now why she is the one for him. A fighter like Rukia, with a heart like the woman he is going to speak to; it is what makes Rias the perfect woman for him. Bending down, he kisses her cheek then makes his way over to the Shun Shun Rikka user.

"Hey."

Slightly startled, Orihime breaks out into a blush. "Kuro…"

"It's Ichigo, Orihime. We…we are brother and sister now."

Sitting down next to her, both teens sit in silence for a spell before he breaks the quiet. "Orihime, I'm sorry you had to find out this way."

She gives him a wan smile. "She is beautiful Ichigo."
"You are too Orihime."

"But…"

"But you know I see you as one of my closest friends, just not more than that." He quietly ends.

Looking down, she takes his hand in hers and threads her fingers through his. "I've always hoped that one day I could do this with you Ichigo, but…but when I saw your face before dinner, I knew I couldn't make it light up the way it did for her. It will hurt for a while, but I know she makes you happy in a way that Rukia and I can't. Don't worry about me, please?"

Ichigo taps her head lightly. "You nut-job, you're family now, it comes with the job as the oldest brother."

Giggling, she lays her head on his shoulder. "So does this mean I'm a Naberius as well?"

"Do you want to be?" He jokes back.

Sitting up, she taps her chin with her finger. "Well, we are siblings, so I guess being a pseudo-Devil wouldn't be so bad."

"At least you have an out in case the Shiba Clan Elders try to marry you off to some stuck-up noble behind Kūkaku's back." He jokes.

Her eyes go wide then as she panics. "They wouldn't do that, would they!?"

Laughing, he grabs the healer and hugs her tight. "Not as long as I'm breathing. If and when you are ready to get married, you know that whoever it is, is going to have the worst interviews of his life. Between me, Uryū and Chad, I don't think anyone is going to pass muster with us."

She sniffs a bit, burying her face in his shoulders. "Thank you Ichigo." She says as she holds him tight.

Before he can respond, a shout comes from the other side of the room.

"ISSEI!!"

Standing up suddenly, the name, the face, it all clicks in his head. Turning quickly, he sees Tatsuki holding the boy to the ground in a submissive hold, anger on her face as she is getting ready to pummel him.

"What did you do Issei!?" Rias suddenly appears behind Tatsuki, trying to keep the karate champion from hitting him.

"I didn't do anything Buchou! All I did was ask who she was." He says as he points at Orihime.

"That's not what you said you pervert! I was standing there when you said 'who is the Devil with the gorgeous rack' to Daiki-san!"

'Oh shit!' Numerous people think as the room's air grows heavy, their eyes darting to Ichigo and seeing his eyes shadowed and head bowed.

Snapping his head up suddenly, Ichigo disappears and reappears over the cowering Issei, far too quickly for anyone to try and stop the fuming Devil. Grabbing him by the kimono, Ichigo again moves with a burst of Shunpo, reappearing on an empty balcony. Not even looking at anyone, not even the terrified Issei in his hand, Ichigo uses his other hand and sweeps open a Garganta. Despite
the screams in the room trying to stop him, he drags Issei in, and both of them are swallowed up by the black void before anyone can move.

"ICHIGO!"

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Two adult bodies lie still, both sweating from their just finished activities. The woman smiles at the man under her as rapid gulps of air escape his lungs.

"You are going to be the death of me yet Nelliel." The man breathes out heavily.

"Well, you wanted to spar Grimmjow. That's what you get when you challenge your betters." She lays a kiss on his cheek though.

"Che, whatever. So what shall we do now that we are…" He begins to smile as his hands begin to glide up her thighs.

"Oh, I thi…"

Both heads twist towards the sudden ocean of Reiatsu that appears not far from their position. War instincts kicking in, both of them quickly get up and get their clothes and Zanpakutō in order.

"You think it's whoever is taking Hollows Grimmjow?" Nelliel's eyes promise retribution as she looks towards the direction of the unknown Reiatsu.

"No, I…I think I recognize this Reiatsu, but it can't be." The former Sexta Espada says as he finishes putting Pantera on his hip and nods his readiness to the former Tercera.

Using Sonído, both Espada simultaneously arrive at the bottom of the nearest sand dune, using it as cover as they crawl up until they can see over the top. Their Reiatsu suppressed as much as possible, they look at the two figures below them, each hearing the words that come from the two unknowns.

"I'm…I'm sssoorry Senpai! I didn't mean it! I wa…"

"SHUT IT!"

Grimmjow and Nelliel give each other confused looks as they see a hulking figure in black armor glaring down at a mere human boy.

"What the fuck is going on Nelliel? Is it one of them?" Grimmjow whispers.

Shaking her head no, Nelliel whispers back. "No, the enemy is supposed to be wearing uniforms that are white. That down there isn't them; I don't know who or what that is. He has Reiatsu, but there is something else I can't identify. Both of them are giving off the same kind of energy though."

"Do you have any idea what Orihime has been through!?" That name is instantly recognized by both Hollows. "I won't let anyone hurt her again Issei Hyoudou! Not you, not Soul Society, not fucking anyone!"

Then the name the scared boy says makes both Espada react, but in different ways.

"I'M SORRY ICHIGO-SENPAI!"
"NOT YET YOU AREN'T! SHE IS MY FAMILY ISSEI! KEEP YOUR PERVERTED..."
The black armor shifts suddenly as killing intent fills the air behind him.

Without even thinking, Ichigo reacts to the threat behind him. Twisting around and summoning four set of chains that shoot up from the sands, he grabs and goes to stab the wild-eyed Grimmjow through his heart, only to stop when a familiar voice snaps him out of it.

"Stop, Itsygo!"

To everyone's surprise, he actually does stop attacking. When Grimmjow continues to struggle against his chains however, Ichigo pumps out more Reiatsu and Devil energy to bring the now shocked former Sexta to his knees, before turning to face the green-haired former Tercera.

"Nelliel." She stops dead at how harsh his voice is.

"I-Itsyo?"

The room is in chaos as the Devils, humans and other assorted beings try to figure out what just happened. Kisuke however is sitting in a corner by the window, deep in thought as he replays the events in his head.

'Hollowfied Zanpakutō, plus ultimate class Devil powers equal...well that is an interesting question to ask Zangetsu next time.'

"Dammit, dammit, dammit! I knew I should have left him behind, but we had no one to watch over him Akeno. No, I'm not blaming anyone but myself, so stop pouting, I should have known that something like this could happen, especially after I talked to him earlier." Rias is almost frantic with worry.

"Buchou, where did he go though? I've never seen that type of spell before." The black-haired sadist asks.

"It wasn't a spell Akeno-san; it is what Hollows use to travel between Hueco Mundo and the World of the Living. He took Issei-kun to where the Hollows live." Orihime says with a shiver as she relives her own experiences of being kidnapped.

"It's not our fault Orihime. Don't you dare blame yourself for what happened. If anyone's to blame, it's me because I should have known he would get that way. I should have kept my mouth shut and just pummeled him." Tatsuki says as she takes a gulp of her wine, her third glass in that hour.

"No one is at fault, but Isshin and I." Kisuke suddenly says from his seat near the window.

Turning to face the room, he stands and walks over to where the Karakura teens and Rias and her peerage are gathered. "I should have guessed as to what Zangetsu is now, but I didn't think it had already happened to such an extent. His Zanpakutō is now a merger of all of Ichigo's powers, all of them including his Hollow powers. So the ability to create a Garganta from the Underworld was well within possibility, but it didn't even occur to me until he used it. They could be anywhere in Hueco Mundo by now; we will just have to wait for them to return."

'If Ichigo and Zangetsu don't feed the kid to a few Hollows.' He decides not to add. Kisuke had seen Ichigo's face for a fraction of time, the black bleeding into his eyes the telltale sign of his fury.

Yuzu hides her face in her Father's kimono as he slowly rubs her back in comfort. Karin is off in a
corner, with Jinta and Ururu trying to keep her from flipping out. Chad and Uryū had left the room to use the time to gather their own thoughts as to what their friend might do to the unfortunate Issei. Koneko and Yuuto sit with Rias's mother and father, quietly telling them all that they know of Rias's newest Pawn in the hopes of explaining Ichigo's reaction, leaving Sōna and Serafall with Yoruichi and Tessai.

Rias closes her eyes in silent prayer.

'Come back Ichigo. Please don't do anything we will both regret.'

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"Itsygo. What are you doing here?" Nelliel sniffles out tearfully.

The moment he heard her sniffle, it broke Ichigo out of his rage and anger, but not enough that he doesn't spare Issei a glare and a warning as his armor slowly evaporates. "This isn't over. Sit there and don't move. Your life depends on it."

Closing the distance to Nelliel, while letting Grimmjow drop to the sands still tied up in chains, he pulls the Espada into a tight hug.

"They told me you were alive Nel, and you were back to normal." Ichigo says softly to her.

"Where have you been? I kept looking for you in Karakura, even after they said you weren't there or coming home. No one would tell me anything and Orihime and Tatsuki didn't know either." She hugs him tight as she closes her arms around him.

Being stronger now, he keeps her from pulling his head in-between her chest this time as he gently pulls back and smiles down at her sadly.

"Why don't you sit down and we…"

"Oi Kurosaki, we got a fight to finish yet. You and my mate can talk later." Grimmjow calls out.

Ichigo's eyes go wide as he stares down into the…blushing face of Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck. "Nelliel...you...and...him...are together!? When the hell did this happen!?"

Giggling, she nods her head in his chest. "Can you please let him go Ichigo? Ah, I finally said your name right!"

Putting some room between him and the fuming former Sexta Espada, Ichigo retracts his chains, Nelliel giggling as an embarrassed looking Grimmjow moves to stand next to her.

"Keep your mitts off her Kurosaki or I'll have to beat your ass again." He grumbles.

Waving his hands and chains in surrender, Ichigo backs up even more. "Whoa, whoa Grimmjow, I...I got someone of my own. Don't sweat it; I won't make a move on her, I promise."

Soon the Devil and two Espada are standing a ways from each other in silence, neither side knowing quite what to say, until movement behind Ichigo reminds him as to why he is here in the first place.

"Where are you going?" Zangetsu says as he appears and his hand grabs the top of Issei's head.

"No...noooo where!"
"Ehmm, wonder how to explain to the Queen how you died accidentally? How about it Grimm-kitty, want a tasty Devil to snack on?"

"What the hell Kurosaki!? Is that your Hollow!?" Grimmjow stares at Zangetsu in shock.

"No, that's my Zanpakutō. He likes to come out a lot."

"Wait Ichigo, he's…a…Hollow." Nelliel says as she stares at the white spirit.

"Yes."

"And no."

"Huh? Well which the hell is it Kurosaki, yes or no?"

"I'm a hybrid like the King here. I'm a Shinigami Zanpakutō that's part Hollow, Quincy and Devil all rolled up into one. I am so bad ass now. Oh and by the way kitty Espada, we are known as Naberius now, so learn it."

Nelliel and Grimmjow share a look of confusion with each other before turning towards Ichigo again.

"You want to tell us something Ichigo, like how your Zanpakutō is Hollow in nature and why your name has changed?" Nelliel voice carries a hint of expectation in it.

"Get comfortable, this is might take a while. You!" He points at Issei. "Sit your ass there and don't move a muscle, I'm not done talking to you yet."

Nodding vigorously, Issei sits down, but as far away from the two Espada as he dares to get. Grimmjow however sits between him and his mate, instinctively blocking Nelliel from the pervert's view.

"Well I guess the first thing is how much do you guys know about me and Aizen's last battle?" Ichigo asks.

Grimmjow snorts out. "Not bloody much, your Shinigami friends just said it was over and that he was gone. Nothing more, nothing less. We didn't even see your human buddies that came with you until a few weeks afterwards, when Nelliel was summoned by Kisuke to work out the deal to keep us alive. Even then he didn't mention you at all. So what happened in Soul Society that had you on the lam?"

Frowning as his own memories surface, he looks up at Grimmjow and then Nelliel. "Well the first thing I should tell you is that I'm no longer human. I'm a Devil now."

Grimmjow and his mate gradually quiet down as the chains float around their heads, they can feel Ichigo's changed energy resonate off each and every link as they flow all around the two. Nelliel hesitantly touches one and feels his ever familiar warmth emanating from the link. Looking at him, and then the white spirit standing next to him, she asks a question that makes two faces shift.
quickly in and then out of anger.

"No Nel, this is not my Zanpakutō's ability, these are Hell Chains, the symbol of my Clan's power. The Naberius Clan is one of the founding Pillars of the Underworld. Why don't I tell you guys what happened after the Winter War from my side? I'm sure you'll understand by the time I'm done what's going on with me."

For an hour and a half, he speaks of his new life, then the events leading up to his awakening, and finally finishing with the two sit-downs he has had with his family and friends. Neither Arrancar say a word as they listen intently; a glare is sent in Issei's direction from Grimmjow when Ichigo explains why he is in Hueco Mundo now.

"So you are a Devil now Itsygo?" Nelliel giggles at his face when she intentionally butchers his name again.

"Yes Nel, I'm a Devil."

"And you have a girlfriend that's already engaged now?" Grimmjow barks out with a laugh.

"Yes again. You two are getting a kick out of this aren't you?"

"You have no idea how funny this shit sounds 'Naberius', but we have things to do ourselves. If you want to see Tier, she's in Las Noches now."

"Nah, I'll just finish my business here and get back so I can start training again. I got a blank Asauchi now so I'll have to finish creating Zangetsu with it. Then I'll be ready to get back in shape again. I'll see you guys around later maybe." He gets up and dusts the sand off his kimono.

"Wait a sec Naberius." Grimmjow looks at him very intently. "How strong are you now?"

Ichigo exchanges glances with Zangetsu, who taps his chin in thought for a few seconds.

"Well without my physical form I honestly don't know. Right now we are about equal to the Head-Captain in strength." Zangetsu informs them.

"And with your true Zanpakutō, then how strong?"

"When, and I mean when we can have my physical form, there is no telling how strong we can be unless we train hard. We won't be lying around though; the King has to learn his Clan's magic, Kidō from his partner and the other Shinigami, and then train with his great-grandfather's and grandfather's peerages."

"Why all these questions Grimmjow?" Ichigo asks now that it's becoming clear something is on the Espada's mind.

"Because of what we are facing here in Hueco Mundo. There is something or someone hunting Hollows, and it either kills them or takes them. So far we haven't caught even a glimpse of the assholes, just rumors and missing or dead Hollows, so I was wondering if you might want to give us a hand."

Nelliel looks at her lover in disbelief. "Grimmjow?"

"Think about it Nel, we need help in a big way, and him being here could be of use to us. I hate to admit it, but we haven't a damn clue as to what is going on around here anymore. Frankly, those chains of his could prove useful in the future in helping to capture whoever it is coming after us."
You seen what he could do with them, they came out of the ground without warning when he captured me. So, how about it Naberius, can you lend us a hand?"

"I have to train Grimmjow, for a month before I can think of anything else. I'm sorry, but what I have to do first means more to me right now than anything."

"What if I agree to come with you and help you train, how about afterwards when you are done doing whatever it is you gotta do?"

Looking at the blue-haired Hollow, Ichigo can see the need in his eyes. Fuck what Soul Society thought of them, he knows that not all Hollows are mindless killers. Shifting so he can look into the earnest hazel eyes of the Arrancar that saved him when he first came here, he turns to her mate and gives him a nod.

"I'll help when I'm done with my training Grimmjow. You and Nelliel are a lot stronger that most, so it should be interesting for the three of us to train together. Who knows, it might be fun to have an Espada rank Arrancar around to keep me honest in my training."

A feral smile forms on Grimmjow's face. "Don't expect me to be lenient with ya Naberius, I'll try and kill you every day if I can. After all, they do say that what doesn't kill ya only makes ya stronger."

"We'll have to tell Tier-chan." Nelliel says then as she looks between the two smirking males.

"Then let's go back to Las Noches and talk to her. How long can you stay Naberius?"

"You can call me Ichigo you know Grimmjow."

"Not yet I can't, only when you and I finish our fight, maybe then. First we have to see Tier."

"How long do you need?"

"No more than an hour."

"Fine, we'll be here. Besides, I have a few things to discuss with Issei here. Mainly about his behavior around my friends and family." He ends by cracking his knuckles.

The two Espada rise up and in a second are long gone, Issei swallowing hard as the feeling from earlier returns.

"So how do you want to do this King? Kill 'im or skin 'im?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of an old fashioned beat-down."

"Well I'll sit over yonder and keep an eye out for your buddies. Have fun because I hope you have a high tolerance for pain Issei-kun, you'll need every bit of it you have." The Zanpakutō begins howling madly with laughter as he walks away.

A heavy hand begins to squeeze down on the shoulder of the young Pawn, who looks up to see two glowing crimson orbs looking down at him.

"Let's talk about what is acceptable behavior and what's not Issei, shall we? Don't worry, no one will hear you screaming out here and if they do, they will have to wait to see if I leave them any leftovers."
His eyes grow wide as the first chain forms with a long flat paddle at the end.

"OH, fuck me!"

Tier sits in her chair at the head of the old meeting table. Staring at her two strongest allies who stand at the opposite side of the table, she listens to the tale they had heard from the Shinigami, the one she and her Fracción owe their lives to. If he hadn't of freed Orihime and killed Aizen, which they still don't know how, she and the others would have died that day at the hands of the Head Captain and the others. Folding her hands, she rests her chin on the top of them as she considers the only answer she can give; her only worry is whether she can spare the two.

"I'll let you two go, but on one condition. If I need you to come back, you do so without question."

"Sure."

"Of course Tia-chan. Do you want to meet him?" Nelliel asks as she and Grimmjow are about to leave.

Looking at her Fracción, Tier stands up and begins to follow them.

"You three come, Loly and Melony you two will keep an eye on things, if anything happens, use a Garganta and escape to the South, they have yet to encroach upon the Menos Forest."

Both Arrancar bow to the Queen of Hueco Mundo. "We will be fine Harribel-sama."

Apacci, Sung-Sun and Mila-Rose stand quickly as well, and follow their mistress outside of the fortress before they all use Sonído to meet up with the famous hero. After less than ten minutes they pause on top of the same sand dune that Grimmjow and Nelliel had used before. Only this time, the sight that greets them causes a few of them to break out in laughter as they watch Ichigo paddle a young man who is hanging upside down.

"I'm sorry Ichigo-senpai! I'll really stop! I promise! Please stop beating my ass! I can't feel it anymore!" Issei tries to free his hands but can't as they are being held by two sets of chains, while a third set hits his ass with a paddle over and over.

"We don't believe you Issei-kun, got ta speak louder."

"I'M SORRY ICHIGOSENPAI!!" That is the last thing he screams before he faints dead away.

After lowering his girlfriend's Pawn to the sand, Ichigo and Zangetsu both stand over the boy, Ichigo smirking as he stares down at the young man.

"He took it pretty damn well Zangetsu."

Snorting, his Hollow nudges the boy with his foot. "Yeah he did. Surprising don't you think Ichigo? Did you feel it?"

Bending down, Ichigo gently picks up Issei's left hand and arm. Staring at it, he can feel something different just under the skin of the Second year student.

"I guess that's where it's hidden. Curious now as to what it does?"

"Well it's got to wait, we have guests. Powerful guests King," Ichigo and Zangetsu both look up
at the top of the sand dunes to see Grimmjow and Nelliel standing on either side of a tall blonde haired woman, her face covered from the just under her eyes to just below her breasts.

"Hey."


"Nice to meet ya."

Apacci starts yelling at him. "That is Harribel-sama to you Shinigami!"

Before anyone can say a word, chains explode around Apacci from underneath the sands, easily grabbing and holding the shocked Arrancar in place. Ichigo sends a look at Zangetsu, who shrugs as he stares at the now trapped Fracción.

"Listen up Arrancar; the last few days have been pretty rough, so we are not in the mood to play games with you or anyone else."

Tier's hand is on her Zanpakutō handle ready to draw, but Nel's hand gently holds her in place. "He won't harm her."

"He better not Nelliel." Her tone is deadly serious.

The green-haired Espada walks up to the Devil hybrid and his Zanpakutō before standing in front of Ichigo, she then places a hand on his face as she smiles at him.

"She didn't mean anything by it Ichigo, she is just protecting our Queen."

"...Zangetsu, let her go."

Apacci finds herself suddenly freed from the chains, just as quickly as she had been wrapped up. Looking at the Hollow, she steps back when she truly gazes upon him. "What the fuck are you?"

"He's my Zanpakutō." Ichigo replies bluntly.

"Yeah, but how is he out like this?" Sung-Sun asks as she draws closer to the three.

Ichigo looks at his Zanpakutō then and smirks. "He is out like this because I have Bankai; that, and he likes to get out a lot more often now that he can."

Grimmjow's and Nelliel's tale comes to Tier again when she sees no Zanpakutō strapped to Ichigo's back. "So it's true, your sword was nothing more than a Quincy spirit weapon like your friend Uryū's?"

Both Devil and Zanpakutō grimace at her words. "Yeah, it's true, but it won't be for long. We got us a blank Asauchi to use tonight."

Tier blinks at the unfamiliar word. "I see. May I speak to you privately then Ichigo Naberius? It's about your deal with Grimmjow and Nelliel; I wish to iron out a few details with you."

"Sure." He walks away with Tier next to him, leaving her Fracción and the two other Espada to sit in the sand with Zangetsu and a passed out Issei.

"What's with the kid?" Mila-Rose asks as she uses her foot to push Issei's head around.

"A lesson in manners." Zangetsu grins.
"That was a lesson in manners? Looked more like a beating to me." Sung-Sun says as she hides her mouth with a sleeve.

"Dumbass if you ask me. What the hell did he do?" Apacci says as she sits near the white Hollowfied spirit.

Smirking, he gives them the short version of Issei's history, ending with his remarks about Orihime.

Whistling, Grimmjow begins to laugh. "Well, I'd keep that to yourselves girls, if your mistress ever found out what he did to the Princess, I think he'd rather have Ichigo's punishment any day of the week. The only thing that saved him from a harsher punishment is probably that he's a servant of Ichigo's girlfriend, just this time though."

"Moron." Mila-Rose says as she pushes Issei down the sand dune a little.

They watch in silence as Ichigo and Tier speak quietly to each other. Half an hour later, Ichigo holds his hand out as Tier removes her Zanpakutō and cuts her hand first, then his, before they shake with their bloodied hands. Nelliel and the others stand as the two return to their group.

"Nelliel, you and Grimmjow will have free passage back to Hueco Mundo any time I need you. Ichigo will be your way home, as well as joining with you when his training is complete. He will speak to his Sensei Kisuke and Yoruichi about finding a way for us to communicate through the dimensions as the Shinigami do. You are now my representatives to the Underworld."

She turns to Ichigo and looks him in eyes. "Our contract is sealed Ichigo Naberius, I hope I never have to use it."

"As much as I want to agree with you Tia, I don't think it's going to be possible. I'll hold up my end of the bargain, no worries. As I said, there are only a few I trust there anymore."

"Fair enough. Nelliel, Grimmjow, be safe in your travels and come home soon."

"We will Tia-chan." The skull-capped Arrancar hugs the other woman before they watch Tier and her Fracción leave for Las Noches.

"So, you two ready?" Ichigo says as he hoists the unconscious Pawn over his shoulder.

"Yes we are Ichigo."

Standing a little distance away, he gives them one last instruction. "When we arrive, stay perfectly still, otherwise the Cerberus will attack. Think of it as a security checkpoint."

"What's a Cerberus, Naberius?" Grimmjow asks in confusion, while his mate asks her own question.

"What's a security check-point Ichigo?"

"You'll both find out soon enough." Opening a Garganta, he steps through with a growing grin.

XXXX

Those still awake feel Ichigo's presence returning along with the young Pawn and two familiar but completely unexpected Reiatsu signatures. Yoruichi glances at the curious face of Kisuke as he looks in the direction of the young Devil, they both can tell he is standing in place, before moving
and separating from the others five minutes later.

"Going straight to his fiancée." Isshin remarks as they track Ichigo's surprisingly calm Reiatsu.

Ryūken scoffs at his friend as he pushes his glasses up. "Did you expect anything else Isshin?"

Amyntas also tracks his great-grandson's power and notices how it feels different.

'Did he make a contract already?' Turning to Merti, he nods for her to go. A magic circle appears under the Woods Elf's feet as she disappears to meet with her young lord.

Sirzechs however gives them cause to laugh. "He thought Hell was just a place; he hasn't seen my sister truly mad yet."

XXXX

Ichigo stands in the doorway, looking at his and Rias's bed, now occupied by a huddle of women. Tatsuki and Karin sleeping on one side, and Orihime and Yuzu curled together on the other side. Rias, Koneko, and Akeno are all sleeping on a second bed that had been brought in. Rukia and Momo are sleeping comfortably on thick pallets with blankets stacked high both on and under them. Not wanting to disturb the sleeping women, he skillfully grabs the barest of necessities before bending down and giving his sisters each a kiss on their cheeks. Looking at Rias, he gives her one on her forehead, before he leaves the room.

Outside, he knows that Merti will be waiting for him, and there she is, hands folded in front of her, a quirked eyebrow sent in his direction.

"He's still alive Merti."

"That is most fortunate Ichigo; I'd hate to see Lady Rias lose a Pawn so soon after acquiring him."

"He was never in danger, just a lesson on what he can and can't do when he is near my family, friends and more importantly Rias and her peerage."

"Do you think he understood your lesson?"

"He better have, the next one will not be so gentle."

XXXX

The man stands outside the door looking in at his Emperor, who lies in a deep coma once again. What the cause was, he cannot tell; all that he knows are the last words he had heard his Emperor speak.

"How is this possible? No one can separate themselves from me!"

XXXX
Training Day Blues

Original Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess.

Edited by regfurby June/July 2018.

XXXX
"Speech"
'Thoughts'
'Memories'
"Tensa Zangetsu"

XXXX
"How is this possible? No one can separate themselves from me!"

Yhwach

XXXX

Ichigo stands still while looking at the golden-eyed she-Devil who is smirking at him. Twenty-five meters stand between them, and she is slowly twirling the next to last piece of clothing he has lost to her since the beginning of this insane retribution game. Swallowing his saliva, he looks behind her to see every woman not only from Rias's peerage there, but also his grandfather's and great-grandfather's peerages, as well as Rukia, Momo, Orihime, Tatsuki and finally Merti, all of them sporting either amused smiles, or in a few cases, deep blushes. Getting ready to Shunpo away from his demented Sensei again, he watches as she saunters over to the woman who had started off his day oh-so-joyfully with a brief but heated argument: Rias. Groaning inwardly, he sees her eyes remain glued to his as his t-shirt is laid on top of the rest of his clothes, courtesy of Yoruichi's new version of tag.

"So Ichigo, care to make a wager on how long you can keep your 'dignity'?" Yoruichi chuckles out.

Before he can answer, his Zanpakutō interrupts his chain of thought.

"Don't give her the satisfaction King. You know she planned this right from the beginning. Show her who the King really is."

"I'll wager whatever you want…Oba-sensei." He smirks as she narrows her eyes dangerously at his insult.

Walking back to her original spot, she states her terms. "You avoid me for the next five minutes; you get your clothes back, plus…" She taps her chin as she thinks, but is beaten to the punch by the assembly of women behind her.

"We'll each give you all the cash we have on us right now Ichi-kun!" The Queen of his great-grandfather's peerage yells out.

Soon almost every women standing behind Yoruichi hands Rias whatever money they have on
them as they shout encouragement to both the Shunpo masters. Ichigo grins first at his Sensei, and then sends a wink to his thoroughly blushing girlfriend.

"If I win Yoruichi, you'll have to play maid to Geta-Bōshi for a month, and wear a maid uniform while doing it too!"

"Why you little bastard!" The werecat bends down in readiness as does Ichigo.

Both stare unblinkingly at each other as they wait for Merti to begin her countdown for the last match to start; Ichigo breathes deeply as her hand descends.

'I can't wait to see her face when this is over.' Ichigo smirks as he readies himself for her attack, briefly thinking about the events of the day in his head that led to this moment.

XXXX

Earlier this morning, after returning from Hueco Mundo

"Oi King."

Silence.

"OI ICHIGO!"

'Five minutes Zangetsu, five more minutes.'

"Love to do that for ya, but I think you might have a slight problem on your hands in, oh, the next minute or so."

'What would that be?'

"The fact that the Queen is ready to kill you maybe?"

'…?…'

"You do remember beating the tar off of her new Pawn right? Well if I was you, I'd come up with a good excuse while she's hovering over you right now."

Brown eyes snap open to see anger filled blue eyes staring at him, as Rias hovers on her hands and knees looking down at him. Before he can even speak, she places a finger on his lips to quiet him.

"Before you even think of speaking about last night Ichigo, tell me why Orihime had to spend the better part of the last hour healing Issei's bottom?"

"Because he's a damn pervert. I won't allow that shit around my friends, your peerage and especially around my family, you included Rias." He snaps out at her.

Jabbing him in his chest she yells back at him. "He is my Pawn Ichigo! I decide what punishment is fit for his actions, not you! Not yet at least! From now on I will punish my own peerage for their actions! Not you, got it Ichigo!?"

"Then you better make damn sure he understands I won't tolerate his bullshit around those that are mine!"

The two glare at each other, before Rias gets up and starts walking away.
"Where are you going?" Ichigo asks.

Not even turning around, she answers him back. "I'm gonna check on Issei one more time before Akeno takes him back home. Then after that I'm taking a bath...alone!"

He winces as she slams shut the door to his confiscated room.

"Well, that could've gone better Ichigo."

'I went too far, didn't I, Zangetsu?"

He sees his white clone appear in the room, looking back at him. The Zanpakutō spirit frowns. 
"No you didn't. It's my fault really. Your instincts come out...well they are amplified King. I'm part Hollow, so being a part of your soul, I'm a big part of what makes you, you. So when your emotions are running high, they manifest to a greater degree. Meaning..."

"Meaning, I need to learn to reign in my emotions better, and not be so impulsive. Fuck, will my life ever be easy?"

Zangetsu shrugs his shoulders as he points at Ichigo. "She's pissed Ichigo, but no matter what you need to step up and apologize to her before she leaves. If not, your time together will be strained more than need be. Go to her and fix this somehow."

Swinging out of the bed, Ichigo jumps up and makes a beeline for the room he feels Rias's presence in. Not bothering to knock, he simply barges right in and stops as his eyes widen comically at the sight in front of him. Not only is Rias nude and getting ready to enter the bath, but so were a few other women, namely his friends, his Shinigami partner, her fellow Lieutenant, his personal assistant and a few of the peerage members.

"FUCK ME!" Two minds scream in sync.

"Run idiot!"

"I'm trying!" He yells out as he dodges the first attack, Rukia's Byakurai almost instinctively.

Flying out behind him, wearing a hastily thrown on yukata, is the violent Lieutenant of Squad Thirteen, followed immediately by his oldest female friend as she screams at him.

"Get back here Ichigo and die like...like a Devil dammit!"

Rounding the corner and getting ready to sprint home free, he hits the immovable barrier known as Isshin Shiba Kurosaki.

Looking down at his panicking boy, he starts to bend down and offer a hand. "What's got you so..."

The former Captain's voice cuts off abruptly, and his eyes widen: first in fright, then in goofy understanding. Ichigo watches in shock as his father Shunpo's away from his prone body faster than he'd ever seen him, yelling back as he disappears. "Good luck son, I've seen that look once too many times to get in the middle and help you out!"

Sweating, he makes the mistake of peeking over his shoulder, only to see multiple angry glares and silent promises of soon to be delivered amounts of massive pain being directed at him. Not one for subtlety, he prays that the next words out of his mouth can dig him out of his grave.
"Ah, sorry, I didn't know she wasn't alone." His worst fears come true as seven different attacks hit him almost at once.

"Well, I guess his first lesson would be how to knock on closed doors." Zangetsu sighs as his partner's shrill screams filled their inner-world.

XXXX

Groaning from his own bed, Ichigo silently thanks the hot compresses on his head, chest and arms for helping to ease his much deserved wounds. He also swears to get even with his old man for leaving him behind. A hand removes the hot compress from his forehead and replaces it with a fresh one. Cracking one eye open, he sees his girlfriend looking down at him with a neutral expression, after a quick but obscenity-laced urge from Zangetsu, he tried to get up to apologize. A soft groan escapes him involuntarily as he moves to sit up, and her hand placed on his chest keeps him down easily.

"You deserved it you know." She says softly to him. "What were you even thinking Ichigo?"

"I wasn't Rias, I just wanted to talk to you and apologize to you. I wasn't watching where I was going and it wasn't until I opened the door that I realized just who else was in the room you were in." He sheepishly grins at her.

"You're lucky to be alive you know. I don't know who was going to kill you first; Tatsuki, Rukia or Akiko."

"My money would have been on Rukia first and then Tatsuki."

"Next time knock Ichigo, it'll save you some unnecessary pain. So, what exactly did you want to say to me? I don't have much time before I have to leave."

Slowly sitting up, he pulls her onto his lap and brings his forehead to hers. "I want to apologize for overstepping my bounds with your Pawn. However, I won't apologize for beating his ass, literally either."

She chuckles as she looks into his eyes. "Only you would make an apology sound like a defense. I'll accept your apology on one condition."

"That being?"

"From now on, you will let me handle Issei, Ichigo. I know you don't like him, but he is my Pawn and as his master it should be left to me to punish him. Until we…"

"Until we what Rias?" He sees her blushing then.

"Have you talked to Yoruichi about anything besides your training schedule?" Her blush deepens then.

"No, what's going on Rias?" Now he wants to know what Yoruichi and her blush have in common.

"My mother and Yoruichi have been in negotiations with each other." Rias breathes out.

Quirking an eyebrow in genuine confusion, he nudges her chin up. "What negotiations?"

After she mumbles her response, he lifts her head a fraction to see her face matching her hair. "Rias?"
"Don't get mad Ichigo, but they are...they are arranging our marriage. They are making our omiai official the moment we deal with Riser Phenex."

Each stare into the others eyes, waiting to see who is going to commit first to the news of their impending marriage. Ichigo breaks it with a smile.

"Although I don't mind breaking up your previous arrangement, I hope you don't mind me taking his place Rias."

"I'd like that very much Ichigo." He likes this side, the shy vulnerable Rias sitting on his...

"You just noticed?"

'Do I want to even know?"

"Nope, just go with it. See ya King." Ichigo feels Zangetsu fade into his inner-world as he looks at the woman sitting in his lap.

"Rias."

"Yes Ichigo?" She tilts her head as he dips his towards her.

"I hope you didn't actually plan on leaving for school today?"

"Huh, why...no Ichigo! I have to..." She is cut off when she is thrown on her back gently as Ichigo hovers over her body.

"Sorry, but you did this to me Rias." He dips his head down and captures her lips.

'Oh, you are so dead Ichigo.' She feels her yukata getting parted by his exploring hands, and her mind goes white.

XXX

An hour later, Ichigo and Rias join a surprised Amyntas, Yoruichi and Venelana at the table for a late brunch. Ichigo is smiling smugly, while Rias is blushing up a storm as she sees the knowing smirks being sent her way by the older women.

"So Ichigo are you 'up' for some training today?" The werecat says with a perverted grin.

"Always 'up' to the challenge Sensei." He wants to laugh at her gobsmacked expression.

Shaking her head wryly, Venelana sips her tea as she looks at the lord of the estate. Taking his cue from her, Amyntas clears his throat as he turns to his great-grandson.

"Ichigo, we have decided on a three part training regimen for you. First, you will train with the peerages between breakfast and lunch. After lunch you will train with your Shinigami powers. After dinner you can either train on your own or with whoever you wish."

"Wait, what about my Zanpakutō? Don't I have to do something with it today?"

"Kisuke and Isshin will be back after dinner to help you with that Ichigo. It sounds easy, but in your case there might be a slight problem."

"What problem?"
No one jumps when Zangetsu appears next to Ichigo, even in his agitated state.

"Zangetsu, you will be the first Zanpakutō ever that consists of Shinigami, Hollow, Devil, and Quincy bloodlines. We...aren't sure if it will work now." Yoruichi tells the white spirit.

Ichigo pats the white hand that grips his shoulder. "Don't worry so much Zangetsu; I'm sure Getabōshi will think of something."

"Fucking bastard. If we could've killed him I would have." Ichigo grimaces as he feels the hatred briefly flare up from his Zanpakutō towards the fraud who had taken his name and place.

"Rias, why are you still here? I thought you had school today." Venelana asks innocently.

"I uh, I got...side tracked this morning Mother." No one misses either teen's blushing faces.

"Really? It wouldn't have anything to do with the moaning that we heard coming from your room earlier, would it Ichigo?" The Shinigami questions her student with a smirk.

Said student stares at his Sensei with a straight face, not only to her surprise, but to the two elder Devils' as well. "Don't have a clue what you're talking about Yoruichi. All that happened this morning was me getting my ass kicked and then Rias tending my wounds. Nothing more."

Cutting in before anything more can be said, Amyntas hurriedly speaks to him. "Ichigo, Akiko wants to train you first today. I'm sure you know why."

Everyone laughs as Ichigo swears lowly.

"I guess I got it coming to me for that little screw up."

"Oh, that's just the tip of the iceberg Ichigo. Rukia and Momo both seemed pretty peeved at you as they left with Akeno and the others. Lucky for you, Koneko, Karin and Yuzu were in their own bathroom or else I think your sisters would have a bone to pick with you." The purple-haired goddess says with a smirk.

Face-palming at his stupidity, he shakes his head in denial. "Where are my sisters by the way?"

Amyntas waves one of the Cerberus over to the table and waits for the beast to speak. "Lady Yuzu, Lady Karin and Lady Orihime are currently with Tatsuki and Merti walking the grounds of the Estates on a tour Lord Ichigo." The Cerberus tells them.

"Ichigo is fine. Pass the message along for me would ya? I got most of the staff to call me that; I'd appreciate if you guys did too."

"Of course Na...Ichigo. Lord Naberius, Lady Gremory, Lady Rias." The Hell Hound bows its head and leaves the room via a magical circle only to be replaced by another who takes up a guard position near the table.

"Uncle?" Ichigo asks as he notices the increase in security.

"I don't want to be caught unprepared again Ichigo." Is all the older Devil says to him.

"Got it. So when do I have to meet with Akiko then?"

Yoruichi sips her tea and looks at a clock on the wall. "In an hour Ichigo, that should give you time to eat and digest a bit before she tears you apart for your stunt this morning."
Slinking down in his chair as his Hollowfied Zanpakutō laughs at him from behind, Ichigo groans out. "It was an honest mistake really."

"I believe you Ichigo." He smiles until she finishes speaking. "The rest however don't. Sorry Ichigo, but to them you might be classified the same as Issei."

"WHAT!?"

Akiko is brimming with excitement as she stretches her limbs. Sitting on the floor, she sends her best intimidating look at her young lord as he does his own stretches. Behind him are a few of the other 'victims' from his early morning intrusion into the ladies shared bathroom. None of them were really mad, but when the chance to make him pay for his blunder came up, they were more than willing to see him sweat some for it.

"Ready for a friendlier spar today Ichigo?" The Kitsune says as her tails bang the floor behind her.

"Yeah, look I'm really sorry for this morning. I wasn't..."

"It's okay Ichigo, we know you are a growing young man and will be curious about the female body, but really, to do something as bold as you did..." She teases, and everyone including Rias can't hold back their laughter.

"None of you are ever going to let me forget that, are you?"

"No Ichigo. So with that out of the way, are you ready for your first lesson in your Devil powers?" Akiko asks as she stands across from him.

Seeing him nod his head yes, the Kitsune sheds her outer clothes and allows her tails to fan out behind her. As her body begins to morph, reddish-orange flames begin to engulf her body. She smiles at Ichigo's look of awe as she takes on her true form and her chains begin to form behind her. Letting her power flow from her, she walks towards her young lord.

"Each of us are reincarnated Devils Ichigo, each of us willingly took the Evil Piece so that we could serve Lord Naberius and his family. Our reasons differ from one to the next, but each of us knew the price we had to pay to achieve this power. These chains, Ichigo, are our blood connection to your great-grandfather and your grandfather, established through a blood ritual unique to the Naberius clan. We are his eyes, ears, and hands when dealing with the Damned souls inside the Skeleton Tower, or as you know it, Hell. We, the members of their peerages, accepted the responsibility that comes with this power. To protect the Naberius Clan, to protect the Tower and finally to retrieve any who would try to escape their sentence. You, Ichigo, have this power in your blood, but you have an additional power we do not have. You have the armor of your Clan that only you, your sisters, and your great-grandfather have at this point in time. Now put it on and we shall see if you can handle it correctly."

Zangetsu groans inside of Ichigo's head then, knowing the pain his wielder is about to suffer. "I get the feeling you are about to get your ass handed to you again King. She's a damn Kyuubi no Kitsune, and to top it off, she's a reincarnated Devil. I hope you remember your history class about early Japanese mythology, how they were thought to be the messengers of the gods? You know what that means for you, don't ya?"

As Ichigo releases his power, he feels the black obsidian plates forming over his body once again, they feel harder than any steel plate, but have the weight of nothingness to them. Soon his own..."
chains form behind his back and immediately take up a defensive posture around him.

'Yeah, she isn't his Queen without reason Zangetsu. I think we only almost beat her so fast last time due to surprising her. This is gonna hurt.'

Looking at the youthful looking Kitsune across from him, he stares into her eyes and sees the seriousness of his situation as she begins to circle him. He makes to match her movements, but she stops him almost immediately.

"Don't move Ichigo, listen to me. I am well aware of your speed and power, but now I want to see if we can't work on your glaring weaknesses."

"What weaknesses?"

"Yoruichi has informed us that your ability to sense the Reiatsu of others is atrocious because you release so much of your own without any effort, you drown out everyone else's. So the first thing we will do to help you is for you to stand in one place and try and find me before I hit you."

"You're screwed."

'Load of help you are. Any ideas of wha…!' He barely dodges the fireball sent at his head.

"What the fuck Akiko-san!" The teen Devil screams out and tries to move only to find himself wrapped up in her chains.

"Stand still! This is the point of this exercise, to make you sense me before I attack. Close and seal the visor of your helm Ichigo; I want you blind for this exercise."

"What!? Blind!? Are you fucking kidding me!?"

His head lurches forward when she uses one of her chains to slap him. "Yes, blind Ichigo. Do. You. Not. Understand. Me. I need you blind in order for you to suppress your own power so you can find me through mine. Now seal your visor Ichigo."

Grumbling, he swallows as his eyes sink into darkness. He feels Akiko releasing him and soon there is no more noise. Standing still, he tries to figure out how to suppress both sides of his power.

'How the fuck do I do this!?'

He then finds himself flying as Akiko kicks him in the back. Standing up, he asks her in confusion. "How come my chains didn't attack you Akiko-san?"

"I didn't emit killing intent Ichigo, that's how I can bypass your chains. As long as I think of no harm towards you, I can easily hit you. When I attack you, I think I am going to hug or kiss you if it helps."

"Hugs and kisses!?” Ichigo feels his Hollow facepalming in disbelief at the simplicity of how to counter the chains.

'Oh, we are seriously in trouble here Zangetsu!' "Wait Akiko-san!"

"What Ichigo?"

"How do I do it? I have never had any success in my control, that…that's why my friends became
different, why at fifteen they fought in a war with me. I'm at fault for what happened to them. Help me please. How do I suppress my powers?"

She begins to speak from right behind him again, much to his surprise. "Yoruichi told us how you were only able to gain mediocre control of your Reiatsu. Do you remember your training with your cousin Ganju? Do you remember that sphere that you had to concentrate your Reiatsu in?"

"Yeah, but…"

"Silence Ichigo. Listen to me. This will not be easy for you. You have to take your power and push it inside of yourself, make that sphere inside your soul and force it there until you need it, we will work at this until eventually it becomes as natural as breathing, instinctual. Do you understand? If you do I will give you ten minutes today to try it. If you fail, I will attack you for the rest of our time. I was told you learn very quickly when your life is on the line, shall we test that theory today or…?"

"Take the ten minutes moron!"

"I'd like to try Akiko-san. Ten minutes."

Taking a deep breath, he drops into his inner-world and finds his white Zanpakutō waiting for him with a bit of amusement in his black and gold eyes.

"Well at least for ten minutes you won't die Ichigo."

The two silently stand across from each other, feeling each second pass by them; today they could feel the passage of time inside their world. Zangetsu is concentrating so hard he misses their observer at first, until in her impatience she tugs on his Shihakushō. Looking down at the young spirit he gives her a smile.

"What's up Imp?" He asks of her.

"Who you talking to Zangetsu?" The Zanpakutō spirit looks at Ichigo in confusion, then he points down at his only female company.

"Her. Don't you see her standing next to me?"

Quirking an eyebrow as he stares at nothing, Ichigo shrugs as he replies back to his partner. "Maybe you got hit in the head harder than I thought Zangetsu. There is no one there."

"He can't see me Zangetsu. Only you can." The little girl smiles sadly at him.

"How is that possible? This is our world; you aren't even part of it."

"I don't make the rules Zangetsu, I can only follow them. But before he really thinks you have some loose marbles, tell me how exactly are you two going to suppress that?" She points to the wild lights in the sky above them. "His power is two-fold Zangetsu, so how do you plan on sealing it or at least suppress it so no one can feel it?"

"Two-fold?"

The little girl looks at him askance. "Yes, you dummy, two-fold. Reiatsu and Devil magic. You are his Shinigami side, he is his Devil side. Together you are the two sides of his power, soooo…."

"So we both have to…Urgggg! Dammit why didn't I think of that?"
"Okay, now ya scaring even me Zangetsu. What is your…"

"Relax jackass, I'm fine."

"Debatable."

Glar ing at his wielder, Zangetsu dons his armor and motions for Ichigo to do so as well. "We suck at forming the ball right? So we create a stable one with our chains Ichigo. Once we do that, you and I will pour our powers into it and then we'll see if it works."

Ichigo lets his armor solidify as his own chains come out and begin to merge with those of his Hollow spirit. Soon the ball grows and grows at the same time he and the Zanpakutō spirit begin to send their combined energy into the swirling mass of metal. Ichigo begins to sweat as more and more of his Reiatsu and his Devil energy drains from him.

"Zangetsu, you feel it?"

"I do."

Rias is the first to notice something wrong with the air around her, the usual sense of warmth and comfort she has when she is near Ichigo fades from around her and it scares her. Looking around, she sees that the others have noticed as well, as they all start staring at the young Devil who is still not moving. Akiko however begins to grin as she looks at the clock on the wall, her tails bouncing off the floor in anticipation.

"TIME!" She yells as the second hand reaches the minute and she launches herself at her pupil. When she is within a meter of him however, her smile slips as a wall of chains suddenly forms in front of her with spikes sticking out from the surface. Quickly flipping in mid-air and landing behind him, she snakes her foot and two tails out at his exposed back only to find her foot being caught in the vice-grip of his gauntlet. Looking up at Ichigo, she sees his visor still down, but looking right at her. Pulling herself free, she quickly moves away before calming her breathing, then on fur covered feet, she gracefully slides to his blind side once again. Smirking as he doesn't move, she almost thinks for a moment that it was a lucky grab earlier, until she senses his intent and jumps aside to avoid the chains snaking at her feet.

"You can sense me can't you Ichigo?" She glares at him then frowns when he doesn't answer. Trying again, she clears her mind and thinks of her moments alone with her husband as she once again closes the distance between them. Just as she pulls her arm back to strike, he twists and suddenly grabs onto her with a bone-jarring hug, his visor facing her and beginning to glow red as a Cero slowly forms between the black horns of his helmet.

"Sensei."

"Ichigo. If you wanted to hold me so closely, you should've asked my husband first or at least made sure Rias doesn't mind sharing." She pulls him into her chest to empathize her point.

Everyone laughs as he immediately jumps away from the burning Kitsune. "Are you mad woman!? I thought you were supp…"

His world suddenly spins and he finds himself lying flat on his back, not even knowing what had
happened. Akiko's voice speaks again. "Ichigo, no matter what your foe does to distract you, you must finish your blow first. I used your honorable morals against you just now because I know how you are with women. You treat them like you do your sisters. This must stop now. I thought Yoruichi would have pounded this into your skull by now."

"Too busy saving the afterlife Akiko-sensei. I didn't have a lot of time to actually train my Shinigami or Hollow powers. First I had to save Rukia, then fight for Karakura town, then rescue Orihime next, and fight the worst battles of my life. I never found the time to really figure out my powers." He says as he slowly gets back to his feet.

He can hear her walking towards him then. "So if you had no training, how did you fight me just now?"

"We figured out how to pour my powers into a sealed state of sorts. Then I could feel each of you in the room and then I could smell you Akiko…"

"Smell me? What do…oh, I see." She giggles then as she realizes what he is smelling. "I guess thinking of Daiki…"

"Akiko!" He yells to keep her from going any further.

The Kitsune laughs at him as she lets her flames die down before reaching for him. "Get up Ichigo, no time for resting. Now each of us is going to line the room in a circle, your goal is to block our chains as we send them at you. One at a time at first, but should you show signs of slowing or improving, we will up the ante. So get ready Ichigo, it's time for a little payback."

"Accident!"

"Hentai!"

Rias groans as she watches the spectacle in front of her.

'I hope he remembers he still has to face Rukia and Momo later today.'

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Issei sits in class wondering what he is going to do the next time he sees Rias, and more importantly Ichigo. The new Devil is terrified of the male senior, after what the older student had done to him in that cold desolate place, even more so was the fact that there were two of him, both equally insane in his opinion. It took everything he had this morning not to scream out in pain when he woke up. He couldn't even walk to the bathroom without his butt flaring into unbelievable pain that coursed through him. It was only after the very same woman who had caused the whole incident arrived with Momo-senpai that he gained relief after she used her strange powers on him, of course he had passed out from the pain before she was done healing him. All he could think of was that she was an Angel in disguise by the time she left him and Akeno alone. That's when his ears got a thorough beating from Akeno yelling at him.

Sighing, he tries to sleep before his next lesson is schedule to begin, only for someone to knock on the door to his classroom. Many of the other students begin whispering quietly as the person walks to his desk.

"Issei-kun, please follow me." He looks up to see a set of violet eyes looking down at him.

"Shiba-senpai? What are you doing here?" He asks in genuine confusion.
Turning on her heel precisely, Rukia motions for him to follow her. "We need to talk about yesterday. Now come."

He is unable to ignore her commanding voice as he instinctively grabs his books and satchel and begins to follow behind the senior. As he follows, he can't help but let his eyes drift down the backside of the older girl in front of him, so engrossed he doesn't notices her stopping until he runs right into her, knocking both of them to the ground. He blushes as he realizes he is on top of her and that somehow she had twisted in her fall so that he is now face to face with a very furious looking Rukia.

"I…I'm sorry senpai!" He tries to get up, only to make it worse when he accidentally grabs one of her breasts which earns him yet another lesson in pain when she drives her knee into his groin.

"GET! OFF!" She screams into his ear.

Rolling to one side as he holds himself down there, he can only imagine what is going to happen to him now once Ichigo finds out about this. Groaning, he feels like he is about to throw up when a sudden coolness encompasses him down in his private area and a new voice begins speaking.

"Issei-kun, are you okay?" He recognizes the voice of the other Shiba sister, Momo.

Squeaking in a high pitched voice, he squeezes out his answer. "I-I'll be fine Shiba-senpai."

He lays there until the cooling stops and Momo bends down over his falling form. She opens one of his eyelids and he can see disappointment in her eyes. Frowning, she moves to one side and helps the younger man to his feet. Looking around, he swallows when he realizes he is somehow in the Student Council room, with most of the Devils he was introduced to yesterday at the party also present. His eyes nearly bug out when he sees the two Maou sitting at the head of the table. Sirzechs has a strange look in his eyes, but Serafall is not looking too happy at all.

"Sit, Issei." Sōna Sitri says as she takes a seat beside her sister.

Nervously pulling a chair out, Issei sits opposite of the two leaders of the New Satan Faction. A cup of tea is placed in front of him by the vice-president of the Occult Research Club, but he just sits there while everyone else is served tea as well. He keeps his eyes on the other side of the table to avoid looking at the other students in the room. Finally Sirzechs begins to speak to him.

"Now Issei, we want to talk to you about last night and why it would be beneficial for you to understand exactly why Ichigo reacted the way he did. Unlike most of us in this room, Ichigo is a pure-blooded Devil who is new to his Devil bloodline. Before last year however, he was basically human, just a very special human."

"I don't understand, how can a pure-blooded Devil be human and then become a Devil? Isn't he like me, a reincarnated Devil as Akeno-senpai explained to me?"

"You didn't listen to Buchou at all last night did you Issei-kun?" Akeno asks with a disappointed frown.

Sheepishly he rubs his head as he answers truthfully. "I'm sorry Himejima-senpai; I was looking at her kimono and got lost in my thoughts."

The young Neko in the room mutters out the hated phrase then. "Hentai."

Yuuto and Tsubaki quiet her down before the conversation begins again. Sirzechs pinches the bridge of his nose as he turns back to his sister's Pawn.
"He is a pure-blood Issei-kun, however unlike the rest of the nobles of our world, his mother, and therefore Ichigo and his sisters, had their bloodlines hidden away by his great-grandfather to keep them safe. But before he awakened his Devil blood, he was what you would call a Shinigami, a Japanese death god. I'll let Rukia tell you his story again, and Issei, this time you had better pay attention. Rias is quite upset with both you and Ichigo; try to not make her any angrier."

Stammering, he bows to Rias's brother as the woman who put him in pain earlier sits towards the middle of the table and turns her gaze upon him. Seeing her expression, Issei gulps as he realizes how serious this tale is going to be, then he realizes she is sitting there not in her Kuoh uniform, but a black set of clothes with a sword on her hip.

"This time, pay attention and you might save yourself another beating Issei-kun. I first met Ichigo during my first solo trip to the World of the Living..."

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"You're a damn lunatic Akiko-sensei!" The newly unsealed Naberius Devil shouts as he lies flat on his back.

"Not my fault Ichigo. I wasn't the one who walked into a room of nude, sexy, and very angry women this morning did I?"

"For the last fucking time it was an accident Akiko!"

"Sure hentai, whatever you say. Now go take a bath and get your wounds healed by your sister. You still have to train with Rukia and Momo when they arrive back from school today."

As the Kitsune and the other laughing members of both peerages leave the room, he hears a few compliments from the other women as they pass by him. Even though they didn't go hard on him this time, they did make sure he paid for what he had done this morning. Even the small fairy had let loose with a few extra volleys of lightning magic, threatening afterwards that she would use her more damaging and explosive 'Fairy Magic' spells on him if the 'bath incident' repeated itself. With each compliment, he mumbles his thanks back to them while pretending to ignore the short tempered fairy as they pass his still blind form.

"Are you going to lie there all day Ichigo?" His assistant asks of him.

Breathing slowly, Ichigo releases the armor that thankfully won't smell and won't need cleaning even after sweating what he thought amounted to half his body weight into it. Even now, he can still sense the peerage members as they walk away, can even differentiate the stronger emotions they are feeling, the common one being amusement. He, of course, is the source of their amusement. After the last of it fades away, he keeps his eyes closed as he concentrates on feeling for his sisters and his friends this time. He finds them almost immediately with his great-grandfather and a few of the male members of the peerages. Trying to keep the lesson fresh, he concentrates on Karin first.

Her Reiryoku matches more closely to his dad then anyone else's in the family, while Yuzu he notices is different from the rest of them. Tatsuki's Reiryoku is closer to a Shinigami than either Chad's or Orihime's powers, so that answers why she is dead set on becoming one of them. Banging his head against the stone floor in frustration, he realizes he has once again changed one of his friend's destinies, although there is nothing he can do about it now. Orihime's Reiatsu however is strangely calm today, even after this morning; he figured she would be slightly aggravated like Tatsuki, but instead she is still her normal, cheerful self thankfully.
'Well I lucked out there; she could literally reject my ass to oblivion.'

"It's always the quiet ones you need to keep an eye on King. Just because she's fine now, doesn't mean she will forget that little incident this morning."

'I didn't see...much.'

"Need I remind you of exactly what you saw Ichigo? I do see what you see, and despite the quickness of your gaze, you did absorb a lot of details?"

'No! I'm fine not remembering. Now how much longer are we going to lie here for?"

"I'm finished, so get yourself cleaned up before we have to see them after school. Ichigo..."

'Yeah?"

"Don't squeal too loud this time!"

'Bite me.'

"Are you done Ichigo?" Merti asks again.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm done. I just want a bath and food Merti."

"I can arrange for a meal to be delivered to your room if you wish."

"Sounds good, I'll need an hour or so to nap as well. Could you tell my sisters and Tatsuki I'm pushing our talk until after dinner?"

"Of course, anything else?"

"Sorry about this morning Merti. I really wasn't thinking when I barged in."

He cracks an eye open when his assistant laughs merrily. "I haven't had that much fun watching someone beg for their life in years the way you were doing with Lady Rukia and Tatsuki. While I do accept your apology, I will not interfere in their training with you."

"That obvious?"

"Yes, it was." Rias says as she joins the conversation and begins to pull him to his feet. "Come on hentai, let's get you cleaned up, eat, and a short nap in that order. I'll wake you when they get here. Then I do have to go for a few hours."

She sees him frown, but he begrudgingly nods his head. "I know, peerage duties and Clan stuff."

Grabbing his hand, she and Ichigo follow behind the dark-skinned Elf as she leads them to their private room, passing a few of the Cerberus who Ichigo swears have knowing smirks when he looks at them. Shaking his head, he moans internally that the whole damn Clan and Estate must know about this morning's 'adventure'.

As he enters his room, he strips slowly and stretches his thoroughly abused muscles, before walking into his bathroom, turning the water to a nice hot temperature, then he leans back into the body that wraps their arms around his waist from behind.

"Get in Ichigo, I'll try and get some of that tension out of you."
Not saying a word, he gingerly steps into the water and lets an audible sigh of relief escape his lips. Soon he is sitting in the middle of the bath and feels her hands start at the top of his shoulders. Neither say a word as Rias works the tension and knots out of his muscles, he can feel his body relaxing as she works her way from his shoulders and down his back and ribs. Pushing him forward, she finishes with his lower back before pulling them both to the back of the tub where she wraps her legs around his waist.

"Feeling better Ichigo?" She asks as she runs one hand up and down his chest lazily. Trapping the hand momentarily, he pulls it to his lips and kisses it. "Thanks Rias."

Sensing something wrong, she nudges him. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want you to leave."

"I have obligations Ichigo, not even I can ignore my duties as much as I would like to. As the King of my peerage, I have to make sure things are running smoothly for my members. Besides I have to speak to Issei as well for his behavior. Any chance I can get you to apologize to him?"

"No. I promised I wouldn't interfere with your peerage, but I won't apologize for defending what's mine."

"Fair enough Ichigo. So with what little time I have before I have to leave, is there anything you want to do?"

Slowly turning around, he gently kisses her. "Just eat and sleep with you in my arms for an hour or two."

"Then let's get cleaned and get you into bed as soon as possible."

"I'd like that."

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Byakuya Kuchiki sits at his desk reading over the latest report of an unknown entity's incursion into the desolate wastes of Hueco Mundo; it has him wondering why it happened shortly after the Captain's meeting held only yesterday. Frowning as he and his fellow Captains were made aware of an ancient pact between Soul Society and what are called the Three Factions. He scoffs as he remembers the details explaining that they and their counterparts worldwide are essentially god-like beings themselves, although they are not true gods, not like the members of the various pantheons, since Shinigami and their counterparts do age, although more slowly than humans or spirits without Reiatsu, and can succumb to disease, like in the case of Captain Ukitake.

The fact that the existence of these beings was withheld from them until now chafed more than one or two Captains yesterday. If it wasn't for the strange incursion in Hueco Mundo and the fact that his sister and Squad Five's Lieutenant Momo are both deemed missing after the Stealth Force made an emergency reconnaissance of the area they were supposed to be stationed in, he wonders if Head-Captain Yamamoto would have even told them of their existence. The announcement that a new and unknown Reiatsu had been discovered in the same park as that of his sister and her comrade has him worried the most. The only thing keeping him from going to the World of the Living himself is the fact that there were no signs of battle, nor were there any signs of forced entry or struggle at their now abandoned apartment.

He takes a deep breath to calm his growing agitation over his sister and the missing Lieutenant Hinamori. The news that these mythical beings do exist and that they reside in the World of the
Living gives him pause that his sister wouldn't have been defeated so easily, at least not without leaving behind a clue as to what had happened. He even agreed with both Captain Ukitake and Captain Hirako's decision at the meeting to allow the two missing Lieutenants at least two more days before sending down a search party to look for them.

"Indeed. Who would have thought that Angels, Devils and Fallen Angels existed?"

"Captain, do you really think that Rukia and Momo are mixed up in this? I know they are two days overdue with their report, but still…?"

"We cannot afford to take any chances Renji. Captain Ukitake and Captain Hirako have decided to give them two more days to report back. If not, they will send a detachment to their last known location to ascertain their wellbeing. You will be included in the party if it comes to that."

"Hai Captain."

"And Renji?"

"Yes."

"If she has been harmed, I expect you to take care of it, understood?"

"Completely Captain."

Rukia sits in the Student Council room watching the two Hell Butterflies leave her and Momo's hands. Both are looking sheepishly at the other, Momo having burst into a fit of panic earlier due to the fact that she was overdue with her report, and Rukia likewise realized she was overdue with her report as well. Rukia hopes that hers and Hinamori's reports will be enough to placate the two veteran Captains' curiosity as to where they had disappeared to. Once the butterflies are gone, she gets up, cracks her stiff joints and drinks the last of her tea before she and Momo make their way to attend the last classes of the day.

"So Rukia, are you still mad about this morning?" Momo says with a slight blush.

"He. Is. Dead." Rukia's eyebrow twitches as she remembers seeing Ichigo's face clear as day and she swears his gaze lingered on every nude body in the common bathroom.

"It was an accident. He said so Rukia."

Looking at the blush on the innocent Lieutenant's face, she wants to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Of course it was an accident Momo, but I'm still not letting him off for his...his perverted behavior. Especially after what he did to Issei-kun last night. If it wasn't for Orihime healing Rias's Pawn this morning, that young man never would've been able to move this morning. And did you hear what Issei's backside looked like!? He must have beaten him to within an inch of his life!"

Momo sighs as she remembers the early morning events. First waking up to a door being slammed as they notice the crimson-haired princess was missing. Only for their sleep to get disturbed again when Ichigo's personal assistant came for Orihime. After hearing about the condition of the young man was in, Momo went with Orihime in case her Kaidō was needed to help the young healer. They both gasped when they were lead to a room were a semi-conscious Issei laid on his stomach, his ass bare to world, heavily bruised and bleeding from what they later learned was Ichigo's punishment.
Orihime only sighed as she began to work on the young man, asking Momo to put Issei to sleep so she could work undisturbed. Giggling, she had asked the burnt-orange-haired healer if it was her first time seeing the naked butt of a man, however she didn't expect the blush that bloomed on Orihime's face. Sensing a juicy story later for the SWA, she prodded the younger woman until she blurted out she had seen Ichigo nude, by accident of course, during his stay at the Fourth when he was recovering. She squeaked that she had gone in to check on him and as she was going to adjust his blanket, he had pushed it off during what she imagined was a dream. No one had bothered to tell her he was nude under the fabric. The worst part was Isane and Captain Unohana had both walked in right after that.

Momo shivers at the thought, but remembers that she couldn't help laughing back then as Orihime tried valiantly to convince Momo that it was a big misunderstanding, even if the blush on her face did little to convince the Squad Five Lieutenant. She and Orihime had both jumped in fright then when Rias coughed politely behind them and asked about Issei's condition. After being assured that her Pawn would be fine, the Gremory heir made an ominous threat about putting a certain orange-headed Devil in his place before leaving them.

After Orihime finished healing Issei, Momo had walked her to the Great Dome after they had both dressed and eaten, and told her to have a good day before she left to meet up with Tatsuki and the twins. Soon she was joined by Rukia, Akeno and the rest of the peerage members including a newly-recovered Issei. After teleporting to their new home, they quickly changed and made their way to school, where they were immediately summoned to the Student Council room after homeroom. That was when the two Maou decided to have another conversation with Rias's new Pawn, to make sure future incidents would never occur. This time Issei thankfully listened to Rukia explaining exactly what type of person Ichigo is and what the formerly human Shinigami is capable of doing to those that he feels are a threat to his family or friends.

It was while wondering how the people back at Soul Society would react to this situation that she realized in horror that they were overdue with their reports. Rukia had begun to panic as well thinking that maybe her brother, or worse, her fiancé, might show up and then Ichigo's secret would get out. Deciding that a break-in at their old apartment would have to do, they both wrote up a fake story of how they told the story to their new classmates and before they knew it had been 'convinced' to live with them. Then they both apologized in their reports for not informing their superiors as soon as possible as they got caught up in the moment with their new friends.

"So do you think they'll buy it Rukia?" Momo dejectedly asks as they walk to their last class.

Rukia sighs back. "I don't know Momo; I just hope they give us a few days or even a week or two before they send someone to check on us. Right now, I just want Ichigo back to his former strength or stronger before he has to face Soul Society. At least then he has a fighting chance against Central Forty-Six, and once the truth of his nobility comes out, maybe, just maybe they will leave him and his sisters alone."

"If not?" Momo swallows nervously.

Stopping, she takes a deep breath before she looks her friend in her eyes. "I won't let Soul Society come after him again, not after he saved all of us. Momo, if I have to choose, regardless of the consequences to myself, I'll choose Ichigo. He's saved me in more ways than I can even tell you. If you want out, I won't stop you."

"He really means that much to you Rukia?"

"He does. He is my best friend Momo; I won't turn my back on him."
Linking her arm through the violet eyed Lieutenant's arm, Momo begins guiding her towards their classroom.

"I'll guess I can indulge my adrenaline habit for a few more weeks."

"I told you that you were an addict."

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Watching as Rias disappears, the young lord turns to his assistant. "Well Merti, I guess I'll be waiting for Rukia and Momo in the training yard out back."

She smiles when she asks which one, after reminding him that there are four fields.

"Dammit, the one that is behind the Eastern Hall, you know the one that is bordered by the low cliff."

The two walk down the long central hallways until Merti has to split away to attend to other Clan business. Ichigo watches her go for a few seconds before continuing to walk on his own, nodding to both the staff and the Cerberus on duty, as he begins his internal dialogue.

'So you think it's going to be a problem?'

"You heard the were-kitty, it might not work."

'I'm sorry Zangetsu, I thought…'

"Save it Ichigo, he fooled us both. He left us in a bind though, the prick."

'Yeah, he did. So you want to explain this morning?'

He hears the sounds of footsteps next to him, before his Zanpakutō answers. "All I know is the kid showed up not too long after you and me got separated. I don't know if she was part of the Hōgyoku or not. The only thing I can say about her is that she is fun to be around."

"Fun? You can have…fun?"

"Up yours King. But yeah, she is fun to be around. Smart but still innocent, but sometimes I swear."

"What?"

"Nothing, forget it. So let's talk about our control. I'm sure you can feel you aren't leaking like a sieve anymore, but we still got work to do. If there is anything foxy-sensei taught us today, is that we still suck at it."

"Hey, we didn't do badly today. We almost made it on our first try."

His Hollow Zanpakutō snorts. "Yeah, until she reminded you oh so delicately when she pressed her body against you. Remember when she rubbed her chest and asked if you wanted a second peek?"

Pinching his nose, the young Devil groans out. "I remember, and you remember what happened afterwards don't you? We got hit on all sides by the others. We are going to practice that tonight when I go to bed."
"You know you don't actually sleep when we are training, you sure you want to put yourself through this?"

"I don't want to live in the Underworld for the rest of my life Zangetsu; I still have a life to live."

"Have you ever thought that maybe we don't for too much longer?"

Stopping and looking at his Zanpakutō spirit with a glare after he materializes next to him, Ichigo grits out. "What the fuck you mean?"

Placing a hand on his wielder's shoulder, the white spirit responds. "Ichigo we are not normal, you realize this right? You are a Devil wielding the power of four races. Hollow, Shinigami, Quincy and Devil, where do you think we are going to end up? Here? Soul Society? Possibly Hueco Mundo? King, you are a hybrid just like me, we are not going to fit in the World of the Living for long. Sooner or later you are going to have to choose where we do belong, and I hate stating the obvious, but we fit in here. We are accepted and more importantly Ichigo, they want us. Do any of the others want us?"

Looking at the white version of himself, he has to admit it does make sense. Soul Society's government did order his execution and threatened his friends and more importantly his family. Hueco Mundo while a possibility isn't his first choice, too much sand and no sunlight. Frowning, he knows why he can't stay in the World of Living for long, because as it was explained to him the other night, he will stop aging physically within the next ten years.

Sure he can use a glamour and make it age in appearance, but he will stop aging physically by thirty. And eventually his human identity will have to publicly 'die' of old age to prevent any dangerous suspicions from the humans not in the know from popping up. And afterwards, he'll have to create new identities and appearances and change them again when they get too old for when he visits the Human World. Seeing the look Zangetsu is giving him, he starts walking again. "When did you get so damn smart by-the-way?"

"Pervert Geta-Bōshi must have stuffed more in our brain then just second year high school shit."

"At least we aren't a year behind. Bad enough I was considered a delinquent back in Karakura."

"You still are Ichigo."

Looking to his right, he finds Tatsuki coming towards him from an adjoining hallway.

"Tatsuki."

"Pervert."

Slapping his wielder on his back, Zangetsu gets his last insult in before fading away. "See, even Suki knows what you were really thinking about this morning."

"Ass."

Tatsuki slides in next to her oldest friend and walks beside him silently for the first few minutes before she breaks her quiet contemplation. "Ichigo, can we talk about me and my powers now?"

"What about them Tatsuki?" His voice has a harsh tone to it.
Frowning at his tone, she voices her anger. "Why can't I have them!? Why do you want to deny me a chance to help you!? If I have…"

"SHUT UP TATSUKI! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE ASKING OF ME! YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS TO YOU!? FINE, I'LL FUCKING TELL YOU! I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU DIE! EVERY TIME WE WERE FIGHTING, I HAD TO FUCKING WORRY ABOUT CHAD AND ORIHIME DYING BECAUSE I MIGHT NOT BE THERE! I...DON'T...WANT...TO...SEE...YOU...DIE...TATSUKI!!"

He stops suddenly, shaking in pure anger at not only her, but at himself. "Suki, I helped cause the changes in Orihime and Chad. Do you know what it was like for me when she was taken by Aizen!? I was scared out of my mind about what might be happening to her! Was she being hurt? Was she being treated well? If...if she was being abused? Do you think I want to see any more of my friends being used like that? As a fucking weapon? A bargaining chip to be used against me? Chad almost died in that damn desert fighting beings he had no business ever knowing existed, but he did. If it hadn't been for Captain Unohana, he might have died that day. So tell me again Tatsuki Arisawa, why would I want to put you in that position? Ehmm, Suki, why would I want to see you possibly die because I woke up your powers?"

"Because it's her choice Ichigo." Both teens snap their heads to see Yoruichi and Isshin walking towards them.

"How can you..."

"It is her right to choose Ichigo. If she wants this, then give it to her. She can never have a normal life again Ichigo; she's seen too much, knows too much now to turn back. Kisuke agrees with me and Isshin on this. Tatsuki has a right to defend those she loves as well. You can't and won't always be there to fight for them. Give her the power so she can do it on her own." His Bankai sensei finishes by giving Tatsuki a nod.

"I don't want her to..."

Isshin steps in front of his son and pulls him into a hug. "Ichigo, I know why you do this. We all do. But you have to let them decide for themselves, just as you did when Kisuke offered you the chance to awaken your own power. Don't you dare keep her from her own desire to get stronger like you did. Give her what she wants."

"She doesn't know what she is asking Dad."

"I think she does."

Looking at his oldest friend, he sees the pleading in her eyes, and he remembers the day she hit him after Orihime was taken from them. Standing in front of him is that same friend, only this time she wants to gain the power to help keep her best friend safe. He can't help the bile that rises in his throat, even as he finally relents; he's going to make sure she gets the best damn training possible at the very least, but first he wants to see her conviction.

Before Tatsuki can even blink, Ichigo is in front of her, chains wrapping her tight in their links and she almost panics when she sees his helmet and glowing eyes staring into her soul. "**I'll give you what you want Suki, but I'll be damned if you aren't trained. Your ass belongs to them until they say otherwise, deal?**"

Gritting her teeth, she nods her acceptance.
"Don't make me regret this Tatsuki. I don't want to lose anyone else ever again." He lets her go and starts walking away, his chains and armor dispersing, leaving the two older Shinigami and his friend watching his retreating back.

"Thank you Ichigo." Tatsuki whispers softly.

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Karin, Yuzu and Orihime are blissfully soaking in one of the hot springs after having the most delicious lunch with their great-grandfather. Tatsuki had excused herself early, telling them she wanted to see how Ichigo was doing after his first training session. Orihime knows what she is really after and silently hopes that Ichigo will refuse. She doesn't want her friend to suffer like they had and probably will continue to do so in the future. Even after Yoruichi told her that it isn't a possibility anymore, since Tatsuki is already changing like the rest of them, the healer can only pray it isn't true.

"Orihime-nee, are you going to stay here with Ichi-nii and us?"

"Huh? Sorry Yuzu, what did you say?"

Yuzu grins at the older sister as she repeats her question. "Are you going to stay here with Ichi-nii and us or go back to Karakura?"

Her brown eyes stare blankly at the two twins sitting across from her, then her mind catches up with what the lighter-haired twin just said.

"You're staying?"

The twins glance at each other before turning back to Orihime. Karin begins speaking to the older teen.

"We decided last night that we can't leave Ichigo. No matter what, he's our brother and we are his family Onee-san. We...we're hoping you'll stay too."

"What about school? Your friends? Otou-san?"

"We'll have to get our school grades transferred, but this time we'll be with Ichigo. Goat-Face said Ichigo can't go home, back to Karakura, or he'll likely draw attention from Soul Society since it's the Jūrücki and under their supervision. So if he can't come to us, we're going to him. They've already torn our family apart once; we won't let them do it again. Yuzu and I have talked about this since we learned the truth Orihime-nee, and where Ichigo goes, so will we."

"And what about, you know...your newly revealed family history?"

"We are going to let Ichi-nii make us into Devils." Yuzu answers quietly.

Orihime nods in understanding before she gives them a smile. "Well, I can't heal him if I'm not around can I? Besides I think he will need it after what he did this morning."

The two younger girls look at each other before Yuzu innocently asks what happened this morning.

Orihime tells them what Ichigo did without even thinking, and when she realizes what she just told them, she slaps her hands over her mouth but it is too late.

"That pervert!"
Sōna looks at her fellow noblewoman and gives her a shake of her head. "I thought it was going to happen. Your Pawn isn't known for his discretion. I hoped that after Rukia-san beat his ass after kendo practice that day, he would have learned to tone down his behavior, but clearly not."

Rias puts three stacks of boxes on top of her desk when the other Devil stops. Sōna lifts one eyebrow as she looks at the boxes, and the crimson-haired teen answers the unspoken question. "I am aware of Issei's...problems. So I have devised a little punishment of my own, not so painful, but effective I believe."

"How many?" Sōna asks curiously.

"Three thousand give or take a few dozen. Rush order, so I didn't have time to count."

"And he has to deliver them all?"

"Tonight."

Sōna looks at her fellow Devil with a look of disbelief before breaking out in laughter. "There's no way he can do it Rias, no way."

"He'd better or he'll have the same stack tomorrow night plus whatever he doesn't deliver tonight."

"Wow, I thought I was tough on my new Pawn, but you Rias, now that is harsh."

"You didn't see him this morning Sōna. Ichigo did a real number on him last night. He had deep bruises and welts all over his backside. If it wasn't for Orihime, it would have taken me at least a full day of magic to heal him."

"So Ichigo went overboard then?"

Rias snorts. "Overboard is hardly the term I would use. I think Tatsuki said it best, 'he beat his ass black and blue'. Not only that, Ichigo already said he won't apologize for his actions, but he at least agreed not to interfere again."

"At least until...you know." Sōna smirks knowingly.

This time Sōna sees the look of happiness dance across the other Devil's face as she gains a faraway look in her eyes. Pushing her glasses up slightly, the Sitri heiress nudges the dreamy-looking Gremory heiress.

"So he's really going to challenge Riser for your hand?"

Coming out of her thoughts, Rias bites her thumbnail before acknowledging the other teen. "Merti told him about a few of our more archaic customs in their talks. Among them, the noble's duel challenge. Ichigo of course jumped on it as soon as Merti explained what it was and how to issue the challenge. He's using the time before the next gathering of nobles to train."

"Do you think he can win?" Sōna asks.

The Sitri heiress has an idea of how powerful Kiku was from what her sister Serafall had remembered, and according to Yoruichi, Ichigo's father is no pushover as a Shinigami either. Then there is his Hollow, well now his Hollowfied Zanpakutō spirit. Orihime went white when Tsubaki tried to ask about Ichigo's Hollow, and the young healer refused to speak of what she had seen that
day. The Quincy archer as well refused to speak of the Hollow. The others, including the Shinigami Lieutenants hadn't seen it fighting, but Rukia remembers the power of that battle in Hueco Mundo. She said it felt like the ocean fell on them that day.

Shifting closer to Rias, Sōna elbows her lightly. "Rias, do you think he can win?"

Rias nods her head. "He'll win Sōna. I never told you how angry he got when I first told him I was in an arranged marriage, he nearly went ballistic. Now that he has awakened his bloodlines, I know he'll keep his promise to me."

"What promise?"

"He promised he wouldn't let me go without a fight Sōna. After hearing what he has done in the past, I'm certain he will win and keep his promise to me. I won't marry anyone else but him."

Sōna and Rias sit quietly until their peerages and the Shinigami make their arrival known, Rukia and Akeno both exchanging words about the 'incident', and why the Kuchiki Shinigami should take it easy on Ichigo.

"Akeno, I already said he was going to pay for his little stunt today, and if I don't he'll think I'm weak. Besides, Ichigo can take a little pain after all he's been through, what Momo and I have planned for him will be a walk in the park for him. So don't you worry so much about Berry-kun, he'll be in one piece more or less when you arrive tonight."

Rias groans as Sōna pats her on the back. "He'll live, she even said so. So Rukia, Momo what exactly are you going to teach Ichigo?"

Momo quickly speaks up. "Well, if he has enough control we will start him with the lower Hadō and Bakudō spells, and if he's really good, maybe some beginner Kaidō. Most of the Onmitsukidō have a basic knowledge of Kaidō for field injuries, no reason he shouldn't have the same skills."

"But first I teach him some of my favorites like Sho and Byakurai again." Rukia begins rubbing her hands gleefully.

A knock at the door announces the last Devil to arrive, everyone turns to see a very worried Issei enter the room and stand before his new master. Bowing very low, he squeaks out an apology.

"I'm sorry for embarrassing you Rias-sama; I'll watch my actions much more closely from now on."

"Answer me one thing Issei, what is your ultimate goal as a Devil?"

While expected, but none the less shocking after last night's events, the newest Pawn declares his dream to his King. "I'm going to create the largest harem I can, and have as many wives as possible!"

"He is so dead." Rukia and Koneko mutter to themselves, while Momo gapes at him in shock, leaving the rest of the room in an eerie silence until Sōna taps the Gremory woman on the shoulder.

"Good luck, you'll be needing it. Rukia, Momo, I will take you to the Underworld now. I'm sure you want to start training Ichigo as soon-as-possible."

Barely nodding her head as she stares at the now starry eyes of her Pawn, Rias doesn't even register the magic circle that takes the three other women from the room. Swallowing, she looks over at
Akeno, who is hiding her laughter behind her hand as she shakes her head back and forth. Yuuto just hangs his head in shame that his fellow second year would actually articulate his perverted goal, while the freshman Neko sits on the couch, continuously comparing him to the greatest perverts in history.

"Is…Issei, did you just say you want to create a harem?"

"Yes Rias-sama, I want to be the Harem King. I want all the beautiful women in it. Including…"

"Including who exactly?" Akeno stops her laughter, the foreboding feeling she is getting from her other senses lighting up into overdrive.

"I haven't thought about it, but I have a few I'd like to see as part of my harem. All the beautiful female Devils included." Again Issei's gaze grows distant.

Koneko gets up from her place and walks over to the dreaming young Devil and punches him right in the gut before storming out of the room. "PERVERT!"

Akeno shakes her head before she walks after the young Neko, calling out as she follows. "Koneko-chan wait! Koneko-chan!"

Yuuto gets up after seeing his mistress nod with her head towards the door. Bowing slightly, he walks pass the coughing Devil where he whimpers on the floor, whispering lowly to him. "Please Issei, keep quiet."

Issei keeps his place on the floor as he watches his master slowly approach him and then kneel in front of him. She surprises him when she cups his cheek and wipes away an imaginary piece of dirt before speaking.

"Issei, while it's not unheard of, it isn't common for younger or reincarnated Devils to form harems in the Underworld. However, if that is your goal, then I'll allow it on a few conditions."

"Conditions?"

Standing, she motions him to sit on one of the couches as she sits opposite from him, this time she holds her skirt in place and swears hearing him moaning ever so lightly. Shaking her head, she looks at the young brown-haired Devil and stare at him hard.

"While I'll allow this, you are forbidden from making any advances on any member of my peerage, Sōna's peerage or those that Ichigo calls family and friends. If, and I mean if, you do intend to follow through on this pursuit of yours, you will keep it to yourself and never utter a word of it in front of Ichigo, ever. If it does come to light, I will deal with the situation myself. Now Issei can you do this? Keep this to yourself?"

"I'll try Rias-sama. Is that all?"

Smirking that she at least got that from her perverted Pawn, she giggles as she stands up and walks towards the stacks of pamphlets. Turning, she waves him over and opens the top of one and pulls out the summoning spell. Handing it to him, she sees his eyes open in recognition of the piece of paper. He slowly looks at his new mistress as he begins to inform him of his punishment.

"There are a few of these for you to hand out tonight Issei-kun. For your part of that little fiasco last night, you will hand out each and every one of these by the stroke of midnight tonight. If you should fail to do so, there will be an equal number tomorrow night waiting for you plus what you do not hand out tonight. I will be leaving Akeno and Yuuto behind tonight to watch over you."
Koneko and I will be returning to the Underworld for dinner and I will not return until tomorrow for school. If there is trouble, Akeno or Yuuto will be here to assist you, so don't worry. Issei, do you understand?"

"From now on Issei, until otherwise told, you must address me as Buchou while in school. Outside of school Rias-san will do except in front of the pure-bloods or other nobles of the Underworld, and then you must use Rias-sama or Gremory-sama. Now, I suggest you get going and get these handed out before midnight Issei. Please don't disappoint me tonight."

"Hai Buchou! I won't!" Issei grabs two boxes and runs out of the club room.

Sensing her guest but not bothering to turn around, she waits for the magical circle to finish dispersing before she turns to greet her visitor.

"Grayfia."

"Rias."

The Sitri heiress watches in utter amazement at the abuse and punishment her newly found cousin is willing to put up with for the violet eyed Shinigami. For the last thirty-five minutes, the three have been trading Hadō and Bakudō spells left and right. The part she found amusing was when he begged both the Lieutenants for their forgiveness for his earlier transgression towards them. At first Rukia, and to a lesser degree Momo, both yelled at him for his idiotic behavior. After pleading for the better part of an hour, they both relented and did forgive him, but they made sure he knew they weren't going to take it easy on him. Smiling, he told him he was ready and then the training began.

Allowing himself to be used as a target dummy, Ichigo withstood the first few Hadō and Bakudō spells well until Momo hit him with a number twelve Hadō. The resulting explosion ruined his shirt and burnt his hands, which to her amazement healed almost instantaneously afterwards. Momo and Rukia both watched intently as his skin healed as if it were nothing, before the two began grinning madly. That was the start of the now running battle between the three Shinigami warriors. Two against one was a better learning experience, which was all they said to him before launching their Kidō against him.

"Ye lord! Mask of blood and flesh, all creation, flutter of wings, ye who bears the name of Man! Inferno and pandemonium, the sea barrier surges, march on to the south! Hadō Number Thirty-One: Shakkahō!"

Ichigo barely dodges the red ball of flame as he rolls to one side only to find a second incantation-less Shakkahō coming at his blind side from Momo.

"Are you two out of your minds!? We didn't cover that yet you…"

"You what Ichigo?" Rukia says as she starts forming her next shot.

"Fucking demented midgets!" He screams as she sends her next flaming ball at him.

Momo flashsteps next to Sōna, breathing heavily, as she decides it's time to take a break and let Rukia have her fun. Both Devil and Shinigami watch the orange-headed hybrid dodge and launch his own counter-attacks against the nimble and well-versed Squad Thirteen Lieutenant. While
Ichigo's Kidō has overwhelming power, it lacks Rukia's finesse and quickness in casting. Sometimes they would blow up in his face, causing the raven-haired Shinigami to compare him to a certain red-haired Lieutenant. The insult seems to work as he began to take his time and form his spells with greater care before using them.

Finally the two stood a few meters apart from each other, both breathing heavily and their respective clothing burnt, torn and in a few spots, bloodied. The female duelist drops to her knees first and calls it quits.

"You...you...and your damn...endless reserves...Ichigo..."

"I...I thought...you'd...never quit...Rukia..."

The two begin laughing as they collapse to the ground of the training dimension that Merti had prepared for them. Ichigo's cousin and Rukia's friend approach the two laughing Shinigami and hand them each a bottle of water. Thanking Sōna and Momo for the water, the two duelists drown their thirst quickly before struggling to get up. Rukia grabs Ichigo's hand and helps him up, only to see him grinning at her.

"What?"

"Nothing, just thinking how much stronger you are now Rukia."

She snorts at him then. "Nii-sama has been training me, as has Captain Ukitake, Ichigo. Although I'm a Lieutenant now, they both believe I can achieve my Bankai soon."

"Really? That's great! I've always believed you could do it you know."

Blushing slightly, she turns away. "Thanks Carrot-top. Now come on, let's get a bath. AND NO PEEKING THIS TIME!"

"I said I was sorry dammit!"

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Rias is ready to leave for the Underworld when she feels Issei's power fluctuating in fear. Knowing something's wrong, she immediately teleports to where he is, only to see the same male Fallen Angel from the night Ichigo regained his memories floating over a bleeding Issei who is lying on the ground.

"Forgive me Fallen Angel, but it would be wise of you to stop your attack before I'm forced to blow you away." The crimson-haired heiress says as she begins to gather the power of her family's devastating magic.

Moving away, the man bows to her as he retorts. "Ah, forgive me Lady Gremory, I had no idea this 'boy' belongs to you. I thought him nothing more than a simple stray that had to be put down."

"Funny, I would have thought your friend 'Yuuma' would have said something to you about him. Fear not, if I see either of you here again, I won't hesitate next time. Now go before my leniency wanes."

Putting his hat back on, the Fallen Angel begins to fly away, but he can't help leaving a taunt behind. "Too bad we didn't kill either one that night, it would have made things easier on them later. Good night Gremory."
Rias can't help herself as she smiles at the retreating back. "I thank you for that by-the-way Fallen Angel; all you did was awaken a powerful being that night. One I'm sure you will see plenty of in the coming centuries...well, perhaps not you."

The Fallen Angel stops in mid-flight, turning to hover, he glares down at the smirking heiress. "What do you mean by that Gremory? All we did is miss out on killing two Sacred Gear holders, nothing more."

Laughing as she crouches down next to her Pawn, she begins to apply magic to Issei's wounds to slow his bleeding before she speaks again. "While that may be true in this one's case, the other doesn't have a Sacred Gear, he is something more than any of us thought possible."

The Fallen Angel visibly tenses. "What is he then?"

Rias gathers her magic again, all too aware that Issei's would-be murderer is also gathering his own. "You will find out in good time Fallen Angel. For now its best you leave as I sense my peerage arriving." As she finishes speaking, the tell-tell signs of magic circles begin to form all around the area.

The Fallen Angel glances around, sneering as he realizes he will be trapped if he continues to stay. "Until next time Lady Gremory. I look forward to meeting this person you speak of."

Rias doesn't let go of her magic, watching as the black winged man flies away and scanning her surroundings for any sign of his allies. Soon, Akeno and Koneko both appear from their magic circles and rush to her side, while Yuuto keeps watch their surroundings for her so she can help Issei with his injuries. Thankfully, Rias and her Queen are able to stop the bleeding enough that they can teleport Issei to the Naberius Estate for further treatment. Standing up after the circle fades, she turns to the nearest Cerberus, who is already on alert after catching the scent of Issei's bloody body.

"Please inform Lord Naberius I need assistance, my Pawn was attacked and I would like to ask for Orihime's help."

"Of course Lady Rias." The young Hell Hound leaps away, several barks echoing as the remaining Hell Hounds around them quickly take up a more defensive position.

Turning back to her Queen and Pawn, Rias asks how Issei is doing.

"He's lost a lot of blood Rias. I'm not sure what we can do other than that." Akeno and Rias both frown at the thought, but if one of them has to, Rias knows it will be her that performs their form of magical healing. As the minutes tick by, the crimson-haired teen begins to worry that her Pawn might really die; she is about to order Akeno to take him to a private room when shouting is heard down the hallway.

"Issei-kun! What happened to him Rias-san!? Did...did Ichigo get mad at him again!?"

Shaking her head as the young healer enters the room, Rias assures her that it isn't the case. "He was attacked by a Fallen Angel Orihime, do you think..."

She stops talking as an orange dome immediately fills the space over her newest member's body, and she sees Issei's wounds disappearing so quickly, she isn't sure of what she had just witnessed. Even his clothes revert back to normal before the healing envelope disappears. Orihime tilts her head to one side as if listening to someone, which the Devils don't see, though Rias notices a small light flashing before Orihime's hairpins are once again whole.
"Shun’ō says he should recover quickly. She says his wounds were very serious, but it was the extra energy in his system that she was concerned with, one she hasn't encountered before, and it was damaging Issei's body until she managed to remove it from him. Do you know what it was Rias?" The burnt-orange-haired healer asks of the still amazed Devil.

"We call that light poisoning Orihime; the light based weapons of Angels and Fallen Angels are dangerous to us."

"Oh, I didn't know that light could be so dangerous. Well anyways, he'll be fine, so we should get him home or to a room here to rest."

"Wait! Orihime what was that just now?" The Thunder Princess suddenly asks.

"That was my Shun Shun Rikka, my power." The teen replies with a gentle smile.

Seeming to come to a decision, Orihime waves to a waiting staff member, then bows to the approaching young Devil woman. "Please have someone take Issei-kun to the room he had last night so he can rest. I'll check on him in an hour or so just to make sure he is okay."

"Yes Lady Orihime." The maid bows back before teleporting away with Issei.

"Lady Orihime, huh?" Akeno asks with a smirk. "I see you are well thought of already Orihime."

The healer giggles then. "Yeah, it seems because I'm Ichigo's sister now, I am seen as a member of the Clan by default. I even have my own suite here too. I think it's bigger than my apartment building in Karakura Town. Come on you guys, it's almost time for dinner."

The Devils can only follow behind the young woman as she happily tells them about her day so far, how Ichigo got 'beaten up' this morning while training with Akiko. How Rukia and Momo launched themselves into a full blown Kidō spar with Ichigo, and finally how Yoruichi announced she is going to personally train him after dinner today. They perk up when Orihime also mentions that it is open to all the female members of the peerages, the Shinigami, and of course herself and Tatsuki. When they ask what the training is going to be, Orihime taps her chin in thought before shrugging her shoulders.

"I don't think she said what exactly, just be ready for a fun night."

Rias and Akeno trade guarded looks between them; they have first-hand knowledge of what the woman's idea of training Ichigo is, thanks to her stories of his early days as a Shinigami. The words 'hot springs' and 'nude' came up a lot during those conversations. Rias blushes as she thinks about the beautiful Shinigami noblewoman, her body screaming of perfection as does Ichigo's because of the amount of time they put into their individual training. Tatsuki's body is already well toned from her own martial arts training, but even Karin's body is beginning to show how well she was adapting to their training methods. Both teen and preteen are definitely showing more defined physiques.

"Maybe we should join them Buchou?" Akeno asks teasingly.

"Maybe we should."

As they make their way into the formal dining hall, loud voices can be heard, among them Ichigo's and Yoruichi's.

"I said no way in hell werecat! I'm not going and that's final!"
"You listen here Berry-kun, either you go or I give Rangiku a very special disk that I have of you and me and your Bankai training sessions."

"W-What!? What the hell did you do!?"

"As a former member of the Onmitsukidō I secretly filmed our training, I figured I would need something to blackmail you with so I could make you do what I want one day, and today is that day. Now after dinner you and me will be playing 'tag' and I will tell you the rules when we get there."

"Ichigo, what is Yoruichi-san talking about? Did you peek at her again or something!?” Karin yells at her brother, faking her anger as she already heard the stories from her own training with the former Captain.

"No…I mean I didn't mean to…Gahh I hate you Yoruichi! Now you got my sisters thinking I'm some sort of pervert you damn psychotic cat!"

"Ara, ara Buchou, that's how he knows that Issei is a pervert. He's one himself." Akeno whispers loudly in a scandalized voice.

The room shakes from the laughter of everyone but the pissed noble Devil as he stalks out of the room. Catching her breath, Yoruichi jerks her thumb at his girlfriend.

"Better calm him down Rias or he'll be useless tonight."

Stifling her laughter and trying to compose herself first, Rias walks after her orange-headed boyfriend, only to be yanked into an empty room by two strong hands as she passes the first hallway. Reacting out of instinct, she tries to twist her arms away only to find her captor is much stronger than her. Gathering her magic, she is about to use her Power of Destruction when her captor speaks to her as he pulls her against his body.

"So you enjoy laughing at your boyfriend, Gremory-sama?” She shudders as a familiar pair of lips work up the side of her neck.

Realizing that Ichigo has her in his grasp, the teen Devil leans backwards into the chest of her boyfriend, arms stretching over her head and wrapping themselves around his neck.

"I'm sorry Ichigo, but it was funny. Don't worry about what Yoruichi said, I already know, she told us last night when we were waiting for you to get back from 'teaching' Issei a lesson. I'm just disappointed that I wasn't the first woman you saw naked that's all."

Chuckling at her admission, he lets her go but still holds her tight. "She may have been the first Rias, but she isn't the one I'm going to marry, is she?"

"You really mean that don't you Ichigo? I…I'm the one you want?"

Turning her around, he dips his head down. "I think you know the answer to that, so let me remind you again Rias Gremory…Naberius."

He tilts her head back as he gently kisses her at first, before he prods her to open her mouth for him. Soon she can feel his tongue touching hers as he pulls her flush against his body, his hands running up and down her spine, pulling her ever closer to his. Both freeze when the room suddenly fills with light from a now crashing door as Yoruichi and Akeno both snap pictures with their respective phones.
"AKEENNNOOO!"

"DAMN WEREKITTY!"

Yuzu nudges her older sister as she sits at the ominously quiet table. "Orihime-nee, what's wrong with Ichigo and Rias?"

Looking around quickly, the burnt-orange-haired young woman leans down so she can quietly answer. "Yoruichi and Akeno broke up a moment of privacy between them. Since then, the household has been walking on eggshells. I don't think either of them are in a good mood."

"Oh, so they got caught kissing again?"

"No Yuzu, we got interrupted by two immature pain-in-the-asses is what happened." Ichigo growls out as he shoots daggers from his eyes at the woman sitting across from him.

Smirking back at him, Yoruichi waves one of her chopsticks at him. "If you had your Reiatsu under better control, I wouldn't have known what you two were doing, now would I Ichigo?"

"Whatever. Now what is this bullshit game of 'tag' we're playing tonight?"

"You'll have to wait and see Ichigo. Besides it will be fun for the ladies I can assure them of that."

Groaning as he sits back in his seat, Ichigo can only imagine what she has in store for him. Strangely Zangetsu has been quiet most of the day after training with the peerage this morning, not even saying a word when Issei showed up for dinner with the rest of Rias's peerage. Deciding to give the kid a break after hearing he almost got killed by a Fallen Angel, Ichigo simply didn't say anything to him. Looking down the table, he can see Tatsuki, Chad and Uryū talking to Yuuto and Akeno. Koneko and Karin seemed to be laughing about Jinta for some reason as he sits there with his arms crossed and his eyes closed. Ururu and Tessai are talking to Sōna and her Queen, while Kisuke and his dad eat at a different table with members of both his grandfather's and his uncle's peerage.

Settling in to enjoy his dinner, he feels his 'uncle's' energy around him. Turning, he sees the older Devil just staring off into space as he holds a glass of wine in his hand. Following his eyesight, he sees what he is looking at. On the wall opposite of him, is a portrait of his great-grandmother, Cornelia in a deep blue dress. Her hand is resting atop of his as they pose for the portrait. He turns to look at his uncle again, only to see he has left the table and is no longer in the room. Bending down, he kisses his girlfriend on her cheek and ignores a few cat calls, mostly from Akeno, Tatsuki and his own sister Karin.

"I'll be right back, just want to talk to Uncle Amyntas alone."

"Okay Ichigo."

As he leaves the table, he can't help but notice Yoruichi's eyes looking in the direction that his uncle had gone. She quickly averts her gaze when she catches him looking at her, and she begins to speak to Akiko and Daiki to avoid looking at him as he walks past them. He dismisses the crazy thought that comes to him as ludicrous; instead, he makes his way to the balcony overlooking the lush gardens of the Estate, where he sees his uncle leaning against the rail.

Neither Devil speak, the two of them just looking at the night sky and watching the glowing lights of the various species as they fly through the air and loop about playfully in the comforting
darkness. After a period of silence, Ichigo decides to break it.

"She was a beautiful woman Grandfather."

The older Devil smiles as he reminisces about his late wife. "Her beauty couldn't hold a flame to her power or her temper Ichigo. But that is what I loved about her, she was very open and honest, as was your grandmother, both poured from the same mold. Both were loved by all around them. Funny how as Devils, we came to embrace such emotions as we changed; love, admiration, and even devotion. It was how we truly felt about each other when we were young. Love was so foreign to us; hate, anger and greed were what drove the old Maou, yet now we no longer hold to those values as we once did. Now it's about family and respect. Something you have no need to look for Ichigo, it has surrounded you every day of your life. Even now they are here because of what you mean to them. I…am envious of you my great-grandson, to have achieved so much just by being yourself."

Ichigo smiles as he keeps looking down at the gardens. "Trust me, it wasn't always easy for me. Tatsuki will tell you for years I was an emotionless body that answered to a name. I think it was Chad that helped get things going as far as friendship goes. The two of us couldn't avoid the thugs, so we made a promise to watch each other's backs. Then we entered high school, and that's where I met many of my friends. Keigo, Mizuiro, Orihime and Uryū among them. Each became more important to me as time went on, some more than others, especially Orihime and Uryū. The four of us - Chad, myself, Orihime and Uryū - we went to war at fifteen against one of the greatest military powers in the afterlife to save the life of yet another close friend. Since then it has basically been the five of us really, maybe six including Rukia's fiancé Renji. I hope you get to meet the pineapple one day Uncle, he's like a brother to me, just as Chad and Uryū are."

Amyntas turns to his heir and looks him over. Standing before him is the future of his Clan and his family. The only being in the universe who has the power of four different races flowing through him. Only seventeen and he has already survived a war, fought to keep his soul from breaking apart from the inside, and in a battle that he has heard first hand from Kisuke, gained the strength to kill a demi-god even when his own power wasn't fully awakened. And now, he has finally unlocked the true potential of his Devil blood, sealed away since the previous generation, and is already using it to protect his loved ones. This makes Amyntas smile, knowing that he can one day pass the reins of the Skeleton Tower to someone who won't abuse his position, nor will he allow anyone else to abuse those who they are supposed to guard. Looking down at his now empty glass, he begins to walk past his 'nephew' back into the room.

"Come Ichigo; let's not make them worry about us." He beckons.

Ichigo stands there for a moment before gathering the courage to ask his question. "Do you ever think you could love someone again Uncle? I…I only ask because you and Goat-Face…you know."

"If the right person comes along Ichigo, I might consider things then, but it will be hard for me. I've decades of loneliness to break through and some very bad habits." Amyntas holds his glass up. "This being one of them."

Nodding in understanding, Ichigo allows the older Devil to return first before he looks into a group of shadows. "I wish you luck."

XXXXX

After their dinner, Yoruichi simply tells him to dress in two layers of clothes and meet Merti in the Great Dome so she can transport him to their training session. Finding it odd for her to request what
she did, he figures that arguing with her will only lead to unnecessary lumps he'd rather avoid. So doing as she told him, he now stands before the grinning werecat and the assembly of women and teens standing behind her. It is then that she tells him the conditions of the game of 'tag' they are going to play.

Pulling out a tantō sized blade, she begins to explain the rules to his utter shock.

"Now Ichigo, I know very well you learn the quickest when your life is in danger, however I want to test a new theory of mine. To see how quickly you can learn when your modesty is in danger."

"My…what?" He asks dumbfounded.

"Oh Ichigo, did you really think any of us completely forgave you for this morning without a chance of getting some payback? You see, I thought this would be a good chance to even out the score with you and them."

"By cutting off my clothes one piece at a time you lunatic!?"

"Think of it as more of survival of your pride Ichigo. Besides, I think the unmarried ladies here want to know what they are going to be missing, now that Rias has already sunk her claws into you. The married ones are just here for the eye candy."

"No way Yoruichi, no way…" He stops when she disappears from view for a brief moment before reappearing in front of him, holding the now cut-off outer layer of his shirt.

Blinking at it in disbelief, he looks down at his chest and sees he now only has a tee-shirt between him and the watching women. 'What the fuck!?'

He looks back up at Yoruichi in horror, realizing just how rusty he truly is against the Goddess of Flash if he hadn't even seen her move. For her part, she just stands there with her ever growing grin.

"You only have to last half an hour Ichigo. If you have anything left on by then, I'll leave it on you, but if not, then…" She shrugs her shoulders as the women behind her begin chanting loudly.

"Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!" The worst part is Rias is with them, having a deep blush on her face but not saying a word to stop it.

"Rias?" He questions desperately.

"Sorry Ichigo, she…she threatened to send everything Akeno has on us to their Shinigami Women's Association if I didn't agree. There are things she has I don't think you even want them to know."

"Oh, dear god no." He face-palms thinking about what Akeno has on the two of them, then turns to face the werecat.

"Fine Yoruichi, I'll play this time, but so help me if anything gets out, there won't be anywhere safe for you." He warns.

"Deal. Now Merti, will you start us off then?"

He can only gulp as he hears Merti shout out. "Begin!"
Twenty-Seven Minutes Later…

Dooding another attack, Ichigo is still somehow surviving, despite running on fumes for the last five minutes of her insane game, clad in only his boxer briefs and desperately trying to keep away with the former Onmitsukidō Commander getting closer and closer to taking her last prize with each attack. He already knows he is going to have to train himself as hard as possible, it's been less than thirty minutes and he can already feel his fatigue setting in but with his Devil energy, he hopes he has just enough in him to outlast his stalking Shinigami opponent. Her past dozen attacks have gotten progressively closer to him, and each time he just barely manages to escape the cutting of her tantō's blade. Sweet music begins to play however for his ears as he hears his female audience begin shouting the countdown for his victory.

"Five!"
"Four!"
"Three!"
"Two!"
"One!"

He comes to a screeching stop and as he raises his hands in triumph, just as he predicted, he feels the cloth of his boxers being cut away by the cheating Yoruichi. However, a triumphant smile appears on his face from the loud and numerous gasps that leave the ensemble of women, including the one who had tried to cheat. Turning to face a wide-eyed Yoruichi who is looking down at something she clearly isn't expecting, Ichigo speaks to his Bankai mentor.

"Wondering how and why, aren't ya Yoruichi?" Ichigo says, only to pause when golden eyes lift up to stare back at him with a knowing gleam of understanding.

"Kisuke, he told you about our first years, didn't he?" The former Captain half-asks, half-states with exasperation.

"Yep, he mentioned something in passing today when I told him about this morning. That's how I came up with this…last ditch addition, just in case he was right. He told me how you did this to him as well, so…I let you think I had nothing on underneath, and since you never said I couldn't use my Devil powers…I win."

Turning, he walks towards his girlfriend, ignoring the soft clinking sounds coming from the thin metal wrapping of Hell Chains he had formed immediately after the game ended to keep his lower body covered. Smirking as he sees the amused and disbelieving looks he is getting from his great-grandfather's and grandfather's peerages, he stops before Rias and kisses her on the tip of her nose.

"I'll see you back in our room Rias. Make sure they give you all the money promised to me so I can buy you something nice tomorrow."

"Ah…ah okay Ichigo." It is all she can say as he walks away smugly.

Head held high for ruining Yoruichi's plans, especially her attempt to cheat at the end, he opens the dimensional gateway to leave the training area, only to pause and speak suddenly. "Yoruichi, don't forget to give Merti your sizes for your new maid uniform. Don't want you to look slovenly when you serve your master for a month." He leaves the room with a grin and a backwards wave.

Rukia is the first one to come out of her daze as she looks first at her partner's dazed-looking
girlfriend, and then to his equally dazed-looking Sensei whose mind seems to have crashed after remembering the conditions of her lost bet.

"Yoruichi, what just happened?"

"I don't know Rukia, I honestly don't know."

XXX

Not taking any chances, Ichigo Shunpo returns to his room, forming his obsidian armor over his body to keep his modesty covered, lest he runs into his sisters or worse, his father. Grimacing at the thought as he runs into his room, he slams the door shut and takes a deep breath as he leans back against it, feeling his Zanpakutō materialize from his inner-world.

"Did you see their faces Ichigo!? It was priceless! Old werekitten had no idea of what to say finally! I told you it would work!" The Hollow spirit cackles wildly.

Finally able to catch his breath, Ichigo begins to laugh as he remembers the practical solution Zangetsu had thought of after he had spoken to Kisuke earlier.

‘Give them a show they won't forget King.' Was what his blade told him to do, and that is what he did, gave them something to remember.

Looking at his Zanpakutō, he shakes his head as he walks towards his bathroom to get the tub ready for him and Rias. He can already feel the others arriving back to the Estate, and from the feel of their auras, he can't help but grin as the two dominating feelings he gets from them are shock and amusement.

"I guess I finally got one over on Yoruichi, Zangetsu."

"King, you know she'll try even harder next time."

"I know, but it was so worth it tonight though. Tomorrow will prove to be interesting I think."

Soon he feels Rias getting closer, so he turns to his Hollow Zanpakutō. "I think I'll hold on to my end of the bet for now, maybe use it for someone that deserves her special attentions."

Zangetsu exchanges a look with him. "You don't think?"

"I don't know, but if..." He stops as the door to the bedroom opens and his future wife walks in.

"Ichigo?" She calls out for him.

"Getting the bath ready Rias, whenever you are ready, you can come join me."

The crimson-haired Devil slowly walks into the bathroom to see her boyfriend standing by the tub, now nude, while tapping one of his feet as he watches the water fill the large spa like tub. Looking at Ichigo, she can tell that he is happy and more than a little smug about what he had pulled off earlier. Taking her own clothes off, she walks up behind him and turns him around so she can look him in the face.

"Ichigo?" Rias asks, seeing the amusement in his eyes and wondering what is going on in his head.

Bending down, he kisses her nose once again. "Come on Rias, we've had a long day and I want to get some real sleep this time. You only have half a day of school tomorrow, but I still won't see you
until your club is over with. But you're mine on your day off, got it?"

"Yes Ichigo. Now tell me, how did you come up with that..?"

"Actually that was Zangetsu's idea. We practiced for an hour until we were sure we could pull it off. I have to admit, it was worth the effort after seeing the looks on each of your faces when I walked past all of you."

Rias buries her head into his chest as she laughs. "You should have stuck around after that Ichigo, hearing your Clan's peerages complaining about how you 'cheated' them out of their entertainment. Yoruichi on the other hand said something to me that I didn't realize I needed to hear. She said that if you were able to plan that, then you would definitely not lose against Riser, that my marriage to you is a sure bet."

Lifting her head by her chin gently, Ichigo looks into her blue eyes as he speaks from his heart to her. "Nothing will make me happier than the day you become mine, and I yours, completely Rias."

He then guides her into the tub and gets in after her, after waiting for her to settle in place, he wraps his arms around her.

'Tomorrow I'll see how much I really have to do.'

In his head, he can hear his soul's partner speaking back to him. "Tomorrow we'll see if that blade can truly hold our power."

XXXXXXXX

Kisuke and Isshin sit in the library with Tessai, another game of shōgi between the two former Captains as they both look up and watch their old friend walk in with a bottle of sake in her hands. Not saying a word, she pours four saucers before handing one to each of the three men in the room. Tessai puts down his book as he gives the other two exiled Shinigami a questioning look before he asks the woman who saved him a century ago the reason for the toast.

"Our little boy has grown up Tessai. He no longer needs us to hold his hand."

"Yoruichi you aren't making sense." Isshin says as he sips from the offered saucer.

Grinning, the purple-haired goddess smiles at the three Shinigami males. "Thanks to Kisuke, Ichigo was able to save his pride and modesty tonight. He's thinking and planning ahead now instead of rushing into things, something he needs to do if he is going to win Rias's hand in marriage and give you yet another daughter Isshin."

Fist pumping the air, the deranged father shouts out to the sky. "DO YOU HEAR THAT MASAKI; OUR GRANDBABIES ARE ON THE WAY!"

XXXXXXXX

Raynare and the other two female Fallen Angels stare at the male among them as he repeats his story once again about his run-in with Rias Gremory. She can't believe that not only did her target survive, but the orange-haired boy she had an interest in did as well. The boy had not only caught her fancy, but had her fantasizing at night that perhaps he might be the one to truly satisfy her lust. Licking her lips in anticipation of her next meeting with the boy, she turns to Dohnaseek as he twirls his derby hat.

"Push back our schedule by two weeks; I want to see what this bitch is talking about. I want to see
if this 'boy' is really as unique as she claims. Another delay won't hurt us and it will give us time to bring in a few extra bodies just in case they do plan on interfering with us."

"I don't like it Raynare, her voice gave no hints of lying, she was telling me the truth that she believed. Whoever that boy is, he has the backing of the Gremory Clan at least, and there is no telling who else might be with them. Are you certain you want to make one more run at him?"

Smiling, she looks down at a folder on the altar, pushing aside a piece of paper, a photo of a young blonde-haired female teen who is smiling.

"If he truly is powerful, I want to make sure I have everything I need before I face him. Send for the nun, I want her here as soon as possible, and find that freak Exorcist as well."

The two other Fallen Angels walk away to carry out her orders, while Dohnaseek simply leaves for his room. Looking down at the other photo in the pile, she picks it up and scowls at the sight.

"So Gremory got herself a toy. Maybe he'll like playing with me more."

XXXX

Eyes snapping open as a familiar sense of dread overcomes him, Ichigo sends dozens of Hell Chains towards the door in anticipation of his father's routine wake-up call. Beside him, Rias covers herself with a blanket and has her own magic working before she can even ask what is wrong; the evil express train makes itself known as it crashes through their door.

"Gooooood Moorrnnnnggg Icccchhhhhggg!! ! !" Is heard before it stops suddenly when Ichigo's Hell Chains and Rias's magic both slam into the elder Shiba Clansman at the same time.

"Nicely done my son and daughter." Isshin says while cratered into the opposite wall before passing out.

Getting out of bed and slamming their bedroom door shut, Ichigo turns to his now awake and shocked girlfriend and juts a thumb at the door.

"Hate asking this now, but do you know any spells you or Akeno can teach me to keep that from happening again?"

Staring at the spot where a slight pool of blood is seeping under the door, she points at it. "Ichigo, I think your father is really hurt."

He wants to scoff at her, but seeing the concern in her eyes, he turns around and opens the door. "Hey, you still dead?"

"I'm fine son, don't worry about me, your sister will heal me."

"Wrong answer."

Stepping outside after putting on a pair of sleeping pants, Ichigo closes the door behind him. Rias jumps back slightly when she hears the elder Kurosaki begin screaming out in pain. After several more shouts, she starts hearing other voices from the other side of the door speaking.

"Ichigo, what are you doing to him?"

"Nothing Yoruichi, just teaching Goat-chin a few lessons about barging into my room and into my life, that's all."
"Ichi-nii, he looks really bad this time."

"Don't worry Yuzu, Orihime will fix him; just get one of the staff to drag him to her room. And damn well knock first!"

"I don't know Ichigo; he does look pretty pale this time."

"Karin, who in their right mind wakes their kids with flying jump kicks and expects not to get hurt? Besides he's lucky it's just a scratch this time, next time it's gonna be a Cero to his face."

"Don't worry girls; your brother has learned everything I can teach him except…"

Several slaps sound out as both Yoruichi and Ichigo round out on the fallen Shinigami.

"Dammit Goat-Face, don't even say stuff like that in front of my sisters, are you insane!?"

"Gotta agree with that one Isshin, I don't think you will ever be ready to teach them about…"

"NO ONE IS GOING TO TELL THEM ABOUT THAT!"

"Ichi-nii if it's about sex, Karin and I already had that class this year."

"What the fuck!?" Three male voices scream out at once.

Soon the voices muffle down for a few minutes before Ichigo walks back into their room, visibly shaken, shutting the door before making his way to the bed where he flops down face first.

"Kill me now Rias."

Tossing aside the blanket, she crawls next to him and starts stroking his hair. "What happened Ichigo?"

"My sisters know about sex." She giggles when she sees the look of despair on his face when he turns to look at her.

"Not funny Rias, they…they shouldn't know about that yet."

Rubbing her hand through his hair, she composes herself before replying. "Ichigo there is a good chance that sooner or later they are going to grow up and want to get married and have children. Besides would you want my mother and father keeping us apart because they think you and I might…?"

"I get it! I get it! Damn."

"Besides Ichigo, I'm pretty sure your sisters are getting tired of you and your father trying to protect them all the time. They know the truth and they are a part of this world now. If anything, you need to be their guide for what they are going to face, including boys." She ends it by kissing his cheek.

She can only imagine what he mumbles out as he hides his face in the sheets. Slapping him on his butt, she pushes him out of the bed.

"Come on, I want to eat before I have to go to school Ichigo."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just know today is going to be as wonderful as yesterday."

"Look on the bright side Ichigo."
"What bright side?"

"You won quite a bit of money and you get to spend it on me."

"True."

XXXX

Merti and Ichigo watch as Rias and her peerage plus the two Shinigami leave for Kuoh Academy, before they turn and walk down the hallway leading towards the gardens behind the Estate. Merti glances at her new lord from time to time, seeing him make multiple faces as he walks silently next to her. Now and then, his scowl becomes his most prominent facial feature. Deciding to make use of their time, she coughs to gain his attention.

"Yes Merti?"

"Is there something troubling you Ichigo?" She asks while keeping her hands in front of her.

He stops suddenly as he looks down at the floor, before he sighs. "Do you think I should unseal them?"

The Elfin woman grabs her lord by his arms and turns him slowly until they are facing each other; lifting his chin, she sees the doubt in his eyes.

"I know what you are thinking Ichigo. The decision isn't yours alone to make though. If your sisters ask, I believe you should honor their wish, which is my honest opinion."

"It figures you would say the same thing Rias did. It's really too late for my sisters isn't it?"

Letting go of him, she starts to walk away. "It's only too late if you don't give them the means to become strong like Orihime and Chad. Uryū however is the same as you Ichigo, he was born strong. Now come, let us find your sisters and see what they have decided for themselves. If they want to become Devils Ichigo, I expect you to honor their wishes, if not you will leave them vulnerable."

Jogging to catch up with his assistant, he sneaks a look at her. "Merti, why?"

Without pausing, she answers her young lord. "Why, Lord Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius? That very name is the answer to your question. Until a year ago, only Lord Amyntas had the power to rule the Skeleton Tower, but now you and your sisters have been found to carry on his line. If he falls, the power goes to you Ichigo. If you fall, it will go to Karin, and should she fall, it will fall upon Yuzu alone to wield the power to keep the Gates of Hell from opening on the Human World. Where there was once only one, now there are four. Ichigo, only those of your Naberius bloodline can keep the balance, only your bloodline keeps humanity and the other races who live in the Human World safe from the Damned, only your bloodline can wield that power and magic. I don't want to see those two young women have to carry such a burden, but it is their destiny to do so if you and Lord Amyntas should ever fall. That is why you must grow even stronger Ichigo, to keep that burden from their shoulders, but you must at least give them the power to do so, just in case..."

"In case Uncle and I should both die."

Merti nods. "It is a burden that I don't wish upon anyone Ichigo, least of all you or your sisters. But one day, Lord Amyntas will want to step down and retire, and you and they need to be ready to lead our Clan. If you should take up his place, you won't do it alone. I will always stand by your side as I did for your grandmother. As did her peerage for Vincent and as Lord Amyntas's peerage
does for him. As will your peerage Ichigo, and you will gain one because there are people who will follow you no matter what. I already sense that in one or two of your friends from my talks with them. You can't rule the Skeleton Tower alone Ichigo, no matter what you want; you must have a peerage to help you perform your duties. We will stand with you and your sisters, helping to guide you and teaching you what you need to know. You, Karin and Yuzu are my life now Ichigo. I wasn't there for Lady Masaki, but I will be there for the three of you."

Stopping before the doors that lead to where his sisters, Tatsuki, Chad and Uryū are waiting for them, Ichigo stands straight as he grabs the handle for the door.

"I will be counting on you from now on Merti. I think you are right about me."

"Ichigo?"

"I do try and do everything on my own, to protect them. But like you said, I'm not alone anymore am I?"

"Of course not. Now let us see what they have decided on, shall we my Lord?"

"First rule; no Lord Ichigo, no Ichigo-sama, no nothing except Ichigo when we are home at the Estate. I know when we are with other Devils it will be expected, but here at the Estate, no one is allowed to use those titles with me Merti."

"As you wish Ichigo."

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Chad, Uryū and Tatsuki listen in as Orihime and the twins discuss what they are going to do today after seeing Ichigo and his assistant. Lord Amyntas and a few of the women from the peerages are going to take the four of them on a tour of the Underworld and do some shopping with the girls. Chad had elected to stay behind and study in the library, while Uryū and his father are going to explore the grounds further. The Shinigami, from what they can gather, have decided to venture off on their own with an escort to various places themselves. Except for Yoruichi, who had disappeared the night before with Venelana and Grayfia.

Tatsuki is the first to hear the doors behind them open up. Turning around, she immediately notices a change on her friend's face. One she hasn't seen in years. She smiles when he smiles back at her.

"I haven't seen you look so peaceful in years Ichigo. What gives?"

After seeing the other five turn to look at him, Ichigo looks at each of them, pausing only for a few moments until he is back to looking at his oldest friend again. Taking in a deep breath, he begins to tell them of his decisions.

"Tatsuki, I will give you what you want tonight after dinner. Karin, Yuzu, if you have decided to do so as well already, I will awaken your Devil powers tomorrow after breakfast. However for you two, it means having to stay with me in Isehara and attending school there. I...we can't protect you if you are in Karakura, and if Soul Society is watching you two, it won't take them long to notice your powers. So if that's all, you guys enjoy the rest of your day and I'll see you after dinner."

"Ah, what about us Ichigo?" Orihime asks with a bit of sadness in her eyes.

Walking up to the young healer, he pulls her into a hug. "Do you want to stay as well Orihime?"
Giggling into his chest, she looks up at him. "You are the future head of both the Shiba and Naberius Clans Ichigo. As such my place is at my Onii-san's side, only if you want me that is?"

"Of course I want you to stay Orihime. You are family now, not just to Yuzu and Karin, but to me and Goat-Face as well. I guess that means another transfer for Sirzechs then."

"Ah, better make one for me as well Ichigo," Tatsuki says with her arms folding under her chest. "No way am I leaving Hime in your care alone."

Before he can mouth off to her, his quietest friend grunts out his request as well. "If it isn't too much trouble Ichigo, I'd like to stay as well."

Everyone whips their head at Chad then; Ichigo's smile can't hide the fact that he is more than happy to have the big guy staying. Uryū begins pinching his nose.

"So I guess Karakura will become my responsibility then?"

"No, it will be ours, you are staying as well." Ryūken Ishida says as he and Isshin both walk up to the group of teens and preteens.

"Father?" That gets a glance from Ichigo, not once has he ever heard his friend call his parent by that.

Ryūken stops in front of his son and lays a hand on the younger Ishida. "The four of you have been friends and comrades for over a year now son. It would be best that you stay as a group and keep on watching each other's backs. As for why, I think you and Ichigo have things to discuss at a future time in regards to your pasts."

Everyone can feel the jump in spiritual pressure before both teens manage to clamp down on their emotional release. Likewise, no one can miss the killing intent in either the orange-haired or glasses wearing teen's eyes. Ryūken and Isshin both give their sons a haunted look before the elder Shinigami turns to leave.

"Ichigo, vengeance is done with a clear mind, not one clouded in anger. If you and Uryū do intend to seek out the killer of your mothers, make sure you can do so calmly, if not he will use your anger against you."

"Remember Ichigo, Uryū, this is your task if you choose to accept it." The elder Ishida adds as he walks into the mansion behind the Shinigami.

When the two older males are gone, their sons look at each other. "I guess you're staying then?" Ichigo asks dismissively.

Snorting at his rival and best friend, the Quincy lifts his finger in a familiar way. "Of course I am."

Looking around the table, Ichigo sees the excitement and trepidation in each of their faces. Orihime and the twins are looking at him with determination, while Chad has his usual calm look on his face, and lastly Tatsuki is nodding her acceptance to him as well.

"Then I guess this is where I say welcome to your new home guys."

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Shinji listens to his Lieutenant's report for the sixth time, trying hard to see if she has left any hidden messages, but all he gets is the feeling that his officer had really forgotten to send her report
but not for the reasons given in her report. Sighing, he lets the Hell Butterfly loose and sits back; huffing in relief that Momo is okay. His relief is short-lived however when he feels the Reiatsu of the Squad Six Captain outside of his office.

"Come on in Kuchiki." He calls out.

Sliding the door open and stepping inside is the very definition of nobility. Well-groomed hair kept in place by his Kenseikan on top of his hair, his scarf hanging around his neck over an immaculate Shihakushō, his Zanpakutō resting against his hip. Byakuya Kuchiki is what every noble family aspires to be like, except for one.

Shinji grins as he thinks about the kid, even if he is missing because of Kisuke's Kidō; the Vizard has no doubt that it's only a matter of time before they hear from him again. Waving for the nobleman to sit, Shinji pours two cups of tea for them. He waits until the Kuchiki clan head is sitting before guessing as to why he is here.

"I take it you heard we got reports from our two wayward Lieutenants?"

"I have heard, yes. Are they well?"

Sipping his tea, the Squad Five Captain nods his head. "Momo says everything is okay, she'll send us a report as to what is going on in the next day or two."

"And Rukia?"

"Well I was on my way to see Jūshirō to compare notes if you're interested in tagging along."

Standing to his feet, the brother of the Squad Thirteen Lieutenant nods his head as he answers. "I believe that would save Captain Ukitake from having to tell us separately of his Lieutenant's condition."

Getting to his own feet, Shinji calls out to his Third Seat and tells him to take care of the squad while he steps out for a few hours. Neither man use Shunpo as they leave the Fifth barracks and make their way towards the Thirteenth barracks. Shinji keeps his face forward, waiting for the younger Captain to break the silence which he does so.

"Do you really believe the Head-Captain, Captain Hirako? About the Three Factions?"

"Can't otherwise Captain Kuchiki, at least until I see for myself. But what are the odds that what the Twelfth has been monitoring for the last few years in Isehara are actually Devils?"

"Indeed. I find it hard to believe that the Squad Twelve Captain couldn't ascertain that there were unusual and unknown beings living in the World of the Living. It makes me wonder as to why they needed to send two Lieutenants to investigate such a minor disturbance to begin with. But with both Lieutenant Hinamori and Rukia's disappearance for two days, I have to wonder again what is going on there."

"So who are you going to send?" Shinji asks knowingly.

"Renji. And you?"

"I think I'll just ring up Kisuke or Yoruichi, see if they are bored yet or not."

The blonde Vizard inwardly grins after watching the noble stumble at the mere mention of his former mentor.
'Even when she isn't here, she can still make him sweat.'

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The First Piece

Original Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess.

Edited by regfurby July 2018.

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"Speech"
'Thoughts'
'Memories'
"Tensa Zangetsu"

XXXX

'Even when she isn't here, she can still make him sweat.'

Shinji Hirako

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The white face of the Zanpakutō spirit cannot help but wince every time his wielder gets hit by Conor O'Madaihin, whom Ichigo is currently sparring against. Although Conor had said he was more proficient with a spear, he is still good enough to train Ichigo with a bokken; mostly due to the spars the former Irishman used to have with Ichigo's grandfather Vincent to help him practice his swordsmanship, or so he says. With his decades of experience and Ichigo restricted to using his body's base speed, the beginning of this spar was pretty lopsided in Conor's favor as Ichigo tried to attack only to find his opponent was many moves ahead of him. Now an hour or so into the practice spar, the orange-haired teen is finally hitting and deflecting the bokken that had landed on him numerous times early on in the spar. Conor wasn't kidding when he said he was going to improve his wielder's fighting techniques as well as help him regain both his stamina and strength. The few Naberius Peerage members in the room stand nearby watching quietly, only offering their young lord advice when they see something that needs correcting, but mostly leaving the teaching and correcting to Conor.

Standing next to them is the blue haired Arrancar Grimmjow, who is nursing a bruised ego and a still-broken arm that he had received from Amyntas's Knight, Edmund, who had thought the Espada was going to attack Ichigo. In his defense, that was exactly what Grimmjow was trying to do, if not for the reasons they were thinking of. Smirking while standing over him is his green-haired mate Nelliel as she pats Grimmjow's head as he sits there waiting for his regeneration to deal with his broken arm. Glancing at the former Tercera Espada, Zangetsu can see her eyes fixated on Ichigo's flowing form, frowning from time to time at his method of attacking or defending.

'Not as dumb as they think she is.'

"Time!" The call comes from Conor, as the sole Knight of Vincent's peerage puts down his practice sword.

Ichigo breathes deeply a few times before bowing to the warrior across from him. Dropping to one
knee in exhaustion, he listens to the older Devil point out his flaws in his swordsmanship, as well
as praising the things he is now getting right. As he does so, he can feel the growing excitement
coming from the female Espada in the room as her hand begins tugging on the Tsuka of her
Zanpakutō as she listens to the lesson. Finally, the Devil Knight quirks an eyebrow towards the
giddy Arrancar who is nearly bouncing in excitement for her chance to fight Ichigo.

"Care to take my place Nelliel?" He offers.

In a burst of Sonído, she is between him and Ichigo, peering down at the orange-haired teen from
her standing position. "Come on Itsygo, I want to see how you do against me now. You and
Grimm-kitty can play next."

"Fine Nel. But don't say you haven't been warned. Bokken or..." He pauses when a bluish-steeled
daitō is placed in his hands by Conor, his grandfather's Knight.

"It belonged to Lord Vincent, Ichigo. I think for now you should use it." His voice is almost wistful
as he says it.

Hefting the blade before his eyes, Ichigo sees a slight curve in the weapon, no scratches or marks
along the blade anywhere. The Tsuka is dressed in alternating colors of black and yellow
diamonds; the Tsuka shaped with four curved points facing outwards and a single golden bar
connecting them at the middle. At the end of the Tsuka, hanging off the Kashira is a yellow ribbon
with a very small but familiar looking medallion.

"Is this a Quincy Cross?" He asks as he touches the cool metal suspiciously.

"Your grandmother's Ichigo. She wanted Vincent to have it when they partook in the Rating
Games. For luck she said." Merti informs him from her place beside Zangetsu.

Looking over at his Zanpakutō spirit, Ichigo grins as he swings the weapon experimentally. Even
Zangetsu can feel the weapon's power as it cleaves through the air, and it is supposed to be a
nameless blade. Walking towards him, the Hollowfied Zanpakutō takes the sword from Ichigo's
hands and runs his hand down the blade, then smiles as he hands it back to Ichigo.

"It will do for now King."

"Alright then, whenever you're ready Nel, we can begin." Conor says as he points towards the
middle of the sparring room.

Getting back to his feet, Ichigo grips the weapon with two hands as he takes a standard stance
against the veteran Espada standing a few meters from him. She pulls her Zanpakutō out and gives
her own weapon a few swings before holding it down at her side lazily. Tapping the tip against her
thigh high boots, she grins at her friend as he arches one of his eyebrows at her.

"Never knew that you would spar so easily Nelliel, what's changed?"

Her smile falters but for a second, then she regains her grin again. "My home is being invaded
Ichigo, I need to get stronger and face opponents such as you to gain enough strength to protect it.
This is the only way I know of to help those weaker than me."

"Fair enough then Nelliel-san. So first one to yield and no limits on our weapons?"

"Cero and Bala?" She tilts her head inquisitively.

"Chains and...hell, whatever Kidō I can remember?"
"Okay."

"Okay then. Conor if you don't mind?"

Zangetsu leans over to the Elfin woman beside him and whispers into her ear. "Ya might wanna put up a few barriers and shields around the room. Things will get dicey soon."

Merti looks at him and thinks back to the aftermath of his 'sparring session' with Ichigo. Immediately understanding, she wordlessly begins to erect multiple magical barriers and gesturing for the other Devils in the room to do so as well. Conor and the two warriors wait patiently until the tall dark-skinned mythical woman finishes setting up the barriers and nods her approval. Dropping his hand, the Knight swiftly exits the combat area.

At first, the two combatants stand there regarding each other, then Nelliel phases out of view and the first clash of metal on metal is heard as Ichigo parries her horizontal strike with ease. Pushing her blade down and away, he comes up and points his finger at her shoulder, barely grazing her with his Byakurai as it skims her uniform top without piercing her Hierro. In answer, she drops a few Bala at his feet, the relatively weak but fast version of Cero creating a cloud of debris which she uses to come at him from the top.

There she encounters his Hell Chains for the first time in combat, as the sinuous metal first blocks her sneak attack, then grabs her gently by the waist before throwing her violently across the chamber. Using her Reiatsu, the Arrancar puts the brakes on her momentum and within seconds of being thrown stops her acceleration in mid-air through the use of Reishi platforms and then pushes forward at him again. Sensing her approach, the Devil sends out a few Shakkahō fireballs then moves backwards into the smoke and sets up an ambush with his chains.

Nelliel can only gasp as she feels the cold sharp metal spikes rip into her leg through her Hierro, her senses unable to detect the metal links lying in wait within the smoke. Jumping back quickly, she waves off her mate when she senses his worry and growing hostility towards Ichigo.

"Not bad Ichigo, can you do…" Her senses twinge a warning and she quickly dives out of the way when eight blade-tipped chains burst from the smoke, sailing straight for her, each of them impacting the spot she was just standing in and leaving behind a sizeable crater.

"I got a little bit of a dressing down this morning from Yoruichi after she found out how badly I did yesterday. Let's say avoiding playing eight hours of tag with her would motivate anyone to get better quickly. She is the fastest Shinigami alive and I am nowhere near my old speed yet, so you'll have to excuse me if I don't take it easy on you guys anymore." His voice calls out from the smoke.

Nelliel gets back to her feet. "That's good to hear Itsygo; I don't want to beat you easily. So I hope you don't mind if I do this…” Her Reiatsu flares straight up as she utters the words dreaded by any spiritual being not of Captain rank or higher, words that many beings of both Hueco Mundo and Soul Society have learned to fear.

"Declare, Gamuza."

With that declaration, a shockwave of Reiatsu burst out from her as she transforms into her true centaur form, her skull mask now covering more of her face and her horns extending high behind her head. Her fists, elbows and shoulders are covered in bone armor, and in her hand she holds her massive double sided lance Gamuza. Stamping one of her hooves, she smirks at the Devil now revealed before her in the black armor she has seen him wearing before.
"Cheating Ichigo?"

"I figured I needed it once you released your Resurrección Nelliel. I know the power you have; you did kick the shit out of Nnoitra in Hueco Mundo."

She frowns slightly at that reminder, since she also got the shit kicked out of her once her emergency transformation failed. "So how do you want to do this then?"

"Go until one of us drops?"

Nelliel frowns at him. "Ichigo, are you hiding the fact that your Reiatsu has increased again? You are, aren't you?"

Shrugging his shoulders, the armor-clad Shinigami slowly releases his power and energy until even Nelliel raises an eyebrow when she senses it stopping at a level higher than what she remembers from him before, but nowhere near what she suspects he is capable of releasing.

"Is that it?"

"For now Nelliel."

Frowning again as she watches him closely, Nelliel begins to stray to one side to bait an attack from Ichigo, only to see the black-armored figure disappear before her and her instincts blaring out a warning. Ducking her head, she feels the blade of Ichigo's weapon slice through the empty air above her head, barely catching a few strands of her hair.

Acting quickly, she Sonídos to the opposite side of the arena, only to be forced to smash away the approaching chains with melee attacks using her lance; deciding to up her own ante, she cuts her hand and feeds the blood into a Cero before letting it loose at her opponent. To her surprise, Ichigo doesn't move, and she can only stare wide-eyed as the beam of blood fueled energy crashes into Ichigo's still figure. There is a tremendous explosion that fills the room with smoke, and everyone seems to wait for the outcome, but she feels her instincts warning her to move again. As she blurs to the side with a Sonído, a black and red Cero fires straight through the smoke and crashes through her now vacated space, impacting against the barriers set up around the arena, though what is more important is the trace of blood she senses within it.

"A Gran Rey Cero?" Both she and Grimmjow look to the floating form of Ichigo as he appears through the smoke, pointing his daitō in her direction.

"Sorry Nelliel, got out of control with that one, first time consciously using it." He remarks flippantly.

Grimmjow snarls at Ichigo. "Fucking watch it Naberius or I'll jump in and kick your ass!"

"Then do it." Ichigo's mocking voice replies. "Zangetsu, it's time."

The Zanpakutō spirit disappears from his place next to Merti and the room begins to feel heavier, even the Elfin woman and the stronger Devils who have experienced it before look up at the black-clad form of the Shinigami Devil hybrid and wonder how much more Ichigo can truly put out.

"Grind, Pantera!" The panther-like Arrancar roars out, his body transforming into his armored white panther state.

Swiftly joining his mate at her side; the two released Arrancar charge up their strongest Cero,
slitting their palms at the same time and letting the blood mingle with their energy before firing dual Grand Ray Ceros towards the still unmoving Ichigo. As their combined attacks streak towards him, Ichigo sends out his chains in a rippling wave that somehow breaks through the attack, tearing it apart before continuing past and crashing down on top of the now stunned pair, causing them to reflexively leap apart to avoid the attack. Unfortunately for them, Ichigo was counting on that reaction, as he immediately sends half his chains against Nelliel and the other half against Grimmjow, the sentient chains striking them from all directions and diverting their attention. At the same time, he suppresses his Reiatsu by forcing it into his chains, slipping easily through the gaps he leaves for himself and getting closer and closer to Nelliel, neither Nelliel nor Grimmjow realizing where he has gone until he is right behind Nelliel.

The centaur Arrancar freezes when cold steel brushes against her throat and the point of a horn makes itself visible in her peripheral vision. The soft red glow coming from a fully charged Cero tells her of the pain that is about to happen. "Sorry Nelliel, I can't have you swallowing this and using it against me."

Then there is blinding light and pain, and Nelliel flies about fifty meters away as Ichigo's attack hits her dead center of her back, her Hierro the only protection that keeps her injuries from being life-threatening. It also has the added effect of causing Grimmjow to fly into an uncontrollable rage as he howls and recklessly charges the person who had wounded his mate, tearing through the chains that separate them and oblivious to the fact that Ichigo had wanted him to react that way. Ichigo immediately disappears behind a solid wall of chains that Grimmjow crashes through and begins to tear apart, only for him to realize it is a trap when the chains surrounding him suddenly wrap around his body before beginning to glow red then exploding like a series of shrapnel bombs.

Even before the concussive blast fades, Ichigo is already catching the severely wounded Grimmjow who is covered with multiple first-degree burns and shrapnel wounds from the exploding chains. As he settles the knocked out panther next to his mate, both of them reverting back to their sealed states, Ichigo lifts his visor and looks at Nelliel as she unsuccessfully tries to heal both of them by drooling over their wounds.

"Merti, can you help her heal?"

Nelliel gives him a grateful look as the Elf forms a magic circle around her and Grimmjow, both Arrancar beginning to heal rather quickly between Merti's Elfin magic and their own regenerative abilities. The green-haired Arrancar gives Ichigo an appraising look before she smirks at him.

"I always thought you liked it rough Itsygo, and now I know it." She laughs at his instinctive face-palm, then laughs some more as he gives her a dirty look.

Shaking his head and letting out a sigh, he starts to speak. "Nel, for the love of…Ehmp!"

Unprepared for the interruption, he glares at the owner of the hand covering his mouth, but is met by an unrelenting stare. "Watch what you say Ichigo, there are words that can and will cause you harm."

His armor fading away as he dismisses it, Ichigo stares at Carles, his grandfather's Bishop, who slowly takes his hand away from Ichigo's mouth.

"Ichigo, saying 'His' name, even just thinking it, will bring you pain."

"What, you mean God?" Ichigo sees all the Devils flinching in pain before glaring at him, then their looks turn to bafflement.
"Ichigo, did you not feel pain just now?" Daiki asks as he stares confusedly at his young lord.

"Ah, no. Why would I?"

Each of the Devils in the room look at him with astonishment then. Merti waves over one of the Cerberus who are guarding the room. "Go to Lord Amyntas and ask for the Bible he keeps and bring it back." She commands.

"Yes Merti." The young female Hellhound disappears quickly.

Ichigo looks around the training area to see every Devil in the room staring at him, but none of them saying a word. Getting agitated as to why they are looking at him so silently, he finally growls out his frustration.

"Okay, what is everyone's problem? Is there some rule I am screwing with again that I don't know about yet?"

Carles is the one who speaks up first. "Ichigo, you can speak about 'Him' without experiencing pain, something which all Devils and Reincarnated Devils cannot do. Any words associated with 'Him' or with the Angels faction causes a Devil to experience pain, and extreme injuries can occur if items associated with them are used against us, like holy water, crucifixes, holy weapons and artifacts, or holy books like the Bible."

"Are you serious?! I've never had any problems with that stuff before now, so why would that change now?"

"You were human then due to the seal placed on Lady Masaki that you and your sisters inherited, therefore it did not affect you. Now however, you have awoken as a Devil, so you should be suffering from the same weaknesses that we possess... Except, you did not."

Lacking a proper response to that, Ichigo remains silent. Minutes pass by quietly, then the young Hellhound from before returns carrying a small metal chest on her back. Merti and Daiki take the chest from the Hellhound and then gingerly places it on the ground before Ichigo's feet. Merti whispers a passphrase and taps the box, stepping back as the sealing magic releases the hidden locks and allows the lid to pop open. As a simple leather-bound book is revealed within, Ichigo notices the other Devils have tensed up warily at the presence of the innocent-looking artifact, and Merti motions Ichigo towards it.

"If you don't mind Ichigo, can you grab the Bible from the chest and hold it for as long as you can?" He doesn't miss the apprehension in her voice.

Still not understanding what the big deal is and starting to suspect that the room is filled with crazies, Ichigo walks over to the chest and picks up the book, noticing the large cross on the front cover, then he frowns and waves it at Merti, who reflexively takes a step back from the holy book.

"Are you sure this is supposed to hurt me? I feel fine."

"Just hold it for as long as you can Ichigo." Edmund Armistead commands with a faint note of incredulity in his voice.

"Fine, fine, I'll just stand here holding it." Ichigo gripes, but does as instructed.

'What the hell is their problem?'

"Could be something to do with the fact that they have been at war with the Angels for so
long that sacred objects of the Christian faith are dangerous to them. Or maybe I am pulling
shit out of my ass."

'I wonder how long this is going to take.'

"Since we have nothing better to do other than wait, you worried yet about why those two
morons still haven't let us near our Asauchi yet?"

'Yeah, I'm getting worried. Kisuke should have come up with something by now...'

"Great...Just great."

'I know. So help me with sealing our Reiatsu some more as we wait this out.'

For several hours the Devils watch as the next Naberius leader stands with a Bible in his hand and
nothing else happening. They are all aware that only weak or low-ranking Devils will catch fire by
merely by touching a holy artifact, but even high-ranking Devils will experience a burning
sensation that rapidly increases until they catch fire as well. After the first fifteen minutes, they all
realize that something about Ichigo is clearly different from any other of their race, since nothing
noticeable is happening to him. Merti and Nelliel even notice early on that Ichigo is performing
Jinzen while standing, with Merti the only one who understands why his Reiatsu output is slowly
dropping over the course of time. Towards the end of the third hour however, his body finally
begins to react to holding the holy book. No one notices it at first however, until the newly-awake
Grimmjow asks what is burning.

Merti immediately looks at her charge's hands and sees wisps of faint smoke rising from his
smoldering skin. Quickly, she aims at the holy book in his hands and flicks it back into the chest
with a simple use of magic, startling Ichigo as he snaps back to the world and blinks at his
suddenly empty hands.

"Hey, what...?" He begins to ask before staring at the burns that cover his hands.

Walking over to her charge and taking his hands in hers, the reincarnated Elf studies Ichigo's hands
as they rapidly heal before her eyes, the poisonous light energy doing little to slow the regenerative
process granted by his Hollow powers. Semi-charred skin fades from black to red to tan within a
few seconds, leaving behind smooth and unmarred skin. Shaking her head in faint disbelief, Merti
finally lets go of his hands.

"Not quite immune, but no other Devil can do what you just did Ichigo. For us, just holding that
'book' for a few minutes would have caused us excruciating pain and quickly set our hands on fire.
All you have to show for it after three hours is just some burnt skin and quick healing." She looks
him in the eyes with a serious expression on her face. "You have changed the Balance Ichigo."

He resists the urge to face-palm. "Well, that's just great."

"Ichigo?"

"Nothing Merti, just thinking. Ah, if you guys will excuse me, I need to eat and shower before I
have to train with Momo and Rukia. I'll see you guys at dinner. Oh, Grimmjow, sorry for this
morning. I forgot to tell her, my bad."

The blue-haired Arrancar grumbles at the reminder. "Yeah, yeah. Just make sure I'm not going to
get a fireball up my ass again Naberius."
Merti's smile causes a few of the peerage members to chuckle as well, finally easing the tension in the air. Scowling at them the Espada stalks out after his rival. Nelliel openly laughs once the two men are gone.

"Both of them are idiots sometimes." The Arrancar says fondly.

Conor just shakes his head; he was the first Devil to find the petite Shinigami and the blue-haired Espada getting ready to trade blows just before breakfast, and witnessed said fireball to the ass.

"I had no idea that the two of them had a history of sorts." He muses.

Nelliel sheepishly looks towards the other members who are unaware of the early morning events. "Well, Grim-kun did stab Rukia through the stomach in the past, so I can see why she would still hold a grudge. But Ichigo should have warned Rukia and Grimmjow that each other were here."

Daiki volunteers his own thoughts. "Well, I guess we now know why he kept the two on separate sides of the Estate, it's just bad luck your mate got itchy feet looking to spar with Ichigo."

"Thankfully Momo and Orihime were with Rukia to keep it from getting out of hand, before Yoruichi and Conor managed to get between them." Edmund says with a chuckle as he remembers the Irishman holding the ice user back from trying to skewer the befuddled and annoyed-looking Hollow.

"I can't believe he actually forgot who she was. I think that is what angered her more, not that he was here, but that he forgot he had tried to kill her. I'd be pretty annoyed myself with that if I was in her shoes." Akio, the missing Rook from Vincent's peerage from the day, says as he leans against his battle axe. He is obviously of Japanese descent, appearing to be in his mid-twenties, with black hair and brown eyes, and is wearing a white martial arts Gi with the kanji for 'gold' in a golden yellow on the back. He also appears to be pretty muscular too from what can be seen of his body.

Nelliel rubs her head then. "It would be just like Ichigo to forget that himself. I can only wonder how training is going to go today."

Daiki, who is wearing a traditional black kung fu uniform, walks away with a bit of mirth as he replies. "I don't think she will have an easy time Nelliel-san; after seeing him today, I doubt very much that today will be like yesterday. But I have to agree with Ichigo, I'm hungry, and after watching him stand there for three hours, I think I need to get something to eat."

Merti is the last one left standing in the room as the Naberius peerages and Nelliel file out, surveying the damage the three spiritually powerful beings had created and resealing the bible in its chest. With a sigh, she closes her eyes and soon the room begins to repair itself. When she finally opens her green orbs, she shakes her head and turns to leave the room.

"Now I have a better idea of what the battles in the Winter War were like..."

"If you really want to see what Ichigo is capable of, come to the Library after lunch."

Having sensed his approach, Merti merely glances at the blonde-haired Shinigami known as Kisuke Urahara who is leaning against a wall outside the training room.

"What do you mean Urahara?"

Kisuke pulls out a disk and waves it at her before answering. "I think it's time you saw, rather than heard, what Ichigo did that day against Aizen. I wanted to wait, but I think his impatience about his Zanpakutō needs to be addressed quickly. This will help us explain things to him later, but first I
She takes the disk with a dubious expression. "You filmed it? How?"

Turning away, the former Shinigami Captain shrugs his shoulders. "Some secrets belong only to me right now Merti-san. Only Ichigo will ever learn of them."

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While lunchtime is normally her favorite time at school, Rias finds it less than exciting without Ichigo's presence as usual. The Kendo Club had elected Rukia and Momo to take over training the club for their upcoming matches until their orange-haired coach finally returns. Their various teachers had given them his homework for each subject without asking too many questions, having assumed that his condition from last year must be the reason for his long absence. The only other thing that their group has to worry about is the fact that Fallen Angels are still around, not active, but still in the vicinity of Kuoh, despite their significant losses sustained from attacking Issei and Ichigo that night.

Yoruichi had said she was keeping a closer eye on their group, but so far the survivors have made no move against them as of yet. Personally, Rias is unhappy about the decision not to hunt down and eliminate the remaining Fallen Angels, or at least drive them out of Kuoh, but she had reluctantly agreed with both Amyntas and Venelana to let it go for now. Sadly, they haven't made another appearance since the night they tried to kill Issei again.

"What's wrong Buchou?" Akeno asks as she picks up a piece of her lunch.

"Nothing. I'm just bored." Rias responds as she picks listlessly at her own meal.

Rukia and Momo quietly snigger as they keep their heads down. Even Sōna rolls her eyes at her friend's behavior.

"You could always skip school again Buchou-nee." The white-haired Neko monotonously injects, having joined them for lunch like usual.

Shaking her head, the crimson princess sighs. "No, he wouldn't want me to do that all the time, even he understands how a peerage works better by now. He definitely wasn't happy to hear about the requests that Koneko or Akeno have had asked of them before however. It wasn't until I assured him that none of us would ever entertain those requests that he finally let it go."

Yuuto groans then as he slides down in his seat. "You didn't tell him about mine did you Buchou?"

Momo smiles at the young Knight then. "I'm sure once he finds out how much of a gentleman you are with your contracts, he won't be so…"

"Cranky."

"Pissed."

"Assholish."

"Can't call the kettle black."

The group settles down after making fun of their missing member, Sōna then asks Rukia and Momo about his family in Soul Society. Koneko wants to know more about the twins, as does Yuuto for some reason. Akeno wants to hear more about his time in Hueco Mundo after seeing
Nelliel and Grimmjow this morning. This leads to a new round of heated insults about the forgetful Berry-kun from Rukia.

Rias can't help thinking how much the group has opened up with each other; even with Ichigo not here in person, it seems he will always be an unofficial part of her peerage. Looking over at her new Pawn, she sees him gazing outside the window in thought. Wondering if Issei is facing any difficulties, she asks the young man what is on his mind, only to belatedly remember the usual things that go through his mind. Surprisingly, after Issei turns to her and rubs the back of his head, he asks her a question that no one is expecting.

"The white version of Ichigo-senpai, his Hollow Zanpakutō, how exactly does it work? I mean, does he and it talk all of the time?"

Rukia, who had been jabbing her fish violently at the mention of Ichigo, stops and confers with her own spirit before answering Issei. "Most Shinigami can talk to their Zanpakutō; in Ichigo's case he does it all the time. Because Zangetsu is a hybrid, an anomaly Issei-kun. You remember us speaking about Masaki-sama right?"

Seeing him nod in answer, Rukia continues. "Well, Zangetsu is a merger between Ichigo's Quincy, Devil and Hollow powers from Masaki-sama, and his Shinigami powers from Isshin-sama. No other Zanpakutō exists like him, the only others who might possibly have hybrid Zanpakutō spirits might be Karin or Yuzu. And the next possibility would be his...kids."

Everyone at the table looks over at the Gremory heiress then, as her cheeks turn pinkish. Sputtering out in denial, she holds them off quickly. "We haven't thought that far!"

"But you are thinking about it now, aren't you Buchou?" Akeno slyly asks.

Rias's cheeks turn more pink, but she refuses to rise to the bait. "We're getting off topic here Akeno. So what else did you want to ask Rukia-san, Issei-kun?"

"Well, can every Zanpakutō spirit come out and speak?"

Rukia and Momo both shake their heads at the same time, Momo answering for both of them. "No, only a handful of Shinigami per generation can achieve Bankai, though currently all the Captains but one and a few of the Lieutenants have Bankai. I don't have Bankai because I lack the strength right now; part of Bankai training is the ability to manifest one's Zanpakutō into our world to face it in a battle of submission. However, I do find it odd that Zangetsu comes out as much as he does so easily. It normally takes a lot of Reiryoku to keep them manifested."

"Why is that odd Momo-san?" Tsubaki asks the Lieutenant.

"Normally one doesn't manifest their Zanpakutō spirit in front of others. Maybe Zangetsu gets tired of being stuck in Ichigo's head. Can't really blame the poor guy, I would probably be grouchy if I was in Berry's head all the time." Rukia says with a bit of amusement.

"Wait. So they are always there?" Rias's eyes grow wide at the implications.

Momo catches on first. "Why yes they are Rias-sama, are there things you don't want Zangetsu to know about?" She asks coyly.

Most of the table stifle their laughter at seeing the shock on the crimson princess's face. She looks at the two Shinigami and remembers that Rukia is engaged, so she can only ask her what it's like.

"Rukia, do they...you know...when ah...?"
Smiling genuinely then, the Kuchiki answers her just as honestly. "Shirayuki knows everything about me Rias, probably even better than I knew myself years ago. She was born of my soul; therefore she will always share my life with me. From when I first fell in love, to when I marry Renji, and she will be there my first child is born. They know us better than anyone else will ever be capable of, but they are also separate entities as well. They have their own ideas, emotions and sometimes their own goals to make us stronger. That is why Ichigo, Renji, Captain Ukitake and Nii-sama all believe that I will someday reach my own goal of Bankai. They believe in me as does Sode No Shirayuki."

"What is his Bankai like?" Issei can't help asking in awe at her description.

"I can't tell you Issei-kun, while the blockhead does use it too much, we generally don't talk about it. I will tell you this though, when he uses it, it's too late for you. Only the strongest of Arrancars and Captains at one time could stand against him, but if he defeated Aizen, then I can't even imagine what it is like now." Rukia finishes with a hint of pride.

Soon the bell signals the end of the lunch period and as the group heads back to their classes, Rias stops Rukia outside of the Student Council room for a moment.

"Rukia is there anything I should know about dealing with Zangetsu?"

"Yes, remember he is a part of Ichigo's soul, they all are. Zangetsu will always look out for what Ichigo feels is his, and you will always be at the top of that list, along with Orihime, the twins and…"

"And you." The heiress finishes for her with a smile.

"He will never put anyone but family and friends first Rias, remember that. That is why he and Zangetsu are so powerful; they both will do whatever it takes to protect what is theirs. Now come on before we get yelled at."

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Yoruichi and Ichigo stand over the downed Isshin as he bleeds out on the floor, again.

"Dammit Goat-Face, why can't I have just one day of peace and quiet without you trying to screw up my sleep!?!"

Moaning as the familiar orange dome once again covers him, his father rolls over on the floor. "Ichigo, I can't have you going soft on me, now can I?"

Cracking his knuckles, Ichigo stoops until he is looking down at his father. "As soon as Orihime is done healing you…" His chains begin to slink from behind his back, many of them forming large spheres at the end. He laughs as his father's eyes get wide with fear while watching the slowly hovering weapons as they start circling him slowly by then.

"Now Ichigo, that's not fair!"

"You said to die with a smile on my face, so I want to see if it's true for you when I kill you."

"Ichi-nii!"

"Sorry Yuzu, but he does have it coming to him."

"I got to agree with him Yuzu. Dad does dumb shit like this all the time, it was only a matter of
time before Ichigo decided to do this."

"Karin! That's Daddy he wants to kill!"

"He's dead already, so what's a little more?"

Yoruichi claps a hand on each of the twins' shoulders. "Your brother isn't going to do anything girls."

"You sure about that?" Karin and Ichigo say at the same time.

Venelana and Merti watch the exchange with a growing sense of normalcy. Since the arrival of the humans and Shinigami, the Devils have admittedly had the best entertainment in decades, if not centuries with how the newcomers treat each other. The best entertainment is currently between Ichigo and Rukia arguing or Yoruichi and any one she felt like teasing at that moment, with Ichigo and Rias having become her frequent targets as of late. Venelana hasn't laughed so much in her life until she met the mocha-skinned Shinigami for the first time at the spa. Since then, the other woman has slowly grown to be a close friend and confidante, a devious one at that.

Standing beside them, Merti cannot imagine how her young lord can even function normally after watching how his father acts around his children. She does notice however that the girls are spared the physical altercations that their father heaps upon Ichigo, who responds with equal force. Even now as Isshin lies on the floor, there is no real malice between father and son. Oh, she knows they won't hesitate to actually hurt the other to a certain point, but to them it is part of their routine, even with the others around they still won't hold back.

Soon the orange shield faded away as Orihime finishes healing the former Shinigami Captain, who somehow manages to get Yuzu between him and his son.

"You chicken-shit coward!"

"Now, now son, that's no way to speak in front of your sisters!"

"Put Yuzu down and I might consider giving you a head start."

Kissing his youngest on her head, the family patriarch pops a Gikongan into his mouth and Shunpos from the scene, only to have his son disappear right after him. After a moment, Isshin's Gikongan-possessed Gigai starts to jog after him.

Karin looks at Yoruichi then. "Am I going to get that fast soon Yoruichi-sensei?"

"One day Karin. Now come on, I'm hungry. Tonight Ichigo is going to awaken Tatsuki's power and we need to be ready for anything."

Merti glances at the Shihōin princess then. "Trouble?"

"Kisuke anticipates nothing going wrong, but then again he didn't count on Ichigo being a Devil."

Merti shudders subconsciously after remembering what she had seen her orange-haired young Lord do in his fight against Aizen. None of the other teens were made aware of the video yet, seeing as Kisuke didn't think they were ready to see Ichigo in such a way, especially his three sisters, and she fully understands why. Walking towards the sounds of mayhem from where the two males had fled to, Merti can only shake her head in annoyance at the amount of items scattered along the hallways. Servants are busy repairing the damage that father and son have caused in their wake. Finally sensing the two standing outside the building, the Elf makes her way to the balcony closest
to the two combatants and peers down at them. Isshin is grinning, as is his son who is facing him, both with their weapons drawn, and both having a few cuts already.

"Daddy! Ichigo! Stop that this instant!" Yuzu shouts, the twins and Yoruichi having followed behind her and noticed Isshin and Ichigo still fighting.

To everyone's amazement, the two men look at the youngest female with sheepish expressions. Ichigo sheathes his blade on his back, while Isshin puts Engetsu back on his hip and obediently reenters his Gigai when it jogs back up to him. Both males give each other a shove as they make their way back to the women.

"He started it Yuzu my darling daughter!" Isshin says while giving Ichigo a second push.

"You were the one who started it years ago, you moron!" Ichigo responds as he drives his elbow into Isshin's stomach.

"Both of you knock it off. I want to eat lunch in peace today." Karin says as she turns back towards the mansion.

"Asshole." Ichigo quietly gets out.

"Wimp." Isshin retorts.

"Both of you shut it!" Yoruichi shouts out from inside the dining room, causing everyone to blink in surprise as no one had noticed her leaving.

Entering the dining room, both father and son sit on opposite sides of the table, with Ichigo sitting between Yuzu and Karin, and Isshin sitting between Merti and Yoruichi. Soon the rest of the peerages and Ichigo's friends make their way into the room. Orihime and Tatsuki are talking to Chad and Uryū about what the karate champion's power might be like after tonight. Ichigo does his best to hide his grimace, but Karin notices it anyway.

Leaning so only her brother can hear her, she whispers to him. "Ichigo, it will be okay. I trust you, she trusts you."

Looking at his sister, he smiles at her. "Thanks Karin."

It isn't long before Kisuke and the rest of the shouten show up for lunch. Sitting at the opposite end of the table, the hat missing from his head after a not so gentle reminder from Merti, Kisuke clears his throat.

"Ah, excuse me. But I have an important announcement to make. Ichigo, after considerable study, I'm afraid the Asauchi I prepared won't work for you."

No one can react in time to stop the white Zanpakutō spirit from appearing and wrapping his hand around Kisuke's throat, lifting him straight up in sheer unbridled fury.

"Speak quickly Geta-Bōshi before I kill you. This is yours and Dad's fault that we are even in this position. This is what happens when you keep secrets from us. Now you're telling us we can't be whole, I can't be what I'm supposed to be. One reason Urahara, give me one reason not to kill you now." Even Ichigo shivers in slight fear while watching Zangetsu so calmly declare his murderous intentions, but the killing intent flooding the room completely as the Zanpakutō spirit stares down the greatest mind from Soul Society tells them that he is not joking at all.

Looking into the black and gold eyes glaring murder at him, Kisuke can only wonder if this is what
Aizen saw just before his head was ripped off.

"Choking, Zangetsu." The blonde-haired Shinigami manages to gasp out before Ichigo barks at his spirit to release his throat, which the white copy does with an angry scoff.

Tessai quickly hands him a glass of warm water. Swallowing gingerly, Kisuke holds up his hand to show he is fine.

"I guess I deserved that Zangetsu, Ichigo."

"Kisuke spit it out. I get it that you weren't done, but as you can see, Zangetsu is tired of waiting, as am I. Now what the hell is the problem?"

"Thank you Ichigo for that insight." He keeps a wary eye on the still seething Zanpakutō spirit. "However I have come to the conclusion that because of your new bloodline, a normal Asauchi will not work for you."

When he pauses, Ichigo has to hold his blade back from attacking again. "Stop Zangetsu, you know how much of an over dramatic moron he can be. So stop fucking around Kisuke!"

Cold sweat going down his brow, Kisuke is about to pull out his fan, but stops when Yoruichi’s hand settles on the butter knife in front of her. Gulping as he knows exactly what she is thinking, he slowly takes his hand from his Haori, then shifts in his seat before speaking to the deadly trio.

"Zangetsu is unlike any Zanpakutō in existence, we all agree on this. So taking in account these new facts, Tessai and I visited someone who I thought could give us some help with Ichigo and Zangetsu's problem. He did in fact come to the same conclusions as I did and offered us only one alternative." He automatically pauses again, only for Yoruichi to glare at him.

"So help me Kisuke, if you don't stop right now!"

"Yare, yare Yoruichi, I'm getting there. The solution to Ichigo's problem is simple. He has to see Hephaestus."

"Huh? / Who?" The two question.

"Hephaestus is the Greek god of the forge Ichigo. He is responsible for the weapons of the ancient gods of Greece." Amyntas says in shock.

"You know this guy?" Ichigo says as he pulls Zangetsu into an empty seat near him.

"Yes I do, as do most Devils. We have…an arrangement."

"What kind of arrangement Uncle?"

"He supplies us with the weapons we need to fight the Angels and Fallen Angels and we give him the materials needed to forge them, plus a substantial amount of gold. Of course he has similar arrangements with most of the other factions as well. The gold is just so he can purchase more materials for his own projects."

"So, he's like a mercenary or something?" Zangetsu says while glaring at the hatless Kisuke.

"He is an independent contractor in a manner of speaking. Once the Greek gods lost favor and they retreated back to Mount Olympus, he started selling out his services to any who would pay or give him the needed materials for him to forge their weapons." Kisuke drones out monotonously, a fact
he knows will irritate Ichigo.

"Then exactly how is he going to help me and Zangetsu Kisuke?" Ichigo begins glaring at his sometimes mental mentor.

"Simple Ichigo, you are going to the Isle of Lemnos in the Aegean Sea. There you will see Hephaestus and give him a gift to help reforge Zangetsu." Kisuke smiles brightly at him.

"What gift?"

"That depends on what he wants Ichigo. You'll find out once you and Orihime get there."

The brown-eyed Devil glances at his adopted sister with a curious look in his eyes. "Why do I have to take Orihime? I'm not going to take her if she is going to get hurt, so forget it Kisuke."

This time the former Captain is able to get his fan out, ducking when a butter knife flies at his head. "Now Ichigo, I would never endanger your family, not even I'm that stupid. Don't comment on that, any of you. Anyway, as I was saying, Orihime I believe will be able to help you gain favor with Hephaestus when you meet with him."

Ichigo and Zangetsu grow quiet, Karin finally recognizing the blank look for what it is: both he and his Zanpakutō are talking to each other inside his mind. Now and then, he or Zangetsu will make a facial expression that is easily identifiable; from his famous scowl to what she thinks might be a small grin. Soon, the two males become animated once again as Ichigo and his white copy turn towards her older sister.

"You up to this Orihime…Imouto?" He says with a smirk.

Smiling back she answers him. "Of course…Onii-chan."

Turning to his uncle, Ichigo raises an eyebrow. "So how do I get to Lemnos Uncle?"

"Tonight after dinner, you and I will be practicing your teleporting magic before you and Tatsuki have your 'date' as they say."

"What!? / Dammit Yoruichi!"

"How is that my fault Berry-kun!?" She says as she points a fork at Ichigo threateningly.

"Easy, you corrupt everyone around you eventually! If you don't believe me, ask Goat-Face and… sh!" He slowly glares at the two older male Shinigami who are putting on their most innocent expressions.

"Nope, no idea about what you're talking about Ichigo. How about you Isshin, any idea what your boy is talking about?"

"No idea Kisuke. My boy would never, ever blame someone else for his problems."

"Well, I guess payback is indeed a bitch King. Come on, we have to get ready to put a beat down on Chappy-sama and her sidekick today." Zangetsu fades away laughing as Ichigo grumbles; as he stands up to leave however, he turns to look at his burnt-orange-haired sister.

"See ya then. Orihime if you begin to feel uncomfortable about going, I won't force you, got it."

"Don't worry Ichigo, I'll be fine. I'll meet up with you when you are practicing with Rukia and
Momo-chan."

Nodding to his Uncle, Ichigo leaves the room with Merti, the two of them talking quietly between themselves. Kisuke slides down in his chair as Isshin slumps in his seat at the same time. Yoruichi gulps down her wine as the others in the room notice the three Shinigami seem very relaxed suddenly.

"What just happened Daddy?"

"We might have just started your brother down a path he can no longer avoid Yuzu." Isshin looks at the doorway his son just left through. "He will become the center of not just the Underworld, but possibly the entire Afterlife as well once he meets with Hephaestus and Zangetsu is made whole."

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One of his white legs swings lazily over the side of his new home, the moat of blue fire lapping the side of the black stone, never burning nor heating the foundation. Next to him is the only other inhabitant of his wielder's new world, a young female child perhaps ten or eleven years old in appearance. Her eyes occasionally glance towards the older male as he lies on his back, a smirk playing at his lips.

"I see you smiling Zangetsu, why?" She readies herself for all possibilities.

Stretching his arms over his head, but not once cracking open his closed eyelids, he simply smiles at her.

Getting to her feet, she gets into a crouch. "I know that look Zangetsu, you ain't fooling me."

Her eyes go wide when he disappears from his prone position; not even waiting, she jumps off the side of the black castle and plummets down the side of the towering structure. As she falls, she looks over her shoulders and yelps when she sees his black sclera eyes are less than a foot from her.

"Zangetsu!" She cries out as his arms wrap around her waist and he Sonídos towards the flat planes a few hundred meters away from the moat.

Setting her down, he swiftly dodges her swinging foot. "Oi squirt! I thought you like the thrill of the fall."

Huffing as she crosses her arms beneath her budding mounds, she narrows her eyes at him. "I do, but sometimes I wish I could do what you and Ichi can."

Ruffling her hair, the Zanpakutō spirit begins walking towards the forest surrounding their home; waving for her to follow, he begins to question the young girl.

"So, you don't know how you got here, why you are here, or if you even have powers. And I don't know what you are either; you aren't a plus soul, so the Hōgyoku is out. You aren't a Hollow, no hole. So basically we have no idea who or what you are."

"Sorry Zangetsu. I just felt like I should be here with you two." She stops as she looks up at the white male.

Looking down at her, he notices she has gotten a bit taller and she seems to be aging, if slightly. Yet her Reiatsu is still nil and if she was anything else, he should have felt something. Hoisting her back onto his shoulders, he begins walking into the blackened woods, never once bothering with
the creatures stirring around him; after a short walk, he makes his way to a different spot, a small cottage hidden carefully among the tall trees. Opening the door, he lets the girl down as he makes his way deeper into the small home. The child immediately makes her way over to a couch and plops herself down as she waits for her caretaker to return from the other room. She smiles when she can smell the treat he calls hot chocolate in the air. Her eyes trace his hand movements as he places it on the small table in front of her.

"Thank you Zangetsu."

"No problem kid." He smirks as he sits down in his own chair; the only other chair in the room is reserved for his wielder once he figures out this is where his Zanpakutō comes when he needs to keep their lives separate.

Not that he minds keeping an eye on his wielder; he knows Ichigo needs privacy from time to time, especially when it comes to him thinking about their mother, and now that he has found his Queen. Even Zangetsu would hide his feelings for the woman that is in part his mother: even if she never gave birth to him, he came from her. She had been the one thing both he and Ichigo would always agree on, and her death is what caused them to become the hardened warrior they are now. Ichigo, because he never wanted his sisters to suffer another loss like that; himself, to prevent his wielder from ever being the cause of another person he cares for being lost. Now the two of them are only a day or two away from regaining their true weapon, their true form – the missing piece to make them feel complete.

Soon his thoughts are pulled from thinking about their mother to the woman that now brings stability to their inner-world. He can't help the smile that forms as his thoughts shift from sadness to giddiness. Rias Gremory had done what no other woman had been able to do at this point in Ichigo's life, make him fall in love. Thinking about the various women, from Tatsuki to Yoruichi, the Hollowfied spirit had always wondered why his partner never thought of them as something more than a friend. Not that any of them were unworthy of the orange-head's attention, it was that he was just too damn dense and respectful towards them. If they hadn't been separated from each other, he wonders whether anything would have changed for them back then. Then again, Rias is perfect for his King: she is powerful, open, knows how to keep him in line, and most of all, loves him for whom and what he is.

Rukia had been the closest to being with his King, but the one thing they couldn't overcome was the fact that she would have to return to Soul Society eventually, while Ichigo was still alive as a human and would have to remain in the World of the Living. He knew Ichigo had wanted it to work, but deep inside they both knew that it wasn't possible, since they never wanted Rukia to have to go through the pain of watching Ichigo's human body grow old and die. Compared to how Shinigami aged, while she would remain young for ages, he would have refused to let his human body die prematurely and put his family through that heartache again. In the end, it is why he let the Shinigami princess go.

Zangetsu still remembers the weather during the days that followed, cloudy with some heavy downpours, but in time it gradually faded as the war ramped up Ichigo had to focus on the coming threats.

The next closest to Ichigo had been his childhood friend, Tatsuki, she would have made a fine match with her strong and fiercely protective personality, but once again the Afterlife had ruined any chance of that, since Ichigo believed he would always have to keep his Shinigami life a secret from her, and he did not wanted to lie to her like that if they were in a relationship. Plus, with his abilities as a Shinigami, the karate champ had no way of matching him in terms of power or abilities, and Ichigo did not want Tatsuki to get hurt just because she was too close to him. In the
end, he decided that pursuing a romantic relationship with Tatsuki would only lead to heartbreak, and chose to remain friends with her instead.

On and on list grew as the Zanpakutō spirit gleaned over the women that had somehow threaded their way into Ichigo's heart as people he would die to protect, yet was unable to see as a potential romantic partner...

"Zangetsu what are thinking about?" The child asks as she looks at him.

His black and golden-yellow eyes sweep towards the young girl sitting on the couch. "Just wondering what Masaki-sama would be feeling now that she has two new daughters in her family's life."

The young girl slides off the couch and onto his lap as she snuggles into his chest. "Do you think she would approve of Rias-sama?"

"No doubt."

"You miss her, don't you?"

"He and I both do Imp."

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"Are ya still gonna go Captain?" The blonde-haired Vizard asks of his walking companion.

Steel-grey eyes betray nothing, but inside Byakuya, he is a swirling mass of emotions. Despite Captain Ukitake's assurances, the Kuchiki noble can't help the feeling that his younger sister is hiding something. The preposterous report was just that, preposterous, but therein lies the problem: it was so ridiculous that he is sure she is lying, however the same report from Momo hadn't bothered Shinji Hirako at all. All the other Captain would say on the matter was that he felt his Lieutenant was just enjoying her first long term mission and had gotten caught up in the moment, as well as the fact she had grown much stronger under his tutelage. Byakuya himself knows not to interfere on missions to the World of the Living, but Rukia is his sister, Renji's fiancée, and more importantly, the future Kuchiki Heir. Her safety is paramount to him at this point in his life, both in his role as the Kuchiki Head, and in his new relationship with Hisana's younger sibling as a true older brother should be.

Casting a calculating look at the half Hollow Captain, he sees the amusement dancing in the man's eyes and knows that his dilemma has been observed. Breaking the cold noble image he is famous for, Byakuya relents and answers truthfully.

"I will give her a few days and then I will visit her."

"Say hello to my Lieutenant when ya get there then Bya."

"Indeed."

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Sōna sits with the twins and Orihime watching the three Shinigami beat the hell out of each other during their Kidō spar. The Sitri heiress can only flinch from time to time, watching her cousin get hit with fire, lightning, or ice from the Kuchiki princess, while her partner uses her superior Bakudō spells to keep him in place for the few moments needed before his Reiatsu breaks him out or uses her favored fireball Kidō to harass him. Despite the blood and cuts on their bodies, the
three seem to be enjoying themselves in the mock battle. Ichigo laughs now and then when he successfully scores a hit with his own Kidō, each of his casts getting progressively stronger and faster as the sparring goes on. She knows that the end of their sparring session is coming when once again Momo bows out from exhaustion after nearly two hours of non-stop Kidō casting.

Touching down next to Orihime, Sōna hears the petite Shinigami groaning out in appreciation when the now-familiar orange dome envelopes her, healing her almost instantaneously. Momo sags down next to them, breathing heavily as she looks up at the fake sky above them and lets out a huff.

"I can't believe those two." She says, looking at Rukia and Ichigo.

Yuzu quips up and asks her why.

"They don't know what the word quit means. I understand your brother has always been like this, but watching Rukia drive herself the same way makes me jealous that I can't keep up with them yet. Even now, the two of them are still going at it."

Sōna notices the same thing about her cousin; he never seems to tire or even think of quitting from what she has seen of him and been told by his mentors, Kisuke Urahara and Yoruichi Shihōin. Both of the former Captains had trained him early on in his Shinigami powers and both had agreed he would have one day stood a chance at challenging the current Head-Captain. But that is no longer a possibility for him; his path is now laid out differently before him. She smiles as she watches her cousin and his friend building up for their last attack.

"Oi Midget, just wanted to say sorry for this beforehand!" Ichigo shouts from his position.

Rukia's Reiatsu slowly saturates the air around her as she builds up for her best Kidō. "Berry-chan, I hope you don't mind me kicking your ass again, especially in front of your family!"

She disappears in a flicker of Shunpo before reappearing over his head. "Ye lord! Mask of blood and flesh, all creation, flutter of wings, ye who bears the name of Man! On the wall of blue flame, inscribe a twin lotus! In the abyss of conflagration, wait at the far heavens! Hadō Number Seventy Three: Sōren Sōkatsui!"

Orihime's shield instantly springs up between the five spectators and the explosion of fire and dirt that erupts from the spot where Ichigo had been standing. Rukia lands close to the group, panting heavily with her back to them as she surveys the damage to the training dimension.

"Ichigo?" The raven-haired Shinigami calls out when he doesn't reappear.

When the dust finally settles, there is no sign of the intended victim, causing the six teenage women to look around in worry. However, Rukia leaps forward instinctively as a wall of white electricity crashes down on the ground behind her, nearly catching her in its raging conflagration.

"Dammit Ichigo! You could've killed your sisters you moron!" The violent Shinigami screams as she scrambles back into a ready stance.

Waving his hand to clear the dust from his attack away from his face, Ichigo points to the familiar orange shield as it keeps the five spectating women safely protected behind it.

"Oi, you really think Orihime would've let that happen?"

Glaring at him, she lunges for his throat, but sees him grin widely at her just before she reaches him. "Bakudō Number One: Sai!"
As the Kidō takes effect, her hands are shoved behind her back and she loses her balance. Stumbling to the ground and falling to the front of his feet, Rukia glares up at him as he begins laughing and holding his sides. "Do you know how long I've been waiting to spring that on you Midget!"

"You better let me out Ichigo or so help me…"

The atmosphere around them takes a sudden plunge as the air begins to drop rapidly in temperature. Not letting it faze him, the Devil makes his way to kneel beside the struggling Kuchiki. She watches as he exaggerates his hand movements, bringing it down to her ribs, he gives her one last smirk.

"NO ICHIGO!" She begins screaming as he starts tickling her ribs, taking a quick glance to the side, he motions to Yuzu and Karin.

"Come on you two! You know you wanna!"

As the two younger women charge the older one on the ground, Ichigo backs away to a safe distance. After letting his twin sisters get their fill of excitement, he releases the Bakudō and grins at the shorter Shinigami as she pants on the floor. The three soon fall too quiet for his tastes however, and his intuition fails him when he finds his hands being thrust behind him in a reversal of the exact same Kidō he just used on Rukia. His sisters, all three of them, attack him with a vengeance, and soon he has four sets of hands bringing him to tears as they tickle him relentlessly.

"It's hard to believe." Momo whispers quietly to Sōna.

"What Hinamori?"

"That he can still smile and laugh after everything he has gone through."

Sōna looks at the Shinigami and sees a distant look in her eyes. "Did you ever work with Ichigo before?"

"No, I was Captain Aizen's Lieutenant; I never actually met him until that day at Kuoh."

Sōna stares at the young woman in shock. "You were his Lieutenant?"

"The person I kept in my heart wasn't real Sitri-sama, because of Ichigo I know that now, but I still believed in the person I served for so long. Before you ask, I don't blame Ichigo for what he did. We all know now what Aizen's Zanpakutō was capable of, so Ichigo freed me from that dream when he killed Aizen."

"And now?" Sōna gestures towards her cousin.

"Now I know the truth and that Ichigo is aptly named for what he does."

"Lady Masaki must have known somehow when he was born." A familiar voice says to them as the newcomer walks up to the two observing women.

"Merti-san." Momo says with a small bow.

"Lieutenant Hinamori, Lady Sitri."

Sōna gives a small nod to the Elvin woman. "Merti, I guess it's time for dinner soon?"

"Yes, I've come to retrieve Ichigo and his sisters. Tonight will see Ichigo learn his first magic spell
from Lord Amyntas, and then he has to awaken Tatsuki's powers according to Yoruichi."

Momo casts a quick glance at the young Devil as he tries to fight off his two younger siblings. "Hard to believe that she too has powers of her own."

"Does that bother you Momo?" Merti asks.

The Shinigami Lieutenant sighs. "Not anymore Merti-san. Before it would've been hard to imagine so many humans from one place being so gifted, now though, not so much. Orihime with her healing abilities, Sado-kun's arms, and Uryū being a Quincy... each of them fighting in a war at fifteen and all of them surviving when two of them shouldn't have even known of our world. Now they are linked forever to Ichigo and to Soul Society, as some of its greatest heroes."

"Yet your government condemned Ichigo." Sōna remarks with a frown.

"I still don't know why they did that Sūri-sama." The Squad Five Lieutenant replies with her own frown. "None of us do."

"When Ichigo trains tonight with Lord Amyntas, all of you will be shown the reason why. Isshin and I decided earlier that all of you should know the truth despite Urahara's objections. Be prepared though, the ending was... brutal." With that cryptic comment, Merti then steps away from the two before calling out to Ichigo.

"Ichigo, it is almost time for dinner, Lady Rias and her peerage will be arriving soon."

Ichigo waves from the bottom of the pile before he fights his way free by using his speed to tickle each of his attackers until they are red-faced laughing messes. When he finally escapes from their dogpile, he lifts them each to their feet, earning a playful glare or two before they join the other three in the room.

"Merti, I got time for a shower?"

"Yes Ichigo, there is time for you, Rukia and Momo to clean up before then."

"Alright then, I'll see you guys at dinner." He disappears in a Shunpo, leaving them behind.

"You okay Rukia?" Momo asks with feigned innocence.

Rukia glares at her in reply. "I didn't see you in there Momo. Why's that?"

Snorting as she prepares her own Shunpo, she glances at her friend. "Because I'm not a masochist Rukia."

She disappears almost immediately after that, leaving three women laughing at the petite woman, while the youngest two are thinking about what she said. Yuzu begins blushing when she finally gets it, and Karin looks at her brother's best friend with wide eyes.

"Rukia-nee are you...?"

"NO DAMMIT! She... dammit Momo I'm going to kill you!" The red-faced Rukia also disappears to chase down the other young woman.

Merti chuckles before placing a hand on each of the twin's shoulders. "Come along Karin, Yuzu. We need to get you ready for tonight as well."

Yuzu smiles as she grabs the Elfin woman's hand. "I can't wait to see Ichi-nii practice his magic.
tonight Merti-chan. Do you think I will be able to learn too?"

"Of course you will Yuzu. As soon as your Devil blood is awakened, you will be able to use magic like the rest of us."

"About that Merti, what exactly is going to happen to me and Yuzu, besides becoming Devils? I mean do we have to go through some ritual or something?"

"I think Ichigo and Lord Amyntas will inform you of what will take place."

Sōna gives the twins a reassuring look then. "Karin, it will be okay. All Ichigo is going to do is pour some of his power into each of you to break the seal on your blood. It shouldn't hurt when he does so; the only thing you should be aware of is when your wings appear for the first time."

"Wings?"

Merti and Sōna both allow their wings to spread from their backs. Sōna's are velvety black, while Merti's are a deep red-brown. The twins and Orihime look at them in awe and hesitantly reach for them.

"Please go ahead, it won't hurt." Merti says as she dips her wings down for them to feel.

"Soft."

"I can't wait to see mine." Yuzu squeaks out.

"I'm jealous of you two." Orihime says as she pouts.

"Onee-san, you can get your own if you become a Devil right? So ask Ichi-nii to make you into a Devil." The lighter-haired twin blurts out.

Sōna and Merti exchange glances with each other as they observe the look of deep thought that shows in the healer's eyes. Orihime shakes her head then and sighs out loud.

"Ichigo would never allow me to become a Devil Yuzu-chan. I think he wouldn't allow me to take part in the Rating Games that Sōna-chan and Rias-chan spoke about."

No one says a word after that as they leave the training dimension behind them.

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Ichigo can only watch in amusement as Rukia and Grimmjow glare at each other while eating, the Arrancar being served Reishi enriched food that serves as a substitute for their usual diet. Catching Nelliel's eyes, he sees her wink at him before slapping her mate upside his head.

"Enough Grimmjow, we are guests here." She chides her mate slightly.

He huffs out in annoyance then. "Hard to eat with her stabbing me with her eyes Nel."

"I can't believe you forgot who I was!"

"Not my problem Shinigami, I was after the strongest one there, you…" He flinches when he is again slapped upside the head.

"Grimmjow." The former Tercera Espada's voice hardens in warning.
Momo lays her hand on her friend's hand. "Rukia, the war is over. They are here because of Ichigo. If he trusts them, we should give them a chance."

"Che." The blue-haired Arrancar looks away from them.

"Fine Momo, I'll do it for Ichigo." Rukia grouses, but does as her friend says.

"So Naberius." The blue-haired Arrancar smirks as he picks up a piece of chicken. "Is she your mate?"

From the direction of his gaze, they can tell he is referring to Rias. The Gremory heiress blinks as she turns to look at the Hollow, and Ichigo confirms it for them. "She will be soon Grimmjow. That's why you and Nelliel are here, to help me train after I get Zangetsu. I'm going to challenge her intended for her hand."

"So I guess you're going to go all out then Itsygo?" Nelliel asks with her own grin forming.

"Of course, between you, my family's peerages and the others, I think I should be ready in a month's time. I'm not going to let her marry someone she doesn't love."

Nelliel looks at the crimson Devil then. "Why not just say no Rias?" She asks curiously.

To her surprise, she feels a slight tension in the air from the Devils surrounding her, especially from Rias. Frowning and glancing at Merti next to her, she wonders at the reason for the change, but her question is answered by Rias.

"Because all pure-bloods are expected to marry another pure-blood to keep the nobility viable Nelliel. Lord Phenex is one such Devil, and Lady Rias's family didn't know about Ichigo until after the arrangements."

"Well that sucks. It isn't much unlike how Grimmjow won me." She ponders.

Akeno stops eating then. "How does your kind pick Nelliel-san?"

Grimmjow cracks a grin then. "I fought her."

Ichigo can feel Zangetsu laughing in his head then. 'What's so funny?'

"I was just thinking about who wears the pants in their relationship. Nelliel was the Third while he was only the Sixth."

Ichigo keeps his eyes down then, knowing if he looks at the male Arrancar, he might break out in laughter at the image in his head.

'At least she's happy with him.'

"We'll be there soon enough King with our own Queen. And just think of the spars we'll get with them around."

'Yeah.' His smile creeps onto his face.

Rias sees his face then. "Ichigo are you okay?"

"I'm fine Rias, just thinking that soon we'll be whole again."

Reaching out with his hand, Ichigo grips her hand lightly before he resumes his dinner, thinking
about his lesson that will be held after dinner with his great-grandfather. He has to admit, he is looking forward to learning his family's magic after seeing how proficiently it works, and during his training with the peerages, how devastating their offensive and defensive capabilities are.

Akiko showed him how combining the fire of her kitsune heritage with her chains can cause massive injuries, often resulting in fatalities against her foes. Her daughter Hanako had begun teaching him her Tōki techniques, which combined with her Yōjutsu and Senjutsu, have both offensive and defensive movements that he cannot hope to match currently. She also told him of another use of Senjutsu, one which he wishes he never knew about: the Bōchujutsu, aka the bedroom jutsu. Hanako and her mother both laughed when his face turned pink upon being told how it worked exactly, something that Rias found interesting when she heard the use herself.

As he raises his glass to his lips, he sees Tatsuki shoot him a look then nod her head towards the dining room balcony. Watching as she leaves the table after laying a hand on Orihime's shoulders to keep her friend from following, Ichigo lowers his glass and leans towards Rias.

"I'll be right back; I think Tatsuki wants to talk to me real quick."

She kisses his cheek before nodding for him to leave. Getting up after excusing himself, he grabs his glass of water and follows after his oldest friend out into the night sky of the Underworld. Seeing her leaning against the railing as she looks over the darkened grounds, Ichigo comes up next to her and leans against the stone railing with his back. She doesn't say a word for the first few minutes; instead, he sees her face shift through a series of complicated expressions before she begins speaking to him.

"Ichigo, I talked to Kisuke, Venelana and your uncle this afternoon about my…situation." He flinches at her pause.

"And?" He questions quietly.

"With or without Zangetsu, Kisuke said it would be too dangerous for me to gain my powers the same way you did with Rukia."

He and his Zanpakutō are now both tensing up in worry. He looks at her from the corner of his eye to see her smile sadly before she continues.

"Venelana and your uncle both agree with him that there is only one safe way for you to save me."

"What do you mean 'save you' Tatsuki?" Now he is starting to feel real worry about his friend.

She leans back and turns towards him, placing a hand on his face she stares at him with acceptance and resignation.

"Ichigo…it wasn't what we wanted, but the only safe way for you to awaken my powers is for you to make me a Devil. Shhh, I know, don't say a word until I finish. Kisuke figures that with your training, if you cut my Soul Chain and then use your Hell Chains to transfer your Reiatsu into me, you would tear my soul apart before we could finish the transfer. My soul was exposed to too much of yours and Aizen's Reiatsu during the war and because of that, my Reiryoku is in too much flux to remain to maintain the stability of my soul. In fact, I need something to stabilize it quickly, otherwise... otherwise it will collapse soon."

Cupping his face as she looks into his eyes, she can see his worry, shock and depression setting in. "Stop it Ichigo, it's not your fault. It was his, Ichigo. Aizen's. I and the others would never blame you or condemn you for what has happened. To be honest, I'm glad about this. If I'm a Devil, I can"
finally stand with you guys, instead of staying home and worrying to death if you guys are ever going to come back."

"Suki…I..."

"Ichigo, I can't and won't accept an Evil Piece from anyone but you. It is the only way to save me now. Please Ichigo, do this for me."

She places her forehead on his as his head dips down in defeat and sadness. "Are you sure?"

"Yes Ichigo, I'm sure."

"Orihime?"

"I told her already. She...she's jealous by the way. She said she saw Sōna's and Merti's wings today and wants her own now."

He can't help but chuckle then. "I can't believe I am going to do this, and with my oldest and best friend to boot. Tatsuki Arisawa is going to become my first peerage member."

The black-haired martial artist hugs him then. "Thank you Ichigo. I promise to listen and train as hard as I can. I won't let you worry for me anymore."

Hugging her back, he lays his cheek on her head. "You better Tatsuki, you can only imagine what I will do if you get seriously hurt."

"I know Ichigo. Come on, let's get back before we worry the others."

Stepping away from each other, Ichigo waves her to go on without him. Watching his spiky-haired friend leave, he leans back against the stone railing once again. Looking into his glass of water as if it contains the mysteries of the world, he still doesn't fail to notice his assistant standing next to him.

"She is strong Ichigo."

"I know Merti, but I'll never be okay with what happened, or will happen to any of them. Tatsuki was the normal one out of all my friends, and now I'm going to be taking that away from her."

The woman stands next to him, looking out onto the grounds before speaking to him. "Ichigo, I believe she is well aware of what is going to happen to her tonight. Yet she does so willingly, she has chosen to stand with you as a member of your peerage, Lord Ichigo Naberius's peerage. Make her choice a worthy one and help her become stronger as a member of our Clan."

"I'm going to kick her ass in training every day from now on, you know this right?" He says with a smirk.

Grinning at her lord, the Elf chuckles Devilishly back. "And I will be standing with you when you do so Ichigo."

"Then you will help me train her?"

"Of course Ichigo, it goes without saying."

"Then tonight you will help me reincarnate my first peerage member."

Taking his arm with hers, she leads him back to the dining room. "Tonight you save a friend's life
Ichigo. Remember that always.”

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Ichigo stands next to his uncle as he goes over in his head the simple instructions he was given. He hears Zangetsu chuckling in his head at how easy the spell is, but they both know that even with Ichigo's newfound control over his Reiryoku and Devil powers, there is still a chance he could screw it up. Taking one deep breath, he forms the desired outcome in his head that he wants and begins to gather his Devil energy around him. He doesn't sense anything until it's too late when an all too familiar feeling of a gut wrenching sensation reaches him. He immediately lurches forward when he opens his eyes and sees that he has been successful in his first attempt.

'Holy shit Zangetsu! I did it!'

"That's nice King, but I think we should get the fuck out of here!"

Ichigo looks down at the white city that is nestled below the tower-like cliff of Sōkyoku Hill. A brief feeling of longing enters his chest, but the reality of being condemned to death by Central Forty-Six brings forth a new bitter emotion to him, betrayal. Taking one last glance at Soul Society, he forms the sands of Hueco Mundo in his mind and as his power gathers once again, he feels his power transporting him once again to his new destination.

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Suì-Fēng still cannot believe what she just saw, she knows it should be impossible but she also knows what, or rather who she had seen. She had arrived well before any of her subordinates and for the first time in her life, she was relieved that she had done so. If any of her squad had seen the orange-haired kid, she would have been forced to report to the Head Captain that Ichigo Kurosaki is no longer powerless and, if she has to guess, his memories were never erased.

As her squad arrives, she turns towards them and waves the all clear signal to them, then gestures for them to secure the area. As they scatter to do their jobs, she glances back to where she had seen the strange light coming from under Ichigo's feet.

'I'll have to contact Yoruichi as soon as possible...'

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Ichigo stares down at the blood spilling from the white clad woman lying at his feet. Zangetsu stands next to him as he too looks down at the unconscious woman, nudging her with his sandal covered foot; the white spirit narrows his eyes at the bloodstained white uniform. When they first appeared here, Ichigo had almost no time to react at all as multiple attacks came his way while he was still gaining his bearings, forcing him to dive out of the way instinctively. His chains ripping out from his body to create a wall between him and his unexpected attackers then using his high speed techniques, he quickly gained the advantage over his less experienced opponents by sneaking up behind them while they were distracted by his chains. Not even bothering to ask why they had attacked him, he struck at them based upon the rumors describing their white uniforms, uniforms that are all too similar to the ones worn by the mysterious people behind the recent disappearance of Hollows.

To his shock, several of them had actually managed to avoid his sneak attack; some of the survivors turned and fled, but taking the lessons he had just gone through with Akiko and the rest of the peerages, he sent half his chains into the sands and let them hunt down his prey, while facing off with the few who thought to stand toe to toe against him. Strangely enough, those
opponents had died fairly easily, though from the shock on their faces they clearly weren't expecting that outcome. Flicking the blood off of his grandfather's blade, Ichigo closes his eyes for a few seconds and pushes his awareness out into his surroundings, but senses no one else close to his position. Kneeling down, he checks the pulse of the woman under him, one of the people who were cut down by his initial counterattack, and frowns at the unsteady heartbeat even as she starts to stir back to consciousness.

"What do you think Zangetsu?"

"She has to be a Quincy Ichigo, she has the same cross on her wrist like Uryū. How are they even here? And what are they even doing here?"

"Questions for Geta-Bōshi to ask her then? Maybe with Nelliel and Grimmjow back at the Estate, they can help him interrogate her."

They both look at the skimpily clad woman, her shorts and rolled up shirt exposing much of her fair skin. He still hasn't seen her face, but her long green hair is steadily getting darker from the blood seeping from her head wound. Grunting as he kneels next to her, he hits a pressure point on her neck to knock her out again, then easily lifts her to his shoulder and throws her over it in a fireman carry. Looking around at the still cooling bodies, he grimaces as he calls his chains back and looks at his Hollowfied Zanpakutō.

"Burn 'em Ichigo. Leave nothing for them to identify."

Nodding in understanding, he forms his chains once again and sends several of them to each body then he unleashes hellish flames of blue through them to destroy the bodies in short time. Once the bodies of his attackers are ash in the wind and the two hybrids are satisfied, Zangetsu returns to his inner-world and Ichigo forms an image of his new home in his mind. Again he feels the tugging, but unlike the previous times, it has less of an effect on his body this time.

As soon as he appears under the Great Dome, he drops the body to his feet and sighs out loud. He can feel the air around him instantly change as the numerous Cerberus guarding the entrance to the Estate become alert at the scent of blood coming from the extra passenger he is bringing. Turning to the largest male, he points down at the woman.

"I need someone to get my Dad, Kisuke, Yoruichi and Ryūken, as well as my great-grandfather here. We might need Tessai to help seal this woman's powers. Orihime too, her injuries are quite bad. Tell them...tell them I think I brought home a Quincy, one who attacked me."

Bowing his three heads, the Hell Hound shifts his gaze towards the younger hounds behind him and barks a command, sending them sprinting off to different destinations while he stands guard over the bleeding, barely dressed woman. Keeping his two outer heads pointed towards the woman, the middle head looks at the future Clan leader.

"Ichigo, who is this woman?"

"Don't know, she and few others attacked me in Hueco Mundo, so I killed most of them and knocked her out, then brought her back with me. I figured I should bring one of them back alive to see if they really are Quincy and why they are somewhere they shouldn't have been."

Before the Cerberus can say another word, the sounds of Shunpo and a few magical circles begin to announce the arrival of the people he had asked for... and more besides. Ichigo and the Hell Hounds watch as not only the six people he had named arrive, but also Rias and Sōna who appear to be following Orihime.
"Ichigo are you okay?" The young burnt-orange-haired woman asks him as she hurries over to his side, all while staring daggers at the crumpled form near his feet.

"I'm fine Imouto. She isn't though. Let's get some restraints on her before we heal her. Ryūken, do you know her?"

Shaking his head in the negative, the white haired elder Ishida gasps in surprise when Ichigo flips her over casually with his foot, her headwear finally leaving no doubt as to her allegiance. They all see the emblem proudly displayed on her uniform cap, the Quincy Cross. Ryūken turns to Amyntas and points at the unconscious woman.

"Do you know of anything to seal her or her powers away Lord Naberius? She will most likely try to escape when she realizes there is no Reiatsu for her to use here, but if the Shinigami use Kidō, she might be able to steal some of it for herself."

The Guardian of the Gates of Hell ponders this for a few moments before his chains snake out from his body. Everyone watches as they encircle the young woman before sinking into her body, and her exposed skin now shows faint tattoo like markings just under her skin.

"I believe that will keep her from trying anything for now Ryūken. I will have Sasha modify the chains for her use in interrogating this woman later." The Naberius Clan leader announces when he is done.

Turning to the young woman standing next to Rias, he motions for Orihime to join them.

"Please heal our guest Orihime, we don't want to seen as rude when she wakes and finds her wounds are still unattended to by then, do we?"

Orihime nods, and even without having to use her kotodama; the healing shield immediately appears and envelops the green-haired woman completely. Her wounds disappear very quickly, but she is left unconscious at Ryūken's insistence. Once the healing is done, Amyntas motions to four servants, and they place the scantily clad woman onto a stretcher before Amyntas turns to the Shinigami and others.

"I can't risk having her inside the Estate, so I will keep her in the Tower until we are ready to speak to her."

Kisuke quirks an eyebrow at that declaration; seeing this, Amyntas forestalls the genius Shinigami by holding up his hand. "No one but those of our Clan may enter the Tower Kisuke Urahara, not unless they are our prisoner or one of the Damned. I or one of my peerages will bring her to you for interrogations later."

"So, no chance to take a peek inside then?" Kisuke asks as his fan hides his face.

Even Ichigo can feel the tension rising quickly at his crazy mentor's words. He feels power being built up from all the Naberius Clan members around him, even Merti who had appeared next to him without his notice. Glancing at his dark-skinned assistant, he leans towards her slightly.

"Merti, what's wrong?" He whispers discreetly.

Leaning closer so no one else can hear her but him, Merti answers him. "Only those of the Naberius blood or those that performed the rites may enter and leave the Tower without consequence, all others will be seen as intruders and dealt with…harshly."

Ichigo's question is easily seen in his eyes as Merti expands on her answer. "The Tower is where
the Damned souls are being kept Ichigo; allowing just anyone, Devil or not, to simply enter would bring chaos. The last thing we want to happen is for someone to sneak in and try to help the Sinners break out. That is why over the ages, the Tower itself began to recognize only those of Naberius bloodline or those of us who have undergone the rites." She elaborates further at his questioning look. "When a new member of the peerage is deemed trustworthy, they undergo a blood ritual that allows them to use Hell Chains and become a warden of the Skeleton Tower. Anyone else is seen as an intruder and immediately attacked. Even the Maou are subject to the rules of Skeleton Tower which is why it is important that the Naberius has control over it. Why only you and your sisters will be able to take over if the eventuality ever arises."

"In other words, only the Naberius Devil guards and prisoners can ever enter that place."

"Exactly."

"So, how is it that the Quincy is able to enter?"

Merti smiles wryly at him. "The chains that your great-grandfather marked her with make her a prisoner, and the Tower will consider her as such now. She will never be free until he removes them from her."

Turning back, Ichigo stares at the unconscious woman as she is taken away, four of the Cerberus forming an escort with Akiko leading them away. Turning to look at his 'uncle', Ichigo begins to understand the weight of responsibility he has had to carry for all these years with only the peerages to help him.

"Uncle."

"Yes Ichigo?"

"When I come back, I want you to train me to take your place."

The older Devil smirks at him. "I won't go easy on you because you are my great-grandson Ichigo."

"I would hope not." Ichigo smirks back.

"Then you and Tatsuki need to start preparing yourselves, in one hour you will gain your first peerage piece Ichigo. She understands the consequences of her actions and knows she will have to stay with you forever as a member of our Clan. Take this time to go over magic with Merti, you will need to perform this ritual correctly the first time; if not…"

"If not I could kill her."

"You are a Naberius now Ichigo, this is part of your heritage. Don't worry so much, we will all be with you and Tatsuki, however because this is not a life or death situation, those who are not Devils cannot be there."

"Orihime, I want her there. She is Tatsuki's best friend and I think she should be a witness to this."

Amyntas looks at the human healer as she stands there clutching her hands nervously while waiting for his answer; his eyes softening, he nods his head and agrees.

"Orihime, as an honorary Naberius and a healer you will be allowed to attend. Just remember not to interfere, no matter what happens."
"Yes Uncle Amyntas. I promise not to do anything."

"Then in one hour we will gain our first new peerage member in over a hundred years. Isshin, Kisuke, Tessai, why don't you come with me and I will make arrangements on how to deal with our prisoner. Yoruichi, I believe you should stay with your student and spend the time keeping her calm for what is to come. Ichigo, Orihime, you will spend this time with Merti going over the ritual. Everyone else, prepare the family room in the Western Wing for the ceremony."

Magic circles appear and one by one the Devils disappear to gather the Clan for the reincarnation ceremony, a ceremony that will see the Naberius heir gain his first ever peerage member.

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Tatsuki sits with Yoruichi in the hot spring, hoping to calm her already nervous state. Even with the saucers of sake that the woman has had her drink, she still feels a few butterflies in her stomach.

"Suki-chan, it will be okay, Ichigo won't let anything happen to you." The purple-haired goddess reassures her.

Dipping until her head is fully covered by the water, she comes up again and smiles weakly at the former assassin. "I know Yoruichi-san; it's just that I'm not going to be human for much longer. I also won't be living in Karakura anymore, and I'll be starting at a new school soon. And my parents…"

"Your parents will be none the wiser if that is your biggest worry Tatsuki. Amyntas and Venelana will pay them a visit and use a subtle magic that will modify their memories of you going to Karakura High. How happy they were that you were accepted into Kuoh Academy on a scholarship for your last year. How they have already made preparations for you to stay with your best friend Orihime, who also obtained this scholarship so that both of you can attend school together. It will be fine, so just relax and let tonight be one of your best memories, that after the ritual tonight you will be able to help protect your best friends with your own strength, just as they have protected you all these years."

Tatsuki nods slowly. "Speaking of Karakura, who is going to defend it now that we are all going to be here?"

Yoruichi grins then as she sits up straighter. "I'll be going to Soul Society tonight to see Jūshirō and Shinji and 'explain' things to them, maybe even see Bya-kun and let him know that his sister is fine."

"You mean you are going to tell them about Ichigo." The younger woman deadpans.

Yoruichi grins even wider at her newest student. "You learn quickly."

Tatsuki rolls her eyes at her purple-haired mentor. "It was pretty easy to read between the lines with that one Sensei. Jūshirō is Rukia's Captain and Shinji is Momo's Captain, while Byakuya is Rukia's brother. Kinda hard not to see where you are going with that."

"But do you know why those three Tatsuki?" Yoruichi asks.

"I'm going to take a guess and say that at least two if not all three stood for Ichigo against those morons running the Central Forty-Six, the ones that you told me about?"

"Exactly. Shinji, and surprisingly Byakuya, both voiced strong opposition against their ruling, while Jūshirō has always seen Ichigo as a friend to Soul Society, even now he respects that Ichigo
gave up almost everything to save us and never asked for anything in return. Of all the Captains, Jūshirō has the greatest hope of keeping Ichigo as a valued ally of Soul Society."

Tatsuki just frowns at her. "You know that's not going to be easy after learning they threatened us and his family." She points out.

"That's why I have to build a foundation of Captains and Lieutenants to support him when Central Forty-Six learns that not only does Ichigo still have his memories, but that he is the heir to two Clans, one in Soul Society and one in the Underworld. I need Central to understand that it would be both politically and literally suicidal to try and harm not only Ichigo, but any of his friends and family. If I gain enough support for him, he might even be able to openly announce his return to them."

"If not?" Tatsuki knows the answer, but hearing it will only confirm her worry.

"If not, then it might be time to petition the Soul King to change our government once again."

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Ichigo stands in his inner-world, Zangetsu near him as they both look upon his changed landscape. The Zanpakutō knows his wielder is still coming to terms with what he is about to do in the next hour. Not that he has any say in the matter, but unlike his partner, the Hollowfied spirit knows that he has decided to support this fully.

"It's getting cloudy Ichigo."

"Sorry Zangetsu."

"King. It's going to be okay."

"I know, but it's still hard for me. I thought after the War, it would be over for them, but it just feels like it's only beginning again. I know, I can feel it."

"Then we train just as hard Ichigo. They will have to train just as hard. We know the truth; they know the truth this time around, no more surprises and no more keeping secrets from us."

Turning to his sword spirit, the Devil-Shinigami hybrid can't help the feelings coming from his Zanpakutō spirit; the excitement is there as always, but so is the resigned feeling of inevitability. "Once we make you whole Zangetsu, there will be no holding back on either account. We need to be the strongest being we can be if I am going to keep them safe."

"I couldn't agree more Ichigo. When the time comes, we will hone each of our aspects to ensure no one will dare touch what is ours."

"Going to be a busy couple of weeks." Ichigo snorts out.

Zangetsu grins crazily then, just like in the old days. "First things first King. We rescue the Queen from that wannabe fried turkey."

"That's not even up for debate."

"Then get going Ichigo, it's almost time for you to reincarnate her."
Nodding, Ichigo disappears from his inner-world; left behind once again, the silent child stands next to the only being that can see her.

"So Zangetsu, you looking forward to your future?"

"A Queen, a peerage, and the chance to kick ass, did ya even have to ask?" His grin gets even bigger.

Face-palming, the small child groans out. "Only you Zangetsu, only you."

"Come on Imp, I want to see which piece she is going to become. I get the feeling I know already, but it's odd that the pieces seem to be alive themselves."

"You noticed did you? I thought it was odd myself how they changed colors from the moment he touched them."

Shrugging, Zangetsu looks at the child for a moment before he dips down and hoists her up to his shoulders. "We will learn what it means soon enough Imp."

XXX

Tatsuki walks arm-in-arm with Orihime down the long hallway leading to the room where her life will be forever changed, keeping her expression as neutral as possible as they pass through the ranks of Cerberus and servants, each of them bowing as she passes them. Orihime tightens her arm around hers as they draw near to the two tall doors leading to the room designated for the ceremony; just outside the room, she sees Isshin and the twins, Kisuke and the shouten residents, her human friends, and finally the two Shinigami Lieutenants. Karin steps forward and hugs her older friend first.

"Be safe Tatsuki, we'll be waiting for you when it's over."

"You're not coming?" The spiky black-haired girl asks.

"We aren't allowed yet Tatsuki-chan; only Orihime because of her healing ability can enter. Karin and I are not Devils yet, so our great-grandfather said we need to wait until Ichigo changes us when he gets back." Yuzu pouts at the end.

Isshin steps in front of her after touching Yuzu's shoulder. "I'm proud of you Tatsuki."

"Eh?"

Isshin places his other hand on her shoulder as he looks into her eyes. "You are giving up any chance of living a normal life, Tatsuki Arisawa, and you are doing it of your own free will. Besides being Ichigo's oldest friend, I think of you as a member of our family. This is why I had Kūkaku add your name to our family's registry; as of now you are a member of the Shiba family, a noble of Soul Society."

Her eyes widen. "Isshin-san…I don't know what to say." She whispers.

"Just keep my boy from getting too much of an ego." He goofily replies with an equally goofy thumbs up.

Laughing lightly, Tatsuki agrees. "It's gonna be hard. You know how stubborn he is."

"You can be just as stubborn." Orihime chides her teasingly.
Before they can chat further, the doors open to reveal Merti stepping out wearing a metallic grey dress. Looking over the ensemble of humans and Shinigami, she moves to stand before Tatsuki and Orihime.

"Do you wish to precede, Tatsuki? This will be your last chance; after you enter through those doors, you will not be allowed to turn away. So I ask you again, Tatsuki Arisawa, is this your choice to freely become a member of Ichigo Naberius's peerage?"

"It is Merti-san." Tatsuki stands straight as she answers.

Stepping to one side then, the Elfin woman holds one arm up and points to the doors. "Then enter, Tatsuki Arisawa."

Gulping once, Tatsuki looks over and sees everyone trying their best to keep their emotions off of their faces. She sees a slight tightness around Uryū's eyes, Chad's eyes are hidden but his hands are flexing repeatedly. Rukia and Momo offer her encouraging smiles, while the other Shinigami wear emotionless masks; they all know what she needs right now, support without the drama. With a firm nod, she begins walking forward with Orihime at her side, all emotions now suppressed except for one, determination.

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Every eye turns to the three women as they enter the room, the Cerberus standing guard on either side getting up and leaving the room, with the doors closing behind them. Ichigo sees Tatsuki’s eyes boring in on his as she strides over to him and his uncle. He can't help but smile at how serious she looks, and seeing her grin determinedly back at him, he finally finds the peace to do what he needs to in order to essentially save his friend's life. Looking at Orihime, he can see the nervousness and excitement on her face as she comes to a stop two paces behind her best-friend. Tatsuki however stops just in front of him and Amyntas and bows to them both.

"Lord Amyntas Naberius. Lord Ichigo Naberius."

Ichigo bows back to his friend. "Tatsuki Arisawa. You have been offered a great honor. Do you wish to accept the responsibility of becoming a Devil, a member of my peerage?"

"I do."

Raising his hand to her, he guides her to a low obsidian altar that is covered with a thick layered silk sheet, as well as a satin pillow. Looking at him, Tatsuki can see the seriousness in his expression as he guides her to lie down on the flat surface, no hint of his earlier smile visible as he waits for her. Sitting first on her rear, she slides back until she is in the middle of the altar before twisting and moving to lie on her back. She almost jumps when two sets of hands help ease her to her place; looking up, she sees the smiling faces of Akiko and her daughter, Hanako. The two women then step away and join their respective peerage. She chances one look around and sees that besides Ichigo and his uncle, both of the Naberius peerages are there, along with Rias and her peerage, and Sōna and hers. She looks up at Ichigo as he steps up to the altar she lies on.

Ichigo reaches into his black and red Haori and takes out his first Evil Piece, the murmurs coming from the room going quiet all of a sudden, and she has the feeling that something unusual is occurring then. Merti stands next to her and reaches down, then parts her own kimono slightly over her heart.

"Tatsuki Arisawa, by accepting this piece, you will be reborn as a member of our race." Ichigo intones, then proceeds to place a small object on the exposed part of her chest.
Tatsuki feels something small, flat and cool at first touch her skin, before a sudden wave of power rushes into her body from the object and her back arches. A small part of her wonders if the feeling is close to what an electric shock would feel like as it rushes through her, her lips parting not in pain but in euphoria. With each beat of her heart, the wave of power pulses further throughout her body, she can feel herself changing from the inside, first tearing and then mending her soul. For her it feels like no time has passed, but each time her heart beats, she notices the well of energy within her steadily growing. Countless heartbeats pass, and then she can suddenly feel the power that she has always associated with Ichigo and the others beginning to well up from deep inside of her body, until with a final pulse, she collapses wearily on the altar as her Reiryoku and Devil powers synchronize and stabilize.

Feeling her heart beat steadily and the new power surging through her body, she hears nothing until Merti's voice intones. "Rise Tatsuki Arisawa, Rook of Lord Ichigo Naberius."

This time, she is able to rise on her own, no pain or disorientation coming from her body that she can feel, just a sense of underlying power radiating through her body. Sliding along until she can sit on the edge of the altar, she looks up and sees relief on both Ichigo's and Orihime's faces. Gingerly hopping down from the altar, she stands in front of Ichigo and smiles at him.

"I guess I'm a Devil now?" She cheekily asks them.

Merti stands beside her with relief in her eyes. "We were worried that it wasn't going to work Tatsuki."

Surprised, she looks at Ichigo and sees the grimace on his face. "Normally it is a very quick ritual Suki, at least according to Merti, but you took over fifteen minutes to reincarnate as a Devil. We were really worried for a while there, but you did it. Congratulations on becoming my Rook, Tatsuki Arisawa... Shiba."

Soon the room fills with warm welcomes and words of congratulations from the group of Devils crowding them from all sides. Tatsuki accepts everyone's greetings and welcomes and so on until she is face to face with her best friend, at which point she knows how much her life is going to change. The excitement and pride her best friend radiates is obvious when she finds herself being hugged tightly by the burnt-orange-haired healer.

"Now you and I can have all kinds of adventures Suki! Just think, we can battle the bad guys together while Ichigo and the others rescue us when we get kidnapped together again and…"

She can't stop herself from laughing then as she pats the over-excited Orihime on the back, quelling her fanciful outburst. "Hime, I'm not going to allow us to get taken in the first place and I'm sure as hell not expecting dandelion head to save me all of the time." She smiles at Ichigo's expected scowl at her words.

"So why a Rook Ichigo?" Daiki Kimura asks him.

Pulling out the rest of his pieces, Ichigo holds them up for them to see. Pointing at one of his Bishops, he speaks. "They have already chosen who I will have for a peerage it seems. When I was going over them to see what piece would be suitable for Tatsuki, one of my Rooks began to glow like my Bishop is now. Merti thinks because of what I am, my Reiatsu and Devil powers have changed the aspects of my pieces. They have already chosen for themselves who is to become a member of my peerage."

"So why is your Bishop glowing now?" Akiko questions as she looks at the softly glowing piece.
Sighing, Ichigo turns until he is facing the Shun Shun Rikka user then answers haltingly. "It has...chosen...already."

Orihime's and Tatsuki's eyes grow wide, as both of them stare at the piece in his hand. "Ichigo, you mean it wants me?" The burnt-orange-haired healer asks wonderingly.

"Not until we come home from Lemnos, and not until you and I have a very long talk Hime. But yes, it has been acting this way every time you come near me. I...I won't say no if you ask me." Ichigo grits out the last part of his statement.

"Why that's Ichigo?" He can hear the slow anger in his new Rook's voice as she tries to understand what is happening.

Turning a hard glare at her, he answers truthfully. "Because Tatsuki, unlike you, Orihime has already been exposed to the dangers of our lifestyle. Unlike you, her powers have already awakened; yours have yet to reveal themselves to us. Not only that, her powers won't disappear if she becomes a Devil, they are more likely to be enhanced."

"They will?" Orihime smiles happily, already imagining her friends gaining new abilities or power ups or even costumes.

Groaning as he knows Orihime is going to become one of his Bishops no matter what, he says to her. "Yes Hime, the pieces make you into a Devil but they don't take away your powers or gifts. In many cases they even work to enhance them. You are godlike already with your powers; I can only imagine what you will become once you are my Bishop."

Orihime does a fist-pump and turns to her best friend. "Did you hear that Tatsuki!? I'm going to be Ichigo-nii's Bishop!"

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The two Cerberus grin as they watch the stalking purple-haired goddess pace back and forth in front of them, now and then when the pulses of energy reach them through the closed door, she would pause until the power fades away again. Once or twice a string of obscenities would leave her mouth about stupid customs and stubborn fools. After fifteen minutes the powerful pulses stop, and for the last ten minutes the group is just waiting for any news to come from the room they are guarding. Everyone immediately looks up when the doors begin to open.

First one out is Ichigo, his face showing no hint of what is going on inside.

"Well!?" Yoruichi says as she gets in front of her second protégé.

"She did it." He cracks a smile as he turns and motions to the person behind him. "Meet Tatsuki Arisawa Shiba, my new Rook."

"Hi guys." Said Rook smiles as she steps out from behind him.

Immediately the Shinigami and humans crowd around the young black-haired martial artist.

"How do you feel Tatsuki?"

"Do you feel different Arisawa-chan?"

"Tatsuki-nee are you really a Devil now?"
"Onee-san?"

Holding her hands up, she grins widely at them. "I feel fine guys, really I do. It…was weird at first, but when it was over I could just feel the power in me already. I think I finally understand what all of you feel like every day."

Yoruichi looks at Ichigo then. "Why a Rook piece?"

Ichigo shrugs. "Not my decision actually. I'm guessing the piece chose her because of her expertise in the martial arts like Daiki-san, it constantly lit up in her presence. The Rook piece will allow her to gain both offensive and defensive capabilities when her power fully matures, so it is a good fit for her anyway."

"You don't know what they are yet?" Isshin directs at his son.

Both Ichigo and Tatsuki turn expectantly to the genius standing in their group. Seeing he is expected to explain, Kisuke sighs and closes his fan. "Young Arisawa is being trained in Shunkō. I think that whatever she becomes, her power will be a derivative of that and manifest itself during her Devil training. I am quite excited to see what she can do once it does show actually."

The Shihōin princess grabs her new student into a head lock and ruffles her hair playfully. "You had me scared by taking so damn long to come out, Suki-chan. For that, your training is going to be accelerated to help you compensate for your lack of speed, so be prepared now."

Tatsuki groans out loud as her future flashes before her eyes. "Ichigo can't you get me a pass or something?"

Snorting at her, he turns his own grin towards her, making even Yoruichi back up slightly. "You think what she has planned for you is gonna suck? Wait until you deal with them." He points at something behind her.

Tatsuki looks over her shoulder to see the Naberius peerages coming out from the room where her ceremony had taken place, many of them sporting large smiles as they heard Ichigo's declaration. Her face pales as she remembers stories about the training they had given Ichigo.

"I hate you Ichigo." She seethes lowly, only for him to hear.

"Suck on it Suki." He says right back.

Chad steps forward then and speaks up. "So what do we do now Ichigo?"

Looking up at his tall friend, he smiles at the quiet teen. "I figure we should celebrate tonight because Orihime and I have business to take care of tomorrow. I…we have something to tell you all then as well."

The dark-skinned human looks at the group's healer and considers what news it can be. In the end, he can only think of one thing. "If she asked, Ichigo, then I want to as well. We made a promise to each other and I won't let you stop me from keeping it."

The Devils, the Shinigami and the twins have no idea of what is going on between the two friends as Ichigo stares at his larger friend. Slowly, he walks up to Chad and puts a hand on his shoulder.

"If that's what you want Chad?"

"It is."
"Then when I get back, I'll make it happen."

Finally, Yuzu bursts out, unable to stand not knowing. "What are you talking about Ichi-nii? What is it that Orihime-nee and Chad-kun want?"

He turns to face his sister. "They are going to become part of my peerage Yuzu. They are going to give up their human lives to become Devils like you, Karin and me."

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Yoruichi looks around the Grand Dining Room filled with every member of the Naberius, Gremory and Sitri Clans, each of them talking with either a Shinigami or human or the new Naberius Rook, Tatsuki. She sees Orihime and Akeno having what seems to be a deep discussion, while Rukia and Momo are laughing with a few males from the peerages. Uryū and Chad are surrounded by a few of the lady members, the Quincy's red face indicating that something embarrassing must be the topic of their discussions. Kisuke and Isshin seem to be in deep and serious conversation with both Sirzechs and Lord Sitri, as evident from the lack of laughter from either Shinigami or Devil. Tessai on the other hand seems to be having a good time as he, along with both male and female Devils, are laughing at something he says as he stands in the middle of the group, while Jinta and Ururu are sitting with Koneko, Yuuto and the twins at one side.

Only three people are missing from the party, and she smirks when she can't feel either Ichigo's or Rias's energy in the room; she can guess what the two teens are doing. Finally, Amyntas is outside on the balcony, alone it seems. Grabbing two glasses of wine, she makes her way out to where Ichigo's great-grandfather is. She walks up to the Clan leader as he sits at a small table overlooking the hot springs that litter the grounds around his Estate. Not saying anything, she sits in the chair next to him and places a glass of wine on the table before him. Silence reigns between the Shinigami and the Devil, until Amyntas utters his first words to her.

"Thank you for teaching my great-grandson, Lady Shihōin."

She laughs then at his formality. "I thought by now that it was simply Yoruichi, Amyntas."

"My mistake Yoruichi, I just had a few things on my mind." He apologizes with a smile.

Sipping her wine, she sets the glass on the table. "I take it you are wondering about Tatsuki?"

"Among other things. That Ichigo's friend Chad and his sister Orihime both want to become Devils as well is surprising to me. I thought the idea of giving up one's humanity would be a hard choice for ones so young."

The former Onmitsukidō Commander laughs with a hint of bitterness in her voice. "Hard to imagine that those young teens have fought in a war already Amyntas, they aren't exactly innocent to the ways of the world anymore. Orihime had it the worst out of them, being forced to leave her friends behind, being branded a traitor by Soul Society, and finally having to watch Ichigo die while rescuing her. Chad found his power by fighting Hollows that were among the strongest of their kind and nearly died in the sands of Hueco Mundo. Uryū sacrificed all his power when he fought to rescue Rukia from her execution in Soul Society, trained hard to regain his power then found out that he has to train even harder when he was defeated easily by the Cuarto Espada. Ichigo... Ichigo died fighting that same Espada. The only reason he is alive is because of his promise to save Orihime, and he became a Hollow himself. Try to understand Amyntas, Ichigo's friends have already bled with him and are willing to bleed with him again by becoming Devils, becoming members of his peerage. I think what those two are willing to give up speaks volumes as to how much their lives have become intertwined with Ichigo's."
The Keeper of the Gates of Hell swirls his wine around his glass before taking a small sip. "And what of you Yoruichi? Will you stay, or will you leave them behind when they become Devils?"

"If you are asking whether I'm going to abandon them, then the answer is no. I have too much to teach them and...and they are like my own children. Tessai and I have come to see them as ours, Kisuke won't admit it, but they bring him a sense of joy and fulfillment that he may never find otherwise. Sorry Amyntas, I'm afraid your Clan is stuck with four relics from Soul Society for the rest of your life."

"I would have been displeased if you...if any of you did leave us."

Smirking into her glass, she can't help teasing him. "Sounds like someone would miss us."

"You would be right Yoruichi." Amyntas doesn't bother hiding his smile. "Speaking of that, I was wondering if you had plans a week from now?"

"Are you asking me for a date Lord Amyntas?"

Shifting until he can look at her, he clears his throat. "I have a formal business dinner with a few of my human clients and business partners in the Human World. I would like it if you would come with me as my friend."

Leaning forward, Yoruichi rests her chin in her hand. "Don't know Amyntas, such short notice, I'd have to find a dress to wear, get my hair and nails done..."

"I'll take care of everything. So will you say yes?"

"I'll go on one condition."

"Name it."

"I'd like to bring the kids with us so they can have a night out on the town. I figure they will need a break from training and the excitement by then."

Giving her a nod, he snaps his fingers and a servant appears next to him. "I want you to rent the top floor of our usual place for two nights."

"Yes Lord Amyntas." The servant walks away, leaving the couple behind in the quiet once again.

"So can I ask about your life Amyntas?"

Leaning forward on the table, he stares into her golden eyes with a small smile. "I was born over close to two..."

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The orange-haired teen's eyes are closed as the crimson-haired teen behind him keeps working the knots out of his shoulders. She smiles affectionately every time a moan or a grunt of pleasure escapes his lips, now and then he twitches when she runs her fingers down along his spine or along his ribs. Kissing him between his shoulder blades, she pulls him back until he is resting comfortably on her chest. Stroking the front of his body, she curls her head into the crook of his neck.

"You okay Ichigo? About Chad and Orihime?"

