Memories of a Broken Soul

by arelia22

Summary

Time is a weird thing; it can sometimes bring relief and hope, but there are times that it only brings dread. For him, time was as much of a curse as it was a blessing; he had time to grow strong and protect, but the memories of those times could become too much of a burden with all the time he had.

Notes

I fucked up big time and ended up posting chapter 8 before 7 without noticing (what an idiot!) so if any of you are all like, 'We've already read this' than yes, you have. BUT you might not have read the previous one (unless you read it in FF.net) so I recommend going back a bit (Sorry!!!!!!!!)
Prologue

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach. But you already knew this so why bother.

“Normal speech”
‘Thoughts’

#1#

The sound of a piddle paddle could be heard even if for him the sound seemed so distant. The sound was not deafening but it wasn’t so quiet either, he should hear the drops of the rain but his ears just couldn’t register anything no matter how much he tried. His half lidded eyes felt so heavy and as the tear droplets fell on his face and slid down his cheeks he could barely make out the slight sting when they intruded his amber orbs.

He was inclined on a tree trunk in… he didn’t know where but it was most likely the woods. His body ached even if he was still and made no attempt to move. His breaths came out in harsh pants almost like if he had run a marathon. He coughed when he felt the air wasn’t enough for his mangled lungs and felt the blood trickle down his chin to join the water on the floor. The little drops mingled together with the puddles of clear water only for it to ting a red color. He honestly didn’t know why he was still alive in this moment. He should have died hours ago yet for some reason he refused to die.

‘Just let this suffering end…’

He wasn’t covered in a puddle of his own blood since he had most likely lost it all back there when he was injured. He could still feel the cold steel piercing his very being and couldn’t avoid a small whimper from escaping his pale lips that had lost color along with the rest of his skin.

He felt his eye lids so heavy he couldn’t help but sigh in relief. Maybe, just maybe he was finally dying and that brought a sense of happiness at the pit of his stomach. He could finally rest and follow his family and friends into death, he knew very well he would never meet them, more less the chance since he was dying here but he didn’t care. The sense of ease that graced his very soul was enough to feel peaceful as his last breaths came closer and closer.

He thought he heard a noise in the distance but he really couldn’t be sure, he could barely make out the sound of thunder and droplets so of course he wasn’t going to hear a noise that was most likely muffled by the rain.

He coughed again, noticing that he didn’t cough up anymore blood, most likely because he just didn’t have blood anymore but he just couldn’t find it in himself to care, he was dying after all, why should that matter.

He felt the pounding in his chest slow down little by little as the minutes went by, minutes that for him seemed like hours and hours even if it was not the case. He started to feel numb but of the cold rain he was most likely drenched in or because it was a side effect of dying he wasn’t sure.

His eyes were almost closed now, he wanted to stay awake until the last of his breaths but he might
not make it. Not sleeping for such a long time had finally done a toll on him. He blinked once and then twice trying to avoid sleep, he wanted to die seeing the trees rustle with the wind, he wanted to see the blue sky even if it was blocked with so many gray clouds, he really wanted to die gazing at his partner in arms, the beautiful blade that had saved him so many times and had taught him anything at his disposal.

He really wanted to die with the pitch black blade as the last thing he saw but apparently his wish was not going to be granted. His eye lids slid closed to hide piercing amber eyes from the world’s sight. He gave out a last sigh as he could have sworn he heard another noise foreign from the precious melody the rain gave him, and as he slipped into sleep from his exhaustion, at mere minutes away from his last breaths he felt ever so slightly with the last of his senses the water droplets stop falling and the winds pick up pace as they carried the clouds away into a distant land maybe even more far away than he had ever traveled before…

‘I’m sorry everyone… I won’t be able to fulfil my promise…’

These were the last thoughts he registered in his fuzzy mind as darkness engulfed him. A never ending darkness that for a weird reason was not scary what so ever.

To be continued…
Chapter 1: Awakening

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“Normal speech”

‘Thoughts’

#1#

Heavy eye lids slipped open very slowly, almost as if something were preventing him from doing so but he was too stubborn to care. His amber eyes were completely open and the first thing he saw was a wooden roof, he was lost in the wood like if he wasn’t even seeing it when his eyes were very much staring straight at it. His thoughts were all jumbled up and he couldn’t form coherent conclusions.

He was very much lost in thought as he didn’t move an inch from the soft surface he was lying on. He heaved out a slow breath to straighten out his thoughts, letting eye lids slide closed once more to try and think slowly and with all the logic he could muster.

His thoughts wondered to the last thing he remembered, the rain drops, the numbness… he had died, hadn’t he? He felt like he was going in circles, every single thing he tried to remember to try and make a logical conclusion drove him to a sole one… he was dying at that moment.

He opened his eyes once more and this time turned his head to look at his right. A shoji door. He blinked to try and get the illusion out if his head but it never left. He turned back to look at the roof before returning to his thoughts.

‘Okay, there are no shoji doors after death… well if you die as a human and go to soul society yes but that’s not the point. I died in soul society as a… shinigami?’

He was thoughtful to himself before nodding to no one in particular.

‘Yes, a shinigami. That would mean I would be reincarnated into the cycle of souls. So what am I doing he-… Where am I?’

As he glanced this time to his left he saw a beautiful garden, the doors on that side were open so he could see perfectly clear a green garden with some flowers here and there. Once he had stared rather intently at the garden he just couldn’t reject it any longer. He just hadn’t died. That was the answer, so now the next question.

Where the hell was he?

He carefully stood up with a groan, clutching his abdomen as a slight pain shot up through his system. He straightened himself up and tried to look at the whole room to find anything that might give him an answer as to where he was. His eyes stopped on a very familiar nodachi, reclined on one of the walls.

He strode to his sword with much care, one hand still clutching his abdomen where he knew he
had been fatally injured before and the other hanging rather limply at his side. When he was right in front of the sheathed blade he let out a small, very insignificant smile and brought his free hand to grab it with much kindness almost as if it were a living thing; that in a way he did consider them to be a living thing.

“Oh so you’re awake!”

He was startled out of his trance like state and quickly turned around at the fastest speed he could muster, he let go of his abdomen to grab the black hilt of his sword with a strong grip, in a defensive position ready to strike any second.

Eyes narrowed and tangerine colored brows furrowed together in a menacing scowl that would make the bravest man waver under his gaze. His eyes fell on the form of a man, taller than himself that also looked like he was double his own age. The man had long black hair tied together in a ponytail at the nape of his neck, the little amount of hair that was too short to be tied was spiky. The new intruder also happened to have piercing green eyes that in his current situation were as wide as saucers.

“Woah!”

The older man lifted his arms so that they were in sight, trying to show he meant no harm. He had a slightly panicked look on his face but still held a half-smug smirk.

“I won’t hurt you so calm down okay?”

The orange head never wavered in his stance even though the pain was almost unbearable. He stayed in a defensive position not trusting one bit the other’s innocence even though he had his hands in sight.

“What makes you think I can trust you enough to let my sword down?”

That had been the first time he had talked in some time now and his voice came out as raspy as he expected it to be, he held back a cough that wanted to come out as a consequence and settled to stare at the man.

The mystery man just let his hand drop to the side and made his smirk widen ever so slightly. But the thing is, it didn’t have an ounce of malice in it he only had a nice and warm feeling to it.

“You don’t have to trust me. But just to mention I happened to be the one that got a healer in time before you died and this also happens to be my house so if you can at least relax that would be great.”

The man’s smirk never wavered even if he had a sword ready to be drawn right in front of him.

Seeing that he would never get any answers from the black haired man with a zanpaktou ready to butcher him he let out a shaky sigh before lowering his hand from the hilt, moving with much care to try and clutch his abdomen that felt like it would rip open if he stayed in the stiff stance he was. The pain shot throughout all his nerves and his knees gave out under him, falling into a crouching position hand still grasping earnestly his zanpaktou and stomach.

“Ah fuck, I knew this would happen.”

The black haired man went to the other side as quick as the other had fallen, supporting him back into the futon and making him sit in the best way possible so as to not worsen the injury that -as he realized just know- still hurt like a bitch. Once the apparent owner of the house finished his task of
setting the orange head with much care, he sat down at the side, a smile still plastered very confidently on his face.

“So, I guess I should introduce myself. My name is Shiba Ryōtarō, 2nd head of the noble Shiba family and captain of squad 10.”

The orange head that had held no emotion what so ever throughout the whole situation couldn’t help but feel surprised, he was so surprised that his surprise flowed out into the open before he could put a lid onto his emotions, but as quickly as it decided to flow out it just disappeared.

He struggled with the pain to shift lightly in his place to notice that the man indeed did carry a captains haori on his back, something he hadn’t noticed earlier since he was too busy being wary of his situation which for the record, he still was. He never dropped the stare, thoughts going rapidly in his mind trying to connect the dots of the mystery that had started the moment Kisuke had thrown him into that Senkaimon.

He closed his eyes trying to let it all sink, his head hurting thanks to the major overdrive it had gone into. He let out a deep breath and slid eye lids open, the others smirk still very present on his face and not even slightly disturbed by the orange heads stoic face.

“Would you mind telling me your name?”

Amber eyes lost eye contact with green as he looked at his hands that were gripping the futon with force he never intended to use. He thought of all the possibilities and outcomes of telling this Shiba his name and found no reason to not be able to. He was feeling way better in his presence now that he knew who he was and even more that he was apparently family even if the other didn’t know.

“Ichigo… my name is Ichigo…”

Ichigo never looked up from his curled fists even when he heard the other shift in his place, now sitting cross legged in a comfy and informal manner, something very normal only for the Shiba nobles.

“Number one protector, huh? That’s a good name.”

“No…”

Ryo barely registered the whisper that came out of the orange head, he was shocked by how dead and void his voice had sounded even when he had just said one word.

“That name does not suit me, I might as well be Strawberry.”

The raven heads eyes softened ever so slightly at seeing the other in such a broken state, he was really worried for him, why wouldn’t he be, finding him in the middle of the woods half dead and then waking up in such a tense state making him discover how broken the boy looked.

‘Boy…?’

He thought about that, he hated how in soul society it was so hard to tell age but in his current situation he couldn’t care less. Sure the orange head looked no older than 18 but he might as well be his own age; even so he didn’t care, he was only a boy in his eyes.

Ryo couldn’t suppress the sigh that escaped his lips as he stood up, leaving the boy still sitting on the futon with a tired expression on his face.
He barely saw the nod he was given in response as it was almost unrecognizable, he let another sigh out as he strode out the wide open door and into the hall leaving the other in his own musing.

Now that Ichigo was left alone to his thoughts he was finally able to concentrate on his theory. He lifted his gaze to look out the peaceful garden as memories flooded his very mind.

“You have to get out of here now!”

The explosions almost prevented the words from reaching his ears but he was still able to make out what the 12th squad captain had yelled at him. He felt anger bubble up from the pit of his stomach, stomach that had a giant hole in it thanks to that bastard’s cowardly move.

“I can still fight damn it I’m a captain not a child!”

The blonde only shook his head, glancing back at the youngest of their captains and couldn’t help the darkness that crept into his eyes at seeing the state he was in.

The orange head had supported a deadly blast that would have killed any other. The newest of the captains had outdone them all by being able to endure that attack but he knew that even being who he was he would not last much longer. He had acted as a shield and now the shield was slowly crumbling

“There is no time, it's not stable enough to last any longer, I’m not even sure it will work. Be careful and promise me you’ll find a way to fix this mess.”

He held hope in his voice, hope that was very much heard by the other even if his thoughts were a mess.

“B-but Kisuke, what are you talking about?”

Amber orbs widened at the panic reaching into his mind. Panic that was slowly but surely making the pain in his abdomen and in so much other places even more painful. He tensed when he felt the former shop keeper place a firm yet gentle hand on his shoulder as he helped him support his mangled body.

“Ichi… just… promise me you’ll try and prevent this tragedy…. Please…”

Ichigo just looked deeply into gray dull eyes trying to find an explanation but quickly lost eye contact as another explosion shook the blood stained floor they were standing on.

“A-allright, I don’t understand but I promise.”

He saw Kisuke’s warm smile but couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe the smile that had disappeared after Yoruichi died resurfaced even if just for a second. His breath hitched in his throat and he barely registered being pushed into what looked like a senkaimon as he tried not to break eye contact with the others sad gray eyes.

“Thank you…”

The sheer thought of that made him want to break down in that moment not even caring but he knew he couldn’t, even if he wanted to, even if his heart constricted in pain the tears never fell. He knew now what Kisuke meant in that moment, the sorrow that was held in his eyes as it was the
last thing he saw before appearing in the middle of the woods.

He connected the dots once more. Kisuke’s promise… the senkaimon that was never a senkaimon since there isn’t one that would just change your location in soul society… the man… Shiba Ryōtarō. He had said he was the 2nd family head but Ichigo knew that the last head to ever have existed in his own family- the Shibas- was the 32nd head Shiba Kukaku.

There was only one explanation to his current situation but he still wanted to test his theory out. If he was right Kisuke’s senkaimon had sent him into the past, and way into the past if the difference between 2 and 32 was something to say.

He heaved out another slow but dreadful sigh as he pondered over what to do now. The man… Shiba Ryōtarō hadn’t said anything about him leaving so he still had some time even if he didn’t want to take advantage of the kind man. He was going to do something about the future that was for sure but for now his top priority was healing up enough to be able to move without pain and finding out how back he had gone.

All of a sudden his senses went haywire and he noticed a strong yet steady reiatsu just outside the room he was in, he didn’t turn to see who it was nor did he show he knew someone was there, he just stood still as the other also did the same. When the reiatsu never left nor did it enter the room he couldn’t help the sudden urge he had to yell at the person; he instead settled with just voicing out his thoughts in a stern yet normal voice.

“I know you’re there.”

He never turned from looking at the garden but he was able to hear the small squeak that came from the other side of rice doors. Suddenly he heard a small distinctively click symbolizing that whoever was outside was now inside.

“I didn’t mean to spy I was just… curious.”

Ichigo still didn’t turn to look at the new comer as her voice -since it was obviously feminine- flooded his hearing. He raised an eyebrow at the last word and couldn’t stop himself from voicing out his own thoughts.

“Curious?”

This time the timid voice seemed to gain confidence upon noticing his voice didn’t hold any annoyance or malice.

“Y-yeah. Chichiue (1) said you had woken up so I was sorta curious… sorry.”

As he heard the apology he felt the sudden urge to face her and deny it. His head turned and his amber eyes fell on equally amber ones. He was glued to her eyes that held the same spark his had a long time ago, not being able to move from the innocent orbs that stared right back at him. He finally noticed what he was doing and cleared his throat to grab her attention as she was also mesmerized in his own eyes.

“T-there’s nothing to apology about. I wasn’t doing anything anyways.”

When he looked back at the girl he was finally able to look at her appearance. She had black silky hair that reached her hips, it had a red broche on her left side that was neatly keeping her hair from her amber eyes. She was at least 1.60 m (5’ 11”) not as tall as his 1.81 m (5’ 11”) but tall in her own way. The girl -since she looked no older than 17- had white silky skin that now that he noticed was
lightly tinted pink in her cheeks, a discreet yet very visible flush.

“O-okay… um, my name is Shiba Haruka.”

He nodded before realizing she was waiting for his reply and opened his own mouth to speak.

“Ichigo, it’s nice to meet you Shiba-san.”

She instantly brightened up and broke into a wide smile before finally registering how Ichigo had called her and quickly changing into a scowl.

“You can call me Haruka, it’s confusing with more than one Shiba in the house.”

He nodded once more taking in the new piece of information that this girl that looked similar to his age had provided. Apparently there was more than one Shiba in this house, he at least no knew there were two, who knew how many more there were.

“And you can call me Ichigo…”

He quickly noticed his own mistake and went to quickly follow his sentence, stammering slightly since he was in a hurry to not mess up and give unnecessary information.

“S-since I only have that, you know.”

Her smile returned as she laughed at his obvious mistake thinking he had forgotten he only had one name. Ichigo only stared at her with an eyebrow raised thinking how she could laugh so easily and how she seemed to be too relaxed in a room with a man she barely knew when said man had a zanpaktou right beside him.

He was about to inquire about that when the door slid open revealing the first person he had actually met and had apparently saved his life with someone else he was never expecting to see towing right behind.

“Hey Ichigo, sorry to interrupt but I brought the healer I told you about in the beginning. The best of the best, captain of squad 4 Kirinji Tenjirō.”

Ichigo was about to be somewhat nice and respond instead of just staying quiet like a bastard that had no manners or ignores people but he was cut off by none other than the current captain of squad 4.

“Hey Ryōtarō ya forgot that I’m also called Lightning speed Tenjirō!”

The orange head only blinked in surprise when the head of the Shiba clan gave Tenjirō a hard slap on the head.

“What you say you’re the one that started to yell out of nowhere! Why would he care of your self-proclaimed title!”

“How many times do I have to tell you it’s not self-proclaimed, it’s a fact!”

Ichigo didn’t let his eyes leave the scene that was playing out right in front of him, thinking how friendly they were with each other and how it reminded him so much of the past when he would
argue like that with Renji or Ishida. He was suddenly startled when a stern and annoyed voice was heard.

“Quiet you two!”

The two adults quarrel was cut short by the person Ichigo would never expect it from. He turned his gaze from the two men that had each other held by the collar of their shihakushos, frozen in place, to the source of the yell which had been none other than Haruka.

“You two are acting like babies, when will there be a single time when you won’t fight over every little thing.”

The two now held a sorry face, Tenjirō rubbing the back of his head sheepishly mumbling under his breath something about unfair and Ryōtarō pouting trying to look as innocent as possible.

“But Haru, he started.”

The person in question only gave a glare as a response before turning to look at the orange head, expecting him to be freaked out or at least startled by the sudden scene that happened right before him only to find Ichigo as neutral as ever. She raised an eyebrow gaining the two elder men’s attention when they realized that he had indeed stayed quiet and calm the whole time.

“What?”

Ichigo only tilted his head slightly to the side to prove his point and show he really had no idea why they were staring at him when he suddenly remembered that those kinds of antics were only normal for Shibas.

‘Damn.’

“No it’s just that I thought you would be freaked out or something.”

Thinking as fast as he could and grabbing onto the first thing that came to mind he responded in an equally normal and not even bothered tone.

“Well you see a lot of crazy things in Rukongai.”

Hoping it was enough of an answer he brought his attention back to the man he had only met thanks to the war and hardships that had even made the zero squad intervene.

Said man was calmer now that Haruka had put both of them in their place but he still held a cheeky smirk on his face, he was also younger than he remembered but of course that was a given since Tenjirō was one of the first to join the original gotei 13. This gave him a clue as to how back he had really gone so he thought it was a useful fact.

“It’s nice to meet you Tenjirō-san. My name is Ichigo but you probably already know that.”

Tenjirō’s smirk only widened now that the attention was back on him, and realizing that Ichigo had made a pretty accurate comment he couldn’t avoid it either.

“Yup, this guy here told me what he knew on the way back but what I’m really here for is to check how your wounds are coming along since this idiot here also mentioned you were in pain.”

“Who are you call-!”

The Shiba’s protest was cut off in mid-sentence when he was hit rather hard in the head by Haruka,
said person still carrying a rather menacing gaze that showed just how annoyed she was, trace of
the shy girl Ichigo had seen mere minutes ago nowhere in sight.

“Behave yourself Chichue.”

Her father only crossed his arms over his chest grabbing onto a rather childish –in Ichigo’s opinion-
face that showed how he really was. He thought of how lucky Haruka was that this Shiba didn’t
wail and cry like his own idiot of a Shiba father.

Ichigo turned back to the healer and nodded standing up so that he would have better access to his
abdomen where the pain was worse. He opened up the white shitagi (2) he was wearing and waited
patiently as Tenjirō got closer, thumb rubbing thoughtfully on his chin and looking at his bandage
covered abdomen.

“Heh… well I usually punch my patients to see if they’re completely healed.”

Ichigo saw Haruka scowl once more, about to open her mouth to protest with a terrified look on her
face when the 4th squad captain held a hand up stopping her.

“But since most my patients are shinigami that are pretty strong in my opinion I really can’t do that
with you so I’ll have to do it the old fashion way.”

He nodded, not even fazed by the mere thought of being punched by an expert in hakuda (3). He
watched carefully as the bandages were slowly removed from his chest and the injury came in
sight. It was still pink, barely sticking itself together. He looked at the rest of his upper body so full
of scars, some that looked as nasty as they did when they had barely been healed and others that
looked old and barely there. Ichigo also knew there were thin scars running all over his back,
clearly made by a whip but if anybody realized it they didn’t comment on it.

He felt a new bandage being wrapped in place after the injury was cleaned and checked, noticing
how all the other injuries he had sustained were gone and couldn’t help but feel curious.

“What happened to my other wounds?”

He received an incredulous look from the healer in question as he finished the last procedures.
Tenjirō stared directly into the depths of amber eyes until he gave out a sigh and shook his head.

“They healed two days ago, ya were out of it for at least a five days.”

Ichigo kept on staring into the others eyes letting the news sink in his mind. He had been out for
five days… five days had passed since then and he still felt like shit. That just shows how bad the
injury really was. He was brought back from his musing when he heard the other’s voice once
more.

“Let me tell you I didn’t think you would make it but seeing you as well as you are now… it’s
seriously a miracle you survived.”

The orange head looked down at his wound that was already covered in bandages, deciding to pull
back his shitagi. His thoughts brought a certain conclusion to mind and he realized he should have
thanked Ryōtarō a long time ago.

“Ryōtarō-san I forgot to thank you earlier… and also thanks to you to Tenjirō-san.”

Both men in question looked at each other before breaking into a small fit of laughter finding
something funny where Ichigo could find no such thing.
“Sorry ‘bout that kid, no need to thank me it was Ryō that found ya not me, I only healed you.”

“Your thanks are accepted but there really is no need. I did it ‘cause I wanted to and that’s all!”

Ryōtarō now had the largest grin Ichigo had seen on the man, one of pure happiness and no alternate meaning to it and seeing this Ichigo couldn’t help but compare the Shiba before him with his own dad, very similar but still different. Thinking about his dad brought a small smile to his own face, but even as it held sadness in it there was still a small warm trace.

The smile did not go unnoticed by the three even if it did go unnoticed by the owner of it and a similar thought passed through their minds as they thought of how that smile was the closest thing the orange head had showed as a sign of positive emotion.

#1#

“So what do you think about the boy.”

The two captains were walking through the halls of the Shiba manor, making their way to the head’s private courters to try and get more privacy with a cup of tea or even sake.

“Ryōtarō… that’s no boy you got yourself…”

Said captain only nodded as he opened the shoji door into one of his rooms. This one in particular only holding a low table, cushions and some sake bottles with their cups on a counter. He sat down, placing a cup of sake in front of both and a bottle in the middle of the table before finally speaking up.

“I think so to… his eyes hold a haunted feeling to them and it breaks my heart to see such a young person with that sort of expression. I just… I just wonder what happened to him to make him like this.”

Tenjirō had already served them both a full cup of sake. The 4th squad captain only took a sip before looking at the other with the most serious face he could muster.

“You saw all those scars right?”

Upon seeing the other nod slowly he closed his eyes briefly only to open them again, gaze hard and in the depth of it all, pissed.

“Some of them are obviously the work of torture.”

Ryōtarō’s breath hitched in his throat and he hissed at the mere thought of it, opening his mouth to give a response but not being able to find one at the same time.

“The ones on his back are whips… there’s some scars on his wrists that have shackles written all over them… he has even more scars but if they’re all from torture or battle I don’t know.”

Tenjirō never wavered from his sudden serious gaze and Ryō could only stare before taking a sip of the sake, trying to let this newfound information sink in as best as it could.

“He’s that bad?”

The other’s only answer was to grab the sake bottle and fill up his cup once more before gazing up and looking directly into green eyes.
“With all this I can tell you he did not over react upon seeing you.”

Ryōtarō tilted his head showing off his obvious confused state.

“What do you mean? Do you think almost having a sword in the gut was not over reacting?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Being in the state he was, having had hardships we couldn’t hope of knowing… it’s a real mystery why he’s more at ease now, I would have thought him to be more untrusting.”

The head of the Shiba clan gave out a long sigh before gripping his cup and completely downing the sake, placing the cup back on the table with force enough to back up his somewhat pissed off state.

“I was going to let him stay here as long as he needed and as long as he wanted, but now… now I just can’t find it in myself to let him leave.”

He gave out another sigh before pinching the bridge of his nose, eyes lids sliding closed to hide green orbs behind before opening them once again.

“It all makes more sense now… his obvious distrust, how weary he was even though he looked like he was sitting calmly on the futon, the haunted look in his eyes and the way he seems to space off sometimes… I can’t believe how much I want to thank who ever put him in my path that rainy night.”

The captain of the 4th squad took another sip of his sake, trying to savor it at the best of his possibilities.

“What are you thinking of doing…?”

The other only glanced up to look at his comrade, a fierce determination burning in his green eyes as they didn’t waver for a second.

“I think you already know…”

Tenjirō only smirked as he downed the last of his cup trying to look as serious as possible with a smug smirk on his face.

“Maybe I do.”

#1#

“Are you sure you don’t need to rest, I mean I can leave.”

“I don’t have anything to do so I really don’t mind if anything I bet you’d be bored with me more than anything.”

Amber eyes glanced worriedly at the orange head that was sitting right beside. She couldn’t get her eyes off him for some reason and her curiosity wasn’t helping one bit.

This boy had been a mystery from the moment he had been dragged into the manor on her father’s back, Tenjirō right behind with a palm illuminated with green lingering as closely as possible to the worst injury that was visible thanks to the tattered clothing the orange head wore. In that moment
she couldn’t avoid freaking out feeling a dread at the sight of all the blood and hoping her younger brother wouldn’t wake up or he would be traumatized for life.

She glanced back at the other, the curiosity getting the best of her and not realizing until she had spoken up.

“How did you get that injured…?”

She quickly noticed her mistake and panicked slightly, trying to form a coherent sentence to avoid making him bothered by the rather intruding question.

“I-I mean i-if it’s okay to tell me.”

Ichigo didn’t let the thought bother him on the outside even if in the inside he felt almost broken. He tried to heave out a silent breath to get the pieces back together, sticking and gluing shattered and broken pieces of his own soul.

“We were attacked… and I tried to be a shield.”

That was the best answer he could muster no matter how hard he tried, after all, an explanation of how an evil master mind had tried to kill the majority of the future captains that had yet to even exist and that he had gotten badly injured taking in the blast was not one he thought she would believe.

In return Haruka only nodded her head, realizing it was a very painful topic and cursing at her own stupidity, after all why would the orange head even talk about such things to someone he had just met hours ago.

She glanced back rather nervously to look at him, noticing how the soft breeze of the garden flew into the room and moved gently his very slightly, long orange locks. She looked at the bright hair thinking how he didn’t seem bothered when his hair was sometimes obstructing his vision and how it might even tickle the nape of his neck when it was moved.

She looked away from the boy that looked no older than herself and went back to gazing at the peaceful garden that had, for some reason never left the others eyes. The sun was starting to set and the night started to enhance the peaceful sight, engulfing them along with it.

She heard footsteps and looked up noticing a servant carrying none other than her little brother.

“Sorry to bother you Ojou-sama (4) but I’m turning on the lanterns before tucking in young Wataru to bed.”

The sound of a new voice brought Ichigo’s attention as he looked away from the garden that helped him find peace, only to see a normal everyday servant carrying a boy with soft black hair just like Haruka’s, piercing green eyes and an innocent and very childlike expression in place. The child in Ichigo’s eyes looked no older than 4 years old but he knew that looks were not always the truth in the matter of age; take him for example, he was already 38 but he still looked like someone in his senior year of high school.

The little boy, Wataru gave him a wide smile that reminded him so much of himself when he was that age, he blinked before realizing that not responding would scare him and gave the little boy a small smile in return.

Haruka all of a sudden stood up to ruffle the black tuff of hair that Wataru had before speaking up in a calm and warm voice, not in the least demanding or annoyed like one would expect from a
noble family.

“It’s okay you weren’t interrupting. How’s Wataru-chan behaving?”

Said boy only gave a cute pout in response, big green eyes staring right into Haruka’s amber ones.

“I’m a good boy Haru-ne.”

Haruka only gave out a chuckle in response, not halting her soft caresses as she smiled rather warmly at the boy.

Big green eyes flickered their attention back to Ichigo as he seemed rather interested in the guest and his bright orange hair.

Realizing this Haruka took a step to the side to have Ichigo be in complete sight, said person stood up from his place on the wooden porch trying to be as friendly as possible for the young boy.

“Wataru-chan this is Ichigo he’ll be staying here for a while so be nice okay.”

Said boy only nodded rather earnestly wiggling his way out of the servant’s way to stand up right in front of Ichigo, a serious and determined gaze that just looked ridiculous on the boy. This made Ichigo’s smile even more genuine as he couldn’t seem to be able to hold his stoic demeanor in front of the young Shiba.

Said boy only nodded before giving out a tiny hand to shake Ichigo’s, noticing the gesture Ichigo knelt down and gave his own hand in response even if Wataru was only able to grasp three of his fingers with his hand.

“Hello Wataru-chan.”

“Umu, you will be Ichi-ni from now on.”

Haruka and the servant that was still there watching the scene with curiosity blinked in surprise, Wataru being way straighter forward than ever before. Haruka was about to tell Wataru how rude it could be for Ichigo and that he should first ask if he can call him that only to stop on her tracks. Not only was Wataru being friendly and not acting shy like he always did but Ichigo had a genuine warm smile that spoke of much kindness and how fond he had already gotten of the small boy.

“I don’t mind.”

Wataru beamed into a wide smile as he seemed very pleased with himself and his current achievement. He let go of the bigger hand and went to grasp the servant’s smaller one, surprising her if only for a moment.

“Thank you, bye bye Ichi-ni!”

Ichigo could only wave at the small boy as he left through the corridors trying to pull on the servant towards the opposite direction. The lady only turned as fast she could to give a shallow bow before voicing out her excuses.

“If you excuse me Ojou-sama, Ichigo-dono.”

As the two disappeared into a corridor Ichigo stood up once more, wincing under his breath at the sudden movement and trying to avoid Haruka from realizing. He glanced to his side when he noticed a stare being directed his way only to see it was none other than Haruka.
He raised an eyebrow about to inquire on why she was staring at him when she beat him to the punch, surprising him by what came out.

“‘In the three hours or so you’ve been awake you befriended my shy and somewhat anti-social little brother… just what the hell did you do?!’”

She raised her arms in an exasperated way to prove her own point, glaring ever so slightly into Ichigo’s direction and trying to squeeze an answer out of him if he tried not to answer himself.

Ichigo in response lifted his hands in a way to defend himself from the girl’s harmless inquiry. He honestly didn’t know himself so just stood thoughtful, hands still raised in front of his chest as to prevent anything Haruka may throw his way.

“Well… I really don’t know… it was just instinct I guess…”

He shrugged the feeling off, knowing the real reason why but not wanting to even admit it to himself since it would only bring back painful memories, memories that at the moment are not welcome even after so much time has passed.

Ichigo gave another quick glance to the shorter girl to see her sighing and actually accepting his response as an answer, Ichigo knew she was only being considerate since she didn’t want him to feel uncomfortable and he couldn’t be more grateful. His own soul was still very much locked up, not even close to being able to open up to another even if that person were someone Ichigo trusted with his life. So now it didn’t even matter because there were no longer people that fell in that category with him.

Pushing the thought aside he noticed how the winds flew gently, rustling the trees giving the gardens view and even better beauty in a whole new level.

“What do you see so much in that garden?”

He was startled when he heard Haruka voice out her thoughts only a little bit behind him. He turned from the garden only to face her, a neutral and very much practiced voice in place, when that was void of any emotion that didn’t betray any of his inner feelings.

“Memories…. Memories that will always be there no matter what…”

Once those words were muttered she never spoke up again opting to stay silent and gaze at the garden with him and sometimes steal a glance or two his way. It stayed that way until she excused herself stating she had to sleep or else she wouldn’t be able to wake up the next day and Ichigo acknowledged her point with only a swift and slow nod, never speaking up that night only gazing at the moon lit garden that held its own mystery behind it.

Neither of the two noticed that the Shiba head was standing rather silently in the shadows, a somber expression held in place and reiatsu kept neatly but completely suppressed. He had been there since his youngest came out and showed much comfort with the orange head but he never knew how to make his presence known, and then with the somewhat awkward silence left it had ended up worse. So when her daughter decided to retire for the night he couldn’t help but take hold of the opportunity at hand.

He came out slowly from within the shadows and at the same time making his presence known little by little so the boy wouldn’t be startled by his sudden appearance. He was actually surprised that the moment he started to let his reiatsu flow was the moment Ichigo turned around to face in his direction.
When he saw this he couldn’t help but feel curious as to how much the boy knew of reiatsu and how to feel people’s presence. He concluded that since Ichigo hadn’t turned when he had his reiatsu muted the most accurate conclusion would be that he really didn’t notice him until now.

He decided to act like that was the case, casually walking towards him and getting in place right beside him as Ichigo turned back his gaze towards the full moon that happened to be out tonight.

“Can’t sleep?”

Ichigo only nodded thoughtfully as he comprehended the complete meaning of those words and thinking that Ryōtarō might as well want to hear a reason as to why.

“It’s been hard to sleep for some time now so I don’t even bother trying when I know I won’t be able to succeed anyway.”

The captain gave Ichigo a questioning but brief glance before returning to watch the moon in its full beauty thinking that the night was spectacular and that if it were any other day he would have invited Tenjirō to stay and have some more sake under the light of the moon.

“Then do you want to eat, I mean if you’re not going to sleep than maybe you’d want to eat something you haven’t really eaten at all since you were unconscious.”

Ichigo pondered for a second, placing a hand over his stomach and thinking that he wasn’t really hungry. He shook his head rather intently to prove his point that he really wasn’t in the mood for food even if he knew he should at least feel some sort of hunger, but of course food wasn’t something his body needed to continue functioning in some time so it was reasonable that his body didn’t really feel like it, food wasn’t easy found in the middle of the desert or the battlefield.

Ryōtarō let out a slow yet somewhat depressing sigh, gaining the orange head’s attention in the process.

Hearing the other Ichigo turned to look at him, tilting his head to the side in a moment of honest confusion. He was about to inquiry on the fact when he was abruptly cut off.

“You don’t have to be so shy about it you know, my home is your home.”

The Shiba head broke into a small warm smile to prove his point and the orange head pondered over the fact before turning back to the present 10th squad captain, a serious and honest expression in place.

“I really am grateful and I couldn’t ever hope to repay you… but I’m not being shy. I may have lived through hell, hardships and seen many awful things but I’m not helpless, I can take care of myself.”

Ryōtarō blinked in surprise, taken aback by how determined and riled up he was. This was not what he was expecting but it didn’t disappoint him for even a second, quite the contrary actually. ‘This boy has guts.’

He broke into a wide smile, clearly showing his comfort at Ichigo’s reaction and not in the least offended by his words. He grasped tightly the orange head’s shoulder to give him a warm squeeze gaining his full attention once more.

“I was just making sure but I’m glad.”
Seeing the older man’s expression Ichigo returned a small smile, eyes flickering from dull amber to fierce bright amber for just a second, surprising the clan head even if just a little.

They stayed like this, in silence, one that was calm and not awkward, both gazing into the night sky with a smile—even if Ryōtarō’s was bigger—on their face.

The silence was only broken after time passed as the older of the two shifted in his seat to stand up, a pop being heard showing how sore he was. He stretched to relieve the soreness and Ichigo just looked at him curiously wondering what he was doing.

“I think I should go rest myself. You should try and get some as well, don’t want you passing out on us from exhaustion.”

Ichigo nodded, standing up as well and thinking that it wouldn’t help to try even if he just slept a few hours. He was about to enter the room he had woken up in when Ryōtarō grasped his shoulder and shook his head.

“We have a new room for you. We had this one for convenience since it’s close to the entrance and it was hard to move you when you were unconscious. But now that you’re awake you can use the real guest room.”

“Alright. Lead the way.”

The Shiba head gave one of his smug smirks, motioning Ichigo to follow him into the endless hallways. They walked in silence until the raven head stopped just outside a pair of shoji doors, more into the manor but still facing the garden in a different area. He actually liked this area more.

“This will be your new room.”

He opened the doors to reveal a normal room that actually held furniture. Furniture being a dressing table, a bigger futon, a low table with zabuton (5) stacked neatly at the side and some decorations that made the room look livelier. In the same room were two other smaller doors, doors that he could only guess as to what was behind.

Ryō entered the room, Ichigo towing right behind as he strode directly to one of the doors that Ichigo had just wondered about.

“This door leads to a bathroom and this other one… goes to a closet.”

The current 10th squad captain opened the closet door, surprising the orange head when a rainbow of clothing came in view from the other side.

“Wow…”

Ryōtarō looked back to see Ichigo’s surprised expression, having a smug smirk himself as he was very much enjoying the others expressions. He just loved how Ichigo would drop his barriers even if just a little if he was either comfortable or just plain distracted.

“Use anything you like that actually fits, we receive a lot of presents from other noble families and some just don’t fit so suit yourself.”

“Thanks, I think I’ll take a bath before trying to sleep.”

The raven head only widened his smirk obtaining a small but real smile from the other. He turned to leave the room, letting Ichigo prepare himself for bed and hope he could rest when he stopped,
one foot in the hallway and the other still inside the room. He turned around, a serious expression where a smug grin was mere seconds ago and he called out, voice firm but not a trace of demand in it.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Ichigo turned slightly, just enough to see the man from the corner of his eye but not facing him completely. The raven head just stood there and Ichigo did the same, a neutral expression plastered in place until he found the courage to speak up.

“Go ahead. You deserve an answer, it’s the least I could do.”

Ryōtarō never hesitated in his hard gaze, eyes full of hope and respect, not an ounce of pity in sight -something Ichigo was silently grateful for-. 

“How long… how long did this hell of yours last?”

The orange head was taken aback by the simplicity of the question. A question that brought down all his plans and the back story he had created in his free time.

He turned, completely this time and fierce amber met determined green.

A sudden tense atmosphere was created but not in the least awkward as both stood in silence, one waiting for an answer and the other running through his mind.

Ichigo’s fierce gaze never wavered, it never left as memories of the war passed through his thoughts, it never trickled away like it did most of the time to be replaced by dull amber when the corpses of his friends, family, comrades and subordinates crossed his mind.

He held his gaze as he made a silent promise to himself that he would prevent the tragedy no matter what, and as he finally found the courage to speak up his answer he never chocked on his words, only strength and determination was found.

“Twenty years.”

And as the two words were voiced out a burden of guilt was lifted off the poor broken soul, guilt that no matter what was said to him he had always believed to be legitimate. But the sad part about the lifted guilt was not in the fact that it was misplaced guilt, no, that would be too simple for a man of impossibilities like Ichigo, the sad part was that the only reason it left was to be replaced by pain. Deep and very much fictitious pain… pain at being toured apart and glued back together with only himself as support.

Something that would sooner or later make it too much of a burden as memories would flood in with all the time he had.

To be continued…

1. Father
2. Inner robes
3. One of the shinigami arts. Hand to hand combat in this case.
4. My lady
5. The cushions Japanese use to sit on.
Chapter 2: Matsuri

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach. I don’t even own the majority of my stuff - I think it would be highly impossible to own such a famous manga/anime.

“Normal Speaking”

‘Thoughts’

Flashbacks

#2#

“Matsuri (1)?”

The orange head glanced to arch an eyebrow at the over enthusiastic Shiba that almost looked like she was jumping in her seat. Her amber eyes were wide and held the puppy look that made him want to soften up but of course being who he was he took nothing of it and hardened his scowl along with his resolve as to not fall by the illusion.

“Yeah! Let’s go to the Tōrō nagashi Matsuri! (2)”

And here was the disaster to come. After been residing in the Shiba manor for 3 days –awake- he now knew how hard it was to say no to the Shiba princess, not because she always got away with everything or that she was overly spoiled, no nothing like that. The reason being that it was better to go with her flow than fall victim to the cute puppy dog eyes or just –putting it plainly- gain a broken nose.

So here he was now, suppressing the urge to throw his hands up to show his exasperation. He really didn’t feel like doing well… anything. Sure his injuries didn’t hurt anymore so long as he didn’t strain himself or stuff like that but he still didn’t quite feel at 100%.

Now back in his time he would have said screw this and would have thrown himself into battle as soon as he was able to hold his sword but now –even if he wanted to- he couldn’t. Number one being he really had no hurry to defeat enemies or protect comrades and secondly being that the Shibas just didn’t let him. Ichigo had known how stubborn Shibas were –he should know, he is one after all- but this was just ridiculous. The moment he had mentioned that he help around the manor or do something the Shiba head and the Shiba princess –as he had dubbed her- started to make a fuss like mother hens and had stubbornly prohibited him from doing anything more than stand, walk, sleep, eat or change and that was just driving him insane. He wasn’t one to be fawned over, heck he was the one that always did the fawning so not only having one but two being over him was slightly weird if not odd.

“I can’t do anything remember. Princess’s orders.”

She sent a glare his way, obviously unamused by the fact that he was now throwing her own words against her and the fact that he kept calling her by that name. She seriously would have given him a through and all beating if he wasn’t recuperating, so instead she satisfied herself by sending a smug smirk his way, one that held a hidden message that sent a sudden chill down Ichigo’s spine.
“Going to the festival isn’t tiring. You only walk, eat from the stands, look at the fireworks and send out the lanterns. Nothing special that can make you strain yourself.”

Ichigo in return scoffed, seeing where the conversation was going but not quite ready to lose the debate so instead he satisfied himself with trying one last time to beat her and maybe, just maybe not fall victim and say yes in the end.

“If I’m good enough to go to the Tōrō nagashi Matsuri I should be good enough to get back to my life and leave don’t you think?”

This got him a reaction, though not the one he wanted but he guessed it was something because the raven head flattered even if just for a second. After she composed herself a thoughtful expression marred her face, one that held hesitation before it was replaced by pure warmth a small smile slowly curling up her lips.

“You should know why you still haven’t left to continue your life.”

And this was because she just couldn’t call the way Ichigo lived a life. Sure she hadn’t been told anything about his life style of before her father found him but she had made her own implications, how could one not when someone arrives half-dead at your doorstep. So she was more than sure that Ichigo’s life was more than hectic, if not plain miserable. Besides, the orange head didn’t even have someone to return to –this he had actually mentioned on his own free will- so she just couldn’t find a reason to return to the streets even when he had a chance to stay.

And of course he’d been offered that decision two days ago by none other than the Shiba head himself but he had yet to answer, not really saying no but neither saying yes. So, once Haruka blurted out that sole sentence his thoughts went running back to that night hesitation and some sort of fear donning into his mind.

“Twenty years.”

Neither spoke as the silence seemed to be as unsettling as one would expect from a conversation of this caliber, the void atmosphere never seemed to waver in its impenetrable quiet and it stayed that way for a good 10 minutes before Ryōtarō even gained the confidence to sigh and look away from the fierce amber that stared right back at him.

The Shiba head brought a hand to scrub over his face, obviously fed up with the stillness that suddenly came over them. So instead he decided to speak up his mind and get it over with.

Better now than never.

“It’d be stupid of me to start saying how sorry I am and that I understand your pain because I seriously can’t. But, I can tell you that you are nothing if not alone...”

He stopped for a second to release a breath as he took in the orange head’s dumbfounded expression –at least he wasn’t angry. Ryōtarō looked directly into amber, wide eyes as he continued, voice full of determination and real sincerity more than anything.

“I want to ask something of you Ichigo... would you be willing to stay with us...? We’ll never ask what you do not want to answer, we don’t need anything from you so please... would you become a part of our family...?”

Silence seemed to engulfed them but it didn’t feel awkward or anything of that sort. Ryōtarō’s fond and warm smile cleared up the thickness that could have been formed as if the small gesture was enough to make the atmosphere relaxed and somewhat... peaceful. He saw how Ichigo looked at
the ground finding it more interesting than holding his fierce eyes and looking at him but he didn’t mind, Ryōtarō saw how the slightly long orange bangs covered Ichigo’s face to make it a complete mystery as to what was behind but it never bothered him, instead he took one last glance at the teen before muttering brief but warm words

“Think about it…”

And just like that he stalked out, leaving a very much stunned strawberry behind but never glancing back knowing with no doubt that if he did he would demand an answer; and Ichigo was grateful for the gesture because he seriously wasn’t ready to give an one.

The man never asked for an answer even after two days had passed. He had acted like the thing never happened but he knew it did because Haruka had been told the next day and started to pester him that he should stay and that he had no reason to return to the slums.

Still Ichigo never answered to the Shiba princess either, he just stayed quiet when the topic came with his many talks with Haruka and this particular one was going to end no different.

Haruka gave out a long, slow sigh before shaking her head in a disapproving manner even though she didn’t question a thing, instead she settled for giving a stern look and giving the final verdict.

“Anyway, we’re going to the festival together so get ready.”

With that she stood from her seated position in the wooden hallway besides the orange head to give him a smile from above, obviously pleased that she was currently taller than him and that he hadn’t reproached just settled for a glare that didn’t look at all menacing from beneath her.

“No need to broad so you might as well have fun ‘kay?”

He just gave out a reluctant sigh before nodding his head in a defeated manner, glancing up at the raven head and looking at her amused smile from the corner of his eyes before the smallest of smirks curled up his lips, discarding the glare that seriously had no use with her.

“Alright… I guess I can try.”

Her smile widened as she beamed with happiness and took off in a hurry, obviously going to get ready and notify her idiotic father of the news.

Once she was out of sight Ichigo’s smile wavered as his face returned to his own shut out mask, one that wasn’t particularly stoic like the Kuchiki’s even if it didn’t betray his own feelings for a second. His mask was more like a neutral kind of face, one that read uncaring but didn’t say anything else even when his fierce amber eyes stood out when he occasionally had them.

He shook his head as his gaze lingered onto the beautiful sakura tree that was starting to shed its own petals, being carried off by the wind and making a majestic sight to look at. But even as his eyes were on the pink colored petals his mind was somewhere else, lost in thoughts and hesitations that just made his case worse because he knew the answer before Ryōtarō had even stopped talking that night and that fact scared him.

It scared him to think that his own heart would jump head on the moment he had been offered a place, a family to belong to. He just couldn’t decipher the feelings of longings that never seemed to leave his mind when he thought about that chance. A chance that made him beam with happiness and at the same time want to tear up. Would this mean he was replacing his family? If so he just didn’t want it so he kept on pushing it aside. He just couldn’t accept his own resolve at the moment and that was just ridiculous.
So instead of losing his head on something that clearly had no answer at the moment he stood up, gaze flickering briefly towards the hallways before realizing there wasn’t even a need to be on edge. It was hard to tone down battle instincts that was for sure. Ignoring the observation he went off to his own room, rice door sliding softly behind and clicking in an obvious sign of closing. Ichigo stood there, inside his room but not quite leaving the door just yet, he sighed before giving himself shake of the head, cursing at his own hesitation and deciding to concentrate on the matter at hand.

He needed to get ready for the Tōrō nagashi Matsuri.

“This is just so damn frickin confusing!”

He seriously considered tearing his own hair off his head; it was stupid and stressful because he knew already his decisions were just being fogged up and blinded and that more than anything annoyed the hell out of him.

“It wouldn’t be if you only stopped lying to yourself.”

And this was another thing. His zanpaktou spirits. Ichigo had tried to find some sort of peace and comfort and had fled into his inner world when he noticed he had time to spare before the festival and the fact that he was already changed and ready to go, but the two just weren’t being of any use, if anything they seemed to leave the orange head to deal with it on his own and that was frustrating. Weren’t they supposed to assist him?

He scowled once the words sunk in because he wasn’t expecting a reply now and much less that. He really did know what he wanted just like his own soul had said mere seconds ago but the thing was that he felt hesitant even if he knew perfectly fine what he wanted, what he preferred but he couldn’t choose thanks to his own useless thoughts only increasing his fear. How would this affect the future? Would it bring to much attention to himself? What would he do from here on if he still had centuries to spare?

“I’m not lying myself, I’m trying to make the right decision and you two are not helping.”

This brought a reaction from the albino that had uninterested until now. He turned around to glare at his wielder before letting out a snarl, not satisfied with Ichigo’s actions and indecision.

“A king is king because he his has his people but you’re just ignoring your people –your soul. You are KING of this fucked up soul of yours so you already know what you –what we want so stop angsting like a god damn teenager and take your pick!”

It brought a certain realization to him, it really did, and he knew his choice from the very beginning he was just wavering thinking of the what ifs. He needed to get a grip, he had only one goal in mind how he accomplished it he shouldn’t care less it just had to guarantee to stop the war in the end.

He stayed silent, getting a conclusion but not wanting to voice it out as he still had a flicker of hesitation weighing him down so instead he turned around and silently started to walk away towards the edge of a blue building to disappear back into consciousness but was stopped when a stern hand was placed on his shoulder. Ichigo glanced back to look at the old man which happened to be a part of Zangetsu in his own way. He stared at him from the corner of a stoic amber eye, not showing an ounce of emotion even though it was impossible to hide them from his very own soul.

“I couldn’t have put it in any other way even if Shiro did add an extra… but Ichigo, you’ve never
hesitated on your choices before, always honest with yourself and doing what you thought was
right and maybe sometimes it made things go wrong but you were always able to fix them in the
end…”

A brief flicker of pride passed through his eyes as he squeezed Ichigo’s shoulder to give in some
comfort and show how honest he was with his words because if he had ever admired anything
from his wielder it had been his strong will to do what was right so he really wanted to get his point
across.

“…now is not the time to ignore that part of you and I wouldn’t think you would need us to remind
you of who you are –what makes you the person we, and many others were -are proud of… don’t
hesitate Ichigo you will only die in the process.”

The orange head in return gave a small barely distinguishable smile but it was enough for both of
them because even if he didn’t show it they knew how Ichigo felt perfectly fine.

They both saw how their king started walking to the edge once more, confidence inscribed into his
very being, showing it as vividly as the day even in the way he walked and strode to the end of the
building. No faltering, never wavering, always going forward, never looking back, and as he stood,
one step away from the ledge he spoke up in a hushed yet stern and determined voice they had yet
to here in a long time.

“Thank you…”

And with that he was off, slowly disappearing into nothingness and awakening in the outside world
to face his life with new found determination and confidence that was always present, it had only
been muted. But now, he would no longer hesitate.

‘I will stop looking back…’

#2#

He had been startled that was for sure.

Why wouldn’t he be when he was peacefully filling out paperwork and all of a sudden an over
excited Shiba Haruka broke into his office and all but demanded they all go to the Tōrō nagashi
Matsuri with such radiance in her eyes one would think she had just won a contest or something.
So, when he had finally been able to calm her down and make her explain her reasons –she never
acted so excited over events like these- he had been more than a little shocked when the realization
donned over him that Ichigo of all people had actually agreed to go and had promised –
involuntarily agreed- he would try and have some fun, so once he had gotten the full gist of the
situation –including her failed attempt at cornering Ichigo into accepting his proposal- he stood up,
pushed the paperwork aside and had hurried over to get ready himself along with little Wataru.
They would all go as a family, maybe make Ichigo realize how w
ell
he could fit –had fit well
already- into the Shibas.

And now, a mere hour later he was striding down a hallway, making way towards the room he
knew the young orange head resided in with gleam and happiness written all over his face. Once he
catched sight of the room he couldn’t help but feel even more satisfied that they could go out and
that the boy had actually accepted –though reluctantly- and that they could coax him out of the
manor now that he could move without pain. So as he stood outside of the room with a smug smirk
on his face he called out to the occupant of the room as he noticed the steady yet small reiatsu
inside the room.
"Oi, Ichigo! You ready? Haruka is already at the entrance with Wataru so we should get going!"

He heard a rustle before a series of other noises followed after, a loud thud being one of them as he could only wonder why but as quickly as the noise came a somewhat flustered Ichigo appeared out the shoji door, ready and in full attire for a festival. He wore a navy blue yukata that had a golden pattern of fireworks on the bottom left, it contrasted nicely with his bright orange hair but still made him look like quite the looker—even though he had looks to spare when he wore normal clothing as well.

His own thoughts lingered, thinking that the orange head would make any woman swoon and if he did join the Shiba clan he would most likely have suitors lined up, ready at any given moment for their prey. His musing was cut short as he remembered the loud thud from earlier and had to cut his own fantasy short.

"Ne Ichigo, what was that noise?"

The ex-shinigami daiko shifted nervously in his place as he seemed to scan his own surroundings looking for an answer only to find none and settle to look at the ground which for some reason was much more interesting than the Shiba head at the moment.

"I-I um…fell?"

The question mark did not go unnoticed but Ryōtarō said nothing, opting to let the young man keep it to himself since it really wasn’t anything of great importance. Ichigo had to thank every god he could think of along with the spirit king that the raven head hadn’t probed further, after all, it’s not like he could go ahead and say *Oh sorry I just happened to be meditating with my zanpaktou spirits when you arrived so I was startled and almost tripped but don’t worry nothing of grand importance.* Sure like that would sound logical for someone that—as far as everyone else knew—did not have a zanpaktou let alone *two!* So he was really grateful when the Shiba curiosity didn’t act up and was able to get free.

Ichigo felt a gaze being directed towards him and turned to look at the Shiba head. He was staring rather intently and for that Ichigo could not avoid lifting an eyebrow.

“What?"

“No, I was just thinking how well Shiba clothing suits you.”

He flushed lightly at the comment but was quickly replaced by panic and soon after confusion, remembering something that Ryōtarō himself had said and not finding it coherent with the two facts put together.

“But I thought you said all these were gifts from other clans.”

Seeing the orange heads confusion he shook his head trying to prove his point; arms crossed over his chest almost like if he were scolding a child but still held the patience to hold his deception and explain.

“We also store cloths that we’ve outgrown or no longer use. Take that yukata for example, it used to be mine some time back.”

Ichigo took in the information as he understood the logic behind it since it really wasn’t wise to leave useless clothing at the back of a closet. He was satisfied with the answer but still couldn’t help feeling a small bit of shock thanks to the fact that was revealed at the end; being that the navy blue yukata was once the Shiba heads. He was brought from his thoughts when the raven head
cleared his throat and motioned Ichigo to follow him into the halls and to the gate.

They walked in silence all the way, a calm yet peaceful one that let the birds chirping be heard like a melodious tune. As they arrived at the gate Haruka was already there; hands at her waist and a scowl on her face.

“You’re late!”

Ryotaro only gave an apogelic smile as he returned his gaze to the orange head that was looking for something that both Shibas had no clue as to what. They were all shocked when Ichigo almost fell face first upon having force being applied in the hug he was suddenly grasped into. The orange head looked down to see a mop of black hair and more than anything the tight embrace the boy had on his own leg.

“Hey Wataru-chan, I was just wondering where you were.”

As that question was answered the two Shibas were finally able to notice how kind and open Ichigo happened to be with the little boy and upon closer inspection they also discovered Wataru’s wide smile.

“I’m glad you’ll come to the festival with us Ichi-ni! We can play games and eat takoyaki or some manju and-“

“Okay okay just calm down, we’ll have some fun together ‘kay?”

The boy just nodded rather earnestly, letting go of Ichigo’s leg only to grab onto his hand, pulling him towards the gate and making him walk, the two Shibas right behind. As they finally caught up they all set into a peaceful and cheerful stroll through the halls of what Ichigo noticed was the old sereitei.

It was certainly an eye opener to see the majestic sereitei he knew being so small and barely being built. He looked curiously at every single detail finding it pretty interesting and seeing how even so much into the past with everything being a smaller version it was still a maze. As they arrived at the border of where the sereitei ended the streets started to look livelier with many people and stands all in happy cheers.

“Let’s go to eat some treats Ichi-ni!”

Ichigo looked down to look at the small boy having an excited expression in place, he looked like he would burst with happiness and this brought a happy expression in place as he gave a warm smile in return before he nodded and replying with a soft and barely audible okay, letting himself be dragged into the many stands and sea of people, not even having time to glance back to see if the other two Shibas were following.

About an hour later Ichigo was dead tired thanks to the fact that he didn’t have a moment to spare between stand in stand, having to keep up with the little boy’s excitement and being careful not to over exert himself afraid that he would have a relapse or something worse. So when Haruka came behind him with an expression of sympathy in place and a hint of amusement telling him she would take over for a while he was more than thankful.

Once he got out of the crowd he went to sit down on a bench that just so happened to have a view towards a small riverbank. He let out a shaky sigh before rolling his shoulders backwards trying to get the soreness off and somewhat relax. Ichigo was surprised when the Shiba head all of a sudden appeared out of nowhere and sat down beside him with a sake jug in hand.
“You’re awfully relaxed in a crowd.”

Ryōtarō glanced to look at him with a hint of confusion in place, mildly shocked that Ichigo was the one to initiate the conversation and not him.

“What do you mean?”

“Well you’re a captain and the Shiba head to boot. Wouldn’t you be recognized or something?”

This brought even more confusion onto the raven head and Ichigo had to make a double take when the other seemed actually curious as to what Ichigo was talking about, after all he never had that problem, no one did.

“We aren’t celebrities, at least not yet that I know of. Sure say the name of any of the 5 great noble houses and anyone would know them but actually recognizing the members of a clan or the gotei 13?”

Ichigo looked curiously at this, wanting to know more information of this time so that he could have more ammo when needed, every piece of information was valuable. Seeing this the Shiba head couldn’t help but break into a smile and continue with his lecture, liking the idea of the orange head being so interested in the noble life.

“Every single noble family is registered into the central 46 records but they still haven’t gone as deep as to write the exact amount of members, names or relations in between them. The five great noble houses are a bit more monitored but since the great noble houses are relatively new there still isn’t a precise record. Take the Shiba clan for example, they know the name of the head which is me, they know I’m captain of squad 10 and also the fact that I was once married and that I have children but they don’t know how many children, genders or any of that."

Ryōtarō gave a pensive nod deciding that giving more internal information wasn’t that bad of an idea before looking back at Ichigo that was engulfed completely in the conversation, interest and fascination written all over his face even if history was never one of his favorites.

“The family registers for the noble families are being integrated at the end of this year. The central 46 is tired of having everything so lax and want to start having control even on us. Of course this doesn’t mean we’re going to sit back and let them do what they want. It’s our clan after all.”

“I imagine that the clans are going to do anything they want before the register right?”

This made a sort of malicious yet playful laugh erupt from the Shiba head, knowing where Ichigo was going with that sole question and not in the least offended by the fact that he and all the other clan heads were being accused of doing underhanded stuff.

“Well you could say, I mean anyone would… though I wasn’t planning on doing anything until like three days ago.”

The new revelation brought newfound curiosity into the orange head. He glanced to look at the raven head to find his wide smug smirk that just wrote danger all over it. He gulped trying not to look nervous and failing miserably as he tried to choke out the words and find out what the Shiba head was plotting.

“A-and wh-what is your plan?”

The older man’s smirk widened if possible before he got close to Ichigo’s ear and opened his mouth to give his answer which was apparently very secretive.
“Forcing you into the Shiba family.”

This made Ichigo scowl throwing his previous nerves away as if they never existed in the first place. He turned to look at the raven head, planning on throwing a fit and giving him a reproach about how he had previously said it was Ichigo’s choice to make and that he wouldn’t force him and now he was doing the opposite. But when he met with sad green eyes he stopped, previous feelings muted and trying to form a sentence together having no luck what so ever.

Ichigo felt bad and looked at the dirt made road the bench happened to be on, trying to get his thoughts in order even if he finally knew his answer.

He felt the silence but didn’t feel uncomfortable as both versions of his Zangetsu seemed to give him strength from his inner world encouraging him to look up again and face his problems like a man he was.

“Don’t look back…”

The sole sentence brought the Shibas attention onto the orange head that was looking into the river bank with determination obviously reflected in his amber eyes. All of a sudden amber met green as a staring contest commenced not even stopping when Ichigo opened his mouth to give out an answer that just so happened to surprise the Shiba.

“You won’t have to force me…”

#2#

“Haru-ne Where’s Ichi-ni and Chichue?”

Haruka glanced down to look at the little curious boy that now held a less excited face and was more inclined to worry. This brought a certain confusion to her but decided not to inquiry just yet and first answer the boy.

“Well Ichigo looked pretty tired so he’s resting for now and Chichue… well he must be somewhere.”

This seemed to alleviate the young Shibas worry even if just a little but he still held apprehension that one would think impossible for a boy his age.

“What’s wrong Wataru-chan?”

“Ichi-ni looks sad when he’s alone that’s why I don’t want to leave him by himself.”

Haruka saddened realizing she hadn’t even noticed and how the small boy caught onto Ichigo’s real feelings when they hadn’t even seen them. She softened up hoping more than ever that Ichigo would stay with them so that he wouldn’t stay alone any longer. She looked down when Wataru’s voice brought her attention as she silently listened to the boy that looked close to tears.

“I always play and talk with Ichi-ni when he’s alone and I really like to spend time with him. I don’t want him to leave.”

The eldest of the two broke into a small smile and kneeled down next to the young raven head to give him a hug, trying to convey her understanding before standing up once more holding him in her arms.

“How about we go and look for Ichigo and Chichue so that we can look at the lanterns together?”
At this he only nodded, not wanting to say anything but gaining comfort by Haruka’s hug but most of all her steady presence.

After some time, it could be said that they had been walking around the stands looking around for what seemed like half an hour when it had only been around 10 minutes. Wataru was starting to get impatient and Haruka was having a hard time keeping him calm when all of a sudden something orange caught her attention and she was finally able to see her target which happened to be sitting right next to her father.

“Look Wataru-chan, its Ichigo and Chichue.”

Said boy beamed with excitement at seeing that Ichigo wasn’t alone, they were about to call out in unison to give them a surprise when all of a sudden Ichigo’s steady voice surprised them.

“You won’t have to force me…”

Both stood frozen not because of what Ichigo had said, no they didn’t even understand the meaning of those words. What surprised them however was their stupid father starting a scene.

“Are you serious?!”

At this Ichigo hesitated but he slowly but surely nodded giving the other an unimaginable relief and tranquil. The Shiba head stood up and pulled Ichigo into a heartwarming hug which the orange head had no idea to react to, only stood there frozen in place.

“I’m glad…”

Once Haruka saw her father’s reaction everything clicked into place and she couldn’t help but let out an equally happy grin spread on her face. She looked down at Wataru that had a face of confusion and knelt down next to him, getting close enough to mummer something in his ear without being heard.

“I think Ichigo is going to stay in the manor with us.”

That sole sentence brought a goofy smile onto the toddler as he glanced back to look at Ichigo’s panicked expression as he was hugged and decided to help him out letting his presence known.

“Chichue let go of Ichi-ni! He doesn’t like your hug!”

The two men finally noticed the new company promoting Ryōtarō to grin widely at his family and Ichigo to blush a light pink in embarrassment. The older of the two ran off to his two children to glop them into a tight hug letting Ichigo take a break from the over enthusiastic Shiba.

“My family has grown once more!”

“Get off Chichue!”

“I love you to Haru-chan.”

“Don’t call me that!”

Ichigo smiled sadly at the scene, finding so much resemblance to his own crazy father and how they would share their love. He was so embraced in memories of the past that he didn’t notice that he was being stared at by the three Shibas until a tiny hand was placed on his leg making him jump slightly and look at the source of the intrusion to his memories.
He was met with the big green eyes of little Wataru as he glanced down at the boy that held curiosity filled eyes and a smile as wide as possible.

“Ichi-ni thank you, for staying with us… I always wanted to have a big brother.”

Those words stung deep into his very core, words that made his eyes water even against his own will. It was more than anything remains from a memory that made this happen not only thanks to the little boys words, it was the very emotions that were conveyed so much like that memory that triggered the phenomenon.

““Ichi-ji when I grow up I wanna be a Shinigami like you!”

Said person could not suppress a chuckle as he ruffled the small tuff of burnt orange hair so much like his mother and gave a warm smile that made the boy very happy since his Ichi-ji was just so hard to make smile. Ichigo thought about the boy’s father, thinking it was so rare that the orange head wanted to be a shinigami with his father being who he was.

“I think your father would be really disappointed if you didn’t become a Quincy.”

This brought a pout to the boy’s face as he crossed his arms over his chest, trying to imitate Ichigo’s signature scowl to the best of his abilities even though it didn’t look one bit menacing.

“But you’re a shinigami and a Quincy!”

The sole sentence brought a certain realization to mind as he just froze to think about what the little boy had said but thought nothing of it as he found a simple yet non-convincing explanation.

“I’m just weird that way.”

“But even if you’re weird I still want you as a big brother.”

“Ichigo?”

A soft voice brought him from his musing as he glanced at the two older Shibas that held worry etched onto their faces. He felt something wet and brought a hand to his cheek to see a lonely tear had betrayed him and showed his true despair.

Ichigo cleaned off the tear as he gave a sad melancholic smile trying to alleviate the worry the others felt for him and also convince himself that he was okay. This seemed to calm them if only a little bit as Haruka tried to smile back while holding a bag up to show the other three.

“I bought two lanterns a little while ago with some brushes so that we can put a name and set them free.”

Haruka gave Ichigo a lantern and a brush which had ink, ready to use and the orange head couldn’t help but glance down at the small paper thing in his hands as he thought of when was the last time he had set one off himself.

The orange head looked at the two Shiba siblings that had left in a hurry to the shore, lantern ready and lit up about to place it on the clear water. He saw the Shiba head behind him an couldn’t help but look curiously while staring into his green eyes, not really expecting the other to speak up since his gaze seemed so distant.

“My wife died in labor… Wataru was born healthy thanks to her sacrifice… that was about 25 years ago.”
Ichigo kept on staring at the man, not really wanting to speak up and ruin the peaceful moment that decided to suddenly bless them. Ryōtarō really didn’t care when the orange head decided to stay quiet and he actually thought of it as a sign of goodwill since he was actually listening.

