(Revisited) The Moon's Tears
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Summary

A look at the original fic four years later, rewrites of the first few chapters and maybe eventually the whole thing. Ichigo deals with a lot of trauma, the consequences of time travel, and people are concerned.

Notes

Matutine
(adj.) Before the dawn.

I kept saying I would rewrite a lot of the earlier chapters, almost four years later I don’t know if I’ll ever rewrite everything. But in honour of the Bleach anime being picked up here’s what I’ve got so far, it’s the first few chapters but y’all can get an idea of what I was going for hopefully. Maybe one day I’ll finish the rewrite.
Kneeling on the harsh ground below him his head hung, Ichigo let tired eyes slide shut. He took a deep breath of air letting the smell of fire and smoke assault his nose as his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Slowly, he opened his eyes once more, taking in the devastating scenery in front of his eyes. The world was in pieces (and saying such was putting the matter at heart lightly). Rubble and debris littered the ground as far as the eye could see, the broken shells of buildings stood alone in the early morning sunlight, glinting a harsh white colour that seemed to drain the world of all it’s vibrancy.

Ichigo let out a sigh, bone weary and empty as he slowly rose from his kneeling position, aching joints and age-old wounds taunting him. He reached out in front of him to firmly grasp Zangetsu’s longer blade for support. The white cloth that wrapped around the handle was a familiar comfort in his calloused hands, where the blade rested firmly entrenched in the earth. It steadied him as he swayed on his feet.

The orange-haired Shinigami let out a bitter laugh as he rose to a straightened position, his muscles protesting the action. Staring at the devastation, the lack of life surrounding him. It was a laugh that reflected his sanity. The state of his being lost to such an intense despair that flooded and combated with a relinquished peace.

Ichigo surveyed the scenery once again, his face as impassive as stone, the thought slowly trickled into his head.

What if…?

No, he acknowledged with an uneasy sway, there was no way to change what had happened, the past was its own in this world. Too much had happened he thought, bitterly recalling what had torn his life away with no fondness.

The moment Rukia has glided through his window the chains of fate had settled into place, entrapping his soul on the path he now stood at the end of.

At the young age of fifteen, he had charged blindly into a war, one that had stolen his adolescence, and ended with the loss of his powers, and the gain of devastating loss. They had called it the Winter War in some strange mockery of the season, and it had raged and thundered as the megalomaniac seeking the power of the gods, had torn throughout the world.

His defeat had been no victory for Ichigo, the world he had lived and immersed himself in had faded before his eyes. The same world that his friends and family had embraced and welcomed just as much as his own soul.

Dealing with PTSD had never been easy, dealing with it in the quiet shell of the house, quaking in a silent mind and empty halls had been worse.

A semblance of peace had reigned for a year before his life was thrown once again back into chaos
by the arrival of Kugo Ginjo. Bringing yet again a new hope and at the same time the knowledge that this was a gamble, a risk he wasn’t sure he was ready to take.

It had all come to fruition and Ichigo had known the outcome from the first moment, betrayal was a second skin he wore well. Soul Society finding a way to give him back his powers had only been a bonus not wholly unexpected.

He had basked in the rush and presence of Zangetsu as his power exploded around him in a brilliant torrent of crashing instincts, and serenity. He may or may not have laughed a tinge crazily in feeling the familiar yet strange power swell inside him.

Fate, cruel mistress she was struck again, and the Quincy invaded and brought with them only death and catastrophe. The first causality had been the Head Captain’s lieutenant; Chōjirō Sasakibe. Ichigo had talked to the lieutenant a few times, tea recipes shared, and the poetry the man harboured like a secret springing up.

The Head Captain was struck down next when he confronted his age-old enemy Juha Bach. Ichigo had raced there in an attempt to stop Bach but he too had been defeated and Zangetsu broken. The world had come to a startling halt as Zangetsu’s presence had once again disappeared almost completely muted. Ichigo had almost collapsed at the feeling that once again overtook him; the overwhelming loneliness that left him gasping in fear and pain.

Everything seemed to rush forward from that point, the Zero squad arrived taking Renji, Rukia, Byakuya, and Ichigo to the Soul King’s Palace where Ichigo struggled for days trying to understand how to regain Zangetsu. Finally, he was sent home where he confronted his dad, it was all finally revealed and everything seemed to click into place.

How one born of three races ended up in the storm that was Soul Society only made perfect sense; Aizen had seen it, and it seemed that Soul Society had an inkling that power of that magnitude wasn’t normal. From there, Ichigo ascended to the Soul Palace and with the knowledge of his powers, he forged Zangetsu anew. The ebony blades glinting in the light of the forge as steam rose up around them.

Training had been a rushed hasty affair, that Ichigo knew would be a gift in the coming slaughter. Maybe it had been age or just personality but in the same fashion he always seemed to muster, he rushed forward intent on ending a war before it struck hard.

Instead, the man who towered like living darkness had used Ichigo’s exit to enter the palace of the Soul King. From there the worlds had spiralled into chaos teetering on destruction, as the lynchpin of the world was killed.

Thus, the three worlds began to crumble as the being who held them together faded. It was only with Jushiro’s sacrifice that they were able to stop the destruction of all three worlds, though they could not stop all of the effects. Juha was sent hurting down into Soul Society as Ukitake took his final breath letting the worlds be saved if only temporarily.

Kisuke and Mayuri in a moment of foresight (or perhaps learning from the last war) had installed a barrier to stop access to the human world; it was activated but not without the cost of Ururu, Jinta and Tessai’s life.

At the same time, the gates between Hueco Mundo and Soul Society were permanently opened and Hollows, as well as Arrancar, came and went as they pleased causing even further chaos. The war raged for years, Ichigo knew the final count was close to ten years, and yet still they kept fighting.
They were overpowered in a two to one situation, every time they seemed to take a step forward; infusing their Bankai with Hollow reaitsu or resurrecting the Captains that had fallen. They were beaten down once again. In a moment of desperation, Aizen was released from his prison cell in Mugen though it was confusing which side his loyalties truly laid with, he aided them as Ichigo continued to grow in power trying desperately to accumulate enough to defeat Juha Bach.

He had eventually reached a point where it was just the harmony of his soul; balance.

At last, he had stormed forward, speeding over a land of desolation and destruction ready to put an end to the war that lasted far longer than a thousand years. The Quincy, a shade of horror, had laughed at Ichigo when he confronted him and continued to laugh as Ichigo sliced his sword clean through the Quincy King in a sideways arc.

His death was like his presence, explosive as it ripped into the atmosphere, torching the land around the battleground. He coughed up blood with a grisly smile upon his face as he lectured Ichigo about how he could have destroyed the world of fear, taunting Ichigo stating that he was the one who had lost in the end. Finally, the light had dimmed in his eyes and the last of the Quincy vanished from existence.

That’s when Aizen had seen the golden opportunity to kill Ichigo in some last ditched attempt at sparing Ichigo or claiming power. Where once Aizen’s power had transcended that of the Gods, Ichigo felt no challenge as he had considered Aizen’s desolate eyes.