"Yeah Rias, I'm okay. Orihime I had a hint of from Suki, but Chad was a complete
surprise...though in hindsight I really should have seen it coming due to the promise we made to each other. Uryū though, I think he won't ask, mainly because his pride would probably cause him to break out in hives at the thought of being subordinate to me in any way, as well as worrying about his own bloodline."

She giggles at his description of Uryū. "I am glad your friends are those that you have chosen to be a part of your peerage Ichigo. Unlike many Devils, you will have true bonds of trust with them. Some Devils have had their own peerage members kill them when they let their guard down."

"Did you know someone personally who that happened to Rias?" Ichigo asks when he notices Rias's hand pausing.

He feels her shift slightly, and then her hand lands on his. "Koneko-chan has an older sister Ichigo, a Nekomata of immense power who became a Devil when she was younger. I don't know the circumstances surrounding her former master, but one day she killed him and went rogue. Koneko, being her little sister, was going to be executed for her older sister's crimes. Luckily my brother stepped in and took her in under our protection to save her, which is how she became my Rook."

"Is that why she has a hard time showing her emotions then?"

"Sometimes she does fall back into her depression, but since you have been with us, not nearly as much as before. I and the others have always wanted to say thank you for that by the way. She hasn't been this open to anyone in years, not even among us; you however seem to make her smile the most."

Ichigo frowns. "Her sister, does anyone know where she is?"

"If they did Ichigo, she would be killed on sight by any Devil who finds her. She is a wanted criminal in the eyes of the Underworld, the killing of a pure-blood isn't something easily forgiven, if at all. I don't want Koneko to ever find out if her sister is found and executed before they have a chance to speak to each other at least one more time."

"I'll try and find…"

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU TWO!?"

Ichigo freezes in front of Rias, his battle senses kicking in at hearing an unexpected voice. Not even turning around, he quickly sends out his chains to capture the intruder, and barely catches whoever the owner of the voice is as she is just as unprepared for his chains as he is for her. Rising out of the hot springs and turning to see who the owner of the voice is, his eyes go wide at seeing the petite woman wrapped in his chains wearing nothing but a towel.

"Suì-Fēng!"

"KUROSAKI!"

"Shit! I am so sorry Captain Suì-Fēng! I didn't…wait what the hell are you doing here!?"

"What am I doing here!? What are you…wait! You said my name! That means…that means that bastard never erased your memories! I knew it when I saw you earlier dammit! Now you're here again!" She curses softly to herself before adding her next thoughts. 'My day just keeps getting better and better by the minute.'

"Oh shit! I-I can explain about this Suì-Fēng!" He yells, suddenly realizing he is in a very bad spot.
Slowly and gently putting the Squad Two Captain down and all too aware of her short temper, he places his body between the volatile assassin and his bikini clad girlfriend. "I know what you must be thinking Captain, but I really can explain everything."

She glares at him for a moment longer, then with a scoff she ignores him and walks towards the hot springs. His eyes go wide when the twin-braided woman begins to un-wrap her towel, and he almost panics and tries to turn around; luckily for him, she is wearing a black one piece bathing suit beneath the towel and simply rolls her eyes at his actions. Holding up her hand to forestall any talking by the two teens, the assassin walks into the hot spring and settles down on one of the underwater ledges.

"I came here to soak because I've had a bad day Kurosaki. Yoruichi and Kisuke aren't the only ones who know of this place, and though I'm amazed by the sheer audacity and moronic behavior you displayed in sneaking here to take a soak when you're supposed to have your powers and memories sealed, I'm now forced to deal with you. Since I have visual proof you are here, and your verbal confirmation that you are likely in possession of your full memories, I am going to have to insist on taking that soak before your presence somehow makes my day even worse. So save whatever excuses or reasons you have for a few minutes or at least until I feel relaxed enough to take the stress."

Ichigo and Rias exchange looks. "Ah, sure thing Suî-Fêng."

Pinching her nose, the petite Captain mutters loud enough for him to hear. "Why didn't Yoruichi at least teach him some decorum when speaking to his superior officers?"

Upon hearing that, Rias blinks in surprise, then she begins laughing softly at him. "I see you left quite an impression with your Shinigami friends Ichigo."

Suî-Fêng pauses, then she glances over at the third person in the hot spring with them, finally realizing that the other person is not only a complete unknown, but she is also a young teen woman with crimson hair, blue eyes and a figure that would rival the human she knows as Orihime and the Squad Ten Lieutenant, who is somehow sharing a hot spring with the prude known as Ichigo Kurosaki, without him causing a ruckus. Feeling her headache growing, she waves at Ichigo for an explanation.

"Who is your friend?" Her tone is completely flat.

Sensing that Suî-Fêng is in no mood for any bullshit, Ichigo takes a seat next to the crimson princess, but cannot help blushing slightly when he tells her the truth. "This is Rias Gremory, Heir to the Gremory Clan of the Underworld, and about a month from now she will be my fiancée."

For a long minute, both teens watch as a faint twitch develops on the temple of the Squad Two Captain; finally, she sighs out in resignation and leans back with her arms on either side of her.

"I know I'm going to regret asking this, but how?"

"You're... not going to ask about the Underworld?" He asks her hesitantly.

"The Kushanâda and Togabito, Kurosaki. " Suî-Fêng shoots him an unimpressed look. "The Captains are well aware of the Underworld's existence and the factions involved within it."

The fact that the Captains only found out about this a week ago is something she doesn't bother to mention.

Looking at Yoruichi's former student, Ichigo lets out his own tired sigh. "I hope you don't have
anywhere to be for a while, it's gonna be a long story I fear."

"I have a few hours Kurosaki, spit it out."

"Well first thing is, I'm not just a Kurosaki; I'm also a Shiba and Naberius. As you know, Shiba was once one of the Five Great Clans of Soul Society, while Naberius is a Devil Clan of the Underworld, one of their Thirty-Three remaining Pillars."

Suì-Fēng sits in absolute silence for the next two and a half hours, stunned beyond words as the Berry retells his story from the moment he woke with a faked case of amnesia to the point he decided to bring his future fiancée to Sōkyoku Hill's hidden hot springs for a late-night soak for nostalgia’s sake.

'Screw having a bad day, I'm going to kill Kisuke!' She screams to herself in her mind.

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Many of the people who are sitting around the room waiting for word of where Ichigo and Rias are can't help but glance at the silently fuming Clan head as he stands in front of the fireplace. Yoruichi sits with Tessai, Isshin and Kisuke as they wait for Merti, the Cerberus and members of the peerages to complete their searches of the Estate, the grounds and their home in the human world. It was only a short while ago that they realized that Ichigo and Rias were not in their room, and the Estate's tracking magic was unable to detect their presence on the grounds at all. Amyntas had immediately ordered the Cerberus and servants to physically search the Estate, but within a few minutes it was clear that both Heir and Heiress had left the Estate without tripping any alarms, which could only mean use of the teleportation spell Amyntas had taught Ichigo earlier.

The werecat is about to get up and speak with Amyntas, when a sound suddenly starts playing, causing everyone to look at her as she digs through her Kimono and finally pulls out a device. Glancing at the ID in surprise, she flips open the Denreishinki and answers the call.

"Moshi, moshi, you're most..." Even the nearby Devils lean back in shock as Yoruichi quickly holds the phone away from her ear, the female voice shouting through the speakers nearly deafening them.

"YORUICHI! YOU BETTER HAVE A DAMN GOOD EXPLANATION WHEN I SEE YOU NEXT TIME!"

The purple-haired goddess looks baffled by her words. "Ah, hello my Little Bee, what can I do for you?" She idly places the phone on speaker for everyone to hear.

"Oh, I don't know Yoruichi. Perhaps you can tell me why I am currently in the hot springs under Sōkyoku Hill with an orange-haired moron!"

Yoruichi's mind goes blank, connecting the fact that she is looking for a missing orange-haired moron, and Suì-Fēng found an orange-haired moron where he definitely should not be. Hissing loudly enough for the entire room to hear, she yells back angrily through the speaker. "Put that dumbass on the phone now!"

There is a pause, then a relieved voice sounds out as Ichigo's voice is heard. "Hey Yoruichi, I can..."

"Shut it Ichigo! Are you crazy!? What the hell are you doing in Soul Society!? Everyone is worried sick about you and Rias! Is she okay!?"
"Yeah, yeah Yoruichi. She's fine, I'm fine. As for why I'm here, well it's sorta a date…"

"A date? You took your girlfriend to Soul Society for a date?" Many of the Shinigami groan out in disbelief and incredulity, but two of them have other thoughts as well.

Kisuke nudges Isshin and whispers to him. "Kid got a set of brass ones, eh Isshin?" In all honesty, he's just as pissed as Yoruichi that his chosen successor would do something so absolutely moronic, but as a man he can't help but admire Ichigo's audacity.

Trying hard to keep his laughter from escaping him, Isshin grins at his blonde-haired friend. "Don't ever say a Shiba man knows the word boring when taking their significant other out on a date."

Both men shut up quickly when the killing intent pouring off the Goddess of Flash is directed their way. When her companions are silent, Yoruichi states clearly into the phone. "Ichigo, I suggest you bring Rias back here immediately and bring Shaolin with you as well. You and I are going to have a discussion on the word 'discreet' when you get back!"

Rias's voice can be heard in the background then. "Are we in trouble Ichigo?"

"I am but I don't…"

"Oh, yes she is Ichigo. I will also be speaking to you and my daughter after your discussion with Yoruichi." Venelana says in a quiet voice, one that sends shivers up more than a few spines.

"Oh crap."

Yoruichi taps her finger on the table next to the phone. "Ichigo."

"Y-Yes Yoruichi?"

"Why aren't you here yet?"

The line goes dead as they hear him yelling to the two women with him. "We have to go now!"

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Ichigo transports himself, Rias and Suì-Fēng to the Great Dome of the Naberius Estate with a deep sense of dread for himself and Rias. The moment they arrive proves his gut feelings correct, when the chilly reception that greets them causes not only Rias to hide behind his back, it even causes the Shinigami Captain he brought back with them to take a half step backwards in awkwardness. Staring at him are three very angry women, Yoruichi, Venelana and his own assistant, Merti, who has murder in her eyes.

"I can…"

"Shut up." Holding her hand up, his Sensei glares at him, then utters the words he already knows he is going to hear. "Training dimension. Five minutes. GO!"

As he starts to leave with Rias, Venelana stops them both. "Rias, a word in private if you please."

"Yes Mother." Rias hastily kisses Ichigo on the cheek before walking to join her mother.

"Ichigo, after Yoruichi is done with you, I would also like to speak to you in private." The Gremory matriarch calmly states.

"Y-Yes Venelana." He gulps at his future mother-in-law.
Suî-Fēng is still standing at the same spot that she had appeared at, as Ichigo had instructed her to do before teleporting them to his home in the Underworld. Her eyes widen but she stands perfectly still as a huge Cerberus approaches her and sniffs her for a few moments, the lack of killing intent from it the only reason she manages to suppress her fight or flight instinct.

"May I have your name please?" Kane asks finally.

She blinks in surprise. "You can talk? I thought you were joking Kurosaki."

"I told you so." Ichigo calls back with a hint of sarcasm. "Kane this is Captain Suî-Fēng, Captain of Squad Two and the head of the Fon Clan in Soul Society. She is also a former student of Yoruichi and a few of us will vouch for her."

"Three minutes." Yoruichi interrupts calmly, though her eyes are glinting dangerously.

"C-Crap! Kane, I leave it to you, gotta go!"

As Ichigo disappears in a blur of Shunpo, the huge Cerberus turns back to Suî-Fēng. "Very well. You may pass. Captain Suî-Fēng, please allow me to welcome you to the main estate of the Naberius Clan."

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Rias hurries to her and Ichigo's room, hoping to change quickly out of her wet clothing before her mother and presumably her sister-in-law decide to destroy her hearing. As soon as she enters, she finds herself being surrounded by a group of females.

"Are you okay Buchou?" Akeno worriedly questions.

"Yes Akeno I'm fine. Ichigo and I were on a date." Heedless of her audience, she hurriedly pulls off her wet clothing and begins to towel herself dry.

"Ichi-nii took you out without telling us." His youngest sister asks incredulously.

"Yes Yuzu, we wanted a little privacy." Rias says with a hint of a blush at being caught by her soon to be little sister-in-law.

Orihime and Tatsuki both begin giggling then. "We all heard how that ended up over the phone. So what was it like being caught by the Captain of Squad Two?"

Pulling on a set of dry clothing the crimson-haired teen looks at Ichigo's Rook with wide eyes. "She is really scary when she is mad. I never heard anyone yell with such force like her."

"Oh you will see soon enough a second time Rias. Ladies if you don't mind, I have a few things to say to my daughter." A cold voice speaks up.

Everyone sees the older and more mature version of Rias standing in the door frame, her hands folded in front of her waiting for the others to leave. As the others hurriedly get up and start to leave the room, Venelana steps aside and returns each departing person's greeting with her own, but keeps her daughter's eyes trapped with her own gaze. Akeno is the last to leave, giving Rias's hand a sympathetic squeeze as she goes; once the door is closed behind her, the older Gremory woman makes her way to the bed and sits down with a huff.

Patting the place next to her, she speaks to her teenage daughter. "Come Rias, we should talk about what you did tonight and see to it that this doesn't happen again."
Rias does as her mother asks and meekly sits next to her on the bed, folding her hands in her lap and waiting for her chastisement. Although her secret date with Ichigo was very thrilling, on hindsight she realizes just how foolish and needlessly risky it was, especially in light of Ichigo's history with Soul Society and their previous orders to execute him.

"Rias, did you and Ichigo have fun?"

The teen looks to her mother in surprise then slowly nods her head, waiting for the yelling that has yet to start.

Patting her daughter's hand, the older woman simply sighs. "Rias, I know you are smart enough to understand what you did wrong. Both you and Ichigo need to understand that you can't simply disappear anymore. Both of you are the heirs to your Clans and if anything were to happen to either of you, we wouldn't know what to do or where to find you. I understand that you are his future wife and I don't begrudge you wanting to spend time alone with him, but we both have heard what Ichigo is capable of doing when those he cares for are harmed, and even more so when it is his own foolish actions that causes them harm. I'm sure you don't want to see him ever like that."

Rias ducks her head in shame. "I'm sorry Mother; we just haven't had much time to ourselves lately. He wanted to get away and I let him bring me because I wanted to spend time alone with him as well."

"Still, Soul Society?" The Gremory Matriarch points out. "Surely I don't need to explain why that is such a bad idea?"

Seeing the crestfallen look on her daughter's face, Venelana embraces Rias and rubs her back. "Next time at least tell Merti or Akeno what you two are doing; however, no more going to Soul Society. You were both really fortunate to be caught by someone who is sympathetic to Ichigo's plight; otherwise I dread to imagine what the consequences could have been. I think that you should talk to your brother tomorrow when Ichigo is gone with Orihime, he will tell you about the Pact the Underworld has with Soul Society and the rules that uphold it."

"Pact?" Rias stares at her with obvious confusion.

"Come now Rias, did you really think we aren't aware of the other races in the world? There are many more you have yet to meet my dear, so tomorrow I want you and your peerage to gain an audience with Sirzechs and ask him about the Pact."

"Yes Mother." She nods obediently, prompting another hug from her mother, one that she returns. Both mother and daughter sit in comfortable silence for a few moments.

"So, tell me how was it?"

"How was what Mother?"

"Your date with Ichigo? Did you get further this time?"

"Mother!"

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"You two are insane!" Ichigo screams out as he dodges the hits the two death gods are raining on him, hell-bent on kicking his ass from one side of the room to the other and back again.

The already irate Suì-Fēng sweeps viciously for his legs, while the just as irate Yoruichi sends
lightning-fast kicks towards his chest. Unable to escape their synchronized attacks, the Devil uses his chains to forcibly anchor himself to the ground and take the smaller Shinigami's leg sweep, while enduring Yoruichi's kicks to capture the leg of his mentor. Kicking Sui-Fēng in the face and sending her skidding back, he bodily tosses Yoruichi over his head before quickly Shunpoing to a safe distance to ready himself for their next assault.

"Not bad Berry-kun." The words come from behind him, and Ichigo instinctively dodges the head strike coming from the current Captain of Squad Two. Unfazed by her drop kick missing, Sui-Fēng twists in mid-air and drives her heel towards his groin, the eager light in her eyes telling him that she intends for it to connect with bone-crushing force.

Hurriedly shifting to take the attack on his thigh, he lashes out with an arm and manages to clip her with his fist, however it comes at the cost of not seeing Yoruichi flip on top of him and rabbit punching him in the back of the head, followed by Sui-Fēng kicking him in the stomach as she drops to one knee. Quickly setting up a Kidō barrier with Zangetsu's help, he takes the opportunity to punch Sui-Fēng right in the face before grabbing the smaller Captain's uniform top and flipping her around before bodily slamming her into the ground, then the shattering of his Kidō barrier warns him just in time to deflect the Shunkō powered punch aimed at his face. As soon as his hand phases through the wrist of the former Captain however, he realizes that it is only a speed clone, which doesn't help him when he is sent flying forward by the gale-force wind caused by Sui-Fēng's Shunkō-enhanced punch, followed again by Yoruichi's lightning-type Shunkō-enhanced kick that smashes him right back to the ground.

Standing to his feet and wiping the blood from his mouth as Yoruichi and Sui-Fēng land on either side of him, he looks at his two nemeses and knows that continuing to fight them will get them nowhere. "Okay, I get it you're pissed Yoruichi. I said I was sorry."

Yoruichi scowls at him then sends him a look of utter frustration. "Ichigo look. I'm not entirely mad at you for being in Soul Society; yes, it was an utterly moronic thing to do, but I'm actually rather proud that you snuck in there in the first place without getting caught..."

"I caught him. Twice." Sui-Fēng deadpans. "He's nowhere near as sneaky as he thinks he is, and it's pure luck that I was the one to find him rather than, say, Mayuri Kurotsuchi."

Ichigo ignores Sui-Fēng's mutterings and asks the more important question. "Then why the ass-kicking?"

"It's because you didn't tell anyone where you and Rias were going! Ichigo, you are the Naberius heir and she is the Gremory heir, both of you are nobility and you both have responsibilities to your clans and their futures, and your actions have consequences that go far beyond either of you. The simple life you envisioned once upon a time is over now; get that through your head! Soon you will be fighting for Rias's hand in marriage, and then after that you will have to start planning the rest of your 'human' life and then your life afterwards in the Underworld as her husband and the next to rule the Skeleton Tower Ichigo, and yet you decide to wander off to Soul Society of all places without a word to anyone and even bring her along with you! That is why I'm pissed Ichigo, you two could have been hurt or killed or worse and none of us would have even known what had happened to either of you, and all because you didn't bother to think your actions through!"

Ichigo bites down the urge to make a snappish retort like he usually would do. He pinches his own nose, thinking about his actions, and knowing Yoruichi is right. He didn't think his actions through; he just wanted to be alone with his girlfriend for a bit before he left for Lemnos with Orihime, then he remembered the hidden hot springs under Sōkyoku Hill and the fact that he can teleport freely now, and as they say the rest is history. Sighing as he reluctantly acknowledges that he did mess
up, that things could have gotten really bad if he was caught by someone other than Suì-Fēng, he looks at his mentor with a small frown on his face.

"I understand. It won't happen again Yoruichi. I'll make sure to tell Merti or someone in the peerage from now on where and who I'm with, and I'll make sure not to drag Rias anywhere where she can be put in potential danger."

Hearing the sincerity in his voice, Yoruichi finally powers down from her Shunkō state, followed somewhat reluctantly by Suì-Fēng who winces as her bruises make themselves known to her once more. Yoruichi grins at her former protégée then turns to Ichigo as her grin grows decidedly mischievous.

"Good. Now tell me Ichigo, did you get further with Rias?"

There is a shocked silence, then two enraged voices bellow in sync. "YORUICHI!"

"What? Her mother wants to know."

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Ichigo and Orihime stand side by side under the Great Dome the next morning, waiting for Ichigo's great-grandfather to bring him the gold and other items that might prove useful when bargaining with the Greek God Hephaestus. Orihime is talking to Tatsuki, who is going to have her first lesson as a Devil with Amyntas and Vincent's peerages after she and Ichigo leave. Everyone else is back in the World of the Living getting ready for school, along with Chad and Uryū who will be officially transferring to Kuoh Academy this week. Tatsuki however will be transferring next week after she has a bit of training and after seeing her parents once their memories have been changed.

Ichigo sees Venelana and Yoruichi walking in together, causing the young Devil to straighten up a bit more as he sees the women send him knowing smiles. As they approach him however, he swallows his apprehension and goes with what has been planned.

"Good morning Yoruichi, Okaa-san." He sees his Sensei's eyes widening at the title.

Venelana appears to take it in stride, though her eyes sparkle at his words. "Good morning son. I trust that you and Rias slept well last night."

"We did Okaa-san."

Yoruichi glances between the two of them. She senses something has passed between the two of them, but it's obvious that neither are going to talk about it right now. So she turns instead to Ichigo and places a hand on his shoulder.

"Come back safely Ichigo, protect your sister, and if you can't make a bargain with him, leave, don't force the issue. We'll find a different way to gain your Zanpakutō."

"I understand Yoruichi; I will protect her first, work on my Zanpakutō second."

Kissing him on his cheek, she moves to stand in front of the young woman. "Take care of yourself Hime, don't do anything rash and listen to your Onii-san. Stay safe and keep your wits about you, and do come home safely."

"Yes Yoruichi, I will." She smiles when the older Shinigami kisses her cheek too, then she throws her arms around Yoruichi in a warm hug instead.
"Time to go Hime. You ready?"

"Let's go Ichigo!" She fist pumps as she does a little jump of excitement, drawing laughter from their audience.

Tatsuki, Yoruichi and Venelana step away from Ichigo and Orihime as a magic circle appears under their feet; the two teens wave as they disappear, heading towards the island that may hold the final piece to Ichigo's life.

Tatsuki looks at the older two women. "Do you think they'll be okay?"

Venelana speaks then. "Don't worry Tatsuki-chan; they will be back before we know it. Come, I will escort you to your first lesson in using your magic."

As the peerages start to leave, Yoruichi stands there staring at the empty place Ichigo and Orihime used to be, until a hand touches her shoulder. Knowing who it is, she speaks without looking at the Devil. "Don't worry, he understands now Amyntas."

"Thank you Yoruichi."

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In an alleyway, a stray dog begins to whimper and tuck its tail between its legs as it smells the building charge in the air, then it begins running away while barking as a strange light fills the late morning air. Bluish flames form the outline of a magic circle that flashes briefly and brightly until it fades away. Standing in the middle of the lightly scorched outline are two individuals, one with orange hair and brown eyes, the other with burnt-orange hair and brown eyes. Quickly scanning their surroundings, the man places himself between the woman and their surroundings, then he relaxes when it appears that they have not been seen.

"I think we're good Orihime, no one was around when we came through." Ichigo says as he turns to his companion.

Her smile greets him as he looks down at her; stepping back, he moves out of the way so his adopted sister can get her first look of the Greek island. Both teens shift their small backpacks and move through the alley, heading towards the sounds of people coming from the busy street. Stepping out of the small alley, the two teens find themselves in the middle of a market area, with tourists browsing the shops and locals displaying their merchandise. Grabbing Orihime's hand, Ichigo guides her onto the sidewalk without releasing her hand; looking over his shoulder, he is glad he did so as her eyes are distracted by looking at everything they are passing by. Turning back to see where they are going, he remembers his uncle's instructions, walk three blocks to the right and look for a coffee shop. The owner is someone that he called a 'mediator'; from the snort Merti had given, she doesn't seem to think much of this person. She even warned him that morning to keep Orihime as close to him as possible, not to allow them to be separated no matter what.

"King, maybe we should tell her."

'I think so too. Yuzu and Karin would kill me if anything happens to her.'

"I see you forgot to mention Suki-chan."
'Didn't forgot, I know what she would do to me.' He turns to his companion.

"Orihime."

"Yes Ichigo?"

Stopping and pulling her into a small space between two shops, Ichigo keeps his back to the street as he tells his adopted sister what he knows. "Listen, Merti warned me that whoever it is I'm supposed to meet is a very questionable character. No matter what happens, don't leave my side. I don't care what happens; we don't leave each other's sights."

Seeing that he is serious, the healer agrees by nodding her head. Satisfied, the Shinigami-Devil steps back out onto the sidewalk and again takes her hand. Keeping her close to him, the two adopted siblings walk down the block that should have a small coffee shop in the middle of the row of family-owned shops. He almost misses it in fact; it is so small compared to the shops back home that it is only the smell of coffee beans that helps the two teens find the shop. Standing outside, they both give the other a look; both of them thinking that it is sort of creepy how dark the interior of the shop is despite the bright daylight outside.

"Keep a hold on me Hime."

"Okay Ichigo." Snaking her arm through his, she lets Ichigo walk them into the dim shop.

"Ah welcome to…" The woman's voice that greets them fades as she takes in the two teens, both foreigners judging by their clothes.

What puts the woman, Zera Argyros, on edge is the power coming from the young male adult. Her gift of reading auras had given her quite an advantage in earning a few 'extra fees' from those foolish enough to seek her help in guiding them to see the local deity. The young adult female with him is also no stranger to power, although hers is warm and soft compared to his; his aura is something she has never felt before, part of it she recognizes as Devil in nature, but it is masking something else that she cannot identify. Shaking her head, she begins her introduction again.

"Welcome to Menos Café. I am Zera, the proprietor."

The two stare at her for a few moments before the male speaks without a hint of an accent. "I am Ichigo Shiba; this is my…sister, Orihime Shiba. I was told I could get directions to speak to the local smithy."

Ichigo places a small bag on the counter near the woman, but he isn't oblivious to the strange look in the female proprietor's eyes when she studied both him and Orihime intently. What he isn't expecting is the slight hint of shock and recognition for a fraction of a second when she looks closer at him, Orihime she dismisses at first but after looking at him she ends up taking a second look at her. In his mind, Zangetsu is not in a happy mood, telling him something had brushed against their inner-world, but it is nothing more than a feeling he had gotten from the other woman.

"Are we in the right place?" Ichigo asks the woman, who blinks and focuses back on him once more.

"Ah, forgive me Mr. Shiba; I sometimes have an attention problem. Please, would you and your sister take a seat? I'll be right back with some tea."

Nodding, Ichigo guides his sister over to a table, keeping his back to the wall behind him and sitting beside her in such a way that if anything goes wrong, he can easily protect her from harm. As Zera turns her back to them, she can't help but feel a bit jealous of the girl; she is certain that the
girl isn't Ichigo's actual sister, but she'll soon find out who she is, and if Ichigo proves interesting, maybe he can provide her some 'entertainment' as well if he is willing.

Unaware of her thoughts, Ichigo none the less keeps watch on both herself and the door; when his sister tugs on his sleeve however, he looks over at her questioning face and asks what's wrong.

"When did you learn how to speak Greek?"

He looks confused by her question. "What? I was talking in Japanese Orihime, I only asked her if we were in the right place."

"No Ichigo, I didn't understand a word you said just now when you were speaking to her, she seems to understand and speak the same language that you do, but I don't know what language it is."

Before he can continue, Zangetsu speaks up suddenly. "**Might be a perk of the job King. May be a part of your Devil magic, instant language skills, how else could they travel the world and make contracts otherwise?**"

"Well that's nice to know, I just figured she spoke Japanese. Merti didn't mention to me that I would have this ability Zangetsu." Not realizing he had spoken out loud enough for Orihime to hear him.

"So do you think…I'll be the same when you reincarnate me Ichigo?" She asks him hopefully.

Ichigo frowns as he looks at Orihime. "Hime are you sure? I mean it, are you really sure of this? Once you do this, there is no going back, no Soul Society, no possibility of seeing our friends once they pass on. You will become a Devil and a member of my peerage forever Orihime."

"If Tatsuki did it and Chad is going to Ichigo, I can't leave them or you. If giving up my humanity is the price to pay, I am not afraid, not anymore. Ever since you became a Shinigami, my life has changed with yours and theirs. Besides, after being around the other Devils, I don't see them being as evil as they told me their ancestors once were. And you haven't changed either Ichigo, so I'm fine with becoming a part of your peerage."

She blushes red when he pulls her head forward and kisses her forehead before resting his head on it. "I want you to understand this now Orihime. You are now my sister, and I'll protect you always, but being a part of this Clan is going to require you to step into the Skeleton Tower. That is the place where the Damned souls are paying for their earthly sins. I don't want you to change even if you have to become one of their jailers, the person who has to literally oversee their punishments. Do you think you can do it?"

Grabbing his hand as she keeps herself from looking into his eyes, she admits her concerns to Ichigo. "It will be hard Ichigo, but…but if they are there, then they must deserve to be there. I know it will take time and maybe I'll never really get used to it, but leaving you, Tatsuki and the twins behind isn't an option anymore for me. Otou-san told me once that family is the most important thing to us, so if my family lives in the Underworld, then that is where I belong, with you and with them."

He laughs ruefully at her conviction. "You're crazy, you know this?"

Giggling, she pulls away slightly as she realizes the woman from earlier is approaching their table. "At least the little green men aren't responsible this time."
Zera returns to their table with a tray bearing a pot of tea and three cups; placing the cups in front of the two teens, she pours their drinks first and hers after that. Sitting across from them, she motions to the two teens to drink, then watches in bemusement as the one named Ichigo places a hand on top of the girl's cup before sniffing his cup first. After a few seconds, he removes his hand and takes a sip, then nods to the girl who finally begins to drink from her own cup of tea.

"Don't trust me Ichigo?" She asks with a smile.

Grinning back at her, his next comment throws her for a loop. "Merti said you might do something rash, so I had to make sure."

"Merti sent you? That's a name I haven't heard in decades. What were you going to accomplish by simply sniffing my tea if I may ask?" Her tone is suddenly more cautious.

Tapping his nose, he answers her. "You'd be surprised by this, I can smell that you aren't human completely, I can also smell the sea strongly in you, so I'm guessing Mermaid or some other water dwelling Yōkai. Merti didn't tell me much other than that you are exiled to this island and you are the person that sends Hephaestus his potential clients."

Leaning back, she studies the boy and girl even closer, then finally decides to answer him truthfully. "I am part Empusa, Nereid and human. My mother was half Empusa and half Nereid, while my father was a powerful psychic from Japan who met my mother, fell in love and married her. I gained his gift of reading auras, which is how I vet potential clients: for example, yours is somewhat muddled, but I can tell you are at least part Devil. She however is something new to me, her power is immense, but it's being held back by her nature. Is she a pacifist?"

"My sister's power is beyond what most could even comprehend." Ichigo replies with a smirk.

Tapping her fingers on the table, she subtly makes a move towards his hand, only for him to move it away just as quickly. The girl beside Ichigo narrows her eyes at Zera's actions, then says something she recognizes as the language Yasaka had removed her ability to speak and understand when she was exiled from Japan. Laughing lightly, Zera moves her hand back.

"Your 'sister' is a bit jealous Ichigo. Are you sure she isn't something more to you?"

The air grows heavy around the Yōkai woman, trapping her in heavy weaves of invisible cloth. The girl looks confused, then frowns at Ichigo until he speaks to her again, at which point a red tint seeps into her cheeks and she snaps her head back at Zera with wide eyes, before speaking rapidly to Ichigo. After what feels like an eternity but is likely less than a minute, Zera feels the air returning to normal; gasping immediately for air, she clutches her chest with a trembling hand while staring at the two teens with a hint of fear.

"What was that?"

"Don't make assumptions about her again. And to answer your inquiry, she is my adopted sister. Now can we discuss the reason we are here?"

Folding her hands, she keeps them flat on the table to keep them from shaking. Whatever it is that Ichigo did, the Yōkai blood in her is screaming for her to run, but she has a duty to the old god, so she stills her fear as best she can while remaining seated at the table.

"My apologies Ichigo. So, you wish to see Hephaestus. I can guide you for a price."

"How much?"
Gulping slightly, she decides to push her luck just one more time despite knowing how badly she is outclassed by him. "Not money Ichigo, I require something more than that. I require some of your life force, you see as I said my mother was a Nereid and Empusa, we do feed off strong souls to help keep us alive. I promise I won't take much."

For a long minute his eyes glaze over as he stares at her, until she is almost certain he is no longer looking at her. Slowly waving her hand in front of his eyes, she turns to the girl and sees she is drinking her tea, not even paying the slightest bit of attention to their conversation.

"When is he going to answer me?" She asks her curiously.

The girl looks at her in confusion, then smiles back at her.

"What don't you…ah, that's right, you aren't a Devil." Frowning, Zera turns back to Ichigo, only to see a sight that nearly causes her to leap back from her seat in fright.

"So, you want a piece of our soul do you Empusa? Well, I can tell you that's not a good idea; you see, I would have to kill you and before you ask, she's off limits as well, Ichigo would tear you apart for just thinking it. So, our souls aside, tell me how much we really need to pay you now?" Ichigo's eyes have turned black and gold, his expression decidedly sinister as he leers at her.

"W-What?" It takes Zera but a moment to sense the difference in Ichigo's aura, and the sheer darkness present in it has her gripping the edge of the table to keep herself from escaping in fear. "Who... no, what are you!?"

Those black and gold eyes seem to appraise her mockingly. "Don't you seem curious? Its best you forget about us once you tell us what we need to know and we leave. Safer for you if you did so anyway. So, what do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Confused, and more than a little terrified by his words, Zera hurriedly nods her head, wanting nothing more to do with whatever the young man Ichigo has transformed himself into.

Looking satisfied, Ichigo turns to the girl beside him, who yelps at first before blushing when his strange double tremble voice speaks to her. Orihime's smile only grows as they speak for a few moments before she looks over at Zera expectantly, and Zera gives her an incredulous look at her lack of reaction to her brother's transformation.

"As he said, it would be best to tell us what we need to know and then forget about us." Ichigo speaks up again, gaining the woman's attention as she realizes that his eyes and voice are back to normal. His aura no longer radiates the darkness of his transformed state, and considering Ichigo seems to refer to it as a separate entity...

"Just who or what was that?" She asks again, trying to make sense of what she has just seen.

"Forget about him, now how do we find Hephaestus?"

Sensing that her questions are going nowhere and not daring to push her luck any further, Zera takes a deep breath to calm her shaky nerves, suppressing her fear as much as she can, then she gets up and walks briskly back into her office. Grabbing paper and a pen, she returns to the table and quickly draws a map for the two teens, listing both an address and a time.

"At exactly seven fourteen P.M. local time, a symbol will appear, knock twice on the door and step back. Deviate from that, and you will have to wait until tomorrow to try again." She informs them curtly. "Beyond that the meeting is out of my hands."
Ichigo looks at her for a long moment, then nods. "Thanks. Here by the way, Merti said to give this to you when we got what we wanted."

Zera says nothing as he places another small sack on the table to match the first one, then stands up to leave. When he and his sister are almost at the entrance however, she is unable to refrain from asking one last question.

"Ichigo Shiba, what are you really? You aren't just an ordinary Devil are you? That transformation just now, I know from your aura that it is a part of you, but you refer to it as a separate being... Just what is it really?"

Ichigo pauses in the doorway, but he doesn't look back. "Like he said, just forget us Zera-san, we don't exist."

With that, the young man guides his sister out of her coffee shop and they disappear quickly within the crowd. Staring after them for a long moment, Zera finally picks up the two sacks of coins, then she walks over to the counter and drops them into a safe that is hidden away by a magic partition.

"So that is Hephaestus's new customer, a very young Devil by the feelings I got, don't you think so Mom?" A young female voice speaks up with a hint of smugness.

Her heart sinking, Zera glances at the door and sees her youngest daughter standing there. "Zeva, stay away from him, he's too dangerous."

"I don't think so Mom. I felt his power; while it is pretty dark, it gave no hints of evil intent, and I could even sense warmth to his power when it wrapped itself protectively around the girl as soon as you mentioned his relationship to her. Such a glaring weakness, it won't take long for me to get him under my thumb."

"Zeva, I know what you are thinking, but don't. I don't think you'll survive this time if you try anything with him and his sister."

"Don't worry Mother, he might be a Devil but I know how to get what I want despite the risks." Her teenage daughter saunters away, already placing phone calls to her associates. Zera slumps against the counter in despair, her invisible shackles preventing her from interfering with her daughter's plans despite knowing what is about to happen.

'That's what I'm afraid of Zeva, you don't know the risks this time.'

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Watching as the girl begins to follow their targets, the first dark-skinned teenage looking woman turns to the other.

"What do we do sis?"

"You follow her, I'll follow him. Keep your distance and if anything goes wrong, leave no witnesses."

"I guess this why she wanted us here yesterday huh?"

"She knew what the exile might try, but this is unexpected."

Following behind the older teen from the café, the first young woman dials a number and speaks when it is answered. "He is being followed by Zeva Argyros."
Pausing until the other party finishes speaking, she gives an affirmative and closes her phone. "Foolish girl, I pray you aren't that stupid."

Zeva smirks as she watches the two foreigners sit at a semi-secluded spot near the beach; looking at the next table, she can see three of the four local human males she had called to help her already seated there. Knowing what is going to happen to the orange-haired girl doesn't cause her any discomfort, it's just the price for her victims to pay for her feed. Soon the leader of the quartet joins her as she motions to the table the two foreigners are sitting at.

"I don't care what you do to her, he is mine. Make sure their bodies can't be found once we are done."

"Of course, Zeva. She'll provide us with lots of fun, the boys will be happy with that one."

"I'll call when I'm finished with him."

"Right."

The man leaves to join his friends sitting at the table next to the couple, Zeva sees him keep his face straight even when the boy sends him a glare when he is caught checking out the girl's body as he gets closer. The girl must have said something to the boy as the scowl became a frown before he smiles at her last words to him.

Ichigo shakes his head with a smile after Orihime tells him that no 'ordinary' boy would be able to hold her attention, not after seeing the likes of Renji, Toshiro and the other Shinigami, plus Chad and Uryū, she feels her future love would have to be someone from the Afterlife or even a Devil to make the slightest of impressions. Besides, she knows whoever it will be, has to pass muster with him and their other friends anyways. Getting him to smile, he can't help but feel that his old man has made the right decision by bringing her into the Shiba Clan for the sake of the twins.

"Oh, darn it, she forgot our honey Ichigo." Orihime pouts as she looks at their tray of food.

Looking down at their food as well, he chuckles when he sees plenty of condiments but no honey. "I'll get you some Orihime, be right back."

Seeing her sheepishly pausing as she chews her food, he sends her a smile before getting up and walking over to the window they had ordered their food from. Just barely able to see Orihime from here, he stands behind a couple waiting for their order; glancing at his watch, he sees that they have plenty of time to go before they have to head to the specified address on the map. The place is in an older neighborhood, and the house itself is in a semi-secluded spot just up a nearby hill overlooking the Aegean Sea. Stepping forward after the young couple finishes their order, he freezes when he feels Orihime's Reiatsu spike briefly, but when he turns around he sees a young woman standing in his way.

"Excuse me." He makes to move past her when her hand grabs his arm.

"Don't worry about her, if you do what I want, she'll be returned to you alive." The young woman's smug tone of voice immediately sends ice shooting down his spine, followed by white hot fury.

"King, don't do anything foolish! If you go off the handle, you will expose us to Soul Society! Just get her somewhere quiet and then we'll show this bitch how she truly fucked up."
Breathing fast and tight to control his anger and knowing Zangetsu is right, that Soul Society would find out he isn't sealed and come looking for him, his family and his friends if he acts carelessly here, Ichigo glares at the woman, who looks somewhat similar to the woman at the café. Stepping into her personal space, he growls out to the older teen.

"If even one hair is out of place, you will suffer unlike anything you can imagine."

Patting his cheek confidently, the woman smirks at him without a hint of fear in her eyes. "Now, now big boy, just follow me and this will be over shortly. As for her, don't worry, they will only hold on to her to keep you from doing anything stupid to me. Now follow like a good boy, to somewhere a little bit more private."

Following the woman, he stops to grab his and Orihime's backpacks, plus his last piece of luggage. Tempting as it is to pull the Asauchi out and kill her right there, he listens to the constant stream of calming words from Zangetsu, with Orihime's safety depending on him to keep his cool and think clearly, he has to bide his time for an opportune moment. Scanning the narrow alleyway, they are currently walking down now, he comes to the conclusion that the buildings on either side of them are deserted. Smirking at that realization, he suddenly rushes the older teen in front of him and grabs her by the hair, shoving her head hard against the door frame of the nearest empty building to stun her, then quickly stifling her screams with his free hand as he drops the bags and kicks the door shut with his foot while grabbing and lifting her by her throat with a crushing grip.

"Five seconds, that's all I will give you before I start tearing you apart!" His eyes and voice are changing even as he keeps her feet dangling off the ground.

Struggling against his hand, Zeva's eyes begin to bulge in panic as she realizes not only is he far stronger than her, she is unable to drain his energy the way she does to her usual victims. As his fingers slowly constrict around her throat, the darkness of his aura flares with killing intent that roars around her now, causing her to kick ineffectually against him.

"Let…go…fool! If…I don't…contact soon…they will…kill her!"

Furious black and golden eyes narrow as he tightens his grip even more. "Wrong thing to say bitch! Now you are down to four, three, two, and…"

"Stop Lord Ichigo!" The door to the abandoned house is kicked wide open, and a dark-skinned teen with sea-blue eyes and black hair beneath a low-brimmed hat rushes in to kneel before him while glaring at the woman in his grip. "Please don't do this Lord Ichigo! She's Yōkai, there are rules even we Devils must abide by, so please allow us to handle her punishment! I assure you that we will deal with her harshly, but we cannot execute her without trial. Please Lord Ichigo, please let her down."

Ichigo frowns at her. "Who are you?" If she hadn't knelt before him, he would have thought her an enemy and attacked her already, but her actions had thrown him off enough that he is willing to hear what she has to say. The woman slowly takes off the hat she is wearing, and he sees an all too familiar sight pop into view, a pair of Elf ears.

"I am Nia Mai'ryl, Lord Ichigo. Aunt Merti sent us to watch over you and Lady Orihime; we have been here since yesterday. Please, can you let her down now? My sister is following Lady Orihime as we speak, she will not come to any harm, I promise you that." Her eyes show nothing but honest sincerity, and Ichigo scowls as he makes his decision.

Dropping the Yōkai in his grip roughly to the floor, Ichigo's hands close so tightly that blood seeps from his fists. Gritting his teeth, he squats in front of the gasping teen. "I don't care what she
says, if Orihime has been harmed in any way, and by that I mean if she has even been touched in any way I deem inappropriate, you will wish your mother had never laid eyes on your father."

Struggling to breathe, the teen slowly reaches into her pocket and brings out a phone. "Let me call them…Oomppp!"

Before she can even press a button, the new arrival swiftly moves behind her and knocks her out. Grabbing the phone, she rips it apart and pulls out a chip from the wreckage before crushing it.

"W-What are you doing!?" Ichigo screams as he rounds on the Elf, his shock at her sudden actions costing him those few precious seconds to react.

"Keeping Lady Orihime safe Milord. Zeva is a mixed-breed Yōkai, not a pure-blood, and she has been suspected of a host of similar crimes, though lack of evidence has prevented the European Yōkai faction from acting on it. Thanks to that, if she is tied to any crime committed against someone of nobility, her life is immediately forfeit. Lady Orihime is nobility by both the standards of Soul Society and the Underworld; she is the sister of Lord Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius. You. Now that Zeva has been caught red-handed kidnapping and attempting to…"

The Elf is forced to cut off her explanation as her chains hurriedly rise up to deflect Ichigo's attempt to spear the prone woman with his own chains.

"PLEASE LORD ICHIGO! LET US HANDLE THIS! LADY ORIHIME WILL BE SAFE, I PROMISE YOU!"

"Out of my way Nia. You said she's been suspected of doing this before, so Orihime isn't her first target. She will pay for every person she has ever targeted, successfully or not." Death is clear in his voice and his eyes reflect the same threat.

"She will, but not here I swear it! Mother and Aunt will deal with her, you however have something you must do before you can return home Lord Ichigo. Now please trust us Lord Ichigo, I promise Zeva will be dealt with and no harm will come to your sister!"

Ichigo growls at she brings up his Lordship again, but knows it is her way of reminding him that his actions will affect his newfound family. "Your sister, her name."

"Her name is Kimi."

"How do we find them then?"

Raising her right hand, a small swallow appears in her hand. "My familiar can find her in a matter of seconds since we are close by."

Scowl in place, he glares at the unconscious teen who is the cause of his fury. "I'll trust you for now, but if Hime gets hurt…"

"No need to say anything Lord Ichigo, I understand. But I have a small request to make however."

He narrows his eyes at her. "What kind of request?"

"Aunt Merti says you know Kidō." Pointing at their unconscious prisoner, Nia elaborates. "Can you tie her up?"
An evil smile forms on Ichigo's face as he raises his hand and points it at the unconscious teen Yōkai. "Bakudō Number Four: Hainawa."

Watching the golden energy chain wrap tightly around the other woman's body, Nia speaks without thinking. "Must come in handy when Lady Rias gets out of line in the bedroom when you're 'playing.'" She mumbles.

Ichigo gapes, his anger evaporating at the random comment, even his inner Zanpakutō sputters out in disbelief at the off-handed remark coming from the Elfin teen.

"Are you serious!?!" To his horror, he realizes his face is covered by a deep-red blush. "I've... we've... I'd never...!"

Giggling at his discomfort, Nia kneels down by a window and sends her familiar on its way but casts a teasing glance over her shoulder. "Sorry Lord Ichigo, Lady Yoruichi's teasing must be rubbing off on us... still, it's something to keep in mind don't you think?"

Groaning at she begins giggling again, Ichigo can only palm his blushing face.

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Orihime tries not to fidget in the moving car; the four men by her table had grabbed her so quickly that she didn't even have time to make a sound before they forced her down a set of stairs, the other diners sitting too far away to react to her abrupt kidnapping. She felt the sharp point of a knife poking her in the ribs to keep her quiet as the strange men forcefully led her to a waiting car and shoved her in. Sitting in the middle of the back seat, two men on either side of her, Orihime tries to remain calm, knowing that she's not as helpless as she seems to be; she also knows that Ichigo can find her much more easily now that his powers have changed, and if she is lucky he will return and deal with her kidnappers before she has to do anything. Deciding to relax and wait for Ichigo's arrival, she sits there humming a tune as she watches the landscape passing her by, unaware of the conversation going on around her.

"What's with the girl? She isn't screaming or fighting us at all. Something's not right here Alexis."

"Doesn't matter Etor, Zeva has her boy-toy, we get to have our fun with this one. I'm going the first round with this one."

"Yeah, whatever. But still, it's creepy Stephon. She just got kidnapped and she acts like she is being given a tour. Gotta wonder what's going on in that head of hers?"

Attis, the driver swings the car into a driveway as he voices his opinion. "Who cares, just look at her. I bet she's real fresh." The four males begin laughing as they pull up to a house.

Opening the door at the front of the house, Alexis grabs the unnaturally quiet girl's arm and pulls her out roughly with him. His face shows his puzzlement as the girl still refuses to utter a sound, even when he roughly pushes her through the front door and up a flight of stairs to a small landing. His three accomplices follow close behind them, exchanging smirks and looks of anticipation. Opening a bedroom door and shoving her in, she stands with her back to the wall and looking at the four of them, that is until Alexis begins to take his shirt off and points at her to do the same.

She stares uncomprehendingly at him, but finally reacts when he begins to unbutton his pants; fisting her hands in her skirt, she says something none of them understand. It doesn't matter to them however; they see her face and her anger, and Alexis feels the rush in him as he knows the girl finally understands now what is going to happen to her. Deciding to put the bitch in her place, he
raises his open hand to slap her.

"Koten Zanshun!"

His world briefly explodes in agony, followed by a searing pain at his forearm. His eyes stare uncomprehendingly at the bleeding stump of the arm he had intended to hit the bitch with, the cries of shock coming from his mates sounding like they are coming from a distance.

Eyes hard and unyielding, Orihime calls Tsubaki back to her as her would-be rapist sinks to the floor in agony while clutching his bleeding stump, her anger briefly raging when she realizes what these men were planning to do with her. She also has a sinking feeling that these men were probably not going to let her live after they were done raping her; Tatsuki had sat her down one day and forced her to read through a long list of news reports, each of them containing the details of missing or murdered young women and their known or suspected circumstances of death or disappearance. It was horrifying just how many of them were raped before being murdered, and the number of missing women whose fates are still unknown leaves even worse to her imagination. Although she had never expected herself to be placed in such a situation, she had trained for this possibility with Tatsuki's help, and her six tiny friends ensure that she will never have to deal with kidnappers alone.

The man whose hand she had amputated screams something out she doesn't understand, but she figures it out anyway when his three accomplices start to move towards her. Before she can decide how to respond, the window behind her suddenly explodes inward, showering the room with shrapnel and causing all four males to scream in agony as the shards of glass somehow rain down only on them. Instinctively raising her shield to protect herself, Orihime glances at the window and wonders if it is Ichigo; she knows how angry he is probably going to be, and she is worried that he will do something reckless like try to climb in through the broken window. However, it is brown skin and a black ponytail that she sees, the person flipping in through the window wasting next to no effort in attacking and subduing the three standing men before they can even mount a defense, then kicking in the face of the already-disarmed man to knock him out too. Standing up before her, Orihime sees a teen wearing a pair of tight black pants and an even tighter tank top under a loose jacket, but when she sees the ears, she can't help but squeal out in recognition.

"You're an Elf!"

Smiling at her, the Elf laughs at her exclamation.

"That's the first thing you say to me Lady Orihime, you're an Elf?"

"Ah!" Orihime hits the side of her head lightly. "I'm sorry…"

"No harm done." The Elf giggles. "Kimi Mai'ryl at your service, Lady Orihime, I'm here at Aunt Merti's instructions."

Giggling as well, Orihime activates her healing shield around the Elf, removing the few cuts she had gotten from entering through the window. Glancing at the still bleeding stump of her would-be rapist's wrist, Orihime drops the shield and turns to him, only for Kimi to quickly place a hand on her arm and gently but firmly shake her head no.

"Lady Orihime, please don't heal him."

Confusion reigns on the healer's face as she looks at the Elfin teen. "Why?"

Frowning down at the human man, she answers the teen truthfully. "This is unlikely to be the first
time they have kidnapped someone; their actions were far too practiced for that. I'm glad you kept a calm head until you reached this place, their hideout, that way we can dig up more information on these kidnappers without having to bring them back for interrogation. Aunt Merti will be here soon to decide their fates."

Orihime blanches at the implications of that statement, then a look of horror crosses her face as her compassion as a healer wages a war with her feelings at almost becoming one of their victims. Shaking her head in confusion, she steps back from the young Elfin woman. "I…I don't want them to die Kimi! But, but they…"

The Elf gives her a look of understanding. "Please stop Lady Orihime. This is out of our hands; Aunt Merti is in charge of not only Lord Ichigo's safety but also yours and the others until your training is finished. She has complete discretion in these matters."

Almost as if on cue, a swallow flies in through the open window and lands on Kimi's out-stretched hand. Whispering in a language that sounds like music to Orihime, the healer watches as the bird flies away again.

"That was a message from my sister; both she and Lord Ichigo will be here in a few minutes Milady; we should wait outside for them."

Nodding sadly, Orihime makes to step over the one-armed man but squeaks in shock when his remaining hand suddenly clamps around her ankle. Looking down reflexively, she sees his face contorted with rage, flecks of spit flying from his mouth as he screams profanities at her and nearly trips her if it were not for Kimi grabbing her arm and steadying her.

"Give me a moment Milady." Stepping forward, the Elf stomps down on the man's arm, the audible crack from his forearm breaking followed by a pained scream as the man loses his grip on her ankle. Kimi then swings her foot to kick the man in his stomach, the force of the blow pushing him back almost to the wall before he flops into a boneless heap, puking over himself and the floor.

"A-Ah, thanks…Kimi?"

The Elf turns to her. "I'm sorry you had to witness that Lady Ori…"

"Orihime." The Shun Shun Rikka user says to the Elf with an embarrassed smile. "Please, just Orihime, Kimi."

"I didn't wish to speak to you so familiarly…Orihime, but if Lord Ichigo's scowls whenever anyone does the same with him means anything, I shouldn't be surprised that you feel the same way. Are your friends like that as well?"

"It goes for them too Kimi." Orihime affirms, then she and the Elf step outside while avoiding the puking male, leaving the bedroom door open and proceeding down the stairs to the more spacious living room.

Soon a magic circle forms beside them, and as Orihime turns to greet the newcomers, she has no time to react before she finds herself in Ichigo's arms.

"Are you okay? Did they hurt you? Did they touch you? Tell me what they did and I swear they'll pay Hime!"

"Calm…calm down Ichi-nii." Blushing furiously, she tries to pull away but can't as his hands immediately latch onto her arms and he stares into her face, anxiously looking for any injuries. "I wasn't hurt, Kimi saved me."
"Saved her?" The Elf pipes up. "I barely reacted in time after she cut off the one fool's hand. Surprising really, Aunt Merti said Orihime has a gentle disposition...I was originally planning to teleport in behind them and knock them out, but with her attack I had to come in through the window instead."

Ichigo finally snorts, relief evident on his face as smirks at his adopted sister proudly. "Hime while not certified, is a black-belt due to Tatsuki's training, and she has her Shun Shun Rikka protecting her as well. Honestly, she isn't defenseless at all, she just hates hurting people even if they are enemies. Something we will talk about when we get back home, right now."

Three heads snap at him, and Orihime overrides the two sisters before they can speak. "No, we aren't Ichigo! We came here to fix Zangetsu, and that's what we are doing. It's not late yet, so we still have time to make it there. So, no, we are not leaving Ichigo."

Ichigo glares at her. "Orihime! Those men were going to…"

Placing a finger on his lips to shush him, she gives him a knowing look. "I can guess what they were planning Ichigo, but I also knew you would come and all I had to do was hold them off. In the worst-case scenario, I would have escaped by using Santen Kesshun. But I didn't have to, and it seems Merti-san has a better sense of planning than either of us had expected. So, what's done is done, we're both safe now, so let's go get your Zanpakutō fixed."

Staring into her brown eyes and seeing her sincerity, Ichigo can only shake his head in frustration before glancing up the stairs. Before he can take a step towards the kidnappers, he is blocked by both Orihime and Kimi.

"Forgive me…Ichigo, but I will send word to Aunt Merti. You and Orihime should get moving if you are going to make it by today. Nia will stay with you, and when you get there, she will wait for your return. I'll clean up this place and keep watch over that one as well." Pointing at the still bound and unconscious Zeva being guarded by Nia.

Looking at the young Elf who is clearly a twin to the one had who brought him here, the only difference being her violet eyes, he asks as he gestures towards the upstairs bedroom. "Did you... make my displeasure known to them?"

Knowing what he means, she smirks and nods her answer to him. She then yelps when she finds herself in his hug being thanked profusely.

"It…it's just my duty Ichigo." She stammers, unused to this treatment.

Orihime and Nia giggle when they see Kimi's darkening cheeks and her frantic looks in their direction. "Ichigo, we should get going." The burnt-orange haired teen takes pity on her new friend and calls Ichigo over to her side.

Pulling away, Ichigo nods his head in thanks again and glares at Zeva, who is now slowly sitting up on the floor with a pained and disoriented expression on her face. Grabbing their bags and his blank Asauchi, Ichigo leads Orihime out of the house with Nia falling into step behind them.

Watching as her sister leaves with their young Lord and his sister, Kimi pulls out her phone and dials her aunt, giving her a quick report on the situation; she then listens to the instructions coming from the other side and closes her phone after giving her goodbye. Turning to face Zeva, she hardens her face as she speaks to the bound Yōkai teen.

"I won't lie to you Zeva Argyros; this will not end well for you. Aunt Merti is coming here herself
as well as two others; one of them cares deeply for Ichigo and his sister. As for the four upstairs, their lives are forfeit. This isn't the first time they have done this, I glanced inside the closest when Orihime wasn't looking and saw the evidence. You didn't plan on letting either of them live did you?"

"What does it matter?" Zeva replies back snidely.

"It matters because it will determine how much you are made to suffer. I have only one thing to ask? What did you think you were doing, going after a Devil noble?"

She is gratified to see the arrogant hybrid's face turn white. "H-His power, but I didn't think he was a noble, I thought he was only a servant..?"

Pinching her nose, she can only sigh at the girl's stupidity. "Your mother and younger brother are going to be devastated by this Zeva. She paid for her crimes long ago, why did you not learn from her?"

The hybrid glares at her again, and Kimi knows she has struck a nerve. "My mother and brother are weak! All my mother does is skim from those seeking Hephaestus, and all my brother wants to be is like our father. Me, I felt his power, I wanted it, I deserve it!"

Shaking her head, the Elf stares at the bound Yōkai teen without a shred of pity. "And that arrogance is why you are here now, bound, your life forfeit. Your own mother knew not to incite him, but you thought otherwise and now it will cost you and your accomplices your lives; I only regret we weren't able to deal with your group sooner."

Ignoring the curses and screams coming from Zeva, Kimi walks back into the bedroom and makes sure the kidnappers are still incapacitated, before opening the closet door. All the proof she needs of their crimes are tossed haphazardly inside, and the moment she clearly saw the first few photos earlier, she already wished she hadn't. Swallowing down her anger, she steps back and kicks the disarmed man one more time, this time in his groin, before looking around for a duffle bag or suitcase to store the evidence in. Finding a large hiking backpack in the room next door, she goes back and piles all the photos and any portable drives and discs she finds in the closet into it. Going back next door, she unplugs the PC from the power socket then she opens it and removes both hard drives and places them into the backpack too. A more thorough search of that room yields nothing more of interest, and the third bedroom has nothing in it at all, much like the rest of the house; it is bare and shows little evidence of being lived in.

'House must be where they bring their victims, not where they live.'

Despite that, she goes over the rest of the house carefully, searching for any more clues or hidden caches, even making a cursory search of the grounds outside, before making her way back to where her now exhausted prisoner sits waiting.

Soon a magic circle appears and a much more mature version of Kimi appears before them; Merti Longoak stares down at the bound Zeva, before turning and saying something in a low voice to the two women behind her. The shorter one growls lowly, while the other woman's face remains neutral. Kimi points upstairs indicating where the other kidnappers are, then watches as her aunt and the two Shinigami make their way up the stairs before stepping into the bedroom, not bothering to close the door behind them. She watches Zeva flinch when three quick thumps sound out in succession, along with the brief screaming and cursing of the fourth male before his voice is silenced permanently. The trio of women exit the room again, and she can see Zeva's wide eyes as the three women nonchalantly clean the blood off of their weapons before tossing the blood-stained shirt back inside the room. Coming down the stairs again, Merti points at Zeva, and the
Yōkai girl starts struggling as she is harshly lifted to her feet by Kimi and dragged to the center of the room, where the three older women join them.

Nearly crying in panic as the reality of her situation finally hits her, as the magic circle forms under her feet, Zeva almost swears she sees her mother's tear-stained face looking in through a window.

'I guess you were right Mom, I did choose the wrong Devil.'

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Ichigo looks back when a loud explosion echoes through the air, Nia saying nothing as he spots the trail of smoke beginning to billow into the sky from the direction they had left a while ago. Ichigo glances at her in shock and she just minutely inclines her head to his unspoken question; he pales slightly, but says nothing in return and faces forward again. Orihime on the other hand keeps her eyes resolutely forward; she knows what may have happened, but doesn't want to find out, and Ichigo's hand grabbing hers keeps her focus on walking away. But both of them can't help looking back when suddenly they hear a sound unlike anything they have ever heard before; turning around, they stare wide-eyed as something massive forms above the smoke.

Two huge doors, visible even from this distance, chained shut and adorned with two half skeletons whose white bandaged skulls adorn each of the doors, their torsos on either side with their arms positioned at an angle to pull the gates open on command. As the Gates slowly creak open, they notice two thick ropes with charms attached to them preventing them from opening fully. Through the gap, they see the face and left arm, both covered in tribal markings, that adorn a large demonic creature that is peeking out from behind the Gates, armor plating its upper arm that is wielding a large blade. Reaching through the gap with its blade, the demonic creature skewers something, then pulls it back into Hell through the Gates with spine-chilling laughter. Four times it repeats the action, then the Gates close and the entire massive structure cracks and crumbles into nothing, leaving behind just the smoke from the burning building.

"I-Ichigo?" Orihime's fearful voice alerts him to the painfully tight grip she has on his hand.

"It's out of our hands Hime." He replies, squeezing her hand back tightly.

Nia speaks up then. "Four souls were taken to Hell, the four human males who kidnapped Orihime. Zera is still alive however; punishment for Yōkai is different from humans. Various treaties are in place, so she will be taken back and we will contact the one who will deal with it. I'm sure Yasaka will happily deliver justice for the crimes Zera has committed, besides I think she will take your words into account since you did have a 'date' with her daughter."

Ichigo and Orihime both freeze but for different reasons, Ichigo being stupefied by her suggestive words, and Orihime thinking Ichigo did something he should be ashamed of.

"Wha...what the hell are you talking about Nia!? I never dated anyone but Rias dammit!"

"Oh, did you forget your time in Kyoto with your uncle already Ichigo? I'm sure Kunou will be heartbroken you feel that way..."

"Ichigo! Did you really cheat on Rias-san!?"

"No I didn't! Rias knows about what happened! And Kunou is just a kid... wait dammit, I am not some kind of pervert!"

Nia sneakily adds just a bit more fuel to the fire. "I understand that Yōkai practice polygamy Ichigo, so if you wait just a few more years..."
"SHUT UP DAMMIT!"

Walking behind the trio, a woman of ageless beauty and grace feels a tug pulling at her lips as she replays the memory of them disposing of some of the vermin in her brother's town. For far too long the rebellious Yōkai teen and her human allies had preyed upon the innocent who were seeking to enjoy Lemnos; the Yōkai's mother had been forbidden to intervene after the last incident. The Fates had determined Zeva would not change no matter how many chances she was given, so her fate was to be determined by her next actions.

Naturally, Zeva squandered her last remaining chance, and now she will be sentenced by the Underworld and the Japanese Kitsune of Kyoto.

'Now to see what makes this Devil so special.'

Ichigo stands before the door, waiting for the symbol to appear before knocking, Orihime standing just behind him while Nia is watching them from her hiding spot in an abandoned barn across from the small hut-like home. At exactly seven fourteen P.M. local time, the symbol appears and Ichigo knocks the required amount of times and steps back to stand next to his sister. Both wait anxiously for a few moments until they hear the door slowly creaking open. Stepping from the light that is emitted from within the home is a middle-aged woman, slightly hunched with dirty blonde hair and dull grey eyes.

"May I help you young sir, madam?"

Pulling out the scroll and a small bag from his backpack, Ichigo hands the items to the woman who carefully opens and reads the document. Stepping back inside, she waves for them to follow her inside. Ichigo pulls Orihime slightly behind him as he enters first, Zangetsu increasing his eyesight and hearing to adjust to the now darkening interior. The woman never stops until she is standing at a door at the back of the house and waits for them to stand behind her.

"This way." Before he can wonder where they are going, he and Orihime both gasp when they find themselves staring into a brightly lit and hot cavern after the door opens, one that is far bigger than the dimensions of the house.

"Holy shit!" Orihime blurts out.

Ichigo chuckles at the rare but understandable curse from the usually polite girl; leading her into the spacious cavern, the sounds of metal hitting metal rings out loudly from deeper within the place. As they follow behind the older woman, he sees piles of different ores and other materials needed for forging; coal bins, oil and other fluids in large barrels lining the walls, some even hanging high above them from multiple chains that glint in the low light of the fires. Gradually, the woman leads them further into what Ichigo can only guess is a complex cave and tunnel system, and they abruptly find themselves in a huge room with a large furnace and forge occupying the center.

Standing at the anvil is a large bare-chested man, wearing a worn and heavy leather apron, his arms the size of tree trunks, and his legs the same size except for one, which begins to deform towards the ankle; Ichigo grimaces at the condition of the skin and lack of muscle surrounding the joint of the man's foot. Looking over at Orihime, he sees her looking at the affliction with a thoughtful frown on her face. The woman who escorts them stops before a small table with several chairs and
curtseys lowly to the large man.  
"My Lord, you have guests." She places the document and the small sack on the table before moving away towards another tunnel.

Both teens stand there awkwardly as the huge arm swings rhythmically up and then down with great force, over and over again, small gusts of air stirring the heat and some dust after each strike of the hammer. Looking at Orihime, Ichigo finally decides to speak to the god.

"'Cuse me, but can my sister at least sit down?"

The arm stops mid-swing. "Of course she may. Sit Orihime Shiba, forgive my lack of manners."

Orihime shoots her adoptive brother a look; he only gestures to the simple chair with a wave of his hand. Sitting down in the chair, she folds her hands into her lap and looks around the room, while Ichigo moves to stand behind her.

"Ichigo, this place is really big." She whispers to him. "But why is it underground?"

"Because the heat needed for my forge comes from the magma that flows beneath the sea floor of the Mediterranean Sea. Without it, I am unable to complete my projects, or fix other weapons such as the Asauchi you have in your hand Ichigo Shiba. Strange that a Devil such as you would carry a weapon of the Shinigami, but none the less I am intrigued as to how you came upon such a thing." The Greek god speaks up in a neutral manner.

"Can I take a seat? It's kinda of a long story to tell." Ichigo feels telling the truth is the only good option, Zangetsu begrudgingly agreeing with him.

When Hephaestus nods, Ichigo takes the empty seat beside Orihime, placing his bag down at his feet and hanging the Asauchi behind him. Taking out two water bottles, he hands one to his slowly sweating sister and takes a drink from his bottle as well. Seeing that their host has yet to turn away from his forging, but appears to have no problem hearing them, Ichigo begins to tell Hephaestus his story.

"I was born to a Shinigami father and a Quincy mother who met nearly twenty plus years ago…"

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Zeva wakes up with a ringing headache, courtesy of the punch given by the purple-haired woman the moment she had seen a few of the photos that her deceased associates had foolishly taken of themselves and their victims. Groaning, she sits up and looks around, seeing that she is a plain cell with a single cot that she is currently resting on, while across her is a door that is clear with holes for speaking and a slot to one side in the wall. Getting up from the cot, she takes a better look around her new residence. Her cell contains a toilet that while open to view, does have a few privacy walls that reaches her waist when she is standing, which are hopefully enough to keep her mostly hidden when she is using it. In one corner of the cell is a small shower that has thick semi-translucent plastic curtains for privacy, and the last thing in her cell is a small sink next to the toilet.

"Well, I guess this is home for the short time I'm alive." She mutters to herself, only for a female voice to call out unexpectedly to her.

"Hey new girl, where are we?"

Looking through her cell door, Zeva sees a tall thin woman across from her, her green hair framing
her green eyes, and what looks like green thunderbolts for eyebrows. She is also wearing the same white short-sleeve shirt and white cotton pants as herself. Furthermore, Zeva notices numerous seals on the woman's exposed arms as she leans against her own cell door.

"You don't know where we are...umm..." Zeva motions to the other woman.

"Name's Candice Catnipp, Quincy. You?"

"Zeva Argyros. I'm a mixed Yōkai. And to answer your question, we are currently 'guests' of the Naberius Clan."

"What's that?" The Quincy looks baffled by the name.

"You don't know who the Naberius are?"

"Never 'eard of 'em. So what, are they allies of those fucking Shinigami or something?"


Now it is the other girl who gives her an incredulous look, slowly shifting to a rigid stance. "I don't know where the fuck you been living, but Shinigami are very much real. I should know; I've killed a few of them myself. Until that orange-haired freak that is."

"Wait, I thought he was a Devil." She frowns.

"Devil? Wait are we talking about the same person? Yeah high, ugly bright orange hair, shit for eyes and a permanent scowl on his face?" The Quincy describes to Zeva the very same person she had tried to kill.

"Yes, him. Candice, he isn't a Shinigami, he is a Devil. A pure-blood Noble who has Elfin assassins as his body guards."

"Devils? Yōkai? Elves? This some kind of joke? That bastard was clearly a Shinigami, his Zanpakutō however I'll give you was strange, chains instead of a normal blade, but I felt his Reiatsu clearly."

Zeva is now the one confused. Reiatsu, Zanpakutō, these are terms she has never heard of, and it clearly shows on her face.

"Zeva right? Shinigami are the so called 'balancers' of souls, fucking bastards though are also pretty fucking xenophobic about things. They nearly massacred my race over a thousand years ago, only a handful of us survived including our Emperor."

"That isn't quite correct my dear Quincy." Both women turn to see a blonde-haired man leaning against the wall outside Candice's door, and they are almost certain that he wasn't there a few seconds ago.

"Who are you?" Zeva blurts out.

Tilting his hat down to cover his eyes, the man's voice takes on an ominous tone as he speaks. "I will be one of your interrogators; Kisuke Urahara at your service, Miss Argyros, Miss Catnipp. We'll be having a few chats with one another over the course of your stay in the Underworld, perhaps longer in Miss Catnipp's case. Not every day you find out that there are more Quincy who have been in hiding from Ms. Catnipp's statement, but as to where, now that is the question. As for you however Miss Argyros, I'm afraid your time with us will be...shorter."
Zeva backs away from her cell door as the man is joined by a tall figure in a brown cloak, as well as one of the two women who were with the Assassin Merti at the house. Merti herself stands with the cloaked figure, gesturing to Zeva.

"She's the one Sister."

Both Candice and Zeva hear the softest and most alluring voice they have ever heard replying to the Elfin woman. "I shall deal with her first, Kisuke you may ask your questions of the one you call a Quincy. When you are done asking, I shall gather the information you seek."

"Merti, please open her cell for me." Kisuke places his hat and Haori on a hook outside of the Quincy's cell, holding only his cane as he waits.

Candice backs up quickly and looks around for anything she can use as a weapon, even desperately trying to summon her spirit bow, only to find nothing in reach and unable to absorb what little Reishi she feels.

"Ara, ara Miss Catnipp; that is the one drawback for your kind isn't it? If you are unable to absorb Reishi, it means no spirit weapons. But I am not here to physically harm you, Ichigo would be quite upset if I did that to his prisoner; no my dear, I will simply ask you a few hundred questions."

"Fuck you Shinigami! I ain't answering any of your stupid fucking questions, so you might as well get to the torturing! But be warned as soon as my friends find you, you…" She falls over screaming then, the seals on her arms beginning to glow dark red.

Merti enters the cell first with Kisuke stopping next to her as they look down at the writhing woman, the Elf speaking again when the seals stop glowing. "Those runes not only seal away any powers you possess child, but they can also be used to punish you if you displease us. My sister developed that spell herself; she will not tolerate your foul language or threats."

Zeva watches fearfully from her own cell, looking at the cloaked figure that has yet to move, she steps backwards and falls on her rear as the screams from Candice finally die down. When her fellow prisoner's soft sobs reach her, her own cell door fades away and the purple-haired woman enters first, followed by the shorter Asian women with twin braids and a sleeveless white Haori. Although she sees the hilt of a sword sticking up from the Asian woman's back, it's the cloaked woman behind them who holds her true attention. A myth, a legend, someone feared but rarely seen, she is the Elf known as Sasha Mai'ryl, younger sister of Merti Longoak. Even she has heard of them; they and their third sister had been assassins for the Old Maou Faction before their masters were defeated and they were set free by Vincent Naberius, upon which they decided to freely serve the Naberius Clan.

Pulling back her hood, Sasha Mai'ryl looks down at the terrified woman, her clouded white eyes piercing into the soul of the young Yōkai shaking as she stares back up at her in fear. Kneeling, she slowly reaches out and cups both cheeks of the young woman and smiles sadly as she speaks.

"Zeva Argyros, this will hurt."

In the other cell, Candice covers her ears, trying desperately to keep out the inhuman screams coming from her fellow prisoner out of her head. Looking up, she sees Kisuke looking down at her in pity, and it only sends another surge of fear through her.

'Who the fuck are these people really?'

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Ichigo wipes his mouth after eating the last of his meal, something their host had called for after three hours of telling the Greek god their life's story so that he and Orihime can rest and refill their stomachs. Taking a drink from his wine glass, Ichigo looks to see Orihime nodding off, her head jerking upwards as she desperately tries to stay awake.

"Not much longer Orihime." He places a hand comfortingly over hers, gaining a small smile from his adopted sister.

"It's okay Ichigo. I'll try and make it." She whispers.

Turning to the Greek god once more, Ichigo asks if he has any further questions.

"Just one Ichigo Naberius, what do you plan on using your Zanpakutō for?"

"What I've always done Hephaestus, protect my family and friends, and guide the plus souls to the other side. I will always perform my Shinigami duties even if I am no longer one."

"And when you take over the Skeleton Tower?"

"I will do my duty. I don't want either of my sisters being made to take up Amyntas's place if at all possible; that role is for me and me alone to fulfill."

Leaning back in his chair, the Greek god looks at the young man, seeing the conviction that Yasaka had told him of. But it is his actions today concerning his adopted sister that convinces the God of Craftsmen that the hybrid Devil before him is nothing like his ancient forefathers. From what Hephaestus has seen, Ichigo is kind, gentle to his family, fierce and deadly to his enemies, loyal and sacrificial to his friends, and more importantly he is a true warrior that is rarely seen in this time. Not since his days with the other Greek deities has he seen such a force of nature in one so young, reminding him of both Perseus and Achilles when they were young.

Ichigo's sister Orihime, while not his sister in blood, is in his honest opinion truly the purest person he has met in the last thousand years. Her smile and laughter soothe the beast in the young man, her loyalty to him unquestionable, and her love for him genuine, even though it will never be more than the love of family now. While he is also interested the strange power, she is said to possess, it is unfortunate that he has nothing for her to heal on hand.

Lastly, the Asauchi they had brought him to fix. Looking at the blank Zanpakutō in his hand, he inwardly sighs, feeling troubled. The Asauchi is actually almost complete, but he is lacking the key ingredient he needs to help the young Devil reforge the weapon, and that is why when he speaks to the young man, he does so with complete regret.

"I am sorry Ichigo Naberius, but I cannot reforge your weapon. I lack the one thing I need in order to reforge your Zanpakutō. If I could do so I would, but the thing you seek is no longer within my power to give you."

Before giving either teen a chance to speak, he gets up from the table, only to stumble slightly on his deformed ankle and fall. As he reaches out to brace himself, he feels his arm caught in a steady grip. Looking to see who caught him, he finds himself looking into Ichigo's concerned brown orbs.

"You okay Hephaestus?"

"Yes, just an old injury that can't be healed Ichigo. Thank you though, and once again I'm sorry that I can't help you."

The Greek god observes Ichigo frowning for a brief moment before he twists his head towards his
sister. The two siblings exchange a wordless conversation, then Hephaestus finds himself being guided back to his chair by Ichigo. Settling him down, Ichigo crouches to look at his ankle closer, and begins touching it a few times. Puzzled at first, the Greek god wants to flinch away, but finally recognizes his actions as that of someone assessing an injury for healing. As the youth gently moves his foot and ankle around, he hears him muttering to himself.

"Zangetsu its fine, we'll find another way."

"No, I'm not giving up you ass."

"Look, let Orihime heal him and we'll go home and find out if there is a plan B from Geta-Bōshi."

"Yeah, I'll kick his ass if there isn't one, trust me, I don't want you like this either, but we were both tricked and are paying the same price."

Looking up and seeing Hephaestus giving him a confused look, Ichigo shrugs his shoulders then. "Zangetsu's a bit pissed at me and Geta-Bōshi, sorry for that. Had to calm him down and keep him locked up; didn't want him to mess your place up because…fuck would stop yelling at me! Dammit Zangetsu, I promise you a Zanpakutō and I'll find one, just give us a few moments to get him healed and we'll be on our way."

The Greek god sighs. "While the gesture is appreciated Ichigo Naberius, this injury has never yielded to any healer; it is a birth defect, so perhaps it can never be healed at all. Please don't worry about me; as I said I cannot help you, so it would sit poorly on me to accept any help from you."

"Ah, you don't understand Hephaestus, look at those eyes." Turning to look in the direction Ichigo is pointing, the Greek god flinches as he sees the sadness in Orihime's puppy eyes. "Yeah, that look. Trust me when I say this, just let her try, and if she can't heal it we'll get out of your hair. If you don't she'll most likely beg until you do; trust me, she can make stones crack from the pressure according to our friend Tatsuki."

Looking between the two siblings, Hephaestus reluctantly agrees to let them try. While he feels bad about accepting their help despite being unable to give any in return, he cannot deny his curiosity at seeing Orihime's power firsthand. Nodding once, Ichigo gets up before moving to stand behind his adopted sister; clasping her shoulder, he smiles at her. "I know you wanna, so go ahead Orihime."

"Goody! Now please sit still Hephaestus-san, it shouldn't take long."

The God is startled when he feels her power spike, then a translucent and shimmering orange dome forms over his ankle. At first nothing happens as the young woman scrutinizes his injury, then one of the points of her hair pins glows and turns into a bright light; his eyes widen surprise when it transforms into a tiny fairy woman who speaks to the young healer.

"Orihime, it will take more power than you have right now to fix this. I suggest you take some of Ichigo's. The fairy turns to face the Greek god. "Hephaestus-sama, this will very likely be a long and painful healing, we are going to have to rebuild your ankle and foot using Ichigo's Reiatsu. I hope you don't mind."

"You can really heal it?" He can't believe the fairy-like spirit's words.

Snorting, the young hybrid Devil rolls his eyes. "I guess seeing is different that hearing, go ahead Hime, take whatever you need, I got loads of it."

"Ah, Ichigo how?"
"Oh, sorry. Momo taught me this." Placing his hand again on her shoulder, Ichigo's hand begins to glow green, and Hephaestus can feel the hybrid Devil's energy flowing into Orihime.

"That will do Orihime, Ichigo don't stop until we are done." The tiny fairy assisting Orihime instructs them, before a second tiny fairy joins her and both of them zip into the orange shield, fading from view.

The Greek god looks at his foot as a sudden burning sensation begins to creep in, then he watches in shock as the skin around his lower leg and his foot begins to disappear, soon followed by the veins, muscles, tendons and finally his bones vanishing from existence. Glancing up at the human child, he sees the sweat and intense concentration on her face as she bites her lower lip with a determined frown on her face, Ichigo's hand pulsing bright green as he continues to feed her his energy, and he chooses to remain still and not utter a sound or word to distract them.

Looking at the stump of his foot again as it starts to itch, he sees bone extending from the end of his leg; the new growth swiftly replaces his missing lower leg, ankle and his foot, then he watches in complete fascination as tendons, new muscle, ligaments and blood vessels begin to creep down from his stump and cover the bones of his newly reconstructed foot. The last thing to happen is a layer of skin that grows rapidly and covers his new leg, the entire process taking less than an hour from start to finish, leaving him staring at something he never would have dreamt possible before today.

"You…healed…me." He whispers almost disbelievingly, a hand reaching down to touch his foot hesitantly. He then flexes his foot, finding that he has full motor control over it, and he no longer feels any of the aches or pains he had always associated with his crippled limb. "You healed me!"

Looking up with sheer gratitude, Hephaestus sees Orihime being cradled by Ichigo, who is smiling down proudly at the sleeping woman in his arms. The tiny female fairy looks at her mistress with an exhausted smile, then she turns to the Greek god.

"It will feel funny for an hour or two, so please stay seated for a few moments if possible Hephaestus-sama. Orihime will be alright with a little sleep and some food later on. Ichigo, thank you for your help, without it, we couldn't have healed him, his injury was very old."

"Yeah, no problem." The orange-haired young man simply waves off her gratitude. "So, Hephaestus, if you don't mind, can you have someone guide us out of here? I'd like to take Hime home and get her into her bed as soon as I can."

The Greek god blinks at him in surprise. "You don't want anything in return Ichigo? Or a reward for your sister?"

"I know she wouldn't take anything, so we're good."

Looking back down as he flexes his new toes once again, the Greek God of Craftsmen feels something boiling in him as he stares at the impossible miracle. Something welling up in him that has been missing over the past few millennia: desire, an overwhelming desire to create something that would be one-of-a-kind. The two teens before him had not only healed something that no other deity, witch, or Yōkai could, his no longer deformed foot the best proof of that as he sits there looking down at it, they had also helped him find back his missing drive. Staring at the young adults in front of him, Hephaestus feels a smile tugging at his face as he watches Ichigo look down at the young woman in his arms, the young man's eyes and expression showing fondness, brotherly love and pride for his sister as he shifts her to a more comfortable position.

Two teens who at fifteen had gained powers that would thrust them into a war they had no right or
business being involved with. One being branded a false traitor by an uncaring militant society, the other condemned because he did everything he could to save his friends, his family and his home. Two teens who lost someone precious to them at a young age, struggled to find their place in the world, and through their hardships, found each other and others like themselves to form a new family. He can only smirk at the sheer idiocy of Soul Society's nobles once again; he had heard before of their previous erroneous decisions and heavy-handed methods, and now two of their greatest mistakes are before him, united as family. The girl's power capable of performing miracles that outclass many gods and goddesses he knows of, and the young man who became her brother, a unique lynchpin who will one day shake the very foundations of all the realms.

It is what they both hold in their hearts that awoke his desires once again: their love for each other and their friends, and their willingness to sacrifice without asking for anything in return. The Blacksmith of the Greek Gods flexes his hands and feels his power increasing slowly, a feeling he hasn't felt since the days when his father ruled the heavens and earth.

"Wait Ichigo. I will reforge your Zanpakutō." He calls out to them.

Both teens look at him curiously, with Ichigo voicing his question. "Huh? I thought you couldn't?"

"I couldn't until now. The thing I needed - the thing I lacked - is a power that needs to come from within my own soul. I had thought it lost for good, but what Orihime did for me has stirred my stagnant soul and awakened it to what it once was before. For centuries, I have only had the inclination to fix broken things or make lifeless objects, but your sister Ichigo, has given me a reason to pour my heart and soul into my creations once more. As you have done me this kindness without expecting anything in return, so shall I return you your kindness in full. All I will need from you is your blood, to add your Devil powers to the Asauchi and strengthen it to withstand the increasing power that will flow from you as you age."

Ichigo looks surprised by this. "I thought I was already in my prime." He mutters.

Laughing, the Greek claps a hand on the table then. "You? Already in your prime? Ichigo Naberius, you have no idea how powerful you really will be one day, do you?"

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Looking at the Devil messenger kneeling in front of her, Yasaka lifts an interested eyebrow at the request she has just received. Turning to see her daughter's expression, the Yōkai leader smiles at the blush on her young Kitsune's face. Her daughter had been sitting beside her and learning how to deal with other deities and factions, and this request from the Naberius clan, though unexpected, was far more interesting to Kunou than the usual treaties and negotiations due to personal reasons.

"Tell Lord Naberius I will be more than happy to pass judgment on his prisoner. In fact, I think my daughter and I would like to spend a few days with him, if he is willing to allow it."

"Of course Lady Yasaka, I shall return in an hour's time with his answer."

"One more thing, do you know if Ichigo will be back home in time? I think my daughter would like to see him again."

"I will endeavor to find out. By your leave?"

"Of course, I hope to hear from my old friend soon."

Watching as the messenger departs, Kunou looks towards her mother. "Why did the Devils ask you to judge this Yōkai Mother? I thought the Yōkai in charge of the Mediterranean would have final
Yasaka smiles proudly at her daughter. Even distracted by the news of Ichigo, she still manages to correctly assess this request. Standing up and extending her hand to Kunou, Yasaka nods in answer to her question as they walk back to their private chambers. "Normally that is what would have happened Kunou, but since Zeva's mother is an exile of my realm, even though she is descended from foreign Yōkai immigrants, she is technically mine to deal with. Zeva's father was Japanese even though he had married into the Argyros family, and coupled with the fact that she attacked a Devil who holds Japanese nationality and happens to reside in our country, it already becomes our problem; when you add in the fact that Ichigo-kun's noble family specifically requested for me to be their Arbitrator, our claim easily overrides any claim the Mediterranean Yōkai could have on her."

Pausing until she sees her daughter nodding her understanding, Yasaka continues with a gentle smile.

"Either way, I'm willing to bet the European Yōkai Council as well as the Mediterranean Yōkai representatives are relieved about that, considering which Devil clan Ichigo-kun is from. It would have turned into a highly embarrassing international incident for them if Zeva was one of theirs, not only getting the Naberius involved, but also likely involving the four Maou to mediate a cross-faction mess like this. With me as the Arbitrator, the Japanese Yōkai Council only needs to be notified of the proceedings, and they'll most likely let me deal with this myself while they try to find a way to compensate the victims' families without compromising the existence of our world. The human families do deserve closure after all."

Her little Kitsune nods in agreement. "So what are you going to do Mother?"

Frowning, she considers her daughter's question. "It depends on the crimes committed Kunou, some are punishable by exiling the offender, and others demand a more…permanent punishment."

Rias knows something is wrong the moment she and the rest of the Kuoh Academy students arrive back at the Estate. Merti is waiting as per usual, but it is the two other elves standing with her that have Rias and Sōna looking at each other. They have heard rumors of the Elf standing in wait next to Merti, her cloudy blind eyes and midnight blue hair identifying her as Sasha Mai'ryl, a Lake Elf who had been a famed assassin during the Civil War and now chief interrogator for the Naberius Clan. One that rumors said could make the dead talk if given enough time.

The youngest Elf however is someone they had never seen before, but after she is introduced to the students, Rias can see the same facial features in her as her mother. Kimi Mai'ryl truly does follow in the footsteps of both her Aunt Merti and her mother, Sasha, in the deadly but beautiful category.

"Merti, Sasha-san, what is going on?" Rukia asks as she steps forward.

The two older women share a glance before Sasha defers to her older sister. "There was an attempt on both Ichigo and Orihime while they were meeting with my contact. Her daughter had Orihime kidnapped and then tried to blackmail Ichigo for his life force." Merti informs them.

The three Elves are impressed as are the Cerberus from the combined killing intent (radiating) from the group. Rias steps forward and is the first to speak.

"And what happened to them Merti? Are they okay, where are they?"
The alluring voice of Sasha answers the Gremory heiress. "They were not harmed Lady Rias, Lady Sōna. Nia - my other daughter who is with Ichigo still - witnessed him taking down his blackmailer, while Kimi had the pleasure of seeing Orihime defend herself quite proficiently from her accomplices. As for the offenders, the four humans have been dealt with, while the lone Yōkai was brought back here to be judged by her own kind. This brings us as to why we are here, we would like to inform you that Yasaka is here, along with her daughter Kunou."

Issei can't help but blurt out his shock. "Dealt with? Does that mean…does that mean they're dead?"

Three sets of eyes stare at him with hardened expressions; it is the blind woman who speaks again. "One does not kidnap and attempt to rape the adopted sister of Lord Naberius's great-grandson and expect to live Issei Hyoudou. These are the measures we will be using to deal with those who threaten our Clan from this day forth. Now that Ichigo and the twins have been found, we will ensure that, that dark day is never repeated. We will not fail Vincent and Kiku a second time."

"But…"

"Issei-kun, please be quiet!" Rias cuts off her pawn.

Her peerage, Sōna's peerage and the Shinigami and humans all stare at the crimson-haired princess after hearing how harsh her voice is. She turns to look at her pawn.

"Issei-kun, this is a part of our world, your world now that you must come to accept. There will be times that the deaths of those who oppose you can't be avoided, other times that their deaths are used to send a message to your enemies. They just told us that Ichigo's sister was kidnapped and would have been raped by humans, so I have no sympathy as to what their punishment was. As for the Yōkai, I'm sure Yasaka will deliver an acceptable sentence onto her. Listen closer from now on Issei, and you will see that this world and the human world is not just black and white, but shades of grey splashed with red as needed."

"Yes Buchou." The pawn says with a hint of anger in his voice.

Akeno places a hand on his arm and shakes her head at him. 'Let it go.'

Frowning, he barely shakes his head. "Forgive me Buchou."

Staring at him for a minute, Rias turns around and walks away without a word. Rukia, Momo, Chad and Uryū follow shortly after, as do both peerages except for Issei, who stands there waiting until he is alone with the three Elfin assassins. Merti tilts her head as she speaks to him.

"You have something to say Issei?"

"There was no other way? You couldn't have held them for the police or someone to take them? Why did you have to kill them!? What gives you to right to decide anything!? Why!?"

He doesn't see the teen Elf move, instead finding himself bent over her fist that she had driven into his stomach. Kimi leans down and pulls his head up by his hair.

"What gives us the right Issei-kun? I'll tell what gave us the right to deal with those humans the way we did. I brought back the tapes, their drives, their pictures. I had to watch them, watch what they had done to the human women that had fallen prey to their mistress's murderous lust for life. All of them couples, the men drained of their life, their women, raped repeatedly and then killed. The sea or a shallow hole their final resting place. So Issei, you ask what gave us the right, I think avenging the dead is a good enough reason. Don't judge what we do ever again, your own mistress
is a kind Devil, but make no mistake, she has the power to destroy those that would bring harm to what she claims as her own, including you."

Pulling her fist back, she takes out a handkerchief and hands it to him along with a silver flask. "Wipe your mouth and drink. It will heal your bruises and give you some energy."

Wiping his mouth and taking a swig from the flask, he mutters his thanks to her and then stands on his own. Grimacing, he makes his way out of the dome behind the guide of a young maid who had been summoned by Sasha.

Soon after, Yoruichi and Suì-Fēng join with the three Elves in watching the newest Devil leave the room, Merti speaks then. "I assume you heard Yoruichi?"

"I did. Kimi did the right thing. Unlike Ichigo and Orihime, he has yet to see the battles of life and death. He hasn't seen the worst of humanity as we have or seen the greatness that others fight to attain. Maybe after this he will start learning what his place can be in this world."

"I hope so Yoruichi, I truly do; if not he will face a lifetime of disappointments and unnecessary hardships."

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Orihime watches the two men, one a god, one a hybrid Devil as they stand before a vat of molten metal, Ichigo's Asauchi having been melted down and now they are about to add the next and last component. Holding out his hand, Ichigo doesn't flinch as the old god slices open his palm and then turns and holds it over the red-hot metal. He counts to fifteen loudly before releasing Ichigo's hand. Quickly healing it, the burnt-orange-haired healer watches in fascination as the metal turns black and then silver before returning to a deep cherry red. Stoking the flames in the furnace, the God of Blacksmiths and the Naberius Devil alternately pump separate bellows in turns. After an hour of work, the Greek god places his hand over the ladle and smiles at his helper.

"We are ready to pour Ichigo, please grab the handle attached to the trunnion on your side."

Nodding his head in agreement, Ichigo grabs the wooden handle that is attached to the ladle trunnion; unlike modern ladles in the human world, the Greek god's ladle is a very simple design as the trunnions are pivoted on adjoining wheels that move by pushing the handles downwards to allowing the pouring. At the signal given, the young Shinigami-Devil pushes down on his handle and watches the molten metal flow into a form of sand that has been placed in position to receive the liquid metal as it flows through the top opening of the form. Ichigo can only assume that the standing sand form is only possible because of whom the blacksmith is.

"How does this work?" He asks when Hephaestus uses a small hammer to break open the form, revealing a glowing red roughened shape of a long-bladed weapon.

"I will use your description of your old blade as a reference, but your blood will determine the final shape." The god replies before he picks up a pair of thongs and lifts the hissing metal up and inspects the form closely for any flaws. Satisfied, he walks over to his anvil then places it down and picks up his heaviest hammer. The first strike rings loudly as the sparks fly clear across the forge, both Orihime and Ichigo ducking from the flying embers.

"Hime, best stand back some." Ichigo cautions her.

"Okay Ichigo." She moves back until she is once again at the table, Ichigo however moves closer to the forge.
Orihime watches as the two men speak, the massive god effortlessly lifting and dropping the hammer in tune to an unheard rhythm. After exchanging some words, Ichigo takes the offered hammer and under the watchful eye of the master smith, he begins to help forge his soul blade, the symbol of his father's and mother's families. Pulling her knees up, she rests her chin on her knees and watches her older adoptive brother as he hammers out the shape of Zangetsu.

"Lady Orihime, please drink this."

The Shun Shun Rikka wielder turns her head in surprise and almost squeaks out loud when she sees Nia sitting beside her, holding a tall glass of iced water in her hands.

Nia motions towards the doorway, where Orihime sees the same woman who had escorted them inside leaving the cavern again, which answers her unspoken question.

"She came and got me a few minutes ago, told me to contact our Clan and tell them work is still in progress. I'm guessing things are going well then Lady Orihime?"

"Ah, you don't have to call me Lady, -sama, or anything like that Nia-chan."

"As you wish…Orihime."

Taking a drink of ice cold water, the adopted sister of Ichigo nods to her adoptive brother and Hephaestus. "They seem to be in their own world Nia-chan; I guess Ichigo and Zangetsu are both glad he will be fixed."

"You have no idea, Hime-chan. Closest way I can describe being without a blade, is that it's kinda like how you guys probably feel being nude in public."

Hearing twin screams of surprise, Ichigo and Hephaestus both look over to see that Ichigo's Zanpakutō spirit had snuck out to speak to the girls. Shaking his head, Ichigo returns to pounding out the shape that is forming in his mind, his blade not as wide as it had once been in its Shikai release and the handle now almost forty-seven centimeters in length. His rough blade is only ten centimeters wide at the base before narrowing to a point at the end of the almost one-meter long blade. Looking at the man directing him, he points at a section near the base and asks how to create stamps in it, only for Hephaestus to beckon him to hand over the hammer.

Handing the hammer back to the god, he watches Hephaestus set it down for a smaller one and then meticulously chisel out the marking he had asked for with a set of sharp-edged engraving tools, the extra metal going into a scrap pile to be melted down again. The asked for markings begin to take shape, starting about five centimeters from where the Tsuba would begin; the first is a crescent moon, followed by a replica of his mother's Quincy cross, finally ending with the Shiba and Naberius Clan symbols that finish just before the half-way mark of the narrowing Zanpakutō, the long blade ending with a slight upward curve. With the chiseling done, they begin the heating process once more.

"Now Ichigo, we will begin the fine shaping of Zangetsu, this might take the rest of the night." Hephaestus tells him.

"Okay." Turning to see Orihime and Nia still sitting there, he looks at the Greek god. "Is there somewhere they can crash for the night?"

Smiling, Hephaestus claps his hand and to the fascination of the three young adults a silver and gold owl flaps its way into the room. Landing next to Orihime, the owl blinks its metal eyes at her.
"HE'S SO CUTE!" The auburn healer squeals as she stares at the metal bird.

"His name is Pistós: he is very loyal, hence his name Orihime. He will show you and Nia to a room for you to retire to if you find yourselves needing sleep. All you have to do is ask him to show you and he will. Ichigo and I will be up for the foreseeable future. So feel free to stay or look around, just mind the locked doors, there are things behind them I don't wish to escape."

Nodding her head but never taking her eyes off the bird, the burnt-orange-haired healer hesitantly touches its feathers and ohh's at how real they feel. Nia watches Orihime in her child-like wonder, the sister of her aunt's young Lord touching and speaking to the bird as if it is a small child. She sees the two men at the anvil also watching, then the Greek god leans over and speaks quietly to the Devil, who gives him a look of surprise but nods his head as if he is agreeing to something. Soon the sounds of metal upon metal rings out loudly again as the two men take alternating swings with their hammers, drawing Nia's attention out from Orihime's interactions with the mechanical owl. The Elfin teen sits there watching the men work for a while, then she glances down at her phone when it vibrates in her hand, the message she has been waiting for finally arriving.

To: Nia

From: Merti

Understand you are not coming back as scheduled. Take care of them and see to their safety.

Smiling as she closes the phone, Nia can't help the feeling of happiness she feels knowing that her aunt is leaving the safety of Ichigo and Orihime in her hands. Looking up at the sight of his damp orange hair, she sees a glimmer of Kiku in him. To humans, her four hundred years of life might make her seem old, but in the eyes of Elves and Devils, she is but a teenager, until now at least. Now she and her sister will be seen as young women, women who can serve their lord with honor.

She turns her attention to the Hollowfied Zanpakutō spirit who has taken a seat near Orihime and is watching the young woman as she tickles the owl on its belly. The black sclera looks into her sea-blue eyes with a hint of amusement.

"You have questions Nia-chan?"

"One. Are you a spirit or a weapon?"

"Both. I was born from his soul Nia-chan, but his Zanpakutō is my physical form; this. " He waves over his body. "This is just my ability to be outside of his inner-world thanks to him gaining Bankai."

"So is he going to get more powerful when he has you in his hands?"

"Right now, he stands in the middle of a sea of Reiryoku, when we finally have our blade, it will become an ocean. Between his Shinigami, Quincy, Hollow and Devil bloodlines, he will continue to grow in strength. It will even affect his Evil Pieces."

"What?"

Leaning down to her ear, he makes sure Orihime is too engrossed with Pistós to even notice them talking. "Ask your aunt when we get home about his Evil Pieces; she noticed it almost as soon as it happened. As Ichigo grows, so will the strength of his peerage. Even the one already in Tatsuki will increase in power."

She stares at him with shock in her eyes. "How is that possible?"
"No idea, but I can feel it already as they get closer to finishing, with each blow of the hammers, I can feel that I'm getting stronger. His pieces are changing as well, their desires and powers growing."

"His pieces are alive!?"

"Sentient? Not really sure, but I know who each piece wants to join with already. Two are quite surprising, even to me. I can't wait to see the look on King's face when he realizes it too. Should be a riot when he makes them into Devils."

"Who, who have they chosen Zangetsu?"

He smirks then and shakes his head. "**Nope, waiting for the surprise is something an assassin like you hates, isn't it Nia?**"

"You're a dick Zangetsu." She smiles when he begins laughing, gaining Orihime's attention.

"Guys?" She tilts her head in confusion.

"**Nothing princess, just me making fun of our Elfin bodyguard here.**"

"I am fine Orihime, but he is right, he is making fun of me right now."

Zangetsu cringes as he faces the look not even his wielder has much immunity against. "**Gah! Orihime don't!**"

"But Zangetsu." Her mouth pouts slightly and her eyes flutter just enough for him to make his next decision easy. Without a word, the Zanpakutō spirit fades away to escape those puppy dog eyes, leaving behind a snickering Nia with new blackmail to use against him in the future.

'Who would have thought he would be afraid of a pair of puppy dog eyes.' The Elf smiles as she listens to Orihime beginning to tell her about the owl now resting on her shoulder.

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Yasaka listens as Kunou repeats her story for the second time since their arrival to the Naberius Estate. Venelana Gremory and Akiko Kimura had been their personal escorts to the estate that is home to the famous hot springs of the Naberius Clan. While most of them are located on their surrounding lands, only the elite of the Underworld are allowed to use those that are located on the grounds of the Main Estate. Amyntas had told her that once Ichigo and the twins' true identities are made known, those springs would be off-limits to the public until a permanent solution to the Old Maou Faction is found. She had kept a blank face at this but knew what he really meant: the complete annihilation of those responsible for his late wife's and late children's deaths.

After being briefed by Sasha and her daughter, she holds off going into details about what the Elves had actually learned from the young Yōkai half-breed. Even she has limits as to what she wants to know before sitting down to dinner. Scanning the room, she has to admit that this is one of the most unique dinners she has ever had the privilege of attending. Not only is it the first time that Amyntas Naberius, Watcher of the Gates of Hell, has invited her here, but it is also because of the other guests in attendance. The humans who are Ichigo's friends from his hometown had been the first unusual members of the gathering. However, it is when she finally meets the Shinigami that are his mentors, teachers and friends that she finds out how much she has yet to learn from them.

"Yasaka-sama, did you talk to the Strawberry when he was in Kyoto?" Rukia asks as she passes a
dish to Tsubaki.

Smiling, she shakes her head in reply. "We have yet to officially meet Kuchiki-san, I knew who he was but I didn't think he was ready then to talk to me."

"Oh, why's that?"

"He was on a 'date' with Kunou; I didn't want my daughter to get jealous of me trying to 'move in' on him."

"Mother! It wasn't like that, stop teasing!" The young Kitsune exclaims in horror.

Karin who is sitting next to the fledgling Kyuubi snorts in disbelief. "Really? The way you told that story, you make Ichigo out to be a knight or a superman. For instance…" Her voice squeaks when she speaks next. "…You should have seen how Ichigo-sama just beat-up that purse-snatching thief, he was so quick and powerful in his attacks."

"I don't sound like that Karin!" She exclaims embarrassedly. The room politely holds back their laughter, Yuzu placing her hand on the young nine-tail Kitsune’s shoulder.

"Ignore Karin, Kunou; she likes to tease everyone, especially those who are Ichigo's admirers."

"Yeah Yuzu, at least I didn't get jealous of Rias-nee-san once we found out she was going to be our future sister-in-law."

"Karin!" She exclaims as well, her face turning red.

"See Kunou, she can't even deny it."

Seeing Rias look at her, Yuzu sends her a sheepishly apologetic look. "Sorry Rias-nee-san."

"It's okay Yuzu, but I'm glad we had our bath together and worked things out."

"Me too."

A loud thump is heard from the table that the twin's father is sitting at, Yoruichi smiling innocently even as her hand rests on the back of the other Shinigami's head. Waving everyone off, she politely tells them she thought she saw a spider on Isshin's head. She then bends down and whispers in the ear of the former Captain, a loud grunt is heard next when the werecat's arm disappears under the table. Karin begins laughing then, Yuzu looking at her father worriedly until her sister speaks the reason for their dad's discomfort.

"Daddy!" "Don't worry Yuzu, I'm sure once your brother gets home, he and Isshin will have a talk about it."

The elder Kurosaki begins whining then. "Yoruichi, I'm one of your best friends, not my kids..."

"Shut up Isshin, you are one of my best friends, but I see your kids as family…” She stops abruptly as the room growing quiet.

"Yoruichi?"

Staring down at her plate, she quietly speaks. "I'm sorry Isshin, I shouldn't have said that."

Placing his hand on her shoulder, his usual goofy façade absent, Isshin speaks loud enough for everyone to hear. "Masaki couldn't have picked anyone better to look after them Yoruichi. I know
you have always wanted your own kids, but…but circumstances haven't been in your favor. I don't want you to feel guilty for thinking of them as your own, especially Ichigo. One day the twins will see the same things he does, so no more feeling guilty about what we, the adults in this room failed to do."

First looking at his twin girls, then Ichigo's friends and finally Amyntas, he continues to speak. "Kisuke and I noticed how close you and Ichigo have gotten since he led the 'invasion' to save Rukia. Helped him gain his Bankai in three days and gave him the tools needed to fight Byakuya afterwards. The most telling of your feelings for him is when you thought I sentenced Ichigo, my own son to exile; I knew how much you hated what we did. I don't blame you for feeling that we betrayed not only him but those close to him. We all bear some blame for what happened to Ichigo and the others, but they made it because of their own relationships and with some help from us. So yes, I can see why you think of Ichigo as your son and the others as your kids Yoruichi. There is no shame in you saying so."

Every Devil in the room looks at the Shihōin princess; tears begin escaping her as Isshin gently pulls her into a hug. Rias however catches the current Watcher of the Gates of Hell looking at Yoruichi in a much different light, but when he notices her looking at him, his demeanor changes back to neutral.

'That's strange...He looked…'

Just then Tatsuki begins convulsing in her chair, her eyes straining from an invisible force that has taken her in its grip. Screaming for help as she is pulled from her chair, Momo and Kimi begin frantically pressing down on Tatsuki's arms and legs as they start shaking violently.

"What is wrong with Tatsuki!?!" Karin screams as she rushes over to the older teen.

"Kisuke, her Devil power is beginning to rise rapidly!" Amyntas says as it begins flooding from the young martial artist.

Kisuke freezes at those words, then a slight smirk forms on his lips. "I don't think we have anything to worry about. She'll be fine in a few minutes, just hold her down so she doesn't hurt herself, she isn't in danger."

Every head turns to Kisuke, and Tessai is the one that speaks for them. "Boss, are you sure? She looks to be in trouble."

Not even bothering to open his fan, the former Captain picks up his saucer, toasts the air and delivers the news to the room with a smile.

"It's done; Ichigo's Zanpakutō is complete."

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Hephaestus stretches his arms over his shoulders and rolls his neck to remove long ignored kinks from his muscles. His helper is sitting exhausted in his own chair, staring at the cloth covered blade on the table next to him. Both had found extra energy and drive as the blade seemed to forge itself in their hands, time moving quicker than either man had noticed, only the two heads now using the other table as a pillow indicating just how much time has truly passed since they started. Soon the white copy of the hybrid Devil appears as he too begins staring at the covered blade. Turning to his wielder, he gives Ichigo an expectant look.

"Give me a few minutes Zangetsu, I know you want to test it just as much as I do, but my arms feel
like jelly. Let me rest and then I'll wake Orihime and see if she'll heal us."

"It's not just that Ichigo, well mostly that but I need to tell you something first."

"Yeah and what would that be?"

"Our Bankai has changed, radically. I'm not sure how but when you see it you'll understand."

"Any other surprises in store for me oh spirit of joyful tidings?"

"Yes, but now I'm not telling ya, that one I'll let surprise you since you want to be an ass."

"Look sorry okay, just worn out and I want to soak in a nice hot bath for a few hours, can ya blame me?"

Snorting, the Zanpakutō spirit flips him off anyways. "Sorry King, but I'm sticking to my threat this time. But a bit of good news though. It will hold."

Sitting straight up, Ichigo looks at the weapon peeking out from the brown cloth. "Then all we have to do is…"

"That's it Ichigo."

"Ichigo sit, I'll have someone bring us a special meal to eat, it will restore you enough so Orihime doesn't have to use as much of her power to finish healing your muscles." Hephaestus tells him kindly.

"Thanks." Ichigo sits back with a sigh.

The Greek god takes a seat opposite of him and extends his hand towards the young Devil, chuckling at the puzzled look coming from him. "I do believe it's called a hand shake Ichigo."

"I know, but why are you thanking me? Orihime is the one that healed you."

"I think when you and I are done, I will tell her that myself. This is for you coming here with her and helping her heal me. Also, I want to say thank you for helping in the forging of Zangetsu. Seeing how much effort you put into it shows me you truly care about your partner."

The young hybrid Devil smiles, shaking the old god's hand as he leans forward. "We are both in your debt Hephaestus."

"Then a favor Ichigo."

"Name it."

"Would you and Orihime come back and see me from time to time? I feel I could learn much about the new world from you both. I have only heard of the changes to the world over the centuries, but I haven't stepped foot from this place in a few hundred years, so the world I once knew is no more."

"We'd be honored to Hephaestus. But if you feel the need to take a vacation, I'm sure I can entice you to spend a few weeks at our estate, it has some the best hot springs in the Underworld, or so I'm told."

"Agreed then, Lord Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius."
"How about just Ichigo, I ain't one for titles."

The Greek god smirks. "Then we have an agreement Ichigo. Now let's get something to eat for us as well as them."

"Better bring Orihime two plates, she can get really hungry."

She thinks she is dreaming as her senses begin to fill with the smells of hot delicious food. Yawning, she lifts her head and wipes her tired eyes, then she jerks back quickly when she realizes that Ichigo is staring her in the face.

"Morning sunshine. Got something for you and Nia."

Looking down instinctively, her mouth waters at the sight of two heaping plates of food, a variety of cheeses, roasted or fried lamb, fruits sliced or chilled and a type of porridge that occupy her vision, while off to the side a spicy warm wine finishes off the meal.

"Thank you Ichigo." She gushes happily.

"Don't thank me, thank our host, he said to eat up and it will help you when you heal me."

Frantic eyes scan his body as she reaches for her hairpins, but he gently grabs her hands to stop her. "I'm not hurt, my arm muscles are just kinda sore because of forging Zangetsu Hime. I'll need you to restore them before I…sorry I mean before we claim our Zanpakutō."

Doubting him at first, she looks him over again and doesn't see any physical injuries, then finally nods in agreement. Hearing the sound of her fellow bedmate giving thanks to their host, the healer turns and sees the Elfin teen also awake and beginning to dig into her own meal with a voracious appetite; giggling, Orihime does the same with her plates of food. Halfway through her meal, she looks over to see Ichigo nodding off as he sits in his chair, while the Greek god hosting them is nowhere to be seen.

"Nia, do you know where Hephaestus is?"

Pointing a fork at a nearby tunnel, she swallows her food. "Yes, he said he had to prepare a room for Ichigo and Zangetsu. Said the room needs to be reinforced before testing their initial release."

Glancing back at her adoptive brother, she can't help the pride she feels as she looks at his peaceful face. A movement out of the corner of her eye makes her glance over quickly, but she sees nothing out of the ordinary.

'I thought I saw a woman's face reflecting off that polished shield…' Frowning in confusion, she looks around the room, then checks on her brother one more time before resuming her meal.

Hephaestus doesn't even react when a woman's voice speaks to him. "So he is the heir of the Naberius Clan then brother?"

"He is, Aphrodite."

"Very handsome for a Devil, too bad he is spoken for already."

Chuckling at his sister, the Greek god continues to add protection to the sizable room they are
standing in, then a rare mischievous streak hits him as he turns around and begins to walk up to his sister without even a hint of his previous limp. Seeing her eyes zoom down to stare at his leather strapped ankle, then back up to stare him in the eye, he can't help but laugh at the amazement and disbelief in her expression.

"How? How are you healed brother?" Aphrodite whispers to him.

Cupping his onetime lover's cheek, he tells her a brief version of the story told to him by Ichigo, Aphrodite's eyes getting wider when he mentions how the young woman in the main forge had healed him with the young Devil's help.

"His adopted sister, Orihime, healed something that all the other gods could not heal?"

"Yes sister, she did. At first I thought it was just an empty promise to get me to reforge his Zanpakutō, and when I watched my own leg disappear it took me all of my self-restraint not to panic... but when I watched it grow anew right before my eyes, I can't even describe to you how much I wanted to scream out and rejoice. It is not just the appearance either; as you can see, it is truly healed, both in body and spirit. Her power is...unique to say the least."

Lightly placing a hand on his arm in congratulations, the Greek goddess then peeks around the corner to see a young Elfin Devil, a sleeping orange-haired Devil and the burnt-orange-haired human teen sitting at the two tables. Briefly observing the youngest girl with her godly powers, she is surprised when she sees the face of the young woman.

"She's beautiful Hephaestus. Why didn't he pursue her romantically?"

Scanning the finished walls of the testing room, he nods at their readiness before turning to answer his sibling. "If they were born as normal humans, then he may have. But instead they share a bond that was forged through trials and tribulations Aphrodite, something along the way changed between them and they can no longer walk the path of lovers. Instead, the bonds of family have taken root, replacing romance with familial love. He will always protect her, and she will always tend to his wounds. Fighting in a war at their young age can do that to mortals such as they, dear sister."

"Incredible." The Goddess of Love mutters to herself.

Slipping back into the room with her brother, she walks to stand before him, gently grasping his arm. "Brother, Father wishes to speak to him."

The Greek god frowns. "No, I don't think that will work Aphrodite. Before you ask, I'll tell you why. He would rather fight than allow some old fart to try and bribe, cajole or even threaten him into forming an alliance or a loveless marriage to seal a treaty. No, for now tell Father I will continue to speak with Ichigo, and if Father wishes, I will tell the young Devil the truth of why he wants to see him."

Aphrodite looks at him askance. "He would dare fight against Father?"

"Without a doubt." Turning to where he knows Ichigo is, the Greek god points in that direction. "If you doubt me, send a messenger to Amyntas Naberius and ask for an audience with him. Maybe he will tell you the whole story and then you can judge for yourself the heart that young Devil has. Something that many of us have long since stopped using my dear sister."

A silvery reflection appears behind the goddess as she steps backwards into the mirror. "I think I will brother, I wish to know who has Hades in such a twist."
"Safe journeys Aphrodite."

Smiling, the Goddess of Love disappears into the light, the forger watching until the silvery reflection vanishes before leaving the room.

"Now time to wake him and really see what he has in him. I haven't had this much fun since...hell I can't remember."

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Nia and Orihime both turn to see the old god walk back into the cave, on his shoulder is the owl that has Orihime so infatuated. Seeing her looking at his winged creation, he whispers to the owl and lets it fly off, only for it to land gently on Orihime's shoulder, much to her delight. Coming over to the table, Hephaestus nods to the young woman and the Devil with her.

"I think it's time Orihime. Please heal your brother and wake him."

Nodding her agreement, she turns to Ichigo and sends out her healing fairies, the orange shield surrounding her sleeping brother and healing his sore and tired muscles without him waking. Leaning over, she begins to shake him lightly and speaking at a normal voice to wake him.

"Ichigo. Ichigo time to wake up. Ichigo come on, you need to get up." She giggles when he replies sleepily.

"Dammit Goat-Face leave me alone for just this once you annoying asshole."

"Zangetsu can you wake him up please?" Orihime says to the air above the sleeping hybrid, who jerks awake with a startled shout.

Rubbing his head frustratedly, Ichigo yells out. "What the hell is your problem Zangetsu?"

Materializing into the real world again, the white Zanpakutō spirit grabs the orange head and twists it until brown eyes are looking into brown eyes. "Our sister said to wake you up, so I did."

"By dropping me into the damn moat of flames you fucking insane asshole!?!"

"What are you worried about, it's not like it was gonna kill ya moron. Did you forget you have the flames of Hell at your disposal chief?"

"Zangetsu." Orihime gives him a disappointed look.

"Sorry, you did say wake him, but never said how though." The two young women can only face-palm at his words.

Coughing, the God of Craftsmen gains their attention then. "Ichigo, I'm going to measure your power when you go through your Bankai and Devil transformations. I want to know how much your Zanpakutō changes you, if you don't mind."

Ichigo stands up from his seat. "Not really, I'm kind of curious myself and I'm sure dickhead already knows."

The Hollowfied Zanpakutō spirit laughs at him then. "So where do we do this, not here right Hephaestus-sama?"

The Greek god motions them to follow him as he leads them down a side tunnel. "You are correct
Zangetsu; I have a special room I use to try new weapons or to test repairs. I believe it should hold when you and Ichigo release your various states."

The three teens follow the Greek god to a small door that opens into a rather spacious dome-shaped room that has a small alcove set near the door they entered through; the stone lining the wall is undressed and grey with streaks of white. Stepping in, Hephaestus motions for Orihime and Nia to enter the alcove before directing Ichigo to the middle of the room.

"Ichigo, I'll keep Orihime and Nia with me, my power should offer enough protection from your own. Also, when you unleash Bankai I will start my measurements. I want to see if you can do it."

"Do what exactly?"

"Join a very short list Ichigo. So when you and Zangetsu are ready, you may begin." He moves to stand in front of the two witnesses, but doesn't block their view of him.

Wielder and spirit face one another over the Tsuka of their still covered Zanpakutō; Ichigo's hand holds the Zanpakutō near the Tsuba under the cloth. "So any last words before we do this?"

"Yeah I do Ichigo. I want you to know that I will always protect whatever you do, I will always help you find a way to win, and lastly, you better make sure you train your ass off and make her our rightful Queen. Got it?"

Sniggering at his blade's spirit, he smiles as he places his free hand at the end of the Tsuka, with Zangetsu placing his hand next onto the hilt, then moving his other hand down so Zangetsu can place his other hand near where the Tsuba should be.

"Well this is it Zangetsu, ready?"

"I am Ichigo, let's do it!"

At first the three beings watching them notice nothing, but soon the first wisps of black Reiatsu begins swirling around Ichigo and Zangetsu as they stare at the cloth covered blade. As the black threads get thicker and thicker, a howling wind starts to rotate around the two hybrids in the middle of the room.

"Now King! Release it all now!"

The black explosion forces those watching to cover their faces as the shock wave hits the tiny alcove they are standing in, crashing against the protection Hephaestus has in place. As the shockwaves disappear, they see Ichigo standing in the middle of the room, at his side in his right hand is a blade with a short handled Tsuka decorated in alternating white and black diamonds, at the end hangs a foot of his Hell Chain; just as his old Shikai was missing the Tsuba, this one does as well, while the blade is the most prominent change. No longer the wide butcher-like blade, it has shrunk down to a mere nine centimeters in width that extends the same measurement until just about halfway before narrowing rather rapidly towards the end, similar to shinogi zukuri. The total length of his new Zanpakutō is one point two meters, the entire weapon curving slightly less than that of an ōdachi. The four engravings now clearly stand out as they glow an alternating light and dark blue.

Taking a practice swing, Ichigo stares as power erupts from the blade and crashes into the far wall, loosening stone from the impact.

"Shit, sorry about that."
"No need to worry Ichigo, there are several layers to get through before I have to start worrying. How does he feel?"

"Incredible." The hybrid Devil marvels at the masterpiece Zanpakutō in his hands.

"Are you ready for the next step Ichigo?"

Nodding, he holds the blade vertically in front of him before bringing it down into a two handed stance. 'Ready Zangetsu?'

"**Remember, I am no longer that false blade Ichigo, I've changed.**"

'Got it. Here we go.'

"Bankai! Tensa Zangetsu!"

Orihime and Nia both begin gasping as they can no longer breathe, the Greek god exuding his own power to push back the black aura that now shrouds the young Devil, lowering the oppressive pressure that threatens to crush them. Staring at the raging storm of pitch black Reiatsu in the room, both healer and assassin wait with anxious anxiety for the person within it to reappear. Soon the blackness fades away and Ichigo is standing there, but his Zanpakutō is not what the Shun Shun Rikka user remembers.

"He changed." She says unconsciously.

"Orihime?"

"His Zanpakutō, Zangetsu. That is not what it looked like before."

Nia looks at the blade now in his hands, and it looks rather odd, with a longer Tsuka than his Shikai, while the blade retains the shape and curve of a katana it ends as a shobu zukuri instead. The Tsuka is covered with simple black leather wrappings, while his Tsuba has changed to that of five pointed rods separated in perfect symmetry, which leads to a blade that is now the length of a normal katana. No color other than black is visible on the Zanpakutō. At the end of the Tsuka, a much longer section of Ichigo's Hell Chain dangles. Orihime watches as Ichigo brings the weapon to his eye level and then runs a hand down the blade.

'What is this?'

"**My true form Ichigo. Now let the god take his measurements. Hope you like what you hear from him.**"

Moving until he faces the three in the alcove, Ichigo uses his free hand to motion to them. "I'm ready."

"Good, all I'm going to do is toss some spheres in there with you Ichigo. Won't take long."

The first one to pass through the protection of his godly aura instantly disappears, as does the next one. With the third one, it lasts long enough to crumple before disappearing.

"Hephaestus what is going on?" Orihime asks as she watches the Greek god toss a fourth sphere into the room.

Taking out a fifth one after the forth one lasts a fraction longer than the third, he holds it out for her to see. "The density of his power is measured by how long each sphere can maintain their shape."
Each successive sphere exponentially increases in durability, but so far none have lasted long, just as I suspected."

"How many do you have left?" The Elf asks curiously.

"This makes five out of ten Nia."

"Has anyone destroyed all ten?"

Looking down at the Elf, he smirks. "Only enough for me to count on both hands. If Ichigo crushes all ten, he will join a very exclusive list."

"How exclusive?" The teen Elf asks.

"Only ten have made the list." Grinning at her wide-eyed look, he tosses the fifth sphere out before adding, "The last to do so was Sirzechs Gremory."

XXXX

Yasaka stands over the prone teen, her rage barely contained after seeing and hearing the evidence of what the young female Yōkai had been involved with. Casting a glance at the others in the room, she steps back slowly. Fighting down her emotions until she can once again exude the nobility of her race, the Kyuubi opens her eyes again and stares down at the silent prisoner.

"Zeva, there is nothing I can do or will do to save you from the punishment you deserve. You are directly responsible for the deaths of one hundred and sixty-seven men, along with the rapes and murders of their significant others, whether they were girlfriends, fiancées or spouses. There is no sentence less than death for you. The only one who can spare you at this point is not here at the moment. I have an idea of what he will decide, but if he defers the punishment to his great-grandfather, you will die at sunset after the final judgment is passed."

"I understand Yasaka." The half-breed Yōkai replies.

"Do you wish me to contact your mother?"

"No. Just return my body to her. Tell…tell her I love her and I'm sorry for disappointing her."

Looking up, she nods to the two Devils standing guard. "Take her back, we will wait for Ichigo and see what he wishes for her."

Bowing to the powerful Yōkai, they lift the chained teen without comment and lead the emotionless teen away.

Rukia watches it all, stunned by what had taken place. When she was told that they were going to pass judgment on the prisoner, she and the others wanted to see the woman that had tried to kill their two friends. Karin, Yuzu, Ururu, Jinta, Kunou and Koneko were forbidden from attending, they were informed that things were going to be shown that the older beings just didn't want them to see. The teenage Devils and humans were given a choice to attend or not; a few of them now regretted choosing to watch, among them her fellow Lieutenant Momo who had run off to throw up, as did Tatsuki and Reya Kusaka, one of Sōna's bishops.

Rukia herself almost left when the more graphic details were played, the screams and begging almost driving her to pull Sode No Shirayuki from her sheath to plant it in the young woman's head. Throughout it all, only the older peerage members, the Maou and the older Shinigami remained coldly expressionless. Even Captain Sui-Fēng kept easing Suzumebachi unconsciously in
and out of her sheath, as if she were using the motion to try to sate the urge to repeatedly stab the young half-breed Yōkai, which was kinda scary paired with the blank look on her face. One look at Isshin also had her convinced that it was a good idea that the former Captain hadn't attended in his soul form, she was almost positive he had shut down his Gigai's expressive functions to prevent his fury from leaking into his expression.

But it was the man sitting in the center behind Yasaka that had the hardest expression on his face during the brief trial. Amyntas Naberius sat in his true form, his eyes never leaving the young woman's face as he listened to Sasha and Kimi lay out the evidence of the humans' involvement with Zeva. When Sasha showed her lord of what she saw in the young woman's own memories, only the briefest hint of anger escaped him, but it was enough to remind them all of his true position as Guardian of the Damned.

Swallowing when the doors shut behind the now departed Yōkai, Rukia sits there in silence waiting for something to happen, anything.

"Isshin, what will my great-grandson most likely decide?" Amyntas suddenly asks.

Ichigo's father looks at his grandfather-in-law and tiredly replies. "I honestly don't know Amyntas. Killing like this isn't him. If...if someone talks to him first and tells him the truth however, I think he'll come to the right decision."

"I'll talk to him Isshin, it might be better if someone like me or Merti explains it to him why he has the final say." Yoruichi volunteers.

"No, I will Yoruichi. I think it's time I told him some of the things a Clan leader is expected to decide on. But you can tag along if you want."

Rukia and Rias both realize at the same time what they are talking about. The Shinigami leaps to her feet first as she yells at them. "Are you crazy Shiba-dono, Shihōin-sama!? You can't dump this on him right now! He...he isn't ready for this, he hasn't had to sentence a criminal to death like many of you have done in the past..."

The Goddess of Flash looks at the younger Shinigami with an understanding expression to Rukia's objections. "If not now Rukia, then when? He wasn't raised as a noble like any of us here. This is one lesson that must be taught to him, Rukia Kuchiki, one that you will someday have to teach your own children. Passing judgment and rendering a sentence on a criminal is part of a Clan leader's responsibilities; your brother has done so a few times himself. I have, Isshin has for Kūkaku, and so have the various Clan leaders both here in the Underworld and back in Soul Society. Ichigo can't be treated with kid gloves anymore Rukia, I'm sorry to say it but this has to be done, and preferably as soon as he gets home."

"But why tonight? Shouldn't he at least rest before facing this?" The Kuchiki pleads.

"He will know that we are keeping something from him if we wait. I doubt Rias would even be able to look him in the face, knowing what she does."

Rias nods her head at the younger Shinigami. "Yoruichi is right Rukia; I can't hide my feelings from Ichigo. I would cave and tell him, I'm not as experienced as they are in explaining this necessity."

"If he chooses to spare her?" Rukia hesitantly asks.

"Then we will spare her, but she will never see the light of day again Rukia. She will live out her
life in the darkest of our prisons, but either way, what awaits her after her death is far worse."

Rukia's eyes bulge out as she looks at the man that is the current Watcher of the Gates of Hell. "She will be…"

The grim expression on Amyntas's face sends chills down her spine. "Yes, she is partially human; as such her soul will be taken by the Kushanāda upon her death Rukia Kuchiki."

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Before tossing in the eighth sphere, the Greek god pauses as he looks at the young Devil still standing there. Deciding to see if he can make the list, he shouts out for Ichigo to don the armor of the Naberius Clan.

Orihime and Nia see black Reiatsu swirl upwards from Ichigo's feet and watch in awe as the plates of his black armor form on his body, from his greaves to his gauntlets, to his breastplate, and then his two horned helmet. Orihime shivers at how closely it resembles his Vasto Lorde transformation, an action that does not go unnoticed by Ichigo.

"It's still me Orihime, not like before." He assures her.

"I know Ichigo, I can still feel you."

Ichigo's helmet seems to smile to her, which makes the two young women giggle at how the fearsome helm somehow reflects his true emotions despite having no facial features to do so.

"Last three Ichigo, now reach down deep and let it all out."

Nodding, Ichigo's body stiffens slightly, and then the protection in front of the god and two teen women begins rippling under the pressure straining against it, forcing Hephaestus to ramp up on his aura.

Throwing out the sphere in his hand, it disappears as quickly as the first one had, the next one suffering the same fate as the fourth, and when he takes out the tenth and final sphere, he smirks at the transformed Devil waiting in front of him.

"Here it goes Ichigo, you can relax after this one." All three watch as the tenth ball sails through the protection, crumpling and disappearing just before it can hit the floor of the room.

As it does, Ichigo sags to one knee and lets his armor fade, Zangetsu morphing back to his Shikai release as well. Orihime looks at the Greek god, who gives her a gentle nudge, and she is out of the alcove with her healing shield around the teen before she is even halfway there.

"Ichigo!"

Lifting his head up, the drained young man gives her a weak smile. "I'm fine Hime, just tired. Standing there at full power after so long wore me out real good."

Nia and Hephaestus walk up to the two siblings as Orihime's healing fairies check Ichigo over for any injuries after both his Bankai and Devil releases. Nodding to the god, the young hybrid Devil smirks up at him.

"How did I do?"

"You just joined a very short list Ichigo. I look forward to seeing what you will do for the next few
Orihime looks at Ichigo before tilting her head. "You will live that long Ichigo?"

Ichigo twists his head up at her, and at first, he is quiet, then a smile slowly appears on his face and he starts chuckling. Seeing her pout at him, he begins to break down in laughter, weakly gesturing at Nia for help explaining. A head of burnt-orange hair looks at the young Elf and sees her eyes filled with amusement.

"Orihime, Devils are near immortal, we do not age. We only die if outside circumstances are the cause. Ichigo won't age, I won't age, and soon you won't age. Your physical appearance will stop changing in your late twenties to early thirties."

Ichigo catches the dead weight of his sister, still laughing as she topples across him in a dead faint. "Well I think she'll be happy when she wakes up that she's going to be young forever, at least once she becomes a Devil."

Lifting the unconscious healer off her young Lord in a bridal-style carry, the Elfin teen speaks as she shakes her head. "I think we should return home soon Ichigo, our Clan might start worrying."

Hephaestus cuts in before they can say any more. "Before you go Ichigo, I still have two things to do for you and Orihime. Follow me back to the forge."

Nia, carrying Orihime, and Ichigo follow the Greek god back into the cave once more. After Nia places Orihime on two chairs, each of the young adults take a chair of their own. The Greek god however moves over to his forge and takes two completed tantō sized blades from a shelf. One with a black and sea blue Tsuka, the other with a black and violet Tsuka; he hands the one that is black and blue to Nia.

"These tantō will never break or need sharpening Nia Mai'ryl. They have the few melted scraps of Zangetsu mixed in them. Wield them with honor and pride as you guard Ichigo's life for all his days."

Both awake Devils gasp at the gifts, Ichigo more so at what the Greek god had just said to the Elfin teen.

"Nia, who are you exactly?"

Sitting straight as she faces her young Lord, she replies solemnly. "Nia Mai'ryl, Lake Elf of the Naberius Clan, daughter of Sasha Mai'ryl, assassin and chief interrogator of the Naberius Clan. I and my sister are now your bodyguards for life Ichigo. We have trained all our lives for something like this, but to be honest we never thought we would be given the honor of being Lord Naberius's first choice to keep guard on his great-grandson. Please allow us to fulfill our duties Ichigo."

He shakes his head after listening to his inner spirit. "It's not that Nia, it's because...well honestly I seem to attract a lot of trouble. All my life it has come looking for me, so I want to say I'm sorry in advance to you and your sister."

Hephaestus begins laughing loudly then, so much so that it awakens the fainted Orihime who blinks her eyes and looks around groggily at her new location.

"What happened? I just had a strange dream..."

"You fainted Hime. I guess living forever was a bit more than you could deal with." Ichigo replies casually as he sits next to her, prompting her to give an eep of embarrassment.
"S-Sorry." She apologizes sheepishly as she moves to sit up, a large hand helping her do so.

"Thank you Hephaestus-sama." She smiles at the old god, who returns her smile.

"No Orihime, you may call me Hephaestus as well. I will not allow you to call me anything else. And that is also why I wish to give you a gift before you leave."

"A gift?"

Holding his arm out, the owl, Pistós, comes flying in and lands on the Greek god's arm. He leans down and lets the bird walk onto Orihime’s shoulder.

"Many Devils have familiars Orihime; I would like you to have Pistós as yours when you are reincarnated by your brother. He will also serve as a means for us to communicate if the need ever arises, and he can guide me to your side if you are ever in need of my help."

Tears begin falling down the face of the Shun Shun Rikka user's face as she jumps up and hugs the burly Greek god, all the while saying the same thing over and over as she does so.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Hugging her back once more, he carefully moves her back to her seat and smiles down at her. "Come visit when your semester is over at Kuoh. I'll show you Mount Olympus from our point of view."

"Really?"

Nodding his head, he waves to the entrance where the same woman who showed them in is there waiting for them. "Take our guests back to the house."

"Yes My Lord. Please follow me." She curtseys to him, then turns and waits expectantly for the three teens to follow.

The three give their last goodbyes and promises to visit soon before departing the forge and the Greek god.

Watching them go with a smile, Hephaestus's expression turns neutral as he detects a divine presence appear behind him, and he turns around to see his father standing there.

"Zeus."

"Hephaestus."

"I see Aphrodite didn't waste time in speaking to you."

"I had to see him with my own eyes my son." Picking up a sphere similar to the one for the test, the Greek god bounces it in his hand, then looks at it startled.

"You used them?"

"Yes, and as I thought, he passed."

"Then I will listen to your advice. When he is ready to see me, I will gladly invite him to Olympus, and I will listen to your council on how to deal with him honestly."

"Thank you, Father. I hope you don't get impatient, he is still a student in high school."
Chuckling as a portal opens behind him, the leader of the Greek gods smirks at his son. "I just hope I can keep an eye on your sisters once they see him."

Groaning as he realizes he had forgotten how they would react, the God of Craftsmen shakes his head at the trouble that might follow the Naberius Heir.

'Great, nothing like making a Devil heiress pissed than besotted goddesses chasing her intended.'

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Ichigo and Nia both know something serious is going on when the only two people waiting for them when they return to the Underworld are Isshin and Yoruichi. After the two older Shinigami give Orihime a hug and look her over, they ask Nia to take her to her room where a hot bath and delicious food are already waiting for her. When the burnt-orange-haired healer looks at Ichigo with confusion, he just smiles at her and waves her off after promising he will eat and bathe as well.

After they leave, he sighs out at his father. "What's going on Goat-Face?"

He isn't ready for his father's serious response. "We need to talk Ichigo, and in private. Follow Yoruichi and I."

XXXX

Sasha sits at her vanity as her oldest daughter Kimi brushes out her hair for her, her younger daughter Nia watching them from the bed. Smiling at the care her daughter shows while doing this, the older Mai'ryl is proud of how her two children have grown to be fine Elves. From the moment they learned of their father's death at the hands of a fallen angel, they had pledged themselves to endure the same training she and her sisters had been forced to undergo thanks to the cruelty of the Old Maou Faction. Her daughters had proved their worth over the years however, so much so that they were given their first great honor, Hell Chains of their own. Few outside of the peerages had ever earned them, and now her daughters can proudly count themselves among the few who have. Their next distinction came when Yoruichi Shihōin was brought to see them. After a test that she and Merti weren't allowed to witness, Amyntas gave her twins the greatest honor possible, guarding Ichigo for life. Both her daughters had proven themselves today in keeping Ichigo from violating long standing treaties with the Yōkai, keeping his sister from becoming a victim of unspeakable horrors, and dealing with the situation cleanly and effectively.

Then the presence she has been tracking since it entered the mansion stops in front of her door; stopping her child, she calls out.

"Come in Ichigo."

Nia and Kimi both see a weary but conflicted young Devil walk into their mother's room, stopping briefly before spotting a chair and then sitting in it without asking. Despite his action, no one reprimands him as they can see the conflict on his face, the hybrid Shinigami-Devil sitting there with his elbows on his knees and his hands folded over so he can prop his chin up as he stares into space.

"Ichigo?" Nia says as she shifts on the bed.

"Sasha...Amyntas, Goat-Face and Yoruichi told me what happened after Orihime and I left that house. All I want to know is, if there is a way for you to show me, what was in her head?"

The older Elf softly answers him. "I can, but I won't Ichigo. Your mind is tired as is your body."
Tonight, just rest and recover."

"No. I need to know now if it's true what her own mind showed. If I'm to make a choice I want to know all the facts, and I won't always be rested and prepared for it. Please Sasha, show me."

Sasha closes her eyes and listens to his heart beating strong and steady; his body odor is free of alcohol or other toxic substances, and his body does not show any signs of anxiousness, only just a hint of weariness. Lastly, what Reiatsu he allows to leak from him is calm.

"Sit in front of me Ichigo; I need to touch you so you can experience her memories."

Picking his chair up, Ichigo moves it until he is sitting in front of the Elf his 'uncle' had told him is responsible for extracting the information needed to sentence the teen Yōkai who had tried to seduce and kill him and have his sister raped and murdered. Staring straight into Sasha's clouded over orbs, he doesn't flinch as she lays her hands on his cheeks, nor does he utter a response when she speaks next.

"I warn you now Ichigo, what you will feel next is what she tried to hide from me. She failed."

Then he understands Sasha's words when he is nearly overwhelmed by feelings of bloodlust, joy in killing, and happiness at ending human lives. Zeva's voracious appetite barely being sated as she ripped out the souls of the countless men she had fed upon during her short life. Her utter lack of compassion and remorse when she knew the details of what was and would be done to the women she helped victimize. No remorse, no empathy for her victims, just...just hollow hunger, an unrepentant killer. A true sociopath and serial killer. It becomes worse when images begin to form and match Zeva's feelings, showing her point of view as she watches her victims' bodies shrink to almost nothing as she drains their life energy, the screams coming from the female victims she sometimes overheard being raped and murdered only adding to her pleasure.

It is when he feels the smile on her face as she overhears their meeting with Zera and spies on her would be next victim, her cruel thoughts regarding Orihime and the way she plans for her kidnapping, rape and murder, that his mind is made up. Gently, he places his hands over the elder Elf's, indicating that he has seen enough. Feeling her lift them slightly, he takes them into his hands and removes them from his head, holding them in front of his eyes.

"How do you stand watching, feeling what they do, Sasha? How are you not insane?"

The Lake Elf only stares at him with sightless eyes. "Did Merti tell you anything?"

"Only you developed it and it cost you something, she didn't say what though."

Taking his right hand, she places it over her heart and asks what he can feel. Frowning, he is about to say nothing, when he suddenly realizes what he is feeling, the lack of a heartbeat. Snapping his head up at her in shock, he is about to ask when he feels a single heartbeat finally.

"Yes Ichigo, you noticed correctly. My heart beats much slower than everyone else's. That's because in order to fulfill my pledge to your great-grandfather, I gave up half my soul so I could keep my sanity, the other half is hidden away, the part that is insane. It suffers so I do not have to. That is my price to pay."

Hearing nothing from the heir of her Lord, she lays a finger on his lips. "Don't ask, I will never tell you how it was done. That is my secret alone, one that I will pass on to whichever of my daughters is willing to follow in my footsteps. You don't get to argue against it Ichigo, we are Naberius,
every member of our peerages are Naberius. Our life belongs to the Clan first, ourselves second. We have each made this pledge to help keep the Sinners in their place and to keep the Guardian of the Damned safe from all harm. That pledge now includes you and your sisters."

Kissing the back of her hand and giving them a grateful squeeze, he gets up and leaves the room, but pauses as he reaches the door before glancing back. "Thanks Sasha, for not coddling me."

"You are welcome Ichigo. Now rest, I think your day has been long enough."

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Waking from her slumber, Rias feels Ichigo crawling into bed with her, his warm arms wrapping around her and pulling her tight against his body. Turning until she sees his face, she gives him a knowing smile, tracing the contours of his face before giving him a chaste kiss. He pulls her in even more and his head buries itself in the crook of her neck, his breathing slowing as it flows over her naked skin.

Just before he feels the weight of sleep pulling on him, he tells her softly. "I sentenced her to death, Rias."

"Do you find it acceptable?" She asks him just as softly.

"I know she'll never repent or show remorse for her crimes Rias. I saw it in her memories, I know it for a fact."

"You know she'll be interned in the Skeleton Tower when she dies."

"She already is. I asked that she be given numbing poison on my way here, Uncle Amyntas agreed to my request to give her an easy death."

"Then sleep now Ichigo. We'll talk in the morning." She doesn't get an answer as the man holding her falls asleep, his breathing soft and steady.

XXXX

Amyntas and Yoruichi don't react when the Gates open and the chains rattle over the estate, then all too soon the Gates close and crumble away.

Sipping his wine, the Guardian of the Damned glances at the former Captain. She is staring at her own saucer of sake, her mind clearly going over what Ichigo said before he left her and Isshin. He is proud that his great-grandson didn't vomit or try to run when they showed him the evidence gathered from the house. He also understands Ichigo's confusion when they told him what the girl had admitted to doing.

'Why the hell would she admit that? Is she asking for us to kill her?'

'No Ichigo she ain't, but she couldn't hide it from Sasha. '

'Couldn't hide it? What does that even mean Yoruichi?'

'It means Sasha retrieved the girl's memories Ichigo. '

Wait, who is this Sasha and how can she even do...whatever it was you just said, retrieve memories?'
'She is Merti's younger sister, and the mother of Nia and Kimi. She has a power to see into someone's memories and extract them so she can allow others to see them Ichigo.'

'Did you guys see them?'

'No, only your great-grandfather did. Don't Ichigo, I know what you are thinking, I won't allow it son.'

'Not your choice Dad. You and Yoruichi just sat me down and told me it's my choice to decide Zeva's fate and why it is my duty as the future head of this Clan that I learn to deal with this kind of shit. So, if I'm going to decide between having someone executed or imprisoned I want to know what the fuck was going on in her head.'

'Fine, but I'm warning you now Ichigo, it won't be easy. Promise us you will talk to someone if it gets to be too overwhelming for you to cope with.'

'I promise I will, Yoruichi, Dad. I got to go now and see Uncle Amyntas, so he can tell me about Sasha before I see her tonight.'

'I'm already here Ichigo. I'll tell you where to find Sasha, but I hope you are prepared for what you will see.'

"He made his choice Yoruichi; he found a solution that worked for him."

Sipping her sake, the former Assassin nods in agreement. "Yeah he did Amyntas, but it won't always be this way."

"Maybe not, but we now have time to teach him better."

"That we will Amyntas, I'll make sure of it."

"Then you have decided Yoruichi?"

Turning to face the elder Devil, she smiles at him.

"I've thought about it long and hard Amyntas, there is no going back for me."

"So?"

"Yes, I'll stay as a member of your Clan."

XXXX
Candice lies awake on her bed in the very early morning hours, staring up at the ceiling. The events of last night racing through her head as she remembers the visit her former cellmate had received and what had happened to her afterwards.

Flashback Start

Candice watched as the girl called Zeva was brought back three hours after they took her away, the two guards removing her chains and guiding her into her cell without speaking once to her. She watched through a cracked eyelid as the teen stood there for a length of time before quietly making her way over to the small cot in her cell and climbing in. A hours passed before she noticed a new presence approaching their cells; looking up and seeing the orange-haired young man standing there brought back the memories of how easily he had beaten her squad of Quincy. She must have made some unwitting noise since he glanced into her cell without warning.

She immediately feigned being asleep, all the while looking at him through almost fully-lidded eyes, and on seeing his expression she had to wonder what was wrong with him. The person who stood there now almost made her believe he wasn't the same person as the one who had single-handedly destroyed her squad. Back then he had been snarling, hitting and killing her men with ease, his eyes filled with determined fury and the hunger of battle. Now, now that spark was gone, replaced by weariness, his shoulders hunched with resignation and his eyes, dead to the living. He turned away from her cell, walking over to the Yōkai girl's cell instead and knocked on her cell door almost too softly, his voice speaking listlessly.

"You know why I'm here Zeva Argyros." His quiet voice echoed out clearly in their cells.

"I know why, so get on with it." Her fellow prisoner responded, and Candice had to fight back an involuntary shiver at how dead the Yōkai teen's voice seemed to be.

"Answer me one thing before I do. Did you really feel no remorse for what you and those men
did?" The Shinigami's voice hardened audibly with those words.

Zeva laughed quietly before she answered him truthfully. "Humans are food for me Devil, I took what I wanted. They took what they wanted."

"So, you really have no remorse for what you did, what your friends did..." He shook his head, then moved closer and slid open the food slot before placing a small bottle on the shelf. Stepping back, he started to walk away before Zeva spoke once more.

"Why are you giving me the easy way out?"

His footsteps stopped, then his voice answered quietly. "A favor to someone."

"Maybe this is your way of avoiding doing the deed yourself?" The Yōkai teen taunted him. "Do you fear having to execute me with your own hands, watching the light leave my eyes?"

Candice winced at hearing those words. She knew full well that the male had no problems with killing his opponents, and the Yōkai teen's taunt would only backfire on her. As expected, the orange-haired male came back into view, stopping in front of her cell, a furious glare easily seen on his face.

"Had I sensed any remorse from you Zeva, any kind of empathy for your victims, I might have let you live out your days in prison, but you have shown me nothing worth speaking of, not even now. For the families of your victims, for the people you helped to rape and murder, I sentence you to death. Drink it and it will be finished."

Despite the feeling of death suffusing their cells, her fellow prisoner still raised her head defiantly. "If I refuse?"

"Then I will execute you myself." Candice watched as the orange-haired male touched the Tsuka of his Zanpakutō, the gesture unmistakable and the grim expression on his face telling her he was not lying at all.

Silently staring at him, the Yōkai teen finally got out of her cot and grabbed the bottle before she returned back to her spot, staring down at the vial of death in her hands.

"What will you do with my body?" She suddenly asked.

"Cremated please. And Ichigo..." She hesitated. "...never mind."

Candice watched as Ichigo turned and walked away again, listening until his footsteps faded away into the distance before rolling out of her own cot and walking over to the door of her cell. Peering into the shadows of the opposite cell, she saw the teen still looking down at the bottle, and nearly jumped when Zeva suddenly spoke to her.

"Candice Catnipp, when they come for me, watch what happens, and witness the price we all must pay for the sins we commit while living." A look of resignation was on the Yōkai teen's face. "I'd always known the final outcome... but it was fun while it lasted, I guess."

She watched as Zeva opened the bottle and swiftly drank the contents down. As the girl lay back down on her cot, Candice saw her give a very weak smile then.

"The poison will kill me after I fall asleep, so this is good bye Quincy." Candice didn't move or
respond, watching the teen as the rise and fall of her chest gradually slowed, then stopped.

Closing her eyes briefly to respect the passing of her fellow prisoner, Candice moved back to sit on her own cot, wondering what Zeva had meant by 'watch when they come for her'. Unexpected movement from the other cell caused her to look over immediately, and her eyes widened when she saw two Zevas, one still lying on the cot, and the other one standing with her Chain of Fate already severed. The loud creaking of metal on metal rang out, followed by the sounds of chains rattling, the sounds almost deafening in their enclosed cells. Hurriedly getting to her feet and looking around for the source of the noise, she saw the shade of Zeva turning to look straight at her.

"This is what happens when you sin, Candice Catnipp." The spirit's body suddenly jerked and arched backwards as a large blade pierced her through the back without warning, exiting from the front of her body and lifting her into the air.

Reeling back in horror, Candice watched as the body and blade seemed to slowly retract into the opposite wall of the cell, through what appeared to be a massive pair of doors that she was having difficulty seeing. As the body and blade vanished through the door, the sounds of malicious laughter reached her ears, then she heard the doors slam shut. Soon, the world grew silent again, but huddling in a corner of her cell, hardly daring to move or breathe, Candice continued to stare wide-eyed at the other cell and its dead occupant, her mind still trying to cope with the existence of that thing. Nearly an hour later, the sounds of boots reached her ears, and she saw four men walk up to the cell. Unlocking the door, they entered the cell, then lifted and wrapped the body in a red sheet, before carefully hoisting it onto their shoulders and then leaving the same way they came, the now-empty cell and her memories the only things remaining of her fellow prisoner. Then, she suddenly realized the tall woman with pointy ears and clouded eyes from before was standing in front of her cell.

"W-What happened to her?" The Quincy asked with a faint tremor in her voice, unconsciously rubbing the seals on her arms.

The supposed Elf lowered her head as she answered. "The Empusa known as Zeva was judged, sentenced and executed for her crimes, Candice Catnipp. She now resides in the Skeleton Tower, suffering endless torment to pay for her sins in Life, until the Tower feels she has been purified and releases her back into the Cycle of Life."

"How can that be? How can a place decide that for a human soul?" Candice stared at the blind woman in horror.

"The Tower is not just a place, Candice Catnipp. It is an existence that predates the very first Sinner, and will likely exist until the end of Time. The Devils were merely the first to discover its location in the Underworld, and also the first to understand the rules that bind it and all who would trespass within its domain. The Naberius Clan was established to keep watch over the Tower, to prevent the ignorant from stumbling upon it, and to ensure the souls of the Damned as well as those who were foolish enough to sell their souls to our kind during the reign of the original Satan and the Old Maou do not escape its confines. But over the course of centuries of the Naberius Clan's stewardship, the Tower has strangely evolved like all things often do: it has developed a symbiosis with the Naberius Clan, and it is now a fact that no one outside of the Naberius bloodline can develop the magic needed to affect its domain. Furthermore, only those of the Naberius peerages, the Kushanāda, the beings of our creation, and the lesser demons may enter the Tower unmarked by its magic; none else may enter without damning themselves, except for those who have already been damned; they need no assistance in entering the Tower, the Tower will simply claim their souls when they die."
Candice gritted her teeth. "So how come you have a Shinigami killing for you then?" She nearly demanded. "Since when did Shinigami start serving this Tower of yours!"

The smile on the face of the blind woman sent shivers down her spine however. "Shinigami? No little Quincy, he is no Shinigami. While Lord Ichigo may perform those duties once again, he is not one of them any longer. He is a true pureblood Devil of the Underworld and the next to rule our Clan when his time comes."

"H-How is that even possible!?!" Candice backed up even further when the blind Elf woman leaned forward, her milky eyes reflecting what little light there was.

"Some things are not my place to speak of; they must come from him if you wish to know. Either way, even if we do release you, it will be without the knowledge of our clan or our ways, so you need not know the answer to that question Quincy."

Release. Perhaps the word would once have given her hope, but after everything she was forced to reveal, Candice knew that it was now synonymous with Death. "I don't…I can't go home now because of you, Mai'ryl Sasha, even if you choose to set me free. After all the questions you made me answer, my Emperor will condemn me to death the moment he finds out... and he will, of that I have no doubt."

Perhaps it was the bitterness in her voice, or the resignation in her face that revealed she wasn't lying. Either way, the Elf stared at her with those unsettling eyes for a passage of time, before turning to speak to someone outside her range of vision. A few minutes later, she heard the sound of footsteps, then her door was opened and the same teen Elf from before entered, followed by a trio of servants pushing a cart on silent wheels, and carrying two padded chairs with them.

Motioning to her to take a seat as the chairs were placed on either side of the cart, Candice couldn't help her mouth from watering when food, real food was revealed on the trays placed on the cart in front of her. Shakily taking a seat, her eyes nearly tearing up in disbelief, she saw the teen giving her the okay nod, and she started to dig in ravenously as the blind Elf sat in the chair opposite her.

"Tell me of your life Candice Catnipp, and we will see if we can protect you by allowing you to stay. Don't hold anything back: you already know why you can't."

Pausing between bites of food, Candice fixed the Elf with a resigned look. "Fair enough Sasashama. I guess I should start with my childhood, back before I knew anything about Shinigami and Hollows…"

XXXX Flashback End XXXX

Her recollection is disturbed when she sees a familiar figure standing across from her in front of the empty cell. She watches him silently and after a few minutes of him not moving, she calls out to him.

"Not the same as killing in combat is it…Ichigo Naberius?"

Remembering what he had looked like last night, she feels that the orange-headed teen standing before her is in much better shape now. His face had gained some color back, his posture straight, but his eyes are still showing signs of being haunted by what had happened between him and the now-dead Yōkai teen. Hearing her words, he looks back in the cell one more time and makes to move away, but pauses as he answers.

"It's harder today than it was yesterday. Knowing she is dead because I sentenced her to die."
After her conversation last night with Sasha, she decides to ask the question on her mind. "Why did you spare me, Ichigo Naberius? Why didn't you just kill me or leave me to be eaten by the Hollows?"

Seeing him glare at her with anger in his eyes, she wonders what she had said that was so wrong as to elicit that kind of response from him.

"When your Emperor took my mother's Quincy powers, he left her defenseless during a Hollow attack. I woke up to my mother's dead body on top of me; she died protecting me from the Hollow with the only thing she had left, her soul. I'll never leave anyone to that fate, not even a Quincy who follows your Emperor." Ichigo coldly informs her.

"Your mother was a Quincy? But how…aren't you a Devil? Wait, weren't you a Shinigami even before that? What the hell are you!??" She can't help but exclaim in confusion.

He sighs tiredly. "It's a long story..."

Waving to the interior of her cell, she deadpans back to him. "Perhaps you haven't noticed, but I got nothing but time Ichigo. And as I've told Sasha-sama, I can't go home, not anymore."

Snorting, he asks her why, which leads her to telling him the truth, again. "Our Emperor knows everything we do, and even if he says nothing, his loyal officers will be more than happy to interrogate me... and by 'interrogate', I mean torture. Once they learn that I told your friends everything, I will be killed immediately afterwards. Even if I was forced to reveal the information unwillingly. Thanks to you and Sasha-sama, I can't ever go back again."

Frowning at her, Ichigo finally motions towards her cell, and a guard steps up to unlock her cell door. Thanking the guard with a nod, Ichigo steps into her cell and takes a seat on the floor beside the door, close enough that he can prevent her from making a break for it. Not that she has any interest in doing so, considering her cell is ironically the safest place for her right now. Candice simply sits on her bed and watches the hybrid sit there gathering his thoughts, until he finally decides to speak up.

"I have a few hours before the others wake up, so since you truly seem interested, I'll tell you why I am like this. It all starts with events over a hundred years ago; Sōsuke Aizen, an ambitious Shinigami Captain, had been field testing a new experiment to find a way to transcend his Shinigami powers..."

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Tessai doesn't even notice the Reiatsu in the air until it is too late, due to having developed an embarrassing tendency to zone out everything else while he is working on the tedious, yet vital task of checking the shop's inventory. Straightening up as he hears the chime ringing to announce a customer, he inwardly sighs as Reiatsu gives away just who is visiting. This particular customer is not someone he had expected to see anytime soon, but considering the circumstances, he is not surprised by the sudden visit. Finally exiting the storage room, the former Kidō Commander shifts his glasses as he gives the Shinigami standing in wait a short and polite bow.

"Good day to you Captain Kuchiki. How may I help you?"

"I need one of Urahara's Gigai and a travel itinerary to Isehara to see my sister and Squad Five Lieutenant Momo Hinamori. Their last reports left several questions that need explaining in greater detail." Byakuya places the order calmly.
"Of course, this way Captain." As Tessai leads the Kuchiki heir to the back, he sends Jinta a very specific look, one that the boy acknowledges with a blink.

The red-headed boy waits until both Tessai and the Captain are out of sight before speed-walking out the shop and then taking off at a mad dash once he feels he is a safe distance away. After running halfway across town, he pulls out his cell phone and hits the first speed-dial number on the list.

"Moshi, Moshi Jinta. Is there something amiss or are you trying to weasel your way out of one of Tessai's punishments again?" A chipper voice greets him.

"Kuchiki's here, as in the Head of the Kuchiki Clan, Captain of Squad Six Kuchiki!" He replies frantically.

"My, this is quite unexpected; oh well, what's done is done. I'll be sending...a surprise for him, so run on back Jinta. Oh, and please tell Tessai to restock the third shelf, I'm afraid we will be in need of a much larger order soon."

"Right, third...The third shelf, got it!"

He hears the distinctive sound of a fan being opened. "Yes, the third shelf. Tell Tessai to be prepared, I received some disturbing news and I don't want to be caught off guard again."

The boy looks at his phone as the line abruptly goes dead. Grumbling at the unfairness of his life and job, he starts to make his way back to the shop at a quick run. Pausing only for a second to give Ururu a noogie as he passes by the young girl, he heads towards the room where he can feel both Tessai and Captain Kuchiki, and knocks on the door hesitantly.

"Come in Jinta."

Acting sheepish, Jinta slides the door open and peers into the room. "Ah, Tessai-san, the Shopkeeper said we'll be having a few guests soon and he wants us to restock the third shelf."

Tessai sees Jinta's eyes direct themselves ever so slightly at Byakuya when the word 'guests' is spoken, and he nods his head in understanding then motions for the boy to leave. Knowing who one or two of their guests may be, he chooses to do the only thing he can to prevent immediate bloodshed from happening.

Turning, he bows to the Squad Six Captain before speaking. "Forgive me Kuchiki-sama, but this is for your own good. Bakudō Number Sixty-One: Rikujōkōrō."

With his experience in Kidō casting, Tessai's Bakudō is completed almost as soon as the words leave his lips. The Kuchiki Captain's eyes widen as six bars of light slam into his midsection, pinning him in place. However, rather than attempt to break free, he turns his icy gaze upon the former exile instead.

"May I ask what the meaning of this is, Tessai Tsukabishi?"

Before Tessai can answer however, the floor of the room begins to glow a bright blue color before it flashes and causes them to blink their eyes to clear away the tears from the blinding luminousness; only to reveal four women standing in front of him, one of them immediately being recognized by Byakuya.

"How did I know you would be the cause behind this Shihōin?" The Kuchiki Captain grits his teeth as he sees his former Sensei and nemesis smirking back at him.
"Ah ah, Bya-kun, don't be like that now...after all this time, a simple hello for your Sensei would be a nice change for once." Yoruichi greets him, smiling as wide as she can while bending to meet his gaze.

Scoffing at the werecat, he shifts his gaze to the other women and sees someone who shouldn't be here. "Captain Suì-Fēng, do you mind explaining your presence here?"

He is shocked by the smile that forms on the current Onmitsukidō Commander's face. "I'm here as a teacher for a few days Captain Kuchiki. While I am sure not many can question my loyalty to Soul Society, it is an unavoidable truth that my loyalties to Yoruichi and the Fon Clan have always been stronger."

"I see." Byakuya simply nods his understanding, loyalty to one's clan is something he is all-too familiar with. His eyes then travel to the next two women, and his eyes visibly widen in surprise as he takes in their appearance.

The first woman is wearing a body suit, one that is reminiscent of the Shihōin princess's outfit from the Winter War, and nothing much else, but that is not what catches his eyes. It is her physical attributes that makes him question whether his staff had fed him something different this morning. Blinking once in disbelief, he stares at the two foxlike ears adorning the head of the woman, and the nine fox tails swishing gently behind her. Almost unconsciously, he compares her to Sajin Komamura - the well-known werewolf Captain of Soul Society, as well as to Yoruichi, the lesser-known werecat. He has to admit the woman's physical stature is on par with Yoruichi's, but her bright red-orange hair and silvery grey eyes that draw him to the fact that her hair is actually fur covering her exposed body reminds him more of Captain Komamura. Shifting his eyes to the other woman and seeing her studying him just as intently, he notes her emerald green eyes and the two point tipped ears sticking out from under her silky black hair. He also notices that the beige dress she is wearing accentuates rather than hides the curves of her physique, something that is quickly picked up on by the blasted shape-shifter who delights in making his life a living hell.

"You see something you like Kuchiki? Be careful, one is married, the other, well let's say her new charge wouldn't like it you kept staring at her too long, if ya catch my drift?" Yoruichi snickers.

Closing his eyes in annoyance, Byakuya takes a deep and calming breath to find his center before opening them again and focusing his gaze on the one person he believes is responsible for this entire situation. "At least tell me why I am currently restrained, Yoruichi Shihōin?"

To his surprise, a look of frustration replaces her playful smirk as she pinches the bridge of her nose exasperatedly. "You want to know why? You have the worst fucking timing in the entirety of the afterlife Byakuya Kuchiki, that's why. All you had to do was wait two or three more weeks and I would've been able to explain things to you, Shinji and Jūshirō properly, but no, you just had to come and check on her yourself, didn't ya?"

He glares at her immediately. "Rukia is my Imouto Shihōin, and she is also my heir. I may have failed her in the past, but I have no intention of doing so again. What I do to protect her is my business alone."

The werecat rolls her eyes at him. "I should have known those half-baked reports from her would draw you here. You never would've been satisfied by them like the other Captains were. Fine, you want to see Rukia, you can do it, but you'll have to do it my way or else I'll have Tessai drop you in the deepest hole in the training room and seal you away for the next two months. So Byakuya, here is the deal: you will give me your Zanpakutō, you will listen to everything I tell you, and you won't say a word until I say otherwise. If not, you better get comfy in that Bakudō and prepare for two months of intense boredom."
"You really think you can kidnap a Captain of the Gotei Thirteen and get away with it?" He asks her almost incredulously.

Yoruichi's smirk comes back in full force. "I just did. No one here remembers you coming to the shouten, Tessai and the kids were gone for the week, and Kisuke and I were with Isshin at a medical conference harassing Ishida-san. So, Captain, what's it gonna be? Here or there?"

Byakuya's eyes narrow almost imperceptibly at her. "You would really do it wouldn't you?"

"Betcha ass I would. You have no idea of the shit storm you're about to find yourself in." Yoruichi smirks again. "So, by your question, I'm going to go with you saying yes?"

"Yes." Thanklessly he had informed Shinji of his travel plans, and the Vizard Captain was both cunning and paranoid enough to check up on him if he disappeared without a trace, so he knows Yoruichi's threat is an empty one. However, he does want to know what Rukia has gotten herself involved in, and if that means he has to endure the werecat for a while more, he is willing to do it for his adopted sibling.

"Good. Release him Tessai. Give me your Zanpakutō when you are released Byakuya, and don't do anything stupid okay? There are five of us and just one of you. Those two might feel weak but trust me; they'll kick your ass just as I did back in the day."

Not bothering to grace her with a reply, he simply hands over Senbonzakura over after mentally informing the Zanpakutō spirit to go wild if he is being attacked, which calms down the spirit somewhat. After being provided his Gigai and told to enter it, Byakuya takes his bags from Tessai and turns to his former Shunpo instructor.

"I am ready to leave Shihōin, now show me this so-called 'storm' of yours and how my Imouto is involved."

"Fine. Hang on and remember Byakuya, don't move when we get there until you are given the all clear. Akiko, if you please?"

Before he can ask how they are planning to travel, he feels a different power flare around him and his world shifts radically. When it abruptly stops, he drops his bags and drops to one knee, his mind spinning with intense vertigo and his breakfast retracing its path back the way he had eaten it this morning. Unable to control himself, he vomits onto the marble floor under him, his stomach retching painfully over and over again.

"Well, at least he wasn't the only one Yoruichi."

"Mother! Yoruichi! That was not funny!"

"Sorry Hanako but we couldn't resist; now both he and you-know-who have something in common."

"Here Kuchiki-sama." Hearing the new voice address him, Byakuya weakly raises his head to see a woman who looks similar to the nine-tailed Kitsune accompanying Yoruichi earlier.

Kneeling before Byakuya is a young woman whose white tails brush along the cool marble floor, her golden, cat like eyes looking at him with concern, face framed by white hair, with white fox like ears and a hairstyle matching the other woman's. She wears a lovely lavender colored yukata with white lotus print on it, and a sakura pink obi.

"Drink this please, it will get rid of the taste and help restore you." She advises him politely.
Nodding his thanks, he takes the cup and drinks it down until there is nothing left, feeling his stomach settle slightly as the liquid stabilizes it. Handing the cup back to the woman with another nod of thanks, he attempts to stand up, then fights to keep himself from flinching when three very large faces suddenly fill his vision. Forcibly clamping down on his instincts, he makes no movement as the middle head sniffs him very thoroughly before backing away.

"Welcome to the Naberius Estate, Byakuya Kuchiki." The Cerberus speaks in a gruff voice. Everyone turns to look at the stoic Shinigami when he doesn't say a word.

"Is there something wrong with him Yoruichi?" The Cerberus asks the purple-haired Goddess of Flash.

"No Kane, I think he passed out while still standing somehow." Said woman replies, smirking as she goes forward to poke Byakuya in the face.

She quickly pulls her hand back however when the irritated Captain swipes at her invading digit, returning her smirk with a glare of his own. Shaking his head in annoyance, the Kuchiki turns to face the Cerberus and greets him properly. "Forgive me Kane; I wasn't informed of anything prior to my arrival. I thank you for your kind welcome and apologize for my intrusion."

The not so subtle glare he is giving to a certain werecat makes it obvious who he considers to be the offending party; even Suì-Fēng has trouble hiding her amusement at seeing the normally cool and aloof noble acting so prickly towards Yoruichi. The werecat in question and Akiko the Kitsune however are openly laughing at him, while Merti on the other hand has yet to show him any kind of emotion.

Unaware of their thoughts, Byakuya's eyes continue to glare at Yoruichi. "So exactly where are we Shihōin?"

The former Onmitsukidō Commander simply grins at him. "Well that's the surprise Byakuya, why don't we show you why your sister spends her nights here with Lieutenant Hinamori?"

"Very well." As he reaches down to grab his bags however, Byakuya realizes they are missing. He isn't given the chance to ask about them however as he realizes the five women are leaving through an adjoining hallway without waiting for him. Catching up to them with a quick use of Shunpo, the Kuchiki noble finds himself walking down a hallway filled with opulence: the tapestries are rare and expensive weaves of the finest materials, the statues seem to be from masters of years gone by, and the paintings are worked with skill that is equal to the most famous of artists from the World of the Living. He also notices that the maids and other servants are going about their own tasks with ease and efficiency that would put the servants of many of his fellow nobles to shame, though the Kuchiki clan prides itself on having highly skilled servants; what he finds most baffling however is the way they greet Yoruichi with respect, just as much as they show the two Kitsune and the Elf. Soon he finds himself stopping in front of a pair of large wooden doors, his guides turning to look at him.

"Byakuya, once you enter this room, you will learn the real reasons why you were brought here." Yoruichi informs him, her face surprisingly serious.

He looks at the woman with suspicion, but sees something he hasn't seen on her face in years: trepidation.

"Yoruichi?"
She shakes her head tiredly. "I wanted to wait for this day Byakuya, but sometimes you just have to make it up as you go along. Go on then; you'll find out what I mean."

Swallowing his own trepidation, Byakuya pushes the doors open and steps inside the room; the first thing he notices is that it is already being occupied, by many people who he can only describe as unique. A large man with red hair and piercing blue eyes, wearing a green t-shirt that says in yellow print 'Smart, Good Looking & Irish, It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This!' with jeans is the first to look at him when he enters the room. Next to that man is what appears to be a Griffin of all things, laying at a table and reading a book while a servant turns the pages for it. Beside them, a man in a simple but elegant navy blue kimono gets up and walks over to the red-furred nine-tailed Kitsune woman who had walked in behind him, giving her what he can describe as a very intimate kiss.

"Jeez, Mom and Dad why don't you two get a room? Oh, that's right you do have one, so go use it." The white haired younger version of the red-furred Kitsune complains.

"Now, now Hanako, if you want a younger brother or sister so badly all you have to do is ask. Besides, like you and Conor have any room to talk when it comes to showing your affections, openly I might add." Her apparent mother, the red-furred Kitsune smirks at her.

"Arrrgggghhh, you are impossible Mother!" The white-furred kitsune childishly sticks her tongue out before retreating to a balcony patio amidst the chuckles coming from the other people in the room.

Her action draws his attention to the balcony, which is when he hears a voice coming from outside the balcony that he knows all too well, a voice that he shouldn't be hearing. Walking stiffly out onto the balcony, never noticing the smiles and smirks coming from the rest of the room's occupants - especially the man wearing a familiar white and green bucket hat - he steps out onto the patio and stares blankly at the sight before him.

"Dammit Grimmjow! This is supposed to be a friendly spar to ease me back into the swing of things you asshole!"

"Fuck off Naberius, I told you I'd only fight you with the intent to kill ya!"

"Well fat lot of good it will do Tia if I'm killed before I can fulfill my pledge to her you dickhead!"

"Ichi-nii, Grimm-kitty, stop it with the bad language! What if Takeshi and Millaray-chan were here?! You two are lucky that Takeshi is at school and Millaray is taking a nap!"

"Sorry Zu. Sorry Yuzu." The two quarreling voices immediately stop and apologize to the younger voice, before their owners exchange heated glares once again.

Standing on the patio, not seeing the surprised man sitting with two young pre-teens to one side or the two teenage Elves standing behind them, Byakuya's grey eyes scan the grounds below him, where he finds the young man whose voice he recognized lying on his back with a blue-haired, white uniformed man standing a few feet away and throwing blades of grass at him.

'No, it can't be!' His mind tries to protest.

Even as he mentally denies who he is seeing, the younger man he is staring at seems to go rigid as he realizes someone is watching him, and quickly looks back up at him. There is silence as Byakuya's grey orbs lock onto the young man's brown, and their eyes widen at the same time. From everyone else's vantage point, it looks almost as if both males have rehearsed the very same
moves as they raise a hand in unison and point at each other before shouting out at the same time. For once in his life, Byakuya's shock allowed him to match his opponent's crude speech perfectly.

"What the fuck are you doing here!??" The two of them scream out at each other.

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Sitting across from the man who is still rubbing his forehead and temples with his hands are the three Shinigami now responsible for his current discomfort. Now and then one of the occupants of the study would take a quick glance towards the sounds of laughter that echo through the closed windows from outside. A maid quietly sets a fourth glass of scotch near the mumbling Kuchiki, who quickly picks it up with one hand and downs it in a single swig, just like the three glasses before it.

"Ah, Bya-kun, I know you're in shock but you really should take it easy." Kisuke cautions as he watches the usually calm and collected Captain drink like a fish before the group of Devils, humans and former exiles.

Said Captain turns to glare at him with slightly crazed eyes. "This all your fault and his, Kisuke Urahara. I blame both of you for this."

"Wait, how is this my fault?" The shouten owner protests, ignoring the rolled eyes and smirks being sent his way.

Sinking his face back into his hands, Byakuya can only think of one thing. 'I'll kill them both in their sleep. No one would possibly blame me, right?'

Submerged in his dark thoughts, he still feels a hand clap onto his shoulder and he looks up to see Isshin smiling wryly at him. "Byakuya, I know this is a lot to take in, but the fact is my son is a Devil Noble and there is nothing Soul Society can do about it. Be thankful Kisuke saved us a second time because if the Naberius and Sitri Clans had found out that Ichigo had been executed due to Central's ridiculous paranoia, it would have led to a war neither you nor Soul Society would have been prepared for. They take family bonds just as seriously as the Shiba do, and if Kūkaku and the rest of the Shiba clan had found out about Ichigo and the twins relation to them through Masaki, they would have cheerfully helped the Naberius and Sitri storm Seireitei to hunt the members of the Central Forty-Six down."

Narrowing his eyes, the Squad Six Captain remarks back to the former Shinigami Captain. "You speak as if you would have nothing to do with any of it, Isshin Shiba. But you have already chosen their side, haven't you?"

Isshin narrows his eyes as well. "I chose my side long ago Byakuya. The moment Amyntas approached me after Masaki's funeral and told me the truth about her and her father's side of the family, I chose my kids over Soul Society. Heck, I think it'd be more accurate to say I was on the side of my kids' side since the day Ichigo was born."

"And the rest of you?" The stoic Captain asks, directing his question to the rest of the room.

"We are staying as well Kuchiki-sama. We can't trust Central Forty-Six anymore; not after hearing they would have had us killed for trying to help Ichigo." Orihime apologizes from her seat between Chad and Tatsuki.

"He is my cousin, so I'm staying as well Kuchiki-san." Uryū volunteers from his seat beside Serafall.
Looking at Ichigo's other two friends and seeing the unspoken agreement on their faces, Byakuya looks at the three former Captains and sees that they too have chosen to stay. Giving a heartfelt sigh, he speaks up once again. "So why am I here then?"

"You wanted to see your sister, and this is where she stays, so if you want to see her, being here is the best way." Yoruichi says with a flippant tone.

"No Shihōin, there is something more you wish from me, so what is it?" He retorts coolly, his mask finally managing to reform.

Feigning being caught, the unrepentant werecat answers him anyway. "Fine, since you asked so nicely; since you are going to be a guest here for time being Byakuya, how about you train with him?"

"Him?" He can't help his mask from cracking again as he glares at the bane of his existence. "You want me to train…that oaf?"

Immediately, looks of anger appear on many of the faces he can see in the room. A cold voice speaks to him from behind, and he turns around to see his fourth guide standing there, her piercing emerald eyes glaring down at him as she speaks for everyone else in the room.

"He may not be most of Soul Society's idea of a noble, he may be unrefined by your standards Byakuya Kuchiki, but Ichigo Naberius is a noble at heart. In the short time we have spent with him, we have all verified this for ourselves, that the stories we have heard of his loyalty and courage are indeed true. One day Ichigo will lead this Clan and take responsibility for the Skeleton Tower, the place where all Sinners must pay the ultimate price for their crimes, and we will follow his lead with pride. So forgive us if we do not see him the way you do Lord Kuchiki, but Ichigo is the one we trust to lead the Naberius one day, and we will not brook your blatant dismissal of his abilities."

Looking around and seeing that everyone else in the room agrees with her words, Byakuya shakes his head slightly, then stands and makes his way over to a window where he looks out at the six people on the lawn. Ignoring the questioning looks being sent his way, he silently observes the two Arrancar sitting on either side of the dark-haired Kurosaki twin, while a young Elf stands behind them watching the younger lighter haired twin as she admonishes her older brother. Seeing the young girl stand with one hand on her hip and the other pointing vigorously down at the boy who has his hands up in a defensive posture, he remembers the times he had seen Rukia do the same to Ichigo when they thought no one else was watching, something which had amused him back then, especially when she recounted how she had lectured Ichigo on his stubbornness in the same manner multiple times. That very same boy, who is honestly the only reason he even has a relationship with his sister now, who is sitting there laughing at his sister's dressing down, even when she stamps her foot in anger. Closing his eyes briefly, when Byakuya reopens them again they are now filled with resolve. He folds his hands behind him, then turns to the room and begins to speak.

"Forgive my words Merti-san, but Ichigo and I have a…unique understanding, you could say. You are correct however; I often forget that despite his heritage, Ichigo wasn't raised as a noble nor did he live in Soul Society, so his attitude and his lack of formality should not be blamed on him. Unfortunately, I cannot help train him as my time in the World of the Living is short, however I will not speak of what I have seen here, I do owe him that. And when the time comes, I will give him my support if he decides to openly declare himself to Soul Society and make a claim for the Shiba Clan. That is the best I can offer you at this time."

In the silence that follows, only Yoruichi speaks as she looks over at the current Guardian of the
Damned. "Take it Amyntas; it's the best we can hope for." She advises him.

The older male nods but looks towards Ichigo's father for a second opinion. "Isshin?"

"As the head of the Kuchiki Clan and one of the Four Noble Houses, Byakuya's support will go a long way towards keeping Central Forty-Six and the other nobles from making any moves against our family that still live there. Knowing that attacking them would only bring about a war that both sides would suffer greatly from will give Head Captain Yamamoto enough reason to back off from pursuing Ichigo and the others, us included." The former Shiba noble and former Captain reports.

Amyntas leans back in his chair and closes his eyes, weighing his choices. He is thankful that at least one noble of stature is willing to give his great-grandson open support, which will go a long way in keeping the peace. Especially once they tell that same nobleman the information that had literally dropped into their laps.

"Kisuke, is that enough to tell him?" The Devil lord asks of the genius Shinigami in the room.

"It is. Byakuya, I need you to sit down for the rest of the reason why you are here."

The Kuchiki's eye twitches involuntarily. "There's more?"

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"Gremory-san, do you know when our other new students will be coming back?" Suzuki-sensei asks as she hands the young woman five extra sets of homework assignments.

Smiling at the older woman, the Gremory Heiress replies politely. "I believe they will be back next week Suzuki-sensei, they are still adjusting to their new home and our school's tougher academic standards."

Their new homeroom teacher raises an eyebrow as she looks at the younger woman. "Make sure they understand that falling behind so soon will make the year tougher if they plan on going to University after they graduate."

"I will let them know Suzuki-sensei, have a good evening."

"You as well Gremory-san." She sighs out as the crimson-haired teen leaves with the homework for the students who had only shown up for one day and the one student who has yet to arrive.

After leaving their teacher's office, Rias makes her way to her club's meeting place where her peerage, Sōna, Sōna's peerage and the two Shinigami Lieutenants are all waiting patiently for her arrival so they can return to the Naberius Estate. Entering the room, she sees Akeno and Tsubaki talking quietly between themselves, while Sōna is sitting with the two Shinigami, and the rest of the peerages are just sitting around or standing in wait. Glancing around the room, she sees Issei and Yuuto both standing at one side in silence; when they notice her looking at them, they acknowledge her presence with a small bow.

"Well we only have a few hours before we have to come back and start for tonight, so hurry up and finish your homework and any assignments you may have." She informs the gathered youths.

A chorus of yes's and hai's greet her announcement, and she nods to Akeno then waits as the Thunder Priestess forms the magic circle to transport them. Soon, everyone finds themselves back in the Great Dome of the Naberius Estate, but as they are given the all clear, Rukia suddenly freezes in mid-step, causing her friend to walk right into her back.
"Rukia? What's wrong?" The petite Squad Five Lieutenant asks confusedly.

"Nii…Nii…Nii-sama." The Kuchiki Lieutenant stammers in a very frightened voice.

"Nii-sama? Rukia your brother isn't here, no one in Soul Society knows we're here…" Momo's voice stops abruptly as she looks past Rukia and freezes as well when she sees the ridiculously handsome but unattainable Byakuya Kuchiki standing before the group of teens. Swallowing the moisture in her suddenly dry throat, she quickly grabs Rukia's arm and offers the Kuchiki Clan leader a deep bow.

"Forgive us Captain Kuchiki for not giving you a proper greeting." Her mind racing as she tries to make sense of Captain Kuchiki's presence, she still doesn't forget to jab the unresponsive Shinigami beside her to hurry up and greet their superior officer.

Rukia finally snaps out of her daze and she bows lowly before her brother, or more importantly right now, a Captain of Soul Society. "I am sorry Brother, forgive our rudeness for being slow to greet you."

She is shocked once again when a familiar voice pipes up, its owner coming to stand next to her older brother. "See, that is what I'm pissed about Byakuya, how she becomes timid around you whenever she thinks she has done something wrong." That familiar voice complains.

"I seem to remember telling you that I would endeavor to correct that gaki." Byakuya replies with what Rukia almost swears is faked annoyance.

Reflexively wanting to shout at Ichigo for daring to speak like that to her brother, the raven-haired Shinigami takes a deep breath and looks up but immediately stalls at the sight of the smiling orange-head standing beside a grinning Byakuya, both of them looking somewhat worse for the wear.

"W-What the hell did you do to Nii-sama, Berry!?" She gasps when she spies the bruises on her brother's face.

Coming up behind Rukia and Momo, Rias can see what the cause of Rukia's anger is. Ichigo has a healing fat lip and a cut over his right eye, while Rukia's brother also has a fat lip and what looks like a black eye as well. Both men seem to be moving stiffly, likely hiding other bruises on their body if she has to guess, and from the awkward expression on their faces it is clear that they aren't expecting to receive a scolding. Before either man can say a word however, it is the two Arrancar who walk up behind them that provide an answer for their situation.

"Cut them some slack Ice Princess, they only had a 'heated' debate about things earlier; now they solved it, so problems gone." Grimmjow says as he stops beside the orange headed Devil.

Nelliel stifles her laughter, adding more fuel to the fire. "Well, after going Bankai and forcing the staff to fix all the damage these two had caused, calling it a 'heated debate' is putting it mildly Grimmy."

The heads of all the youths in the room swivel to stare at the two men, as one of them nervously rubs the back of his head, and the other simply smirks in his direction, at least until two very angry women step in front of them.

"Ichigo." Rias's hard glare settles on her boyfriend.

"Nii-sama." Rukia's tone for the first time causes Byakuya to flinch, especially at the disappointment in her tone.
Both men make the same mistake by offering nothing in their own defense.

"You're both idiots!" Rukia shouts out when she realizes they won't talk.

Rias steps in with the next barrage. "How could you be so thoughtless and cause so much damage to Lord Amyntas's estate!? Did it even occur to you two to wait until a training dimension could be set up before you started fighting!?"

Fortunately for them, a woman steps between them and explains the truth of the situation. "Rukia, Rias, it was only a friendly talk that got out of hand, but all is well now like Grimmjow said. Amyntas told us that the staff working on cleaning it up will be getting a bonus in their next paycheck for their trouble. Now Rukia, why don't you and Momo go speak to Byakuya in private, while Rias, you and Ichigo can go spend some time together before dinner. The rest of you, please follow me to the library so you can get your homework done before dinner. Sōna, your sister is here to see you."

"Yes, of course Yoruichi." Rukia says with embarrassment after realizing the scene she had caused in public.

Ichigo winces at the elbow he gets from the werecat, and he obediently walks up to Rias and links his arm with hers before walking away with her side by side. Byakuya watches them go, before turning to his sister and Momo, a small and uncharacteristic smile on his face.

"I am happy to see you are doing well Rukia."

She blushed and bows apologetically. "I'm sorry for yelling at you in front of everyone like that Nii-sama." Surprisingly however, after she straightens up from her bow, she doesn't hide her eyes from him like she usually does.

Byakuya startles her when he chuckles for the first time ever in her presence. "Do not worry Rukia, it's fine. I had it coming to me for letting that gaki get the better of my temper like that and being so impolite as to wreck my host's estate when I'm merely a guest here. Now, I've been assigned a room for the duration of my stay, so why don't you and Lieutenant Hinamori come with me to my room and we will discuss what exactly is going on, especially the events that surrounded the end of the Winter War."

Both Rukia and Momo recognize an unofficial command when they hear one, so they both follow Byakuya down the hallway leading to the wing that they are staying in; both of them send questioning glances at each other when the elder Kuchiki opens the door to a large suite, one that is situated rather nearby to their own set of rooms. Stepping in behind him, the two Lieutenants obey his gesture and make their way to the small table in the sitting room, taking their seats after Rukia's brother has done so first. He surprises them again when he pours three cups of tea from the steaming teapot already waiting on the table, and hands each of them a cup before sipping at his own tea as well. A quiet sigh of contentment sounds out from him as he sets his cup down, then he fixes them with a stern expression.

"First, let me say I am relieved to see both of you are doing well. Rukia, Jūshirō will be glad to know you are safe; Captain Hirako will be just as pleased to know you are safe, Lieutenant Hinamori."

Both Lieutenants lower their heads in apology. "We're sorry for making our Captains worry Byakuya-sama. We didn't mean to be late with our report, but I guess you already know what happened that night then?"
"I have been told, yes." The older Kuchiki replies wryly. Sitting back in his seat, he sips his tea again before continuing to speak. "I now know more than you could imagine, Lieutenant Hinamori. I will tell you that both of your disappearances along with what I now know was Ichigo being in Hueco Mundo and flaring his Reiatsu forced the Head Captain to disclose certain facts that were not general knowledge even among the Captains. First and foremost, he along with Captains Unohana, Kyōraku, Ukitake, and Komamura - due to Captain Komamura's clan being affiliated with Japan's Yōkai Faction - have all known about the existence of the Underworld and those who ruled it, along with the fact that we have had a treaty with the Three Factions dating back over a thousand years."

"You mean, they knew all this time about the Three Factions Captain Kuchiki?" Momo questions, her voice filled with a tone of betrayal.

Nodding his head to the affirmative, he continues. "The Head Captain and Central have always assigned the places we patrol in lieu of keeping that secret, and in order to prevent any Shinigami not in the know from ever finding out, we were never assigned to places where the factions had declared their territories. There is, however, a small but select group of Shinigami, trained in diplomatic skills and sworn to secrecy who report directly to Central, and they are dispatched to deal with Hollows and pluses in the big Three Factions' territory in Japan while being supervised by the territory's owners so as not to agitate said owners. Japan's Yōkai Faction is more laid back about having us in their territory since we have been coexisting with them for far longer than the Big Three have been with us, so Captain Komamura's clan is assigned to patrol their territory."

Rukia scrunches her eyes in confusion then asks how it was possible they were assigned to Isehara then.

"It seems the smallest of mistakes can lead to the biggest consequences Rukia, somehow it just fell through the cracks of bureaucracy." He says.

Rukia and Momo both look at him with disbelief before the Squad Five Lieutenant asks incredulously. "We only found Ichigo because someone misplaced the paperwork to tell our Captains we were not allowed in Isehara?"

"It would seem so Lieutenant Hinamori, but I don't think the results are ones that either of you can argue against. Am I correct Rukia?" The elder brother asks his younger sister with a small glint in his eyes.

"Hai Nii-sama." Rukia answers him with a huge grin.

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Ichigo sits with Rias as they do their homework, Yuzu and Karin having left moments earlier after spending time with their future sister-in-law, asking questions about what life in the Underworld is like, what will be expected of them, and some of the history behind the Devils and the Seventy-Two pillars. He had sat there half listening to their conversation as the three girls spoke about the soon to be changed status in life for the twins. Both Yuzu and Karin had expressed confidence that tonight's ceremony will go off without a hitch, both of them believing in their older brother's abilities. He couldn't help the warmth that welled up in his heart listening to them talk about him and how proud they are of him, claiming that even when they didn't know where he was, they always held onto the glimmer of hope that he would come back home for them someday.

It then led him into thinking about the other half of the ceremony that would take place right after he had unlocked the Devil heritage of his sisters. Knowing that Chad and Orihime had made up their own minds about becoming Devils, Ichigo once again questions the sanity of his friends.
Chad he can understand, but why the hell did his pieces have to pick Orihime? Still, she had proven herself during their time in Lemnos, even at breakfast where her smile only faltering once when she again told them how everything had gone for them both, and only because she was recounting when the Gates of Hell had appeared back then. When Hanako had gently pressed her about it, the Shun Shun Rikka user had answered them honestly, saying that it would take time for her to get used to that part of their Clan, but she wouldn't abandon her friends and more importantly her new family for something like that.

The last one he thinks about is Uryū and his stance on his change. It came as no surprise when his cousin had muttered that at least he wasn't a Shinigami any longer, much to the amusement of Ryūken and Isshin as the two fathers had sat there listening to them talk about Chad and Orihime. Ever since both young men learned of who had been responsible for the deaths of their mothers, Uryū had taken to training just as hard with the Devils as Ichigo himself did. Uryū had also finished his entire weeks' worth of homework and assignments in one night, claiming he would be fine to Rias and Sōna. Much to his and Rias's amusement, Sōna had taken it as a challenge from the Quincy, one that had ended with an undisclosed bet. He would not be surprised if those two became rivals in Kuoh in terms of grades, though who would win in the end was anyone's guess.

A hand on his face forces him to look up and into blue eyes that are twinkling as they gaze at him. Before he can ask what is wrong, he gets his answer in the form of soft lips closing in on his. Dropping his pen, he leans in as Rias deepens her kiss with him, his own affections soon catching up with hers. Once again his instincts take over as he continues to kiss Rias, and he doesn't even notice that they are both now lying on the floor, their homework from before forgotten as her arms encircle his neck blissfully. Soon their wandering hands find their way underneath each other's clothing and she arches her back with a moan as his hand slides up her inner thigh.

"Ichigo! Rias! Time for dinner you two, now hurry up!"

The Gremory heiress laughs when her love begins growling at the sudden interruption. "We'll be right there Mother!" She calls out in reply.

"Make sure you're both decent!" Venelana's amusement is clear in the tone of her voice.

"We will be Mother!" Rias begins laughing again at the grumpy look on Ichigo's face as he stares at their bedroom door.

"She's crazy you know that Rias." He mumbles almost petulantly, then he gently pecks her on the lips before lifting himself up off her body.

Smiling he helps her to her feet and assists in straightening out her clothes, Rias replies back with a gentle bump against his body. "You know she loves to tease us Ichigo, well you mostly, but she is right. Even so, you have to think about the bright side of this."

"Yeah, and that would be what exactly?" He asks as he pulls her in for another hug.

Pulling his head down, she whispers huskily into his ear. "We will have the rest of our lives to make up for all the interruptions once we are…engaged."

He smiles at her then and after exchanging one last heated kiss, they leave their room to join the rest of the peerages for dinner. It is truly amazing, Ichigo reflects to himself, that before his arrival and the revealing on his last bloodline, he had never had so many people eat with his family at one time, but now he does so with not only his great-grandfather's and grandfather's peerages, but also Rias's and Sōna's peerages, as well as his friends and their Shinigami comrades. Even as they enter the dining room, already filled with people he recognizes, both he and Rias receive their now
normal share of greetings and teasing from them as they make their way to the large table they share with the head of the Naberius Clan. Tonight, Sirzechs, Grayfia and Millicas are in attendance, as are Rias's parents and Sōna's older sister Serafall. Yoruichi and Isshin are also sitting with them tonight, while the twins are sitting at another table with his friends as well as Merti and Sasha.

However, it is Byakuya, who sits with Rukia and Momo at their table who draws the most glances, with some of the Naberius peerage members chuckling quietly as they discuss the display of power that he and the older Kuchiki had let loose in their ‘talk’ this morning. Byakuya is calmly ignoring their gossip, much as he had expected, while Ichigo himself has made peace with the older Shinigami and isn't planning to let anything spoil what is going to be the next life-changing event he will take part in tonight.

Byakuya greets him with a nod as he and Rias take their seats at the table. "Ichigo, I understand that tonight you will awaken your sisters powers." The Kuchiki says suddenly.

Nodding his head, Ichigo waits for the older man to continue and is surprised by what he says next. "Then make sure you keep your vow as you did that day on Sōkyoku Hill."

"Trust me, I won't forget…Kuchiki-san."

A choke is heard from the younger Kuchiki, and he turns to the petite raven-haired Lieutenant who stares at Ichigo before asking who he was and what did he do with the real Ichigo.

Rolling his eyes in amusement, Ichigo takes a sip from his glass before replying back to her. "I can't be that arrogant kid that you met for the first time forever Rukia. I have responsibilities that I can't ignore any longer."

Under the table, Rias grabs his hand and gives him a sad smile. "You did the right thing Ichigo."

"Yes, you did Ichigo. The families of Zeva's victims would have thanked you for delivering justice for their loved ones if they were allowed to know what you did." Yasaka says as she joins the conversation, having entered the room with her daughter and a maid escort just a moment ago, at which point the younger Kyuubi had immediately made her way over to sit with the twins. The older Kyuubi on the other hand takes her place at the main table, giving a polite nod to the others seated before her, and adding her voice to the conversation. "Although the affair does raise interesting questions as you suspected Ichigo, you were also correct in your suspicions."

"So, you found whoever it was then?" He asks as he feels his Zanpakutō spirit keeping his anger suppressed.

"Yes, you did Ichigo. The families of Zeva's victims would have thanked you for delivering justice for their loved ones if they were allowed to know what you did." Yasaka says as she joins the conversation, having entered the room with her daughter and a maid escort just a moment ago, at which point the younger Kyuubi had immediately made her way over to sit with the twins. The older Kyuubi on the other hand takes her place at the main table, giving a polite nod to the others seated before her, and adding her voice to the conversation. "Although the affair does raise interesting questions as you suspected Ichigo, you were also correct in your suspicions."

"So, you found whoever it was then?" He asks as he feels his Zanpakutō spirit keeping his anger suppressed.

Yasaka grimaces. "It would seem she was already dealt with by the time the European Yōkai Council found out who she was. It was…quick, as far as anyone can tell."

Frowning, Ichigo notices both Merti and Sasha looking at him, and he nods to them in understanding when the sisters both fractionally incline their heads to him. Having witnessed the entire exchange, Yasaka makes a note to thank her sources for helping her feed the information to the Elves to put an end to the entire sordid affair. She had also ensured Zeva's body was sent back to her mother, accompanied by a letter addressed to Zera from her daughter. It had been written during Zeva's brief stay at the Tower, and out of respect for the privacy of the grieving mother, no one had tried to pry into what the contents were.

The last thing Yasaka had done was to visit Zera's youngest boy personally at the home of the prominent psychic family he was staying with, who also happened to be his father's relatives. The
boy, Alex had cried when he learnt of his sister's death, but after being told as gently as possible the truth that she had murdered countless innocent people to feed upon their souls, his grief was combined with an intense shame at what his sister had done. Yasaka was genuinely taken aback when the boy bowed deeply to her and offered his life as compensation to the families of the victims for his sister's many crimes.

'You will not be held accountable for your older sister's mistakes Alex. I think your mother is grieving enough for one lost child, regardless of my feelings about her, I will not allow her to suffer the loss of another child for crimes he had nothing to do with.'

The boy had hesitated before making his next request. 'At least, tell me who...who sentenced her to death.' He had asked, no, begged her.

'Why?' She had been genuinely curious as to what he would answer that with.

'So that I may make up for my sister's crimes by serving their family or clan Yasaka-sama. Although a part me will always love her, Zeva has brought shame to our family, our father's family especially as we are greatly respected for our psychic abilities and our use of them to help others. Even though father had technically married into mother's family, the way my sister abused his abilities, the abilities that we had inherited from him, will stain our family's honor for generations to come unless I do something to help make up for her grievous crimes.'

Humming thoughtfully, the Kyuubi had tilted the young Hanyou's head up, nodding at the sincerity she saw in his eyes. 'I will see what I can do Alex, be patient and wait for the day to come when they call for you.'

'Yes Yasaka-sama.' The young Hanyou had bowed to her and left the room. Glancing at the old Yōkai responsible for Alex's education and training, she saw the sadness in the old Tengu's eyes.

'Do you think this will change him Akihiro?' The Yōkai deity had asked him.

Shaking his great head, the winged Yōkai had responded sadly. 'The death of a family member is always hard, even among our kind, but to find out the reasons that lead to her death were evil ones...only time will tell. We will keep a closer watch on Alex, Yasaka-sama, and if things change I'll inform you.'

'Thank you Akihiro.'

Returning her thoughts to the present, Yasaka can almost see the wheels turning in Ichigo's mind as he eats his food mechanically; she only hopes that he will make the right choice in the future regarding the young Hanyou teen, one who is no older than his twin sisters. She sees his brown orbs look at her for a moment before turning to speak to Rias, who laughs at whatever he said to her. Dinner progresses normally for the rest of the hour, conversations ranging from school, the shapes of Ichigo's new Zanpakutō, and the reasons why it hasn't returned to his soul as of yet.

"Well that's easy to answer Ichigo." The head of the Naberius Clan replies to the last question. Ichigo pauses and sends a quizzical look towards his uncle. "How so?"

"Well, many Devils are able to store their weapons in small spaces or objects that they wear or have embedded into their bodies Ichigo. I think all you have to do with Zangetsu is store him in your armor and bring him out as you do your chains and armor when needed. You would look rather suspicious carrying him out in the open the way you have been doing recently after all."

"And no one thought to tell me this earlier, why?" Ichigo asks with a bit of annoyance.
Isshin is the one to answer, and the answer Ichigo gets is one he almost swears is designed to piss him off on purpose. "Well son, seeing how you and Zangetsu were kept apart for so long, we figured you two needed time to get 'reacquainted'."

The white Zanpakutō spirit is out in a flash, barely missing the elder Shiba with the first swing of his sword as the elder Shiba ducks immediately after he the air quotes he had used around the last word. "God damn sicko, I'm going to ram my blade so far up your…DAMMIT!"

The former Captain wisely used the momentary pause to escape, and the screaming Zanpakutō spirit was right behind him, firing an occasional Bala to try and slow the speedy Shinigami down. Ichigo gets up as well, his eyes glowing blue as his Reiatsu begins to break free of its containment.

"Excuse us, we'll be right back after we send Goat-Face packing back to Soul Society in a box and make him Kūkaku's problem again." He then vanishes in a burst of Shunpo, and his signature can be felt chasing after the two combatants.

A moment later a loud explosion is heard from outside, followed by a howling gale hitting the windows shortly after a red explosion appears in the distance.

"Ehmm, seems his Cero is getting better Nelliel." Grimmjow comments as he puts a piece of beef in his mouth and chews on it contentedly.

The former Tercera agrees as she helps herself to some fried noodles. "I can't wait to fight Itsygo again now that he has Zangetsu." She reminisces fondly.

Hearing the two Arrancar talk about fighting Ichigo again, Rukia eats a slice of apple as she sighs loudly. "Great, all we need now is for Zaraki and Renji to show up and this whole damn place will become a battlefield."

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Isshin lays unconscious, a grin on his bruised and bloody face, while next to him is a heavily panting Ichigo who is trying to move his stiff and dislocated arms as he glares down at his father. Zangetsu stands over Isshin's head, a look of satisfaction in his eyes as he too stares down at the father.

"Damn old goat really does know how to fight." The Zanpakutō spirit comments.

Groaning as he pops his first arm back into place, Ichigo snorts out as he rotates his arm with a pained wince. "I guess we got to finally see why he was made a Captain."

"And to think, we could only force him to release his Shikai." The white copy grumbled.

"Well I hate to say this Zangetsu, but it looks like I'm going to need a crash course in experience in the upcoming month. If I had to use Hell Chains to beat him, and Yoruichi and Sui-Fēng can still beat me in speed, and let's not forget Momo and Rukia are still better at Kidō than me, then I'm fucked trying to face Soul Society right now. And let's not even think of Riser for the moment, he has used his Devil powers all his life, and I agree with Merti and Uncle Amyntas that not using you to prove to the Underworld that I am a member of the Naberius Clan is going to be a severe handicap."

"That was dumb by the way. I know why you're doing it King, but still. If you aren't going to use me, be thankful you didn't mention anything about not using your Kidō and Hollow
powers, those we can still use to some degree of surprise and effectiveness. Anyways we got some of the best teachers around to help us train and I'm sure as hell ain't letting you lose our Queen, not after we found her. So you're right Ichigo, training is going to really suck, not just for you but for me as well. I'm a part of you and if you are going to truly protect everyone again, we need to gain that experience from everyone working together to do it."

Both spin around when a new voice suddenly speaks up. "I hope you both truly believe that Ichigo, Zangetsu. I won't let you dishonor Lady Yoruichi's name if you should fail in your task."

"Captain Suì-Fēng?" Ichigo hesitantly speaks, recognizing the newcomer, while Zangetsu rolls his eyes at how easily the Squad Two Captain had snuck up on them, again.

"I said I won't let you dishonor her name Ichigo. Now listen up Ryoka." Seeing both of them looking at her but withholding their questions, she nods in approval. "Ever since Lady Yoruichi came back into my life when you led the invasion on Soul Society Ichigo, I have always wondered why she never came home after the Winter War. That changed after your exile; over the months you were gone, she and I would speak, and it always came back to not just you but to your human friends as well. I have to admit I was jealous of the attention she was giving you humans, but over time listening to her speak about each of you, I can finally see what she does in each of you. You remind her of us when we were young and rebellious, more so her and Kisuke, but a hint was given there in Byakuya and myself as well. But for us, what we had in the past was changed when she left us behind; I do not think I need to tell you what that did to Byakuya Kuchiki, or to myself as well."

She pauses and looks back over her shoulder then, before turning back to face them once more. "Ichigo Naberius, promise me you will protect Lady Yoruichi no matter what happens in the future."

"What!?" Now the two look-a-likes are confused.

"Yoruichi has broken from her Clan, Ichigo, she can no longer return to Soul Society freely. Once her letter reaches the Elders of the Shihōin clan, she will be expunged from their family, labeled an outcast, and a death sentence will be issued for her to prevent the secrets of the Shihōin and the Onmitsukidō from being divulged to outsiders."

The Devil screams out in anger. "What the fuck did she do that for then!?"

The petite Chinese Captain walks up to him and gently takes his cheeks in her hands, pulling his head down to look him in the eyes. "The first reason Ichigo is simple; she no longer trusts the Shihōin Clan, Central Forty-Six, or Head Captain Yamamoto to do the right thing. But I think the next reason is more important: it's because she loves you, your family and your friends more than she cares about her own status in life Ichigo, that's why she has chosen to take this risk in order to remain by your sides. Lastly, it is also to keep her oath to your mother; yes, Lady Yoruichi has told me about her feelings of guilt for failing to keep that promise to your mother, and she has chosen to fulfill it this way, by giving up everything to stay with you here. Don't try to talk her out of it Ichigo, it's already done. Lady Yoruichi is now the very first noble, not just from the Shihōin clan, but in the entire history of Soul Society, to openly break from her Clan and join another, one which is not even part of Soul Society."

"No..." He doesn't want to believe it, but knows Suì-Fēng has no reason to lie to him. "Why, Yoruichi..?"

"As of now Ichigo, Lady Yoruichi is a member of the Naberius Clan. She's your family. That is
why I will train you as much as can before I have to leave and return to Soul Society, because I am leaving her safety in yours and your peerage's hands. Please don't disappoint me Ryoka; I can't bear to lose her, not again."

He stares at her with a lost expression. "Suì…"

"From now on Ichigo, I will allow you to call me Shaolin in private. If we are to keep her safe, we will do it as friends at least. Is that agreeable with you, Ichigo Naberius?"

Taking a deep breath, he forces himself to calm down. "For her, anything Shaolin. So I guess after Rias and the others leave, I will be training with you, Rukia and Momo instead?"

Patting his cheek, she smiles at him sadly. "That would be ideal Ichigo. Now you best go see your girlfriend; I'm sure she's wondering by now where you are. I'll take care of your dad, so get going."

"Thanks…Shaolin." She watches the troubled youth leave via magic circle, leaving her, Zangetsu and Isshin alone.

"Did you really mean it, about Kitty-sensei? They would sentence her to death for leaving like that?"

Unexpectedly, Isshin is the one to answer from his prone position. "In all of Soul Society's history, no one has ever broken away voluntarily from the four major Clans, not once. For her to leave the Clan that knows the most about assassinations and recon in Soul Society, the Shihōin, Yoruichi has done what most nobles would consider to be absolutely unthinkable. And for her to openly do so is a slap in the face of the nobles of Soul Society, it means she doesn't ever plan on returning to them kiddo."

"But why…Dad? She isn't even a Devil, so why?"

The patriarchal head of the Kurosaki family sits up with a grunt and looks at the being who could have been Ichigo's twin in appearance. "Because, Zangetsu, there is one thing Suì-Fēng didn't tell Ichigo. All the Shihōin family members are females; no sons are ever born into their clan. Males marry into the family, but none are born into it. So…"

"She really does see him as her own son."

"I have to admit, Masaki and I couldn't have thought of anyone better for the task. Funny, if he had been raised in Soul Society…" Isshin's eyes gain a faraway look then.

"Gah, please don't say it! He'd have a heart attack!"

Even Suì-Fēng cringes at where the elder Shiba's mind is tracking, so she knocks him out with a well-placed round house kick to the face. The older Shinigami slides back into blissful unconsciousness.

"Thanks." Zangetsu sighs out in relief.

"No problem. Now help me drag him through the briar bushes just for good measure after thinking such a thought." Suì-Fēng says with a menacing smile.

"I'm in." Zangetsu happily grabs one leg as the Squad Two Captain grabs the other, and they go about carrying out their self-appointed task.

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"Ichigo." Rias moans out as her boyfriend kisses her deeply in their room. "What's gotten into you?"

"Shhh, not now Rias. I promise to tell you when you guys get back. Don't worry about Koneko, she'll be fine with my sisters, at least I think she will be." He scrunches his eyebrows as he recalls the movies that Orihime had planned on watching.

Rias kisses him again before whispering. "We'll be back before you know it Ichigo. Yuuto and Akeno each have only one contract, as do I. Issei will be delivering pamphlets again. So we should be back within a few hours."

He looks worried. "Rias, your contracts…"

"You know I don't allow those kinds of contracts, they are reserved for Devils that are, well I guess you can imagine what kind of Devils they are Ichigo. My contracts are for those who want to get ahead in life, business or love, so I give them the means to do so. In return, I receive a fair percentage of their profits or in the cases of love, a hefty fee if they succeed. I am a high class Devil Ichigo, I don't need as many contracts, but in the human world they do provide us with the means and wealth to operate among them. Uncle Amyntas and Merti will explain this to you and your peerage over time. The Naberius are fortunate in that they don't need contracts like the rest of us, guarding the Damned is seen as a far more important duty in the eyes of the Underworld, and they also have their hot springs as a lucrative source of income. They do very well in the Rating Games too, as I'm sure your grandfather's and great-grandfather's peerages will attest to, and I'm sure your peerage will do just as well once you have a full set of pieces."

Ichigo buries his face in her neck and starts to shower it with kisses, before moving up towards her ears. "Well I know who most of them are now; it's just a matter of time and reason to approach them. There is more than one that terrifies me in approaching them however, but the pieces have already decided, so there's nothing I can do about it." Pulling away from Rias slightly, his eyes wander down from her face to her hands.

Smiling, she grabs his hands and brings them up to her chest. "I'm sure you will either get them to join you, or at least you will be able to move on to someone else when the pieces are rejected."

Kissing her forehead, he gives her a thankful grin. "Well, I have to convince two of them before they go home, at least one of them I think will jump at the opportunity to become part of my peerage."

Rias looks surprised. "Can you tell me who they are?"

He leans down and whispers their names into her ear, and she backs up, shock evident on her face. "You have got to be kidding me!? Ichigo, do you...how are you...how are you going to ask them that!?"

"Very, very, very carefully Rias. If I don't take the risk, I won't ever get another chance to ask. Think about how much easier it will be for me to run the Skeleton Tower if they agree? I have to try and get those two at least, he might be a dick, but he is also one hell of a fighter. As for the other, she wasn't the former…"

He is interrupted when their door opens and Akeno pokes her head in. "Sorry Buchou, but we must really get going soon."

"I'll be right there Akeno, just a minute if you don't mind." Both she and Ichigo wince in disappointment when she says that.
"Of course Buchou, we'll be in the Great Dome waiting." She begins to close the door, then opens it again. "Ichigo don't forget to keep your Reiatsu down, we can feel it all the way down there when you get 'busy' with Buchou."

The door slams shut just in time for the Vice-President to escape being shot by the small bolts of destruction aimed at her, leaving behind small scorch marks on the door. Akeno giggles to herself as she imagines the flushed and angry expressions on the faces of her King and her lover.

'My, they get pissy with a little teasing.' She giggles again as she passes by Merti and Venelana, giving both older ladies a polite bow. The Gremory Matriarch nods back to her daughter's Queen, before stopping Merti a short distance from her daughter's room.

"I think it might be best if we wait in the hallway Merti." Venelana sighs, knowing how grouchy her daughter is going to be if Akeno's giggles are any indicator.

"Understandable Lady Venelana, I have learned that Ichigo becomes very grouchy when he and Lady Rias are interrupted." The Elf concurs as well.

Waiting outside the room for the teens to emerge, Merti glances behind her and notices someone watching Akeno as she makes her way down to the Great Dome; as soon as he sees her watching him however, a blush immediately forms on his face and he hurriedly disappears from view.

'Well now that is interesting.' Merti begins to smile at the thought of another couple forming.

Soon Rias and Ichigo emerge, both teens with scowls on their faces, but on seeing the two older Devils standing outside their room they change their demeanor quickly.

"Merti, Okaa-san." Ichigo greets the two of them with a smile.

Rias greets them with a smile as well. "Mother, Merti."

Both older women return the greetings, then the four of them walk to the Great Dome where both Kuoh peerages are waiting to depart. Sōna is going to supervise her new Pawn, and a few of her other peerage members also have their own work to finish among their contracts as well. Momo Hanakai and Tsubasa Yura, Sōna's Rook are staying behind to help train Tatsuki and help her draw out any powers that she might have had because of the large amount of Reiatsu she already had before becoming a Devil. Kimi is going to stay with the twins, as are most of the female members of the Naberius peerages, to help them understand their transition into their new lives. Nia on the other hand intends to stay with Orihime, while Chad is getting help and advice from the male members of the Naberius peerages.

Reaching the Great Dome, Ichigo moves to stand by Merti as he watches the group of teens leave for the World of the Living, and he can't help but give Rias a smile as she disappears. When the circle fades away, he makes his way over to the door that leads to the training dimension, Merti right behind him, neither speaking a word as they enter. He already knows Yoruichi will be here, and he tries to keep his face as calm as possible when he sees her standing there with Suì-Fēng, but he fails to keep the brief hurt out of his eyes.

"Ichigo what's wrong?" The golden-eyed woman asks perceptively.

"Nothing Yoruichi, must be dust or something." He knows it's a lame excuse, but he doesn't have a better way to avoid the question, and he knows that she knows it.

"Alright Ichigo, but you're telling me later." He nods to her and takes a good look around the room, finally looking back as Suì-Fēng speaks to him.
"I'm sure you've noticed by now that this place is completely bare of anything to impede your speed Ichigo. That is what we will focus on tonight, pure speed and your ability to dodge multiple attacks. Also you may not defend; this training is solely to focus you on dodging and keeping ahead of attacks. Zangetsu."

The white spirit appears within moments. "Ya called Captain?"

"Yes. You will be helping with this exercise as well. Ichigo, for the first part of this exercise you will not be blinded, the second part we will use your helm's visor to help you train your detection as you did with Akiko the previous time. Just like before, all you have to do is keep from getting hit by any of us."

"Understood Sui-Feng." Ichigo responds promptly.

Yoruichi had been quiet, and her eyes narrow at Ichigo at his continued refusal to address her. "Ichigo."

Not even flinching at her tone, he simply grins at Sui-Feng. "Thirty second head start at least Sui-Feng."

To her surprise, the current Squad Two Captain merely jerks her head at Ichigo. "Get going."

As her protégé disappears in a burst of Sonido, the werecat twists on her former protégée. "Shaolin, what is…?"

"Sorry Yoruichi, time for me to prepare my ambushes." Sui-Feng apologizes, and Yoruichi can only gape as the Onmitsukidō Commander promptly vanishes with a Flashstep, leaving her predecessor behind.

Growling, she turns on the only other person in the room who might have answers to her question, only to see Zangetsu grinning madly as he waves goodbye. "Sorry Kitty-sensei, but I learned to stay out of cat-fights. Ciao!"

Grumbling as the Hollow spirit disappears in a burst of static; Yoruichi shoots an almost-hopeful look towards the Elf standing beside her. "I'm afraid I have no idea what is going on, Yoruichi." Merti says apologetically.

"Well I'm getting answers tonight; one of them will crack before I'm done." Huffing angrily, the Goddess of Flash disappears in her own Flashstep.

Looking around the room and making sure the barriers are in place, Merti starts to watch the high-speed combatants. "Well, I guess I might as well join the fun." She disappears with her own version of high speed movement.

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Isshin, Kisuke, and Ryūken sit on one couch, while across from them sit Byakuya, Serafall and Zeoticus. Venelana sits with Akiko and Daiki, while Sasha stands behind and to the left of Amyntas, who is sitting alone between the two groups and directly across from his Queen and her husband. All the Devils keep glancing at the three Shinigami males as Byakuya's face fluctuates between different emotions after hearing what Isshin had told them.

Finally, those turbulent grey eyes focus on the Shinigami noble seated across from him. "Are you sure that is what Sui-Feng said Isshin? There isn't a chance…"
"None at all Byakuya, Yoruichi was never one for half-measures. What she did was something that even I cannot and will not do: Kūkaku and Ganju are the closest family I have left, and I cannot sever my ties with Soul Society while they still live there. But Yoruichi doesn't have anyone close to her in her family, at least not anyone that I'm aware of. Suì-Fēng is most likely the only person beside Kūkaku in Soul Society she would still think of as family."

The older Kuchiki stares down at the glass in his hand then. "To make her go this far...He truly has a power he doesn't even realize he has."

"So you noticed." Kisuke casually remarks, causing the rest of the room's occupants to look between the two men.

Venelana is the first to ask her question. "Care to enlighten us Urahara, Captain Kuchiki?"

Seeing Byakuya still lost in thought, Kisuke dips his head as he speaks for them both. "When Ichigo first invaded Seireitei, he did so with only Yoruichi, three humans and Ganju helping him in the beginning. Yet, by the time he was done, the entire Eleventh Squad had mutinied, as did a Lieutenant and two very senior Captains, while the Fourth Squad and their Captain were quietly supporting him. During the battle over Karakura, the Vizards who hated Soul Society joined the fight to kill Aizen, not to help Soul Society, but to help protect Karakura, Ichigo's home. After the war, when the Vizards ended up reconciling with Soul Society once more, all of them along with a majority of the existing Captains openly declared against Central Forty-Six's plan to execute Ichigo and anyone who tried to help him, risking a second civil war to protect the human who had saved them all. Byakuya Kuchiki is one of those Captains who spoke against harming Ichigo, and for that I give you my thanks, Kuchiki-sama."

Byakuya's eyebrows rise in surprise, before he nods his head in acceptance. "You are correct in your assertions Kisuke: the Captains have not changed their minds and a majority of our military strength will likely side with Ichigo once they learn of his revival and the reasons of his exile, especially if Central demands his execution once more. Such a confrontation is what we must prevent for the time being, and I suggest speaking to the senior officers in select squads first, especially the Lieutenants. If we slowly disseminate the information, a slower spread of truth might buy Ichigo enough time to regain his full strength and allow us to prepare for any 'misguided' decisions from Central once more."

"Would they truly try again?" Amyntas asks the question that is on the minds of all the Devils present. "Even knowing who Ichigo really is, what his Devil heritage is, would they truly risk another war to try and execute him?"

The three Shinigami share glances amongst themselves, before unanimously deferring to the still serving Captain. Byakuya frowns thoughtfully, before carefully articulating his thoughts. "It would depend on the Soul King and Zero Squad, I believe. If they agree with Central Forty-Six and truly believe that Ichigo is a threat, then..."

Serafall speaks up suddenly, and for the second time since they first met her, Kisuke and Isshin feel the huge amount of power emanating from the petite woman. "He has to know that we will fight, Lord Kuchiki; all four of us Satans will fight. We would not be fighting alone either, we each have our own peerages and they are hardly beings to scoff at. The last thing the 'Balancer of Japan' would want to do is to jeopardize the balance between the realms. After all, if the last of the world's Soul Kings should fall before they can pass on their throne to a blood related successor, it would badly affect not just the balance of their region, it would also soon start affecting the balance of the rest of the world's souls. No, I think the problem lies with your Central Forty-Six, they seem to have too much power over the Gotei Thirteen, and your Head Captain Yamamoto's..."
unwillingness to change the status quo has slowly lost him control of them over the centuries."

Before Byakuya can answer, he hears Isshin speak up as well. "She has a point Byakuya. Even I remember hearing the tales of Old Man Yamamoto and the original Captains. We may have become less bloodthirsty over time, but we also gave up something in the process. The first Captains gave up their power to do what is right; what we are doing now instead is to follow laws that, well, that don't make sense anymore. Let's face it, my boy's actions should have shown us how ass backwards we are, but rather than admit to their mistakes, Central condemned him for his potential instead. Sometimes, it seems we are the only ones still living in the past while the rest of the world moves on." The former Shiba says as he looks at his fellow nobleman.

"Open rebellion is not an option at this time Isshin, not with what Kisuke and Sasha-san have learned from the Quincy." Byakuya frowns.

Isshin flops back in his own seat with a grimace. "I find it hard to believe as well, but if Sasha says she is not withholding the truth, then I'll trust her. The problem is, how do we get that information to the Head Captain in a way that will make him take it seriously? Remember it took him over two hundred years to admit that Aizen was up to no good, and Aizen had to literally start a civil war before he would admit that much..."

"Perhaps we could have Ichigo go back and fight some Quincy again, and this time leave a few captured survivors for Soul Society to find?" Sasha volunteers her suggestion.

Kisuke's fans snaps open as he thinks out loud. "That could work. We know that Soul Society is still monitoring Hueco Mundo, but they are always too slow in sending a team to investigate. If we can get Ichigo to drag out the fight for a much longer period of time and leave a few Quincy tied up like presents, with someone else, maybe the Arrancar staying until just before Soul Society arrives to prevent stray Hollows from getting to the Quincy while they're helpless, then Soul Society would have no choice but to take the Quincy back for questioning. And hopefully realize they are Quincy."

"But to do so, he would have to leave them unable to use Reishi." Isshin points out.

Byakuya looks between the two men before turning towards the blind Elf. "How do you keep the Quincy from doing so now, Sasha-san?"

Despite her blindness, Sasha is fully aware that all eyes are on her now. "With Ryūken-sama's help I was able to modify my magic to seal Candice Catnipp's ability to absorb spiritual particles, mainly because with Ichigo, your sister and Momo around, there will always be leaked Reiatsu in the air regardless of how much they try to suppress it. If we are planning to seal the powers of any newly captured Quincy, I would have to go with Ichigo and the two Arrancar when the time comes. Our two Arrancar allies should probably be the ones to guard the Quincy until the responders arrive, since they'd be the least likely to raise suspicions if they're seen, and they can either retreat to Las Noches or escape through our magic circles if the situation turns against them for whatever reason."

All heads turn towards the Clan head and wait for his decision, which he comes to without much thought required. "I'll speak to the Arrancar and inform them of this myself. The rest I'll leave to you two, Byakuya and Isshin. Kisuke and Sasha will speak with the Quincy further and see if she can offer any ideas of how to scan for intrusions from the shadow world the Quincy are hiding in. Serafall…"

"I will speak to the other three Satans Amyntas." The female Maou says as she stands. "Like you, I've found part of my family; I don't intend to lose them again."
Amyntas gives a grim smirk. "Then we better start training him harder tomorrow."

Zangetsu is grinning down at his wielder, who had dropped unconscious the moment the former Shihōin princess called for an end to the training. The active Captain is also breathing heavily, as is the Elfin assassin who sits on her knees taking deep regulating breaths while looking at the only one not showing any signs of distress. Yoruichi is grinning just as much as the Zanpakutō spirit is, but her sights are firmly set on the younger Onmitsukidō Commander.

"So Shaolin, you gonna tell me now what is going on between you and Ichigo? Or do I have to force it out of you, *punishment force commander*?" Yoruichi's eyes gleam threateningly with those words.

The smaller Shinigami leans away from the lecherous smile on her mentor's face. "You win… Yoruichi. I…told him… what you did…and…and asked…him…to protect you."

Yoruichi's expression goes blank as she stares first at her former protégée, then at Ichigo, then moving back to Sui-Fēng again. "You did what?"

Looking down, the Chinese Captain answers the same thing again, but adds one last thing. "He promised me he would do as I asked Yoruichi-sama. I don't regret telling him what you did, I know you wouldn't tell him nor would Isshin-sama, and this is something he needs to know. I didn't tell him everything, but Zangetsu knows now and Isshin knew, I assume from you."

"Shaolin, that is for me…"

"NO! Not this time Yoruichi! You and Ichigo are both alike in that regard. You both want to protect those around you by keeping them at a distance, well this time you can't. This time Ichigo knows about it and he is going to see to it. You call him family, well it's about time you act like one Yoruichi! You call him son, so let him do what a son's supposed to do, protect his mother! You might not be Masaki-sama, but you and Venelana are the closest to a mother that he and the twins are going to get, unless… unless by some miracle, they find Masaki-sama in the Rukongai." The Chinese Captain finally ends with sadness in her voice.

Flopping down in front of her successor, the werecat can't help but pinch her cheek fondly. "You sure know how to stick it to someone when you get the chance, you know that right?"

Swatting away her hand tiredly, Sui-Fēng can't help the relief she feels inside. "Sorry Yoruichi, but I had to. You know that they will try and come after you. I will keep my Clan out of it, but I can't stop the Shihōin Clan and you know they won't listen to the Head Captain even if he orders them to stay away from you. You know too much, they are going to silence you one way or another, or at least try to."

The former Shihōin leans back on her hands then as she looks up at the white sky. "I guess I really did it this time, eh Shaolin? Well there's no crying over spilled milk, though I guess that is a pretty bad example to use in my case. Anyway, Berry-kun is going to be pain-in-the-ass when I talk to him later, at least now I know what I'm gonna say to him."

Up until now Merti had remained silent, but this stirs her curiosity enough for her to ask. "What will you say to him Yoruichi?"

"I want a Mother's Day gift, he's late."

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Within his inner-world, Ichigo stands on the tower looking down at the blue flames surrounding the new center of his world. The clouds had threatened the sky earlier, but as he trained with them, he could feel the clouds dispersing as he thought about what Shaolin had told him. Yoruichi had given up everything for them, for him. He knows when she asks later, he won't be able to lie to her. He shakes his head in disbelief; Shaolin was right, he does see Yoruichi as that now more than ever.

"Is it wrong to see her that way…Mom?" He knows he won't get an answer, but to his surprise his world reacts anyways.

He sees the sun blaze a bit brighter as it shines down on his world, and a gentle breeze caresses his face. Hopping down to the land surrounding the Tower, he makes his way over to a place that he can't understand why is here, but it is. Standing in front of the exact replica of his mother's grave, Ichigo bows deeply to her grave marker.

"I love you Mom, and I will never stop loving you."

After he fades away from his inner world, Imp comes from around the corner and stares at the stone, her hand touching the name briefly and a smile forming on her face before she skips back into the forest.

'He is lucky to have you. Now, I wonder how Zangetsu is going to react to my new appearance.'

The newly grown teenager grins to herself.

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Rias looks at the clock again, waiting for her last peerage member to arrive back at the club room. Issei had gone home for the night, something she is going to have to change soon if she plans on keeping him closer. Tapping her finger on her chin, she and Akeno are still looking at the neighborhood he is living in and can't find any housing suitable for them to move into as of yet. The thought of Issei living with them right now is out of the question until she can find a solution to Ichigo and Issei's relationship, which is barely civil in her opinion.

Ichigo is keeping his word to not interfere with her peerage, well at least with Issei; he still spoils Koneko as much as he does his own sisters, which seems to help soothe the emotional wounds caused by Koneko's older sister. Akeno and Ichigo still have their little spats but nothing happens that is out of the ordinary, and Yuuto still finds time to spar with Ichigo every now and then. She then sits up straight as a sudden thought forms in her head.

"Buchou?" Her Queen asks when she notices Rias's changed expression.

"I wonder..."

Now Sōna is finding interest in her demeanor. "Rias, what are you thinking?"

Looking at her Queen and fellow Devil heiress, she tells them her idea. After a few minutes, Sōna replies thoughtfully.

"I don't know Rias, I mean it could work, but how are you going to get them together?"

As soon as she asks her question, Rias turns to the now opening door and points at Yuuto as he walks in.

"He's going to help me."
Hearing his King's words, and seeing the majority of the other Devils staring at him, Yuuto can only react with polite confusion.

"Help with what Buchou?"

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"Are you sure?"

"Yes sir. Neither Rukia Kuchiki nor Momo Hinamori sleep in the house requisitioned for them. Always around the same hour their Reiatsu disappears and it doesn't return until the next morning."

"And the others?"