“I’d imagine you’ve lost many people and just because you joined our family it means you won’t lose any more people but… at least you won’t be lonely.”

The head was quite surprised when Ichigo let out an annoyed huff of breath and turned back to the river while speaking up, voice steady yet barely audible.

“I bet it’s a nuisance to take in someone like me.”

“Maybe… but let me tell you, I happen to have a soft spot for cripples, bastards and broken things.”

Ichigo scoffed, looking back at the raven head with a tug of a smile lingering dangerously on his lips even though he was trying to give an annoyed scowl while failing badly.

“So now I’m a broken thing.”

“Who said you were a broken thing, maybe you’re a cripple or bastard. You yourself chose one.”

Ichigo didn’t respond, thinking back to the lantern and who he should place it for; he thought of his friends, family, comrades, subordinates and many others that had died throughout all his life, he thought back to the boy with burnt orange hair and how he had met his demise; his parents, Orihime and Uryuu dying while trying to protect the boy and failing miserably, Ichigo only arriving in time to hear Uryuu’s final words to him that even now resounded in his very core, words that came out in pauses as he coughed blood and struggled to breath but Uryuu was still able to convey his disgust against the whole master minds that had created the hell they were living in.

“Beat the bastards and remember us in the end.”

The words were more than enough for Ichigo to understand that Uryuu didn’t want revenge, he wanted Ichigo to win, to survive and that was what he had done till the bitter end but now… now he was not in that time, the people that had died had yet to even be born he now he had… time.

So after a lot of thinking and being in a memory induced state he was finally able to decide on what to write on the lantern. So he grabbed a brush and wrote the two kanji letters that meant the start of his new life and lit the small lantern making way to the shore and kneeling down to place it on the water.

Meanwhile Ryōtarō had been seeing the whole thing, never interrupting or calling out, knowing it would be better to leave it at that and let Ichigo do as he pleased and just watch on the sidelines, so when Ichigo started walking towards the shore and kneeling down like a little boy about to play in the water he couldn’t help but follow behind silently to see the name of the person Ichigo cherished enough to write on the lantern.

But what he saw amazed him and at the same time made him proud as Ichigo finally placed the lantern in the water letting it float and make the kanji visible.

過去(Kako)(Past)

To be continued…
Chapter 3: Reluctance and silence

Disclaimer: I don’t own bleach in any way or form. The ONLY thing I own is the Shiba characters.

“Normal talking.”
‘Thoughts.’

#50 years later#

Chirping noises resounded through the morning breeze, the cool wind rustled the trees along with the chimes that just so happened to be hung on the hallway. The noise made its way to ears of a curled up figure in a futon, groaning lightly and cuddling further into the covers as his dreamless sleep was disrupted. The noise happened again, this time added by a set of footsteps as they made way towards the shoji doors of the slumbering person.

The doors were sprung open with force enough to make a loud clang but even that didn’t wake the curled up figure.

“Wake up Ichi-ni, stop being lazy! Chichue is calling so hurry up, c’mon!”

A tuff of orange hair poked out of the covers as amber eyes were barely visible, still glazed thanks to the sleep induced state he was in mere seconds ago.

“Five more minutes.”

The other which had gone with the purpose of waking up the orange head pouted, arms crossed over his chest in evident disagreement.

“Do you want me to call Haruka-ne?”

This made Ichigo react, jumping out of the warm confinements of the futon and rushing into the closet to get changed. Being wide awake even though it was relatively early he yelled from the other room, hassled in changing clothing but sure that his alarm clock would hear him.

“What does Chichue want at 6 in the morning?”

The smaller boy only shifted in his place, thoughtful with a finger resting on his chin in a very pensive way trying to find an answer. He shrugged to himself once he couldn’t find one and seeing as the orange head could not hear a shrug he decided to voice out his thoughts.

“He didn’t say.”

Having already finished changing, the oldest of the Shiba siblings came out to join the youngest, wearing a simple forest green kimono with a black haori on top since it was pretty chilly for being beginnings of January. Ichigo ruffled the black locks of the boy, earning himself an annoyed glare even if his hand wasn’t pushed away.

“Let’s go Wataru-chan, wouldn’t want Haru to get mad because we’re late now would we?”

Seeing the boy –which now looked like a 13 year old- nod, he began to walk down the halls of the Shiba manor towards the dining room, knowing full well that early family meetings would always be held with breakfast before the Shiba head would have to go to his captain duties.
Once they arrived to the dining room the playful smile that was on Wataru’s face disappeared, being replaced by a frown thanks to the man that just so happened to be sitting next to his father. The youngest of the Shibas glanced up to look at his elder brother, seeing an unreadable expression etched onto his face that just made him shudder thinking how fake the orange head besides him now seemed to be.

He winced when he noticed the sharp glare that the intruder sent his way and proceeded to enter the room as quietly as possible and sit next to his sister which just so happened to be scowling rather fiercely.

Wataru glance at his father once more to see a very fake smile on his face as he tried to be a good host for a man he clearly disliked and he couldn’t agree more. The man looked old and had gray hair that reached a little bit over mid-back, his piercing black eyes bore holes into his very being and he couldn’t help but quiver under the gaze. He would be eternally grateful that his dear brother went to the rescue, interrupting the stare with a polite greeting.

“"It’s nice to see you again Gen-Jisama.”

No one missed the clench of his teeth as he murmured the sole sentence as he gave a shallow bow, but even as he did, Ichigo’s unemotional expression never wavered, in fact it hardened, getting locked between locks and codes never to be let free in front of someone Ichigo wasn’t comfortable with.

The reaction given in response was enough to make their blood boil but of course they could do nothing but endure it as the old man seemed to spit out the words.

““At least one of your snotty brats has enough manners to manage a somewhat proper greeting.”

Gen scoffed as he rolled his eyes and took a glance at the Shiba head which—for the record- had hands balled in fists at his lap, knuckles as white as snow and getting whiter by the second.

““And you’re no better. I don’t know why my brother even bothered to leave the head of this clan to a failure like you.”

This seemed to get a reaction from Haruka that had stayed silent the whole time, trying not to throw a tantrum but failing miserably in the end.

““Don’t speak that way of Chichue!”

Seeing that the Shiba daughter would end up doing something she would later regret Ichigo strode to her side and placed a hand in hers, trying to make her calm down and get some comfort by his presence.

““Che, look at that. The Shiba-hime is a disgrace to the family at this rate—“

“I think you should leave Ji-san.”

The old man glanced wide eyed at the interruption, seeing that the Shiba head which had wanted to avoid conflict from the beginning had suddenly decided he had enough.

““You’ve over stayed your welcome.”

The older man scoffed once more as he stood up and strode out towards the wide open shoji door and into the hall, giving a glance back to glare at the Shiba main family and then just leave like if he had done nothing wrong and Ryōtarō had been the one to do badly.
Once the man was out of earshot Haruka was finally able to let out her frustration as she yelled out her thoughts for everyone to know.

“I just hate that shitty geezer!”

They all couldn’t agree more with Haruka and Ryōtarō would have voiced out his thoughts in front of the man if he wasn’t scared what the Shiba elder would do to his children if he pissed off the man.

“You were awfully quite Wataru-chan.”

Once Ichigo had spoken up the Shiba head noticed that what the orange head had said was accurate and weird at the same time so he glanced to look at his youngest seeing that he still had a deep frown and as the curiosity beat him he raised an eyebrow to inquiry.

“Your brother’s right you know. It’s weird that you didn’t start offending the bastard the moment you saw him.”

Wataru just crossed his arms over his chest, scowl very prominent on his face as he had a perfect teacher to copy from.

“I didn’t want Ichi-ni or Chichue to get in trouble again.”

Yes that’s true, he remembered the times that the Shiba council was convinced by none other than Shiba Gen that Ryōtarō had done an awful job raising them and how it was necessary to take action. In the end they sent Ichigo to some extracurricular noble classes so that he would give a good example for the other two and that had given the young Shiba a sort of regret because he had bothered his Ichi-ni so now he had tried to keep his mouth shut and not say a word.

Ichigo on the other hand exceeded the elders expectations, he had passed his lessons with flying colors, acting as proper and educate as a high class noble would act and making Shiba Gen shut up and not bother them in a long while. Of course good things never last long. So when Wataru suddenly put a sorry face and inclined his head slightly Ichigo couldn’t help but ruffle the short black locks of the little brother he had never hopped to have but more than anything was grateful for.

“It wasn’t your fault I already told you so who cares. We were able to shut the council to so we ended up winning.”

Wataru was able to muster up a small smile as he sat back in his seat, everyone else mirroring his actions as some servants came in to place an early breakfast on the table for the Shiba family to enjoy.

As the air lightened up thanks to Gen leaving Haruka was able to relax and muster up her more cheerful demeanor, trying to make what was left of their time be somewhat enjoyable.

“So Chichue why did you wake us up so early and summon up a family meeting?”

The Shiba head seemed confused for a second before he remembered what he wanted to tell his children before the bother had appeared.

“Oh yeah I forgot all about it because he came unannounced.”

Ichigo scoffed, not being able to agree more but still wanting to show his displeasure. He really hated his uncle.
“Well I have some news to share with you all but first I want to ask my dearest elder son something.”

Ichigo glanced at his father rather nervously; even now he felt weird referring to the man as a father and with respect but he had slowly but surely gotten used to it, only rarely slipping up and screwing up, so now that said man was actually referring to him as his son—which was the story they had created that now seemed more of a true than a lie- he couldn’t help but feel apprehension.

“How’re your studies in the academy coming along?”

This seemed to gain everyone’s attention as all eyes were on the orange head that now looked overwhelmed by the sudden attention, he really hated this moment.

“I would like to know to Ichi-ni, even if you really don’t like to talk about yourself I’ve been kinda curious.”

Haruka nodded at this, wholeheartedly agreeing with Wataru in how Ichigo wasn’t really talkative and how they knew mostly nothing of his time in the shinigami academy.

“W-why the question Chichue?”

“Well I received a call from Yamamoto-dono the other day to talk about out of work business. Apparently he wants to know your opinion on his pride that happens to be the Shinigami Academy, and since you just so happened to be a student and are also lauded for being a prodigy I think you could give valuable advice.”

Ichigo shifted nervously in his place, trying to find a way out of the conversation if it was the last thing he did. After all, what could he say? The academy his boring because I already know all this? I just entered the academy to become a shinigami and join the gotei 13 to stop a future war? Not something he could comment on.

“I think… it’s interesting?”

Ryōtarō glared at his eldest son thinking how he was not being honest and was just trying to avoid the topic all together. This was part of the reason he had decided to take the problem before leaving for his squad; he would get a proper answer before sharing the news.

“I think that was more of a question than an affirmation.”

“The thing is Ryōtarō-san, I-“

Ichigo was cut off rather abruptly by a slap on the head by none other than Ryōtarō himself. He had a menacing gaze that would have made Ichigo quaver had he not lived in a war and more than anything held a ting of disappointment.

“Chichue, NOT Ryōtarō-san.”

The orange head nodded in understanding, feeling bad he had slipped and called the man by his name when he had stopped doing so decades ago. He was about to keep up with his previous thought when all of a sudden he was interrupted again by the hand the Shiba head had suddenly raised.

“I already know more than enough to not need your answer Ichigo… There was a meeting for teachers to share their opinions with each other in the presence of the Sotaichou or in this case principal of the academy and a small detail came to light which the principal could no longer
Ichigo looked down, finding more interest in the folds of his kimono than the current conversation, he knew what was to come and he seriously couldn’t blame anyone but himself, after all it was his fault he was so bad at suppressing his knowledge in the shinigami arts and not attract attention.

“The teachers mentioned how talented you were and how bored you seemed to be in their classes so they wanted Yamamoto-dono to take matters in the situation… they decided to place you in advance class but with a higher year.”

The orange head stayed silent, as he was too surprised to even speak up at the moment, after all, he was not expecting that, actually, it was the last thing on his mind.

“So you’re telling me Yamamoto-dono decided to solve this problem by raising me into another year?”

Ryōtarō looked uncaring as he nodded, doing so like if it were a normal everyday thing for a young shinigami student and not some bizarre anomaly; so now that Ichigo understood, the raven head couldn’t help but give a warm, proud smile before speaking up.

“The teachers debated on which grade to place you in and decided you advance to 5th.”

That was something he was not expecting, and from the sudden drop of chopsticks that was heard to his side was anything to go by, neither did his two siblings.

“Do they realize the difference between 1 and 5?”

The Shiba head raised an eyebrow at the weird question, thinking how stupid it was but not really wanting to point it out clearly and embarrass the orange head.

“Are you saying the Sotaichou doesn’t know how to count?”

Ichigo really wanted to throw his hands up and yank his hair off, they were taking it to lightly. It was as if his father thought it was normal to jump 4 years like that even though he was supposed to be a normal soul—even if he was anything but normal.

The orange head was brought back from his musing when Haruka decided to speak up rather excitedly, almost as if she was the one going up in terms of years.

“Stop brooding Ichigo, it’s not a bad thing.”

Ryōtarō seemed to take advantage of Haruka’s point and join in, making the orange head feel like if he had done something wrong and was being scolded for it.

“Haru’s right. It’s a big responsibility since you’ll have to work harder than your piers but at the same time it’s a privilege so don’t look at it like it’s a bad thing.”

Ichigo sighed, apparently accepting defeat and embracing the situation, after all it wasn’t a bad thing so per say, it’s just that he didn’t want to gain attention and now that would be pretty much impossible—even though his family name and hair made it hard as it was. Therefore, instead of mopping on he decided to think of it as something positive. At least he wouldn’t get bored… much.

“Oh and one last thing Ichi.”
Said person scowled before looking at the one at fault for his expression, honestly hating the nickname but not being able to do a thing as he responded through gritted teeth.

“What.”

Ryōtarō in response grinned, liking how Ichigo actually responded to the name even though he was being victim to a murderous gaze at the moment.

“More paperwork came in yesterday night. Might as well take it with you before leaving for the academy that way I won´t have to send it later with a servant.”

Ichigo groaned, earnestly wanting to forget about the blasted papers and throw them in the trash, feelings that were very much understood by the Shiba head, as he was also prey to the same sheets. They both hated those papers, which were—as surprising as it was- the Shiba council´s doing.

The reason that Ichigo and Ryōtarō understood each other on the hatred of those measly papers was because only they knew the content of those ink scribbled sheets, sheets they had kept a secret and would like to keep it that way. After all, the duo did not want Haruka or Wataru to find out the papers were none other than marriage proposals. Proposals that had to be rejected and sent back. Papers that came in mountains at times that kept you busy for a long while as Ichigo had found out thirty years ago when the feral attacks had started and he had discovered their existence.

“Ryō, what´s all that?”

The Shiba head jumped from his place, being honestly surprised at the sudden presence that seemed to appear out of nowhere. He scurried to rapidly grab a handful of scattered papers to try to hide them in an open drawer and failing miserably as his panicked state didn´t let him think calmly.

Ryōtarō was wide eyed as he twitched nervously in his seat, finally looking up at the intruder and feeling a dread at the pit of his stomach, after all, this person was to perspective to be true –though he rarely showed it.

“I-chigo… d-didn´t we agree that you would call me Chichue?”

Ichigo in response just rolled his eyes before sitting down on the free chair and looking rather seriously at the raven head, giving an unemotional expression that didn´t calm Ryōtarō what so ever.

“Chichue what is this?”

The orange head lifted his hand to reveal a paper he had grabbed when the Shiba head was panicking, trying to give the most menacing gaze he could muster—which happened to be really murderous- and pointing at his very visible name on the sheet.

In response, said person started to look around to notice the stack on the floor he had failed to notice earlier, cursing at his stupidity but at the same time accepting fault.

“W-well that happens to be a… paper which, um… happens to have your name on it?”

The newest of the Shiba´s eyebrow twitched, as his rage started to seep out even if his face held no expression at all.

“And my name also happened to be on at least half of these papers?”
“Well… ah… it’s nothing you should worry about Ichigo… I’ll take care of it, it’s my responsibility.”

Ichigo looked at the raven head, seeing no sign of his previous nervousness in sight and having a determined expression that also happened to have a small hint of sorry, so small that you actually had to stare into the deep green and be very perspective to notice. Therefore, when the orange head noticed that the Shiba head did not want to tell him directly he stood up and grabbed a new brush with a jar of ink, opening it and placing it on the clean side of the desk before sitting back on the chair and starting to read the paper.

“What are you doing Ichigo didn’t you hear me? It really isn’t your problem.”

The orange head looked up from his paper to look directly into green eyes, surprising the other as the amber eyes seemed to shine brightly and shut up rather abruptly.

“If it wasn’t my problem before than now it is.”

Getting back his ground as a superior person his gaze hardened as he spoke up sternly and trying to clearly show it was not up for debate.

“These marriage proposals started to show up because you are Shiba, the surname I gave you so it is NOT your problem, let me handle it and go back home.”

The Shiba head was firm in his words but the moment Ichigo stood up rather suddenly and looked at him from above—since he was still seated—he just could not maintain the determined glare he previously had.

“It turned into my problem when I entered the Shiba family. I accepted the responsibility that came with that name so I knew what I was getting into… besides, thanks to these papers you always come home late… Wataru misses you and so does Haruka so just let me help you and stop being stubborn Chichue…”

That had been the first time that Ichigo had called him Chichue in private without having to remind him of it and even if it was the day he really involved Ichigo into the clan’s duties and he really hated himself for that, he would never want to forget that memorable occasion. He had felt a happiness incomparable with that sole word at the end of the scolding so it was always a good memory even if it came with the reminder of those proposals. Proposals that came like an open faucet at times and other times like a small leak. He really would have cursed the elders—Gen— to the end of the world for introducing his children to the noble world and practically stating that they were open for marriage.

So now that Ichigo helped him out with a great portion of the papers he had free time to spend with his family even if just occasionally.

“What are those papers anyway?”

The Shiba head glanced nervously to look at Haruka, feeling a déjà vous all over again; he was never good at lying, and lying to his children came as an even more challenge.

“Well… they’re-“

“Practice paperwork you could say.”

Haruka and Ryōtarō turned to look at the orange head, the nervous father being relieved Ichigo had interfered and the Shiba princess glad that she was getting an answer.
“What do you mean practice paperwork?”

“What an important part in a shinigami life is to— as ridiculous as it sounds— know how to fill out paperwork so I asked Chichue to lend me some of his so that I can study real formats and not just the ones we see in the academy.”

The Shiba head would be forever grateful that his eldest son somehow knew how to think on his feet, in other words, knew precisely what to do in any given situation in the blink of an eye.

Haruka seemed to be content with the answer and let the situation slide, going back to eat when she noticed her favorite side dish was finished.

“Ahh! Who ate my sweet and sour pork?!”

She glared at the two men only to receive two terrified expressions, the Shiba men shaking their head rather earnestly to try and avoid the wrath they knew the Shiba head would most likely have if they had eaten it.

All three turned to look at the seat they knew the remaining family member would be seated, only to find it empty along with the plates nearest to him with the exception of one half eaten piece of Haruka’s precious dish.

The two men seeing this, stumbled to stand up and quickly ran out of the room wanting to get out of the room as fast as they could, both going in different directions wanting to get as far away as possible but still waiting for the explosion they knew would come.

“WATARU!!!!!!!!!”

#3#

The loud stomp of steps through the hallways of the manor made the wood crack as the culprit of said noise ran, scurrying over to his destination with a stack of papers neatly carried in his arms. The man was panting, sweat dripping down his bald head to fall off at the end of his chin, obviously having been running for a long time or just being unused to such exercise. He hurried over with his strong, muscled build trying to get the papers as fast as possible to the one awaiting them, striding with such posture that showed how much of a proud man he was even though he was obviously a servant, his pitch black mustache radiating the source of his pride and joy rather intently.

“Ichigo-sama! Ichigo-sama, I brought the last stack!”

He slid to a stop outside a door that was slightly open, juggling the papers in one hand to try and open the half lid shoji door by himself only to stop when the door opened on its own.

“Oh, thank you Kaiganehiko. But you know, I could have gone to fetch them myself.”

The man now named Kaiganehiko shook his head, obviously disagreeing with the orange head and beaming with energy to try and show Ichigo that he had not been bothered one bit by caring the paperwork for his dear Ichigo-sama from the 10th squad barracks to the manor.

“It was my pleasure. After all, you’re leaving for the academy any minute now.”

Ichigo gave a smile in response, knowing that the man would never bother to whine or anything remotely similar just like the twins that once guarded the Shiba manor in his own time, he actually secretly wondered if they were somehow related.
‘The name sounds awfully similar.’

The man gave a deep bow before straightening up once more in his proud posture looking slightly down to see the orange head in the eye since he was smaller than the bald man.

“Well then, I’ll take my leave. Have a good day Ichigo-sama and I hope that your time at the academy is satisfactory as always.”

The Shiba nodded before giving a small smile, gesture that was very much appreciated by any and all members of the household since Ichigo rarely if ever showed emotion –he usually maintained a blank expression, not void just blank or serious.

The servant rushed off once again and when he was out of sight, Ichigo turned to look at his small amount of stuff he was planning on taking to the academy. He had his satchel with some new clothing he had just got for Christmas –courtesy of Haruka- which were composed by some new training robes –since he usually ripped his pretty easily when training on his own- and a warm yet simple haori perfect for the chilly weather of the season. The orange head was obviously taking the just arrived papers and most importantly the black hilted zanpaktou that was neatly placed on the wooden sword rack he had on his long table.

Ichigo strode to the end of the room to grab Zangetsu and examine the blade, unsheathing it beforehand and looking at the small emblem that had been inscribed on the flat side of the steal. It was the Shiba crest, marking the blade as Shiba along with the wielder himself, making the simple sword 100 times its original worth.

Ryōtarō had insisted that Ichigo’s sword be marked as Shiba and by default himself, saying how the blade had protected his precious son from numerous dangerous situations and that it should be cherished as such; and of course Ichigo couldn’t decline because it was so true and he could never hope to repay both Zangetsus –though Zangetsu-Shiro had bitched all weak in his mind about how painful it had been and that it had taken him incredible self-control to not burn the sword smith that happened to be engraving the emblem.

‘I wonder if I can use Zangetsu in sparing now that I’m a fifth year.’

He really wondered, and that was only because it was prohibited to use zanpaktou or Asauchi - as they were called before having the soul of the shinigami in them- that came from outside of the academy in his first year so he had had to leave Zan in his room while he used a stupid training sword in class, it was real hell. He hopped that now that he was a 5th year he could take his partner for a run inside classes and not just when he would train on his own.

He smiled once more at his blade and sheathed it back in its black sheathe, slipping it in his obi and moving to grab his satchel and place it on his back before reaching for the stupid, annoying, hellish paperwork.

“You leaving already?”

Ichigo would have been startled by the rather sudden appearance of his youngest sister if it weren’t because it was quite hard to sneak up on him since he knew at every moment of the day when someone was close by, and of course he had obviously noticed Haruka making way towards his room a long time ago.

“Yeah, I have to get my new timetables and check in with Yamamoto-dono so that he can tell me all about my new classes so I want to get there as soon as possible.”
Haruka gave a soft sigh and looked down, thinking that she really hated when Ichigo left for the academy and how lonely and empty the manor turned without his steady yet small presence.

“Will you come back…? Soon?”

Ichigo gave a soft smile upon seeing how the usually fiery Shiba princess was looking rather depressed and sad at the fact he was leaving; he really hated making his new family and old family and anyone dear for him on that matter, sad.

“Don’t worry, I’ll come back once I have a free day or in the holidays.”

She seemed to process this before thinking that it was the best she would be able to get out of him and also the fact that Ichigo could not come home very often thanks to his studies and that she shouldn’t be so selfish.

“Alright… and I hope you make friends this time.”

The orange head rolled his eyes, thinking how he would give anything up to find a single person that didn’t want to befriend him because he was Shiba, talented or just because he was good looking –well, that’s what everyone else said about him.

“Yeah well, it’s kinda hard when you can’t even be yourself.”

Haruka gave a chuckle upon realizing how hard Ichigo had it when he was expected to be a roll model for the rest of the clan and that he certainly would have problems to find someone that would approach him for being himself and not his name.

“Well, that is a dilemma you have there.”

Ichigo gave a low scoff, really wanting to point out how it was more of a dilemma and that he didn’t mind being alone but thought against it, knowing the Shiba hime would never accept something like that. So instead he walked past he and into the hallway, glancing back to look at her one last time before leaving and trying to give her a small smile as a goodbye.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Itte rasshai! (1)”

#3#

“Okay, let me get this straight. You’re telling me Yama-ji decided to put a first year in a higher year and that this first year just so happens to be in our class that –may I mention- is advanced 5th year?”

“That’s exactly what I said Shu.”

The first person that had spoken stopped on his tracks, well aware that he was obstructing the traffic in the hallways of the academy but not even caring as he glanced back to look at his white haired friend.

“You have got to be kidding me Ju, what is the old man thinking?”

Said person which happened to be called as Ju, shook his head, being as serious as possible and hopping his brown haired best friend wouldn’t through a tantrum in the middle of the halls like he did so many times before when chasing girls.
“I don’t know but maybe—”

“Kyōraku Shunsui and Ukitake Jūshirō, you are being called by the headmaster.”

Ju -now known to be an abbreviation of Jūshirō- stopped mid-sentence to look at the person which interrupted his opinion on the new interesting rumor only to find the Men’s dorm supervisor looking at them with his usual uncaring face. He gave a shallow bow to the man knowing that it was needed even when the man wasn’t bothered a bit by the lack of respect.

“Good day Sir. You said Sensei was calling both of us?”

The older man nodded before flickering his gaze back to the other boy now known to be Kyōraku Shunsui, said person squirmed under the supervisor’s gaze as he wanted more than anything to leave that very moment.

“I hope you didn’t get in trouble so soon Kyōraku.”

“M-me? Get in trouble? What makes you think that?”

Jūshirō gave out a sigh, knowing where the conversation was going but not wanting to think about it as they needed to be somewhere else. So before the dorm supervisor or Shunsui could speak up once again, Jūshirō intervened, wanting to leave the discussion for later and appease his curiosity.

“Sorry Sir but we have to go. Bye!”

The white haired boy ran off with a small pace of Shunpo, knowing that it would be better to get away and not wait for a replay and as such the reason as to why he currently had Shunsui grabbed by the collar of his white kosode (2), dragging him to their destination while throwing a deft ear to the protest and struggle the other was pulling.

#3#

“I know you mentioned how there was no need for a guide on the first week but I really insist, it will be easier to get up to date with your classes and the advanced material you may not know about.”

“I appreciate the concern Yamamoto-dono, but I prefer to go on my own.”

Yamamoto shook his head, unpleased by the insistence the young orange head had to be left on his own. When the teachers had mentioned the Shiba prodigy’s ant socialness he hadn’t considered how grave the situation was but now he could almost feel the denial the boy showed.

“Why are you so insistent Ichigo?”

Said person never wavered in his neutral mask that showed nothing; Yamamoto had to give the boy props, he was good at hiding his thoughts and feelings in the outside but of course he wasn’t easily fooled and could feel the small apprehension the orange head’s reiatsu seeped out as he wanted to avoid the topic whole hardily but knew he could not, and even more when he was locked in a gaze with the strongest shinigami to have ever existed that now looked 100 times more frightening than the old man did in his own time.

“Well, it’s not that I loathe the idea of being around people it’s just that, well… everyone tends to try and get near me just because of my family name or because the teachers consider me a prodigy and that’s not the best of people to be around.”
The black haired man pondered over this, knowing perfectly well, what the orange haired prodigy meant and how annoying it could get to be with people that just wanted to ride on his name. He sighed, bringing a hand up to scrub his hardened features and see if he could do something about it but found nothing what so ever, he was quickly brought back to attention when said source of the problem stood up from his place on the zabuton (3) that was in front of himself, giving a bow out of respect more than anything and straightening up again to look at Yamamoto in the eye.

“Thank you for the thought Yamamoto-dono but I’ll be fine so if you’ll excuse me…”

The headmaster sighed again, apparently having been left with no ideas and not finding an excuse to make the orange head stay and see if his idiot of a student’s –Shunsui- would come around before the boy left so that he could push the new 5th year into the two boys care, but as he found nothing he stood up and looked at Ichigo in the eyes, still surprised how the lad good look at him directly without at least flinching like everyone else did, he really liked that about the young Shiba.

“Alright, you may leave.”

With another –this time shallow- bow, Ichigo strode out, silence echoing as not even his footstep resounded as he left the man’s office and into the hallways, obviously leaving to his room and get everything ready since he now had a new timetable and thus, new material.

Yamamoto on the other hand pinched the bridge of his nose as the last hope he had plumed down and the two 5th years didn’t arrive in time. He wasn’t looking forward to tell the Shiba captain that the plan of make the orange haired prodigy a bit more social failed, but, before he could even begin to fathom how depressed the man would be when word caught his ear the door was flung open, a scowling –which was a rare sight- Shunsui and a slightly guilty looking Jūshirō came in.

“S-sorry Sensei we had a little… problem.”

Said person groaned, already imagining what the delay would be about and judging by the two boy’s expression not being far from the truth. He was pretty sure Shunsui had been up to no good again but thought nothing of it as he was too focused on the matter at hand that had to be solved.

“Never mind that I have a problem to think of right now so you two aren’t needed any more.”

Shunsui’s scowl seemed to worsen, not being in a good mood as he had been going through a shity day and not wanting to take that as an answer.

“You called us here Yama-ji so what’s with not being needed!?”

The man turned to glare at the brown haired boy, making him shudder under his gaze and being quite proud of it in the end. Yamamoto was about to retort again when an idea came to mind, and idea that may help his case and at the same time avoid an upset Shiba.

“You know what never mind what I said, I do have a job for you two and you might not like it but I need you take an eye on someone…”

To be continued…

I Have a nice trip.
2 Upper part of a shihakusho.

3 Japanese cushion for sitting.
Chapter 4: Prodigy-san

I checked.

"Normal speech"

'Thoughts'

Flashbacks/dreams

#4#

Tick... Tock...

The pendulum kept its steady rhythm of left to right, never wavering in its strikes and not even hesitating to stop and wait for those that had been left behind.

Tick... Tock...

It stroke once more, keeping up with its never ending dance of ticking and tocking even as many men and women, hollow, shinigami, quincy, human, gave up on living and decided to stay shrouded in the shadows of the past, being left behind by the eternal tick of the unwavering clock.

Tick... Tock...

The pendulum continued on its tracks, never looking into the past, never looking back, always stepping into the future something he came to envy from the clock at some point in time, something he longed for as if it would stop the suffering that just seemed to increase as time flew by, time that for him had just suddenly stopped.

Tick... Tock...

He hated that tick, he really detested the steady rhythm of time leaving him behind but he knew more than anything that he just hated himself, something he had barley come to understand, something he had feared all along and was finally able to accept.

Tick... Tock...

Mostly everyone would like to know when he had started to stay behind. They all knew he had just stopped but when it had started they just couldn’t decipher. They couldn’t guess if it was when he first lost someone truly dear to him or if it had happened when the war had started to take a turn for the worst.

Tick... Tock...

They never realized that his scowls and smiles were as fake as a nameless zanpaktou being called a real one but they didn’t notice... no, more like they were unable to because at some point in time Kurosaki Ichigo had just become a master at concealing his feelings.

Tick... Tock...

Ichigo had actually thought of when he had started to hate the blasted tick of a clock but the only
conclusion that he could think of was that he just didn't know. He didn't know if it was the day that
he had found Yuzu, Karin and Isshin coated in blood at his doorstep half dead yet half alive. He
didn't know if it was the day he had lost his dad, someone from his immediate family that had been
there since the beginning even if he had been goofing around most of time. He didn't know if it was
the day he had lost the whole Ishida family in one night. He seriously, didn't know.

Tick... Tock...

That pendulum would someday make him go insane he thought to himself, because the more he
thought of the situation the more he seemed prone to think he had not lost everyone but rather the
fact that he had basically failed to protect them even if he had no fault what so ever.

Tick... Tock...

He really didn't know if the whimpers of pain and anguish triggered such a thing either but he
could still hear them so vividly as time went by, time that ticked and tocked in a mocking way that
just made the oranget cower more and more by the screams and cries of his allies that just made
the clock something to hate even more.

Tick... Tock...

That noise, noise he could so vividly hear even now, laughing at his incompetence of being there
and making the yells, whimpers, cries, the ticks so unbearable even in sleep, something that just
seemed to drive him crazy even now. Something that just kept running amok through his head...

Tick... Tock...

THUD!

Pain, pain was the first thing that he registered once he had been abruptly kicked out of his dream,
pain that seemed unbearable at the moment even if he just fell a dull twinge while trying to get on
his feet from the cold wooden floor. He started to get up slowly while supporting himself by using
the desk that was previously used as his pillow. He stayed quite to himself even as his inner
thoughts ran amok with the sense of inner pain and memories that just made him silent in more
than one way.

"Ow…"

He stood at his full height while groaning thanks to the slight pain. He gazed through the open
window that had brought a gentle breeze into the room making his tanned colored skin gain goose
bumps from the chills that ran down his spine. He sighed, thinking how stupid it was of him for
sleeping on the desk but thought nothing of it right after when he realized how meaningless it was.

He turned once more to look at the full body mirror that was at his left, mirroring his disheveled
form with slightly long orange locks that brushed lightly down his neck in such an unruly and
messy manner that made him look like someone from the Rukongai when he was actually someone
from such a high class many would be jealous.

Ichigo sighed once more while running a hand through his slightly spiky locks to try and make
them at least a little bit neater while failing graciously. He thinks nothing of it as he starts walking
towards the bathroom that was attached to his room, only turning once to look at the silent clock
that was plastered at his bedside showing that it was barely five in the morning and that he had no
need to be up so early.

He brushed it aside.
He strode into the bathroom to try and get a warm bath and the silent yells accompanied with pleas for help out of his mind, something that had kept on torturing him since he had awoken from his not so peaceful slumber. The water eased the pain as it felt warm and encasing around his body giving him a sense of relief and peace while distracting him from his inner musings. Once finished he changed into his uniform, knowing that he would be unable to sleep even if his classes started at seven and that he still had time to catch a small nap so as to say.

Ichigo dried his short yet long orange hair while trying to distract himself and looked at the new timetable he had gained just yesterday, knowing that it would be a pain in the ass to try and stay low when he just so happened to jump four grades in one go.

"It's going to be harder to fool the teachers…"

That was his current train of thought, he didn't want to start thinking about his dream even if he knew it was unavoidable, even if he knew that it would be talked about the moment he saw his inner spirits and since he was actually planning on going to visit until it's time for his lessons he knew it would be sooner rather than later.

He let down the towels to let them dry on their own, leaving them extended so that they wouldn't smell. Ichigo turned to look at his window, bringing a hand slowly to touch the corner of the paper made window with much care and patience one would think he was about to touch something very fragile. He let out a small pulse of reiatsu and it resonated silently with something that seemed to start on that corner, expanding itself throughout the whole room while giving a shimmer that showed there was a barrier.

He brought down his hand, satisfied with the response he was given and taking a deep breath to level out his reiatsu, knowing that it was most likely fluctuating slightly thanks to the more than normal use he just so happened to be using mere seconds ago, after all, checking a captain level barrier for fractures or deformations was not an easy task. When decided it was more than okay he let it disappear back into nothingness, knowing that even if it was technically impossible to discover it was best left invisible.

He sat down on his futon while deciding he would go visit his inner spirits for some morning sparring, wanting to keep up with his reflexes and abilities and not let them diminish and get rusty, he just hoped that he could avoid talking about his dreams like last time that he was able to push the topic aside.

#4#

RIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!

The bell signaling the entrance to class resounded through the hallways of the shinigami academy. Sound making every student go into their destined classes so that they would not get scolded, more than actually wanting to be punctual. The teachers followed right behind, getting into their respective classroom so that they could start to teach the lesson of the day, lessons that had barely restarted thanks to the fact that winter break had just ended.

In a particular classroom the chatter of gossip never stopped even as the teacher entered the room, they were all so concentrated on the newest revelation that they had yet to even notice her presence.

She cleared her throat trying to gain at least a small part of their attention to no avail and having to resort to a major alternative. She slammed her thick, hard covered book on the desk, making every student jump in their seats and those who had yet to be seated scurrying over to their seats. She
smirked, loving the started reactions she had gained before looking around the room to see if she finally had their attention.

"Very well, now that I have silence we can start with class. But before that I have the honor of introducing a new classmate that has just been transferred into this group."

The curious mutters started again, showing how they were talking of that precisely some seconds ago. The teacher smiled, loving the suspense she seemed to be giving the students that were waiting expectantly the newcomer. She smirked once more before turning towards the door to call out to the one that just so happened to be outside, making the new classmate walk inside with a face of indifference making many stare wide eyes at the orange haired boy.

"Well class this here is your new classmate. Present yourself please."

He nodded, turning to look at the class with a composed demeanor even if he had around thirty pair of eyes directed towards him, not even twitching when several snickers or mummers resounded in the closed up room.

"Hajimemashite, my name is Shiba Ichigo, I hope we can get along."

He gave a shallow bow, surprising many at the formal yet informal way the orange head seemed to carry himself, obviously being from nobility but not really giving the air of an arrogant everyday prick.

Ichigo in return didn't think anything of the curios gazes he seemed to gain, not really caring when the whole classroom -and most likely the whole school- seemed to talk about him. He gazed once more around the room before his amber eyes widened ever so slightly thanks to the two that happened to be seated in the back, making his expression a bit more livelier but far from looking surprised for a normal person even if he was.

'What are Kyōraku-san and Ukitake-san doing in the academy?'

He was thoughtful, trying to think of all the possibilities as to why the hell one of the oldest captains of the soul society was still in school and came to a terrifying and bone chilling conclusion.

'I'm even more into the past than I thought.'

He tried to remember his frequent talks with the two captains to try and draw out any number of years they might have mentioned to see if he could finally gain an exact number in how back he had gone to no avail, he just couldn't concentrate at the moment that was for sure.

He was abruptly interrupted by the teacher's voice gaining his attention even if he had yet to show that he wasn't paying attention in the first place.

"Shiba-sama could you take a seat?"

Ichigo had the urge to groan from the suffix, hating how in the past they were even more prone to being formal even if you were a brat in the academy, he really despised this more than anything.

He turned to look at the teacher with a small, very much fake –even if mostly no one realized- smile on his face while trying to give his friendliest voice possible.

"I don't mind if the suffix isn't added. And this goes to everyone. I'm not particularly fond of being referred to as –sama."
The teacher seemed surprised by this for a second before nodding and giving out an equally *honest* smile. Ichigo could have sworn he heard a small mummer of a voice talking in between each other and couldn't help but shudder at the sudden bad feeling he got. In the end he chose to ignore it and follow previous instructions and sitting down on a free seat at the end left side of the room quite close to the two future captains since they just so happened to gain his curiosity, something that was quite hard to do given the fact that he had been something akin to uncaring in the past present and future.

Ichigo heard the teacher start her lesson, starting with basic shinigami duties since her class just so happened to be office duties, something that was very much frowned upon by the majority of the shinigami officers and in training but since he really didn't care he quickly tuned out from what she was saying, deciding that taking out his notebook and writing small notes to show that he was paying attention even if he wasn't was more than needed -he didn't want to be scolded so soon.

The orange head turned to look at his left when he heard a small sound but once he did he quickly regretted it because he was suddenly face to face with none other than Kyōraku Shunsui that was curious with wide gray eyes that made his own amber go wide as well. Kyōraku gave a wide smile that made Ichigo completely forget about the calm captain of the 8th and only see and over excited boy with brown hair that just so happened to be in his class.

"Hello Shiba-san, my name is Kyōraku Shunsui and this here is my best friend Ukitake Jūshirō, it's nice to meet you."

Ichigo composed himself rather quickly when he noticed how the white haired male was eyeing him with something akin to sympathy, apparently very much used to seeing Shunsui in his current state of mind.

"Uh… hi…?"

This seemed to surprise the other, not taking Ichigo for being a shy person since he had spoken his mind in front of the class like if it were something normal, he raised a brown eyebrow ever so slightly before shrugging it off knowing that the orange head had to be surprised since he had suddenly spoken up just like that so instead he decided to try and be friendly, after all, that was basically the idea.

"You want us to stalk the new kid?"

*Yamamoto* shook his head, very much exasperated since the boys before him seemed to be getting the wrong idea and that could be bad.

"No no no, I want you two to look after the boy. He's new to some of the stuff you 5th years already know and more than anything he needs someone he can depend on if he needs it."

This time Ukitake decided it would be best to answer, knowing that Shunsui was still most likely thinking of something else and not what Yama-ji had in mind.

"So you wants us to keep an eye out for him?"

This time *Yamamoto* was more pleased thanks to the fact that at least one of the two was understanding and that maybe the idea wasn't as crazy as he had thought of at first.

"Exactly. I don't want you guys to follow the boy around and stalk him, I want you to look out for him."

"Maybe even befriend my boy."
The three turned rather quickly to look at the 10th squad captain, the two students very much surprised by the sudden appearance of the shinigami captain and the fact that he had called the reason of their discussion my boy.

"Ryōtarō, what are you doing here?"

The raven head smiled before looking at the two that had an expression of awe and respect, they were really surprised by the presence of the captain and head of the Shiba clan but more than anything they were surprised by the fact that the new prodigy was apparently the Shiba captain's son.

"Well I wanted to see how things were going for Ichigo but from the looks of it he declined the offer of help didn't he?"

The headmaster sighed before pinching the bridge of his nose, obviously tired of the dilemma that happened to be starting thanks to a single boy that didn't want aid.

"Yeah, that's true he did reject a guide but I'm trying to pin Shunsui and Jūshirō on him so that might make a difference."

The Shiba head shook his head, not wanting to give the two academy students a job that would be pretty much thrown their way. He didn't want to involve the boys in his case unwillingly and that was precisely what was happening.

"They shouldn't be pushed into this. It's my problem I just wanted to see if Ichigo would accept anybody on his own accord, not much for being a guide but just to have someone but apparently that'll be impossible with my unsociable son in the equation."

He shrugged, knowing that it was impossible from the beginning but still wanting to try. He was brought to attention when his sleeve was tugged and as he felt it he turned to look at the brown haired boy, a little bit taller than his own son but not by much.

"Um, Taicho… could this Ichigo happen to be the prodigy?"

Ukitake face palmed while Yamamoto groaned, apparently very much fed up with Shunsui's comments. Could the boy not read the mood?!

"Well yes that's my boy. Why?"

Shunsui's response was to give a wide smile surprising everyone present when he suddenly took a turn for the better and started to act more cheerful.

"I'll keep an eye on him. He sounds interesting and I bet he could be a good friend if he only opens up."

That sole sentence seemed to give the young Shunsui trust, trust and acceptance from the Shiba captain which was happy with the current outcome, enjoying the fact that maybe, just maybe Ichigo would finally make friends.

"I'll leave that to you then…"

"So, how are you taking this jumping grades thing?"

Ichigo glanced back to look at the younger Kyōraku Shunsui, looking his way even if he was still facing the lesson.
"Well… It's fine."

Shunsui frowned, not really liking the small responses he was gaining from the orange head. He wanted to get the other talking, was that too much to ask? So instead of trying to point that out he tried to get a bit more conversation from the boy, not really caring for that class or the fact that Jūshirō was trying to gain his attention, most likely to get him to stop… well, from doing what he was doing.

"When I asked I actually meant about the rumors. You know, gossip and all that stuff isn't bothering you?"

This time Ukitake couldn't help but interject in the conversation, thinking that this was a bit less straightforward than what he had thought that Shunsui would start as.

"He's right about that. It must be a lot of trouble and pressure for you."

Ichigo seemed thoughtful for a second before he turned to actually look at the two this time since he noticed that they weren't necessarily asking something as troublesome as he had first thought they –Kyōraku- would do.

"I don't let it bother me. The gossip didn't start when I jumped grades you know so I kinda got used to it."

This surprised the two as they had not expected that kind of answer, much less an answer at all so when he actually did answer they couldn't help but glance and look at each other and then back to the orange head that was paying attention once more to the class

"So you really don't care?"

His amber orbs turned slightly to look at the white haired boy that held a somewhat saddened expression. So instead of just shrugging the question off like he would have done to anyone else and also knowing that he wasn't prying and was only genuinely curious and slightly worried -so Ukitake-like he couldn't help but see the kind smiling captain of the 13th instead of the young boy in front of him- Ichigo decided it would be okay and answered honestly.

"No… I've never really cared. I just let them talk all they want. It won't change who I am anyways."

After that neither of the two boys spoke up again, deciding to just spare a glance or two at the Shiba prodigy every once in a while with curiosity and well hidden worry, knowing that even of the orange head did talk and wasn't actually cold it would still be hard to get him to open up. Ichigo was just that kind of person.

A tough nut to crack.

Once the class came to an end Ichigo couldn't help but feel relieved, he wasn't necessarily comfortable with the various glances that the whole class gave him even if he had just told Kyōraku and Ukitake he didn't care. It was just so troublesome and annoying he was lucky his temper had been completely under control and that he no longer had the urge to punch the first person that turned to look at him.

Ichigo heaved out a sigh as he strode through the long hallways of the academy and towards his next class, he still gained mummers and glances but it's not like he could make them stop so he
ignored it, trying to keep the most neutral face he could muster since he had a family to think of and as such he couldn't just scowl at anyone that crossed his path like before.

Once the gym came into view Ichigo abruptly stopped, glancing back to stare out the window when a rather familiar spiritual pressure made its way to his senses. Apparently he wasn't that far behind in his thoughts about that presence because the moment he actually turned was the moment his amber eyes met the familiar figure of the 4th squad captain even if said person wasn't wearing his usual attire.

The orange head was rather surprised by the unexpected appearance of Tenjirō and decided to call out to the man, striding over to the window and peering out to gain better access so as to say.

"Oi! Tenjirō-san!"

Said person turned to look at the orange head, giving a feral grin upon locking eyes with the target and walking over to the Shiba while ignoring the various glances and mummers they seemed to gain.

"Yo, Ichigo. How ya doing squirt?"

Ichigo just scoffed and rolled his eyes before giving a half heartily open palm strike as a greeting to the man, barely avoiding the small smile that seemed to creep it's way on his lips without permission as he felt at ease in the company of someone that wasn't there for convenience or just plain curiosity.

"Who you calling squirt? I'm not that shorter than you anyways."

Tenjirō's grin only seemed to widen as he was obviously expecting an answer along those lines but thought nothing of it, opting to recline himself on the wall to relax while speaking to the orange haired brat he considered in a way as a friend.

"Oh, but you're still younger so height doesn't change a thing."

The Shiba prodigy didn't seem to take hard the not so subtle offence and only shrugged it off, huffing in obvious exasperation while shifting himself into a more comfortable position on the window frame and somewhat mirroring the older man.

"Well then that just means that I'll be a brat in your eyes forever."

"Exactly my point. But of course that's something you should have noticed years ago."

Ichigo seemed to give up on debating with the man any longer as he really didn't care about anything that was said to him and much less when he was taunted by said person, he was only fooling around and trying to get Ichigo riled up so it was something that wasn't needed to get bothered about. So instead of pursuing the line of talk any longer he decided to get to the main point while he still had time and his class was yet to start.

"So, what are you doing here? And lacking your uniform as well."

"I came looking for ya actually."

The Shiba was actually shocked by the response before he hid it well and turned to look at the raven head to see if he wasn't pulling his leg or something only to find him serious as ever –which wasn't much by the way- and no joking around expression in place, looking a little saddened which was kinda rare and –as Ichigo suddenly noticed- lacking his usual pipe as well.
"Why?"

"Well… I'll be leaving today… in a little while actually."

Tenjirō honestly looked troubled for a second before he hid that apprehension deep down and turned to look at Ichigo, sad smile forming on his face while replacing his usual amusing smirk.

"I'm going to the royal palace."

Ichigo sighed before he gazed up into the blue sky, knowing that the man was most likely waiting for his answer but not really being ready to give one just yet so he tried to delay it if just a little. He noticed that the eavesdroppers he had gained at first were now only mild and really just there and not almost falling over while trying to hear and not look suspicious at all. Ichigo noticed that the clouds passed with a slower trail than usually and looked troubled, so much like his inner feelings that for a moment there he actually felt like showing it out in the exterior as well. Upon realizing where his thoughts were going towards he couldn't help but scold himself in his very own way because he had known this day would come so he didn't need to feel this way, it was just useless crap.

The newest prodigy never really turned to look at his companion but he decided staying silent was worse than actually speaking up so he did. Trying to convey his thoughts and—as girlish as it may sound—feelings so that the—previous—4th squad captain could get the message through and maybe just maybe go in a bit more peace than what he would leave as if Ichigo decided to stay silent.

"You know… I kinda knew this day would come someday… it would be awfully stupid of the spirit king if he didn't notice your talent even if you are a nut job but even so it's a little sad to know you'll be leaving…"

This time Ichigo did turn to look at the man and he let the playful smirk grace his lips as he said the last words, words that may not hold much significance but more than anything held a hidden meaning and purpose.

"Now who'll play tag with me huh?"

The message seemed to do its job as Tenjirō's smile returned to its playfulness and mischievous nature, giving many passing students the shudders but more than anything giving Ichigo a response of thanks.

"Yeah well you'll have to find a new kitty to play with."

Ichigo seemed to be taken a back for a moment as he was suddenly reminded of a certain someone but quickly hid it, thinking how ironic life was and that Tenjirō had no idea of how right he was.

"Ha, I guess I'll find one sooner or later."

They shared a glance before the older man pushed himself off the wall and turned to look at the orange head with a wide smirk, thanks and a little bit of melancholy written all over it as he raised a hand to say bye and leave in a swish of shunpo, the only thing left that said how he once stood there being the soft breeze of the movement, movement that would seem magical and fast to any student but a certain Kurosaki Ichigo, or as he was going by now, Shiba Ichigo.

RIIIIIIIIIING

"Ah shit."
Dodging was the first thing that came to mind when Ichigo entered the dojo 20 seconds late, and as his senses never actually failed him he went with the flow, knowing that it may look weird for any outsider but not really being able to stop himself since he was already moving to avoid a roundhouse kick that was directed his way by pure instinct.

He bent himself back almost making a complete ark and showing just how flexible he was for a man. He got his bearings back quicker than one would think and returned to his normal posture, barely stopping himself from returning the gesture when he finally noticed that the person that had actually delivered the kick in the first place was the hakuda teacher. What he did do though was getting in a defensive stance, more than prepared to receive any more attacks even if he highly doubted the teacher would try so again and even more so because Ichigo was now ready for it and there would be no more surprises.

"Ah, I wanted to teach the newbie a lesson."

He was completely right in thinking that he wouldn't be attacked again when he took in the teacher that just so happened to attack him, having to suppress the small chuckle that wanted to escape his lips at the posture the hakuda teacher ported.

The man had chocolate colored skin with bright yellow eyes and black, mid-back hair. He had his arms crossed in front of his chest and had a very visible pout in place, showing just how disappointed he was that Ichigo had dodged his attack and more than anything, effortlessly.

But, when his previous words sunk in Ichigo couldn't help but scowl, very much annoyed at the fact that he was being belittled –even if he was supposed to be an academy student- and that the teacher was most likely doing it just for his own amusement. But even if he himself was not at all amused he decided to hide his annoyance with his usual blank façade.

"Isn't it better that I was able to dodge?"

The raven head was thoughtful for a second before he shrugged it off, not in the least bothered by the obvious point and the fact that the whole class was actually watching with glittering curiosity and some sort of awe because the previous 1st year had avoided an attack that would have been too much for even them to handle –the only reason why they might be able to dodge is because they had learned the hard way that this particular teacher liked to attack out of the blue.

"Maybe, but still, you took my fun away."

Ichigo didn't seem amused one bit by how this particular instructor was more than just a little off and that he seemed to ignore his point, not really caring for the fact that he was cutting time of the lesson and that more than one student was throwing dirty glances his way. But before he could even get a good look of who was being an ass at him the over enthusiastic teacher brought his attention, apparently finally have finished his sulking of how unfun it was and that it would have been better if he had let the kick hit.

"Well anyway. My name is Shihōin Takahiro and I'm the Hakuda teacher for advanced 5th and 6th years. I hope you don't disappoint Prodigy-san."

Seeing that they were finally getting somewhere, Ichigo gave a shallow bow, not at all surprised by the fact that the man before him was a Shihōin and that he acted the way he did. Shihōins had a knack for being playful and serious the next second.
"Like whys, Shiba Ichigo, I hope I keep up to your designated standards."

And with that the class began, being practical for its majority and only having some small explanations of stances and attacks but all being mostly demonstrated and needing a somewhat open area in which they just so happened to be in.

The Shiba prodigy -as he was called by the Shihōion instructor- followed perfectly throughout the lesson, receiving various praises on how he was very advanced for a previous first year and that apparently it was a good idea to send him all the way up to fifth. Though, even with all the moves and stances Ichigo had done perfectly the hakuda teacher had decided that said orange head would do a mock battle next class to show what he was really made of so that he could ascertain just how talented he really was.

The orange head had only shrugged off the challenge with only mild disturbance, feeling that was pretty well masked as his disturbance was directed to how harder it would be to hide his knowledge and ability in front of a whole 30 set of eyes.

On the other hand, what had happened that did bother Ichigo and what he had noticed throughout the whole class was that he kept on receiving dirty looks from a small group of punks –as he had come to dub them- that just looked ready to jump him, having a certain dangerous feeling to them and more than anything just plain jealous –though if they noticed this last fact was still a mystery to Ichigo, probably not anyway. But, even if one or two of the members of said punks sometimes came close to hitting him when practicing Ichigo didn't let it bother him, knowing that these kind of people where prone to exist here and everywhere and that he could do nothing about it and much less during class.

The thing that the orange head didn't notice however was how he received slightly worried glances from a certain Ukitake Jūshirō and Kyōraku Shunsui, the two boys seeing clearly the ordeal and not liking it one bit but not being able to do a thing any ways.

At the end of said class the bell rang and everyone scurried out to the cafeteria, knowing that there would be a line if you waited even a second longer and that all the good food or at least the better ones would be over soon.

Ichigo did so as well, knowing this fact and only limiting himself to a low level of shunpo –academy level- to get a higher chance of getting out before the first years that were still very clumsy in said art arrived. He did get the expected results and the moment the orange head was able to secure himself an onigiri bento he left, going out the doors and going to his usual eating place under a tree to eat in peace –Ichigo didn't particularly liked to eat in the cafeteria.

While the orange head had done all this the two boys still kept on observing –stalking- him, checking out his every move and frowning upon seeing him leave. It was kinda incredible that even with Ichigo's ridiculous colored hair his absence was not really noticed and that apparently it was a very common occurrence.

Kyōraku groaned before bringing up a hand to yank at his not so long brown locks, obviously exasperated by the prodigy's behavior and finally seeing the depth of the problem.

"Great, and I thought the problem was hard when I noticed the nasty looks Kei and his goons sent him. This is just plain hard!"

Ukitake gave his best friend a compassionate glance, knowing that even if he would complain and laze around of how annoying it was to actually do stuff when he brought his mind to do something he would do it.
"Well, it was your idea to take in the responsibility before seeing the grievance if the circumstances."

"Not helping Ju-chan."

The white haired boy just shrugged, not caring that his long life friend was throwing a fit for something that was quite useless to brood about or either the fact that they were now moving on to a bench in the outside, place they usually went to eat when they wanted space for themselves while he was still listening to the brown haired male's whines.

"Ah! This is so stressful!"

"Don't brood Shunsui, there is nothing we can do about it."

"But Ju, Yama-ji said to look out for the new kid and help him if he needed it but he's a prodigy. What can we do?!"

The white haired boy rolled his eyes, having had enough pf his best friend's complaints. He glanced to the side when something orange brought his attention, turning to look at the side and seeing the prodigy eating on his own under a tree.

Upon seeing this Ukitake couldn't but sigh, thinking how Shunsui was right, and how it was just so hard to approach the kid and the worst of all was that he was too good at what he did he didn't even need help, they couldn't go up to him with the excuse of helping him out.

Kyōraku just turned to look at what he was seeing before his eyes landed on the culprit of his demise, glancing back to looking at his best friend with a face that read all over it _see what I mean?_ That just plained pissed the white haired male –not really showing it and not being much anyway since he really couldn't seem to hold his anger.

Ukitake was about to sigh once more and agree with his companion when all of a sudden a loud noise brought both of their attentions, turning to look in the direction of the orange haired prodigy so fast one would think they had just gained a whiplash, and what they saw just made them widen in eyes.

To be continued…
“Normal speech”

‘Thoughts’

*Flashback/Dream*

#5#

The wind brushed lightly against tan colored skin, creating a sort of goose bump feeling as it did so. The leaves rustled as the breeze played with their light forms and made many fall in their wake. The chirps resounded slowly yet melodiously, letting a soothing sound find its way to ears of a silent figure that sat cross-legged underneath a great maple tree that worked as a haven of torments and gossips that seemed to come with much ease when he was around people.

The flicker of light that passed by the small holes of the leaves made ceiling sometimes blinded him from seeing past his very own tranquility and that was something that in its very own way he was thankful for.

The tranquility that seemed to overcome him when he came to this place just very well made him forget of those god like enemies he had faced in the past, the tortures and pain he and many others were tested to overcome over and over again as the war raged on with never ending ease and hostility. His little haven that very well created a barrier for him that sometimes could only be found in the Shiba manor back yard which was basically a whole forest or his own inner world of cold skyscrapers that reached past the very clouds and all the way to a new world.

But Ichigo had found an untrembling support from this maple tree when he came to eat lunch there and that very nearly soothed him to forget of all his responsibilities and pain. All the things he wished to leave behind but at the same time frightened him to forget, the cries, the sorrow in pure display that plagued his memories of good and bad. His little place that could always bring some peace.

That was, until it was completely disrupted by snot nosed bastards that didn’t know when to stay put.

“Well well well, look who’s here? Our new buddy Mr. Prodigy-san.”

The peaceful haven was completely destroyed and the cruel reality came crushing down on him as Ichigo glanced up to look at the group of five punks that had dared disturb him in his tranquility.

His eyes held no malice however, only mirroring the coldness beneath his very soul that was represented in chilly metal and glass buildings. Eyes that only showed uncare and discipline of every and all emotions as not even one slipped through his cold exterior making the five cower even if they had previously come with cocky smirks on their faces.

However, one seemed to be unaffected by the cold and unnerving gaze the orange head sent their way and proceeded to kick the half eaten bento that was on Ichigo’s hands creating a dull noise amiss the previous silence.
I’m talking to you! Shiba scum!”

This seemed to gain his attention as the previous first year stood up with ease and grace befit of someone hiding every bit of power and strength underneath layers and layers of perfect reiatsu control that was something that no one seemed to understand even now.

“You can talk anything you want about me. I really don’t care. But…”

The ominous pause seemed to gain the desired effect as the previously brave boy finally noticed the unhidden coldness Ichigo was radiating before, making him take half a step back as the shinigami in training’s dull amber eyes gazed directly into his.

“… Don’t speak crap about my family. Or I can’t guarantee everything will end well.”

“H-ho, lo-looks like I s-stepped on a ne-nerve eh pre-prety boy?”

Even as the boy spoke his voice was unable to stay steady and cracked many times along the way, making his buddies well aware of his unhidden fear and how they had obviously stepped on unwinnable boundaries.

The Shiba prodigy however stood quietly, not in the least caring that he was being unusually cold or that he was scaring his classmates even if he had yet to really speak coldly, the only thing that actually looked unnerving and made him seem untouchable being his eyes.

“Well I think we should try to get along better, don’t you think, Prodigy-san?”

The tall male that was the one actually doing the speaking of the group grabbed a bit more confidence when Ichigo’s eyes strayed to look past them and to something else, making him feel less threatened and a bit –a lot- more cocky.

“I think we started off and the wrong foot. Ne, noble trash?”

He had seriously made his grin spread and reach his eyes and that slightly if not really unnerved his fellow buddies –punks- as they tried to gain his attention and convey how much of a bad idea this really was after all.

“Maybe we can start again. Try to do everything the… right way, without frauds like you did to get in 5th year.”

A crack was heard and the four punks that came with the main punk turned to look what the sound was only to pale from who was standing behind them. But of course main punk didn’t notice this and continued.

“What? You honestly thought that nobody would know how much bullshit your ability is? It’s just plain impossible to be talented enough to jump four grades!”

"Leave, I have nothing to do with your little jealousy tantrum."

The taller boy cringed, suddenly taken aback by the cold voice Ichigo seemed to use, voice that made him want to back away even if he knew he had started it in the first place; but even so he stood as tall as he could and prepared himself to strike, not expecting at all to be stopped by anyone and knowing he would have to go through with his threats like a man he was.

“What?! You’re getting mad because I put you in evidence?! It’s not my fault you noble bastards always do underhanded things!”
“Leave.”

Everyone involuntarily flinched at the coldness of the tone used, shivers went down their spine as a sudden chill that was foreign from the cold winter appeared out of nowhere, a sudden weight that was previously nonexistent making them very aware of their current situation.

“I shall not repeat it again. Leave. Leave unless you want to discover yourself why I jumped four grades in the first place.”

The main punk was shocked to no end, completely ignoring the tug of his shihakusho and the various mummers that his fellow punks made to gain his attention. Wanting more than anything to show the orange head that he was not to be messed with even if on the inside he was trembling with fear.

“Y-you, want a fight or something?!”

“K-kei, this is bad! Behind us-“

“Shut up! He started the fight I didn’t do anything wrong! This fake did!”

The now named Kei turned to point at the orange head, every bit of pressure on him as not only Ichigo’s threat lingered closely but the comments from his buddies did as well.

But, before Kei could even blink he was startled by a hand on his shoulder, making him look slowly back to stare into unwavering amber.

“Back off Kei… you have nothing left to do here.”

Feeling the threat at being grabbed from behind by his now decided enemy he lifted up a hand to strike with a reiatsu induced punch that would have defiantly hurt a student had they not been Ichigo.

The strike never connected however. Being stopped on the last minute by none other than Kyoraku Shunsui that had been previously standing behind them and waiting for the perfect moment to intervene.

“Ma ma, I doubt we should get into a fight so soon should we?”

This seemed to bring Kei out of his raged state as he snapped out of whatever eerie he had entered. Finally noticing that Ukitake and Kyoraku had been behind them this whole time.

“K-Kyoraku… Shunsui…”

The small and playful smile that was on Shunsui’s face quickly morphed to something that made him look all the more intimidating than he already was. The unusual and never present smile that made Kei shiver in fear even more so now that he had two bone chilling people is his near vicinity.

“Leave.”

Kei yanked his hand from the grip Shunsui had him in, making a snarl like sound while retreating with his petrified buddies.

“I’ll remember this.”

When the group of five left Shunsui breathed a sigh of relief as he glanced to look at his white haired friend that had a frown that clearly read how disapproving he was of his actions but not
being that against it at the same time.

As he asserted Jūshirō’s expression he once more turned to this time look at the orange head which was kneeling down and picking up the previous bento that was now on the floor in a heap of trash and uneatable food. Shunsui frowned as he walked to the mess and helped clean up as well, looking at the Shiba but not really being able to see his expression like he did with Jūshirō.

“You alright Shiba-san?”

The white haired teen walked over as well, crouching down slightly while putting his hands on his knees to get a better view of the mess, trying to be as soft as possible since he thought the orange head was bound to be angry or maybe even offended.

What he didn’t expect however, and neither did Shunsui was for Ichigo to look up and stare directly in his eyes with a small yet very much there smile on his face.

“Yes, everything’s okay. There really was no need to intervene but even then I’m grateful.”

This made both teens freeze, not being able to believe the fakeness of such expression as Ichigo finally stood at his full height. A damaged and battered bento in his hands that made them realize that Ichigo seriously didn’t get to eat much before he was disrupted. With the same fake smile as before, one that looked so different from the one he had given their shinigami duties teacher not so long ago he spoke again, voice not even betraying his real expression and not a hint of uncertainty in place.

“Then, if you’ll excuse me.”

Before the two could even call out to the orange head he disappeared, a perfectly assaulted shunpo being used as he flickered out of existence, obvious demonstration that the newest 5th year was more than deserving of the promotion and making any and every doubt they had had before completely disappear along with the orange head because the two teens would have to be complete idiots like Kei and his buddies to not notice how Ichigo was more than ready for the attack that Shunsui had prevented.

Shunsui had actually protected them, not him.

The silence stayed as it was for a while after Ichigo had left, the steady yet muffled presence that they had come to recognize as the prodigy’s being detectable yet untraceable as they tried to think of what to do next and maybe even search for him but the two found no answer.

Shunsui stood at his full height at last.

Jūshirō turned to look at the brunette to find any sort of answer.

And when he did, he found none.

#5#

“…This fake did!”

“… fake did!”

“… fake…!”

“fake”
“fake”

“Fake… I guess you can catalog me as such, can’t you?”

His company stayed quiet, not wanting to respond to such question as they were sure that they could do nothing to appease Ichigo’s uncertainty. They had a hard time doing so before, now it would only be worse.

“Aizen was a fake bastard to the end remember… I guess that’s the reason why I was the only being that could actually understand him to some point… deception… facades… something we excelled in didn’t we?”

“IT’S NOT THE SAME!”

Seeing as he finally got a response Ichigo turned to look at his Shinigami/hollow counterpart, putting on a sad smile that was genuine to no end. A smile that demonstrated just how much sadness was hidden beneath everything and how that smile lacked any sentiment but despair.

“It’s the same… we just had a different purpose in mind…”

Bubbles seemed to erupt as Ichigo shifted in his place on the cold skyscraper, one of the many skyscrapers that were flooded in his inner world every single time he went back to brooding and overthinking things but ask him if he cared. The water would disappear once he got his bearings back in place so who was he to start whining over this as well.