Ichigo had seen the attack for the farce it was, the man had no desire to see the dawn. The wind had echoed hollowly throughout the streets as they charged forward, an echo of the beginning and the end. It was over within a minute as Aizen took a step and faltered before turning to face Ichigo an eerie smile on his face. Soft words of sorrow and apology echoed throughout the silence as Aizen’s body seemed to bubble and shift before lavender reaitsu gathered around the once Shinigami, Aizen fell backwards soft laughter bubbling from his red stained lips. Leaving Ichigo to kneel in the dirt as the reality of the situation dawned on him.

His thoughts had always been on defeating Juha and saving his family and friends. While he may have succeeded in the first respect, he had failed where it truly mattered. He was utterly alone, all the souls in Soul Society had been killed, some had fallen to the Hollows and some were never to rejoin the circle of Rebirth; their very souls had been destroyed. The Arrancar who had aided them during the war were all passed, leaving only a few mindless Hollows who wandered confused throughout the ruins.

The humans were safe. but he had no life there anymore. He was far older both in mind and spirit than any human could understand much less help him. There was no place for him there.

This was his final place of rest, a world crumbled to ruin, a lost cause that he had failed. No longer was there any battle to fight, any souls to save, just the scales of life clattering uselessly against each other.

“Ichigo, you did not fail. You fought with every inch of your being; you are not at fault for the devastation that has befallen you.”

Old man Zangetsu spoke in a calm and soothing voice as his blissfully cool presence washed over him and he felt his body relax slightly after being on guard for too long.

“King why do ya always take the guilt on ta your shoulders, an don’t answer I know why. Old man here is right if ya can believe in nothing else believe in us.”
Shiro spoke, his dual tone voice raspy and scolding, as his fiery aura gently surrounded Ichigo in a comforting embrace.

Ichigo gave a small nod of his head acknowledging what they had said and yet… he had failed, he couldn’t protect them, couldn’t protect anyone. The world was broken it would soon crumble without the Shinigami to maintain the balance or the lynchpin.

Why? Why couldn’t he do anything to stop this? He was truly useless in the end. Why did they all have to die and leave him alone?

Suddenly, Ichigo felt an unfamiliar wetness in the corners of his eyes. Hesitantly he reached up to wipe away the liquid only to find tears. He had promised them he wouldn’t cry, not till he was at peace. This… this wasn’t peace even with the harmony of their bond. How could he shed tears for his family and friends when he had well and truly failed them; he had promised his dad that he would be strong for the rest of them.

But they were gone, every single last one of them.

The reasons he had woken in the morning after his mother’s death. Yuzu’s kind smiles, and Karin’s faint grousing. Their gatherings on the rooftops, or later in the sand eating Orihime’s eccentric food.

Rukia, Uryū, Chad, Shunsui, Jushiro, Isshin, Yuzu, Karin, Yoruichi, Kisuke, Shinji, Hiyori, Rose, Love, Kenpachi, Unohana, the list went on. What did he have to be strong for, to live for? When all of them, all of it was gone, dead.

Ichigo’s power whispered from his body as the thoughts and feelings built before it exploded out from him swirling in a rapid mixture of deep blues and reds intermixed with sharp blacks and whites, that could only be likened to an atom bomb.

The very ground evaporated under his feet as he sunk to the earth the wind blowing fiercely, his long orange hair whipping in all directions as Ichigo’s very body began to glow his eyes becoming two pools of vibrant light as the landscape began to disappear. The very moment Ichigo was living (if it could be called that) was being erased, the very laws of space and time ripped apart. Ichigo let out a harsh scream as every single drop of his power exploded out from him like a supernova the size of the sun.

And then Ichigo knew no more as his conscious slowly faded to darkness. The concerned voices of his Zanpaktou becoming distant in his mind as he thought of his family and friends one last time, wondering if he would ever see them again, before succumbing to the darkness.

Ichigo came to with a faint groan, his whole body ached in a way that reminded him of the aftermath of drinking with Shunsui. What happened? Ichigo questioned trying to recall the last thing he remembered.

Suddenly Ichigo’s eyes flew open as what had happened returned to his mind scattered bits and pieces…what little he could understand. Slowly with a breath, he closed his eyes and focused on recalling what had occurred. He had lost control of his power and his emotions; he remembered thinking about his family and friends with Zangetsu’s distant voice in the background as his vision faded to black. Zangetsu.

A deep pang of sorrow struck Ichigo’s chest as his mind recalled his two Zanpaktou spirits,
desperately searching his inner world for his two trusted companions. They had stuck with him through far more than the end of the world and didn’t deserve what he put them through in his foolishness.

“Relax Ichigo we are here with you.”

Ossan’s voice said and Ichigo felt his shoulders sag in relief knowing that his Zanpaktou were with him. He never wanted to feel that crushing loneliness again. His very world had tunnelled in around him, and yet when they were together Ichigo felt like he had a wall of iron behind him silently supporting him and keeping him upright.

“Aw King don’t get so sappy on us ya know we’ll always be here for ya.”

Shiro chided with amusement and fondness in the raspy dual tone voice of his. Ichigo nodded attentively listening and analyzing their reaitsu, present but drained, and the bond that thrummed between them; emotions and feelings bright and clear as a summer’s day.

Blearily opening his eyes, Ichigo blinked at gentle sunlight as he surveyed the room he was resting in. Warm oak wood panelling made up the walls and provided a small sense of comfort to Ichigo compared to the white of cold stone walls. On the far side of the room, a pair of shoji doors stood slightly open letting a flash of green seep in and a morning breeze travel through the airy room. The bed had soft blankets of cotton which took away the chill of the light breeze and left only a cozy warmth. Beside the bed resting against the wooden walls was Zangetsu in their sealed state, the ebony blade glowed softly in the mid-afternoon light which peaked through the shoji doors.

Ichigo’s long hair swirled lightly in the breeze and his lengthy bangs shadowed his eyes reminding him that he needed a haircut (Rose used to do it for him until…) as Ichigo closed his eyes and took a deep breath tentatively trying to feel his reaitsu. Connecting with the presence inside him, thrumming through his bones, Ichigo closed his eyes and let it surround him; it was largely depleted leaving a set wariness in his bones, as he slowly let small tendrils stretch out to feel the area around him. He needed to know where he was and what was happening if only to assure himself that he wasn’t in some strange afterlife.

He let out a quiet sigh of relief when he felt the presence of Soul Society, rather than the empty nothingness he had come to know. And then his breath was trapped in his lungs, and he was gripping the sheets beside him in a death like grip as he realized what he felt.

There were presences in Soul Society. That he could sense even with his diminished reaitsu. Souls who were long dead, with no possible way to be alive.

Granted this was Soul Society, Ichigo could feel it in the paved streets echoing faint lives, years of life, the power of the Captains and Soutaicho acting as a shield protecting the land. It comforted Ichigo in a small way, though he was still left floundering and confused, wondering if this was the afterlife.

Suddenly, the soft sound of footsteps loud as gunfire to his senses appeared outside the other set of shoji doors, disturbing Ichigo’s somewhat panicked musings. Gently, Ichigo uncurled his fists from the sheets taking a few deep breaths to regain his control.