"It is as you suspected, they are Devils. A few others are also living in the town, Fallen Angels are supposedly in a church on the outskirts of the town, but so far we haven't seen them yet."

"Then we will issue arrest warrants for the two Lieutenants the moment they return from their mission. We have adequate time to prepare a case against them that not even the Gotei Thirteen can dispute."

"And their punishments?"

"For Hinamori it will be death; Kuchiki, even though she is adopted, will have her Zanpakutō destroyed and sentenced to two hundred years in the Muken. She will be of little worth by the time she is released and I'm sure the rest of the Kuchiki Clan besides the current clan head will thank us for our services. We cannot allow the Angels and Fallen Angels to find out and think we are favoring the Devils, it would be breaking the treaty which says we are to remain neutral!"

A knock sounds at the door of the six judges' chamber. "Enter."

The six rise when a woman with golden eyes enters, her hair is streaked with gray but her physical appearance does not hide the fact that she is someone whose very position demands their respect.

"How may we be of service to the Shihōin Clan?" The head judge asks politely.

The woman doesn't speak; she simply places a scroll on the table. "See to it that we are not interfered with. Once we locate her, she is ours to deal with." She commands.

The head judge unfurls the scroll and has to keep herself from showing any sign of surprise at the words contained within; once she finishes reading it, she simply rolls it back up and nods to the woman.

"She is yours to deal with as you see fit, Chiyoko Shihōin-dono."

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His eyes open to a dark room and not a stitch of clothing on. Moaning in dismay, he peeks under his sheetzss to confirm his suspicions and sees nothing except his…

"I heard if you pull on it enough it will grow, but never did I hear that looking at it does the same thing Ichigo." A familiar woman's voice points out with amusement.

"Why am I not surprised Yoruichi?" Ichigo asks rhetorically as he lets the sheet settle back into place, before turning to look at the woman sitting on the chair next to his bed. "Was it really necessary to put me into bed naked?"
He is taken aback when Yoruichi's only answer is to pull her legs up and wrap her arms around them before settling her chin on her crossed arms while staring at him. He sits up uncomfortably when she keeps staring at him with those golden eyes that he knows are weighing and judging him. Crossing his own arms around his knees, he waits for her to speak, which she does after she finds what it is she's looking for.

"Don't say a word until I'm done Ichigo. Now, I knew you and Shaolin were hiding something from me during training; you two were way too nice to each other at the start, and the way you avoided speaking to me was really obvious. But it was your eyes that betrayed you Ichigo; they were filled with both anger and sadness each time you looked at me in those brief moments we came into contact with one another, and I knew that whatever it was that was affecting you, it had to be serious. After you passed out, I got Shaolin to spill her guts on what happened...or did you really think my Little Bee would keep anything secret from me for long?"

Ichigo shakes his head in answer. "No Yoruichi. I only wanted to ask...am I, are we really worth it for you to leave it all behind? They told me you would be hunted, so why Yoruichi? Why would you do that for..."

Yoruichi gives him a soft smile. "I did it mostly for you Ichigo. Yes, I care deeply for Orihime, Chad, Tatsuki and Uryū. Yes, I care greatly for your sisters. But there is one thing that sets you apart from them, one thing neither Shaolin nor your father has told you about my Clan Ichigo." He sees her eyes misting then.

"W-What didn't they tell me?" This is the first time he has ever seen Yoruichi this vulnerable, and can't help but feel worried about what could have possibly left her on the verge of tears to admit.

The purple-haired werecat gets up from her chair and eases down next to Ichigo on the bed, pulling him into a hug and speaking into his ear. "Because Ichigo, your father's words meant more at dinner than you realize. He knows that all Shihōin women can never bear a son, we can only have daughters."

She feels his breath hitch. "You...you can never have a son? Then..."

"You are my son Ichigo, the son I've always wanted." She finally admits to him. "I know if by some miracle I was to have a child, a son, I would want him to be just like you too."

Ichigo can't help the snort he gives then, even as he feels his own eyes misting. "Loud, obnoxious, border-line insubordinate towards authority figures and a general fuck off attitude? I don't think you want that running around your house calling you Momma."

Yoruichi sinks her head into his crook of his neck, snickering as she speaks again. "True, but you forgot the other things, like being loyal to a fault, honesty bordering on being annoying, resolve that is near undefeatable, and lastly Ichigo, your love of your family and friends that allowed you to do the impossible. Isshin and Masaki were truly blessed when they had you as their son."

Snaking an arm around her waist and holding her tightly, he swallows nervously before giving voice to something he has secretly considered in his heart. "I can't call you Mom, but... but Okaa-san is acceptable."

He feels Yoruichi's arms tighten around him, and a faint snuffle coming from her. "I wouldn't want you to go that far Ichigo, but I'll accept the honor none the less. However, there is one other thing Ichigo." He moans out in defeat, causing her to chuckle.

"So, what's that?" He finally asks.
"Just because I'm part of your family now, doesn't mean you get to boss me around, nor does it give you the right to put yourself in danger to try and save me. Lastly, I am still your elder, which means you still have to show me respect, otherwise..."

He pulls away from Yoruichi and looks at her with an expression of disbelief. "You actually think you need to tell me any of that Yoruichi? God forbid I tell the Goddess of Flash what the hell to do."

She smiles then, looking at him with shining eyes. "I'm glad we settled this then Ichigo."

"Just one thing Yoruichi, who did undress me?"

Yoruichi smiles as she gets up and walks over to his door, and as she turns the knob she tells him a name.

"OH MY GOD! YOU LET SHAOLIN SEE ME NAKED!?"

Merti and Nia find Ichigo and Yoruichi already on their way to the Great Dome, both Elves sending their young Lord a look of concern as the orange headed Devil stumbles along with a haunted look in his eyes while muttering about the SWA getting top notch information about him. The golden-eyed woman with him just keeps smiling as she slows down a step to walk with the two elves. Looking again at Ichigo's shambling figure, Nia can't help but ask Yoruichi what's wrong with Ichigo.

"Oh, just a little lie I told him. Couldn't resist, now I can't wait to see how those two will act around each other tomorrow when we train."

"You didn't tell him that his father got him undressed, did you?" Merti deduces correctly.

"Nope." The werecat says with a bigger grin.

Nia eyes had gone wide when she heard the first part of their conversation, and she nearly trips when she hears the second. "I think, Lady Yoruichi, that they will both kill you tomorrow." The young Elf comments as she catches herself quickly. "Both Lord Ichigo and whoever it was you told him undressed him."

The werecat folds her arms behind her head, a carefree grin on her face. "Nah, just some harmless fun Nia. Besides, it's funny to see him blush, which I'm sure will drive Shaolin crazy as her own thoughts will run away with her. She's still as hopeless as Ichigo was before Rias."

The two Elves shake their heads in unison at the revelation of just who it was Yoruichi had told Ichigo had stripped him. The three assassins finally join Ichigo under the dome, the Cerberus still guarding the only real entrance to the Estate proper. Amyntas had shown Yoruichi the estate's external defenses, a great sign of trust from him, and she had reciprocated by lending her assistance with the defenses. Now, all other avenues of entry had strong magic and Kidō barriers in place to ensure any would be invaders would greatly regret their intrusion, no matter how briefly it lasted. As group of four stand waiting for the arrival of the Kuoh students, Orihime and Chad walk up to join them as well. After exchanging brief hellos, they settle in for the short wait with small talk about the upcoming ceremony.

Orihime is the most vocal about her expectations. "Chad, did you know we could live forever, well as long as we don't get killed that is?"
Ichigo smiles when he sees the brief widening of his giant friend's one visible eye. "She's telling you the truth Chad. It's one of those perks we get for being Devils; long life sure does sound nice, don't it?"

Leaning in closer to Chad, he decides to let someone else share in his misery when he adds the next phrase ever so softly. "I was made to understand, that various members of the peerages will cook for us during special events or occasions, usually the ones who are most motivated to cook."

Seeing Ichigo's eyes swivel pointedly towards Orihime, Chad's face pales then turns green at the sudden images his friend has put in his head. Turning towards Orihime as well, the memory of the last bento she had brought to school keeps racing through his mind: sushi covered in marshmallow sauce and wasabi, with a side of red bean paste covered rice, and he didn't even dare ask what the green liquid was that she had been happily pouring over her dessert of lemon ice-cream and chocolate flavored Pocky sticks.

"You are joking, right?" Chad asks with a slight tremble in his voice.

Ichigo hides his inner-glee as he keeps his face straight. "Nope, not at all. Just ask Merti, she'll back me up."

Turning to the Elfin assassin, he does indeed ask her the question, and when she answers in the affirmative, he breaks out into cold sweat and quickly leaves.

"What is wrong with Sado? It is true that our peerage members often cook during celebrations, but it's only because they enjoy doing so. Why would he look so upset about that?"

Overhearing Merti's words, Yoruichi looks over and gives the orange headed Devil a deadpan look, while Ichigo keeps his face poker straight as he avoids looking at Yoruichi.

"You didn't, did you Ichigo?" She asks him knowingly.

"Did what you crazy werecat?" He still doesn't look her way.

"Oh, you so did. Well then, you should feel honored that Orihime will be making you her first meal tomorrow at lunch Ichigo. Since she is going to be your newest peerage member, you should feel honored to let her cook a thank-you meal for you. Right Orihime?"

The burnt-orange-haired healer turns and smiles up at her adoptive brother. "Of course, I would love to Yoruichi! I have so many things I want to try. Oh, I know, I'll make my special dish for him. Thank you for letting me cook Ichigo, I promise you'll love it."

Fighting to keep his stomach from rebelling, Ichigo nearly groans when he hears Zangetsu grumble. "Well King, nice going. Your little plan to spread the misery really worked out well. I have to admit, when you screw up, you do so with style. First surviving Senka from Kuchiki, and then surviving the Shattered Shaft, next you survive invading Soul Society. You even managed to live through the worst of Hueco Mundo and even beating Aizen, but nooo, this is how you choose for us to go out. Eating her cooking is at the top of the 'don't fucking do' list' you asshole!"

'I get it! I fucked up! Now how are we going to get out of it?'

"We ain't you douche bag, you're gonna suck it up and eat her food no matter what. Did you forget already, she is your sister now you dumbass! If you don't eat it, you are going to make her sad, and she's specially making the meal for you. And we all know how she'll get with
"those puppy dog eyes and pouting lips, and you will be seen as the biggest jerk of a brother in all of history!"

Seeing Ichigo break out into cold sweat, Yoruichi snickers at him. "Problem Ichigo?" The former Captain asks when her favorite target face-palms himself suddenly.

"N-No problem Yoruichi, just Zangetsu being…pushy." He struggles to get out, ignoring his Zanpakutō spirit shouting something about having Orihime's cooking force-fed to him by a crazy werecat.

Not letting Ichigo off the hook, Yoruichi turns to the excited Orihime and offers another suggestion as to what she should do tomorrow. "You know, you should make Ichigo's favorite curry for his entire peerage. I think Tatsuki and Chad along with Ichigo should celebrate the founding of his new peerage with a special lunch, and you should let them know it's to celebrate becoming part of his peerage. Whadda say Ichigo, sounds good, doesn't it?"

"It sounds wonderful Yoruichi." He manages to grit out. He truly hates his life right now, especially seeing the golden-eyed she-Devil standing there next to his overly joyful and irritatingly naive adopted sister.

'I wonder if I can strangle the werecat in her sleep.' He wonders.

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Steel grey eyes widen slightly as their owner feels a sudden case of déjà vu.

"Everything okay Byakuya-nii?" Rukia asks her suddenly tense brother.

Looking around in confusion, he finally relaxes and returns to their match. "I'm fine Rukia, just an odd feeling someone was thinking the same thing I was today."

Rukia shrugs as she goes back to studying the chess board again.

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Rias glances back at Yuuto, who is sweating as he stands there behind everyone else and looking really uncomfortable. Giving him an encouraging smile, she turns to walk up to her boyfriend and gives Ichigo a peck on his cheek. Neither Ichigo nor Rias pay attention to the catcalls and teasing coming from the peerage members who passes by on either side of them, both of them far too comfortable with their feelings for each other now and far too used to the commentary to tune it out. Ichigo does give Akeno a glare as she hurries past them however, which she responds to by blowing him a kiss before she leaves with the rest of Gremory peerage.

"Ichigo, I have to go get ready for tonight with the girls, I hope you don't mind?" Rias asks him apologetically.

Hugging her once more, he finally lets her go and gives her the go ahead. She rewards him with a dazzling smile then she turns to speak with Yoruichi and the Elves, each of them looking at Yuuto in turn before they leave with her. Already made curious by her actions, his interests are peaked when he looks around and notices that he and Yuuto are the only teen Devils left behind. Walking up to the nervous boy, he realizes that something is up when he sees Yuuto shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot and trying to avoid his eyes.

"Alright, what does she want you to do, and how am I involved Yuuto?" He asks the young Knight bluntly, knowing that Rias is most likely involved in whatever this is.
Yuuto gives him an awkward smile. "She wants me to help train Issei, and hopes you will help me train him as well."

To his credit, the young Knight doesn't even seem fazed when Zangetsu suddenly appears and stares at him threateningly. "She does realize what she is asking for right?"

Looking at the two men, one a monochrome mirror of the other, Yuuto sighs in defeat and speaks truthfully to his senpai. "Ichigo, she... she just wants you and Issei to find a way to get along, however impossible it might seem. She can't let this go on for long as he is her only Pawn, and ignoring him will only weaken her peerage in the long run. That is why she plans on having me train him, but I really do need your help as well. You have been in an actual war and you have more experience than all of us combined. I know it's a lot to ask of you Senpai, but please, for me, for Buchou, can you help us train Issei?"

Zangetsu smirks in warning. "The perverted brat might think that death is better than the training he's gonna get Yuuto. Ichigo has had the best Shinigami as his mentors, and Issei's gonna have to get used to getting his ass kicked in the beginning. His speed is atrocious, his mind too focused on the wrong shit, his pain tolerance isn't bad considering what we did to him, but still needs lots and lots of work, and lastly, we have to see it."

Looking confused, the young blonde haired teen asks what 'it' is.

"What he has in his left arm Yuuto. We both felt it stirring in Hueco Mundo; damn thing could be seriously dangerous if he ever gets proper training. Whatever this Sacred Gear of his is, I think the Fallen Angels are truly afraid of him having it." Ichigo answers.

The Zanpakutō spirit looks at his wielder and nudges him. "Think it's time we get a crash course in Sacred Gears King; you, Yuuto Kiba are going to give us that course. Tell us everything you can about this stuff before the ceremonies begin."

The blonde Knight smiles pleasantly. "Of course Zangetsu-senpai. Well first thing you should know is that there are thirteen powerful Sacred Gears known as the Longinus..."

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Orihime and Tatsuki are already dressed and are helping to prepare the twins who are both sitting nervously and waiting as the time for the ceremony draws closer and closer. Yuzu looks up at their older adopted sister as she finishes arranging her hair and looks in the mirror to see that despite how short her hair is, Orihime has managed to make it look fuller with the Kanzashi she used.

"It's beautiful Orihime-nee." Yuzu breathes out as she admires her reflection in the mirror.

Karin nods her head in agreement at seeing her own hair done up in the mirror. Like Yuzu, her hair is done up with Kanzashi which has gathered her longer hair into a tight braid at the back, but leaves some to cover the sides of her face just before her ears.

"Just don't tell anyone I know how to do hair, okay you two?" Tatsuki tells them with a smile.

"We promise." The twins answer in unison. All four of them then turn when a knock comes at their door.

After being told to come in, Isshin slowly sticks his head in before letting the rest of his body follow through.
"Can I have a few moments with them, Orihime, Tatsuki?"

Nodding in agreement, the two older teens leave the room with reassuring smiles for the twins; passing by Isshin, they give him a small bow as befitting his status of nobility. Isshin stands there looking at his twin daughters, admiring the beautiful kimonos that they wear and how lovely they both look in them. Walking up to them, he wraps each with an arm and begins speaking to them.

"I am proud of you two, always remember that Karin, Yuzu. I made a lot of mistakes while trying to keep my promise to your mother, and…and things didn't work out too well for me. First your brother and Rukia, then Aizen waking up his last bloodline, and then I…"

"It's okay Daddy." Yuzu says as she grabs her father around his neck.

"Yeah Goat-Face, we forgive you." Karin chimes in. "But why do you sound like you're leaving us?"

Snuggling his girls closer, he tells them the truth. "It's because I am. Ryūken and I are going back home to Karakura soon. Regardless of everything, Karakura is still the Jūreichi, and we need to keep it safe now that all of you are staying here. Don't worry, I'll still visit as much as I can, but you two have to stay here with Ichigo. You're both going to be Devils now, and you can't live with me anymore, it would only draw Soul Society to investigate why you are there and we can't have them interfering now. So promise me you will listen to Ichigo, Rias, Orihime and the others no matter what."

Uncharacteristically, Karin is the first to sniffle as she throws her arms around Isshin and promises to do what he asks of them. Yuzu follows right after, telling him to eat good and not to get hurt fighting the Hollows and making him promise to call them once a night before they go to bed. The three are still holding on to each other when Akiko pokes her head into the room. Seeing them as they are, she quietly leaves but flares her power to tell Isshin that it is time.

Releasing his girls, the former Shiba Captain kisses them each on their cheeks and holds his hands out for them to hold. Taking his hands, the father and daughter trio walk out together, and they see all the peerage members waiting to escort them to the ceremonial chamber, the very same place that Tatsuki had been reincarnated earlier. As they pass by the first members of the Naberius peerages, they hear the others falling into place behind them, each member of their escort taking their place behind the soon to be princesses of the Naberius Clan. As the trio make their way to the doors of the ceremonial chamber, they see those not allowed to witness the ceremony standing in the hallway: Kisuke, Byakuya, Rukia, Momo, Uryū, and Ryūken. Surprise is on Karin's face when she doesn't see Yoruichi standing among them, but she keeps walking forward without saying anything.

When they finally arrive at the doors, Isshin sees his son, Orihime, Chad and lastly Yoruichi standing together outside the entrance, waiting for them. Isshin lets go of his two girls and walks up to his oldest child then wraps him up in a tight embrace.

"I leave them with you Ichigo, make sure you don't make the same mistakes I did raising all of you." He says softly to his son.

Returning his father's hug, Ichigo whispers back. "Who says you did a bad job Goat-Face? I might be a little rough around the edges, but I think you did okay."

The two men separate solemnly and Isshin gives his girls one more hug and another kiss on their cheeks before retreating slowly down the hallway, his tears gradually falling as he leaves all his children behind for what he hopes is a better and safer life. All three of them have moisture in their
own eyes watching their father leave their lives, Ichigo's hand rising almost unconsciously for a short moment before he lets it drop again. Looking down at his younger sisters, he knows he has to give them one last opportunity to walk away.

"Karin, Yuzu, I have to ask one more time, are you sure?" He asks them quietly.

Wiping away their tears, both his sisters stand up straighter and give him their final answer. Seeing their conviction, he turns and pushes open the doors stepping into the room along with Chad and Orihime. Yuzu enters behind them as well, while Karin hangs back and looks up at the Shihōin princess hopefully.

"Yoruichi?"

The purple-haired werecat gives her a small smile. "I'm allowed Karin; I'm a member of the Naberius Clan now. I'll tell you later, it's sort of complicated." She takes Karin's hand and leads her in behind the others.

As the dark haired twin walks in, she sees her great-grandfather Amyntas standing before four altars. Standing on either side of the room are Sōna and her peerage, Rias and her peerage, Rias's parents along with Sirzechs, Grayfia and Millicas, and finally Serafall and her parents. Yoruichi leads her to the second altar, set between Yuzu's and Chad's, while Orihime is sitting on the last altar, her feet nervously swinging back and forth as Tatsuki rubs her back and talks to her reassuringly. Climbing on top of her altar, Karin sits there watching as the rest of the older Devils file into the room and surround them, with the last two members closing the doors and sealing them.

"Ichigo, it's time." The oldest Naberius says with a hint of excitement.

Taking a deep breath, Ichigo looks at his two sisters and his two friends, each of them sitting and waiting in their places upon the altars, before speaking to them as a group. "First I will awaken Yuzu and Karin's sealed bloodlines, then Chad, Orihime, I'll reincarnate you with your Evil Pieces afterwards. I'll need each of you to lie back and try to relax, and then…then we'll do this."

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"Get out there you moron!"

"What!? Why do I have to get out there!?" Zangetsu yells at the voice still hiding in her room.

"Dammit Zangetsu, don't argue with me, get out there now! They are your sisters too you dope! They would want you there with them!"

He jumps back when Imp throws something against her door. "You call Masaki-sama, Mother. You call Goat-Face, Dad. Well you also call Karin and Yuzu your sisters, so get out there and witness their awakening, right now!"

"Fine, I'm going you crazy ass kid!" Muttering angrily to himself, the Hollow spirit fades away from Ichigo's inner world. After a moment of silence, the door slowly opens and an eye peers out through the gap; after verifying that Zangetsu is gone, Imp sighs out and looks down at her body.

"Great, this isn't going to go over well."

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Ichigo sends his Zanpakutō spirit a look when the monochrome spirit suddenly appears between
Rias and Akeno, still muttering to himself. Seeing his wielder looking at him, Zangetsu shrugs his shoulders and mouths to him that he'll explain later. Nodding once, Ichigo sees Rias and Akeno both look up at the taller spirit and to his dismay Akeno licks her lips in a suggestive manner. Deliberately ignoring Akeno and turning back to his youngest sister, Ichigo sees Yuzu looking back up at him with wide and nervous eyes. Leaning down, he grabs hold of her hand and speaks comfortably to her.

"It's going to be okay Yuzu. Uncle Amyntas told me the easiest way to release the seal is to let my power flow around you until I feel the seal. Once I do so, the rest of it should go really quick. Though, if you feel any pain or discomfort, you tell me to stop, understand?"

Nodding, she answers him looking more relieved than before. "Yes Ichi-nii."

"Good girl." Placing her hand back at her side, Ichigo waits until he feels the chains unravel slightly in his inner-world, then he lets his power envelope his youngest sister. Slowly, he can see his power flowing around her, until it covers her completely, then he closes his eyes as Merti and Amyntas had instructed him to do and imagines Yuzu in his head. Slowly an outline of her appears in his mind, and he almost snaps his eyes open when he realizes he can actually see the power flowing through her body. Letting his own power latch onto hers, he watches it weaving through her body until it hits a blockage and sort of stops, while her power flows unhindered through it still. Carefully, he sends more power to probe the blockage, and to his great surprise, the outline of the Naberius Crest forms in his mind. Observing the crest, a Quincy cross is the first thing he notices as he follows the linked chains to a pendant type design at the other end. Six different emblems jut out from the center, starting from the left of the chain links: a pair of skeleton legs, followed by a pair of talon like hands, then the three heads of a Cerberus, and finally a single Devil wing finishing the family crest. As he examines it closer, it seems to respond back to his power, seeking out his power in anticipation.

"Yuzu, are you okay?" He asks with his eyes still shut.

"Yes."

Grasping her hand, he asks. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." His sister replies nervously.

"Here we go." He floods the symbol with his power, watching it expand until it can no longer contain the excess, then it shatters soundlessly.

As the seal quickly evaporates from his vision, so too does the outline of Yuzu's body as he feels her hand tighten around his, almost to the point of breaking the bones of his hand. Looking down at his sister, he is almost frantic with worry until she suddenly smiles up at him and loosens her grip on his hand. He slowly pulls back the envelope of his power from his sister, then leans down and looks her in the eyes, and is relieved to see her joyous looking orbs looking back at him.

"I...I can feel it Ichi-nii, it's kind of weird but it also feels kinda like Mom somehow..."

Ichigo looks up at his uncle, who sends a speculative look back at his nephew. Turning back to Yuzu, he gives her a brief hug. "Don't move until we are done Yuzu, I'm gonna remove Karin's seal next, so just hang in there, okay?"

"Yes Ichi-nii." She squeezes his hand reassuringly before letting go of him.

Moving over to his other sister, he looks down at the wide eyed Karin, who had seen everything
that had happened to Yuzu. Before he can say anything however, she shifts her eyes to him and says her next words bluntly.

"Just get it over with Ichigo, I ain't got all night."

He can see her body tremble slightly however, and he can't help but give a smirk at her show of bravado. "Smartass." He says quietly, taking her hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze, then he lets his power flow and surround her as he did for Yuzu.

Now that he knows what to look for, he quickly finds the same seal in Karin, and squeezing her hand lightly in warning, he floods the seal until it shatters as well. Just like her twin, Karin stiffens as her full power starts to flow through her body for the first time, but her next observation alleviates his worry completely.

"Cool."

Grinning at the wide-eyed Karin, he gives her the same instructions that he gave to her twin, and she nods her head almost absently as she watches him walk over to his oldest guy friend next. Looking down at the tall Japanese-Mexican youth lying on the altar, Ichigo gives his friend a reassuring nod when he sees Chad looking up at him with his one eye still uncovered by his hair. Pulling a Rook out, he pats the giant's arm and looks pointedly at his chest. With both Chad and Orihime watching closely, he sets the Rook piece down on Chad's chest, right over his heart.

Stepping back, he watches in anticipation as the Evil piece glows brightly and disappears into Chad's chest. For a moment nothing happens, then both of Chad's arm armors suddenly appear without warning, and both Ichigo and Chad gape when the Hollow like armor begins to extend and cover other parts of Chad's body, the left and right sides of his body armor taking on the same coloring and appearance as his left and right arms respectively. The armoring of his body only stops once his vital organs are fully protected by tough-looking plates of Hollow armor.

"Chad...You okay?" Ichigo finally sputters out, staring wide eyed at his friend's impressive transformation.

Observing the new appearance of his evolved armor; the intimidating young man who once swore to always guard Ichigo's back nods in his usual calm manner before giving him the thumbs up. "I feel better than ever, Ichigo."

Seeing Ichigo's expression, Amyntas gives him an explanation again. "It must be because of your immense Reiatsu Ichigo, it's the only thing that could explain why your Evil Pieces act the way they do and affect them differently."

Seeing that Chad seems to be alright and thinking that his Uncle's explanation makes sense, Ichigo can only take a deep breath to steel himself before he walks over to the last person he will reincarnate tonight, the one person he wishes he didn't have to do this to, but knows that his Evil Piece has picked her for a reason. Pulling out his Bishop, he looks into Orihime's expectant brown eyes; she smiles at him affectionately and raises her hand to touch his cheek.

"I know you don't want this for me Ichigo, but Chad and I are the same. Our only remaining family now is you, and after this the Naberius Clan. I've told you before, family is the most important thing to me, now more than ever since I have become a Shiba. If giving up my human life is the price I have to pay to stay with you guys forever, I am really okay with it Ichigo." Her hand runs down his cheek and lands on his hand holding her Evil Piece.

Lifting it between her breasts, above her heart, watching him watch her, she slowly sets the Bishop
piece in his hand down until it touches her skin. He slowly lets go of the piece, and just as it did for Chad, the Evil Piece glows brightly before it disappears into her body. Orihime feels her pulse quicken slightly before a new surging and warm power begins to flow and mingle with her Reiatsu, and she can't help the smile that blooms on her face when she realizes it is his power merging with her own, finally joining her with him, even if it is not the way she had once dreamed of. Tilting her head to one side, she sees the worry in his eyes as he keeps a close watch on her face, his comforting hand still holding hers tightly. Orihime can't help feeling giddy as she feels her two sources of power merge until finally there is only one new power remaining, a power that feels just perfect.

"Hime, are you okay?" Her best friend suddenly asks, and she realizes that Tatsuki has come up to join Ichigo as they stand beside her.

Before she can answer them however, her six fairies suddenly emerge and the one who has the worst temper immediately flares his anger at the Shun Shun Rikka user.

"What did you do to us woman!? Look at us, we...we're bigger!" He exclaims.

Orihime slips into her old habit of trying to apologize to Tsubaki, but someone stops her, a very angry looking, spiky haired Tatsuki who grabs the fuming Fairy by his not-so-small-anymore body and twists him around until she is nose to face with him.

"I heard all about you Tsubaki, from Orihime, Chad, Rukia and Uryū. You are a loud, foul mouthed bastard who always yells at her and belittles her. Well let's get something straight right now, I won't allow it, you got it pipsqueak!? If I catch you doing so, I will kick your ass sideways!"

Chad and Ichigo both palm their faces in exasperation, Karin is grinning madly as she tries to keep herself from laughing, while Yuzu looks between at the darker-haired teen and the fairy in her hand with shock in her eyes. The five calmer fairies are floating about with amusement on their features, but the fairy who is the object of her ire really blows all their expectations out of the water.

"I like her." Is all he says as he stares back at Tatsuki, which causes both Karin and Orihime to burst out into helpless giggles.

"Looks like someone's got a crush going on." Zangetsu mutters without thinking, and he immediately turns away and whistles innocently when the two feuding beings turn their attentions him. As they both narrow their eyes, they are stopped by Ichigo.

"Tsubaki, Tatsuki, if you guys don't mind, there is one last thing we need to do."

"What's that Ichi-nii?" His fair-haired younger sister asks curiously.

Walking over to her with a smile, he kneels in front of her and gently holds her arms, then instructs her on what to do next. She smiles and closes her eyes, then she feels her body suddenly move as two wings sprout out of her back, though she isn't ready for her brother's quick intake of breath or the quiet curse he lets loose.

"W-What's wrong Ichi-nii? Didn't I do it right?" She asks him fearfully.

Shaking his head slowly, Ichigo can't help but stare at the wings his sister possesses, his hand running down the leading edges of her shining silver wings and watching her shiver slightly. Motioning to Aisling, he asks the Faerie for a long mirror if possible for them to look into. The Faerie quickly conjures one for them to use, and Yuzu's mouth drops open as she witnesses her
silver wings beating gently for the first time.

"Pretty..." Is what comes out of her mouth first, followed by a more panicked question. "I-Ichi-nii, why are my wings silver? Is this normal?"

Chuckling, Amyntas steps forward and offers Yuzu the same explanation that he gave Ichigo earlier. "Your brother's immense Reiatsu somehow changed his power Yuzu, not just his Devil powers, but his Evil Pieces as well. No other pure-blood has ever had wings such as yours, nor have any of their Evil Pieces, not even their Mutation Pieces, ever chosen their future hosts for themselves. Maybe if Ajuka Beelzebub was here, he would have a better answer for us, but all I can tell you is that Ichigo's power has made things unpredictable for all of us."

"So having silver wings is okay then?" She asks him hesitantly.

"I think it's fine, just a side effect due to your brother." He smiles reassuringly at her.

The watching Devils burst out laughing however when the darker-haired twin immediately voices her opinion loudly. "Great, because of Ichigo we're gonna be the freaks of the Underworld!"

"OI! It's not my fault!"

Shaking his head wryly, Chad gets off his altar and steps closer to the long mirror, focusing on his wings like he had heard being described by the male members of the Naberius peerages. Flexing his imagined wings mentally, he watches as his own wings appear in the mirror just like expected. However, much like Yuzu's wings, his wings aren't normal bat-like wings, but far longer and narrower, looking almost armor-plated, his left wing white streaked with red and his right wing black streaked with purple. Spreading them fully, he admires them in the mirror then flaps his wings once and a powerful gust of wind forms in the room. Even the Devils look surprised by the power he has in his wing sweep.

Ichigo sees a nervous Orihime approaching the mirror next, followed by her fairies and Tatsuki; if anyone is going to surprise him, he knows it's going to be her. What happens next shocks literally everyone in the room, when not two wings appear but four. And unlike anyone else's wings, her wings clearly resemble those of the faerie race in shape and makeup, being nearly transparent and having colors that start from yellow, then fade to green, and finally being dominated by blue, which matches the colors of her power. Both the Shun Shun Rikka Fairies and Aisling are transfixed by the sight of her wings, and Tatsuki can't help commenting on how beautiful they are. Most importantly to her however, she sees Ichigo standing behind her with the biggest smile she has ever seen on his face.

"She's right Orihime; they do look beautiful on you." He praises her honestly.

To his surprise, she nearly bursts into tears, and when she lunges into his chest and grabs him tightly, he hurriedly asks her what is wrong.

"Thank you for giving me this life Ichi-nii. I do feel like I have a real home and family now." She mutters into his chest, shedding tears of joy.

Finally understanding her actions, he holds her tightly and kisses the top of her head. "You will always be family now Hime."

Looking over at Tatsuki, Ichigo nods his head at his oldest friend to take his place, and when she does so, Ichigo walks over to the last person who has yet to reveal her wings. Standing before Karin, he sees her fidgeting nervously with her kimono and avoiding his gaze. Touching her
shoulder, he can feel her stiffening beneath his hand.

"It doesn't matter Karin, you are a Devil now, and you'll always be pretty no matter what your wings look like." He reassures her.

She immediately glares at him with a flushed face, but finally tells him what her problem is. "I-It's not that Ichigo. I just…I don't know how."

Holding back the urge to chuckle, Ichigo kneels down and holds both of her arms, then tells her the same thing that Rias had told him when she was teaching him to spread his wings for the first time. Motioning to the others to clear a space from behind him, he also extends his own large wings from his back, spreading the light-eating black appendages to their fullest extent for his sister to see. Karin stares at them with awe, then as she holds on to his biceps, she focuses on his instructions, and soon she feels the increased weight on her back as her newly released wings beat in the air for the first time. Looking up with delight, she sees Ichigo's face develop a proud smile as well.

"They're beautiful Karin, take a look for yourself." He folds his wings away, then takes her hand and guides her over to the mirror.

Looking at the mirror, Karin's view is blocked by Ichigo at first, then he moves away and she gasps as she sees her wings for the first time. A pair of pure white bat wings are spread out behind her, beating gently against the air.

"T-They are beautiful Ichigo...But I thought only Angels have white wings?"

"Relax will ya, they're still in the shape of Devil wings, and anyone who makes that mistake will feel really silly afterwards." Her brother casually remarks.

Now that the reincarnation and unveiling ceremony is officially concluded, the four new Devils are suddenly swamped by Devils who are hugging or kissing them and offering them congratulations on joining the family. Yoruichi, Ichigo and Amyntas stand further back with smiles on their faces, allowing their peerages to experience their moment of joy.

Yoruichi pats her pupil's arm as she praises him quietly. "You did good Ichigo."

Keeping his eyes on his friends and family, he leans over and gives her a brief one-armed hug. "I couldn't have done this without a little help from everyone, Okaa-san."

XXXX

Isshin sits on the balcony with the other Shinigami and the two Quincies, drinking slowly from his supply of sake. Tears roll down his face as he felt the moment when each of his daughters finally released their powers; he knows now that his daughters have gotten both his and Masaki's abilities, and they are starting to walk down their own paths without him. Smiling sadly as he looks up towards the sky, he can only say one thing to the heavens above.

'Watch over us all Masaki, please.'

XXXX

A face sheds tears at the words that echo around her.

XXXX
Smiling darkly as she looks over at her fellow Fallen Angels, Raynare's smile widens as she looks over at the photo one more time.

'Soon, it will be mine, Twilight Healing.'

XXXX
Disclaimer insert here: I don't own or have ever owned Bleach or High School DxD. Please buy their stuff so they don't go home poor and destitute. Thanks.

All characters belong to their rightful owners, all OC are for entertainment value only. As usual an M rating is for future violence, dismemberments, gore, language, very foul language, and of course mature scenes will be in, but don't expect a ton of them. Again, enjoy your time here.

Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess, don't forget to include her in your reviews or send a PM to her with your thanks. But don't bother her on plot; she won't answer just like me :)

Edited by regfurby August, 2018.

"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu"

'Soon, it will be mine, Twilight Healing.'

Raynare
As Yoruichi stretches, it takes all her self-control to keep from bursting out into laughter as she looks over at her blushing and mumbling protégé. Ever since this morning when she had Sui-Fēng ate breakfast with herself, Ichigo and Rias, the boy had been unable to keep the red from forming on his cheeks every time he glanced at the petite Captain. Even Rias had noticed something was wrong, but Yoruichi quickly used Ichigo's distraction to inform the Gremory Heiress of the real story before she got the wrong idea. The crimson-haired teen had then stifled her own laughter, then upped the ante a bit when she 'innocently' asked the Shinigami Captain if she was looking forward to training with Ichigo and seeing him 'passed out' again.

Both Yoruichi and Rias had to stifle their giggles when Sui-Fēng responded that she didn't mind seeing Ichigo passed out again, which caused the young Devil lord to choke in horror and turn a bright shade of red. That was also when the Squad Two Captain had noticed Ichigo's blushing face and mistook it for him possibly being sick. After both Rias and Merti informed her that Devils almost never succumbed to such things however, she had finally dismissed this reaction as something caused by other reasons. Needless to say, Ichigo had hurriedly made his excuses to leave the room, claiming that he wanted to get ready to escort Rias and the others who are going to Kuoh when they headed to the Great Dome. Yoruichi had agreed, then subtly steered Sui-Fēng away from Ichigo until it was time for their training, knowing that all she needed to do at that point was wait for the fireworks to begin. She knew Ichigo would eventually screw up and accuse Sui-Fēng of undressing him, then she would get to have the last laugh on her wayward students for what they had done behind her back.

The former assassin looks up when she feels both Merti and Sui-Fēng enter the training dimension, and she begins grinning when Ichigo's embarrassed moan immediately reaches her ears.

"Yoruichi, why are we doing this so early? Usually he trains with the peerages after breakfast."
Ignoring the orange-haired Devil, the twin braided Captain asks her former mentor quizzically.

Standing to her feet while stretching her arms over her head, Yoruichi sees Ichigo looking anywhere but at her and her former protégé, both of them wearing the sleeveless and backless uniform she had designed for Shunkō users. Sui-Fēng also notices Ichigo acting weird, and seeing his blush in full form once again, decides to find out what is wrong with him.

"Ichigo, what is wrong with you?" The Chinese Captain bluntly asks as she begins stretching in front of him.

"No…nothing Shaolin…just…ah…nothing." Ichigo turns away hurriedly, his face turning even
Not satisfied by his answer at all, she walks up to him and turns him around by the shoulders, eyes narrowing at him when his blush grows even worse.

"Okay Ichigo, what is going on?" She demands, crossing her arms under her breasts as she looks at him. She hears him mumbling something, but it is far too low for her to make out.

"What? Speak up!"

"I said…” Again his words get lost in his mumbling.

"That's it! What the hell is your problem Ichigo? Ever since breakfast, you have been blushing like someone with his first crush, you can't look me in the eyes, and your evasiveness is really beginning to annoy me. So, spit it out! What…is…your…problem!?"

"After training yesterday you undressed me and…and…you saw me naked dammit!" The flush on his face grows as he glares at the black haired Onmitsukidō commander.

Suì-Fēng's face slowly contorts from annoyance, to shock and finally anger when she screams back at him. "What the hell are you talking about Ichigo!? Your father took care of you after you passed out! Who…who told you otherwise!?"

As he raises his arm and starts to point at the source of his information, the light goes on in his head at the same time it does for the Chinese Captain, and they both glare in the direction of his arm to where they see Yoruichi watching them with an expression of amusement. Their eyes narrow in murderous rage as they turn as one towards the now smirking shape-shifter who beckons towards them with the 'come get some' hand movement.

"Well Merti, this would be a good time for you to find a safe place to watch." Yoruichi calls out to the Elf as she bounces on the balls of her feet, smirk still firmly in place.

Looking first at the purple-haired goddess and then at said goddess's current and former protégés’ who are slowly releasing large amounts of killing intent, Merti wisely agrees. As she begins to back away, she sees the petite Shinigami ease her Zanpakutō from the small of her back, while her young Lord reaches out and summons Zangetsu into his hand from his inner-space.
"Sting all enemies to death, Suzumebachi!" Sui-Fêng screams out.

Ichigo doesn't even bother with Shikai as his voice sinisterly speaks. "Bankai: Tensa Zangetsu."

"Well, if you want to play two on one, I'm game." Yoruichi immediately disappears from in front of them.

Sui-Fêng grabs Ichigo's arm before he can move. "Whoever catches her first holds her down so the other can help skin the cat. Got it?"

"Deal."

The Elfin assassin watches with a hint of a smile as the two disappear from her sight as well.

'She did say it would be interesting this morning, but getting herself killed wasn't part of the plan I hope.'

XXXX

Watching the five Devils learn how to use their wings for the first time are beings that represent four different realms, namely Human, Shinigami, Hollow and Devil. Sitting next to Byakuya is Nelliel, while Grimmjow sits on the other side of his mate, followed by Kisuke sitting on the other side of the male Arrancar. Across from them are Isshin, Ryûken, Amyntas and Sasha, who are listening to the conversation between the Devil, the Squad Six Captain and the two Espadas.

Grimmjow sits with his arms crossed, while Nelliel is asking several very pointed questions about the proposal being presented to them. Now and then, Sasha would answer questions that her lord cannot, or offer advice on how they could use what resources they have at their disposal, with Kisuke offering his help in the way of equipment or devices he needs to test.

"So, you saying you're going to ask this Quincy that Ichigo brought back with him, to help you come up with a way to detect Quincy intrusions into Hueco Mundo. How?" Nelliel finally asks, wondering if they have a valid enough plan to stop the Quincies from capturing anymore Hollows or outright killing them.
Sasha looks over at the green-haired former Tercera Espada, or at least faces her when she answers. "I don't know what Ichigo and Candice spoke of yesterday, but when Kisuke and I went to interrogate her this morning, she answered everything we asked her without me needing to do anything. I could tell she was not withholding the truth in her words; it seems she is simply resigned to the fact that she has nowhere else to go now."

"Ryūken, Isshin, do you have any idea of what Ichigo could have spoken to the Quincy about?" Byakuya asks, grimacing when he sees Tatsuki lose control of her wings and have to be scooped up by one of the Griffins when she comes too close to impacting the lawn.

Ryūken pauses as he holds up his tea cup, only sending Ichigo's father a quick glance. "I believe Isshin might know better than I Byakuya-san. He and Ichigo have a better relationship than Uryū and I have had until recently."

Isshin snorts then as he looks down at his own cup, swirling the tea in his cup idly. He does answer the question however. "Only one thing I can think of Bya; and that would be about his mother and how she died. Sasha and the Quincy girl had a long conversation after 'she' was…sent on her way. From the sounds of things, the Quincy wasn't made aware of that particular aspect of the Emperor's powers."

Byakuya's own eyes grow distant for a few moments as he remembers his late wife, Rukia's sister Hisana; he knows how the feeling of losing a loved one continues to hurt. Much like the Kurosaki's still hurt from the loss of Masaki. Looking up at the sky, he sees the lighter-haired Kurosaki twin having fun with her silver wings as she swoops around her less agile sister, causing the dark-haired Kurosaki twin to use profanity laced shouts to announce her displeasure at her sibling's antics. Turning back to see the others still looking at Isshin, he then inquires how they plan to test any theory involving information provided by the captured woman.

"She knows she can't go back, not after basically giving us everything she knows, including the fact they can steal our Bankai when we use them." Sasha replies. "This alone seals her fate to us now Captain Kuchiki; given that she has little choice but to choose between us and death, we would do well to accept her and turn her into an asset."

Byakuya stares into her blind eyes and almost swears she is reading his soul and thoughts right then; the blind Elf then begins to smile and she motions to a chessboard laid on a nearby table. The Squad Six Captain frowns in confusion, then his eyes widen in shock as he realizes what she means.

"You can't be serious? Why would he even consider it?"
Amyntas answers his question even as he continues to watch the sky above them. "Ichigo, as you already stated, changes people Byakuya."

Grimmjow's mouth twists in disgust, but he refrains from saying anything too impolite when he speaks. "Not that I got anything against that Naberius, but why would he take someone like her?"

"Because Ichigo told me that one of his Pawn pieces reacted to her after he spoke to her yesterday." Uryū says as he joins the group of adults, bowing politely to acknowledge his peers.

Surprise comes to almost everyone except the Elfin woman, whose face clearly shows she had some prior knowledge of the news. Uryū sits next to father, who pours him a cup of tea and gives his son a barely noticeable nod. Uryū returns an equally silent greeting.

"Kisuke." Isshin says as he looks at the former Squad Twelve Captain, hoping for an explanation.

Taking his hat off, the shouten owner folds his hands down on the table as he speaks. "Merti told me how Ichigo's Evil Pieces changed colors the moment they touched his hands. I can only assume that somehow his Reiatsu and Devil powers have greatly influenced their designations; as such, they will only react to the person that is closest in compatibility to whichever Evil Piece he has. I understand that both his Knight pieces and his other Bishop piece have already made their decisions. It should prove interesting if the persons picked are willing to accept immortality and an increase in power to become a member of his peerage...though I do wonder what will happen when the Knight pieces are used on the people they had chosen."

Ryūken looks at his son worriedly then. "Uryū?"

The Quincy teen shakes his head. "No Father, he told me none of his pieces have reacted to me. I asked." He pauses, then smirks sadly. "Besides, we have always been on opposite sides of things. Shinigami. Quincy. Devil…"

"And yet, one of Ichigo's Evil Pieces have reacted to a Quincy." Kisuke points out. "Things are changing, and Ichigo is at the very center of it."

Everyone reflects on that for a moment, then Amyntas breaks the silence.

"Uryū Ishida, you are welcome to stay here for as long as you wish. Your teacher has shown a
fondness for you it seems, I think it is because she and Kiku had a close relationship after her marriage to Vincent. Cornelia cried the entire wedding, stating her son had found the most beautiful Queen she could have imagined.” Amyntas says, his expression sad yet amused at those memories.

"I...I am surprised by how much Serafall-san knows of our ways Amyntas-san, I...just wish…”

Ryūken places his hand on his son's shoulder. "We all do Uryū."

The sound of excited shouts interrupts their conversation, and they turn to see the younger Devils begin their landings. Yuzu and Orihime both glide gracefully to near perfect landings, while Chad does a somewhat impressive three-point landing, only to have Tatsuki and then Karin crash into him when their wobbly landings cannot avoid the towering teen. The peerage members overseeing them swiftly land next to the groaning pile of younger Devils and quickly ascertain that only their egos have been bruised, leading to amused chuckles as they help separate the teens from the pile, or in the case of a fiery Queen, open laughter as she hauls the dark-haired karate champ to her feet.

"Tatsuki, for your first day you shouldn't worry so much. You did very well but only time and practice will make you better.” Akiko tells the new Rook with a smirk.

Huffing as she brushes her leggings off, Tatsuki looks up at the nine-tailed Kitsune and wonders out loud whether Ichigo was as bad as them when he first started flying.

"No, he was a natural with his wings actually; he said because of his Hollow, his instincts can guide him on how to use his wings, which is rather convenient I must say. Yuzu and Orihime both did very well, but they are still not as skillful as Ichigo. He flew so naturally, it was almost as if he was meant to fly...He also seemed to have had a lot of fun during his first practice session, but some of us almost had heart attacks watching some of the stunts he pulled off that first time.”

Yuzu quickly pipes up as she joins them. "Awww, why does Ichi-nii always seem to know how to do things like this without help?"

Orihime walks over as well, placing her hands on her younger sister's shoulders and giggling. "Ask your cousins Kūkaku and Ganju how well he did trying to learn how to use the Reishūkaku that we needed in our invasion to rescue Rukia."

"Rei...What's that Orihime?” Tatsuki asks her best friend curiously.
"It's Kūkaku's version of a cannonball. We had to use our Reiatsu to expand and stabilize it in order to break through the barrier that surrounds Seireitei. Of course, Ichigo, with his utter lack of control, caused it to blow up after we broke through." Uryū says with a smirk as he joins their group, though Orihime and Chad both recall that event happening somewhat differently.

"Well, it all worked out in the end though." Yoruichi comments as the werecat suddenly appears and gingerly makes her way over to the nearest table, sitting down with an audible sigh as Orihime's healing shield quickly envelops her.

"Ah, Yoruichi, what happened to you?" Hanako hurries up as well, looking worried as she scans the fading butterfly marks, numerous bruises and small cuts that litter her body.

Despite her soreness, the former Onmitsukidō Commander smiles when she answers. "I fought the dynamic duo known as the Furious Bee and the Fuming Berry and won. Those two were quite angry at me this morning for some...unknown reason." She can't help but snicker as she says the last part.

Tatsuki face palms then. "You never told him did you Yoruichi-sensei?"

"Well... I told him that the Furious Bee was responsible, and it was so worth it too." The werecat grins madly.

"Yeah, yeah Yoruichi, you can bite me too." Ichigo grumbles as he limps through the doorway leading to the balcony.

"Ichi-nii!" His youngest sister cries out upon seeing his rapidly healing face and the visible bruises that can be seen through his torn-up shirt.

"I'm fine Yuzu; Zangetsu is getting quicker at healing me when I'm not in my spiritual body. I'll be fine in an hour or two, no thanks to kitten-sensei." He earns a glare from the purple-haired goddess for the nickname. "Suì-Fēng however needs some help, so Orihime if you could?"

Before the orange-haired healer can answer him, the petite Captain walks in stiffly through the same doorway, barely mustering up the energy to shoot Yoruichi a glare as she makes her way to the same table they are sitting at. Collapsing into an empty seat, she moans out in relief as a second shield envelops her, though more than a few eyebrows are raised at the simultaneous healing
domes being deployed.

"When did you learn how to do that Orihime-nee?" Karin asks curiously.

"Oh, it was yesterday when I was talking to the guys about any changes they might have, Shun'ō told me he thinks he can split their healing shield between himself and Ayame. As you can see it looks somewhat different..." They realize that Orihime's dual healing shields are shaped like hemispheres rather than the elongated, two-pointed dome they are more familiar with. "... And they heal better when combined, but otherwise they work just as well on their own. The others think they have gained greater strength and durability as well, but until I use them I won't know for sure." The oldest Naberius sister tells them happily.

As the Karakura teens eagerly discuss the benefits of Orihime's improved healing shields, Merti walks in finally and takes her place beside Ichigo; knowing that the Elf has something to tell them, the younger Devils quieten down and look towards her, at which point she informs them that they have about a week to learn to control their Devil powers so as not to expose them to normal human beings, and their training would begin after lunch. At the word 'lunch', two males immediately turn pale, which causes a few glances in their direction as the others wonder why they seem so afraid. Tatsuki and Yuzu both begin discussing the menu for lunch, which to Ichigo's horror seems to have grown to include everyone still present at the Estate. Casting a fearful glance at Chad, he sees his quiet friend literally looking like he has fainted in his seat.

Trying to save all of them from a potential disaster, Ichigo quickly speaks up. "You know Orihime, you can always wait until after your training to make us lunch..."

Unfortunately for him, Isshin overhears them, and despite having firsthand knowledge of what his son's fear is, he decides to stick up for his eldest daughter and make his oldest son sweat some anyway. "Nonsense, my newest daughter has been looking forward to this ever since you told Sado about how meals are often handled by the peerages themselves when they aren't in the Underworld, and she still hasn't cooked that celebratory feast for joining your peerage yet my son. I think everyone here is looking forward to your sister's meal, don't you agree Tatsuki?"

Ichigo's eyes dart to his oldest friend, his longest-serving ally when it comes to avoiding Orihime's strange cooking. "Yeah, I know I am." His eyes nearly bug out at her instantaneous reply, and he sees the devious smile on her face. Why would she do that?? If anyone would stick up for him, it should have been her!

Yoruichi grabs Ichigo, putting the plan she came up with last night with Isshin and Kisuke to 'punish' him for not having faith in Orihime's cooking. "Come on Berry, you need a soak and I know just the place." Grabbing Ichigo before he can summon up any kind of protest, she disappears with him in a Flashstep.
"What the hell was that about?" Tatsuki asks in confusion as she eyes the two now empty places at their table.

Walking over to them, Kisuke whips open his fan and gives her a knowing smirk. "Nothing to worry about Arisawa-san, Yoruichi is just having some fun as she torments her 'son'."

Rias sits at her desk enjoying the bento that Yuzu had made for her entire peerage; the older teen can't help but smile at the thought that she is going to be an older sister to the twins as well as to the gentle healer who was adopted by their family. It was only shortly after Ichigo had returned from Hueco Mundo that she and Orihime had begun to really talk with one another; Orihime had been very forthcoming about Ichigo's life in Karakura and the adventures they've had, the only thing she had a hard time speaking about was her time as a prisoner in Hueco Mundo. When Rias had asked Ichigo about it, his eyes had gained a distant stare to them as he answered her truthfully.

'I took someone from her back then Rias, someone who may have become important to her one day, but I...we'll never know now.'

Not wanting to pry too much from him, she had quietly asked Tatsuki and Uryū the same question later when Ichigo was training with Merti, Yoruichi and Suì-Fēng. The new Rook had fallen silent at first, taking a quick glance to see if the archer would answer, but Uryū simply turned and walked away without a word to them. Rias's confused face must have been especially obvious, as the spiky haired girl took pity on her and brought her to a private room, where she told her the whole story about the deceased Cuarto Espada.

'Ichigo thinks Hime had unconsciously developed feelings for Ulquiorra, and he had for her as well. I know when I was watching over her shortly after Ichigo went missing, she had a lot of nightmares. Two names were always said, Ichigo's and Ulquiorra's. Uryū won't say what he saw that day, but I do know he won't be the person Hime falls in love with. Since Uryū was there...the memory is too strong for Orihime.'

Rias stops reminiscing and takes a look around the classroom; Akeno, Sōna, Tsubaki and the Shinigami are the only ones in their classroom for lunch. None from their group have had reason to go to the cafeteria since they started bringing bento with them from the Estate, and today her soon to be sisters-in-law had prepared bento for all of them. Yuzu insisted they each have a healthy meal and despite assurances from her brother, the stern look she gave them brooked no arguments to the contrary. It also told Rias of what Yuzu thinks of the Academy's lunch menu; while she personally feels the food served is healthy and tastes good, it is still not up to Yuzu's high standards in both
nutrition and taste. Remembering the cutely determined frown on Yuzu's face as the lighter-haired twin lectures them on healthy eating, Rias can't help the smile that comes to her face again, especially when she thinks about the surprise Ichigo is going to get today.

Taking another bite of her delicious bento, the Gremory Heiress thinks about her recent days, starting with the arrival of the two Shinigami Lieutenants that she and the other Devils have grown close to, helped by the fact that Rukia is a source of information on the other former humans who have become part of her future husband's peerage. Glancing to her left, she sees the violet-eyed young woman scrolling through her phone looking at the latest Chappy merchandise she has plans of buying before she leaves for Soul Society. Looking at the other Shinigami Lieutenant, she sees Momo and Tsubaki sitting together with Akeno near the back, their heads put together conspiratorially and laughing amongst themselves. Shivering as she turns back around, she can't help but feel a sense of dread about what they are planning, although her mood immediately sours when she thinks about the fact that the two women will have to return to their own world soon. She knows that Ichigo isn't looking forward to it either, but when she asked him about it, he had told her there wasn't anything he could do about it.

'I'm no longer a Shinigami Rias. That life ended the day they tried to execute me. I'll never trust Central to do the right thing ever again, and if they come after my friends or Kami forbid my family, I will have no choice but to end them.'

She shudders thinking about the way his voice had Hollowfied, his eyes beginning to bleed black and his pupils taking a golden sheen as he gained a fierce look in his eyes...

"You okay Rias?" Blinking away her thoughts, the Devil turns to see worry evident on the face of the violet-eyed Shinigami. Nodding quickly, the crimson-haired Devil gives her a weak smile.

"Sorry Rukia, just thinking that's all."

"About a certain strawberry maybe?" Rias hears the teasing tone in Rukia's voice, which makes her blush lightly.

"No…no…I…was just thinking." She weakly denies.

Rukia cocks her eyebrow and a sly smirk forms. "Are you sure?"

Fortunately, or unfortunately used to Akeno's teasing, Rias manages to retain her composure and
ignore the words. Instead, she quickly glances around to make sure they won't be overheard, then leans closer to speak. "Rukia, what will happen when you and Momo go back?"

The raven-haired Shinigami pauses and looks at her in surprise. "I'm not sure what you mean Rias." She keeps her voice low to prevent eavesdroppers as well.

"I mean, will you be able to come back to the World of the Living?" Rias knows that Rukia and Ichigo are best friends, and doesn't want them to be deprived of that friendship.

With a sigh, Rukia sits back with a look of sadness on her face. "I...don't know. I'm a Lieutenant, and there aren't really that many missions that would require us to come here. It could be centuries before I set foot back here, depending on where I'm assigned to patrol."

"What about Ichigo then? Orihime and Chad, even Uryū are your friends. Would you be given leave to see them, if their nature is kept secret?" The Gremory Heiress asks again.

Frowning as she thinks about it, Rukia slowly shakes her head in answer to the young teen Devil's question, an answer that is displeasing to them both. The bell warning students that lunch is going to end soon starts to chime, putting an end to their conversation rather abruptly. Around the room, the members of both peerages pack away their remaining bento, and Akeno takes her seat behind her mistress just as Momo returns to her seat behind her fellow Shinigami; both of them notice the odd vibe in the air, causing the Squad Five Lieutenant to ask them what is wrong.

Turning to look at her fellow Lieutenant, Rukia speaks with longing in her voice. "Just realizing how much I will be missing everyone when I go back, Momo."

xxxxx

Amyntas stands with his hands behind his back, his two most trusted clan members standing behind him in wait while he thinks about what to do with the fourth person in the room with them. Merti Longoak and Sasha Mai'ryl stand flanking said person; Merti's eyes occasionally drift between her sister, their Lord and the woman they are guarding, while Sasha's unseeing eyes remain focused on the back of the Devil she had sworn her life to centuries ago. Between them sits Candice Catnipp, the latest source of tension for the Naberius Clan, and based on her uncomfortable expression she is well aware of her situation.

"There is no other way?" Amyntas asks the Elves half-heartedly, but resigned acceptance can
already be heard in his voice.

Shaking her head despite knowing that he can't see her, Sasha answers him truthfully. "There are, but with her help and her knowledge, Ichigo will be able to achieve quicker results with his Quincy arts before he has to face Riser Phenex, Milord."

Amyntas frowns and glances back at them. "Merti?"

"I can only show him the katas that Kiku taught me, but I neither possess the abilities of a Quincy nor the knowledge of how to use them. Candice Catnipp possesses both, and with her help, Ichigo will gain valuable experience in using the Quincy arts. I know this doesn't sit well with you or Lord Byakuya, but I and Sasha truly believe her words. Candice no longer has a home to return to and… our offer has been received favorably."

Seeing Amyntas turn fully to look at her, Candice can't help but shiver as she huddles as far back into her chair as it would allow her, not daring to avert her eyes from his piercing gaze. After a long moment, the Naberius Lord finally speaks, and his voice is deadly serious. "I will allow this Candice Catnipp, but I warn you now…"

She hastens to assure him of her compliance, not wanting to hear his threats. "Forgive me Naberius-sama, but I already know, I…I saw what happened to that other girl. I know who and what you truly are, and I know nothing I say will ever convince you otherwise. But…but I will teach him everything I know, I swear on my hon…well, I swear it to you." Candice ends her pledge with a bow and her hand over her heart, feeling it beating rapidly in her chest.

Amyntas's gaze only grows more piercing. "Ichigo is my great-grandson; your Emperor took my granddaughter away from me, leaving a hole in my heart for not going to see her sooner, telling her who and what she really was. My greatest regret, other than the night my family was massacred, is knowing that she wouldn't have died if I hadn't sealed her power away, the power that would have kept her safe…and alive. So, understand this Candice Catnipp, I will literally move Hell to seek vengeance against anyone who would seek to take my family away from me again." His power slowly reveals themselves to the green haired woman as she sits there, her fear showing as his metallic black armor appears on his body in wisps of dark power.

"You know what will happen if you betray us Candice Catnipp, so as a condition of your release, you will still wear the Reishi seal as a way of monitoring your location. It will be deactivated while you remain at the Estate, and you will be allowed to train with Ichigo to help keep your own skills intact; lastly, you will be given quarters in the Estate and allowed to use the facilities here. Are these terms acceptable to you?"
Candice's eyes go wide at hearing the generous offer. She snaps her head to the blind Elf standing beside her, hardly daring to believe that the words she heard are true. Once she sees the small smile form on Sasha's face however, she hurriedly stands and bows even deeper to Amyntas than before. Swallowing with her suddenly dry throat, she answers as calmly as she can.

"I humbly accept, Lord Amyntas."

The still-transformed Devil nods calmly. "There is one last thing you should know; there is another Quincy here, Ichigo's cousin Uryū Ishida, as well as his father Ryūken Ishida, though the latter will be returning to the World of the Living soon. I think Uryū would benefit from learning any 'useful' techniques that you have, though it would depend on what he already knows. Perhaps you can show him a few things while he is still here." The Naberius Lord's armor disappears as he speaks.

Again, Candice is in shock, she hadn't even known that any other Quincy existed outside of those in the Wandenreich. She pulls herself together, however, knowing that now isn't the time for such questions. "I will Lord Naberius."

"Merti, I place her under your supervision; Kane will be informed of her changed status as well as the Peerages. I will see the three of you at lunch."

The two Elfin women bow their heads, hurriedly followed by the Quincy; Merti then escorts Candice from the room, leaving the Watcher of the Skeleton Tower alone with his Head of Interrogation. Waiting for a few minutes to ensure they are alone, Amyntas then turns and looks at the blind Elf who is still patiently waiting for him.

"Are you sure of this Sasha?"

"I am sure, Amyntas." She answers with respect and a hint of affection in her voice.

Amyntas simply sighs at her words. "Did you see this coming, Sasha?"

Smiling, the blind Elf begins to walk away with a bit of laughter in her voice. "Your great-grandson is unlike any Devil we have ever seen before, Milord, so it really isn't surprising to me that one of his Pawns have reacted to a Quincy."

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Yoruichi is in heaven; holding a saucer of sake in one hand, and a bottle of sake in the other, her back is skillfully being massaged by a hot young orange headed young Devil.

"You suck, you know that right?" Ichigo says as he continues to work on the muscles down her right ribcage.

She leans back and pats his cheek without looking. "At least I'm not nude Ichigo, count that as a blessing."

Ichigo snorts at the bikini-clad werecat then, knowing that she is right. When they came out of her Shunpo earlier, he had seen the hot spring and immediately had flashbacks to the hot spring during his Bankai training. He almost launched himself into another Shunpo before her hand suddenly grabbed his arm in a crushing grip, bringing his escape to a crushing halt. Fortunately for his peace of mind, he saw her pointing towards the bathing suits hanging on the rack nearby, and noticed his own was already waiting there for him. Yoruichi had laughed at his expression when he finally remembered that the Naberius hot springs, unlike most Japanese Onsen, permitted bathing suits due to catering to a mostly western clientele in addition to possessing a highly efficient magical hot spring cleaning system, but what really got her cracking up was when she began to undress in front of him and he immediately started shouting at her to use the damn changing room.

'That is why you lost this morning Ichigo; you thought you knew what I was going to do, so you reacted the way I predicted.' She thinks smugly to herself, roughly knowing what is going through his mind based on his expressions alone.

Eventually deciding to spare his sense of modesty, Yoruichi ended up using the changing room, but she did make a few comments wondering if he was like this with Rias when they shared a shower together. Even though he didn't bother to answer, the red and annoyed face he had told her more than enough.

Shaking his head to get rid of useless thoughts, Ichigo begins to work her other side. "Yeah, yeah, whatever." But there is no real malice in his words now, not since he and Shaolin had talked.

Noticing this, the purple-haired werecat decides to ask a more personal question. "Ichigo, I have always wanted to ask you this, and seeing how we are alone now, I guess now is as good a time as any." She begins quietly.

"Sure, what's on your mind Yoruichi?" Ichigo absently agrees as he begins working at the top of
her shoulders again.

"Why Rias?"

Confused, he stops momentarily before starting again. "Why Rias what?"

"Why did you fall for her? Why wasn't it Rukia or even Orihime that you felt...an attraction for?" She shifts so she can see his expression better.

Ichigo's hands stop completely as he sits behind her thinking, wondering how to really answer that question. He and Zangetsu had talked about it when he was in his inner-world; well he had talked, Zangetsu stayed silent until the very end and slapped him upside his head.

**Instinct Ichigo.** 'The white spirit had deadpanned.

'Instinct, what the hell kind of answer is that?' Ichigo had frowned at the merriment that showed on his Zanpakutō spirit's face then.

Placing his white hands on his wielder's shoulders, the Zanpakutō spirit began to speak to him. 'What are you Ichigo?'

'Duh, a Devil.' He frowned when Zangetsu's face didn't shift in expression.

'That's right King, a Devil. Rias is a Devil, you are a Devil. Deep down inside you, you let your instincts guide your actions, didn't you? You knew she was your mate; that your future was tied with hers, even before we were freed from Geta-Bōshi's Kidō. You never had these feelings with the Ice Princess or Hime did you? Somehow, you just knew they weren't the ones for you. Why else did you let the Midget go when she confessed to you? Why else did you feel the sadness and guilt when Ulquiorra disappeared on Orihime? Because you knew they weren't meant for you, we still feel it when we see Hime's face, that we took away a chance of her finding her own happiness. You knew that neither you nor they would be happy if you became a couple with either of them. Orihime will be happy as your sister now, and Rukia will be happy with the baboon. That, Ichigo, is why Rias was able to get into your heart so easily, she is the one we have been looking for all this time.' Zangetsu's black sclera had begun glowing slightly then.
Coming back to the present, he sees Yoruichi's golden eyes staring unwaveringly into his as she waits for his answer. "I guess she has always been the one." It's all he says.

"Are you sure it isn't because of her generous 'assets'?” She teases him. Rolling his eyes at her question, Ichigo smirks at her then and pushes her back around so he can continue working on her back.

Moving his hand down her spine and finding the spot that he had stopped at prior, he begins to work down the middle of her spine after finishing with her shoulder blades. "You know me better than that kitty-sensei. But I won't lie and say she is anything short of gorgeous to me."

"Always the gentleman, aren't ya Ichigo?” Yoruichi smiles as he pushes her slightly forward and begins working on her lower back.

He rolls his eyes again. "I guess so Yoruichi."

She spends the rest of the time sitting there in silence and taking sips of her sake; even when he has moved back after finishing with her massage, neither of them say anything as Ichigo gets out first and holds open a towel for her when she moves to follow him. Drying off in separate changing rooms again, Yoruichi can only think about how much Ichigo has changed from the shy, prudish and completely oblivious awkward teen that had gotten nose bleeds when he saw her nude in the hot spring. It also makes her chuckle when she remembers how brash, loud, and obnoxious he used to be, although it also makes her feel guilty as well after seeing how much he has changed, for better or for worse. In two short years, Ichigo went from being a naïve fifteen year old schoolkid forced to fight in a war for people he never knew existed, to being a veteran seventeen year old warrior on his way to inherit not only his own clan, but also the responsibility of the Tower and a marriage of love that will hopefully take place in the coming weeks.

Speaking of marriage, it seems that unlike marriages between humans or even Shinigami, if two Devils wanted to marry at seventeen, they could. It was really surprising when she had overheard Rias and Ichigo discussing it quietly one night when they thought they were alone. She was also impressed when she heard what he wanted to do with his 'human' life; becoming a literature teacher at Kuoh, which he said did sound very appealing to him. Admittedly, Yoruichi was caught off guard by this because she had been so sure he would follow in Isshin's footsteps and become a doctor; but thinking about it again, she really shouldn't have been surprised since she knows of his love of literature. Plus, now that she thinks about it, with his nature as a protector, knowing that he is helpless to prevent most of the injuries and illnesses of his patients in the first place would probably make him miserable as a doctor, and she suspects that he had probably realized it already. Rias on the other hand hasn't decided yet, but from her words, she is leaning towards the business world to help expand both her Clan's, and now his Clan's influence in both the Underworld and the World of the Living.
She had quietly slipped away when their talking had stopped after a while and she recognized the feeling in his suppressed Reiatsu, so with a fond farewell to the shy teen she once remembered him as, she went to hunt for Shaolin instead... Her reminiscing is interrupted when she hears the Berry curse lowly under his breath.

"Dammit, Zangetsu I know we are going to our execution, but I really didn't think it would turn out this way."

She has to take a moment to figure out what he is talking about, but when she does, she ends up having to slap both hands over her mouth to stifle her laughter, especially when she hears Zangetsu grumbling after he materializes.

"Well dumbass, I hope you're satisfied, we are going to our deaths soon. You just had to joke around and now look at where we are, or rather where we'll be soon. I hope you got a plan on how to deal with this King."

"I…I got nothing." Again she has to hold her laughter in when she hears the despair in his voice.

"IF…and I mean if we survive this, I'm gonna kill you myself King."

She hears Ichigo sigh then. "Look, the quicker we get this over with, the quicker we can do damage control with the other peerages. How the hell did it go from a simple lunch with just the four of us to practically everyone in such a short amount of time?"

Grinning to herself, she decides its finally time to get him to see how much off the mark he is, and for him to find out what his sisters have been doing all this time in his absence. Putting her tabi on, she walks out of her stall and shouts for Ichigo to hurry up, arching an eyebrow at the deadpan stare that the white Zanpakutō spirit is giving her, then smirking back at him as he disappears with a huff. Coming out of his stall slowly, Ichigo has the expression of a man walking to his own execution clearly showing on his face.

"Come on Berry-kun, it can't be that bad can it?" Again the brief look of horror shows on his face, and she can barely keep herself from laughing in his face.

Shaking his head slowly, Ichigo gives her a look of utmost regret. "When you are asking for an
antidote that doesn't exist, remember I tried to warn you guys.”

The Devils that are standing around in the kitchen can't believe the feast the young Bishop is creating under the guiding eyes of the new princess of the clan, Yuzu Naberius, who in their biased opinions is truly a master in the culinary arts. Some even suspect it to be a trait inherited from both Cornelia and Kiku, and perhaps from the few dishes being prepared that Yuzu claims were recipes left behind by her mother, Masaki must have been skilled in the kitchen as well. They watch in amazement as the young healer glides through the kitchen preparing the many dishes that were agreed upon that morning, with nearly half of the dishes being vegetarian for those who didn't eat meat like Aisling and Isi. For dessert they would have Kasutera and Bota Mochi; Orihime herself seems to be looking forward to having some of the red bean paste covered Mochi.

One dish however is specially prepared by the youngest twin and oldest sister, containing two types of Japanese curry. One is the Kurosaki recipe taught to Yuzu by Ichigo himself, while the other is a vegetarian-friendly version of the same dish. Both dishes are being served with the typical Japanese curry rice sides of fukujinzuke, rakkyō and benishōga. It doesn't take too long before everything is ready to be served for those who are staying for lunch, and all they are waiting for is the next clan leader and his sensei to show up.

Orihime can't help but beam with happiness as the dishes are placed on serving trays by the kitchen staff, they even have to gently scoot the young woman out of the way and tell her to take a seat, not to listening to her arguments about letting her serve the gathering.

In fact, the kindly Devil in charge of the staff tells her in no uncertain terms that she isn't going to be allowed to do so. "Lady Orihime…with so many dishes and with the number of those dining today, you wouldn't be able to do it all yourself, so please sit down and relax as we take care of the rest. You have done very well and we are all looking forward to the feast you have prepared, so you should go refresh yourself for lunch, you too Lady Yuzu."

The burnt-orange-haired sister and the lighter haired twin can only obey the woman, who somewhat reminds Orihime of Captain Unohana for some reason. Not wanting to find out if the kind-seeming older Devil has a dark side to her like the Squad Four Captain, both girls quickly bow in thanks before leaving to get washed up and changed before joining the peerages for lunch.

Nearly bouncing excitedly as she walks with Yuzu down the corridor, Orihime beams at her adoptive younger sister as she speaks. "I hope your brother likes what we made Yuzu; I don't think he has eaten anything I made since the beginning of our first year."
Yuzu can't help but giggle as she walks hand in hand with the older teen. "I think you told me what you had him eat that day Orihime-nee."

The two girls share a laugh before reaching their shared room; after entering and finding that Tatsuki and Karin have finished with their own showers, the two sisters quickly shower as well then dress in elegant yukatas that they now own in abundance, courtesy of Lord Amyntas who had gotten each of them completely new wardrobes for both their stay the Underworld, as well as when they return with Ichigo to the mansion they will be living in once he and the others have their powers under enough control to return to school.

Orihime gestures for Yuzu to turn around, and she ties the younger sister's obi behind her back to keep it from getting in the way. Tatsuki does the same for her once she has finished dressing. The four girls then leave together, reaching the main dining room just as Ichigo and Yoruichi arrive at the same time, both of them wearing yukata as well.

"Ichi-nii, I hope you like what Orihime-nee made for you, it's your favorite dish." His youngest sister says as she grabs his hand to walk into the dining room with him.

"Ah, yeah, I'm sure I will Zu." Noticing his lackluster response, Tatsuki is about to yell at him when a mocha-skinned hand touches her arm and grabs her attention.

Turning, she sees Yoruichi with a finger placed on her smiling lips, and she almost gasps at the words mouthed to her. She now understands why Ichigo, and now that she thinks about it, Chad looked so pale when they learned that Orihime was going to be making lunch for them. Neither of them had tried Orihime's food since she started living with the Kurosaki's in Karakura. Seeing the resigned expression on the face of her oldest friend, she can't wait to see it change to shock when he finally tastes the dishes her best friend and Yuzu have made during the last hour. Linking her arm with Orihime's and pulling her along, she smiles conspiratorially with the former Shihōin princess, both of them now eagerly awaiting Ichigo's and Chad's reaction to the feast. As they enter the large dining room where the feast is being held, she can also see almost everyone from the Naberius peerages and the numerous guests present except for those in school right now.

Unable to resist throwing a bit of fuel onto the fire, Tatsuki quips out to her oldest friend. "Rias and the others are going to miss a great meal, so make sure you make them platters Ichigo, wouldn't want her to get pissed at you for not doing so, would you?"

The glare he sends her is so worth the teasing.

"I'll...make sure of that Suki." Ichigo growls at his friend and Rook.
Guiding Orihime to her place at the main table, Tatsuki leaves to join Akiko, Daiki and their family at another table: she is training with the martial artist Nekomata and his daughter, the half Neko half Kitsune Hanako. Taking a seat next to her is the eight-year-old son of Hanako and Conor, Takashi, who has his mother's hair and eye color, but without any tails, and his ears are like his father's. Both his parents conceal their grins when she ruffles his head playfully, which results in him giving a comical grimace and attempting to fix his hair before quickly getting distracted and practically drooling over the aromas coming from the kitchen.

"Tatsuki, why do Ichigo and Sado both look so unhappy?" Hanako whispers quietly as she finishes setting her son's place at the table.

"Oh, you'll see or hear about it soon enough." Tatsuki smirks, and the rest of the table give her curious looks as they follow her gaze to where she is watching the table that Chad is sitting at.

It is clear that the giant man is feeling very uncomfortable with his position; as he sits there like a frozen statue, all he can think about is how not to embarrass Ichigo, and more importantly Orihime, when he starts to eat later. His table has four places laid out for who he knows will be the twin Elves Kimi and Nia, as well as their aunt and mother Merti and Sasha; the fifth and sixth placements are a mystery for him however. Looking around, he sees the older Shinigami sitting together at their own table, all except Yoruichi, who sits at the main table with Ichigo and his sisters. Joining Isshin, Byakuya and Kisuke at their table are the Armistead family and Akio. By process of elimination, he realizes he has gotten Aisling the hot-headed Faerie at his table as well... which still leaves the last member of his table unaccounted for. Closing his eyes, he sends a prayer to whoever might give him pity for the next half hour.

After everyone has taken their seats and before lunch is served, Amyntas suddenly stands up and taps his fork against his crystal goblet. "Thank you for attending today's lunch, I am sure many of you are looking forward to this feast as much as I am." He smiles as cheers and laughter break out from the younger members of his clan, before raising his hand for silence then continuing to speak. "But before we start, I have one last piece of clan business to announce. Kimi, Nia if you please."

All heads turn to watch the twin Elves as they stand up and head towards the door of the dining room, pulling it open without a word. Many eyes widen as they see a young green-haired woman wearing a pale-yellow kimono standing outside, something she seems uncomfortable wearing as they can see her picking at her sleeves and obi absently. Stopping when she notices the door is wide open, she hastily enters the room and bows to her Naberius Lord.

"Forgive me Lord Amyntas, I'm...not used to wearing such formal clothing." As she straightens up again, they see the Quincy clearly fidgeting under the curious gazes of every eye in the room.
Clearing his throat, Amyntas speaks up again. "Please be seated Candice Catnipp. Today is a special day for us, as we celebrate Ichigo's first peerage members joining him. For those of you who do not know her, this is Candice Catnipp, and she will be instructing both Ichigo and Uryū with their Quincy powers. Please welcome her service to our clan."

Candice shifts nervously as she is given polite applause, as well as many welcomes and thank-yous from the assembled group. She is more than aware of the thoughtful looks being sent her way by older people in the room, some of whom she has no doubt are aware of how she came to be a guest at their Estate. Bowing back to them again, she lets the twin Elves lead her to a table where a large dark-skinned teen is sitting, along with two older Elves she is very familiar with, and what appears to be a Faerie of all things. As she takes her seat, she notices the large teen's one eye looking at her curiously for a moment before he speaks to her in a pleasant deep voice.

"Sado Yasutora."

"Candice Catnipp." The Quincy replies back automatically. She then nods to the older pair of sisters. "Sasha-sama, Merti-sama."

Sasha's clouded eyes regard her for a moment before the Elf speaks to her. "This is Aisling Coghlan, one of Lord Amyntas's Bishops." Her hand indicates the Faerie seated to her left.

The two females exchange polite greetings, and then the serving staff appear bearing a multitude of trays; remembering the delicious meal she ate when she was first given the opportunity to change sides, she can't help the smile that forms on her face as she smells the food being served. Strangely enough, she notices the tall teen flinching slightly as each dish is set on the table, and she can see cold sweat breaking out on his face. Wondering if there is something wrong, she glances to either side of her and sees the teen Elves slightly grinning at him, while the older two Elves simply look amused. The Faerie however shows confusion on her face as she too notices the weird behavior coming from her young lord's second Rook. Apparently deciding that it's not her problem, the Faerie begins piling food on her plate while engaging Candice in conversation.

"I understand that you are a Quincy, is this correct Candice?" The woman asks as she takes several Spring Vegetable Tempura from one of the dishes.

The green-haired Quincy nods her head slightly. "Former Quincy as of now Coghlan-sama."

The Faerie simply waves off her formalities. "Sama? No need for that Candice, only Lord Amyntas, Lord Kuchiki and his sister should be addressed that way. Every other noble here seems to have an aversion to honorifics such as that."
"Even Ichigo?" Glancing at said young man, she sees the orange-haired teen has yet to place any food on his plate.

Aisling laughs lightly at that. "Yes, he's the worst really. When we first met him, he wasn't quite himself. Quick to take offense and even quicker to offend others." A faint crackle of electricity courses through the air around her. "But now that he's recovered he's not too bad; since you will be training with him, just call him Ichigo. It'll go a long way with him."

"Umm...I'll keep that in mind." Candice agrees hesitantly, helping herself to the food when she sees everyone else doing so. When she sits back with a generous serving of food on her plate, her puzzlement finally gets to her when she realizes that everyone at her table including herself has food in front of them, all except the large quiet teen.

"Sado, are you not hungry?" She asks him curiously.

To her confusion, she sees his body stiffen in fear, then his broad shoulders slump as if resigned to his fate. She sees him slowly reach out and place a very small portion of food on his plate, then with very hesitant hands, he lifts the first bite of food to his mouth.

"This is great!" Nearly jumping at the sudden shout behind her, Candice whips around to see the main table erupting in laughter as they watch Ichigo stare at his food in amazement.

"Of course, it's great Ichigo. Did you have reason to think otherwise?" She hears the purple-haired Shinigami known as Yoruichi ask the surprised Devil Heir.

"Well...ah...not...no...I'm sorry but who made this?" She sees his head jerk forward in the next moment when the young dark-haired girl sitting next to him hits him on the back of his head.

"Dammit Ichigo, you know damn well Orihime-nee made this! Who the hell did you think did!?"

"Well...I thought Yuzu did. This is...Mom's curry." Silence follows his words at the main table, then the burnt-orange-haired young woman speaks with a hint of pride in her voice.

"Yuzu taught me the recipe Ichigo, just as you taught her years ago. I hope it tastes as good as
Masaki-san's cooking was.

She watches as Ichigo wordlessly scoops even more curry onto his plate, then begin to eat with gusto. Not even stopping to drink, he finishes his entire portion of curry within a few minutes. Wiping his mouth with a napkin, he then looks over at the young woman who spoke earlier, who then blushes profusely when she hears the young Devil Lord speak.

"It…was great Orihime. She would have agreed, right Goat-Face?"

'Goat-Face, what the hell is a Goat-Face?' Candice suddenly hears the sound of frantic eating coming from her table, and she looks back to see Sado digging into his food with abandon; every now and then, he pauses to take a drink from his glass or refill his plate before continuing to demolish the food before him.

Smiling at his antics, she turns back to look at Ichigo again, only to see him stomping on something on the floor while yelling about secrets being kept from him. Confused by his actions, she leans to the side and peers carefully, finally seeing an older male lying on the floor and getting his back stomped on by the orange-haired hybrid who keeps calling him 'Goat-Face'. Ichigo then turns to the burnt-orange haired young woman - Orihime - and bows deeply to her, offering apology after apology to her for what she can gather is a very severe misunderstanding. The young woman is still blushing deeply, but she waves her hands frantically as she tries to let him go without any reprimand or punishment. Ichigo then straightens up while thanking her again, then he glares at the purple-haired Shinigami who is laughing so hard that she slides down her chair, prompting other people from the other tables to laugh or chuckle as well as they watch the spectacle unfold.

"So Sado, you still feel badly about it?" Candice's ears perk up when she hears the Elf named Kimi ask of the taller Devil male.

Turning to focus on their conversation, she sees Sado nodding his head before sighing. "I do Kimi. I will apologize to her after lunch. I…just thought she wouldn't be capable of cooking…anything."

Beside him, Nia pops some of the tempura into her mouth. "Well, I guess we know who the chef of Ichigo's peerage is gonna be."

Watching the Elf chew with gusto, Candice feels her stomach rumble with anticipation, and she takes a bite of food from her plate as well, humming in delight as the deliciously cooked food sends fritters of flavor across her taste buds. She notices Sado looking over at the main table where Ichigo is getting reprimanded by a young fair-haired girl as she points at the food, his hand on the
back of his head as he continuously nods his head in agreement to whatever the girl is saying to him, and the purple-haired Shinigami still laughing at them. Chad's eyes then turn to her, and when she notices his attention, she leans over slightly to speak to him.

"To be honest, I am not used to such…friendliness, Sado-san. Where I come from, no one is truly anyone's friend; everyone is looking out only for themselves or trying to build some kind of semi-permanent alliance in order to get ahead."

Shaking her head, she then gestures to the room behind her. "Family. That is what I see when I look at how they are acting with each other. I see one big family, each looking out for everyone else and no one looking to one-up anyone for place or favor." She pauses, remembering her own experiences in the cutthroat environment of the Wandenreich. "Truly, I envy them."

Chad shifts his one visible eye to survey the room, and silently agrees with the Quincy's observation. Since the first day he had met Ichigo, his once solitary and cold existence had slowly eroded to becoming part of a duo, then part of a group of close-knit friends, and now, as the Quincy had pointed out, he is part of a large family. Both he and Orihime are no longer alone in the world, and for once he finds himself thanking the thugs of Karakura for inadvertently helping him find this life by introducing him to Ichigo, however unwittingly.

Looking at the female Quincy however, he sees both loneliness and emptiness in her expression, an expression that he and Orihime used to have as well. Not wanting to see that expression on her face, he finds himself speaking his mind. "Maybe one day soon, it will be the same for you."

Candice remains silent; although she doesn't answer him, but he likes to think that her expression is a little less lonely and empty now.

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Ichigo watches as his sisters and his peerage follow the older Devils for their first lesson in the use of Devil magic; teleporting is what they are going to be taught, after which they will be seeing what effects their reincarnations have had on their powers. As they leave his sight, he sees Chad give him a look of amusement; his grin says it all to the young Devil Lord.

'Ve owe her big.' Ichigo thinks as he watches the quiet giant walk behind the chattering Orihime while Tatsuki nods her head along with her best friend's words. Sensing Sasha come up beside him, he turns to look at the blind Elf, who lightly touches his arm.
"Ichigo, we will be using the same training dimension from this morning. Change and meet us there." The former assassin informs him.

Glancing at Merti and Candice who are waiting behind them, he understands what this training will entail. "Yeah." Giving them a nod, he leaves the two Elves and the Quincy to themselves as he heads towards his room to change.

Walking down the hallway towards his and Rias's room, he is surprised when his phone begins to ring. Touching each pocket until he finds it, he answers it on the last ring. He smiles when he sees who is calling him. Answering his phone, he can hear his fiancée's voice sounding somewhat off when she speaks to him.

"Rias?" He stops walking to better focus on his conversation.

"Ichigo, I just wanted to see how you were doing. I have a free period right now, so I figured I'd give my boyfriend a call."

"You know you don't have to hide anything from me Rias." He hears silence from her, followed by a sigh.

"I was thinking about what's going to happen when Rukia and Momo leave, Ichigo."

Ichigo stands a bit straighter and grimaces at those words. He has tried to avoid thinking about it so far, but now that Rias has brought it up, he cannot avoid the topic any longer.

Looking around, Ichigo ducks into the nearest empty room he can find. Locking the door behind him, he sits on the bed and finally speaks to Rias, his own voice betraying his feelings on the matter.

"We'll see them again Rias, it's not like we won't. Rukia will…"

"She said it could be centuries before she gets a chance to come back, Ichigo. She's your best friend; I know you two have been through a lot already, so I guess I'm just worried how it would affect you guys to go so long without seeing each other."
Ichigo now frowns as well; once his memories were freed, he and Rukia had settled back into their squabbling sibling relationship as if nothing had ever happened, but he still remembers the expression of pain on Rukia's face when discovered him after his long disappearance and he didn't remember her. Talking to Rias now brings it back to reality for him: Rukia will eventually have to return to Soul Society, a place he can no longer see himself ever going back to, and this forced separation will only hurt them once again. He covers his face with his free hand as he sits there and tries to think of a solution, before smacking his face as he realizes just how dumb he is.

"I'll talk to Geta-Bōshi and Suì-Fēng today Rias, I have an idea or two I want to run by them."

"Really? That would be great." He hears her voice chipper up then.

"If I didn't know better Rias, it sounds like you and Rukia are getting close." The sound of her laughter can be heard through the phone.

"She's been telling me how to keep you in-line Ichigo, of course we're getting closer." He can almost picture her beatific smile as she tells him those words.

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Candice is nervous as she waits with the two older Elves; her new clothes don't help matters much as they are skin tight and accentuate her womanly curves, which is not the impression she wants to give Ichigo at all. Unfortunately, her new clothes consist of a pair of black leggings and a tight white top similar to the ones she had been informed by the Elves are worn by women athletes of the human world; even her boots have been replaced with simple but extremely comfortable leather calf high boots. But there is one thing that overjoys her: with the lowered restrictions on her seal, she can absorb enough Reishi particles from the air to form a Spirit bow for training purposes. Summoning and dismissing her bow once again just to revel in the fact that she can, she looks around the room they are standing in, noticing once again that it is quite desolate, nothing but white all around her, and the only color is the simple black door they had entered through.

She almost jumps when the green-eyed Elf touches her arm. Spinning around, she sheepishly grins at the woman who smiles at her in understanding.

"Sorry Merti-san." Candice apologizes.

"No need to be jumpy Candice, no one is going to hurt you while you are here. I just wanted to ask
what you were going to teach Ichigo first.”

Candice feels a bit stumped by the question. "Oh, well honestly, I just want to see what Quincy skills he does already have. I've never really had to deal with someone who wasn't a member of the Wandenreich and possessed basic Quincy skills already." She replies honestly.

Nodding her head, the Elfin assassin speaks then. "I have katas I wish to teach him, I will need your help in making sure they are being done correctly."

"Sure, what are they?"

Merti takes a few steps back, then begins a series of movements and strikes while explaining what each one does and how they were taught to her. It doesn't take long for Candice to begin staring at her outright, and as Merti continues to demonstrate the katas the Quincy's eyes grow wider and wider. When the Elf finally finishes the katas, Candice has only one thing that comes to mind.

"That…that isn't possible."

Sasha turns her head curiously in her direction. "Why is that?"

Looking both amazed and baffled at what she has seen, the green-haired woman then explains about the parts she did recognize and understand from the katas and how they work. The two Elves then begin smirking after the young woman finishes her explanation, though before they can say anything more, they hear the door open and their young lord make his way into the training dimension. As Ichigo approaches, he notices the unsettlingly wide smiles on the faces of the Elves, and his survival instincts kick in as he stops before them and asks what is going on.

Sasha is the one who answers his query. "Today Ichigo, we will teach you your grandmother's magic. Follow both Merti's katas and Candice's instructions and it will go smoothly. Also, Ichigo… put your Hell Armor on when you are doing this exercise."

"Got it." It takes him just a mental command to summon the Hell Armor to him.

As the black armor begins to form on Ichigo's body, Candice can feel the power rising within him. It feels mostly dark, but she also feels the warmth she had heard snippets of being mentioned earlier. Unable to look away as the intimidating two-horned helm forms over his head, she feels a
slight shiver pass down her spine as she remembers how he had utterly wrecked herself and her former comrades when they fought him in this form in Hueco Mundo. Fortunately, this terrifying being is now on her side... or rather, she is on his side.

"Okay, what now Merti, Candice?"

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Issei anxiously awaits with the others in the club room; today he was told that not only is he going to be training, but his training will be with Buchou's future husband, Ichigo-senpai. He subconsciously shivers as he remembers bits and pieces of suppressed memory of the last time he was alone with the orange headed Devil and his white maniac clone of a Zanpakutō spirit. He still feels phantom pains on his backside every time he dredges up those memories.

In all honesty, Issei really wanted to tell Buchou no, but the stern look she gave him made it clear that arguing would do him little good. Sighing in depression, he leans back into the couch as he waits for his mistress and her Queen to arrive. Next to him, the white-haired Koneko is munching on her usual sweets as she waits for Rias and Akeno to arrive as well.

"Ah, Koneko-chan where do you get your candy from?" Issei is genuinely curious about it, as Koneko never seems to be without any kind of sugary confection.

To his surprise, the young Rook actually responds to him. "From Kazuhiro's shouten, he runs a candy shop that the Gremory Clan owns." She finishes as emotionlessly as she always does whenever she speaks to him for any reason.

Nodding his head in thanks, he shifts back to his own place and sits there uncomfortably; he knows their conversation is over since Koneko never talks to him like she does with the two younger girls he knows are Ichigo's twin sisters, or the older burnt-orange-haired teen with those massive...ahems. He has to forcibly still his thoughts whenever he thinks about the orange-haired goddess with her twin blessings, he knows that it will only lead to more trouble for him if he even gives an inkling that he is thinking such thoughts, and that is what he wants to avoid at all costs. Trying to settle his lecherous thoughts with images of two best friends kissing and hugging, he is distracted as the door swings open and the two Devils they are waiting for step inside. Rias and Akeno are both neutral-faced as they make their way into the room, while behind them, the Devils and Shinigami of the Kendo club file in, smiles and laughter in their voices as they put away their shinai and bokken. Lastly, Sōna and her Queen, Tsubaki, file into the room, both of them looking as serious as ever.
Issei stands as the crowd of teens make their way to the center of the room where the transportation circle to the Naberius Estate awaits them, even though he wishes to be anywhere else but here at this moment, preferably safe at home while playing his eroge. As a side note, he really has to thank Buchou for making his parents unaware of his current status of being a Devil, a simple spell from Akeno had them thinking he is part of a serious club and that he would be late in coming home many nights as most of the club's activities are nocturnally oriented. Standing between Yuuto Kiba and Loup Garou, another more recent Rook of the Sitri peerage, he waits for the now familiar glow of magic to signal their departure to what he knows will be a very long night for him.

At least this will help him to grow stronger, and hopefully win Buchou's affection!

Hopefully.

Seeing the magic circle start to glow, Issei closes his eyes and braces himself to help with the vertigo he still sometimes suffers from during these teleports; thankfully, Kiba had given him a pill to help with that, though he still feels suspicious about the damn Pretty-Boy being so helpful.

He feels the world shift and a few moments later, the echo of the Great Dome resonates around him, while the Cerberus on duty cheerfully greets the teens...or at least as cheerfully as a massive, three-headed, absolutely serious guard dog can be. Shivering lightly, he looks around the Dome at the great three-headed hounds that seem to stare at each of them without a hint of emotion or acknowledgement, or at least that is how they make him feel. The Naberius Knight who had shown them around the Estate on Day One had assured them that it wasn't the case; he told him that outside of their normal duties, the Hell Hounds are actually quite friendly if you make an effort to talk to them, which he probably won't ever get a chance to do so as his family is still living in the human world and he only visits here infrequently.

Making his way to the library, Issei passes and greets various members of the Naberius Clan, each of them returning his greetings in kind. The red-haired nine-tailed Kitsune Queen even pats his head as she passes him by, renewing the vigor in his footsteps. On the other hand, he also sees the beautiful orange-haired sister of Ichigo-senpai's as she and that girl known as Tatsuki walk past him; it takes him all of his willpower to keep his eyes level when he sees the black-haired martial artist's eyes narrowing at him, but he manages to stay above the safety line and she does say hello back to him when he greets them, so he counts that as a win. Releasing the breath that he is unconsciously holding, Issei suddenly remembers that he still has a lot to get done before dinner otherwise he will be spending yet another late night staying up doing his homework, which is now a must since he became a Devil. Buchou had told him that she expects him to go to University once he graduates from Kuoh, and becoming educated will help him advance as a Devil, or so she had said. Sadly, this is causing a rift between him and his two previous best friends as they would complain continuously that he spends more time with his new 'friends' than he did with them, which makes him feel a bit conflicted since they have been friends for so long.
Placing his bag on the table inside the library, Issei digs out his text books and begins to do his homework after he puts in a set of earbuds and starts listening to various songs from his favorite anime series. As he continues to work on his textbooks, he has to admit that once he really started putting in effort, he is finding his ability to learn and understand the material in front of him much easier now that he had been 'reborn' as a Devil. On the other hand, Yuuto Kiba had simply shrugged his shoulders when he asked that damned Handsome if it was a perk or something. The Devil Knight had then said it wasn't anything more than his imagination, and not to worry so much about it. Like hell he would just stop worrying about it! Continuing to grumble about damn Pretty-Boys under his breath, Issei is so lost in his work that he nearly jumps out of his seat when Koneko suddenly taps his shoulder.

"Come on Issei-senpai, dinner." She informs him simply after waiting for him to pull out his earbuds, then she walks over to the door where he sees Ichigo-senpai's light haired younger sister waiting for her.

Getting up, he closes his textbooks and puts them to one side of the table. He debates a bit on whether or not to bring his smart-phone along, but ultimately decides to leave it in his bag since no one should be calling him anyway. Hurriedly catching up to the two younger Devils who are walking along the corridor at a casual pace, he listens to Yuzu as she tells Koneko of how her brother had embarrassed himself at lunch when he found out that Orihime, the orange-haired Goddess had been the one to cook for them. Wondering why Ichigo-senpai would do something like that, he only realizes he had uttered his question out loud when Ichigo-senpai's younger sister turns and smiles at him, before answering his question.

"Well, Orihime-nee's cooking was… unique when she gave part of her lunch to Ichi-nii in their first year. He never forgot that and...well, since he was gone, he didn't know she had been learning how to cook from me."

"Oh, I wish I was here when that happened." He wants to taste Orihime-senpai's cooking now.

Yuzu giggles at him, easily reading his thoughts. "Well don't worry Issei-kun; the leftovers are in your bento for tomorrow. Yours too, Koneko-chan." Koneko smiles at her, then she and the other Devils find themselves outside the dining room doors.

Opening the doors for the two girls and waiting for them to enter before him, Issei then makes his way to his usual spot next to Yuuto Kiba and the large intimidating teen he now knows is Chad, Ichigo-senpai's old friend. The three young men sit there and watch as the staff bring in ridiculous amounts of food, laying out plates and cutlery at each of their places at the table. Sometimes he wonders where the Devils get all of their food, and more importantly, how they can even afford such things. Tsubaki-senpai had told him a few days ago that he would understand the how and why once he went over his finances with the Gremory Clan's head accountant, although he has the nagging suspicion it is none other than the wife of Sirzechs Lucifer, the Strongest Queen and Head
Maid of the Gremory Clan. He shudders when he pictures of the grey-haired woman known as Grayfia Lucifuge in his mind; her body is awesome but her terrifying aura and no-nonsense attitude scares him far more than Ichigo-senpai does, especially when he found out she married the current Lucifer, Rias's older brother.

Just then, he sees Ichigo-senpai and his personal assistant, the green-eyed Elf Merti both walking into the room with Rias-buchou and a green-haired woman he has never seen before following behind them. He sees the unfamiliar woman talking with Buchou about something that has her looking between the woman and Ichigo-senpai with what he can only think of as disbelief. Ichigo-senpai simply shrugs and says a few words, then he pulls out a few chairs for the three women to sit in; after getting them settled in, he takes his own place near the middle of the table. The staff begins serving them as well, and as the sounds of conversations and soft laughter drift throughout the room, Issei looks around and notices something odd.

Two people he had seen on his past few visits are not present; one is the large scruffy-looking man who is supposedly Ichigo-senpai's, Yuzu's and Karin's father, while the other is the stern-looking white-haired man who is supposedly the father of that glasses-wearing Quincy teen, Uryū or something. Leaning over, he discreetly asks Chad where the two fathers have gone, and the large teen quietly informs him that the two fathers have gone back to defend Karakura, Ichigo-senpai's hometown, from supernatural incursions until a permanent solution can be found, since he and his siblings have decided to stay here together. Feeling somewhat awkward as he considers his own home situation, Issei asks Chad what it was like for him and the others to find out about the afterlife so suddenly. He can't help but be surprised however when the taller teen grunts out an answer he isn't expecting.

"It was unusual." That is all Chad is willing to say on the topic, leaving Issei to wonder on what exactly the big deal is behind Chad's story.

The rest of dinner passes quicker than Issei would have liked, and he soon finds himself standing in a training dimension with Yuuto waiting for Ichigo-senpai to arrive, which the older teen does shortly after, but not alone. Following him is the purple-haired Goddess that Issei remembers as his neighbor from a few weeks ago, his cheeks heating up as he remembers trying so hard to spy on her and finding out that she knew that he was trying but still put on a tease for him anyway. Gulping when he sees the mischievous glint in her eyes, both she and Ichigo-senpai stop in front of him, and the two of them stare at him for a long time, causing him to shiver when he almost swears something passes through him.

"Issei, do you know why you are here?" Ichigo-senpai asks without any warmth to his voice.

Issei hurriedly nods. "Ah, yes Ichigo-senpai. I'm here to train with you."
For some reason, he sees the older teen Devil frowning at him then. Issei watches as Ichigo-senpai glances to the woman next to him, then the older teen Devil suddenly walks closer to him until he is almost within arm’s reach.

"What is your goal in life Issei, and don't lie. I want to know what I'm working with, so honesty is going to go a long way with me. Tell me Issei Hyoudou, just what is your life's dream?"

Swallowing nervously, Issei glances to his right and sees cold sweat slowly dripping down Yuuto's face as the damn Pretty Boy stands there silently looking like he doesn't want to be here. Glancing to his left, he almost jumps back in shock when he sees a pair of golden eyes within a few feet of him, he didn't even hear the purple-haired woman move. His eyes briefly threaten to drift downwards, but the scowl he can feel coming from Ichigo-senpai makes him swallow hard and look back at the person who had asked him what his dream truly is.

Feeling like he is signing his death warrant, but unwilling to back down from his dream, Issei looks into those demanding brown orbs and answers with full seriousness. "I want a harem Ichigo-senpai, I want lots of wives, I want to be the Harem King."

For five minutes, the two of them say nothing, Issei keeping his stubborn gaze locked as firmly on Ichigo-senpai's as he can and not daring to waver in the slightest. He knows people look down on his dream, but it is his dream damnit!! Finally, Ichigo-senpai pinches his nose and mutters something under his breath, which causes the purple-haired Goddess next to him to break out in soft laughter. Slumping in exhaustion as the tense air suddenly disappears, Issei wonders what is going to happen next, when Ichigo-senpai suddenly looks back at him and in a cold voice, asks a surprising question.

"How are you going to protect them?"

"Huh?" Issei is completely blindsided by those words.

Before he can even react, his left arm is suddenly caught in a tight vise-like grip by Ichigo-senpai who raises it before him. Again, the same cold voice speaks to him.

"You want to be a Harem King, and gather a large harem. How will you protect them, Issei Hyoudou?"

Looking in confusion at his arm, he truly has no idea of what Ichigo-senpai is asking him and tells
him so. He hears the older teen Devil sighing tiredly, then his arm is released and he sees Ichigo-senpai crossing his arms in thought, watching him with those cold brown eyes as he warily begins rubbing the spot on his left arm that feels like it had been crushed.

"Never mind, I'll tell you later. Look Issei, you and I didn't start off on the best of terms, but for Rias's sake I am willing to do as she asks. I'm going to train you until you're worth something, and during that training Issei, I am going to be honest: they will be some of the worst days of your life. I won't have my wife being guarded by someone who can't even protect themselves or fight for her as they should be able to do so. Most importantly, we will need to find out what that thing in your arm is."

Feeling angered, shamed and embarrassed by Ichigo-senpai's harsh criticism, the last part however makes Issei to look up in confusion. "What thing?" He asks them with obvious puzzlement.

Both Ichigo-senpai and the purple-haired Goddess exchange looks, then the latter sighs, causing her... assets to bounce lightly, and he finally succumbs to his inner lech. For a whole second his eyes are drawn almost hypnotically to the bouncing orbs, then a cough snaps him out of his daze, only for his head to snap back slightly when the golden-eyed Goddess flicks his forehead with surprising force.

"My eyes are up here Issei-kun, don't do it again. You really don't want to be on my bad side so soon...besides, I only show them to Ichigo." His eyes nearly bug out when he hears Ichigo-senpai swear loudly under his breath, all but confirming it.

"Dammit Yoruichi!"

'No, damn you Ichigo-senpai!! First Buchou, then this purple-haired Goddess too!!'

"Sorry Ichigo, I couldn't help it." She grins and shrugs, and Issei forces himself to look straight up to avoid being hypnotized by those twin bounties of hers again. "Now Issei, do you really have no idea that you possess a Sacred Gear?"

"Sacred Gear?" Racking his brains for any mention of those words, he shakes his head in the negative and sees surprise on the faces of Ichigo-senpai and Yoruichi. A sudden smack to his right makes him look in Yuuto's direction, and he sees the damn Pretty-Boy palming his face hard and groaning.
"Sorry Ichigo-senpai, with everything that was going on, it must have slipped our minds..." The Gremory Knight apologizes profusely. "We suspected Issei-kun to have a strong Sacred Gear since his reincarnating cost was so high, but we never found the time to explain it to him..."

Feeling even more confused by that damn Handsome's words, Issei sees Ichigo-senpai nodding his head slowly. "It's fine. Since we're here now, we'll just have to help Issei bring out his Sacred Gear at will."

He nearly jumps when the purple-haired Goddess - Yoruichi - suddenly speaks up from right beside him, where she had snuck up silently once again. "Sacred Gears are powerful artifacts left behind by... well, you can call him the Biblical Creator Issei-kun, and we are fairly certain that you possess one of them. Since we don't know what it is, other than the fact that it is powerful, we are going to force you to find out what it is and make you bring it out. I know you hate to hear it, Issei-kun, but Ichigo is right in his assessment: as you are now, you are just a liability to Rias and the Gremory Clan, and you can't even protect yourself from weaker opponents like those low-ranked Fallen Angels. But don't worry; that's why we are training you now, and we'll get you into shape before you know it. So grab that backpack and follow me, today's training is going to be about strength and stamina. Yuuto, you'll be sparring with Ichigo with everything you have. Now hurry up, let's get going you two!"

"H-Hai!!" Issei can't help but respond immediately, feeling an unshed tear of gratitude come to his eye. He can tell that unlike most people who simply see him as useless baggage, Yoruichi - no, Yoruichi-sensei, she genuinely wants him to grow stronger and to be able to protect both himself and Buchou. Silently, he vows to never let her down, even... even if it means her Oppai are off limits to him forever.

Choking back a pained sob, he barely notices her telling Ichigo-senpai something that he can't hear, but the face Ichigo-senpai makes quickly sends yet another round of shivers down his spine and puts an end to his tears, especially when he sees the black and gold bleeding into Ichigo-senpai's eyes. Glancing at Yuuto who is still looking at him sheepishly and hasn't seemed to notice Ichigo-senpai's change in expression, he cannot help but wonder if the damn Handsome will be alright.

"Let's go Yuuto." He sees Yuuto give a hurried affirmative before he follows Ichigo-senpai to the other side of the room; turning back, he goes to pick up the backpack that was indicated by Yoruichi-sensei earlier, only to stumble over it when it doesn't budge. Trying again with all his might, he struggles as he finally lifts it up and slings it onto his back, the heavily padded straps holding it in place without cutting into his muscles and his legs trembling as he stands there looking at his new Sensei. Already having a vague idea of what she is planning thanks to all the Shōnen anime he has watched, Issei watches her walk towards him with a sway and once she is in front of him, she says those dreaded words.

"Now Issei, start running and don't you dare stop until I say otherwise. Now get moving, we ain't
Looking into Yoruichi-sensei's eyes with trepidation, he sees the challenge in her eyes, asking him whether he is going to give up right from the very start.

Issei begins to stagger forward with the heavy backpack weighing him down, his momentum gradually building until he is jogging forward at a slow pace, then it builds into a decently fast jog. Huffing and puffing, he realizes Yoruichi-sensei is running next to him, and his confused look prompts her to give him an answer.

"Don't get the wrong idea Issei-kun; I am only here to make sure you don't die on us." The mischievous grin on her face makes him nearly trip and fall, but then he remembers the words she said to him before, and he feels his determination beginning to build again.

'I am so going to die.' He thinks as he runs with the humming woman next to him.

A few hours later, two people exit the room, each carrying an unconscious person in their arms. Ichigo is carrying Yuuto in a fireman carry, while Yoruichi has Issei slung under her right arm like a sack of potatoes. Both former Shinigami are grinning from ear to ear, and when they enter the recovery room opposite the training room and spot the person they are looking for waiting for them inside, they immediately approach the godlike healer with their cargo. Orihime's eyes go wide as she sees them place the two younger teens on separate couches; with a mental command, her healing barriers immediately appear over Issei and Yuuto, while she gives the older two people an evil glare.

"Don't worry Orihime, we didn't hurt them, much. They just passed out because we pushed them to their limits and they ran out of energy. They did okay for their first time actually, so you can stop giving me the evil eye. Okay?" Ichigo apologizes to his adopted sister, but his grin still remains plastered on his face.

Huffing as her fairies heal up the small cuts and bruises on Yuuto and Issei's bodies, she does find out that the two young teens are indeed only suffering from exhaustion and low levels of magic. She still glares at Ichigo though when she notices the small bruise on Issei's head that looks to be deliberately inflicted. Pointing at it, her eyes demand he explains which he does by shifting his stare towards the former assassin.
"Not Ichi-kun's fault Hime; the pervert couldn't keep his eyes on mine at the beginning, so I had to remind him of it yet again." Yoruichi sounds rather amused by it actually.

"Oh, sorry Yoruichi. I thought that maybe Ichigo...beat him up again." She watches her adoptive brother roll his eyes, before making his way over to an empty couch in the room and collapsing in it with a sigh.

A few minutes later, a servant wheels in a trolley bearing a light meal and refreshments for all of them as Issei and Yuuto both begin to regain their consciousness. The blonde Knight is the first to recover; he sits up and looks around the room, holding his head with a wince as the shield around him continues to heal his injuries. Spotting Ichigo, he remembers exactly why he went unconscious, and his brow automatically furrows as he looks at his Senpai. Ichigo gives him a grin in return when he sees the look in his Kohai's eye.

"You wanted to fight Zangetsu, Yuuto, and you got your wish. So, what do you think now?" The hybrid Devil asks.

"I hate you senpai, I really, really, really hate you and your Zanpakutō." Yuuto says without hesitation.

Chuckling, Ichigo hands the blonde Knight an energy drink and a sandwich. "He took it easy on you today Yuuto, but you did surprise him with your Sacred Gear's ability; it even sort of gave us an idea we're gonna try tomorrow when we train with you guys again."

Before Yuuto can ask for any details, Issei lets out a groan and starts to wake as well.

"Ugh...What hit me?" The newest Pawn of the Gremory Clan asks groggily as he slowly sits up and holds his head.

"That would have been the Shihōin Express." The purple-haired werecat beside them chuckles as she takes a sip from a glass of milk instead of the energy drink they are drinking. She then chuckles again when Issei lets out another groan and flops back tiredly onto the couch.

Leaning back in her own chair, Yoruichi sees the curious looks being sent her way by the other teens. Sighing dramatically, she recounts the training she had put Issei through. The werecat snorts when she tells them how it was pretty obvious that Issei sucked in all manners of fighting, so the first thing she did was increase his strength, endurance as well as his speed, which meant using one
of Kisuke's nifty little training orbs.

Not having heard of them before, the gentle healer asks what exactly the purpose of those orbs is.

"Well, that's easy Hime, they increase their weight through gravity and can be made to keep increasing their weight over a period of time."

The young Pawn then sits up straight. "That's why the backpack felt heavier by the time we were done! Is that why, Yoruichi-sensei?"

The werecat grins at him. "That's right Issei-kun; that is the whole purpose of strength and stamina training anyways. The orb in your backpack adds half a kilogram to its weight at whatever increment I set them to, which in your case is about every five minutes. You started at twenty-five kilograms, and our training lasted four hours, so you do the math." The former Onmitsukidō Commander tells him.

Issei sits there and tries to figure it out in his head, his new-found book smarts helping him to calculate the answer. 'Five minutes times twelve is an hour, four hours is four times that, half of that is twenty-four...' His head drops suddenly when he comes to the final answer. "I…I…could only do…just under fifty kilos. Awww man, that's really pathetic."

To his surprise, a voice he isn't expecting speaks to him then. "I don't know why you're bitching, you did have to run close to a marathon in length with the Goddess of Flash giving you 'encouragement'. That just wore out your muscles faster, and you also ran for almost four hours straight; most untrained humans would have collapsed and died by then. Luckily for you, your Devil physiology can handle that kind of training, so by tomorrow you'll probably be able to handle even more than that. Yoruichi knows what she is doing; her speed is almost unrivalled in Soul Society, and not many people get to train with her, so count yourself lucky she even agreed to help me with your training."

Everyone stares at Ichigo in silence after his speech. Even Yoruichi puts down her glass of milk and looks over at the orange headed Devil whom she sees as her son, cocking an eyebrow at said teen as she sees him acting nonchalant and quietly sipping from his bottle of water. Finally, unable to bear their scrutiny, Ichigo puts down his bottle of water and turns to face them with a scowl.

"His bad habits aside, Issei isn't that much different from any of us. He had a normal background, has a family and friends, and more importantly, he used to have an uneventful life until…well, until someone found out he has a Sacred Gear in his arm and tried to kill him for it. Even though he died and was reincarnated, Issei still has a massive target painted on his back, and to prevent himself
from being killed again he has to find out what his Sacred Gear is and how to make it work for him. The worst part is that unlike us, Issei has never fought in a real battle or even for his life before, so it's possible that his Sacred Gear isn't appearing simply because he's not ready yet, or he lacks the proper mental aptitude to use it right now. Either way, Rias asked Yuuto and I to train Issei, and the best way to do that is to get Yoruichi's help in building up Issei's physical body before he can even consider doing advanced training like sparring with us. Even if he has to suffer some pain and minor injuries during this training, it is in his best interests to make him stronger, and it will only help him in the long run."

Ichigo then focuses his gaze on the silent but wide-eyed Gremory Pawn. "Issei, all of us from Karakura town have experienced this for ourselves. We were thrown headfirst into Soul Society's war shortly after we found out about the Afterlife; a civil war that we shouldn't have been involved in, but ended up being dragged in anyway. We each suffered to learn that the only difference between life and death was our own resolve to find the strength and power to see things through to the end. You will need that same resolve to achieve your...'life's dream', to protect the people that you consider friends and family, and to find out why you have that Sacred Gear inside of you in the first place... whatever it is."

For a long moment after Ichigo's speech, no one says a word, all of them lost in their own thoughts.

Orihime looks down sadly as she finishes healing both younger Devils; she remembers her weakness which led to her being kidnapped, and the following battle on the roof of Las Noches where Uryū was badly wounded, Ichigo Hollowfied and Ulquiorra turned to ash.

Yoruichi's eyes grow cold as she once again curses Soul Society for forcing a group of innocent schoolchildren to clear up a mess of their own making, then spitting on that sacrifice by trying to execute the boy who had done so much to save them.

Yuuto's fists clench tightly as he remembers his former life, a life where he was an experiment of the Church, where his friends had all died in agony while he alone managed to live; he recalls the oath of vengeance that he had sworn on their deaths, and the training he had put himself through under the tutelage of Sirzechs's Knight to grow even stronger. Having witnessed the skill and power that Ichigo possesses firsthand, he is determined to keep growing stronger and stronger until he can finally avenge his friends and lay their memories to rest.

Ichigo's eyes cloud over as he once again remembers his mother's death and the part he had in it. Despite the many victories and defeats he has suffered since then, that first and most painful loss has continued to define his path.

Unlike the others, Issei is having a flashback to the events of his death. Where the girl he truly believed to be his girlfriend, Yuuma Amano, transformed into a Fallen Angel and asked him to die
The horrific pain he felt when her spear of light pierced through his stomach, the sadistic smile on her face as she took obvious pleasure from his suffering. Those mocking words she had said to him as he lay there dying in his blood.

'Don't blame me boy; blame the God who put it in you.'

His body begins to tremble as he remembers how helpless he had felt, the realization that he was about to die and was unable to do anything about it. The sheer joy and relief that he experienced when he woke up the next morning, finding out that he was still alive and knowing that his parents wouldn't be mourning the death of their only child.

Except, it had all been true, and he had really died...

Before anyone notices his trembling, the door suddenly opens, catching all their attentions and snapping Issei out of his post-traumatic flashback. They see three familiar faces standing in the doorway and looking at them.

"Ichigo is correct Issei Hyoudou, Yuuto Kiba; the only way you two can move forward is to find your limits now and push past them to get stronger." Sui-Fêng says as she enters the room, with Venelana and Grayfia following behind her.

Issei and Yuuto immediately stand to greet them, while Ichigo and Yoruichi remain in their seats but greet them warmly. Orihime vacillates between standing or not, but eventually compromises by bowing to them from her seat. Grayfia eyes them all carefully before she takes a place behind her mother-in-law, who sits next to Yoruichi while Sui-Fêng sits on the other side of the woman she holds a deep respect for. The matriarch of the Gremory Clan smiles at the young teen Devils and tells them to sit, softly admonishing them that the only time she expects them to act so formally is in the presence of other nobles; she also chastises Orihime lightly, telling her that as a noble now, she isn't supposed to bow to anyone but to the Heads of the Clans and the Maou.

Before Orihime can respond, the door opens again and the other young adults and teenagers staying at the Naberius Estate troop in; Tatsuki makes a beeline towards Orihime, while Chad and Uryû head towards an empty couch on the other side of the room. Yuzu and Karin enter behind them, followed surprisingly by Rias and Sôna, who must have chosen to come home early, and Serafall Leviathan, who is wearing her customary Magical Girl costume.

Greetings are exchanged among the occupants of the room as everyone tries to find a place to sit. Rias exchanges hugs with her mother, before taking up a seat next to her fiancé on his couch. Yuzu and Karin sit on his other side, and Serafall and Sona sit on the couch beside the twins.
Once they are all settled in, Tatsuki lightly nudges her best friend in the ribs. "So Hime, how does it feel being the sister of the next clan head, and nobility of the Naberius Clan?" Her words cause the Shun Shun Rikka user to sputter out how she isn't anyone special, which only worsens when Uryū smirks and reminds her she is not only a Naberius noble, but a Shiba noble as well. Despite the fact that she is adopted, Orihime is still a noble by connection, and being the sister of the next Naberius Clan head actually makes her status a bit higher than the average Devil noble in the Underworld.

Baffled by this revelation, the young Bishop asks Venelana if it is true.

"Of course, it's true Orihime; when Ichigo reveals who he is a month from now, you and the twins will become the most sought-after Devils for marriage. There will be Clans lining up to propose an arranged marriage with their heirs, but don't worry, looking at your older brother's face, he won't allow it." Everyone looks at Ichigo then, and they all see the infamous scowl shaping on the future Clan leader's face.

"Damn right about that Okaa-san, no one gets to marry my sisters unless they allow it. So, I'll make sure they understand loud and clear that the old rules and customs can be stuffed where the sun don't shine if they think it still applies to them." Ichigo's anger can be felt as it slowly bleeds out through his Reiatsu.

A familiar hand closes around his arm and pulls him into a comforting embrace. "I'm sure Uncle Amyntas will take yours and your sisters' feelings into account Ichigo, so don't get so worked up. Besides, the twins are still in middle school dummy, and Orihime is your Bishop so she isn't going to get pawned off as property to be bartered for, even if the other Clans tried to do so. Lastly, I doubt Uncle Amyntas would even think of doing that to them, so whatever happens we'll have him on our side."

Smiling at her boyfriend until the scowl leaves his face, Rias cups his cheek then pulls his face down and gives him a chaste kiss in front of everyone. She hears Yuzu fawning loudly over the kiss while Karin mutters something about gross public displays and getting a room. The darker-haired twin earns a small head-slap from her older cousin Sōna, and the Student Council President then rolls her eyes as Serafall grabs them both in a playful hug and tells them to get along.

"So, what were you guys doing earlier?" Ichigo asks his younger sisters with amusement as he watches Karin try to get out of the hug.

Yuzu beams excitedly at him as she answers for them. "Karin and I have Sitri magic in us Ichi-nii, Sera-nee was teaching us how to use water magic!"
Ichigo looks at Serafall only to see the very pleased look on the Satan's face as she lets the struggling Karin go. "They do have our magic Ichi-kun, which makes me wonder if they have the Naberius Clan's Hell Chains and magic as well now. If they do, then your sisters may well become very powerful Devils in time, just like you are now."

A slight red creeps into his cheeks from his cousin's compliment, and looking again at his twin sisters, he sees excitement in both of their faces as they take in her words.

"Good job you two." It is the only thing he can think of.

Karin however frowns as she looks at her brother, seeming to recall something. "Ichigo, did…did you hear a voice when you were our age?"

Before he can answer that question, Zangetsu suddenly materializes suddenly with a very pleased look on his face. He walks up to Karin and kneels in front of her with a black-toothed smile on his face, causing Karin to give him a really creeped-out look and start to back away slowly. "Oi, w-what's with the creepy smile Zangetsu?"

Flicking her forehead in annoyance, he rolls his eyes then explains to her what he's found out. "You can hear her, can't ya? Your Zanpakutō Karin-chan, she's trying to talk to you isn't she?"

Startled exclamations immediately come from the people in the room, but only one voice seems to make it through the confusion. With a small voice, the dark-haired twin answers her brother's Zanpakutō spirit. "I…I thought I was going crazy. The moment Ichi-nii woke up our Devil powers; she has been talking to me almost non-stop..."

Ichigo hurriedly kneels next to his sister. "You're not crazy Karin, you're amazing if you've woken your Zanpakutō spirit already. Yoruichi and I will teach you Jinzen as soon as we can, its best if you try to contact your Zanpakutō spirit before she gets annoyed. If she is already talking to you, she must be impatient as hell to meet with you."

"So…I'm not crazy then?" She asks him tentatively.

"Nope. Your Zanpakutō spirit will drive you nuts until you speak to her however, so before bed tonight, come to our room and we'll show you how to perform Jinzen. Even though you
don't have an Asauchi yet, I think Geta-Bōshi might be able to 'appropriate' one somehow for ya. Since we know a certain blacksmith, getting it to work for you shouldn't be a problem now either."

Karin throws her arms around Ichigo's neck and gives him a big hug, then does the same for his Zanpakutō spirit as well. "Thank you Zangetsu, Ichigo."

Smiling at the now-embarrassed Karin as she quickly pushes herself away and looks away with a huff, Ichigo then spies the look on Yuzu's face, one that says she is hiding something. He sees her look away quickly when she catches her brother looking at her.

"Yuzu?" Ichigo knows she's hiding something.

"I-Ichi-nii?" She tries to deflect his suspicions, but it's obvious he doesn't buy it when he crosses his arms in front of his chest and raises an eyebrow at her.

"Just tell him, Zu." Karin nudges her twin, and they see the fair-haired twin slump dejectedly.

"Fine, yes I hear a voice too. But it's not a boy or girl, sort of in-between I guess?" The look on her face tells them what she thinks of it. "...So, does that mean I'll be coming tonight too?" She sees the duh expression appear on Ichigo's face.

"Yes Yuzu, both of you need to learn how to become partners with your Zanpakutō as soon as possible, it's the only way to truly unlock their powers. The sooner you can do that, the sooner you can unlock your Shikai and Bankai." No one misses the hint of pride in their older brother's voice then.

"Well I guess the apples don't fall far from the tree, eh King?" Zangetsu can't help his own pride from seeping out.

While the other young adults begin to congratulate the twins on their newfound ability, the older adults in the room exchange significant looks: the discovery of three Devils with the ability to wield not only Hell Chains but also Zanpakutō, Kidō and Devil Magic is a force that will reshape the Underworld in ways no one had thought imaginable.

Serafall sums it all up in a single sentence as she elegantly takes a sip of her tea, hiding the
mischievous smirk on her face. "Time to settle old scores, Ichi-kun."

Hearing his older cousin's words, the orange headed Devil and his white counterpart begin grinning as they look at the Leviathan with anticipation. "Bet your ass cuz, it's time for some payback."

XXX

Under the clear night of Hueco Mundo, the ring of white clad soldiers stand guard, watching the surrounding landscape with utmost vigilance as the two Sternritters walk around the last place their comrades had been reported from. The black-haired female Sternritter sweeps the surrounding sand dunes with her lavender eyes, searching for the missing Quincy she had thought of as part of her group. Her piercing gaze catches those of the other Sternritter, whose round glasses continue to scan the area around them.

"Well Quilge, where is she?" Bambietta Basterbine finally snarls out impatiently, her hands flexing in anticipation.

The man scans the dunes once more before looking down at the female Quincy and giving her a flat answer.

"She is no longer in Hueco Mundo; her whereabouts are unknown at this time."

He watches impassively as a myriad of emotions fly across the smaller woman's face, then he sees it finally settle on the one he knows she will pick.

"NO SHIT SHE'S NOT HERE! THEN WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE THEN!?!" Those furious lavender eyes glare at him, but completely fail to pierce through the gleaming glasses of the unmoved male Sternritter.

"All I can say is that she is not dead Basterbine, be glad that I can even discern that much. The others however are definitely dead, killed by something I have never encountered before." He frowns as he once again analyzes the almost untraceable energy still left over in the dunes around them.

Surprise comes to the female Sternritter's face. "You mean it wasn't the Shinigami or Hollows?"
Slowly shaking his head, Quilge Opie gestures towards the top of the dune. "No, neither should have been able to defeat twelve Soldats and a Sternritter without leaving behind some trace of their energy. Whoever or whatever killed them and captured your compatriot was neither one of our known enemies. The faint residue I feel is unlike anything I have ever felt before. But whatever it is, it was powerful enough to defeat all of them on its own and take the Sternritter prisoner. It is my honest opinion Bambietta, that your 'friend' is either dead or will be soon. We should leave and report our findings to Sternritter 'B' as soon as possible. If there is a new and unknown enemy we are not aware of, they will need to decide how to proceed with this unknown enemy lurking about now."

Bambietta clenches her fists tightly. "Go, I'll follow soon."

The man quirks an eyebrow in her direction and sighs exasperatedly then.

"Try and leave one or two alive, they are hard enough to train." Walking into a shadow, the male Sternritter disappears, leaving eleven fidgeting men in his wake.

Turning her gaze upon the first Soldat, Bambietta strikes before he can even utter a cry for help or plea for mercy. Nine others follow soon after, leaving one standing before her, his face showing no fear as he looks at her.

"You'll do. Follow me when we get back and pray you don't cum before me."

 Ichigo sits watching his two sisters meditate deeply on the carpet in front of him. As he had asked them to earlier, both twins had come to his and Rias's room soon after they took their showers. Sitting on their bed is his girlfriend, along with his adopted sister, his mentor and her former protégée. The two Shinigami are the ones who had taught the twins the basics of Jinzen, giving them bits of advice on how to gain entry to their inner-worlds and advising them not to get upset if they didn't learn their Zanpakutō's names right away. He notices Yuzu must have reached her inner-world already, as her expression is one of awe; in contrast, Karin has adopted a scowl on her face, but even as he watches it is slowly being replaced by the smile she now has. Around ten more minutes pass, before he sees his youngest sister opens her eyes, followed by her dark-haired twin as they both blink in slight disorientation at the change in their surroundings.

He can't help it when he asks them simply. "Well?"
"Amazing Ichi-nii, it was amazing! My inner-world is like a savanna surrounded by a jungle of some kind, with wild animals and birds everywhere, but I could only hear my Zanpakutō, I didn't get to see her or him still." Yuzu gushes at him, but pouts at the end.

Karin looks at her sister with some guilt in her expression; it is clear to Ichigo that she did get to meet her Zanpakutō. "My world is Karakura Ichigo. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No, did your Zanpakutō say anything to you about it?" Her older brother asks in return.

Shaking her head, the dark-haired twin scrunches her eyebrows in thought. "All she said is that it is where my powers first awoke, and that she likes it there. Something about familiar territory, or whatever that means. From what I saw of her, she is hazy, like smoke slowly shifting in the wind but not fading away. Or maybe water vapor since our magic is based off of water? I don't really know Ichigo."

Ichigo nods sagely. "Could be, since neither of you were Shinigami or Quincy before gaining your Devil powers, so it could be an amalgamation of your soul's powers. Just like me, you two might gain all three of them, since Goat-Face is a Shinigami and Mom was a Quincy and a Devil, so it wouldn't be much of a surprise if yours and Zu's Zanpakutō take that into account when they were born from your souls." He smiles at the wonder he sees in both of their faces.

Yoruichi stretches as she stands up and walks over to the twins. "He could be right Yuzu, Karin. Until we get you two blank Asauchi, we won't know exactly what your Zanpakutō are capable of. So, for tonight in any case, you two have done very well, but let's not push it too much. We'll practice here every day after your other training with the peerages, and since tomorrow is Sui-Fēng and Byakuya's last day here, I think we should spend as much time with them as possible. So, kiss your grouchy brother and lovely sister good night and let's get to bed."

Ichigo doesn't bite at Yoruichi's jab, instead he gives each of his sisters a peck on their cheek, even Orihime when she tries to leave the room without waiting for it. The gentle healer's cheeks grow a rosy red as she dips her head down and utters a stammering good night to him and Rias both before she practically flees the scene, dragging the twins out of the room behind her. Amused by her actions, Sui-Fēng follows behind them while asking loudly if it is going to be a common occurrence to see her so flustered when getting kissed by a boy on her cheeks or anywhere else; Yoruichi then asks Sui-Fēng the same question, resulting in the two disappearing in Shunpo as the current Squad Two Captain tries to hit her former mentor.

XXXX MILD ADULT SITUATION: SKIP TO NEXT PAGE BREAK TO BYPASS. XXXX
Ichigo closes the door behind them, and Rias drops immediately back onto their bed as she relaxes there with a contented sigh, happy that they are finally alone. Not that she minds having Ichigo's sisters around, but with everything currently going on in their lives, their moments alone are few and far between. Between school and his training, most nights leave them collapsing into bed with only a quick kiss and an exhaustedly spoken good night to each other. Today had been a better day for once; they had spent an hour together without any interference or someone trying to bother them, even if it was spent just quietly doing their homework in their room. Stretching, Rias is about to get ready for bed when she feels Ichigo's power fluctuate, a familiar Kidō surrounding their room. Feeling a thrill of anticipation going through her body, Rias smiles as she lays there, waiting and wondering what Ichigo has planned for them now; to her delight, she isn't made to wait long.

Her true love soon appears over her body, a lustful grin on his face as he slowly lowers his lips to hers. She lies there, letting her fingers drag across his nude back, feeling his skin and the goose bumps that form under her touch. Thinking how not so long ago, he would get so flustered even with her see-through negligees; now he is the one taking off their clothes on nights like this, and with such skill that she sometimes doesn't even know when she had gotten naked. Soft lips touch hers again and soon they are caught in a fierce battle of wills; clothes already discarded and his hands roaming freely in familiarity over her heated body.

"Ichigo." She murmurs when his lips leave hers.

Her breathe hitches when he begins to trail kisses down her neck, closing her eyes as he takes his time tonight to touch as much of her skin as possible. He is in no hurry as he explores every region of her body, her mouth opening slightly when he takes her left peak into his mouth and pinches her other peak with sensitivity to match. A gentle pull from his teeth sends both pleasure and a bit of pain to her brain, igniting the fires in her nether region. Moaning out loud, she bites him back just above his own nipple, earning her a satisfying hiss from her lover. Her back then arches when Ichigo moves from his original place and switches breasts, softly pulling her other nipple into his mouth, his tongue swirling over the engorged and sensitive tip. She mewls and leaves faint scratch marks on his back as his lips suckle tightly on her teat, her fingers tightening her hold on his flesh as she knows what he is going to do next and she begins to pant in anticipation.

Letting go of her nipple with a loud pop, Ichigo's hot breath flows over her flushed and sweaty skin and he gives her a look of intense desire. "So beautiful."

Kissing her skin again, he snakes his way down her breasts and kisses his way in-between her valley, his kisses and love bites leaving faint marks while he descends down the middle until his lips are crisscrossing the flat planes of her stomach. Then his hand brushes lightly through her well-groomed patch where he is soon tracing lines in her silky hair with his fingertips. She nearly screams when he slips the first digit into her moistening folds, the spike of sensation temporarily overwhelming her senses. Quickly moving up, he covers her lips with his as his thumb finds her
pearl and he begins to gently fondle it, her entire body thrashing beneath him as his caresses nearly bring her to her peak. Removing his hand and waiting as she tries to control her shuddering gasps, he keeps her quiet until he is sure she is starting to recover before moving back down. She tenses up, her body eager in anticipation until he runs his tongue over her glistening bud and forcefully dips his head between her legs, her hips immediately bucking as she screams out in bliss.

"Please Ichigo!" She runs her hands through his hair, pulling his head closer to what she wants him to touch.

Squirming in pleasure, she can only lay there and surrender to her lover's ministrations as he responds to her plea. One of her hands tightens in his hair and the other tightly grips the sheets as she feels his tongue lapping at her entrance, her thighs involuntarily trying to squeeze his head tight, but he has done this before and he uses his shoulders and arms to force her thighs apart, preventing her legs from closing. She screams again as his pink appendage worms its way into her painfully aroused and dripping folds; little bolts of electricity shooting through her body when his warm muscle laps over the bundle of nerves that protrudes from her hood and forcefully conveying its pleasure to her brain, driving her overloaded mind into a frenzy as her dam finally breaks and torrents of her nectar gush forth onto his waiting lips.

Her moans become rapid as he skillfully assaults both her nub and her folds at the same time, never pushing too deep, as they both agreed to wait for that special night before they break that final barrier together. Until then, she can only imagine what it will be like when they finally join together as one, his fingers and tongue already capable of driving her to such heights. From the skill he has shown her so far, she truly believes that night will be the greatest night of pleasure she will have ever experienced, and hopefully the beginning of many more nights afterwards. Then she screams again as he begins to use his tongue to drive up and down the folds of her womanhood, his fingers holding her petals open so he can drive deeper into her flower as his thumb continuously rubs her tiny bundle into a rising oblivion.

Soon the fires are too hot, her breathing too shallow and rapid, she knows it's close and coming and she can only ride it out until it happens. As the second wave crashes into her body, she feels her abs tighten and lock in place, her body flooding his mouth and fingers with her second orgasm of the night. As his fingers and tongue continue to caress her quivering womanhood, she feels herself go limp as she stares up at the ceiling, barely seeing him move to hover over her with a proud a smirk on his face, and the first thing she thinks of she blurts out loud.

"I hate you Ichigo."

"Hmmmm?" His damnable grin only grows wider.

"You know damn well it's not fair that your Hollow instincts let you know how to please me." She
grumbles and pouts cutely for him, but the look in her eyes take on a devious glint as she tiredly pushes him on his back and half-straddles him this time.

"Rias?" Ichigo looks at her in surprise, then sees her eyes locked onto his as she takes his arousal firmly into her hand.

"Do you remember what we talked about last time we wound up like this?" She asks him playfully as she lowers her head while keeping her eyes locked with his.

He does remember, and before he can say anything, she follows through with her promise from that time. His head slams into the pillow when the heat of her mouth engulfs the first few inches of his hardened shaft. Her tongue swirls the slit at the top, making his legs buckle from the sensation, then his own hands begin to run through her crimson locks as she begins a steady bobbing up and down on his rock-hard arousal. He has to force himself to lie still when she takes more of him down her throat, not wanting to accidentally jab her in the back of her throat and cause her harm, but his fingers involuntarily begin to rip into the sheets as she adds a bit of suction into her bobbing.

"D-Damnit Rias." He utters as she slowly lifts her mouth up his entire shaft, her lips never leaving the seal they create as they ascend almost painstakingly upwards, his hips involuntarily rising with them as well.

Watching her boyfriend's face contort with the many feelings of pleasures he must be experiencing from the act she is giving him, Rias is feeling very pleased with herself. Placing her hands on his thighs to keep him from jerking, she shifts the angle she is taking him in and soon she can take even more of his shaft down her throat, his shaking hips telling her that she is making him lose what little control he has. A slight jump from his back is the first warning she gets that she is close to bringing him to the end of his struggle for the first time with anything other than her hands, and she redoubles her efforts with her eyes still focused on his. She hears her lover panting hoarsely while uttering soft curses as she continues to suck and lick his engorged muscle, his hips beginning to buck more and more wildly.

Rias sees Ichigo's eyes snap open wide as his body begins to quickly tense up for release; she can feel it coming, and she goes to take him deep in her throat but he stops her and lifts her off of him instead. Looking at him in surprise, her hand doesn't stop stroking his manhood however and when her soft thumb rubs across the slit at the tip, it quickly brings him to his peak. His hips buck as he groans when he begins to climax, his seed exploding out across the bed and himself, her own hand getting some as she continues to pump him until nothing more flows from his now softening member. Looking into his glazed over eyes, she knows he is lost somewhere after his orgasm. Grinning at her success, she crawls up his body and bites lightly on his lower lip to bring him back to the present.
"Shower." She gives him that simple request when he finally stirs from his stupor.

"Yeah, shower." Comes the hazy reply.

Getting up and playfully stretching her nude form for his pleasure, she smiles at his appreciative gaze then pulls him to his feet and gently pushes him towards the bathroom door. After Ichigo enters the bathroom, she makes her way over to the bedroom door and presses the communication button on the wall. After a short pause, a pleasant female voice greets her and asks what she requires.

"Ah, could you have someone get us new bed sheets?" Rias asks the female Devil from Housekeeping on the other side of the line.

Not asking about the circumstances, the female Devil politely agrees and informs her that a maid will be dispatched to replace the bedsheets in her room.

Smiling as she thanks the housekeeper, Rias presses the button again to end the call, then heads towards the bathroom with a spring in her step, looking forward to another pleasant experience with her fiancé.

XXXX END OF ADULT SITUATIONS XXXX

Rukia sits formally with her brother as Byakuya makes them tea, not the time-consuming Tea Ceremony, but still his movements are executed with the grace that is expected of a high born noble. During the entire time he prepares the tea, neither he nor she say a word to each other. As he finishes and places her cup before her however, he gives her a sudden smile as he lifts his own cup and holds its warmth in his hands.

"Your sister mastered the Tea Ceremony within a month of her arrival at the Kuchiki Estate; her sensei especially took great pride in how well Hisana did. Her sensei's opinion effectively 'shut down' the Elders' arguments that your sister did not have the grace to be nobility; their faces were priceless when they heard the praise given to her by Captain Ukitake and Captain Kyōraku after she had served them." He pauses as he looks almost longingly into his cup.

"Nii-sama?"
"I am…going to miss your constant presence when you marry Renji, Rukia. I never thought that the day would come when you would leave me behind, to find your own happiness. You will be free to live independently of the Elders until you ascend to take my place as the head of the Clan; until then Rukia, I wish for you and Renji to live your lives to the fullest. It was why I allowed him to court you when he asked me for my permission, and why I waited for you to confirm your own feelings before I allowed your engagement. It is all so that you can be as happy as your sister would have wanted you to be. I never would have allowed an arranged marriage like the ones the Elders try to force me into, well perhaps one offer would have been acceptable to me, but I have long since learned of his 'feelings' for you."

Rukia smiles when she realizes who her brother is speaking of. "I did confess to him Nii-sama, but…he graciously let me know that it would never have worked out between us. We see each other as siblings, and he says if he had an older sister, he prays she would have been like me and not…well, you would know better why."

Byakuya's eyes widen as he realizes who she speaks of, and they both laugh lightly thinking of Yoruichi as anyone's older sister, more so if she had been Ichigo's. The Squad Six Captain looks up from his teacup and sees something that two years ago would not have been possible: his sister smiling while in his presence, his own smile reflecting hers. Silently thanking Ichigo once again for making all of this possible, he sits and talks with Rukia about her duties, her dreams and what she would like her wedding to be. Soon their talk finally turns to the orange headed Devil and his quickly developing skill with Kidō.

"So, he has mastered both Hadō and Bakudō up to the Sixties already?" Byakuya is truly surprised by this, seeing that Ichigo has previously shown no aptitude of any sort towards Kidō.

Rukia nods to her older brother. "He has excelled since the awakening of his last blood line Nii-sama, and after gaining his true Zanpakutō, his control over his Reiatsu and his Devil magic has become very proficient. I wouldn't be surprised if by the time Momo and I left, he is close to mastering the rest, and his learning of Kaidō would only be an added bonus if he was somehow unable to use his regeneration ability."

Byakuya shakes his head, internally despairing at how quickly Ichigo is gaining power compared to himself. "And what of your studies, have you been neglecting your Bankai training?" He quickly changes the subject, and watches as his younger sister smiles again.

"Actually, I have been sparring against Grimmjow and Nelliel to help me gain strength Nii-sama. While I am not as powerful as Ichigo, they are both skilled warriors capable of testing my limits without pushing beyond it. Actually, they have been very helpful in that respect; both are excellent teachers, even if Grimmjow is rough with his language."
The Shinigami Captain's eyebrows rise at that admission, and he sets his cup down. "You have been sparring with the Arrancar?"

"Yes Nii-sama, they offered to spar when they found me practicing with Sode No Shirayuki on my own. They felt I wasn't pushing myself as I have no true opponent other than Ichigo, but with him training with the others, we haven't had the time for sparring other than our Kidō duels."

The older Kuchiki considers her words, then finally nods in approval. "As long as you find benefits with them, I see no reason to stop you Rukia. I only ask that you be careful with them, as they are still Hollows."

"Yes Nii-sama." She goes quiet.

"Rukia?" Sensing she has something more to say, he prods her gently.

When Rukia looks up again, he sees something he hasn't seen for a few years in her eyes: longing. "Do you really have to return with Captain Suì-Fēng tomorrow? Can't you stay another day?"

Byakuya shakes his head slowly. "We must return tomorrow Imouto; we need to begin informing select Captains and Lieutenants as to the true nature of Ichigo Naberius, and prepare for the fallout should Central Forty-Six instigate any move against him or his family. After witnessing their powers, it would be a devastating war for both sides. It would be better if we were prepared to 'take steps' to avoid such a conflict." He sees her expression go from quizzical to knowing as she lets his words sink in.

"Nii-sama…"

He raises a hand to stop her. "You should retire for the night Rukia. Before you do, you should also write your fiancé a letter and let him know that you are well and should be returning as scheduled. Then we have a wedding to plan for, so it would be a good idea if he begins to think of who he would like to invite." Byakuya's firm but kind tone quietly ends their night.

Getting up, Rukia bows to her brother and as she walks by him, she surprises him with a kiss on his cheek. "Good night Nii-sama."
"Good night…Imouto." Without thinking, he takes her hand and gently presses his lips against it. Rukia looks surprised by his actions, but gives him a happy smile then leaves the room quietly.

Listening to the door close behind him, Byakuya reaches into his Haori and pulls out a small portrait. It was painted shortly after his own wedding. Gently touching the worn paper, he whispers to the woman smiling up at him.

"I have done my best Hisana; the rest is up to Renji now."

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Three women sit in the private hot spring of the Naberius Clan, sake saucers forgotten, extra bottles lying around and the lone maid standing behind them listening with wide eyes and cheeks ablaze as the purple-haired werecat gives very detailed and explicit instructions to the equally red faced Chinese Shinigami on how to shag a man.

"And once you lick his…"

"YORUICHI! ENOUGH! I shall…not even…think of doing such things! No one alive interests me enough to do…such…Gahhh!" Remembering the sake in her hands, Suî-Fēng quickly drowns her words in her fifth saucer in less than ten minutes, her nerves completely frazzled from having to listen to her mentor's love advice go on and on.

"But Shaolin, how am I supposed to become a godmother if you don't get knocked up!?" The werecat demands almost petulantly as her hand slaps the water to emphasize her displeasure.

"Easy, just wait until Berry gives you one!" The current Onmitsukidō Commander shouts back at her.

Those golden cat-like eyes blink as Yoruichi considers her words, and a moment of blankness covers her face. "Yeah, that's right; Berry-kun will give me one way before you do Shaolin. Good thinking, I knew you would make a good Captain one day!"

A face-palm and a groan greet her answer, and her former protégée mumbles expletives under her breath about drunken cats and tipsy Elves. The Elf in question simply tilts her head towards the two Shinigami women and covers her mouth politely to keep from laughing at the sight of the
taller woman suddenly hugging the smaller woman into her breasts. Twin braids flail back and forth as the woman shakes the head she is holding while lamenting about not being a godmother yet, the smaller woman ineffectively struggling to get free. Soon a fourth woman enters the room, slipping out of her emerald robe and handing it to the Devil maid before sliding into the water next to her sister, thanking the servant as she receives a saucer of sake from her.

"What is going on with those two Merti?" Sasha asks as she calmly takes a sip of the warm liquid.

Merti leans against her younger sister, enjoying their close proximity. "Shaolin refuses to find a man and bear a child for Yoruichi to call a godchild."

"Oh, is that all? Shame on you Suî-Fêng." Laughter greets the now shocked face of the Captain, who begins to scowl much like a certain Berry at those words.

Finally disentangling herself from Yoruichi, the Chinese Shinigami pinches her nose as she pours a sixth saucer of sake. "I'm not refusing Sasha, I'm...just not ready, that's all. No one in the Gotei is worthy enough for me to call husband, much less live up to the expectations of the Fon clan."

"Maybe we should find you someone then." Merti comments with a smile hidden by her drink.

Yoruichi's eyes grow wide as she turns to face the older Elf assassin. "That's an excellent idea Merti! Do you have someone in mind already!? We can set them up on a blind date and give him tips on how to seduce her!" She declares, much to the horror of her former protégée.

"Wait...Wait just a damn minute Yoruichi! I never agreed to that! I...I'll find my own man!"

"Sure you will Little Bee, sure you will. So Merti, you tell me when and I'll make her come and meet her husband to be!" A giggle follows as Yoruichi's eyes sparkle with mischief.

Too distressed to argue any further, Shaolin sinks deeply into the hot waters until only bubbles mark the spot she occupies.

Sasha cocks her head as she listens to the sound of the bubbles. "Did we break her?" She asks curiously.
"Nah, she's just blowing off steam so she doesn't try and kill me." Yoruichi waves her hand as she pours herself another saucer of sake, a smile of contentment on her face.

The petite Shinigami finally rises again, huffing out a sigh. "Are you done yet Yoruichi?"

"Of course not, but I won't get to do this again anytime soon, so I am allowed some wishful thinking aren't I?" The golden-eyed woman replies as she scoots closer to Suì-Fēng and gives her another hug.

However, the young woman she has so much pride for suddenly drops her head and begins to wring her hands in distress. Seeing the signs that something is bothering her precious Little Bee, the Goddess of Flash gently tilts Suì-Fēng's head up to look into her unhappy grey eyes.

"What's really wrong Shaolin?" The former Captain asks her favorite successor.

"There's..." Suì-Fēng frowns, then finally gives a soft sigh. "There's no going back for you, is there Yoruichi?"

"I know, but I had to do it Shaolin. There really is nothing there for me but you, Kūkaku and Ganju, and you know why I have to keep my distance from her. I can always sneak in and see Kūkaku whenever I want to anyways. And knowing you, you will always find me whenever you need to see me. So, don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Besides, who in the Clan is even capable of taking me on?"

"Chiyoko has been making moves lately to become the next head of the Clan." Suì-Fēng reports bluntly, and she sees the amusement in her former mentor's golden eyes.

Purple hair begins shaking in rhythm with Yoruichi's head as snickering comes out from the mouth of the werecat. "Chiyoko is going to become the next head of the Shihōin? Has my Clan fallen so low that they would bring back a has-been to take my place?"

Suì-Fēng frowns at her dismissal. "She is gaining support from the other Clans except…"

"The Kuchiki. Bya-kun knows what kind of Shinigami she was; I doubt he would seriously even consider endorsing her if she comes a calling upon him. There is still bad blood between them after he learned that her aunt nearly killed his mother before she married his father. No, while it's..."
possible that she'll become the next head of the Shihōin, she'll never get any real support from the Gotei Thirteen, and now that the Fon Clan is firmly entrenched as the new Commanders of the Onmitsukidō, she has no ability to use the Onmitsukidō as she pleases." The purple-haired woman finishes.

Merti and Sasha share a look before the younger Elf asks the pertinent question. "How will this affect Ichigo's status in Soul Society if they find out about him?"

Both former and current Captains share a look, with the former deferring to the latter. "They will see him as an enemy, along with the rest of the Naberius Clan, when they find out that Yoruichi is now part of his family. They will probably try to declare a blood feud, accusing the Naberius Clan of trying to steal the secrets of the Shihōin Clan through Yoruichi, as well as sheltering a clan deserter." Suì-Fēng unhappily informs them.

Merti glares then as she speaks very ominously. "Then let them try, we will show them why we were chosen to be the assassins of the Underworld."

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Standing with his hands hanging limply at his sides, Zangetsu stares at the teen before him.

"How?"

Giving him a half-hearted grin, Imp answers him honestly.

"I had a growth spurt."

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Translations:

Reishūkaku (霊集核) : Spirit-Gathering Core
Kasutera : Castella cake
Botamochi (牡丹餅) : Japanese sticky rice balls coated with sweet Azuki (red bean) paste
fukujinzuke (福神漬) : Japanese pickled Daikon radish
rakkyō (辣韭) : Chinese onion
beni shōga (紅生姜) : Japanese pickled ginger
Disclaimer insert here: I don't own or have ever owned Bleach or High School DxD. Please buy their stuff so they don't go home poor and destitute. Thanks.

All characters belong to their rightful owners, all OC are for entertainment value only. As usual an M rating is for future violence, dismemberments, gore, language, very foul language, and of course mature scenes will be in, but don't expect a ton of them. Again, enjoy your time here.

Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess, don't forget to include her in your reviews or send a PM to her with your thanks. But don't bother her on plot; she won't answer just like me :)

Edited by regfurby August, 2018.

"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu"

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"I had a growth spurt."

Imp
The morning starts sadly for the Estate inhabitants as they gather to watch Rukia and Yoruichi bid goodbye to their loved ones. Byakuya and Suì-Fēng are leaving with Kisuke, Grimmjow and Merti back to the World of the Living, and the two Captains will then return to Soul Society from separate points, Byakuya from Isehara and Suì-Fēng from Tokyo. Ichigo had spoken quietly to the Squad Two Captain and given her a Devil-designed smart phone that allows her to call her former mentor without Soul Society being any the wiser. Rukia had given her brother a letter to give to Renji to let him know she is safe and sound and that she will write to him in the near future about her plans for their wedding. Momo had also written a letter to both her Captain and to her friend Captain Hitsugaya, letting them know she is having fun on her mission and that she will be home soon.

Ichigo holds his girlfriend's hand as they watch the departing group gets framed by the green light of Merti's magic, looks of longing and wistfulness on their faces as well as the faces of those staying behind. Shaolin sadly waves goodbye to both her former mentor and her newest student, trying to hide the pain in her eyes. Byakuya looks stoic as always, though the Squad Six Captain's eyes soften as he looks to his sister one last time and gives her a farewell nod. Soon they are gone in a brief flash of light, and the room quietly empties as the members of the Naberius peerages slowly head towards the family room and dining room; they plan to wait there for the return of the three who have gone to Hueco Mundo to help stem the Quincy intrusion, a task that should only take them a couple of hours at the most.

Candice looks around, still unused to her newfound freedom; she finally opts to follow Sasha and her twins back to their room in the Estate, feeling ironically more at ease in the presence of her former captors. She does drop by the dining room to check on Uryū and Ichigo, wanting to know when their next training session will be.

Orihime and the twins have a much easier time deciding what to do next, and they follow Tatsuki to the dining room where the rest of the Academy students are waiting for their departure in less than an hour. Uryū is leaving with them today, as he needs to finalize his enrollment in Kuoh Academy; Serafall on the other hand is returning to the Capital to take care of much needed business with the other three Maou. Promising to return in a few days, she instructs Uryū to follow the Candice's instructions during training to the letter. She also reminds Uryū that one day that he will need that power to help their cousin avenge their mothers’ deaths by killing the man who had stolen their powers that fateful day and left Masaki and Kanae to die. Nodding his agreement, Uryū had also hugged the older Devil reluctantly, after she demanded it, and assured her he would do as she said.

Chad had only dropped by the dining room briefly before going off to train on his own, leaving Ichigo and Rias as the last two Devils still in the dome with the Cerberus guards; in fact, Ichigo doesn't move until Rias gently tugs on his hand and pulls him out of the dome. Soon they are walking down the hallway, not to the dining room where the younger Devils and Shinigami are waiting for their departure, but to the family room where the older Devils are waiting. As they
walk, she grips his hand tightly and speaks to him in a worried voice.

"Please be careful today Ichigo. I know why you need to push yourself, and I know it's not just about Riser anymore." She says as she leans into his shoulder, the two of them walking side by side. "I just... don't like the thought of you getting hurt."

Pulling her closer, he speaks to her truthfully. "If things get out of hand in Soul Society and Hueco Mundo, I will need to keep my part of the contract I made with Tier."

"Do you think things will get so bad that she will have to call upon you?" The crimson-haired beauty demands.

"If she has no other choice, then yeah, she'll have to call on me to uphold my side of the bargain." Her boyfriend remarks solemnly.

Rias sighs after a moment. "From what Grimmjow and Nelliel have told me of her, she will be a formidable Queen."

Ichigo smirks in agreement. "I couldn't ask for better, she knows what it will mean when she finally comes to accept her Evil Piece. Tia will become both the Queen of Hueco Mundo and the Queen of my peerage when that day arrives. I wouldn't even have known if my Evil Piece hadn't reacted to her that night. I guess that means beating Issei's ass in Hueco Mundo had a very unexpected, but very beneficial outcome." His smirk widens as he looks at the very piece he is talking about, the Queen piece which glows brightly in his hand when he takes it out.

Elbowing him first for mocking her Pawn, Rias hesitantly reaches out to touch the Evil Piece, only doing so when he nods his encouragement. She can feel his power flowing through it, both warm and dark at the same time. Unlike her Evil Pieces however, his pieces seem to be alive and sentient, the Queen piece gently pulsing with her touch as she runs her finger along its smooth surface. It is something she had never thought possible, not even Mutation Pieces would act like his Evil Pieces do. Her brother had even mentioned that he had talked to the creator of the Evil Pieces, and Ichigo would soon be getting a visit from that reclusive Maou to look over his remaining pieces and find out what makes them so different from everyone else's. Hopefully it isn't anything to worry about, but it still makes her think that the man by her side is truly the most unique Devil she has ever had the privilege to know, and it is her fortune that she is lucky enough to snag him as her husband-to-be.

Last night had been the moment of truth for her as she lay in his arms, after a vigorous session where they had shared their passion with each other. It wasn't done on a spur of the moment; she
had gone through a great lot of thought on her part and many deliberations with her Queen before she dared to ask him that one simple question, a question he had answered after getting over his surprise last night. Gazing into his warm brown eyes, she still remembers the nervousness she had felt when she had pulled up her courage last night and asked him that question.

"Will you marry me the night you defeat Riser, Ichigo?"

*His brown eyes had widened, and after a few long moments where he had only stared at her, he gave his answer by way of a very long and gentle kiss, one which ended with these simple words: 'I would be honored to Rias.'*

Now they are on their way to speak to those who can effectively block their marriage, but neither of them really thinks they will. Her mother calls him son-in-law already; his great-grandfather calls her great-granddaughter in private. As they come to the room that holds Amyntas, Yoruichi and Venelana, the two teens begin to feel the first tendrils of nervous energy forming in their stomachs, and they realize something that should have been obvious from the start: those they need to speak to are not alone in the room. Exchanging a quick look and feeling countless eyes from the Naberius peerages rest on them curiously, Ichigo and Rias determinedly make their way over to the table that has the three people most concerned with their future sitting together; as one, they bow to the three of them.

Amyntas, Yoruichi and Venelana give them surprised looks; the werecat is the first to ask the question, having figured out this was coming.

"So you two have decided on a date then?" Her grin shows when her student's eyes widen barely a fraction, but his surprise is enough to show that she has hit it on the mark.

"Yes, the day I beat Riser." It is all he needs to say for them to understand.

Venelana and Amyntas both exchange pleased looks, nodding their approval for the two teen Devils. The Gremory matriarch gets up and kisses her daughter and future son-in-law on their cheeks, giving them her formal blessings and smiling at the blushing teens as the other members of the Naberius peerages in the room begin to cheer and clap for their newly-engaged young Lord and his future wife-to-be. Yoruichi gets up and does the same for them, ribbing her 'son' that she has to inform a certain Goat-Face soon of the impending nuptials; his despair at this is both real and feigned, as she knows he would never deprive his father of hearing this news. The last to give his formal approval is the Lord of the Naberius; Amyntas shakes his great-grandson's hand then kisses his future great-granddaughter-in-law on her cheek as well. Beaming at the young couple, he turns to address the room at large.
With a single spoken command, the Cerberus are sent to gather the rest of the clan so he can formally announce the engagement date to everyone. The hounds quickly round up not only those in the house, but also all the staff within earshot as well. Within minutes, the room and the surrounding hallways are filled to near overflowing capacity, the Lord of the Naberius Clan using his magic to ensure that everyone can see and hear him as he makes his announcement.

"On the day my great-grandson Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius defeats the son of the Phenex Clan, Riser Phenex; he will marry the daughter of Zeoticus and Venelana Gremory, Rias Gremory, that very same night as well. Their union will unite not only our two pillars, but that of the Sitri Clan as well. There is only one thing we of the Naberius Clan need to do. We will need to train Ichigo to defeat the immortal phoenix in such a way that there is no doubt as to whose bloodline flows through his veins!"

A roar of agreement supports his words, followed by clapping and cheering as those who are listening to the announcement from the Watcher of the Gates of Hell and are closest to the two named teens surge forward to surround them with glee, hugs and kisses. Yuzu and Karin had joined him before the announcement, and they now have their brother in a near death grip as they hug his neck while squealing, Orihime and Akeno dancing in place before pouncing on the crimson-haired beauty with delight. Chad, Tatsuki and Uryū simply stand near them with smirks on their faces, watching the two groups hugging and kissing each other. The cheers swell and fill the surrounding hallways and the estate as staff, peerages and Cerberus all let loose their own joy for the world to hear at the news.

Eventually everyone settles down, everyone sent back to do their duties, and then the dreaded question is brought up.

"So who asked who?" Sōna asks them with a knowing smirk.

Both teens blush, then the orange headed Devil finally speaks. "She asked me last night. I said yes."

Tatsuki blurts out in surprise. "Rias asked you Ichigo? Why didn't you ask her first?"

Both teens blush again, but this time it is Rias who speaks. "Ichigo did ask me first Tatsuki; it was during his last night before our break, when he asked to spend his life with me. He didn't have his memories back then, but he still asked me with all sincerity, and I said yes to him that night."

"So Ichigo always knew he was going to marry you, Rias-nee?" Yuzu asks with sparkling eyes.
The teen Devil looks down at her future sister-in-law and smiles at the young brunette. "I think we both knew that night we were going to spend our lives together, it...it was our first kiss for each other that day. He told me that it was the custom he knows to cherish one's first kiss, and I think that I will always remember that day as the day I fell in love with him completely. It also helped that he continued to show me how much he loved me that night, but that's a story for when you girls are older."

Ichigo moans out loud as he catches the look of glee on both Akeno's face and Yoruichi's, the latter leering as she leans forward and demands details of what happened that night. He stiffens however when he hears Akeno say she would be happy to show the former Shinigami Captain what happened. That was a mistake on Akeno's part; Koneko begins smirking as she backs away from the Queen of Rias Gremory's peerage.

"Akeno-sempai? Told you it would come back to bite you in the ass someday..."

Akeno feels a chill go down her spine, then she breaks out in cold sweat as she realizes what she has revealed, feeling both Ichigo and Rias letting loose large amounts of killing intent as they stare at the black haired Thunder Priestess. When Rias asks her what the young Rook is referring to, she knows better than to try and lie.

"Well, you see Rias-buchou..." Akeno says as she slowly begins to back away towards the door. "I sort of...well, there might be a video of your first kiss with Ichigo while you two were...ehmm, naked in the bathroom..."

She tries to run, but doesn't make it through the door before chains snap into place around her ankles and wrists, hoisting her up into the air; Ichigo slowly gets up with a large evil smirk playing on his face as he helps his soon to be fiancée to her feet as well.

"Shall we keep our promise to our misbehaving friend, Rias?"

"Oh, yes I think we should Ichigo." Turning to the room, she graces them with a beautiful smile as she begins to walk away with her boyfriend.

"We will be back as soon as we finish carrying out our promised punishment. Please do not mind us. Come Akeno, I think you know what awaits you."
Any protest the Thunder Priestess could have made is silenced by the chain covering her mouth. As the three leave the room, a few people begin laughing, while several others turn to the white haired Nekomata and asks her what punishment the Gremory princess is planning for her Queen.

"They told her next time she tries something like this, they would make her pee herself laughing." The youngest member of the Rias peerage gives an uncharacteristic smile as the first hysterical screams of mercy begin to flow into the room from down the hallway.

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Grimmjow and Tia watch as the Shinigami with his trademark green and white striped bucket hat sets up the last of the desert sensors for the first group of detectors. After switching it on and placing a small Kidō camouflage to help it blend in with the surrounding sand, he gets up and dusts off his knees, then asks the Queen of Hueco Mundo to turn on her new smart-phone. When she does, she gasps as she watches the screen fill with thousands of small white dots.

"How did you do this Urahara-san?" It is all the green eyed beauty can ask him.

Tia examines her phone one more time, before nodding to the blonde scientist. "We cannot thank you enough Urahara-san; this does make me believe in his words." She says to him.

Always the inquisitive one, Kisuke asks her what his young pupil had said to her that day.

"He simply told me that we have a right to live as freely as any other, it is a view I wish more people share... Of course, his contract with me does soothe my soul even more, seeing that he has kept his word to me." The Hollow Queen replies.

"Contract?"
Tia smirks at him. "That is between me and Ichigo, Urahara-san, until the day should come that I must fulfill my side of the bargain. Until then Urahara-san, you have your secrets, and he has his." He can see the humor dancing in her eyes.

Chuckling in defeat, Kisuke looks around the sand-dunes and sees why Ichigo feels that a part of him belongs here. His protégé had once told him during a lull in training of his changed inner-world, saying that it was always twilight unless his emotions were in flux, and describing how in the center of his world is a replica of the Skeleton Tower. When pressed, Ichigo had admitted that Zangetsu had forbidden him from entering the Tower as of yet; unless he met a certain goal, his Zanpakutō spirit would not let him anywhere near the inside. Ichigo believed that whatever was in there, his Zanpakutō spirit was sure he wasn't ready to face it yet.

Even after racking his brains, Kisuke doesn't quite know what could possibly be in there to warrant such a reaction from Ichigo's Hollowfied Zanpakutō. The other oddity that has the genius Shinigami intrigued is the presence of an unknown spirit that his orange-haired student cannot see or sense, but his Zanpakutō spirit can. Ichigo had thought it might be a remnant soul from the Hōgyoku, but Kisuke wasn't so sure. Most of the knowledge he has on the orb tells him that if Ichigo and Zangetsu had truly desired its destruction, then not a single one of the trapped souls should have remained behind.

A polite cough brings him back to the present, where Tia, Grimmjow and Merti are all looking at him.

"Sorry, just something Ichigo once told me about his inner-world. So where were we now?" He asks as he casually snaps his fan open.

Tia points at her smart-phone and quirks an eyebrow in query.

"Of course; as I was saying, if our sources are correct, every time a portal opens within the detected area, you will get a warning as to where within an approximate radius of ten meters it is, give or take. Once a sensor goes off, call us, and do not engage the Quincy unless you feel you can overcome them or they are an immediate threat. Ichigo, Sasha, Grimmjow and Nelliel will be sent to take care of the invaders. Of course, we are hoping no more intrusions will occur until after his previous engagement is over, but knowing Ichigo, if it does, he will abide by his agreement with you Queen Tia." Again, he hopes to be given a hint of what said agreement could be, but Tia's already stoic face being nearly covered leaves little for him to gauge her reaction by.

Turning away from the Shinigami, Tia looks in the direction of Las Noches before she answers the curious former Captain. "I know you have questions Kisuke Urahara, but Ichigo and I have our
reasons as to why we won't discuss our terms. Before you get the wrong idea, we have no intentions of challenging Soul Society or the World of the Living, neither one of us wish to...to be burdened with a war that would result in an undesirable outcome for the 'balance' between realms. Our contract is more for my benefit than for his."

"Your benefit?"

Sighing softly, the Hollow Queen turns back to face the man who has given her kingdom a fighting chance against the Quincy invaders. "If this proves to be useful Kisuke Urahara, I will gain from our contract, as will he. You should return now, I understand Ichigo has training soon and Grimmjow is very much needed to participate, is he not?"

Knowing the conversation is at an end; Kisuke shuts his fan and gives the powerful Arrancar a short bow. "I will inform Ichigo that our initial objectives here have been completed, and we will move into the next phase where we return every other day to sow more sensors around the desert to give you better range and directions. Please focus your defenses on the areas not covered by the sensors for now, as an attack from your blind spot could have devastating consequences."

Receiving a nod from the Hollow Queen, he returns to where Merti is still waiting to transport them back. Grimmjow speaks to his Queen privately, and a few minutes later he rejoins the other two. The panther Arrancar looks at Kisuke and Merti, giving them a short nod as Merti forms the magic circle beneath their feet. Glancing back at the Queen of Hueco Mundo, the last image the Shinigami sees is the look of relief and hope in her emerald eyes just before she disappears with her Fracción via Sonído.

"She seems at ease now Grimmjow." Merti says as the green magic circle begins to take them away.

"You have no idea Merti-san; she hasn't slept well in months, now we will have a chance to send a message that we won't be easy meat from now on."

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Golden eyes watch as her student goes through the numerous katas he has had to relearn from her and Urahara since the recovery of his memories, plus the new katas he had learnt from the Naberius Clan. Ichigo's body mass is becoming leaner and denser every day, gaining even more muscular definition than before, and his concentration has vastly improved thanks to all the practice he is getting, unless of course she decides to mess with him by stripping in front of him. But today is not a day to distract him; today he is going to fight almost every single peerage
member, Shinigami, Arrancar and Elf one on one for five to ten minutes per round without stopping, and he will get no rest until he falls flat and can no longer move to defend himself.

This of course had put Rias in a terrible mood when she found out what his plans for training were, and even more so when she found out it was going to last from now until a week before the Clans were scheduled to meet, a month from now. Rias had only expressed her displeasure for a few minutes before Ichigo took her into another room, where judging from the Reiatsu he was letting loose, indicated that he was smoothing things over with Rias through lots and lots of persuasion; the smiles they wore when they came back out told her just as much.

The former Shihōin princess glances away from her student when she feels her oldest friend's Reiatsu appear once again in the transportation dome; he, Grimmjow and Merti must have been successful in their endeavor to seed Hueco Mundo with sensors to help the surviving Arrancars and their Queen detect the Quincy threat in advance. It might be a long-term project, but each completed stage will provide an additional layer of security for their Arrancar allies. Tracking the three of them as they head in her direction, she knows they will be joining the people who are going to fight her student in one-on-one matches until he is no longer capable of fighting. Orihime has already been assigned to healer duty, but she is only allowed to heal lethal wounds on his body; all others he has to leave to Zangetsu and his Hollowfied nature to regenerate as he battles his way through his list of opponents. No line up is necessary either: whoever feels the need to jump in after each opponent is done will be allowed to do so, with the only restriction being that defeated opponents are not allowed to challenge Ichigo again. Akiko, the Queen of Amyntas’s peerage, had volunteered to take the first spot, being the oldest and most experienced of them all after Amyntas himself.

The fights will be watched by Ichigo’s peerage and his twin sisters, though they have been told that under no circumstances are they allowed to interfere; they are only there to learn what they can by observing Ichigo fighting with only his Devil magic, Kidō and Hollow powers. Ichigo's primary goal is to learn how to harden his body by using his Blut Vene and his Hierro, though his Hell Armor can be used later in the spars. She watches her student finish his final kata and come to a halt, before calling for everyone to get ready.

As the Naberius peerages begin to leave for the training dimension, she notices Kisuke pull aside Ichigo and speak to him, a Kidō barrier keeps everyone from eavesdropping, and she wonders what her best friend said to her 'son' to make him smirk and shake his head in denial to the blonde Shinigami’s questions. Kisuke’s expression is both amused and resigned, and he lowers the barrier without another word.

Once everyone is moving towards the training dimension, Yoruichi sidles up next to Ichigo in the hallways, everyone else either moving in front or behind them. Rias and the others had left for Kuoh Academy two hours earlier, leaving Orihime, Chad, Tatsuki and the twins in the estate. Tentatively, by next week they should all would be going to Kuoh, though the twins will be going to the same middle school that Koneko had just graduated from the previous year. Ichigo had groaned about having to deal with a 'Dragon Lady Sensei', but Koneko had merely smirked and
patted him consolingly on the back. Taking a glance at Ichigo, she can see her student looking at her from the corner of his eye.

"So, you sure about this Ichigo?" She doesn't bother beating about the bush this time.

Looking around him, Ichigo breathes in deeply once before he answers her. "Each time I got stronger to face Aizen, I had to fight with my life on the line, Yoruichi. Now Rias's future rests on my ability to fight and defeat an immortal, I have a contract with Tia to see through and help her save the remaining Arrancar, and one day, I will have to manage three peerages that help me oversee the Damned souls that reside in the Skeleton Tower. Lest I forget, Uryū and I also have a score to settle with the fucking bastard who murdered our mothers by stealing all their powers. So, am I sure of this Yoruichi? Absolutely." His tone leaves little doubt that he is no longer the same young teen who had just discovered his powers, the teen he was before the war changed everything.

Placing her hand on his shoulder, Yoruichi pulls him down and whispers into his ear. "Don't you forget Ichigo, this time you will not fight alone, nor will we allow you to do so ever again. Your mother might have named you, but we will see to it that you won't do it by yourself. We will stand behind you each and every step of the way."

"Then...that means if your former Clan comes after you, you aren't going to leave us behind either, right Okaa-san?" His eyes show that he wants the same reassurance from her.

Her eyes glisten as she pulls him tighter into her side. "I believe my Little Bee and my Furious Berry saw to that the other day, ehhmm Ichigo?" She sees him smile in response, and they both know that they are good to their words.

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Amyntas, the twins, and Ichigo's peerage all stand on a high platform in the training dimension which will allow them to view the fighting below, with several screens set up around them to display the fight from multiple angles. Karin and Yuzu are both on edge, knowing that in a few minutes their brother will be fighting for his life and receiving injuries from the many experienced fighters waiting for their turn to fight him. Grimmjow had been given the green light to take the second spot after Akiko, Ichigo pointing out that the sooner he kicked the former Sexta's ass, the quicker the battle maniac will stop calling him Naberius and start using his first name.

The panther Arrancar had retorted that it would be a cold day in hell before that would happen, to which Ichigo had simply returned a mocking smile filled with sinister intent; Grimmjow had
immediately yelled at him to bring it on, and that was that. The other members of the peerages who are planning to fight move to the sidelines of the training dimension as the field is being prepared; Amyntas notices that the field contains many obstacles that will cast a great many shadows on the battlefield, and his interest is perked. Analyzing the battlefield, his eyes then look for and find Merti and Sasha, both of whom are watching the proceedings with a knowing look on their faces. He also sees Candice with them, the green-haired female Quincy watching Ichigo with a confident smirk on her face.

'Could it be..? If they truly did teach him ‘that’, I wonder who he plans to use it on?'

As he looks down at the battlefield again, he sees his Queen walking up to Ichigo and her words are clearly broadcast to all of them.

"Ichigo, before we begin, I need Zangetsu to come out and speak to Sasha." The Kyuubi tells her young lord.

"Ah, sure thing. Hold on a sec." Ichigo closes his eyes but for a moment, and a monochrome copy of him appears standing beside him.

"What's up Queenie?" The Hollowfied Zanpakutō asks with a bit of curiosity himself.

The nine tailed Kitsune points to Sasha and asks him to speak to the blind Elf alone, while she and Ichigo wait.

Shrugging his shoulders, Zangetsu makes his way over to Sasha and asks her what she wants; he is soon engrossed in a conversation that appears to be silenced for some reason. Amyntas sees a scowl form on the face of the white spirit and then anger flashing across his face, but Sasha tilts his head downwards and speaks into his ear as she points to the Quincy standing next to her. He sees Zangetsu turn his head and shake it roughly, which Candice answers with a nod of her head. For five minutes the three of them speak, and soon the Zanpakutō spirit balls his fist and nods his head in acquiescence to them before making his way back to his wielder. From there onwards, the Guardian of the Damned is once again able to hear the conversation being carried out.

"King, you wanted them to push you beyond your limits; well they found a way to do it. You're not going to like it one bit though." Zangetsu grumbles to his partner.

"How bad is it?" Ichigo remarks questioningly.
"Tell him." The Zanpakutō spirit deadpans to the Queen of Amyntas's peerage.

Akiko looks the orange-haired Devil in his eyes and lays it out for him bluntly. "We found the one person that would make you fight with everything you have. The moment before we begin, Sasha will use her magic on you, and you will see only one face on each of us as we fight against you."

"Who, Riser Phenex?" Ichigo asks with some curiosity.

Zangetsu shakes his head and gives him a blunt hint. "Much worse than him King. Much worse."

"Then who?" He can't think of anyone else he would want to fight at the moment.

Akiko stares Ichigo in the eyes and answers clearly. "Yhwach, the Quincy Emperor. Candice's memories were used to recreate his image, and when you spar with us, it will be his face that you see Ichigo. No, do not argue. Remember that this is to push you both mentally and physically, this is what you asked of us that night, to push you beyond your limits. We will deliver on our side of the bargain, and we expect you to deliver on yours. With that said, are you sure you wish to continue from this point on, Lord Naberius? Once you do, you know there is no turning back. So, what is your answer?"

Glaring at the nine tailed Kitsune, Ichigo grits out his answer. "It will do. Let's get this going then. Sasha!"

The Elfin woman walks up to the scowling young Devil and without further ado, she grabs his head and chants in her musical language. Ichigo's eyes widen as the person he is seeing in front of him changes from the blind Elf to someone he thought was long gone.

"Old man?" He breathes out raggedly.

"No Ichigo, this is what Yhwach truly looks like. The impostor took his younger form from a millennium ago." The false Zangetsu's lips move, but it is Sasha's voice that he hears coming from it.
"I'll fucking kill him when I see him Zangetsu, I swear to all that that I can, I will make him regret the day he rose from his sealed prison!"

"Then let's get this going, and the sooner the better."

"Are you ready Ichigo?" Again, he hears Sasha's voice speaking, and he has to force himself to look away from that hateful visage.

"I'm ready." He makes his way towards the center of the designated battleground, where another Yhwach is waiting for him.

Akiko flames her body to her hottest temperature and releases her numerous chains as she points at him. "For five to ten minutes, each of us will attack you with everything we have until we force you to submit, you suffer a grievous injury, or you defeat us. Do you understand those three rules, Ichigo Naberius?"

Seeing the imposter pointing at him, Ichigo's rage is stoked to greater heights. "I do, now let's do this!" He flies towards him and the first thing he uses is his least powerful Hollow ability, a spread of Bala to kick up the ground and obstruct his opponent's vision.

Knowing that it is just a distraction, Akiko lets Ichigo get close before she lashes out with her Hell Chains, each of them alight with foxfire-enhanced hellfire, and manages to wrap him up in a few of her chains before they slacken suddenly.

'What the hell?' Feeling the ground tremble beneath her, she immediately leaps up as one of his chains burrow up from underground, almost catching her unguarded feet, and before she can land a set of Ceros find their pathways leading to her from six different angles surrounding her.

'Not bad Ichi-kun. Using Utsusemi, clever trick Sui-Fēng taught you.' She quickly deflects the Ceros with her Hell Chains, using the least amount of effort to redirect their pathways away from her. Landing lightly, she can no longer feel Ichigo's presence whatsoever now that he has disappeared again.

Sending out numerous sets of Hell Chains, she sets up a moving barrier around herself to keep him from sneaking up on her while searching out his energy. She barely detects him heading towards her as he appears behind her via Shunpo and hits her with a Hadō Number Sixty-Three: Raikōhō, the weaving streaks of lightning crashing heavily into her protective barrier, and he finishes off his
attack with a series of Bala and Ceros that tear through her chains. Not waiting for him to finish off her barrier, the Kyuubi launches all of her chains at him and uses her own Yōkai magic to launch foxfire fireballs to chase down the speedy Devil. She hears him grunt as several of her chains connect, but he immediately vanishes once again, the rest of her attacks missing him. Quickly pulling back her chains and reforming her barrier, she takes stock of the damage and notes that if he had continued to hit her full on with that last series of attacks, she would have been in some trouble, but her counterattack with chains and fireballs had been just enough to force his retreat before he could fully press his advantage.

Back and forth the two combatants go at each other, chains and fireballs clashing with Kidō and Hollow attacks, Akiko appearing to be at a disadvantage as she begins to hit him slower and slower each time he gets closer to her, until her allotted time with Ichigo is nearly over and she suddenly springs the ambush she had been setting up ever since the onset of their spar. Stumbling on the floor slightly, she waits until he commits to a Cero barrage before she suddenly accelerates back to her full speed, catching him by surprise with three sets of chains, before she pins him securely to the ground and places one hand on the soil as well.

"Forgive me Ichigo, but this is my last attack. Kitsunebi: Seisei no Hono!"

With that quick chant, over a hundred red and orange pillars of flames erupt from the magic circles she had been laying all around the battlefield during their spar, all of them flaring to life at the same time. With a simple mental command, she forces the individual flames to streak towards their target, her future lord, slamming into him and encasing him in a vicious swirling vortex of orange, white and red-hot fires. Standing up, she takes up a combat stance while waiting for the flames to die down, her eyes focused on the flames to see if her young Lord is still standing, or worse, has been dealt a near fatal wound. She, along with the rest of the audience, wait breathlessly for Ichigo to either escape or fall. The harsh sound of flames roaring are only matched by the screams coming from his youngest sister as she cries out for her brother. Akiko can still sense his life force however, and she continues to wait expectantly, until the flames that are still at their zenith are suddenly sent flying outwards by an explosion of raw power from the young Devil.

Standing in the middle of the scorched earth is a heavily breathing Ichigo, surrounded by a wall of smoldering blue flames, his Blut Vene crisscrossing his skin under his burnt off sleeves, his pants heavily blackened and his shoes no longer visible. Panting heavily while glaring at the nine-tailed fox, Ichigo begins to raise his hand when a shout interrupts him.

"TIME!"

No sooner is the word said when a transformed white panther leaps through the air, his roar heard throughout the chamber as he pounces at his opponent's defenseless back. "DESGARRÓN!"
Reacting purely on instinct, the still battered Devil reflexively sends a razor-tipped chain straight behind him, its trajectory intersecting with the attacking Arrancar's chest, but Grimmjow ignores it and continues with his attack. The orange headed Devil takes a broadside from the Sexta's strongest attack, razor sharp claws raking deep furrows across his back, while the panther suffers a spear wound through his chest in response. Breaking off the chain with a single swipe, Grimmjow lands on his feet heavily, his regeneration already kicking in high gear while he looks towards the plume of dust that surrounds the spot his foe had crashed into a second ago. His instincts suddenly blare a warning for him to move, and he dodges away without hesitation, seeing foot-thick beams of white lighting streak past his head.

"Oi Naberius, when the fuck did you learn that shit!?" The panther yells out as he quickly leaps to higher ground, avoiding several more beams of lightning.

A wave of blue flames answers him in kind, the searing explosion decimating the top of the small hill that the Espada had quickly vacated. The familiar sound of Sonído comes from the flames around him, warning the Aspect of Destruction that the Devil he is now fighting is no longer the same ignorant kid he had fought and nearly killed less than two years ago. Eyes burning with excitement, the panther laughs insanely as he hunts for the Shinigami turned Devil.

"Can't play hide and seek all day Naberius, soo…UMMPP!" The sand covered landscape races to fill his vision as a set of chains shoot out of the ground, wrapping around blue-haired Arrancar's waist and forcing him straight down at high speed.

"FUCK!" Bracing himself, Grimmjow's Hierro takes the brunt of the forceful landing, the impact only knocking the breath from his body. Swiping through the chains binding him, Grimmjow hears footsteps and turns to see the scowling Devil walking towards him, yellow light flickering across the fingertips on his outstretched hand.

The panther Arrancar can't help but feel that he is about to learn a very valuable lesson from his new favorite sparring partner.

'Eh, is the kid gonna give me what I have always wanted finally?' With a sadistic grin on his face, Grimmjow forces himself to his feet and drives his claws into his palm as he hears the Naberius Devil chant.

"Sprinkled on the bones of the beast! Sharp tower, red crystal, steel ring. Move and become the wind, stop and become the calm. The sound of warring spears fills the empty castle! Hadō Number Sixty Three: Raikōhō!"
Two powerful blasts of energy slam into each other and detonate, the backlash kicking up sand and dust and obscuring both combatants from view. Blinking hazel eyes worriedly scan the ground where her mate should be, but the dust and wind obscure everything within a dozen or so meters of the impact point, hiding all movement within it. The dust cloud swirls slightly, then she sees the orange-haired Devil burst through the cloud, his hands pointed down as he chants again.

"Ye lord! Mask of blood and flesh, all creation, flutter of wings, ye who bears the name of Man! On the wall of blue flame, inscribe a twin lotus. In the abyss of conflagration, wait at the far heavens. Hadō Number Sixty-Two: Soren Sōkatsui!"

Nel watches as twin gouts of blue wrath shoot from his hand and slam into the dust cloud, the cry of pain coming from inside letting her know that Grimmjow hadn't gotten away from in time. Panicking, she is about to step in when her saving grace comes in the form of a voice to her left. With a battle cry, the tall Irishman of Vincent Naberius's former peerage jumps into the fray, the legendary demonic spear Gae Bolg stabbing at the still airborne Devil and driving him away from the cloud of dust. From what she has heard from the others, Conor O'Madaihin had inherited the crimson spear, which was made from the bones of the sea monster Coinchenn after it had died fighting another sea monster called the Curruid, and the demonic spear had then been passed down through his family from his ancestor Emer, to her son after his father, Cu Chulainn, its previous wielder had perished, and after many generations Conor is now its wielder.

To her surprise, she sees Ichigo leaping away from Conor immediately, despite the Irishman supposedly bearing the face of Yhwach thanks to Merti's magic. His next actions show just how much the former Shinigami must fear the legendary spear, as chains, Ceros and lightning all pepper the ground before the runic leather armor wearing Conor O'Madaihin, the Irishman easily weaving through his frantic attacks. Nel hears him laughing as he leaps at the younger Devil again, his thick Irish brogue sounding out loud and clear to their ears.

"'Tis more needed than that to slow me down Ichigo! You know what happens when I hit you with Gae Bolg, none of your wounds will heal until I send it back to the otherworld!"

"Fuck you, you crazy ass bastard! I remember that damn red ivory toothpick pretty w…wait, fucking maniac; I thought you said it didn't have a mind of its own!!" She hears Ichigo shouting in alarm, accompanied by a massive increase in blood lust radiating from the weapon's aura after he insulted it. It's obvious enough to her that Ichigo has identified his opponent, and the illusion of Yhwach is no longer having any effect on him.

"I lied! Hahaha!" The red-haired man continues to follow his young lord all across the landscape, each step getting closer to striking his target, his booming laughter echoing loudly over the curses
being spewed out by the younger Devil. Shaking her head, Nel hops down to pull the groaning Grimmjow out of their line of fire, dragging him back to Orihime for healing.

Up on the viewing platform above the battle, Yuzu's hands are clutching her great-grandfather's coat as she has to endure watching her older brother fight, run, destroy, defend, and sometimes flat out disappear from each opponent after the red-headed Irishman, his wound growing more and more severe and his exhaustion becoming more evident. Choking back her cries, she has to watch as the golden-eyed woman who views them as her family decimates Ichigo with relentless Shunkō attacks, followed by the fairy whose pace of lightning magic is nearly impossible for her to follow. Her sobs finally cause her older twin sister to pull her into her embrace.

"He's okay Zu, Yoruichi and Rukia-nee told me that Ichigo loves fighting. You should know by now that when he and Goat-Face fight in the morning that even though he looks annoyed most of the time, he does sometimes let his smirks show. I know it looks bad, but he'll be fine. Promise." Karin doesn't let her twin see her own eyes, which are filled with the same fear for their older brother.

"You…you promise Karin? Ichi-nii is gonna be fine?"

Tatsuki chuckles and ruffles both their heads then. "I've seen your brother fight Yuzu; this isn't anything to worry about. Hell, I bet Rukia has given him worse than this when he calls her midget or shortness."

"I think his shins have permanent scars from her kicks." A softly giggling Orihime says to her younger adoptive siblings to help ease their fears.

"Your brother will be fine, Yuzu." Chad says as he notes fatigue finally setting into his oldest friend's movements.

"TIME!" Everyone's eyes turn to watch the last combatant finally grace the training room's utterly destroyed landscape.

Pushing his blonde hair out of his eyesight, Kisuke looks to see the breast plate of Ichigo's armor heaving rapidly with the gasping breaths of the orange-haired Devil as he walks to within a few meters of his apprentice. Pulling his bucket hat down, the former Captain silently releases Benihime and begins to twirl her in his hand. Looking up at his opponent, he sees the two-horned helm focusing on the sight of the Crimson Princess already in her Shikai mode.
"Something wrong Ichi-kun?" Kisuke's attempt at humor is not lost on the black armored Devil.

Shaking his head a fraction, the young Naberius lord pants. "I figured you'd be the last Geta-Bōshi, that's why I held this back, just...for...you."

Kisuke easily notices when every set of Ichigo's chains begin to form the tale-tell signs of Cero or Bala as they glow red from the ends. Not wasting time, he deploys his red-mist shield, only to see the chains race in every other direction but towards him. Observing where the first set of chains disappear to, the genius's eyes can't help but widen when they dive straight into the shadows. Quickly figuring out what is happening, Kisuke leaps away from his own shadow and barely avoids the chain attempting to snare his foot, but a quick glance around shows him the reality of the situation.

Seeing the light of dozens of deadly Hollow based attacks shine brightly from the shadows all around him, Kisuke pulls the brim of his hat down and gives a wry smirk.

'Yare yare.'

There is a deafening boom as the deadly beams all converge on the former Captain, the entire battleground shaking from the explosion. Orihime doesn't even wait, she teleports on her own for the first time down to the battleground to heal the two men, Ichigo having collapsed face-down after his attack, and Kisuke dropping to the ground in a crumpled heap. Twin orange shields wrap separately around each of the final duelists, Kisuke in much better shape than his younger opponent as he gives Orihime a weak smile of thanks as her fairy begins rejecting his wounds for him.

"Nasty little trick you have been teaching him Merti-san, Candice-chan." He calls out to them, having figured out who was responsible for teaching Ichigo this final attack. Reaching up for his bucket hat, his hand freezes when he finds only the rim and a burnt inch of fabric left of his favorite head gear.

Dropping his head dejectedly, he tosses the ruined piece of cloth aside. Lying there on the ground, he can only smile as he replays that last attack in his mind. If Ichigo had that kind of firepower back when he was fighting Aizen the first time, would he have had to go through all the trials he faced later? He knew that Ichigo, the Quincy and the Elves had been up to something for the past two days, but he hadn't expected something like this, and for Ichigo to have learned it in less than two days speaks volumes as to his dedication towards his lessons. When he saw Ichigo's chains disappear into the shadows around him he had correctly anticipated the attack coming from his own shadow, but the follow-up attack that came from multiple shadows all around him had left him truly impressed. What truly amuses him, however, is the memory of Ichigo laughing as he fell flat on his face in exhaustion.
"I finally get to kill that fucking hat of yours Geta-Bōshi!"

A nudge at his ribs makes the grey eyed Shinigami look up at his grinning best friend, her eyes twinkling in satisfaction at the state he is lying in.

"I shoulda’ known he had something special planned for you Kisuke." Her laughter is highly evident as she speaks to him.

"Yare, yare Yoruichi, now is not the time to jest as I mourn my beloved." His mournful reply causes her to roll her eyes at his stupidity.

Grabbing his hand, she easily pulls him to his feet, letting him dust off his singed pair of hakama and shake the dirt from his tattered haori. Seeing the three peerages all converging around Ichigo, she hears the youngest Naberius sibling asking her older sister if their brother is going to be alright, followed by a groan of misery coming from Kisuke.

"He's survived worse and they're all worried about him being exhausted. What about me!?!" Her oldest friend cries out over-dramatically as all the attention is now focused on Ichigo.

Shaking her head in exasperation, the Neko grabs his arm and drags him away. "We both know you could have escaped that you moron, it's your own damn fault for deciding to block it instead. You weren't even seriously hurt by it! Now if you have the energy to complain, you have the energy to buy me a glass of milk instead of feeling sorry for ya self Kisuke."

As the two old friends continue to rib one another, they notice the Naberius Lord watching his great-granddaughter heal her brother on their way to the exit. The older Devil waits until the two of them are even with him, before asking them a single question.

"How much longer could he have gone?"

Kisuke looks over his shoulder, then exchanges a look with Yoruichi. Continuing to walk towards the exit, he replies to the question truthfully. "If he had been allowed to use Zangetsu from the onset, it might not have been good news for a few of his opponents, and he would probably still be standing right now. He is growing very rapidly Amyntas, just as we all figured he would. I would say two weeks is all he needs if he keeps up this pace, and you will have your heir's wedding soon enough."
Amyntas nods slowly. "And my great-granddaughters and their safety?"

Yoruichi chuckles at that. "You know that old saying well enough Amyntas: it will be a very cold day in Hell before Ichigo lets anyone touch his sisters or anyone else he cares for." The former Shihōin princess answers the Devil Lord with a genuine smile before she leads Kisuke away again.

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Uryū can't believe how his day is going and it isn't even lunch yet. First was the ruckus of his arrival with the so-called 'Kuoh Idols'. He had almost burst out into laughter when he heard Rukia and Momo's names being mentioned alongside those of Rias, Akeno, Koneko, Sōna and Tsubaki as he walked behind the ladies with Issei and Yuuto. The perverted Pawn had peeled away to meet up with his human friends, and as they left earshot, he couldn't help but feel the amusement at hearing the two other members of the Hentai Trio yelling at Issei for missing out on some new AV star in her newest released movie.

As he and the young Knight walked a pace behind their female companions, he had begun to develop an itch on the back of his neck, one that he was unfortunately familiar with; turning suddenly, he was almost knocked over by a group of younger women who were walking closely behind them, and it was only pure luck that he retained his balance and didn't give them the opportunity to 'help' him up, judging from the poorly concealed looks of disappointment on their faces. Most of the girls were also looking at him and Yuuto like fresh pieces of meat, meat cast amongst starving wolves that is. Sighing inwardly, he had discreetly asked the younger Knight if this was going to be a normal occurrence, and he wasn't enthused in the slightest by the shrug of Yuuto's shoulders and noncommittal grunt. Thankfully, they all arrived at their homeroom without being harassed and were left in peace as the bell for homeroom rang, forcing the younger students to leave for their own homerooms as well. Finding his seat that was assigned to him by the principal, which meant that the Gremory family had their hands in it, he noticed he was sitting near the place that Ichigo would be sitting at when he came back, which also put him in close proximity to Rias, Akeno, Sōna, Tsubaki, Rukia and Momo, who all had seats near Ichigo's as well.

Then, he had to deal with the news of three other transfer students that would be arriving soon, which had all his classmates gossiping as to why so many new students were showing up all of the sudden. It was fairly obvious that he himself was a new transfer student himself of course, since it was his first day at Kuoh, and after his introduction to the class he was inundated by ceaseless questions from his female classmates the moment homeroom ended. Fortunately for him, the bell rang to change classes, his classes of course being the same as the Devils and the Shinigami Lieutenants. His newest rival in knowledge was the glasses wearing Student Council President, Sōna Sitri, although in school he had to remember to call her by her alias, Soua Shitori. Tsubaki, the Student Council Vice President and Sōna's Queen, was a very close third in academics after his arrival, but he was confident that he could keep her at bay, barely. What had him grinning inside however, was knowing that he finally had real competition after being on top of the leaderboards
for so long, though he can't wait for Orihime to join and prove herself to be the dark horse of their group. Despite her academic prowess, it was difficult for him to properly compete with Orihime when she was so truly happy to see his grades beating hers.

Lunch finally arrives while he is thinking, and not a moment too soon. Utilizing his well-practiced skills at sneaking away without being noticed, he finds himself unexpectedly walking beside the long black-haired Akeno Himejima, who just glances at him as he folds his sewing club admission papers into his school-issued briefcase. Neither of them says a word as they make their way to the pre-arranged lunch hangout, namely the Student Council Room, where none of the usual students would dare to disturb them. Uryū feels a bit of surprise when Rias's Queen sits directly across from him, he had figured she would sit closer to her mistress, but a quick look at the Gremory heiress tells him that Rias is busily engaged in conversation with Rukia and Sōna as they talk to each other in hushed tones; he also sees Koneko and Yuuto sitting with Momo and Tsubaki, the Squad Five Shinigami telling them quietly about her life in Soul Society and the friends she is now missing.

Shrugging it off as a coincidence, Uryū is about to take his first mouthful of food, when the Thunder Priestess bluntly asks a question that stops him cold. "What really happened on top of Las Noches, Uryū Ishida?"

All talking at the table immediately ceases, Rukia turning a horrified face towards Rias's Queen, but before she can even say a word Akeno cuts her off. "Ichigo is going to marry the King of my peerage Rukia; I believe we have a right to know what really happened that day to make two of Ichigo's best friends lock up in horror every time someone mentions his fight with that Espada, Ulquiorra was it? Tell us what happened that makes all of you clam up tighter than a nun…"

"Akeno Himejima! Don't you dare…"

Holding his hand up, Uryū stops Rukia from continuing her outburst. He is inwardly thankful that Yuzu's bento prevented them from making a scene at the cafeteria, which is where they would be if they had to buy their own food. He still glares at Akeno however, seeing her shamelessly take a bite of her own bento while waiting expectantly for his answer, which he finally gives after Sōna helpfully puts up a privacy ward around the room.

"We were defeated, Ichigo and I. Ulquiorra was too strong, too fast, and too powerful for either of us as we were back then, we were no match for him even when we worked together. I lost a hand, but Ichigo…he died."

Gasps of horror can be heard from the others, even from the two Shinigami who hadn't known the full extent of what had happened. His sharp blue eyes bore into Akeno's, whose violet orbs can only look at him in horror. Rias's eyes on the other hand drop to the table as she hears the final confirmation of her suspicions; Yoruichi had only glossed over the details, and Orihime flat out
refused to speak of it, but hearing bits and pieces of the story from many different sources, including Ichigo himself, had allowed her to put together a very grim picture of what truly happened back then. Now, she and the others are forced to listen as Uryū describes their friend’s death from the perspective of someone who was actually there.

"I was on the ground, bleeding out from the stump of my arm. Orihime was completely frozen. Ichigo was struggling, his throat being crushed by Ulquiorra's fingers as the Espada held him in the air. He said something to Ichigo, then he placed a hand on Ichigo's chest, right here, and he blasted a Cero straight through Ichigo's heart." The Quincy points to where his heart is located to emphasize that fact, ignoring the horrified expression on Akeno's face. "He made me and Orihime watch as he killed our friend as effortlessly as he would swat a fly. But that was not the end obviously. No, what happened was worse. Ichigo's death broke Orihime from her stupor. She tried to heal him, calling out to him as she tried to do so, her tears falling endlessly as she begged for him to live, all while the Cuarto stood there telling her it was useless, asking her to give up...but then 'it' happened."

He pauses as he takes his glasses off, wiping them before staring at the teen across from him, his blue eyes hardening before he speaks again.

"Even though he was dead, Ichigo came back. He stood up with that massive hole in his chest, and we thought that he was alive, but we were wrong. He came back as a Vasto Lorde, the most powerful form of Hollow. From what I later told, his form was very similar to the Hollow known as 'White', the very same Hollow that had infected Masaki-sama when she was but a teen, and later passed on to Ichigo with his birth. That newly Hollowfied Ichigo stood up, his fatal wounds disappearing except for his Hollow hole, and what happened next was nothing short of a massacre. Ichigo in his Vasto Lorde form was unstoppable: he tore apart the Espada, nothing Ulquiorra did was enough to even slow him down. Both Orihime and I were shocked by his actions... we had never seen Ichigo going on a rampage before, and we didn't know what to do."

His hand absently drifts down towards his stomach, unaware that Akeno's eyes had followed his movement. "It was only when Ichigo tried to execute Ulquiorra's defeated and helpless body that I realized Ichigo had to be stopped. This was not the Ichigo that we knew, Ichigo would not have wanted to execute a helpless enemy. I tried to tell him that he had already won, that he didn't need to finish off Ulquiorra, but I didn't realize that Ichigo was no longer in control. He... he stabbed me through my stomach, and started to charge up a Cero in my face. Ironically, this gave Ulquiorra enough time to partially regenerate and cut off one of Ichigo's horns, the shock somehow causing him to come back to his senses and overcome his Hollow once more. However, this last action was too much for Ulquiorra, he had suffered too much damage and used up too much of his remaining energy, and after speaking one last time to Orihime, he crumbled away into dust, the last memory she has of him being his hand reaching out towards hers, but her hand never able to reach his. Ulquiorra, had died to save her from Ichigo's rampage... It left a terrible scar on Hime's heart. This is the reason why she refuses to speak of that incident at all, and the reason why Ichigo is unable to help Orihime find her peace."
Uryū clears his throat, blinking several times to dispense his vision of that day. "Anyway, the Hell Armor that Ichigo now wears is very similar to his Hollow form, Akeno-san; it may be shaped into plate armor, but it still has 'his' shape down even to the two horned helm he wears. The power he displayed back then was the power of his true Zanpakutō spirit coming out to help save his life, but we didn't know it back then, so to us, he…"

"He was Ichigo's inner-Hollow." Rukia quietly finishes for him, her red-rimmed eyes an indicator of the tears she has shed.

"Yes Rukia, that was Zangetsu doing what he had to in order to save his wielder; he took over and fought Ulquiorra with Ichigo's true Shinigami and Hollow powers, and anything or anyone that stopped him from killing Ulquiorra would be destroyed as well." Ishida says as he puts his glasses back on. "It is unfortunate what happened on that day, and none of us like to talk about it, but it is not something that we wish to hide. I hope that satisfies your curiosity, Akeno Himejima-san."

The Thunder Priestess flushes as she looks down in discomfort. "I'm sorry Uryū, but I had to know. I had to know why that memory makes you and Orihime shut down the way you do, why Ichigo holds so much guilt over that particular event. I am sorry for what had happened to all of you, but I won't apologize for asking, we love Ichigo and care for both you and Orihime as well, so we only want the best for all of you." Akeno wipes her eyes and looks at him firmly. "I thank you for telling us the truth, Uryū-san, I'm just glad that it won't ever happen again."

The Quincy teen can't help but let out a snort. "Obviously you do not know Zangetsu well enough then."

There is a shocked silence, then a loud "Huh?" The whole table immediately demanding an explanation.

Pushing his glasses back up, Uryū glances down along both sides of the table. "Really, Rukia Kuchiki, you of all people should know what I mean. Ichigo's Zanpakutō is born from his soul, and his Zanpakutō spirit is Hollow, Shinigami, Quincy, Human and Devil in nature; add that to my cousin's unwillingness to stop no matter the cost to himself, do you really believe for one minute that his Zanpakutō wouldn't do the same thing to keep him alive through death once again? Or push him beyond all reason and morality to protect what he views as his?"

All eyes then follow his gaze to glance first at Rias, then at the now wide-eyed and blushing Koneko, who looks just as shocked as the rest of them.

"Yes, both of you are at the top of that list along with his twin siblings, Orihime, Rukia and
Tatsuki. Chad and I have both fought beside him long enough to know who he would put first: his family, then his friends, and now his peerage, before finally his own welfare. Yes, Koneko, he counts you as part of his family. Since he prioritizes all of you so highly, each of you should keep this in mind that when he is being overprotective, he's just him being himself.

Seeing that his last comment has left them unable to respond properly, Uryū sighs and stands up from the table, the thought of eating his bento no longer appealing to him. "As a side note, I must ask that each of you keep this information to yourself. Orihime…still has trouble with what happened that day, and bringing it up with her will only wound her heart deeper."

As he packs up his bento and leaves the room, he hears a small voice speak then. "She...was truly falling in love with him, wasn't she?"

Uryū stops at the door, his head resolutely facing forward. "Love? I don't know if it was love, but she didn't want him to die, that I do know."

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She looks down at the tickets in her hand, golden-blonde hair neatly tucked back under her habit as she listens to her current overseer.

"You will travel by train until you arrive at the eastern border of Russia; from there you will take a freighter to Northern Hokkaido. Once you have docked, you will travel by both train and ferry to your final destination in Isehara. Do you have any questions, Asia Argento?" The male Fallen Angel asks from under his cloak.

Never raising her eyes to the speaker, she nods once. "Am I going to be there long?"

She misses his devious smirk that appears on his face. "Not long at all. Now you must get going, you don't have much time to make it to the station. Take this; it will help you on your journey."

Bowing once again, she grabs her bags and takes the offered coin purse before making her way out into the night of the town she is leaving behind. Once the door shuts on her, the cloak is removed to reveal a middle aged male with black hair and blonde bangs, looking at the feather he had taken from the fountain in Isehara.
'So, my dear Raynare, what are you really after?' He can only imagine the surprise waiting in store for her.

A hand slaps the back of his head and makes him grunt out in surprise. Whirling around, he gives his assailant a piteous look. "What was that for?"

The woman pinches her nose as she glares at him. "Why did you send her Azazel? What could you possibly be thinking by putting her in danger right now!??"

He puts up his hands in surrender. "Now, now my dear, we both know that the upcoming strife is going to change the spiritual and Yōkai realms forever. I am sending her because her power will be of great use to them. Anyways, now that’s over, I wonder how come they don't realize you are both here and there at the same time...”

Another slap to his head answers his question. "Because I want as many of us to survive this ordeal as we can you ass, so don't get too conceited on me. I only agreed to help you because as insane as the three of you are, you are our best hopes of ensuring our coming victory. Now I must return before they realize I am not really there." She turns to go, then stops and turns back again. "One last thing: she better be safe, or else."

The man takes a step back warily. "Of course, but one thing, are they really…"

"Ichigo and Rias, yes. Issei-kun will have to find his own way now, but rest assured Azazel, he won't be as helpless as you think. A Shinigami is training him now."

"A Shinigami? Not a purple-haired Shinigami by any chance?" He grins while thinking about the purple-haired woman until the Yōkai in front of him speaks the next part.

"She already has eyes for someone else Azazel. Besides, you would remind her too much of her own friends, and not in a good way."

With a morose sigh, his head slams down on the table as he feels her presence disappear. 'Why are all the good ones always taken?'

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Brown orbs stare into the night sky, his white carbon copy sitting next to him and idly swinging his legs over the parapets of the Tower, a tune humming from his mouth as he stares skywards himself. Ichigo can feel the giddiness coming from Zangetsu as he too feels incredibly smug at killing that damn bucket hat. Soon he joins his Zanpakutō spirit in humming that nameless tune which causes the two of them to break out in chuckles when the nameless song ends.

"It was so worth it." Zangetsu says as he crosses his arms over one raised knee.

Sitting up, Ichigo cracks his neck before he replies. "How would that commercial go, 'bucket hat, twenty yen, face, priceless'."

They can't help but start laughing again as the memory of that hat burning from their Ceros and Balas play out in their minds, along with the look of surprise on Kisuke's face that they finally get to see again since the day Ichigo first used the Getsuga Tenshō. Standing up, the orange-haired Devil stretches his arms over his head, then looks across the landscape towards one particular object in his inner world.

"When will you let me into the Tower, Zangetsu?" Ichigo asks this question every time he comes here, but each and every time the answer he gets is the same, at least until now.

"Why do you wish to enter that place Ichigo? What do you think you will find waiting for you in there?" Zangetsu questions him instead. Ichigo scrunches his eyebrows when he hears the resignation in his sword's voice, but it isn't a refusal, so he decides to press on.

"Because it's my inner-world Zangetsu, shouldn't I know what it does?"

Unseen by him, a teenaged Imp sits beside his Zanpakutō spirit.

"You know he has a point Zangetsu." Imp says quietly to her companion.

"Whose side are you on anyways, he can't even see you Imp." Zangetsu mutters in return.

Ichigo looks at his muttering Zanpakutō spirit with a bit of worry, but he knows if Zangetsu is going crazy, he will find out soon enough. Leaning forward a bit, he looks at the other side of
Zangetsu and sees nothing once again.

"You know how crazy you sound right?" Ichigo sighs as he leans back on his arms and remarks with a bit of humor.

A grunt and a finger flip answers his comment. "I can't help it if she doesn't think you are special enough to see her King."

Ichigo coughs something that sounds remarkably like 'Emperor's New Clothes', and Zangetsu adds a second finger to his reply. Imp just rolls her eyes at both their antics. After a moment, Ichigo asks his question again.

"So…"

Zangetsu sighs. "I…am not sure if you want to see what waits for you there Ichigo. It is a portal to the real place, the real Skeleton Tower. What you see in there is what actually is happening in the Skeleton Tower. Going in there from your inner-world allows you to physically teleport there no matter where your physical body is. There is also someone in there that I don't want you to meet just yet."

Ichigo unconsciously tugs at the back of his neck, only one person would cause his sword to answer that way, but it isn't possible, he is dead, a dead spirit, right? Shouldn't he be in the cycle of life? Sighing to himself, he speaks to Zangetsu again. "When you think I'm as ready as I could possibly get, I want to go and see for myself."

The white spirit shrugs. "Sure thing, but I think when the time comes, it would be a good idea to let someone else know we're going in there just in case things go bad. Anyways, you better get going. I can hear them talking and if you ain't awake soon, kitten Sensei is liable to do something..." He doesn't get to finish as the now scared Ichigo disappears from their inner world faster than if he was using his Bankai.

Imp giggles at him. "You are such an…" A hand covers her mouth.

"I'm the only one who can speak that way Imp, now let's go; I'm tired and want some sleep." He picks her up and sets her on her feet, placing his arm around her waist as he prepares to Sonído away.
"You can't keep him out of there forever Zangetsu; sooner or later, you are going to have to tell him who is in there." Imp cautions him.

Looking far away, the Zanpakutō spirit sighs and gives her a half-grin. "Until then, let him have some peace and happiness Imp, he's earned that much at least for now."

Sighing as well, she wraps her own arm around his waist, then leans into him. "I'm sorry, you're right. Give him at least that much, right."

"Right, come on now, it's been a long morning, time for a nap and then when I wake up, it will be time to try out a few other things." Their surroundings blur as he moves them away at high speed.

"I wonder why he didn't use it today." Imp muses as she watches the scenery zip past.

Inside his head, Zangetsu speaks to himself. 'Because the best laid plans are those you don't ever speak of.'

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Snapping his eyes open and quickly scanning his room, he senses nothing amiss at first, then he catches someone giving a disappointed pout out of the corner of his eye. Golden eyes shine in the dim light of his room as Yoruichi approaches him, giving him an all-knowing grin.

"Careful Ichigo, you might wake them up." She cautions as she points towards the two heads using his chest as their pillow.

Looking down, Ichigo sees Yuzu and Karin sleeping on either side of him; he also sees Orihime sleeping soundly on the couch in his room, while Tatsuki and Chad are sitting at his small formal table while sipping hot tea from their cups.

"How long?" He lays his head back down, pulling his sisters closer to him.
"Not long, a few hours. You really outdid yourself today Ichigo, I have to say I'm proud of the effort you are putting into this, but don't push yourself too hard, otherwise it'll be all for nothing." Her grin fades into a more serious expression towards the end.

"I won't, but I had to find out today if I could do it." He assures her.

Yoruichi grins as she pulls out the tattered remains of a green and white bucket hat, waving it at him. "I would say you did pretty good Ichigo. Kisuke was pretty impressed, both of us were. But you should know a single powerful attack like that won't work on a supposedly-immortal Phenex, so….

First smirking at his 'mother' before winking at her, he replies. "I'll think of something Okaa-san, you know I always do."

"Smartass. I don't want to see the day you fall flat on your face when you can't 'think of something' Ichigo." She sees the pain in his eyes then. "Ichigo?"

"That day already came." Her eyes widen when she realizes what day he is talking about.

Looking quickly towards Orihime at the table and seeing the burnt-orange-haired healer still lying on her arms sleeping, she leans closer to him and tells him quietly. "What happened that day wasn't your fault Ichigo. Both of you were being lied to, just be thankful Zangetsu came through for you when he did."

"Yeah, I know, so what time is it exactly?" Ichigo changes the subject as he slowly sits up again, prompting Karin to complain in her sleep about her pillow moving.

"Too late for lunch and too early for dinner Ichigo, but I can get you something if you are hungry."

Shaking his head no, he asks for a cup of tea instead, which Tatsuki pours and brings to him. After thanking her for the tea, he takes a sip, but sees the martial artist hasn't moved back to her seat, standing there instead with her arms folded under her breasts and looking down at him.

"What?"
"I'll never match you will I?" She asks him bluntly.

Frowning, he looks down at his cup of tea. "No."

Tatsuki shakes her head tiredly. "Ichigo, you dummy. I don't think any of us will ever match you, ever. Just don't leave us too far behind though, you'll make the rest of us look bad." She finishes with a weak grin and light tap to his shoulder.

Ichigo gives her a small smile, then she carefully sits on the bed while avoiding Yuzu; soon the two begin talking about Tatsuki's Devil training. She blushes when she recounts how her first attempt to use teleportation magic ended in disaster: she had found herself in someone's room while they were 'coupling', and she wishes she could scrub her mind of that memory. Ichigo sniggers when she tells him who they were, thinking about the looks that Hanako and Conor must have had when a beet-red faced Tatsuki attempted to escape from their room. Then she goes on to tell him that she's still having some trouble with flying and hopes that he can help her with her next flying session, which he agrees to so long as it doesn't clash with his training schedule.

He then notices that Chad is listening to them from the table, so he motions for his best friend to pull up a chair and sit closer too. Quietly, the gentle giant does so, and a few questions from Ichigo has him describing his training as well. It turns out that Chad's flying is much better than his magic at this point; unlike Tatsuki, his attempt at teleporting had sent him into the middle of a Cerberus pack during one of their hunting patrols, so they had helpfully stopped to give him directions back to the main estate.

Smiling quietly, Yoruichi sits in the background and listens to her three students speaking lowly among themselves so as not to wake the three sleeping sisters. She notices the quick pained look on her 'son's' face when he learns that Orihime had exhausted herself healing both him and Kisuke, but he is relieved when he finds out that her exhaustion is mainly due to her learning how to use more of her magical powers in conjunction with her Reiatsu to help her get more used to her newly changing powers.

Inevitably, their talk shifts to Ichigo's training from earlier that day, and they soon start teasing him about his tendency to run and hide from most of his opponents. Ichigo pouts as he defends himself, telling them that most of those attacks would leave really nasty effects if they landed, especially the ones inflicted by Conor's cursed spear, Gae Bolg. Tatsuki asks about the Yhwach illusion cast by Sasha, and Ichigo confirms that after fighting Conor, it was really hard for him to believe that his opponent was an older Zangetsu imposter. Not wanting to talk about it, Ichigo then asks about Grimmjow, showing visible relief that Orihime and Momo were able to heal his wounds with relative ease, but his relief changes to irritation when he finds out that the Sexta is still insisting they haven't had a proper spar to settle things yet and is demanding a rematch.
While Ichigo grumbles about crazy-ass blue-haired panthers, the door opens and Merti and Candice enter the room. Seeing them all sitting beside Ichigo's bed, they pull up chairs from the table to join in as well. After hearing that they are discussing his afternoon training session, Candice is quick to praise Ichigo's last attack, though she also points out that Ichigo didn't use it in a true combat situation since Kisuke made no attempt to escape or counterattack. While Ichigo sulks at that revelation, Tatsuki asks how Ichigo performed that attack, and after some back and forth looks between Merti, Ichigo and Candice, Yoruichi suggests that Candice explain the method to all of them.

"You should be the one to explain it Candice, since it is a technique derived from the Quincy to begin with." The golden eyed woman says with a wink to the green-haired Quincy.

Surprised that Yoruichi knows about it, Candice sees that everyone's attention is focused on her now. With a shrug of acceptance, she folds her hands into her lap, then points towards a shadow in the corner of the room. "The Quincy use a technique for 'teleportation' known as Shadow, this is something only a select few may freely use among the Quincy Wandenreich, mainly the Sternritters. Ichigo's grandmother, Kiku-sama somehow learnt this technique and created new uses for it, among them the ability to use shadows to 'teleport' one's attacks. We first discovered Ichigo using this when he sent one of his chains to attack through the ground during a training session, and it came out through our shadow instead; after putting together Merti-san's recollection of Kiku-sama's techniques and my own knowledge of it, we did a few experiments and found out that Ichigo can not only send his chains through any nearby shadow, he can also intuitively determine which shadow to extend which of his chains from. This even works when he cannot see the shadow directly, although it seems that he can only make use of shadows that are cast on a surface. In short, as long as both he and his target have shadows around them, he will be able to attack his target through all of the shadows, making him the perfect assassin."

All eyes turn to look at the orange-haired Devil as he sits up in bed, he hands stroking his sisters' hair.

Tatsuki's eyes suddenly widen. "Wait, if you can teleport through the Shadows like the Quincy do, does that mean you can attack them directly at their base?"

"Technically yes." Ichigo replies honestly. "However, that would be really risky since I would have to travel to their world, and I would be outnumbered and unfortunately, overpowered as I am now."

"You and Uryū also have time Ichigo, don't forget that." Yoruichi speaks up then, and he sees the disapproval in his 'mother's' eyes at his unspoken thoughts. "Candice says that the Quincy Emperor has slipped back into a coma, so until we see evidence of his revival, we will assume he has suffered a serious setback in his plans and keep on training. Kisuke is now working on a counter-plan to deal with their invasion, since we now know exactly how they plan on invading Soul Society, thanks to Candice."
Candice blushes slightly at the attention, but shakes her head in the negative. "I really had no choice Yoruichi-sama, being defeated and captured by Ichigo has left me expendable to the Wandenreich, and revealing what I have told you is tantamount to treason. I have nowhere left to go, and you could have easily gotten rid of me...But...you allowed me to live instead, offering me protection and safety instead of death. So I will keep my pledge to Lord Amyntas and teach Ichigo and Uryū whatever I can, and if the twins show signs of their mother's heritage, I will teach them as well."

"Sounds like you've had it rough too." Tatsuki pats her shoulder comfortingly. "So, the twins could be like Ichigo? Devil, Shinigami and Quincy hybrids?" She leans down and rubs the back of the darker-haired twin, not noticing the faint scowl on Karin's face.

"More than likely Suki, they do have the same parents; the only difference is that Ichigo was also born partially a Hollow. That is what makes him so...unique." Yoruichi's grin widens at the look on his face.

Rubbing his face tiredly, Ichigo finally admits. "I'll tell you it wasn't easy at first, dealing with Zangetsu, but now, I wouldn't know what to do without him by my side. He's saved me countless times when I had no right to survive what I did. Especially..."

His voice trails off, and Tatsuki decides to ask the forbidden question. "Ichigo, if you don't mind, could you please tell us what happened when you went to rescue Orihime?" His first Rook gently asks of him.

To all of their surprise, it isn't Ichigo who answers her; it is one of the other two people who had witnessed it firsthand who does. "He died, Suki. Ulquiorra killed him with a Cero through his heart, but he came back when I called for him. Begging him to come back because I didn't want him to die. Zangetsu was the one who answered my pleas; he was the one who saved Ichigo and I that day on top of Las Noches." A soft voice informs them.

"Orihime." They see the burnt-orange-haired Devil still resting on her arms at the table, but quietly watching them with her eyes focused on Ichigo's.

"I-Ichi-nii...you died?" Yuzu's frantic voice suddenly alerts them to the fact the youngest Kurosaki sister is awake, her voice cracking and her eyes threaten to tear as she hears that her brother's rescue of their older adopted sister had ended in his death. "Why... why..."
"Why didn't you tell us?" Karin finishes for her twin, the darker-haired girl glaring up at him with tears glimmering in her eyes. Her hands are fisted tightly in his shirt, revealing just how badly affected she is by this news.

"Y-Yuzu, Karin... you're awake?" He stammers.

"Of course, you dumbass! No one could sleep through all the racket going on right above us." Wiping fiercely at her tears, Karin pulls herself up into a seated position. "Now, tell me what the hell happened and how the hell you died." A muffled agreement comes from Yuzu, whose face is now buried in his chest.

"I'll tell them, Ichigo." Orihime volunteers quietly, pulling her chair over to sit beside his bed. "I was the one who was responsible for all of it, so it should be my duty to tell them."

"Orihime, it's not..." He sees the resolute expression on the healer's face and sighs. "Just... let me give my side of the story, and you can help me fill in the blanks, alright?"

With Orihime giving a nod of agreement, Ichigo sits up straight and thinks of where to start. Gazing at his hand, the one that she had healed the night before she left with the Cuarto Espada, he begins to tell his story from that point. "I knew something was wrong when Orihime went missing, despite the so-called evidence that she had left willingly with Ulquiorra. I didn't believe it for one moment what the Head Captain was saying. After the way they tried to deal with Rukia, I knew the Gotei could not be trusted to do what's best for us. So Uryū, Chad and I left to find her, we already knew where she was, but it was Kisuke who allowed us to follow behind her..."

Over the next two hours, Ichigo, Chad and Orihime shared what each of them had done under the night sky of Hueco Mundo and the false sun of Las Noches. Ichigo and Chad told of their battles and their experiences with various Arrancar, while Orihime described her internment with Aizen and the Espadas. While she never mentioned Ulquiorra's name with any special regard, all of them could pick up her emotions whenever she spoke of the emerald eyed Espada, and Tatsuki swallowed when she saw Ichigo's pained looks whenever Orihime mentioned his name. It was obvious to her that Ichigo felt guilt for killing someone who had come to deeply affect the feelings of his adopted sister, even if the Shun Shun Rikka user was kidnapped by that same person in the first place.

The story is now being told from Orihime's perspective, as she begins to speak of the fights between Ichigo, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra, only stopping when her voice threatens to break as she reaches the part where Ulquiorra released his Segunda Etapa and killed Ichigo. Ichigo comforts his crying sisters, while Tatsuki hugs and comforts her crying best friend. Orihime barely manages to finish describing the battle, up to the point when Ichigo and Uryū had helplessly watched Ulquiorra disappear into ash as he and Orihime both reached out for each other's hands.
"I'm sorry Orihime." Ichigo apologizes to the sobbing healer, his twin sisters crying into his chest as well. "If...if I had only been stronger..."

"It's...It's not your fault Ichigo, I don't and won't blame you for what happened." She whispers through her tears. "We...we were all lied to from the beginning. Aizen and Yhwach are the only two I will ever blame for what happened to you, me, Chad and Uryū. I wouldn't be here now if you and the others hadn't come for me, so I am the one who should be saying sorry to you for being so weak and useless."

"You're not weak, Orihime." Everyone looks at Candice when she speaks up unexpectedly.

The green-haired Quincy shifts uncomfortably from the attention being directed her way, but she clears her throat before speaking again. "I don't know you that well, but the few things I do know about you all say the same thing Orihime-san. That you went willingly with your kidnapper in order to save your friends, not even knowing if you would live or die when you went with him. You were fully prepared to give your life for your friends. If anything, I would say that makes you one of the bravest people that anyone could ever hope to meet. Besides, you were only fifteen, and you had to make a choice that most adults might have balked at, but you didn't. So I don't think you or anyone else should say that you were weak, it's just...honestly, your youth was used against you by a master manipulator who deceived all of Soul Society, including that stuck up old bastard Yamamoto."

Orihime giggles wetly at that unexpected description of the Head Captain, and both Ichigo and Yoruichi chuckle in agreement as well. To everyone's surprise, Zangetsu suddenly appears and places his hand on Orihime's shoulder.

"See Hime, even the Quincy knows that you aren't weak. To be honest, he...honestly didn't think he could handle you getting hurt or worse, that's why King here did everything he could to keep you out of it, but when he was defeated and you went missing, it's like all our worst nightmares came true. Let's just say his inner-world was pretty fucked from that point onwards until I finished it."

Orihime's brown eyes stare into his golden irises. "Zangetsu. You..."

The Zanpakutō spirit folds his arms across his chest. "I killed Ulquiorra. I took him away from you, not Ichigo. He wasn't going to let you go, so when he put that hole through our chest, I took control away from Ichigo and from that piece of shit sealing me away, and fought him with most of our true powers, though I didn't even know about Mom's last bloodline until we
trained in the Dangai for our final fight against Aizen. If we had known the truth in the beginning, it might have never come to that. So, from this point onwards, you and Ichigo are not to ever blame yourselves for what I did to save both of you. Ulquiorra's death is on my hands alone, you got me Orihime Naberius?” His golden orbs glare resolutely at both teens.

The healer turns to him fully, and to everyone's surprise, his included, she wraps her arms around his waist and leans her head into his chest. "Promise me you will always keep him safe, Zangetsu-nii."

Ichigo can't help the smirk that appears on his face when Zangetsu's face shows shock and embarrassment at Orihime's action. Awkwardly patting her on the back, he gives her his promise. "Yeah, I'll keep him around for you guys to torment, especially when he and Rias beg….arrggghhh!"

Orihime looks at her empty arms before realizing that Ichigo must have yanked his spirit back into his inner-world, where he seems to be as well judging from the way his eyes have glazed over.

"Did I do something wrong?" Her innocent question causes the entire room to burst into laughter then.