He was used to it.

Ichigo involuntarily chuckled as his thoughts kept on drifting farther and farther away from reality and into a sea of memories that always assaulted him when he was most vulnerable. Fact that was well known by his two counterparts that stepped forward to place a hand on each of Ichigo’s shoulders where he sat at the edge of the submerged skyscraper.

“You know, it’s funny how right he seems to be at times when I think of all the philosophical bullshit he would spout out in the middle of fights or when he wanted to make a dramatic ending… that bastard…”

Zangetsu seemed to be the calmest at the time when he saw the unforgiving rage that seeped deep beneath the golden eyes of a certain someone as they both saw how truly deep Ichigo was this time.

It was sometimes hard to keep on dragging Ichigo out of his depressions by themselves. They weren’t able to depend on the Shibas lately because Ichigo had moved out so it was turning harder and harder to keep their king on the throne when he had nothing to keep him together where he was now. No friends or acquaintance to support him as his new family did and that in its own way sometimes overcome the orange head.

“What are you talking about Ichigo?”

The old man was grateful when he received a reaction from Ichigo and that he wasn’t that drowned in despair as to not notice his surroundings, turning slowly to look at his Quincy counterpart for better assessment of his next words.

“That time he told me-us how the true betrayal was not the one we can see but that which we cannot perceive. I think he is right you know…”

“Ya talking ‘bout Aizen king?”
The albino seemed to spit out the name, rage very predominate in his tone as he cursed the man to the very depths of hell for starting that war and turning his king into what he had become. A god like being that was only holding up by a thin piece of tape.

“Yeah… he’s a bastard you know… but he’s also a genius… I wonder how he was able to stand the loneliness so long…”

He was making more sense that was for sure, something that the two spirits were silently grateful for, at least they were able to draw away from the first topic to be touched.

The fakeness.

“You’re not lonely king, ya got us don’t ya?”

The Shiba involuntarily smiled. Gesture that was less saddened as it was before, making the albino make a double take when Ichigo actually made his smile widen into a full grown grin that looked so real it paled in comparison to Ichigo’s previous facades –the one used in front of the future captains not counting- because this smile, this expression was not fake in the least.’

“Yeah… I still have you two…”

The two spirits froze, not believing even for a second that what was in front of them was real even if, after the next blink they took the grin disappeared into a sad smile that they were oh so familiar with.

“Ichigo you…”

“I never broke down you know… at least not today…”

Silence plagued the panoramic city of blue as the three abruptly shut up, not one nor two muttering a single word as the graveness of that sentence clicked in both Zangetsu’s mind because for Ichigo to not having gone over his breaking point and actually admitting that he had done so before was outstanding in its own way. Something they had yet to understand fully until now.

He had not gone into a deep hole.

“So… ya didn’t lose it?”

This time the albino was responded by an elbow in the gut, blow that was not even damped down to prevent damage as he fell over in a heap of curses and whines but even so a satisfied smirk forming in the inside.

“It’s not that I go insane like you idiot… I just tend to go too deep into shit, that’s all.”

This eased up the previous tension that had formed on all three of them. Ichigo still thinking of Kei’s words even if he didn’t let them plague him. He didn’t need more tortures to add to his collection. He already had more than enough.

So as everything settled down into a more tranquil environment Ichigo decided it would be better to leave and go back into the real world.

Back to reality.

The orange head let himself go as he fell down and letting the everlasting darkness engulf him and knowing his partners would let him. They should know what he was doing and they would accept
that Ichigo was good enough to leave. That he would somehow overcome it.

So they did. And he came back to reality.

#5#

“Just so you know I blame you.”

“Why me?! I didn’t do anything bad! It was both our idea to go look for him!”

“But even when I told you I couldn’t pinpoint his location you went on and on about how we’d find him anyways.”

“I really thought we would!”

“Now we’re late because of it Shu.”

The brunette decided to stay quiet and stop his whining, knowing that when his white haired best friend acted like this it was nearly impossible to make him change his mind.

And it really wasn’t his fault! They both wanted to find Ichigo even if it was kinda impossible given the circumstances. The other teen –in appearance only- was a real prodigy! He knew how to perfectly mask his reiatsu so that he was well, there, but even then you really couldn’t tell how far away or close he was. It was just plain confusing and neither Shunsui nor Jūshirō were able to pinpoint Ichigo’s exact location in the end and now they were late for their next class, Meditation.

“Oh! There’s the classroom!”

The two came to an abrupt halt, cringing at the knowledge that they were sure to get scolded even if it was for a good reason, but, as the door was slowly opened by Shunsui the sight that greeted him was not one he was expecting.

Ichigo was sitting amongst the rest of the class with his normal face that clearly read *I don’t give a damn about what you think* as he did so, not looking in the least shaken up or fake as he did a mere half an hour ago and that at least made both late teens sigh in relief.

“What are you sighing at brats?”

The deep, baritone voice shocked them out of their musings as they finally concentrated on the class and not on the orange head alone. Jūshirō slowly turned to look at their teacher with a calm yet warm smile which he was familiar for, trying to ease the situation as best as he could.

“Good day sensei. Sorry we’re late, we had to leave something in our dorm room before coming to class.”

This seemed to catch the small teacher off guard, not really believing the story but still being quite shocked that she had received an excuse from Jūshirō and not Shunsui like it always happened. The white haired, kind hearted boy had a problem with lying –though he was slowly getting better.

“E-eh… it’s alright I guess. So long as you don’t do it again.”

“Yes, sensei.”

The two were ushered in rather silently, joining in with the rest of the class that –as strangely as it sounds- lacked the usual punks at the far corner of the room. It was quite peaceful without them actually.
“Alright, now that we have most of the class present and that there are no more interruptions I’ll finally give you the news I was going to give you after coming from winter break.”

Everyone started rather intently at the teacher, excitement and unsettledness seeping out in great amounts as the suspense was killing them. Suspense that seemed to entertain the teacher instead as her smile took a turn for a more sadistic side.

“You’ll be able to carry your zanpaktou at all time now. And if you have a blade you want to use for the rest of your short or long career as a shinigami than bring it in, we’ll finally begin decisive training to gain your shikai.”

This seemed to gain a round of cheers as the news was something they had actually been looking forward to. Something that Ichigo was really grateful for because he seriously didn’t think he could last another spare with those toys the instructors called zanpaktou. They were so breakable and weak.

“We want to establish a connection with the dormant spirit in your soul so spending your time in company of the base for the zanpaktou to manifest is a good way to do so. The spirit will latch itself to the asauchi and then little by little we’ll establish a connection with the spirit so please keep your zanpaktou with you as close by as possible and remember to use it well, we don’t need a civilian being threatened by a zanpaktou so behave in and out of school grounds at all time.”

The instruction seemed to gain the instructor a swift chorus of _hai_ as they all started on their very own chat of how exciting it would be and that it was incredible that they were finally able to carry their zanpaktous out of the gyms and training areas.

Ichigo however was shining with well hidden relief and happiness that he would finally be able to use Zangetsu instead of the stupid asauchi and that he wouldn’t have to sneak the black hilted blade in and out of his room all the time.

He really loved this new privilege granted to them but more than anything he could now gloat of both Zangetsu’s steady presence closer to him that always seemed to be able to ease his pains easier in close vicinity and _that_ would become useful. A trigger to help him put on a better façade.

“Shiba-san?”

Ichigo turned to look in the direction where the familiar voice came from, very aware that the two shinigami in training were looking at him with something akin to sympathy and worry which made him realize how much he had screwed up with that fake smile he had pulled off earlier.

“Yeah?”

The two glanced to look at each other, not really trusting themselves to start off the conversation but at the same time not wanting to throw away the chance they currently had to speak with the orange head, scared that he would leave again like nothing and that he would be untraceable once more. But at least here they were in class—even if the teacher was letting them converse with each other— and it would look weird if Ichigo would just leave like that so they were pretty sure he wouldn’t do it this time around.

But as the silence continued Ichigo turned back to stare at the front of the class, not really caring that both Shunsui and Jūshirō were staring at him and that they were obviously bothered by what happened earlier.

‘Of course they would. There’s a limit to how dumb one can be to not realize that fakeness.’
And of course the future captains were far from dumb even if they were still brats and even when
Shunsui sometimes acted like a kid in the past present and future. The only plus that this young
Kyoraku Shunsui seemed to have that the older version didn’t have was that he was more inclined
to do rash stuff or speak before thinking out of the blue.

Almost like right now.

“Hey Shiba-san, do you want to go with Ju-chan and me to buy a new sheath for our zanpaktou?”

…

“Huh…?”

Both Ichigo and Jūshirō were frozen in place, not believing even for a second what Shunsui had
spoken because, seriously, it just wasn’t possible… was it?

“What the hell are you thinking Shu?”

The brunette seemed to be confused for a second, processing his own words and then Jūshirō’s
before the frightening truth dawned over him.

He had done something stupid again….

Or maybe not.

A feral grin spread across Shunsui’s face as a perfect plan formulated in his head, one that even
Jūshirō would have to acknowledge even if it came out nowhere like it had done. Maybe his
recklessness was a good thing sometimes.

“Yeah, go out all three of us, you know we’re going to be carrying our own zanpaktou and well us
being a part of a noble family even if a minor one -unlike the Shiba- we usually gain a zanpaktou
long before entering the academy so I think a special blade deserves a special sheath.”

Silence kept on going on Jūshirō’s side as he stared at the douche ball he called best friend,
wanting to discover what the hell was going on in that big head of his and still not catching up with
Shunsui’s plan.

Ichigo on the other hand had gone out of his initial shock and was able to blankly stare at the
brunette, not a glint of surprise in his expression even as he said his next words.

“You do realize you two barely met me today right?”

“Yup. And that’s precisely why I want all three of us to go. To get to know you better and
strengthen our growing friendship.”

Ichigo in response sighed before pinching the bridge of his nose, not really being able to catch up
with the other’s enthusiasm and unusual positivism. But the orange head seriously couldn’t find a
good response for the invitation.

“So it’s settled, we’ll go today after the next class since on Monday we don’t have any evening
lessons.”

This seemed to bring Ichigo back to reality and made him slightly flustered as he stammered in his
words, not finding a quick enough excuse before it was already too late and the two were already
out of earshot, Shunsui dragging Jūshirō away and the white haired teen letting him at the same
“B-but…”

“What are you planning Shu?”

“Well it’d be bad if we talked about something like that in front of the class where others can hear, and we don’t think Shiba-san will willingly enter a friendly chat with –as he said- people he just met so I thought this was a good idea.”

Jūshirō seemed to ponder on this, thinking that maybe what Shunsui was saying actually made sense because, let’s face it, Shunsui never seemed to make sense completely.

“Yeah… I guess it is…”

Shunsui broke into a wide grin, liking that his idea was actually useful and he hadn’t screwed up in the end.

Now they just needed to make sure that they made the best of their time and…

“And if Shiba-san flees…?”

…and that.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Shiba-san!”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Shiba-san we know you’re in there!”

Another dull knock and that had been the fifteenth one and Ichigo still didn’t know where Shunsui found the enthusiasm to continue. The orange head had come in through the window since he had gone into the forest earlier and what was his surprise that the brunette and white haired male were outside his door and pounding onto it without mercy. He had actually forgotten about that problem but arriving mere seconds ago to the current situation made him clearly remember.

He opened the door with much precaution, not wanting to get hit by a new knock in the process but still not wanting to ignore the two boys. But, it was rather surprising to see Shunsui grinning like a cheshire cat and having an equally satisfied Jūshirō at his side, almost like if they had both won the lottery when Ichigo had just opened the door.

“Shiba-san! Let’s go into town!”

The orange head blinked, clearly used to Shunsui’s rather enthusiastic demeanor and not really taken aback at his actions. So instead of thinking about declining he turned around to look for his partner, not even taking a second to tell the two what he was about to do and not being surprised when they waited for him to come back.

Once he had Zangetsu secured at his waist he came back to the door to be greeted by the two future captains, both having their own unique blade strapped to their waist and waiting rather patiently for
Ichigo.

“Ready Shiba-san?”

Ichigo just sighed before nodding, closing the door to his room before letting out a small flicker of reiatsu to activate an unharmful barrier that just notified him if someone trespassed, he really couldn’t get used to being carefree anymore.

The three academy students walked in silence as they stalked out the dormitories and school gate, not really minding the particularly weird atmosphere that didn’t seem to be able to decide itself between tense and peaceful.

The silence however was quickly disrupted when Shunsui spoke up, not really finding any problem in entering a friendly conversation and wanting to lighten up the mood.

“So Shiba-san I wanted to ask.”

Ichigo turned to look at the brunette, thinking that an inquiry from today’s confrontation was sure to come and fully expecting it.

This is why he tried to distance himself as far away as possible from people lately, they were just so troublesome.

“Can we call you Ichigo instead? Of course you can call us by our first name as well so I wanted to know if you wouldn’t mind.”

The orange head was quickly taken aback by the quite innocent question, not really processing fast enough the question as he blinked in silent question before turning back to the path in front of him.

“I don’t mind. I said so earlier in class.”

“Yeah well, just wanted to make sure it didn’t bother you.”

As Ichigo just nodded in understanding Jūshirō stared on with newfound curiosity. The orange head was really special and unique but most of all he was just full of surprises that made you think he was a heart less bastard and then the next you would think he was just an isolated boy. Really weird coming from a family as cheerful as the Shibas.

“So what kind of sheaths are you guys going to get?”

“Well I was thinking something along the lines of a sea blue. What about you two?”

“I want something cool that reflects my sparkling personality!”

The white haired male just rolled his eyes before looking at Ichigo, question lingering on for him as well an expecting an answer even if the orange head looked like he hadn’t been hearing the whole conversation.

“Don’t really know yet… never really thought of it, I only have the black scabbard and that’s it…”

That sole statement made the brunette keep on babbling on and on about how Ichigo should have an idea of what he wanted and then proceeding to give the Shiba ideas of his own on what Ichigo could get and all the while Jūshirō watched while intervening every now and then to try and point out obvious facts or stuff he thought were to over board.

Ichigo on the other hand had stayed quiet the whole way, never stopping Shunsui’s rambling and
never really responding to the inquiries of what he would like and how he would look cool with
various designs Shunsui had come up with. Ichigo had just listened, well hidden amusement
lingering in his soul as he heard the one sided bickering between the two innocent boy which were
so naïve that Ichigo could hardly associate them with their future self’s. The future duo he had
come to know pretty well and respect. The two he had -to some degree- been able to open up for
advice.

These two however were not superiors or seniors. They were just students. Just like what he was
pretending to be.

Nothing but a fake in all but name.

#5#

“Ne Ichigo-kun what do you think about this one?”

The orange head stared rather intently at the fifth scabbard shown to him up until now, really
feeling that something was missing even if he couldn’t actually pin point it. He glanced to the side
to see the other two beautiful sheathes placed rather carefully on the table and then back to the
deep blue –almost black- sheath Jūshirō was showing him, he just couldn’t decide when the other
two had long from decided.

He didn’t particularly dislike the wooden trinket, it’s just that it didn’t catch his eye like he had
liked and that was something he was looking for so instead of even looking at the sheath any
longer he shook his head, gaining a rather displeased sigh from Shunsui and a sad shrug from
Jūshirō. They had been trying to help him out for some time now to no avail.

“So no good huh… and you still don’t know what you’re looking for either right?”

“Yeah… I just can’t seem to picture something I would want in particular but…”

“Shiba-sama?”

Upon hearing his name Ichigo turned to look at the owner of the shop, disliking the formalities but
trying to appear pleasant anyway.

“Yes?”

“Would this appease your needs?”

The elder man outstretched both his hands to show a scabbard hidden behind a white cloth, taking
his free hand to reveal it as he took the previous cloth off and showing the full glory of the newly
revealed scabbard.

The sheath was indeed beautiful.

It was natural black wood, no paint or decorations to be seen but any way shone with an undeniable
glint of beauty and perfection as a deep red tassel snaked around the top part of the sheathe to
form the sageo (1). The scabbard had a simple wood carving of a lonely moon at the very tip were
it was mostly useable but any way brought attention. It was something Ichigo had the honor of
saying he had fallen in love with.

“This one.”

The sudden sound of his voice in the previous silence shocked his two classmates out of whatever
stupor they had entered and they were both able to quickly turn and stare at Ichigo without him even realizing. The sparks in Ichigo’s shine kinda surprised the two but all the less satisfied them because, this little piece of wood had apparently brought happiness to their new weird friend.

“Very well Shiba-sama.”

Once they had finished their shopping they had started to make their way back to the academy. Excitement about their newfound shop being the current topic of conversation as Shunsui and Jūshirō tried to drag Ichigo the best they could in the conversation and proving somewhat satisfactory till the end.

The peaceful banter quickly paused however as the vicinity of the gates came in sight making both future captains stop on their tracks to try and gain a little bit if answers on the conversation they were all most likely wanting to avoid.

“Ichigo?”

“… yeah?”

“Why did you let Kei do what he did?”

The orange head was actually taken aback by the question, expecting something more along the lines of What the hell’s up with that face? Or I guess you really are as fake as he said you were. However he didn’t really expect that question to be asked, almost like if he was the victim and that there was a reason for what he did and did not do –something that wasn’t entirely untrue- and that there was something behind his calm and uncaring demeanor –which was positively true.

“Why… are you unhappy…? Ichigo?”

This is why he hated to interact with people lately. People that would only be there because they were curious or wanted something in return. People that he just couldn’t find it in himself to trust no matter what, even if the evil over lord had yet to even be born.

That is why he hated to socialize outside of his family. It sometimes became unbearable to continue with an uncaring façade.

“Why do you act like if it’s all okay?”

Silence graced the clearing as the only real noise to be heard was the rustling of leaves. The leaves rustled once more as the breeze played with their light forms and made many fall in their wake. The chirps resounded slowly yet melodiously, letting a soothing sound fall upon the tense quiet that had been brought upon mere seconds ago, one that might as well be there to stay because the two 5th years were clearly not expecting the answer the orange head gave them.

It was an answer than not even the silent eaves dropper didn’t expect.

“Because… Nice words and nice appearance doesn’t conclude that someone is nice, I believe that the nicer you look, the more deceptive you appear…therefore…”

Ichigo turned to look at their shocked expressions, not in the least caring that he was saying something quiet weird and at the same time true. It was their call if they understood.

“…I did nothing to stop Kei… there was nothing to do about it, the result would be the same either
way… You would always have undesired people around you but desired one’s are least likely… fake is a trend lately anyway… a trend that hides those that only come home because they want a hot meal to eat… nothing else…”

To be continued…

(1). Sageo: The sageo is the cord used to tie the scabbard to the belt/obi when worn.
Chapter 6: When?

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach. I doubt I can become Tite Kubo.

“Normal speech”

‘Thoughts’

Flashback/Dream

Previously:

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#6#

After those rather truthful yet cold words were said the clearing settled in a more silent atmosphere, the sound of nature being the only thing heard as Ichigo had his back to his two piers as he tried rather successfully to settle his thoughts; act that was rather easy with his zanpaktou encasing him in their presence.

It served to ground him to the present rather than the past.

He was well aware of the unease in the two’s emotions. He really was. But he still couldn’t find it in himself to care. It was the truth of the world no matter how cruel it was and he should know this better than anyone else. It was a part of this cruel game called life.

But even if all the hardships and harsh experiences caused a gigantic scar in his soul, even as he almost gave up on life and everyone around him he still hoped for a better tomorrow. Still yearned for a new today. Still enjoyed his lessons learnt. Even then he still walked forward.

Even if his reality might as well be fake.

“You know… Life is nothing but cruel and unfair… but… but even then we all strive forward to counter all that which says we’re wrong… That is what it means to be alive.”

His new statement might as well had eased the whole situation even as he had called life cruel. His words held a truth that made the two innocent souls think of how deep their new friend thought even as he was their age. It just made them want to understand the orange head further. Discover new frontiers to their world and learn more from the boy that seemed to master the world.

It was majestic and it might as well be thrilling.
Ichigo turned to look at the two boys in the eyes. Trying with the best of his abilities to convey his very soul and emotions in his next words as his frown turned into a full blown smile that just looked breathe taking and blessing.

“But even as this cruel game called life tries to hold me down I will still smile through it all and not waste time in unfruitful people. All that matters is that which is in front of me.”

“Striving towards the future, right?”

The orange haired shinigami didn’t dare say he was not surprised by Ryōtarō’s intrusion. But at the same time he just couldn’t say he was truly expecting the man to be nearby and much less ease dropping. But going by Jūshirō’s and Shunsui’s expression they were more than a little surprised if not shocked.

“I cannot say I agree with your way of seeing life… But at the same time I cannot find it in myself to disagree… Your view of the world is rather farfetched and maybe even vague.”

Ichigo smirked, thinking of how his father was actually agreeing with him more than what he let on but even then he would not say a thing. It was better that way and he knew that if he even mentioned it the Shiba head would most likely deny it.

That was the kind of man he was.

“But even then I would like to know the answer to that question as well.”

“Which one?”

“Why are you unhappy Ichigo?”

Ichigo blinked before remembering that the two had asked him this particular question as well. He was caught up in his own ideals and explaining why he looked so uncaring and let Kei do what he wanted that he forgot about that question that he might have needed to answer from the very beginning. But still he was quite taken aback by the question; he seriously didn’t understand it and only because-

“I’m not unhappy. Only people without a purpose are unhappy. I have a purpose.”

This of course shocked the three to the core and if the two shinigami students were too shy to speak before a captain before now all that was gone.

“Then why do you frown all the time and do all that- that stuff!”

The orange head was still confused of course. It was weird indeed and sometimes he couldn’t seem to understand people anymore—not that he understood them much in the past- and of course this inability to understand others affected him in a way that sometimes he just couldn’t understand himself.

“It’s not that I’m unhappy as everyone thinks I am. I always try to appear proper as to not weigh down my family; and Chichue and I have had this talk already—you will not change my mind- but I usually prefer to be uncaring so that there is no need to give an even faker façade. I’ll say it again. I’m not unhappy, it’s just that sometimes I can’t help but dislike something’s about myself.”

“… Well that’s just frickin pointless.”

“Shu! Don’t just go ahead and say that!”
Ichigo by now had widen in eyes, thinking it was a rather shocker to see the future 8th division captain curse and look as dumbfounded at the same time. It was weird in a way. If not ridiculous.

“What do you mean?”

“If what Ju-chan and I saw is not a creation of our imagination than your words don’t match your actions. What happened this morning with Kei? That- that reaction.”

Now that was what Ichigo did not want to answer and he could only be grateful that Ryōtarō looked like he had no idea of what Shunsui was taking about because that would be awful. He didn’t want to burden his father but now that he was sniffing around like a stupid mouse he was bound to find out.

‘Now… what to tell the two… I defiantly went to deep into shit earlier and because of that I just gave away a big fraction of my reality… to fix it…”

“Half-truths are better than a full blown lie.”

Then, before he could open his mouth to respond, Kisuke’s hard learned words resounded in his head. That lesson of deception that had been the catalyst to the rest of his refined talent in that art.

He had forgotten the basic. The first thing to do before even coming close to appearing what he wasn’t. That was what came in first place.

“You could say Kei hit a nerve. I usually don’t let what other people say get to me but it wasn’t that easy with what he said.”

Ichigo put on a smile. A small yet genuine one. He didn’t want to scare the two naïve boys so he tried to be reassuring and hopefully they would drop the topic. That was all he was asking for.

“I’m sorry if I scared you guys. Though I’m not sorry that Kei’s lackeys were scared shitless. That’s just the quirks of being assholes.”

“Some punk dared threaten my boy?”

Ryōtarō’s words were said rather murderously, like if the next second he would go and murder someone and if Ichigo hadn’t lived a war he was sure he would be trembling in fear like his peers. And truth be told the next second the raven head started to make way towards the school gate and most likely go punk hunting if it weren’t thanks to Ichigo that had gripped his white haori rather sternly.

“No. There were six punks that I can take care of if needed. So you Chichue go home and rest your old and aching back.”

“How can you say such cruel things to your father Ichigo?! Here I am, wanting to help you and you discard it with such coldness.”

Ichigo just stared at his father with a non-existent expression, lack of anything flickering through his amber eyes as he stared into his father’s green.

“I can say that because I care. That’s how easy it is.”

This time Ichigo’s expression morphed to a small, almost non-existent smile. Like if it was doing a great deal just to stay on his face as long as it did. It was quite hard if not stressful.
“So you just leave me to myself and stop stalking your children. Haruka is bound to find out sooner or later.”

Ryōtarō looked between proud and horrified before settling for horrified and tugging his black raven locks to fortify his despair.

“NO! IF SHE FINDS OUT SHE’LL KILL US!”

“Why are you adding me in your death?”

The raven head completely ignored Ichigo before placing a hand on each of his shoulders, trying to convey his seriousness as he said his next words with a straight expression.

“Ichigo. You must continue with your studies. I have to search for her and make sure no evil punk gets close to her.”

The orange head on the other hand –along with the two fifth years- sweat dropped at the goofiness while keeping an incredulous expression but not daring to say anything. He just couldn’t believe that the reason why Ryōtarō followed Haruka around was because of that.

He knew that the man followed all his kids around. Not daily but he most certainly did do it from time to time but Ichigo was the only one to ever notice. It was kinda obvious for anyone that had a bit of skill in reiatsu sensing. The man never cared to mask his presence anyway.

The only thing Ichigo could be grateful for however was the fact that now the attention was on following Haruka around and not his problems.

But of course the universe had to bring everything back.

“You two kids! I entrust you with my eldest son’s soul! I have to get back to work so play nice!”

And before any of the three academy students could say otherwise the 10th squad captain left in a flicker of shunpo. Act invisible to the student’s eyes with the exception of an undercover god-like being with orange hair.

Care to ask who?

The three were obviously left in a stupor but before Shunsui or Jūshirō could say anything about Ichigo’s goofy yet serious father said person turned around and stalked towards the academy gates in a practiced and elegant walk. Almost as if a tornado hadn’t passed by and with his uncaring face back in place.

Upon seeing this the two started to walk towards their new friend, catching up silently before it was disrupted by none other than Shunsui that looked rather enthusiastic for someone that had just lived a tragic encounter with the Shiba head.

“Ne Ichigo! Your father said he entrusted you with us so that means he acknowledges us as your friends. So we must always stick together to take care of you like he said!”

This of course horrified the young Shiba and he couldn’t avoid almost tripping on his feet as he turned to look wide eyed at the brunette trying to continue his walk so that he wouldn’t look ridiculous –though he doubted he was succeeded in doing so.

“That- that’s- that’s just- you can’t take seriously a guy like that! It would be lowering yourself to his banters and that just makes it all the more stupid!”
The outburst slash stammer shocked yet amused the duo, thinking that they had found something that could easily rile up their new friend even if he seemed to be the most composed person they had ever met.

But of course everyone had their quirks.

“All the more reason to do so!”

“What?!”

Once Ichigo had been able to rid himself of the two future captains he had locked himself in his room, trying to find some peace to gather his thoughts as he was to shaken up by the previous argument –banter.

“You sound like an old man.’

Those words made him jump because they weren’t exactly his even if they were said in his head but they weren’t necessarily someone elses. It was like a little voice in his head that sounded so similar to his own that he couldn’t help but think it might be his conscious.

“You idiot! Like if you had something as convenient as that. You only have a depressing old man that happens to be the embodiment of a mass murdering Quincy king and a genius, blood-thirsty, albino shinigami-hollow.’

Ichigo thought about that, thinking that Zangetsu might as well be right if only excluding the genius part but of course he didn’t voice this out. More so because he knew that if he did he would be bad mouthing himself and that was something he didn’t want.

So instead Ichigo merely nodded before falling flat on his futon without so much as unstrapping his zanpaktou, only lying face first on the soft surface as he let out a strained sigh.

‘And know you’re acting like one too. Maybe you should go find yourself some geezers and play poker.’

This time Ichigo responded but as he was lying on his face his voice came out muffled and incoherent and as such all the albino could do was hope his king had noticed this fact and would repeat his words.

Truth be told the orange head did that precisely as he turned his head to the side, giving out another sigh as he once again spoke up.

“I don’t think poker exists yet.”

‘… What year are we in anyway?’

The previous substitute shinigami thought about this. Trying to find anything to pinpoint how back they actually were as he tried to think of any conversations he had with the two, still academy brats that would one day become captains.

“… When I first arrived at soul society the academy was 2100 years old… Kyoraku-san and Ukitake-san said they were the first graduates to become captains but that doesn’t give me enough information to know how far we are from the present.”
That was all he knew. All he was capable of knowing. And it frustrated him to no end because knowledge was everything on the battlefield. And he knew practically nothing now when before his knowledge exceeded the world.

So now he seriously found it as a pain in the ass. And more so because he had to use a curtain to cover up his horrible past. Might as well be wearing a mask all day.

‘A piece of advice Ichigo.’

‘Old man?’

‘Yes. Remember to always trust the play… the play cannot lie no matter how much its actors do.’

Ichigo stayed quiet, trying to process the word of wisdom –riddle- he was given. It was a real drag to decipher what the other was saying but at least he had gotten better as the time passed.

“So. You think that as long as the intentions are real; it doesn’t matter if the one doing them is fake?”

This of course did not coed well with neither Zangetsu, Ichigo nor the old man. It was for various reasons but even then they were not happy. Ichigo mainly because he believed this to be wrong and the two spirits because Ichigo just didn’t understand.

‘King. It’s not a matter of fake or not. You are you no matter what happens because you’re still being Kurosaki Ichigo even if your name changed.’

‘The hollow is correct Ichigo. We have told you before that it’s not being fake. It’s just trying to make things go smoothly. Not bring attention to yourself. I think that’s all that matters.’

Ichigo thought about this as he was still lying down flat on his stomach. Trying to find the right words to say before speaking up and convey what he wanted.

“I think… I think that I’m over thinking things.”

‘No kidding. We were entrusted with the future. Not too broad about our own shenanigans.’

The orange head sighed before flipping over to stare at the ceiling. Closing his eyes slowly as he pushed that stupid abide foolish problem. He should thank Kei. He was the bastard that had pushed the thought into his mind in the first place. He might as well let the fucker get a piece of his mind next time he tried to pull some shit.

He needed to concentrate on the future. On the evil master mind that will one day appear and try to conquer the world. This was entrusted to him by Kisuke and maybe even everyone else.

He would not let them down.

“Time to get serious.”

#6#

“I-CHI-GO-SAN! IT’S BREAKFAST TIME! HURRY UP OR YOU’LL BE LATE!”

Ichigo groaned, scurrying out of his bathroom as he adjusted his sash at his waist before grabbing rapidly his zanpaktou in its pitch black albeit decorated sheath. He secured it at his waist as he strode to the door and threw it open to come face to face with a tall –even if not as tall is him (yet)-brunette that had a goofy smile that he wanted to punch off.
He really hated these wake up calls and more so because they didn’t wake him up. It was just to annoy him into eating with the brown haired devil in front of him and the one besides Ukitake Jūshirō.

This had been a routine of sorts for the past two months and even then he still hadn’t come used to it because Shunsui always did it the hard way –yelling and banging his door until Ichigo came out. And don’t get him wrong, Ichigo opened the door every time but the thing that pissed the orange head off was the fact that the brunette always kept on yelling that they were late when they weren’t.

“I’m ready, you don’t have to yell until I come out. We’re not even late.”

“But that’s just the fun part of life! Always be one step ahead!”

“Yeah, yeah, you keep telling yourself that. Let’s go Ukitake-san.”

“What about me! We’re a team!”

“Than hurry up Kyoraku.”

“Shu-n-sui not Kyoraku.”

And then that detail. No matter how much Ichigo had opened up to the two and how much he acted a bit more laid back –at least with them- he never called them by their given name and it had become a tedious routine to point out that fact for both of the innocent boys. But still they had gained what nobody had been able to.

Make the young Shiba get riled up.

Ichigo –back in high school- was easily taunted and would show his annoyance rather easily but as time passed –and more so now- he had come to completely eradicate this defect –if you could call it this- so now it was a real talent to be able to make the calm and usually uncaring Shiba riled up to the extent that it actually mattered. And let’s just say that Kyoraku Shunsui had succeeded rather painfully; literally.

It had been rather amusing to see a twitching mess on the floor for both Ichigo and Jūshirō and as Shunsui had whined about being hit by Ichigo said person couldn’t avoid the laughter that erupted from the depths of his throat.

To say the two boys were shocked was an understatement because they had never ever have heard the orange head laugh and it was rather satisfying if not refreshing. But as soon as it had come it left and it had become the two’s life goal to repeat it.

But of course Ichigo just looked amused –which shocked the future captains- at the promise the boys made each other, thinking that they were doing something that was bound to happen and that it was stupid to think they had made it their life goal when Ichigo didn’t necessarily avoid laughing.

He just didn’t do it often.

This however promoted Shunsui to think that Ichigo was a sadistic bastard which Jūshirō completely agreed to. The orange head looked absolutely amused to a new level but did not disagree thinking that he was sadistic thanks to a certain albino living in his head.

But now as they strode to the cafeteria Ichigo couldn’t help but keep a scowl etched on his face
while the two boys took it in stride thinking that it was just one of those days Ichigo was in a bad mode.

The real reason of course was not this but at the same time it was. He wasn’t really in a bad mode, it was just that he had received bad news that morning and he was not happy about it. For some reason seeing a hell butterfly –the Shiba clan one nothing less was not something he enjoyed. It always brought bad news and this one had not been differently. Actually, it had been by the far the worse because Shiba Ryōtarō had never sounded so jumpy and jittery.

“Ichigo. I need you to come home after your morning classes. I’ll send a letter to your teachers so come right away.”

So as Ichigo ignored his friends –the two had become something akin to friends in the past months- he went with his activities in complete auto pilot. The two noticing but deciding not to comment on it until they were in their meditation dojo with some sort of privacy.

“Hey Ichigo, is something bothering you?”

The orange head actually turned to look at them for a change, not looking forward like he usually did and just glancing from the corner of his eye. Act that surprised the two as they weren’t expecting it to be so easy –gesture that showed how bothered the orange head was.

“I received a hell butterfly this morning… It was from Chichue. I have to go to the manor after morning lessons.”

This of course made the two perk up in interest, thinking that it was rare for such a thing to occur and much less for a clan member –albeit one from the main family- having to need to return as soon as possible… sort of.

“How can a teacher be so free willed?”

The white haired boy couldn’t help but ask in pure concern. He knew that Ichigo didn’t like to bother other with his problems but even then he had to ask. It was like a need he had to do.

“I don’t know but that’s what I’m going to find out.”

Before Shunsui could butt into Ichigo’s business and Jūshirō could question once again, the meditation teacher strode in with a small yet almost practiced skip, looking blissfully unaware of her surroundings and the small group of three agreed in their thought.

“Alrighty my students! I hope you have practiced the techniques that we have been trying lately because today everyone must be completely relaxed!”

This of course made the whole classroom silent as almost no one had even cared to practice the exercises given and as such no one even dared to make a sound in fright that they would be hauled into demonstrating.

Thankfully the petite teacher just smiled and continued on with her explanation about relaxation until she said something that caught everyone’s attention.

“Today we’re going to begin trying jinzen to a new level. This time we want to enter the inner world and not just create a peaceful sense. So there must be complete and utter silence even if you fail, and even a mummer of a voice is enough to be called success much more if you are able to
enter your own inner world.”

Everyone was now excited with the lesson. Thinking that it would be a piece of cake to get into their inner world and all hoping that they could meet their zanpaktou spirit. Of course reality was another deal and the only ones well aware of this were the childish teacher and Ichigo himself.

“Okay! Everyone get on the floor into the basic position I have been teaching for the past year so if you just happen to forget it than you’re free to ask any of your classmates because I’m not repeating it.”

Everyone sweat dropped at this, thinking that she would not go down on her threat and that she really wouldn’t help anyone. So the whole classroom sat down on the floor and started to drop into the correct position.

“Concentrate on yourself and no one else. Try to pull on your own soul. That’s the best I can give you. Breath, in and out…”

Ichigo in the end just entered a state of complete peace, not even trying to get into his inner world since he thought it would be best to stay like this in case someone called. He didn’t want to be the only one to enter his soul.

But as he stretched his senses he was able to notice how his two friends were in a level where they were no longer there, they were in such a state that you could easily notice –if you knew what to look for- that they had succeeded in entering.

However, Ichigo couldn’t help but jump in his seat when he felt a hand on his shoulder that distinctly belonged to the teacher. He opened his eyes slowly in time to be face to face with the petite women that had a face of disappointment.

Ichigo just stayed calm and stared into her impassive hazel eyes, thinking that if she had disrupted his peace she must have a reason.

“You’re not even trying.”

Her voice was soft. Barely above a whisper and the orange head was sure that if the room wasn’t as quiet as it was it would have been impossible to have heard her voice.

“I know you already have contact with your zanpaktou, I noticed this on the first day. But weather you know its name or not is still a mystery to me. That’s the best I could find out while reading your reiatsu.”

She knew. And Ichigo had known this as well but he had never let this bother him because out of all the teachers he knew she would be the only one capable of noticing. So it didn’t come as a surprise that she was disappointed. He understood after all. She had expected the most out of him even if she never said it.

So instead of responding or thinking of some excuse he only sighed while drifting back into jinzen and disappearing into his inner world. He knew that the petite teacher would get the hint and notice right away in his reiatsu pattern that he had gone into his soul.

As expected he landed on his steel and glass, cold building, thing that was quite common for him and as such as soon as he had appeared he let himself fall flat on his back.

He was quickly yet quietly joined by his white doppelganger as he also laid on his back, the two mirroring each other as they gave each other silent company before it was obviously disrupted by
Zangetsu himself.

“The bitch sent you in?”

“… Yeah. She did.”

“… You’re not gonna tell me she’s not a bitch?”

“… What’s the point? You’ll keep on doing it anyway.”

The two stayed in silence once more, Zangetsu surprisingly pouting like a five year old as Ichigo stayed calmly in his place. His peace being weird compared to some months back as he gave out a sigh to relax his sore muscles but didn’t make an effort to move.

“It’s peaceful huh?”

“…Yeah… it is…”

In the end Ichigo had taken a rather long nap in his inner world along with his shinigami-hollow counterpart, they had both curled up against each other before they even realized it and the Old man had been the only one too gain amusement when they had woken up stuck together like two brothers seeking comfort from the other.

Once the great dilemma had been over and the two –cause the old man had stayed quiet- had agreed that it had never happened Ichigo retreated back into reality; surprised to find Jūshirō already wide awake while Shunsui was still concentrated in his meditation.

“Oh, Ichigo-kun, you’re back. How did it go?”

Ichigo blinked his amber eyes in plain curiosity as he tried to think of what he had even done to be asked how it went, but then he remembered what they were supposed to be doing and quickly stammered to reply.

“A-ah, fine, everything went fine. Did anything go well on your side?”

Jūshirō was silently amused yet confused by Ichigo’s slightly flustered state, only noticing it because he had come to learn a lot of the orange head in the past months and as such he was able to see these small details many missed –some people would say he was to observant for his own good.

“Yeah. I found my inner world and I heard giggles. Though I never found out where it came from.”

“Eh… that’s nice. I guess you achieved plenty.”

The white haired boy nodded. Thinking that he had done a good job and that he thoroughly enjoyed his experience. It was exciting and thrilling in its own way but even then he wanted to know about Ichigo’s thrilling experience –because he was sure Ichigo had achieved something if not more.

“And you? I can’t figure out the depths of your fine.”

“Well I found my inner world.”

“I thought as much. And?”
“And I met my Zanpaktou?”

It was barely a question. But even then you could still hear the question mark at the end and it was frustrating to even think about saying this detail. He knew he shouldn’t have said this but even then he knew he couldn’t leave it hidden forever.

“YOU DID?!”

Ichigo jumped in surprise as he was not expecting to be shouted from behind and much less from someone that was supposed to be meditating. It was frustrating and unnerving in a way that he didn’t want to think about and more so because he didn’t even get a chance to answer.

“I met her too! And she’s my perfect dream women with all the curves in the right places, and that shining personality until… until… until she hit me for being an idiot.”

The brunette had started with so much excitement that Ichigo had thought he would choke on his own words until he started to take a turn for a rather depressing side as he was basically curled up on the floor crying for his own suffering.

“Why oh why do all the hot ones do this to the men population!”

“They don’t do that to me.”

“Nor I.”

“And why are my friends such traitors!”

“SHUT UP KYORAKU! THERE ARE STILL STUDENTS TRYING TO MEDITATE!”

This of course shocked the trio as they weren’t expecting the petite teacher to yell from the other side of the room and much less for her to do so in such a way that she would contradict her own words.

Life was just full of contradictions.

But even then Ichigo was curious. Really, really, really curious because he had personally heard that the brunette’s zanpaktou were two women, not just one so he seriously couldn’t stop himself from asking –something he didn’t do often to begin with.

“But Kyoraku-san-“

“Shunsui.”

“-she hit you?”

The future 8th squad captain stayed quiet as he studied his own memory. Completely discarding his previous correction of being called by his given name and concentrating on something that obviously bothered him and this of course lifted Ichigo’s and Jūshirō’s curiosity.

“Well yeah. She did hit me but… I could have sworn I felt four fits…”

The brunette was pensive for another second before he snapped his fingers and looked absolutely genius-like that Ichigo just couldn’t avoid the need to sweat drop because of what he said.

“That’s it! She must have four arms like a spider.”
“Spiders have 8 arms Kyoraku-san.”

“But what if she only hit me with half her arms.”

“That is unlikely. And besides, didn’t you see her? I think it would be quite obvious if she had more arms.”

“You never know!”

Ichigo just groaned as he was patted on the back by his white haired friend. Thinking that the other was bound to know of his suffering and he would be easily understood and he really was because Jūshirō had an equally disbelieving –if not more- expression on his face.

“It never works Ichigo-kun.”

“Apparently.”

“I’m serious, she must have more arms!”

“SHUT UP SHUNSUI!”

“H-hai, sensei.”

#6#

RIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING

“Alright everyone, morning classes are over. Remember to read page 264-282 of proper etiquette for next class!”

“Hai~!”

All the wanna-be shinigami scurried out of the classroom as they gathered their books and notes, trying to hurry up and rush away towards the cafeteria with the exception of three particular boys that were patiently walking out the door and into the hallway.

Two of them happened to be slightly worried for the third when said person was as calm and composed as ever; emotions be fit of his noble status that betrayed not a single thing.

“Ichigo? You’re going home right?”

Ichigo just nodded, trying to concentrate on his own mind because his thoughts just kept on going rampant and not in a good way so as to say.

He was worried, that was clear –for him- but more than anything he was curious. It was weird to be called back home and even then saying to do so after morning classes. That more than anything unsettled him.

As he kept on walking they finally arrived at an intersection where the hallway separated in the direction of the cafeteria or the way out of the academy so with a final wave he left in a small –yet still considerable- shunpo, leaving the two 5th years dumbstruck since they still couldn’t understand how the former 1st year could be so good.

The orange head just kept on flash stepping away, not a second of hesitation as he went from roof to roof at an incredible –for an academy student- speed. He was concentrated on what he did, no
faltering, no regret what so ever, each step calculated and beautiful and even as he did this he was still looking out for his father’s reiatsu, sensing his steady and rhythmic presence in the gardens of the manor and picking up speed to leap over the walls of the Shiba gate and land perfectly in the middle of the yard, right next to the raven haired man.

Said person just turned to look at his eldest with no hint of surprise what so ever, fully expecting Ichigo to be where he stood and not even batting an eye at his over normal speed.

“Ichigo, how have you been doing?”

“Fine. But I think you didn’t call me to ask how I was.”

The smile that was on in his face distinctively disappeared into something that could barely be called one, his obviously fake good mood slipping away as he now stood before his eldest son and the only one he could freely open up to with his problems.

“I feel that I’m troubling you more than I should. Like if you didn’t have enough burdens I add my own.”

“You know that’s not true so why bother.”

Ryōtarō sighed before glancing up to look at the falling leaves of the few trees in the garden, a thoughtful expression in place as he pursed his lips into a thin line.

“There is something I must tell you.”

“I expected as much.”

“But you might not like it.”

“Wh-“

“Not here.”

Ichigo turned to look at his father with curiosity yet apprehension. The man did not want to discuss something rather important in his own manor, like if he didn’t trust the place to guard his secret and fully expecting to be ease dropped on. The orange head was about to ask where when the older man grabbed his white sleeve and dragged him in a captain level shunpo to who knows where while all Ichigo could do was pray that he wouldn’t be dropped.

As Ichigo caught up with what was going on and that he was not in danger –because believe it or not he was doing everything in his power to not unsheathe Zangetsu and cut Ryōtarō’s hand off- he relaxed into the grip, seeing the trees and buildings pass by in an abnormally fast pace that would have made anyone dizzy had they not traveled at these speeds before, and once the blurs came to a stop Ichigo was abruptly thrown on a wooden flooring that he was not expecting to be there.

The shinigami in training blinked as he tried to catch up with where the hell they were to no avail. He couldn’t recognize the place and the woods surrounding the small wooden house –because that was where he realized they were- didn’t help his cause. He tried to seek out his father’s aid when he noticed a rather surprising –yet at the same time not- detail.

Ryōtarō sat cross legged on the wooden floor with a small ozen (1) tray at his side that had a small bottle of sake and appetizers that made Ichigo all the more hungry. He hadn’t eaten while everyone else had gone to the cafeteria.
“What are you doing on the floor like that Ichi? Get your place and grab some food.”

Ichigo just stared at the man before sighing and doing as told, trying but failing to hide his unease since he happened to be in the middle of nowhere –or at least that’s what he thought.

“You know I should sue you for kidnaping. But since you’re my father I lost that option.”

“Ha, and here I thought you were going to ask me where we are.”

“No, I was going to ask where the treats came from.”

“… good point.”

The orange head just gave another sigh before reaching out to grab an onigiri from the white plate, not wasting a second to dig in as he was hungrier than he expected.

As such the simple bean paste filled onigiri was more than enough to clench his hunger making said food taste like gold even if when compared to the meals he normally had at the manor it was nothing but a side note.

Ichigo was so concentrated on getting something solid in his stomach that he barely even realized that he had been served a sake cup and that the raven head was passing him the small container. He reached out and grabbed it while muttering a brief thanks and looking up to stare into the other’s green eyes.

“So? Are you going to answer anything or should I start making 1000 questions.”

Ryōtarō just lifted a hand to hazily scratch the back of his head, gesture that showed his apparent nerves and apprehension.

“Yeah… I guess I should answer. But first of all to tell you where we are.”

“In the middle of the woods.”

“Oh but not just any woods. We’re far off in the 11th district. This shack is the Shiba clan heads and only his. It is the haven that one has when we wish to be alone or in complete secret.”

Ichigo stared curiously at this, seriously being intrigued by this because he had never even heard of it. This was a fact that was unknown to him and let’s just say that when it came to Shiba history he could easily call himself a genius.

“The location of this place is only –and I will say it again- only known to the clan head and their heirs when it is believed they are ready. So no one currently knows of this place except myself and now you.”

The orange head frowned at this, not really keeping up with what he was being told and what he truly understood. He didn’t really know where this shack was and even if he did remotely know of its position why would he tell him.

“This shack is about 4km west from the gate of the district, passing the water fall and a few cherry blossoms away. It’s not hard to miss if you know what you’re looking for. And the reason why I’m telling you this is because you are meeting the conditions for those that know of the location.”
As those words finally processed correctly in Ichigo’s mind all he could do was stare at the raven head with his drink mid-way, not being able to believe what he was hearing and not understanding why this was happening in the first place.

It was going too fast.

“You shall be the third Ichigo. I need your help. Because I feel that if I don’t do this now, the elders might start to control the whole clan. We must do everything to push them away… keep them at bay.”

It was clicking in place and the more he understood the why the less he wanted to take part directly. He wanted to help. He wanted to be by his Chichue’s side but even then he couldn’t help but feel wrong. Misplaced.

Haruka and Wataru deserved this. They were the man’s children not him. He was an outsider. Foreign from his world.

This was not right.

“Ichigo…”

To be continued…

Hello everybody!

1 Ozen: Japanese tray at the same level of a low table but way smaller. Usually used in nobility when in meetings or in places where there isn’t a table.
Chapter 7: Noble clans

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach. Or maybe I do… wait no I just remembered I really don’t.

“Normal speech”
‘Thoughts’

Flashback/Dream

#7#

“Ichigo…?”

Ichigo was shocked out of his daze the second he felt a warm and patient hand on his shoulder. He blinked, trying to clear his vision because for some reason he couldn’t quite see as well as he was supposed to – he blamed it on the surprise. The orange head turned his rather lost eyes in the direction of his raven haired father to try and see if the man was joking or something but he was only meet with hard resolve.

Ryōtarō in contrast softened up upon seeing a rather new and rare expression on Ichigo’s face. He had never seen the orange head so open and for some reason that didn’t bode well with him. It was kinda unnerving in a way.

Ichigo sighed, realizing how the Shiba head was in fact serious and recognizing the resolve in the others green eyes for what it was. It would be uncharacteristic of him to not see it and for some reason that sole fact reassured him. He didn’t think he would be able to speak to his father if the man himself wasn’t sure of what he was doing.

“You do realize what you’re doing, right?”

The raven head nodded, being fully satisfied with the fact that Ichigo catched onto his determination and deciding to take full advantage of it.

“Yeah. I know perfectly well what I am doing. And believe it or not I took a long time to sit down and think… I only just decided this morning and I am not going to postpone this. We’re running out of time.”

“You mentioned something like that earlier as well. What do you mean?”

Ryōtarō narrowed his eyes as he stretched out his senses just to make sure no one was around. This was not something he would like anyone to hear so he would take no chances.

“The elders are starting to advance. I don’t think it will end nice for us. More like use the clan head as a puppet and I just know their gonna do something soon. All the other clans are the same, no exceptions and almost everyone is just sitting down and doing nothing… though I think the Shihōins are putting a decent fight.”

“And what does this have to do with naming me as heir?”

“Like I said earlier; I need you by my side. I can’t stand up to the elders alone and more so with Gen making my life a living hell. You, however, have stood up to the elders and have
outmaneuvered them each step of the way. Almost as if you know exactly what to do to get under
their skin without them being able to do anything about it and that is precisely what I need right
now.”

“What about Haruka and Wataru? I think they have as much right as I do if not more to claim the
post.”

The raven head sighed as he shook his head to try and harden his next words. He really couldn’t
show the depths of his denials for this option but even then he tried to convey it just the same.

“It won’t happen. In public eye you’re my full-fledged son so there is no way to say they have
more right. The elders will put a fuss and take away the only opportunity I have at naming my own
heir… Besides, the kids won’t be able to bear with the insults and taunts. We need a cool head with
an equal stubborn personality and I think that just about describes you. We can’t leave them to
themselves or the bastards will end up doing something unforgivable… I think it’s time we regain
full control of the clan.”

Ichigo decided to overlook the comment of kids in favor taking the situation seriously. Though that
didn’t stop him from rolling his eyes even if Ryōtarō didn’t seem to even notice.

“Is anyone else on this?”

“No… I told Tenjirō before he left but that’s about it… Why?”

The orange head sighed before threading a hand through his longer than normal hair—he hadn’t
gotten a haircut in a while now- before staring into Ryōtarō’s eyes. He realized the risk he would
be taken in accepting such an important post. And he also realized the rather dangerous situations
he would be thrown in but that was just a side note—comparing it to a war was helpful—so when it
came to decide between leaving the man he now saw as a father alone and helping him out the
decision came quite easy. Now if he could only pause the announcement.

“You think we can… not tell the elders that I’m stepping up as heir?”

“Then you’ll do it?!”

Ichigo was quite startled as he almost dropped his cup thanks to the sudden outburst. He certainly
wasn’t expecting that and he certainly wasn’t expecting the man to overlook his question in favor
of celebrating and doing a ridiculous dance that in Ichigo’s mind greatly resembled Isshin’s antics.

As he thought of his real father his gaze slid away from his current one and a rather melancholic
expression seeped onto his face. But it was soon discarded as Ryōtarō clamped a hand on his
shoulder that almost made him jump if only not because he was biting the inside of his cheek. He
turned to look at the raven head with a more neutral expression but apparently he didn’t hide his
sadness as well as he thought because Ryōtarō wavered if only for a second before giving his
biggest smile.

“We’ll do just that. But if I need you, I’ll call you, so be ready.”

Ichigo just nodded in response as he was startled once more into widening his eyes when Ryōtarō
started to fill his cup of sake to celebrate. He tried to stop the man when it started to overflow and
stain the wooden floor but his warnings were taken in deaf ear and all he could do was reprimand
the man once said person realized.

He was in for a rough life that was for sure.
“I can’t believe Shiba-Taicho called you for a cup of sake! Sake! You should have invited!”

“How was I supposed to know what goes on in his head. All I know is that now I have a headache.”

Shunsui and Jūshirō turned to look at each other before looking back at the lying orange head. They were in his room and they had come banging down the door the moment they had found out Ichigo had arrived and let’s just say that arriving at 4 in the morning was the least of the young Shiba’s problems.

Said person was on his futon lying on his back while covering his eyes from the non-existent light—he hadn’t let the two turn the lantern on. He was trying to steady his head so that it wouldn’t spin like he felt it was while cursing the Shiba head to the depths of hell for doing what he did.

Ichigo had barely managed to get to the academy and the only reason he had been able to do so was because he had taken a brief nap before returning. He would be eternally grateful that it was Saturday and as such there would only be extra classes in the afternoon.

The two –son and father- had drunk after Ryōtarō had decided they would celebrate like if there was no tomorrow. He didn’t let Ichigo leave no matter what and refilled his cup every five seconds before eventually getting the brilliant idea to spar and see how Ichigo was doing in his lessons. The Shiba head didn’t even care that he was half inhibited and was only making Ichigo side-step and occasionally reflect.

Ichigo’s only amusement was thinking how the Shiba head would have to go work in four hours.

‘Ha, bastard.’

“I doubt Shiba-sama asked you to go home for a cup of sake Ichigo-kun. What happened?”

Ichigo blinked lazily as he uncovered his eyes to gaze at his two friends—he still didn’t quite know what to think of them. He tried to think clearly even with his pounding head-ache and only found it difficult as his pain doubled over promoting him to bite his lower lip in frustration. The orange head sighed before sitting up with more effort than what he would like while still managing to look regal.

This actually surprised the two as they weren’t expecting Ichigo to keep his noble image but kept that comment to themselves in favor of staring at their orange haired friend.

“I think… I think it’s not right to involve outsiders.”

Shunsui scoffed while Jūshirō merely rolled his eyes. It was pure indication that they thought Ichigo’s excuse was pure bullshit even if they didn’t quite point it out as such. They still couldn’t believe Ichigo was as reserved as he was when they had made it rather clear that they would stick around for a while.

“Well I don’t think we fall under that category anymore. We’re supposed to be friends!”

The orange head only winced as he tried to ignore the pain that he was feeling. He glared at Shunsui while said person only rose his hands in an apologetic manner as he realized he had hurt his friend with the volume of his voice.

“Look, I know we’re… friends and all… but I don’t think I should talk about this… I’m sure
you’ve noticed the new system central 46 pushed onto the noble clans and it has to do with that so let’s just leave it be for now since you’ll sooner or later find out.”

The two pondered over this as they saw the depths of the situation. They also knew of the elders trying to gain control of the clans but they weren’t necessarily involved so as to say. That was the head’s responsibilities and to some degree the heir’s. It wasn’t something that involved other members.

But as they thought of this sole fact realization dawned on Jūshirō as he widened his eyes and gapped at the orange head while Shunsui only looked confused.

“They- you- b-but the announcement-?”

“I know and that’s how we’re going to keep it… at least until needed.”

Shunsui turned from his best friend to Ichigo as he furrowed his brows in confusion. He couldn’t quite understand but even then something just felt wrong for a reason. But of all a sudden the dots connected and he turned surprised to stare at his orange haired friend.

“You’re serious… you’re the he-“

“Yes Shunsui. I am so shut up and don’t say a thing.”

This made the brunette immediately shut his jaw as he processed the others words only to realize something even Ichigo hadn’t noticed. This of course promoted the young Kyoraku to brighten up as a wide smirk actually freaked out the other two while he only ignored it.

“Oh my gosh! Ichigo called me by my given name! Did you hear that Ju? That was my name not Kyōraku-san. Yes! First life goal accomplished!”

The orange head looked flustered and was spluttering incoherent words as he looked between the white haired boy that now had a wide smile and the brunette that was doing the happy dance in the middle of the room. The only thing he could accomplish was to point an accusing finger at the boy before sighing and dropping down on his futon once more; act of reluctance to stay quite as he just groaned aloud.

“Oh I give up.”

“I knew I could accomplish something today! Since we’re on it why not continue being cooperative!”

“I’m not going to answer a million question!”

“Alright, question one: Why avoid given names?”

Ichigo stayed on his back as he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in pure exasperation. However, a new thought came to mind as he stared at his ceiling; through his eyes flashing a rather sadistic expression even as he let his face stay calm with only a ghost of a smile in place.

“I wonder…?”

“There you go with your inner sadistic personality again. You’re avoiding a simple question!”

“There are complicated questions that have a simple answer. But there are also simple questions with complicated answers.”
“And what’s with the riddles?! I have enough riddles with the one she gave me!”

This of course made Ichigo’s previous expression morph to that of confusion as he sat up to look at the brunette with curiosity burning deeply in his eyes; barely hidden beneath layers and layers of composure.

His expression was mirrored by Jūshirō that had stayed quite until that moment. He had decided to let the other do the talking since it seemed he was getting somewhere but now that Shunsui had said something off he couldn’t help but look confused as well.

“Who?”

Shunsui just blinked at Ichigo’s question, not noticing the burning gaze his best friend had directed his way nor how curious and intrigued the orange head looked. All he did was sheepishly scratch the back of his head before looking at the rather interesting floorboard while trying to hide his nerves.

“Well, I kinda fell asleep while waiting for you and I heard my zanpaktou speak to me in my dream. Though there were two voices, which one I did not recognize. However, she, or they said some weird stuff. Like a riddle of some sort.”

“What did they say?”

Shunsui turned to look at his white haired best friend before gaining a thoughtful expression, tapping his chin to try and remember the exact words he was told while completely unaware of Ichigo’s calm and almost blank demeanor.

“Hm… It was something like Forget about our past encounter. The blood is smearing the future. The warm wind curls around the gates of heaven and hell... that is probably a sign... Escape from our sorrowful fate, we are not a flower from hell. We will not let them ensnare us, we shall play our own game... We shall tell you our name as that is the simplest part. We are, Katen Kyōkotsu. Weird huh? I can’t believe I remembered it in the first place.”

“YOU KNOW YOUR ZANPAKTOU SPIRIT’S NAME?!”

“Don’t yell Jūshirō, my head still hurts.”

“Sorry.”

“But anyway. Is it true Shunsui? Did they really tell you their name that easily?”

“W-well yeah. They said their name and then poof, I woke up. Weird huh?”

“Have you tried releasing it?”

The two boys turned to look at their orange haired friend, thinking it was kinda weird to see him with such a different expression compared to his previous flustered state and Ichigo’s inner sadistic side –they had never seen this blank and superior-like expression. It was like having a completely distinct person right in front of them.

“N-no, I didn’t have time.”

Ichigo kept on looking blank, trying to take into consideration all the varieties to see if there was something off about this situation –besides the fact that Shunsui was really ahead in contact with his zanpaktous- but not being able to form any concrete hypothesis. He knew too little of the past to
know if his presence affected it in some way.

But even then he couldn’t let this pass. He needed to know more about this situation no matter what so he wouldn’t stay quiet, not when dealing with such an important topic like this.

“We should go and try.”

“NOW?!”

“Yes now.”

“It’s barely five in the morning!”

“I sometimes wake up at that time to train.”

“You’re just an over achiever.”

“Fact that I do not care to debate about. Let’s just go to the dojo and get this over with.”

Shunsui just pouted before glancing to look at his white haired companion, not being able to believe that the other held a curious expression and looked like he whole heartedly agreed with the orange head. So instead of getting into an argument he stood up as Jūshirō did the same; glancing to look at the still sitting orange head before offering his hand which the other looked at curiously.

“Let’s just go. You’re not going to leave me alone until we go.”

Ichigo looked shocked for a second before he let his orange bangs cover his expression that quickly morphed into a small smile; gesture that was missed by the two boys even as he grabbed the brunette’s hand to stand up. He didn’t really want the other two boys too know he was actually enjoying himself.

“Alright then. Grab your zanpaktous and we’ll all go to the dojo.”

#7#

“So how does this work exactly?”

“You don’t even know? What have we’ve been learning the last couple of weeks?”

“… Stuff.”

Ichigo tightened his fist, doing everything in his power to not punch the other as he took a steady breath to control his ragging headache.

‘Please kill me.’

He turned to look at his white haired friend, finding the other with an equally disbelieving expression that showed just how surprised he was at Shunsui’s statement. Apparently even he didn’t believe it was possible for the brunette to have discarded such an important lesson when he really did.

“Okay, you have to… well first you try to… um, how to explain it-“

“You search deep within your soul for those words that resound in the very depths. Those words will probably be your release phrase or at least a hint to finding them.”
The two best friends turned to stare at the orange head, as they conveyed obvious disbelief. They couldn’t help but wonder how in the world Ichigo knew about the topic; almost as if he knew perfectly well what he was talking about and like if he had experience himself.

Ichigo on the other hand just stared blankly before sighing and averting his gaze from the two boys in a timid sort of way that showed the little shame he was feeling at having said something that sounded a little bit strange. But even then he tried to contain his nerves by grabbing earnestly the hilt of his own zanpaktou.

“Look just… just try and do as I explained and see if you can find anything.”

The brunette along with Jūshirō looked about ready to question the other, but stopped the urge in favor of unsheathing his zanpaktou and concentrating on the metal piece before him.

“Alright… concentrate… Easier said than done.”

Shunsui shut his eyes to try and do as he was told, reaching into the depths of his very soul –as Ichigo had described it- and hearing a whisper while following his instincts to mutter those same words. He barely understood them as he give his sole attention in condensing his power on the sole metal blade before him.

"Flower Wind Rage and Flower God Roar, Heavenly Wind Rage and Heavenly Demon Sneer. Katen Kyōkotsu."

The blade shinned a bright blue in the brunette’s signature color. Ichigo along with Jūshirō were awed even if for entirely different reasons as the orange head stared at the blade that slowly morphed into that of Katen Kyōkotsu’s shape before shimmering and snapping back abruptly to its previous sealed state almost as if she had heard her master’s command but decided not to show herself after all.

But what kept Ichigo in his blank expression wasn’t the lack of a shikai appearing or the whining Shunsui that was being consoled by Jūshirō. No, he had bigger problems because he was 100% sure that blade should have a twin; not just one like it had briefly appeared when it did.

Something was off.

“See! I knew it couldn’t be that easy! Tell him Ju, it’s impossible to use shikai off the bat like that.”

“Don’t worry Shunsui, we’ll figure something out. Maybe ask a teacher or something. Or we could even consult it with Yamamoto-dono.”

At the mention of the old man’s name the three boys couldn’t help but shudder; an unrequired shiver going down their spines as the mere thought of the captain commander –and headmaster- and his monstrous knowledge along with power.

Ichigo was feeling the same shiver and couldn’t help but think how the geezer was scarier now than in his past no matter how calmly he acted in front of the guy. One thing was sitting on a cushion speaking with the old shinigami and another was asking for advice.

It was like asking to be trained to an inch of your life no matter how insignificant the question might be.

“Okay… maybe we don’t ask Yamamoto-dono… But we could ask a teacher.”

“Or just let Shunsui figure out what’s wrong.”
The two turned curiously to look at the orange head that was casually staring at the brunette with his hands on his hips, doing so in a way that made the two think that Ichigo just had to be damned crazy if it weren’t for the neutral expression he wore.

“Figure out what? There is nothing to figure out about.”

“The riddle.’

“Huh?”

Ichigo really couldn’t suppress the urge to roll his eyes and did so the moment his amber eyes caught sight of the dumbfounded expression on Shunsui’s face. He thought that the man just had to be joking to have forgotten so soon about the riddle and thinking that it was bound to be the key to unlocking this mystery.

“The riddle your zanpaktou gave you.”

“Oh! That one…! How does it work?”

The orange head just stared with new found exasperation on his face as he saw from the corner of his eye the white haired boy face palming at his best friend’s stupidity —or was it distrait?- and wondering just how in the world he had beared their friendship up until that point without the Shiba as an intermediary.

Ichigo just somehow was always able to say what Jūshirō found hard to express and as such it was becoming a nice routine for the three to follow in a strange yet comfortable way where Ichigo would point out the obvious, Shunsui would blink at the fact and Jūshirō would agree with the first.

Like he said odd.

“You figure it out. It’s your zanpaktou not mine and certainly not Jūshirō’s. It’s your responsibility to think about it because only you can understand it… or at least intemperate it.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean? You think I can’t understand my zanpaktou?!”

“It means exactly what it implies.”

Shunsui just groaned as he let his arms hang limply at his side, Jūshirō looking at the brunette with new found amusement and Ichigo scowling with his arms crossed over his chest.

For some reason it just kept bothering him and it would continue that way until the brunette acquired shikai.

‘Have I altered the timeline to such extent?’

#7#

“The central 46 chambers were said to be founded by the spirit king himself centuries before the very creation of the zanpaktou with a safe haven in mind. The noble clans are actually a recent trend even now when the spirit king graced the original members of the protection squads with the title. The five great noble clans were chosen upon importance and not political power, only taking into consideration what they have contributed to the afterlife and not their influence. The Kuchikis, for example bestowed the law and order we were lacking long ago while the Shihōins created a jail for those that disrupted the laws the Kuchikis gave. Each clan gave something significant and it
wasn’t necessarily gold and as such the soul king rewarded them with equal power… Questions up until this point? “

As the old looking teacher finished his history lesson about the spirit king and its recorded actions many hands rose in question. The old man gazed lazily throughout the whole classroom before pinpointing the owner of the first student that rose their hand before calling out in an equally lazy voice.