Ichigo’s eyes slowly opened once more, trained on the door and the strangely familiar presence behind its thin frame. Slowly, the shoji doors slid open inch by inch to reveal the person behind the light wooden frame.

Ichigo let out a sharp breath at the sight that greeted him. Spiky raven hair stuck up untameably
Ichigo would know), highlighting the wise grey eyes and carefree smile below. An ebony shihakusho swirled lightly in the breeze the lieutenant badge of the Thirteenth glowing brightly in the gentle sunlight. The Shiba clan crest stood out boldly in black on his left arm as he finished opening the door.

“Ah, you’re awake, Captain Unohana said you probably wouldn’t wake for a few more days. Especially with your reaitsu being almost completely depleted.”

Kaien Shiba spoke in a fast voice that still retained an air of gentleness his eyes alight with sudden energy like a puppy released to run free. Ichigo stared at the Shiba with mute shock as his mind tried to process what he was seeing. Kaien Shiba had died long ago killed by Aizen’s treachery and yet here he stood in front of him alive and as exuberant as ever.

There were very few explanations that seemed plausible and he was beginning to suspect that he was indeed dead after all. That or some illusion, because no dream could replicate with such intensity the world around him.

Gently Ichigo reached out his reaitsu in the barest of caresses, to feel for certain if this was really the Kaien Shiba, and not an illusion like Kyoka Suigetsu was capable of producing (though such illusions had long ago stopped working). Ichigo’s shoulders visibly relaxed once he had affirmed that this was indeed the Thirteenth division’s lieutenant; though Kaien showed no signs of feeling Ichigo’s soft prodding.

Kaien quirked his eyebrow at their young guest’s peculiar actions but shrugged it off before studying the young man in front of him. Bright orange hair and dark eyes that were filled with sorrow, pain and a wisdom beyond years. His face (much like Kaien’s own. They could be twins!) rested in a twisted frown as he looked at Kaien with something akin to confusion. Pale skin seemed to glow unhealthily in the quiet sunlight as the man moved to sit up revealing a heavily scarred chest as the blankets slid down to pile at his waist. A visible shiver wracked the young man’s frame and Kaien quickly sprung to action.

“There is no need to be in such a hurry! You should rest Captain Unohana said you would probably be sore for a few more days not to mention, you won’t be up to your full strength.”

Kaien spoke in a soothing voice as he moved closer to the orange-haired kid who flinched slightly at the mention of Unohana as if he knew the living fear the women represented. Reluctant and tense he let Kaien help him move into a more comfortable position where he could see through the crack in the shoji doors. It led into a small garden full of lush greenery in the afternoon sun with a warm brown tiled path leading off into the distance. The clan heir liked to walk there in the early mornings with Isshin-Jii sometimes.

The lieutenant sheepishly rubbed the back of his head as he considered the kid sitting in front of him as Kaien settled onto a chair placed beside the bed. He tilted his head in sudden curiosity and asked, “I never received your name you know with you being unconscious and all?”

“My name? It’s Ichigo, though usually, it is the host that gives their name first… am-am I dead?”

The swift reply came in a deep voice with soft undertones that spoke of patience and strength, it was the voice one would perhaps expect from the leader of an army. One who could command men with only a single word, more powerful than yelling at the soldier; it reminded him of the Head Captain. And was followed by soft hesitance and furrowed brows.
Kaien smiled at Ichigo’s name and the slightly snarky response, that was well within the realms of etiquette. He frowned for a second as he acknowledged that the kid had not given a last name. As well as the faintly devastating question. It was a question that led to many more within the lieutenant’s mind.

Kaien put his hand out in front of Ichigo and with a brilliant smile said, “I am Kaien Shiba, lieutenant of the Thirteenth, please call me Kaien, and excuse my lapse in manners. After all, I would say we’re pretty close after I saved your life. And as far as I can tell you and I are both alive in Soul Society, though in a rather perverse sense we are dead.”

A ghost of a smile danced across Ichigo’s face, eyes fond and warm in a way that ignited a smile on Kaien’s own lips. He silently endeavoured to make Ichigo smile as much as possible. If only to relieve the terrible ache that settled on Kaien’s chest the night he had found Ichigo. There was some hidden darkness in the young soul, and he looked too much of a Shiba for Kaien to let the matter rest.

Ichigo’s gaze darted to the katana resting against the wall an unreadable expression placating his features, before he reached out and gave Kaien’s hand a firm shake and he said in a pleasant tone of voice that lingered with mischief, “It is nice to meet you Kaien-san.”

“I did not say Kaien-san was acceptable, thank you.”

Kaien said his voice rising slightly as Ichigo’s lips curved with lingering mischief and amusement, and the clan heir grinned at the expression. The young lieutenant made a great show of hastily looking around in fear, sending a flashing wink in Ichigo’s direction as he hoped Kūkaku hadn’t heard him. The Shiba princess could be a downright nightmare when she was furious, and Kaien was never one to incur her wrath without good reason. And for even speaking to Ichigo too loudly she would likely verbally flay him or worse.

Kaien settled a bit in the chair placed a fair distance from the cot, dragging it closer with all the grace and screeching noise of a bat. Ichigo regarded the action with sceptical eyes, but it was distant like the youth was seeing two images at once.

One of the servants, Tsubomi, if Kaien recalled the chestnut-haired girl correctly, knocked, disturbing Kaien’s musings. She entered quiet as a mouse and set down a tray of tea before darting off with a respectful bow. Ichigo eyed the tea like a man in the middle of the desert eyed water, partial disbelief, and a bit of longing.

Kaien wondered at the expression, curiosity thrumming under his skin and growing louder the longer he spent in the presence of the strange kid. With a shake of his head, he poured the steaming liquid into two mugs and handed one to Ichigo, eyes discreetly tracking the patchwork of scars.

Sipping the near scorching liquid down in a gulp, Kaien did his best to retain his dignity and not choke on the burning liquid, instead focusing on the heat blossoming in his chest. A vague twist of Ichigo’s lips that reflected a smile appeared, even as his grip on the mug tightened.

Kaien bit his lip as he considered the kid over the lip of his own mug. Finding a reaitsu deprived, unconscious young man on your way home from work was a surreal and strange experience that Kaien was loathed to repeat. That, however, didn’t diminish nor banish the living wraith seated in front of him.

Ichigo looked like he had come from a war zone that first night, wearing a shihakusho (though it had been barely recognizable as such) faded and torn, skin pale and looking like death. His breath had been near non-existent, from where it fluttered shallowly.
Seeing him awake did little to dispel the discontent that brewed in the clan heir’s chest like one of Nejibana’s storms. Those eyes of his, hidden beneath long bangs as they were, held sorrow so deep and thick it was like a ravine, one that Kaien could lose himself in. There was age not built of life, and peace of soul reflected in some shattered portions.

Ichigo was an enigma if Kaien had ever met one, and he silently vowed to keep the kid away from the Twelfth Division. Furrowing his brow Kaien considered asking Ichigo a question, wondering if it would disturb the strange and serene silence between them, or startle the kid.