Renji keeps wondering whether the man sitting across from him is really Captain Kuchiki or not. Since he greeted his Captain upon his arrival at the Squad Six barracks this morning, the man simply hasn't acted normal. Insisting he stay and have lunch with him, telling him to let the squad relax for the next couple of days from the normal training schedule, and the last thing that sets him most on edge, is when he was given the next two days off to enjoy himself. Having lots of questions but not daring to ask, Renji watches the hour to their usual departure time for the day drawing nearer, and he begins to fidget at his desk until his Captain clears his throat.

"Renji, I have something I wish to speak to you of, but only if I am sure you will be able to handle the information properly." Steel grey eyes shift to look into his eyes seriously.

"Captain?” He tenses when a barrier is erected around their office, sealing their conversation away from prying ears. Byakuya relaxes into his seat and looks at him.

"I know you have been patient with me in regards to Rukia, Renji... However, I wanted to wait
until now before I spoke to you about her assignment."

"Is…is she okay Captain?" The red-headed Lieutenant questions hesitantly, feeling emotions he hasn't felt in years rearing their ugly heads, the same emotions that he had when Rukia first left with the Kuchiki family all those years ago.

Byakuya pulls out a sealed envelope and slides it across the table to him, motioning for him to take it. When he goes to tear it open however, Byakuya holds out a hand to stop him.

"Leave it for the privacy of your own room Renji, what I wish to speak of is of more importance right now."

Hearing his Captain's voice leave little room for argument, Renji obediently tucks the letter into his Shihakushō and places his fists on his knees.

"Cap..."

"You may address me as Nii-sama in private Renji; you and Rukia will marry soon, so you should address me as such in private and during Kuchiki-only functions. During public events however, Captain or Kuchiki-sama must be used."

Renji feels his head spinning slightly at this announcement, and he feels a small nervous smile form on his face as he uses the honorific for the first time. "Of course…Nii-sama. But is she alright, Rukia and Momo both?"

A deep breath is taken, then those steel grey eyes focus on his face once more. A serious expression forms, and the next words he hears almost makes him lose all composure.

"Rukia is safe Renji: she and Momo are currently living with and training…Ichigo."

Renji is stunned. He can't believe it. His…his brother, his comrade, his friend... is alive. Finally, he manages to pull together enough thoughts to speak. "Carrot-top is alive?"

"Listen to me carefully Renji, there are many things I have to say." The Kuchiki head sits there and
waits until his Lieutenant is fully composed once more before speaking again.

"What I'm about to tell you may sound unbelievable, but every word is true..." Byakuya begins to tell Renji everything that has happened, from the very first Captain's meeting after Aizen's defeat, to when he left Isehara that morning. During his recounting, Byakuya can see the myriad of emotions that play across the face of his soon-to-be brother-in-law. Anger, confusion, shock, anger again, fury, sadness, hopelessness, and when he learns of his friend's true nature, utter denial at the news. However, when he delves into the new threat looming over Soul Society, he sees Renji gain his resolve once more, the same resolve that had led his Lieutenant to stand against him when Rukia was sentenced to death. Picking up his cup of tea, Byakuya takes a sip to wet his throat, then he gives his most important order to the man across from him.

"You will keep this to yourself, Lieutenant Renji Abarai. Captain Suì-Fēng and I will slowly include others at our pace, but if anything should happen, you are to make your way to Isehara and protect my sister, your fiancée, with your life if necessary. Is that understood?"

Still looking dazed by the news, Renji nonetheless pulls himself together to give his answer. "Yes Captain Kuchiki. Ichigo...will we...will I get to see him soon?" He really does want to see the teen who had given him the courage to save the woman he loves.

Byakuya only looks contemplative. "I honestly don't know Renji; his...power is already growing higher than when he defeated Aizen. I can only imagine what Head Captain Yamamoto and Central Forty-Six would do if they learn that he even has his memories back, not to mention the newest allies he has. I have spent the last few days around beings that, until a month ago, were nothing more than myth to me, whose powers are now revealed to be on par with ours. But after watching him train with the Naberius Clan's peerages, I came to this conclusion: we would be severely outmatched in numbers alone. You know that each squad is made up of just over two hundred and forty Shinigami, with the Gotei Thirteen's entire standing force composed of just around three thousand total enlisted troops. Renji, the majority of us have been in the dark for far too long as to the other deities that exist in the World of the Living and beyond. The Devils of the Underworld alone far outstrip us in regards to their dealings with the modern World of the Living. That experience has led them to gather large numbers of capable warriors to serve with them, far more than we have recruited from Rukongai in the past thousand years. Ichigo...has even taken his sister as a member of his peerage."

"His...sister? Yuzu or Karin?" The way his Captain had said 'sister' tugs at his memory for some reason, though he can't quite remember what.

"Neither. Orihime Shiba."

Renji's eyes go wide. "She...she became...a Devil?" He is very familiar with the burnt-orange-
haired teen who had saved countless lives in the aftermath of Aizen's rampage, her incredible healing skills allowing her to treat wounds that even Captain Unohana would have been unable to. It is not an exaggeration to say that she is one of the most highly regarded individuals known to Soul Society, even if Head Captain Yamamoto refuses to admit it. He now recalls that she has also been adopted by the Shiba Clan as one of their daughters, thanks to Ichigo's father, Shiba Isshin.

"Yes, she did, and as a result will never end up in Soul Society even when she dies. We have lost a great asset because of our leadership's blundering ways, Renji. Not only her, but Sado Yasutora and Tatsuki Arisawa have also become members of Ichigo's peerage, and the Quincy, Uryū Ishida, is allied fully with him. Do you see why I and Captain Sui-Fēng must now do what amounts to treason if this news reaches the wrong ears first? We must unify the Gotei Thirteen as a whole if we are to persuade the Head Captain that instigating any challenge against Ichigo Naberius could result in nothing short of the possible annihilation of Soul Society and the balance of all worlds."

Stunned again by his Captain's words, Renji Abarai sits in silence as he runs the names through his head: Chad, the gentle giant who had been Ichigo's best friend for years, whose skill and power is easily a match for any Lieutenant. The Quincy archer who had saved his life against the Octava Espada, fought alongside Ichigo on the rooftop of Las Noches, and had even defeated Captain Kurosaki one-on-one when they invaded Soul Society to save Rukia. He doesn't know much about Tatsuki Arisawa, but he does know that she is Orihime's best friend and Ichigo's childhood friend, so he isn't surprised if she has exceptional abilities as well.

Cursing inwardly to himself, he is once again furious at his inability to support the teen who has done so much for him, for all of them. He knew something had happened during their brief separation after Aizen's defeat, but he never found out what. After the war, Ichigo just seemed to disappear from everyone's surveillance, even the Twelfth had claimed they couldn't find him. To think that it was all a cover-up for Central's failed attempt to execute him, their paranoia causing them to betray the one who had saved them all. Now his four human friends, once allies of Soul Society, have turned their backs on them, leaving Karakura and joining with their true friend and his fiancée in the Underworld, joining him instead of...

"They don't trust us any more, do they Captain?" He finally says.

A sad nod of his future older brother-in-law's head confirms this statement. "Do you blame them Renji? We threatened to not only execute their friend, the savior of Soul Society, but also any who would give him aid, be they his friends or family. Why would they ever trust our leadership again? I personally believe they have done the right thing by removing themselves from under the oppressive yoke of Central Forty-Six. Central clearly does not have their best interests in mind, and unfortunately for us, I do not believe they have our best interests in mind either. Our only hope lies in the fact that Ichigo deems his friendship with you, Rukia and the others within the Gotei as too important for him to completely abandon; the few of you who are his friends here may well be the only hope we have of Ichigo standing at our side if we should... once again encounter a threat that proves too much for us to handle alone."
He deliberately does not mention the Quincy invasion. Barrier or not, he does not want to risk tipping off the invaders that their plans are known.

Silence reigns over the two men as Renji continues his internal debate over his divided loyalties, which doesn't last longer than a few seconds. "I will follow you wherever you lead me Nii-sama. To Hell and back if necessary." He states with full conviction.

The genuine smile that appears on Byakuya's face almost causes the red-headed Lieutenant to faint in shock. "It's actually a very pleasant place to visit Renji, I think you and Rukia might find it a nice place to…spend your honeymoon."

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Her back hits the bathroom wall as her lover's hands grip her bottom and hold her up, his lips capturing hers in a frenzied attempt to get as close as possible to her. Rias moans as Ichigo's tongue invades her mouth with precision, roaming expertly inside, he gently pulls her tongue into his mouth to allow his future mate to taste him. Her clothes begin to slide off her body even as she pulls his shirt away from his chest, leaving tell-tale bite marks down the front of his chest as her hands further down to his waist. Pulling off the last articles of fabric from his body, she takes his hands and guides him into the steaming bath water where she makes him sit down first before settling between his legs, letting out an appreciative moan as his hands rise up to cup her breasts.

"I miss seeing you at school Ichigo." She twines her fingers between stronger digits, pulling them down to rest on her waist.

Looking at their joined hands, he nuzzles her neck softly. "I'll be going back Monday, uncle and Merti say I have enough control that I won't affect anyone now. Tatsuki and the others should be okay to join me as well."

"That's the best news I've heard in a while! So…how did it go today?" She feels him tense slightly before his arms fold under her naked breasts and he rests his head against the crook of her neck.

"Not too shabby according to Yoruichii and Akiko, they and the others think two weeks training, tops."

"Two weeks? Really?" Her joy is clear when she hears the news.
"I got an added bonus today too." She feels his chest rumble with laughter then.

Twisting so she can see his eyes, she sees them twinkling in feral glee. "What did you do Ichigo?"

"I killed his hat." She blinks in confusion at the statement.

Scrunching her eyes, she mouths the words as she thinks about who….’Oh! His hat!'

"You are so evil! Why did you kill Geta-Bōshi's hat Ichigo!? I liked that hat!"

Ichigo gives her a horrified look. "What!? We all hate that damn hat, Yoruichi, Uryū, hell even Goat-Face tried to kill it once or twice! Every time he dips his eyes under the brim of it, you know he is going to drop some crazy ass shit on you! Nope, it had to die and pay the price for his years of tormenting the shit out of all of us Rias." He growls before finding a hidden spot to leave his own mark on, just under her neckline.

"I-Ichigo..." She pushes against him as he sucks the blood to the surface of her skin. "Dammit Ichigo, you better hope I can hide that in the locker room when I go back!"

He buzzes her ear as he nibbles at her earlobe. "My fiancée, my mark."

Deciding he has had enough fun for the moment, Ichigo pushes Rias gently forwards, grabbing the soap and beginning to lather the washcloth. "So, is Issei with Yoruichi tonight then?" He asks her curiously.

"Yes, he isn't looking forward to it, but he knows he has little choice if he wants to gain any strength of his own. It will be good for him anyways to train with someone of Yoruichi's caliber. Was your training as harsh?" She lifts her arms so he can begin to wash her sides.

"Worse I think. Kisuke tried to kill me for ten days straight while we waited for a window to leave and rescue Rukia. And then when I was under Sōkyoku Hill training for my Bankai...well, let's not relive those memories." She feels him shift uncomfortably under her.
Giggling, she shifts herself deliberately as well, causing him to groan out as a rigid warmth presses up against her lower back. "I believe that is the first time you ever saw a naked woman Ichigo. Your 'mother', how scandalous of you."

"I didn't want to Rias! She just sprung that shit on me when I wasn't ready!" His cheeks flame with embarrassment as he involuntarily recalls that memory.

Rias leans back lightly against him. "I know that, Ichigo, but you have to admit it is pretty funny the way she tells the story of your reactions from back then." His scowl forms, but his touches remain soft as he pushes her forward again and begins to wash her back.

"Yeah, yeah, make fun all you want." His breath on her neck warns her immediately of what is to come next. "Thankfully I've gotten over that little obstacle, haven't I?"

"Ichigo…” She squirms against him as his hands bring the washcloth to the front of her body.

"As much as I wish to continue this Rias, we do have to attend dinner on time tonight." He whispers to her with a smug smile on his face.

"You teasing bastard." She whines as he begins to clean her front of her body without diverting his hands unnecessarily.

Twenty minutes later, the two of them leave their room wearing normal clothes, as dinner is said to be very informal tonight. Making their way to the dining room, they wait for his sisters, his peerage, the two Arrancar and the two Shinigami to join them as well so they can walk together with them. The rest of the Clan and the visiting peerages are already waiting for them inside, those that don't have contracts to fulfill tonight at least. Among them are Tsubaki and Tomoe, who had come to discuss the upcoming matches with her Club's president. Sōna and Akeno had stayed behind to oversee the others at the Academy, as did Uryū, much to Ichigo's surprise, until Rukia told him quietly what had happened at lunch.

"It's okay now Rukia, we also had that talk today." He glances back at Orihime, seeing the burnt-orange-haired healer and Yuzu busy telling Tsubaki what had happened during the morning spars.

"So, what happened then?" She also glances at Orihime.
"Zangetsu took responsibility for it, told her to never blame herself for it again. I think she understands him, better." He can still feel Zangetsu radiating satisfaction from his inner-world, satisfaction that it is finally over with.

He sees Rukia frowning slightly then. "What's wrong Midget?"

Deftly avoiding the retaliatory shin strike, he grins as she huffs out her annoyance at him. "It's just that I have to work so hard to bring Sode No Shirayuki out into my world, yet Zangetsu just pops out here whenever he feels like it...Do you know how maddening that is to me Ichigo?"

Shrugging his shoulder, Ichigo tells her he honestly can't answer her question, then his Zanpakutō spirit surprises them by popping out without warning. "Well, if you want, I can help you with that Shortness."

He too dodges Rukia's retaliatory kick with a smirk, then he holds her in place by gripping the top of her head as she flails ineffectively at him. Laughing at the furious Lieutenant, his laughter stops when he feels his feet beginning to freeze, Sode No Shirayuki emerging from Rukia's inner-world to protect her wielder.

"Release Rukia-sama at once Zangetsu, or I will freeze that which most men hold to be of the utmost importance." Ichigo, Grimmjow and Chad wisely back away at those words.

Releasing Rukia and holding up his hands as he backs away as well, Zangetsu smirks as he speaks to the icy Zanpakutō spirit. "No harm, Shirayuki, no harm, but look at who is out."

Shinigami and Zanpakutō both then realize that Sode No Shirayuki is indeed out of Rukia's inner-world with no effort on her wielder's part. The icy spirit looks around herself in stunned fashion before turning her gaze on the Hollowfied Zanpakutō standing next to his own wielder, his smug expression saying it all.

"How did you do this Zangetsu?" She demands of him.

"Easy, because King and Shortness are so close to each other, I can help ease your ability to come outside. I figure I can do the same for the baboon and a few others, but not a lot of them because we are only acquaintances, not friends; as far as I can tell, only with those he feels close to, am I able to have some kind of effect. I guess it's another perk due to his Devil
Rukia stares at Ichigo and Zangetsu with both amazement and giddiness then; turning to her own spirit she asks one question. "Can this help me gain my Bankai, Sode No Shirayuki?"

Frowning as she stands there to think, Sode No Shirayuki looks first at her wielder and then to her fellow Zanpakutō spirit; seeing the smiling white face of Zangetsu, she answers Rukia truthfully.

"While not ideal Rukia-sama, it…will go a long way in helping you train. Don't think for one second however I will go easy on you because of this, it just means you will need to work that much harder to maintain my power when you use it. As for you, menace, I will speak to you right now. Follow me." She glides away to an open balcony, with Zangetsu clasping his hands behind his back and following her.

"Stop looking at her ass Zangetsu!" Rukia suddenly shouts out, causing the male spirit to stumble and glare back at her.

The Squad Thirteen Lieutenant then turns and jabs her orange headed friend in the chest while growling to him. "He better not touch her inappropriately Ichigo, or else!"

"Hey, she already threatened to freeze his…" Ichigo stops when he remembers who is behind him. "Well you know what I mean. And he wouldn't ever touch her like that dammit!"

"Better not!"

"Come on you two, we're all hungry and listening to you two squabble is pissing me off." Grimmjow says as he walks by the Devil and Shinigami, the others following behind him wordlessly.

Rukia glares once more at Ichigo before making her way into the dining room as well. Rias chuckles as she takes his arm and pushes him forward. "We both know he wouldn't do that Ichigo."

"I wouldn't put it past Zangetsu to at least get Shirayuki all wound up though. You have to remember Rukia's and my relationship; it's built on annoying the shit out of each other." He ends it with a smile as he thinks about those days.
Entering the room, the couple make their way to the low table where the Elves are already sitting with Candice, the food spread out before them just waiting to be eaten. Helping Rias to her chair first, he plops into his spot next to Kimi and pours himself a glass of juice to drink. As he relaxes in his seat, he hears the conversations around him are centering on the spars from this mid-morning and several anecdotal stories of his performance during those fights. He shakes his head ruefully as soft laughter fills the air, mostly at his expense. Focusing back on his own table, he listens to Merti and Candice as they explain to Rias how Ichigo had done fairly well for his first time using his grandmother's Quincy magic, even commending his skill at killing a certain object. Her elbow hits him hard when she heard him snorting in amusement.

Candice then asks where Uryū is, to which Rias tells her that he is staying with Akeno and the others tonight after he had shown an interest in how contracts are made and maintained by the Devils. When Candice asks if she can observe for one night as well, Rias replies that she has no problem with that, unless of course Lord Amyntas has objections to her request. Both turn to look at Ichigo then, and he promises to bring it up when he and his uncle sit down next to discuss his growing involvement with the Clan.

Issei's training is the next topic, and he finds himself having to assure his girlfriend that her Pawn will be fine, maybe sore in the mornings, but otherwise he’ll be in good shape. He does hint however that as Issei gets better, things will literally heat up in his sessions with the Shihōin princess if she finds him to be dogging it whatsoever. When she presses him for details, he lets slip that Bala and Byakurai aren't out of the question; again, his ribs earn an elbow and a fierce glare for how jovial and unconcerned his answer is. He sends a finger up her spine to mollify her unhappiness as he leans over to grab a plate of fruit and places it between them; this earns him a kiss on his cheek. As he smiles at her, he feels a brief spike of worry come from his Zanpakutō's emotions, but after that they are calm; he doesn't find it too surprising, considering how alike both he and his Zanpakutō spirit are when it comes to Rukia. Glancing at where he knows Zangetsu is, he wonders what the two spirits are talking about.

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Golden eyes watch the pale skin of the other Zanpakutō spirit, her beautiful face shifting through several emotions denoting her unrest at being out of her natural element. Sensing that she will not break the silence, he does so for her.

"She'll be fine."

With a light huff, Sode No Shirayuki turns to him with a semi-annoyed glare on her features before her shoulders sag. "My Bankai is a formidable weapon Zangetsu, I...worry she'll be unable to survive its effects when she uses it."
Zangetsu shrugs at her. "Tell me what it does, and I'll tell you what I think; it's the best I can do for ya Princess."

Sode No Shirayuki doesn't answer him at first. He watches as her pale hands grab the railing she is standing in front of, frost coating the stone as she looks away from him and out into the distance. When she finally begins to speak, he finds himself wondering what she is so worried about, until she tells him the full details of her power. He steps closer to her as she delves deeper into how truly frightening her power is and the effects it will have on her wielder when she tries to use it. Unable to help himself, he finds himself grasping the same railing that she is holding, dark Reiatsu pulsing as he leans forward, his brow furrowed in thought. He can't even contemplate the cost of that power, a cost that is...unimaginable to him. Glancing at the lavender eyes now studying him, he shifts his gaze until he is no longer facing the spirit he had first briefly touched when Rukia awoke Ichigo's powers with her own.

"King won't like that Shirayuki, not one bit. Best we keep that from them until she actually earns the right to use your power. When she does, I promise you, we will find a way to help her." His grip slowly breaks the stone under his hand in his worry.

"Zangetsu, calm yourself." His back stiffens when he hears Imp's voice, but a quick glance around tells him that she is nowhere near him.

Seeing that the icy Zanpakutō spirit is now lost in thought, he quickly sends his thoughts inwards through his connection with Ichigo. "How the hell are you doing that Imp? I thought you only existed in Ichigo's inner-world!"

She scoffs at him. "Dummy, if you had been paying any attention whatsoever, you would have realized by now that only you can see or hear me, which means I can always speak to you whether you are here or out there. Jeez, you sure you didn't crack your own skull this morning too?" She sends him a feeling of laughter as well.

"Damn crazy kid."

"Takes one to know one Zangetsu, remember that." Her giggles slowly fade away in his mind.

"Zangetsu are you alright?" A hand lightly touching his shoulder brings him back to the present, and he realizes the stone railing is now turning to dust under his fisted hands.
"Sorry Princess, just thinking to myself."

Sode No Shirayuki bows her head slightly to him as she speaks. "She missed him very much you know, Zangetsu. Not knowing what had happened to him weighed heavily on her mind for many nights. It didn't help that Byakuya-sama and Senbonzakura-sama both knew of his exile and the reason for his sentence, but were unable to include us in that secret. Even though she understands now and they have grown closer as siblings should, we can't help but feel some anger at what Byakuya-sama was forced to agree to at that meeting."

Waving his hand, he leans forward and smirks at his fellow spirit. "It worked out in the end for us both Shirayuki, so don't let it bother you."

'I find myself saying that a lot lately.' He finds himself thinking.

The two stand silently together until a voice calls out to them. "Oi, Zangetsu, you staying or you want to help me lob some Bala at Issei tonight?"

Looking over his shoulder, Zangetsu cocks his head to his companion. "Think I'll stay a bit longer if ya don't mind Ichigo."

"Sure, then I'll see you later Zangetsu, Sode No Shirayuki."

"Ichigo." She gives Zangetsu's wielder a polite nod as he walks away, noting a happy smirk on his face as he does so.

"He's going to enjoy himself, isn't he Zangetsu?"

"Count on it."

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Suì-Fēng has to do everything in her power to keep herself from snapping the pen in her hand as she feels the approaching Reiatsu of the last person she wishes to speak to. Her restraint fails when the door to her office is abruptly and violently slammed open, and the figure of Chiyoko Shihōin strides in without so much as an ‘excuse me’ or a verbal acknowledgement of Suì-Fēng’s status as a Captain of the Gotei Thirteen. Putting aside her ruined pen, the Squad Two Captain narrows her eyes at the intruder who is walking about her office and looking disdainfully over the contents that adorn her private space. The offending party then stops in front of her desk and sits down without an invite.

"Tell me where she is, Shaolin Fon. Where is Yoruichi Shihōin?"

The Squad Two Captain raises her eyebrow in the most expressionless way possible as she looks at this pathetic version of her mentor. Using every skill at her disposal to keep her voice even, she answers the woman with a few choice remarks.

"You enter my office unannounced, demand to know where your former Clanswoman is, and think for one second I have any obligation to answer your demands, Shihōin-san? Tell me first, have you forgotten your manners when addressing a superior officer of the Gotei Thirteen? Or have you forgotten that addressing the head of a Clan by her formal name without asking her permission first can be considered an insult to the offended Clan?"

Bright yellow eyes narrow at the unexpected hostility coming from the woman sitting across from her; she had expected the Squad Two Captain to obey her every demand since the Fon Clan was subservient to the Shihōin Clan, and Shaolin Fon was merely an inferior replacement for that exiled traitor of the Shihōin clan. Instead, she remembers too late that Captains of the Gotei Thirteen are not subordinate to the authority of the Four Great Houses. Worse still, Shaolin Fon, or Suì-Fēng as she is now known, had recently become the Head of the Fon Clan, putting her above the authority of all but the Head of the Shihōin Clan, whose leader has been deemed to young by the Elders. The fact that Squad Two is currently in Shaolin Fon’s hands also means that the Fon Clan have a powerful tool to use against the Shihōin Clan if forced into a corner, and she currently lacks the authority to wrest that control away from them. Scowling inwardly at the fact that none of her advisors had put these facts together and warned her of the possible threat, she decides that perhaps a softening of her position will ease tensions and allow her to gain her the answers she seeks, even if her gut churns at having to approach this Fon Clan member with anything resembling humility.

"Forgive me Captain Suì-Fēng, but it has been a while since I have actively served with the Gotei Thirteen, many of their customs have since slipped my mind. As for the latter, my congratulations on your ascension to Fon Clan Head, I had not received word of it and therefore meant no disrespect."

Black eyes stare coolly into the lying yellow eyes across from her. "Be that as it may, Shihōin-san,
it would be wise for you not to forget them the next time you wish to address me in person. Even
for nobles, the punishments can be…quite severe." She easily spots the anger that glints in those
cold yellow eyes. "Now to answer your question: no, I don't know where she is right now. It is not
a matter for the Gotei Thirteen to track down someone who has decided to leave their clan
voluntarily, especially if they are also acknowledged as an exile from Soul Society. If you have
nothing else…" A hand slapping down her desk cuts her off.

"You do realize who we are talking about, 'Captain'!? We are talking about a woman who knows
every one of the Onmitsukidō secrets as well as every secret of the Shihōin and Fon Clans! Yet
you dare sit there and tell me that it is not any of your concern!? Maybe we should ask the Head
Captain what his opinion might be, 'Captain Sui-Fēng'!!"

Said Captain simply looks her dead in the eye. "Go ahead Shihōin-san, but I'll tell you now what
Head Captain Yamamoto will do. He will do nothing. He will tell you that it is an internal matter
of the Shihōin Clan and we of the Gotei Thirteen do not interfere with matters of the Four Great
Clans. He will tell you that Yoruichi Shihōin has been exiled from Soul Society, by her own clan
no less, therefore is none of our concern unless she makes herself our concern. Since that is the
case here Shihōin-san, we of the Gotei Thirteen have no obligation to keep an eye on Yoruichi
Shihōin's whereabouts."

Ignoring the fact that Chiyoko is nearly seething with rage, Sui-Fēng continues on blandly. "As for
you, Shihōin-san, I suggest you leave my office and do not show up here without an appointment
ever again, otherwise I will have little choice but to arrest you for trespassing. After all, you are not
an active member of the Gotei Thirteen, and I highly doubt you have orders to enter this restricted
area; the Onmitsukidō do have secrets that are not meant for the eyes of outsiders like yourself."
She leans forward and smirks slightly. "Besides, I would think you have more things to worry
about than the whereabouts of an exile. That little scandal of yours back then with the Kuchiki
Clan? I'm sure Captain Byakuya would be interested in any facts the Onmitsukidō can dig up...

Keeping her dispassionate gaze firmly locked on her uninvited guest, Sui-Fēng can't help but gloat
inwardly as she watches Chiyoko Shihōin's face grow redder and redder with fury. Standing
quickly, the Shihōin glares down at her, but says nothing as she finally stalks out of the office,
slamming the door shut behind her. Waiting for a full five minutes as she tracks the receding
Reiatsu, Sui-Fēng pulls out her newest phone and sends off three text messages to the three
individuals who need to know of this intrusion. Two minutes later, there are responds from all
three of them, asking that she keep an eye out for any further activity. Smiling, she deletes their
replies and sets about finishing off her backlog of paperwork.

'Try to capture Lady Yoruichi on my watch? Bite me bitch.'

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The Gremory Heir can't help but feel sorry for the newest member of her peerage as he is pushed and pushed by the cajoling woman who runs beside him, taunting him whenever he seems to be slowing down and demanding to know if he's all talk. Sweat pours off the teen's face and body as he keeps on running; the backpack on him must be weighing close to forty-five kilograms by now if her calculations are correct. Still, she has to give him credit; despite his obvious exhaustion, he is still continuing to run, unwilling to give up despite the verbal abuse he is getting from his audience, along with blasts of Sho that kick up dust plumes near his feet whenever he seems to be slowing down. Rias's eyes had twitched more than once at the mocking given to her Pawn by her lover, and her mood is now reflected by the unusually quiet teen standing next to her, his arms wrapped firmly about his waist to keep her elbows from striking him after he had openly laughed at her Pawn's suffering. However, she can still see an open smirk on his face, and his eyes reflect his inner-Hollow's sadistic glee as they shine a bright golden sheen once in a while.

"It's not funny Ichigo, Zangetsu. He isn't like you two." She tells them once again with a scowl on her face.

"Oh, come on Queen. He deserves it after telling Okaa-san to 'bring it on'. " Zangetsu retorts. "Only an idiot challenges the Goddess of Flash to a race, especially one as useless and slow as a rock as he is! Even worse, he made that bet with her! Nope, he deserves every bit of his punishment today. Really, if he won, he actually thinks he can…"

"Stop. I get it Zangetsu. No…need to remind me of those absurd terms again." Rias is sorely tempted to face-palm at this point.

"Told ya he was an idiot Rias." Ichigo says without an ounce of pity for the Pawn as he continues to enjoy the scene before him.

Shaking her head in resignation, she has no choice but to agree with him. "I know Ichigo, but please keep the glee out of your voice when you say so, and you too Zangetsu if you can."

The white clone however is not one to be dissuaded by polite requests as he continues to give 'encouragement' to the Sacred Gear holder. "Come on Issei-kun, you only got ten kilometers to go yet. Maybe if you bet her a dip in the hot springs, you'll find what you really need to pick up the pace!"

Issei manages to shout at him through his heavy pants. "Shu…shut up Zangetsu-san! You're not helping! OWWWWW! What was that for Sensei!?"
Yoruichi smirks at him after whacking his head. "That's for even thinking it! Now, less talking, more running, move your ass Issei-kun! And just for that, I'm adding another five kilograms!"

They see the backpack sag just a bit more and Issei nearly stumble at the sudden weight increase. But after a misstep or two, they see him manage to return to the same steady pace as before, which is an encouraging sign after only a few days of running around with a weighted pack. Of course, this is possibly helped by the former Onmitsukidō Commander prodding his every move, questioning his resolve, and letting him know that if he truly ever does form a harem, he'd better be in shape to keep up with his husbandly duties and protect them.

Rias's blue eyes swing to the two men standing next to her, noting once again that Zangetsu's black sclera are studying her Pawn's left arm intently each time he runs past them. She knows a conversation she can't hear is being exchanged between the spirit and his wielder, since every now and then one or the other would suddenly make a comment in regards to Issei's arm and the power supposedly residing in it. Her boyfriend's brown orbs are also studying Issei's arm, and they narrow expectantly whenever Issei stumbles or seems to be on the cusp of collapsing. Rias also notices an unspoken conversation taking place between Ichigo and Yoruichi as the purple-haired werecat passes by them, a look or nod as well as a glance towards Issei's arm is the only thing she can make out from their conversation however.

'What does he have in his arm?' Rias can't help but wonder to herself.

"Stop." Ichigo suddenly calls out when Issei passes by them once again.

Walking up to the panting and doubled over teen Devil, Ichigo pulls out a bokken from the bag he had brought with him. Tossing the wooden blade to the left side of the younger teen, he motions for him to pick it up, which greatly confuses Rias.

"Ichigo?"

"Don't worry, it's not what you think. Issei, time for an experiment: Zangetsu is going to attack you, I just want you to defend, nothing more."

"What!? Attack me!" The Pawn's eyes grow wide as Zangetsu pulls out his own bokken from the bag and begins stalking towards him.
"Oi! Better pick it up Issei-kun, NOW!" Zangetsu jumps high up into the air, raising the wooden sword over his head and slashing as he descends downwards.

"FUCK!" Ichigo, Rias, and Yoruichi watch with baited breath as the Pawn hurriedly grabs the sword with his left hand and moves to block the feral looking Zanpakutō spirit with a look of terror.

Just as the two swords touch, an explosion of energy bursts forth from Issei's left hand: the hand that is gripping his bokken. No one moves or says a word as they wait for the dust to clear from around the two duelists. When it does, Ichigo shows no surprise, and neither does Yoruichi as they both walk up to the heavily shaking Issei, Zangetsu stepping back with his bokken sitting across his shoulders to hold up both his arms.

"Seems you were right Ichigo, a bit of true danger and that thing responded. 'Bout time too, I was dying to see it." The Zanpakutō spirit mentions offhandedly.

"You knew? You knew it would respond to a threat against him Ichigo?" Rias begins stewing inside as she hurries to catch up to her orange-haired fiancé, trying to meet his eyes as she demands an answer from him.

"Not really, just a theory, but Yoruichi had noticed yesterday that whenever Issei was running, now and then strange spikes in his energy would boost his reserves whenever he was in danger of falling behind or getting injured. So, we took a chance to see if a sudden attack from Zangetsu when he was already exhausted would force it out finally, and yes, it did." Ichigo stops and pulls up Issei's left arm to study the strange armor that now encases it.

Covering her Pawn's arm is a reddish metal gauntlet, segmented into overlapping triangle plates that end in sharp edges to surround a green gem in a circular square pattern. Along the edges of his arm are successfully larger and larger fin-like edged blades, three spike-like protrusions sticking well beyond his elbow. Ichigo touches the gem briefly and pulls his hand back when he feels a presence in the gem rejecting him; looking closer at it, he swears he feels a set of eyes glaring back at him before the armor disappears back under the Pawn's skin.

"Well, I guess we'll have to work on you more before you can keep it active." Yoruichi says as she pokes the spot on Issei's hand that the gem had centered on in the gauntlet.

Looking at the still shocked and exhausted Issei, Ichigo feels that the Pawn has had enough for one night and lets him go. Seeing that Issei is in no condition to leave the Estate, he tells him to call home and inform his parents that he is staying with some friends for the night. Before Issei has a chance to express any gratitude, Zangetsu gleefully reminds him that tomorrow is an off day from
the Academy, so they would be spending most of the day training, especially training his stamina. Head hanging lowly at that, Issei makes his way towards the exit from the training dimension, the backpack slipping from his shoulders and landing on the ground with a dull thud. Four sets of eyes watch him leave before Yoruichi speaks up.

"Well, I'm off to take a nice bath, see ya tomorrow morning kiddies." She walks away, waving casually as she does so.

Exchanging looks with Rias and Ichigo, Zangetsu simply shrugs his shoulders and disappears back into Ichigo's inner-world, leaving the two Devils alone. Rias looks at Ichigo, who sees her expression and immediately begins to back away slowly, not realizing the grin that forms on his face when he sees the small but building anger burning in her eyes.

"Now Rias, I had to make sure that thing in his arm didn't get a hint, and Zangetsu can be pretty bloodthirsty even in a spar, so this was the best way...Don't be mad, please?" He keeps backing away, but the red aura that is building up behind her leaves him in no doubt that he isn't getting out of this unscathed.

Dodging the first balls of destructive energy that are sent his way, Ichigo begins laughing as he continues to run and dodge Rias's attacks, not even attempting to defend himself against her as he lets her vent her frustrations out on him.

"You could've told me something Ichigo! I...I thought Zangetsu was really going to hurt him! I swear to...I'm going to beat your ass black and blue! Stop moving and take your punish...Don't you dare give me that look mister! Ichiiigggooo! ! !"

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Kimi and Nia both sit in the spa listening to the younger Naberius members talk about their lessons, thinking about the improvements they have personally witnessed. Yuzu has gotten her teleportation spell down fairly quickly, while Karin has shown vast improvements with her flying. But it is their older adopted sister that is the star pupil: not only have Orihime's teleportation and flying skills become scarily impressive, but her fairies have also been the biggest shock with regards to her increased powers. They had already witnessed her healing shields becoming more versatile, but it turns out her defensive and offensive shields have also doubled in strength and power. From their tests, Tsubaki's bladed disc-shield can slice through their strongest defensive barriers and shields like a hot knife would slice through butter, while her defensive three-point shield formed by Lily, Hinagiku and Baigon can withstand Chad's El Directo without flinching.
Compared to her, Tatsuki is still trying to find out what her powers are; the only thing she has noted so far is the quadruple increase in physical strength that is mostly evident when she spars against Daiki and Yoruichi. Her Reiatsu has also yet to yield its secrets to her, but no one is really worried, they all believe it is just a matter of time before her power reveals itself.

Just like Orihime, Chad's powers have already been established, and his new armor isn't that different from his original powers. Despite its appearance, it is surprisingly lightweight and durable while covering all of his vital organs, granting him significant defense without a corresponding loss of agility when sparring against the more experienced members of the Naberius peerages. Hanako has become his most common sparring partner, the hybrid Yōkai's speed and flexible fighting style while using her Ki aura-based fire attacks forcing him to learn how to defend, redirect and then counter attack just as swiftly and reflexively with his 'Right Arm of the Giant' and 'Left Arm of the Devil' whenever any openings would appear. He had even learnt to incorporate his wings into his attack patterns, using them for short bursts of speed to enhance his attacks or dodge attacks, or simply throwing up a cloud of dust to obscure his movements. In any case, it is obvious that Chad is becoming a formidable fighter, and the twins are actually looking forward to seeing how far he can go.

They aren't too sure of Uryū's skills, since the Quincy archer only trains with Serafall Leviathan and Candice Catnipp, the latter only when she isn't training with Ichigo and the older Elves as well.

The sound of doors sliding open announces the arrival of the exiled Shihōin princess as she tosses her yukata into a nearby bin and walks over to join them. As she approaches the hot spring, she adds her towel to the rest of the towels that are hanging near the edge of the hot springs, and she slowly eases herself into the steaming water with a tired sigh. The teens and preteens wait for her to settle in before asking her if she is alright.

"I'm okay, just haven't run that much in years. Training you guys is really proving useful, even if Rias's new Pawn is severely out of shape compared to the rest of ya. Looking at it that way, he's gotta be the worst student I have ever agreed to take on..." She muses half-heartedly to herself.

"Worse than Ichi-nii, Yoruichi?" Yuzu says with a giggle, remembering some of the stories the werecat had told her.

"Well, your brother's problem was that he had no fear of rushing headlong into battle, always acting cocky and getting creamed by stronger opponents, then having to deal with his doubts and fears while still in battle, but somehow always managing to pull through, though barely in some cases. Issei on the other hand has none of those traits, he's led a normal human life so far, but he's fairly determined and hardworking if somewhat stubborn. His biggest problem is still…"

"I don't think Zu and Karin need to know about that Yoruichi." Tatsuki quickly interrupts her, the
black-haired teen's eyebrows twitching with annoyance.

Karin smirks as she looks at the older teen. "You mean about Issei's porn habit? I already know about it...I overheard Yuuto and Loup Garou talking about it yesterday in the library when they were studying. They didn't know I was there, I was hiding from Merti and they didn't see me."

"So you were hiding! I knew it! You left me alone with those...those pins and needles all by myself Karin! How could you!?" Her twin cries out in disbelief.

Giving her sister a sheepish look, the dark-haired twin hugs her in apology. "Sorry Yuzu, but really, how many more clothes do we need to try on and have altered? Uncle Amyntas has already bought us enough clothes to fill three wardrobes, if I have to stand for one more hour of kimonos and yukatas and evening gowns I am going...to...go...nuts!"

"Karin."

Snapping her head to the purple-haired goddess who has a washcloth laid over her eyes, she sees Yoruichi lift the washcloth to regard her with one golden eye.

"How exactly did you hide from Merti?"

Karin shrugs. "Ah, well...I just...hid my Reiatsu and my magic...in...my...chains..."

The older twin's voice trails off when she sees both Nia and Kimi staring at her with shock in their eyes, the Elfin twins looking like their thought processes have just crashed. Yoruichi removes her washcloth and glances at the two Elves, then turns to her fully and asks her to explain what she has just said.

"I...I heard Ichigo telling Geta-Bōshi how he used his chains to hide his powers, so I just...imagined myself doing the same thing, and guess what...it worked." She starts to look worried. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no, you did nothing wrong Karin." Kimi recovers enough from her shock to tell her. "Hiding is fine, being able to hide from Aunt Merti is really good actually, but when you said you hid your powers in your chains, does that mean you have unlocked your Hell Chains already?"
Karin sends a mental command to her Hell Chains, and the sounds of metal on metal can be heard coming from behind the black-haired twin; after a moment, two sets of Hell Chains come creeping out hesitantly, but they do move in concert with Karin's mental commands. Yuzu begins clapping as she congratulates her sister on having gained the use of her Hell Chains, which leads to Tatsuki asking the fair-haired twin if she has tried unlocking hers yet.

"Unlocking mine? Why would I have them Suki-nee?"

Yoruichi leans forward and gestures towards Karin. "Well Yuzu, we figure that if Ichigo and now Karin have them, then you should have them too. Just imagine them in your head and if you have them, they should form relatively easy. Everything else seems to come easily to you too."

Blushing at the compliment, Yuzu closes her eyes and begins to breathe lightly, her eyes shifting under her eyelids as she concentrates. At first nothing seems to happen, but a buildup in her magic alerts them to something happening, then the sounds of metal on metal can be heard coming from behind Yuzu, a single set of Hell Chains slowly appearing over her shoulders. Clapping and congratulations sound out from those in the pool as the fair-haired twin opens her eyes with a wide smile, holding her hand out for one of her chains to gently place itself in the palm of her hand. Looking down at the sentient links and stroking them carefully, Yuzu glances at her sister and smiles with joy.

"I guess we both have them Karin." The smirk that forms on Karin's face tells her that her twin is just as proud of her achievement as she is.

"Just think of what we can do now to Goat-Face when he tries and keeps shit from us again." Karin suddenly blurts out as she makes her chains wiggle threateningly.

Yuzu face-palms as the other occupants of the hot spring burst into laughter, the youngest Kurosaki sibling admonishing her sister for being too much like their older brother. Karin doesn't dispute her words at all, and even rubs her hands in glee as she ponders out loud the things she can do with them, only for Kimi to stop her with warnings that if Akiko or Aisling catch them using their Hell Chains for mischief, their punishments will be less than pleasant. When pressed for details, both Elves try to change the topic, but Orihime and Tatsuki quickly figure out why they would know, and they begin laughing at them. Nia's face reddens, and she mutters unhappily about nine-tailed foxes overreacting over chains that ripped up her dresses by accident.

"How did that even happen?" Tatsuki finally questions the Elf after she gets her laughter under control.
Nia sighs out miserably. "I was just taught how to form the tips needed to perform precision movement of objects with my chains, and I was so excited that I went to see Akiko to ask for some pointers. When I got to her room, no one was there, so I decided to wait for her to come back. But I saw her open closet and, well, one thing lead to another and I accidentally tripped and fell and tried to catch myself, but my chains lashed out in my panic and they might have chain sawed their way through her closet by accident…"

As the girls collectively wince at that disaster, a new voice speaks up with amusement. "And do you remember how red I tanned your little behind when I found out after I caught you running away and you tried to play the innocent one with me?" The Queen of Amyntas's peerage, Akiko Kimura says as she slides the door open and walks over to join the growing crowd of relaxing females.

Nia blushes in embarrassment. "Yes, I do Akiko." She sees the nine-tailed Kitsune smirk.

After hanging her towel on the rack and stepping into the steaming water, Akiko bids the Devil maid watching over them to bring her a bottle of sake as well as two sake dishes for herself and Yoruichi. Settling down in the water, she looks over at the youngest Naberius twins, especially at their newly birthed Hell Chains, and she narrows her eyes when she speaks to them.

"Yuzu, Karin. Both of you will have to start training with me starting tomorrow on how to use your Hell Chains properly. I expect you to listen and obey my every command during the time we will spend training, as the Hell Chains are your bloodline, but they are also very powerful and dangerous to yourself and to others if they are not used as they are meant to be used. After all, they are the instruments that seal the sinners to their fates within the Skeleton Tower, and that is not something to play around with."

"They what?" Karin says in awe.

Akiko smiles as she elaborates. "Hell Chains are what seals the souls of the sinners to their fate within the Skeleton Tower, Karin. Every soul in there has Hell Chains binding them, but some still manage to slip their yokes even then; someday in the future, you, Yuzu, and every member of Ichigo's peerage will have to hunt them down and send them back to finish their sentence in the Tower. Until the Tower itself deems them purified of their crimes, the Damned must suffer for their sins."

No one speaks for a while, the younger Devils feeling uneasy with their future role, and the older Devils and adults already knowing of it. Finally, the burnt-orange-haired healer asks them when she will get her own Hell Chains.
"That will depend on Amyntas or Ichigo, Orihime. If and when they think you are ready for them, you will have to undergo a ceremony that fuses the magic and blood of the Naberius clan into your body and soul. It is an extremely long and painful ceremony, but fear not, there is no risk of failure. It is considered the highest honor for any peerage member to receive their own Hell Chains; it symbolizes your final step in becoming a true blooded member of the Naberius Clan, with a blood link to the Tower and the power it holds."

"So how come me and Karin already have ours, Akiko-san?" The lighter-haired twin asks the Kyuuubi as her chains fade back into her body.

"Because of your grandfather Yuzu, you have always been Naberius by blood; sealed, yes, but Naberius since your birth, just like your brother Ichigo…and perhaps Zangetsu."

"What do you mean Zangetsu, Akiko-san?" The bewildered Tatsuki asks her inquiringly.

Sipping her sake, the Kyuuubi closes her eyes and gathers her thoughts. "Zangetsu is unlike anything I have ever seen in my life, Tatsuki. He is a spirit born of Ichigo's soul, yet he is also born from Masaki-sama; if anything, he could have been Ichigo's twin, had the circumstances been right. It is also he who first gained the power and knowledge to use Hell Chains through Ichigo's body, I thought maybe it was because of him being Ichigo's Zanpakutō spirit, but I'm not so sure now."

Yoruichi closes her eyes as she sips her own sake, considering the things that the other woman had just said. It all makes a surprising amount of sense to her suddenly. Twins do run in the recent history of the Kurosaki family: Merti once told her that Kiku's father had a twin brother who died not long after they were born due to complications from being born too premature, with her father only surviving said complications by the skin of his teeth. Isshin had an older twin brother who died shortly after Ganju's birth. Yuzu and Karin don't need to be mentioned, and she has always considered it somewhat eerie how Zangetsu is Ichigo's exact copy other than his lack of color; unlike most other Zanpakutō she has seen, including her own Soul Slayer he doesn't seem to have his own unique appearance.

Even the Zanpakutō spirits of the other Vizards do not resemble their wielders in appearance, and when Hollowfied, they simply look like their former selves with masks. She has always dismissed Zangetsu's appearance as a quirk caused by him growing up as Ichigo's Hollow from birth, but perhaps there is truly something more to it than that? Now that a Devil has pointed out the possibility of twins, she finds herself noticing all the clues that support this theory, clues that she and even Kisuke have noticed before, but had unconsciously ignored since they did not have a proper theory to work with.
A hand gently shakes the werecat, and her eyes spring open and focus back on the world around her; she sees Orihime looking at her with worried eyes.

"Sorry, I drifted there, is something wrong Orihime?"

"No, we have been talking for the last five minutes, but you seemed to be out of it. So we got worried."

Patting Orihime on the hand, Yoruichi grins as she looks into the healer's brown eyes. "Just thinking of other uses for those chains Hime, I'm sure Akiko and the other married Devils will be glad to show you and Tatsuki the ropes when it comes time for you two to learn."

"YORUICHI! THERE ARE YOUNG LADIES STILL PRESENT!" Only the werecat's quick reflexes prevent her from spilling her sake when a fuming Tatsuki dives at her. A hurriedly cast Sai prevents the martial artist from trying again, and Yoruichi teases her with a wink.

"What wrong's with what I said Suki-chan? I was just saying that for you and Hime."

"LIAR!"

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In a dark hallway located deep underground, a man reads the report obtained from the woman standing in the shadows. After a few moments, he adds a Kidō mark to the scroll and rolls it back up, handing it back to the woman's outstretched hand.

"Your suspicions merit investigating. The Gotei Thirteen seems to be shifting their allegiance from us to those of outsiders and former exiles; this cannot be allowed to continue. My seal will give you authority to investigate those whose recent activities have become questionable. Find out how far it extends beyond the two Lieutenants, Chiyoko Shihōin."

Cold yellow eyes gleam triumphantly. "It will be my pleasure, Iwao Kuchiki."

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“It will be my pleasure, Iwao Kuchiki.”

Chiyoko Shihōin

"Good morning Ichigo." His girlfriend says to him as she shuts off their alarm clock.

Yawning as he sits up, he leans over to kiss her on the cheek. "Morning…it's good to be back home.”
"Well…now that you are home, how about we start the morning off right?" She winks at him as she gets up and sways her hips before walking towards the bathroom.

"Couldn't agree more." He smiles as he too gets to his feet.

Stretching, the Naberius Devil makes his way to their bathroom after his girlfriend to begin the first day of his return to school with his memories restored and having his family and friends living with them. Ichigo's peerage and his sisters took rooms close to his and Rias's, while the new staff members and Ichigo's household took rooms in the next hallway. Sirzechs and Amyntas agreed to split the cost of the dual household, with the Gremory Clan having overall say in most matters. Not that anyone really argued, and for once the chaos that normally would have followed Ichigo and his friends had been avoided by the simple process of him and Rias both shrugging their shoulders and saying that it was fine with them.

Of course the household was woefully understaffed with the addition of three new peerage members, the twins, Uryū, the three Elves, and of course, Yoruichi. The purple-haired Shinigami had opted to stay with Ichigo and the teens to help watch over them and to coordinate with Merti regarding their security needs, especially keeping the twins safe while attending their private middle school. The members of Amyntas's and Vincent's peerages assigned to help them would be traveling back to the Underworld each day with any of the teens who needed to do so, allowing them to continue their training in a safer place, but at the end of the day the new younger reincarnated Devils would be returned back to the mansion for dinner and to sleep.

Hearing the water start to run, Ichigo places a barrier on the door to their bedroom, not wanting another instance of Karin walking in on him and Rias as they take their shower together and the hefty barrage of snide remarks that would follow when they rejoin the rest of their friends. Seeing Rias already waiting for him, he slips in behind her and begins their now daily routine; lathering and rinsing her hair with shampoo, and once he is done, washing her back for her.

"Are you nervous Ichigo?" She inquires as he washes her back.

"Not really for myself, just more so for Karin and Yuzu." He admits. "It's a new school and they both need to start over with making friends, joining clubs, and of course keeping the fact they are now Devils a secret."

After thoroughly washing her back, he turns around and holds the washcloth over his shoulders for her to take. Feeling Rias begin to wash his back, he sighs as he feels some leftover tension fading from his muscles.
"They will do fine Ichigo. Yuzu and Karin are very likable girls so I don't see them having any problems making new friends. And don't worry so much for their safety: between the three Clans here in Isehara, I doubt anyone would be stupid enough to even think of coming here to cause trouble. Well, except for those egotistical idiots still at the church..." She mutters towards the end.

"Has anyone thought of what to do with them? I mean they did kill humans, tried to kill me and Issei and still they are allowed to hover around." Ichigo frowns.

Feeling him tense up slightly, Rias begins to massage his back. "The Maou will do something about them soon Ichigo; we just need to give them time to find a way to do so without us having to go to war with the Fallen Angels."

"I hope so Rias. If they come after any one of us again, I'm not holding back this time. I learned my lessons all too well the first time around." Twisting around to face her, he pulls her into his arms and looks into her eyes. "I won't lose any of you, not if I can prevent it."

"...We better hurry Ichigo, I'm sure they are all waiting by now." Rias's actions don't match her words however, as she leans up towards him and his head lowers to meet her lips halfway.

"They can wait...a few minutes."

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Brown orbs silently stare up the long stairway with a sense of déjà vu as Ichigo patiently waits for his twin sisters and their older sisters, the white-haired Nekomata Koneko, goddess-like Orihime and martial artist Tatsuki to show up. Koneko was 'unofficially' adopted by the twins after they spent almost every night in the same room with her at the Estate getting to know each other, the young Rook exchanging stories with them about their 'older brother'. It seems they had really bonded over those stories, although he never did find out what those stories were about.

Glancing at his watch, Ichigo huffs out impatiently before sucking in a deep breath and letting out a long forgotten yell.

"Koneko! Karin! Yuzu! Hurry up or we'll be late dammit!" His shout causes most of the new staff in the hallways to look at him bewilderedly.
"Just like old times, eh King." Zangetsu says from his inner-world.

Rolling his eyes mentally, Ichigo remarks back to his spirit. 'Yeah it sure does feel that way. Still, having them living here with me makes me very happy that they're here instead of Karakura; hopefully Goat-Face won't bitch too much about how much he misses them. All his lazy ass has to do is go to Geta-Bōshi's and use their new point-to-point Senkaimon to get here.'

"True. Better get ready though, I think I hear them coming."

Unlike before when he would call upstairs, he hears three sets of sock covered feet instead of one stampeding down the hallway from where their rooms are located, echoing out as they rush over to the top of the landing. The current Rook of his girlfriend's peerage glares down at her older sibling when he sees her head appear over the railing.

"I was helping them with their uniforms Onii-san, you do remember how complicated they are? But of course, I should've remembered what a lolicon you were back then too." The young Nekomata says as she gives him an unimpressed look.

Sputtering at the forgotten insult, the oldest brother points his finger at the young teen and shouts back at her. "Dammit Koneko, for the last time I am not a LOLICON! This is your fault Akeno; I swear to…I'm gonna…"

Karin and Yuzu giggle behind Koneko as they watch their brother stalk away towards the dining room where everyone else is waiting for the five young women to come down and join them. Coming up from behind the younger girls, Orihime and Tatsuki slowly make their way to the top of the stairwell as well. Tatsuki's face is a mixture of horror and embarrassment as she tugs at her sleeves while continuously brushing down the front of her skirt of her new school attire.

"How the hell do you put up with this Koneko? This uniform…is…is so old-fashioned and outdated." She complains once again.

Shrugging as she leads them down the stairway, Koneko tells her fellow Rook the reason why. "Grayfia-sama had a lot to do with the new uniform design, so if you have any complaints, she would be the one to talk to Tatsuki-san."

Tatsuki visibly pales. "Ah, never mind. I'm good Koneko."
Orihime giggles at the face her best friend makes. Both of them had witnessed the more disciplined side of Ichigo's future sister-in-law when Sirzechs had tried unsuccessfully to convince his wife to allow the new Devils of Ichigo's peerage to call him by his first name. A pinched cheek and a not-so-friendly reminder later that they must respect his position as the current Maou Lucifer is all it took Grayfia Lucifuge to cow her husband.

As they enter the dining room, they see Ichigo and Rias sitting to the left of Ichigo's head of household, Merti Longoak. The seats to Merti's right are reserved for the twins, Orihime, Tatsuki and Koneko. Kimi and Nia sit on the opposite side of the table with Rukia, Momo, Chad and Uryū. Rias's peerage - minus Issei - sits in-between everyone else wherever they can find a seat. As the five young women take their places, the discussion at the table soon turns to the missing time everyone is going to have to make up for. Besides schoolwork, Ichigo also knows that the Kendo Club's first competition is scheduled for the following week, so he feels rather anxious for them even though they had done just fine in his absence.

Orihime on the other hand is looking forward to her first club activities with the cooking club, while Tatsuki mumbles about whether or not she'll have any competition this year for karate in Kuoh's Karate club. Amyntas had given her a pair of miniature stud earrings which function as a seal to allow her to fight at her old strength whenever she wants to, so as not to miss out during her Senior year. The only solace she gets is that both Grimmjow and Nelliel have agreed to spar with her every night when she gets home, now that they have their own training dimension under the house, courtesy of Urahara and Tessai. Of course Ichigo can't wait to use it the first chance he gets so he can use it to finally put an end to his and Grimmjow's long put-off final spar.

Soon breakfast is done, and the teen and preteens gather at the genkan, shoes and bento in hand as Merti and the staff see them off for their first day of school since Ichigo’s full recovery. The older Elf reminds her nieces that even though they are finished with their schooling, appearances make all the difference in blending into any environment. As the large group walks through the sally port into the outside street, Merti turns to the Gremory head of household and speaks warmly to her.

"Harumi, I thank you for allowing me this honor to serve my lord. I don't intend to take over your place, so I will be more than happy to share the duties with you." The emerald eyed Elf informs her.

However, Merti and the newer members of the staff are answered by laughter from the older staff members as Harumi speaks. "Merti, while that is appreciated, you should realize that when Ichigo and Rias are here, all we do is clean those rooms not in use by them and care for the grounds. That means they clean their own rooms, bathrooms, the kitchen, the living and dining rooms and also the entertainment room themselves. Everything else we take care of, per Ichigo and Rias's rules. Even Grayfia has to obey their rules when she is here."
Merti's eyebrow rises slightly before asking why that was.

"Because they...they don't want us to feel like servants Merti-san, especially Ichigo. The Gremory Clan has always treated us better than any other clan does with their own servants. Ichigo is no different, he was very insistent that he did his own chores when he first arrived, and the rest of Rias-sama's group quickly followed his lead. It is a policy which will now continue with his return, and he made sure to tell his sisters and his peerage the same rules last night." The black-haired shadow controller says.

Merti nods her head in approval before walking back into the mansion, Harumi following closely behind the Elfin assassin. Taking their seats in the living room, the two begin discussing the new living arrangements and then the safety of so many nobles now living under one roof.

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As she looks down at her folder, Aki Hikō can't ignore the weird feeling inside her gut when she was told to expect two very important transfer students this morning. Frowning in thought as she remembers that the news was first delivered by their new principal, one Aisling Coghlan, a westerner from Northern Europe who had been suddenly hired to replace her ill predecessor, she knows that it was the start of her uneasy feelings. The new principal had the staff gossiping after she had swept in and took immediate control of the morning staff meeting without much explanation of whom and where she was from originally, only that she was born and raised in Ireland which helped explain her accent, though not her petite stature. The Irish woman was absolutely no-nonsense in her behavior, the air of authority that she was giving off making the staff obey her instructions without any questions, though to her credit she did seem to know what she was doing. Then there were the three new teachers the new principal had brought in and introduced to them; each teacher was being paid for by a separate budget, and each of them were assigned to teach the very same classes these two new arrivals had been assigned to, although they would be in her homeroom. Sighing, Aki internalizes that it must be a business or politically motivated maneuver, especially since it is hardly a secret that the school is privately owned by a well-hidden family or conglomerate that catered to rich or affluent families.

Tapping her pen on her folder impatiently, she inwardly vows not to let these new students think for one second that she would bow down to their whims, though she would still be careful enough not to get into trouble herself. Just as a smirk begins to appear on her face, her eyes blink haphazardly as they land on at what she knows is an impossible sight. Turning her head fully to stare in the offensive object's direction, her temple begins to throb as she sees a familiar male teen with bright orange hair walking into the premises, escorting two younger girls who are wearing the same middle school uniform of her students.

'It...can't...be...possible!' She inwardly seethes to herself.
Grinning smugly as he stops before her once again is the one person she refuses to believe would show up in her life yet again.

"Shiba-kun?" She forces herself to greet him, her eyes darting briefly to the two girls beside him.

"The one and only Hikō-sensei. May I introduce you to my sisters, Karin and Yuzu Shiba?"

The teacher can only stare at him with confusion. "I thought you were the only Shiba other than your uncle?" She had done her fair share of background checks on Ichigo Shiba after that fiasco with him and that white-haired girl Koneko Tōjō, thought she had the feeling she was being allowed to view his information.

"I am. Uncle adopted them, along with their older sister after their own parents passed away in a terrible accident while they were on holiday. Since they were employees of great ability to my uncle, he adopted their children instead of letting them being handed over to social services. As of now they are family to me, Hikō-sensei."

While Ichigo speaks, she sees the two girls wear sad but stoic expressions, all but confirming his story. Nodding her understanding while inwardly vowing to do more background checks, Hikō-sensei watches as the orange-haired male turns from her and places his hands on the shoulders of the dark and light haired girls, calling them Karin and Yuzu respectively. She watches as he confirms that they each have their cell phone for emergencies and some pocket money, before handing them their bento. He also reminds the girls that his number along with a few other names - some of which she recognizes - are in the phone, before kissing each of them on their foreheads and telling them that two people named Kimi and Nia would meet them after school to pick them up. The two girls, whom her files state are fraternal twins, hug the teen before they walk into the school yard.

"So Hikō-sensei…" He finally begins.

Shaking herself out of her daze, the glasses wearing teacher asks if there is anything she should know about the two twin sisters.

"Not much really. I just hope we can have a better relationship this time around." He gives her a short bow before he and the others in his group leave her behind in surprised silence.
Before she can even think that he's turned over a new leaf however, she hears one of the girls with him asking him a question that immediately makes her see red.

"So that's the infamous Dragon Lady-sensei Ichigo?"

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Issei wants to bang his head on the nearest tree as he has had to listen to Matsuda bitch at him for missing out on their twenty four hour pornathon, starring many of their favorite AV stars and their hottest movies. On his other side, he can feel Motohama directing calculating looks his way as he and his two best friends lie on the side of the hill basking in the sunshine. Rias had given him yesterday off to rest after spending three straight days training with Ichigo, Yuuto and his gorgeous but sometimes sadistic Sensei, Yoruichi.

He rubs the back of legs as the phantom pain from her numerous 'encouragement' love taps still cause him to shiver slightly, not to mention the aches from three straight days of continuous running that he remembers whenever he runs his hand down his calf muscles. It doesn't help that Yoruichi-sensei had also taken a liking to using his rear for full open handed slaps every time she sensed him slowing down during his runs. He was embarrassed to admit to himself that he was a little bit turned on every time she did that, and had the uncomfortable feeling that Sensei already knew and was doing it deliberately, but he still hoped for the sake of his dignity that no one else would ever find out about it.

Of course, in comparison to what the others are put through, he does feel like he had gotten the easier part of the training regimen. His fellow Devil and peerage member, the young Knight Yuuto Kiba, had spent those same three days sparring not only with Ichigo, but also his inner spirit, Zangetsu. The murderous white clone of Buchou's fiancé still scares him, even from a distance; he could almost swear his left arm would grow tighter and his overall feeling of wariness increasing every time the sword spirit looked his way. However, what always puts him off the most are Zangetsu's eyes; those black and gold orbs would stare into his as if waiting in anticipation, for what he has no idea.

A subtle but hard shot to his ribs lets him know his bald-headed friend is trying to gain his attention again, so sighing, he looks over at the squinted eyes of the former sports star.

"What?" Issei asks bluntly.

A hand with one finger is pointing at the arriving crowd of students. "Who…is…that…with…Ichigo…senpai?"
Following the direction of his friend's hand, the hidden Devil gulps before hurriedly grabbing and pulling the hand down. "Idiot, don't ever...ever...ever point or say anything about that girl. Trust me; Ichigo-senpai is not someone you want on your bad side, and doing anything to her WILL get you on his bad side. And as for whom she is, she is his adopted sister, Orihime Shiba. Now let it go and forget you ever saw her." He tries to discourage them, but only serves to stir up their ire.

"What the fuck Issei? Ever since you joined that Occult Research Club, you haven't hung out with us one weekend, not even when we rented all those new movies. What, too busy making Rias-senpai and Akeno-senpai do nasty things with you, or is it true you are blackmailing them for sex!?" The glasses wearing friend shouts loudly.

"You...you bastards! Where did you hear that from!? Who told you...?" A shadow falls over the three then. Gulping, Issei knows who it is by the menacing feeling roiling just under the surface of the teen glaring down at them.

"Issei, did I just hear correctly?" The voice asks him murderously.

The two teens on either side of the Sacred Gear holder both turn around and look up, only to see a head of orange on top of a scowling face. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, they immediately point inwards at their shocked friend and begin placing all blame for the rumors on him, saying they had nothing to do with what their friend had been bragging about and that they tried to warn him about doing so.

"B-Bastards! I had nothing to do with those rumors! I bet you two are the ones who started them in the first place!" Issei protests vehemently.

A hand grips his shoulder and lifts him to his feet. Thinking he is about to get pummeled in public, Issei closes his eyes and waits for the beating...which doesn't occur.

"I warned you about this Issei. Now let's go." Ichigo says as he drags the younger Devil away, Issei stumbling confusedly after him until they are both far enough that Issei's treacherous friends can't hear him. He then turns to look at the younger male.

"Listen Issei, I know they're your friends, but you better get them to ease off on that nonsense. If the wrong things start getting spread around, I'm liable to get pissed, and you know what will happen next. I don't care if you choose to hang out with them or not, but you better start thinking about your own future later on. You and those two morons are already pegged for being the
biggest perverts in the Academy, and Rias doesn't want you to gain the wrong reputation, nor do I: it will make her look bad if you are...deemed too perverted."

Issei hangs his head sheepishly. "Sorry Ichigo-senpai, but they are my oldest two friends and I guess they got a bit jealous because I'm not spending as much time with them as I used to...It used to be just the three of us for a long time..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I have my own idiot friend like that still in Karakura. Too bad he isn't here though; he could have filled in for you." Ichigo says as he gestures for Issei to follow him. The two of them then catch up with the rest of the peerages in short order.

Seeing Buchou glance at him, Issei gives Rias a slight bow before walking between the giant known as Chad and Ichigo-senpai. The girls had pulled Orihime and Tatsuki up to the front with them as they give the new students an impromptu tour of the Academy on their way to the main building.

"Yoruichi told me your speed is getting better, but your stamina still sucks Issei. So she wants you to wear from now on." Ichigo suddenly pulls out an ordinary looking leather belt and hands it over to Issei.

Taking hold of it, Issei grunts out in surprise by the weight of the thing. Casting the older teen a look of incredulous horror, he sees Ichigo grinning at him as he points back at Yuuto. Turning to look at the blonde Knight, Issei's eyes go wide when he sees the normally cheerful teen giving him a strained smile as he points down at his own belt.

"Shihōin-sama is making both of us wear these Issei. She says not only will it help us with our stamina, but also with our strength training as well. The only time we can take them off is in the shower and when we go to bed."

Issei can't help but groan out loud, although he dutifully puts his new belt on. "Not even here and Sensei still finds a way to make me exercise until I am at Death's doorstep." He mutters, not quite as quietly as he thought he did though.

"Don't bitch Issei, Yuuto has to wear it when he spars with Zangetsu, just wait until you have to spar with me while wearing it." The newest Pawn immediately begins uttering a string of curses and complaints about a certain werecat and her evil apprentice, greatly dreading his future.
"Ichigo, is Issei-kun okay?" Orihime asks as she looks back at them and sees the commotion.

Smiling and waving her off, he just points to Issei's newest accessory and explains. "He'll be fine in a few days Hime, just let the belt do its work. Geta-Bōshi says that it is the fastest way for them to build up their muscles for high speed training like Shunpo and their Devil's equivalent."

The burnt-orange-haired healer begins to drift back towards them. "You think I can get one too?" She inquires of him hesitantly.

Tossing her a look of confusion, he asks her why.

"Because I want to get stronger too Ichigo, Tatsuki wants me to train harder with her so I won't… well you know…"

He gives her a nod of understanding then. "Ah, sure thing Hime, I'll pick one up tonight when Uryū and I go back to train with Candice."

After Orihime thanks him, Rias guides the new Third years towards their homeroom, leaving Ichigo to walk with both Issei and Yuuto to their homeroom. As they go in, the orange-haired Devil pokes his head into the classroom and sees the person he is looking for.

"Oi, Momo have you seen Souna by any chance?"

The white-haired Bishop of his cousin's peerage looks up from her book and replies back to him. "She and Tsubaki are probably in the Student Council room Ichigo-senpai. They are most likely going over the schedule for the upcoming Parent's Day."

"Thanks." He waves to her and to the two members of his girlfriend's peerage before he makes his way to the nearest stairwell that heads upstairs.

"Ichigo Shiba please report to Principal Yamato's office. Ichigo Shiba please report to Principal Yamato's office."

"Oh, you got to be kidding me! I'm not even here five minutes!" His slight outburst causes a few of
the newer female students to cringe away from him.

Stalking away from his intended destination, the young Devil Lord makes his way to a place he had hoped never to see with as much frequency as he had in Karakura. Sighing as he approaches the door to the principal's office, he knocks on the outer door before proceeding inside after hearing the secretary's voice telling him to enter. Seeing the woman wave at him to go inside without looking up from her computer, Ichigo does so with a bit of hesitation and dread. Closing the door behind him, he makes his way over to the desk between the two familiar chairs, only to struggle mightily when he notices a familiar head of purple hair in his right peripheral vision.

'You really got to be fucking kidding me!' He thinks as he finally gives in to the temptation to turn and sees the werecat grinning at him from where she is sitting.

"Ah, Shiba-kun. I take it you do know Shihōin-sensei then?" His principal asks candidly after seeing his reaction.

Nodding his head yes, he answers back as politely as he can. "I do know Yoruichi-okaa-san, Yamato-sensei."

A slight jab to his ribs out of sight of the older gentleman causes him to grunt, but he does change his statement while sending her his own death glare. "She is an 'old' family friend Yamato-sensei."

Seemingly unaware of their byplay, the principal beams at them both. "Good, good then. However please refrain from such familiarity while in school Shiba-kun, we don't want the other students to get the wrong impression of our newest faculty member. Now the reason I called you down here is rather simple. Please escort Shihōin-sensei to your homeroom if you don't mind. She is taking Kai-sensei's place as she had to take a leave of absence due to some family matters. Kai-sensei will most likely miss the rest of the year, so with glowing recommendations, we hired Shihōin-sensei to fill in for this year as well as the History courses for the school."

"Oh joy." The orange-haired teen says dully.

Ignoring the less than enthusiastic remark, the grey-haired principal looks at his newest teacher and asks if she has any questions or needs before being escorted to her homeroom. Looking pleased when she says no, he gives them both another smile and a departing nod as they both leave his office.
Once they are in the outside corridor, Ichigo slowly walks up to the nearest window before turning to look at his motherly mentor, a smirk on his face when he sees her golden eyes giving him a knowing look.

"Ichigo."

"Shihōin…sensei." His smirk widens as looks at her in her new set of clothes.

Huffing out as she walks over to him, she glares down at the clothes she finds herself currently wearing. Instead of her usual outfit of black leggings and loose orange jacket over her black undershirt, she is wearing her 'Kuoh acceptable attire'. A light beige skirt with a loose white shirt and a formal jacket that completes her new outfit, one that most of the teachers of Kuoh Academy are expected to wear. Stopping before her student, she flicks him in his head and quietly lets him know of the danger he is in for laughing at her. Backing up in surrender but still quietly laughing anyway, he finally asks why she is posing as a new teacher in their school.

"Well, it seems that if I want to keep an eye on you guys, I have to do so as a teacher, so here I am, your new history teacher, Yoruichi Shihōin-sensei." She gives him an expectant look.

"What!?! Don't we already have Kimi and Nia here?" The young Naberius lord whispers to his newest teacher. "Does Uncle really think we'll be attacked so openly?"

Crossing her arms, Yoruichi explains further why she is at Kuoh. "It's not just his idea Ichigo; it's mine and Sasha's idea too. I know you can protect yourself, hell if it was just you I would have argued against this, but it's not just about you..."

"... It's about Hime, Chad and Tatsuki." Ichigo's brain catches onto the unsaid names.

The assassin nods her head affirmatively to him. "They aren't like you yet Ichigo, they have no Hell Chains or Hell Armor to protect them, and they don't have your natural ability to learn and grasp things quickly the way you do. Until they have fully accustomed their powers, I will be here to keep an eye on all of you."

"Fine then Yoruichi, if that's the case what do I call you while we are in school? Okaa-san or Sensei?" He feels the sudden burst of goosebumps when she leans forward and glares at him menacingly.
"If you call me Okaa-san if front of your fellow students Ichigo, I promise whatever I do to Issei-kun, I'll do a thousand fold to you. Got it?"

"Yes Shihōin-sensei." He gulps as he leans backwards from the death glare she is giving him.

Just as suddenly as she was glaring at him, she is now smiling and wrapping one of her arms around his. "Now show me where our homeroom is Ichigo. Since I'm replacing your teacher as of right now, you get to show me the way to my new domain... 'son'."

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Yoruichi watches as Ichigo goes up the next flight of stairs to see his cousin before homeroom. Ever since he had discovered that the Student Council president is family, the orange-haired Devil has tried to spend some part of each day with her, getting to know her and her family better. Serafall had also spent time with both him and the twins when she was staying at the Naberius Estate, and she had promised to see them whenever she could get away from her duties as Maou. Turning the knob to her homeroom class and then opening the door to her new life, the werecat wants to laugh at the shocked expressions she sees on the students, namely those of the Devil persuasion. Seeing a teacher's desk in the classroom in addition to the teacher's podium, she goes over to her desk and sits down, then in a very professional manner, pulls out the lessons that Sasha and Merti had helped her create for her classes. A combination of the events she had personal knowledge of and the pivotal events the two Devils had partaken in had given them some very unique insights on history, and she was interested in teaching that knowledge to her classes.

Quietly organizing her lesson plan on her desk, Yoruichi glances up and sees the back of the room has grown silent as Rias, her peerage, Ichigo's peerage, Uryū and the two Shinigami are all sitting quietly and watching her every move. Taking a quick glance at the clock, she sees it's about time for the homeroom bell to ring, when the door to the classroom flies open and Ichigo, Sōna and Tsubaki all hurry into the classroom. The three of them grace her with a short head bow before making their way to their desks, none of them looking surprised to see her, and she figures Ichigo must have already told them. Just as the bell begins to ring, she stands up and walks over to the teacher's podium, waiting for the bell to end before speaking.

"Good morning. I am Yoruichi Shihōin; I will be taking over for Tanaka-sensei who is on leave due to family matters. For those of you who are in my History classes, we will do a brief review of past materials and afterwards any changes I make will be handed out with your new syllabus. This is Homeroom, so I will take roll call and then we will spend some time getting to know one another. Also from time to time I will need help with certain class and school related activities and other menial tasks, so I will need a volunteer. Anyone?" She already knows who she's going to pick, but seeing him slide down in his chair to avoid attention makes her eyebrow twitch in annoyance.
Acting like she is genuinely looking over their faces for signs of volunteering; her eyes slowly drift until they land on the now cowering orange-haired Devil. Rias, Akeno and Orihime are doing their best to cover-up their amusement, while Uryū makes no such attempt.

"Ah, thank you for volunteering…"

Sitting up and then banging his head on his desk, Ichigo speaks up to her. "Shiba. Ichigo Shiba… Sensei."

"I'm glad to see such consideration for your fellow students Ichi-kun; I expect good things from you this year." She gifts him with a teasing smile. "Now as I was saying…"

Ichigo tunes out her words and glances around seeing most if not all of his friends and his girlfriend failing miserably to keep their amusement hidden. Dropping his head on the desk one more time, he growls internally to himself.

'Could this day get any worse?'

"Oi, dipshit! Don't you know that every time you say that, something worse does come along!?

'Sorry.'

Feeling the agitation from his Zanpakutō spirit, he does his best to calm himself. 'Please Reiō-sama, just one day of respite, is that too much for a Devil to ask?'

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After school, Kimi and Nia take leave of the teens and make their way to the middle school to pick up the younger twins, while Ichigo and Tomoe go ahead to the Kendo club to practice with the two Shinigami, Rukia and Momo. Rias and her peerage leave for the old school building, where their Occult Research club is located, planning to make up for lost time with their own contracts, leaving Yoruichi alone with Sōna and the remaining student council members who head up to the Student Council Room. Sitting in a corner, Yoruichi listens to the young teen Devils as they
continue to draw up plans and needed arrangements for the upcoming Parent's Day event, all while working on grading her class assignments. Knowing that Ichigo has to keep his family's identity secret for now, she had already informed Sōna that she would be stepping in for Isshin and Amyntas for the duration of the festival, so that was her contribution done. Looking down at her first stack of assignments to grade, Yoruichi internally moans to herself.

'How did I let Merti and Sasha talk me into this?' Gloomily, she begins to read the first paper when a few words reach her sensitive ears. "What was that about another clan showing up and causing a scene?" She immediately asks the younger Devils.

Sōna and Tsubaki check their notes before looking up at their newest teacher. Sōna clears her throat and begins to explain what she and her vice-president were talking about.

"We were talking about the Bael Clan, Yoruichi-sensei. We were just wondering how Sairaorg Bael is going to react when he finds out his cousin Rias's future husband is the heir of the Naberius Clan. We think he's going to be happy to know that she is marrying someone related to his mother's former clan, the Vapula." Sōna says with a hint of happiness in her voice, but also a hint of worry.

"Oh, is there something I'm missing then?" The golden-eyed woman inquires.

She notices a slight tightness around the eyes of the two glasses-wearing Devils as they exchange glances again. Sōna folds her hands on the table and begins to speak.

"It…is a touchy subject Yoruichi-sensei. Sairaorg's mother was from the Vapula Clan before her marriage to the current clan head of the Bael. Both she and Sairaorg were made outcasts from the clan after his birth and his failure to inherit the Clan's Power of Destruction that both Sirzechs and Rias inherited from Venelana Gremory. Many feel that the Bael Clan not only insulted the Vapula by mistreating Misla, Sairaorg's mother, in addition to refusing to acknowledge Sairaorg as their heir until he defeated his younger half-brother who had inherited the Power of Destruction; they also insulted the Naberius Clan to a lesser extent because Amyntas's grandmother was from the Vapula Clan."

After a brief pause, the Sitri heir continues. "Just as the Gremory are famous for treating their servants like family, the Vapula are famous due to their loyalty to family and those they choose to give it to, like their friends. Although Lord Amyntas is the head of the Naberius clan, he still honors his familial ties with the Vapula clan, and he was greatly offended by the Bael Clan's behavior towards Lady Misla. Neither the Vapula nor the Naberius clans were able to do anything about it however, the Bael Clan being the most powerful and highest ranked clan in the Underworld as the only Great King ranked clan. The Vapula are still ranked as Arch Duke of the Ultimate class however, so they supported Sairaorg and Misla financially until Sairaorg became the heir of the Bael clan, at which point he demanded financial support from the Bael for himself and
his mother. I think there was a lot of discreet celebrating in both the Vapula and Naberius clans when Sairaorg defeated his half-brother and became the heir of the Bael clan."

Yoruichi's eyes narrow slightly; this won't bode well if Ichigo finds out about his extended family and their mistreatment at the hands of the Bael. Knowing him, he will personally take it as a sign of disrespect and demand for it to be answered sometime in the future, even though Sairaorg had already dealt with it himself. Hopefully this newest cousin would be willing to convince Ichigo that the insult has already dealt with by forcing his father to acknowledge him as the Bael heir. No need for Ichigo to stir up yet another hornet's nest on top of everything else they're dealing with.

Frowning in thought, she decides that keeping things a secret is what had gotten them all into their current situation, and thus she asks Sōna to bring her sister to the mansion tonight so they can both fill Ichigo in on more of his family's history, especially Sairaorg's situation. Sōna agrees it is a good idea and decides to visit her sister beforehand to explain the situation, so she dismisses the rest of the Student Council before leaving with her Queen for the Underworld, leaving Yoruichi to herself and to her ungraded papers.

All alone now, Yoruichi reads and grades the stack of papers one by one, the former Shihōin clan head can't stop thinking about her own treatment by her own clan after her defection. Even though she had been officially forgiven when it was revealed that Aizen was the cause of her defection, she still couldn't shake the feeling that all the smiling faces were false ones, all except for one, just biding their time in order to stab her in the back and making sure it is permanent this time. After losing both her parents and deliberately isolating herself from her younger sibling to protect her from noble politics, Yoruichi had always felt alone within the walls of the Shihōin Estate, and the only place she felt alive was when she was with her former squad or with the Fon Clan and her Little Bee. Now though, now she has a new family in the Naberius, and Ichigo and the others are her kids that help her stave off her loneliness. Shaking off the bad memories, she goes back to grading her papers seriously and never notices the time passing until a certain orange-haired teen knocks on the door before walking right in.

"Hey." He says simply as he looks at her stack of marked assignments.

"Berry. What are you doing here?" She asks without looking up.

Stopping by the window, he looks at her with a grin. "I thought since it was time to go home, you might want to walk with us."

Surprised, Yoruichi looks up and realizes the sky is already beginning to darken. Putting her unmarked papers into a different folder from her marked ones, she puts both folders in her bag and hands it to Ichigo. Her son takes it without any complaint, and she gets up with a stretch before motioning for him to take the lead, which he does. Walking just behind him, she sees the two
males of Rias's peerage also waiting, although she sees her newest student is sweating bullets as he struggles to remain standing.

"Come on Issei, it's only a few miles to walk to the mansion, better hope you don't give me cause to 'inspire' you again." The assassin chirps out as she places a hand encouragingly on his shoulder. Issei only shivers, remembering just what she considers to be 'inspiring', both in the good and bad way.

"I hate you both." Is all he can say as he falls in behind her despondently.

Yuuto falls in behind her as well, the Knight seems to be doing better than Issei based on the less than visible signs of strain on his face, but then again he does have more experience than Issei has as well. As their group walk out through the gate, she feels their senses go on alert, although Ichigo surprises her when he also sends out a narrow pulse of Reiatsu into their surroundings. She hasn't realized that he had picked up on how to use Pesquisa from Nelliel already. Feeling Ichigo continue to send out minute pulses of Reiatsu into their surroundings with his eyes still open, she grins to herself, thinking how Soul Society had lost perhaps their greatest warrior since its founding days due to its own ignorance and paranoia. Not to dismiss Shunsui or Jūshirō, but she simply can't think of many Shinigami right now who can match her student in raw power alone, not to mention his absurd learning curve and his near-limitless potential. Ichigo's only hindrance at this point is his lack of experience, which she and the others will more than make sure he gets before he has his duel with the immortal third son of the Phenex Clan, Riser Phenex.

Not that she has any doubts about Ichigo's abilities actually; it is more a question of his mindset: if it comes down to finishing the older male off, will he? Ichigo is infamous for refusing to kill his enemies even when they push him to his limits; Zangetsu had been the one to finish the battle with Ulquiorra after the Cuarto had blown a hole through Ichigo's heart, but Ichigo had still tried to save Ulquiorra after regaining control of his body anyway. No, she doubts Ichigo will ever go that route; Ichigo's plan is more likely to simply pound the older Devil into the ground until Riser submits and if not, to use any and every means available short of murder to drive home the point that Rias is not going to marry Riser Phenex ever. A slight tingle goes up her spine when she thinks about her orange-haired Strawberry in his Hell Armor wielding Zangetsu in his Bankai form. If that still doesn't make the fiery Devil call it quits, she knows that Ichigo will find a way to end the duel in his favor without killing the older Devil and getting exiled. Hopefully, the Phenex clan head or one of the Maou will step in and force Riser to surrender before it ever gets that far.

Sighing to herself, Yoruichi looks up at the night sky, her gaze on someone far away. 'I hope you are watching over us all.'
Stepping into the foyer, the group finds the mansion and its staff already waiting for them as they walk in. Ichigo goes to find Harumi while the others get ready to leave for the Underworld, Yoruichi taking Issei and Yuuto to the room designated for use of teleportation magic, which also serves as the place of last retreat if they should be attacked. Waiting for the orange-haired Devil to rejoin them, the two younger Devils begin trading notes and tips for their next training session with their respective trainers, but it soon turns into a grueling session of predictions about what lies in wait for them. Yuuto is the one who starts it as he tells his fellow peerage member that tonight he is going to have to fight both Ichigo and Zangetsu in a two on one spar, then do his homework while watching Ichigo train with his Quincy cousin and the other Quincy woman still living at the Naberius Estate.

Issei sends a quick glance at Yoruichi and sees that the purple-haired woman isn't paying any attention to them; he then relays his own schedule to the only Knight in Rias's peerage. Speaking with a low tone, he says that he is going to have more weight added and he is expected to beat his old time by one minute or better, all while his Sensei had said she will use something called a Shakkahō on him if he begins falling behind. Seeing the wide eyes of Yuuto when he mentions that, Issei quietly asks him what it is.

"It's a fireball Issei, so I suggest you don't fall behind. Okaa-san isn't lenient on slackers; when she wants you to do something, she gets what she wants." Ichigo suddenly says from behind them, causing them both to whirl around in fright.

"Oh…shit." The brown-haired youth moans out loud, seeing that his Sensei is watching them with an amused look.

Yoruichi saunters over and slaps his shoulder again, her voice playfully seductive as she speaks into his ears. "Relax, Issei-kun; I'll only throw fireballs at you if you slack off. Remember that at the end of the tunnel is a harem with your name written on it. So buck up Issei, it's only for an hour or two...every day!"

Dropping his head, Issei groans as he curses his fate. 'Why me? Why me god….ouch dammit!'

XXXXX

Uryū can't help the smirk that shows on his face as he watches his cousin try for the umpteenth time to get his Blut Arterie to work. Cursing up a storm, the former substitute Shinigami scrunches his eyes shut as his task master lashes out at him again with her usual roll of curses and unladylike utterances. The glasses wearing genius snorts in amusement when he sees his cousin drop his head in both shame and embarrassment as Candice continues dressing down his mediocre skills. He turns away lest he gets caught laughing at Ichigo again, and decides to go join the younger Naberius Devils and the two Shinigami training under Sasha instead, as the twins go over the few
things they had managed to pick up quite easily which their older brother is failing epically at.

Coming up behind Karin, Uryū sees the familiar blue pattern of Blut Vene forming just under her skin as she lets her Reiatsu permeate her blood; her sister is also using her Reiatsu, but for her it is the red-patterned offensive side of the Blut, the Blut Arterie. Watching as Yuzu combines her Quincy attack with her Hell Chains, it is something that none of them had considered before, until the light-haired twin had used it once by mistake and her Hell Chains had hit a target with such force that the impact caused it to disintegrate. After being praised for her new attack, Yuzu was asked to learn how to master it, and the fair-haired twin has been practicing with it since then very diligently. It is to that end that Ichigo is now suffering from the very abrasive mouth of his teacher as she points to his younger sisters and asks him if he is so hopeless that perhaps his sisters should fight in his place.

Of course that comment sets off a fifteen minute screaming match between the two hotheads, until Sasha appears between them and lightly raps on both their foreheads with her knuckle. Uryū doesn't hear what is said, but it causes Ichigo and Candice to take a more courteous attitude with each other, for all of twenty minutes before they are at it again. The blind Elf is held back by Rukia the second time, the petite Shinigami telling her that Berry and Candice will have to figure it out in their own way and to let them scream at each other until they do. Momo seems to find the whole situation funny, she no longer hides her laughter as she watches the two of them openly bickering with each other, something she is growing used to since Ichigo and Rukia do exactly the same thing for any reason they see fit to fight over.

"So how did you do today Ishida-san?" Momo asks the younger Quincy when she realizes he has joined them.

Glancing back over his shoulder at Ichigo, he doesn't suppress his grin as he replies. "Better than someone we all know."

He hears the answering shout from Ichigo. "I heard that asshole, I do have Hollow hearing! Ouch, the hell was that for Candice!?"

Her rebuttal causes a new round of sniggering from the observers. "If ya hearing is so damn good Ichigo, explain to me...WHY THE HELL YOU STILL CAN'T USE BLUT ARTERIE MORON!"

They don't hear his answer clearly, but the reaction from the green-haired Quincy tells them it must have been insulting as her bow immediately forms and she lets loose a few dozen arrows at Ichigo, who promptly avoids it by using his Sonido to put distance between them. Sasha goes to break them up once more, but teacher and student have different ideas as Ichigo shouts out another insult and disappears in a buzz while Candice gives chase and shoots at him while shouting.
"Well, if he is going to learn, this is the best way. Having someone trying to kill him always did work wonders for him." Rukia sighs out as Sasha rejoins them.

"You want to join in don't you Rukia?" Momo asks knowingly as she watches Ichigo dodge the spirit weapon armed Quincy.

Shrugging her shoulders, Rukia answers her friend back. "Nah, someone else should have the privilege of beating on Berry besides me Momo."

"So…if Uryū and I wanted to, we could join Candice-san then?" The Squad Five Lieutenant asks quickly, both she and the male Quincy sharing a Devilish look.

Before Rukia can retort, the two of them disappear and shouts of 'traitorous bastard' and other expletives are soon heard loud and clear throughout the training room as the battle becomes three-on-one. Karin covers her twin sister's ears to spare her from the sewage coming from the mouth of their older brother, but Yuzu caught the first few words and began to giggle despite her sister's valiant efforts. Rukia's left eyebrow begins to twitch as she hears Ichigo continue his stream of foul language until she can't take it anymore and Shunpos to join the other three in dealing pain to the foul Berry, leaving behind Sasha who in a rare show of annoyance rubs the bridge of her nose while muttering about the rashness of today's youth.

For fifteen minutes, the four-on-one chase continues until Ichigo, in a moment of desperation, finally uses his Blut Arterie to power his Byakurai and forces them back with red-tinged lightning. Seeing the shit-eating grin on his face as realizes what he has done, the four realize that the young Devil Lord has found his groove and with malice leaking from his soul, Ichigo lets loose a war cry and begins to even up the score with those who were trying to use him for a pin cushion. Rukia is the first to get hit; after catching her with his Hainawa, Ichigo binds her up and presses his finger against her temple, reenacting the shooting of a gun, something the petite raven-haired Shinigami does not seem to understand since she just looks at him oddly.

Rolling his eyes, he finds his next target easily enough as he forces his Quincy teacher to come to a complete stop to avoid a barrage of Blut Arterie empowered Kidō attacks. Candice's eyes betray her surprise at how completely he has mastered the offensive aspect of his Blut, but just as she tries to use her Hirenkyaku to escape, she finds a set of brown orbs staring into her green eyes from just a foot away, Ichigo having used Sonido to cut her off. Watching her begin to step back warily, the young Devil Lord smirks and raises his hand, powering up his next favorite light attack, his Bala.

"What was that about my sisters fighting in my place…Candice-san?"
"I…I…was kidding Ichigo." She nearly shrieks in fright when a chain unexpectedly wraps around her waist and holds her in place, the light of his Bala shining in her peripheral vision.

"Bang, you're dead Candice." Again the finger pistol touches a forehead.

"Dammit." She utters out, getting the hint.

Letting the older Quincy go, Ichigo turns and seeks out his cousin to show him how much 'family' means to him. Laughing with his Hollow voice, the orange-haired Devil breaks out in a burst of Sonido to chase down his Quincy relative. Sasha and the twins don't get to see what happens, but the explosions in the distance tell them that the two young men must really be going at it. Soon however, a third body is dropped next to the first two defeated opponents who groan in unison, Rukia dropping her head while Candice just glares at her younger student with a silent question of 'how did you lose' in her eyes. Uryū just lies back in his burnt and wet clothes and covers his eyes with his forearm.

"So our only hope is the Squad Five Lieutenant then?" The older Quincy asks the Shinigami sitting next to her.

Rolling her head towards the green-haired woman, Rukia makes an observation. "Candice, while Momo is better at Kidō than me, she hasn't really faced anyone like Ichigo in an actual battle. Unlike Captain Kenpachi who lives for the joy of battle, Ichigo is truly becoming a master at it. Four different bloodlines flow through him and with each day, he gains knowledge and strength that I can only dream of. If she was ever going to defeat him, it would have been early in his life as a Shinigami; now, I doubt any but the oldest and most skilled of my kind can stand a chance at defeating him. No, I think Momo will be joining us soon if things keep up as they are."

"PUT ME DOWN ICHIGO NABERIUS!" The shrill shouts of the aforementioned Lieutenant prove her words true.

"Told ya."

Static fills the air as Ichigo reappears in front of his three defeated sparring partners, a bound and squirming Momo Hinamori draped over his shoulder. Grinning as he sets her down on her feet and releases the binding Kidō, Ichigo looks over the four of them with a smug look.
"Fine Berry, you did good, now can we call it a night and get some damn dinner?" Rukia grumbles as she stands to her own feet.

"Sasha?" The young Devil lord asks of the one in charge of their training for the day.

"Go now before you kill each other." She replies bluntly, her milky eyes somehow managing to give a deadpan expression.

"Cool, let's go. I hear Orihime and Akeno are going to make French tonight." Ichigo says as he leads the way to the exit.

Yuzu however stops before the blind Elf and begins fiddling with her hands, shyly darting looks at the green-haired woman standing next to her.

"Ah, Sasha-san, is it okay if…if Candice eats with us tonight?"

Candice snaps her head towards at the youngest Naberius in surprise, while the blind assassin quirks an eyebrow. After a brief pause, Sasha gives Yuzu an answer. "I will ask Lord Amyntas if it is permissible Yuzu-sama. It is the best I can do at the moment."

"I understand." Yuzu begins to walk away sadly, her head hanging down.

"Oi Candice!"

Startled again, the green-haired Quincy looks at the orange-haired Devil. "Yes Ichigo?"

"Tell my uncle I said it would make his great-granddaughters happy if you could come over for dinner tonight. Same thing for you Sasha." He tells them with a smirk.

Both women watch as Ichigo continues to lead the group of teens and preteens out of the training dimension. Hands folded in front of her, the black-haired interrogator of the Naberius Clan watches as they leave the room before she begins to follow behind them, Candice following a step behind her. The green-haired Quincy never taking her eyes off the place she had watched the light-haired twin leave through just moments before.
"I will ask Lord Amyntas for permission to let you leave with them Candice." Sasha suddenly speaks up quietly.

"W-What?"

Not even turning to look behind her, the blind Elf simply smiles as she keeps on walking. "They wish to have you join them for dinner Candice; it would only be proper for you to accept their invitation. It seems you have people who won't use you this time around, my dear."

Shaking off her shock, Candice hurries behind her, looking somewhat uncomfortable. "It is not something I'm used to Sasha-san." The younger woman answers truthfully.

"Better not disappoint Yuzu then. Now hurry to your room, I'm sure you will wish to shower and change before leaving with them. Pack a bag for the night as well; I will make arrangements for you to shop for new clothes or anything else you might wish for while you are in the Human World. I understand it will be your first time back there in quite some time, if I'm not mistaken."

"Thank you Sasha-san, thank you so much!" Candice leaves using her own high-speed technique, much to the amusement of the Elfin Devil.

"Ah, to be young again." She waves her hand as she leaves the room, collapsing the training dimension behind her as she steps through the doorway.

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Breathing hard, Chad is once again on the defensive against the agile Nekomata Kitsune daughter of Ichigo's great-grandfather's Queen. Although every bit a motherly and kind figure when she is doting on her young son Takeshi, Hanako-san fights with the deadly precision and grace of both her parents' lineages. Again as the hybrid shoots her fist forward, he rolls to the side and hurriedly digs in with his feet, bracing his right arm against his shield to block the heated Ki based attack. Once again, he doesn't react quickly enough after that as the more experienced Devil slips behind him with her hand pointing at his neck in a knife strike, the simulated deathblow signifying the end of their bout.

"That will be enough for today Sado-kun. Tomorrow we will begin training you with your magic and adding them to improve your attack and defensive abilities. After you are proficient with them,
we will start training you to use your full armor more effectively with your Devil magic." The white-haired Rook pauses then gives him an encouraging smile. "You should be proud however; you have improved vastly since our first spar, so take a shower and meet up with Lord Ichigo so you can return home."

"Thank you Hanako-san for these lessons; I feel I can better keep up my side of our promise now. Now that Ichigo knows he is a noble and his family will be hunted once again, I will do everything I can to help him keep them safe." Chad replies politely as his armor disappears.

"You two are close, like brothers Sado-kun?" Hanako asks with a bit of curiosity.

Nodding his head yes, he tells her how the two of them first met and how they formed a bond that only grew stronger as time went by, even after Ichigo became a Shinigami. How his own powers had awakened when he found himself trying to protect Ichigo's younger sister, Karin, from Hollows during the famous duel between the substitute Shinigami and his then unknown cousin Uryū. The rest of the story Hanako had heard before, but she is still amused that the two young men had first met each other by beating up the local thugs and gangsters in their quiet town. Smiling as she claps a hand on the tall teen's arm, she gives him one last training tip before they leave for the night.

"Sado-kun, this clan...is a family in reality. While Lord Amyntas is a pureblood Devil and has every right to use us as he sees fit to keep the Tower secure, he doesn't, much like the Gremory Clan who treats their servants as family. The Naberius Clan learned the true value of loyal servants from the Gremory Clan around the time Amyntas's father became Clan Head, due to his close friendship with the Gremory Clan Head at the time; their friendship is much like the one you have with Ichigo. Being Naberius means everything to each of us: I was born into this Clan because of my parents, and when I was given my Evil Piece, it was the happiest day of my life. Knowing Ichigo's grandfather wanted me to be a part of his peerage because he recognized my strength and loyalty to the Clan filled me with so much pride. Being his Rook gave me a way to honor his trust and prove my worth, not only to him and to his father, but also to my own parents. The day that Vincent-sama, Kiku-sama and Cornelia-sama were murdered was the day I lost a piece of my heart. Knowing that I would never see my King or Queen again, it left a void in me for many years, a void that is slowly being filled in by Ichigo and the twins, as well as each of you, his friends. I don't want to lose another family member ever again, Sado-kun, so please come to us anytime you have to, regardless of what concerns you may wish to tell us. We became family the day you accepted your Evil Piece, so to us you are our son, our brother and our nephew; we will always watch your back, just as you will always watch Ichigo-sama's back. Don't ever forget that." She pulls his head down slightly then places a motherly kiss on his forehead, patting him fondly on the cheek.

Chad watches with wide eyes as Hanako smiles and walks away, gently touching the place she kissed; he could have sworn he felt her emotions flow from her lips to convey the truthfulness of her words. Still somewhat dazed by her actions, he is about to walk back to his own room in the Estate when a male voice suddenly speaks up behind him.
"She is right Sado-kun; I do see them as my family." Chad turns to see the fiery hair of the older Naberius Clan leader as he leans against the door frame, sharp eyes watching him.

"Lord Amyntas." The tall teen bows immediately.

Amyntas waves off his actions. "In private, Sado-kun, you can call me Amyntas, or…Uncle." The older Devil smiles when he sees the look of surprise on the teen's face, then he beckons for Chad to join him.

"Walk with me Sado-kun; I think it's time I get to know the future of our Clan a bit better. I would really like to know more about your own grandfather actually; Ichigo says he played a huge part in making you the man…sorry Devil you are today." Chad smiles at the brief joke about his new lifestyle, and Amyntas continues with a knowing smile.

"Don't worry, I won't tell any of your friends that you can actually hold a very long conversation either."

"Sure thing… Uncle Amyntas. I guess I should start off with the fact that my father…"

XXXX

Grimmjow sits on a rock in the underground training room, watching as his mate fights with the black haired female martial artist in hand to hand combat. While Nelliel is a natural with a Zanpakutō, watching her move around using only her hands and feet against Ichigo's new Rook has his blood boiling in ways that leaves him groaning every time he catches a glimpse of her sweating skin. He smirks each time the newly reincarnated Devil tries to hit his woman, only to find herself swinging or kicking at empty space as the former Espada uses her Sonído with such ease that she seems to appear and disappear without a trace like magic, only to come up behind the younger woman and gently hit her on the head to signify yet another loss. Laughing to himself every time he sees the look of frustration on Arisawa's face as she whirls around in a futile attempt to hit his mate, it only makes him hunger for the day he and Ichigo can finally settle up their own differences, although hopefully it won't be in such a one-sided manner. He knows deep down he is in for one hell of a brawl, especially after witnessing what Ichigo did to the blonde shop keeper that other day, and the former Sexta can only grin madly knowing their match will soon be decided.

"Oi Grimmjow, what are you smiling for?" He looks to see his mate and Tatsuki Arisawa looking at him oddly, having paused to take a quick breather.
"Nothin', just waiting for my turn with Naberius." He smirks at them.

"Grimm-kitty, you play nice with Itsygo, you understand me." His wife glares at him reproachfully then.

Holding his hands out in front of him, he barks back at her. "Come on Nelliel, you know him and me got things to finish between us, and the only way that's happening is when we kick the shit outta each other."

"What is it with you two anyways? I don't get it." Tatsuki asks the blue-haired Arrancar with some annoyance.

Grimacing as he stands up and walks over to the two women, he answers Tatsuki with a growl. "We always got interrupted in our fights. If it wasn't Tōsen, then it was Nnoitra or someone else fucking getting in the way. We both NEED this Tatsuki, we need to have a clean, winner-takes-all knock-out drag-out fight to really see who the best is!"

"...Have they always been like this Nelliel-sensei?" Tatsuki quietly asks Nelliel as she discreetly leans over towards the green-haired woman.

Covering her mouth to hide her smile, the former Tercera tells the Devil her own thoughts. "I think the two of them are long-lost siblings, they just have no idea of how to become friends other than fighting. But since the end of the Winter War, Grimmjow has actually settled down rather nicely, if he hadn't, I wouldn't have picked him to be my mate."

"I can hear that shit Nel." Grimmjow snarks at them.

"Of course, you did Grimm, but it is true, you have calmed down nicely since the end of Aizen's reign over us." Nelliel says as she walks up to her husband and pulls him into a passionate kiss.

Tatsuki rolls her eyes as she once again has to witness the Arrancar couple's amorous byplay, and she quickly turns around when Grimmjow grips Nelliel's rear and lifts her up. Then she feels their Reiatsu beginning to fill the space rather quickly, but before she can make a magic circle to run for it, she feels their Reiatsu calming down, followed by her sparring partner apologizing to her.
"Ah, not a problem Nelliel-sensei, it's just hard to watch all you lovey-dovey couples go at it so much." She says with a smirk at the two shamelessly grinning Hollows.

Grimmjow shocks her however when he asks her a question that she has tried not to think about. "How is it that you and Naberius never got together, Tatsuki?"

 Automatically opening her mouth to shout her denials at him, Tatsuki doesn't this time as she feels the thought bringing forth old feelings within her. Suddenly feeling very tired, Tatsuki finds a rock to sit on and stares at the ground instead, her foot moving the sand and pebbles around in various patterns.

"I guess I lost any chance the day Masaki died." Her once forbidden secret leaves her mouth almost unwillingly, the confession causing a single tear to roll down her cheek. "I thought back then, that it would sort of be him and me as best friends for life, perhaps more afterwards, but on the day Masaki-sama died, a huge part of Ichigo died as well. He was never the same after that, and we drifted apart over the years. I couldn't really get close to him again until after Rukia came into his life, and she was the first to start filling in that void within him, something I couldn't do ... and neither could Orihime."

"That's not entirely the case Suki." Three heads snap towards the orange-haired Devil who is standing just a few meters away from them.

"I-Ichi...go." She blushes and stammers at him, knowing he must have heard her secret.

The young Naberius Lord walks up to her and pulls her to her feet, staring into her eyes. "I have always considered you one of my best friends, Suki, but I was being a jackass back then because I didn't want anyone to see how much Mom's death really hurt me. So I kept all of you at distance, to keep you from knowing what I was really feeling. I'm sorry for that, Tatsuki. You will always be in my life now, but...not..."

"Not like that, I know. Has Rias really been the only one?" She looks sadly into his brown eyes, and sees him looking at her just as sadly when he returns his answer.

"Yeah, it...was fate." He smiles at her then.

Punching him lightly, she threatens him with her fist. "Best not ever repeat what I just said if you value your life Ichigo."
Pulling her into a hug, he responses sarcastically then. "Who'd believe me?"

"Ass." She hugs him back though.

"Oi! Why are you here Naberius?" Grimmjow finally growls out, breaking up their touching moment.

Gently separating himself from his black haired Rook, the orange-haired Devil leans into her with a whisper. "Want to see some real fighting Tatsuki?"

"You serious?" Tatsuki asks him incredulously.

Holding his hand out and uttering the name of his sword, a malicious smile forms on Ichigo's face as he stares at his blue-haired opponent.

"Time to end this Grimmjow, but before I do I only have one request to ask of you and Nelliel."

"Yeah, what's that Naberius?" The former Sexta grins as he pulls out his own blade.

"I want to offer you and Nelliel something, something that might prove very useful to you guys in the future."

Grimmjow stops and looks at his green-haired mate, who is staring at the young man that she has grown very fond of. "What do you want to offer us Itsygo?"

Ichigo looks at the two Arrancars with a smirk and shows them two Evil pieces.

"You got to be fucking kidding me right?" Grimmjow all but explodes angrily at him.

"No I'm not, Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez. Fight me with everything you got right here, right now and I'll tell you why afterwards." The heir of the Skeleton Tower says as his Hell Armor forms over his
"I will give you what you have always wanted Grimmjow, and then I'll prove why you and the others will need this in the future."

"Others?" Tatsuki questions out loud.

Turning his black helmet towards his first peerage member, Ichigo tells her the truth. "My Evil Pieces pick who they want as their hosts, Tatsuki, and my Knights have picked Grimmjow and Nelliel to become theirs."

"Holy shit!"


Rukia's hand grabs the table's surface as a small tremor shakes the mansion slightly. "Is this what you call an earthquake?"

"Nope, that would be Ichigo and Grimmjow fighting right now Rukia." Yoruichi says without looking up from the paper she is still grading.

"They're fighting!?" The petite Shinigami nearly shouts out as she stands to her feet.

A hand stops her from going any further. "You must stay here Rukia, what is going on down there is between Ichigo and the Arrancars. If all goes well, we will be informed in due time." Merti tells them.

"Merti-san?" Momo questions the older Devil, her expression uncertain.

The Elfin assassin looks them both in their eyes, her expression serious. "Clan business, I can't say anymore until it is finished." She apologizes.

Rukia and Momo look at the other Devils in the room with them, seeing that each of them is looking as anxious as they are right now as to what is going on below. The worst affected is Orihime, who keeps glancing down towards the training dimension where she knows her best friend is with her adoptive sibling, very close to him while he is in his full release form. She can
feel Ichigo's power even up here as can some of the others, the darkest parts of Ichigo's soul fighting the battle hungry former Sexta with everything he has. Their fight continues for another thirty minutes before the shaking finally stops and everyone immediately hurries towards the room that leads down to the training room. Relief is felt when a spiky-haired Rook pops her head out of the trapdoor looking unharmed, but it only lasts for a moment when she spots them waiting in the outer room and immediately yells out to her best friend.

"Hime, better get down here quick, they need you!"

Orihime hurry down the trapdoor into the training room without a word, and the rest of them quickly follow after Tatsuki as she heads towards the spot where they see a white uniform with a head of green hair standing. As they approach though, they begin to hear the woman who is standing with one fist on her hip and the other hand violently pointing towards a crater in the ground, and the curse words she is yelling finally clues them in that something very odd is going on.

"You damn blue-haired asshole! Stop smiling you orange headed moron; you are just as much at fault as he is! Both of you are going to get it when Hime is done healing you two, you jackasses! Don't you dare crack a smile at me Grimm-kitty! Look at the condition the two of you are in! You're missing a leg Grimmjow! And you Itsygo! You're missing a hand! Don't smirk at me Berry-kun, you're both in serious trouble; you're not healing quick enough so poor Orihime has to do it for you! I said stop smiling now you two!" Nelliel stomps her foot angrily, causing a minor shockwave to rock the ground.

The group of mixed teens and adults carefully walk to the edge of the crater and peer down into the depression; they see two figures lying less than a meter from each other, both sporting visibly wide and bruised smiles on their faces that can even seen through the two familiar orange domes covering their bodies. More importantly however, Ichigo's left hand is clearly missing, and Grimmjow's right leg is missing below his kneecap.

With a horrified cry, Yuzu is the first to react as she hurriedly slides down the side of the crater, reaching the orange-haired Devil before anyone can stop her and wringing her hands in distress while tears fall uncontrollably from her eyes.

"Ichi-nii! Ichi-nii!"

Smiling up at his younger sister, Ichigo shushes her gently. "Now, now Zu. I'm okay and so is Grimmjow. Nel is just being overdramatic. Nothing to worry about, really; we are both fine, just a bit winded."
The sound of someone stomping up to him and a fist to his face after Orihime's shield fades away says otherwise as his other younger sister lets him know it most certainly isn't alright. "You. Are. An. Asshole Ichigo! Was this really necessary!"

Another hand slaps the snickering Espada upside his head, and he growls at the offender. "What the fuck Shinigami!? It's his fault too!"

"It's both your faults, dimwit." Rukia retorts as she glares at the both of them. "Did either one of you think of what we could and did feel upstairs as you two morons went at it? Especially Ichigo's three sisters and his girlfriend? Huh? Did you?"

Both the Devil and Arrancar go awkwardly silent as the reality of Rukia's words hit them, the Devil more than the Espada. Begrudgingly, Ichigo huffs out an apology to everyone present, as does Grimmjow, but he almost earns another slap on his head from Rukia when he says it was worth it. Momo gives Ichigo a sympathetic look as she stands next to Orihime, while Rias stands before her boyfriend, hands on her hips as she looks down at him knowingly.

"So?" Is the only thing she asks when he meets her gaze.

Looking at Nelliel first and then her mate, Ichigo cracks a smile. "They both said yes."

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"Ouch, Hime!" A hand slaps his head once again nearly forty five minutes later.

He can tell Orihime is pissed at him from the way her eyes narrow and her lip points downwards after she uses her Shun Shun Rikka on him once again, this time healing him after Nelliel insisted on her own brawl with the orange-haired Devil. The green-haired Arrancar silently chuckles to herself as her head rests in the lap of her mate; Grimmjow however is sending him death glares.

"Oi, not my fault Grimmjow, it's just as much her fault as mine dammit!" A light tap to his own forehead causes him to shut up as he looks up from his own spot in Rias's lap.

"It's both your faults, Ichigo, Nelliel." The Gremory heiress states factually.
Sighing, Ichigo moves his head around until he is resting in his favorite spot, one that allows the woman whose lap he is resting in to run her hand through his hair. Looking over at the Arrancar pair, he is smiling inside: two of the strongest former Espada will be his Knights by this week's end and he still has the strongest Evil Piece yet to reincarnate.

Thinking back to when Tier first proposed the contract to him, he admittedly had been so shocked by her suggestion that he told her no at first. When she quietly asked him why, he told her the truth, that he didn't want the Arrancar to feel subjugated to yet another Shinigami, even a Vizard like himself. Her laughter had broken the momentary stalemate as the blonde Hollow had told him that Nelliel spoke highly of him after the War and that it made quite the impression on her that not all Shinigami were out to harm them. Further proof had been given when the Queen of Hueco Mundo told him that she owed her life and those of her Fracción to the three Shinigami who had rescued them and the human who had healed them in a rundown house.

He had stifled a laugh at Tia's impression of the shouten before explaining to her that it was his adoptive sister Orihime who had healed them. Tia had expressed some curiosity as she remembers Orihime's demonstration when she healed Grimmjow missing arm that Tōsen had removed after leading his Fracción to their deaths. This of course led to him quickly retelling the facts about his four bloodlines, how Orihime had been adopted as his sister after he disappeared from Karakura, and what it meant for him to be a pureblood Devil and Orihime his Bishop. Learning that his Evil Pieces were reacting to certain people had left him in a dilemma, but as he told her then, it was one that he didn't really want to think about just yet. That is when the emerald eyed woman had asked to see his Evil Pieces, which he obliged by pulling them out. Imagine his surprise and hers when his Queen piece began to glow yellow in her presence.

'I'll be damned.' The words slipped out of his mouth after seeing his strongest piece reacting to the Queen of Hueco Mundo.

Tia had looked at him and asked what was wrong; he told her that since he had received his Evil Pieces, they had begun to react only to certain people. He then explained to Tia what the Queen piece was and the importance it held in his peerage. He and Tia both watched as his Queen Piece glowed even brighter when her hand moved towards it. She had closed his fist around the glowing piece, and that is when they struck the contract, one that she insisted be sealed by blood. The next biggest shock came to him when his blood and hers mixed for the contract; he felt the magic of the contract binding them together fully, then brown eyes and emerald eyes shared a quick look of mutual understanding: they knew that from that moment onwards, they would always be joined together as comrades.

Coming out of his memories, he sees that he and Rias are now alone in the training room, the others having left them at some point. Looking up at her, he sees her smiling seductively down at him.
"I hear the hot springs here are pretty useful Ichigo. Mind if we try them out?"

Ichigo blinks in surprise. "But…"

"No buts Ichigo. Come." She lifts his head and after pulling him to his feet, begins to walk towards the shimmering water, all the while dropping pieces of her clothing behind her as she walks.

"Ah King, this is the part you agreed to."

'Shutdap, I know that.' He quickly follows suit behind Rias.

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Shinji and Jūshirō are both looking at the Squad Six Captain with blank expressions on their faces. It had been around noon when messengers from him had come to their respective squads and handed them messages to join with him and his Lieutenant for lunch at the Kuchiki manor. Both Captains had met each other outside of the Estate's main entrance and shared a quick conversation as to what could possibly warrant a meeting with the nobleman and his sister's fiancé. Before they could delve into the matter more, Renji had shown up and greeted them before guiding the two Captains to a well-furnished but isolated room within the compound, where Byakuya was already waiting for them.

Neither the Captain nor the Lieutenant of Squad Six say a word until the meal has been served, and Byakuya causes them to wonder how serious the matter to be discussed is when he places a sound proof barrier around the room and reinforces it with a second barrier midway between it and the four men sitting at the low table. Picking up his saucer of sake, Byakuya toasts the men with good health before sipping from it. They follow his actions soon after and then begin to eat in silence for the first part of the meal.

After a prolonged period of silence, the Squad Five Captain finally gives in and asks what had prompted their invite. Byakuya puts down his utensils and looks at him.

"I only wish to convey to you that my sister, Captain Ukitake's Lieutenant Kuchiki, and your own Lieutenant Hinamori are both doing well and will be staying in the World of the Living until their allotted time has passed." He informs them.
Confusion shows on both men's face then, and the older Captain asks if the two Lieutenants are having trouble accomplishing their mission.

"No, they actually finished the mission within the first day Jūshirō." Replies the stoic Captain as he picks up his utensils once more.

The two other Captains now share a baffled look before Shinji presses the matter further. "So, if ya saying that Momo and Rukia are finished, then why haven't they come home and reported ta us then?"

The faint smile that appears on the face of the Kuchiki clan head causes alarms to sound in the heads of the other two Shinigami. "It is because of the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the unknown anomaly, Captain Hirako, that they have chosen to stay."

"Circumstances? That being what exactly?" The white-haired Captain inquires quizzically.

"Both of you remember the meeting with the Head Captain, when he informed us of a certain long hidden treaty, don't you?" Seeing them glance to his Lieutenant, Byakuya continues. "Don't worry, I told Renji the truth of that meeting because of what transpired in Isehara; I no longer saw it fit to keep him from knowing."

"Byakuya, I know what was said is still hard to believe, but what does any of this have to do with Momo and Rukia…" Captain Ukitake pauses as he puts two and two together.

Shinji has already figured out what Byakuya is hinting at. "They met…Angels?" He guesses.

"Not Angels, but Devils. And a certain Devil." The Squad Six Captain says calmly, taking far too much enjoyment in his dragging out of the explanation.

Shinji and Jūshirō both look at him askance, before turning to his soon-to-be brother-in-law for further clarification. Shinji nudges the Lieutenant to speak.

"Renji, what'd ya Captain trying ta say?"
Looking somewhat uncomfortable, Renji looks towards his own Captain for permission. "Captain, may I?"

After receiving the nod, Renji’s mood turns a one-eighty and he begins grinning madly at them. "This Devil my Captain speaks of is the next heir of the Naberius Clan." He proclaims.

Captain Ukitake inhales a quick breath; he had studied the ancient scrolls after gaining permission from the Head Captain to review the various factions in case something was to happen and they were forced to interact with the three factions once again, and he recognized that name.

"Are they not the Clan that holds control over the Sinners Byakuya?" He asks hurriedly.

The Squad Six Captain nods at him. "Indeed they are Jūshirō. It is due to this fact that I allowed Momo and Rukia to stay behind, and after finding out who the heir is, I saw no danger in letting them stay with him at his mansion."

Spitting out his sake, Shinji glares at the nobleman then. "What!? You mean they not only encountered the heir to a noble Clan of Devils who supposedly holds control over the Sinners, but they're also living in his mansion!?"

Byakuya and Renji share an amused look before the Squad Six Captain answers Shinji. "Yes. I believe you will understand why once we tell you who he is. Someone you are quite familiar with in fact, as are you Jūshirō."

Both white-haired and blonde-haired men have looks of confusion on their faces as they try to think of who the other Captain could be speaking of. Shinji races through his brain, trying desperately to think of who it could be. He mentally checks off everyone, except for the one person who he knows is missing.

"Impossible, he's dead Byakuya. Well as good as dead." Shinji points out.

The Kuchiki noble gives him a certain look. "Tell me then, who placed the Kidō to erase his memories? Who gave Urahara permission and convinced us to allow this to happen? Who has shown they have no love for Soul Society after they handed down that asinine sentence and would do anything and everything to...how would Rukia say it Renji?"
The red-haired Lieutenant grins as he repeats her words. "She would say 'stick it to 'em' Captain."

"He lives? He became a Devil?" The Squad Thirteen Captain blurts out before hushing the volume of his words.

"No, he didn't become a Devil." Byakuya tells them, before dropping the bombshell. "He always was a Devil. His Devil bloodline, as well as his sisters' Devil bloodlines, had been sealed before their birth." That one fact sets off a round of heated denials from the other two men who declare it to be impossible, that they would have seen the signs.

"What signs? None of us were even aware of the other factions back then." That reminder cuts their arguments short. "No one would have known of it except for two people."

Ukitake's eyes go wide then. "Isshin. He knew all this time?"

Byakuya shakes his head. "Only after the death of his wife. The other who knows is the boy's great-grandfather, he found out about Ichigo's existence on Masaki's death. He is the Guardian of the Damned, the Keeper of the Skeleton Tower, the Watcher of the Gates of Hell, and the current head of the Naberius clan, Amyntas Naberius. He is also Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius's great-grandfather, Masaki Kurosaki's grandfather, and the father of Vincent Naberius, Masaki's father and his only son."

From there, Byakuya shares the story he was told that first day upon seeing the orange-haired Devil. He watches the two Captains exchange looks between them as the story was told of how Kiku Kurosaki met and married Vincent the Devil noble. Her life as a reincarnated Devil, and then the day she was murdered along with her husband. It is then that he reveals the final bloodline of Ichigo and who his relations are, a revelation that floors both men.

"Ichigo is also a Quincy? Holy Shit..." Shinji mutters out.

"That would explain his Zanpakutō then. I thought it was strange he gained one without the use of an Asauchi..." Ukitake ponders. "But now he doesn't have one, because you said he suppressed that side of himself?"

A knowing smile then shows up on Byakuya's face. "You both forgot about Urahara again."
"He had an Asauchi all along." Shinji says knowingly as he palms his face. "I always knew he had more secrets he wasn't telling any of us, that sneaky bastard."

"Yes, he did Captain Hirako." Byakuya confirms. "Now Ichigo has it and it has been reforged for his use."

"What was he thinking!?!" The white-haired Captain suddenly bursts out, causing the three other Shinigami in the room to look at him with perplexity.

"Captain Ukitake, is there something we should know?" Renji asks.

Sighing before he takes his first sip of sake, the oldest Shinigami in the room collects his thoughts before speaking. "Ichigo wasn't the first Substitute Shinigami the Gotei Thirteen has used before. It was during your exile Hirako, and you weren't privileged to that knowledge Abarai, but before Ichigo came along there was another human who had great spiritual powers whom we allowed to become our agent. Unfortunately for us, he went rogue."

"So that's why Central is being such an ass about it..." Shinji mutters. "And?"

"And that is why Ichigo was given that combat pass, so we could keep tabs on him and if necessary...cut off his ability to use his Shinigami powers if he too went against us." Jūshirō finally admits.

Silence fills the room then as the two Shinigami who didn't know both look at the two others who did know with looks of anger.

"What the hell were ya thinking!? He never showed any signs of betraying us, well until that damn death sentence Jūshirō! Now he has absolutely no reason to ally himself with us! Oh for fuck's sake what the hell are we going to do now!?" Shinji says slamming his hand angrily on the table.

"Nothing." Byakuya says with a calm expression on his face.

"What da ya mean nothing? He has no reason..."
"That is incorrect Captain Hirako; he still intends to perform his duties as a Shinigami, whether we allow him to or not." The Squad Six Captain informs him. "Besides, Ichigo told me himself, he still plans on carrying out his duties to the Plus souls. And more importantly, he would never abandon his friends here." Byakuya then stares at the Vizard Captain seriously.

"That is why you two are the first ones I sought out. When, and we all know that sooner or later it will become common knowledge that he lives, Central Forty-Six will issue orders for Squad Two to hunt him down, and it will cause the Gotei a serious division among its ranks. I and Renji will stand against this order, and we know of others who will, but just as many will not."

A startled gasp escapes from the white-haired Captain. "You speak of treason, Captain Byakuya."

"Is it treason when the intention is simply to protect one of our greatest heroes?" Byakuya questions them. "No, I will not follow that order, and that order alone Jūshirō. We owe Ichigo a debt that we can never repay; I will not allow such an order to tarnish us any further than our past actions already have." He glances towards the Vizard, who is now frowning in thought.

"He's got a point Jūshirō; I mean, you know what will happen if that order is ever given. In Squad Eleven alone, Kenpachi would go on a rampage when he finds out that the kid never lost his memories; throw in that he has his powers back and there is an order to execute him before he gets his spar first, and everyone will be in for a world of hurt."

Renji speaks up with his observations as well. "Both Captain Hitsugaya and Rangiku have close ties to Isshin and the Kurosaki family, as well as Orihime Shiba. Which means the Shiba Clan will be involved as well. While I do not remember how many Captains voiced their displeasure at the previous meeting, I can only assume that none of them will be happy either."

"I know Shunsui won't obey, he won't follow an order that would put the Soul Society in danger, and he would stand there and argue against it until the world ends." Ukitake breathes out heavily.

"As would Captain Suì-Fēng." That remark gains the other two Captains’ attention.

"What does she know of this?" Jūshirō almost demands.

Pausing as he pours another round of sake, Byakuya smirks at him knowingly. "I believe you have heard certain rumors surrounding the Shihōin Clan as of late."
"Yes. / Yeah." Come two immediate replies.

"Then I should tell you the truth of that matter. Yoruichi Shihōin is now Yoruichi Naberius."

A head slams on the table this time, Shinji groaning out almost painfully. "She had to do it, she finally had to do it didn't she. She always said she wanted to leave, but of all the Clans and of all the beings in the known realms, she picks his. The greatest assassin to come from Soul Society in generations leaves the Shihōin clan and is now a part of his Clan, oh the joy to be on the receiving end of that mess."

"I do believe it to be worse than that." Byakuya replies.

"How much worse could it possible get Bya?" The Vizard grumbles as he tilts his head to look at the noble Shinigami with a frown.

"Suì-Fēng has been teaching Ichigo as well, they seem to have bonded in the short time they were with each other, so that makes two of the greatest assassins of Soul Society in generations on his side." Byakuya smiles at their deadpan expressions before throwing in the final bombshell. "Don't forget, the Shihōin Clan and Central still have no idea that Ichigo Kurosaki lives and is now Ichigo Naberius."

Ukitake face-palms then. "I can't believe this is happening. How did this even happen? Why did we even allow this to happen?"

"It has happened and there is nothing we can do about it Jūshirō. All we can do is try to keep Soul Society from getting involved in a war against the Devils. Yes Shinji, they will go to war with us if someone tries to assassinate a pure-blood Devil from the Naberius clan, or even one of those who are seen as their friends and comrades by said clan. Considering we barely survived the previous war in one piece, and the man who helped us survive in the first place is now the target for Central's assassination, I think it would be suicide for us to even try."

Shinji leans back with a curious light in his eyes. "How strong are they exactly Byakuya?"

"We would be overrun in short order." The Kuchiki replies evenly.

A whistle escapes the blonde Vizard then. "Really? If you are saying it Bya, then we would be in
serious trouble if word about this gets out."

"Which is why I invited the two of you here. I know what I am about to say is treasonous but we have no choice, the very survival of Soul Society depends on our ability to make the Head Captain stand down and force Central Forty-Six to abandon any idea of killing Ichigo and his family. If not, as I have already stated, I will side with him on this matter." The Squad Six Captain tells them firmly.

"Any other surprises we should know about before we discuss this further Byakuya?" The Captain of Squad Thirteen asks him.

"Now that you mention it, yes. His adopted sister Orihime Shiba has joined him as a member of his peerage, as did two of his other friends."

"Oh, and who might those friends be?" Shinji already knows he won't like the answer.

"His sister Orihime, and his friends Tatsuki Arisawa and Sado Yasutora have become members of his peerage. Uryū Ishida hasn't become a Devil yet, but he has chosen to side with his cousin."

This time it's Ukitake who groans out in disbelief. "Three allies who were pivotal in the war, and we lost them too. Orihime alone is worth half of Squad Four's medics, and now she is a Devil."

Byakuya notes that neither Captain mention Tatsuki Arisawa, who is a stranger to both Captains. "First and foremost, Orihime Shiba is a noblewoman of Soul Society Captain Ukitake. Even adopted, she is still a member of the Shiba Clan, and now she is also a noble of the Underworld. I do believe you see what I am trying to drive home now Captains? We can't afford to antagonize them, not with the political mess involved, and we cannot go to war with them, since they have power, numbers and even the greatest healer other than Retsu Unohana and Hachigen Ushōda on their side, although I think we all know whose side the latter will take as well." The three Shinigami look at the only Vizard in their midst for verification.

"Well, ya got me there. We Vizards do tend to stick together. Ichigo was one of ours first before becoming a Devil, even now, damn kid is still our favorite, just don't tell Hiyori I said that though." The Squad Five Captain admits readily.

"So how and where do we start Captain Kuchiki? I assume you have a plan at least?" Ukitake queries.
Byakuya nods at him before outlining the plan. "To start, the four of us and Suî-Fêng are the beginning of this alliance, but I know Captain Kyôraku will be in on it soon enough, as will Captains Ôtoribashi and Muguruma, as well as Lieutenant Kuna. After that we will approach the other Captains and Lieutenants cautiously one by one until we know for sure what their sentiments towards Ichigo and the others are. The only ones I know for certain are not ideal at this time are Captain Komamura and that clown-faced freak Kurotsuchi."

That last name earns him a few chuckles, no one had ever heard Mayuri Kurotsuchi being spoken of kindly, but neither had they heard Byakuya Kuchiki speak of anyone so disparagingly before. Raising his saucer, Kenseikan moving slightly in his hair, the Squad Six Captain offers one last toast.

"To the success of our endeavors."

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Yoruichi and Merti stand before the head of the Naberius clan, both of them watching the ageless looking Devil stare at them incredulously after they had delivered the news to him.

"Both…said yes?" He asks once again.

"Both said yes." Merti confirms with a growing smile on her face.

Yoruichi can't help but mirror that smile; the former Shinigami assassin hadn't seen this one coming either, but the two former Espada becoming Knights and Devils in Ichigo's peerage had apparently been the true end result of the fight between the former Substitute Shinigami and the former Sexta since the very beginning. She really had to hand it to her boy: when he first told her who each of his pieces had chosen for his peerage just before he went down to the training room, she thought he had taken a harder knock to his head than she thought, but now she can just imagine Kisuke dancing a jig when he learns of this new development.

"Will it work though?" That is a question from Amyntas, who has never heard of an Arrancar being reincarnated by the Evil Piece system.

Yoruichi supplies the answer. "It will work Amyntas, just as it has worked for other spiritual beings before. Nelliel is probably the second strongest surviving Arrancar, Tia Harribel is currently
the strongest, but very little separate the two in power or skills. Ichigo doesn't want anyone other
than us to know, but Tia has agreed in principle to become his Queen when certain conditions are
met. He wouldn't elaborate on what they are, but it sounds like a done deal regardless. And it
seems he will have a full set as you say.”

Amyntas sits at his desk and thinks of the powerful beings his great-grandson is gathering around
him already. Ichigo's first Bishop's power is truly the scariest thing he has ever seen or heard of,
the ability to reject reality is something that no one in their right mind would scoff at, and she is
now his adopted great-granddaughter as well. Ichigo's two Rooks, while still young, have the
potential to become powerful Devils of high rank, and the other Bishop that the golden-eyed
woman spoke of is an asset that needs to be harnessed as soon as possible, although she has other
obligations that she must deal with first. The list of Pawns so far is rather impressive as well; seven
Arrancars of varying powers will become Devils shortly if things go well for Ichigo. He leans back
in his chair and for the first time since Ichigo's recovery breathes out a sigh of relief. His family
will be safer in a matter of weeks, and the power that is readily available to help defend the Tower
with will almost double if what the two standing before him say is true.

"Tell Ichigo I expect to see him and his new additions this weekend for the ceremony, and Merti, I
want his two Shinigami friends to witness it." He commands.

"My lord?" The Elf questions confusedly.

"I think she should see what is entailed, don't you? Yoruichi, I extend that offer to Kisuke and
Tessai as well. I know Kisuke has been dying to witness the ceremony, and I am curious as to what
will happen with the Arrancar, as much as I am sure he will be." The clan leader says in answer.

Grinning at him, Yoruichi replies back. "Nothing in this world or the next one would keep him
from witnessing the reincarnation process, not when two of them are former Espada, Amyntas.
Nope, I think 'hell' would have to freeze over first before he misses seeing that after your invitation
to watch."

"Well, this weekend we will see the addition of two more Devils to my great-grandson's peerage."
Amyntas says with a pleased smile. "Oh, and Yoruichi, my personal tailor will be here this
weekend to take your measurements for our engagement. If you are still willing that is?" Merti sees
her Lord looking at the purple-haired woman next to her rather expectantly.

"I'll be here Amyntas. Make sure he knows I look good in black and orange though, nothing
white." Yoruichi reassures him.
Amyntas smiles then as he motions for them to join him at the table on the balcony that overlooks the various public and open hot springs. Sitting down and waving off the chilled wine, he instead chooses water to have with his meal. Yoruichi follows his lead but asks for milk instead. Merti gives them each a speculative look, but chooses to say nothing.

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Candice can't believe the meal sitting in front of her was prepared by the teens from the two peerages. The smell of the food wafting throughout the house has everyone having a hard time waiting to eat. Even the staff seems eager to eat. Sitting in the expanded dining room, the green-haired Quincy sees every member of both peerages, the Shinigami, the two Arrancars - the presence of both had been a surprise to her when she first saw them - and finally the older Elfin Devils, Merti and Sasha, along with the twins Kimi and Nia. Yoruichi is also present, sitting to her left, while the younger Naberius twin, Yuzu, is on her right. No one had asked what Candice was doing there other than to give her greetings of welcome to the mansion when she arrived with Sasha and the others, and that made her feel very happy.

Her guest room at the mansion is also surprisingly large and she is both happy and nervous that she will be getting to sleep alone for the first time since she was released from her old room. Most nights she has slept in the same room as Sasha or Merti, trusting the two Elves above the other members of the clan, but tonight and tomorrow she had been given her own room to sleep in. Before she can contemplate on this further, the door opens again and the Leviathan Maou makes her appearance, along with her younger sister and her peerage as well. More tables are quickly brought in and seating is once again adjusted to allow friends to sit next to one another, though everyone seems to be taking it in good fun.

After all the newcomers are settled into place, dinner is finally served. The staff for once has work to do as they bring out large serving trays filled with dishes filled with the entree, ratatouille that is paired with the New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc that was already poured into the wine glasses on the table earlier. Those considered too young to drink alcohol were given non-alcoholic sparkling cider instead.

Conversations soon begin and she finds herself talking to the blue-haired and green-haired Arrancars seated across from her.

"So you're the Quincy who taught Ichigo those nasty little attacks of his." Grimmjow says as he licks his lips from the halibut quenelles in white wine sauce he requested in place of the 'cooked rabbit food'.

"Sorry, what?" The former Sternritter asks in confusion.
Nelliel laughs then. "That trick with the shadows. I had no way of defending against it. Every time I tried to turn around, he had a chain speeding at me from some crevice or hole or other. The only defense I found was to try and obliterate the source of the shadow, but that left me to open to his speed and Kidō based attacks, and only worked until he started using my own shadow against me. Gotta give it to you Candice-chan, Itsygo is far more dangerous now than when he first came to Hueco Mundo."

Candice blushes slightly at the praise. "Oh. That isn't my magic; that was his grandmother's. She was the one who first thought to use it to fight against multiple enemies at once by using our means of travel to send her Hell Chains through the shadows and catch her opponents off guard. All I did was help him learn how to use it."

Grimmjow snorts then. "Well, all I can say is that he finally gave me the fight I wanted and he won easily, even if we did cut off a limb from each other at the end. I know now I can say I gave it my all and this time no one interfered."

Issei Hyoudou, who is sitting two chairs down, looks somewhat queasy at the description of lost limbs, but he still asks the blue-haired Hollow how he knew of Ichigo from before.

"You're kidding right kid? You mean to tell me he didn't tell y'all who Nelliel and me are? Oi, Ichigo you didn't tell them who we are?" Grimmjow yells out to the orange-haired Devil.

Stopping mid-bite, Ichigo scrunches his eyebrows together and then sheepishly shrugs as he swallows. "Forgot to, why don't you tell him how we know each other? And don't embellish the facts or I'll sic the Midget…ouch dammit Rukia!"

"First, stop calling me Midget asshole; and two, you better start treating Grimmjow and Nelliel nicer from now on, or I'll have Captain Unohana give you a lesson in manners Berry." The violet eyed Shinigami says after kicking him as she walks by.

Rubbing his shin, he glares at her as she sits down. "When the hell did you two become so buddy-buddy anyway?"

Lifting her nose haughtily, she informs him. "Since you are toooo busy to help me with my Bankai, both of them, as well as Zangetsu are helping to train me. The three of them have been sparring with me and helping me and Sode No Shirayuki achieve our missing pieces. Granted both Grimmjow and Nelliel don't have Zanpakutō like us, but still their insight has been most helpful."
And Zangetsu, well he knows how to goad me when I am slacking. Much like you do Ichigo.”

"Che, whatever Midget." He ducks as she throws a bread roll at his head.

"So Grimmjow-san, how did you and Ichigo-senpai meet?" The Gremory Pawn asks innocently.

"I tried to kill him and Rukia when we were on different sides in our war. I first heard of Berryhead after Ulquiorra failed to kill him, so I went looking for him with my Fracción, but instead I found eight strong Shinigami and then me and my boys had to fight against them. I put a hole through Rukia's stomach and nearly killed Berryhead, but he saved himself with that bullshit Vizard mask and then Tōsen, one of the rogue Shinigami Captains that wanted to overthrow the Spirit King showed up to stop our fight. I was the only survivor from my group that night, but that was how our first fight went."

Ignoring the stunned look on the faces of Issei and the others who had not heard the story before, Grimmjow continues to regale them with the tales of his fights against Ichigo. As the rest of the room listen to the description of the fights between the two former enemies, some parts make them react in horror, while others have them looking at Orihime in sadness due to her part in the fights. Grimmjow grudgingly admits that he lost the last fight in Hueco Mundo and had it not been for Nnoitra's interference, it might have been the end of him right then. Around this time, they had finished eating their entrees, which are then replaced with the main courses, Pot au Feu paired with Pinot Noir, and for the vegetarians, a vegetarian Tartiflette where the Reblochon cheese used in the traditional recipe was substituted with Cornish Organic Brie, a vegetarian cheese, as well as a lack of bacon in it as would be called for in the original recipe; this was paired with a Chardonnay.

"So, you only survived because Captain Unohana healed you?" Momo asks the blue-haired Espada, who grins widely at her.

"She is one scary-ass lady that Captain; I thought Aizen was a pussycat after meeting her."

Ichigo shivers as well, having briefly glimpsed the darker side of Retsu Unohana. "I don't ever want to get on her bad side."

Yoruichi smirks at him then. "It's a good thing you didn't Ichigo, she wasn't the first Kenpachi without reason."

There is a stunned silence as every Shinigami, human and Arrancar pauses in their meal at that
The Neko assassin holds her wine glass in her hand as she looks down in it distantly. "It isn't common knowledge, and I only found out by accident, but Retsu Unohana once went by the name Yachiru Unohana, a feared and violent criminal from the Rukongai. She is among the oldest of the Captains, and she was there during the foundation years of the Gotei Thirteen, when Head Captain Yamamoto personally recruited the strongest and most dangerous members of the Rukongai to serve as the forming Captains of the Gotei. Yachiru Unohana was the one who helped create the Eleventh Squad, the hardest fighting squad out of all the squads, though she eventually left the squad when she was taught medicine by Tenjirō Kirinji of Zero Squad. She is perhaps the only one of the original Captains left from that time period besides the Head Captain himself. Even Jūshirō and Shunsui were still in the infancy of the Academy back then and didn't become Captains until later."

It takes a long moment for her audience to process those words, and their reaction is unanimous.

"Holy…" Ichigo starts.

"...Shit." Momo and Rukia finish for him.

Yoruichi smiles before looking around the room. "When I look at all of you, Devils, Shinigami, Arrancar and former humans working together, I wonder what the future holds for us now, just like it did for those Captains back then. Before I even met Isshin and Masaki, I had no hope of making friends outside of Soul Society, but…I can say with perfect honesty, that this is where I belong now."

She feels a pair of strong arms wraps themselves around her from behind, warm brown eyes staring into her golden orbs then. "We are the ones who are lucky to have you here…Okaa-san."

The pale man grins madly as he follows the blonde-haired teen off the cargo ship; he had been the only other passenger on board, but he made sure to keep his distance from the other person as per his orders. He was only to watch and protect her from the shadows, he wasn't allowed to have any contact with the nubile teen girl walking down the gangplank in front of him. His eyes trail over her cloaked form, seeing that she is still developing into a young woman, but he hopes to claim her while she is still in her boyish shape. Mature women don't excite him as much as the tomboys do; they had always been his weakness. It was because of a certain tomboy that he had been
excommunicated when she caught him causing such pain during one of his exorcisms that the possessed person died from the wounds he had inflicted on the sinner.

Now that he knows where he is going to next, he feels a sense of excitement starting to build in him when he learns that the town is filled with disgusting Devils. Since he had received no specific orders regarding them, he would get to kill any Devil in the town the moment he finds them. Sharp teeth glint with the moonlight as Freed Sellzen steps off the wooden walkway and follows behind the young nun into the darkness of the Japanese port town.

'Time to kill those shitty monsters once again.'

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Kneeling before his Emperor, Jugram Haschwalth can only think of how things had gone downhill after Yhwach had suffered from that unspecified episode. Now the Quincy Emperor sits on his throne in deep thought as he silently listens to the report of the missing Quincy who were sent to subjugate the Hollows for their army. Among the most disturbing of the details is the missing Sternritter, Candice Catnipp. By all accounts, she shouldn't have been defeated by such low-level beasts, yet she was undoubtly missing with no sign of her body to be found. The bodies of those sent to find her met a much different fate, all that remained when they were found afterwards looking like nothing more than torn scraps left behind by the Hollows who had fed upon them like scavengers, leaving little for them to be identified as the missing members of the Jagdarmee.

The Sternritter in charge of the search nearly had fits because the defeat of his men had left him feeling as if he had chosen weak Quincy to form the hunting teams. Sternritter 'J' was angry that he was still being held back from finding out who or what was killing his squads in the sands of Hueco Mundo, and this is the first time he had returned to Silbern since he began investigating the disappearance of the Sternritter 'T'. With three other teams gone missing and all indications pointing to them being ambushed by Hollows, Jugram had summoned him back to give his report in person. Now Quilge kneels exactly one pace behind Jugram as they wait for his Holiness to react to the news and allow them to travel to find out what exactly what is going on.

"We shall travel to Hueco Mundo and end this threat once and for all. I will personally lead the attack, and the first stepping stone shall be laid in our conquest of Soul Society. Now leave me and prepare yourselves." The Quincy Emperor finally declares.

Both Quincy rise and bow to him before turning to leave the room, neither man noticing the grimace of pain that crosses the lifeless eyes of Yhwach as he rubs his chest with his hand.
"I shall find out who has denied me my power."

Looking over the mansion, golden cat-like eyes scan the outside of the building for flaws in its security. Frowning at the fact that she still can't get any closer, even with the cloak she is wearing that is one of the few confiscated from the former traitor which has a limited Reiatsu suppressing ability. How Central Forty-Six had gotten their hands on it, she didn't bother to ask, just as long as it helps with her current assignment: to gather any information on the two Lieutenants who are supposed to be investigating the strange energy signatures coming from this town. So far, all she has seen for herself are the two delinquent Lieutenants living with the oddest group of teens she had ever seen in her life. Snorting to herself that these 'children' have no idea of the dangers that are hidden all around them, she is about to leave when she sees them leaving the mansion, accompanied by an unexpected person of interest.

"What is this?" She quietly says to herself as she recognizes someone that Central had deemed a threat not more than a year ago, a person who is supposed to have his memories wiped and banished from all contact with Soul Society.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? Ichigo Kurosaki and Rukia Kuchiki together again."
Taking a few quick snap shots, she puts away her memory capture device and waits for them to leave the premises before making for the outskirts of the town and opening the Shihōin Senkaimon.

'It seems the Kuchiki Clan's little princess hasn't changed one bit. Iwao will be pleased when he sees this; they can finally rid themselves of their 'Rukongai bitch' once and for all, just like…the first bitch.'

AN: So compared to previous chapters, this was a short one. I blame it on a few things. First I got sick for over a week, even this weekend I called out sick from work. Also family issues may have me going home once again for a few days to be with my family, so I am putting this out this week in case I do have to go home. But let me say I am already writing the next chapter and it should make up for this one in a big way. As for this chapter, thank god I have Okami, without her, some of the material here wouldn't be possible, such as the dinner scene and the foods we used. Again, having her has been the biggest reward for me finding her as my beta and co-creator for this story, again big round of applause for her. Next most of you seen the obvious hints as to who else will become Pawns for the peerage; I have to say I am loving it. Now I have a few things to talk over with Okami in regards to the Arrancars being reincarnated and depending on what we do, I think I won't drastically change them much except for one all important feature. So I'll hopefully be back
here in two or three weeks, depending as I said if I have to go home or not. 'Til then folks, see ya around.

Liam and Okami Princess

Response to Reviews Corner 3: Now before I begin review responses, I have to say, a lot of you guys read too much in the Los Noches flashbacks. There is no UlqiHime in this story; however that doesn't mean you won't see it in any of my other stories, current or planned.

Guest: New story idea: Sorry but I have a long list of planned stories already to write. I think about seven different ideas are in various stages of planning, two have actual first chapters written, but between me and you, if I start another one before I'm done these three, I think someone might gut me in my sleep. **cough, cough** my editor **cough, cough**

Soulsteel Blade: Welcome and hope you enjoy the rest of the story.

:S You get a clear idea in this chapter of who his peerage will be made up of.

Fifth Horseman: You too get a better idea this chapter of his peerage. As for Yoruichi, we have plans for her much further down the road. I think it will work, but there will be a price to pay for it however. Candice I admit is taking things in stride but that will come into play possibly in the next few chapters. And for Hiyori, I have been thinking about her and the other Vizards as well.

aliestrikehero: We are using the Irish myth of Gáe Bulg for our story.

Damaio The End: If someone knows him, let him know this doesn't have an UlqiHime pairing, I am using that for a different story.

Hollowking: Working on it for future chapters, hopefully this one helps you a bit.

Magery: Nope not Ulquiorra, I like him as well and plan to use him in future stories, paired with Orihime, much to someone's dismay. Reason I like him with Orihime is because of how
Nova Alexandria has written them, before her story I didn't really see it, but now they have grown on me as a couple.
Obligations

Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess, don't forget to include her in your reviews or send a PM to her with your thanks. But don't bother her on plot; she won't answer just like me :)

Edited by regfurby Nov 30 2018

XXXX

"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu"

XXXX

'It seems the Kuchiki Clan little princess hasn't changed one bit. Iwao will be pleased when he sees this; they can finally rid themselves of their 'Rukongai bitch' once and for all, just like…the first bitch.'

Chiyoko Shihōin

XXXX

Ichigo sinks his head under the water of the hot spring once again, a solid week of spars not only with his peerage, but also with his uncle's and grandfather's peerages has him feeling each and every one of his bruised and aching muscles. Adding that on top of his daily spars with Grimmjow and Nelliel, he is now thanking 'the big guy' that this weekend he is going to get a break for the ceremony, the one that will reincarnate two former Espadas as his peerage members. Rukia had shown much excitement at the fact that she is going to witness such an important event, while Momo is withholding her opinions for now. Orihime, Tatsuki and Chad are also excited to know that the two Arrancars will be joining them, even if it means they will have to split their time in Hueco Mundo to help Tia and the others. That is the only flaw with having them in his peerage; he can't and won't deny them time to go back to the place they have called home for years, decades or even centuries.

Since they'll be learning magic however, he doesn't see it as too much of a hindrance, all he has to do is call one of them and they can return within seconds if needed. His thoughts are interrupted as he feels water being displaced behind him; smiling, he leans back against the body that wraps her legs around his waist. Her crimson hair floats on top of the water around him as he relaxes, her hands beginning their magic of loosening the knots in his body.

"Why are you so stiff today Ichigo? I would think after the week you had, you would actually be looser, not tighter." Rias says as she kneads the tight knots in his muscles.

Leaning forward, he answers her quietly. "I've just been having this bad feeling all week, like everything is going too good for us lately. No Fallen Angels attacks, Tia hasn't communicated to us that the Quincy have intruded into Hueco Mundo and life in general has been…great."
"So, let me get this straight, the reason for your worry is because...things have been too peaceful for your liking? Are you an idiot or something Ichigo Naberius?" She twists a certain muscle harder than need be.

"Yeesss." He winces as he rides out the punishment. "I...we've never had things this quiet in...I don't know how long Rias. I guess I'm just wound up and waiting for something to happen, anything, because of the feeling I got in my gut."

Leaning her head against his back, the Gremory heiress reflects upon her boyfriend's observations. Ichigo, in her opinion, is someone who can't stand still for long, even in his training he is always moving from one lesson to the next. The only time she sees him sitting still is when they are in their room or the family room doing their homework or eating together; other than that, he is always sparring or learning. He does makes time for them whenever possible, if not she has to force him to stop and talk to her if need be, but mostly he does it on his own. That is one of the things he learned early on from Yoruichi: never ignore the woman you love or you could lose her for good.

Picking up from where she left off, Rias works the knots out of Ichigo until she finishes. Twisting around, he kisses her on her cheek and motions for her to turn around as well. Not that she needs to have the same thing done for her, but feeling his hands running down her back always makes her body heat up. Rias turns around obediently and moans out as his hands start out at the top, and within minutes she is putty in his hands. Soon those wonderful appendages find their next mark as she finds herself lying flat against his chest as the front of her body receives his attention.

"How much longer do we have to wait Ichigo?" Her voice is filled with lust.

Kissing her exposed neck, Ichigo answers her with just as much want in his voice. "Three weeks Rias, in three weeks it will be Mr. and Mrs. Naberius."

"And I thought this week was long." She moans frustratedly as she pushes back against him.

"We both know why we have to wait Rias, but it doesn't mean I can't..." His fingers trail down the front of her body, all the way to their final destination. She gasps and starts to writhe as her lower body receives his ministrations.

"You better make me forget before we leave this bath Ichigo."

"I intend to Rias."

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"Your Majesty, we are ready."

"Then tonight we proceed with our invasion of Hueco Mundo. This time I will be in command Jugram."

"As you command your Majesty."

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Friday night sees the entirety of the Gremory, Sitri, and Naberius peerages assemble for their departure to the Underworld. Excitement courses through those who are assembled as they wait for the last four people to arrive. Ichigo, Merti, Sasha and Yoruichi are leaving last minute instructions for the staff and for the security team that Merti had assembled from hers and Sasha's own resources. It had been a shock to all three heirs to know that more than a few Elves had moved to the Underworld, especially after Sasha had told him that there were close to three legions of Elven
warriors in various villages and towns spread out among the lands of the Naberius Clan. When asked, she plainly told them that they were all trained warriors who had sworn their allegiance to the clan centuries before. Among their duties are regular patrols to help the Cerberus maintain the integrity and security of the various estates that dot the Naberius holdings.

"So, you're saying that there are close to fifteen thousand Elves that my uncle can call upon to help him fight." Ichigo asked in shock when he first learned that the four Elves of the clan were by no means alone. "Wait, I thought Uncle Amyntas said Merti was the last of her family's line?"

"When Elves marry into a family, they become part of their new family; they no longer carry the lineage of their parents forward unless it is a son that marries. Merti never married Ichigo; hence she is the last of our family line. Tatianna and I both married into other families which is why we have different last names." The blind assassin smiles when she senses the embarrassment coming from her young lord.

"Sorry, forgot you and Tatianna were married. So…is her husband still alive?"

Sasha takes his hand and holds it in hers, absently tracing lines on his ring finger. "He passed away a few years after Nio did, killed by a member of the Old Satan faction. The life of an Elf serving in the Underworld is a violent affair Ichigo, but you must never try to keep us from fighting; this has been in our blood since we swore our allegiance to Lord Amyntas."

"I still don't have to like it Sasha." He answers back bitterly.

"Which is why we will follow you anywhere Ichigo: you value life, while others would throw it away." She slips her arm into his as she leads them to the gathering of people waiting to leave for home. "This weekend Tatianna wants to meet you Ichigo, she wants to go over the finances of you and your peerage."

'I'd like that. Be nice to meet the only sister I don't have to worry about kicking my ass." He mumbles.

Laughing as they walk into the room where everyone is waiting for them, Sasha leaves him gaping as she dashes his hopes with a few choice words. "Who said she was always an accountant, Ichigo?"

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Amyntas, Kisuke, Tessai and Isshin await the arrival of the teens, their mentors and the two soon-to-be newest peerage members in the transportation dome of the Naberius Estate. As they stand there waiting, Kisuke breaks the silence as he asks his fellow Shinigami-in-exile how things are going in Karakura.

"Eh, not too bad, Ryūken however is being a dick about things. I swear he always seems to find them damn Hollows before I do or the resident Shinigami does. I can see why Ichigo and Uryū were always at odds in the beginning of their relationship; it is exactly like mine and Ryūken's now." The Kurosaki patriarch bitches out with annoyance.

Amyntas chuckles at his grumbling. "So, you are saying you are too slow then Isshin?"

The other two Shinigami openly laugh at the pole-axed expression on the former Squad Ten Captain's face. "No dammit, I…well I just don't want old man Yama showing up and demanding Ryūken to stop, we all know how prideful that SOB can and will get."

While the others nod in agreement, Tessai pushes his glasses upwards as he informs the Kurosaki
father that he has nothing to worry about.

"Eh, why's that Tessai?"

The former Kidō Commander answers with a grin. "Because I have readjusted all of Squad Twelve's monitoring devices, they are sending back false information as to who is dealing with the Hollows for the time being. Sooner or later they'll realize something is wrong, but until then, they are blind to what is going on."

"Great, just in case 'he' comes, I have nothing to do with whatever it is you did then." Isshin snarks back hurriedly.

"Don't worry Shiba-dono, no one will ever know who did it and why. And it's not like anyone would see you as being capable of doing such a complicated Kidō anyways." The braided haired man replies back with a straight face.

Again, laughter erupts from the waiting men, before a magic circle appears on the floor underneath the Great Dome and cuts off their laughter. As the figures of people emerge from the magic circle, Isshin finds himself tackled in a bear hug from his youngest daughter, while his older children stand idly by watching with smirks on their faces. Karin finally relents and hugs him, but Ichigo body slams him when the older Kurosaki's eyes gain a familiar glint in them.

"Preemptive strike Goat-Face, I'm allowed to after all the shit you did to me as a kid." He says as he cracks his knuckles over the fallen Shiba male.

"Had…to…make sure…someone…keeping you…on your…toes…my son." Isshin wheezes as Yuzu fusses over him and sends glares at her older brother at the same time.

"When will you two ever stop?" Karin says as she walks past their prone father, deliberately ignoring his weak cries for help.

Pulling Isshin to his feet, Ichigo dodges the right jab to his jaw and ducks under the older man's defenses before putting him in a head-lock. "Come on Goat-Face; let me walk you to your room."

Unable to get his arms free, Isshin pleads to his older daughters for help. "Orihime, Rias, help your poor daddy get away from his mean son! Please, for daddy's sake, help!"

Orihime smiles as she pulls the lighter-haired twin into her arms and walks away. "Sorry Otou-san, Ichigo told me never to interfere with your bonding time. Yuzu, we need to hurry and get ready for dinner."

Just like Orihime, Rias gives him an apologetic smile. "I don't think I should either Isshin, I think Ichigo might be upset at you right now and I'd rather not get in the middle until I am his wife, maybe then I'll be able to help." The crimson-haired Devil giggles as she hurries after the darker-haired twin as well.

Soon, only the two Kurosaki males are left in the Dome with the Cerberus on guard duty. Letting his father go, Ichigo grabs Isshin's arm and gives him a serious look.

"Dad, did you ever have…I don't know, get a feeling that something bad was going to happen when you went after 'White'?"

Frowning as he looks at his son, the Shinigami nods his head once. "You're having a gut feeling?"

"Yeah, it won't go away."
Isshin frowns, then he pats Ichigo on the shoulder. "Trust your instincts Ichigo. I did back then." He walks away, leaving his son standing there thinking.

"Zangetsu, where are we in terms of fighting ability?"

Phasing into the material world, the white Zanpakutō spirit gazes at his wielder. "I would say we could take on a few Captains and not worry at this point, except for those four. Why, you think something is going to happen?"

"Yeah, something really bad. Be ready, I'm gonna probably need everything we have so far."

"I'll be ready Ichigo. If it is for real, whoever it is, is gonna be sorry he fucked with us."

Determined brown orbs stare back into golden orbs. "You let loose if shit happens; I won't hold you back, not anymore."

Smiling as he fades back to his world, Zangetsu speaks one last time. "I'll be ready King."

XXXX

The dining room is once again filled with Devils and their guests for the upcoming ceremony, marking a new era for the Underworld. No one had ever reincarnated anyone from Soul Society or Hueco Mundo before, until tonight when Ichigo will gain his two Knights, the mated Arrancar pair of Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez and Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck, both of them former Espada. The two in question have seats at the head table with Ichigo and his uncle Amyntas, along with Yoruichi, the twins, Orihime, Isshin and finally Serafall. The Leviathan Maou had gotten the news and wanted to watch the ceremony herself, so she snuck away from her family's estate and made a beeline to the Naberius Estate as soon as she could.

Tonight, the combined peerages will spend the weekend celebrating with no thoughts of training for any of the young Devils. Amyntas had insisted that they all take a break, since they have been training non-stop since the day after becoming Devils themselves; he had even ordered Merti, Sasha, Yoruichi and Rias to keep his great-grandson from going anywhere near a training room or dimension during the weekend. The four had readily agreed, much to the annoyance of his scowling 'nephew' as he was forced to sit there and agree as well; a whispered threat from the crimson-haired beauty in love with him crumbled his will to argue in seconds.

Dessert and after-dinner drinks are soon served after the guests have their fill, the younger Devils getting permission to drink weak wine to wash down the sweets. Talk slowly fills the room as the older Devils speak to the two soon to be reincarnated Devils, each of them receiving words of encouragement and congratulations on becoming the newest members of the Naberius Clan. Nelliel and Grimmjow soon find themselves at a table with the other Knights from the various peerages, each Knight explaining their roles within their respective peerages. Ichigo on the other hand quietly makes his way to the balcony to find some alone time to gather his thoughts before tonight's ceremony, only to find out that he isn't as alone as he thought he was.

"Ichigo," Amyntas comes out from the shadows, a glass of wine in his hand.

Nodding to the older Naberius, Ichigo leans on the stone railing and sets his wine glass down. "Uncle. You here to enjoy the silence too?"

"No, I've been watching you since you came home Ichigo. Your father told me something has been bothering you this past week."
Swirling the semi-clear amber liquid before lifting it to his mouth, Ichigo takes a sip before answering. "Guess Goat-Face really is worried then. Can't be helped I suppose. All week I've been on pins and needles, something in me is trying to warn me of something, but as to what I just don't know."

Amyntas hums in thought. "I believe it is your instinct Ichigo. From what Urahara has told me of Hollows, they have heightened senses, something you still have even though you became a Devil, a Devil that has the powers of a Shinigami, a Quincy and lastly those of Hollows. Somewhere you might have developed a foretelling sense for danger, an ability all predators have, one that keeps them alive. I can't tell you not to worry, but if anything should happen Ichigo, I won't allow you to face it alone."

A chuckle sounds out between the two Devils, the younger one speaking then. "I guess everyone has the same idea too?"

"Can you blame them Ichigo? You, who have fought for them so many times in order to protect them, shouldn't be surprised that they won't allow you to do so anymore. Especially those three. Yoruichi, Rukia and Orihime each have made it clear to us that you need to stop trying to shoulder the burden by yourself. I and your father also agree on this. Venelana, I believe made it clear that night as well." Amyntas suppresses his smile when he sees Ichigo shiver at the recollection of that incident.

Swirling his wine, Ichigo does remember his 'Okaa-san's' words that night, the night he and Rias took off without telling anyone.

'Ichigo Naberius, tonight will never happen again; am I understood?'

_Nodding to his future mother-in-law, Ichigo was surprised when she sat next to him on the couch. 'Soon my daughter will be your wife Ichigo, but she will also become a young widow if you keep acting like you can do everything on your own. You can't. If you can't or won't depend on others to help you, tell me now so I can spare my daughter the heartache she will suffer from your death. I won't allow her to marry someone with a death-wish.'_

'Venelana?'

_He moved back slightly as her eyes bore into his. 'You are the heir to two noble clans Ichigo, and as the head of those clans, your duty is to them first, personal issues second. You can't keep gallivanting off like this without word or escort as to where you are going. Between the Old Satan Faction and your enemies in Soul Society, lest we forget the Fallen Angels and Angels, you are surrounded by potential enemies wherever you go Ichigo. I need you to understand this, as a noble: your life isn't completely yours anymore, others will and do depend on you, namely your Clan and your peerage. I'm sure Yoruichi and Suì-Fēng have or will tell you the same things being nobles themselves, so keep this in mind from now on when you want to do something yourself. We won't take your privacy away, but you can't keep going off by yourself anymore. That is why you have Merti, Sasha, Nia and Kimi with you, they are your bodyguards.'_

'What? I thought only Kimi and Nia were.'

_She looked at him askance. 'I have known your uncle for many years Ichigo, if he said only Kimi and Nia, then he damn well made sure their aunt and mother weren't too far from you either.'_

'What of Yuzu? Karin? Even Orihime?'

'None of them will ever be alone Ichigo, you just won't see their guards around them. He has
placed a ring of death around those three, Orihime included because she is nobility herself, your sister and theirs. He won't risk anyone harming her or the twins, because frankly, he knows what you will do if that should ever occur.'

Snorting in agreement with his girlfriend's mother, he hung his head then. 'I guess I screwed up tonight, didn't I?'

Pushing aside his shirt, she touched the lingering bruises on his chest. "I believe Yoruichi and Sui-Fēng said as much, Ichigo.'

'They did, more than once Venelana.'

'Do you understand Ichigo?'

'I do, really I do Ven…'

'Okaa-san as of now Ichigo. The same as Yoruichi. You are now my son Ichigo, just as your sisters are my daughters. Now return to Rias and remember your promise.'

'I will Okaa-san.' He gave her a kiss on her cheek before leaving.

"Venelana made it very clear to me that night Uncle. Trust me; I won't ignore hers or Yoruichi's words or warnings anymore." He sips his wine again.

There is a pause, then his uncle apologizes to him. "I'm sorry that you got caught up in any of this Ichigo."

"I'm not."

Now it is Amyntas who looks surprised by his nephew's admission. "Ichigo?"

"The moment Midget pierced my soul with Sode No Shirayuki, I had never been happier Uncle Amyntas. The power I got to protect them, it is exhilarating to be honest. If I had lost them that day when I fought and defeated Aizen, I honestly don't know how I would have made it. I don't think any of you would have been able to understand the feelings I would have had if I had to watch Chad, Uryū, hell even Orihime fight Hollows without me. Never getting to see or talk to Rukia, Renji or any of my other Shinigami friends again. Honestly, if I had lost my powers, I don't know what I would have done."

"You would have lived on Ichigo, because you have three sisters and friends who love you too much to ever let you forget that." The voice of his Bankai teacher says from behind him.

Twisting around, he sees Yoruichi and all the people they had mentioned standing in the balcony doorway or the surrounding windows.

"Guys?"

Rukia slowly walks up to him and smirks when he steps back warily. "You're an idiot Ichigo."

"Oi!"

"Do you really think we would have left you like that? After everything you have done for each and every one of us here, do you think for one second we would have left you alone?" The violet eyed Kuchiki says as her own tears threaten to fall.

"Rukia…I know they would have tried to keep you guys from seeing me. You know that law about
"Interfering with humans and all." He counters.

"Baka! You taught us to ignore those rules and laws because they are asinine to begin with! Your own father is a Shinigami, so tell me carrot-top, how could they stop us from seeing you when your own father is one of us?"

Opening and closing his mouth several times, he looks over at his mentors, his dad, and sees them giving him open confirmation to her words.

"You really would have done that...for me Rukia?" He can honestly say he didn't see that one coming.

Walking until she is close to her friend, she grabs him in a hug and speaks to him. "My clan does have its own Senkaimon Ichigo, I don't think Nii-sama would have said a word if me and a few others used it to visit the World of the Living, for some...shopping."

"I...I'm sorry Rukia." He hugs her back then.

"Good, I don't ever want to hear you talk like that again. Powerless or not, you are my best friend Ichigo."

Yoruichi sees the tightening around her young pupil's eyes as he hugs Rukia, the same look that he had during his fight with Aizen. "Ichigo, what did Aizen say to you that day?"

"...Nothing."

"What did he say to you when he had you in his grip?" Yoruichi demands insistently, she and a few of the older members of the peerages easily hearing the slight hesitation in his voice.

Snapping his head up, he stares at Yoruichi with wild eyes as the memory of that battle forces its way to the forefront of his thoughts. Shaking his head wildly, he is about to deny that anything had been said, but Zangetsu appears next to him and grips his chin tightly.

"Tell them Ichigo."

Rukia looks at the spirit next to her and sees the anger in his golden eyes. "Zangetsu, what are you doing?"

"I want King to admit to what happened that day. I want him to tell each of you what he was feeling when Aizen had him at his..."

"No! It's over with Zangetsu!"

Zangetsu tightens his grip, refusing to let Ichigo pull away from him. "No, it isn't Ichigo. You haven't spoken to anyone about that day, why is that? You want to know what is in there, but until you voice what you were feeling that day, I will never allow you in there. NOW TELL THEM!"

The Devils, Shinigami and Elves watch as the two nearly identical males stare at each other angrily, until the orange-haired Devil backs down from his Zanpakutō spirit and begins to speak lowly to them.

"Fine dammit! I was terrified alright, terrified and...helpless. Aizen figured out that Kisuke might have used Kidō to try and seal him or worse, so he was prepared for it. I was losing my powers after I used Saigo no Getsuga Tenshō on him, but it failed to do enough damage to stop him. It was
what he said when he had me by my throat that made me truly feel absolute despair for failing, not even what Ulquiorra did to me when he killed me made me feel the same amount of despair when Aizen told me what he was going to do after killing me." He swallows painfully as his partner releases him.

Looking first at the woman in his arms, then at his oldest sister, his golden eyed mother-figure, and then his father and the twins, he tells them the words that they had not been allowed to hear on Kisuke's video that day.

"He promised me he would use Karin's, Yuzu's and Goat-Face's Reiryoku to help create the Ōken, and then he told me what he planned to do to my loved ones once he ascended the throne. I felt absolutely powerless hearing him tell me those things, unable to fight back, unable to save you. I… I was defeated and had no way of fighting anymore. Not until someone showed up and saved me." He looks at his white clone then.

Orihime is in tears, as are his sisters and his best friends, while the faces of the Devils show barely restrained fury, and the faces of the Shinigami are etched with bitterness. Zangetsu however stares at him approvingly, placing a supportive hand on his wielder's shoulder.

"You finally admit your fear because you thought you were alone and at his mercy that day Ichigo. Truth is, you were never alone Ichigo, not even once. When you saved the Ice Princess who was behind you? When you lost to Grimmjow the first time, who helped you train your 'inner-Hollow'? When you raced off to save Orihime, who followed you yet again and who came afterwards? When you were losing against the Quinto, who stepped in until helped arrived? When you and Ulquiorra fought on top of Las Noches, whose voice reached us, brought us back? And more importantly, whose father gave his son the time to train in the Dangai Ichigo? Don't you see, you have never truly been alone in your battles Ichigo. Someone has always been with you to lend a hand, whether it was human, Quincy, Shinigami, hell even a former Espada came to your aid. That is what they mean by not doing it alone, because you have never really been alone." Waving his arm behind them and encompassing the assembled group, he speaks again.

"Your family, friends and your Clan will always stand next to you Ichigo. The only time you will ever truly feel that fear again is if you deny them the right to help you and they aren't there. You finally admitted your fear Ichigo, now it's time for you to understand this. I will never allow you to feel alone again if I can help it, but I want one thing from you Ichigo, only one. Don't ever think you have to do it alone, because as I said, you never have been alone."

Ichigo pulls the Shinigami in his arms tight against his chest as he waves for his sister and then his friends to join them. Rias watches as her boyfriend, his Zanpakutō spirit and his best friend are first hugged by his sisters, then his cousin and then finally his peerage. The four Shinigami that have been with them for each step of their journey also form a ring around the teens and preteens, each of them with smiles on their faces. Rias watches as those who fought in the Winter War against a common enemy make the solemn promise of never again. Soon the group breaks apart when one of the three in the middle lets it be known she can't breathe. Laughter and an insult about her height finally bring smiles and grins to the group of friends, even as Ichigo is kicked in the shins. Wincing in pain, wielder and Zanpakutō then stare at each other for a long moment before the spirit fades away, having received an agreement from his partner.

"You guys done yet?" Akiko asks them with a hint of amusement.

"Yeah, we're done Akiko, why?"
Pointing to the two Arrancar next to her, she grins as she speaks. "We have two new Knights to reincarnate, but if you guys want to wait…" The group shouts 'No' back at her. "Well the sooner we get done, the sooner we can start celebrating tonight Lord Ichigo."

"I'm with her Ichigo, let's get this done so I can find out how much stronger I am when we spar." The blue-haired Espada says with a feral grin.

A slap to his head quiets him down, but Nelliel's own eyes tell them she wants the same thing that her mate wants. "I'm ready as well Ichigo."

"Then let's reincarnate my two newest peerage members Akiko, it seems my Knights are as impatient as always." He tells them with a grin.

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Braided blonde hair swings gently as the Queen of Hueco Mundo walks down the hallway leading to the throne room, so far, they had intercepted three small groups of Quincies invading their lands, none were of sufficient value to warrant calling Ichigo or the others for assistance. As she turns the corner, her senses go haywire as she feels numerous powerfully strong and more importantly unknown entities suddenly appearing within the walls of Las Noches. Twisting around and releasing her Resurrección, she fires off La Gota at a male figure dressed in white that she sees out of her peripheral vision. The water missile crashes into him, and she steps back when the water disperses and the figure's uniform shows she has done little damage even as he speaks to her.

"I'll shall enjoy showing you who is the Master and who is the slave, Arrancar."

Static sounds herald the arrival of her Fracción as they appear before her, but she halts them, knowing this man can easily defeat her girls.

"Sung-Sun, Mila Rose, Apacci, go and make the call, then get as many of the others as you can out of Las Noches. Obey me and leave now."

"Mistress?" Sung-Sun asks in disbelief.

"Obey me and call him now!" She then powers up her Cero and then releases it towards the Quincy to buy them some time.

"Go, they are too powerful for you. Make contact and do not return for me, do you understand!?" Even as the Cero explodes in the corridor, she can sense she has done little to no damage yet again to the strange man.

Her three Fracción look to argue, but a stern glare from her stops them short. The tallest of them punches the wall next to her then leaves via Sonído, as do the other two, but not without the smallest one giving her one last look.

"I am counting on you three, call Ichigo and tell him our contract is in force."

"Hai Mistress Harribel."

Turning her full attention back to her opponent, the former Tercera Espada powers up her ultimate attack and as soon as the man pushes the rubble away with a streak of blood coming down his forehead, she lets loose her attack on him, burying him in rubble again.

'Hurry Ichigo, I will only be able to hold them back for so long.'
Under the twilight of the Underworld, Ichigo watches as his two Knights begin to reincarnate as his Evil Pieces slip into their bodies. He and everyone else watch as they lie there without anything obvious happening until Nelliel begins to scream out in pain. Grimmjow is the first to react as he instinctively tries to sit up, but then he too begins screaming in pain and clutching his hand over his Hollow hole. Ichigo rushes to Grimmjow's side and looks up to see both Kisuke and Amyntas at the other table with Nelliel.

"What the hell is going on Kisuke, Uncle!?!" He says as he tries to hold down the blue-haired warrior, the Nekomata Rook Daiki rushing to hold down the other side of the screaming Arrancar.

Shaking his head in confusion, Kisuke is about to answer when he sees something unexpected happening in front of his eyes. "What is this?"

Ichigo's eyes follow his mentor's eyes and they both stare at the now shrinking hole in Grimmjow's chest. The same thought crosses their mind and they immediately glance towards Nelliel, but her Hollow hole is not in view, so they turn back to watch Grimmjow instead. As the Hollow hole slowly fills, the pained cries from both Arrancar slowly fade to quiet whimpers, and then finally to nothing as the two now reincarnated Devils lie on separate tables unconscious but breathing regularly.

"What just happened?" Isshin asks as he approaches his son's side.

Shaking his head, Kisuke for once is at a loss for words as he stares at the spot that once was a void in Grimmjow's chest. Looking towards the panther Arrancar's green-haired mate, he can only speculate as to where Nelliel's Hollow hole could have been. Using Kaidō, he scans the former Tercera's body and finds that she is completely fine, just unconscious from her ordeal and possessing no Hollow hole either. Releasing his scan, he looks up at his young protégé and gives his best answer for the time being.

"It would seem your two Knights have regained their humanity, for the lack of a better word, by becoming Devils Ichigo; they have somehow regained what they had lost when they first became Hollows. I am truly impressed Ichigo, you are always surprising me." His fan snaps open as he looks down at the two newest members of Ichigo's peerage with sincere amazement in his eyes.

Before his orange-haired student can reply however, Kisuke's phone begins ringing obnoxiously. Flipping his fan shut and fuddling around his Haori, he pulls out his phone from a hidden pocket and flips it open and answers.

"Moshi, mos...Sung-Sun-ch...what's going on!?!" His suddenly raised voice pulls all attention back to him as the shouting genius pulls the phone from his ear slightly.

"Say that again but don't shout Ms. Sung-Sun. You are under attack by Quincy. Tia is leading them away to the throne room you say. No, no we will be there in five minutes, find a place to hide or hold out. We are on our way." Snapping the phone shut, he looks at a furious looking Ichigo.

"Time to honor your contract Ichigo, I hope you're ready." Kisuke then pops a Gikongan into his mouth and the Devils witness the release of a Captain-class Shinigami as his Reiatsu momentarily fills the room.

Following on his heels, Yoruichi, Tessai, and Isshin also pop their own souls out with Gikongan as they each give him looks that brook no argument, causing him to roll his eyes at them. "I get it jackasses. Uncle, see to my Knights if you could. Orihime, Chad, Tatsuki get ready, we're leaving
"Not without us Ichigo." Akiko and her husband Daiki say as they use magic to change their clothes into more suitable ones for battle. The nine tailed Kitsune then turns to the Naberius peerages and lifts her right hand in command. "Prepare yourselves, we go to war."

The room immediately fills with magic as the peerages of Ichigo's great-grandfather and grandfather change their attires to clothes more suitable for combat. But what causes his heart to leap into his throat is when he sees his girlfriend, his cousins Sōna and the current Leviathan Maou also change into more suitable clothes for combat, along with Rias's and Sōna's peerages. Serafall notices his gaze and turns on him with hard eyes when she senses him about to object.

"Do not argue, Ichigo. We are going." She cuts off his attempt to speak with a no-nonsense tone before she turns to the current Guardian of the Damned. "Lord Naberius, please inform the other Maou that I am leaving for Hueco Mundo with my sister and my younger cousin, the heir to the Naberius Clan to fight against the Quincy invaders. Candice, you will safeguard your student Uryū Ishida. Sōna, you and Rias are to keep your peerages together at all times and lend support to the Elves and the Hell Hounds; none of you are to recklessly engage the enemy unless you are being attacked, and you are to call for assistance if that should happen."

Knowing the seriousness of the situation, each of them give her a bow back and acknowledge her commands. Turning back to Ichigo, Serafall walks up to him and pulls his head down so she can speak to him privately.

"Trust in their abilities Ichigo. They are not helpless children but powerful Devils, make use of that power and know you will win this battle."

Lifting his head back up, he sees his girlfriend and each of the younger Devils he has come to see as his family looking to him for approval. Nodding to them reluctantly, he turns to his uncle and asks for any last-minute instructions.

"Go to the Eastern lawn Ichigo, the others will meet you there. Sasha, get the first seven cohorts, Kane gather your strongest fifty and guard them with your lives."

The Elf and Cerberus both bow before disappearing. Ichigo walks up to his scared younger sisters and gathers them into a tight hug as he promises both of them that he will return.

"You promise right Ichigo? That you will come back with everyone?"

"I promise Karin, now I need you to keep Yuzu safe until we return. Can you do that for me?" He kisses her head when she nods to him and then he kisses Yuzu's head as well before joining the others who are heading towards the Eastern lawn.

"Please be careful Ichi-nii." Yuzu whispers as she watches her older siblings file out of the room grimly.

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Ichigo pauses for a second when he sees close to eight hundred Elfin men and women standing at attention in their black uniforms on the lawn, each of them wearing a silver breastplate with the Naberius Clan's emblem stamped near the right shoulder. Coming down the stairs and wondering how they assembled so quickly, he stops when Merti places a hand on his arm.

"Put your Hell Armor on Ichigo, after you separate your soul."
"What?"

The assassin hands him a green pill he recognizes as a Gikongan.

Taking it with a sigh, he pops it in his mouth and...nothing.

"Ah, Kisuke, what gives?" Ichigo says after spitting out the Gikongan when it becomes obvious that his soul won't separate from his body.

Scratching his head as he approaches them, the former Captain shakes his head slowly as he speaks. "I can only assume that when you unsealed your last bloodline, it...healed you Ichigo as it did for your new Knights. You no longer have a 'human soul', you became a Devil. Maybe when we return and find the time, we'll look into further, but time is of the essence now."

"I guess that explains how I was able to go Bankai when Hephaestus tested me and Zangetsu." Ichigo mutters.

"What test Ichigo?" Amyntas asks of his great-grandson.

Orihime jumps in excitedly. "Hephaestus-san threw these metal balls into the room with Ichigo and they all disappeared because of Ichigo's powers. Hephaestus-san was very happy that he destroyed all ten of them."

"I... see. Well then, we have nothing to worry about." The Guardian of the Damned shares a subtle look with his Queen, one that only Kisuke and Yoruichi notice because Ichigo has already turned towards Merti.

Staring at his Head of Household, Ichigo sees the same look he has now come to recognize in those who are getting ready to go into battle looking back at him. Taking two steps back, he releases his Reiatsu and Devil magic to form not only his Hell armor, but also Zangetsu in his out-stretched hand. Placing the Zanpakutō on his back by using his Hell Chains to secure his Zanpakutō, he faces the gathering of Devils, Shinigami and Elves, then he looks at his father after lifting the visor on his helm. His dad chuckles as he calls out loudly to his son.

"This is your show kid. You tell us what you want us to do."

"Me?" Ichigo looks baffled at him.

Yoruichi face-palms as she speaks. "Yes, you Berry. It is your contract with the Queen of Hueco Mundo; hence you are in charge of this little venture to save them. Time is still running Ichigo; what are your orders?"

Pausing as he listens to Zangetsu, Ichigo scowls at first, then his scowl fades the longer Zangetsu speaks to him. Soon his gaze focuses back on those waiting for him to give them their commands.

"When we arrive, Chad will blast us two openings through the outer wall of Hueco Mundo. Then I want Chad, Tatsuki, Aisling, Remei, and Carles to each take command of one of the cohorts and secure the outer walls. If you run into any of the Wandenreich, incapacitate them if possible and leave them bound for Soul Society to find, but don't risk your lives for it. Kisuke, I assume you have those on you." Seeing the blonde-haired man give him a quick nod, Ichigo continues.

"Good, leave as many of Kisuke's devices as you can on the Quincy bodies, dead or alive. The more of those floating around, better the chances that someone outside of the Twelfth will get
their hands on one. According to Kisuke, Kurotsuchi will try and hide that information, so seed them wherever you can. Hanako, I want you in charge of Chad's group until they secure the outside, then I want you to rejoin your mother and begin laying down offensive spells. We can't afford to leave the Quincy or anyone else a base of operations, especially one that has been easily compromised as it seems to be the case here. I plan on leveling Las Noches as soon as we retrieve Tia and the surviving Arrancar. Any Hollow you see captured, free them and tell them to head to the deep deserts, tell them not to return until Tia sends word to them that it is safe to do so."

Pausing for a second, he continues. "Rias and Sōna, you and your peerages will follow the remaining cohorts and Hell Hounds to take the areas under the dome. Use overwhelming force if you come across any of the Wandenreich, I know each of you has been studying their tactics thanks to Candice. Rukia go with Sōna, Momo with Rias. Do not take any chances, hit 'em quick, hit 'em hard; don't give them time to react. Lastly, destroy any towers or buildings you come across after you clear them, we're not leaving anything standing for the enemy to use. Kane, cover them and give them support, if you can take down any of the weaker Sternritters, do so. We need to take a few alive for interrogation, once we're done either we'll take them with us or leave them outside the walls for Soul Society to find. The rest of us, we hunt and eliminate anyone not a Hollow and not one of us. Uryū, Serafall, Merti, Candice, Orihime and I will head directly for Tia and the throne room. Any questions?"

When no one says anything, he feels compelled to add one last thing to those following him. "Stay safe; I'll see each of you when this is over." A magic circle then appears under his feet as he uses his vast superior stores of Reiatsu and magic to transport them all to the sands of the eternal night.

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Quilge Opie stands over the cowering chained Hollows, looking over his best crop of recruits in months; all due to their Emperor leading the assault on Las Noches himself. He smiles as he sees the numerous defeated faces looking blankly at the sand underneath, none of them had dared to speak in defiance after his 'demonstration' that is still lying in its own pool of blood. Walking down the lines, he takes stock of the various Adjuchas, a few dozen Arrancars and the one Vasto Lorde waiting to be transported to Silbern. Looking towards the two dozen Jagdarmee soldiers under his command, he begins to plan on how to make up for lost time to quickly increase the Soldat ranks when he feels the hairs on his neck beginning to stand on end. Turning around sharply, he sees a large glowing circle less than ten meters away.

"What is this?" He demands as the light suddenly glows so bright, he has to cover his eyes from the sudden flash.

Eight spikes slam into his chest before he gets the chance to lower his arm. Coughing up blood, he falls to his knees and his eyes go wide as he sees a black armored man walking towards him, long chains extending from the being's back and leading towards him as well. Following the chains, he looks down at his chest and sees the chains are attached to the spikes that have pierced his chest. An armored boot crunching in the sand before him has him looking up again and seeing glowing crimson eyes boring down on him from within a two-horned helm. All around him, he sees and hears his men screaming as multiple arrows find their hearts or heads, but it all sounds as if it was coming from a great distance. Dropping one hand into the sands to hold himself upright, he rallies what little strength he has left to glare at the armored monster peering down at him.
"Who are you?" He utters out as his lifeblood splatters from his lips onto the ground before him. His answer comes in the form of a hand rising up and two fingers pointing at his forehead. "Hadō Number Four: Byakurai."

The last thing Quilge Opie sees is a flash of white before his head snaps back with a large hole punching through his skull, his glasses falling to the side and eyes staring blankly skyward as the Sternritter crumples lifelessly to the ground. The armored creature then turns to a larger man who is also covered in armor, a white and red color scheme on his left arm and a black and purple color scheme on his right arm while the rest of his body is covered in white armor.

"Chad, make our entrance. Remember everyone, do not hesitate, killing blows as soon as you spot anyone wearing the symbol of the Wandenreich. Incapacitate if possible, but take no chances. If they live, restrain them for later. Good luck and stay safe." Ichigo says as he watches his Rook power up his arms.

"El Directo!" Chad's first blast cleanly opens a hole all the way through the outer wall. A few seconds later his second strike hits the wall about fifty meters to the left of the first one, causing it to implode in a shower of debris. Ichigo looks behind him and nods to those who are to follow him. As they assemble, he turns to his girlfriend and sends her one last look before a magic circle appears under his feet.

The crimson-haired beauty takes one deep breath as she meets her boyfriend's gaze, watching him leave them behind so he can go save his future Queen. A hand on her arm makes her turn to see Momo Hinamori giving her a reassuring smile.

"We should do our part as well Rias-san, he's counting on us to eliminate as many of our enemies as we can."

"Right. Gremory Clan, Nadine, let's move in! Sōna, Kane, take the right hole! Now let's show these Quincy the power of the Underworld!"

She begins to race towards the left hole with her peerage, followed by Momo, one cohort of Elves and twenty-five Hell Hounds being led by Kane's oldest daughter, Nadine. To her right side, Sōna, her peerage, Rukia, Kane and his compliment of Elves and Hell Hounds race alongside them. As they draw closer to the hole in the wall, a wave of water shoots out from her fellow heiress as a woman in a white uniform suddenly shows up in front of the gaping hole. The woman barely has time to gape before the water slams into her less than a second later, Rukia freezing the water into ice as she passes and someone from the Elfin cohorts shattering the frozen statue into ice chunks, leaving behind red ice cubes as they pass through the breached white wall.

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Hanako watches as the two younger peerages race through the two opens in the wall, the second Sternritter they encountered didn't stand a chance after Sōna drenched her in water and Rukia froze her into ice. She shakes her head slightly when she sees one of the Elves break the frozen Sternritter into pieces however, preventing her from being captured. Turning to her mother, she sees the older Kyuubi smirking as she looks at her husband and takes his hand.

"Let Hanako have some fun out here dear, we'll have ours in there." She tells Daiki.

"Of course, my Queen. Hanako, Conor we'll see you once you are done."
Rolling her eyes, Hanako responds to her father while her husband nods to his in-laws. "Okay Dad, Mom. See you in a few."

Watching as her mother and father disappears into the closest hole of the wall along with Lord Amyntas's peerage except for those who are staying with her, she whispers softly behind them. "Please, be careful."

A hand on her shoulder makes her look up at her red headed husband, his leather tunic glistening from fresh polish and Gae Bolg humming in bloodthirsty anticipation. He kisses her cheek and whispers the same sentiments to her as well before turning to lead the remaining members of Vincent Naberius's peerage into the right hole of the wall of white before them. The white Kitsune Nekomata Devil hybrid then faces the five cohort Captains remaining behind with Chad, Tatsuki, Aisling, Remei, and Carles.

"Chad, you and Remei circle left with your Elves, remember to free any prisoners you find. Tatsuki, Charles, circle the opposite way. Once the four of you meet up, send your familiars to me and let me know. Tatsuki, Chad, take these." She hands the two Rooks a sealed ball. "Break them open and have them report to Aisling once you are in position."

Looking at the fairy who is floating near her, the white-haired Rook gives her the last orders. "Aisling, you'll support the right side, I'll support the left. Once they are done, you are in charge, keep the surviving Quincy alive until we leave." Getting a nod from the fairy, she turns to the Hollows who are still chained and looking at the Devils with terror in their eyes. As she approaches them, the fires she inherited from her mother begin blazing forth along her Hell Chains.

"We are here to save Queen Tia Harribel; once we let you out of your chains, make for the deep deserts, do not return until she calls for you. If you see the white Quincy uniform, do everything you can to escape, we can't patrol the entirety of Hueco Mundo ourselves. Lastly, Lord Ichigo has told us that some of you may try to attack us, let me show you why that will not be a wise choice."

She snaps several sets of flaming chains to encase and then burn the bodies of the dead Quincies until only glowing ash remains in the spots that they once lay.

"Do you understand the consequences?" When she sees the Hollows frantically nodding, she orders the Elves of Aisling's cohort to begin releasing them from their chains.

Watching as the freed Hollows flee into the desert via Sonido or otherwise, she turns to Las Noches as she feels the first of her mother's attacks breaching the white dome.

"Wow, who pissed you off Mother?"

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Chad can feel the Reishi infusing his armor and his spirit as he flies over the eternal sands of Hueco Mundo, the Elves under his and Remei's command surprisingly able to keep pace on foot with the two airborne Devils as they glide over the shifting sands of Hueco Mundo. Deciding to scout ahead, he gains the older Devil's attention and lets her know his intentions.

"Stay safe Sado-san, I'll follow you with the Elves, come right back as soon as you spot something or not. I don't want to separate our forces until we have to." She warns him.

"Okay Remei-san." He glides higher and begins to use his wings to keep him about two thirds of the way up the side of the towering walls.

Judging that he is nearing the halfway point of the towering structure, the Rook suddenly spies
movement coming from the desert sands ahead of him and subtly glides closer, spotting between ten and fifteen men in white uniforms using Reishi whips and spirit bows to crowd dozens of Hollows into two long lines that are stretching back at least a hundred meters. Frowning, he begins to circle back to get his older companion when he spots an Adjuchas suddenly trying to make a run for the open sands after breaking free from the lines somehow. Chad watches in horror as one of the Quincy guards raises his arm at the fleeing Hollow and forms a bow, a bow he knows all too well and the power of the arrow it will let loose. Without thinking, he charges up his arm and folds his wings back to force himself into a deep and speedy dive. Shouting as loud as he can to divert the attention of the Quincy guards, he launches his signature Devil infused blast at the ground beneath them, causing the Quincies to get thrown around as the shockwave from his attack hits them.

"EL DIRECTO!"

The resulting plume of sand is more than enough to break their lines of sight, while the Quincies and Hollows alike are thrown off their feet by the impact. Unfurling his wings and adjusting his glide, Chad drops in front of a stunned white uniformed warrior without a word.

"Who are... arrrggeghhh!" Chad's fist connects solidly against the much weaker man's chest, caving in his ribs from the force of his blow.

As the dead Quincy spins away in a trail of blood, Chad immediately begins moving, the remaining Quincy guards regaining their bearings and firing a multitude of Reishi arrows at him, his armor easily capable of absorbing or deflecting most of the impacts, but knowing that the few exposed areas on his body are still vulnerable to their attacks. Weaving in the same manner he had learnt from Hanako while constantly moving forward and using his arms to land devastating blows on any Quincy who enters his range, he soon finds himself surrounded by the remaining Quincy guards, all of whom have their bows pulled back and their arrows aimed directly at his head, legs and chest. One of the Quincy guards speaks up in an arrogant tone.

"Whoever you are, you cannot match the full might of the Wandenreich. Surrender now or perish!"

The man's last word causes Sado Yasutora to raise his head, exposing both his brown eyes for the first time.

"I am Ichigo Naberius's Rook, reincarnated Devil. I'm here to help my King rescue the Queen of Hueco Mundo, Tia Harribel. I do not wish to fight, so if you could surrender now, things will go easier on you."

First a look of incredulous stupor appears on the Quincy's face before it twists into a sadistic smirk and then laughter begins to escape from between his lips. The rest of the white clad men soon join him in his laughter, some even lowering their bows in their hilarity. Chad simply stands there and watches them without any expression, though his eyes are cataloguing each of their positions and the positions of the Hollows cowering away from the battle.

After getting the laughter out of their system, the first Quincy barks a command and his fellow Quincies raise their bows at Chad once again.

"How about you surrender to us instead and maybe we won't torture you for too long? We'll even give you a quick death once we're done getting the information we want out of you, what say you stranger?"

For the first time, a brief smirk crosses Chad's lips as he dips his head and raises his left arm; the arm that he had been quietly charging up to use his most devastating attack while the Quincies had been wasting time laughing. Five disks of crackling energy surround his fingertips as he clenches
them into a fist, and Sado Yasutora answers the taunt in his own serious way.

"La Muerte!"

There is a dull thump as the young man's fist punches into the sands beneath his feet, and all laughter and sound are cut off suddenly. At first nothing seems to have happened, then each of the white uniformed men vomit blood as they crumple lifelessly to the ground, their innards completely destroyed by the Demon's Left Arm. Standing tall, Chad looks at the image that is formed in the sand, the outline of the Devil's skull easily seen beneath the fallen Wandenreich soldiers. He dusts his hands off and begins to make his way to the captured Hollows when a voice stops him cold.

"Sado Yasutora, I believe I said to come back when you found something." The Bishop of Vincent Naberius says as she lands near the silent teen, her eyes quickly taking in the scene and giving him a look of extreme displeasure.

Chad lowers his head and speaks in return. "Not enough time Remei-san, one of the Arrancar was going to get killed."

Remei tilts her head slightly, then nods in acceptance. "I see, still we will talk of this when we return. Proceed with your cohort and continue to secure the perimeter." The Aloja Devil hybrid says as she walks past him towards the line of prisoners. "My cohort and I will set them free."

Nodding once, Chad takes to the air once more, his cohort of black uniformed Elves following behind the young Devil as he flies further around the white fortress.

Back with Remei however, the Captain of her Elfin cohort makes her way to stand beside the golden haired, emerald eyed woman whose mother's race hails from the waters of the Human World. "Armistead?" She asks her friend with concern.

The reincarnated Bishop sadly frowns as she watches the ever-shrinking form of the tall teen fading into the distance. "It's nothing Feralaana, just…"

The Elfin Captain places a light hand on the Aloja hybrid's shoulder. "He is young Remei, he will learn, as will Lord Ichigo."

Huffing as she turns to the still cowering Hollows, Remei Armistead releases the multitude of Hell Chains at her command. Striding towards the corrupt former human spirits with her Hell Chains waving menacingly behind her, she stops before them and signals for her Elves to form two lines of archers on either side of her, all the while giving the Hollows a glacial stare.

"I give you two choices, freedom or death. Freedom if you run as far away from here as you can. Death if you are foolish enough to stay or try to eat us. Grimmjow and Nelliel have told us what you are capable of; I however can massacre the entire lot of you. Now what will it be Hollows?"

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Ducking behind her attacker, Tatsuki grabs the back of the white uniform top and viciously pulls the Quincy backwards into her knee, hearing the satisfying snap of his vertebrae; she flips him over and finishes him off with a right hook to his ear, knocking him out. Panting as she stands up, she tries to take in deep breaths as she looks over the Elves who had followed her into battle; what she sees isn't encouraging to her at all. The battle is all but won, the Captain of her cohort bellowing orders to assemble the wounded and dead while those who can still fight are being told to form a defensive formation, but she can easily see the unmoving bodies of countless Elves strewn across
the sand. Turning to look at her unofficial bodyguard, bile and her dinner threaten to race back up her throat as her eyes focus on the half missing face of the teenage looking Elf who had accompanied her all this while as they made their way around the outer wall of Las Noches, his lone remaining eye staring sightlessly at her from what is left of his ruined skull.

Feeling her legs begin to wobble, Tatsuki races away to find privacy, barely making it over the top of the nearest sand dune before dropping to her knees and letting her body void its of the food and drink in her stomach, vomiting over and over again. She can't stop herself from vomiting until nothing but dry heaves answer the call of her stomach, its incessant demands to rid itself of its offending contents only ceasing when nothing but empty air answers its call. As she wipes her mouth shakily, a tanned hand holding a canteen appears next to her face as a slight baritone voice speaks to her.

"Drink, Arisawa." The owner of the voice advises her.

Tatsuki grabs the container without hesitation and pours some of the fluid into her mouth, whisking it around to help remove the foul taste before spitting it out. Taking another sip of the springy tasting water, she finally asks the question she dreads hearing an answer to. "...How many?"

"Seven killed, thirteen wounded."

"I'm sorry." She mumbles out.

"For what exactly Arisawa?"

She shudders as the half-ruined face of her Elfin bodyguard comes to mind, and she nods back towards the scene of battle behind the dune. "For...for failing them. For not being strong enough to help out more of them. I don't know, I just know I'm sorry that they're gone Vernes. I... I got them killed." Bile and grief threatens to fill her throat again, but she feels the canteen gently being lifted towards her mouth, forcing her to take another sip of the cool liquid.

"This is your first real battle, yes?" The Elfin Captain asks her. When she nods quietly, he continues speaking. "We know that you weren't part of Ichigo's battles for Soul Society like Yasutora Sado, Lady Naberius or Ishida Uryū had been. For you, this is your first time partaking in a real battle, and you did very well. You achieved our goals of holding our position and taking prisoners. Do not feel ashamed for leading us into battle, Tatsuki Arisawa. None of us were expecting the second wave of Quincy after Carles left to take on that Sternritter who showed up, and I can tell that you truly feel hurt by the loss of our Elves, something many Devils wouldn't feel if this was like the old days." Vernes places a gauntlet covered hand on her shoulder. "For fighting alongside us, for trying to keep us alive, thank you."

"Ichigo never lost anyone though." Tatsuki responds back dejectedly, guilt still churning in her stomach. "He never did."

"He nearly lost Rukia Kuchiki in Hueco Mundo, as well as Uryū Ishida by his own hand." Vernes corrects her factually. "It is not your fault that the Quincy launched a second surprise attack on our cohort. Without your assistance, it is very likely that we would have been wiped out by those Quincy, allowing Carles to be surrounded on all sides. It was you who prevented that grim fate from happening."

"But…"

"But nothing, Tatsuki Arisawa. Look, each of Lord Ichigo's allies could have died in battle, yet
Each of them willingly went with him to help rescue Lady Orihime. Just as each Elf warrior here knew that when Lady Mai’ryl came to us and had us prepare to follow our Lord, and then you into battle, death was always a possibility for all of us, yet we still followed you willingly into battle. None of us blame you for our losses, in fact we regret not being stronger ourselves, otherwise you would not be forced to suffer such grief. Tatsuki Arisawa, this is your first battle, and the lesson you need to take from it is to accept that there is always the possibility of losing some of the people you lead. It is a bitter lesson that each of us in command have had to learn, whether we liked it or not.

Taking another sip of the cold liquid, she hands the canteen back to the Elfin Captain. "Does it ever get easier...losing those who follow behind you?"

Vernes closes his eyes briefly. "I hope not Arisawa. If it does, it is time for me to stop leading."

"He's right Suki-chan. The moment you stop caring, that is when you truly become a monster. If you need an example, remember what Orihime said about the Squad Twelve Captain who murdered his own men in his efforts to try and capture her and Uryū Ishida?"

A new voice whispers in her mind.

Tatsuki Arisawa closes her eyes briefly as she retreats back into her inner-world; to the same place she found herself in during the heat of the battle when she was suddenly pulled from the real world, only to find herself standing in the middle of an ancient stadium. Across the arena, a female figure had stood wearing ancient bronze armor, a Corinthian-style helmet cradled in the same hand that was holding a long spear, along with a shield resting against her back. The bronze skinned woman had said she was her Zanpakutō spirit.

"It still hurts." Tatsuki whispers to her as yet un-named spirit.

The Zanpakutō spirit pulls the young Devil into her arms. Now wearing simple white cotton peplos and sandals for footwear instead of bronze armor, the bronze-skinned woman rests her head on top of her wielder, gently comforting her.

"I know you are hurting Suki-chan, this is the first time you have had to experience such an emotion in your life. I know that right now, nothing I say will change your feelings, but do not let it eat away at your soul; this place reflects your emotional state, just as it does with any Shinigami."

Tatsuki leans back into her warm embrace. "It does?"

"For Shinigami, their inner-worlds have always reflected their emotions, it is how Zanpakutō spirits know when to step in and help their wielders. Ichigo speaks of the rain stopping when he is near Rukia Kuchiki, I can only assume that because of how close they are, her presence affects his inner-world in a positive way."

"Does... does this mean I'm a Shinigami?"

The bronze-skinned Zanpakutō spirit shakes her head in the negative. "No, you could have been once before, but not anymore. Because you are now a Devil, I've changed to reflect that change."

"Will you tell me your name at least?" The spiky-haired Devil asks her forlornly.

Shaking her head again while holding Tatsuki, the bronze-skinned woman admonishes the young
Devil lightly. "I only lent you my power today to keep you alive; you still have to earn the right to know my name Suki-chan. The same goes for all Shinigami and their Zanpakutō spirits, even if you aren't one yourself. The only way for you to earn that right is to come visit me every night until I deem you worthy to wield me. After that, you will need to inform the perverted shouten owner to get you an Asauchi as well."

"Great, now I'll have to owe Hat and Clogs something." Tatsuki says as she shivers in revulsion.

Chuckling as she pulls away from the shivering teen Devil, the bronze-skinned woman smiles as she gently kisses Tatsuki on the cheek. "Go now Suki-chan, and keep your wits about you. Until we leave this place, your enemies may show themselves again. And yes, I'll lend you my strength until we leave here, you are my precious wielder after all. Now go and remain vigilant."

Tatsuki rejoins the Elfin Captain; her visit took her less than a blink of an eye. "Vernes, thank you."

"Arisawa?" He looks at her in confusion.

Getting up, she looks towards the dune, behind which she knows that seven young Elves will not return to their families, and thirteen more still need medical attention. A number that could have been far more had she not been there to help them.

"Just...thank you."

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Rias's face reflects her determination as she blasts away yet another volley of Reishi arrows shot at her by the Quincy soldiers attacking her, the Bael Clan's Power of Destruction leaving behind gaping holes in the ranks of her enemies. Behind her, her peerage and Sōna's peerage are working together seamlessly; Akeno and Tsubaki, along with herself and Sōna are responsible for keeping the two groups working together as well as covering each other from enemy attacks, while the rest of their peerage members are working in pairs to protect each other and take out any nearby targets. Momo and Rukia are using their Kidō and Zanpakutō to destroy the buildings that provide cover for larger groups of Quincies, the Elves escorting them are rapidly firing at any humans wearing the Quincy cross on their uniforms, and the Hell Hounds are darting to and fro, using their innate fire magic to incinerate any Quincies attempting to draw closer and finishing off any downed Quincies within their reach.

The battle had started off simply enough, when the Gremory and Sitri peerages had caught sight of a group of Quincies forcing two lines of Hollows to enter one of the buildings within the dome. Rias and Sōna had already discussed their battle plans beforehand, so the two groups had split up to launch a surprise attack on either side of the Quincy forces; the Elves would attack from range first, followed by the Hell Hounds charging in from the sides to prevent any Quincies from escaping. Momo and Rukia would use their Kidō to seal off the building's entrance, while the Gremory and Sitri heiresses would assassinate the Sternritter leading the group with their magic. Finally, their respective peerages would follow the Hell Hounds in to secure any incapacitated Quincies and free the chained Hollows.

The surprise attack had went exactly as planned. When the first of the magically infused Elfin arrows pierced the throats or heads of the Quincies milling around the captured Hollows, the Sternritter in charge had only lived only a few seconds longer before both Rias and Sōna had hit the man with their magically created attacks one after the other. Sōna displayed a vicious smirk on
her lips after seeing the Sternritter's chest explode outwards from the impact of her water-based snakes, although her friend and future cousin-in-law's ball of Destruction had then vaporized him before he even hit the sand. The Quincy guards were easily taken out by the combined Underworld forces, and soon enough the Hollows were being set free by the peerages and told to flee to the deep deserts.

Unfortunately, that was as far as their success went. They had severely underestimated the swiftness and availability of reinforcements within the dome of Las Noches, and within minutes they were being attacked by multiple groups of Quincy soldiers from all directions, reinforcements continuing to pour out from deeper within Las Noches. At first their forces were able to make some headway against the Quincy soldiers arrayed against them, but soon it became a stalemate between the smaller group of Devils, Elves, Shinigami and Hell Hounds, and the much larger force of white uniformed Quincy invaders, before slowly turning into a fighting retreat on the part of the Underworld forces.

The battle was now bogged down in one of the larger open areas between buildings, with the Elfin archers standing their ground unwaveringly while trading hundreds of arrows with the advancing Quincy soldiers, while the Hell Hounds, Shinigami and Devils supported them as best they can, be it through magical attacks or defense. The speed advantage of the Quincy Hirenkyaku had been negated by the members of both peerages using their magic to create transparent barriers that the Quincy soldiers would smash into or trip over when moving at full speed in their attempts to flank the Underworld forces, allowing the Devils and Hell Hounds to finish them off with ease. Despite their solid defense however, the seemingly endless number of Quincy soldiers and the continuous attacks being fired from their spirit bows are slowly whittling down the numbers and endurance of the Underworld forces with no end in sight.

Issei stands behind his King as she powers up her next attack, his only assigned duty is to keep her from getting blindsided by any sneak attacks. The petite Shinigami Momo had been caught by one such attack, and she had run off screaming somewhere, faster than any of them had expected, though fortunately not in the direction of the attacking Quincy forces. Although they were all worried for her safety, none of them could spare the time to go after her without weakening their defenses even further, and the only thing they could do was hope to rescue her safely after the battle.

Issei's left arm had finally revealed the red gauntlet and the glowing green gem embedded in it after his training last week, although so far, the only thing he could do with it was to get it to double the strength of his attacks. While it did seem rather weak, Yoruichi, Ichigo and Zangetsu all felt it had a lot more potential than being a simple 'Twice Critical' as Akeno and Sōna had both theorized it to be. One thing they all agreed on was its durability as a defensive armament, so now he stands behind Rias and Akeno as they send wave after wave of furious magical attacks into the slowly dwindling ranks of the Quincy, his heart beating rapidly as he watches the carnage going on around him while protecting their backs from any further sneak attacks. Suddenly, the ground all around them erupts in explosions of sand, and he finds himself lying stunned on the ground, blood seeping from a gash in his forehead.

"Imbeciles, what the hell are you doing losing to these wannabes!?” A woman's voice shouts angrily from the direction of the Quincy forces. "Now you've made me to come out here to deal with these weaklings rather than deal with the bastards attacking our people within the walls!"

Issei slowly pulls himself to his feet, his mind trying to figure out what had just happened. All around him, he sees the Elves and Hell Hounds struggling to their feet as well, the Devils of the Gremory and Sitri peerages looking somewhat worse for the wear, and many of the Elves and Hell Hounds sporting serious injuries. His woozy mind struggles to remember, one of their briefings had
covered someone like this, what was her name..?

One of the Quincies makes the mistake to try and reply. "But...but Basterbine, they are...."

To the horror of the watching Devils, Elves, Hell Hounds and Shinigami, the woman points her finger towards the Quincy soldier and he immediately explodes into red mist. Their horror only intensifies as they realize the woman had tried to do the same to them, and the only thing that saved them was the natural defenses provided to them by their magic.

"Anyone else wanna question me!?" The woman smirks cruelly before turning back to the Underworld forces. "So, what do we have here? You're not Shinigami, nor humans. So, would one of you kindly tell me who you are before I kill you?"

Sōna's face turns pale as she recognizes the woman. Candice Catnipp had given all the information she could on the Sternritters she knew of in the Wandenreich, especially the ones she had worked with in her original group. This particular woman was considered by Candice to be one of the most dangerous and psychotic individuals within the Sternritters due to her powerful ability and murderous mindset. "Who we are isn't important Bambietta Basterbine, what we are here to do is." The Sitri Heiress replies coolly, allowing no hint of her unease to show on her face.

"Ah, seems the kiddies have me at a disadvantage, but oh well, I'll leave one of you alive and gut the information outta you soon enough!" With that declaration, Bambietta flings her hands towards the teens, expecting to see them blow up in a massive explosion; she smirks at the cloud of fine sand that billows up with a thunderous boom, but her smile lessens when the cloud disperses to reveal circles of glowing runes shining in front of her targets, none of them damaged by her explosion and all of them with looks of grim determination on their faces.

"Our turn Quincy." Akeno says as storm clouds form under the false sky of Hueco Mundo. "It will be us asking you questions when this is over."

Bambietta twitches slightly as she hears the dull boom of thunder punctuate those words. Raising her hand again, she levels it angrily at the big-chested brat. "Well this should be fun then." The Sternritter known as 'E' says with a sadistic grin, Reishi flowing into her from her surroundings as she prepares her arsenal to destroy her foes once more.

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The Lieutenant of Squad Five continues to run from the visions she is forced to endure after being struck by thorns in the back, the images of Aizen and what he did to her playing repeatedly in her mind. Her mind was screaming at her to run, to get as far away as she could from them all, and that is what she did, she ran away from her friends, her fellow Shinigami, and the Devils that were counting on her. All she knew was that after those thorn-like Reishi weapons had hit her, all her nightmares had suddenly come to life, each and every one of them tearing at her mind. Fresh vomit drips from her Shihakushō as she struggles to run from the visions of her former Captain, the man she had thought she was in love with, and what he truly wanted from her; popping up between them are visions of what her current Captain wants from her and lastly the memory of her oldest friend stabbing her through the stomach, each of them had become unrecognizable animals, ripping her mind apart with their terrible actions towards her.

Panting heavily, she slows down to an exhausted trot and finally stops inside a room filled with pillars. Most are still intact, but a number of them show signs of a battle of some sort taking place here. Panting as she tries to catch her breath, Momo mumbles blankly to herself as she leans one handed against a white column with her other hand gripping lightly at her face.
"Need to get away, need to go back to Soul Society, need to…" A mocking voice stops her dead.

"Need to die Shinigami." She immediately whirls around, her released Zanpakutō shooting a line of fire at the disembodied voice.

"Tsk, tsk Shinigami, not there." Momo shivers and whirls again, feeling warm breath trailing eerily down her neck.

Swinging her Zanpakutō around wildly, Momo frantically tries to scan the increasing darkness overtaking the room, her vision clouding as fear and desperation begin to rapidly overtake her senses once more.

"No…no…no…please make it stop." She cries softly to herself, her eyes wide with fear and delirium.

"It will stop, when your life ends…little Shinigami." The hairs on the back of her neck stand on end when she feels a presence standing right behind her.

"N-No…"

The lights fade to nothing, leaving her standing in complete darkness, alone and moments away from dying. Her mouth is dry with fear, unable to summon any Kidō to help her fight back the blackness that surrounds her. She is unable to do anything but stand there and wait for her end to come.

"Fear, so fearful, it sings its sweet melody to me Shinigami. Time for you to…!"

"Momo Hinamori."

Sasha. She latches on to the familiar voice, recognizing the female Elf who had always been kind to her. She can't believe it, her friend is here, her friend is in danger, shaking as she finds her voice, she screams with all her might. "RUN SASHA! HIS POWER…IT'S BASED ON FEAR…RUN AWAY!"

The man's voice echoes loudly as he speaks with glee. "Too late Momo! She's here and I've already found her. She'll learn just as…arrgk!"

"Momo." Sasha's voice speaks her name again, and the petite Shinigami shudders as a delicate hand lands on her shoulder, before almost weeping with relief as she recognizes the touch as Sasha's. "Sleep now Momo, your fears will fade when you wake." Those words bring both warmth and unconsciousness to the distraught Shinigami, never seeing the blue circle forming under her feet and taking her away.

"What…did…you…do!?" Äs Nödt screams in anger as he backs away from the unseen figure, the one his senses had found but his eyes have yet to lay upon.

The echoes of metal striking stone sound out from all around him, then the woman begins to speak, her whisper filling the echoing chamber all around him.

"You are the one called Äs Nödt correct?" The man can't help but feel intrigued by the faintly musical voice, though he isn't baited into saying anything.

Focusing his senses on her voice instead, he smiles when he senses her again, his Reishi thorns immediately flying out and hitting something yielding and causing a brief flash of light to appear some distance to the left of him. Extending his powers quickly, his frustration begins to grow yet
again when his power fails to cause the fear of his victim to play out before his senses.

"You are a slippery Shinigami; you aren't as inexperienced as the other one." Using Hirenkyaku, he sprints towards the place where the flash had been, but as expected he finds no one there.

The sound of metal striking on stone once more fills the room with its sound, causing him even more aggravation. "Why hide, Shinigami? Sooner or later my thorns will find you, and then you will experience the same torment your fellow Shinigami felt. Come out and show yourself to me, the sooner I kill you, the sooner your torture ends." He taunts his mysterious prey.

His anger increases yet another fraction when he hears her soft laughter echoing throughout the room, the position of her voice indeterminable. "Oh, such an amusing young man you are. But I will tell you one thing to help ease your soul in its passing. When I finish with you, you will thank me for ending your life Äs Nödt."

"Bitch! I'll kill you for speaking such bullshit!" Light glints off the white columns to his right; without any hesitation, he turns and fires off hundreds of his Reishi thorns towards the figure he glimpses there, one wearing a green cloak that shrouds her head underneath a deep cowl.

"Got you now Shinigami!" Äs Nödt crows out, only to see each and every one of his Reishi thorns being intercepted by small glowing circles or chains with large flat plates at the ends of them. Growling in anger, he studies the chains and sees them extending from behind the cloaked figure's back. "Nice try, but anything attached to you means my power can affect you through them!"

"Really." The woman glances down at her chains, then back up at him. "Ah, did you really think Hell Chains would allow such a thing to happen to one such as me?"

"Hell Chains? What kind of Shinigami trick is that?" His demand is met again by her laughter.

"Momo was the only Shinigami you faced here Quincy."

A chill now goes down his spine. "What? What nonsense are you talking about?"

Stepping forward, the hooded figure approaches him at a relaxed pace until she is standing less than five feet away.

"I've been hunting you, Quincy. I made sure to learn about each and every one of my Lord's future enemies, you in particular were the one I fancied killing the most, but seeing you now, I am disappointed in what I see."

His rage fuels his outburst. "You...! You are disappointed in what you see!? Then let me show you the truth!"

Throwing his hand up, a dome covered with hundreds of eyes peering down at the cloaked figure suddenly springs into existence. "Nowhere to run now, whoever you are! The moment you looked into those eyes of mine you became trapped within my power. How do you plan to win now?"

The cloaked figure's hands rise up and take hold of both sides of her hood, pulling it back after a slight pause. Äs Nödt frowns when he sees his prey's face for the first time. Her black hair is held back by a simple leather band, exposing two elegant pointed ears that he has only heard of from fairy tales. When he sees her closed eyes however, he smirks to himself, having figured out her plan.

"Nice try, but you can't fight when you can't see, and the moment you open your eyes you will lose."
“Really? Let’s put it to the test.” Her eyelids split open, and Ås Nödt realizes his powers won’t ever work on the woman in front of him.

Milky blind orbs stare in his direction tauntingly, almost as if knowing exactly where he is.

“W-What are you?” Ås Nödt finds himself stepping back almost instinctively, and he forcibly stops his feet from moving. That brief lapse of attention spelled his doom, however.

“I am your end.” Chains begin to rise up from all around the two warriors, each of them tipped with a sickly-sweet smelling liquid and trapping him within their tightening embrace. "Let me show you true fear, Sternritter ‘F’, the Fear."

Husband and wife cheerfully stroll along the deserted hallways of the giant fortress, once in a while they would come across one of the human warriors of the Wandenreich, but death came quickly for those weak Quincy. The couple would take turns killing them, man or woman it didn't matter, the final judgment had already been decided for any who currently served the person responsible for killing their lord's granddaughter, the mother to his heir all those years ago, the very same woman who should be here among them now. Neither of them bats an eye nor show any sign of regret with their kills, the only thing they feel is satisfaction in executing those whose weapons destroy souls, which even to those of the Underworld is an unforgivable sin.

They deliberately choose to ignore the fact that their young Lord, his cousins and his teacher also possess that same soul-destroying ability.

As another white uniformed man and woman step out from around the next corner to confront the advancing Devil couple, a pillar of white-blue flames encapsulates the pair of Quincies before they can even speak, leaving behind nothing but ashes as nine tails thump moodily on the floor behind her, while the Nekomata at her side rolls his eyes at his wife.

"So, I get the next two, my love?" Daiki says as he helps his wife over a pile of rubble.

Kissing his cheek, she smiles at him, her mood temporarily lifting. "Of course, dear, if you're quick enough that is."

"Well aren't you the cheeky one there." A deep and aged voice speaks up from behind them.

Both Devils casually turn around to see two men standing less than three meters behind them, an older man with glasses and a younger man with spots on his face and also wearing a pair of glasses. The older man looks at the Kyuubi and Nekomata respectively before his eyes trail over to the spot where the two blackened areas signify the deaths of their comrades.

"Did you kill them?" The younger man asks as he brings forth a number of glowing blades into existence.

"Maybe. What's it to you Quincy?" Akiko asks as she bats her nine tails behind her, a magic circle forming beneath her feet.

The older man brings out a pistol and aims it at her. "Disgraceful how you killed them, burning them to death is such a barbaric way to kill."

Daiki snorts in amused disbelief, muttering under his breath that burning someone to death was barbaric but destroying someone's soul was perfectly fine. Akiko smirks at her husband's words before she replies to the older man. "They didn't feel much pain…for long."
Without further warning, a shot and two knives streak through the air towards the foxy Devil, however both Quincy stare in shock as three small circles of reddish flames appear in their paths and disintegrate the attacks before they reach her. As the three puffs of smoke dissipate, Daiki steps forward and smiles at them dangerously.

"My turn."

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Yoruichi and Kisuke jog unhurriedly down the dimly light hallway, both of them casting out their senses for the Reiatsu of the invading Quincies. So far, they had only run across the weaker members of the Wandenreich, none amounting too much of a challenge for the two experienced assassins. Both of them know that it is just a smokescreen however; the person they are currently tracking is leading them to a spacious area far away from the congested fighting taking place in the hallways near the center of the main structure, far away from their young charges who are fighting against large numbers of Quincy and the older Devils who are hunting their own targets, so as to keep them away from any possible sources of help. Yoruichi's golden eyes scan the dimly lit passage way ahead of them before forcing her companion to slow down to a halt.

"Kisuke." One word conveys an entire thought to her oldest companion, one glance her target and their next action.

A flick of her hand and the two of them separate via Shunpo while sending two blasts of Hadō Number Thirty-One: Raikōhō that hit the door in front of them and send it crashing open. Loud laughter answers their challenge as a wheezing voice speaks to them from the room behind the ruined door.

"Ah, that was cheating Shinigami. Why don't you come in and play with me?"

Shaking his head, the blonde exile doesn't move from his spot. "Why should we, Quincy? From what I can see, you don't play by the rules either…Guenael Lee. Have you ever wondered why you haven't been able to lose us yet?"

A creepy looking old man walks into the light of the doorway, his gnarled face looking at the two experienced assassins with hatred. Disappearing without a sound, he reappears behind Yoruichi, only for her to disappear just as his blade slashes through the spot she had once stood in. Looking around in confusion, he sees the purple-haired woman now standing next to a blonde-haired man wearing a Captain's Haori over his black Shihakushō, the curvaceous woman on the other hand wearing black spandex pants and an orange over-shirt with white straps covering a black undershirt, with a pair of brown tabi covering her feet. She lounges nonchalantly against the blonde-haired male Shinigami, her burning golden eyes meeting his lopsided gaze with a challenge.

"I see you are one of those assassins, Shinigami. It matters not, I'll…" He disappears and reappears suddenly behind them, but stops when he realizes both Shinigami have disappeared from their positions as well. The man's voice begins to echo from all around him.

"Have you figured it out yet? In the interest of saving time, let me enlighten you as to what is going on. You see, each of us were assigned to find and execute specific Quincies should we find ourselves fortunate enough to come across them. Our main target is you, though we do have a basic knowledge of the other special abilities in order for us to fight against those Quincies should we encounter them instead. Where we got this information, you ask? Regrettably, the source of our information passed away during her interrogation. Such a shame, really; she was of great value to us, but it seems her heart couldn't take the strain for very long. She died less than two days after we
started, but fortunately for us, the wealth, oh the wealth of information she gave us was truly worth the pain she endured, Guenael Lee.” Kisuke says in a mocking tone.

"Hm... you speak of Candice Catnipp? I don't believe it, she knows the penalty of treason Shinigami; I think you're lying." The gnarled old man retorts as he peers about the room where the voice floats from.

"Really Kisuke, it's not nice to divulge information without asking for something in return." Yoruichi's voice admonishes, her voice sounding strangely disembodied as well.

Guenael steps back into the room he came from, and he feels two Reiatsu signatures phasing into existence, one in front of him, the other behind him. Looking towards the one in front of him, he sees the purple-haired woman stepping out from the shadows, her golden eyes pinning him to the spot. She crosses her arms under her generous breasts as she tilts her head mockingly.

"Still not sure of what's going on Quincy? Let me tell you what my long-winded dumbass associate has failed to inform you of. You've been wondering why you haven't left our conscious minds yet, well that's the easy part; you see, we are constantly leaping backwards in time. Each time you attack us, we use a forbidden Kidō that takes us back a minute or two in time depending on your actions, erasing everything you do to us and letting us remember your existence. That includes attempting to vanish yourself from our minds. It's tiring really, but seeing how easily you killed that small squad of Elves, we knew it's better not to take any risks with you. So, it's time for you to feel what it's like to be the one falling behind in time."

Guenael’s eyes grow wide as his chest and back suddenly explode in pain and a shower of blood, but his body then vanishes and reappears several steps to the side, seemingly unharmed. The old man visibly grits his teeth at his two smirking opponents.

"This... will be annoying."

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Two Números are running for their lives, but at each and every turn they take, one or the other would glance back to see the brutish smiling man and his little pipsqueak sidekick still chasing them. The bastard hadn't yet given up in his pursuit of them, always calling out to the two female Arrancars, asking them to stand still and fight him. He was retarded if he thought they would do so; they had seen what he had done to those other Arrancars while the little twerp next to him continued to egg him on with his cheers. Stumbling around the next corner, Menoly looks over at her fading Arrancar sister Loly and sees that she isn't going to last much longer. Swallowing hard and grabbing her darker-haired sister, Menoly pushes her ahead of them, whirling around and releasing her Resurrección as she does so.

"What are you doing Menoly!?" Loly screams as her helpless body is forced forward by the push.

"Run you dimwit! Save yourself!" Menoly's winged form screams at her sister as she tries to collapse the hallway behind them to cover their escape.

"No! Menoly No!" The black-haired woman cries out frantically, knowing that her sister is planning to sacrifice herself.

The shorter haired Arrancar fights back the urge to sob, knowing that her attempts to stop their enemy are futile. "Loly, I'm sorry..."

As the large Quincy, the one calling himself Mask De Masculine pushes his way through the
corridor with his fists both raised before him like those of early human pugilists, a woman's voice suddenly makes him stop in his tracks.

"How disgusting, Quincy. To hit a defenseless woman is such a barbaric thing for a man to do."
The voice comes from behind the Arrancar, and they turn in shock to see a beast of myth walk into the light of the hallway.

Loly and Menoly can only gape at the creature with the face of a woman, whose body rests upon that of a lion, with wings folded upon her back while her tail swings gently back and forth. Being Arrancar, they naturally have no idea what the creature is supposed to be, but at the very least they can tell that she is not a Hollow like they are. The woman's voice then issues forth from the lips of that strange creature again. "Don't you agree Husband? Isn't such a thing now frowned upon, or has such behavior regained acceptance once more?"

Both the Quincies and Arrancars swivel their heads in surprise when they hear the voice of a man speak up unexpectedly from behind the masked Quincy.

"No dear, you are very much correct, trying to harm a defenseless woman is still considered very low class today. It reminds me of…"

"Who are you and what are you two doing here?" The masked Quincy interrupts them with a hint of confusion in his posture.

The male creature looks at his wife, then shrugs his front legs and shoulder blades; the female creature shakes her head and hair, causing a brilliant glow to form around her body. When the light fades, standing where the creature was is now a woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a beige toga-like dress, and sandals on her feet with golden thongs stopping just above her ankles. Stepping forward until she is beside the long-haired Arrancar on the ground, she looks down at Loly and holds out her hand with a kind smile.

"Rise young Arrancar, we are not here for you, just the Quincy."

"H-Huh?" Is the only intelligent thing that Loly can think of saying.

A sudden glow draws all eyes to the place where the other creature once stood; the male creature has also transformed into a human form, wearing a gold and purple nemes on his head and a white kilt around his legs, his bronze chest showing off his toned and muscled body as he makes his way towards the two Quincies.

"Again friends, who are you?" Masked De Masculine asks of them.

Black wings and Hell Chains flare out from the back of the two newly human-guised Devil hybrids, the woman speaking up in answer for both of them. "I am Euphrasia and my husband's name is Donkor. We are Sphinxes in service to the Naberius Clan, and we are here to assist our young Lord in his promise to the Queen of Hueco Mundo, Tia Harribel."

Loly and Menoly share a look of disbelief, both sisters thinking the same thing. 'He really came.'

Seeing the female Sphinx step forward to trap the Quincies in the corridor between herself and her husband, Menoly takes several steps back towards her sister, resealing her Resurrección form but not daring to take her eyes away from the insanely muscled white dressed Quincy man who is still a threat to them. When Loly clutches her hand however, they both yelp as a glowing circle suddenly appears beneath their feet, taking them both by surprise.