“Kyoraku?"

Said person stood up to ask his question as his sudden movement basically woke up the dozing Ichigo by his side. This, of course, caused Shunsui to smirk as he had been trying to keep Ichigo awake all day long in revenge of that night two weeks ago where the orange head had basically told the brunnette he was on his own in regard of his zanpaktou.

Ichigo on the other hand just waved off the smirk with one of his own that looked rather uncaring while he supported himself on the desk with his arm. Shunsui hated the fact that Ichigo didn’t look bothered no matter what but he was planning something that might just tick off his new buddy.

“Sensei, what did the Shibas contribute with?”

This of course did catch the young Shiba off guard as he widen in eyes while almost falling over since he had removed his hand. He quickly composed himself in favor of glaring at the brunette while trying to ignore the new stares he himself had gained.

“Well, the Shibas have always been a lively bunch and actually gave the spirit of the afterlife with organizing festivals and fireworks. But we cannot overlook the fact that the Shibas themselves created the means of transportation to the spirit palace and as such made something that was unheard of even for the king himself... There is also a rumor that the first person to have used kido was in fact a Shiba but this event was never registered and as such we don’t even know who discovered it… maybe our young Shiba-sama can clear up some of these doubts.”

As the old teacher finished his lecture everyone was now staring at the orange head with new fascination including the geezer himself. It was a little unnerving but Ichigo bearded it with little to no difficulty as he stood up with a composed air and noble don’t fuck with me kind of aura.

He was about to speak up and say not even they had registration but all of a sudden Ichigo was interrupted as the classroom door flew open with such force that all everyone could do was stare wide eyed at the person that even dared interrupt a lesson.

The teacher was just as surprised but once the person came into sight almost everyone recognized the Shiba clan symbol on the cloths of the newcomer. Ichigo was the only one to really recognize the person for who he was but even he was surprised by the panting and flustered clan servant – basically- at his doorstep.

“I-I apologize for the interruption but I have come with an important message for Ichigo-sama that could not wait!”

Ichigo narrowed his eyes before walking up front as he didn’t even wait for permission and received the crumpled letter while completely discarding the bow he was given by the Shiba servant.

He unfolded it and read it with a blank expression even if he was basically raging inside before biting the inside of his cheek to avoid yelling out loud in pure anger.
Ichigo crumpled up the already crumpled letter before turning up to look at the servant that quickly flinched upon making eye contact with the young Shiba. Ichigo held rather cold eyes that betrayed not a thing and for some reason it was the scariest thing he had ever seen.

Everyone that caught even a glimpse of Ichigo’s expression couldn’t help but mirror the servants flinch before getting out of their daze in favor of observing the orange head’s next action.

“Kaiganehiko, is Chichue still in meeting?”

“H-hai Ichigo-sama. He was only able to give instructions when they had a short break... will you intervene sir?”

Ichigo only gritted his teeth before nodding his head and turning to look at his teacher for the first time since the ordeal happened.

“Sensei, may I leave?”

“I... I believe I do not have the authority to stop you.”

The orange head dipped his head in brief thanks before turning back to the bulky servant. Ichigo was about to tell the other to follow him but quickly stopped once said person presented him with a significant haori.

“Ichigo-sama, your new haori.”

Ichigo bit his lip before receiving it and dawning it with full pride, not even caring about the surprised gasps his peers gave as almost everyone recognized the significance of the gold lining of the clan symbol.

“Let us go Ichigo-sama. Ryōtarō-sama needs our heir by his side.”

“Right.”

With that in mind the two stalked out of the room while Kaiganehiko stayed exactly three steps behind in honest respect. Ichigo of course realized this and only sighed before speeding up in a fast walk down the halls before an idea came to mind. With this new thought he turned to look from the corner of his eye towards the Shiba servant without stopping, promoting said person to straighten up even as he walked.

“Kaiganehiko I need you to go get me something.”

“Of course Ichigo-sama.”

“Fetch the central 46 law book in my room and bring it to me in the manor. I’ll go ahead.”

“Hai!”

Ichigo flash stepped away from the academy and left the other behind with one goal in mind. He couldn’t help but feel apprehension and he just knew he would have to play his trump card if the situation was as bad as he thought.

But even then he couldn’t believe that he had needed to come out as heir so soon nor could he believe that the shitty geezers had moved so soon. And more than anything he found repugnant what the elders were doing at this moment in the meeting room just because they felt they had the right.
‘Bastards are trying to marry us off.’

To be continued…

Shit I screwed up! I updated another chapter when I hadn't even posted chapter seven, lol.

Sorry for the inconvenience.
Chapter 8: The heir and the five fools

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach. Or maybe I do… wait no I just remembered I really don’t. Sigh… it sucks to be me…

“Normal speech”
‘Thoughts’

*Flashback/Dream*

#8#

In the confinements of the Shiba manor no body dared say a word. Even the usual chirping birds had gone to a still as if aware of the torment going on. The retainers stayed weary, even as they were told everything would be alright; but no one could really blame them when even the family stayed preoccupied.

The clan members of the main family were all hauled up in the tea room. Neither wanting to hear, nor wanting to miss a thing; because if the yells and arguments were to go by, the meeting wasn’t going well for them.

“THIS IS DISFRACFUL! BLASFIMY! HOW DARE YOU TARNISH OUR CLAN LIKE SOME CIRCUS ACT?! I KNEW MY BROTHER SHOULD HAVE NEVER GIVEN YOU THE HEAD OF THE CLAN!”

“IF ANYONE HERE IS GOING TO BRING THE CLAN DOWN IT’S YOU AND YOUR MANIPULATION, GEN-JISAMA!”

“How dare you ACUSE ME!”

A thud resounded through the thin walls of the Shiba manor and the two siblings couldn’t help but wince at the loud noise.

They wanted to help. They wanted to barge into the meeting room and give the geezers a piece of their mind but they knew it was impossible. The meeting had been prolonged long enough, and even if they weren’t particularly invited to hear they did so anyway. Now, they had a good idea of what was going on and neither was happy.

Haruka was raging with unhiden homicidal anger and Wataru wasn’t faring any better; his immature side making him all the more rash. The only reason why he hadn’t inclined more to his impulsive side was thanks to Haruka which had a strong grip on his sea blue kimono.

“Haru-ne… do you think Chichue will lose and we’ll have to marry some idiot noble?”

The raven haired girl scowled and turned to look at her brother. She was feeling hopeless in the midst of the situation but the best thing she could do was hope –as ironic as it sounds- so seeing Wataru doubt was not what they needed.

“Of course Chichue will come on top in the end. He’s the clan head, he has to.”

The young teen shook his head to disagree with his sister as said person only furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. Wataru didn’t want to doubt his sister or father but the situation was
looking rather bad.

“Your words don’t match with the circumstances we’re in.”

Haruka pouted in pure displeasure as she couldn’t quite disregard the comment. It was true in a way, but being negative was not what she wanted and Wataru wasn’t helping. She sighed, thinking how she missed the small boy that just listened and nodded. This Wataru was so dense.

Wataru on the other hand just stared at his sister for a while before averting his gaze when he heard another incoherent yell. He hated to wait but right now that was his only option—until his beloved Ichi-ni arrived.

“Haruka… do you think Kaiganehiko contacted Ichi-ni already?”

“Eh…? Oh, yeah. He should have at least… Though I don’t know what help Ichigo would be… and Chichue didn’t let anyone read the message he sent him nor did Kaiganehiko tell us. That’s so unfair.”

“Well, I doubt Chichue would have asked for Ichi-ni on a whim.”

The amber-eyed girl only nodded in agreement. This was something she was in honest understanding with Wataru, and she just wished Ichigo would be able to do something.

All of sudden, a loud clank took them out of their stupor and they both turned to look in the direction of the shoji door only to widen in eyes.

At the door stood their dearest Oni-sama with the coldest expression they had ever seen and had never thought possible. Ichigo’s amber eyes were frozen and unnerving in a way. His bottled up emotions only being visible through those orbs that were like an open book. And then, to top it off, the imposing haori with the golden lining that had them gapping at the sheer significance of that cloth.

Ichigo hadn’t really noticed the presence of his two siblings but once he did he tried to soften his eyes with little to no difficulty in a way to reassure them. He heard another indignant yell from the room down the hall and his eyes narrowed while returning to their previous state.

He strode forward with the dignity of a noble heir and held his head high even if he was still wearing his academy uniform under the precious haori. The orange head kept his expression in place, and with the most strength he could muster, he threw open the door causing an equally—if not more—loud clank.

All the occupants of the meeting room froze to a still as the five clan elders and Ryōtarō stared wide eyed at the newcomer. Ryōtarō’s expression, however, soon turned for the better as his green eyes hardened with new resolve.

The elders, however, didn’t take it well and once they spotted the golden lining on Ichigo’s haori, their approval went downhill. Gen—in contrast with the dumbstruck geezers—growled under his breath as he stared indignantly at the orange head in honest gesture of fury. He was already riled up as it was, but now having an interruption—and one by the apparent heir they did not know of—was more than enough to make his small fuse explode.

“Disgraceful. You plan to tarnish our clan further with these monstrosities?!”

“No Ji-sama. If anyone is fit to lead this clan, than its Ichigo. And all five of you have seen it before.”
A silent mummer when between the four elders as they momentarily discarded Gen’s opinions; all of them thinking something along those lines but not being able to do much about it. This, however, did not last long as Gen sent a furious glare to the four subdued elders causing said persons to obey and shrink under his gaze without a second thought.

“This brat plans to lead this honorable clan?”

“Do not speak lowly of my son. He is-“

“I can very well prove you wrong and out do you in anything you throw my way, Ji-sama.”

The two shifted to stare at the orange head as he intervened, both being mildly shocked that Ichigo remained his calm in the midst of it all.

Ichigo, on the other hand, averted his gaze to look directly at Gen with his cold, unnerving eyes. Said person involuntarily flinched and averted his eyes as discreetly as possible. But what he didn’t quiet notice, was how his action almost looked like a half-baked bow.

The Shiba heir gave a rather warm smile that read sadistic all over it in response. Making Ryōtarō grin from ear to ear and want to give Ichigo a pat in the back but refrained himself only because they still had matters to attend.

The orange head closed the door quietly behind him as he completely strode in and sat beside his father with all the etiquette while leaving not a hint of disgrace so as to prove Gen wrong. Ryōtarō beamed proudly and turned to look at Ichigo, all the while maintaining his smile and looking stronger than ever –and that might as well be true.

“Council. I present to you the heir of the Shiba clan and soon to be third head of said clan. He has all the right to be here and as such there shall be no arguments.”

One of the subdued elders hesitantly nodded while taking the reins of the elders; taking into account what Ryōtarō said but still knowing his place.

“I believe there are no predicaments.”

“Good. Now that we have everything cleared out, I believe we should continue, Gen-Jisama.”

One of the fidgety elders flinched at the tone used but straightened up soon enough making Ichigo believe that said person was Matsuoka. The man –looking no older than 50, but even then having snow white hair and piercing green eyes- shifted his gaze to look at Ichigo while quivering slightly under his cold eyes yet sadistic smile and Gen’s harsh glare. But, soon enough, Ichigo noticed this and softened up his eyes so that the man –because that was what he was no matter how much he acted like a kid being reprimanded- would relax.

Matsuoka seemed to take a hint and gave a bow in thanks as he felt better than before. He tried to keep his act together even as Gen hardened his glare and concentrated on the rather compassionate heir –even if Ichigo didn’t quiet give that image.

“O-of course. We were discussing an important issue that has been ignored up until know. The clan has many members at age and even then none marry and we are worried for the clan’s prosperity. So we have decided to implement a method that has be used before and is also practiced in other clans and will start to arrange marriages. We shall start with the main family and will find suitable partners out of the many proposals we receive monthly. There shall be political interests in mind
but we will also bear in mind the compatibility with the soon to be wed. So we believe that there shall be no problems what so ever."

“And you don’t believe that the problem will start in forcing two people that hardly know each other to marry?”

“Y-yes, it has occurred to us. But that is why we shall leave courtship at an indefinite amount of time instead of a leeway of 3 months like usual.”

Ichigo merely turned to look at his father while suppressing the urge to scoff and roll his eyes. Ryōtarō looked back at him and only gave a thumbs up and his signature grin.

“Don’t worry Ichi, we have come to a better agreement and the discussion has diverted from its original proposal.”

“I take it the leeway of courtship was your doing.”

“Yup. And that’s not all. Tell him Matsuoka-san.”

The white haired man looked momentarily taken aback by the sudden order but complied anyway. He gave a shallow bow and once again turned to look at the shinigami-to-be.

“We-we have come to a better understanding on both sides and have decided that it shall only be necessary for those of the main family to ma-“

“No we did not come to an understanding. I told you five that I shall not force my kids into marriage and neither will you so get that in your head!”

“Yes they will you bumbling scum so forget about freeing your brats because that is not happening! We need to fix this retched blood-line and those kids of yours aren’t of any help!”

The white haired elder turned into a spluttering mess and all the confidence he had gained disappeared as an all-out brawl started between Gen and Ryōtarō once more. The same debate of how Ryōtarō should have never been head and how Gen was an insensitive bastard—even if it wasn’t said in those words.

Ichigo, however, did not like being ignored and was about to intervene when the soft noise of the opening of a shoji door interrupted his actions. He turned to look at the slightly open door and furrowed his brows when he saw a hard covered book being presented to him by the small crack. But, realization soon dawned on him as he recognized the central 46 law book he had asked for not long ago.

The orange head grabbed it while smirking at the infinite possibilities he had been presented with. He had plenty ideas to shake off marriage but without proof he could hardly put his plan in motion.

Ryōtarō had done plenty enough as it is and only made his job easier, if not, an even better idea. So with hard proof in his hands—thanks to Kaiganehiko that was retreating back into the living room in hopes that no elder noticed his presence—Ichigo now had a golden ticket to freedom.

His plotting was cut short, however, when a hoard of paper went flying in the air and landed throughout the whole room. The orange head hastily caught the ones already signed by both sides—the clan head and the council—and gathered all the information written to make sure that his father hadn’t approved of something that could tarnish his plan. Once he saw there was no problem, Ichigo stood up and grabbed by the shoulder the raven haired man that was rather busy fighting with Gen.
Once Ryōtarō noticed Ichigo’s gesture, however, the raven haired man stopped his debate in favor of looking back at his adopted son with questioning eyes. But when Ichigo only gave a small yet reassuring smile as a response all he could do was hope the orange head knew what he was doing.

“Excuse us council but I believe a break is due. To make sure both our ideas are in order and actually get somewhere instead of just fighting.”

The white haired elder –Matsuoka- hastily nodded as he tried to approve when he saw Gen made no move to do so but was soon silenced when said person lifted an arm to halt the other and mutter in between clenched teeth rather painfully.

“Five minutes.”

Ichigo didn’t seem to mind this as he quickly pulled Ryōtarō out of the meeting room and into the living room where his two siblings were residing –and most likely ease-dropping. He quietly opened the shoji door and threw his Chichue on the floor while he flopped himself on the ground as well.

This, of course, had surprised the two youngest –not counting Ichigo- as they weren’t expecting to see their orange haired brother so quickly. And as they were about to question his presence they finally took a real look at Ichigo’s serious expression which, by the default, shut them up.

The orange head didn’t take it personally and quickly placed the book on the low table while opening the thick book in a page he knew by heart. As he did this, everyone else observed and awaited an explanation with little to no patience until Ichigo hesitantly turned up to look at his sister.

“Haruka, I have a plan. But you might not like it.”

Haruka stared dumbfounded at Ichigo until her amber eyes hardened in pure determination as she stared into Ichigo’s similar orbs. She nodded before taking a deep breath and turning back to stare at her eldest brother.

“If it can save the rest of the clan, then I’ll do anything.”

“Haruka you can’t just-!”

“I know…! I know what you want to say Chichue, but… but I can’t be selfish and whimsical when I can do something to save the rest… I just want to protect the clan…”

Ryōtarō clamped his jaw shut as he saw the hard determination on his only daughter’s expression. He then turned to look at his eldest son while scanning the completely serious and composed expression on the orange head, and lastly, gazing at his youngest to find nothing but unbidden turmoil. The raven head sighed before pinching the bridge of his nose and turning back to look at Ichigo with the scariest expression he could muster –even if he knew it would hardly even faze the orange head.

“If something goes wrong I blame you.”

“And so be it because if it fails I’m going down with her.”

This last statement confused the three raven heads as they didn’t quite understand Ichigo’s vow-slash-comment. He was assuring them that everything would still end according to plan even if he failed. Ichigo had everything planned out.
“I dare ask… what’s the plan?”

Ichigo’s sadistic smirk was the response Wataru gained for a whole minute. This didn’t help anyone relax but it at least made them hopeful as Ichigo gave them one last scan and proceeded to explain his plan.

Payback was such a bitch.

#8#

“All right, we shall adjourn this meeting and commence the final verdict. Any last struggles from the head?”

Said person shifted nervously in his place as he bit his lower lip in apprehension. All eyes were on him but honestly, that was the least of his worries. Ryōtarō sighed in reluctance, giving Ichigo one last glance before swallowing the lump in his throat and manning up.

“Yes. There is actually… We’ve been thinking that… if only my eldest were forced into marriage. We don’t need to ruin Wataru’s life so early and all the council wants is to marry my kids to someone suitable. We’d both end up winning right?”

Gen seemed thoroughly satisfied by the time the raven head had finished. An evil smirk curling on the edges on his lips as his eyes twinkled in mischief.

“I think we have come to an agreement then. No need for two male brats I guess. We can always focus on the heir and that beast you call daughter.”

Ichigo honestly had to bite the inside of his cheek to avoid attacking the stupid geezer and killing him on the spot. And as he glanced to look at his father he found him fighting a similar war with himself. But he wasn’t about to let their chance go to waste. Right now they were walking on thin ice.

So instead of yelling out a mountain load of insults he concentrated on the elders that were writing down the official document. Just a little longer and they would erase that smug smirk on that bastards face. Any time now.

Apparently his pleas were heard, because no more than two minutes later –and he was glad he lasted that long without saying a single curse out load- the jittery elder gave the finishing touches and passed it towards Gen so that he could sign it and then pass to Ryōtarō.

Once the raven haired man had finished signing it the official clan seal was elegantly placed on the scroll and stashed with the rest making Gen’s creepy smirk worsen ten-fold –if that was even possible. But before Gen could utter a single word Ryōtarō placed the second part of their plan in action.

“I want to establish the courtship now.”

Gen looked utterly pleased even as the raven head glared at him with his entire being. It seemed as if the old geezer was getting more and more content as the seconds flew by.

“Ho? Then I imagine you already have an option in mind.”

“That’s right. And you cannot disagree.”

“We’ll see.”
The Shiba head merely clenched his jaw before giving a deep breath to calm his anger. His eyes were narrowed and eyebrows furrowed even as he gazed at Ichigo from the corner of his eye and gave a slow nod.

Ichigo took the gesture in stride as he scowled at the five elders in front of him with an expression that gave the others goose-bumps. He slowly stood up and stared at the smirking Gen before giving a waist-length bow that left the five utterly bemused.

“I would like to ask for permission to court Shiba Haruka.”

#Flashback#

“Okay, so the elders want to arrange marriages. Specifically the main family, which, is us. So we’ll just give them what they want.”

“Ichigo, you aren’t advising we actually let them arrange your marriages, are you?”

The orange head smirked in an evilly, yet sadistic way that just so happened to unnerve the Shiba head. It was an expression that promised a storm of catastrophe, and all Ryōtarō could do was thank the spirit king he wasn’t the target of despair.

“Basically. But we do it our own way. We go a step ahead of them.”

“How? If we’re going to let those geezers win, how are we going to one-up them?”

“Well Haru, this is where we come in. Those bastards want an arranged marriage, that’s what they’ll get. They already agreed to leave the clan alone so long as we marry. And if we can convince them to let Wataru out, then that would just leave you and me. A male and a female.”

The 10th squad captain suddenly widened in eyes as he put two plus two together and gaped astonished. It was brilliant, but at the same time it wasn’t what he wanted.

“Are you thinking of marrying my darling Haruka?”

The two siblings finally caught up with the implications and couldn’t help but glance from clan head to heir; both with expressions of utter surprise.

But, in response, Ichigo gives a small yet sincere smile and looks back at the central 46 book. Fingers lightly touching the words written in ink with care and gentleness.

“Yes and no. Chichue already signed the document that decrees courtship with an unlimited time. And central 46 allows in-breeding according to the law book, so it wouldn’t be illegal even if we are siblings. So I was thinking, that the safest way to shake Gen off our asses is by doing this. I court Haruka, but we just, don’t marry. Simple enough and also effective. If either of us wants to have ‘an affair’ we would be able to support each other.”

As Ichigo finished explaining the others sat quietly as they all pondered on the escape plan the orange head had come up with. Honestly Ryōtarō couldn’t help but think it was brilliant but he just hated being so useless. Yet, he also knew that no matter how much he fought the elders would still come on top. But this way, they would be the ones to give the last laugh.

Haruka, in contrast, had believed in Ichigo from the very beginning. Even if he suddenly comes out with a plan such as this she still had faith in her brother. After all, in the past years Ichigo has never let her down and she just knows he isn’t about to start. So her answer was clear from the very beginning.
“I’ll form part of this plan.”

The orange haired heir turned to look at her as seriously as possible to try and make sure of her feelings. He was willing to do anything for the sake of his new family but he wanted to make sure of her resolve.

“Are you sure? Once in, you can’t back out.”

“I am sure as hell not letting those bastards get away with it.”

“So we’re set then?”

“Ich, I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Me too Chichue.”

“What? You’re not even sure of your own plan?!”

#Flashback end#

‘My plan. I’m not an immature teenager anymore. The war changed me. I can think with a straight and rational head. Yet it doesn’t mean I know what I’m doing. I just hope it works.’

“Shiba Ichigo, do you know what you’re saying?”

Ichigo scowled as he straightened up and glared at the furious elder. He wasn’t about to back down now and he would sure as hell show everyone how it was dangers to fuck with an undercover war veteran –not that they knew this.

“I know exactly what I’m doing Gen-Jisama.”

The positively enraged man clenched his jaw as he glanced to look at the silent clan head. Doing a great amount of effort to avoid going hysterical.

“And do you agree with this profanity?”

“It goes by the conditions the council has established, and it abides to the central 46 laws. I do not see, why he can’t do it.”

Gen seemed to tremble in ire as he turned back to look at the terrorized elders, tightening his fist as his knuckles went white.

“I want proof. Be useful for once and search the law book!”

“I already have the book with me, Ji-sama. I can show you the exact page if you want. I, for one, actually learn from my lessons. Though if you didn’t know this, I understand. It must be old age which has dulled your fine senses.”

“I WILL NOT HAVE A BRAT LECTURING ME!”

Ichigo couldn’t help but smirk sadistically as he dipped his head in a shallow bow. Doing everything in his power to avoid laughing and enrage the man even more.

“Excuse me Ji-sama. I did not mean it as a lecture. But if you took it as one I can only imagine, what crossed your mind to think such a thing. Maybe you, yourself, thinks to lowly of oneself. My apologies”

The orange head only nodded as he laughed in the inside. He just couldn’t help riling up the man and at the same time it was hilarious to even think about it. The only reason why he knows all these stupid rules is because he gets bored in class and reads the book instead. No one dares sleep in class with *that* teacher.

But as he pushed aside the thought of teachers, lessons and boring, he retrieved the book and opened it on the page he needed. He then passed the book towards the furious elder before settling himself back on his rightful place next to an amused Shiba Ryōtarō.

Ichigo turned to look at the raven head before raising an eyebrow. The man was almost too entertained for it to be good.

The head in response simply waved a hand and shook his head with a silly smile plastered on his face before motioning towards the group of elders that were whispering among each other.

The orange head turned to look at them before a satisfied smile made itself on his face at the unsettlement clear in the elder’s actions. It seemed like if they were reluctant to agree on the arrangement because apparently they couldn’t find a loop hole. They wouldn’t find one anyway. It didn’t exist.

It was a sure win from here on out

#8#

Ichigo gave a gigantic yawn as he walked thoroughly relaxed towards the academy gates. He was so at ease he didn’t even mind being exhausted. It was a mere consequence of going through the whole procedure at that very moment instead of waiting for later.

After the sneaky elders had found no way to deny Ichigo’s request, Ryōtarō had called Haruka into the meeting room and told her the news –the fact that the plan had worked. The raven head had also pointed out how it would be better to sort out the whole arrangement at that very moment than wait since Ichigo was rarely home –even if he had been coming back lately. So the three of them and the five elders had stayed cooped up in the meeting room for a good five hours straight and now they were officially engaged –even if they weren’t planning on marrying. Gen even had the nerve to have the rings on hand already so they both had one on.

But now this catastrophe had ended and they had literally come on top. Now Ichigo could relax a little until the next under-handed move Gen would decide to pull –though he really hoped it wouldn’t be soon.

So with that thought in mind Ichigo strolled into the academy grounds while stretching his sore muscles. The guards only gave a swift nod as they saw who it was and didn’t even question why he was arriving so late. The orange head gave another prolonged yawn as he went into the dorms and walked down the halls towards his own room. Once he arrived at his door he was about to enter but something brought his attention and he stopped.

He narrowed his eyes and noticed his barrier was tweaked and showed signs of intruders even if Ichigo couldn’t sense any reiatsu inside his room. In fact, this was also weird considering there should at least be traces of his own or the intruders.

The orange head scowled instinctively and pressed himself against the wall as he quietly grasped the door and opened it as slowly as possible. Once the door was open enough he leaned in to see
inside. He noticed the light was on, and also the fact that there were soft mummers. But other than that he couldn’t see anyone.

Ichigo stealthily stalked inside and rounded the corner slowly to try and catch sight of the trespasser. But as he leaned a little further his eyes caught sight of two very familiar people seated on the floor and chatting secretly.

“What are you two doing in here?”

The two in question jumped upon hearing Ichigo’s sudden voice. They both widened in eyes and stared at the orange head with awe before Jūshirō composed himself enough to form a coherent sentence.

“Close the door Ichigo.”

Ichigo rose an eyebrow but did as he was told before walking towards the two seated boys and crouching down at their level to stare directly in their eyes.

“Now, what are you two doing here?”

Shunsui grinned sheepishly before scratching the back of his head and glancing to look at Jūshirō. The white haired boy, in contrast, held a weary expression as he tried swallowed a lump in his throat and tried to explain himself as simple as possible.

“Yamamoto-sensei, Kyoraku-dono and my father are searching for us…”

Ichigo furrowed his eyes brows as he glanced from Jūshirō to Shunsui and then back. He was trying to process what he was told but he honestly couldn’t quite understand what that had to do with them being in his room.

“Shunsui and I released our Shikai this afternoon.”

The Shiba heir couldn’t help but show surprise as he was told this interesting fact. He honestly wasn’t expecting it to happen so soon but that still didn’t answer his question.

“That’s a good thing right? So what does that have to do with Yamamoto-dono and both your fathers looking for you…? And you two hiding in my room.”

The two boys looked at each other before the brunette turned to look at Ichigo once more. He had been silent up until then, which was odd but it seemed like if he was finally ready to speak.

“We’re the first ever Shinigami to have ever had dual blades.”

Ichigo widened in eyes before finally noticing the second blade next to Shunsui. He couldn’t believe he had missed that fact. He must be more tired than what he initially thought. At least this but peace to his mind. Now he knew he hadn’t screwed up and changed the future 8th squad captain’s shikai.

But, once again, he still didn’t have an answer.

“Okay, I can see now… But why are you hiding in my room?”

“They want us to graduate.”
“Well congratulations.”

“Whose side are you on, Ichigo? I don’t want to graduate.”

“Maybe Jūshirō does.”

“Honestly I don’t think I’m ready to graduate or face Otou-san.”

Ichigo rolled his eyes as he stood up once more and placed a hand on his waist. He really couldn’t see the problem but apparently his friends were frightened of graduating and more so of their originality.

“Ah, c’mon! How bad can it be?”

“Maybe if you three came to my office you could find out just how bad it can be.”

The three academy students froze as they turned to look at the head master in flesh standing at the door. Yamamoto had a hard frown on his face and was obviously displeased yet for some reason he had an expression that read slight disappointment.

But as the two boys stood up and walked past Ichigo towards the door all he could was sigh reluctantly and follow suit. All the while thinking how he wouldn't get sleep tonight.

‘Why does crap like this come all at once? Can’t I have a break for once?’

To be continued…

Shiiit! I had forgotten to posted chapter seven, and no one said anything! I fixed already so don't worry. The next chapter will come along once my beta finishes. Tehee, sorry for the inconvenience!
Chapter 9: Shut up and wait.

Chapter Notes

This is short because I needed to cut it here but chapter 10 will be up really soon. Also, there's an omake at the end that I am rather proud of (It's actually a simple change of a word in a part of the story and a whole other thing came out of it. You'll see!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Disclaimer: I do NOT own Bleach. Hear this loud and clear 'cause I won’t say it again!

“Normal speech”

‘Thoughts’

Flashback/Dream

#9#

“So, what do you have to say for yourselves?”

The three in question were staying silent in fear of what would happen next. The captain commander was wearing a frightening expression, which made them want to flee.

Ichigo, though, just really wanted to sleep. He had barely come out from a tiresome meeting and now comes another. He sometimes couldn’t help but wonder why trouble followed him like a magnet, even if he had reluctantly accepted this was how it would always be long ago. Problems following him everywhere he went—including the past.

It was becoming exhausting to keep up his mask in the middle of this new dilemma. Ichigo was also very aware of the fact that he was scowling and visibly annoyed. It seemed as if he wasn’t even bothered by the presence of the Eighth and Thirteenth Squad captains in the room, who were Shunsui’s and Jūshirō’s fathers respectively.

“I asked a question and am expect answers, boys.”

Yamamoto was being depleted of his patience, Ichigo noted. It was a miracle the not-so-old man hadn’t snapped yet to say the truth, and the orange head couldn’t help but hope he didn’t. The best way to avoid getting a good dressing down was to give the guy his answers, but nobody seemed inclined to take the initiative. Something, Ichigo was barely willing to do.

“I don’t know enough to fully answer your questions, but I’ll explain what I know seeing as no one else will. I’m kinda tired and would like to end this quickly.”

“Very well young’un. I believe this should be better than nothing.”
Ichigo dipped his head in response before jumping ever so slightly at being grasped by the shoulder. He turned to look at who had brought his attention only to raise a curious eyebrow as his eyes landed on Kyoraku Shunsui. It didn’t look as if the future Eighth squad captain was trying to stop him from speaking. It’s more like he decided to overcome the problem himself, and *that*, all in all, was quite astonishing.

“Wait. It’s kinda unfair to make Ichigo explain, so I’ll do it.”

Something seemed to seep its way onto Yamamoto’s features as he stared at the brave brunette. Something that eerily resembled pride, but Ichigo could only guess. It had only crossed his expression for half a second, and the captain commander was even more deceptive than in his own time line.

“Ju-chan and I… we didn’t *want* this. We wanted a little bit of peace before having to face our duties; finish the academy properly, goof around and hang out with Ichigo… We were being selfish considering Ichigo actually has more duties than us. We just yearned for more time to be kids and not having to worry about tackling our duties. We were cowards. We tweaked with that hard-ass barrier in Ichigo’s room and hid without his permission.”

By the time Shunsui had finished, both Jūshirō and Shunsui held their head low and looked ashamed. It was obvious they were embarrassed by what they had done; and more so, because they had involved Ichigo — unintentionally.

“Then, Ichigo-kun wasn’t involved after all.”

Shunsui was merely taken aback by his father’s statement and could only nod in response. He really had nothing to say and Jūshirō wasn’t faring any better.

Yamamoto, on the other hand, sighed as he closed his eyes and massaged his temples. All this was taking a toll on his mind, then he opened his eyes a minute later and moved his gaze onto Ichigo.

“I believe we dragged you over in vain. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Ichigo was actually snapped out of his momentary daze as he blinked rapidly to try and push away the fatigue. He was kinda used to it, so it came as easy as breathing air. His only problem was maintaining a clear head and his mask dawned.

“No. It did look like I was involved, so I really can’t blame anyone for being suspicious of me when I was there at the time when we were found.”

“It was also suspicious to find a barrier encasing your room, you know?”

“I also find this questioning. May I ask *why* was there a barrier?”

As Shunsui pointed out the obvious, everyone turned to stare at the orange head in newfound interest. Looks like he had gained everyone’s curiosity with a seemingly simple question and Ichigo was beginning to dislike the situation.

What could he say anyway? That he has too many nightmares and it’s necessary to prevent his screams from leaving the room? That he feels in danger all the time thanks to a war started my a madman who still doesn’t exist yet? Or better yet, tell them how he put the barriers to make sure no unwanted guests entered his room when he spoke to his spirits or when they decided to materialize? Now *that* would be fun to explain.

*Yippee!*
Ichigo was now, in fact, left speechless when the dreaded question was thrown his way. His brain was too mushed up to think over proper answers that didn’t sound stupid. His excuses would only worsen his situation. And he honestly wanted anything but that. Yet, when he realized he had stayed quiet long enough, he went forth to respond. His brain still working a mile per second to try and find something.

“Ah… well I- The thing is-“

Bang!

“What in the world is going on now?!“

Yamamoto had sensed Shiba Ryōtarō half a second before he had appeared, and barely twitched while the rest in the room jumped, surprise at seeing an exasperated squad captain of the Tenth burst in. It seemed Ichigo wasn’t the only one Shiba who’s tired. The two duel-wielding future captains could only guess as to what the untimely meeting had been about –they had been planning on interrogating the orange head later that day, but things weren’t going so smoothly.

Ryōtarō didn’t look like he had the patience of the day to deal with their current problem. Despite that, he made his way to stand besides Ichigo with a practiced stalk filled with elegance. Eyes scanning the occupants of the room as he pursed his lips in a thin line and lastly turned to look at his son.

“Is everything okay?”

Ichigo internally sighed in relief since he was thankfully interrupted. On the outside, however, he merely nodded before his gaze darted back towards his two friends and the captain commander.

“Yeah, I was just dragged along by mistake since Shunsui and Jūshirō were hiding in my room. Apparently, they unlocked their shikai and are both dual wielders, which is why we’re now dealing with complicated circumstances.”

The raven haired man looked immensely relieved and appeared about ready to pass out. Looks like someone had shocked him with wrongly delivered news. And being the over-worried father he was, he had panickingly rushed to this meeting.

“Well, that’s good to hear. Here I thought something bad had happened, and right after the meeting as well. Thank god it’s nothing bad. So, captain commander, what are you going to do with the two kiddies? I’m curious now.”

Yamamoto barely batted an eye at Ryōtarō’s choice of words and much less his question. It was obvious that the older man was used to the Shiba’s antics, and didn’t seem about ready to be fazed by them. Ever.

“We mentioned having them graduate, but there has been some problems. I planned to train the two personally and finish their lessons since they still need polishing. I believe that the academy isn’t well prepared enough to help the boy’s in mastering their blades. As such, I find it viable that they stay under my complete guidance because I at least know the basics of dual-wielding.”

Yamamoto had a point, everyone else thought. No one in the academy would be able to help them out. And considering the fact that they both came from noble heritage -even if from a minor house- meant they were also adept in various arts that they shouldn’t had learned yet. The extra lessons students from noble family took had assured this.

With that reasoning in mind, it wouldn’t be difficult for the boys to pass the exams and graduate at
this very moment. So all in all, Yamamoto was making a right decision. Even though the two students knew this, that didn’t mean they necessarily agreed.

“Sensei, are you sure this is for the best?”

The person in question glanced to look at the pale boy that had finally decided to speak up. It seemed as if reluctant resignation was starting to show on Jūshirō’s features and Yamamoto could only sigh in slight pity.

“Yes, Jūshirō. I think it would be best if you two went along with my orders as willingly as possible.”

The white haired boy turned his gaze downcast and seemed to grudgingly agree. The Shiba head, who hadn’t been informed of the problems mentioned by the captain commander, finally made his own conclusions and couldn’t help but feel sorry for the two boys. It was a little regretful that they wouldn’t be able to finish the academy course together –his boy and the other two.

“Yama-ji, what about Ichigo? He’ll be alone in the 5th year.”

Ichigo scowled at this and was about to reproach when Jūshirō quickly perked up, beating the orange head in speaking and being very enthusiastic when agreeing with the brunette.

“That’s right, Sensei! Ichigo just barely stopped being indifferent with us and finally accepted that we’re friends! We can’t leave him behind!”

This time, everyone else was stunned silent by how much emotion the words carried. Shunsui had a firm expression in place that silently agreed with his friend. It was ironic, Ichigo thought, how he used to deny wanting to interact with others and now they were in a battle of wits just because they wanted to stick together. Actually, Ichigo would have pointed out that he wasn’t a child and didn’t need their worry, but he just couldn’t find it in himself to turn down these two. In reality, he felt warm and fuzzy inside –as stupid as that sounded- and found it hard to differ since he had started to like the idea of following the boys out the academy doors.

He was in fact, yearning this outcome.

But because of this, the orange head couldn’t help but over-think their situation and began an analysis of the current circumstance. The two boys looked like they had finally come to the idea that they would graduate whether they wanted to or not. But now they just refused to abandon him, whom they had just met a little over a month ago, and he had been not-so-easy to interact with.

It was the other way around actually. Ichigo had been merciless in his masked emotions, had denied himself the pleasure of calling the two friends and by default their very names. He didn’t want to screw around with the past. He didn’t want to intertwine himself with people of his time. But most of all, he guessed he just didn’t want to hurt anyone else.

He had done enough of it already.


That was his duty and the purpose of his very existence even when he himself was the one that brought forth the pain. Such hurtful contradiction.

But this was also why he was reflecting and thinking about their situation. It was as plain as day that the two boys wouldn’t want to leave him alone. It was obvious that the four captains didn’t know what to say. But most of all, it was true that the moment he would reveal his shikai, any time
after this dilemma, he would be questioned.

‘Why do you also have dual blades?’
‘You could have graduated with the boys, what happened?’
‘Is it so lonely to be left behind?’
‘Did you know of this before?’

Ichigo could easily mention many questions he would be asked and this was more than a little annoying. But what would be the pros in revealing his power here? What would he avoid if he showed his shikai now and not later? How would they react, to a third dual wielder? These were also questions that he could be asked if he decided to do the previous. But at the same time, it might as well be a small price to pay. He would graduate sooner than the rest anyway, so what was the problem in doing so three months earlier? Besides, he was tired of mourning around. He also wanted to live his life since he wouldn’t be able to do so later and hadn’t been able to do so before. So, Ichigo came to a conclusion.

“I want to graduate with Jūshirō and Shunsui as well.”

This single statement actually shocked everyone further –if it was even possible. However, it also snapped them out of their previous haze, so it didn’t take long for the earful to come. Ichigo had fully expected the serious face Ryōtarō gave him, and the slightly disapproving looks from the two other parents in the room. He didn’t even want to mention Yamamoto.

“What are you talking about, Ichigo. The boys are graduating because of a reason. No matter how talented you are or how much I have taught you myself, it is not enough to follow them down the same path. They need training, supervision, and most important of all, specialization. I did not raise you to be so naïve as to believe that things will go your way just because you want to.”

The orange head only stared at the raven head like if he had gone insane. Honestly, the bad thing about keeping low-cover was how underestimated he was –by much. But it wasn’t their fault. It was his own, but it was still annoying. It was also irritating to think that Ryōtarō would go ranting and scolding when the man personally knew that Ichigo didn’t do stuff on a whim. But apparently the situation was confusing everyone—which was not surprising considering the time it was and his vague decision.

But Ichigo was too tired to properly explain his reason. He usually do. However, the thought of doing what he would do in his brash, teenage years was quite appealing –charging head first and screw the consequences. So, the orange head did just that. He spared not a moment and unsheathed his black hilted blade without even thinking with practiced ease and held it vertically in front of him; his other hand coming to rest gently on the metal as he all but felt the glee in Zangetsu’s emotions.

“Ichigo, put your zanpaktou back in its sheath. Don’t make me-“

“Wait a second.”

The raven head promptly clenched his jaw shut as he –and everyone else- noticed the serious tone in Ichigo’s voice. That, more than anything, made him think twice about questioning his son even if he should already know this—the clan meeting was hard proof of it. But Ryōtarō was basically dead on his feet from being in session all day long, and afterwards organizing the engagement. He was pretty sure Ichigo was too, so that would be a good reason as to why the orange head was
being so reckless, which wasn’t characteristic of the boy.

He simply shut up and waited for whatever his son wanted him to wait for.

Ichigo noticed everyone was watching his every movement. However, he seriously couldn’t find it in himself to care –at least Ryōtarō had stopped ranting. He needed his whole concentration in suppressing Shiro-Zangetsu’s uncontrolled reiatsu unless he wanted the room to go ablaze in black.

He inhaled and strengthened his grip on both the hilt of the blade while preparing himself to tug the zanpaktou in two and separate –taking the small form of Quincy-Zangetsu in his left and leaving Shiro-Zangetsu on his right like always. It was a habit he could do in half a second if he wanted –but this usually involved leaving his reiatsu to roam free and throw itself into Ichigo’s other hand- and it was also perfect for combat. Right now, however, all he needed was demonstration.

“Darkness cast upon the unsuspecting moon.” Everyone widened in eyes and dropped their jaws. “Somber heavens enlighten and are torn asunder.” Understanding finally graced Yamamoto and his features twitched in amazed satisfaction. “Zangetsu!”

And just like that, his immediate surroundings were dyed black. So much for going slow to avoid a giant explosion, Ichigo thought bitterly. But, it at least stayed around his now visible blades and didn’t go further. The reiatsu was dancing to its own melody around the beautiful Khyber knife and Trench knife. It was wild and untamable, yet the waltz was all the more enhancing. But Ichigo was able to tap into his own ability and reeled in the flames until they flickered out of existence and promptly disappeared. He then twirled the Khyber knife and buried it slightly on the wooden floor to avoid stabbing someone in accident. The trench knife being way smaller in comparison to the other and deciding to only draw the blade closer to his body while the tip pointed downwards. Best to be cautious in a room full of dumbfounded people that could get wounded by a reckless move.

As much as he would like to deny it, Yamamoto would have to forever accept the fact that he had indeed been shocked to his very core. At his age, it is hard to catch him off guard.

However, the young orange head had done that and much more. He had basically assured his ticket to graduation. Ichigo had showed them his shikai to make sure no one would question him. He was forcing Jūshirō and Shunsui to graduate –since their excuses would be invalid- and Yamamoto couldn’t help but think it was genius.

So, it came easily to make a decision concerning their new variable. The answer was simple once the initial shock wore off, and no one would change his mind. Maybe this was a good opportunity after all.

“I take it this is your final decision, young’un?”

Ichigo merely nodded as he narrowed his eyes and stared at the captain commander. He was showing how determined he was with this choice and he wasn’t about to back down. This was the best for now.

Yamamoto simply sighed and shook his head in reluctance. He was getting too old to deal with overly enthusiastic brats, but he guessed this was better than shy squirts that were scared of their own shadow. Besides, he had already determined the outcome and it just so happened that his decision matched the orange heads.

“Very well. Then all three of you are graduating at the end of this week. You shall be dismissed of your normal activities and will concentrate on studying for the final test. It is not up for debate and
I expect you all to pass on your first try.”

He heaved an uncharacteristic breath of pain.

“I think it is time I step down as headmaster and focus on the court guard squads. I founded this academy a little over one thousand years ago, yet I haven't paid much attention to the squads and their management. And besides, taking in three students with unique circumstances is not going to be simple. I have enough on my plate as it is.”

Ichigo gave a lopsided smile as everyone was left gaping—again—and absently threw Zangetsu-ossan in the air, and into Shiro-Zangetsu. Both blades melting into the other as his normal, sealed nodachi materialized on his right hand before sheathing it at his waist. He was trying to be nice and give everyone time to process what had just happened.

However, as soon as the whole situation sunk in, everyone released a sigh of relief as the tension vanished from the room. Nobody had known what to expect when Ichigo had suddenly released his shikai. But apparently, luck was on their side and Jūshirō and Shunsui couldn’t help but beam in happiness by the outcome. They are now actually itching to question Ichigo and ask since when he had known how to release his blade but they decided to postpone it.

Actually, the whole room wanted to know, but as Ryōtarō smiled broadly and patted Ichigo on the back, the two captains shared a silent conversation—for future use surely—before congratulating the young Shiba as well. Yamamoto simply shook his head once more and went forth to sit down while muttering something about foolish children, when inwardly he was pleased.

Three students had great journeys in front of them and and Yamamoto could only hope he would be there to see the trio succeed. This was his new goal. So with that thought in mind, he shut off the gleeful conversation the two groups of shinigami and students were both having alike. Both busy enough with the trio’s situation to question his decision about leaving the academy—though he could bet tomorrow, first thing in the morning, he was sure to be asked.

‘How troublesome.’

To be continued…

Okay… hum… this was short… Whatever! The next chapter will be published right after this one, so please be patient. It won’t be that long of a wait, promise!

Omake (I couldn’t resist, thanks MugetsuIchigo!):

Shunsui: Yama-Ji, what about Ichigo? He’ll be alone in the 5th year.

Jūshirō: That’s right Sensei! Ichigo just barely stopped being such a tsundere with us and finally accepted that we’re friends! We can’t leave him behind!

Ichigo: W-what do you mean tsundere?

Ryōtarō: I don’t think that tsundere is the right term for Ichigo.

Jūshirō: Than what is he?
Shunsui: Maybe a *kuudere*? He’s really cold and cynical but he’s actually sweet on the inside. Or a *yandere*, violent and psychotic but shows affection to those he is close to.

Ichigo: I’m neither god damn it!

Ryōtarō: No, not quite. He tends to be violent at times and is also rather cold and distant yet he’s also *kawai* and fluffy on the inside.

Yamamoto: I believe he’s more *tsundere* than *yandere*, but is also very *kuudere*.

Ichigo: Even Yamamoto-dono (T^T)

Jūshirō: But still, Shiba-sama has a point. And so does Sensei. So what category would Ichigo fall in?

Ichigo: I’m right here you know?

Shunsui: Let’s make a vote!

Ryōtarō: Oh, that’s a great idea! Let’s see what species my boy is!

Jūshirō: Leave a review and tell us what you think!

Ichigo: Don’t I have any say in this? And what about the graduation problem?

*The end?*

Chapter End Notes

Time skip next chapter!
“Excuse me, can you tell me where I can find the third seat?”

The tiny, blonde shinigami curiously turned to look at the source of the voice. His big, brown eyes quickly landing on a black haired girl with piercing amber eyes; looking like if she was barely touching her twenties and being the-most-beautiful-women he had ever seen. He blinked and momentarily taken aback by the sudden appearance of a civilian in the First Squad barracks. However, he quickly composed himself after digesting her words and raised an eyebrow in question.

“Third seat? Which one?”

The amber-eyed girl also blinked in mild confusion. She honestly didn’t know what to answer, this seated position thing was new to her as well. It had just been introduced into the system a little while ago and she wasn’t a part of the Gotei 13. It wasn’t easy to suddenly grow accustomed to something like this.

“I-I don’t know.”

The blonde shinigami took pity in the raven head and gave a crooked smile in understanding. Even he sometimes didn’t understand the new system the captain commander had installed. And it was all the more confusing with their squad having three third seats. Why couldn’t they just give one seat to each?

“Well, I guess I can help you find one of the third seats. Those three are mostly always together, so if we find one, we’ll definitely find the rest. I’m telling you, those three act like they’re glued together.”

The raven head overlooked the snarky comment in favor of concentrating on the first words. Her amber eyes sparkling with unhidden mirth as her smile widened.
“Really? That’d be great!”

The brown eyed shinigami gave a wide cheshire grin in response, extending his hand to the raven haired beauty and receiving the greeting in return.

“I’m the 20th seat, Hirako Shinji. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Shiba Haruka, like wise.”

Shinji’s grin flattered for half a second before his smirk returned in full force as he finally concluded whom the raven head was looking for. He did a quick search of reiatsu in the vicinity, looking for a certain orange-haired third seat and only finding the other two. He couldn’t pinpoint Ichigo’s presence, and that more than anything ticked him off.

“Well, shall we go, Haruka-chan?”

Haruka just cleared her throat as she nodded and followed the flamboyant blonde, the two wandering deeper and deeper into the first squad barracks and passing by more shinigami as they went.

All of a sudden, Shinji aha-ed and grabbed her wrist—with a bit of difficulty thanks to the height difference- then led her to the left. They rounded a corner and suddenly came face to face with the two third seats in question; one with straight white hair in a low ponytail to the side, and the other with shaggy brown hair.

“Oh, the third seats! See, I told you we’d find’em, Haruka-chan!”

The two couldn’t help but widen in eyes as Haruka just waved nervously at the two. Shunsui was the first to recover and went forth to glomp her in a bone crushing hug, the raven haired girl being startled for half a second before she returned the hug with only mild awkwardness while she gave a meek smile to the white haired boy that was returning her previous wave.

“Haruka! You came back! When did you come back? Have you seen Ichigo? What are you doing with this little brat?!”

“Oh, I am so not a brat! I turned 48 last month!”

“You’re a squirt compared to my four centuries. You still look like a kid!”

“At least he acts his age. You on the other hand, still acts like a kindergartener.”

“Ju-chan~! Why did you betray me?”

“What? It’s the truth.”

The raven haired girl merely stared unimpressed at the scene unfolding itself before her very eyes. She wanted to say she had missed the banter that usually happened when the three third seats were together, but now she just didn’t know what to think –and Ichigo wasn’t even there yet. However, that didn’t mean she didn’t want to see Ichigo –she was still looking for him now that she thought about it- it’s just that she could do without the quarreling.

In the end, all the raven head could do was give a resigned sigh that brought them to attention. They had been so enhanced in their fighting they had forgotten all about Haruka and the fact that she had been looking for them.
“Ne, Haruka-chan? You were looking for Ichigo right?”

Haruka perked up at the mention of her elder brother. Her amber eyes lit up with so much delight that the three boys were momentarily surprised by the magnitude. Jūshirō smiled warmly and came forth to place a hand on her shoulder, his eyes warm as he spoke and using such fondness that Shinji was taken aback. He didn’t know the two third seats were close to the Shibas –aside from Ichigo obviously.

“I just arrived an hour ago and wanted to see Ichigo first. I haven’t even seen Chichue.”

Her enthusiasm was almost tangible and Shunsui couldn’t help but be affected by it. Besides, he was already hyped up by Haruka’s arrival. He also happened to know where Ichigo was, so he won’t disappoint the young girl.

“Oh! I know where he is! He said he would be training in the outskirts.”

“Can we go now?”

“Sure! Let’s go, Ju-chan. Shin-chan-!”

“You so did not call me that.”

“I sure did, now stay here Shin. Everyone else, let’s go find Ichi!”

Haruka smiled broadly as she followed after the brunette through the engawa in the direction of the forest. Jūshirō had shifted to walk besides her the moment they started moving while Shinji merely stood gaping at the scene. They had basically ignored him and moved along and that just annoyed him to no end. They so did not leave him behind like a brat not being able to go play with the big kids.

So the blonde came to a decision. He scowled and ran behind the three, not even caring that he had just disobeyed an order from a third seat when he was only a 20th seat. Sure, he was a squirt compared to them, but he was still a shinigami –a seated one.

#10#

By the time Shinji caught up with the trio, they had already started a new conversation. He decided to stay hidden and made sure his reiatsu was suppressed enough before following on light feet. He was curious after all.

“So, what’s been going on while I was gone?”

Shunsui looked pensive for a second before sharing a silent look with Jūshirō. He honestly didn’t know where to start, and if the shrug he was given was anything to go by, his white haired friend didn’t either. So instead, he turned back to look at the raven head while making sure not to trip while they walked into the woods.

“Well, there’s a lot of stuff that has changed lately. It’s kinda weird how fast everything happened seeing as you were only gone for approximately 10 years, give or take.”

“It was ten and a half. Wataru is still staying for another month but he’ll be back soon enough. I missed the Seireitei. Rukongai was exciting, but I can only take so much time out in the 3rd district. The sabbatical was a breather though, not counting the training we had.”

Jūshirō and Shunsui were rather curious by the time she finished –and so was a certain blonde
hidden behind a tree- and they were itching to ask more. Ichigo had only told them so much, and Haruka could only tell the duo the bare bones before she had to leave. The only thing they knew is that Wataru and Haruka were sent to a lower district in Rukongai by the elders; something about giving them special lessons about interacting with normal people and **deflating their heads** –as Ichigo had told them with the slightest twist of rage in his features. So now that she was back, they wanted to know what had **really** happened.

But Haruka had asked first, and the two new by experience that she would point that out and – maybe- avoid answering. The two friends knew very well that the elders of the Shiba family were fighting tooth and nail to take the main family down –and they were less subtle than the other clans trying to do the same to their own clans. So it wouldn’t be odd if Haruka avoided answering –the siblings had made it rather clear that they would handle their own family problems and that they wouldn’t involve others.

“We-“

“But enough about me. I want to know about the recent events going on. I haven’t had time to gossip yet.”

Jūshirō gave a small chuckle as Shunsui pouted since he had been stopped mid-sentence. Haruka didn’t seem to notice, and honestly Jūshirō thought it was for the best. Knowing the brunette, he was bound to start chatting non-stop into the next after-life. Better take everything in steps.

“Well, Haruka-chan, as Shunsui said, there have been a lot of changes. Ichigo, Shunsui and I were stationed as third seats.”

“I know!” Haruka nodded excitedly “It was shocking to hear you three had been placed on such a high ranking right off the bat. But I guess that happens when the Gotei 13 gets more lax on the strength levels. I’ve heard tales of the times when the original Gotei 13 were "defenders" in name only and was comprised of nothing less than a brutal mob of killers. But it was for that very reason they were a force to be feared. Yet, you three were placed on a senior seat even when you graduated two centuries ago –inexperienced in the eyes of the other seniors I bet.

“Yeah well, we’re considered prodigies, remember!”

“I seem to remember that Ichigo was the one lauded for being a genius, Shunsui. We were just admired for our dual blades.”

The brunette pouted as he was discovered in his attempt to show off. Haruka just chuckled as Jūshirō had a sly smile on his face. It was always amusing to mess with Shunsui.

“So, what else? That’s hardly anything.”

“Oh, me next!”

Shunsui perked up excitedly. His previous gloominess gone before anyone could blink as he rose his hand and jumped while they walked. **So child-like**, Jūshirō thought humorlessly while Haruka just continued laughing.

“So Shu, what else?”

“The next Kenpachi was chosen!”

“What?!!”
The raven head couldn’t quite hold her shock as she stared wide eyed at the smirking brunette before turning to look at Jūshirō that held a sympathetic smile. He looked like if he truly understood her surprise, which helped to calm her own. She turned back to look at the still smirking boy before rolling her eyes and easing herself to wait for the whole story.

“Wasn’t Unohana Yachiru known as Kenpachi?”

“Yup! But something happened. Only the captains know the details, but word has it that she was beaten in one of her recent missions to the outskirts of Rukongai. Apparently this person is a real beast and Unohana-Taicho herself recognized this and stepped down.”

“So this beast is the new Kenpachi?”

Shunsui only shook his head grimly, none of his previous excitement in place and looking highly displeased.

Haruka, on the other hand looked confused as she furrowed her eyebrows and waited for an answer. This was becoming quite frustrating

(Some where behind a tree and not so far behind, Shinji eavesdropped to the whole ordeal. He had just entered the Gotei two months ago after all. This was new for him.)

“Then who the hell succeeded Unohana-san?”

“Some guy named Fujikawa Teiji. But who cares about him! The surprising part is what Unohana-Taicho decided to do!”

“Well, what happened?”

“She turned into the Fourth Squad captain!”

“Isn’t the Fourth Squad the medical bay?”

Shunsui nodded as he kept his eyes wide with wonder, as if he himself still couldn’t believe what had happened.

“Yes, but the thing is, apparently, Kirinji Tenjirō taught her healing kido at some point and was actually pretty good at it. Now, she’s a totally different person and she even changed her first name to Retsu!”

“She’s still scary at times though.”

The white-haired boy interjected, his kind smile nowhere to be seen and seemingly as appalled as Shunsui. This was rather recent, so it was still the main gossip of the time.

“What else has occurred lately? Apparently, interesting things happen when I’m away.”

“Ichigo will be transferred to the Tenth Squad next week.”

“What? He’s being sent to Chichi-ue’s squad? Why?”

“He’s getting promoted to a lieutenant!”

Haruka couldn’t quite stop showing her surprise as she stopped walking and openly gapped at the brunette. This was a little too shocking for her to handle and as such, her brain couldn’t properly digest the words spoken –state that was mirrored by the small 20th seat following behind.
On the other hand, Shunsui was grinning broadly as he stood with his hands on his hips. There was an underlying emotion of pride in the way he carried himself, and Haruka was sure that Jūshirō held it just the same. As such, the raven head couldn’t help but compose herself in favor of giving a sad smile that held much relief.

She remembered how Ichigo would refuse their father’s offer of transferring him from the First to the Tenth and turning him into his lieutenant. She honestly didn’t know what the fuss was about, but she was glad the orange head had finally relented. At least there was some good news.

Haruka was about to ask if there was anything else she should know, when all of a sudden a shock of uncontrolled thunder made them all jump in shock. Jūshirō and Shunsui looked at each other with wide eyes before both of them sprinted towards the dimming, blue light; Haruka followed close behind even in her flustered state.

When the two boys finally stopped, they were at the edge of a spacious clearing in the middle of the forest. This place had actually been made when the first Kenpachi –Unohana- and Yamamoto had fought a long time ago; leaving a giant hole in the leafy woods. In the middle of the clearing stood a certain orange head with a face showing utter exasperation. He had sweat running down his forehead while he bit his lower lip. But what really brought their attention was the way he was cradling his burnt arm close to his chest—it was still smoking slightly.

Haruka gasped lightly as she sprinted forth while avoiding falling face first on the dirt. She slid to a stop at the bottom, her breaths harsh and short as she finally arrived at Ichigo’s side and threw herself onto the orange head while careful with his obviously burnt arm.

Ichigo looked wide-eyed from the girl in his arms to his friends walking towards him with slight frowns. He tried to compose himself, his brows furrowing while he tried to connect the dots and finally came to his senses.

“Haruka? What are you doing back home?”

The raven head reluctantly retracted herself from his chest, her eyes hard with angry tears at the edges even as she gave a potent glare that would have made him flinch, but he didn’t.

“Who cares about that right now! What were you doing?! Your arm is completely barbecued!”

Ichigo grimaced at the implications made before getting a good look at the surrounding area. One would like to think that Ichigo had given as much damage as he had received, but his pride was completely tarnished as he realized that wasn’t the case. He didn’t know if the burnt tree was good enough success for anyone else, but it certainly wasn’t the case for him.

“Well, I was trying to use something similar to Hadō #11. Tsuzuri Raiden, but using Bakudō #4. Hainawa as the current, and Hadō #4. Byakurai as the attack.”

Haruka blinked in bewilderment as she stared at her elder brother. She honestly had a hard time understanding what Ichigo was talking about. The fact that the two third seats looked like they understood, however, annoyed her.

“What Ichigo is trying to say, Haruka-chan, is that he’s trying to combine Hainawa—which is a Bakudo- and Byakurai—a Hado. He wants to use the Hainawa to trap the enemy—as it is normally used- but add a Byakurai traveling into the rope. That way, he not only binds the opponent, but attacks them as well.”

“You could have told me that from the very beginning!”
“That’s what I said, but in different words!”

“You know I don’t understand technics behind Kido! I only use it! And besides, that still doesn’t explain your injuries!”

“Well, uh, I kinda failed… a lot… before actually succeeding… five minutes ago.”

Haruka face palmed and Shunsui gave an amused chuckle while Jūshirō merely sighed and shook his head. Ichigo on the other hand, had the decency to look embarrassed and everted his eyes while scratching the back of his head.

It wasn’t his fault that Kido didn’t exactly come as naturally to him! But anything he learns now is a tool for the horrible future that is growing closer and closer. He’d honestly be better off practicing anything but kido—it took three months to be able to use Hadō Number 31: Shakkahō without exploding back in his time-line-but that didn’t mean he could leave it aside. Kido can be useful after all, so here he is, trying to tinker with kido while trying to not get himself killed.

Needless to say, he wasn’t doing such a good job.

But that didn’t stop him anyway. In the past two centuries, he’s been trying to perfect every area in the shinigami arts and he’s pretty close to it. His hollow abilities aren’t half bad, but still need polishing. While his Quincy techniques, could use another two centuries—metaphorically speaking, he’s Kurosaki Ichigo for fucks sake. So, he still had a lot to do. The only problem he had was how to practice secretly.

Which comes back to his current company. He was practicing very calmly and earnestly when the trio came around. If he had been left to his own demise, he would have practiced instant regeneration and healed his arm. Now, that was impossible and very well frustrating—he mostly never carries injuries. Now he’s going to have a bandaged arm for about a week give or take. Fuck.

Speaking of which, Haruka is now looking at him worriedly because he spaced off—and now that he thought of it, he still didn’t know when she had came back. So instead of sinking himself into his own thoughts, he coughs to bring back attention before turning back to gaze at the raven haired girl.

“Anyways, I finally succeeded, so I doubt I’ll get burnt anymore.” ‘I hope’ Ichigo added in his head and continued speaking, “So if you’ve finished playing mother hen, I would like an answer as well.”

Haruka pouted at the reference but stayed quiet as she gave him another calculating gaze and sighed. She tried to avoid the apprehension bubbling from the pit of her stomach and concentrate on her orange haired brother. He had asked a question after all.

“I just got here like two hours ago.”

“And have you talked to Chichue?”

“Nope! I wanted to come see you first!”

Ichigo couldn’t help the small smile that filtered across his features at the enthusiasm shown. He really loved his siblings to no end—new and old—so it was nice to see his affection returned. To some people it seemed odd, and to others it looked natural. And while Ichigo and Haruka were still engaged—which was still a secret outside of the Shiba council—their love was that of siblings.

So instead of brushing her off—like most would think he would do since nobody really knows him-
he rustled Haruka’s long, black locks with his uninjured hand. Nobody looked particularly surprised by this, seeing as they all knew Ichigo at personal level. They looked like if they were a close knitted family, and Ichigo was more than comfortable with everyone present.

All of a sudden, Ichigo’s warm smile disappeared completely as he heard a rustle in a nearby tree. He stilled, retracting his hand and placing it on his hilt as everyone noticed his shift in mood. The orange head narrowed his eyes as he tightened his grip, battle hardened instincts going ablaze as he scanned the area and found nothing. His heart was beating rapidly, which was odd all things considered. But for some reason, the unease he felt at the pit of his gut was making him nervous.

Something would happen. Somebody was out there. His suspicious was nearly killing him.

“W-wait! I-I’m not an enemy! I swear!”

Ichigo froze as his brain went haywire and his heart dropped. His mind was barely catching up with what the voice had said but that didn’t seem to be his current dilemma. No, the problem was the rather familiar yet at the same time, foreign voice. That fuckin’ squeaky tone that still sounded laid back and had the same Kansai accent as always.

How could he already be here?

“How could he already be here?!

Shin?! What the hell are you doing here?! Did you follow us?!”

This only verified his suspicions.

But still, what was Hirako Shinji doing 700 years in the past before hollowfication? Was Shinji really that old? It might be the case. But still, that didn’t mean he was ready to face such a familiar face. To avoid breaking down at seeing someone he saw die, alive. His heart, mind and soul were basically going into cardiac arrest.

“It’s not my fault that you guys basically left me without an explanation!”

“You don’t need explanation when a superior is telling you to stay.”

“Ukitake-senpai! That is so not fair!”

“Stop acting like a kid, Hirako.”

Everyone stilled as Ichigo’s cold voice echoed across the clearing. Everyone’s blood ran cold as the attention was brought back to the orange head and his shift in posture. His hands hanging limply at his side, his long bangs obscuring his eyes, his head held high and body language screaming superior.

“You’re a Shinigami, so act like one.”

Said blonde looked utterly terrified as his big brown eyes shifted from his orange haired third seat to the other three that looked as baffled as him. He was about to open his mouth to mutter a quick apology when all of a sudden Ichigo turned to look at the trio –Haruka, Shunsui and Jushiro- with a scowl plastered on his face.

“I’m going to get my arm checked. I’ll see you guys later. Haruka, go check on dad as soon as possible. We’ll catch up later.”

And before anyone could say otherwise, Ichigo was gone in a rapid Shunpo. The silence left was rather deafening as none knew what the hell had happened. Shinji tried to find something to explain
the strange behavior in his superior officer but found none. It was rather confusing, and more than anything, frustrating.

“Does Shiba-san dislike me or something?”

This seemed to shock everyone out of their reverie, each having different thoughts in the sudden scene played before them, and each having different conclusions. But of course, the small boy couldn’t possibly know this, and honestly, they doubted he ever would. Even they didn’t understand the enigma that was Ichigo, but at least they had the gist of things.

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Then what do you think happened, Haruka-chan?”

Haruka bit her lip as she tried to ponder over what to say, but apparently Jūshirō caught onto her hesitation and decided for her. He wasn’t about to say the real reason he thought Ichigo had been so cold, but the blonde deserved an answer. He had a calm and measured voice as he spoke, and that more than anything, brought everyone to attention.