Eventually, with Nejibana’s faint encouragement Kaien settled on asking, it was Ichigo’s choice to answer, and maybe the more Kaien knew, the more he could aid the youth.

“So, Ichigo… you don’t have to answer if you’re not willing, but what do you remember?”

The lieutenant tentatively questioned. Silence thickened quickly in the small room as Ichigo’s face contorted with a rush of emotions that tugged at Kaien’s heartstrings. There was such an agony and pain there, accompanied by thick sorrow, and a multitude of unidentifiable things. Kaien was left wondering how any one man, could hold so much emotion. Ichigo’s breath rushed harshly from his lips, and the diminished presence of his reaitsu fluctuated wildly around the room in quaking waves like Ichigo’s own breath.

Kaien frowned at the obvious distress that was plaguing the kid, Ichigo was already beginning to close off, and his state only seemed to worsen his slight form trembling, hands clenched in white-knuckled grips. Kaien had no doubt that if he pushed for answers, he would receive them only on the basis of how vulnerable Ichigo appeared at that moment.

Nejibana whispered with his instincts and before he could really comprehend the movement, his reaitsu was surging out, the calming presence that swelled within the waters of his spirit swept out and surged through the room.

Ichigo shuddered, shakes slowing slightly and Kaien made sure he was a good distance away from Ichigo’s personal space before he gently coached, “It’s okay Ichigo just breathe, deep breaths come on… in…. out.”

Slowly Ichigo settled, his hands releasing their white-knuckled grasp on the bed sheets, there was sweat lining his brow and his breath was still ragged. But the fear and terror that had paralyzed him, had passed leaving the soul appearing drained and weary.

Kaien made some soft reassuring noises letting his reaitsu continue to flow throughout the room and he gently spoke again voice quiet and calm, “Hey it’s okay Ichigo, you don’t need to speak about it, not till you’re ready, not if you don’t want to. Even if you are never ready.”

Ichigo looked up through tangled bangs at the words eyes radiating a faint light that seemed a touch brighter than he had previously seen them. Roughly Ichigo nodded the motion betraying the exhaustion in every bone of his body.

Kaien considered the kid for a minute before he turned his gaze to the open shoji doors, where the greenery outside helped soothe him. Kaien was concerned at the scene he had just witnessed; he had no idea how to aid Ichigo. And he couldn’t help but wonder what could have traumatized him, that even the thought of what had happened before left him trembling. Regardless Kaien decided he would stay with Ichigo for a while longer, letting his presence help soothe the fractured soul before him.

Briefly, Kaien glanced over at Ichigo checking up on the former patient. There was a faint smile
curving his lips, infinitesimally small, but there nonetheless. There was a strange wonder in the air about the kid and Kaien wondered what the future would hold for Soul Society at Ichigo’s appearance.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope y’all enjoyed this rewritten version of the first chapter, I have the second one written and if you’d would like to see let me know. Comments are always appreciated and I hope everyone is staying safe during Quarantine and is excited for the new anime.
Quatervois

Chapter Notes

Quatervois (n.)
A crossroad; a critical decision or turning point in one’s life.

Hey, y’all! Here is the second chapter of what I have of the rewrite, a huge thanks to everyone for all the positive comments on the last chapter. I was actually looking at FF.Net where I first posted this fic (in its first incarnation what y’all know is actually also a rewrite) and it’s actually six years old. Crazy. Also, a super huge thank you to ScarletTitiana for editing this chapter!! Anyways, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Kaien perched beside Ichigo on the bed as the day faded into lush hues of rouge and blossoming lilac. The lieutenant was rambling, speaking of gentler topics to fill the silence, to diffuse the previously tense air.

Speaking of his Taicho and Kyōraku's endless antics brought a light smile to Kaien’s lips, as he recalled Lisa’s near regularly scheduled appearances in Ukitake-san’s office; or the one occasion where Kaien decided it was a wise idea to drown his perceived sorrows in many bottles of sake. After the disaster of the following ceremony, he earned a quiet laugh for that story.

Idly, his speech drifted to a conversation of their clan, and how the elders kept pressuring Isshin-jii to bear a successor when the man was far too much of a free spirit to ever settle down. Laughing in a weary manner, the Lieutenant bemoaned the large amounts of paperwork he had to shoulder after his recent naming as the clan heir.

Ichigo remained quiet as the lieutenant spoke, a thoughtful and slightly troubled air about him. But whenever Kaien glanced over there was a softness to his features, and a fondness kindling in his eyes as he listened.

As Kaien continued to talk aimlessly, he wondered over the kid they had taken in. It was obvious that wherever Ichigo had come from, he had seen something horrible. Scars such as his did not appear from nothing, and the same could be said for the obvious trauma. It left Kaien wondering if the kid had a home to return to and if he was even able to.

However, he knew that no wars had been waged upon Soul Society's soils, not since the Blood War, which was now a mere legend of the past. Which left him with the question of where such a war could come from. The mortal world?

More troubling was the state of Ichigo himself, with scars that were ghastly to look at, a sort of fragility hanging off of his shoulders, and the veritable well of reaitsu that dwelled beneath the surface. Nejibana's soothing presence eased his thoughts where they deepened his brow and weighed heavily on his heart.

Turning to consider said kid, Kaien caught Ichigo mid-yawn, eyes blinking in that manner that
communicated a desire to stay awake but was overwhelmed by the body’s need for sleep. It was almost adorable; Kaien wisely refrained from commenting on it.

Popping up from the bed, the movement accompanied with a few creaks that made both Ichigo and Kaien wince, the heir turned to face the kid, sincerity heavy in his eyes and said, “I’ll leave you to get some sleep Ichigo. Don’t be afraid to call if you need anything.”

Ichigo nodded, still distant, but perhaps a bit closer to awake. Shaking his head, and biting his lip in thinly veiled amusement, Kaien turned and moved towards the shoji door.

Pausing in the doorway, Kaien flashed a last fleeting glance in Ichigo's direction. His lips curved up of their own accord at the sight of the kid glancing at the garden, with something tranquil painting his features. He hoped the troubled young man would be able to get some rest.

Nodding more to himself, Kaien silently slipped out of the room, assured that Ichigo would be alright. In any case, the kid probably needed the time alone, if the contemplation lining his brow was any indication.

Kaien paused and stood outside in the hallway, leaning back against one of the walls behind him, highlighted in burnished amber in the flickering glow of the oil lamps. There were still remnants of unease that Nejibana couldn’t soothe, brewing in the pit of his stomach, and bubbling up to the back of his throat.

Running a hand through spiky tangled locks, Kaien decided to visit his sister. Even though Kūkaku was young, she possessed a certain level of wisdom for life and all its complexities - a maturity that the women of the Shiba clan seemed to hold in bounds (for good reason, considering the nature of Shiba men).

Decision made, Kaien pushed off from the wall and padded through the familiar hallways of their childhood home towards his younger sister’s room; thoughts drifting tempestuously as he walked.

Staring pensively for a moment, Kaien shook away his worries and knocked lightly on the thin rice frame. Sounds of shuffling greeted Kaien for a few minutes before Kūkaku’s low voice called out, “Come in.”