"Help those that are waiting for you. When this is over, we are all leaving together." Euphrasia
commands them, hearing both Arrancars screech in surprise as they are swiftly transported away. Her Hell Chains then come alight with the fires of the Underworld, her husband's doing so as well just moments later.

"Now that we are alone, shall we Quincy?"

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Mila Rose sends another barrage of Bala and Ceros down the long passageway, keeping the Quincy from against their last place of refuge, neither she nor her sisters willing to leave Las Noches while their mistress and Queen fights for her life and the lives of every other Arrancar, Adjuchas or Hollow still left within the fortress. Sung-Sun is busily wrapping the waist of the third Tres Bestias with ripped sheets to help bind her broken ribs, Apacci sagging painfully against the wall as her Reiatsu levels nearly bottom out.

"Dammit! I…don't think…I can hang…on Sung-Sun." The horn-headed Hollow tells her reluctantly.

"Just be quiet and stay still!" Changing places with the lioness of the Tres Bestias, the viper Arrancar charges her Cero and fires it down the corridor, aiming for the moving shadow at the far end. A mocking laugh sounds out from down the corridor, telling her that she had missed yet again. Stamping down on both her anger and her fear, the normally quiet member of the trio shudders when the voice of the woman taunts them with her mocking voice.

"Need to better aim than that you Hollow bitches! I'll be on top of you soon enough if you don't try harder!"

"Try this on for size Quincy." A deep voice speaks up from behind them, and Sung-Sun's and Mila Rose's eye grow wide as chain after chain slips past their vision and down the hallway into the darkness, a scream of anguish pain howling out seconds later.

Whirling around reflexively, the Fracción back away as they see two majestic creatures standing behind them, heads and front bodies that of an eagle, rear body of a lion, with large wings folded to their sides. Apacci is the closest to them, and her heterochromatic eyes nearly bug out as she stares at them helplessly.

‘Can't be. Myths, legends, I…I remember hearing stories of your kind, but…you can't…be real.’ Her heterochromatic eyes say differently as does the female griffin, Charis.

"You... you aren't Hollows. Neither of you are. Just... what are you?" Sung-Sun asks warily of the newcomers.

One of the majestic creatures lowers its head to look at her. "We are griffins, my Hollow friend. My husband, Nikias and I are here to help rescue you and your Queen."

A large arrow suddenly streaks out from the darkened corridor, aimed at the aimed at the griffins, but it is shattered by a yellow circle of energy that forms right before them. Tsing rather irritability, the larger male griffin retaliates by sending his chains down the hallway after the offender once again, each chain tipped with a razor-sharp spike that the Arrancar barely notice as they shoot past. Screams are heard from the corridor yet again, and when the chains start slackening, the male griffin seems to smirk as another yellow circle forms across the semi-destroyed doorway. A loud crash is heard from right behind the circle, and the male griffin chuckles as he walks towards the sound.
"Seems like she couldn't stop in time, Charis." He tells his wife.

Conjuring up a single chain, tipped this time by a large spiked ball, the male griffin dispels the magic circle and uses the impromptu flail to smash in the head of the knocked-out Quincy woman. As her husband steps over the now dead body, the female griffin looks at the three stunned Arrancar women and speaks to them.

"Outside you will find Lady Rias Gremory and Lady Sōna Sitri fighting to hold the lands under the dome, if you wish to live freely, join them and help in any way you can. They are easily identifiable as they are the ones fighting an army of Quincies and surrounded by Elves and Hell Hounds. I advise you to hurry if you want to get some help for your friend."

She then walks out behind her husband without another word.

"Well fuck me." Sung-Sun says as she and her two fellow Fracción exchange worried looks. Apacci's pained groan finally snaps them back to reality.

"Let's... let's just hurry up and get some help for this dumbass."

"Oi!"

Sweat dripping down her face, the Queen of Hueco Mundo is at her wits end. Her Reiatsu is almost depleted, and any attempt to absorb Reishi from her surroundings has been met with failure as the men she is facing seem to drain it from her home at an astonishing pace. Unable to maintain her Resurrección form any longer, she stands on the opposite side of the Throne room from the bearded leader of the Quincies, her battered face a stoic mask that contrasts sharply with the victorious look on his own. His arrogance is certainly well founded with how easily he beat back her attacks, but the six men he brought with him makes his victory a hollow one in her eyes. The bleeding hole in her shoulder was inflicted by the man wielding a gun like weapon; her attacks were deflected by the Quincy whose wind type attacks had nullified her water-based attacks. The bearded Quincy then begins to walk towards her, smirking as he makes his declaration of victory.

"It is over Hollow; surrender now and serve me willingly or...not. It doesn't matter, you have lost and your body will serve as a warning to the others. Haschwalth, grab our pr…!"

The wall between the defeated Tia and the looming Quincies explodes inwards as hundreds upon thousands of chains blazing with intense heat streak through the flying rubble towards the invaders quicker than any of them can react to. The sudden and surprising attack costs three of the Quincies their lives as dozens of burning chains find their marks before the shocked Quincies can mount a sufficient defense against the super-heated black metal links. As the first wave of chains shatter, the echoing screams and charred stains on the floor are all that is left of Gerard Valkyrie, Lille Barro, and Pernida Parngjas, Yhwach's Elite bodyguards. Askin Nakk Le Vaar is barely hanging on to life, bleeding heavily from several blackened wounds as he kneels next to his Emperor, his charred flesh being torn open by his frantic use of Hirenkyaku to get away from the chains. Then the sound of something heavy opening causes the survivors to falter as three separate swords suddenly spear the air above the dead Quincies, pulling their now visible, screaming souls back through the solid walls.

A woman's child-like voice breaks the stunned silence then. "I see your great-grandfather didn't stay back long Ichi-kun."

"Yeah, I guess so Serafall. Hey Tia, I see we made it in time." Yhwach and the surviving three
Quincy stare at the broken down wall as an armored and horn-helmed man steps through the dust of the destroyed wall, followed by a woman with green eyes and pointed ears, a young burnt-orange-haired woman with a generous figure, a short black haired woman with twin-tails and equally big breasts, and a woman wearing a white ninja uniform as well.

However, it is the last young man that steps through the broken wall that brings shock to the surviving Quincy invaders. Wearing a white uniform that mirrors their own along with a black half-cape, Uryū Ishida stops between the armored man and the short dark-haired woman, his Quincy Cross gripped tightly in his hand. Pushing his glasses upwards with his free hand, the Last Quincy stares at Yhwach with incredible hatred as he begins to speaks.

"That's him, isn't it Ichigo."

"Yeah, that's the man who killed our mothers Uryū. The so-called Quincy Emperor, Yhwach." The armored male's biting voice replies back.

Yhwach frowns as he finally figures out what has been happening since the arrival of the new combatants, the reason why things aren't going as he had seen, the reason why his Elite Sternritter had fallen so easily, the reason why he wasn't gaining back as much power as he should from his fallen soldiers. Somehow, their souls and the power he had bestowed upon them were being negated and taken before he could receive their portions of his soul back. For the second time in his life, Yhwach begins to feel the same heightened anxiety that he hasn't felt since his battle and loss to the Head Captain of Soul Society all those years ago, a feeling that is only magnified when he recognizes those who stand before him as Devils from the Underworld. But why Devils are here, and why is there a Quincy standing with them instead of at his side are questions he needs answers to. The only clue he has are the words exchanged between the Quincy and the armored male, but even then, he feels that there are pieces of the puzzle missing.

Glancing down at Askin, Yhwach tries to give him a bit of his power to help speed up his recovery, but he is blocked off by an orange shield that suddenly envelops the kneeling man and forces his power back into him. Using his powers to identify the culprit, he turns around to stare at the pair of determined brown eyes staring back at him as their owner speaks to him almost timidly.

"I'm…I'm sorry but I can't allow you to heal him Quincy-san. This fight is between you and my family."

Looking at the orange-haired girl askance, Yhwach asks her almost boredly. "Your…family. Who is this family you speak of, child?"

"Tell him Orihime." The armored, two-horned man suddenly prompts her.

Folding her hands in front of her, the orange-haired girl, Orihime looks at Yhwach with defiance, pain and determination in her gaze.

"These are my family, the ones standing before you now. They are Leviathan Maou Serafall, formerly of the Sitri Clan. Uryū Ishida, Quincy and cousin to my older brother, Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius, the heir and next clan head of the Naberius Clan of the Underworld, future holder of the titles granted to him by my great-grandfather Amyntas Naberius. The…"

Yhwach cuts her off with a glare towards Ichigo. "Enough! I know what he is, but why are you here interfering!?!"

"The names Ishida and Kurosaki mean nothing to you, do they?" The Quincy teen, Uryū Ishida asks with venom in his voice.
Jugram steps in front of his Emperor, wary of the power that he feels building up in all of the individuals before him. "They did once, before they became traitor. But we know who both of you are; you are scheduled for indoctrination later, after we have..."

A dagger of ice slices his left ear off before he can finish speaking, his hand automatically clapping to the bleeding stump in reaction to the pain. He sees the short dark-haired woman introduced as Leviathan Maou Serafall stepping towards him, a dark look in her eyes and a tremendous amount of pressure coming from her body. "Ichi-kun, Uryū-kun, take your time with the bearded goat. I will take this man, Merti you can have the one that is hiding, and Orihime, you and our new friend can heal Tia Harribel, I may have use of her powers soon."

Beside Yhwach, Askin looks at the woman in confusion as to why he wasn't mentioned, but as he tries to stand, he hears his Emperor speaking to him.

"Your power will aid mine."

A light engulfs the wounded Quincy before he can even scream. Collapsing to the floor and dying as his life and powers are stolen from him, he sees nothing but disgust and anger on the face of the glasses wearing teenager before him. As his vision fades to black however, he witnesses something he didn't think possible as a wave of powerful energy digs straight into the side of his Emperor, cutting through all of his protections and forcing him to take several steps away from the attack. A single thought goes through Askin's mind as battle is joined in the room around him.

'So, this is what he meant by serving in both life and death.'

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Rias glares up at insane bomber as she aims yet another of her damn Reishi explosions at them, this time it is one of Sōna's Bishops who forms the shield that blocks the explosion from reaching the Hell Hounds. Seeing the white-haired Momo Hanakai drop to the ground in exhaustion, the Gremory heiress gathers magic power again for her next attack, only to halt when her fellow heiress places a restraining hand on her forearm.

"Conserve your strength Rias; we must wear her down before we finish her off." The Sitri heiress remarks as she too glares at their floating enemy.

"How much longer do we need to hold out for Sōna!? Look around you! She's managed to kill or wound half the Elves and a third of the Hell Hounds already!" The crimson-haired princess shouts back.

"I know!" Sōna snaps back just as harshly. Although she is mindful of how strongly the Gremory clan members feel towards those they consider to be their family, the black-haired heiress is feeling no less distressed at watching her friends and allies being systematically destroyed by that murderous explosive bitch.

Fighting back the urge to curse, Sōna calmly takes hold of her angry friend and speaks to her again. "Rias, I know you are angry and I know you are feeling desperate, but we need to calm ourselves down. Bambietta Basterbine is far stronger than any of the other opponents we have fought so far, and if we do not figure out a way to stop her right here and now, we are ALL GOING TO DIE. We are just lucky that her Reishi-based explosions do not work well against our magical attacks or defenses. Let our peerages shield the rest of our allies as best as they can, we must work together to find her weakness and finish her off before she can do the same to our forces."

Another explosion shakes their surroundings as a plume of sand is thrown up in the air again, but
this time Rias's heart stops as she hears Koneko's name being screamed. Turning towards the explosion, she sees her white-haired young Rook staggering out of the explosion with blood and grime running down the front of her chest and face. Despite the durability of her Rook body, it is clear that she took significant damage from that explosion, her white hair now stained with red as she struggles to reach her King's side.

"Rias-nee...chan." She finishes before collapsing face first into the sands beside Rias.

"KONEKO!" Rias can only watch in horror as Yuuto goes over the proverbial cliff in berserk rage, his Sacred Gear exploding all around him as he launches himself into the air at the laughing woman still floating above them. She barely notices Issei dropping to his knees beside Koneko, a look of broken disbelief on her usually perverted Pawn's face, followed by a look of focused rage.

A loud scream of anger draws her attention back to Yuuto as he draws even with the laughing madwoman in the sky, banking sharply with his Devil wings as Bambietta points her hand towards him. Rias's eyes widen with horror as smugness shows on the Bambietta's face before the entire sky before her is engulfed in a massive explosion, Rias screaming Yuuto's name in grief as the Quincy bomber turns towards the others still on the ground.

"Need to keep you pests....AARRGGGHHHH!"

An unexpected shadow flits across the face of the anguished Quincy as she grabs at the spurting amputation of her arm, the first significant injury she had been dealt throughout this entire battle. Looking upwards with fury, she sees the singed and bleeding Devil Knight wielding a bloodied sword in one hand and holding something in his other, a look of vengeful triumph on his features.

"Now try and make your damn bombs!" Almost as if to add insult to injury, Yuuto's irrational mind then causes him to sling the bleeding appendage he had cut off from the Sternritter known as the 'The Explode' right back into her face.

As her bloodied arm slaps her in the face before falling to the ground far beneath her, something snaps in Bambietta's mind. Screaming with absolute fury, she pulls in as much Reishi as she can from her surroundings before activating her Vollständig, the massive pillar of energy annihilating any of the surviving Quincy soldiers beneath her before ending in a Quincy cross, then the entire pillar of energy shatters to reveal Bambietta with radiant blue-white wings floating around her like a cape as she points her remaining hand at the Devil Knight who was thrown back by her transformation. Yuuto's eyes widen and he tries to speed away from the enraged bomber as she fires off a seemingly infinite amount of Reishi bombs from her cape at the frantically dodging Knight who is creating countless blades to intercept her bombs. Barely moments later, her ability to create bombs overtakes his ability to create blades, and as his stamina finally runs out, she hits him with multiple bombs in the chest which detonate simultaneously. Laughing gleefully as blood sprays from his ruined torso, she raises her hand to finish him off, only to flinch back as a sizzling bolt of Destruction just barely misses carving out her right eye.

"FUCK YOU ALL NOW! I'M GONNA KILL ALL YOU FUCKING CUNTS!" Ignoring the badly wounded Devil falling to the ground, Bambietta now turns her full attention back to the rest of the Underworld contingent and starts to bombard them indiscriminately with her Vollständig, countless Reishi explosions tearing apart the ground around them as they desperately try to regroup and stay alive through her deranged assault.

Sōna has no choice but to expend her remaining magic to construct a shield of water over those who are desperately trying to pull their wounded back to safety, the Elves especially having used up most of their magic and are now very vulnerable to Bambietta's explosions. The Hell Hounds are doing their best to cover the exposed Elves with their fire magic while pleading with the young
heiresses to sound the retreat. Sōna barely registers Rukia using her Shunpo to drag the injured Elves and Hell Hounds back to safety, her Kidō and Zanpakutō abilities utterly useless against Bambietta's Reishi explosions. She barely notices Rias glaring at Bambietta with murderous fury, the Gremory heiress clearly intent on fighting to her last breath against the psychotic bomber.

Help comes for them from a direction that they least expect.

"Die, you explosive cunt!" A new voice suddenly screams out as a salvo of Ceros are fired out from one of the inner walls, followed by a massive barrage of Bala coming from one of the two new figures carrying a third between them.

"Hold the fucking bitch still, and one of you get Apacci out to the outer wall for us!" The words come from the tallest of the three running figures, their figures disappearing in a burst of static and reappearing within the ranks of the Underworld forces. Seen up close, they turn out to be three female Arrancars with bone-like masks on their faces, the smallest of them clearly needing magical healing. The other two Arrancars continue to fire Ceros and Bala nonstop at the furious Sternritter trying to counter their barrage above them.

"Who...who are you?" Akeno asks as she tries to catch her breath, her entire body drenched with sweat from the continuous battle and use of her powers.

"Never mind that for now, we need to kill that bitch before she gets any stronger! If you haven't figured it out by now, she's absorbing the surrounding Reishi that makes up our world to power herself! Find a way to keep her from sucking it up and we can kill that bitch!" Mila Rose screams out as she continues to fire Ceros at the explosive creating Quincy, Sung-Sun bombarding her with countless Bala as a pair of less-injured Elves hurry over to offer help to Apacci.

Given this temporary reprieve, Sōna's eyes widen at the information and she glares at her crimson-haired friend in exasperation then. "So that's how she can maintain so many attacks! How did we forget that Hueco Mundo is a world filled with Reishi!?!"

Rias doesn't get a chance to answer as the sounds of Ceros and Bala being fired become more frantic. "Less talking, more attacking!" Sung-Sun shouts at them.

As both Devils charge up their magic to attack the insane woman above them however, a bloodied hand suddenly grips Rias's torn sleeve, causing her to jump despite herself; looking behind her, she sees her sole Pawn standing despite the blood streaming down his face, a look of fierce determination on his features.

"Issei!? Weren't you with Koneko, what are you still doing here!?" Rias automatically reaches out to grab her Pawn's arm as he slumps to his knees beside her.

"Couldn't...leave you...Buchou...don't want...to disappoint...Zangetsu...or...Ichigo...or...Yoruichi-sensei..." A green glow catches her eye, and she looks down to see the gem in his Sacred Gear glowing a brilliant emerald green.

"Issei, what -"

"Buchou...My...power isn't...twice...critical...it doubles...every...ten...seconds...I've...been...holding...for over...two...minutes...use it...to finish...her..." Issei's words are forced out sluggishly, and it's clear that he's beginning to slip in and out of conscious thought. Rias can't even imagine what her Pawn is currently going through or what he is planning to do, but the last part of his statement is perfectly clear.
"Sōna! Trap her now!" Grabbing Issei, Rias spreads her wings and launches herself into the air. "Akeno help me!"

"Where are you going!?" Mila screams out as she notices her flight. "We can't keep this up for much longer!"

"Just hang on a little longer!" Rias shouts back as she spots Sōna casting her spell. "Akeno!"

The Thunder Priestess looks to see the last of their Elves and Hell Hounds retreating behind the shields of the conscious peerage members. Unfurling her own set of wings, Akeno launches herself up to join her King, quickly grabbing the other side of the slowly fading Issei to support him. Before she can ask her King what she wants of her, Akeno sees a massive wall of water forming quickly behind the insane killer and crashing right into her.

"Akeno! Go!!"

"Got it Buchou!" Akeno immediately charges up as much of her remaining magic as she can safely use. Storm clouds gather in the false sky as her lightning magic fills her body, but her focus is entirely on the hateful Quincy woman who had caused so much grief to all of them. She doesn't know what Rias has in mind, but she has no doubt that the Quincy cannot be allowed to evade it.

"What is this..!?" Caught off guard by the wall of water crashing into her from behind, Bambietta Basterbine struggles to free herself, barely registering the booming thunder that is disguised by Mila Rose and Sung-Sun continuing to bombard her with Ceros and Bala from the front. "You damn bitches..!"

Seeing Akeno calling on her lightning magic, Rias gives Issei's body a small squeeze, hoping that whatever plan her Pawn has is truly capable of ending the insane Quincy bomber once and for all. "Issei!"

Issei gives her a weak smile. "T-Transfer."

A skill he had only unlocked as he cursed his weakness and inability to help Koneko. A skill that he would now use to ensure they were fully avenged.

With that single word, Rias feels her power double, then double, then double again almost exponentially as an endless torrent of power surges through her body, causing ripples of pressure to wash over her surroundings. She knows for certain that her body would have been torn to pieces by this power if she wasn't a natural-born High Class Devil. How did Issei hold on to this much power in his wounded state!? "Buchou... for... Koneko... and... Kiba... avenge... them..." Issei coughs out before falling limp in her hands.

Holding back her tears, Rias glares at Bambietta Basterbine, just in time to see Akeno's thunderbolt slam down into the screaming Quincy as the barrage of Ceros, Balas and other magical attacks being sent her way by the combined forces of the Underworld and the Arrancars now slam into her unhindered, thanks to Bambietta being paralyzed by Akeno's lightning. All of these attacks just buying time for Rias to call on her now massive reserves of power and focusing them all into her Power of Destruction.

"Akeno, get out of the way!"

As her Queen glides back from the Quincy, Rias fires her Power of Destruction straight at her immobilized target with as much power as she can push into it, the massive attack distorting the
very space it is travelling in as it disintegrates even time and space within it. The Quincy's eyes visibly widen as she fights back against her paralysis, her Vollständig wings slowly aiming her Reishi bombs towards the incoming stream of destructive power, but the water around her body is suddenly flash-frozen into ice. Stunned by this sudden development, with precious seconds being wasted as her Reishi bombs explode all around her within the ice, Bambietta suddenly sees a single dark-haired Shinigami hidden within the Underworld contingent, her Zanpakutō pointed towards her and a look of vengeful triumph on her face.

With a final scream of frustration and rage, the Power of Destruction finally connects with Bambietta's body and the very fabric of her existence is ripped to pieces before their eyes, no trace of her body left behind as the destructive stream of magic continues to flow to an end. In the sudden silence that follows, the two flying Devils glide back down to the blood-soaked sands, Rias's Pawn now snoring softly as they land next to the worn out Sitri heiress who gives them a faint nod of acknowledgement from the place she had collapsed on in the sands. Rias smiles tiredly in return as she carefully lays her most surprising peerage member onto his back, seeing her Queen also giving Issei her own appraising look.

"Not bad Issei-kun, not bad at all." Akeno says as she smooths his hair back before kissing him on his forehead.

"Oh looky, Bambi-chan died."

The sudden cold words send a chill through the hearts of all the surviving Underworld forces, their building euphoria from having survived a battle with an absolute monster crashing as they realize the battle is not over yet. There is a frantic flurry of movement as the surviving Elves and Hell Hounds pull back their lines to face the newest threat, supported by the barely standing members of the Gremory and Sitri peerages.

Rias, Sōna and Akeno exchange grim looks as they see three fresh looking female Quincy walking towards them from the nearest tower, the power that they hold clearly evident since they are doing nothing to suppress it. Frowning, Rias rises to her feet unsteadily but starts to gather the remains of her magic anyways to continue the fight, only for her actions to be called out by the shortest of the incoming Quincies.

"You really think in your condition you can beat us after fighting Bambi-chan?" The petite dark-haired Quincy taunts her, only for the smug grin on her features to fall when another female voice interrupts her.

"They might not, but I can Quincy."

All heads turn to see a woman with silver hair in an intricate braid walk towards them from a magic circle, wearing dark leather pants and a vest that barely contains her generous bosom. Her silver eyes take in the conditions of the surviving Elves and Hell Hounds, the two peerages, the lone Shinigami, the three Arrancar, and finally the three new Quincies. Seemingly satisfied with her appraisal, she walks until she is standing between the Underworld forces and the puzzled, curious, but ultimately unworried Quincy trio. Her silver eyes narrow at them before she speaks to those behind her.

"Lady Rias, Lady Sōna, your older siblings will be pleased by the efforts of yourselves and your peerage members. Now both of you should make your way outside the walls with your peerages, the surviving Naberius forces and the Hollows you have rescued; I will take over from here.

There is a tremendous sense of relief coming from the forces of the Underworld as they heed the words of the silver-haired woman without question; all of them know who she is and just who she
represents. As the surviving Elves and Hell Hounds hurry to evacuate their wounded and dead to the relative safety of the walls, Sōna leaves to rejoin her peerage with a single nod of thanks to the silver-haired woman, but Rias stays for a moment longer, relief and confusion warring for dominance on her face.

"Grayfia?"

The woman doesn't turn her head, but she responds to her young sister-in-law anyway. "We are here to keep our promise to your soon to be great-grandfather-in-law, Lady Rias. Your brother is making his way to your intended as we speak. I only wish we made it here sooner."

"Do you really think it would be that easy?" The petite Quincy suddenly giggles as she interrupts their conversation. "Just who do you think you guys are?"

"No one that would take notice of you." Grayfia raises her hand and in an instant, countless blades of ice burst forth from the body of the tallest of the three Quincies, tearing her body apart from within. As the two remaining Quincies stare in shock at the frozen and mutilated corpse of their companion, the silver haired woman begins to stride towards them.

"As the Queen of Lucifer Maou, I will ensure that neither of you survive to trouble my King or his family any further."

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Cang Du leaps backwards after yet another unsuccessful barrage of attacks against the broad-shouldered man before him, his nerves raw from the Shinigami's senseless and unending chatter throughout their fight. The Quincy had thought he had found himself a decent fight at first, but within a few minutes, he began to have his doubts about the so-called 'pitiful' members of the Gotei Thirteen, if the man he is fighting is any indication of their true level of strength. Somehow, someone had made a serious mistake somewhere, he just wished he knew what it was. Over the last twenty minutes, he has tried and failed to hit the black-haired man with his stubble covered face and his torn Haori worn over his Shihakushō, a man who claimed to be a former Captain when he was asked. Shaking his head in annoyance, Cang Du uses his spirit bow to send close to a thousand Reishi arrows at his opponent at one go, hoping to buy himself some time; as he sprints towards the closest hallway with Hirenkyaku however, he isn't sure whether he is trying to gain time to breathe, or simply to escape.

Unfortunately for him, both options are gone when he sees the Shinigami that he was fighting nonchalantly leaning against the doorway through which he was hoping to run through. Instinctively leaping backwards again, the lightly scarred man narrows his eyes as he glances back at the spot where the Shinigami was standing at before, only to see a perfect circle of crumbling stones left on the ground.

"How, Shinigami? How are you doing this?" He slowly clenches his hands in frustration as he glares at his infuriating opponent.

The broad-shouldered Shinigami just gives him a wide but sheepish smile. "Don't feel bad kid, I'm not one of those younger Shinigami who rely on trading blows and calling out special attacks to defeat their opponents. Now if it was my boy fighting you, he'd be glad to take all your hits and dish out his own, but for me you're just getting in my way of spending time with my cute little children. So how 'bout it? Just offer up your head and let me get back to my quiet life, nothing personal about it really."

Taking offense at the man's perceived superiority, Cang Du stiffens his posture and his resolve,
gaining a wry smile from the Shinigami as he pushes off the doorway. Glaring at his opponent, Cang Du suddenly realizes that the Shinigami has sealed off his movements by standing in the doorway, a fact that the broad-shouldered man doesn't seem to have realized yet. A glint forms in the Quincy's eye along with the beginnings of a plan: without any hesitation, he fires a massive barrage of arrows all around the doorframe and the Shinigami, the sole purpose of the overwhelming barrage to keep the Shinigami in place for his follow-up attack. Activating his favored Reishi Claws, he dashes forward with a burst of Hirenkyaku, and stabs his claws fiercely at his opponent, feeling them strike against something solid. Wondering if his claws have sunk into bone, Cang Du's eyes widen as he sees exactly what he has hit.

"H-How!?!" He shouts when he sees his claws parried easily by his opponent's Zanpakutō blade.

"Really?" The Shinigami rolls his eyes in exasperation. "If that's the best you can do, I guess it's my turn."

Barely twisting in time, Cang Du staggers slightly from the force of the one-handed downward stroke of the Shinigami's Zanpakutō, the broad-shouldered man no longer jovial in his appearance and seeming to take this fight seriously. Moving back a step, the scarred Quincy is forced to dive out of the way as his opponent's blade fills the spot his upper chest had just occupied a few moments before. Leaping back several times with Hirenkyaku, Cang Du's eyes widen again as his opponent is suddenly in his face, and he frantically attempts to deflect each steady attack from the Shinigami's Zanpakutō blade with his claws as it comes closer and closer to striking a vital area on his body. Sweat drips down from Cang Du's forehead; a single bead of sweat suddenly drips into his left eye causing him to blink instinctively and raise his hand to wipe it; too late, he realizes his mistake and feels the edge of his opponent's weapon sink into his right side, only for his quick reflexes and special ability to save him as he reflexively transforms his entire right side into solid iron. Jumping back quickly, he glares at the Shinigami once again.

"My designation is 'I' for iron. That was your only chance at killing me Shinigami." Cang Du remarks as he activates his Blut Vene to stop the bleeding and harden his body even further.

"Iron eh?" The broad-shouldered Shinigami grips his Zanpakutō in both hands and raises it to point towards the Quincy. "Funny thing about iron, with enough heat it will begin to melt...did you know that, Cang Du?"

The scarred Quincy narrows his eyes at his opponent. "Flame Kidō has no hope of burning me long enough to 'melt' me."

Tilting his Zanpakutō's blade slightly downwards, the broad-shouldered Shinigami shakes his head sadly then. "I wasn't just talking about Kidō, but I guess you'll find out. Yoru de moesakaru, Engetsu."

There is a sudden flare of heat, and Cang Du backs away warily as his opponent's Zanpakutō morphs from a solid blade of steel into a blade that flickers with reddish flames down the entire length of the weapon, until there is nothing but flames in the shape of a daitō in the hands of the broad-shouldered Shinigami.

"Unlike my kid's Zanpakutō, Engetsu is both an Elemental based weapon and a Kidō based weapon. These flames aren't as powerful as Ryūjin Jakka's, but all Kidō that are flame based are enhanced to a much higher degree, and most other Kidō gain flame-based properties. Watch. Bakudō Number Sixty-One: Rikujōkōrō." Six beams of light crash into Cang Du, and he howls as he feels the beams of light burning into his iron skin.

Isshin stares at the now trapped Quincy before stepping forward once more, his blade rising over
his head as he casts his second attack in record time.

"Hadō Number Thirty-Three: Sōkatsui." Engetsu swiftly changes from red flames to a flickering light blue before the flame-based Kidō streaks forward, engulfing the trapped Quincy in a powerful blast of blue fire.

Watching impassively, Isshin knows that no matter what the Quincy had believed of his power, Engetsu's flames would always burn hotter the stronger his opponent is. As his opponent's screams fill the room, Isshin also realizes that he has no wish to torture his opponent, even if the Quincy before him had possibly benefitted from the death of his wife. Eyes hardening, the former Captain steps forward one last time, lifting his burning blade high over his head to end the Quincy's suffering.

"Sorry, but this is the end of the line for you."

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"Yare, yare Yoruichi, that was hardly worth the effort to even wake up this morning." The bucket hatted man says as his foot keeps the gnarled old man from getting up.

Yoruichi rolls her eyes as she feels the tingle of Devil magic sliding through her once again. Ever since she began to stay long lengths of time around them, she knows when one of them is using their powers; the man she felt using Devil magic is easily on par with the Head Captain in strength. Sighing as she looks at her best friend since childhood, she points down at the sprawled out Quincy.

"End it Kisuke; I want to get back to the kids before something bad happens." The former assassin says.

Shrugging absently, Kisuke plunges Benihime downwards quickly, then steps off the now dead body of the old man. Neither he nor Yoruichi showing any further interest in the corpse as they move as one towards the battle that is now raging ahead of them under the dome. Behind them, the body slowly fades away, as if it didn't exist in the first place at all.

"... Think he bought the story?" Yoruichi quietly asks her companion.

Kisuke just smirks at her. "He isn't as smart as he thinks he is. Now that we've spent so much time bullshitting his creation, he's bound to try something stupid to overcome our 'forbidden Kidō'. Sucks to be him I guess."

A sudden rumble shakes the dome as the two Shinigami feel powerful Devil magic being used ahead of them again.

"Did you know he would come Kisuke?" She asks the blonde scientist more conversationally. "Our red-haired friend, I mean."

Shaking his head, Kisuke replies back matter-of-factly. "Not really, but considering who else is here, he might have felt a need to help."

"Good thing his wife arrived first." Yoruichi shakes her head morosely. "I guess this will end sooner than we thought then."

"Most fortuitous for our forces, since I suspect they've taken far more casualties than we had originally planned for." Kisuke reminds her. "Also, rather fortuitous for Soul Society, since their greatest threat is being annihilated before it even gets to build up the necessary army to invade
them. Such a shame really Yoruichi, I was hoping that if the Quincy did invade them, it would shake them enough to force them to change, but as it stands now…”

"...it'll only be a matter of time before they piss him off." The Shihōin princess finishes for him, her golden eyes narrowed unhappily.

Tilting his hat down as they reach the surface once more, Kisuke adds with barely a whisper. "That's what I'm afraid of."

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Head Captain Genryūsai Shigekuni Yamamoto sits impassively as he and the assembled Captains and Lieutenants listen to reports from the Twelfth Squad coming from the speaker set up for the emergency Captain's meeting. The first report to reach his ears had been sent less than twenty minutes ago when a Hell Butterfly had informed him of an ongoing battle that seemed to be emanating from the former stronghold of Aizen Sōsuke. At first, the consensus of the assembled Officers was that there was a battle for power between the former Espada who were trying to take over as the ruler of the Eternal night desert of Hueco Mundo, but as the battle progressed, a new power was detected. A power that only he and his four oldest students had sensed before, their first interactions with it well over a millennia ago.

Casting a narrow eye at the silently fuming Mayuri Kurotsuchi, the aged Shinigami can only chuckle internally at the rage the mad Captain must be feeling right now. The moment the Squad Twelve Captain had attempted to open a Garganta to the land of the Hollows, it had failed and collapsed the second it was formed. After his fifth failed attempt, the clown-faced scientist had finally figured out that he was being blocked from opening a way to Hueco Mundo by an outside source, a very powerful outside source. Fuming, Kurotsuchi had stomped and raged and demanded that his men find out who was blocking him so he could collect the 'bastard' for experiments and find out how he did it, but none of his scanners could identify the culprit. Afterwards, the pharaoh-dressed Shinigami had no choice but to inform the Head Captain of the new events taking place at Las Noches while grumbling about his inability to retrieve direct 'samples'. Hence, the emergency meeting where they all are now, sitting and listening to Squad Twelve's analysis of the data they can interpret from there.

'Devils, what are they doing there and why? They have never shown any interest in us, let alone the Hollows, only those who are living have value to them.' Yamamoto thinks to himself as he hears the slightly breaking voice of a young Shinigami shouting out excitedly about the rising levels of power they are now measuring. The next words that the young Shinigami speaks catches his attention, however.

"Captain Kurotsuchi, there are Quincies there! I don't know how we missed them the first time but they are there fighting! We also detected the former Tercera Espada fighting against them but her signature has now vanished!"

"FOOL! What of the person blocking my efforts!??" The painted-faced Captain shouts out in anger.

"So…sorry Captain, but we haven't been able to find him or her sir! Whoever they are, they are not using Reiatsu! We don't know what this power is, except it is similar to the samples that were brought back from Isehara not that long ago!" The now scared Shinigami subordinate replies back.

Byakuya doesn't bat an eye as the Squad Twelve Captain rounds on him. "Isn't your sister there now Captain Kuchiki? Perhaps if I pay her a visit, she may…”

"I assure you if my Imouto has anything to report, she will report directly to her Captain, Captain
Kurotsuchi. Should you require any answers, please direct your questions to either Captain Hirako or Captain Ukitake as their Lieutenants are the ones investigating that city.” The stoic Captain remarks, although the ice in his voice is evident, much to the surprise of many there.

"HOLY CRAP THAT WAS A HUGE ONE AKON-SAN!" All heads turn to the speaker once again as another person's voice exclaims loudly.

An excited voice that is familiar to many of the officers is heard next. "Shit did you guys record those numbers!? I've haven't seen numbers this high since Head Captain's battle over Karakura!"

Yamamoto senses the oldest female Captain's eyes flicker briefly towards him before regaining her serenity without anyone else noticing. Looking towards his other students, he sees Shunsui lowering his sakkat over his eyes even further; the more of his student's face is hidden, the deeper Yamamoto knows he is in thought. Next to him is Jūshirō, who is frowning as he speaks to the Squad Five Captain who is the only other Captain with a Lieutenant in the World of the Living. Neither of his students bat an eye as they hear the voice of the younger Shinigami gaining in pitch and decibel as he describes the power levels being used in a battle they can only see through their sensors that continues to rage in a fortress built to house the strongest Arrancar and usurped once by a traitorous Captain and his followers. However, since the aged Captain is discreetly focusing his attentions on his students, he spies the Clan leader of the Kuchiki Clan giving a very brief nod to his white-haired student, who nods back just as briefly towards him, while the blonde-haired Captain sitting by his side feigns ignorance of their exchange.

'Jūshirō, Byakuya and Shinji, what are you three involved with?' Yamamoto's thoughts are broken up by yet another excited shout.

"AKON-SAN THERE...THERE...CAN'T BE! WAIT NOW FOUR, MAKE THAT FIVE STRONG ENERGY SOURCES, NO A SIXTH THAT IS WEEKER HAS NOW APPEARED!"

"You buffoons! What is going on!?" Kurotsuchi screams out as he leaps to his feet in frustration. "JUST WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THERE!!"

"Sir, its Akon here. There are five beings whose energy we still haven't been able to identify who have just appeared on the battlefield. There are also dozens of weaker beings with similar energy types who are engaging in battle alongside them, but sir, they…their energy readings are stronger than most of our Lieutenants and Captains, sir."

A hush falls on the Captains then, each of them thinking along the same lines. A possible enemy that is far stronger than those in the room they are standing in, fighting in Hueco Mundo against Quincy of all things, and five or six of them possibly stronger than all but the aged man sitting at the front of the room. Shunsui Kyōraku lifts his sakkat then as he glances at the female healer in the room. Her eyes find and meet his, before they turn to stare at the white-haired Captain at the end of the line, who is now staring back towards the front himself.

"Head Captain?" Jūshirō's voice asks him.

Tapping his cane on the floor in front of him, Yamamoto orders the Captain of the Twelfth Squad to silence his communications with his men. When the clown-faced man tries to argue, he responds by flaring his Reiatsu at him, the dangerous weight pressing down on Mayuri Kurotsuchi ending any further arguments from him.

"The unknown energy readings come from Devils of the Underworld." The aged Captain informs them wearily. "It is obvious that the Devils are attacking Las Noches, but for what reason we cannot determine at this time."
"Head Captain, while that may be the case, it doesn't explain why there are Quincies there." Retsu Unohana reminds him. "From what I remember the only two Quincies still alive are the ones we know of in the World of the Living. Yet from the readings, there are several dozens of them fighting within Hueco Mundo. Perhaps we should send Squad Two to investigate the whereabouts of the two Quincies we know of?"

Yamamoto nods in agreement. "Captain Suì-Fēng, as soon as the situation in Hueco Mundo stabilizes, you will return to the World of the Living and verify the whereabouts of both Ryūken Ishida and his son, Uryū Ishida. After which you shall go to Isehara and make contact with both Lieutenant Kuchiki and Lieutenant Hinamori. I want to know if they have made any discoveries there yet."

"Hai Sōtaichō." Not even daring to glance at her fellow conspirators, she stares straight across at the current Squad Three Captain, Rōjūrō 'Rose' Ōtoribashi.

Unknown to her, Rose frowns inwardly at how emotionless the Squad Two Captain is acting. Lately, she had been showing signs of the icy façade she was famous for slowly defrosting, but the moment she stepped into the Captains meeting she had seemed oddly tense, and now with her latest orders, she seems almost...broken?

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT!?" All heads snap towards the speakers, the sheer volume of the shout overcoming the silencing Kidō that had been placed on it earlier.

Yamamoto nods to the Squad Twelve Captain. "You may speak to your men Captain."

Huffing almost silently, Kurotsuchi barks out towards the speaker. "Report! What is going on you imbeciles!?!"

"Sir! There's been a massive spike in one of the unidentified energy signatures! If we were to compare the amount to Reiatsu standards, it's as strong, if not greater than one of the senior Captains using Bankai!"

Four faces exchange quick glances, while a fifth hides their emotions.

'What in the name of the Soul King is going on in there?'

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Karin hurriedly enters the Dome once again, seeing that the number of injured has increased since the last time she was here. Yuzu is still directing the triage efforts, the youngest Shiba daughter is far better in medical emergencies because it was she who always gave Goat-Face the extra pair of hands he needed at the clinic; this time it is Karin's turn to give her twin those extra helping hands. The dark-haired twin watches the Naberius staff follow the directions of the youngest Naberius princess as to who requires priority treatment or those who should be moved to available empty rooms to wait as their wounds aren't as life-threatening.

Most of the Elves and Devils who can heal are present and giving the young heiress nods of approval for her leadership, obeying her instructions as if their Lord himself was giving them the orders. Noticing that her sister's now-longer blonde hair is hastily pulled back into a bun to keep it away from her face as she works, the dark-haired twin does the same for her own hair. Smiling inwardly at the determined and focused look on her younger twin's face, Karin makes her way to the tables that were set up as hastily prepared triage stations to see if she can help with anything. It is there that she comes across the Devil who runs the Estate's staff of younger Devils, her hair actually displaying hints of gray and white, a subtle hinting of her true age.

"Ah, Lady Karin, your sister is doing exceptionally well to be able to take charge at such a young age. Is this because Lord Isshin runs a clinic in the human world?" Klara asks her as she stands out of the way of the crowd.

Nodding her head, the older twin answers the older Devil. "She's our Dad's best helper; Ichigo was usually told to stay out of the way and I was drafted to help Yuzu with the little things, but in emergencies, she always came through for our dad." She pauses, then adds softly. "She also wanted to become a nurse, but now that we…well, I don't know what she'll do now."

The older woman glances at the young princess of the Clan, then she smiles softly and places a hand on the dark-haired twin's shoulder. "Lady Karin, there is no reason either her dreams or yours cannot come to fruition, just because you are Devils should not be the cause for you to stop
chasing the life you want. You will leave the human world one day, but that day is decades away
yet Milady; it is not the end of the world now, just different."

"Did that happen for you Klara?" Karin asks curiously.

"I haven't been to the human world in over a thousand years; back then women did not have
the choices that it offers today. I do so envy the youth…"

"KARIN!" Both women snap their heads towards Yuzu, who is running towards a new group of
arrivals.

Karin looks at Klara apologetically. "Thanks Klara, gotta go help Yuzu."

The dark-haired twin then moves towards the group at a run, but she freezes for a second when she
recognizes two of the newly-arrived wounded. "YUZU HELP!"

Quickly rushing to her sister's side, the light-haired twin gasps as she sees who her sister is staring
at.

"Momo-chan! Yuuto-kun!"

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"Aisling, it's time. The familiars are back."

"I'm ready Hanako."

A male voice however stops both female Devils from acting. "That won't be necessary Aisling; I'll
take over now so Hanako can help those still fighting."

Every Devil turns to see the man who just spoke, many of them bowing or kneeling in place as
they recognize who the speaker is. Aisling bows in acknowledgement for her group. "Beelzebub
Maou."

The green-haired Maou looks over at the white fortress and then looks behind him, as yet another
surprise addition comes into view: the current leader of the Devils military forces, Falbium
Asmodeus, or better known as Asmodeus Maou, the last member of the Four Great Satans. The
bald Maou walks up to stand beside Ajuka, his eyes rolling as he sees yet another of Akiko's
attacks bursting through the dome again, a pillar of flames that signals the death of someone
powerful.

"Between the Naberius Clan and the Gremory Clan I don't think our presence was needed here
Ajuka." A loud explosion helps punctuate the lazy Maou's argument.

"Normally I would agree Falbium, but the reason we are here is because of the Quincy. The one
who is directly responsible for Lord Amyntas's granddaughter's death, the one named Yhwach may
be here as well. We are here to ensure that 'they' don't use this as an opportunity to assassinate him
or his young heir." The creator of the Evil Pieces informs him casually.

The current Beelzebub Maou then looks at the two veteran members of the Naberius Clan.
"Hanako, I am familiar with the spell you are responsible for, I'll take over so you can join with the
rest of your Clan. Aisling, I will need you to gather those still outside the walls and help evacuate
those in need of aid. Your skills at healing are needed back in the Underworld; while young Yuzu
is capable of directing the triage efforts, she needs someone to show her how to use her magic to
heal, and you are the most capable healer for that job so please prepare to return."
Both Devils bow to the Maou without a word, Hanako squeezing the fairy's hand briefly before disappearing in a magic circle to join with the rest of the Naberius forces. The fairy floats over to the newest group of Elves and Hell Hounds coming out from Las Noches, her eyes assessing their battle injuries, and as soon as the Captain of the survivors nods her readiness, the Naberius Bishop utilizes her magic to take the group back home.

Both Maou have already turned their attentions towards the white structure before them, the military leader grimacing as he scans deeper into it with his magic. "I'll take a gander then to see how things are going."

"Keep in mind that this is their fight, they need to end this themselves if the opportunity arises."

"No worries, just going to lend a hand, nothing more." Whistling as he walks away, the bald Maou waves over his shoulder as he makes his way towards the domed fortress.

Eyeing the places he can feel his fellow Devils fighting against the Quincy forces, Ajuka Beelzebub touches the sand and begins a simple chant he had learnt and modified less than a week ago. In mere seconds a huge circle appears around the outer wall of the entire fortress, then the magic begins crawling upwards and inwards to where he knows his allies are going to be pleasantly surprised by the effects of his seal.

'Use this wisely young Naberius; if he truly is here, then it's time to avenge your Clan's honor.'

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Rias, Sōna and Rukia watch in shock as the opposing Quincy forces suddenly falter all at once. They had just about made it to the wall with their survivors when they were ambushed by a group of Quincies and the Sternritter known as Bazz-B. Sōna and Rukia barely got a defensive wall of solid ice in place to repel the first and second attacks of the loony fire-based Quincy, while the Sitri and Gremory peerages covered the retreat of the wounded Underworld forces and prepared to launch their best and most powerful attacks in a desperate bid to break through the Quincy lines. None of them expected the strong wave of magic that suddenly swept through them all, revitalizing the Devils, Elves and Hell Hounds while causing the Quincy forces to stagger. Rias and Sōna both gasp as they recognize the spell that Sasha had developed to keep Candice from accessing her own power during her brief stint as their prisoner, only magnified tremendously and adding in a spell to boost the vitality of the Underworld forces. Rukia however is more focused on the battle at hand; she doesn't hesitate once she sees the Quincies spirit weapons suddenly disappear, and the Sternritter's eyes widen in shock as his flames are suddenly extinguished.

"Tsugi no Mai, Hakuren!" Acting swiftly, the Kuchiki heiress taps the ground four times and an immense wave of ice and subzero wind sweeps over the helpless Quincies, freezing them in place.

"Rias, do you know any magic that can shatter them?" Her voice is strangely emotionless, as is her face.

Glancing worriedly at Rukia for a moment, Rias raises her hand and forms a small ball of magic. Flicking her wrist, she sends the ball of magic speeding towards the ice sculptures and when it connects with them, all the trapped Quincies are shattered in an instant. Rias lowers her hand as the bodies disintegrate into ultra-fine particles of ice, blinking tiredly before turning to Rukia when the exhausted voice of the Shinigami Lieutenant speaks to her.

"Since I started training for my Bankai, my ice has become denser and colder than before. Each of my dances have grown in lethality thanks to Grimmjow, Nelliel and Zangetsu. Sode No Shirayuki and I are getting stronger, and we are getting closer to achieving my last release." Despite her
exhaustion, no one misses the pride in Rukia's voice as she gently runs her hand down the length of her blade.

"That's great, but we still have to move quickly before yet more reinforcements show up." Sōna reminds them both. Looking at the now melting fragments of the Quincy forces, the three turn back towards their Naberius allies before directing them towards the wall and safety, making their way out of Las Noches as quickly as they can to meet with the other survivors of the counter-invasion. Just for a brief moment though, Rias pauses and looks back towards the place her fiancé and the rest of those who have gone in to rescue the Queen of Hueco Mundo are still fighting.

'Be safe Ichigo, Orihime.'

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Tia Harribel slumps against a pillar as she watches the orange dome covering her slowly healing her numerous wounds, her Reiryoku levels finally replenishing now that she is safely away from the man who was stealing it not only from her home but from herself. Her last glimpse of the mustached man was of him fighting fiercely against his two new opponents, his wild and animalistic glare making her wonder if he was ever sane to begin with.

Glancing at the now older Orihime, she sees that the burnt-orange-haired healer's eyes are narrowed in concentration as she focuses on using her powers to heal the former Tercera as quickly as she can. The Arrancar then switches her glance to the green-haired woman whose back is facing towards them as she keeps a vigilant watch over both females in the abandoned room. In the green-haired woman's hands is a spirit bow, something which had shocked the Hollow Queen the moment it had appeared, and it was only the woman's clearly protective stance and the adoptive sister of her soon-to-be King explaining who the young woman, Candice Catnipp is that allowed her to relax.

Leaning her head back against the wall, Tia closes her eyes briefly as she replays the scene from less than ten minutes ago. A smile graces her lips as she remembers the shocked and furious look on the mustached man's face when he saw Uryū Ishida standing among the invading Devils. The orange-haired Devil that she knows is hidden beneath that black armor and the dark-haired Quincy teen are the same teens who had invaded Hueco Mundo less than two years ago both launched themselves at the most powerful man she has ever met since Sōsuke Aizen. One of the women, an Elf as Orihime had explained to her, had suddenly vanished from the room with a struggling form in white, while the last and shortest person had encased the only other remaining Quincy in a block of ice before she too disappeared with her opponent. That left the young healer and her bodyguard to help carry her away from the furious fight raging between Ichigo, Uryū and the self-proclaimed Quincy Emperor.

"Orihime, will it be much longer?" Tia has to ask once more as she hears the sounds of battle echoing through the outside corridor.

A soft smile greets her as well as an answer. "Just a minute more Tia-san, I'm almost done."

"Thank you. Thank you both." She replies sincerely, earning another smile from Orihime and a head nod from the still guarding Quincy.

"Tell me, Candice was it?" Seeing the woman glance back at her, Tia continues. "Tell me why you are here allied with the Devils?"

The green-haired Quincy woman lets out a small laugh before answering, though her eyes go back to sweeping the room. "Short story is that Ichigo beat me easily a few weeks ago and took me
prisoner; while I was a prisoner, an Elf named Sasha, you'll meet her soon enough…she did something to me. I don't know what it was she did, all I know is that I gave up everything I knew, and I mean everything, even things I wasn't fully aware of. Her methods leave nothing hidden at all. So after that I was resigned to death, and as I was waiting for my next interrogation or execution, I saw something I wish I never had."

The blonde-haired former Espada notices Orihime wince in sympathy as the other woman continues. "A woman was brought in for crimes committed against Ichigo and Orihime, and during the brief time she was there, we spoke to one another. It was how I first learned of Devils, Angels and other beings besides us, Humans, Shinigami and Hollows. To think we are just a small part of a much larger picture...Anyways, she was taken out for interrogation and then brought back later; she…looked resigned for some reason, only later did I find out why when I got a front row seat to witness her death. Ichigo came by and talked with her briefly before sentencing her to death for her crimes when she showed no remorse, I believe she already expected that outcome and was making no effort to fight it, though I also learnt that what Ichigo did was letting her off easy, at least from what Sasha and Merti told me."

"It was hard for him to do that." The Shun Shun Rikka wielder explains for her adoptive brother. "He…he didn't want to sentence her to death, but she held no remorse for the many people she had murdered…she was the first person he has had to kill outside of battle. Otou-san and Yoruichi had to explain to us why it was his duty as the future leader of the Clan, but still…"

When Orihime falls silent, Candice continues telling them her story. "Ichigo came back the next day and just stared at her empty cell for a long while. That was when I first spoke to him. He ended up telling me his story, from his earliest memories to the time his mother was murdered, and to the time when he finally regained his memories. He…made me think about my own life for the first time in years, made me feel things I had forgotten about. Between him, the dead girl Zeva and Sasha, I guess I remembered what it meant to be human."

Tia's eyes widen a fraction more than normal as those words hit her unexpectedly hard, and she shakes her head while frowning. Again, her predecessor's words come back to her.

'Itsygo has a way of changing those around him, whether by accident or on purpose. You just know that he is the one meant to change the world someday.'

The blonde smiles under her bone mask, the last holdout from her days as an Espada. Looking at the healer kneeling next to her, she takes a deep breath and then speaks to Orihime.

"Orihime, remove my mask."

"What!?" Both healer and Quincy twist to look at her in shock. The Queen of Hueco Mundo simply unzips her jacket, revealing the bone plating that covers her upper breasts as well as the shark-like bone mask that covers the lower half of her face.

"I-I can't do that Tia…you…you could revert back to a Menos or worse. Nelliel told me what could happen…" Orihime's words are cut off when the green-eyed woman raises a hand to stop her.

"Only if the mask is forcibly removed, Orihime Naberius. If you reject its existence, I'll be fine. Trust me on this."

Tia can see the struggle in the healer's brown eyes that are looking back at her, prompting the former Espada to soften her gaze as she speaks to Orihime again. "I chose to keep this when Aizen made me into an Arrancar, but I don't need it any longer. I am ready to face the world as who I am. Please Orihime, I ask you to help me reject my mask."
"Sōten Kisshun, I reject." Within seconds, the shark-like bone mask covering her lower face disappears, along with the bone plating that covers her neck and breasts. Orihime's face immediately turns a bright red when she realizes Tia is fully exposed to them, but the former Espada notices none of it. Slowly, the Queen of Hueco Mundo reaches up to touch her uncovered face, remembering the last time she did so was when she had been on the verge of defeat. Now, less than twenty minutes later, she feels...stronger, both with her resolve and her heart.

Tia looks towards the blushing and stammering healer, giving her a grateful smile. "Thank you for healing me, Orihime Shiba Naberius."

"How happy you must be, Hollow, that you are no longer a beast." A male voice suddenly speaks up, putting them all on alert. "As for you Candy-chan, so this is what you been up to...living with humans and animals. Too bad for you, all of your fates have been decided, as is fitting for a group of beasts and traitors."

Three heads suddenly see a young boy standing not too far from them, his smile not reaching his eyes. Orihime immediately turns back to Tia, hurriedly positioning herself to shield the Hollow Queen from his gaze. "Tia, your jacket! Your jacket!"

"Gremmy Thoumeaux." Candice greets the newcomer evenly, ignoring the commotion going on behind her as Orihime urges Tia to zip up her jacket. "So, you were here."

"Ah, so you do remember your old comrades Candy-chan... but still, to walk away from your Emperor and your people, for what exactly? I didn't hear that part too well, all the mushy girly stuff had me wanting to puke my guts up." The youthful-looking blonde-haired Quincy says with his fake smile completely unchanging.

"Gremmy, I warn you now to either leave or surrender, this is a battle you can't win." Candice says as she pulls down her ninja mask, part of the outfit she was given by Merti and Sasha, revealing the look of determination on her face.

"... It seems you have forgotten who you are talking to, Candy-chan." The young-faced Quincy says in the same lighthearted manner, but his eyes have taken on a deadly glint. "I suppose I should remind you of the difference between our powers."

Plaing herself firmly and aiming her bow between his eyes, Candice glares at him. "Do your worst, creep."

Gremmy looks amused for a split second before her image disappears and a sudden arrow from behind him rips through his cloak-covered arm. Twisting around in surprise with his arm already healed, he looks for the traitor, only to have two more arrows pierce both of his thighs from either side of him, dropping him to the floor for a few moments before he imagines them being healed again. Looking around the room, he realizes Candice is nowhere to be seen, but he also notices that the air has taken a strange shift, one that has him puzzled until he realizes he isn't absorbing any more ambient Reishi.

'What is this!?' He raises his hand to absorb more Reishi from the surrounding environment, but the Reishi seems to resist being absorbed.

Frowning at the anomaly, he turns to the two women being protected by a triangular orange shield and smirks as he speaks. "I'm not sure what is going on, but I just need to make you two disappear before I continue to play with Candy. Now become nothing!"
To his complete surprise, nothing happens again. Standing still as he desperately tries to figure out what is going on, his back is suddenly shredded by a few dozen arrows that break through his Blut Vene, but he simply erases both the arrows and his wounds with a thought and whirls around to find no one again. His quarry continues to elude his gaze, releasing yet another barrage of arrows that he easily imagines away again. Smirking as an idea comes to mind, he is about to imagine all moving objects around him suddenly crashing to the floor when he is interrupted by an arrow piercing through his right leg and another piercing through his left arm at the same time. Scowling at the continued stalling tactics, he imagines his wounds healing once more, but this time they don't heal fully in reality.

"...Huh?"

As he stares blankly at his half-healed arm, he hears a voice speak out from somewhere within the room. "Don't quite understand what is going on do you Gremmy? Have you figured out why your powers seem to be failing? Why the all-powerful Visionary is no longer working?"

Anger rising in him, Gremmy whirls around again only to find the traitorous Quincy standing just a few meters away from him. Glancing behind himself, he notes that the other two women are still watching him through that triangular orange shield, and he once again wonders why his powers had failed to work on them. The sound of footsteps has him stuffing his hands back into his pockets before turning to look at the approaching Candice.

"Given up on running already, Candy-chan?" He mocks her, though her answering smile sends his hackles rising.

"Not at all Gremmy, I just... don't need to avoid your attacks anymore."

Blind hate surges through his mind as he glares at her, imagining her combusting into flame. To his shock, nothing happens yet again. As she continues to approach him, he continues trying to imagine her death, each one more brutal than the last, and each one to no avail.

'Burn! Crush! Explode! Disintegrate!' Beads of sweat run down his forehead as he desperately tries to make something work. 'Disappear! Bleed! Eviscerate!'

"Give up, Gremmy." Candice says, now less than a meter away from him. "Nothing you try is going to work here now."

'Here..? The room!' He nearly snarls as he figures out why his powers aren't working. 'So that's why the Reishi is so weird!'

"Noticed finally Gremmy? But it's probably not what you think." His Quincy opponent remarks bluntly.

Before he can demand an answer, Gremmy feels the Blut Vene protecting his body suddenly fade, leaving him completely defenseless. Quickly trying to form his spirit bow, his eyes widen when nothing happens either. "You bitch! What have you done!"

The green-haired Quincy just smirks at him. "At the moment, there is a powerful magic seal surrounding Hueco Mundo that prevents all Quincy from absorbing the ambient Reishi. Since you don't produce any Reishi of your own, it means that none of your special abilities are going to work." She notices his eyes staring in disbelief at the spirit bow she still has in her hand, and her smirk widens. "Oh, this? Since I left that bastard, my new allies are protecting me from its power. The tables sure have turned, haven't they?"
When Candice flaunts the glowing seal that is wrapped along the length of her arm, Gremmy feels the last of his fraying temper snap.

"YOU BITCH! VOLLSTÄNDIG!"

He stands there waiting for his powers to return, his fear rising with each passing moment that nothing happens. Seeing Candice shake her head and start to approach him once again, Gremmy involuntarily takes a step back, then another. He had never before imagined his powers failing, never before felt actual fear, but both are now happening.

"S-Stay back!" He shouts as he starts to rapidly back away from her, his eyes searching wildly for the exit. His panic increases when he realizes the burnt-orange-haired woman is now standing in front of the exit, the Hollow Queen standing at her side with Zanpakutō raised, and the triangular orange shield still protecting them from him. "Stay away from me!!"

"You have nowhere to run Gremmy." Candice speaks as she continues to approach him. "Nowhere to hide. No way to defend yourself. Just give yourself up; you lost the moment the seal was activated."

'The moment the seal...' Gremmy's eyes flash, and he remembers something he had learnt from the pair of Shinigami who killed his puppet. 'They repeatedly cast themselves back in time to avoid being affected by my puppet's ability, and if they could do it, so can I! All I need to do is to imagine myself far back enough in time that the seal hasn't activated, and I'll be able to imagine myself being unaffected by it!'

Without any hesitation whatsoever, he focuses on that single thought while pushing all his remaining Reiryoku into imagining himself in the past, several minutes before the seal activates.

It's the last thing that Gremmy Thoumeaux ever does.

With a choking cough, blood erupts from all of his bodily orifices, splattering the floor beneath him with red and nearly catching a stunned Candice in the face. As the blonde Quincy collapses to the ground, he feels his devastated body slowly beginning to fade along with his senses, leaving behind his equally devastated true body.

The three women in the room stare in shock at the ruptured, bleeding brain floating within a small glass dome, the only thing that is left of the Quincy known as Gremmy Thoumeaux. Orihime is the first to break the silence.

"Is... is that?" To her credit, the burnt-orange-haired healer's voice only wavers a bit as she speaks.

Candice frowns contemplatively. "Gremmy's true form? I heard that Guenael Lee was Gremmy's puppet, but I wasn't aware that Gremmy himself was also one..."

"A Quincy whose true form is a brain?" Tia shakes her head slowly. "That is as strange as the hand creature that attacked me alongside the mustached man earlier."

"Hand creature?" Orihime perks up at this. "There was one?"

"Several of those chains burnt it to ashes. It was dead before you entered the room."

"Oh..."

Candice straightens up from where she had been examining the brain. "I honestly don't know if this is truly Gremmy, but if it is, then there's one last thing we need to do." She looks towards her
The reincarnated Bishop looks rather uneasy. "Is there... no other option, Candice-san?"

"We cannot allow Yhwach to steal back Gremmy's powers through Auswählen, Orihime. It would put both Ichigo and Uryū in grave danger." The green-haired Quincy answers her seriously.

With both Candice and Tia waiting for her decision, Orihime can only nod reluctantly. Her hairpins glow brightly before six fairies appear around her, the physical manifestations of her Shun Shun Rikka, and they accompany her as she kneels down gently beside the floating brain in the jar.

"Ten no kyozetsu, han'nō no tate." Orihime softly speaks towards the brain of Gremmy Thoumeaux. "Shun'ō, Ayame."

"Got it." The two fairies take up positions on either side of the brain jar and deploy their healing shields, although this time they are using their shields to perform an entirely different task.

"Tsubaki."

The blue-clad fairy nods silently and begins to speed in circles around the two separate shields that are enveloping the brain jar. Steadily accelerating with each pass, he waits for Ayame and Shun'ō to tell him when to act, and on his one-hundredth fly by, he hears Shun'ō calling out to him.

"Now!"

Without any hesitation, Tsubaki rips through both shields, the brain jar and the floating brain in a single pass, his body transcending physical matter for a brief moment and severing Gremmy's powers from his soul; it is a feat only made possible by Ayame and Shun'ō rejecting the connection of both. The blue-clad fairy also feels Gremmy's former power latching onto him, but he says nothing and floats back wordlessly to Orihime's side with Ayame and Shun'ō following him.

"It is done." Orihime tells Candice and Tia quietly. "It was really Gremmy... his powers are now gone."

Candice nods solemnly. "So, all that is left now is just..." She pauses for a moment before making her decision. "Orihime, could you wait for me outside the room with Tia? It won't take long."

"Alright." Orihime absently links her arm with the former Tercera and begins to guide her outside the room, unaware of the baffled look Tia is giving their connected arms. After her experience with Zeva, Orihime is all too aware of what Candice is going to do, and she finds herself unwilling to look at the lonely ruptured brain floating unmoving in its jar, the green-haired Quincy slowly advancing on it. As Candice forms her bow, Orihime closes her eyes and turns away.

'I'm sorry.'

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The Ultimate Queen stands watching as the Naberius teams hurry to retrieve the bodies of their fallen, her senses constantly on alert for any approaching Quincy threats. Behind her, the remains of three Quincy Sternritter stand frozen solid, their bodies torn apart by the countless shards of sub-zero ice that had impaled them from within. Grayfia pays the frozen corpses no attention whatsoever; her eyes are fully focused on the Elves who are evacuating their dead, many of them with hardened gazes that only soften for a moment whenever they come across the bodies of those they know.
After the countless deaths caused by the Devil Faction’s Civil War, Sirzechs Gremory had claimed the title of Lucifer Maou with the dream of ensuring that all future generations of Devils and their allies would never have to experience the same kind of grief and suffering caused by that war. It is a goal that she has supported wholeheartedly, she and the other three Satans, and they have done so much to make this dream a reality.

And yet, here she is overseeing the aftermath of yet another terrible battle in which countless lives were lost once again.

Her eyes drift towards the numerous craters left behind on the landscape, the stark reminder of the desperate battle that was fought here between the mad Quincy bomber Bambietta Basterbine, and the combined Underworld forces which included both Heiresses of the Sitri and Gremory families and their peerages. It was the fiercest battle fought in Las Noches by far, and the combined Underworld forces had come extremely close to complete annihilation. Even now, Yuuto Kiba is in critical condition, a combination of Devil magic and Shinigami Kidō the only thing keeping him alive, while Koneko Tōjō had taken a full blast from one of Bambietta's explosions, her Rook enhancements the only thing that allowed her to escape with just severe burns and a concussion. Fortunately enough, none of the other young peerage members are as badly wounded as those two, having mostly suffered injuries from flying debris and having to deal with magical exhaustion. Issei Hyōdō is the most worn out among them, having passed out after unlocking the true form of his Sacred Gear, unlocking two different abilities for it, and using both in combination to power up Rias's Power of Destruction to incredible levels; it was the only thing that allowed the Gremory Heiress to land a decisive blow on the Quincy bomber and finish her off for good. Grayfia had witnessed that final desperate attack when she was scrying for Rias to open a portal directly to her location, and she was not lying when she said that both Sirzechs and Serafall, as well as herself and their parents would be extremely proud of them for having managed such a feat.

After they finished freaking out over the fact that their younger siblings had almost died to such a powerful enemy, of course.

Sadly, the Naberius forces that had accompanied the two peerages into battle had not nearly been as fortunate. Over half of the Elves and Hell Hounds had fallen in that battle, and two thirds of the survivors had been too badly injured to continue. Only the remaining third of their survivors were capable of escorting both peerages back to the breach in the outer wall, though in all honesty, Grayfia would have preferred to evacuate all of them straight through the portal she had come through. Unfortunately, priority was being given to retrieving the dead and wounded, so all she could do for them was direct them to the regrouping point outside the fortress. Thankfully, Ajuka’s special sealing array had activated a few minutes later, reducing the threat from any remaining Quincies to an absolute minimum.

Seeing that the Naberius forces in her sector are almost done retrieving their dead and injured, the wife of the current Lucifer Maou decides to join her husband’s Pawn, who is standing guard over his own nearby sector of the battlefield. Grayfia estimates that not that many of the Sternritters are left by this point, most of them having being killed off in battle, while several others had fallen after a strange light had engulfed them without warning. All of those engulfed by the light had shown surprise and betrayal on their faces before their powers and their lives were stolen from them, but she hadn’t seen it happen again after Ajuka’s sealing array became active. Wondering just how many of his men the Quincy Emperor had already sacrificed in his attempt to gain victory, Grayfia walks up to Beowulf, who is wiping the blood off of his sword with the tattered remnants of a once-white uniform. Sensing Grayfia’s approach, Beowulf turns and bows to his King’s wife before speaking to her.
"Tis strange these Quincies are, Grayfia. Their power while strong is based too much on the environment around them, and once Lord Ajuka's spell was used, they lost all battle sense and became defenseless children. Had they not been such a threat to our injured companions, I would be loathe to stain my blade with the blood of these weaklings."

Patting the Pawn on his arm, Grayfia gently tugs him to follow her in finding the rest of their peerage. "I believe they were too arrogant to realize that the source of their abilities could be removed Beowulf, a weakness that worked to our advantage. Come now, there are others that still need to be evacuated back to the Underworld before we go look for my husband."

"Yes, my Queen." The young descendant of the legendary hero says as he falls into step one pace behind her. After a moment of walking, he speaks again.

"Grayfia, where is young Ichigo now?" His words are answered by a tremendous power that ripples throughout the domed fortress.

"I believe he and his cousin are still fighting the Quincy Emperor, the one named Yhwach." Grayfia answers dryly.

The warrior grins as he feels another power rising in strength to join them. "His great-grandfather as well?"

Snorting in amusement, the silver-haired Devil replies. "Amyntas won't allow his great-grandson to fall to the man who murdered his granddaughter, neither will those two assassins of his. The Quincy Emperor is already dead; he just doesn't know it yet."

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Nianzol Weizol is at a loss as to how the current progress of the battle to gain control of Hueco Mundo is going. The moment those burning chains had burst through the wall and burnt three of his Lord's strongest Elite to ashes, he had questioned whether or not he should still be here fighting; not that he was given a choice, since the woman now standing in the middle of the vast room he is in had grabbed him by the scruff of his uniform and dragged him here using that strange power of hers, both she and he having moved without moving as best as he can tell. As soon as they had appeared here, she had violently tossed him against a wall and then stood there in the center of the room, hands folded before her as she regarded him with cold green eyes, and she had remained there completely untouched even as he tried and failed many times to hit her with his attacks.

Once again, he speeds with Hirenkyaku towards the dark-skinned woman, only to have his weapon barely skim past her skin as he rushes by. It is infuriating to him that she can dodge his attacks with such ease, and what makes it worse is the fact that his abilities are somehow not working on her. Each time he attempts to split her body with his Wind, she simply gazes into his eyes with a knowing smile on her lips and nothing else happening. Skidding to a stop, he glowers at the woman as she tilts her head to look at him.

"Have you decided to stop running? Or should I show you why you have lost?" His opponent's chiding voice taunts him.

"Fuck you bitch. I don't know how you are doing it, but it ends now." As he prepares to use his Vollständig, he feels a sudden wave of power pulse through his body and the room, followed by an abrupt sense of loss as the Reishi he is trying to gather suddenly slips through his grasp. "W-What!?"

"That was unexpected." He looks to see the woman shaking her head at him in mock apology.
"Well then, it seems our time here has come to an end. I will however grace you with two things Quincy. First I shall show you the form that was forced upon me as a child, the source of my power."

"What are you…?" Nianzol's eyes grow wide as the beautiful woman in front of him suddenly begins to change before his eyes.

First, he notices the woman's skin beginning to crack up and down her body, followed by muscles covered in blackened skin bulging out between the cracks. The woman sheds her outer clothing even as her body continues to distort, her face morphing into a hideous shape that causes him to back up in horror. Finally, her outer layer of skin flakes off completely, talon-tipped fingers softly scraping off the last few patches of dried skin that still cling to her body, and her mouth widens into a fanged grin. What is left of her hair retreats into her scalp as thick reptilian scales form over her head, face and body.

"My god." Nianzol whispers as the nightmarish creature before him no longer resembles the sensual woman from moments before, instead looking like it had crawled out from some long-forgotten swamp. Even then, he still doesn't understand how this creature has managed to overcome his ability...

Plants suddenly shoot up from the floor beneath him, catching him by surprise as they wind rapidly around his legs and lower body. As the vines continue to climb up his legs, he desperately tries to shake them off, only to discover that they are covered with thorn-like spikes that dig into his skin with each movement. His panic grows as the vines swiftly reach his chest, and he instinctively tries to rip the growing plants from his body with his Blut enhanced hands, but his Blut Vene fails suddenly and the vines begin to grow quicker and thicker over his body.

"It is no use Quincy; your powers are greatly diminished and you have no way of removing those vines." His eyes dart frantically to the monstrous woman who is still standing there watching him calmly. "As for this form of mine, I once thought it was a curse when I first became a Devil, an eyesore that brings nothing but horror to the people around me... but I soon learnt its true potential. This form allows me to combine my Devil's magic with the magic of my people, giving me a far greater affinity with plants, and also a much more lethal variety of abilities, such as the hallucinatory venom I injected in you while bringing you here, and the neurotoxins coating the thorns on my vines that are now flowing through your bloodstream."

"Poison!? What… wait…Devil? What Devil? Why are you here!? What business do you have interfering with our plans, our goals!?" He feels his mind beginning to slip as the vines continue to inject their deadly toxin into his body, the voice of the monstrous woman uttering a single word in his hearing.

"Yhwach."

"W-What...What does the Emperor...have to...do with...!?" Words begin to fail him as his heart begins to pump at dangerous speeds, the toxins in his bloodstream spreading everywhere and causing his veins and arteries to protrude grotesquely from his skin. Black blood begins to pour from his eyes and nose as his two tongues swell up in his throat, constricting his breathing.

"He murdered the granddaughter of my liege; as such I will do everything I can to help my liege and his great-grandson avenge her death today."

"Gra...nd...aught...rr..." Nianzol's last burbled word is cut off as the vines wrap around his head leaving his eyes exposed.
"Masaki Kurosaki, a Quincy your Emperor killed by taking away her powers while she was defending her child from a Hollow. That child is the Devil I have sworn my life to protect in her place, even if it means my death one day." She tilts her head slightly. "As for your abilities... what makes you think I was ever standing before you in the first place?" Giving the cocoon a small smile, she watches as the vines cover the rest of Nianzol’s face before they begin to constrict tightly. "Farewell Nianzol Weizol, I am pleased to inform you that your Master will be joining you shortly." The sound of bones being crushed echo loudly from the cocoon for a few more moments before all that remains is silence.

Standing silently behind the cocoon, Merti doesn't turn when her sister walks in through the doorway and stands next to her, but she does acknowledge her presence. "Sasha. How did it go with your fight?"

"Rather lackluster Merti, he proved to be...inadequate at the end." The blind assassin tells her with a shrug. "To succumb to my poison so easily when he himself dealt in something similar...I thought one such as him could have proven a capable foe and stem the effects of my magic, but he like all the others...failed." She shakes her head in disappointment. "In the end, he was simply a coward who would prey on those weaker than himself."

Sasha stood over As Nödt as he lay withering in pain, screaming his lungs out as he tried to claw his eyeballs from his skull, begging her to end his life like he had done for the past quarter of an hour. His mask lay in tatters on the floor, exposing his fleshless lips and hideous features, but for one who had seen the worst of the Devil Faction's Civil War, Sasha had no fear of As Nödt's face. Furthermore, after seeing the terrified memories of the young Momo Hinamori when she saved the Shinigami Lieutenant and put her to sleep, Sasha was in no mood to play around with the Quincy assassin or give him a peaceful death. Momo had already suffered so much from the one she had once called friend and Captain, and As Nödt's decision to torment her with his image and reopen those barely healed wounds had proven to the Elf that the Quincy she was fighting deserved no less than her absolute worst. As such, when she drove her poison tipped chains into his body, she had used every available torture in her mind to set about destroying what he once believed true terror should feel and look like.

'Now As Nödt, you will find out the meaning of true terror. Death will bring you no peace; the moment you die, your soul will be claimed by my lord and your torment shall continue. No one can escape the Kushanāda, especially not sinners like you. Don't worry, your many brothers and sisters will be going there soon to keep you company.'

Sasha watched as his rapidly beating heart finally exploded under the strain, and she stepped back to witness his final demise. She watched as As Nödt's soul moved from his dead body, a look of confusion on his face, before they both heard the sound of chains coming from somewhere beyond the room.

"What...?"

It was the only word the Quincy spirit managed to say before a huge blade suddenly slammed through his body and lifted him from the floor. Screaming in terror, As Nödt frantically tried to remove himself from the blade, his eyes bleeding and his fleshless lips howling as he was pulled through the wall to where all sinners would go.

"I see. I am sorry for your disappointment sister." Merti remarks after hearing the brief retelling of Sasha's battle.

Sasha only nods as she watches her sister's demonic shell begin to fade back into her body, her true self once again emerging. As Merti's skin begins to regrow and she dresses herself with her
discarded clothing, Sasha asks if she knows how Ichigo and Uryū are faring.

The room shakes in answer and they both feel Ichigo's magic and Reiatsu explode throughout the building. Merti turns to her with a wry smile on her face.

"I would say he is doing good Sister."

Both Elves giggle as they make their way out of the room, heading back to their young charge and his cousin as the forgotten cocoon of Nianzol Weizol slowly disintegrates to ash behind them. Merti nudges Sasha almost playfully.

"So, you think Riser stands a chance now?"

Rolling her unseeing eyes, Sasha returns her older sister's playful smile as she slips her own arm through that of her older sibling. "Not a snowball's chance."

Crimson hair flows elegantly down his back as the current Lucifer Maou walks along the slowly quieting hallways of Las Noches' inner fortress, his destination fixed in his mind. A door slams open ahead of him and a woman wearing a white uniform and a familiar star-like emblem on her hat steps out before he flicks his wrist in a fraction of a second, her body disintegrating before she even gets her scream out. Not bothering to look as he hears the sound of a blade slicing through the flesh of the soul he had just given to the Skeleton Tower, Sirzechs has eyes only for a certain head with silver hair and silver eyes. He pauses though as two familiar people step out of an adjoining corridor to join him, two siblings that he recognizes by sight. Those Devils who know of the three Longoak sisters also know that they are not natural assassins: dark things had been done to them by the old Maou, things that were thankfully long forgotten now with the deaths of those who had performed the deeds in question. Nodding in acknowledgement as the two Elves bow to him, Sirzechs continues to walk along the corridor with both Elves taking up positions behind him.

Not a word is said for the first few passageways as the three Devils make their way higher up towards the growing and very dense presence of the Naberius Clan's next head. A bright smile crosses Sirzechs's face when the familiar head of silver he is waiting for appears before him, along with a few other familiar heads as well. His wife and Queen Grayfia, his Pawn Beowulf, one of his Rooks Surtr Second, and his only Knight Souji Okita close ranks behind him as they continue to head up towards the main battle. Sasha and Merti nod to his Queen as they make space for her and the others, and their nod is easily returned. A comfortable silence ensues even when two Shinigami assassins casually join their group, Sasha and Merti slipping from their spots behind him to join with the other two, and a quiet conversation begins to take place between the four. Sirzechs listens in discreetly, and he can't help but smirk as he hears them complaining softly about how easy their battles had gone since they were forewarned of their opponents' abilities by Candice Catnipp. His smirk then falls as he remembers that despite all that foreknowledge, his younger sister and her peerage, as well as the Sitri Heiress and her peerage had almost been slain in battle by one of the Sternritter whose powers had proven to be far stronger than any of them had anticipated. Had it not been for Yuuto Kiba sacrificing himself to maim her, and Issei Hyōdō unlocking the true form of his Sacred Gear along with two of its abilities... He doesn't even want to think about what could have happened, and then there is that persistent feeling that he should really know who Yhwach is...

Still keeping his eyes forward, he casually reaches out to touch his wife's arm without anyone seeing his gesture. Her hand wordlessly reaches up to take his and give it a reassuring squeeze, before letting go and brushing off some dust from his arm. Their little byplay is interrupted however when a crash sounds out from ahead of them and a female voice begins yelling.
"Dammit Shinigami, watch where the hell you're walking!"

Sirzechs and his peerage look surprised by the shout, but the group behind them begin to chuckle once they remember that there is only one other Shinigami still inside the fortress. Soon enough, they hear his voice answering the voice yelling at him.

"Sorry my dear Arrancar-chan, I didn't see that step." Isshin apologizes as he steps into view.

"Just watch it." Menoly grumbles as she pushes past him while shaking her head in disbelief, walking ahead of him. "I don't know how I got picked to be your guide in the first place."

Kisuke and Yoruichi stifle their snickers at the familiar sight of Isshin rubbing the back of his head as he once again apologizes to the Números. "Well, since you were the least injured, you got picked as my guide Menoly-chan. Sorry about that."

"ARRGGG! Are all Shinigami as loony as you or are you just 'special'?"

"He's special all right." Menoly yelps and nearly trips in surprise, too worked up by her conversation with Isshin to notice the larger group of Devils, Elves and Shinigami watching the two of them. Isshin just waves lazily at them, having detected their approaching presences before they even came into view.

"Well hey there Yoruichi, Kisuke…everyone. I guess you can see…I got lost…again." The former Captain informs them sheepishly.

Cocking an eyebrow at him, Yoruichi wonders out loud whether it's genetics or not. The bucket-hatted Shinigami mutters that it's genetics, no doubt about it.

"So Menoly-chan, where exactly are you taking him?" Kisuke asks the Números as he readjusts his bucket hat.

Pointing upwards while looking somewhat unnerved by the large number of powerful beings so close to her, she still manages to answer him rather flippantly. "Dumbass wants to get closer to whoever is still fighting up there. I told him I would get him close but no way was I getting anywhere near the throne room. Have any of you felt the shit that is being let loose up there? I thought Starrk and Baraggan had power, but…well, there's just no way am I getting myself caught up in that. Since you all know this guy and you seem to be heading there yourselves, I'll be on my way back to where it is safe. See ya."

"You do know that Tia Harribel is still up there fighting for you and your people right now, don't you Menoly Mallia? Don't you want to see if she is alright?" Yoruichi calls out to her.

Pausing in mid-step, the fair-haired Números looks over her shoulder at them with an unreadable expression. "She's dead. We haven't felt her Reiatsu in the last half hour. If that's all you want to…"

"She's alive." A soft voice interrupts her. All heads turn to see Orihime and Candice coming towards them from an intersecting hallway. "I just finished healing her ten minutes ago…" The burnt-orange-haired healer's voice trails off as she realizes who she is talking to. "Menoly?"

"You!" There is a visible change in Menoly's expression as she begins to back away in panic. "I'm…I…I…Shit!" She spins away in an effort to run, only to flinch back when she sees a tall, dark skinned woman with pointed ears standing in her escape route.

"Orihime, why is this young lady running from you?" Sasha asks as her blind eyes stare down at the cowering fair-haired Arrancar.
"Umm...She and her sister...tortured me when I was a prisoner here, Sasha-san." The young Bishop's voice becomes far quieter towards the end.

A killing aura immediately fills the hallway as both Sasha and her sister Merti box in the smaller woman between them to keep her from escaping. Both Elves glaring at her with visible anger as their chains appear suddenly behind them.

"Wait! Please stop! No...no more please! No more fighting because of me!" The Shun Shun Rikka user hastily pleads as she pushes past them to stand beside the trembling Números.

All eyes look towards the healer in disbelief then, including Menoly's. The Números is the first to speak then. "W-Why? I...I tortured you. Why don't you want them to kill me!?!"

Looking at the trembling Arrancar, Orihime replies back softly. "Because the war is over Menoly-chan. Aizen is dead, and both you and I are free of him and this place. I don't want to see any more people die because of him and what he forced all of us to do, not even you or your sister. I...I have forgiven you both a long time ago; it was his fault that we were brought together in such a way, and I have long since learned that the past will only bring you heartache if you don't let it go. I've moved on from those days already, you can do it too."

"You forgave...us?" Menoly drops to her knees as she stares up at the younger woman with disbelief on her features.

Orihime kneels down beside her and gives her a compassionate smile. "Yes, I forgive you and Loly. I even forgave Ulquiorra-san in the end."

The Arrancar can't move as she sits on her knees, staring at Orihime blankly. She had expected to be killed the moment the Shinigami and these other people found out that she and Loly had tortured the burnt-orange-haired healer while she was in their captivity. Now she is at a loss as to why Orihime would protect her, how she could even utter those words of forgiveness to her. If Grimmjow hadn't interfered back then, she and her sister would have killed the young woman kneeling beside her in their jealousy; instead, Orihime had survived, and the man they had pledged their lives to had betrayed them all before dying at the hands of the orange-haired Shinigami who had come to rescue her.

Lost in her own memories, she doesn't notice as the two Elves dismiss their chains and step past her, followed by the rest of their group.

"We need to move. Ichigo and Uryū are the last ones fighting other than Serafall, though it shouldn't take her long to make her way back to the throne room once she is done playing around." Kisuke remarks as he passes by.

"Menoly, you are free to go." Sasha adds without a backwards glance as she and Merti stalk ahead of the group, both Elves still seething at the discovery of Orihime's tormentor, but choosing to respect the kind-hearted healer's wish to spare her former tormentor's life.

Still on her knees, the young Arrancar watches as each of the strange and powerful beings make their way past her. None of them spare her a second glance except for Isshin, who only gives her a sad smile. Finally, Orihime gets back to her feet, before slowly extending her hand towards the Números.

"We might need a guide still, Menoly-chan."

The Arrancar's eyes widen, and they begin to grow damp as she tentatively takes Orihime's hand in
hers.

"...Orihime?"

"Yes Menoly?"

"I know you said you forgave us, but I…we would still like to offer our apologies, if you will accept it." Menoly bows deeply to Orihime, the tears falling to the floor beneath her the only indicator of the Arrancar's sincere apology.

Wordlessly, the healer pulls her into a warm embrace. "Okay, I will."

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Yhwach grunts as he parries yet another furious attack from the armored teen fighting him before dodging the next fusillade of arrows sent his way by the Quincy teen. The moment the newcomers had broken through the wall and stolen his key to controlling the Hollows, he had been forced on the back foot against the young man in black armor and the traitorous Quincy fighting at his side. It hadn't taken him long to realize that the black-armored teen was a Devil, since he still remembered the power of the Devils and the pains he had taken to avoid them nearly a millennia ago when he was fighting the Gotei Thirteen for the first time. It turned out he was right to make that decision, as he had personally witnessed Head Captain Yamamoto being humbled by that power, a power that gave even him pause when it was then directed his way.

During their final battle a millennium ago, both himself and Yamamoto had taken their fight beyond the borders of Soul Society and into the World of the Living. They had ended up in some rural Japanese village, with the small population of spiritually-aware humans dragged into the conflict screaming and panicking as their homes were destroyed and their people killed by indiscriminate attacks from both sides. Both men had believed that the only way the battle would end was if one side finally killed the other; neither had expected a third party to intervene, but they also hadn't known they were fighting in an area considered under the control of one of the Pillars of the Underworld, the Gremory Clan. It was only when the screaming of civilians abruptly ceased and an unnatural pressure fell upon them, that they realized a newcomer had joined their battle.

He still clearly remembers the Crimson Duke standing over the unconscious bodies of the Shinigami who had foolishly attempted to bar his way, the Devil swatting them aside with barely a look in their direction. That old fool Yamamoto had taken naturally offense to this, engage the Devil himself while spouting some self-righteous tripe about intruders getting in the way of Soul Society's affairs, and he was ruthlessly crushed by the crimson-haired Devil for his efforts. Unfortunately, Yhwach wasn't allowed the chance to finish off Yamamoto as the Devil had turned to him next, and it was only his ability to manipulate his future that allowed him to escape without being crippled. The destruction to the small village after the battle had been absolute, but the amazing part was that outside of those who had died in the initial clash between himself and Yamamoto, no one else had. The Devils had apparently teleported all the humans away so that the two powerhouses could fight without causing more casualties until the Crimson Duke showed up to deal with them. Gremary... that name still sends chills down his spine, and he almost swears he felt that Devil's power briefly during his fight, but he can't think of any reason for the Crimson Duke to come and interfere with this battle. Strangely enough, he is feeling a very similar power coming from the black armored teen, who is fighting like a demon straight out of Hell itself.

Swinging his broadsword upwards, Yhwach barely keeps the scowl from his face when his blade is once again deflected at the last second by those damn chains that keep appearing from nowhere.

A half-step to the right takes him away from the single Heilig Pfeil fired at his back. Twisting in mid-move and sprinting forward sharply, Yhwach swings his weapon at the traitorous Quincy teen,
but once again he finds his target missing. The glasses wearing Ishida teen is both slippery and perceptive, using every fault and opening he can find to hit him with one of those extremely dense Reishi arrows. Yhwach had allowed the first one to hit him to show the younger man the difference in their strengths, but quickly learnt it was a mistake when the arrow went straight through his hand with ease, barely missing his head when he was forced to sweep the projectile to the side. Angered and humiliated by his injury, Yhwach was forced to move again to avoid the wave of black and crimson energy moving at even higher speeds towards his back, followed by yet another Heilig Pfeil that prevents him from retaliating.

The Quincy Emperor had even been forced to use his Auswählen over and over again to quickly gain power when it was clear that he was losing the battle with the two young men. After reclaiming his power from several subordinates, his Auswählen had then inexplicably failed, and now he can't even absorb the surrounding Reishi from Hueco Mundo. Feeling a strange itch crawling on his skin, he wonders what is impeding him from using his true power, the same power he had lost over a millennium ago, the power he needed to seek vengeance against the Shinigami and the Soul King. But these two brats are truly proving themselves to be a thorn in his side!

Trying to put distance between himself and the two teens, he finds himself having to dodge not only those dense Reishi arrows, but also Ceros, blades of crimson-black energy, and those damnable chains that keep following up both their attacks. Rolling to his left, he finally deigns to use his bow for the first time in battle; he almost smirks when he sees the Devil youth make no effort to avoid his arrows, but his smirk immediately falls when he finds out why, a veritable wall of disk-like chain links forming before the teens and intercepting his arrows with ease.

'Are they sentient? I don't remember the Gremory Devil ever using chains in battle, so is this… new?' He scans the teen Devil before him with his hard red-brown eyes, looking for a weakness he can use.

"Why do you fight me Devil? You said your name is Kurosaki, but the only Kurosaki I know of is a boy in the Human World, so you can't be him." The Emperor asks offhandedly, feigning interest to gain himself more time. The answer he gets is in the form of numerous sets of chains sent stabbing towards him, each topped with razor sharp blades, forcing him again to use Hirenkyaku to avoid each of them. Moving swiftly through the throne room, he is able to escape all the chains but one. The lone spear-tipped chain shoots out from his shadow, slicing his ankle painfully which spins him out of control and sends him crashing straight into one of the stone bleachers resting on either side of the once-raised dais in the middle of the room. The air around him glows with lines of Blut Vene, but they do him no good at all as yet another arrow tears straight through them like they didn't exist, forcing him to dodge as it narrowly grazes his cheek. As he finishes his roll however, he is hit in the face by a black plated foot, knocking out several teeth from his mouth and causing him to spit out a mouth full of blood.

"How's does it feel Yhwach? Knowing that someone can force you to feel the same weakness you left our mothers with? I promise you this, Uryū and I will make you pay for taking our mothers from us!" Yhwach blindly strikes out at the voice, and this time his ribs crack when a gauntlet-covered hand smashes into his chest, sending him crashing into the wall.

"Get up Emperor; we aren't done kicking your ass up by a long shot. We have years of pain to vent out on your worthless hide. NOW GET THE FUCK UP AND FIGHT!"

Cursing as he slowly gets back to his feet, Yhwach spies the two teens now standing side by side before him; each of them have another attack at the ready. Wiping the blood from his mouth, he tries to activate Auswählen again, but once again it fails. An attempt to absorb nearby Reishi also fails, and he grits his teeth in frustration.
"What did you do?"

Seeing the smug looks on their faces, it is easy to tell that they know exactly what he is asking them. "Easy dumbass, all Quincy need to absorb spiritual particles from their surroundings to use their powers, so we simply took that away from you. My Great-grandfather's best assassin developed a special seal to prevent Quincies from absorbing ambient Reishi when we captured Candice to keep her from escaping, and she later helped us improve it even further; oh, by-the-way, Candice wanted me to tell you that she quits and good riddance to you. So, if you were wondering how this is fair to you, to fight you while you are crippled and this is not an honorable way to end you? Guess what, we don't care. You stole our mothers’ powers for your own, now you fight and die on your own." Lifting his helm, Ichigo lets his black sclera eyes stare hatefully upon the man whose image his false Zanpakutō had taken for his own.

"I am the source of all Quincy powers, boy." Yhwach growls at them. "Don't pretend you would have cared if I had taken back my powers from anyone besides your loved ones. At least Head Captain Yamamoto had the guts to fight me on even grounds. Are you too afraid to do so?"

Laughter comes from both teens then, with the dark-haired teen rebutting. "As my cousin just said, we don't care if we fight you fairly. We both learned our lessons the hard way that fighting with honor and fighting to survive are two different things. Today we don't fight for our honor, but to avenge our mothers. You took their powers and left them to die; my mother died in a coma, while Ichigo's…"

"Mine died protecting me from a Hollow that was attacking us when you stole her powers. Your ass is lucky that my Dad killed that Hollow, because if not, both he and my great-granddad would be feeding you to them when this was over. As it is, I get first dibs. You want fair, you should have stuck with regaining your power on your own rather than stealing it from others asshole." With that said, both Devil and Quincy fire their attacks at him, both attacks travelling so fast that he can barely react due to his dwindling ability to absorb any ambient Reiatsu.

"Getsuga Tenshō!" This time the blade like attack is so condensed that it rips right through his left arm and severs it from his body, while the Heilig Pfeil punches straight through the Blut Vene on his right shoulder and cripples that arm as well. His back hits the wall behind him from the force of their attacks, blood pouring from his open wounds as he struggles to get to his feet; glaring at his opponents, he knows then that he has no other choice. He has to use his own Vollständig to break free of that accursed seal and heal his body, otherwise he will die.

Pushing himself straight up, he grins when he realizes he barely detects a foreign source of Reiatsu... one he can use to activate Ransōtengai. Absorbing the Reiatsu and adding it to his own Reiryoku, he commands his hands to grab several capsules of Gintō on his belt that he then stabs and releases into his bloodstream. A column of white energy erupts from his body, piercing the roof above him and tearing through all barriers; he can feel the ambient Reishi once again flowing into his body, no longer prevented from doing so by the seal they had placed on him. Returning his body to full health with a single application of Reiryoku, he looks to see how his opponents are taking in his renewed strength, only to realize that neither of them are showing any signs of worry on their faces. Quirking an eyebrow, he asks if they know that their deaths are now at hand.

"Did you think we wouldn't have taken your Vollständig into account, Yhwach? If you think you can take us, then show us your powers; show us how a coward fights for his life."

Anger rages through his body at those condescending words; this Devil has made him feel an emotion he thought he was far above, but each repeated act of indifference, each word of scorn and derision coming from the black-armored child only serves to stoke his anger to greater heights.
Pulling out his medallion from his pocket, Yhwach activates his bow at full power.

"I'll show you both why you will die here and now, and then I will use Hueco Mundo to initiate my assault on Soul Society as I had planned. I may have lost most of my loyal Sternritters, but I can always make more of them, and maybe I'll spare one or both of you as my slaves to create the next batch instead. Then I will kill the Soul King and everyone else who stands in my way, and I will rule over the afterlife as I was meant to!"

"You are mad." Uryū scoffs while shaking his head in derision. "I learned why our ancestors were hunted down two centuries ago, why the Soul King would allow such a massacre to happen. And after I found out that the source of our powers was you, I finally understood. Your powers were designed to kill the Soul King, they were never meant to protect the balance. If the balance is upset, then all the worlds will be endangered or even destroyed. Even if it means that the Quincy line will end here, we can't, no, we won't allow you to do that."

Flexing his newly-restored body, the Quincy Emperor smirks as he asks how they intend to do that. Both teens harden their expressions then, the Quincy teen raising his bow while the black armored teen shouts. "By taking your life! Bankai, Tensa Zangetsu!"

The Sternritter designated as 'B' quietly studies his surroundings, his eyes looking for the woman who has so far made a mockery of him. She had wasted no time in separating him from his Emperor when she first appeared in the room, grabbing him from his rightful place next to Yhwach and taking him away in a flash of light. When his eyes had cleared, she was standing a good distance away from him while he shook loose ice from his body. Her next attack had almost left him without his other ear.

Truly annoyed, he had unsheathed his sword early in the fight and used Hirenkyaku to appear next to her, swinging his blade horizontally at her neck, only for his hand to rebound when his weapon struck against a glowing rune-covered circle of energy. The twin-tailed young woman had simply looked to him with a glowing smile on her face. "Is that best you have Quincy? If not, I will allow you more time to amend for your sins before I give you to the Guardians."

Not even a blink of an eye later, Jugram Haschwalth had backed away under the cover of thousands of arrows, peppering the area that the petite woman stood with destructive bolts of soul-destroying energy. Landing on the opposite side of the room and waiting for the cloud of dust and debris to settle, he now reaches up to touch the bleeding stump where his left ear had been. He will have to ask his Emperor to heal him once it is feasible to do so, as well as apologize for letting himself get wounded so easily, but right now he needs to stop the bleeding before it can weaken him any further. Still scanning the cloud of dust and the room for any sign of his opponent, he tries to gather Reishi from his surroundings, only for nothing to happen. Frowning in confusion, he tries again to absorb the ambient Reishi, and this time he notices something pulsing through the air and preventing the Reishi from being absorbed.

"You can feel it, can't you? The seal that prevents all of you Quincies from absorbing Reishi from your surroundings." The voice of the young woman echoes out from within the cloud of dust, which finally dissipates to reveal her being completely unscathed by his attacks. Jugram's frown deepens as she begins to walk towards him casually, her expression still as cheerful as it was when their battle first started.

"You know? When I first met one of my younger cousins, you can't imagine the happiness that coursed through my body that day." She tells him conversationally, still walking forward without a
hint of worry in her step. "I was so eager to find out more about him, find out about his family, the family I never knew we had. I wanted to know how he grew up, the things he had done and experienced, the kind of life he was living."

A dark shadow suddenly crosses the young woman's face, and her eyes seem to glow with inner malevolence. "But then he broke my heart when he told me how his mother, MY OTHER COUSIN DIED!" Acting on instinct, Jugram attempts to dodge the attack his senses are telling him is coming, but he isn't quick enough. The twin-tailed young woman seems to teleport forward and kick him squarely in the ribs, sending his body flying several meters away, the sound of his bones breaking audible in the silence of the room.

Jugram crashes heavily into a pillar, then he finds himself inexplicably trapped by shackles of ice that pierce through his arms and legs, the blood in them freezing almost immediately and slowly invading his body from within. Coughing out a lungful of blood and fixing his eyes on the twin-tailed young woman, he activates the power his Emperor had given him: 'The Balance', the power to return all misfortune accumulated on his body to those fortunate enough to inflict it.

To his utmost shock, nothing happens.

"Wondering why your powers aren't working?" The twin-tailed Devil remarks offhandedly as she begins to advance on him once again. "I could say it's an effect of the seal, but the answer is actually simpler." Her cold blue eyes glare at him, sparks of pink dancing within their depths. "When one's skill and power is absolute, fortune and misfortune cannot affect the outcome of battle."

Jugram's eyes widen in disbelief. "That is... impossible!!"

Seemingly teleporting forward at his words, the twin-tailed woman stomps heavily on his chest, ignoring the way he chokes up more blood. "I. Don't. Care. After your filthy, cowardly Emperor stole my cousin Masaki's powers and got her killed, I don't care what any of you Quincies think. The only thing I want to do is annihilate the whole lot of you, and what better way to do so than to show you the true difference in our power?"

She points her hand at his face, a cold blue light beginning to gather in her palm. "You who look down on other races and think them inferior. You who think so highly of yourselves that you would murder innocent beings without the slightest hint of remorse. It's been a long while since I last had to do this, so I hope you don't mind if I make a mess..."

Pinned helplessly to the pillar, Jugram can only look up at his future death with wide eyes. "Who... what are you?"

The twin-tailed woman meets his gaze evenly. "Serafall Leviathan, Maou. Now pay for your crimes... Celsius Cross Trigger."

There is a brilliant explosion of white, and he knows nothing more.

Serafall straightens up and looks at the solid block of ice that contains the frozen corpse of Jugram Haschwalth. An expression of uncomprehending horror is still present on his face, preserved for all eternity... or at least until she allows the ice to melt. Even then, every cell in his body has been destroyed, flash-frozen by temperatures so far below zero that even arctic ice would shatter. Ironically enough, the only thing holding the dead Quincy's body together is the very ice that entombs him.

Stepping back to view her handiwork, the Maou then looks around the room and laughs somewhat
awkwardly, noticing the rather abrupt change in her surroundings. The empty room has been turned into a glittering, frozen wasteland, thick sheets of ice covering every exposed surface of the room and large icicles hanging like crystals from the ceiling. The only place that has been spared from her magic is the doorway she had come through, and she had only done so for a good reason.

Looking towards the shadowy doorway, Serafall suddenly smiles and calls out cheerfully. "Tia-chan, I know you are standing there. Come out and help me deal with this."

There is silence for a moment, then a tall, tan-skinned blonde woman steps out from the shadows of the doorway, her wide emerald eyes taking in the frozen wasteland present in the room. Her eyes then drift to the lone surviving occupant, the twin-tailed petite Devil who is smiling at her warmly.

"Orihime told me about you, Tia Harribel, and that you are going to become Ichigo's family. Is this true?" Curious blue eyes scan the statuesque blonde who is watching her warily.

"...Yes. I am Tia Harribel. Are you Serafall Leviathan?" The Queen of Hueco Mundo asks her, scarcely able to believe that the petite woman before her holds the power to change the landscape at her whim. She resists the urge to back away as the twin-tailed Devil skips over to her and links her arm with hers.

"Yep, just call me Serafall, Tia-chan! We're going to become family after all!" The Maou tells her happily.

Tia blinks in confusion, still caught wrongfooted by the petite Maou's ability to change her moods without warning. "... Family?"

Serafall smiles at her. "You're going to become Ichigo's Queen, aren't you?" When Tia nods in acknowledgement, the Maou continues to speak. "That means you will become his family, and by extension my family as well. Don't worry, we will always take care of our family."

Despite the emotions that are stirred up by those words, Serafall gives Tia no chance to process them; instead, the Maou tugs her over to the frozen block of ice that contains the body of Jugram Haschwalth.

"Tia-chan, you can manipulate water, can't you?" The twin-tailed Devil asks her innocently. "Would you mind helping me clean up this mess? I don't want to leave this room looking like this, but if I just released my magic the ice would melt everywhere and make the mess even worse."

Tia stares at the frozen look of horror on Jugram's face, then she turns to stare at Serafall. She sees no deceit in the Maou's expression, only curiosity and hopeful expectation.

"... Alright, but I'll have to release Tiburón. Is that okay?" She finally gives in to the request.

"Sure, go ahead!" Serafall skips back several steps and gestures to the room. "Go ahead Tia-chan! I'll release the ice when you're manipulating the water!"

Tia plants her feet firmly on the ice before unsheathing her Zanpakutō from behind her. Holding it before her with the blade pointing downward, she intones the words of her Resurrección. "Destroy, Tiburón!"

A surge of water engulfs her blade, before enveloping her entire body in a cocoon of water. Slashing her sword down, Tia parts the cocoon in half, revealing her released form. A thought suddenly occurs to the former Tercera, and she looks down at herself. Surprisingly enough, her clothes don't seem to have changed, although her jacket is now hanging open around her shoulders and her breasts are wrapped by what appears to be linen bandages, preserving her modesty.
Shrugging inwardly to herself at this oddity, Tia focuses her Reiatsu once more and points her Zanpakutō forward, utilizing the skill that would best fit this situation.

"Cascada!"

Serafall is impressed by the miniature tidal wave that surges forth from Tia's sword and washes over the room, soaking the magically enhanced ice with Reiatsu enhanced saltwater almost a foot deep. Almost absently, the twin-tailed Maou raises blocks of ice beneath her feet and Tia's to keep them from getting drenched by the saltwater.

"Okay, I'm going to go ahead and release the ice now Tia-chan, just sweep it all out of the room and down the corridor!" Serafall calls cheerfully to the former Tercera.

Tia stares at Serafall again, before nodding in acceptance. "I'm ready."

Focusing her magic into her fingertips, Serafall snaps her fingers and utters a single word.

"Break."

All the ice in the room immediately shatters into fine powder, including the frozen body of Jugram Haschwalth. The only ice not affected by her command are the two blocks of ice beneath her feet and Tia's. As the powdered ice dissolves into Tia's Reiatsu enhanced saltwater, the Arrancar wordlessly sends the water flowing out of room and down the corridor, not particularly caring where it ends up at.

Serafall watches the water drain from the room, carrying with them the remains of the dead Quincy as her eyes gain a vindictive gleam. "Not quite the ending you envisioned for yourself, did you Quincy? I bet your Emperor never foresaw this future for you either... Knowing Ichigo, he is ramming your Emperor's futures up his ass right now." She mutters under her breath. When she sees Tia looking at her in confusion, she immediately adopts a cheerful expression once more.

"Good work Tia-chan! Room looks sparkly clean now!" She isn't kidding, the room is practically sparkling after the impromptu ice and saltwater bath. "Come Tia-chan, I will bring us to Ichi-kun and Uryü-kun, and you can tell me all about yourself. If you are going to be our family and Ichigo's Queen, I want to know all about you too."

Dismissing the remaining blocks of ice and evaporating the water residue with a single thought, Serafall skips forward and takes the Espada's arm in her own again. Waving her hand over her head, she forms a magic circle beneath their feet and pulls Tia close to her.

"Wait! Where are we going!" Tia questions as she feels the power building beneath her feet. Serafall just flashes her a mischievous grin.

"Easy, we're going to help the others kill the Quincy Emperor!"

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Shinigami, Devils, and one lone Arrancar are hurriedly making their way up the last stairwell leading to the throne room's level. Most of them can tell that the fight above them has changed somehow, with Isshin feeling as if his son's power is actually being held back for some reason. Frowning, the former Captain glances again at the dead bodies they have been passing, each of the Quincies having looks of surprise or betrayal on their faces but no other marks on their bodies; his gut tells him that they are somehow related to whatever is going on upstairs. Glancing to his left, he sees that the brilliant Shinigami running next to him is also paying close attention to the dead bodies. Their eyes suddenly widen as Ichigo's suppressed Reiatsu suddenly explodes in a torrent of
fury; grey eyes meet brown as they start to Shunpo towards the source of long suppressed anger and rage that is steadily skyrocketing, leaving behind the rest of their group.

"Kid's pissed Kisuke." Isshin mumbles.

"Ehmm. We need to hurry then Isshin." The shouten owner replies.

"Anything to do with what we saw earlier?"

A grimace crosses the former scientist's face then. I'm not sure, but if what I suspect is true, then there's only one way to prevent the worst possible outcome from happening."

Picking up speed as they reach the final floor, Kisuke Shunpos towards the throne room, hoping that he can make it in time.

'No matter what you do, you must not kill him Ichigo!'

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After Yhwach unleashed his Vollständig, their battle had taken a decided turn for the worse.

Uryū holds his lower ribs, Ichigo shielding them both with his chains while the armored teen struggles to stay on his feet. They had truly underestimated the power of the self-proclaimed Quincy Emperor; ever since the bastard regained his ability to absorb Reishi, the fight had taken a brutal turn for the two teens despite all of their advanced preparations and training. Ichigo's armor is now showing signs of breaking, and in a few spots it is even missing entirely. Uryū's ribs are fractured, Ichigo's timely intervention the only thing that prevented his chest from being caved in by a kick, and his right arm hangs limply with blood dripping from the wound in his right shoulder, one that mirrors the wound he gave Yhwach earlier. The murderer they are facing has no visible wounds on him now; even his clothes seem to have repaired themselves after every attack. The only consolation they have is the displeased frown the murderer is wearing at his continued inability to kill them both.

Grimacing as he falls back for the moment, Ichigo pushes through the pain and extends a hand to his cousin.

"Uryū you okay?"

"I'm fine." The younger Quincy takes the offered hand and allows Ichigo to lift him back to his feet, wincing as he jostles his fractured ribs again.

"Are you sure? You look pretty winded there." Ichigo says while sending his chains to deflect the numerous explosive arrows sent flying at them from Yhwach's bow. Uryū gains a sour expression as he remembers how the Quincy Emperor had suddenly became capable of reading his every move in advance; Ichigo was somehow messing up that foresight however, which is the only reason the teens had survived until now.

"...The Almighty' really is a ridiculous power." Uryū curses under his breath. He has to admit that Yhwach is only getting stronger, while he himself is weakening from his injuries. "Ichigo, if...if I fall...you end it, you understand?"

Looking over his shoulder, the orange-haired Devil nods his head. "Get out of here then, I'll hold him off as long as I can."

"No, I'm not leaving Ichigo. Just promise me you'll end this here."
"I promise."

Sensing that the Quincy Emperor is gathering more Reishi for his attack, Ichigo drops his barrier and sends his chains hurtling towards Yhwach in a pre-emptive attack, his Zanpakutō striking furiously against the defense of the Quincy Emperor's own weapon while Uryū keeps watch on Ichigo's back, hoping he can find some way to help his cousin. So far the older black-haired Quincy had turned the focus of his attacks solely on the armored heir of the Naberius Clan after Uryū's severe injuries, and the results are now beginning to show as the fight continues on relentlessly, Devil teen and Quincy Emperor both fighting without end.

Trying desperately to keep his promise to Uryū, Ichigo is utilizing every trick and skill that he has had hammered into him for the last two weeks. Despite his success in the beginning, as he and Yhwach continue to fight, the early advantage he has had slowly disappears as the man before him continues to adapt to his attacks and gain more ground. The only thing that is preventing Yhwach from outright dominating the fight at this point are his Hell chains; it seems that even with the power of 'The Almighty', Yhwach is incapable of predicting their movement and attack patterns.

"Oi King, speaking of chains, why the hell haven't we used them fully?"

Almost stumbling at Zangetsu's unexpected voice, Ichigo fires back at him immediately. "The hell Zangetsu, what do you mean by use them fully dammit!? I've been using them with everything I can think of!"

"Yeah? Then why haven't you used your flames again?"

"...Flames?"

"Duhhhh! The ones you and Merti used to fry those first few morons with. Did you forget them already King!?"

'Well shit I did.' Ichigo grumbles inwardly, though a grin forms under his helm now that he remembers.

Twisting suddenly in mid-step, he sends all his chains shooting forward at the Quincy Emperor again, who scowls at the display before bracing himself to bat away as many of the attacks as he can while healing himself through the damage taken from the rest; it is something that he has done several times already in this battle.

'Got you asshole.'

Unlike his previous attacks, Ichigo suddenly lights every single one of his Hell Chains on fire with the familiar blue flames from his inner-world, the shocked look on the older man's face as they crash into his defenses telling Ichigo that he wasn't expecting to face those blue flames again, not after the surprise attack that killed off three of his Elite Sternritter. Not letting up on his attack now that he has regained the advantage, Ichigo presses forward against Yhwach, sending Ceros, Bala, Getsuga Tenshōs and Kidō spells towards his opponent at a blistering pace, his burning chains boxing in Yhwach's movements and forcing him to burn his reserves on healing. Seeing Yhwach stagger for just a moment, Ichigo immediately Sonídos behind him and cleaves his blade downwards, striking through the same arm he had cut off earlier and burning through the stump with his Hell Chains. Yhwach howls in agony, and Ichigo adds insult to injury by punching the Quincy Emperor in the back of his head as hard as he can, his armored fist crunching through the bone and sending Yhwach reeling.
Seeing the Quincy Emperor's defenses wide open, Uryū suddenly raises his crippled right arm, his mastery of Ransōtengai allowing him to manipulate the movements of his body through Reishi alone. Ignoring the damage, he is causing his own arm, the Quincy teen lets loose yet another barrage of Heilig Pfeil in the direction of Yhwach, forcing the older man to expend even more Reishi to heal his broken body. Repeatedly bombarding the slowly rising Quincy Emperor with his Reishi arrows, Uryū huffs out as Ichigo jumps back to his side, beads of sweat rolling down his forehead.

"Anymore bright ideas cousin? I can't hold this for much longer!" He shouts at Ichigo.

Shifting in his black armor, Ichigo replies sarcastically. "**Hell yes, me and Zangetsu are gonna beat him with everything we have. You... just wait until...**"

Uryū's eyes narrow as Ichigo quickly formulates a plan that should work. Once Ichigo finishes, he shakes his head in agreement and forces his body off the ground. Ichigo uses Sonído to rejoin the Emperor in battle, while he unleashes Reishi arrows like lighting from his bow as he strains his reserves to their very limit, not giving Yhwach the slightest opportunity to regain his momentum.

Taking a deep breath to focus himself, Ichigo pushes his Devil energy into his Zanpakutō and watches it light up with blue flame, then he narrows the gap between himself and the killer of two women, two wives, and two beloved mothers.

"**Time to pay up fucker.**"

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Unknown by them, a teen watches with glistening eyes as the two people she cares for most in the world clash with that monster, the insane man who is directly responsible for their pain and their broken childhood. Wiping her tears, she can't help but cringe every time the young Devil takes a deep wound to keep his Quincy cousin from being struck, only the toughness of the Hell Armor he wears preventing the wounds from being lethal to him. It doesn't prevent her from studying the battle as it progresses, however, the feelings she is interpreting from both Zanpakutō and wielder causing her to pay close attention to the things happening in the background. She knows subconsciously what is happening around them, quickly realizing what the Quincy Emperor is doing to keep himself going. Each time they get close to crippling the monster, he would suddenly gain even more reserves from his surroundings, his Vollständig allowing him to bypass the seal and continue to use Auswählen on his subordinates.

Scowling harshly as Ichigo takes another glancing blow to his chest, she studies the man her friends are doing everything in their power to kill, and the madness reflecting back from his orbs makes her think of him as a rabid animal... She suddenly wonders what Yhwach will do once he runs out of subordinates' lives to steal. Will he surrender? Try to run? Or will he... try to spite them one last time before dying?

"Zangetsu."

"**Little busy here Imp!**"

"Can you feel any other Quincies within Las Noches?" She asks him urgently.

There is a short pause before the Hollowfied Zanpakutō answers her back. "**The only ones I feel now are Four-eyes, Candice and this asshole. Why?**"

"What do you think this asshole will do if he chooses to spite us before dying?"
Her words are met with stunned silence as Zangetsu processes those implications.

"Shit...I don't...know."

Ichigo closes the distance between him and Yhwach once more, using his Hell chains to cut off any possible retreat for the mad man while attacking him furiously with his Zanpakutō, but it seems the mad man has decided to go on full offense as well, meeting Ichigo blow for blow and relying heavily on his powers to undo any damage done to his body. Cursing as he jumps back to avoid a horizontal swing, Ichigo feels his armor being hit by yet another arrow, but this time a piece of his armor is blown off by the impact.

"Hey King, we might have a problem."

"What problem!?" Ichigo almost demands as he uses Kuyō Shibari to hold Yhwach in position followed up by several of his chains firing off Haien from different positions before he charges back into the fray. The Quincy Emperor simply absorbs the blows, his body shrugging off the Bakudō and healing through the Hadō just in time to block Ichigo's Zanpakutō with his spirit sword, the light of madness visible in his eyes as he snarls at the Devil teen opposing him.

Struggling to hold back the Quincy Emperor's monstrous strength, Zangetsu curses silently before telling his wielder what his other inhabitant had asked him.

"I didn't think of that." Ichigo admits worriedly. "Zangetsu, what do you think would happen if we kill him?"

"King, I don't know. If she is right, if that bastard is spiteful enough to do something before he dies, we...might end up killing all three of them inadvertently." The sword spirit replies unhappily.

Both of them know who he is referring to without the need for any names. Needing some space to think, Ichigo inadvertently slows down the pace of his attacks, his Hell Chains no longer harassing the Quincy Emperor quite as fiercely as before. Unfortunately, Yhwach picks up on this almost immediately and begins to advance on Ichigo, fighting off attacks in every direction and powering through the injuries he is receiving. Ichigo finds himself being forced back step after step, having to slow his attacks even further when he remembers Yhwach can no longer use Auswählen to save himself.

"Ichigo, what the hell are you doing!?” He hears his cousin shouting out as the battle rapidly shifts back into Yhwach's favor. Struggling to hold off the Quincy Emperor, Ichigo shouts towards to the teen behind him.

"Uryū, if we kill him, all the remaining Quincies might die!"

"WHO CARES!? KILL HIM DAMMIT!!"

"I can't you asshole! The only remaining Quincies are you, Candice and Ryūken!"

Laughter greets the two warriors as Yhwach stops advancing on them. "Figured it out finally did you? You are correct, if I die, every Quincy will die with me. The Final Sacrifice."

Uryū stares in shock at the progenitor to all Quincy. "You would kill us all when you die?"
The Quincy Emperor's eyes glitter with madness and his words are filled with cruelty. "Of course, you are alive only to serve me, your lives are meaningless without me."

Both Devil and Quincy cousins grow quiet before their Reiatsu suddenly explode with their fury. Ichigo disappears and reappears before Yhwach in an instant, his armored arms grabbing both of the older man's forearms and his chains wrapping around him.

"Fucking bastard! Killing our mothers wasn't enough!? Killing your own friends, your comrades who believed in you not enough!? But to kill everyone that shares your blood, who was unfortunate enough to be related to you…!"

Uryū watches dispassionately as Ichigo's fingers sink into Yhwach's forearms, the smell of burning flesh filling the younger Quincy's nose as runes brand themselves into the Quincy Emperor's forearms. Seeing the older Quincy attempting to shove Ichigo away, the Last Quincy aims and fires his arrows at Yhwach's joints, causing the older man to scream in pain as he suddenly loses all feeling in his limbs. Watching the Quincy Emperor dangle helplessly from Ichigo's Hell Chains, the sound of running coming from outside the doorway causes the younger Ishida to twist around and aim his bow in that direction, only to see a pair of familiar faces rush in through the large doorway leading to the throne room.

"Ichigo! Uryū! Don't kill…him…" Kisuke shouts at first before his voice returns to normal as he sees all three men still alive. "Oh, good."

"Don't worry Geta-Bōshi, we…didn't." Ichigo growls unhappily.

Releasing the arms of his mother's murderer, the Devil teen steps back and lets the older man drop to the floor. Yhwach attempts to use his powers, and his eyes grow wild when he realizes they have been sealed away again. "No! NOOO! You little bastard, you have ruined everything!"

Ichigo continues to back away wordlessly, not wanting anything else to his mother's murderer; he only stops when several sets of arms wrap themselves protectively around his waist.

"It's over Ichigo." Yoruichi says as she carefully guides him to the ground with Sasha and Merti's help. "Time to stop."

A golden dome envelops him then as Orihime calls forth her healing shields, one for her brother, and one for her friend. "What did you do to him Ichigo?" Her eyes glance at the Quincy Emperor, before suddenly darting towards Uryū as her power fills her in on the full extent of his injuries. "What happened to you Uryū!? Hurry up and sit down, you shouldn't be moving with those injuries!"

As the frantic Orihime begins to fuss over the Quincy teen, Ichigo lets his armor fade away, rubbing his head as he explains what he had done to Yhwach. "I sealed away his ability to use Reishi permanently, using a modified runic array from the one Sasha had used to seal Candice's abilities temporarily. Sasha drummed that spell into my head every day while we were training, but I didn't consider using it on Yhwach until we found out that killing him would also kill all the remaining Quincy. Bastard was really going to do it too, he would have killed Uryū, Ryūken and Candice without a thought, taking them with him when he died."

Kisuke gives him a look of confusion then. "Wait, how did you figure out Yhwach would kill them if he died?"

A small laugh escapes the former substitute Shinigami as he shakes his head wryly. "Actually, Zangetsu was the one who warned me about it. He has his own inner-voice it seems. A smarter
"Up yours King, just because she doesn't like you, doesn't mean she ain't real." The white version of Ichigo says as he materializes into the real world.

A bitter laugh is suddenly heard from the Quincy Emperor's direction, causing everyone to look at the sealed Quincy. "Just as I thought, you are an abomination. Your whore of a mother…"

A gauntlet-covered fist slams into the side of the vile man's face, rocking his head sideways and dislodging a few teeth, but a new set of chains keeps him from moving too far as the fully-armored head of the Naberius Clan steps into view before Yhwach. Beside him stands Isshin, the former Captain having a murderous look on his face but having moved just a fraction too slowly to land the first punch on the murderer of his wife. A wordless look of exchange takes place between the two men, then Isshin folds his arms and steps back, allowing Amyntas to speak.

"First thing you will learn while in my care is respect for my family, Yhwach. Urahara told me what might happen to the surviving Quincy if you should be killed, but don't worry, there are far worse fates than death. You will live long enough for us to find a way to spare Uryū and his father from your curse. Candice too will be spared since she has become a member of my Clan. It shouldn't take us long, we've already protected them from your Auswählen, so enjoy what time you have left because once we find out how to save them, your life is forfeit. Your place in Hell has already been reserved." With those words, the chains holding the defeated Quincy Emperor fully encase his body, preventing him from saying anything more. A magical circle then forms under the encased Yhwach and in a flash of magic, he disappears from the room, sent to his new prison in the Tower.

With a sigh, Amyntas lets his black armor fade from his body as he turns to look at his battered great-grandson and the others in the room. Wishing he could have reached here earlier, he waves his hand to keep them from asking him any questions.

"Yhwach is already in a secured place within the Skeleton Tower, a place that no one but those of the Naberius Clan can access. I'm sorry Uryū, you can't enter, but you Ichigo can. However, I don't want you anywhere near him until we can spare your cousin, his father and Candice Catnipp from their fate, do you understand?"

Nodding his head, Ichigo indicates his understanding, even if it does leave a bitter taste in his mouth. Uryū nods his head as well, his wounded arm finally restored and feeling completely worn out from their battle. Dropping tiredly on the floor next to the orange-haired teen, Uryū lets out a sigh to indicate how exhausted he really is. Both teens sit there and stare blankly at the throne room that has been completely destroyed by their battle; the white-stone bleachers reduced to mere rubble, the dais where Aizen had once ruled from pulverized to dust, and the huge hole in the roof that was caused by Yhwach's Vollständig.

Gradually, more and more people begin to enter the room, some of them familiar, while others are more unexpected. Sirzechs and his peerage are the first to join them, having trailed slightly behind their group, and Menoly Mallia enters the room with them. The crimson-haired Maou wears a complicated expression on his face after hearing that Yhwach has already been sent to the Tower, and he eventually leaves while saying that he needs to check up on Rias. His peerage leaves with him as well, but Menoly stays behind to accompany Orihime.

Following that, various Devils from the Naberius peerages begin to show up, each of them casting looks around to see who else has already reached the throne room. Various familiars are summoned and then leave at their master's commands to spread the word of Yhwach's defeat and find and return with anyone they should come across in the fortress. A few Elves also show up
with them, having chosen to accompany their friends in the peerages rather than evacuate with their Cohorts, and both Sasha and Merti approach them to ask for news on the survivors.

Ignoring all of the activity going on, Yoruichi kneels in front of Ichigo and Uryū, her golden eyes looking over them both; to their surprise, she then lays a hand on one of their knees each and squeezes gently.

"You both did good facing him. I know you are both disappointed by the outcome, but I want you both to know we will find a way to fix things so the outcome you want can come to fruition."

They smile at her. "Thanks Okaa-san. / Thank you Yoruichi-san."

The glasses wearing Quincy then turns his head when he hears a child-like voice shouting. "Where is my Uryū-kun?"

Ichigo snickers, earning him a jab to his ribs from his cousin. Cradling his bruised ribs, the Devil teen calls out to the speaker. "Over here Serafall-sensei."

The Leviathan Maou walks over to them while grumbling about the battle being over already. Behind her is the Queen of Hueco Mundo; to those who know her, they can easily see the lack of bone on her features. Before Ichigo can ask what happened, his older cousin stares hard into their faces, before causing him and Uryū to groan in embarrassment when she speaks.

"You both look like shit."

"Thanks, Serafall. Didn't really need you to tell me what I already know." Ichigo rebuts back. Ignoring her pout, he turns to look at the familiar blonde woman at her side. "And you Tia, what happened to your mask?" Only those who know him well can hear the concern and alarm in his voice.

Giving him an uncharacteristic smile, Tia touches her uncovered face again as she informs him of her decision to remove the last remnants of her mask, a reminder of her service to the traitor Aizen.

"In accordance to our bargain, I am ready to become the Queen of your peerage Ichigo. You have defeated the invaders and their Emperor, and as such, I will willingly serve you." She bows to him.

"Not serve Tia Harribel; I want you as a partner, just like all the others in my peerage. My peerage is my family; that is what I want you and the others to always feel when you are with me, members of my family. That okay with you?"

Seeing him extend his hand towards her, she reaches out with her tanned hand and with a firm grip, she gives her consent. "Then I accept the offer Ichigo. But what will you do now? I doubt any of us can ever feel safe here again."

"We have already taken steps for that, Tia Harribel." A new voice speaks up as Akiko, Daiki and Hanako enter the room, a few other members of the Naberius peerages greeting them as they enter. "Your peerage, as well as the peerages of Ladies Rias and Sōna have already returned to the Estate Ichigo, so stop worrying."

Ichigo glances towards Serafall at the mention of her sister's name; at first the twin-tailed Maou looks like she is about to head straight back to the Estate, but then she visibly takes a deep breath to calm down and chooses to stay instead. Knowing how much it pains the Leviathan to be unable to check on Sōna's well-being, Ichigo slowly stands again with Yoruichi and Tia helping him to his
feet, while Orihime and Serafall help Uryū to his. Using his Pesquisa, Ichigo scans the fortress and finds no one else alive within its ruins, at least no one who is not in the same room as him. Turning to his soon-to-be Queen, he explains to her what they have planned for Las Noches.

"Tia, we made arrangements to ensure Las Noches can't be used against your people again, or allow anyone else to use it for themselves. We plan to raze the entire fortress to the ground, and when the time comes, we'll build you a better place to live in, if you decide to return here to live that is."

Running her hand along the shattered remains of one of the bleachers, the Queen of Hueco Mundo shakes her head sadly. "I don't think I'll be coming back for a long time, at most only to get word out to those who have survived that our world is now safe from the Quincy invasion."

"Alright. Akiko, Hanako, it's time. I'm going with you two to see it finished; Tia do you want to watch?" Ichigo asks as he forms his armor again.

The blonde Arrancar nods after a moment of thought. "I think I will."

Once his armor finishes forming, Ichigo gives the orders for everyone else to return home while he goes with those who will see the final chapter of a by-gone era finally close.

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As the Captains stand around discussing what little they can discern from the few bits and pieces of data that Squad Twelve has managed to obtain from the lands of the Eternal Night, a very excited voice suddenly breaks through the lull.

"WE HAVE VIDEO! AKON-SAN WE HAVE A LIVE STREAM AGAIN!" A few Captains chuckle once they recognize the same voice from the beginning of the emergency meeting speaking.

"Alright! Alright already dammit. Sent it to the Captains you nitwit, don't keep it to yourself. Now let's see what we…have…here…"

The screen glows bright in the Captain's hall before static and sound comes from the flat screen monitor that displays Hueco Mundo. At first, they only see the white domed building in the distance, before someone starts zooming in with the lens. As the picture becomes clearer, murmurs are heard as they spot the billowing columns of smoke rising through the rooftop of the dome. The camera stops and centers on several figures visible at the base, before again zooming in to get a closer image to identify who the figures are. At first, they appear fuzzy, but as the picture focuses more on them, the first thing to stand out is the black armored form in the middle, which is flanked by two figures with numerous tails.

Even though he has never seen that armor before, Head Captain Yamamoto knows through his own research that the armor is worn by only one Clan of the Underworld. Now, before his and his subordinates' eyes, someone is wearing that armor in Hueco Mundo, announcing to them that a specific Clan from the Underworld is actively involved in the realm of Hollows. His eyes narrow in thought as he sees the figure turn to the figures on his right and his left, before another figure appears in front of the speaker; this one however is known to quite a few of his officers. Tia Harribel, the former Espada who had taken over as Queen of Hueco Mundo after Aizen's defeat. The blonde Arrancar is now seen moving to stand next to one of the two multi-tailed women, and another two people then come into view, one of them with messy hair and the other one bald; both appear to be male by their looks. The two women with tails then squat down, and as the camera begins to zoom in on them, the screen suddenly goes blank for several seconds.
"What is going on you fools!?” Kurotsuchi screams out at his men.

A voice quickly responds to his demand. "Sir, it looks like there was an overwhelming and sudden burst of power that overloaded our cameras. We should be getting a clearer picture...right about...now."

This time a few Captains can't keep their gasps contained when the screen shows twin columns of flames shooting into the night sky directly from where a white-domed fortress should be.

"Did they just destroy Las Noches?" Tōshirō Hitsugaya asks in disbelief.

As the oldest among the Captains, Jūshirō Ukitake coughs slightly before he answers. "It would seem so Captain Hitsugaya, I can only imagine the power needed to perform such a feat though."

"That's impossible! No one has that kind of power!" Mayuri shouts as he looks at the screen, even though his hands are rubbing together greedily as he ponders on how to obtain and experiment on such a powerful specimen. His thoughts clearly betray him as the Captains around him are shooting him disgusted looks.

Swiftly banging his camouflaged Zanpakutō on the floor, the Head Captain stills any further conversation. "Captain Kurotsuchi, I assume if you can get a video feed from there, we can send a reconnaissance force into Hueco Mundo?"

"Of course, Head Captain. I'll be mor..."

"Captains Kuchiki, Zaraki, and Kyōraku will leave with a small squad each. Captain Kurotsuchi will provide back-up and an emergency means of escape should they need it. All those assigned will leave in one hour. Dismissed." The Head Captain stands and leaves before anyone can question or argue over his orders, leaving behind a glaring Squad Twelve Captain to stew in his anger over being denied passage to the sands of Hueco Mundo, and two Captains exchanging a knowing look.

"Well, that was interesting." Hirako Shinji says as he watches the old man leave, Rose and Kensei standing next to him. The blonde Captain deliberately does not look in the direction of Byakuya or Shunsui.

"What do you think has him so spooked Shinji?" The crew-cut Vizard asks his former leader, oblivious to the byplay.

Shaking his head before answering, the Squad Five Captain replies back. "Whatever it is, it has the old man pretty shaken."

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A thousand years, that was the last time he had seen or spoken to anyone from the three factions. Sirzechs Gremory, future Lucifer Maou of the Devils and the wielder of the Power of Destruction; he was the last Devil Yamamoto had encountered. One of four powerful young Devils who would rise up to defeat the old guards of the Old Maou faction, along with Serafall Sitri, Ajuka Astaroth and Falbium Glasya-Labolas, the four of them eventually became the Four Great Satans of the New Devil Faction. He still remembers the battle he had fought with the younger crimson-haired Devil, snorting inwardly at his own ignorance back then regarding the power he would face that day.

He had been battling the self-proclaimed Quincy Emperor back then, fighting off his invasion of Soul Society before confronting the man himself. Having finally chased down Yhwach to an
unassuming human village with hardly any population to speak of, he had been fully prepared to exact justice on the Quincy Emperor at any cost, but it just so happened that the village was under the rule of the Gremory Clan of the Underworld, and they did not take kindly to the two powerhouses fighting in their territory.

Lost in the memory of his first true defeat, Yamamoto sips his tea as he sits looking over Seireitei from his office, the rising white cliff of Sōkyoku Hill visible in the distance. Soon the person he is waiting for enters his office, a second cup of tea already set out for her by the dutiful Lieutenant Sasakibe. Striding over to his desk, her braid still draped in front of her body, the Squad Four Captain Retsu Unohana sits down without a word, picking up her own cup of tea and sipping quietly. By the time both are finished with their tea, Unohana has calmed down and is waiting for him to speak.

"Why now?" Is all he asks when he pours himself a second cup of tea.

Rubbing her thumb along the rim of her empty cup, the healer of the Gotei Thirteen murmurs her own reply. "It does seem strange Head Captain. The Queen of Hueco Mundo along with at least three Devils and two unknowns show up after what appears to be a large-scale battle with Quincies from nowhere, then they destroy Las Noches for some reason. More questions than answers for now. We will have to wait until Captain Sui-Fēng returns from Karakura Town to know if either of the Quincies we do know of were involved or not. Perhaps we should have her stop and ask 'him' for information as well."

A grunt from Yamamoto causes her to lift a quizzical eyebrow. "Head Captain?"

"He'd rather I flounder in darkness than help me now." The ancient Shinigami grudgingly admits. Unohana's eyes widen at this admission.

"You really think Kisuke Urahara would be so petty as to deny us information over what we had no control of?"

The Head Captain rubs his eyes wearily. "I would be surprised if Captain Sui-Fēng came back unharmed from her mission. No one there has forgiven us for what was done to Ichigo Kurosaki, least of all his family and friends. As far as I know, not one of the reports from the Shinigami stationed there have made any mention of help from the humans; only Isshin Shiba has been seen taking any actions against the Hollows, but even he does not say a word to our Shinigami. Not a peep from those left behind by Captain Hirako or from Kisuke's group either. No Retsu, I think we will have to learn everything on our own this time."

Pouring herself a fresh cup of tea, Retsu Unohana knows what her Sensei and benefactor must be feeling right now. A dangerous foe is on the horizon and one of the Three Biblical Factions is stirring actively in the both the Human World and Hueco Mundo. Their former allies in the Human World are giving Soul Society a wide berth after learning of the sentence handed down to their friend and champion, Ichigo Kurosaki. All they can do now is wait for the three Captains and the Shinigami going with them to investigate Hueco Mundo and report back within the next few hours. Sipping her tea with a tired sigh, she settles in for a long wait with her Head Captain to find out what has had happened under the eternal night sky of Hueco Mundo.

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Ichigo stands under the Great Dome, his eyes staring at the scene around him as Elves and Hell Hounds lie in rows by the dozens being tended to by every available healer, including Aisling and Orihime who had rushed over to help them once she saw the large numbers of wounded. Both women now have blood staining the sleeves of their shirts, while his youngest sister Yuzu, who
had been directing the healing efforts right from the start, has bloodstains all over her clothing. The air is filled with the moaning sounds of pain, as even the iron-clad discipline of the Elves and Hell Hounds waver with the severe injuries that many of them are suffering from the aftermath of the counter-invasion. Ichigo's wide eyes take in the missing body parts literally ripped or torn from their bodies, skin blackened and peeled away from exposure to intense heat and explosive force, and flesh that has been pierced through or seared from the bone. His eyes then drift to the rows of covered bodies, or in some cases the remains of bodies, that occupy a full third of the dome; those white sheets are stained red with blood, and the Elves and Hell Hounds milling about them are glassy-eyed with grief and exhaustion. Suddenly feeling his stomach churning horribly from the weight of his actions, Ichigo realizes that his decision to lead the Elves and Hell Hounds into battle against the Quincies had indirectly caused all these deaths and suffering. A growing need to fix them somehow overcomes his exhausted brain as he seeks out his adoptive sister, his legs beginning to move on their own once he catches sight of her burnt-orange hair; making his way to her side, he lays a hand on her shoulder.

"Ichigo?" Orihime questions when she looks up and sees the intensity in his eyes.

"Heal them all Hime." With that, he begins to pour the last of his reserves into his adopted sister.

"ICHIGO NO!" Yoruichi and Isshin both scramble towards him once they realize what he is doing, only to be halted by a single look from Orihime.

"Heal them." He whispers again quietly to her before slumping down in her arms. Smoothing back the hair from Ichigo's face, Orihime closes her eyes and begins to channel her King's power into her healing shield.

"Sōten Kisshun, I reject."

With those words, the healing shields of Ayame and Shun'ō expand and combine back into a single curved shield which continues to expand in size and power until the entire Naberius Estate is contained within it, Orihime's healing power flowing through the walls of the estate and all of its occupants as she begins the healing process. Her arms continue to support Ichigo as she studies his face for signs of strain, wanting to ensure that her King doesn't actually pass out from exhaustion as he continues to power her healing shields with his Reiatsu. He is dangerously low on Reiryoku already, but she understands why he is doing this, it is the same feeling of guilt and responsibility that weighs on her every time she sees her friends being hurt in her place, so she does her best to help her King ease his guilt, adding as much of her own magic and Reiatsu into the healing process as she can.

Those giving aid to the wounded stop and stare in wonder as the very injuries they are tending to begin to disappear before their eyes. Yuzu, who has been learning healing magic from Aisling swings her head to look at her older siblings, seeing both of them standing together with her brother's energy flowing into her sister's shoulder, and her sister's powers pulsing throughout the estate, healing even those who are not within the Great Dome. Aisling herself looks around the Dome, seeing flesh reknitting themselves and skin growing back over exposed muscles and tendons at an incredible rate, while shattered bones pop back into place and open gashes seamlessly repair themselves. Even the clothes that were ruined in battle begin to revert back to their original status, before a voice calls out to the two teens who are responsible.

"Orihime, Ichigo, it's done. You can stop now." Akiko says as she stands before them, a look of respect in her eyes.

Fluttering her brown orbs open after concentrating for so long, Orihime looks up to see her brother's brown orbs slowly opening as well. She smiles at him in relief, seeing the joy she is
feeling being reflected on his face, and the last thing she feels are arms catching them before she knows nothing more.

"Orihime! Ichigo!" Yuzu screams in fear as she sees her older siblings suddenly collapse in Akiko's arms, both Yoruichi and Isshin sprinting over immediately to help them. Yuzu and Karin hurry to their side as well, followed by Tatsuki, Chad and Uryū.

"... They're fine, just completely exhausted." Yoruichi reports after checking on their condition with Kaidō. Everyone supporting them gives a sigh of relief, having feared the worst: that both teens had exchanged their lives to save the lives of countless injured.

"Damn it Ichigo, stop scaring us like this!" Tatsuki growls at him, although she is unable to hide the relieved look on her face. "Hime too, I can't believe both of them pushed themselves so hard that they passed out..."

As the others mumble words of agreement, Yoruichi straightens up with Orihime in her arms. "Tatsuki, here." The older woman says as she carefully passes the unconscious healer over to her best friend.

Tatsuki gingerly accepts Orihime from Yoruichi, her enhanced Devil strength allowing her to carry the other teen with ease. "I'll bring Hime back to her room then. What about Ichigo?"

"I'll bring him to his room." Isshin Shiba says as he hefts his son into a better position in his arms. "One of these days he's gonna have to learn some restraint."

Merti sighs as she looks down at her young lord, pushing back some of his hair before looking up at the older Kurosaki then. "I thought that word didn't exist to you or to him, Lord Shiba?"

Isshin grimaces slightly at the jibe. "It doesn't, but it also doesn't mean he shouldn't learn of it someday. Now give a Shinigami a hand and help me get him to their room, my boy has gotten heavy with all these damn muscles of his and I don't fancy lugging him around the Estate."

Laying her hand on his shoulder with a brief smile, both Merti and Isshin leave the Dome via magic circle, missing the arrival of three very worried young women.

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Rias is sitting next to her young Rook, Koneko's small body slowly healing from both hers and Akeno's magic while the two older teens talk softly to each other.

"She did good Buchou." Akeno says as she wipes a tear away while fondling the white hair of the Neko. "But... Yuuto..."

Sniffling, the Gremory heiress nods her head in reply before looking over at her badly wounded Knight, who is being held in magical stasis on his bed. Further on, she sees Rukia sleeping in a chair next to her fellow Shinigami, her head and arms lying on the bed which holds the unconscious body of Momo Hinamori. To her left, she sees a blonde-haired, tan-skinned Arrancar sitting with Nelliel and Grimmjow and discussing something seriously, while behind them is a dark-haired Números lying on a bed while trying to reassure a lighter-haired Números that she is now okay. Rias wonders where Issei and the members of Sōna's peerage are resting, and hopes that they are okay, but right now she is feeling too worn out to go look for them.

Suddenly, she straightens up and gasps as she feels both Ichigo's and Orihime's magic filling the air, her skin tingling from the sensation. Getting to her feet, she hears Rukia waking up just as abruptly behind her and cursing loudly about Ichigo not controlling his Reiatsu once again; it hits
them then as they stand, the healing power that they had all witnessed before. Rias feels the aches
and pains in her own body recovering at an astonishing rate, the wide-eyed look on Akeno's face
telling her that her Queen is undergoing the same experience. Koneko sighs loudly as she relaxes in
her sleep, her battered body visibly healing from its wounds, while the Arrancars stiffen as they
feel their own regenerative powers mixing in with the reality twisting magic of Ichigo's adoptive
sister. Rias's eyes immediately dart towards Yuuto, her Knight in greatest need of Orihime's
healing, and she is relieved to see the horrible wounds on his chest and stomach rapidly fading
back into healthy skin. Rias watches as the stasis spell around his bed ends, its job complete, and
she sinks back into her chair in relief... only for her heart to almost stop as the magical energy
coming from Ichigo and Orihime suddenly drops to almost nothing.

Leaping to her feet again, Rias begins to panic when she tries to sense for their magic and feels
how exhausted both of them are. Quickly moving towards the door, she hears both Rukia and
Akeno chasing after her as she rushes down the corridor.

"Rukia, what are those two idiots doing!?!" Akeno huffs as she races towards the Great Dome, no
one is allowed to teleport there while it is being used as an emergency triage center so they have to
run instead.

Huffing loudly as she refrains from speeding ahead with Shunpo, Rukia bites out a response to the
young Gremory Queen. "My best guess is that Strawberry and Orihime worked together to perform
some kind of massive-scale healing with Orihime's abilities, but considering how far we are from
the Dome, it must have really pushed them to their limits. Both of them are giving me so many
reasons to keep them locked up for their own good; Strawberry already has a bad habit of ignoring
his limits, and Orihime should have known better than to help him with it."

Rounding the corner that leads to the Great Dome, the trio feel the magic coming from the pair
cease abruptly, and neither Orihime's nor Ichigo's magic or Reiatsu presence can be felt anymore.
Almost frantic with worry now, Rukia takes off at an even greater pace, the two Devils right
behind her as she crashes through the doors of the Great Dome only to barely glimpse Isshin and
Merti leaving the Dome via magic circle with a head of orange held in the elder Kurosaki's arms.
Scanning the room frantically for the other member of the pair, her violet eyes see Tatsuki and
Chad heading towards another door with Orihime held in the shorter teen's arms. Hurrying up to
them, the Shinigami asks them whether Orihime is okay.

"Hime's fine, just exhausted." Tatsuki answers her, a tired yet relieved expression on the martial
artist's face. "What she did was just... amazing."

Rukia glances at the other occupants of the Dome, seeing the formerly wounded Elves and Hell
Hounds slowly sitting up and examining their newly-healed bodies with looks of wonder and
amazement. "Yeah, I've never seen Orihime heal so many people at one go before." The petite
Shinigami admits. "Where's Ichigo by the way? I could have sworn that I felt his Reiatsu mixed in
with Orihime's healing."

"His dad was taking him to his and Rias's room to rest, Rukia. Ichigo gave his energy to Orihime to
use for her healing, and they both passed out from exhaustion, the dumbasses." The Rook mutters
the last part under her breath.

"They saved many lives with their healing, some of whom could have possibly died without it." 
Chad reminds them quietly, the gentle giant serving as a protective screen from all the people
hurrying about. "Ichigo trusted Orihime to make good use of his power, and she did so by
successfully healing all the wounded people inside the Dome."

Snorting to herself amusedly, Rukia shakes her head in disagreement. "You've got one part wrong,
Sado-kun." As the taller teen looks to her in confusion, she continues in a perfectly deadpan voice. "It wasn't just the dome; Orihime and Strawberry healed the entire Estate."

While Tatsuki and Chad are discovering just how powerful Orihime can be, Rias has approached Yoruichi to ask her where Ichigo has been brought to. "Your room of course. He might need someone to replenish his magic though; I heard you can do that." Ichigo's 'Okaa-san' informs her with a smirk.

Rias blushes at the seductive and teasing tone the werecat used with her answer, and it is only made worse by Akeno giggling beside her. Nodding as fast as she can, the Gremory Heiress teleports herself to her room, leaving behind the ringing laughter of her Queen and the mother figure to her boyfriend.

Still giggling to herself, Akeno bids the woman goodbye and makes her way over to Rukia to tell her where Ichigo can be found. Golden eyes watch the young Queen leaving before she looks around for Amyntas. Finding the oldest Naberius standing to one side of the room, Yoruichi makes her way over to him as he talks to two men she has never met before. Stopping a discreet distance away, she sends the Naberius Lord an inquiring look, and he waves for her to join them.

"Yoruichi, may I introduce you to Ajuka Beelzebub and Falbium Asmodeus? Gentlemen, this is our newest clan member and Ichigo's sensei when he was a Shinigami, Yoruichi Shihōin Naberius."

"Please to meet you Yoruichi." Ajuka says with a small bow.

As she smiles and nods at the messy-haired Maou, her hand is taken and a kiss placed on the back of it by the other bald Maou who adds. "A pleasure to meet someone as beautiful as you Yoruichi Naberius. I must admit to my jealousy that the Naberius Clan have gotten several very powerful beings without allowing us a chance to ask first."

"Well, you wouldn't have gotten us anyways; we are all here for Ichigo. You guys never stood a chance." She smirks at the bald Devil.

"Ouch." Falbium winces in response. "You have one lucky great-grandson Amyntas."

The Guardian of the Damned laughs lightly then. "You'll be saying differently when those very beautiful women rip my great-grandson a new one when he wakes up tomorrow. He'll be lucky if he is even allowed to move from his bed."

However, their mood turns serious then. "So those were the Quincies and their Emperor. Nasty bunch they were, even with the advantage of our magic; they had skills enough that I think the Shinigami would have been hard pressed to fight against them in a year or so." The messy green-haired Maou deduces.

"I would agree with you Ajuka-san." Kisuke says as he joins their group without waiting. "I was actually hoping they would target Soul Society first, perhaps shake them out of their superiority complex, but now, now we'll have to see what the future may hold."

The two Maou frown at that, giving the blonde-haired Shinigami a strange look before questioning his reasons for saying such a thing.

"Asmodeus Maou, I'm sure you have heard that we are under the auspices of Central Forty-Six, a council made up entirely of nobles to govern and rule Soul Society in the name of the Soul King, correct?" He asks them.
Seeing the Maou nod once, Kisuke continues then. "Well to be blunt, they are a bunch of old fools stuck in the past. Head Captain should've reined them in long ago, he even had the opportunity to so when Sōsuke Aizen killed off their original members, but the stubborn codger is a stickler for tradition and refused to change the status quo, so now it is too late to change them again short of open munity at this point, or an invasion to force their hand. The Quincy would have been that changing force if they had successfully invaded Soul Society."

Ajuka gives the blonde man an incredulous look, then he realizes Yoruichi shares the same resigned expression on her face. "You agree with him on this, Yoruichi?"

Sadly nodding, she speaks. "I left my Clan because those very same nobles had sentenced Ichigo, their savior to death. Do you think you could live with a group of people every day of your life, knowing they had willingly murdered someone who had saved them?"

"No, I couldn't." Falbium answers quickly, the military strategist knowing just how treacherous such people would prove to be. Ajuka just shakes his head sadly, knowing that the Devil Faction unfortunately contains many such people, but he also gives her the same answer.

The group falls into contemplative silence then, and Kisuke looks over at the previously wounded Elves and Hell Hounds, seeing them already getting up and helping to move their dead. "This is what those fools forfeited when they passed judgment on Ichigo due to their own paranoia. A goddess in her own right is now a Devil of her own free will, her abilities capable of performing feats of healing that are borderline miracles. His oldest and best friends no longer willing to assist Soul Society in their times of need. The former Espada and Arrancar firmly aligning themselves with Ichigo and even joining his peerage. Members of Soul Society willing to disobey orders to keep Ichigo's existence a secret and help train his abilities. All of that power, all of those allies, lost out of warrantless fear. Those fools don't even realize just how close they came to starting a war with you, or how close they came to being invaded by the Quincy. Knowing them, it wouldn't have made a difference; they are self-righteous xenophobes of the highest order, and the only way they will learn is through the harshest of lessons. Though, the problem we are facing now is what they will do in the future when they find out about all of this, about who and what Ichigo really is."

Ajuka grimaces then and looks at the burnt-orange haired Naberius Lord. "Too many secrets led to this Amyntas, hopefully there are no more?"

"None. We told them everything they needed to know, everything." Sensing the need to lighten the mood before the gloom overtakes them, Amyntas then motions for the two Maou to follow him. "Come join us for some refreshments. We have all had a long and tiring day, the least I can offer you is food and drink."

As they let Amyntas lead the way, Falbium pauses when he watches the Devil Lord extend his arm to the purple-haired woman beside him, who takes it without pause. Hanging back with Ajuka and Kisuke, he discreetly mutters to the blonde Shinigami. "Something going on we should know about?"

Snapping his fan open with merriment in his eyes, the genius Shinigami smirks as he quietly retorts back. "I think my kitten has found the place she can truly settle down and call home."

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"Damn fool. I know you Ichigo, I know why you did it, but sometime in the future please think before you act, you ass."

"He can't hear you Zangetsu." The teen says as she sits at the end of the bed, swinging her legs
Snorting at the unconscious orange-haired Devil, Zangetsu can't believe how idiotic his wielder can get sometimes. This is just another example in a long line of 'doing first, thinking of the consequences second' incidents that his wielder keeps getting involved in. His own spiritual reserves are the only thing keeping Ichigo from slipping into a coma, and it was only Orihime's healing prowess that allowed them to pull off that healing stunt at all. Fortunately, the fact that the Queen is healing him with her own magic is a good sign that they wouldn't be laid up for long. As soon as Ichigo reaches a certain safe point, he can rapidly build both their magic and Reiatsu up at a steady rate, it is just getting Ichigo out of his dangerously low levels of Reiryoku that he has to contend with right now. Pulling a chair up to the bed, he looks at his unconscious wielder, the twin of himself as he sits down and thinks about that bastard Yhwach.

He wanted nothing more than to cut the Quincy Emperor's head off as quickly as he could, but he yielded to Ichigo in wanting to put the hurt to the man for as long as possible, which turned out to be a damn good thing that they did. Damn Quincy was killing off his own subordinates by stealing their lives and powers in an effort to kill Ichigo and Uryū, but the revelation that Yhwach's death would kill ALL the remaining Quincies had caught them by surprise; if Merti hadn't drilled those runes into Ichigo's head, it was entirely possible that they would have lost. That damn Quincy bastard even managed to break through the sealing array that kept him weak for half of the fight by brute-forcing the activation of his Vollständig, and he didn't even know how to deal with magic in the first place!

'Dumbass. He knew what we were, knew how dangerous we could be, so why didn't he try to escape?'

"He probably thought he could win, Zangetsu." Imp says as she looks at him.

Eyes opening wide, the Hollow spirit looks at the teen spirit. "You can hear my thoughts?"

Sheepishly grinning, she nods her head yes. "For some time now Zangetsu, I'm so sorry, it…it's just I like listening to you whenever I can. You and Ichigo both. I like knowing what makes you guys happy, what make you guys angry or sad, and more importantly what annoys you both. Just knowing you are both okay makes me happy, and knowing you are sad makes me want to know why so I can help change it. I'm sorry for intruding, but it's just...you are both my only friends, even if Ichigo can't see or hear me, you can still pass on what I say to him."

Zangetsu quirks an eyebrow at her. "Even if he thinks I'm mad as a loon?"

"Well, you are in your own way." She answers him smugly.

"Tsk. Fine, but why do you think that bastard thought he could win?"

"Well, besides the fact that he actually nearly did win? He fought the Head Captain to a draw a thousand years ago from what Ryūken and Urahara said, so that means he fought Yama-jii when he was at the height of his power and still managed to get away. You have to wonder how much stronger he would have been in a year or so if he was allowed to fully regain his power, and if he had taken over Hueco Mundo with all those Hollows under his command to fight what? Several thousand Shinigami at most? He would have had numbers and strength on his side, but the longer he fought you and Uryū and Ichigo, the more desperate he became."

She pauses then. "That is why I asked you how many more Quincies were still alive. He kept using Auswählen to steal the lives and power of his remaining subordinates, and the Devils were also making short order of those who were left. I started to wonder: why would he not care about how
many of his remaining subordinates he killed, unless he saw no point in keeping them alive when
he died? We used magic to protect Ryūken, Uryū and Candice from his Auswählen, but what if
there was something else we didn't know of, something that would kill them? My suspicions only
grew when he made no attempt to escape and instead started to fight more recklessly."

"And that's when you guessed what would happen if we killed him. Nice deduction by-the-
way, we didn't even think of that until you warned us. We almost got Uryū, Ryūken and
Candice killed in our need to avenge our mothers."

"But you didn't Zangetsu; you listened and both of you were able to stop him in time. It's not over
yet, but I believe that pervert will find a way to save them. Once he does, you will get your final
verdict."

"Thanks kid." The Zanpakutō spirit reaches out to ruffle her hair before leaning back in his chair
and closing his eyes.

"You're welcome Zangetsu." Imp says as she stretches out next to Ichigo. 'Sweet dreams…my…'

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Yoruichi pads down the hallway silently, deep in thought as she makes her way towards Ichigo and
Rias's room. She had left Amyntas and the two Maou to discuss the upcoming meeting of nobles
with them and her two friends, Kisuke and Isshin, who joined them after bringing Ichigo to his
room. She figured she didn't need to stay at that point; one or the other would tell her what they had
decided on when she sees them next. Right now, all she wants is to check on the kids, all of them.
First however will be her 'son'.

'One of these days he is going to push me too far.' Rounding the corner in thought, the werecat
collides into Ichigo's youngest twin sister who yelps and falls to the ground.

"Yuzu, I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention." She says quickly as she picks up the light haired
twin and helps her get to her feet.

Waving her hands in front of her, Yuzu begins speaking rapidly herself. "No, no Yoruichi. My fault
too. I just left Ichi-nii and I'm on my way to the kitchen now to make Rias and Rukia some dinner."

"Why are you making them dinner? Isn't the staff on duty?" The golden eyed woman asks her
curiously.

"Yes, but they asked for my curry, my mom's recipe. Rukia-nee and Rias-nee both wanted some,
and I know Ichi-nii would want some too when he wakes, so…I thought it would help them…
because…they don't look too good. Plus I'm feeling kinda stressed out from all the injured, in
addition to what happened to Ichi-nii and Orihime nee-san, and cooking helps me to relax, so…"

"Do you need any help?" Yoruichi asks even as she looks towards Ichigo and Rias's room.

"No, I'll be fine. Besides I can see you want to check on him too. Go ahead and I'll be back soon. I
think they will want to talk to you before me anyways." Yuzu then slips around the older female
and waves goodbye before going down a different hallway.

Watching Yuzu until she's gone, the former Squad Two Captain then continues walking until she is
before the door she wants to visit. Knocking gently, she pushes the door open to see a packed room
inside, rolling her eyes when she sees not only Rias and Rukia, but also a bed with Orihime, a bed
with Koneko and another bed with Momo Hinamori all placed inside the room. Sending a
questioning look towards her student, she sees Tatsuki shrug her shoulders before turning back to
the conversation she is having with Chad, Grimmjow and Nelliel who are sitting around the burnt-
orange-haired healer's bed. Tia and her Fracción, along with Menoly and Loly are occupying the
table nearest to Orihime, while Akeno, a newly-healed Yuuto and surprisingly Issei are sitting
around the young Neko's bed. The Neko in question is awake and drinking some miso soup while
asking quiet questions and looking over at the bed that has Ichigo in it.

Walking up to Momo's bed, she sees that the young woman is still asleep, with Sasha sitting next to
her knitting while Merti is reading a book.

"She suffered greatly at the hands of that Quincy, Yoruichi...she might need me to help her deal
with any lingering effects." The blind Elf answers her unspoken question without looking up.

"That bad?" Yoruichi asks worriedly.

Sasha lowers her voice then. "Most of As Nödt's power stemmed from the memories of his victims.
He would manipulate their memories with his power to slowly drive them insane through fear.
Momo's memories were especially traumatic…the guilt that she has for thinking she failed her
former Captain somehow, and her unconscious belief that her Captain and friends are unwilling to
trust her because of her former loyalty to Aizen must have proven too much for her to handle. As
Nödt made her think she was at fault for everything that happened during the Winter War, and
Rukia told me she fled from the battlefield screaming; no one knew what had happened, as they
could not see the Quincy that was tormenting her. When I found her, Momo's mind was nearly
broken and he was about to end her life, so I took over and killed him instead."

"Did you make him suffer?" Yoruichi doesn't hide her hatred for that Quincy; she has a soft spot
for Momo, and she hates that the kind-hearted Lieutenant is still suffering from the trauma of being
betrayed by the man she had once trusted the most.

"Of course, he suffered greatly then and is still suffering greatly now." Sasha says with a vindictive
smile that crosses her face. "Normally I wouldn't bother with Sinners, but As Nödt is a special case.
I made sure he was sent to a place within the Tower that is mine to deal with."

"...I don't want to know, do I?"

Merti chuckles. "Most don't Yoruichi, not even Amyntas."

The two Elven sisters then share a quiet laugh, before Sasha turns towards the bed with Ichigo.
"You should check on them, make sure they eat when Lady Yuzu returns with their food."

"I will." Yoruichi gives one last gaze towards the unconscious Lieutenant, reaching out and
smoothing her hair back before stepping away.

Heading over to Ichigo's bed, she spies two sets of bloodshot eyes focusing on his every
movement, or rather his lack thereof. Sighing internally, she pulls a chair up and sits next to the
crimson-haired Gremory Heiress, looking over her unconscious student. Using basic Kaidō, she
scans Ichigo's body again and grimaces at how low his Reiatsu still feels. However, she does
notice it slowly increasing as Rias continues to give her magic to him at a low but steady rate so
she doesn't wear herself out. Rukia is doing much the same, but her Reiatsu levels are far less than
Rias's magic, and it isn't going to hold out for much longer so Yoruichi decides to put an end to it
before she collapses too.

"Rias, Rukia, take a break for a bit and don't argue with me. Both of you need to rest, so I'll take
over and give him some of mine instead." She hardens her eyes at them, and to her relief they both
accept her instructions without protest.

Rukia immediately slumps back in her chair, nearly falling asleep right there and then, while Rias gets up and crawls into bed next to Ichigo, earning a few quiet catcalls from the Arrancar in the room. Nelliel quiets them down with a few choice words, and the Números all turn their attentions back to the newly reincarnated Knight and badger her for explanations, which she happily provides. Yoruichi's sensitive hearing can pick up the former Tercera explaining to them that Rias is Ichigo's intended and that they already share a bed and bath together, earning more than a few gasps of surprise and a round of approval from the female Arrancars for his choice. The Tres Bestias especially had seen what Rias could do with her powers, and now seeing her up close with Ichigo, they can understand why the two of them are a couple. When asked to elaborate, they mention that they had already told their mistress about Rias's fighting abilities, which leads to the reincarnated Arrancars and Números pesterling them for details, followed by the Fracción giving a detailed recounting of their fierce battle against Bambietta Basterbine.

Tia by this point had left the group and made her way over to Ichigo's bed, and after receiving a nod from the dark-skinned Shinigami, she sits beside her in the chair she had pulled all the way from her original table. Casting a glance towards the exhausted and now softly snoring Squad Thirteen Lieutenant huddled in the chair beside them, she quietly engages Yoruichi in conversation.

"So Ichigo is your student?" It is the first thing she asks.

Smiling, Yoruichi leans forward and tucks a blanket around the now sleeping Rias before she replies back to the Espada. "Yes, among other things. We...are now family in a way. If you must know, I see him as my son, and his sisters as my daughters."

Green eyes look over at the sleeping Shun Shun Rikka user, and she nods slowly then. "Is she truly his sister now? I had once thought they were a couple by the way he came and rescued her back then."

Yoruichi sighs quietly. "Once upon a time that may have happened, but the whole Shinigami thing sort of ruined it for them." Tia doesn't miss the sadness in the werecat's voice.

"You don't approve of his choice then?"

"More like I couldn't keep my promise to his mother, Masaki. I was supposed to watch over him and the twins, keep them safe from harm, but things...didn't work out the way she wanted them to be. In the end, we needed him to fight Aizen because Kisuke saw no other way of defeating him. He trusted us, he fought and won, and then he was betrayed." Bitterness is heavily evident within the last words she said.

"Soul Society?" Tia guesses.

"Close. Central Forty-Six. Sentenced him to death within hours of Aizen's defeat. We didn't even know that the Head Captain had begun to put a new Central together, so we were all taken by surprise by their secret announcement. Thankfully the person who was ordered to do so saw things differently, and Kisuke somehow knew about it even before she came to tell us." Yoruichi was never prouder of her Little Bee than when she actually broke her oath and disobeyed orders to do the right thing for once.

"So, because he became a Shinigami, it ruined what chance he and Orihime had at romance."

Green eyes dart over at the healer with obvious sympathy.
"Partly, the other reason is that he is a Devil, a pure-blood whose birthright was awakened the moment the seal on his soul was partially released in his fight against Aizen. I think Rukia confessed to him as well at one point of time, and he politely let her down, but it didn't ruin their friendship thankfully. As for Orihime, I think being his sister is the next best thing that she could have hoped for. It was probably fate that made him wait and when Rias came into his life, they fitted together almost right from the beginning." The werecat smiles when the sleeping Gremory heiress unconsciously pulls Ichigo tighter against her body, almost as if to illustrate her point.

"See what I mean?" Golden eyes dance in amusement as they turn to look in emerald eyes then.

The door suddenly opens, and everyone still awake turns to see Yuzu carefully walking into the room, with several members of the staff pushing in carts loaded with food in front of them. Seeing the looks of amusement and shock she is getting from the room's occupants, she puffs up her chest and narrows her eyes at them imperiously.

"What?" Her voice dares anyone to comment.

It is almost funny how a group of powerful beings surrender to the withering look being sent their way by the youngest Naberius sister, but they are all eager to eat her delicious cooking once more, so they make no protest. Waiting until she is certain no one has anything to say, Yuzu waves to the food and tells them to eat, which nearly triggers a stampede.

"Hey! Save some for Ichi-nii and the others!"

XXX

Byakuya stands with his fellow Captains while the members of Squad Twelve that Kurosaki had insisted on accompanying them continue to analyze everything from the sand to the air to the bodies now being lined up for transport back to Soul Society. From the moment they stepped foot inside of Hueco Mundo, Byakuya couldn't help but feel anxious about what they might find. The video of Las Noches being utterly and completely destroyed by those flames kept playing over and over in his head, but more importantly, he recognized the black armor, he had seen it once before when Ichigo came stepping out of one of those training dimensions with Rukia and Momo right behind him giggling about something they had done to him inside. In his honest assessment of the black armor, it made one feel the endless void of death and punishment as if Ichigo was judge, jury, and executioner. He still recalls the glowing crimson eyes he had seen before the young Devil allowed his armor to fade away, which reminded him of the time when he fought the younger man right after he had thankfully stopped his sister's unwarranted execution.

Shaking the distracting thoughts from his head, the Kuchiki Clan Head spies Shunsui tipping his sakkat down as he peers at his hand; he is holding one of the same white devices he knows to be called a 'flash drive' from the brief time he had spent in the World of the Living. His sister had shown him one that had her homework on it as she plugged it into one of the Estate's many notebook computers, something he has every intention of buying for himself, Rukia and Renji upon her return due to how useful they have turned out to be.

Byakuya himself had also found a flash drive when he used his foot to turn over one of the bodies he had come across; the device had fallen out of the dead Quincy's pocket. Not sensing a trap or any other ambush nearby, he had picked it up and instantly recognized the crest stenciled to the side of it, the Naberius Coat of Arms. He stuffed it into his pocket to examine later, because Kisuke and Ichigo obviously wanted that information to make its way to Soul Society no matter the cost to themselves, so it would only help if he had a backup copy.

"You know what this symbol means Byakuya?" Shunsui asks suddenly, tilting the flash drive to
show him the stenciled Coat of Arms on its side.

Nodding as his eyes continue to scan their surroundings to ensure they will not be overheard, Byakuya replies lowly back to his fellow Captain. "It's from Ichigo and Kisuke. The information on these devices must be very important for us to see if they have planted so many of them. I suspect, if Kurotsuchi had been here, he would have demanded all of them to be turned over to him 'for investigation purposes'. Thankfully, Head Captain made the right decision to have him stay behind, since his Lieutenant and third seat cannot order us to do the same, can they?"

Shunsui simply lowers his sakkat further, then his pink Haori swirls over his normal Captain's Haori as he spins around to see his Lieutenant walking up to him and Byakuya. Smiling cheerfully and starting to greet her, he pouts when she cuts him off with her usual blunt self-pre-emptively.

"Not now Captain, Squad Twelve has positively identified the dead bodies. They are, or rather they were Quincy. But they are not like Uryū Ishida or his father, these ones are very different. Not just the clothes they are wearing but also the equipment they had on them. A few medallions have been found, like this one." She pulls out a strangely designed emblem, both Captains quirking their eyebrows when looking at it.

"Hide it Nanao-chan." Shunsui finally orders her. "I want to know what it is, and I don't want you to speak of it to anyone. No telling what Kurotsuchi might keep from us later, so to be on the safe side…"

"... We should have an independent review of all the data we collect, Captain Kyōraku." Nanao finishes for him with a smug smirk.

"That's my lovely Nanao-chan for yo…arrggghhh." Shunsui rubs his stomach where her book 'accidentally' hits him.

"Forgive me Captain; I thought I saw a Hollow bug." She apologizes before walking away quickly.

Waiting until the Squad Eight Lieutenant is far enough away from them, the stoic Kuchiki begins speaking again, his voice low enough that only his fellow Captain can hear him.

"I feel as if we just had a close call with death."

Looking at the remains of what was once the most dominating structure in Hueco Mundo, the Squad Eight Captain has no choice but to agree. Whoever was with Ichigo had enough power to reduce the once imposing fortress to little more than blackened rubble, the only Quincy bodies found had been outside the walls. It was more than likely that anything inside the fortress had been reduced to ash as well. Seeing Zaraki Kenpachi striding towards them, his Lieutenant at her familiar place on his shoulder, Shunsui whispers to Byakuya in an undertone.

"We best hope he doesn't find out Ichigo's still alive and well, or that civil war we want to avoid will become unavoidable."

Byakuya grimaces uncharacteristically. "Then we had better make sure we are ready to stop it at any cost."

Pulling his sakkat down even further, Shunsui looks into the distance with a bleak look on his face. 'Not gonna be easy going against Yama-jii...I hope you get some good ideas for us Jū.'

XXXX

Yhwach hangs alone in the dark, his naked body shackled by thick chains and strung up like some
kind of trophy. Unable to move at all, the Quincy Emperor has nothing else to do but think back on the events of his capture and continue plotting his eventual escape, although with the recent events, the ancient Quincy has to wonder if escape is even possible.

He had been brought to this room by that damn Devil hours ago, and the moment he arrived, the chains holding him had disappeared, leaving him standing alone on a small raised platform. When he went to step down however, he bounced back from the invisible wall surrounding the platform. When he placed his hands on the barrier and tried to use his powers again, he felt nothing, not a hint of Reishi to absorb, nor could he sense any of the Quincies who were still among the living. Glaring down at the runes branded on his arms, he wondered if they were truly responsible for blocking his abilities, or whether the barrier surrounding his platform had left him isolated from everything else. For over an hour he just stood there patiently, waiting for something to happen, the platform just large enough for him to stand on but too confined to allow him to sit, which was probably the intent of those who now held him prisoner.

His patience was finally rewarded when his first visitors showed up, eight reddish-skinned beings with pure black eyes wearing blood red pants and shirts, their feet were bare and the only other distinguishing marks on their body were the black tattoos running up and down their exposed skin. Two of them approached him right away, one of them touching the invisible barrier surrounding his platform and deactivating it with a shimmer, which was the exact moment he had been waiting for.

Pushing himself forward, he threw a heavy punch at the nearest demon, smirking to himself as he thought that he had caught the lowly thing unprepared. A split second later he realized that he was mistaken as the demon easily caught his hand, and he quickly realized he was not going to come out of it unscathed when the demon gripping his hand began to crush it, forcing him to his knees as he futilely tried to pry the vice-like grip off with his other hand. He didn't even see the second demon stepping forward until it grabbed his shirt and pulled him back to his feet, grabbing hold of his other hand and wrist and stepping away until he found himself being stretched out between the two demons by his arms. Unable to fight back against his captors, he could only watch as four of the other demons began prepping several chains with shackles that were attached to several large floating metallic rings, before he saw the remaining two demons beginning to advance on him.

He was helpless to fight back as his clothes were torn from his body by those two demons and tossed aside like rags. Joining his clothes were the Quincy trinkets on his body: his remaining Gintō, his specially-designed medallion to steal the Head Captain's Bankai, his Quincy Cross... all were taken from his body and tossed on top of the table nearby.

'And now the torture begins.' He mentally snorted at the display, recognizing tactics that were designed to cripple his self-esteem and leave him feeling vulnerable in his undressed state.

Strangely enough, the two demons grabbing his arms simply dragged him over to the floating rings and held him still without speaking; the two demons who stripped him joined the first two and grabbed hold of his legs, while the other four demons began to shackle each of his limbs to their own rings. Once they were done, he could feel the chains stretching both his arms and legs out to the point that his joints would have popped out of their sockets if he tried to escape, and he couldn’t help the grunt of pain that escaped his lips. Seemingly satisfied by his response, the demons left as silently as they had entered, the last one waving his hand to extinguish the lights in the room. And that is how he had been left naked, shackled and in the dark for what seemed like hours or even days.

Hanging there in the dark, he wondered how much time had really passed, the only thing he was aware of was how cold it had gradually gotten and how the pain in his joints was increasing
incrementally the longer he hung in that position. With his abilities somehow sealed again, he knew he would have to suffer through this physical torture while he looked for a way to escape his new prison, not that it would be the first time he had to do so. The very first prison he had been trapped in was when he was born without any of his senses, and it was also the first place he had freed himself from; this new prison would just be a different place for him to study and find a weakness to exploit later.

His musings are interrupted by the sound of a door opening, which causes him to look towards the sudden light in the darkness. At first all he can see is a shadow moving beyond the doorway, before a woman with nine flaming tails walks in, followed by a tall man wearing a black Gi, and then others. One after another, men and women enter the room, their features illuminated by the light coming from the first woman's flaming tails, and more than half of the men and women are not human from what he can observe. The last to enter the room is a tall man wearing black armor, followed by five dark-skinned women with pointed ears. These six are the ones who approach him, while the others simply spread out around the room and observe.

"I see you have come to gloat, Ichigo Kurosaki." Yhwach comments, staring at the black-armored figure without any expression on his face.

Chuckling sounds fill his ears as the other beings in the room express their amusement, then one of the pointy-eared women move to stand in front of him. Smiling up at him, he sees her cloudy eyes looking straight at him and realizes she is blind, but it doesn't seem to hamper her as she raises her hand and accurately places two fingers on his forehead before speaking.

"He is not Ichigo; he is your new lord and master for all eternity, Lord Amyntas Naberius. I am to be your First, Yhwach; I am Sasha Mai'ryl, and I will indoctrinate you to your new life."

The door to Yhwach's prison slams shut as the first of his screams pierce the air beyond the room; two red-skinned demons move to stand in front of them until the Keeper of the Skeleton Tower is ready to leave once again.

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Opening his brown orbs slowly, Ichigo notices he is lying on a bed, just not the one in his room back at the Estate. Looking around, he gasps when he realizes this place looks exactly like his old room in Karakura, the home he no longer has. The sounds of his Zanpakutō laughing from outside of his room makes him slowly get up from his bed and walk out into the hallway, that is when he sees the differences between here and from his old home. Gone are the modern sheet-rock walls; instead, wooden planks and beams greet his eyes. Trailing his hand along the wooden wall surfaces, he finds the spiraling stairway that leads to the lower floor and the main room of the house.

"Zangetsu? Hey, where are you?" He shouts loudly for his partner.

Hearing the familiar double tremble answering him back, Ichigo walks quickly to the room where the voice came from. Passing through the open doorway, he finds his Zanpakutō spirit seated at a table, three plates of food already set. Taking the seat indicated to him, Ichigo gives thanks before he starts to eat. Then he stops mid-bite when he sees the set of chopsticks across from him float up with food in them.

Pointing wide-eyed at it, he yells out loud. "Oi, who the hell is sitting there Zangetsu!?"

"Imp, dumbass; I told you she was real. Now ya believe me?" His Zanpakutō huffs out irritably.

Ichigo stares at the undeniable proof before his eyes. "But...why can't I see her?"

Zangetsu stares at the chair, before shrugging his shoulders in defeat. "She says it's part of the rules, whatever the hell that means."

Pointing at the now moving utensils, Ichigo then asks what she looks like next.
"I…don't know King. I can see her, but when I try to tell you, I can't." Ichigo sees his partner frowning then and tilting his head as if listening to someone.

"She says that is part of the rules too. Sorry, but that's all she can tell me."

Not bothering to answer back, Ichigo eats in silence with his Zanpakutō and his invisible friend eating as well, his magic and Reiatsu restoring themselves to much safer levels than he knew he had when he passed out. Still, seeing the wooden chopsticks pick up food and watching it disappear into nothing is somewhat unsettling to him; even with all of the things he had seen since his mother passed away, food disappearing into nowhere is near the top of that very strange list. Finally finishing the last of his meal, he pushes the plate away and places his hands on his belly in contentment then.

"So, you want to tell me why there was food here Zangetsu?" Ichigo asks his inner-spirit curiously.

He slides back from the table when he sees the feral grin greeting his answer, the chill that shoots up his spine at Zangetsu's words causes him to wonder if he should stay in his coma longer.

"It's so when you go back King, you aren't completely helpless when you face the Queen, Kitty-sensei, the Ice Princess and more importantly, our new dragon of a Rook. Oh, the things I heard Tatsuki-chan promising to do to you when you woke up even had me laughing in anticipation. So the short version is this: you're dead when you wake up King. Good luck." Zangetsu then lifts his finger and jabs Ichigo in his forehead, sending the Devil's consciousness back to the real world.

"That was actually kinda funny Zangetsu." Imp says as she gathers the now empty plates.

Smiling at the now unoccupied spot across from them, the sword spirit turns to look at the now fifteen-year-old looking Imp. "You need a new name kid, Imp ain't gonna cut it for much longer. So how about…Shi no Tenshi, Shi for the shortened version?"

"Nope, how about Michibiku Tenshi, Michi for short?"

"Ehmm, Guiding Angel…I like how that sounds. So, Michi, are you ready to see the King get his butt handed to him?" Zangetsu has recently started noticing that whenever he curses, he would receive disapproving looks from the teen with him, so he now closely monitors his language when it is only them. Michi, formerly Imp, grins as she admits something to him.

"I always enjoy seeing Ichigo squirm around all those very pretty ladies."

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Opening his eyes for a second time, Ichigo feels the weight of three bodies pressing against his form. Blinking slowly, her crimson hair fills his vision much to his delight, and a small smile forms as he slowly and quietly checks to see who the other two bodies keeping him warm are. He isn't surprised to see Yuzu's light colored hair on his left, his younger sister hugging his arm in her sleep, but he is surprised to find Koneko's white hair to his right. Closing his eyes, he spreads his senses out to see who else is in the room with them; their muted voices tell him there are quite a few people in the room, though their voices are too low for him to identify.

'Ah, so Yoruichi is here. Orihime, Tatsuki…dammit. At least Chad and Uryū are here to save me… I hope. Grimmjow, no surprise there either. Nelliel and Tia. The Números, Sasha and Merti. Akeno and Yuuto…fuck how many people are in our room?' Deciding that sleep is more important at this
point of time, he goes to close his eyes when a stray lock of his girlfriend's hair tickles his nose, and he sneezes involuntarily.

Immediately, all the voices stop their conversations, then bodies begin to move all around him, the worst part being the growing aura of anger that fills the room, chiefly from the freshly-awake woman now straddling his waist as she leverages herself up and glares at his closed eyelids.

"Yuzu, Karin, Koneko, Orihime, please allow us some privacy and wait outside while we have a small chat with your thick-headed brother?" He hears Merti's voice command.

"Yes, I believe that would be prudent for Chad and I as well Merti-san." Ichigo silently curses his cousin Uryū for being a coward then, though it's not like he can speak up about it.

Grimmjow is another traitor as he walks by the bed. "Make sure there's enough of our King left over for me to spar with later on Nel." He remarks flippantly before leaving.

The door closes with a menacing click behind Grimmjow, and knowing he can't feign sleep any longer, Ichigo reluctantly opens his eyes and looks straight into Rias's eyes; he gulps when he sees the magic glowing in her blue orbs.

He only gets to say one thing before he is crushed by an avalanche of feminine fury. "I can explain Rias!"

XXXX

Yuzu, Orihime and Koneko all jump at the first yelp that sounds out loudly from the room; none of them however make a move towards the door that is now being guarded by Nia and Kimi. The two teen Elves shudder as another loud voice of protest is cut off by a thud, the exact words being muffled by the thick door behind them. Knowing that their brother isn't coming out anytime soon, Karin starts to walk away, much to the surprise of her three sisters.

"Karin, where are you going?" Yuzu asks of her older twin.

Waving her hand over her shoulder, the darker-haired twin answers back. "Gonna find Goat-Face and see if he'll start showing me how to use that katana Ichigo gave me to practice with."

"Oh, then can I watch?" Yuzu asks as she quickly catches up to her twin.

"Nope, you have to practice too Yuzu. If we have an inner-world, we need to start getting stronger if we're ever going to learn our Zanpakutō's names. So, if you're really up for some hard work, then you can tag along."

Orihime watches them leave with Koneko silently in tow; left to herself, the burnt-orange-haired healer waits outside Ichigo's room while he is being admonished for his action from last night. She had been warned earlier not to interfere because they knew he would get mule-headed if she stood by him in his defense. She still frowns about it though; after talking to both Merti and Yoruichi, she agrees that in his depleted condition last night it was ill advised for Ichigo to do what he did, but at the same time she knows and understands why he did it as well. It was why she had supported his reckless decision, and when she felt him shunting her output by overwhelming hers during the healing process, she simply went along with it and focused on using his power more effectively. She smiles, knowing that he only did it because he would recover much faster than she would have thanks to his Hollow powers, a thought that would have once caused her to be afraid. Zangetsu, when he thought of himself as only a Hollow, had once been frightening to her, horrifying at his worst. Now though, she can tell the Hollow spirit has 'mellowed' from the few conversations she
has had with him when he helped Ichigo train Yuuto.

The point in which she and Zangetsu had made their final connection was during one of Yuuto and Issei's training sessions, when Ichigo was sparring with the young Knight and Issei was running for his life with Yoruichi and Momo chasing after him with Kidō blasts. Out of the blue, Zangetsu had appeared and spoken to her.

'Hime, I wanted to say I'm sorry.'

At first Orihime had been confused as to who was speaking to her, until she turned around and saw the white version of Ichigo sitting next to her. Seeing his head tilted just slightly towards her, she responded back the only way she could.

'Sorry for what Zangetsu...nii?'

'Back on top of Las Noches, we...Ichigo wasn't in control. The old man had us right where he wanted us back then, and all I had were my instincts to work with. It...it could've, no, it should've ended differently, but all I had were his promises back then, I had no other means to control our power because of 'his' interference.'

'His promises, Zangetsu?'

She watched as he flopped his head towards her completely then, seeing the sad smile on his face as he continued. 'Ichigo made a promise to Tatsuki to bring you home safely, and he also made one to himself, to save you no matter what got in his way. That's why when Bat-boy blew that hole through his chest and killed him, it was your words alone that reached him and me. Your cries allowed us to break free of the old man's restraints and fight with our true Shinigami powers, not just his limited Quincy powers. Had it been that way from the beginning, things... could've ended differently...maybe, just maybe...' 

She hesitantly reached out to touch his shoulder. 'It's okay Zangetsu-nii; we both have our regrets from back then. I...I should have tried harder to reach Ulquiorra-san as well. I had glimpses of what he truly wanted to be, but I just wanted to go home, in my heart I wanted you guys to come for me and take me home. Then you did come, all of you, and...'

'Did you ever doubt him?' Zangetsu gestured to his wielder.

'No.' She sighed dejectedly. 'I just...wish that I had been stronger back then. To keep him from having to fight as hard as he had to.'

To her surprise, Zangetsu scoffed at her words. He only grew stronger Hime, each time he fought he grew, and thankfully he did it when he needed to the most. When we fought Aizen with our Mother's true blood...ah, what's done is done little Sis, so we just have to get you stronger so you don't worry yourself so much in the future.'

'Yes... stronger. I will be stronger next time, Zangetsu-nii.'

Hearing the door opening breaks her out of those memories, and when she looks up, she sees nearly everyone filing out of the room, the only one not doing so is Rias of course. Making her way to his door, two sets of arms snake through hers and stop her in her tracks. Confused, she looks at her captors and spies a grin on Tatsuki's and Nelliel's faces then.

"Tatsuki, Nelliel-san?"
The green-haired Devil speaks then. "Don't worry about Itsygo, Rias-san will take care of him. He's fine, little bit bruised in his ear-drums perhaps, maybe a few other things needing healing elsewhere, but he is otherwise alive. Now as for you…well, we are going training with Zangetsu now."

"Wh…why? Did I do something wrong?" The brown eye healer tries unsuccessfully to struggle out from her friends' iron grips.

"Nope Hime, but we do need to teach you to take over when wonder-dummy does something stupid like that again." The Zanpakutō appears behind her and gently pushes her into moving again.

"Zangetsu?" She stares wide-eyed at him. "What do you mean?"

"It means you did a fairly good job using Ichigo's power to heal all those wounded people, Hime." The Hollow spirit informs her. "So now we are going to teach you how to better control his power when he gives it to you to heal people next time. Ichigo still lacks fine control with that part, so by using me as a guinea pig, you are going to learn how to regulate any power he gives you and return some to him if he tries to use it all so recklessly again in the future. You wanted to get stronger; this is the best way to start you other than watching Suki kick your ass when you two spar." He laughs when she pouts at him.

"She doesn't always kick…my rear." She mumbles.

Tatsuki starts laughing as well then. "Tell me Hime, when was the last time you won our spar?"

"Ah…" Brown eyes search frantically for an answer, but she comes up empty.

"Exactly! Now move it Hime, we have lots to do before we leave."

XXXX

A late-lunch is held, and everyone finally joins up in the same dining room, a much bigger room now that multiple peerages and Clans are eating together. At the head table, the four Maou are sitting with the current heads of the Gremory, Naberius, and Sitri Clans, with Ichigo and Rias sitting with their combined peerages and the soon to be reincarnated Arrancars. Tia sits next to Rias, while the Números sit in-between the younger Devils. Small talk is the order for the meal, and no one is really in the mood to talk about the events from the day before. Ichigo is still a bit depressed when he found out he had missed the funerals for those who had fallen, but he understood why after Merti explained to him that getting their bodies into the ground as soon as possible had been essential for the future. Learning that those Elves who did die will sprout a tree from their graves that can live for several millennia gave him some small comfort, though learning that the Hell Hounds had cremated their fallen and used their ashes to nourish those trees had left him rather speechless. His only request was that next weekend, Merti and Sasha would take him to see the families of those Elves who had fallen for him to personally extend his condolences and thanks, and bring him to the Hell Hounds to do the same.

At the head table, a different discussion is taking place, as Sirzechs and Amyntas speak with the other Devil leaders on what they are going to do when Soul Society eventually decides to see what is going on in Isehara.

"Do you think they will really come for their Lieutenants, Yoruichi?" The Head of the Devils military asks as he sips from his bowl of soup.
Pausing with her glass in hand, the former Captain nods when she speaks. "Most definitely, how soon though remains to be seen."

Casting a glance at the table where Momo and Rukia sit with the Sitri peerage, Yoruichi frowns with her next statement. "I just worry about Ichigo and the others though. In the short time those two have been here, they have all gotten very close. The battle only cemented that friendship as each trusted the others to watch their backs. Momo more so after Sasha came to save her from the Quincy. So far, her mind hasn't shown any signs of regression thanks to Sasha, but I'd rather she stay here than in Soul Society."

"The last time I spoke to Shinji, you would have to kill him to give up on his new second-in-command. And she has progressed well under his tutelage; Aizen was truly impeding her training, just giving her enough to get by, but not enough to become the Shinigami she's supposed to be." Isshin reminds her bluntly. "Still..."

Serafall quips in then. "If worse comes to worst, we could always take them back from Soul Society."

The Shinigami and Devils all turn to stare at her. "And threaten the treaty we have with them?" Falbium asks the question they are all thinking.

The Leviathan Maou shrugs as she replies back. "Technically, they broke it already by sending Shinigami officers here without consulting the Gremory Clan. Though I bet they are hoping that we don't find out about this screw up when someone in Central Forty-Six realizes that Rukia and Momo are already here without the permission of the Gremory Clan. They'll try and send someone new after they recall the Lieutenants and then pretend that they hadn't already violated the treaty, and failing that they will deny that they ever sent Rukia and Momo on this mission; at least from what I've heard, that's what they'd probably do."

"It could prove to be useful blackmail later on, though it is certainly stretching it." Yoruichi frowns as she says half-heartedly. "Though the ones who will suffer the most from any backlash are Rukia and Momo."

Ajuka agrees internally before shifting the conversation towards the former Squad Twelve Captain. "Kisuke, how will they react once they find out your protégé still lives?"

Kisuke looks at Isshin and then Yoruichi before he huffs out in discontentment. "Probably not well. Time has stood still for Soul Society for the last nine hundred years or so since Head Captain Yamamoto formed the government. Clans and old noble houses still rule the majority of the Soul Society; Ichigo and his friends, both human and a growing number of younger Shinigami within the Gotei Thirteen have shown them that civil unrest is a possibility, more so after Ichigo's 'exile', and that gives them reason to worry. I know you have heard how Rukia reacted once she found out Ichigo was alive and why, and I can only imagine the response will be pretty much be the same from the rest of Ichigo's allies when the rest of the Squads learn the truth and the reason why of it. Byakuya has by now informed both Shunsui and Ukitake, and possibly his Lieutenant Renji Abarai, while Suì-Fēng will only approach those she knows sided with Ichigo that day. Even so, they should have a sizeable portion of the Gotei Thirteen on Ichigo's side, and once Central finds out about it, I'm afraid Isehara is going to need to be put under military guard by the Devils just in case they send someone more willing to carry out their orders behind Head Captain Yamamoto's back."

"That bad?" The current Leviathan wonders.

"That is the worst-case scenario." Urahara admits candidly. "The best case, and probably the most
likely knowing Head Captain Yamamoto, is that he will call for talks first. I believe he still remembers the last time he fought Sirzechs-sama, I don't believe in his current condition he would want to try again." The Shinigami scientist adds.

"Damn fool if you ask me. He should've swallowed his pride and allowed Orihime to heal him like Sui-Fēng did. At least my Little Bee took the healing so she wouldn't be a hindrance to her Squad; him though, I don't know what was going through his mind at that point. Was it some form of penance for failing to realize what Aizen was up to? Pride as a Shinigami to not accept charity from a 'Ryoka'? It probably is something stupid like that, knowing him." The former Squad Two commander muses bitterly.

Sirzechs folds his hands and rests his chin on top of them. His eyes are still haunted by the knowledge that he could have prevented all this from happening by killing Yhwach back then. "So at this point, we will do nothing but wait. We won't stop them from recalling their Lieutenants, but we will definitely need eyes and ears there to ensure their safety. I think we Devils have been a bit negligent about paying attention to what goes on in the world's Soul Societies, thinking that what happens in any of them would not directly affect us. But now I realize that's not exactly true, and we need to start paying attention."

"Already taken care of Sirzechs, I got...a little surprise for my Berry later on." The werecat tells them smugly.

Kisuke and Isshin both moan then, the elder Shiba groaning out loud. "Really Yoruichi, did you really have to do that?"

Yoruichi shoots them a glare. "Ya betcha I did. She's due to come here soon as a matter of fact. She didn't say why, only that it was important she do so. To be honest, I'm a little worried about that as well."

"So back on topic: now that we have a way of monitoring their situations, what do we do if a large number of Shinigami begin to flood Isehara in a worst-case scenario then?" Serafall asks next.

"Leave them to me and Ichigo." Yoruichi declares. Seeing the others looking suspiciously at her, she elaborates her plan. "No, we won't kill them, they will most likely be following orders to observe and report, so we'll just capture them and hold them until a later date when we can confront them with deliberately breaking the treaty. Because I doubt the Gremory clan would allow that many Shinigami into their territory at once, even if it was to deal with a major Hollow infestation. If any seated officers come, we'll deal with them ourselves, but if they are under orders to eliminate Ichigo and his friends, then... we might have a big problem on our hands." The assassin says as she glances over at her 'son' and his friends.

A loud cheer goes up from near the Gremory Peerage as a now-recovered Issei begins dancing around his chair.

"What's that about, Yori?" Kisuke asks as everyone in the room watches the young Pawn's antics with amusement.

Rolling her eyes almost fondly, she answers her friend. "Just found out he can do whatever he wants for the rest of the weekend, nothing Devil related, just be...normal."

The former scientist sighs as he lowers his head. "Normal? Does any one of us even remember what that means anymore?"

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'CLANG!' Pantera grinds down Zangetsu's spine, stopping at the wrappings where a normal Tsuba should have been located, but this Zanpakutō's design is just as unique as its wielder. True to form, Ichigo had regained what he lost in only a day and is now sparring with Grimmjow, partly to repay the Espada for ditching him to the mercies of the women yesterday, and partly to try and clear his head.

"Your head ain't all the way in it Ichigo." Grimmjow tells his King as the orange headed Devil swipes at his Knight's abdomen, barely sparking the former Espada's Hierro.

Leaping back to avoid the blue-haired Knight's retaliatory round-house kick and the accompanying left hook to his head, the Devil shakes the distractions out of his head as he answers.

"Sorry, just thinking." Grimmjow easily avoids the half-assed Byakurai fired at his legs with a contemptuous snort.

Firing off his Bala in varying sequence, the former Espada closes the distance between them and locks blades with his new King. "Thinking about what exactly?" He growls as he tries to break Ichigo's guard.

Scowling as he shoves Grimmjow away from him, Ichigo finally lowers his Zanpakutō and stares at Grimmjow. "Uryū, Candice and Ryūken. What could've happened to them if I had killed that asshole."

Seeing that their spar is at an end, the former Sexta lowers his own Zanpakutō and moves to stand in front of the former Shinigami. "But ya didn't, you saved them when it counted. You also saved a whole lot of Hollows too, and by now you should have figured it out that you saved those thankless bastards in Soul Society...again."

Watching the hybrid Devil release his Hell chains while looking at them, Grimmjow hears him muttering softly to himself. "And gave them even more reasons to fear me..."

"You don't owe them dickheads anymore!" The blue-haired Arrancar cuts in. "You did their dirty work, fixed their problems, and were thrown away by them after all of that. A few of us agree with that crazy nut-job of a father you have there, it's time for you to live for yourself this time around and stop caring what that shitty Society thinks. You got a hot babe to marry, so do what most married men do Ichigo, live a little."

Looking at his Knight, Ichigo huffs out in exasperation. "Out of all of you, it would be you who sees it my way."

Grinning, the blue-haired Knight holds a hand up, his golden band reflecting the simulated sunlight brightly. "Best thing to ever happen to me, she might be hell to fight against in a spar, but she... well you'll find out soon enough."

"Pervert." Ichigo rolls his eyes.

"You'll be one soon enough." Grimmjow retorts.

Ichigo tosses the former Sexta a bottle. "Ass. Now drink this, it'll help your body replenish both your magic and Reiatsu levels quicker. Kisuke figures that because of who you were before, you'd need this to help you adjust quicker. The Underworld's source of power is magic, so we'll all be learning how to use it from the other peerages, even Rias and Sōna volunteered to help us get used to using it."

Neither of them reacts when a third person appears via Sonído beside them, her blonde hair and
emerald eyes taking in both men before she speaks.

"I thought you were supposed to be resting, Naberius-sama?"

Rolling his eyes, Grimmjow points at the orange-haired young lord. "He hates being called that Tia, doesn't like his ego getting too inflated he says."

"Don't pay attention to him, he's pissed that he was still unconscious when your call for help came." Ichigo counters. "But to answer your question, I had to get the hell away from all of them. Since me and Grimm-kitty aren't recovering anymore, we decided to have a light spar, nothing serious."

"Nothing serious." She looks around to see hills burnt black, large crevices formed, some hills missing large portions of themselves, and from the lingering amounts of Reiatsu in the air, Bala, Ceros and other formidable attacks had been used liberally. Turning back, she looks at her future King with a complicated expression on her face.

"Something on your mind?" Ichigo asks of his future Queen.

Both Devils see her scrunching her eyebrows in thought before she slowly nods to herself. "A few things. First, is it true…our holes will…disappear?"

"Yes. Grimmjow and Nelliel's holes are gone, and they are both fine, actually I think they both said they feel better than they have in years. Am I right Grimmjow?" Ichigo sends a glance to his sparring partner.

"Better than fine Tia, we…we feel whole…and the voices, they aren't there anymore, that background static is finally gone." Grimmjow admits.

"That will make them happy then." Tia says with a small smile.

She sees Ichigo shift then and motion for her to continue. "They have talked amongst themselves and they have all agreed to your proposal Ichigo. Menoly and Loly too. Which brings me to my next concern, and it should be yours as well Grimmjow…"

"I know, but ever since she found out…she's been listless. I don't know what to do Tia." The blue-haired Knight growls out in anger and frustration.

"Give her time Grimmjow, and I'm sorry about that by the way; I didn't realize she was there when I told Kisuke and Yoruichi that my two Pawns went silent." Ichigo apologizes as he remembers Nel's expression, her hazel eyes tearing up when she realized what it meant, that her Fracción hadn't made it.

"Hiding here won't make it any easier for her to cope with her grief; you should go and be with her at this time Grimmjow." Tia says with a heavy voice.

"It's okay Grimmjow; Tia's right, she probably needs you now." With his King saying the same thing, Grimmjow just frowns and leaves without saying a word.

As they watch the former Sexta disappear, the blonde Espada moves to stand closer to her future King. "There is one last thing I wish to ask for Ichigo."

"Sure, name it." He responds calmly.

"I…I would like Orihime to remove all of our mask fragments if she can."
"Huh? Why?" He looks stunned by the request.

"If we no longer have holes Ichigo, we are no longer truly Hollows. Ridding ourselves of our masks will help us move on." Tia looks him in his eyes, her emerald green meeting his concerned brown.

"You're not planning on going back are you?" He asks her quietly.

"None of us are, Ichigo. We've decided if we are to become Devils and members of your Clan, then our home will be here. You said we could go back, but I don't think any of us will go back for our own reasons. The Underworld will become our new home, and while I will visit Hueco Mundo from time to time, it is only fair to say that it doesn't feel like we will be welcomed once they realize we are no longer Hollows. Do you understand what I am trying to say, Ichigo?"

She sees the tightness around his eyes for a brief moment before he answers. "Completely, Tia."

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Isshin sits next to Kisuke as he watches Karin and Yuzu go through their Zanjutsu katas with the purple-haired Goddess of Flash guiding them. When his dark-haired daughter found him in the study yesterday with her great-grandfather and asked him to start teaching her to use the blade in her hands, he had felt torn between pride and reluctance at her request. Thankfully, Yoruichi had seen through his hesitation and volunteered to show them the katas that were taught at the Academy. Kisuke had tagged along just to watch the younger Devils learn from a master Zanpakutō wielder, something that very few outside of her own family even suspected of the former assassin. While her prowess with Hakuda is legendary, her Zanjutsu is equally masterful.

"It will take a few days before Tessai and I can procure them Asauchi, Isshin." The shouten owner suddenly volunteers.

"You mean a few days before Yoruichi can pilfer them from the Shinōreijutsuin?" Isshin replies bluntly.

Faking hurt emotions, Kisuke laughs as the other man rolls his eyes at him. "You know me oh so well. Besides, she wants to see if her little sister is doing okay, and what better way for her to thumb her nose at her own clan but by stealing a few Asauchi from their private stocks?"

Isshin gawks at him and then at the figure in the distance. "Is she fucking crazy? She's gonna steal from her own clan!?" He hisses frantically. "Is she trying to commit suicide!?"

"Shhh, don't let Ichigo find out you moron! You know how pissed he would get if he ever found out she snuck back to Soul Society, and more importantly her clan." Kisuke whispers back violently then.

"If who snuck back to Soul Society?" Both men freeze when they hear Sasha's musical voice speaking from behind them.

Paling unconsciously, they both turn as one to see the Elfin assassin's cloudy eyes staring at them, both gulping at her blank expression that is somehow more terrifying than if she were glaring at them. Kisuke recovers first and smiles as he starts to speak.

"Save it silver-tongue, you're a novice compared to the likes of my former master." Both men shudder again at her uncanny ability to pre-empt their actions despite her blindness; even Kaname Tōsen, the blind former Captain, would pale in comparison to her. The former Old Maou Assassin holds her silence for a little while longer, before she finally gives in with a small sigh.
"I will keep silence on one condition."

"And what might that be Sasha-san?" Geta-Bōshi asks politely.

Smiling just like a certain braided haired Shinigami would, she speaks her condition. "She must take Merti with her."

Kisuke exchanges looks with Isshin, who just shrugs his shoulders and turns to watch his girls sitting seiza across from the woman he knows will kill absolutely anyone or anything she feels is a threat to her new family. The former Captain tunes out the negotiations next to him; he can see both his girls again, but this time he is seeing them as they were when they were only four and his wife was still with them. His eyes gaze at them distantly as his mind drifts back to the last time his family went to the park near the river, Ichigo had the biggest smile ever on his face when Masaki told him what a good big brother he was for watching after Yuzu and Karin when they played at the playground...

That was the last time they would spend the day together as family. Shortly afterwards, their world had lost its center and for the longest time, the sun didn't shine on their family again. Isshin had nearly given in to his own despair to protect his children from Aizen by coming to within a digit of completing his call to Amyntas a year after Masaki's funeral, but at the last second it had been Yuzu's laughter that had stopped him. Coming out of the clinic to see what going on, he saw his normally gloomy, scowling son giving her a genuine grin as he showed her how to operate the vacuum cleaner. Hidden as he was, he had watched as his only son taught his blonde-haired younger sister a few basic household chores. That one act gave him hope that his normally happy child was still in there, and it turns out that he was; only now did it show up more often. It was truly ironic, but becoming Devils had actually completed his children’s’ souls.

Seeing his son and his twins as they are now makes him wish more than anything that she is with them still, to see how much they have grown. Knowing her though, she probably would have skinned Kisuke alive if he had tried to drag Ichigo into their fight with Aizen, but if she had lived, would it have been any different? He had given up trying to blame anyone for her death until Ryūken had told him the truth as to what had happened that day. For the first time ever, he had hated someone with every fiber of his being, not even the Hollow that killed her had gained as much of his hatred. Now all the ones responsible had been made to pay for their trespass of destroying his son's and daughters' early happiness, for taking his beloved one's life. Blinking back his tears, he sees them continue to interact with one of the women who is more than willing to step in and provide his kids the support they need, now that he isn't around them as much.

'Maybe it's time.' He thinks to himself.

To be honest, Isshin misses his own family in Soul Society. Ganju and Kūkaku would be more than willing to put up with him for a few years, maybe forever if the current acting Head has anything to say about it. But before he does that, he will have to speak to his children and get their opinions. Ichigo's answer he already knows, but Karin and Yuzu have yet to meet that side of the family. Sitting up straight, an idea comes to him then.

"Hey Sasha."

"Yes Isshin, how may I be of help?" The blind assassin replies, her conversation with Kisuke already done by this point.

Smirking to himself, Isshin knows what he is about to do is going to earn him more than a few new lumps from his oldest, but it is so going to be worth it in the end.
"When Yori and Merti go to Soul Society later on, I need them to…"

The hot springs have been closed off from the rest of the household while every female from the Gremory, Sitri and Naberius peerages sit with the new arrivals talking about their lives as Devils, what is going to be expected of them and the benefits of accepting their Evil Piece. Menoly and Loly are sitting close to Orihime, talking to Tatsuki and the healer. After the initial blowout between the Rook and the two former Números had taken place, the Shun Shun Rikka wielder had managed to placate her friend, barely. She had brought up arguments about how the former Squad Five Captain had twisted the minds of those that served him, and also gave her reasons for forgiving them. Only then did Tatsuki finally relent in her desires to beat them to a pulp and grudgingly accept the fact that they are to become a part of Ichigo's peerage as well. Their sincere apologies to Orihime and herself, as well as their promise to guard Orihime with their very lives had also won them Tatsuki's small approval. The three of them had ended up discussing how to best protect Orihime and lamenting her occasional airheadedness, much to the blushing healer's chagrin.

Beside them, Tia's Fracción are laughing and meeting Akiko and Aisling saucer for saucer as the five women sit drinking sake and trading stories back and forth about their own respective lives. Hanako however sits with Tia and Isi as they talk about the honor that is being given to the blonde Espada.

"As his Queen, I will be his strongest member then?" The blonde asks them curiously.

"Yes, we've felt your power Tia-san; even without your Evil Piece you are exceptionally strong." The Kyuubi-Nekomata Devil confirms.

"I was still defeated quite easily by that Quincy, I…I'm not sure if I'm worthy to be his Queen Hanako-san." Tia hangs her head slightly.

Placing a hand on the woman's bare shoulder, the Rook reassures her. "Ichigo feels otherwise Tia-san, I have heard from Kisuke-san that he believes you are worthy of the title. The Quincy who defeated you had powers that would have given many of us difficulty as well; besides, the next time you face someone like him, things will go differently for you. From here onwards, you will have both your Hollow powers and those of the Naberius Clan to fight with. While it may be some time before you get your chains, your use of water will grow exponentially. Water magic is very strong within the Sitri Clan and since Sōna is Ichigo's cousin, I'm sure she'll help you develop some very useful spells for combat. Just wait until you see what Ichigo can do with his magic."

Tia gives them a confused look. "Ichigo is…"

"Shhh, no one is…"

Sasha enters the room then, and most of those soaking take time to greet the blind Elf as she makes her way to the pool of hot water. Easing herself in next to the female sphinx, Euphrasia, who is in her human form, the Elf sighs contently then as the heat of the enriched water soothes her tired muscles. Next to enter are Yoruichi and Merti, both of them sporting huge smiles on their faces as they disrobe and enter the water together. Rukia sees their expressions and asks them what they are smiling for.

"A secret Rukia, one that will make you pee yourself when we pull it off." Yoruichi whispers conspiratorially.
The Squad Thirteen Lieutenant gulps as she sees the former Captain's evil expression. "I don't want to know, do I?"

Yoruichi grins at her. "Nope, you don't. However, you'll be here when it happens."

'We are so screwed.'

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Kicking a stone in front of him, Issei sighs as he walks alone through the town. After arriving home less than two hours ago, he found himself feeling restless and wanting to get outside. He is still having trouble dealing with the images he had seen during the battle in that strange world, at least what he had seen before he passed out, and he needed to find peace with his inner turmoil. He had also seen the covered bodies of the Elves and Hell Hounds as they were being prepared for their funerals, and suddenly realized that many of them had been killed fighting alongside him in that desperate battle against the Quincy bomber. It had taken everything in his power to keep himself from breaking down in tears as he heard the Elfin priestess chant over their bodies, Nia Mai'ryl translating the Rites of the Dead for them, and again when the Hell Hounds were cremated and the Elves buried. It was only after the last body had been placed in the ground and the last handful of ashes scattered that they had made their way back to the Estate, and only then had he allowed himself to find a quiet place to let his anguish out. Even then, it wasn't until he had received some unexpected advice that he was able to fully open up to his sorrow.

'It's okay to cry son.' Issei's head snapped towards the voice of the older man, Ichigo's father who stood near him and surprisingly was smoking a cigarette.

'Sir?' He asked in confusion.

'I said it's okay to cry son, to mourn the dead. There's no shame in showing your grief for those that have fallen in battle.'

Standing up and finding the courage, he approached the former Shinigami Captain as he stood facing the night sky of the Underworld. 'I bet Ichigo-senpai wouldn't cry.' He retorted.

A snort answered him back. 'I only wish he would cry again one day.'

Issei had looked at the older male like he was crazy. 'I don't understand why you would want that.'

Isshin had glanced at him then. 'Easy kid, he needs to mourn for her someday. Avenge her, done; mourned her, not finished with that yet. I think he's afraid that if he starts mourning her again, he'll never stop crying.' He took another drag of his cigarette and blew out a few smoke rings, before he turned fully to look at Issei once more.

'Believe it or not, Ichigo used to cry all the time, but his mother always made him smile as soon as he set eyes on her. Now those days are gone, disappeared the same day she was killed. He built some mighty tall walls around his heart ever since, but between Rukia, Orihime and now Rias, they're slowly crumbling now. Maybe he can find it in himself to let his tears out and truly put his grief to rest. After all, tears are the heart's way of healing itself.' Flicking his cigarette butt away, the Shinigami father placed a hand on the young Pawn's shoulder then.

'Listen to someone who has been near death all his life Issei, don't keep it bottled up in ya. You'll heal quicker that way.' With that said, the older man began to move away, patting his shoulder once more before doing so. He didn't look back as deep sobs began to come from Issei behind him.

Suddenly, Issei finds himself falling backwards after bumping into something very soft. Landing
on his rear, he hears a voice yelp just as he opens his eyes. Looking up, he quickly feels those familiar phantom pains when he sees someone's pure white panties right before his eyes. Stifling the nose-bleed he feels coming on, he slowly ascends his gaze upwards and notices the figure's brown laced boots next. Following those, his eyebrows rise when he sees blonde hair falling around the face of an Angel.

"I am so sorry!" He exclaims as he quickly stands up and offers his hand to the young girl wearing a blue dress.

Her hand grabs his almost bashfully, and as he lifts her easily to her feet, he almost flinches when her cross comes into view. 'Who is she?'

The young girl's voice however tugs at him when she speaks. "I am so sorry too! I should've been watching where I was going..."

Issei blushes as she begins to bow to him, quickly he touches her shoulder to stop her frantic apologizing. "No...it's okay, I'm at fault too. I was...thinking and not paying attention. I'm sorry too." His blush fades when he remembers just what he was thinking about.

When he sees her smile at him and her green eyes staring back into his brown eyes however, he can't help the red bleeding back into his cheeks then. "Sorry, I haven't introduced myself. My name is Issei Hyoudou."

"I'm Asia Argento, please to meet you Issei-kun." The blonde-haired nun smiles at him.

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Ryūken sits at his desk looking at the sheepish looking Shinigami sitting across from him. Puffing out after taking a deep drag of his cigarette, he sighs as he looks at the Squad Two Captain.

"So, what are you going to do, Captain Sui-Fēng?"

She drops her head then and huffs out. "Nothing except to report you were here the entire time, and your son is now attending a private academy with the others, one you wish to keep a secret to allow them to move on with their lives and live peacefully, having nothing more to do with our world. In a way, I'm not really lying."

The Quincy can only look at the Shinigami with a bit of respect, since the woman is willing to betray her own kind to keep his son safe for the time being. More importantly, she had had helped deliver to him the news of the outcome of the battle that had taken place in Hueco Mundo from the Naberius Clan; the man responsible for Kanae's death is no longer a danger to him or their son.

"How long do you think we have before someone does find out the truth, Captain?" The elder Ishida asks then.

"Hopefully a few more weeks, but sooner or later they will recall Lieutenants Kuchiki and Hinamori if they don't report something tangible by then. If that happens, they may send someone from Squad Twelve to investigate, and that is when the problems might crop up." She replies with a frown.

"I see, so what do you need me to do?" Knowing the few exiled Shinigami in Karakura for as long as he did, Ryūken can tell by the way the face of the woman shifts that it isn't going to be good.

Her grey eyes find his as she tells him seriously. "You will need to grab Shiba-dono and flee to where the others are. I'll have my squad looking in the wrong place at the start, but I must warn
you, I believe there are elements within my squad who are now acting under someone else's orders. Shihōin Chiyoko is her name, I believe she is making a grab to become the next head of the Shihōin Clan, and the only thing standing in her way is…”

As the Captain continues to elaborate, Ryūken takes off his glasses and pinches his nose. 'Oh, for the love all that is holy. I thought she was a pain in the ass before, now there are two of them.'

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"Well, we'll see you guys probably Wednesday night, okay Tia?" Ichigo, Rias, Yoruichi, and Sasha stand together, being the last ones to leave the Estate.

Bowing slightly, the former Queen of Hueco Mundo speaks to him. "We will endeavor to learn as much as we can before then Ichigo. Please rest as well; I'm sure you will have plenty of opportunity to do so once you get home."

The orange-haired Devil shivers when he feels three sets of eyes glaring at him from his sides. "Don't remind me."

With a final wave to Tia, Ichigo and the three women traveling with him are transported back in their home in Isehara; when the light of the magic circle fades, they are greeted by Rukia and Akeno who are waiting for them, their worried faces betraying the reason for their waiting.

"Now what?" Ichigo says when he sees their expressions.

"We have a slight situation Buchou, Ichigo." The Thunder Priestess informs them.

"And not a good one." The Squad Thirteen Lieutenant says right afterwards.

Ichigo pinches his nose then. "Oh for the love…?"

"Issei has made contact with someone who might be working for the Fallen Angels." Akeno replies with an unusually serious demeanor.

"He what!?" Rias nearly shouts in horror.

Her Queen relays the story she had gotten from Issei after he had stopped by and asked to speak to her. Telling her of his encounter and the strange feeling he had gotten when he got closer to the church the person he met was heading towards, she had then asked Issei for the complete story at that point. After hearing what she needed to, she ordered the Pawn to go home first and come back later so he can tell his story again to Rias in person.

"I feel that as his King, you might want to be the one to explain why it is so dangerous for him to befriend this young lady, Buchou."

Rukia looks at Ichigo then. "Ichigo, I know what you want to do, but I have to agree with them that we can't afford to get involved with these 'Fallen Ones' just yet. We somehow avoided a potential war with them when they attacked you and Issei before, and we have only just finished a major battle in Hueco Mundo. Maybe we should take a wait and see approach for now."

Nodding his head slowly in reluctance, Ichigo frowns as he replies. "Yoruichi and Merti told me already that they're still hanging around Isehara, but if they kill another innocent, I don't give a shit what happens, someone's gonna pay."

Sasha agrees with him on that point. "He's correct Rias, Rukia; regardless of the ceasefire treaty,
we can't stand by and allow their trespass in this city for much longer, or allow them to kill indiscriminately either. Let us hear what Issei-kun has to say before we make any concrete plans. Is that acceptable to all of you?"

Rias reluctantly agrees, but she voices her needs to Ichigo. "Issei needs to understand what he is dealing with Ichigo, so I ask that you don't interfere with my handling of this."

"I won't, just give him a little slack though Rias. I'm sure he didn't mean to do anything wrong." His answer surprises everyone who knows of his dislike for the Pawn.

"Ichigo?" His violet-eyed Shinigami partner questions worriedly.

Walking away and heading towards the kitchen, Ichigo replies over his shoulder. "I was impulsive like him once, remember Midget? I don't regret what I did, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to save you or the many people I did, but I do admit it got me into serious trouble a couple of times."

Sasha and Rukia both begin laughing at that, with the older Elf asking whether anything has changed.

Stopping at the doorway, Ichigo pauses before he answers. "I nearly got killed by Grand Fisher at my mother's grave, and then again by Byakuya, Aizen and the former Espadas at various times and places. This time, I fought the Quincy Emperor the way all of you have been teaching me to do so, and it paid off for once."

"How so?" His answer cuts off all their laughter.

"I didn't have to die to move forward."

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Rias stands before her Pawn, growing angrier the longer she argues with him about why being near someone who is affiliated with either the Angels or the Fallen Angels is entirely unacceptable to her and extremely dangerous for him.

"Issei, why don't you go get something to eat or drink? I need to talk to Rias in private for a few okay?" She sees her orange-haired boyfriend step out from the shadows of the corner where he had been listening to them both arguing.

"Okay Ichigo-senpai." The Pawn bows slightly before leaving, though not without a backwards glance at his King.

Waiting until her Pawn leaves the room, Rias turns on her boyfriend, only to find him in standing front of her with his hands grabbing hers.

"I think we all need to take a break Rias. I'm not going to get in the way of how you handle your peerage, just a timeout for you both." He pulls her over to a couch with him, then sits her down on his lap.

Feeling him stroke her hair out of her face, Rias meets his eyes and sees him looking at her with understanding. "He's hard-headed like you Ichigo." She grumbles unhappily, though his snort of agreement brings a small smile to her face.

"Yeah, but he'll come around, we all do eventually, well except for Geta-Bōshi, I think he likes it when Yoruichi beats on him." Ichigo points out with a not-so-subtle dig as his mentor.
"What am I going to do with him Ichigo? I don't want to see him get hurt or worse, but if he continues to stay near her, the chances of the Fallen Angels finding out could spell disaster for them both." Rias sighs before leaning into his chest.

She feels his arms wrap around her tightly then, his face nuzzling into her hair before he begins speaking. "I'd tell you he'll be fine, but we both know as a Devil, trouble is going to come looking for him. For now, I'll see if Kimi and Nia can keep an eye on him for you. If he runs into trouble, at least help will be close at hand to bail him out. But you are going to have to let him learn these lessons for himself; experience does help with the learning curve, just look at me."

Giggling into his chest, she sarcastically reminds him why he isn't the best choice. "You died how many times gaining that 'learning curve' Ichigo? I don't think Issei has nine lives like you."

"Did ya really use a cat analogy with me?" She can feel his scowl without looking up at him.

Biting him on his chin playfully, she then whispers into his ear. "Yes, I did Ichigo. How about I show you another one that you might enjoy?"

She feels him stiffen only for a moment when she begins to unbutton his shirt after pulling his tie off of him. She then begins to lick around his exposed neck and chest. "I do like how you taste, ehmm Ic...hi...go..."

"You been hanging about Yoruichi too much, but if this is the end result, hang out with her some more." He tilts her head up and she closes her eyes as she feels his lips capturing hers, his tongue skillfully parting her lips and caressing her tongue.

'Thank you Yoruichi Okaa-san…'

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Most of the teens sitting at the dining room kitchen are doing their homework, though Rukia and Momo had finished earlier so they are going over the schedule for the upcoming kendo match against a rival private all-female school well to the south of Isehara instead. Issei and Yuuto sit with Akeno, the older student going over their work with them, while Koneko, Yuzu and Karin are doing theirs while waiting for Ichigo and Rias to make an appearance. Kimi and Nia are out scouting the city and the Church discretely for any signs that the Fallen Angels are going to cause more trouble, but so far the place remains relatively quiet.

Downstairs in the dimensional training room, Chad, Tatsuki and Orihime are practicing with their magic and seeing if their previous Reiatsu levels will allow them to use more powerful spells. So far, the house only shook once in the last hour. The only occupant of the house not doing anything of importance is Yoruichi, who is sitting near the younger occupants while drinking her milk and watching them study.

However, that changes when a powerful surge is felt by everyone in the dining room.

"I wish those two would remember to seal the room first." The purple-haired woman idly remarks while sipping her milk.

Yuzu, ever the inquisitive one, asks what the older Shinigami means; the answer she gets is one she regrets learning though.

"They're practicing for when it comes time to make you and Karin aunts." Yoruichi smirks at them.

Karin is the first to understand what that means, and she shudders and gasps at the older woman.
"Ewww, I didn't need to know about Ichi-nii and Rias-nee's sex life Yoruichi!"

"Wha…what do you mean…sex!? Ichigo and Rias-nee are…no…no…" Yuzu cries into her hands then, having figured out her words finally. "I'm too young to be an aunt! Didn't Otou-san give Ichi-nii 'the Talk'!?"

"What 'Talk' do you mean Yuzu?" Momo asks innocently, however Yoruichi latches on to a different part of her sentence.

"Yuzu, Karin, didn't you say you were given 'The Talk' at school? Did…did Isshin…"

"Stop!" Karin covers her ears and answers. "Goat-chin said he would give us 'The Real Talk' and he held us down with Kidō and forced us to watch! It was the most horrifying thing I've ever had to sit through! There was…so much blood and screaming! He…he even had videos and pictures of…of a live birth!"

Yuzu begins to gag some. "I…I thought I was ready…but…it…so horrible!"

Staring at the two shivering girls, Yoruichi begins to bleed Reiatsu unintentionally then. "That sonuvabitch! I thought it was suspicious that he backed off so easily after hearing that your school had given you 'The Talk'…to think that he…that…that moron!!"

Rukia then shows her own naivety when she asks what 'Talk' they are talking about. She regrets it almost immediately when Yoruichi's mood abruptly changes, both she and Akeno grinning not only at her, but at Momo as well.

"Tell me Hinamori, did Toshiro ever explain 'things' to you?" The werecat says as she gets up and walks over to comfort the shivering twins.

Seeing her shake her head no, the Goddess of Flash looks over at the Kuchiki heiress then. "And did Byakuya explain 'things' to you yet either Rukia?"

Rukia frowns in confusion, trying to recall anything that could be what Yoruichi is referring to. "Come to think of it, Nii-sama told me that a month before my wedding date with Renji, he was going to set up an appointment with Captain Unohana for some reason, he said it was important but never mentioned what it was though." Both Lieutenants share a puzzled look when they see Karin and Yuzu looking at them with terror in their eyes.

"Shhh, Karin, Yuzu, don't ruin the surprise for them. You two, upstairs with me now." Yoruichi says as she points at the two younger Shinigami. "Akeno, would you care to help me with this?"

"Of course, Yoruichi sensei." The busty young woman stands up and guides the still confused Rukia and Momo upstairs, though she begins sniggering when they see Ichigo and Rias walk by them with a subtle glow on their faces.

Frowning at Akeno's reaction as he comes to stand before his sisters and Yoruichi, Ichigo notices Yuzu's face turning red and hiding her eyes from him, while Karin gets up with a truly scary expression on her face and stops right in front of him. Looking down at his younger sister, he is about to ask what is wrong when her fist reels back and then rockets forward into his gut, forcing him to bend over with a startled cough.

"The hell Karin! What was that for you little…” A clenched fist to his jaw silences the rest of his tirade then.

"First off, that was for making me and Yuzu remember one of the worst days of our lives!” She
yells as she stands over her brother. "And second, that was for being a damn hentai!"

Ichigo rubs his jaw in confusion. "Again, what the hell are you on about!?"

"Goat-Face told us about the facts of life!" She shouts back, and she sees her brother immediately pale and then turn a shade of green.

Rias also pales as she remembers the eccentric head of the Kurosaki family being beaten up by Ichigo over attempting to give his daughters that kind of information. She also remembers the twins revealing that they had already received 'The Talk' from their school, but it seems that the Kurosaki Patriarch wasn't deterred for long. Steadying herself with a deep breath, she winces when Karin again begins yelling at her older sibling.

"Do you know what it's like being forced to know that kind of crap as a female Ichigo!? Not just the stuff they teach us in school, but all the really clinical and gory ass details!? That is what me and Zu suffered when he held us down with Kidō and gave us his 'Real Talk'!'" Looking decidedly green at bringing up those memories, she hits him in his ribs with her foot once more.

"Now what was that for dammit!?!" Ichigo grabs his sister's foot to prevent her from kicking him again.

Glowering darkly at him, his dark-haired sister points downwards towards his belt. "Because your shirt is sticking through your zipper, you don't really need to flaunt it, do you Ichi-nii?"

"Huh? / What?"

The two older teens then look together and see Ichigo's shirt sticking out from the zippered part of his pants; Ichigo earns himself another kick when Karin hears him muttering to himself.

"No wonder why it was so hard..."

Yoruichi pulls the growling Karin away before she can stomp on Ichigo's head with her free foot. "Come on you two, you can help me and Akeno give our two naive Lieutenants the 'Talk'; just think of it as spreading the pain. Oh, and Ichigo, first rule is to always check yourself and your partner's state of dress if you don't want anyone else to know what you two have been doing. Not that it helps when you both release so much power when she and you...well, you get the picture." She laughs at Rias's crimson face and Ichigo's middle finger as she guides the flustered twins upstairs towards Akeno's room.

Once they are gone, the Gremory heiress looks over at the dining room table and finds it empty; the only indications that other people had been there are the spots of red where Issei and Yuuto had been sitting, since Koneko's plate and books are both conspicuously missing.

"Wonder where they went?" Rias wonders as she walks over to her still downed boyfriend.

"Rias."

"Yes Ichigo?"

"Can we go back to our room now? Skip talking to Issei until tomorrow." He groans as he shifts his gaze to his girlfriend then.

Kneeling down, she grabs both his hands and helps him to his feet. "Tomorrow is good enough. I'm hungry though, so let's grab something first and take it back with us."
Standing slowly, he asks Rias why she seems to be taking the topic of childbirth better than his sisters did. The Gremory heiress cups his cheek and honestly answers him while her face gains a wistful look.

"Because my mother and Grayfia told me what to expect when I was old enough to understand and my body started to change. Yes, they told me everything including the pains of intercourse and childbirth, but it was at the end when they said that giving themselves to the one they loved and giving birth to their child were the happiest moments of their lives. I can't wait to experience that someday Ichigo…with you." She kisses him then before breaking away and leading them to the kitchen.

Ichigo is following behind his crimson-haired beauty when they both pause at the sudden and eerily screechy voice of the Squad Five Lieutenant. "Yuzu Naberius, how can you sit there and speak of things like that!?"

"I guess Momo and Rukia really will share in the pain." Ichigo comments as he guides Rias back into walking.

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"Renji, what is the matter?" Byakuya wonders out loud when his Lieutenant shudders uncontrollably.

Looking pale, the red-haired Shinigami speaks to his future brother-in-law. "I think someone just walked over my grave."