“Ichigo is a reserved person by nature. Being eavesdropped on like that probably annoyed him. He doesn’t like letting people into his personal life, so it must have come as a surprise to see you hiding around in the bushes and observing everything. And by the way, that’s very wrong.”

“Ju-chan is right, Shin. You can’t just spy on people like that. And you disobeyed my order. I won’t tell Yama-ji, but not a single word about this to anyone, got that?”

Shinji just nodded solemnly as he agreed to leave this endeavor in secret. He wasn’t convinced with the answer given, but wasn’t about to question it. Instead, he tried to shift the topic to something less confusing and went forth with something that was bugging him since the very beginning. Something that’s been bothering since the very beginning.

“Why is third seat Shiba’s reiatsu all muffled and untraceable. I couldn’t pinpoint it earlier.”

The blonde almost seemed to pout as he crossed his arms over his chest. The way he stood made him look nearly childish, yet it was stupid how the flamboyant boy could still look older.

Shunsui, however, was the one to laugh humorously at the mention of Ichigo’s reiatsu while Jūshirō only smirked with unhidden amusement. Even Haruka was mildly aware of her own mirth as they livened up a little and forgot about Ichigo’s leave momentarily.

However, this only seemed to bother Shinji even more, making him scowl and glare at the three as he was laughed at for his ignorance.

“What’s so funny?”

The only immediate answer he received was Shunsui’s laughter getting louder.

“What?!?”

“Y-you can’t just- you can’t just find his- find his reiatsu like that!”

The brunette was now laughing hysterically on the floor. But his humor was centered now more on the red and furious expression on the blonde, than the initial question. Even Haruka started chuckling while Jūshirō stayed highly amused on the sidelines thanks to the current sight before him.
Imagine this: a blonde midget with shoulder length straight hair, whose face is as red as a tomato, brows furrowed in rage and hands clutched in fists at his side. This was highly amusing.

“What!?"

#10#

He kept flash stepping. Never stopping. Never wavering. Wind rushing against him and goose bumps traveling down his spine. He continued. Eyes hard as steal while as he steadied his raging heart and uncontrollable tremble.

He had been harsh. He knew it. Yet he didn’t care. Anything to avoid hearing- seeing the midget blonde.

He could still- still see the scenes playing before him. The screams, the panic, the blood, corpses everywhere and the enemy breezing past their defensive lines. He could surprisingly see past the gore and yells, shivers and disgust. Everything seemed to be a mere hindrance in his line of sight. Nothing mattered in the battlefield. Even the explosions were simply background noises. The only things that were still worth his attention was protecting his friends.

He picked up pace, his feet unconsciously taking him to the Shiba compound as he tried to forget, forget, forget everything about the cries of misery. The yearning for peace and pain filled screams for help he always heard, but was never able to respond to. The visons he had so vividly forgotten were now assaulting him in full force as if mocking him and saying here I am.

He felt vile rushing up his throat and quickly swallowed. He tried to blink away the tears that gathered at the corner of his eyes. He tried to settle down his harsh pants and closed his eyes for a fraction of a second in mid-shunpo. But grave mistake it had been, because in that millisecond, he saw so much yet so little.

“Turn tail!”

He heard explosions in the background. Bombs, no doubt. Seireitei was basically obliterated. But at least someone had noticed in time and warned the rest. Shinji had basically saved their lives. The “E” had been the cause.

*static*

“Sosuke is the least of our problems! If this keeps up, there’ll be nothing left!”

He remembered agreeing with him. Backing the vizard in his statement and pushing the issue through. They fought side by side not only in the battlefield but also in meetings.

*static*

“It’s dangerous, Shinji-san. At least wait for everyone else to come back.”

“It’ll be all right, Kisuke. I’ve got Ichigo with me, so it’ll be a walk in the park.”

Shinji had always trusted him, and unconsciously, he had trusted the man back. But it isn’t until know that he really comes to the realization. Shinji was one of his best friends back in the war… when he was still alive.

*static*
“Ichigo, promise me you’ll die long after I do. Give a man on his death bed a bit of hope for the future.”

He never has known how useless it felt to see someone close die in your arms. Yuzu and Karin had been long dead when he had regained conscious, so this was the first time facing real death. Sure, he had seen many comrades fall in the battlefield. Others at death’s door step. But he had never kneeled besides someone precious to him awaiting death.

“’Kay…”

*static*

“You shouldn’t be here! You’re dead, you dyed in my arms! There is no way in hell you’re still walking around and attacking your comrades. Shinji!”

“It’s no use Ichigo! We lost him too… she/he somehow obtained his corpse.”

Back then he still couldn’t believe they would abandon Shinji like that. Only later did he notice that wasn’t exactly the case. It just hadn’t sunk in yet.

From then on they burned every corpse possible.

*static*

He inhaled a shaky gulp of air and made a necessary stop on a rooftop three flash steps away from home as he tried to compose his raging heart. He honestly felt he would hurl any second now. But as he was about to bite back the bile and continue on his tracks to lock himself up in his room for the rest of the day, a firm hand grasped his shoulder made him jump.

He airlifted in half a second, eyes wide with fear and alertness as he clearly intended to behead whoever dared sneak up on him. He was mid-movement when his steps faltered upon the image of a bloodied field and mutated hollows. His foot slipped and he was about to fall down the roof when all of a sudden he was caught by the hem of his sleeve. The newcomer gave a startled sound to show his surprise. Ichigo lifted his head, fully intending to bark out an ‘I’m fine!’. That quickly died in his throat as his amber eyes met with aquamarine green ones.

Understanding ones, like they kind of know what Ichigo is going through, but not the reason behind it.

“Chi… chi-ue…?”

“Ichigo…”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope you liked the bunch of revelations held in this chapter. Many had asked me what had happened with Yuzu and Karin and here is a little detail about them. The majority of you hadn’t bothered asking who the bastards were and honestly I’m
disappointed. No one sought to ask who had been the one that had made a living hell out of the past. Well here is your answer.
I created a cover for this chapter (like when you get to the middle of an episode and they put an image with the character and the episode number) and was rather excited to share it even though it’s not that good. Tell me what you think!
PS: It shall be in my tumblr account. Remove spaces.
https://41.media.tumblr.com/6b8a3367bb0dd880bd9c582b4fe8f084/tumblr_nkz0tlPuSk1tkdbqro1_1280.jpg
https://40.media.tumblr.com/2071efacb8f68e648395c40ceb5722df/tumblr_nkz0tlPuSk1tkdbqro2_1280.jpg
Opinions appreciated.
Chapter 11: Nothing can be Explained

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach. Get this into your thick heads already!

“Normal speech”

‘Thoughts’

Flashback

#11#

The room was silent. The only noise disrupting the choking silence being the tea poured into cups. The nice smell filled the lounge with an aroma of green tea. Once the cup was filled, the man pouring the tea placed the pot down and pushed the cup towards the person adjacent from him. The raven haired man shifted in his place, moving to sit Indian styled as he lifted his own tea and took a deep sniff before drinking a small gulp. He exhaled, eyes closed as he awaited in peaceful silence for the hush to end. The man placed the cup down once more before opening his aquamarine eyes to stare at his orange-haired son which had yet to touch his tea. He eyed the Shiba heir critically, his eyes scanning the deep lines of exhaustion lining the other’s amber eyes and the bandages around his arm.

“Are you sure you don’t want to lie down, Ichigo?”

Ichigo stiffened slightly at the implication before relaxing his shoulders into a somewhat normal posture. He didn’t look up however, and only grasped his cup before taking a small drink.

“No, it’s just a superficial wound. It’ll heal easily.”

Ryōtarō tighten his jaw in retaliation.

“You know I’m not talking about the burn.”

This time, Ichigo was prepared and didn’t show any external motion to show how affected he was by the raven head’s words. He simply took another sip before placing the cup back onto the table.

“Do you remember that night… 250 years ago?”

Something oddly similar to grief made its way onto the Shiba head’s features before it smothered out into a sad smile.

“Yes, of course I do.” He stopped, just for a second before his expression darkened just slightly “What about it?”

Ichigo didn’t answer right away, and Ryōtarō didn’t push him either. He waited, knowing that when Ichigo was ready he would talk and not wanting to push his luck. Either way, the orange head never started a conversation unless he was entitled to finish it, so the raven head had no rush what so ever.
“Remember how… you said… you wouldn’t ask what I don’t want to answer?”

He received a nod in response, and Ichigo was doing everything in his power to not run away and forget about this whole situation. But he had come to a decision, and when he started something, he’d be damned if he didn’t finish.

“Would you like to ask…? I’ll answer so… Would you ask…? I owe you—no, I think you earned the right to know. Therefore… Would you be willing to ask?”

Ryōtarō honestly didn’t know what to think about his current situation. Ichigo had looked dead pale when he had caught him on the roof. He had honestly appeared to be on the verge of tears and that nearly killed the shit out of him. The young Shiba heir hadn’t even said a word when the raven head had inquired on his wellbeing. Hadn’t even looked him in the eye when he had treated his wounds. Yet now, after he had hauled Ichigo into the compound and served him a cup of tea, the orange head was asking him if he was willing to ask. Willing, not wanted or liked to. He had used willing for some strange reason. Like if asking was a challenge itself. And maybe it was. Who knew? It all came back to a single point.

Was he willing to ask?

“What will I find if I decide to ask?”

The orange head shrugged, expression hidden and oddly unreadable even as he took a sip of his tea.

“You could find the past, or maybe the future. You can find the truth, or maybe a lie. It depends whether you’re willing to risk asking and on what you ask.”

The raven head gulped as he wet his dry lips. He was uncharacteristically nervous and didn’t know why. Maybe it was because of the tension. Maybe it was because Ichigo was actually trusting him with something Ryōtarō had long given up on knowing. Who knew? But now, he was going to know.

But first.

“Why now?” He tried to elaborate when all he received was a raised eyebrow “Why are you letting me ask know? What has changed?”

Ichigo stayed silent as he gazed into his tea. The swirling liquid reflecting his image in a mirror-like way.

“It has nothing to do with the way everything’s changed. I thought I’d make it through the pain.”

Ryōtarō furrowed his eyebrows in response “What?”

The orange head lifted his gaze and stared directly at the raven-haired man. He had decided, so no backing down.

“If you’re willing to ask, than you might just learn why. Even if nothing can be explained.”

Ryōtarō took a stifling breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose and returned the stare. He’d be damned if he was outdone by his own son!

“Then I’ll ask.” He decided “Even if I don’t understand your pain, you’re-“
“-not alone, right?” Ichigo interrupted with a grim smile “Yeah, you told me that back then as well.”

“Right… of course I did…” The raven head stilled, trying to find a good question before deciding and going forth “Where did you come from? You always used to imply Rukongai, but you never really admitted it.”

Something between a sadistic smile and a grim expression settled itself onto the orange head’s features. He lifted is arm to perch his elbow on the low table before supporting his head by the cheek.

“No, I didn’t. And that’s because I’m not from Rukongai or Soul society. I’m from the human world.”

Ryōtarō’s eyes went comically wide as he stared at his son with unhidden surprise. He was trying to find the right words to say before chocking out his biggest question.

“But how?”

‘What a predictable question.’ Thought Ichigo in the depths of his mind.

“That’s because I was originally human… Some-what human.”

The raven head stilled as he rubbed his eyes and tried to calm down. This was important and he’d be damned if he went ballistic when his eldest son was telling him such important and painful things. Besides, he had things he’s been wanting to ask about since a long time ago.

“I noticed, after you released your shikai, that you’re blade never changed. Not even the hilt. Since when did you know Shikai?”

Ichigo gave a funny smile in response, one that looked grievous and weighted with so much hardships that Ryōtarō had a hard time not grimacing.

“Two hundred and fifty years ago, I traveled to the past. You could say I’ve had my Shikai for nearly three centuries.”

The raven head clenched his jaw to avoid gapping in response. Right now, what he needed was a calm mind.

“How is that possible?”

“I told you didn’t I? My hell that lasted twenty years. It was a war. Our scientists had much motivation. Anything is possible.”

“Who are you, really?”

Ichigo glanced solemnly to look at the raven head. His head was held high but his eyes expressed grief, and Ryōtarō could almost see the bloody images flashing through his amber eyes.

“Here? I am no one. I am simply Shiba Ichigo, a shinigami third seat of the first division which happens to be the heir to one of the great noble clans. There? I was a captain, a Shinigami-Human-Quincy-Hollow hybrid that was ignorant to his true heritage the first 15 years of his life. I am a part of the Shiba clan and regarded as one of the strongest person to have ever set foot in any world.” He paused, searching the raven head for any hint of uncertainty. A single tip to insinuate he didn’t believe him before glancing down towards his tea “But I was just another survivor as well.”
“Let me guess, we lost.”

Ichigo gave a humorless chuckle as his grip tightened around the cup. His eyes were tired and almost vacant in a way that showed nothing but pain.

“Yes, we did.” He turned back to look at his pseudo father “But you know what’s the worst part of it? That we didn’t even know it. We fought and fought and fought and fought and we just Kept. Getting. Up!”

He was tired. Dead tired. He just wanted to curl up in bed and never wake up. Sleep, and not dream with scream filled terrors and bloodstained fields. But it was too much to ask. It was his burden.

Ryōtarō on the other hand didn’t know what to think. He was pretty sure it hadn’t sunk in yet, but right now he couldn’t find it in himself to care. His son, his eldest son was suffering—had been suffering this whole time. His own blood—and wasn’t that a shocker, Ichigo was from the Shiba clan. The Shiba head would rather practice Seppuku* than leave Ichigo the way he was.

The orange head had said so in the beginning I thought I’d make it through the pain. Well obviously, he hadn’t. So here he was now, giving nothing but bones to feel a little lighter. Opening his soul to his great, great, great, great, great, great, grandfather (?) Honestly, Ryōtarō hardly had it in himself to feel pity. Because that wasn’t what Ichigo needed. No, he only needed someone at his side. Someone that knew—no matter how little.

“The war is coming, right? Or did you see something familiar?”

Ichigo stiffened slightly, shoulders rising barely an inch before settling back to their normal position.

“I-I saw someone. A good friend. I’ve seen others but…” It’s not the same.

“We aren’t alive” The tone was quivering, stiff at best. And Ichigo almost gave himself a whiplash as he stared wide-eyed at the raven head.

“You were weary of me. You didn’t recognize me. That just means I’m not alive. But… Haruka and Wataru, are they alive?”

“I… I don’t know.” The orange head shook his head, almost like if he couldn’t believe it “The Shiba clan is a mess, scattered out throughout the whole Rukongai because of some issue. The only Shibas I know are two cousins, my dad and my sisters.”

Ryōtarō looked relieved as Ichigo gave his answer. At least there was hope for his kids. Some sort of possibility that they were still okay. That was something he could live with.

“Ichigo?” He asked, uncertainty lacing his voice as he stared at his cold tea.

“Yeah?”

“Is the war drawing near?”

Silence, reluctance and apprehension is what happened next. A whole ten minutes spent in fear as he awaited an answer and Ichigo went through all the possibilities that could come forth from giving this information.

“No…” A whispered murmur, timid and unsure but still there “About seven centuries before the first move is given. It’s still some time away.”
A reluctant sigh, somewhat between relief and misgiving.

“How old are you, really?”

He received a lopsided grin in response. Something that looked rather amused yet still carrying lines of remorse.

“288 years old.”

Ryōtarō almost choked with his own saliva “Two hundred and eighty eight?! B-but you’ve been with us for 250. And you said it all started 20 years ago. So that means you were 18!”

“And I achieved bankai when I was fifteen. Surprised?”

“I think that’s an understatement.” He muttered, voice laced with bewilderment “So that just means you really are a prodigy!”

Ichigo couldn’t help but give a dry laugh at that.

“In all but kido and technicality.”

“That’s just a mere side note in comparison to the rest. A mix of all races! Ha, now I’ve seen it all!”

Ryōtarō stood up, liking how they were keeping on happier topics and not concentrating on the everything-went-to-hell thing. Ichigo furrowed his eyebrows in confusion before the raven head settled down right beside him and pulled him into a half hug around his shoulders.

“I’m the proudest man in the whole worlds!” he exclaimed, tone transfixed with enthusiasm and understanding “I’ll be right by your side until my last breath, Ichi. You remember that. Anything at all, I’m right here.”

Ichigo gave a small and almost insignificant smile in response. He felt lighter now that he had told somebody. And he was pretty sure Ryōtarō would keep quiet until Ichigo was willing to talk. This was the best outcome. Wise psychologists would say that the best way to deal with your problems was talking –to bad most of them were dipshit insane. But it still worked! Which might just mean he’s crazy as well -which oddly enough, doesn’t bother him as much as it should.

But right now, all Ichigo could think of, was how he didn’t feel that visible pain in his very soul. At least for now.

“Oh, by the way, Haruka came back.”

“WHAT!”

#11#

It wasn’t a surprise that Ichigo couldn’t sleep that night, nor the next, or the night after that one. Actually, he was lucky in being able to sleep 21 hours that week in total –three hours per night. And when he arrived at the first squad barracks one week later, it didn’t come as odd when the whole division avoided him like the plague –his scowl alerted anyone of what a bad mood he was in. However, when it came down to it, the other two third seats didn’t seem to care –because obviously they’d notice about his foul mood. No, they actually pestered him like no tomorrow. Actually, Shunsui did. And the worst part of it all, was the fact that Shunsui almost looked desperate for answers. Nearly demanding after receiving nothing for a whole week. And the very
thought just made him shiver.

“Aw, c’mon Ichigo, why’re you in such a bad mood? Does it have to do with last week? Are you mad at Shin? We deserve an explanation, right? Aren’t we supposed to be friends? Can’t we talk about it” When he received no response but a grumbling later, Shunsui scowled and finally snapped “Stop giving us the cold shoulder, Ichi.”

Ichigo had had enough. He turned around, clenched his jaw, tightened his fist and stroke the brunet with an open palmed punch right in the middle of his chest. Said person flew back a good ten feet before abruptly stopping thanks to a post. The third seat grunted, his body falling with a dull thud on the veranda as he twitched painfully on the floor.

“WILL YOU KEEP QUIET, YOU ASSHOLE! YOU’RE BOTHERING THE WHOLE DIVISION!”

“Me?” Shunsui said while picking himself from the floor “I’M NOT THE ONE WHO’S YELLING FOR NO REASON!”

“Oh yeah?” Ichigo debated back “WELL I’M NOT THE IDIOT WHO’S BOTHERING WHEN I’M OBVIOUSLY IN A BAD MOOD!”

Shunsui flinched, most likely affected by the harsh truth before his eyes hardened to steel gray.

“AND WHO’S THE ONE THAT DECIDED TO LEAVE IN A FLASH AND STARTED TO IGNORE US TODAY AS WELL?!”

This time, Ichigo stiffened, and Jūshirō started noticing the tell-tale signs that things were getting ugly before the orange head scowled once again. His eyes were set in a cold glare, and Shunsui was sure that if he hadn’t been victim to it so many times before, he would have turned tail and run off a long time ago.

“I left to treat my injuries.” Ichigo said, in a low and threatening voice. They had gathered a crowd by now. “You were there. You should know.” His voice stayed even, and if Jūshirō knew something about Ichigo, it was that his usual annoyance and loud self, is nothing compared to his silent ire.

“Yes I was. And even I noticed that wasn’t all there was to it.” Shunsui down-right said. He was starting to get pissed at Ichigo when before it was all just curiosity mixed with indignation.

The orange head clenched his jaw, balled his fists and turned around before walking forth in a predatory stalk. His entire posture just screamed rage but he had decided to leave before saying something he might later regret.

“Hey Ichigo! I’m not done with you just yet! Get back here! We-!”

“Shunsui.” Jūshirō suddenly cut in. But it was too late. Ichigo stopped and slowly turned around before giving a deadpanned expression. One lacking any type of humanity, much less emotion.

“Is there really a we in your arguments, Kyoraku?” said person flinched “Did you consider Jūshirō or me by any chance?” Ichigo turned back forward, his voice barely above a whisper “You sure didn’t.”

And with that last phrase, the orange head kept walking before turning a corner and disappearing into the crowd. Shunsui, which looked wide-eyed and horrified with himself stood silently before Jūshirō grasped his shoulder and made him turn his way. The white haired third seat held nothing
but silent disappointment.

“I would have thought better of you, Shu. And now you just went and fucked over you’re
friendship with Ichigo.”

Shunsui grimaced. Jūshirō mostly never cursed.

But before he could even utter a word, the white haired man left and followed the orange head’s
path.

The division had the sympathy to scramble away when Shunsui was left all alone.

“What have I done?” He muttered to himself, the things he said repeating themselves over and over
before everything went back to the emotionless expression on Ichigo’s face. He had always hated
that, and now he had caused it. He really was acting like a whimsical brat.

#11#

“Ichigo!”

Said person barely even paid hide to the voice of his white haired friend as he kept walking. He
looked at Jūshirō from the corner of his eye and was glad to only find him following behind.
Ichigo slowed down ever so slightly so that the third seat could catch up before they both walked
side-by-side in a comfy yet tense silence.

Ichigo was merely glad his friend was a mute presence at his side and proceeded to control his
raging emotions.

It had hurt. It had honestly hurt. And not because of what Shunsui had said, or what he hadn’t. It
was because his friend didn’t seem to know when to leave the topic be and stay on the sidelines.
Yet at the same time, Ichigo hated himself.

Nothing new, really. He had always hated himself one way or another. In the beginning, for his
mother. Now, for so many things. He honestly didn’t know where to start.

But still, that hadn’t been the point. Shunsui had honestly crossed a line Ichigo wasn’t ready to
cross yet. Simple as that.

“I’m leaving today.”

He didn’t know why he had decided to speak out of nowhere, but Jūshirō was waiting for
something, so Ichigo should at least respond.

The white haired boy looked positively alarmed “B-but why?”

Ichigo closed his eyes for a second “My transfer date is today. Talk about ironic.”

He opened his eyes to glance at his side only to find the white-haired man’s understanding gaze –
filled with honest relief.

“I thought you were leaving, leaving.” He muttered timidly.

Ichigo had the gall to laugh, a small and vacant chuckle “I thought so. But no, I’m just going to the
tenth as planned.”

“Well that’s good.” A silent pause, one completely respected by nature’s usual tunes “Are you mad
Ichigo didn’t even miss a heartbeat “I’m disappointed in him, not mad… Though I am pissed he didn’t stop to think about us I guess. But not really mad, mad. Just annoyed.”

“Would you be willing to talk to him?”

“No.” A pause “Not unless he approaches me first, I won’t.”

“But you would?” It was more of a statement.

“Yeah” The orange head gave a grim smile “Yeah, I would.”

Jūshirō gave a court nod “Than that’s all I needed to know.”

“So you had a fight with Shunsui-kun and now you’re sulking like an egocentric brat.” Ryōtarō said in-a-matter-of-fact tone.

Ichigo made a face between a scowl and a pout, further emphasizing Ryōtarō’s point.

“I’m not sulking.” He said while crossing his arms over his chest “I’m just analyzing the whole situation and trying to get him to understand.”

“So you’re whining.” The raven head pointed out as he looked up from his paperwork to stare at his orange-haired son “I don’t think that’ll help you find a solution.”

Ichigo was about to open his mouth to retort when Ryōtarō’s glare shut him up.

“No Ichigo, I’m serious. Shunsui can’t understand you if you don’t even tell him what’s wrong. You, aren’t considering them either. What’s the big deal about telling them? You told me. Unless there’s something stopping you.”

The orange head looked downright miserable “I can’t; it’s different. You’re a wise old man that knows how to react calmly and rationally. What guarantee do I have that it’ll end as well as it did with you? Besides, they were there. Millennium old men, battle hardened with centuries of experience and knowledge. You can’t compare them. They aren’t ready.”

Ryōtarō gave him a pointedly look “And you were ready to charge into a war at the age of what, 18?”

“No, I wasn’t. But I didn’t have a choice. Here they do. Which is why I’m not telling them until later. Until it’s necessary and I can’t postpone it any longer.”

“Fine.” He said in reluctant acceptance “Have it your way. But what about the captain commander? What excuse do you have for him? He’s too old? He’s too naïve? He’s too ignorant?”

Ichigo actually had the decency to wince “Uh, no. It’s just… Yamamoto is Yamamoto. You should get the gist of it by saying just that.”

Ryōtarō gave a blank face “Okay, you have a point. He might judge us crazy and throw us in the maggot’s nest.”

The orange head gave him a pointedly expression that clearly conveyed his disbelief.
“Alright, alright, he would throw us in the maggot’s nest. Not might.”

“You see my point now?”

Ryōtarō sighed as he went back to his paperwork “Yes, I see your point. Now keep your whining to yourself and let me finish this. I’m almost done.”

Ichigo scoffed as he rolled his eyes but stayed quiet as he was told. He relaxed in his seat and perched his elbow on the table. The orange head could hear the many noises the 10th division made in their training and couldn’t help but feel tranquil. It was rather nice to have nothing to do. But the peace was only ever so bearable before tragedy would come along. At least right now, all he could do was wait.

Suddenly, the raven head stood up with a childish grin as he handed Ichigo a scroll. The orange head took a deep breath and received it before opening it, and reading it. At the end, there were three lines used for signing. One had Yamamoto’s signature, the other Ryōtarō’s and the last was still empty.

“Just sign there and you’ll officially be my lieutenant.”

Ichigo looked up at his father while raising an eyebrow “Do I have a choice?”

Ryōtarō replied with an enthusiastic smile “Nope! You finally agreed, now you’re screwed.”

“Why do I put up with you?” the orange head grumbled; even as he was signing the papers.

Once he finished, he passed it back to the grinning man before said person shoved the lieutenant’s badge in his face. Ichigo sighed as he received it and tied it around his arm.

“Great, now I’ll have to see you 24/7.”

“Don’t be so grouchy.” The tenth squad captain waved him off “This was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Of course it would.” He complained.

Ryōtarō grinned. Ichigo just gave up.

#11#

“Are you sure the brat is still in Rukongai?”

“Yes sir. I’m positively sure young Wataru is still there.”

“Have the assassin’s been sent yet.”

“Of course my lord.” Responded a third person “They were sent yesterday at dawn.”

The first one grinned evilly “Than everything’s going according to plan.” He paused for a second “Has our dear heir been promoted to lieutenant yet?”

“Yes sir. Just this evening.”

“Than everything’s advancing smoothly. It was annoying to always find him with those other two brats all the time. Now, at least the two Shibas are likely to be in each other’s company. At least there shall be no witnesses left.”
“Are you planning on openly killing them, my lord?”

“Like if. Make it look like an attack. Just like the rest of the main family.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” A fourth said solemnly “Because if you screw up, don’t think I will back you up, Gen.

“Remember I am your superior and you must treat me with respect!”

The previous person scoffed “I like to avoid as much wastefulness as possible” He answered in a monotone voice “Speaking politely consumes more time and energy.”

“What?”

“For example ‘If you would be so kind’ and ‘Wouldja’ takes .09 and .03 seconds each to say. That’s a whopping .06 difference. Supposing I ask you something ten times per day, it could cut out to two thousand seconds from the course of a year. Convert two thousand seconds to minutes, and it’s about thirty-three minutes. What can be done in thirty-three minutes depends on the person, but still, that’s a huge difference. As such, let’s not concern ourselves with trivialities, and put all your efforts into your lousy intents at overthrowing the Shiba Clan.”

Gen growled “Let’s see if you’re all high and mighty by the time I succeed.”

“On the contrary. If you don’t succeed, I’m sure you’ll be discovered, and I’ll be freed from your clutches.”

Gen smiled darkly as he stared at the young man sitting before him; tall, lean, with raven black hair and steel gray eyes in a beautiful, bright shade, his hair held up in a low ponytail, while two kenshi kin decorated the left side.

“I will not, Kuchiki Ginrei.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Seppuku: Ritual suicide by disembowelment carried out by samurai. Literally means "stomach cutting."

Tan, tan, tan~
Cliffhanger?
Chapter 12: Pride

A/N: Hey guys! Sorry for the prolonged hiatus but I assure you my reason was completely valid. First I was concentrating on my final tests and university examination. I finished that and started typing again and was about two pages away from finishing. But then, tragedy came along and my dear grandmother passed away. But I’m finally in the mood to type down by ideas and I’m almost done with the next chapter too.

On the other note, those who have been yearning for an update on “The Ending that never came” I am proud to announce I have written down the first two pages, Yay! (It’s something right?) Anyway, I hope you like the chapter, and await the next one with excitement please.

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach. But you already knew this so why bother.

“Normal speech”
‘Thoughts’

#12#

“Pass me the stack over there.”

Ichigo glances up to look at the stack of papers settled on the far end of the table before turning back to look at the raven-head buried deep into paperwork. He’s pointing towards the various papers while filling in reports, so he really isn’t looking at whatever the hell he’s pointing.

“The ones from Central Forty-Six or the ones from the Captain Commander?”

“Both.”

The orange-head stands up with a sigh before walking towards the wretched papers and brought them to Ryōtarō’s side. He takes the opportunity to move the papers they have already completed to another place, before going back to his own work.

They’ve both been working on desk duty for the past day, so the division has been oddly quiet. The only noise that disrupted the silence was the sound of scribbling and shuffling paper which was starting to get annoying.

“Are the reports for the Central Forty-Six finished?” asked the raven-head after five minutes of silence.

“Getting there,” said Ichigo without looking up from his work.

“What about the new training menus for the squad?”
The orange head’s left eyebrow twitched even as he continued scribbling away “Getting there.”

“How have the reports of last Saturday been checked?”

“I wasn’t here last Saturday, you left it halfway.” The Shiba heir growled out.

The raven head turned pensive as he paused his work and tilted his head sideways. He felt there was still something missing but couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Oh! How about-?”

“Don’t leave all the frickin’ work for me!” Ichigo exclaimed “All you do is sign and sign and sign while I read, fill out, sort and organize! Do some of your work too!”

Ryōtarō pouted as he ignored his work. He had never been a fan of paperwork; actually, he only did it when he didn’t have a lieutenant. It was too bothersome to even try doing it. The only thing he liked about work, was how he could sit down and stare at it for hours and never feel his annoyance diminish –believe it or not, it’s hard to keep angry for a long time and he’s been like this for half of his life. So all in all, he was a master at avoiding paperwork.

“Ne, Ichi?”

“What?” Ichigo groaned as he buried his head deeper into his papers.

“Did you know that the big secret to breaking the rules is making it look as though you’re following them?”

“Oh, you would know so well, wouldn’t you?”

Ryōtarō beamed in a way that made Ichigo sigh and roll his eyes. Why was he cursed with idiotic fathers?

Ichigo swears about his luck and resumes working. He was about to tell the man to shut up and get back to his own, when a knock disturbed their work. The Tenth Squad Captain glanced to look at the door before giving permission for entrance. Once the door flew open, a messenger entered with a pale face and shoulders tense.

It was clear as daylight this guy was a newbie.

“G-good afternoon Ryōtarō-sama, Ichigo-sama; I-I brought an urgent message from the training house back in the 3rd district.”

Ryōtarō narrowed his eyes as Ichigo glanced from the corner of his eye to stare at the trembling man. It was clear the message was bad news. And honestly, no one likes the messenger of bad news.

“Well.” The raven head urged, “What is it?”

“U-uh, th-the guards tasked with safe keeping Wataru-sama have been killed and-“ He paused, gulping down his nerves as he was stared down by two vicious Shibas “-and Wataru-sama has gone missing. He-he ran off while the guards brought him time.”

Never be said that the Shibas were forbearing when someone was in danger.

#12#
In a dark forest, far away from society, three cloaked people were chasing after a smaller fourth. The small figure jumped towards a branch before glancing back briefly to check his pursuers. He cursed, the colorful words coming out in a mumbled whisper as he continued flash stepping farther and farther each time. He was about to take another step when he was found mid-flight; the three surrounding him in the air as two started to chant, and one unsheathed his sword.

The young boy quickly discarded his long coat before unsheathing a blade of his own and doing a black flip to avoid the kidō sent his way. The boy grit his teeth as he turned in mid-air to intercept the blade coming from his behind. He was about to twist his wrist, fully intent on shaking off the metal sword before the cloaked figure growled low and his hidden eyes flashed red.

“Shiba Wataru.” The stranger rasped out “I have… orders…”

Wataru strengthened his grip as his zanpaktou was pushed back before giving a war cry and forcing his attacker off. The ravenhead was about to go forth with his strike, his blade having no mercy for a criminal before he was hit with a Shakkahō point blank from behind. The boy grit his teeth to avoid yelling out as he was thrown through a tree and onto the cold ground. He forced himself up, his movements far from precarious as he used his zanpaktou to stand.

“Why are you after me?” He growled out “If you know who I am, you should know you won’t get away with this.”

“But we already have, young noble.” Chirped out the one who had managed to hit him “You won’t get away.”

Wataru gave a cocky smirk in response as he readied his blade for the attack. Two days had gone by since he was first attacked in the training house. Honestly, he had no idea why he was being targeted but he wouldn’t go down without a decent fight. He would make his Ni-sama proud.

“Let’s see what you pieces of shit have in you.”

#12#

“It’s been two effin days since I last had contact with him!”

“There is nothing we can do as of yet, Shiba-sama.”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses!” He slammed his hands on the table “I want you guys searching high and low for him. He has to be somewhere!”

The man hastily raised his hands placatingly as he cleared his throat and glanced to look at the other occupant of the room.

The other merely raised an unimpressed eyebrow at the man as he stayed in his perched position on the wall. He sighed as he shook his head before glancing to look at his father while simultaneously ignoring the distressed man.

“Wataru is strong. He’ll hang in there.”

Ryōtarō all but growls as he stares down his eldest son from his seat on the floor. He was pissed. Actually, ‘pissed’ was an understatement. He was furious.

Lately, Gen has been an annoying pain in the ass, and now Wataru goes and disappears on him. He honestly doesn’t think he can hold his temper any longer. Not even on his own son.
“Are you telling me to abandon him?”

“No.” Ichigo can’t help but scowl at the man for even thinking about it. “I never said that. I said he was strong and you should trust him a little more.” He changed his glare towards the up-until-then forgotten man as he gave his next words “And I recommend you don’t talk back.”

“B-but the search party c-can’t be sent until a week has passed. A-and a missing person report hasn’t been filled so-“

The poor man’s words were muted as a choked sound akin to a squawking penguin escaped his throat. He trembled, his uniform doing nothing to hide his terror as he paled and fell over his own feat.

“I thought I said it loud and clear.” Ichigo intoned calmly once he realized just how angry Ryōtarō was to use reiatsu “You shouldn’t talk back. Assemble a search party or the Tenth Squad will act.”

The man barely had enough air in his throat to muster up a quick ‘yes, sir!’ before he was out the door on trembling legs. Ichigo would have honestly pitied the man if it weren’t for the fact that he was busy enough with his own problems.

“Reign in your reiatsu.” He told the enraged Shiba clan head. “The people vicinity will pass out if you don’t control it.”

“Then so be it.” He muttered through clenched teeth “As long as that stupid councilman gets a piece of my fury.”

Suddenly, he was slapped over the head in a way that made him feel like a child again. The ravenhead glanced up slowly to stare incredulously at his son with an expression of disbelief written all over. His reiatsu had stopped fluctuating, and he was now concentrating on his scowling eldest.

“What are you doing?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“I’m stopping my idiot of a great grandfather from doing something he might regret.” He stated calmly, almost as if it didn’t sound weird. “I know it’s frustrating, but there isn’t much you can do anyway.” Ichigo crossed his arms and gave a long sigh as he shook his head in a way that was able to convey full disappointment—like when a parent is reprimanding a child for doing something oddly stupid “I thought I told you to trust Wataru a bit more. If we don’t believe in him, then who will?”

Ryōtarō seemed to pout as he pondered over his words. In the end, he couldn’t help but feel Ichigo was right. However, that didn’t mean he was okay with it.

There was still something else that was bothering him. Something he might as well point out now that he had the chance.

“Ne, Ichigo.” He called attentively.

“What?”

“You do realize that it should be the other way around?”

Ichigo raised an eyebrow as he cast a questioning glance at his father “In what sense?”

Ryōtarō chuckled as he stood from his seat and ruffled Ichigo’s orange locks. They were getting quite long now. About two inches longer than the nape, but it still held that fluffy feeling to it.
Ichigo batted his hand away the next second, and Ryōtarō was left smiling as his eyes landed on the subtle, yet cute blush on his son.

“You should be the hot tempered one trying to screw the rules, while I would be the one who tries to calm you down.”

Ichigo merely huffs an annoyed breath as he stares at his smirking father. He knows that beneath that smirk lies the fatherly worry Ryōtarō is trying to keep hidden but says nothing of it. The raven head is just trying to protect his children. It’s no wonder he’s throwing a fit.

“What are we going to do?” he can’t help but ask. His little brother is out there somewhere, and not knowing his whereabouts is worrisome enough.”Are you going to send a team or-“

“Central Forty-Six will send a recon team, so all we have to do for now is wait.”

The orange-head stares at the raven head as he senses a subtle feeling of suspicion coming from the man. Ryōtarō has been acting a little bit odd since yesterday, but he hadn’t been able to ask before. Now he was just dying to ask.

“Do you have an idea?”

“Maybe,” His knowing smirk says otherwise “I’m just thinking if our favorite elder has anything to do with it.”

“I think I’d be surprised if he wasn’t.”

“I guess you’re right.”

The ravenhead stills for a second before he starts making way towards the door. Ichigo follows behind without a hint of hesitation as his eyes narrow with apprehension.

He can’t help but feel something will go wrong.

#12#

Two boys walked side by side in the first division barracks. One of them was glaring at every poor soul miserable enough to walk by his side, while the other held a soft smile that almost seemed glued to his face. However, when the fourth seat ran away with a terrified yelp, the second boy found the others demeanor too far.

“Shu,” he muttered carefully “you’re freaking out the whole division.”

“They should’a thought about it before looking at me funny.” Came the grumbled reply.

Jūshirō stopped abruptly as he raised an unimpressed eyebrow at his brown haired friend.

“You think it’d be easy to not stare when there’s a perpetual cloud over your head and a gloomy expression on your face.”

Shunsui snorted as he crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his feet in a nervous attempt to hide his discomfort. He glanced back to look at his white haired friend with a deadpanned expression before he averted his eyes to check his surroundings.

“Why would there be a cloud over my head? I don’t see a problem with myself.”

“Sure, there isn’t.” Jūshirō replied sarcastically “Your mood is even darker than that in the
“Maggot’s Nest.”

“No, it’s not.” He retorted, “If that’s what you think, then I guess clouds suit my mood just fine. Don’t need to include that place to the equation. It gives me the creeps.”

Jūshirō sighed tiredly but didn’t say a thing to deny it. He guessed it was a good thing he had exaggerated. At least now, Shunsui recognized his bad mood.

“So I’m in a bad mood.” The brunette elaborated “What about it? It shouldn’t be anybody’s business.”

“It becomes their business when you give them the killer glare.” Jūshirō shook his head disappointedly before pointing out with little to no care “Just go talk to Ichigo and apologize already. You’ll both benefit from it, believe me.”

“What!?” The brown haired boy exclaimed.

“What are you afraid of, Shu? It’s just Ichigo. I bet everything will go back to normal if you go talk to him.”

Shunsui shook his head rapidly as he took a step back in fright. He tried to open his mouth to find a suitable retort but was stopped cold when he noticed a familiar reiatsu wash over the division.

He turned, his eyes immediately landing on the duo walking towards the first division main gates in an elegant, yet lethal stalk. It was honestly shocking. He had last seen Ichigo two days ago but now he looked like a whole different person.

The tenth division captain walked at the front, while Ichigo kept a one step distance behind. The two held an air of superiors with a majestic feeling to it. They looked invincible, regal; and maybe they were. But right now Shunsui just couldn’t recognize his ex-best friend.

Suddenly, the two got out of his sight, the captain and lieutenant no doubt going to see the captain commander for some business. He knew a captain rarely went out without their lieutenant, so it didn’t come as odd that Ichigo was walking around with Ryōtarō –the fact that his captain was also his dad didn’t seem to hinder them in the least- but that didn’t mean he hadn’t been surprised. The two were going around with a sense of long learned familiarity of captain-lieutenant.

“It’s incredible right?”

The brunette jerked back when he heard his long-since-forgotten friend.

“What is?”

Jūshirō couldn’t help but smirk “How he’s grown up, seems comfortable in contrast with our days in the academy.” He glanced to look at Shunsui to find him gaping like a fish “He’s incredible, right?”

Shunsui stared at his best friend with something akin to shock before he averted his gaze downward. His shoulders shook, the gesture surprising the white haired boy before Shunsui lifted his head towards the sky with a humorless chuckle.

“Y-yeah, he’s incredible. He has always been incredible,” His eyes turned distant as his dry smile toned downwards “Powerful, reliable, smart, cool-headed, distinguished, and regal along with being the Shiba heir.” He paused, his gaze turning back to his dead-serious friend as his own eyes flashed with understanding “But he’s also frail, erratic, oblivious, short tempered, an easy target,
and our friend, right?”

Jūshirō brightened up as Shunsui gave him a small smile. Yeah, Shu was absolutely right. While Ichigo could be a powerhouse prodigy, he was also breakable and often looked like the weakest when he was in a vulnerable state. But they were friends; they trusted each other and were always there to lend a shoulder. That was the kind of friends they were.

“I’ll go talk to him.” Shunsui smirked when all Jūshirō could do was stare dumbfounded “You’re right. It’s Ichigo. I’ll go talk to him and everything’ll be alright.”

“You better sort this out soon, because I’m tired of seeing the two of you sulk.”

Shunsui gave a wide smirk as he stood taller in a way that showed he was proud of himself. Jūshirō couldn’t help but sweat drop at the action even as he was internally relieved.

Yeah, they would be okay.

#12#

“Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t sure.”

The millennium old man pondered as he gave a thoughtful hum and scanned the father and son sitting before his menacing oak desk. He didn’t want to believe it, but he couldn’t accuse the man of lying—he was a captain and clan head.

“Do you have proof?”

“Not exactly.” Answered the raven-head “I have theories backed up with events. But nothing concrete.”

The captain commander sighed in a long suffering way as he reclined back to rest on his chair. He had had a long day. And now the young Shibas were bringing this new revelation—which might not be so new, he thinks to himself. He’s too old for this shit.

“Then I can’t do anything as of yet.” He replies sorrowfully “I can try and get the council to keep an eye on your clan elders. But without proof, I can’t promise anything.”

Ichigo stays quiet as Ryōtarō sighs dramatically and tries to negotiate with the powerful shinigami. He says nothing as Yamamoto disappoints his father again and urges him to get some god damn proof. He merely listens to the two adults, while he hopes Ryōtarō will give up soon.

And yearns nothing major happens.

What his father said back in the office has had him thinking. Gen has been rather obedient lately—in his opinion—but that’s the most suspicious part of this all. He knows they can’t tie the man to Wataru’s disappearance—the guards tasked with protecting him were disposed of—but his gut keeps telling him it’s a fact; the beginning of a long since began anguish. And the worst of it all, he knows his gut has never failed him yet.

“I recommend being on guard.” The old voice advises “Be careful when searching.”

Ichigo knows he has missed a great part of the conversation when he realizes Ryōtarō is standing. His big brown eyes blink up at his father as he tries to assess the man’s next move.
“You’re really going after him?” He’s pretty sure the question mark isn’t needed.

“Of course I am. The council guards could be under Gen’s control. I can’t just leave it as it is.”

“What about the division?”

Ryōtarō smirks in a fully knowing way as he gives a quick glance towards the old man “I know it’s in good hands.”

Ichigo wants to say otherwise. He wants to blurt out a snarky remark to fluster the older man but stays quiet. He has this feeling that there is something more to it than what the man lets on.

The feeling of apprehension just multiplies.

“Does this fall under the category of ‘Something-Haruka-Isn’t-Supposed-to-Know’?”

“You got that right.” He shivered, the ire of the Shiba princess almost tangible in his thoughts “Let’s just say I am on a mission under the captain commander’s order, ‘kay?”

“Whatever you say, captain. It’s not me that’ll get the beating when she finds out.”

Ryōtarō winces but doesn’t say a thing as Ichigo stands as well. They bid the old man a quick farewell and thank you before leaving the First Squad Barracks with new resolution. At least the geezer was willing to do his part while Ryōtarō played hooky.

Now, all that was left was to leave as undetected as possible.

He glanced to look at the raven head to find the man earnest to leave. He sighed, the action well rehearsed as he tried to find the patience to deal with the man he called father.

“You should hurry up and go.” When all Ryōtarō did was give him a questioning look, he couldn’t help but sigh and pinch the bridge of his nose, again “I’ll be alright. Go ahead and leave before someone catches onto our plans.”

The ravenhead gives him a broad smile even as Ichigo rolls his eyes in plain resignation. Though, here’s a fond kind of renounce in Ichigo’s movements. Something that makes it obvious he wouldn’t have it any other way. He has had years of practice with dealing with people like that; so cheery and childish. He lost that a long time ago when he was nine years old.

All of a sudden, a warm hand ruffles his orange locks causing him scowl and reach up to slap the hand away. However, the raven-head crouches slightly to Ichigo’s ear before muttering parting words -the quick whisper to deep for Ichigo to fully comprehend, and too simple to accuse. But he’s so sure there’s a second meaning lying beneath; a whole ocean of emotions.

He’s too stunned to say a word; Ryōtarō’s voice echoing in his head.

“Then I’ll be going.” The raven head blurs out after giving Ichigo one last ruffle. “I’ll entrust everything to you, Ichigo.”

The clan head smiles one last time as he gives a quick salute and disappears in a fit of shunpo. He leaves a stunned Shiba heir behind, the orange head rooted to the floor as the words keep on resounding in his head.

‘What was that about?’ He thinks. ‘Why does it sound so final?’ He can’t help but wonder. ‘Why are you saying...goodbye’?
To be continued…

Preview of the Next Chapter:

“That’s why I hate goodbyes,” he muttered to himself under the subtle rain. “it’s like dying a little each time.” He closed his eyes slowly as he continued full speed while being mindful to the injured package in his arms. His hand tightened carefully as he bit his lower lip to avoid giving a pathetic sob before opening his eyes and choking out a painful whisper “…Liar.”
Chapter 13: Harsh Reality

Chapter Notes

A/N: My poor beta reader is a very busy girl so she hasn’t been able to send me the corrected version. However, I think I’ve left you hanging long enough and decided to post this as it is.

Any error is entirely my fault so don’t go running your mouth against my lovely beta!

Disclaimer: I do NOT own bleach so don’t even think about it!

“Normal speech”

‘Thoughts’

Flashback

Hell Butterfly

#13#

Ichigo seethes in anger when the poor messenger finishes his report. He honestly looks ready to throw up before hyperventilating in pure fear of the Shiba heir’s expression. He had always known the orange head was somebody that no one dared defy, but he hadn’t known why up until that present moment.

Ichigo’s form was basically pouring out a bloodthirsty aura that made him look scarier than the captain commander on a bad day. His eyes were cold and murderous to an extent where just looking into brown eyes for a fraction of a second was dangerous. The expression schooled onto his features was nonexistent to a degree where he could have passed off as a statue.

But the guard knew better. He knew Shiba Ichigo was dead serious. The orange head wasn’t reeling in his rampant emotions. He was tucking them in behind a cold mask of cruelty. To tell the truth, the central-46-guard-turned-messenger had never been happier to be on the Shiba’s side. There was a 99.99% probability he wouldn’t have survived if the situation were otherwise.

“And you don’t know where he is now?”

The guard flinched as he tried to imagine rainbows and ponies to avoid pissing his pants. Scary.

“No sir. Shiba Gen-sama ‘s whereabouts are currently unknown.”

Ichigo narrowed his eyes as he scowled with the force of a tsunami “Revoke that.”

“H-huh.”
“It is Gen.” he spat out “That scum doesn’t deserve anything more. Write that down in your brain and send a message to the councilmen; Shiba Gen is an outcast until found and proved otherwise. That’s an order.”

The poor guard nodded dumbly as he scurried off in a feet of high level shunpo to avoid being in the presence of the young Shiba heir. Honestly, Shiba Ryōtarō was a kitty in comparison to Shiba Ichigo; he was a lion.

Once left alone, Ichigo tsk-ed before gritting his teeth with unhidden anger as he scurried off in a hurried pace towards the captain’s office. He couldn’t believe that the moment he set foot in the division, was the moment trouble would come along. Ryōtarō hadn’t left long ago either –about half a day, it was already night time- and now he had new information. This just kept on getting worse and worse.

He strode into the office like he owned the place before settling down on the couch while clutching his head to think. He was as alone as he could get since duties were over for the day, so he didn’t bother masking his fury. His pensive frown was harsher than ever as he bit his lower lip to avoid shouting out in desperation. The more he thought, the darker his conclusions became.

There was no way in hell this would end nice and easy.

Now that he thought about it, fighting pseudo hollows in Hueco Mundo was ten times better than this. Back in the war everything was as simple as it could get. Kill or get killed. Survive or join the dead. However, since coming to the past everything turned complicated. Think ahead of time, make sure to stay on the timeline, keeping distance from people, getting stronger and making sure to look normal.

Sometimes he couldn’t help but think leading a battalion to battle was easier.

In the end, Ichigo just sighed as he closed his eyes in resignation. Just as he was about to stand up and go speak to Yamamoto once more, a hell butterfly flapped in with unsteady wings. His brown eyes stared at the tired insect, his orbs skillfully scanning the pattern on its wings as it carefully laid on his shoulder and brushed an extremity against his cheek gently.

Ichigo raised a finger to caress the poor thing while he successfully prodded it to jump onto his digit. Its black wings flapped once as it gave a low jingle –the white pattern on its wings barely recognizable.

“You have news for me.” He whispered gently to the Shiba messenger. The insect jingled once more, its tiny wings flapping gingerly as it seemed to regain its lost energy “Will you share it with me?” the patterned butterfly stayed still for a second before Ichigo released a small pulse of reiatsu into the messenger. This successfully convinced the hell butterfly of its decision as it jingled one last time and relayed the message.

Ichigo couldn’t find it in himself to hate the little thing.

#13#

Ryōtarō raised his speed as he heightened his senses to try and find anything that could lead him to his youngest son while simultaneously avoiding the tall trees. He had already gone to the training house back in district 3 to try and find trace of Wataru’s spiritual pressure. He really hadn’t found anything, but the path of destruction was a good hint anyways. After two hours of following obvious signs, he had finally picked up the young boy’s reiatsu and was now sniffing a real track.
It was pretty hard though, the signature muted or raw to a level where he knew Wataru had fought hard. But the real problem of it was how other signatures also prevailed. It got confusing –when the scents mixed up to a degree where it was impossible to discern- but even then he continued onwards as best as he could.

Ryōtarō knew he could be waltzing into a trap -if he were the hunter instead of the prey, he would also do the same- yet nothing stopped his hazard searching and his unwavering pace. He would find his son’s location even if it was the last thing he did. It was the least he could do if he was going to fail –get Ichi the information they lacked. Because the raven head knew Ichigo would succeed wherever he couldn’t. The orange head was the hope and light of the Shiba clan, he had been certain of this even before Ichigo had revealed his dark past.

His only regret was giving all that responsibility to his son.

But Ryōtarō wasn’t worried. Ichigo wasn’t alone. He smiled to himself as he thought of young Ukitake and Shunsui. Those two would undoubtedly stay by Ichigo’s side no matter how much he thought otherwise. They would take care of his son till the end. That was what they had promised on that day inside Yamamoto’s office back when he was still the headmaster.

“I’ll keep an eye on him. He sounds interesting. And I bet he could be a good friend if only he opens up.”

The raven head chuckles to himself as he speeds up and absently ignores the raindrops falling into his eyes. It wasn’t the first time, and it wasn’t the last. He had entrusted Ichigo to those two boys millions of times over the years even if they hadn’t noticed. He trusted them.

Over…

“I’ll leave that to you then…”

And over…

“You two kids! I entrust you with my eldest son’s soul! I have to get back to work so play nice!”

And over again…

“No Ichigo, I’m serious. Shunsui can’t understand you if you don’t even tell him what’s wrong. You, aren’t considering them either. What’s the big deal about telling them? You told me. Unless there’s something stopping you.”

And he would keep on doing it in the future if he was given the chance. He knew Ichigo was in good hands.

Ryōtarō took a deep breath as his trail disappeared for a split of a second and his feet wavered to take the next step. However, it soon continued in a straight line and he forgot about the up brut shift in favor of continuing his scan. He could almost pinpoint Wataru’s exact location, his daddy-spying-skills being very useful in his current situation since he’s better accustomed to his children’s reiatsu.

He gave a cocky smile when his senses brushed softly against a familiar presence and mentally cheered his success. The raven head was about to give a giant leap in the right direction when suddenly, he heard a zoom-like sound and felt an odd sensation originating from his rib cage. He stupidly stopped on a tree branch; his body flat against the bark as he glanced down to find the source of his discomfort.
The arrow sticking out of his abdomen was not what he was expecting.

Ryōtarō paled suddenly as he grit his teeth and clutched his injury to pressure it and avoid major blood loss. He whirled around the next second, his highly alert senses on overdrive giving him a half a second head start as he narrowly avoided another stab — a robbed person standing in his previous location.

“That was very close.” He whistled, his smug smirk providing a mean to ground himself to the here and now without feeling fear “Do you mind **not** waving around dangerous weapons out of nowhere?”

“It wouldn’t make a difference, now would it?” the newcomer chirped out, her jaw being the only thing visible as she gave a smirk of her own “You’re already injured anyways. It doesn’t change a thing when you’re already dying.”

“Now you’re selling me short.” Ryōtarō pointed out confidently “Did you think an injury of this caliber would take me down?”

The robbed individual’s smirk only widened as she brought her forefinger to her lips and traced her blood red lips in a vain way “Did you think we would give you an injury of **that** caliber?”

Suddenly, Ryōtarō’s eyes widened as he started to feel a numbing pain coming from his wound. He coughed, his free hand coming up to cover his mouth as he started to feel blood trickle down his chin.

“This is no ordinary arrow.’

“So you finally realized it?” she inquired cruelly “I honestly enjoy seeing people in pain. Too bad I haven’t been able to use it on your precious son.”

The raven head gave a strained laugh as he supported himself against a nearby tree. The robbed woman’s smirk flatters, and for a moment, Ryōtarō is left wanting to celebrate his victory.

“What’s so funny about dying, old man?”

The tenth division captain gave another chuckle as he gives a court answer with unhidden amusement “Nothing.” He laughs again “Nothing at all.”

The enemy growls as Ryōtarō barely bats an eye.

“It’s just-” he laughs again as he stares up to grin stupidly at nothing “that just means Wataru has given his pursuers a run for their money.” He turns back to look at the frowning women as he gives a smug smirk “That means he’s alive and kicking.”

“Not for long; the others are still searching for him”

“I don’t think you’ll find him.” He points out.

“Oh, we’ll find him. And by the time we’re done with your brat, you’re other kids will be down as well.” Her creepy smirk returns as he Ryōtarō scowls in an unlikely way “There’s nothing you can do.”

“Oh yeah?” he narrows his eyes “Think fast.” And he’s gone before she can react.

“Bastard!”
Ichigo continues flash stepping at breakneck speed as he grits his teeth in pure desperation and his chocolate orbs flash into golden for a split second. His waraji-clad feet kick off the ground harsher as he jumps off a rooftop and onto the next –his father’s words resounding deep in his skull.

“I-Chigo, listen carefully; I don’t have much time. He’s at the edge of the second district, about five km west from the main town.”

He felt relief back then; a light at the end of the tunnel. It actually kept him thinking –naively- that it was finally over and everything would be alright –deep down he knew this was wrong.

“There are e-enemies following him, and another hidden in the shadows –fucking bitch, that hurts!”

But his air is soon enough caught in his throat once he hears the frantic efforts of his father. There’s a static noise in the background, an eerie laughter that sends chills down Ichigo’s spine like nothing he has heard before along with a dull noise of metal against metal.

For some reason, his goodbye just keeps on making more sense. But with each passing second, Ichigo just can’t accept it.

There are louder curses in the background, a sudden explosion that can only be considered as kido resounding with enough force to break him out of his reverie and back to attention as he steps onto the next roof.

“I don’t th-think I’ll be able to get to him; I’ll only be a-“

More noises in the background as Ryōtarō swallows hard. He’s obviously in pain, and this just clears any suspicion Ichigo had. Chichue is noticeably wounded.

“-a hindrance by then. You need to get Haruka-chan to safety and find your brother as fast as you can; they’re a-also coming after the two of you”

The raven head gulps another mouthful of spit as he tries to avoid coughing and only succeeds in giving a pitiful wheeze instead. That noise only makes Ichigo grit his teeth more as he almost arrives at the Shiba manor.

Worry about you! He wants to yell. We will be fine! He can’t help the need to convey. But he can’t do neither, for his father is miles away, either fighting for his life, or dying –and the mere thought of it frightens him to no end. It almost feels like a déjà vous.

“H-hide and be careful. I’m really sorry I won’t be able to help, but I know you can do it, Ichi.”

He can’t help but think his father is being stupid. Entrust him with Haruka and Wataru? He couldn’t keep safe his own family back in the war, but Ryōtarō believes he can take care of his kids’ just fine. Pathetic, he thinks of himself. What kind of protector he was –as proof, he’s letting it happen all over again.

“Y-you’ll save your brothers.”

But the raven head still affirms he will.

“You’re my successor, my son.”
Ryō still thinks he can take the clan far, and still thinks of him as his son.

“There’s a reason I’m trusting you with my everything; our family, the clan, the division, the future.”

His words don’t waver, and Ichigo can’t sense a single lie in his tear filled words; back when he first heard it, or now under the thin rain.

“Ichi, yesterday is gone, and tomorrow has yet to come. Make it memorable.”

The orange-haired lieutenant makes a strained noise from the back of his throat as he kicks open the yard gates. He notices the lack of guards, and immediately heightens his senses as he blinks back unbidden tears –Ryōtarō’s final words left unsaid echoing in his mind.

I believe in you…

‘Don’t believe in a failure.’

“Haruka!” he yells when he notices the lack of human beings “Haru, where the hell are you?!” His voice travels the entire compound, his hurried steps taking him down the veranda as he hopes to find anything to appease his gut retching worry “Shiba Haruka, if this is your idea of a joke, you’ll get a piece of my mind when I find you!” he can’t help but yearn it’s a joke.

He doesn’t think he can handle another loss this night—or anytime soon. He’s dying little by little with each tick of the clock.

Suddenly, he hears a faint noise coming from his left. His steps quickly come to a halt, and his whole body goes rigid. There are enemies, Ryōtarō had said, he would not act on his emotions—if he did, he would have left a chaos that far surpassed a tsunami a long time ago- he stayed calm and closed his eyes as he breathed in a soft inhale of air. Calm…

Another noise comes to attention, and if he weren’t so good at reading spiritual pressure, he’s sure he would have missed the small flame that belonged to his sister. It was masked, a bizarre fuzzy interference lagging his tracking to an almost useless level—if he weren’t a master, he would have failed.

As he finally follows the trail left behind —brushes of reiatsu on the floorboards, walls and other random things specifically left behind— he forms a plan in his head. He takes a few steps forward before quieting them to nonexistent. He twists his own reiatsu, the sense fuzzy —like Haruka’s— in a perfected manor. It almost seems normal—to a certain degree- and he’s proud of himself when he scans his own signature and notices it’s starting to leave the compound —like an invisible force departing. Once he’s done, all this in a spasm of three seconds top, he distorts his reiatsu back to relatively ordinary —where he’s present, but people can’t pinpoint his exact location. He usually always stays this way, but now he has an accurate use—he can tip off any intruder.

So now, with light steps, and distorted reiatsu, he makes his way left; his pace hurried and concise as he gets nearer and nearer. Ichigo hears another noise straight ahead, and makes a mental celebration as he perceives his objective was met. Whoever is on the other side of the shoji door a few feet up ahead has no idea what is going to happen next.

The next moment, however, Ichigo opens the door slowly and silently as he peers inside the room to find out what he’s against. The sight that greets him, is not a good one, and for a second he almost charges in recklessly.
Haruka is falling onto the ground, the movement is hazard, and to Ichigo it’s almost in slow motion. The intruder is unknown, but his sword is out in the open, and under the moon’s dim light, it’s easy to tell that its blade is coated in something. The individual is crouched down slightly, his solar plexus obviously disrupted in a vulnerable way even as he keeps its blade horizontal and ready for action.

Actually, Ichigo was about to attack, his posture shifting to predator as he inclines forward and supports his weight against the balls of his feet. However, his eyes suddenly widen in slight panic as his instincts yell at him to act now. Ichigo throws the door open, the sound only slightly distracting the unknown person as he heaves his blade downwards towards his fallen sister at an alarming speed while he throws himself in-between the two—he doesn’t even realize what he’s doing until he feels the searing hot pain against his abdomen.

“Gaah!” he cries out, his face consorting into pain filled anger as he falls onto a knee instinctively but unsheaths his zanpaktou without hesitation. His opponent seems mildly alarmed, his posture turning stiff and his hand twitching slightly as if he’s barely realized what he’s doing.

But the robbed person doesn’t even have time to think as Ichigo whirls around and throws himself to his feet while simultaneously flipping his grip on his hilt and slashing upwards. The individual narrowly dodges by pure instinct and no brain as he parries against Ichigo’s next strike before throwing the orange head off balance when he aims towards his bleeding wound.

The Shiba heir seems taken aback slightly as he’s pushed down to a single knee once again but acts accordingly when he aims to kick the intruder over his own feet. The cloaked person panics again, movements hazard as he stumbles over Ichigo’s attack but composes himself fast and aims again towards the orange head’s weak point and turns around to make a hasty retreat.

Ichigo throws himself to his feet just as fast and he barely stops to wince and pressure his bleeding wound with his left hand. He flash steps out the hallway, his feet following the escapee close behind to end it as soon as possible—Haruka obviously needs quick attention. The person quickens his pace into the Shiba backyard and towards the giant forest. The orange head quickly notices a chance and sheaths his blade but continues his chase as he tightens his grip on his wound—it’s deeper than what he initially thought.

However, Ichigo concentrates on his opponent, he needs concentration if he’s going to succeed, so for now, injuries are forgotten and danger is pushed aside—right now that’s his quickest and safest way out. He readied his right hand, two fingers pointing directly at the enemy as he took a deep breath and exhaled it just as quick.

Yellow sparks started to come from his digits.

“Bakudo no. 4, Hainawa!”

The yellow rope-like kido came out of his fingers like a bolt of lightning at the speed of sound. It followed its objective quickly, and before the enemy could fully turn around, it had already circled his body and latched itself onto a nearby tree.

Ichigo let go of his injury next, his left forefinger joining his two right fingers as he took another breath and furrowed his brows.

“Hado no. 4, Byakurai!

The blue strike came next, the two swirling colors circling each other as the Byakurai effectively shocked his enemy with enough force to cause damage, pain and burnt. But Ichigo kept his
concentration, his teeth biting onto his lower lip as he ignored the blood pouring down his left side in favor of steadying the *Hakudo*. Suddenly, the two started to merge and form a single strike. It’s power never wavered, but it started to turn green until it was completely fused into one and Ichigo stopped powering the kido.

His enemy was left unconscious and tied to the bark of a non-burnt tree —alleluia!— the kido was still a color green and looked stable enough as it surrounded its victim. There was no doubt in mind he had succeeded.

So without further ado, Ichigo decided to leave the intruder for later and attend to his sister. There was no doubt in mind she was in danger without medical assistance, so Ichigo wasn’t willing to wait longer. He chanted a quick spell and encased his catch in a sturdy barrier that would conceal his presence and appearance —the intruder would be invisible. He didn’t want the wrong people stumbling upon his prey. He would find answers, no excuses!

So Ichigo took a 180 degree turn and pressured his wound again before taking off towards where he left Haruka. He found her the same as he had left her —on the ground while looking pale as a sheet with a light gash over her shoulder— her wound wasn’t life threatening in the least, but Ichigo knew better. That gleam the blade took under the moon; there was something behind it.

The Shiba-Hime groaned in her unconscious state, Ichigo being careful of his own wound as he jostled her up into his arms and carried her bridal style out the manor. He knew he needed to be quick —his apprehension skyrocketing to new levels.

It was still raining outside —predicatively, just like a minute ago— but he didn’t have anything to cover Haruka and decided to just make haste. He was already soaked to the bones, but his body didn’t seem to register the cold. He was trying to shield Haru the best he could with his own body and succeeded in prolonging her dryness a little bit longer —he was already wet anyways. However, his breaths started to come out in pants, his vision hazy and steps insecure even as he shook his head and continued onwards. He just needed to push his limits.

He should have healed himself a long time ago, he knew this from the very beginning. It was the smart thing to do. But for some reason, his body didn’t follow his brain. He wanted to use instant regeneration, but *didn’t* use it. He wanted to send a hell butterfly to the c46 while he arrived at the 4th squad, but *didn’t* even call for it. He even wanted to search for Ryōtarō’s reiatsu, but *couldn’t* find the courage to look —he was scared of what he would find.

Ichigo tightened his grip on Haruka as he numbly stared forward and took his next step towards the upcoming roof. He was getting slightly worse, but blood loss was a stupid reason for passing out so he continued. There was nothing else to do anyway.

Suddenly, a little butterfly started to travel alongside him. He flickered his gaze momentarily, instinctively prodding it to relay its message as he didn’t waver in his steps.

He should have known better.

**Confirmed death of Captain of Squad 10, Shiba Ryōtarō, also known as Head of the great noble Shiba Clan.**

The numbing certainly got worse.

Ichigo grit his teeth painfully as he thought of his siblings and what he would say. Wataru would definitely blame himself for Ryōtarō’s death. Haruka would, without a doubt, yell and kick up a fuss about leaving without telling her. And he, he would have to hear it all; be strong for the two
because *they hadn’t known*.