Sliding the door open Kaien entered his sister's room, greeted by the sight of shades of crimson lining the walls, comfy wood-panelled furniture and the light drifting scent of jasmine, accompanied by the overwhelming tint of gunpowder. Kūkaku was seated on the bed, accompanied by said gunpowder and fuses, little foils of brightly coloured papers nearby. The Shiba princess turned to face Kaien with a knowing grin.

Out of the three siblings, Kūkaku was the one who had found love in the Shiba’s famous craft of fireworks. He had lectured her before about making them on her bed (or even anywhere other than the workshops set aside for building fireworks) but the young woman was a true Shiba through and through; and completely disregarded the rules.

Shaking his head with an exasperated smile, Kaien strolled over to Kūkaku’s bed and plopped down beside her with a huff, disturbing her materials, and ruffling her hair. Kūkaku frowned in annoyance, and playfully swatted Kaien on the arm and pouted with a whine of his name.

Remaining strong in the face of her ire, Kaien resolutely turned his head away, chin tilted towards the ceiling with faux haughtiness. Kūkaku laughed and called his name once more before she fell quiet, the kind of silence that lingered with hidden intent. The lieutenant had only a minute to worry before Kūkaku was crawling over Kaien, hands racing over his sides.
Kaien laughed at the ticklish sensation before he carefully flipped his sister over and launched a counter-attack. Mercilessly, Kaien continued to tickle his sister, and her sweet laughter bounced about the room, till she finally yielded, eyes bright with mirth.

Rolling off his sister, Kaien carefully propped himself up, dusting the gunpowder off with a faint sense of annoyance. The younger Shiba only laughed and stuck her tongue out at him. Kaien rolled his eyes but made no further moves to attack his sister.

They sat together in the silence for a few moments, Kūkaku continuing to tinker on the explosive device in her hands. Kaien rolled his fingers together idly, watching the younger Shiba work as he organised his thoughts before talking to his sister.

“You went to see the unconscious man today did you not?”

She questioned, perceptive as ever in the silence that had descended comfortably between the two siblings. Kaien nodded, unwilling to procrastinate any longer he ran a hand through his hair and responded, “Yes, he was awake. His name is Ichigo.”

Kūkaku set down the small canister she had been filling and turned her murky sea-green eyes on Kaien. There was a deep-sea of emotions in her eyes - surprise at the information, and hesitance at whatever news Kaien might be carrying about the kid.

“And?”

His younger sibling questioned quietly, in the suddenly tense atmosphere. Kaien frowned, the motion pulling the corners of his lips as he lamented the loss of the previous jovial atmosphere. Letting out a sigh, Kaien shifted and receiving a slightly impatient look, he responded, “It’s bad. It’s just… he’s… It’s obvious that he’s been through something traumatic…”

“The scars?” Kūkaku questioned, interrupting his previous train of thought, and Kaien remembered that she had been there the night Kaien had burst through the doors carrying Ichigo. Frantic and calling for one of the servants to fetch Unohana, he had paid little attention to his surroundings, only keen on finding a place to set the (too), thin man, down where the healer could treat him.

“Yeah the scars… and he’s scared? It’s like the shell shock you see in the people from Rungokai sometimes. But… it’s so hard to explain Kūkaku, you have to meet him to understand. There’s this great big sadness in him.”

While his younger sister remained quiet, pondering the solemn confession, Kaien turned his gaze away, distant and lost in his thoughts. Kūkaku’s warm hand settling on his arm helped to draw Kaien back, and settle some of the worry blooming in his chest.

“What do you want to do, Kaien?”

She asked, sounding so young that it drew Kaien’s eyes. Sometimes he forgot that Kūkaku wasn’t a woman yet, that she had taken on the mantle of maturity after their parents had passed to help care for Ganju. He forgot that the kid beside him was still unsure, still searching for her place in the world.

Kaien wrapped an arm around his sister, drawing her into his chest where he gently rested his chin atop her head, to her murmured weak protests. What did he want to do to aid Ichigo?

The question rang like a gong through his mind, lingering and spreading like waves in the sea. Kaien had no idea how to aid with trauma, even Unohana-san was likely not practised in the
matters. Ichigo required healing in both the mental and spiritual sense, that much was obvious. But the manner of aid was less so.

But more than anything else, the biggest question that remained at the forefront of his mind was that whether wherever Ichigo had come from still existed. Was he a soul from the mortal realm? Someone from the far reaches of the late Rungokai Districts? If it was the latter, Kaien did not want to return the kid to an environment that had injured him so grievously.

What if Ichigo wanted to return? Who was Kaien to deny Ichigo that right? He could try and convince the kid to stay, but for what? He likely had nothing to keep him in Soul Society. The best the clan heir would likely be able to offer was healing under Unohana’s care and even that was weak.

What did Kaien want? He wanted to protect Ichigo from whatever had harmed him. He wanted to help Ichigo heal. Still lost and struggling for an answer, Kaien tightened his grip around his sister and murmured in the quiet, “I… I just want to help Ichigo. But I know nothing of his situation.”

Kūkaku wrapped her hand around his own in a silent show of reassurance, and a thoughtful silence settled over the room. Kaien could just see those amber eyes now when he closed his own eyes, and it troubled him deeply.

“You can speak to him tomorrow about his situation, and try to go from there,” his younger sister advised after a moment, her voice soft and soothing. Kaien considered the suggestion with a nod, after all, it was easier than trying to plan a thousand different outcomes. Still, the thoughts remained, crowding his mind.

Nejibana helped to clear his thoughts, ironing them out so that her wielder wasn’t overwhelmed and could think clearly. It came to him slowly, and all at once, an idea that was both a solution and a commitment.

“What if….If Ichigo has no family, we could offer to adopt him into the clan.”

Kaien suggested after a moment, words heavy and slow, though receiving a gentle feeling of approval from Nejibana. Kūkaku was quiet, and the lingering silence seemed to be akin to a battle, waiting for the decisive blow.

After a moment, she sighed, and shifting in Kaien’s arms, she said, “What would the elders say, Kaien? And do you know Ichigo? Do you think we can or should trust him like that and bring him into our family?”

He winced at the multitude of questions thrown his way, instinctively knowing an answer to a few of them, and after thinking over the others, he replied, “Who cares about the elders? If Isshin-jii gave his approval, the only thing they would be able to do would be complaining and whining about it. In any case, I think I can manage to handle myself well-enough in their eyes for one argument.

“Kūkaku I don’t know Ichigo at all. He is a complete and utter stranger to me. But I feel as if I can trust him, I feel like I know him like he’s not the kind of person to stab someone in the back. I feel he belongs with us, not any of the other clan members, us.

“I want to help him heal… I am no master of the soul or mind, but I know that we can help. Just give him a chance sis, and meet him, look him in the eyes. Then if you say no, I will respect your decision.”
The silence descended between the two like the swift tides of night and Kaien resisted the urge to reveal his discomfort with a single movement after his speech. He glanced down at his sister who was fiddling with an unlit fuse, betraying her own heavy thoughts on the matter.