XXXX

Monday's walk to school begins interestingly enough after dropping off Yuzu and Karin at their middle school and meeting up with Issei so they can arrive at Kuoh as a group. Issei takes the front with Yuuto, Orihime and Tatsuki walking behind them. Akeno is walking with Momo, her hand over her mouth as she listens to the teasing the two Shinigami are enduring at the hands of the laughing karate champion. Rukia and Koneko walk on either side of them, both sporting blushes at the things that Tatsuki keeps bringing up, while Rias and Ichigo bring up the rear of the group with Chad and Uryū trailing after them.

Tatsuki guffaws once more after barely getting over the fact that two people over a century in age each have never been taught anything about sex, birth-control beyond brothers with sharp pointy swords threatening would be suitors, and what happens when a woman gets pregnant. Chad and Uryū both have the presence of mind to keep their faces neutral looking whenever they see the embarrassed Kuchiki heiress turning around to glare back at them.

"Can you please not laugh Tatsuki? It was bad enough with Yoruichi-san and Akeno telling us, but when Yuzu and Karin started to chip in, that was it for me. I swear if Renji even mentions having children anytime soon, I'm cutting him off for the next century!" Rukia growls out as she rubs her darkened and baggy eyes.

Momo, who is leaning tiredly against Akeno as they walk, mutters out that she seconds that thought, and her eyes are looking equally darkened and baggy from not sleeping too well either. Unlike her fellow Lieutenant, Momo seems far too tired to deal with any ribbing, which inadvertently spares her from the worst of the embarrassment. The Queen of Rias's peerage is barely holding back her own laughter as she lends Momo her arm, though she also questions Momo if she has someone in Soul Society waiting for her.
"Y-yes, sort of. I-I have someone I like, but Shiro-chan doesn't know..." Momo begins to stammer before she pulls herself together. "I think Shiro-chan would have a fit if he knew." She finally admits.

Orihime quips up then and asks who the lucky person is, to which the petite Shinigami blushes a deep red as she answers. "Ah, ah…Orihime…I mean…well…you guys won't tell if I tell you who he is, right?"

"Not like a lot of us plan on going to Soul Society soon Momo, I think your secret is pretty safe with us." Rias giggles as she answers for the rest of the group.

"Well he…he's from your brother's squad Rukia…it…it's Rikichi-kun." The Squad Five Lieutenant tells them with a flushed face.

Rukia's eyes go wide as she turns to look at her friend, a smile growing on her face as she suddenly gets an idea. "I bet Nii-sama would be happy to transfer him to Captain Hirako's squad if you asked your Captain nicely, Momo." She tells her friend enthusiastically.

"Do you think so?" The black-haired Kidō expert wonders out loud.

Rukia begins laughing then. "Come on Momo, I bet if you show up wearing that uniform, he would gladly follow you anywhere."

As Momo begins to imitate a ripe tomato, Ichigo suddenly comes to her defense then. "Don't worry Momo, I'm sure once I show Renji my pictures of Rukia in her uniform, he will be just as bad…owww! Dammit Midget what is your problem!?"

Seeing her violet eyes begin to frost over in contrast to her beet-red face, the orange-haired Devil smirks and flips off his best friend then. "Ha, you so don't want him to see you wearing that! I'm right ain't I Shorty!? Hahaha…now I know what to give Goat-Face if he ever goes back to Soul Society! I'm sure the SMA will love them!"

"You bastard Ichigo! Get back here you asshole!" Rukia takes off after Ichigo as he dashes off, one screaming, the other one laughing hysterically as they run through the gate leading to Kuoh Academy.

Rias takes Koneko's arm and whispers into her ear then. "Don't you even think of getting a boyfriend until University Ko-chan, you already know what's going to happen if Ichigo and the others find out."

"I know Buchou, they're all crazy as bats." The white haired Neko smiles inwardly as she watches the older teens break apart into various groups to escort them to their classes.

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Momo catches up with Rukia and Ichigo as they stand with the rest of the Kendo Club, the two of them going over their schedule for the week leading up to their first tournament. Moaning as she finds out she has the first match, the brown eyed Shinigami looks at the data on her prospective opponent, a teen named Yamano Sato, a two-time champion in her division. Along with her stats, the club's first year manager also had several hours of tapes of her matches for Momo to study, something Ichigo had implemented for them after learning that many professional coaches do the same thing to prepare their teams for competitions.

After thanking the younger woman, Momo left to get to their class early, needing to stop at one of the restrooms so she can drink the medicine that the blind Elfin assassin had started giving her the
moment she woke up back at the Estate after the battle in Hueco Mundo. Swallowing the contents of the bottle, the Shinigami looks at herself in the mirror and adjusts her loosely tied ponytail. She frowns as she sees her bloodshot eyes, barely suppressing the quiver as she remembers vaguely what had happened to her before Sasha saved her life.

She still has flashbacks to that battle in Hueco Mundo, but with the magic that Sasha had weaved into her psyche, she is dealing with the images much better than she had after learning what her former Captain had tried twice to do to her. Tōshirō hadn't left her bedside for weeks after the traumatic battle of the Winter War when she was stabbed by the others believing she was Aizen. Her childhood friend had looked the worse for the wear after she woke up from her brief coma, and she instinctively flinched away from his touch. But once Aizen was dead and his illusions revealed to be false memories in her mind, she had begun to heal mentally after finally learning the truth courtesy of her new Captain, Shinji Hirako, who gave her the complete unredacted facts as to the extent of Aizen's betrayal and the list of crimes they could verify after raiding his secret labs.

During the battle in Hueco Mundo, she had been doing very well until she was blindsided by the Quincy and his power began to work on her mind. She can't help shivering as she remembers those awful visions, but she also remembers seeing those cloudy eyes when she thought she was going to die and the way they brought her back to reality. Sighing, she opens her book bag and takes out the bottle of eye drops she has been using, and uses them to hopefully make the redness in her eyes leave before lunch. After taking one last look at herself in the mirror, she proceeds to leave the restroom and nearly knocks down a taller student who bumps into her just outside, the other person falling down while trying to avoid her anyways.

"Ouch, I'm so sorry." Momo apologizes as she bends down to help the other student get up, but when their hands touch, she groans internally at the power she can sense coming from the young woman.

'Really, really don't need this so early on a Monday.' Her brown eyes gaze into the surprised blue of the teen who is still holding on to her hand.

"Okay, so who are you and what are you, because you're clearly not human?" Momo asks quietly as she hauls the other teen to her feet. "Don't lie because I've had a rough weekend and I don't really want to fight you here and now. So please explain why you are here?"

The blonde-haired young woman blinks in surprise, but she answers her truthfully anyway. "My name is Aphrodite, and I'm here to find someone whose name is Ichigo. You don't know him by any chance, do you?" The Greek goddess asks, slightly stunned that she had been discovered so soon.

"Why are you looking for him?" Momo doesn't recognize Aphrodite's name, but she can feel the headache already starting to form. She thanks the Reiō that Kaidō can be used to cure headaches, otherwise she would be in a seriously bad mood for the rest of the day.

Unaware of her thoughts, the beautiful disguised goddess flips her long hair and states her intentions. "I am here as an offering from my father, Zeus. I am to become Ichigo's bride."

Momo face-palms immediately after that declaration, before looking the other spiritual being over. "So, you are here to die then. Well, good luck to you Aphrodite, or whatever your name is. Fair warning though, if Rias doesn't kill you, then the others probably will. Ichigo's already made his choice and that won't change, so do yourself a favor, go home and give up on whatever you're planning. Trust me, the women in his life...well, let's just say kicking your butt will be the least of your worries."

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Aphrodite smirks challengingly at her. "I am the Goddess of Love; he won't be able to resist me…"

The goddess's smirk drops when the other woman simply rolls her eyes.

"Then like I said, good luck, you're in way over your head." Momo bluntly replies before brushing past the stunned female god.

Walking down the hallway, the brown eyed Shinigami nearly stomps back to her homeroom after turning around the corner, her hand discreetly applying Kaidō to her aching head.

'Are we ever going to get a break?'


The normal students had no idea why their homeroom teacher was in such a foul mood all morning, since none of them could see the white spirit that was glaring at the transfer student who had claimed a seat in the middle front of the classroom, well away from the orange-haired Devil who has his head buried in his arms and muttering to himself about the unfairness of life. The crimson-haired Devil heiress sitting next to him however has started loudly egging on the white Zanpakutō spirit after the human students had left the classroom for their lunch, discreetly prompted by her magic, and she is even giving him suggestions on how to skin and roast the now sweating goddess.

"Did you hear the Queen, oh Goddess of Love? Stick you in an oven, an apple shoved in your mouth and up your…"

"Zangetsu…" Yoruichi cuffs the Zanpakutō spirit in his head. "Time for threats later. As for you, moron, what the hell were you thinking announcing you're his fiancée? You do realize that not one, but three Devils of immense powers are his kin or soon to be kin, and that's not including their peerages? Your dad must be a complete and utter dipshit thinking Ichigo would actually break off his relationship with Rias Gremory just to marry you."

"You tell her Kitty-sensei! Why don't we just tie her up and dump in Hueco Mundo to get the message across quicker!?" Zangetsu seethes out as he slowly begins to change into his Hell Armor form.

"E-Enough! My…my works were said in jest! My father doesn't know I'm here and…and I just wanted to meet him after seeing what he and Orihime did in Greece. Please don't send me away, if my father were to learn of what I just did, after…" Aphrodite pauses and ducks her head to hide her face.

"After you did what?" The purple-haired Goddess of Flash asks curiously.

"... After I promised not to go anywhere near Ichigo until he and my father had met. I'm sure he told you what transpired in my brother's forge." Aphrodite pauses and ducks her head to hide her face.

"After you did what?" The purple-haired Goddess of Flash asks curiously.

"Yes, he did. Now are you going to answer me truthfully? I know you are holding back."

Sliding even further down in her seat, the Greek goddess looks at Yoruichi hesitantly. "I…I thought if I could gain Ichigo's admiration, it would prove useful to my father…and I hoped to…finally find someone I could love. I felt his power and I saw how he looked at his sister, and I wanted that…"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, I say we just seal her then dump her into a Garganta and get this over with Yoruichi Okaa-san! She just admitted to trying to break up the King and Queen, I vote we kick her ass and get rid of her!" Zangetsu growls.
"I agree with Zangetsu." Sōna's admission is surprising to everyone in the room. "We cannot afford any distractions while we prepare for the upcoming matters at hand, namely that special event which Ichigo is preparing for. No need to speak of it in front of her, but to be on the safe side, I think ridding ourselves of her would prove more beneficial to us."

"She's got a point sensei. After this weekend, we really don't need more bullshit with someone else, let Zangetsu open a Garganta under her feet and get it over with." Tatsuki offers nonchalantly.

"You're not serious are you!!?" Going to escape from her desk, Aphrodite finds her body suddenly immobilized after Ichigo binds her with a quick Bakudō.

"No, we are not going to kill you or beat you…hopefully. However, until we hear from your brother what to do with you, you are staying put. Orihime, do you know how long it will take Pistōs to reach Hephaestus in Greece?" Ichigo asks as he sits up and pulls his very angry girlfriend down in his lap.

The perky burnt-orange-haired healer taps her chin once or twice before she answers. "Actually he should be back in a few minutes; I can feel him getting closer Ichigo."

Rubbing his forehead in frustration, he thanks Momo when she performs a quick Kaidō on his head to rid him of his growing headache. "Aphrodite is it?"

Seeing the disguised goddess nod hesitantly, he continues. "They're all right in regards to certain things they said; I do have other things more important to deal with than your mess. Depending on what your brother tells Orihime, I'm willing to let this slide this time; however, if you pull something like this again, I am looking the other way as they deal with you. Between Zangetsu and Rias, I doubt you'll leave here with your skin or your dignity intact."

"Don't say anything stupid please." Rukia speaks up as she notices the indignant look appearing on the disguised goddess's face. "You have no idea of how ugly things can get for you if you say the wrong thing now, and since you aren't supposed to be here, you won't be protected by your faction either."

Pouting, the goddess huffs back at the Japanese death god. "I wasn't going to say anything, Shinigami." She bites down the urge to question what a Shinigami is doing in Isehara in the first place, knowing that she is already on shaky grounds as it is.

A few minutes of waiting later, Pistōs mechanical wings sound out loudly in the room as the owl flaps in furiously through the open window before settling on his mistress's shoulder. The bird leans forward and the two begin to speak to each other in a way that no one else can understand. Orihime begins giggling when the bird leans away, his golden eyelids blinking once as it looks right at the disguised deity, then Orihime folds her arms and nods once, and a light flares from one jeweled eye, turning into a translucent figure that forms out of nowhere.

"Hello Sister." Aphrodite stiffens at the visage of her older sibling's projection. "Before you plead ignorance or something else similar, know that I have already spoken to our…very upset father."

The Goddess of Love pales even more as the Greek god's projection continues to speak. "As such, he has decided you will remain in Japan until he sees fit to recall you home. A condition of your temporary exile is that you are to be remanded to the current rulers of Isehara, namely the Gremory, Sitri and Naberius Clans of the Underworld. In short, Sister, you belong to them for the time being. Now for the best part, your magic is being monitored; you are only allowed to use it in defense of your life and in defense of those who will now hold sway over your actions, namely one Orihime Shiba Naberius. She is now…your superior, your guide in what you can say it means to be
a modern-day woman. I wish I could see your face right now, but I'm sure you understand that this is for your own good, since you know how Father can get. Until your return my dearest Sister, behave yourself, punishment is theirs to decide if you prove to be an unruly child."

The light fades, as does the image of a boisterously laughing Hephaestus. Orihime is standing there with her mouth wide open, as is the rest of the room, but none more so then Aphrodite herself.

Breaking out into a grin, Zangetsu turns to look at Orihime with laughter in his eyes.

"So, Sis, what shall we do to her first?"

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Issei just wants to snap and slug both the idiots on either side of him right now; the moment they sat down for lunch, the two hadn't stopped once from bitching at him for ditching them over the weekend again. Eating his meal in silence, the young Pawn is trying to think about what had happened to him during the battle, and what he could have done better. The battle had been far worse than he had watched on television: hot, noisy, dusty, confusing and worst of all, bloody. It was also exhausting, nerve-wracking and soul-crushing.

All he had done was stand by Buchou and Himejima-senpai, a useless lump of meat serving as a weak shield, until that voice had spoken to him and gave him the power to help them at the end. Since then, the voice hadn't spoken to him even once, but he can still remember every word that was said. Looking at his left fist as he flexes it, he also remembers his Senpai's and Sensei's words to him the day before the battle: that he held a great power, but how to unlock it was up to him to discover.

That is what he had decided on when he woke up back at the Naberius Estate, discovering that he had passed out and the battle was now over. He had decided to unlock his power and make a difference in the world, to keep his allies as safe as he could, the graves of the Elves and Hell Hounds further motivating his decision. He had only fainted due to exhaustion, the Devil doctor had told him that in time his energy would increase, but he has to work on building his stamina anyway, something that he has every intention of doing so.

"Oi! Are you even listening to us Issei!?” Matsuda suddenly yells into his ear.

Whether by reflex or by annoyance, it doesn't matter at that point, but the brown-haired Sacred Gear wielder discovers he had just punched his bald-headed friend in the face without any hesitation whatsoever. Getting up and seeing Matsuda scrambling away with blood flowing from his busted lip, along with the look of terror on his glasses-wearing friend Motohama, Issei belatedly realizes that he wants to get away from it all.

"Sorry." He leaves everything behind, his coat and book bag as well as his unfinished lunch. He doesn't think about anything as he walks out the gate and down the nearest sidewalk, he keeps on going until he finds himself alone at an isolated park. Moving to the playground and picking a swing, he sits down in it and stares forlornly at the ground in front of him.

"Issei-kun?” His eyes lever up when he hears a familiar, very concerned voice.

Staring at him from a few feet away is the young blonde woman from the day before, her hands folded in front of her as her green eyes study him with obvious worry. Standing up quickly, he rubs his hair back and gives a short awkward bow to the teenaged nun.

"Ah…sorry I didn't see you there Asia-san."
She giggles with relief as she starts walking towards him. "Just Asia is fine Issei-kun. I'm surprised to find you out here; don't you have school today?"

Frowning, he motions to the empty swing beside him as he sits down once again. "Yeah, I do, but I had to leave. Got into… I hit one of my best friends today."

"Why?" She grips the chains of the swing and gently sits down before kicking forward some. "If you don't mind me asking, but is there something troubling you that made you do that?"

Gripping the chains of his own swing, Issei kicks forward as well. "I saw things this weekend that I don't think I was ready for. Terrible things. People got hurt and I felt useless, I couldn't do anything for them. So, when my friend yelled at me for a stupid reason, I guess... I just lost it and hit him."

"Can you tell me what you saw? Maybe I can help." She offers him kindly.

Looking sideways and seeing the cross on her garments, Issei wants to say no, but his mouth has other ideas and with a highly edited version of the story, he tells her everything. For the full twenty minutes he speaks, she doesn't say a word, just swings quietly beside him and listens to his story until he has finished.

"I don't think you were useless Issei-kun, just scared." She finally tells him.

"Yeah, that I know, but…"

"But you stood by them until it counted, right? Your friends made it out of their situation thanks to you, so despite your own fear, you stood your ground, and that made all the difference. Some would call you a hero for that, Issei-kun."

Before he can say anything, a new voice speaks up. "She's right you know Issei. I should know, I was there watching, and I was also once where you were." Rukia says as she approaches the two startled teens with her footsteps barely any sound.

"Shiba-senpai?" Issei says as he stands up in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

She shakes her head at him. "Keeping you safe of course. Despite your various habits, none of us want you hurt you know?" Rukia then turns to the wide-eyed nun who is watching them. "You must be Asia Argento? I'm one of Issei's senpai at Kuoh Academy; it's nice to meet you." The violet-eyed Shinigami remarks with a smile.

Bowing politely towards the older teen, Asia smiles as well when she speaks. "Nice to meet you too Shiba-san. I'm not sure what happened to Issei, but he is a hero I believe."

Blushing at her open praise, Issei sees the Shinigami glancing at him before looking over the young blonde-haired girl with a twitch forming on her lips. "A few of us believe so as well Asia-san. Issei, you need to return, Ichigo and Rias took care of things for you, and no you aren't in any trouble except for having to do extra chores for the week with the Kendo Club. Asia-san, Issei still has things to take care of, so if you can, please excuse our departure."

The blonde-haired nun shakes her head while getting up. "Oh, not at all, I have to go back as well. Thank you for this chat Shiba-san, it was nice meeting you and Issei-kun."

Bowing to the black-haired woman, the younger teen begins to walk away, but she pauses a short distance away and turns to look back at Issei.

"I hope we can spend the day together again Issei-kun, I would like to make a friend here." She
waves goodbye to him.

"That'd be nice Asia-chan, I'd like that too." He waves back to her as she walks around a corner. Feeling the weight on his shoulders lessen significantly after his chat with Asia, he looks around for Rukia, only to see the petite woman already walking away, and he rushes to keep up until he is walking side by side with her.

"Shiba-senpai…"

She holds up a hand to quiet him. "Look Issei-kun, it's none of my business who you're friends with, just…just stay safe okay? Trust me Issei, I know what you feel, and I have seen former enemies become the greatest of friends and allies. Who do you think most of Ichigo's future peerage really are?"

"I thought he was friends with them?" The confusion clearly shows on Issei's face, because Rukia snorts at him in amusement.

"Grimmjow, Nelliel, Tia and all the Fracción, they all used to serve the man that Ichigo killed during our civil war. Most of Ichigo's peerage is now composed of those former Espada and Números that Aizen created to invade Soul Society, with Grimmjow especially having tried to kill both Ichigo and myself more than once. Even before them, my own brother Byakuya nearly killed Ichigo the first time they met, and you should know by now that most of his friends in Soul Society, minus a few Captains, had once tried to kill Ichigo at one point or another. Yet, Ichigo not only survived and beat them, but also ended up befriending most of them. That is why Ichigo is asking Rias to cut you some slack on this; he wants you to build a friendship with Asia if you can, even if your faction opposes hers."

Just like Ichigo, the young Pawn speaks without thinking, and with barely contained fury at that. "Why!? So, I can betray her later on!?"

'SMACK!'

Holding his throbbing cheek, Issei stares at the violet eyes of the short-tempered woman, her own fury barely being contained within them. "No, you imbecile! Have you heard nothing that I said!? Ichigo believes you can become actual friends with Asia, even if a worst-case scenario forces you in conflict with her and the 'Fallen Ones' again! He is tired of seeing blood flow, so if he can avoid spilling it, he'd rather do so; if you can gain her trust, we will have a means to speak peacefully with the Fallen Angels if they are prepared to, and even if they refuse, it is still one less person we might have to fight, and we can even try to get her out before we have to take things a step further!"

Seeing him about to open his mouth, she stops him from speaking. "Don't Issei, just listen. I am sorry for hitting you, and I was wrong for acting so harshly when you thought someone wanted you to hurt your friend, but I still think you should have known better after what I told you earlier. Ichigo is my best friend; in the very short time I've known him, his loyalty to his family and friends, regardless of who they used to be has never been questioned, so hearing you accuse him of that made me snap too. Again, I'm sorry and I apologize, but Ichigo is someone who has literally died to protect his friends, especially me and Orihime, so there is no way he will ask you to do something as despicable as betraying your friend."

Healing his bruised cheek with Kaidō, she looks the young Pawn in his eyes. "You two didn't get off on the right foot, but he heard what you did in Hueco Mundo and he was glad you were there to help Rias and Akeno. He may not like your perverted habits, but he now counts you among the close circle of friends he will protect with his life Issei, and he will go to ends of the world to protect you. Just don't get yourself caught by him staring at those things for too long otherwise it
will only make your training sessions that much more miserable."

Issei pales as he remembers his current training regimen; he is already going to ask them to make him even stronger so he can help more, be someone they can count on, and he doesn't want to imagine what Ichigo will do if he decides to punish him for his habits again. Touching his cheek, he feels no more pain coming from the slap, and he makes his own apology then.

"Shiba-senpai, I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have reacted so defensively about it, but... I feel that Asia-san is someone I want to protect. I...don't know Ichigo-senpai as well as you and the others do, but all my life I've never really...had people looking out for me like that, and the way he used to treat me...It makes me a bit distrustful to be honest, and it's been worse since...that night. Getting betrayed like that...I'm having a hard time believing that people actually care for me and not expect them to stab me in the back at some point."

Rukia frowns inwardly. She had suspected it for a while, but Issei's words just confirmed that he still has trauma over his death at the Fallen Angel's hands. "Yeah, a lot of us were caught off guard that night too. Come on Issei, we should get back before we miss practice." Rukia turns and begins to walk away.

Looking one last time where the young nun had gone, Issei begins to walk faster to catch up to Rukia. "Shiba-senpai, back there you said something about being once where I was, what did you mean by that?" He asks her curiously.

Looking at the sky, Rukia finally tilts her head towards the Gremory Pawn. "Did you know Ichigo once had a cousin named Kaien?"

"No, he never mentioned him. Why?" Issei then sees a tear form in her eye, but she wipes it away quickly.

"We have a ways to walk, time enough to tell you everything so you can understand..."

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Ichigo and Momo both look over to see Rukia and Issei walking into the gym, the young man barely juggling the tall load of towels in his hands. The Captain of the team calls for a break and Issei begins to hand out towels to the sweaty members of the club, who take them from him with wary thanks. The three Shinigami however gather together along with Tomoe, watching as the rest of the club relax for a few minutes before they have to resume training for their first match of the season.

"So where did you find him at Rukia?" Ichigo asks her quietly.

Glancing at the younger brown-haired teen, she smiles sadly. "With his new friend at a park. He really likes her from what I can see, he is very protective of her and she is younger than him by at least a year. She's also very pretty, blonde with green eyes; Harribel-san could be an older sister to her if her skin wasn't quite so tan."

Tomoe watches as some of the kendo club members begin talking to Issei, a laugh is heard as he sheepishly looks down when someone asks him why he is helping them. "Do you think they could be setting him up with an ambush like before, Rukia-san?"

"If they are, she's not part of it. She...she's too innocent. Don't ask me how I know, but I swear you can practically smell innocence on her. It's rather surprising considering the rest of her faction, but I'm willing to bet if she's ever hurt anyone or anything, it was purely by accident." The Shinigami
Lieutenant says quietly.

"Nia's been watching her all day, the girl was visiting a local thrift shop and wandering around town earlier, it was pure coincidence that she encountered Issei at all. There's really no way she could have known he was there, it was only chance that he left school and picked the one park that was on her route back to the abandoned church." Ichigo reports to them.

Momo adjusts her bokken as she surreptitiously keeps an eye on Issei. "Still, shouldn't we keep a closer eye on him Ichigo? I can take first watch, make sure there are no more chance encounters with her..."

Rukia holds up her hand to stop Momo from continuing. "Ichigo said it best; Issei needs to grow, and he won't grow if we keep treating him like a child. Nia, Kimi and the other Elves watching from a distance is fair enough at this time, any one of them can call us if things get out of hand. Leave it them to observe him for the time being, and just let this play out. If this is indeed a trap or a first move from the 'Fallen Ones', we won't be the ones to start it, it will be them." She smirks at Ichigo then. "Besides, she may turn out to be a true friend to Issei, like the ones you have made Ichigo."

Ichigo just shakes his head in wry acceptance and looks to see Issei handing out water bottles now. "Rukia's right, he does need to learn on his own, and if this is a first move, let them make it first, we'll just finish it." He pauses however, and his eyes glint dangerously. "If this friend does betray him like that Fallen Angel did to him though, I'll settle it with her myself."

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Tapping his cane on the wooden floor, Head Captain Yamamoto begins the Captain's meeting.

"Report, Captain Kurotsuchi."

The demented Captain of Squad Twelve steps out of his position and bows slightly to the oldest Shinigami in the room before he begins his report for the other assembled Captains to hear.

"As we know, a large-scale battle took place in Hueco Mundo a little more than three days ago. My team was able to bring back a few specimens and from the examinations of those bodies, we have concluded that they are indeed a different breed of Quincy from the ones we know of. Furthermore, we have pieced together the remains of one body of a race we have never encountered before, and while this race is humanoid in shape and appearance, it clearly isn't human upon further examination. This being's life span was easily over six hundred years or more, and while her basic physiology is similar to humans, we have determined that her senses and physical attributes were highly advanced in comparison. Hearing, vision, smell and physical strength were of a higher degree than most humans."

The Squad Five Captain however grows impatient at this point. "Enough of that. Wad' about the Quincy?"

Glaring at the Vizard, Mayuri narrows his eyes. "As I was about to say, they were not normal Quincy. In fact, I don't believe they were completely human anymore. We believe they have been living in a high Reishi environment for the last several decades or more from the concentrations of Reishi we found in their bodies. We are still studying the artifacts found on many of the bodies, but so far, we have been unable to make them work. Perhaps if we use one of the two Quincy we do know of..."

"To do what exactly? We know for certain that Isshin, Kisuke and Tessai would object vehemently
after what we did to Ichigo and now you suggest we kidnap his friend or worse, his friend's father?" Jūshirō Ukitake cuts in, reminding them that they aren't going to be welcomed with open arms after the decision that was handed down concerning Isshin Shiba's oldest child.

"If the power that was recorded in these new Quincy are correct, I believe we should be thanking the Devils instead. My own belief is that these Quincy would have been a grave threat to Soul Society and as such, we should be thankful the Devils took care of them for us. As for the Quincy in Karakura, Captain Suì-Fēng has already reported that Ryūken Ishida was at his hospital and the younger Ishida, along with a number of Ichigo's friends have transferred to a private school to get away from...well, to get away from us." The long white-haired Captain grimaces then.

"I do not fault any of them for not trusting us any further, as we have proven beyond a doubt that we cannot be trusted." The Captain of Squad Thirteen finishes unhappily as he looks at his sensei, Head Captain Yamamoto.

Murmurs and one or two objections are clearly spoken then, the Head Captain watching to see which of his officers agree with his student. Among those clearly on Jūshirō's side is his other student Shunsui Kyōraku, as well as Captains Kuchiki, Hitsugaya, the three Vizards, and surprisingly Captain Suì-Fēng. Captain Kenpachi isn't in attendance, and the one he thought would say something hadn't as of yet. Looking into the serene eyes of his oldest student Retsu Unohana, he can see that she is troubled by the facts and implications coming from the words spoken by the Captain of Squad Thirteen. After some deliberation, she finally makes her move.

Taking one step forward, everyone quickly quiets down in respect for the elder Captain as she looks around the room. Clearing her throat, Retsu looks down at the floor when she begins to speak.

"While I agree these discoveries bring to light the fact that we have been in the dark for far too long concerning these Quincy, I also believe we have a chance to gain a better picture of what is really going on in the human world. Lieutenants Kuchiki and Hinamori should be ordered to return at the end of the week and make a full report before a complete Captain's meeting. Isehara holds secrets, and if two Lieutenants as experienced as them have yet to uncover any, perhaps we should see if someone has altered their memories enough to blind them."

Byakuya's façade almost drops along with Ukitake, Kyōraku, Suì-Fēng and Hirako; all five thankfully keep their faces as neutral as possible. However, it is a new voice, a voice that brings Byakuya's blood to boil that speaks up next as she steps out from behind the aged Head Captain.

"I believe that would be best. Central Forty-Six has many things they wish to ask as well." Chiyoko Shihōin says as she smirks at the head of the Kuchiki Clan.

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Issei is frantic, the blood soaking the walls is everywhere he looks, and the bastard that just casually claimed he killed, no, murdered the human occupant of this house is still gloating about how much he loved taking the filthy sinner's life, his 'passion' as he called it.

"You...you call this...a passion?" The Pawn feels the urge to vomit then.

Freed Sellzen laughs insanely at him. "Fuck yeah! I'll kill 'em all! Yōkai, humans, dirty shitty Devils, even those fucking holier than thou Angels if I can ambush one! All of 'em deserve to die! As for you, you little piece of shit, you're next!"

Issei easily dodges the light bullet from the gun the deranged Exorcist is using, his weeks spent...
training under Yoruichi serving him in good stead. Kicking a table at the white-haired human, the Pawn tries to get closer, but is once again forced back by a few rounds from the gun.

"Ahahahaha! Die asshole!" Freed screams out as he starts to fire his gun in rapid succession.

Diving behind a couch, Issei sees a shattered lamp next to his head. Without giving it much thought, he picks it up and rushes forward once again, throwing the lamp at Freed at the last second; the Exorcist shoots automatically at the lamp, giving Issei the break he needs and allows him to grab both of Freed's wrists. Head butting the Exorcist viciously but holding on to his arms, Issei is getting ready to knee the man where it counts when a familiar voice breaks his concentration.

"ISSEI-KUN! FREED-SAN! What…what is going on!?" Asia screams as she enters the ruined and bloody room with her hands covering her mouth.

"Asia-chan?" The Pawn's horrified face reflects his disbelief that she is here at all.

Taking advantage of Issei's shock, the excommunicated Exorcist uses the younger teen's broken concentration to wrench both of his wrists free, drawing and driving a sword of light into the brown-haired Devil's thigh before bringing up his gun and firing point-blank at the young Devil's heart. He watches with triumph as the Devil flies backwards and over the tossed couch, before turning to glare at the terrified nun, then he walks up to Asia and backhands her violently.

"You little bitch; I thought I told you to set up the barriers! Now I have little time to torture him if he's still alive! Fuck! You're mine when we go back; I'm going to enjoy tasting your flesh for your first and last-time bitch!" He slaps the blonde again before knocking her out with a punch.

Before he can turn back to deal with the Devil, he is hit by a red-armored fist that crunches into his jaw and sends him flying. "I'll kill you!" Issei rages as he stumbles on his injured leg towards his fallen opponent, a murderous look in his eyes.

Spitting out blood, the crazed Exorcist rises again only to freeze when a glowing circle begins to form near them.

"Looks like I'll have to kill you later fucker!" He jumps over the couch and grabs the unconscious blonde nun before making a dash out of the room, firing his weapon wildly at Issei as he does.

"Issei-kun!" Rias cries out at seeing the blood-painted room and her Pawn staggering towards the doorway with a gaping wound in his leg, the sword having pierced his femoral, with only the poisonous blade stopping a majority of the bleeding from escaping.

"Asia! Asia!" Issei screams at the top of his lungs before he collapses, his hands still reaching towards the open doorway as tears leak from his eyes.

Akeno scans the room in disgust as she uses her magic to identify the poor murdered victim, before beginning to remove the evidence of the horrific crime. Koneko and Yuuto are both holding on to their unconscious fellow peerage member as they see Rias clenching her fist in extreme anger.

"This will not go unpunished." Giving a nod, Yuuto and Koneko return to the mansion with Issei through a magic circle; Rias kicks a piece of ruined furniture in frustration before she begins to help her Queen in restoring the slain girl's home.

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Sasha and Harumi hurry into the dining room upon Yuuto and Koneko's return to the mansion,
Issei's prone body lying on the dinner table as Orihime's shield repairs the damage done to his leg and body. The blind Elf looks at the still healing wound on his leg, grimacing as she informs the young healer of the cause of his wound.

"Light? How is that deadly?" Tatsuki asks as she sits out of the way watching them work.

The head of the Gremory staff explains that Devils are most susceptible to weapons that the Angels had originally used to fight them; that Holy light is a purifier for their ancient foes to combat the darkness that dwells within all Devils.

"Even us?" Yuzu asks as she stands next to Orihime as her assistant.

"Not you, nor your twin sister or older brother, though we haven't tested the others as of yet Lady Yuzu. Ichigo has already demonstrated a very incredible resistance to their weapons, not a complete immunity, but in battle he would have a decisive advantage over any Fallen Angel or Angel who rely on the natural weakness of Devils to Light magic. Perhaps it is because each of you uses Reïatsu in conjunction with your magic, that you may each have as much resistance to Light magic as Ichigo does."

Yuuto and Koneko look at the others of Ichigo's peerage, both of them thinking the same thing. An advantage like that could and would turn the tide against their enemies if it ever came to war. Ichigo himself, according to Urahara can defeat most Captain-class Shinigami by now, and he is only growing stronger as his magic develops further. Yuzu and Karin both have their Hell Chains and possibly their Hell Armor as well as a Zanpakutō spirit, and just like their brother, they can also use magic now. The first three Devils born that cross the bridges of so many spiritual and magical bloodlines, their very existence makes the Naberius Clan one to be feared as well as respected once again.

But it is Ichigo's peerage that further tips the scale in the Clan's favor, as three former Espada and five Números of decent strength have only just added their power to an already powerful assembly of peerage members. A Quincy who has just agreed to become a Pawn, and an as of yet unidentified Bishop only increases the power and flexibility he has at his disposal, all of them having battle experience along with the two former humans and one who did very well during her first time in battle. He would have had more, but Nelliel's two Fracción had disappeared during the battle and their two Evil Pieces that had once been active, now lay dormant.

The young Nekomata leans towards her fellow peerage member and whispers to him. "Where is Ichigo-nii?"

"In the Underworld seeking an audience with the Maou. I think he's had enough." Yuuto remembers the blaze in his Senpai's eyes after he and Rias had a brief but heated argument before their peerage went to Issei's rescue.

Ichigo had wanted to go as well, but Rias forbade him from joining her, reminding him that Isehara was still under the control of the Gremory Clan and Issei was her Pawn, not his. The orange-haired Devil shot back that he didn't care, if there was trouble, he wanted to go. It was only when both Yoruichi and Merti intervened and told the Gremory heiress to go, that Ichigo reluctantly backed down. The glare he sent Rias though said that it wasn't over, and if he is in the Underworld seeking an audience with the Maou, then he is going to make it his business soon.

The white-haired Rook watches the orange shield disappear, leaving a semi-conscious Issei mumbling about not leaving 'her' behind. She watches as Chad approaches with instructions by Orihime to take him to a spare room to rest, and only after her fellow Rook carries away the unconscious Pawn, does she finally move from her spot and make her way over to the older teens
belong to Ichigo's peerage. Yuzu is showing signs of distress, while Karin sits next to her, hugging her younger sister and telling her everything is going to be okay. Tatsuki and Uryū go with the two Naberius Knights into the kitchen to make Orihime and the others something to eat; dinner hadn't yet been prepared when the Gremory peerage took off to rescue Issei.

A familiar surge in power announces the return of her King and Queen, Akeno bypassing everyone and heading straight to the upper floors, saying she'd be back after taking a hot bath. Her mistress though has a smoldering fire in her eyes when she sees that the dining room table still has a spot of blood on it, having escaped the burnt-orange-haired healer's notice.

"Where is he Koneko?" Rias almost demands when she does not see her boyfriend waiting for her in the room.

Koneko hesitates, and Sasha answers for her thankfully. "Ichigo is in the Underworld Lady Rias. He has gone to seek an audience with Lucifer Maou."

"He went to see my brother!? Why!?" Now Koneko feels sorry for her Onii-san when he returns.

Sasha doesn't bat a blind eye at the Gremory heiress's temper. "He is doing what he has always done Lady Rias: he is going to protect Isehara the only way he knows how. When he returns, you and he will need to discuss this. He isn't a Devil of noble blood, brought up with the pride of a Devil; he is a Devil of noble blood that reacts with a human heart, it is what makes him unique, even among the Shinigami. We keep forgetting that he wasn't raised like us; he was raised, and still acts human. So the murder of an innocent and the attack on one of us is going to make him seek the only path he knows, vengeance for both of them."

"She's right Rias, Ichigo will never let this go now. To kill a human in his eyes is simply a declaration of war. He is going to fight, and the only thing you need to decide now is this; will you fight with him, or stand aside? I know I will fight, as will Momo and all the members of his peerage. Even Yoruichi and Kisuke have a limit as to what they will allow." The Kuchiki heiress says as she and Momo join the others at the table.

"But... this will bring a war we aren't ready for." The Gremory heiress weakly protests.

"And when will we ever be ready for war?" Momo smiles sadly at the young heiress as she asks her that question. "We Shinigami are always in battle Rias-san, this is no different to us: we see an enemy that is killing humans for nothing more than pleasure, and we will exterminate him and those who support him to keep the balance and prevent the Gotei from coming here. To do any less than that is to show our weakness and to invite in worse enemies."

Seeing the look of distress on Rias's face, Sasha looks to the younger men and women in the room and informs them solemnly. "War has already been brewing for some time. Yasaka spoke of it to Ichigo and Lord Amyntas when they were in Kyoto. This may only be the beginning."

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Six of the Underworld's most powerful Devils each release a long breath when their staff and three members of the Naberius Clan leave the meeting room. Amyntas pulls out a pewter flask and takes a swig from it before passing it to Falbium next. Sirzechs grabs the flask and takes a long swallow, before passing it to Serafall, who frowns and passes it on to Ajuka instead.

"Well Ajuka, what do you think of Ichigo now?" The crimson-haired Maou asks tiredly.

Rolling his fingertips along his chair, the Beelzebub motions towards the door the younger Devil
had left through. "I think everyone's assertions of his power are grossly underrated. You each felt the power he was unconsciously leaking, the killing intent alone drove a few of our senior staff to leave with short breaths. Thankfully that rage now has a target."

'One that isn't us.' He leaves it unsaid.

Grayfia speaks up next. "And what of the Fallen Angels, do you have a plan on how to deal with them?" She meets each of their gazes evenly. "We are all aware of their activities within Isehara, but the fact remains that the Gremory Clan is the one in control of the area. Will we set a precedent in allowing an external party to override the decision making of the owner?"

Serafall sighs then before speaking. "Sirzechs made it clear to Ichigo; he must speak to Rias before he is allowed to do anything. I doubt she will stop him a second time, Grayfia."

"Lord Amyntas, will he listen?" Ajuka asks of the current Naberius Clan head.

Shaking his head, Amyntas laughs slightly. "Maybe not at first, but in the end she will prevail. You know this well Lucifer Maou, for a good man…"

"Always has a better woman behind him." Sirzechs finishes as he pats the hand of his silver-haired wife beside him.

Falbium sighs and massages the bridge of his nose tiredly. "I only hope he listens, otherwise the fallout is going to be... troublesome."

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Ichigo and Zangetsu clash blades as each tries to kill the other in their battle. The white copy knows his wielder needs this; it goes against both their natures to stand aside and let the innocents pay the price, especially when it involves politics. Not hesitating, the Zanpakutō spirit fires off a Cero from his helm and sees Ichigo deflect the destructive orb straight into the air.

Riding the shockwave from the explosion, Zangetsu uses Sonído to get behind Ichigo and brings his weapon down, cutting through the back of his wielder straight through the spinal column. Pausing for a second at the unexpected success of his attack, his eyes go wide when he sees no blood appearing.

"What the... Shit!" He dives out of the way as a Cero smashes through the speed clone's afterimage.

Glaring at the crater that now occupies his previous spot, Zangetsu looks up and gives the orange-haired Devil the middle finger.

"Bite me Zangetsu." Ichigo calls back. Both smile at each other once again and disappear into the next series of clashes.

Far behind them, a blonde-haired Espada watches the two warriors sparring ruthlessly with one another, while sitting on an outcropping nearby are Yoruichi and Merti, both of them deep in conversation. Behind the Espada are the remaining Números from Aizen's rule, the five younger women watching in rapt astonishment at the speed and power they are witnessing from not only the orange-haired Devil, but also his white-bodied counterpart.

"Harribel-sama, is it normal that a Zanpakutō spirit should exude such power?" Menoly asks as she grimaces at the Bala that hits the black armor dead center, smoke billowing from the blast but not doing much else.
"I do not believe so Menoly. From the little Gin or Kaname told us, only those who obtain Bankai can bring their Zanpakutō's spirit into the material world. Yet it seems Zangetsu can materialize of his own free will whenever he wishes." Tia remarks as she and the others watch dual Getsuga Tenshō crashing into each other and canceling each other out.

Francesca Mila Rose, who is using Apacci to lean forward, jerks a thumb at the two warring clones. "Anyone know why they are going at it so violently? It reminds me of Grimmjow and his old Fracción when they fought back then."

Cyan Sung-Sun glances at the Shinigami and Elfin Devil who are still in deep conversation, and she utters quietly to the others. "I overheard that Ichigo must yield a contested decision to his mate, Rias Gremory. The place they live in is under her family's control, and Ichigo's Clan are only there as guests. A human was recently slain by something called an Exorcist; Ichigo wants to remove him and others called Fallen Angels who are apparently supporting the Exorcist, but the Gremory Clan has yet to make a solid decision, much to his consternation."

"You mean he's pissed they won't let him kill the bastard." Apacci finally huffs out, doing her best to ignore the weight on her shoulders. "Don't blame him though, weren't they the ones that tried to kill him and that hentai a few weeks ago?"

Tia nods her head as a Gran Ray Cero rockets across the training dimension and destroys a distant hill with a thunderous explosion. "I believe that is part of the reason why he is here. The other reason is that he had a fight with his mate, so he…"

"He's sulking, is what he's doing." Yoruichi says as she and Merti finally join their conversation.

Each of the women wince as they see Zangetsu slamming Ichigo into yet another hillside and firing a Shakkahō right at his head, the dust clearing to show Ichigo's own Cero charged and firing right back at him.

"He is young Yoruichi; he has yet to have a true fight with Rias over anything. They are both passionate about their views, however we can't have them fighting over this. If you have no objections?" Merti asks her fellow Assassin.

Waving her hand, the mother-like figures gives her blessing. "I already stated my opinion on this Merti: I will heed the Maou for now, but one more murder and not even I and Kisuke together are going to be able to stop him. Or the others. Or even want to."

Nodding in acceptance, Merti walks towards the two warriors that stop their battle when they notice her approaching, each allowing their armor to disappear. She waves for them to join her, and soon the three of them are sitting together and discussing something. The six women can see Zangetsu get up during the private conversation and wave his hands violently towards his wielder, who just smacks his thighs with his hands, obviously angry over what is being talked about. Merti then motions towards the white spirit and he sits, reluctantly, but he does sit. For over ten minutes, the three just sit and speak quietly. Tia, Yoruichi and the Números watch as the three finally stand and Zangetsu fades away; what surprises even the female assassin is her 'son' hugging the Elf for a minute however. A shout sounds out as he jumps back, and Merti's laughter drifts towards them. They then watch as the young Devil lord and his Head of Household walk back together, a slightly less angry looking Ichigo greeting his adoptive mother with a brief hug and kiss to the cheek.

"Yoruichi Okaa-san."

"Ichigo Musuko-san. Feeling better you two?"
Rubbing the back of his head sheepishly, he nods to her. "Yeah, until we go home. Merti informed me that Rias is none too pleased that I came to see her brother without telling her. Zangetsu wants no part of her if she's going to be in foul mood, the chicken-shit bastard."

Everyone sees a slight wincing of his eyes, followed up by him rolling his eyes. "So…we're going home now." He finishes lamely.

Turning to look at the tall tanned blonde standing next to his mentor and the females behind her, he gives each of them a nod. "Tia, have you and the others talked about it yet?"

The former Tercera looks behind her and sees each of the Números nodding their heads in assent; seeing a consensus, she gives him their answer. "We look forward to becoming a part of your peerage Ichigo, and they have each decided to remove their mask fragments as well. I believe you have already spoken to Grimmjow and Nelliel about this."

Ichigo winces. "Grimmjow yes, Nelliel…not yet. She's still…she's still mourning the loss of her brothers, so I'll let him talk to her when she's ready." They all see the brief self-hatred in his eyes, the loss of Nelliel's former Fracción is a failure he feels responsible for, even if he doesn't say it.

"They are free Ichigo, hopefully in Soul Society or the Cycle of Life; they no longer suffer under the Quincy, nor do they have to wander the deserts alone. We will be there for her if she needs us." The future Queen of his peerage remarks to him solemnly.

"...Then this Wednesday we will return and reincarnate you guys. I'm sorry for not staying, but I have someone I need to see."

A few minutes later, some very unique suggestions from the five Números has a blushing and flustered Ichigo hurriedly creating a magic circle to take himself home, leaving Yoruichi and Merti behind. Walking to the exit of the training room, Tia inquires why the two of them didn't leave with Ichigo, and the werecat just smirks as she smiles at the blonde.

"Merti and I have a bit of thieving to do and a package to bring back. You might like to watch tomorrow when we come back; just have one of Amyntas's peerage bring you all to the mansion around midnight."

Loly, unaware of whom or what Yoruichi is, asks what she means by 'thieving', and the answer surprises even Tia when Yoruichi begins grinning madly.

"Gonna teach someone a very valuable lesson as to why I'm the Goddess of Flash and why her branch of the family was passed over for a good reason."

AXXX

Everyone is asleep by the time Ichigo walks in through the front door, needing some time to himself and to rid himself of the images brought about by the five female Arrancars, images he actually finds much to his liking, even if he only admits it to himself in private. He had also wanted to walk by the house where the young teen girl had been murdered. He can smell blood still lingering in the air, though it is very faint, and he and Zangetsu both snarl in muted rage at what that bastard had done. Nia had caught up to them as they waited to see the four Maou, which was most likely due to them summoning both his great-grandfather and Grayfia, and she had informed him of what they had found in the murdered teen's house. That had set off the hour-long argument between himself and Yoruichi with the most dominant Devils of the Underworld. Although he failed to get permission to act on his own pre-emptively, he had at least gotten a compromise from them, that he would be allowed to act if he felt another human was in imminent danger, but he had
to have definitive proof before acting.

'Yeah right, I'm not waiting.' He thinks to himself as he makes his way up the dark staircase.

Spreading his senses throughout the household, he accounts for everyone except for Yoruichi and Merti; they had other business to attend to, or so his 'mother' had said. Nothing he really wants to know after seeing her grin, though he feels safer knowing that Merti is going along with her; what trouble can two highly trained…

"Who'd ya kidding Ichigo? The two of them doing something on the sly doesn't bode well for someone or somewhere. Just hope it doesn't come to bite them or you in the ass later."

Zangetsu grumbles.

Snorting, he silently agrees with his partner as he cracks open his bedroom door and hears Rias's soft, but steady breathing. Gliding to his closet like a ghost, he grabs some sweats and a t-shirt and moves to leave their room, when the light suddenly turns on. Twisting slowly, he sees Rias beginning to sit up, her face showing him nothing of what she is thinking or worse, feeling. Seeing her look pointedly at his hands, she then looks back up and points silently to their bathroom.

“How does she always know!?"

'I don't know but it's a terrifying ability!'

"I'll be there in a few minutes Ichigo." Knowing it is not a suggestion, he nods slowly and makes his way to the door, all the while aware of her eyes following his every move.

Tossing his clothes into the hamper, Ichigo grabs two stools and gets the bath ready; standing by the porcelain tub, he lets the water get hot before stopping up the drain and fills it. Turning around, he sees his naked girlfriend already waiting on her stool, and taking a deep breath, he makes his way over and instead of turning his back to her, he sits down facing her.

The two Devils sit facing each other for an undetermined amount of time before Ichigo breaks the silence. "I'm sorry for flying off the handle Rias. Before you say anything, your brother and the other Maou made it clear why I need to wait, which…is…very hard for me. Knowing who my enemy is and allowing them to kill the people I am protecting has never been something I've allowed to take place, I've always fought to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. So, when you refused to allow me to go with you to fight whoever this Exorcist is, it…went against everything I know. I can't and won't stand by Rias, not for you, not for your brother, not for anyone. But I do understand the larger picture now, even if does disgust me to have to not follow my heart due to damn politics. I know that a lot of lives could be lost if another war breaks out, so I'll follow your lead on this, but you need to understand one thing: I won't stand by for much more, and if this ends with a war, I will be fighting in it from the start."

For several moments, he watches as Rias's blue eyes study his face, before a sad expression takes over. Leaning forward, she uses her hands and twists him around. Wondering what she is doing, he doesn't speak as she pours the hot water over his head and then begins to clean his back.

"Rukia and Momo, as well as Sasha gave me much to think about when you left Ichigo. Things that for me as a Devil, were hard to understand at first. This." She softly places a hand over his heart. "This, Ichigo, is what I forgot about in trying to understand you. This human heart of yours is and will always be your guide through life; I failed to see it even though you have given it to me and will forever entrust it to me as my husband. Rukia also told me that it is because of your heart, your will to protect all innocents regardless of the consequences, that you gained the power you needed in the past. You didn't do it for yourself; you did it to protect everyone you love from
feeling the pain you did when Lady Masaki passed away. I understand your anger today, but I too have things I must protect and prevent as the Gremory heiress. We both do. Now though, they coincide."

"Rias?"

He feels her hand trembling faintly. "I'm letting you act accordingly to your wishes, as a Devil and as one who will join our two Clans together with me. This town will be as much yours as it is mine after our marriage, a gift from my Clan. You swore to protect human life as a Shinigami, now you will do so as a Devil Ichigo. I ask only one thing, please protect Issei when you go, Akeno and I will take care of any stragglers."

Ichigo reaches up to grasp Rias's hand. "I want Yuuto to come as well. He needs more experience and an extra sword helping Issei would benefit his training. Koneko too, I know she has more in her then she lets on, both she and Tatsuki can provide cover with Chad and Uryū. Orihime I'll leave with Kimi and Nia as our backup, I know she's been training, but losing her...isn't an option for us. She'll be an absolute last resort with the twins."

Rias pushes her head forward and rests it against his back. "You don't ask for much do you Ichigo?"

Letting the water run down his head and back, he chuckles some. "Usually not, but I have a feeling about tomorrow. A bad feeling."

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Issei can't believe his luck; he was out looking for his friend Asia after being allowed to look for her, but he still cannot find her. Ichigo-senpai had told him he wanted him to try and convince the young woman to leave the Fallen Angels behind, the orange-haired Devil even saying he was going to see if Ryūken could take her in and protect her until they found a safe and permanent place for her to live in, somewhere no one from the Fallen Angel faction could find her. Frustration is beginning to creep into his heart, when he unexpectedly hears her voice coming from around the corner. Peering out carefully, he sees her kneeling beside a distraught little girl, so wanting to find out what is wrong, he comes up from behind them and breaks into their conversation.

"Asia-san, are you okay?" He asks her with concern. He did after all see that murderous Exorcist slap and punch her into unconsciousness.

"Oh, Issei-san!" Pointing at the little girl, Asia blushes slightly when she tells him she's having trouble following what the little girl is saying because her Japanese is still at a beginner's level. Nodding, Issei crouches in front of the girl and after speaking with her, he tells Asia that the child got separated from her mother about a street away. Seeing how distraught the child is, she asks Issei to tell her that they would take her back and help her find her mother. The Pawn does as she requests, and he takes up the rear of their trio as Asia holds the hands of the now much calmer girl and using Issei as a translator, the young nun and the girl have a quiet conversation about the local parks, the best places to eat sweets and places that might interest the Westerner in learning about the local culture.

Coming to the street the child had mentioned, Issei and Asia begin asking around if anyone is looking for a missing child. As the day slowly wears on, Issei is beginning to worry that they aren't going to find the kid's mother, when a relieved scream from behind them lets them know that their search has ended. Turning, they see a woman in her mid-twenties running up to them, her arms outstretched as she reaches them and grabs the crying girl who hugs her back just as tightly. The Devil and the young blonde nun step back, letting the mother and child have their happy reunion
before the mother begins thanking them both for finding her daughter. Neither of them would accept anything, until the woman insists and presses into Issei's hands several bills and a brief whisper for him to take the beautiful teen next to him out to dinner.

Blushing madly, he bows and informs the joyful mother that he will do that. Translating the mother's words for Asia, the green-eyed nun blushes as well when she bows and offers her thanks in return for the gift. Watching both mother and child depart, the little girl waving goodbye to them, the two of them say nothing as they leave the area. Deciding he needs to talk to the girl next to him, Issei finds an alleyway that looks unused and motions for her to follow him. He sees Asia hesitate at first, but the sounds of the crowded streets finally urges her to follow him. Keeping an eye on the street, he turns to look at the young blonde in front of him and he rubs the back of his head awkwardly.

"I guess we should talk about what happened last night Asia-san."

The young nun lowers her head in agreement. "We should Issei-kun. Why were you there? Sellzen-san said that a Devil worshipper lived there and she was evil. He said we had to... to purify her, and set her soul free of her sins. So why were you there?"

Issei sighs, before telling her the complete truth. "Because I was the person she was going to make a contract with, Asia-chan. I am a Devil."

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Ichigo has his newest first edition Shakespeare novel out and is reading the book for the second time since his 'uncle' found him a copy of Hamlet. Rias is sitting next to him, looking through a bridal magazine with Akeno and Orihime, their first wedding ceremony is going to be a simple Shinto affair, while the wedding ceremony immediately after high school would be a more Western affair. Uryū is also taking part in the discussions, going over choices for materials and what lace patterns would accentuate Rias's figure and bring out her eyes and hair, the depth of his tailoring knowledge amazing the three of them. Chad sits with Yuuto and Koneko, helping the younger Devils relax by playing his guitar, the only real possession he had chosen to bring with him from Karakura. The Naberius Clan had basically given Ichigo, the twins and his peerage members all new wardrobes and replaced any items they had left behind, except for personal items like Chad's guitar.

Tatsuki is currently on a laptop talking to her parents via Skype, being the only one with a normal family in their entire group; she maintains contact with her parents as much as she can, though the stories she can share with them are limited to the goings-on in school. Next to her, Candice is also taking part in the conversation at the karate champ's insistence, having been added to her circle of friends. The green-haired Quincy had been brought in to help keep anyone from fleeing by air, namely she is to shoot any escaping Fallen Angels through their wings and ground them where one of the Devils will finish them off. The last person waiting with them is Sasha, sitting in a chair she had found at a local shop; the Elf had insisted they bring it home for her because she found it comfortable to sit in when she did her knitting.

A ringing sound causes everyone's attention to focus on the orange-haired Devil then. Tatsuki ends her Skype call, Chad stops playing his guitar, and even Sasha turns her head to focus on him.

Picking up his phone, Ichigo listens to the message, and he accidentally releases a brief but furious burst of his Reiatsu at its contents. Clicking off his phone, he stands up and looks at Orihime.

"Kimi is bringing Issei back; he was attacked and seriously wounded by the Fallen Angels while speaking with Asia. Nia is following the Fallen Angels and the girl now, she gave up her freedom to protect his life."
No one says anything more as they wait for the familiar circle to appear, which it does after a moment and in the middle is Kimi holding on to a bleeding Issei. The young Pawn is still conscious, but the grimace on his face tells them how much pain he is in. Orihime's healing shield is over him within seconds as she rushes to kneel beside the young brown-haired Devil after the teenage Elf places him carefully down on the floor. The burnt-orange-haired healer peeks under his torn shirt loosely hanging open before turning to Ichigo, she tells him the extent of his wounds.

"This wasn't meant to kill him Ichigo; this was done to inflict as much pain as they could while he bled to death. These...how could they be so cruel?" Her eyes harden significantly as she speaks, and she focuses on speeding up the healing process to alleviate Issei's pain as quickly as possible.

Looking at his soon-to-be wife before addressing all of them, Ichigo gives them their pre-battle briefing. "According to Sirzechs, the leader of this particular group of Fallen Angels is named Raynare; she is pretty much a sadist and an unrepentant murderer. She...she is responsible for a number of unsolved murders before you guys came here; I think it was between six or more teens and young men. Yoruichi almost caught up to her during her last murder but the Fallen Angel escaped moments before her arrival. Yoruichi told me what this Raynare had done to them: trust me when I say this, we'll be doing the world a favor by sending her back into the reincarnation cycle, or preferably the Tower. Hopefully when she comes back as a human, it will be without any of her memories or power."

As anger and determination appears on the faces of all those present, Uryū pushes his glasses up and asks one last time. "So, we're really going to do this then?"

Nodding to his cousin, Ichigo gives them each one last chance to back out. "I won't hold it against any of you if you wish to back out. I'm doing this because these Fallen Angels have gotten away with murdering humans in Isehara for far too long. Politics kept us from going after them despite their illegal actions, but it seems we've finally been given the authority to safeguard the population under the protection of the Gremory Clan. The only ones here who can truly end their existence are Candice and Uryū, the rest of us will only be sending them back in the Cycle of Life, but I hope and I mean this, I hope they get a different choice, one that they regret."

Tatsuki snickers then and smacks her fist fiercely into her hand. "Yeah, I agree with you on this one Ichigo, a few millennia in the Skeleton Tower might do them some good since they truly deserve it."

"Issei's healed Ichigo." Orihime reports when she comes to stand by her brother's side, as does a newly-healed but clearly determined Issei.

Ichigo looks at the Pawn and his Elfin bodyguard. "Let's hear it, what happened?"

Nervously looking at each of the other Devils, Issei looks at Rias, who gets up from her chair and walks over to him; taking his hands, she speaks to her Pawn softly. "Issei, it's okay. You have nothing to worry about; we just want to know what happened to you and to your friend."

Casting another look around the room, Issei sees everyone gives him encouraging looks, and the last person he looks to nods his orange hair as well.

"I found her near the market area, she was...."

Issei stands there recalling how after telling Asia he was a Devil, she had at first wanted to deny his admission, but after convincing her, she had reluctantly accepted his words as the truth. Fearing she would leave him, he had then asked in desperation if she no longer wanted to be his friend then. No one can hold back their smiles when he excitedly tells them how readily she had reaffirmed their
friendship after telling him that he didn't seem evil to her. To show her how much her friendship had meant to him, he sheepishly admits using the same dating strategy he had used with the disguised Fallen Angel before, but the outcome was completely different this time.

It was after the date when they went to sit by a pond, that things had changed rapidly for them. Issei pauses then as he looks at his fellow Devils, letting out a shuddering breath.

"Y-Yūma showed up." He casts his eyes downward then in shame at the memory of his previous killer. "She beat me effortlessly, and if it wasn't for Kimi-senpai and Nia-senpai, I…"

"You have nothing to be ashamed of Issei-kun; there were four of them after all." The violet-eyed elf remarks. "You did well, your Sacred Gear has increased in power, but that Fallen Angel does have a few centuries of experience over you. She is equal to my sister and me in that regard."

"So, there were four of them then?" Akeno asks of the Elfin teen.

"Yes Akeno-san, besides the one who calls herself 'Yūma' that we know of as Raynare, there was that male Fallen Angel Yoruichi fought, and two others we have never seen before. Issei fought against one of the new ones, I fought the other and my sister fought the male. However, we lost the young girl when Raynare attacked Issei from behind and threatened to kill Issei after she wounded him. The girl, Asia Argento, begged them to spare his life, and in return she would go with them without any struggle. Despite that, he did put up a valiant fight."

Issei hangs his head despondently. "I…I should've listened to you Buchou. If I did…"

"Did what?" Ichigo interrupts Rias's Pawn. "If you did nothing, then she wouldn't have known she has a friend here. She accepted the fact that you are a Devil Issei, that counts for something, and when we get her back, you can make it up to her then."

"We're going after her then?" The Pawn looks at him hopefully.

"Rias?" Ichigo says looking at his crimson-haired girlfriend.

Standing up, the Gremory heiress makes for the door, Akeno following behind her. "Akeno and I have something to do Ichigo, whatever happens, happens. Just remember your promise to me though."

"I will. Promise." He says as she sends him a wink.

Turning to the others still in the room, Ichigo begins. "Issei, Asia's your friend. It's up to you to make the decision."

Issei looks at him, his eyes filled with determination. "I don't want her near them any longer Ichigo-senpai."

Ichigo stares at him and smirks when he sees the look of determination in the brown orbs of the Pawn. "Issei, you're with me. Koneko, you are with Chad and Tatsuki. Yuuto, you're with Nelliel and Grimmjow. Orihime, I know you can fight and have been training, but…"

"But I'm with the 'gear in the rear'." She laughs then as she fist pumps. "Yes! I've always wanted to say that!"

Tatsuki headlocks her then and pinches her cheek as punishment. "Only you would say some cheesy line like that Hime! What is that even supposed to mean anyway!?"
After letting her friend's head loose, the black-haired Devil looks around the room and grins at all of them. "So, when do we go and get this nun back?"

Ichigo looks at Kimi and lifts one eyebrow in question. The Elfin teen nods at him. "We can go anytime Ichigo, Nia's found their new lair. It's an abandoned shrine this time, a bit higher up in the mountains, probably to keep us from interfering in their plans. They must have known we would look for them at the church and changed locations in secret."

Looking around the room, he sees everyone standing up and getting ready. He isn't surprised to see the mad grin on his blue-haired Knight, though the sad and distant look on his other Knight's face has him worried.

"Nelliel, you don't have to go tonight. I know how you feel about fighting and killing and because of…"

Holding her hand up, the green-haired former Espada stops him then. "I'll be fine Ichigo; I'm going to keep Yuuto-kun safe and ensure Issei-kun's friend isn't harmed. That's all I need to do. I'll make it through."

Giving her a nod, he turns to his newest mentor, her blind eyes looking over the group of young Devils and their assorted allies. Standing to her feet, she steps before the group and folds her hands in front of her.

"Only one thing I need to say: come home safely, all of you. Waste no effort in your battles; Nia and Kimi know what to do if they feel you need help. I doubt it though, many of you have been blooded before, therefore keep a close eye on those who haven't been tested as you have been. Tatsuki, keep Chad at your side at all times, the two of you work well as a team. Nelliel, Grimmjow, Yuuto has gotten better, allow him to take the lead and support him as necessary, and Ichigo: I don't have to tell you what to do with your student. You not only fight for the Underworld now, you fight for all the humans and for one scared and lonely child. Now go and bring honor to our Clans, all of you."

A chorus of agreements greets the Elfin assassin as a circle of blue magic takes them to battle.

As the magic circle fades away, Venelana steps into the now deserted room, walking until she is next to the former Old Maou Assassin before she speaks. "This will draw eyes here regardless of the outcome."

Sasha nods slowly. "This is perhaps the opening skirmish then, Lady Venelana. Yasaka forewarned us that war is on the horizon, this may simply be the first move by those hiding in the shadows. I'll have Merti and Yoruichi increase security on the mansion, with your permission of course."

The older brunette woman nods her acceptance. "I must return to speak to my husband now that he has returned from the meeting with the Phenex Clan and inform him of this. I leave their care to you and your operatives, Sasha."

Bowing, the blind Elf feels Venelana leave in a magic circle, and once she is alone she calls for Harumi. "Send your shadows out in force and if anything, and I mean anything new appears, I want to know the second it reveals its presence."

"Of course, Sasha." The shadow puppeteer curseys as her shadows darken the walls around them. "I would do no less to protect them."
Everyone suppresses their power the moment the circle starts to take them to their destination. Ichigo summons his partner, as do Yuuto, Nelliel and Grimmjow. Chad dons his armor, however Tatsuki's new appearance causes some confusion, making her issue a stern warning when she sees them all staring at her.

"I catch anyone trying to look up my skirt, they get a foot up their ass, got it?" She threatens quietly.

A series of nods and yes's answer her back. Satisfied, she shifts her breast plate a bit complaining about the tightness around her breasts, the only person who hears her has to clasp his nose shut to prevent a nosebleed. Tatsuki glares at the blonde Knight, but he determinedly looks away from her.

Ichigo quickly takes charge of the situation the moment they reach their destination. "Kimi?" The Elf points, and soon enough her sister appears next to them silently.

"There are more people than before Ichigo, close to a hundred humans, a few of them are Exorcists and the number of Fallen Angels have increased as well." Nia reports as she goes over what she has seen with her young lord.

"And the girl?"

"I did not see her Ichigo, I couldn't get too close to the inner sanctum, a walled off area has been erected around it, I have no idea what is going on in there." The teenage Elf confesses.

Alright then. We go in as three groups. Nelliel; you, Grimmjow and Yuuto take the side closest to the western entrance. Chad; you, Tatsuki and Koneko take the eastern side. Issei, you and I are going in through the front door.

A series of quiet affirmatives confirm his orders. As the groups separate to their assigned locations, Ichigo looks at the nervous young man standing next to him. Taking a deep breath, he utters a memory from his own trying times, words that were first spoken to him by the false Zangetsu but still struck a chord deep in his heart. "Issei, these words once served a purpose for me. Hopefully, they'll serve you now. 'Abandon your fear Issei. Look forward. Move forward and never stop. Pull back and you will age. Hesitate, and you will die.' These words helped shape me, even if the person who once said them is no longer here, but the meaning still rings true. Your friend is in there and she needs you, so find her and keep her safe, that's all you need to do."

Swallowing nervously, Issei holds up his left hand. "Should I use this then?"

Smirking, Ichigo looks down at the Pawn. "Not yet Issei, wait for as long as you can before you reveal what you have; let them see what they failed to stop that night. We'll both show them."

Snapping his head up as three sides of the shrine explode inwards, the former exorcist Freed Sellzen grins madly when he sees a familiar head of brown hair show itself in the front door. Pulling out his sword and his pistol, he pauses when Devils he has never seen before reveal themselves on all sides, the one that draws his attention however is the tall orange-haired Devil next to the shitty brown-haired Devil, a very strange sword held in his hand.

"So, the shitty…" Freed ducks when a ball of black and red energy narrowly misses blasting his head off.
Hearing an explosion, he turns around and his eyes widen when he sees the large hole behind him, revealing the faces of those inside who were watching the closing moments of the ceremony and who twist to see the cause of the disturbance. Looking back at the invaders with cold sweat now beading on his forehead, he sees three separate groups of Devils; some of them are releasing high amounts of energy, and all of them are directing it his way.

"I need some help out here!" Freed had been told to expect only one peerage, the shitty Gremory Devils to show up, not two or more peerages from what he can see.

"Is that him Issei?" He hears the orange-haired Devil ask of the shitty younger Devil standing next to him.

"Yeah, he's the one who threatened Asia-san, Ichigo-senpai."

'Ichigo? Ichigo? Where have I heard tha…HIM! THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY!'

"So, you are the one Dohnaseek warned us about. I'll kill you then myself you shitty Devil!" He jumps up with a yell and as he descends, his eyes grow wide when he sees a familiar red gauntlet flying towards his face.

Ichigo smirks at the speed Issei just used, completely taking the human Exorcist by surprise. He quickly motions to the others to make their way inwards. Koneko and his two Rooks go straight at it, while Yuuto and Grimmjow intercept the four Fallen Angels that appear from the back room. Seeing the numbers beginning to grow, he jumps in with Nelliel, his green-haired Knight assisting Yuuto with his opponents, and himself taking over for Issei.

"Issei, take Grimmjow and find your friend, we'll take care of things out here! Now go!" Ichigo charges his hand and fires several Bala into the back wall again, throwing up a cloud of dust and making his previous hole bigger.

Watching the Pawn and his Knight rush through the cloud of dust, Ichigo finds himself standing face to face with the crazed human Exorcist, the Light-based pistol already in his hands.

'Fuck it.' Letting the human point his pistol at his chest at point blank range, he smirks as he knows what will happen next.

"You're dead asshole!" Freed pulls his trigger again and again, only stopping when the Light pistol clicks on empty. Ichigo lifts a single eyebrow as he looks down at his tattered shirt, his skin completely unmarked beneath it.

'Yuzu's going to kill me for this.' He inwardly muses, hearing Zangetsu give a bark of laughter.

Ichigo's eyes wander back up and he lets his smirk grow even wider at the wide-eyed look of disbelief on the murderous Exorcist's face. "Let me show you how us 'shitty Devils' do it… right."

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Grimmjow's foot slams into the closest human he can reach, kicking him towards the back wall and scattering the others in the wake of the speeding body. Straightening up as the body splatters against the wall, he pulls Pantera from his sheath and grins as he looks at the stunned faces of both humans and Fallen Angels at their unexpected invasion. Before he can speak however, a woman's voice shouts at them from the raised dais.

"Too late Devils, I've collected my prize already!" Both Devils' eyes widen as they see the limp, nude body of a young blonde girl crucified on a strange cross.
"AAASSSSIIIIAAA! ! !" Grimmjow barely catches the kid in time, his own teeth gritting at the realization that their mission has failed.

Holding the struggling boy back, he roars out to snap the kid out of his berserk rage. "Stop! I'll get you up there so you can grab your girlfriend, and then we deal with the psycho bitch together!"

Sniffing the air, Grimmjow smells fear emanating from some of the humans, though from the rest he smells something completely different. He knows that smell all too well, rabid animals filled with blind devotion that face him and the kid. Disgusted by this reminder of Aizen's brainwashing techniques, the panther Arrancar pulls the kid behind him and raises his Reiatsu, a sonic boom answering his call as Nelliel appears at his side.

"We need to get to the girl and keep that one from fleeing." Grimmjow says while pointing at the dominatrix dressed Raynare. "The sword brat doing okay?"

"Don't worry, Yuuto's doing fine, and no one is leaving, didn't you feel it?" His mate responds to him.

Grimmjow pauses then and smirks in realization. "Forgot they were here. Ready babe?"

"Enough chatting!" Raynare shouts, the dark-haired Fallen Angel seething at their lack of fear. "Kill those two but bring me the boy, there is something... special I'm planning for him!"

Nelliel brushes her hand down her mate's arm as she looks sadly at the advancing assemblage before her; pulling Gamuza from her sheath, she speaks loud enough for the room to hear her.

"Forgive us, but you are in our way." Without another word, both she and Grimmjow dart forward together, their Zanpakutō clearing a path towards the dais as Issei follows right behind them, the brown-haired Pawn never taking his eyes off of his friend's face.

'Hold on Asia, please hold on!'

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Rukia, Momo and Candice leave the clearing; the three of them had been holding the perimeter with the teen Elves. Once Kimi is finished setting up the barriers, she lets the others loose to join in the fray. Rukia is the first to enter, Momo right behind her, while Candice finds a place outside to cover the entirety of the shrine and snipe any Fallen Angel trying to fly away once they realize there are several barriers keeping them from using magic to flee.

Rukia and Momo barely enter the courtyard before they hear Ichigo yelling at them that it's only Grimmjow, Nelliel and Issei in the inner sanctum and to go support them. Shunpoing straight through the hole in the wall, the two Shinigami instantly dive into the confused humans and Fallen Angels from behind, most of them had their backs turned because they were surrounding the three Devils that are almost at the raised platform where a nude girl hangs on a cross. Rukia's eyes flare with rage when she sees Grimmjow and Nelliel battling the Fallen Angel from the night that Ichigo regained his memories, the same Fallen Angel who had killed Issei and set off this entire chain of events. Motioning to Momo, she begins to fight her way towards the woman who had nearly killed her best friend and his girlfriend's Pawn, her fellow Lieutenant aiding her through judicious use of Hadō and Bakudō.

"Rukia-senpai, help me!" She glances up to see Issei pulling the girl away from the cross; his eyes are wet and red from his tears as he cradles the naked girl in his arms.

Snapping one look at the Fallen Angel who is attempting to flee the battle, she resists the urge to
chase after her and moves instead towards the sobbing young man, gathering both him and the girl into her arms and telling him to hold on; with a quick burst of Shunpo, she gets them to a room as far from the fighting as she can bring them. Quickly, she scans the girl in his arms and hisses at what she doesn't find.

"Senpai?" His voice cracks when he hears the worry in her voice.

Looking at the crushed boy in front of her, she pats his shoulder and turns around. "Hold her Issei, I'll go get Orihime."

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"Issei-kun…I'm cold…so cold…" Her broken whisper shakes him from his stupor, and he hurriedly takes off his jacket and puts her arms through the sleeves with great care before buttoning it up to hide her nudity. That done, he gently cradles her in his arms once more.

"You'll be fine Asia-san, just hold on please! Please, she'll…"

Her hand weakly reaches up and finds his face; wiping a tear away, she speaks to him in a distant voice. "I'm glad I found one friend before I leave to see my Creator. Thank you Issei-kun…today…was…fun…"

Her hand falls limply by her side. Grabbing her hand, he shakes her lightly at first, and then vigorously when she doesn't respond to him.

"Asia-san? Asia-san!? Asia-san!?" He sees her chest isn't moving anymore, her eyes dull and lifeless. "No, Asia-san! ASIA-SAN!!"

A pair of hands gently grabs his shoulders, pulling him away from Asia as a familiar orange shield forms over her body. To his shock, the shield quickly dissipates, and he turns to see a startled Orihime looking at one of her fairies. The two of them speak lowly, but a phrase he hears is 'missing part of her soul'. Stunned beyond belief, he barely registers Orihime asking him if something had happened before he rescued the young teen; as his mind slowly starts to work again, Issei tries to remember everything he had seen when he entered the Inner Shrine, and he tells them that he heard the Fallen Angel talking about taking Asia's Sacred Gear from her.

Both Elves stand then and glare at the sounds of the fighting, Kimi speaking for both of them. "Issei-kun, if that is true, unless we get whatever that bitch took, Orihime can't heal her completely. We need to get that Sacred Gear back to save Asia!"

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Ichigo goes flying sideways when a Fallen Angel is thrown unexpectedly into him. "Sorry Ichigo!" Tatsuki calls out.

Scowling at his Rook, he sees her looking back sheepishly before she plunges back into the fray and cracks open the skull of the next human that she gets her hands on. Twisting back to his previous opponent, Ichigo sees the bloodied remains of the foul-mouthed Exorcist's shirt lying on the floor, red the prominent color on those rags after Ichigo had shown him how a real sword is supposed to cut. Both Devil and Zanpakutō growl in anger, knowing that the crazed murderer has fled; he lets it go however, the main objective of this mission is to save the girl and anyone else they 'help meet their maker' is just an added bonus. Uryū and Candice are both outside anyway, shooting the wings of the few Fallen Angels that had tried to escape by flying, and they are more than capable of handling a single wounded Exorcist.
Looking around, he sees the fight is almost over, the few surviving humans lying motionless except for a few moans, and most of the Fallen Angels had been killed in combat. Hearing scrapping sounds coming from behind a curtain, Ichigo goes to investigate when three figures filled with fury barrel past him into the curtain, revealing a skimpily-dressed woman trying to escape their attacks. Her face is one that both Ichigo and Zangetsu recognize almost immediately.

"Bitch that tried to kill the kid, ehmm, what's up with the Ice Princess and her firecracker sidekick though?"

"Give it back you bitch!" Even Zangetsu is stunned by the rage in Issei’s voice as he attacks the woman. "Give back her Sacred Gear, you filthy whore!"

"Holy Shit, the pervert is insulting a woman!"

Grimmjow walks up next to Ichigo, casually snapping the neck of the Fallen Angel that is struggling in his hands before dropping the body carelessly. He nudges his king and gestures towards Issei. "Kid's friend didn't make it Ichigo. They took her Sacred Gear or something, and your two bodyguards said Orihime can't heal her without it."

Remembering Rukia's story about his cousin Kaien, Ichigo flares his power, stopping all the fighting around him. Even Raynare stares at him in shock as he begins to speak.

"Issei, this is your fight. She tried to kill you and she hurt your friend badly. No one will interfere unless you want them to, so show us everything you've got!"

"Promotion, Knight!" Issei shouts as he lunges forward and punches the Fallen Angel in her face before she can even react.

The Devils surround the two combatants then, making sure the Fallen Angel can't escape the furious Pawn but otherwise allowing him to take his own vengeance. Outside the shrine, Ichigo feels a few familiar signatures approaching them, but knowing that they have full control of the shrine, he just turns his attention back towards the fight.

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Issei scowls as the light rod grazes his leg again. Not caring about the blood seeping from the wound, he avoids the follow-up blows and waits patiently for an opening. He knows he is at a disadvantage if he keeps dodging and blocking, but he is always getting just a bit closer each time. His promotion had given him speed, but his defense is still weak; if not for the grueling training that he has been enduring, he has no doubt he would have been skewered a second time already. The other thing he notices is all the encouragement he is getting from all the Devils around him; it is something he is not used to getting as one of the Perverted Trio, but their support fills him with the determination to live up to their belief in him. Another near miss snaps his attention back to the raven-haired woman in front of him as once again she fails to claim his life, her sneering expression the true face that she was hiding from them.

Wiping the blood from his cut cheek, Issei moves forward again and seeing a brief opening, quickly drives his armored fist into the bare skin of the Fallen Angel, but barely misses with the follow-up uppercut. Jumping back and nearly splitting his legs to avoid her retaliatory swipe, he glares at the smirking woman who had just tried to remove his future children.

"For hitting me close to my chest, hentai-kun." She says lazily, her hands glowing as she uses the Sacred Gear she had stolen from Asia to heal her injuries again. Her eyes though keep darting to the surrounding Devils, looking for a way to escape.
Growling at his inability to hurt her, he resorts to asking why she had killed his friend.

"Friend? She wasn't your friend you hopeless loser. She was just a stupid little girl and a Sacred Gear wielder, and just like you, she was disposable. What do you think your mistress will do if she finds you lacking? She'll kill you as well. Take your Sacred Gear and put it in a real man, not some virgin who can't even look at a nude body without embarrassing himself." She waves her hands towards those watching them.

"Look at them Issei-kun, do you see them? Really see them? Not one of them is a loser like you, all of them are fit and strong like me. Asia-chan was just like you, a weak-bodied human who got lucky and was born with a power; a power that I took from her because I can use it better for myself. Do you see any wounds on me, do you!? They have all healed because of Twilight Healing, it is the power she used unwittingly on a Devil like yourself you know? That's how she got cast out, by healing an animal just like you! So if you don't mind, I need to kill you and leave, it's not like anyone here can harm me anymore!" She forms two light rods this time, baiting him to attack her first, when he hears a deep voice speaking to him.

[Issei Hyoudou, do you wish to save your friend? To make your sensei proud of their training? Do you wish for the power to avenge her?]

'Who's there? Who's speaking to me?' He finds himself asking unconsciously.

[Listen to me carefully and I'll help you. You have shown me enough that I have decided to lend you my aid and see if you are worth the trouble, hentai-kun.]

'Hey, what the hell's that supposed to mean?' He jumps back when Yūma, no, Raynare gets tired of waiting and attacks him first, one of her light rods coming dangerously close to his head, though he effortlessly shoves it skywards with his gauntleted hand.

[Boost yourself as high as you can and I'll tell you what to do next.]

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Seeing Orihime looking worried as she maintains the weak barrier over Asia, Ichigo knows this fight has to end soon, but he also wants Issei to earn his victory. Rukia had stayed out of his fight against Grand Fisher, so he is going to keep out of this one for as long as Issei continues to fight. The nun is Issei's friend, so if anyone should avenge her, it should be the Pawn in front of him. He snaps to attention though when he sees the green gem on the gauntlet glowing brightly.

"Oi Ichigo, did that ever happen before?" Grimmjow says as he points at the shining red colored metal plates covering the hand of the Devil.

"Nope, I think we're about to see something new from the kid." Sending out a small Pesquisa, Ichigo confirms that no one other than those in the room with him are still alive.

The Fallen Angel is now circling the perverted Pawn who is bleeding from both of his legs, his right arm, and a few spots on his chest and face; Grimmjow gives the kid credit for sticking it out as long as he did. He waits along with everyone else for the outcome of the battle and when it happens, he sees both Devil and Fallen Angel charge each other and just as they close the distance, Issei suddenly screams out as he thrusts his armored hand forward. A red ball of energy fires out from the red gauntlet, too fast for the Fallen Angel to dodge; it smashes right through both rods of light before slamming into the center of the charging black winged woman's body, throwing her backwards over the heads of Chad and Tatsuki with a scream of pain and a spray of blood.
"Someone want to get and drag her ass back?" Ichigo says as he approaches the heaving Gremory Pawn who is trembling from exhaustion.

Falling to one knee, Issei vomits, the stress from the battle finally overcoming him. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he sees someone handing him a small vial.

"Drink Issei-kun." He looks up into the violet eyes of Ichigo's Elfin bodyguard, the same one who had punched him the day he learned what had happened to the humans that kidnapped Orihime and tried to argue for their lives. Now, there is nothing but concern and understanding reflected in those violet orbs.

Taking the vial, he quietly thanks the teenage Elf and accepts her help so that he can stand up. She holds onto his waist and drapes one of his arms over her shoulder, moving him towards the still body of Asia which is being preserved by Orihime's shield. He fails to keep the deep utterance of loss within him, but neither woman say a word. Stiffly, with Nia's help, he makes his way over to the young blonde and slides down to the floor beside to her, he gently pushes her hair away from her forehead.

"I'm sorry Asia-san, I was too weak." He whispers quietly.

A hand on his shoulder makes him look up at the orange-haired Devil behind him. "It ain't over yet Issei." Ichigo informs him.

"Ichigo-senpai, I don't understand." He then follows Ichigo's rising hand and sees him pointing at Chad, who is carrying the limp and broken body of Raynare towards them.

Coming before his King and the Gremory Pawn, the large Rook carefully places the Fallen Angel on the ground and steps back again. Issei wonders what is going on until he sees his King and her Queen making their entrance in the shrine. Rias pauses as she looks around the destroyed shrine and the bodies now littering the place.

"Overkill much?" She quips wryly.

Grimmjow barks out a laugh then. "This ain't nothing Rias-sama, it's nowhere near Hueco Mundo on a good day."

"Nor a bad day in Soul Society Rias; count yourself lucky that Berry held back or there probably wouldn't be a roof over our heads now." Ichigo's peerage chuckles at his expense.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it, insane Reiatsu and no way to control it back then." The orange-haired Devil folds his arms and looks away from them.

Issei just stares numbly at the chatting Devils. "Umm... guys? I don't understand..."

He is distracted by the Fallen Angel when she comes to, and discovering that she is too weak to heal herself with Asia's Sacred Gear, she actually begins to beg for her life, even changing back to the face that Issei has come to hate in his heart.

"Please Issei-kun, they want to kill me! Please save me!" The urge to empty his stomach nearly becomes too much and he turns his face away from the crying figure.

"Please Buchou." He finally lets his emotions catch up to him and the others respectfully give him space. "Please."

Nodding her understanding, Rias steps past him and he hears her judgment and the sentence that is
to be handed down. Barely able to look out of the corner of his eye, he watches as a grim faced Ichigo and Grimmjow grab the wailing woman by her arms and drag her away, Rias and Akeno following a few paces behind them. Feeling a tingling sensation on his wounds, he looks up and finds Momo beginning to heal his body with Kaidō, since Orihime is still occupied with keeping Asia's body in stasis.

"There is nothing you can do for her Issei-kun." Momo whispers as they hear a loud scream, correctly identifying the pain in Issei's eyes as a fellow victim of betrayal. Raynare's death cry is followed by silence for a few seconds before a sound Issei had once heard in the deserts of Hueco Mundo resonates in the room.

The scraping doors and creepy laughter that follows tells him that something important has happened to Raynare, but he doesn't know what for sure. He remains quietly kneeling beside Asia until the four return, Ichigo and Rias entering first, with Grimmjow and Akeno following behind them. Three of them stop, leaving Rias to approach Issei then. He watches as she hands something to Orihime, who turns quickly and places it under Asia's jacket, her shield instantly glowing as it returns to full strength. Knowing that Ichigo's sister is doing something to help Asia, he shifts to his knees and watches as the pale face of the nun begins to regain its color once again. Soon, his tears of relief fall as the shield fades away and the young nun takes a deep, healthy breath.

"I think she should see you first Issei." The Squad Five Lieutenant nudges the teen forward with an encouraging smile.

Crawling his way to Asia's side, Issei leans over and takes one of her now warm hands in his own, waiting for something, anything to happen. She stirs slightly, her fingers closing over his as she begins to wake.

"Asia-san?" He sees her eyes fluttering open then. "Asia-san, you're...you're okay now. Please say something, anything."

"Issei-kun?" Emerald orbs slowly open before focusing themselves on him. "Are you still my friend Issei-kun?" Her hoarse voice whispers to him.

Dropping his head on her arm, he answers her with true gratitude in his heart. "Always Asia-san, I'll always be your friend."

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When they arrive back at the mansion, most give surprised but respectful nods to the group waiting for them; most of them hesitate to move until Ichigo speaks up.

"All of you grab a shower or bath and I'll get us some takeout." It is a clear dismissal, and the weary combatants begin to move out of the room as Ichigo makes his way over to the group of powerful beings standing together. None of them speak until it is just Ichigo and Rias standing before the group of Maou and the heads of the three Clans.

Bowing to the elders before him, Ichigo speaks first. "There were close to a hundred humans and about ten or eleven Fallen Angels. None were left alive Uncle."

Amyntas nods, though he glances to the man at his side. The red-headed man is the one who speaks next. "And the human child, what is to become of her then?" Zeoticus Gremory asks of his daughter.

"A choice Father, I will give her what I couldn't give Issei. If she declines, she will be free to leave
or stay. I hope she stays regardless though." Rias informs him.

Venelana prods her daughter to explain further, and her daughter does so. "She is a Sacred Gear holder Mother, a very useful and rare one at that. It is called Twilight Healing, and it has the ability to heal all beings including Devils; one of the Fallen Angels revealed that it was for that very reason Asia Argento was cast from the Church in the first place. Having her with us will greatly improve our standing in the Underworld, even if she chooses to remain a human. As I said, she will be allowed to choose for herself."

Sirzechs looks at his future brother-in-law then. "Do you agree with her choice Ichigo?"

"Dumb question to ask…Nii-san. She's like Okaa-san, both of them." He swears he can feel Yoruichi's glare on him, but the Gremory matriarch intervenes then with a smirk.

"See husband, at least he's smart, unlike that buffoon you arranged for her." She chides her husband.

Zeoticus Gremory rolls his eyes as he pats his wife's hand. "Yes dear, you're right as always dear."

Ichigo and Rias both fail to stifle their snort or chuckle when Zeoticus fakes his voice of long suffering. The Gremory Clan's head smiles at the two young Devils before him and tilts his head towards the stairway.

"I know you two need a bath, so we'll wait for you in the dining room. Let it be known that we are satisfied with your actions and your report."

"Yes Father. / Thanks."

Watching his daughter walk away arm in arm with Ichigo, Zeoticus turns to his wife and speaks lowly. "Have they decided what to do yet Venelana? Time is growing short now that the Phenex Clan wants an early marriage."

"We will tell them tonight Zeoticus, and it won't be pretty when we do."

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Azazel watches as his people sort through the remaining dead bodies, the humans being taken to the woods behind the shrine to be buried, while the Fallen Angels are being returned to their homes in the Underworld. The only one that catches his eye is the woman he now kneels next to. Briefly pushing her hair aside, he grimaces at the face of a once promising Fallen Angel, but over time even he couldn't ignore her more vicious appetites when it came to humans. Nodding to his two waiting brethren, he watches as they take her body away. A body that had become an empty husk from what he can feel from it.

'How did he take her soul? It shouldn't have been possible. She should have instantly gone on to the reincarnation cycle.' Yet the body revealed otherwise.

Raynare's soul had been taken by the Kushanāda, that much he could tell; the residual effects the Gates of Hell left behind were easy to detect for those looking to find it. Frowning in thought, he walks back to the front of the shrine, where the last of his troops are waiting for him to give them their orders.

"Restore the shrine as if it was built yesterday." He commands. Seeing their nods, he walks further outside to see her standing under a nearby tree waiting for him.

With a tired sigh, the Gregorian leader makes his way over to the golden-furred woman; the Kyuubi of Kyoto had certainly not been lying as to what had happened here. Stopping just in front of her, he looks back over his shoulder and grimaces one last time.


Nine tails lazily thump behind the Yōkai deity as she pushes away from the tree. "It was indeed very bad business Azazel. However, I did warn you something was wrong with that one and her
followers, and I'm unsurprised that this is what it came down to. He is not one to stand idly by while innocents are killed, Azazel; humans, Yōkai, spirits, it doesn't matter to him. Ichigo is driven always to protect despite what he has become and what he once was."

Azazel rolls his eyes at her declaration. "I take it you have found one worthy of your allegiance then, Yasaka?"

The Kitsune Empress smiles coyly at him. "Perhaps more than one, perhaps I have chosen a side already. I will be in the Underworld as a guest of the Gremory Clan this weekend, and I will make my final decision then; after I see how he handles himself against the son of the Phenex Clan. His love is on the line and I want to see to what lengths he will go to defend what he considers his." Her foxlike mouth grins when she finishes.

"...Any chance you can record their fight for me? I have never seen a pure blood Devil fight with the powers of not only his blood line, but also those of a Shinigami, Quincy and Hollow." He sneaks a hopeful look at the Yōkai woman standing next to him.

Yasaka smirks without looking at her friend. "Not this time Azazel, you will have time enough if you are going to actually go through with it."

Gaining a serious expression, the leader of the Fallen Angels answers her truthfully. "Ever since your warning about the storm clouds gathering, I find myself believing you more and more each day my old friend. I won't let our differences interfere with the human world or our own. If a great evil is on the rise, we will need our greatest warriors to unite and fight against it. Devils included."

Both turn to watch as the once decrepit and destroyed shrine is restored by magic and stands once again in its former radiance. Holding out his arm, the Fallen Angel turns to the Kyuubi.

"Need a lift home?"

"I do, but dinner with you alone is still a no Azazel, you're far too much of a playboy." She laughs at his dejected face as they and the others leave behind the silence of the grave.

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Five women sit in the hot tub, silence reigning as they drink their sake, until the one-armed woman among them finally speaks up.

"Not your fault Yoruichi, you didn't know they would strike so soon." Kūkaku pours another saucer of sake and hands it to her oldest friend.

Accepting the saucer and staring dejectedly at the clear liquid, the werecat slowly breathes out her frustrations. "I should've, the signs were all there, but I wanted to the twins to finally meet you. Sorry Kūkaku, not the family reunion I imagined for you and the kids. It was supposed to be you surprising him and watching him get crazy, not seeing the aftermath of a fight and hearing the news that Rias and Ichigo have until this weekend to get ready to save their relationship."

Beside her, the Gremory Matriarch places a hand across her own. "I can only apologize as well Yoruichi, Kūkaku; we are trying to find out how they even got the information to begin with. No one from the Underworld is supposed to come here without our permission or informing us, yet someone clearly has. As soon as we find out how, we will deal with it ourselves." Venelana says with a bit of heat in her voice.

Pausing, her mouth sneers slightly as she continues. "My daughter is happy with Ichigo, intends to spend eternity with him, and someone has the gall to try and take that from her. This couldn't have
come at a worse time, and tomorrow will only bring them more bad news. I am thinking of taking them out of school until this business is done."

The long-eared Elf across from her shakes her head slowly. "That would not be wise, Lady Venelana. Taking them out of a structured environment would only add to the chaos, and with them already missing as much school as they have this year, it would put even more strain on them as a group. We will return to the Underworld this Wednesday for the ceremony and then again on Saturday for the young Devils gathering. From this point forward, we will need to keep them occupied every minute they are awake. Right after his homework is done, Ichigo will be training until he drops. I hate doing this, but you will need to speak to your daughter and make her understand that the pressure he is facing is going to push him to his limits. He'll need her more now than ever before."

Venelana rubs her eyes tiredly. "I'll see to it today Sasha. Yoruichi, when will you tell Rukia and Momo about the orders they will be receiving?"

"Tomorrow after breakfast, Ichigo too for the obvious reasons. Kūkaku, you might want to tag along, help reassure him if he gets antsy." The golden-eyed woman remarks quietly.

All of them sip their sake in silence, the last member of their group finally breaking the silence as she leans against her blind sister for comfort. "Tomorrow will be the start of a very long week for us all."

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Sitting on top of the Tower, a white figure glares at the darkened sky, the threat of rain that had been missing for the last week or so is once again rearing its ugly head. Next to him, a teen-looking woman is lying prone while staring at the same sky, sadness etching her features as she worries about the two beings she holds closest in her heart. Stealing a glance at Zangetsu, she can almost taste the murderous rage in his energy, subconsciously reflecting the feelings of his wielder. She knows something must have happened when he stopped dead in their talk earlier and his eyes began to glow red, his head tilting as if he was listening to something distant. Then he took off in a flash, out the door and out of their shared world. She had to wait two whole hours before he returned, fury flowing through his blood as he made his way to the destroyed landscape of their final battle against the false Zanpakutō spirit who was connected to the Quincy Emperor.

She had watched him then from a high vantage point as he raged, blasting away at the landscape, nothing wasn't used by him, every Kidō and magic spell he had learnt alongside Ichigo had made an appearance, and he had continued attacking until he dropped to his knees in a four-meter-deep crater, his rage finally spent. Making her way carefully to the edge, she knelt down and looked at him, seeing his face blankly staring at his blade. Slowly, he had looked at her, and her questions were ended with his next words.

"Saturday, he fights for Rias's hand."

Since then, not a word had been spoken or a sound made as she lies next to him. She doesn't know what he is thinking as he watches the gathering storm; all she knows is that this week will be very hard on Zangetsu, and his Hollow side is slowly edging out his Shinigami side for dominance.

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Rias snuggles deeper into Ichigo's sleeping embrace, her mind working in overdrive after the revelations of the evening.
Both of them were apprehensive the moment they saw not only her parents, but also her brother and sister-in-law as well as Sōna and Serafall with Ichigo’s great-grandfather gathered in the study. Ichigo’s hand squeezing hers told her that he knew something bad was about to happen, and when her father spoke, it nearly caused her to lose her composure as well.

‘Ichigo, Rias…The Phenex Clan is demanding an early marriage between Riser and Rias. It seems that word has reached them about you, my daughter. That you have been seen in the company of a young man more often than not, and they say you have been seen displaying emotional attachments beyond what you would normally show for a servant or a member of your peerage.’ Her father stated with little fanfare.

‘So, what does this mean Zeoticus-san?’ Ichigo asked of his future father-in-law.

Walking towards Ichigo, her father placed a hand on his shoulder. ‘I won’t lie to you Ichigo, they can insist for an early marriage if they feel Rias is acting inappropriately. They know that if that Rias intends to seek an end to this marriage by any means necessary, they can push for an earlier marriage to see this union made reality. I am sorry Rias, Ichigo, but you have no choice but to seek a duel this weekend, or…’

Rage is all anyone could feel for those few moments, murderous rage radiating from her boyfriend’s tense body. Acting out of reflex, she gripped his other hand and soothed his emotions by squeezing it as hard as she could until he and Zangetsu brought his feelings back under control once again.

Despite this, her father never once looked away from Ichigo’s expression. ‘I’m sorry son; this is entirely mine and Sirzechs’s fault. We didn’t know about you when we made this arrangement, nor did we truly understand Rias’s hatred for Riser. No matter what Ichigo, you are the one that we want to see being with Rias as her husband. I will stand by you both, and win or lose, I’ll break off her engagement with Riser Phenex regardless of the consequences.’

‘Otou-san?’ Ichigo called her father by that title for the first time ever. ‘I want to ensure there will be no more challenges or anymore negotiations for her hand in marriage. I…we will challenge Riser the ancient way, and my demand will be to marry her that night. With your permission Sir, I will formally ask for her hand in marriage in front of the other Clans, and when I win, because I can’t and won’t allow any other outcome, I wish for you and Venelana to give us the blessings of your Clan.’

Rias saw her father glance quickly at her mother, who was positively beaming at her boyfriend’s words. ‘I think I safely speak for my wife and the rest of the Clan when say you will have it, Ichigo.’ He admitted with a wry smile as Ichigo shook his hand in gratitude. ‘We couldn’t ask for a better young Devil to join our two Clans.’

Soon her mother was in front of both of them and kissing them on their cheeks; she then gave way to Grayfia who surprisingly did the same. Sirzechs also grinned as he shook Ichigo’s hand and ruffled her hair playfully, much to her annoyance. The rest of the gathered nobles also offered the same well wishes and congratulations on their impending nuptials after the conclusion of the duel with Riser.

‘Ichigo, how do you plan of defeating him if I may ask?’ Her father then asked of her boyfriend, the others in the room also listening attentively.

Ichigo just smirked at them. ‘I plan on neutralizing his family’s magic with some of my own families’ magic Otou-san; between Sōna, Serafall, Uncle and Tia, I have a plan that will work, all our peerages have seen to it.’
Huffing silently at his refusal to give away his plan, Rias twists until she can see his face as he lies beneath her. Snuggling in the crook of his arm, she gently runs a finger down his cheek, the effect visible on his face as he gradually relaxes to her touch.

"I believe in you Ichigo." She gently kisses him before sliding out of their bed. "... And thank you."

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Waking up, Ichigo notices that he is alone in bed; looking at the time, he sees it is barely six in the morning. Panic fills him as he reaches out to find where his fiancée is, then relief fills him when he finds her not too far away from their room. Quickly putting on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, he makes his way to her location. Walking through the dimly lit hallways, he heads downstairs and out through the doors that lead into the back yard. Stopping on the deck of the patio, he looks around and finds her lying on her back in the middle of the yard, just looking up at the sky. Walking up to her, he stops and takes in her blue eyes as they gaze up at him.

"Couldn't sleep?" He asks.

"No. I'm sorry. Just…with everything yesterday, my mind is working overtime right now." She says, patting a dry spot next to her.

Accepting the invitation, Ichigo lies down next to her and grunts when she immediately rolls into his side and squeezing him tight. "I wanted to say I'm sorry Ichigo. For making you face this alone."

"I won't be alone Rias, I do have a Zanpakutō spirit that will kick my ass if he thinks I'm losing or worse, starting to doubt myself. So, don't say you're sorry for something you didn't do." He pulls her warm body tighter to his own. "We both knew that this day would come, just not this soon."

"I am though, I'm being selfish because I don't want to marry him, and because you're the one who is going to get hurt in your duel against him. I can't help but feel so guilty right now. If only I had a full peerage or if I could fight him with the power that my brother and the Bael Clan have, I would do so, but I'm not as strong as my brother yet. That is why I'm sorry Ichigo, because only you have the strength right now to fight him, and you are doing so for my sake." She buries her face into the crook of his neck even more.

He sighs then. "Rias, I won't ever blame you for me falling in love with you, or you with me, and I certainly don't think you are weak in not facing him. But you and everyone else have said it before: he is nearly immortal, and I need to be the one who faces and beats him. I am the one who wants to marry you, not for your titles or your Clan's influence, but because I can't imagine my life without you now. This is why I fight, not just for you, but for both of us."

Hugging her closer, he chuckles lightly. "I also want to pay him back for manhandling you during our semester break too. He is going to learn the hard way that his actions do have a price that needs to be paid, I'm just lucky to be the collector of those fees."

"You are impossible, Ichigo Naberius." Smiling at him, she moves until she is lying flat on his chest. "Just like Rukia and Orihime both said you can be. You have no fear when it comes to laying your body or your life on the line for others. But I do know if I lose you, I won't be the same person ever again. So, you better listen well to me husband. I want you to win and don't you dare toy with him. Beat him senseless and end it as quickly as you can. Payback can be for another day, like in a Rating Game. Do you understand me? Save your vengeance for another time, show him what a true warrior looks like and defeat him quickly. Besides…"
His face turns crimson as she tells him exactly what she expects of him the night of their wedding.

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Breakfast is not held with its usual chaos of hurried bodies, instead Yuzu and Orihime are basking in the glow from the many comments and praises both Kūkaku and Ganju had heaped on them over the breakfast they just served the elder members of the Shiba family. Ganju is scarfing down his food despite the warning head slaps from both Ichigo and Uryū, the younger brother of Kūkaku shaking off all mention of manners until his sister drops one closed fist on the table and uses her prosthetic hand to hold up her chin, one eye narrowed dangerously at him. It not only forces Ganju to straighten up, but Ichigo and Uryū unconsciously as well.

Smiling again at the burnt-orange-haired healer, Kūkaku brings forth another blush, but for different reasons this time. "I see you've filled even more since the adoption Orihime, has Ichigo been beating off your suitors yet or has he decided you will remain a perpetual virgin?"

"THE HELL KŪKAKU-NEE!" Ichigo shouts after choking and spitting rice across the table, hitting Rukia in her bow.

A piece of fruit flies back in retaliation from the angry Shinigami and hits the furious Devil in the face. "Stop yelling with your mouth full of food Berry! Dammit, no wonder why Nii-sama thinks you are a barbarian, you act like one!"

"Yeah, this coming from the sister of the man whose sphincter could split wood in two!" He retorts quickly.

A head slap from Yoruichi and Kūkaku quiets the two best friends immediately, however the mood doesn't lighten up any when the former Captain points at them as well as the other Shinigami present. "The three of you with me now. Kūkaku, Ganju, you two coming along?"

The table quiets down as the three mentioned people stand up and begin to follow the former Squad Two Captain as she leaves the dining room at an easy pace. Sasha clears her throat, attracting the attentions of the others and motioning for them to stay seated. The rest of the teen Devils watch as Ichigo, Rukia, Momo and the others disappear down the hallway leading to the training dimension room. Turning to the two older Elves, Akeno asks what is going on.

Merti turns her green eyes on the young Queen of Rias's peerage, scowling like her charge often does. "More bad news is about to be delivered, Akeno."

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Rukia and Momo both exchange looks with Ichigo as they walk, the Fifth Squad Lieutenant silently asking him the question, only to see him shaking his head that he doesn't know either. Keeping quiet until they step into the training dimension room, Yoruichi takes hold of Ganju's shoulder and tells the rest of them to keep up before disappearing with Ganju in a Shunpo. Kūkaku follows after her, but Ichigo gently grabs hold of the other two before they can speed off as well.

"I don't know what the hell is going on, so let's keep our heads on straight until we find out." He warns them quietly.

Momo giggles in reply. "This coming from the former poster-boy of no restraint."

"Second that." Rukia adds with a grin.

Ichigo rolls his eyes. "Seriously you two, this can't be good if Yoruichi has them tagging along.
and I can feel Tessai and Geta-Bōshi waiting as well."

Rukia frowns at him and looks the way the former Shihōin went, her eyes growing slightly larger when she feels the presence of the two others, neither of them bothering to suppress their Reiatsu for some reason.

Momo's eyes widen as she too senses the same thing. "Ichigo…this can't be good, can it?" She asks him worriedly.

"No. Let's go before we get chewed out for being too slow." He disappears in a Shunpo with the two Shinigami in tow. The three of them come to a stop after a few seconds of sprinting, noticing the desolation of the area they and the others are in.

"Sit." Yoruichi commands.

Momo, Rukia and Ichigo find places to sit, while Yoruichi, Kisuke and Tessai stand before them. Ganju and his sister stand to one side watching all of them, expressions of curiosity on their face. The biggest indicator that something big is going on is that Kisuke doesn't even have his fan in his hand as he steps forward and looks down at them.

"I won't bore you with long winded and complicated explanations, so here it is. Yoruichi found out from Suì-Fēng that you, Rukia and Momo, are being recalled to explain why you two haven't found out anything yet. Captain Unohana will examine both of you to see if you have had your memories replaced." The blonde scientist states bluntly.

"What? / What?"

No one flinches when Zangetsu suddenly appears behind the two stunned Lieutenants and glares at Kisuke unhappily. "What's really going on Geta-Bōshi, Okaa-san?"

Yoruichi's golden eyes take in all of them before fixing themselves on the Hollow spirit. "What did you expect was going to happen, Zangetsu? We leveled Las Noches, killed a shitload of Quincy, and all the former Espada and Números can't be accounted for. Head Captain is obviously being pressured by Central for answers, and…and there seems to be a growing influence within the government to wrest control of the Gotei from the old man. It seems my cousin Chiyoko is part of this new movement, and knowing her, there is definitely something shady going on behind the scenes." The female assassin pauses, then adds her reassurance. "Suì-Fēng will be there to help keep you two safe as well as Captains Kuchiki, Ukitake, Kyōraku, and Hirako. You won't be alone, and no matter what happens, we will be there for you two."

"Any other bad news you want to drop on us, Okaa-san?" Ichigo sighs out, unable to look at either of his friends in their eyes.

"Yes, they have the body of one of the Elves." Yoruichi reveals, and she sees Ichigo clench his fists in anger then.

"I want the body back, I don't care how it's done Okaa-san; I'm not leaving an Elf's body in the hands of that butcher Kurotsuchi for a second more. Did you... did you tell Merti or Sasha yet?"

Nodding her head, Yoruichi tells him that she has already done so. "As soon as Suì-Fēng can break in, she'll take the body back to Kūkaku's place and we'll retrieve it from there. There's one thing though Ichigo; according to them, it's too late by now for the tree of life to take root for that Elf. I'm sorry, with all the destruction and the battles going on, we really screwed up."
Dropping his head down, Ichigo reluctantly agrees with her. "We were all doing our best that day Yoruichi, but it seems it just wasn't enough. I just hope that if we get the body back, it will bring that Elf's family some sense of peace." Rubbing his face tiredly, he adds. "This day just keeps getting better and better, what more could go wrong?"

Tessai and Kisuke both stifle their laughter as Yoruichi sends each of them a glare before turning back and smiling sweetly at her 'son'. "Maybe...something else occurred when Merti and I went to get Kūkaku and Ganju." She hedges awkwardly.

Zangetsu slaps his face as he mutters loud enough for everyone to hear. "I understand now why Kingy drinks bottles of antacid when Okaa-san isn't within his sights..."

Yoruichi's eyebrows twitch irritably at his comment, and she lets both of them know it with forehead slaps to each of their heads. "It wasn't anything dangerous...I just stole a few Asauchi that's all...from the Shihōin vaults...no big deal...really." She trails off at the looks she is getting.

Two Shinigami, one hybrid Devil, and one hybrid Zanpakutō all stare at the woman incredulously.

"No..."

"Big..."

"Deal?"

"Are you fucking nuts!?"

The three older Shinigami stand idly by as the younger Shinigami and two hybrids shout and yell about it being the stupidest, most idiotic, craziest, and completely insane thing they had ever heard of. Ichigo is the worst when he says he would have gone crazy if she had been captured or worse, with Rukia right behind him in saying it's no wonder why the Berry is as looney as he is; with family like her, how could it not be inherited, even if they aren't blood related? Momo has the decency to hide her own opinions after her initial shout of disbelief, though her expression is one of clear disappointment. Zangetsu just stares at her with open disbelief, and if the way steam continues to escape his nose is any indication, he is trying really to control his emotions as he fumes in silence.

"Are you done yet?" The werecat asks while keeping her own anger under control. "I didn't do it for fun, I did it to send a message to someone, to leave me the fuck alone and to get Karin, Yuzu and Tatsuki their own Asauchi you morons. Did any of you think how you were going to pull that off by any chance?"

Zangetsu is the first to speak up, his eyes drifting to his wielder. "At least let us know next time Okaa-san. You know how he gets, just look at him."

Yoruichi sighs as she does see the hurt on Ichigo's face, appreciating that Zangetsu chose to point that out rather than lay into her like the others. Kneeling in front of her 'son', she grabs his hand and looks into his eyes. "Listen Ichigo. I didn't tell you because this is personal for me. I heard some pretty disturbing things about my Clan, and I wanted to send that woman a message that I could get to her anytime I want to. This is my Clan..."

"No, it isn't Okaa-san." Ichigo interrupts her quietly. "They were your family once, but you are my family now. If anything, this problem is our family's problem, and as family we will solve it together. You said to me once, that family sticks together through the good and the bad. If you are in danger, we will protect each other, regardless of who or what is coming after you. And if you
need our help, we're gonna give it to you. Yoruichi-okaa-san, you are a Naberius now, not a Shihōin. You call me son, I call you mother, and I'm not about to lose another mother, never again."

"...I swear I miss the old days when you were so easy to manipulate with a little skin showing." Pulling Ichigo into a tight embrace, she whispers into his ear then. "You're right, family does stick together Ichigo. I'm sorry."

He hugs her back just as tightly. "We can't lose you Yoruichi. Not just me, but the others: Chad, Uryū, Orihime, Tatsuki and the twins. More importantly, him, the one you know will be affected the most. All of us care for you, and if you were to die on us..."

"I know Ichigo, I know..." She kisses his forehead then and stands up, pulling him up with her. "I promise, I won't just disappear without telling you again."

"Alright. Now, what are we gonna do about these two?" Ichigo says as he points at Momo and Rukia, who slowly stand up while exchanging looks as well.

"We can't keep them here, too many questions already about their involvement, so we let them go and see what Central is really looking for. Jūshirō and Shinji might be able to return them on the grounds that they are already known and anyone new would be scrutinized too much, but mostly we'll just have to wait and see." Kisuke remarks to Ichigo, getting nods of agreement from all of them.

"I will have tracking Kidō placed on them as well, Ichigo-dono, don't you worry." Tessai smiles slightly at the look of exasperation on the young Devil Lord's face as he hears that hated honorific once again.

"Dammit Tessai, I told you drop that crap!" Rukia snorts and Momo giggles slightly at the vehemence of his protest.

"Laugh it up Kuchiki, I bet you probably eat it up having servants calling you Rukia-sama or Rukia-dono all the time." Ichigo jabs sourly at his best friend.

"Bite me Berry-dono." Rukia sticks her tongue out at him.

Getting serious now, Ichigo looks at the two Lieutenants with concern. "You know what I'm gonna ask, so are you two sure?"

Both Lieutenants nod after another look between themselves. "Ichigo, we have to go back and report to our Captains sooner or later. Yoruichi is right, what happened in Hueco Mundo was too much for anyone to miss, and refusing to check in will only put suspicion on us. As for what we will report, we'll them the truth that we have finally identified the strange anomaly as Devils and we are currently learning as much as we can about them. How open and willing we have found the Gremory Clan to put us up and that they have made no effort to subvert us or harm us. Of course, we'll keep the existence of you and the others out of our reports." The violet eyed Shinigami replies in her usual business-like tone, revealing none of her hidden worry.

"Momo, you have anything to say?" Ichigo asks of the other Shinigami Lieutenant, who shakes her head before smiling at him.

"We will be fine Ichigo. Captain Hirako is a fair Captain, and Tōshirō will stand with me along with Rangiku and most of the other Lieutenants too. As Yoruichi-sensei said, we need to find out what they know and whether Central is planning any actions against the Devils of Isehara."
Looking between the two Shinigami, he frowns but relents. "If this goes south…"

"Don't worry so much Ichigo, we'll be fine. Nii-sama and Renji won't let anything happen to us." Rukia says as she lightly taps his arm in reassurance.

"Alright, I'll see you guys in a minute, I need to speak to these guys alone if you don't mind. Go on without ahead me, Rukia, Momo?"

"Sure thing Ichigo." Rukia begins to walk away, the other Lieutenant joining her a second later.

As soon as the two Lieutenants are gone, Ichigo turns to the blonde-haired genius in the room. "Uncle, Akiko and I will perform the ceremony tonight. You sure it will fool Unohana?"

Kisuke pulls a silver ring from his Haori and hands it to the younger man. "She'll never be able to tell. As for the second part you asked for, all she has to do is move it from the finger you place it on to any other, and you will know within seconds that she needs you. Also, because of Tessai's Kidō, you will be able to teleport to her position without danger; the ring will give you a general outline of the room and its occupants." The bucket-hatted man smirks proudly. "Ichigo, you have impressed me greatly by asking for this; it'll take me a bit of time, but we'll have the rest done soon."

Palming the silver ring in his hand, the young Devil looks at it for a moment before closing his fist. "I just hope it doesn't come to that Kisuke; if it does, it really will mean a split in the Gotei."

Kisuke grabs hold of both of Ichigo's shoulders then, his eyes looking deadly serious. "It has to be done. If they continue to stagnate the way they have, they'll never be able to move forward as the other supernatural groups have done Ichigo. The Head Captain has to take back the reigns of control or else Central will become too powerful, and you know how they feel about those different than them or not under their control. If the Gotei goes to war and loses to Central…"

"I know, the balance will collapse and everything will fall like dominos." The Devil finishes with a scowl on his face.

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Rias waves to the departing members of her extended family, Ichigo leading the way with Uryū and Akeno walking side-by-side today. She smiles as her Queen teases the young Quincy male, even as far as the sally port she can hear Akeno asking loudly if the young man will help her create some new clothes for her wardrobe and whether she should model them for him. Closing the door, the crimson-haired King frowns to herself briefly; Ichigo's smile was forced when he said goodbye to her. Ever since he heard about Rukia and Momo's new orders, he had been hiding his feelings, worry etched deep in his brown orbs the few times she caught him thinking about it.

Looking at the closed door, Rias lowers her head until it touches the wooden door and she clenches her hand into a tight fist, bringing her own anger under control before she goes to meet up with her Pawn and her future sister-in-law. Schooling her features into her usual smile, she then sets out to join Orihime and Issei to take the two Devils back upstairs to where the young blond-haired nun is still sleeping. Passing by the library, she sees Sasha and Merti sitting inside with Kisuke, Tessai and Akiko, the five of them going over Ichigo's training with Kūkaku and Ganju and telling them what to expect tonight and Saturday when they have to leave for the Underworld to attend the next meeting of young Devils.

'He will win.' Rias mentally says to herself as she finds Orihime and Issei still waiting for her in the dining room. As soon as they see her, they stand and follow behind her as she leads them upstairs
to the room that Asia is sleeping in. The three of them stop before the closed door, one which just so happens to be the one closest to Akeno and Koneko's rooms. Gently knocking on the door, she waits a few moments before opening the door slightly. Seeing the young human girl still sleeping soundly, she smiles before turning to look at Orihime.

"I think some food might wake her Orihime. Could you bring her some of our breakfast?"

The Bishop nods her head and makes her way back downstairs to the kitchen to reheat some of their leftover breakfast. Looking at her Pawn, Rias closes the door and turns to him.

"I think it'd be best if you wait downstairs until I send for you, Issei. She'll probably be disoriented and may be a bit frightened when she wakes up." She can see in his eyes that he is torn between wanting to stay or obey her by leaving.

Finally, Issei lowers his head slightly. "I'll wait downstairs in the living room, if that's okay with you Buchou?"

Touching his arm, she smiles appreciatively and watches him quietly leave with a few backward glances. Her smile fades as she turns and opens the door gently again and quietly entering the room, leaving the door slightly ajar so Orihime can slip in when she returns. Finding an empty chair, the Gremory heiress sits in it and begins to think over the events of last night when her family had brought the unwelcome news to herself and Ichigo. She always knew Ichigo had a temper, but the killing wave that he released had caused the air to shimmer from its thickness before she brought him back by the simple process of grabbing his hand and squeezing it reassuringly.

After the two of them had made it back into the house before the rest woke up, they shared a long bath together, then got him dressed him for school and quietly talked about how she was going to approach and offer Asia a choice. When they descended the stairs together however, they could smell the food the two early-rising sisters were cooking, causing Ichigo's stomach to rumble loudly much to her amusement. Breakfast went normally enough until he was taken away by Yoruichi with the other Shinigami, only to come back in a subdued mood. She knew it was bad when he kept a distance from everyone until they actually left for school, and all he said was 'see ya' before leaving her with only a goodbye peck to her cheek.

A soft sigh causes her to look at the bed, and she sees the green eyes of the young nun slowly blinking open as the teen looks around at her surroundings. Asia doesn't seem to have registered her presence yet, but that changes when Orihime hip checks the door open as she carries in a tray of food and spots Asia starting to sit up in bed.

"I see you are awake Asia-chan." Orihime greets her with a friendly smile as she walks over to the bed.

Wide eyes dart between the Orihime and Rias, who she just realizes is sitting in a chair beside her bed, but the delicious smell of food prevents Asia from doing more than squeak out. "Where am I? How did I get here? Where's Issei-kun?"

Setting the tray on the bed next to Asia, Orihime steps behind Rias and allows the Gremory heiress to answer her questions.

"Issei is safe, Asia. Before we tell you the rest, there are some things we wish to discuss first, such as how you became involved with the Fallen Angels, the former exorcists and their mundane human allies, if you would tell us?" Rias gently questions the girl before her. This is the real reason she had Issei stay out of the room; she doesn't want Asia to associate her questioning with Issei's
presence, something which could taint the bond the young blonde nun has with her Pawn.

Looking down at her tray of food, Asia slowly nods and then starts off by slowly recalling her early childhood in the orphanage…

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Sasha takes one more look at the other occupant of the room. Tired of feeling his nervous fidgeting through the floor, she puts down her knitting and swings her blind eyes towards the worried young man.

"Issei Hyoudou, if you disturb my knitting one more time with that shaking foot of yours, I will cut it off." She brings forth one blade-tipped chain to stress her point.

"I…I'm sorry Sasha-sensei…it's just that this waiting…I…I want to make sure she's okay…I'm sorry, really I am." He holds his knees down in a futile attempt to stop his nervous jitters.

'The young Devils today.' Shaking her head, the blind Elf snaps her fingers to get his attention.

"Since you seem to be having trouble sitting still, use this time to meditate and find out what your Sacred Gear is. If it is what I believe it to be, then you should have spoken to him by now." Her blind eyes cast a brief glance at the left arm of the Gremory Pawn.

Looking down, Issei does feel a slight warming in his left hand. Deciding that until Buchou calls him, he might as well see if he can make sense of what happened yesterday, he folds his legs beneath himself and starts to slowly breathe in and out, clearing his head of all distracting thoughts; it is something he is now able to do after learning it the hard way from Yoruichi-sensei, who would constantly flick his forehead whenever he was distracted during meditation practice until he was able to enter that state of nothingness without any disruptions. The place, while a black void of nothing, still somehow allows him to be fully aware of the outside world, which doesn't prepare him for the change that takes place inside.

[I see you have come to seek me Issei Hyoudou.]

"Who are you?" The teen feels a large presence behind him, but when he turns around there is nothing there. Of course, this is entirely in his mind, so he doesn't actually turn around either.

[I am called Ddraig. The Welsh Dragon or Red Dragon Emperor. I once was a powerful dragon Issei Hyoudou…]

"Ah, Issei is cool Ddraig; you know you don't have to use my full name all the time." He absently rubs the back of his head.

[I see.] The teen almost swears he can hear annoyance in the dragon's voice.

Still unable to see the dragon he is talking to, he says the first thing that comes to mind. "So, you want to tell me more about you, since it looks like we will be with each other for a while?"

There is a silence, before the entity speaks again.

[I will give you a brief recounting of my life…Issei. I shall start from the beginning, some time in the past…]

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Asia sits in her new bed, her tray already cleared away after she finished her delicious meal. She is now looking at the two older teens with her mouth slightly hanging open. After telling them her story, the older girls had revealed their own pasts, and Asia could only feel shock at what she had learnt. Rias Gremory is the heiress to one of the Seventy-Two pillars of Devil society, while Orihime Naberius is the adopted sister to another heir of the Underworld. Asia had been amazed to learn that the kind, brown eyed young woman was once a human like herself, and she had willingly given it up to stay with her adoptive family. Furthermore, Orihime is also a healer like herself with the ability to heal all races, but unlike her, no one had punished her for what she could do with her powers. After hearing Orihime’s past, Asia had felt compelled to ask questions; at first, she was rather hesitant to ask, but with each new answer, she soon found herself unable to ask the questions quickly enough to answer the many questions that kept popping into her head.

"So, your Onii-san is a pure-blood Devil like Rias-sama, Orihime-san?" The nun asks with amazement, receiving a warm smile from the burnt-orange-haired healer.

"Yes, he is. Yuzu and Karin are pure bloods too; they are my younger adoptive sisters. My best friend Tatsuki became a Devil too, but that's because she was slowly changing and this was the safest way for her to gain her power. Asia, I know you have been taught that Devils are evil, but the truth is just like any other civilization, they have adapted and changed over time. I have known evil men who were supposed to serve a greater good, but whose hearts were taken by corruption; if you stay, you will meet those who had no choice in what they became because they had lost their hearts after dying, but after being given the chance, now they are good friends and fellow Devils like me."

"Do I...have to decide right away? The blonde-haired teen asks timidly.

Rias and Orihime both stand to their feet. "No Asia, will tomorrow be too early for you though?" The Gremory heiress asks kindly.

Shaking her head, she smiles as she says that will be time enough. The only thing she asks though is to see Issei if he is available. Both older girls giggle at her request and tell her to stay in bed, that Issei will be right up. After they leave, she leans back into her pillows, or several dozen pillows from what she can tell, her body is being propped up by quite a few of them. As she waits, she looks around the room she is in; it is nothing like the small cubby hole they had forced her to sleep in at the church, this is practically the largest room outside of some of the small deserted Cathedrals that she had spent time in after she was excommunicated.

Musing on the events of her life, she hears someone knocking on her door and calls for them to enter. She smiles when she sees a very relieved-looking Issei opening the door and entering her room.

"Hey." Issei says quietly, his brown eyes shining with warmth and concern.

"Hello Issei-kun." She replies, her green eyes shining with relieved tears.

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The three peerages sit together at lunch, their moods slightly dispirited between finding out that Rukia and Momo are going home on Friday night and the fact that Ichigo and Rias will have to fight for their future on Saturday. Sōna and Tsubaki are already making plans for the Sitri peerage to help the young Naberius Lord get ready for his fight; Serafall is planning on staying until Saturday morning before she has to return to the Underworld to help prepare for the young Devils gathering, while Sirzechs and Grayfia have already left. The conversations between the peerages are now about the brief battle that took place last night against the Fallen Angels.
"So, the ones responsible for Ichigo's and Issei's near deaths have been eliminated then?" Momo Hanakai asks her Shinigami namesake curiously.

Slurping her noodles, Momo Hinamori nods her head. "All of them but one. The exorcist named Freed is still at large. None of the Elves have been able to track him, it's like he is able to move about invisibly."

A muted growl causes everyone at the table to look at Ichigo, his face blank and his hands unmoving as he glares at his food darkly.

"Ichigo-senpai?" The Gremory Knight calls out worriedly to the older teen.

Slowly, his face twists to face them, causing many at the table to wince upon seeing his Hollow eyes burning in those pools of black. "He's dead; he just doesn't know it yet." Ichigo growls in a dual-toned voice.

"Senpai?" Tomoe asks with a shiver as she has never seen Ichigo Hollowfy before; the sight sends chills down her spine.

Golden irises scan the room quickly, and seeing that no one else is looking at him, Ichigo speaks lowly to the Devils. "Listen kiddies, he's thinking too much right now and without Rias being here because she's taking care of Asia-chan, he's getting cranky, so I took over to give ya all warning. Between that piece of crap human getting away, and the news from the Underworld and Soul Society, Ichigo isn't in a good place right now; he's feeling more than a bit stressed, so just try to keep that in mind for the rest of the week, and if you can, cut him some slack."

Tomoe watches in fascination as Ichigo's sclera fades from black to white; the simmering anger and worry can still be seen below the surface of his brown irises however. Poking at his food disinterestedly, the orange-haired Devil finally gives up and pushes it towards Chad.

"I'll be on the roof guys." No one moves or says anything as he walks away, hands in his pockets.

Once Ichigo is gone, Tomoe speaks in a hushed voice. "Was that...?"

"Yes, that was Zangetsu." Rukia frowns as she shifts her food idly on her plate as well. "We're going to have to help him get through this you guys. Normally I'd say leave him alone, but he isn't that fifteen-year-old kid I first met. He's now a seventeen-year-old man thrust into a world of responsibility that he wasn't taught to handle like a few us here have been."

Sōna frowns as well, looking towards the direction her cousin had walked off in and taking the Shinigami's words to heart. "I'll speak to him Rukia."

"I'd appreciate that Sōna; I think family would be ideal at this moment. Advice on how Devil nobility works and what he will soon face should come from someone that has been through it already." The Kuchiki heiress replies gratefully.

Tsubaki and the rest of the Sitri peerage watch as their King gets up and goes to seek out her relative; most of them are now used to dealing with the Gremory Clan, having found themselves actively becoming a part of both the Gremory Clan and the Naberius Clan on a daily basis, with the joint counter-invasion on Hueco Mundo being merely the most obvious example. The Queen of their peerage was the first one after Sōna who had seen the growing bonds of deeper friendship and camaraderie developing between the two peerages ever since Ichigo had first come to Kuoh, and the inclusion of the two Shinigami in their group had only deepened those bonds between them. Normally, the two peerages would operate independently of each other, perhaps even maintain a
friendly rivalry, but ever since her King had found out that Ichigo was her cousin, she had made sure that their peerages did everything together whenever they could. Looking around at the closely-knit atmosphere of the people at the table as she shifts her glasses upwards, Tsubaki prays internally that after this weekend they can live their lives as normal Devils and have fun like the humans would during their last year in high school.

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Pushing the rooftop door open, Sōna searches out for her second cousin and finds him lying on the roof above her, hidden from the casual observer checking the rooftop. Part of her wants to admonish him, but that is her sensible side speaking; the other side that is seeking him out is that of family right now. Scanning Isehara from her rooftop height, she finally sees what the Gremory Clan did when they picked this slightly elevated area for the Academy all those years ago. Less than a kilometer away, the first of the boutiques and market areas catering to the richer elements of the Academy begin, but she, like many others, have learned that the places just beyond those stores offer much better deals on items of equal or greater value. She and Rias had hit quite a few of those areas, dropping hundreds of thousands of yen easily from shop to shop during their first two years here.

Turning, she approaches where her cousin is lying, climbing up the ladder until she can see his prone body better. He keeps his eyes closed thankfully as she makes her way over and sits down next to him. Leaning back on her hands, she just waits for him to speak. Ten minutes pass before he does say something to her.

"You ever regret being born a noble Sōna?" His words are within her expectations, and she doesn't have to think much before answering his question.

"More than once or twice Ichigo." She replies frankly.

Cracking one eye open, he looks to make sure she has her skirt held down before he turns his head fully towards her. "I belong to two clans, and yet I know nothing about being a noble or any of the shit or baggage that comes with them. Now today, I find out I have less than a week to finish preparing to fight and basically demolish a Devil that is supposedly nigh-unbeatable just because as a noble the rules don't strictly apply to…us. Rias can't walk away with a simple refusal; she needs me to sever it in such a way that she won't dishonor her family and her Clan by her actions, and I am the only one who can do it."

Sōna looks down at him, a sad smile adorning her face as she speaks to him. "I would suggest a good game of chess Ichigo, but Rias isn't anywhere near as good as I or even Riser for that matter. The only choice she had before you came was a Rating Game, but compared to Riser, her peerage still lacks in members. With you though, you can do what most people can't, and that is to beat Riser Phenex one on one in a duel; you have the magic and the Kidō in you to do that. Serafall, Candice and I know that with what we are teaching you, you will succeed, you will win, and you will marry Rias Saturday night."

"...And if I don't?"

'Where the hell did that come from?' Sōna stares at her cousin, feeling somewhat surprised by his defeatist attitude, but her answer slips out before she can prevent it.

"Then she will become part of his harem and he'll have his way with her every night."

"Fuck that!" Ichigo jumps to his feet and begins pacing back and forth, his agitation now on full display.
"I know what he did over the summer break Sōna, how he manhandled her, insulted her like she was like some kind of 'escort' who is paid to spread her legs and let him do whatever he wants to her! Do you know why I am so pissed Sōna!? I'll tell you why! I don't know if I will be able to keep myself from killing him if he doesn't or won't yield!" He stops pacing as he feels his Reiatsu threatening to break loose, spending a few moments just trying to calm down his raging emotions.

Sensing his weakness, Sōna pushes him to talk more. "Being a noble does set us apart from others Ichigo, it sets higher standards for our bearings, appearances, and what we do in public does affect our standings with other nobles and their Clans. Riser, even though he is a pig-headed chauvinist, does act within the rules set down by our forefathers on how to act in public; however disgraceful I find his behavior with his peerage in private, it is an acceptable one by our standards."

She knows that statement will provoke Ichigo, and she isn't disappointed by his reaction.

"I don't give a shit if it is acceptable or not! He's supposed to show her respect as a man, not act like a fucking man-whore around her!"

Trembling with barely-repressed fury, Ichigo clenches his fists and squeezes his eyes shut. "I love her Sōna, I love her so much, and he threatens that love. For the first time in my life since my mom died, I feel like I can move on, and Rias is the center of my world now. Do you know Rukia once confessed to me? We both knew it wouldn't truly work out, she's there, I'm...I was human. And I wasn't going to let that change anytime soon. Not after what my family went through after Kaachan died, I wasn't going to put them through that again if I had any say in it. Even as a Devil now I'm going to do everything I can to prevent that, while still fighting to protect the people I care for. Orihime was another fuck up on my part, I knew she had feelings for me, but I couldn't find it in me to ease her down during the buildup to the Winter War and when it was over, I was already gone. Next time she saw me, I was in a relationship with Rias. Fuck!"

Sōna watches her cousin punch the water storage container behind her in his anger. While she doesn't like to see him so distressed, she knows he needs to get all this off his chest before his fight with Riser on Saturday, otherwise it would only serve to distract him in battle. She is surprised however by how much is actually weighing on his mind...

"What am I going to do Sōna?" He suddenly asks her out of the blue. "I truly believe the world is out to get me today...between this, Rukia and Momo being recalled, and what happened last night, I haven't had any time to think, sit back and take stock of shit at all."

'Now we are finally at the heart of his problems. Separation from his Shinigami friends on top of fighting Riser isn't the only issue causing him stress however.'

Pushing up her glasses, Sōna answers him frankly. "You knew sooner or later that Rukia and Momo would have to go back Ichigo, so what it is you are really feeling?"

She sees him looking at her sideways then. "You certainly live up to your reputation, Sōna Sitri. Fine, the truth is that I'm afraid I'll never see Rukia again, okay? In those months before the Winter War and then the battle I fought and defeated Aizen in, she and Renji became my best friends, family to me, and if she goes back, there is a very real chance I may never see her again. Central Forty-Six sentenced me to death because of my power, and Head Captain Yamamoto let them do it. As Yoruichi-okaa-san reminded me so harshly that day, I'm supposed to have my power sealed and my memory wiped, so me going there to see them ain't exactly a good idea."

Sōna frowns in thought. "I still don't understand how that happened, Ichigo. You are a noble of the Shiba Clan, doesn't that..."
His snort cuts off her questioning. "The Shiba clan started to fall apart after my cousin Kaien died and Goat-Face chose to hide in the World of the Living with my Mom. You've met my cousin Kūkaku; well, I don't think she really cares for Seireitei life, her idea of being a noble is to rile the rest of them up and call them out on their petty ante bull. My cousin isn't 'their kind' of noble Sōna, she… she is a true Shiba, one who won't put up with shit from anyone, no matter who they are. I guess that is partly where I get my 'rules don't mean shit' attitude from, it comes from that side of my family. Anyway, once the Shiba Clan left Seireitei, they were no longer considered one of the Five Great Noble Houses anymore, so what little weight the Shiba name may have carried died there."

"I see. Now tell me Ichigo, would your cousin Kūkaku let you sit up here wallowing in self-pity?" Sōna smirks as she sees fear flash across Ichigo's face, and he swallows while looking away nervously as she continues speaking.

"I didn't think so, Lord Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius. That name alone carries more than just your three families, it says who and what you are: Devil, Quincy, Shinigami and Hollow, and the replacement one day for your great-grandfather as the Guardian of the Damned, Keeper of the Skeleton Tower and the Watcher of the Gates of Hell. A little stress goes along with being a Devil noble, former Shinigami, future brother-in-law to a Maou, cousin to another Maou, and Rias's future husband and someday father to her children. So now it's time you started learning how to be a noble, not just acting like one. First things first however: we will deal with Riser as the challenger for Rias's hand. Then we will work on Rukia and your other friends afterwards."

Getting to her feet, Sōna brushes off her skirt before looking back at him. "Come on Ichigo, before we're really late; Yoruichi-sensei will cut us only so much slack."

Standing beside her, she sees Ichigo giving her a thoughtful look then. "Is that how you got out of your arrangement, Sōna? A game of chess?"

She smiles at her orange-haired cousin. "My opponent was arrogant and never saw it coming. Just as Riser won't know what hit him until it's too late. Sitri magic runs strong in you Ichigo, which is surprising though useful; between our magic and the Flames of Hell, you are truly a scary opponent to face."

Ichigo returns her smile appreciatively. "Thanks, Sōna, I'll apologize to the rest after school for being an ass. Rukia will tell you it's my worst feature, over-thinking things."

She puts her arm through his and waves her hand, a magic circle appearing under their feet. "You're just worried Ichigo, and no one will blame you for that. They will only blame you if you sit around and mope endlessly."

As the magic takes effect, he finally begins to smirk at her. "Yeah, I guess I'm not that moody fifteen-year-old anymore."

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Yoruichi glares at her two late students, Sōna graciously nodding to her as she makes her way to her seat, Ichigo however stops and leans into her ear briefly. "Sorry Okaa-san, won't happen again."

She looks at him from the corner of her eye and then motions for him to take his seat. Resuming her lesson, she hides her smile as she turns to the blackboard.

"Next Tuesday will be your first test..." A bigger smile forms at the collective groan coming from
her students.

"How will this be handled then?" The man who is speaking has his face hidden by a placard.

Chiyoko Shihōin stands in the middle of the forty-six nobles, a tight smile on her face. "We will arrest them the moment they arrive back. Interrogations will be handled by our special squad and confessions will be extracted by any means necessary." She replies back confidently.

"And if their respective Captains object, then what are your plans?" Another faceless voice asks.

A dark smirk appears on her face then. "You are the highest authority in Soul Society now, use your will and bend them as your forbearers failed to do before the traitor took their honorable lives."

Rias, Issei and Sasha sit at the kitchen island watching Orihime and Asia prepare dinner for the rest of their friends. The Devil heiress keeps glancing at the blushing face of Issei every time the blonde-haired nun asks if he can taste the dishes, and has him tell them what he thinks of them. She can't help the smile that forms on her face listening to her Pawn stutter his responses, Sasha making it worse when she tells Asia the famous saying that the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Rias feels a slight blush thinking about the same thing with Ichigo; he always eats extra portions of her meals when it is her turn to cook, Yuzu even complaining that her 'Ichi-nii' was complementing her food more than hers.

Ichigo's two Knights soon make their way to the kitchen area themselves, both of them having come back from their trip to Hueco Mundo to spread the word that the threat to their home is no longer an issue. They also told the hiding Hollows that Las Noches had been destroyed and the former Queen wouldn't be returning. Judging by the state of their clothes, some Hollows had not cared for the news, or simply didn't care for their presence.

"Hime, what's cooking?" The blue-haired Devil asks as he picks up a piece of fruit and bites into it.

Ichigo's Bishop taps her chin as she looks at Grimmjow. "Let's see...we'll be having tonkatsu covered in sauce with shredded cabbage, miso soup, rice, and pickled daikon. For those who don't eat meat we have miso soup, rice, and pickled daikon, but in place of the tonkatsu and cabbage, we have kabocha croquettes and Nasu Dengaku instead. Dessert will be Asia's favorite that we found online how to make: crepes filled with fruit filling and topped with powdered sugar."

By the time the young woman is finished describing their dinner, mouths are watering and more than a few eyes drift towards the kitchen as the delicious smells waft into the dining room. Those who are still in school decide to work on their homework as they wait, while Nelliel fills in Ichigo and Sasha on the events of their trip. She reveals that they did run into a few Hollows that needed 'encouragement' to not try and eat the newly reincarnated Devils, though Grimmjow barks out a laugh then, recalling how he had to use his Resurrección to emphasize his mate's point to a newly evolved Vasto Lorde.

"So how did it go?" Yuuto asks of the former Sexta.

Grimmjow's grin grows larger then. "It wasn't much of a fight after I released, he just didn't stand a chance. Becoming a Devil did wonders to get me to the level of power that I have now, compared to what it was then."
Ichigo arches an eyebrow at him. "So, after dinner you feel like testing that out Grimmjow?"

Grimmjow doesn't get a chance to answer as Sasha interrupts them both. "After dinner Ichigo, you will begin training, we have a plan to help you for this Saturday. Do not fret Grimmjow, you will take part in it. The only ones I want watching this week are Orihime, her healing will be needed, and Issei, who is still learning how to use his new powers. After this Saturday, Issei's training will resume, but it will also change to help him increase his magic."

"Oh? So what kind of training will I be getting Sasha?" The young Naberius lord asks.

Sasha turns her cloudy eyes towards him and she smiles darkly. "By the time this week is over Ichigo, you will not lose to the likes of Riser Phenex."

Popping another piece of fruit into his mouth, Ichigo's Knight smirks madly. "I think someone is gonna get his ass kicked all week."

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Asia sits between Rias and Issei during dinner, her face flushed from the many compliments given to her for the meal she and Orihime had cooked. Yuzu brought some levity to the table when she was heard muttering about her older sister becoming a better cook than she is, until Ichigo whispered something in her ear that made her eyes go wide and a big smile form on her face. After that, their talk slowly became a question and answer session for the young blonde-haired nun who begins by asking if everyone at dinner is a Devil.

She is greatly surprised by some of the answers.

Orihime is the first to answer, even though Asia already knows her story. "I was human, and so were Tatsuki and Chad."

"I am a Quincy, but this Wednesday I'll become a Devil." Candice remarks from her place next to Yuuto.

Nelliel answers next, the mature woman giving her an encouraging smile. "I and Grimmjow were once Hollows known as Espada, the same is true for Ichigo's Queen and five of his Pawns, they too are Hollows, but they will become Devils this Wednesday along with Candice. To be fair, I will miss Hueco Mundo, however being back in the World of the Living has brought a sense of peace to me." She pauses then, a sorrowful expression crossing her face. "Ichigo had two more Pawns who were Hollows, and they were my brothers in all but blood, but... they were lost in battle."

Grimmjow squeezes her hand beneath the table before changing the subject. "Only thing I'll miss about Hueco Mundo are the fights, but with Ichigo around, I won't be bored much." This draws out a few chuckles and grins, breaking the gloomy atmosphere brought on by Nelliel's previous comment.

"I am a Quincy, and I am Ichigo's cousin. Unlike Orihime, Chad, Tatsuki and Candice, I will not be reincarnated as a Devil." Uryū states as from his seat beside Akeno.

"You're still human then? So why are you here if you don't mind me asking?" Asia inquires of him curiously.

Looking around the table before pushing up his glasses, Uryū gives Ichigo a look which the Devil returns with a nod of his head. "Well the truth is we were separated not too long ago…"

Speaking briefly, the younger Quincy gives a basic retelling of the events starting from Rukia's
arrival to Karakura all the way up to the event where they found out Ichigo had been forcefully exiled after defeating the then traitor to Soul Society, Sōsuke Aizen.

"Once we were told the truth and were allowed to see him again." He pauses then before continuing. "We decided that we couldn't separate again. The four of us had been through a lot together, and now that Tatsuki is here, all we are missing really are the majority of our Shinigami comrades."

Rukia lowers her head at his words. "Momo and I must leave this Friday, Asia, we...we don't know when we will able to return, if at all."

Rias grabs the petite Shinigami's hand then. "Don't say that Rukia, things are being worked on right now that will allow you to contact Ichigo in the future. Kisuke is coming up with alternatives even as we speak."

Momo looks hopefully at the blonde-haired shop keeper who has yet to say a word. "Is this true Urahara-san?"

"It is. A few things are coming along nicely." No one misses his creepy smile when he says that however.

Rolling his eyes, Ichigo turns to the teenage nun. "So, any other questions Asia?"

"If I were to become a Devil would I still be able to pray and read the Bible?" Her eyes lower at this point.

"No, but Kisuke can probably come up with something." Ichigo answers. "He's useful like that."

Eyes lighting up, she looks at the blonde scientist with sparkling eyes. "Really? You would do that for me?"

Kisuke begins to sweat under her earnest gaze, but Ichigo speaks up before he can protest. "You would be giving up something close to your heart Asia; I think it's only fair some of us help you out now and then. Mind you it might take a while, but we will make the effort to find a way that won't bring you pain or anything." The orange-haired Devil reassures her with a sideways glare at Kisuke.

"Thank you Ichigo-sama..." She begins to tear up.

"No sama." Tatsuki interrupts her.

Chad speaks next. "Nor dono."

"Ichigo is allergic to honorifics in private, but understands that they are necessary evil in public with other Devils of nobility." Merti concludes, much to Ichigo's annoyance as he growls at them.

Giggling through her tears, Asia looks at Rias and then asks what Evil Piece she'd receive if she agrees to become a part of her peerage.

Rias thinks for a while, then smiles at her. "You would become my second Bishop, Asia."

"Second? There's someone else?" The fiancé of Rias looks at her in surprise, as do most of his peerage and the Elves.

Akeno face-palms at their reactions. "You didn't tell Ichi-kun about Gasper?"
The crimson-haired heiress's eyes widen with shock then. "Oh, I am so sorry Ichigo. I'm so used to doing things without him, and…well, the truth is I don't know how to help him yet. Not even Beelzebub Maou has been able to come up with a way to help Gasper after my brother asked him for suggestions."

Yoruichi and Kisuke both exchange a look at that tidbit. "Tell us what the problem is Rias-san, maybe we can help." The werecat asks her intriguingly.

Koneko speaks up then, all eyes turning to the usually quiet Neko. "We could really use Gasper's help Rias-nee, and it isn't fair to keep him sealed that way forever. We know why you had no choice but to do it, but now we have Ichi-nii and the others, maybe we can finally help him."

Ichigo prods Rias then. "We'll talk about how to help him later, but first: why is he sealed?"

Poking at her dish despondently, Rias relays the events that led to Gasper becoming her Bishop, knowing full well how her soon-to-be husband is going to react. To no one's surprise, the story does gain a reaction from Ichigo; even if it was brief, the house still shook slightly from his Reiatsu. Looking back on her actions, Rias also has to admit to being too young at the time when she reincarnated Gasper, failing to fully grasp how dangerous his abilities were due to her inexperience. Having no choice, she had ended up sealing him away until she could gain enough strength to help him control that incredible power.

"So, he can stop time and you said he has another ability, but you're not sure of its complete nature." Kisuke sits with his fan out, tapping his cheek idly in deep thought.

"That's one hell of an edge to have Rias. Between him and Asia, if she chooses to become your other Bishop, you would have an immense edge in future Rating Games." Kimi offers from her spot next to her mother.

Sitting at the other end of the table, Venelana folds her hands and rests her chin on them, speaking with the voice of experience as she informs them that they already have too much to do.

"While I do agree we should solve this problem and soon, this week will be quite full with training. I do believe they are currently waiting, Merti, Sasha." The Gremory Matriarch reminds them.

"Yes, they have arrived and are indeed waiting for their young lord. Orihime: you, Asia and Issei will observe this week. Your own training will have to wait until next Monday, seeing that we will need your healing abilities for the next five days." Ichigo's Elfin advisor requests from the trio.

"Ah, what exactly is going on?" Ichigo is getting that gut feeling once again.

Yoruichi stands and stretches almost languidly; walking by Issei, she gives him a light love tap on the head as he holds his bleeding nose and tries to avert his eyes from her. "You want to know Ichigo, ya gonna have to follow me and find out."

Seeing that dinner is over, the rest of the teens stand as well and follow after her, Ichigo bringing up the rear with Rias on his arm. The group make their way to the door leading to the dimension that they use for training; stepping through the door, Ichigo's eyes narrow as he sees every single member of the Naberius Clan waiting for them, and he is beginning to get uncomfortable flashbacks to a previous training session that began the same way. Rias kisses his cheek and tells him to stay where he is, as she and her peerage head up to the viewing platform where Serafall is watching, along with Sōna's peerage and the younger members of his peerage.

Just like last time, Akiko steps forward first and she once again begins to release her chains and
engulfing her body in flames. "Rules are simple Ichigo. You will fight all of us, and you will not use Zangetsu at all. You may use any Kidō, Hollow power, Quincy power or Devil magic you have, just no killing blows. Those on the viewing platform are off-limits, they have their own practice to do."

"That's it?" He begins to release his own chains and don his armor.

"Oh, just one other thing. You fight us all at once." She slams the ground with a grin, causing a pillar of flames to erupt from under his feet and signaling the start of the fight. He hastily Shunpos out of the way, only for his eyes to widen at the sight of chains, Bala and Cero from the Espada, Kidō from the Shinigami, as well as every major attack his great-grandfather and grandfather's peerage members have in their arsenals chasing him down, while numerous magic circles light up on the viewing platform and rain spells down on him as well.

"Dammit!!"

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Asia sits on her knees with awe in her eyes as she heals the red-haired Irishman Conor, who claims to be the descendant of a legendary Irish hero, as he and his wife continue to laugh and chat together as they watch her regrow three layers of new skin for his burnt arm. All around her, people are laughing and joking in the aftermath of the battle, and it amazes her that none of these people are showing any signs of distress or pain, unlike the many people she had healed as a member of the Church in the past.

When the fight first began, she had honestly felt scared to death at the power she was feeling and the countless attacks reshaping the dimension until she could no longer recognize the place she had first seen. She had ended up gripping Issei's hand for courage, and he had pulled her closer to his side without even realizing it, an action which caused her eyes to pop out and a blush to form on her cheeks, but she didn't say a word to stop him either. As the fight progressed, both she and he would squeeze each other's hands repeatedly to reassure themselves of their safety, watching as Ichigo defended and attacked at the same time while weaving through the veritable maze of powerful attacks. Parts of his body and armor would get destroyed by glancing blows both physical and magical, but he would just grow new ones at near instantaneous speeds while continuing to take out his attackers. Orihime, who was standing beside her, had filled her in that Ichigo's Zanpakutō spirit, Zangetsu, was part Hollow and held the power of high-speed regeneration, an ability which he kept when he was reforged.

Watching the raging battle, she at first had worried that the others were trying to kill Ichigo, and she even had the feeling that some of them had half heartily tried - namely Grimmjow, Conor and Akiko - but as the battle continued, she saw something that confused her greatly; each of the people attacking Ichigo were sporting grins and even laughing as they fought, while every now and then the orange-haired Devil would also bark out a laugh or two if he got in a few good attacks, some of which had actually resulted in pretty amusing situations for the recipients. One incident she couldn't help blushing at was when a surprise attack by Ichigo's water magic had nearly ripped the clothes off of the Rook Akio Kawaguchi; the former human had frantically tried to cover himself as he used his magic to repair his clothes, and the wolf-whistles directed at his bare bottom had urged him to finish repairing his trousers even quicker.

As the nearly one-sided fight slowly evened into a stalemate, she could tell that it was taking its toll on Ichigo as his armor had slowed in its self-repair, but his limb regeneration hadn't slowed nearly as much. When she asked about it, Orihime had told her that Ichigo still wasn't as experienced with his Devil magic as his Hollow and Shinigami powers, and even though he had surpassed the rest of
them, he was still nowhere near as well versed as the older peerage members. The burnt-orange-haired healer then told her not to worry about it too much, since if things got really bad, Ichigo still had means of escape. Wondering what her fellow healer meant, Asia got to see it first hand when the black-armored Devil suddenly dropped into a shadow and disappeared, prompting looks of concern and expectancy on the faces of those he was fighting. Each of them turned towards the shadow nearest to them, many of them trying to keep each other's backs covered or turning them away from anything casting a shadow; their actions were explained a moment later as chains tipped with black spheres and burning with blue fire shot out from the shadows without warning, forcing each of them to dodge at speeds nearly imperceptible to her. It turned out to be merely a distraction as jets of water followed their movements, shooting at them from other shadows, drenching their clothes and causing the ground to get muddy beneath their feet.

Not wanting to fight on the slippery ground, those who had wings expanded them, while those who didn't used other means to take flight, escaping the primitive trap set by the noble heir. Ichigo himself shot out of a shadow and took to the air as well, and the battle resumed as before, though this time Ichigo focused on defeating his slower adversaries, while those with speed and agility continued to score blows against him. Most of the offensive spellcasters had already been taken out in the earlier battle, leaving those who were skilled at close combat and those who were exceptionally good at defensive casting. Finally, it was the combination of a large man she later learned was named Tessai Tsukabishi, Kisuke Urahara, Akiko the nine-tailed Kitsune, and Merti the Woodland Elf that brought the fight to an abrupt end.

Tessai had briefly trapped Ichigo with a large-scale Bakudō, followed by both Kisuke and Akiko hitting him immediately with chains and suppressive Kidō, then Merti had performed the coup-de-grâce by flipping Ichigo's helm off and punching him sharply in the back of his head, stunning and knocking him out before his Hollow regeneration could kick in. She then grabbed him before he could even start to fall, cradling his body close to hers even as Akiko and Urahara jumped up to help her, Tessai slowing their fall with another Kidō. As the quartet slowly descended to the muddy ground below them, Momo and Rukia were the first to reach them, both Shinigami Lieutenants using Kaidō to examine and heal Ichigo's multiple injuries. Rias flew down from the viewing platform to join them as well, ending up fretting over the two Shinigami as they healed the unconscious Devil. Asia had felt her own breath finally let out in a gust of relief when she heard Ichigo loudly asking Merti if she knew she hit harder than his father, laughter from those on the sidelines greeting her ears as they stood up as well and began to make their way to the downed Devil to offer their comments. Orihime then grabbed her hand, dragging her - and by proxy Issei - along so that she could get to Ichigo as quickly as possible to help him recover.

After being flown over the muddy ground by Orihime and Issei, Asia's green eyes took in the scene before her as Orihime released them and joined the two petite Shinigami who had moved on to healing the others as well. Not quite sure what to do, Asia had stood there until a hand found its way to her shoulder; looking behind her, she saw the blonde-haired Kisuke Urahara holding a fan in front of his face.

"Asia-chan, would you mind using your Twilight Healing to help with the healing so Orihime, Rukia and Momo don't exhaust themselves today?" He had asked her politely.

Nodding, she had walked up to the first patient he directed her towards, a tall young man she heard was named Chad who was sitting on the ground with his arm hanging at an odd angle, while Yuuto sat next to him, his foot also pointing at an unnatural angle. The two of them had rather foolishly jumped into the battle after the majority of the spellcasters were defeated, wanting to test the limits of their own strength as well. Fortunately, Ichigo had disabled them swiftly and painlessly, and as she laid her hands on the taller teen and called on her Sacred Gear, she helped heal her first person of the night. Once she was done healing both teens, she had moved on to the
next injured person, gaining praise and thanks for her assistance from each one, and inwardly marveling at how different these people were from the ones she had healed in the past.

Soon a cough brings her out of her thoughts, and she looks up to see the white-haired Hanako smiling down at her. "You did very well Asia, I can't even tell where Conor got burnt. You are just as talented as Orihime at healing; Rias will be very fortunate to have you as a member of her peerage. I do hope you accept her offer Asia Argento, she treats her peerage as extended members of her own family, and I know she will care for you like a younger sibling of her own."

With that said, the Kyuubi Kitsune-Nekomata Devil hybrid gathers her husband's arm in hers, and they make their way over to where the older Kyuubi is slapping the back of her own husband, walking past Tatsuki who is waving her hands wildly and berating the sheepish Chad and Yuuto for jumping into the battle despite being told not to. Sitting back down on a clean patch of grass, Asia almost jumps out of her skin when a cup appears in front of her face, the steaming tea a welcoming change of smell from the blood and dirt hanging about. Looking up, she thanks the orange-haired Devil who is standing next to her and looking unfazed by the brutal training session he had just gone through.

"Thanks for the help Asia. I think we would have worn out Rukia, Momo and Orihime if we had only those three helping to heal us." He smiles as he watches the peerages congregating with each other.

"Ic…Ichigo-san, isn't there any other way to free Rias-sama?" She asks him timidly, having learnt from Rias about her engagement to some horrible person and the need for Ichigo to beat him in a duel.

Asia sees him glancing at Issei who is standing with the Pawns of the older peerages and speaking with them, but he quickly shakes his head and turns back to her. "There might have been another option, but I didn't want to risk it to be honest. He might have been able to pull it off, but I want this more, so I will fight for her freedom. I…well, let's just say love makes you act funny at times."

She giggles and thanks him again for the tea, then watches as he makes his way to the crimson-haired Devil heiress who fusses over him. A few shouts from him are heard when the purple-haired woman Yoruichi suddenly leans into him and says something she can't hear. Taking a deep breath and sighing as she witnesses the close familial relationships that she has always longed for, she suddenly notices a blushing Issei looking at her and feels her heart beating faster in response.

'Maybe I've already made up my mind.' She smiles and waves to the brown-haired Sacred Gear holder, who smiles and waves back at her.

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At ten minutes to three in the morning, Ichigo is woken up by the vibrating watch on his wrist. Without moving much more than his arms, he shuts the watch off and rubs the sleep out of his eyes. His body, while no longer sore, is still heavily fatigued from the fight. Rubbing his arms on the smooth back of the young woman sleeping nude on top of him, he slowly circles his arm around her body and rolls her over until she is lying on her back. Watching as her blue orbs blink open sleepily, he smiles and captures her lips for a long kiss. Breaking apart after her arms wrap themselves around his neck, he speaks lowly to her.

"We should be back in an hour or two, no more Rias." He sees her nod her understanding.

"I'll keep the bed warm for you until then." She kisses him one more time before telling him to hurry home.
With a promise to do so, he gets up and heads to their bathroom, quickly washing his face and
dressing in dark clothes. Checking to make sure he has the silver ring for tonight, he kisses Rias's
sleeping form one more time before heading out into the hallway. Quietly closing the door, he
turns around and pauses when he sees the people waiting for him. Walking up to Merti, he greets
his Head of Household.

"Everyone else under?" He asks the Elf quietly, his eyes darting to the unexpected person beside
her.

Rolling her eyes at him, Merti smiles at his answering scowl. "I've only been doing this for a
thousand years or more Ichigo. Putting a number of teenagers into a deep slumber is quite easy for
me. We did forget that Orihime here wouldn't be affected because her Shun Shun Rikka would
have seen and nullified the potion easily though."

"Don't worry Ichigo, I won't say anything about tonight, not even to Tatsuki, Chad or Uryū, and
yes, not to her either." His adopted sister tells him quietly.

Placing a hand on her shoulder, he murmurs his apologies to her. "Sorry Hime, but you understand
why this has to be kept secret for now."

She nods. "I do. So, we better hurry then."

Taking the lead, he heads towards the room that they use for teleporting to the Underworld. Once
they are within, he turns to the only one who hasn't spoken yet and gives her a reassuring grin.
"When this is over, I have one more thing to give you."

The petite figure nods her head as the light grows around them and takes them to where she will
become the second Bishop for Ichigo Naberius. The wide smile on her face isn't missed by any of
them.

XXXXX

Venelana and Grayfia arrive back at the Gremory Estate a little past ten P.M. Both of them had
been asked to witness the reincarnation of Ichigo's Queen and his six Pawns. Seeing the tears of
happiness on the young Quincy's face as she accepted her piece had been one of the most moving
parts of the ceremony. After they had finished taking Tia and the five Arrancar to private rooms to
recover after their holes had disappeared, a second ceremony was held to convert the young nun,
Asia Argento into her daughter's second Bishop. Immediately afterwards, Rias and her peerage had
surrounded the young girl and welcomed her into their family; seeing her cry with happiness,
Venelana had immediately joined them and hugged the quickly flustered young blonde, telling her
that she would love having Asia as her newest daughter and causing Asia to shed more tears of joy.

Both ceremonies had also marked the first time that all four Maou were in attendance for a
reincarnation event as well. Serafall was staying with Ichigo every night to help him in his training
and to teach him some of the Sitri Clan's more powerful magic, while Sirzechs wouldn't miss the
reincarnation of his sister's newest Bishop for the world, so their presence was only to be expected.
Less expected were Falbium and Ajuka, both of whom had unexpectedly shown up and asked to
witness the reincarnation of Ichigo's Queen, since they had met her during the battle against the
Quincy and were curious to witness the reincarnation of an Arrancar for themselves.

Needless to say, both Maou left the reincarnation ceremony with many new ideas.

As the two Gremory women enter the vast foyer of the Main Gremory Estate, the senior maid on
duty bows to both of them.
"Lady Gremory, Eleni Phenex seeks an audience with you as well as with Lady Grayfia. She is waiting in the formal sitting room." The maid bows to them again and steps aside.

Violet eyes meet silver; the older woman then leads the way to the sitting room, while Grayfia changes her clothes with magic regain her image as the Head of the Gremory Household. As they make their way along the hallways, they pass Zeoticus, who shrugs his shoulders helplessly as they both give him a questioning looks but doesn't join them. Stopping in front of the door to the formal sitting room, Venelana allows her daughter-in-law to open it and enter first; Grayfia then stands to the side to allow her mother-in-law to enter, as dictated by her position as the Matriarch of the Gremory Clan. Sitting in a chair by the fireplace, a woman of great beauty awaits them while quietly reading a book; her blonde hair frames deep blue eyes that turn to gaze at them.

Closing her book and putting it to one side, the woman rises and nods her head to both of them. "Good evening Venelana, Grayfia."

Both women return her greetings and walk over to join her; Grayfia takes up position behind her mother-in-law, hands folded in front of her and eyes scanning the blonde woman across of them, while Venelana takes up her place directly opposite of the woman who she would have once called sister-in-law, but no longer if things go as planned.

"Hello Eleni, what brings you to our home at this hour?" Venelana asks as they both sit down, giving the Phenex Matriarch a genuine smile.

Before the other woman can answer, a knock at the door announces the arrival of a tray bearing both tea and spirits, along with finer refreshments for their consumption. The two servants quickly serve their mistress and her guest before bowing deeply and taking their leave. A few silent moments pass as the women sip from their respective cups, before Venelana waves to Eleni once again.

"I came to see why Grayfia has refused to allow my son to visit his fiancée in Isehara for these past few months." The blonde woman says with a glance towards the silver-haired woman. "Is there something amiss I should be concerned about? Or should I ask if the rumors going around are true?"

Venelana stares intently at the mother of Riser Phenex, before sighing out her answer. "Really, Eleni? The reason your son has been denied permission is because we are currently housing a few guests that have requested to remain anonymous at this point of time. Until their departure, no Clan outside of the Sitri and Gremory Clans are allowed in our territory."

The blonde Devil raises a delicate eyebrow at her. "May I ask why the Naberius Clan has four Elfin assassins housed with your daughter and her peerage then?"

Grayfia steps in at this point, answering for both of them. "They are present in their capacity as bodyguards, as we have had need of their services to ensure the safety of our guests; Lord Amyntas was most generous in lending them to us for the duration of our guests' visit."

Minutes tick by as the three women engage in a staring match, before Eleni huffs out in annoyance. "Let's end this charade Venelana, I know for a fact that your daughter is in love with someone else and has no intentions of marrying my son. As one mother to another, all I ask is that whatever you are planning, please make sure my Riser isn't killed to end this arrangement. That is all I seek here today, a promise to spare his life."

Seeing the bitterness and resignation on her friend's face, Venelana's expression visibly softens. "I promise you that your son will survive no matter what, Eleni. I am truly sorry that this arrangement..."
even occurred, but my husband and son were not aware of a more suitable option until just recently."

The blonde woman closes her eyes, allowing her posture to relax fractionally to signify her relief. "Who is it then? I have not heard of any other Clan putting forth a suitable suitor for your daughter."

Venelana smiles mysteriously at her. "He is someone who has recently become a Devil, Eleni. I cannot speak further about this as it is not my place to discuss it without the permission of his Clan."

Opening her eyes and staring at the brunette sitting before her, then at the silver-haired wife of the current Lucifer, Eleni finally nods her head. "I have your assurances that whatever it is your daughter is planning, it will not result in my son's death?"

The Gremory Matriarch leans forward and takes her counterpart's hand in hers. "Yes, you have my word, Eleni."

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Friday comes too fast for the entirety of the house. Rukia and Momo are both packing the few knickknacks they are going to take home with them, while the three younger peerages are waiting for them to come downstairs and join them. Leading Ichigo's peerage is his new Queen, Tia Harribel. Wednesday saw the six Arrancars join his peerage without much difficulty, even though they all passed out like Grimmjow and Nelliel had when their Hollow holes disappeared; by next morning however, all of them had recovered with no ill effects. With some help from the Gremory and Sitri Clans, Cyan Sung-Sun and Emilou Apacci are now the two newest students to enroll at Kuoh Academy, while Franceska Mila Rose will be attending the nearby University with Tia, Grimmjow and Nelliel, each of them having gained modified skills thanks to Kisuke Urahara who had used the same technique he first used on Ichigo to seal his original memories and give him new memories to start as a second year student, only without the sealing portion this time.

There is also an unexpected addition to their household in the form of a stray Greek Goddess. Most of them had actually forgotten about Aphrodite, having been too absorbed with the hectic events of the past few days, and it was only when she peeked her head into the kitchen with a lost expression on her face. Needless to say, even Rias was rather apologetic about the oversight, and Aphrodite was quickly roped into helping Orihime, Yuzu and Asia prepare the next day's meal after making sure that she actually had a room to stay in and wasn't starving to death.

Helping the other girls prepare her first mortal meal, Aphrodite is nervous about what the other residents will say about her cooking. After the embarrassment of discovering that she had been forgotten, and Rias officially assigning the empty room she had been sleeping in to her use, the Greek Goddess had found herself being surprisingly accepted by the nicer members of the household, namely the three girls she is working with. After an impromptu meal and a peaceful night's sleep, she had gotten up two hours early with Orihime, Yuzu and Asia to prepare the farewell breakfast for the two Shinigami Lieutenants; among the dishes were some rabbit-themed pancakes that Yuzu had a member of the staff specially make a shaping form for today's meal.

"She is going to love these Yuzu!" Orihime giggles loudly as the first batch of pancakes find their way to the warming plate. "Rukia loves Chappy the rabbit!"

Watching the four of them from the table, Karin groans out then. "Please tell me you guys plan to make normal round ones? You know Ichigo hates that damn rabbit with a passion."
All four cooks turn on the dark-haired twin then, Aphrodite huffing out indignantly. "That rabbit is
the cutest thing alive! If your brother hates Chappy, then he can starve!"

Grimmjow enters the kitchen then and freezes at the tense atmosphere. "What's got everyone's
panties in a twist?"

Karin points at the four chefs and snitches on them, which unexpectedly causes Grimmjow to gulp.
"Karin, ah…don't let Nel hear you say that please. She…she loves the rabbit too."

Groaning, the dark-haired twin gets up from her chair and leaves while palming her face. "I can't
believe this; it has its own damn cult!"

Ichigo passes his departing sister with a questioning raise of his eyebrow and wanders into the
kitchen before stopping on a dime. His eyes glaze over at the multiple bunny shaped pancakes, and
the tension in the room immediately skyrockets. Coming out of his stupor, he then does something
that surprises all of them.

"Thanks. She'll love them." With that, he leaves the kitchen with a small smile on his face, and the
five stunned beings watch him go.

Yuzu is the first to react, her fists curling in worry. "Ichi-nii…"

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Momo discreetly wipes her eyes as they leave the twins at their school, she and Rukia both trying
to hold back their tears until after they are out of the sights of the two younger girls, both of whom
had cried softly when they said their goodbyes. Sui-Fēng had delivered the news late last night via
Hell Butterfly, telling the 'Shiba sisters' to wipe everyone’s memory and to meet her at a deserted
shrine outside of Isehara right after school; no one had missed the fact that it was the site of their
second battle against the Fallen Angels. Rukia walks slowly with Ichigo and Uryū on either side of
her, the cousins assuring her that Kisuke is working on a way for her and the others to contact them
from Soul Society without Central or the Head Captain ever knowing. Kimi and Nia walk side by
side with the Squad Five Lieutenant, none of them speaking as they make their way to Kuoh
Academy, but their arms wrapped around Momo tell her more than words ever can. Once they
arrive, the normal routine starts as the older Devils make sure the younger Devils arrive to
homeroom on time, while Sung-Sun, having seen the crying faces of Issei’s best friends when they
see him walking with even more beautiful teen women, remarks loudly that she thought both boys
smelled like virgins.

Many of the girls standing around and staring at the new students with open wonderment begin
giggling behind their hands at that comment, and even more when the two stunned Second years
fall to the ground in despair while crying at how cruel their Senpai are to them. Annoyed by the
commotion, Apacci begins to stalk over to them, only to have Ichigo grab her arm and guide her
back to the front office to get their official paperwork to attend Kuoh.

"Issei, you better talk to those morons and soon, I'm not sure how much longer I can keep Tatsuki
from pouncing on them for their comments." Ichigo informs the Gremory Pawn flatly. "Sooner or
later she is going to show them why she was named the second strongest high school woman in
Japan for her age group when we were still First years. And I don't even want to think about what
my two newest Pawns will do if they hear anything perverted about them; if we're lucky,
we'll find your friends in Hueco Mundo before they get eaten."

Issei gulps and asks what the worst case is, only to pale at the answer. "That's easy; they get
thrown into a Garganta and fall forever."
Still trembling at the thought of falling for all eternity as he walks with Yuuto and Ichigo to his homeroom, Issei nearly stumbles when they pass the teacher's office and a familiar head of blonde hair almost walks into him.

"Issei-kun!"

"A-Asia? ? ?" He looks to see his King standing behind the younger woman with a smile. "Buchou!?"

"Take care of her, Issei-kun; she's in your class as of now. I'm taking Ichigo's advice and placing her in your custody. Oh, by the way, my brother and sister-in-law will be stopping by your parent's home today and speaking to them about her home staying with you. Hope you don't mind?" Rias watches as the two teens blush furiously then.

"Come on lover boy; let's get you to class before you three are marked tardy." Ichigo says as he loops his arm through Rias's, the red-haired heiress leaning into his side happily.

"Hai senpai." Moving somewhat stiffly, Issei waits until Asia is even with him before walking with her behind the two older teens, Yuuto whistling a familiar tune from behind them.

‘Is that the wedding march…?’

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Once the last of her true students arrive, Yoruichi Naberius seals the classroom, the normal humans having been shuffled off to their own specially-prepared self-study room to ensure that only those of spiritual or demonic origins are left behind. Once they are all seated, she grips her podium and looks over the younger men and women before her.

"Today is a shit day." She starts off bluntly. "I won't say this will be easy for any of us, especially those of us who have known Rukia and Momo the longest."

Ichigo looks out the window, hiding his emotions for a second before turning back to look at the older Shinigami. The former Squad Two Captain sees for a brief moment in his eyes the same fear that he had that day when he saw the means of Rukia's execution as she was being held in the air above Sōkyoku Hill. Thankfully, it is gone just as quick as it came.

'He's getting better.'

Without revealing her observations, she continues speaking. "So today, we will eat as a group here in class, I've made arrangements to have a large lunch delivered here, and no one will notice, so stay here until then. Also, there will be no work today, I want you all to relax and spend this time before we have to say goodbye; no matter how long it takes, we will see them again, I promise you all this."

Stepping back, she makes her way to her desk and lets them loose for the day, the former assassin smiling as everyone crowds around the two Shinigami and offer their well-wishes and farewells; not one of the women in their group has a dry eye, while even the men seem to be having trouble with blinking. The only one unaffected is Aphrodite, who makes her way to sit beside Yoruichi.

"Not going to sit with them?" The werecat asks the Greek goddess.

The golden-haired female shakes her head and leans back. "I'm an outsider Yoruichi, this is their time, and I don't want to interfere with what little time they have left." She says rather quietly.
The purple-haired woman glances at the beauty beside her. "What do you think so far? Your first week staying with us must have shown you something by now."

Aphrodite gives her a half-hearted glare. "You mean, after you guys actually remembered that you dragged me back to your Estate?"

Seeing the werecat avert her gaze with some embarrassment, the stray Goddess huffs before giving a small smile. "It has, their loyalty to each other is something I haven't seen for quite some time. We gods of Greece have always lacked that kind of stability; oh, alliances have formed from time to time, but nothing to that degree. I can tell that at the center of their bonds are Ichigo and Rias, Sōna too has a huge say in things from what I have seen of them. Their peerages though...there are some truly unique powers being wielded by them. Orihime's power alone would garner quite a bit of interest if she stayed among my family, and Uryū's..." She frowns slightly then.

"The power to completely destroy a human soul is something that has always been considered taboo, and to think that an entire tribe of people with that ability used to exist without our notice... Now, there he sits, one of only three left free in the world with that power. Sorry, two left free in the world, your friend Kisuke said that Candice's arrows might no longer work that way. He also said something worse could happen, but he didn't say what; I don't really want to know what could be worse than having the power to destroy human souls though." She sees the young revived Quincy Devil in question sitting near the two newly-revived Arrancar Devils, the three of them laughing just as loudly as the others as they listen to Rukia recounting the story of Ichigo's fight during the Don Kanonji show.

Yoruichi spares another glance at the beautiful young woman next to her. "Anything else you care to share Aphrodite?"

The Greek Goddess shrugs. "Tatsuki's power reminds me of the physical strength and dedicated ability of the Spartans, her armor is somehow similar yet different, and I sense she and my sister Athena would get along well with each other. Sado's power seems similar to those you call Hollows, but it's different too in its own way...he often surprises me with his gentle manners, but I know he can erupt into great violence if pushed too far, and I'd hate to see the day that someone angers him enough to erupt like Mount Vesuvius. Asia, Yuzu and Orihime have very kind hearts; they are the ones who truly accept me into their midst, and they have tried their best to make me feel welcome despite my... previous introductions. Asia and Orihime both bear scars on their hearts, but their pasts have only made them stronger and kinder. Karin is different from her twin, but she still cares very much for Yuzu, otherwise she wouldn't spend so much time hanging around her when she could be doing other things instead..."

Yoruichi stares at Aphrodite, noticing her gaining a distant expression on her face as she continues to speak her observations of the peerages. "Yuuto and Issei are interesting young men, but they both have personal tribulations that they have yet to overcome; Yuuto's past is deeply mired within his heart, and Issei's heart is badly broken. That little kitten Koneko was hurt by betrayal too, but her heart is slowly mending...Tsubaki and Tomoe have both suffered and overcome loneliness and isolation, though the rest of Sōna's peerage seem fairly ordinary. I haven't spent much time with Ichigo's other peerage members, but from what I have seen of her, Tia Harribel has a strong will and a powerful soul, one day she may stand among the Devil's factions greatest Queens."

Blinking as Aphrodite falls silent, Yoruichi is inwardly stunned by the wealth of information that the Greek Goddess has provided her. Some of the things she mentioned were actually rather concerning... "And what about yourself? Have you learned anything yet from your time with us?"

Aphrodite laughs quietly. "If there is one thing I have learned so far, it's that I want to learn how to
cook on my own. Oh, don't get me wrong, I have no real use for cooking, back in Olympus as we only ever eat Ambrosia, but I can see why they do it. A sense of self-worth, the knowledge that they can create something which brings joy to the ones who eat what they prepare. Cooking is strangely freeing, and I can see why Yuzu loves it so much; her creativity amazes even myself, and when the others cook, they put in so much effort that I feel jealous of my lack in talent and experience. After seeing the faces of the others in the house as they eat their food, I can tell how much they truly appreciate the time and effort being spent on their meals. I would like to learn how to cook before I go home, something tells me I would enjoy doing it."

The golden eyed woman looks at the Greek goddess of Love with newfound respect. Despite her less-than-stellar introduction to their group and her rather snobbish behavior, she is actually semi-decent to be around, and her words from earlier tell Yoruichi that she possesses a strangely keen insight on the people that she observes. The former assassin had also discreetly asked around on what Aphrodite had been doing in the past few days, and what she had discovered was fairly surprising. It turns out that the maids of the household had unofficially taken care of Aphrodite, and she had repaid them by helping out around the Estate with various chores. Unsurprisingly enough, the Greek Goddess had disliked cleaning chores the most, the fact that she couldn't use her Divine magic to perform the chores made her far less effective than the maids who could use Devil magic to aid them. On the other hand, Aphrodite had no problem helping out with laundry, seemingly intrigued by the advances in clothes washing technology and modern fashion; she also seemed to enjoy shopping trips with the maids, using her natural charm to obtain discounts from the storekeepers for their purchases.

The Greek Goddess had also proven to have a strangely protective and vindictive streak in her, as the maids had recounted an incident where Grimmjow had stayed awake late playing some online game and left crumpled soda cans and empty bags of snacks littered everywhere inside the entertainment room. When Aphrodite overheard the maids lamenting the fact that Grimmjow never cleaned up after himself like the other peerage members did, she had cleaned up all the trash in the entertainment room by herself, making sure to check every corner... before marching into Grimmjow's and Nelliel's shared room while they were away and emptying the entire bag of trash on Grimmjow's side of the floor. It had been a minor mystery at the time since none of the maids admitted responsibility for the mess, and the final consensus had been that the maids were telling Grimmjow to clean up his own shit, something that both Ichigo and Nelliel fully supported.

Another interesting fact was that Aphrodite's self-assigned guest room was located near the servants' quarters, and she often visited the maids shared bathroom rather than use the small bathroom inside her room. The maids told Yoruichi that the blonde Goddess claimed to miss the shared baths of Greece, but they also revealed their secret belief that she just felt lonely.

All in all, the Greek Goddess of Love is a surprisingly complex individual, and Yoruichi's conversation with her has only confirmed this.

Suddenly, the Greek Goddess asks a question that breaks the wearecat out of her thoughts. "Do you think he will win?"

Knowing who she is referring to, Yoruichi's golden eyes watch Ichigo closely, before she closes her orbs and speaks from her heart. "There is one thing that Ichigo excels at: winning at any cost. He knows that he has no other options now, this duel will settle things for him and Rias. Losing is not an option; he will do everything he needs to do as a Devil to ensure his victory, but if he has no choice, he will use Zangetsu to finish it."

Aphrodite shivers slightly. "Don't tell him this, but I saw his Zanpakutō spirit through his reflection when my brother finished forging his blade." Turning her head, she meets Yoruichi's gaze as she
continues. "I've never seen a weapon like him before, when he looked into Ichigo's eyes, there was power in his gaze like I've seen only in my a few of my brothers, and the scariest part is that he is still growing... It will make him enemies, Yoruichi, enemies that I fear will test him in the future."

Yoruichi takes the well-intended warning for what it is, and gives the concerned Goddess a small smile in return. "He will face each challenge that comes and overcome them to protect his loved ones. It is what he has always done, and what he will continue to do."

As they continue to meet each other's gaze, they hear the group of young adults share a loud laugh at something Akeno says to Uryū, the young archer's ineffectual protests only making them more amused. Turning to look at them, Aphrodite smiles faintly then. "My father will want to meet him soon, Yoruichi Naberius."

"What about?" The werecat sensei asks her fraudulent student.

Placing her chin on her arms as she watches the younger men and women interacting, Aphrodite shakes her head in a negative way. "Who knows what the 'Father of Gods and Men' wants with Ichigo, but don't let him go alone. If he does go, tell him to take your friend, the one Sasha calls silver-tongued. Unlike Ichigo, Kisuke Urahara can be a very devious person."

Yoruichi chuckles quietly then in agreement. "You have no idea how true that is, Aphrodite."

The two of them continue to sit apart from the gathering, leaving the peaceful conversations to the others as they wait for lunch to arrive.

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After school is over, the Devils from the Occult Research Club and Student Council wait in the old school building, while Ichigo, Issei, Yuuto and Tomoe watch as the other members of the Kendo club wipe away their tears and say their goodbyes to the two Shiba 'sisters'. Rukia and Momo both tell the humans that they shouldn't give up because they have to leave and ask the team to fight for the honor of Kuoh next week. They also inform the club that they should be getting two new members starting Monday and not to worry so much, that they'll be rooting for the club from Europe. The reason they give for their departure is that their older brother was admitted to a hospital for a serious illness and they needed to be at his side.

The Kendo club members give the two sisters their last few hugs before they leave for the weekend, too depressed to continue training. They know that on Monday they will have an early morning practice to make up for the lost weekend. Once the last of the normal human members leave, Ichigo looks at the two Shinigami Lieutenants who are still looking forlornly after them.

"You didn't wipe their memories. Thanks." He says as he looks at Rukia.

Sadly smiling, the Kuchiki heiress takes his hand in hers. "You're welcome Ichigo, but to be honest, I don't want them to forget about us either. We started this season together, and admittedly they've grown on me. They'll bring Kuoh a championship this year because there is no doubt in my mind that they are a strong team this year."

"Many of them wanted to see you off Rukia-san, Momo-san, but we told them you needed to pack still and Ichigo and Rias will be escorting you to the train station before taking you to Tokyo for your flight." Tomoe says as she stands behind them.

Momo sighs as she turns slowly in place, the bokken in her hand a gift from the team, while Ichigo is carrying Rukia's identical gift. "Just one more week and I could have fought in my first match..."
She turns to Rukia then, a forlorn look on her face as she asks. "Does it always feel like this Rukia, feel so wrong to leave this all behind? Is this what you felt the day they came for you?"

Rukia reaches over and takes Momo's hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. "Yes, it was Momo. I know that if I ever get a mission here again, I'm taking it, but this is always the hardest part of the mission. Leaving behind…loved ones." She squeezes Ichigo's hand as well. "Especially my best friend."

"It ain't forever Midget, as soon as Kisuke finds a way, you'll see me again. Promise." He smiles when she barely kicks his shin with her foot, turning to look into his eyes.

"And you never break a promise, do you Berry?" Her violet eyes stare into his brown orbs as she waits for his answer.

"No, I don't. You two ready?" Seeing both her and Momo nod, he leads them to the old school building then.

Silently traveling along the deserted hallways, they use the exit closest to the former Academy building to approach where the others are waiting for them. When they enter the building, they see Rias and Sōna, along with their peerages and Ichigo's. No one says a word as they assemble and Akeno forms the magic circle that takes them to their destination. As soon as they arrive, Tia, Grimmjow and Nelliel each perform Pesquisa, each only registering the sole occupant of the building in front of them. Grimmjow however frowns as he realizes something.

"Ah, didn't we fuck that place up Ichigo?" The blue-haired Devil says as he points at the fully-restored shrine.

Looking around, Ichigo and the others also notice that there are no signs of the battle from a few nights ago. As they approach the abandoned structure, a petite woman with braided hair walks out, her sleeveless Haori billowing out from behind her, and her Zanpakutō hanging from its usual spot.

"Captain Suì-Fēng." Both Lieutenants bow to their superior.

"Lieutenants Kuchiki, Hinamori, there's no need for formality, not when we're alone from now on." The Onmitsukidō Commander says as she walks up and scans the two younger Shinigami for any signs of injury.

Satisfied with their well-being, she turns to Ichigo and walks up to him, looking him up and down as well. "You look stressed Ichigo, something going on?"

Seeing his faint grimace, she looks around her and sees more grimaces and hardened faces, while Ichigo's eyes tighten slightly as he answers. "Yeah, I have to fight my duel tomorrow Suì-Fēng. Somehow the family her 'fiancé' is from caught wind of our growing 'relationship'. They want to force the marriage now from what I've been told."

Suì-Fēng shifts her feet and folds her arms in front of her body then. "Then just kick his ass Ichigo, you aren't a stranger to doing that from what I remember."

At her blunt words, the mood lightens up considerably as those behind Ichigo who know what she means begin to laugh from her statement. Ichigo also manages to give a smile at the confidence the black-haired assassin shows in him. "I'll do my best not to disappoint you, Sensei."

"You better not." Suì-Fēng then pauses as she looks over the Devils and the two Lieutenants she has to escort back. "It might not be a good idea if you are here when I open the Senkaimon, so I'll give all of you five minutes, okay?"
"We said our goodbyes earlier, but…" Hearing footsteps, Ichigo steps aside and as he does, he sees each of the female peerage members rushing forward to hug and whisper their words of farewell in private to the two young women, the males following after them to offer their handshakes and farewells.

When the last person steps away, the two Shinigami Lieutenants bow to them and wait for them to give more distance. Ichigo, holding his girlfriend's hand, waves at them with his free one. "Later Rukia, Momo."

"Later Ichigo." Rukia watches Ichigo step closer to the peerages, then the glow of magic takes her best friend and her newest friends away, and she feels her throat constrict involuntarily. Swallowing hard, she wipes the lone tear away from her cheek and huffs out a deep breath. "I'll never get used to that."

Suî-Fēng clears her throat then, commanding their attention. "Before we go, there is something I need you to know now that we are alone. Central Forty-Six and certain members of the Gotei have been acting strange recently. I've had twenty members of my squad transferred out, all of them loyal to the Shihōin Clan in some manner or other. Also, we learned last week that the top fifteen graduates of the Shinōreijutsuin have been assigned to Central Forty-Six immediately after graduation for the past two years, and their actions after that have remained a mystery. We are not yet certain of what is going on, so if anything happens, don't say a word; let your Captains take care of it for you." She says with a serious expression as she pulls Suzumebachi from her sheath and activates the Senkaimon.

"Captain, what's wrong? Is there something happening because of the Devils?" Momo asks worriedly as the doors form and begin to slide open.

"I honestly don't know, I just want you to keep quiet until you are called before the Head Captain. Not a word to anyone other than me, Captains Kuchiki, Ukitake, Hirako, Kyōraku and Lieutenant Abarai for now. When we arrive, treat everyone else with suspicion until after we find out what is going on with these odd behaviors." Both women nod their understanding and then follow the petite Captain through the gate back to Soul Society.

After stepping through to the other side, they are greeted by the very people Suî-Fēng just mentioned, all except for Captain Kyōraku. Momo and Rukia both bow in greeting to the others, though as Rukia begins to make her way to her fiancé, an unexpected voice speaks up and stops her as its owner appears with fifteen strangely dressed men behind her.

"By authority of Central Forty-Six, I place Rukia Kuchiki and Momo Hinamori under arrest for treason and giving aid to a known criminal. Take them into custody!" Chiyoko Shihōin declares as she makes her way towards the two stunned women.

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Upon arriving back at the mansion, Ichigo heads straight to the training dimension with Yoruichi and Merti, while Rias herds the others into the kitchen and dining room to start on their homework and wait for dinner, before she goes after her boyfriend herself. Once she enters the training room's dimensional space, she finds Ichigo sitting with Akiko, Serafall, his new Queen and his great-grandfather going over last-minute details for tomorrow night's events. Approaching their group, she takes a seat on the cushion to Ichigo's right, sharing a nod with Tia who is seated on his left. After greeting the others and being caught up with what they have discussed so far, she listens to Lord Amyntas as he continues his briefing.

"The Naberius Clan will arrive after the Gremory Clan, and I will have you introduced as a
Shinigami, Ichigo. We don't want the other Clans to know who you are until we offer our challenge, and after Riser tries to turn you down - and he will, trust me on that, due to thinking you are of a lower social rank - we will reveal who you truly are. Normally, Riser would be allowed to turn down your challenge without his reputation taking a hit, however by revealing your Naberius heritage which is of equal rank to the Phenex, he will not be able to do so without looking like a coward, something I have no doubt his pride will refuse to accept. However, remember this Ichigo: once they find out who you really are, we will become targets once again for the Old Maou Faction."

The younger Naberius Lord nods his head in understanding. "That's why I'm not using Zangetsu during the duel, Uncle; I want to save him for when it really counts, like exacting revenge for our family."

Merti leans forward then, her fists on her thighs. "Remember what Sasha, Yoruichi and I have said before about vengeance Ichigo: no emotions, no feelings, nothing for them to use against you, and finally, no satisfaction until they are all in the ground."

Ichigo nods grimly. "I understand. Once it begins…"

"We finish it to the bitter end." Sasha declares.

"To the bitter end." The others echo.

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Chiyoko slams the door to her office open, forcing her subordinates to scurry for cover or find business elsewhere. Once she is inside her private space, she drops to her chair and slams her Zanpakutō on the desk in front of her, fuming at the sheer arrogance of the Gotei Thirteen's Captains. Steepling her hands before her, she stares blankly at the far wall as she goes over how everything had gone wrong the moment she tried to take the two Lieutenants into custody, her plans ruined by the forcefulness of the four Captains present. The only part that makes her smile is that Byakuya Kuchiki is now right where she wants him, as do the Elders of his Clan.

XXXX Flashback Start XXXX

"By authority of Central Forty-Six, I place Rukia Kuchiki and Momo Hinamori under arrest for treason and giving aid to a known criminal. Take them into custody!" Chiyoko Shihōin declared as she made her way to the two stunned women.

A cold voice stopped her dead in her tracks. "What do you mean treason, Chiyoko Shihōin? My sister has committed no such crime."

Turning around, she saw his cold steel eyes glaring at her. "We have evidence that your 'sister' and Lieutenant Hinamori have been in contact with and have given aid to Ryoka, Captain Kuchiki. We also have evidence that she and her companion have been actively consorting with an enemy of Soul Society, one who has been sentenced to death if he should ever regain his powers, and lastly, they have been seen in the company of a known criminal."

Stepping in front of his sister and the other Lieutenant, Byakuya tilted his head and asked for her to clarify her evidence with proof.

"I have no need to share that with you Captains. Now stand aside so we can take them to be interroga…"

"The hell ya are." Shinji Hirako interrupted her as he stepped next to his fellow Captain. "Momo
ain't goin' with yas' so kiss off. Tradition states they are remanded into the custody of their squad until they are brought forth before Central, or did ya forgat that little tidbit Shihōin?"

She sneered at the half-Hollow Captain, disgusted by his presumption to speak on equal terms with her. "Tradition also says they can be remanded to those who captured them, so they will be coming with me, now." She made to gesture for her men to apprehend the still-silent Lieutenants when another voice of authority spoke up.

"Now, now Shihōin-san, would you care to tell us which squad you are associated with? Perhaps I can speak to your Captain personally." Ukitake Jūshirō said as he too moved to step between her and his officer, his hands folded inside the sleeves of his Shihakushō but his expression firm.

"I am the Captain of my squad; we answer only to Central Forty-Six. Now you st…"

A blade sliding out of its sheath caused everyone to look at the person who was pulling out her Zanpakutō. The final Squad Captain levelled her blade at Chiyoko's group. "Squad Two handles all criminal cases Shihōin-san; until Head Captain Yamamoto says otherwise, we don't recognize your warrant, nor do we recognize your squad. Any further attempts to take the Lieutenants into your custody will mean a breach of tradition, which we of the Gotei Thirteen uphold to our highest standards. Now, if you wish to speak to them, you may make your appointments with each squad's respective Captain to do so. As for incarceration, they will be held by their own squads. If you wish to take this up with the Head Captain, we can do so right now, I'm sure he will be most pleased by the formation of a new squad without his knowledge, as pleased as we four are right now. If you try to use violence, we will apprehend you and your 'squad' for causing a disturbance. So, the choice is yours Shihōin-san: leave them to us, speak to the Head Captain, or try to force the issue. Choose carefully, none of us suffer any fools."

Glaring at the woman who commanded the Onmitsukidō, at least until she had tightened her reins around the current Clan head of the Shihōin Clan, Chiyoko backed down from the confrontation that would pit her and her men against four powerful Captains. "You will have the prisoners report to Central Forty-Six at ten A.M. tomorrow to hear the charges against them. All evidence will be presented then."

"Very well. Lieutenant Abarai."

"Ah, yes Captain?" That stupid boy, Renji stared dumbly at the back of his Captain.

Everyone's eyes went wide when Byakuya removed his sheathed Zanpakutō and spoke to it quietly before holding it out to his side. "Lieutenant Abarai, you will escort me to Squad Six's holding cells as well."

Chiyoko was the first to recover, doing her best to suppress her inner glee while feigning a look of concern at the Kuchiki Clan Head. "Please explain your actions Kuchiki-dono, why are you surrendering your weapon to your Lieutenant?"

She fights back her urge to flinch at his gaze of cold steel. "I did visit my sister and Lieutenant Hinamori in the World of the Living at the beginning of their mission. If they have indeed committed treason, then it only stands that I am a part of that conspiracy as well. Now if…"

"You may confine yourself to your estate Kuchiki-sama; however, you will have to wear these." She interrupted him, pulling out the Reiatsu restraints she was planning to use on the Lieutenants and handing them to one of her men. "Place these on Captain Kuchiki, then escort him to his estate under heavy guard. As for those two, restrain them as well and take their Zanpakutō."
Before her subordinates could move however, Reiatsu from the Vizard Captain slammed them into the ground. "Might wanta' think 'bout that one too…Shihōin. Momo, give ya Zanpakutō to me, wouldn't wanna see someone destroy it by accident or anything."

Gritting her teeth as she tried to bear the spiritual pressure, Chiyoko saw Lieutenant Hinamori remove her Zanpakutō and hand it to her Captain without a word.

Reigning in his spiritual pressure, Shinji took Tobiume and grabbed his Lieutenant's shoulder. "See ya tomorrow…"

Before she could stop them, the two of them disappeared in a Shunpo. She then heard Captain Ukitake speaking to Byakuya. "Are you sure of this?"

Whipping her head to him, she caught him nodding his head. "I am. Please keep my sister safe until we dispense with these trivial charges tomorrow. Renji, escort me to my estate and then see to your fiancée afterwards. These are my wishes as your future brother-in-law and as your Captain." Both he and Lieutenant Abarai then Shunpoed away, followed quickly by Captain Ukitake and Lieutenant Kuchiki, leaving her glaring impotently at the only Captain still present.

"Captain Sui-Fēng, is there something you wish to say to me?" Her pale-yellow eyes burned with hatred as she glared at the petite Shinigami standing in front of her.

Shaking her head, the Captain sheathed her Zanpakutō and turned to leave; her parting shot however caused Chiyoko's blood to boil. "You wonder why your branch was passed over three centuries ago to become the head family? Try looking in the mirror and seeing how your ugly jealousy stares back at you."

**Flashback End**

Gritting her teeth at the hateful memory, she forces her rage back into a simmer as she focuses on the single thought that brings her pleasure now. 'A marriage to save his sister will be his only option after tomorrow.'

**Flashback End**

"Ya know what this 'bout doncha Momo?" Shinji asks his Lieutenant bluntly as he sits across from her.

Momo bows slightly as she answers. "It's about the Devils and Ichigo, Captain Hirako."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Shinji asks her how it happened, and she then proceeds to tell her Captain the whole story, from the moment they saw Ichigo on the first day they infiltrated Kuoh as transfer students, to finding out the truth of his 'exile', to when he regained his memories during their first fight against the Fallen Angels.

"Wait, first time? You fought them more than once?" The blonde-haired Vizard inquires of his subordinate, feeling his headache beginning to grow.

Nodding again, Momo tells him how it was then that Ichigo was able to access not only his Shinigami abilities, but his true Devil powers as well. How after the battle, they were escorted to Ichigo's ancestral home in the Underworld where they stayed for a few days, and she relays the full extent of the orange-haired Devil's true family heritage to her Captain then.

Shinji had already heard parts of this from Byakuya, but to hear Momo tell him everything that Byakuya glossed over is an entirely different thing. For example, Masaki wasn't just any ordinary
Quincy, but a blood relation to Ryûken Ishida and a pure-blooded Quincy at the time due to a seal used by her grandfather. He isn't given time to think on it further as Momo begins to tell him of her days as a student, leading up to the event where she and Rukia had followed the Devils to Hueco Mundo to fight against the Quincy invasion. Here, he sees his young officer shudder in fear as she recounts what had happened to her and how she now owes her life to the Elfin assassin who rescued her.

"I'm sorry kiddo, for ya havin' to go through that crap again…” He starts to say, but she refuses his apology with a polite shake of her head.

Momo smiles as she looks at her Captain, meeting his regret with her sincerity as she speaks to him. "I am okay, Captain. I admit the images were very upsetting, but Sasha-san used her magic to force my brain into seeing the truth from the lies, and she also gave me this potion as well to help me if I need it. She said I might experience periods of self-doubt, but this potion would take the edge off of them and allow me to confront and deal with my fears rationally. She…she saved my life Captain; I owe her a debt I can never repay."

Shinji reaches out and pats her shoulder. "We both do Momo. She saved my officer and I won't forgat dat. Now what happened after that then?"

Momo picks up where they came back from Hueco Mundo and had to deal with their next obstacle. She giggles as she describes how the young Pawn of Ichigo's fiancée…

"Wait, what fiancée?" Shinji suddenly interrupts with wide eyes. "Byakuya said the kid had a girlfriend, not…well, not that…"

He inwardly moans with misery when Momo suddenly squeals and claps her hands with delight. "Oh, she is so beautiful Captain! Her name is Rias Gremory and she is also the heiress to her Clan! Remember I told you how he was staying with her when he didn't have his memories? Well they fell in love then, and they plan to marry tomorrow night after Ichigo beats her original fiancé in a duel."

Slapping his face into his palm, Shinji suffers through another twenty minutes of hearing about his fellow Vizard's love life and how much happier he looks and the shocker that he no longer scowls anywhere near as much as he used to, something that even Rukia had mentioned during their shared baths.

"Ah, Momo dear, sorry to interrupt again, but can we move on with your report so I can find a way out for you?" Shinji's deadpanned words causes his Lieutenant to blush and deflate somewhat.

"Sorry…so as I was saying, Issei met this young nun and…” She continues to tell him the rest of her story, and when she is done, Shinji rubs his chin as she folds her hands into her lap and waits for him to speak.

Leaning back with a sigh, the Vizard knows he is going to have to tell the others in Karakura to pack their bags now; no way are they letting the kid out of their sights again, and better to let them know now before Central gets involved. Also, he has to send a Hell Butterfly to Isshin, warning him that things are now going to come out into the open. Ryûken has to be warned too, maybe he'll ask Suì-Fēng about going to the World of the Living and getting messages to both of them instead. Glancing at Momo's hopeful look, he leans forward again with a sigh.

"Well, I guess we know what they intend to charge you with Momo, but the known criminal thing has me worried. Who do they consider a criminal, and why?"
Jūshirō, Shunsui, Ise and Renji all sit listening to Rukia giving her version of events in Isehara, the petite Lieutenant not pausing at all except to take sips of her tea to wet her throat. The two Third Seats are currently keeping a barrier around their room to keep anyone from eavesdropping in on their conversation. When she is finally done, it's her fiancé who breaks the silence.

"So, Carrot-top finally figured out he likes women? And is going to get married tomorrow?" Renji can't keep the laughter out of his voice then.

Giggling, Rukia nods her head in answer. "He is so…what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Domesticated." Her Captain offers up with a smile.

Nanao shrugs and corrects it with her observation. "Whipped. Unlike some here who should act as honorable as he does…"

Everyone can see the look of exasperation on the Squad Eight Captain as he prepares to defend himself once again. "But my bea…Uhmmmp."

The white-haired Captain gives the Lieutenant of Squad Eight a nod of appreciation before turning to look at his own Lieutenant. "This will be a tough battle tomorrow Rukia. They know you have seen Ichigo somehow, and know you have been staying with the Devils, but who is this criminal they speak of?"

"I don't know Captain. They can't mean Ichigo; they already exiled him, so…" Rukia shrugs her shoulders in defeat.

Nanao pushes her glasses up and speaks then. "Captain Kuchiki though…what is he planning to do? Is he going to use his position as the head of the Kuchiki Clan and get this swept under the rug somehow?"

Shunsui sips his sake as he looks around the room. "He knows that if Rukia-chan is charged and he was there during her mission, depending on the evidence they bring against her, he can try arguing that he gave both of them permission to stay with the Devils to learn as much about them as they could. If he takes on full responsibility, he can use his influence and force Central to drop the charges against them before this gets out of hand. However, Central creating a new squad without our knowledge and using it to try and arrest two Lieutenants does trouble me more than anything else; after seeing who the supposed Captain is, well…"

Ukitake gives a grim nod, and Rukia asks them worriedly. "Who is she? You and Nii-sama called her a Shihōin, but why does Nii-sama glare at her like that? Did she…"

"She tried to kill your sister before her marriage to your brother, Rukia." Renji interjects unexpectedly in a low voice.

All eyes turn towards him in shock. "She…she what Renji?" Rukia barely whispers.

Looking at his violet eyed fiancée, the Squad Six Lieutenant relays what Byakuya had told him earlier. That on one of his trips to visit Hisana in the Rukongai where she was staying then, that he had felt numerous Shinigami gathering near her residence which caused him to speed up, only to find a masked woman getting ready to stab his future wife. Using his Shikai, he had incapacitated nearly all of the Shinigami before attacking the masked woman and forcing her to reveal who she was.
"She was a self-proclaimed agent of Central Forty-Six, Chiyoko Shihōin, and she told him that Hisana had been seen consorting with criminals in the area and had been marked for death as their accomplice. Hisana didn't deny it Rukia, but she told Byakuya that they were the only ones who had food and water in their area, and she had no one else to turn to, to feed the few children in the area that had Reiryoku. Chiyoko then called Hisana a whore unfit to marry a noble, and Captain Byakuya nearly killed her right there and then, had another Squad not arrived to break up the disturbance."

"W-Why would she call Onee-san a whore? She…she wasn't exchanging her body for food was she Renji?" The pineapple-headed Shinigami shakes his head uncertainly at his worried fiancée.

"Captain didn't say if she did or didn't Rukia, but I don't think it mattered to your brother. Does it matter to you?" Renji asks of his future wife.

Closing her eyes, Rukia remembers how hard life in the Rukongai was, how lucky she had been that she had someone like Renji to protect her from the most horrible elements of Rukongai life. Her older sister though, she didn't have anyone to look out for her until Byakuya found her, and she doesn't want to think of Hisana in that way, so she accepts Renji's words and looks him in the eyes.

"Onii-sama loved Nee-san enough to marry her anyways, so you're right, it doesn't matter anymore. Chiyoko seems to hate my brother for something more than that though…but what?"

A rustle of clothing causes the three Lieutenants to look at the white-haired Captain then. Jūshirō shares a look with Shunsui, the other long-serving Captain giving a tired sigh before Jūshirō clears his throat and looks towards them.

"Chiyoko Shihōin was hoping for an arranged marriage to your brother Rukia; starting a year or two before he met your sister, the Elders for both Clans were actually in discussions for their marriage. Chiyoko…she blames Hisana for stealing your brother's affections, and the Elders of the Kuchiki Clan nearly exiled him when he chose to marry Hisana over Chiyoko. The only reason your brother is the Head of the Kuchiki Clan is because of Ginrei Kuchiki's protection, and the fact that he achieved Bankai at such a young age. Those two things were what forced the Elders to back off from him, and they weren't happy when Hisana died and Byakuya refused to remarry, searching instead for you as part of Hisana's final wishes, then adopting you when he found you in the Shinōreijutsuin during your time there. Byakuya…the Byakuya you see now is close to what he was like when your sister was alive Rukia; when she died, he closed his heart off and became the cold man you knew for all those years, until…a certain orange-haired Devil showed him what he was about to lose when you were nearly executed."

"Ichigo did!?" Rukia questions her superior with surprise.

"Why else do you think your brother spoke in Ichigo's defense after the Winter War? It was to repay him a debt of honor Rukia, something Byakuya's pride won't allow him to forget. Ichigo saved his soul, made him remember what was truly important when he came to your rescue during Aizen's rebellion."

"Nii-sama feels he owes Ichigo?" The violet eyed Lieutenant sits there with amazement, as does Renji.

Captain Kyōraku speaks up then. "True nobles know the worth of a debt of honor, Rukia-chan. Byakuya won't let any harm befall you ever again, nor will he stand by and allow Lieutenant Hinamori to come to harm either. No, I think your brother is up to something, but what it is we'll just have to wait and see."
Byakuya Kuchiki sits in his private room, ignoring the Reiatsu cuffs on his wrists as he writes out the document that will effectively end another great Clan. Behind him, his two oldest and most loyal servants, an aged woman and man sit quietly in the corner closest to their Clan head. Neither Sango nor Tamotsu say a word, clearly able to read the mood of their young master; it is something he is grateful for. Laying the brush down to the side, he turns to his two servants and motions for them to come forward. Both swiftly rise and silently as ghosts, they make their way to his position, bowing to him before kneeling again.

"Tomorrow will bring great change to our Clan. I want you to prepare to leave the manor with every other servant once the news reaches you. Here are the documents that will secure your futures and freedom away from the Clan, also this last scroll will tell you the location of a large sum of currency and many valuables that will keep all of you alive well into the future. If someday I send word back to you, I want you to seek out the Shiba Clan and offer them your services."

The older man, Tamotsu bows lowly to him. "Kuchiki-dono, why is this happening? Why are you so worried about tomorrow, young master?"

Smiling for the first time to his oldest servant, Byakuya bows his head back to them as well. "Tomorrow the Kuchiki Clan as it is will be no more; it will wither and die out as the rottenness in its trunk is exposed. There is no one left of eligible status nor strength to lead it after I am gone, and Ginrei will not leave retirement for it, not after he learns of this. Forces beyond these walls have conspired against me for the last time old friends; I must put an end to it before they grow beyond control. I implore both you and your wife to get the staff safely outside of these walls and live free of the treachery that pollutes the same air that we breathe. Where I will go, I do not know as of yet, but hopefully we will meet again. Now, takes these and prepare them, do so in secret and you will know when the time comes. Be safe, be wary, and be swift; now go Tamotsu, Sango. This will be our last time together for a long time."

The aged woman bows, then gently embraces him. "Be well young master, and come home someday please."

Byakuya pats her gently on the back and offers the older man a farewell handshake before allowing the two to leave as equals instead of servants.

'They must be rubbing off on me more than I care to admit.' Byakuya smirks to himself as he thinks about the Devil household; a set of green eyes briefly floats through his vision then. 'If only for one more time…'

Shaking his head, he looks at the time, then stands and walks to his room. Tomorrow will be his last day as the Twenty-Eighth Head of the Kuchiki Clan, and the last day of the Kuchiki Clan's existence. Undressing himself for bed, he puts out the few candles and lies back in total darkness.

"Byakuya-sama, are you sure this is the path you seek?" His Zanpakutō spirit remarks solemnly.

'It is Senbonzakura, we now know what the Elders were meeting about, and I have no intentions of allowing them to do so. I know they had Hisana murdered, and now they think they can force me to marry that woman; no, the Kuchiki Clan dies with me tomorrow if I cannot save Rukia and Momo Hinamori from their clutches. If I die, I do so hoping to open the Head Captain's eyes to the depth of corruption that runs rampant throughout the Noble Clans and Houses.' Byakuya replies firmly.
"Then seek proof, not rely on this foolish hope that the boy will save her again." His Zanpakutō spirit protests.

The black-haired noble chuckles gently then. 'Still believe his victory over us was a fluke do you, old friend?'

Byakuya grins as his Zanpakutō's irritation surfaces, just like whenever he mentions Ichigo and Zangetsu.

"You did not answer the question Byakuya-sama, why do you not force the truth from Chiyoko or Iwao?" Senbonzakura chooses to ignore his wielder's question, instead asking a question of his own.

Keeping his eyes closed and trying to control his breathing at hearing those hated names, only a slight pinch around Byakuya's eyes betray his inner rage. I will see to their ends one day, but as to why I don't simply take their lives myself: I have no proof of their misdeeds, so I will be seen as a murderer if I removed their heads without such proof. Just as Aizen once did, Chiyoko already has the backing of Central to overrule the words of a Captain, even mine, and it seems the Elders of my own Clan are conspiring again me by using Rukia's so-called 'crimes' as bargaining tools to force the issue of our marriage. No, I will end the Clan, save Rukia, and save myself from a loveless marriage, especially to the woman who I believe poisoned Hisana.'

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Floating in the hot spring fed pool, Yoruichi stares up at the night sky of the Underworld. Next to her is the current lord of the Naberius estate, also floating on his back. After meeting with Ichigo, Rias, Merti and Sasha, the former Shihōin had decided to spend the rest of her night at the Naberius estate instead of returning home. She had then seen to the final preparations and given instructions to the tailors on what Ichigo's and his peerage's clothes should look like when they arrived to dress for the gathering. Akiko and Isi had designed and commissioned the kimonos that Karin and Yuzu would wear separately, however. After she was done, Amyntas had asked if she would eat a light repast with him, if she didn't mind of course. She had accepted his offer, and they had a quiet meal, neither saying much, since both of them were deep in thought as to the possible consequences tomorrow night would bring the Clan.

"Yoruichi, thank you again for helping my great-grandson become the fine man he is today."

Amyntas comments as he floats beside her.

Grabbing his hand to stop him from moving, the golden eyed woman straightens up and drops to the bottom of the hot springs; seeing her do so, the older Devil does the same as well. Staring at him in his eyes, the purple-haired goddess moves closer to him and places a hand on his naked chest. Taking a deep breath, she draws even nearer and looks into his amber eyes then.

"Ichigo told me something this week that I wanted to…sorry, I…it's been awhile since…look at me stuttering like a teen with her first crush." She lowers her head, only to feel him lifting it with his hand.

"How long has he suspected that we have…been getting closer to each other?" The older Devil asks.

Yoruichi laughs lightly, her golden eyes sparkling with mirth. "I didn't even think he could tell, what with how dense he has been all his life when it comes to his own pursuers; him knowing about us was a surprise, truly. Even Kisuke and Isshin don't know, I think…I hope." She trails off with a frown.
Amyntas brushes some of her hair away from her shoulder, drawing her eyes back to his own. "Does this relationship make you feel uncomfortable Yoruichi? I've had many faults over the years, and you know of my current problem. Yet you haven't said a word about it, why?"

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she leans inward and kisses his cheek. "No, I don't feel uncomfortable because we are taking this slowly, Amyntas. We aren't jumping into the sack and deciding to get married tomorrow, no pun intended. The truth is, I'm just as scared as you are. My last affections weren't realized in time, and the person I liked married a good woman later, I don't think I could replace her even if I still loved him now. As for your problem...we all have one or more, but I will help you if you wish me to help you, and it might even do me a bit of good."

Pulling the dark-skinned woman closer to his body, Amyntas whispers into her ear then. "Good...because truthfully, I'm scared too Yoruichi, I...haven't loved anyone since Cornelia. Part of me wonders how my Clan, my peerage and Vincent's peerage will react if we do declare our intentions to them. And Ichigo..."

"I think he would tell you the same thing I'm about to tell you, 'to hell with what they think, you love her so go for it'." Pulling him closer, she pushes herself against the older Devil and gently kisses him on his lips.

Soon his tongue feathers across her lips, and she gives him permission by opening her mouth to let him in. For several minutes the two share a deep and passionate kiss in the shallow end of the pool, their lips locked and their tongues dueling, before finally breaking apart for air. Standing forehead to forehead as they regain their composure and breath, a smile forms on the former Shinigami's face as she speaks to him lowly.

"We agree to take this as slow as we both need it to be then?"

"Yes." One hand gently brushes her face, his gaze meeting hers with tenderness.

"Good, because I want him to see to his happiness before anyone else's, including mine. Ichigo and Rias deserve this Amyntas, as do Isshin and the twins, and now Orihime. I think Masaki would be happy, but also mad that we are letting her baby boy get married at seventeen though."

The Naberius Lord chuckles, his hand dropping down to hold hers as they move towards the pool's edge. "Masaki would have understood if she was here. We Devils do things differently than in the human world after all. Besides, think of the second wedding we get to plan for after they graduate high school in the World of the Living."

Yoruichi grins as her fingers entwine with his. "Yuzu is going to go crazy, Karin, not so much, his peerage though...that will be a sight to see." Both adults laugh as they realize that Ichigo's peerage has ten women in it so far.

"To happier times Yoruichi." He takes a glass of watered down wine from the tray beside the pool and hands it to her before taking one for himself.

"To happier times for us as well." Clinking her glass against his, she gives him one more kiss before drinking the wine and leaving the pool together with him.

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"Rukia Kuchiki, Momo Hinamori, you have been found guilty and are sentenced for your crimes. Do you have any last words before your sentences are carried out?"

The lone Devil in disguise says nothing as she moves her ring to another finger, five minutes is all
she needs, and it is someone else who speaks that unknowingly gives her that time.

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At eleven, the entire mansion is bustling with activity from the three peerages converging together to leave as a group for the Gremory Estate before splitting up to leave for their respective Clans' estates. Ichigo has never been to Rias's home before, and he wants to see it before the wedding ceremony that is to take place there that night. Both he and Kisuke stand to one side of the large room watching the others rushing around, all of them feeling nervous except for the Arrancars and the Shinigami whose battlefield nervousness are long gone due to their warrior lifestyles.

The last of the bags are being set down and the younger Devils smiling and joking about their first time meeting other Devils when a sound unlike anything they’ve heard before screeches into life. All of them look in the direction of the sound, seeing both Ichigo and Kisuke staring at the bracelet that glows brightly on Ichigo's wrist.

Furious rage fills the young Devil's eyes then as he touches the bracelet and feels what the paired ring is sending him. After a moment, he turns to his future bride and lowers his head slightly to hide the Hollowing of his orbs as he speaks.

"Rias, we will meet you at the gathering, take Yuzu and Karin with you and inform my great-grandfather that my Bishop needs me. I'm going straight to Soul Society with my peerage to get her back."

Kisuke lays a hand on Ichigo's arm then. "Not just your peerage Ichigo, we need numbers. Merti, we will require fifty of your best warriors. Sasha, those cloaks will come in handy right about now if you please, and when you get to the Estate, have someone fetch Yoruichi, we may need her help with this. Harumi, please see to Ryūken Ishida, then collect Isshin Shiba as well just in case they make a move against either of them. We leave in less than five minutes, now go, hurry."

No one argues, the only sign Rias shows is her worried eyes that looking into Ichigo's as she and her peerage disappear in a magic circle, followed quickly by Sōna and her peerage disappearing in their own. Sasha, Merti and Harumi leave in separate circles, leaving a blank-faced Ichigo looking at his bracelet with clenched fists. When Kisuke taps his arm, he sees the question in the genius scientist's face and answers.

"I can feel deep seated anger Geta-Bōshi; whatever has happened, it has her ready to kill."
The Longest Day Part One

Beta and co-creator: Okami Princess, don't forget to include her in your reviews or send a PM to her with your thanks. But don't bother her on plot; she won't answer just like me :)

Edited by regfurby April, 2019

"Speech"

'Thoughts'

'Memories'

"Tensa Zangetsu / Ichigo wearing Hell Armor"

[Ddraig]

"I can feel deep seated anger Geta-Bōshi; whatever has happened, it has her ready to kill."

Ichigo Naberius

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Rukia wakes up to see Renji still sleeping outside her cell, Captain Ukitake standing outside and placing a finger to his lips as he quietly slides her cell door open. Waving for her to follow, she watches as he walks away, then she gets up and makes her way after her Captain, following him to his private office where the smells of a well-cooked breakfast await her. Her stomach growls as the mouth-watering odors invade her senses, and she feels her face burning as her Captain gives her a knowing smile.

"Sit Rukia, I believe today will be a long one for us all." The white-haired Captain she views as a father figure says to her as he takes a seat at the table. "I'll wake Renji in a bit, but first I want to talk to you in private."

Sitting at the table as requested, she picks up a piece of toast along with half an egg omelet before nodding her understanding and beginning to eat.

"Good, then the first thing I want you to know is no matter what happens today, we will see to your freedom." He holds up a hand to wave away her shocked look. "Don't argue Rukia, you know that Ichigo will be hell to fight if something were to happen to you, and the other Captains agree with me on this. Ichigo has always protected his family and friends with a fierceness the likes of which none of us have seen in years, and he will undoubtedly choose to protect both you and Momo the same way. With that said however, we will still have to go through the motions today and see what Central Forty-Six claims to have as evidence, and if the worst were to happen, we will break you, Byakuya and Momo out of this place and get you to the human world, as close to Isehara as we possibly can."

Rukia's shocked face shows him all of her thoughts, along with the piece of egg that hangs half-
forgotten from her mouth. Finally realizing what she looks like, Rukia swallows her food before uttering out her next words haltingly.

"Ca…Captain Ukitake…you can't seriously mean to...! I…we…Captain, you just can't do that, not for us…!"

"Enough Lieutenant Kuchiki." Jūshirō halts her protests with his gentle yet authoritative voice. "The very government we swore to protect has taken steps to undermine the Gotei Thirteen, meaning the Head Captain as well as all the Captains and Lieutenants. We are the ones who will stand before the Hollows and safeguard the Balance, not them, yet they seem to be making new laws and rules without consulting us for our input or knowledge, rules designed to be used against us. This creation of an unauthorized new squad under Chiyoko Shihōin is but one such example; it is part of a growing cancer within our system, a system meant to rule and safeguard the afterlife fairly, not threaten to arrest and torture the very Shinigami protecting Soul Society and the World of the Living."

"But... but why Momo and I? We did nothing wrong except fail to inform them in a timely matter of who we were staying with! Nii-sama said...I thought that it would be seen as an accomplishment to further our ability to deal with the Devils better in the near future, not become some act of treason!" The violet eyed Lieutenant says with a clearly upset look on her face.

Jūshirō frowns at her question. "First, we didn't inform the Devils of your arrival, and even though Central was the one responsible for sending you there, they will blame both of you because you didn't return home immediately after discovering the Devils. Your brother is seeking to redirect this blame to himself by claiming responsibility for extending your mission, but whether or not Central accepts his reasoning remains to be seen. The other charge will be harder for you and Lieutenant Hinamori to explain, however, since Ichigo…"

"Wouldn't have even been there if they had just left him alone!" Rukia finally snaps as she slams her fist down on the table.

Panting harshly, she suddenly realizes what she had just done, and she quickly bows to her Captain. "I'm sorry Captain Ukitake; my deepest apologies to you for showing such unsightly behavior..."

Sipping his tea calmly, the white-haired Captain looks at his young Lieutenant with a tired expression on his face. "You don't have to apologize to me Rukia. We failed him, all the Captains and even the Head Captain failed that young man after the Winter War. We should have stood up to the newly elected Central Forty-Six and demanded that he be treated with all the rights and respect of a fully-fledged Shinigami, not allow them to influence us with their baseless fears just because he wasn't a true member of the Gotei Thirteen. If we had offered them our assurances, he would never turn against us, perhaps we could have stopped them...But…"

"But Ichigo would never bend to their ways Captain, we all know that. His personal honor is far too strong, even the Devils are learning that lesson as we speak, but they don't threaten him, they have embraced him instead with open arms and are willing to protect him with their lives if necessary, something we should have done for him as well. We've lost one chance to do so, and I'm not sure we will get another...I can only imagine what will happen when Central finds out who makes up his peerage though." The Kuchiki heiress replies, her voice becoming softer and softer as she speaks.

"So, it's true that his friends have become Devils then?" Jūshirō asks with a hint of curiosity.

Rukia face-palms as she answers her Captain, though she has a fond grin on her face. "He's a damn playboy is what he is Captain. He has ten women in his peerage, including Orihime and Tatsuki;
one of them is the only other surviving Quincy besides Uryū and Ryūken, her name is Candice Catnipp and she is now one of his Pawn. Then you have the surviving Arrancars: Tier Harribel, the former Tercera Espada who is now his Queen, Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck, another former Tercera Espada and now his Knight, her fellow Knight is Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez, the former Sexta Espada, then there are the Números who reincarnated as his Pawns; so far that includes Franceska Mila Rose, Emilou Apacci, Cyan Sung-Sun, Menoly Mallia, and Loly Aivirrne."

Jūshirō can't stop the laugh that escapes him then, and after a few minutes of laughter he grins at the scowling Lieutenant sitting across from him. "I'm sorry Rukia, but I remember the days you spent in this office wondering what kind of blockhead Ichigo was to ignore that lovely young lady, Orihime's affections. Now he has ten women in his peerage and...well, you must wonder why?"

Sighing, Rukia leans forward on the low table. "He cares for them deeply I guess...still, Rias is the luckiest woman alive to be the one who finally snared his heart, unlike the others who failed...like..."

Jūshirō sighs quietly, knowing the facts of what had transpired in the World of the Living. He had been there when Kiyone put his Lieutenant to bed after one of the rare times she had gotten drunk after spending a night out with the other Lieutenants. He and his two third seats had come across her and Rangiku Matsumoto, the Squad Ten Lieutenant stumbling down the alleyway leading to the Squad Ten barracks; knowing that Rukia wouldn't want to be seen in such a state, he had graciously taken his inebriated officer off the other Lieutenant's hands and had Kiyone Kotetsu and Sentarō Kotsuaki carry her back to their squad barracks. Once Kiyone had changed Rukia's clothing and put her in bed, he came to her room once to check on her, and what he had heard instead gave him insight into hers and the young substitute's deep friendship.

"Why did he have to die Captain?" She suddenly blurted out; her words still slurred from her inebriation.

Looking down at his newly promoted second-in-command, Jūshirō tucked her blankets up to her chin. 'I thought you had accepted Kaien's passing, Rukia?'

'Not... not Kaien, Ichigo. Why did he... why did he leave me like Kaien did? One day he was here, next day...he's gone.' Her eyes grew foggy then, a lost expression appearing on her face.

'I confessed to him...and he...he ...' She giggled then as she turned red. 'He blushed really red, like a strawberry...he told me he loved me, but as nothing more than an annoying older sister he never had. He... told me the truth Captain; he said he still wanted to live a human life for as long as he could, and I...I couldn't fault him for that wish, could I? I still got a best friend out of it though, and now I'm with Renji...since I'm in love with him and will...soon...marry him....'

For a moment, Jūshirō thought that Rukia had fallen asleep, then he saw her stirring again. He stayed silent as his Lieutenant blinked heavy eyelids before sighing wistfully out loud. 'My best friend is gone Captain, and I don't know what to do about how much I miss him. I miss all my friends in Karakura...Kaien...Strawberry...He was supposed to check with me before doing something stupid...but he did something stupid and I have no way of telling him he messed up because he won't hear me again...stupid Ichigo... he should've been there...to see me...get...'

She fell asleep then with tears staining her pillow, thinking her best friend had died like his cousin had many decades before. It was with a heavy heart that Jūshirō left her room. All night he stayed up, trying to decide whether he should tell her or not. It should have been an easy decision, but he had no idea where Ichigo was, and he doubted Isshin would ever tell him even if he asked. No, the only choice he had was to stay silent, just like all the other Captains had done afterwards, but who would have thought that fate would intervene, allowing her to find him again purely by accident
thanks to a clerical error on Central's part?

"Captain…Captain Ukitake, are you okay?" Rukia's voice brings him out of his memories, causing him to look at his worried Lieutenant.

"Sorry, I was just thinking Rukia." He shakes his head briefly, then begins to eat his breakfast as well. "Now, I assume you have some means of contacting Ichigo if something should go wrong?"

Rukia pauses as she raises her chopsticks, a half-eaten bowl of rice in her other hand. "We…no, not yet Captain. Geta-Bōshi…sorry, I mean Urahara-san is working on modifying what the humans call smart phones so that we can speak to him without Squad Twelve or anyone else finding out, but we don't have any working copies yet."

When he raises a curious eyebrow at her, she lowers her eyes in slight embarrassment. "I just found my best friend and the only man Renji sees as a brother, he and the others from Karakura, they're all with him now, so…can you blame us for wanting to keep in touch with our friends, Captain?"

Jūshirō puts down his chopsticks, then reaches out to pat Rukia on the hand. "No Rukia, I think you, Renji and a few of our younger Shinigami are finally beginning to understand what we truly should be." Smiling at her with reassurance, he gifts her with one more saying. "Bonds of friendship last forever Rukia: as long as you believe in them, they will never wilt and die. Now finish up your food, and we'll go wake Lieutenant Abarai... we have a long day ahead of us."