He should have stopped Ryo. He should have told him to wait or suggest going together. He *could* have helped his *father* and watch his back like he’s *supposed to*.

He did neither.

“That’s why I hate goodbyes,” he muttered to himself under the subtle rain “it’s like dying a little each time.” He closed his eyes slowly as he continued full speed ahead while being mindful to the injured package in his arms. His hand tightened carefully as he bit his lower lip to avoid giving a pathetic sob before opening his eyes and choking out a painful whisper “…Liar.”

#13#

**Confirmed death of Captain of Squad 10, Shiba Ryōtarō, also known as Head of the great noble Shiba Clan.**

Shunsui stared dumbly at the hell butterfly in Jūshirō’s hand as he tried to understand the meaning of those words. It might as well be spoken in Italian, because for some reason it just didn’t process in his head.

“J-Ju-chan,” he stammered out “w-what is that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it says.” He whispered “There is no *meaning* behind those words.”

Shunsui looked up to stare at his white-haired friend with tear filled eyes. Jūshirō was faring no better, a single tear streaming down his cheek as a sad smile curved his lips slightly “Ichigo will be devastated.”

“He’ll act otherwise.” Shunsui pointed out sadly.

“That’s why we’ll be there for him”

The brunette bit his lower lip as he took a deep breath, cleared his eyes and nodded. Right now their priority would be their friend; they had to find Ichigo quick.

“Do you think he knows already?” Shunsui enquired, his feet absently starting to move towards the gates of the first division to start their search.

Jūshirō pondered over this as he started to follow Shunsui’s example. He took a deep breath and stretched his senses in the off chance Ichigo wasn’t in *stealth* mode –the erratic reiatsu he found answered Shunsui’s question without doubt.

So in the end, he decided there was no need to respond. Shu had already started to make way towards the fourth, and without a hint of hesitation, Jūshirō followed his hurried steps until they were out-right flash stepping.

“He’s going to the medical bay.” The brunette pointed out needlessly with a touch of worry “Do you think he’s injured?”

“I don’t know.”

“I-if something happens to him-“

“He’s alive, Shunsui.” The white-haired boy reassured “He’s moving at top speed. If there’s
anything wrong, we’ll find out when we get there.”

“Shiba-Taicho is gone.” He mumbled aimlessly.

“But Ichi is still there.” He had to be the strong one. Shunsui was made into a mess internally and Jūshirō was sure Ichigo would be no better. He bit his lower lip, his feet kicking off the ground as he continued his rushed journey and tried not to think of the late Shiba.

The raven-head had become a steady presence in their life’s since before they met Ichigo. He was the captain of the tenth squad and an admired figure by many. But to them, Ryōtarō had been like an annoying uncle of some sort. He had been important to them as well. So it honestly hurt. More than people would expect –obviously- and more than they dared show. They didn’t want to break done crying when their dear friend needed them the most. Like they had conveyed beforehand, Ichigo was top priority.

Jūshirō sighed once again as he set his eyes on the fourth division not-so-far-away and glanced to look at his friend “Let’s hurry, Shu.” Said person barely nodded before he picked up his speed to the limit.

To be continued…

Preview:

“I can go alone.” he whispered with an empty voice “Leave it all to me.”

“That’s what I’m scared of;” The brunette countered back “that you’ll get your idiot-self killed before morning.”

“Then if I die, I will make sure to die after morning.”

“Are you always a smartass?”

“Nop, sometimes I’m asleep.”

Shunsui sighed dramatically as he pinched the bridge of his nose “You insist on going on a rescue mission on your own.” He pointed out exasperatedly “Well let me tell you something; I’m not letting you… even if you’re an idiot”
Chapter 14: Enough Courage to Trust You.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Ask me no questions and I will tell you no lies. So don’t ask me if I own bleach… because I don’t.

Hello there earthlings, Happy New years! I am back to torment- aham* entertain people with my fanfictions and not so frequent updates! Ha-ha-ha *evil laughter Now for those of you that have bad memory –I am totally included in that batch of people, I had to reread my own story jajaja- previously on MoBS:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The youngest of the Shiba clan Wataru is still missing at the edge of the second district 5km west from the main town. Ichigo has gone looking for Haruka only to find an assassin and Haruka down with poison in her system. He apprehends the guy while getting hurt and hurries to the 4th division to treat Haruka all while Shiba Ryōtarō meets his demise at the hand of the enemy’s underhanded methods. Shunsui and Jūshirō hear the news and search for their friend in hopes that he’ll be able to pull through and follow him all the way the 4th. What will happen next?

#14#

By the time Shunsui and Jūshirō had stormed into the fourth division barracks Ichigo’s fluctuating reiatsu had long since arrived. They sped up ever so slightly their stalk-like walk as they entered the dead silent medical bay and tried to track down their orange-haired friend all the way to the waiting room. Once they rounded the last corner the two stopped on their tracks as they found Ichigo sitting silently on a lonely chair in the darkest corner. He had his head bowed, his hunched figure looking foreign on their strong friend with the odd combination of a blood stained Shihakusho.

Shunsui quickly snapped out of his stupor and walked across the waiting room in three steps top before kneeling down before the silent orange head. He placed a shaking hand on the other’s shoulder and was slightly shocked when Ichigo didn’t show signs of responding.

“Hey…” the brunette whispered his tone thick and shaky as his eyes glazed over with unhidden worry “Ichigo?”

The only reaction the orange head gave was a slight twitch of his shoulders that didn’t betray a thing. Jūshirō quickly came forward as well and joined Shunsui on the other side of his best friend as he placed a firmer hand on Ichigo’s unoccupied shoulder.

“Ichigo… where’s Haruka?”

This gave an even bigger reaction, and Jūshirō was almost ready to give up until the orange head hesitantly raised his head so that his blank brown eyes and pale features were in plain sight.

“Haruka?”

“Exactly Ichigo, where’s Haruka? Why are you in the medical bay? I thought you would want to
be back at the manor with her.” Prodded on the white-haired boy. This had been the only thing that had actually given a reaction so he might as well use it.

“…Haruka is in operation…” he rasped out, the words gorgy and dazed as if Ichigo barely knew what he was talking about.

“Haruka-chan is?!” exclaimed the brunette, not at all sure what the hell was going on as he stood up and looked around to see if this wasn’t some sort of sick nightmare.

“What happened, Ichigo? What’s going on?” whispered the white-haired boy as if he were scared someone would ease drop. This was getting more and more confusing.

“We were…” mumbled the orange head, his voice distant as his mind was suddenly elsewhere. “We were… attacked…? Again.”

“There’s been a breach in the defense! Everyone get out now!”

“Tou-san went to look for Wataru.” Ichigo numbly spoke up “He- Wataru disappeared from the camp.”

“Ichigo, I’ll go look for your sisters! You go and fend off the intruders!”

“They wanted to kill him… they wanted to kill us.”

Big explosions resounded in the background as the resistance tried to push the Quincies and hollows back with little success. Ichigo had already lost count of how many he had slain, how many dead comrades he had seen, and how long this battle had already taken.

“Ryōtarō-Jisan was killed.” Shunsui hissed; his expression murderous as he grits his teeth to avoid yelling.

“Yes… he was ambushed from behind.” Ichigo said a little firmer, his expression turning clearer as his brows started to furrow ever so slightly in anger now that his thoughts were starting to make sense. Saying things out loud was certainly helping him get a straighter head.

“Ambushed?” Shunsui questioned.

“That’s right; this was all just a part of Aizen’s plan to distract the protection squad.”

“What was the real objective?” questioned a random person.

“To hit Kurosaki-Taicho where it would hurt the most; his family.”

“From what Chichue told me on his last message…” Ichigo paused as he took a steady breath “… enemies were following Wataru and they would be coming after us too… Gen went aol a little while ago too.” He added as an after thought

“Do you think he had anything to do with this?”

“Do you think Bach was involved in this?”

“Of course he was.” Spat out a gossiping Shinigami that just so happened to be lucky enough to still be alive even while being slightly more useful than food canon “That tyrant wants Shiba-dono out of his way as much as Aizen does.”

“Shiba Gen has always been a thorn in the main family’s side.” Responded the white-haired boy
“I’d be more surprised if he weren’t involved.”

“But what happened with Haruka and…” Shunsui scanned his friend, his too-pale features catching him slightly off guard as he tried to assess Ichigo’s state “how are you?”

“Chichue was right.” Ichigo stated a little bit clearer as his blank gaze slid up to stare into Shunsui’s warm brown eyes “They did come after us. I almost didn’t make it on time.”

“Is she going to be alright?”

“That, my dear boys, is a question I can answer easily.”

The new voice just so happened to startle the three out of their closed off state as they jerked to the side to look into the kind-like eyes of one Unohana Retsu—not so long ago Yachiru. Her eyes still held a slight edge of insanity that you would easily find if you knew what you were looking for, but right now all the three could see was hope.

“Is Haru okay?” inquired the orange head, his blank eyes shifting to overly bright for a full minute as he stood up from his seated position and ignored his sudden pain.

The small smile he received in return was more of an answer than he would ever get “She’ll be fine with enough rest.” She asserted “The wound wasn’t lethal, even while the poison was life threatening. You were able to bring her back in time so that’s good news in between the bad.”

Ichigo gave a big sigh of relief as he collapsed on his own chair with a loud thud as he stared with gratitude filled eyes towards the fourth squad captain. He was pretty sure the adrenaline had been the only thing keeping him completely conscious up until that very moment.

“And what’s the bad news?” inquired the white-haired boy; only because someone had to do it, and that obviously wasn’t going to be Ichigo himself anytime soon.

This time Unohana frowned full power “The poison identified was the same that killed the late Shiba captain—if my studies are accurate. His last recorded reiatsu signals were corrupted with that same substance so we were able to identify it as a slow numbing killer poison.” She glanced back to look at the seated orange head with curiosity filled eyes “That same corruption was identified in your reiatsu not so long ago before it disappeared.”

This new data only made the two friends whirl around to stare wide eyed at the orange head with panic filled eyes. They quickly discarded all common sense, and before the captain could stop them, Shunsui was already all over Ichigo lifting his Shihakusho for injuries.

“Wh-what-?!” yelped the orange head.

“Where were you injured, Ichigo?” bristled the brunette “Why didn’t you say so from the beginning anyways?!”

Jūshirō was about to go on to join Shunsui in a mother hen rant before the raven head stopped them with one swift glare. She quietly strode up to the seated orange head and easily enough identified the not-so-deep stab wound amidst the blood stained garment.

“This will hurt a little but bear with it.” She mumbled, her right hand coming up to the painful looking wound as she started to pour healing kidō “The poison was kicked out of your system—I honestly don’t know why- so the wound is the only thing I need to treat. Stay still and don’t strain yourself for an effective, high recovery. Understood?”
All the orange head could do is numbly nod his head as the kaido replenished his reiatsu reserves causing his body to heal itself. He honestly never got tired of seeing how healing kidō worked, and he was pretty sure he never would.

Once the sweet looking captain was finished she took her leave to fill in her report about the *Shiba case*. She had also mentioned that Haruka was in room C-305 in case they wanted to go in to see her. She wasn’t in any danger, and all that was truly needed as treatment was for her soul to recover—something she could easily do at home, the raven head had supplied amusedly with the faintest hint of I-know-what-you’re-planning-young-man. So when the three boys were left all alone in the waiting room once again, all eyes fell back on the only Shiba around.

“What are we gonna do now?” questioned the brunette.

“They must still want to kill us.” Responded Ichigo, his mind going a mile per minute as his head started to clear against the haze he was in earlier due to the shock—some events were too familiar for his taste.

“So what’s gonna happen?” Shunsui questioned again.

The orange head bit his lower lip in deep thought as he tried to think of a valid plan. He was still feeling light headed—understandable— and couldn’t keep his field of thought concentrated on a single thing but he had to make an effort.

“I need to relocate Haruka and find Wataru.” He decided at the end.

“It’d have to be in an unknown place.” Pitched in the white-haired third seat.

“I have just the place; the Shiba head’s cottage in district 11, no one should know of its existence.”

“You have a cottage in district 11?”

“My point exactly.” Retorted the orange head.

He gave a sigh, his fingers itching for his zanpaktou as he thought about his little brother still out there in the middle of danger. He knew where Wataru was—he knew *specifically* where his little brother was. *At the edge of the second district 5km west from the main town*, his brain supplied. He had gained this info at the price of his father—at the price of his *foster father* that had been more of a great friend than anything else.

However-

“I’m also going after Wataru.” He stated absently, more towards himself than anything else even as he informed the duo.

It took less than a second for Shunsui to bristle at the mere mention of Ichigo going out on a rescue mission. “Oh no, you’re not! We’re coming with you.”

“I can go alone.” Ichigo whispered with an empty voice “Leave it all to me.”

“That’s what I’m scared of;” The brunette countered back as he crossed his arms in defiance “that you’ll get your idiot-self killed before morning.”

“Then if I die, I will make sure to die after morning.” The orange head pointed out sardonically

“Are you always a smartass?” Shunsui replied with an expression akin to resigned acceptance that
Ichigo would continue to be an anomaly.

“Nop, sometimes I’m asleep.”

He mentally snorted, see? In the end he sighed dramatically as he pinched the bridge of his nose
“You insist on going on a rescue mission on your own.” He pointed out exasperatedly “Well let me
tell you something; I’m not letting you… even if you’re an idiot”

“That doesn’t change my opinion.”

Shunsui narrowed his eyes dangerously and was about to retort when all of a sudden white filled
his vision as Jūshirō intervened and stepped right in the middle.

“Ma, ma, let’s settle down.” He stated calmly as if he weren’t playing mediator for a bunch of
kids. “Shunsui’s right in the sense that you shouldn’t go alone, Ichigo.” He stated leisurely, easily
ignoring the annoyed stare Ichigo sent his way and the triumph smirk that curled the edges of
Shunsui’s mouth “But he’s also wrong in the sense that you’d be going at all.”

“Wha-“ Ichigo began.

“Yes!” Shunsui celebrated excitedly “It’s two against one Ichi.” He drew out the line, and it was
most certainly not in the orange head’s favor “I’ll go for Wataru.” The brunette assured in a more
serious tone. “I promise I’ll get him back.”

“But-“

“Ichigo, c’mon.” Shunsui interrupted with a calm smile “Trust me.”

Ichigo’s breath hitched in his throat as he thought about this odd thing called trust. Did he trust
them? He asked himself. Was his trust still reserved towards the older versions of the two? No, his
mind supplied, it wasn’t.

“No Ichigo, I’m serious.” The voice of a certain raven-haired man resonated in his very soul
“Shunsui can’t understand you if you don’t even tell him what’s wrong. You, aren’t considering
them either. What’s the big deal about telling them? You told me. Unless there’s something
stopping you.”

Was there something stopping him? No, he guessed not. The only thing stopping him was-

Myself.

“I do.” He answered before he realized it even if he meant it from the bottom of his heart. “I do;
trust both of you that is.” He said firmer, his gaze fleeting up to meet the twin pair of startled eyes
he received as if they weren’t expecting him to accept or deny Shunsui’s statement. His voice was
filled with conviction- with so much passion it was almost suffocating. “I’ll trust you with Wataru
then.” He fleetingly agreed, his lips forming something close to a smug smile as his amber eyes
twinkled with so much life the two honestly didn’t know where it came from “And when the
time’s right,” Ichigo continued “I promise I will tell you all.”

Ichigo chanced a glance back to his friends as his half-smile grew more on the warmer side “My
past, my present and our future. But for now let’s entrust the present to each other because it’s all
we got.” He turned to look back at Shunsui with an apology in his eyes and at the same time
gratitude. “I’ll entrust Wataru with you.” He felt the need to repeat it.

“And I’ll do just that.” Shunsui replied in the end, his eyes conveying as much of an apology as
Ichigo. And he was certain, at that very moment, their differences were cast aside permanently and they were likely to stay that way. There was forgiveness, acceptance, and also a tinge of relief. 

*Finally, his mind easily supplied, finally I can see Ichigo.*

“I’ll be in charge of retrieving Wataru and meet up with you guys at that super duper secret cottage of the Shiba’s.” he answered amusedly “So, are you planning on telling me where it is or will it remain a secret?” Shunsui rose an eyebrow, his cheeky nature tangible as he sent a playful smirk at Ichigo.

Said person merely gave a half-crooked, yet tired smile as he suppressed the urge to hit something; preferably the brunette’s face actually. “Shut up,” he answered half heartedly, his soul still aching from recent events as he sent a glance towards the-up-until-that-moment forgotten white-haired boy “Could you prepare Haruka for transfer, Ju?”

“Of course.” The boy easily supplied, his warm smile reaching his eyes as he cast a silent gaze to Shunsui with a clear message of don’t-screw-it-up. Honestly, for such a nice guy Ukitake Jūshirō was no pushover and could be just as scary as Ichigo on a bad day or Shunsui on a particularly paper-work filled day.

Alright,” Ichigo sighed as he closed his eyes for a moment and opened them once again only seconds later “the cottage Shunsui,” he cast his serious gaze to his friend “in the middle of the forest in district 11, where all the cherry blossoms are, about 4km west from the gate of the district, passing the water fall, you’ll find a withering tree right in the middle of everything. Pass right besides it on the left side and you should be able to see the cottage.”

Okay, 11th district, 4km west from the gate after the water fall in the Sakura forest, pass by left side of dying ugly tree, got it.” Shunsui answered just as seriously as he absently noticed his white haired friend leaving the room and going towards Haruka’s room. “And Wataru’s position?”

Ichigo winced as he thought about his little brother. If Wataru stayed in the same area Shunsui might be able to find him easily. If not-

“He’s at the edge of the second district, 5km west from the main town. That’s what Chichue told me before he- before he died.” He replied, his tone as even as he could muster even if he slightly cracked at the end.

Suddenly a strong hand gave his shoulder a tight squeeze causing him to jump slightly in surprise. He turned to look at Shunsui, his steel gray eyes determined even as he gave Ichigo the broadest smile he could muster.

“Don’t worry Ichi, everything’ll be all right.”

He gave a smile of his own, a little cricked and stiff around the edges but just as genuine “I sure hope so.”

“I know so.”

“Thanks Shu.”

Said person seemed to falter for half a second at the nickname before he got his bearings back together. He stared into Ichigo’s amber eyes before his smile widened crinkling the edges of his eyes with mirth and apparent happiness.

“Anytime!”
And Ichigo was sure he meant it.

“Do you think she’s going to be okay?” asked the white-haired boy, his green eyes staring worriedly at the pale girl resting on the futon in the middle of the room. He then shifted his eyes to his orange-haired best friend and his frown instinctively deepened as he gave the other a once over.

“Are you going to be okay? You also look pale.”

“I’ll be fine Ju, I just lost some blood so I bet I look worse than what I really am. We’ll both be fine. Haruka’s strong and so is Wataru.” he clenched his fists as he whispered the last words as if he was trying to convince himself more than the other.

“I know that.” Replied Jūshirō “But I still think you need some rest.” His gaze softened as he looked at his friend seated right across from him on the other side of Haruka’s makeshift bed.

“Why don’t you lie down a little while? It would do you some good.”

Ichigo sighed as he passed his hand through his orange tresses. Honestly he wanted to say yes. He was really tired, and if he was honest with himself he also felt like crap. Actually, if the concerned glances Jūshirō kept sending his way were anything to go by, he must also look like crap. But-

“I’ll stay here.” Jūshirō’s soft tone brought him out of his reverie as he turned to stare into the other’s green eyes. “I’ll look after her, promise.”

Taking a quick break just kept getting more tempting.

“Alright.” He found himself saying only seconds after “I’ll take a shower before lying down a bit.” He smiled sadly despite himself as he took a weary glance towards the main entrance “God knows Wataru will only panic if he arrives to see his Ichi-ni in bloodstained cloths after such a brutal night.”

Jūshirō just gave a soft chuckle in return before making shoeing motions towards the orange head. Honestly, if it were left to debate Ichigo would procrastinate rest until he all but collapses.

“We’ll be waiting here when you come out. Now go on.”

“Alright, alright, what’s the rush anyways?” Ichigo grumbled, more than a little bit disgruntled even as he stood up and walked out of the main room. Time to take a shower, he smelled like coppery blood and he honestly didn’t like how he was so used to the smell… also a nap. If he honestly had the time of the world he would nap until next year. But alas, that’s not possible.

Sigh.

“Now where is he?” Shunsui muttered to himself, his feet quick and stealthy on the trees he was using as platforms as he kept his reiatsu muted and his senses heightened. “He couldn’t have gone far, right?”

He stopped on a nearby tree, his feet light on the branch as he crouched down and surveyed the area carefully. He could see some abnormal signs on the nearby nature, as if a tornado had gone by really recently. It was obvious he’s on the right track but still this is turning frustrating and-

“UWAAAAAAHHH!!!”
“Wataru-chan!” he shunpo-ed at top speed, his feet taking him as fast as he could muster as he followed the sudden sounds of trees breaking and yelling mess. He kept on jumping from tree to tree, not bothering to stay very stealthy as he started to catch up to the destructive path.

“Get back here you brat!”

“No way! What do you think I am, an idiot? That’s you!”

“Why you little-!”

Shunsui honestly had to resist the urge to face palm. Wataru was making things worse for him. He picked up speed, his steps measured as he started to shunpo alongside his charge and his persecutor at tree level.

Wataru glanced to the side just as he neared the duo, his feet were quick and undisturbed but when he saw the brunette shunpo-ing almost right by his side he visibly brightened up.

“Shu-ni!”

“Yo, Wataru-chan!” he greeted, a two fingered salute as he glanced back to look at their follower before jumping down to run alongside the raven head “In a bit of a pinch I see.”

Wataru visibly grimaced as he glanced back to look at the hooded man still following close behind carrying a giant axe as if it were the lightest thing in the world. “Yeah, I am. And I was doing so well too! Up until axey here jumped me out of nowhere.”

“Really?” Shunsui raised an eyebrow. “He looks particularly weak.”

“Well yeah, he is.” Wataru acknowledged “The two people I was fighting before were formidable but suddenly one of them perked up, something about better pray before calling this guy to stall me.”

“Oh.” Answered Shunsui, a foreboding feeling at the pit of his stomach as he thought about just who would be better pray. Only one other person was in this forest with Wataru before he no longer dwelled with the dead.

“And right after that, axey started to swing his weapon around like a headless chicken. He has no talent what so ever but I’m more afraid he’ll accidentally chop my head off or something.” Wataru muttered under his breath, his expression disgruntled at having to run away against someone of such low standards but having no other option.

“Well how about we get rid of him then?” supplied Shunsui, his gaze as steady as ever even as he glanced back to look at the destruction the other was leaving behind before wincing. That guy was a danger, even to himself. “For now our top priority is getting you to safety, and knowing Ichigo he’ll chop my head off if we do something unnecessary.”

Wataru’s eyes widened “Ichin- ni sent you?”

“Well yeah,” Shunsui thought absently “he sort of did.”

The look Wataru gave him showed he was not impressed.

“Okay,” he complied, his gray eyes rolling in exasperation as he upped his speed ever so slightly to keep distance from the crazy psycho “we kind of forced him into staying and taking care of the situation while I came to fetch you.”
“I’m not a dog, Shu-ni.”

“Same difference.” Argued the brunet “Now, if we wanna escape this idiot we’ll need a plan and not just speed.”

“Seeing this idiot I bet something stupid will work. What do you have in mind?” he asked, his green eyes shifting to look at Shunsui’s silver eyes interestedly before he shuddered at the smirk on his face.

“Something fun.”

Wataru gulped “For some reason I doubt your definition of fun is the same as mine.”

The smirk he received as an answer was more unnerving than anything.

#14#

“Well you look better.”

Ichigo glanced down to look at his white-haired friend seated at the edge of Haruka’s futon, he was almost at the same spot he was before Ichigo had left but the orange-haired shinigami knew better since that wooden table and tea had most certainly not been there before he went to shower and take a quick nap –a 45 min nap actually.

“I do feel better.” He answered.

“I’m glad.” Replied his white-haired friend, his green orbs scanning every inch of Ichigo as he took in the brown and red yukata the other wore. “The change of clothes also did wonders now that I think about it.”

“Of course it did.” Scoffed the other, his feet taking him towards the table as he sat in front of Jūshirō, yet right next to Haruka’s futon “The main reason why I decided to change actually.”

He took the pot of tea carefully in his hands and poured himself a cup of the steaming liquid. It was still hot, and most likely would have stayed that way for however long it was needed since Jūshirō seemed to be keeping it warm with his reiatsu. Ichigo took a sip and instantly felt calmness wash over him as he tasted fresh jasmine and vanilla along with a tint of something he couldn’t identify, something-

“It’s cinnamon.” Jūshirō interjected, his knowing eyes on his orange-haired friend as he pretended to not notice the rather flabbergasted expression on Ichigo’s face. Sometimes his best friends were so easy to figure out Jūshirō thought to himself.

And other times they were a real pain in the ass to figure out.

“Hey Ju?”

“Huh?” Jūshirō turned to look at Ichigo in the eyes, his green orbs shimmering as he tried to concentrate on molten amber.

Like now actually, now was one of those moments when Jūshirō could never figure out what they were thinking.

“I need a favor.”

“Wha-“see what he means?! Favors and Ichigo don’t go together!”
“I need you to find something for me.” Continued Ichigo, as if he hadn’t noticed the shocked expression on Jūshirō’s face and the gapping-like-a-fish movement he was doing. “Actually, I need you to find someone for me and bring him here.”

Jūshirō was seriously left floored “Uh… who?”

“The assassin I captured back in Shiba Manor. He should still be waiting, tied up to that tree in the backyard to be specific.”

“What?”

See?!

“You thought throwing a rock at him and saying, hey you, follow me! would get the guy to ignore me and give me the chance to run away and finally be able to get behind him safely to get a clean blow and incapacitate him?”

“Uh… yes?”

Wataru stared at the other with blank eyes as he seemed to stare down somebody that was at least two feet taller than him. Then suddenly, as if by the magic of unicorns, Wataru brightened up and gave a giant smile that had the brunette wondering if the other was bipolar.

“That was a great idea!”

“Oh…” Shunsui was seriously taken aback “Thanks?”

“Anyway,” said the raven head a bit more seriously as he placed his hands on his hips and narrowed his eyes at the other “we need to get somewhere safe. This is getting eerily uncomfortable and I have a feeling Gen’s name is written all over this with capital letters.”

“About that,” interjected the brunette, his silver gaze unwavering as he scanned his surroundings as if making sure he was alone with the other before lowering down to whisper into the other’s ear “We’re going to the Shiba’s secret cottage.”

“Really?” questioned the other with childish glee “I’ve always wanted to go to the family’s secret cottage!”

“Ssshhhhhh!”

“Ops,” Wataru smiled sheepishly “sorry. Je je”

Shunsui sighed for the umpteenth time that day before shaking his head in plain resignation. Honestly, these Shibas would defiantly be the death of him.

“Okay then, Wataru-chan lets go.”

“Alright!” chirped the other, his enthusiasm more subdued but not less fearsome in the inside.

Shunsui erringly thought before he even took the first step, that the two Shiba males were worlds apart of different yet at the same time they were so identical it was almost creepy. But there was something for sure, thought Shunsui; both held the tremendous ability to make him want to bang his head against a wall or something. This was something he could never deny. But-
But by the fourth step Shunsui had already forgotten and decided he had enough of thinking today and all he needed to do now was get Wataru to safety. And maybe get some sake for himself. He was sure that after all this ordeal he would need at least half a dozen sake bottles.

“A sakura forest?”

Shunsui turned back to look at Wataru as he rose an eyebrow in silent question. What was so special about a Sakura forest anyways?

“Chichue always used to take us out for some family bonding at some Sakura forest. I never knew exactly where it was because Chichue and Ichi-ni would always shunpo us over at top speed but… do you think this is the same forest?”

He honestly had to fight a lump in his throat at the mention of the late Shiba captain. Wataru still didn’t know and-

“Maybe it is.” He found himself saying even before he registered “Maybe this is the place he left his soul and beautiful memories each time he came around.”

Yes, maybe it was. Maybe this was the most precious place Shiba-taicho cared for and the only place he would rather rest.

“Shunsui!”

The brunette turned, his eyes falling on the form of his white-haired friend carrying… someone on his back and stopping right besides them.

“Wataru-chan!” Jūshirō brightened “It’s good to see you’re okay! You’re not hurt are you?”

“N-no, not at all, Ju-ni.” He smiled nervously as he scratched the back of his head with mild embarrassment “Shunsui-ni saved me before it became dangerous so I’m just tired, nothing a good night’s rest can’t solve.”

“Anyway Ju-chan,” Shunsui cut it “Who’s that you’ve got on your back?”

“Oh, this?” Jūshirō glanced at his back towards the hooded, unconscious person before turning back to look at the duo “Ichigo asked me to fetch him. Apparently he’s the assassin that was sent to kill Haruka and Ichigo in the main manor but Ichigo was able to capture him and he wants to get information.”

“Assassin?!” squeaked Wataru “There was an assassin sent to the manor? Everyone’s okay right?”

“Don’t worry Wataru, Haruka and Ichigo are okay. They’re in the cottage so let’s go.”

Soon enough the raven head was nodding enthusiastically at Jūshirō as they all trotted through the forest before stopping before a withering tree. Since Jūshirō had already entered once before, Shunsui decided to follow him closely and Wataru soon followed the brunette’s example. Better safe than sorry, he thought.

A second later they were greeted by a completely different scenery. A cottage was standing proudly amidst the Sakura and maple trees, this place looked like something taken out of a fairy tale book.
“Come on, Ichigo’s in the main room.” Jūshirō explained “he should be waiting with tea.”

The two kept on following the white-haired boy before they were all entering by a shoji door where they casually took off their shoes. Jūshirō was carrying extra baggage so his movements were more sluggish and slow but he still managed rather great all things considered. However, just as they were about to advance deeper into the house Ichigo appeared right around the corner, his amber eyes sweeping over all three of them before landing permanently on his missing little brother.

“Wataru!”

“Ichi-ni!” yelled the smaller Shiba son, his eyes showing such happiness at seeing his brother as he completely forgoes common sense stating he was now a big boy as he rushed to give the other a bone crushing hug.

Ichigo merely chuckled before returning the hug and patting the other’s head like a dog. Wataru seemed a little sad at the fact that was being petted like some little kid but let slide as he leaned slightly into the touch.

“It’s good to see you’re doing okay, Wataru.”

“Hai.” Replied the small raven head “It’ll take more than an axe wielding idiot to beat me!” he answered proudly as he retracted himself from th hug and looked up to frown at his brother “But Ichi-ni, I heard you and Haru were attacked by an assassin. Are you two okay?”

“Of course we are.” Reassured Ichigo “Haru got hurt but is already out of danger and only needs rest. I-“

“Also got stabbed and was told by Unohana-taicho to rest, remember?” interjected Shunsui, his gray eyes daring Ichigo to defy him.

Ichigo merely huffed as Wataru looked mildly startled “I’m fine. Besides, I am obeying her. I sent Ju to fetch this guy instead of going myself. That has to count as something.”

“Well... I guess you have a valid point.” Admitted the brunette “By the way, who is he?”

Ichigo’s gaze hardened as he helped Jūshirō place the unconscious assassin on the wall so that he could keep sitting up even if he was dead to the world.

“If you ask me I doubt he’s some normal assassin sent out to kill you. He’s obviously talented.”

“Obviously.” Stated Ichigo, as if he had a clear idea of who was trying to kill him since the very beginning

“All right know-it-all, who’s our mysterious almost-assassin.”

Ichigo didn’t even falter in his words as he stared at his two friends as if he were telling them the biggest secret in the world.

“Kuchiki Ginrei.”

“... What?”

To be continued…
A/N: hey, so I wanted to warn you guys, reviewing with an “Update soon!” or “When will you update?” won’t help much in my updates. I took so long to update for various reasons which are nothing to snort at. I moved out of my parent’s house to go to college and had to start working to be able to sustain myself. I also happened to finally find out why I was always in pain all over my body and have been officially diagnosed with a chronic illness. So even if I want to write, I don't have the time and will not sacrifice school and or work for a hobby even if I really enjoy it, sorry. I’m not writing this because I want to have my very own pity party, more like I feel obligated to tell you guys why my updates will be very sporadic and almost nonexistent. Just know I won’t give up so you guys shouldn’t lose hope either.

Thank you for reading and please leave a review, it helps the author!
Chapter 15: Tears and Wallow; Pride and Joy

Chapter Notes

Yaho!
Hello there, I am back!! So I was able to find the time to start a new chapter on a rainy, almost snowy day in the beginning of March! Let’s just hope I actually finish this chapter and not leave it half ways and finish it in December jajajaja.
So onto the story!
Disclaimer: I do not own bleach nor it’s characters. I simply enjoy manipulating them to do as I please.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

#15#

“What do you mean it’s Kuchiki Ginrei?!” exclaimed the youngest Shiba.

Ichigo looked at his little brother slightly taken aback as he rose an eyebrow in surprise. Shunsui and Jūshirō also looked shocked which had him thinking that nobody had noticed any particular detail either.

“Well,” Ichigo began “first of all, I had on good sources that Gen was working with some of the Kuchiki higher ups. Another curious thing is the blade this assassin is using.” He explained “Every clan has its particular attributes and things that identify them. One of those things is the blades the guards use. This one-“ he pointed towards the one on the assassin’s hip “-is a Kuchiki blade.”

“How were we supposed to know that? We’re not history freaks like you Ichi!” reasoned Shunsui as he pointed at the orange haired man that was staring at him impassively.

“That’s not all you idiot.” Ichigo fought back as he crossed his arms over his chest “The clothing is a traditional Kuchiki garment and the attacks used as well. At least for this guy, I don’t know anything about the rest of the assassins that were trailing after Wataru.”

“They weren’t from the Kuchiki clan.” Interrupted a voice from the ground.

As a whole, they all turned down to look at the black clothed figure that was awakening. He was struggling to sit up on his own and was trying to look as harmless as possible.

“Hey don’t move you scum!” threatened Wataru, his posture defensive as he placed his hand on his Katana.

“Relax Wataru-chan, he’s not about to attack us. Right, Kuchiki-san?” inquired Ichigo with a raised eyebrow

“Of course not Shiba-san.” Answered the other curtly as he lowered his disguise and revealed midnight black hair framing a youthful face with distinctive Kuchiki features, a couple of Kenseikan decorating the left side of his silky strands as his gray eyes glistened. “But I must say that I am shocked you knew who I was.”

Ichigo gave a slightly crooked smile as he crossed his arms over his chest “I knew it was a
Kuchiki, narrowing down the candidates was easy once you take into consideration your skill level. You would have gotten away if I hadn’t surprised you.”

The young Kuchiki nodded in understanding “I was not expecting the Kido, much less an altered version of it.”

Jūshirō slightly perked up at this as he turned to look at Ichigo “Oh, so you really did succeed this time.” His smile brightened with pride “No wonder the Kido surrounding him was weird.”

Ichigo merely nodded slightly as he instinctively straightened up with his own bit of pride. He turned slightly towards the Kuchiki to give a slight glower that barely fazed the other outwardly – Ichigo could only hope to guess how he was really faring.

Damn Kuchiki masks.

“Tell me everything.” He demanded, his tone even with an underlying threat barely concealed “Everything you know, names, places, events, information.”

Kuchiki Genrei merely stared back with a hardened expression of his own, his gray eyes bearing determinedly into Ichigo’s amber ones before giving a light nod to himself.

“Shiba-sama,” he began, his tone full with respect “I need your help as well.”

The orange head merely raised an eyebrow at the sudden form of respect but made no mention as his eyes glimmered with slight understanding. He held out his hand towards the Kuchiki heir and the other grasped it hesitantly before being hoisted up.

“We’ll talk in the main room.” Ichigo decided “I don’t want Haruka to be alone when she wakes up.”

“Is that really wise?” questioned Shunsui “Ichigo, this guy nearly killed Haruka and stabbed you as well.”

“There was a reason.” He countered easily while leading everyone into the room “There is more to this then I originally thought.”

The silent Kuchiki nodded to better assert Ichigo’s assumption as he trailed after the man. Everyone else followed timidly behind but no one made further mention until they were all seated around the table.

“Begin.” Ichigo commanded, his tone showing no room for argument as he silently stared down the raven haired Kuchiki.

“I think you already knew this, but Shiba Gen is behind these attacks.” He informed evenly.

“We had our suspicions.” Jūshirō confirmed, more for the sake of keeping this conversation on track than anything else.

Ginrei nodded “But he also happens to be controlling the Kuchiki council, not only the Shiba one.”

“How is that possible!” exclaimed Wataru, his hands slamming into the table while he threw a nasty glare towards the man “Gen has nothing to do with the Kuchiki’s. I bet this is all a trap for-“

“Wataru,” Ichigo reprimanded with a side glance that made the younger flinch and slump with loss.

“Thank you Shiba-sama.” Ginrei inclined his head in gratitude “As I was saying, Shiba Gen is
currently under control of the Kuchiki elders as well, and by default, the clan.” His eyes turned somber as he took a quick glance towards Ichigo before focusing again on everyone “A decade ago our main elder, Kuchiki Tenzō died from a grave illness and as a last request placed his best friend, Shiba Gen as an outside advisor. Gen took control of the council from the outside in less than five years and has been keeping everyone at bay with threats, hostages and blackmail.” His eyes turned downcast as he stared at his white knuckled hands with self hate “He has Setsura, my sister, as Hostage. I couldn’t do anything but follow his orders.”

Everyone’s eyes filled with slight understanding of the entire situation. Apparently this was no minor internal war in the Shiba higher rank. Now another clan was involved, and by default, the problem has only gotten bigger. With one clan lacking a head and another completely immobilized, the process of incriminating Gen could be harder than originally planned even if Ichigo stood up as clan head right away.

However-

“Gen is AWOL and I sent word to the C46; he’s now a Shiba outcast and right now I have full authority to strip him of his rank as Shiba Elder.” Ichigo pointed out.

Everyone turned hopeful eyes on him as they took in his words. As things had advanced, they had enough evidence to ask for a warrant of his arrest but it would take longer with his high status still intact. If it were just a Shiba clan member, no matter how much of an advisor he was to the Kuchiki’s, they could still act fast.

“I know where Gen is most likely hiding.” Ginrei added on easily, a glint in his eyes showing eagerness “We can get him while he’s still seething with anger at his failure.”

Ichigo nodded and was about to stand up to go put in motion their plan when a noise from behind brought his attention to the awakening Shiba princess. The movement was soon noticed by everyone and Ichigo was suddenly reminded of the grim fact that Shiba Ryōtarō was dead and he had yet to tell either of his siblings.

“Ichigo?” Haruka murmured groggily, as she hesitantly began to sit up “Where am I?”

The orange head easily gave a tired smile as he helped her into a sitting position; he held her left hand in his right and motioned Wataru to come forth as he expertly grasped his little brother’s hand with his remaining one.

“We’re in the Shiba cottage. Specifically the head’s cottage.” He explained softly.

Haruka merely blinked in slight shock before giving a nod in understanding. Suddenly, she zeroed in on Ichigo’s slightly strained smile and easily pinpointed something was off when she felt Ichigo squeeze her hand. She turned to look at Wataru to see if maybe he knew something, but his distressed frown was plain answer that he had no idea what could be the problem—it was obvious the youngest Shiba had also noticed the hard expression on Ichigo’s face.

“We will be waiting in the room next door.” Jūshirō informed them offhandedly, his sad smile doing nothing to alleviate her concern when Shunsui followed right behind with an unknown boy with distinctive Kuchiki features.

When Ichigo squeezed their hands again both siblings turned towards their elder brother with a forbearing feeling about the whole situation. Apparently this was some big news, and judging by how everyone was acting, it was not good news.
“Chichue…” Ichigo began, his tone only caring a slight waver “went out to investigate the whole case –tried to find clues about Wataru’s whereabouts.”

“I knew nothing about this.” Haruka interjected lightly, her brows furrowing lightly with held annoyance about being left in the dark about Ryōtarō’s departure.

Ichigo merely nodded in understanding, as if he knew exactly what Haruka wanted to say and knew that she did not approve of their undercover missions without telling her.

“We decided not to. He left yesterday morning after we met up with the Captain Commander.” He explained softly “He was able to pinpoint Wataru’s location rather easily and by the time nightfall came around, he was able to contact me via Hell Butterfly and give me this information.”

Wataru’s brow furrowed lightly as his grasp on Ichigo’s hand tightened ever so slightly with trepidation “He went looking for me. What about a search party? Surely with all that was going on-“

“Central 46 didn’t want to act hastily and the one week leeway was decreed even when Chichue pushed forward.” Haruka interjected “The elders also agreed to this agreement so we basically had our hands tied.”

Ichigo nodded easily to assert her information before elaborating “A councilmen came in the morning before Chichue left and we were able to scare him into sending out a search party with threats of sending one from the 10th squad but even then nobody would be mobilized until 24 hrs at the soonest.”

“So Chichue came looking for me. Because obviously he wasn’t going to wait any longer.” Wataru narrowed his eyes suspiciously at his elder brother as he started to come up with his own conclusions “Ichi-ni, where’s Chichue now?”

The orange head flinched lightly at the hard tone as he averted his eyes to look at their intertwined fingers “His Hell Butterfly not only came with your position, but he also told me we were all being targeted and he was being attacked.” He came up to look into his sibling’s eyes and his heart broken expression only deepened at seeing their sorrow “Unohana-taicho told me earlier today that they were using a slow killing poison and was able to pinpoint it in Haruka’s system, my own stab injury, and Chichue’s reiatsu.”

“Poison.” Wataru murmured slowly “One of the goons that was going after me was using poison.”

“I think Chichue was ambushed.” he explained softly “Must have been one of the people after you that got separated. He-“ Ichigo swallowed slowly when he felt a tight knot in his throat constrict his words “…Chichue was confirmed… deceased b-by the time I was carrying Haruka to the fourth.”

He felt as if his whole world went spiraling down on him when Haruka’s hand started to shake in his grasp and Wataru’s own slid away from him to clutch his arm instead.

“Y-you’re joking.” Wataru whispered –almost pleaded “Chichue-“ he shook his head almost as if trying to shake off the whole situation “Otou-san would never fall for some low life thugs! He-“ Wataru looked at Ichigo with a shocked expression as if the whole thing had just sunk in, his eyes glistening with tears “He’s the tenth squad captain, he can’t-“

When the words choked in his throat all Ichigo could do is pull him into a bone crushing hug as he noticed, but didn’t register, the fact that his eyes were also shedding tears before turning to look at a silent Haruka. She squeezed his hand as tight as she could, her eyes filled with tears as well as
she looked at Ichigo with understanding and sadness. He gave a weak sad smile before shaking off her clutch and opening up his arm in a silent gesture to welcome her into the hug. She gave a weak breath and curled into his side a heart beat later as she held onto his robes for dear life.

“W-we’ll be okay.” Ichigo murmured sorrowfully as he tightened his grip on the two’s shoulders “We’re still here; we still have each other.”

Haruka nodded roughly into his chest while Wataru tightened his grip even further.

“Chichue is gone.” Haruka spoke up at last, her words resounding in the silence of tears and wallow even if they were muffled by Ichigo’s cloths “He saved us; he sacrificed himself for his children.”

Ichigo nodded in agreement as he combed a hand through each of their hairs “He did, and because of that, each of our lives is even more precious.” He took in a shaky intake of breath when images of death and falling friends and family flashed through his eyes “For all those people that lost their lives to make sure we lived. We must make sure to live it in full.”

“Because if we don’t, we’re no better than a disgrace.”

Alright,” Haruka began when everyone was gathered back together in the main room. Her eyes were still puffy and red and she sat closer to Ichigo than was necessary but no one said anything “so what’s the plan here.”

“We’re going to get Gen before he can escape.” Wataru asserted with such conviction filled with hatred that no one dared question him. He was sitting at Ichigo’s other side, and was no better than Haruka.

Ichigo nodded as he tried to be a strong pillar for his siblings, his reiatsu wrapping itself reassuringly around the two. He turned to look at his two best friends before zeroing in on the Kuchiki sitting across from him.

“You’ll need to come with me to Central 46.” He informed tersely “I’ll be stepping up as clan head, stripping Gen of his elder status and bringing forth proof for his arrest all in one fell swoop.”

He suddenly stopped to look at both of his siblings with an apologetic look and a smile that rang false “Once this is all finished we can all sit down and decide on a proper head, ‘kay?”

Wataru’s sudden scowl and Haruka’s offhanded slap on the head did nothing to alleviate his concern about the whole situation. In all honesty, he hadn’t been expecting the reaction and was easily caught off guard with a flabbergasted expression clear on his face.

“What-“

“You idiot!” Haruka interjected harshly with a scowl of her own “You are our heir, you’re the pride and joy of the Shiba clan and more than anything you are the person Chichue entrusted this clan too.” She reprimanded him while Wataru nodded in the background in full agreement “There will be no such ‘sitting down’ as you called it, and you will make Chichue proud while we back you up all the way.”

“Ichi-ni,” Wataru called when all Ichigo could do was stare at Haruka in shock. Ichigo turned to look at his little brother in time to see a mean smile curve his mouth that almost had him shivering “Give’em hell for all of us. We believe in you.”
A loud laughter brought the three Shibas back to attention on the rest of the people still present. Shunsui was booming with mirth at Ichigo’s expense and even Jūshirō had an amused smile set in place while Ginrei held a slightly entertained expression in his eyes.

“Well that’s set in stone.” Shunsui informed him while he dramatically brushed off a tear from under his eye before flashing a smirk at Ichigo’s general direction “So what now, Pride and Joy of the Shiba clan?”

Ichigo grimaced at the title but held his horrified expression to avoid any further teasing at his expense “We’re going out.” He explained “Shunsui, please stay with Haruka and Wataru and keep them safe. Jūshirō, Kuchiki and I will go to Central 46 to set things straight.”

“We don’t need protection.” Wataru scowled.

The orange head flashed him a smirk that meant nothing but trouble “Oh, I beg to defer. You’ve been on the run for a while and need to rest while Haruka is still in recuperation.” When they looked ready to protest Ichigo’s smirk grew “Soon-to-be clan head’s order.” He informed them.

Haruka joined in on a scowling Wataru but didn’t offer further objections since it was a mute point. Jūshirō smiled knowingly his way while Shunsui flashed a blinding smirk while he nodded at Ichigo’s silent request.

“Don’t worry Ichi,” he exclaimed to the worlds “I’ll keep your cute little siblings safe!”

The two’s scowl hardened in menace while Ichigo laughed at their expenses. Jūshirō’s own smile widened and Ichigo could have sworn that even Ginrei’s mouth twitched upwards.

“Okay then!” Ichigo exclaimed as he levered himself to his feet “We’re off then. Stick to the plan and current groups and everything’ll be fine. I’ll make sure Jūshirō can accompany us inside since he’s the one that helped me bring Kuchiki-san here and we’ll make sure to inform each other if anything goes wrong.”

Everyone nodded in acceptance as Jūshirō and Ginrei followed Ichigo out the door. Before Ichigo could go further down the halls to the entrance Jūshirō stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder that had him looking back.

“I think it’d be best if you changed cloths, Ichigo.” He recommended.

“Ah,” Ichigo grunted in understanding “maybe you’re right.” He nodded to himself as he made way towards the rooms and noted that the two followed easily behind “After I change I’m gonna flash step us out of here and into the closest town.” He flashed an apologetic smile at Ginrei’s way before he elaborated “This place isn’t supposed to be general knowledge so you’ll have to forgive me for not wanting you to know its exact location.”

Ginrei merely nodded in understanding as he showed no sign of annoyance “Comprehensible, I wouldn’t want anyone outside of trusted allies or the main family knowing where Kuchiki treasures lye either.” Suddenly, a slightly mischievous glint filled his steel gray eyes surprising the other two in the process “However, I cannot promise anything if I happen to grasp awareness of our location when you flash us away.”

Ichigo almost stumbled for half a second at the implication but caught himself just in time before an answering smirk curled his mouth “I assure you, Kuchiki-san that you won’t even have time to grasp the motion before we’re already out and far away from this place.”

“I am looking forward to witnessing the great speed of the Shiba prodigy first hand then.” Ginrei
relented, his eyes still carrying that slight mischief that had Ichigo smirking and Jūshirō suppressing an all out laughter.

If only he knew.

Ichigo practically burst into the Central 46 chamber with full decorum followed behind by Jūshirō and a slightly more restrained Ginrei. He was wearing a black Kimono with a white on red stripped obi holding everything together; he had thrown a red haori on top too, the gold lining glistening with his every move and the Shiba emblem blazing proudly on his back.

The poor guards on duty had almost had a heart attack when Ichigo had demanded a hearing, but seeing that the Shiba clan actually had an ongoing investigation, it was not that odd that Ichigo would be at their doorstep at the first rays of light.

Once the councilmen and women had gathered in their respective seats –only some of them throwing confused glances at the other two present- Ichigo stepped forward and waited for the fools to begin.

“Shiba Ichigo,” one of them called out from high above “you have asked for a hearing as the Shiba heir and we have all gathered here as soon as possible. What are your demands?”

Ichigo narrowed his eyes slightly at the implication that he was being a bother but paid them no mind as he folded his hands inside the sleeves of his haori with a calm air about him.

“First of all, I’d like to inform in the presence of the forty wise men and six judges gathered here, that I, Shiba Ichigo, heir to the Great and Noble clan of Shiba am stepping up as its current Head.”

Murmurs swept over the council but a loud bang from one of the judges brought back attention as they seemed to refocus.

“Shiba Ichigo, 3rd head of the Great and Noble Clan of Shiba, what is it that you are here for?” the same man demanded again, his fierce voice carrying through the entire room as he seemed to be getting near the end of his patience.

Ichigo merely smirked in response as he inwardly celebrated the fact that the council now accepted his new status. Now going onto step two of their plan would be simple enough and should show now interference.

“Now, as new clan head I would like to send in the report that Shiba Gen, Great Elder of the Great and Noble Clan of Shiba is now stripped of his rank and will be only considered a Clan member from now on.”

Somebody cleared their throat in the impending silence, and they all seemed to give their attention to one of the forty people gathered.

“I seem to recall,” she began skillfully “that yesterday evening you gave the order that Shiba Gen was an outcast.”

Ichigo easily nodded in agreement to this.

“Then I’d imagine the status is now permanent.”

“Yes ma’am.”
She seemed to nod in agreement even if Ichigo couldn’t see a thing past the boards and soon enough the attention was brought back to one of the judges – a different one, considering his tone of voice.

“Then Shiba Gen’s status as mere clan member is now integrated.” He slammed his hammer “Is there anything else you wish to discuss, Shiba-sama?”

Ichigo’s smile curved maliciously and a shiver ran down everyone’s spine at the gesture. He calmly gestured Kuchiki Ginrei over, and the man came to his side in an easy and practiced manner.

“Next order of business, I request a warrant for Shiba Gen’s arrest immediately for conspiracy against the Shiba Clan, as well as Manipulation of the Kuchiki Clan along with the order for the murder of the entire main family of the Shiba Clan including myself and the late Shiba Ryōtarō, 2nd head of the Clan.”

Everyone’s shocked silence was rather priceless, but the immediate uproar in the room was the icing on the cake. The whole thing was progressing rather swiftly, and if everything went according to plan than he would never have to deal with stuffy elders again.

Now all he had to do is hope the idiots got their bearings soon so that they could apprehend Gen and bring him in for trial.

#15#

When Shiba Wataru managed to escape from the assassins he sent, all he did was increase the level of urgency in the order and wish for the best – the brat may have training, but he hadn’t gotten into the academy yet and should show no trouble – he was not worried. When Shiba Ryōtarō decided to go after the boy – like he had expected- he was gleefully giving out new instructions for the bile man he called nephew and was easily appeased when the first hit landed perfectly and practically sealed the man’s fate in stone. Then he sent the Kuchiki brat to take care of the Shiba Princess while he went into hiding to await news of success and was beyond irritated when nothing but failure graced his ears.

But when he found out that their precious heir had managed to out maneuver him where even Ryōtarō hadn’t been able to, he was furious. No, scratch that, he was ablaze with uncontrolled rage.

He had not expected the boy to survive.

He had not expected Ichigo would manage to save Haruka and get her to the fourth in time.

He had not expected Wataru to be saved either.

Yet most of all, he had not expected, that a measly two hours after he lost contact with the last of the assassins in the woods, he would be found, arrested, and brought to the council for trial only to find he had been stripped of his rank and that Kuchiki effin Ginrei, had testified against him.

And that brat was now Clan Head too, what were his odds now?

“Shiba Gen,” a booming voice began from somewhere high and menacing “former High Elder of the Great and Noble Clan of Shiba, you are brought here to face trial for your crimes against your own Clan as well as the Great and Noble Clan of Kuchiki.” The man informed, as if it hadn’t been obvious what with being bound to a chair in the middle of the room. Their new Head was also
present on the side along with that brat from the Ukitake family and Kuchiki Ginrei himself, oddly enough, the Kuchiki Head was not present, something he barely had time to think about.

His gaze focused on the council instead when it became obvious he would gain nothing out of giving Ichigo his most murderous glare. In all honesty, he had not expected his plan to fail. Everything was foul proof, it should have worked, it had to work. But he had failed, and the only thing that crossed his mind then was the words Ginrei had muttered back then when he set his plan in motion.

“Let’s see if you’re all high and mighty by the time I succeed.” Gen had growled, all the confidence of the world on his shoulders.

“Oh the contrary. If you don’t succeed, I’m sure you’ll be discovered, and I’ll be freed from your clutches.”

It was almost as if the boy knew something he didn’t, as if he was certain that Gen would fail and was just waiting for the bomb to fall. But Ginrei had not betrayed his plans to anyone –he had made sure of it– he had only opened his mouth when he was caught and out of Gen’s reach –that was the only conclusion he could come up with. So how had he known he would fail? Where did his confidence come from, why?

A flash of bright orange caught his eye and he instantly scowled as realization dawned on him.

He should have gotten rid of that brat first; he really should have done that in the very beginning. Shiba Ichigo was an anomaly to everyone. A prodigy, an outspoken spitfire that was not afraid to speak up, but was subdued and carefully noble when needed. This boy- this man, should have been his target from the start.

“Shiba Gen,” a different person called out “you are here by charged with the following charges: Manipulation of the Shiba Elders, Manipulation of the Kuchiki Elders, Blackmail and Hostages against the Kuchiki Clan, sending out assassins to kill the main family, injuring two members in the process and killing one. How do you plead to these charges?” she inquired.

Gen made sure to keep his face straight as he sat perfectly in his chair as if it were the comfiest throne in the world. He could still get out of this, they only had a Kuchiki’s word, he might be able to pull this off if-

“Innocent.”

The shocked murmurs that filled the room was totally within his calculations, and if he riled up the people pressing charges against him their word would be less believable even if they were-

Completely calm.

He froze in shock upon noticing this and could do nothing but stare bewildered as Ichigo rested comfortably against the wall while the white haired brat flanked his right side with an easy going smile and the Kuchiki Heir surveyed the whole situation with measured eyes on his left side – measured, not guarded, and most of all not worried.

“Order!” a judge exclaimed as he calmed the masses “Shiba Gen, it is your word –that of a measly Clan member- against the Head of Shiba and Kuchiki, along with its Heir and main families from both. We were also able to find some of your servants and get testimony out of them. Your hands are practically tied; this is a mere formality.”

Gen blanched at the implication as he grit his teeth to avoid lashing out. He really was backed into
a corner. The council had already made up his mind and he only made it worse by pleading innocent. By the way things were progressing, it would not end well for him.

“Shiba Gen, such actions against two Great and Noble Clans cannot be overlooked. More so, because your actions caused the imminent death of previous Clan Head, Shiba Ryōtarō. We shall now pass judgment!”

Everyone seemed to shuffle in their chairs as they all focused on the Judges in the higher part of the room. The one in the middle cleared his throat as his silky tone filled the entire council even if it was soft spoken and slow.

“Shiba Gen, your crimes are far and many, as such, your execution will be handed out as soon as possible in the presence of all Heads of the Noble clans. This cannot be delayed any further, and any protest will be heard in mute tone.” A loud bang resounded through the area as if sealing the deal “This verdict is final and shall be carried out at 1900 hours!”

Gen paled even further as council guards came forth to escort him out and into a prison cell. He fought against their grasp tooth and nail as he tried to get a word edgewise while he was dragged.

“No wait! I-I didn’t do anything! I was working under somebody else’s orders! I’m innocent I tell you, innocent! He-“

The door slammed loudly behind them and the silence seemed to break them out of their reverie as Ichigo sighed in relief while his shoulders slumped and Jūshirō gave a crooked smile. Ginrei looked oddly pleased with himself too, as if he didn’t believe that the threat was finally out of the way.

But the council was still gathered, and no one had been dismissed yet so there were still matters to attend. Ichigo himself had been the one to request it, and hopefully he wouldn’t be pushing his luck to far. He walked towards the center, gave a respectful bow to show his gratitude at the gathered men and women before straightening up the courage he usually reserved for the toughest of battles and wanna-be gods.

“Shiba-sama, there was a last matter you wished to breach with us?” one of the forty wise men intoned carefully with respect from somewhere to his left.

“Yes.” He breathed in a steady gust of air “As you have witnessed, this entire case began because the Elders have too much power over the Clans and rule with an iron fist even against the Head. This has brought great misfortune admits the Shiba Clan and I wish for you to understand that this will not continue.”

“What do you have in mind?” one of the judges questioned.

Ichigo hardened his gaze even further as he tried to convey how he would not be accepting a no for an answer.

“I wish to disband the Elder’s council in the Shiba Clan and give back the power to the Head of the Clan.”

…

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes
Well, on the good side, I did not finish this in December. But it took me three months to finish this which is hilarious and sad all in one fell swoop. On another note, here is when the Shiba Clan gains its individuality and its more fiery personality. With the Elder system gone –it must have disappeared somewhere along the way– the Shibas will be free to do as they please and the beginning of what is without a doubt the best clan in all soul society will come to life –so this will be fun.

I do feel sorry for making you guys wait but hey, it’s better than not updating at all so it has to count as something (?

Anyways, I hope this chapter was enjoyable and thank you for your reads, favorites, follows and reviews.

Please leave a review on the way out!
Thanks.
16. Outwitted in Shogi by the Youngest.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Bleach is a non-edible chemical, please do not drink it. I am not the owner of said liquid nor its manga counterpart.

Also, it’s surprising how I typed this down in a single day after I accidentally started hearing the bleach character songs and suddenly had a euphoria/ inspiration moment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

#16#

“I wonder what’s taking Ichi-ni so long.” Wataru sighed from his position sprawled all over the table as he kept on shooting weary glances towards the main entrance.

Shunsui snorted as he moved a shoji piece forward after a long period of debate. He instantly deflated though, when Wataru merely lifted an arm and moved his own piece in an almost non-caring way. The worst part of it, is that though the youngest Shiba was distracted, he was playing a very hard game against Shunsui.

“It’s not that easy to just declare yourself head of a great noble clan, strip someone of their rank permanently, get a solid trial and make a verdict.” He pointed out grimly as he whined softly at how he was being cornered “Besides, Ichi also said he wanted to try something else that would help avoid any future issues with elders in your clan.”

Wataru sighed for what had to be the hundred time before glancing longingly towards the door again as Shunsui made another move. He barely glanced back to look at the board before moving a chip and turning back.

“I know, but it’s been a whole day and he still hasn’t come back.” He turned back to look at Shunsui with a raised eyebrow as a thought came to mind “And shouldn’t you be at work for that matter? I would have though the Captain Commander not as lax as to just let you play hooky.”

The brunet spluttered “I’ll have you know that I am fulfilling an important mission given to me by my ranking superior.”

“Not your direct superior though.” Pointed out Wataru with a sigh as he flopped backwards to lie on the tatami floor instead “This is boring. And you keep on losing which makes it even more boring.”

“Well I’m sorry for losing. Not all of us are trained in shogi since the day we could walk.”

As a response Wataru straightened his position and sat up to glare indigently at the other. Shunsui merely smirked in response which only made Wataru’s glower harden.

“That scowl has nothing on Ichigo’s Wa-chan, you can’t intimidate me like that.” The brunet laughed.

His scowl turned into a pout “Ni-sama is a master in the art of scowling, that’s like comparing a
Shunsui snorted “So now you’re a puppy.” Cue another cheap scowl “But you know what? That’s a side note.” The brunet leaned in seriously as he stared into Wataru’s green eyes with a somber expression “What I really want to know is why you Shiba siblings change your form of address all the time.”

Wataru almost fell over “Ugh, are you serious!” he cried indigently “That’s your great question? Why does it matter how we address each other?!?”

“Because one minute you’re all like Ichi-ni! And then you’re Ni-san. And to top it off, sometimes you switch to Ni-sama or my Ni-sama!”

The raven head blushed deep red as he crossed his arms and turned the other side to hide his embarrassment in vain.

“Ni-sama is Ni-sama, that’s all that matters.”

Shunsui hummed to himself in thought “Could it be that Ichigo is forcing you to address him as such?” he questioned amusedly.

Wataru bristled “Don’t speak about Ni-sama like that! He’s a kind and compassionate brother that would play with me whenever Chichiue or Haruka-ne were too busy and taught me a lot of stuff and never brushed me off with my annoying demands and-“

“I get it, I get it.” Shunsui placated “So you just have a brother complex; makes sense I guess.”

“Ni-sama is awesome, of course I admire him!” he exclaimed proudly with an odd sparkle in his eyes.

Shunsui sweat-dropped “That’s not what I said.”

All of a sudden the door slid open which caused both occupants of the room to turn in that direction. The moment Wataru locked eyes with amber brown he visibly brightened further and almost looked like he wanted to tackle the orange head in a hug.

“Ichi-ni, you’re back!” the teen exclaimed in honest delight as he ignored Shunsui’s mutter in the background about conflicting signs.

“Hey,” Ichigo greeted with a cheeky grin to showcase his obvious good mood which could only mean a great sign “What’s this I hear about admiration?”

Wataru shook his head rapidly as he flapped his hands around in denial “Nothing at all Ni-sama, everything is fine. Right Shu-ni?” he turned back to give the brunet a menacing smile in warning.

Shunsui merely snorted “Yup, nothing to talk about here.” He leaned in excitedly as a grin creeped onto his face “And, how did it go on your side?”

“Well,” Ichigo began as he sat down cross legged at the edge of the low table “We got Gen sentenced and he is now officially terminated… permanently.” His grin was pretty much a giveaway of what kind of permanent this termination was “And I was able to convince the council to call in an emergency meeting for all clan heads.”

“Really?” Shunsui arched an eyebrow in shock while Wataru just looked on. He really didn’t know how hard it was to get one of those authorized. “So my father was there as well?”
“And so was mine.” Jūshirō cut in as he entered the room with a tray filled with food to the brim followed closely behind by Haruka with another tray.

“Ohay,” drawled Wataru as he immediately grabbed the closest dish and leaned in to grasp some chop sticks “So all the noble head guys gathered in C46, then what?”

Ichigo sweat-dropped “You do realize I’m one of those guys right?”

“Ah,” he paused his eating “Ichi-Ni doesn’t count?”

“Ha-ha,” Ichigo mocked laughed as he grabbed his bowl of rice “Very funny Wataru-chan, I think we may need to go back to those manners lessons.”

“I’m okay. Really!” Wataru instantly cut in as he threw his elder brother a panicked expression which quickly melted into a scowl when he realized how he was snickering into his rice.

“Anyway!” Jūshirō cut in when it seemed another banter was about to ensue “Ichigo got all the clan heads gathered and an emergency meeting about the elder system was issued. I got kicked out of the room as expected along with Kuchiki-san so what happened next is an honest to god guess from my part. The only thing I know, which I bet everyone else can tell as well, is that it went well.”

At this point everyone turned to look at Ichigo who paused mid-bite to blink curiously at the rest. When it became obvious that they would not be able to wait any longer, he sighed and put down his bowl as he swallowed the food he had in his mouth.

“This will became general knowledge tomorrow onward, therefore, as Head of this Great and Noble Clan of Shiba, it is my responsibility to remind you not to say-“

“-A thing until then. We get the point big shot, now get to the juicy part.” Haruka cut in which made Ichigo glower menacingly while she merely pretended to ignore it.

He cleared his throat “As I was saying,” a sadistically satisfied smirk curled the corners of his mouth “make sure not to slip because this is big.”

#Flashback#

*Bang!*

“We shall now bring the 36th Noble Meeting to order!” resounded a voice from high above somewhere to the left.

If Ichigo was being honest with himself he was actually terrified to be here. He had heard stories about these meetings, and they all sounded like horror stories at the time. Seated as he was at the end of the abnormal table he couldn’t find it in himself to disagree with that previous thought.

*It was actually worse.*

The table was a long and rectangular with chairs on both sides and a nameplate showcasing every clan name. At the end of the table, the side closest to the Central 46 council the table widened to form a semi-circle with five bigger and fancier chairs with no nameplates. The only reason he could think of for this discrepancy was the fact that you would have to be an idiot to not know who sat at each chair. The chair was intimidating enough, but as Ichigo sat on one of said seats he couldn’t help but think that sitting at dead center right of the semi-circle was even worse.
“As the one who brought to attention our current meeting, I would like to ask 3rd Head of the Great and Noble Clan of Shiba, Shiba Ichigo to take the floor.” The same voice from before bemoaned.

Ichigo stood up as calmly as possible with the steadiest air around him he could muster. He did not want to be picked on for being the newbie here, but he most defiantly did not want to show himself as an arrogant prick; he needed to get their support one way or another.

“This emergency meeting was called mere minutes after one of our previous high elders was trialed for murder, attempt murder, complot, manipulation and blackmail among others.” He began slowly.