“If you believe that we should help this kid, then I’ll trust you. But remember, you’ll be the one dealing with the council,” Kūkaku cautioned, her voice sincere, as she briefly glanced up to flash Kaien a fond smile. With a great deal of effort, he resisted the urge to fall back and grasp at his heart because his sister was so cute and accepting. Instead, Kaien nodded and placed a chaste kiss on the crown of her head, whispering faintly, “That’s all I could ask dear one.”

The Shiba princess laughed, a reassuring sound that brightened the room once more as Kaien disentangled himself from Kūkaku, stretching out tense joints and stressed shoulders.

“No going to stay and help me craft fireworks, Kaien?” Kūkaku questioned with a cocky grin as Kaien made to turn and walk towards the doors. Pivoting halfway, Kaien fixed his sister with a chiding look, though there was a hint of amusement underneath. She giggled as he glided to the doorway, where he paused once more, and she playfully waved a small canister.

“Be careful Kukkaku,” he cautioned with a roll of his eyes. His sister nodded and Kaien could only hope that she wouldn’t almost burn the house down once more. Exiting the room, the lieutenant braced himself against a wall and took a deep breath and decided that he would speak to Ichigo later.

For now, his mind and heart had decided that it was time he went and visited his younger brother. Tease Ganju for his fascination with boars, and maybe sample some of his cooking (which grew more splendid each passing day).

It would help to take his mind off of the orange-haired youth sitting in their guest room. Decision made, Kaien pushed off the wall, and with the reassurance of Nejibana’s presence padded off to find the youngest Shiba.

X

He was in the past, he was in the kami-forsaken past. The Past. One hundred something years before he was even born. This thought circled relentlessly through Ichigo’s mind as he paced his inner world, his own weak reaitsu surging about him, storms raging and thundering overhead. Blinding sheets of rain cascaded around him, plastering his (too) long bangs over his eyes, and drenching his shihakusho so it hung off his frame.

Ichigo was ignorant to this fact as he continued to pace, Shiro and Ossan watching the spectacle in the distance with varying levels of concern, as Ichigo tried to come to terms with the rather monumental fact that he was indeed in the past of all things. He was thankful his spirits understood Ichigo’s need to come to terms with it alone, at least for a few minutes.

It was just so, so very impossibly hard to believe. There was hope stuttering in his chest like a fire, flickering and dangerously close to rising ever higher because he could change it all.

He could save them.

Stop their deaths from ever occurring. All the hardships, the torture, the isolation, the suffering that had stripped everyone of what they once were. They could live.

It was just so hard to comprehend, how had he even appeared in the past? Was it through some strange last mechanism of the Hogyoku or the last will of the Soul King? It made little to no sense
in Ichigo’s mind, but he couldn’t seem to worry over it in greater depth. Not when he had to accept it had happened, he could puzzle it out later.

Not when the realization he was in the past kept slamming into him at every turn. Sighing, Ichigo took a deep breath in a vague attempt to calm his rushing thoughts, focusing on the motion, and the settled presence of his inner world. He glided over to the edge of the crumbling skyscraper he was standing on, and plopped down gracelessly, letting his legs hang off the edge as he focused on his thoughts.

He was in the past, at a time where Kaien Shiba was still alive and lieutenant of the Thirteenth division. He could talk to and look at his cousin, who did look exactly like him (and that wasn’t strange at all). According to what he had sensed in the short time he had been in this time period, the Vizard hollowfication hadn’t even happened yet (his thoughts instantly dredged up memories of a grinning blond, soft piano strings, long nights around the fire). Pushing back the lingering memories, Ichigo took another deep breath, banishing the nausea that roiled in his stomach, and attempted to still the shaking of his hands.

Ichigo could save them all. He could stop the Winter War from happening, deal with the Quincy invasion and all the various invasions that Soul Society would undergo before long. Make sure they all lived.

He would have to relive everything… years upon years till the timeline he had come from, always knowing the enemies in the shadows and what would happen before it did. Live without seeing Rukia, Uryu, Chad, Orihime (don’t think of their last words, her scream as he was too late over and over), again. Oh, kami, he would have to live with the people he had known all his lives as complete strangers, interact with them and meet them all over again. He would have to pretend that he could see their deaths, know their secrets, while they would know nothing of him, and stare at him blankly with eyes empty of familiar love. Ichigo shuddered, fisting his hands into the fabric of his shihakusho at this trembling realisation, dragging harsh breaths from his lips.

Hunching forward, Ichigo shivered as he realized he would have to deal with the future alone, making sure that he didn’t interfere and change the timeline beyond all recognition. Right? Would his presence change the timeline? What would happen if the timeline was changed? Would he even be born? Could he even tell anyone? Should he tell anyone?

And even if he did - how would they react? Would they express their disbelief, anger, betrayal? Would they scream and yell at him till he made sense? Lock him up in Muken so he could experience Aizen’s prison, bringing all the torment and pain full circle??

But what if he screwed the world over again? What if everything went wrong, and he couldn’t save them? What if he couldn’t do anything, and had to hold their broken bodies in his arms again, and know that they would never exist because of his mistakes. Know that they’d never become who they truly were because he wasted that chance, like a failed executioner.

The fears and worries grew larger in his mind with every passing thought, overwhelming him, leaving him stuck in a limbo of confusion and unsure of what the future could hold. He could kill them all. Ichigo shivered breath brittle at his lips, he felt like screaming, felt like falling upon the ground and staying there, unmoving for centuries.

Shiro’s warm presence wrapped around Ichigo’s huddled frame, pulling him out from the desperate thoughts twisting in his mind, that left his eyes stinging, and his heart aching in his chest. Instead, there was the beat of his own heart echoing loudly, even in the drowning lull of rain beating like bullets upon his inner world, and the almost overpowering brilliance of Shiro’s own reaitsu soothing Ichigo’s paranoia.
“Shh Ichi, deep breaths. Breathe with me - In. Out. In. Out,” The hollow (and Shinigami) portion of his powers whispered, voice quiet but loud as thunder, striking mounting cluttering thoughts cluttering his mind.

Ichigo listened to his zanpaktou’s advice and began to take shallow breaths in, focusing on the repetitive motion, and only the simple motion of breathing. Eventually, he didn’t feel as if all his thoughts and emotions were filling up every inch of his body, twisting it to suit their needs, and his usual level-headedness returned.

“You’re with me?”, Ichigo questioned tentatively in the silence, words barely falling from his lips. Shiro growled his affirmation in Ichigo’s ear where he was still curled around the only survivor of a broken world.

“Always Ichigo. We’ll figure this out together,” Zangetsu-Ossan’s voice rumbled in Ichigo’s inner world, as the tall spirit’s presence made itself known directly to Ichigo’s left. The orange-haired Shinigami craned his head up to look at the older spirit, who was glancing down at Ichigo reassuringly, eyes warm with the love they shared.

“Focus, Ichigo. You can go slowly and take things one step at a time. Our presence here has already changed the timeline irrevocably,” Ossan advised, as his cool reaitsu helped Ichigo to clear his thoughts. The bearer of the two spirits nodded, taking a few last deep breaths before he glanced out at the storm-swept state of his inner world. He was in the past. The why and how didn’t matter now, not till he had sorted out his place within the past. Ichigo accepted it, had to accept it or he couldn’t move on, this was the past. There would always be shock and disbelief if the truth of his presence were to be known.