Momo glares at the young white-haired Captain as he paces back and forth in front of her cell, the scowl on his face telling her he is really mad at her. Behind him though, when he isn't looking, the strawberry blonde Lieutenant of his squad and her own Captain both give her thumbs up or other encouraging signs while he continues his 'interrogation'. Finally getting tired of Tōshirō's constant under-the-breath comments, Momo stamps her foot and grabs the bars of her cell, gaining all their attentions.

"Tōshirō Hitsugaya, I've had enough of your questions. My love life is not for you to decide on any longer, besides I know about a certain Shiba princess that you are fond of, I believe her name to be…Karin perhaps?" She crosses her arms and smirks at Tōshirō as his jaw drops open in disbelief; behind him, Rangiku covers her mouth and attempts to stifle her giggles, while Captain Hirako openly smirks as he rolls his eyes in amusement.

"And you will say you're sorry to Rikichi-kun right this minute Shiro-kun, he is my boyfriend and I will not have my oldest friend insult him any longer, now go and apologize to him!"

Rangiku cheers out loud for her fellow Lieutenant then. "You tell 'em Momo! Make the meanie Captain say he's sorry to cute Rikichi-kun! Hell, if this is how the Devils changed you, you should go back for more!"

"RAAANNNGGGGGIIKKKUUUUU!" Tōshirō spins on his Lieutenant, his eyebrows twitching in anger as he points back at his cell-bound friend. "Stop being an idiot for once! Those Devils are what got Momo into this mess to begin with! If not for the fact that she has been staying with those Devils, those evil beings of…"

"SHUT UP!" Momo screams then, interrupting his rant and causing all three Shinigami outside her cell to stare at her in shock. Her anger is pouring out from her in waves, and her eyes hold a furious glint in them that is far more than they have ever seen before.
"Shut up Tōshirō. You have no idea of what they are like, or who they are as people. You call them evil, well here's a hint for you: Squad Eleven is capable of far greater evil than those Devils, and Squad Twelve beats them in being evil hands down. If Captain Shiba was to hear you speak of people you don't even know that way, I'm sure you would see nothing but disappointment staring back at you." Momo crosses her arms over her chest, turning her back to him. "Especially since…"

"Especially since what Momo?" Rangiku gently prods her friend when she doesn't continue speaking.

"Nothing…forget I said anything." Momo huffs and makes for her chair in the corner of the room, when Tōshirō's voice stops her from moving.

"Why would Captain Shiba disapprove of what I said about these Devils Momo? Tell me why!?" His teal eyes glare at her through the bars of her prison cell with a mixture of frustration and disbelief. "Just what are you hiding from me?"

"Well, sooner or later the cat's gonna get outta the bag Momo-chan, you might as well tell 'em before they find out the hard way, you're the best source since you stayed with them so long."
Shinji remarks suddenly, causing both Rangiku and Tōshirō to look at him with suspicion.

"Captain Hirako?" Momo asks her Captain, only to watch him cross his arms and lean backwards against the wall.

"It's alright Momo-chan. No one is listening in, and it's about time they started learning everything."

"Thank you Captain Hirako." Momo bows politely to him, gathering her thoughts before she turns to speak to her childhood friend.

"Do you know the real story as to why Captain Shiba stayed in the World of the Living, Tōshirō? The real reason why he failed to return that day?" She asks him carefully.

"Captain Shiba stayed in the World of the Living because he fell in love with a human and chose to stay with her instead of returning to carry out his duty. Everyone in the Gotei knows that story by now, what does that have to do with the Devils? I fail to see the connection." Tōshirō says impatiently, his frowning eyes glancing from Momo to Shinji and back again.

Stepping closer to the bars, Momo motions for him and Rangiku to come forward, which he complies with after some hesitation. Rangiku doesn't hesitate at all, skipping forward quickly. "The truth is that Captain Shiba stayed to save Masaki Kurosaki's life: she was dying after being bitten by a Hollow, since Hollow Reiatsu is poisonous to her kind."

"Her kind? Since when is Hollow Reiatsu poisonous to humans?" Rangiku asks with a frown.

Nodding at the strawberry-blond Lieutenant, Momo continues her explanation. "Hollow Reiatsu was poisonous to Masaki because she wasn't just an ordinary human…she was a Quincy. A pure-blooded Quincy, just like Ryūken Ishida. She was bitten by the Hollow because she risked her life to save Captain Shiba's, and the only way her life and soul could be saved was for a powerful Shinigami to tie his soul to hers, using his Shinigami powers to suppress the Hollow that was corrupting her soul. Captain Shiba did so without any hesitation, giving up his powers to save the life and soul of his savior, and they eventually got married and started a family in Karakura, the Kurosaki family."

Tōshirō's eyes had grown wider and wider as Momo told her story, and they nearly bug out at this
last sentence. "Are you telling me that Ichigo is part Quincy!?" Beside him, Rangiku gasps as well, having come to the same conclusion.

Nodding her head, Momo smiles faintly to her two close friends. "Yes Tōshirō. Ichigo Kurosaki's mother was a Quincy, and his father is a Shinigami, therefore he gained the powers of both along with the powers of the Hollow that had infected Masaki's soul. However, one thing that none of them knew was that Masaki herself wasn't just a Quincy, she was something much more. Something none of them found out until after her death, when her secret finally came to light, and Captain Shiba made use of that secret when Ichigo was exiled from Soul Society."

"Stop teasing them Momo, Shiro-kun's gonna flip out at this rate." Shinji suddenly speaks up again, grinning at the irate white-haired Captain. "Just skip ta the good part and tell them what ya discovered."

"Don't spoil the story for them Captain." Momo gives a fake pout, ignoring the low growl coming from Tōshirō at the use of his hated nickname. "Anyway, I was just giving them some background knowledge, otherwise some things won't make sense for them."

Looking at Tōshirō and then Rangiku, Momo clears her throat and then continues to speak. "As you both know, Central tasked me and Rukia to investigate some strange energy readings in Isehara. We quickly discovered the presence of the Devils, on our very first day in fact, and the official story is that we continued to investigate the Devils since we had no standing orders to do otherwise. Unofficially, we stayed because we discovered the presence of someone very important to us, someone whose presence we were not expecting at all, and to not stay and find out what the hell happened to him was a thought that never crossed our minds."

Seeing the look of dawning realization in their eyes, she nods and continues her story. "Now, to give you some information on the Devils, the nobles of Devil Society are grouped under the Seventy-Two Pillars of the Underworld, though less than forty Pillars are currently active. Just like our Five Great Noble Houses, their heirs and heiresses are next in line to take over their respective Clans, and three of them are studying at Kuoh Academy in Isehara, which we infiltrated under the guise of transfer students. They were the Gremory Heiress, the Sitri Heiress, and finally, the Naberius Heir."

"Wait a minute, I've heard that name before...out in the Rukongai when I was a child, and later again with regards to the...Kushanāda, I think? Aren't they the ones who control...the Gates...of...Hell." Rangiku's eyes grow wide and she stares at Momo in disbelief.

Momo winks at her fellow Lieutenant then. "Yes, that's them, and they really do have that ability. Their heir was the reason we continued to stay in Isehara, and even though we didn't discover the connection until much later, his presence made all the difference to us when we first started interacting with the Devils."

Gripping the bars near his friend's head, Tōshirō leans in with a hard glare. "Tell me Momo, why would this person make such a big difference as to how you view the Devils? Why would you trust anything he said, or even consider him to be important? Unless..."

Being a child prodigy, Tōshirō Hitsugaya quickly pieces together the picture his childhood friend has been painting for him. Leaning back from the bars, he begins pacing back and forth again, pausing only to stare at Momo twice with a twitching brow before stopping and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Just how long have you known about this, Captain Hirako?" He finally questions the Vizard Captain. "How many people are in on this secret?"
Shinji barks out with a laugh. "Finally, the kid genius sees it. Congratulations chibi Captain! I won't be telling ya who the others are just yet, so what's ya gonna do about it now?"

Rangiku can't stand it any longer as she jumps at Tóshirō and begins to shake him by the shoulders. "Who is it!? Tell me now Captain! Enough riddles, just tell me who Momo is talking about!?"

Slapping away her hands irritably, the short white-haired Captain turns to her with a frown. "Haven't you worked it out yet Matsumoto? Momo said that Masaki Kurosaki wasn't just a Quincy, and the Heir of the Naberius Clan is someone both important and trusted by them. Who else could she be talking about, other than Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Rangiku's eyes open wide in shock. "He…he's alive? But…wait…you just said that he is the Heir of the Naberius Clan…that means..." She turns to stare at Momo. "Oh…my…god…Ichigo is…"

"Lord Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius is alive and well, Rangiku, and he is a noble Devil of the Underworld, just like his sisters, like his mother, and his great-grandfather, Lord Amyntas Naberius of the Naberius Clan." Momo smiles at their dumbfounded expressions, enjoying this rare moment of getting one up over them. "If you are wondering how it is possible, Masaki was one of two survivors of an ambush on Lord Amyntas's family, the other being Lord Amyntas himself; it was a massacre that killed both her parents, Lord Vincent Naberius and Lady Kiku Kurosaki Naberius, as well as Lord Amyntas's wife, Cornelia Naberius. To protect the infant Masaki from further assassins, Lord Amyntas sealed away her Devil heritage and left her in the care of a normal human family, declaring to the Underworld that she had perished in the ambush. With the seal suppressing her Devil heritage, Masaki grew up as a pureblooded Quincy, eventually meeting Ryüken Ishida and Isshin Shiba in Karakura. After saving Captain Shiba's life, and being saved by him in turn, she fell in love with him and married him, and her seal was inherited by their three children: Yuzu, Karin, and Ichigo. After her death, Lord Amyntas tracked down Isshin Shiba and revealed Masaki's true heritage to him, demanding that he contact the Naberius Clan if her children, Lord Amyntas's great-grandchildren were ever put in danger again. Captain Shiba did so when Ichigo was exiled from Soul Society, and Lord Amyntas took guardianship of Ichigo and hid him away for his safety. After Ichigo successfully broke the seals on his Devil heritage and regained his powers and memories, Lord Amyntas declared him the official Heir of the Naberius Clan, and he also brought Karin and Yuzu to Isehara where they had their Devil bloodline unsealed as well. All three of them are now pureblooded Devils of the Naberius Clan, and they live in Isehara with the Gremory and Sitri Devils as their allies."

Tóshirō frowns visibly, the fact that Karin is now a pureblooded Devil not sitting well in his mind. "... If Ichigo Shiba is now a Devil, how can you be certain he is trustworthy?" He finally asks Momo.

The petite Lieutenant shakes her head slowly. "You didn't see him, Shiro-kun. Even with his memories and powers sealed, even with his inability to recognize either of us, he was still the same kind and protective person that we knew and trusted, the same person who fought to defend us and save Soul Society. The very first thing he did after regaining his memory and powers was to jump into battle to protect us, a battle that nearly killed him just minutes before. Even though he is now a Devil, his heart still hasn't changed one bit... at his core, he is still a Protector."

"Holy fuck." Momo giggles when she hears Rangiku curse under her breath, seeing Tóshirō turn back to glare at his Lieutenant. "Urk. I'm sorry Captain, slip of the tongue and all that."

"That's fine Rangiku-chan, you are part of this now. Today will probably see the end of an era and the beginning of hope for the poor souls of the afterlife." Shinji flippantly remarks, drawing their eyes to himself. "Momo, you have anything else you need to tell them?" He regrets his choice of
words however when Momo immediately repeats something he had forgotten.

"Oh, yeah. Rangiku, Shiro-kun…Ichigo's getting married today."

Three heads follow Rangiku's fainting body; Tōshirō and Shinji grab her before her head hits the wooden floor, and the Vizard Captain sighs with annoyance.

"Thanks for that, Momo. Just what we needed."

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Suì-Fēng glares at everyone as she stalks through her barracks, her foul mood causing her subordinates to scatter at her approach. For the past half day, she had tried unsuccessfully to reach her friend and former mentor, her attempts only reaching Yoruichi's voicemail each and every time. Glancing at a clock in one of the offices, she sees that she has less than thirty minutes to reach the damn werecat before she and her fat-oaf of a Lieutenant are required to escort the prisoners to Central Forty-Six to hear the charges against them. The only prisoner she has talked to since the debacle yesterday was Byakuya, and he was acting strangely unworried about the outcome of the trial.

'I have no doubt about tomorrow's outcome Shaolin; whatever happens, you must maintain your position as the Captain of Squad Two and the Commander of the Onmitsukidō. You are in a valuable place for your mentor if needed in the future.'

Growling in frustration, she slams open the door to her office and strides into the room. As soon as she sees who is inside, however, it takes every fiber of restraint she has to not kill her Lieutenant who is sitting on his couch and spilling his snacks on her floor, his eyes wide with panic as his face begins to sweat. Drawing her Zanpakutō, she flings it at him, seeing his eyes nearly bug out as it slams into the wall and vibrates next to his head.

"You have ten minutes to clean this office from the floor to the ceiling, and I'd better be able to see my reflection from every wooden surface…Lieutenant." Walking up to him, she glares into his eyes until he nods his head in frantic agreement, then she pulls her Zanpakutō from the wall and leaves out the nearest window, her next destination in mind.

After looping back several times to shake off any hidden followers, she enters the secret training area under the former execution site of Sōkyoku hill. The scaffolding that once held the massive Zanpakutō is now gone, all that remains of that once insidious device are the crumbling stone foundations, slowly being buried beneath the overgrowth of the surrounding grounds. In contrast, the training area beneath the hill is still in pristine condition, the self-repair Kidō seals on the walls and floor ensuring that it will endure the passage of time with relative ease. Making her way to the center of the vast interior space, she finds a flat area and sits down comfortably to perform Jinzen, needing to release the anger and stress she is feeling right about now.

When she opens her eyes again, she has to quickly dodge to the left as a speedy blur flies past her head, the gleam of golden death her only warning before she lands on her feet and feels out the air around her.

"I see we won't waste time today…bitch." Suì-Fēng grins at the hornet-themed Zanpakutō spirit, feeling Suzumebachi quivering in mock outrage.

"Tsk, tsk, slut…you wanted this…so I will oblige you." Suzumebachi readies her stinger and attacks Suì-Fēng again.
Choosing not to dodge this attack, Sûi-Fêng raises her Reiatsu to counter the threat, but she isn't quick enough to prevent the curse from taking hold as she sees two Homonka forming on her skin, one on her shoulder, the other on her upper thigh. Quickly using Shunpo to reach the trees that dominate her inner-world, the current commander of the Onmitsukidô Corps scans her surroundings, trying to detect her fighting partner. Unlike her initial form, Suzumebachi is no longer a small spirit; after gaining her Bankai, she is now actually a head taller than her wielder. Her appearance had also changed over the years, and her current form would have allowed her to easily slip in amongst the masked ninjas of Squad Two, the only hint of her true nature being her multi-faceted eyes that are always scanning her surroundings, looking for easy openings to strike at and eliminate her targets. Of course, that would require materializing Suzumebachi outside her inner world and giving her a change of clothing to wear, but it's nothing particularly difficult for her to pull off.

"Tell me Little Bee, why are you here? It's obvious your mind is already made up, so why hesitate to commit to your decision?" Suzumebachi's voice floats from high above the petite Captain, and Sûi-Fêng suddenly grins as an Ichigo-inspired plan comes to her mind.

Setting loose a barrage of Kidô, mostly Hadô, but also a few restraining Bakudô all around her, Sûi-Fêng quickly leaps away as the explosions cover her retreat, a series of Flash Steps getting her behind her target without the Zanpakutô spirit being any the wiser. Slowly peeking around the tree she is hiding behind, the assassin grins as she spots Suzumebachi crouching on a branch ahead of her, one hand on the trunk, the other wielding her Zanpakutô as she peers into the wreckage of the forest. Quietly murmuring the words, Sûi-Fêng holds her hand out and casts her incanted Bakudô.

"Bakudô Number Sixty-Three: Sajô Sabaku!" With a flash, ropes form around the shocked Zanpakutô spirit and begin to tighten rapidly.

Hopping down next to her trapped prey, Sûi-Fêng's smile falters as Suzumebachi's body fades and the ropes drop down around nothing.

'Speed clone!' She takes an unconscious step back, only to feel sharp steel at her throat, and she sees the smirking masked face of Suzumebachi in her peripheral vision.

"Creative, I will give you that Shaolin, but you should know that tricks like those don't work on us. No amount of creativity will let you escape this choice, so make up your mind, yes or no?"

Warrior and spirit stand immobile on the tree branch, the taller of the two folding her arms beneath her breasts as she stares at her wielder with her insightful multi-faceted eyes. Sûi-Fêng however looks at her hands, twisting them in front of her before giving out a sigh.

"All my life, I have served the greater good. My family has always walked in lockstep with the Shihôin Clan, helping them do the deeds that would protect Soul Society. My oath to the Gotei Thirteen and the Shihôin Clan was absolute…until…now."

Suzumebachi places a comforting hand on her wielder's shoulder. "Until now, when Ichigo and Yoruichi-sama showed you what you were missing…a life that you seek for yourself, a life where you can be Shaolin Fon, not Sûi-Fêng. With Central's current actions, I know that what she did is what you wish you could do."

Casting a glance at the Zanpakutô spirit in front of her, Sûi-Fêng nods once. "This…farce that Central is concocting upon the Gotei is nothing more than a dangerous game to them. To charge three high-ranking, and more importantly well-respected and popular officers will not go the way
they think. The only problem is, what will he do? The last time he faced Central, he didn't have numbers on his side, but this time I know there will not only be a decisive favor against them, even if he doesn't do anything, it will still most likely result in a true division within our ranks. Our unity... is going to collapse."

Suzumebachi walks up to Suì-Fēng and wraps her arms around the waist of her wielder. "You have made your choice, Shaolin. When the time comes, do not hesitate in your actions, do not falter or turn back."

Leaning into the arms that hold her lovingly, Suì-Fēng lays her head against the chest of her Zanpakutō with a bitter sigh. "For once… I know my duty, and it is to to a cause that runs opposite to that of Soul Society's."

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Forty-Six nobles slowly file into the newly modeled chamber that allows more accused to stand before their judgment. Today is the day their plans are set in motion; they will see to it that they are the only ones who will wield the power to rule the afterlife and to remind those who fight the Hollows that they are nothing more than soldiers who must follow Central's every command. Leading the oldest and highest-ranking Clans and Houses of Soul Society are two individuals who will bring together and bind their Clans under one rule: theirs. Iwao Kuchiki and Sahiye Shihōin walk to their respective places as two of the six Head Judges presiding over this trial, the other four Judges hand-picked from their branch families to ensure the trial's outcome. Side by side, the two noble Elders ascend the walkway to their place high above those who are to be tried and judged for their crimes, as would be the case today, however there is no true need to judge when the outcome has already been decided in private by the six.

"Your cousin is certainly a fool today Iwao; to think he believes because he is the Head of the Kuchiki Clan we will show leniency to that piece of shit 'sister' of his, he must be delusional or just simply that arrogant. I savor the moment he learns of her fate and his." The woman says with well-hidden anticipation as she sits down first.

Sitting beside the Shihōin representative, the black- and grey-haired Elder of the Kuchiki Clan smirks behind his placard as well. "My cousin does need to be reminded of who is truly in charge of the Clan, and today I will remind him of this fact. I am certain once we give him the choice of marriage to Chiyoko or imprisonment, he will see he has little choice but to choose marriage. Our clans will unite as they should have been before that Rukongai bitch came into his life, and the mistakes of the past will be rectified here today."

The two quietly share a laugh as the first of the witnesses are brought in to mark the day Central Forty-Six takes complete control of the Gotei Thirteen.

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Momo, Rukia and Byakuya entered the chamber with their heads held high as they marched towards the center of the area designated for the accused to stand. Their escorts from Squad Two were hand-picked by Captain Suì-Fēng to ensure no assassins could silence them before they reach their 'hearing'. At the head of the procession is the petite Captain herself, her Lieutenant bringing up the rear, and behind them are most of the Captains and Lieutenants except for Kenpachi and his pink-haired demoness, along with Mayuri. The former two are AWOL as is their norm, even for an event of this importance, while Mayuri is simply too busy with the body he retrieved from Hueco Mundo to bother attending. Head Captain Yamamoto himself leads his Captains and Lieutenants into the room and directs most of them to take their places in the few available pews that will allow
them to bear witness to the proceedings, while the three prisoners find their way to the center of
the chamber and stand before the Forty nobles and six Judges who will hear the evidence of their
criimes and decide on their guilt.

A wooden gavel bangs down and the lead Judge speaks from his place, his face hidden by the
shadows cast by the sparsely placed lights. "Silence! These hearings are now in session! Byakuya
Kuchiki, Rukia Kuchiki, Momo Hinamori, you stand before us charged with treason, consorting
with Ryoka, giving aid to the known criminal Yoruichi Shihōin, and giving aid to the exile Ichigo
Kurosaki. Chiyoko Shihōin, bring forth the evidence to support these charges."

There is a faint stir as Chiyoko Shihōin steps up to the raised platform, her yellow eyes drifting
over the accused for a moment before settling on Byakuya's visage with a malicious glint in her
eyes.

"Thank you. The evidence is quite clear. I have photos taken of Rukia Kuchiki and Momo
Hinamori not only in the presence of the criminal Yoruichi Shihōin, but the fugitive Ichigo
Kurosaki…"

"What the hell ya mean fugitive!?!" Shinji snaps out from his place, his hands slamming down on
the railings. "Last fuckin' time I checked he was exiled, not a damn criminal! How are you
associating him as a criminal!?!"

"SILENCE!" The lead Judge bangs his gavel again. "Head Captain Yamamoto, you will order your
Captains and Lieutenants to keep quiet during these hearings! They have no right to speak in these
matters! One more outburst and you will all be thrown out!"

Rage builds in the eyes of many of the Gotei officers, even the three oldest Captains outside of
Yamamoto shift uncomfortably at the words being directed at the highly regarded and well-liked
Captain of the Fifth. Pulling the brim of his sakkat down, Shunsui sends a glance towards his
oldest friend.

"Yare, yare Jūshirō, looks to me like they are making their play."

The white-haired Captain wears a barely perceptible frown on his face, his eyes taking in the
resentment that is building in the officers of the Gotei and the anticipation he can almost feel
coming from the nobles of Central Forty-Six.

"I couldn't agree more Shunsui." He finally replies.

Both men turn to look at Shinji again, seeing Rose and Kensei sending their own death glares up at
the faceless voice as they hold on to their fellow Vizard, Shinji's hands nearly breaking apart the
railing in front of him with his anger. Behind them, the Lieutenants quickly read the mood of their
Captains and make moves to stand as close as they can to their commanding officers in support,
while Head Captain Yamamoto wears a displeased frown, seeing the direction being taken by
those who were given the authority to rule as directed by the Royal Family, a body he had helped
create to bring law and order to the once wild and violent Seireitei.

With the Captains forced to remain silent, Chiyoko speaks again with a faint smirk on her face. "As
I was saying honorable judges, these photos clearly show Lieutenants Kuchiki and Hinamori going
to school with the aforementioned fugitive Ichigo Kurosaki, and later we were able to take this
single photo of Yoruichi Shihōin posing as a teacher at this school. We had each squad member
immediately send any photos they had taken to their team members and myself as more than five
members of my squad have disappeared under mysterious circumstances in recent weeks. We have
to assume that Yoruichi Shihōin and Ichigo Kurosaki are actively giving aid to those we now
know are Devils, and they are working to eliminate our men. To finalize our proof, we have these last two photos proving that the two Lieutenants are even living with these Ryoka." Chiyoko lays out copies of the photos in front of the three Reiatsu cuffed defendants then, showing the familiar faces of Orihime, Chad and Uryū.

"Lieutenant Kuchiki, explain why you gave aid to these Ryoka? Why did you not report back immediately once you made contact with these beings of the Underworld?" A faceless female voice asks from high up in the stands of the sitting nobles.

Rukia lifts her chin high. "Our standing orders are to investigate the strange energy readings, not report back on any new races found. We didn't report our findings because we were still investigating the energy readings and trying to learn more about them. Until we returned yesterday, we had no idea that you had prior knowledge of these Devils, so we felt it was wiser to learn as much as we could from them before reporting back to our Captains."

"That doesn't explain why you didn't report Ichigo Kurosaki's presence to us immediately!" That same woman's voice snaps out harshly.

Anger at what she knows to be the truth makes the violet eyed Shinigami snap back at them with equal harshness. "You are at fault for that! You sentenced him to death for doing what we couldn't do against Aizen! And you dare call him a criminal, you are the criminals here! I know what really happened that day! Isshin Shiba and Kisuke Urahara told us you tried to have him executed; instead they saved him by having him sentenced to exile, his memories stolen from him to deny him access to an integral part of any Shinigami's soul, the ability to speak to his Zanpakutō! How dare you! How dare any of you sit there and accuse me of crimes when you are the greater criminals in this room today!"

There is an immediate outburst of noise as the Forty-Six nobles in the chamber shout their accusations and anger at her words, silenced only by the repeated banging of the gavel.

"Shut up you Rukongai trash! You will stay silent from this point forward and only answer our questions!" The lead Judge declares when the room falls silent.

Ripples of Reiatsu leak from the spectators then; a few Captains are from the Rukongai themselves, and hearing nobles speak to a highly accomplished officer in such a manner really grates on their slowly fraying nerves. Among them, the white-haired youngest Captain shifts his angry eyes towards the direction of the voice, his fists tightly clenched in an effort not to reach up for the hilt of Hyōrinmaru. Rangiku gently squeezes his shoulder, bending down to whisper calming words into the ear of her Captain. As the Captains struggle to keep their anger under control, another voice speaks out from the six Head Judges.

"So, you don't deny giving him aid then?" Byakuya easily recognizes the voice of the Kuchiki Elder, Iwao Kuchiki, and he has to restrain himself from smirking grimly.

"Aid? What aid? You know so damn much, you tell me what I did then?" Rukia shouts back at Iwao, flexing against her restraints.

Another voice sounds out with a contemptuous sneer in her tone. "We know he has his memories back Lieutenant Kuchiki, how else did he fight in the park that night?"

"What?"

Chiyoko brings out a file and opens it in front of the three accused. "The fugitive's Reiatsu was finally verified two days ago. Squad Twelve was able to differentiate it from the others; while parts
of it have changed for unknown reasons, enough of his Reiatsu was still present to compare it to a sample that is on file along with those of every other Shinigami serving, including yourself and your fellow conspirator, Momo Hinamori. Is it because you still harbor romantic feelings for him that you sought to help him regain his memories with the aid of his father and Kisuke Urahara? It is obvious that Kisuke Urahara, along with Tessai Tsukabishi and Isshin Shiba are criminally liable for allowing Ichigo Kurosaki to retain those memories by deceit and purposely disobeying an order from Central Forty-Six to seal and destroy those memories. So, Rukia Kuchiki, did you aid him in restoring his memories or not? Your obvious admission suggests as much, even admitting that former Captains Shiba and Urahara informed you of those facts surrounding his exile. Facts that were sealed by the very body sitting here."

"Fuck you." Rukia doesn't shed a tear when she is slapped viciously by the suddenly angry woman in front of her.

Slamming his cane to the floor, Head Captain Yamamoto glares at Chiyoko Shihōin and pins her in place with his overwhelming Reiatsu. "You will keep your hands to yourself Chiyoko Shihōin, or else you will find yourself before me explaining your actions towards my subordinates."

Chiyoko stiffly nods, and he pulls back his Reiatsu and allows her to move again. He sees her glaring at Rukia, but she takes no further action against the violet-eyed Lieutenant. "My apologies Head Captain. Now answer the question, does he…"

"I refuse to answer any more questions." Rukia interrupts her coldly.

"As do I." Momo says as she steps up beside Rukia. "What we did was help an old friend and ally. We helped the Devils uphold a contract in Hueco Mundo, and in doing so we saved Soul Society from a possible invasion by unknown Quincy in the near future, along with gaining friends among the Devils. None of our actions are criminal; what we did was to ensure the future of Soul Society by gaining new allies and rebuilding our ties with former ones, yet you insist on repeating the same mistake you made when you threatened to kill one of their own. Too bad you will never know how close you came to complete destruction, because you lot are clearly a lost cause."

Tōshirō, Rangiku and many of the Lieutenants look on in shock as the woman who most have always known as being kind, quiet and friendly verbally roasts the members of Central Forty-Six, her words showing none of her characteristic kindness at all. This is not the same person who had left with Rukia; this is a much stronger and far more self-assured Momo who is willing to speak her mind and stand up for her own opinions. The white-haired Captain finds himself smirking as he silently cheers for his oldest friend.

'Good for you Momo.'

"So, you think you know better do you? You violated a treaty over a thousand years old and by doing so, you leave us vulnerable to actions that can be taken against us in the future. You have given refuge to the criminals now named in these indictments, and willingly withheld information from not only your Captains, but also the highest authority of Soul Society: Central Forty-Six. Seeing that you refuse to admit your guilt or culpability in these matters, we have no need to adjourn and decide upon your fates. Before we do so however, Captain Byakuya Kuchiki: you have claimed responsibility for the actions of Lieutenants Kuchiki and Hinamori. Do you have anything you wish to add in your own defense?"

"No." The stoic Captain speaks up for the first time since the interrogation started, and his one-word answer causes gasps of shock from around the room.

Seeing all eyes on him, the Squad Six Captain walks to stand before the two Shinigami women
with him. "I believe my sister and Lieutenant Hinamori have adequately explained their actions, as they were in line with my orders. Any accusation of criminal actions should therefore fall on myself as their commanding officer, not on them as loyal Shinigami."

Up where the Head Judges are seated, Iwao grins in triumph at Byakuya's admission of involvement. Exchanging a look with his own co-conspirator, he asks the Kuchiki Clan Head to explain what his orders were and how he was involved with the actions of the two Lieutenants.

"Very well. I became aware of who was living in Isehara the moment I saw Ichigo Shiba with my sister and Lieutenant Hinamori. Seeing as he is listed as an exile, not a criminal, I ordered them to stay and ascertain his affiliation with the Devils that have claimed that city. Regardless of the state of his memories, so long as he brought no direct harm to Soul Society, I saw no reason to provoke a conflict with someone who had once defeated a being none of us could defeat. I also had them keep quiet about who they were living with due to the discovery that he is under the protection of two powerful Clans of the Underworld, whose heiresses are both attending the same school that he is, according to my sister. Head Captain, perhaps you recall who are involved with the Gremory and Sitri Clans?"

Nodding gravely, the oldest and strongest of the Shinigami Captains steps forward then. "I do Byakuya Kuchiki. The Devil involved with the Gremory Clan is Sirzechs Lucifer, Maou of the Underworld, and the Devil involved with the Sitri Clan is Serafall Leviathan, also a Maou of the Underworld. If the siblings of two Maou are on his side, then it is wise of the two Lieutenants to seek a path of alliance by staying to learn more about them, rather than provoke a conflict and risk dragging Soul Society into a war with the Underworld."

Iwao and those allied with him can see the effect the Head Captain's admission has on his men, most of the Captains and Lieutenants either nodding their heads in agreement or looking rather thoughtful. Not wanting to risk the failure of his plans, the Kuchiki Elder forcefully plays his trump card.

"While that is true Head Captain, they have violated the terms of the treaty that forbids them to get involved with Devils, and thus they have endangered Soul Society by allowing these Devils to learn of our latest abilities and advances since our last contact with them. Regardless of Captain Kuchiki's orders, it doesn't absolve Lieutenants Kuchiki and Hinamori of their crimes, it only implicates Captain Kuchiki as well. Breaking the treaty is treason, you yourself have upheld this law in the past, Head Captain Yamamoto. Besides, regardless of the reasons why Ichigo Kurosaki was sentenced to death, his unwillingness to adhere to our laws and traditions makes him an enemy that cannot be allowed to live. He was only given exile because his memory and powers were stripped from him; now that he has recovered his memory and powers, he is to be considered a criminal of Soul Society and all those who assist him will be judged as his accomplices. All three accused now fall into this category." He pauses his speech, giving it a moment to sink in before continuing with evident smugness. "Having reviewed the evidence for ourselves, we have decided beforehand that if we should find sufficient proof in these hearings, we will render a verdict by vote. All in favor of guilt, raise your hands."

To the horror and anger of those officers standing in the pews, they see every member of Central Forty-Six raise their hand, not a single one of them dissenting or abstaining. Their gazes then shoot towards their Head Captain, waiting for him to put an end to this farce of a trial, but the ancient Shinigami continues to watch the proceedings with a stony expression on his face, expressing neither approval nor discontent at the sentencing.

The lead Judge bangs his gavel once more. "Momo Hinamori, you have been found guilty of treason and aiding known criminals of Soul Society. Your Zanpakutō will be destroyed, and you
will be executed at dusk on Sōkyoku Hill by the members of Central Forty-Six's Security Squad. Rukia Kuchiki, you have been found guilty of treason, aiding known criminals of Soul Society, and disrespecting our authority. Your Zanpakutō will be destroyed, and you will be sentenced to two hundred years in the Muken with no chance of parole. Byakuya Kuchiki, you have been found guilty of treason as well as indirectly aiding known criminals of Soul Society, but your standing as a noble mitigates your crimes to a lesser degree. As such, you will be placed under house arrest, and the Elders of your Clan have taken the necessary steps to rectify your failure and ensure your Clan's future."

"This is bullshit!"

"You can't do this!"

"What the hell is this crap!?"

"Stop! Calm yourselves!"

"Head Captain you must stop this please!"

Banging his cane once more against the floor, Yamamoto releases his Reiatsu to stifle all the outcries. Anger fills his gaze as he glares at the individuals that form the government of his people, the same ones who had abused their right to rule by royal decree to perpetuate such a massive injustice, and it is with a heavy heart that he speaks the next words laced with condemnation and contempt for those who sit above them all and dare to proclaim themselves judges.

"While I agree with your outrage at this judgment, we are all subject to obey those who the Royal Family have placed in the position of power to rule in their stead." He begins in his gravelly voice. "We cannot do anything but make a direct appeal to the Soul King, and as such, I ask for one week's allowance to contact them and receive an answer to have these sentences overturned."

Chiyoko Shihōin's voice immediately speaks up from the panel of Head Judges, confirming his suspicions that this trial was never intended to be a fair one. "Denied Head Captain. As you said, we rule by the Royal Family's decree, not you, your Captains or any other Shinigami here." Her words are even, but she cannot hide the traces of smugness in her voice.

Unable to do more without breaking the laws of Soul Society, Yamamoto glowers furiously at the Shihōin Elder as he is forced to swallow his protests. Inwardly, he vows to pay a visit to the Soul King and get to the bottom of this injustice, even if the only thing he can do then is to avenge the unjust fates of his officers who are being sentenced to death or worse.

"Rukia Kuchiki, Momo Hinamori, you have been sentenced for your crimes. Do you have any last words before those sentences are carried out?" Iwao's voice sounds out again.

Standing before the two Lieutenants, Byakuya looks at the assembled nobles hidden by shadows and placards, never seeing Momo remove her ring and place it on a different finger. Taking a deep breath, the Kuchiki Captain speaks. "I see I was informed correctly of the deep corruption that flows through those who dare call themselves nobles of Soul Society. Isshin Shiba was correct when he left behind this life to gain true freedom for himself and to protect his family by taking on his late wife's name. Yoruichi Shihōin… I believe she too has taken on a new name from what I have been told. She too has seen the disease that has taken root in our once glorious society, a disease that was discovered after what Aizen did to your predecessors; I thought you would have learnt by now how absolute power corrupts absolutely, but it is obvious the lesson was lost or ignored by you. What a pity."
Pausing, he slowly swings his gaze over the shadowed individuals of Central Forty-Six, the shadows doing nothing to protect them from his piercing gaze. "I once believed as you did: that we were the standards for which Soul Society stood for, that we were nobles because we were inherently noble. However, someone showed me I was wrong, that we were wrong. He was thrust into his position without age, experience, power or knowledge of birth, yet he still did nothing but protect those who couldn't defend themselves, fighting against those who abused their power and sought to harm them. Despite all the power, authority and respect he has gained since then, he still lives a modest life, treating those who work with him and serve him not as inferior beings, but as equals, and it has only deepened their loyalty and respect for him. He is a true noble, one that I wish to emulate, but I won't do it as a Kuchiki; I will earn that right as a man with no name."

"Wh...What are you saying, Byakuya Kuchiki!?" Chiyoko nearly screams as that horrible feeling from long ago claws its way into her soul again, that feeling of her prize slipping through her fingers and disappearing.

"Simple. I renounce the name Kuchiki and all rights of being a noble of Soul Society, including my reduced sentence and any protection the Kuchiki Clan may have offered me."

Looking back at his sister, he sees her smirk as she too renounces her name and the false protection it has offered her. Ignoring the scandalized shouts coming from the members of Central Forty-Six, he turns to look at the shadowed spot where he knows Iwao Kuchiki is sitting, easily imagining the look of rage on the Kuchiki Elder's face as his plans fall to pieces around him.

"I have also seen to the removal of my late wife's remains and had them taken to someone who will see to their safety, along with those of my late parents, Iwao Kuchiki. There is nothing you can use any longer to force me into a marriage with the woman I know in my heart murdered my Hisana. Yes, I know all about your plans of forcing me to marry her to save myself and lessen Rukia's punishment, but I am no fool, and I am no coward. By forsaking my name, I deny you the success of your plan even now and I deny the survival of our Clan as there is no one of power to replace me. Am I correct, Ginrei Kuchiki-sama?"

A grey-haired Shinigami steps out of a shadowed alcove at the back of the chamber, revealing the former head of the Kuchiki Clan, Ginrei Kuchiki. If anyone could see Iwao Kuchiki's face now, they would see him go pale with shock and disbelief that Ginrei was present all this time.

The older Shinigami casts a disdainful glance over the ranks of Central Forty-Six as well as the six Head Judges, before he turns his gaze to the now-former Kuchiki Clan Head. "Yes, my grandson. I am too old to lead, and I have no intentions of doing so after reading your accusations, as they paint a compelling picture of the events surrounding Hisana's death, along with the actions our family has taken against both of you. I am truly sorry Byakuya, Rukia; our family has shamed themselves beyond all possible redemption, and I accept your rejection of our family name and wish you both the best in your future endeavors...just be happy when you find what it is you seek, my grandson."

A sad smile graces Ginrei's face as he sweeps out of the chamber, the younger Captains and Lieutenants bowing in his passage, each of them acknowledging his former status as a Captain and a respected former head of the Kuchiki Clan.

"Y-You can't." Chiyoko Shihōin finally speaks, the first person to make a sound in the silence left behind by Ginrei's exit. She clenches her fists tightly as she glares at Byakuya with the utmost loathing. "You belong to me! You threw me away the last time for a piece of gutter trash and you do it again for her damn sister! I won't let you!"

Glaring back at her, Byakuya returns a look of equal loathing. "There is...." He is suddenly interrupted when an unexpected voice speaks up then.
"Forgive me Captain."

All turn to look at the person speaking, Byakuya frowning at her slightly. "Forgive you for what, Momo?"

She lifts her hands, and the Reiatsu-inhibiting cuffs around her wrists shatter as her new magic flows freely for the first time, her fire-red Devil wings unfolding from her back and the silver ring on her right hand glowing with a bright white light.

"I'm sorry because they were right about one of us; I did betray Soul Society because I have seen what we are doing, and I freely chose to follow him instead. Now my King comes for me, and there is nothing any of you can do stop him.

Her ring flares up brighter than any eyelid can shield their eyes from, and a new voice speaks up from the radiance in the middle of the room.

"Sorry it took us so long..."

After he and Kisuke examine the information coming to him via the ring, Ichigo looks over his peerage and speaks to them.

"This is really not what I want to do right now, but our second Bishop has just sent me a distress signal. Her life is in danger, and I intend to go save her. Anyone who wants to come along and crash the party in Soul Society, take a step forward."

To his surprise, all his peerage members do so, even the former Arrancar and Números who should be the most concerned about entering Soul Society as an invading force once again. Looking at them, he smiles with gratitude when he sees their determined gazes meeting his firmly. "I knew I could count on you guys. Uryū, you don't have to do this you know."

Rolling his eyes, the Quincy archer looks at his cousin. "I doubt Serafall would be in a pleasant mood if she found out I didn't help her cousin...and mine, to rescue his Bishop. So, thanks but no thanks Ichigo; she will be downright pissy if she thought I let you go invade Soul Society without helping."

Grimmjow speaks up next as he stands between Chad and Nelliel. "So, what's the plan other than kick everyone's ass that gets in the way? Think we can actually pull off an invasion?"

Snapping his fan open, Kisuke steps forward and waits for Ichigo to give him the okay to speak. "Our Bishop is in a chamber from what we know, a fairly large room filled with people, but with enough space to teleport into. The moment the Elves arrive I will tell them what to do, each of you however will wear a cloak to hide not only your faces, but your Reiatsu from the Gotei Thirteen. The less they know of who you are right now, the better; this will allow us to negotiate from a stronger position with the Head Captain later. Also, this is meant to be a simple snatch and grab, we are getting your second Bishop, the body of one of the Elves and maybe a 'hostage' or two..."

"Hostages!" Kisuke and Ichigo grin at the surprised faces of Ichigo's peerage.

"Willing ones, actually. I'm not leaving behind any of our friends if they are in trouble; we have a safe haven here, and I'm going to give it to them until we can ensure their safety. If we can't, well, I guess the family is gonna get a tad bit bigger."

Cyan Sung-Sun looks at her King then. "Do you believe them to be in that much trouble Ichigo?"
The orange-haired Devil nods at her. "I do Sung-Sun, it is the only reason our Bishop would send her distress signal to me so soon. Something must have happened when she went back and only a few things would force her to use it so soon. One of the two things I'm feeling from her ring is that her life is in imminent danger and she needs us to come and get her, the other is that those who know about us might also be in danger. I plan on taking them with us and then dealing with the Head Captain later, forcing him to think before he acts especially if I take a few of his Captains and Lieutenants to cut down on his strongest fighters available."

"Holy shit Ichigo, you really plan on doing more than simply rescuing our Bishop aren't ya?" Tatsuki sounds impressed as she changes into her armored form, many of Ichigo's peerage doing the same around her. They also distribute Kisuke's cloaks and start to drape them over their armor. Smirking at his oldest friend, he sends her a wink. "They can kiss my ass for the shit they pulled on not only me, but you guys as well. Time for them to see that there are those who will stand up against them and fight them, push them right back and even harder if we are forced to do so. I am sick and tired of Central doing whatever they feel like doing and getting away with it, Suki. We're gonna show them that it isn't the case anymore."

Looking at his peerage, he sees excited gleams and anticipatory smiles on their faces; deciding to issue his other orders before they get too excited to listen, he starts to speak again. "I know all of you know who most of the Captains and Lieutenants are, so let's assign our targets quickly. I think we are safe to leave the Vizards alone, Shinji's on our side and the others won't fight against us. Tia, you know most of them so point them out as those to be left alone. Captains Ukitake and Kyōraku are nominally on our side, leave them alone unless they engage you in combat, but it's more than likely they'll just put up a show of fighting. Don't mess with Captain Unohana, she will focus on healing rather than fighting, but if you piss her off you will realize she isn't the gentle person she projects herself to be. The only ones I see causing us trouble will be Captains Komamura, Kurotsuchi, Kenpachi and Hitsugaya. Komamura and Hitsugaya are far too rigid and unbending with their rules, Kenpachi is a battle-freak, and Kurotsuchi is just a freak. Work in pairs if they engage you and defeat them if you can, but don't take any needless risks; our objective is to rescue our people, not give them more hostages to capture. Head Captain Yamamoto will be taken out by using our Elves when we get there; I'll let Kisuke fill them in as to what they need to do when we teleport there. The other Lieutenants and Captains we will only react to if necessary and only if they attempt to fight us. Last thing, when we get there, address me only as Lord Naberius, Kimi and Nia will inform those we are taking with us to do the same. It will keep the others in the dark a bit longer."

"Ah Ichi-nii, so who is our second Bishop?" Orihime asks curiously, pretending not to know so as to keep their secret.

"That would be...a surprise."

"Seriously though, there are only two people she could be, so work it out yourselves. I think you will all be surprised as well as pleased by who she is, and I think she will be a great asset to us as a Bishop, trust me on that."

As his peerage begins chatting among themselves, the room begins to glow and Sasha and Merti return with the Elves chosen to follow him to Soul Society, along with Yoruichi and two others he didn't expect to see.

"Hanako, Conor what are you two doing here? You're supposed to be escorting my uncle and the twins to the gathering." He asks the Rook and Knight with some surprise.

The white-haired Rook smiles at him indulgently as she speaks. "Lord Amyntas asked us to keep
you safe Ichigo; besides, I have always wanted to meet Soul Society's greatest warriors, and now is my chance to do so."

"And I wasn't letting my wife out of my sight if she is planning to face Head Captain Yamamoto." Conor adds on with a grin as his wife shakes her head amusedly.

Thanking them both, Ichigo turns to look at his purple-haired 'mother'. "You game for this Okaa-san? We're going into a den of vipers, and some of them really want you dead."

The dark-skinned woman sighs and places her hand on her hip. "You know I wouldn't miss this for the world Ichigo. Truth is, I need to find someone when we get there, so after we get the body of the Elf, I'm taking Merti to the Shihōin manor to find my younger sister."

Ichigo's voice nearly cracks as he stares wide-eyed at Yoruichi. "The…there's…there's more of you?"

Walking up to him and running her finger down his now twitching cheek, she suddenly grips his chin and speaks menacingly to him. "Yes, there is Ichigo, and she's your new aunt, so you better treat her right or else you know what's coming for you..."

Ichigo's entire body goes stiff with shock at the news that he has a new 'Aunt'. Behind her, most of his peerage exchange looks of consternation, not really sure what to do about the fact that there will soon be two werecats to deal with on a daily basis. The Karakura teens take it in stride, however: Uryū face-palms and starts muttering to himself, Chad seems completely unmoved by the news, and Orihime and Tatsuki both slap their hands over their mouths to prevent their giggles from being heard.

Smirking faintly at Ichigo's petrified expression, Yoruichi turns to face his peerage. "Anyone got a problem with that?"

"No." Is the answer given by the assembled Devils.

"Good, now let's get this show on the road and get Ichigo's Bishop and our allies back safely, while kicking some ass if we need to." She pokes Ichigo in the forehead, waking him from his stupor. "Well Ichigo? You're the only one who can get us there, so move it!"

Shaking away his lingering shock, Ichigo forms his armor, but he doesn't form Zangetsu, much to his Zanpakutō spirit's displeasure even if he grudgingly agrees that it's the best way to keep Ichigo's identity a secret. Creating the teleportation spell with his magic and forming his destination in his head, the last thing Ichigo sees is Kisuke lowering his hat to hide his eyes while mouthing the words 'Good Luck', before the magic circle activates and fills his vision with light.

'Rhang on Momo, we're coming for you…'

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Rias watches as the Naberius peerages escort Yuzu and Karin to their estate, frowns and worry on all their faces after learning that Ichigo has left for Soul Society with only his peerage and two members from their grandfather's peerage to back him up. As the young twins disappear into the building, she finds her mother's arms wrapping themselves around her shoulders and whispering words of comfort into her ear then.

"He is strong Rias, don't worry. He'll be back and this nightmare will be over one way or another."

She reaches up to hug her mother's arms tightly. "I know Mother. I just hope he doesn't have to
fight; he will need everything for when he faces Riser today. I want a clean victory, not one in which Father has to break up our arrangement and lose respect among the Pillars." The crimson-haired beauty sadly remarks as she mentally sends her greatest wish for protection to the man she loves.

'Hurry home to me safely Ichigo.'

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Lord Amyntas stands under the Great Dome, his anger barely held in check as he looks at the spot that he had sent his newly confessed love, his oldest and most trusted companions along with two of his son's peerage and fifty of his strongest Elfin warriors to face off against Soul Society's own soldiers.

'If anything happens to any of you, I will personally come to avenge you, treaty be damned. I will not allow anyone to hurt my family ever again.'

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Sirzechs smiles after the messenger from his father leaves, waiting until the servant is truly gone before turning to the others and speaking with a casual tone.

"Well, it appears we will meet with Soul Society again after all these years."

Ajuka looks down at the wine he is sipping. "How long has it been since we last dealt with him, Sirzechs? A hundred, two hundred years? I hope he has mellowed some, last time he was so damn overbearing."

The Lucifer Maou chuckles at his fellow Maou's observations. "Well, the Soul King does have a lot on his shoulders, after all he nearly had to confront one of his wayward relatives hell-bent on usurping his position, and Ichigo took care of the other insane child for him. I think we are in a position to dictate better terms this time, don't you agree, Serafall, Falbium?"

The military leader and the foreign affairs Maou both agree with him, the latter idly twirling her magical staff with a dangerous look in her eyes.

"So, we will just have to wait for the Head Captain to give us a call then." Sirzechs laughs as they stand up and teleport to the Young Devils gathering together.

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As the blinding light fades, the Head Captain suddenly feels the presence of numerous new entities surrounding him. The first thing he sees is the black-armored figure standing directly across the room from him, numerous other cloaked and uncloaked figures standing by his sides. Yamamoto's eyes immediately notice the two dark skinned women with slightly pointed ears standing behind the black-armored figure and speaking to his two Lieutenants and his Captain, the three accused officers nodding at whatever is being said to them. His hand begins to tighten on his Zanpakutō handle, but he stops when he realizes that each member of Central Forty-Six has a green-and-silver armored warrior standing behind them, their bows drawn and aiming heavy broad-headed arrows at the back of each head. Not one of the warriors have their eyes looking elsewhere except down the shaft of their arrows as they hold Soul Society's highest ruling body hostage, the members of Central Forty-Six sitting stiffly in their seats and not daring to move or say a word.

Of the numerous cloaked and uncloaked individuals standing around the black-armored figure, the two that stand out the most are a large-bodied Caucasian male with red hair on his head and face,
while next to him is what appears to be a white-haired female Kyuubi-no-Kitsune that he doesn't recognize from the Yōkai faction. Another two that catch his eye are two older dark-skinned women with the same pointy ears as the armored warriors and the two younger women conversing with his officers; one of them has emerald green eyes, while the other's milky eyes suggest she is blind. Despite their variety of appearances however, the dark energy that he feels coming from them tells him only one thing: that they are Devils from the Underworld.

"Are you breaking the treaty Devils?" He asks the armored figure he assumes to be their leader. From the words of Momo Hinamori's confession, he suspects that this has to be the 'King' she spoke of.

Almost as if validating his suspicions, the black-armored figure ignores him and turns to Momo Hinamori instead, tilting its helm down and speaking to her with a voice distorted by its metal visor. "Not even home one day and you're already getting into trouble, Momo? Do you want to tell me what happened that forced you to call for help already?"

To Yamamoto's surprise, Momo doesn't show any hesitation as she recounts the events that happened starting from the moment she and Lieutenant Kuchiki had arrived back in Soul Society, the failed attempt by Central to arrest them, the farce of a trial that had just taken place, and the reason she was forced her to call for her King today. All the while as she is speaking, the black-armored figure remains silent, as do the other individuals standing around them. Yamamoto also notices several attempts by the Central Forty-Six members, Chiyoko Shihōin and the six Head Judges to protest, but the creaking of bowstrings from behind them or a poke from a pointy-tipped arrow keep them from saying a word until she finishes and bows lowly to her 'King'.

"I'm sorry Lord Naberius, if...if there had been another way, I would have taken it, but..."

The black-armored figure places a gauntleted hand on her head. "You did the right thing Momo. Okaa-san, Merti, Sasha, I believe you have a task to accomplish..."

He is interrupted by Lieutenant Hinamori, who waves his head down so she can whisper something into his ear.

After standing straight again, the black-armored 'King' that Lieutenant Hinamori addressed as 'Lord Naberius' speaks again, with a hint of amusement in his voice. "Kimi, Nia, take Momo and help her retrieve her boyfriend; Momo, tell him the truth as fast as you can, but if he refuses, don't force him to follow you, understand?"

"Yes, I understand." She bows to him again, a beaming smile on her face.

"Good. Okaa-san, we'll have a friendly chat with Head Captain Yamamoto while we wait for your return."

There is a flurry of movement as two additional groups of individuals are formed, then they vanish in separate magic circles, leaving Yamamoto to wonder just where they are going. Shaking his head inwardly, the Head Captain focuses his glare on this so-called 'Lord Naberius'. Knowing the vital role that the Naberius Clan plays in keeping the Sinners in Hell, Yamamoto is aware that any attempt to confront this Devil will end up with a political nightmare, which prevents him from simply drawing Ryūjin Jakka and crushing these interlopers with the full force of his Reiatsu. With his three students beside him however, he is fully confident in his ability to subdue or eliminate these intruders if necessary; Central Forty-Six being taken hostage simply gives him the opportunity to observe these Devils under the premise of 'not endangering the nobles'. He still needs to find out just what these Devils are planning, and how they plan to get away with it.
Unaware of the Head Captain's thoughts, Ichigo takes stock of his current surroundings. Yoruichi, Merti, Sasha, Kimi, Nia and Momo are carrying out their missions, so he is left with his peerage, his grandfather's Knight and Rook, and the Elfin warriors that are holding Central Forty-Six hostage. Looking around the room, he sees quite a few Captains and their Lieutenants standing still, though only Captain Komamura has his hand resting on the Kashira of his Zanpakutō, ready to draw it if called upon to do so. Fortunately, it appears that neither Mayuri Kurotsuchi nor Kenpachi Zaraki are in the room, otherwise the two Captains would likely have attacked them already. Ichigo then notices the restraints on the wrists of the Kuchiki siblings and taps them with his finger, easily shattering the Reiatsu-inhibiting cuffs with a small application of Devil energy.

"Thanks for the assist…Lord Naberius." Rukia grins as she turns to face him.

"I thank you as well Lord Naberius." Her older brother echoes as he rubs his wrists with a grimace.

Looking at Squad Six Captain, Ichigo has to ask why he was in restraints. "So…Byakuya-sama, want to tell me how you ended up on trial with Rukia and Momo?"

Byakuya inwardly smirks at Ichigo calling him ‘-sama’, but outwardly remains composed as he answers. "The truth Lord Naberius is that earlier this week, I discovered this woman - Chiyoko Shihōin - along with several of the Kuchiki Elders finalizing their plans to get rid of my sister and Lieutenant Hinamori once they returned from their mission. They were going to make me submit to an arranged marriage in exchange for getting Rukia's sentence lowered, but they were not planning to tell me that Rukia's sentence would only be lowered from two hundred years in the Muken to one hundred, and they were still going to destroy Sode No Shirayuki and cast her out of the Kuchiki Clan. A broken Shinigami has no value in marriage or status in the eyes of the noble Houses, and casting her out will reduce that value even further. They know that by destroying her Zanpakutō, Rukia will suffer nearly the same amount of pain as soul suicide, since destroying part of one's soul is excruciating and unbearable. However, that is exactly what they are aiming for, they want to punish her for being 'upstart Rukongai trash'."

The scowl on Byakuya's face tells them exactly what he thinks of that idea, and he pauses to glare at Chiyoko Shihōin and the Head Judges before turning to face Rukia. "Having discovered what they were planning, I had no intention of letting their treachery succeed, but the only thing I could do was remove their ability to benefit from this trial and expose their plans for all to see. I'm sorry Rukia, but I had to let them do this to us, to show Head Captain Yamamoto the truth of what Central has been doing without his knowledge."

The air becomes incredibly tense then, as the nobles of Central Forty-Six and especially the Kuchiki and Shihōin Clans realize that one of their own have betrayed them to the Head Captain. Byakuya can feel the sheer hatred and loathing being directed his way by Iwao Kuchiki, even if the Elder's face is still hidden by the shadows. Despite that, he strongly suspects that Iwao's expression currently matches the one on Chiyoko Shihōin's face however.

Turning his back on the seething nobles, Byakuya looks at the officers of the Gotei Thirteen, then he speaks to them and their Commander in a voice that resonates throughout the entire chamber. "Head Captain, once your word was enough to force these nobles to obey the rules, once your will to enforce true justice was absolute, but now as you age and your power wanes, Central's power continues to grow unchecked. For far too long, I too turned a blind eye to this fact, believing that Central enforced true justice and were using their powers wisely, but my eyes were opened by a rash young man who attacked me for failing to do the duty I was supposed to do as a brother: a duty to protect my sister from all that would harm her. When I realized I was quoting Central's justification of executing her to regain my honor, I realized just how far I had fallen; never before had I been so ashamed to use the word 'honor'. I kept my eyes open from that day forward. I
watched how Central used words like 'justice' and 'honor' to justify their every action, even if it was the complete opposite. I saw how deeply Central has been corrupted by their lust for power, and this trial was the final testament to show what lengths they would go to hold on to that power and subvert 'Justice' and 'Honor' to suit their selfish ambitions. Nothing said to me will change my mind about them; I have no regrets at renouncing my name and my connection with Central. I can only hope that by exposing their plans, I have done my duty as a Captain of the Gotei Thirteen, but even if I haven't, I will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that I have said my piece and hope that you will act to change the dying soul of Soul Society."

There is stunned silence left in the wake of Byakuya's words, both from the officers of the Gotei Thirteen and the nobles of Central Forty-Six. Byakuya sees the Head Captain's eyes wide open for once, the ancient Shinigami apparently struck speechless by his heartfelt words. He truly hopes that the Head Captain will take his advice to heart and burn out the infection from Soul Society before it becomes fatal, but whatever happens, his role in it is done.

Turning to face the woman who had started this all, Byakuya's lips curl up in a derisive sneer. "Hisana was a beautiful soul compared to you, Chiyoko Shihōin; no matter how noble your birth, it can never compare to the nobility of her heart. That is why I will never consider agreeing to a marriage with you, your soul is twisted and corrupted by your desire to gain power. While I may never be able to prove your part in Hisana's death, I hold you and Iwao guilty in my eyes, and until the day I find proof and can avenge her without staining my honor, I will bide my time and wait for that reckoning."

Rukia's eyes widen at his side as she finally realizes what her adoptive older brother has been saying all this time. Staring at the Shihōin woman standing just a few paces away and seeing the vicious look of triumph on her face, Rukia's mind goes completely white. Instinctively launching herself into a Flash Step and gathering her Reiatsu into her fist, Rukia smashes the face of her sister's killer. As Chiyoko falls to the ground with a pained cry, Rukia finds herself being restrained by her brother's arms being wrapped around her body.

"Not like this, Rukia. One day the proof will come to light, and then we will see to her execution. Nothing will stop us then."

Tears and sobs finally break from Rukia's body as she feels the combined stress of the day overwhelming her senses. She collapses into her brother's arms, holding him as tight as she can while she grieves for her lost sister. Neither of them looks at the yellow-eyed Shihōin woman who slowly picks herself up from the floor, wiping the blood from her split lip. With a snarl, Chiyoko spits in their direction.

"How dare you attack a noble, you filthy Rukongai trash! Imprisonment is too good for you; I will make you suffer for the rest of your life before executing you on Sōkyoku H-"

Several sets of chains suddenly erupt from the black-armored Devil's back and snag the woman before she can react, wrapping her completely from head to toe in less than a second. Grabbing the screaming package, the Naberius Lord then hands her over to one of the tallest cloaked figures behind him.

"Lord Naberius, just what do you think you are doing?" Yamamoto finally intervenes, unable to remain silent now that a noble has been captured.

"I am dealing with someone who has threatened the life of someone under my protection." Snorting at the Devil Lord's hypocrisy, Yamamoto takes a single step forward, only for the Devil Lord to raise his hand. "Uh-uh, take one more step and these nobles die, though considering
they have done the same to so many of your men, maybe you should take one more step and save yourself the trouble of having to kill them later on. Oh, calm yourself down, I'm joking…partly. But Chiyoko Shihōin is coming with us, I have a few acquaintances who would like to speak to her about her past actions, besides this pair of siblings that is..."

Before the Devil Lord can continue speaking, everyone hears the unexpected patter of feet running towards the room from the outside. The doors are flung open, and a small cloaked figure rushes into the room on swift feet.

"Big sister was right! Yes, I can leave now!" The voice is that of a young girl, and she unexpectedly leaps straight into the Devil Lord's arms. "So, you are…mphhh!"

"Shhh! Not yet..." The rest is lost as the black-armored Devil lowers his head to speak directly into her ear of the cloaked girl, and she nods several times before clapping her hands together.

"Yes, I got it big brother, be right back...oh, by-the-way, she's a bitch just like Byakuya-sama says she is." The cloaked girl points at Chiyoko before jumping out of the Devil Lord's arms and leaving in a burst of Shunpo, before the Devil Lord turns to look at Yamamoto again.

"Sorry about that. Now, where were we?" Standing behind Yamamoto, Shinji feels his eyes widen as the black-armored figure rubs his plated hand across the back of his helm, an action that he has seen performed countless times by a certain orange-haired Berry. He barely pays attention as the disguised former Vizard continues speaking.

"Oh, right. As I was saying, she's coming with us; we will get the information Byakuya and Rukia need to render their judgment against her and find out if she is truly guilty of those crimes. If she is innocent, she'll be returned unharmed, if not..." The black spaulders shrug at the unfinished sentence.

Yamamoto eyes the armed warriors standing behind each member of Central Forty-Six, knowing that his hands have been tied. While it galls him to allow a Devil to pass judgement on any member of Soul Society, the fact still remains that the entirety of Central Forty-Six has been taken hostage, and he cannot investigate Captain Byakuya's claim if they are all killed right before his eyes. Much as he dislikes it, he has no choice but to concede to the actions of the intruder. "Your word on her safe return if she is found to be innocent, Devil."

"My word is my promise…it always has been." That statement tickles a faint memory in the aged Shinigami's mind, but it is fleeting as he sees Lieutenant Rukia suddenly pointing to someone behind him.

"Renji, we have to take Renji with us." The violet-eyed young woman says something completely absurd.

Before Yamamoto can rebuke her, another chain flashes out from the Naberius Lord's back and wraps itself around Lieutenant Abarai's waist, lifting him up into the air before setting him down next to Rukia. Yamamoto belatedly remembers that the red-headed young man is the fiancé of the violet-eyed Lieutenant, and it seems that Lieutenant Abarai has no plans to resist his kidnapping either. Frowning with disapproval at the two young adults, he notices the Devil Lord looking at Rukia's waist intently.

"Where is Sode No Shirayuki?" Those words reveal that Lieutenant Rukia has been giving classified information to the Naberius Lord; just like Lieutenant Hinamori, there is no denying that she has thrown in her lot with the Devils now.
"Captain Ukitake has her." Another chain seeks out Yamamoto's white-haired student and brings him over to the growing group of Devils and soon-to-be deserters. Jūshirō's expression seems almost... resigned, and amused? He meets his Sensei's eyes from across the room and nods to him almost imperceptibly.

Yamamoto returns the nod, his expression completely flat. He has no idea what his student is planning to do, but he hopes it doesn't end up cause him too much of a headache.

Back with the Naberius Lord, it appears that he is now conferring with some of his cloaked cohorts, and one of the cloaked female figures draws everyone's attention to her when she claps her hands suddenly and nods her hooded head to something the black-armored Devil says. The black-armored Devil then places his hand on Jūshirō's shoulder, causing Yamamoto to scowl openly.

"Sorry about that Head Captain. We'll be taking Jūshirō Ukitake as well, and I believe Captain Shinji Hirako has Tobiume. Captain Hirako, if you would please?" Glancing to his side, Yamamoto sees the Squad Five Captain smirking as he walks up to the armored Devil and holds out Lieutenant Hinamori's Zanpakutō.

"Ya take care of my 'ittle Momo and her guy friend, ya 'ear me…Baldy." Shinji's smirk widens as he places the Zanpakutō into the outstretched hand of the former Vizard, who hands it to Rukia to hold.

"Sorry Captain Hirako, you're coming with us too, as is Captain Shaolin Fon." Another set of chains snap out and capture a surprised Sui-Fèng, who does nothing to resist as she is placed next to Shinji.

Yamamoto's scowl is now on full display as he realizes just how many of his officers appear to be influenced by this Devil, seeing as they do not resist being captured at all. Glaring at the Devil Lord in front of him, his hands grip his Zanpakutō with an increasing pressure as he tries to work out how things have developed in this manner. It all boils down to a single conclusion. "You planned all this, didn't you?"

To his surprise, the Devil Lord makes no attempt to gloat about the success of his plan. "Not really, we were...given knowledge of how many people were attending the trial and the size and disposition of the room. Based on these factors, my... advisor deduced where the trial was being held, as well as who was most likely in attendance. The reason I brought so many Elves was to prevent you from starting an unnecessary battle. My only real reasons for coming here are to retrieve my Bishop who was in danger, and retrieve the body that belongs to one of my Clan's Elves, a body that your Squad Twelve Captain has managed to obtain. Everything else is just as much a surprise to me as it is to you. As for your Captains, I have need of them for reasons you'll understand when you contact the Maou, which I recommend you to do once my group departs from here. I give you my word on my family's honor however, that your Captains will be returned to Soul Society safe and sound, and they will not be held as hostages against Soul Society in any way." The black-armored Devil glances to the doorway then, and Yamamoto feels several Reiatsu signatures swiftly approaching. "Well, it's looking like our time grows short Head Captain, Momo and the others are almost back already."

True enough, the first to arrive is a deeply blushing Momo, followed by an equally blushing Shinigami male and two snickering... Elves, was that what the Naberius Lord called them? Following behind them. The Devil Lord waves for them to join the main group behind him as several larger, and angrier Reiatsu signatures can be felt approaching the door; one of them is someone Yamamoto easily recognizes.
There is a massive crash as a body comes flying in through the door, missing both arms and a left leg. Blood splatters the few officers standing too close to the landing spot, but even if they can't see the kanji on the bloodstained Captain's Haori, the unique headdress of the person makes it all-too obvious who he is.

"That body belongs to me you filthy curs! Give it back or I'll dissect you in turn!" Mayuri Kurotsuchi screams in rage as he writhes impotently on the floor, his lone good foot scrabbling to push himself upright until a soft leather boot slams down on his kneecap, breaking it.

"Sasha?" The Naberius Lord calls out to the furious Elf standing over the screaming Captain, another Elf walking past them into the room with two cloaked figures following her, one of them markedly shorter than the other, and a wrapped body being carried in her arms.

"We found this…thing cutting up the body we were sent to retrieve, My Lord. He then told us we would be of the utmost value to his research if we volunteered ourselves for future experiments. When we refused, he told us we had no choice in the matter and tried to cut us with his Zanpakutō. If Lady Naberius had not been with us..." She grits her teeth angrily as she glares at the unrepentant Captain. "I should destroy your mind right now you sick freak, put you through the same kind of tortures you have inflicted on so many others…" She kicks him again, breaking several of his ribs in the process.

Yamamoto finds it rather telling that none of his officers make a move to help Captain Kurotsuchi, even though the Squad Twelve Captain coughs out blood onto the floor. The ancient Shinigami also notices the black-armored Devil glaring at the Squad Twelve Captain before giving an order, one that sends chills throughout the room.

"Cut off his other leg Sasha. Take it as payment for the desecration of our warrior's body."

The Elf doesn't even hesitate before drawing her blade and cutting off Mayuri's remaining leg, prompting a fresh round of screams and curses from the clown-faced Captain. Yamamoto inwardly sighs, knowing that Mayuri Kurotsuchi has survived being liquefied into soup before, so replacing lost limbs won't be an issue for the mad scientist. What is more important however is what else the cocky young Devil Lord is planning, and whether or not the Devil Lord will get overconfident with his success and allow Yamamoto the opportunity to take down the Devils without a significant loss to Central Forty-Six. Yamamoto's hard gaze doesn't waver from the black-armored Devil who moves to stand before him, the Elf - Sasha - kicking Captain Kurotsuchi's bleeding and limbless torso over to the Gotei officers standing behind him.

"Kisuke was right, maybe we should've let the Quincy invade Soul Society, forced your hand to evolve, adapt to the changing times in the World of the Living." The Naberius Devil begins. "This psychotic Captain is a prime example of what is wrong with your Court of Pure Souls, Head Captain Genryūsai Shigekuni Yamamoto; you have turned a blind eye for far too long to the actions of those under your own command. You have allowed Central Forty-Six to condemn good officers with the flimsiest of evidence, allowed them to separate and destroy families because of their irrational fears, allowed them to hurt and alienate your allies as 'threats to Soul Society'; I could go on, but I'm sure you get my point. When you are ready to clean up your mess, when you are willing to see what the other deities have done while you remained stuck in the past, come find us. I know you have a means to contact Lucifer Maou – my brother-in-law - so please do so soon. Okaa-san, are we ready to leave now?"

The last is addressed to the taller of the two cloaked figures who had accompanied the Elves back with Captain Kurotsuchi. The cloaked figure nods and replies in a strangely familiar voice.
"Yes, we can leave. We have accomplished all of our goals…"

With absolutely no warning, Nemu Kurotsuchi suddenly appears behind them and attacks Sasha, the normally placid expression of the Squad Twelve Lieutenant twisted with vengeful fury as she attempts to murder the woman who had maimed her 'father'.

"Sasha!" Ichigo's chain lashes out instinctively, barely catching Nemu's arm as she tries to stab Sasha in the back. Dragging the struggling Lieutenant towards him, more chains wrap around her as she nearly breaks free, ending up with her hanging before him in a cocoon of chains like Chiyoko Shihōin. Ichigo is about to knock her out and throw her towards the other officers of the Gotei Thirteen when he feels something he isn't expecting: one of his Evil Pieces is resonating with Nemu. Face paling beneath his full helm, he quickly forms the Evil Piece and holds it out towards Nemu, seeing it glow brighter as it nears the still struggling Lieutenant.

'You've got to be fucking kidding me! This can't be happening, no way this is happening, no… nooo…nooo!'

"Face it King, those Evil Pieces don't lie, though I can't believe how ridiculous your luck is."

Conor, who has been silently keeping guard on their surroundings all this time, steps forward to offer his congratulations to his young Lord, inadvertently confirming that Ichigo's worst nightmares have come true. "Looks like you've found your newest peerage member Lord Naberius, we'll be 'aving to take her with us as well."

Metal on metal sounds out as Ichigo palms his face, and the next thing he hears are the words coming from the Head Captain in response to Conor's comment. "What is the meaning of this, Lord Naberius? What do you mean she is your new peerage member? You have already turned one of my officers into a Devil and captured several others, now you plan on turning yet another? Naberius Lord or not, do you think you can come to Soul Society and do as you please? Your actions are dangerously close to causing a war between our two factions, boy!" Yamamoto growls out angrily.

Ichigo hurriedly holds up a hand to reassure the furious Head Captain. "Head Captain Yamamoto, it was never my intention to start a war between our two factions. My Evil Pieces just happen to be very picky about who they choose to hold them, and I was not expecting Lieutenant Kurotsuchi to be one such candidate. On my honor as the Naberius Heir, I will offer her the choice to join my peerage without any coercion or bribery, and if she turns it down, she will be allowed to return with the other officers. Unfortunately, it's clear that we have overstayed our welcome, so let's continue this conversation another time Gramps. Oh, remember to contact the Maou to find out what's going on, and one last thing: if Central leaves me and mine alone, we won't need to meet again, but if they ever threaten what's mine once again, it will be for their last time."

Before Yamamoto can respond, Ichigo activates the emergency recall spell and all the Elves, 'captives' and his peerage are teleported away by countless circles of magic. When the light finally dies down, Yamamoto realizes there are no more Devils, Elves or any of the officers that were taken by the Devils in the room with them.

Glaring angrily at the spot that the Devils had occupied, Yamamoto's hand grips his Zanpakutō so tightly he can almost feel the wood crack. All around him, screams and shouting accusations begin as Central Forty-Six finally realizes the threat is gone and their members begin leaping to their feet, placing blame on him and his remaining officers for failing to protect them. Words like treason,
incompetent, rogue elements, and even mutiny are uttered from the lips of the cowardly nobles that form the government, the very same nobles who didn't dare say a word when their lives were being threatened by the Devils, yet are quick to spew death threats against his officers now that the threat is over. Slamming his Zanpakutō into the ground and releasing his overwhelming Reiatsu, Yamamoto paralyzes the squabbling, immature children where they sit, refusing to deal with their antics any longer.

"Captain Komamura, you and your officers are to sequester the members of Central Forty-Six and all members of their security forces to their rooms until I have had a chance to speak not only to Lucifer Maou, but also the Soul King. You and your squad are to ensure that they don't leave their rooms, nor are they to receive any visitors, on pain of being branded a traitor and collaborator to our enemies. This room will be sealed until all such investigations are complete. Captain Kyōraku, Captain Unohana, you are with me. From this point forward until the emergency is over, Soul Society will be placed under Martial Law. Dismissed!"

As he yanks his Zanpakutō out of the ground, Yamamoto can hear the shouts and protests of those being led away, the nobles effectively neutered by his declaration of Martial Law. The remaining Captains and Lieutenants in the room carry out his orders without hesitation, Captain Komamura sending orders for his squad to begin escorting the nobles to their rooms within the building, while the other officers prevent any nobles from trying to escape the building. Lieutenant Isane begins working on the limbless torso of Captain Kurotsuchi when Captain Unohana indicates for her to do so without her aid. As the Head Captain begins to walk back to his barracks, she and Shunsui, along with Lieutenant Sasakibe follow him out of the chamber as well.

When they are halfway back to the Squad One Barracks, Yamamoto suddenly mutters under his breath. "Gramps, he dared call me Gramps. Why does that remind me so much of someone else?"

Behind him and Lieutenant Sasakibe, Retsu and Shunsui share a look, a faint smile gracing both their faces as they think the same thing.

'Only Ichigo would dare call Sensei 'Gramps' after getting away with breaking into Seireitei a second time.'

'Gramps, he dared call me Gramps. Why does that remind me so much of someone else?'

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When the light finally dies down, the newcomers to the Underworld all blink at their abrupt change in surroundings, while the Devils and Elves begin to relax and put away their weapons.

Ichigo turns to look at the Shinigami they have 'captured', keeping his armor worn for now. "Renji, Shinji, Captain Ukitake and...ah, who are you exactly again?"

The younger male Shinigami looks at Ichigo with faint apprehension, but Momo is quick to hug his arm and comfort him. "He's...Ichigo, this is my boyfriend, Rikichi Yamato of Squad Six."

"Uhm... it's nice to meet you." The young man bows to him awkwardly.

"Oh, well please stand still until Kane clears all of you." Ichigo nods back before moving to check on the now-unconscious Nemu.

"Who is...What the hell is that!?" Renji nearly screams when he sees the huge canine approaching them, but Rukia and Byakuya hold his arms, keeping him in place as the three headed Hell Hound stops before them.

"This one is very excitable Ichigo. You always bring us such interesting guests." The Hell Hound's
deep growly voice is filled with amusement, surprising Renji so much that his jaw hangs wide open. Turning to the new arrivals, the Cerberus then proceeds to sniff each of them in turn, and after a few minutes declares all of them except for Nemu and Chiyoko to be safe to move.

"Hold on guys, there is something I need to do first." Ichigo stops them as he lifts the sheet covered body from Merti's arms and places it gently on the marble floor. "Hime...can you restore this Elf's body? I don't want her family to see her like this."

Pulling off the cloak she is wearing, the brown eyed healer kneels next to the body and places her hand on its chest. Shun'ō and Ayame appear, forming an orange shield over the body as Orihime begins to frown.

"This is..." Her frown deepens as she closes her eyes and begins to focus on what her Shun Shun Rikka are telling her. After a few long moments, she opens her eyes and turns to look at Ichigo with a complicated expression on her face.

"Ichigo, Shun'ō and Ayame are telling me that this body doesn't belong to a single Elf, but from the... collected pieces of several Elves that were combined and grown together before being experimented on." Her face is nearly green by the time she finishes speaking. "Ichigo, what do I do!?

All around her, the listening Elves are struck dumb by her revelation, the possibility that the recovered body was an abomination of nature had never occurred to them at all. Sasha and Merti are the ones most affected by the news, both Elves visibly trembling as memories of the Old Maou Faction and their horrific war experiments return to their minds.

"That... that absolute MONSTER!" Sasha seethes, her hands nearly crushing themselves into fists. "I should have killed him when I had the chance!!"

Merti is silent, but her body radiates just as much fury as her sister does. No one notices Byakuya taking a half-step towards her, but the former Kuchiki stops himself quickly, steeling himself and replacing the look of concern on his face with a stoic frown.

"Enough!" Ichigo commands, drawing all eyes to himself once more. "What's done is done, we can't go back and kill that damn clown freak now. If we get the chance in future, we'll make him pay for what he has done, but until then we will just have to make sure something like this can never happen again!"

He pauses then, waiting for all the Elves to nod their approval, before turning to kneel beside his still pale-faced sister. "Hime, can you help this body grow a tree of life? She may not be a true Elf, but she also did not ask to be created this way; I hope that even without a soul, we can help her to find true peace."

"I-I will try." With a shuddering breath, Orihime closes her eyes again and focuses on the unnatural body, her orange shield encompassing them while the surrounding Elves watch her intently. After several long minutes, she finally nods her head and relaxes, her shield disappearing and her two fairies returning to her hairpins. "I did it. Each... piece that was used will grow its own tree of life, and the trees will all grow together as a single tree afterwards; I also sealed up all the wounds on her body so that she can be buried with dignity."

To his surprise, Ichigo hears countless held breaths being released suddenly, the Elves around them showing visible signs of relief and joy. Many of them vocally thank Orihime for allowing their retrieved brethren, though with an unnatural body, to find true peace. Merti and Sasha also
throw their arms around the flustered healer, causing Orihime to squeak in surprise as she is enveloped in their hugs, before returning them with a huge glowing smile.

Ichigo stands up after giving Orihime's hand a squeeze in thanks, then he begins to issue commands to the waiting Elves. "Kimi, Nia, take Nemu and Chiyoko to the holding cells; I want extra guards on them both and no one but your mother, Merti, Yoruichi or Kisuke are allowed in to see them. Bring this body to a waiting room and decide where to bury her later; we're already cutting it close to getting to the Young Devils gathering on time, so everyone who is going should go freshen up right now."

As the Elves and cloaked Devils hurry to obey his command, Shinji strolls over to him with a wide grin on his face. "So, it really is ya Ichigo." The blonde-haired Captain comments. "Wanna lift the visor so I can see ya face?"

Ichigo glances down at himself and realizes he is still wearing his Hell Armor. "Shit, sorry Shinji, hold on and lemme take this off." The visor clears away first, followed by the rest of plate mail to reveal the familiar visage of the former Substitute Shinigami grinning back at Shinji.

The two of them stare at each other for a few seconds before clasping each other in a hug, Shinji grinning madly as he speaks. "Hiyori is gonna kill ya when she sees ya Ichi-kun, ya know dat right?"

The orange-haired Devil shrugs with a smile. "Figures. I heard what you and the others did for me back then Shinji, thanks for trying. I wish we could talk, but we are severely pressed for time, so...Merti, can you have the staff show our guests to their rooms and the baths, then have food and a clean change of clothes waiting for them? They will be joining us for the Young Devils gathering, so make sure they dress appropriately." Ichigo begins to walk away with Orihime, Sasha, Yoruichi and Yukiko, while Rukia and Momo choose to follow their fellow Shinigami guests to find out where they are staying.

"Oi Ichigo, what's the rush?" Renji calls out towards the back of the departing younger Devil, wondering why everyone is in such a hurry.

"I got a bride to fight for pineapple-head, we'll talk later. Rukia, fill them in about the situation as quickly as you can. Remember, we'll be going as my great-grandfather's guests, but on paper, you guys will be guests of the Maou and representatives of Soul Society. Tia, Candice, I need to talk to you guys as well, come on."

The last of the cloaked figures fall in line behind Ichigo, and they follow him out of the room to have a quick discussion before splitting up and returning to their own rooms, where they will prepare for tonight's gathering of young Devils. The Elves have also fully vacated the room, leaving behind just the Shinigami and the Hell Hounds.

Once everyone else has left, Captain Ukitake folds his hands into his sleeves and remarks quietly. "Well, not quite what I was expecting to happen, but still..."

Rukia bows to her Captain then, her voice clearly apologetic. "I'm really sorry that this has happened to you, Captain Ukitake. It seems that we don't have enough time for a detailed explanation however; just know that today is a very important day, as I told you this morning, and it appears that we will be attending as guests of Lord Naberius and the Maou. We should hurry and freshen up if we are to leave with the others on time."

A stream of maids then enters the room just as she finishes speaking, and they begin to guide each
of the Shinigami to their respective rooms, though Rukia and Renji notice they are being guided by
the same maid; they both turn red when she helpfully informs them that they are being roomed
together.

"Renji, Rukia." Both Lieutenants stop when they hear Byakuya call out to them, and Renji
suddenly feels a strong urge to flee.

"Sorry Captain…Nii-sama." Forcing himself to ignore his senses, Renji immediately turns and
bows to his future brother-in-law, only to see Byakuya waving off his apology.

"I was only going to say don't be late. Carry on." All of the Shinigami present stare at Byakuya in
disbelief, even Jūshirō and Suī-Fēng, as he leaves the Dome and heads down the familiar hallways
to his usual guest room. None of them notice the faint curl of Byakuya's lips as he savors the
successful prank.

'I guess... it's fine to relax once in a while.'

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Ichigo jumps into his shower after going over his plans for the upcoming duel; between his Pawn
and his Queen, he knows that tonight will silence all remaining doubt that still lingers in the back
of his mind.

"Stop thinking so much about it Ichigo, just use your instincts and finish it quickly, but not
before you extract a bit of payment for what he did to our Queen over the break." Zangetsu
advises him.

The Devil teen clenches his fists at the reminder. 'I won't lose, not to some stuck-up noble prick
who treats women like objects. I'll make him wish he had never put a hand on Rias.'

"Now you're talking…remember, no mercy, no quarter, stake your claim on our Queen, who
belongs to you just as much as you belong to her…King."

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Taking a sip of his excellent tea, Jūshirō Ukitake can only marvel at the splendor of the Naberius
Estate that he has seen so far around him. Marble floors, aged and extinct woods, and finely-
worked metal adorn many of the hallways and rooms, even his guest bedroom in the Estate makes
his home in Soul Society seem…drab in comparison. Chuckling to himself at the direction his
thoughts are going, his mind recalls the shower he took earlier, his very first one ever. Although he
had heard of showers from those who had been recently assigned to the World of the Living, he
hadn't been there himself in over a thousand years except for that one time, which didn't count to
him. As he remembers how amazing the hot shower felt on his skin, he begins to blush as he also
recalls the kind young maid who taught him how to turn on the shower and even offered to wash
his back for him. Although he had politely declined her offer, it had only earned him a flirtatious
pout, as well as a promise to help him with his needs if he ever deemed it necessary. After the maid
left, he then stood under the hot shower for what felt like ages, trying to purge the improper
thoughts from his mind, until he heard someone knocking at his main door and a familiar voice
shouting for him to hurry up.

As it turns out, Yoruichi was indeed a part of the Naberius household, and he got an unpleasant
reminder of her shameless personality when he came out of the shower wearing only a towel, and
found her waiting in his bedroom with a teasing grin on her face, as well as an army of maids
behind her. Looking at the bed, he had seen the fresh clothes laid out for him, so he tried to thank
them for their assistance and ask them politely to leave. That also turned out to be a mistake, as her
answering grin made the hair on his neck stand on end before she sauntered close to him and then
spoke seductively into his ear.

'Now, now Jūshirō, what kind of hosts would we Naberius be if we didn't provide full service for
our guests? Ladies, he's all yours.' His protests were drowned out by the army of eager maids who
made sure to dress him, very completely. In short order, he was clad in a comfortable black silk
kimono and pleated grey hakama pants, with a matching black silk haori over his shoulders and
new tabi and zōri on his feet. Finally escorted to the mirror by those giggling Devil maids, the first
thing Jūshirō saw was the redness on his face.

'Thank God Shunsui wasn't there, otherwise I would never hear the end of it from him.'

Thinking of his fellow Captain makes him wonder where the rest of the 'guests' are, and Jūshirō
looks around the sitting room again. Yoruichi had brought him here after he was dressed, telling
him that the others would be arriving shortly, then she had left to get bathed and changed as well.
Two of the Devil maids who had helped him dress had also followed him here, and they brought
him a tray of tea and biscuits before bowing and telling him to ask them if he needed anything.

Currently, the only other person in the room with him is Shinji, besides the Devil maids that is.
The moment the Squad Five Captain entered the room, Jūshirō could immediately tell that he must
have had the same experience as him, since the very large smile on the blonde Captain's face as he
flirted with his Devil maid escorts was a pretty obvious indicator. The Vizard Captain had entered
the room with one maid hanging on each arm, and he gave them each a kiss on their cheeks as
payment for helping him. After they served him refreshments, he began to entertain them, as well
as the maids who accompanied Jūshirō, with his favorite 'Berry-chan stories' as he called them. The
maids turned out to be a very attentive audience, and even Jūshirō found it amusing how they
giggled and gasped at the tales of their young Lord learning to become the man he is today. Right
now, Shinji is telling them of Ichigo's first battle with Grimmjow, but his impromptu storytelling
session is cut short by the door opening once more.

To the surprise of both Captains, all the maids immediately leap to their feet upon seeing who
enters the doorway, and they bow to the man who enters the room. For a moment, Jūshirō wonders
if he is Ichigo, since they have the exact same shade of orange hair, but the man appears to be in
his late twenties or early thirties with dark hazel eyes instead of Ichigo's warm chocolate, and he
also possesses a distinct aura of age and experience that Ichigo lacks. Shinji gets to his feet, as does
Jūshirō, although both Captains are not quite sure how to address the man.

Finally, the orange-haired man speaks to them with a calm voice. "Captain Jūshirō Ukitake,
Captain Shinji Hirako, allow me to welcome you to my home. I am Lord Amyntas Naberius, and I
believe you know of my great-grandson and adopted great-granddaughter, Ichigo and Orihime
Naberius, as well as their siblings, Yuzu and Karin Naberius."

The eyes of both Captains widen as they realize this is the true Lord Naberius, the one who leads
the Clan and watches over the Gates of Hell. "You're their great-grandfather?" Shinji lets out a low
whistle. "You look pretty good for your age. Six, seven hundred years old maybe?"

"Closer to two thousand, we lose track of birthdays after the first millennium." Lord Amyntas
answers with a wry smile.

Shinji and Jūshirō exchange looks then. Two thousand years would make this Devil Lord nearly as
old as Head Captain Yamamoto. "A pleasure to meet you Amyntas-dono…" Jūshirō says after a
beat, with Shinji following suit as they both bow to him.
Yoruichi enters the room then, distracting them from their greetings as all three men give approving nods to the radiance she puts on display as she walks in wearing a pure white kimono with an orange obi tied in the back, her hair hanging in loose curls as she walks up to the men. Right behind her is Sui-Fēng, no longer in her Shihakushō, but instead wearing a bright yellow kimono with a black obi tied in the back, her hair done up with a traditional set of Kogai and Kushi holding her smooth black tresses back from her face. Both women pause and bow to the Captains and the Lord of the Estate, then Yoruichi glides closer and snakes her arm through Amyntas's outstretched one, the orange-haired Devil Lord giving her a warm smile of welcome. Sui-Fēng smiles too as she passes behind her mentor, standing to the left of the two Captains who are still staring at her.

"You... kimono..." For once, Shinji appears to be at a loss for words, his eyes unable to look away from the kimono-clad Onmitsukidō Commander. Sui-Fēng's smile becomes an icy glare. "Do you have something to say, Captain Hirako?" She asks him coldly.

"Ehm... ahh..." Shinji hurriedly tries to change the subject. "You look hot Yori." He blurts out abruptly, causing the Devil maids who are watching him to burst out in giggles.

"Why thank you Shinji, it's not every day I get a chance to dress up and go out for the evening. I'm usually always busy you know...kicking a certain orange-haired brat's ass daily, picking off a few Quincy or Fallen Angels, it's never a dull moment around here." Yoruichi's flippant reply earns her exasperated looks from both Amyntas and Sui-Fēng, though when the werecat hugs the Naberius Lord's arm closer and gives him a mischievous smile, his expression becomes one of fond amusement.

"So Yoruichi, you really did leave the Shihōin Clan for another person?" The white-haired Captain remarks as he looks at where her arm is resting.

"Yep, though it's pretty old news by now Jūshirō, didn't Chiyoko put a bounty on my head?" Sui-Fēng shudders for a moment as she recalls the offered amount. "She put up almost ten percent of the Shihōin coffers to anyone who could lead them to you and allow the Shihōin assassins to finish you off." She growls in anger. "It is the single biggest bounty on anyone's head in Soul Society, not that anyone would be foolish enough to try..."

Yoruichi blinks at her with fake surprise. "Wow, I guess I should be flattered then." A low growl from the Devil beside her has her rolling her eyes. "Okay, okay, sorry for that. Sheesh, between you and Ichigo, I'll never have any more fun..."

"I AM NOT WEARING THIS!" The shout causes every head to turn, and the only ones who recognize the source of the commotion are Yoruichi and Sui-Fēng.

Sasha's voice can be heard next through the doorway. "Yukiko Shihōin, I will not let you disgrace your Clan or your sister by wearing jeans and a t-shirt to a formal gathering, and I also do not care if they belong to your older sister. You will keep that kimono on, or I will staple it to your hide with a few well-placed Hell Chains, do I make myself clear?"

"Fine! But as soon as this, this whatever it is, is done, I am taking it off!" The first voice responds unhappily.

"You will still have to wear it to the wedding afterwards, and only after the bride and groom leave will I allow you to remove those garments. If I even see one piece missing, I'll show you why the younger Devils dare not disobey me."
After a moment of silence, Sasha Mai'ryl leads a pouting Yukiko Shihōin into the room, the dark-skinned girl bearing a clear family resemblance to Yoruichi. The younger Shihōin princess glares at her older sister when Yoruichi fails to stifle her laugh at seeing Yukiko's kimono. "See, I told you this looks hideous!" She immediately complains to Sasha, who somehow manages to keep a straight face while facing Yukiko.

"Come…come on Yukiko-chan, pink…looks…good on you." Shinji bites the inside of his mouth, trying to prevent a snigger from escaping as he stares at the lurid pink kimono with a large pastel yellow obi tied in the back of her waist.

"It looks like someone puked on her." Yoruichi finally croaks out through her laughter. "Sasha, please."

"Very well." Sasha speaks then in her native language, causing the lurid pink kimono to turn into a deep forest green, with her obi changing from yellow to a soft cotton white.

"Thank you, Big Sis!" The younger sibling jumps for joy, nearly leaping at her sister only for Sasha to catch her by the top of her kimono's eri and hold her in place.

"Yukiko Shihōin, your sister is wearing the kimono given to Lady Kiku Naberius on the day she was made our Lord Vincent's Queen, so please refrain from damaging it." The older Elf chastises her.

As Yukiko agrees sulkily, Yoruichi turns to Lord Amyntas and quietly asks if this is true.

"Kiku was my son's Queen Yoruichi, and she was also Ichigo's grandmother. I can't think of anyone more deserving than you, his adopted mother to wear it. Ichigo is also aware of this, and he is looking forward to seeing you in it." The older Devil remarks as he takes her hands in his and squeezes them lightly.

The former Shihōin princess wipes the lone tear that escapes from her eye as she bows her head to him. "I am honored, Amyntas."

The Naberius Lord lifts her head back up, his fingers lightly tilting her chin and allowing her to see his smile. "Only the best for you, my dear."

As the two adults lose themselves in each other's eyes, another group of Shinigami arrives as Rukia leads Renji, Momo and Rikichi into the room. Each of them is wearing formal kimono as well as traditional footwear, with their Zanpakutō strapped to their waists. Rukia and Renji wear red kimono with a violet obi, while Momo and Rikichi wear dark blue kimono with a black obi. All four of them bow to the Captains and then Lord Naberius before moving to find seats for themselves. Momo and Rukia quickly notice Yukiko and pull her over to join them, gushing over how cute the Shihōin princess is in her formal kimono, but they only cause Yukiko to pout even more.

A few minutes later, the other females of Ichigo's peerage enter the room as well, the former Arrancars now wearing black with silver trimmed uniforms that are styled after their Resurrección forms, although Tia's and Mila Rose's uniforms do not expose much skin so as to not to scandalize anyone at the formal gathering. Behind them, a colorful trio can be seen, with Orihime wearing a bright yellow kimono with flower patterns and a bright orange obi, Tatsuki wearing a lavender and silver kimono with a more open neckline and a bright red obi, and Candice wearing a leaf-green kimono with yellow bolt patterns and an intricately-tied pale blue obi. However, all of their attentions are drawn to the footwear that can be seen poking out from beneath Tatsuki's kimono bottom.
"Tatsuki, you're not really planning on wearing sneakers to the gathering, are you?" Yoruichi asks her curiously as she looks at the young Rook's feet.

"Ah, no…?" Tatsuki begins, but when she sees that no one is convinced, she gives in and shrugs. "Fine, I was. It's more comfortable than those traditional slippers, and I don't see why I have to wear them."

"You tell them sister!" Yukiko cheers from the sidelines, only to be shushed by two amused female Lieutenants.

Sasha pinches the bridge of her nose before motioning to the group of maids watching the spectacle; she asks them to bring Tatsuki her proper footwear, and they quickly return with the requested items. Turning to Tatsuki, Sasha points to a chair and orders her to sit and take off her sneakers, somehow managing to do all this with pinpoint accuracy despite being blind.

"Please Sasha, I never learned to wear traditional footwear, can't I just go wearing sneakers? Pretty please?" Tatsuki clasps her hands together to beg for mercy.

Sasha regards Tatsuki with her milky eyes for a moment, then she sighs. "Either you wear tabi and zōri tonight, or I help you change into a low-shouldered ballgown with billowing skirts and high heels. Your choice."

The martial artist nearly turns green at the image. "Alright, alright! I'll wear those slippers; you don't have to get so serious!"

Grumbling and ignoring the giggles coming from the other females in the room, the black spiky haired Rook takes off her sneakers and hands them to one of the maids, who assures her that the sneakers will be in her room when she returns. After being assisted into the traditional footwear, she finally stands up and gives the footwear a try.

"Huh...They're okay, I guess." She peers down at her feet, shifting from one foot to another and testing several poses before nodding to herself in satisfaction.

"Good, the rest of our party should be arriving soon. Now, for Ichigo's peerage and our Shinigami guests, you will be paired up with older Devils to help you navigate any social interactions with Devils of different Clans. Just like in Soul Society and the World of the Living, nobles of the Underworld have attitudes that vary widely, though you should avoid all members of the Phenex Clan if possible until tonight is over. The Gremory and Sitri Clans will be there to lend you their helping hand, so don't hesitate to ask them if you have questions, but do not allow your tempers to get the best of you and provoke unnecessary conflict either." Yoruichi informs them, followed by Amyntas giving his own advice as well.

"For those of you in Ichigo's peerage, right now you are still considered low-class reincarnated Devils, therefore many of the natural-born high-class Devils will look down on you. In time this will change, but not today, so be wary of your surroundings at all times. If you aren't sure of anything, find one of us and we will give you aid." He turns to look at the 'guest' Shinigami then. "As for each of you, you will be announced as guests of the Maou as well as visiting representatives of Soul Society, so you will have the same level of protection as high-ranking diplomats. As long as you do not abuse this protection, you should not face any problems at the gathering."

Once everyone has nodded their understanding, Amyntas turns to face the door, his arm resting lightly around Yoruichi's waist. "Now, all we need is for my great-grandson to finally show up, and then we can be on our way."
Almost as if on cue, the door promptly opens again. Everyone immediately looks towards the door as it opens, but the person they are waiting for is not the one who enters; instead, Byakuya and Merti are the ones who walk through the door, and Rukia's jaw nearly drops at seeing how handsome her brother looks in his Western three piece suit of striped charcoal-grey wool, dark red tie and polished black dress shoes. His hair is still neatly combed backward, but it is no longer being held up by the Kenseikan that symbolize his leadership of the Kuchiki Clan. Looking around the room, she can't help but notice how many of the women present are letting their eyes wander up and down his statuesque frame, although her brother only seems to have eyes for the woman at his side.

Unlike Sasha who isn't attending the gathering and is therefore wearing her usual clothing, the Arrancar who are wearing their new uniforms, and the other females who are wearing traditional kimono, Merti is wearing a silk emerald evening gown that hugs each of her curves and reveals a plunging yet modest neckline that is held together by thin silk straps. Her arms are covered with opera gloves of a pale green shade that extend well beyond her elbows, tapering just above her upper arm with a leaf-patterned border. A black choker is worn around her neck, barely noticeable against her dusky skin, yet it adds a heightened sense of elegance to her form.

Both Byakuya and Merti bow to the Naberius Lord, before bowing to the assembled Captains as well.

"Byakuya, there is no need to bow to us. We are of equal rank in the Gotei." Captain Ukitake admonishes lightly.

However, Byakuya shakes his head in disagreement. "You are the guests here, not I, so it is only natural for me to show you my respect. Besides, I have forsaken my Clan name and my title; perhaps I should be bowing to you as a commoner would to a noble instead."

"Do not joke on that." The white-haired Captain immediately retorts, with Shinji chuckling at their byplay. "You are still a fellow Captain, at least until Head Captain Yamamoto says otherwise, and you know full well that we do not make our people bow to nobles within the Gotei." Jūshirō shakes his head with a sigh. "To think that you would leave your Clan just like Yoruichi did... I do hope you are aware that Central will likely declare you a fugitive rather than allow you to leave peacefully."

The other three Captains grimace at this, knowing he is right; Sui-Fēng is the one who speaks up next. "I can assure you Byakuya, that here in this Estate, you have nothing to worry about no matter what Central Forty-Six tries to do to you. None of us will look down upon you or betray you to Central for choosing to live away from Soul Society and their influence. You have served the Gotei loyally for so many years, it is time for that loyalty to be repaid to you."

"I agree Byakuya, and I am sure Shinji does as well." The Squad Thirteen Captain says as he offers his hand to the Squad Six Captain to shake. "All officers of the Gotei Thirteen know that you are a man of honor."

Taking Jūshirō's hand, the steel eyed man murmurs his thanks to each of them.

"There is always a place for you here Byakuya." Ichigo's great-grandfather suddenly cuts in, much to their surprise. "You would be a valuable asset to our Clan, and now that you have no immediate plans, perhaps you might take us up on our offer to teach Ichigo?"

Glancing at Rukia, Byakuya's mouth twitches upwards as he speaks. "That would be acceptable; his manners certainly need improving if he is to one day lead the Naberius Clan. I am certain my sister will be more than happy to help as well."
Renji palms his face and utters loud enough for his fiancée to hear him. "Berry is gonna shove his titles onto Karin and run when he hears about this. Though she might kill him if he tries to."

"No shit." Rukia whispers back with a giggle.

Kimi and Nia enter the room then, taking up positions on either side of the doorway. Their attire causes more than a few raised eyebrows to be sent their way by the visiting Shinigami, since the skintight black bodysuits they are wearing seem vaguely familiar, though the loose black hooded cloaks that float from their necks down to their waists conceal most of it; their faces are also masked except for their eyes, and their hoods are pulled up to hide their hair. Shortly after they take up their positions, Ichigo enters the room wearing all black as well, with black tabi boots that stop halfway up his calf, giving way to tightly wrapped black bandages ending just below his kneecaps, then becoming loose hakama pants that stick out from above the last wrap of the bandages and going up both legs before disappearing beneath a black wide sleeved cloak similar to the ones that Kimi and Nia are both wearing. Walking behind him are his two sisters, Yuzu and Karin, each of them wearing a black silk kimono with the Naberius crest displayed predominantly on the surface of a full moon, with silver obi tinted black along the seams. On their waists, both young women wear the Asauchi that Yoruichi had procured for them from the Shihōin Clan.

Following him are Isshin, Kūkaku, Ganju, Chad, Uryū and Ryūken, with Isshin wearing his Shihakushō and plain white Captain's haori over his Shinigami uniform, Kūkaku wearing a bright red and white kimono with a green obi and her short sword hanging from her back, Ganju wearing a white kimono top, dark green hakama pants and a straw yellow haori without his usual head band, Chad wearing a dark grey kimono with white hakama pants and a black silk haori with red accents, and lastly the two Quincy are wearing pristine white uniforms, though in a style that is different from the Sternritter.

As Chad switches place with Orihime, Ichigo leads his extended family to stand before his great-grandfather and Yoruichi, bowing to them once they are all gathered behind him.

"We're ready Uncle Amyntas, Okaa-san." As he raises his head, Ichigo shares a feral grin with the Naberius Lord and his adopted mother, both of them just as eager as he is for what is to happen at the gathering.

"Then let my four great-grandchildren introduce themselves to the Underworld."

With a single gesture, Amyntas signals for everyone to gather in their pre-assigned groups and positions. Orihime smiles at Kimi and Nia as they approach her and the twins, serving as their direct guards, while the rest of Ichigo's peerage save for Momo surround their group protectively. Ichigo, Isshin, Kūkaku, Ganju, Uryū and Ryūken join them as well, forming a 'Shiba group' under Isshin. When planning the groups, Ryūken had grumbled about this arrangement until Amyntas pointed out that Isshin would be the one having to deal with the political stuff while the rest of the group could relax in anonymity; the malicious chuckle that came from the older Quincy then had sent shivers down Isshin's spine. Unfortunately, try as he might, no one was willing to take the leadership position from him.

The second group to form is the 'guests' from Soul Society, led by Captains Ukitake, Hirako and Suì-Fēng. They also include Rukia, Renji, Rikichi - whose family name turns out to be Yamato, Momo - who is allowed to accompany her boyfriend instead of following the rest of Ichigo's peerage, and lastly Merti, who serves as their escort and seems to be accompanying Byakuya. Jūshirō is nominated to be their overall leader, seeing as he is both the most diplomatic Captain of their group as well as the most experienced in combat. Rukia and Momo will also be helping him, since they have the most experience with Devil customs.
Ahead of both groups, the two older Naberius peerages form up, with Amyntas's peerage surrounding him and Vincent's peerage following behind them. Yoruichi remains at Amyntas's side, both of them aware of the significance of that position, as well as the upheaval it will bring to Devil society when she is revealed. Reaching out with his hand, Amyntas takes Yoruichi's hand in his own and squeezes it lightly; she returns the squeeze, looking up at him with a grateful smile.

Once everyone is in position, Amyntas gestures for the maids and manservants to throw open all doors between this room and the Dome so that they can walk straight there without any delay. As the servants' hurry to obey his orders, he smiles and takes the first step forward, leading the way for a bright new future for the Naberius Clan.

"Now, let's go claim my fifth great-grandchild."

"Where is he?" Rias asks for the umpteenth time to her Queen.

Annoyed by her King's repeated questioning, Akeno rolls her eyes as she answers the question again. "Maa, maa, Buchou, he'll be here, don't you worry. Grayfia took Isshin-san and Ryūken-san to the Naberius Estate once we learned of Ichigo's safe return from Soul Society, so just give him some time to arrive."

Pouting slightly at Akeno's answer, the crimson-haired heiress looks around for her future husband once again, absently noticing that she had lost sight of the third Phenex son at some point right after he began groping his Queen. He had seen her looking and, with a smug smile, began to French kiss his Queen right in front of all the guests who were watching; Issei had gaped with an open mouth and envy in his eyes until Yuuto smacked him in the back of the head and reminded him why they were really at the gathering. Thankfully, Riser made no effort to approach her so far, otherwise she might have been forced to accompany him as his 'fiancée' or risk causing a scene. Her greatest fear is if Riser is drinking, because Phenexes can still get drunk, and there is no telling what kind of mood he will be in if that happens. It is something she wants to avoid finding out until Ichigo is standing at her side.

Just as she takes a sip of her wine, a young woman's voice breaks her out of her depressing thoughts.

"I don't see your rumored boy-toy hanging on your arm tonight, Rias-nee-chan." Ravel Phenex snidely remarks as she joins Rias and Akeno.

Before Rias can reply, a folded fan hits the young Phenex Devil lightly in the back of her head. "Yare, yare Devil-chan, kids these days sure have no manners. Now run along, us grown-ups have things to discuss and they don't concern you."

Ravel angrily turns around to see who dared to hit her, only to find a blonde-haired man wearing traditional Japanese clothing standing behind her. Despite his placid appearance, her gut instincts sense something dangerous in his gaze.

"W-Who are you? You're not a Devil, how did you get in here!?" She immediately takes several steps away from him, her eyes darting around the hall and seeking out the nearest guards to call to her aid.

"Urahara-san, I didn't expect you to come." Rias suddenly intervenes, bowing to the older man. Akeno bows to him as well, causing Ravel to stare blankly at both of them.
Straightening up again, Rias turns to look at Ravel. "This is Kisuke Urahara, an associate of my family. He is here as our guest due to our invitation; now, please leave, we have business dealings to discuss, and they are not meant for you to listen in on."

Ravel glances at Akeno, then at Kisuke, her brow furrowed slightly. Still feeling unnerved by the dangerous glint in the blonde man's eyes, the equally blonde-haired sister of Riser nods stiffly before scurrying away. As she leaves, Kisuke glances towards his two young apprentices and motions with his head towards the retreating young woman.

"Jinta, Ururu, keep an eye on her and our surroundings, warn us if anyone else comes our way. Don't need any more drama than what is to come."

"Right boss. / Okay Kisuke-san." The two preteens ghost away in different directions, both of them keeping an eye on the fleeing noblewoman while watching their half of the crowd.

After casting a weak privacy barrier, Akeno bows to the former Squad Twelve Captain. "Thank you, Urahara-san, your intervention gave my King a way to avoid having a conversation with Ravel Phenex without causing undue trouble for herself or our Clan. However, please refrain from hitting other children again, otherwise my King may not be able to smooth things over next time."

"Yare yare, you sure cut to the point Akeno-chan." Kisuke crosses his arms with a faint smile. "You are correct of course: an invited guest of your family hitting another guest will certainly paint your family in a poor light. However, I'm just helping my student protect his fiancée, nothing more, and besides he'd kill me if I did nothing while watching you get insulted by a Phenex. Boy has gotten so violent ever since he became a Devil." The younger Devils laugh lightly at his dramatic pout.

"I appreciate your help Urahara-san, I really do." Rias bows gratefully to him before giving him a mischievous grin. "Also, I will neither confirm nor deny this if you ask, but I did enjoy watching you chastise Ra-"

Grayfia suddenly appears next to them, causing Rias and Akeno to jump slightly, although Kisuke just gives her a wary glance which she replies to with a nod. "Ready yourselves, they are here."

Three loud clangs from the Herald's halberd draws all attention in the room to him, as the doors leading to the Grand Ball Room slowly swing open. Dismissing the privacy barrier, Rias and her peerage watch as the Herald of the Maou loudly begins to make his announcement.

"My Lords and Ladies of the Underworld, I present to you Lord Amyntas Naberius of the Naberius Clan, followed by his peerages, escorting Lady Yoruichi Naberius of the Naberius Clan, a Shinigami." Hushed whispers can be heard throughout the room, many speculating why after so many centuries of avoiding these events, the Naberius Lord would come to this one; others are wondering why the Herald would deliberately announce the woman being a Shinigami, and lastly, gossip is flying at the fact that the woman shares Amyntas's last name.

"Did he say Shinigami?" A young Devil murmurs to his date.

"Aren't they Japanese death gods? What is one doing here?" Another inquires.

"Didn't Amyntas choose to shut himself in his estate after losing his wife and Heir? What is he doing here, does anyone know?" An older Devil asks his equally old peers.

"Wait, that woman shares his Clan name?! Did he marry her or something?! I thought after Lady Cornelia...?" A group of female Devils begin to whisper heatedly amongst themselves.
"Fools and idiots. If Lord Amyntas had gotten remarried, he would have had to send out wedding invitations to the rest of the Pillars as it is his duty as a Clan Head. Since there were no wedding invitations, it's clear he did not remarry!" The Vapula Clan Head scoffs quietly at the younger nobles gossiping near him.

His wife elbows him lightly in the ribs. "You know that Lord Naberius has never gotten over the deaths of his wife and children, and his Clan has had no heir to take his place. Perhaps he is finally starting to move on, and adopting that woman into his Clan would offer her protection while he courts her? Still, for him to choose a Shinigami woman while there are plenty more fitting candidates among our noble daughters... just what is he planning?"

The whispered conversations begin to crescendo as the Herald announces the arrival of even more guests, causing more and more questions to begin forming in the minds of nearly every high-ranking Devil present.

"Introducing the honored guests of the Naberius Clan: Lord Isshin Shiba of Soul Society, followed by his children Lord Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba, Lady Orihime Inoue Shiba, Lady Yuzu Kurosaki Shiba, and Lady Karin Kurosaki Shiba. Followed by their cousins Lady Kūkaku Shiba and Lord Ganju Shiba. Followed by their escorts."

Isshin enters the room leading the Shiba group, with Kimi and Nia walking on either side of the them, Ryūken and Uryū following behind the two Elves, and Ichigo's peerage bringing up the rear. Isshin's expression is one that befits nobility for once, his posture stern and regal, and he exudes confidence with every step. Kimi and Nia both have their hoods lowered to reveal their pointy ears, though their masks remain pulled up to hide their lower faces; their dark garments contrast sharply with the pristine white uniforms worn by Ryūken and Uryū, and the intricate black-and-silver uniforms worn by the Arrancar rearguard draw away attention from the kimono-clad individuals walking in the middle of the group.

Rias only has eyes for her fiancé, her heart soars now that Ichigo is here. She sees him discreetly scanning the room for her as well, and his eyes light up when they fall on her face. Both young lovers exchange quick smiles then, the most that they can do at this point of time, although she is most certainly looking forward to changing that after the duel.

As the Shiba contingent moves further into the room, the Herald begins to speak again.

"Introducing the representatives of Soul Society and honored guests of our Maou: Captains Jūshirō Ukitake, Shinji Hirako and Suì-Fēng of the Gotei Thirteen, followed by their officers and their escorts."

A greater buzz sounds out from the crowd as the Shinigami contingent enters the room, led by Jūshirō and followed closely by Shinji and Suì-Fēng. The three Captains walk with grace and dignity that befits nobles, yet there is no mistaking their military bearing; it is one that can also be seen in Rukia, Renji, Momo and Rikichi behind them. Byakuya and Merti bring up the rear, the Elf walking with one arm looped around the former Kuchiki's arm, and both of them wearing small but genuine smiles on their faces.

Every Devil at the gathering is now watching as Lord Amyntas guides the two groups of guests to the official welcoming line of the four Maou. Their eyes widen when they see the guests bow or shake hands with the Maou without any hesitation, several of them exchanging pleasantries with the three male Maou, while others are given hugs or kisses on the cheek by the Leviathan. Rias nearly growls in displeasure when she overhears a few of the older Devil women making some very suggestive remarks on what they would like to do with Ichigo, since he stands out the most from the group of younger guests with his bright orange hair, easy confidence and well-muscled
body. Her anger changes to amusement however when the conversation shifts to Captains Byakuya and Ukitake, though she doubts either Captain would appreciate the commentary.

Akeno leans over and whispers to her then. "It is time Buchou. Your freedom lies in yours and Ichigo's ability to make Riser accept the challenge of a duel."

Rias nods and looks at the rest of her peerage, taking in all their worried faces. "Be safe, stay near the older Devils of not only our Clan but also the Sitri and Naberius Clans, and do not draw any attention to yourselves if you can."

Seeing them respond to her with quiet nods and affirmatives, she makes her way over to where Ichigo is standing. Stopping in front of her true fiancé, she sees his eyes roaming appreciatively over her white dress that ends just above her ankles, leaving her arms and shoulders bare and with a neckline that dips modestly into her bust. Seeing him hold out his arm, she gladly accepts the offer and places her hand on his limb, smirking inwardly at the envious and jealous eyes watching both of them. One set in particular though has barely hidden rage in them at this blatant betrayal of her brother's engagement; she bites her lower lip as she watches the two young adults get drawn into a crowd of inquisitive younger Devils.

'Brother needs to know about this. Maybe this is the rumored male she has chosen over him.' Ravel turns away and hurries over to her brother's side, failing to notice the twin-tailed young girl who signals discreetly to a former Shinigami Captain, who then begins to follow the drill-haired noble from a distance.

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Ichigo leans against the wall, sipping from his cup of diluted wine. Rias had left him a few minutes ago to track down her older cousin, and he now has his sisters in his sights as he watches his peerage and those of his great-grandfather and grandfather continuing to make it very clear to any interested Devils that the three young ladies are not up for any unwanted advances. He has to suppress a grin whenever an overconfident young male Devil decides to approach them, only to discover that the Shiba sisters and their female friends are surrounded entirely by members of the Naberius peerages. Most of these Devils seem to quickly remember urgent business elsewhere, but one drunken young Devil refused to take no for an answer until Grimmjow placed his hand on Pantera's hilt and made it clear where the Zanpakutō would wind up if the Devil brat didn't disappear from the former Espada's sight in under ten seconds. Coupled with the killing intent that he was being blasted with, the young Devil quickly sobered up and fled, but not before proclaiming that his father would hear of this.

Situations like these were the hardest part of the night for Ichigo to endure, having to watch his peerage help keep his sisters safe from arrogant nobles like that boy instead of him being the one to protect them, but both his father and Kisuke had made it clear to him that he needed to conserve and conceal his power until the duel starts. Still, seeing Grimmjow's feral smile does bring a bit of smug satisfaction to him at how quick that particular warning started circulating around the room, especially when Amyntas glared challengingly at that blustering boy's father, who quickly backed down and dragged his son away without a fight. With the obvious protection of the Naberius Lord, most Devils were now very aware that the Shiba sisters were not pieces to be bargained for or propositioned openly.

Taking another sip of his watered-down wine, Ichigo becomes aware of an older blonde-haired woman standing nearby and watching him. When he turns to look at her, he notices right away that she doesn't avert her gaze, instead looking at him even more intently.

"Yes?" He asks the woman politely, though he is hoping that his girlfriend will finally return to
save him from being drawn into yet another useless conversation.

That had actually been the second hardest part of the night so far: having to keep up a facade of actually caring about the power and status of the obviously rich and snobbish Devils in his age bracket. Fortunately, he already had some practice dealing with such people at Kuoh Academy, since it had been at one time a school for the rich and powerful, meaning many noble elites of Japan's society had sent their daughters to the Academy. As for stuck up male teens, he had far too much experience dealing with them at Karakura High, and some of the younger Devils acted little better than the humans they looked down on so much. His future with Rias is the only reason he can stand there and listen to them go on and on about themselves; he can still hear his father, Yoruichi-okaa-san, Suì-Fēng, hell even Captain Ukitake drilling into his head that he needs to maintain a certain noble image otherwise his challenge to Riser will be laughed off.

To his relief, having a cold but polite attitude worked wonders to discourage actual conversation with him, aided the subtle pressure from his Reiatsu on his immediate surroundings to keep the weaker-minded away. Though it hasn't stopped the female Devils from watching him from a distance, much like the older blonde-haired woman who is still observing him intently.

"King, she's getting on my nerves, see what the hell she wants and then get rid of her ass before the Queen comes back."

'Yeah, yeah, hold your damn horses.'

Sipping his wine one more time, he turns and walks up to her, since it's clear that she isn't going to approach him herself.

"Can I…help you…Ms…?"

The woman's sapphire blue eyes meet his chocolate brown, then she smiles politely as she speaks. "I just wanted to see you up close, Ichigo Shiba. You and your family have caused quite the stir among the nobles, especially as guests of the Naberius Clan; it has been ages since Lord Naberius attended any type of formal affair like this one. May I ask how you came to know Lord Naberius? Is it because your father is a noble and has some dealings with the Naberius Clan? I was unaware that they had contacts even in Soul Society..."

"Something like that." Ichigo says noncommittally as his eyes begin to look around for his absent girlfriend. The woman appears to notice his wandering gaze, as her next conversation topic sharply gains his attention.

"Then perhaps you might know that the Gremory and Sitri Clans have been building stronger ties with the Naberius Clan as well... their youngest daughters are around your age I believe? Rias Gremory and Sōna Sitri, have you met either of them?"

Looking at her from his peripheral vision, he only sees a polite expression on her face along with a hint of curiosity. "We go to Kuoh Academy together, along with my siblings and my cousin."

The woman glances in the direction of Kūkaku and Ganju. "Your cousin, that would be…?"

"Uryū Ishida, the young man in white standing with my sisters, Madam." He inwardly at the brief confusion that appears on her face as she turns to look at the indicated male, before smoothing her expression back into a polite mask.

"I see. I was actually thinking of sending my youngest there to study, would you recommend it for a First Year student?"
Looking at her, he thinks about it for a moment. While he can easily redirect her query to Rias, Sōna, or any of their peerage members, he has the feeling she is testing him, and it will reflect poorly on him if he has no opinions on the school he has studied in for around a year, even if most of it was missed due to the backlash of his memories being unsealed. Finally, he begins to speak.

"Well... as an Elite School for young ladies of exceptional backgrounds, the staff, facilities and education level are held to the highest standards in the country. Their recent change to allow in a fixed number of male students have not lowered their standards; while some of the newer male students can have... unique personalities, the female students are protective of each other and will not tolerate any misbehavior from the male students towards them. Lady Rias and Lady Sōna have settled into the role of older siblings to the younger students as well, they are very highly regarded by the student population and will ensure that your daughter settles into school with no problems." He pauses, then looks at the blonde woman more seriously. "For a more in-depth discussion regarding your daughter's future education, you might wish to speak to Lady Rias or Lady Sōna; the Gremory family runs the school, while Lady Sōna is the Student Council President and would know more about such matters than I do."

The blonde woman slowly nods, seeming to be rather distracted. "I see, perhaps I'll do that..." She pauses as she notices two specific Devils making their way towards them. "Enjoy the rest of the party, I'm sure you'll give Rias your warmest wishes when her fiancé announces their marriage shortly afterwards."

A scowl immediately crosses Ichigo's face before he can stop himself. "I'm pretty sure she has other ideas, Madam. Now if you'll excuse me." Ichigo bows to the woman slightly before making his way to his girlfriend, who is approaching them with a tall dark-haired male holding her arm and laughing at something she just said.

"Rias?" Ichigo sees her glance towards him, only to stiffen when she notices the blonde woman he was talking to. Feeling the woman's gaze still resting on his back, he glances back at her with a frown, only to see her walking away without another word.

Deciding to put aside that woman's strange behavior for now, Ichigo turns to smile at Rias again, and she greets him by standing on her tippy toes and kissing his cheek. "Ichigo, this is my cousin Sairaorg Bael. Sairaorg, this is Ichigo, he is the one I was telling you about."

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Ruval and Ravel watch as their mother makes her way back to them, grabbing a glass of wine from a nearby tray and draining it quickly before placing it down again.

"Mother!?” The younger Lady Phenex inquires, worried and unsettled by her mother's sudden action. She had been assured when she came across her oldest brother and their mother that Eleni Phenex would look into this possible breach of Riser's engagement herself, but the investigation doesn't seem to have gone well.

Looking over her shoulder, Eleni sighs out before turning to face her oldest son. "Ruval, you will not interfere if anything should happen tonight, anything at all."

"Mother?” The Heir of the Phenex Clan shifts uncomfortably in front of his mother. "Is this about Riser's...?"

Sighing again, she grabs a hand from each of her children then. "That young man, Ichigo Shiba does indeed know Rias Gremory." She tells them. "While I do not know how close they are, I do know that he is not just some simple noble from Soul Society; in fact, I'm sure that he is somehow
related to Lord Amyntas, I just don't know how exactly. Kurosaki was the maiden name of Lord Amyntas's daughter-in-law, and for him to invite a group of people bearing the same name as Kiku did... it cannot be coincidence. If you add in the fact that there are close to a dozen Shinigami officers attending this gathering as guests of the Maou, and the fact that the Leviathan greeted the Shiba children with kisses on their cheeks... I suspect that the Maou are also backing Ichigo Shiba, and if he chooses to contest Riser's engagement with Rias, they will allow it."

"What!? But that’s...! Mother, you can't be serious!" Ravel immediately protests. "He's not even a Devil, why would the Maou allow it?"

Eleni looks at her daughter sadly. "For one, he holds the favor of Rias Gremory; if he didn't, she wouldn't be introducing him to Sairaorg Bael."

Ruval looks at his mother, then at Rias and Sairaorg Bael, who appear to be having a pleasant conversation with Ichigo Shiba. As he watches, he sees Orihime, the burnt-orange-haired younger sister of Ichigo join their conversation, then she blushes as the orange-haired young man says something that causes both Rias and the boisterous Sairaorg to begin laughing loudly. As both Shiba teens begin to laugh as well, he suddenly notices his youngest brother storming over towards them with a furious look on his face, pushing past the guests then attempting to shove the orange-haired young man out of his way as he reaches out for Rias's arm. Before Ruval can even think of intervening, his mother places a restraining hand on his arm.

"Remember, do not do anything." She reminds him. "This is between Rias and Riser, and Ichigo Shiba as well."

Seeing the stern look in his mother's eyes, Ruval is unable to do anything as he watches the unfolding events with his family.

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All night, Riser had watched Rias dodge and weave away from his advances, ever since he deliberately made out with his Queen in front of her. He was about to grab her and force her to accompany him as his fiancée when the famously reclusive Naberius Clan had made their unexpected appearance, drawing all attention to themselves and allowing Rias to slip away once again. If the shock of seeing Lord Amyntas Naberius show up in person wasn’t enough, the reclusive Devil Lord had even invited a large number of guests to the Young Devils gathering, most of them being Shinigami officers from Soul Society. He, along with his peerage and his loyal followers had no clue what the Naberius Lord was trying to do, but ultimately that was none of his concern. Focusing instead on finding Rias again, he had searched through the Grand Ballroom with little success until he glanced at the Shiba contingent and finally found his fiancée, speaking to Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba with a beaming smile on her face.

Rage immediately filled his heart as all those rumors he had heard about Rias finding a new lover ran through his mind, his eyes nearly bugging out as he watched her cling to that orange-haired boy's arm. Fury ran through his veins as she laughed at something the boy said, the attractive burnt-orange-haired young woman with them blushing scarlet as that meathead Sairaorg threw his head back and laughed as well. His lust towards the burnt-orangegette's voluptuous body was frozen by his rage at seeing his prize being stolen by another male, a punk brat from Soul Society who wasn't even a Devil, most likely a Shinigami since that's where they all came from.

Unable to continue watching this farce any longer, he began to push his way over to them, ignoring the shouts and curses being directed his way by the lesser nobles he shoved out of his way. He was determined to drag Rias to a private room and teach her to obey her betters, punish her for daring to humiliate him in public. The closer he drew to them, the louder their laughter seemed to grow in his
mind, mocking him by openly flaunting their relationship in front of his peers. Everywhere he looked, he could see the other Devils hiding smiles or whispering about his lack of strength, his inability to keep his future wife in her place beneath him. Not even thinking of what consequences there would be, he fully intends to crush her foolish hopes once and for all by announcing their upcoming marriage and demanding for it to be held as soon as possible, preferably here and now. The only obstacle in his way is the tall orange-haired boy whose arm Rias is still clinging on to, but no mere Shinigami can hope to stand in the way of Riser Phenex.

"Out of my way peasant!" He shoves the boy as hard as he can while reaching out for his perceived property. "Get over here now Ria….Fuck!"

A sharp pain goes through his arm and before he knows what is happening, his body is violently twisted and his arm pinned behind his back to keep him from advancing any closer to Rias, the wrist of his other hand that was reaching out for his fiancée suddenly flaring with pain as it is clamped by what feels like solid bands of steel.

"Pleasure to finally meet you…Riser Phenex." A low voice growls in his ear. "I believe we were having a pleasant conversation before you rudely interrupted us, care to apologize?"

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"So, you're the one who stole my cousin's heart? Nice to finally meet you Lord Shiba... or should I just call you Ichigo? Sōna has told me quite a bit about you, though not much more than that you're related to her somehow, she deliberately kept the details rather vague. I hope someday you'll tell me the story of how a nobleman from Soul Society and a Devil from the Underworld could be related to one another." Sairaorg says cheerfully, though the larger framed man keeps his voice fairly low so no one can overhear their conversation.

"Pretty complicated really, I only found out myself a few weeks ago." Ichigo reveals, keeping his face straight when he hears Zangetsu speak in his mind.

"Oi, you feeling it yet?"

'Yeah, behind and to the left of us, about the last time I saw that douche bag hanging around his groupies.'

"Make sure your feet are set, just in case."

'Got it, warn me when he approaches.'

"So Ichigo, what are your plans for after graduation this year? Venelana says you're interested in Literature, English to be specific." The Bael heir remarks inquisitively. He either seems to be ignoring or otherwise unaware of the furious glare being sent their way by Riser Phenex, but Ichigo would put his money on 'ignoring'; Rias had told him that Sairaorg was easily the strongest and most capable of Devil in their generation, and after meeting him Ichigo could believe it.

Nodding his head, while inwardly listening to his Zanpakutō giving him updates on Riser, Ichigo answers the question politely. "Sirzechs says that Kuoh Academy only takes the best, and that's my aim for University: to be the best when I'm there, and one day apply there as a teacher. I do have a fallback option of becoming a doctor like my old man, I even have the hands-on training for it, but I think Yuzu's gonna take up that part of the family trade instead. She's made of tougher stuff then I am when it comes to healing, since being a doctor can take a lot out of you emotionally."

"That's good to hear..." Sairaorg pauses when a burnt-orange-haired young woman joins their
"Orihime, I'd like you to meet my cousin, Sairaorg Bael." Rias says as she gestures towards the older Devil, Sairaorg's eyes widening as he sees Ichigo's sister up close. "Sairaorg, this is Orihime Inoue Shiba, Ichigo's younger sister."

"Oh, nice to meet you Sairaorg-sama..." The beautiful young lady bows gracefully towards him, and Sairaorg automatically bows back to her.

"Nice to meet you too..." Sairaorg turns and hisses to Ichigo. "Ichigo, I thought she was your sister?"

Looking at the Bael heir confusedly, Ichigo finally realizes the mistake Orihime made. "Sorry Hime, you're a noble too, so you only have to address the heads of the Clans with -dono or -sama."

Orihime blushes with embarrassment as she grabs Ichigo's arm and hides her face in it, inadvertently mirroring Rias's position holding his other arm. "This is so hard Ichigo...in Soul Society, I never had to worry about meeting the other nobles, yet here I'm surrounded by them."

Both Rias and Sairaorg laugh at that, especially Sairaorg who has experienced the same kind of awkwardness around other nobles as well. Ichigo and Orihime also begin to laugh as well, and the burnt-orange-haired young woman shakes the older Devil's hand in the Western style and properly introduces herself to him. As the four of them continue to chat, Zangetsu alerts Ichigo to the angry Devil now making his way over to their group.

"Here he comessss! Get ready Ichigo, he's right behind you."

Using his Reiatsu to anchor his feet, Ichigo sees Orihime's and Rias's eyes grow wide and then he feels the hand on his arm trying to shove him aside.

"Out of my way peasant!" Ichigo doesn't budge, instead grabbing hold of the arm trying to push him away and twisting it behind Riser's back, then using that leverage to force the blonde-haired Devil off-balance before grabbing the hand that is reaching out for his girlfriend and crushing it by the wrist.

Ignoring the curses being hurled his way by the Phenex, Ichigo doesn't react when his peerage and Uryü appear and surround them.

"Pleasure to finally meet you...Riser Phenex." He growls in the blonde Devil's ear. "I believe we were having a pleasant conversation before you rudely interrupted us, care to apologize?"

"Get your filthy hands off of me!" Riser tugs his wrist free from Ichigo's grip and delivers a spinning elbow to Ichigo's face, the sound is heard by nearly everyone in the room. Even those who had not seen the confrontation start are now watching the growing tensions intently.

To many of the nobles present, Riser's attack should have stunned the orange-haired young man from Soul Society, or even broken his face, but to the experienced eye, they realize he is barely affected by the hit at all.

"Nice one Riser Phenex, I think you loosened a tooth. No, sorry, it was just my imagination. Now are you gonna apologize or are you gonna move on? I don't care either way, but you aren't laying your hands on Rias Gremory."

Wrenching his arm out of the joint lock and trusting his flames to heal him through the damage, Riser Phenex whirls on the orange-haired male who dares to interfere with him taking his future
bride. Anger laces his features and small flames burst out along his arms and legs as he begins to speak menacingly towards this no-name noble from some backwater society.

"I don't know who you think you are, but she is my woman, my property, my future wife…"

"Blah, blah, blah." He can't believe it when the orange-haired brat cuts him off halfway. "Funny thing asshole, she doesn't seem to have a ring on her finger, and from our talks I know she has no intention of marrying you, so once again I'm telling you to stop harassing Rias."

Enraged beyond belief at this casual dismissal of his engagement, Riser punches the orange-haired teen with a fistful of flames, only to see him move his head few inches to the side and avoid the attack completely.

"I see. Uryū, would you mind cousin?"

"As long as you don't get any blood on it Ichigo." The white-uniformed teen standing behind Ichigo removes his glove and hands it to the orange-haired young man.

"You bastard... what the hell are you trying to do!?" Riser seethes at the orange-haired Shinigami who seems to be making a fool out of him.

Holding the glove in one hand, Ichigo gently swings it from side to side. "One, I'm gonna show you how to slap someone correctly. Two, I challenge you, Riser Phenex, to a duel for Rias Gremory's hand in marriage."

Riser feels his jaw break and stars fill his eyes as he finds himself sprawled heavily on the marble floor, healing flames licking along his shattered jaw and his arms and legs trembling beneath him. All around him, he hears voices and whispers commenting on how he was knocked down by a simple slap from the glove, and remarking on the sorry state he now finds himself in. His entire body shaking in unbridled rage, Riser forcefully pushes himself off of the floor and erupts in flame as he whirls around to confront the younger man who had hit him and made a mockery of his image and his position.

"I will kill you where you stand!!" Howling in anger, he is about to lunge at the orange-haired Shinigami when a voice of power stops him cold.

"What do you think you are doing Riser Phenex? Do you really intend to fight without properly accepting the challenge at your feet?" The one who speaks is Falbium Asmodeus, the usually laid-back Maou brimming with power as he approaches and gives Riser a stare of disapproval.

Confused by the Maou's words, Riser barely suppresses his anger and forces himself to face the Ruler of the Underworld. "Forgive me Asmodeus Maou, but what are you talking about? This low-class Shinigami noble interfered with my personal affairs and struck me in the face, so I intend to teach him to respect his betters. Since he is not a Devil, I don't have to accept his farce of a challenge either. Now if you'll excuse me, this punishment is a private matter, so I don't believe it concerns the Maou." The third Phenex son turns to face his opponent once again, only to find the orange-haired male bastard smirking at him.

"Low-class? No, he is not, Riser Phenex; he is my great-grandson."

All conversations in the room grind to a halt as the gathered Devils stare at Lord Amyntas in shock, the Naberius Lord having said those unbelievable words as he calmly makes his way to Falbium Asmodeus's side. Riser's mouth hangs open, his eyes twitching from Amyntas to Ichigo, then back to the Naberius Lord again. Despite his usual arrogance, the third Phenex son is intelligent enough
to know what kind of standing his opponent will have if the Devil Lord's claim is true, and he also notices that both men share the same bright orange hair, as well as similar brown eyes.

"I-Impossible, this can't be! Everyone knows that the family of Lord Naberius were all killed during the Civil War…"

"Shut your mouth or I'll break your jaw again!" Ichigo interrupts Riser as he steps forward threateningly; no one misses the fact that his eyes turn black and glow slightly red over his irises. Riser's mouth snaps shut immediately, and Ichigo turns to face Lord Amyntas, bowing to him with respect.

"Great-grandfather."

The Naberius Lord nods approvingly. "Ichigo, you have made your challenge, now would be a good time for you to properly introduce yourself to Riser Phenex."

"Yes, you're right of course, thank you for reminding me great-grandfather." Ichigo turns to look at Riser, seeing the Phenex Devil's face contort with a bevy of differing emotions before settling on loathing and disgust. Looking around him, Ichigo sees his family, his friends, his peerage and his Clan all standing around him, giving him their unwavering support. Filled with a deep sense of pride, Ichigo clears his throat so that everyone can hear him.

"I am Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius, son of Lord Isshin Shiba and Lady Masaki Kurosaki Shiba, grandson of Lord Vincent Naberius and Lady Kiku Kurosaki Naberius, and great-grandson of Lord Amyntas Naberius and Lady Cornelia Naberius. By right of my birth and my bloodline, I am the true-born Heir of the Naberius Clan, and will eventually become the Guardian of the Damned, Keeper of the Skeleton Tower and Watcher of the Gates of Hell."

Falbium Asmodeus walks up to the stunned Riser Phenex after Ichigo finishes his introduction, pointing to the glove lying at his feet. "Riser Phenex, you have been challenged for Rias Gremory's hand in marriage by a Devil of equal or higher standing as yourself. Do you accept the challenge, or will you refuse?"

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Yoruichi watches the building confrontation, a hint of sadness in her heart as she witnesses the beginning of yet another chapter in her adoptive son's life. She still remembers the day they found Masaki's lifeless body covering Ichigo's body, her lifeblood splashed around them and bleeding through his shirt. The memory of his shrieking cries as he tried so desperately to wake his mother still haunts her mind, tearing her own heart with the knowledge that even now, he still blames himself. It was far worse a pain than when she had to leave Shaolin behind in her escape from Soul Society; far worse than those desperate hours after Kisuke and Tessai were falsely charged by Central Forty-Six and sentenced to death with the Vizards.

For years after Masaki's death, whenever Kisuke got news of a possible sighting of Grand Fisher, she would take off for days, weeks, or even months at a time, trying to track down the exceptionally cunning Hollow. Each time, she found that the Shinigami on duty had already been killed, a stronger replacement waiting for the Hollow to return to the same place, but Grand Fisher never attacked the same place twice, not until Aizen made him an incomplete Arrancar and sent him to target Ichigo. It brings her some peace to know that Isshin had been the one to deal Grand Fisher his death blow, bringing an end to the murderer who had killed his wife so long ago. Despite this resolution, the family was still without a mother, and she still felt personally responsible for failing to protect Masaki.
She eventually found some solace when she began to train Ichigo for his Bankai while they were rescuing Rukia from her execution. The few days she had spent alone with him until Renji showed up, had been some of the best and funniest days of her life, and each time she transformed in front of him, she couldn't stop laughing at how prudish he was acting, even if she didn't miss the fact that he did peek on more than one occasion at her naked body. Then when Ichigo started his training to tame his 'inner-Hollow', she still remembers how worried she had gotten; how Kisuke managed to keep the truth of Ichigo's Zanpakutō a secret from any of them was a complete mystery, and it was also the most infuriating fuckup he had ever pulled on the teen up 'til that point. Had Kisuke been upfront with Ichigo, maybe, just maybe he wouldn't have had to fight with a fake Zanpakutō, and his battle with Aizen could have gone very differently.

In the end, Zangetsu, the real Zangetsu had saved Ichigo one more time and helped him kill the false god, bringing an end to the civil war which threatened the world's Balance. But then, Ichigo was betrayed, and anger wells up in her chest as she remembers how the newly and secretly reassembled Central Forty-Six had immediately rushed to condemn Ichigo and sentence him to death, not even giving him a chance to decide what he wanted to do when he woke up. Her oldest friend had then made good on every debt he owed Ichigo, hatching a desperate, if somewhat insane plan to save Masaki's son from Central's execution.

Volcanoes couldn't hold a candle to the rage she felt when she found out exactly how he planned to 'save' Ichigo, unaware that Kisuke, Tessai and Isshin were planning to save him in a very different way. She still remembers the moments after they used the Kidō, the crushing guilt and despair she felt at failing Masaki's child once again, and she fled to the river right after they were done, missing the arrival and departure of Amyntas and never getting to say goodbye to Ichigo properly. Ironically, that was what allowed her to discover the truth of the matter, as she had ended up tracking him down to properly say goodbye, only to wind up discovering the full extent of the conspiracy. Oh, she certainly made those two pay for what they had done, but inwardly she was thankful to them because in the end, it was through their efforts that Ichigo had come out of his trial far stronger and happier than he was before.

Now here she is, watching her adoptive 'son' yet again have to fight for his happiness, fighting to protect Rias's heart from being broken by a Devil who was only interested in her body and her prestige, one who saw her as a bed partner to conquer and a brood mare to give his clan pure blooded babies. She discreetly wipes away a tear when she hears Amyntas claim Ichigo as his great-grandson, knowing that it was a long-thought impossible dream of his to do so, and hearing the pride and joy in his voice as he finally reveals his heir. Her own heart swelling with pride and joy as she hears Ichigo acknowledging him with just as much respect and pride. She then hears Falbium Asmodeus issue the challenge once more, and she patiently waits for the response that follows.

'I hate seeing you fight my son, but I know you will find the rest of the happiness that you have been missing; the happiness that you have always deserved.'

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"I hate seeing you fight my son, but I know you will find the rest of the happiness that you have been missing; the happiness that you have always deserved."

_Yoruichi Naberius_

'Weeeellllllyllyyy,' he thinks. His days as a normal student are gone for good. He's a canine Devil, and a strong one at that. 'I'll have to show them that,' he decides as he steps away from his friends and throws his head back as a massive wave of killing intent washes over him, two older peerage members of the Naberius Clan grabbing Ichigo's arms and struggling to keep him in check as he tries to lunge forward with murder in his eyes.
"Oi Ichigo, you must wait until Asmodeus Maou declares the duel's commencement or this'll not go over well! There are rules you must adhere to in order for this to work! Don't lose sight of what you are here for!" Conor yells as both he and Daiki struggle to hold Ichigo's arms in their iron grips, sweat appearing on both Devils' brows as they feel themselves losing their grip. "Damnit Ichigo, wake up!!"

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"Oh, you got to be fucking kidding me? Did he really need to push Ichigo's buttons that much?" Zangetsu shakes his head while staring at the sphere that is near the base of Ichigo's version of the Skeleton Tower in their shared inner world.

Michi, formerly known as Imp, watches as the colors swirl violently around the circumference of the orb made of suppressed magic and Reïatsu, and even she can feel the growing bloodlust in Ichigo radiating from it. Looking worriedly at Zangetsu, she then frowns in confusion because she realizes the once volatile Zanpakutō spirit is suddenly no longer giving off mostly Hollow energy: his Reïatsu and magic is now evenly divided and calm, with a faint hint of anticipation also hanging around him. Then, just like a light switch, Ichigo's bloodlust abruptly vanishes.

Zangetsu smiles appreciatively, knowing just who is responsible for calming Ichigo down. "Thank you, my Queen."

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To say that Rias panicked when she saw Ichigo lunging towards Riser would be a massive understatement. If Lord Vincent's Knight and Lord Amyntas's Rook hadn't been watching him closely, her lover would have lost the duel before even getting the chance to fight Riser at all. She knows that if he had actually attacked Riser, Ichigo's challenge would have been forfeited, since once the duel is accepted, both participants can only start and end their battle in the place designated as their arena. If Ichigo had lost, she would have had no meaningful options left to her other than to marry the third Phenex son or risk losing her family's standing. Standing there watching Ichigo, her worry only grows when she sees the whites of his eyes slowly disappearing and being replaced by black and glowing crimson orbs.

"Get in there and calm Ichigo down now, Rias!" Akeno hisses into her ear as she jabs Rias sharply. Jerking back in shock, Rias looks at her Queen and sees the frantic look Akeno's face. The Thunder Priestess places both hands on Rias's shoulders.

"Look at him Rias. Really look at him, feel his killing intent. Even if Lord Amyntas's peerage members manage to hold him back for now, if Ichigo goes into the duel like that, he could accidentally kill Riser and then he would face backlash or worse from the other nobles; it also wouldn't surprise me if he made a careless mistake and loses the duel instead. You need to calm him down and make him remember why he is here in the first place Rias. Make him remember that he's fighting for you, not fighting to kill that pig-headed asshole." Akeno shoves her King in the back, pushing her towards the orange-haired Devil. "Now go!"

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Ichigo strains forward with all of his physical might, trying to break free from Daiki and Conor's grip on his arms, when a soft body suddenly bumps into him from behind. He immediately freezes, his mind recognizing the warmth and softness of her body, his nose remembering the scent of her shampoo, and his face remembering the silky texture of her long crimson hair which flows around him. Quickly turning around to support Rias, he doesn't even realize that he has broken free of
Daiki and Conor; all of his attention is on his crimson-haired lover, and when she lifts her face up to meet his gaze, he nearly flinches at the deep worry in her eyes.

"Rias." Only now does he hear that his voice has started to Hollowfy.

Rias reaches up and touches his face, not caring about the whispers and comments coming from the other nobles standing around them. Slowly, she runs her hands through his hair until her fingers disappear into his bright orange tresses, then she gently eases and entwines her fingers behind his head and pulls his face down towards hers. Her mouth reaches up to him, lips brushing past his cheek with the lightest of kisses before nipping on his earlobe, her actions hidden by her mane of silky hair; she whispers quietly into his ear.

"You must control your emotions Ichigo; all of us can feel your killing intent. I know what he said to you makes you angry; it makes me angry too, but he's doing it on purpose, he knows that if you attack him outside the duel, you will disqualify yourself automatically. So, don't give him that easy win Ichigo, don't attack him until you are in the designated arena for the duel with him and the proper start is given. So please, please remember who you really are, who you represent, and why you are here now; ignore Riser's taunts until then and make him pay for it later. I want to be yours Ichigo; I won't accept any other as my husband, not since I've met you. I love you Ichigo Naberius, there can be no one else but you." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she looks into his returning brown orbs and smiles up lovingly at him.

When Ichigo finally nods his head, Rias glances at Riser and decides to return all the humiliation and suffering the older Devil had given her since their engagement was made. Smiling again at her lover, she begins to move her face closer to his. "Then, this is for good luck."

Watching the young couple, Isshin quietly holds out his hand as Kisuke slips him a few bills, both men are grinning as they watch Ichigo receive the hottest, most passionate kiss either of them has seen in years from the girl who will hopefully become his future wife in a few hours. Yoruichi shakes her head beside them, mumbling under her breath about hot springs, nudity of a goddess and nosebleeds, but she can't help the smile that grows on her face as well. Ichigo and Rias's peerages begin to clap and cheer, followed by a large majority of the younger Devils in the audience who are clearly eager to encourage the developing scandal in their midst. The claps and cheers continue until the two young adults finally split apart, their breathing heavy and their foreheads still touching.

"Sorry Rias…I hate to admit it, but he did get under my skin by running his mouth." Ichigo quietly confesses as he glances towards the Devil who is glaring hatefully at them, the third Phenex son almost overcome with rage. Ichigo doesn't bother hiding his smirk then, inwardly categorizing the different ways he is going to pound out his revenge on that arrogant Devil.

"As long as you're fine now Ichigo. We should let Asmodeus Maou start the duel officially so you can beat Riser up for real." Rias gives him one last kiss on his lips. "Kick his ass for me Ichigo, make him feel every last ounce of pain that he has put me through."

Before she can slip out of his arms, Ichigo grabs her tightly and holds her to his chest, whispering into her ear. "Remember what you said about tonight Rias…about becoming a Naberius...I'll be holding you to your promises."

Rias's face matches her hair when she registers his words, and even after he releases her and walks towards the Maou, her head is still floating in the clouds. She doesn't notice the head of purple hair that sidles up next to her, but she does hear the teasing voice that comes from her side.

"So…Rias, it must have been good whatever he said to you, to make you blush like that." Yoruichi
says teasingly as she peers at the red-faced heiress.

Fighting down the urge to hide her face, Rias answers her future husband's adopted mother with as much dignity as she can muster, although she knows that her glowing red face is giving her true feelings away. "All I know is that when Ichigo makes a promise, he follows through with it no matter what." She retorts primly.

"Good thing for you then." Yoruichi replies as she lightly bumps the Gremory Heiress's shoulder with her own; her smile quickly turns into a wicked smirk however when she adds in an undertone. "Perhaps this time no one will be able to hear you screaming his name all night long."

"Yoruichi!!"

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Lord Ambrosio Phenex stands with his wife Eleni as they watch their son and the newly-declared Naberius Heir walk towards Asmodeus Maou who is waiting for them to join him. The Phenex Lord frowns as he contemplates Riser's words towards the orange-haired boy, wondering what history his son has with the young Naberius Devil. He also isn't happy with the Naberius Heir's display of intimacy with the Gremory Heiress, though he suspects his wife knows something of this matter; whatever she does know, she is keeping resolutely silent about it. Shaking off his unfounded doubts, the father of Riser Phenex decides to get his answers directly from the source: Lord Zeoticus Gremory and Lord Amyntas Naberius.

Walking over to the two Devil Lords, the Phenex Lord greets them with a perfunctory nod. "Lord Gremory. Lord Naberius."

Both Zeoticus and Amyntas return his nod of greeting. "Lord Phenex. Come to watch over your son?" The Gremory Lord asks him with a neutral expression.

Ambrosio scowls at him. "Cut the act Zeoticus. What's really going on? Why is your daughter cavorting with that young Devil when she is engaged to my son, and why are you allowing him to challenge Riser for your daughter's hand?"

The Gremory Lord turns to face him with a solemn look on his face. "To put it simply Ambrosio, Rias has rejected her engagement with your son and wishes to be engaged with the Naberius Heir instead. My wife and I only supported Riser's engagement with Rias because there were no other suitable candidates for her marriage; with the introduction of Ichigo Naberius however, he has already gained our daughter's affection, and we believe him to be a far more suitable candidate for her marriage. We had originally offered to negotiate the dissolution of Rias's engagement with Riser and her subsequent re-engagement with Ichigo by ourselves, but he chose to challenge Riser for our daughter's hand in marriage instead, wanting to prove his worth as a marriage candidate and preventing any loss of face for the Gremory and Phenex families."

Ambrosio snorts at those words. "Prevent any loss of face for the Gremory and Phenex families? Your daughter has already made a mockery of her engagement with my son, and her open intimacy with this Ichigo Naberius is only making it worse!"

Zeoticus then waves his hand dismissively. "Then all Riser needs to do is to defeat Ichigo Naberius in this duel, and he will recover any possible loss of face. After all, we as Devils respect personal power, and Riser only needs to prove himself the more powerful Devil. Likewise, Ichigo will not only need to defeat Riser, he will need to do so in such a manner that no one here today can deny his capability and power."
Ambrosio glowers at Zeoticus for a few more moments before grudgingly admitting that the terms are fair. If Riser wins the duel, he will solidify his claim on Rias Gremory and remind all Devils of the Phenex Clan's true power, while Ichigo Naberius will be seen as a reckless upstart who was defeated by an older and more experienced Devil. If Ichigo Naberius were to somehow win the duel instead, it would show that Riser was defeated by a Devil capable of overcoming the well-known regenerative power of the Phenex Clan, so there would be no true loss of prestige for their family. Although the loss of Rias Gremory would be regrettable, it was always within the rights of the Gremory Clan to seek out the best possible candidate for their daughter; at the very least, he can feel satisfied that Riser will not be replaced by someone who is his lesser.

Of course, he does also consider the possibility that the Naberius Heir will try to defeat Riser through underhanded means, but the Phenex Lord is fully confident that his son will crush his opponent if he dares to try that. Besides, with so many Devils witnessing the duel firsthand, the Naberius Clan will have its reputation irreversibly tarnished if their Heir was to use such despicable methods, and the Gremory Clan will also suffer the backlash if they allow that person to marry their daughter.

Ultimately, he figures that this duel will boil down to a match of personal power versus personal power, and the only question now is: just how powerful is Ichigo Naberius?

Turning to the last member of their group, Ambrosio addresses the orange-haired Devil Lord who has remained silent so far.

"Lord Amyntas." He waits for the reclusive Head of the Naberius Clan to look his way. "Do you truly believe your Heir is capable of taking on my son? There is no one else in Riser's age bracket - save for Sairaorg Bael - who is capable of defeating him, and this has been proven time and time again over many Rating Games, as you should well know."

Amyntas nods his head in agreement. "That is true, but Ichigo is by no means an ordinary Devil. He is far more skilled and powerful than you could ever imagine, with more combat experience than many older Devils. Regardless of the outcome of this duel, I believe none will be able to question my Heir's power by the time it is over."

Ambrosio feels a faint chill go down his spine, involuntarily recalling the killing intent that the Naberius Heir had projected earlier. Now that he thinks about it, such strong killing intent is a mark of those who had survived on the frontlines of the Civil War for years, but that is impossible as the war had ended several centuries before Ichigo Naberius had even been born. Furthermore, Ambrosio had not felt any remarkable power coming from the Naberius Heir when he was observing him earlier...

Shaking his head to indicate his disbelief, the head of the Phenex Clan remarks back with subtle questioning. "I'm sorry Lord Amyntas, but when I observed him earlier, I did not sense any remarkable amount of energy coming off from him…"

"That is because we taught him how to suppress his power early on Lord Phenex; after all, if your enemies can feel you coming a mile away, it pretty much makes any surprise ambush all but impossible." An unfamiliar female voice speaks up calmly from behind him.

Turning around, Ambrosio sees the purple-haired Shinigami woman who was introduced earlier as Yoruichi Naberius gliding past him up to Lord Amyntas and taking his arm, while behind her, a younger version of herself - a sister or a daughter? - follows along, guarded by an Elf he recognizes as Merti Longoak, one of the famed Assassin Triplets taken in by the Naberius Clan. Merti's presence puts into perspective what the Shinigami woman was saying.
"A tactic used only by assassins." Ambrosio sniffs in recognition and disgust. "No true Devil would stoop to such underhanded methods."

Yoruichi raises a delicate eyebrow at him, looking faintly amused by his words. "Truly? How narrow-minded of you, Lord Phenex. Surely you have not forgotten that those same assassins were employed by both sides of the Civil War, and all veterans of that war have learnt how to suppress their powers out of necessity to prevent said assassins from tracking them down and ambushing them. I do believe that you yourself are constantly suppressing the majority of your powers, and many of your peers are unconsciously doing the same. Since only the most foolish of Devils would constantly reveal the true limits of their power, wouldn't Ichigo learning to suppress his power be a mark of experience and wisdom instead?"

Struck dumb by her logic, Ambrosio can only stare at the smirking Shinigami woman as her smaller version giggles at their exchange and the former Elf assassin smiles politely. Zeoticus and Amyntas both chuckle as well, the Gremory Lord patting him on the shoulder.

"She's got you there, Ambrosio. Truth be told, I'd forgotten that all of us older Devils have been unconsciously suppressing a portion of our power as well... We've been doing it for so long that it's just become part of our natural processes." Zeoticus comments with a smile.

Coughing awkwardly, Ambrosio casts about for something else to say about the Naberius Heir. "What about his clothing, then?" He finally asks them. "That dark and form-fitting costume is typical of assassin garb; what reason does he have to wear such clothing in a duel with Riser?"

"I'll admit that his clothing is designed to be worn by an assassin." Yoruichi freely admits much to his surprise. "However, Ichigo is only wearing it to honor us as his teachers, not because he plans to assassinate your son in this duel. The Onmitsukidō of Soul Society all wear such uniforms when they are carrying out their missions, and as their former Captain, I have my own personal uniform, as does my protégée Suì-Fēng who took over my position when I left. Since Ichigo was trained by both of us, we have judged him worthy to wear that uniform in combat, and I hope to one day see my own baby sister wearing that uniform with pride as well."

Ambrosio notices the younger girl's eyes widen with surprise, and the purple-haired Shinigami woman smiles down at her younger clone. "Go watch your big brother closely Yukiko; he will be showing us why Soul Society and Hueco Mundo have learnt to respect his power, and by the time this duel is over, the Underworld will know better than to mess with those who are under Ichigo's protection."

"Yes, Big Sis!" The smaller purple-haired girl cheers before hurrying away to get a better view; with a bow to them of farewell, Merti follows behind her as well.

"... Are you perhaps underestimating my son, Lady Yoruichi?" Ambrosio asks stiffly, his body tense from the seeming insult. "I hope you are aware that the title of 'Immortal Phenex' was not given for show..."

He begins to scowl when he sees Yoruichi Naberius exchanging quick smirks with Zeoticus Gremory and Amyntas Naberius before she turns to look at him with confidence in her golden cat-like eyes.

"Riser may be 'immortal', Lord Phenex, but he is not the first such opponent Ichigo has had to fight over the years. Considering that both of Ichigo's previous 'immortal' opponents were slain by him in combat, I would think your son is very fortunate that Ichigo isn't planning to kill him in this duel; after all, it would be a waste of our extra training if he loses this duel over a technicality."
The Phenex Lord glares at Yoruichi then, her golden eyes meeting his gaze unflinchingly, but before he can respond, Lord Amyntas intervenes with the voice of reason.

"I believe the duel will speak for itself, Lord Phenex; however, there seems to be some problem going on with Asmodeus Maou and our two competitors. Perhaps we should go find out what it is?"

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Ichigo makes his way to stand next to Asmodeus Maou, Riser matching him two paces to his left while sending him hateful glares. Not bothering to respond to the third Phenex son's immature display, Ichigo's mind focuses on what is going to happen after the duel is over, when Rias is safely his...he swallows as he thinks about one thing, no, make that two things.

"So what if you are married at seventeen, King? She's your mate, your wife, your...Queen. You won't be alone anymore Ichigo; you will always have her standing at your side."

'It's not only that Zangetsu, I just wish…'

"I know, Mom's not here to see it…"

'...Yeah, I think she and Rias would have gotten along pretty good.'

"She'd probably be happy that you are showing some interest in the female species, period."

'Dick.'

"Can ya blame me? First Tatsuki, then Orihime and Rukia, afterwards in Soul Society there was that Squad Ten Lieutenant, and I think the Lieutenant of Squad Four. Hell, you almost got Nelliel while in Hueco Mundo, but let us not forget the most important person: nude...Shihōin...princess...So don't stand there and deny I ain't right, you did act suspect…"

Ichigo growls inwardly, willing his partner to drop the subject. 'Alright I get it, I get it…seriously though…in a few hours I'm going to be married...shouldn't I be scared?'

"You should be, but since you're not, I think you know what it means don't you? Means you already know what you have to do to make it a reality. But don't end it too…quickly, King; there are some things you need to get off your chest, therapy of the soul you could say."

'Pissed much? So am I. There's one more thing though before we start; Zangetsu, it's just…I'm sorry, I don't want you in this, but you understand why right?'

He feels his Hollowfied Zanpakutō spirit rolling his eyes. "As long as you use me to deal some payback for our family being stolen from us, I'll let this slide. Heck, I'll still be able to feel you punch him in the face, so it's all good."

Ichigo chuckles outwardly then, causing the son of the Phenex Clan to sneer and ask if he thinks this is funny.

"No, I'm laughing because I'm ready to kick your ass Riser Phenex. So Asmodeus Maou, when and where will this duel be taking place?" Ichigo says as he pulls off his cloak, revealing the skin-tight body suit top he is wearing, then pulling out a strange bandana and tying it over the top of his head, before pulling out the last part of his uniform from under his collar, lifting it up to his nose and effectively covering all parts of his body save his hands and eyes.
Riser lifts an eyebrow and snorts at his new outfit. "What are you supposed to be, some kind of ninja? It seems my fiancée's delusional love for that backwater country is spreading..."

"Considering you even know what a ninja is, I'd say it's spreading more than you think." Ichigo retorts calmly. Seeing the blonde Phenex Devil scowl at him again, the orange-haired Devil continues speaking in a more menacing tone of voice.

"To answer your question, I'm not just a ninja." Ichigo swings his crimson gaze towards the arrogant Devil, his orbs beginning to flare with deadly light once again. "I am your executioner Riser Phenex. Or at least I wish I was, too bad this duel doesn't allow me to do that. The only things preventing you from suffering a gruesome death by my hands for the way you have been treating Rias, belittling her honor and acting like a man-whore are the rules of this duel and the Rating Game dimension. Now let's get this duel started, the sooner I kick your ass, the sooner I can get back to my future wife."

Before Riser can reply, Falbium Asmodeus steps between them. "The Rating Game dimension has been set up and is ready to simulate the chosen arena." The Maou informs them, looking at each young man in turn. "Riser Phenex, as the challenged party, you get to choose the arena for this duel."

Gritting his teeth angrily, the Phenex Devil glares at Ichigo before turning to look at the bald Maou. "Very well. The arena I choose for this duel, Asmodeus Maou, is the training field down there." He points out the nearest balcony towards something Ichigo cannot see.

Falbium raises an eyebrow at him. "A training field? Very well then. The Rating Game dimension will simulate th-"

"The training field down there, NOT one simulated by the Rating Game dimension." Riser clarifies, overriding the Maou's words as his eyes continue to glare daggers at the Naberius Heir.

Shocked gasps come from the onlookers at his words, each of them realizing just what the Phenex Devil means by this. Even Falbium Asmodeus looks taken aback by his demand, the bald Maou's eyebrows rising even higher.

"... Riser Phenex. Surely you..."

"As the challenged party, I have the right to choose the arena for the duel." Riser interrupts him again with pride filling his posture, though it changes to condescension when he looks at his opponent. "Unless of course, my opponent is too cowardly to fight me without the protection of the Rating Game system?"

"Kill him King!" Zangetsu howls in Ichigo's head. "Kill that damn fucker and show him just what he is messing with!!"

'Ooh, don't worry, he's going to find out just exactly what.' Ichigo replies grimly. 'Too bad I'm not allowed to actually kill him; he's just forfeited all protection from the Rating Game system...'

Falbium glances at Ichigo with a barely-concealed frown on his face. While Riser is well within his rights to choose a dueling arena outside of the Rating Game dimension, it is something only the most foolish or confident of Devils would do; unfortunately, the third Phenex son clearly doesn't view Ichigo Naberius as a serious threat. When Ichigo nods his head in agreement to the duel location, the bald Maou can only sigh in frustration, but his hands are tied.

"...Very well. Riser Phenex, you have chosen the field of combat, and your challenger Ichigo
Naberius has accepted. The rules for this duel are simple: the first duelist to submit either by yielding or being defeated in combat will forfeit all claims to Rias Gremory's hand in marriage. As this duel takes place outside of the Rating Game dimension, the killing of either duelist is prohibited and will result in the killer also forfeiting all claims to Rias Gremory's hand, with additional penalties to be decided upon later. That said, I give each of you this one last chance to kneel in submission to your opponent and offer the withdrawal of your claims. Do either of you wish to do so?"

Ichigo simply shakes his head no, Riser scoffs before doing the same thing. Falbium then points towards the balcony that Riser had indicated earlier, and both Ichigo and Riser walk out towards it, neither Devil appearing to be in any great hurry to get there. The Maou follows a step or two behind them, and the assembled Devils allow the three Clans involved in the matter to file out first behind him, leaving the remaining Devils to either head towards the nearest balconies or set up scrying magic to better observe the chosen field of battle.

Standing on the balcony, Ichigo looks down and sees a rather large area, about the size of a football field with pillars, walls, towers and a few other structures littering the flat central area, and the entire field is surrounded by ten-meter-high walls to keep stray attacks in. Looking back at the Maou of military affairs, Ichigo jerks his thumb towards the dueling arena.

"That's big enough for this duel? Ah, no offense Asmodeus Maou, but Geta-Bōshi has a training room that stretches on for kilometers on end; not complaining about this field or anything, but it just seems a bit small in comparison."

To his surprise, Ichigo sees Falbium Asmodeus smiling at him. "Looks can be deceiving Ichigo; once you enter that place, you will see what I mean." Turning to the young woman at the center of the upcoming duel, the Maou then asks Rias Gremory one final question.

"Rias Gremory, do you wish for Ichigo Naberius to fight for your hand in marriage?"

The seventeen-year-old Devil looks first at her mother, seeing the more mature version of herself smile and nod her head in approval to her daughter; she then sees her father and every other member of her family giving her the same approving answer. Smiling with delight, she turns to see her peerage also giving her the same encouraging gestures, and she finally turns to the last group whose approval she needs most of all: the combined Naberius and Shiba Clans. If their smiles of welcome aren't answer enough for her, she also sees Amyntas, Yoruichi and Isshin nodding their approval to her. Faced with such overwhelming support from all her friends, families and allies, Rias feels her heart swelling with joy as she turns back to Falbium Asmodeus with a look of determination in her eyes.

"I hereby declare that Ichigo Naberius has the right to duel for my hand in marriage, Asmodeus Maou. I have no desire to marry Riser Phenex; I only wish to marry for love, to be the only woman in my husband's eyes, and I know that with Ichigo that is what I will have." She resolutely ignores Riser, who is seething with his fists clenching and unclenching as if wanting to strangle her.

Satisfied that all conditions have been met, Falbium turns to the two opposing duelists and issues his commands. "Ichigo, as the challenger, you are to take the far end of the arena over there. Riser, you may have the closer end as the one being challenged. The duel will start as soon as you are both in place and I give the command. Both of you may now enter the arena, but be aware that everything you say or do will be witnessed by all who are watching."

Ichigo smirks at Riser then. "Good, don't want anyone trying to question me when this is done."

Before Riser can retort, he hears the faint sound of static then the ninja clad Devil is gone; as gasps
of surprise begin to come from the crowd, Riser looks startled by Ichigo's disappearance, then he turns to Rias with a triumphant sneer on his face. "Did your boy toy just run away and leave you behind, Rias? How cowardly of him..."

Falbium Asmodeus interjects before Rias can answer, announcing in a deep voice. "The challenger Ichigo Naberius has entered the arena. Riser Phenex, enter the arena within the next thirty seconds or you will forfeit this duel."

Snarling in humiliation, Riser whirs around and sees Ichigo's figure standing at the far end of the arena, his arms folded across his chest and his foot tapping impatiently on the ground.

"Ready anytime you are, Riser." His voice can be clearly heard by all. "Or you can forfeit if you're too cowardly to face me in the arena."

Throwing one last glare at the smirking Gremory Heiress, Riser uses his magic to teleport himself inside the arena. Standing there, he looks around and sees that the arena's dimensions haven't changed yet, so he flares his magic to a certain output, causing the training field to grow wider on his side and creating new obstacles as it expands. Gesturing with his hand, he motions for his opponent to do the same, then he scowls when Ichigo only raises his eyebrow at him.

"The arena will change size after you release a certain amount of your magic, Ichigo." Falbium calls down from the balcony where he is overseeing their duel. "Both competitors are expected to expand their individual sides of the arena by the same amount before the duel to show that they are equals."

"This is fine for me though; distance doesn't really matter for me, the shorter the better actually." Ichigo's surprising answer is met with frowns and murmurs from the Devils witnessing the duel, a few of them glancing at the Naberius Clan wondering just what exactly their Heir is trying to convey.

"Spoken like a true coward, Naberius." Riser calls out to him arrogantly. "If you can't even match this requirement, what right do you have to challenge me to a duel?"

Frowning at Riser's words, and picking up the increased muttering coming from the spectators, Ichigo glances at Falbium Asmodeus, only to see the Maou give him a brief nod of agreement. Scowling with annoyance, Ichigo flares his magic to the exact same output as Riser, and the audience falls silent as his side of the arena swiftly grows to match Riser's side of the field, obstacles sprouting from the ground to fill in the new space as well. Smirking at his scowling opponent, Ichigo then swivels his gaze back to the Maou watching them.

"If we're done with this posturing, may we start the duel Asmodeus Maou?" The orange-haired Devil calls out to him bluntly, earning additional scowls from several of the older and more stuffy nobles at his lack of proper decorum.

Rolling his eyes inwardly, Falbium Asmodeus looks to see the other three Maou are watching the duel from their respective balconies and giving him the signal to go ahead. Turning back to the two competing Devils, he speaks one more time.

"The duel between Riser Phenex and Ichigo Naberius for the hand of Rias Gremory will now begin!"

As cheers roar out from the watching nobles of the Underworld, Riser immediately calls up a magic circle, one that Ichigo identifies as a teleportation circle. Wondering what Riser is trying to do, Ichigo is surprised when the Phenex Devil suddenly flares his magic and sinks straight into the
magic circle in less than a second, reappearing from the exit circle less than arm's length away with a burning fist swinging straight for Ichigo's face. There is a loud thud as Riser's fist connects solidly with the unmoving orange-haired Devil, the flames from his attack washing over the ninja-clad Devil's head and upper torso as Riser smirks at the obvious conclusion to the shortest fight he has ever been in.

"That's it?" Ichigo's voice suddenly speaks up within the flames. "Tatsuki and my little sisters hit me harder than that. Let me show you how they hit me daily."

Before Riser can react, he is jabbed solidly in the chest by a fist that cuts through the flames, followed by a foot to his chin that sends him flying. The sound of his bones breaking during the impact can be heard over the flames, and the air pressure generated by both attacks causes the flames to be extinguished. Crashing to the ground back where he started, Riser hurriedly scrambles to his feet, feeling his flames immediately restoring the damage done to his body. Looking for his opponent however, he scowls when he realizes that the orange-haired Devil hasn't even moved from his spot; even worse, the Naberius Heir then tilts his head to one side, the completely undamaged mask on his face barely concealing the large grin that mocks him beneath its surface, and his arms are still crossed over his chest, his foot tapping as he waits.

Getting back to his feet, Riser ignites both his fists this time, wariness now slowly trickling into his mindset as he tries to figure out how his opponent had survived his attack. With this much distance between them, he is completely blindsided by Ichigo's next move.

"Too slow..." Riser is forcibly bent over by a sudden fist to his stomach, dropping him to his knees as his intestines explode from the impact. Feeling his flames immediately restoring his organs back to working condition, Riser's eyes widen in shock as he realizes the black tabi of his enemy are standing right before his eyes.

"Die!!" Without any hesitation, Riser sweeps both hands forward and sends a massive wave of flame towards his opponent, causing a pillar of fire to erupt from the ground before him. Panting harshly as he tries to calm his racing heart, Riser scans the flames for his opponent, only to stare in shock when he finds the Naberius Heir standing back at his original position on the other side of the arena.

"When the hell did he move?" Cold sweat begins to bead on Riser's forehead as he hears the other Devil speaking to him again.

"You better start getting serious, Riser Phenex, or this is going to be a long fucking fight for you." Ichigo finishes his words by reappearing in front of the older Phenex Devil and kicking him in the face once again.

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Eleni Phenex grips the railing as she watches her son get sent flying again after being kicked in the face a second time by his opponent. It is clear by now that Riser's opponent far outclasses him in terms of physical ability, and although Riser is unlikely to be defeated by physical moves alone, Eleni has a sinking suspicion that Ichigo Naberius is still holding back, baiting out Riser's stronger attacks before he uses her son to make his statement. Feeling a solid lump growing in her throat, the Phenex Matriarch glances worriedly across the room to where the Naberius contingent is gathered, seeing blank faces on the entirety of the Naberius Clan except for the youngest daughter, a fair-haired girl named Yuzu who looks distressed by the battle. However, the tall blonde-haired woman standing behind Yuzu notices the girl's distress as well, and she kneels down and holds the younger Devil in her arms, speaking lowly into the fair-haired pre-teen's ear. Eleni sees the young girl nod several times before a look of saddened understanding crosses her face, and the tall blonde...
woman straightens up again, although her hand is now holding the young girl's free hand comfortably. To Eleni's surprise, the blonde woman then looks in her direction, her emerald eyes meeting Eleni's blue orbs across the room, and they convey to the Phenex Matriarch a look of complete sympathy.

Gripping her arms tightly, Eleni Phenex turns back to the arena when she hears the crowd reacting to something, and she sees Riser on his feet and with his fist buried in Ichigo's stomach. However, the victory is short lived when the orange-haired Devil simply straightens up and then disappears again. Unable to see where he went, she nearly screams when she sees Riser suddenly being slammed to one side with the sound of bones breaking. Covering her mouth in horror, Eleni watches as her youngest son is hammered brutally in every direction by an invisible opponent...

No, she finally realizes what is going on: Ichigo Naberius is moving so fast that he is nearly invisible to the naked eye, a feat that she has only seen being performed by the fastest of Knights among the peerages. She knows that Riser has had no training to fight opponents moving at those speeds, and she can only fervently hope that the Gremory Matriarch will honor her request to spare her son's life.

After a few seconds of being attacked, Riser slams painfully into the ground yet again, Ichigo reappearing on top of his back this time with a foot already planted in the base of her youngest son's spine. Raising said foot, the orange-haired Devil stomps down hard, and the sound of Riser's scream echoes throughout the arena as his spine is brutally pulverized. The scream then turns into a choked cough as the Naberius Heir kicks him in the stomach, crushing his organs and sending him flying once more, this time crashing into one of the pillars that dot the arena.

"When are you going to start showing me how much better you are than I am, Riser Phenex? Didn't you say you would beat me and make the woman I love scream your name in your marital bed? Get the hell up and start fighting, or I'm gonna kick your ass until there is nothing left!"

Lifting his arm, Ichigo braces it with his other hand, and his voice drops so low that his Kidō chant nearly goes unheard.

"Hadō Number Eighty-Eight: Hiryū Gekizoku Shinten Raihō!" The large explosion of electrified spiritual energy smashes straight into the unprotected body of his older opponent, the screams ripping from Riser's mouth telling the Devils just how painful the attack is.

The Phenex Matriarch watches helplessly as her youngest son collapses to the ground once the attack is done, his flames immediately restoring his lightning-charred body back to full health, but unable to remove the humiliation on Riser's face as his younger opponent turns his back on him and begins to walk away. "I'll give you some time to recover. Don't take too long though; I'm still not done with you." The Naberius Heir calls back insultingly as he leaves.

Her heart filled with worry for the safety of her youngest son, Eleni barely notices as another woman joins her at the railing. It is only when the other woman gives a quiet sigh that she glances over to her left and sees Venelana Gremory standing beside her, looking down into the arena as well with a face carefully schooled to be as emotionless as possible while watching her previously chosen son-in-law fight with her daughter's currently chosen fiancé.

The Phenex Matriarch doesn't say a word, and in the end, it is the Gremory Matriarch who speaks up first.

"I'm sorry Eleni, I truly am sorry that you have to see this duel happen, but your husband and mine left them with little choice to not do so. Rias hasn't participated in a Rating Game yet, and she still lacks pieces for her peerage as well as full control over one of her Bishops. Other than renouncing all of her titles and giving up all of her privilege as a pureblood, my daughter was left with only this
avenue of escape if she wanted to be with Ichigo. I can see from your eyes that you never wanted any of this to happen, not to your son or my daughter; as her mother, I can tell you I feel the same way as well. I hope that when the time comes, you will help do what's best for Riser, Eleni."

With those words said, the brunette Devil walks away and rejoins her family, leaving behind a brooding Phenex Matriarch who continues to watch her son and his opponent fight with heaviness in her heart.

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Riser forces himself back to his feet, feeling his flames already restoring his body back to its prime. That last hit had been the worst since the duel started, causing him more pain than anything he has ever been hit by in all of his previous battles. If he didn't know any better, he would have sworn that the Naberius bastard was using Holy Lightning like some kind of Fallen Angel, but instead of being 'holy', what he felt instead was 'rage' coming from his opponent's lightning as it coursed through his body. Naturally, he wasn't stupid enough to believe the orange-haired Devil when he said he was giving him time to recover, but he would certainly use this time to make sure that bastard regrets it.

Gathering his magic in a way few Devils know he can, he begins uttering the spells of a different kind of magic, and without giving any warning he unleashes waves of highly compressed air at the Naberius Devil who is walking away from him. Having also foreseen that the other Devil will use high speed movement to escape, Riser immediately widens his attack radius to the entire arena around him the moment Ichigo Naberius disappears from view, lashing out in all directions until he hears a pained grunt as his opponent is finally caught by one of his many whips of air and forced back into view.

"How's it feel!? Even though it might be wind, it can be strengthened to feel like beams of steel! Now it's my turn!" Riser increases the number of air whips hurtling towards his wounded opponent, sharpening them into blades as he lifts both hands and sends twin sets of funneled air slamming into his opponent from either side. With the orange-haired Devil pinned between both rapidly spinning twisters, Riser ignites them with his flames and gives a malicious smile when he hears the shouts of pain coming from his opponent who is being engulfed by the newly-created firestorm.

"Does that hurt? It's still not enough!!?" Riser doesn't stop there as he continues to send more blades and whips of air at his opponent, pushing even more of his magic down the two burning vortexes until he smells his opponent's flesh searing from the heat.

"Let's see you try and mock me now!" Riser roars as he pushes yet even more magic into his attack; the flames turn white hot and the ground around them begins to melt as he grins in triumph. "Where's all your arrogance now, you bastard? Go on, say something!"

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Serafall watches calmly as her cousin stands in the middle of the raging inferno, her thoughts going back to the day she had seen Ichigo learning how to endure against the flames of Hell that his great-grandfather had used against him. Smirking to herself at the premature look of triumph on Riser's face, she glances over to her sister and sees Sōna casually taking a sip of wine from her glass as she looks over in her direction as well.

"It won't be long before Ichigo is ready." Serafall comments.

Sona smiles with anticipation as she looks back to the arena. "Riser won't know what hit him."
Lord Ambrosio watches the battle with a small frown, watching as his son continues to pump more magic into the white-hot inferno that his opponent is trapped in. He is surprised that Lord Amyntas hasn't already called a forfeit on behalf of his Heir, but after seeing Ichigo Naberius display his physical prowess and magic earlier, the Phenex Lord suspects that the young Devil's defenses are nothing to scoff at either. However, if things continue to escalate in this manner, there is a very high chance that Riser will end up overpowering his opponent's defenses and killing him, which is a stain he doesn't want on his youngest son's record. Glancing to his side, he looks at Lord Amyntas and is taken aback by the sheer look of unconcern on the Naberius Lord's face, something that has him feeling decidedly uneasy. Unable to stay silent after witnessing that, Ambrosio walks up to his fellow Clan leader and speaks again.

"Are you not going to yield on behalf of your great-grandson, Lord Amyntas? If this goes on, his recovery will take months at the least, and I cannot guarantee that he can survive."

The Naberius Lord glances at him with a faintly curious expression. "Is that concern I hear Ambrosio? I would have thought you more interested in seeing your son crush my Heir completely."

The Phenex Lord scowls at him, not liking the insinuation that he was hoping to see the Naberius Heir killed in battle. "I may dislike your Heir for his audacity in challenging Riser's engagement to Rias, but I have no interest in seeing any of our purebloods being incinerated to death, much less the newly-revealed Heir to the Skeleton Tower. I cannot believe you would risk the death of your Heir just to have him steal away the Gremory Heiress from my son, Lord Amyntas."

The Naberius Lord levels a flat stare at Ambrosio, and the Phenex Lord return his gaze without flinching. After a moment, Amyntas nods his acknowledgement to him.

"Do not worry Ambrosio; I believe Ichigo is ready to take this fight to the next level, your son's attack simply took him by surprise is all. I know he'll be fine, since I've subjected him to the purifying flames of the Skeleton Tower during his training."

Ambrosio's mouth falls open in shock. "Are you mad!? Those flames are only used to remove the burdens of the crimes committed by the Sinners! Yet you...you bathed him in those flames? How? Why?"

He shivers as he witnesses the smile that forms on the face of the Guardian of the Damned then, who turns his gaze back to the arena.

"To prepare him for the day he takes my place, of course."

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'How are you doing, Zangetsu?' Ichigo stands in the middle of the raging inferno, using his Reiatsu to create an invisible barrier between his body and the blazing flames that surround him. Although he was caught off-guard by the savagery of Riser's attack, his high-speed regeneration coupled with his training to endure the Skeleton Tower's flames have made him all but immune to the heat given off by flames of this level.

"Done King. So as soon as you're done faking being trapped, can you please start pounding the living hell out of this moron for real now?"

'Yeah, I'm ready. Hopefully he'll show us more of his magic, that way our peerages can learn how
to fight him just in case we end up facing him and his peerage in one of those damn Rating Games.'
Ichigo replies as he begins to plan his escape from this inferno. Grinning as an idea comes to mind,
he begins to send his magic high above the arena where the superheated water vapor from the air
has gathered; sensing the waves rapidly forming overhead in his mind, his grin grows.

'Time to step it up.'

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Riser instinctively looks up as he senses the magic building overhead, and his eyes widen when he
sees twin pillars of water crashing down towards him. Quickly leaping backwards to avoid the
falling water, his mistake is in not keeping his eyes on the Devil in front of him, who immediately
bursts out from the flames when the Phenex Devil is distracted. As Riser shields his face from the
water pillars that slam into the ground, he also fails to see the Naberius Devil lift and clap his
hands together, causing both pillars to turn into two solid walls of water that slam into him from
either side, dousing all of his flames and cracking or breaking nearly every bone in his body.
Pumping out as much magic as he can, Riser forcefully teleports himself away from the attack and
collapses behind the furthest pillar he can find, forcing his flames to restore his pulverized body as
quickly as possible. He knows he doesn't have much time, so he isn't surprised when the sound of
static reaches his ears and that hateful voice speaks up again from nearby.

"Hiding won't do you any good Riser. Let me show you my grandmother's magic, I think you'll
really appreciate it."

Without any warning, Riser feels a spike of agony shoot through his recently-healed leg. Biting
down his scream of pain, he looks down with shock and sees a spear-tipped chain impaled into his
leg, trailing back into the shadow of the pillar he is using. He is further shocked when a second
spear-tipped chain snakes out of the shadow and shoots towards his arm. Grunting in pain, he
throws himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the second spear-tipped chain and feeling the first
chain tear itself free from his leg.

Tumbling out from behind the pillar, Riser ignores the way his flames struggle to heal the damage
from his shattered thigh, instead trying to find where his opponent is attacking him from. To his
anger, he sees Ichigo Naberius standing near a pillar, apparently waiting for Riser to notice him.
Riser's scowl only deepens when he sees unmarred flesh instead of black and charred skin, the
Naberius Devil's clothes slowly repairing themselves right before his very eyes.

"Surprised, Riser?" The orange-haired Devil mocks him. "You aren't the only one with high-speed
regeneration, even my clothes can regenerate too."

"How is that possible!?" Riser demands angrily. "The Naberius Clan has never been known to have
to have regenerative abilities!"

Hearing the other Devil snort, the third Phenex son is taken aback when his opponent simply
dismisses his accusation with a wave of his hand.

"That's a family secret Riser, I have no reason to tell you." The Naberius Heir pauses then.
"However, I will admit that the Phenex healing seems to be more useful...Your family makes a
fortune from selling your 'Phoenix Tears', while my own healing is limited to myself unless I use
Kaidō or...well, I'll keep that second part a secret for now."

"What the hell are you talking about, Naberius?" Riser growls at him. "Are you trying to beg for
my mercy?"
"As if." Ichigo scoffs in response. "Just so you know, I've been ordered to end this quickly, but...I won't. I know I'll catch hell for this later, but I really don't like you Riser Phenex. Had you shown even one ounce of consideration towards Rias or at the very least given her the respect a man should have toward his future wife, then maybe you would still have Rias as your fiancée. So, I thank you for fucking that up Riser. Now I'll be the one who gets to show everyone just how she is meant to be treated, as the only one in her eyes."

"You fu-" Whatever Riser has to say is interrupted by the bright light that suddenly forms at the tips of Ichigo's fingers, as the orange-haired Devil raises his hand towards Riser. "Bala."

Caught off guard by the speed of the attack, Riser is forced to brace himself and endure the energy barrage. His body is hammered by countless energy balls slamming into it for what feels like an eternity, the flashes of black and crimson that pound up and down his body reminding him of the Bael Power of Destruction until his opponent finally stops his attack.

"Five minutes Riser, I'll give you that time to recover and meet me in the center of the ring." Once again, the Naberius Heir disappears in a burst of static, leaving behind the battered Phenex Devil glaring after him.

Breathing hard, Riser forces himself to remain on his feet, ignoring the healing flames that flare up all over his battered body and focusing instead on replaying the attacks used by the Naberius Devil so far in his head. Ichigo Naberius has proven to be more troublesome than he had expected; each time he believes he has seen everything, that bastard would pull out something new from his sleeves. Even Riser's rarely-used combination of wind and fire magic had proven incapable of defeating him, and if what the Naberius Heir had claimed was true, then he possesses regenerative ability that is strong enough to endure most of Riser's hottest flames. Gritting his teeth as he considers his options, the blonde Phenex decides he is done playing by his opponent's rules.

'Fuck you Ichigo Naberius; I'll take the fight to the air then.' Forming his wings of flame, the youngest son of the Phenex Clan jumps into the sky and heads straight for the center of the arena.

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Rukia's fist slams down on the railing after she hears her best friend's little speech. "What the hell are you doing Berry? Are you trying to get yourself killed!?"

Renji glances down at his fiancée then, and he chuckles in answer to her question. "This is Ichigo you're talking about Rukia; what did you think he was really gonna do? After all that training he was put through, he was never intending to make this a short fight."

Rukia growls as she continues watching the arena, her hands gripped tightly around the railing. "He's getting too cocky for his own good." She murmurs softly in worry, not realizing that her words are overheard by someone else.

Yasaka's ear twitches as she glances over at the young Shinigami from where she is conversing with the older Shinigami and Devils, then she approaches Rukia and remarks quietly to her. "While I do agree that Ichigo is taking things further than necessary for a simple duel, he does so with a second objective in mind Rukia. He is deliberately forcing his opponent to show more of his skills, so that when he finally defeats Riser Phenex, the entire Underworld will know that he is not to be taken lightly in the future. Defeating Riser at his strongest will show the masses and the nobles that Ichigo is someone to be feared and respected, but the question still remains: how will this end for Riser? He is not truly as immortal as he claims to be, and if he continues fighting like this, his regeneration will fail him at the worst possible moment. That is my only worry."
Before Rukia can reply, Isshin's voice speaks up from behind them. "My son won't kill him if that's your worry Yasaka-sama. Sure, he'll kick the living hell out of Riser, but cause his death, not a chance. Ichigo knows what he'll lose if he does so." The former Captain says in defense of his oldest child.

Byakuya, who had been watching the duel so far with the other Shinigami, also speaks up in Ichigo's defense now. "Ichigo is a skilled and honorable warrior, I have first-hand knowledge as to those facts; even if he wishes to, he will not kill this Devil. As Yasaka-sama has stated, this is Ichigo's one way of proving himself, and he must win this bout cleanly and without any question to do so. Killing Riser will only tarnish his reputation, but defeating Riser at his strongest without killing him will prove to all Devils the power that he commands; a power he does not abuse without reason. Lastly, although Ichigo has not said so, I believe he is also sending a message to those who are watching him from their places of hiding."

"The Old Maou Faction." Merti supplies then with frost in her voice, though she still keeps her eyes on Yukiko. "Ichigo is doing this so that they know he is a true pureblood of the Naberius Clan, a true descendant of Lord Amyntas and the Heir to all of his titles. Once the old Maou faction knows, they will have no choice but to seek him out with their assassins. In other words, he's using this duel as bait. Once their assassins show themselves, the true bloodbath will begin as we wreak our vengeance upon them."

Yasaka smiles as she witnesses both younger Shinigami shudder from the venom in Merti's words, too distracted by their conversation to pay attention to the duel. "I have to agree with Merti, Rukia, Renji. Those ancient bastards from the Old Maou faction have no care for any consequences; they would have willingly set loose the contents of the Skeleton Tower upon an unsuspecting World of the Living just so they could ensure Lord Amyntas were to die without a true heir and cause the Naberius Clan to collapse. It is that kind of foolish, short-sighted thinking that makes them such a dangerous threat...Imagine the horror Soul Society would have to face if that is allowed to happen. The Sinners would flood the World of the Living, the balance would collapse, it would be the end of everything."

Pausing to make sure that her message has sunk in, the Ruler of Kyoto then continues to speak once again. "So, knowing all that, this duel does serve two purposes. One is to gain the hand of Rias Gremory in marriage, thereby uniting the Naberius, Shiba and Gremory Clans against their enemies. The other is to let the Old Maou Faction know that they haven't killed off the Naberius Clan's future as they had hoped; that the Naberius Heir has fully grown into his power and will defend his loved ones against all threats. If you two plan to stand at his side as his friends, you will have to train even harder than before to not become his burdens; you will need to gain enough strength to help the Naberius Clan protect the only four Devils who are standing in the way of the complete and utter destruction of the human world and all worlds that are connected."

Gulping at those ominous words, Rukia feels Renji's hand squeezing hers; looking up at her fiancé, she sees him grimace then, but she can tell that his mind is already made up, as is hers.

'I guess we really aren't going back again, Renji.'

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During the lull in the fighting, Tatsuki and the rest of Ichigo's peerage are surprised when they see Ruval Phenex heading in their direction. Tia moves to intercept the oldest Phenex son, while the others form a protective circle of death around Karin and Yuzu. Sairaorg stands in front of Orihime as he quickly joins Tia in cutting off the nobleman.

"Ruval, can we help you?" The Heir of the Bael Clan calls out to Ruval as the Phenex Heir reaches
their group.

"I just wanted to speak to these people is all, Sairaorg; after all, the only ones introduced to us were the three Naberius sisters, and I'm curious as to whether these others are also members of the Naberius Clan, or perhaps bodyguards of some sort." The blonde Phenex Devil says with a charming smile, although his eyes seem to stray towards the burnt-orange-haired woman standing behind the Bael heir.

Sairaorg adjusts his body to block Ruval's view of Orihime, keeping his expression as calm as ever. "Well ask away, but don't feel insulted if they refuse to speak to you. After all, Riser is your brother and he is fighting their King." The more muscular Devil says as he politely continues to stare down the Phenex Devil.

Ruval looks at him with surprise. "Their king? You mean these are all his peerage members? That is surprising, most Devils take years to gather a full peerage..." He trails off, then adds somewhat doubtfully. "Are they any good at fighting? Riser's peerage is battle-hardened, their greater experience in Rating Games will give them the advantage over new and untested peerages. I hope Ichigo Naberius didn't go for quantity over quality when he was choosing his peerage members."

"I assure you we are all well-versed in combat." Tia Harribel states coldly as she speaks up for the rest of her fellow peerage members. The former Tercera doesn't need to look behind her to know that her Fracción and the other reincarnated Arrancar are all smirking at the Phenex Heir for claiming that Rating Games count as battle experience. "Our King met us in the fires of war, and we were all forged into weapons there. Regardless of when we joined his peerage, combat experience is one thing that none of us are lacking."

"Is that so? My apologies then." Ruval glances out of the balcony and sees his brother take flight then with wings of flame. "It seems my younger brother has finally decided to take the battle seriously. Your King has done very well so far, but I'm afraid it ends here; Riser's strength in the air far exceeds his strength on the ground. Please don't take this the wrong way, but without any special ability to fly, your King cannot defeat my younger brother."

Before the Phenex Heir can leave, Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck calls out from behind him. "You really don't know anything about Itsygo, do you?"

Ruval glances back and gives the turquoise-haired woman a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

Nelliel smirks at him playfully, drawing his eyes to the pink stripe across her face and the knowing look in her eyes. "You think Itsygo can't fight well in the air, but the truth is, once Riser started flying..."

"...the damn fool walked right into Ichigo's domain." Nelliel's mate, the blue-haired Grimmjow finishes for her with a feral grin.

Tia Harribel sums up the situation for him without waiting for him to reply. "Battling in the air has never hindered our kind, Ruval Phenex; many of our battles were fought in the sky. By taking to the air, Riser has just given Ichigo the excuse to show off part of his true speed."

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Ichigo smirks when he feels Riser taking to the air, the Phenex Devil's wings of flame casting light in all directions and creating countless new shadows for him to play with.

'So, I guess he's in the air now; that's fine by me.' Waiting until Riser is nearly overhead and
preparing to cast his magic, Ichigo steps back into the shadow of a nearby pillar and immediately Flash Steps behind his opponent, the movement too fast for Riser to follow as he begins to bombard the ground below him, thinking that Ichigo is perhaps hiding behind that pillar.

Standing on a Reishi platform and watching Riser use up his magic, Ichigo decides not to waste any more time waiting and goes on the offensive instead. Using Hōhō to control his movement so as not to alert his opponent to his attack, Ichigo throws a silent punch at the Phenex Devil's unguarded back and at the very last second pumps out enough water to cover his fist before driving it straight into the shoulder blades of the fire wielding Devil. As Riser screams in agony, Ichigo pushes the magic and Reiatsu-infused water into the older teen's injured body and uses it to extinguish most of the flames in Riser's wings, causing him to tumble uncontrollably out of the sky. Racing downward until he is moving alongside of the completely dazed Riser, Ichigo decks him in the face, sending the arrogant Devil smashing into the ground while Ichigo rapidly slows his descent above him. Stopping just a few meters above the arena floor, Ichigo lifts an eyebrow at the rage on the Phenex Devil's face as he struggles back to his feet.

"How!? How are you standing on air like that!? It…it's not possible!! You're not using wings and there is no magic circle under your feet!" Riser roars in absolute fury as his flames begin to restore his body once again. Building up flames in both his hands, Riser launches several dozen fireballs in Ichigo's direction, only to seethe as the orange-haired Devil nimbly evades all of them.

Easily dodging the linear attacks of the balls of super-heated magic, Ichigo waits until the fuming Devil launches himself back into the air, then he decides to use one of his increasingly favorite attacks. "My turn: Bala."

Recognizing that word, Riser immediately dives and weaves as large balls of super condensed energy race past his body; sometimes they pass by so close they are practically skimming across his body, eliciting muted curses from the Phenex Devil as the black and red orbs tear shallow grooves across his flesh. As his flames continue to heal the minor damage that he keeps on taking, Riser suddenly realizes that the energy orb barrage has stopped, only to stop dead himself when he glances back and doesn't see Ichigo anywhere behind him. Hearing a menacing hum coming from the air nearby, he instinctively whirls around and finds that his opponent has somehow gotten past him and is now preparing a new attack with several sets of chains flowing from his back like a parody of wings, each of them glowing with a menacing ball of black and red energy poised at their tips.

Having been impaled by those same chains earlier, Riser's mind finally makes the connection as he stares at them. 'Hell Chains! That bastard...What the hell is he!? This…can't…be real!'

"Cero." That one word causes the entire sky to light up with red and black, and Riser's body then experiences a whole new level of pain.

Time loses all meaning as Riser is simultaneously burnt, crushed and blown to pieces, his broken body tossed around by countless impacts of uncountable beams of energy. Falling backwards and downwards through the air as the destructive barrage ends, Riser flips over a half dozen times before his body finally slams into the ground beneath him. Coughing out blood for the first time since the battle started, Riser weakly rolls to his hands and knees again, wiping the blood from his mouth and barely registering his flames beginning to restore his body. Any semblance of restraint is gone from his mind now, and he begins to push more magic into his healing flames, turning them into a dome of super-condensed heat and wind, a virtual wall of napalm that surrounds his body like a barrier to buy him time for his next attack.

'Hell Chains! He has Hell Chains! Only those deemed worthy by the Naberius Lord are allowed
those! Yet this bastard already has so many!! That's impossible, this must be some kind of plan to make sure I lose Rias Gremory's hand in marriage! Why are they doing this to me!! I won't let him do this!!'

His mind continuing to rant as he builds up his power, Riser pushes as much magic as he can into his next attack, fully intending to obliterate his opponent along with the rest of the arena. 'If I can't have Rias, then no one else can!!'

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Ruval frowns as he watches the dome of wind and fire that surrounds his younger brother, then he gasps out loud when Riser's magic suddenly increases and he realizes what Riser is planning to do.

"Ruval, what's wrong?" His mother asks him worriedly after hearing his surprised voice and seeing his face turn pale.

Turning to his mother, Ruval only manages to get part of his sentence out. "He just learned it; he hasn't had time…"

The rest of his words are drowned out by the roar of flame that sweeps through the arena, followed by an agonized male scream that causes even the most hardened of warriors to cringe upon hearing it. Eleni's face turns pale as she recognizes the painful and agonized voice of the Naberius teen her son is facing. Snapping her head back, she desperately hopes that Riser hasn't done something unforgivable, and when she finally sees what is happening, she can't help but gasp in horror as she takes an unconscious step back from the sight before her.

'W-What have you done Riser!?'

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"Are you hiding from me, Riser Phenex? I'm getting bored out here, so if you don't come out soon, I'll just find my way to you." Ichigo says as he glares down at the swirling dome of wind and fire.

After several seconds with no response, Ichigo begins to raise his arm, only to find himself moving much slower for some reason. Immediately sensing something is amiss, he looks around and realizes that the air is now filled with Riser's magic, creating an invisible buildup of pressure on his body as concentric rings of magic begin moving away from Riser's dome of fire and signaling the start of something massive.

'What the fuck is this?' Ichigo can only stare as the dome begins to shrink and reveal Riser Phenex standing before him, fully healed and covered in deep red flames mixed with the golden flames of his healing barrier.

"You forced me to reveal this attack early Ichigo Naberius, so thank you for allowing me to demonstrate my new finishing move. Flames of the Phoenix, Consume thy Flesh!"

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Yoruichi, Isshin and Amyntas all stare in horror as Riser's burning aura explodes from his body in all directions, forming six massive birds of flame that swiftly rise up to surround Ichigo from all sides. Beating their wings powerfully, the six magical phoenixes generate gale-force winds that sweep towards Ichigo who is trapped at their center, forming a compressed spherical hurricane around him that surpasses the most destructive winds known to Devilkind. Below him, Riser snaps his fingers and the six firebirds immediately ignite their winds and charge headlong into the sphere at their center, causing it and the entire arena to explode with deep red and golden flames. The last
image they see of Ichigo before he disappears into the inferno is his skin turning black and then flaking to ash as his flesh burns down to his muscles and then bones, his screams of agony echoing through the minds of all those who are watching.

"ICHI-NII!" The piercing scream comes from Ichigo's sisters, and when all heads turn to them, they see Yuzu struggling in the arms of Tia, while Orihime is weakly beating on both Akiko and Hanako's arms as she tries to escape them and get to her brother. Only Karin stands still, her pale face filled with disbelief and her fists balling at her side as she desperately searches the flames for any sign of her brother. Finally giving out a choked sob, she turns to level a hate filled glare on the Phenex Clan, marching towards them with blue Reiatsu forming around her body like an aura of flames, while yellow Reiatsu does the same around Yuzu's body thanks to the twin bond that they share.

"If my brother dies, we will make you pay for it in blood! The Maou will never let Riser get away with this!" Karin screams with grief and rage, not even to realize that her Hell Armor is forming as it swiftly begins covering her body then, with Yuzu's appearing just as quickly afterwards which finally allows her to break free from Tia and run over to join her older twin.

"What is the meaning of this Lord Amyntas!? How do these children possess Hell Armor!?" Ambrosio demands after seeing the two newly armored pre-teens get quickly subdued by a pair of Elf twins and brought back to the care of the Naberius Lord's peerage. Turning his gaze towards the Devil Lord, Ambrosio remembers him claiming that he had bathed his Heir in the flames of the Skeleton Tower, and after witnessing the Naberius Heir wielding multiple Hell Chains and his younger sisters wearing Hell Armor, the Phenex Lord can only come to a single conclusion. Gritting his teeth angrily, Ambrosio points his finger at Amyntas and spits out his observation accusingly. "Just how far are you willing to go to make sure my son loses his duel, Lord Naberius!?

"Don't be a moron, Ambrosio." Amyntas sharply retorts, indicating his clear lack of mood to deal with pleasantries. "This has nothing to do with the duel and everything to do with who their parents are. These children are my direct descendants through Vincent and Masaki, of course they would inherit all of my abilities through their bloodline."

"All of...?" Ambrosio stares at him with dawning horror. "Then, your Heir...?"

As if in answer his question, there is a tremendous explosion from the arena and an unearthly metallic scream, which sends shockwaves rippling across the arena and crashing into the walls that surround the training field. What is even more terrifying to witness is the concentric ring of water that cuts through everything in its path as it rapidly expands across the arena, along with the towering geyser of water that rises from where the Naberius Heir was last seen. As the watery pillar comes crashing back down, all the remaining flames in the arena are wiped out, revealing a menacing black armored figure standing in the middle of the geyser.

Wickedly sharp horns curve forward from the black visored helm which barely conceals his balefully glowing crimson eyes that radiate killing intent. Multiple Hell Chains dance around his body like whips poised to strike, black and crimson energy leaking from his body like an aura of flames. Ambrosio feels his heart sinking as he realizes that Ichigo Naberius has already mastered the use of his Hell Armor, which makes this a battle that Riser cannot hope to win.

Unnoticed by him however, the oldest sister of the Naberius Heir has stopped her struggling, lowering her head as mixed tears of relief and horror begin to roll down her cheeks.

"Too late, you are too late…you don't know what Riser has unleashed now Lord Phenex…" Orihime whispers lowly under her breath; she and Uryū are the only ones present who recognize
that soul shattering sound for what it is and who it represents. "My brother still lives... and now the fight is over."

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Rias feels her entire body go numb when Ichigo's screams of agony reach her ears, the only thing preventing her from falling to her knees outright are Grayfia's slender arms wrapped tightly around her waist. The only thing she can feel is the tearing in her heart as she watches the man she loves suffer for her, tears falling from her eyes as she witnesses what could very well be his last moments, knowing that she could have prevented all this, prevented his suffering by accepting her fate and becoming Riser's property and wife. She barely registers the commotion going on with the Naberius group, dimly aware of the shouting and heated words being exchanged, but unable to tear her eyes away from the sight of her true fiancé being consumed by a funeral pyre. It is of cold comfort to her that Riser seems to have been consumed by the flames as well, the arrogant Phenex having been caught by his own attack. All she cares about now is finding out whether her husband-to-be is still alive and breathing, or whether she has to prepare to avenge his remains.

All that changes when the air is abruptly shaken by an inhuman metallic scream, a massive geyser of water erupting through the flames and sending out a concentric ring of water that cuts through everything in its surroundings like a razor-edged blade. As the pillar of water comes crashing back down into the arena, Rias sees a very familiar black armored figure being revealed where Ichigo used to be, his Hell Chains and Hollow-tinted Reiatu on full display. Clasping her hands to her mouth as tears of relief begin to flow down her cheeks, Rias rejoices at the indisputable proof that the man she loves has somehow survived Riser's attack. When she turns to share her joy with her peerage however, she glimpses a very different reaction coming from Ichigo's adopted sister.

Orihime is standing between Akiko and Hanako, her head hanging low and her long locks of hair hiding her expression from the people around her. However, Rias can tell from her body language that the burnt-orange-haired healer is not just feeling relief... but also fear. A fear that Uryū Ishida also seems to share, seeing as the bespectacled Quincy archer is standing behind her and doing his best to keep the grimace off his face. Wondering why the two of them are reacting in such a manner, Rias suddenly recalls the story that Orihime had shared with her, a story about the battle on top of Las Noches where Ichigo was fatally wounded, before subsequently being brought back to life under the control of his inner Hollow, as Zangetsu was thought of back then. Although Orihime had later forgiven Zangetsu for the trauma he had caused her, it's clear to her now that these wounds still run deep, wounds that the inhuman metallic roar had brought up again for the two teens.

"Look, it's Riser! He's still alive!"

Those words from Akeno cause Rias's mood to plummet as she quickly begins scanning the arena, hoping for once that her Queen is wrong and her arrogant ex-fiancé had killed himself with his own attack. Unfortunately, Akeno hadn't been seeing things, and Rias quickly spots the blonde Phenex Devil repeatedly teleporting away from Ichigo's attacks, the haggard look on his face giving away his true state of exhaustion despite the lack of wounds on his body.

Clenching her fists tightly, Rias suddenly pushes past Grayfia and runs up to the railing, gripping it tightly as she shouts to her true fiancé at the top of her lungs.

"Fight Ichigo! Damn you, fight!" She ignores the shocked looks being sent her way, focusing instead on reminding Ichigo just what he is fighting for. Soon, more and more yells begin to join hers, starting with his best friend Rukia who joins in shouting at the top of her lungs.

"You heard her Berry-chan! Hurry up and get this over with; we have plans for tonight you
imbecile!"

"Fuck Ichigo, Nelliel and I have beaten you closer to death more times than this!" Grimmjow roars out as he plants his foot on the railing. "Show that Phenex bastard what it really means to be beaten to death!!"

"Umm, I don't think we should say that..." Nelliel says awkwardly, then she perks up and joins Grimmjow in shouting at their King.

Rias continues to shout encouragements to Ichigo, knowing that all of this will be worth it so long as her lover quickly defeats Riser and comes back home to her arms. She is secretly surprised and delighted when her peerage begins to shout encouragements to Ichigo as well, even the quieter members like Koneko and Yuuto who normally wouldn't be caught dead making so much noise. Bolstered by their support, Rias continues to call out to Ichigo, hoping that he would hear her and act accordingly.

Soon their combined yelling grows so loud, she can see him pause and turn his head briefly in their direction before raising his fist and going after Riser with renewed fervor. She smiles then, knowing that her words have finally reached Ichigo's ears.

"This will turn brutal if Ichigo seeks to defeat Riser with the greatest possible speed, Rias." Grayfia says quietly, her sister-in-law no longer supporting her with arms around her waist, but instead standing beside her. "Are you sure you want to keep on watching?"

Nodding resolutely as Grayfia observes her expression, Rias answers with full determination on her face. "Yes Grayfia, I'm sure...No, I must."

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"ICHIGO!" Zangetsu screams out in horror as he feels his wielder's pain, pain that drives even him to his knees as the smell of burning meat fills his nostrils.

Helplessly watching as Ichigo's blackened body fades in and out of their inner-world, rage and fear allows the hybrid Zanpakutō spirit to seize control temporarily and stop the passage of time in their shared world. Staring at the now-visible mess of charred flesh and bone that forms the body of his King, Zangetsu fights desperately to obey Ichigo's wishes, but he ultimately makes his decision then.

"Sorry King, but it is my duty to protect you." Reaching forward, he grabs Ichigo's body and ignores the heart wrenching screams of pain that enter his body as he holds on to the melting arms of his partner.

Settling Ichigo's blackened body against his, Zangetsu begins the process of repairing him from the deepest damaged tissues and organs to the upper layers of flesh and the burnt off skin. Focusing entirely on protecting Ichigo's vital organs, Zangetsu is helpless to prevent Ichigo's skin and flesh from burning away just as quickly as he can heal it, causing even more hoarse screams of pain to come from his wielder. Getting angrier and angrier at the damage Riser is inflicting on his King, the Zanpakutō spirit is about to take over fully when he hears Ichigo's voice mumbling.

"Cold...so cold Zangetsu...so damn cold..."

Zangetsu shakes his wielder lightly, not daring to jostle him any more than that. "Dammit Ichigo, use your Blut Vene! Listen to me; you need to use your Blut Vene to reinforce your body, then wrap your body in Reiatsu and water to reduce the damage! Come on King! You hear
me! Use Blut Vene and water dammit!

He knows his voice has reached Ichigo when the faint blue glow of Reiatsu-infused veins begin to show up in Ichigo's body, followed by water covering the outer layer of his orange-haired wielder's skin. Smiling as he holds Ichigo's now steadily-recovering body, he speaks to him in a fondly mocking tone of voice.

"Sometimes I swear you do this on purpose Ichigo. When? When are you going to learn to never give your enemies too much time to recover? I know I said I wanted you to kick his ass, make him pay, but this time you're the one who got his ass beat instead. I think you need to get your head back into the duel; you're supposed to be pounding your pain and the Queen's pain into him, not letting him turn you into a piece of charcoal." His humor begins to fade when Ichigo still doesn't say a word, and Zangetsu lowers his head and begins to peer at him in worry. "Come on King, say something."

"This will not do." Snapping his head up at the unexpected voice, Zangetsu has no time to react when a red skinned finger pokes him in the head, his vision clouding up and his eyes rolling up into the back of his head. The owner of the voice then begins to disappear, leaving them a smile and a single parting message. "Use my power as it is meant to be wielded Ichigo. And when the time comes Zangetsu, you better claim me as Ichigo does with Rias Gremory."

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Brown orbs open to see the usual twilight of his inner-world; lying next to him is Zangetsu, who appears to be unconscious. Worry filling him immediately, Ichigo rolls over and shakes his white carbon copy awake.

"Get up Zangetsu." He looks around and sees nothing out of place except his recovering Zanpakutō spirit. "Hey, wake up!"

Groaning as he slowly awakens, Zangetsu's eyes snap open and he sits up to scan their surroundings. He doesn't see anyone besides them, which doesn't tell him who was the person who knocked him unconscious. 'Fuck was that?'

"Did I lose, Zangetsu?" Ichigo's worried voice breaks him out of his confusion, and the blade spirit turns to see a fully recovered Ichigo staring at him fearfully.

Still feeling pissed at whoever knocked him out, Zangetsu smacks the forehead of his orange-haired wielder. "No dumbass, but you got caught with your pants around your ankles. Sorry about that pun, but you best get your fucking head back into the duel, it's time to stop fucking around with this asshole, he seriously fucked you over and you nearly died for it. Now it's your time Ichigo, time for you to show Riser the full fury of your heritage. I know you didn't want to use my help if at all possible, but the time for holding back has passed and you nearly lost your life and the duel. Sorry, but I had to bring you in here to help you recover, you were completely unconscious out there so I did what I had to do. You haven’t fallen yet, your body is now recovering, but if you don't move your ass and deal with Riser soon they're gonna think he's won, and if no one sees you within the next minute or two, the Maou might even have to declare you unable to continue and settle the duel in Riser's favor."

Staring at his wielder in an attempt to convey the seriousness of this situation, Zangetsu watches as acceptance finally crosses the face of his wielder, who reaches out with his hand. The Hollow spirit accepts the outstretched hand of Ichigo, allowing himself to be pulled back to his feet; looking into
the slowly returning crimson orbs of his King, a feral grin soon matches his own grin.

"You're right, I've been careless." Ichigo gains a dangerous gleam in his crimson eyes. "Then it's time we show him how fucked he truly is Zangetsu. No more holding back."

Both the Devil and his hybrid Zanpakutō then fade from his inner world, neither noticing the pair of eyes watching from her place inside the Skeleton Tower.

'Thank you...for allowing me to see him up close.' The young reddish skinned woman says to no one in particular as she continues to watch from her vantage point.

Riser pants harshly within the sea of flames, the deep red and golden fire restoring his body instead of damaging it as his healing flames are part of its origin. The same cannot be said for his opponent however; the orange-haired Naberius Devil is trapped within a swirling ball of Phoenix flames that continues to incinerate his body while spewing out flames and winds across the arena.

"That... That's what you get for... mocking me, you damn... Naberius bastard." The older Devil laughs breathlessly, feeling the strain from using such a powerful magic without much practice beforehand. Although the amount of magic he used on this move was rather steep, this attack is not only self-sustaining, but it also continuous to heal him while incinerating his surroundings with an endless supply of wind and flame. It is a move truly fitting for the strongest of Phenex Devils, a testament to their overwhelming power.

"Now... just need the... Maou... to declare me... winner..." Turning to look for the Maou on his balcony, Riser then realizes that the flames are blocking his view of the audience and his surroundings.

"... Tch, what a pain." He scoffs with irritation at this unexpected development, not wanting to dispel his flames too early and risk letting his opponent escape. After everything that the Naberius Heir had done to him, he feels completely justified in making sure that the orange-haired Devil cannot pull off any last-minute tricks, especially since the younger Devil had revealed his own regenerative abilities... 'But it doesn't matter how strong his regeneration is, the flames of the Phoenix will burn his body to ashes.'

Ignoring the flames that continue to heal his body, Riser heads over to the sphere of Phoenix fire to see whether his opponent is still alive. To his surprise, the Naberius Heir still has all of his limbs, his regeneration apparently strong enough to prevent them from being completely burnt away, although all of his exposed flesh is charred black and his bone can be seen in several places. From his experience, Riser knows that regeneration of this nature doesn't reduce the pain of being burnt, it only prolongs the agony as the destroyed flesh and nerves are rapidly replaced only to be burnt away again in a vicious never-ending cycle of pain.

'Why don't they stop this? He can't even be conscious; the pain alone should've driven him to faint.' Riser wonders half-heartedly as he looks around for any sign of the Maou's intervention. 'Shouldn't these flames tell them that I've already won? Just what are they waiting for?'

He should have known better than to tempt fate as he suddenly feels the rapid buildup of magic coming from his opponent; before he can even do anything, the sphere of Phoenix flame suddenly explodes with the force of a bomb, torn apart by a concentric ring of super-dense water that shoots forth from its position like an ever-expanding razor-edged disk while a deafening metallic scream fills the air and causes Riser's body to lock up with instinctive terror. The blonde Phenex can only watch helplessly as the razor-edged ring of water speeds towards him, cutting through everything
in its path, be it rock, pillar, wall, or himself. As the wave of liquid shears through his body and his flames begin to reconnect his two halves, Riser sees everything and anything above the ring of water magic sliding off to one side as the following shockwave from the metallic roar crashes into them just a split second later, each object looking cleanly cut in two from the knife-like attack. Riser's body however is sent flying by the shockwave, and after crashing painfully into one of the bisected walls, the blonde Phenex Devil stiffly raises his head and sees a towering column of water rising nearly a hundred meters into the air before it begins to tilt downwards towards him rapidly.

"Shit...Shit!!" Forcing his magic into a teleportation circle, Riser barely manages to escape as the top of the water column smashes into the place he just fled from, drowning out all the flames that are still burning in the arena.

Reappearing from the exit circle nearly a dozen feet away, Riser stops and stares as he sees something he has only ever heard tales of from his father. Black plated armor that covers nearly every inch of his opponent's body, glowing crimson eyes that stare back at him from behind the downturned visor of a dual-horned helm. Black boots that crunch into the now hardening ground, the colossal amount of water that mixed in with his flames have turned the melting ground into fragile crystalline layers that crumble beneath their feet. Knowing that what he is seeing can only be the vaunted Naberius Hell Armor, Riser tries to build up enough magic to repeat his earlier attack, only for a piercing pain to shoot through his heart just as he starts.

"No matter what you do, you can't....aarrgghhh!!" His body is bent over double by the spiked chain that punches through his chest and out his back, causing flames to leak from both sides of his wound in a futile attempt to heal it.

Dropping to his knees, Riser lifts his head up to see the Naberius Heir staring down at him; behind the Hell Armor-clad Devil are numerous sets of Hell Chains that are swiftly disappearing into the surrounding shadows.

"I let my guard down once Riser Phenex and you nearly won; that is a mistake I won't be repeating." Without any further warning, a thick ball of metal smashes his leg from under him, causing Riser to flip head over heels and crash heavily to the ground, tearing the spike from his chest in the process.

Coughing out a lungful of blood, Riser instinctively tries to teleport himself to safety. Successfully forcing his magic circle to teleport him away swiftly, Riser hides himself behind a ruined stone pillar on the other side of the arena when suddenly another weighted ball-tipped object slams into the side of his body, breaking several of his ribs easily from the force of the impact. Spinning as he drops to the ground, Riser manages to see the ball-tipped chain retreating into the shadow of a broken wall this time, and he curses loudly as he teleports himself away, barely avoiding another weighted ball-tipped chain crashing down on where he just vacated. Yet, no matter where he flees or teleports himself to, Riser finds himself continuously being hounded by the homing attacks of the metal spheres linked to his opponent's Hell Chains.

Forcefully teleporting himself away from yet another attack, Riser pants harshly as he tries to catch his breath, waiting in fear for the inevitable metal sphere to fly at him from the shadows. After a few seconds with nothing new happening, he almost begins to think he is safe... until he feels the hair on the back of his neck stand on edge when a deep baritone voice speaks to him from directly behind him.

"No matter where you run, I'll find you." A gauntlet covered hand then grabs the back of Riser's head and the ground swiftly rises up to meet his face.
Ichigo is relentless as he pursues the ever-fleeing Riser Phenex, constantly attacking him from the shadows and forcing him to dodge or teleport away from the crippling blows. Each failed dodge, each time Riser successfully teleports, he can feel the blonde Devil burning through even more of his magic reserves. Ichigo chooses not to rush in recklessly however; he waits to feel the other Devil's magic announce his new position before using the shadows of the destroyed objects in the arena to attack Riser with his chains. With Riser constantly being forced on the run, Ichigo can move about freely in the arena, adding even more pressure on his opponent who is constantly forced to split his attention between the sneak attacks from the chains and Ichigo's own movements around the battlefield. Using Sonido to follow Riser whenever the older Phenex Devil manages to teleport away, the orange-haired Devil mainly uses weighted sphere-tipped chains to bludgeon his opponent from the shadows; sometimes on their own, sometimes in conjunction with other chains tripping Riser discreetly or attacking from multiple angles so he can get in a few solid hits on the body of his foe. With the time between each of Riser's teleports increasing, he knows that Riser is expending his magic reserves rapidly and won't be able to last much longer; after the blonde Phenex nearly killed him with his previous attack, Ichigo has absolutely no intention of allowing Riser to pull off another deadly magical attack like that again.

As Riser desperately teleports away once more, Ichigo begins to notice distant shouts and screams coming from the audience; although he ignores them at first, he soon starts wondering what is going on, and he focuses his hearing and looks in the direction of the main building. Then he sees them, all three Clans' peerages cheering for him from their places high above the arena, his enhanced hearing allowing him to pick up their individual words and encouragements. Smirking under his helm, he raises his fist high in the air, letting them know he is okay and still fighting before continuing to hunt Riser with renewed determination. Feeling the Phenex Devil reappearing almost on the opposite side of the arena from him, Ichigo decides he has weakened Riser long enough and uses Shunpo this time to relocate right behind him. Seeing the older Phenex Devil on his feet but looking worn out and jumpy from the countless sneak attacks, Ichigo smiles menacingly as he reaches out towards the unaware blonde Phenex.

"No matter where you run, I'll find you." Without giving Riser a chance to react, Ichigo grabs the older Devil by the back of his head and slams him face-first into the ground, shattering his nose and teeth painfully on the uneven crystallized surface. As the Phenex Devil's flames automatically begin to restore his face, Ichigo smirks behind his visor as he sees the wounds take a few seconds to regenerate instead of disappearing almost immediately. With this final confirmation, the former Substitute Shinigami can now safely say that the 'Immortal Phenex' is no longer immortal.

"Yield, Riser Phenex. Yield and I'll let you walk out of here on your own two feet, your dignity intact. This is only time I will offer you this chance, refuse and I'll really bring the pain." Ichigo knows how unlikely it is that the older Devil will surrender, so he begins to build his Reiryoku and magic in preparation to carry out the threat.

"Fuck you! Why do you persist in this!? Do you have any idea of what you are ruining!? My Clan and hers are among the last of the purebloods still in existence! Our union is for the greater good of the Underworld! Our children will secure the future for our Clans! What would you, a filthy half-breed Devil who doesn't even belong to the Underworld know about any of this!? I won't let you stop me! I will keep on healing and eventually beat you, Naberius! You will be the one to yield, and once I get you out of my way, I will claim what is rightfully due to me!" Riser's flames attempt to cover his body, but Ichigo slams his face against the ground once more and plants his knee against Riser's spine for good measure.

"Pureblood. I am sick of hearing that word. Do you think because you are a noble you can do
whatever you want to Rias? Did you ever consider her feelings at all Riser Phenex? Do you even care that she doesn't want to marry you? No! You know full well that she wants love in her life, that she wants to know the man she marries wouldn't be using her just as breeding stock. Yes, I remember you referring to her as such, a broodmare I think you called it...."

Ichigo is cut off then as Riser furiously interrupts him. "That's right! All she needs to do is just lie there and accept my seed, and she will give our Clans children the likes of which have never been considered before! Children that will become invaluable to the Underworld in our future wars against the Fallen Angels and Heaven! Children who are capable of using the Power of Destruction and the healing power of the Phenex, children who are unstoppable warriors! So don't you dare deny my Clan the future of the Underworld, Ichigo Naberius, Rias Gremory is mine!"

Ichigo can't help but stare at Riser in disbelief then. "War? You would make your children fight in an unnecessary war!? Against Heaven and the Fallen Angel Faction!? Do you have any idea of the horrors of the battlefield? The smells, the blood, and the death that always accompanies you? And you're planning to subject your own children and the Underworld to another such war!? Do you even understand what the hell you are saying?"

"Of course, I do! It means us Devils will finally gain the power to crush our hated enemies and become supreme rulers of all creation!" Riser begins to struggle beneath Ichigo's knee, weak bursts of flame attempting to force his opponent off his body. "You don't know what we endure having to watch those Angel and Fallen Angel bastards acting like our superiors when we are the ones who are better than them! Our children will be the apex of our civilization; MY children will lead our Pillars to victory!"

Ichigo scowls at the clearly delusional Phenex, knowing that there is no point reasoning with him any longer. "I see. Then you leave me no other option but to end this now. Bakudō Number One: Sai. Bakudō Number Four: Hainawa. Bakudō Number Sixty-Three: Sajō Sabaku."

Riser begins to panic when each successive Bakudō causes his body to lock up even more, his arms somehow pinning themselves behind his back and causing his face to eat the dirt. When he is completely unable to move, Ichigo Naberius gets off his back and stands still while facing the cursing Phenex. "What is this you bastard!? You think you can hold me with this forever!?"

"No, just enough to force you into submitting." More Hell Chains begin to emerge from the Naberius Devil's armored back, each chain much thinner than usual and alternately tipped with tiny spikes or much smaller balls of metal.

Unable to see this development, Riser simply scoffs into the ground. "Go ahead and do your worst; I'll never surrender to someone like you!"

Ichigo's eyes glow menacingly behind his visor. "... You'll regret saying that."

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Ambrosio Phenex watches in horror as his youngest son is systematically being tortured by his opponent, the younger teen Devil hitting his son with a furious barrage of metal balls and spikes connected to his Hell Chains at ever-increasing speeds. He can barely keep up with the attacks at their current pace, but their effect is all too clear on his son; each time his son screams out in pain, Ambrosio's fists clench even harder, and he is barely able to keep himself from interfering when Riser's body is reduced to a broken and bleeding mess. As he knows full well, the Phenex regeneration doesn't make them immune to pain, and although his son's body keeps restoring itself rapidly, his mind and body are clearly reaching their limits as they struggle to overcome the
massive amount of trauma that he keeps accumulating. Ambrosio doesn't know whether to thank or curse the Naberius Heir for stopping his attacks every so often, but before his son's flames can complete their healing, the beating and screams always start again.

Soon the sounds of sobbing reach his ears, and when his hand is tightly grasped, he instinctively looks down to see his only daughter looking up at him with tears welling in her bloodshot eyes.

"Please make him stop Daddy! Please make him stop hurting brother!"

Ambrosio grits his teeth as he is forced to break the news to his daughter. "I can't Ravel, only Riser can choose to stop this, and you know he won't. Your brother places far too much value on what is at stake here."

Yanking her hand away, Ravel is unable to hold back her tears any longer as she runs over to her mother and her oldest brother while sobbing. Ambrosio sees his wife doing her best to comfort their daughter, her own face pale with fear and eyes barely holding in her own tears, while Ruval wears a grim expression on his face, the oldest and most experienced of Ambrosio's sons unable to come up with a better solution for Riser either. The sound of distant thuds gradually stops once more before all hear the now dominating fighter speaking to his broken opponent.

"I tire of this Riser Phenex, yield or I will drown you." To emphasize his words, the area around them begins to fill with magical water and Ichigo watches coldly as the older Devil begins to choke on the rising water level.

After several heart-stopping moments of watching Riser Phenex slowly drown, the Naberius Heir then reaches out and grabs his opponent by the hair, dragging his head up and pulling him over to the nearest elevated surface before dropping his face unceremoniously on it. As Riser begins to cough out the water he had swallowed, Ichigo jumps up and then standing in midair, the armored Devil points his hand down at the water surrounding his still trapped opponent. "Hadō Number Eighty-Eight: Hiryū Gekizoku Shinten Raihō."

Riser's screams are echoed by his wife and daughter as what appears to be several beams of highly charged electricity strike the water surrounding his son. Again, the head of the Phenex Clan is forced to suffer his youngest son screaming in agony, his skin beginning to fry and break apart as the lightning courses through every cell of his body and boils the water both within and around him. To his horror, the Naberius Heir continues to attack his son with several more strikes of lightning, each one causing Riser to scream more violently in pain as his body is further destroyed on a cellular level, and each time his flames take longer and longer to restore his body. Bowing his head, Ambrosio is unable to continue watching any longer as he silently wills his son to realize that the Gremory Heiress simply isn't worth dying for.