The table went up in shock as they all murmured to each other while others stayed deadly still. To Ichigo’s left he saw Kuchiki Taiki make a minute flinch before he clamped it down in a mask of indifference. It was obvious he knew what Ichigo was talking about, but Kuchiki was a man of few words and carefully manipulated plans where he would not contribute unless his win was assured –something Ryōtarō would complain about all the time.

“Silence!” yelled one of the councilmen followed by a loud bang from his mallet.

Once the room was silent again Ichigo cleared his throat and looked around the room. They all seemed at least interested in what was going on, while others actually appeared apprehensive or excited.

‘That’s a good sign.’ he thought to himself.

“Shiba Gen has been sentenced to death at seventeen hundred hours today with all you present. He was stripped of his rank and claimed an outcast even before the trial, which as you all know, now makes him a mere clan member.” He looked around the table to see that all those that looked previously annoyed were actually taking him serious now. “Gen has sinned against Shiba and Kuchiki alike and while I hope that was the extent of his damage, I cannot in good conscious overlook the fact that it was very unlikely.”

Many of the nobles nodded gravely while others refrained from commenting at all. It seems that they at least knew that the elders are seriously controlling the clans.

“The main reason for this meeting is to inform the council of this situation. But I believe the most important issue, which involves all of us gathered today, is the elder system themselves.”

Everyone had been piqued into interest, even the ever stoic Kuchiki looked interested in what Ichigo was about to say which was good. If he wanted to win this, he would need the backup of all other four Great Noble Heads, nothing less.

“The Elder system was integrated into the clans approximately 600 year ago to even out the power the Head has over their clan. It must be noted that the elders in question must report to the C46 every major decision that may impact strongly in the future, short or long term to make sure there are no issues.” Ichigo explained calmly “In resume, this is the elder system: a way to make sure the Head does not create a monopoly out of their clan behind the C46’s back” He pointed out, it was a gamble to openly out the Central 46 but he really had no other option “The internal mayhem caused by what the elders want and what the main family wants makes sure the clans are behaved and busy in their own stuff which can only benefit this council.” He turned towards the podium where the 46 were seated “Am I right?”

The silence was thick and heavy but everyone stayed in their chair and no one yelled out in outcry.
It seemed everyone else also wanted to know the answer to that, and the council was at least willing to negotiate the matter otherwise they would have never agreed to call this meeting.

“We must retain order of the Soul Society, otherwise the civil wars that can ensue for the power could cause mayhem.” Someone finally answered.

“Yet this same elder system has caused more trouble than before. Many of the main families have their hands tied behind their backs because the elders have too much power and opposing them is suicide while others have no means of voicing their situation.” Ichigo calmly reasoned.

No one dared speak after that. Everyone knew the truth of the situation and they all knew that what he was saying was the hard reality. If this continued any further, there would be even further disaster and they all see it coming. Even the C46, who rarely concedes a point is willing to acknowledge that they made a mistake.

“The fallout has already began.” Stated a clam voice from Ichigo’s side which had him instantly turning in time to see Kuchiki Taiki standing from his seat “Many of our heads have been in and out almost as soon as they have been posted and some lines have had to be crossed to make sure someone adept kept the position.” He took a deep breath and glanced around the entire table “This is unacceptable.”

A lady from mid table also stood up gracefully as she kept her expression in a permanently set scowl. Almost immediately attention was diverted to her as she calmly lifted her chin and made sure to not look down at those at the head of the table while still appearing haughty.

“If I may?” she asked.

Ichigo glanced down towards her nameplate and filed away the clan for later use before nodding lightly when it became obvious Kuchiki would defer to him in this situation.

“The Shiba clan may not have noticed this because it is a well-known fact that their noble lineage is fierce and stubborn in their decisions so they have stood relatively strong for the past 600 years.” She calmly explained without a tone of offense “However, almost every clan, as Kuchiki-sama has mentioned, has had to rapidly switch heads because they do not last.”

Ichigo turned to survey the tables and noticed that they were all somewhat right. The number of heads seemed to differ from clan to clan, but with the exception of Shihōin, Feng and Ise –and obviously Shiba- they were all in their double digits for clan heads. Ichigo discreetly turned to Kuchiki Taiki and saw as plain as day the number 25. It seemed this issue might be even worse than he initially thought.

Another male stood up at the furthermost end of the table, his yukata simple and appearance modest.

“May I, Shiba-sama?”

Ichigo looked down at the nameplate and almost did a double take “Go ahead Omaeda-san.”

The man nodded in thanks “Is it safe to assume that the great clans stand together in this motion?”

Almost instantly a dark skinned women wearing an extravagant Kimono hanging around her shoulders seductively stood up as she closed her gold patterned fan. “The Shihōin stand with Kuchiki and Shiba.”

Internally he almost cheered; two to go.
A cranky old man sitting on Kuchiki’s right looked around with a low growl before standing swiftly as well. “The Ozutsuki clan stands with Shihoin, Kuchiki and Shiba.”

Finally everyone turned to look at an angry looking man who sat with his arms crossed over his chest. From what Ichigo knew of him, he was the 37th head of the Fujiwara Clan. They had been staying under the radar lately, and Ichigo would bet good money that someone was being held hostage for a man that reminded him of Kenpachi Zaraki to remain tame.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was only half a minute at best, the heavy man stood up slowly, as if cautious of the situation, before standing proud and straight. “The Fujiwara clan stands with Ozutsuki, Shihōin, Kuchiki and Shiba.”

Check mate.

#Flashback end#

“And since no one wants to go against the Great Clans, all the other ones fell like domino soon after. While the C46 didn’t want to denounce the elder system, they were able to see the danger this posed for the entire high society and it was agreed that we would disband it completely and start from scratch.” Ichigo explained to his dumbfounded audience.

“But that just means that they’re back to square one.” Pointed out Jūshirō who had completely paused in his eating to pay closer attention.

Of all those present the white-haired shinigami was the one more aware of the political side of Soul Society and it’s law. Ichigo often found himself paying attention when Jūshirō would go on a political spree since the other always seemed to know insignificant looking facts that were actually noteworthy.

“Yes and no.” the orange head agreed “The elder system was disbanded and a new system was implicated. The clan will decide if there will be elders or not but that just means the head has to do the job of six including himself.”

“That’s just forcing the clans to keep them!” cried Wataru in anger as he slammed a hand on the table “They’re getting their way anyways, nothing changed.”

Ichigo merely smiled “Be as it may, but the elders do not have the final say anymore.”

“Wait, they don’t?” Haruka questioned in shock as she set her chop sticks down to give Ichigo her full attention. “Then doesn’t that defeat the point? C46 wanted to keep the clans under control.”

“Correct.” He praised “But the system is different now. First: The five elders are chosen by the entire clan and appointed internally; no more outside influence.” All four sighed in relief “Second: The Elders cannot make an important decision without the Clan Head present and even then it is up to vote.” They all perked up in interest, beforehand one of the elders would always run the show –Gen being a good example of this. “Third: The elders are mere advisors, not in charge. If all elders are against a decision the Head is making, they can explain their point while the Head explains theirs. Two hour minimum period before a vote is drawn again. If the result is the same the Head has the ability to disregard their opinion so long as the previous has been met and the good of the clan is in mind.”

Everyone stayed silent in response while they all processed this new information. It seemed like the system was pretty much refined and all loopholes were covered. While there might still occur conflict, it can be swiftly resolved and no one has to lose anything. It was obvious that some
information had been specifically left vague, but in Jūshirō’s honest opinion the Heads probably had the full information and what Ichigo had decided to share was pretty much the gist of it.

Either way it could not be debated that this was swifter and way better than what any of them could have hoped for. It also didn’t help that Ichigo had probably cemented his position no matter how young or new he was at the job.

Everything would be okay.

#16#

Everything was not okay. Why did he have to go and jinx it? If only he had shut his big fat mouth maybe everything would have been fine but nooooooo. He just had to make the situation somber – even though logically speaking he really hadn’t done anything, it was bound to happen anyways.

Shiba Ryōtarō was dead, KIA if you wanted to be specific, and so once they five returned to the main Shiba compound the mood pretty much latched onto every living thing causing even the trees to look down. Jūshirō hadn’t really forgotten about the late Shiba, let’s just say that there were more pressing matters at the moment and so he had pushed it to the back of his mind for the meantime. Needless to say, it’s back.

As he shares a quiet glance with Shunsui who also looks abnormally down, Jūshirō grimaces and discreetly motions towards the Shiba siblings who seem to have a perpetual gray cloud floating above them that grows larger and larger the closer they get to the compound.

Everyone seems to be distracted even though there is a visible bustle of activity in the manor that can be discerned from miles away. The guard at the gate looks apprehensive as well, and it seems he really hasn’t noticed their approach until his expression visibly brightens even though the lines of stress remain.

He turns around towards the inside and yells something to one of the other retainers walking by who also perks up and runs off somewhere else, leaving his broom on the floor in his haste.

They really can’t hear what was said from their current position, but Jūshirō would be hard pressed to deny it had anything to do with their arrival.

“Ichigo-sama!” the heavily muscled guard cries out in glee “Haruka-sama, Wataru-sama, you are all well!” he runs up to the group with such happiness shining through that it almost seems the man wants to hug the three but refrains from doing so out of respect.

Ichigo seems to be the only one able to quirk a crooked smile that looks a million times worse than if he had stayed frowning but in the end it’s the thought that counts. The guard visibly deflates as well but the honest happiness at seeing the three Shibas remains nonetheless. He quickly waves them inside with a kind smile that belies his sadness before closing the big wooden gates, something Jūshirō thought he would never see.

This doesn’t surprise the three Shibas so apparently it’s some sort of clan custom they are not pry to and leaves it at that. They are outsiders, they shouldn’t even be here and for a minute Jūshirō hesitates as he casts a glance towards the Shiba members walking around and their tangible mourning before turning to Shunsui with an arched brow. They share a silent conversation, and it’s obvious that the brunet believes they shouldn’t be here either. But as they were about to turn towards their orange-haired friend to excuse themselves, said person neatly deposits himself in-between the two and grasps their shoulders before giving a shaky smile.
That’s all the promoting Jūshirō needs, so he slides his hand into Ichigo’s and gives it a squeeze in support before letting go just in time to see Shunsui mirroring his own action. The slightly steadier smile that Ichigo gives them makes him feel certain that he has done the right thing.

Because while Ichigo is now Head of his clan and a person worthy of respect—they respected him with or without the title anyway, Ichigo’s that kind of person- he was their friend first and foremost and they intend to stay that way until their last breath. Everyone knows that Ichigo is the steady pillar for the Shiba Clan, the one they all go to and Haruka and Wataru rely on him even further as the younger siblings. So Ichigo needs his own support, and they’ll be damned if they don’t fill that role.

And so they stay.

The funeral of the late Shiba Ryōtarō is as somber as to be expected. The Clan gates remained closed for 10 full days after his death and the members all grieved their deceased head. The only thing that seemed to lighten the mood was their new head and all he had accomplished in the small time he had gained the position. The eldest Shiba sibling had caught the culprit of their sadness and made him pay ten-fold while making sure something of that sort would not happen again. Needless to say they were all glad the late Shiba had appointed Shiba Ichigo as his successor.

It was obvious he was mourning though. His smiles only for show and holding a tang of sadness that would probably stay for a while but it was obvious he was trying to make an effort for the clan. The orange head made sure to keep up with his duties at the tenth squad, and many Shinigami regardless of squad also grieved for the man many had looked up to. Ichigo merely responded to the condolences with a calm and understanding smile that never failed to make people feel worse – the Shinigami theorized that their powerlessness only made them feel shitier. But through it all, it was refreshing to see both 3rd seats of the 1st squad giving the orange head all the support he needed every step of the way.

After the ten days were up the gates opened again and the Shiba main Compound went back to the way it was. The clan symbol was polished squeaky clean everyday like always, the doors remained wide open with one guard on each side proudly displaying their Clan and the pathways were kept leaf free even though the trees surrounding the house were many. The only thing weird at first, new once you actually notice, was the Elm Tree proudly sitting on the right side of the path to the main entrance about 75 feet tall that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

The proud and longingly smile Ichigo would throw its way whenever he passed by made those present think that maybe this was another one of those Shiba customs that only the head was privy to.

It sure seemed like the case.

After those long ten days Ichigo sat down with Shunsui and Jūshirō, a couple bottles of sake settled neatly in the middle of the table with a serious expression that had them both tensing up in apprehension.

“The future is not a nice place.” He tells them.

If he ever wanted their full attention this took the cake. And so they find out. About the past, the present they share and the future that once was.

He had promised to stop fantasizing about running away to some other life and start figuring out the one he had now.
Quick comment, the Elm tree that suddenly appeared -in case some of you were wondering- is a Shiba Clan tradition that only the Head knows about (not canon, do not quote me please). Ryōtarō means Splendidly Stout Son and stout can be interpreted as Strength and Determination. Elm in plant language signifies inner strength and realm of intuition.

I tried to make the beginning happy go lucky because I knew it would end sad so I hope I succeeded somewhat. As seen –even if vague- Shu and Ju are now in the know of what kinda happened in the future/past. Yes, I am being purposefully vague because at this point in the story many past/future details must still remain unknown. Hope this was worth the long wait – I.AM.SO.SORRY!- and thanks for reading.
Chapter 17: The horrors of being an Elder Brother

Chapter Notes

Disclaimed: This is obviously not Bleach no matter how we look at it. This is a fanfiction, which I guess I kinda own (?) but the manga is not my property.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

#17#

Sometimes Ichigo found it peaceful working at the 10th division office instead of the Shiba compound, because here at least the Shinigami would think twice then barge into his office unannounced.

It wasn’t as if the retainers would do that, no it was the rest of the entire blasted clan. When Kukaku had told him that the Shiba Clan had been one of the biggest Clans before that incident where they had framed Kaien for some bullshit that was obviously Aizen’s fault and pretty much eradicated the entire Clan she wasn’t kidding. It didn’t help that the branches just kept on extending since the Shiba Clan did not believe in frivolities like arranged marriages or two children per couple.

Maybe he should have thought twice about that.

And usually he didn’t mind, they only came knocking on his door when it was a request. But because he tried to be kind and impartial to everyone regardless of how closely related they were, it seemed like it was an open invitation to chat or share tea with him while they shared their day’s activities –they don’t need to report their daily doings word by word, god damn it!

Sure, sometimes it was a nice change of pace, but the fact that he always tried to make time for the clan made their respect and awe almost increase ten-fold –why!? No matter how much he insisted, everyone made sure to address him as Ichigo-sama and regard him as some sort of untouchable figure head even though they found it easy to speak with him –contradicting signs, he knows.

But that wasn’t the main issue here. While doing paperwork in the tenth was slightly less arduous, he always found himself eating his words when Shunsui would barge in, Jūshirō not fair behind with an apologetic expression that Ichigo knew was all for show before taking over his couch.

Why did he have to be in the middle? The thirteenth division was to the left of the tenth and the eighth was to the right. Perfect meeting space, Shunsui calls it. Well Ichigo calls it paperwork hiding place for the two lieutenants.

Like now.

“If I had known that all this paperwork was involved with being a lieutenant, I never would have agreed to it!” Shunsui exclaims dramatically as he sprawls all over the double couch in a practiced manner. It pretty much was, every single day they would play the same tone.
Jūshirō sighed –like always- from his position on the love seat as he put his cup of tea down on the table “Shu, if a third seat position generated paperwork, why would you think lieutenant would be any less?”

The brunet whined “I would think a lieutenant would get to pass on all those annoying papers onto the third seat and that was why we used to have so much to do.”

Ichigo put his pen down as he mentally labeled the continuation of his paperwork as a lost cause “Jūshirō and I would always do that paperwork. I don’t see why you complain.”

Shunsui straightened up to look at the orange head who was standing from his position behind the big mahogany desk with a startled look. “You’re telling me you two actually did it out of your own free will.”

“Yes.” Twin replies graced his ears causing him to scrunch his nose up in disgust.

“Anyway,” Jūshirō interjected before Shunsui came up with some witty reply “We’ve been lieutenants for a good century now. You’re not going to tell me your sudden passionate hate for paperwork just came out of nowhere, right?”

The brunet crossed his arms over his chest and looked to the side with a scowl. Jūshirō merely narrowed his eyes menacingly since Ichigo was busy making tea for himself to do it instead.

“Your cheap scowl is not going to make me not pursue this Shu.” The white haired lieutenant pointed out.

“Well I’ll have you know,” Shunsui grumbled “that I have high hopes.”

Jūshirō merely threw the other a glare as Ichigo sat down on his left sharing the smaller couch. It was a wise choice, from previous experience Shunsui could go from sitting, to sprawled out to downright lying from one second to another without conscious thought of who else was sharing the couch.

“What I want to know is who started the cheap scowl thing.” Ichigo pointed out grimly.

“It doesn’t matter.” They both answered at the same time causing Ichigo to deflate instantly and grumble silently into his tea.

“Okay then.” The orange head appeased “Back to topic Shu.”

Jūshirō brightened while Shunsui groaned. “Ichi, you have to tell me how you do it! Where do you dump all your paperwork? Do you bury it?”

“To easy to see when someone has dug a whole.” Ichigo pointed out languidly for pure amusement purposes.

“Burn it with kido?” he question instead.

“Pretty sure the smell of burnt paper is a dead giveaway.” Jūshirō cut in cheerfully catching onto what Ichigo was plotting.

“Ugh, throw it in the river?”

“And risk people seeing the wet sheets going down stream?”

Shunsui looked ready to rip out his hair. “You’ve gots to tell me!”
Ichigo looked on in amusement as he stood up and opened the cupboard where all the tea sets should be. Jūshirō’s eyes widened comically while Shunsui brightened almost instantly.

“I picked up Chichiue’s old habit. But I only stuff them in here so that the office isn’t buried in paper. I do fill ‘em out eventually.” He pointed out as he rolled his eyes when the brunet deflated once again.

The white haired lieutenant quirked a smile in Ichigo’s direction once the cupboard was closed again “You had me scared there for a second. It’s in Shunsui’s job description to avoid paperwork at all costs, not yours.”

“It is!?”

“He meant it metaphorically.” Ichigo quickly snapped back and had to contain himself to avoid laughing at the dumbstruck expression on the other’s face. “Back on topic, again.”

Shunsui groaned as he flopped onto the couch with all the grace of a cow on wheels. “My dad decided it was a great idea to make me the heir to the Kyoraku clan.”

Ichigo and Jūshirō shared a quick glance at that and found themselves mirroring each other’s confused expression. This wasn’t news to the two, but apparently the brunet still had had hope that one of his other siblings would succeed their father.

“It’s usually the task of the first born Shu.”

Shunsui looked almost comically panicked “I know, but I’m not leader material like Ichi or you. You two were practically groomed for the position!”

“And you weren’t?” Ichigo questioned calmly in great contrast with the brunet.

“Kinda?”

Jushiro sighed “Not impressed Shunsui. I’m the only son of the family, and while I wasn’t raised with heir in mind, I still received noble training. I think I should be the one panicking.”

“The Ukitake main line died out in the Elder plague, yes?” Ichigo questioned the white-haired male.

He nodded “In the end there was no other option but to pass it onto the nearest blood relation, and that happened to be my Father’s lineage. He was barely Head for two years before you got your own position.”

They both turned to the brunet with a questioning glance before Ichigo spoke up “And you’re panicking about this because there will be more paperwork?”

“Yes!” he answered instantly with an indigent expression that made Ichigo want to face palm. “I’ve seen how you drown in paperwork before! I am not resigning myself to that fate ever.”

“The only reason why that happens is because Ichigo juggles his clan head duties, his lieutenant duties, and the non-existent captain duties.” Jūshirō pointed out with a wry twist of his mouth “Even though the tenth technically reports to the 1st division, Yamamoto-dono trusts Ichigo’s judgment enough to pretty much run the entire division.”

Shunsui groaned “I don’t understand why you aren’t captain yet, just swing into the 1st, bankai blazing and I bet you’ll get appointed in a second.”
Ichigo rolled his eyes as he threw his legs over the table and crossed one over the other in a way that seemed ordinarily graceful “Sure, let me just go and tell him how I’ve had bankai for better part of half a millennium, I bet he’ll buy that.”

“I thought we had agreed to calm down Shu.” The white haired lieutenant placated “In the eyes of the senior captains, even a decade of training is nothing. Just because you have bankai doesn’t make you captain quality.”

“In the future that’s all you pretty much needed to ascend, and the gotei 13 was a mere shadow of what it previously was. If I have any say in it, that won’t be changing and we might have more competent shinigami in the future.” Ichigo assured the other two, causing them to sigh in a way that was obvious they had already had this conversation before.

Shunsui sighed in a way that conceded defeat before sitting up again and throwing a leg onto the table as well. The reprimanding expression Jūshirō gave them both only made him grin harder.

“However,” the brunet began “I think you need to at least show you have discovered bankai so that in less than a century you could fill out the position.”

Ichigo was about to retort when all of a sudden the door to the office slid open with such force it almost made him drop his tea in shock. As they simultaneously turned to look at the newcomer, Ichigo found himself raising an eyebrow at the out of breath Wataru grabbing the door frame for support.

“What blew up this time?” he found himself asking almost automatically after so many aforementioned situations.

The raven head took a lungful of air before straightening with an almost panicked expression “Nothing blew up. It’s worse!” the shinigami waved his hands dramatically to showcase his point “The vain of all elder brothers. Boyfriends!”

Ichigo rose an eyebrow slowly as he gave Wataru an incredulous expression “You like guys? Why didn’t you tell your big brother? I don’t judge.”

Wataru turned an impressive shade of red as he spluttered at the snickers Shunsui was not able to contain and the smile that was twitching on Jūshirō’s face.

“I’m serious!” he yelled out when even Ichigo started to laugh out loud “Haruka-ne has a boyfriend!”

The air in the office seemed to dim almost instantly and both lieutenants itched to run away as the full impact of Ichigo’s murderous aura invaded the previously cheery atmosphere.

“Ho?” he rose an eyebrow almost too calmly “There’s a brat out there that thinks he can date Haruka just like that?”

Wataru shook his head rapidly to showcase the denial as he spluttered at the snickers Shunsui was not able to contain and the smile that was twitching on Jūshirō’s face.

“I’ve heard them talking and he was telling her that he wanted to court her the right way and ask for your permission even though the Shiba Clan doesn’t really force those kind of things.”

Ichigo felt a smirk curling the edges of his mouth causing those in the room to look even more apprehensive. The expression was pure danger for those involved, and no one had the illusion that they would be left unscathed just because they were bystanders.
“Please tell me we won’t have to help Ichi burry a body.” Shunsui whined from his position on the couch where he was trying to appear smaller.

The widening of Ichigo’s smile only made him whimper further as Jūshirō grimaced and Wataru escaped the room running even though he was proficient enough in shunpo for a fifth seat.

“I promise to refrain from murder unless I am provoked.” He assured them.

It most defiantly did not.

#17#

Two days after, while Ichigo was having morning tea with one of the new clan elders –Shiba Meishi- a hell butterfly entered through the half open shoji doors and fluttered precariously around his head until Ichigo lifted a finger and it landed calmly. The message that was shared was expected, but he still found himself smiling evilly at the prospect of future entertainment.

“In half an hour.” He told the insect who quickly took off and went back to its owner.

As he turned back to look at his current companion, he saw her smiling warmly at him in a way that made him feel like a child even though he was well over four centuries old.

“Am I right to assume that Ichigo-sama has found something to entertain himself with this evening?” she questioned good naturedly which had him mirroring her smile soon after.

Ichigo really liked the new elders, and Shiba Meishi was honestly his favorite. She was his something times removed great grandmother from a branch of the first head’s youngest daughter – that guy had had 14 sons and daughters! And while she was old, her attitude was still Shiba crazy and had a great sense of humor. She mostly always backed him up in Clan meetings, and when she didn’t, her points were valid which always had him thinking of new alternatives that would always work better.

She also insisted on calling him Ichigo-sama –like all the blasted clan, ugh!- and also insisted he call her grandmother even though it was considered unsightly.

“I’ll have you know that it’s my job as an elder brother and clan head to make sure someone worthy courts my little sister.” He told her seriously which would have had better impact if he weren’t suppressing a smile.

“Of course.” She agreed with him even though her expression stayed amused at the situation. “So who’s the lucky boy?”

Ichigo hummed to himself as he tried to dig up all information he had on Haruka’s intended. “Shiba Kazuki of one of the branch families. Son of Shiba Dochiro and Nana, though not blood related. He was adopted into the clan directly from the streets about a decade before the Elder Plague. I remember the hassle that Gen raised.”

“Ah,” she made a noise of understanding “If I remember correctly, Reiko-san was the one that convinced Gen to leave it be.”

The orange head nodded, he had heard about it of course, but hadn’t really gotten involved in the situation. Ryōtarō had taken care of everything afterwards so he only knew the basics, which pretty much the entire clan knew.

“It’s amazing to see how much power Reiko-san had over her husband.” He pointed out curiously
“Was there a reason for that Mei-bachan?”

“The Kasumiōji Clan only agreed to the marriage because Gen was the little brother of the first head. If I understood correctly, they threatened to remove their alliance many times because of Gen’s attitude so he always stepped back in line when Reiko cut in.”

“Huh.” He breathed out as he thought about it. Shiba Reiko had died a year before Ryōtarō of illness so it was easy to see why everything had turned so drastic. “Well, I’m off to meet Kazuki.” He told her as he hoisted himself onto his feet and reached out an arm to help her stand as well. She took it with a grateful smile before standing strong on her own two feet. Like always she threw Ichigo a smug smile and he merely returned it as per routine.

As they both went their own separate ways Ichigo’s smile turned vindictively sadistic.

He turned the corner into one of the out of the way hallways as a shortcut and pretty much crossed the entire compound in three minutes flat. He walked up to one of the main sitting rooms at the entrance of the building for formal requests and wasn’t surprised to see a retainer kneeling on the floor waiting for his arrival to open the door. Ichigo gave a wry smile to the young male with pitch black hair cropped neatly and bright blue eyes.

“You were right behind me twenty seconds ago, Daisuke-kun.” He admonished good naturedly.

The teen-looking raven head merely inclined his head in acknowledgment “It is my duty to attend to Ichigo-sama’s needs after all.” He agreed.

Ichigo sighed in resignation before giving the teen a casual wave which caused the boy to smile kindly and open the door for him. He had honestly tried everything; nothing worked with Kusakabe Daisuke, citing that he was born to serve the Shiba Clan. It did not help that Daisuke meant Great help.

But as Ichigo entered the room calmly, he sat down on the cushion in front of the Shiba Clan symbol and supported himself with the arm rest left specifically at his left. The tray set at his right side and the pipe already lit made him give a warm smile at seeing how the retainers pretty much had his habits memorized.

He grabbed the elaborate looking pipe and grasped it expertly with his thumb and forefinger resting it comfily on his palm. About five minutes in, two minutes before the scheduled time, the door at the other side of the room –not the one he had come through- opened slowly to reveal Haruka looking slightly uncomfortable with a man trying to appear as strong as possible while still showing nerves. Behind them a couple entered the room before the door slid closed. Haruka went up to him and gave a nod in greeting as she took her seat on his left side a little way towards the back.

The family of three sat down on the designated cushions in front of Ichigo before bowing low as is accustomed.

Ichigo knows he makes an intimidating figure with his patterned gray Kimono showcasing mini fireworks at the hems in blues, yellows and greens. His red Haori is draped over his shoulders as, pooling around him like silk with the Shiba emblem proudly displayed on his back. His orange hair had also grown over the years, and about three years back he had decided to just let it grow and was now on its way to mid-back.

Even then he tried to give a reassuring smile which they crookedly returned in response. He turned slightly towards Haruka, and found his smile almost splitting his face when he found her twitching
“Nervous much, Haruka-chan?”

Said person blushed deep red and averted her eyes somewhere else. It was obvious she wanted to be anywhere except here at this current time, but was willing to go through her temporary torture.

“This is a bad idea.” She muttered remorsefully in a way that hinted how much she had tried to persuade her intended to not do this. She took a deep breath and turned back to look Ichigo in the eye with a determined expression “Ni-sama, I would like to request the annulment of the marriage agreement between the two of us.”

“What?!” They all exclaimed in shock as they quickly turned to Haruka so fast they almost got a whiplash. Ichigo even heard a loud thud from one of the side doors that sounded suspiciously like his two best friend eavesdroppers.

“We haven’t cancelled that?” he questioned instead to avoid the surprised expression the family of three were giving him.

The side door slid open and Ichigo easily spotted Shunsui and Jūshirō trying to scramble away to remain unseen. Daisuke bowed low and gave a murmur of an excuse before supplying “I believe that register is in your office, Ichigo-sama. If I am correct, it has been cancelled since day two of your appointment.”

Ichigo rubbed his chin thoughtfully before nodding in understanding “If you say so, it must be true. You pretty much fill in the role of my secretary most of the time, Daisuke-kun.”

The person in question gave a smile one level bellow smug before bowing again “If that is what Ichigo-sama needs at the time, then I am happy to fill in that role.”

The orange head waved him off with a fond smile before turning back to look at Haruka who had a startled look on her face. “There you have it, that thing was probably ripped to shreds seconds after we were able to cancel it.”

Haruka groaned and visibly deflated onto her cushion as she adopted a more casual posture like she always did. It was weird to see her acting so goody two shoes noble-y.

Ichigo quirked another smile before turning back to his audience “So, now that that’s out of the way, I believe there was something I was going to be asked.”

Kazuki cleared his throat and straightened his position into stiff-as-a-board that only made him look comically in Ichigo’s honest opinion.

“Yes sir,” he began nervously even though his backbone remained –Ichigo mentally praised that “I want to ask your permission to court Shiba Haruka.”

On Kazuki’s right, his father –Dochiro- grimaced while Nana –his mother- kept an ever patient smile that had him thinking those weren’t the exact words they had told him to use.

“Okay.” He agreed easily, which had Haruka instantly narrowing her eyes at him and the trio looking even more startled –looks like he had completely thrown to the trash every impression they had on him. “However, I would like you to answer a question for me Kazuki.”

Kazuki nodded seriously as his eyes shinned with determination. Looks like Haruka had really found herself a spit fire that was waiting to reign free. He really couldn’t see his little sister with a
prim and proper noble anyway, Ichigo thinks she’d go stir crazy after an hour.

“Shiba Haruka is the princess of our clan, no matter how much she likes to deny it.” He added on when she looked on menacingly “So what I want to know, is what you have to offer her in the future you two see yourselves sharing.”

Haruka looked confused at the question, almost as if she couldn’t believe he was asking something like that. He wouldn’t imagine himself doing so either, but in this case he needed to seem like a greedy bastard—somewhat.

“Uh,” Kazuki began nervously as he absently tugged on one of his brown bangs. “May I be honest Ichigo-sama?”

Ichigo smiled in encouragement and gestured he continue.

“I was picked up the streets by Father and Mother some time back. I wasn’t raised into this noble environment. So I slip up on manners most of the time, and all I have is because Dochiro-san and Nana-san have been kind to me since day one and treat me as their blood son.” He gave a warm smile to both parents who also smiled “I didn’t get to meet Ryōtarō-sama much while he was still alive, but he was always kind to me as well and I couldn’t help but admire him. Everyone in this clan has welcomed me no matter what blood I carry, or how different I may look. I have come to love this clan and all its people and I admire Ichigo-sama and what he has done for the entire family as well. So— he stopped to chew nervously on his bottom lip before his deep gray eyes hardened with determination “I really have nothing else to offer to this clan or Haruka-chan, but I can assure you that my feelings are genuine.”

Ichigo’s smile widened until he started to outright laugh. Everyone looked on quizzically before he calmed down and took a deep breath to calm himself. The grin remained on his face though, and as he took a long drag from the red on gold pipe, he leaned in excitedly to stare into Kazuki’s eyes.

“I like you Kazu.” He told them truthfully, which startled the brunet “That is the exact answer I wanted to hear. No, you actually overcame my expectations.” His grin widened “Welcome to the family Kazuki, but be warned that the main family is even crazier than then the rest.”

“Ichigo!?” Haruka yelled angrily that was only downplayed by the blush dusting her cheeks “We’re not getting married, we’re going to start dating!”

“Yet.” He responds smugly.

“Ugh!” she throws her arms up in outrage and vacates the room in an angry huff that Ichigo knows is all for show.

“So,” he turns to the trio with his smile just as wide “I think dinner is in order.” He tells them cheekily.

“Yes!” Shunsui slams the door open with all his excitement and a mirroring grin on his face “Shiba dinner spreads!” He yells in delight will Jūshirō comes up behind him and karate chops him square on the head with a sweat drop.

“Sorry about him,” he tells the three dumbstruck Shibas sitting in front of Ichigo “He’s actually a five year-old.”

“Let go!” Shunsui flaps around when Jūshirō grabs the back of his shihakusho and drags him out the room “Let go Ju! Ichī, help me!”
Ichigo merely looks on in amusement while he nibbles with his pipe. The three new additions to the main family chaos seem like they want to question if this was really an everyday thing. The way Ichigo just gives them an amused smile makes them think that it is.

#17#

“There’s gonna be a festival today!” was the first thing she told him once he arrived at the main building’s gate. He blinked curiously his gray eyes and furrowed his blonde brows in harsh concentration.

“We don’t have any festivals programed.” He told her in lieu of an answer which had her pouting almost instantly.

She harrumphed and threw her long purple hair over her shoulder and turned the other way in mock annoyance. He honestly felt she looked more amusing than intimidating, but in a couple years that might not be the case.

“Ki-kun is no fun.” She complained “The Kuchikis are hosting the festival this time.”

“Eh?” he questioned with no enthusiasm making her turn her nose up further. He sighed in resignation before giving a placid smile as he rubbed the back of his shaggy blonde hair. “So we’re going out today?”

“Yup!” she switched quickly to vibrating in excitement.

“Yoruichi-chan!” a man with dark black hair came running out the building as he waved at the two kids. “Kisuke-chan, Sensei said there are no classes today.”

Yoruichi turned back to give Kisuke a smug smile which had Kisuke sighing again in resignation. "I heard from Yoru-chan.” He said instead “We’re supposed to go to the festival the Kuchikis are throwing?”

The man nodded in agreement with a kind smile towards the two “The Kuchikis may be hosting it, but it was the Shibas that pretty much gave the idea.”

Kisuke blinked up curiously at the retainer in mild curiosity “I heard the Shiba and Kuchiki Clan have a really strong alliance going on right now. Is this related?”

“Well,” he scratched the back of his head, as if not being able to decide if he should explain the situation to kids or not “the Kuchikis feel indebted to Ichigo-sama from the Elder Plague. This is actually a bad kept secret among the clans, but there is a reason why the current head, Kuchiki Ginrei, does not wear the traditional Kuchiki Kenseikan.” He told them “The previous head didn’t want Ginrei-sama to inherit, but Ichigo-sama convinced him otherwise.” He grimaced “This enlarged their debt even though Ichigo-sama insists they owe nothing.” He started laughing as if it were some sort of joke the kids were not privy to.

Kisuke merely hummed in understanding while Yoruichi pouted at the impromptu lesson “Boring politics.” She waved off “Today is my day off, and I will not have you ruining it with these serious questions, Ki-kun.”

The blonde laughed nervously at the offhanded threat before sending the retainer a grateful smile for the answer. The man merely answered in kind before giving a bow and retreating to his other chores –that actually looked like a smart move, and Kisuke would have followed his example if he wouldn’t get castrated for even trying.
“So we’re going to this festival.” He stated calmly to placate her “What’s it about?”

“Hanami.” she told him as a matter of fact with a bright smile on her face “The Sakura in the Kuchiki compound are the prettiest, so they’re opening to public view; there will also be some stalls.”

“Let me guess, the Shibas are throwing fireworks at the end of the day?” he added drily, already knowing the answer.

Yoruichi nodded as she started to drag him out “They get more ingenious in their techniques as festivals pass, it’s always interesting to watch.”

“I see.” He deadpanned as he let himself be man handled by the determined Shihōin princess towards the outer streets. Kisuke knows a guard will be joining their tale pretty much the entire time, but he guesses that’s all the leeway they will get on their outing. They are barely three decades old, so he understands no matter how much he may not like it.

As he sighs again in resignation and nods at the appropriate time to make sure Yoruichi thinks he’s actually listening as she babbles a mile per minute, he can’t help but think he may end up even more tired than after his usual training. She’s a real high maintenance person, and the fact that she insists on hauling him through all her adventures makes him just as much prone to incredible situations.

All of a sudden he senses the lull in her conversation and pears curiously from behind her to see what has brought her attention.

“What’s wrong, Yoru-chan?” he asks.

She points in the direction of the Kuchiki compound and Kisuke follows her gaze towards the crowd of people already gathering outside the gates trying to get in. He hums in understanding and already knows what is to come the moment he sees her crossing her arms.

“That’s a long line.” He points out unnecessarily “Do you want to come back later?”

Yoruichi shakes her head almost instantly as she puts on a serious face that Kisuke rarely sees. “No, we’ll just wait.”

Kisuke nods as well and starts walking forward without looking and bumps into someone before he can even take half a step. He would have fallen on his back, if it weren’t for a strong and steady hand grabbing his shoulder.

“Woah,” the person he bumped into says “are you okay?”

Yoruichi makes a surprised noise from his left, so he turns up to look into deep brown eyes and almost swallows his tongue as a deep blush dusts his pale cheeks.

“I-I-Ichigo-sa-sama!”

The orange head merely smiles kindly which makes Kisuke feel even worse, because it was his fault they bumped paths –literally.

He bows lowly “I’m so sorry Ichigo-sama, I didn’t see where I was going!”

Kisuke expected to be reprimanded or some sort of witty retort, but is surprised to hear the charismatic Clan Head laughing instead. He straightens nervously and looks up in shock.
The etiquette books said nothing about this!

“Not to worry.” Ichigo says instead. “Were you two coming to the Hanami?”

Yoruichi almost instantly brightens at the mention of the festival “Yeah! Is Ichigo-sama coming as well?”

The orange head’s smile widens as he looks down and can’t help but find Kisuke’s dumbfounded expression, and Yoruichi’s childish enthusiasm amusing. He had seen the two kids running around causing mayhem before, but this is the first time he has spoken to them in person in this time.

“Of course.” He tells them “If you would like, I bet I can smuggle us in without the gate hassle.” He tells them in mock conspiracy.

Yoruichi’s grateful whoop of delight and Kisuke’s sigh of relief is all the answer he needs, so he gives them a winning smile and makes a gesture of follow. They go towards a side door where the guard looks resigned in amusement, yet still greats him kindly and respectfully, only shooting the two tag alongs a fleeting glance before letting them in.

As they enter the compound without a problem, Yoruichi shoots him an expression of awe while Kisuke looks like Ichigo’s his new hero. He merely laughs in amusement which only serves to brighten their mood.

“Run along then.” Ichigo waves them off “I bet it would be boring staying with me, I’m meeting with my crazy best friends and Ginrei-chan.” He smirks in amusement when Kisuke looks like he choked on air and Yoruichi gives him a surprised expression.

For the sake of their sanity, Kisuke decides it’s for the best they do as he says and pulls Yoruichi towards the right direction.

“Thank you very much Ichigo-sama.” He says in lieu of a farewell, which he answers with a cheeky smile.

Kisuke thinks that those that describe the orange-haired lieutenant slash Clan Head as amazing, are onto something. At this very moment he can’t help but think that that word aptly describes the hurricane that just passed by even though he thinks amazing is a type of synonym for insane—he guesses the interpretation of the word amazing is up to each person. He hopes that long distance awe is the most he will ever interact with the man if only to protect what little sanity he has left.

The way Yoruichi smirks like a cat that got the milk makes him think his purple-haired best friend liked the man too much for that to ever happen.

Kisuke looks back and sees the orange head joining an obviously drunk Kyoraku Shunsui, a softly laughing Ukitake Jushiro and an annoyed looking Kuchiki Ginrei. There’s a little raven haired boy hanging onto the Kuchiki’s Haori like a lifeline, yet still looks interested in the other three.

He’ll be seeing more of the orange head in the future.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes
So I finished this but decided to keep it saved on my laptop in standby. Maybe write more for next chapter and see how many chapters I can write back to back between work, school and all those other real life bothersome things humans need to do –like sleeping, ugh ʕ •ᴥ•ʔ. Hopefully I can write a couple and update with those for a while before my muse disappears again.

Anyway, hope you all liked this chapter, and please review!

Thanks for reading.
I'll be updating on Wednesday until my Bleach streak remains
Chapter 18. Twin Trouble is better than this

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: If I owned Ichigo, I would have developed the actual concept of soul society further, like really Kubo, you had a gold mine there!

“No matter how much suffering you went through, you never wanted to let go of those memories.”
— Haruki Murakami

See the end of the chapter for more notes

#18#

The day Shiba Haruka got married was a grand day for many, and was considered the event of the century thanks to all the commotion the Shiba Head made. Haruka loudly complained many times that Ichigo seemed more excited than her and was insist that everything be perfect—nothing less for his little sister, he would say.

Pretty much everyone agreed that it was an amazing—yet crazy—event. The Shiba compound was decorated to the T, and the normal Shiba dinner spread was mediocre in comparison to what the chefs whooped up that day. The bride looked beautiful in the finest silk kimono, and everyone agreed the groom looked dashing too.

At the end of the day, a couple trees were burnt down by drunk Shibas trying to light fireworks—this particular incident was the reason why decree number 62 of Shiba Life was created—and even retainers joined the fun. Shunsui ended up swimming with the fish when he flirted shamelessly with a Shihōin that did not appreciate it, and Jūshirō actually ended dead to the world on one of the tables after Shunsui spiked his drink continuously.

Kuchiki Ginrei had to be carried home by an irritate lieutenant after Ichigo spiked his tea—best prank ever—while Sojun trotted behind his father and right hand with a wide smile on his face after playing with all the Shiba kids—needless to say, future playdates were scheduled.

Ichigo enjoyed the show from his seat and made sure to stay relatively sober—not for Shunsui’s lack of trying—because someone had to be conscious to clean up the mayhem that was bound to be left at the end of the day. Haruka kept on throwing him knowing glances the entire afternoon, and at the end of the day, made sure to give him an extra big hug and a kiss on the cheek in thanks before departing for their honeymoon.

A couple decades later Haruka came to visit the main compound—she had moved out into the third district, deciding to open an orphanage for the rukongai kids—and looked him in the eye with a serious expression on her face.

“I’m pregnant.” She told him. And that was how he officially became the godfather of some Shiba baby that hadn’t even been born.
He had freaked out internally for like two seconds before giving a smile and congratulating her. Ten seconds after she had left his eyesight, he had shunpoed towards the thirteenth division where Jūshirō was filling out his paperwork and had a mini panic attack—or so he says, after Jūshirō called Shunsui for backup, it took three bottles of sake to calm the orange head enough to tell them what had happened, and another crate for him to stop worrying needlessly.

So that was how he found himself right now in third district north Rukongai, pacing helplessly outside the master bedroom and grimacing every time he heard his little sister yell.

“She’ll be fine.” Shunsui assured him with a soft smile and a steady hand to his shoulder that did nothing to alleviate his worry.

“She sounds like she’s being killed and tortured at the same time!” he freaked out before curling up his nose in disgust when a particularly loud and painful scream resounded through the walls again. This time, even the brunet winced while Jūshirō gave an ever patient smile. “If this keeps on going, I think I’m gonna go crazy.”

“Oh, should we play a game?” Shunsui recommended.

Ichigo threw him a murderous glare that had him shrinking out of fear. Usually they joke about the intensity of Ichigo’s scowls and dub any others as cheap, but today takes the cake. They had never seen such a scary scowl.

“Ma ma,” he placated “Just sit down and calm down Ichigo.”

“Calm down?!” he shrieked as he grabbed the front of Shunsui’s white haori “You want me to calm down under this situation?!”

Jushiro was about to intervene and make sure Ichigo didn’t accidently murder the brunet before a long and choked yell echoed, followed by a wail of what could only be a baby. Ichigo froze, before his wide eyes turned towards the door.

Almost instantly it flew open and out came a midwife trotting out with a blue bundle in her arms. She looked around for a minute until making a sudden decision and handing the baby to Ichigo.

“Take care of him, there’s another one coming!” she yelled back before turning on her heel and hauling herself into the enclosed room again.

Ichigo found himself dumbfounded in shock as he stared down at the little pink baby he had been handed. He was so engrossed in his stare that he pretty much ignored the continuous yells from the other room.

“It’s a he.” Ichigo whispered almost venerably.

Shunsui and Jūshirō just sighed in relief at the importune distraction before huddling around Ichigo to take a good look of the newest member of the Shiba main family.

“He’s so small.” Shunsui remarked as he tried to compare Ichigo’s big hand with the baby’s smaller ones. “Does he have a name yet?”

“I don’t think so.” He absently answered as he gave the baby his forefinger to grasp “Haruka said she would come up with something sooner or later.”

Jūshirō peered curiously at the little bundle before moving the blanket slightly down to see the baby’s head. He wasn’t surprised to see a tuff of brown hair growing on his scalp instead of the
usual black of the Shiba clan, before narrowing his eyes in curiosity.

“Do you think he’ll have green or brown eyes?” The white-haired captain asked.

Ichigo furrowed his brows “Not sure, babies’ eyes settle only after they’re a certain age.”

Shunsui hummed curiously as he looked from the baby to Ichigo “And you know this because?”

“Haruka needs to talk to someone beside Kazu about these things.” He pointed out as a matter of fact.

The door flew open once again, and Kazuki came out with a wobbly smile and a tired expression on his face.

“Ni-sama, could you join us for a minute?” he asked the orange head.

Ichigo inwardly winced at the way of address but filed it off as a lost cause. He had tried to get Kazuki to call him Ichigo, just Ichigo. Needless to say, it’s a failure. So instead he treks towards the door and follows the man into the bedroom.

Haruka looks just as tired, but she’s holding a green bundle with a pride smile that has him returning it as soon as he enters. He gives the brunet baby to Kazuki who receives the babe with a grateful smile of his own before turning towards the younger baby.

“This little guy’s a spit fire.” She tells him “He didn’t want to let his older brother come first, but still lost the battle.”

Ichigo gives a smirk as he peers down at the sleeping baby. It seems all the hassle tired him out too.

“He’s defiantly a Shiba then.” He jokes, which instantly makes her laugh while Kazuki merely huffs on the side.

“You Shibas are so proud of your genes.” He interjects in mock annoyance.

Ichigo’s smile only widens “I’ll have you know we Shibas are the best!”

This time Kazuki can’t repress a smile of his own which makes Haruka beam before sharing a winning gesture with Ichigo.

“We are.” He says lovingly in a way that makes Ichigo feel that he is doing something right with this clan.

“So,” he interjects before they go all mushy “What are the names of the new additions to the Great and Awesome Shiba Clan?”

Haruka laughs again before waving him over and easily handing over the little baby Shiba in green.

“Well,” she begins hesitantly “we didn’t know we would have twins, so it’s a good thing we didn’t come prepared.”

“But we think we know exactly what to do now.” Kazuki grins as he shares a plotting smile with his wife “We’re going to name the firstborn Shiba Yasahiro. It means tranquil and describes intelligence and wisdom.”

“I like it.” He tells them sincerely which makes them share twin smiles.
“And the little firework in your arms,” she begins smugly “will be named Shiba Isshin. It means-“

“One heart.” Ichigo interjects unconsciously as he looks down at the green covered baby with wonder in his eyes “It can be interpreted as whole heartedness.”

Haruka’s smile widens “I take it you approve?”

Ichigo’s eyes must show something he’s not aware of, because her smile softens and her eyes look kind. Kazuki smiles as well, and something losses up in his chest at the notion.

“Yeah,” he whispers “It’s perfect.”

Of course, they come to the conclusion that Shiba Isshin is his favorite godson at that very moment in life, and tease him mercilessly all the time –but we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

“How ‘bout you go show the boys outside?” Haruka recommends softly “I bet their itching to barge in too. And I’m kinda tired.”

Ichigo nods in agreement before giving a small smile in gratitude and following her advice. Jūshirō and Shunsui surround him pretty much instantly and both look down at the bald little baby.

“Wow,” Shunsui remarks amazed “this one’s a blank slate. We won’t know who he resembles until later.”

“Calm down Shunsui, it’ll be an exciting experience.”

Ichigo smiles knowingly at the two which instantly has them on edge. He merely grins cheekily before gesturing with his head towards the bedroom.

“Shiba Yasahiro was the little brunet.”

Jushiro blinks curiously “And this little guy?”

The orange head’s smile merely widens “Shiba Isshin, black hair, brown eyes.”

Shunsui looks confused for half a second before understanding dawns on his face and he groans in annoyance. Jushiro is resigned with the situation almost instantly and only laughs at the odd tidbit of information only the three of them or privy of.

“Is it weird knowing how cute he is as a baby?” Jushiro asks instead while he lets Shunsui sulk in a corner.

Ichigo cleared his throat “I think it’s weirder that I’m my father’s Godfather.”

Of course they didn’t know goat-face and oyaji was named Isshin once upon a time, so this new data is a huge shock, second only to one.

Their resigned to know that number one also has everything to do with Shiba Ichigo and leave it at that. Though it doesn’t change the fact that they don’t even know what to say to someone who is carrying their father in their arms.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry I’m late!” Wataru chooses that moment to barge into the room, his enthusiasm high and completely overlooking the shocked air in the room. Ichigo merely looks on smugly.
“Ichi-jichan,” a little, green eyed brunet tugs on the hem of his Shihakusho almost timidly.

Ichigo looks down at the boy with a patient smile from where he’s sitting on the engawa of the tenth division barracks. The new recruits are trying to imitate the katas the senior shinigami are practicing and look almost comical in their endeavor. They aren’t exactly standard, so he knows no one will find these practices anywhere but here. He also knows these help much more than the set ones used in the academy.

They’ll get used to it.

“Yes Hiro-chan?” he asks calmly.

Yasahiro pouts almost reflexively but doesn’t correct him in his endearment. “I and Shi-chan were talking-“

“It’s Shi-chan and I, Hiro-chan.” Ichigo corrects.

The boy’s cheeks puff out before he takes a deep breath and starts again “Shi-chan and I were talking ‘bout growing up.”

“Hm,” Ichigo hummed in interest as he made a hand signal towards Wataru that was leading the exercises today. He instantly switched gears and changed the dynamic as according to what Ichigo had told him “And?” he promoted.

Suddenly a little body draped himself over Ichigo’s shoulders, seemingly out of nowhere “Hiro-chan and I wanna be big like Ichi-jichan and Wataru-ji.” He tells him excitedly.

Ichigo doesn’t look in the least disturbed by the sudden invasion of personal space. Instead he looks over his shoulder to raise an eyebrow at the raven head.

“Why do you want to grow up?” he questions “Being old is boring.” He tells them in a matter of fact tone.

Yasahiro pouts again up at the orange head “Are you sure?”

Ichigo nods “Positively, you have to fill up paperwork from hell.”

The two boys share a look from over his head before seeming to remember the stacks of paper he works with before shuddering in disgust.

“I think I’ll keep on playing with my toys.” Isshin admits calmly before brightening “Oh, but Ji-chan might answer us!”

Yasahiro brightens in delight before turning back to Ichigo “Ka-san got mad when we asked her why she looked older than Ichi-jichan. Do you know ji-chan?”

Ichigo chokes on air in a fashion that makes a couple shinigami turn in worry towards his direction. The orange-haired captain merely waves it off before turning back to look at the brunet in the eye.

“You told Haru she was old?!”

The nod he receives in answer only makes him even more horrified.

“Now listen here kids,” he starts his lesson “it is very important, no matter what happens, to never, ever, and I mean never, call a lady old no matter how old they really are.”
“Eh,” Isshin whines “But what if she’s a wrinkly old lady?"

Ichigo shakes his head “No matter what.”

They share another silent conversation over his head before Yasahiro turns back to him “If Ji-chan says so. Does that mean Ichi-jichan can’t answer our question?”

Ichigo laughs at their childish curiosity before giving them a grin. He gestures Yasahiro to huddle closer which he quickly agrees to before leaning down in a conspiring way as he looks both left and right which makes the twins laugh.

“The secret about aging is reiatsu, lineage, and the soul.” He tells them “If you don’t actively stimulate your reiatsu, your aging is faster. If your lineage is new, you most likely age faster too. While the soul depends entirely on the person.”

“Oh~” the boys chorus in tandem.

Ichigo grins “Right now I look like the youngest of the Shiba trio because of a combination of these three; while Haruka looks like the oldest. Another example is Kuchiki Ginrei, who is younger than me, but even though his lineage and reiatsu is a given, his soul isn’t exactly young and so he looks like he’s in his mid-forties.”

“Wow,” Isshin drawls “So Ichi-jichan is really strong!”

Ichigo sweat drops “That’s what you got from my lesson?”

The giggles he gets in response makes him sigh in resignation even though the smile curling the edge of his mouth betrays him. Instead he grabs Yasahiro and makes sure Isshin is holding onto his shoulder tightly before hauling himself up in one swift movement which makes them giggle even harder. As he sends a fleeting wave towards Wataru, he quickly switches to Shunpo mid-step. Needless to say, the boys cry out in delight.

“Like this?” Isshin asks as he adjusts his knees to try and imitate the posture the older blonde is trying to show him,

Kisuke merely hums in thought before trying again “Maybe bend your elbow a little bit inward so it’s better guarding your kidney.”

The raven head pauses and looks up to look at the boy in shock “I need to guard my kidney better? I can easily get stabbed in the kidney?!” he looks panicked now “I’m gonna die!”

A karate chop on the head makes him stop mid-rant “Concentrate Shi, Kisuke-kun is merely being literal. Your elbow needs to be bent at an angle where your arm is right above your kidney.”

Isshin groans before looking up at his second favorite-est uncle –but don’t tell him, it’s a secret! “But Ji-chan, how was I supposed to know?”

Wataru merely rolls his eyes before giving the young blonde a placid smile “Sorry about that, and thanks for helping in his training.”

Kisuke waves off the apologies with a nervous chuckle “It’s no problem, it also helps us remember the basics before the Academy tests.”
“I bet you two will pass it with flying colors.” He tells him offhandedly as if it were a given.

Come to think of it, when it comes to the Shibas, it might as well be a normal thing. He’s heard that almost every wanna-be shinigami bearing the surname Shiba is way ahead of their peers ability wise even though the theoretical parts sometimes stump them.

“We hope so.” He says instead, not bothering to point out that Yoruichi is an heiress in training, and that there is just no way she won’t pass.

Almost as if summoned, purple hair suddenly invades his vision followed by the telltale sound of shunpo a second after. She’s smiling smugly, which makes him think that poor Yasahiro was left really behind.

“You were supposed to train Yoru-chan, not race.” Kisuke points out futilely.

As expected she waves off the comment “Same thing.”

All of a sudden, another boy, similar to his own stature appears out of nowhere slightly out of breath.

“S-so mean Yoruichi-chan, you left Yasahiro-chan and I behind.” The raven head points out as his gray eyes shimmer with unshed tears.

“He-he,” she snickers “that’s what happens when you challenge the goddess of flash, So-kun!”

“No one challenged you.” They all chorus in a deadpanned tone of voice that made it obvious they had had this conversation before.

“Besides,” Yasashiro begins as he seemingly materializes out of thin air “your self-proclaimed title means nothing against Ichi-jichan.”

Yoruichi harrumphed loudly as she turned the other way to hide the light blush on her cheeks “Ichigo-sama was the one that said I was well on my way to becoming the goddess of flash.”

Wataru sighed in resignation before waving the three younger kids over “We’re leaving, Sojun-kun, I’ll leave you at the gates on our way home.”

Sojun smiles timidly before giving a slight bow in gratitude “That’d be highly appreciated, Wataru-san.”

The three trek out the Shihōin grounds after giving their farewells. Almost a second after they leave, Isshin grins which causes Wataru to raise a brow.

“What’s so funny?” he asks.

“I was just thinking, Ichi-jichan doesn’t have any kids, so who’s the heir of the Shiba Clan? Yoruichi-chan is the heiress to Shihōin, and Sojun is heir to Kuchiki.”

Sojun almost instantly looks embarrassed as he shoots quick glances in the Shibas direction.

“I-I’m not so sure I’ll be the heir. My health isn’t that great, and I’ve heard people in the clan saying that I’m not suitable for the position too.”

“Nonsense,” Wataru waves off his concern “I have it on good authority that the Kuchiki heir is Sojun-kun.”
The Kuchiki smiled gratefully which Wataru quickly returned before turning towards his two nephews. “Now, the Shiba Heir is a little bit more complicated.”

“Because Ichi-jichan has no direct descendants?” Yasahiro questioned.

“Correct,” he praised as he ruffled the boy’s brown hair “so until he does have kids –which he swears up and down he won’t have- that means one of the secondary descendants need to succeed him,”

“That means Yasahiro and Isshin, right?” the raven-haired Kuchiki pointed out.

“So it does.” He grinned down at the two boys “Ni-sama says that Yasahiro is the current Shiba Heir, so I’d be inclined to believe him.” Wataru tells them in mock conspiracy which makes the raven heads giggle, while Yasahiro pouts.

“I’d be an awful Clan Head!” he pretty much decrees.

“Hiro-chan will be a good Clan Head.” Isshin proclaims proudly with a little cheer that Sojun mirrors with slightly less enthusiasm. The way Wataru smiles in agreement, does nothing to alleviate his concern.

#18#

“You have your tooth brush?” Ichigo asks his youngest godson.

“Yes Ji-chan.”

The orange head furrows his brows in thought “Your hell butterfly?”

“Yes Ji-chan.”

“Enough money?”

“Yes Ji-chan.”

Ichigo scowls “How about-”

“Yes Ji-sama.”

The orange haired tenth squad captain narrows his eyes at the cheeky smile Isshin is giving him. The brat knows how much he hates that way of address, but he can’t help being a slight mother hen. At the end he rolls his eyes in resignation before ruffling the boy’s unruly black hair.

“Fine, have it your way. But once you find out you forgot something, you’ll regret it.”

The way Isshin’s smile wavers for half a second makes Ichigo smile before patting the boy one last time and pushing him in the right direction.

“Alright, so you decided to become a Shinigami, that means I expect nothing but the best.” He grins.

Isshin mirrors his grin instantly and almost seems to recite “Because the Shiba genes are the best!” Ichigo chuckles good naturedly “Don’t let Sojun hear you say that.”

The expression Isshin gives him is a giveaway of what he is planning on doing.
“Run along then.” He waves him off.

Isshin waves back before sprinting the rest of the way towards the Academy gates. Ichigo had honestly never expected the twins to actually separate and decide on different paths. Yasahiro may be well versed in Shinigami arts, but they had diverged paths and would have to be separated for a while. At least Isshin would have Sojun a couple years up, Yasahiro would be staying in the main compound with Ichigo. He insisted on learning all he could, and was taking his future position seriously even though Ichigo wouldn’t have forced the boy into the position no matter what.

He was about to turn around and go on his merry way towards the Shiba compound to continue his duties before a sudden chill went down his spine.

Ichigo’s breath hitched in his throat and he went stiff as a board while his reiatsu unconsciously reeled in around him like a cocoon. He absently scanned the area and found no disruptions, but as the seconds ticked by the forbearing increased. If he were any other person he would have thrown the feeling away as an act of his imagination but he is not any other person.

He’s a battle hardened war veteran that no matter how much he’s enjoying his life, is waiting for the other shoe to drop. He’s a man who followed his instincts in battle and has survived because of it. And if his senses weren’t in overdrive, he seriously would have missed it. The meek reiatsu just barely brushing against his senses. A subdued presence that makes you think un-noteworthy and instinctively erase their existence from memory.

He doesn’t move a single muscle as his eyes move downwards just in time to see a boy who looks like he’s barely into his teens with shaggy brown hair and thick black glasses.

The boy keeps on walking towards the academy, and Ichigo stomps down the urge to sever him in half—or discarding that, running into the academy and getting the kids out of there.

Because the little boy that just walked past him with the most innocent air in the world it has to be fake, is none other than Aizen Sosuke.

Ichigo bites back to the bile that’s threatening to come up and shunpos away at the speed of light towards the compound.

It won’t happen again

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I have chapters on standby… huh. It feels weird, like an accomplishment.
Please review!
Ichigo stayed in his room that weekend, making almost everyone panic and a few others to start running around like headless chickens around the Shiba compound as if the world was ending.

Many chalked it up to the fact that he was suffering withdrawal symptoms from Isshin’s entrance into the Shino Academy, while others found themselves worrying about the probabilities.

Once Monday rolled around, and Yasahiro strolled into the Shiba compound to start his heir training, Ichigo stepped out of his room, smiled sheepishly to the family and retainers, before joining the oldest Shiba Twin for breakfast.

As the two sat down at the dining table, it was obvious that the servants were frantic in their attendance, more so than before. Yasahiro easily noted how apprehensive, yet glad the retainers acted around his Ichi-ji, and that kind of behavior freaked him out—it was also obvious that all these foods were Ichi-ji’s favorites.

“Is there anything you would like to talk about, Ichi-Ji?” he asked when it became obvious that the orange head wouldn’t say anything himself.

Ichigo paused mid movement, his hand stuck between his rice bowl and mouth for half a second before he continued as if nothing had happened. The retainers didn’t pause, though it was apparent that they were listening as well.

“Ichigo-sama to disregard how much we worry for him.”

“Nothing much,” he shrugged his shoulders expertly—Yasahiro really hoped he would get lessons for that, because it honestly looked cool “I was feeling sick since Friday afternoon so I stayed in my rooms.” Ichigo paused “I guess I worried everyone.”

Yasahiro stared incredulously at his uncle before turning to stare at Ichigo’s attendant.

“Did he really just say that?” he pointed towards Ichigo’s general direction.

Even ever composed Daisuke looked like he had had a terrible weekend “It is not uncommon for Ichigo-sama to disregard how much we worry for him.”

“Hey!” Ichigo called out disgruntled “I worry about everyone in this clan very much too.”

The stare the two gave him made him hesitate the tiniest bit. He sighed in resignation, and swung for the next best thing on his mind.
“Hiro-chan,” the eldest twin looked annoyed at the name, but didn’t forge on when he realized that Ichigo was being serious “I’m not getting any younger, I realized that when I dropped off Isshin at the academy the other day.”

Yasahiro honestly couldn’t hide his shock.

“I’ve been around for a long time, and I’m pretty sure the new generations will only surpass us as time flies by.” He gave the brunet a sad smile “You are my heir, and in a blink of an eye you’ll be Clan Head and Isshin will be Captain of the tenth; I can already see it.” He paused, as if realizing that he really did feel that way “I may not be as old as Unohana-senpai, or even Yama-ji, but I’m old in my own right, and I just can’t help but think how the years have flown by.”

Yasahiro stares at the sad yet proud smile plastered on Ichigo’s face and can’t help but feel it’s wrong and completely out of place. He shares a silent look with Daisuke and knows the retainer feels the same thing so he sets his scowl—one that might even rival Ichigo’s on a good day- with a vigor that conveyed his determination.

“That,” he began softly before narrowing his eyes and proclaiming “is the bullshitiest bullshit I have ever heard in my entire death!” Ichigo flinches in shock “Yeah, you might be getting old, but look at the Captain Commander, he’s still Captain Commander and he’s ancient.” The orange head can feel a slight smile tugging his lips at that admission “And sure, I may be your heir, but I hope you keep me as an heir for a looooooooong time because I am sure as hell not ready to carry that position, not even two centuries from now. Because what you do is awesome and I bet no one can ever really replace you no matter what.”

Ichigo stares at Yasahiro in wonder as he carefully sees everyone else nodding in agreement. Daisuke even gives an approving smile, as if he really couldn’t have said it better himself, and Ichigo knows no one really could have. Yasahiro really will be an awesome heir, he can already see it. He finds himself involuntarily smiling, and something twitches inside and the knot of apprehension in his stomach eases. The kid may not know exactly what he did, but Ichigo finds himself grateful and full of determination he didn’t know he had momentarily lacked.

Aizen Sosuke is a fledging Academy Student, he may know how… different he is from the rest, but he shouldn’t have dreams of conquer just yet. The Ywach problem might be a little more complex, but if everything goes well, Ichigo should be able to strike the Quincy King down before he reclaims his intellect and power. So yeah, maybe he’ll be really ancient by the time that rolls around, but he’s pretty much Jūshirō and Shunsui’s age, he won’t be that old.

So it’s no surprise that he finds himself suppressing a smile before he files it away as a lost cause and smiles wide and bright like the sun as he ruffles the brunet’s head softly. The way Yasahiro’s cheeks ting red makes him smile wider, but instead of slapping the hand away like he usually does, he smiles too.

As the retainers watch in amazement, the knot in their stomach eases and the thought that their little heir would most defiantly do good to their Ichigo-sama crosses all their minds.

“Yeah,” Ichigo seems to agree even though no one said a thing “I think you might be right.”

Yasahiro beams like he won the lottery as he absently leans into the pat “Of course I am!”

“Brat.” Ichigo complains even though his cheeky smile remains.

As Daisuke watches in silence, he can’t help but think that Ichigo-sama and Young Master Yasahiro share the same bright smile.
It lights up the room better than any of their fireworks ever could.

“Being a member of the Gotei 13 is completely different to the academy!” Shihōin Tsukiya bellowed at the new recruits. “It’s harsher, tougher, and more than anything, real.” He surveys the perfectly lined team of 10 and nods to himself when no one even twitched. “Your mistakes can cause a life of a team member, or even your whole team. And the decisions you take, will impact those around you.” Tsukiya paused until his gaze fell on his straight faced daughter, not a hint of recognition or childishness. Good. “I expect the best of you, dismissed.”

“Yes sir!”

Tsukiya sighed as the recruits scattered to install themselves into their new barracks. As he was about to move towards his own office, he felt a strong arm drape over his shoulder and instantly tensed –there was only one Shinigami out there that could beat him in speed and dared to act so casually and that was-

“Yo, Tsuki!” the orange haired captain greeted casually making the Shihōin bristle.