His presence would inevitably change the timeline. What was the point in trying to keep the timeline the same if he could still make sure that every person he loved was born and lived a fulfilling life? The characters in movies, shows, novels on time travel that he had seen or read always tried to ensure that nothing changed and failed abysmally.

Ichigo knew that wouldn’t be able to keep everything the same. He wouldn’t be able to ensure that his friends would be born, or that the Vizard incident would or would not happen. So, what could he do?

He could try to strengthen the Gotei 13, make sure they were ready for all the battles to come their way. He could prevent Kaien’s death. The lieutenant hadn’t deserved to die and Rukia had been devastated by his loss.

But should he act to prevent the Vizards’ hollowfication? If he did, then they wouldn’t have to deal with the pain of harmonizing with their darker nature (it would be easier if Ichigo taught them how to do it). But they would lose the great increase in power it provided, and hence, Soul Society’s lone edge against the Quincy.

And Ichigo would be alone. The lone Vizard, he would never again have that family he had found in the enigmatic collection of Captains and lieutenants (supporting each other, fighting constantly back to back, ruffling his hair, with whimsical antics and light grins).

It all depended on Aizen. His name alone sent a complex mixture of emotions curling through his gut, dominated by the rushing hate at his instigation of the Winter War. But this war had allowed the Gotei 13 to survive the Quincy invasion. Aizen had even joined their side in the fight, in the end. Did Aizen deserve a second chance? Ichigo had felt the ever-present loneliness in his blade, hovering like a dark cloud.
Ichigo groaned out loud, running a hand through the hair that stuck to his forehead in curtains. There was just so much to think about, so many events that could or could not happen, and so many plans to make. It was overwhelming and he couldn’t do it alone.

Shiro growled at that sentiment, and Ichigo reminded himself that he wasn’t alone. But could he tell anyone? Sure, there would be disbelief, but he could prove it with the knowledge he held of his friends and their shared future that had been his past. And yet. Did he want to burden them with that knowledge? The knowledge of a bleak future where they and everyone else had died.

No. Everything in Ichigo shied away from even the thought of telling them, watching the horror blossom on their features, and burdening them with such a heavy future. So, no. He wouldn’t tell anyone. Ichigo could, would figure it out, and handle the future alone but for his swords’ spirits.

He would make sure that he stood tall and remained strong enough to carry his burdens on his own, with the aid of Zangetsu.

He felt some of the stress worrying his brow abate at the decision, even as it felt like he had settled the fate of the world(s) onto his shoulders once again. More so than in his youth, when he was recklessly rushing into battles, leading the charge, fighting the main villain nearly always on his own. The semi-new shackles were invisible but heavy nonetheless, but Ichigo couldn’t resent them, because as always, he was trying to save his family.

Leaning back against Shiro, Ichigo sighed, tired and weary, having lived so much in only… twenty, thirty years. He had experienced wars, the like of which the mortal realm had never seen, dealt with incomparable loss, and at the end, instead of being granted peace, he was here on another journey, or rather one life-long quest.

The hollow-like spirit’s reaitsu pulsed, warm around Ichigo, dispelling his thoughts, the multitude of fears and doubts that still lingered, despite the major concern having been put to rest. A hand ran through the tangled mop of Ichigo’s hair, a silent assurance of the unconditional support that his present company always offered. Ichigo was beyond thankful that his zanpaktou were with him, he would surely be lost without their presences.

Ossan and Shiro’s reiatsu wrapped comfortingly around Ichigo, and he basked it in, letting his thoughts idly drift, from Orihime’s eccentric cooking to the time Chad and Ichigo performed a particularly risky manoeuvre that paid off. He stayed away from any memory remotely close to being devastating, instead of focusing on the happier times that seemed as if from a dream sometimes, compared to everything else.

A knock pierced the swirling cacophony of Ichigo’s inner world, and trading an apologetic and fond look with his spirits, Ichigo pulled himself from his inner world. He winced slightly as the warm hue of the fading evening light and flickering oil lamps pierced his sight, realizing that he had been meditating for quite a while.

Before Ichigo could stretch out his likely stiff joints, and settle into a slightly more comfortable position, the door to his temporary room slid open, and the familiar scent of gunpowder became apparent. Ichigo hid a wince at the familiar but much younger visage that greeted him, with bright grey eyes, and noticeably whole limbs wrapped up in a kimono. The sight of his cousin hit Ichigo like a gong. He struggled to push back the images of her and Ganju lying on the battlefield - they had died together, the last Shiba clan members of Soul Society, and reminded himself that this was real.

The younger Shiba princess stole into his room with a wink in his direction, glancing around the guest room with a distracted air as she settled in the chair at his bedside. His chest hurt just looking
at this young, unburdened, unjaded Kūkaku. His cousin who hadn’t seen war hadn’t experienced
the loss of her older brother and the fall of her clan.

“Kūkaku Shiba, nice to meet you.”, her voice interrupted his steadily derailing train of thoughts,
and Ichigo looked up to catch her left-hand hovering in front of his face, a bright optimistic grin
behind the gesture. Smiling slightly at the expression, and all of its warmth Ichigo reached up and
shook her hand and responded, “Ichigo. It's a pleasure to meet you, Shiba-san.”

“None of that, call me Kūkaku, there are far too many Shibas in this house for you to go around
calling us all Shiba-san,” the Shiba princess chided Ichigo with a teasing grin and light humour in
her dark eyes. Ichigo sighed and shook his head, but relented with a nod and the slight twitch of his
lips. Appeased, Kūkaku nodded and settled in the rickety chair, comfortably splayed over its frame,
she regarded him carefully.

Ichigo resisted the urge to twitch at the intense gaze Kūkaku had levelled on him. He reflected that
he should have been used to the soul-piercing gaze that Kūkaku had only managed to hone further
in later years (and turned it his way often enough), but it was not so. He still felt as if she was
laying his soul bare, and gazing at his deepest, darkest secrets.

After another minute, the Shiba nodded to herself, having looked her fill, she idly fiddled with a
fuse, pulled from some pocket within her kimono, and asked, “Ichigo do you have anywhere to
return to?”

Let it never be said that the Shiba family were not blunt. They were likely the very definition of the
word (himself included occasionally). Ichigo winced at the question, a quick grimace twisting his
features before it fell away. Kūkaku looked vaguely apologetic at having provoked such a reaction,
and likely triggering traumatic emotions (in her estimation), but said nothing as Ichigo took a deep
breath and tried to calm his racing heart.

He wouldn’t be able to do this unless he could get control over his emotions. Ichigo wouldn’t be
able to move forward if at every turn he was stopped by memories of their deaths, accompanied by
the constant press of his emotions running up his throat. Steeling himself, Ichigo pushed them
away, he had to focus on the present - he could deal with the thrumming emotions in his chest later
(though knowing Ichigo, he would just ignore them till it became too much, never one to deal with
his memories).