"Yield, this is your absolute last chance Riser Phenex." The Naberius Heir's emotionless voice sends chills down his spine.

Hearing gasps coming from the watching audience, Ambrosio raises his head again and sees several sets of Hell Chains picking his son up from the ground, two holding him at his waist and one wrapped around each of his limbs. The Naberius Heir lifts Riser up into the air and then holds him before the younger Devil as they both seem to hover in the air without any means of support. Feeling worried as to what is going on, the Phenex Lord glances towards the nearest magic screen that is displaying their battle and sees the view suddenly zoom in on his youngest son's body. Ambrosio can't understand why until he sees the four additional thin chains that are wrapped around each of his son's arms and legs, so thin they can only be seen up close, and they all lead back to the young Naberius Devil who is holding Riser aloft. A niggling worry begins to form in
his gut then as he tries to recall some of the lesser-known stories that were told during the days of the Civil War, when Lord Amyntas Naberius had just lost his family to the assassins of the Old Maou Faction and the terrible vengeance he wrought on those he had caught after that. The Phenex Lord's face pales drastically when he hears the heated voices coming from the older members of the Naberius Clan which confirm his worst fears.

"Who taught him that!" Akiko questions her fellow peerage members angrily.

"There's no way he should know that form!" Aisling yells out just as angrily. "Who taught him to do that!? Admit it now!!"

"Merti, did you teach him that?" Lord Amyntasinterrupts them, his tone serious as he questions Ichigo's head of household, who bows to her Clan Head as she answers.

"No Milord, I did not teach him, and I have no idea how he came upon that knowledge. It…it was forbidden to teach him that technique, as you have commanded."

Before he can hear any more, the Naberius Heir's distorted voice speaks once again. "You only have yourself to blame for this then."

"NO!!" Ambrosio shouts out immediately as he rushes to the balcony, but he is too late to stop what just happened. The Phenex Lord grips the railing in fury and sickness as the thin Hell Chain moves so quickly all one can hear is the ripping of flesh and bone as the chainsaw attack shears straight through his son's left leg, cutting it off at mid-thigh. Even as the watching Devils all freeze at the brutality of his action, the Devil teen barely pauses as he moves on to cut off Riser's right arm above his elbow, then his other arm, and finally his last remaining leg, with flames pouring out from Riser's bleeding stumps they try and fail to reconnect his severed limbs.

"Ambrosio! You…You have to do something!!" His wife nearly sobs as she rushes to his side, clutching his arm tightly as she pleads for him to intervene. "Riser is... our son is...!!"

Gritting his teeth as he sees the Naberius Heir continuing to hold his son's mutilated body in the air, Ambrosio looks down at his pleading wife, his heart and mind telling him two different answers. "Eleni... you know that if I interfere now, Riser will never forgive us for taking away that choice from him."

"I'd rather he be alive and hating us than dead and gone!!" The Phenex Matriarch screams back. "If you won't stop this, I will!" Ambrosio tries to grab his wife, but fails as she swiftly disappears in a magic circle, only to reappear in the arena below him.

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"Ichigo…"

'I know Zangetsu…I don't want to use it either, but he is leaving me no choice.' Ichigo stares at the nearly unconscious Devil still struggling weakly in his grip.

He descends to the ground, dropping Riser Phenex unceremoniously as he scowls under his helm. 'He's fading Zangetsu…I can't do this anymore; if he doesn't yield soon, I'll have no choice but to use it.'

The blue flames building along his chains give voice to what he means, the hellish blue light slowly flickering into life as he looks down at the limbless body of Riser. Fighting down the queasiness in his stomach, he is about to raise his chains to strike again when a familiar blonde-
haired woman suddenly appears from a magic circle and throws herself over the other Devil's body.

"Stop, I beg you to stop Ichigo Naberius!" She pleads with him.

Pausing his attack, Ichigo speaks with a heavy heart but a voice of ice then. "I want to, believe me I want to. But if Riser doesn't yield, then I have no choice but to continue until a winner is declared for our duel."

"Then, as his mother..." Ichigo steps back with shock as the blonde woman gets on her hands and knees, bowing her head lowly to him as tears roll down her cheeks. "As his mother, I yield on Riser's behalf."

"You're...his mother!?" He looks at her closer then but cannot see her face as it is turned towards the ground. "If you are truly Riser's mother, then I have no problems accepting your surrender on his behalf... but will the Maou accept your surrender?"

Ichigo's question is answered when he feels a magic circle forming beside them. Glancing towards it, he sees the four Maou rising up from the circle, Falbium Asmodeus standing at their forefront. The one who speaks is not the bald Maou however, but rather Serafall Leviathan.

"This duel is at an end. Eleni Phenex, your submission on behalf of your son is acceptable to us." The twin-tailed Maou says with a polite smile on her face, properly observing the formalities for the end of the duel. "Our medical facilities are now open for your use; you may either bring Riser there to be healed or take him home to recover. As the loser of this duel, and according to the conditions set beforehand, your son has forfeited all claim on Rias Gremory's hand and may not appeal for this ruling to be overturned." She then turns to Ichigo and her smile becomes more genuine. "Ichigo Naberius, you are declared the winner of this duel, you may now take Rias Gremory as your bride."

"It's over then?" Black armor begins to fade with relief evident in his voice, although he stops after removing his helm due to the lack of clothing beneath his armor.

"Yes, it's over." Sirzechs Lucifer answers for all of them as he gestures towards the main building, and two more magic circles begin to form behind them. Ichigo's future brother-in-law claps a hand on his shoulder as they watch the remaining principles of the duel rise up from the magic circles: Ichigo's great-grandfather Amyntas, his father Isshin, his adopted mother Yoruichi, his future parents-in-law Lord and Lady Gremory, and of course his future wife, their daughter Rias. From the other magic circle rises a single solitary figure, who rushes over to his wife's and son's side without even bothering to acknowledge the other group's existence. "It's over...little brother. Rias, what are you waiting for? Come give your new fiancé a big hug."

Ichigo has no time to react when he is tackled by a red-headed blur from the front. Her fists start raining down blows on his chest as she half-heartedly berates him for making her worry, shedding tears of joy all the while. Grabbing her wrists, he manages to pull her into his embrace, and he hears her pained words escaping from her throat unwittingly.

"Damn you Ichigo...you didn't have to go through all of that for me! Why!? Why did you do that you moron!? You idiot!"

Remembering the sheer agony of being burnt alive by Phoenix fire, then comparing it to the pain of never being with Rias again, Ichigo reaches up with one hand and gently cups her tear-stained cheek. "Because a life without you next to me is one I don't want to imagine, Rias."
She hides her face then, much to his worry; at least until she speaks to him again. "I swear the moment I say I do; you will obey me no matter what Ichigo Kurosaki Shiba Naberius. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Despite the fierceness of her words, Ichigo only smiles at her then. "Only one problem with that Rias."

The red-headed Heiress snaps her head up to look at him then, her eyes going wide with worry. "Ichigo!?"

Taking her in his arms, Ichigo turns around with her to face her family; bowing low to them, he asks that most important question in his and Rias's life, hoping for all the Devils watching this duel to witness him formally requesting her family's permission for her hand. "Lady Venelana, Lord Zeoticus, I humbly ask for your permission and blessings to marry your daughter, Rias Gremory."

Rias's face turns bright red at the suddenness of his question, before beginning to panic when she hears her mother speaking then with a hint of doubt in her voice. "I don't know Ichigo...What do you say Zeoticus, should we give him permission?"

"I'm thinking about it seriously my lovely wife, it depends on him though." Her father says with a not-so-hidden smile.

"Huh? / Mother! Father!" Even Ichigo blinks at the Gremory Lord's words, while Rias is now extremely worried.

"Ichigo, you have yet to give my daughter an answer to her question." Zeoticus reminds him, causing Ichigo's eyes to widen then.

'Fuck me!'

"No shit...answer him already you idiot!"

Ichigo immediately bows to him. "I do. I mean I promise Zeoticus, I swear it!"

"Not to me, Ichigo...to my daughter." The Gremory Patriarch corrects him with a smile, causing the watching Devils to break out in laughter.

flushing slightly, the orange-haired Devil turns to his future wife and takes her hand in his. "Rias Gremory, I accept the conditions that you have set for our marriage. Will you accept me as your husband and partner in all things?"

After hearing his words, Rias gives him the widest smile he has ever seen before throwing her arms around him. "Yes Ichigo, I do!"

Their families begin to clap for them then, and the oldest male Gremory Clan then offers Ichigo his hand. "Welcome to the family, Ichigo."

Shaking the Gremory Lord's hand, Ichigo and Rias begin accepting their families' congratulations until the orange-haired Devil suddenly remembers there is one other family behind them. Turning to look for his opponent, he realizes the Phenex family have long since left the arena, and he feels a sudden surge of compassion well up for the fallen Devil.

"Momo, Rukia!" He sighs out in relief when his Bishop and his best friend swiftly appear beside him using Shunpo. "Can you look for Riser and offer to heal him so they don't have to do as much work when they get him home?"
The two Shinigami Lieutenants exchange glances. "Why not…"

Ichigo's raised hand silences Rukia. "The less anyone knows of her abilities, the safer my sister will remain." He sees Rukia's eyes widen before she nods her head in understanding. "Thanks, Rukia."

Watching the two petite women ask Serafall Leviathan for directions to the infirmary before disappearing in a burst of Shunpo, Ichigo turns to the parents of Rias Gremory then. "I hope this doesn't end your friendship to the Phenex Clan, Zeoticus, Venelana."

Venelana Gremory shakes her head once. "You don't have to worry about that Ichigo; regardless of how the duel went, you spared Riser's life and won. You also held back on your more dangerous abilities, so you have nothing to feel guilty about... I'll talk to Eleni later; you just focus on your upcoming marriage with Rias."

Ichigo watches the other adults nod their heads as well, and he lets out a deep breath. "Thank you, Venelana. Shall we return home then?"

Everyone seems to stare at him with amusement. "Aren't you forgetting something son?" His adopted mother asks him.

The orange-haired Devil looks at Yoruichi with confusion. "What did I forget?" He then fumbles to catch the small box that his father throws at him.

"Go ahead, open it up." Doing as he is told; he nearly chokes at the sight in front of him. Tears threaten to well up in his orbs as he lovingly touches the diamond ring held within, a ring that he has seen many times on the finger of a different woman, but he finally closes the box and hands it back to his father, much to Isshin's and Yoruichi's surprise. Smiling at them, he then summons another small box from a magic circle and opens it to reveal its contents.

"If anyone should use Mom's ring to propose with, it should be whoever we allow to marry Yuzu, Dad...we all know she's the one who truly inherited Mom's will. This ring...is the right one for me to use."

Getting to one knee, he takes out the ruby and sapphire surrounded diamond ring and holds it out for Rias. "Rias Gremory, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" She shakes excitedly as he takes her hand and places the ring on her finger; looking at it as everyone begins clapping and cheering for them, she can't help but think it looks strangely familiar.

"It was my late wife's ring, Rias." Those words almost take her breath away, and she quickly turns to look at Ichigo's great-grandfather, the Naberius Clan Head smiling softly at her. "As the future Lady of the Naberius Clan, you should wear it. It would honor us all."

Almost as if his words were a summons, every single member of the Sitri, Gremory and Naberius Clans attending the gathering teleports down into the arena, their magic circles rapidly surrounding the two that will soon be joined in marriage. Smiling as he sees his sisters appear along with his peerage, Ichigo kneels down when Yuzu rushes towards him, only to get socked right in the face with a small gauntlet-covered hand.

"Moron! Dummy! You scared the hell out of us, stupid Ichi-nii!" She continues to rant at him, the redness of her eyes letting him know that she must have cried for him earlier.

Letting his youngest sibling vent, Ichigo keeps a wary eye on his other sisters, knowing that if Yuzu had activated her Hell Armor, Karin likely has as well. Fortunately for him, neither of them
makes a move towards him, but both of them are giving him the stink eye.

Finally pulling Yuzu into his chest to quiet her ranting, Ichigo gives his peerage a pleading look. "Oh, come on guys. I won, didn't I?" Chad slaps him in the back of his head in answer.

"OI!"

Uryū pushes up his glasses then, smirking at his orange-headed cousin. "Yes, you did win Ichigo, however please refrain from doing so in a way that gives us a heart attack in the future." He looks towards Rias then. "With that said, we do have something more important to attend to tonight."

Everyone immediately cheers then, eagerly anticipating the wedding ceremony between the Heiress of the Gremory Clan and the Heir of the Naberius Clan.

"Well, what the hell are we waiting for!? Time to finish the day right!" Ganju shouts out loudly, causing the cheers to become even louder.

Holding up his hands for silence, Ichigo turns towards the bashfully smiling Rias once the noise has died down. "You ready to become Mrs. Ichigo Naberius?" He asks, offering her his hand.

Rias beams at him as she takes his hand. "I've been waiting for a very long time, Ichigo."

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Watching the celebration taking place in the arena, Yasaka shakes her head inwardly as she thinks. 'Not the way I thought it would end, but a win is a win. Take this time of joy and savor it my young friends; soon all of you will be tested.'

Beside her, she feels a faint tug coming from her sleeve. "Mom, is it really over? Ichigo is going to marry Rias tonight?"

Yasaka nods her head, looking kindly at her despondent daughter. "Yes Kunou, he and Rias will marry tonight. That is why I was brought here, to officiate at their marriage if he won his duel with Riser. So, we must join them and get ready once we are back at the Gremory Estate." She ruffles her daughter's hair then as the younger Kyuubi sulks unhappily.

"It's not fair Mother…if he was born at least partially Yōkai, I would have been able to marry him too someday. Polygamy isn't a crime with the Devils either, but he just had to be brought up as a human…"

Yasaka sighs with understanding. "Regardless of how Ichigo was brought up, he will never accept loving more than one woman, my daughter. Considering the way his own father was said to have loved his mother and she loved him in return, I believe it is something he has inherited from both his parents. So Kunou, you will just have to find someone else to carry your heart one day. Someone who will appreciate you the way Ichigo does for Rias, but it won't be Ichigo. Now come along, I don't want to keep them waiting for us any longer."

The younger Kyuubi nods her head dejectedly, but she finally voices her agreement. "Yes Mother."

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Ichibē Hyōsube, Commanding Shinigami of the Soul King's Royal Guard, stares in disbelief at his Majesty as he tries to comprehend the orders just given; so dazed is he by the orders that he accidentally asks the same question again.
"Do not worry Captain Hyōsube, I understand your confusion. If Head Captain Yamamoto asks to leave for the Underworld, you may give him permission to do so at my behest. Captain Ōetsu Nimaiya, you will follow him and act as my official representative when they travel to see the Maou. I have no wish to go myself as I don't need a repeat of my last visit; I'm still a little embarrassed with the way I acted the last time I saw them."

The two men murmur their confused acceptances and watch as the Supreme Entity that rules Soul Society disappears back into his chambers, the wall completely sealing shut after he enters. Turning to look at the other three members of Zero Squad, the five Elite Captains then stand and make their way back to their own respective cities, each bidding good night to the others before departing, until only Ichibē and Ōetsu stand together on the highest floating city and thinking about the rapidly shifting future.

"So, you going then old friend?" The bald monk finally asks of the creator of Zanpakutō.

Ichibē laughs when he sees the younger man fist pump as he answers. "Hell yes! I want to see Ichi-chan's Zanpakutō; from the sounds of it, Hephaestus-san pulled it off beautifully. I have never allowed someone else to reforge a Zanpakutō from an Asauchi but me, but I figure someone like the Greek God of the forge would know how to treat them right the same way I do. So, I gots to give the old man his due, seeing the first hybrid Zanpakutō is going to be a real treat for me. You want me to deliver that message for you, save us all some time, that's fine with me too you know."

The heavily bearded man sighs heavily as he folds his hands and nods his answer, inwardly groaning as Ōetsu waves cheerfully and disappears to his city, yelling to his assistants to get ready to leave for the Underworld. Stroking his beard absently, the bald monk finally returns to his own city.

'I actually feel sorry for you Ichigo…Nimaiya's just as mad as Zaraki some days.'

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Shalba Beelzebub sits before the remaining two assassins, their three compatriots lying next to them minus their heads. As the two remaining assassins shake with terror at the cold-blooded executions of their comrades, the son of the original Beelzebub looks down expressionlessly upon them. The Old Maou survivor hadn't given them any explanation as to what was going on, the moment they kneeled before the Devil in answer to his summons, he struck off their youngest companion's head without any warning. Then his tirade began, a tirade about failing to do their duty and dishonoring their Clan of Dark Mage-Assassins. His ranting had only grown more vicious and violent as he struck off the next two heads within minutes of each other, then he simply sat down on his throne and began to stare at them. For the last hour, they had been kneeling absolutely still, cold sweat soaking their clothing and the blood of their slain compatriots pooling on the floor beside them.

"You failed me nearly forty years ago, do you know how?" Shivering at their Lord's tone, the two assassins shake their heads no, and he removes the fourth head.

"Think carefully before you answer me. What did you do forty years ago that I would see as a failure?" Shalba asks again of the last remaining Mage.

Shivering and wracking his brain for any memory of a job their Clan had done during that time frame, only one contract stands out and as his head slowly rises, he instinctively knows that it is the one his Lord is referring to. "Naberius…"

"Yes…Naberius. Do you remember what your father told me? Emmmm, do you? His exact words
were, and I quote, 'It is done, all that remains is the clan head', end quote."

Pulling out a picture from his robes, he throws it at the last assassin and watches it land face up in front of sole surviving mage. "That is the great-grandson of Amyntas Naberius…I want him dead by the end of the week, or you'll join the rest of your men."

Watching the assassin hurriedly prostrate himself before leaving, the true Beelzebub Heir turns to the shadows waiting in the room. "Make sure he doesn't live past the moment he kills the brat. As for the twins, bring them to me, I'll have use for them later."

The shadows seem to ripple in agreement. "Of course, my liege."

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"How long are you going to stare at it Isshin?" Ryūken asks quietly as he adjusts his tie for the last time, brushing down his white jacket as he peers out at the scruffy man from the side of his eyes.

Smiling, the former Shinigami Captain closes the lid on the picture in the locket, the only one he has yet to show his children. Standing to his feet, he meanders over to stand next to the Quincy, checking his own kimono of dark blue paired with a light blue obi in the same mirror.

"She would have absolutely loved today, you know?" Isshin comments off-handedly. "It makes me wish she was here today to witness this."

Pausing, the white-haired Quincy nods his own understanding. "Kanae as well, Isshin. To think Ichigo would beat Uryū to the alter…I didn't see it coming in a million years."

Chuckling, the scruffy man claps the other man on the shoulder. "Tell me about it Ryūken…though Yoruichi and surprisingly Sui-Fēng both got it right; it just took the right woman to come along and prove that my son really had it in him. And damn did he ever pick a winner…think of all the cute grand-babies I will have to spoil!"

Ryūken grimaces at those words. "Somehow, that image doesn't fill me with joy. Besides, you do realize you have to wait at least six to seven years before that happens, right? Both Ichigo and Rias do plan to attend University, and if Ichigo is serious about his pursuits, he'll need the extra two or three years to get his Masters degree in literature before he can properly support his family."

"Ah, what's a few extra years to a Shinigami, or even a Devil Ryūken? We've got no lack of funds, and besides, we still need to work on that kid of yours…"

Ryūken smirks at him knowingly. "I believe Uryū is…showing some interest in someone, he came to me last night and asked some things about his mother and I. How did we meet, when did we first date, how we found out we were interested in each other…things like that. When I pressed him on it, he said that someone had sparked a feeling in him, but he wasn't quite sure of it yet. I thought it was Orihime, but when I asked, he shook his head sadly and told me she had yet to let go of someone…I presume it to mean she still holds something in her heart for that Espada who was her former captor. "The former Quincy scoffs lightly at that.

Finished buttoning his jacket, Ryūken turns to look at Isshin, seeing the Shinigami absently nodding his head yes, but with a troubled expression on his face. Shaking his head with amusement, the Quincy speaks to Isshin with a smile. "We're getting old, Isshin. You realize our children are surpassing us, that one day we will actually have to contemplate retirement. We cannot shoulder their burdens for them forever."

The former Captain scoffs as he walks over to the door and opens it. "Speak for yourself, Ryūken.
"I'm already retired."

"Self-imposed exile doesn't count Isshin!" Ryūken shouts after the departing Shinigami, before shaking his head at his own foolishness. "Though I suppose a fugitive Quincy could be seen as the same..."

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Amyntas sits with the four Maou in Sirzechs's private study at the Gremory Estate, a room that the Lucifer still uses from time to time whenever he visits his parents and Rias. Serafall and Ajuka sit on either side of Amyntas, while Falbium, Sirzechs and Grayfia sit opposite of them. On a table in the middle, sits a blood red ruby that is softly glowing, waiting for one of the powerful Devils to activate it and answer the call.

"You know what this is about Amyntas; you sure you want us to answer it?" Ajuka says as he motions towards the gem.

"We cannot avoid this issue forever." The current Keeper of the Gates of Hell replies. "Let's see what he has to say and then I'll accept any decision you decide upon."

"I have never seen this Head Captain like you have before Sirzechs, so you should do this." Serafall says as she leans back on the couch and gestures for Sirzechs to go ahead.

Falbium offers a grin as he waves to the device as well. "Might as well see how mad he is Sirzechs, pretty sure he's beyond upset that a Devil, a young one at that, bent the rules of the treaty and broke into Soul Society to rescue his friends...even if he doesn't know that it was the very same person who did it once before. Reason says he's not going to be in the best of moods when answering the call, and you know he's always been a hard-ass to work with."

Sirzechs raises his hands to draw their attention to him. "Before we begin, I would like to remind everyone that tonight is my little sister's marriage, and I recommend that we give them tonight and the day after for themselves...to recover. So, Monday afternoon is the earliest I'll let him come if he asks us for a meeting. Are we all agreed?" When all heads nod their acceptance, he turns to his wife and watches as she waves her hand over the ruby, causing the image of almost a dozen figures to appear.

The Maou hold back their surprise at seeing so many Shinigami standing near the Head Captain and his long-time Lieutenant. Counting quickly, Ajuka concludes that they must be the remaining Captains and Lieutenants of the Gotei Thirteen. Falbium notices that the expressions on most of their faces are politely neutral, except for one with a black and white painted face who wears a furious expression.

With so many Shinigami watching this meeting, Serafall knows now is not the time to act casually with them. "Greetings Head Captain, I am Leviathan Maou. I speak for the Underworld, and I wish to extend my greetings to the rest of your officers as well. It is a pleasure to finally meet you." The youngest looking Maou says properly.

Within the projection, they can see the oldest-looking Captain nod his greetings to them. "I am pleased to meet you as well Leviathan Maou, however the reasons I have for contacting you is of an urgent matter. I am officially registering my deepest concerns about our treaty, and wish for an immediate meeting to take place in the Underworld in regards to the actions taken against Soul Society by one of your nobles. Lord Naberius I believe he called himself, with black armor and Hell Chains as proof of his identity." The gravelly voice of the white bearded Shinigami states clearly from his projection, his steely gaze watching them while his hands are folded upon the head
of his disguised Zanpakutō cane.

Serafall taps her chin in simulated deep thought, and after a few moments she begins to nod her head in understanding. "I see, can you clarify whether it is the younger Lord Naberius or the older one you wish to speak to?"

Opening one eye, the ancient Shinigami replies back knowingly. "So, there are two?"

Noting his lack of surprise, Serafall replies carefully. "Yes, Head Captain, there are currently two Lord Naberius, one is the current head of the Clan and the other is his heir. As a matter of fact, the younger Lord Naberius will be marrying the heiress of the Gremory Clan tonight!" The youngest Maou finishes with a gush of exuberance, discreetly watching the ancient Shinigami for his reaction.

"He said he was married already to the sister of Lucifer Maou…Sirzechs Gremory, now Lucifer…" The Devils hear Yamamoto muttering softly. "Was he lying or just confident?"

Sirzechs and the others can't help laughing then, Asmodeus barking out his comment. "Your brother-in-law was more than confident today, wasn't he Sirzechs?"

"Well, what can I say, Rias saw something in him even before he…well, enough about that. Serafall if you may, please continue." Sirzechs remarks as he cuts off any further discussion about the man his sister is about to marry.

"Of course Sirzechs, discussing my cousin can wait for another day. Forgive us Head Captain, as I was saying, today is a very special day for my cousin. If you wish to speak to him, will the day after tomorrow be too soon, or do you wish for a later date to meet our representative? You might know of her perhaps, her name was Yoruichi Shihōin, though she has since changed her name to Yoruichi Naberius." The six of them then wait to see how the various Shinigami will react.

To their hidden surprise, the Head Captain doesn't even betray a single twitch at her name. Neither do any of his officers say a word, though the Devils can see them exchanging quick glances.

"Yoruichi would not be a favorable choice at this time, Leviathan Maou; her notoriety has gained her many enemies within the Shihōin Clan, more so since she is suspected to have absconded with the current Head of the Clan." Yamamoto replies evenly.

Serafall deliberately sighs with a troubled expression on her face then. "Head Captain Yamamoto, the Naberius Clan is allowed to send whoever they wish to represent them, and since she is a former Shinigami, Yoruichi Naberius has been chosen to represent the Clan regarding Shinigami matters. If this is a problem, then we are at an impasse; the Naberius Clan has stated they will not budge on this issue. Before you ask why, it is because Yoruichi Naberius is of great importance to both Naberius Lords, in more ways than you can possibly know. So, before you make a hasty decision, please remember that it is either her or no one at all."

A small frown crosses the ancient Shinigami's face then, then he turns to the serene braided-haired woman at his side. "Captain Unohana. Your thoughts."

The six Devils look at the Squad Four Captain, one who is most noted for her impressive healing abilities and her apparent pacifism; each Captain and Lieutenant's description has been firmly entrenched in their memories, supplied by the residing Shinigami in order to help them identify those they would need to keep an eye on, or those they will probably meet soon.

The oldest female Captain lowers her head in thought, before turning to look at the ancient Captain. "Yoruichi has always been a fair and levelheaded Captain, while as a noble…"
"She is a filthy whore who has given away the long-held secrets of our clans to another clan, a clan of Devils at that! Which is something we will be having 'words' about with the current Naberius Clan Head, you can be sure of that!" A voice suddenly shouts from beyond the projection's limits.

Banging his cane once, the Head Captain glares off screen towards the speaker who had just interrupted the Squad Four Captain. "You are here only as the highest-ranking member of your Clan, Sahiye Shihōin; you are allowed to watch, not to speak, and if you interrupt this meeting once more you will find yourself sequestered in your chambers again. If the current Shihōin Clan Head had not gone missing, you would still be in your chambers within Central Forty-Six and under investigation. Now, remain silent and allow Captain Unohana to finish speaking."

As they hear the sound of spluttering coming from off-screen, the dark-haired female Captain bows in thanks to the Head Captain before continuing to speak. "As I was saying, Yoruichi… Naberius was a fine Captain and noble, and as the Shinigami representative within the Naberius Clan, I do believe she is ensuring that our officers will receive nothing but the utmost of care. If she is the one meeting us, I have no objections to her presence. Shunsui?"

Looking vaguely surprised, the sakkat and kimono-wearing Captain tilts up his reed hat and grins before he gives a flourishing bow towards the watching Devils. "Be nice to see her again I suppose, I have no objections with her. What about you Tōshirō-chan, any objections?"

All the Devils present see the short white-haired Captain scowl with annoyance at the name, but he still answers the question properly. "None, I only met former Captain Yoruichi a few times, but she seemed capable and she is still well respected among the ranks, so she'll do."

The Head Captain nods gravely, then he turns to the man that the Devils had secretly been wondering about. "And what of you, Ōetsu Nimaiya, do you have any objections?"

The Shinigami in question has dark skin with a very unusual hairstyle and wide rimmed glasses; most importantly, he looks completely bored by the whole affair despite being surrounded by high-ranked officers of the Gotei Thirteen. To the experienced eyes of the six watching Devils, they can tell he is either someone higher up the chain of command than even the Head Captain, or he has political connections capable of disregarding the Head Captain's authority.

"Nah, just want ta go and see what's I needs to see. Anyone who gets me there, fine by me. So, two days and we're off ta see the wizard!" More than a few heads turn to look at Ōetsu Nimaiya worriedly as the afro-haired man seems to be spouting some random gibberish at them.

"I'm afraid I do not know who you are…" Serafall waves her hand towards the strange man. "Could you please introduce yourself?"

The dark-skinned man strikes up a strange pose while pointing his thumb towards himself. "I am Ōetsu Nimaiya, I invented the Asauchi." There is a long moment of silence as the six Devils stare at him with polite incomprehension, before the dark-skinned man begins to smile. Unknown to them, the Elite Captain knows full well that they are aware of the importance of his title, and he smiles when he sees no reaction from any of the six Devils after he drops his bombshell. 'Pretty damn good, hope they like poker.'

After an awkward silence, Serafall clears her throat and speaks up again. "I see, so you are coming as well? I will warn you now Nimaiya-san, if you cause any trouble, we'll send you straight…back to wherever you belong, understood?"

"Gotcha." He gives her a thumbs up.
"Then Yoruichi Naberius and her escort will meet you here in two days’ time." Holding up a map, she points to a section near Isehara. "There is a shrine there, and it will be an area of safety for you as it is currently abandoned and no faction has any claim to it anymore. Yoruichi will arrive at approximately five P.M., and your transportation will bring you to the Underworld in time for you to join us for dinner. Oh, and do pack an overnight bag…while we will provide all your basic necessities while staying with us, you'll need them for any other personal effects you might require."

After rattling off those instructions, Serafall waits for the Head Captain to either confirm or clarify her words; to her surprise, he simply nods and motions for someone to cut the transmission. Once the image is gone, all the Devils save for Amyntas let out a collective sigh then.

"Well, who is going to break the news to Ichigo?" Sirzechs asks them hopefully. "He will certainly believe the universe is out to get him when he realizes not only are the Head Captain and three other Captains and Lieutenants coming to the Underworld, but also a member of the Royal Guard."

"Royal Guard? Who? That Nimaiya guy?" Serafall asks the crimson-haired Devil with surprise.

"Yes, Ichigo may not be aware, but Kisuke has intimate knowledge of them; he is after all a former member of Zero Squad himself, an Elite Captain sent by the Soul King to keep the Seireitei on the right path, although that changed when they managed to exile him. I wonder how he is going to feel when he sees his old comrade; it isn't like anyone from that Squad has ever considered, much less succeeded in defecting before."

As the other three Maou begin to wonder how the Zero Squad Captain's presence will affect the meeting in the Underworld, Sirzechs stands up and holds out his hand for Grayfia. "I hope you enjoy yourselves tonight, ladies and gentlemen, there is room for everyone to stay here of course."

"I'll be going back to the Naberius Clan with Ichigo and Uryū." Serafall replies promptly, getting to her feet as well. "No need to prepare a room for me."

Ajuka and Falbium exchange looks, then they both accept the offer and as they leave the room, Amyntas sends a meaningful look towards Sirzechs. "We'll discuss what our plans are tomorrow then."

The crimson-haired Maou nods towards him. "We made a pledge to you, Amyntas, and we'll see it through. No one will get to your family again, no one."

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Rias stands in the middle of a pack of busy servants, each one adjusting or re-stitching the white kimono that is her wedding present from the Ishidas' until the female Devil standing in front of the nervous bride nods her head in satisfaction.

"You look beautiful Rias." Venelana Gremory beams with pure joy as she looks over her daughter's kimono. "He'll be speechless, I know it."

"Not like Ichi-nii needs much to make him speechless…Okaa-san." The youngest of the Naberius great-grandchildren says giddily as she admires her newest sister's wedding kimono.

Karin speaks up as well, with a happy look for once. "My brother is really lucky you know, marrying someone as good looking as you Rias."

Darting her eyes to the third sister, Rias sees tears in Orihime's eyes. "Orihime? What's wrong?" The crimson-haired Heiress wonders if the burnt-orange-haired healer is somehow upset by these
events.

"Not…nothing's wrong, I just can't help it Rias. The first of our group is getting married and I'm just happy that we're here to see it." Orihime quickly dabs at her eyes, looking at the mirror to make sure her makeup isn't running.

"You'll be up here someday too Orihime." Rias happily remarks as she bounces lightly on her feet.

Orihime's eyes widen then. "Don't let Ichigo or the others hear you say that! I already heard from the Cerberus that if any male Devils come asking to court me, Ichigo has given them permission to eat them…whole!"

The room fills with laughter from the women then. "Only that blockhead would order something so lame, usually he just beats up anyone he thinks is trying a fast one on his friends and family." Tatsuki giggles at Ichigo's antics.

A few eyes look at the black-spiky-haired Tatsuki then, and she quickly tries to change the subject. "Well, I also know he said he's waiting to see a certain white-haired Shinigami for some reason or another, what was that kid's name again Hime?"

"Oh, Captain Hitsugaya, the Squad Ten Captain." The brown-eyed healer replies, causing Karin's eyes to immediately snap open in shock.

Pointing an accusing finger at Orihime and then Tatsuki, the darker-haired twin begins to stammer. "He…he's…he's a Captain!? Why the hell didn't anyone tell me!?"

All the Devils in the room look at Orihime then, and the burnt-orange-haired healer looks just as surprised as Karin is. "Sorry Karin-chan, I thought Ichigo told you or Otou-san." She quickly apologizes.

Groaning loudly, the dark-haired twin flops down in her chair, face-palming as she mumbles to herself. Yuzu makes her way over to her sister and sits by her side, holding her free hand as they talk quietly amongst themselves. Feeling slightly awkward at being the indirect cause of Karin's distress, but also feeling relieved that her sisters-in-law are taking care of each other, Rias turns back to her mother who gestures for her to lower her arms.

"So, how long until…we can start?" Rias slowly puts her hands down, thankful to get blood flowing into her limbs once again as she waits for her mother's answer.

"The last of the Clan Heads arrived not too long ago and Ichigo should be ready by now." Venelana comments. "Tia, please go see if he is ready, and then, well then my baby girl is getting married!"

Rias can't move as her mother rushes up to her and begins hugging and kissing her cheeks.

"Mother! Stop that!" Despite her words however, Rias doesn't offer any resistance to her mother's show of affections.

Pulling away, the woman who is considered the older and more mature version of the crimson-haired Heiress looks knowingly at her daughter, then she turns to the room and claps twice to gain all their attentions. "Ladies, if you please, I'll need a few minutes with Rias. Grayfia, please stay as well."

Rias watches as the room slowly empties, the last to leave is a happy looking Koneko, who bows to the remaining women as she closes the door softly. Both remaining women then gaze at Rias in her wedding kimono, causing the youngest Devil in the room to fidget nervously under their gazes. "Mother, Grayfia. Is there something wrong?"
"Rias, there is one last thing we must do before you marry Ichigo, and that is to…"

DeVeer, there is one last thing we must do before you marry Ichigo, and that is to…"

"The hell Uryū, how damn long is this gonna take!?” Ichigo glares at his cousin who is modifying his hakama with needle and thread once more.

Pushing his glasses up, the Quincy archer gives him his usual response, which is using his middle finger to adjust his eyewear.

"Nice, Uryū, nice. One of these days I'm gonna cut that finger off.” The Devil grumbles with his normal scowl.

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Looking around his room that is currently occupied by what feels like every male peerage member of all three clans, Ichigo tries to distract himself by listening in on the soft whispered conversations taking place around him. Thankfully, no one is talking about his duel with Riser, much to his relief; although he had won, he had to resort to rather drastic means, and he also had to give the older Devil credit for refusing to give up, not consciously at least. He had seen Riser's limbs slowly reattaching themselves even as his mother pleaded for an end to the duel. Luckily, the Maou put an end to it before he was forced to use that last attack, one of the many new attacks he can now see in his head; not even Zangetsu has a clue as to where this extra knowledge had come from, but the monochrome spirit had a gleeful aura about him as he raved about how he couldn't wait for his King to use them on those enemies most deserving of his future wrath.

"There, done Ichigo.” Blinking once, the orange-haired Devil looks at his smirking cousin, who points towards the mirror. Obeying the wordless instruction, Ichigo turns to look at the mirror and his eyes widen in amazement.

"Damn…”

'Damn doesn't come close.' Ichigo thinks to his Zanpakutō spirit as he sees the wedding outfit his cousin had made for him in literally an hour.

Dark grey and white pencil thin striped hakama cover his pure white zōri and tabi. He smiles when he sees that Uryū has incorporated each of his family crests upon the deep black haori that he is wearing over an equally black under kimono, and the last piece is the black obi with white trim that is wrapped neatly around his waist.

"Thanks, Uryū, you did an amazing job.” Ichigo sees his cousin nodding back at him as if this was just an everyday occurrence, but the proud gleam in the Quincy teen's eyes tells Ichigo that he is pleased by the heartfelt compliment.

A knock at the door causes the talking in the room to quiet down as Yoruichi opens the door and walks in, a few cat calls greeting her, though she only grins at the few males who had the courage to do so.

"Watch it boys, or my 'son' might kick your ass for hitting on me.” A round of laughter greets the werecat's remark. "But I do need to speak to Ichigo in private, so give us a minute or two.”

A chorus of affirmatives greet her words, and Ichigo watches as the Devils and guest Shinigami leave his room, each giving the purple-haired woman a small bow as they do so, her unofficial title of 'mother' to Ichigo earning her that respect. When the last temporary visitor leaves, she closes the door and stands facing away from the younger man.

"Yoruichi?” He asks her worriedly, feeling somewhat unnerved by her uncharacteristic silence.
He sees the werecat slowly exhale before she turns to face him, and he gets a close look at the kimono she is wearing. His great-grandfather had asked him if he would allow her to wear it after telling him that it once belonged to his grandmother; knowing what Yoruichi had given up for him, his family and his friends, he had no inclination of denying her the opportunity. She is family now; to him, to the twins, and to Orihime. As she walks towards him, he also sees her checking him out, her eyes wandering up and down his kimono-clad frame.

Brushing off some invisible lint from his shoulders, the golden eyed woman speaks almost fondly. "She’d have loved this, Ichigo."

"Considering who made it, I wouldn't doubt it. But are you okay?" He finds himself asking again.

The purple-haired woman pauses, before looking up into his eyes. "Isshin said I had to ask you, so here I am Ichigo. Where do you want me to be in your ceremony?"

Ichigo blinks at her in confusion. "What? Where you're supposed to be? OH…oh." Pausing as he considers his options, he finally pulls her into his arms. "Well that should be obvious…Okaa-san. My true Okaa-san might not be here, but someone needs to be, and considering you're our family now…it should be you, Yoruichi. You, Geta-Bōshi and Tessai have trained and watched over us for years, and because of us, you gave up your own Clan to be here for us. We need you Yoruichi; we can never fully repay you for everything that you've done for us, though I'll deny it if you ever say a word to Kisuke about me needing him…"

"Too late, I heard he and Ajuka have started some joint projects together…" She smiles when she hears Ichigo groan.

Muttering something about 'damn mad scientists', Ichigo finally gives her a warm smile. "By the way, the kimono does suit you Yoruichi…you look…wow…" His eyes take in and admire the white kimono she is wearing.

Stepping back slightly, she pulls Ichigo's face down and kisses him on the cheek. "Thank you."

"You are welcome." He kisses her on the cheek as well, then he holds her hands as she smiles up at him. "Is there anything else we need to do?"

"Nothing much besides the obvious, Ichigo." She shrugs at him. "Take care of Rias, always. She's a lucky woman you know? But there is one new thing I must teach you…"

Ichigo stares at her in confusion. "Right now? Kinda late ain't it?"

"You'll need it…for tonight." He swears her eyes are sparkling when she says it.

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The immediate families of the bride and groom to be are with Yasaka and her daughter as they wait for the arrival of the two teen Devils who are about to be married. The Kyuubi had been invited to officiate over the wedding due to her close ties to Inari, and with her friendship with the Naberius family, she had accepted the invitation along with one to spend the weekend in the Underworld with them enjoying their hot springs. Her main task is now at hand, and she is upbeat as she anticipates joining Ichigo and Rias in marriage. Of course, it was Ichigo's wish for a Shinto marriage, being the one with a human upbringing, but being Devils complicated the process and made the prospect of a human marriage all but impossible, except for her personal bond with Amaterasu-Ōmikami-sama bypassing such restrictions entirely. Her powers as the handmaiden of the main Shinto Goddess would allow the Shinto marriage to take place, and her connection to the
kami would bond their marriage vows as real, sealing them together as husband and wife for all
time.

"Mother, are you sure you want me to do this?" Kunou asks her once more.

The elder fox spirit smiles as she looks down at her incredibly cute daughter then. "Yes Kunou,
you need to learn this if you are to lead our people one day. Think of this as making a friend for
life: Ichigo and Rias wouldn't turn down a request of help if you ever called upon them after doing
this for them. This is one way our races can deepen the bonds of trust and friendship even more."

"I'm just nervous…I don't want to make any mistakes." The younger Kitsune admits worriedly. "I
don't want to mess up this marriage for Ichigo."

Yasaka pats her daughter on the head comfortably. "Close your eyes and think about it as doing
the same thing in your room then Kunou." The older Kyuubi advises her, just as the light-haired
Naberius twin joins their conversation.

"Ichi-nii told me another trick, but I don't think looking at the Devils naked would help you
Kunou." Yuzu giggles as she repeats a very common human advice.

Giggling as well as she imagines that scenario, Kunou agrees wholeheartedly with the youngest
Naberius princess. "I can't do that! No way could I make it through with my face redder than
Orihime's face was after she made dinner that first night I was here and everyone was
complimenting her cooking."

"My face?" The oldest sister asks them as she and Karin join them. "Did I do something wrong,
Kunou?"

The two young girls giggle again as they repeat what they were talking about, causing Orihime to
blush again at the remembrance of the compliments that her first dinner as a Bishop cooking for
Ichigo's peerage had won her, especially from Ichigo himself. Karin shakes her head and pats the
young kitsune on her shoulder then.

"Ichi-nii isn't going to even hear what you or your mom are saying, trust me on that...the moment
he sees Rias-nee, he's gonna be deaf, dumb and mute to everything else around him but Rias."

"Well, at least I hope he hears the part where I ask him to speak the marriage vows." Yasaka laughs
lightly as she chimes in with the younger women, knowing that Ichigo will be completely
entranced by his beautiful bride-to-be.

"They're coming!" Kimi suddenly shouts as she and Nia quickly take up opposite sides of the
adjoining hallways, with Ichigo arriving from the right, while Rias would come from the left.

"Goat-Face, you better behave or so help me…" Karin growls as she lets loose a set of her Hell
Chains to emphasize her point.

Her father winces and looks around for her younger twin sister. "Look Yuzu, your sister…Yuzu!?"
Isshin backs up when he realizes his youngest daughter has her own set of Hell Chains out as well.

"Otou-san..." Yuzu takes a few menacing steps towards the head of the Kurosaki-Shiba family, her
eyes narrowing uncharacteristically when she speaks. "This is Ichi-nii and Rias-nee's most
important day, don't…you…dare…screw it up!"

"Yes, my dear daughter!" Isshin raises his hands in surrender, watching as his kids march past him
and take their places quietly; after a moment, he follows behind them and finds Yoruichi already
waiting beside his seat.

"So...how did it go?" Isshin asks in a whisper as he takes his seat.

"I think his only word when I explained it to him and then showed him the Kidō was 'sweet'. Sorry, you just gotta wait Isshin." She whispers back at him with a grin.

"Can't be helped. So, are you okay now?"

"Yes, he...he and I talked. You raised him well Isshin, no matter what they say, you did a good job." The former Shihōin Clan Head says as music plays and she and Isshin watch the two teens making their appearance in the hallway, joining together where the hallways meet and moving together at the front of the procession that is led by Yasaka, her daughter and a half-a-dozen musicians.

Behind Ichigo and Rias, their immediate families take their places and begin to follow behind the two teens who are about to join their lives out on the wide expanse that will serve as replacement for a shrine. Waiting at the altar for them are several other Kitsune handmaidens that Yasaka had picked to help them with the ceremony. As the bride and groom lead the way, Isshin can see hundreds of nobles from the surviving Seventy-Two Pillars watching them with hushed whispers about how quickly the two young Devils are getting married, despite having just only defeated Riser Phenex. Isshin frowns at their insinuation that the speedy wedding is to prevent Riser from somehow getting his revenge after recovering from his serious injuries, but Yoruichi grins and elbows his ribs as she walks beside him, knowing that the words of unimportant nobles mean nothing in the end; besides, the wedding after the soon-to-be newlywed couple graduate from university will be on a much grander scale, a western-style wedding more suited to the Devils' tastes.

Ahead of the procession, the current Yōkai ruler of Kyoto takes her place in front of the altar with the six other handmaidens of her race, smiling as Ichigo and Rias stop and stand before her. Flaring her aura, she begins the wedding by performing the purification rites using her powers as the handmaiden and avatar of her Goddess to prevent the Devils from suffering any undue harm from the blessings, then she is handed an aged and well-worn scroll by one of her handmaidens. Delicately opening the blessed parchment, she smiles at the two young adults standing before her. Turning to a small altar that was brought in with her entourage, Yasaka begins reading the Norito soujou and the ritualistic words reporting their marriage to the Emperor.

When she finishes speaking, she hears all the main guests stand and bow, Kunou's wordless instructions for those who had never before taken part in such an event making the mother kitsune feel a swelling of pride at her young daughter for being so mature and accomplished. Turning back to the newly-wed couple, she sees Rias's eyes glistening with joy, while Ichigo's eyes keep wandering over to the woman he is binding his life with. Two of the younger fox spirits then bring forth the ceremonial sake and place it before the two young Devils. Yasaka hands the first sake saucer to Ichigo and her attendants pour the sake for him; she watches as Ichigo sips twice before drinking the rest, her eyes twinkling when she sees his eyes water a bit at how potent the rice wine is, courtesy of it being a gift from the Shiba Clan.

Rias does better as she sips from her saucer twice and drinks the third time without flinching, handing the saucer back to the Kyuubi. Two more times they perform this ritual, taking turns to sip between them. When the third exchange of sake is completed, Yasaka deftly motions for the couple to approach the altar, and when they do, she hands Ichigo the blessed scroll, pointing out without the audience seeing what he has to read. Stepping back, she then listens to his pleasant baritone voice as it carries throughout the air, reciting the words of the wedding vows. Once he is
done, two of the kitsune hand the two Devils each a branch from a sakaki tree. Ichigo whispers to his bride what to do then, and she follows his lead as they both lay their branches on the altar. Stepping back, Ichigo and Rias bow twice and then clap twice to end the ritual.

The teens then turn and face each other, Ichigo is the first to take out a golden ring and place it on Rias's ring finger. Here, the start of soft crying can be heard from several of the peerage members, Orihime and Yuzu among the first to shed tears of joy as they watch Rias take a golden band and place in on the orange-haired Devil's ring finger as well. Taking her place once again, Yasaka signals for sake to be handed out to the family and friends of the bride and groom and for them to drink the sake handed to them. Once everyone given the sake have finished drinking, she motions for her daughter to signal all the remaining Devils to drink their sake as well.

"You are now officially Ichigo and Rias Naberius. Congratulations you two, and may you have a joyous and eternal life together." Yasaka says to the newly-wed couple before closing the ceremony.

"So, can I kiss her now?" Ichigo asks her with a grin.

Giving him a wave to go ahead, she and the other females watch as Ichigo cups his wife's blushing face for the first time as her husband.

"I love you, Rias Naberius." His lips capture hers then, and cheers erupt from the three Clans when she wraps her arms around his neck and returns the kiss just as passionately.

Yoruichi and Isshin exchange amused looks as the bride and groom are quickly swamped by their friends and peerages, all of them offering their well-wishes and congratulations. Amyntas, Zeoticus and Venelana join the two former Shinigami Captains as they watch the teens and older peerage members exchange tearful hugs, firm handshakes and even kisses to each of their cheeks. Venelana squeezes the hand of the former Shihōin Clan Head as she sees the wistful expression in the purple-haired werecat's golden eyes; leaning forward, she speaks to her lowly.

"I hope this isn't the only Naberius Lord I get to see married in my life time." The Gremory Matriarch's lips curl mischievously with those words, and Yoruichi can't stop the slight darkening of her cheeks as she automatically glances towards Amyntas after hearing the older Devil's greatest hopes spoken out loud.

"We're working on it." She whispers back just as quietly.

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Lord Amyntas stands with the 'visiting' Shinigami as they watch the newly-married couple dance slowly in the middle of the dance floor, the sixty-plus member orchestra playing a slow classical number now popular in the World of the Living that gives them time to be alone before the rest of the clans join them in celebration. Looking around, the Naberius Lord sees that Shinji Hirako is once again flirting with the ladies, although this time the Captain has a pair of younger Devil noblewomen hanging on his arms as he recounts his time in Soul Society and the years of his exile to the fawning pair, with Suì-Fēng and Momo both discreetly rolling their eyes in the background as they eavesdrop on him.

"I must thank you again for the use of your healing springs, Amyntas-sama; they are helping me greatly with my illness." Jūshirō says with a much deeper and clearer voice than before.

The Devil Lord merely nods and points to his heir. "It was a request from my great-grandson, Captain Ukitake. Don't be too hasty in your thanks yet however; come Sunday night, you may be
"What?" Suí-Fēng's head whips towards them, and the Captain of Squad Two looks worried as she walks up to the head of the Naberius. "What do you mean, put through worse?"

Turning to face both Captains, Amyntas's hazel eyes first give Suí-Fēng a reassuring look, before he turns to look at the older white-haired Captain. "Ichigo and Orihime plan to heal you permanently, Jūshirō Ukitake. My great-granddaughter's fairies have said that because of where and how long you have been suffering, they will have to rebuild your lungs from scratch using Ichigo's lungs as the base template for your cure."

Staring with shock at the Naberius Lord, Ukitake reaches behind him for his seat and drops down heavily in it, slowly raising a hand to his chest. "It... it can't be healed, Lord Amyntas. While I do appreciate the kind thoughts of Ichigo and Orihime, no one has been able to heal my illness, not even Captain Unohana..."

Amyntas smiles at the disbelieving Captain before refuting his words kindly. "Oh, but they can. Do you know the story of the Greek God Hephaestus? He is their God of the forge, a blacksmith for the rulers of Mount Olympus. From the time he was born up until less than a few months ago, he too had a life-long affliction that left one of his feet physically crippled. Those two healed him by removing his foot and most of his lower leg, then they used Ichigo's Reiatsu to rebuild his foot so that he could walk normally again. It was that miraculous act that allowed the ancient Grecian God to find the spark of inspiration that he needed to reforge Ichigo's Zanpakutō, and when the time comes, he'll also be forging the twins and Tatsuki's Zanpakutō. So, if Ichigo and Orihime can rebuild a God's foot, I don't see them having any trouble rebuilding your lungs." The Naberius Lord sips at his wine as Captain Jūshirō looks at him with wide eyes, and the Shinigami officers surrounding their oldest Captain also stare at him like he had just given Jūshirō a new lease of life.

"I'll be cured?" Jūshirō whispers faintly.

"Yes, no more bloody coughing fits, no more shortness of breath. If you wonder why they are doing this..." Amyntas pauses and points to Rukia, who along with Renji are among the first to join the married couple on the dance floor once it was opened for all. "She is the reason. After she spoke of how Ichigo's cousin died that night, how you were unable to avenge him due to the coughing attack you had, and how much you have suffered even as you unwaveringly served your mentor, the Head Captain Yamamoto without compromising any of your personal morals, Ichigo and his sister decided that they simply had to help you somehow, and this is what they finally decided on."

Looking at his loyal Lieutenant, then at the orange-haired Devil who swaps partners with Lieutenant Renji to dance with a smiling Rukia, Jūshirō finally begins to smile. "I'll be sure to thank them all."

"No need to thank them Jūshirō Ukitake, they only do this because you are important to Rukia and to the memory of Kaien Shiba. He is another member of my extended family that I will sadly never have a chance to meet." Amyntas sighs out quietly at the end.

Glancing at the Naberius Lord, Jūshirō pats the seat beside him as he speaks. "Then perhaps I can shed some light on Kaien and Rukia's early years together, Lord Amyntas, and why Ichigo and Rukia are now best friends."

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"I can't believe it." The violet eyed Shinigami says as she twirls along the floor with her best friend
leading their dance.

"What?" Ichigo cocks an eyebrow as he dips his shorter partner gracefully, causing her to give him a wide-eyed stare.

"That you know how to dance! You never even hinted at knowing you could!" She frowns at him when he chuckles, causing him to hastily explain himself before his shins begin hurtting.

"I'm not laughing at you, promise!" As they transition into the next movement of the upbeat dance, he tells her the truth. "When I found out I had to dance with my wife, I sorta had to get lessons… from everyone, and they kept telling me I was bad at dancing. That's why I was laughing..."

She laughs at him then, especially when he blushes lightly and continues speaking. "For starters, I had to learn with Yoruichi, Merti, Sasha and…Venelana. Then when Tia and the others found out, they took turns helping me to learn as well. Sometimes for two hours a day after my training sessions I had to learn how to dance, I don't even remember how I got to bed some of those nights."

Giggling helplessly, Rukia leans against the orange-haired Devil as the music begins to slow down again. "You certainly did a lot for her." She says to him wistfully.

"Yeah...so...when are you and Renji going to tie the knot as they say?" He quietly asks as they dance near the couple they are seeking.

"Nii-sama has said we have no more reasons to wait now that we are no longer the Head and Heiress of the Kuchiki Clan, so Renji and I can get married any time we want to now." She indicates that she would like to stop dancing, and she and Ichigo make their way to the side of the dance floor to wait.

"So, whenever you and Renji are ready, I want you to tell Merti and we'll make the arrangements for you two. And don't worry about expenses; turns out I got quite a bit of cash on hand for things like this." He smiles at her when she narrows her eyes at him.

"What's that supposed to mean Strawberry?" She asks him suspiciously.

"It means Midget; I can splurge on family events..." He pauses, then adds quietly. "And you're now my family."

He sees her face crinkle as she rolls his words around her head, then he sees her mouth open like a goldfish. "That's right Rukia, I know Byakuya has taken the Longoak name, and so have you as his sister. By taking on Merti's last name, you and Byakuya have become members of the Naberius Clan through Merti's family. Ask your Nii-sama if you don't believe me."

"Wait, is that why Nii-sama did it?" She looks fairly distressed now. "I thought he and Merti...Why would he do that Ichigo? He's..."

"He is no longer a Kuchiki, Rukia." Ichigo explains quietly. "He still needs to protect you and Renji from their retaliation, so that is why he took Merti's last name; the offer of protection from one of the Seventy-Two pillars isn't something to scoff at even for a member of Central Forty-Six. And it also helps that the current Heir of the Naberius Clan has just married the current Heiress of the Gremory Clan, and he is cousin by blood to another Maou and her sister, who is the current Heiress to the Sitri Clan. And through his marriage, he is now a cousin to the current heir of the Bael Clan. Not too shabby to have as your protector, eh Rukia Longoak?" Smiling at his dumbfounded best friend, he sees his wife gliding towards him in her red kimono, her pure white wedding kimono now safely stored away for their own children to use one day. Renji is holding her
arm and escorting her as the music fades to a gentle background melody, indicating a pause between dances.

"Thanks...for everything, Ichigo." Rukia finally speaks up, her eyes soft with gratitude.

Holding her hand up with his, he answers back warmly. "That's what family and best friends do for each other Rukia, we take care of our own."

As they smile at each other, their original dance partners finally reach them. "Your wife is a damn talented dancer Ichigo, thankfully she is graceful enough to cover my lacking abilities." Renji compliments as he hands off the smiling Devil Heiress to her new husband.

"You didn't do too bad Renji; Ichigo couldn't even dance until a few weeks ago, his first lesson with Yoruichi and Merti resu..." Ichigo covers Rias's mouth then, not wanting his wife to finish her mischievous sentence.

"Let's not dwell on the past Rias, there's no need to relive those nightmares for them." He can see in Rukia's and Renji's eyes that someday they will learn the truth, but unfortunately for them it is not tonight.

Giggling behind his hand, Rias nods her head, but they both know it isn't the end and his eyes reflect that knowledge back to her. Soon another female joins their group and her hands slide up Ichigo's arm until it ends up on his shoulder.

"Sorry Rias, but will you mind if I steal him for a dance or two?" Yoruichi asks the newlywed wife.

Shaking her head in answer, Rias smiles when Amyntas walks over to them and holds his hand out for his newest great-granddaughter-in-law to take as well. "I'd love to dance with you too, Ojii-san. Ichigo, Yoruichi, have fun dancing."

Smiling as his great-grandfather escorts his wife over to the dance floor, Ichigo takes his adopted mother's hand and begins to escorts the purple-haired goddess out the dance floor as well. "Shall we begin, Okaa-san?"

Watching their two friends dance happily with their newest family, Renji and Rukia file out onto the dance floor again and start dancing with them as the next slow song begins for the reception, more couples soon making their way out to join them as well.

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Merti finds Byakuya standing with the other Shinigami Captains and quietly talking with Sirzechs Lucifer, a serious expression on his handsome face. Making her way over to the group, the Elf sees the former Kuchiki Clan Head turning to face her as she walks up to him, and he holds out his hand, which she takes without complaint.

"I believe couples are allowed to join the bride and groom upon the dance floor." She informs him quietly.

"Then, would you do me the honor, milady?" He asks her just as quietly.

"Are you asking me to dance Byakuya?" She feigns coyness, seeing his lips turn upwards slightly then.

"I'd be honored to be your partner Merti Longoak, and I hope you are to be mine." The two then
leave behind a group of wondering Shinigami, all their eyes unwittingly on the tall Elfin woman's
dress which accentuates her curves as she moves beside Byakuya.

Shinji takes a sip of sake as he watches the former Kuchiki Clan Head disappear onto the dance
floor with the former Elfin Assassin. "Looks like he has found yet another reason for leaving."

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Over an hour later, Ichigo finds himself hiding at a table that is secluded from the prying eyes of
the nobility, his tired feet resting as he diligently watches his twin sisters dance with a few of the
younger Devil nobility, acting as their guardian in the shadows while the watchful eyes of Kimi
and Nia protect them in the open as the twin Elves dance with members of the Gremory or Sitri
peerages near the two. Orihime and Chad are also sitting at his table, along with Sairaorg who is
talking to the two younger Devils about the history of his Clan and how he is related to Rias and
Venelana. The newly married Devil listens with half an ear to Sairaorg’s more lighthearted version
of his story, knowing much of the true darker history that the Bael clansman and his mother, Misla
had suffered while he was still growing up.

Before he can continue listening however, a bare arm suddenly wraps around his neck, which is
soon followed by the rest of his wife as she sits in his lap. No longer wearing her kimono, Rias is
now wearing a strapless blue satin gown, her hair no longer held up by her Kanzashi. Innocently
lifting a wineglass to his lips, she whispers in his ear as he drinks.

"Our mothers want to see us Ichigo…"

Gulping down his wine quickly, he helps his wife to her feet and then turns to the other three
occupants of his table. "Chad, can you help me keep an eye on the twins? Yes, I know the Elf
twins are watching them, but it never hurts to be careful. Orihime…enjoy the night, and thanks for
being here little sis. Sairaorg, you have my approval, but she has a midnight curfew."

"Ichigo!!" The table laughs as Orihime blushes deeply before she shyly speaks again.
"Congratulations again you two; Rias, you looked so beautiful during the wedding and you were so
handsome as well Ichigo. I just hope my wedding will be as beautiful as yours was...Anyway, we'll
see you two tomorrow night for dinner; Yuzu, Aphrodite and I are going to make dinner for
everyone, well the staff will be helping us this time since there's going to be so many of us..."

"Wait... Aphrodite?" Ichigo suddenly remembers that the Greek Goddess of Love is still living
with them, although he doesn't recall seeing her anywhere today. "Does anyone know where she
is...?"

"We'll find out later tomorrow Ichigo; promise!" Rias reassures him before she turns to the others
sitting at the table. "I'm sorry, but Yoruichi and Mother want to see us now...so..."

"OH! Sorry, sorry, sorry, hurry up and go." Orihime quickly apologizes when she realizes that her
sidetracking is holding them up. "Yoruichi gets pretty mad when Ichigo's late, so we'll see you
tomorrow!"

"Yeah, we'll see you guys tomorrow." As the newly-wed couple begin to make their way through
the outer corridors of the building, Ichigo pauses one last time to look at the open grounds behind
the Gremory Estate.

"Ichigo, what's wrong?" Rias asks when he continues to stand there staring out at nothing.

"Just thinking how in a few short years we'll permanently join at least four to five Clans by our
blood when we have our children..."

Laying her head against his arm, she quietly exhales then. "I can't wait for that day you know... the day when we start a family of our own..."

Ichigo smiles at his beautiful wife. "Yeah, our very own family. Well, better get going now or our mothers will never let us hear the end of it." The newly married heiress snorts in amused agreement.

Arm in arm, the two young Devils continue to make their way to Rias's bedroom where their two mothers are waiting for them. Passing various members of the staff, both of them fight down blushes as the female Devils giggle and bow as the couple passes by, while the male Devils smirk and offer them polite bows as well. Despite that, Rias is smiling as she pulls Ichigo's arm tighter and closer to her as they make their way to her bedroom. Along the way, they walk past the library and see Sirzechs, Zeoticus, Isshin and Kisuke talking animatedly amongst themselves; not wanting to get caught up with whatever madness his nut job father and bucket-hat mentor are currently plotting, the orange-haired Devil quickly Shunpo's the two down the hallway before they get spotted.

A slap on his arm causes him to look at his wife, who is trying and failing to give him an accusatory look. "That was rude Ichigo; your father was in there too."

Ichigo shakes his head immediately at those words. "That was the point Rias. Once he and Kisuke start getting us involved, we'd never get to our mothers on time, and I ain't getting killed because of those loons."

Rias grins as she continues to drag him along. "Still, we could have said hi as we walked by, but I see your point. Come on Ichigo; let's see what our mothers want us for. I don't know how much more waiting I can take today."

Understanding the clear meaning behind her words, Ichigo manages to return her heated gaze without blushing. "Same here Rias."

Letting his wife lead the way, Ichigo begins to study the hallways, trying to keep his mind from wandering to the endless possibilities of tonight. Much like the Naberius Estate, this place reflects the wealth and power of the Gremory Clan; from the artwork to the decorations, Ichigo can only imagine the money they have spent over the centuries to amass the displayed fortune that he is walking by. Soon however, the hallways become simpler and the doors begin to space out more and more, though his only thought is that the rooms must be steadily growing larger in size the closer they get to the main family's wing of the mansion. Finally, the crimson Gremory Heiress stops before a door and pauses with some trepidation.

"Rias?" Ichigo inquires after a few seconds of her not moving.

She glances at him with a slight blush, then murmurs to him. "This will be the first time you've been in my room Ichigo; besides my family and Yuuto, no other male has ever stepped foot in here before."

"Is there something I should be aware of then?" He sees her blush deepen then.

"Yes, well...Let's just get this over with." Taking a deep breath, she opens the door and walks in briskly, leaving him to stand by himself until he leisurely walks in and stops just two paces into her room.
"That's what I did too." Ichigo hears Yoruichi say, but his eyes are glued to the walls of his wife's room, where large photos of them are hanging from nearly every surface that is available.

He sees photos of the first day he is with the family, all the way up to just before they left for Hueco Mundo to rescue the Queen of his peerage. Most of the pictures are of them snuggling together whether they are awake or sleeping, though the biggest of them, which thankfully hides both of their bodies from the neck down, is the night he confessed to Rias in the bath. Looking over at Rias, he sees his new wife looking down and with her back turned to him. Shaking his head to clear his shock, Ichigo walks up to her and wraps his arm around her waist.

"Don't let Zu and Karin see this…you'll never hear the end of it." He kisses the top of her head then, and he hears the two older women in the room chuckle at them. "So Okaa-san…Okaa-san, what's up?"

Venelana and Yoruichi share a glance then, and they both smile before a magic circle appears beneath all of them, much to the younger couple's surprise. When the light fades, they are outside somewhere and standing before a modest looking cottage that seems just large enough for two people to live in. In front of the doors are several packed suitcases and two large Cerberus guards who seem to be radiating pride and amusement.

"Ichigo, Rias, this is where you will spend your first night together as husband and wife, and you won't need to return until Sunday at six P.M. for dinner. We had this cottage specially built for you two on the grounds of the Naberius Estate, well away from the Elfin villages, but close enough for you to seek their help if you need any. The two Cerberus here have instructions to detain anyone who might…try and spy on you two. In other words, if Isshin or Kisuke try to do anything, these Cerberus have orders to bite their asses." The golden eyed woman says without any concern for the two targeted men.

Two young faces immediately grow crimson as they know what the werecat is implying. Neither dare to look at the other while their mothers are watching them, and Venelana laughs before she approaches her daughter and kisses her heated cheeks then.

"There are so many things I want to say to you, but all I can think to say to you now is…have a wonderful night." She ends it with a whisper and a hug.

"I will Mother, we…we've been waiting for this night for so long, I know Ichigo will make it special for both of us." Rias says as she hugs her mother back.

Looking at the two Gremory women hugging each other, Ichigo arches an eyebrow at the purple-haired goddess who is his adopted mother then. "Thanks for all this, Yoruichi."

"See you tomorrow." She pats his cheek lightly, then gives him a brief hug.

Both older women turn to the Cerberus and give them some last-minute instructions, and when they are finished, the two women wave to the newlyweds before disappearing in a magic circle. Both Hell Hounds then bow as well before they lope away and begin their security patrol of the area surrounding the cottage. Once everyone is out of sight, the two young Devils take deep breaths before they pick up their suitcases and walk inside.

Looking around them, Ichigo can't believe the place their families have created for them in less than a week. In the middle of the large living room, they see a fireplace burning with flames already; to one side of the living room they see the kitchen, and to the other side a large open bedroom that is slightly elevated above the living room floor, with a door further inside that leads to the bathroom. The ceiling looms high over their heads, and a small table is already set up in the
living room with two covered plates and two large glasses, a bottle of champagne sitting in an ice bucket next to it chilling.

"I guess we should eat before we take a bath." Rias remarks wryly as she makes her way over to the bedroom to change out of her current clothing.

Meandering towards the table, the first thing Ichigo notices is that there are no windows on any of the walls at all, which causes him to laugh silently as he knows that more than likely, Sui-Fēng, Sasha, and Merti had a hand in how the cottage was built. Fortunately, the faint breeze coming from somewhere lets him know that proper ventilation won't be an issue, otherwise he dreads to think what the fireplace will do to their enclosed cottage. Placing his bags near the table, the orange-haired Devil then lifts the covers off the plates and his eyes widen when he sees the little morsels of cheeses, crackers, chocolates and sweets they are covered with. This has to be Yuzu, Orihime and Uryū's contribution for tonight; the last thing he notices, which causes his eyes to roll are the Chappy dollies under everything, which is obviously Rukia's and Nelliel's handiwork.

'Dann Midget, I'll make sure there are no bunnies in her wedding or reception.' He snarks inwardly as he walks towards the bedroom and the futons, two large ones that are placed side by side.

"Ichigo, do you want to change?" Rias asks as she begins pulling her gown off, giving him a perfect view of the white lace panties and bra that she is wearing over smooth skin.

"Ichigo?" She turns and sees his eyes wandering up and down her well-toned frame. Striking a pose, she asks him coyly. "Or maybe we should eat nude?"

"That's fine with me." He replies absently, and she can see him still staring at her as if in a daze. Pulling his face down, she kisses him thoroughly. "Go get out of your suit, and find me when you're done changing."

Nodding hazily, Ichigo does as she says, bringing his suitcase away from the table and dropping it into the nearest corner from his futon; he opens the larger one and finds several changes of clothes, mostly loungewear and nightwear, and one formal set for him to wear for dinner tomorrow. Opening the other smaller case, he finds his toiletries, smart phone and a small computer tablet inside. Turning on the tablet, he sees a Bluetooth icon blinking; when he touches it, soft music begins to play from hidden speakers in the cottage. Grinning to himself, he uses the volume control on the tablet to lower the volume so that they can barely hear the music playing in the background.

Quickly kicking his clothes off, he grabs his favorite sweats and t-shirt and throws them on. Padding across the floor in his bare feet, the orange-haired Devil sits down opposite his crimson-haired wife who is waiting for him in her white lace bra and panties. Turning her glass over, Ichigo pops off the cork of the champagne bottle and pours her glass first, then his. Tipping their glasses together with a clink, she gives the toast.

"To us." She smiles at him.

"To us." Comes his reply.

After sipping the bubbly drink, the two share a quiet time together, each feeding the other small bite sized treats and sharing heated glances in between small talk. Forty minutes later, the plates are more than half empty, and the champagne bottle is tipped over and empty. The newly married couple sits across from each other, neither knowing what to do next until Rias stands and holds her hand out to him.
"We should take a quick bath Ichigo…before…bed." Her face flushes when she looks at the futons.

Gulping and nodding his head, Ichigo stands to his feet and lets her lead the way. Once they enter the bathroom, they both strip off their clothes with their backs to each other, Rias sitting on her stool first, and Ichigo sitting behind her. Going through their normal routine, the teens wash each other's backs before they join each other in the tub. Slowly the washing becomes touches and caresses, and then more intimate touches begin to take place. Heavy breathing and moans of pleasure fill the steamy room until the crimson-haired beauty forces herself to slowly back away.

"Ichigo…can you give me a few minutes…to…ah…prepare…" She looks at him shyly then, her body still shivering with pleasure from his touches.

Ichigo leans forward and kisses her once. "I'll turn the bed down and wait." He tells her.

"Thank you Ichigo, I won't be long." She kisses him back eagerly.

Watching her husband as he lifts himself out of the tub, Rias sees him rinse quickly under a shower head before he dries off his body. Tossing the towel to the side, he makes no effort to put any clothes on as he leaves, Rias's eyes watching his backside the entire time he is in the bathroom until he passes out of sight. The Gremory Heiress then quickly hurries and shaves her bikini line before she gets out of the tub and rinses herself off. Drying her hair with a warm fluffy towel, she rubs baby lotion all over her body to moisten her skin and then pulls out the white sheer négligée she has been saving for tonight. Looking herself over in the bathroom mirror, she takes one deep breath, then another, and then makes for the door, the light shining from the bathroom silhouetting her nearly nude body.

"Ichigo…do you like it?" She asks her husband seductively as she poses for him.

When no answer comes, she tilts her head and looks into the darkness at their shared futon where she can see Ichigo waiting. "Ichigo?"

Deciding to add a bit of sway to her hips, she slowly paces across the room to their bedding and stands over him with her hands on her hips, cooing softly to him. "Iicchhiiggooo…." When still no answer is forthcoming, she frowns as she gets on her hands and knees and crawls over his body, looking down at his face questioningly.

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Covering her mouth with one hand, the other wrapped painfully around her ribs, she tries desperately to hold back her own laughter at the situation, but the white Zanpakutō spirit that is acting out on the other side of her makes that a nearly impossible task. Zangetsu is bent on his knees, his forehead touching the ground in front of him as his hand keeps slapping the black stone under him repeatedly. His other hand is in the same position as hers, wrapped around his rib cage to protect his ribs, and then after sucking in a deep breath he starts laughing even harder as he collapses onto his back. She loses it then and lets her own laughter join his, both of them rolling about the rooftop as they keep on laughing.

"It…it…it isn't funny Zangetsu! It could've happened to anyone who had the same day he had, so stop!" She giggles helplessly, knowing it won't make any difference to either of them.

"Make it stop first Michi, please make it stop! Hahahahahahah! Oh god! Please make it stop! It's killing me!" Is the Zanpakutō spirit's answer to her pleas.
"Zangetsu…it's…it's…ha..hahahahaha…I can't help it! I can't help myself…hahahahahahah…poor
Rias-san…they'll never get a break…hahahahahha…"

"See, I told you! Hahahaha…"

"I know, but…still…it…not…his fault! We…we…really should feel…bad for…them!" She
winces then as her ribs ache from all that laughing.

"No way Michi, no way! Tell me, how…how many…how many men do you know would fall
asleep on their wedding night!?"

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As she walks through the quieted hallways, the brown eyed healer keeps smiling to herself as she relives the memories of the young Bael heir. All night long he stayed by her side; dancing, talking and even just keeping her company as they sat together amongst the three Clans. Sometime during the latter part of the festivities, they had managed to find a quiet corner to themselves and just talk. Sairaorg had shown great interest in her 'human' life before she joined Ichigo and the others as part of his peerage. He had also been surprised to learn that she had already fought in a war and was greatly disappointed in the tale of her captivity. Sairaorg was quite insightful when she tried to hide her feelings about her deceased captor, but after careful prodding on his part, she found herself telling the young nobleman everything.

It was during her talk with Sairaorg that she finally realized what Ichigo had truly given her: not a man she could love romantically, but instead a brother she could call as her own once again. Isshin, the twins and Ichigo had given her what she had been missing since her brother had passed away, a real family. Because of them and Tatsuki, she was never going to be alone in her life again. Orihime had always had moments when she felt truly alone after her brother Sora passed away, at least until she met Tatsuki Arisawa and from that day onwards she and the spiky-haired martial artist became the best of friends. Then she met Ichigo Kurosaki for the second time.

That first day of high school after seeing his bright orange hair and hearing his name again, she remembered that terrible night and realized that he was the same Ichigo who was now standing in front of her best friend and talking. Then shortly afterwards, it began: her new life, her real life. It wasn't long after Rukia Kuchiki broke into Ichigo's room that she became aware of the existence of Shinigami and the afterlife itself when he and the petite Shinigami helped her brother's spirit pass over to the other side. Her own powers then blossomed into creation between Ichigo's uncontrollable Reiatsu and the Hōkyoku answering her deepest desire to protect her best friend
Tatsuki during that fateful challenge between the Quincy Uryū Ishida and the new Substitute Shinigami Ichigo, although they only found out the details much later.

Retelling the Bael heir everything she had gone through from rescuing Rukia from her execution to the final battle in Soul Society had been therapeutic to the gentle healer. It was also during her conversation with the Devil heir of the Bael Clan that she could admit to herself she was slowly growing used to the idea that she could love someone else in that manner other than Ichigo. Sadly, she also knew that it wouldn't be those who had stood by her all this time.

Uryū had always treated her kindly whenever Ichigo had seemed distant to her in the past. She could admit she had seen the signs coming from the Quincy archer, but she didn't want to let go of her feelings for Ichigo back then. Uryū then witnessed her reaction when the Cuarto Espada disappeared while reaching for her hand, and he understood that he wouldn't be that special person in her heart. Chad had stood by her side when Ichigo was training to subdue his inner-Hollow, but unlike the Quincy teen, he knew his place was to protect her from harm. The two males had become her best friends as well, and now they were all together once more, having tied their fates to Ichigo's for good.

The last man to truly influence her life was no longer among the living; wherever he was, she could only hope that it had finally freed him from his endless solitude and loneliness. She smiles sadly as she thinks about Ulquiorra Cifer, almost, almost wishing that because of her, she had made him feel something other than never-ending emptiness. In that last instant when he reached for her, she could see in his eyes that he wanted to feel her touch once he understood what having a heart really meant, and when his body disappeared into a cloud of ash, she felt her heart ache in quiet mourning.

In any case, each male had only confirmed what she wanted to deny in her heart, but it was Ichigo himself who had given her the greatest number of clues that she was never going to reach her goal of capturing his heart. Despite all of Rangiku's encouragement, the young healer somehow knew Ichigo was destined for someone else, someone who wasn't her. Her money had been on the violet-eyed Shinigami who had become his best friend, but Rukia had told her once they reunited in the Underworld that she did confess to the orange-haired Devil and he had gently declined her admission.

Rukia then told her that when Renji finally asked her brother for permission to court her, she knew Ichigo had been right, that there was someone already in Soul Society waiting for her. Rukia's life had always been in and would always be in Soul Society, while Ichigo's was in the World of the Living. The Squad Thirteen Lieutenant figured it was either Orihime or Tatsuki that he was holding feelings for, although the young healer knew he did not; never in her dreams however did she think it would be a Devil who would capture Ichigo's heart, but Rias did that and more.

"Someday I'll fall in love and get married too…" Orihime sighs hopefully as she opens the door to her room and freezes when she sees just who is waiting inside.

The familiar young light-haired twin speaks with sly eagerness on behalf of the filled room. "So Orihime-nee…is there something you want to share with us?"

"Yeah, big Sis. Did you and Sairaorg have a nice…date?" The other dark-haired twin smirks as the females of all three Naberius peerages and most of the Gremory peerage are sitting or lying around in her room, grinning or smiling at the burnt-orange-haired healer.

As Orihime considers escaping, her best friend steps behind her, stopping any thoughts of running away. "If you try and run, we'll tell Ichigo…and you know how he'll get Hime, so…spill it."
"Spill...what...exactly...Tatsuki?" She gulps nervously.

"Hime...Hime...Hime...we've been watching you all night. Did you forget the older Devils have familiars?"

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Tatianna stands before the assembled Devils and Shinigami in front of her, while behind her sits her family: her sisters Merti and Sasha, both are sitting stoically while they wait for her to begin.

The dark blue-haired Elf exhales gently and looks first at her Lord; seeing him nod, she begins her report. "As many of you in this room are well aware of; our Lord's wife, son and daughter-in-law were taken from us by a well-prepared and efficiently planned ambush. What no one outside of the Clan has ever been told is that the person directly responsible for this traitorous act...was an Elf from the Longoak Clan. A young man who betrayed his people and saviors after we were freed from the Old Maou Faction by the Naberius Clan, he...his loyalties were never to the Naberius Clan, his only loyalty was to power and wealth. When he was contacted by our enemies with an offer of both and given his first chance to prove his skills, he turned on the Clan and helped set up the ambush that nearly wiped out the only bloodline that can keep the Skeleton Tower from spilling its contents upon the human world."

After taking a steadying breath, she continues speaking. "His treachery was only discovered when Lord Amyntas returned alive and ordered Sasha to find out how our enemies knew that he and his family were going to be in the Human world. That traitor must have known he would be the first to be interrogated because when Sasha went to find him, he had already vanished. The proof of his guilt lay in the small cache of gold coins found hidden in his room; they bore the mark of Shalba Beelzebub. While old coins from the previous regime still linger, there were too many for him to have acquired them normally or properly account for; our understanding was that he was hoarding them either to exchange them for wealth in the human world, or to use them once the old regime tries to resume their position of power, but either way, he wasn't able to retrieve them all before he had to flee."

Pausing, she shares a look with her two sisters before she finishes her report. "We have never stopped searching for the traitor, and because of Ichigo's duel earlier this evening, we are positive he will seek out not only Ichigo...but his sisters as well. Orihime might be safe as she is not a true Naberius, but she must be guarded at all times lest they use her as a hostage and a negotiation tool. You can all assume Lord Ichigo will not react kindly if Lady Orihime was to be kidnapped a second time. Which is why we are here now: our plan is to have Byakuya Longoak pose as yet another new teacher at the twins' middle school, and Renji Abarai has agreed to patrol the area along with elite members of the Elfin Clans. Ichigo will be the primary bait as we have discussed with him before the duel; we will force the traitor and any assassins to concentrate on him once they realize the twins are too hard of a target to reach. There is also one last thing we must emphasize to all of you however: his younger sisters are not to know that he has willingly accepted to act as the bait, that is his only demand."

Isshin sighs as he sinks deeper into the couch. "They'll never forgive him when, and I know my girls, they will find out what's going on."

The blue-haired Elf turns to look at him. "Be it as it may Lord Shiba, Ichigo and his peerage are very well aware of the consequences of their actions. However, rest assured we have a few small surprises awaiting anyone who actually tries." The third Longoak sister says reassuringly.

The purple-haired Shihōin princess leans forward in anticipation. "She's almost ready then?"
Tatianna smiles. "His assumption that she would make a fine Queen proved most...fortuitous."

Rubbing his eyes as he yawns, Issei has to stifle a scream when he feels an unfamiliar weight sleeping on his chest. Slowly, as his eyes focus, he sees blonde hair filling his vision. Blood starts to rush to his face, and the young Pawn bites his tongue to keep from yelling out when he sees the familiar blonde girl only wearing a thin nightgown and curled up on his body. Lifting the blanket, he internally sighs to himself in relief as he sees that he is also wearing his night clothes.

'Nothing happened...To think I almost though I didn't remember losing my virginity...but what is she doing in here anyway?' The Longinus holder wonders.

[She didn't feel like sleeping alone last night Issei-san. That is what I heard her say when she snuck into your bed early this morning. I think she didn't want to be alone after the night she had, and she trusts you enough to sleep beside you. You must have made an impression on my young wielder.]

'All I did was stay and talk to her all night Ddraig.'

[Sometimes it is the little things that women appreciate Issei-san, you paid attention to her and made her feel that she was part of the peerage and not an outsider. All her life, she has only experienced people using her for their own selfish gains. And the betrayal she suffered after healing that Devil must have truly hurt her heart and soul.] The Dragon's reminder fills Issei's heart with sadness after he remembers how the young nun had been excommunicated from the Church simply for using her powers to heal a wounded Devil, one whose true nature she wasn't even aware of at the time.

Her life after that had been one of constant movement, being sent from one group of Fallen Angels and their human supporters to the next for a number of years. All throughout her exile, she had only met two Fallen Angels that hadn't treated her badly, none of whom she could remember, but they had each given her better clothes and warm food to eat. Outside of those instances, she had for the most part been forced to wear severely worn clothing and eat nothing more than porridge or gruel. She admitted to him that she had sometimes thought of running away; however, she lacked funds and also had no idea if they could track her or not, so she ended up never attempting to escape her lonely miserable life.

Asia also admitted that when she first met him, she had been wary of his kindness; it had only been when he took her out that day to have fun that she gradually felt she could trust him enough to consider him a friend. It had come as quite a shock to her when she learnt that her new friend was a Devil during the encounter that night with the former exorcist, a being that had caused her to be excommunicated in the first place; her hesitation had cost her a chance to escape with Issei then. When the Fallen Angels brought her back to the Church that night, she was sure that they were going to give her to Freed to do as he pleased, but surprisingly, the Fallen Angel Raynare had quickly put a stop to it before it could get out of hand. Issei had grimaced when he heard about that and silently vowed he would make that bastard Exorcist pay for daring to hurt Asia, but most importantly, he also felt some sadness for Raynare's fate despite everything she had done to him. That was how he knew that the scar she left in his heart still remained.

Issei knew he was weak, weaker than most of his King's peerage in terms of power, weaker than the newest members of the Naberius peerages. It is why he is going to see Ichigo and Rias on Monday, to ask them for extra training. Gulping, he sees black sclera with golden orbs staring at him in his psyche then; Zangetsu was scary enough just from looking at you, but having to battle
him, and then both Zanpakutō and Devil together someday to prove his worth weighs heavily on his consciousness. But seeing Ichigo fight Riser Phenex in the duel only cements his resolve to get stronger, and the only way he can do so now is to tap into the potential of Ddraig.

'Ddraig?'

[Yes Issei?]

'Please help me…I am asking you to show me how to wield your Sacred Gear,'

[You are on the right path now, Issei Hyoudou. Just keep training and learning from your Elders and Senpai; only through their knowledge will you find what you seek. Suffer and earn your fortitude; fall and pick yourself up; fight and earn their respect; and lastly… believe in your abilities, as well as in yourself. However…]

'However?'

[No more porn…I beg of you; to see another nude female form in such a manner…it makes my brain seize and my stomach twist into knots. I can actually feel illness setting in. And clean your room, it's a pigsty. Should you ever feel inclined to invite Asia-chan over someday, she will most assuredly find your…ehmm…your materials and your tissues…your used tissues...]

'…?...'

["..."o_0"...]

'Oh shit!'

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Uryū sits next to his father quietly as they eat their meal, the younger man contemplating the events of last night that for the first time has him questioning his future as a Quincy. Taking a glance at the table filled with giggling teens, all of them of the female persuasion, he sees the object of his thoughts sitting between Rukia and Candice; Akeno Himejima. The black-haired female Devil had made it a point to stick to his side until well after midnight when most of the younger Devils finally went back to their rooms, many of them tired from the long day they had endured. Starting from the moment he arrived with Ichigo and his clan however, the former Miko-in-training had kept almost every single Devil well away from him with a simple stare or a small demonstration of her magic; mainly the crackling of electricity from her free hand. Her other hand firmly gripping his arm that she had somehow wormed her way through.

During the duel she had stayed close to him, guiding him through the various meanings of what the laws of Devil society were, pointing out what types of magic were being used during the fight and voicing her worry when it looked like Ichigo was going to kill the third son of the Phenex Clan. She had only left his side briefly to support her King, allowing him to keep an eye on Orihime and note her discomfort at the reminder of Ichigo's rampaging Hollow form. When the duel had concluded, he was teleported alongside Akeno to the center of the arena so that they could be present when his cousin officially proposed to her King in front of the entire ensemble of the Underworld's Devil noble society.

After that, the only time they spent apart was when Akeno was required to be with Rias as she prepared for her wedding, just like he had been shanghaied by Yoruichi to help create Ichigo's
wedding Kimono. After the wedding…he still shivers as he remembers the feelings of Akeno's soft body pressed against his as they danced throughout the night, the Queen of the Gremory peerage laughing and smiling the entire time and making him blush fiercely due to her not-so-subtle hints of wanting an even closer relationship with him.

"Is there something wrong Uryū?" His stoic father asks while continuing to read the Underworld's version of a newspaper.

Taking one more glance at his interest, he sees her glance at him with a smiling face, and her accompanying wink at him causes him to blush even harder. "No…no Father, I am well."

'If all it takes for Himejima-chan to make you blush is just a simple smile and wink, I wonder what would happen if you did decide to become a man and pursue her Uryū.' The older Ishida thinks with a hidden grin, making sure to keep the newspaper between his face and his son.

"Father?" Ryūken glances over his newspaper and sees the red on his son's cheeks.

Turning the page and then taking a sip of his coffee, Ryūken Ishida looks at his son from the corner of his eye. "We are the last two Quincy alive Uryū; the prospect of finding a wife for you among our kind is no longer feasible, hence I will not object to you seeking a marriage based on love."

Seeing his son staring at him with shock, Ryūken lowers his newspaper, then he takes his glasses off and sets them on the table as well. "You know the history of Masaki and I, Uryū; there is no need to dwell on the past, so I will get to the point. Our marriage was only to be of political convenience, a marriage between two purebloods of Quincy heritage, intended to keep our race from dying out. I never for a moment thought she would marry me for love; I rather expected her to leave our home the moment she graduated from high school and seek a life away from Karakura and the Ishida family to be honest. But fate stepped in and…well you know the rest my son. What I'm trying to say to you, Uryū, is if you have feelings for 'someone' and someday it leads to you asking for her hand in marriage, I will give you my blessings now and support your decision."

Uryū's mind goes blank momentarily as his father's words went make themselves known in his head. Slowly, a smile forms on the younger man's lips as he speaks. "Thank you…Dad."

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"Gah! Zangetsu what the hell are you doing here?" Ichigo shouts as his eyes open and he immediately sees his Zanpakutō spirit staring down at him.

Black teeth start grinning back at him as the sword spirit speaks to him. "Oi King…did you forget about something last night?"

"Last night? What about…OH SHIT! Don't tell me I…I…fell asleep…on her?" Ichigo's voice ends with a squeak as he finishes asking his question, his memories of last night slowly catching up to his now extremely active brain.

"Well you certainly made for some pretty good laughs in here… Ouch dammit Michi stop hitting me. Not my fault, he did ask… Wait one minute; you were laughing just as hard… OWWW! Okay! Okay I'll lay off for now. Damn teenager… So, to answer your question Ichigo, yeah you fell asleep on the Queen."

Banging the back of his head on the solid stone floor, Ichigo covers his face with both hands and begins moaning to himself. A soft kick to his side makes him glare at the now standing Zanpakutō
spirit.

"Oi, what the hell!?"

Zangetsu reaches out and lifts the grouchy Devil to his feet. "Before you go and make it up to her Ichigo, we need to talk about the duel first."

"Yeah, kinda figured we should. Did you figure out how we knew how to use them yet?" The Naberius Devil asks cautiously.

Shaking his head, the white Ichigo clone looks at an empty spot on the Tower's roof and grimaces. "I think there is someone else watching over us Ichigo. I don't know who or why, but I have the gut feeling we'll be okay for now. I don't think they want to hurt us either, but protect us instead for whatever reason. So, I ain't gonna look a gift-horse in the mouth and say no to their help."

Ichigo looks up as his Zanpakutō spirit pauses, watching as the emotions play across Zangetsu's face; just when he is about to ask what is wrong, the sword spirit speaks. "When you find some free time…I think you're ready."

Ichigo's eyes widen, then his back slumps and he casts his eyes downward. "I'm ready? Are you sure Zangetsu? You made it clear you weren't going to let me in there unless…"

"You proved you're ready since you took your training seriously, even your dancing lessons." Zangetsu grins as he watches Ichigo blanch at those memories.

"Seriously though Ichigo, you made vast improvements in your abilities and you didn't panic even when you came close to dying yesterday. I think I did enough of that for the both of us; you did what I told you to do even as you were fighting to stay conscious out there in the arena, you listened and gave me the time to heal you. So even in the midst of that, you kept your head on and proved to me you are ready to face the contents of the Skeleton Tower. Remember this well though Ichigo Naberius: when we enter the Skeleton Tower from your inner-world, it will still be as if we enter from the real world, do you understand?"

"Yeah, I do Zangetsu. He's really in there, isn't he?" The sword spirit sighs internally as he watches Ichigo reflexively clenching his hands into tight fists.

"He is. I honestly don't know how, but he is." Zangetsu releases his anger subconsciously as he sees his wielder's face briefly sour in distaste.

Looking over the landscape, Ichigo sits down between two of the parapets then. "Aizen Sōsuke is in the Skeleton Tower. I hope he is at least enjoying his 'accommodations' then."

"Don't forget that other asshole is there too Ichigo." He smirks when he sees a gleam in his wielder's eyes.

Leaning backwards, the former Shinigami smiles as he looks at a passing pack of Cerberus off in the distance, speaking in fondly malicious remembrance. "Yeah...I'll make sure to see him too then. Let him know that Shibata Yūichi made it safely to Soul Society despite everything he did to the child and his mother. I'll definitely let Chad know he can visit as soon as he earns the rights to his Hell Chains."

"You're taking the news better than I thought Ichigo." Zangetsu says as he sits down next to
Ichigo, looking to see Michi sitting down on his free side as well.

Both spirits watch the emotions play across the young hybrid Devil's face as he continues to stare outwards. Zangetsu knows the emotions that are flowing from his wielder but he chooses to stay silent, waiting for Ichigo to talk when he's ready. Turning to look down at his female companion however, the Zanpakutō spirit quirks an eyebrow when he notices she's grown even more since last night. Instead of a young teen, she now looks to be at least eighteen or nineteen. Shaking his head slightly, he turns his head outwards to observe the world that is his home.

The forest that was once sparse is now thriving and growing ever closer to the damaged landscape to remove the stain of their battle with the false spirit from their inner-world. Among the changes is a growing population of beasts that call the Underworld home, such as Cerberus, crows, and all manner of creatures of the night. Since the awakening of their last bloodline, this world is slowly reflecting the power that flows through their veins and souls. They were true hybrids; an amalgamation of Quincy, Hollow, Shinigami and Devil heritages, with the Naberius blood once awakened having changed his wielder into a pureblood of the Underworld, a nobleman of the Seventy-Two Pillars. He wonders if he would have ever been born if Ichigo had been born a true Devil; if the King would have become the person he is right now. Snorting, he knows the answer in his heart: just the thought of being anything else rubs his wielder's soul the wrong way, so there is no doubt he would have ended up the same.

Soon the orange-haired Devil moves and catches the Zanpakutō spirit's eye. "King?"

"Let's hold off on seeing the inside for a few days okay? I...want to enjoy my weekend with Rias." Ichigo looks at his inner-spirit hopefully.

"Off you go then Ichigo, don't worry, once I feel that you and the Queen need some privacy I'll just hide out in my private cubbyhole. Just yell if you need me though; I'm always ready." He stands up along with his wielder.

Turning as if to leave, Ichigo pauses a moment before speaking to his white self. "There's no one else I'd rather have as my Zanpakutō than you, Zangetsu."

Before the Hollowfied blade can respond, Ichigo is gone, an overwhelming sense of pride hanging in the air around the two remaining spirits.

"He's right Zangetsu, no one could be prouder of their partner than he is."

Turning to face away from the young woman, he kneels down so she can climb on his back, so she doesn't see the moisture in his tear ducts as the two Flash Step away.

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Blue eyes watch the twitching face that is under her scrutiny with fascination. Ever since her husband began to stir awake a few minutes ago, the heiress made herself more than comfortable on his firm chest. A faint blush forms on her face as she straddles his legs, her body maintaining a very close distance between their pelvic areas. Her chin resting on top of her folded arms, Rias Gremory Naberius smiles as her husband of less than a day finally begins to blink his eyes open to the morning. The heat radiating from his nude body against hers causes the young wife to snuggle closer to her bonded partner, her arms wrapping themselves around his neck as her head reaches his lips. Quickly silencing any apology, he is going to try and make, the red-haired Devil's teeth lovingly nibbles his lower lip. His eyes widen as she lifts her body above his, her hair forming a curtain of crimson to hide their slowly reddening faces. Staring down into his brown orbs, she speaks lustfully to him.
"We will never speak of last night husband. It wasn't your fault; nor was it mine. You were tired from the day you had and I understand, I truly do. However, I will tell you this. If you think for one second, we are leaving this bed before we become man and wife in body and spirit, I will show you why the men of the Gremory Clan fear to arouse the anger of their women. Need I say any more Ichigo?" She smiles as he firmly shakes his head in answer.

Leaning until her lips are at his ears, she gives him the last needed bit of encouragement. "I've waited long enough my husband; don't make me wait any longer."

Ichigo lifts his hand to his wife's face; cupping her cheek, he draws her in for a kiss. As their lips meet, they begin to share their love in their passionate touches, he feels her hand ghosting over his skin before lazily trailing down his pectorals, leaving behind small faint circles upon his bare skin with her fingertips. Every so often he feels her nails lightly rake his skin, causing him to shiver at how intimate she makes her touches feel. Needing to reciprocate her actions, he tilts them over until his wife settles to one side of the futon, pulling back until he is looking into her slightly glazed eyes. Leaning into her once again, he begins leaving behind butterfly kisses that start on her soft cheek before moving down her jaw line to her neck. Now and then he pauses to suck on a spot he knows will stimulate the crimson-haired beauty. Ichigo hides his growing enthusiasm each time she moans and her nails dig lightly into his skin when he sucks on one of her erogenous zones.

He soon reaches her breasts, a small thought forming in his head as he makes his decision. Smiling, he softly nips at her while he seals his lips on the skin surrounding her areola; with a light inhale of his breath, he sucks on her now protruding nipple. Nails dig into his stomach as she puffs her chest out to close the distance between them, letting out a loud moan. Using his free hand, he snakes it around her waist and draws her close to his bare skin, his body shifting until he has her lying flat on her back. Never taking his lips off her breast, he uses one hand to hold himself up over her to begin tracing the flesh downward between the valley of her heaving chest. Shifting to the unattended side of her chest with his mouth, his free hand slows as he begins to thread them downwards through her trimmed pubic area. Her quickening pants and lifting of her hips to greet his winding digits emboldens him to dip his pointer finger through her moistening outer folds.

He almost yelps when she bites his earlobe and whispers menacingly into his ear. "Don't you dare take much longer Ichigo."

She isn't left waiting for long; her moans suddenly grow louder when his long fingers part her moistening folds, his thumb rubbing her hooded pearl vigorously in response to her demand. Switching back and forth, he nips, sucks and pinches her breasts as his hand manipulates her growing heat. His thoughts almost shut down when her hand encircles his own growing arousal and a steady pumping rhythm soon matches his own. As her hand reaches the top of his hard organ, her finger rubs the slit at its tip. Once or twice she rubs the sensitive flesh there before she lets her hand glide down the inches of her husband's blood-filled shaft. He can't help it when he starts to buck his hips in time with her movements.

"Riaassss." He sucks hard on the current object of his attention.

She responds by quickening her pace. "I won't wait much longer…husband. No more foreplay Ichigo, make us complete now. We…have been patient for long enough."

A growl erupts from his throat in answer to her demands as he grabs her hands and pins them on either side of her head, her half-lidded eyes gazing lovingly up at him as he uses his hips and legs to settle himself between her thighs, his erection sliding along her folds, lubricating his shaft as he grinds his pelvis against hers. Settling his weight on her body, he lifts one of his wife's legs and
begins to align their bodies, his tip penetrating her outer petals making both of them shiver as he
starts to push himself fully into her tight canal. His lips catch hers as he moves past her inner folds
and the walls of her womanhood begin to stretch to accommodate his first access. The sheer heat
and tightness of her walls makes him slow his entrance slightly as he wants both of them to
appreciate the skin-on-skin contact that marks the beginning of their life of marriage.

This is the moment the two young lovers had waited so eagerly for. Everything they had shared
and done over the past few months, all of it leading them to this one act they had dared not commit
until they were married. Each act of pleasure during the weeks leading to their first time had made
it easy for the two young Devils to learn what brought the most pleasure to their significant other.
Now he is ready to end their long wait as he pushes forward once more. His shaft slowly
penetrating her until he is pushing against the barrier that marks the last of their innocence, he
pauses then and takes a deep breath, she does as well and both young adults forcibly relax.

Ichigo snaps forward and muffles his own pain as his wife bites deep into his shoulder as he
sheaths himself fully inside her. Both had known this part would be the hardest and she had told
him to make it fast for the both of them. He stays absolutely still as she lets her body adjusts to the
sudden intrusion, smelling the metallic tang of iron in the air, her spilled virgin blood mixed with
the blood from his shoulder bringing a sense of finality to the act. He kisses the tears that are
leaking from the corner of her eyes; using one hand, he runs his fingers through her long tresses,
his voice urging her to relax and let the pain pass. His eyes roll into the back of his head when her
inner walls subconsciously clench around his hardness as he holds her tightly in his arms. After
evening out his breathing and giving both of them a few more minutes, he pulls back out slightly
and pushes back again into her, feeling her teeth sinking even deeper into his skin, but a shudder
and moan of pleasure slips from her throat as her insides throb around him.

The Gremory heiress can't believe how her body is feeling right now; the nerves in her lower body
feel like they are exploding exponentially with pleasure after the breach of her virginity, the pain
she knew she would feel already fading after the first few minutes of their joining. The first shift of
her husband's length inside of her brings forth entirely new feelings after the pain is gone; she can't
help the moan of approval as her insides welcome the tingling that is now sparking up and down
her inner walls. When he slides out even more, she worries she's done something wrong, only to
have him assuage her fears as he pushes back in with an even harder, faster thrust that sends ripples
of pleasure up her body.

"Ichigo." She barely whispers as her body grips him, holds him before she relaxes and lets him pull
almost all the way out again before he snaps forward once more, sending a brief scream of pleasure
erupting from her throat.

The newly-married Devil heir shivers each time he plumbs deep into his wife, her snug walls
holding him in place each time his body comes flush against her body, her hitching breaths urging
him to push harder as she grows more accustomed to his length, and he obliges her request readily
enough. His hand snakes down between their bodies and he tweaks her nipple which elicits a
pleasured growl from his crimson-haired wife, her hand raking down his spine leaving her own
marks as she pushes her hips upwards to match his own downward thrusts into her eagerly waiting
depths. Both Devils sigh out with longing when he pauses momentarily, each catching their breaths
as they pause in their first married act of sexual bliss; his sweat dripping down to join hers on her
heaving chest.

"I feel so incredible Ichigo." She kisses his chin as he holds his body just a space above her.

As her lips find his Adam's apple, he flexes his lower abdominal muscles, causing her to inner
walls to squeeze him hard. "Rias..."
"This is only the beginning Ichigo, the first of many for the rest of our lives." She tilts her head up and joins her lips to his as he begins to move his hips to the rhythm of hers again.

She almost squeals out when he rolls them over so she can dominate the pace by being on top, which she does as she places both her hands on his chest, lifting her hips, and slowly dropping her body down, pausing as her pelvis meets his. Smirking, she grinds her sensitive button against his coarse pubic hair; the extra friction sending jolts of pleasure throughout her system. Rolling her hips forward and back, she watches his hands almost rip the sheets under him as she contracts her muscles in a rippling motion along the entire length of his rigid appendage. Leaning down, she lets her hair fall on either side of his face as she increases the pace, rocking back and forth even faster, she feels it deep inside her abdomen, the coiled heat building quicker as her nub continuously rubs against his pubic hair and his manhood swells larger in her passage.

She knows she is close to her release. The feeling is no longer alien to her after Ichigo had done the same to her during their nights in bed with only his hands and tongue, she remembers how incredible it felt, and this is promising to be an even greater release. His hands and tongue, while excellent at igniting her nerves, have now been surpassed; these feelings are on a completely different level, his length igniting her inner walls with sensations she had never thought she could experience, and she isn't able to get enough as her body finally lets go of her growing desire. The former Gremory Heiress's mind shuts down as the euphoria escapes her coiled muscles, her body wracking with pleasure as it shoots up and down her nerves.

Ichigo almost loses it when her walls tighten and quiver so hard around him, he rips the sheet under him to shreds with his straining fingers. Yet he is able to catch her as she starts to collapses towards his chest, even as he does everything he can to calm his racing heartbeat from their exhilarating copulation. The pleasure of being deep inside of her completely annihilates the frivolous notions he had been expecting after hearing the boasting others had claimed. Breathing deeply through his nose, he is assaulted by the scent of sweat from their exertions mixed with the fragrance of her herbal shampoo from last night, the suppleness of her skin under his calloused fingertips making silk seem rough in comparison; he smiles as his wife rolls her hips forward once more, eager to restore him to his full hardness. Her lips find his again as he intertwines their hands together and lifts his body up, allowing her to wrap her legs around his waist, all the while never letting their intimate contact be lost.

Breaking apart, Ichigo lays his forehead against hers. "I…I'm not going to last much longer Rias."

She nuzzles his face then and pecks the corner of his mouth. "I know. I want this Ichigo, I want to feel you inside me as you release. We will finish it together Ichigo."

Placing his hands on either side of his wife's head after gently laying her on her back again, Ichigo stares into her blue eyes and slowly penetrates her waiting canal once more, teasing her as he stops midway to steal a kiss. When she wiggles her hips, he smirks but answers her by swiftly plunging the rest of his manhood into her velvet passage, drawing out a moan from her. Holding still but for a few seconds, he retracts until only his tip is still inside, kissing her once more, he plunges in with a single deep thrust of his hips. Her smothered moans and feverish whispers of encouragement make him find a steady pace and she increases his pleasure by gripping his shaft as tightly as she can, squeezing her walls with each passage of his arousal until he begins to feel himself swelling again. His pace then becomes faster and more frantic, their moans growing steadily in volume until he joins her loud screaming as they finish as one.

Pressing into her without hurting her, he feels his manhood throb and pulse each time he leaves behind his essence into her protected womb, the sweat pouring off his body joining hers on the soaked, torn and filthy sheets beneath them. Both lovers are panting as they try to catch their
breathe from their first joining as husband and wife. Feeling a sudden tingling in his arms, he eases slowly from her passage before he drops to one side of his glowing Devil Heiress, her satisfied eyes staring hazily at the ceiling above her still. Smiling, he traces his fingers over one of her sensitive nipples which causes her to react with a moan.

"You okay Rias?" He lays his head in the crook of his arm as he keeps running his hand up and down the front of her body.

Nodding and moving so she is looking at him face to face, she smiles and her hand touches his cheek as she answers him. "I am glad we waited Ichigo, it was...wow." She smiles lovingly as she looks into his eyes, and a twinkle forms as she speaks again. "Just one question though?"

Quirking his eyebrow, he nods to her to ask, and she leans closer to him. "How long do we have to wait before doing it again?"

"Not long at all." He scoots over and begins kissing her softly as he moves her on to her back once more. "As a matter of fact, you should know that because I am Shinigami and Hollow, with a dash of Quincy...my recovery time is incredibly fast...my wife."

She arches up as he slips into her once more, once again taking possession of the protruding nubs of her chest as he begins to steer them on their next journey into the abyss.

'Mom and Grayfia grossly understated how incredible the first time really is.' She suddenly throws her head back and gasps when he hits her pleasurable spot with consecutive rapid thrusts, knowing that they won't stop until the lust they had built up over the months is finally sated.

XXXX End of Adult Situations. XXXX

When Amyntas, Yoruichi and Venelana walk into the dining room, they pause as they see both Isshin and Kisuke sitting on the floor with ice packs on their heads. Standing over them are quite a few women and teens, the youngest two consisting of Yuzu and Koneko who are still hitting the cowering Shinigami.

"Daddy! You will never ever, ever try that again! You're lucky Kimi found you instead of Merti-san or Sasha-san! How could you!? To try and spy on Ichi-nii and Rias-nee! That's! That's! Despicable!"

"You should know better as well Geta-Bōshi-san. You know once Yoruichi-san and Venelana-sama find out that you tried to spy on Onii-san and Onee-san on their wedding night, you will face severe..." She pauses as both mentioned women now occupy a spot behind the white-haired Neko-Devil hybrid.

"Sorry." Koneko smiles in fake sympathy as she steps aside for the two mothers.

Venelana Gremory normally would keep her temper in check when it came to the shenanigans of the two Shinigami now trying to find a place to hide from both her and the now crackling lightning-encased former assassin who is standing next to her, but she doesn't feel inclined towards showing mercy this time. Lifting her hands, she pauses as she speaks to the current Guardian of the Damned.

"Forgive me Amyntas, but this can't be overlooked."

A smirk forms on the other Devil's face as he erects a shield to protect his mansion and the bystanders, effectively cutting off any chance of escape for the two whimpering morons. "I wholeheartedly agree with you and Yoruichi, please proceed as you wish."
Yoruichi’s Shunkō powers up and her eyes glow white as she stares at her best friend. "I won't lie to you Kisuke, but I am so going to enjoy this."

"Wait! Wait! Wait! It's...it's a...ah...ah...misunderstanding Yori-chan! Honest! Kisuke and I got pretty loaded last night and...and...and got lost while walking around! Yeah, that's it! We got lost! Tell her Kisuke!" The elder Kurosaki-Shiba yells out.

Snapping his fan open and remembering that first dinner when Isshin threw him, Tessai and Yoruichi under the bus while trying to save his own skin and being a bit of a sadist, Kisuke smiles at his violent purple-haired best friend since he and Tessai began their careers as Shinigami together with her. "I cannot tell a lie to my beautiful Yoruichi. Isshin made me do it! He wanted to make sure Ichigo sealed the deal and became a man!"

The room grows quiet quickly then, all mouths dropping at the admission from the bucket-hatted man.

Suǐ-Fēng's head is bowed over; her petite fist silently pounding the table as her body quakes in stifled laughter. Over and over again she chants her internal mantra while giggling to herself. 'He's dead! He's dead! He's finally gonna die!'

Byakuya flips his paper to the next section and murmurs loudly enough for his sister and Lieutenant to hear. "I've always wished to see his mind finally crack."

Shinji props his chin on top of his fist and looks at his white-haired fellow Captain. "Now ya know what we had to live with while we were exiled."

"How did you ever manage?" Jūshirō responds as he watches the two irate women close in on the two cowering Shinigami.

"Sake. Lots of Sake."

Tatsuki glares at Orihime, Uryū and Chad and points at the former Squad Twelve Captain. "You let that moron train you so you could invade Soul Society!? Are you guys stupid or something!?"

Loud screams echo throughout the room as the two men begin receiving their punishments together. No one pauses in their breakfast, nor do they turn their eyes away from the spectacle as Isshin and Kisuke are 'counseled' on their inappropriate behavior. Lightning, both white and red engrave those lessons deep into the soft tissue of the two former Captains, now and then an open-handed slap or clenched fist accentuating their ire.

For ten minutes the two buffoons are 'lectured' and threatened with the most painful of deaths should either man ever get caught doing something so harebrained ever again, especially if they are caught trying to spy when three specific names are mentioned.

"Daddy! Y-You would spy on me!?” Yuzu's face goes scarlet as she imagines the worst.

Karin and Orihime both blush as red as the youngest sister, the dark-haired twin glares at her now drooling father and raises a closed fist. "Wait 'til I tell Ichigo what you did you jackass."

When the shield collapses, Venelana stops Orihime from healing her adoptive father and mentor.

"The pain will ensure their lesson is well learned Orihime. Please allow the staff to treat them normally. I trust you two will behave?” Her last comment is directed at the two now thoroughly-chastised morons.
Isshin shakily nods twice before passing out, Kisuke just falls backwards unconscious, a smile plastering his face. Shaking his head, Amyntas waves for his staff to take the two Shinigami to their rooms, instructing them to be seen by a physician as soon as possible and making sure they are only treated without the use of magic. Eyes roll as they are wheeled out of the dining room, Venelana still glaring at them as they leave. Yoruichi chuckles as she sits next to her former protégée and Amyntas. Raising her head, the Chinese Captain grins as she begins sipping her tea.

"No one would have missed him Yoruichi." The Squad Two Captain remarks candidly.

"True, but then we'd be haunted forever. You know how he devious he can be, he'd find a way back."

Twin braids nod in exasperated agreement, as the two now settling-down mothers sit next to their families to enjoy the rest of the meal. Talk starts up soon again and the topic of the duel begins to dominate the conversations between the Shinigami and Devils, with Jūshirō taking the lead as he asks the current Naberius Lord the meaning behind the duel.

"The duel is used to settle disputes between Clans, without the Clans themselves being directly affected by the two who have an issue that cannot be settled in any other manner. Also, it is always made public so that neither side can cheat or use lethal means to achieve their victory. During the dark years of our history, death was often the only way for a duel to end, but when the Old Maou Faction was defeated, Sirzechs Lucifer abolished that outcome from further use to prevent the remaining purebloods from being wiped out over petty differences. In this case, Ichigo and Rias chose this path to free her from the arrangements her…" He hesitates as he looks at the current Lucifer Maou's mother.

"It's fine Amyntas, I understand. He's right though Ukitake-san, my husband and son did rush things to see to it that Rias married a pureblood Devil and, well, continue the 'purity' of our two Clans. Unfortunately, the only available Devil close to her age was Riser Phenex, and as you can see, his behavior was less than desirable after the agreement was made. It was a very lucky stroke of fortune that your Central Forty-Six blundered in the way they did. Thank you for that by the way Captains." Venelana smirks, seeing both current and former Captains blanch at her remark.

Grinning openly at their embarrassment, the Gremory Matriarch continues. "As such, when Rias and Ichigo fell in love, they had a few options available to them, but most would have proven… risky. The first was that we, the Gremory Clan could ask for an annulment from the Phenex Clan; however, this would come with a loss of influence for our Clan, and Rias must have guessed they wanted this union for more than one reason. Although even I was taken aback by Riser's own admissions as to why he wanted my daughter's hand in marriage. That said, her next option would have been to challenge Riser to a Rating Game in which she would have been severely outnumbered, and with most members of her peerage having little-to-no experience in Rating Games, she surely would have lost. Rather than suffer this risk, Ichigo chose his only viable option by that point, which was to challenge Riser to a duel according to the old rules. Because he made the challenge as an individual, his loss wouldn't have stained the honor of either the Gremory or Naberius Clans, yet his victory will ensure Riser can no longer pursue an engagement with my daughter. You may think it a barbaric way to solve disputes, but it's something we have had in our blood from the time our race made the Underworld our home. We may be more civilized now, but even now we still find it hard to ignore what we are. I hope this clear up some of your inquiries, Captain Ukitake."

Nodding his head, the white-haired Shinigami sips his tea calmly as he asks his next question. "How long have you known who Ichigo really was?"
A snort from the purple-haired woman next to Amyntas causes Jūshirō to look at her. "Yoruichi?"

The purple-haired werecat shakes her head. "We didn't, at least not until…well, not long after I
found him and who he was staying with were we able to put the missing pieces together. But even
we were surprised when we found out exactly which Clan, he and the twins are members of. And a
damn lucky thing for Soul Society that Kisuke lied to their faces about destroying his memories.
Even doing that might have caused severe consequences between Seireitei and the Devils once
they discover Central's actions, but we don't have to worry about it anymore Jūshirō. Now all we
have to do is to keep Ichigo and the Head Captain from going at it when they meet." Yoruichi
casually pops some of her food into her mouth as she smirks at him.

"Ya think that's a bit dark even for ya Yoruichi? Kid's not really that pissed, is he?" Hirako asks as
he pauses his eating, one of the few Captains who truly know how bad an outcome that would be.

"They tried to kill him, then made the unspoken threat against his friends and family if they had
tried to help him, whadda ya think is gonna happen Shinji? A quiet discussion over a cup of tea?
Ichigo's going to rip into the old bastard and I will stand right behind him when he does. I thought
after everything Ichigo's done for us, they'd at least give him a chance. But no, they didn't and now
Ichigo is never going to trust the Gotei for the foreseeable future, unless and only unless the old
man and those morons in Central Forty-Six admit their screw-up and make amends. Maybe then
you guys got a chance of Ichigo and his friends not withholding their help in the future." The
newest member of the Naberius Clan declares angrily, pointing her chopsticks at the Vizard
Captain.

Ukitake looks at his fellow Captains, both of them nodding in the direction of the table that holds
the former Karakura teens. Looking to Orihime for an answer, he watches as she looks at Chad,
then Tatsuki, and then finally Uryū. Seeing the hidden acknowledgement from each of them, she
returns his gaze and bows slightly.

"If Ichigo asks us to stay out of Soul Society's trouble in the future we would, not because he is our
King, but because he is our friend and family Captain Ukitake. We were told of the consequences
that would have been directed at us if we had tried to help him escape Central...I'm sorry, but I
don't think we can trust Soul Society either." Her voice never wavers and her back is straight as she
replies to one of the most powerful and longest-serving Captains of the Court of Pure Souls.

"I see. Thank you for your honesty, all of you." Jūshirō sighs as he turns back and sees Byakuya
looking thoughtful as he continues to read his paper.

Looking back at Shinji, Ukitake can see the brows of the Vizard Captain furrowed deeply in
thought; catching the blonde-haired Captain's gaze; the Squad Thirteen Captain sees the pained
realization in Shinji's eyes.

'We lost not only an exceptional healer but also some of our greatest warriors to date, simply due to
blind fear.'

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Riser Phenex sits up in his bed quickly and begins to scan his surroundings. Gone is the roaring
crowd and destroyed landscape of the arena. Instead he is lying in his bed, his wounds healed and
his body whole once again.

'Was... was it a dream?' He turns to see his younger sister sleeping next to him, her book closed on
the night stand.
"You lost." His head snaps to the person whose voice it belongs to.

"M-Mother?" His eyes widen a moment later as her words register in his mind. "What do you mean I lost??"

Eleni Phenex is sitting next to his bed, her face showing relief that her youngest son is finally awake. "You lost Riser. There is no shame in losing to a Devil whose power far exceeds your own."

"No, I can beat him Mother! Let me heal and train and I'll…"

"Do nothing. There is nothing left for you to fight for now anyway my son. Rias and Ichigo were married last night at the Gremory Clan's main estate. She is out of your reach now." The Phenex matriarch gives him a sad look as she grips her son's hand comfortably.

"I will tell you this Riser, Ichigo didn't want to continue at the end, but he wasn't going to stop because you refused to give in. It was only through my interference did the Maou grant him his victory."

"How could you?" Riser stares at his mother in disbelief. "How could you do this to me? She was our path to becoming the most powerful Clan in the Underworld, surpassing even the Bael Clan!"

Shaking her head, Eleni speaks to him. "It wasn't meant to be; the moment she fell in love with Ichigo Naberius, Rias chose a path that included love from her husband. You didn't fit in her life, if ever Riser. You actually got off lucky in that arena: if you really want the truth…Ichigo could have killed you instantly had he chosen to do so."

The third son snorts in denial. "No, HE was lucky Mother. I will challenge him again and take Rias back."

"And if you do so, I will not stand in his way this time when he kills you." Eleni's eyes harden then. "I love you my son, but you will listen to me right now. Ichigo is beyond anything you have ever dealt with before. He was able to overcome your strongest attacks, yet he didn't use his greatest powers on you in that duel; if he had, and it was a duel of the old ways, you would not be breathing right now."

"That's... that's impossible Mother…"

Her hand slams on the table next to the bed, cutting him off and waking Ravel with a start. "Wh-Mother! What's wrong!?!"

Ignoring her daughter, Eleni glares at her son, his thick-headedness pushing her anger to the surface. "Venelana explained to me just how dangerous Ichigo truly is. He has the blood of Shinigami coursing through his veins! You may think them a backwater society, but they are known as Soul Reapers for a reason! Ichigo didn't even use his Zanpakutō in the duel, his Soul-Slayer as it is called in some circles! Do you realize that a Shinigami's power grows exponentially with the use and activation of those weapons!?! Even if all he has is his initial release form, his power would have been at least three to four times as great as the power he has already displayed! Death would have been the ONLY OUTCOME, and the only thing stopping him from using it was his desire to beat you fairly as a Devil! Now stop this foolishness about revenge! If you go after that Devil again, after the Maou have ruled in his favor and Rias has become his wife, HE WILL KILL YOU!"

Riser and his sister stare at the very angry form of their mother. "…Mother?"
"I'm...I'm sorry Ravel. Your brother isn't thinking straight, and it's making me worry." Eleni slumps back tiredly into her chair, her hand raised wearily to her eyes.

Riser has never seen his mother like this in all his life. Annoyed at one of them when they misbehaved, certainly, but truly angry, never. Swallowing as he goes through his memories, the male Phenex begins to see a disturbing pattern as his mother's words finally reach his inner psyche, and he sees it as clear as daylight. As his own powers waned, the Naberius Devil's powers had been increasing, his attacks growing more potent...and that final form of his, that terrifying figure clad in Hell Armor and wielding Hell Chains, hounding him no matter where he fled to and attacking him without respite. When he was finally caught, nothing he did could stop the pain and abuse his body was put through...He begins to shiver uncontrollably as his hazy thoughts become clear and he stares with horror at his arms and legs, remembering what his opponent had done to them.

"He cut them off." He whispers hoarsely.

Ravel wraps her arms around her brother's body then, her tears flowing freely as she tells him what happened at the end of the duel. "He did brother. He cut them off with his damn chains and then he dropped your body down on the ground. He was building up for yet another attack when Mother threw her body over yours and stopped him. She begged him to cease his attacks on you Brother. He wasn't going to stop until the Maou agreed to end the duel, and they only did so on her request. Brother, Mother saved you. Saved you because that Devil wasn't going to stop, he was going to keep...keep hurting without mercy. He said that unless you quit, he was going to continue hurting you..."

Hugging his sobbing sister, Riser looks at his mother again. "He was? He was going to fight me until..."

"Yes Riser, he was preparing another attack and from the feel of the magic, it would have been his strongest attack by far. You were still semi-conscious and had yet to yield. Riser, I believe he was holding back out of fear of accidentally killing you, but it did not deter him from continuing to inflict as much pain as he could on you, regardless of your ability to defend yourself. Believe me when I say this, you did not lose to lesser Devil, you lost to a seasoned warrior. Ichigo Naberius is a true Devil, a true Naberius."

Leaning back into his pillows, Riser stares blankly up at the ceiling. "...I will obey you Mother. I won't pursue Rias Gremory any longer."

Getting to her feet, she nods and leaves his room silently, never seeing the twisted anger in the eyes of her son as he watches her leave.

'Doesn't mean I won't hurt her peerage in the Rating Game. There, I will exact my vengeance.'

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Unohana Retsu looks at her travel bag as it sits in the corner of her office. At her desk, she reads over the reports left by her squad from the night prior; as usual, several members of Squad Eleven had been admitted for reasons varying from overzealous spars, drunken brawls in the Rukongai, and of course fights with other squads. Sighing, she glances at the rest of the reports and after signing off on them, she looks up and waits. Right on time, her Lieutenant walks in with a stack of files under one arm and a tray in her free hand. Not saying a word, the tall silver-haired Isane Kotetsu places the files on her Captain's desk and the tray on their shared work space. Pouring them two cups of tea, the older sister of Kiyone Kotetsu is almost the polar opposite of her younger sibling; tall, shy and almost timid in her mannerisms, while her sister is shorter, louder, more
outgoing and borderline rude when drunk. It is those attributes of the older Kotetsu that Retsu knew hid a great power that would one day come to light. The same day she knew she could safely leave the Squad behind, with the woman across from her holding it all together.

"Isane do you have any questions or concerns for when I am gone?" Unohana asks after her first sip.

Shaking her head in answer, the silver-eyed Lieutenant does ask something else though. "These Devils, are they truly that strong Captain?"

"They are." She holds her hand up to forestall Isane. "Just like us, they have a hierarchy of power. The most powerful Devils are the Maou and Super Devils, comparable to our Zero Squad and Head Captain. Under them are those who are equivalent to our Captains and Lieutenants, their Ultimate Devils, Kings, Dukes and such. As power lessens, so do the titles of those that rule the Underworld, or so Head Captain Yamamoto explained to me some time after his defeat at the hands of Sirzechs Lucifer, the leader of their current Maou."

"Then that Devil who was here yesterday, the one who saved Rukia, Momo and Captain Kuchiki…he was…?"

"I have no idea. He hid his power completely, but I have an inkling we know who he is…he is someone from our past, I would hazard a guess." The Squad Four Captain smiles knowingly as she sips her tea again.

"We…know…a Devil, Captain? How could we know a Devil?"

"Think, Isane; think of whom that Devil had come for yesterday? Besides Momo who he claimed to be one of his peerage, he could have left the others behind but he didn't; he even went as far as to take Shinji Hirako, Jūshirō Ukitake, Suì-Fēng, Byakuya Kuchiki, Renji Abarai, Rikichi Yamato and Rukia Kuchiki…all but one have something, or rather someone in common, someone who would do anything to save them." Retsu watches out of the corner of her eye as her Lieutenant sits and thinks before realization dawns on the willowy woman's face.

"It's not possible Captain!"

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Nanao can only stare at the empty desk of her Captain; his paperwork is sitting on the far corner of her desk, done. His office is absolutely clean, not a spot of dirt or dust visible. The most disturbing thing is his pink kimono, folded and lying neatly on his seat. Turning to the sounds coming from his personal training grounds, the Lieutenant sets her folders down and moves to the window of their shared office. Staying in the shadows, she watches as her Captain flows from kata to kata effortlessly, the sweat dripping from his bare chest indicating that he has been training for quite some time. Suddenly he stops, she sees him looking up at her hiding spot and staring for a few moments before he continues again.

"It isn't polite to stare Nanao-chan; now if you don't mind could you bring me some water, I'm a bit parched." Her Captain then blurs as his dual Zanpakutō flashes through the numerous training dummies, each falling apart in tiny pieces once gravity catches up with his attacks.

Grabbing a cup and a pitcher of water, the Squad Eight Lieutenant Flash Steps down to where her Captain has just stopped. Standing and watching as he starts to pull his shitagi on, she pours him a cup of water and hands it to him, waiting patiently as he downs it in one gulp. Handing the cup back to her, he pulls on his kosode and answers her questioning look.
"I don't expect trouble, but you can't be too careful Nanao. I trust you've been doing your own training?"

"Hai Captain. My Kidō is exemplary, as is my Hohō. I am in constant talks with my Zanpakutō and my Hakuda is still above average." Her head bows slightly at the end.

Picking up his Haori, he pauses as he looks at her. "Don't worry so much Nanao. This is Ichigo we are going to see, Jūshirō and the others are in capable hands."

Shaking her head, she responds. "It's the Head Captain I worry about Captain, he…well, he is going to be very displeased that we have all been withholding information that is this important from him. Especially since nearly every one of his Captains, including you have known for some time before yesterday that Ichigo is now a Devil, most likely the same Devil that broke in here yesterday..."

Waving his hand, he smiles as they Flash Step back to his office. "Yare, yare my dear. Just you stick close to me and …HEY WHAT WAS THAT FOR!?"

After hitting her Captain, Nanao fixes her glasses while giving her Captain the cold shoulder again. "Harrumph! I won't allow you to use that as an excuse for you to try and hit on me again Captain. Now that you are done with last week's paperwork, we can finish this week's."

Leaning back at his desk, Shunsui pulls open his favorite drawer, only to begin silently crying when he sees the bottle of sake sitting upside down and empty.

"I already took precautions." Nanao declares smugly as she starts her half of the paperwork, ignoring her Captain's faked cries of anguish but smiling inwardly at his antics.

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Running his hand down his long white beard, one eye cracks open as Yamamoto finishes his Jinzen. "Tomorrow will be a telling day."

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As they wait for the arrival of his great-grandson and his new wife, the current Lord of the Naberius Clan stands in wait with his newly installed Head of Household, Yoruichi Naberius. She had readily agreed to the named post after Amyntas sheepishly admitted that losing Merti to Ichigo wasn't something he was prepared for. It also made it easier for both of them to find time alone.

Looking over his shoulder and seeing the twinkle in her eyes has him thinking back to last night when they spent time alone during the festivities that were celebrating not just the joining of the Gremory and Naberius Clans and by extension the Sitri Clan, but at how far their own relationship has grown during the time he has gotten to know her. Seeing her standing just slightly behind him causes him to return her smile; even if for now it isn't the proper way for them to act in public, he hopes it won't always be this way.

At first, he had tried to deny his slight attraction for the mocha-skinned woman after meeting her for the first time at Kuoh Academy. But as the days went by and his contact with her grew more and more frequent with each meeting, he suddenly found himself waiting in anticipation for her arrival with Venelana during their meetings. While those early visits were mostly about Ichigo and his 'locked' memories once they realized what Kisuke Urahara had done, they gradually became something more the longer the purple-haired goddess stayed in his presence. Her easy-going and teasing ways had slowly breached his defenses, not only whenever she was around him, but also when she was with his peerages as well.
With his Cornelia's death, he had long since given up on ever wanting to feel those emotions again, but the golden-cat-eyed woman had made that impossible for him the longer she remained near him. Each visit from her had him looking forward to her staying longer and longer so he could enjoy her presence, even if her duty was to his great-grandson first; something he is eternally grateful for. Of course, everything came to a head the day Ichigo nearly died once more at the hands of the Fallen Angels, that day the woman chose a side, her 'son's'. She admitted to him and Akiko the day after Ichigo's memories and powers returned that she had panicked, thinking that she had lost him again and the thought that she had failed him once again terrified her. It had made her later decision to leave her Shinigami clan and join the Naberius Clan easier once she knew that Ichigo and the teens from Karakura were never going to return to their hometown.

Luckily for all of them, things worked out for the best. Amyntas can see that his great-grandson is going to be a true force to deal with in the coming years, and Yoruichi is partially responsible for seeing to his great increase in strength. The former princess had taken to Ichigo's training once he and Zangetsu were freed from their prison with a sadistic zeal; Amyntas couldn't help but chuckle the few times he had watched her training them. The assassin certainly knew how to push Ichigo's buttons, and she was merciless in her ways. But the end results were made clear yesterday when Ichigo all but demolished the third son of the Phenex Clan, though it also proved troubling to him that Ichigo had somehow used an attack that wasn't taught to him, something he was going to ask his 'nephew' about once the chance presented itself.

Glancing around the room, he can't stop the smile that grows on his face as he sees a few of his female peerage members nodding their heads at him, more than one sending discreet looks of approval at their newest clanswoman standing less than a pace behind him. They all know what is happening between him and Yoruichi, even Ichigo had seen it early on; the woman had made him feel something he thought was lost along with his first wife: love. Of course things, were not easy for either of them in the beginning; she had felt the sting of betrayal from her people and her Clan during her exile, and he had turned to drinking to dull the pain he had carried every day since the murder of his wife, son and daughter-in-law, worsened by his failure to keep Masaki safe from harm. It was during these times he had sunk so low; he even forwent his duties to the Skeleton Tower to wallow in self-loathing and had to force the burden of leadership onto four others. Akiko, Sasha, Merti and Tatianna had been the true force of the Naberius during his times of weakness, each woman loyally taking over the role of keeping the Sinners imprisoned until their Lord could fight his way back out of his despair. Now they will no longer be alone in their duties because of Yoruichi's new position, she will now be running the Clan in his name when he is unable to or is needed elsewhere.

Ever since Yasaka's warning, he knows he needs someone he can trust to speak for the Clan during the coming months, especially if the possible war is to come to fruition. Discussing it with his most loyal advisors, the three Elves and Akiko all spoke in favor of Yoruichi taking over for Merti as his Head of Household. Their arguments were sound when they pointed out she had already proven her worth to the Clan, especially among the Elves. Many had already begun deferring to the former Shinigami as one of their leaders after the battle in Hueco Mundo and after she started teaching the younger Elves her techniques from her time spent with the Onmitsukidō. His own peerage and his late son's peerage counted her as a friend and valued comrade. It was also evident that the young teens from Karakura saw her as a much-needed and highly-trusted mentor. But it is the way Ichigo acts around the woman that is most telling; she had filled a place that had been lifeless for years in his great-grandson's heart, at least until Rias was able to claim it for her own. Amyntas knows without a doubt his great-grandson will annihilate anyone who foolishly thinks of trying to hurt Yoruichi, his 'mother'. But for the Naberius Lord, it is something he has begun to dare for once more that made him ask Yoruichi to take his offer; he genuinely wants to pursue his feelings for her and seek to build a new life with her by his side. And one day, he hopes to give her what she
had secretly told him was her greatest wish.

A shifting behind him and a slight touch of his hand makes him subconsciously return the gesture as he turns to speak to her. He pauses when he sees the look in Yoruichi’s eyes, the same as the one she had last night when she shyly told him that she had first started to fall for him soon after she began to stay at the Estate, but out of respect for his wife she kept from voicing those feelings, at least until they kissed for the first time. Cornelia would always have her place in his heart, Yoruichi knows this and does not mind, even welcoming it; but the woman he is now falling in love with also wants her place there, informing him of such when he confessed his feelings for her as well.

'Just promise me Amyntas that if we do pursue this, I am not going to be her replacement, that I will be a woman you love as much as you did her. I don't and won't accept being placed second in your heart. Do you understand what I mean?'

He did understand. She had given up everything to stay with Ichigo and his friends. Now the Naberius Clan is her home, and he is going to do everything in his power to show her that she had made the right choice.

Tilting his head down, he speaks to her lowly. "Thank you Yoruichi."

Turning her head upwards slightly, she whispers back to him. "For…?"

"For bringing back something lost in this mansion years ago." He sees her give him a quizzical look. "The feeling of love."

She smiles and blushes faintly, and is about to respond when a flash of magic fills the air, leaving four teen Devils standing in the previously empty center of the Great Dome. Ichigo is holding several bags and watching as his wife repeats her question to Kimi. "What decision?"

Amyntas coughs politely, watching the faces of his great-grandson and great-granddaughter-in-law turn rigid as they finally realize they are not alone.

Ichigo and Rias robotically turn to face their audience, gaping as they see nearly every member of the Clan, the ‘visiting Shinigami’, the pack leaders of the Cerberus, the Elves and the Heads of Staff for the various Devils standing in wait and watching them. The young couple look at each other before turning their heads towards him and Yoruichi for an explanation.

"Welcome home Ichigo, Rias. I trust that your first night of marriage was enjoyable." He along with a majority of those present see their two faces color brightly by the words spoken, and before a wide audience no less.

Ichigo and Rias squirm slightly, exchanging a look as they remember the last moments they had shared before returning home.

The two newly-weds took one last look into the house that had served its purpose. Rias leaned against her husband and groaned out loud. "Can't we just skip dinner Ichigo?"

"As much as I'd like to, we can't Rias. It will be our first official dinner as a married couple, so it's pretty important that we show up, at least for tonight. I would love to continue our…marital duties, but we also have to perform our duties as nobles and leaders of our respective Clans. Besides, any more of this morning and I don't think I could look anyone in their eyes with a straight face today." His face flushed as he thought about how their morning started.

"Well at least I can walk without a limp. Thank you for that by the way, your Kaidō has gotten rid
of most of the soreness." She giggled as he mumbled an apology to her.

Ichigo blushed even more from her teasing. "Sorry..."

"Oh, I'm not Ichigo. It was everything I expected it to be...and so much more." She pulled his face down and captured his lips in a passionate kiss again.

"Ahemm. Forgive our intrusion Lord and Lady Naberius." Both Devil teens slowly parted, their faces showing surprise as they noticed Ichigo's two Elfin bodyguards standing near them, Kimi smiling broadly while Nia covered her mouth to stifle her humor.

"Kimi? Nia!" The orange-haired Devil voiced out in surprise. "What are you two doing here so early?"

"Early, Ichigo? You do realize we only have an hour to get you home and ready for dinner tonight...or did you get, ahem, distracted this morning Milord, Milady?" The chastised Devil quickly darted back into the house to grab the rest of their bags, leaving the three women standing outside, two of them looking expectantly at the third.

Rias raised her eyebrow at the twins. "We had an enjoyable time you two. We couldn't help it that we lost track of time...in our indulgences. Now how about we return to the Naberius Manor and get ready for dinner?"

Ichigo returned with their bags, only to see the grinning faces of the three females. "I miss something?" He asked curiously.

"Nooope." All three of them sing-songed at once.

"Ohhhkkaaayyy then. Kimi, get us home if you please." The orange-haired Devil sweat dropped before saying.

As the magic circle began, the violet-eyed twin looked at Ichigo and Rias. "There has been a decision made Ichigo, Rias."

"What decision?" Rias asked as the magic engulfed them.

Coughing slightly, Rias recovers quicker than her husband and inclines her head to her new great-grandfather-in-law. "We thank you for the wonderful accommodations and for the meals you left for us, Uncle Amyntas."

Walking up to the two Devils, the Naberius Lord stands before them and looks both of them in the eyes. "There is one last present for me to give to you, Ichigo, Rias."

Standing aside, he waves for Yoruichi to come to him. When she reaches his side, they step to Ichigo's right and looks over at the ensemble of peerages and the staffs. Nodding his head, he looks out the corner of his eye to watch the expressions on his great-grandson and great-granddaughter-in-law's faces when it happens, Yoruichi already having her smart phone out and secretly recording the moment.

At some pre-arranged signal, everyone present except Ichigo's family and the Shinigami bow together and speak as one. "Welcome home, Lord and Lady Naberius!"

Ichigo and Rias both gasp in surprise, then Ichigo quickly looks at his 'uncle'. "You already did it?"

"What is going on Ichigo?" Rias questions as she looks between her husband and her great-
Yoruichi answers for Amyntas, smiling at her 'son' and her 'daughter-in-law'. "We made it official this morning Rias. Today, you and Ichigo have been given the official titles of Lord and Lady Naberius and because of that, you will rule the Clan alongside Lord Amyntas until the day he wishes to step aside and fully hand the reins over to you both."

"Even though only those of the Naberius bloodline can rule the Skeleton Tower, we wish to ensure that no one can dispute Ichigo's claim to his rightful titles. As his wife, your place has also been secured by this declaration Rias. When you and he have children, they will possess the blood not only of the Gremory and Naberius Clans, but also those of the Bael, Vitas and Sitri Clans of the Underworld and the Shiba Clan of Soul Society as well. You can imagine the jealously that will arise because of your close connections to two of the current Maou, not to mention the political ramifications of joining with a Clan of Soul Society." Amyntas finishes for his significant other.

Ichigo sends a glance at his three younger sisters and nods in understanding. "I just didn't expect it to be so soon, Uncle."

Neither Ichigo nor Rias miss the tightness around the eyes of both his 'uncle' and 'mother'. "What else is going on?" He immediately questions.

Amyntas smiles at him wryly. "It cannot be helped Ichigo. But tomorrow we will be having some very important guests for dinner."

Ichigo's gut begins to reverberate in excitement, hoping it's who he thinks is coming he asks. "Who is coming?"

Kisuke decides to answer for his hosts. "Why, Head Captain Yamamoto, his Lieutenant, Sasakibe, and also Captains Unohana, Hitsugaya and Kyōraku along with most of their respective Lieutenants. I also believe one of my former comrades from Zero Squad will be joining, and possibly and unfortunately a few detestable others from Central Forty-Six and the Shihōin Clan."

Ichigo barely holds in his contempt when he hears the last part about Central and the Shihōin Clan. "Yoruichi, Yukiko, are you guys okay with this?"

"Who do you think will be leading the welcoming wagon?" The golden-eyed woman says with a hint of mirth mixed with resignation at the potentially unpleasant task.

"Yukiko?" He looks at the younger princess.

Waving her hand in annoyance, the Shihōin Clan Head in hiding replies to Ichigo. "Not that I gotta choice here about escorting them, but if Big Sis is staying here, so am I. Don't really care what those buttholes got to say at this point, they've been lying to me since Nee-sama saved Kisuke and Tessai-san, probably even before then." She grumbles.

"Great, so I have a day at least before I have to deal with Gramps, didn't really expect him to show so soon. Rias, I need to go with Byakuya, Merti and Sasha, we need to see to a few things with our prisoner. Sorry guys, but I might be late for dinner." He apologizes.

Rias grabs his hand then. "Ichigo…"

Leaning down, he speaks into her ear. "I have to do this Rias, for Byakuya and Rukia before the Head Captain shows up."

"I was going to say don't be long and I'll save you a plate if need be, to help replenish your energy
for tonight." She finishes by kissing his cheek fondly.

Kissing her cheek in return, he looks at Orihime next. "Hime, we'll take care of Captain Ukitake in the morning; that okay with you?"

"Yes." She answers with a nod.

"I guess we aren't going to school tomorrow, so make sure someone collects our homework and that it gets done before we go back on Tuesday or Wednesday. Momo, you and Tomoe should readjust our team now that you and Rukia are back. Also, we need to figure out what to do with Renji; he's too old to be a student…"

"Up yours Ichigo!"

Rukia's eyes twinkle then. "The Academy could always use personal in maintenance, right Sōnan-san?"

Ichigo smiles as the younger Devils and Shinigami decide the protesting Pineapple's fate, allowing him to sneak away with Byakuya and the Elves. Walking down one of the hallways, Sasha speaks then. "Ichigo, you still have that other Shinigami to deal with."

"I know. I'll make the offer and as soon as she refuses, we'll send her back with the Head Captain and the others when they leave."

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Chiyoko Shihōin's head snaps up when the door to her cell suddenly opens and several figures enter through the piercing white light. Blinking her eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness after being kept in the dark since her capture, the assassin smirks when she sees who is standing before her.

"So, you really do have your memories back Ichigo Kurosaki; I had only guessed, but it was enough to convict those two, even snaring Byakuya in my nets. Now that Central knows it is you, your family and friends will…" Her head snaps violently in one direction, blood dribbling from her split lips as Kimi Mai'ryl's fist withdraws back to her side.

"Tsk, tsk Shihōin. My Clan doesn't like it when people make empty threats." The orange-haired Devil says as he pulls up a chair.

Dragged to her feet and then forced to kneel before him with a harsh kick to the back of her kneecaps, the pale-eyed relative of his 'Okaa-san' is gagged and her hands bound behind her back with Hell Chains. Kimi and Nia easily hold her in place with another set of Hell Chains as their Aunt takes her seat next to Byakuya. Once all three are seated, Ichigo waves for Sasha to begin.

"Let's get this done and over with. Byakuya and Rukia deserve to know the truth after so long."

Struggling uselessly against her bindings as she stares defiantly into the pair of cloudy orbs, Chiyoko begins to tremble when the blind Elf speaks with a disturbing smile on her lips. "Prepare yourself Chiyoko Shihōin; this will be extremely uncomfortable for you, in all ways possible."

Not one of the observers move as the first of the muffled screams are ripped from the throat of the gagged and bound Shinigami.

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Nemu Kurotsuchi's head swivels to the sounds of someone's muted screams, knowing that besides her and the captured noble of the Shihōin Clan, there are no other prisoners in the detention center. Her guards thus far have treated her with surprising respect, and had even asked if she needed or wanted anything other than the food and drink they have provided her. Declining their offer politely, she had waited until they had left, and when she was sure they were no longer outside her cell, she began to test her food in all the ways her creator had programmed in her. Her surprise only grew when she couldn't detect any of the thousands of poisons or drugs her father had imprinted in her memory, nothing to indicate that she was being prepared for interrogation or torture.

Now as she sits waiting for her turn to be interrogated, which she believes will happen after they are done with the Shihōin noblewoman, she once again begins to go over all the data available to her up to that moment. Her Reiryoku is effectively sealed by a means that she had no understanding of or has hope of defeating in her current condition. The room she is placed in also acts as a barrier, blinding all but her five basic senses as to what is going on outside of her cell. Despite being a prisoner, so far, she hasn't been tortured or harmed in any way. Lastly is the statement that the black-armored male had said that confuses her the most, one that she repeats in her head to try and understand what it means.

She has no idea what an 'Evil Piece' is or means; all she can deduce is that it has something to do with becoming a 'peerage' member as the red-haired man had said when she was captured, and it is something related to the Devils and the Underworld. Because her father had forbidden her from going through the archives sent to him from both the Head Captain and the Daireishokairō, her knowledge on what powers the citizens of the Underworld could possess is, much to her lack of surprise, next to nothing. All she can hope for now is that her suffering won't be long and that she will be killed quickly after refusing to betray Soul Society. Already resigned to her fate, she quietly looks up when the door to her cell opens and a person appears through the light.

"Hello Nemu." A familiar woman's voice greets her.

Eyes going wide, the Squad Twelve Lieutenant speaks the name belonging to the owner of the voice as she stands to attention. "Captain Suì-Fēng."

Stepping into the room, Suì-Fēng is followed by Yoruichi and Yukiko, the latter drawing Nemu's attention as they all stand before the incarcerated woman. "We need to talk...about your upcoming decision."

"What would that be, Captain?" Nemu asks in confusion as her eyes return to the petite Squad Two Captain. This is not going the way she had envisioned her interrogation to be like.

Yoruichi grins as she moves to stand before the waiting Lieutenant. "Nemu Kurotsuchi, one of Ichigo's Pawn pieces has decided to take you as its host. Of course, you have every right to refuse, but we are here to convince you to do otherwise."

Tilting her head to one side and scanning each of the women in front of her, she can only ask why she would even consider leaving Soul Society.

"Because Nemu, if you do, you will be free of your father's insanity; we all know you care for him greatly, but even you must know where to draw the line and call it quits. If you say yes, it means no more using your body to distract his opponents in his fights. No more using your body for him to conduct his less-than-savory experiments. But most importantly, no more will you be under his constant control; you will be free to become your own person, one who can decide how to live her life as a Devil. The only downside to this argument is that you may never be allowed to return to Soul Society or remain a member of the Gotei Thirteen. Finally, before you answer, there is one more person who wishes to speak to you before your decision." Yoruichi steps aside, allowing
another figure to enter the room.

Bowing slightly to her fellow officer, Momo Hinamori speaks with a gentle smile gracing her face. "Welcome to the Underworld, Kurotsuchi-san."

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Ichigo has no idea how long he and the others have been listening to the truths pouring out of the still-bound Shinigami. The thought of eating was made impossible after hearing the crimes this woman had committed on her own accord or under orders from Central Forty-Six, or even her own branch family of the Shihōin Clan. It took Merti and himself to keep Byakuya from killing the woman when she was forced to tell him with her own mouth who had ordered both Hisana's and Rukia's deaths and the reasons why. Once the former Captain had regained his composure, Byakuya asked Ichigo to keep the information to himself; the former Kuchiki Clan Head would tell Rukia the truth himself when he felt he could do so in a calm manner, and Ichigo had quickly agreed to his request. Suddenly feeling the need to stretch his body and still his stomach, Ichigo leaves the cell and makes his way down the hallway until the screams and sobs are but a muted buzz in his ear.

Sagging against the wall, he slides down tiredly; closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the wall, he tries to digest the sheer number of crimes that Central Forty-Six has been directly or indirectly involved with. When a mocha-skinned hand touches his shoulder, Ichigo wearily pats the floor next to himself, sensing Yoruichi sitting down then leaning against his shoulder. Feeling the comfortable weight of his mentor and now adoptive Mother resting against his body, he speaks to her quietly.

"She…that woman isn't leaving here alive Yoruichi…fuck…I can't even…" He sighs and shudders as he struggles to rein in his raging emotions.

Finally cracking an eye open and glancing at the woman next to him when she doesn't respond, he sees Yoruichi struggling with her own emotions and feelings as well. He doesn't force her, but when she begins to speak, he listens intently.

"Shihōin. We are one of the Five Great Founding Houses of Soul Society, or Clans if you will, just like the Shiba Clan once was before Kaien's death and your father's defection. We have also, as far as I know, always been in command of the Punishment Squad, Ichigo. We eliminated the threats to Soul Society and the Seireitei at the behest of Central Forty-Six…or so we thought. Both Kisuke and I were young when we began our careers in the Punishment Squad, and we did what we were told without fail. But in the years leading up to my own defection, both Kisuke and I found many of our orders to be poorly-concealed lies, and in return…we lied about certain things to our superiors over the years."

Pausing, the former assassin closes her eyes in remembrance. "I…I have done things I am not proud of Ichigo…I was young once, believed in my Clan first, Squad Two second and all others last. But

The golden-eyed woman sees him still listening, and knowing that he won't interrupt her, she continues while wrapping her arms around her knees. "I…I have done things I am not proud of Ichigo…I was young once, believed in my Clan first, Squad Two second and all others last. But
unlike Chiyoko, I had my eyes opened by my best friend. Just in time too as it turns out."

Looking at her hands, she smiles sadly then. "You are lucky Ichigo; you and your sisters were saved from being born into ruthless politics that are the day-to-day business of the nobles. It was one of the reasons why your cousins Kūkaku and Ganju left the Seireitei, after Kaien's death and Isshin's disappearance; Kūkaku held no love for Central or the nobles after her older brother's death, so she didn't mind the Clan's fall from grace. Isshin as the oldest of the next strongest branch could have challenged her for the right of being named the Clan Head when he was still a Captain, but he didn't, and later disappeared into the World of the Living; the rest you now know of course. Technically as his son, you could put forward your claim to take over the Clan if you choose to do so now."

Twisting her head to look at him, she finishes with a faint smile. "You are still a noble of Soul Society Ichigo, even now as a Devil. No Shiba would deny you your claim if you really want it, and I believe even Kūkaku and Ganju would support you without question. Just don't answer yet Ichigo, give it some time and think it over…there may come a day where you, I and the others might find a way to return there without the fear of a knife in our backs or an execute-on-sight order."

Patting his knee, she sits back against the wall and the two of them wait in silence for Sasha to finish, which doesn't take long as she comes out of the cell with Merti and Byakuya less than twenty minutes later. Both of them look up to see the former Kuchiki Clan Head walk silently past them without saying a word, his face a cold and emotionless mask. Merti pauses in following him, but a nudge from Ichigo's foot has her moving forward to catch up with the Shinigami again. Kimi and Nia leave the room last, and when one of the Elf guards arrive, they speak to him quietly before letting him pass into the cell. Watching him bring the captured Shihōin out, Ichigo can see that the woman is unconscious and her clothes are drenched and reek heavily of her bodily wastes. He watches as the Elf takes her to another room where two female Elves join him. A moment later, the male Elf leaves the room and closes the door behind him before taking up a position to guard the cell.

"She will have much to answer for Ichigo, Yoruichi. The...things she has done in her relatively short years of life amounts to her being given the harshest penalty, even by Soul Society's standards. I will inform Lord Amyntas as to what I have seen." Sasha pauses then, and her milky eyes glance towards them.

"Do either of you wish to hear the rest?" The blind assassin asks.

"...Yes. Ichigo, why don't you go see to your wife and relax for a few? Tomorrow will be another day in a long line of stressful days." Getting to her feet, Yoruichi extends her hand to help the Devil off the floor.

"I'll see her after I speak to Nemu." Ichigo takes her hand and pulls himself to his feet.

"No need for that Ichigo, Momo is in there with her now. Don't worry, Suì-Fēng and Yukiko are both with her, Nia will make sure you make it back to your room. Find me in an hour's time; I'll be in the training dimension with Issei." The werecat looks to see one of the twin Elves moving towards them.

"Eh, why is Issei training on a Sunday? I thought he had a day off today." Ichigo acknowledges Nia when she stops next to him.

"You made quite the impression on him. Your duel showed him how far he has yet to go if he wants to be able to fight for Rias as her Pawn in the Rating Games. Remember Ichigo, he yields
one of the thirteen Longinus in him, and that demands a strong mind and body to wield correctly. He was going to ask you and Rias to train him, but I got to him first when I heard he was asking some of your peerage to spar with him. He isn't ready for them as he is now. So, rest up and come find me after you have eaten and rested for a few…if she lets you, of course." She smiles wickedly as she leaves him standing with his bodyguard and blushing slightly.

"Ichigo."

"Come on Nia, I'm gonna hazard a guess and assume Rias isn't by herself at this moment. Knowing our peerages, she's probably getting the third degree…about last night." He sighs as he looks towards the closed door of Nemu's cell; shaking his head, he pulls out his pawn and sees it glowing brighter.

"I'm sure things will work out with her." Nia says as they walk past the door, behind which they can hear faint murmuring.

Putting his Evil Piece away, Ichigo tells her why exactly that is the outcome he fears the most.

"You believe she would willingly become a Devil just to use it to gain knowledge for her father?" The Elfin assassin asks as she shifts uncomfortably.

"Nemu is from Squad Twelve, her 'father' created her. Hell, to be honest I have no idea if she is a Shinigami, Mod Soul or something else entirely." Passing through the magically sealed doors, the two pass through the heavily-guarded Outer Watch area.

Ichigo nods in greeting to the fifteen or so Elves currently on duty. It was another one of those surprises Ichigo had learned early on, that his 'uncle' used Elves along with Cerberus packs instead of Devils to guard most of his Clan's territory. There were the usual amount of ordinary Devil citizens, but most of them were involved with the various skills and trades needed to bring the Clan extra wealth from the large number of hot springs and vacation lodgings providing a peaceful retreat for those Devils seeking to escape the Underworld's daily life, as well as maintaining the Naberius Estate itself. While most Elves did serve as members in his family's military forces, there were a few who instead chose to serve in normal jobs; Tatianna Ver'har, the third Longoak sister was one such Elf. She was the chief financial advisor of the Clan, managing his bank accounts, as well as those of his sisters and now his peerage, and how well they were performing all reflected her business savvy.

After she married and had her children, Tatianna went to the human world for a brief visit and that was when she found the world of Finance. Gaining numerous degrees after studying Business and Accountancy at a university, she asked for one year's trial at handling the vast wealth of the Clan to prove that she could still be of service even after retiring as an assassin. The outcome was more than obvious at the end of the year: the Clan's wealth had nearly quintupled from her efforts. From that day onward, the third Longoak sister became the driving force behind the insane reserves the Clan now has at its disposal.

Looking at Tatianna, one would see a normal beautiful Elf, tall, voluptuous and gentle on the outside, but beneath that disarming smile lies a slumbering demon who, along with Sasha and Merti, had been among the most feared and hunted assassins of the Devil's civil war. Only blind luck and maybe a helping hand from Fate had landed the three sisters, all grievously wounded, on the grounds of the Naberius Clan. Weak and close to dying, they were no match against the Devils and their peerages that stood guard over the Sinners. Taken into custody, they were then nursed back to health by the Lady of the Clan and her daughter-in-law; after many visits, they broke down and begged to be freed from their existence. It was a freedom they thought could only be obtained in death. Finding out that they had been forced by the Old Maou Faction into becoming Devils and
assassins, Vincent had taken their life experiences personally and made a promise to them.

'Fight for us, and I will personally grant you and your people their freedom. Whether you stay or go, you will still be set free at the end of this conflict.'

Ichigo smirks as he remembers Merti's words during his first week at the Estate. 'They never saw us coming. Since we knew the locations and layouts of their bases, their weaknesses, their numbers and even their identities, we helped the Anti-Maou Faction mow right through them. And true to his word, Lord Vincent set us free. That is how and why we Elves have never left the lands of the Naberius. That, and the human world is no longer the safe haven it once was for our kind, or any other magical being for that matter. The Underworld is now our home, and will always be our home forever.'

Once he and Nia are free of the small house that leads to the underground prison, both use their high-speed movement to quickly enter the Estate proper. Making a beeline for his room, Ichigo begins to shiver when he hears numerous squeals and laughter coming from behind his closed door. Stopping in front of it, he once again hears loud giggles and shrieks coming through the thick door. Casting a glance at his bodyguard, he motions for her to move quietly away with him. Once he is far enough down the hallway, he stops and looks around again.

"Ichigo?"

"I can't bring myself to ruin her night by letting her see me like this right now. The images of what that…that… Come on, help me find Grimmjow, I need to vent some." They turn the corner, missing his sister opening the door of his bedroom.

Sticking her head out the door, Yuzu looks left then right before pulling her head back inside. "No one is here Rias-nee." She reports confusedly.

"I…I could have sworn I felt Ichigo…" In the middle of the bed, the young wife hides her frown from the excited group of female peerage members.

Only one other person had felt him too; she also knew why he wasn't there when Yuzu looked.

'Stupid Strawberry, still trying to hide your feelings.'

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Issei and Yoruichi take a break from their training to watch Grimmjow and Ichigo trade blows, the former Sexta Espada in his Resurrección form, while Ichigo is clad in his Hell Armor. Each time Zanpakutō meets Hierro, the air reverberates with loud thunder-like repercussions. Neither duelist shows any signs of quitting any time soon, both of them going faster and faster to the point the newest Pawn of the Gremory Clan can no longer follow their movements. All he can see are two blurs, one white and the other black, clashing and twisting around one another while zipping furiously around the training dimension. Looking up at the woman sitting with crossed legs on a boulder above him, he timidly asks a question of his trainer.

"Ehmm…Yoruichi-Sensei, is it possible to teach me that?" He motions to the blurs, which are now leaving small craters whenever they impact with each other or their surroundings.

Looking down at her pupil, the purple-haired werecat shakes her head much to his not-so-hidden disappointment. "Oi, don't look glum Issei-kun, they can use Reiatsu, you can't. But I know Kiba-kun is supposedly just as fast as the average Shinigami, so once I learn how to teach you his speed skills, I will. But those two, forget it for now. Their power in both speed and strength is
phenomenal; Ichigo's far more than Grimmjow's because of his Zanpakutō's ability. Even wearing his armor, Ichigo is just as fast and he ain't even using Bankai yet."

"I keep hearing this word Bankai, but what does it mean?" Issei asks curiously.

The two of them find themselves no longer alone when Ichigo and Grimmjow come to a stop right in front of them, Ichigo picking up a spare water bottle and tossing it to his Knight before taking one for himself. "Bankai is the second release of any Zanpakutō, usually only a few Shinigami in each generation is capable of achieving it. Byakuya and all the Captains but one have Bankai, a few Lieutenants and one or two of the stronger seated officers have theirs as well. Rukia is close to getting hers, and Momo should be able to attain hers now that she has the extra power; she told me she didn't have what it took to maintain one before, but now she is going to try again."

Looking at the blade in the hand of his King's husband, he looks at his own left hand then. "I wonder what Ddraig is capable of when I earn the right to wield his Sacred Gear."

Tapping the flat of his blade on the hand in question, Grimmjow tells him what he thinks. "Kid, I heard it's one of them Longinus-class Sacred Gear thingies. One created from a Divine Dragon, not that I'd ever seen one, but hell the books I've read speak of those two like they were Gods themselves. If half of the shit I read is true kid, your harem might not be that distant a dream after all."

One Devil, his Zanpakutō spirit, a Shinigami, her Zanpakutō spirit and finally one extremely embarrassed Dragon groan out at that idea. "Really Grimmjow, you just had to mention that topic again." Ichigo grumbles.

Yoruichi lets loose a Byakurai at the former Arrancar Knight to show her displeasure, only to have the panther Devil laugh loudly as he dodges. "Face it Yoruichi, the kid's got tits and ass on the brain fifty-nine seconds out of sixty. I want to see if he can do it."

Trying to defend himself, Issei feigns innocence. "I…I…not sure what I want anymore…I mean…yeah a harem was…is my…well one of my goals, but I want to be like you guys. I want to be able to fight and protect them from harm, so I guess I'm saying, I can wait for…OWWWW!" Issei glares at Ichigo as the orange-haired Devil whacks his head. "What was that for?"

Ichigo smirks at him. "For impressing me. Look, Rias told me if you want to pursue a harem, I got no say in it, so I ain't gonna stop you. But if you want to be serious and learn how to fight, to protect what's yours, you need to do exactly everything we tell you to do. And the first thing you need to do is this. Run with your hands shaking in the air and hop on one foot in a circle while screaming out 'Fight for Love! Fight to Protect! Listen to me great Usagi of the Sky!'. Now do that for the next ten minutes and maybe, just maybe the great Usagi will answer you."

Looking at each of the three people standing or sitting around him, Issei sees nothing but serious expressions staring back at him. Taking a quick glance around, he makes sure no one else is watching, and after huffing out in embarrassment, he finds a spot a few meters away and begins to hop on one foot in a circle and waving his hands high in the air as he screams out loud.

"Fight for Love! Fight to Protect! Listen to me great Usagi of the Sky! Fight for Love! Fight to Protect! Listen to me great Usagi of the Sky! Fight for Love! Fight to Protect! Listen to me great Usagi of the Sky!" Issei gradually loses himself in his strange dance, never seeing the three pull out their smart phones and begin recording the actions for blackmail and future home movies to show Issei's sons and daughters one day.

"You are so evil King." Grimmjow murmurs impressively as he watches the amusing spectacle.
Shrugging his shoulders, the Devil replies just as softly in return. "Look at who my Sensei were back then."

Seven minutes into the dance, a new voice suddenly breaks in with an embarrassed cry. "W-What are you doing Issei-san!?"

All four snap their heads to see Asia and Orihime standing behind them. Orihime quickly glares at the innocent-looking Ichigo and Grimmjow, knowing that one or the other had put the young Pawn up to his silly dance. "Ichi-nii! Grimm-kun!"

"Well shit, I'm outta here. Later!" Grimmjow vanishes in a burst of static, Yoruichi's laughter echoing out as well from somewhere far away.

"Ah, what's going on?" Issei hesitantly asks still in his awkward pose, seeing cold sweat dripping down Ichigo's face as he shifts nervously in front of an angry-looking burnt-orange-haired healer.

"Tell him Ichi-nii. Tell him...or I'll tell Rias what you have her Pawn doing." Orihime's eyes twinkle when she sees the fear creep into her adoptive-brother's eyes.

"Oh, come on Orihime! It...it was a simple prank! Nothing Geta-Bōshi wouldn't have done to any one of us!" Ichigo begins to back away slowly, only to feel slowly boiling rage build up from the aforementioned pranked Pawn.

Pointing a trembling finger at Ichigo, his face shadowed by his sweaty hair, the Sacred Gear holder finally bellows out his rage at his Senpai. "You tricked me Ichigo-Senpai! You tricked me didn't you!? AARRGGGHHH!!"

"WELL THAT DID IT." Zangetsu murmurs when the red-scaled armored gauntlet forms around Issei's hand and a glowing green light encapsulates the furious Pawn.

"Yeah it did. Now for some fun." Ichigo immediately reforms his Zanpakutō just in time to divert the Pawn's first swing.

Deftly parrying each punch, Ichigo feels the power pulsing from within the gem growing stronger as he and Issei clash across the landscape. Signs of Yoruichi's stamina and speed training also become evident when the Naberius Devil starts to employ slow Shunpo, yet the fury-fueled Pawn is able to keep up with his movements. Every now and then as he crosses his blade against the gauntlet, he hears the pawn uttering the same word over and over under his breath. Realization hits him after three minutes when the brown-haired youth suddenly flashes in front of him and he punches his fist forward, screaming one last time.

"I got you Senpai! EXPLOSION, DRAGON SHOOT!" With that statement, Ichigo immediately channels his Reiatsu into Blut Vene to offset the damage he knows he will take as he lets the Dragon Shoot hit him squarely in the chest.

There is an earth-shaking boom that sends shockwaves through the area and throws up a thick cloud of dust as the powerful energy projectile connects with the orange-haired Devil. As the exhausted Pawn starts to topple forward, Asia and Orihime both grab hold of his arms before he can fall flat on his face. Huffing and puffing while his body struggles to stay upright, Issei rests his hands heavily on his knees while peering into the dust cloud that obscures the spot where his Senpai was just standing. Several seconds go by without any movement from the cloud of dust. Swallowing, he looks up at his other Senpai and sees her eyes narrow from worry into irritation as she glares into the shifting cloud.
"Hmmph, serves you right Ichigo-kun." Orihime mutters lowly as she continues to glare into the slowly thinning cloud of dust.

A ragged cough sounds out then, and a figure waving his hand in front of his face disperses the cloud of dust around him. The three of them are slightly shocked by the appearance of the orange-haired Devil. Both sleeves are gone, showing bright-red blisters that are healing rapidly. The holes that are burnt through his shirt show ugly pink splotches on his chest. What puts them on edge though is the smile he has on his face as he walks over to join them.

"Not bad Issei. Pretty good shot you got in there at the end. How many boosts did you pile up before letting that thing go?" He asks cheerfully.

"Ah, one every ten seconds…so about two and a half minute's worth I guess." Issei watches in dumb fascination as the other Devil's skin heals back fully in front of his eyes.

"Well, I guess we'll have to start pushing you harder starting tomorrow Issei. Can't wait to see if you can pull that off on Yoruichi or not. Asia, take him to his room and I'll have someone check on him in an hour or so."

"O-Oh, I'll watch over him Senpai. I've got nothing else to do until tomorrow when I start training with Akeno-Senpai and Hanako-san. They are going to teach me some of the basics, like the teleportation spell. So…I…ah…you know..." Her cheeks glow bright red as she tries not to stare at the young Devil being supported in her arms.

Rolling his eyes, Ichigo gives them the okay to leave. Standing there, the adoptive siblings watch the younger Devil begin jabbering as he tries to talk to the former nun without stuttering. As the two younger Devils leave the dimension however, the healer folds her hands in front of her and turns to stare at the taller male. She smirks internally as he begins to shift nervously next to her. Finally, after a minute, he sighs out.

"Okay, what is it? Normally you would be talking up a storm, so what did I do? Other than that." He smiles inwardly thinking about the blackmail material, but wisely keeps his adopted sister from seeing his hidden glee.

Gently taking his hand, Orihime remarks to him. "Rukia asked me to see you. She knew you were outside the door earlier, as did your wife Ichigo. Rukia said your Reiatsu seemed pretty agitated from the little she could actually feel. Rias felt it too, she tried to hide it but we could see she was worried about you."

Taking her arm and letting it slip through his, he begins to walk with his adopted sister to the exit. "I didn't want her to see me after we interrogated that Shihōin prisoner. I know I'm not supposed to hide it from her, but you…well, you guys sounded like you were having so much fun, I just wanted her to have that for a bit more. That's why I went looking for Grimmjow, I knew he'd be alone or with the guys and knowing him, he wouldn't pass up the chance to spar. Besides, I had to vent after what I heard from Yoruichi's former clanswoman. They are…worse than we thought, far worse than we could have ever imagined Hime. Now I really have to thank Geta-Bōshi and Goat-Chin for making that choice, just thinking they'd kill you guys without hesitation just for even thinking of helping me…well you get the point. I wasn't ready to ruin Rias's night, but it seems I found a way to screw that up anyhows."

Orihime smiles at him and squeezes his arm lightly. "Then go to her and explain it. You are married now Ichigo and the key to a great marriage…"

"…is communication between spouses." He finishes as he smiles at his adoptive sister. "Got it."
Stepping out into the hallway, he keeps hold of Orihime's arm and stares into the distance for several moments before a grin forms on his face. Seeing both Kimi and Nia waiting, he speaks to the violet-eyed Elf.

"Tell your mother that Orihime, Nia and I are going to the World of the Living for a brief pit stop. I...need to get an 'I'm sorry gift' for Rias."

Bowing slightly while wearing a knowing smile, the teenaged-looking Elf speaks. "Of course, Ichigo."

Watching her disappear using her magic, the orange-haired Devil conjures up the place he wants to visit in his mind. Linking his free arm with the other Elf, he tells both females to hold on as he teleports them away.

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Himejima Akeno finds the young Quincy archer in the library as is his norm when he is either studying or looking for some alone-time. Smiling to herself, she makes her way to the table he is at and sits down next to him. Opening the book, she had picked out earlier, she pretends to read while she secretly studies his face shifting through several emotions that are obvious to the Gremory Queen. First, she sees surprise, then anxiety, before he shifts to a more relaxed and definitely a pleased look. Several times, she spots his mouth half open as if to speak before he stops himself. For ten whole minutes she watches him struggle to break the ice, so after her careful observations of him since her arrival, she decides to break the deadlock herself.

"Did you have a good time with me last night...Uryū-sama?" She closes her book and turns to the Quincy archer, bashfully batting her eyes at him.

Clearing his throat at the 'unintentionally' misleading words, Uryū shuts his book and turns to face her slightly. "Yes, I did. Thank you for your help, having you stay with me all night to ensure I didn't commit any mistakes with the nobles was most gratifying."

"Oh? Was that all?" Her voice heats up slightly as it gains a coy tone.

A slight pink tint on his cheeks shows he is thinking of more, so she pushes him further. "I thought having a very attractive young Devil on your arm during the evening would have been... appreciated more than that. But alas, I see I was wrong..."

"No! I mean no, you being next to me was...very enjoyable." He blushes even more as he recalls the revealing dress she wore and the tantalizing brushes of her smooth skin against his...

Swallowing hard again, he can't help but moan out when his eyes dip for a fraction of a second. 'I can't believe how soft yet firm they are...!' When Akeno leans forward, his eyes widen involuntarily as her face lines up with her cleavage and she looks up at him with a playful hint of... "So...would you care to join me for a walk? I have heard that when the Cerberus hunt at night, their howls are said to move one's soul. Since I will be spending as much time here as I do at the Gremory Estate, I wish to hear it for myself."

"I...I would like that very much Himejima-san." Uryū rises first and extends his hand to her.

Taking it, she speaks to him again demurely. "Thank you very much...Ishida-sama."

Almost choking at her use of honorifics, he sputters out to her. "Ah, n-no sama please. I am not my father."
"Ara, ara Ishida-sama. I must call you that because as the Queen of Rias Naberius's peerage, I must address my King's husband's cousin with that much respect." She smirks to herself at seeing the look of confusion on his face as he silently mouths through the extended chain of relations.

"I must insist on just Uryū…" She cuts him off with a single finger on his lips.

"Then I wish to be called Akeno from now on. Do we have an accord Uryū?"

His eyes widen, and then smiling genuinely to her, he agrees. "We do."

"Now that's settled, how about we grab a nice bottle and some glasses and we can go to the hot springs near the edge of the forest at the base of the volcano? Aisling told me that no one uses that particular spot at night."

"Hot springs? Wine? Ah, are we…allowed to do that?" Uryū states in confusion, letting the black-haired Queen lead the way as his mind tries to catch up to the recent changes in their relationship.

Pulling his arm into her valley, she breathes on his neck as she speaks. "We can do anything we want, Uryū. It will only be the two of us there anyways."

' Just...two of us...Oh shit! OH SHIT!'

XXXX

After watching the last of her guests leave for the night, Rias Naberius sits in the middle of her and Ichigo's bed, wondering where her husband is. She had felt his power rise and then disappear suddenly after he came out of the training dimension. Earlier on, she had asked his sister Yuzu to check on him when instead of entering the room, he had stood outside for a minute or so before he moved away. Rukia had also felt him too, the petite Shinigami frowning at the closed door before motioning the Devil Heiress over to one side to speak with her privately.

'Moron is hiding again. Whatever he and Nii-sama learned from Shihōin Chiyoko must have been bad, real bad for Ichigo to avoid seeing you after that. Send Orihime to fetch him when you can, if anyone is good at reading him when he gets like this, it would be you, me and her. Normally I'd kick his ass for making us worry, but feeling him just now…I don't think it's a good idea.'

The petite Shinigami must have had a premonition, because shortly after Ichigo disappeared in the training dimension, Rukia's older brother came and asked to speak with her privately. The way Byakuya held himself as he stood in the doorway was truly telling. While his body looked relaxed, his face was anything but. Rukia herself must have noticed it too because she quickly took her brother's hand into hers and squeezed it tightly. That was the last Rias had seen of the bunny-loving Shinigami and her brother for the rest of the night.

Now she is alone after her and Ichigo's peerages have left for their own rooms for the rest of the night. Tomorrow will be a busy day as they get the Estate ready for the arrival of the Head Captain and several other Captains to have dinner and possibly spend the night. Glancing at the clock, she gets up to undress for her bath when there is a knock at the door.

"Come in." She says loudly.

Her eyes grow wide when the door opens and a huge bouquet of flowers fills the doorway, preventing anything else from being seen.

"W-What's this?" She stammers in confusion.
"A present for Milady, from a very sorry and repentant husband." Ichigo lowers the flowers enough to allow his wife to see his version of a puppy-eyed face.

Placing her hands on her hips, Rias looks at the flowers and then at the remorseful expression in his eyes. A pleased grin secretly builds at the knowledge she can't win, and she imperiously motions for him to enter the room. As he shuffles in, she sees a giggling Orihime and Nia behind him, both looking in from opposite sides of the doorway. "Please have the staff bring us a...very large vase."

Both Bishop and Elf giggle while mock saluting and vanishing from the doorway, Nia's voice loudly saying 'You're welcome' as she and the burnt-orange-haired healer leave with large smiles on their faces, eager to share the news with the rest of Ichigo's peerage and friends. Closing the door with his foot; Ichigo walks up to his wife and places the huge bouquet containing several hundred red roses on the only place he can, their bed. Turning around to face her, he sheepishly walks up to her while rubbing the back of his head, noting that her arms are folded under her breasts and she has a stern expression on her face while tapping her foot expectantly. Looking into her anxious eyes, Ichigo gently cups her cheek, relief immediately filling him when she leans into his touch and grabs his hand tightly, holding it in place.

"Sorry. I...I heard how much fun you were having in the room, and after we interrogated our prisoner, I really didn't want to ruin what sounded like a good time in here. Orihime told me that I managed to do it anyway and...well...this is my way of apologizing to you and to tell you...I will tell you everything from now on, even the...things I don't wish for you to hear. I forgot and tried to hide it again, old habits die hard Rias. So...again I'm sorry for hurting you." He genuinely apologizes as he pulls her into his arms when he is done speaking.

Feeling him kiss the top of her head, Rias wraps her arms around his body and tightens her embrace on him. "I was worried Ichigo. I knew you were outside the door, Rukia did too. Still, walking away and trying to do things on your own won't be allowed anymore, do you hear? I am your wife Ichigo, I expect us to have difficult times, but we will face them together, not separately. I should be upset right now but I'm not, I understand why you did what you did. Just no more Ichigo, we are the future Clan Heads of the Naberius, we need to stand as one for our Clans. With that said, you are forgiven...this time."

"Thank you." He lifts her face and places a chaste kiss on her lips just as someone knocks on the door. "I'll get it. How about taking a bath together before bed?"

"I was just going to take one before you came back...I guess you can join me." She sends him a teasing pose, causing him to hit the door with his face.

Giggling, she watches him rub his nose before opening the door. "Good evening Lord and Lady Naberius. Nia said you needed a large vase for flowers. Will this do?"

Ichigo nods his head at the older of the two Devils servants in the doorway; stepping to one side, he watches as they carry in a heavy vase and place it by the window.

"Hey, thanks. By the way it's still Ichigo."

"Of course, Ichigo, but we wanted to say it in private at least once. However, you know in public settings the staff must adhere to protocols." The male servant says apologetically.

"I know. So, thanks again for your help." As the two Devils begin to leave, Ichigo unwittingly stops them when he makes a comment about the vase, jokingly asking if it is an antique.
The older one again turns to address Ichigo. "It is indeed an authentic Ming Dynasty vase. It is one of several thousand we have in storage."

"S-Several thousand?" The young Devil chokes out, feeling his heart beating faster as he looks at the price-less antique vase and realizing it is just one of many held by the Naberius.

It is then that the younger servant adds in the reason why they have so many. "Lord Amyntas and Tatianna Ver'har use them to reward the most faithful of our human supporters. It is how we show them our appreciation for their dedication to the Clan."

"...I'll keep that in mind. Again thanks." Ichigo gives a respectful bow to the two as they finally leave the room, then he turns to look at the vase again. "We are so taking some home with us Rias." He grins as he runs his hand over the curved top of the vase.

Lifting one eyebrow, the crimson-haired Devil Heiress fakes a pout as she speaks to him. "I think you love touching its curves more than those of your…wife, Ichigo, seeing how you are stroking it so lovingly..."

She isn't ready for her husband's speed, nor is she ready for him to flip her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carry her into their bathroom. "Nothing is as beautiful as you, even if you are a sassy minx." He growls.

Knowing that beating on him for the way he is carrying her won't work, she grins as she does the next best thing.

"Dammit Rias, stop biting my ass!"

"Oh, don't worry, Momma will kiss it and make it all better. Now get me to my bath you big baby."

XXXX

The next morning, the promised chaos that threatens to engulf the Estate and the staff is proceeding as expected, even the departure of their new Mistress of the Clan doesn't interfere with the Devils and Elves performing their frantic tasks.

"She'll be back in a few hours Ichigo, so don't fret so much my son." Isshin says as he stands with Ichigo watching Rias, her peerage, Kimi and an escort of four Elfin archers vanish into the magic circle.

Ichigo only nods his head in answer as begins to think about the day he's had so far, pinching his nose he knows today is going to be extremely stressful between him and the Head Captain. Looking back, this morning with his wife is now just a blissful memory for the young Lord Naberius.

XXXX Flashback Start XXXX

Having woken up to a very busy household, the young husband was reminded by his wife that she had to return to the Gremory Estate to prepare for the dinner, as well as make arrangements for moving most of her possessions to the Naberius Estate. Following a brief shower, the two had dressed quickly to meet with the Clan in the main dining room, every member of his Clan readying themselves and giving aid to the staff as they prepared to show off the best that the Underworld could offer to such 'esteemed' guests. They had decided to eat with their individual peerages after being separated from them for most of the weekend. For some reason, Ichigo found his peerage looking upbeat and hiding their smirks. At first, he was confused, until he saw them shooting looks at the table where a red-faced Issei was sitting.
"You showed them didn't you Grimmjow?" Ichigo asked as he sat down between Tia and Tatsuki.

Rolling his eyes as if to say duh, the blue-haired Knight pointed at the table where the Gremory Pawn was sitting. "Not like it did much damage to his ego there Ichigo, that little blonde girl hasn't let go of him yet."

Ichigo turned to see Grimmjow was right, Asia was all big smiles and light laughter as she chatted with the Gremory peerage, while keeping her arm wrapped around Issei's. Despite being married now, Ichigo and Rias decided that it would be easier to leave the Gremory moniker for her peerage, so they had informed his great-grandfather of their decision earlier this morning. Thankfully, the oldest Naberius understood completely and accepted their reasons behind it.

After watching the peerage of his wife tease the blushing Pawn and Asia Argento trying to comfort him, Ichigo turned back to talk with his own peerage. So far, they have been able to adapt rather quickly to life in the Naberius Estate; with Grimmjow and Nelliel being the only other married couple, the older couple had the most to say about their new life, mainly about how large their room was.

"It's just that Itsygo, because it's too big that it makes it feels so empty to us." Nelliel remarked.

Pausing with one raised eyebrow, Ichigo looked at his green-haired Knight and questioned why she and Grimmjow hadn't gone shopping yet if it was such a problem for them.

Both Knights froze then and looked at him askance. "Shop?" Grimmjow questioned with bafflement.

"Well yeah, shop. You do get a monthly stipend you know? So go to the human world and buy what you want, just remember it has to fit in your room though. Same goes for all you guys as well." He finished by pointing it out to the rest of his peerage when he saw all their starry-eyed looks.

His peerage as one began to grin madly then, Tatsuki and Orihime speaking in hushed whispers, while Chad nodded his head and continued to eat silently. The former Fracción began planning their rooms and trading ideas with one another, many wondering what the modern world had to offer them now. Even Tia had a twinkle in her eyes that she tried to hide by staring into her cup of tea while sipping calmly from it. Seeing that his peerage was now well distracted, Ichigo ate with his thoughts turning to his first real problem of the day, Nemu Kurotsuchi who was still in the detention cell. Letting his peerage discuss their shopping plans, he turned to Tia and asked for her opinion on what to do with the Shinigami Lieutenant in holding.

Overhearing his question, Momo piped up then as she paused from talking to her boyfriend, Rikichi Yamato, informing Ichigo that the Squad Twelve Lieutenant was close to choosing but wanted to speak to him privately before she committed to a course of action. Looking around at his peerage, Ichigo made up his mind to let them relax a while more as he got up to go visit his potential new Pawn, Tia getting up with him and motioning for the others to stay where they were. Both made their way over to Rias's table where Ichigo quickly informed his wife where he was going, and that he'd be back to spend what time they had left with their parents before the Gremory and Sitri Clans left for their own estates. The only one not leaving with them was her cousin.

"Eh? You sure you want to stick around Sairaorg?" Ichigo asked the future Head of the Bael Clan who was seated beside Orihime.

"If you don't mind, it's not like I have a lot to do until Thursday when I have to get ready for my Rating Game against Seekvaira Agares." The Bael Heir informed him with a smile.
"Suit yourself. Tia lets go." Waving to his twin sisters and Orihime as he left, Ichigo and his Queen walked down the hallway leading to the holding cells that were located near the main mansion of the estate.

The two talked about the ramifications of Ichigo absconding with two Lieutenants from the ranks of the Gotei Thirteen by inducting them into his peerage, as well as causing two other Lieutenants and a Captain to defect from their ranks along with the young Shinigami who was his Bishop's boyfriend. Ichigo shook his head, wondering what was behind his Evil Pieces deciding on their own who to add to his peerage. Thinking about the choices they had made, he also muttered to himself on why so many of them were females; be they Shinigami, Hollow or formerly human, all but Chad and Grimmjow were women. He prayed to the Kami that his last Pawn would be a male, someone for him, Grimmjow and Chad to hang around with when they were performing their duties as a peerage.

Unfortunately, there weren't many males he could or would reincarnate with his remaining Evil Pieces. Even if he were to offer, Ichigo highly doubted Byakuya would be anything less than a Queen; he inwardly sniggered at the thought of that visual, but had to admit the Shinigami Captain was simply too powerful, just like the blonde walking next to him. Next was Uryū, who was both his cousin and a Quincy; for some reason he felt that his blood relative was due a greater honor in the future, so he certainly didn't think he would accept the Evil Piece either. Which left Renji, but if somehow the Pineapple and Rukia could return to Soul Society, he didn't want two of his best friends divided by being on opposing sides of duty. So, the Pineapple was out, which left only one other possible candidate to check if his Pawn thought he was worthy of being reincarnated. Before that though, he still had to deal with the black-haired Lieutenant sitting in her cell, the daughter of that mad scientist; inwardly he hoped she would say yes, just so he could rub it in the clown-faced bastard's ugly mug that she had chosen them over him.

"…One can only hope."

"What was that Ichigo?" Tier asked as they approached the nondescript building that hid the passageway to the underground cells.

"Just thinking out loud, sorry. Kinda hope Nemu says yes." Ichigo released a bit of his magic to identify himself to those inside.

Crossing her arms under her bosom, the former Tercera asked why that is. He gleefully told her why as he recounted some of the history between his cousin's family and the Squad Twelve Captain.

"I figure tit-for-tat, he took Sōken, we take Nemu. Not much of a swap for us, but knowing him, he made Nemu capable of becoming something incredible in due time. Even if he didn't, having her brains in our peerage can only help us in the long run. I know I am the luckiest S.O.B. alive right now having the incredible peerage that I have, but one more like her, hell who's gonna stop us?"

Chuckling, the Queen of his peerage agreed with him but when she paused, he turned his eyes towards her. "Something wrong?"

Tia looked him in the eye then and spoke from her heart. "I can't describe how incredibly honored I and my Fracción are that you gave us this gift, Ichigo Naberius. Admittedly on my part, I was extremely wary of becoming your Queen, but now..."

She placed a hand on her womb and continued. "I feel alive like I did when I was among the living. And with my Hollow hole now filled, it gives me hope that I can...that someday I may bring a child into this world."
Ichigo stopped and stared at the woman with a hint of shock and curiosity. "You want a child, Tia? I... well that is something I didn't see coming. Now that I think about it, all of you may one day want that won't you?"

Seeing her nod her head, he turned around and grabbed the handle to open the first magically-secured door. "I guess the mansion is gonna need some serious additions added on in the coming years..."

Taking his comment as an opening, the Queen asked her next question then. "So, you would not oppose us seeking to have children then?"

"Hell no, but swear to me one thing."

"Yes?"

Ichigo winced slightly. "Keep my damn father away from them. I'll kill him if he passes on his insane antics to hyperactive two and three-year-old kids."

"Agreed." She smiled at him.

Soon the two Devils were standing in front of the cell door that housed Nemu Kurotsuchi. Knocking on the door in case the Shinigami was involved with personal business, he waited until he heard the Lieutenant answer back. Opening the door, Ichigo was held back by his Queen as she stepped inside first.

"As your Queen, it's my duty Ichigo." Her eyes hardened slightly when she saw him getting ready to argue. "Remember your position Ichigo Naberius."

Grunting in annoyed acceptance, he nodded to her and waited until Tia called for him to enter. When he did, he found Nemu sitting on the edge of her bed watching him closely as he stepped into the cell. He looked her over and was relieved to see her unharmed and looking well. Pulling up two chairs, he sat in one while his Queen declined the other; instead, she stood behind him with her hand fingering the Tsuka of her Zanpakutō.

"So, I hear you wanted to speak to me Nemu. I really don't have a lot of time right now, because with the Head Captain coming here within the next few hours, we're honestly a bit stressed for time." He saw her nod once in understanding.

"Then I shall be quick Naberius-sama. What do you plan to compensate my Captain with should I decide to become your Pawn? He will be losing me, so in return he will expect something of equal value..."

Ichigo cut her off roughly then, speaking with a tightly-reined in voice. "He's fucking lucky to even be breathing, Lieutenant Kurotsuchi. Ishida Sōken turns out to be a distant relative of mine, and adding the fact that he desecrated the remains of some of my Elves, he should be grateful that I am allowing to breathe. If I wasn't so sure of Gramps reaction, I'd have let Sasha take his head. Sorry Nemu, but your Captain is a deranged sicko and truthfully needs to be put down. Being a genius doesn't give him license to do half the shit I have heard rumors of him doing, even to you, his own 'daughter'. You stay, he gets shit. You go, he gets fair warning, and next time he crosses my path and fucks with what is mine, I'll kill him myself. Does that answer your question?"

Both he and Tia waited for the obvious answer, which didn't come. What did come was surprising to them instead.

"Lieutenant Hinamori said you would probably decline offering my Captain compensation; even
threaten his life if it was brought up. I had to know if what she told me was true Naberius-sama: your honesty she said was one of your greatest attributes, even if it is annoyingly blunt in Kuchiki-san's words." Nemu gave him an uncharacteristic smirk at seeing his scowl when he heard Rukia's remarks.

"You should also know that I trust Hinamori-san, not because she's a Lieutenant, but because while many may consider her to be a shy and good-natured Shinigami, I have closely observed her since Captain Hirako began to personally train her. That softness she once wore is no longer there, replaced by the tempered steel of a calculating and thoughtful warrior. Aizen Sōsuke tried to kill her multiple times for other reasons than he may have claimed Ichigo Naberius, so with that in mind, I wish to accept your Evil Piece so that I too may become more than what I am now. I want to…I want to leave my Captain's shadow, and I also have a personal reason for staying as well."

Shocked by her detailed confession, Ichigo asked what her personal reason was, and when she told him, he could only stare at the woman with nothing but amusement in his eyes.

"Very well. Once this is done Nemu, you are ours, forever. You know I have many former Espada and Arrancar in my peerage, is that gonna be a problem for you?" He turned serious when he felt his Pawn piece pulsating rapidly in anticipation of Nemu's answer.

"No. As you said, once I am a Devil, I am no longer a Shinigami, just as they are no longer Hollows."

Ichigo looked over his shoulder at his Queen and saw the blonde studying the usually robot-like woman. She nodded her head once and with that, Ichigo turned back to the Shinigami.

Looking into his future Pawn's eyes, Ichigo could only give a brief sigh at the direction his life had gone. Arrancar, Shinigami, humans, family, and the robotic daughter of a psychotic demon-clown Captain were all...all now Devils within his peerage. It sounded like something from a comic book. Chuckling at the thought, he looked into the never-moving gaze of the young woman and gave her a smile. "Well then, follow me down the rabbit hole, Nemu Kurotsuchi."

XXXX Flashback End XXXX

Ukitake Jūshirō stands up after soaking in the hot spring in preparation for what is about to take place. Blushing once again, he turns to see the same young female Devils waiting for him, towels and a clean robe in their hands. As he approaches them, he sees them all smiling, and more than one of them are looking his nude body over as they cluster around him. They then proceed to dry him off and once the oldest Devil says he is ready, they slip the robe over his outstretched arms and the youngest ties it closed around him. Standing on either side of them, the Devils then bow as one; the two at the furthest ends extending their arms and indicating the room he is to enter.

"Good luck Captain Ukitake." They chorus as he nods to them and begins his walk towards his future.

When he enters the brightly lit room, he sees Ichigo sitting behind Orihime and waiting for him. The young healer looks up at him with a smile and taps the futon in front of her.

"Please lie down Ukitake-san. We don't know how long this will take, so you might as well be comfortable."

Nodding at her instructions, Jūshirō sees every Shinigami and former Shinigami kneeling in place along the outside of the circle that he and the two Devils now occupy. Holding his robe tightly closed, he sends a wry glance at the grinning former Shihōin noble, not rising to her bait.
"Orihime, Ichigo, I want to say even if this doesn't work, I can't thank you enough for at least trying where so many others have failed." The white-haired Captain says as he lies on his back, holding his robe closed around him.

Ichigo snorts in understanding. "I have a good feeling about this Captain Ukitake; I think we can finally rid you of your ailment, something I know many in your squad will be…well you get it."

Jūshirō sees the hopeful look in Rukia's violet eyes as she sits between her brother and fiancé, watching the proceedings intently. "I see. Well then, I am ready."

Orihime's healing shield encompasses his body then as she speaks. "If this works, you will feel a lot of pain while your lungs are being rebuilt. I have to reject them from existence and…"

Everyone stares at the young healer when she pauses in her speech, behind her Ichigo also appears to be in a catatonic state. Scrambling to her feet and rushing to her best friend, Rukia is blown back by a powerful wave of magic and Reiatsu which surrounds the three in the center. As she is caught by her brother and Renji, she and the others are stopped by a bodiless voice.

"Do not interfere; no harm will come to them, they merely have need of my assistance."

Orihime stands in a vast empty void; nothing is visible to her except the pitch-black air surrounding the small island she found herself afloat on. Extending her hand, she feels a slight shimmering barrier responding to her touch, and when she pushes against it, she squeaks when her hand sinks into the gel-like substance.

"Where am I?" She questions out loud.

"You are in my world, healer."

Jumping slightly in surprise, Orihime slowly looks around and still can't see beyond the little island of light. "Who are you?"

"I am that which you seek to remove from Jūshirō Ukitake. This I cannot allow you to do."

"Why? Are you the reason why Ukitake-san is always sick then?" Orihime feels her anger sparking to life, discovering that the white-haired Captain's illness is deliberately being caused by something... or someone.

A slow dark chuckle answers her inquiry and it adds to her growing ire. "And if I am, what do you think you can do? Remove me? Your powers may be vast, Orihime Inoue Naberius, but I am...special. Now stop this foolish..."

The voice stops and stares into the darkness that surrounds its body as a strange ominous presence fills the air, finally revealing itself as a woman clad in blood-red leather who steps next to the frozen Devil healer out of the darkness, and with her arrival, the sounds of metal links clinking together loudly echoes throughout the darkness surrounding all three beings. After a pause, the voice speaks again.

"And you would be whom exactly? The power of this Devil child perhaps?"

A feral smile shows on the lips of the leather-clad being as she waves one hand dismissively. "No, not hers, but her brother's...Mimihagi."
A shift in the blackness stirs around the two entities stare at one another. "You have me at a disadvantage. Who or what are you?"

"Someone who can and will kill you. Unless of course you seek to compromise with Orihime here. This Shinigami, Jūshirō Ukitake is of great importance to those that surround my Lord. So, if you are going to bring them misery, I'd rather kill you then spare any time speaking to you." Millions of blue-flamed chains suddenly shoot out through the darkness, burning away the shadows that surround Orihime and revealing the Fallen God in his entirety.

"Do not underestimate me Devil; I'll take your life before you can take your next breath." Warns the strange fist-shaped entity that stares at them with its single narrowed eye.

In answer, the leather-clad woman begins to chuckle, then giggle, before breaking out into full-blown laughter. "You...you kill me...hahaha...that's rich coming from you....hahaha...I didn't know your kind...had...humor..."

Fury races through the being known as Mimihagi, who was once known as the Right Hand of the Soul King. Deciding to teach this new interloper a lesson, it reaches for its power, only to grunt in pain when a red leather-clad arm is suddenly sticking out of its back. "H-How?"

"You let yourself go, feeding only on his Reiatsu from the time you accepted and answered his parents' prayers, while I have grown over the millennia, growing with each new soul that enters the domain of the Clan I have chosen as my own. You gave up your body to hide in his, while I was given one to reward mine for all he has done; his deepest desires were answered that day. The rules however keep her away from him, even 'it' knew he would never move forward if he was allowed to know. One day our bargain will end, and one will be allowed to know the truth; I will live, she will...well, I don't know what will happen to her. All I know is this: I can see why she loves him. Her love is why I must protect them. I have what you don't have Mimihagi; I have something to protect while you have nothing but a body to consume. So, I give you this choice, release him or else."

"You think it is so easy? If I leave, he will die. You know this to be true, so what will you do now?"

"She has the power to do what is needed. As long as her brother feeds her his full power, she can do anything, and I mean anything. I do not speak untruths, you know this, and I will kill you if you don't compromise. Now you will obey her demands and you will accept her desires, if not, I will help her end you." Removing her bloody arm from Mimihagi’s back, the woman steps backwards and then fades away, leaving behind the now curious looking Orihime.

"Ano, are you the person I was speaking to?"

Mimihagi feels a slight burning in the air behind it; scowling inside, it looks into the grey eyes of the healer once again. "Yes, I am the one you were speaking to. You may address me as Mimihagi."

Bowing politely this time, Orihime speaks to the being. "I see. Please tell me why I shouldn't be allowed to heal Ukitake-san then? Why I should let him suffer and see the sadness that fills the eyes of Kuchiki-san? He is a very good Captain and a friend to many, so why would you deny me the chance to heal him?"
Slanting to one side, the being can only chuckle internally at the young Devil in front of it. "When he was young, he became very ill, an illness that started to destroy his lungs. In an effort to save his life, his parents prayed to me to heal their son, but as with many gods, there is a price to pay for their miracle. His price is that I will someday devour his body, and I have done as much already. So, you see...I can't be removed, or he will die."

Hoping that its declaration will convince the leather-clad demon and the burnt-orange-haired healer standing before it, Mimihagi is greatly shocked by the next words that come from the lips of the teenaged Devil. "I see, so I will have to use you against your will then. I am sorry Mimihagi, but Ukitake's life means too much for me to allow you to kill him. Please don't think any less of me. I am truly sorry."

Before it can say a word, her orange shield springs up around the deity and traps it inside. Pulling on her brother's power, the burnt-orange-haired healer sends her fairies to inspect her patient; as the minutes tick by, the young woman sees the supernatural being banging against her shield. Allowing a small space to appear, she hears it crying out to her.

"Do you know who I serve!? I am a part of the Soul King! Do you really want to risk the balance you foolish child!?"

"Do you mean the same Soul King who allowed the nobles of Central Forty-Six to sentence Ichigo to death? The same Soul King whose nobles would have had us killed if we tried to help him? If that is the Soul King you claim to serve, then...I am not that sorry anymore. I also doubt your death alone would upset the Balance either." Turning to her fairies again, she ignores the increasingly desperate pleas from the trapped being.

Banging its body frenziedly against the barrier, Mimihagi can feel its body slowly dissolving, the Reiatsu it had siphoned over the centuries returning to its rightful owner. Fear grips the deity's mind as the reality-rejecting barrier erodes its body; thinking desperately for a way to escape, it freezes when the voice of the scarlet-clad demon speaks to it again in its mind this time.

"Amazing isn't it, Mimihagi? A year ago, this child, as you called her, wouldn't hurt a fly, yet today she doesn't hesitate to end your life. The folly of Soul Society's nobles will be the root cause of your death...perhaps if you beg more, offer her something she can accept..." The voice drawls out mockingly.

"What can I offer her if she won't even listen to me!? She is obstinate just like any other Devil! If she doesn't stop soon, I will be unable to sustain myself or Ukitake! Help me!"

"What will you give us then?" Mimihagi desperately searches its memories for anything to give the voiceless demon, and can only find one thing it can pledge.

"My eternal servitude..."

"What was that?" The demon's voice perks up, interest evident in her response.

"I will swear my life and power to Ukitake for as long as he lives! My power will be his without taking his...without devouring him."

"You will? You promise?" Mimihagi snaps its head to look at the healer then, the orange barrier paused in draining its Reiatsu.

"Yes. Your...powers can transfer mine to him, but you will have to use your brother's
Reiatsu to restore his body. I will still exist in him, but separately. Will that satisfy you Devil?" It watches as the six tiny flying figures gather around her and speak so low it can't hear what is being said.

Finally, after what seems to be a long conversation, the burnt-orange-haired healer turns to it and speaks. "I will watch you closely as I heal Ukitake-san, and if I sense one moment of deception, I will reject you from his soul immediately. Do we have a bargain Mimihagi-sama?"

The fist-like being lowers its head. "Shrewd like your race is rumored to be. I accept the contract Orihime Naberius. Now release me and I will uphold my side of the contract." It watches the orange shield drop and with a nod to each other, Mimihagi sends the healer's mind back to where it had taken her from.

"I'll watch you just in case." The deity feels several chains slinking across its body, and it can't help but give a shudder. "Don't want you to be called a liar."

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Ichigo blinks his eyes open; looking around, he sees his adoptive sister continuing to heal the Shinigami Captain under her care. He then sees the others all looking at them with worry evident on their faces. Gently nudging Orihime, he feels relief when she looks up at him and tells him that she's fine. Letting her and Zangetsu guide the transfer of his powers into her, he motions for Rukia to come closer.

"We can't Ichigo, something is keeping us away…" She nearly stumbles when she attempts to push at the air only to fall forward slightly.

Trying to hold in his laughter, Ichigo tells her not to blame him for her clumsiness, which illicit a response from her older brother.

"She speaks the truth Ichigo. For five minutes you and your sister were still as statues and we were unable to approach you, neither of you would respond to our inquiries until now. Did something happen to you or Orihime?" Byakuya makes his way next to his grumbling sister and kneels just outside the healing shield.

"Hime?" Ichigo looks at his adopted sister, only to see her trying to hide her face from him then. "Hime."

"It…it's nothing Ichigo. Everything is fine now…I'll explain later…please?" Her plea at the end of her statement forces him to yield.

"As long as you and Jūshirō are fine, I'll let it go. If it has something personal to do with him, then I'd rather you tell him only. We don't need to know." He concedes.

"That…would be best Ichi-nii." She and Rukia giggle when he rolls his eyes at them.

"Yo Ichigo, what happened?" Shinji asks when he too kneels next to the former Squad Six Captain.

Shaking his head, he tells them the truth. "I don't know exactly, I was letting Zangetsu channel my powers to Orihime when suddenly I found myself in my inner world…alone. I called for Zangetsu, but he didn't answer at first. When he finally came, he was just as surprised to see me as I was relieved to see him. He told me he was just helping guide our powers into Orihime and then the next second he found himself staring at me. So, whatever happened to them…?" He points at Orihime and Ukitake, then shrugs his confusion.
Momo steps into the room then, with Nemu Kurotsuchi in tow as well as Kimi and Nia. Bowing to her King, Momo motions for Nemu to join her as she sits next to Rukia and the three soon talk amongst themselves, the two Elfin teens taking positions behind Ichigo. For an hour no one speaks loud enough to disturb the young healer or her brother as they hold vigil over the welfare of the white-haired elder Captain, until he begins to move once again. At first Jūshirō coughs violently, and the faces surrounding him reflect emotions of disappointment. Orihime drops her shield then as she and Ichigo help Ukitake sit upright, Ichigo handing her a glass of water which she gives to the Shinigami Captain.

"Thank you Orihime, Ichigo. You tried…"

"Captain Ukitake, I need you to take a deep breath please." Orihime says to him politely.

Looking at her, he does as she asks and inhales deeply then exhales. His face starts showing raw emotions as he takes in another deep breath and exhales, and then another and another until he jumps to his feet and places a trembling hand on his chest.

"I…I…don't feel it anymore…” He looks down at Orihime and before anyone can stop him, he pulls her to her feet and begins hugging her tightly.

All watch as the white-haired Captain whispers the same thing over and over into her ear. "Thank you. Thank you."

Rukia nudges Ichigo. When he looks down, he can see the tears in her eyes, and he smirks while looking back at the Captain. "Don't mention it Midget."

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At roughly four-thirty in the afternoon, Ichigo and Amyntas watch as the welcoming committee assemble. Yoruichi and Yukiko stand with Sasha and Merti, along with one hundred and fifty Elf archers. Ichigo stands behind his uncle as he gives them their last-minute instructions then.

"We want no disputes; all discussions will be the responsibility of the Maou. Sasha and Merti, the Gremory Clan have given us access to the 'Train' which Ichigo wants you to transport them to the Underworld with. He wants the Head Captain to see firsthand what we have to offer our citizens. I understand that Soul Society's Rukongai is in complete disrepair, so if we can show him something different to offer the souls of the Eighty Districts, hopefully this will be a stepping stone to bring a real and lasting change to the afterlife."

Yoruichi looks at her 'son' then. "Rukia?" She asks questioningly.

Nodding his head, Ichigo answers back. "Not just her Okaa-san, but Renji, Momo, even Rangiku and Tōshirō came from there. The afterlife is supposed to be a place of peace and tranquility when humans die, but in reality, it's anything but. If the Head Captain is going to make the changes needed, then he needs to see firsthand that it can be done. And if things work out…”

"You sly bastard Ichigo!" Yukiko cheers then. "The Maou will use this as an opportunity to divert funds to them in exchange for treaties, goods and what not!"

"Something like that." The orange-haired Devil admits. "I just happened to be given a crash course in economics, one of those lessons is that long-term investments return greater yields."

Face-palming, Yoruichi utters out the name of his tutor. "Tatianna."

"Amazing talent she has there, ain't it Okaa-san?" Ichigo says with a smirk.
Ukitake and Shinji both do a double-take as the words sink in; the piano-teethed Captain sputters out in disbelief. "You...you're gonna use urban redevelopment to gain a financial foothold in Soul Society?"

"Yeap, and the noble houses and clans are gonna help me pay for it. Byakuya was most helpful in explaining that the nobility account for nearly ninety-eight percent of all wealth in the Seireitei and Soul Society in general. Given those facts, and the fact that we need to give the old codger a much-needed bargaining chip to use against them, well...you can see why we would offer our assistance to him." Ichigo's grin widens then.

"Besides, you know what we have that you don't have Shinji?"

Palming his face and looking through the gaps between his fingers, the Vizard Captain dreads the answer to his question. "What...would that be?"

"We have numbers. Numbers in which to help train, build, and more importantly guard our investments." The heir of Naberius can see the light bulbs going off in the heads of every Shinigami present.

"They'll never go for it Ichigo. Never." Sui-Feng says incredulously then.

"Eventually they have to Captain Sui-Feng." Lord Amyntas breaks in. "Someday the material world will end and the humans that reside there will find themselves in the afterlife unless they discover a way to travel the stars. Do you think for one second that those billions of souls would live in the squalor that Soul Society offers them? They will rise up and take up arms against the Seireitei, and then what? You can't destroy them without affecting the Balance, and you can't send them back into the Cycle of Life without giving them somewhere to go, can you? No, you will have to give them something to live for; a place they will feel safe in and a place they can live a life resembling what they had left behind."

All of the Shinigami look at the two Devils then. "How far ahead have you looked?" Jushirō asks them with amazement.

"We are near immortal Captain Ukitake. Long-term for us is in millennia, not centuries." The older Lord Naberius replies with a smirk.

"We'd rather have a peaceful solution to my current status, Captain Jushirō. Fighting the old man is last on my to-do list, but if I have to beat it into his thick-headed skull that he has to change things, I'm more than willing to cross Zanpakutō at that point. He is the one person standing in the way of change, and he is also the only person who can force the nobles to bend knee to his demands." Ichigo's eyes flash a dark golden-yellow then.

"You are forcing him into a corner Ichigo, are you willing to take that chance?" Ukitake asks of the young Devil.

"If I have to, yes. If Rukia and Renji ever want to return to the Gotei Thirteen to continue as Shinigami, I will do it for them." Looking down at his feet, he continues speaking. "I'd also like it if Momo, Byakuya, Rikichi and Nemu could do so, perhaps even me. We are Shinigami at heart, all we wanted was to serve and protect, but the damn politicians got in the way. As for Okaa-san, Otou-san, Kisuke and Tessai, well I'm sure they wouldn't mind being able to visit and not worry about assassins trying to kill them."

"Well kiddo, you got us behind you then." Ukitake and Sui-Feng look at the Vizard Captain who had spoken up. "Like I said before, Ichigo is and always will be one of us, a Vizard. I know in my
heart he would do anything for us, just like we will for him, even if it means going against the orders of the old man."

"Then I'm in." Sui-Feng says as she looks at her mentor and Yukiko. "I'd like to see Yoruichi and Yukiko return someday, even if it's for something as simple as having lunch with me."

"Well, I can only speak for myself, but I have a feeling Retsu and Shunsui will side with you as well Ichigo. Things have to change someday if we are to survive as you said. Besides, I have a debt of honor to your sister. One that I can never repay her for." The white-haired Captain remarks candidly.

"Hey, it's almost time!" Yukiko shouts to the group.

All eyes turn to look at the hyperactive former Shihōin then. "Remember Yukiko, you represent the Naberius in this matter. Look to your older sister for her cues and things will go smoothly. Also, no matter what is directed at her, let her handle them as she sees fit." Amyntas reminds her.

"Hai, Lord Amyntas!" Yukiko pulls up her face mask and makes her way to the group of older Elves who are waiting ahead of them.

Ichigo watches as his great-grandfather makes his way to stand in front of the formally-dressed Yoruichi. She is the only formally dressed delegate that will greet the Shinigami contingent. The dark-skinned woman is wearing a pale-orange kimono with red obi; Sasha and Merti on the other hand are dressed similarly to Yukiko, while the Elven archers wear their standard battle armor. Standing before the Honor Guard that will serve as an escort, he speaks to them as a whole.

"Today is an important day for our Clan; as such I have no need to tell you how to act accordingly. My only standing order is this; protect Ladies Yoruichi, Yukiko, Sasha and Merti, as well as our Shinigami guests. You are allowed the use of deadly force to enforce this order. Show our guests the greatest courtesy you can, but maintain your vigilance, both towards them and to outside forces. Now go and bring our guests to the Underworld."

As one, the Elves snap to attention and hammer the floor three times with their weapons as a chorus shouts out. "For the Underworld! For the Maou! FOR THE NABERIUS!"

Taking Yoruichi's hand before she is able to move forward, Amyntas whispers to her. "Come home safely."

Rubbing her thumb over his hand, she replies back just as softly. "We all will."

Stepping away, the Watcher of the Gates of Hell raises his hand in salute to them. "For our honor."

The light glows fiercely and the entire assembly disappears.

'Good luck Okaa-san.'

'Return to us safely Yoruichi.'

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Stepping through the Senkaimon, Head Captain Yamamoto finds himself in a clearing situated before a beautifully restored Shinto shrine. Reaching out with his senses, he finds two Shinigami waiting for him as well as numerous other energy signatures, most are well-hidden except for the few standing on either side of the outcast Shihōin princess. Waiting for his subordinates to clear the gate, he stands there and matches stares with the female golden-eyed warrior, seeing that she is
very calm considering who steps through the dimensional gate after him. A low growl escapes his throat when the utterance of 'traitorous bitch' reaches his ears, and he shows his displeasure by releasing enough Reiatsu to show the Shihōin Elder his insistence that all appropriate civilities will be followed.

Soon the gate disappears and when it does, Yamamoto watches as Yoruichi approaches with the group he assumes to be her honor guard, coming to a stop several meters away. She bows as indicated by her place within the Clan and speaks to the group of Shinigami and the representatives of Central Forty-Six.

"Welcome to Isehara, Head Captain. I, Yoruichi Naberius, am to be your guide and official escort to the Underworld."

"You are nothing but an outlaw Yoruichi! How dare you show your face to us?" The voice of Sahiye Shihōin cuts in abruptly, dripping with venomous contempt.

The creaking of bow strings answers her outburst as a blind Elf steps forward and speaks. "Be wary of the words you speak from this moment forward, Sahiye Shihōin, or else you will personally find out how much the Naberius will defend one of its own. Head Captain, we were assured all appropriate protocols would be followed, yet…"

Turning to glare at the noblewoman behind him, the white-bearded Shinigami speaks in a firm voice that is loud enough to be heard by all in the clearing, both visible and hidden. "Elder Shihōin, this is your last and only warning; we are here seeking the reasons why the Devils have after a millennium of solitude sent one of their own to Soul Society to remove my officers, not to entertain your personal grudges. You will not speak unless spoken to; do you understand, Shihōin-sama?"

Glaring at her former relative, the white-streaked Shihōin Elder nods her head once in grudging acknowledgment.

"Will that suffice, Naberius-dono?" The aged Captain turns and asks of the former assassin.

Smiling politely, the purple-haired woman inclines her head in acceptance. "As you said Head Captain, these talks are to be peaceful. We wouldn't want any undue violence to occur. Now please allow me to introduce three important members of the Clan to you. First is Sasha Mai'ryl, head of the Naberius Clan's internal security forces. Merti Longoak, Head of Household for the younger Lady and Lord Naberius. And finally, Yukiko Shihōin, my younger sister…and also a student of Sasha Mai'ryl."

Staring at her now-revealed Clan Head, Shihōin Sahiye sputters her objections almost immediately, prohibition to speak be damned. "You can't Yukiko-dono! You are the Head of the Clan! You…you can't do this!"

Yukiko scowls at the agitated Shihōin woman. "Pfft, yeah right. I know damn well what you and the rest of the Elders were planning for 'your Clan Head'. I saw who you were arranging my marriage to and my answer to that is…HELL NO! No way, no how am I ever going to marry who you want me to. And if your addled brain just forgot, I am now a student here, so do whatever you want with the Clan, it's no longer my concern. Okaa-san and Otou-san are gone and beyond a few Shinigami I know, I have no real reason to stay in Soul Society under your thumb anymore." The masked younger sister of Yoruichi says as she folds her hands beneath her chest and turns her head away.

Shock is all that could be registered on the face of the older Shihōin noble, her mouth hanging open wordlessly. Seeing that their conversation is at an end for the moment, Yamamoto speaks
again.

"You have taken another one?" He asks sternly, only to see a smirk form on the former Shinigami's face then.

"I didn't take anything Head Captain; you simply lost another to a better way of life. As you will see for yourselves when we travel to the Underworld. Now, if you are ready, we will take you to our transport and show you what I mean."

Nodding stiffly, the Head Captain and the other Shinigami are enveloped by light and soon he feels his body shifting as the world around him disappears and reappears a moment later. Looking around, he sees that they are in a dark cavern, lit from above by soft lights and to one side is a platform of some kind.

"Yare, yare Yori-chan, where are we?" Shunsui asks as he holds Nanao up from the sudden vertigo caused by dimensional travel.

"You'll see Shunsui; don't want to ruin the surprise. After all, you are gonna be using a mode of transportation unlike any you have used before." The purple-haired goddess says with a smile as she and the Devils look towards the dark tunnel.

The Shinigami curiously gather on the platform with the Devils and most jerk back in surprise when a loud whistle blares from one side. A few moments later another whistle sounds out as a light begins to break through the oppressive darkness in the tunnel. Coming closer and closer, the Edo period warriors step back when a large metal machine bursts through the gloom and pulls into the cavern. Sliding to a stop before the waiting group, the doors of the contraption hiss open and a lone figure steps out from one of the coaches.

Bowing low, the Devil speaks as he raises his body. "Welcome Naberius Clan. Welcome Shinigami of Soul Society. Please step aboard and we will make our journey to the Underworld. I am Reynaldo of the Gremory Clan and for today, the Naberius Clan and I will be your conductors for your trip."

Bowing gracefully back to the conductor, Yoruichi then motions with one hand for the visiting guests to enter one of the lead carriages. "We will sit up front Head Captain."

In his long career, the aged Shinigami has never gone anywhere without using his own two feet or a Senkaimon. Stepping forward tentatively, he boards the odd contraption with clear hesitation, at least until he hears one of his oldest students whispers loudly to his Lieutenant.

"Now this is a first Nanao, to see the old man afraid of a train car."

Huffing with annoyance, he hears Shunsui hide his laughter along with the former Yoruichi Shihōin as he speeds up his boarding. Behind him, Chōjirō Sasakibe sends a pleading look to the Captain of Squad Eight to keep his mouth quiet lest they all suffer for it upon their return to Soul Society. Tōshirō Hitsugaya and Rangiku Matsumoto board next, followed by Retsu Unohana and the strangely quiet Ōetsu Nimaiya of Squad Zero. Once they are all on board, the conductor shouts out in customary function 'All Aboard' before the doors slide shut and the magically-driven train inches forward, picking up speed as it enters the tunnel. Sitting in the first car, the youngest Captain begins the conversation with the new Naberius Head of Household.

"Yoruichi Naberius." The Squad Ten Captain says using her new name. "I was wondering why we are using this train instead of using what we have already clearly seen before."
Knowing that he refers to the magic circles that they used to breach Soul Society, Yoruichi waves to the window next to her and replies honestly in answer. "Because there are things that both my lords wish for you to witness. Using a teleportation circle would deny you that view. So, enjoy the ride Hitsugaya-bou." She leans back in her seat, pulling out a paper fan so she can hide her smile behind it the same way Urahara would, although she would deny copying him if anyone asked her.

Arching one white eyebrow, the Captain turns to look out the window. At first there is nothing to see as the train passes through roughly-hewn rock, but as the minutes tick by, he notices the walls getting smoother and smoother, until the Devil conductor lets them know what is going to happen.

"Passing into the Underworld." With those words, a strange sensation passes through each of the Shinigami as the train passes through an archway.

Light abruptly returns to their surroundings, and he and the other Shinigami blink before opening their eyes widely at the sights around them. From their vantage point, they can see a small village they are passing by; each house is well built and does not show the neglect that is evident in many of the further districts of the Rukongai. The Devils that walk among the homes are well dressed and their facial emotions are the opposite of many Rukongai citizens. None appear dirty, hungry or even show signs of distress, each looking and acting happy to the Shinigami who are observing them carefully. As the train travels deeper into the territory of the Underworld, villages give way to towns, then even larger communities until, as they near their destination, they can see cities aglow with billions of lights and what they can only assume to be the Capital of the Underworld.

The train begins slowing as it approaches the largest skyscraper in the city, the capital of the Devils looming high over the train tracks that begin dipping downwards. Entering at just under ground level, the magically-driven train pulls up to a very well-lit platform that is surprisingly devoid of life. The youngest Captain spares a glance at his Lieutenant, only to see her and Nanao leaning forward conspiratorially with the former Squad Two Captain, giggles breaking out when Rangiku notices him looking at them. Pinching his nose, he is about to ask what is so funny when the Conductor, Reynaldo once again speaks loudly.

"All guests are informed that this is the last station for tonight's run. Please disembark to your right and remember not to leave anything behind."

Grabbing his and Rangiku's luggage, the white-haired prodigy files out behind the elder Captains and into a scene from a movie he once had the misfortune to watch. Standing in a long line are dozens of Devils wearing both maid and butler uniforms who have seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Bowing as one, they greet the Shinigami and the Devils of the Naberius Clan with clear voices, welcoming them to the Underworld. Standing awestruck at the reception, Tōshirō feels his Lieutenant nudge him suddenly.

"Give them the bags Captain." She whispers fiercely into his ear.

Giving her a fake glare, Tōshirō holds up the two bags and murmurs his thanks to the two young male Devils that take them from his hands. Once all the bags have been collected, Yoruichi bows and motions to an elevator.

"You're not coming?" The current Squad Eight Lieutenant asks her curiously.

Shaking her head, the golden-eyed woman speaks reassuringly to her. "'Fraid not Nanao. I have to join with the rest of Clan as we wait for the Head Captain and the Maou to finish their discussions first. Don't worry, we will be going shopping tomorrow, I promise."

Tilting his head back in exasperation, Captain Hitsugaya growls out at his second-in-command.
“That’s what you were talking about?”

Rangiku blinks at him innocently. "Of course, Captain! What did you think we were talking about? Certainly nothing about you and a certain dark-haired twin or anything."

Sputtering and looking at his Lieutenant in shock, he tries to ask what she's talking about, only to have her wave her hand dismissively at him as she makes her way to the elevator. "Now, now Captain, we all know of your crush. Come along or we'll be seen as rude if we keep them waiting."

Sending one more glance at the Devils and Elves staying on the same level as the train, the Captain joins his fellow Shinigami as they enter the contraption that the Devils are calling an elevator. Once inside, he is glad that it is larger than it had appeared from the outside. Moving about until the Head Captain finds his place at the front, Tōshirō grabs the rail out of instinct when he feels it moving upwards after the doors had closed on them. Counting the seconds, he starts to grow worried until a stopping motion forms in the pit of his guts and a pleasant dinging sound announces their arrival.

Stepping out near the end of the entourage, the white-haired Captain and his Lieutenant are greeted to the sight of four high-backed chairs and their occupants. Starting from left to right, he casually categorizes the four greatest Devils currently in power, recognizing them as the same Devils he had seen during the Head Captain's projected meeting. He is beginning to place names to the Devils when he hears a herald announce the official greetings.

"Welcome Shinigami of Soul Society! May I introduce our Maou!" The uniformed Devil gestures to the first Devil on the left.

"Ajuka Beelzebub. Falbium Asmodeus. Sirzechs Lucifer and Serafall Leviathan. The Four Great Satans of our Underworld." The herald bows deeply to his leaders when he finishes.

Head Captain Yamamoto bows his head in acknowledgement, then proceeds to introduce his officers. "My Lieutenant, Chōjirō Sasakibe. Squad Eight Captain Shunsui Kyōraku and his Lieutenant Nanao Ise. Squad Four Captain Retsu Unohana. Squad Ten Captain Tōshirō Hitsugaya and his Lieutenant Rangiku Matsumoto. Lastly, his Majesty's representative, as well as a Captain of Squad Zero, Ōetsu Nimaiya."

Serafall inclines her head then and motions to the sides. "Please be seated."

Before any of the Shinigami can respond, several Devils come out from the sides and place seats with cushions behind each of the visiting Shinigami, as well as small waist-high tables beside their chairs. Bowing, the servants leave the room. Clapping her hands once, a new set of Devils appear with several trays, dishes and flasks. Stopping before each of the Captains and Lieutenants, they place a tray on each table before setting down various teas and coffee. Small pastries are also laid out beside the drinks. As before, the Devils bow and leave the room in swift silence.

Grunting slightly at the display, Yamamoto takes a seat in the offered chair, eyeing the beverages and pastries beside him doubtfully. Following the Head Captain's lead and taking a seat, the young genius Captain picks up a tea cup and arches his eyebrows as the delicious scent of rose tea, one of his favorite's wafts from its surface. Sipping the tea calmly and savoring its taste, Tōshirō listens to the Head Captain begin the conversation with the four powerful beings before them.

"You know why I am here, so let us dispense with the frivolities and deal with the issue I have come before you to speak of. I want to know why after a millennium your faction would break the treaty and send a young noble of the Underworld to interfere with a trial taking place in Soul Society, and even take three criminals on trial with him."
Serafall leans forward, and the once-smiling Devil shifts her demeanor then. "Perhaps Head
Captain, you should be asking why this young Devil noble even knows of your 'Soul Society' and
their perceived notions of 'justice'? Young Lord Naberius acted in the best interest of everyone
concerned with this matter. Furthermore, you and your race were the ones who started this fiasco
not too long ago with your foolish sentencing of one of our own."

Narrowing his one open eye, the aged commander asks for clarification.

"Under the stipulations of the treaty, all judgments and punishments of either race were to be
handed down and carried out by their respective races, yet your Central Forty-Six disregarded this
and sentenced one of our own to execution. You, Head Captain Genryūsai Shigekuni Yamamoto
almost allowed this injustice to the Underworld to be committed. Do you deny this?" The young-
looking Maou asks, her eyes ablaze in fury thinking about what had almost happened to her cousin.

The Head Captain stares back at the young-looking woman and answers as truthfully as he can. "I
have no knowledge of any of your kind who were being sentenced by us or Central Forty-Six.
Perhaps if you care to clarify exactly who you are referring to?"

Serafall leans back in her chair and smirks. "I was hoping you would say that. Please allow the
Naberius Clan to enter." She looks towards a blank portion of the walls and motions for them to
witness the arrival of the named Clan.

A section of the wall swings open, and the newly-revealed doorway exposes dozens of Devils
standing in wait. In front are four Devils, each clad in black Hell Armor. As one they begin to walk
forward, the sounds of their metal boots striking a loud ringing pattern against the polished marble
floor. The young white-haired Captain sees Yoruichi walking arm-in-arm with the foremost
armored Devil, while next to them, the second pair consists of a young crimson-haired Devil
woman and her own black-armored escort. The last three consist of two smaller armored figures
holding hands with a burnt-orange-haired woman whom he instantly recognizes. Behind them
stream in numerous beings of various species, legends, and to his shock, two or three humans
whom he also recognizes.

'So, they did follow him here!'

As the newcomers stop a short distance away, the herald begins to speak at the behest of the
Leviathan Maou.

"I am pleased to introduce his lordship Lord Amyntas Naberius. Watcher of the Gates of Hell,
Keeper of the Skeleton Tower and Guardian of the Damned. His Head of Household Yoruichi
Naberius. His great-granddaughters, Lady Orihime Inoue Shiba Naberius, Lady Karin Kurosaki
Shiba Naberius, Lady Yuzu Kurosaki Shiba Naberius, and his heirs…"

Head Captain Yamamoto is instantly on his feet as he hears the names of Shiba and Kurosaki
being spoken; behind him, he can feel his officers also moving to stand as the last of the Devils are
introduced. His eyes are focused solely on the young Devil who is taking off his helm, and the
current serving Head Captain and oldest serving Shinigami can't believe his eyes as familiar orange
hair and brown eyes are revealed.

"…Her ladyship Rias Gremory Naberius, her husband and joint Head of the Naberius Clan Ichigo
Kurosaki Shiba Naberius, and his Head of Household Merti Longoak."

The deafening silence following the announcement is broken by a single loud exclamation from
Head Captain Yamamoto.
"YOU!"

Smirking at the Head Captain's expression of disbelief, Ichigo can't help himself as he waves to the stunned Shinigami. "Yo Gramps, long time no see."

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Hyrulian Hero Akai: I'm having all my stories re-edited again, so thanks for pointing out that glaring mistake, my bad and Word autocorrect.

Guest who keeps calling me Bunge: This chapter should make up for it, I hope.

End Notes

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