“Shiba.” He growled “How many times have I told you to not call me that!”

Ichigo waved off the concern like usual as he smirked at the annoyed tick forming on Tsukiya’s forehead. He knew the raven head didn’t really mind the endorsement, but for some reason the younger male always felt annoyed when Ichigo called him that –he wondered if Tsukiya was still sour about that time he outpaced him in a race and started to make a barbeque at the finish line to mock the other of the speed difference.

“It doesn’t matter how many times you tell me, you’re still Tsuki to me. And I’ve told you to call me Ichigo.”

Tsukiya’s growl froze in his throat as his eyes widened in horror. “Do you have any idea what father would say if I regard you so casually!” he shrieked.

“Ichigo” he pointed out.

“Yes,” he agreed “but when I complain about you under my breath, he thinks I’m talking about any other Shiba in this god forsaken town. There are around six hundreds of them, and not all of them are blood!”

“Hey!” Ichigo called in outrage “I’ll have you know just having the Shiba surname makes us awesome by default.”

Tsukiya merely grumbled under his breath as he glanced back to scowl at the orange head. “And, what are you doing here?”

Ichigo sighed “You know, any other lieutenant would treat captains with respect.”

The man gave him the look this deserved as he made a meaningful gesture towards the second division captain’s office.

He scoffed “Fine, but I didn’t come to visit you –contrary to your belief, I have more important things to do than babysitting snot nosed Lieutenants.”

Tsukiya bristled like a cat again –Ichigo’s new favorite pastime was riling Shihōin heirs up “I’m
500 hundred years old, thank you very much!”

Ichigo merely smirked as he let go of the Shihōin and started walking in the general direction of the barracks with a backwards wave in goodbye “My cute little nephew who still hasn’t arrived, needs a playmate to practice his speed –the fact that he’s not here yet makes me think I’m doing the right thing. So your daddy is letting me borrow some of the new recruits.” He glanced back to give a cocky smirk when Tsukiya started spluttering “Second division Shinigami are the fastest after all.”

With a last bellow of laughter Ichigo left in the general direction of the new shinigami’s living space. As he mentally connected the dots, realization suddenly dawned on him as he riled up in preparation for a fight “Oi Shiba, stay away from my daughter!”

The louder laugh that ensued, made him think it was a lost cause.

“I’m serious!” he cried out as he slumped his shoulders “Yoru-chan is already taken with that orange haired pervert, the fact that he only finds it amusing is not helping.”

“Hmm,” an elderly voice grumbled from behind him making him squeak in shock and turn towards the second division captain “Yoruichi-chan only has a teenage crush on someone she admires Tsukiya, don’t worry.” A quirk of a smile made Tsukiya take a step back in preparation as the man’s eyes only twinkled in amusement “Besides, a marriage arrangement between the Shiba Clan Head and future Shihōin Clan Head can only benefit us, even with the age difference,”

“Otou-sama!” he squealed before falling backwards in a faint.

The Shihōin patriarch merely laughed out loud in mirth as he turned around in the direction of his office. After all, he had only come out for the teasing.

#19#

“So in easier terms, three hundred and eleven years ago, the event we dubbed the Elder Plague ended.” He recited hesitantly before looking up at his favorite uncle –do not tell Wataru-ji– with big wide eyes “Right?”

Ichigo snorted as he speeded through a ten page report while he surveyed Wataru’s lessons.

“Too simple terms.”

He deflated “The whole thing in the book is long and boring, why do I have to know all this?”

Ichigo sighed as he put down his pen and reclined on his chair as his bones creaked back into place. Yasahiro winced at the noise, but Ichigo didn’t even bat an eye.

“Let’s see Hiro-chan, tell me decree number 41 of Shiba Life.”

Yasahiro puffed his cheeks at the name before taking a deep breath and intoning word for word “Any disagreements between clan members must be settled in the designated fighting areas and away from any defenseless spectator.”

The orange head nodded in agreement as he crossed his arms over his chest “And decree number 62?”

The brunet felt his brows furrow as he tried to dig up the information that he had read dozens of times from the Shiba Handbook “Fireworks can be used anytime, anywhere with the proper
precautions as stated on decree number 1 of Shiba Life, but lighting any becomes prohibited if under the influence of alcoholic beverages.” He paused before looking up at Ichigo with an inquisitive look “Wasn’t this decree made on my parents wedding?”

Ichigo felt his lips twitch up in a smile before he settled back on his serious face. Yasahiro didn’t miss it, he would really like to hear the story of that day, but everyone had been so plastered they barely remember the occasion and Ichi-ji is tight lipped.

“Yes,” he agreed “now why do you memorize the decrees from young age?”

Yasahiro brightened “Because it’s part of the Shiba life, like Decree number four: It is illegal not to drink milk. Or decree number 18: Any singing must be reserved for bathing areas unless told otherwise by a high stationed member of the clan. Or better yet, decree number 26!: If a panda is waiting in line behind you, it is indispensable that you allow them to pass first. All these decrees are the way we live and we must make sure to uphold them… even though I think Decree number 92: No goats are allowed near the main compound; is stupid.”

Ichigo shuddered at the last decree and decided to completely erase the memory from his mind. Shunsui had scarred him for life, and if he had it his way, he would never see a goat again.

“So all the laws and decrees outside of the Shiba Clan are also a way of life, of a citizen of soul society.” He explained calmly as the brunet scowled.

“But those are boring.” He waved off.

Ichigo nodded in agreement making Yasahiro raise an eyebrow incredulously. “Politics are boring most of the time, but it’s always good to know them so we can use them to our advantage.”

Yasahiro sighed as he quirked a reluctant smile “Knowledge is power?”

Ichigo smirked “Exactly. Now, from the top.”

The brunet grumbled under his breath but acquiesced with a calm intake of air before he intoned from the text books. “Three hundred and eleven years ago, what is dubbed the Elder Plague or Noble Crisis, was put to a stop when 3rd Head of the Ancient and Noble Clan of Shiba, Shiba Ichigo, put into action an emergency Head meeting with Central 46. Article number 254, section C was put into question, and after the backing of all five Great Clans was shown, all the lesser Clans agreed as well. Because of this, Section Y was put into place, and the control of the Clans was returned to the hands of the Heads.” He paused for air before continuing softly “The Elder Plague ended at the right moment, otherwise the casualties might have been worse. Among the incidents were: Rapid Head rotation, Economy depletion, Oppressive tyranny, Monopoly attempt & acquisition as well as mysterious Clan member deaths.”

Ichigo nodded “Correct. The gotei 13 started to degenerate around that time to. The moral of the entire Sereitei was affected by this Crisis, and so rotation was very common.”

Yasahiro furrowed his brows as he glanced up from the book “But all the current senior Shinigami are freakishly strong, more so because the new rules implemented for a Shinigami to be promoted.”

“That’s because of this. We tried to fill in the empty spaces with subpar Shinigami and it actually ended up affecting us negatively instead. So the Captain Commander came to his senses and put those rules in place.” He explained cheerfully… too cheerfully.
“And you had nothing to do with this sudden eureka?” he asked incredulously as he flipped through all the pages of the most recent history book “Your name is on almost half of these rules!”

Ichigo scratched the back of his head nervously as he averted his gaze towards his paperwork. He has really, really tried to stay under the radar, but underhanded, non-notable maneuvers are not his thing.

“A-anyway! I expect you to have finished pages 264 through 421 by the time I’m done with the paperwork.”

Yasahiro sighed and decided to go along with the change of topic before looking at the stacks of paperwork on the desk. If his calculations were correct, Ichigo-jisan should take around two hours to finish what’s on his desk. But he would bet his own twin, that before the time limit, Wataru-ji will walk in the door with more papers from hell.

“Okay.” He agreed easily. He could totally do it. His due date is like, six hours from now.

#19#

So maybe he had underestimated his crafty, successful, Captain Uncle and the orange head had had an ace up his sleeves.

Yasahiro paused.

Sleeve, his haori was cut and had no sleeves –who would think to do that besides him?!

Anyway, back on topic. Wataru had strolled into the office with a stack of paperwork juggled with one hand followed by the third seat and fifth seat with their own respective stacks of paperwork – where the fourth seat had run off to, he had no idea. That was normal.

Wataru-ji had placed the papers on the desk, dusted his hands and paraded right back out as the officers did the same in a moment of brilliance. Normal as well.

His uncle Ichigo had looked up from his desk, scanned the new forms and sighed. Hey, normal!

Then the orange head had reclined himself on his chair and closed his eyes to take a… nap? Okay, it could be normal.

Half a minute later, he snapped his eyes open again –smallest nap ever- and a smug smile curled the edges of his mouth before two men materialized out of nowhere right behind his Ji-san… Uh… normal?

“I am never betting with you again, King!” The white haired man that looked erringly similar to his Ichi-jisan whined. “I don’t want to do icky paperwork.”

The man with the sunglasses and shaggy hair merely sighed in resignation and took the empty chair to Ichigo’s right. “If we all work in tandem, we should finish in an hour.”

Yasahiro remained speechless throughout this entire encounter as the two newcomers found their space and jostled for elbow room on the paper filled table. As realization dawned on him, he spluttered before trying to speed through the book. His ji-san just smirked at the notion, and Yasahiro inwardly cursed his Uncle.

Zanpaktou sprits helping Ichi-ji-san with paperwork. NOT.NORMAL!
So here he was now, nursing bruises from his training session / punishment from hell for not finishing on time the stated pages. He carefully moved down the streets of the first district as he dragged his feet before heaving another earth moving sigh.

Ichigo-ji was certainly a crafty man, he really hoped he’d be able to learn to do that in his lessons.

Back on track, after being beaten in hakuda –soundly and thoroughly- he had decided to take a stroll in the first district to sort his mind through all the laws and historic events he had read in the span of 4 hours.

He was nonchalantly walking through the market area, when all of a sudden he bumped into someone else who was walking out a store at the exact moment he was passing by the doorway. The two collided, and it took all his training to not land like an idiot on his butt while the other merely let out a surprised yelp. He quickly turned up with an apology on the tip of his tongue when he was met with the white and blue standard Shihakusho of a Shinigami Student.

“Oh,” he said instead “a Student!” Yasahiro smiled sheepishly when the other brunet merely raised a brow “Sorry about that, I just wasn’t expecting you… Coming out the door and being a student I mean.”

The brunet only looked on curiously behind his black framed glasses before clearing his throat “It is no problem. I should have seen where I was going.”

Yasahiro gave a grin in response as he scratched the back of his head. “I guess we were both at fault. So you’re a first year?”

The boy kept his curious expression as he regarded Yasahiro with a slightly critical eye. The brunet wore a blue Yukata with dusted leafs at the bottom. It was a little dirty, and his peach colored skin was full of scratches and bruises –he couldn’t decide if he was a stray or not.

He nodded “I just began last week. It’s rather interesting.”

The calm tone he took made Yasahiro think that the boy didn’t find much interest in the classes.

“I have a brother in first year too!” he revealed, cheerful enough for the both of them “Though we’ve been taking classes from Ji-chan… uh, Ji-sama since little.”

This piqued the interest of the other, and Yasahiro found himself feeling proud of his accomplishment before his smile faltered “Oh, where are my manners!” he exclaimed fearfully as he looked from side to side to make sure Ichigo hadn’t stalked him and decided to slap him for the slip with a paper fan –he has done it before, do not judge. “My name is Shiba Yasahiro, it’s nice to meet you.” He outstretched his hand.

The brunet paused for a second before a hesitant smile lifted the edges of his mouth “Aizen Sosuke, the pleasure is mine.” He grabbed the hand and shook it. “So Shiba Isshin is your brother? It’d be hard pressed to believe that.”

Yasahiro laughed nervously as he tried to suppress a wince “Shi is a little more… boisterous.”

If the slightly strained smile was anything to go by, he knew what Yasahiro was talking about. He looked at the state of Yasahiro’s person again, before he quirked a smile “Did you have trouble with some of the residents?”

“Oh,” he stuttered as he looked down at his Yukata “not exactly, Aizen-kun. My Ji-chan – Ji-sama used Hakuda training as a form of punishment for not finishing my work in time.”
The boy blinked back curiously before deciding to not point out the craziness for politeness sake and concentrated on something else “You may call me Sosuke if you wish.”

Yasahiro beamed “Call me Yasahiro, or Hiro! Almost no one calls me by my first name.”

Sosuke quirked a hesitant smile but nodded in agreement. It seemed this Shiba was easier to like. “So Yasahiro-kun is training to be a Shinigami as well.”

“Uh,” he stuttered nervously “not really, I’m-“

“Hiro-chan~!” an evil voice from hell interrupted him, making Yasahiro freeze before turning mechanically towards the direction of the voice. “I thought I told you to be back before dinner~.”

Yasahiro finished turning so fast he was surprised he didn’t get a whiplash. Ichigo was walking calmly towards him, completely changed out of his Shinigami captain clothes, and now wearing a pale gray Yukata and his red Haori draped over his shoulders. Yasahiro always wondered how his Ji-san was able to make such a simple assemble –if you discount the gold lining of the Shiba Clan Head Haori- look like a top of the line fashion.

“Ichi-jisama!” he squeaked as he frantically looked for an excuse as his eyes fell on his new acquaintance. “I was gonna head home soon, honest. I was just making a new friend!” His ji-san always said it was important to have friends, right? He would approve of his diversion… maybe.

Ichigo stopped in front of him, and he felt he was sweating a river when those sharp amber eyes fell on Sosuke. The orange head didn’t show any outward expression, but Yasahiro could discern the amusement there. Damn is Ji-san!

“Hmm,” he hummed “I see your friend is an Academy Student.” He leaned down so he was eye level to the two –he didn’t have to make it look like they were short! “My name is Shiba Ichigo, Tenth Squad Captain of the Gotei 13 and Head of the Great and Noble Clan of Shiba.” Ichigo paused to add dramatization as Sosuke seemed to be suppressing a shiver “But most important title of them all, I’m Hiro-chan’s favorite uncle.” He finished with a grin.

“Ji-chan!” Yasahiro bristled like a cat “Don’t embarrass me!”

Ichigo merely started to laugh out loud at the blush dusting his cheeks as he patted his brown locks. “Sorry Hiro-chan, it’s just funny to tease you.” He said with a smirk before turning to the other brunet with a cocked brow “And you are, young Shinigami-to-be?”

“A-ah.” He stuttered, he had never stuttered this much! What was with these Shibas! “Aizen Sosuke.”

“Well,” Ichigo’s smile unnerved him “Since you’re Hiro-chan’s friend and all, besides the fact that you’re probably Shi-chan’s classmate, you are formally invited/required to come eat dinner at the Main Shiba Compound tonight.”

Yasahiro turned instantly to his uncle with wide eyes as Sosuke mirrored his shocked expression. What the hell?!

“No buts!” Ichigo cut in quickly with practiced expertise as he grabbed both their shoulders and herded them in the direction of the Shiba land “Shi-chan just arrived home for the weekend since it’s a free one, so we’re having a dinner spread!”
“B-but…” he tried again, but his voice was barely above a whisper as Ichigo’s smile deterred him. This was an ‘effin captain of the Gotei 13!?

“Sorry.” Hiro apologized from over Ichigo’s shoulder, his smile more of a grimace that had Sosuke sighing.

Shibas, it turns out, are all quirky and hard to handle. He really wished there was a handbook to know how they worked.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Umm… will you lot believe me if I say I forgot yesterday was Wednesday –in other words, posting day? No? Well tough luck ‘cause that’s the truth.
Hoped you guys liked this new chapter!
If you want to waste some time, swing by my new Fanfiction, Surprises come in many sizes (in FF.net) or Surprises come in many sizes, shapes, colors and Ichigos (in AO3). It’s a oneshot/drabble thing that I’m posting one new chapie a day. Humor is the main genre, and I’m receiving recommendations for future chapters.
Also, someone out there asked for a timeline, so here it is… kinda.

Event
Ichigo Age
Beginning of Story: 38
Ichigo enters Academy: 88
Ryōtarō dies: 288
Haruka Courted: 450
Twins Born: 510
Isshin enters Academy: 590

Hope this helps!
Thanks and review on your way out!
Chapter 20: The Promised Bond

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I miss my bunny Temi, he went with my Mom on vacations... I obviously do not own Bleach.

New chapter humans. Enjoy!

There's an OMAKE at the end, check it out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

#20#

Sosuke had been born and raised on the south side of Rukongai and had stayed there for as long as he can remember. In the 67th district things aren't as bleak as the lower districts, but it still leaves much to be desired.

He knew he was different, even without Mai's input on the situation, he knew it was odd to be hungry like a clock three times a day if he ate at the appropriate times and he knew it was odd to have to do meditation to control his power. Mai's explanation about reiatsu and potential was helpful though, and he always wondered what he would have done without his pseudo Mother.

Mai was a normal soul, she didn't eat and didn't get hungry, yet she still found it in her heart to raise him and earn money to feed him; a total stranger. Mai would always say it was the right thing to do, that while we are all different from one another, at the core we're all the same.

Sosuke believed her.

As time went by, he came to understand who Mai really was. She had been nobility once upon a time, the eldest daughter born to inherit a noble title and wealth she didn't even want. Mai had always loved to paint, Sosuke knew that, but he had not known that she loved any type of artistic activity; from drawing to dancing, some of those not exactly fit for a noble. Mai had known this, and so had her family, but when it became obvious that she had inherited no spiritual pressure what so ever, they started to become even more intolerant towards her behavior and activities.

"I wasn't befitting for noble life." She would tell him time and time again with the slightest ting of sadness behind her gray eyes.

Sosuke found this unfair and vividly remembers throwing a temper tantrum or two which he now feels ashamed of. In the end Mai had been thrown out of Sereitei and the first through fifth district had been banned to her by Central 46 themselves. He never understood why, but know that he thinks back, Mai always had a moment of passing, albeit vindictive glee when she happened to mention her father. He wondered why, now he knows.

Mai had been part of a lesser clan, and her father was the most against her extracurricular activities, always comparing her to the first born of the other noble clans, including the Great five. One day he had had enough and told her she would get married to another noble and that she was expected to behave and serve her husband as a good noble wife. Obviously, Sosuke cannot see fiery Mai
agreeing to this, and she hadn't.

However, that hadn't been the end of it. Mai's father had blackmailed Mai with marrying off her little sister, and for Mai, that was unacceptable. So she had accepted, but every time Mai did anything he did not approve of, Mai's sister got the brunt of her father's rage. Needless to say, one day he crossed a line he shouldn't have; did something inexcusable and unforgivable that made Mai snap, the consequences be damned.

She killed him to protect her.

She got exiled for saving her sister.

She had been wronged.

That was what Sosuke thought. It shouldn't be fair. And it wasn't fair. Mai was the kindest person in the world, yet they called her exile a soft verdict. They said it had been for her own good as well, that her noble heritage had been taken into account. Sosuke knows, even if Mai doesn't say it, that her exile had been worse than death if that means she can't see her little sister, and live with the knowledge that she never will.

Honestly, Sosuke could not understand how she didn't hate the central 46 and the being that controlled them.

Then Mai had fallen ill, and Sosuke had had no choice but to pick up the workload and earn money to eat and buy medicine for Mai. But nothing she took- nothing the Rukongai doctors did ever helped. As time passed by, she got worse and worse. He had run out of options, and if he wanted her to survive, he would have to swallow his pride and seek help elsewhere.

Sereitei had been his first thought. Mai's old clan had been his second. But once he got the chance to voice his concern, try and get heard and granted his petition that would hardly cost them, they turned him away with sneers and curses.

He hadn't tried it again.

In the end, mother luck still shined upon him, and placed a shinigami retired from the fourth on his path. He agreed to help, but the treatment would be costly, and even though the man tried to help and shoulder some of the cost, it was still a lofty amount.

So Sosuke did the next best thing he could think of with his abnormal spiritual pressure, and uncanny ability to learn and master anything he was taught. He joined the Academy, and hoped a Shinigami's salary would help him save Mai.

The first weeks were brutal, he had gotten a part-time job in a little store close to the Academy, and thanks to his enrolment, all his food was covered by the school. But even his prodigious abilities had him dropping dead each night for bed after hours of school, work and then homework coupled with training. He felt it would be hard to last the full six year requirement.

And then he met Shiba Ichigo.

The man was hard to describe. But every time he tried, his brain formulated the peculiar idea that god had decided to combine a tornado, a Tsunami, some… world peace, atomic bombs from the future –whatever that is- catastrophe, harmony and ponies into a single soul on a whim.

So Shiba is hard to understand, and nosy –not to mention sadistic- to the point of wanting to tear out your hair. He seems to do crazy and ridiculous things on a whim, but then all of a sudden, bang
it makes sense!

Like that one time he had just suddenly started to carry a compass on his person for no reason. He held onto the thing like a life line, and when questioned why, he would set his frown in a hard line while he gave you a look like if the end were near.

"I'm teaching Shinji-chan bankai." Would be his enlightening answer. Then, two weeks later this Shinji had learned bankai and Sosuke found out the guy had a Shikai that disoriented your senses – or something like that, Shiba (the youngest, Yasahiro) had explained.

Or that one time Ichigo had stated that dogs would be good shinigami!

Suddenly a rumor starts going on that the recently graduated Komamura Sajin—who wore a bucket over his head—was not human.

After many other scenarios, Sosuke came to a conclusion. For all that he felt he was above his year mates in power, and that he had been taught to seal his reiatsu since a young age, he felt he was no match for Shiba Ichigo unless he artificially enhanced himself – and even then, he could never become all seeing like Ichigo seemingly was.

One time, he had accidently mentioned how Shiba seemed to be omnipresent because he knew *everything* that was going to happen, had already happened, or would happen, in front of the orange head. The orange head had thrown his head back in laughter and almost choked two minutes later when he couldn't stop. That had been scary.

But in reality, Sosuke knew that no matter how much he wanted to deny it- no matter how scared he was at the prospect, he found himself admiring Shiba Ichigo.

That was the day he unofficially joined the Shiba-taichou Fanclub.

Then Shiba found out Sosuke was juggling a job and school—he *knew* it would happen sooner or later— and the first thing he did was pull Sosuke aside one day after his shift, with an expression that had him honestly freaked out before they had shunpoed away at top speed, reaching the 67th district in record time.

He stopped outside what Sosuke recognized as his own home, and felt the color drain from his face.

"It's admirable." He calmly stated, as if he hadn't just discovered his most well-kept secret. Mai was ex-nobility after all, and Shiba was a Noble Clan *Head*. "But you cannot keep this up Sosuke."

Really, Shiba was just voicing out loud what he didn't want to accept and he found himself hunching his shoulders at the harsh reality. The helpless feeling lasted for less than half a second, but it was still the worse he had ever felt. The next second Shiba had placed a hand on his head and ruffled his hair—like he had seen done to Yasahiro and Isshin—before giving him a smile.

"You concentrate on your studies Sosuke." He had calmly advised "I'll make sure Mai is taken care of."

And that was the day Shiba—or Shiba-sama out loud—became Ichigo-sama.

Later on he had decided it was time to investigate exactly what impact Ichigo-sama had in the C46 ruling. Because let's be honest, the reason Mai is out there is because C46 commanded it that way, and if Shiba Ichigo had something to do with this declaration…
It turns out Ichigo-sama is some sort of puppeteer that the puppets don't even know about. They think they are free, but as Sosuke's brilliant mind goes through law book after law book, he comes to the realization that if Ichigo-sama hadn't done what he had done, the assassination squad would have gone to kill Mai and many others like her long ago.

Many rules that were about to be passed, or many old laws make Sosuke grimace, and the more he reads, the more he finds out that Mai could have been killed, tortured, imprisoned, assassinated and poised many times over if this hadn't been fixed before. He finds his ire at the C46 grow to unrecognizable levels, and the more he thinks about it, the worse it gets. It grows and grows, and suddenly he also hates the Soul King for allowing this all, for letting the C46 get away with these inhuman acts, and mainly just forming the C46 to begin with.

Then he sees Ichigo-sama walking leisurely through the market before the man catches his eye and waves with a small smile. Almost instantly Sosuke's ire, hate and rage disappears as a sense of relief washes over him instead.

He thanks whatever deity out there for making sure Ichigo-sama had been born as he was, and when he was. He thanks Ichigo-sama in his thoughts, because unintentionally the man has saved him from grief many times over and if that isn't a life debt, he doesn't know what is. Then he thanks him again, because otherwise, he's pretty sure he would have brought forth mass murder and world domination with maybe overthrowing the Soul King thrown into the mix either wise.

He can't wait to see what world Ichigo-sama is creating.

#20#

He's different.

Ichigo might be unfair in the way he's comparing Sosuke to evil master mind, contact wearing, horrible fashion designer for evil armies Aizen. But he does, and what he sees is not all bad, and the way he unintentionally made Sosuke into a more normal kid from Rukongai is nice. He finds it heartwarming that Sosuke cares for someone like Mai, and a little, truly sadistic part of himself that he likes to keep under lock and key cannot help but sympathize with the brunet. C46 would have really screwed him over at least fifty times, and Mai a couple hundred. The soul king took no interest –and has taken no interest now- in making sure the Central doesn't go over their head, so really, Ichigo can understand.

He does not approve.

But if he has it his way, it won't happen. Here he is not the Ryoka boy who suddenly gained Shinigami powers. He's a respected captain, he's a Clan Head, he's nobility, and his voice means a lot more than he might actually imagine. The way everyone shuts up when he has something to say, makes him feel fluffy and humbling in a way that his him questioning if he has turned into a girl in his old age. He makes a difference though.

So he doesn't question it. He takes what he can get, and what he cannot, he finds another way –always has. He feels the Council is changing for the better, and if everything goes to plan, there will be no megalomaniac ex-Shinigami Captains fused with Hōgyoku's to worry about.

In reality he has only known Sosuke the boy for a little over four months, and anything can happen in the future. But he has high hopes, and the way Sosuke now smiles when Isshin, Yasahiro and he go out to get dinner, has him optimistic.

It can work.
"You want to introduce him to Kisuke-kun!?" Yasahiro squeaks as they walk towards the academy gates to go pick up Isshin and Sosuke for the weekend.

Ichigo knows he shouldn't be using his status to get the boys out of school, but he really doesn't care. It's for the greater good! Making sure genius kids do not turn into evil overlords is important after all.

"But of course." He nods as he shares a conspiring grin with Shunsui. Honestly, the man is older than Ichigo's 590 years by a couple decades, why the man still acts like a child half the time puzzles him.

The small brunet looks like Ichigo has slapped him with a dead fish covered in jam. Ichigo would like to think that what he's planning is nothing out of the ordinary, and if Aizen hadn't been hell bent on world domination, he thinks Kisuke would have gotten along swimmingly with the other genius. Maybe Yasahiro realizes this too—not the future information, mind you- because his expression is stuck somewhere between horrified and exasperated.

"Ji-sama, if we do that Kisuke-kun will go all sciency on us and we won't get to pl- umm, talk and debate politics like big kids?" he gave a nervous smile as Ichigo snorted.

"Yeah right," Shunsui, god bless his tactless brain "You kids just want to play."

Yasahiro bristled but didn't deny it as he turned the other way with a light blush dusting his cheeks. Ichigo shared another cocky grin with the eighth division Captain as they arrived at the gates.

"Ichi-ji!" Isshin called enthusiastically as Sosuke just looked to the side as if he couldn't care less. Ichigo might have believed it if he hadn't been so versed in people reading.

"Yo!" Ichigo greets with a grin as he ruffles the raven head's unruly hair. "Missed me so much brat? I just saw you three days ago."

"As if!" Isshin crosses his arms defensively even though they all know it's for show.

Ichigo's grin widens as he switches target "Hey'a Sosuke, ready to go?"

The brunet academy student sighs as if he doesn't know why he even agreed to accompany them before he gives Ichigo an expression that he refuses to call a pout.

"As if I have any other option." He states grumpily.

"Nop!" the orange head states happily before herding them in the right direction "I told Ki-kun and Yo-chan to meet us up at Sokyoku, so we'll be shunpoing there."

"Sokyoku hill?" Isshin questions wearily as he furrows his brows "Wouldn't that mean that-" his eyes widen when he catches Ichigo's happy smile.

"Yes."

That's the last thing he hears as he's suddenly whisked away at the speed of light making him feel like two seconds away from puking, and his vision a blur of colors that has him thinking a rainbow has decided to dance the tango around him for some reason. Once he can stand up straight without feeling like curling up in a fetal position, he sees that Sosuke, while a little green, has fared better than he has. Yasahiro got a ride with Shunsui-ji, so it's obvious he's as dandy as ever.
"You still can't shunpo without feeling sick?" a sickingly sweet voice interjected from somewhere on his right "How cute."

Isshin growled as he turned around to glare at Yoruichi "Shut up! As if you don't get pale when Ichi-ji shunpo's at top speed!"

Yoruichi takes offense in this and instantly bristles. But there is something in her expression that has Isshin thinking that so long as he involves his ji-sama in the same sentence, the Shihōin can't really get mad. He's proven right when Ichigo merely offers a smile that has her turning her nose up as she crosses her arms over her chest even as a light blush dusts her cheeks. Honestly he finds it creepy, but when he asked Ichigo-ji about it, he just smiled vindictively and winked.

He doesn't know what to make of it, but he thinks Ichi-ji only finds Yoruichi's little crush amusing and cute in a not-pedophile kind of way… if that makes sense.

"So," Ichi-ji brings them to attention. "I brought a new brat to play with, so I hope you all know how to be nice."

There are immediate protests about how they are not brats thank-you-very-much, but Ichigo easily waves off the claims and turns to give introductions.

"Now, this is Aizen Sosuke." He places a hand on Sosuke's shoulder while he keeps his grin firmly nailed on his face as he turns to Kisuke "He's from Rukongai, so you two have that in common - among other things."

Kisuke nods, but doesn't expect much.

He should have known, that questioning Shiba Ichigo was one of the most stupidest things a human being could ever do. He had thought he had already learned that lesson, but it turns out his brain just cannot keep up.

#20#

Turns out Sosuke and Kisuke become the bestest of friends after they figure out just what else they have in common. They babble about theories and science in a way that has the rest staring for half a minute before filing it away as a lost cause and turning to do other things.

Yoruichi groans at this, but in the end she cannot decide whether to feel glee over the fact that she won't be subjected to crazy talk, or horrified with the mere thought of what two-of them could cook up.

Yasahiro looks like he had expected this from the very beginning and only sighs in exasperation before conjuring a book of out of nowhere and burying himself in his studies nose deep.

Isshin looks like he wants to pull his hair out before turning to get support from his elder twin only to find him nerding too. So instead he really pulls his hair and cries miserably to himself –Ichigo is oddly reminded of how his own Isshin –Goat face- would cry when they were mean to him.

Shunsui looks vaguely horrified for a second before he turns around discreetly and shunpos away. Ichigo knows this could only mean one thing; the man has decided going through this suffering alone is unfair and will most likely bring Jūshirō from the collar if needed.

Kisuke has sparkles in his eyes, and he almost seems to want to pull out the contraptions he invents and sometimes carries in his pocket but is trying to restrain himself at the same time. Ichigo gives him five minutes.
Sosuke appeared to be miffed for half a second—seeing his ex-nemesis… future ex-nemesis so human is humbling—before rising his eyebrows all the way to his hairline and tentatively starts to hold his own side of the conversation. As the words go by, it has become obvious he'll rival Kisuke's sparkle eyes in no time.

And Ichigo… Ichigo had expected this all along so he's not really surprised. He only smiles knowingly, herds the rest of the chicks in a different side of the hill, and prompts them to play tag. Needless to say this gets their attention instantly, and before he knows it, everyone seems to be having fun.

"So in reality, So-kun is your would-be future nemesis?" Shunsui asks skeptically as he pauses his sake intake.

Jūshirō looks confused too, and if Ichigo weren't trying to be serious here, he would have laughed at their expressions. Instead he looks ready to pull out his hair but refrains from doing so since they are walking through the streets of the first district and it would look weird.

"Yes," he repeats for what seems to be the fifth time "but my presence here has changed so many things, his reason for going evil is pretty much disappearing."

Jūshirō hums as he gets over his shock before pointing out "Aren't you getting a little over your head?" The unimpressed look Ichigo gives him has Jūshirō rephrasing his words. "Like, sure you're important and all, but has your existence really made such a big impact on the future?"

Ichigo harrumphs "Well it's not like a meant to change C46 in a way that helped avoid his childhood trauma. I just moved around the inhuman parts I could."

Shunsui and Jūshirō share twin sighs of resignation, like if they are erringly familiar with the way Shiba Ichigo seems to work in an almost magical and mysterious sort of way. Ichigo feels he should take offense in that, but decides it's too much trouble.

"So, do you have any plans?" Shunsui asks instead as his eyes absently scan the stores.

"Ichigo doesn't work on plans," Jūshirō points out seriously even though he cannot cover the mirth shining in his eyes "fate just likes to work in his favor most of the time."

"And the rest of the time, she's a total bitch." Ichigo grumbles to himself as he gives his best friends the stink eye "And don't make me out to be some sort of unnatural being." He grimaces "It's bad enough I heard Sosuke saying something along those lines the other day."

"Really?" Shunsui looks too excited at the sound of his suffering "What did he say?"

Ichigo turns to Jūshirō instead when it becomes obvious Shunsui is not in one of his sensible moments. But as he meets the white-haired man's eyes, he sees the edging curiosity growing there as well.

"Ugh!" he complains "I need to get better friends!"

Shunsui rolls his eyes so hard he almost strains himself "No you don't, you love us and you know it."

"Ichi can't live without us." Jūshirō points out with a serious nod that leaves Ichigo baffled.
He really hates how they can tease him as if they are still only apprenticing under the captain commander. As if they were less than a century old and can actually excuse their childish behavior. Ichigo knows they're not really serious per say, even though he's certain they mean their words. It doesn't mean that he can't get outwardly annoyed even if the fluffy feeling at the pit of his stomach remains.

"If I could get rid of you two, I would have done so a long time ago. But you guys are harder to get rid of than cockroaches." He bristled, making the other two share a smirk before laughing at his expense.

Ichigo stops to give an irritated growl before it becomes too much and he joins in the laughter. It takes some time for their chuckles to subside, but when it does, Ichigo still feels like he's on cloud nine as Shunsui outstretches a fist.

"Friends?" he surrenders as Ōshirō's fist joins his.

Ichigo snorts and adds his own "Best friends."

The grin they share feels like the best thing in the world, and the way their eyes shine gives him the impression that they think so too. His life has been tranquil and happy lately. All the hardships he has gone through have stayed in the past where they belong, and little by little, he has come to regard his current life as his real life. The life he is living now is his, no matter what he initially came to do.

He's content.

"Wait a second!" Shunsui yells from out of nowhere as he pushes Ichigo to the side and dashes towards a stand that had been behind him. "Look at this!"

Ichigo turns around, and when he finds himself staring at Shunsui's starry eyed expression as he admires a flowery pink Kimono he had seen many times before, he remembers –even if not at that very moment- that what is destined to happen, happens.

Now, in the present, he only sighs and shares an exasperated look with Ōshirō who also looks resigned. That Kimono is bound to be bought by Shunsui, so they might as well get used to seeing the brunet in pink now too.

"IT'S ON SALE~!" Shunsui squeaks like a rabid women on a warpath to the mall specials.

Really, what else can they do but laugh at their friend?

To be continued…

People have been insistent on more Guidebook for Shiba Life, so I'm gonna add a decree per chapter. If any of you have ideas, let me know through PM.

-*OMAKE*-

"Decree number 19!" A young Wataru yelled during dinner, making everyone stop their fight for the last piece of pie.

Everyone on the table turned to him with an angry expression as he kept on smiling like if everything were fine with the world. When it became obvious they had no other option, they all took their seats while grumbling under their breath.
"Ok!" yelled Ryōtarō at the end of the table "at the count of three everyone."

The entire table looked somber and serious as their eyes stayed glued to their target.

"One, Two and Three!" was their cue.

"ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS!"

*Decree number 19 of Shiba Life: If a fight for the last piece of a certain dish ensues, the debate of who gets it shall be decided by rock, paper, scissors.*

-.END-.  

Chapter End Notes

And that is chapter 20 my friends. Now, many have been mentioning about who is older than who, and who grew up with who, but I've checked the wikia, and there's nothing really concrete. Also, this is an AU, so calm down and enjoy the show. The order with which the Canon characters appear here have a reason.

Besides that I hope you liked, I know many of you have been excited at the prospect of a not evil Aizen, so I recommend you all to just continue reading and see if Aizen will be evil or not.

I always found it stupid that we never got a reason for Aizen's evilness, so I tried to give him a backstory... even though it might be lame.

Please review!
Chapter 21: The Alignment

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: My ownership of Bleach should not be in question, I do have to wash my white clothes after all.

Shiba life Decree at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ichigo yawned widely as he kept his pace measured and calm. He was out of uniform today, lazily taking advantage of his day off as he made his way towards the outer edges of the 15th district. He was also out of clan head clothing, instead donning a red yukata with green leaves splashing the left edge and spreading its way up. Today he had agreed to visit his little sister Haruka and his brother in law Kazuki down at their orphanage and was making his way there.

The town was just waking up, so everything was almost as lazy as his current attitude of life making him unconsciously yawn widely and stretch languidly once more before slumping his shoulders with a sigh. He turned around the corner and spotted the red painted orphanage in the next block but didn’t pick up his pace as he slung his left arm on the inside of his yukata and tightened his grip on the bag he carried with his right. As he neared the building, the noises of laughter and running feet started to get louder and more predominant in a way that had a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth.

A couple of orphanage kids ran out the building laughing as they chased each other before one of the smaller girls spotted him in the distance and yelled to gain the others attention. She pointed towards him, and wide smiles easily graced their features as they all waved him over while one of the older boys ran inside to get Haruka.

They always did this whenever he came along –which wasn’t as often as he would like with all his duties- but if he ever had spare time, he would always try and make an effort to drop by no matter how short of a visit it was. It also helped that he would always bring sweets whenever he dropped by, even though Haruka would always give him an exasperated eye roll at his blatant bribe.

There have also been a couple kids that deign to join the Shinigami Academy, and he tries to make sure they all settle in when they move into Sereitei. The other kids sometimes ask him to pass on letters or tales onto their wayward friends, so he’d be inclined to theorize that the kids like him, and not just because he brings candy like Haruka insists.

“Ichigo-sama!” The smallest girl that spotted him first waves enthusiastically making the edge of Ichigo’s mouth twitch upwards in amusement “Welcome back, Ichigo-sama!”

The orange head stops in front of the giggling little girl and crouches down to her level with a kind smile as the rest of the brats all laugh along.

“I came back, Kabo-chan.” He states calmly as the small raven head stifles another bout of giggles behind her hands.
“Thank you.” she intones strongly each syllable before she extends her arms upwards in the universal sign of pick me up that every child seems to master along with puppy dog eyes and an innocent smile. “Please?”

Ichigo makes himself look put upon but has trouble suppressing the mirth in his eyes. The other kids giggle, well-adjusted to the routine, which is pretty much his cue to do as requested.

“If I didn’t know any better,” he begins with an amused smirk “I’d say Haru put you up to this.”

The giggles he receives all around is more than enough answer. He stands back to his full height, Kaho giggling along as he smiles at the other gathered kids and hands the bag to the oldest of the bunch, Amahiko aged 57 and looking like a thirteen year old in human years. He was one of the kinder souls, calm, soft spoken and a brotherly demeanor that makes the majority of the children gravitate under his warmth.

“Here you go Hiko-chan.” The pale eyed boy huffs a bit at the honorific but gives a bright smile either way. “Make sure it’s all shared among you, okay?”

The boy rolls his eyes as if to say he already knew the drill after so many times but inclines his head either way. “Of course Ichigo-sama.” He agrees easily. “I will make sure to set aside some for the ones still asleep.”

Ichigo laughs a bit at that as he makes his way towards the main building and past the orphanage gate. It was actually one of the Shiba properties that really doesn’t see use since it is quite far from the closer districts where the majority of the Shiba live their daily life. When Haruka had asked if the couple could use it to house children, Ichigo had readily agreed and made sure to add in extra amenities to keep all the kids safe and happy in district 25. He likes to think that they have a way better life here, and while he usually doesn’t have the time to make sure everyone is settled in, he does make sure to keep the orphanage running smoothly and sporadically assigns missions to his fellow clansmen to help out. They also sometimes scourge the farther districts for kids in tough situations and keep a very keen eye on any who shows sign of hunger. Being alone, on the streets and having to somehow find a way to get food is the worst thing that can happen to a child.

“I see you brought back your welcome committee.” A voice dryly comments, the humor very badly hidden in a way that makes Ichigo snort at the tone.

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“Of course.” He answers Haruka while giving a cheeky smile. “It wouldn’t do to leave all the kiddies outside where they can get in trouble.”

Words of protest instantly clamor among the younger kids while the older ones just laugh and take the joke in stride. Really, they are all good kids and rarely get in trouble but it’s amusing to needle them.

“Spirit king forgive they ever do anything.” Haruka laughed, her eyes crinkling along the edges in a show of the scatter wrinkles she has steadily been gaining as the decades pass.

Ichigo may be the ‘oldest’ of the Main branch Shiba siblings, but thanks to his enormous amount of reiatsu, his age hardly shows on his body, and only his age old eyes give him away. Haruka now appears to be in her early fifties, and while she is still undeniably beautiful and regal in her age, you can tell that the years have not been all that kind. Once she stopped using the reiatsu she had been taught to use and focused more on her own children, and later on the orphans, her aging had sped up. Wataru on the other hand, as he had a good amount of reiatsu and used it regularly as Ichigo’s lieutenant, still looked like he was in his early thirties and definitely looked older then Ichigo who looked like he was in his mid-twenties and would seem to be staying that way until the foreseeable
“Of course,” Amahiko smiles craftily. “We are always on our best behavior for Ichigo-sama.”

Haruka snorts. “I see how it is now.”

Everyone laughs as Ichigo smiles good humoredly and expertly removes his geta at the entrance and steps onto the engawa. Once he has completed his task, he looks down at the little girl still in his arms and raises an eyebrow.

“Do you wanna go inside with us, or will you play in the courtyard?” he asks her softly.

She giggles before wiggling one of her sandaled feet. “I wanna stay with Ichigo-sama.”

Ichigo laughs but obediently removes her sandals and places them on the rack with the others. A couple of the kids follow inside while other separate and go back to whatever it was they were doing before Ichigo arrived. Haruka merely rolls her eyes but doesn’t comment on Ichigo’s soft spot for little girls before beckoning him to follow the engawa and towards the back area.

“I already had the tea set up in a back room where we can see the kids play.” She tells him. “I know you like to watch, don’t lie to me.”

The orange head huffs but doesn’t refute her comment as he dutifully treks behind her. Ichigo can hear kids laughing already, and if he strains his ears, he can also hear people moving about inside the household. Once they round the corner, they find themselves in a room with the shoji doors open and facing the playground where Kazuki was already sitting at the low table and nursing a cup of tea.

“Good morning Ni-sama.” Kazuki greets enthusiastically, his tone as steady as ever with no quaver even though the man has greatly aged into what appears to be a sixty year old man since he hardly has reiatsu to speak of, and his reserves have never been used.

“Good morning Kazuki.” Ichigo answers back kindly. “As polite as ever I see, how many more times will I have to tell you to drop the stuffy honorific?”

The man chuckles but diligently answers the rhetorical question. “At least one more time Ni-sama.”

Haruka takes her seat on the man’s right while Ichigo takes the seat across from her. Kaho is easily deposited on his lap, and she eagerly latches onto his kimono while the other hand grasps the cookie Ichigo automatically gives her from the plate.

“So,” Haruka begins without preamble. “What brings you to this side of Soul Society? I don’t think I have nagged you enough to copulate and take a day off, so there must be a reason.”

Ichigo quirks a smile at that, he can’t really deny that he doesn’t take days off very often, and while he likes to come visit when he can, Haruka usually has to remind him at least a dozen times before he sets aside time to come.

“Well,” he begins calmly while a hand comes up to grasp his warm tea cup. “While I do believe Wataru should be the one to tell you this, I also know he will be too busy these next month and I’m sure he won’t want to tell you via Hell butterfly.”

Haruka frowns slightly while Kazuki looks on in interest. “What’s this about? Your visit is unexpected, and you didn’t even bring Daisuke with you. Is everything alright?”
Ichigo snorts into his tea before putting it down. “Daisuke-kun has other, more important things to do than follow me around day in and day out.”

“I disagree.” A voice remarks from somewhere outside the room. “Ichigo-sama must be guarded at all times no matter what he may think.”

Ichigo’s shoulders slump, and he most definitely does not pout when Haruka chortles with laughter and Kazuki quirks an amused smile. “You’re testing out another one of Ki-kun’s reiatsu suppressing gadgets, aren’t you?”

“No.” comes the monotone answer. “This one is Sosuke-san’s. I have been told this prototype will last twelve hours. It has been an asset in making sure I am able to complete my duties without tipping you off... Ichigo-sama.”

The orange head sighs before shooting Haruka a scowl that has her instantly clearing her throat and trying to sober up her amusement. Ichigo does not believe for a second that she will let this one go.

“Anyway!” he bulldozes on as he tries to forget the untimely interruption. “Everything is fine and nothing is on fire so don’t worry so much or your blood pressure will rise.” Haruka huffs but doesn’t interject to avoid getting sidetracked again. “What I wanted to tell you, is that you are about to be an aunt, congratulations.” Ichigo deadpans without any fanfare.

Haruka startles, her eyes wide as she stares at Ichigo for all he’s worth.

“Oh no. What poor soul decided it would be a good idea to let you procreate? And out of wedlock too! Ichi-ni I didn’t even know you were dating!”

Ichigo groans when everyone turns to him with surprised and or disapproving stares.

“No! By the Spirit King Haru, I started this conversation talking about Wataru, of course I meant that he’s going to be a father, not me!” he corrected vehemently.

“Oh.” Haruka muttered, her brow furrowed before she gave him her best unimpressed stare. "Seriously? Well while it’s definitely good news, and I’m happy for him and excited to finally be an aunt, I would also like you to know that I am getting tired of waiting.”

Ichigo blinked in confusion as he glanced to the rest of the room’s occupants to see if anyone would give him any hints as to what she was saying. Everyone looked just as confused as he did, so he turned back his query to his sister with a raised eyebrow and questioning eyes.

She huffed as if everyone was so troublesome before elaborating. “I mean, when are you going to settle down and have kids? I’m not getting any younger and I would like to see my little future nieces and nephews while I’m still kicking you know?”

He pursed his lips before answering in his most dry tone. “One moment you are upset about the idea of me having children, and the next you harp about me not having children. Make up your god damn mind!”

“I was caught by surprise, okay! But seriously Ichigo, think about the clan’s future!”

Ichigo rolled his eyes. “You and I both know that the clan is more than secure with Yasahiro as Clan heir. You’re pulling at strings here.”

“Okay, yes that’s true. But you can’t tell me the clan wouldn’t be thrilled to see their treasured Ichigo-sama settle down and have pretty children.”
“You mean handsome, right?” Ichigo pointed out.

“No.” Haruka deadpanned. “I meant pretty. Face it Ichigo, you are a feared captain and everyone respects you, but your innate grace and your long hair makes you look pretty.”

Ichigo bristles, a flush creeping up his neck while Kazuki coughed into his hand to hide laughter. “I am not feminine.”

“Never said you were.” She discredited. “I said you were a pretty boy, which is totally and utterly different. No one would ever confuse you for a women, you don’t have the body even though your hair is enviously soft.”

Ichigo face palmed. “I don’t need to hear more. Just forget about me settling down, that’s not going to happen. I’m married to the Clan, the end, no more comments. Let’s focus on our new future niece or nephew, okay?”

Haruka rolled her eyes but graciously dropped the subject. Someday she hoped Ichigo stopped being such a workaholic. At least he had Yasahiro, Isshin and all the other kids he seems to have somehow brought under his wing to distract him. Making sure Isshin doesn’t cause mayhem in his new division must be a tiring chore indeed.

#21#

“I don’t want to do paperwork anymore!” Shunsui loudly complained from where he was sprawled over his desk. “Why can’t I get rid of all these forms? Why do I have to approve a change in lunch menu? A Captain shouldn’t have to look through these non-important forms!”

“Taichou!” the voice of his lieutenant piped on queue, please stop whining and finish your paperwork!”

“But Love-chan, I’ve been sitting in this office for the entire morning, I need some fresh air.”

Aikawa Love huffed and instantly pointed at the open window. “You get more than enough fresh air. Please finish all the paperwork, remember there is a meeting scheduled for this afternoon and we need to be free by then.”

Shunsui sighed over dramatically before picking himself off the desk. “Ju-chan will be here soon to go get lunch, why can’t we stop now?”

“All the more reason to continue working.” Love bellowed. “Once Ukitake-Taichou comes, I’m sure that your productivity will drop even further.”

As the brown haired captain was opening his mouth to respond, and amused chuckle cut him off and made him turn to look happily at the doorway. “I see how it is now, I’m a distraction.”

Love grimaced and looked slightly horrified at the impression he had given. But before he could even say a word in edgewise, Jūshirō rose his hand in placation. “Don’t worry Love, I know you don’t mean it that way. I’m just teasing Shu.”

Shunsui pouted but didn’t refute Jūshirō’s words which was more than enough answer. Instead he stood from his desk, tossed a withering glare at the papers before focusing his entire attention on his white haired best friend.

“So lunch?” he asked.
“Of course.” Jūshirō answered with a smile. “Though it’s just the two of us since Ichigo is still visiting Haruka and Kazuki.”

Shunsui sighed but dutifully followed Jūshirō outside the office and towards Seireitei proper where they would find the stands and restaurants. “Why does he get a day off but I don’t?”

“Because he delivers his work on time?” Jūshirō answered with a raised eyebrow. “I thought that was already obvious.”

The brown haired Captain laughed and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. Jūshirō didn’t believe him for a second, Shunsui would go back to trying to get out of paperwork before the hour was done.

“Love-chan should do a lot of those forms, I don’t know why they want Captain level approval.” Shunsui refuted.

“There are.” Jushiro agreed. “But remember that the division always likes to keep their Captains informed and in agreement, so I suppose that’s their way of making sure we get the news of the going ons in the division.”

“I guess.” Shunsui acquiesced petulantly. “And soon I will have to get a new lieutenant too. Love-chan is really close to getting Bankai and I have no doubt that Yama-ji will want him for the vacant Captain positions.”

Jushiro hums agreeably before sending him a sidelong glance. “Shinji-kun is stepping up as Captain of the 5th today, and besides the 7th, the 3rd also lacks a Captain right now.”

“The 9th got Kensei-kun last year too, so that’s two divisions with Captains retired and being replaced with Shinigami that have less than a decade of experience in bankai and two empty divisions.” Shunsui elaborated. “Not to mention that the 7th just got their lieutenant Kotsubaki Jin'emon when Isamu-Taicho passed way.”

“That was sudden.” Jushiro pointed out while pausing outside the stand where they would get their lunch. “But at least we have quite a couple retired Captains. Not to mention both our fathers.”

Shunsui felt a shiver go down his spine. “That crazy geezer, he looks like he’s on death’s door but he can still kick my ass when he pauses his tea drinking.”

Jushiro waved a hand as if to disregard the comment. “Yes well, the original Gotei 13 was a feared thing even today. While I do think we can get back to that strength in a couple decades, I believe right now we are in a precarious position of power balance. I think this is what Ichi wanted to avoid when he passed that bill for Captaincy requirements.”

The 8th division captain nodded. “It’s too bad that the C46 can stick their nose in it if the position has been empty for more than a decade. I think that’s why Yama-ji preferred placing Shinigami with bankai and potential to become a power house in the position.”

Jushiro sighed. “True, not much we can do about that now.”

They were just about to enter the ramen stand when two first division runners flashed into existence in front of them. Instantly, their good humor disappeared and they turned towards the two kneeling figures to give their full attention.

“Reporting in.” One of them answered. “By order of the Captain Commander, Yamamoto
Genryūsai Shigekuni, Captain of the 8th division, Kyōraku Shunsui—“

“And Captain of the 13th division, Ukitake Jūshirō—” the other added. “Are to report immediately to the first division barracks for an emergency meeting.”

Shunsui and Jūshirō shared a look before nodding in tandem and racing towards the first at top speed. Almost instantly they left the messengers to lag behind and made their arrival in record time. They had already had a meeting scheduled for later, the fact that it could not wait a couple hours was worrisome.

#21#

Ichigo was smiling at the ridiculous antics the kids got up to while drinking his tea. He had moved the cushion to the engawa and was watching some of the older kids run around with wooden sticks playing at being Shinigami and some of the younger kids trying and failing to emulate them. Kaho still stayed with him, but she was sat in her own cushion on his right while Daisuke sat at his left.

He was about to refill his cup when he noticed a quick silver flash of reiatsu in the vicinity that hadn’t been there half a second ago. He felt it again in another three timed successions that had him instantly on alert.

“Daisuke.” He called up to his already standing attendant. “Could you?”

He nodded instantly. “Of course Ichigo-sama, I will return momentarily.”

Daisuke skillfully flashed away, and soon enough the previously flickering reiatsu smoothly and softly came back into existence and easily met up with Daisuke’s deeper and stronger one. Ichigo kept half an ear on the playing children while the rest of his attention stayed on the two signatures meeting up a couple feet away behind the walls surrounding the orphanage. It only took half a minute before Daisuke was coming back, and the other signature disappeared from existence again even though Ichigo could easily track the small trickle of presence the other could not hide now that Ichigo knew it was there.

“Ichigo-sama.” Daisuke leaned down to whisper in his ear. “There has been an emergency meeting called at the first. Your presence is required.”

Ichigo grit his teeth to avoid cursing out loud before standing calmly so as to not scare the kids. He turned down to the little girl blinking curiously up at him before sending her an apologetic smile.

“Sorry Kaho-chan, something came up at home and I must leave earlier than expected.”

Kaho tilted her head slightly before nodding. “It’s fine.” She reassured him. “I’m just happy I was able to see you today Ichigo-sama.”

Ichigo’s smile softened further and he bent down to quickly ruffle her hair before walking back towards the entrance at a brisk pace. As he was putting back his geta, Haruka came out the side door and looked at him with a quizzical and raised eyebrow.

“Going somewhere?” she inquired.

“Emergency meeting, I’ll tell you later what I can Haru.” Ichigo responded without fanfare.

Haruka’s expression instantly fell into something more serious before she nodded. “Of course, be safe Ichigo. Daisuke, please take care of him.”
Ichigo huffed and Daisuke instantly responded. “Of course Haruka-sama, always.”

Without waiting to hear more, Ichigo quickly fell into his fastest Shunpo and raced towards the first division, his ever present shadow following a step behind and keeping pace. It took a bit to reach the first district, and from there, he only paused long enough to get quick clearance into the Seireitei walls before he was running along the roof tops and passing by the Shinigami patrols without them even noticing. Ichigo would have been worried if it weren’t for the fact that really no one could track his movements when he was going at top speed unless you were a Captain class Shinigami. By the time he was rushing into the first division barracks, a good twenty minutes had passed since his summons and he was not shocked to see the meeting hall’s doors closed. Daisuke quickly and efficiently took up position outside the entrance and Ichigo only spared a brief glance and strode into the room without fanfare.

Almost instantly he gained the attention of all the Shinigami in attendance and wasted no time in taking his position so that Wataru, who was momentarily filling in, could step back with the rest of the lieutenants.

“I’m sorry for the delay.” He apologized, a couple of the Captains shot him an amused look at his civilian clothing but no one commented. “I was out in district 25 when I got notice.”

Shihōin Tsukiya, captain of the 2nd division snorted at that. “Anyone else would have been later.”

“Indeed.” The Captain Commander easily interjected before slamming down his cane to gain everyone’s attention once more. “Now that we are all gathered together, we can focus on the reason for our impromptu meeting.” Everyone straightened, and Ichigo distractedly noticed that Shinji had already stepped up in his official capacity as Captain. They must have done a brief initiation while they were waiting for him. “One of our reiatsu sensors in Hueco Mundo picked up a worrisome signal. We have been keeping track of all the Vasto Lord level Hollows since the seals were developed, and as of 45 minutes ago, one of the signatures morphed into an even higher level that we had not been aware existed up until now.”

Many mummers ran amok in the hall, and more than one lieutenant paled at the news. Ichigo merely pursed his lips and waiting for the room to fall silent again so that the Captain Commander could continue. He had a feeling he already knew what this was about.

“The sensors cannot pick up any more information without further data, the only thing we know for certain, is that it seems to be an evolution.” Yamamoto surveyed the room with critical eyes before continuing. “Because of this, we will be sending out a small squadron. We are being cautious and so one of the senior Captains must head this mission along with a junior Captain.”

This was troublesome, Ichigo couldn’t help but think. A captain was only considered senior after a century in the position. Out of all their Captains, seven of them could be considered senior, but the Captain Commander would not go, Retsu could not leave the 4th without their best healer, Ginrei had a capable lieutenant, but Sojun has always been a sickly child and grew up to be a sickly adult who could take a turn for the worse at a moment’s notice, it would not do to leave the 6th without a leader. Going up, Shunsui could go, as could Ichigo while Hikifune Kirio could also be considered but may not have the skill set necessary for the mission. Jūshirō was also applicable, but he didn’t have a lieutenant at the moment, and leaving his division would be the height of foolishness.

That left them with two logical options, and the glance Shunsui and Ichigo shared more than confirmed that he was not the only one thinking this. They needed more front line Senior Captains for sure.
“Shiba-Taicho.” The Captain Commander called out suddenly. “Can you depart within the hour?”

Ichigo hummed in thought, not at all surprised by Yamamoto’s request. He was also Clan head, and while his duties to the Gotei were more pressing, if there was any kind of turmoil he needed to attend with his Clan and there was a viable alternative to take his place, he could turn it down.

“I should be able to make it work Sensei.” The orange head nodded. “What size should the squadron be?”

Yamamoto huffed at the manner of address but didn’t waste time complaining it as he usually did. “A five person team, you will take point, add a junior Captain of your choosing, two lieutenants and a healer.”

“Okay.” Ichigo sighed as everyone looked at him expectantly. “Shinji-chan, you’re coming with me, let’s get some battle experience in you.”

Shinji pouted, his form slouching slightly from where he stood next to the empty positions where the 3rd and 7th division captains would be if they had any. Kensei, who stood on the other side of the empty 7th division in his own 9th division position seemed to sag in relief. One could not blame him, the man did not have a lieutenant at the moment while Ōtoribashi Rōjūrō, aka Rose had been used to being without Captain and could survive for the duration of their mission.

“I’m a captain now, why am I still -chan.” Shinji grouched slightly.

Ichigo rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. “Because you’re still a brat and I can.

Now, Retsu-san, can I borrow your 3rd seat?”

Retsu quirked a smile in his direction and Ichigo was glad to see that it was not her terrifying smile. “Of course Ichigo, I will tell Kotetsu Takashi to meet you in the gate room in an hour.”

The orange head nodded his head in thanks before tilting his head thoughtfully. He had two lieutenants to choose and depending on what kind of mission it may turn into, he needed to pick carefully.

“Ichi.” Shunsui called from his left. “If it suits your needs, can you take Love-chan with you?”

Ichigo quirked an eyebrow before turning to look at Love who was a bit shocked to be put on the spot like that. Once he noticed Ichigo staring at him, he bowed respectfully before straightening back to attention.

“If Shiba-sama will have me, I would be honored to follow you in this mission.”

Shunsui looked playfully irked at the way Love showed Ichigo respect while all Shunsui ever gained were exasperated glares. Ichigo knew that the only reason why Love was being so formal, was because the Aikawa’s were one of the retainer families that Shiba had taken under their wing.

“That’s fine by me.” Ichigo flicked a wrist. “I think I’ll take Yo-chan with me too, that way we’ll be a speed-strength team. Sound good sensei?”

Yamamoto nodded in agreement. “Make sure to keep open communication. Report in every twelve hours. Meet up in one hour at the gate room. Kuchiki-taicho, have your squad prepare supplies for the team and ready within that allocated time.”

“Understood sir.” Ginrei agreed, his eyes turning towards Sōjun who nodded once and flashed
away to get started.

“Dismissed.” Yamamoto banged his cane, and instantly everyone broke rank.

Ichigo started towards the door and Wataru quickly came up to his right side while Daisuke expertly took the other. Ichigo only paid half a mind to his shadow before turning towards his brother. “Wataru-chan, go get the kids and bring them to my Clan office, I’ll go change and meet up there for debriefing.”

Wataru snorted but didn’t mention how ridiculous Ichigo sounded. Instead he quirked a quick smile before jumping out the nearest window and making his way towards the 10th.

The moment he was gone, Shunsui and Jūshirō took up his empty side and accompanied him towards his Clan compound. Ichigo didn’t bat an eye, but did turn to Shunsui with a puzzled expression and a disbelieving tone.

“What was that with Love? I thought you needed your lieutenant so you could slack off.”

The 8th division Captain rolled his eyes before shooting a betrayed look towards the chuckling white haired Captain. “Love may be a pain in the rear, but he’s my lieutenant and it’s my responsibility to make sure he is up to notch. Once he gains Bankai he’ll be in the spotlight and I don’t know about you, but I don’t want another Kensei who was thrust into the position with little field experience. At least you trained Shinji like crazy, he’s a bit more prepared for it then Kensei was.”

“Don’t remind me.” Ichigo huffs but doesn’t refute the point. Battle experience can only be gained in dangerous missions, and now in days, missions like those seem to be in low demand. It’s a good thing, but it’s also a bad thing.

Before long, they entered the compound and made their way towards the main building. Once inside, Ichigo stood at the first hallway intersection before pointing towards the left. “You guys head on to my office, I’ll meet you there.”

They both nodded, and Ichigo turned on his heel towards the right and to his private rooms without missing a beat. “Daisuke-kun, you will be staying here.” The orange head ordered, his tone leaving no room for arguments. “You’ll be shadowing Hiro-chan, am I understood?”

Ichigo stopped and Daisuke similarly paused with him. Sometimes Ichigo wondered if the other knew everything Ichigo was going to do before he even knew it himself. He ignored that thought though, and instead focused on giving him a steady and amber eyed stare to show he was being serious.

Daisuke met his stare head on, and really, if he was any other Clan head he was sure they would take offense to an attendant being so ‘out spoken’. After half a heartbeat, the raven haired teen huffed in resignation before quirking a smile. “If that is what Ichigo-sama requires of me, then that is the role I will fulfill.”

Ichigo rolls his eyes good naturedly but doesn’t refute the point. Instead he turns back to his rooms and strides towards his closet. Daisuke stays outside as he’s supposed to, and in two minutes flat Ichigo is changed into his Shinigami attire. He turns towards the stand mounted on the wall where Zangetsu had been resting for the day. Really, the only reason why Ichigo doesn’t take his Zanpaktou with him on his day off, is because he can instantly call his blade to his side if he has need of it.
He grasps the pitch black scabbard and unsheathes the blade slightly to stare at the Shiba Clan emblem engrained on the flat side of the steel. He remembers of a time that seems like eons ago when Chichiue had had his Zanpaktou engraved. A blade that had protected his precious son from numerous dangerous situations and that should be cherished as such; Chichiue had called his Zangetsu. Ichigo had agreed then and agrees now that he could never hope to repay both Zangetsus for all they have done. He stores his Zanpaktou back in its scabbard with a click, and easily slips it onto his obi at his waist. Now was not a time to think about those sentimentalities.

Once in full Shinigami regalia, he strides out his room and starts to make his way towards his Clan office. While on the way there, he hastily ties his hair up into a ponytail to keep it out of the way and makes sure he has his haori secured and in place. As he enters his office, he blinks in confusion at all the occupants before turning to Wataru to give him a deadpanned stare.

“I brought all your chicks!” Wataru crows cheekily, ignoring the glare more than one person throws his way.

Ichigo sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose but doesn’t make a move to shoo anyone out which is an answer in itself. Instead he turns towards Yoruichi who is smirking at him, Kisuke who looks eerily curious, Yasahiro who looks mildly worried, Isshin who looks jumpy and excited, Sōjun who looks irked at being dragged along when he had obviously been busy with something else, and Sōsuke who just looks plain confused.

Ichigo thinks back to Haruka and her teasing about getting settled and having kids before a chill runs down his spine at the realization that he somehow, for some reason, seems to have adopted all these ‘teens’ and without even noticing. The thought is mildly terrifying. Half these kids already call him Ji-san or some variation of it, and the other half is too formal to do so but still turns to him for advice.

Holy shit.

To be continued…

Decree# 57 of Shiba Life: Dance battles are perfectly respectable ways of solving a disagreement and are not restricted by the designating fighting areas.

Chapter End Notes

I am alive! Muhahahaha. Special shout out to my friend from fanfiction.net aGnamZer0. See? Now you know why I found your PM so funny when I read it. I had already finished typing this in case you were wondering.

For everyone’s reference, here is how the Gotei 13 looks at the moment:

1. Yamamoto Genyūsai Shigekuni // Sasakibe Chōjirō
2. Shihōin Tsukiya // Shihōin Yoruichi
3. EMPTY // Komamura Sajin
4. Unohana Retsu // Sugimoto Hanako
5. Hirako Shinji // Ōtoribashi Rōjirō
6. Kuchiki Ginrei // Kuchiki Sōjun
7. EMPTY // Kotsubaki Jin'emon
8. Kyōraku Shunsui // Aikawa Love
9. Muguruma Kensei // EMPTY
10. Shiba Ichigo // Shiba Wataru
11. Kenpachi Kiganjō // Kurokawa Masaru
12. Hikifune Kirio // Nakanishi Shigeo
13. Ukitake Jūshirō // EMPTY

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