“I have no place to return to. My home was destroyed by war,” said Ichigo eventually in the
expectant silence, fingering the hilt of his zanpaktou for comfort. He took a few more deep breaths
to calm himself and looked up, expecting to see pity, maybe compassion in Kūkaku’s eyes.

There was an inordinate sadness in Kūkaku’s eyes, accompanied by emotion that was unlike pity,
being more understanding in its nature. Ichigo knew she couldn’t understand the magnitude of his
loss, but he recalled that the Shiba siblings had lost their parents at a young age. And maybe she
hadn’t seen war, but she knew the veterans of it if those stormy grey eyes gazing at him were any
indication. He appreciated the lack of pity, sick of the emotion clogging everyone’s eyes when he
had passed them on the street, and felt that maybe she understood him.

The orange-haired Shinigami flashed the Shiba princess a small reassuring smile, trying to let her
know that he was okay (he wasn’t but Ichigo could pretend to be, he was good at that). Kūkaku
looked sceptical for a minute, gaze locked onto his own, trying to divine some measure of the truth,
before she let the matter go and instead fiddled with the fuses in her hands once more.

“So Ichigo, do you know where we are?” the Shiba princess questioned, after a minute of
contemplative silence, throwing Ichigo for a loop. He arched a brow at the unexpected question,
puzzled for a moment as to why she would ask. Then it occurred to Ichigo that he had been found in the middle of nowhere, reiatsu near completely drained, and the thought that he might have died and entered Soul Society wasn’t all that strange.

“We are in Soul Society. In what I presume is the Shiba mansion?”, Ichigo stated, ending with a slight question, though he was quite certain of his location (if only because Kūkaku and Ganju had once sat with him on the roof, speaking of it all in fond terms, reminiscing and bemoaning the duties of nobility). Across from him the young Shiba grinned and nodded, shifting raven locks over her shoulder, she seemed pleased that Ichigo was willing to speak, if her eyes were any indication.

Silently, he wondered if all he would receive would be an unending barrage of questions, about where he had come from, who his family was, and why he had a zanpaktou. The thing was, Ichigo wasn’t a good liar. Oh, he could lie, Kisuke had made sure of it if only to save their skins. But for Ichigo, lying involved half-truths. And he wasn’t sure whether he could dredge up a story for the curious Shiba on the spot, at least not without shoving unwanted memories to the forefront of his mind.

“Nee Ichigo, what do you like to do with your unfilled time?” Kūkaku asked, and Ichigo deflated a little at the innocent question, relief flooding his veins. Glancing up briefly, he caught thoughtfulness heavy in Kūkaku’s eyes but beyond that, there was a familiar gentleness to her features, one that reminded him of his Kūkaku. Turning his attention to the sheets, he avoided the flashes of nostalgia and the pang in his heart as he considered the best way to answer her question.

What did he like to do in his free time? Whenever there had been a moment in the war, it had been spent sleeping, eating, or training. Maybe if he was lucky he had the chance to research with Kisuke or have a cup of tea with a friend. But spare time had been an unfamiliar concept in the time of war (and wasn’t that unsettling in of itself). Ichigo tried to think of what he had liked as a hobby before the wars, but it seemed like trying to remember another life. Maybe reading, the thrill of a street fight with punks, aiding the spirits in Karakura Town, spending time with and taking care of his sisters?

Eventually, Ichigo settled on an answer and replied, “Reading mostly, drinking tea, and walking about in nature. Yourself?”

Kūkaku blinked in surprise at his answer, before her face brightened with a soft glow, though Ichigo suspected his answers were quite generic (and something you would find on a dating website).

“I like working on our fireworks for the most part. Oh! I should teach you how to make them sometime!” the Shiba princess replied, idly fiddling with the fuses once more. Her answer (and subsequent enthusiasm) brought a grin to Ichigo’s lips, as the image of how Ichigo had first entered Soul Society came to his mind. He perked up slightly at Kūkaku’s offer - to learn how to craft the fireworks of the Shiba family would be an honour for Ichigo (though he might already be aware of the basics). After all, it was a heritage he had never experienced, at least not in true depth.

“You should have seen the first time Ganju tried to work with fireworks, Ganju is our younger brother,” Kūkaku began to recount with a fond grin, looking at Ichigo, as if trying to discern his reaction to the sudden story. Ichigo only raised a brow and the Shiba princess beamed and continued, “Well you see Ganju had the gunpowder, and the stars ready in the canister. But then he lit the fuse and accidentally dropped it near the canister, and it would suffice to say that without it being sealed, it got everywhere.”

Kūkaku finished with a wink and a cheeky grin, and Ichigo could almost imagine how the story played out. He flashed the Shiba a grin, briefly reflecting on Yuzu and Karin’s falls in their youth.
It was a bad idea to reflect on those memories, however, and Ichigo hastily pushed away from the memories that were beginning to cloud his mind, thick with grief, drawing on Zangetsu’s presence to ground himself. As if noticing his sudden discomfort, Kūkaku turned concerned eyes his way, motherly and warm, even at this younger age in life.

“How are you feeling Ichigo?” she asked, gently, as if speaking with any more forcefulness would make Ichigo freeze up (because honestly, his current emotional state was not a suitable topic for a relaxed conversation). So instead, Ichigo shrugged and focused on the physical aspect of the question, replying, “Tired and a bit sore.” Here, Ichigo paused, with mischief in his eyes, he fell into a monotone and continued, “But that’s to be expected when you’re drained of your reiatsu.”

He received an arched brow for his answer, and a soft peel of laughter that made Ichigo’s heart flutter, as if Kūkaku was both confused and amused by something he had said. She visibly shook it off, flashed him a reassuring smile, and commented, “Unohana-Taicho is arriving later in the evening to check your physical health once more, so hopefully everything will be alright.”

Ichigo frowned (and no, he did not pout, irrespective of what Shiro said) at the knowledge of Unohana’s return, already feeling the female Captain’s icy stare. As if sensing his fear and thoughts on the matter, Kūkaku gave Ichigo a sympathetic look, one that was quite light considering she didn’t have to deal with the check-up.

They settled in silence for a moment, Ichigo content to focus on Kūkaku’s presence (and he definitely wasn’t looking over every other minute, rather simply drinking in the sight of her alive and well). For that matter, the presence of Soul Society as a whole, alive and unbroken - was both strange, like he was drifting in between two realities, and grounding, assuring him that it was real.

“Would you like to hear about the time Kaien completely botched an important ceremony?”, Kūkaku asked after a time, mischief lining her features and making them glow in the oil lamp's warmth. Ichigo mirrored the grin on Kūkaku’s features and nodded. The Shiba princess beamed and nodded before she began, “Well you see, Kaien was in a hurry…”

Ichigo settled to listen to the story, letting her soothing voice wash over him. Laughing as the tale of mischief and happy accidents was told, he resolved to himself and to Zangetsu, that he would protect everyone. He would save them. He wanted, no, needed to continue seeing their smiles, hearing their laughter even if they didn’t know him.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading. I hope you enjoyed the second chapter of the rewrite. I’ve tried to delve a lot more into the characters and their motivations while also trying to keep them in character. Comments are always super appreciated, thanks for reading y’all!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!